

Francesco Grandi

Italian painter
(1831-1891)

He was born in Rome on April 21st. 1831. He was the first painting teacher was L. Venuti; he then attended the Accademia di S. Luca, where he was a disciple of T. Minardi. Still in Rome, just seventeen years old he began working in a studio rented on his own and in 1851 was ranked first in the school copy of life. A year later he won the Balestra award with a typical academic picture of history: *Castor and Pollux brought to Rome the news of the defeat of the Tarquins*. Between 1855 and 1856 he was called to paint in the church of Bambin Gesù, where he executed, for the Passion chapel, the two paintings, signed and dated, the *Kiss of Judas* and the *Flagellation*, and decorated the dome of the Mattei chapel with *Angels* and *Prophets*.

In the second half of the 1850's he took an active part in the fervor of renewal of the decorations of the great basilicas and Roman churches promoted by Pope Pius IX. The most important and impressive of these enterprises was the rebuilding of St. Paul Outside the Walls, devastated by the fire of 1823. Grandi was among the twenty-one painters, almost all Roman, mobilized under the direction of Minardi - then inspector of public paintings and director of the study of mosaics in the Vatican - for the execution, starting from 1857, of the thirty-six frescoes, illustrating the facts of the life of the apostle, with whom it was decided to decorate the new large nave that Pope Mastai had consecrated a few years first, in 1854. Two scenes were assigned to Grandi: *St. Paul preaching to the people* and *St. Paul driven from the temple by the Jews*, carried out by the end of the decade. For the same church the Roman artist also made other works and provided various cartoons for the chronology of the pontiffs, the stained glass windows and the mosaics.

In the following years, now an established painter - he was awarded the title of knight and in 1872 Minardi as director of the Mosaic School - he was often called to produce commemorative images for the solemn Vatican ceremonies of canonization such as those on the occasion of the martyrs' beatification of Japan, for which Grandi provided several paintings: *The Japanese martyrs in glory*, *The Blessed Novaret gathers the abandoned children*, *The Blessed Castelate and two Japanese prisoners* (unknown location).

On the side of the secular painting had meanwhile contributed to the creation of the *Galleria Dante*, a series of 27 huge paintings (m 6 x 4) depicting salient episodes of the *Divine Comedy*, designed by the painter F. Bigioli between 1854 and 1860. The singular project was R. Gentilucci was promoted by the Fabriano publisher, but active in Rome, who was concerned to have the monumental cycle exhibited in various Italian, European and even the United States cities. The discreet success of the initiative prompted Gentilucci himself to devise an even more ambitious undertaking: the *Shakespearian Gallery*, a series of one hundred scenes from the work of the English playwright. The project, to which Grandi also took part, remained unfinished and is today considered to be missing - as well as the *Galleria Dante* - although some sketches

are kept at the National Gallery of Modern Art in Rome.

In Fano, in the Teatro Comunale, in addition to the mythological-allegorical figures painted on the ceiling, he decorated the curtain with the *Triumph of Caesar in Fano*, following the almost contemporary example of the nearby Municipal Theater of Rimini, inaugurated in 1857, for which the painter his contemporary F. Coggetti had made a curtain with the scene of *Caesar crossing the Rubicon*. He also worked in Rome for the Metastasio theater and for the Argentina theater, where he painted, among other things, the ceiling with the *major Deities*; he also provided the curtain for the Dresden theater.

Perhaps thanks also to the friendship of architect V. Vespignani - who had been commissioned by Pius IX to restore the patriarchal basilica of S. Lorenzo al Verano - Grandi was asked to make his contribution to this other remarkable collective undertaking from the strong symbolic value, realizing in the nave aisle the two frescoes depicting the culminating moments of the passion of the titular saint: *The martyrdom of s. Lorenzo* and the *transport of the body of the saint in the catacombs* (1869-70). The paintings, together with the others made for the occasion by the most famous painters active in Rome at that time, were destroyed during the bombings suffered by the basilica on 19 July 1943; but it remains a model now preserved in the Pinacoteca of the Accademia di S. Luca in Rome.

In these works of great breadth and discoveries of didactic inclinations, Grandi shows himself to be a sober and thoughtful composer, easy and clear in the narrative cadences, but also attentive to the notes of color and reality, looking for a balance between theatrical effects of naturalism and noble composure, more neo-hanaleque than neoclassical. Like C. Fracassini, F. Podesti, C. Mariani, his contemporary painters and colleagues in the great Roman decorative enterprises, Grandi also looked to the sumptuous results of English and French academic painting, of the various F. Leighton and W.-A. Bouguereau. It was precisely these compositional stylistic features which, on the other hand, made his way to ecclesiastical patrons appreciated, which aimed at reviving the glories of an era in which Rome had been a yard in the service of faith and the greatest painters of stories had been service of the Pope.

Also due to Vespignani's interest, Grandi saw himself commissioning other important commissions of a religious nature: in S. Lorenzo in Damaso, for which he frescoed the tondi with the *Virtues* in the new presbytery, in S. Giacomo degli Incurabili, where in the The high altar gave an unusual interpretation of the *Trinity* (with the Eternal Father, the dove of the Holy Spirit and the angels who worship the tabernacle before the canvas), and others. They were all churches in which the academic painters of history recalled, with rhetoric illustrative vein, the glorious glories of the primitive Church of martyrs and confessors. In this neocinquecentesco iconographic *revival*, alongside the counter-reform inspired themes, taken from Roman martyrologists, there were also more unusual hagiographic subjects, but always functional to the politics of religious propaganda through images pursued by ecclesiastical orders and summits. So in 1862 the "nation" of the Lucchesi had commissioned Grandi, for the church of S. Croce and S. Bonaventura, a painting that represented the history, almost unprecedented from an iconographic point of view, of *Seleucus indicating to the bishop Gualfredo the place where the Holy Face is hidden*. A more declared ideological commitment, on the other hand, was obviously to address the choice of a political-historical subject as unusual as *S. Lorenzo*

da Brindisi leads the Hungarians against the Turks, of whom the Capuchins of Rome, for whom the painter had the work carried out in 1881 and they were donated to Pope Leo XIII, who left it in turn to the Vatican Art Gallery.

Other works of sacred theme Grandi performed in different churches of Rome between the sixties and seventies: one can remember an *S. Apollonia* in S. Maria in Trastevere (1866) and the side paintings with the *Pietà* and the *Oration in Gethsemane* for the chapel of the Passionists in the church of Saints John and Paul, signed and dated 1879. He also participated in the decoration of the new Verano cemetery, designed by his friend Vespignani, creating scenes for the Stations of the Cross, as well as frescoes for various other chapels of the cemetery complex.

In 1884, in the meantime, the son of Vespignani himself, the architect Francesco, executed the project of his father, who died just two years earlier, for the reconstruction of the presbytery and the apse of the basilica of S. Giovanni in Laterano. Grandi, a painter now expert in large-scale decorations with historical-religious subjects, as well as on good terms with the Vespignani family, had to seem the most suitable candidate for the realization of the side frescoes illustrating, on the right, *Innocenzo III who approves the Franciscan and Dominican orders* and, on the left, the *architect Vespignani who presents the plan for the renovation of the presbytery and the apse of the basilica to Leo XIII* : iconographic choices, which clearly reaffirmed the continuity and symmetry between the pastoral fervor of the militant Church of the Middle Ages and the politics of conservative patronage wanted by Pope Pecci.

Grandi received numerous assignments also from private clients, among which different Roman patrician families: the Borghese, the Orsini, the Savorelli. Other commissions saw him active at the same time outside Rome. At Arpino, in 1870, he painted the *Aurora which follows Lucifer* in the Palazzo S. Germano. His are also frescoes with *St. Michael victorious on the rebel angels* and the *Last Judgment* in the vault of the Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel in Velletri, as well as a more imposing and demanding cycle frescoed in the dome of the cathedral of St. Eusebius in Vercelli with scenes taken from the legend of the titular saint.

Even as an official portraitist, Grandi had esteem and honors alive: from him he wanted to portray his friend V. Vespignani and the popes who had already favored him, Pius IX and Leo XIII (unknown location), as well as various other eminent persons of the Roman Curia.

Grandi died in Rome on December 23rd. 1891.

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