

Francesco Rosa

Italian painter
(1638-1687)

He was born in Rome on 25 November 1638, son of Giovanni and Giovanna Romani.

The main biographical information is obtained from the anonymous *Life of Francesco Rosa*, added to the *lives of the painters, sculptors and living architects* of Lyon Pascoli.

From the Pascolian *life* we learn how the young Rosa "until the age of twelve", when he was an orphan of both parents, attended the Roman College, where he met Pier Filippo Bernini, son of the famous artist. After a first training with the not otherwise known "Placido Palermitano", Rosa entered the workshop of Giovanni Angelo Canini, through which he developed his interest in classicist painting and approached the engraving techniques. In these same years there was the attendance of Elder Nicolas Poussin, from whom he learned to compose scenes of historical-literary subjects.

Rosa's public debut in Rome took place between 1660 and 1663 in the church of S. Rocco a Ripetta (chapel of S. Antonio: *Glory of the Saint* in the dome, *Virtue* in the pediments and *Scenes from the life of the saint* in the lunettes) and in the chapel of S. Apollonia in S. Agostino (allegories of *Virginité* and *Martyrdom*). If in the frescoes the stylistic reference is still the luminous painting of Giovanni Lanfranco, in the paintings there are already some typical elements of the painter, such as the uniform brunette palette and languid features, with simplified features.

"At the age of 25" the painter married Ortensia Succi, daughter of his nurse, renouncing to take "a niece of Poussin", perhaps to be identified in Barbara Carabiti, daughter of his sister-in-law.

In the mid-1660's the career of Rosa experienced a significant turn thanks to the support of powerful patrons gravitating around the circuit of Fabio Chigi and Cristina of Sweden, as the cardinals Luigi Alessandro Omodei and Camillo Massimo. The first involved the artist in the new decoration of the rooms of the Casa S. Carlo and of the church of Ss. Ambrogio and Carlo al Corso, where Rosa executed three altarpieces: the *Apparition of the Virgin with the Child to s. Enrico* (covered by the *sermon of St. Barnabas* by Pier Francesco Mola), the *Miracle of s. Filippo Neri*, taken from the canvas of a similar subject by Guido Reni, and the *Apparition of s. Blessed to s. Enrico*, obtained at the death of Maestro Canini (1666).

The latter is to be counted among the most convincing proofs of the artist, in consideration of the balanced and monumental composition, inspired by *Ananias who heals s. Paolo* di Pietro from Cortona in S. Maria della Concezione, to which is added the convincing piece of landscape, fruit of the contact with Gaspard Dughet in the poussinian *entourage*.

Around 1669 Rosa exhibited in S. Giovanni Decollato a painting depicting the *landing of Agrippina in Brindisi with the ashes of Germanicus* taken from the *Annals* of Tacitus, recently identified in the deposits of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. The success of the work - exchanged at the time for an original by Poussin - is confirmed by its reproduction in print by Cesare Fantetti in 1673 and by the request of Cardinal Massimo to Rosa of a drawing, to be

identified with a sheet recently passed on the market. The canvas with *Venus*, in all likelihood, also included the canvas with *Venus, offering weapons to Enea* in a private collection.

To the same group of works of scholarly theme and of antiquing taste is reported the lost *Alboin requires Rosamunda to drink from the paternal skull* (before 1670) painted for Sigismondo Chigi, probable precedent for the assignment to Rosa of the frontispiece of *L' Adalinda* by Pietro Simone Agostini (1673), a musical fable staged in the family palazzo all'Ariccia.

The public success in the early seventies of the 17th century is confirmed by the artist's entry in 1673 in the Academy of S. Luca and, the following year, in the Congregation of St. Joseph of Terrasanta, presented by Ludovico Gimignani.

For the Chapel of the Virtuosi at the Pantheon Rosa painted in oil on canvas the *Moses*, next in the conception to those isolated figures of saints, hermits and philosophers that would have characterized the production of paintings by room of his last years.

In these years there were also important disappointments for the artist: in 1673 he had to abandon the works for the fresco decoration of the dome of S. Maria in Montesanto for a quarrel with the architect Carlo Rainaldi; moreover, none of the six paintings painted for the church of Ss. Vincenzo and Anastasio remains *in situ* today, and only recently have he been referred to two works depicting the *Annunciation* and the *Dream of s. Giuseppe*, hypothesizing a source from the church near the Trevi Fountain.

The most important public commission of Rosa was the great altarpiece with the *Miracle of Our Lady of Monserrato* for the high altar of the Spanish church of S. Maria in Monserrato (1674-75).

Transferred in the nineteenth century along with some of the furnishings in the church of the Holy Trinity of Genzano, the work presents an iconography with a dense political and allegorical meaning. The sketch also includes the sketch - or perhaps a memory - and a commemorative print by Charles de la Haye, which contains a long dedication to Cardinal Luis de Portocarrero, ambassador of Spain to Rome since 1678. For the cardinal Rosa executed a "quantity of large paintings representing the funtions he did in Rome in his embarking so in presenting himself to the Pope, like other things expressed", today dispersed, to be placed by 1679, year of the Cardinal's return to Spain.

La Vita pascoliana also cites a series of views of Rome performed for Portocarrero, entrusted by Rosa to the best specialists of the genre and within which he would have executed the "figurines". The enormous gains deriving from the brief but intense attendance of the Spanish cardinal, estimated at five thousand scudi, were for the most part spent by the painter "in the bassetta game".

A non-marginal figure in Rosa's promotion in the seventies and eighties was later "the Imbasciatore of Portugal" , recently identified in Luís de Sousa, archbishop of Braga, arrived in the papal capital as early as 1676, in whose inventory (1697) there are seven paintings explicitly assigned to the Roman painter.

Of great commitment was also the *Death of St. Francesco Saverio* painted for Lorenzo Onofrio Colonna between 1675 and 1680 and today in the basilica of S. Barnaba in Marino.

Alongside the direct commissions and the church works Rosa has dedicated in recent years especially to room paintings to be allocated to the market, to try to repay the huge debts due to gambling, which led him to serve a sentence of twenty months in prison in 1685-86. From this

point of view the singular approach to the stylistic ways and typical subjects of Salvator Rosa could be explained, whose works were certainly much in demand on the market after death (1673), and that Francesco seems to have imitated in a series of paintings such as *Belisario* of Pamphilj collection of 1681, not coincidentally mistaken for an original of the Neapolitan Rose. Precisely the painting in Galleria Doria Pamphilj today represented the fundamental reference point for the restitution to Francesco Rosa of a group of works of analogous subject and composition, often assigned to Salvatore, such as the *Bartimeo* (or *Belisario*) of the Bob Jones Museum of Greenville (South Carolina) or the *Diogenes throws the bowl* in a private collection.

Among the rare public commissions of recent years is documented a lost *St. Magdalene penitent* for the church of S. Francesco in Siena, painted for Cavalier Dionisio Marescotti and mentioned by local guides alongside other works from Rome. To be placed in the eighties of the century is also the *self-portrait* preserved in the Uffizi, which is associated with the only other portrait so far known, that of daughter Marta, today at the Academy of St. Luca.

There are many lost public works cited in the sources, as well as easel paintings, mostly scholarly subjects or figures of saints, mentioned in documents or inventories of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Rosa died in Rome on November 26, 1687, at the age of forty-nine, following a "malignant fever".

His wife Ortensia and his three children survived, Marta, Sigismondo and Fabio. There are very few works by Sigismondo, while Fabio, a computist of the Apostolic Palace, a friend of artists and collectors, is known to donate part of his rich collection of paintings to the Accademia di S. Luca.

by Michele Nicolaci - Biographical Dictionary of Italians - Volume 88 (2017)

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