

The Italian Job

A review of the exhibition: Italian Paintings from the Richard L. Feigen Collection at the Yale Art Gallery, May 2010 to September 2010

by Geoffrey Detrani

Tucked away in the exhibition “Italian Paintings from the Richard L. Feigen Collection,” at the Yale University Art Gallery, among depictions of martyred saints and bleeding crucifixions, is a small, affecting work, *The Vision of St. Lucy*, by Fra Angelico. This vision of answered prayer, with its ruby-sulfur tinge and elemental geometry, offers a compelling balance to the dazzling painterly brilliance of one of the exhibition’s anchoring masterpieces. *Danae and the Shower of Gold*, by Orazio Gentileschi.

These two works are like opposing parenthetical marks, each holding their end of the technical and conceptual spectrum in this beautifully realized exhibition. One’s theme is pagan, its picture-space airy, its demeanor evocative of exultation for the human body and the human condition. The other’s theme is Christian, its scale diminutive and constrained, peopled with bodies riddled with illness and spirits disturbed by want. Both are Renaissance Italian paintings from the Richard Feigen collection. That’s their core commonality and the wide art historical swath that is Italian painting from the 1400’s to the 1600’s is the purview of this show.

Fra Angelico’s painting, *The Vision of St. Lucy*, depicts, eponymously, the somnolent visions of Lucy, adolescent daughter of nobility who had a thing for spiritual epiphanies. Lucy, whose mother suffered from incurable bleeding, is said to have visited the tomb of St. Agatha to pray for her mother’s relief. In the painting’s cramped space, we see mother and daughter, bent low in the chapel, visited by St. Agatha, herself surrounded by a quartet of blue gowned angels. Fra Angelico shapes his pious story with blunt skill and palpable directness, crafting the picture with a simplified graphic ease. Message is paramount and draughtsmanship immediate. Here the human body is a rigid, problematic container, clothed head to foot and troubled with fault.

Gentileschi’s work, on the other hand, is a spectacle of refined painterly skill. This piece of soft-core Baroque-erotic tantalization illustrates the classical myth of Danae, daughter of a Greek king who was imprisoned by dad and impregnated by Zeus. Gentileschi’s Danae is a woman of alabaster skin, reclining in the manner of an odalisque on sheets of remarkable trompe-l’oeil definition. Set against a velvety black, Danae is shown attended by cupid and showered with gold coins, towards which she reaches her hand and turns her gaze. Gentileschi holds nothing back in this gorgeously luminous painting. Light and form are mixed to masterful effect through this artist’s prodigious skill.

Though I’ve posed these two works as occupying opposite corners of a common ring, in fact Gentileschi’s work is an exception in that, save for it and a few other works, all of the paintings in the show are religiously themed. This tips the scales to the severe side of

things as the show is dominated by stern, martyred, or tortured saints, bleeding crucifixions and somber resurrections.

This is not so remarkable given the reality behind the production of these paintings. They were made by artists working for the church in a Europe dominated by clerical authority and beholden to a mission of providing the visual force to an authoritarian message. These pictures taught and admonished perhaps more than they served as objects for delectation. Consequently, there is a ferocity of imagination in them that veers to the sadistic.

We're obliged to note, for example, that St. Lucy makes another appearance, this time in Annibale Carracci's "Virgin and Child with St. Lucy and the Young St. John the Baptist" (1587). Here we see a benign visaged Madonna and child, et. al., in an otherwise serene scene. But panning down, we notice St. Lucy who is presenting a plate of two eyeballs to the holy duo. St. Lucy, a Christian martyr, had been the victim of torture, and her eyes had been gouged out. Is she presenting her credentials or asking for recompense?

Whatever sub-textual story of fear and trembling is told by the stridency of Renaissance religious art, formal beauty is abundantly on display in this fascinating presentation of one collector's treasures.