

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

ANTONIO PAOLUCCI

NEWLY-APPOINTED DIRECTOR OF THE VATICAN MUSEUMS

A report by Alberto Carosa in the January 2008 issue of *Inside the Vatican* announced the Holy Father's appointment of Antonio Paolucci, one of Italy's most respected art experts, as the new director of the Vatican Museums.

A widely-published scholar as well as a journalist, he has published more than 600 articles in Italian newspapers and magazines. The former Italian minister of culture, Paolucci talked with Lucy Gordan about his love of art, his long and very distinguished career as a public servant, and his plans for the Vatican Museums' future. —*The Editor*

Why did you choose to study art history? Were your parents in this field?

ANTONIO PAOLUCCI: My father was an antique dealer, so art history was an obvious choice.

What did you focus on as the subject of your doctoral dissertation?

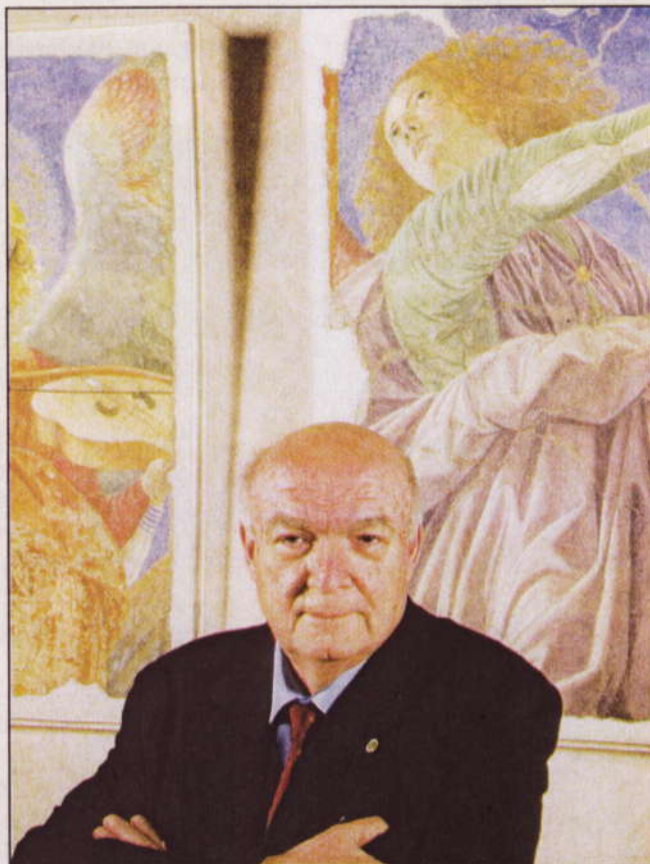
A. PAOLUCCI: Renaissance painting in Ferrara.

Do you consider the Italian scholars Roberto Longhi, the Caravaggio expert, and Francesco Arcangeli your mentors? And if so, can you tell us what you learned from them?

A. PAOLUCCI: Yes, they both taught me to look at artworks with curiosity and love.

You are an expert of medieval and Renaissance art history. Would you have liked to live during those times? If so, why?

A. PAOLUCCI: Yes, because during those times even the very poor lived surrounded by Beauty with a capital B.



If you could invite a famous personality of the past to dinner, whom would you choose?

A. PAOLUCCI: Lorenzo de' Medici, better-known as Lorenzo Il Magnifico or The Magnificent, so he could tell me about life in Florence during the lifetimes of his contemporaries: the painter Botticelli and the religious reformer Savonarola.

You have written monographs about Piero della Francesca, Luca Signorelli, Antoniazio Romano, Michelangelo, and Masaccio; of these, who is your favorite artist and why?

A. PAOLUCCI: Of the artists I've studied and written about, my favorite is Piero della Francesca because his paintings are an awesome synthesis of poetry and logic.

What are your all-time favorite works of art?

A. PAOLUCCI: The complete works of all the great Italian painters from Giotto to Caravaggio.

It seems to me that painting must be your favorite art form. Do you paint?

A. PAOLUCCI: Heaven forbid, goodness no, I don't paint. I've never even tried. I'd feel ridiculous and wouldn't want to make a fool of myself.

The first time I entered the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua with its frescoes by Giotto, I was overcome by its beauty and had to rush out. Have you ever suffered from "Stendhal's syndrome"?

A. PAOLUCCI: No, because people who study and love art never suffer from Stendhal's syndrome. We love art with all five senses; we're absorbed by the beauty of the art we're in front of at that moment and would never want to rush away.

You've received many honors: *Cavaliere di Gran Croce* of the Republic of Italy, *Legion d'Honneur* of the Republic of France, Italy's *Gold Medal for Distinction in the Field of Culture*, *Academician of the Lincei*, and the *35th Guidarello Journalism Prize*, to name a few, during your long and extremely successful career. What decisions or events have given you the greatest satisfaction?

A. PAOLUCCI: When His Holiness Benedict XVI asked me to become director of the Museums.



Correct me if I'm wrong, but the most overwhelming event for you as a scholar, lover of art, and Italian public servant must have been when you first entered the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi immediately after it was so severely damaged in the 1997 earthquake. True?

A. PAOLUCCI: You're right, but as extraordinary commissioner of its restoration, I'm also extremely proud to have completed the job well in advance, believe it or not, of the deadline. That undertaking and its success were, without a doubt, the greatest challenge and accomplishment of my career.

You are president of the committee which cares for all the magnificent temporary exhibits in the *Scuderie*, once the stables, of the Quirinal Palace, not to mention that you've been curator of numerous temporary exhibits elsewhere over the years. Which one has most challenged



Left, *The Laocöon Group*, a monumental marble sculpture, bought by Pope Julius II to create the Courtyard of Statues from which the Vatican Museums originated.

Above, the spiral staircase of the old entrance at the Vatican Museums and, below, the staircase of the new entrance

(Photos: Grzegorz Galazka)



your scholarly research expertise?

A. PAOLUCCI: The one I'm working on now which will open next September in the *Scuderie*. The subject is Giovanni Bellini, the great Venetian Renaissance painter.

Speaking of temporary exhibits, are you organizing one in the near future to celebrate your appointment as director of the Museums?

A. PAOLUCCI: I'm mulling it over, but have made no definite decisions as yet.

What are your immediate plans for the Museums, then?

A. PAOLUCCI: To make the most of our collections and the expertise of my expert colleagues.

How close to completion is the construction work to enlarge the Museums' entrance under Piazza Risorgimento?

A. PAOLUCCI: It's still in the planning stages.

Recently the Museums' hours have been lengthened; closing time is now 6 PM. Do you have plans to open a restaurant inside the Museums? After all, many of the world's great art museums house one or more restaurants or snack bars...

A. PAOLUCCI: Again, this is something we're considering, but nothing definite has been decided so far.

Many museums, even in Italy, now regularly stay open during the evening to host events like lectures, concerts, and receptions while people admire the art, with dinners before or afterwards; some even rent out galleries for private parties. What's your opinion about introducing evening events in the Vatican Museums?

A. PAOLUCCI: I know museum



Photo: Grzegorz Galazka

THE MUSEUMS' MOST RECENT DONATION

During a private audience with His Holiness on December 12, 2007, the Great Britain and Florida, USA chapters of the Patrons of the Arts in the Vatican Museums donated a portrait of Pope Benedict XVI by Russian-born painter Natalia Tsarkova to the Museums. "The portrait depicts the Holy Father seated on the recently-restored throne of Pope Leo XIII as a reminder of both his role as a professor and as Successor of St. Peter," Tsarkova told me. "It took me two years to paint. To understand His Holiness' philosophy and personality, I read many of his books and had special permission to draw the Holy Father during liturgical ceremonies, but it took me only three days to complete his face on canvas."

Besides Tsarkova, in attendance were Leonardo Cardinal Sandri, prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches and nicknamed "godfather of the portrait" by Tsarkova; Cardinal Giovanni Lajolo, president of the Pontifical Commission for Vatican City State; Monsignor Renato Boccardo, general secretary of the governorate of Vatican City State; Dr. Antonio Paolucci, the new director of the Vatican Museums; Mr. John J. Brogan, who represented the American Patrons; Sir Thomas Farmer, who represented the British Patrons; and Legionary of Christ Father Mark Haydu, the present director of the Patrons.

More recently, on February 8, Tsarkova unveiled her portrait of Andrea Cardinal Cordero Lanza di Montezemolo, the archpriest of the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, at the Palazzo Cardinal Cesi on Via della Conciliazione.

She is now working on a portrait of Lebanese Father Jacques Haddad (1875-1954), who was consecrated a Capuchin priest on November 10, 1901. During his lifetime Haddad founded many missionary schools, orphanages, and hospitals throughout Lebanon. The founder of the Congregation of the Franciscan Nuns of the Cross of Lebanon in 1930, Father Jacques will be canonized in May of 2008.

evenings are a common practice now all over the world. However, I don't approve because the great art museums of Italy and of Europe risk losing their aura of sacredness. People will possibly begin perceiving museums as entertainment centers and escape hatches and no longer as "libraries of art-works," as they should.

Before coming here to the Vatican, you were superintendent of art in Venice, Verona, Mantua, Florence, and all of Tuscany, and Italy's minister of culture. What are your favorite museums to visit as a private citizen?

A. PAOLUCCI: In Italy, Rome's Villa Borghese. Abroad, Boston's Isabella Gardiner Museum.

Do you agree with the journalist of *The London Times* who wrote that because of her enormous artistic wealth, Italy was a prisoner of her past?

A. PAOLUCCI: Yes, I agree with him, but it's gratifying, not a hardship, to be a prisoner of such a seductive and glorious past.

If you hadn't become an art historian, what other profession would you have chosen?

A. PAOLUCCI: University professor, of art history, of course.

My pipe dream would be to spend five minutes all by myself in the Sistine Chapel. What's yours?

A. PAOLUCCI: Yes, five minutes by myself, but in the Raphael Rooms, not in the Sistine Chapel. Raphael was the greatest painter of all times. However, this is not a real pipe dream of mine. I can satisfy this dream every day, whenever I want.

Lucy Gordan is the culture and arts editor of *Inside the Vatican*. ●