



ANTONIO CANOVA IN THE *SALA DELLE DAME*

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The so named *Sala delle Dame*, because of Gregory XVI's custom of allowing ladies to kiss his foot, was built by Pope Paul V Borghese, who commissioned in 1608-9 the "divine" Guido Reni to create the frescoes on the ceiling with the *Pentecost*, the *Transfiguration*, and the *Ascension into Heaven*, framed by refined stucco decorations featuring Borghese emblems.

Although from the Seventeenth century, the room, with its refined *scagliola* floor, evokes the era of Canova and the cult of Renaissance art, visible in the pilasters of the walls adorned with 22 paintings purchased by Gregory XVI. These paintings are life-sized reproductions of the pilasters from *Raphael's Loggias* and the two friezes with the Hours and Seasons from Raphael's tapestries, executed by a group of artists led by Luigi Fabiani di Riofreddo, a painter of ornaments and animals.

Within the *Sala delle Dame* is a collection of works by Antonio Canova (Possagno 1757 - Venice 1822) and artists closely associated with him, housed at the Vatican Museums since 1984 when the ensemble arrived from the Seminario Romano Maggiore. The Seminary had received these works from Pope Gregory XVI (1831-1846) as part of a bequest from Cardinal Placido Zurla, a close friend and associate of the pontiff. A fervent admirer of the great sculptor, the prelate had gathered a precious collection of Canova's works throughout his life. Most of these are sketches and plaster casts – materials particularly dear to Canova – of religious themes, aligning with the cardinal's taste and with the process of enhancing the "sacred" works of the Master promoted immediately after the artist's death by the Church and by Zurla himself. Alongside the two precious sketches for the *Adam and Eve mourning the Dead Abel*, a work that was never realized, you can see, after having been stored in the Museums' warehouses for years, the small model of the *Catholic Religion*, the sketch of *Pope*

Pius VI in prayer, a plaster cast of the unfortunate *Mourning over the Dead Christ*, the head of the so-called *Saint John the Baptist as a child*, the portrait of the trusted friend Giuseppe Bossi, and two large *self-portraits* of the sculptor engaging with the 19th-century plaster cast of Pius VII, Canova's pope, placed opposite.

The exhibition is enriched by the small model of *Milo of Croton* and the project for a *Monument to Canova* by Giuseppe De Fabris, a sculptor from the same region as the great artist from Possagno. The copy of the *Borghese Gladiator* attests both Canova's and his period taste for antiquity. The only marble work is the beautiful head of Christ by Cincinnato Baruzzi, the "heir" of the Roman *studio* of the sculptor, derived from the plaster cast of the *Lamentation*.