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# THE COLLECTION OF PALMYRENE FUNERARY PORTRAITS IN THE MUSEI VATICANI

Notes and observations



EDIZIONI MUSEI VATICANI

# Introduction

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*To the extent that the modern world stifles dialogue among cultures, it heads towards conflicts which run the risk of being fatal for the future of human civilization. Beyond prejudices and cultural barriers, of racial, linguistic, religious, and ideological separation, human beings must recognize themselves as brothers and sisters, and accept each other in their diversity.*

Pope John Paul II, *Discourse at the Plenary session of the Pontifical Council for Culture*, 18 January 1983

The site of Palmyra, ancient Tadmor, also known as ‘the Pearl of the Desert’, in the Syrian desert, was added to the list of UNESCO World Heritage sites in 1980 on account of its unique aesthetic expression and because it represents one of the most important archaeological sites, at a crossroads of millenary cultures<sup>1</sup>.

In 2013 it was also added to the list of World Heritage Sites in Danger,<sup>2</sup> because it had been under threat right from the beginning of the civil war in Syria, becoming a tragic symbol of all the conflicts in the Middle East<sup>3</sup>. It is impossible here to go more deeply into the numerous aspects tied to this question of the protection of cultural heritage and related international agreements<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *Site of Palmyra*, UNESCO, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/23>. See also Pandolfino 2016.

<sup>2</sup> The list updated in April 2017 contained 55 sites considered to be under threat for various reasons, such as war, political instability, industrialisation or human folly. As well as Palmyra, this list numbers other Syrian heritage sites: Aleppo, Bosra, Damascus, some villages in the north of the country (the so-called *Dead Cities*), Krak des Chevaliers and Qal’at Salah El-Din. See UNESCO 2013.

<sup>3</sup> March 2011 saw the first damage caused by the Syrian armed conflict and the consequent sacking and illegal excavations.

<sup>4</sup> Nor is it possible to summarise the relevant bibliography as it is too extensive. See Arimatsu, Choudhury 2015; Ravagnan 2017.

Palmyra's darkest hour was undoubtedly the period between May 2015 and January 2017, when its most important and best-known monuments were largely destroyed by the iconoclastic fury of the militants of the Islamic State<sup>5</sup>.

We are talking about a real 'cultural cleansing', which means efforts to sweep away the millenary multi-ethnic and religious culture of the Near East in order to restore the area to a fictitious original purity of Islam:

Islamic State views ancient cultural heritage as a challenge to the loyalty and legitimacy of the Iraqi and Syrian people to their cause. To destroy this heritage, defined by statues, temples and ancient cities, means [...] to stifle any nationalistic claim and, from this point of view the archaeological sites are considered to be potential threats capable of feeding Iraqi and Syrian nationalism, as opposed to feelings of pan-Islamism – and therefore anti-nationalism – propagated by Isis<sup>6</sup>.

In addition to this deliberate destruction is the sacking of archaeological sites and museums, which inevitably become an alternative source of financial support for the Caliphate<sup>7</sup>.

UNESCO has defined the destruction of Palmyra as a real 'war crime', because it deprives the Syrian people of knowledge of themselves, of their identity and their history<sup>8</sup>:

The past is not a remote place. It is the mirror of ourselves. To cherish history and art is to care about the future. Only if we can imagine ourselves as part of a human story that connects those ancient faces from Palmyra with the people around us can we call ourselves "civilised",

as the British art critic and journalist, Jonathan Jones, has affirmed<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>5</sup>In August 2015 the Temple of Baal (the central building and a large part of the colonnade) was destroyed as well as the minor temple of Baalshamin; then in September the Roman funerary towers were also destroyed, in October the great monumental arch of three arcades, and in January 2017 the proscenium of the theatre and the *tetrapylon*. Much damage was also done in the Palmyra Archaeological Museum.

<sup>6</sup>Rizzi 2016. The war conducted by Isis against the world's archaeological heritage sadly includes some of the most important sites in the Ancient Near East, from Nineveh to Mosul, from Nimrud to Dur-Sharrukin, from Palmyra to Hatra, from Mari to Dura Europos and Apamea, just to name a few, besides vandalising all the archaeological museums.

<sup>7</sup>According to the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums, between 2012 and May 2015, 125 archaeological items from Palmyra were confiscated by authorities in Syria, Italy and Lebanon. The exact number of objects stolen, however, remains unknown. See also *Systematic Excavations of Archaeological Sites*, UNESCO, <http://www.unesco.org/ne w/en/safeguarding-syrian-cultural-heritage/situation-in-syria/movable-heritage/archaeological-sites>.

<sup>8</sup>The Director-general of UNESCO, Irina Bokova, stated, after the destruction of the temple of Baalshamin: "Such acts constitute a war crime and those responsible must answer for their actions".

The International Court of Justice in the Hague ratified violation of the obligation to respect the integrity of the cultural heritage for the first time in 1995, and in 2015 the UN condemned intentional destruction of buildings and sites and illegal trafficking of objects of symbolic, cultural, scientific and religious importance (Resolution 2199 of 2015).

<sup>9</sup>Jones 2016.

The fury of the Isis fanatics culminated on 18<sup>th</sup> August 2015 with the terrible assassination of the elderly Syrian archaeologist, Khaled al-Asaad, the 82 year old ex-Director of the Palmyra site and Museum for over half a century, who had fought so hard for Palmyra to become a UNESCO World Heritage Site. His life had been entirely dedicated to Palmyra, his city of birth. Kidnapped, tortured and killed because he refused to reveal the location of the antiquities hidden when it was feared Isis would take the city. He was publicly beheaded and his body displayed attached to a column with a card, which labelled him as a blasphemous apostate. This image, which circulated worldwide, became the symbol of the Just against fundamentalism. This Supplement to the *Bollettino* is dedicated to him.

The city of Palmyra had already been destroyed once, in 273 A.D., by the Roman emperor, Aurelian, who wanted to tame the legendary queen Zenobia, who had began her conquest of Syria and the East. Following this destruction the city once more flourished and enjoyed a long period of peace before being gradually abandoned during the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

The spectacular ruins of the ancient city only began to come to light in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when two English travellers, James Dawkins and Robert Wood, re-discovered the by-then forgotten ancient city. Palmyra immediately exercised a great fascination and its antiquities – the funerary portraits in particular, torn from their high funerary towers and extensive hypogea – became, over the course of time, the domain of the antiquities market, highly sought-after by private collectors and museums alike<sup>10</sup>.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Palmyra once more became part of the new craze for ‘journeys to the Orient’ and these funerary portraits became the typical souvenir of a visit to Syria: “Questing spirituality and a re-awakened interest in the East therefore contributed to making these portraits coveted objects for collectors in the West”<sup>11</sup>. The period from 1880 to 1910 saw the greatest dispersal of these portraits among European collections, by means of both the antiquities market and via diplomatic channels. Later, 1960 onwards also saw a record wave of sales of these portraits, which has continued to this day, enlarged by illegal trafficking resulting from the Syrian conflict.

These tragic events have however also increased the symbolic value of these funerary portraits, which have become the most eloquent heritage of a glorious city, whilst at the same time, mute testament to the horrors of its destruction.

The fury of the destruction in Syria, and Palmyra in particular, has occasioned numerous events also in Italy and a series of exhibitions, publications, conferences and meetings have been organised, with the aim of mobilizing individual consciences and international institutions towards guardianship of the Syrian cultural heritage. There are three main reasons for the high risk of destruction in this area: the absence of law and order and the consequent increase in clandestine excavations, the transformation of several

<sup>10</sup>Palmieri 2012.

<sup>11</sup>Koustrup Høj 2017, p. 31.

archaeological sites into military centres and the fanaticism of groups of fundamentalists against ‘images’<sup>12</sup> and paganism:

An unacceptable historic madness which is achieved by means of the destruction of the memory of the cultural stratification of countries such as Syria and Iraq, to which we all owe so much: the earliest agriculture, the first villages, the first cities, the first territorial states, the first empires and, naturally, the foundations of the three great monotheistic religions of the world, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, each a child of the other,

as archaeologist Paolo Matthiae affirmed at the opening of the exhibition at the Colosseum entitled *Rinascere dalle distruzioni* (‘Rebirth from destruction’)<sup>13</sup>.

The Musei Vaticani have loaned works of art to two major exhibitions in particular, the first in the Palazzo Venezia in Rome in 2014<sup>14</sup> and the second more recently in Aquileia in 2017<sup>15</sup>.

This Supplement to the *Bollettino dei Monumenti, Musei e Gallerie Pontificie* is also intended to be an effective tool in the recovery of the cultural heritage of one of the most important commercial and cultural centres of the Near and Middle East in Roman times. A very timely study, which inserts the collection of Palmyrene portraits of the Musei Vaticani within the wider *Palmyra Portrait Project* set up in 2012 by the Danish archaeologist Rubina Raja. More than 3,300 funerary portraits held in museums and private collections all over the world were listed and studied. The project also monitored the international art market, making an important contribution to the denouncing of the illegal trafficking of these portraits, which has been prospering during the years of the conflicts in Syria.

<sup>12</sup>“It is not necessary to wait for a so-called cultural education of images in order to become aware of their tremendous power: Platonic and Islamic, Jewish and Christian, different forms of iconoclasm have alternated one with another throughout history and have contributed towards moulding and defining our way of looking at the world and the way in which it is represented”, see Bettetini 2006.

<sup>13</sup>The exhibition was held from 7<sup>th</sup> October to 11<sup>th</sup> December 2016. Two particularly relevant Palmyrene funerary reliefs were exhibited, nicknamed ‘the two war-wounded’, because they had been savagely damaged with their faces hammered away. They have been restored in the Laboratories of the *Istituto Superiore per la Conservazione ed il Restauro* (ISCR) in San Michele, following an agreement with the National Museum of Damascus, to which they were returned at the close of the exhibition.

<sup>14</sup>This exhibition, entitled *Siria. Splendore e dramma* (‘Syria. Splendour and drama’), took place from 20 June to 31 August 2014. Four portraits were loaned: Invv. 56598, 56599, 56597, 56602. See Pinnock, Tonghini, Tortorella 2014.

<sup>15</sup>This exhibition, entitled *Portraits from Palmyra in Aquileia*, was held from 1<sup>st</sup> July to 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2017. Two portraits were loaned: Invv. 56698 e 56599. See Novello, Tiussi 2017.

## ACQUISITION OF THE PALMYRENE FUNERARY PORTRAITS IN THE MUSEI VATICANI

The splendours of ancient Palmyra live again today in those thousands of stone faces scattered in museums and private collections throughout the world, which represent the largest collection of funerary sculpture from the Roman period outside Rome, as Rubina Raja herself confirms<sup>16</sup>.

All these portraits allow us to reconstruct the social strata of a prosperous and legendary city, a crucible of diverse people who went to and from Palmyra, at the same time mixing among themselves<sup>17</sup>.

Rome, in particular, holds three different collections of Palmyrene funerary portraits, that of the Museo Barracco<sup>18</sup>, that of the Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale 'G. Tucci'<sup>19</sup> and that of the Musei Vaticani. Their histories are possibly entwined, though at present there is no relevant documentary proof.

There are thirteen Palmyrene funerary portraits in the Musei Vaticani in the collections of the Department of Ancient Egypt and the Ancient Near East. The circumstances of their acquisition differ and date back to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>16</sup>Raja, Højen Sørensen 2015, p. 64.

<sup>17</sup>Palmieri 2012.

<sup>18</sup>There are three portraits in the Museo Barracco (Invv. 206, 249, 250), see Cagiano de Azevedo 2002, pp. 399-400 ('I rilievi palmireni').

The portrait Inv. 206, from the London antiquities market, was the first to come into the collection of Giovanni Barracco, certainly before 1892, since it appears in the great catalogue of Giovanni Barracco and Wolfgang Helbig dated to 1893, see Bonanno Aravantinos Roma 2010, pp. 173-175.

The history of the other two portraits, Invv. 249 and 250, seems to somehow be linked to the noted archaeologist and antiquarian Ludwig Pollak, his friend and adviser as well as provider of antiquities to Giovanni Barracco, see Pollak 1929, 190. Pollak travelled in the East for three months in 1900 and recorded in his diary for 19<sup>th</sup> April of that year a visit to Baron Ustinoff in Jaffa, where he had had the opportunity to see some 'reliefs from Palmyra', but makes no reference to any purchase, see *Merkel Guldan* 1988, p. 188, footnote 282. Once back in Rome, in July 1900, he noted in his Diaries that the Palmyrene portraits had been exhibited in the museum of Barracco; but with no precise note of the number of portraits, nor it was Barracco who had acquired them. The fact remains that in the catalogue of the museum written by Barracco and Pollak themselves in 1910, only the portrait Inv. 206 appears (Barracco had therefore not acquired any further portraits at that time). Pollak's Diaries for 1913, however, record that the elderly Baron Barracco and Pollak went to the Museo Barracco in Corso Vittorio Emanuele and here together they looked at 'the new arrangement of the Palmyrene portraits', this time in the plural. The two portraits, Invv. 249 e 250, therefore came into the Barracco collection between 1910 and 1913. It is not certain, however, if these are the same ones as those exhibited by Pollak in 1900. I thank Orietta Rossini for all the information regarding the history of the reliefs in the Museo Barracco.

Independently of the transfer to Giovanni Barracco, there is good reason to believe that Ludwig Pollak had been the mediator in the sale of other Palmyrene portraits in both Italy and other parts of Europe (thanks to Elena Cagiano for her interesting thoughts on this).

<sup>19</sup>The funerary portrait (Inv. 6011) in the Tucci collection was formerly the property of the Parisian antiquarian Feuardent and later purchased by Count Stroganoff from the antiquarian Hoffmann; it then passed into the Muñoz collection, becoming the property of G. and S. Sangiorgi, from whom it was bought by the Italian State in 1971; see D'Amore 1997, pp. 230-231; D'Amore 1984 pp. 642-643; see also Piacentini 2010, pp. 44-46, fig. 23; Bonanno Aravantinos 2010, p. 174.



**Fig. 1.** View of the former display of the Palmyrene Portraits alongside the so-called Scala dei Rilievi Assiri

In chronological order, two are shown to have arrived in the Musei Vaticani probably in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Invv. 1600 and 15030). They appear in the 1957 catalogue of the sculptures in the Kaschnitz-Weinberg storerooms, but there is no trace of their arrival in the Museum in the archives<sup>20</sup>. We suspect that their history is particularly linked to that of the reliefs in the Museo Barracco<sup>21</sup>.

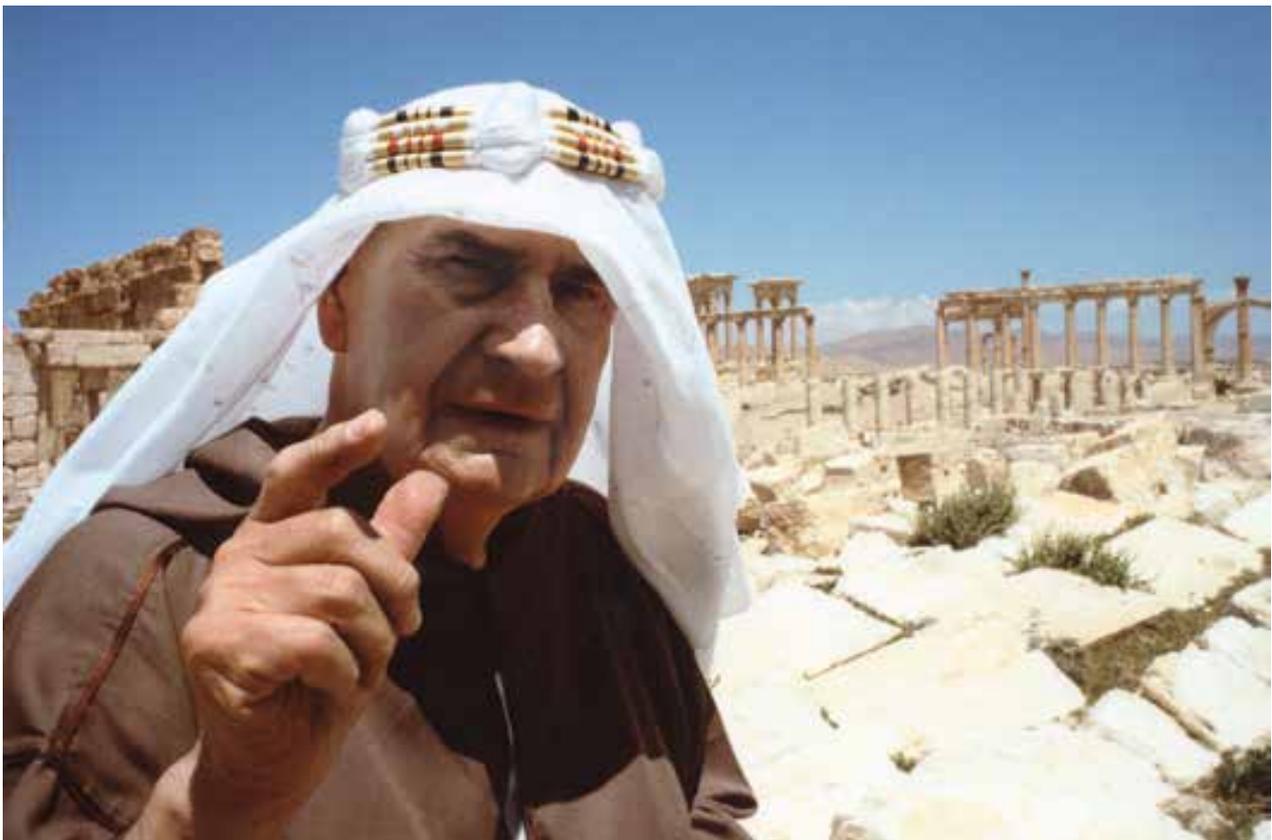
A third portrait (Inv. 15029) was a gift of the Apostolic Nuncio in Jerusalem, Gustavo Testa, in 1945-1947<sup>22</sup>. This sculpture was immediately displayed in the so-called *Scala dei Rilievi Assiri* (Staircase of Assyrian Reliefs), where the cufic and cuneiform inscriptions were already displayed, alongside portrait Inv. 15030, which was taken out of store for the occasion (*infra*)<sup>23</sup> (**fig. 1**).

<sup>20</sup> Kaschnitz-Weinberg 1937, p. 303, n. 740 and 741, Pl. CXV.

<sup>21</sup> Current research.

<sup>22</sup> Gustavo Testa (1886-1969) was Apostolic Delegate in Egypt from 1934 to 1948, in Palestine and Jerusalem from 1948 to 1953 and then Nuncio in Switzerland from 1953 to 1959; he was made a cardinal by Pope John XXIII in 1959. He also gave to the Musei Vaticani a Roman marble sepulchral stele, dated to the second half of the I-II century A.D., today displayed in the *Galleria Lapidaria* (Inv. 8416), see *CIL* VI, 27799; Nogara, Magi 1945-1948, p. 373 and fig. 15; Di Stefano Manzella, Gregori 2003, 186, n. 2579 (L. Bologna); Mander 2013, p. 176, n. 74.

<sup>23</sup> Nogara, Magi 1945-1948, p. 372 and fig. 14.



**Fig. 2.** Federico Zeri in the archeological area of Palmyra

A few years later 1952, relief Inv. 1600 was displayed alongside the other two.

Much later, in 1992, these three portraits were moved into room VIII of the Museo Gregoriano Egizio, dedicated since its foundation to the antiquities of the Ancient Near East. The reliefs were placed alongside some neo-Assyrian inscriptions, cuneiform tablets and cylindrical seals<sup>24</sup>.

Ten Palmyrene funerary portraits were added to the collection in 1999 thanks to the bequest of Federico Zeri, on condition they were exhibited<sup>25</sup> (**fig. 2**).

This considerable bequest and a series of other circumstances led to a re-thinking of the layout of the last four rooms of the Museo Gregoriano Egizio under its then Curator, Lorenzo Nigro.

The new arrangement was opened during the Holy Year, on 15 June 2000. The entire Vatican collection of Palmyrene funerary portraits was now placed together in room VII, within a niche.<sup>26</sup> The disposition of the sculptures on the wall recalls the sepulchres of the Palmyrene, which presented the portraits of the deceased, carved into the stone which sealed

<sup>24</sup>Grenier 1992.

<sup>25</sup>For the bibliography of these reliefs, see below Rubina Raja.

<sup>26</sup>Nigro 2000; Nigro 2001.



**Fig. 3.** View of the current display inside the room VII of the Museo Gregoriano Egizio

the burial, each alongside or beneath the other. Only two of them, on account of their size, seem rather to have been sculptures of a more public nature, or from sarcophagi<sup>27</sup> (**fig. 3**).

The Palmyrene portraits which belonged to Federico Zeri used to decorate the *dromos* of his villa in Mentana, near Rome, arranged as a sort of ‘gallery of ancestors’ as the Zeri family were originally from the Syrian city of Homs (classical Emesa) from whence the caravan route for the Euphrates left, pausing always in Palmyra.

During his lifetime, at the time of the Rimini exhibition entitled *Romana Pictura* in 1998<sup>28</sup>, Federico Zeri had spoken of his wish to leave his archaeological collection to the Musei Vaticani. Besides the Palmyrene reliefs, the collection also included a ‘Fayum portrait’ from

<sup>27</sup> See the Catalogue of Rubina Raja below.

<sup>28</sup> The Fayum portrait from the Zeri Collection was part of the exhibition in question, see *Romana Pictura* 1998, p. 314, n. 146.

Egypt<sup>29</sup> and paleo-Christian remains<sup>30</sup>. He invited the then Director of the Musei Vaticani, Francesco Buranelli, to his museum-house in Mentana, in order to explain to him the reasons for his wishing to leave these finds to the Vatican (fig. 4).

As Buranelli himself has written, Zeri undoubtedly recognised the fundamental role played by the Church in the transmission of art; and he also recognised the influence of Christianity in acquiring and transporting the classicism from which it sprang into Medieval and Renaissance art. As well as that, he acknowledged that successive Popes had collected and commissioned works of art from all periods and taken care for their conservation and evaluation<sup>31</sup>.

In truth, the link between the Musei Vaticani and Federico Zeri dates back to long before this, during the Directorship of Carlo Pietrangeli (Director from 1978 to 1995, the year of his death). A close friendship developed between these two very different men:

Carlo Pietrangeli and Federico Zeri were friends and, at first sight, never was there a more unlikely friendship. The former was Director of the Musei Vaticani, a grand gentleman of the old school, of a cultured and clerical understatement; the latter, formally an atheist, was possessed of a controversial and proverbially hot temper, irreverent towards everything and everyone. Nevertheless, the two became friends and saw each other often. [...] What could have united these two men, apparently so different? Above all, it was their deep knowledge of archaeology and the history of art, and then their love of Rome, a love sustained by an immense erudition<sup>32</sup>.

But who was Federico Zeri? It is not easy to describe such an extraordinary personality. He was a critic and historian of Italian art, in particular, that of the 1400-1500s, an influential academic, intelligent, ironic, and thought-provoking, advisor of many museums and private collections throughout the world, an untiring and acute observer, curious about every aspect of art, a meticulous collector, a passionate and impassioned scholar, a free spirit who showed no respect, but questioned everything. He was proud of not holding a university chair in Italy, and denounced the corrupt system for such appointments with a vigour for which he reserved his strongest arguments.

He loved clarity and had a taste for provocation. Noted for the position he took regarding Italian institutions which did not know how to protect their own works of art, he held the safeguarding of the Italian artistic heritage close to his heart for the whole of

<sup>29</sup>Inv. 56605. It is a portrait of a young man, of unknown provenance, dated to the late Severian period (220-250 A.D.) and exhibited today in the Museo Gregoriano Egizio. It came from the Stroganoff Collection, see Pollak, Muñoz 1912, vol. I, p. 80, Pl. 48; Parlasca 1966, pp. 73, 200, 214; Parlasca 1980, p. 33, Pl. 131.1; Hill, Meurer, Raven 2010, p. 3 in part.

<sup>30</sup>The three fragments of paleo-Christian sarcophagi did not come however into the Musei Vaticani due to complications in the procedures for exportation.

<sup>31</sup>Buranelli 2001.

<sup>32</sup>Paolucci 2009.



**Fig. 4.** Federico Zeri's villa in Mentana

his life, holding it as the mission for which he had to fight, giving vent to his indignation on both radio and television.

Zeri died in his beloved house in Mentana on 5<sup>th</sup> October 1998. This is what the art historian Antonio Paolucci said of him<sup>33</sup>:

No-one understood the Italian artistic heritage as did Zeri. His was the complete, painstaking and implacable, understanding of one who had chosen to be within the artistic heritage, an observant eye, a mind able to organize, to remember and to file, a judging conscience... he detested purely cosmetic restorations, useless exhibitions, the clamour of publicity, stupid sponsorship, the vacuous haughtiness of holders of university chairs, opportunists and the feebleness of museum superintendents and directors. And thus he gave ferocious judgements, which were sometimes also unjust: he was, however, our real antagonist, the only one by whom it was worth being judged<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>33</sup> Antonio Paolucci is one of the most remarkable Italian art historians. He was Minister for the Beni Culturali, Superintendent in Venice, Verona, Mantua and for the Polo Museale Fiorentino, and Director of the Musei Vaticani (2007-2016).

<sup>34</sup> Adnkronos, Florence, 5<sup>th</sup> October 1998.