MALARIA

TITLE	Malaria
ARTIST	Martinetti Stiavelli, Maria (Rome, Italy, 1864 - Marin County, California, USA, 1937)
DATE	1887
TECHNIQUE	oil on canvas
DIMENSIONS	140 x 222 cm

At first glance, *Malaria*, a work executed by the Roman painter Maria Martinetti in 1887 at the age of 23, may seem like a typical "genre scene".

The painting features a woman in a work dress, typical of the "Ciociaria" zone, holding a ball of yarn and thread wound around a spinning wheel, and a boy lying on a shabby mattress, partially covered by a worn-out blanket, with his head slightly raised and supported by his left hand.

The setting is poor: a copper basin rests on the floor of broken and uneven "terracotta" tiles; the wall is made with dry stone; a simple wood-burning stove in the background dimly lights the room, revealing the boy's jacket and boots under the rudimentary bench on which the mattress lies.

Despite the typical elements often found in works depicting peasant life, the painting lacks the folkloristic characteristics particularly appreciated by international tourism at the end of the 19th century.

Malaria is a large canvas, mature in style, assured in composition, and particularly original in the multiple levels of meaning that the artist consciously or unconsciously imparts to the subject.

Upon closer inspection, we notice several details that allow us to delve into the painting: the female figure wears a necklace with two strands of coral and gold earrings, symbols of her

status as a married woman; the boy, only a teenager, has a face marked by illness, with dark circles around his eyes, a pallor over his entire body, and a "scapular" on his chest to entrust his soul to the Virgin Mary.

Everything is suspended, waiting. The woman has stopped winding the ball of yarn, her hands resting in her lap, watching the boy; her face shows fatigue from the long vigil. The boy's intense gaze fixes on the void, aware that the illness will soon claim his young life.

ICONOGRAPHY

Maria Martinetti selects a theme quite common in the painting of the time. Many works were inspired by the effects malaria had on the populations of the Pontine Marshes, a scourge eradicated only in the first half of the 20th century through the reclamation of the marshy areas.

However, the painter does not follow the iconographic example of great artists who had mainly set the subject near a body of water, a symbolic element of the disease, of the transition between life and death, mourning, and sorrow.

Maria finds her sources in realist painting, both Italian and international, and bestows on these two peasants from the Roman countryside a composed dignity, a severe elegance, and a moral nobility. The essentiality of the composition, focused exclusively on the figures illuminated by a powerful "stage light" that leaves secondary elements in the background, amplifies the "epic" dimension and introduces us to a modern reflection on the fragility of human destiny: the young woman, probably part of the family unit, is not just a peasant lovingly attending to the sick boy and watching over the hearth but can be interpreted as the personification of a Moira, who in Greek mythology symbolised the force and inevitability of fate.

The moment of suspension in which the woman is depicted emphasises the dramatic effect: the boy's life is still to be unravelled, a significant part of the ball of yarn is still around the spinning wheel, and the thread runs parallel to the bed where the young man lies. Yet we cannot oppose a destiny already marked. Soon her hands will resume work, and the thread will complete its course.

STYLE

The stylistic quality of this painting is astonishing. The careful intervention of the Painting and Wood Materials Restoration Laboratory, supported by analyses carried out by the Cabinet of Scientific Research applied to Cultural Heritage, has restored the painting's surface to a high level of legibility, which had been severely compromised by heavy overpainting that altered the colour relationships and light vibrations, eliminated several details, and obscured the execution technique.

In this painting, Maria Martinetti demonstrates a masterful firmness in drawing and, above all, an extraordinary control in the application of colour, through elaborate chromatic overlays and a free and rapid movement of the brush.

Absolutely masterful are the different types of whites layered in the mattress, pillow, sheet, the boy's shirt and complexion; the handling of the cobalt blue apron, with floral bands barely hinted at by pink and blue flashes; the details of the woman's dress, from the "sleeve protectors" to the waistband, from the leather bodice to the "cioce" traditional shoes from Lazio region; up to the refined touch of acid green light that, from the flame of the stove in the back of the room, reflects on the woman's earring and reaches the surface of the copper jug on the opposite side of the painting.

HISTORY

After the two exhibition opportunities in Paris in 1889 and Chicago in 1893, the painting remained in the artist's studio until her death in 1937, and in 1938 it was sold at auction with the rest of the family's assets.

In 1953, the painting entered the Vatican as a gift to Pope Pius XII, and was later transferred to the collections of the Vatican Museums, although initially destined for furnishing at the former Pontifical Commission for Cinematography, now the Dicastery for Communications.

In 1993, it returned to the Vatican Museums' deposits.

In 2024, the restoration was completed thanks to the support of the *Patrons of the Arts in the Vatican Museums*, Canadian Chapter.

MICOL FORTI

CURATOR OF THE DEPARTMENT OF XIX CENTURY AND CONTEMPORARY ART