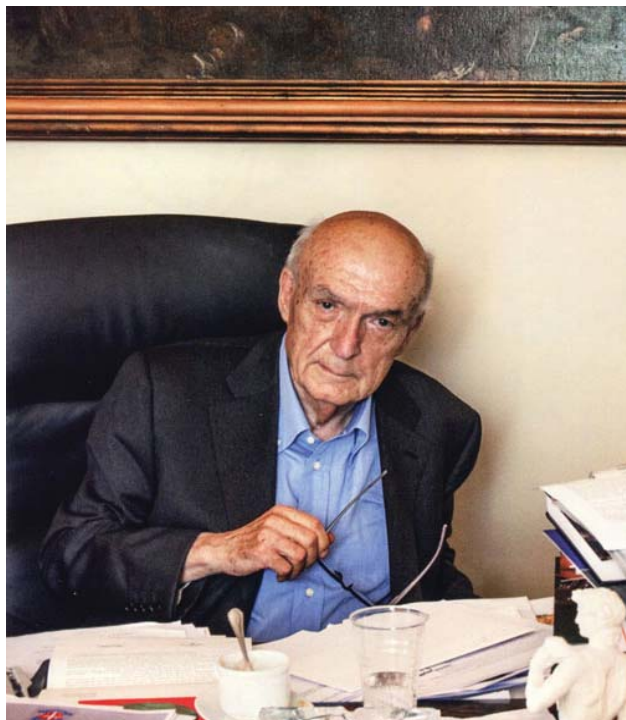


ART WORLD INSIDER

RENAISSANCE AT THE VATICAN



PROFESSOR ANTONIO PAOLUCCI, DIRECTOR, VATICAN MUSEUMS

Anna Somers Cocks profiles Professor Antonio Paolucci, the custodian of one of the world's greatest repositories of art at the Vatican Museums in Rome

After a brilliant career as a museum director in Florence and elsewhere in Italy, and then as Minister of Culture, in 2009 Antonio Paolucci was called on by the Vatican to lead its famous museums, whose first director was none other than the sculptor Antonio Canova.

This is a collection of collections made by successive popes, who had the pick of the antiquities discovered in their territories. It is also an ancient palace and administrative centre with outbuildings designed and decorated by some of the greatest names in Western art.

The 20th century brought the ethnographic collection, but fine art seemed a thing of the past. Paul

VI (reigned 1963 to 1978), who knew many artists from his time in Paris, inaugurated the collection of modern art in the Borgia Apartments, decorated in the 15th century by Pinturicchio and home to some 600 donated works of variable quality (ironically, the Vatican's version of Bacon's famous popes is not among the best).

Now, the Vatican is once again engaging with work by living artists and this year, for the first time, it has a national pavilion at the Venice Biennale with commissioned works by the Italian multimedia collective Studio Azzurro, the Czech photographer Josef Koudelka and the American painter Lawrence Carroll.

What do you say to these who think the Church should sell all of its treasures and give it to the poor?

If it sold all its masterpieces, the poor would be poorer. Everything that is here is for the people of the world.

Has the election of Pope Francis made a difference?

Because of him, even more people have come to Rome. After the Angelus prayer and the papal audiences, they want to see the museums. We have 5.1 million visitors a year and I would like to have zero growth now.

What is the role of the Vatican Museums?

People expect them to be very pious: instead, you see more male and female nudes than in most museums. The Museums have managed to embrace the culture of mankind with great ease; the Church took classical antiquity and said, 'This is mine because revelation has sanctified Antiquity, and I will put it in my house: here you find artistic creation of every kind, from Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel to the Raphaels to Japanese art, Etruscan. Egyptian...

Do you have other collections to care for?

We are like a superintendency for the Vatican, protecting and conserving its heritage. It is just 44 hectares, half garden and half buildings by some of the greatest architects who ever lived - Michelangelo,



The museum's Raphael Room is dominated by the master's School of Athens

Bramante, Bernini and Borromini - and thousands of works of art. Certain places outside the Vatican also come under our care, including the great basilicas of Rome, the shrine of Loreto, the church of Sant' Antonio in Padua. In addition, we are an archaeological service. The Vatican was built above a Roman cemetery. We have found hundreds of tombs dating from the 1st century BC to the 1st century AD including the tomb of St Peter, which you will soon be able to see front a new, underground route, with the last segment to be inaugurated around Christmas

Do you have donors?

Donors from the United States have just paid for the €4 million conservation of Michelangelo's Cappella Paolina and now they are giving €2 million to restore the Gallery of Maps and the same amount to restore the Scala Santa. Every year we get €5 to €6 million, mainly from the United States, but also from the United Kingdom, Belgium and elsewhere.

Do you make loans?

Many. Our criteria for agreeing to a loan include the scholarly merit of the exhibition, but also the priorities of the Church. For his recent visit to Brazil, Pope Francis wanted an exhibition on the Face of Christ, and when Benedict XVI went to Dresden, we sent Raphael's Madonna of Foligno so that it could be shown with the famous Sistine Madonna.

How do you and Cardinal Ravasi, President of the Pontifical Council for Culture, divide up responsibility for culture in the Vatican?

We are two departments of a single Vatican cultural policy - for example, we worked together on the Vatican pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale. Cardinal Ravasi and I are also close friends. He has been decisive in the new cultural policy of the Vatican. His main aim is to rebuild the relationship between the art of today and the Church, a relationship that was broken over 200 years ago with the beginnings of modernity. Ravasi believes that religious art has

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become repetitive and needs a new language. He is well aware of the difficulties and always says that the pavilion at the Biennale is a small green shoot, a sign of the Church's intentions.

In the past there were powerful patrons who knew what they wanted: Julius II and Michelangelo looked each other in their eyes and argued, and the result of this relationship was a sublime masterpiece. Today, how can you avoid art by committee, which leads to blandness?

Cardinal Ravasi believes, as do I, that this is a beginning [for contemporary art and the Church]. It would be ridiculous to ask an artist to do a Virgin and Child or a Crucifixion. The theme of our Biennale pavilion is neutral, it is Genesis, which works for atheists as well as believers from many religions. Ravasi wants to find common ground in which to work. But I do believe that new religious art needs to be figurative; otherwise we risk falling into vague New Age mysticism, while Christianity is made up of concrete things.

What gives you the most pleasure about this job?

After the crowds have gone, standing in the Octagonal Courtyard lit by the rays of the setting sun, with the great sculptures, the Laoconn, the Venus Pudica, around me. Or being in the Stanze di Heliodoro, with the fresco of the Liberation of St Peter: it's already Titian; it is Caravaggio before Caravaggio - Raphael really was the greatest painter of all time. To think that they pay me for this!

Anna Somers Cocks is the Founder and Editor of The Art Newspaper and CEO of U. Allemandi & Co. Publishing Ltd.