

ANGELS IN ART: FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE PRESENT

ROME IS FULL OF ANGELS, NOW INCLUDING AN ANGEL EXHIBIT COMMEMORATING POPE FRANCIS

■ By Lucy Gordan

While there is no definitive global census to prove it, Rome is widely considered the home of the largest concentration of angel art and sculptures of any city in the world. Angels are central to Catholic doctrine, and the city, with hundreds of historic churches and museums, naturally houses countless angelic masterpieces. Depicted in bronze, marble, terracotta, mosaics, frescoes and oil paintings, they reflect the city's spiritual imagination and artistic evolution.

Probably Rome's most famous angels, lining the bridge leading to *Castel Sant'Angelo* — itself topped with a statue of Archangel Michael — are Bernini's 10 marble statues, now copies, carrying instruments of Christ's Passion. Pope Clement IX (r. 1667-9) deemed Bernini's original statues too magnificent to endure outdoor weather, so he moved them to the church of *Sant'Andrea delle Fratte* near the Trevi Fountain, where you can see *The Angel with the Crown of*



Thorns and the one with the *titulus* (the sign placed above Jesus on the cross with the letters "INRI" — "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews").

Other Bernini angels are in the Chigi Chapel of Santa Maria del Popolo and in Santa Maria della Vittoria, where the angel in his statue of *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa* is about to pierce the saint's heart with an arrow, not to omit the bronze angels of his *baldacchino* in St. Peter's Basilica.

As for mosaics, in Santa Prassede's Chapel of Zeno, the 9th-century mosaics shimmer with angels having multi-colored wings. St. Mary Major's ceiling and its mosaic wall lozenges of Biblical episodes are said to be gilded with the first gold from the New World.

Turning to frescoes, there are angels painted in both the Sistine Chapel's and St. Ignazio's ceilings, but don't miss the 13th-century fresco of the *Last Judgement* by Pietro Cavallini, probably Giotto's teacher, in Santa Cecilia in Trastevere.

One of Bernini's 10 marble statues holding the instruments of Christ's Passion flanking the bridge leading to Castel Sant'Angelo. (photo: Grzegorz Galazka)

Below, in the center, is the *Angel of Sorrows*, the only non-Catholic angel in the city, sculpted by William Wetmore Story for his wife's tomb.

On the left, in the exhibition at the Capitoline Museums in Rome, is *Winged Assyrian Genie* and, on the right, *Guardian Angel* by Pietro Da Cortona



Over the centuries, angels evolved in art from mysterious winged figures into emotionally expressive human-like companions. While most of Rome's artistic angels are joyous, the city's unique non-Roman Catholic one is the marble *Angel of Grief* (1894) sculpted by William Wetmore Story for his wife's grave in Rome's Protestant Cemetery. The angel is weeping and collapsed over a dismantled altar.

The word "angel" comes from the Hebrew (*mal'ak*) and Greek (*angelos*), both meaning "messenger." In Christianity, angels serve as intermediaries between God and humanity, the role that Pope Francis saw as his too.

One year after the death of Pope Francis, Rome's Capitoline Museums are celebrating the memory of the "Bishop of the Least" with the exhibition "ANGELS: Messengers, Guardians and Wayfarers. Sublime Creatures from Ancient to Contemporary."

On until November 1 in four ground floor rooms of the Palazzo dei Conservatori, thanks to its commemorative nature, the exhibition is intended to be an event of not only artistic but also of spiritual significance.

Presented in chronological order through a selection of artworks — paintings, sculptures, parchments and documents — the exhibition traces the role of the angel in Western artistic tradition. The works are on loan from several Italian museums, among them Rome's Capitoline Museums, Palazzo Barberini and Barracco Museum; Naples' Capodimonte; Florence's Accademia, Bargello and Uffizi; and private collections, especially for contemporary paintings.

As the press kit recounts: "The project aims to trace the angels' iconographic evolution in their dual role as a bridge between the human and the divine, while also offering the public food for thought on the relationship between the visible and the invisible" — for Pope Francis interpreted his vocation as a bridge between heaven and earth. Moreover, the exhibi-



Ecstasy of St. Teresa by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome.
Below, *Musician Angels* by Melozzo da Forlì, on loan from the Vatican Museums



Below, *St. Michael the Archangel Defeating the Devil*, 2003, by Ugo Attardi (photo: Lucy Gordan)



tion reflects the themes of guardianship, guidance and proclamation, the spiritual cornerstones of Pope Bergoglio's pontificate.

In the entrance room, the plaster *Custodian Angel with a Small Child at his Feet* (1849) by Pietro Tenerani, on loan from Palazzo Braschi, stands alone. On the walls are panels, called "The Lexicon of Angels," listing their hierarchy, characteristics and Biblical appearances. Although the exhibition's chronology is clear, its three thematic sections are hazier: The Messengers, who bring hope; The Guardians, who protect, are a symbol of divine care and loving kindness, and are ever present in the

life and journey of every man; and the Wayfarers, figures of closeness, who embody the celestial presence that guides, accompanies and directs Man's journey through the challenges of his time.

On display in the first room are angels that pre-date Christianity. The oldest is a granite relief of a winged Assyrian Genie, dating to the 9th century BC, on loan from Rome's Barracco Museum. Nearby are an ancient Greek vase with winged figures, the base of an ancient Roman child's sarcophagus with angels at its corners, and a damaged ancient Roman winged Eros. In the second room are medieval, Renaissance and Baroque paintings with angels, and in the third room a small bronze statue of *Saint Michael the Archangel Defeating the Devil* dating to 2003 by Ugo Attardi, and the most recent pastel *New Angels* by Emiliano Omar Gallani on loan from a private collection in Bologna dating to 2025. This third room houses numerous other contemporary works belonging to private collections seldom if ever on display. They include *Ultramarine Blue* and *Re-annunciation of an Annunciation* by Omar Galliani and *Rebel Angel on a Dark Blue Background*.

The exhibition's highlights include *Guardian Angel* (1656) by Pietro Da Cortona on loan from Palazzo Barberini; *The Annunciation Angel* (1650) by Carlo

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Dolci on loan from the Uffizi; and Guercino's *Saint Matthew with the Angel* (1622), formerly in the Capitoline Museum, and Giovanni Antonio' Galli's *Guardian Angel* (1620), known as "*Lo Spadarino*," housed in the Church of San Rufo in Rieti. If you are not yet "angel-saturated," head to the Galleria Doria Pamphilj to admire Caravaggio's *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (1597) and to the Galleria Borghese for his *Madonna and Child with St. Anne (The Palafrenieri)* (1605-6); and the Vatican Museum's Pinacoteca for Melozzo da Forlì's *Musician Angels* and Raphael's *The Transfiguration*.

Although only four works depict angels, the inaugural show of 41 bronze and marble sculptures, all for sale, by the Polish sculptor Igor Mitoraj (1944-2014), at Rome's Teldi Art Gallery on Corso Vittorio Emanuele 295 until September 30, is certainly worth a stop. Subtitled "The Shape of Silence," Mitoraj's sculptures inhabit a suspended temporal realm: interrupted faces and bodies recall the city's archaeological memory and turn absence into language. He reinterprets the legacy of classical sculpture in a contemporary key. As the exhibition's catalog recounts: "From the 1970s onward, he developed his distinctive style: idealized human figures, often of classical inspiration, yet deliberately fragmented, mutilated or bandaged — like relics suspended between archetypal beauty and contemporary vulnerability."

A marble version of two bronze statues in the exhibition, an angel facing the Virgin Mary in a kind of Annunciation

scene, is in the Vatican Museums. Rome is also home to three permanent Mitoraj installations: Fontana della Dea Roma (2003), a striking 10-meter-high bronze fountain located in a park in the Vittoria neighborhood; the bronze doors of Michelangelo-designed Basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli e dei Martiri (2006), one door representing the Annunciation, the other the Resurrection; and a nearby freestanding marble head of St. John the Baptist (2006), all located near Piazza della Repubblica.

Elsewhere in Italy, Mitoraj's works are found in Agrigento's Valle dei Templi, the Uffizi, and in Milan, Pisa, Pompei and Venice. Outside Italy, they are found in many places in his native Poland, as well as Athens, Bamberg, Barcelona, Japan, Lausanne, London, Paris (where he studied, lived on and off from the 1960s, and died), St. Louis, The Hague and Washington D.C.

In 1983, Mitoraj moved to Pietrasanta near the marble quarries of Carrara, a destination for sculptors since Michelangelo, and opened his atelier. On June 6 his atelier, now his namesake foundation, opened its museum to the public on Via Oberdan in the city's former covered market.

On display are 69 works, recently donated to Italy by his heir, Jean-Paul Sabatié, including bronze, marble and resin sculptures, not surprisingly some angels among them, along with a collection of the artist's jewelry.

This inaugural exhibit "*Mitoraj Present*" will run until January 10, 2027.○