

Luca Signorelli's soaring legacy

His frescoes have been seen as a decisive influence on Michelangelo's "Last Judgment" in the Sistine Chapel.

ORVIETO, ITALY

The 15th-century master inspired artists from Michelangelo to Raphael

BY RODERICK CONWAY MORRIS

Giorgio Vasari, the Florentine father of art history, proposed Luca Signorelli as a pivotal point in the development of art "because he showed the way to represent nude figures in painting so as to make them appear alive."

ART REVIEW

The art historian also highlighted the frescoes Signorelli painted in the Capella Nova in Orvieto's Duomo as a decisive influence, "as anyone can see," in Vasari's words, on Michelangelo's "Last Judgment" in the Sistine Chapel.

The tumultuous scenes of the end of the world in Signorelli's frescoes at the Duomo feature scores of nude figures as they had never been seen before (or since), along with "angels, demons, ruins, earthquakes, fires, miracles of the Antichrist, and many other such things." The paintings still have the power to astonish visitors today, yet the artist whose works "Michelangelo always praised above all others," as Vasari said, now is comparatively little known.

Born around 1450 in Cortona in Tuscany, near the border with Umbria, the artist spent much of his career in this neighboring region, and it is Umbria that is hosting "Luca Signorelli," a long overdue exhibition devoted to him (the last monographic show, in his hometown and Florence, was in 1953), with a trio of shows in Perugia, Orvieto and Città di Castello.

Signorelli, according to the mathematician Luca Pacioli, "was a worthy disciple" of Piero della Francesca, from whom Luca would have learned mathematical perspective and other techniques. The Perugia show, of the three the one with the largest number of moveable works, opens with Piero's "Madonna di Senigallia," dated to the 1470s, and two pictures of the Virgin and Child (on loan from Oxford and Venice), attributed to Signorelli and unmistakably in the style of his master.

Other formative influences are well illustrated by works of the Umbrian artist Perugino and the Florentines Andrea del Verrocchio and Bartolomeo della Gatta.

By the time he was in his late 20s or early 30s Signorelli's talents had been

recognized: In the early 1480s he was called to the Sistine Chapel in Rome to contribute to the frescoes being painted there by Perugino and a team of Florentine and Umbrian artists. Signorelli's hand has been discerned in two scenes in the chapel — "The Testament of Moses" and "Christ Giving the Keys to St. Peter" — and these works are represented in Perugia by fine 19th-century watercolor copies of the frescoes, from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

In the central room of the show, the artist emerges as an independent master, displaying that "bizarre and fanciful invention," as Vasari put it, that was to help lend his work its originality and lasting appeal.

This is also the point in his career when Signorelli's new race of boldly modeled and candidly presented nudes — which were to have such a telling effect not only on Michelangelo, but also on Raphael and other artists of the High Renaissance — start to become a regular presence in his works.

Signorelli's earliest surviving monumental work, the "Sant'Onofrio Altarpiece," normally in Perugia's Duomo, is displayed here.

Commissioned by Bishop Jacopo Vannucci (also from Cortona), it offers clear evidence that Signorelli had spent time in Florence familiarizing himself with the latest trends there and studying some of the Flemish works then in the Tuscan capital. At the same time the altarpiece manifests an idiosyncratic and lively personal vision. The near-naked angel, with his childish pot belly, intent on tuning a lute at the foot of the Madonna, is a particularly charming image of nudity as a symbol of unself-conscious innocence.

"The Medici Tondo," commissioned by Lorenzo de Medici and on loan from the Uffizi, is remarkable in setting the Virgin and Child against an idyllic pastoral backdrop of lithe, near-naked youths and a grazing horse. This blending of Christian and pagan motifs reflects the Neo-Platonic, classicizing tastes of the Medicean world and probably dates from 1484, the same year as Botticelli's "Birth of Venus," which once hung with it in the Castello Medici country villa, according to later documentary evidence.

Signorelli's virtuoso handling of the nude is confirmed in the following room by two panels from the "Bichi Altarpiece" at the Sant'Agostino church in Siena, one depicting two young men stripping off to bathe in a river, and the other a diaphanously clad female with infant. The altarpiece was broken up in the mid-18th century and its components dispersed. These two images, which seem to anticipate much later styles of painting, came from the Toledo

Museum of Art in Ohio.

The next section of 25 drawings from a wide number of collections confirms the superb and expressive draftsmanship that underlies the artist's works.

One of these, a male nude seen from behind, from the British Museum, resembles the pose of one of the crossbowmen in "The Martyrdom of San Sebastian," which is on show at the small exhibition at Città di Castello, north of Perugia. This innovative composition, with its daringly low viewpoint, in which two of the soldiers are shown nude but for their loincloths and three in fashionably tight attire, revealing their athletic physiques, caught the eye of more than one contemporary artist, among them Raphael, who copied one of the figures.

After an extended stay in Città di Castello in the mid 1490s, the artist went on to execute a large commission at the Monastery of Monte Oliveto Maggiore, south of Siena, decorating the main cloister with the "Legend of St. Benedict."

Finely made watercolor copies of two episodes, again from the Victoria and Albert, bring the Perugia exhibition to its close, and should encourage visitors to make the journey to that picturesque rural location to see this impressive fresco cycle.

Having completed nine of the St. Benedict episodes, the artist was called away to Orvieto in 1499 to undertake his supreme masterpiece, the "End of the World" frescoes at the Duomo.

Fra Angelico had begun the Orvieto frescoes in 1446. He completed only a small part of the vault before he was summoned to Rome and then to Florence, leaving a vast area still to paint. Signorelli set about the task, with an updated plan and indefatigable determination, and completed the frescoes by 1504. His final touch was to insert a full-length portrait of himself, flanked by a friar in a Dominican habit, almost certainly a posthumous portrait of Fra Angelico.

The primary source for the frescoes was the Book of Revelation, with additional input from learned and popular literature. But while absorbing these, the artist exercised an extraordinarily free hand in realizing his particular visions of the End of the World, the Preaching of the Antichrist, the Resurrection of the Dead, The Last Judgment and, facing each other across the chapel, the Blessed and the Damned.



La sublime eredità di Luca Signorelli (ac)

Some scenes, with their winged devils diving and rolling in the sky, and death-rays devastating terrified crowds on the ground below, uncannily prefigure 20th-century science fiction.

The complete or near nudity of the Rising Dead, the Blessed and the Damned on "that great and awful day" is not the only thing they have in common. All are comely and in the prime of life, manifestations of a delight in the human form that Signorelli found powerful new ways of depicting.

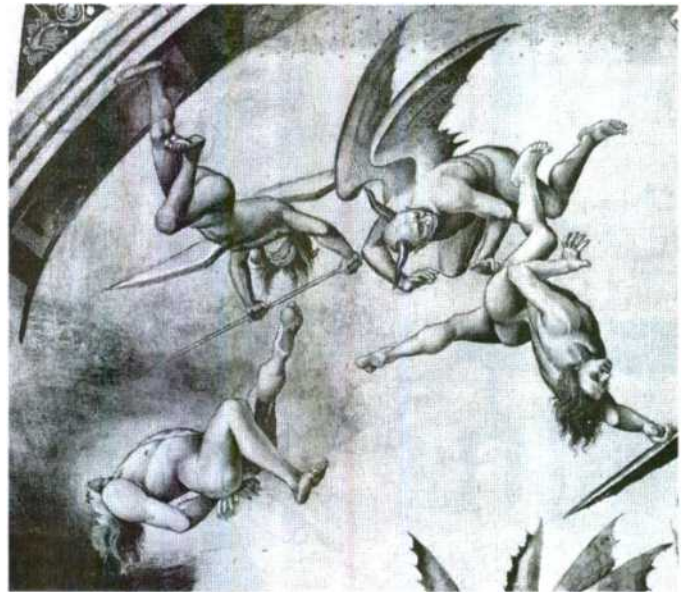
Luca Signorelli. National Gallery of Umbria, Perugia; Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Orvieto; Pinacoteca Comunale, Città di Castello. *Through August 26.*

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MUSEO DELLA CATTEDRALE DI SAN LORENZO, PERUGIA



ABOVE AND BELOW, MUSEO DELL'OPERA DEL DUOMO, ORVIETO



Clockwise from top left: The "Sant'Onofrio Altarpiece" from Perugia's Duomo; a detail from the "End of the World" frescoes in Orvieto's Duomo; Signorelli's self-portrait, at left, flanked by a friar, almost certainly a posthumous portrait of Fra Angelico, who had begun the frescoes.