

François-Xavier Fabre, an Italian Career

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François-Xavier Fabre (1766-1837) has gone down in posterity through his gift to Montpellier of his extraordinary collection of painting. As a result of this act, he is better known as a collector than for his own works of painting. While he may have wanted some of his works to be displayed alongside his rich collection of French and Italian painting, he remained nonetheless an artist neglected by his fellow countrymen. He had produced nothing for several years and the up-and-coming glory of his early days as a young winner of the Prix de Rome was outshone by his fellow artists Girodet, Gros or Gérard. Unlike Fabre, these latter painters had subscribed to the cause of the Revolution, accompanying the rise of Bonaparte with their work and adapting their art to Romantic tastes. Steadfast in his monarchist opinions, Fabre had preferred to stay in Italy and uphold the strict principles of David's Neoclassicism, which had gone out of fashion.

Nevertheless, far from his homeland, he was a reputed artist with the European aristocracy who had just discovered the charms of Tuscany. This is evident in the vast collection of drawings and paintings from his studio which he bequeathed to the museum that bears his name today ; his career was never as effusive as during this period when he became an Italian artist in his own right, in contact with a cosmopolitan artistic society, embracing the model of Nicolas Poussin, his classical master. While the museum's arrangement touches upon various aspects of Fabre's work (Rooms 22, 24, 26), the ensemble presented here is meant as a tribute to his long Florentine career and to the personality of this artist.

Room
Fabre

...

Neoclassicism

...

Becoming Established in Florence (1793-1800)

The French Revolution brought drastic change to Fabre's life : fully integrated into the Academy model and an advocate of the old French monarchy, the young painter found himself helpless in Italy in the face of the irreparable fall of royal rule and the abolition of the Academy. He fled from Rome and settled in Florence where the young artists opposed to the idea of a Republic – Corneille, Desmarais, Gagnereaux (1756-1795), Gauffier – gathered during the tolerant reign of Ferdinand III. The Grand Duke of Tuscany assigned him a studio and it was during the first few weeks of his stay that he met the poet Alfieri and the Countess of Albany whose friendship would be a determining factor throughout his Florentine period (see boxed text).

To guarantee himself regular work, Fabre produced many portraits during this time (cf. Room 26) for an aristocratic clientele of passing tourists who would move in the circles of the countess and the poet. The *Portrait of Allen Smith* is one of Fabre's most ambitious compositions in this area (fig.1). Directly inspired by the famous *portrait of Goethe* by Tischbein (1751-1829) as shown by the *modello** in the Musée Fabre, he is seated, almost reclining on ancient ruins to the backdrop of the River Arno, in a microcosm of the finest references that these travellers sought to find during their "Grand Tour". Rather than the three-quarter pose in the sketch, Fabre would depict Allen Smith in profile in a nobler pose as highlighted by the draped classical effect of the draped fabric of his cloak, taken directly from the effigy of the German poet.

From around 1796, Fabre resumed the grand genre of history painting through the commissions of a more learned clientele eager for scholarly works, several sketches of which are to be found in the Musée Fabre : *Theseus and Ariadne at the Entrance to the Labyrinth**



fig.1- François-Xavier Fabre
Portrait of Allen Smith
Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum
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English translation by Susan Schneider

* An asterisk indicates that the work mentioned is displayed in the room



fig.2- François Xavier Fabre
*Double portrait of Alfieri
and the countesse of Albany*
Turin, Civic Museum of Ancient Art
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Two illustrious friendships, Vittorio Alfieri and the Countess of Albany

François-Xavier Fabre met the Countess of Albany and the poet Vittorio Alfieri in 1792 just as he had fled from Rome to settle in Florence. In 1780, Louise of Stolberg, the Countess of Albany (1752-1824), had forsaken her royal husband, Charles Edward Stuart, pretender to the throne of England to follow Count Vittorio Alfieri (1749-1803), a famous poet and playwright. A child of the Enlightenment, he stood for literary revival in the eyes of his fellow countrymen with the return to classical dramas tinged with passion and romance. In the Tuscan capital, the couple hosted gatherings in the form of a Salon and held sway over cultural life in Florence through the countess' relations and the emblematic figure of the poet. Disillusioned with the excesses of the Revolution, his anti-French political stance brought him closer to Fabre. A firm friendship grew up between the couple and the young painter, bringing him support and backing.

Fabre painted various portraits of his friends. In 1796, he produced two matching pieces. The countess is depicted in an informal pose; she was the painter's pupil as an apprentice artist. Alfieri retains a haughty and dignified manner, in keeping with the poet's stature.

In the same year, a double portrait shows them in their study in industrious intimacy (fig.2). A more moving image is that of his friend painted six months before his death (1803): despite the full red cloak enswathing him, Fabre's is a very tender vision of the old man. The last portrait of the countess dates to 1812.

With no concessions to his model, Fabre depicts an elderly woman, far removed from the attractive young aristocrat. The delicate rendering of the lace of the collar and bonnet, the care taken in depicting fabrics and the model's lively expression tinged with modesty convey Fabre's affection for the countess, who would bequeath her collection to him in 1824.

ordered by Lord Holland (the final painting is at Holland House, London); the *Death of Leander**; or, commissioned by Lord Bristol, *Pyrrhus and Ulysses Rob Philoctetes of the Arrows of Hercules**, the most ambitious of the painter's Neoclassical compositions in terms of size (2.2 x 4.5 m, Musée du Louvre). For the *Return of Ulysses**, Fabre calls on David's formula of a tight composition in the foreground of the canvas in an interior setting. The choice of a night scene heightens the subject's dramatic tension and reveals Fabre's qualities as a colourist; his tenebrism with notes of the fantastic heralds his *Saul and Ahimelech** (Room 22).

Fabre, a Celebrated Painter in Florence (1800-1824)

Meanwhile Italy gradually fell to the armies of the First Consul; in May 1799 the Grand Duke of Tuscany took flight and French troops entered Florence. Yet for Fabre the situation had changed. While it may have pained him to see the symbols of monarchy repressed and the brandishing of the standards of the Revolution, he was now a painter with a solid reputation. Furthermore, in 1801 Lucien Bonaparte recast the former dukedom as the new Kingdom of Etruria, offering a dazzling court life where the painter's talents could flourish. Despite repeated summons by the artistic authorities of the Emperor and subsequently of Louis XVIII, Fabre remained in Italy where he was hailed as a master. While he took up again with his former friends – Girodet in particular (see Room 26) – during a short trip to Paris (1806), he was aware of the distance that existed between his rigorously classical – even outmoded – art, as compared with the new Romantic tendencies that appeared in France during the first decades of the nineteenth century.

As a token of Fabre's conservatism, religious subjects occupied an important place in his work: *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy** marked his return to the 1806 Salon. While the iconography is a throwback to the pietistic images of the Counter-Reformation, the painting reveals the artist's indebtedness to seventeenth-century Bolognese painting in the languidness of the saint's body and the limpid composition of the landscape. Conversely, he chose a powerful sense of naturalism to portray the grandeur and destitution of *Saint Jerome in his Hermitage** or the emotion gripping Joseph of Arimathea as he took down the body of Christ (see *Study**). Here Fabre again demonstrates his taste for drama and the classical expression of the soul's passions, which find their apogee in his *Saul** (Room 22).

Poussin's historical landscapes would also remain a constant reference. In the *Death of Narcissus** he measures himself against his model, which he followed to the letter with his steep rocks, the mirror-like river, the rich foliage and the presence of classical architecture in the style of the master. Yet to this Fabre also brings a sense of elegance and sensuous mildness more directly evocative of eighteenth-century pastorals.

His meeting with Antonio Canova (1757-1822) provided the opportunity for Fabre to bring together the main points of his talent as a portraitist – in the Neoclassical painter's tribute to the greatest Italian sculptor of his time, he is portrayed surrounded by the tools and tokens of his art. With the perfect, geometrical lines of the face, and the hair with its deeply chiselled curls, *A Muse** is a direct citation from the sculpture of antiquity whose models he would tirelessly rework, as is apparent in the replica of his *Venus Italica* (fig.3) shown on the painting. In this portrait of Canova, the natural pose and the keen gaze lend a restrained ardour to the artist's face, emphasized by the virtuosic sheen of his neckerchief. Yet the most moving of his portraits is probably that of himself in his twilight years (*Portrait of Fabre in Old Age**) when he had almost given up painting, revealing the bitter and disenchanting way in which he surveys his oeuvre.



fig.3- Antonio Canova
Venus Italica (plâtre original)
Possagno, Gypsothèque Canova
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