

L'INCANTO DI ORFEO

*nell'arte di ogni tempo
da Tiziano al contemporaneo*

The Enchantment of Orpheus

This exhibition draws inspiration from one of the masterpieces boasted by Palazzo Medici Riccardi – *Orpheus Enchanting Cerberus*, sculpted by **Baccio Bandinelli** – to then explore the deepest folds of the myth built around one of the most meaningful figures of classical antiquity. After being celebrated by ancient authors, the vicissitudes of the mythological poet and bard were studied and interpreted over the centuries, each time offering new insights. The works on display trace an ideal tale around the figure of Orpheus, from archaeology to the present day, with a special focus on the attractiveness of this myth for Florence during the Renaissance, in particular for the Medici family.

Our tale begins with a superb marble bas-relief from the National Archaeological Museum of Naples, in which **Orpheus** is depicted with his beloved **Eurydice** and the god **Hermes** – a major source of inspiration for the poet **Rainer Maria Rilke**. It then continues with other important works of art, from the iconic painting by **Gerrit van Honthorst**, executed during the artist’s stay in Italy, to the sublime drawings by **Francesco Salviati** and **Rembrandt van Rijn**. Orpheus’ enchanting music played with a lyre could charm, sweeten, and move men and women alike, birds, wild animals, and trees, and even attract the rocks and river flows:

“There was [...] a plain that was endowed with green but had no shade. Yet when the divine poet would play on his resounding lyre, shade on shade would seek that glade.”

(Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, X, 88-90)

Travelling with the Argonauts

Even the alluring Sirens are among the creatures spellbound by Orpheus' music and singing. In the very moment when they try to hamper the Argonauts from continuing their journey, they surrender to his melodious poetry and let the ship go:

“and suddenly to the heroes, too, they sent forth an enchanting voice. And they were already about to cast the hawsers to the shore, had not the Thracian Orpheus, son of Oeagrus, holding in his hands his Bistonian lyre, rung forth the hasty snatch of a rippling melody so that their ears might be filled with the sound of his twanging; and the lyre overcame the maidens' voice.”

(Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica*, I, 903-909)

The specific episode of Orpheus casting a spell on the Sirens is recalled in the works by **Alberto Savinio** and **Fausto Melotti**, while the main events of the myth are interpreted in a symbolic key in the monumental triptych by **Luigi Bonazza** from the early 20th century and in the series of drawings by **Luigi Ratini**, which also illustrated some episodes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Orpheus and Eurydice

This exhibit could not but pay tribute to the passionate love shared by Orpheus and Eurydice. The myth has it that Eurydice was running along a river bank trying to escape **Aristaeus** who was chasing her, when she was killed by the bite of a snake hidden in the tall grass.

“The band of her Dryad playmates filled the mountain summits with their cries: Rhodopeian fortresses wept, and Pangaeian heights and Thesus’ martial land, Getae and Hebrus, and Actian Orithyia. He, seeking solace from his lovesickness in his lyre, sang of thee, O sweet wife, of thee alone on the solitary shore, of thee at dayspring, of thee at the death of the day.”

(Virgil, *The Georgics*, IV, 458-465)

The masterpieces by **Titian Vecellio** and **Eugène Delacroix** immortalise the moment when Eurydice passes away, while **Ary Scheffer** and **Gustave Moreau**, exponents of Romanticism and Symbolism, respectively, linger on Orpheus’ desperate mourning of his beloved. Orpheus is ready to descend into the realm of the dead to rescue her.

Variations around his myth

The myth of Orpheus – his charming music, his profound love for Eurydice, his fragile humanity, his overwhelming affliction – has inspired poetry, cinema, literature, and theatre from any epoch to investigate the power and weaknesses of the arts and of the human being.

The image of Orpheus also captivated many artists from the 20th century, including **Giorgio de Chirico**, the author of the set and costume designs for **Claudio Monteverdi's Orfeo**, staged for the **Maggio Musicale Fiorentino** (1949), and **Jean Cocteau**, who devoted a cinematographic trilogy to his myth: *The Blood of a Poet* (1930), *Orpheus* (1950, based on the play staged in 1926), and *Testament of Orpheus* (1960).

In the Hades

Orpheus decides to descend into the underworld, the realm of the dead. Playing his cherished lyre, he sings a sublime melody, begging **Hades** and **Persephone** to bring his lost wife Eurydice back to life:

“We all shall take this way, this is our final dwelling; the human race must here submit to your unending sway. She, too, will yet be yours when she has lived in full the course of her allotted years. I ask you only this: return her to me for a few more years only [...] It’s even said that, moved by Orpheus’ song, the Furies felt their cheeks moistened with teardrops for the first time.”

(Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, X, 34-37 and 45-46)

The spellbinding power of Orpheus is once more successful: to the astonishment of all creatures, the gods acquiesce to his request and allow Eurydice to leave the underworld.

The suggestive infernal atmospheres pervaded by the power of poetry are masterfully depicted in this section, from the back of a mirror to a painting on copper by **Jan Bruegel**, from the acclaimed sculpture by **Pierre de Franqueville** to the bright colour palette of **Anselm Feuerbach**’s painting.

His last song

Although he has been ordered by the gods of the underworld not to turn and look at Eurydice until reaching the upper world, Orpheus – at the threshold of the light – cannot resist and yields to his eagerness: he eventually turns around and loses his beloved a second time, this time forever:

“And when all at once the god stopped her, and with pain in his voice spoke the words: he has turned around, she couldn't grasp this and quietly said: who?”

(Rainer Maria Rilke, *Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes*)

Orpheus turns to music to find solace to his suffering, anguish, and tears, until the Bacchantes, enraged at his refusal, hit him ferociously tearing him to pieces. The beastly fury of the women armed with wands and adorned with grapes finds a powerful expression in the 17th-century painting by **Alessandro Tiarini** and in the neoclassical fresco by **Luigi Catani**.

As the rocks, the forests, the rivers mourn the death of Orpheus, his head along with his lyre floats down the River Hebrus, still singing melodious songs and softly uttering the name of his beloved wife, as testified in the poetic image of **Odilon Redon's** work. Meanwhile, the shadow of Orpheus joins Eurydice on the Isles of the Blessed holding her in loving a tender embrace.

THE GROUND-FLOOR GALLERY

The Limonaia of Palazzo Medici-Riccardi hosts works by contemporary artists, creating a stunning contrast with the elegant 18th-century architecture of the location. Our tribute to the myth of Orpheus is not a rebirth, as it has been a continuous presence affirmed even in the twentieth century through innumerable interpretations in sculpture and painting. This multifaceted myth pivots on love and death, loss and overwhelming suffering, and the main episodes of its legend are a recurring theme in art. One of the major sculptors in the post-WW II period, **Ettore Colla** (1896, Parma–1968, Rome), is present in this exhibition with a metal sculpture entitled *Orfeo*, where engineering blends with the industrial sphere evoking the profound bond between Orpheus and his instrument, between poetry and singing, between love and music.

THE GROUND-FLOOR GALLERY

One of the most acclaimed artists of the last three decades, **Eva Marisaldi** (1966, Bologna), showcases a site-specific installation, built with a motorized ensemble of nine drums, which are heard with a martial rhythm. This installation draws on the premiere of **Claudio Monteverdi's** *Orfeo*, staged in Mantua in 1607, when the clashing sound of drums had a primary role in an orchestra for the first time. A second “instrument” placed at the centre of the installation can be operated by the audience, producing a bellowing sound – in the myth of Orpheus the animals listen to him playing the lyre. A celebration of noise in art, which flows from Monteverdi to the present day passing through the Futurist experience.

THE GROUND-FLOOR GALLERY

At the far end of the Limonaia, we find the work *Dove sei* (2019) by **Daniela De Lorenzo** (1959, Florence), who displayed her creations at the Venice Art Biennale in 1988, followed by other exhibitions in important museums and galleries both in Italy and abroad. Her work consists of a diptych of wooden panels processed with a special technique: an inlay of tiny scraps of drawing paper delicately pressed inside a series of carvings executed on the wooden surface following an oculographic layout, corresponding to the movement of the eye when looking at a figure to identify it. We are faced with two bodies that seem to have evaporated, and we barely perceive their shape; as if they were evanescent shadows. One of the two bodies is almost invisible: it is hard not to identify these “twin souls” with Orpheus and Eurydice, in the miserable moment when he loses his beloved forever after rescuing her from the heart of darkness.

THE COLUMN COURTYARD

Orpheus Enchanting Cerberus

This sculpture was executed by **Baccio Bandinelli** and placed at the centre of the courtyard in 1519 upon the will of Pope Leo X Medici as the emblem of the serenity and concord that the Medici wished to usher in Florence and as a universal symbol of peace and harmony: Orpheus, the bard who had descended into the Hades, even managed to enchant Cerberus, the three-headed dog guarding the gate to the underworld.

The sculpture, which originally featured a lyre, is an interpretation of the celebrated *Apollo of the Belvedere* from classical antiquity. The symbols of the Medici family stand out on its elegant base, chiselled by Benedetto da Rovezzano and Simona Mosca: eagles holding shoots, the family coat of arms, a diamond ring with three ostrich feathers, and the yoke, the personal emblem of Pope Leo X.

HALL 8 - FIRST FLOOR

Orpheus: Literary Sources and Inspirations

Ovid is one of the most important classical authors who delved into the myth of Orpheus, celebrated in the Books X and XI of *The Metamorphoses*; one of the two versions of this work on display dates back to the Medici period with notes by Agnolo Poliziano. Furthermore, Poliziano was the author of the drama *Fabula di Orfeo*, which he wrote in Mantua in the early 1480s. This text is showcased next to a precious illuminated anthology of *Greek Hymns*, which includes the *Argonautica* and the *Orphic Hymns*, attesting to the cultural interest that developed in that period for Neoplatonism. Another invaluable manuscript on display is the libretto for the musical drama *Euridice* by Ottaviano Rinuccini, which was first staged at Palazzo Pitti in Florence in 1600 in the framework of the celebrations for the marriage of Maria de' Medici, and considered the forerunner of the great lyric opera.

Paying homage to Baccio Bandinelli, who sculpted the statue depicting Orpheus Enchanting Cerberus in the courtyard of the palace, on display are some manuscript papers for his reference book on drawing and a praise from the 18th century.