

# FELICE CARENA

## Life in Paint

17<sup>th</sup> October 2024 | 16<sup>th</sup> February 2025

# Felice Carena

Turin 1879 – Venice 1966

In the citadel of art, Felice Carena explored nearly every room and took on various roles. He was both a student and a mentor, a dignitary, an academic a judge, honoured with great public accolades, and finally, withdrawn in meditation, with a clear intention to intimately reconstruct what had been destroyed in the public sphere.

His education took place at the Albertina Academy in Turin, under the guidance of Giacomo Grosso.

The literary influences that shaped the young Carena have been identified: Arturo Graf, who was teaching at the University of Turin at the time, and Giovanni Cena, one of his students, as well as the esteemed critic Enrico Thovez.

Pietism and humanitarianism brought other interests to Carena's attention, such as Segantini's luminous allegories, the symbolism and slightly funerary idealism of Bistolfi, tinged with mystical inspirations, and the atmosphere of intimate, soft shadows in the work of Eugène Carrière.

Carena's horizon then expanded to other artists such as Rodin and above all, Medardo Rosso. He turned to these sculptors to deepen his understanding of a subject that, as it had been for 17th-century painting, appeared fundamental to him: the impact of light on form, the complex paths by which colour becomes light and the vast possibilities of using light to alter the plasticity of bodies and the contours of objects, extracting from them an essential expressive force, those dominant qualities that, having surpassed the Impressionist ferment, settle as dramatic essences in painting.

In 1906, he moved to Rome and, after experiencing the war as a soldier, was appointed, in late 1924, to a teaching position at the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence due to his distinguished reputation. He became president of the Academy in 1933 and concluded his teaching career in the painting department in 1944. From 1945, he relocated to Venice for two decades of exceptional research into the values of colour that transforms into light and from light into pure creative spirituality.

# Family Belvedere

The exhibition, organised thematically, traces the creative journey of Felice Carena from 1924, the year he was appointed as a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence, until the end of his life in 1966 in Venice.

The exhibition opens with a series of family portraits, some of which have never been seen and come from his heirs. The master kept these works for himself, depicting his wife Mariuccia Chessa, sister of the painter Gigi Chessa, married in Turin in 1919; his first daughter Marzia, born in 1910 from his relationship with the Baroness Ferrero of Rome; his daughter Donatella, born in 1920. The exhibition also includes several self-portraits, which offer deeply intense autobiographical reflections and a continuous introspective exploration, forming almost a separate chapter in his complex iconography.

Carena's painting always resolves the expressions of character and emotion with formal dignity and a distinctly personal style, keeping him at the forefront of critical attention, not only in Italy but internationally. With great expressive power, the works respect both facial recognisability and interpretative depth, with modulations of tenderness (such as *Donatella Writing*, 1933) and truth, two of the key elements that run his entire work.

# Still Lifes and Flowers

Still lifes and flowers, as a genre, were privileged subjects for Felice Carena from as early as the 1910s. These motifs became a focus for his attention on chromatic form and a pure reflection on the structure of the image: how light and shadow shape the rhythm of the composition and how the simplicity of elements — shells, vases, bottles — can contribute to a narrative where the true protagonist is the painting itself. The texture, brushstroke movement and choice of pigments unite the surface quality with the luminosity that emanates as a suggestion of the carefully calibrated whole. In this "silent model," the positioning of an object or the shift of a shadow becomes decisive, with tone achieved by reducing the volume of forms and granting the background an essential role.

It is important to remember that behind the Venetian still lifes of the 1950s and 1960s lies the experience and exemplary skill of a master who left a substantial mark on Italian art, embodying a tangible connection with the great artistic tradition, which he resolved with a renewed harmonic quality.

Still life can be seen as a moment of introspection, an approach to one's sentimental self—rationality and improvisation encapsulated in a brief arrangement of forms. How different are the works of the 1910s and those from the Florentine period (1924–1944), which are compact, rounded, and rich in colour, compared to those produced after his arrival in Venice in 1945.

# Classical Echoes and Art at the Academy

*The Stillness* is one of the masterpieces from Carena's classical period: it presents a vision of a timeless earthly paradise, much like the Renaissance Concert scenes of Giorgione or Titian, where the proximity of nymphs and men symbolised the harmony between humanity and nature. Also inspired by classical ideals is *The School* (1928), which Carena painted four years after being appointed to teach at the Academy of Florence, where he would later become president. Art, he seems to suggest, is not an instinctive gesture or mere impression, but a craft and a dialogue with the great lessons of the past. However, it is not just Titian's model that enters the classroom, which the students in the background have already copied. A young man, standing at a distance, contemplates pensively, while humbly dressed figures transform the academic space into one open to everyday life, reflecting Carena's belief in painting as an expression of existence. The same thought animates *Self-Portrait in the Studio* (1933), where, on the right, we see the sketch of a *Pietà* (a theme dear to the artist, both for its sacred and profoundly human significance) and around him, something not typically found in an artist's studio: a group of poor people, faintly inspired by Courbet's *The Painter's Studio*. These figures were equally beloved by the painter from Turin.

"I have loved the light and the poor," he would say of himself.

# Theatre of Man

At times, Carena is inclined to view life as an existential theatre, a stark contrast to his depictions of bucolic figures that envision an idyllic Arcadia. Here, we encounter a series of episodes whose meanings remain suspended and temporally vague. In this unfolding of seemingly hallucinatory sequences, there are no protagonists or spectators: the spectacle is the audience itself, watching a scene that the painter does not depict. It is a realm of tensions without leading figures, where an ideal order fragments into many anonymous faces: the theatre of man is a humanity, astonished, defenceless and seemingly resigned to its own passive existence.

The artist attempts to fill the void he perceives in society by crowding the characters in his theatre with a frantic rhythm of painting, amplifying the subterranean noise of existence with the nervous flickers of his brushstrokes. There is no separation between spectators and interpreters when it comes to the sphere of humanity in the matter represented, and simultaneously created, by the artist. The painter observes and, as Pirandello once said, is observed by the characters who manifest themselves around him, pressing to appear.

# Serenity and Tension of the Figure

The figure is a recurring theme in Carena's painting. Two elements converge in his choice. The first is the poetic movement of the Return to Order, which represents a revival of classical ideals that swept through Europe between the two world wars, and which Carena also felt in the 1920s. Resuming the Renaissance hierarchy of genres, the figure and the nude became the most important subjects in painting.

The second element is a sense of humanity, which the artist regarded as the ultimate purpose of art. "Art must be immersed in an ever-greater humanity," he would say. Much of his painting expresses a participatory sense of humanity. This might be reflected in the shepherds, herdsmen, and horsemen he observed in Anticoli Corrado, the Lazio village where he lived; or in the beauty of the female form, portrayed in all its radiance, even though sometimes the corporeality is captured in its fragility and weight.

A sense of serenity prevails in Carena's works, along with a harmonious relationship with nature, also expressed through the theme of bathers. However, his profound spirituality and religious sentiment do not prevent him from painting, starting in the late 1920s, scenes of unease, which translate into a sign imbued with tension, bordering on expressionism.



# Sacred Art

In all of Carena's works, one can perceive a rare ability to express the “sacred” as an event that permeates form, beyond specific religious representation.

There is a search for meaning, with profound reasons behind the narrative: to impart a sense of thoughtful reflection to every scene.

There is a sacredness to the painter’s creative craft, rooted in the awareness that the pursuit of artistic freedom is always oriented towards the realm of the spirit and that painting cannot merely be a play of original or provocative ideas. The ideal thread running through Carena’s work is this sense of the unfathomable depth of being, intimately Christian because intimately human. For him, there is no separation between spirit and matter, just as there is none between the painted image and truth, as his primary interest lies in recognizing spiritual value in representation. The evolution of form is understood within the creation of the painting itself.

The awareness of religious meaning grows as coloured matter transforms into light, with the simplicity of a flower blossoming or clouds shifting in the sky. These natural effects penetrate the depth of Carena's work, giving it a higher, almost pantheistic, dimension of the world and a firm purpose, chosen through experience: life, which finds its ethical and aesthetic culmination in Christ, the proportion through which problems and mysteries are resolved. This occurs, however, with the "cognition of pain" that pervades earthly things, and for Carena, painting becomes almost a physical compendium, a substance to be observed as a form of prayer. In this transposition, the artist finds the expressive resources from which to draw.