Fabiola or On the Silent Multiplication

My first encounter with Fabiola occurred in Brussels in September 1992. I was wandering around flea markets looking for hand-painted copies of masterworks. The low market value of copies would allow me to possess a collection of “originals” of famous paintings. I expected to someday have my walls covered with unique versions of Leonardo da Vinci’s Gioconda [Mona Lisa] or The Last Supper, or whatever I could find.

Surprisingly, in the same market, a few shops apart, there were two identical portraits depicting a feminine profile that, although vaguely familiar, was not identifiable to me. Street vendors were calling her Fabiola.

Six months later I had acquired a dozen replicas of the veiled woman by Jean-Jacques Henner, whereas my masterpiece collection was still only a couple of copies of Jean-François Millet’s The Angelus and a very laborious version of Pablo Picasso’s Les demoiselles d’Avignon. Eventually, I ended up swapping my Picasso for yet another Fabiola.

The omnipresence of this obscure painting was somewhat enigmatic. I was wondering why, out of all available models, the amateur was insisting on copying a painting by a forgotten master of the nineteenth century. The seductive simplicity and its consequent ease of reproduction weren’t enough to explain its potential for multiplication. I perceived a mutual ignorance: whereas professional painters plagiarized Marcel Duchamp, Sunday painters paraphrased Jean-Jacques Henner. Fabiola indicated a different criterion of what a masterpiece could be.

—Francis Alÿs

Mexico City, September 1994
The works in this installation all depict the same subject: a fourth-century Christian saint known as Fabiola. She is portrayed, in accordance with her canonical representation, as a young woman in profile, facing left, wearing a crimson veil. The prototype is a lost 1895 painting by a late nineteenth-century French academic, Jacques Henner. In its iconography, style, and composition, Henner’s portrait was unique, even conventional. Nonetheless, his direct rendering of the saint’s features was deftly sketched and, as evidenced by the wide variation among the works on view here, not easily replicated. Given that the original was lost long ago, the model for each of these works must have been a reproduction, perhaps an illustration in a book or magazine, a picture postcard, or an engraved print. Although many thousands of mechanically reproduced images of Fabiola have been printed, every work included here was made by hand. The 14 objects (and the original) distinguish themselves from one another by appending any initial impression of homogeneity. Contributing to their enormous diversity is the variety of mediums: of paint, gouache, embroidery, enamel, pearls, fabric, paper, silk, cloth, and in some cases, even a coinable instance; seeds and beans. This, along with the unusually broad range of supports (which includes glass and porcelain among the more usual materials), blurs the boundaries between folk art, craft, or traditional fine art, in which these works were created.

There is also a notable range in the makers’ levels of skill. Only a few demonstrate the proficiency expected of a professional artist; almost all have been made by hand. Yet, paradoxically, it’s the technical limitations of the “Sunday painter” that often make an individual rendering particularly compelling. Different differences may be attributed to the fact that, consciously or not, some of these makers introduced features belonging to another model, perhaps someone known personally, or made an idiosyncratic or improvised change.

Little noted in the ecclesiastical pantheon for centuries after her canonization in 437, Fabiola finally escaped from obscurity by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when nineteenth-century Europe. According to her first advocate, the early church father Saint Jerome, she left an abusive husband and remarried, only to be widowed years later. After converting to Christianity and making public penance for the sin of divorce, she then devoted the remainder of her life (and finances) to charitable work, reputedly founding the first hospital for the poor; on the outskirts of Rome in the late fourth century. Fabiola’s life was to be marked by a series of miracles, the most famous of which, published by the British Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman, a pillar of the Catholic, revealed her as the true patron saint of London. The Catacombs quickly became a best seller, and it continues to influence Catholic devotion and articulations. Reviewed as the protector of abused women, Fabiola is also extolled as an exemplar of grace. However, she does not seem to have become the object of official or public worship expressed in the form of dedicated sites and shrines. Devotion has remained marginal, and the personal supplications to the second half of the twentieth century, popular interest in Fabiola consequently required inexpensive reproductions, but as this work demonstrates, the conventional image of Fabiola as such, the image of the third-century botanical and biblical author, the devotee of the image’s true and ancient prototype, by the use of the material qualities that lend it an aura. What is it that makes it become an icon, an object beyond any consideration of taste? How it has served as a reminder of the existence of a completely parallel and separate art scene from, say, train, one with its own references and obsessions.

—Lynne Cooke

Byzantine Fresco Chapel

In the salão, Merô Collection founder Dominguê de Moré became aware of two thirteenth-century frescoes that had been stolen from a church in Lyons. Completely unknown fragments, and yet, as far as his knowledge allowed. After establishing that the Holy Archepiscop of Cyprus was the rightful owner, the Merô Foundation purchased these damaged yet evocative works on the Church’s behalf and financed their restoration. The Archepiscop agreed to an extended loan, and in 1986 the Byzantine Fresco Chapel, designed by architect François de Moré, was opened to house the frescoes. They returned to Cyprus in 2006, and this project is the second in a series of installations in the building that began in 2003.

The Fabiola Project

Frances Alpy: The Fabiola Project is curated by Frances Alpy and Lynne Cooke. Senior Curator, Special Projects in Modern Art, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. The exhibition is coordinated by Tolly Kamus, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, the Merô Collection, and is generously supported by the John R. Eckel, J.D. Foundation; Jamie and Shannon Sasser; and the City of Houston.