

The Earthly Eden: Painting the Enchantment



In the late 1800s and early 1900s poets such as Giovanni Pascoli and Gabriele D'Annunzio, like the Romantic poets who preceded them, viewed Versilia, the coastline, the Garfagnana mountains and the plains of Lucca as a paradise on earth. Giacomo Puccini drew lyrical inspiration from his home alongside Lago Massaciuccoli. This region, which still maintains many of its charms today, was untouched by the forces of industrial "progress" already affecting so much of the Western world, which would later be decried by writers like T. S. Eliot, Aldous Huxley and Giuseppe Ungaretti (the son of Lucchese parents).

At the same time, artists (Moses Levy, Alfredo Meschi, Nino Carrara, Giovan Battista Santini, Plinio Nomellini, Alberto Magri, Lorenzo Viani and others) were painting the natural landscapes and seascapes of this mostly rural world, enchanting both in reality and in the artistic imagination. The rivers, forests, beaches and countryside, and the men and women who worked the soil, appealed to these artists. But they were not insensitive to the city of Lucca with its monuments, and especially to Ilaria del Carretto, symbol of a pure and eternal beauty.

To what degree were these artists influenced by the poets who preceded them? This is a question, according to the coordinator Maria Stuarda Varetti, to which the exhibition of the Fondazione Banca del Monte di Lucca may propose an answer. Professor Umberto Sereni, curator of the exhibit, has suggested that we look at, among other literary sources, Giovanni Pascoli's *Canti di Castelnuovo*, especially the series *La Sementa* (early poems

composed around 1897; the word means *the sowing*), to see the inspiration for Alberto Magri's painting *La Sementa* (above). With his two sisters Maria and Ida as protagonists, Pascoli drew an appealing portrait of country life. The *Sementa* is viewed not in terms of hardship, but rather for the beauty and authenticity of rural life, as were the vendemmia, the casa colonica – all of which would be threatened by the encroachments of modern life. The Bargan Magri (1880-1939) was a friend and contemporary of Pascoli. He had worked for ten years on his large painting *La Sementa*, and it was received with great acclaim at the Venice Biennale in 1928, when modernity had already begun its advances across Europe.

The romantic traces of Percy Bysshe Shelley, whose inert body washed up upon the beach at Lerici, and of his fellow poets would not be extirpated from this territory. They had written of eternity, purity, idealism and freedom. They were inspired by and found refuge in Italy with all its natural beauties.

The exhibition, which covers the three floors of the Foundation's palazzo, includes some 70 paintings. In addition to the Italian painters there are works by foreign artists such as the American etcher and illustrator Joseph Pennell (who illustrated, for example, *Italian Hours* by Henry James and *A Road in Tuscany* by Maurice Hewlett) and by women artists such as Evelina Gaddi and Marzia Martelli Bernardini. This is a unique opportunity to see works of art rarely on public view.

– by Norma Jean Bishop

Lorenzo Viani, *Benedizione dei morti del mare* (Blessing of the dead from the sea), GAMC Viareggio



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