

Antonello Da Messina
Ca. 1430-1497

By
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Of all the artists of the early Italian Renaissance considered most important to the development of artistic expression in Northern Italy was a gentleman born in Sicily!

Antonello da Messina made it possible for large paintings to decorate important meeting halls and churches using oil paint on canvas instead of frescoes on plaster in those areas where frescoes were not likely to withstand the dampness of winter or the storms of spring, such as in Venice and Milan. (Even the pristine colors of Leonardo da Vinci's fresco of the Last Supper faded and decayed not long after he painted it in Milan.)

Antonello's oil paint also made it possible for every major family who wanted to celebrate its greatness to provide portraits for their descendants that far exceeded the depth of color and naturalistic expressions of the egg tempura on wood portraits that preceded them.

So, who was Antonello da Messina and how did he come by this extraordinary talent of his with the medium of oil on canvas?

Background

In the 15th century, Naples and Sicily alternated between Angevin (Anjou, French) and Aragonese (Aragon, Spanish) control and eventually were united under Alfonso V of Aragon, who in 1443 assumed the title of “King of the Two Sicilies.” At that time Naples was the largest and most affluent city in Italy and attracted artists from all over Europe, including Flanders (The Netherlands), the home of Jan van Eyck , Hugo van der Goes and Roger van der Weyden. It is believed that Colantonio (Niccolo Antonio) learned the technique of oil painting from a relative of Van Eyck in Naples in the 1440s and passed it on to Antonello, his student, in the 1450s.

But while the work of the Flemish artists was considered “late Gothic,”Antonello’s mastery of oil painting, combined with the humanistic approaches being developed in early Renaissance Italy, led him to create far more vivid and naturalistic works of art than any of his Flemish predecessors. So exceptional and realistic were his works that he was called to Venice to share his knowledge with the burgeoning Venetian School whose love of color resulted in the outstanding works of the Bellinis, the Vivarinis and Carpaccio.

Antonello's Works

Among Antonello's early works was an altarpiece he painted for the Church of San Cassiano in Venice. Notice the image of Saint Nicholas of Bari (otherwise known as "Santa Claus") on the left looking out at the viewer—a definite reference to a technique introduced in Italian painting in Florence by Masaccio in 1427, called, "the sacred conversation." It is said that Venetian art was never the same after Antonello's visit—either in the atmospheric colors of the landscapes or in the realism of the figures.

It is not certain if Antonello produced this next work while still in Venice or after his return to Messina. It is a truly exceptional work known as "St. Jerome in his Study," that closely resembles that of the Flemish Masters, complete with Gothic windows above and a towel on a hook on the side. However, the evidence that Antonello had already returned to Messina may be seen in the Sicilian landscape evident through the windows on the first floor to the left, and the majolican floor tiles below. But the Lion of St Mark (icon of Venice) is also seen lurking in the shadows on the right.

His "Salvator Mundi" is another example of the combination of Flemish coloring and the delicate humanism in the features of Christ's face, with an inscription referencing the artist at the base, as was common in Flemish art.

His painting of the Madonna (“The Virgin Annunciant”) looking up from a book and raising her hand in greeting to the Angel, is a big step away from the Flemish in that the face of the Madonna is definitely Sicilian with her dark eyes and Greek nose, while her veil is delicately patterned.

In one of his depictions of the Crucifixion, Antonello’s imagination truly exceeds every other artist of his time. Although Golgotha is depicted complete with skulls, and the countryside is once again Italianate, the bodies of the two thieves on either side of Christ are extraordinary in the way they are twisted while hanging from bare tree limbs instead of the usual crosses.

Finally, the numerous portraits Antonello painted are scattered in museums all over Europe, but they all display a certain insight into the characters of the men he portrayed. Here we show just two: one labeled “The Condottiere,” and a second called, “The Man from Cefalu’.” The last one almost looks like he could be a relative of someone you know, laughing at one of your jokes.

