

Urban Souls and Kings on Royaards' Canvases

'INCONTRI' is the Belgian artist's first solo exhibition, at the Centro San Bartolomeo

A celebrated photographer and an unknown woman in red; a barista of Ethiopian descent and a priest; a king and a former king. Yet Benjamin Royaards is not confined — in a Pirandellian sense — to six characters. There are countless figures whom the Belgian painter from Antwerp — now ten years resident in Bergamo — has committed to canvas. His talent is unmistakable, as is the sharpness of his artistic gaze. “I try to capture the soul of the people I portray. Every portrait is an encounter, a conversation that enriches my life. Whether they are famous or unknown makes no difference to me,” Royaards says.

Bergamo's exhibition season opens with him.

His very first solo show, titled **INCONTRI** – Encounters, runs from 6 to 14 September at the San Bartolomeo cultural centre. “These fifty works needed to be shared with the public.” He is curious to see how people will respond: “Do they recognise something of themselves in my portraits? Do they identify with them?” he wonders. But perhaps the real question is this: will the people of Bergamo recognise those portrayed? Almost certainly — many of Royaards' subjects are woven into the social fabric of the city.

And if Italy is a nation of coffee bars, the Flemish painter has clearly taken note. “I was having coffee with Gianni Limonta, a wonderful photographer, at Bar Pozzoli in the Santa Lucia district. Suddenly I felt compelled to paint him. He's the quintessential Bergamasco: rather stern by nature. But when I showed him his portrait, he was moved.” The owner of Kefa Coffee in Via Pignolo also became a source of inspiration. As did the woman in the red dress “who was sitting alone at a table at La Marianna. I had no idea who she was, but in 2022 she became the starting point of my painting practice.”

He has been painting for only three years, but Royaards comes from a profoundly creative family. “My parents are both actors. My great-grandfather appeared on some of the most illustrious stages in the world. After studying film and photography at the 'Kunsthumaniora', I produced a feature film directed by my father, Hans. And Antwerp — where I'm from — is a breeding ground for writers and painters. In Italy, on the other hand, it sometimes seems as though having an artist in the family is a calamity,” he says with a laugh. His children are still very young; whether they will inherit their father's artistic

inclinations remains to be seen. “They’re called Riccardo, Lucia and Leonardo. I had to let my wife — who’s from Bergamo — have her way when it came to their names. And that’s just as well. For them, carrying my surname here is complicated enough,” he jokes.

The youngest, six years old, appears on the poster for INCONTRI.

Then there are the official marks of recognition, arriving from both Vatican City and Brussels. “The portrait of Pope Francis came about after his visit to Belgium,” Royaards explains. “Something about Bergoglio’s presence struck a chord in me. I sent a photograph of the painting to the Vatican. He wrote back to thank me — it meant a great deal.” The Belgian royal family went even further.

Inspirations

“The first portrait was born from observing a woman sitting at a table at La Marianna.”

“One day I saw a photograph of King Philippe of Belgium,” the painter recalls, “alongside his father, Albert II — the former king who abdicated in favour of his son. I made a painting from it and sent a picture of the work to the palace. The King liked it so much that he asked me to send him the original. I gifted it to him, as I couldn’t imagine a better home for it. A print of that portrait will be on display at the exhibition in Bergamo.”

Benjamin Royaards is a *modernissimo pittore di palazzo e di bottega* — a thoroughly contemporary painter of court and of workshop.

“Ezio Lorenzi was one of the last artisans of the Città Alta,” he says. “He is approaching one hundred and had to close his tiny shop on Via Salvecchio some time ago. I painted a portrait of him in which his age is tangible — and, since he no longer works, so is his sorrow.”

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