



Marco Navoni  
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# Guide to the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana

Electa

# Preface

Why so much passion, so much care – and so much expense – in the matter of collecting works of art on the part of Federico Borromeo, Carlo’s cousin and successor, who in 1567 did not hesitate to sell his collection of antiquities in order to offer the Church the model of a bishop who was also poor?

The point of reference – the Council of Trent – was the same, but what differed was the sensitivity of the Christian humanist Federico, who thus, in *De pictura sacra*, harkened back to the Council’s indications that invited one to “give people instructions about the mysteries of faith and sacred stories, not only with words, but also with paintings and other visual media that can stimulate people to reflect on the articles of faith”. Not just sacred painting, however; because the face of God the Creator and Father is also discovered and rediscovered by reading in the two books, the one containing sacred stories and the one about nature.

Hence, what will the visitor who – after taking a curious look at the casts of Trajan’s Column – climbs the staircase and crosses the threshold of the Pinacoteca, find? The intense concentration of Leonardo’s *Portrait of a Musician*; the cartoon for the School of Athens by Raphael, truly a unique work; the very refined *Madonna of the Pavilion* by Botticelli; the unparalleled *Basket of Fruit* by Caravaggio (“I would have hung a similar basket next to it but as no one was able to attain its incomparable beauty and excellence, it remained alone”, Federico noted); and then Titian, Bernardino Luini, the *Elements* and the villages of Jan Brueghel... Encounters that fuel intense emotions and turn a visit to the Ambrosiana into one of the pages that never fade in the great book of memory.

The Pinacoteca is not something static, it lives and grows, and it has done so from the beginning. Generous gifts were added to Federico’s collection by Galeazzo Arconati (the Codex Atlanticus), Manfredo Settala, Giovanni Edoardo de Pecis, Duke Lodovico Melzi d’Eril, Leone Sinigaglia, Attilio Brivio, Count Vincenzo Negrone Prati Morosini... The story is magnificent and well known. A dream come true

would be to have a Sala del Novecento (Twentieth-century Room); but, to quote the Gospel words – one sows and another reaps – we probably have to say that one dreams and the other creates. All the same, we shall see...

In the meantime, my memory returns gratefully to recent donations: the splendid *Head of Christ the Redeemer* by Gian Giacomo Caprotti, known as Salai (1480-1524), donated by Bernardo Caprotti in 2013; the *Christ Carrying the Cross* by Giovanni Francesco Maineri (1460/1470-1510?), donated by Bruno Vergano in 2014; the splendid fifteenth-century Italian majolicas offered by Anna Villani; the 72 Hindu ritual plaques representing Virabhadra, the warrior god, donated by Giuseppe and Paola Berger in 2018; the *Landscape with a Lake*, donated last year by Antonio Coppola and hung next to the *Landscape* by the same artist; lastly, a “Tower Clock” that reproduces the complex astronomical machine of Chiaravalle Abbey, which was also studied by Leonardo da Vinci, donated in 2020 by Dolce&Gabbana.

Lastly, on display once more is the *ritual Tupinambá Cloak*, consisting of 5,300 feathers, prevalently from the Scarlet ibis and restored by Guia Rossignoli on the occasion of the Eighteenth Edition of *Restituzioni*, an event sponsored by Intesa SanPaolo to which we express our gratitude.

Heartfelt thanks also go to Marco Navoni and Alberto Rocca who, with this *Guide*, have helped us to penetrate the forest of symbols that is the world of art and painting in particular.

**Mons. Marco Ballarini**  
Prefect, Biblioteca Pinacoteca Ambrosiana

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# Entrance

Lombard sculptor  
17th century



**Bust of Cardinal  
Federico Borromeo**

Inv. 2395  
Bronze; 90 x 47 cm

On the gate door that leads from the entrance hall to the Sala Custodi of the Library stands a bronze bust of Cardinal Federico Borromeo. He is portrayed in the conventional manner adopted for portraits of him after his death. The bust was made at the expense of the Borromeo family.

Casts from Trajan's Column  
16th century



Inv. 1556



Inv. 1557

### Plaster Casts

Inv. 1556 - 1566

It was probably Cardinal Federico Borromeo himself who wanted these plaster casts for the Ambrosiana. They reproduce a number of scenes from the famous Trajan's Column in Rome, on which bas-reliefs tell the story of the conquest of Dacia by Emperor Trajan. The casts were originally in the collection of Leone Leoni (1509-1590), the famous sculptor to Emperor Charles V, who kept these works in the "Casa degli Omenoni", his residence in Milan. He himself had taken or replicated them from earlier models. The value of these casts was both documentary and academic,

antiquities and archaeology in the Ambrosiana, so that, also in Milan, it would be possible to admire the great works of Rome and use them as models for studies at the Academy. The following scenes can be seen on the left wall, from top left: (1) Three Dacians fleeing, and Roman soldiers; (2) A Roman knight, two fallen Dacians and Emperor Trajan; (3) Emperor Trajan performing libations; (4) A Roman knight, Emperor Trajan speaking and Dacian ambassadors; (5) A Roman knight, Sarmatian knights and a boat carrying troops; (6) Emperor Trajan on horseback. On the right-hand wall, from top left: (7) Dacian knights helping their



Inv. 1559



Inv. 1561



Inv. 1560



Inv. 1562

comrades as they are swept away in the Danube, and Emperor Trajan at the helm; (8) Dacians attacking and a Roman knight; (9) Dacians attacking and Dacians fleeing; (10) Transport of horses on the river, Emperor Trajan and a Roman soldier working; (11) Roman soldiers attacking and Dacians washed away in a river. It is important to note how these casts provide precious evidence of the state of some of the original reliefs on Trajan's Column in the mid-sixteenth century. They reproduce scenes carved on the first seven spirals around the column, which were the easiest to reach and thus also to copy most accurately.



Inv. 1563





Inv. 1564



Inv. 1565



Inv. 1566

Pellegrino Tibaldi (Pellegrino Pellegrini)  
Puria di Valsolda (Como), about 1530 - Milan, 1596



### Stories of the Four Crowned Martyrs

Inv. 1202 - 1203  
Black chalk and charcoal, bistre  
watercolour on primed paper; 195 × 58 cm  
Donated by Cardinal Federico Borromeo,  
1618

Pellegrino Pellegrini, called Tibaldi, who was the architect of the Fabbrica del Duomo, made a number of preparatory cartoons for the stained-glass windows of Milan Cathedral. The subject is that of the early-fourth-century Four Crowned Martyrs, the patron saints of sculptors and stone cutters (and for this reason the patron saints of the Duomo craftsmen).

The cartoon on the left portrays a nude figure on a bed, surrounded by onlookers. On the right we see a young pilgrim moving away.