

Descrivedendo Duomo Museum

“San Carlo in procession with the Holy Nail”

“San Carlo in procession with the Holy Nail” is the title of this work, created by the Lombard artist *Fede Galizia* in the second decade of the seventeenth century.

This painting is a remarkable size: it is around 216 centimetres high and 121 centimetres wide and so forms a rectangle, with the vertical being the longest side.

The technique used was oil on canvas and the painting was created in a realistic style, that is, attempting to reproduce forms and colours as they are normally perceived by the human eye.

The subject of the painting is the Archbishop of Milan, *Carlo Borromeo*, who holds a cross in his hands to lead what we know was a procession held in 1576 in the cathedral square to ward off a plague that had struck the city.

The point of view adopted with regard to the main subject is close and diagonal: the artist captures Carlo Borromeo from a slightly raised position at three-quarter length, favouring his right side as well as the front. The result is that the Archbishop, depicted in the foreground at full length, occupies most of the canvas: his figure starts close to the lower edge and continues up to around fourth-fifths of the height of the painting, leaving space for the figures and the surrounding buildings only at the sides and in the upper part of the canvas.

I will now describe the appearance of the main character before moving on to the other elements in the painting.

Carlo Borromeo is portrayed as a man of around forty years of age who holds a large cross in his hands. His head is slightly bowed forward and tilted towards his left shoulder.

A barely visible beard is seen on the thin face around a mouth held shut. His large, round eyes from which copious tears fall stand out, while his gaze is directed at the large cross that he carries in front of him. His expression is emotional but, rather than sorrowful, he appears hopeful and proud. The clergyman extends his right forearm to grasp its base while his left reaches higher up, the hand resting on a transparent veil placed around halfway up the wooden vertical of the Cross. At the intersection of the two pieces of wood, *the Relic of the Holy Nail*, which was used for the crucifixion of Jesus, is preserved. The Cross, made of dark wood, starts at the level of Carlo Borromeo's abdomen and reaches above the top of his head: it must therefore have been around a metre high.

Bare feet stick out from the Archbishop's clothes, the left in front of the right, which displays an injured big toe, both engaged in walking on uneven ground where stones, earth and sprigs of leaves can be seen.

Carlo Borromeo wears an outfit of clothes suitable for the solemn occasion. A long black cape with a train, open at the front, has a hood with a red cuff that reaches the man's forehead, covering his hair entirely. Through the opening of the cloak at the front, a short red cape called a *mozzetta* can be seen, from which the collar of a white knee-length tunic, called a *rocchetto*, protrudes at the neck, and beneath that, a light-coloured cassock stretches down to the ankles. Around his neck, the man wears a cord tied in a knot, the end of which hangs freely in front while, above his head, there is the golden circumference of a halo.

Two winged angels fly above the figure of Carlo Borromeo, depicted as *putti* with curly blond hair, their nakedness only partly covered by fluttering purple fabrics.

The angel on the left, one of whose wings is black, raises his right arm above his head holding an olive branch in his hand while, with his left hand, he grasps a sword with the blade turned upwards. The angel on the right holds a special red cardinal's hat, known as the *galero*, at the sides of which hang some short cords. From among the angels, a beam of light bursts forth that stands out against a dark sky filled with clouds and falls on the Archbishop, the cross and the onlookers.

At the lower edges of the canvas, behind Borromeo, many participants in the procession are depicted in the background: on the left, the faithful bear crucifixes and candles, those on the right are probably canons, dressed in similar clothes to those worn by the Archbishop leading them. All are rendered with essential brushstrokes and, as the procession gradually moves away and becomes less well-defined and the colours more muted, they become almost transparent.

The background of the scene is occupied by an urban view that shows how the centre of the city must have appeared as it was crossed by the procession.

At the right edge of the canvas, the tall, narrow structure can be seen of what used to be the ancient city district known as *Rebecchino*, featuring many windows and a red sloping roof while, also on the right, between Rebecchino and the outline of Carlo Borromeo, Palazzo Ducale can be glimpsed.

Finally, in the upper left band of the canvas, also in the background, the *cathedral* appears, looking very different from the current one: there are no spires or pinnacles but a façade with three portals crowned with a curved cornice, above which stands the structure of the lantern, with red sloping roofs and a square bell tower. The main light source in the painting seems to be the ray that pierces the clouds above the Saint's head and illuminates his face, as well as the figures of the faithful at the bottom right of the canvas.

Grey tones predominate, against which the red, black and white of Carlo Borromeo's ceremonial robes stand out in the foreground.



The morphological description drawn up and validated between September and November 2023, **certified by DescriVedendo**, was created by Team DescriVedendo with the National Association of the Visually Impaired ETS, in collaboration with Veneranda Fabbrica del Duomo di Milano.



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