

Transparent Art. Rock crystal carving in Renaissance Milan

In the Museo del Prado in Madrid

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USPA NEWS - The Museo del Prado in Madrid is presenting the exhibition 'Transparent Art. Rock crystal carving in Renaissance Milan', which offers an analysis of the previously little explored art form of carving rock crystal or hyaline quartz.

Of the 20 examples of carved rock crystal on display in the exhibition, 14 are from the group known as 'The Dauphin's Treasure', which belongs to the Museo del Prado, while six come from the Medici collections in Florence and that of Louis XIV, grandfather of Philip V of Spain, in Paris. Together they constitute a remarkable group of works which are now displayed so that visitors can visually appreciate all their artistic merits in a unique and unrepeatable experience that is further enriched by the technological support of Samsung in the form of tablets which allow for a 360-degree view of some of the objects as well as highly magnified details.

'Transparent Art' is a small-format exhibition which, in addition to being unusual in terms of subject, also offers a unique opportunity to see a type of art form largely unfamiliar to the general public: that of carving hyaline quartz or rock crystal. This was a particular speciality in 16th-century Milan, the center for the production of extraordinary pieces based on artistic inspiration, erudition and technical expertise and which rivalled comparable works from the classical period. The artistic and material value of these objects meant that only monarchs and the highest ranks of the European aristocracy had the means to acquire them for their collections.

With the aim of giving this art form the recognition that it deserves and of revealing its most significant facets to visitors to the exhibition, Room D of the Jeronimos Building will house a group of 20 pieces, all masterpieces of the highest quality and of particular importance, which fully represent the two most important workshops in the second half of the 16th century: those of the Miseroni family and the Sarachi family, in addition to two individual artists, Francesco Tortorino and Annibale Fontana. Finally, the exhibition includes works attributed to other names and three paintings, notably The Miseroni Family in their Workshop by Karel Akréta, as well as a print and two medals which together complement the objects on display.

These rock crystal objects, made in workshops in which members of a single family applied their talents to the different stages of this difficult art form, were destined to enrich the collections of the great European monarchs, among them the Holy Roman Emperors, the kings of France, dukes of Bavaria, Mantua, Tuscany and Savoy and also the Spanish monarchy, given that in 1554 Philip II assumed the duchy of Milan and patronised the leading Milanese lapidaries (stone cutters).

In order to understand the artistic context of this art form, the exhibition offers an in-depth exploration of the historical circumstances that gave rise to this facet of sculpture, while also focusing on intellectual and symbolic aspects that explain the choice of certain themes, both religious and mythological, to be seen on the works. Some of them, in the form of fantastical beasts, are not the result of chance but rather of ways of seeing the world based on certain Neo-platonic ideas regarding the universe and nature, and are also influenced by the thinking of Leonardo da Vinci, whose ideas are thought to have been used to improve the design of the tools and machinery required for rock crystal carving.

Revealing the secrets and different readings involved in these unique objects is a challenging undertaking. On occasions their concept of art implies a substantial knowledge of history, philosophy and the natural sciences. Also evident is a sense of humour, while on occasions they seem to anticipate the way in which contemporary art actively involves the viewer.

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