

Caterina Volpi

Salvator Rosa

“Pittore famoso”

Celebrated from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century above all as a romantic and rebellious artist, throughout the course of his life, Salvator Rosa himself astutely initiated, fuelled and perpetuated the evolution of his legendary status. Creatively prolific, he was an etcher, poet and primarily a painter, active in various categories of visual art with divergent styles, including battle scenes, landscapes, ‘bambocciate’ (or genre subjects), as a portraitist, painter of religious, allegorical and mythological histories as well as depicting chilling scenes of witch-craft. Born in Naples in 1615 after apprenticeships with his father-in-law Francesco Fracanzano and later with Aniello Falcone and Jusepe de Ribera, he moved to Rome in 1639, probably during the disorderly aftermath of Masaniello’s popular revolt. The works of his first brief roman sojourn reflect his southern origins in both taste and style; by 1640 he was in Florence working for the court of Giovan Carlo de’Medici. For a decade Rosa dominated the Florentine scene, generating a series of important works of philosophic, genre, battle and landscape subjects. Here he founded the ‘Accademia dei Percossi’ that brought together literati, scientists and painters united by a liberal, almost libertine vision. Motivated by the Jubilee year of 1650, Salvator Rosa definitively returned to Rome where he debuted with a series of impressive, large-scale works, many with profound philosophical meaning, which he executed for the annual public exhibitions at the Pantheon, at San Giovanni Decollato and at San Salvatore in Lauro. In his works of the following two decades Rosa pursued and developed a highly personal poetic style. While remaining attentive to artistic and cultural innovations in mid-century Rome he guarded his creative autonomy thereby anticipating developments in art that would follow over the next two centuries. Salvator Rosa died in Rome in 1673 at his house in the Via Gregoriana where he lived from 1650 with his life long companion Lucrezia and their son Augusto. With the exception of the 1973 exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, London, two important studies of 1963 and 1975 by Luigi Salerno, Jonathan Scott’s monograph and various articles by Helen Langdon, very little of scholarly import has been produced on the artist in recent decades. Simply for his complexity and his fame he would deserve to be the subject of further in-depth research and an up-to-date complete catalogue of works. The recent exhibition held at the Museo di Capodimonte, Naples, is surely a first, fundamental step towards a re-evaluation and consideration of the artist’s life and works in the light of current scholarly methodology. This monograph, projected by Caterina Volpi, a member of the Neapolitan exhibition’s scientific committee and author of numerous articles on the artist, is planned for publication with Ugo Bozzi Editore in January 2011. The publishing house, engaged for over forty years in the production of complete catalogues and studies on landscape and figure painting of the seventeenth century, is now able to renew this extensive double tradition with an in-depth contribution on a master who was able to articulate himself and renew, with the most personal idiom, both pictorial genres. The volume will consist of a substantial introductory article analysing the paintings of Salvator Rosa in the light of his biography and the culture of his age; particular attention will be given to the pictorial and literary context in which the artist moved and to the expressive media he adopted as a practicing artist (etching, drawing, poetry). A complete catalogue of the paintings including comparisons with preparatory drawings and related etchings will follow. Finally a register of published and unpublished documents will conclude the work.