

# THE HAUKOHL FAMILY COLLECTION A DIFFERENT TAKE ON FLORENTINE ART

The 17th century was the golden age of Baroque in Europe. Caravaggio adopted it in Rome, while cities like Naples, Antwerp, and Amsterdam fell under its spell through the accomplishments of Rubens, Rembrandt, Van Dyck, and others. The fact that Florence — still revered today as the birthplace of the Renaissance in the 15th century — had its own burgeoning Baroque period, with specific characteristics, is less widely known. Rather than following the pan-European taste for gushing emotions and flamboyant compositions, the Tuscan capital developed a more poetic and balanced Baroque — restrained, soft, even melancholic. Leading the way through their patronage was the Medici family of bankers and entrepreneurs, who ultimately became the grand dukes of Tuscany.

Today the Haukohl Family Collection honors the legacy of Medici patronage with the exhibition *Baroque in Florence*, now concluding its five-city European tour at the Bozar Centre for Fine Arts in Brussels (on view through July 21). Based in Houston, with strong ties to Florence, the collection originated some 40 years ago with businessman Mark Fehrs Haukohl — officially Sir Mark, a title bestowed by the government of Italy in 2007 to honor his philanthropy. He began by acquiring Italian drawings of the 16th and 17th centuries and soon turned to Florentine paintings of the 17th century. “The grandeur and bravura of these paintings gives you a true



PIERDANDINI (1646–1712), *Esther Before Ahasuerus*, c. 1680, oil on canvas, 34 x 57 in.

idea of how the Medici thought about art and positioned it in society,” Sir Mark says.

Today the collection ranks among the finest private holdings of Florentine Baroque art outside Italy. Of the current exhibition, Sir Mark says,



CESARE DANDINI (1596–1657), *Saint Dorothy of Cappadocia and Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, c. 1640s, oil on canvas, 47 1/2 x 40 in. and 47 3/4 x 40 in. (respectively)

“There has not been, outside of Italy, a show like this of Florentine art that is a snapshot of Medici history from the 17th century into the 18th. If you can’t get to the Palazzo Pitti or the Uffizi, this is the next best thing.” On view in Brussels are some 30 works from the collection, complemented by a dozen more from Luxembourg’s Musée National d’Histoire et d’Art (MNHA), which organized the European tour.

#### STANDOUTS

A highlight of the exhibition is *Esther before Ahasuerus* by Pietro (known as Pier) Dandini. This evocative scene drawn from the Old Testament was among Sir Mark’s early major acquisitions. It began his fascination with the entire Dandini family of painters who lived and worked in Florence during the 17th and into the 18th century: brothers Cesare and Vincenzo, their nephew Pier, and Pier’s sons Ottaviano and Vincenzo the younger.

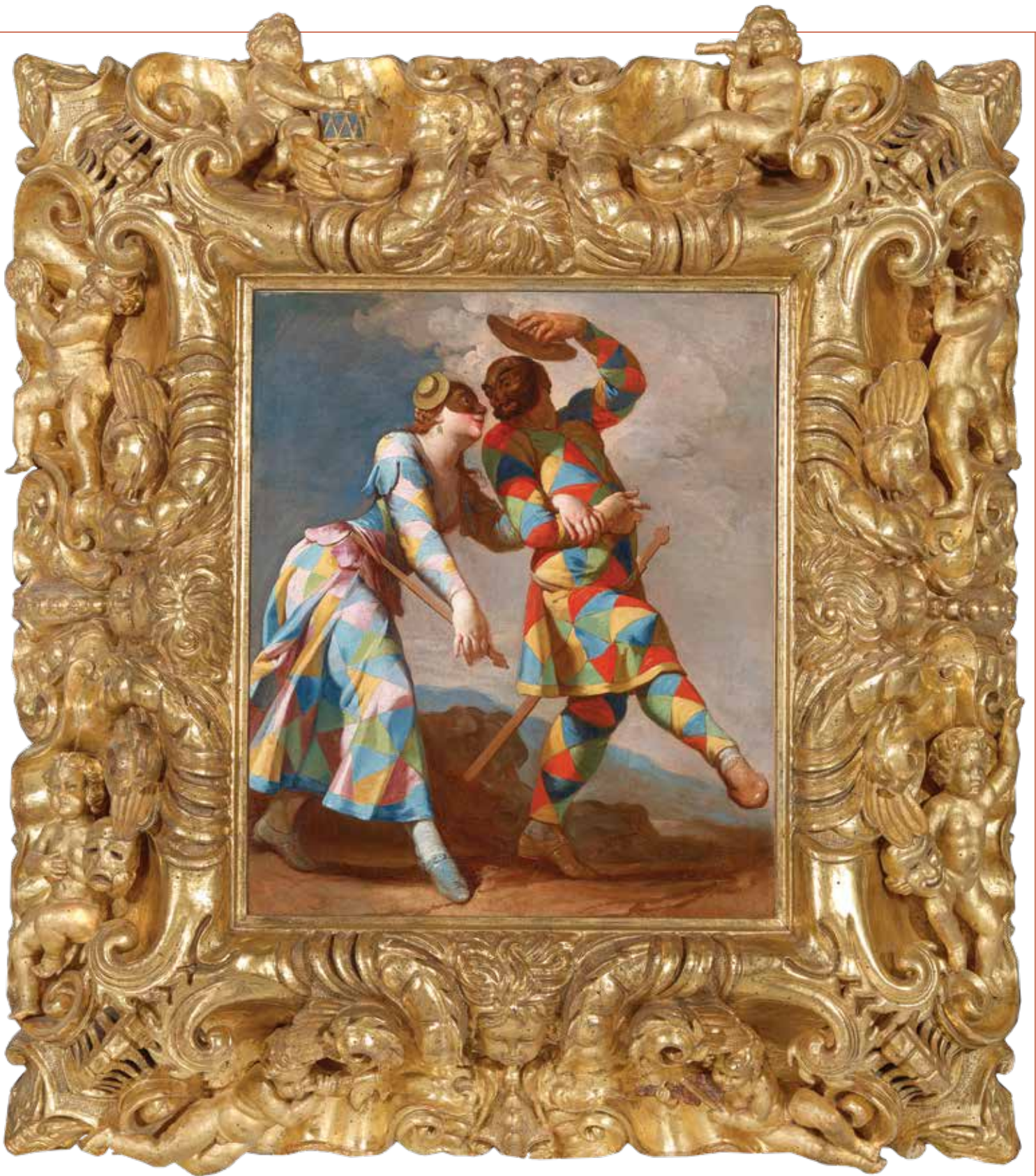
While other families of Italian painters, such as the Tiepolos of Venice, were well documented by scholars, Sir Mark was surprised to find the Dandinis were not, and so decided to remedy the oversight. His extensive research into the family, their work, and, indeed, the entire Florentine Baroque period of the mid-17th century, led to his



participation in co-founding The Medici Archive Project in 1995. Today, in addition to maintaining an ever-expanding digital knowledge base and hosting a thought-provoking lecture series, the project funds post-doctoral candidates studying the *Mediceo del Principato* — more than 4 million documents of Medici family correspondence housed at the Archivio di Stato in Florence.

The Dandini family is represented in several prominent museums worldwide, including Cesare’s *Holy Family* at the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg and *Moses Defending Jethro’s Daughters at the Well* at the National Gallery of Ireland, as well as Pier’s *Moses Striking the Rock in the Desert* at the Seattle Art Museum. Yet the Dandinis are still not as widely known as other historical Italian artists. (In fact, Cesare did make some headlines in 2020, when an Iona University art historian spotted his painting of the

VINCENZO DANDINI (1609–1675), *Saint Mark the Evangelist*, c. 1645, oil on canvas, 48 x 37 1/2 in.



GIOVANNI DOMENICO FERRETTI (1692–1768), *Harlequin and His Lady*, 18th century, oil on canvas, 23 1/4 x 19 1/2 in.

*Holy Family with the Infant St. John* at a church in New Rochelle, New York, where it had hung in virtual obscurity since the 1960s.)

Among the works by Cesare Dandini in the Haukohl Family Collection is a pair of octagonal depictions of female saints: Dorothy of Cappadocia with the roses that are part of her iconography, and Catherine of Alexandria

with the spiked wheel of torture that is part of hers. Vincenzo Dandini is represented by a depiction of the goddess Juno and by a commanding Saint Mark the Evangelist.

To fully create a historically authentic presentation, all the works in the touring exhibition were rehoused in frames similar to those seen



GIOVANNI DOMENICO FERRETTI (1692–1768),  
*God Reproving Cain for the Murder of Abel*, 1740,  
oil on canvas, 30 x 25 in.

#### FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

After the Brussels exhibition closes this summer, selections from its checklist will tour university campus museums throughout the United States. Opening this September at the Rollins Museum of Art (Rollins College) in Winter Park, Florida, the tour will continue to the David Owsley Museum of Art (Ball State University) in Muncie, Indiana, and then the Arthur Ross Gallery (University of Pennsylvania) in Philadelphia, with the potential to add new venues indefinitely. It's an ambitious plan that "reignited for me how important art is to the campus community," Sir Mark says, recalling how his own love of art was fueled by visits to the Kresge Museum of Art at Michigan State University when he was an undergraduate there. (Born in Milwaukee, he went on to earn a Master's degree in business administration from New York University.)

"Art education is important to create balance in today's world," he says, noting that while many university museums hold excellent modern and contemporary collections, Old Masters are often out of reach for them financially. It's a gap he plans to fill by lending the collection to university institutions without a rental fee. To enhance the project, Rollins, Ball State, and Penn will jointly finance a gallery guide for the new touring show. In addition, the Haukohl Family Collection will provide guest lecturers of international stature and has developed suggestions for an interdisciplinary curriculum tied to the exhibition.

"It's a major thrust for me that the collection be used for sketching and art history," Sir Mark explains enthusiastically, "but we want to go beyond that to religious studies, feminist studies, theater and music classes, European history." If the Haukohl Family Collection truly does venture "beyond the Medici," perhaps it will be in this way.

According to Sir Mark, "It is all about the intellect" has long been the Haukohl family's guiding principle. The collection's paintings certainly stimulate viewers' aesthetic sense, and also the intellect, prompting inquiry and discussion. Now the forthcoming university tour will offer both to a new generation. ●

**Information:** [bozar.be](http://bozar.be), [medici.org](http://medici.org), [rollins.edu/rma](http://rollins.edu/rma), [bsu.edu/web/museumofart](http://bsu.edu/web/museumofart), [arthurrossgallery.org](http://arthurrossgallery.org). The European tour is accompanied by a handsome 288-page catalogue that is titled *Beyond the Medici: The Haukohl Family Collection*, edited by Federico Berti, and co-published by MNHA with Silvana Editoriale (ISBN 978-2-87985-545-5). All photos here were taken by Tom Lucas for MNHA.

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at the Uffizi and the Pitti. When possible, appropriate antique frames were acquired at auction. In other cases, frames specific to the individual works were commissioned and made in the 17th-century fashion. "The framing is the capstone," Sir Mark notes. "It is the key to recapturing the period. Very often the original frames did not make it through the centuries. Sometimes they were damaged, or changed as fashions and tastes shifted."

The heavily carved and gilded frame that now surrounds Giovanni Domenico Ferretti's *Harlequin and His Lady* is a particular triumph, decorated with musical putti and lavish curlicues that perfectly complement the scene's theatrical theme. A painter much in demand during his lifetime, Ferretti painted frescoes that graced the interiors of numerous churches and private homes. Some can be seen in Florence at San Salvatore al Vescovo and the Badia Fiorentina monastery church.

Another important work by Ferretti in the Haukohl Family Collection is *God Reproving Cain for the Murder of Abel*. Since the 1960s, it has been linked to his *Adam Despairs for the Fall of Man* in the Hermitage's collection. It's likely that both paintings were originally owned by one individual. Today, though located thousands of miles apart, they remain united by their powerful depictions of robust men brought to grief for their misdeeds under the disapproving gaze of a formidable god.