

ON EXHIBIT: Florentine painter Carlo Dolci at Wellesley's Davis Museum

Monday

Posted at 4:00 PM

By Keith Powers, Daily News Correspondent

WELLESLEY - No, you haven't heard of Carlo Dolci. Here's betting you won't forget him after you see this exhibition.

The Florentine painter (1616-1687), whose stunning works are on view through July 9 at Wellesley College's Davis Museum, painstakingly created devotional images all his life, reflecting his profound religious commitment.

The subject matter won't shock you. His devotion might not move you. A thrilling narrative yoking these paintings together doesn't exist.

But the sheer appeal of these beautiful works is undeniable.

More than 50 paintings, a sketch book and several chalk studies fill multiple rooms at the renovated Davis. They detail the life of Dolci, who hardly worked in obscurity - he painted his entire life, and found some patronage from the powerful Medici family, furthering his reputation.

These oils are neat, precise, with a brilliant palette. What makes them stand out from other academic painters is the luminous surface, a kind of photographic finish - the labels refer to it as "seemingly enameled." Layers of brushstrokes are not themselves visible - the painstaking work of the artist is subsumed into the naturalistic surface.

That finish doesn't not shine in glossy fashion - in fact, just the opposite. Most of the paintings have a matte surface, calm and inviting. The details are intriguing, but focused on the subject. Skin tones, and the reverential aspect of the subjects - saints in prayer, mostly - envelop the viewer in an artistic world which time may have passed, but which resonates through its execution.

Dolci lived in a time when the Catholic Church had decreed that its teachings should be made simpler and clearer to the general population - a direct result of the 16th century Council of Trent. An important part of the painter's life was his membership in the Confraternity of Saint Benedict the White, an association (not just of painters) created to perform acts of Christian charity and to further these goals of the church.

Thus most of the paintings are portraits, which make little attempt to tell a story. Jerome, Matthew, Francis, Peter, Mary Magdalene - sit alone for the most part, their gaze averted from this life to their own choice of a greater one. Narrative intrigue is left aside, with the focus directly on the piety of the subject. This simple aspect pervades nearly every work.

Extensive labels and a thorough catalog accompany this exhibition. Curated by Eve Straussman-Pflanzer of the Detroit Institute of Art, it collects works from many major museums and private collections.

The exhibition is arranged generally in chronological order, from a first work - "Portrait of a Young Man" - painted when Dolci was 15. Two paintings - the "Blue Madonna" (created by a student of Dolci) and "Ecce Homo" - are set aside in "chapels," small alcoves, barely lit, that enhance their devotional aspect.

A sketchbook from the Dolci family - he also taught a daughter, Agatha, who created a few independent works of her own - is on view, along with an iPad that shows allows visitors to flip through the entire sketchbook as well.

A wall-mounted timeline focuses on the artistic events of Dolci's life - when major works were created, and for whom. There is one still life in the exhibition, startling in its singularity, created with the same precision and surface luminosity.

"The Medici's Painter: Carlo Dolci" remains on view through July 9, along with several other exhibitions, including a fascinating 18th century series of prints by Giovanni Piranesi, "Vedute di Roma."

"The Medici's Painter: Carlo Dolci"

WHEN: Through July 9

WHERE: Davis Museum at Wellesley College, 106 Central St., Wellesley

ADMISSION: \$20, Wellesley alumnae \$12, students free

INFO: 781-283-2051, www.wellesley.edu/davismuseum

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