

The Vatican will be the most talked-about newcomer



The traditional crib in St Peter's Square this Christmas, offered to the Holy Father by the Italian region of Basilicata, is the work of a Nativity sculptor, Francesco Artese, with an international reputation. The prototypical installation pioneered by St Francis is becoming an art form in its own right. It wouldn't surprise me to see a presepe at the Venice Biennale, where two years ago the Italian Pavilion featured traditional Sicilian breadwork shrines made in honour of the feast of St Joseph.

If the Venice Biennale says a thing is art, then art it is. For more than a century, the biennial exhibition launched in 1895 has made the international reputations of artists and art movements. From small beginnings in the Caffè Florian in St Mark's Square it has expanded over the whole city, turning it into the art world's secular Mecca. In 2011, 89 countries had their own pavilions and 440,000 visitors passed through the official venues for the International Art Exhibition in the Giardini and the Arsenale.

Representation in Venice is as important for nations as for artists. A pavilion at the Biennale is a sign that a state, no matter how troubled or politically backward, has joined the Western cultural consensus. Over the past decade the Gulf states have used their presence at Venice as a platform to advertise their Westernisation, while the first appearances in 2011 of Iraq, Zimbabwe and Haiti – the latter in a shanty-pavilion of shipping containers – signalled creative triumph over adversity. When the fifty-fifth edition opens in June, it will welcome eight new nations, including Bahrain, Kosovo, Kuwait and Nigeria. But the most talked about newcomer will be the world's smallest state, situated just 400 kilometres south of Venice: Vatican City.

It's six years since the first whispers of a plan for a Vatican pavilion at the fifty-fourth Biennale followed the appointment in 2009 of the art-loving Gianfranco Ravasi as President of the Pontifical Council for Culture.

Created archbishop that year and cardinal three years later, Ravasi is a prelate in the Renaissance

tradition who feels that the Church at the centre of Italy's cultural patrimony is currently punching below its artistic weight. He was the power behind the revival in 2007 of the Vatican art collecting initiative started by Pope Paul VI, and the orchestrator of the historic Sistine Chapel meeting between Pope Benedict and 500 international artists in 2009.

One of the stated aims of the Pontifical Council for Culture, founded by John Paul II in 1982, is: "To foster the Church's and the Holy See's relations with the world of culture, by undertaking appropriate initiatives concerning the dialogue between faith and cultures." Where better to promote that dialogue than Venice? But as a site for dialogue, Venice is less accessible than Twitter.

Accommodation in the city during the Biennale is as hard to find as it was in Bethlehem during the Census of Quirinius. After considering its options, the Vatican may have accepted the offer of space in the Arsenale, the old naval shipyard that now houses half the main exhibition and a clutch of national pavilions. Nothing is confirmed so far. After its false start in 2011, the Vatican is keeping its own counsel: its exhibition plans are under embargo.

The only information released so far is that fewer than 10 artists, established and emerging, have been selected. No names have been mentioned, but Ravasi favourites Jannis Kounellis and Arnaldo Pomodoro are hotly tipped, and the names of Bill Viola and Anish Kapoor (who attended the Sistine Chapel meeting) are being bruited about. The only detail to have been officially divulged is the show's subject: the first 11 chapters of the book of Genesis.

Appropriate as it is to a new beginning, the theme of Genesis carries historical baggage: Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling is a tough act to follow. But in reaching out to non-believers, the Vatican is unlikely to be looking for literal illustrations from its artists. The message at Venice, like the papal tweets from @pontifex, is likely to be more universal. Whatever it is, it should sit comfortably alongside Massimiliano Gioni's catholic (with a small 'c') theme for this year's main exhibition, "The Encyclopedic Palace". Gioni, at 35 the youngest Biennale curator for 110 years, plans to use his exhibition to discover "what room is left for internal images – for dreams, hallucinations and visions – in an era besieged by external ones". If he's not singing from the same hymn sheet as the Vatican, he's asking similar questions.

Ravasi is prepared for spoiling tactics by subversive elements in the contemporary art world, not least the Veneto-born Maurizio Cattelan who made the sculpture of Pope John Paul II struck down by a meteorite (La Nona Ora, "The Ninth Hour"). For the Holy See, the stakes are high. At the October press conference confirming its participation, the director of the Vatican Museums, Antonio Paolucci, announced: "The Holy See wants to choose the best contemporary art and not expose itself to criticism." But it's not that simple. The Church is entering a public forum for debate where criticism will be unavoidable, and should be welcomed. The hotter the debate, the more animated the dialogue. The Vatican should take heart from the furore initially generated by Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling, which now attracts four million visitors a year – 10 times as many as the record audience for the Biennale. If the experiment fails, it can learn from the experience. If it succeeds, it will have made room for spiritual visions in a secular Mecca, and ushered in a new age of sacred art.

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