

Painting

Giorgia Meloni's face on a church mural is offensive - but not for the reason the Vatican thinks

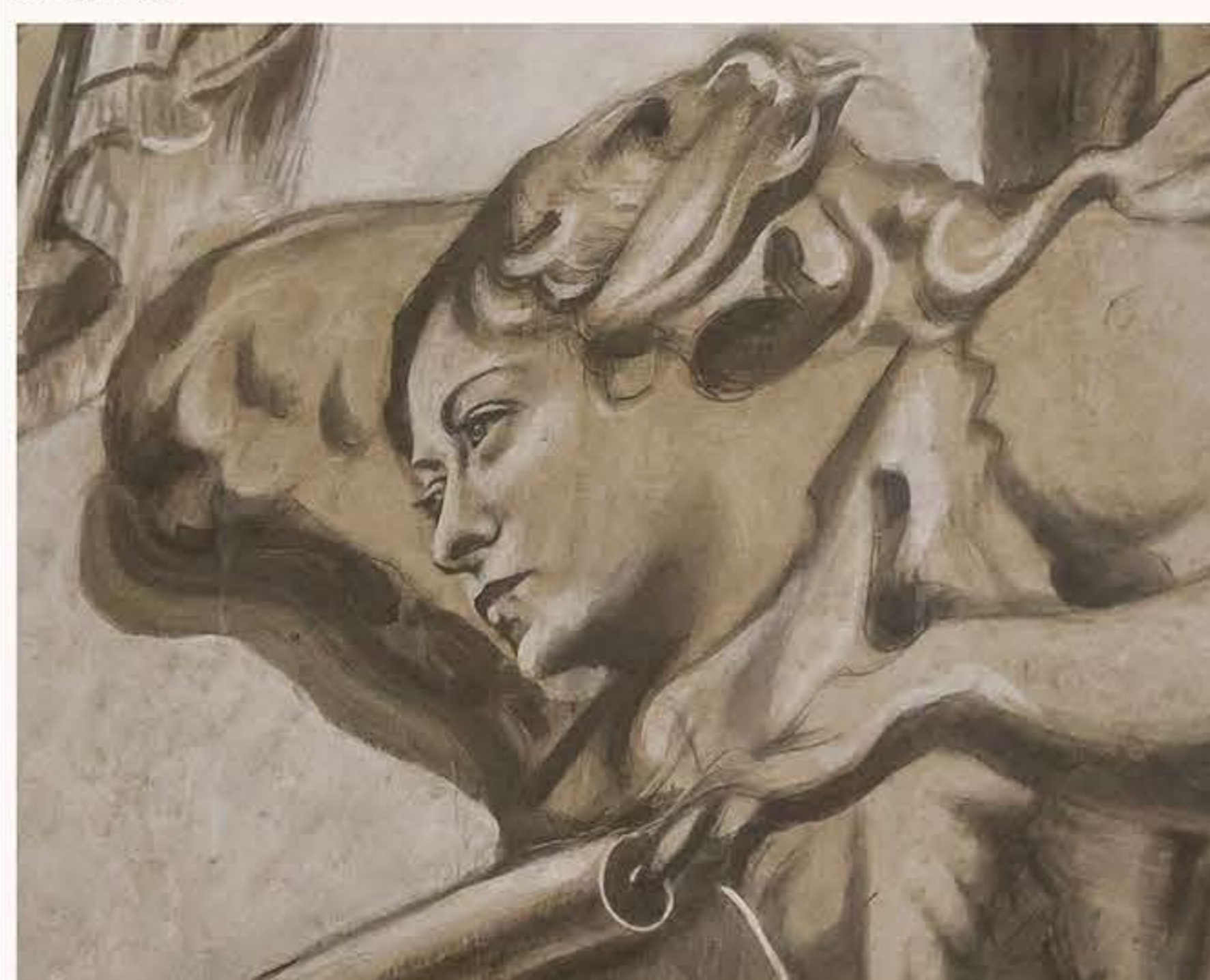
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When the likeness of the populist leader as an angel was painted into a cheesy tribute to Italy's last king, it caused outrage. But far better artists have been similarly profane for centuries



No angel ... detail from the fresco resembling Giorgia Meloni at the San Lorenzo in Lucina Basilica in Rome. Photograph: Anadolu/Getty Images

It must be the ugliest wall painting in Rome - and that's even without the bizarre portrait of Giorgia Meloni as an angel. Artist Bruno Valentinetti painted his tribute to Umberto II, the last king of Italy, earlier this century in a side chapel of the ancient church of San Lorenzo in Lucina in its historic heart, the Centro Storico. It's the kind of unsightly accretion you try to ignore when enjoying the city's artistic glories which include, in this particular church, a staggering, stormy vision of the Crucifixion by the 17th-century painter Guido Reni, his most unforgettable masterpiece.

Valentinetti's mural, by contrast, is a glib, tacky, photorealist effort that didn't even last two decades before water damage demanded restoration. Valentinetti, now 83, carried out the repairs himself and had the genius idea of giving an angel the face - highly recognisable because obviously based on photos of her - of Italy's populist prime minister. What was he thinking? Is he in love? Or was this an insidious piece of propaganda?



Meloni no more ... the face of the angel erased from the fresco after protests. Photograph: Remo Casilli/Reuters

Given Meloni's far right political roots, it may be significant that she materialised in the chapel of Italy's last monarch. Umberto II's father Victor Emmanuel III collaborated with Mussolini and ceded the throne to his son in 1946 in the hope of clearing the monarchy's name. But in a referendum that year, the people chose a republic anyway and Umberto II went into exile in Portugal. So in the artist's mind, and Meloni's "Who, me?" reaction to his angelic vision of her, perhaps there are disturbing affinities with the authoritarian Italy of the early 20th century.

The church may have suspected this. After removing Meloni's face, the artist claimed he was pressured to do so by the Vatican. Cardinal Don Baldo Reina has spoken of his "bitterness" at the artist's secret portrait, strong language conveying condemnation of Meloni's uninvited appearance in the heavens. This is understandable in our dark times. In Europe's populist age you never know what is funny and what is terrifying. The artist may be a harmless eccentric or a gaslighting manipulator - either way Meloni gets free publicity and the undercurrent of an idea that she's in some way holy or chosen by God. Funny if you don't think about it too much, a bit scary if you do.

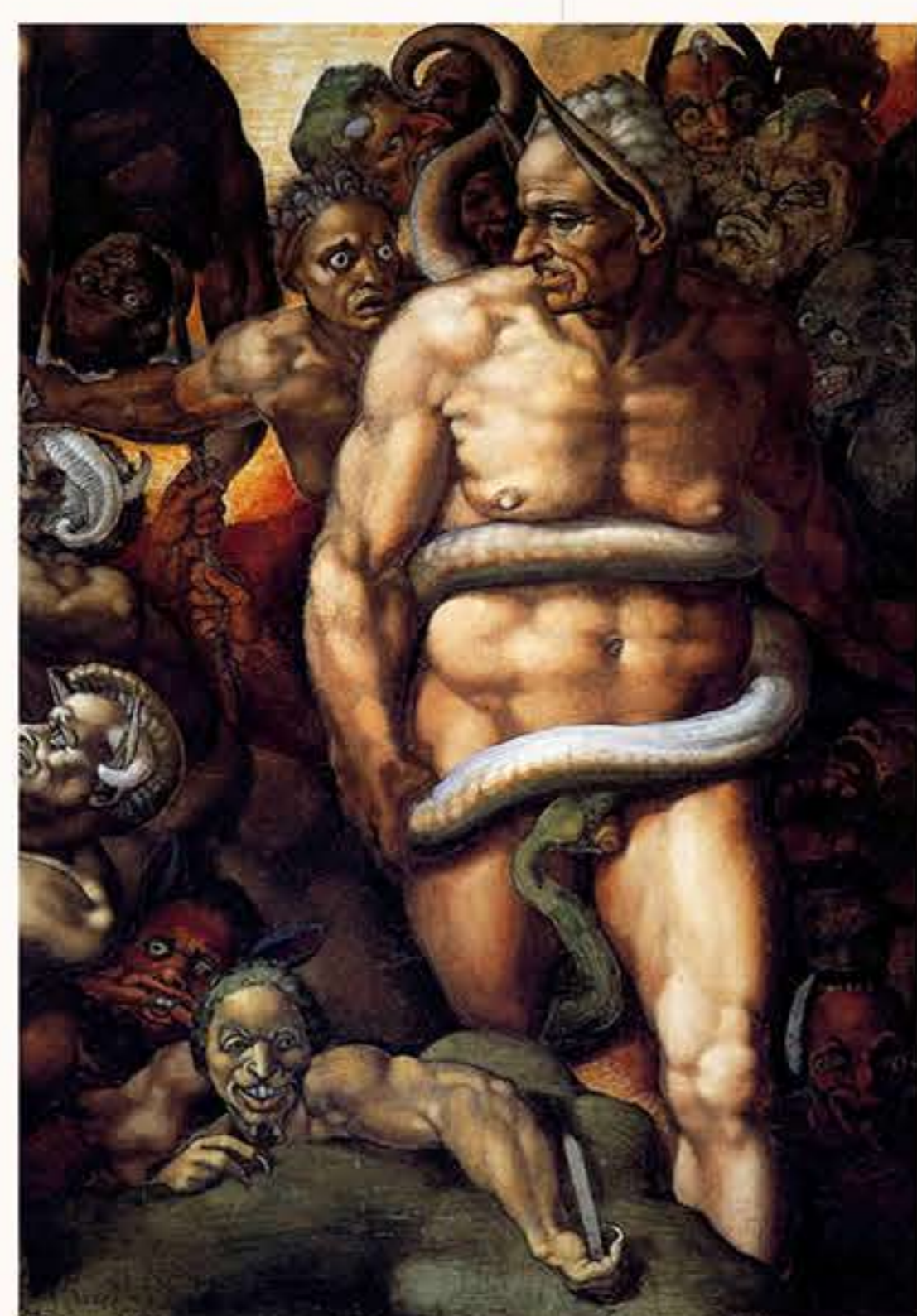
Yet one thing the cardinal says about art, and Italy's religious art in particular, is nonsense. It's wrong to paint Meloni in a church, he argues, because "images of sacred art and Christian tradition cannot be misused or exploited". In other words, the sacred and profane are separate, and Christian art must be free from any taint of politics or contemporary life. When has that ever been true?



Only human ... Madonna and Child With Two Angels by Fra Filippo Lippi. Photograph: Alamy

Italy's frescoed churches are full of portraits of real people, powerful and famous in their day, depicted as unmistakably as Meloni. In Santa Maria Novella in Florence you can see women of the wealthy Tornabuoni family portrayed in scenes of the Births of the Virgin and Baptist by Domenico Ghirlandaio in the 1400s. In another Florentine church, Lorenzo de' Medici greets his young sons and their tutor in a scene of the history of the Franciscan order. These are naked displays of wealth and status by leading families in the sacred setting of a church. The Medici went further and had themselves and their friends portrayed by Benozzo Gozzoli in their family chapel in the company of the Magi, processing to the Holy Land. A business associate of theirs got Botticelli to portray them as the Magi themselves, wealthy and wise, with Cosimo de' Medici touching the foot of Christ.

Would these have made Don Baldo Reina feel "bitter" if he was around in 15th-century Italy? Such gross, quasi-blasphemous displays certainly appalled Savonarola, who toppled the Medici in a religious revolution. Yet the contemporary portraits that fill Italian Renaissance art also humanise holy themes, dragging art out of the holy shadows into real life. And while rich people paid for their faces to be inserted into religious scenes, artists also took advantage to do so secretly, in brilliantly ambiguous fusions of the sacred and profane that haunt and stun us today.



Painfully familiar ... Minos in Michelangelo's Last Judgment. Photograph: Public domain

The first artist who did this was probably Fra Filippo Lippi, a friar who ran off with a nun called Lucrezia Buti. They had two children together and Lippi seems to celebrate his partner (they never married) in depictions of the Madonna. His Virgin and Child in the Uffizi Gallery adorns Mary with ravishing jewels and translucent silk in a way that outrageously crosses the line between reverence and desire: it is hard to believe this is not his portrait of Buti.

Some of the most celebrated frescoes in Rome contain portraits of contemporaries that artists added secretly or unofficially as private jokes, homages or acts of revenge, even in the heart of papal Rome. The most astonishing is in Michelangelo's Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel. When a papal official called Biagio da Cesena accused Michelangelo of filling this fresco with male nudes for his own irreligious reasons, Michelangelo responded by giving Minos, the judge of Hell, Biagio's face. He stands to this day, in the chapel where popes are elected, with a snake wrapped around his naked body, clamping its mouth on his penis.

What has changed? Obviously these were great artists, their private portraits artistic miracles. The portrait of

Meloni was an embarrassing hack job that deserved to be removed on aesthetic grounds alone. Yet our expectations of church art are also different. It is required to be safe and contemplative, not contentiously real. That is surely at least partly because while Christianity once permeated everyday life without barriers between life and faith, in the modern world it's a more tenuous presence, even in Italy. And it is overshadowed by politics.

It's probably safe to say that the Vatican under American Pope Leo XIV is to the left of Meloni's government. So when Valentinetti inserted into his restoration job the face of a rightwing populist, implying that Meloni belongs with the angels, the Church begged to differ. She may look like an angel to Bruno Valentinetti, but for a lot of us she's the devil in disguise.

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