

A detailed oil painting of a woman's face and upper torso. She has reddish-brown hair styled in a bun with a green headband. Her expression is serene and contemplative, looking slightly to the right. She wears a white garment with a fringed neckline and a red shawl draped over her shoulders. The background is dark and textured.

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Bianca Boni

The Cumaean Sybil

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Bianca Boni

(Rome 1786 – 1857)

The Cumaean Sybil

Miniature, after a painting
by Domenichino (1581–1641)
now in the Galleria Borghese, Rome

Watercolour and gouache on ivory,
13 x 10 cm; in original case bound in red
leather and lined with moss-green silk

SIGNED BOTTOM RIGHT: Bianca Boni

These two miniatures (see by the same Artist the miniature representing *Salome*, after Guido Reni), of the highest quality, succeed in their intent to convey the Ideal of Beauty that was such a feature of the art of Domenichino and Guido Reni, the painters on whose work the two figures are modelled. Their original case, bound in leather and lined with silk, doubtless served to protect the fragile paintings while travelling, given that most of these items were intended for those cultured, wealthy and aristocratic patrons visiting Italy who, though discerning, were nevertheless unreservedly enthusiastic in their love of art. Any one of them,

stopping to admire the old master works in the country's museums, would want to take home a memento of the treasures he had seen, and these small "souvenirs" were specifically designed to cater for just such a market; thus, incidentally, also testifying to the history of taste in the early 19th century.

Little was known about the talented Roman miniature painter Bianca Boni until Bernardo Falconi published the results of his research in 2014. Basing his work on previously unpublished archive documents and correspondence, Falconi has succeeded in providing us with an outline of her life and work and in restoring her to the



prominence she deserves (B. Falconi, *Bianca Boni "miniatrice romana (1786 – 1857)"*, in *Bollettino dei Musei Comunali di Roma*, n. s., XXVIII, 2014, pp. 83 - 110).

The daughter of Giuseppe Boni, a sculptor of Tuscan origin, Bianca was born in Rome on 6 January 1786 and christened the very next day in the presence of her godfather Gaetano Galvani, a painter from Parma. Growing up in an artistic environment, she learnt the rudiments of drawing at her father's knee, but it is another detail in her biography that reveals to us the identity of the person who is likely to have played a crucial role in her future career as an artist. Her elder sister Candida's husband was no less a figure than the sculptor and painter Felice Festa (Turin, 1763/4 – 1825), and he may well have encouraged her to turn her hand to miniatures, given that he himself was both an adept of large-scale work and an expert in the sophisticated technique of miniature painting.

A prolific artist, Bianca painted both portraits and copies of work by other masters, building a solid reputation for herself with her contemporaries. A tourist guide published in the first half of the 19th century for Englishmen preparing to travel to the continent contained a list of names of the most illustrious contemporary artists in each discipline. For the discipline of miniature painting in Rome it lists only two artists, Bianca Boni and Teresa Fioroni (*Information and Directions for Travellers on the Continent by Mariana Starke. Sixth Edition thoroughly revised and corrected, with considerable additions, made during a recent expensive journey undertaken by the Author, with a view to render this work as perfect as possible*, London, 1828).

On 22 May 1825 Bianca received the prestigious recognition of being elected an Honourable Member of the Academy of St. Luke, an honour awarded on the grounds that "...for a long time [the Academy] has admired Your skill in the art of fine miniature painting and Your rare con-

stancy in the practice of that discipline, thanks to which You have forged a reputation for yourself both in Rome and abroad" (B. Falconi, p. 88).

In the *Manuale di notizie riguardanti le scienze, arti e mestieri della città di Roma per l'anno 1839 dedicato ai Sigg. Professori ed Artisti della dominante* (Rome, Tipografia dei Classici, 1838) we learn that the artist's studio in Rome was situated at n° 30, Via Felice.

As far as Bianca's personal life is concerned, we know that she married Luigi de Bustis y Figueroa at the age of twenty-two but that the couple separated almost immediately thereafter, though we have no idea on what grounds (B. Falconi, pp. 86-87). While the French poet Alphonse de Lamartine (1790 – 1869) was visiting Rome in 1811, he bought a miniature from Bianca depicting a *Virgin* by Guido Reni. He was so pleased with the superb quality of her work that he then commissioned her to paint a portrait of him as a gift for his mother. While posing for her, he fell for her charms and was "foolish enough to confess my feelings" as he tells us in his *Mémoires*, adding that the lovely Bianca was so enraged at his confession that she destroyed the portrait and returned him his money because she saw her work as a vocation, assigning it far greater importance than her private life (A. de Lamartine, *Memoires inédits ...*, 1870).

BIBLIORGRAPHY: B. Falconi, *Bianca Boni "miniatrice romana" (1786 – 1857)*, in *Bollettino dei Musei Comunali di Roma*, n. s., XXVIII, 2014, pp. 83 - 110, figs. 8, 9.



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BIANCA BONI