

Francis Aljys The Fabiola Project

Byzantine Fresco Chapel
The Menil Collection

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Fabiola or On the Silent Multiplication

My first encounter with Fabiola occurred in Brussels in September 1992. I was wandering around flea markets looking for hand-painted copies of masterworks. The low market value of copies would allow me to possess a collection of “originals” of famous paintings. I expected to someday have my walls covered with unique versions of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Gioconda* [*Mona Lisa*] or *The Last Supper*, or whatever I could find.

Surprisingly, in the same market, a few shops apart, there were two identical portraits depicting a feminine profile that, although vaguely familiar, was not identifiable to me. Street vendors were calling her *Fabiola*.

Six months later I had acquired a dozen replicas of the veiled woman by Jean-Jacques Henner, whereas my masterpiece collection was still only a couple of copies of Jean-François Millet’s *The Angelus* and a very laborious version of Pablo Picasso’s *Les demoiselles d’Avignon*. Eventually, I ended up swapping my Picasso for yet another *Fabiola*.

The omnipresence of this obscure painting was somewhat enigmatic. I was wondering why, out of all available models, the amateur was insisting on copying a painting by a forgotten master of the nineteenth century. The seductive simplicity and its consequent ease of reproduction weren’t enough to explain its potential for multiplication. I perceived a mutual ignorance: whereas professional painters plagiarized Marcel Duchamp, Sunday painters paraphrased Jean-Jacques Henner. *Fabiola* indicated a different criterion of what a masterwork could be.

—Francis Aljys
Mexico City, September 1994



J. Mahssens, *Fabiola*, 1947. Found in a flea market in Brussels. Oil on canvas, 15¾ x 11¾ inches (40.3 x 29.8 cm). Courtesy of David Zwirner Gallery



Preparations for *Fabiola* at Curare, Mexico City, 1994. The first exhibition of images of Saint Fabiola from Francis Aljys’s collection, it consisted of 28 copies of the lost Jean-Jacques Henner painting

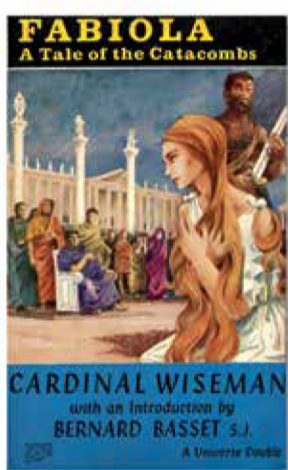
The works in this installation all depict the same subject: a fourth-century Christian saint known as Fabiola. She is portrayed, in accordance with her canonical representation, as a young woman in profile, facing left, wearing a crimson veil. The prototype is a lost 1885 painting by a late nineteenth-century French academician, Jean-Jacques Henner. In its iconography, style, and composition, Henner's portrait was unexceptional, conventional even. Nonetheless, his delicate rendering of the saint's features was deceptively subtle and, as evidenced by the wide variation among the works on view here, not easily replicated. Given that the original was lost long ago, the model for each of these works must have been a reproduction, perhaps an illustration in a book or a magazine, a picture postcard, or an engraved print.

Although many thousands of mechanically reproduced images of Fabiola have been printed, every work included here was made by hand. The 514 objects quickly distinguish themselves from one another, dispelling any initial impression of homogeneity. Contributing to their enormous diversity is the variety of mediums: oil paint, gouache, embroidery, enamel, plaster, ceramic, pencil, chalk, and in one particularly memorable instance, seeds and beans. This, along with the unusually broad range of supports (which includes glass and porcelain among the more usual materials), blurs the distinction between folk art, or craft, and traditional fine art, in which these works have their roots.

There is also a notable range in the makers' levels of skill. Only a few demonstrate the proficiency expected of a professional artist; almost all must have been made by amateurs. Yet, paradoxically, it's the technical limitations of the "Sunday painter" that often make an individual rendering particularly compelling. Other differences may be attributed to the fact that, consciously or not, some of these makers introduced features belonging to another model, perhaps someone known personally, more likely an idealized or imaginary woman.

Little noted in the ecclesiastical pantheon for centuries after her canonization in AD 537, Fabiola finally escaped from obscurity on the wave of the Catholic revival that swept late nineteenth-century Europe. According to her first advocate, the early church father Saint Jerome, she left an abusive husband and remarried, only to be widowed some years later. After con-

verting to Christianity and making public penance for the sin of divorce, she then devoted the remainder of her life (and fortune) to charitable work, reputedly founding the first hospital for the poor, on the outskirts of Rome in the late fourth century. Fabiola's rise to cult status began in the 1850s, when a racier version of her story was published by the British cardinal Nicholas Wiseman, a pillar of the Catholic revival. *Fabiola, or The Church of The Catacombs* quickly became a best seller, and it has continued to influence young minds for generations. Revered as the protector of abused women, Fabiola is also extolled as the patron saint of nurses. However, she does not seem to have become the object of official or public worship expressed in the form of dedicated sites and shrines. Devotion has remained at the level of personal supplication. Far into



1962 edition of Cardinal Wiseman's book *Fabiola, or The Church of the Catacombs* (called *Fabiola: A Tale of the Catacombs* in this edition) published by Universe Books. Cover art by Barry Wilkinson

the second half of the twentieth century, popular interest in Fabiola consequently required inexpensive reproductions, but as this collection, amassed from cities throughout Western Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America, attests, hand-painted versions also found a ready audience. The vast majority of these works were produced for functional—that is, devotional—purposes rather than for purely aesthetic ends.

Although some of the works in this collection have a patina, close inspection reveals that most were made between the middle and the later part of the last century. Sometimes artificial aging has been reinforced by accidents; shorn of the frames that once would have enhanced and protected them, many bear abraded edges or are otherwise damaged. No attempt has been made by their current owner to redeem their fall from grace by disguising the signs that almost all of them were found in flea markets and similar haunts. In contrast to those of works typically found in art museum exhibitions, the histories and previous owners of these representations of Fabiola are mostly unknown. Their lowly status is uncontested.



Photographic reproduction of Jean-Jacques Henner's lost painting *Fabiola*, 1885



Jean-Jacques Henner, *Head of a Woman with Veil (Tête de femme au voile)*, ca. 1885. White chalk and charcoal on blue paper, 11½ x 8 inches (29.3 x 20.2 cm). Jean-Jacques Henner Museum, Paris. Photo: Michel Urtado, © RMN-Grand Palais / Michel Urtado

Artist Francis Alÿs, creator and owner of the collection, recounts its genesis and history in the accompanying statement in this brochure. Most of his acquisitions have been made serendipitously in places as far-flung as Maastricht, Mexico City, and Beirut; in addition, colleagues and acquaintances

have supplemented his finds with theirs. Beginning as a modest, almost casual quest, his deliberately low-key venture has evolved in unanticipated ways. With the copy as its founding precept, Alÿs's collection privileges the replica over the original, the anonymous over the renowned, the artisanal over the professional, and the lowly or kitsch over the precious.

Rejecting the conventional white galleries that are the norm for the display of modernist and contemporary artworks, Alÿs has sought to historicize his collection's reception. Its installation in the Byzantine Fresco Chapel at the Menil, a building originally designed for the display of thirteenth-century frescoes from Lysi, Cyprus, seems particularly fitting, for this space was a consecrated church and operated as a reliquary of sorts from 1997 through 2012, when the frescoes were on view. Alÿs's gambit, above all, is designed to center attention on the *image* of Fabiola, that is, on the elusive prototype somehow ever present among the myriad approximations. Over the past fifteen years, he has asked himself repeatedly: "Why that image in particular? What gives it that power to resist . . . first, mechanical reproduction and, now, digital reproduction? Is the ritual, the *act* of painting, a requisite for conferring on the image its aura? What is it that made it become

an icon, an object beyond any consideration of taste? How has it served as a reminder of the existence of a completely parallel and separate art scene from, say, 'ours,' one with its own references and obsessions?"

—Lynne Cooke



Unidentified artist, *Fabiola*, date unknown. Found in Mexico City. Acrylic on canvas, 20¼ x 15¾ inches (51.4 x 40.3 cm). Courtesy of David Zwirner Gallery

Byzantine Fresco Chapel

In the 1980s, Menil Collection co-founder Dominique de Menil became aware of two thirteenth-century frescoes that had been stolen from a church in Lysi, Cyprus, hacked into fragments, and put up for sale. After establishing that the Holy Archbishopric of Cyprus was the rightful owner, the Menil Foundation purchased these damaged yet exquisite works on the Church's behalf and financed their restoration. The Archbishopric agreed to an extended loan, and in 1997 the Byzantine Fresco Chapel, designed by architect Francois de Menil, was opened to house the frescoes. They returned to Cyprus in 2012, and this project is the second in a series of installations in the building that began in 2015.

The Fabiola Project

Francis Alÿs: The Fabiola Project is curated by Francis Alÿs and Lynne Cooke, Senior Curator, Special Projects in Modern Art, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

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