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Vatican revives its ancient patronage of the arts

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For centuries, popes sponsored the work of artists such as Michelangelo, Raffaello or Bernini, who went on to create some of their masterpieces within the very walls of the Vatican.

Yet over time, the marriage between art and faith grew stale ? the Vatican?s culture minister even called it a ?divorce? ? with the Roman Catholic Church finding itself estranged from the art world it did so much to create.

Now, in a bid to revive its ancient tradition of arts patronage, the Holy See will participate with its own pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale [1], a leading international arts festival.

The exhibition, unveiled on Tuesday (May 14) at the Vatican [2], will feature works by contemporary artists taking their cues from the Book of Genesis.

It?s an about-face for the church, which has often found itself as the subject of some controversial ? some would say blasphemous ? works of contemporary art.

The most famous case is probably ?The Ninth Hour,? a 1999 sculpture by Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan depicting Pope John Paul II being hit by a meteorite.

Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, the Vatican?s culture minister who was considered a strong contender during the recent papal conclave, has made reconciliation with the art world a top priority since his appointment in 2007.

In 2009, Ravasi promoted a meeting between Pope Benedict XVI and some of the world?s leading artists in Michelangelo?s Sistine Chapel, 45 years after the first such event hosted by Pope Paul VI in 1964.

The Vatican first tried its hand at commissioning art two years later, when it called on 60 artists ? from painters to architects to movie directors ? for a show to mark the 60th anniversary of Benedict?s ordination to the priesthood.

At the 2013 Venice Biennale, the Vatican didn?t commission artists to create religious art, such as crucifixes or other works that could be used for church liturgies ? though this will eventually be an objective of the Vatican arts patronage, according to Ravasi.

Rather, under the title ?Creation, Un-Creation, Re-Creation,? the Vatican asked artists to reflect on the Genesis account of the creation of the world and the fall of humanity.

The artists? personal religious faith was not a factor in their consideration, Vatican officials said.

Italy?s multimedia group Studio Azzurro was entrusted with the theme of ?creation,? while Czech photographer

Josef Koudelka, who photographed the 1968 Soviet invasion of Prague, was chosen to represent ?un-creation.?

His photographs ?expose an abandoned, wounded world, and at the same time are able to transform fragments of reality into works of art,? said Antonio Paolucci, director of the Vatican Museums, who curated the exhibit.

American painter Lawrence Carroll was assigned to the theme of ?re-creation,? working with ?salvaged materials,? according to Paolucci.

The Vatican pavilion will cost nearly $1 million, covered entirely by donations and corporate sponsors.

According to Ravasi, the Vatican?s participation at Venice Biennale is just ?a first step? in re-establishing an ?authentic dialogue? between art and faith. Whether there will be further artistic ventures will be up to Pope Francis, he added.

For now, the Vatican is considering participating at Milan?s Universal Exposition in 2015.

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Links:
[1] http://www.labiennale.org/en/Home.html?back=true
[2] http://www.cultura.va/content/cultura/en/eventi/europa/venezia.html