Francis Alÿs was born in Antwerp, Belgium, in 1959. He studied architecture at the Institut d'Architecture de Tournai, Belgium, and the Istituto di Architettura di Venezia, Italy. He began to work as an artist in 1990 after moving to Mexico City and had his first one-person exhibition there in 1991. Major exhibitions of his work have been presented at such venues as Art Angel, London (2005); Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany, and touring (2004); and the Musée d'art contemporain, Avignon, France (2004). He participated in the Venice Biennial in 2007 and 2001 and the Carnegie International in 2004. Alÿs lives and works in Mexico City and London.

selected bibliography


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Francis Alys
Fabiola—An Investigation, 1994–

This collection of works, all bearing the profiled image of a young woman in a crimson cloak, was begun some fifteen years ago. Now comprising almost three hundred items, it is installed here for the first time in a museum as a collection. Viewed en masse, its striking cohesiveness depends on the fact that every work not only depicts the same subject—the Christian saint known as Fabiola (d. 399 AD) —but also strictly adheres to the same iconographic formulation. All are, in fact, replicas. Given the composition’s manifest simplicity, it is highly unlikely that the image was copied for the usual pedagogical reasons—as either an exercise in acquiring technical skills or refining an academic style. Even if some appear to have been created for a religious market or to serve devotional needs, most betray the hands of novices, amateurs, or Sunday painters.

In 1885, a French academician, Jean-Jacques Henner, created the definitive, albeit fictitious, portrayal of Fabiola. The prototype for all these works, Henner’s disarmingly conventional rendering owed its repute to a bestseller. An inspirational hagiography in the guise of a romantic historical novel of the kind popularized by Sir Walter Scott, the melodrama Fabiola, or The Church of the Catacombs (1854) by the British Cardinal Wiseman gave rise to a cult devoted to this formerly obscure female saint. Riding the wave of the evangelical Catholic revival then sweeping Western Europe, Henner’s depiction had its visual sources in the portraiture of secular subjects developed by the Bellinis and others working in fifteenth-century Venice. So widely venerated was his devotional image that it ensured both its subject and its creator considerable renown. Alongside the myriad printed reproductions that have long flooded mass markets throughout the Christian world, handcrafted and painted versions by amateurs and professionals alike continue to be limned over a century later.

From his first discussions with Dia about this project, the collection’s instigator expressed the wish that it be installed in a venue whose galleries were designed for the display of old-master paintings. That is, neither a white-cube gallery of the kind conventional for modernist artworks nor the raw warehouse spaces utilized for post-sixties installation art was deemed suitable; a historicizing setting became a prerequisite for the presentation of what, on this occasion, was to be considered a site-related project. Consequently, not only the context but the modes of presentation and display deployed here impact decisively upon the reception of the project. When invited by Dia Art Foundation to collaborate on this venture, the Hispanic Society of America agreed at once to make available galleries normally devoted to the presentation of its nineteenth-century paintings. Established in 1912, the Hispanic Society’s vast holdings of artworks, artifacts, books, maps, documents, and much else pertaining to the history and culture of the Hispanic world were donated by the American collector and philanthropist Archer Huntington. That this Fabiola collection should find a temporary home in an institution founded by an exceptional patron for the display of his unrivaled holdings seems most fitting.

In marked contrast to the majority of the artworks in the collection of the Hispanic Society, most of the Fabiolas are anonymous, their pedigrees scant and their provenances slim; moreover, shorn of the frames that once enhanced and protected them, many are in poor condition. With noticeable traces of paint loss and collateral damage, their abraded surfaces also attest to each work’s loss of effective and material value and their consequent descent into the abandoned and homeless realm of the flea market. Contextualized within this institutional frame, the Fabiola collection may be described with equal validity as an ensemble of religious artifacts or a trove of academic copies. Two quite distinct avenues of inquiry thus present themselves to the visitor entering the museum’s northern annex: one involves an address to the collector; the other focuses on the collection qua collection. These dual lines of investigation soon prove to be the weft and warp in a strange textile woven from various layers of fact and fiction.

The owner of the Fabiolas is Belgian-born artist Francis Alys, who amassed the ensemble almost by default. Shortly after he abandoned his vocation as an architect in favor of a conceptually driven art practice, Alys decided to make an art collection for himself. Given his limited resources, his abiding fascination with various forms of artisanal production, and his interest in the structure and role of the (art) market as it impacts economies of production, he resolved to build his collection from “hand-painted” copies of what he assumed would be famous masterpieces that he would find in flea markets and similar haunts. But, in place of the anticipated journeyman renderings of Raphael’s Sistine Madonna, Leonardo’s Last Supper, or Millet’s Angelus (or, for that matter, the audacious interpretations of Alberto Korda’s Che Guevara), he encountered pictures of a young female saint whom he came to know as Fabiola. For rather than the Madonna (or even Madonna), she remains the copyist’s favorite model. If most of his early acquisitions were found serendipitously, on his wanderings through cities as far flung as Maastricht and Mexico City, more recently the findings of colleagues and contacts have expanded his project. Beginning as a modest, almost casual, quest, Alys’s deliberately
low-key venture has nonetheless produced an exceptional entity and a shift in his thinking. The questions raised over the years by both the geographic dispersion and the abundance of copies have transformed the original endeavor into an investigation: “Why that image in particular? What gives it that power to resist... first mechanical reproduction and now digital reproduction? What does the act/ritual of painting that image... mean for its author? What is it that made it become an icon, an object beyond any consideration of taste? How has it served a reminder of the existence of a completely parallel and separate art scene from, say, ‘ours,’ one with its own references and obsessions?” Alys’s collection may be distinguished from most others assembled by artists on account of its founding precept: its basis in copies, for this governing mandate has meant, ipso facto, that the work of the celebrated professional practitioner is forsaken for that of the artisan, the renown for the anonymous, the original for the replica, and the precious for the ostensibly commonplace or banal. That Alys would choose to devote his attention to unknown practitioners is fully in keeping with his aesthetic; that the project’s originating conception, its governing logic and axioms, would ultimately produce results far from what he could have anticipated is fully in accord with his customary ways of conceiving projects; that its underlying ethic downplays issues of the signature statement in favor of communal or collective discourse is symptomatic of his interest in collaborative methodologies.

Only recently has the Fabiola project acquired the critical mass that enables it to function autonomously, as a “public” collection in its own right. Presenting it within a traditional art museum does not preclude consideration of the sacral function, which, irrespective of any religious impetus in their making, probably played some part in the individual reception of each work. Whether, for example, a picture was used for private devotion, or whether it functioned as decor, as a pious or historicizing decoration in a residence, or whether it served as a gift to devout friends or family members, or to nurses or abused wives (the alleged beneficiaries of Saint Fabiola’s protection), ultimately remains hypothetical—or the province of social historians. Yet, encountered in this context, alongside artifacts of many different kinds and functions, speculation of this kind seems inevitable and natural.

Given that the aesthetic ideal underpinning these works is not the free expression of the creator, individuality and subjectivity should be deliberately suppressed, yet they surface nonetheless. Indeed, Alys asserts, “I personally see them as all different: each seems to project some kind of personal ideal of womanhood or to disguise, consciously or not, a familiar face with the features of Fabiola.” As such, they embody fundamentally different standards and conventions from those that inform thrift-store paintings. Alys’s project neither celebrates nor lampoons the transvaluation and idiosyncrasies of the works (unlike, for example, Jim Shaw’s exhibition of thrift-store works in a modernist context). Questions of taste and connoisseurship are but some of the issues raised by Alys’s current contextualization of his project. Had the collection been installed in a more conventional mainstream institution, then his gesture could, perhaps, have been read in relation to the by-now well-codified discourse of institutional critique. Yet, rather than soliciting routine responses generated by that well-rehearsed debate, Alys’s arm’s-length insertion of his project within a less familiar matrix invites a form of cultural anthropology wherein artistic, religious, and historiographic meanings come equally into play. “Flea markets are black holes of the signified,” Cuauhtémoc Medina argues eloquently, “places where objects lose their inherited meanings that gave them a sense of belonging, where they acquire new meanings as they pass to other hands.” In embracing these anomalous objects, Alys has not only given them new life, he has offered them multiple identities.

Lynne Cooke
notes

1. Smaller selections have previously been exhibited: In 1994 twenty-eight examples were shown in a solo show by Francis Alys, "Fabiola," Cuare, Mexico City, September–October 1994; in 1997 he showed approximately sixty in a group show, "Antechambres," at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London; the same sixty were then supposed to have been shown in the 2nd Biennial of Saarema, Estonia, in 1997.

2. The only other iconographic representation of Fabiola known to this author from that period is seen in an oil painting from 1855 by Edward Jakob von Steinle, now in the Städelisches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main. Though Jean-Jacques Henner’s original is now lost, vast numbers of reproductions in a variety of print media were published throughout the twentieth century, from renowned sources including the Louvre. For a sample of current ownership and market-related issues see http://antiquesandthearts.com/forumresponse.asp 4/2/2007.

3. The project originated in a commission to Alys in 2000 for a new project to be shown at Dia’s exhibition facility at 548 West 22nd Street. When that building closed in 2003, the proposal morphed into an invitation to conceive an off-site project.

4. The Hispanic Society of America is the first of several venues, each significantly different in identity and typology, that will host the project.

5. For logistical reasons, Alys was forced to discard the frames that accompanied most of these paintings at the moment he purchased them. Beyond details relating to the city in which each work was sourced and its purchase price, little is known of their individual histories. Alys requested that the publication accompanying Dia’s presentation contain a detailed scholarly catalogue itemizing each object in the collection to date, further indicating that the project fit the typology of an art collection. A sound provenance is one of the features of a work of art that enhances and confirms “the assessment of connoisseurship by demonstrating a historical chain of connections to the time and place of a work’s production,” Martha Buskirk argues. “Such histories help authenticate and therefore secure market value, even as conservation labs have continued to search for evermore precise tools to study and evaluate the material or intrinsic traces of authorship.” (Buskirk, The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003, pp. 4–5.) In addition to recording the price and place of acquisition, the presence or absence of a signature, and other relevant data, this itemized catalogue will include a condition report by Dia’s conservator.

6. Certain subsets can be identified within the totality of the collection: one encompasses embroidery, possibly the work of pious needlewomen who purchased readymade kits in order to put their craft in service to their faith. Another group, containing some thirty examples, is defined by a palette whose hallmark is an acidulous orange-red used in rendering the saint’s cloak, as well as by a loose and cursory, even clumsy, handling. Alys sent some sixty Fabiolas to an exhibition in Saarema, Estonia, in 1997 (see note 1). When the works were shipped back to him, he discovered that almost thirty had been replaced with substitutes, crude versions made to simulate his "originals," which had mysteriously disappeared on route. Wishing to conceal rather than acknowledge that they had lost or otherwise appropriated his works, the Estonian organizers seemingly hoped to fool him into believing that the substitutes—the copies they commissioned of his copies—were not fakes but works he himself had collected.


8. Evidence of the fact that they were made from reproductions of Henner’s now-lost original, is found, for example, in their size variations, the reversal of the motif (in several instances), and the substitution of green for the customary red in the cloak.

