



Michele Casella

TIMELESS PAINTER

Un Pittore Senza Tempo

MUSEO

ITALO AMERICANO

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Quotations for this catalog were taken from the following sources: *Forza Zio Mec*, by Michele Cascella, 1969; *Michele Cascella: L'estasi Delle Cose*, by Alberico Sala, 1968; *Omaggio a Michele Cascella*, by Paolo Levi, 1976



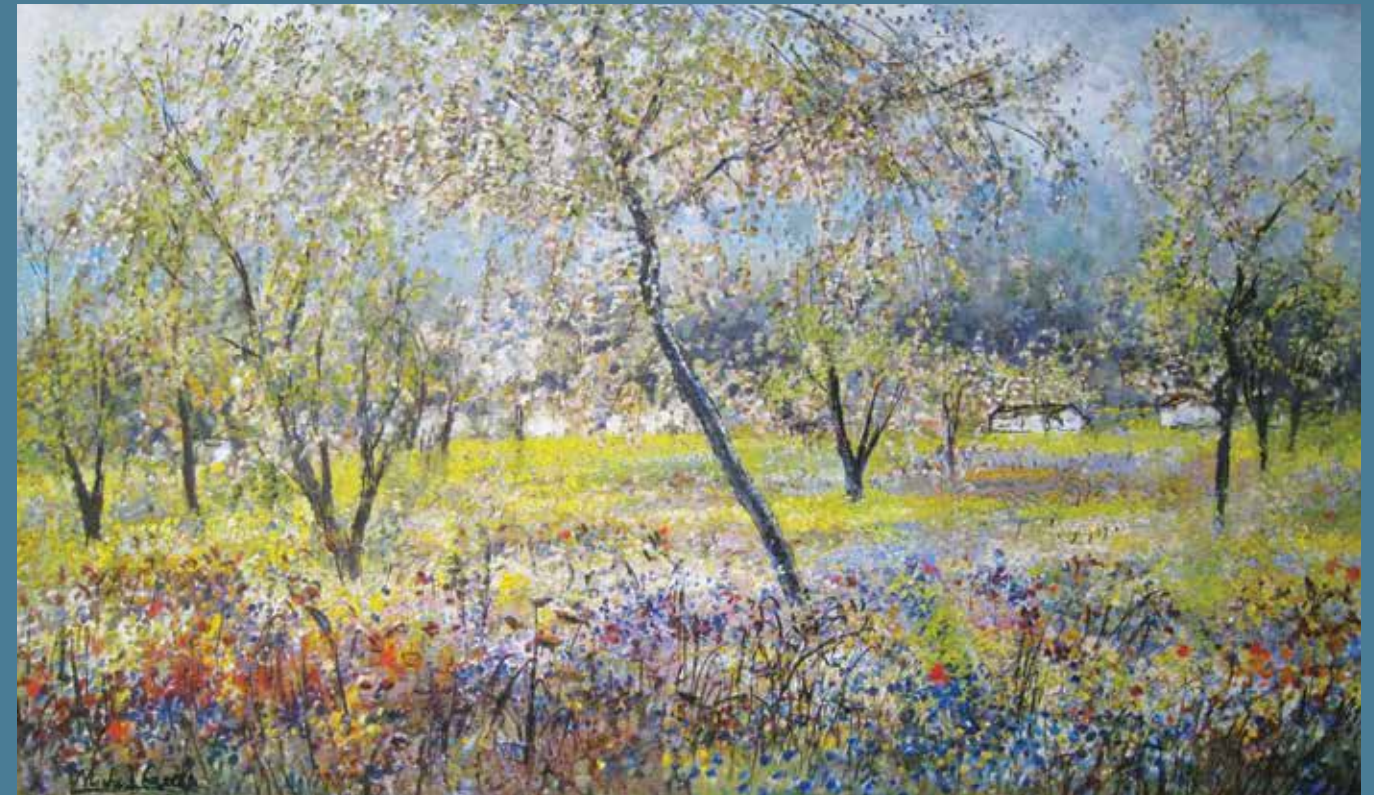
Michele with his little helper, exhibit co-curator, Francesca Lane Kautz, at a show in the Bay Area in the mid-1960s. Photo by Susan Bensal.

Michele Cascella

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Curated by Francesca Lane Kautz and Mary Serventi Steiner of the Museo Italo Americano



Spring, c. 1960, Oil, Private Collection

“The passage of time has not diminished my feelings nor, therefore, my palette. I paint with the heart of a boy from Abruzzo.”



Michele with future wife, Isabel Lane, in the studio of his Palo Alto home, 1964.

“Cascella marched across Liberty, Dada, Futurism, Cubism, the Novecento, Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera, without getting even the slightest scratch. He has always been himself; while at each step he has advanced, steadily becoming better and more intelligent. In some ways, he has not changed since his twenties. Without ever deliberately intending it, in this way he has achieved the result of being as young now as he was then. His are paintings that do not belong to any kind of movement or trend — they have attained a kind of classical structure that is all their own.”

— Dino Buzzati, Italian Novelist and Journalist

Michele Cascella was born on September 7, 1892 in Ortona, in the Abruzzo region of Italy. When he was 3 years old, his father, Basilio, moved the family to Pescara, in Corso Manthonè, across the street from Gabriele d’Annunzio’s house. The Pescara city council gave Basilio a piece of land to build a color lithographic works and art studio in 1895. Here Basilio printed the magazine *L’Illustrazione Abruzzese*, *L’Illustrazione Meridionale* and finally *La Grande Illustrazione*. Among the

collaborators were some of Italy’s most renowned writers and poets, such as Gabriele d’Annunzio, Luigi Pirandello, Umberto Saba, Matilde Serao, Grazia Deledda, Ada Negri and Giovanni Pascoli.

Like his brother Tommaso, Michele studied under his father, an important painter, ceramist and lithographer. In school, Michele was never a good student, not even in drawing, and his mother decided that an ecclesiastic career would be

best for him. But his father wanted him to be, and made him, a painter, taking him to his studio and making him copy the drawings of Leonardo and Botticelli, or simplifications of large mouths and noses that he prepared specifically for him. For Michele and Tommaso, their father was their guide in design and in comprehending the logic of art. He initiated them into the intricacies of draftsmanship, composition and color combinations and gave them precious instruction in the arts of etching and lithography.

It was his father who first made him aware of the possibility of painting air. “Remember,” he said, “that everything lives and breathes with a special hue at dawn. Everything at dawn is worth painting — it vibrates and responds to the first light. You must learn to capture that indelible moment. Feel its transparency. It is a fleeting moment which can be yours. If you catch it, you will have a style of your own.”

In 1907 he exhibited for the first time at the “Famiglia Artistica” in Milan. He was 15 years old and was hailed as a child prodigy. The following year he exhibited at the Caffè Ligure in Turin, in 1909 at the Druet Gallery in Paris and in 1910 at the Salon d’Autonne. His technique then consisted mainly in the use of pastels and some oils.

Around 1910 he began to frequent the cultural circles of Milan, where he became acquainted with his great friend, the poet Clemente Rebora, as well as the philosopher Antonio Banfi and the writer Sibilla Aleramo, who in turn introduced him to Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Umberto Boccioni and Margherita Sarfatti.

During the First World War, he was initially assigned to orderly work in Schio but soon requested and received permission to be transferred to the front, so that he could move around more freely and draw as he wanted. His visual memories regarding military life have been portrayed in his pictures and some of these works are at the Risorgimento Museum and the Historical Collections in Milan. At the end of the war he settled in Milan and dedicated himself to engraving and ceramics, to later return to oil and watercolor painting.

In 1924 he exhibited for the first time at the Venice Biennial and in 1925 organized a personal



Top: Michele (third from the left) with his boyhood friends, circa 1898. Middle: (from right to left) Michele, age 15, his brother Tommaso, age 17, and their father, Basilio. This photo was used to advertise their first show in Milan at the Famiglia Artistica in 1907. Bottom: Michele (left) with author and feminist, Sibilla Aleramo (center) and his good friend, Clemente Rebora, outside of Milan in the summer of 1914. At the time, Michele was having an affair with Sibilla, who was 16 years his senior, which she later wrote about in her 1933 book, *Il Frustino* (The Whip).



exhibition at the Pesaro Gallery in Milan, which received good reviews from Italian art critic Carlo Carrà. His seascapes, urban views, and female portraits brought him success and invitations to all the Venice Biennial exhibitions until 1942. In 1926 Michele was informed by the Biennial that his watercolor “Mattutino” was bought by His Majesty the King.

In 1928 Michele made his first trip to Paris, although he and Tommaso had exhibited there years before. From then on, he considered Paris his second home. He was particularly drawn to the world and the feeling along the Seine — of Saint Germain des Pres, and of the small hotels on the Left Bank where he lived. The personalities, the manners, even the gestures reminded him of certain parts of Italy. In 1929 Cascella exhibited at the Beaux Arts Gallery of London. During the 1930s he primarily used watercolors, painting views of towns. These paintings were exhibited in galleries in Paris, London and Brussels, some of which later became part of the collections of the Luxembourg Museum, the Jeu de Paume and the Victoria and Albert Museum.

In 1933 Cascella worked with the *Corriere della Sera* sketching important Italian localities. In 1934 he received a commission from Princess Maria José of Piedmont for a set of paintings of southern Italian landscapes. In 1937 he won the gold medal at the Paris Exposition Universelle and exhibited in Johannesburg. In 1938 he worked on the drafts of the opera Margherita da Cortona which was performed at the Scala Opera House in Milan. His most frequent subjects during this period were flowers, still life, fields of poppies, and landscapes of Abruzzo and Portofino, using oils, watercolors, pastels and lithography.

After the Second World War his exhibitions abroad increased considerably throughout Europe, South America, and eventually the USA. In 1959 he took his first trip to New York. He later stayed frequently in California, and beginning in 1966 displayed his works exclusively at the Galerie Juarez in Los Angeles.

Cascella spent much of the 1960s and 1970s in Palo Alto and Tuscany. Among his collectors at that time were many prominent Americans, including two U.S. Presidents, a California Supreme Court Justice, and then-Governor of California, Ronald



Top: Two generations of Cascella family artists (clockwise from upper left): Tommaso (painter and ceramist), Andrea (sculptor), Gioacchino (painter), Pietro (painter and sculptor), and Michele Cascella, 1941. Bottom: Portrait of Michele by close friend and colleague, Giorgio de Chirico. “I always admired de Chirico very much, as a man and as an artist. He was perhaps the only colleague who demonstrated to me affectionate esteem, generosity of spirit, and a true understanding of my work”.



Michele painting at his Tuscan home, Podere San Luigi, in Colle Val d'Elsa near Siena, 1972.



This page top: Michele relaxing in his Palo Alto garden, circa 1963, reading the *Corriere della Sera*, a newspaper for which he did illustrations in the mid-1930s. Middle: Young children watching Michele sketch in Spain, 1973. Bottom: Michele with Gregg Juarez, his U.S. Art representative for 25 years. Opposite page: *Fiori*, c. 1960, Oil, Private Collection.

Reagan. One of his oils of Portofino, in fact, hung over the fireplace in the Governor's mansion.

In 1972, Cascella was awarded a gold medal of merit by the city of Milan and in 1975, the town of Pescara dedicated a complete museum to the Cascella family in the original location of his father's lithographic establishment. Included are the works of his father Basilio, brother Tommaso, and nephews Andrea and Pietro, who were important sculptors. That same year he was also made an honorary citizen of Portofino. His works have been exhibited in many international museums, such as the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Gallery of Modern Art in Brussels, the de Saisset Museum at Santa Clara University, the Galleries of Modern Art in Rome, Milan and Turin, the Museums in Pallanza and Ortona, the Mario Rinaldi Museum in Cortina d'Ampezzo and the Broletto Museum in Novara.

In the 1980s, important exhibitions of his works were held at the Palazzo Reale in Milan, the Palazzo del Diamante in Ferrara, and the National Museum of Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome. In 1988, Mondadori published the first volume of the *Catalogue of Paintings by Michele Cascella*. His long, roving life and uninterrupted devotion to his work, according to the Italian art critic Alberico Sala, in the book *Michele Cascella: L'estasi delle Cose*, "provided Cascella with a great stock of experiences, and brought him up against many unusual aspects of life. He has taken careful note of everything around him, but has always remained his own unshakeable self. The various "isms" that have held sway at one time or another over the artistic world have never affected his art in any real or meaningful sense, and his painting has always retained that extraordinary quality of freshness and candor, in its mythic, fable-like treatment of images, sharing their joy with us through the quality of his eye and the openness of his heart."

After a lifetime dedicated to painting, Michele Cascella died in Milan on August 31, 1989, a few days before his 97th birthday. In 1992, in honor of the 100th anniversary of his birth, a wide collection of his works ranging from 1907 to 1946 was organized at the Palazzo della Permanente in Milan.





Fiori e Vele, 1907, Pastel, Private Collection. Photo by Nicolò Minerbi.



Vele ad Asciugare, 1908, Pastel, Private Collection



Strada a Schio, 1917, Pastel, Private Collection. Photo by Nicolò Minerbi.

“Pastels have always had a kind of spell on me, almost a suggestive power. They have at times caused me, I don't know how to describe it, to dream, to escape reality, to reach a state of pure abstraction, yet nonetheless concrete and true.”



Campo di Fiori, 1969, Pastel, Private Collection. Photo by Nicolò Minerbi.



Casa di Faffi, c. 1940, Ceramic plate, Private Collection. Photo by Nicolò Minerbi.

“I paint to express myself within the limits of my infinitely human defects. It is hard to state precisely the purpose of what I create. Ever since the earliest days of my youth, I carry on and renew a dialogue, from one canvas to the next, with the world of nature and man-made things.”



Casa di Faffi, c. 1950, Oil, Collection of Marielis Forster



Podere San Luigi, 1971, Pen and ink, Private Collection. Photo by Nicolò Minerbi.

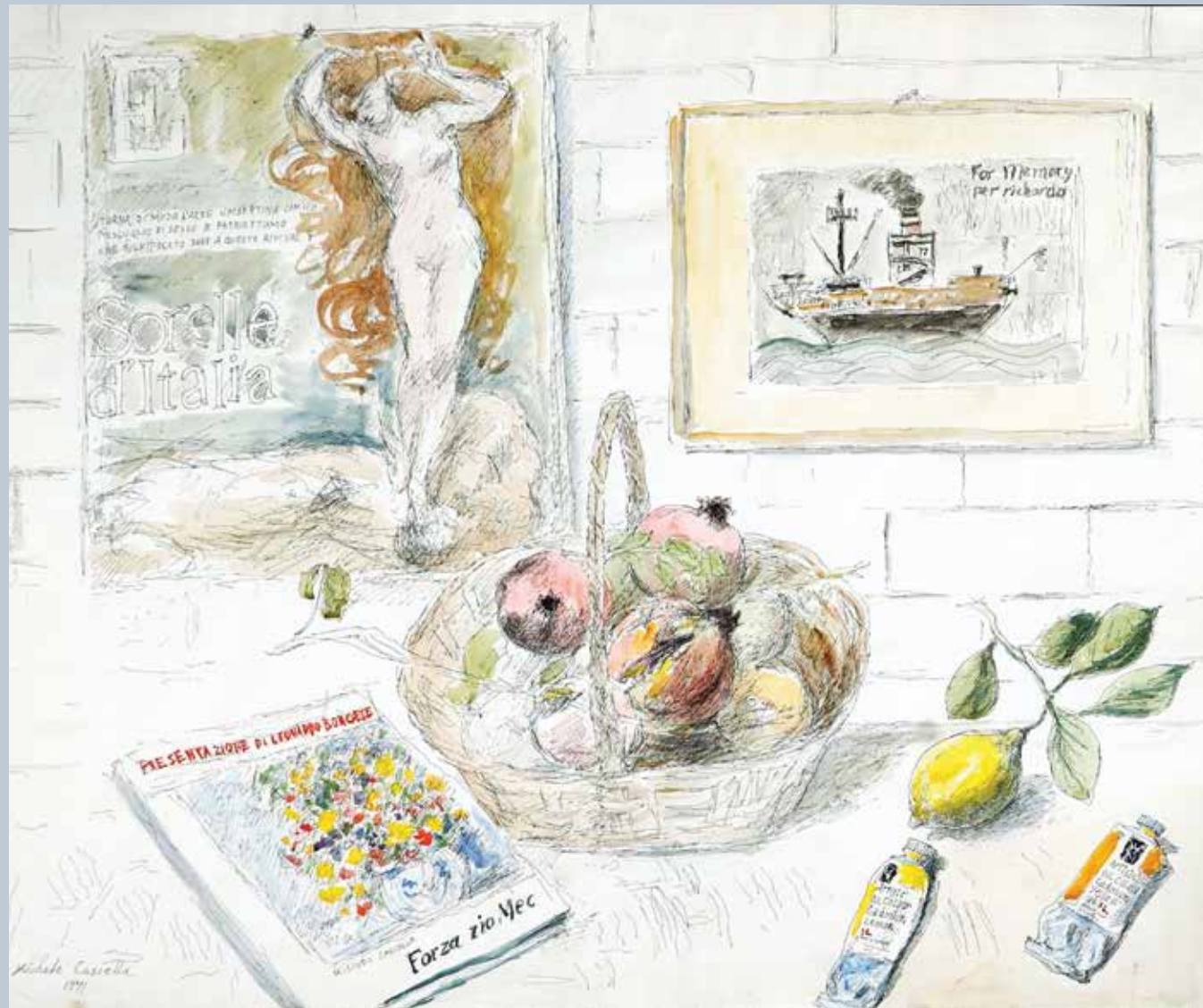


An illustration of La Piazza Vittorio Veneto by Michele Cascella for the premiere Italian newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*, for which he did almost daily illustrations in the mid-1930s.



Scene from Rapino (Chieti), 1950, Ceramic pasta dish, Private Collection. Photo by Nicolò Minerbi.

“After my experiences in the army, pen and ink drawing became my favorite method of expression. I used to go off to a place I had already decided on in my mind and work on my drawings with painstaking attention. The *Corriere* published one of my drawings almost every day, and at the end of each month I received payment at the rate of three hundred lire per drawing, and was also given a press-card.”



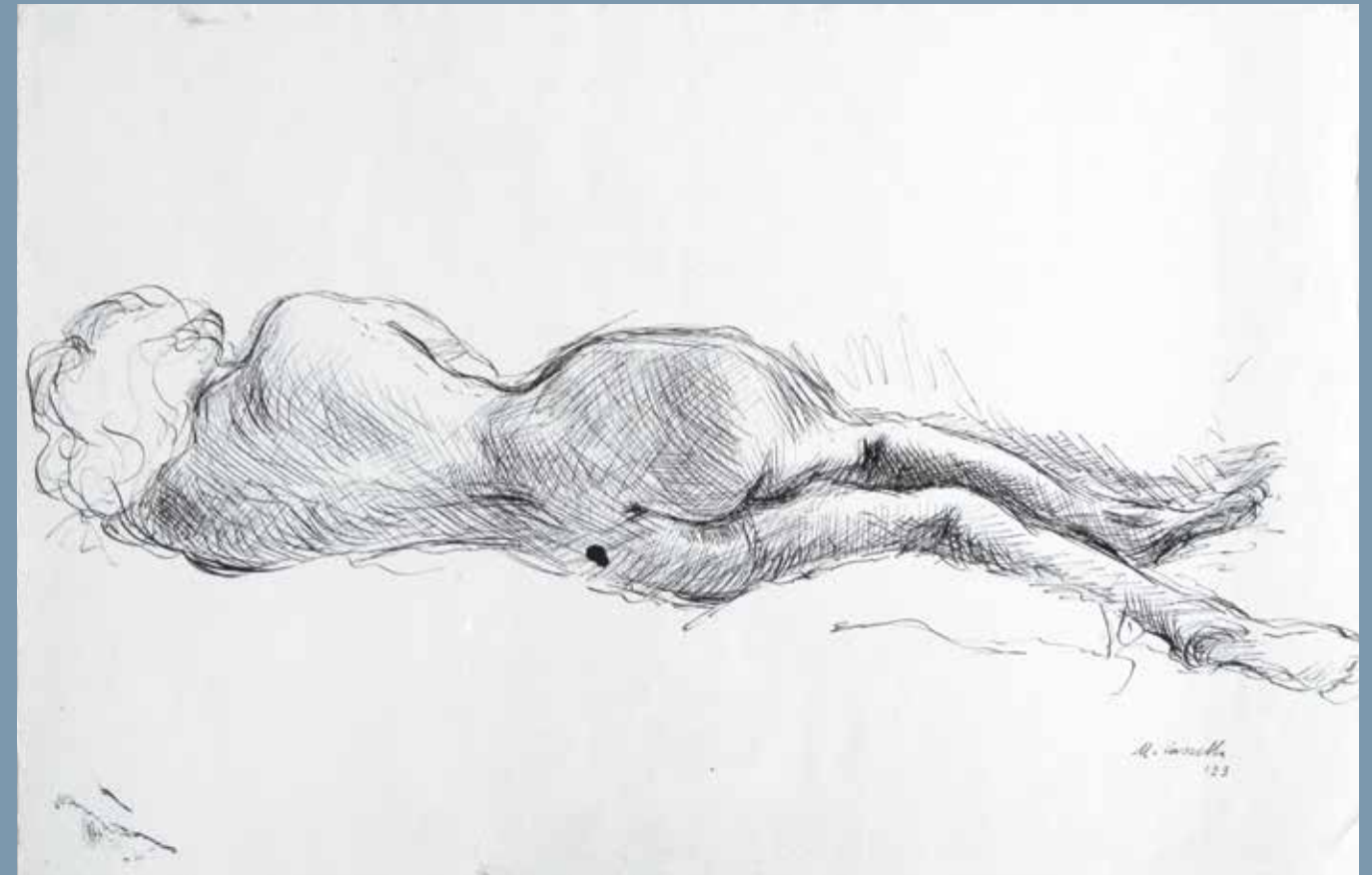
Forza Zio Mec, 1971, Watercolor, Private Collection



Forza Zio Mec, verso, 1971, Pen and ink, Private Collection



La Mia Mano Sinistra, 1967, Pen and ink, Private Collection



Nude Model, 1923, Pen and ink, Private Collection



“My contribution is, in fact, extremely limited: I painted, I continued to paint, and for me painting is synonymous with living, seeing that I could not live without painting.”

This page top: *Venezia*, 1964, Watercolor. **Middle:** *Prato, Early Morning in the Square*, 1958, Watercolor. **Bottom:** *Paris, Place de la Concorde*, 1962, Watercolor. **Opposite page:** *Portofino, Narrow Street*, 1964, Watercolor. All paintings this and opposite page from the Collection of the de Saisset Museum at Santa Clara University.



Field of Poppies near Carmel, 1961, Oil on canvas, Private Collection



Autumn, c. 1960, Oil on canvas, Private Collection



Autumn in Paris, 1962, Oil on masonite, Collection of the de Saisset Museum at Santa Clara University, Gift of Mrs. Francis J. Hickson

“My father urged me to take advantage of the first light of dawn in any season. To convince me, he used to say, ‘Just imagine yourself as a baker, who must put his bread in the oven each morning and when the sun rises the loaves of bread are cooked and out of the oven. If you start early, you will have finished your pastel, instead of the bread. Believe me, everything is alive with color in this fleeting, blessed hour of dawn... In time, when you have learned to listen to the voice of dawn, and to capture the transparency of the air, you will have found your palette and attained your own personal, unmistakable style.’”



Palo Alto, c. 1964, Oil on canvas, Collection of Calabi Gallery



La Bambina Marinaretta, 1962, Oil, Private Collection

“I use canvas, brushes and colors, like many others, in order to satisfy the most pure, basic and intimate need of expressing my world; with a means of expression so common, so openly defenseless, a language that can seem old-fashioned, without the minimum updating. Once on the canvas the bread remains bread, the flower is that well-defined flower... Why try to flee from simplicity, intentionally forcing a language that lives inside of me, which was born with me?”



Blue Vase with Flowers, c. 1963, Oil, Private Collection



Flowers in Brass Pot, c. 1960, Oil on canvas, Collection of Mark and Kathleen Balestra



This page top: *Servizio di Caffè per Bambini*, c. 1936, Private Collection. Photo by Nicolò Minerbi.
Bottom: Detail from *Servizio di Caffè per Bambini*. Opposite page: *Kelly*, 1968, Oil on canvas, Collection of Kelly Matson



Angels Camp, 1961, Oil on canvas, Collection of Sandro and Sharon Lane, Juneau, Alaska



Gold Rush, 1961, Gouache, Private Collection

“Usually the sources of inspiration for my paintings have little or nothing to do directly with the painting itself. Most often the inspiration comes from distant emotions—the intimate emotionality aroused by a musical piece, a theatrical performance or folkloric spectacle—that take on a meaning that could be defined as all-encompassing. It’s the inner feelings, therefore, that feed my instinctive creative process.”

Top left: Michele Cascella at Angel's Camp, 1961. Right: Abruzzi Fantasia, c. 1959, Watercolor, Private Collection. Photo by Nicolò Minerbi. Bottom: New York Fantasia, c. 1960, Gouache, Private Collection



Verona, Piazza delle Erbe, 1962, Gouache, Collection of Fernando and Colleen Vescia



Milano, Via Andrea Doria, 1962, Watercolor, Collection of the de Saisset Museum at Santa Clara University



Santa Margherita Ligure, 1964, Watercolor, Collection of Mark and Kathleen Balestra

“My paintings are not the result of any cerebral strategy,
but the simple expression of my deepest feelings.”



Paris, Place des Vosges, c. 1960, Oil, Private Collection



Roofs of Paris, 1964, Oil on canvas, Collection of the de Saisset Museum at Santa Clara University



Paris in the Rain, c. 1960, Oil on canvas, Collection of the de Saisset Museum at Santa Clara University



Michele Cascella in Place Furstenberg in Paris, c. 1950

“In 1923 I was completing a watercolor of a fountain in a piazza in Palermo, when I heard an elderly woman turn to her companion and say ‘Look at what he is reduced to, the poor thing, just in order to eat.’”



Abruzzi Farmhouse, c. 1960, Oil, Collection of Sidney Gutterman



Winter in Abruzzo, c. 1960, Oil, Private Collection
Opposite page: *Summer*, c. 1960, Oil, Private Collection



Fruit Trees and Yellow Flowers, c. 1960, Oil on canvas, Private Collection



Michele Cascella at his home in Tuscany, 1971



“I remember him with his neck set somewhat squarely on his big shoulders, and his walk that was a cross between a fisherman’s and a shepherd, but with a Majella wolf’s leap locked up in that swift strong body, and with a pipe stuck in his mouth; and that face of his with its square-set temples, the rounding dome of his skull close-cropped and his thinnish hair somewhere between white and red, and the angular nose and his mouth with its chiselled, thrusting lips; and then, in total contrast to these strongly-marked, rather ferocious features, two wide open boyish eyes. And under the broad arches of those shaggy eyebrows that spread themselves out across the high, smooth forehead, that kept knotting and unknotting itself, he would be smiling. And Michele would be smiling, yes, always smiling...” — Giovanni Titta Rosa, *Michele Cascella, Objects in their Ecstasy*

Photo: Michele Cascella, 1960



Piazzetta di Portofino, Oil on canvas,
Collection of the de Saisset Museum
at Santa Clara University