

Art Investor by D. Stephen Pepper

A resourceful museum exhibit

How and why the great art of the Bourbons came to Detroit is a revealing tale of international collaboration.

During a recent 10-day tour of the Midwest and Southwest, I visited museums, private collectors, and made presentations on the subject of real value in art. I received very exciting responses from both private and professional groups, which are worth reporting. In this column, however, I want to comment on an exhibition at the Detroit Institute of Art, and on the role of the urban museum.

The exhibition is called "The Golden Age of Naples," and is subtitled "Art and Civilization under the Bourbons, 1734-1799." It concentrates on the art produced during the 18th-century reign of the cadet branch of the Bourbon dynasty of France, which was established in Naples and Spain in the 18th century. The exhibit was originally assembled in Naples, where it was shown in 1980; the earthquake which devastated Naples early this year caused a delay; the exhibition survived, however, thanks to the commitment of the Neapolitan officials responsible for art, who believe that Italy's great cultural heritage is essential to its salvation, and to the museums of Detroit and Chicago, which committed huge sums to cover the increased costs of shipment of works of art. The exhibition will continue in Detroit until Oct. 31, and will open in Chicago in January.

Its most impressive features are the grand scale and eloquence of

the religious art of the period, and the cultivation of the fine arts under the reign of the Bourbons. Francesco Solimena (1657-1747) is the great protagonist of the former. The first work the visitor views as he enters is one of Solimena's great altarpieces, which is about 13 feet high (375 cm.), painted in 1710. It conveys the ecstatic and evangelistic power of religious art of the time, with the powerful deep blues and reds of the drapery of the leading religious figures depicted.

Solimena's own portrait displays his strong sense of personal authority. The light divides his face in half, half light and half dark, with a broken path of light falling over the eye otherwise surrounded by shadow. Behind is his painting of Olympian gods, as if he could personally invoke them.

By contrast, the second great painter of the era, Francesco de Mura (1692-1782) is a cultivated artist-scientist, typical of the Bourbon era. In his self-portrait, painted in the mid-1740s, de Mura casts himself in an even, light illumination. He holds a sketch of Minerva, the protectress of the arts; his features show the acute tension of the man of rational belief who sees in his calling as an artist the task to convey the outlook of Reason.

The third great artist of the period, Corrado Giaquinto (1703-66) combines in happy union the two previous tendencies, the religious

excitement of Solimena and de Mura's clear and rational lighting and imagery. In the exhibition, Giaquinto is represented by four paintings that depict the life of the Virgin. Their warm, high-keyed tonality, and transparent shadows reflect the Bourbon era, while the dramatic accents and directed control of large religious canvases show his grasp of Solimena.

English historians in particular have delighted in depicting the Bourbons as despots whose decadence despoiled the people—a self-serving view masks the reality of the Jacobinism, organized by the British, which swept away the Bourbon rule in France and attacked it in Spain and Naples.

This exhibition helps set the record straight. Under the Bourbons, Naples was a seat of intellectual life, as it had been when Frederick II, the great Hohenstaufen emperor, founded the first university in Europe there in 1252. All of this ended in characteristic Jacobin fashion when a peasant army under Cardinal Fabrizio Ruffo invaded the city and executed all intellectuals who favored French rule.

The Detroit Institute of Art, in mounting this exhibition and committing much funding to the undertaking, fulfills one of the most important functions of the urban museum, that of educating the public. The Detroit Institute of Art has been noted for its commitment to this role for American museums, particularly since Dr. Fred Cummings became the director. At a time when the United States desperately needs profound revitalization of education, the Detroit Institute is one of the best prepared in the country to carry out expanding accomplishments.