

**Raffaello Sorbi**, *The Evening Walk--Environs of Florence*  
1844 – Florence - 1931

oil on canvas  
29 7/8 by 35 7/8 inches (76 by 91 cm)  
signed and dated lower left: 'Raffaello Sorbi 1870'

provenance: Mrs. S. Tolfrey, London, by 1872;  
Private collection, England

exhibited: Possibly Parma, 1870;  
London International Exhibition, South Kensington, 1872, no. 1515;  
Royal Manchester Institution, the 53<sup>rd</sup> Exhibition, Manchester, 1873.

note: Raffaello Sorbi was born in Florence and trained at that city's Accademia di Belle Arti, studying with the academic master Antonio Ciseri (1821-1891) from whom he learned a very polished manner suitable to the grand history paintings he produced in his early years and which from the age of seventeen were quite successful. Beginning in the mid-1860s and influenced undoubtedly by the movement of the Italian group of painters from Florence and Naples known as the Macchiaioli, who were active from the 1850s and rejected the academic approach, favoring instead bright and often sketchy scenes of everyday life, Sorbi also turned to smaller scale works of various genre. Then in 1872 the French dealer, Eugène Goupil, made an exclusive agreement with Sorbi to acquire almost all of his production.<sup>1</sup> This gave the artist access to markets in Paris, London, and New York, and he never really had to worry thereafter about sales. He was appointed an academician at the Florence Royal Institute of Fine Arts. In 1923 he gave his *Self-Portrait* (fig. 1) to the Galleria degli Uffizi, and in 1927 he participated in the Esposizione Nazionale at the Palazzo Pitti. In 1931 several months before his death, Sorbi received the Order of Commendatore della Corona d'Italia. His son also became a painter.

At the Mostra (Exhibition) di Belle Arti of Parma in 1870, Sorbi displayed a work entitled *La Strada* (*The Road* or *The Path*),<sup>2</sup> and one certainly wonders if that was in fact the present painting. If so it was then, like several other of his works (figs. 2a-b), sent off to England. Scenes of strolling figures set in the landscape were frequent not only in Sorbi's oeuvre (figs. 3a-c), but also in those of the Macchiaioli and other Italian nineteenth-century painters such as Giuseppe de Nittis (figs. 4a-e). The present work, however, has a rather unique, evocative sensibility. Sorbi, in addition to landscapes and some contemporary subjects, produced several categories of painting, including scenes set in ancient Rome and Pompeii, 18<sup>th</sup> century genre, and the one to which this picture belongs, identified by his chief scholar as "Fourteenth Century Settings."<sup>3</sup> Within this category Sorbi displayed something of an obsession with depictions of the most famous of all Florentines, the great poet Dante (figs. 5a-d).<sup>4</sup> He focused especially on the scene of Dante encountering his beloved Beatrice on a pathway outside Florence (figs. 6a-e). In some cases she holds a bouquet of flowers, and in the present painting, it will be noted that the little girl leading the procession of women also carries a bouquet, perhaps evoking Dante's first meeting with Beatrice when they were both only nine years old. In any case it is clear that the figures here are not in modern costume, but in Sorbi's imagined 14<sup>th</sup> century style dress, which he had employed the previous year in another painting featuring two women entitled *Beatrice Feeding the Doves* (fig. 7);<sup>5</sup> and so perhaps the present work is a veiled allusion to the walk of Beatrice with her companion. The same young woman with a double braid seen from the back reoccurs in another of the "fourteenth-century paintings" dated 1874 (fig. 8).<sup>6</sup>

Beginning just at the time of this painting what has been characterized as “Later Tuscan Realism” saw the Italian painters of the Florentine school and Macchiaioli, like Silvestro Lega (1826-1895), who was also a former Ciseri student, turning to refined, vast landscapes without limits that employed dramatic color and light contrasts in depictions of the countryside (figs. 9a-c).<sup>7</sup> Sorbi too was attuned to this approach, as evident in a number of his works (figs. 10a- c). In the present painting the child leading the procession-like strollers may be intended to provide a wistful note of contemplation on the process of aging. The two main figures, deep in conversation and in contrasting dress of black and white, make their way along a path in a wide green field. Other strollers can be seen in the distance, which culminates in a low range of hills, suggesting, as the title gives it, “the environs of Florence,” perhaps in the direction of Fiesole. The setting sun reflected in the wispy clouds and the broad expanse of sky with the diffused light suggests evening is approaching, and the mood is definitely nostalgic and elegiac.

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<sup>1</sup>See the exhib. cat. *La Maison Goupil: Il successo italiano a Parigi*, Palazzo Roveretta, Rovigo, 2013, pp. 204-209.

<sup>2</sup>According to the *Dizionario degli Artisti Italiani Viventi*, Florence, 1889, p. 488.

<sup>3</sup>Antonio Parronchi, *R. Sorbi*, Florence, 1988, p. 106.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 93, 101, 114-115, 118-120, and 193.

<sup>5</sup>Sold Christie's. London, June 14, 1974, no. 247.

<sup>6</sup>Sold at Sotheby Parke Bernet, New York, October 7, 1977, no. 157 (as “*The Minstrel's Tune*”).

<sup>7</sup>See the exhib. cat. *The Macchiaioli: Painters of Italian Life, 1850-1900*, The Frederick S. Wight Art Gallery, UCLA, 1986, p. 139.