

# The Museum of Modern Art

## VITTORIO DE SICA

The French film critic André Bazin wrote of Vittorio De Sica, "To explain De Sica, we must go back to the source of his art, namely, his tenderness, his love. The quality shared in common by *Miracle in Milan* and *The Bicycle Thief*...is the author's inexhaustible affection for his characters."

Born in 1902 in Sora, near Rome, Vittorio De Sica spent his early years in Naples. His father, Umberto De Sica, was a bank clerk and former journalist who knew many show business people and used these contacts to launch his son's career. In his teens De Sica made his screen debut and was popular as a singer of Neapolitan songs in amateur entertainments. De Sica studied accounting in Rome and completed his military service before taking a job in a theater company. He progressed from playing clowns and old men to leading roles in romantic comedies, and by 1930 he was a matinee idol. Throughout the thirties, he teamed frequently with director Mario Camerini, the most prestigious Italian director of the era, in a series of lighthearted films such as *I'd Give a Million* (1935).

In the years 1940-42, De Sica directed several minor films in the "white telephone" film genre, developing his directorial and technical skills. In 1943 he directed *The Children are Watching Us*, which he wrote with Cesare Zavattini. It launched a life-long collaboration between the two that was instrumental in the development of neorealism.

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After the war, De Sica and Zavattini made several masterpieces in the neorealist style. De Sica showed his expertise in directing nonprofessional actors and making use of outdoor location shooting, as well as his compassion for the poor. *Shoeshine* (1946) received a Special Award at the 1947 Academy Awards presentation and marked De Sica's international reputation as a major film director. In 1948 De Sica and Zavattini collaborated on the landmark film *The Bicycle Thief*, which received an Academy Award for best foreign film. These films garnered more acclaim abroad than in Italy, where they were scorned by right-wing politicians as defeatist works which gave a distorted picture of Italian life to audiences abroad.

De Sica and Zavattini's next collaboration, the neorealist fantasy *Miracle in Milan* (1951), shared the 1951 Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival. *Umberto D* (1952) followed and was De Sica's favorite of all his films, which he dedicated to his father. Again, the films were praised abroad and denounced in Italy.

During this period, De Sica continued his acting career and starred in Max Ophul's *The Earrings of Madame De...* (1953), and Luigi Comencini's *Bread, Love and Dreams* (1953), opposite Gina Lollobrigida. The two leads were so popular that they made a sequel a year later. In 1959 De Sica starred in Roberto Rossellini's *General Della Rovere*, one of his greatest acting roles.

In 1960 De Sica directed Sophia Loren in *Two Women*, for which she received an Academy Award for best actress--the first time the award was given for a foreign-language performance. De Sica and Loren made several more films together in the 1960s, most notably *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (1963) and *Marriage, Italian Style* (1964). Both were commercial hits, and the former received an Academy Award for best foreign film.

After something of an artistic slump in the 1960s, De Sica's directorial talents enjoyed a final flowering in his later years, especially with *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (1971). The film won much critical praise and his fourth Academy Award for best foreign film. The last two films De Sica directed were *A Brief Vacation* (1973), a film in the neorealist vein written by Zavattini, and *The Voyage* (1974), starring Sophia Loren and Richard Burton.

De Sica was married twice, first to stage actress Giuditta Rissone, by whom he had a daughter, Emi, then to his frequent costar, the Spanish-born actress Maria Mercader. They had two children, Manuel, a jazz musician and film composer who wrote the score for *Finzi-Continis*, and Christian, a popular comic actor and director.

De Sica died in 1974 in Paris.

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