

## SVEVA CAETANI: FORMA E FRAMMENTO

Curated by **Chiara Ianeselli**

Spazio Extra MAXXI | October 3 2025 – January 4 2026

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*Rome, September 2025.* Titled "**Forma e Frammento**," this is the first retrospective in Italy dedicated to **Sveva Caetani** (Rome, 1917 – Vernon, Canada, 1994), scheduled at **Spazio Extra MAXXI from October 3, 2025, to January 4, 2026.**

The exhibition, curated by **Chiara Ianeselli**, features over **200 works, documents, and archival materials**, reconstructing the artistic and personal journey of this understudied figure and restoring the complexity and depth of her story.

The exhibition explores the many facets of her work —painterly, literary, and spiritual— combining fragments of her life and imagination. Alongside the artistic production, biographical, sometimes dramatic, details emerge as essential keys to understanding the deep roots of her expression.

Sveva was the daughter of Leone Caetani, one of the leading Islamic scholars of the twentieth century, and a descendant of the noble and ancient Caetani family—renowned for its role in Italian politics and culture; their ancestor Benedetto Caetani, elected Pope Boniface VIII, was the initiator of the Jubilee in 1300. Forced to spend about 25 years in isolation in her home in Vernon, Canada, Sveva transformed her pursuit of knowledge, through in depth and extensive reading, into a tool for resistance and rebirth.

At the heart of the exhibition is **Recapitulation**, a cycle of 47 watercolours that Caetani began in 1975, and worked on over the following 14 years: a recapitulation, a visionary journey retracing her life's experiences and now arriving at MAXXI, in Rome and in Italy, fulfilling a wish expressed by the artist but unfortunately never realised in her lifetime.

The exhibition is under the patronage of the Embassy of Canada in Italy and is the result of a collaboration between the *Caetani Center* and *the Museum and Archives* of Vernon in Canada, the *Fondazione Leone Caetani – Accademia dei Lincei*, the *Fondazione Camillo Caetani*, the *Fondazione Roffredo Caetani*, with loans also from the *Vernon Public Art Gallery* and the *Fabbrica di San Pietro*.

The project also includes works by **Carlo Benvenuto** (Stresa, 1966) and **Houda Kabbaj** (Casablanca, 1985), created in dialogue with the exhibition.

Under the patronage of  
**Ambasciata del Canada in Italia**

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"I am Sveva Caetani, the only daughter of Leone Caetani, who was Duke of Sermoneta, Italy and the second-to-last head of the thousand-year-old Caetani family. My father was also a famous orientalist and Islamic scholar, as well as the author of the work *Annali dell'Islam* (Annals of Islam). He was my idol—I admired his intelligence, character, integrity, vast knowledge, and inexhaustible enthusiasm for human thought and creativity. My paintings, entitled *Recapitulation*, are dedicated to his memory."

Sveva Caetani

**1917** – Sveva Caetani is born in Rome (6 August 1917 – Vernon, Canada, 28 April 1994). Her parents are Leone Caetani (Rome, 12 September 1869 – Vernon, Canada, 25 December 1935)—15<sup>th</sup> Duke of Sermoneta, 6<sup>th</sup> Prince of Teano, and Marquis of Cisterna—and Ofelia Fabiani (Rome, 29 July 1886 – Vernon, Canada, 30 December 1960). Sveva was Leone's second child; in 1901, Leone had married Vittoria Colonna (Rome, 1880 – 1954), with whom he had a son, Onorato Caetani (1902 – 1946), who suffered from severe neurological problems. Sveva's childhood was spent in Rome, where she received a rich and cosmopolitan education from numerous nannies, who taught her French, English, music, and drawing.

**1921** – The family moves to Vernon, British Columbia, Canada. Leone, Ofelia, and four-year-old Sveva cross the ocean, but the family continues to travel regularly to London, Paris, Rome, and Monte Carlo.

**1929** – While traveling to Havana, New York, Paris, and Monte Carlo, the family arranges for Sveva to receive private painting lessons. Following the global economic crisis, the family's trips become less frequent. Sveva's education continues in Canada.

**1930** – At thirteen, Sveva begins attending the Crofton House School in Vancouver, where she distinguishes herself through her passion for the arts.

**1932** – At fifteen, she contracts a severe case of measles, forcing her to interrupt her studies and return to Vernon.

**1934** – Leone Caetani is admitted to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, and is later transferred to a Vancouver hospital, where he dies on 25 December 1935.

**1935–1960** – After Leone's death, Ofelia chooses to live in complete isolation at the family's residence in Vernon with Sveva and her governess, Miss Jүүл. For twenty-five years, Sveva lives in a state of near-seclusion, unable to further her education.

**1964** – After her mother's death, Sveva regains the freedom to resume her studies and engage in new cultural exchanges. The same year, she begins teaching at St. James School.

**1969** – She earns a diploma from the Adult Institute of Victoria.

**1970** – She obtains her teaching certification from the University of Victoria.

**1971** – She resumes painting regularly.

**1972** – She begins teaching at Charles Bloom Secondary School in Lumby.

**1975** – She develops the concept for *Recapitulation*.

**1978** – She begins creating the *Recapitulation* painting series.

**1989** – She completes the *Recapitulation* series.

**1994** – She dies on 28 April in Vernon, Canada.

**1995** – The volume *Recapitulation: A Journey*, which collects the series, is published.

# Sveva Caetani: Forma e Frammento

## RECAPITULATION

In 1975, Sveva embarked on a project that would occupy her for the next fourteen years: “The idea of bringing together all the experiences and judgements of my life in a visionary journey, embodying my father as a mentor and guide.” She called this endeavour a *Recapitulation*—a cycle she envisioned as “a journey, as all life is. Because journeys, from Homer to Virgil, from Dante to Cervantes, from Bunyan to Swift, are self-revelations. They are what the traveller finds, whether as a wonder or a monster, and which they must, as Dante says, learn to see clearly and then leave behind. Dante, more than anyone else, was my model.”

With extraordinary dedication, Sveva created a structured series of watercolours on paper. The series is divided into nine sections, described by Roman numerals: **I – Inception; II – The Burrows of Nightmare; III – Transition One; IV – Le Morte Stagioni; V – Transition Two; VI – Areas of Fate; VII – Great Themes for a Great Journey; VIII – A Litany; IX – Journey’s End.** Within these sections are 47 experiences, each corresponding to an individual work.

The works draw from a remarkable variety of iconographic sources: personal memories, magazines, geographical atlases, other artworks, poems, anecdotes, and current events. The journey begins with a departure—an image of train carriages winding through the mountains—and continues with a fundamental encounter with Sveva’s father, Leone Caetani. Together, they face existential trials and challenges, moving through both intimate and universal moments. Often, multiple events occur in the same scene, a narrative style reminiscent of the medieval period.

The Alberta Art Foundation in Edmonton housed the still-incomplete series from 1985. Despite being confined to a wheelchair with hands deformed by arthritis, Sveva heroically completed the final painting in 1989, dedicating the following years to promoting her work.

The works of *Recapitulation* were published in the volume *Recapitulation: A Journey* in 1995, the year following Sveva’s death. They are accompanied by texts, sometimes poems, written in three different languages—reflections that contextualize or enrich the experience of the image.

**For the first time in history, the complete series is presented in its entirety.**

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## TELEGRAM

In this telegram of the Pacific Telegraphs sent to Sveva from her father on October 8<sup>th</sup>, 1935 at 4:25 pm is written: “Caetani, Vernon BC Thanks Beautiful long letter Dantes inferno most wonderful poem in the world Learn that love Leone.”

It was one of the last messages from her father: Leone died on December 25 of the same year in Vancouver and is remembered by Sveva as “*the first inspiration for Recapitulation.*” In an interview, the artist recalled that only a figure like Leone Caetani, already on his deathbed, could have sent such a message: “*It was so typical of him, the impulse that gave him the strength to send me a telegram with a single subject, to encourage me with all his heart to learn the Divine Comedy; at that moment he was undergoing treatment at the Mayo Clinic. What other man would have done such a thing in that situation? That telegram, preserved like a treasure for fifty years, became for Sveva part of the incentive that inspired the series Recapitulation: a tribute both to a courageous message*” and to Dante.

Right from this telegram our Journey begins.