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The routes of color

Edda Ricagno

Old Genoa is a city of palaces: a density of tall buildings, contiguous, separated by narrow alleys. The fabric is of medieval origin and so has remained until the present day, while the buildings are the product of a continuous stratification taking place through centuries of rich urban history. Beyond the generating historic events, from the physical point of view one may read in the urban design two distinct and linked plans: the area enclosed by the walls of the 9th century, corresponding to an archaic structure, and another that may be defined as 'organic', born from the routes leading to the port from the first wall, enclosed within the 13th century wall. Within this context, the chain of frescoed buildings lies in the trading areas and in those where power entrenched itself, foremost those of civil power. The first frescoed facades are found in the oldest areas of urbanization, immediately beneath the Castello along the lines that lead to the first urban nucleus, always in relation with a curia or a 'hotel', in this case that of the Embriaci and Sauli families, and to a market, while those of the first half of the 1500s are located instead in the vicinity of the docks. The fact that the commercial locations and the seats of power remain in the same positions over a long period ensures that renovation also follows closely the same space. Therefore we are able to read the 'routes of color' in the manner of a 'temporal mosaic', where the persistence of the oldest painted interventions are incorporated with those of change and renewal. The most interesting case of the persistence of a family in a single place is that of the

Imperiale family that, after an initial operation of demolition and construction during the Renaissance, take on the adaptation and decoration of the houses of the adjacent families. The transformations that occurred over the course of the century culminate in the cutting of the present day via Scurreria, a route once again frescoed, that runs from the piazza of the cathedral of S. Lorenzo and terminates precisely on axis with the entrance of the palazzo.

The greatest splendor is reached however between the middle of the 1500s and the middle of the 1600s: the so-called 'Genoese century' that saw the rise of splendid new buildings of the Genoese noble families active in trade with Spain and the rest of Europe.

This great fervor of initiatives enriched the city with new facades and masterful entrance halls, and gave impetus to the work of the fresco artists who were very active in this period. There are facades that bear painted architecture or figures, floral decorations, scenes often intended to illustrate the magnificence of the family by works of Genoese painters that from the beginning of the 1500s onward had glorified the city. It is a virtually unknown heritage almost completely buried in time from deterioration and lack of care.

This is the age of via Garibaldi, the Strada Nuova, when a group of noble families came together to build, on the edge of medieval center at the foot of the hill of Castelletto. The major part of the palaces, with exteriors ornamented in stone, are frescoed only internally. As for those completed later in the style of the 1700s, they are certainly not lacking in color, as in Palazzo Rosso. The only example entirely frescoed is that of the palazzo of Angelo Giovanni

Spinola, showing a perfect equilibrium among painted architectural and decorative elements. But the most extraordinary building and in a certain sense most 'colored' is certainly the palazzo Lomellino-Podestà, by G.B. Castello. Beyond any illusory pictorial form, the ornamental solution is a unique example of free decoration with a clear mannerist stamp, realized in stucco on a intense, uniform azure field.

With regard to the renovating of the 'Ripa Maris', not a street but a city face lapped by the sea until the 19th century construction of the 'Strada Carrettiera', only one facade frescoed with decorative elements emerges, that of the palazzo Cibo, frescoed like the two adjacent buildings on the internal street, the via del Campo, while the rest of the building is treated in a continuous manner and colored in a different tonal scale.

During recent years the City administration has promoted the restoration of approximately a hundred of these facades, to the point that the historic center has totally changed its image. Suddenly there was this 'unveiling' of one of its most important 'secrets', revealing a richness and variety that the scholars themselves had not imagined. Needless to say, this activity has encouraged other studies and further research.

The Region of Liguria is supported in this promotional endeavor by the city administration for some streets, such as via S. Lorenzo and via del Campo, with mechanisms of assistance to private citizens, as well as from the Superintendent for Architectural Heritage. Therefore today a series of routes are offered in the historic center by which to enjoy this rediscovery.