

A few "Ticinesi" worth talking about [continuation]

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A FEW "TICINESI" WORTH TALKING ABOUT.

Text of a short talk with special reference to architects and sculptors, delivered before the "Nouvelle Société Helvétique" (London Group) on November 19th, 1937.

by J. EUSEBIO.

(Continuation).

His favourite apprentice had been Francesco Borromini, who has been hailed as the one great genius the Canton Ticino has ever produced. Born at Bissone 1599 of an artistic family. The father, *Domenico Castelli*, was an architect of note, and his mother, a *Garoci*, came from a family of architects. His real surname was therefore Castelli, but the reason for the change is unknown. As a youngster he went to Rome to work for his uncle, *Leone Garoci*. Meantime Carlo Maderno, to whom young Borromini was also related, was engaged on the construction of the Church of S. Andrea della Valle and Borromini, already in 1621 was designing details for the Cupola, and sculpturing original supports for the lantern. From Maderno he received help and guidance, which he reciprocated by a strong attachment and admiration. When in 1624 Maderno was put in charge of St. Peter's, Borromini was given a number of minor tasks to perform which gained him useful experience. When Maderno died Bernini succeeded him as chief architect of St. Peter's. Borromini stayed on under him for five years, decorating, cutting statues, ornamenting chapels and so on under his direction. The first opportunity of showing his prowess came to Borromini when he built the small convent of the "Trinitari" fathers in 1634. He was then 35 years of age. After this his works follow in an uninterrupted crescendo: the Palazzo Spada, with an original perspective portico; the alterations to the Palazzo Falconieri; the construction of the Oratory of the "Filippini" fathers, to which he gave an unorthodox curved-in façade. He transforms and decorates the interior of the Cathedral of S. Giovanni in Laterano; he builds the church of S. Ivo with the bizarre corkscrew cupola; he starts the construction of the Church of the "Sette Dolori," left unfinished; he rebuilds the Palazzo Carpegna, which now houses the S. Luca Academy and in which he constructs the world famous "rampa" — this I can best describe to you as a staircase without steps, ascending gradually, with the same incline throughout, within an oval shaped space. Had he lived he would now have made a fortune with multi-floor garages. Many and many more are his works: in Piazza Navona, the Church of S. Agnese and the adjacent Palazzo a Propaganda Fidei are but a few more gems he gave the world before a tragic fate attended him. Yielding apparently to an attack of neurasthenia he committed suicide on August 2nd, 1667. His works found many admirers and also bitter critics. He wrote that he would never have lived to be merely an imitator. His numerous followers brought "Borrominian" teachings all over Europe. Amongst these I would like to mention *Carlo Fontana* of Rancate who built several notable Churches and buildings at Rome.

As my remarks regarding these three gentlemen have been wholly appreciative, I would like to give you some bold criticism of their work. I have found it in a book: "Italy and the Italian Islands" by William Spalding, Esq., Professor of Rhetoric in the University of Edinburgh, and published in 1841.

"In Domenico Fontana — Prof. Spalding writes — who, very late in the century, designed the aqueducts, the Lateran Palace, and the back elevation of the Lateran Church, we see the taste for clumsy proportions and overloaded ornament already carried to extravagance, although the general arrangements are still good and judicious. At Naples Fontana executed the extensive Royal Palace. . . . A third family, from the diocese of Como, refuses to be so summarily dismissed. In the preceding century, it had furnished Rome with Domenico Fontana, who introduced his kinsman Carlo Maderno; and now Maderno in his turn presented his cousin Francesco Borromini. Of the trio who thus transmitted papal favour like an inheritance, each successive member was worse than he who went before him. Maderno was the most extensively mischievous; because, unfortunately for his memory, he was allowed to lay his sacrilegious hands upon St. Peter's, whose lengthened nave, with the portico and façade (the latter of which is the most hopeless deformity in Rome), will hold up his name to reproach while the world endures. But, though Maderno's impure taste was unequal to ecclesiastical architecture in any shape, and though his mind sunk into utter stupidity when it attempted to deal with the conceptions of Bramante and Michel Angelo, yet he was not always a blockhead; for, like other men of his time, he could build palaces, if he could do nothing else. It is not easy to assign to him his true share in the palace of the Barberini, continued by Bernini, and finished by Borromini, which has on the whole a striking and majestic

air; but the same character belongs to the sober and well arranged Mattei palace, which was wholly executed from the designs of Maderno. On Borromini's head rests the guilt of having modernized the nave of St. John Lateran, walling up the old columns in huge piers, piercing the piers with strange niches for statues, and transforming the whole interior into its present shapeless ugliness. Among his original designs in Rome, the Church of S. Agnes in the Piazza Navona, though extravagant and faulty, has redeeming features, and is not his worst. That unenviable distinction belongs to the little church of San Carlo at the Four Fountains, a building whose whole cubic contents are said not to equal one of the piers of St. Peter's. On its puny front the outlines undulate like waves; and columns large and small, pedestals, entablatures, and balustrades, doors, windows, niches, pannels, and sculptures, jostle each other as if fighting for room."

Apparently Prof. Spalding is no lover of Baroque art, it is to be wondered what language he would have used to describe statues by Mr. Epstein.

Of the sculptors proper, at Rome, I shall mention only: *Stefano Maderno* of Bissone, whose sepulchral statue of the martyr St. Cecilia is still one of the sights of Rome; *Antonio Raggi* of Vico Marcote, notable for an imposing life-size mural sculpture "Death of St. Cecilia" in the Church of S. Agnese, as well as for the "Danube" group of the Four Rivers Fountain in the Piazza Navona; *Francesco Aprile* of Carona, *Camillo* and *Giuseppe Rusconi* of Mendrisio who have all left in various Italian Cities, particularly at Rome, some very fine statues.

Our friend, Prof. Spalding, thinks quite a lot of Stefano Maderno's statue. "To about the year 1598 belongs the exquisitely graceful and touching statue of Saint Cecilia, in the church dedicated to her in the Trastevere of Rome. It is the youthful work of Stefano Maderno, a sculptor otherwise obscure. The supposed body of the martyr had just been discovered in its sarcophagus, lying upon its face in the attitude in which the statue lies; and the purity of design in Stefano's work has been attributed to the impression wrought on him by the sight of the holy relics."

Important "Ticinesi" painters during the Baroque period there are but few. *Giovanni Serodine* of Ascona and *Gioran Battista* and *Pier Francesco Mola* may be mentioned. The "Homer," by the last named, in the Academy Gallery at Venice is a perfect study of chiaroscuro.

Venice also during the Baroque age extended its hospitality to famous "Ticinesi." The architect *Baldassare Longhena* of Maroggia merits special mention for his Palazzo Rezzonico on the Canal Grande, the Chiesa della Salute, which is his "chef d'œuvre," the façade of the Church of S. Giustina, and the Palazzo Pesaro. *Giuseppe Sardi* of Morete continued Longhena's work and of his own we have the frontage of the School of S. Teodoro and the Church S. Maria del Giglio. At Genoa at this time worked a number of families of artists hailing from the Ticino: The *Casellas*, sculptors, the *Castellis* and *Carbonis*, all painters.

There are many more notable "Ticinesi" whose work in Italy, Austria, Germany, Russia and elsewhere I would very much like to illustrate to you, but I fear I have already imposed upon your patience. I propose therefore to end with a brief review of the Neo-Classics of the "Ottocento."

Neo-Classicism in art attempted a return to simplicity of form and unity of order from the exaggerated pomposity of the baroque. Typical buildings of this new age are museums, theatres, and triumphal arches. At Milan we find some of our architects: *Cantoni* of Muggio (Palazzo Serbelloni), *Soave* of Lugano, and *Canonica* of Tesserete (appointed Royal architect by Napoleon, who had just assumed the title of King of Italy); in the Romagna, *Morelli* of Torricella. Italian architects brought neo-classicism to Russia, but there we also find the *Giardis* of Montagnola (the University, and Bourse at Moscow), *Rusca* from Agno, and *Rossi* from Lugano. *Pietro Nobile* of Campestro distinguished himself in Austria. The versatile *Giorgio Fossati* of Morete was engraver, writer and architect. At Venice he published a book of fables, which he had also illustrated with woodcuts of his own making.

Well above their contemporaries, both at home and abroad, for originality of conception as well as for perfection of execution are the sculptor Vela and the painter Ciseri.

Vincenzo Vela was born 1820 at Ligornetto near Mendrisio. Although he came from humble folk, he was a born aristocrat, and not a man of the people. This is borne out by the fact that nearly all his subjects are taken from Mythology and amongst the great of his day. He worked first in the local marble quarries and when ten years old went to Milan to work for his brother, *Lorenzo Vela*, who taught sculpture at the Brera

Academy. From the start he was averse to traditionalism and bent on asserting his own unorthodox ideas. In 1847 he earns a scholarship and goes to Rome. Here he conceives the idea of his "Spartaco," which he executes immediately on his return to Milan. This is a particularly fine statue. The athletic figure of the rebel slave, his chains broken, his determined features, the stiletto in his right hand, created a stir when Vela exhibited it in Paris in the year 1855, in as much as it epitomized the spirit of the age. Vela showed his rebellious spirit not only in art, as already hinted, but also in actual life; he took an active part in the wars of the Risorgimento.

(Continued on Page Three.)

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