

# Ticinese architects and sculptors in past centuries [continued]

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# TICINESE ARCHITECTS AND SCULPTORS IN PAST CENTURIES

*By Dr. A. Tanner, translated from "Deine Heimat" by one of our readers.*

*(Continued from issue May 25th)*

Domenico Fontana erected great and very beautiful buildings, like the palace and Logge of Lateran and the Fontana of Asqua Paola. Moreover, the two most famous palaces of Rome, viz., the Quirinal and the Vatican, bear his hall-mark. But the height of his glory Domenico Fontana achieved when he solved the very difficult mechanical problem of the transport and erection in the Square of St. Peter of an extremely heavy Egyptian obelisk, which had been lying for centuries in the ruins of the Circus of Nero. This problem had been declared by all technical men of the time to be incapable of solution, but the clever and daring Ticinese by risking his position (the Pope had intimated a grave penalty if by falling the obelisk should have been broken) attempted the task and succeeded.

To such an outstanding event, of which exist illustrative incisions, commemorative medals and even Latin carmens, had been invited all the dignitaries of the Church and around, held back by soldiers, was all the population of Rome, excited at the prospect of the great deed. The Pope had had it proclaimed that whoever should shout in the course of the operations would be immediately beheaded, and to show that this was no empty threat he placed the headsman ready with block and axe on a special platform, in sight of the multitude, so that no one should disturb the precise command of the chief with shouts of any sort. The workmen — they were over 900 — had attended Mass and partaken holy communion the morning of the great day and when they entered the enclosure they knelt in prayer.

The obelisk, held by stout ropes, had to be lifted up to the top of the base and then set erect. Thirty-five capstans, each operated by ten workmen and two horses, had to be set in motion at the same moment, at the command of the architect, who was the only man who had the right to say anything. One can well imagine the enormous impression which all this staging was to have on the populace gathered in the square. Domenico, for whom also perhaps everything was play, gives the order and the immense obelisk slowly begins to rise into the air, amid the screeching of the capstans, of the ropes and of the scaffolding. A few moments of intense emotion pass; only the sight of the headsman, ready with the axe, prevents the population from shouting in astonishment at seeing the tremendously heavy mass lifted into the air, but at the very last moment, when but a few centimetres were needed to complete the lifting operation, the obelisk suddenly remains stationary in the air. The capstans, perhaps due to slipping of the ropes, do not act any more. With the speed of lightning Fontana understands the unforeseen difficulty and feels a shiver of horror, but he realises at once the value of the counsel of a sailor who, at the risk of his life, shouted "Water the ropes" and the architect repeated the same words, so that every workman understood. The wet ropes grip again and the obelisk is lifted by those few centimetres required to give a position of stability.

On the base of the obelisk, when erected, were chiselled the words: "Domenico Fontana di Milli, trasportó ed eresse" (Domenico Fontana from Melide, transported and erected) and that Milli (Melide) though unknown to the citizens of Rome, added and perpetuated with the name of the great architect shows that Fontana, along with his name desired to immortalise also that of his beloved little hamlet.

When Fontana died, his nephew Carlo Maderno, from Bissone, followed him as architect-in-chief for the cathedral of St. Peter and, therefore, also as the foremost architect of Italy. Maderno proved himself an even finer architectural genius than his uncle. Before being chosen as leader for the work which the Pope was having carried out he had already designed and built the Church of St. Susanna, which is one of the finest churches of that time, and which served later as standard for nearly all the churches of the Baroque architecture. His lasting title to glory is, however, that to have completed the building of the cathedral of St. Peter. Contrary to the original design by Michelangelo, Maderno decided to give to the cathedral a predominating longitudinal aisle although, according to Michelangelo, it should have been of more central shape. Maderno had to solve all the problems which were linked up with such a change and he did so with great foresight and an unerring artistic sense.

All the main front of the cathedral is his work, but according to the original conception it should have had also two lateral towers. The two towers were, however, not built because Maderno feared that the ground under the cathedral was not solid enough to bear that weight also. That this assumption of the clever Ticinese technical man was right was proved when Bernini succeeded him. He attempted to build two frontal towers of his own design, but when one was finished it had to be taken down again because the ground was giving way. The portals in front of the cathedral are also the work of Maderno, and he is the creator of several of the finest palaces of Rome, among which we would mention the Mattei palace, Chigi palace and Santa Maria della Vittoria. The art of Maderno, the first great architect of the so-called Baroque period, has been appreciated by all for the richness of content, for the exquisite sense of proportion and for the geniality of certain combinations.

A relative of Carlo Maderno was Stefano Maderno, a renowned sculptor. Besides the very well-known Santa Teresa by Bernini, the Santa Cecilia by Maderno is, for composure of line and simplicity of attitude the most beautiful statue of the Baroque period.

Another relative of Maderno was Borromini, and he also is one of the most famous architects of Rome of the Baroque period. Borromini was a strange type — his antagonism for Bernini was well known to all Rome. At his time he was greatly admired for his daring architectures and then looked down upon, when the Baroque style went out of fashion. He certainly had some faults, but today people are beginning again to understand and admire his genial art, although somewhat over-ornate, and all the modern critics acknowledge the genius and originality of Borromini's work and the importance it has had for the

subsequent development of architecture. Among the very fine buildings by Borromini which are to be found in Rome, we will point out the Barberini palace, the Campanile of St. Andrea delle Fratte, the interior of St. John Lateran, the main front of St. Agnes, St. Ivo, St. Carlo alle quattro Fontane.

Contrary to what was the rule for the other Ticinese artists, who were living a retired and laborious life and very rarely gave cause to speak about them, there are many items of news to be found in the archives of Rome about Borromini. He lived an eventful life and died a violent death. He asked to be buried in the tomb of his relative Carlo Maderno, which was granted — while dying away from his native soil he desired to feel near his fellow-Ticinesi.

Another Fontana, from Mendrisio, we find again as architect in the 18th century, viz., Carlo Fontana who, in Rome and in Florence, erected notable buildings. In Venice also the Baroque architecture had a Ticinese as its greatest exponent, viz., Baldassarre Longhena from Maroggia. Those who have been to Venice know the admirable church of Santa Maria delle Salute — the architecture is stupendous. It is perhaps the most beautiful and most original structure of the Baroque style. The great portals, the wonderful volutes, which unite the central to the outlying portions and the very beautiful dome leave an unforgettable impression. And Longhena, like all the Ticinesi, besides being a genius of architecture had also an excellent engineering mind. Among the innumerable works of art by him which are to be found in Venice, we would point out also the Rezzonico palace, which adorns the Grand Canal. (To be continued.)

### THE PILOT'S CORNER

By Captain MARK CLIFTON

Very often I hear an air passenger make a sarcastic remark about the whole silly business of fastening his seat belt during a flight. Even if he is prepared to admit that the best protection on takeoffs and landings is a strong seat belt, he balks at the idea of danger when the light over the control cabin door flashes on during a flight at cruising altitude. Sure, he may feel a bit queasy from the sharp jolt as the plane wings through an airpocket or two, but the idea that these currents could throw him around is a little absurd. Anyhow, they never have. And he has flown over most of the globe.

The hard fact is that we pilots don't put that light on half as often as we should. As a result, the men in the hangar who repair interior upholstery have more than a few times patched up the fabric where the moving parts of the paying passengers have torn holes in the ceiling.

There was a specific instance a few years back when I was flying freight across the Pacific Ocean to Japan. Everything that should have been secured was tied down; with the exception, of myself and the second pilot who was sleeping peacefully sprawled out on one of the four reclining seats behind the cargo. I had just left the third pilot alone at the controls for five minutes so that I could make some coffee when he flew right smack into the biggest, fleeciest white cloud he could find among the few scattered en route. The plane dropped as if someone had pulled the legs out from under a grand piano — then it hit bottom with a groan of metal.

First I found myself clawing my way off the ceiling and then as suddenly slammed against the edge of the crew compartment bunk. The bruise that my thigh got, turning into a blue mark as round as a baseball, was *with me a month*. But the second pilot fared worse than my-

self. In his cosy chair he had sailed right up to the ceiling and down again with such force that his weight broke both the back and arm off the chair — and one of his own ribs. When he saw that the pilot at the controls had gone through a cumulus in a practically clear sky, he was ready to fight, bruises and all.

While this was a case of carelessness on the part of an inexperienced pilot, the real difficulty is that even a seasoned pilot cannot always tell where the big cumulus (turbulent clouds) or cumulonimbus (thunderclouds) are hiding. They may very often be veiled or covered by layers of thin stratus clouds through which the pilot flies solely by reference to instruments until suddenly — thump — his plane rocks crazily in the turbulent air. Weather services advise of such conditions en route. Other pilots report their experiences along the route, and at what altitude they encountered what. But this does not preclude the chance of running into hidden clouds.

In the early days of aviation the bumps and drops acquired the name, "Airpockets". Something you dropped into that gave the same sensation as the first dip on a rollercoaster. Later studies into weather phenomena showed that in certain types of air masses where cumulus clouds are formed, vertical air currents reach velocities at times in excess of 3,000 feet per minute. This would not mean anything if the currents were uniformly up — or down. But the trouble and the danger is that they run up and down in the same cloud. This means that an aircraft hurtling horizontally at 300 miles an hour is in one current going down — and then within a split second in another, going up. With the inertia existent in this situation anything not tied down wants to stay where it is. But that may not be where the air-plane is. You can get some idea if you will take a bean, put it in an empty waterglass, and covering the end with the palm of your hand move the glass quickly up and down. An unstrapped-in human body can and often does react in the same way.

Of course as pilots we do everything we can to reduce this turbulent effect. On entering turbulent air we first disengage the automatic pilot and fly manually. We reduce power and hence our forward airspeed. This cuts down the speed with which we hit the vertical currents. If the plane rises too much and too fast, we reduce power even more. Sometimes, we have to reduce power so much that the engines get too cold. In such a case we may even let the landing gear down to require more power for the reduced speed. Sometimes the downdrafts are so strong that we must use Maximum Continuous Power to maintain even the altitude assigned to us on the airways.

And of course each second we must be ready to change power setting and plane attitude as the currents switch from up to down. To make the flight safe and comfortable for the passengers, and safe and efficient for the airplane, that is the pilot's job. So when you see that *Fasten your Seat Belts* sign flash on, even if at the moment it may seem silly, or be inconvenient, be a safe passenger and tighten yourself in.

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