

SPECIAL FEATURE

"Artisti dei Laghi": The Colomba Family of Arogno

Acknowledgments to

Fabio Delucchi and Lorenzo Sganzi.

□ The Artists

The Colomba family of Arogno comprised five *artisti dei laghi* ('artists of the lakes'), so called because their place of origin lay in the region of the Pre-Alpine Lakes. These were Andrea, stuccateur (1567-1627); Giovanni Antonio, stuccateur (1585-1650); Giovanni Battista, stuccateur, painter, architect, and entrepreneur (1638 [?]-1693); Luca Antonio, painter (1674-1737); and Giovanni Battista Innocenzo, painter and scenographer (1717-1801). In a pleasant and very readable guide book, Lucia Pedrini Stanga has succeeded in reconstructing in fascinating detail an admirable biography of these little-known Baroque artists, one that appeals both to the general reader and to the student of art and historian.

This important contribution to the history of the Baroque artistic legacy has been promoted by the joint initiative of the Swiss canton of Ticino, the Lombardy region, and the Council of Europe. It covers two centuries of 'adventure' which may, in all fairness, be termed of considerable historical and artistic significance - providing deep insights into the grand movement of professional artists, begun towards the end of the sixteenth century and stretching to the end of the eighteenth century. The work is lavishly illustrated in both colour and black and white, and done so marvelously by any professional criteria.

The author questions, with ample supporting evidence, the traditionally held view that misery and misery alone must have lain behind Alpine migration; that poverty and poverty alone must have been the driving force behind the movement. The case of the Colombas of Arogno was indeed a classic example of 'artistic internationalism'

Driven into exile partly by their strong desire to free themselves from the restrictions of their own national confines, get a wider knowledge of the

world, and gain a better understanding of things new, the Colombas were invited to the major centres of Europe as they were recognized as well-informed artists, fully equipped in the new Baroque style, in the new aesthetic philosophy of the Baroque. As such the Colombas succeeded in organizing themselves in highly specialized and qualified itinerant workshops. From a close study of the routes followed by the artistic members of the Colomba family in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it can be noted that the migratory flow ranged from as far south as Naples and Rome, to London and Vienna, Warsaw and Prague, indeed, as far as Moscow and St Petersburg. Their travels not only promoted their artistic talents; they reconfirmed their capacity to 'create culture'. In this way, observes Pedrini Stanga, 'these professional artists contributed to the fusion of regional and national styles in a common movement of countries situated on both sides of the Alps.' Travelling artists had indeed

been one of the main driving forces 'behind the stylistic unification and the permeation between the forms of the mid-European Baroque and those of the Italian Baroque.' The net result was a common European art. 'The Alps,' she so very accurately points out, 'long considered an element of division, had in fact assumed the role of a vehicle for closer relationship, a meeting place of men, ideas, and artistic trends. From Arogno to Bissone, Maroggia, and Lugano; from Arogno to Brescia, Berenno, and Trento; from Arogno to Vienna, Warsaw, and Prague; and indeed, to London.'

The migratory movements of the Colombas have been characterized by brief pauses, by frequent and continuous comings and goings. These *artisti dei laghi* used to leave home almost invariably in February, says the author, 'shortly after their country had celebrated the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary.' Their choice of time was not only determined by its religious significance. It had also social and cultural implications, intimately connected with the migratory practices of the local inhabitants. The timing 'signalled the departure of migrants from the village and preceded wedding celebrations that were generally held before spring.'

□ The Artistic Itinerary Project

Today, the term *Artisti dei Laghi* carries a second, though closely related, connotation. The Swiss canton of Ticino, in collaboration with the Italian region of Lombardy (as has already been indicated) have agreed to render due homage to these artists through the *Artisti dei Laghi* itinerary project, a cultural journey which, through a series of activities and publications, will lead (it is hoped) to the rediscovery of the migration of architects, decorators, painters, and stuccateurs, that were active throughout Europe between 1500 and 1800.

The project has been recognized, ever since 1987, by the Council of Europe as a cultural route, apart from constituting a tourist attraction. It consists in the organization of exhibitions and other activities around specific themes by various European countries. Such themes have already included 'St James of Campostella', 'Rural Habitat', 'Baroque', 'The Silk Route', 'The Celts', 'The Vikings', and 'Mozart'.

It was Lorenzo Sganzi who had originally come up with the idea of the *Artisti dei Laghi* project. He is currently its coordinator.

Asked how his original idea of such a project emerged, Lorenzo Sganzi replied:

Once we became aware of the Council of Europe's great programme of cultural routes, we thought it would be interesting to develop, within this already-existing framework, the theme of artistic migration from the region of the Pre-Alpine Lakes of Italy and Switzerland in the past centuries. Through the cultural routes, the Council of Europe in fact seeks to authenticate the formative historical process of Europe, its reconstruction across peoples and nations, thanks to the exchange of ideas and commodities, trade, cultural and artistic networks, religious currents, and so on. From this point of view, we thought it opportune to draw attention also to the contribution given by these artists to this open and multiple European identity. It

was in part also to the credit of these individuals - who travelled freely throughout Europe according to the possibilities of work that they encountered - that for at least three centuries, from the early Baroque to Neoclassicism, art in Europe developed at the same rhythm and with more or less similar stylistic changes.

How did the Council of Europe come to recognize the project ?

Recognition came only after a long phase during which the Council of Europe sought very meticulously to ascertain the validity of the project. With the help of a scientific commission, one that included such art historians as Carlo Bertelli and Mariusz Karpowicz, we endeavoured to define with utmost clarity the methods to be adopted and the constituent elements of the project. Especially challenging was the Council of Europe's attitude, indeed its disposition to extend what may be termed 'a privileged focus' - in relation to the traditional capitals of European culture - on to a hidden legacy, peripheral and still awaiting evaluation. Standing out within this legacy are the many architectural and artistic jewels of the regions lying off the valleys of Lombardy and Ticino. Very often these include autographed works of art by artists who were, at one time or another, active through most of Europe.

What activities are envisaged within this project ?

The cultural routes of the Council of Europe are not considered as an end-product but rather as a continuous process of evolution. In our case, the book on the work-routes followed by the Colomba family of Arogno, written by Lucia Pedrini Stanga, together with a seminar held at Mendrisio in 1994, were simply the first two stages in this process. The second volume should appear shortly. Written by Simonetta Coppa and Silvia Colombo, it deals with the artistic itineraries of the Corloni family of Scaria. These artists include a great master of international Rococo - Carlo Innocenzo Carloni. Moreover, in recent years we have been in touch with several scholars throughout Europe who are currently pursuing research in this particular field. The intention is to create a network of scholars to promote collaboration in this specialized area of study.

We have drawn up a fairly detailed map of what can be achieved in the coming years with regard to the major issues involved in the entire field of

artistic migration. For the realization of a route that may be defined European in all its aspects and manifestations, it is necessary to involve similar projects emanating from other countries and other contexts.

What difficulties did you encounter ?

As in the case with several other cultural projects, the one major problem is to find the necessary funds. Then there is the problem inherent in the very nature of the project - an international project such as this, which aims at cutting across frontiers, is understandably more difficult to realize. There is always the temptation to seek refuge in one's own national confines. Finally, to understand clearly the mechanisms of the Council of Europe has not been a very easy task. Nevertheless, it has been through the superb organization of the Council of Europe that a precious host of vital acquaintances and very useful contacts have been made. These will definitely prove of extreme benefit not only to the current project in

particular, but also to the wider field of historical
and artistic research of all participating
institutions.

