



Trento, a painted city – Street art from the Italian Renaissance

What does the expression “street art” make you think of? Perhaps Banksy’s stencils or the murals in western Berlin? Or maybe any one of the thousands of urban art expressions that are embellishing our cities as a form of district and suburban regeneration? The last frontier of figurative art? Not exactly. Even in past centuries, in fact, artists and clients have used **the façades of houses and mansions as if they were gigantic canvases** to satisfy their aesthetic taste, to advertise wealth, erudition and munificence ... and especially to communicate. What then could be better than pictures, that are stronger and more immediate than words? We should know since we live immersed in advertising and are bombarded on all sides by visual marketing! A very long time before television, the Internet, social media and advertisement taxes ... there were the façades of houses, the streets and the squares that became the **best creative and communicative spaces one could hope for!**

Particular economic, political and social contingencies made this phenomenon literally explode throughout Europe in the Renaissance. From the end of the 15th century to the first half of the 16th, this fashion hit **Trento too**. Those were times of great economic as well as artistic growth, and Trento was a busy crossroads of people, goods and armies. The city was becoming richer and wished to show it off. And so it started restyling! The narrow and malodorous alleys and poky houses were replaced with wide and pretty streets and monumental palazzi. The decoration of the façades was **also encouraged by Prince Bishop Bernardo Cles** who, in a letter to one of his employees in 1533, ordered that “*those who had the means should paint their façades*”. He couldn’t put it any plainer than that ...

“Painted façades” started popping up one after the other on the front walls of the palazzi, inspired by what was being done in the cities of the neighbouring Veneto region. After all, if something is beautiful, works and sells well, why not imitate it? The rich Trento families started competing to see who could order the most magnificent decorations, **and, to do so, they called in some of the best artists of the time. Thus, this became the status symbol of the Renaissance society.** By representing the stories taken from bygone times and from classical mythology, the commissioners intended to show off their erudition, prestige and munificence. Does this seem excessively self-celebratory to you? Not as much as some posts we read on the social media these days! In some cases, though, there was also the specific intent of giving an assist to important figures or of **clearly posting political preferences**, of showcasing whose side one was on. In these cases, courage was also needed in addition to money. In an era torn apart by religious wars, farmers’ revolts, secular fighting for European supremacy, the act of painting the image of an emperor on one’s front wall could prove to be detrimental ... much more than a ‘like’ on Facebook!

It has been estimated that, in the peak era, in Trento there were about fifty partially or entirely frescoed houses. This was an exceptional and at the same time short-lived booming trend and, with the onset of Mannerism, the fashion of having one’s façade painted started fading until it almost disappeared in the Baroque era. Some of these frescoes have survived,





however, and also thanks to the restoration works conducted especially in the 1980's and 1990's they still amaze us with their elegance. Together with the fountain of Neptune, the Castello del Buonconsiglio and the cathedral, they are **one of the symbols of Trento**. Since ever. Or, at least, since the Middle Ages. The historians, literary scholars, artists and intellectuals from later centuries were enchanted by them from the start. The French notary Pierre Le Monnier in 1614 described them as *"beautiful houses, most of which painted with various figures, stories and coats of arms"*. And today? **Just like in an open-air museum**, as we observe the painted houses of Trento we can **relive the spirit of those times and understand the dynamics of temporal and religious power**. We can travel in time back to the 16th century Trento, a **'Middle-earth'** (without elves or hobbits, of course) where the warm winds off the Mediterranean Sea mingled with the fresh breezes from the Alps and from Central Europe.

In this podcast we will present **a small and picky selection** taken from the over fifty external wall frescoes that today still embellish the heart of Trento.

Some of the most beautiful painted houses are found along what was once the **path walked by the Prince Bishops** when they left their fortified residence in the Castello del Buonconsiglio on their way to the cathedral. This is our starting point, as we leave the castle behind us and we walk along Via San Marco. Just a few hundred metres along and we arrive at the intersection with Via del Suffragio and its medieval porticoes. *El canton* (The Corner), as it is called in Trento's dialect, was a central crossroads where markets, artisanal workshops and inns were located. Incoming goods travelled from the north in boats on the Adige River that was yet to be straightened and they entered the city after passing the Torre Verde customs post and the San Martino gate. The prestigious Canton is the location where the **Palazzo del Monte**, one of the most spectacular painted palazzi of northern Italy, was built between 1505 and 1515. Little is known about the Meli, or de Melis, family that commissioned it to be built and frescoed. For sure it must have been very rich and politically faithful to the Holy Roman Emperor **Maximilian I von Hapsburg**. Maximilian was a central figure for Tyrol and for Trento in particular. Indeed, Trento's cathedral is where he was officially crowned emperor in 1508. News of the ceremony echoed throughout Europe and it was attended by the delegations of all the Italian States and even by a man named Machiavelli ... On that day in Trento an important page of history was written: the Hapsburg empire resumed its interest in Italy. For the bellicose Republic of Venice the message was clear. Choosing between the Hapsburgs and the Serenissima, the bishopric of Trento did not remain silent but **publicly took a position, and this precisely with the façades of its palazzi**. The frescoes of Palazzo del Monte, finished by 1519, are actually a means of period propaganda in favour of the Hapsburgs as it depicted the emperor as the 'German Hercules'. The entire building is dedicated to Hercules' famous labours as an explicit and public allusion to Maximilian's virtues and to the empire's military power put at the service of the common good.

As we proceed along Via Mancini that in the 16th century was called *Via Lunga*, and turn left onto Via Belenzani, formerly *Contrada Larga*, we find ourselves admiring **Palazzo Geremia**, an authentic gem of Trento's Gothic-Renaissance style. This is yet another exceptional specimen of "Painted Trento", one more spectacular **public homage to Maximilian I** when





he was still king. The intent was to celebrate the diplomatic encounter between the sovereign and the ambassadors of the king of France that took place in Trento in 1501. The façade was frescoed by a Veneto painter between 1502 and 1503, thereby reinforcing in the city the fashion for painted houses that had started to trend in the 15th century. The way it is done is sublime, using **a variety of subjects and scenes that is unparalleled for the times**. There's the Wheel of Fortune that alludes to the alternate destinies of human beings: first it brings them success and then leaves them stranded. Life is tough! Then there's the Virgin and Child, several legendary Roman heroes such as Mucius Scaevola and allegorical quotes from recent history, such as the victorious fight of a man with a lion that seems to refer to the Battle of Calliano that in 1487 saw Trento's and imperial troops win against the Venetians. The most remarkable scene, however, is that of the **celebration of Maximilian I**, who is depicted in four large scenes decorated with ornaments and rich oriental rugs: we see him as he performs his diplomatic duties and when he benevolently receives the notables of Trento (as is written in the inscription), including the host Giovanni Antonio Pona a.k.a. Geremia. Definitely an *ante litteram* political marketing operation.

Further along, equally noteworthy is the façade of **Palazzo Alberti – Colico** for its colours and subjects. Indeed, it is the only one in Trento that depicts a full array of 'peltae', i.e. ancient Greco-Roman shields. As a classical example of stylistic overlap, the decoration was started in the second half of the 15th century and finished in the 1530's when Marcello Fogolino (a painter with a rather tumultuous life, as any good artist is expected to have) painted in the top section a long sequence of fake marble heads that look like ancient sculptures.

Of a wholly different kind are the frescoes of **Palazzo Thun**, located on the opposite side of the street and currently the City Hall. The majestic grey mock ashlar decorating the façade unexpectedly came to light in 1997 during its restoration. As a feudal family not prone to frills and more used to the rustic fortified mansions of Val di Non, the Thuns still would not abstain from expressing their economic power with a frescoed façade. The result is an austere and iron-gray mock architecture that was relatively inexpensive but sufficiently ostentatious. The mock ashlar-work motif will be used again a few years later on the façade of **Casa Sardagna**, at the corner of Via SS. Trinità with Via Mazzini and in the mid 16th century at Palazzo delle Albere.

It is not difficult to imagine the amazement and admiration Via Belenzani must have sparked with its painted houses. But, as Frank Sinatra would say, the best is yet to come ... and it's in Piazza Duomo. The fountain, the porticoes, the cathedral, the belfry, the crown of mountain ranges all around ... here one risks falling prey to the Stendhal syndrome, and don't say we didn't warn you! And yet, what would Piazza Duomo be like without its magnificent pair of frescoed houses? We are talking about the **houses known as Casa Cazuffi and Casa Rella**, once a staple on every 'Greetings from Trento' postcard and one of the first pictures to pop up when googling Trento.

At first they look like just one big building, but they are actually two distinct houses. Even their decorations have been painted by different artists and in different periods of time. **Casa Cazuffi**, on the left, is more refined, showing a sequence of elegant grey-monochrome





figures, as was the fashion in Rome in the early 16th century. Originally, the figures were supposed to stand out like actual sculptures and this reveals the skill of their author, Marcello Fogolino, who painted them in 1530. The themes are mainly allegorical, such as Justice, balancing on a wheel; Opportunity, with a child on her back; The Carriage of Fortune, with the wheel we have already seen at Palazzo Geremia and that is also depicted on the rose window of the nearby cathedral.

Still unknown to us, instead, is the author of the lively decoration of the façade of **Casa Rella**, as colourful as a Benetton shop window but much older. It seems it was frescoed in 1538-1540. Quite peculiar is the depiction of the medieval “Stairway of Virtue”, an allegory of spiritual elevation, faithfully copied from a German etching. Abounding in pedantic themes, some of which still an enigma, the large pictorial surface is unfortunately showing the signs of Time.

Before we leave Piazza Duomo, let’s take a look at the façade of **Casa Balduini**, that perhaps offers the most ancient external decoration of the city, consisting of a light and elegant weave of green garlands and ornaments with stylized flowers and leaves, borderline between Gothic and Renaissance.

The walk ends in Via Oss Mazzurana. As a short-cut from the cathedral to the castle, this street hosts many stately palazzi. One of these, **Palazzo Cazuffi**, was originally entirely frescoed. Today all we can see are three panels near the top depicting the life story of Rebecca. You need to strain your neck a bit to see them but, never fear, a good cream will get rid of the stiffness afterwards!

Jokes aside, the painted façades we have described are precious features of the city’s face, they are windows opening out onto Trento’s past. As silent witnesses to political, religious and human events, they are **in danger of disappearing due to their state of disrepair**, but we can’t forgo such artistic heritage. This is one of the challenges addressed by **Italia Nostra**, the Italian association that through the years has invested so much energy in mapping and studying these frescoes, a commitment that has culminated in the publication of “**Trento: città dipinta**” (Trento, a painted city). In its own small way, this podcast is following the same path, that taken to overcome indifference, to trigger curiosity and stimulate knowledge. The aim is to take care of a collective wealth that belongs to all of us and that should be handed down intact to future generations.

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