

2014: The Restoration of the Apse

In 2014 all ornamental elements of the apse have been restored. The building benefitted from the protection of the Minister for cultural properties (Ministero dei Beni Culturali) which took care of the works, financed by donors as 'Compagnia di San Paolo', 'Fondazione CRT', 'Città di Torino' and thanks to the endowment of the church itself.

The firm 'Alina Pastorini Restauro' was entrusted with design and performance, whereas the architect Carlo Benzonelli was responsible for supervision and security coordination.

The restoration project is the result of a long, complex and not always linear process which disclosed the church secrets and led to the best possible choices.

Many different competences have been gathered to obtain this valuable result: the exploratory stratigraphic survey carried out by the restoration firm, the chemical analyses of Dr Stefano Volpin from Padova, the archive research of Emanuela Gambetta and Monica Regis, the historical research of Professor Giuseppe Dardanello from the University of Torino in cooperation with Dr Romina Origlia.

The evolution of the church can be summarised along three significant steps:

1. The Vittone period, in 1755, characterised by techniques using lime and bright stucco.
2. The 'Ottocento' period, between 1830 and 1864, characterised by marbling and yellow-red tempera paintings giving the aspect of marble, as well as gold-coloured paintings and extensive repairs.
3. The 20th-century period, when the lack of historical documents is compensated by the stratigraphic surveys. Some up keeping repairs have been identified, such as the refreshing of the frescoes and the ornaments, although without a precise project.

The restoration re-established the ornamental features according to their aspect in the 19th century, consisting of yellow, deep-green and grey marbling which reminds of the altar of Vittone and respects the structural harmony as it used to be around 1891. The main features of these intensive repairs are the brightness, the freshness of the marbling techniques as well as of the gold-leaf decorations, and the outstanding beauty of the frescoes. The result emphasises the original harmony of the 'chiaroscuro' of the frescoes and the brightness of marbling and gold-coloured paintings. Before the repairs, the panache illustrating the 'Charity' was almost unreadable and about to collapse. It has now been brilliantly and thoroughly restored.

Historical Archives of St Rocco

The archives of the church are extremely important in terms of historical literature and contain valuable documents and manuscripts relating to the various events of the church and the Brotherhood which still deserve a thorough exam. The main corpus of the documents covers a timespan starting in the 16th century until the present days, but we also found extracts of documents concerning the legal certificates allowing the founding of the church in 1374, under the protection of the 'Vergine delle Grazie', as well as parchments and other papers which date back to the 15th century.

In 2011 Emanuela Gambetta and Monica Regis reorganise all the archives according to the relevant scientific criteria. The method 'Guarini archivi' is applied to the inventory and the classification of the archives. Eventually, the volume of the archives amounts to 30 linear metres and 1734 unities. Presently, conservation measures are being examined in order to allow a safe consultation of the archives.

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LA CONFRATERNITA DI SAN ROCCO

a cura del gruppo di lavoro della Confraternita di San Rocco



1667
2014

SAN ROCCO
adotto i restauri

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE BROTHERHOOD OF SAINT ROCCO MAIN EVENTS AND WORSHIP OF SAINT ROCCO

In the very heart of the district of 'Porta Marmorea', where life was particularly hectic, in front of the University and close to the town hall tower overhanging the dense network of small medieval houses of 'via Dora Grossa', the parish church of St Rocco, already mentioned in the Middle Ages period, was a lively religious centre gathering upper-class citizens and merchants. The Brotherhood of St Rocco was founded on the traces of this church, which was repeatedly transformed between end 1500 and end 1600.

Its main intent was to fight against the terrible and frequent plague epidemics in the city and to give Christian burial to abandoned corpses.

The Charity Burial Society

As from its foundation, the main aim of the Brotherhood is to give Christian burial to abandoned corpses. A notice published in 1677 by the Brotherhood of St Rocco in Torino declares its will to give, in the future and at its own expense, a 'decent burial to all corpses of this town and outskirts, neglected even by the parish priests because of their poverty.'

The Brotherhood fulfilled this engagement even during the plague epidemics when they recovered many abandoned corpses all-over the town.

The files kept in the archives of the Brotherhood describe how the city civil servants in Torino used to grant a burial certificate for the abandoned corpses once they had been recovered and subsequently moved and exposed in the town hall for their formal identification. According to the gender of the dead, the religious ceremonies were attended by brothers or sisters, always dressed in their respective surplices. Most probably, this ritual liturgy was introduced in 1715, when Giovanni Battista Fornelli di Lanzo was found dead on his way to Rivoli.

All documents registered in the archives of the Brotherhood give evidence of the activity of this Charity Society, such as notebooks, lists of names, account books, lists of buried corpses, bonds, decrees, injunctions and records.

The worship of St Rocco della Croce, prince of Montpellier, extremely popular in Europe as a protector against the plague, was widely widespread among the inhabitants of Torino as from beginning 1500. Nevertheless, only later, in 1598, as soon as the premonitory symptoms of a new plague appeared, 35 brothers of the flourishing Brotherhood of Santa Croce were given permission to create a new Brotherhood called 'San Rocco, Morte ed orazione'. They were entitled to officiate at the chapel of the "Madonna delle Grazie", close to the church of St Stefano and St Gregorio. Very soon the chapel appeared to be too small to accommodate all believers and it was decided to enlarge it.

The architect Carlo di Castellamonte was entrusted with the project of this enlargement work. He found a smart and brilliant solution by creating 2 identical twin churches, separated by a wall lengthwise but united behind a common façade with 2 different entrance portals, one for the parishioners and one for the brothers, respectively oriented towards the altars of St Rocco and of the Madonna delle Grazie. After the pulling down of the church and the chapel, the works came to an end in 1617.

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Graves and Writings of the Crypt

The church of St Rocco in Torino, among the most ancient in the city, was attended by merchants as well as noble and upper-class citizens living in town and environs. They used to be buried in the crypt and, although the graves and inscriptions on the walls have nowadays disappeared, the historian Bosio quotes clearly their names in his book.

The list of the believers buried in this crypt is quite long: Cesare Nomis in 1626, Giuseppe Tasso (probably of the same family of the famous writer Torquato) in 1627, Giambattista Sclopis di Giaverno (silk merchant) in 1683, Don Emilio Malliano (theologian and lawyer, rector of the parish) in 1705, Gian Francesco Lagrange (founder of the family of the mathematician Luigi) in 1709, Don Giorgio Secondo Gianotti (apostolical protonotary, rector of the Brotherhood and parish priest) in 1757, Anna Caterina Spitalier Ajres (sister and prioress of the Brotherhood) in 1765, Vittorio Amedeo Pellione, earl of Simiana (collegiate church doctor of the Faculty of Law) in 1771, Giuseppe Maria Anselino Gandolfo, marquis of Melazzo, earl of Riccaldone, in 1774, Don Giovanni Batta Valimberti (rector and parish of St Rocco), in 1793. In this crypt only 2 inscriptions and one polychrome chip of the floor are still visible nowadays.

The Savoia Royal Family

Relations between the Brotherhood of St Rocco and the Savoia royal family used to be frequent and friendly. This is confirmed by a written record dated 1620 relating that some brothers went to Arles with the intention of obtaining a relic of St Rocco. They subsequently placed this relic in a crystal urn given by the Royal Lady Madama Cristina, and then put it under the refectory table. Another evidence of these good relations are all licences, permits and privileges granted to the Brotherhood by the Savoia family, some members of which were themselves brothers and sisters. Moreover, we know that ornamental hangings of 1700 magnificently embroidered with the Savoia blazons were placed around the table where the relic used to be displayed during the saint patron festival.

XVII Century

The parish and the Brotherhood were constantly and heavily quarrelling. Therefore, in 1652, the clerical authorities decided to abolish the parish of St Stefano and St Gregorio and to give up the church to the Brotherhood. In 1667, the prior of St Rocco appointed Brother Francesco Lanfranchi, assisted by his son, as architect responsible for a new project aiming to rebuild a new church by merging the two old small chapels.

The main features of this new church are its quadrangular plan and an imposing octagonal dome. The huge rectangular hall after the entrance was surrounded by marble columns. It was destroyed end 1800, when the Torino Municipality decided to demolish the façade in order to enlarge via St Francesco d'Assisi. The high altar is surmounted by a rounded dome. A circular choir had been planned but was never built.

Between 1687 and 1692 approximately, the stucco worker from Lugano, Pietro Somasso, and his assistants Michele Pantalino and Giuseppe Pozzo, are entrusted with the stucco ornaments of the church. The building of the main dome starts in 1698. Once again, Somasso is the artist responsible for the stucco decoration of the 8 large windows, of the surrounding pilasters and the cornice. In 1690, the famous engraver Filippo Patalino committed himself to complete the façade before the end of the year, but the works lasted far beyond the foreseen deadline because of a serious shortage of funds and were completed only in 1780, thanks to the intervention of King Vittorio Amedeo III.

XVIII Century

Beginning 1700, the aspect of the church was approximately as it is nowadays. In July 1742, the Brotherhood decided to entrust Pietro Felice Concone and Antonio Maria Osella with the whitewashing of the church which was entirely painted white, except for the capitals and the bases of the columns the colours of which are not specified.

The present appearance of the church is mainly due to the project of Bernardo Vittone who built a new high altar with polychrome marbles from Valdieri, Susa and Frabosa as well as with alabaster from Busca. This new altar replaces the previous wooden one and matches with banisters, pedestals and steps inserted in the altars between 1745 and 1749.

The flooring of the presbytery is a masterpiece of marble marquetry of different colours. The banister was built in 1754.

The wooden statue of St Rocco was built around 1616 and was later exposed on the façade of the new church designed by Carlo di Castellamonte. The restoration of the altar by Vittone gave the opportunity to move the statue and place it in a niche overhanging the choir and especially created for this purpose.

In 1790 all ornaments in stucco and cornices of the barrel vault were so deteriorated that the Brotherhood, technically unable to restore them, decided to demolish and replace them with a fresco painted by Rocco Comanetti and representing the Glory of St Rocco.

XIX Century

During this period, the church underwent many deep transformations consisting of various whitewashing of the walls as well as paintings and gold-plating works. Thanks to the architect Lorenzo Panizza, in 1820 the façade and the interior of the church were restored and embellished. All cornices and pilasters of the dome and the tambour were painted in deep yellow, probably in order to simulate a sheet of gold. The same decoration works took place ten years later in 1830 for the capitals and the columns, always thanks to the architect Panizza. Other artists as Felice Vacca and Vincenzo Radicati decorated the dome with pictures of the four Evangelists and other ornaments. Pilasters and internal walls were painted with a technique using brilliant stucco giving the appearance of marble. Between 1864 and 1865 the decoration of the choir finally completed the works started in 1830 and gave to the church its present aspect. Meanwhile, two large pictures consecrated to St Rocco's life are hanging on each lateral wall.

In 1885, a new urban sanitation plan in Torino imposed the enlargement of Via St Francesco d'Assisi and, as a consequence, the destruction of the façade of the Brotherhood building, as well as part of the church, namely the choir stalls and the organ. The Municipality of Torino took care of the demolition and the rebuilding of the façade. The new façade, designed by the valuable engineer Carlo Velasco, shows two ranges of pilasters. On both sides of the entrance portal there is a niche where two statues were placed in 1924, dedicated to St Rocco and to St Espedito respectively. The present architectural order of the church is the result of this last transformation. In 1891, the new façade is completed, and the organ has recovered its final location. The Brotherhood requested the Municipality to finance some works intended to embellish the internal areas of the church, especially to whitewash the new walls in accordance with the old ones and to repair the main dome. The geometer Eugenio Vaccarino was responsible for this project which involved the general gilding of cornices, mouldings, jambs and other relief ornaments. Bases and capitals of columns were systematically gilded, as well as pilasters and counter-pilasters, doors and windows lintels and the four arcades of the church.

XX Century

The few documents concerning this period only give an incomplete information according to which, in 1942, the church was still in good condition. Air raids and bombings in 1942–1943 started fires which damaged the small dome and destroyed the sacristy wardrobes and most of the stained-glass windows.

IN 1962, the roofing is once again damaged by water leaks which can easily be identified by humidity stains and dirty marks, especially of the dome, causing a progressive state of repair of the frescoes and all gilded ornaments. Between 1996 and 2000, the coating compound of the main dome and the ornaments had to be refreshed. In 2011, the dome had to be secured by anchoring the unsteady elements, fixing the marble slabs and the steps and sealing the clefts.