

Domenico Fontana

Autor(en): **[s.n.]**

Objekttyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): **- (1926)**

Heft 263

PDF erstellt am: **01.05.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-691034>

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DOMENICO FONTANA.*

Architect and Engineer, 1543-1607.

In the year 1585 there ascended the pontifical throne, the Cardinal di Montalto under the name of Sixtus V. Though of stern character, and according to some historians, far more addicted to using the gallows than did secular monarchs; he favoured building operations upon a large scale, in doing which he was ably seconded by a distinguished artist from the then Province of Como, nowadays part of the Swiss Canton of Tessin.

Domenico Fontana was born near Melide on the Lake of Lugano and at the age of twenty he went to Rome to join his brother Gian who was an architect and engineer of no mean ability himself, having to his credit such works as the building of the Palazzo Giustiniani, the Pauline Fountains, and later the Sixtine Bridge at Rome; the Palazzo Gori, façade of the Church of St. Martin at Siena, the rebuilding of the Aqueduct of Augustus; the building of the Aqueduct of Frascati and the dikes of Tivoli, Ravenna and Ferrara.

Under the tutorship of the elder brother young Domenico soon gave promise of excelling him, for he had an inborn genius for architecture and mathematics, and Cardinal di Montalto gave him a first commission to build a chapel in the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore as well as a small palace in the garden of that basilica. The Pope Gregory XIII., jealous of these efforts on the part of the Cardinal to perpetuate his name as a restorer of the beauty of ancient Rome, deprived Montalto of his Cardinal's stipend upon the pretext that a man of such vast wealth as the Cardinal must be, needed no money from the Church to which he planned making such magnificent gifts. Montalto, who was not a man of large means, found himself greatly embarrassed; but Fontana, grateful for his patronage, advanced more than a thousand Roman écus (5000 francs) from his own savings in order to complete the work.

This proof of loyalty and affection was not forgotten and when Montalto became Pope, Domenico Fontana was elected papal architect.

For many centuries there had lain neglected in Nero's circus, a gigantic obelisk of red granite from the mountains near Thebes, said to have been dedicated by Sesostrius, King of Egypt, to the sun.

It was originally brought to Rome by Caligula and raised in honour of Augustus and Tiberius; but afterward overthrown by the Barbarian hordes when they laid waste the beautiful Imperial city.

It was deeply imbedded in the earth and its estimated weight was over a million pounds.

Sixtus V., reviving imposing plans in his mind, conceived the idea of having it lifted and erected in the great Square in front of St. Peter's.

Domenico Fontana, summoned with other distinguished architects and mathematicians to a council at the Vatican, presented an ingenious working model in which an obelisk of lead, by means of an arrangement of pulleys and windlass, rose and was lowered again. None of the other architects would undertake the task upon his own responsibility, and when the Pope appointed two of them to assist Fontana in the experiment, he proudly refused to share the risk or the glory, since the only feasible project had originated with him.

Sixtus V. ordered him to begin first with a smaller obelisk formerly part of the Mausoleum of Augustus.

We are not given definite details of Fontana's process by Angelo Baroffio in his "Memorie storiche dei Paesi e delle Terre costituenti il Cantone del Ticino," from which source we draw most of these facts.

The historian contents himself with stating that this clever feat of engineering began by trussing the great obelisk in matting, jute, wood and iron stays, so that it finally exceeded the weight of a million and a half pounds.

Naturally such unheard of proceedings drew vast crowds of people to the neighbourhood of the circus to see the work carried out; but Sixtus V. had forbidden all ingress to the enclosure and had prohibited all noise under penalty of death, and to this end had placed a sinister warning nearby; a gibbet ready for the immediate hanging of any offenders.

Before setting to work, the good Fontana asked Sixtus V. for his blessing, which the Pope gladly accorded; but he warned the daring engineer, that if the undertaking failed, his life would be forfeit.

Thus the gallows was a threat and incentive to the architect, as well as a check to the populace.

Fontana, thus forewarned, prepared swift saddle-horses at every gate of Rome in order to fly from the Pope's wrath, if need arose.

It was the 30th day of April, 1586, when he began his herculean task.

At the blast of a trumpet 900 workmen and 140 horses began pulling, and at the sound of a bell, placed in a wooden tower which rose above the mechanism, all pulling ceased. In three tremendous pulls the obelisk rose three hand's breadths from the ground, where it had lain for so many centuries; the earth shook, the wooden tower creaked, but the work was not disturbed, and to celebrate the happy course of the enterprise, the cannon from the Castle of Sant' Angelo fired salvos of joy.

*This is another delightful article reprinted from the September issue of the "Swiss Monthly." (Published at Lausanne, 10/- per annum).

On the 13th of June the obelisk glided upon its rollers, and on the 10th of September it was raised in place upon the pedestal prepared for its reception in the centre of the great square facing St. Peter's.

The rejoicing was general; the artillery boomed anew, the workmen, intoxicated with delight, lifted Fontana in their arms, and carried him in triumph through the various quarters of Rome to the sound of trumpets and cymbals.

As a recompense Pope Sixtus made this excellent artist a Knight of the Golden Spur, gave him 5000 golden scudi as a gift, and an annual pension of 2000 more; while upon the base of the obelisk he caused to be chiselled; "Domenicus Fontana ex pago novocomensis transtulit et erexit."

Furthermore the Pope had a bronze medal coined, 37 millimetres in diameter, upon one side of which was the effigy of the celebrated architect, and around it the inscription: "Domenicus Fontana a Melino novocomen. agri." and on the other a great obelisk with this epigraph: "Caesaris obeliscum mire magnit. asportavit atque an. D. MDLXXXVI."

To further demonstrate his engineer's ability, Sixtus V. had him place the original experimental obelisk from Augustus' mausoleum in the centre of the Square of Santa Maria Maggiore; and two others unearthed elsewhere were placed one in the Square of San Giovanni Laterano, and the other in the Piazza del Popolo. To celebrate this another medal was struck.

In the years 1588-1590 Fontana finished the great dome of St. Peter's with Jacopo della Porta's assistance. Another of his works was the façade of San Giovanni Laterano facing Santa Maria Maggiore, the loggia of the Benedictine, the Vatican Library intersecting the court of Bramante, and the building of the Palace called Monte Cavallo on the Quirinal.

The excavation of the side of Monte Quirinal toward the Forum and the Strada Pia, already begun during the pontificate of Gregory XIII., and the Forum itself from the Baths of Constantine leading to the great colossi of Castor and Pollux were also the work of Fontana, as well as the restoration of Trajan's column and the great Fountain of Acqua Felice for which he sought springs in the Alban hills and brought the waters 23 miles in aqueducts for the Quirinal and the fountain at the Piazza delle Terme.

The Strada Pia was re-named Via Sistina in honor of Sixtus, during whose pontificate "The Eternal City forthwith doubled itself" as one chronicler avers.

The two celebrated colossal groups of two heroes or demi-gods breaking horses called "The Horse Tamers," Fontana brought from the entrance to the Baths of Diocletian and placed in the Square of the Quirinal, for centuries called "Monte Cavallo" from them.

Here Fontana continued the work upon the pontifical palace begun in 1574 under Gregory XIII., as a summer palace for the Popes on account of its elevation and the freshness of its air.

To it frequent additions were made by subsequent popes and it is to-day the Royal Palace.

There is a story that Sixtus V. desirous of opening a wider vista with a broad street leading directly to St. Peter's, found that it would be necessary to demolish a quantity of buildings—palaces, houses, pavilions, gardens, etc.

He therefore sent to Fontana and showing him a plan, asked him point blank how many men he would need to clear the place thoroughly? "I should ask your Holiness for one month's time and one hundred men."

"Good," said the Pope, "but if you took two hundred men you would be content with fifteen days, would you not?"

"Yes, Holy Father."

"In consequence in eight days with four hundred men you could do it also."

"Without doubt."

"Let us put eight hundred men."

"Then, four days would suffice," said Fontana who knew the Pope.

"But if you were to take fifteen or sixteen hundred you could finish the work in two days?"

At a nod of assent from the architect, the Pope added: "Well, then take three thousand men, four thousand if needful, and have everything done in twenty-four hours!"

Imagine the surprise of the people living there when they saw their gardens and property invaded by an army of workmen, who commenced by knocking down all the boundary walls without so much as 'by your leave', and left the owners barely time to carry away their portable belongings and furniture.

The greater part of these buildings belonged to the Roman aristocracy, to relatives of cardinals and even to the cardinals themselves. Sixtus V. shrewdly estimated that if he delayed he would be so overwhelmed with pleas that the street would never have been opened.

Many other works of construction were planned, when the death of Sixtus V. cut them short. Two popes followed in quick succession that same year, and the third, Clement VIII., unfortunately listening to envious rivals of the great architect, suddenly accused him of malversation of funds demanding an accounting of his administration.

These accusations were the more astounding, directed as they were against an artist of such eminence, who had given proof of such disinterestedness in the time of Cardinal di Montalto.

But machinations of jealous rivals failed to tarnish Fontana's fame and good name. The viceroy of Naples hastened to secure his services and he was appointed Royal architect and engineer-in-chief to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

He went to Naples in 1592 and married there, Canals which preserved the province, called the Land of Labor, from floods, and a road along the sea-coast and other works, occupied him until he began building the royal palace and the Medina Fountain. He was working on plans for building the port of Naples, afterward carried out under Pierre d'Aragon by Francesco Picchiati, when he died in the year 1607, aged 64 years.

His only written work was an in-folio volume entitled: "Del modo tenuto nel trasportare l'obelisco Vaticano, e delle fabbriche di nostro Signore Sisto V. fatto del Cavalier Domenico Fontana."

It was printed at Rome in 1590 with 19 engravings by Boniface da Sebenico; it is curious as indicating the methods which Fontana was forced in a way to create, since the ancients left us no documents upon this subject.

SCHWEIZER BUNDESLIED

von Robert Faesi.

Dank Gott und guten Mächten,
Die uns auf diesen Grund gestellt!
Hier wollen wir uns flechten—
Ein Volk von freien Rechten—
Zum engen Bund in weiter Welt.

Du hegst uns, Muttererde,
Du ziehst hinan uns, Vaterland,
Dass jung auf altem Herde
Des Lebens Flamme werde.—
Heut liegt dein Los in unsrer Hand!

Mit unsrer Hand erbaun wir
Und türmen hoch dich, Schweizerhaus!
Treu deinen Pfeilern traun wir,
Froh von den Zinnen schaun wir
Und ruhn in deinen Gräften aus!

A free rendering of Robert Faesi's Bundeslied.

Now God be thanked, and all good Powers, who
placed us on this Land!

Here let us weld this folk of ours into one little Band.

That o'er the world, though wide it be, for Freedom's
rights may stand.

O Fatherland! Thou bidst us raise in Thee, Dear
Mother-Earth!

A Switzer's House, that Thou mayest praise, when we
have proved our worth,

By keeping bright the Flame of Life, on each re-
curring Hearth.

Leave now thy Fate in our sure Hand! with confidence
we place

Each well driven Pile (as Thou hast planned); then
soaring into Space,

We crown with Joy the topmost Stone: — So rest in
Thine Embrace.

The original (German) text, written by the well-known author, Prof. Dr. Robert Faesi, appeared in the 1st of August number of the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" which paper has kindly placed at our disposal for publication an English version rendered by Mr. D. B. McLaren.

THE "PROMENADES."

By Sophie Wyss, the Swiss Soprano.

In their "Promenade Concerts" at the Queen's Hall, Londoners have something unique in music making. I once told some friends in Geneva about this enterprise, and they would not believe me. A concert where one could walk about during the performance? Ridiculous! A concert given by the same Director and Orchestra every night of the week except Sundays, for about half the year on end? Impossible! And an entrance fee of two shillings? *Epatant!*

"To us in Switzerland the affair would indeed seem fantastic. Fancy asking Ensermet or Andrae to give Wagner on Mondays, Haydn and Handel on Tuesdays, Mozart on Wednesdays, Verdi and Rossini on Thursdays, Moderns on Fridays and a mixture of all on Saturdays! And to keep that up for months on end! They would reply that it was impossible—and so it is, from their point of view. They are only occupied with the cream of productions; in London we have to think also of the milk. There are no State subsidies here, no Municipal aids. Music has to stand on its own feet, unaided. It is left alone to compete with the Cinema and the Cabaret in the race for the people's luxury money. And in this very fierce struggle, the Promenades are the vanguard and bear the brunt of the first attack.

It is extremely important that they should continue to flourish, for they are the recruiting ground for the music lovers of next year. This greatest City in the World's history is backward in the art of music, and recruiting is necessary indeed. The work is carried on by the repetition of the best known and best loved classics. These in themselves are the best possible recruiting agents. They are the best foundation, and on the whole they suffer least from technical errors of erring humanity. Indeed, when the history of the Renaissance in Music