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Ticino Architects in the World

Piero Bianconi

was born in Minusio on 31 May 1899. Self-taught in his younger years, he became a teacher in Canton Ticino. He later enrolled at the University of Fribourg where, in 1933, he became a Doctor of Philosophy. He was subsequently appointed lecturer at the University of Berne, but in 1935 returned to his native Ticino to pursue a teaching career in high school and teachers' training college.

The efforts and accomplishments of Piero Bianconi have enriched various spheres of Ticinese culture. These include the educational field (in which he was a professor of art history and of French and Italian), the written media (he has contributed to newspapers and magazines), the world of art (he is the author of monographs and biographies) and prose literature.

I once made fun of the Ticinesi when I said they were like cabbage: in order that they should grow healthy and strong, one has to transplant them; scattered in the world they thrive much better than in their confined homeland. In fact, it is quite true – half the history of the Ticino is concerned with emigration, tells of the communities in all parts of the world where one will find «our people», workmen, masons, farmers, innkeepers, gold prospectors and others; an endless number of anonymous people amongst whom, occasionally, a personality of great distinction stands out: a Pellegrini from Croglio, who became President of Argentina, a Pedrazzini from Locarno, who discovered silver mines in Mexico and became a very rich man.

A special group amongst these emigrants are the «Ticinesi builders and architects in the world», not to forget the many artisans and entrepreneurs. This almost fateful vocation of the Ticinesi, has brought forth with surprising regularity many eminent artists. As an explanation of this phenomenon, may we quote Pascal: «The force of habit is such that ... in one country everyone is a

builder, in another everyone is a soldier...»

It is somewhat exaggerated to talk of the «History of Ticino Art» (as one used to do, and in fact still does nowadays); in reality it is more an artisan's tradition which spread beyond the frontiers of the Ticino to the Northern parts of Lombardy and which, in history, developed into a surprisingly remarkable phenomenon.

Due to mental laziness, one makes quite often the big mistake, quite contrary to history, to identify the boundaries of the Ticinese tradition with the political borders of today. We have to remember that at that time (and often still today) it concerned a community of origin and culture. Therefore, the artists from the districts of Valsolda and Como must not be left out from this contemplation; it would be an absurd mutilation.

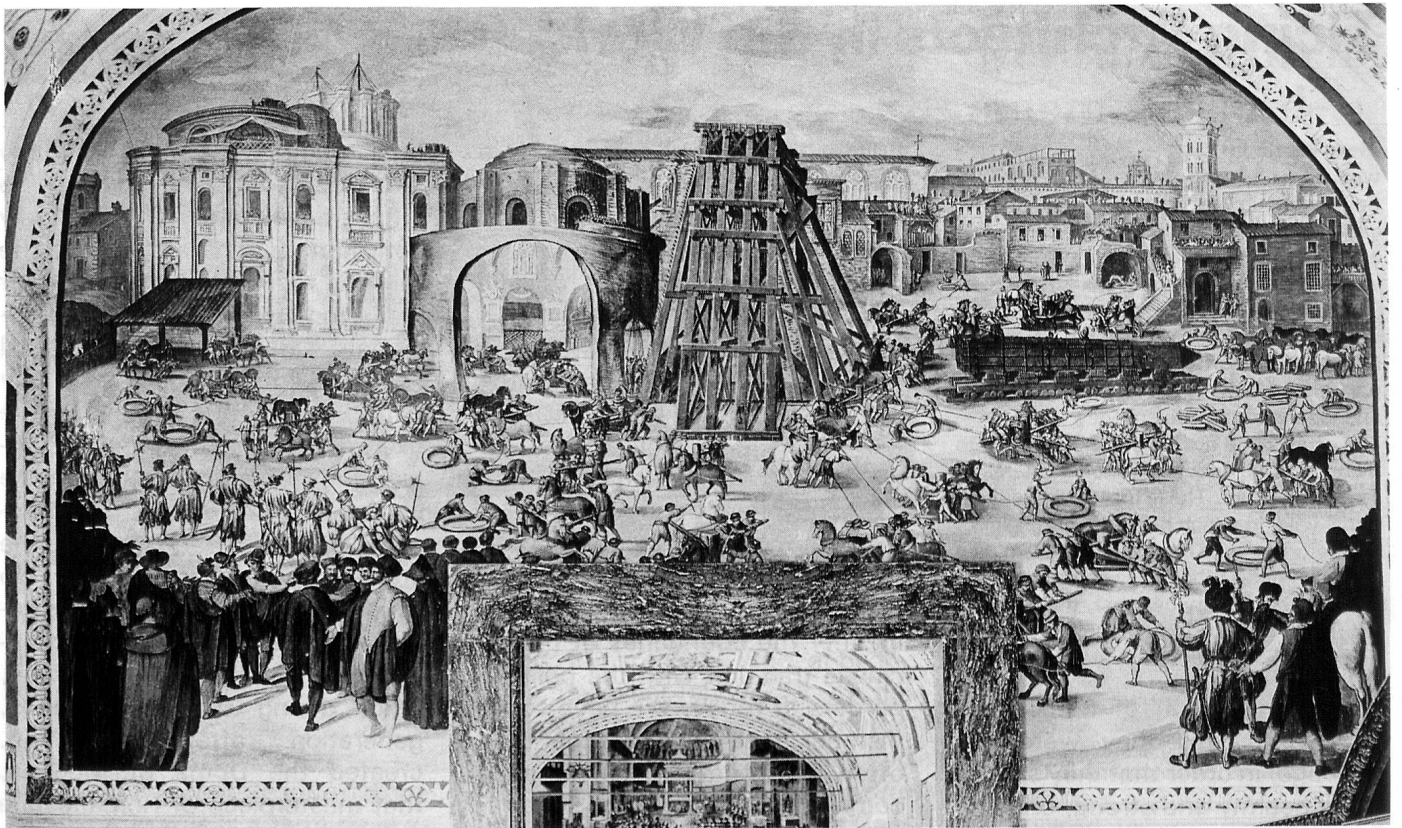
It must be said that the small number of our excellent artists

and creators have found their way into Italian history and art to whose development they actively contributed; others followed the reigning movements with more or less good luck, but with strong regional influences. The political frontiers where thus not of any importance; let us remember the example of the builders of Campione, that Italian enclave on the shores of Lake Lugano, which became to an exceptional degree the cradle of a number of artists. No scholar concerned with this phenomenon has ever thought of excluding the masters of Campione, who, during several centuries, generation after generation, created the Dome of Modena, that masterpiece of Romanesque culture.

Talking of the Romanesque period, we note that its influence through the intensive activities of the Ticinesi – in Italy and elsewhere – will remain evident for ever. Another equally prolific pe-

Facade of St-Peters-Church in Rome, with the well-known Obelisk (right).





Fresco in the library of the Vatican; erection of the Obelisk.

riod lies between the end of the 16th and the middle of the 17th centuries, shortly before the Neo-Classical era and above all in Rome; it is marked by unattainable works in Milan and Russia.

The following short remarks deal with this aspect as well as with the activities of the Ticinesi in Northern Europe. We must also point out a work of a later date on the creative activities of the Ticinesi in Poland (1). This study describes above all the often mistaken aspects of how this art developed.

At the beginning of the 18th century, the architect Domenico Trezzini from Astano, commissioned by Peter the Great, completely constructed the town of St. Petersburg in the swamp of the Neva: «By levelling the ground, by digging canals and by constructing churches and palaces», he created the town in an admirable position, a model of urban construction.

Also in Russia, but a century later, another Domenico, Gilardi from Montagnola, took part in the rebuilding of Moscow after the town had been gutted by fire in 1812 during the advance of the Napoleonic army. He was named the «second founder» of Moscow.

Going back to the end of the 16th century, one meets a third Domenico in Rome, Domenico Fontana from Melide (1543–1607), a positive genius of urban construction. Under the pontificate of Pope Sixtus V, he connected the Roman churches in a bold manner by wide roads and had obelisks erected along them. One of his contemporaries said of him: «He created these roads by going from one end of the town to the other, ignoring its hills and dales; the former he had levelled down, the latter filled in...»

The most famous of those obelisks is the one situated on St. Pe-

ter's Square, an extraordinary creation of European reputation; it brought Fontana riches and honours. He was dubbed a knight and received by the Pope who presented him with a magnificent golden chain and put all his trust in him. The report of Fontana's work is contained in a carefully illustrated book, in which the details of his creation and the means by which he achieved it are explained and clearly presented: working methods, the equipment of the workmen, the horses' harness, ropes, large wooden vessels, the machines used to transport and erect the giant granite column, which actually carries the name of Fontana and his homeland. Fontana created the Lateran Palace, the Sixtine Chapel, the Vatican Library, monumental jet fountains

¹ Mariusz Karpowicz, *Artisti ticinesi in Polonia nel '600*, Repubblica e Cantone del Ticino, 1983

and bridges. He was the first of a number of Ticinesi who predominated architecturally in the Eternal City for a whole century (from the death of Michelangelo to that of Borromini): that colony of Ticinesi which gave Rome its present form», Burckhardt wrote in his «Cicerone» in 1855 (that Ticinesi community which bestowed on Rome that special brilliance still existing today). One of the disciples and collaborators of Fontana was Carlo Maderno from Capolago (1556–1629), the son of one of his sisters.

After Fontana's departure for Naples, Maderno became the Vatican's main architect. With great application he created his own style. One remembers the facade of the famous Church of St. Susannah, with its charming relief with light and dark, its tasteful Baroque style which contrasts vividly from the robust mannerism of the Counter-Reformation. The list of all Maderno's creations in Rome and elsewhere would be far too long. Let us just mention the beautiful palaces Mattei and Barberini, as well as the finishing touches on the Cathedral of

Entrance to St-Peters-Church with its stucco-decorated vault.



St. Peter, where he changed the basic outlines set by Michelangelo. Whenever he had a free hand, he was brilliant, such as when he created the superbly beautiful entrance to a vault in stucco-work; yet far more impressive is the enormous façade dominating St. Peter's Square.

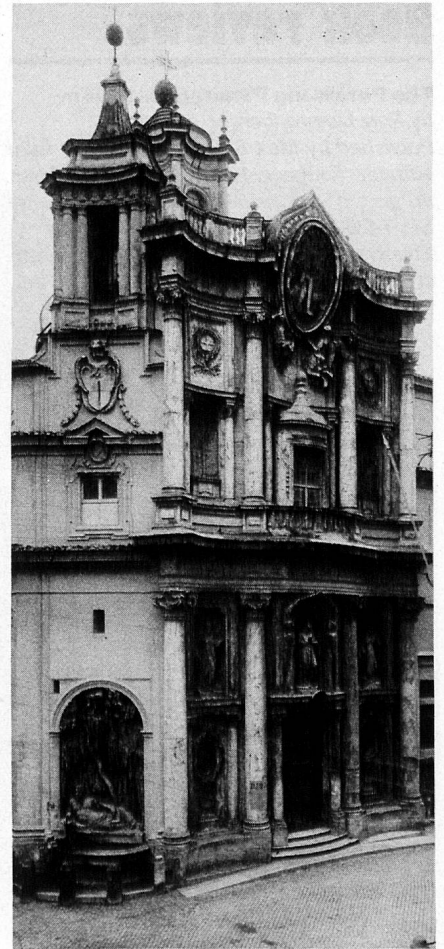
We have neither the space nor adequate words to honour one of the greatest artists of the Baroque epoch, Francesco Borromini from Bissone (1599–1667); he was the protégé of Maderno when he began his work in Rome.

When considering his architectural masterworks showing incredible imagination, one cannot but admire his deep knowledge as an artisan, the inherited experience based on a long Ticinese tradition. Churches, oratories, palaces, interiors like that of the small Church of «St. Charles with the four fountains» – his first work whose facade shows the date of his death – the Oratory of Filippini and that of the Propaganda Fide, the interior renovation of San Giovanni in the Lateran and the «smiling» Church of Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza, whose belfry – surrounded by a luminous glow – is pictured on one side of the latest Swiss one-hundred-franc note, whilst Borromini's portrait is shown on the other.

Also in Rome, one must not forget a great painter and contemporary of Borromini, Giovanni Serodine from Ascona (1600–1630) whose best-known work is the large nave of the church in his hometown.

The Neo-Classic period at the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th centuries was a very fruitful year for Ticinesi architects, above all in Milan, capital of Northern Italy.

Of the many vast architectural projects of Emperor Bonaparte, only the ambitious Arena (1807) remains, the creation of the state architect Luigi Canonica from



Facade of the Church «St. Charles with the four fountains».

Tesserete. Yet he was not the only great one of that epoch; others worth mentioning are Giacomo Albertolli from Bedano, Simone Cantoni from Muggio and some of lesser reputation, just to give an idea of that extraordinary period.

It would be too simple and at the same time very tedious to continue the enumeration of the great works in Italy and the world; we should just mention Gaspare Fossati from Morcote who was at work in Constantinople where he restored the Church of St. Sophia, and – reverting to Italy – Giuseppe Frizzi from Minusio who constructed most of his work in Turin. May these few short indications serve as a starting-point for a more detailed study of the long and glorious tradition of the Ticino «a country of master builders».