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TICINESE ARCHITECTS AND SCULPTORS IN PAST CENTURIES

By Dr. A. Tanner, translated from "Deine Heimat" by one of our readers.

(Continuation from issue 15th June 1962)

During the neo-classical period also, the Ticino gave a substantial contribution of great artists. In this connection should first of all be mentioned the family of the Albertolli (four of them), from Bedano, all first-class decorative artists, among whom stands out particularly Giocondo Albertolli, for a great many years professor at the Royal Academy of Arts of Milan. To the name of this outstanding architect and decorator should be linked that of Giacomo Mercoli from Mugena.

The artists so far mentioned are merely the greatest. If we desired to take into consideration artists who have also been renowned at their time, but who to-day enjoy less fame, we would never come to an end. Wyss, who studied the condition of the Ticino in the eighteenth century, refers to over seventy in that century alone, and all architects, sculptors or decorators of great fame. And then no longer in Italy alone — Italy having become an insufficient field for their activities, the Ticinesi were emigrating, to bring their artistic creations to other cities, to all the reigning families of Europe. Even in the German-speaking part of Switzerland we find some of them — like the brothers Pisoni from Ascona, who built the fine and classical cathedral of Soleure. A number of them went to Germany and were among the foremost architects. In Austria we find, among others, Ricca building churches and palaces, and in Copenhagen, Trezzini. A special field of activity for the Ticinese architects was then provided by Russia. When Peter the Great decided on founding Petersburg he called as his engineer just that Trezzini who, up to then, had been architect to the Royal family of Copenhagen. When Trezzini died, other Ticinese artists followed him, like Rusca, who erected the Tauris palace, and Gilardi, who built the great palace of the Bourse. Another Gilardi was allotted by Czar Alexander the stupendous task of rebuilding Moscow, which had been destroyed by fire during the Napoleonic campaign, and Gilardi built some of the finest monumental structures of that city. Another Ticinese, Adamini, was also architect in Petrograd and designed the great pronao of twenty-four columns for the church of St. Isaac. Later, in 1834, emulating Fontana, he erected the great column in honour of Czar Alexander, and he also accomplished a prodigy of engineering. According to Francini, who had been able to know direct from Adamini, there were present 10,000 soldiers and 30,000 spectators, and there were used 62 capstans set in motion by 2,332 workmen. The brothers Fossati, from Morcote, architects, restored the greatest Byzantine temple, viz. the church of St. Sofia in Constantinople.

We come now to the nineteenth century, in which stands out, among all others, the name of a great sculptor, Vincenzo Vela. Of Vela it is well to speak somewhat at length, because both as a man as well as an artist his personality is attractive and typical of the Ticinese soul. Vela was born in Ligornetto in 1820, and as a young boy was sent to learn the work of stone-cutter in the nearby quarries of Arzo and Besazio, but, but as he showed at once a decided artistic taste, his elder brother, Lorenzo, who was marmoreal worker in Milan took him there, at

his own expense, and sent him to the Academy. Young Vincenzo made rapid strides, and even during the period of studies one of his sculptures was allotted a prize of about 70 crowns, which was a real fortune for the poor stone-cutter.

With that money he decided to go to Rome, to continue his studies, and he is in Rome when he hears that civil war, that of the Sonderbund, is imminent in Switzerland. As he is a member of the Carabiniers Corps of the Ticino he immediately leaves art and friends, to go and do his duty as a citizen. The brief campaign over, Vincenzo Vela, who felt enthusiastic about the strategic genius of Dufour, desired to make him a bust and, with a few sittings, he fashioned one of the best portraits of the great general. Later, in Milan, inspired by the movement of rebellion of the people against foreign oppression, with which he made common cause, he sculptured "Spartaco", the slave who broke his own chains, and his fame as an artist leapt forward. The Austrian authorities, hoping with favours and enticements to subdue the rebellious soul, ask him for the stone portrait of the Austrian governor in Lombardy, but Vela disdainfully refuses to accept an order which would have made him a rich man and well favoured by the rulers, but which grates against his conscience. Two days later he receives notice of his immediate expulsion from Lombardy. He bids his friends good-bye and, proud of his coercion returns to Ligornetto. These particulars of his life make one feel the man of integrity and loyalty, the one-piece man. He is the type of the old Ticinese artist, modest, straight, clever, jovial, without finesses of culture, but full of genius, of common sense and of fine sentiments.

The success of his works steadily increased and he has been considered the greatest Italian sculptor of his time. Today certain of his sculptures are no longer admired, but others will remain so, like the "Desolation", which is in Lugano, "Spartaco", which is in Geneva, "Springtime", "Napoleon Dying" (which is in Paris), and the "Victims of Work", which was sculptured while the Gotthard was being pierced. The collection of his plaster-casts can be seen in his ateliers at Ligornetto, of which he made a gift to the Confederation, as a museum.

It could now be asked whether, of all those artists, of all those treasures and monuments of art, there is really nothing to be seen in the Ticino. I reply that there is extremely little, in proportion to what the Ticinesi have done outside their Canton. The Ticino was neither big enough nor rich enough to give scope to the artistic genius of all its sons who, in order to work, have been compelled to emigrate. The Ticinesi have been, it can be said, servants of art and had therefore to offer their genius where it was in demand. Several good monuments are, however, to be found in the Canton Ticino — like the Colleggiata of Bellinzona, and especially that of Lugano, which is a jewel of the Renaissance capable of standing alongside the finest churches of Italy. Moreover, the castle of Locarno, now reconditioned, has a number of very beautiful architectural features.

These are real monuments, but if we content ourselves with the crumbs which fall from the table of the rich, and

which, for those who know how to taste them, have the full flavour of the complete dishes, then there is such an abundance that we could never come to the end. In nearly every church, and in many of the houses of the southern Ticino, below the Ceneri, there are paintings, stuccoes and decorations which would do credit to the richest of palaces or to the most magnificent of churches. But they are only fragments. "And why?" it could be asked. It is not difficult to reply. Those artists, who were spending the major part of the year in the large cities of Italy, when they returned to their villages for the few winter months they would, to amuse themselves, just as a pastime, sculpture a statue or an altar for the church, or affresco a wall. And even in their own home, small and lowly house of an artisan, just to beautify it a little, they would amuse themselves adorning some corner of it with stuccoes, sculpturing a chimney piece or painting a ceiling. Sometimes the work would not even be finished — as soon as the favourable season came round again they had to be off. In the following winter, if they still felt like it, they would carry on with the work which had been interrupted, otherwise they left it half finished because, after all, it was of not much importance to finish it as the poverty of the little house bore no relation to the richness of the decorations.

Those who visit little villages like Carona, Bissone, Maroggia and quite a number of others, are really struck by the abundance of such fragments disseminated in the houses, even the humblest of them, where no one would ever imagine that such treasures could find a place.

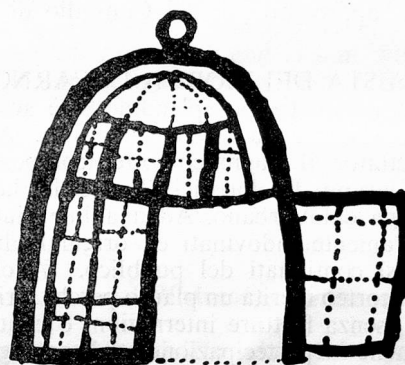
This uninterrupted legion of great artists who went out from our canton is for us Ticinesi like a title of nobility. It is due to this title that we can look the rest of Switzerland straight in the face. Other populations of the Confederation have acquired glory on the battlefields, fighting for liberty, others, in the cultured and industrious centres have paved the way to an enlightened bourgeoisie, capable of governing itself and of creating intellectual values, but for us Ticinesi our history is that of our art. The following is a thought by Francesco Chiesa: "History is not alone to destroy cities but also to build them; it is certainly history to defend one's country by means of arms, to discover new lands, to impose laws, to rule by force, but it is history also, and no less noble history, to do work of intelligence and beauty, to spread in the world the honoured name of one's own country or of one's own village, to hand down from father to son the most sincere traditions and to enrich them continuously, to be workers rather than soldiers, to be teachers rather than captains of adventure."

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