



Journal logo

Perugia through words and pictures

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Abstract

Selected topics in the historical and the architectural legacy of Perugia and its University are reviewed in this introductory contribution to the 2010 edition of the BEACH series conferences, hosted in the Aula Magna of the University of Perugia.

Keywords: Type your keywords here, separated by semicolons ; Perugia, University of Perugia, history, art, architecture;

1. Introduction

This hall*, which is much younger than the speaker, was solemnly inaugurated in 1959 in the presence of the President of the Republic, when the speaker was just a young high school student. Do not, however, let the age of this hall fool you about the age of the University, which was founded in the middle of the thirteenth century and can claim to be one of Europe's oldest universities. The French cardinal Bertrand de Got, when elected pope in a conclave in Perugia, took the name of Clement V and transferred the capital of the Pontifical States from Rome to Avignon. From the new French seat, thanks to the city in which he was elected, in 1308 sent the document which is still preserved in our archives with which the University of Perugia was officially recognised, at the time already active for about half a

century. On the basis of this irreproachable documentary evidence, the 700th anniversary of the foundation was celebrated two years ago.

2. Cultural heritage of the University of Perugia

Hosted at the beginning in the Bishop's palace, the University had its own premises donated by Pope Sixtus IV to the city around the 1470s; the construction was contemporaneous with the Sistine Chapel. This fifteenth-century building, still called the Old University (Figs. 1 & 2), is currently occupied by the Courthouses, but its return to the University is anticipated.

The very ancient birth of the University and its continuous development from 1308 until today are not isolated events in Perugia's history, nor are they without reason. The city in the late Middle Ages, in the years in which the University was born, had reached the climax of its political, economical, and cultural development. It was a free city with a Republican regime, run by an oligarchy of merchants

* i.e. the Aula Magna of the University of Perugia

and bankers, capable of handling a large amount of business affairs that all worked towards the wellbeing of all social classes within the city. These two groups of bankers and merchants were structured in two distinct corporations according to medieval customs and detained a large part of Perugia's wealth, such that the Palazzo Comunale (Figs. 3 & 4), begun around the 1290s, would have had great difficulty being completed without their significant financial contribution. The Municipality was never able to return the sum received on loan. About one hundred years later at the end of the fourteenth century, to remedy the debt, it had to relinquish to the Arte della Mercanzia the premises where it is still found. The Mercanzia acted to install a luxurious wooden decoration, much more costly and original than a fresco decoration, which would have been the obvious solution (Figs. 5 & 6). An analogous event concerned the Arte del Cambio, which in the middle of the fifteenth century transferred to the premises, that then towards the end of the 1490s commissioned Perugino and his school to fresco, realizing a pictorial cycle amongst the most interesting of Renaissance art (Figs. 7 & 8). The Cambio's decoration, apart from the usual elegant solutions by Perugino, introduced to Perugia the latest innovations experimented with success by Pinturicchio a few years earlier in the Borgia Apartments, frescoed in the Apostolic Vatican Palaces on commission by the Spanish Pope Alexander VI. Speaking of the Cambio and of the Mercanzia, the uncommon thing, even in a country of ancient traditions such as Italy, is that the two *Arti*, then called the *Collegi*, had already become nobiliary societies in the sixteenth century, have never ceased to exist, and are still active and preserve a large and important artistic and archival estate.

In reality, Perugia has a history that originates much earlier than the Middle Ages and recalls one of the great urban civilizations of Ancient Italy: the Etruscans. It is known that the multiethnic character of the country has extremely ancient roots: many centuries before Christ the Italian peninsula was already divided into three large principal ethnic areas, all three Indo-European, but clearly differentiated. Latino-Italic was at the center, amongst which there were the ancestors of the Romans, who would later reach universal fame just as their language, Latin, was destined to become celebrated as much as them.

Latin survived up to the Roman civilization and is used in unusual contexts even until today, for example, the plaque that reminds us of the inauguration of the current location of the Faculty of Humanities in 1961 (Fig. 9). To the South were the Greeks, so thickly installed as to occupy almost all of the southern territory, that not by chance still for historians and archeologists is *Magna Grecia*, the Latin translation of *Megale Ellas*, the name by which the Greeks themselves called it, because it was a country of ethnic groups, language, and Greek culture much more extensive than the motherland. To the North were many Celtic tribes, generically called Galli by the Italics. In this mosaic, rendered even more diversified by the presence of other minority Indo-European and non Indo-European populations, the great triangle-shaped area of Etruria was embedded, contained between the flow of the Arno and Tiber Rivers and the Tyrrhenian Sea coast between the mouths of the two aforementioned rivers (Figs. 10 & 11). The Etruscans, a population of unknown race and origin, spoke a language incomprehensible to all the other populations of Ancient Italy: not Italic, not Indo-European, extinguished in the first centuries of the Christian era, but testified to by over eleven thousand epigraphs and texts of various natures. In-depth analyses have revealed in Etruscan distinct characteristics that are typical of the Finno-Ugrian and Ural-Altai languages, so much so that a few years ago a distinguished linguist put forth the well-founded hypothesis that Etruscan can be considered a type of extremely archaic Hungarian. The Etruscans, *Rasna* in their language, brought a great urban civilization to Italy that was much more evolved than the aboriginal ones, and thus gave a significant contribution to the Roman civilization, that in its turn was in great part at the origin of European culture, for which the western world's cultural debt towards the Etruscans is relevant. Of these ancient and mysterious people, Perugia preserves not only historic memories and archeological finds, but many monuments are still an integral part of the urban web and are absolutely the most antique in the city, like the well of Piazza Piccinino, known as Pozzo Sorbello (Figs. 12 & 13), the maternal womb of Perugia, and the most monumental of the city doors, called the Etruscan Arch (fig. 14). In addition to these signs of Etruscan

culture, which are themselves already important, the Etruscan legacy is entrusted to a ring of necropolises that surrounds the city. However, already present in the historical city center are the first city walls, dating between the fourth and the second century B.C. and about three kilometers long; they mark a lasting Perugian city-planning style and lend the unmistakable physiognomy that the city still preserves after many centuries.

The process of romanizing Italy and many European countries led to the gradual disappearance of the Etruscan civilization, and Perugia became politically and culturally a Roman city. Interestingly, with respect to the underground burial place of Volumni (Fig. 15) - *Velimna* in Etruscan, *Volumnius* in Latin - the most ancient burial urns show Etruscan writing, then bilingual writing appears, until the most recent urns have exclusively Latin inscriptions, testimony to the slow but decisive linguistic and cultural transition.

At the fall of the Western Roman Empire in a large part of Europe, the formation of the Roman-Germanic reigns followed, but in Italy the persistence, even if limited and localized, of the Eastern Roman Empire, impeded the formation of a unified reign under a German monarchy, like in France, Spain, and Portugal. Italy remained divided between Longobards and Byzantines. Perugia, due to its clinging position on high hills and its imposing city walls, was chosen by the Emperor of Constantinople as the cornerstone of the defensive system known as "Byzantine Corridor", a chain of fortresses on both sides of a long, narrow territory that passed the Longobards' dominion and put Rome in communication with Ravenna, assuring the Byzantines of the possibility of escaping from their enemies more rapidly.

The most important city, between the two poles of Rome and Ravenna, was in fact Perugia, which apart from a brief circumscribed episode, was always successful in escaping Longobard rule. The Longobards' rule was consolidated in nearby Spoleto, the capital of a duchy (Fig. 16) so strong that it would survive for centuries after the fall of the Longobard reign, whose capital was Pavia. The Byzantine presence in Perugia is confirmed; among the most significant witnesses is undoubtedly the Church of Saint Michel the Archangel (Fig. 17), one of the

oldest of the city and of the region and one of the few to preserve the classic Byzantine typology of the central plan, luckily with very few changes from how it was originally.

Still during the Dark Ages, exactly in 966, the Benedictine colony known as the Abbey of Saint Peter, at the southernmost part of the city, whose basilica, constructed on pre-existing Etruscan structures, was the first cathedral of Perugia. The Benedictines grew and over the centuries the church became a complex architectonic element of noteworthy dimensions with three cloisters and many other constructions, that controlled a large piece of land. After the unity of Italy, the land passed to State property and is now administered by a foundation set up specifically for this purpose. For years the vast Benedictine building has hosted the Faculty of Agriculture, one of the most prestigious of our University (Figs. 18 & 19).

Perhaps it was the tie with the Roman Empire, even if at times it was purely symbolic, that firmly linked Perugia to the natural heir of Ancient Rome, the Catholic Church. Perugia demonstrated a constant and loyal Guelph ideology that gave it an advantage with the Church, that in fact preferred Perugia to other nearby cities. Illuminating in regard to this is the Maggiore Fountain (Fig. 20), where the ties with the Church of Rome and the Sacred Roman Empire are repeatedly underlined by figures and writings. The frequent presence of the Papal Court explains the diffusion of refined art in Perugia, that expressed itself in products of an extremely high level.

Apart from the influences from the Roman court, from an artistic point of view Perugia experienced another positive effect, although indirect, tied to Saint Francis. The saint was born in Assisi in 1182 and in the neighbourhoods of Assisi ended his days in 1226. At first glance his influence in Perugia would not seem evident because Guelph Perugia and Ghibelline Assisi were neither friends nor allies, but enemies. It is worthwhile to remind ourselves that the choice of the young Francis to begin a new life serving God, the poor and the humble was made during his long convalescence from the wounds brought back from the war between Assisi and Perugia. The saint's importance, whose worship had a very rapid diffusion in Italy and Europe, as well as the will of the Roman Church to make the Franciscan movement

re-enter into the ecclesiastical hierarchies, brought to Assisi the construction of the imposing complex of the Sacred Convent of Saint Francis (Figs. 21 & 22). To decorate this, the Pope, who was owner and commissioner, called on the greatest artists of the time from Rome, Siena, and Florence. The result exceeded all expectations: Cimabue, Giotto, Pietro Cavallini, Simone Martini and the other great artistic personalities active in the Assisi building site opened new roads in Italian and European painting. It was such that the Perugian artists and their commissioners found themselves able to observe, at a distance of only 25 kilometers, the latest artistic innovations produced by Roman, Siennese, and Florentine avant-gardes, justly considered the true beginning of Italian painting. Perugian art and more generally Umbrian art was never to forget this and preserved this late-Gothic mark, that remains evident at least until the beginning of the sixteenth century, in the artists of authentic Perugian formation, such as Pinturicchio (Fig. 23). This lesson of extremely high level, consolidated in the Assisi building sites and lasting through time, prepared the way for the great Renaissance season of Perugian art, in which we see artists blossom, such as Pietro Vannucci, called the Perugino (Fig. 24) and the previously mentioned Bernardino di Betto, called Pinturicchio (Fig. 25), who was the official painter of several popes. They were both nationally affirmed artists in their time, which must be emphasized because in that period there were many great geniuses in Italy, like Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael, to name just a few, that gave their country fame throughout the world.

The result is obvious to everyone. Today Perugia and Umbrian art are present in museums and public and private collections from Russia to Hawaii. The catalog, still incomplete of the Umbrian artistic presence outside of Italy, already contains more than seven hundred and fifty titles just of paintings. The current locations of these 750 paintings are known, and to this we must add a large number of documented works which are at the moment impossible to find. Put together, the two lists reach about one thousand. If the loss of many masterpieces is painful, the damage is in part compensated by the fame that the works present in many countries and

prestigious locations give to Umbrian, and more generally, Italian culture.

In fact, between the fifteenth and sixteenth century, the fame of the Perugian instructors and others active in Umbria was so solid that it attracted the attention of a very young genius, so great as an artist and as his own manager that he was not the type to waste time in secondary workshops with outdated teachers. He is the most celebrated of Italian painters, Raphael. Although born in Urbino and son of a respectable painter, he decided to move to Umbria where, between Città di Castello and Perugia, and perhaps also in other locations, he lived and worked from 1500 to 1507, leaving eleven masterpieces (Figs. 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31), as well as other undocumented works. If the legacy of Raphael in Umbria has unfortunately withered down to nothing, the years spent by Raphael in Perugino and Pinturicchio's workshops left lasting characteristics in Raphael's figurative language; in his turn, the Raphael lesson profoundly influenced the Perugian painting for decades, much longer than the physical presence of this genius from Urbino.

Just 20 years after Raphael's death, Perugia's history experienced an irreversible turning point. The profound political and economical shifts now rendered the formula of the citizen's republic impossible to propose, exceeded by princedom. Even Perugia, after a hard-fought war in the middle of the sixteenth century, ended up under the direct rule of the Roman Church. The Rocca Paolina (Figs. 32 & 33), named after the commissioner Pope Paul III (Fig. 34), constructed between 1540 and 1543 not to defend the city from enemies but to subject it to pontifical power, transformed the old city, once leader of itself, into one of many city centers that became subjected to the Pope, and in fact a colony. The negative effects were evident: in a short period of time the city suffered a serious demographic decline, a general deterioration, and a regression in the level of artistic production.

Some years later, in 1567, if the nobles of the Collegio della Mercanzia wanted a painting of value, they had to turn to a painter of the Marches, Federico Barocci of Urbino, a fellow citizen of Raphael, who produced the unsurpassable *Deposition* luckily still in the possession of the old commissioners and in its place of origin (Fig. 35). The situation did not

improve with time and the thinning out of the artists was accompanied by the progressive lack of commissioners. It was such that the talented artists of Perugia either were not in the city, or if they wanted to make a name for themselves, they had to emigrate, as happened with the great architect Galeazzo Alessi, whose Umbrian legacy is very limited. He instead found a way to produce monumental buildings in Liguria and Lombardy. In Milan, the Palazzo Marino is his creation, and it is the current location of the municipality (Fig. 36). Not only in Perugia was there suffering due to the cultural regression, but also in all of Umbria; in later times Giuseppe Piermarini left Foligno. He was another genial architect who was responsible for one of the most celebrated theaters of Europe, the Milanese Scala Theater (Figs. 37 & 38). The situation, in fact, did not improve even in the eighteenth century, the age of Enlightenment, when Perugia and Umbria, however, remained in the dark. The absence of great local artistic personalities made it clear that the marquises Antinori had to turn to a Roman architect, Francesco Bianchi, for their residence. He designed Palazzo Antinori, later called Gallenga-Stuart, constructed a short distance from this Aula Magna under the supervision of the Perugian Pietro Carattoli, now property of the municipality and whose use is granted to the University for Foreigners (Figs. 39 & 40).

Founded in 1926 with the main goal of the diffusion of the Italian language and culture in the world, the University for Foreigners in Perugia marches decisively towards the completion of its first hundred years, which will occur in sixteen years, and it is one of the cultural poles of the city. The Antinori were not the only ones to turn to foreign artists. The Aula Magna, where we find ourselves now, was constructed at the end of the fifties of the past century, but sits on the monumental complex of the eighteenth century, which hosts the rector's office and many other university structures and was at the beginning the church and the convent of the Olivetani monks (Fig. 41). This well-known branch of the Benedictine family entrusted this important undertaking to the celebrated architect Lodewijk van Wittel, son of the great Dutch painter Gaspar who invented the modern landscape. Luigi Vanvitelli, as he was renamed in Italy, was widely active for the highest commissioners, not the least being the King

of Naples who was the sovereign of the largest and most important reign in pre-unified Italy. The King commissioned Vanvitelli to do the scenographic Reggia di Caserta. Vanvitelli, in regards to the Perugian convent where we are now, did not personally supervise the construction, but he was the author of the plan, that he defined down to the smallest details and then entrusted to his student, Carlo Murena, a circumstance that explains the current name of the building: Palazzo Murena.

Almost until the end of the nineteenth century, Perugia was immersed in the deep sleep of the *Ancien Regime*, that in the Pontifical States assumed the connotation of hibernation, as can be seen in this photograph (Fig. 42) of exceptional documentary value, taken in an unknown period, but more or less between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, when the city still had a medieval aspect. Closed in the second circle of walls, the photo presents a very rare urban web, with houses dispersed in the middle of fields and vegetable and flower gardens. The Etruscan city walls of the IV-II centuries B.C. and about three kilometers long have already been mentioned, but it must be remembered that the medieval city built another wall that defended the urban areas constructed close to the Etruscan walls and settlements, rising along the outgoing roads from the five principal city gates, called "Vie Regali". Built between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and about fifteen kilometers long (Figs. 43 & 44), this too, like the Etruscan one, is in large part preserved and visible.

3. Conclusion

The unification of Italy brought at least one benefit for Perugia - it became the principal city of an invented region, but with a certain historical plausibility: Umbria. The new region was created by using a piece of Etruria on the right side of the Tiber, where physically we find ourselves now, together with the so-called Umbria on the left side of the Tiber all the way to the Appenines, plus a part of Sabina, province of Rieti, which in 1923 was taken away from Umbria and given back to Lazio, of which it is still a part today. Being the administrative center of

the new region gave a certain vitality to the city, where the multi-century sleepiness had impeded large urbanistic interventions, the creation of a network of communication, and essential infrastructures, like the aqueduct. The city and the region had also experienced historical delay and theft, not least by Napoleon, which was then aggravated by the appropriations of the pontifical government that retained many Umbrian works of art returned from France after Napoleon's defeat. Despite all this, the city and region found themselves with a landscape in large part still intact, an enviable archeological and artistic heritage, old medieval institutions still in existence, an academy of art starting in the sixteenth century and a university founded in the fourteenth century that, revitalized, is still today promoter of culture, as our meeting today proves. It is an excellent occasion for seeing many welcome guests to whom we direct much warm sentiment, together here in the heart of the university, which is proud to look good even after 702 years.

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