

VILLA VALMARANA “AI NANI”

The Villa Valmarana “ai Nani”, classical example of a countryside dwelling, was built on behalf of the juriconsult Gian Maria Bertolo in 1669. Presently it includes the Owners’ residence, the Guest House and the Stables.

The garden that surrounds the villa stretches on a longitudinal axis, adapting itself to the natural profile of the Berici hills and faces on the “Valletta del Silenzio”, described by A. Fogazzaro.

In 1720 the Valmarana family, that still lives there, became owners and commissioned the architect Francesco Muttoni for changes and ornamental embellishments.

The Owners’ residence was enriched by small tympani, encircled by statues and by a lovely turret, which lodges the stairs leading to the upper floor. Very simple is the main floor: a central hall that, like the “portego” of the Venetian house, goes from a façade to the other and two sitting-rooms per side, communicating between them.

In 1757 Giustino Valmarana called Giambattista and Giandomenico Tiepolo to fresco the Villa. They were returning from their pictorial enterprise at the Wuerzburg Palace where, with their frescoes, had celebrated the wedding of Federico Barbarossa with Margherita of Burgundy.

The Villa owns its name to a poetic legend. It tells of a dwarf princess who lived secluded in the pre-existent castle with all her servants, dwarfs too. Upon seeing a beautiful prince in the garden, she realized her handicap and threw herself from the tower. The careless dwarfs, for punishment, were petrified and were placed on the surrounding wall of the villa.

Goethe writes in his “Tagebuecher” (Diary) on the 24th September 1786:

sp“Today I have visited Villa Valmarana that Tiepolo has decorated, giving free course to all his virtues and defects. He didn’t succeed in realizing the sublime style like the natural one, but in this aspect there are splendid things: as a decorator, broadly eaking, he is full of happiness and cleverness”.

The very special frieze, the frames around the frescoes and the architectural decorations are by Gerolamo Mengozzi-Colonna.

THE OWNERS' RESIDENCE

CENTRAL HALL (I)

Iphigenia's Sacrifice is illustrated in three-dimensional vision: at the centre the priest Calcante is about to kill the young Iphigenia. All the onlookers lift their glance, because miraculously, over a vaporous cloud, two cupids carry a deer, that will be sacrificed in the place of Iphigenia. On the right wall Agamemnon covers his face so as not to see his daughter's killing.

On one side of the ceiling Diana with her nymphs sends the rescuer deer. On the other side Eolus, god of the winds, blows a breath, so that the fleet can sail.

On the other wall weapons and foodstuffs are being prepared for the expedition and the departure towards Troy. From the framing a main character stands out (perhaps Giustino Valmarana) that, touched, follows the tragedy that takes place on the altar of the sacrifice. Very interesting is the dog that greets his owner (perhaps Ulysses').

Above the doors there are the personifications in monochrome of the world's four most important rivers, as known in 1700.

ILIAD'S ROOM BY HOMER (II)

Briseis, Achille's slave, is taken away forcibly from her tent to be introduced to her new owner: the king Agamemnon, who is waiting for her in a majestic position as a despot; Achilles, taken by anger, for his slave's kidnapping, flings himself against Agamemnon but is held back by his hair by Minerva, goddess of war and knowledge descended from the sky; Achilles, sad, is comforted by his mother Tetis, goddess of the sea, who, at his crying, is taken by a Nereis on the sea wave's surface.

The rural landscape of last wall is due to Giandomenico. On the ceiling is reproduced. Minerva

FURIOUS ORLAND'S ROOM BY L. ARIOSTO (III)

Angelica, princess of Cathay, is tied at a cliff by pirates, to be devoured by a sea monster; the knight Ruggero, on horseback of a hippogriff, comes down to rescue her; Angelica afterwards meets the Saracen soldier Medor and cures his thoracic haemorrhage; love is born between them, but poor as they are, they have to be rescued in a peasants' house; in taking leave they thank the two peasants, giving them as present the ring that Orland had offered to Angelica as a token of his love (the characters of the two peasants are by Giandomenico). On the last wall

Angelica engraves Medor's name on the tree. On the ceiling Cupid blindfolded drives a chariot among clouds: it is an allegory of the loving passion, that, blind, determines human behaviour.

ENEID'S ROOM BY VIRGIL

Venus, goddess of love, appears to her son Enea and his companion Acate, disembarked, after a storm on the African coasts and immediately moves away taking Ascanio with her. Cupid embodies in Iulus, who, together with his father, is regally welcomed by Dido: between the two, love is born; on the other wall there is Mercury with winged feet, who, as messenger of the Gods, introduces himself to Enea, ordering him to leave Carthage and to carry on his journey towards Latium. From Iulus, that will marry Lavinia, will descend the "gens iulia" (Julius Caesar and the great-grandson Augustus). So the Romans will descend from the Trojans and their birth will have royal and divine origins; in chiaroscuro is represented Vulcan, god of fire; in his forge he is supervising the works of his blacksmiths that are moulding the weapons for Enea, at the presence of Venus. On the ceiling, partially destroyed by a bombardment of the town of Vicenza in 1944, is represented Venus' triumph.

LIBERATED JERUSALEM' S ROOM BY T.TASSO (V)

In the Renaissance, the lively imagination, the magic that benefited of philtres and potions were cliché. The frescoes recall episodes of the first crusade with Rinald as protagonist. The witch Armida that protects the Saracens, tries to block the Christian's advance. With her melodious song she sends Rinald to sleep and kidnapps him, dragging him on a chariot, first to a castle and then to the "Fortunate Island" (presently the Canary Islands). In that luxuriant vegetation, with the help of an enchanted mirror, she bewitches Rinald and the warrior, totally subdued by the witch's arts, loses all dignity. Goffredo of Buglione, commander-in-chief- of the Christian army, sends two soldiers to look for him; they show him a shield, a gift of the wizard of Ascalona, in which he can see reflected the episode of the magic he has undergone. He is ashamed and decides to take over his virility and go back to his task of crusader; marvellous in the colours, in the attitude and in the expression, the farewell between Rinald and Armida. The witch tries once more to seduce him with the arts of sensuality, but reason prevails in Rinald. On the ceiling an allegory represents the victory of virtue over vice, of light over darkness, of good over evil.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The leitmotiv of the paintings in the Owner's residence is the sense of sacrifice and renouncement as human value: Iphigenia accepts to sacrifice herself for the Achaeans' good; Briseis, though compelled, sacrifices herself, and forgoes her love for Achilles; Orland sacrifices himself, giving up Angelica, but loses his mind out of grief; Enea renounces to the comforts and to Dido's love, to continue his sea voyage and disembark in Latium; Rinald sacrifices himself, foregoing pleasant loving: he does that for sense of duty too.

Giustino Valmarana has certainly put forward his wishes, setting with Tiepolo upon the literary and mythological topics.

To notice, moreover, that the ceilings represent, in their allegories, the theme of the intervention of the Divine in men's destiny.

THE GUEST-HOUSE AND THE STABLES

The building enclosing the garden on the west side, was created to host the family's guests. In origin, the seven arches, held up by pillars, opened to a large porch, on which the rooms faced.

These arches have then been closed, probably in order to benefit from this part of the villa also on the cold season. With the opening of wide rectangular windows, the porch has been transformed into a large hall.

In the seven frescoed rooms of the building, with the exception of the Sala dell'Olimpo, Giambattista Tiepolo asks his son Giandomenico and his other assistants to continue his work, as if to indicate that the god's and goddesses' world is finished and that time has come to go from the classic drama to the bourgeois comedy, thus from Metastasio to Goldoni. We are faced with a break between joy and melancholy, between performance and reality. While Giambattista in the Palazzina interprets his world, in the Guest-house the son reflects the spirit of the times. The new man of the 18th century could no more take delight in "Dialogues" and "Discourses", science had lost its impenetrable seriousness and the "nouvelle vague" was preparing its amusement with his own style. The redundancy of the poems of chivalry, sentimental pathos and the actions of characters blinded by fury had been represented until their exhaustion. Giandomenico Tiepolo detaches himself, with the lightness of his colours, from the pearl-like sparkle of the cultivated and joyful painting of his father. At the outbreak of Enlightenment, both worlds of Aristocracy and of People come into stage. The people is made of dwarfs, gamblers and charlatans who, as if following the artist's order, come into the scene, bow, ask for applause and for a little offering.

THE CHINESE ROOM (I)

The pictures are an extravagant evocation of China, which had just become fashionable in Venice with the "Turandot" by Carlo Gozzi. The worship of a moon-light goddess, the purchase of spices and of precious fabrics, are the simple pretexts to show all those goods that, since the times of Marco Polo, were shipped into Venice. The artist, who never visited the Celestial Empire, after attending the theatre works and after the likely reading of the "récits de voyage", must conclude that it is an extraordinary country, where very peculiar animals, insects of enormous size, unthinkable vegetables live. The Pine-tree gives a special emotion; the fact that it is painted out of its frame, gives the room a three-dimensional effect.

THE COUNTRYSIDE ROOM (II)

In this room Giandomenico changes style: what interests him here is the Venetian countryside world, scenes of an sultry sunny day, bleaching the trees' foliage. On a wall a family eats his rustic meal: an enormous "polenta" dominates the white cloth, the father eats holding his son on his lap, while a woman eats her meal with the plate on her big stomach. On the opposite side two women and a girl go to the market: they are all dressed up, wear a hat and high-heeled shoes rather than the worn-out slippers of the precedent scene; a hen's head sticks out from a basket. On the other side of the same wall an old woman, now resting under a tree's shadow, goes to town to sell her eggs. While recovering her strength, she says the rosary.

The fresco on the opposite wall shows an imaginary landscape.

THE GOTHIC OR VACATIONS' ROOM (III)

This room represents the other side of the countryside life where the peasants' work in the age of feudal serfdom is no more protagonist; the main theme here are the landlords who get from the land the income for their luxury.

The room is called gothic for its architectural decorations. In these neo-gothic frames, women walk admiring the landscape, sometimes together with their gallant; they walk in summer and in winter, always sumptuously dressed and looking absent-minded and bored, as they do in all their life's duties.

THE ROOM OF THE OLYMPUS GODS (IV)

Here we find again the touch of the father Giambattista who, with his mythological subjects, go back to "sublime". On a wall a Jupiter sits on the clouds, as in a throne, holds arrows and sceptre; on his feet is painted an eagle.

THE CARNIVAL ROOM (V)

On a wall is frescoed a Moro coming down the stairs to serve some hot chocolate: according to the experts, this character is painted by Giambattista. The scene has inspired Antonio Fogazzaro who, in his book "Piccolo mondo moderno" calls the room "the Darwinian Room". The other three walls show scenes of the Venetian Carnival. They are painted by the son and were later reproduced in the Zianigo Villa owned by the Tiepolos; they are now in Cà Rezzonico. The scenes show ludic themes: the Charlatan, the New World and the

Minuett of Pantalone and Colombina: everything is painted with great lucidity and disenchantment, with precision of details and a rapid, incisive touch.

THE ROOM OF THE ARCHITECTURAL DESIGNS (VI) **(Closed to the public)**

The room was frescoed by Antonio Visentini. Here, gardens and villas, animated by small characters (drawn in distemper by Giandomenico) space out among the columns.

THE ROOMS OF THE “PUTTI” (VII) **(Closed to the public)**

In this last room of the Guest-house, some “putti” play and joke cheerfully within the oval frames. The parrot with its multicoloured feathers looks splendid. The preparatory drawing is certainly by Giambattista, but it seems that the execution is not by the Tiepolos, but by some apprentices.

THE STABLES

On the southern side of the Guest-house we find the large Noble’s entrance that allowed the entry of the coaches directed towards the Palazzina and the Stables. The Stables, by Muttoni, are of special interest. In fact here the architect exploits with great ability the different levels of the ground to fit the two floors of the building; one is on the same level as the Stradella di S. Bastian, the other on the level of the small internal courtyard of the Villa.

Maxwell Parrish made a beautiful drawing of the porch and stables of the Foresteria for Edith Wharton’s book : “Italian Villas and their Gardens” (New York 1904)

Some unforgettable scenes of the film “Don Giovanni” have been shot at the Villa Valmarana in 1979 by Joseph Losey: a tribute of the director’s love for the Venetian landscape and culture