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The Sacred and the Studies: the Archiginnasio Public Library of Bologna (Italy)

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ABSTRACT

The Palazzo dell'Archiginnasio was the seat of the Bologna Studio from 1563 to 1798 and inside it many sacred representations recall the profound and widespread presence of the Christian religion in the complex of the decoration of the building. The chapel of Santa Maria dei Bulgari hosted the most important ceremonies concerning the University; every lecture hall and each of the two halls that served as a lecture hall for law students and for artist students had an image of the Madonna and Child on the wall, corresponding to the teacher's chair.

Keywords: Studio; Frescoes; Chapel; Pier Donato Cesi; Antonio Morandi

Il palazzo dell'Archiginnasio ha ospitato dal 1563 al 1798 lo Studio di Bologna e al suo interno molte raffigurazioni sacre ricordano la profonda e diffusa presenza della religione cristiana nel complesso della decorazione del palazzo. La cappella di Santa Maria dei Bulgari ospitava le cerimonie più importanti che riguardavano l'Università; ogni aula di lezione e ognuna delle due sale che servivano da aula magna per gli studenti legisti e per gli studenti artisti aveva una immagine della Madonna con il Bambino sul muro, in corrispondenza della cattedra dell'insegnante.

Keywords: Studio; Affreschi; Cappella; Pier Donato Cesi; Antonio Morandi

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1. The University of Bologna and the Archiginnasio

The University, or rather, the Bolognese Studio was established between 1563 and 1798 in the Palazzo dell'Archiginnasio, built specifically for this purpose by Pope Pius IV. In fact, with the inclusion of Bologna, starting from 1511, in the State of the Church, a new season was opened, not only political, but also artistic and civil, for the city. Especially since the middle of the century the popes dedicated themselves to a program of beautification of the city and enrichment of its artistic and monumental patrimony that interested many public buildings. With the ascent to the pontificate of Pius IV, Gian Angelo de 'Medici, who was affectionately linked to the city for having graduated from his University in civil and canon law, a real program began that in a few years equipped the city with important monuments. More than the Legate, Carlo Borromeo, who was in Rome involved in managing foreign affairs and the complex question of the Council of Trent, was the Vicelegate Pier Donato Cesi, bishop of Narni, starting from 1560 and up to 1565, to decide the interventions, to choose architects and artists to commission the new aspect of the city. Therefore, within a few years, the Farnese Chapel in the palace of the Anziani up, frescoed by Prospero Fontana, the summer apartment of the Legates in another wing of the palace, the Old fountain in via U. Bassi and the fountain of Neptune were carried out, in the new square specially opened, mentioning only the most important monuments.

The need for a new centralized seat for the Bolognese schools, the Studio, to use a term of the time, was felt both by teachers and students, still forced to teach first in rooms attached to their private homes or rented specifically, the latter to wander the city from one school to another; that part of the city government that belonged to the pontiff wanted instead to gather all the classrooms of teaching in a single prestigious building, both for the University and the city's decoration, and for a better control of the teaching orthodoxy, in a moment in which the Protestant heresy threatened the orthodoxy of the Catholic faith, even after its condemnation expressed in the Council of Trent. Only the Senate opposed, thinking of spending - it was the city that paid, through the proceeds of the tax called Gabella Grossa - and still hoping to complete the civic basilica of San Petronio, which with the large wing of the cross of the transept should have occupied the area where Archiginnasio was designed.

But Cesi, having the support of the pontiff, got the city government to approve his project and buy the buildings where the schools of San Petronio were located, owned by the Fabbriceria di San Petronio, and gave the task to the architect Antonio Morandi called the Terribilia to transform those classrooms and that fifteenth-century portico into a comfortable, elegant and representative building for a European-known institution of higher education such as the University of Bologna. The work began with the first purchases and demolitions of the shops under the arcades in 1562 and ended in the following autumn, when the contemporaries left their admiring comments on the new Schools, on the occasion of the inauguration of the academic year (**Figure 1**).



Figure 1: The entrance courtyard and the door of the Chapel of Santa Maria dei Bulgari
Source: Biblioteca dell'Archiginnasio

Terribilia, in fact, had to work on an existing building, leaving the useful parts in place, in a heavily constructed urban context and, moreover, in a hurry, given the enthusiasm of the Vice-Delegate for the achievements that were inaugurated with the Archiginnasio. So he kept the portico, substituting the previous octagonal pillars with elegant columns, he kept the overhanging vaults, maintained a central courtyard that re-proposed the ancient Court of the Bulgari, maintained, regularizing it, the symmetrical plant with two large classrooms at the ends climbing two staircases and crossing two rows of classrooms; a simple façade, marked by arcades of porticoes and monumental windows, characterized by the continuous string-course below and by the elaborate cornice above the windows. Symmetrical all because it had to host similar schools: schools for the law students and for the philosophy students - including doctors - on the left, both ended at the two ends, from a great hall (the current Stabat Mater and reading room of the Library respectively) (**Figure 2**).



Figure 2: Aula Magna of law students or Stabat Mater
Source: Biblioteca dell'Archiginnasio

The opening of the square during the two following years, and the harmonization with the new building of the adjacent Ospedale della Morte (now Museo Civico Archeologico) with a new façade, although designed and executed by Terribilia, concluded the intervention in this part of the city (Foschi, 1987, pp. 88-98) (**Figure 3**).

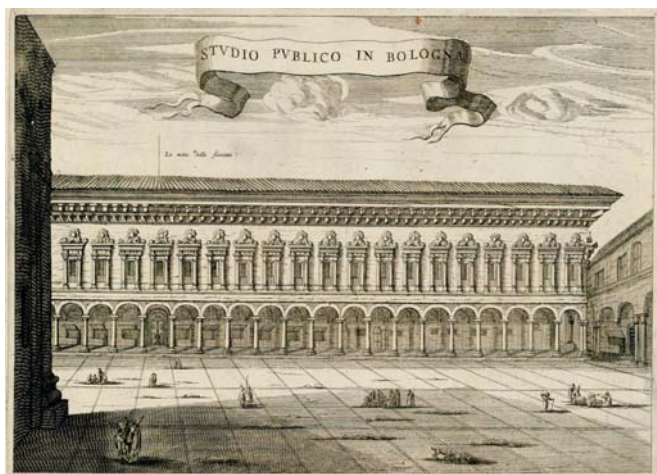


Figure 3: The elegant façade of the Bologna Schools or Studio
Source: Biblioteca dell'Archiginnasio, Cartella Gozzadini 3, 146

2. The Schools and the Sacred

The higher studies, born in private form and at the end of the twelfth century passed under public control, have always been closely linked to the local ecclesiastical hierarchy. Since 1219 it is the archdeacon of the Bolognese Capitolo that has the authority to confer the doctoral degrees: in reality the archdeacon was the main dignity of the Capitolo and the most important one after the bishop (Sarti-Fattorini, 1896, n.16, pp. 259-260). In the thirteenth century he began to lose importance in the religious and liturgical field as it became increasingly important in the cultural one, because in 1219 Pope Honorius III attributed the authority to confer the "licentia docendi" to candidates who had completed their university studies and passed exams (Paolini, 1988, pp. 129-172).

The sacred is still intertwined visibly with the studies that were conducted in the university premises and is indeed present everywhere in the halls: first of all in the east wing of the ground floor, the one immediately visible for those who enter, still exists the Chapel dei Bulgari, dedicated to the Virgin. Before January 29, 1944, the date of the disastrous air raid that also struck the Archiginnasio, the chapel was decorated with frescoes by Bartolomeo Cesi depicting scenes from the life of the Virgin (**Figure 4**). After the end of the war the chapel was rebuilt the same as it was, but most of the frescoes did not remain.



Figure 4: The Chapel of Santa Maria dei Bulgari in the nineteenth century

Source: Biblioteca dell'Archiginnasio

The image of the Virgin still dominates every place in which university teaching took place: in every lecture hall, above the doctor's desk, there is still a fresco depicting the Madonna with the Child. The same representation, interpreted in a slightly different way each time, stands in the two large rooms at the opposite ends of the building, the Lecture Hall of the Legisti (today called Sala Stabat Mater), and the Aula Magna degli Artisti (today a reading room of the Library). The hall, now called Stabat Mater, recalls the first performance of the opera *Stabat Mater* by Gioachino Rossini, conducted by Gaetano Donizetti, which was held here on March 18, 1842.

Still the Madonna, but in this case the Madonna Annunziata, was invoked and spiritually presided with her image to the preparation of the "teriaca", a secret and precious medicine, which was prepared once a year by the doctors of the Studio in the courtyard of the Archiginnasio. It had to treat a great number of diseases and was then distributed to the city pharmacists (**Figure 5**).



Figure 5: The preparation of "teriaca" in the courtyard of the palace

Source: Biblioteca dell'Archiginnasio, ms. B.2329, c. 161

St. Petronius, the bishop working in Bologna between 430 and 450 and sanctified in the Middle Ages, finally was the saint depicted in degree diplomas as the terrestrial and celestial authority that could legitimize human knowledge.

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