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The Treasury Museum of San Lorenzo Cathedral, Genova

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Treasury Museum, San Lorenzo Cathedral in Genova

Treasury Museum of San Lorenzo: where and why

The Treasury Museum of the Cathedral of San Lorenzo, located in the historic heart of Genova, has been much written and spoken about in Italy, because its interior architecture is in itself considered a work of art, as discussed below.

It is completely hidden from view, being underground, because the density of the historic environment rendered a new building impossible. If the interior of the Gothic cathedral, which underwent Renaissance additions, is in itself a place removed from the pulsating life of the outside world, being a place of silence and meditation, it is all the more so in the underground museum, whose atmosphere appears motionless and as if petrified. Actually, there are *some* signs of its existence on the outside: located just under the courtyard of the Archbishop's Palace right behind the Cathedral, between the walls of the church and the foundations of the Archbishop's palace, a sunburst pattern in the paving of the courtyard indicates - for those who know how to look - the presence of "something" (but access to the courtyard is not public).

Fig. 1 the courtyard paving reveals the underground museum by reproducing the geometric lines of its structure



This small museum arose to house the collection which had until the Second World War been on public view in a room behind the sacristy. In 1865, the question of the proper conservation and display of the treasury was raised, but it was not until 1900 that the Museum of the Cathedral Treasury was legally established and three cabinets with iron doors were built and placed in the sacristy. However, this arrangement, which remained in place for fifty years, made it too easy to handle and move the objects, which not only deteriorated but also, over time, ended up being arranged in no particular order.

Finally, in 1951, it was decided to completely redesign the exhibition with the involvement of the architect Franco Albini. At that time in Italy the design of a new space to be used expressly as a museum was not at all

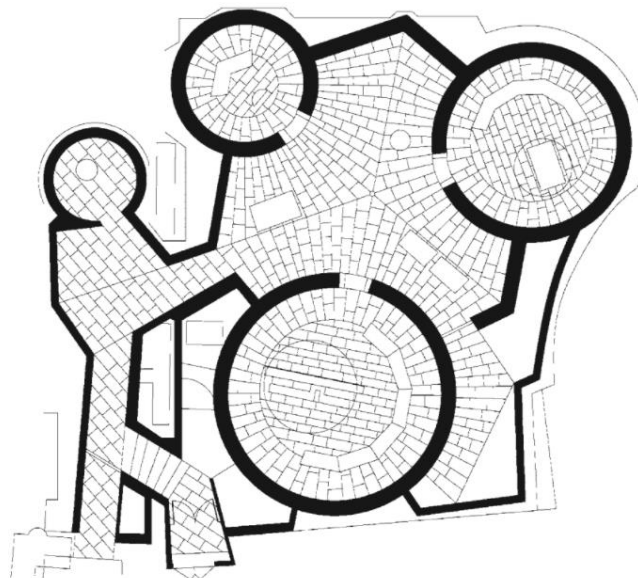
common, and even less so for collections of a religious nature. Another very particular aspect concerns the explicit request that many of the objects on display could continue to be used (chalices, monstrances, altar frontals), and indeed they are still used on various liturgical occasions, and some (the processional arks) even leave the cathedral for processions along the city streets. This is a very unusual aspect for objects kept in a museum, and theoretically it could be able to mend that fracture mentioned above: it should help to unite the secular aspect of the museum and the religious one to which the objects belong. As we know, the exhibition transforms the objects, taking them out of their functional context and putting them back into a new ritual (the museum visit).

In fact, this requirement has been interpreted in a purely functional way, i.e. as the need for the clergy to have a privileged and separate access to the museum from the public, to be able to remove objects easily, safely and without interference. Thus, the clergy access the museum directly from the sacristy, while visitors enter from the cathedral. In the exhibition, there is no explicit mention or allusion to the fact that these objects are still alive, i.e. in use: in the rarefied atmosphere with no contact with the outside world, they appear to have been uprooted from their functional context.

Treasury Museum of San Lorenzo: how

The designer's choice is very particular, masterfully exploiting the dense communication potential of the space, and generating an architecture that forms an indissoluble whole with the objects it presents. The underground architecture is reached by a short "initiation" path from the left aisle of the church (this entrance serves also, according to Kay Bea Jones¹, "to adjust one's eyes and mind to the change in light and spirit"). It generates an exclusively internal space: the suspended, intimate and immobile atmosphere does not suggest at all that the objects are still alive. This effect is further emphasized by the particular shape of

Fig. 2 Plan of Treasury Museum of San Lorenzo Cathedral, Genova



the spaces: if the perimeter was dictated by the irregular contours of the available volume, the choice of

¹ K.B.Jones, *Suspended Modernity: the Architecture of Franco Albini*, London-New York 2016, Routledge (first published 2014 by Ashgate Publishing)

inserting some small circular exhibition rooms takes on a strong symbolic value. Although it was used for a wide variety of functions in the ancient world, the *thòlos* form (a circular space generally created in an earthen tumulus and covered by a sort of vault) has always been associated with spaces of a sacred nature and tombs. In particular, it recalls the Treasury of Atreus in Mycenae, although this museum does not have sloped walls. Here, the soft natural light filtering through a glass oculus at the top of each *thòlos* also plays an important role, while the artificial light is designed to create strong and very dramatic shadows. The architect has therefore made use of an archetype of great expressive power, typical, however, of a pre-Christian religious context, which evokes both the sense of removal from life of the objects on display (in contrast to the real situation, as has been seen) and a generically sacred attribute. While the walls and the floor are evenly covered with blocks of grey Serena stone, a grey local limestone, the reinforced concrete ceilings reveal their modernity.

The only color that stands out in this strictly monochrome context is the red of the fabric on which the objects in the display cases rest: this color is associated with preciousness and wealth, and in the Catholic liturgy in particular it evokes the Passion of Christ, as well as being associated with the upper hierarchy of the clergy.

Moreover, the entrance to each *thòlos* has an unusual profile, almost reminiscent of the keyhole with which treasury chests are equipped: passing through them takes on the sense of a further initiatory step, while at the same time giving a slight sense of profanation.

Fig. 3 interior space



The irregular geometric space and the curved walls of the *thòloi*, as well as the lack of external references, immediately generate a loss of orientation in the visitor, immersing him or her even further into an "other" place with no apparent connection to the world above. At the same time, this place has been described as a total environment, as an interiority without comparison.

In this museum the communication aspect, so important today, was entrusted almost exclusively, according to a practice that was very common in the middle of the last century, to a non-verbal communication implemented through the space and the layout: small, minimal captions were provided, but no information panels, and for a not-particularly informed visitor the function of many items on display is unclear. Yet the uncommon fact that many objects are still in use could have been an opportunity to make through the display more explicit the bond with function, which in many museums the objects, being uprooted from the life for which they were conceived, lose

Actually, this museum appears as an art museum, putting the historical and religious aspects decidedly in the background. The Chapter of the Cathedral did not pursue a possible communicative and interpretative program, requesting only that the objects be protected and could be easily taken out for use about once a

year. Despite the fact that the entrance for the public is directly accessible from the cathedral, the visitor perceives a clear caesura between the cathedral and the exhibition environment, whose rarefied and theatrical atmosphere is not perceived as an ideal complement to the religious spaces.

Treasury Museum of San Lorenzo: what

The museum houses and exhibits about fifty works of great historical, artistic and devotional value (relics, art works and liturgical furnishings) from the Middle Ages and the following centuries, up to the 18th century. The collection is the result of a very complex centuries-long history: the first nucleus was built up between the 12th and 13th centuries, mainly from spoils of war, and then over time was enriched by donations. However, the original treasury was much more considerable than what can be seen today. Many objects are dedicated to St John the Baptist, the patron saint of the city: to his martyrdom and his veneration.

The objects are heterogeneously owned: they belong partly to the Municipality of Genova, partly to the Cathedral Chapter and partly to the Protectorate of the Chapel of St John the Baptist. This fact has influenced both the architectural choices and, even today, the management of the museum (which depends on the municipal administration even though it belongs to the Cathedral context). Some objects bear witness to legendary events, while others are historical testimonies in all respects.

The entrance, where there is a silver reliquary statue of San Lorenzo, opens onto a first small thòlos where a very valuable piece is kept, the so-called "sacred bowl", which is considered the emblem of the museum. It is a precious vase in green jasper, long considered the Holy Grail, where Jesus is said to have consumed the Last Supper and where his blood is said to have been collected, recently returned to the exhibition after a

Fig. 4 view from the entrance: the silver reliquary statue of San Lorenzo and the first "tholos"

Fig. 5 the so-called "sacred bowl" (considered the Holy Grail)



delicate restoration operation. It is not clear whether it is of Roman (1st-5th centuries CE) or Arab (9th-10th centuries CE) origin, but it is part of the spoils of war brought to Genova in 1101 during the First Crusade. In the 13th century, the Archbishop of Genova identified it as the Holy Grail, and with the centuries its importance and its mystery increased, also because only eminent people could observe it closely. The precious object was even pledged by the Genoese government, which was in financial difficulty, and was

repeatedly the subject of attempts at theft and misappropriation. At the beginning of the 19th century it was taken to Paris by Napoleon. It was discovered that it was not made of emerald, as was thought, but of blown green glass. It was decided to return it in 1816, but it was probably on the journey back from Torino to Genova that it broke and a piece was lost. It has recently undergone a delicate restoration, that has replaced the missing piece.

This object is only one, though the most important, of the many valuable relics that the museum holds and which deserve special mention. The cult of relics, although not exclusive to the Christian religion, is very common in it, even if in the contemporary world few believers still participate or approve it. However, history teaches us that it is a complex phenomenon, difficult to understand from a modern perspective, and that it was practiced by different social classes. Often, as the history of some of the objects in this museum shows, relics have been at the centre of fights, economic exchanges, pilgrimages, rivalries, and they have also often been symbols of legitimization of power. Many of them, including the Holy Grail, have fed a series of myths and legends, starting from a primitive historical event.

Fig.- 6 the Zaccaria Cross



Indeed, in the second thòlos stands out the Byzantine “Cross of Zaccaria”, from the 13th century, made of gilded silver and decorated with pearls and precious stones, which is also a reliquary, as it holds fragments of wood that tradition says came from the Cross of Christ. It was commissioned by the Emperor of the East in the 9th century to give to the Basilica of St John the Evangelist in Ephesus. In the 13th century, the Bishop of Ephesus had it restored as it was in a very poor state of preservation, as evidenced by an inscription in Greek on the back. In 1308 the Turks plundered the basilica, but the cross was immediately recaptured by the Genoese Zaccaria family (from whence it takes its name), who then donated it to Genova Cathedral. It was later used in the consecration ceremony of the Doge on the day of his election, and it is still used today to welcome the new Archbishop entering the Cathedral, as well as being displayed in the Cathedral every year on Good Friday.

In the showcases behind the Zaccaria cross is a Byzantine reliquary with a bone from the arm of St Anne (11th -12th century) and a reliquary with a bone from the arm of St James (14th century). Next to it is the reliquary containing the ashes of St John the Baptist, a work of goldsmith's art, which was probably originally a jewellery box but was sold to the Cathedral by the Pinceti family who were in financial difficulties.

The theme of relics is also present in the third thòlos, where a 15th century processional ark made of embossed gilded silver and lacquer is displayed. In 1098, the Genoese had brought the relics of St John's ashes from Mira, and this ark is intended to carry them in procession on 24th June, the patron saint's day. The ark, built like a miniature Gothic church, depicts the key events in the life of St John, from the announcement of his birth to his burial. It is a work of art of great interest, documenting the artistic evolution of the period.

Another ark claimed to contain the ashes of John the Baptist can also be admired, made of embossed, engraved silver leaf and quartz covering a wooden case. It dates back to the 12th century (with some interventions in the 16th century) and is the oldest known ark to hold St John's ashes. The hut shape is decorated with plant motifs and depictions of the martyrdom of St John. According to a tradition, the ark was a devotional offering of Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, but there is no definitive evidence.

Finally, there are the precious reliquary "of the Virgin's hair", dating from the 17th century, and - in the fourth thòlos - an early 19th-century reliquary in gilded silver containing a thorn from the crown of Christ.

In addition to the relics, the museum also houses objects of great devotional value. In the third thòlos is the famous St John the Baptist's plate, made of chalcedony, gold and precious stones. According to tradition, it was used to hold the head of the Baptist after his beheading. It is Roman, from the first century CE, probably commissioned by an emperor, with a later intervention by a goldsmith from Paris who in the early 15th century added an elegant decorated frame (which actually keeps the parts together as the plate is broken) and inserted a small head of the Saint in the centre. The decoration was probably commissioned by King Charles VI himself, or at least by a member of the Valois dynasty, and later a councillor of the king gave it to Pope Innocent VIII who, on his deathbed, gave the precious dish to the Protectorate of the Chapel of St John the Baptist. In addition to its artistic value, it also has an exceptional devotional value, emphasized by a special feature: chalcedony is a material worked with diamond dust, and changes colour with the light. The

Fig. 7 The St John the Baptist's plate



striking red veins that appear when the dish is backlit emanate from the centre, where the small head of John the Baptist is located, realistically evoking the blood gushing from his decapitated neck.

In the irregular space connecting the different thòloi, which displays some larger precious objects, a large processional silver ark of Corpus Domini dominates the scene. It dates from the mid 16th - early 17th century and was made by Genoese, Flemish, German and Lombard silversmiths. It is arranged in such a way that it can be easily removed because it is still carried in procession on the Corpus Domini day. The ark, which features depictions of saints and scenes from the Passion of Christ, is surmounted by a small temple-shaped monstrance where the consecrated host is placed during the procession.

Fig. 8 the Corpus Domini ark and the Immaculate Madonna by Francesco Maria Schiaffino



Another important object from a historical and devotional point of view is the large, embossed silver statue of the Immaculate Madonna by Francesco Maria Schiaffino, which stands next to the opening leading to the second thòlos. The statue depicts the Madonna crushing the serpent wrapped around a globe and a half moon. The dramatic shadow produced by the statue, and its barycentric position, have made it somewhat of a symbol of the museum. Dated to 1748, the statue was donated to the Doge (his family crest is on the base), in memory of the liberation of Genova from the Austrian troops, and in turn the Doge offered it to the San Lorenzo Cathedral.

Each of the precious liturgical objects kept in the museum would deserve a mention: in particular, the altar pallium from the end of the 16th century, the precious silver chalices of different dates, and two Renaissance gilded textile vestments that in recent times have been replaced by less precious copies because their preservation was not perfectly ensured.

Finally, the museum also holds objects specifically related to the history of the local church, such as the Bull of Pope Gelasius II for the consecration of Genova Cathedral at the beginning of the 12th century, and some

objects from donations: 20th century objects that belonged to the Archbishop of Genova Cardinal Giuseppe Siri, and to Pope Benedict XV.

As is clear, the relevance of this collection is extraordinary.

Treasury Museum of San Lorenzo: who

However, one cannot avoid recalling that much has been written about the architecture and layout of this museum, apart from its collection²: Franco Albini, icon of modern architecture, designed this museum and it has come back into the limelight every time it has been required to be maintained or brought up to standard. Together with the conservation of the precious collection, the main objective has always been to find the most respectful solutions for the architect's work. Perhaps the only example of interior architecture by Albini that is still almost intact, it represents what has often been a two-fold problem in Italy: on the one hand the need to update a museum to modern standards, and on the other the concern not to alter a spatial arrangement of great architectural and documentary value. The museum also becomes, so to speak, the place of conservation and exhibition of itself. The museum of the Treasury of San Lorenzo is considered a museographical masterpiece *per se*, attracting specialised debate on good practice for intervening in, preserving and restoring modern architecture. Yet, unexpectedly, it is often completely unknown to the Genoese themselves.

In order to make the Treasury more accessible and comprehensible, during works carried out between 2008 and 2011 the Soprintendenza finally approved the plans for the original, small Bakelite display labels, which were difficult to read, be replaced with larger slate-coloured plates with captions in two languages. The layout revision was led by Piero Boccardo and Franco Boggero³, but it was really a minimal operation because of the museum's inalterability.

From the visitor's point of view, the museum conveys an ambiguous message. The objects, whose value is enhanced by the display, risk transmitting above all the image of a church dripping with wealth and opulence, as well as beauty, which is far removed from the faithful, and certainly far removed from those of today. The religious identity of the collection is intertwined with the troubled and complex history of many objects, and many changes of ownership. Many stories, as well as history, could be told, but they remain in the background: the visitor is only allowed to "admire", albeit with the support of guides. Indeed, the visitors' feedback all refers to the extraordinary beauty of the objects and the suggestive spatial solution⁴. The typical barrier between displayed object and visitor is not broken down here, although some large objects are unprotected and can be easily touched, but rather the awe that artworks instil is amplified by the visual and scenic effects. If the intention of the designers was to make people feel that objects belong "to another world", this has been achieved. The devotional value, in this context, does not prevail.

Albini, according to the cultural approach of his times, created a small temple of beauty: and its contents are of such value that it seems difficult to create a relationship with them other than pure contemplation and admiration.

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² See the bibliographical references, which make clear the centrality of architectural theme

³ Piero Boccardo is Sovrintendente alle Collezioni dei Musei Civici di Genova; Franco Boggero is the Director of the Historical and Artistic Heritage of Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio di Genova.

⁴E.g. see the visitors' comments on Tripadvisor

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