

Section 1. Study of art

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L'ILLUSTRAZIONE ITALIANA: A SOURCE FOR MUSEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Abstract. *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, the magazine founded in 1873 by Emilio Treves, has been the focus of research mainly concerning political, military and social history. There is no shortage of contributions on the history of illustration and photography or collaborators of a certain importance, but much remains to be explored on museological problems.

Keywords: museums, art, cultural Heritage, journals.

First-hand material from journals provides the stimulus to tackle less conventional and often unexpected lines of research. The study of the critical attitudes preserved in them changes the method of observation which, in this new perspective, must adapt to a much more extensive and varied information context. Periodical publications, compared to the printed volume, obey the logic of timeliness and immediate comment on events; through these media it is possible to follow debates, to make criticisms, because "chi ha qualcosa da dire, chi ha dottrine da combattere o da far valere, giudizi da proporre o da correggere, interessi spirituali da suscitare, sente il bisogno di una comunicazione viva, varia e continua col pubblico degli studiosi e lettori" [1, 410]. Periods of our artistic past, historiographical problems and characters often ignored, or veiled, by "known History", find expression in these exceptional mines of information.

A first reflection on the role played by periodicals in Italian life was undertaken at the conference organized by University of Turin in 2002 [2], the

first international study meeting organized in Italy specifically dedicated to art magazines. Further and more systematic works, characterized by important monographs on little-known periodicals, were presented by Laboratorio Arti Visive della Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa (between 2007 and 2011) [3; 4], at the 2006 Milan [5] and the 2012 Santa Maria Capua Vetere [6] conferences.

Thanks to these researches, supported by the creation of catalogs and computerized databases, today it is possible to understand with greater awareness the value of this kind of sources in the field not only of literary research, but also in that of art criticism, history and the preservation of cultural heritage. However, beyond what is widespread among a very small number of specialists, much remains to be done, as regards historical-artistic and museological research, on information and training tools not exclusively dedicated to art and aimed at wider segments of readers. A significant step forward in this sense was achieved through a study which, completed in

2013 and carried out with the help of four research groups from four universities (Florence, Milan, Roma Tre and Udine), revealed that the press did not specialist topics of critical discussion and visual success of twentieth-century works usually rarely addressed by art historians [7]. The challenge was to trace the idea that had developed, over the course of the century, around the modern artwork and its creator, outside the narrow circuit of actors and users of the art system, and understand how much this diverged or coincided with that which later passed in the historicization of essays and manuals.

To this type of approach, which aims to outline parallel paths to canonized history, look at the research proposed here, centered on the image and the role of the museum communicated in Italy by one of the longest-running national weeklies in the history of Italian publishing.

Distributed in all Italian regions and even abroad, *L'Illustrazione Italiana* was for many years the great illustrated current affairs magazine that addressed to the middle class. On December 14, 1873, in Milan, with the title *Nuova Illustrazione Universale*, the Trieste publisher Emilio Treves decided to launch a new illustrated periodical. After a brief presence on the market as *L'Illustrazione Universale*, the weekly magazine acquired the definitive name, from the 1st November 1875, *L'Illustrazione Italiana* and was on newsstands until 1962, the year in which the magazine, already owned by Garzanti since 1938, ceased publications. A year after his interruption, almost as if he did not want to lose his memory, Flavio Simonetti edited the first contribution dedicated to the magazine. The scholar, in addition to examining in detail the protagonists, the themes and the most important collaborators, composed a sort of “*storia figurata del tempo*”, that is a pleasant tool to travel through a history of about ninety years, through the most significant pages of the magazine [8]. More detailed information on the dynamics linked to the birth of the newspaper, its editorial project and the prominent place it managed to conquer in periodic

journalism, was offered by Massimo Grillandi in the biography dedicated to Emilio Treves [9]. The same news passed to the scrutiny of Michele Giordano who traced the genealogical tree of the periodical, starting from the bud of the *Museo di Famiglia*, passing through *L'Universo Illustrato* and *La Nuova Illustrazione Universale*, up to the luxuriant flowering of *L'Illustrazione Italiana* [10].

In examining the different strands of contemporary journalism, various scholars have subsequently dealt with the problem of the illustrated press and the peculiarities of the magazine in question in a historical key [11; 12; 13].

An enlargement of the field of investigation however, it is identified in the essay by Nello Ajello which examines the continuous “*ossequio*” at the “*mitologia nazionalborghese*” underlying the editorial choices of the Treves house [14].

There was no “*a figure*” magazine was able to record in such a timely manner situations, topics and events that had, at national and international level, a certain importance and reserve a lot of space for art and artists. Anyone who has set out to write about Italy's past as a united country could not help but steal this illustrated Italian history. The appeals and references to the writings and illustrations published in *L'Illustrazione Italiana* were in fact very numerous and an overview allows us to see how the attention for the periodical was born in the context of research centered mainly on political, military and social history [15; 16; 17; 18] [19; 20; 21; 22]. There is no shortage of contributions regarding the history of illustration and photography [23; 24; 25; 26] or collaborators of a certain importance [27], but much remains to be explored on artistic issues [28].

On the side of museological and museographic criticism, with the exception of the analyzes carried out on the periodical by Nadia Barrella and by Donata Levi, there are no investigations on the subject. Barrella's work is the result of a first systematic review of the magazine in this direction and concerns the issues published between 1875 and the end of

the nineteenth century, years in which the cultural heritage was the subject of a museographic administration [29]. A different perspective follows Donata Levi's essay, based on the visual documentation relating to art museums in Italian periodical publications of the early decades of the twentieth century, both of disciplinary and more general content. The analysis highlights a significant absence of images from museum exhibitions in periodicals dedicated to the history of art. In reverse, in magazines of greater consumption, such as *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, she distinguishes a wide range of solutions to communicate, both events related to museums and their characteristics and purposes, to a wider audience in [30].

Starting from the considerable wealth of information that emerged from these first approaches, it would be interesting to extend the scope of investigation to other years of the magazine not yet sounded, in order to evaluate some absolutely unknown aspects of the Italian museum offer. The object of reflection could be not only the museum in its generality, its form and its configuration in a specific historical, political and social reality, but also the attention given to Italy, between the post-unification era and the first half of the twentieth century, to Cultural Heritage and to the preservation of places and of homeland memories.

In the period in which Italy, from an agricultural country, fragmented into dozens of small states, dialects and local customs, was gradually moving towards that modernization that would soon homogenize habits and institutions, Emilio Treves chose to give life to a illustrated weekly that represented the young nation. Shunning any form of regionalism, the publisher introduced a tool on the market of "primo potere" [31, 2] useful for the formation of a wider civil society than in religious traditions, in popular memories, in the search for a linguistic unity, in the artistic Heritage, in the sciences and in the letters, it could have found its own identification.

The civil society to which the newspaper addressed was the upper middle class, or the ruling

class of the country, the main user of museums in the second half of the nineteenth century. From the pages of *L'Illustrazione Italiana* nothing emerges other than the strategies implemented in the museum field by public administrations and the idea of a museum communicated to this type of user/reader. However, we must consider that as social changes, cultural and economic, during the twentieth century, led to a substantial change in the meaning and significance of museum institutions, in the same way, the trajectory of the magazine, compared to its original target audience, has undergone significant changes over time. Consequently, it will be essential to proceed on a double track: bearing in mind, on the one hand, the evolution of the magazine and the "audiences" to which it has addressed over the years, and on the other, the museum model disclosed from time to time. At the turn of the century, the Treves newspaper was for every wealthy family "come avere una figlia che suoni il piano e sappia affrontare un discorsetto in francese" [32; 180].

Its primacy he began to be questioned with the extension of the readers to non-bourgeois bands that he took away to the magazine the representative function of an entire sociological universe. From 1880 to 1895 the publishing industry experienced a period of substantial development determined by the general economic and cultural growth of the population. There was a regression of illiteracy and therefore the enlargement of the audience of potential readers. Then the creature of Treves was threatened and surpassed, in conception and workmanship, by *La Domenica del Corriere*, *La Tribuna Illustrata* and *L'Illustrazione del popolo*, illustrated supplements to major news dailies.

They were newspapers for everyone, conceived for medium-low culture environments, up to the limits of semi-illiteracy or returning illiteracy, with a deliberately interclass type of approach and a strong visual imprint facilitated by the introduction of color [33; 34]. Meanwhile, *L'Illustrazione Italiana* remained only a symbol of distinction and its golden age was

totally extinguished in the first years of the fascist regime. Already in the early 1980s, the newspaper's vision began to no longer identify itself with the vision of the ruling class: the political class of men on the left had now taken over with the not so much to "make" the Italians but to reform them. Under the influence of the socialist weight there was an enlargement of the liberal state and social strata emerged ready to acquire a different awareness of their own needs. The ruling class, for its part, found itself facing the difficult problem of their nationalization, or rather, their insertion into institutional life, which will only be completed in the Giolitti era [35; 524] [36; 23].

With regard to the idea of a museum and of the national cultural heritage in its generality which is derived from *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, it coincided, at least until the 1880s, with that of the political class in power. However, since the magazine always programmatically avoided regionalist connotations, the contributions in its publications allow you to understand too as the requests presented by the various power groups interfaced and the relationship that was established between the politics of cultural Heritage and public opinion. The magazine was born and lived its moment of maximum splendor just in the period in which the museum began to take shape as a cultural organism which was given a precise educational function. The "museo della città" [37; 18] experienced an intense vitality in these years. Responding to the needs of the different municipalities, just integrated into a centralized state system, to bring out their own traditions, the local museums were not only identified as containers for the conservation of the memories of the city and the territory, but also as places whose main function was to serve the city as a study tool from which to draw to encourage the development of a civic and cultural identity [38]. The great season of civic museums then started at sunset when the local autonomies, in the face of increasingly accentuated legislation and state administrative order, gradually lost their role. With the first national protection law, the Nasi law of 1902 (L. 185), and then with the Rosadi law of 1909 (L. 364),

preservation prevailed over all other functions of the museum institute.

The museum, which became an appendix of the superintendency, assumed only the task of the mere custody of the masterpieces without particular obligations towards the public [39; 40; 41]. Among the pages of the periodical, the roots of "anomalìa italiana" [42; 22] are reflected through individual episodes and the responses of the various centers of the country were different, not only in the face of this turning point, but also to the international debate which, following the political expansion of the concept of a liberal state, was changing the role and functions of the museum.

First of all, the magazine gives the opportunity to fill a gap that concerns many Italian museums, especially the nineteenth-century museums; studies proliferate on the modalities of their constitution, on their cultural purposes and on the importance they have assumed in the process of conservation of cultural Heritage, but there is a lack of reflections on the subjects who acted within them, on the tools used to communicate with the public (captions, panels, signs, guides, catalogs) and, above all, the research on the criterion adopted for "making the collections speak" [43]. From the analysis of the material they could emerge the reasons behind the many failures and the backwardness of much of the Italian exhibition system. In particular, it would be interesting to identify the transformations that affected museums between the two wars and to determine how much was felt also in Italy the need to adapt the various exhibition centers to the lively international debate. The same debate that was changing the models and functions of the museum and which, thanks to the OIM, it led to the first international conference in Madrid in 1934. The limited knowledge of these transformations is the result of a culture that has roots in the postwar period, when the great renovation of all those museums that had been victims of evictions, occupations and damage caused by bombing began. For some museums it represented an im-

portant moment to seriously remedy, in the light of their peculiarities and their needs, to the long-standing cultural and structural delays, but for the most part it resulted in a passive adjustment to those social and cultural issues that museums were pursuing on an international level since the 1920s and 1930s. In fact, in many museums the outcome of this adaptation was nothing more than an uncritical recovery of a certain type of object, released from specific educational purposes and motivated by purely aesthetic logic [44; 45].

L'Illustrazione Italiana, whose importance is consecrated, not only by the kaleidoscope of information provided by the textual part, but also, and above all, by the rich repertoire of images, reveals the concrete possibility of reconstructing certain dynamics and this would also mean questioning the well-established image of the Italian museum which, after a long period of stagnation that began in the second half of the nineteenth century, it starts to “renaissance” only in the 1950s with the interventions of architects such as Albini, Bassi, Boschetti, Scarpa.

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