

Painting and sculpture of the 15th century

Chieri cultural heritage of the late Middle Ages between the Gothic and Renaissance period is impressive, notwithstanding huge losses. It begins with the extraordinary cycle of the Story of the life of Christ painted in the baptistery of the collegiate church of *Santa Maria della Scala* (Duomo) by Guglielmetto Fantini, a master of fresco painting, during the first half of the 15th century. The “*Madonna del Melograno*” (the Madonna of the Pomegranate) in the Duomo by a Flemish artist of the very early 15th century, is the most beautiful Gothic sculpture in Piedmont. The sculptural decorations in the Gothic and the Renaissance style of the San Domenico church is splendid and the Gothic pediment of the Duomo, the frescoes of the Gallieri chapel and the stalls of the choir of the Duomo are among the many icons of 15th century Chieri. Among the testimonies of private commissions are the painted ceilings in homes that were the pride of both domestic and public life in the town.

Assistance and charity

Assistance to the poor, the ill and to orphans was left to the Christian charity of private citizens and to the hospital orders. In some towns the poor were received in small hospitals, which later joined to become the *Ospedale Maggiore* (the general hospital). The “*House of Alms*” also took in the poor. Along the via Francigena, hospitals provided a meal and a bed to pilgrims. The fraternities, forerunners of the

confraternities of the 1600's, carried out acts of solidarity towards their fellow followers and distributed food and clothing.

The Chieri nobility, the confraternities and the clerics were the main customers for the furnishings and sculptures (crucifixes, reliquaries and ostensories). Particular attention was reserved for the vestments (precious fabrics from local sources were used but also Sicilian, Genovese and French fabrics).

Medieval Art

In the late middle ages Chieri was a prosperous municipality with a territory which included Asti, Moncalieri and Turin. It was controlled via a series of castles and a web of political connections precociously integrated into the Savoy-Acaia state (1347).

The patrimony of medieval art therefore saw a profound re-visitation in the 1500's which incorporated and in large part substituted the preceding testimonials: this is true for the residual towers as it is for the more ancient palaces. The Santa Maria cathedral has only the Roman crypt remaining.

Among the other residual testimonials, often concentrated towards the end of the 1400's, is the church of San Domenico, with its stone capitals inside and the clay palmettes of the facade. In addition to these there is the jewellery that constitutes the "Cathedral Treasure" and the famous reliquary of the head of San Giorgio in the church of the same name in Chieri, from the end of the 1400's. Another type which has conserved more ancient traces is that of the illuminated decorations used in convents.

The “brickwork” town

Towards the end of the 15th century Chieri had approximately ten thousand inhabitants as opposed to four thousand in Turin. The earnings from multiple economic activities were used to finance the construction of the new city, which was tinged with the red and brown of terracotta, with stamped designs of geometric palmettes and naturalistic foliage. In the 1500's, the century of major economic development, luxurious palaces and towers were erected in the centre of town, some of which were renovated homes and others which incorporated the towers of previous centuries. Some of these palaces are still exist today. The wealthiest local families (Tabussi, Buschetti, Tana, Broglia, Villa, Gallieri and many others) financed the building or the renovation of the ancient churches Santa Maria della Scala (Cathedral), San Domenico and San Francesco in the Gothic-Lombard style. At the end of the century a new convent of Sant'Agostino was built with an eye to the new renaissance influence.

Bankers, merchants and farmers

In the second half of the 14th century Chieri was the most important centre of the Turin area, thanks to significant privileges such as mercantile exemptions along the routes and the Alpine passes that led to areas of great financial and commercial interest (Savoy, Burgundy and Flanders). These were

the activities of the famous Lombards, remembered for their business acumen in money trading in many roads and streets in Europe today (Lombard Street in the City of London, for example). In the 15th century favourable economic conditions led various town families, already involved in commercial activities, to open lending banks in northern European countries- the so-called "*casane*"- often supplanting the work of the people of Asti, and to commission numerous works of art. Among these the family *Villas* stood out. There was a beneficial interaction between Piedmont and the Northern cities and a constant exchange in terms of living, dressing and building with those distant districts.

Internal fighting

Towards the end of the 13th century the local lords, many craftsmen and merchants from the villages and the countryside, flooded into the town. The new middle class united in the "Society of San Giorgio" and challenged the ancient military aristocracy of the "Society of San Guglielmo". The latter had kept the power up to then, thanks to well structured consortium of families. A long period of violent fights between rival factions began, in order to gain control of the town. In 1338 the ancient nobility was expelled and Chieri remained under the rule of the dominion of the King Roberto d'Angiò. In 1347, following the Angevin defeat in Piedmont, the House of Savoy and the Acaia attained the commitment of the Municipality. The town nevertheless maintained a strong administrative autonomy and the right to continue to legislate for it's own affairs.

The birth of the Municipality

The bishop, in charge of the Chieri "Dominion" together with Count Guido of Biandrate, on 7th April 1168, authorized the men of Chieri to meet and to appoint consuls- political institutions which testify to the birth of the Municipality. In Mercadillo Square (Mazzini Square today) the town council met. Beginning in 1184, following persistent internal rivalry, a mayor from outside the area substituted the consuls with the job of carrying out the deliberations of the council and to administer justice. In the 3rd century AD Chieri, having acquired full council autonomy, increased its urban extension, incorporated the villages and the castles of the surrounding area with their representative lords into the administration and founded Villastellone and Pecetto. 24 hamlets, all obliged to supply men to the army, constituted the district of Chieri.

The Destruction by Barbarossa

The battle by the people of Chieri to gain independence from the power of the bishop and his allies – the empire and the vassal counts of Biandrate – began in the 12th century. In 1155 Federico Barbarossa, in agreement with Carlo, bishop of Turin, sent the army against them. They destroyed the towers " *that were not a few*" and set the town on fire. Guido of Biandrate was given ownership over the feud of Chieri. At that time Chieri, defined by its inhabitants as "*a walled village*",

already presented an urban aspect and had good defences. The layout of the walls enclosed a relatively large area. A wider circle was constructed at the end of the third century AD when the city, beginning again from the neighbourhoods of Vairo, Albussano, Gialdo and Arene, had a population of over 10.000 inhabitants.

The year 1000

Characterized by the emergence of the Holy Roman Empire and the temporal power of the church, the early Middle Ages end with the year 1000. Chieri appears as a rural village, an imperial “Curtis” under the control of Landolfo, the bishop of Turin.

In his testament (1037) he recalls that in Chieri he completed the tower and the castle with higher walls that girded the Fortress of San Giorgio. Furthermore he had a church built, very quickly but artistically, not far from the castle, devoted to Holy Mary Mother of God. He had it decorated with images, vestments and vessels used for rites and other sacred ornaments. The building was demolished at the beginning of the 15th century in order to build the present gothic temple (the Cathedral), however some traces of it are still visible in the lower part of the baptistery and in the crypt.

Early Middle Ages

Carreum suffered a drastic demographic decline and a downsizing of the town from the end of the second century AD, probably due to the hydrogeological instability that caused the landslide of the unstable hill of San Giorgio with the consequent abandonment of large sections of the city.

In the area of the future baptistery, on the site of a first imperial domus, late-ancient walls arose, perhaps connected to an early Christian cult building with an adjoining cemetery, as attested by an epigraph from the fifth century.

In the second half of the 6th century, nuclei of Longobards settled on what remained of the Roman city, as evidenced by some precarious structures and the remains of a church for funerary purposes.