

Extraordinary artistic heritage in the monuments of Varese

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On the morning of Saturday 20 November, there was the presentation of “**Vite, arte e storie straordinarie raccontate dai Monumenti ‘alla memoria’ del Varesotto**”, a fine book written by the architect **Gian Franco Ferrario**, with the support of the Order of Architects of Varese Province.

In the Salone Estense, following an introduction by the Mayor of Varese, **Davide Galimberti**, and the President of the Varese Order of Architects, **Elena Brusa Pasquè**, the author **Gian Franco Ferrario** and the publisher **Pietro Macchione**, chaired by the journalist **Paolo Grosso**, presented the book, which documents and catalogues “the architecture of the beyond” in the Province, following the cultural and architectural paths of the Varese architect **Carlo Maciachini**, who designed the monumental cemeteries of Milan, of Giubiano, in Varese, and of Busto Arsizio.

The book gathers the result of visits to **over two hundred sites in the Province**, where it was possible to discover a priceless heritage of funerary art, which covers a period of about 200 years.

The funerary monuments housed in the cemeteries of Varese Province include works by famous architects, and internationally renowned engineers and artists, from Luca Beltrami to Paolo Cantù, from Enrico Castiglioni to **Camillo Boito**, from Carlo Maciachini to **Giuseppe Pagano**, from Piero Portaluppi to **Giuseppe Sommaruga**.

And there are works by the sculptors **Floriano Bodini**, **Enrico Butti**, Luigi Fontana, Pompeo Marchesi, **Lodovico Pogliaghi**, **Arnaldo Pomodoro**, Adolfo Wildt, and many others: **heritage of indisputable value collected in the volume published by Macchione.**

PRESENTATION OF THE BOOK BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE ORDER OF ARCHITECTS

“When I was in primary school, Cristina Ferrari, my teacher at the ‘Parini’ School in Giubiano would always take us to visit the Varese Monumental Cemetery, on 2 November, and make us clean the tombs of those who no longer had anyone to look after their headstones. We children would bring rags and flowers which we would leave one by one on the tombs of the ‘forgotten’. We chose those with the youngest faces or those who hadn’t survived the First World War. Our teacher taught us to read the headstones and to understand the value of dating and the phrases with which those left behind wanted to remember their deceased. A new way of looking at cemeteries as open-air art galleries, can be developed, thanks to the schools, places to remember the “Extraordinary lives, art and stories told by the monuments, ‘in memory of’ Varese Province”, which is the title of Gianfranco Ferrario’s book.

Over the centuries, the act of burying has been celebrated in different ways. History teaches that every country, every era and every religion has its own traditions for burials. Life after death was a popular theme among the ancients, which was almost always interpreted as a journey, and, in different ways, the culture of choosing a burial place has changed over the centuries and traditions and cultures have adapted to altitudes, climate and religions. The Pashupatinath temple in Kathmandu is a place where

death is a ritual that has repeated over the centuries along the river, where a few metres from each other the lifeless bodies, wrapped in white robes, adorned with scented flowers, are burned and the ashes thrown into the purifying waters: no tombstone, no name, no memory, because, for Buddhists, everything is in a process of evolving, everything is transformed and everything returns.

For the Egyptians, however, this was not the case. Thousands of years later, their tombs still bring archaeologists and historians to discuss why they were so magnificent and grand. On the other hand, the origins of our Italian cemeteries are little more than a century old. Famous people were buried in or around churches, and others were buried in mass graves.

For example, the Rotonda della Besana, in Milan, was built in the seventeenth century as the cemetery of today's former General Hospital. About 100,000 people had been buried there by the end of the 1800s, when graves were emptied, because of an excess of bodies and the fear of new epidemics. The bodies were then gathered into mass graves, over which a church was erected, a large and unique religious monument that made everyone equal, without distinction of class or culture.

The book by Gianfranco Ferrario encourages us to reflect upon a topic that is important for everybody: the Christian culture of funerals, and remembering the deceased, through art and micro-architecture.

For us Christians, cemeteries are places of memory, of mourning, of reconciliation, of commemoration, and of prayer. But, this was not always the case. Looking after the graves, visiting the graveyard, individual and communal prayer, celebrating the anniversary and the Holy Mass in memory of the deceased are expressions of a relationship with the mystery of death and with the people who have passed over to another dimension.

In Napoleonic times, the Edict of Saint Cloud (1804) established that burials should take place outside the residential area, and that the headstones of the "citizens" should all be "identical". This measure was extended throughout Italy, and it triggered heated debates among the intellectuals of the day.

In contrast to this trend, Ugo Foscolo dwelt on the value of the tomb, as a place of memory, and the great poet himself introduced the topic of the tomb as a place of civilisation, because it is only memory that can survive the destruction of matter. From tombs, it is possible to reconstruct the history of a territory.

For our culture and traditions, it has become important not to forget our deceased loved ones, and their memory allows us to keep alive the example of human beings of great value and of extraordinary lives, as the book's title mentions.

Through the memories preserved by these tombs, their moral values are passed on to future generations. This is the sense of Gianfranco's book. There is no future without history, and there is no history without memory. The tomb is not only a place of affection, it also allows passing on an entire human heritage, through the faith of the people who contributed to the life and growth of a territory.

Behind Foscolo's theory lies the idea that, in a world that is constantly evolving, only feeling can guarantee immortality to man, through memory. Thus, throughout Italy, the Edict of Saint Cloud was opposed with an anthem to the memory of the deceased, through architecture and art. Cemeteries became filled with small temples, small family chapels, chapels for the farewell ceremonies, where the deceased could rest together.

In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, memory architecture transformed cemeteries into places that were full of works of art, with small and important objects and curious artistic inclusions, inscriptions and engravings, that speak of past lives.

The Varese Order of Architects could not fail to welcome, with all due respect, the book produced by

our colleague, the architect Gian Franco Ferrario, who wisely documented and catalogued memory architecture, following the cultural and architectonical paths of the Varese inhabitant, Maciachini, the great architect who designed the Monumental Cemetery, in Milan, and the Giubiano Cemetery, in Varese and in Busto Arsizio, to whom Ferrario himself dedicated another book on cemeteries as places of memory last year; this is a tangible aid for those who remain, who want to remember, an invitation to schools to discover the history of their territory, by reading memories, walking through cemeteries, which are places to learn about and to preserve.”

Elena Brusa Pasquè

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