

MARTOR



Title: "Two Atypical Museums in Rome"

Author: Rodica Marinescu

How to cite this article: Marinescu, Rodica. 2010. "Two Atypical Museums in Rome". *Martor* 15: 187-193.

Published by: Editura MARTOR (MARTOR Publishing House), Muzeul Țăranului Român (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant)

URL: <http://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/archive/martor-15-2010/>

Martor (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Review) is a peer-reviewed academic journal established in 1996, with a focus on cultural and visual anthropology, ethnology, museum studies and the dialogue among these disciplines. *Martor* review is published by the Museum of the Romanian Peasant. Its aim is to provide, as widely as possible, a rich content at the highest academic and editorial standards for scientific, educational and (in)formational goals. Any use aside from these purposes and without mentioning the source of the article(s) is prohibited and will be considered an infringement of copyright.

Martor (Revue d'Anthropologie du Musée du Paysan Roumain) est un journal académique en système *peer-review* fondé en 1996, qui se concentre sur l'anthropologie visuelle et culturelle, l'ethnologie, la muséologie et sur le dialogue entre ces disciplines. La revue *Martor* est publiée par le Musée du Paysan Roumain. Son aspiration est de généraliser l'accès vers un riche contenu au plus haut niveau du point de vue académique et éditorial pour des objectifs scientifiques, éducatifs et informationnels. Toute utilisation au-delà de ces buts et sans mentionner la source des articles est interdite et sera considérée une violation des droits de l'auteur.

Two Atypical Museums in Rome

Rodica Marinescu

It was in 2007 when I finally decided to visit the Pasta Museum. I had avoided the place in all my previous visits to Rome – some of them quite long; sometimes I did it on purpose because it seemed to me that the entry fee was too large compared to what I thought such a museum could display, sometimes simply because I had

to dedicate my time to other priorities. However, meeting a friend in Rome, who was more knowledgeable and more familiar with museums than me, enabled me to visit at least two very interesting museums that very year, which otherwise I would have missed all the time, but for her firm and welcoming suggestion. The two museums I visited are the Pasta Museum and the Canova-Tadolini Workshop-Museum.

Though it is situated a few steps away from Fontana di Trevi and very close to Quirinal, Piazza Scanderbeg is a peaceful and less frequented place. Only seldom do tourists come here, searching for Vicolo Scanderbeg, the best shortcut to the Quirinal Hill. Yet once here, some, who are still in two minds about climbing up, stop at the two or three restaurants with small, clean, exquisite, and enticing terraces that surround the piazza; some others, like me during that day, look for the square in order to enter the Pasta Museum.

The building that shelters the museum is the Scanderbeg Palace, a four-storey impressive house with high windows and different frames on every floor. A double cornice, simply decorated, extends the steep roof. It is a 16th-century building, completely refurbished in 1864. In a medallion above the entrance lies the portrait (a very expressive profile) of Prince Giorgio Castriota (1403-1468), the Albanian hero nicknamed Scanderbeg. I did not know anything about it at





the time but after I came back, I came across some articles about the dissatisfaction of the Albanians in Italy and everywhere over the functional role of the Scanderbeg Palace. That is, they said, how was it possible for such a sacred place, which ought to remind the whole world of Albania's hero, a defender of Christianity, to be transformed into a pasta museum? I think that the Albanians are right in voicing their grievance, but I also think that the truth lies somewhere in the middle. The only, more delicate problem relates to the existence of documents, objects or anything else meant to remind of the prince, impossible to be displayed in the palace that bears his name. Anyway, it is very difficult to give your opinion under these circumstances. However, I think that those who visit the place should know how to give both identities of the building what they deserve in order for neither to be disadvantaged. Thus, the Scanderbeg Palace should earn its well-deserved place among the palaces of Rome, along with the history and life of the reputed figures that lived here. As for the Pasta Museum founded here in 1993, it is precisely due to its uniqueness across the world that it deserves to exist and to be visited. When I came in 2010 to visit the Pasta Museum, I regretfully found out that it has already been closed for some time.

Though I did not count the halls, any flyer mentions eleven. In any case, each room you visit successively reveals ever more exciting and captivating exhibits.

“Sala del grano” (the wheat hall), like all the other halls on the ground floor, has a primarily didactic purpose. I notice, once again, that the Italians stress the importance of conveying an instructive message, particularly to children. In the middle of the first hall a (manually-handled) mill stone called “gramola” catches the eye, reminding us of the time when the slow and difficult mixture of water and flour used to be achieved through such rudimentary means. Framed in glass in the upper part, explanatory texts are vertically displayed everywhere around on simple shelves made of ochre-yellow (like wheat!) veneered wood while these descriptions are horizontally exemplified with natural products, particularly wheat seeds and ears in different development stages: “grano duro”, that is, glassy, awned wheat and “grano tenero”, tender and somewhat soft. The conclusion I drew after having visited the first halls is: “se la farina è argento, la semola è oro” (if ordinary flour is like silver, the flour used for making pasta – the one rich in gluten – is like gold). The presentation of an incredibly wide array of pasta is what comes next: from pasta “lunga” to pasta “corta”, “pastina”, “farfelle”, “funghetti”, “togliolini”, “capelli d’angelo”, accompanied with plenty of texts and explanations. The manner of representing the pasta processing by starting from the two stages of wheat development seemed to me extremely exciting. Bread and flour-based products are made of tender wheat. Pasta, the Italians’ traditional food, is made of glassy wheat, “grano duro”. They also go through a whole manufacturing process, from preparation, nutritional procedures, consumption, packaging, distribution to recommended energy values.

I climb down to the semi-basement. In sala “Napoli” (Naples) Hall is full of photos of movie stars and celebs (Ingrid Bergman, Sophia Loren, Totò) eating pasta. Here lies “Vetrina Folchi”, containing objects such as cases, cups, plates,



scarves, all with “scène napoletane e lombarde di mangio-maccheroni”. Furthermore, this hall reveals an interesting and not-at-all-neglected relationship between pasta industry and cinema. Another hall shelters testimonies of the relationship between pasta and the world of theatre, of the arts and of their representation over time on stamps and various postal cards. I can also see many children’s drawings whose theme is the fascinating and “tasty” world of pasta.

“Ieri e oggi” (then and now) is the gallery of a real industrial archaeology, containing the first equipment used in the pasta manufacturing process. Some pieces can still operate perfectly, just like the fast state-of-the-art machines. Once again, I saw old photos and lithographies of the first “lavorazioni artigianali e industriali”. I learned that it was only in 1930 when pasta industry adopted the continuous line, unimaginable until that time because of many discontinuities and idle periods of time.

In another wing of the building, on the ground floor, I came across a lot of machines, es-

pecially old and new presses, spaghetti cutting devices used for obtaining favourite shapes and sections, ladles and strainers. I also learned that, when it comes to pasta, the most famous and sought-for are pasta di Palermo, di Genova, di Napoli and di Bologna. I didn’t know that.

Many documents, the oldest of which dates from 1154 (in “Santi Correnti” Hall), show that some Italian cities have known how to produce and preserve pasta ever since the 12th century. The document also mentions the name of a town, Trabìa, (in Sicily), where pasta were traded and exported to Muslim and Christian countries alike. I could also see a letter signed by Gioacchino Rossini, dating from 1859 and sent from Paris, in which the composer showed his dissatisfaction with “la manchanza di maccheroni” (the lack of pasta) from the French menu.

I found out so many interesting things! Close to the exit, a few large boards provide details about the beneficial nutritional role of pasta, about their fast preparation, about the vitamins they contain (especially potassium and phospho-



rus), about their anti-depressive qualities, about their (amazing!) capacity to improve our concentration, about the fact that they can easily be digested, etc. (they do not mention anything about putting on weight). Towards the end of the visit (and by way of conclusion) I also found out that the pasta was discovered by Italians themselves, not by anybody else. This means that they were the first discoverers! They are proud of it and say it bluntly. And right they are!

The Pasta Museum is a history museum of this first type of food, “il primo piatto”, which is, as I said, indisputably Italian. Moreover, it also demonstrates how a balanced and complete nutritional style was made possible via simple means and personal resources. In fact, the Pasta Museum conveys this model all over the world, showing how nourishment – the first need of humanity – can be answered simply and effectively. “Se la semola è oro, la Pasta è gioia di vivere!” (if flour is like gold, pasta means the joy of living) is the poster concluding the itinerary of the permanent exhibition. And, since then, I have

experienced a more plentiful joy anytime I eat pasta.

I used to walk down Via del Babuino when I wanted to go from Piazza del Popolo to Piazza di Spagna. I was looking for it because it is much more peaceful compared, for instance, to Via del Corso, which is a few hundred metres away. It seems that in such a calm atmosphere you notice more easily what happens along the pebbled street with narrow pavements, on which old, beautiful houses full of memories are stuck with each other; you can more easily memorise the sites you want to see again the next day...

Halfway through the street lies the Canova-Tadolini workshop-museum. When I found myself in front of this house, totally different from all the others in the area, I was struck from the very beginning by the uncommonly big windows (they covered almost two levels of the façade). One could see through them a lot of plaster statuettes crammed on all kinds of etagères whereas in front of the permanently open door lied foregrounded an immense, white equestrian statue – somehow protruding from the stairs due to its huge size. On the pavement, on the right-hand side of the entrance there are a few small tables, most of the time busy, and a fountain on the left, above which you can see the statue of the well-known satyr, “il Babuino”, who lends his name to the street (throughout the 16th century the street changed its name three times, from Via Clementina into Via Paolina and, starting 1571, into Via del Babuino).

The museum has been opened to the public ever since 2000, but I did not visit it until 2007. I still cannot understand why, especially because it happened to me to pass by even two times a day. Besides, as I said, it caught your eye before getting in, I mean you could see from the outside that something special awaited you inside, if you dared get in. Still, contrary to my nature, I felt slightly embarrassed. I perceived it as a private workshop and also a very exquisite and highly exclusivist café where prices might be exceedingly high. However, things changed the moment Ioana came to Rome. She talked to me



about this workshop-museum with great enthusiasm, though she had not seen it before, either. But, unlike me, she had read about it and knew it was accessible to anyone, precisely because it contained something absolutely special in comparison with the rest of the Italian museums. Thus, we decided to visit it on the last day she spent in Rome. It was Sunday and we did not expect it to be open. Ioana left extremely regretful after a few hours but I continued to come here almost daily during my stay in Rome (one more month and a half).

I had already developed a habit of sitting every morning on one of the comfortable chairs (they were in fact genuine arm-chairs) of the bar situated on the ground floor. Here tourists and locals alike come to drink their coffee in haste – that very strong, flavoured and unrivalled finger-thick shot of espresso. People speak loud (I don't dislike that!) and comment enthusiastically on the latest developments whereas the two barmen (of the two, Bruno caught my attention), active

participants in the discussion, were concurrently preparing the coffees, hardly paying heed to what they were doing. Everything was unfolding in a noisy background caused by the cups and saucers that knocked against each other, though they never broke. In the first week I found it natural to order something, be it coffee or a cornetto or panini, and a glass of milk. Becoming a “well-known” figure very soon, I only came in to read the papers (though I had never refused a coffee) or, more often than not, I persisted in reading Sthendal's book, *Passaggiato romane*, available for anyone. I did not dare do it, but I think I could have looked through other books displayed there, such as *La sculpture florentine*, *Michelangelo pittore*, *L' arte bizantina*, *L' arte moderna* and, the one I was craving for, *Da Leonardo a Canova* by G. C. Argan. Afterwards, I asked for the permission (just for the sake of being polite, for there are no restrictions whatsoever) to walk about the house – both a workshop-museum and a café and a restaurant – in

order to take notes and photos. I found out interesting particulars about the history of this museum both from a flyer I took at the entrance and, particularly, from the *Connaissance des Arts* magazine, the February 2005 issue. I lent the magazine for an hour and made photocopies. And now it has proven to be useful to me.

Turned into a restaurant and a chic cafe, Tadolini studio preserved for four generations its collection of plasters (1818-1967), the work of a real dynasty of sculptors. We speak about almost two centuries of Italian sculpture. Hundreds of models of plaster used for finite works of marble or bronze exhibited in all the great museums of the world are preserved here. In 1818, sculptor Antonio Canova (1757-1822) signed a document whereby the management of the workshop (where Canova himself worked) was to be taken over by his favourite apprentice, Adamo Tadolini, in order to be used for sculpting. The place is unique, especially because it manages to preserve the colour of those times patina untouched. Of course, the collection does not abide by a strict cataloguing criterion (it would be impossible in such a non-homogenous space), but reunites in a very original manner the works of Canova and of the four Tadollini generations: Adamo, Scipione, Giulio and Enrico.

The ground floor shelters four rooms, the bar and another three rooms, two of them on both sides of the entrance and the other two in depth, on the axis of the entrance. Photos and a few small tables add to the sculptures in the two rooms on one side where you can read and drink your coffee. The other two at the back are suffused with plaster characters, so there is only one narrow corridor through which you enter a fascinating world: a world of princes and kings, of popes, saints, presidents, ancient gods. It seems that all of them are real. Even the busts which, in other exhibition spaces seem indifferent and immobile, give the impression that they are animated, that they know how to look carefully at the dynamic characters beside them. For instance, the impressive statue of Marshal De Sucre (1926), mounted on his huge white horse,

lies in the vicinity – that is found (not looked for!) – of Cardinal Gaspari’s bust (1943) – both are the works of Enrico Tadolini. It seems that both are ready for a secret conversation. Everything takes place under the all-knowing eyes of the “Egyptian woman”, a 1880 bronze statue designed by Giulio Tadolini. Passing by the marble bust of King Umberto I (1901), designed by the same Giulio Tadolini, you squeeze through a narrow and gloomy corridor lit only by the workshop. It is the workshop where Canova and the four Tadolinis worked. Everything stands still: the instruments used along the time, the tens of models left unfinished, even the brick tub degraded by time and surrounded by wood beams. I move further on. The white plasters are projected one by one or in unequal yet compact groups on the walls painted in a thick layer of cheery colour. Somehow peculiar, the left wall reveals the preparatory plaster model of Paolina Borghese’s bust used by Canova to design the famous marble statue exhibited at Galeria Borghese. Very close to it, *the Cimbal Dancer*, Adamo Tadolini’s perfect replica of Canova’s masterpiece, waves her body in a similar way. A motley, mixed, numerous and slightly mysterious and, particularly, vivid world fills the walls of the ground-floor rooms, which, despite being semi-obscure, are very welcoming. A few mornings on end I listened to live chamber music in this pleasant atmosphere. Concerts are not performed here but I learned that chamber orchestras come here on a regular basis for rehearsals.

A narrow wooden staircase, flanked at the bottom by the *Three Graces*, Adamo’s replica, and by Giulio Tadollini’s *Law* ensures the access to the first floor. There is a different world upstairs, though it is complementary to the one already described. It seems that this world is less crammed and that the exhibits are smaller in size. There are fewer plasters, especially busts, arranged one after another in the upper part of the furniture like some immaculate friezes. Instead, fragments of white hands and small and big plaster legs hang on the walls here and there. Everything seems to be in disorder at first sight



and randomly arranged. Yet, when you come here again, you realize that every detail is in its right place. You realize that the discourse might not be the same if you change something. That is, the whole does have a substance and conveys something only by abiding to the strict order of objects and details. Once a piece is moved, it alters the perception of the whole. It does not mean stiffness or inflexibility, it means the power of the fragment, which is not something insignificant. Keeping proportions, it is, in fact, on a micro scale, the lesson of the entire Rome.

If the ground-floor rooms are high (otherwise, how could *The Law* and *Marshal De Sucre* have found room here, to provide only two of the “biggest” examples?), upstairs the ceiling is quite low, made here and there of brown thick beams. Wooden wall cladding alternate with walls painted either in the same thick layer of red found downstairs or in ochre-yellow, the same as the furniture upholstery, the crockery and the golden, shining cutlery. There are more yet smaller rooms, booths, bookshelves, paintings, yellow heavy chandeliers, old photos, art al-

bums – from the series *I Maestri del Colore* – arranged on every table. One can book a table for lunch and dinner, but there are also plain tables where you can drink tea or coffee. Here you are sheltered from the ground-floor hustle and bustle.

The last room on the first floor opens right above the bar. Once you settle here, you can see everything from above - what happens, who gets in, who gets out and also the street... It is the only place upstairs where natural light invades the room through those uncommonly big windows. And if you stretch your hand above the wooden parapet, you are about to touch *Aeneas and Venus* and, beyond them, *the triumphant Perseus* (two more replicas of Adamo, for he was the only one to be granted permission from his master).

And, while sitting upstairs, you imagine that you are a link, though a feebler one, in the never-ending chain of the reception and transmission of art meant to tame and elevate your spirit.