

Analyses and Initiatives for the Conservation and Restoration of the Cultural Heritage of the Monumental Cemetery at Staglieno

Staglieno offers an extraordinary outdoor sculpture gallery and also a realistic representation of the customs and behaviours of the 19th century. The truly significant aspect which ranks Staglieno amongst the most important western cemeteries is that it contains a vast and detailed bourgeois image of death. It bears witness to the changing conception of death throughout the 19th century, reflecting the transformation of a society that, at the beginning, had a great confidence in its own growth by means of the international trades and scientific and technological progress. The 19th century middle class entrusted to its own post-mortem testimony the task of representing not only its social success, but also its own idea of reality and its own values: work, progress, family, charity and religion.

The pride of those bourgeois for their economic and social affirmation can be seen not only in the concrete representation of symbols and professional images, but also in the commemorative epitaphs which tell us about their professional success. Even the choice of lasting materials for the funeral monuments, above all marble and bronze, was determined by the same pride. Pictorial intervention is quite rare but, in the few cases in which it was required, famous painters were called upon to complete the decoration of the tombs.¹

In the 1880's, while bourgeois realism continued to provide funerary imagery in which the theme of the passage from life to death was interwoven with daily reality, some symptoms of disquiet and doubt begin to blossom. The narrative descriptivism of Realism gradually ceases, letting in ambiguous and indeterminate images in which the positivist certainties seem overwhelmed by an increasingly accentuated intimism and subjectivity. The breaking point in this process is represented by the famous Oneto monument by Giulio Monteverde, in which the angel has lost its Christian connotation of a guide to paradise to become the ambiguous and sensual guardian of the mystery of death. In fact some characterised images of the love-death dualism will

Fig. 1 Bistolfi, Orsini tomb



Fig. 2 De Albertis, Ammirato tomb

find a wide diffusion at the end of the century in the symbolist climate of Art Nouveau and Modernism followed by a loss of interest in funeral monuments.²

The rite of remembrance seems to be even more set in a private dimension: it endangers, as we can see at Staglieno, the preservation of an artistic and environmental patrimony which entailed, and still entails for its own survival, the awareness of its being a part of a collective memory of the greatest importance. Therefore the problem arises of how to preserve an articulated monumental structure such as Staglieno, now that those who ordered the tombs and previously guaranteed their maintenance have died without heirs. Public interventions consequently become essential in order to guarantee the preservation of such a complex patrimony which, at the same time, is becoming more and more similar to a museum; therefore it is necessary to overcome the many contradictions occurring in every project by means of new and more adequate legal instruments. Public institutions have recently shown more and more interest in the cultural patrimony of our cemetery and its preservation.

The preservation of an articulated monumental structure such as that of Staglieno (about 330,000 square metres) is a very complex problem.³ Many different aspects of the problems involved in the restoration and preservation of monuments in the open air are concentrated inside the cemetery: they are connected with the techniques and materials (often marble and bronze) that were employed and, above all, with the various typologies of deterioration caused by the action of manifold atmospheric agents in a now greatly urbanised context, such as that of Staglieno. At the same time, for its own structural character the cemetery of Staglieno requires strategies aimed at architectonic and environmental preservation. They are even more complex because they involve the numerous private chapels and the single monuments as well as the architectonic structure of the cemetery with its arcades and galleries. These are also "containers" of monuments

and, for this reason, their deterioration automatically involves the preservation of the same monuments. In awareness of this, a restoration of the roofing of the Semicircular Arcade and the Galleries was carried out because water infiltration, fall of plaster, etc. had compromised both the preservation of some of the monuments and the integrity of the architecture itself.

Another peculiarity of Staglieno gives rise to the even more complex problem of the close interrelation between architecture and natural environmental context. In fact, the fragile balance that the integration implies would require a constant monitoring of the environmental situation and the intense growth of the vegetation. It is particularly necessary to discriminate elements that are intrinsically part of the natural environment from the weeds. These latter continuously produce serious damage to the architectonic and monumental structures. The help of volunteer associations is fundamental for reducing the problem.

In order to preserve the art treasure of the cemetery at Staglieno the Town Council in Genoa, in cooperation with other public institutions, planned a great number of restoration measures. In 2001 and then between 2003 and 2004 the "Soprintendenza per i Beni Architettonici e il Paesaggio della Liguria" (local offices for the preservation of the artistic heritage in the Ligurian region) undertook the restoration of the Chapel of the Suffrages (called the Pantheon), including cleaning of the principal altar,

cleaning and retouching of the plaster and restoration of some of the columns made of black marble inside the church. The Town Council executed the restoration of the two bell towers on the sides at the back, of the two cavaedia between the church and the bell towers and of the great staircases. The church had been damaged inside by extensive infiltration of water which had ruined some of the plaster, so the "Soprintendenza" carried out restoration of both the décor and the architectural elements of the holy building. Inside the church all the niches, decorated with plaster and containing altars or statues, were restored. The plaster outside the Pantheon was restored with a pastel green colour which was found in several traces under the most recent layer of yellow colour.⁴

In the last years some grants-in-aid from the programme "Genova Capitale Europea della Cultura 2004" permitted realisation of the restoration of the Frontal Galleries, Cross-Galleries and Half Circular Galleries. Furthermore, the contributions of sponsors allowed the restoration of some tombs of great value such as that of Giuseppe Mazzini, one of the leading figures of the Italian Risorgimento.

The "public" intervention is sustained more and more frequently by the action of meritorious private associations such as "Per Staglieno", which somehow make up for public action. Moreover the computerized cataloguing of all artistic, sculptural

Fig. 3 Lavezzari, Repetto tomb





Fig. 4 De Albertis, Caprile tomb



Fig. 5 Rivalta, Bianchi tomb

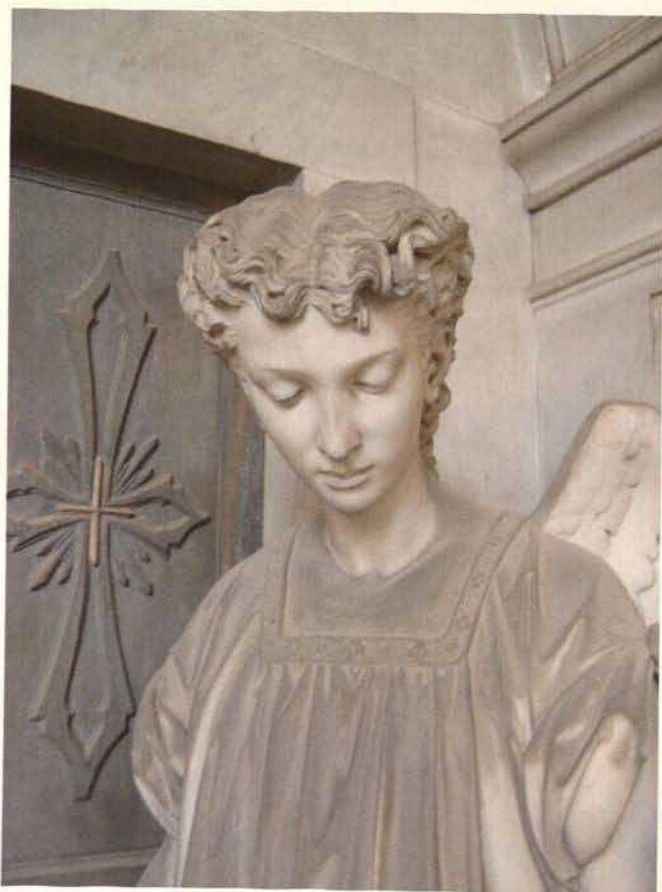


Fig. 6 Rivalta, Pallavicino tomb

Fig. 7 Scanzi, Piaggio tomb



Fig. 8 Toso, Ribaldo tomb



Fig. 9 Toso, Jonassohn tomb





Fig. 10 Villa, Montanaro tomb

and architectural items at Staglieno has been carried out. People can consult the work through a data processing station situated at the Archivio Storico in the Town Council of Genoa. In this context other projects for the safeguarding of the structure started with the installation of a monitoring system in 2001. The system consists of a closed circuit monitoring system inside the cemetery with an emergency call pillar which can be used by visitors who want information about sepulchres or monumental works. In order to preserve the cemetery's historical monumental heritage a "Centro di Restauro Lapideo" was established with the purpose of hosting a school of restoration for the sculptural works inside the cemetery, where specialist restorers of sculpture can be trained.

The Town Council of Genoa and the local university are trying to start a degree course in Preservation of the Artistic Heritage with the aim to provide professional training to future restorers in order to ensure the preservation of the artistic and sculptural heritage of our cemetery.

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