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Exhibiting Renaissance Art at the Poldi Pezzoli Museum in Milan

From the Permanent Collection to Temporary Exhibitions



Fig. 1: Poldi Pezzoli Museum, the Golden Room at the beginning of the 20th century.

Gian Giacomo Poldi Pezzoli (1822-1879), a Milanese aristocrat, is known above all as an art collector. He died in 1879 having written in his will that his apartment and all the works of art housed in it had to become an artistic foundation open to the public.[1] The Foundation had to be named after his family, to remain private and to be managed with the same rules of the Pinacoteca di Brera, the National Museum in Milan.

Moreover, the director had to be the same of the Pinacoteca di Brera. Poldi Pezzoli also provided that his heirs would recognize an annuity of eight thousand liras to the museum, and that the latter should be used to purchase artworks and to take care of the museum's conservation and management activities. The Museum opened to the public in April 1881.



Fig. 2: Poldi Pezzoli Museum, the Black Room at the beginning of the 20th century.

Poldi Pezzoli had started his career as a collector in 1848, by purchasing arms, armours, and jewels. He started the painting collection a few years later, buying, first of all, an oil on canvas sketch by Giambattista Tiepolo. In addition to this, he bought Roman and Greek ceramics, Venetian glass, porcelain, textiles, carpets and clocks. While collecting every typology of art, he developed his personal museum project, the aim of which was to achieve a summa of the history of every form of art, from the archaeological age up to the 19th century, from “major” arts to decorative arts, opening his house to Italian and international collectors and to art students.

On one side Poldi Pezzoli was an “encyclopedic” man, but on the other one, he was a very high profile collector purchasing the best of what was available on the market, in every sector. Although we know very little about his personal life, he was certainly considered a

connoisseur and, besides being an art expert himself, he also had important counselors, such as Giovanni Morelli and Giuseppe Bertini. What we know for sure is that he left a collection of some three thousand objects, most of which are considered masterpieces today. While carrying out his project, Poldi Pezzoli progressively focused on Renaissance art, which became the core of his collection.

Besides buying works of art, Poldi had engaged himself in the ambitious project of decorating the apartment where he intended to exhibit his collection. After choosing a flat on the main floor of his family’s palace in downtown Milan, he called architects, painters and artisans who transformed the spaces into historical rooms.

He chose the “neo-Gothic” style for the Armory, a space designed by Filippo Peroni (1809-1878) who worked as designer of the Sca-

la Theatre, and the neo-Baroque style for the so-called Yellow Room hosting the porcelain collection, which counted pieces from the major Italian and European manufactories. The Cabinet, called “byzantine” or “Dante’s”, was inspired by the medieval style, while the decorations of three other rooms looked to Renaissance art: the Golden Room (fig. 1), the Black Room (fig. 2) and the Bedroom.

Poldi Pezzoli’s exhibiting criterion was based on the contextualization of the collections. He was influenced by previous examples of historic arrangements, such as Horace Walpole’s (1717-1797) Strawberry Hill in Twickenham and Alexandre Du Sommerard’s (1779-1842) Hotel de Cluny in Paris. The Poldi Pezzoli Museum became a model for subsequent collectors: the Bagatti Valsecchi brothers in Milan, Fredrick Stibbert and Stefano Bardini in Florence, Isabelle Stewart Gardner in Boston, the Frick in New York.

The first changes to the display of Poldi Pezzoli’s collection were introduced by the first directors of the Museum, and mainly by architect Camillo Boito, from 1898 to 1914. In 1900 he re-organized the painting collection in a chronological and geographical order; furthermore, following the idea that museums should be places for education, he introduced descriptive labels, in addition to the visitors’ guide, published for the first time in 1881.

After that, the most important change in the display of the collections and in the history of the museum took place after the Second World War. In August 1943 an aerial bombardment of the British troops had destroyed the Poldi Pezzoli palace and its historical rooms, with the exception of the staircase and the studio, both of which still survive. All the artworks had been previously evacuated and were brought back to the museum after its reconstruction in 1951. The post-war architect Ferdinando Reggiori (1898-1976) avoided reproducing the original decoration; instead of it, a very sober style was chosen. However, a few exceptions were made: the Yellow Room, then called

the “Stucco Room”, was decorated imitating the original stuccos; moreover, in the Black Room and the Bedroom, the antique decorations were evoked by painting the walls with dark colors.

Since then, the private aristocratic apartment started to look more and more like a museum. The various directors that followed tried to keep up to date the display of the collections according to the most recent museological and museographical theories and yet without ever completely renewing it.

The first temporary exhibition was organized at the Poldi Pezzoli Museum in 1922 and regarded ancient masterpieces returned from Austria-Hungary. Several exhibitions on various subjects followed in the next years, but the first show on Renaissance art was held only in 1982-83. It was entitled *Zenale and Leonardo* and it focused on Lombard art from 1480 to the early 16th century.[2] The idea of the exhibition came up during the restoration of the two Poldi Pezzoli’s panels representing St. Stephen and St. Anthony from Padua. The show had to revolve around the reconstruction of the Triptych of the *Immaculate Conception* (Cantù) by Bernardo Zenale, to which the panels originally belonged. Therefore the Museum borrowed the central panel from the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, and the other two external panels from the Bagatti Valsecchi Museum in Milan. More than fifty paintings by Zenale and other followers of Leonardo were shown in the exhibition in order to better contextualize the triptych within the Lombard artistic milieu. The exhibition was curated by Mauro Natale and Alessandra Mottola, while its display was designed by the Japanese architect Takashi Shimura, who placed all the paintings in large glass and metal showcases (fig. 3).



Fig. 3: Bernardo Zenale (c. 1460–1526), *Triptych of the Immaculate Conception of Cantù*, 1502, tempera and oil on wood, Poldi Pezzoli Museum, Milan, the Getty Museum Los Angeles and the Bagatti Valsecchi Museum, Milan.

This show introduced in the Poldi Pezzoli Museum a new way of conceiving exhibitions, which had to focus on the museum's collections, providing new in-depth study from an historical, scientific and technical point of view. This became a guideline for the museum's exhibit policy, which is still followed today. Temporary exhibitions are installed in the ground's floor main hall, in order to separate them from the permanent collections which are hosted on the first floor.

In 1991, the Poldi Pezzoli organized the exhibition entitled *The Muses and the Prince. Renaissance Court Art*.^[3] Once again the starting point was the restoration of a painting, that is *Terpsichore* by Angelo Macagnino and Cosmè Tura (1460 ca.). Such restoration gave origin to a seven-year research project which saw specialists working on the same works of art from different perspectives, and meeting in a three-day seminar the year before the exhibition's opening.

The result was an extraordinary show, where the "Studiolo", that is the cabinet in which Renaissance princes used to keep their collections, emerged as the place where humanistic culture was developed at its best. This very same culture gave birth to the iconographic program of Lionello and Borso d'Este's cabinet in the Belfiore Palace in Ferrara, namely the cabinet to which the paintings portraying *Terpsichore* and the other muses belonged. In the exhibition, this was suggested by the floor design (fig. 4).

In addition to the paintings, the exhibition showed applied arts, metal works and illuminated manuscripts, in order to emphasize the connections existing between works on different media, often produced, or simply designed, in the same workshops. In the setting by Takashi Shimura, great attention was given to the conservative aspects: temperature, relative humidity, light. In fact a new AC system was installed



Fig. 4: *The Muses and the Prince* exhibition display.

before the exhibition, donated by the municipal company AEM, which acted as the exhibition's main sponsor. The curators were again Mauro Natale and Alessandra Mottola, supported by a scientific committee.

In 1996, following the restoration of the panel depicting St. Nicolas of Tolentino by Piero della Francesca, the Museum organized an exhibition concerning the re-construction of the Augustinian polyptych to which the panel used to belong.[4] The *St. Nicolas of Tolentino* panel was painted by Piero della Francesca in the 1460s for the Church of St. Augustine in Borgo San Sepolcro, where it was dismembered a few decades later. The Poldi Pezzoli exhibition intended to show the seven surviving panels and to suggest their position in the original polyptych, getting loans from Lisbon, London, New York and Washington. In the end, the museum managed to borrow just one painting coming from Lisbon's Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga; nevertheless, the exhibition was a great success because the curators, Alessandra Mottola and

Andrea Di Lorenzo, presented it as an autonomous research project.

The display, designed by Ettore Sottsass, emphasized the scientific character of the exhibition. The architect produced a life-size graphic reconstruction of the polyptych in the first room and placed next to it the section illustrating the results of the scientific examinations which had been carried out on the works: furthermore, he organized a few multimedia consultation points (fig. 5a, b). The two paintings belonging to Piero's polyptych were exhibited in a different room, a solution which was adopted in order to separate the original works from the rest.

After this exhibition, the Poldi Pezzoli came back to Renaissance art in 2009 with a show on the Milanese luxury products under the Visconti and Sforza Duchy.[5] I believe that this exhibition had a great success for three main reasons: first, the works of art chosen stood out for their extraordinary quality and beauty; second, the objects brought together told the



Fig. 5 a,b: *The Augustinian Polyptych by Piero della Francesca* exhibition display.

story of the Milanese court under different points of view; finally, the display - and especially the lights - gave to the works of art the importance they deserved. This positive result was due to the skill of the curator, Chiara Buss, and of the architects: Luca Rolla for the setting and Cinzia Ferrara with Pietro Paladino for the lights. These experts managed to give life to the silk, the gold and the precious pigments used to dye the yarns (fig. 6).

Displayed on a dark background, the artworks received light from below by means of optical fibers. The light was reflected to the entire object thanks to a mirror placed on the top of the showcase. This solution brilliantly solved both the aesthetic and conservation problems, with lighting which did not exceed 25 lux.

Finally it is worth analyzing the most recent exhibition on Renaissance art dedicated to the Pollaiuolo brothers, curated by Andrea Di Lorenzo and Aldo Galli.^[6] Contrary to the previous shows, which concerned recently restored artworks, this exhibition was organized in order to share with the public the results of the new studies carried out on the Pollaiuolo's oeuvre (fig. 7).

By showing about thirty objects, including drawings, paintings, sculptures in bronze, wood, cork and terracotta, goldsmith products, and embroideries, the exhibition introduced visitors into the workshops of the two Florentine brothers, Antonio and Piero, showing the versatility of each one and the differences between their two artistic personalities. The curators have proposed a number of new attributions: in particular, they have attributed the famous four



Fig. 6: *Silk, gold, crimson. Secrets and Technology at the Visconti and Sforza Courts* exhibition display.

female portraits (from Milan, Florence, Berlin and New York) to Piero.

The neutral light-gray color of the exhibit installation, designed by Luca Rolla and Alberto Bertini, certainly enhanced the beauty of all the artworks, which seemed suspended in a silvery atmosphere. As for the four female portraits, they were presented in the last section of the exhibition, which was hosted in the Armory: this is the first time that such a space was used for a temporary exhibition after having been completely refurbished by contemporary sculptor Arnaldo Pomodoro in 2000.

The excursus on temporary exhibitions at the Poldi Pezzoli presented so far confirms the policy adopted by the museum's most recent directors, in particular Alessandra Mottola and Annalisa Zanni, who decided to concentrate on and bring attention to the permanent collections.

Despite its lively attention to new languages and media, as well as to the constantly changing needs of the public, the museum has never chosen a hi-tech display. This choice lies not only in the need to maintain consistency with the atmosphere and the style of this 19th century *casa-museo*, but also in the attempt of avoiding the risk to distract the public. By keeping a neutral display in its rooms, the Poldi Pezzoli Museum visitors should be facilitated in their pure contemplation of the artworks.



Fig. 7 a,b: Antonio and Piero del Pollaiuolo: silver and gold, painting and bronze... exhibition display.

Notes

1. Alessandra Mottola Molfino, *Storia del museo*, in: *Museo Poldi Pezzoli. Dipinti. Musei e Gallerie di Milano*, Milan 1982, pp. 15-61; Lavinia Galli, *La parabola di un collezionista*, in: *Gian Giacomo Poldi Pezzoli. L'uomo e il collezionista del Risorgimento*, ed. by Lavinia Galli Michero and Fernando Mazzocca, Turin 2011, pp. 51-65.
2. *Zenale e Leonardo. Tradizione e rinnovamento della pittura lombarda*, ed. by Alessandra Mottola Molfino, Giovanni Romano and Annalisa Zanni, Milan 1982. The exhibition took place from December 4th 1982 to February 28th 1983.
3. *Le Muse e il principe. Arte di corte nel rinascimento padano*, 2 volumi, ed. by Andrea Di Lorenzo et al., Modena 1991. The exhibition took place from September 20th to December 1st 1991.
4. *Il Polittico agostiniano di Piero della Francesca*, ed. by Andrea Di Lorenzo, Turin 1996.
5. *Seta, oro e cremisi. Segreti e tecnologia alla corte dei Visconti e degli Sforza*, ed. by Chiara Buss, Mi-

lan 2009. The exhibition took place from October 29th 2009 to February 18st 2010.

6. *Le Dame dei Pollaiuolo. Una bottega fiorentina del Rinascimento*, ed. by Andrea Di Lorenzo and Lavinia Galli, Milan 2014. The exhibition took place from November 7th 2014 to February 16th 2015.

Figures

Fig. 1: Poldi Pezzoli Museum, the Golden Room at the beginning of the 20th century.

Fig. 2: Poldi Pezzoli Museum, the Black Room at the beginning of the 20th century.

Fig. 3: Bernardo Zenale (c. 1460–1526), *Triptych of the Immaculate Conception* of Cantù, 1502, tempera and oil on wood, Poldi Pezzoli Museum, Milan, the Getty Museum Los Angeles and the Bagatti Valsecchi Museum, Milan.

Fig. 4: *The Muses and the Prince* exhibition display.

Fig. 5 a,b: *The Augustinian Polyptych* by Piero della Francesca exhibition display.

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Abstract

Gian Giacomo Poldi Pezzoli started his career as a collector in 1848. Aiming to achieve a summa of the history of every form of art. From the archaeological age up to the 19th century, he progressively focused on Renaissance.

His exhibiting criterion was based on the contextualization of the collections in historical rooms: the Gothic style for the Armory, the Baroque style for the porcelain collection, the medieval style for the cabinet and three rooms inspired to the Renaissance art. His house-museum opened to the public in 1881.

The most important change in the display of the collections took place after the second world war bombing. In the reconstruction a

very sober style was chosen and the various directors that followed, tried to keep it up to date according to the most recent museological and museographical theories, without ever completely renewing it.

The first temporary exhibition was organized in 1922 and the first show on Renaissance art was held in 1982-83. It was entitled *Zenale e Leonardo* and it focused on Lombard art from 1480 to the early 16th century. The idea of the exhibition came up during the restoration of the two Poldi Pezzoli's panels representing St. Stephen and St. Anthony from Padua. The show had to revolve around the reconstruction of the Triptych of the Immaculate Conception (Cantù) by Bernardo Zenale, to which the panels originally belonged. More than fifty paintings by Zenale and followers of Leonardo were shown in the exhibition, in order to better contextualize the triptych in the Lombard artistic milieu.

This show introduced in the Poldi Pezzoli Museum a new way of conceiving exhibitions, which had to focus and give value to the permanent collections through research campaigns, often showing a limited number of artworks. This became a guideline, which is still followed today.

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