

Toward a Catalogue of Confraternal Material in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana

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Overview: *This article introduces my current work-in-progress towards the identification, analysis and cataloguing of written and artistic sources belonging to the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan that focus on the increasingly important areas of confraternities, understood as spontaneously formed lay groups for devotion and mutual assistance, and lay charitable organizations, known in Italian as luoghi pii. I am interested in both the original material cultural objects (for example, paintings, sculptures, books, chalices, vestments, banners, flails, crosses, furniture and charity chits) and the original conceptual cultural objects (for example, lauds, music, processions and theatre pieces) that were commissioned, or purchased readymade and adapted, by Milanese confraternities and luoghi pii for use by the institutions' members themselves or for use in their efforts dedicated to the public outside their institutions. My interest extends to things produced by others and given for various reasons to the confraternities (such as official ducal recognition documents) only insofar as they might have influenced those things produced by the confraternities for their own internal or external use. My current work also includes compiling an analytical table of all known Milanese confraternities and luoghi pii, a project obviously destined to be eternally a "work-in-progress," but which I believe is fundamental for mentally mapping the context of in-depth studies. My contribution to the RSA 2007 Miami conference—published in *Confraternitas* that same year—presented the general confraternal situation in Milan to English-language readers and introduced my research in these areas.*

Highly visible scholarly attention in the English language for any topic regarding Milan, one of Italy's most important cities since its foundation in the sixth century B.C., is rather recent.¹ A principal impetus for this interest was Evelyn Welch's *Art and Authority in Renaissance Milan* of 1995. The decades-long study of confraternities and lay charitable organizations is no exception. In English language publications, particular attention has been paid to the situation in a few cities, principally Rome, Bologna, Venice and Florence. Milan received only passing mention in such pivotal publications as Christopher Black's 1989 *Italian Confraternities in the Sixteenth Century*, and Wisch and Cole Ahl's 2000 *Confraternities and the Visual Arts in Renaissance Italy. Ritual, Spectacle, Image*.

Modern publications in Italian treating confraternities in a panoramic manner, such as that of Monti in 1927, though fundamental, remain inadequate due to the then meagre nature of knowledge. In the last couple of decades, Italian studies of confraternities have produced important works that remain, in this still early stage, principally sectorial and geographically bound. Significant publications about Milanese institutions by such authors as Marina Gazzini and Danilo Zardin,

1 The article is based on my talk delivered during the RSA conference in Los Angeles, 19–21 March 2009.

to name only two of the most prolific authors, have contributed significantly to understanding their natures, goals, structures, practices and fates. The 2001 *Il Tesoro dei poveri* is a fundamental point-of-reference for studies of the material cultural legacy of confraternities and *luoghi pii* in Milan, but it addresses the current state of the holdings with little, or no, reference to the original role of the objects in the life of the various institutions.

On a panoramic scale, it may be affirmed that Milanese confraternities and *luoghi pii* tended to be organized along lines similar to their counterparts in other principal Italian cities: the earliest thirteenth-century communities were founded for devotional reasons, but already by the early fourteenth century emphasis existed on charity. They usually were governed by 6, 12, or 24 deputies elected annually and had no—or very limited—paid staff.² Ecclesiastical involvement, apart from spiritual guidance, was expressly forbidden. After limited confraternity expenses had been paid, remaining funds from dues were used up annually for the institutions' goals, administered in money, or in kind, usually at the door of the institutions, and hence principally destined for the inhabitants of the city neighbourhood in question, but sometimes they also were distributed city-wide. Women usually were relegated a very minor role. The Milan of Cardinal Charles Borromeo, canonized in 1610, was one of the matrices for Catholic reform that swept all of Italy and, by extension, the Catholic world. In this reform, a fundamental role was attributed to confraternities and *luoghi pii*. New confraternities dedicated to stimulating and channelling correct modes of devotion were favoured by Borromeo, including the schools dedicated to teaching Christian doctrine, according to the tenets of the Catholic Church. New *luoghi pii*—such as those attempting to prevent young girls from falling into prostitution, or recovering those already entrapped—grappled with the catastrophic poverty, illness, and dissolution of morals left in the wake of war. The farther one proceeds into the sixteenth century after the Council of Trent, the more one sees the development and spread of the types and organizational models promoted by Borromeo, greater variety in the types of institutions, greater standardization and centralization of bureaucracy, more clearly specified membership and duty restrictions, and the management of religious and social aspects more monopolized by patricians.

Prior to the re-organization of confraternities during the Hapsburg and Napoleonic periods, individualism and duplication of Milanese confraternity effort reigned. With the re-organization in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth centuries, the thirty-nine surviving Milanese institutions were compressed into five. It is worth noting that, scarce and succinct though they be, inventories of objects—which had been confiscated from closed churches, monasteries, confraternity chapels and oratories, and brought to Milan's then new Brera art gallery—are helpful for scholars studying such realities in the entire Lombardo-Veneto region. Pre- and post-Unification mutations in the management of public assistance, art collections

2 The reference to the twelve apostles and the twenty-four elders is evident.

and archives eventually resulted in today's *Istituzioni pubbliche di assistenza e beneficenza* (II.PP.A.B.), headquartered since 1853 in Palazzo Archinto. Directly bombed during WWII, the palazzo and the artistic and archival patrimony of Milanese confraternities and *luoghi pii* gathered therein suffered great losses; other documents survive in state and church archives.

The situation in Milan was an early, pivotal, and yet, in some ways, atypical expression of Italian lay piety, which enriched the lives of the faithful and coloured their relationships with each other, with the state, and with the church. The fractious, changeable and often heretical Milanese of the Middle Ages and Renaissance had various early spiritual alternatives, beginning with their strong self-identification in the fourth-century figure of Saint Ambrose and the ancient liturgy that still bears his name. Closer to the period of the appearance of the institutions in question in the mid-thirteenth century were well-known groups, both orthodox and heretical, that attracted great followings in Milan and Lombardy: the *Patarini*, the Cathars, the Valdensians³, the Umiliati, and devotional groups more closely tied with the new mendicant religious orders, such as the "Faith Society" founded in 1232 by the Dominican St. Peter Martyr at one of the city's most important churches, Sant'Eustorgio.⁴ Shortly before his unexpected death in 1402, Gian Galeazzo Visconti, the first duke of Milan, initiated very early attempts at centralization, but the reform died with him. The fact that an early real, or perceived, aspect of Milanese attention to charity and public assistance persists today is intriguing: charity outside the confraternity circles is seen as an expression of "Milanese-ness," as evidenced in the wording of some of the statutes that have come down to us. In fact, contrary to what scholars usually affirm for confraternities in other cities, Milanese lay charity groups were early, consciously, and greatly concerned with charity outside the institutions' circles.⁵

In the context of confraternal studies in Milan, why should one focus on the Ambrosiana Library? One of the richest libraries and artistic collections in Italy, it does not have a catalogue of its holdings focused on confraternity and *luogo pio* studies. The inclusion of printed, manuscript and incunabula material in the digital catalogue available online is still underway. Furthermore, this online system does not currently provide for a subject search on "confraternity" and "*luogo pio*," to cite only the most commonly adopted names for these two kinds of institutions. Though a search in the title field for such words as "confraternity" does provide results, it

3 Also known as "The Poor Ones of Lyon."

4 The male section of the Umiliati movement was disbanded soon after the 1569 attempt on the life of the reformer and archbishop of Milan, Cardinal Charles Borromeo. The female section survived until the Hapsburg and Napoleonic closures.

5 Nevertheless, the unconditional observation that Milanese confraternities, indeed the citizens' natures, were impregnated with benevolence to the poor also reveals a continuing Milanese self-perception as the "moral capital" of Italy, notwithstanding the late twentieth-century *mani pulite* scandal, a self-perception that might colour Milanese scholarship.

should be obvious that the results are not immediately reliable, nor complete: the term may be used for a variety of institutions. Furthermore, one of a myriad of alternative terms for confraternities may have been used; for example, “schola” is often used in the Milanese context to refer not just to a school, or even to an early guild, but also to a confraternity. In addition, the term may not even be present in the title, although the work was destined for, used by, or treated confraternities and *luoghi pii*, whether principally, or in conjunction with other arguments. Finally, “free” searches, though revealing some pertinent sources, tend to return an even greater barrage of unrelated material. Similar problems reign in the card catalogue.

The group of interconnected intellectual, spiritual, practical and cultural institutions founded in Milan under the name of the city’s patron saint, Ambrose, in the early seventeenth century by Cardinal Federico Borromeo, cousin of the reformer Charles, was the focus of other contributions at the 2009 RSA conference. Of interest within the context of this article is the 1811 incorporation of properties adjacent to Federico’s original structure. They included the *luogo pio* of S. Corona. Today, the Sala Luini, organized as part of the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, still offers the original 1521–22 *Coronation with Thorns* frescoed by Bernardino Luini for the *Luogo Pio della S. Corona*, which distributed medicines and medical care free-of-charge to the poor. In 1786, during the Hapsburg reforms, its activities were transferred to the central hospital. For our interests, one should note that all of Federico’s institutions were geared to favouring what can be summarized as “the three Ds”: devotion, didactics and *ex post facto* documentation.

Representative of Federico’s focus on devotion, documentation and didactics, as well as the presence of works in the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana that probably derived from confraternity commissions, is the *Crucifixion*, part of the collection since 1674.⁶ It is a seventeenth-century school copy of Guido Reni’s 1639 oil on canvas originally destined for the Oratory of the Santissimo Sacramento in Santo Stefano, in Reggio Emilia, though the original is now located in the Galleria Estense of Modena. Neither originality, nor the hand of the master, is of importance within the Ambrosiana’s original focus on facilitating and incrementing devotion, on teaching and on providing *ex post facto* documentation, particularly for the hotly contested aspects of Catholicism.

Representative of works in the incunabula and printed books collections of the Biblioteca Ambrosiana that are by, for, and about local, national and international confraternities and *luoghi pii* can be exemplified by the 1568 *Regola* by Besozzi; the 1940 *Documenti inediti o poco noti* by the Misericordia confraternity of Florence; and Roschini’s 1953 work, *I sodalizi mariani e Maria*. Additionally, sermons, writings, lauds, theatre pieces, and so forth, are available in the Ambrosiana, and perhaps eventually may be traced to confraternity use.

Many of the manuscripts, incunabula, and printed materials relating to confraternity and *luoghi pii* in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana are of obvious interest.

6 Inv. 1184; see Rossi and Rovetta, *La Pinacoteca Ambrosiana*, p. 40.

There are regulation books, such as the “Nuovo Regolamento del Luogo Pio di S. Corona in Milano,” produced during the reign of Empress Maria Teresa of Austria.⁷ After a few pages of introductory imperial administrative comments, the text jumps directly to the rules and practical aspects of the confraternity, neglecting any discussion either of its principal charitable goals, or of the religious duties imposed on, or encouraged of, its members, such as the maintenance of their chapel in the right aisle of Santa Maria delle Grazie, for which the confraternity had commissioned Titian to paint the 1540–42 *Christ Crowned with Thorns*. At the time of the writing of this “Regolamento,” the painting featuring the imperial bust over the doorway in the upper right was still in the chapel, though shortly after it was stolen by French troops (1797). It still hangs in the Louvre, and is a good reminder to look with fresh eyes at art works long in view.

The “Protocollo delle sessioni governative” will be of interest to those studying late eighteenth-century reforms.⁸ Not surprisingly given the period, the text is a rational debate between those complaining about and those in favour of the new system for the *luoghi pii*. The list of confraternities in Lombardy and the balance sheet of their income and expenses in the “Protocollo” help identify those organizations that had survived until to the compilation of the record in about 1787, shortly prior to the Napoleonic invasion of 1796, and provide a summary idea of cash flow. For example, the *luoghi pii* surviving in the province of Milan had an income of 3,064,245 Imperial *lire*, while the next closest province, Pavia, had an income of 620,230 Imperial *lire*. Conversely, the charitable expenses of the province of Milan were 1,191,284 Imperial *lire*, while those of Pavia were 305,285 Imperial *lire*. From this we can see not only the immense difference between these two important provinces, but also that, at least that year, while Pavia’s income was about 20% of Milan’s, its expenses, at 26% of Milan’s, were proportionally greater, or, at any rate, the income proportionally less. While further research is needed to determine what conditions produced this cold fact, and to put it into perspective, one already can see the kinds of information and the type of insights that can drawn from this type of documents.

The “Descrizione storica delle chiese, de’ monasteri, delle Confraternite e de’ luoghi pii di Milano” will be helpful to those studying not just Milan, but also other cities including Rome, and regions such as the Veneto and Sicily. Internal evidence indicates that this is an anonymous manuscript begun no earlier than the third, or last, quarter of the sixteenth century.⁹ The text begins with a painstaking description of the life of the Milanese Duomo, in which unfortunately no direct reference is made to confraternities in possession of the individually managed

7 Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, ms P.VIII.3 (2)

8 Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, ms P.VIII.3 (9)

9 Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, ms A.202 sussidio. For a good discussion of the origin of the manuscript, though without any reference to confraternities and luoghi pii, see: Aurora Scotti, “Architettura e riforma cattolica nella Milano di Carlo Borromeo,” pp. 54–90.

altars, and continues with a summary of the religious activities in the rest of the city, divided into six areas according to the principal ancient gates. When carefully combed, the text yields precious information about confraternity life in the city at that time. For example, according to its author, there was an abundance of *luoghi pii*—with and without their own churches—, oratories and “schools,” that is, those institutions dedicated to teaching Christian doctrine. A long history of the origin of the schools precedes a brief, but incisive, glimpse at the marriage of confraternity life and urban development.

At the time of the writing of the text, the writer counted twenty-five crosses erected throughout Milan, of which six were identified as “antique,” dating to a plague of 1524, while the rest were identified as erected on the order of Cardinal Charles Borromeo for the plague of 1576–77. Of these crosses, most had “companies” founded by Charles Borromeo and aided by indulgences granted by Pope Gregory XIII. The members of these confraternities, dedicated to the honour and care of the crosses,

were called every evening by the sound of a bell to go to their crosses to express gratitude, and sing litanies. The various confraternities alternated every sixth Sunday in going in procession to the Duomo with the banner of their cross and of the other mysteries of the Passion [of Christ]. Hand in hand, they went to bless their crosses, which ceremony was performed in pontifical vestments with every majesty, and always a sermon was delivered from a pulpit to the crowd gathered in that piazza where their cross had been erected.¹⁰

Only a few of these crosses have survived to the present, and not all are in their original locations.

Exceptionally helpful to those studying the confraternities of St. John the Baptist, which were dedicated to providing religious comfort to those condemned to capital punishment, are various works, of which the “Sentenze capitali” of 1753 is exemplary.¹¹ Fra Benvenuto gathered and registered all the available news and documents dating from 1471 and ending in 1768 that were related to the activity of this confraternity, one of several in Milan for the comfort of the condemned.¹²

10 Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, ms A.202 sussidio, fol. 12, my translation and paraphrase.

11 Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, ms S.Q.+1.7, second volume in a series of four (numbers 6–9), this volume contains various prints representing the confraternity and depicting events.

12 The confraternity had begun its life in the fourteenth century as a company of “*Verbe-rati*” (flagellants) and was located in the Augustinian church of Santa Marta. The confraternity was transformed in the sixteenth century into the Confraternity of St. John the Beheaded. The seat of the transformed confraternity was moved to the church of San Giovanni alle Case Rotte, so-called because of the fourteenth-century destruction of the quarter once under control of the Visconti’s rivals and precursors in power, the Della Torre; the area flanked today’s San Fedele. The confraternity was closed in 1785 and the church was demolished during subsequent urban renewal. See Verga, *Storia della vita milanese*, pp. 266–267, and Marelli, *Chiesa e luoghi pii soppressi in Milano dal 1764 al*

From the volume in question, some general observations may be made: of the situations for which this particular confraternity was called to respond, there was generally at least one, if not two, capital punishments carried out each month in Milan, though sometimes there were none; the condemned men were imprisoned at the captain's jail made famous in Manzoni's *Promessi sposi* (the women were kept in the captain's office), or in the late sixteenth-century tower of the Porta Romana; the comforters were called to the oratory within the prison by means of a printed invitation explaining the details of the crime and insisting on punctuality on the part of the comforter; those punished were principally male from all parts of the province of Milan, the usual charges being for murder, highway robbery, black magic, and sodomy; sometimes those condemned to death were women, generally found guilty of infanticide or murder.

The text also describes bone-chilling punishments. The condemned usually were dragged by horse tail to the piazza of the Duomo, often to have a limb cut off, then dragged—still by horse tail—to the piazza behind San Lorenzo, where the hanging, or sometimes suffocation, occurred, after which the head and limbs could be cut off and displayed in public where the crime had occurred, even if in another city or along the road.¹³

A note of Fra Benvenuto indicates that one invitation is entered in the book out of order because it was delivered too late, a chilling thought that also gives us an idea of the workings of the bureaucracy involved. It would be helpful to compile a table of crimes and punishments in the book and compare the results with contemporary juridical texts in order to determine if there was a standard hierarchy. Together with other sources about the practices of comforting the condemned, of helping someone have a 'good death,' and of bringing recalcitrant persons to admit and repent their crimes, the text offers a vibrant picture of this grim responsibility.

Finally, Marelli's manuscript "Miscellanea milanese ecclesiastica di manoscritti e stampati" brings us to the clamorous quasi-closure of the circle of confraternity life in Milan.¹⁴ The manuscript is a treasure house of the ecclesiastical history of Milan.¹⁵ Many, but not all, of the documents are in Marelli's own large clear hand.

1808, p. 18 [fol. 62v]. Manuscript pages 47 to 65 of Marelli, "Miscellanea," Biblioteca Ambrosiana, G 125 sussidio, on the closed churches and *luoghi pii* were extracted and published as "Chiesa e luoghi pii soppressi" in *Archivio Storico Lombardo* 2, a. 16, fasc. 3 (1889): 647–664; they cover the period from 1764 to 1810. This publication was extracted as an independent booklet produced in Milan in 1889; the page numbers, accompanied by original folio numbers in square brackets, refer to this edition. Similar pages of the manuscript (pp. 38–41) were published in the same journal in 1948–49, pp. 248–253.

13 In the 1679 case of Lorenzo Garosio, accused of writing licentious material and of acts of sodomy, both as an "agente" and "paziente," his writings were hung around his neck during the proceedings, then burned before his eyes before his punishment of being suffocated and then burned was carried out.

14 Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, ms G 125 sussidio.

15 Not all of its documents are listed in the library's blue index book. It also contains, for

Marelli began his spiritual journey to become a “Servo di Maria” in Milan in 1774, only to experience the closure of the church and monastery just a few years later on 5 March 1779. After the closure, he was hired as a custodian by the Biblioteca Ambrosiana, where he lived and worked—producing these invaluable eye-witness documents detailing the transfers and closures of churches, monasteries, oratories, confraternities and *luoghi pii*, city gate by city gate—until his death in 1819.¹⁶ Some of the institutions that were suppressed were eventually re-opened, especially after the Unification of Italy in the third quarter of the nineteenth century; many, however, never re-opened.

In addition to calling the Biblioteca Ambrosiana’s attention to the fundamental importance of adding “confraternity” and “*luogo pio*” to their list of possible subject searches in their online catalogue, I hope to have conveyed to the reader not just the significant possibilities for confraternity and *luogo pio* research that this library offers, nor just the goals of my current research concentrating on the Ambrosiana library and art gallery, but also my underlying principal focus on the original patronage, adaptation, and use of material and conceptual culture in Milanese confraternities and charitable institutions.

In closing, I would like to mention “the culprit,” that is, the fresco at the Bagatti Valsecchi Museum in Milan, where I have been working since early 2000, which was the “Prime Mover” of my interest in confraternity studies. The fresco depicts a confraternity of *disciplinati* meeting under the tender gaze of their patrons, the Virgin Mary (presented as the Madonna of Mercy¹⁷), Saint Peter and Saint Mary Magdalene. Painted, signed and dated by Antonio Boselli in 1495, it was acquired presumably in the 1880s, as much of the house’s Renaissance and Neo-Renaissance art and decorative arts furnishings during the transformation from the Eclectic Style to that of the Neo-Renaissance.¹⁸ Within the family’s Milanese mansion, it was installed in the antechamber to Fausto’s quarters, the elder brother and bearer of the

example, a copy of a list dated 1377 of the noble Milanese families eligible for automatic promotion into the position of *ordinario* of the Duomo; the famous late eighteenth-century description of Milan by Carlo Torre, who also noted ecclesiastical institutions closed in his time; an 1808 proposal for which institutions were to be closed; and a ceremony for the introduction of bishops and archbishops dated 1818.

16 Marelli, *Chiesa e luoghi pii soppressi*, pp. 3–4.

17 The theme may have been derived by Cistercians from numismatic sources; see Solway, “A Numismatic Source for the Madonna of Mercy,” pp. 359–368. Another interesting example (1525–28) not cited by Solway is by Hans Holbein the Younger for Jacob Meyer, now in the Schlossmuseum, Darmstadt; for an illustration of this painting, see Snyder, *Northern Renaissance Art*, p. 390, fig. 454.

18 The brothers Fausto and Giuseppe Bagatti Valsecchi came into possession of the family mansion upon the death of their mother in 1880. The transformation of the house reflects interlocking political and personal motives in this period shortly after the Unification of Italy and only a generation after the family had received the baronetcy. For further information about the house, the family, the museum, its holdings, its online archival database of late nineteenth-early twentieth-century artisans working in Milan and a constantly updated bibliography, see <http://www.museobagattivalsecchi.org>.

family's baronetcy until his death in 1914. Removed for safekeeping during WWII, the fresco was reinstalled in the 1960s in its original position in the house, as were all objects displayed in the museum, an authentic re-presentation of aristocratic Milanese traditional taste at the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁹ The fresco and museum are remembered here as an incentive to scholars and students of a vast gamma of Italian Renaissance and Neo-Renaissance topics.

Museo Bagatti Valsecchi
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S.Q.+1.7 Benvenuto da Milano, Fra. "Sentenze capitali raccolte dal P. F. Benvenuto da Milano Min. Oss. Reformato della Provincia Milanese, vol. 2, Incominciando dall'anno 1660 inclusive, sino inclusive all'anno 1753."

19 For citations and a stylistic discussion of the fresco, see Chiara de Capoa, "n. 306. Antonio Boselli. *Madonna della Misericordia tra i santi Pietro, Maria Maddalena, angeli musicanti e donatori*," pp. 245–246. The two-volume set is part of the series *Electa* dedicated to museums in Milan. The fresco was noted *in situ* in the apse of the parish church dedicated to Saints Vincent and Alexander in Ponteranica, near Bergamo, for the first time by Cavacaselle in 1871. Cited by Thieme-Becker in 1910, it was featured by Toesca in his 1918 work dedicated to the Milanese palazzo of the Bagatti Valsecchi family. After this—although occasionally mentioned by some of today's scholars—its presence in the house was forgotten until re-identified by Angeleli and De Marchi in 1975. When the fresco was reinstalled, the decorative framework was added. Rather than an uncharacteristic "shell-motif," as indicated in de Capoa's contribution, it was inspired by the flexed and stylized heavenly cloud motif often seen in medieval and early Renaissance frescoes.

- P.VIII.3 (2) “Nuovo regolamento del Luogo Pio di S. Corona in Milano, accompagnato con cesareo real dispaccio del giorno 8 gennajo del suddetto anno 1778.”
- P.VIII.3 (9) “Protocollo delle sessioni governative tenute nel 1790 sulle domande de’ vescovi e de’ corpi municipali di Lombardia relativamente alle Pie Istituzioni di Carità e de’ Poveri aggiuntovi l’elenco nominative di tutte le Pie Istituzioni della Lombardia ed il sommario generale delle loro rendite, pesi, spese e conversioni annuali.”

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