

Golden Modesty of Stucco



by **Ezio Raimondi**

Philologist, literary critic, university professor of Italian literature, Ezio Raimondi (1924-2014) is one of the most prominent names in the culture of the second half of the 20th century in Bologna. Like many young intellectuals educated in Bologna in the 1930s and 1940s (including Francesco Arcangeli, Enzo Biagi, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Roberto Roversi), he also collaborated on "Architrave", the monthly magazine of the Gioventù Universitaria Fascista (GUF), published between 1940 and 1943, in the shadow of the "left-wing fascism" promoted by the Minister of Education, Giuseppe Bottai. The one we publish here, written on the occasion of the 1942 Littoriali del lavoro, is the first printed text by Raimondi, then 18 years old and just enrolled at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Bologna. The article focuses on one of the crafts, plasterer, to which a section of the Littoriali was dedicated. For its correct interpretation, we must take into account some possible typographical errors: in particular, in the fifth paragraph, the word "usenzialità", which we have changed to "essenzialità" ("essentiality"). This is where Raimondi's insight takes shape: the prejudicial rejection of ornament is not a response to the crisis of craftsmanship; rather, it is a convenient alibi in the absence of a culturally serious and thorough analysis. The coming years will prove the validity of this thesis. See E. Raimondi, Aurea modestia dello stucco, in "Architrave: mensile di politica, letteratura e arte", special issue for the Littoriali maschili del lavoro, n. 2, April 17, 1942, p. 3.

A minor art among the minor arts, of a Franciscan patience but with the slight elegance proper to the miniature: this is the art of stucco. An ancient art, well known to men, if we can find its first traces in the palaces of Knossos and follow its various and multiple developments through different civilizations.

First of all, let us say what stucco is: a mixture of lime and pozzolan mixed with marble or gypsum powder, the fineness of which determines the quality, durability and solidity of the mixture itself and, consequently, of the work (a mixture whose composition already occupied the fertile minds of the Romans Vitruvius and Pliny). Let us go no further into the technical details. In any case, the art of stucco can certainly not be called an independent art; on the contrary, it is a complementary art in that it serves to exhaust and complete, in a perfect artistic reciprocity, the fresco, the vault, the wall or the colonnade. And yet it is important, regardless of the necessary virtues of “finishing”, because of the aesthetic merit of being able to isolate, through that magic wave of very light and airy lines and reliefs, that melting of matter from the constraints of mass and weight, to be able to isolate, as I said, artistic individuality in a fantastic and wonderful atmosphere.

It is a humble art, master of the virtuosity of the most moved and refined technique, but it is a necessary one. It is precisely this character, which we have called complementary but never superfluous, that gives it a lively, varied and, I would say, almost polymorphous tone, since stucco can compete and mix with monochrome painting (Roman stucco and, even earlier, Egyptian stucco), with sculpture and with Serpotta's ornamentation, with architecture. From painting, it retains the sweetness of tones and shades; from sculpture, the delicacy of relief, enlivened by a ripple of more agile and wavy lines, thanks to the subtle and evanescent material that allows the artist unlimited freedom; from architecture, the rhythmic relationship of lines and volumes, stripped of all weight and transformed into the ascent and longing for the most incorporeal and spiritual harmony (hence the lightness, or to use a new metaphor, the delicate breath of stucco ornament applied to the mighty mass of a vault or wall).

It is therefore a discreet art, ennobling but not ostentatious. Like all the others, it is the result of a particular emotion and an exuberant freshness of inspiration, which gives the work the spontaneity and youthful fullness of things born out of the blue and transcribed on the spur of the moment, animating surfaces and cultivating delicate gardens of ornament.

It is not our task to rewrite its history, which can be found in any art

history textbook. Instead, we want to point out the characteristics of this art, which, if not the highest, is nevertheless necessary, full of acrobatic virtuosity but authentically inspired. Unfortunately, we cannot say that today it is cultivated as it deserves to be, whereas in the past even great artists tried their hand at it. According to the essentiality theories in vogue today, superfluous ornaments should be eliminated. But it is too convenient to solve a problem by eliminating its various components, without asking what their modern relationship might be.

Littoriali come by the way: those Littoriali that should be a national comparison, a constant influx of energies in the vast field of production, and also a greening, not archaeological, but alive and vital, of our own traditions and technique.

*Homepage: Piero Portaluppi (design), zodiac-themed stucco ceiling (detail), 1932-35, Milan, Villa Necchi Campiglio (Sailko/Wikimedia).
Below: reproduction of page 3 from "Architrave," special issue for the Littoriali maschili del lavoro, n. 2, April 17, 1942 (www.archiviostorico.unibo.it).*

