

Notes on Lecce

Between history and art

According to legend, Lecce was founded during the Trojan war, but there are no certainties on this. According to some historians, this is where the ancient Sybar Messapico settlement was found. For some, this name has the mysterious meaning of “city of sun”, for others, instead, “wild wolf under a tree”, as depicted on the city’s coat of arms, which shows a she-wolf and a holm-oak tree crowned with five towers. In fact, the Greeks named it “Luppia” (she-wolf), the Normans “Licea” (holm-oak tree), and the Swabians “Litium”, which soon became “Lizze”, then “Liccio” and finally “Lecce”, a name that takes into consideration both the ancient Lupiae and the term “ilex” or “holm-oak”.

As proven by the numerous archaeological findings preserved in the Sigismondo Castromediano Provincial Museum, the city’s birth could actually be ascribed to the Messapii, ancient pre-Roman people who probably penetrated Salento from the other side of the Adriatic Sea about 1000-800 BC. In Salento, the Messapii built towns and castles fortified by imposing walls made from huge heaped rocks, as well as civil and religious buildings; they left numerous artistic and cultural testimonies, among which many written texts, yet to be deciphered. The Messapii were conquered by Rome in 266 BC and the city of Sybar received the new name of *Lupiae*.

Very often during excavations, findings coming to light follow a specific order: Messapii, Greek and then Roman, testimony of the historical sequence of these populations. With the Greeks, Lecce became a wealthy city of the Magna Grecia, while the Romans contributed to its economic and social growth with the construction of Porto Adrianeo (Hadrian Port), the Amphitheatre and the Theatre; the Gracchi brothers (late 2nd century BC) gave it the dignity of “municipium”, as testified by statues, mosaics, ruined city walls, and several inscriptions.

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire, Lecce became the object of plunder and invasion by the Ostrogoth king Totila in 542 and 549, and of bloody wars between the Byzantines, Lombards, and Saracens, to which were added savage piratical raids. Totila was defeated by the Byzantines in 552 and Lecce fell under the rule of Constantinople, remaining part of the Byzantine Empire for five centuries. During this period the town experienced a slow decline, overshadowed by Otranto, which enjoyed a much more privileged position during the Byzantine domination.

Lecce re-prospered under the Normans, who elevated it to a countship in the mid-11th century. The County of Lecce continued flourishing in the subsequent Swabian and Angevine rule and was one of the largest and most important fiefs in the Kingdom of Sicily from 1055 to 1463, when it passed to the Aragonese kings of Naples.

Lecce Baroque

Lecce is known as the “Florence of the South” as well as the “Lady of Baroque”, and rightly so, since it was here that, from the latter decades of the 16th century, religious and civil buildings characterized by an architectural style unique in the world were erected; it was here that the baroque style reached extraordinary heights thanks to the local golden shaded calcareous stone: the characteristic *pietra leccese* (Lecce stone), a light yellow, easily worked limestone, whose particular friability lent itself perfectly to the fine carving done with patience, craft and extraordinary fantasy by thousands of stone-cutters, almost becoming lacework, a filigree. A decorative “explosion” which involved not only the important buildings of the town, but also private houses, characterized by extremely elegant compositions made of balustrades, barley-sugar columns, fretwork and floral or fruit designs.

The most important masters were Francesco Zimbalo and Gabriele Riccardi, characterized by classical tones; Giuseppe Zimbalo, with a strongly scenographic impact; the elegant

Cesare Penna, Achille Larducci and Giuseppe Cino, famous for the balance of their compositions.

An essential itinerary covering the baroque masterpieces in Lecce must obviously include Piazza del Duomo, encircled by the Madonna of the Assumption Cathedral (il Duomo), the Bishop's Palace (Palazzo Vescovile), the Seminary, and the Bell Tower (il Campanile), and the actual symbol of Lecce baroque: the Basilica di Santa Croce, a veritable triumph of baroque.

Small masterpieces

Hand-in hand with the great works of Baroque art, Lecce is characterized by two prestigious traditional crafts, extremely old and greatly effective, which are profoundly tied to Lecce's lifestyle. They are the crafting of papier-mâché (cartapesta) and the Lecce stone.

Papier-mâché making mainly consists in sculpting statues and images out of a mixture of paper and glue and then painting them. The papier-mâché art was given great prominence during the time of the Counter-reform when, in order to divulge and strengthen religious sentiments, the Church commissioned an extensive production of statues and images that would clearly represent the emotions and mysteries of the faith; statues with gestures and expressions to which the people could relate. A tradition still kept alive nowadays in the historical centre's many "botteghe" (craft workshops), where age-old techniques are still used.

In the same way, the "botteghe" or workshops of the stone-cutters are found all over the town: they carry on the precious art of working the local stone, creating original shaped ornaments.

Main Sights

Piazza del Duomo

Piazza Duomo can well be defined as the triumph of Lecce baroque and provides a truly amazing sight. It is in fact a completely enclosed space, encircled by the Duomo, the Bishop's Palace, the Seminary, and the Bell Tower, all contributing to creating an incredible scenographic effect with their decorations and the way in which their greatly varying masses were disposed: from the vertical soaring of the slender Bell Tower to the compactness of the Duomo, from the airy arches of the Bishop's Palace to the Seminary's square and measured projecting semi-pillars in hewn stonework.

Until the mid-17th century, the piazza was completely enclosed, so much so that it was called the "courtyard of the Bishop's Palace". In 1761, in place of the only door through which access to the piazza was possible, some porticos were built (work of Emanuele Manieri), which, with their columns, completely changed the perception of space, transforming the buildings into a veritable theatrical scenario. The Duomo itself, in order to fit into this scenario, had to undergo an odd transformation. Since its main entrance is offset from the centre of the piazza, onto which, instead, its left side faces, the entrance to the Duomo was kept plain, almost neutral, with its side, instead, becoming enriched and enhanced, turning it into a false façade.

Lecce Cathedral (The Duomo)

The cathedral was originally built in Romanesque style in 1144, modified in 1230, and then almost entirely rebuilt in Lecce Baroque style between 1659 and 1670 by architect Giuseppe Zimbalo, who also designed the 72-metre-high bell tower.

The cathedral has two façades, with the main one being on the left of the Bishop's Palace, while the other faces the entrance to the square.

The main façade is decidedly plain, although in recent years, and precisely for the Jubilee of 2000, it has been enriched with a massive bronze portal, 6 metres high and 3.20 metres large, made by Armando Marrocco, one of the most important sculptors in Italy. This façade is divided into two orders, decorated with the statues of the Saints Peter, Paul, Gennaro and Ludovic, while the spacing between the projecting semi-pillars shows that the church is divided into three naves.

The façade facing the entrance to the square is, instead, a masterpiece of Baroque art. Majestic, exuberant, and shaped like an imposing triumphal arch, it is enriched with fine decorations and made very impressive by the sumptuous portal flanked by two niches containing the statues of Saints Giusto and Fortunato, and surmounted by a balustrade, above which, in the centre and standing within a grand and highly decorated arch, is a large statue of the town's Patron Saint, Sant'Oronzo (St. Orontius).

The interior of the Cathedral, built on a Latin cross plan, is divided into three naves and has twelve altars, besides the main one. The central nave and transept have a very beautiful wooden lacunar ceiling created in 1685, in which are inset paintings by Giuseppe da Brindisi depicting the history of Sant'Oronzo, such as the Preaching, the Protection from the plague and the Martyrdom, and the Last Supper.

The main altar, dedicated to Madonna of the Assumption, in bronze and polychrome marble of Neapolitan workmanship, is enclosed by three marvellous 18th century paintings by Oronzo Tiso: "The Assumption of Mary", "Noah's Sacrifice after the Flood", and "Elijah's Challenge to the Prophets of Baal". The magnificent wooden chorus also dates back to the 18th century.

The Cathedral also has a 12th century crypt which underwent baroque modifications in the 16th century. It is divided into three aisles supported by 92 columns with ornately carved capitals.

The Bell Tower (Il campanile del Duomo)

The Bell Tower was built in 1661-1682 by Lecce architect Giuseppe Zimbalo, to replace the previous Norman bell tower erected by Godfrey I (Goffredo d'Altavilla), which had crumbled at the beginning of the 17th century.

On a square plan, the Bell Tower is 72 metres high and consists of five levels all enclosed by balustrades, the last of which is surmounted by an octagonal majolica cupola, on which is placed a weathervane in the shape of Sant'Oronzo.

The structure of the Bell Tower is really light and slender, with decorated full-arch windows surmounted by plaques, which, proceeding towards the top, become smaller.

The Bishop's Palace

Originally built in the 15th century, the Palace was enlarged in 1632 and restored in 1758 by Emanuele Manieri on commission of Bishop Alfonso Sozy-Carafa. The architect merged the building perfectly with the scenic setting of Piazza Duomo, doing away with the external stairs and completely redesigning the façade. In fact, Manieri created a slender colonnade with new arches on the right-hand side which, together with the six on the other side, provide an elegant, airy effect, alternating as they do with refined Doric columns.

The Palace is in the shape of an L with a monumental entrance, above which there are three niches, with in the middle the statue of the Virgin Mary, while the gable-end contains a clock made in 1761 by Lecce master Domenico Panico.

The Seminary

The Seminary is one of the most significant works of Lecce baroque. It was built between 1694 and 1709 by Giuseppe Cino on commission of Bishop Michele Pignatelli. In this harmonious, sophisticated construction, the smooth ashlar is interspersed, on each side of the portal, with five pilasters and four windows arranged in two rows. All the windows are elegantly framed. The portal is surmounted by a light three-arch loggia resting on richly

decorated shelves, in the middle of which prominence was given to the coat of arms of Bishop Michele Pignatelli.

The third level of the construction was built in 1729 by architect Emanuele Manieri and it is simpler and more sober.

In the inner courtyard is a very beautiful baroque well, work of Cino, resting on a circular base composed of four decorated steps, and crowned by the statue of Saint'Irene under an arch supported by graceful putti.

Today the Seminary hosts the Diocesan Museum of Sacred Art.

Basilica di Santa Croce

This the symbol of Lecce baroque, a veritable triumph of baroque. It has a richly decorated façade with animals, grotesque figures and floral friezes, and a large rose window, among the most valuable and elegant in the history of modern art.

The church was built between 1549 and 1695 by the greatest local architects of the time, on Gabriele Riccardi's design. More particularly, between 1549 and 1582 the lower façade was built, while the cupola was completed in 1590. In this period the architect who worked on the church, designing its structure and building the more classical lower part of the façade, was Gabriele Riccardi. Starting from 1606, the three portals were added under the direction of Francesco Antonio Zimbalo. The church was completed by his successors Cesare Penna, who built the upper façade and the magnificent rose window, and Giuseppe Zimbalo, who built the gable end at the top of the construction.

As already indicated above, the façade is divided into three different sections: the first goes from the flight of steps to the balustrade; the second from the balustrade to the cornice, and the third through to the gable end.

The lower part of the façade has six smooth columns that support the entablature and divide the structure into five areas. The main portal, built in 1606, has two pairs of Corinthian

columns and shows the coats of arms of Philip III of Spain, Mary of Enguien, and Walter VI of Brienne, while the side portals show the coats of arms of the Congregation of Celestines. Grotesque figures and fantastic or allegorical animals adorn the architectural telamones that support the balustrade, decorated with thirteen putti which symbolize the spiritual and temporal power of the Catholic Church.

The second order of the façade is dominated by the large, magnificent rose window, decorated with floral friezes, bunches of fruits, and cherubs. Two Corinthian columns serve to separate the central area with the rose window from the lateral areas, where there are two niches containing the statues of St. Benedict and Pope Celestine V, and two large female statues representing Faith and Fortitude.

The façade is completed by the rich gable end, which shows the coat of arms of the Congregation of Celestines, representing a cross, a symbol of the triumph of the Church.

The interior is typically that of a basilica, Latin-cross shaped with three naves. Originally, there were five naves, but during the 18th century, two were incorporated into the side chapels. The largest nave presents arches supported by sixteen columns with Corinthian capitals, and is closed by a magnificent gilded wooden lacular ceiling. The side naves, instead, have cross vaults. The cupola, erected in 1590, rises at the transept's intersection. Besides the transept, we can admire a very elegant polylobed apse. The church also contains a number of beautifully decorated baroque altars: those of the numerous lateral chapels, the two of the presbytery, and the main altar. The latter, dating from the 18th century, is decorated with fine marble inlays and was taken from the church of Saints Niccolò and Cataldo in 1956 on the occasion of the fifteenth national Eucharistic Congress. The altar dedicated to Saint Francis of Paola (1614-15) by Francesco Antonio Zimbalo in the left-hand transept and that of Santa Croce (1637) by Cesare Penna in the right-hand transept are remarkable baroque masterpieces. The former, in particular, decorated with twelve bas-reliefs representing the life

of the Saint, is considered to be by many scholars the highest expression of baroque sculpture in the Salento area.