

Gilardi, Adamini, Rusca and the Russian nineteenth century

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The Russian market for Ticinese masters reached its peak between the late eighteenth century and the middle of the nineteenth. Luigi Rusca of Mondonico (1762–1822) went to Russia in 1783, worked as a master builder at the court of Catherine II and her successors and became court architect in St Petersburg in 1802.¹ Domenico Gilardi of Montagnola (1785–1845), son of the architect Giovanni Battista Gilardi, rebuilt the University of Moscow after the fire of 1812 and designed several public buildings and noble residences in Moscow before returning to Ticino in the 1830s.² The drawings of the Gilardi architects preserved in Ticino have been published as an illustrated catalogue raisonné by the Mendrisio Academy Press of the Università della Svizzera italiana, with essays on neoclassical building in Moscow and St Petersburg and on the family's biography.³ Father and son both came home to Montagnola in the end: Giovanni Battista handed his Moscow post to Domenico in 1817 and died in his native village two years later, while Domenico settled there for good in 1832 and built the chapel of S. Pietro at nearby Gentilino.⁴ The Adamini family of Bigogno in the Collina d'Oro supplied builders and engineers to St Petersburg, where Antonio Adamini worked with Auguste de Montferrand on St Isaac's Cathedral and on the erection of the Alexander Column in 1832.⁵

The last great Ticinese commission in the east was the restoration of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople in 1847–1849, carried out for Sultan Abdülmecid by Gaspare Fossati of Morcote, who had worked earlier as a court architect in St Petersburg and had settled in Constantinople in 1837, together with his brother Giuseppe.⁶ Their work was presented at Morcote in 2022 in an exhibition promoted by the commune, with texts by art historians of the Università della Svizzera italiana, under the title *Da Morcote a Costantinopoli. I fratelli Fossati al servizio del Sultano*.⁷ By then the lake masters had become a small community of architects and engineers with an international clientele. Their villages, meanwhile, were beginning to shift

from the export of builders to the new emigration to the Americas discussed in Chapter C.IV.

Master Place of Destination Principal works origin Filiberto Melide Vienna Hofburg, Leopoldine wing Lucchese (from 1660) Costante Bissone Warsaw Column of Sigismund III (1644) Tencalla Domenico Astano St Petersburg Peter and Paul Cathedral (1712– Trezzini 1733) Luigi Rusca Mondonico St Petersburg public and private buildings Domenico Montagnol Moscow University of Moscow (after 1812) Gilardi a Gaspare Morcote Constantinople Hagia Sophia restoration (1847– Fossati 1849)

Table 2: Selected Ticinese masters north of the Alps and in the east. Sources: see notes to this section.

1 Notes

1. DSS, "Rusca, Luigi", <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/024554/>. ↩
2. Lara Calderari, "Gilardi, Domenico", DSS, version of 25 November 2005, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/024536/>. ↩
3. Accademia di architettura, Università della Svizzera italiana, "Gli architetti Gilardi a Mosca. La raccolta dei disegni conservati in Ticino" (Mendrisio Academy Press), catalogue page, <https://www.arc.usi.ch/en/node/9916> (illustrated catalogue raisonné of the Ticino collection of drawings by the Gilardi architects, with essays by Piervaleriano Angelini and Alessandra Pfister). ↩
4. Dizionario storico della Svizzera, "Gilardi, Domenico", <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/024536/> (return to Montagnola in 1832, chapel of S. Pietro at Gentilino); "Gilardi, Giovanni Battista", <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/024537/> (born and died at Montagnola, active in Moscow 1787– 1817). ↩
5. DSS, "Adamini", <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/041399/>. ↩
6. DSS, "Fossati, Gaspare", <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/024531/>, which also mentions the illustrated album on the restoration published in London in 1852. ↩

7. Università della Svizzera italiana, "Da Morcote a Costantinopoli. I fratelli Fossati al servizio del Sultano", news item, 2022, <https://www.usi.ch/it/feeds/20726> (exhibition promoted by the Comune di Morcote at the Casa araba of the Parco Scherrer, 19 June to 29 September 2022, with texts by Daniela Mondini of the Accademia di architettura; restoration of Hagia Sophia 1847– 1849). ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/lugano-gilardi-adamini-rusca-and-the-russian-nineteenth-century