

Turin and the Savoy court

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In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the court of the dukes of Savoy, from 1713 kings of Sicily and from 1720 of Sardinia, rebuilt Turin as a capital, with new quarters, churches and a ring of residences around the city. Lake masters found work there as architects, military engineers, stucco-workers and painters. Michelangelo Garove of Bissone (1650–1713) became engineer to Duke Victor Amadeus II and worked on the Venaria Reale, the Collegio dei Nobili and the fortifications of several Piedmontese towns.¹ Around him and his successors worked teams of stucco-workers from the Luganese villages who decorated the interiors of the Savoy residences.

The Turin market was attractive because the court paid salaries and pensions in addition to fees for individual works, and because the proximity of Piedmont to the Lake Maggiore region allowed relatively short journeys home. For the families of the Sottoceneri, Turin thus combined the advantages of a large public client with a travel distance that permitted frequent returns. The career of Pietro Somasso of Lugano shows how long such an engagement could last: he ran an enterprise of stucco decoration for Duke Victor Amadeus II from 1683 until his death in 1709, his work in the Palazzo Reale is documented without interruption from 1683 to 1703, and in his last years he decorated the vaults of the western pavilion of the Venaria Reale.²

1 Naples, Sicily and the south

Further south, the viceregal court of Naples employed Domenico Fontana after 1592 and his son Giulio Cesare Fontana, who succeeded him as royal engineer. Fontana began the Palazzo Reale in Naples for the viceroy in 1600, while the Fontana workshop brought masons and plasterers from the lake to the city.³ In Sicily the Gagini dynasty, founded by Domenico Gaggini of Bissone, dominated sculpture in marble for three generations

in the sixteenth century. These southern careers show the reach of the network. A master from the Lake of Lugano could work in Palermo in one generation and his descendants in Messina or Naples, while relatives at home still managed the family land in Bissone or Melide.

2 Patterns of the Italian markets

A comparison of the Italian markets brings out several constants. First, the lake masters entered each city through a small number of successful families, who then recruited relatives and neighbours. Second, they relied on the confraternities of the *nazione lombarda* for religious, social and financial support. These confraternities also kept records that today document their presence. Third, their careers depended on the demand of a court or a building office and on the favour of individual patrons, which exposed them to political risk. Fourth, they combined permanent settlement of some family members with the seasonal or periodic migration of others, so that a family could hold positions in Rome, Genoa and Turin at the same time while keeping its base in the village.⁴

This structure resembles, in miniature, the organization of the great Italian merchant houses of the same period, which placed family members or trusted agents in several markets and kept a central household at home. The difference lay in the asset being exported. Merchant houses sent goods and credit, whereas the lake families sent skilled labour and design, a form of capital that could not be seized by a creditor or confiscated by a hostile ruler because it resided in the trained hands and eyes of the masters themselves.

3 Notes

1. La Venaria Reale, "Michelangelo Garove" (biography), https://old.lavenaria.it/sites/default/files/page-documents/dipiu_storia_biografie_michelangelo_garove.pdf. ↩
2. Reggia di Venaria Reale, "Pietro Somasso", biographical sheet, https://old.lavenaria.it/sites/default/files/page-documents/dipiu_storia_biografie_pietro_somasso.pdf (stuccatore from Lugano, impresario of stucco decoration at the Savoy court 1683–1709; activity in the Palazzo Reale documented continuously from 1683 to 1703; stucco vaults of the western pavilion of Venaria 1703–1709). ↩
3. Ippoliti, "Fontana, Domenico" (cited above); Wikipedia, "Royal Palace of Naples", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal_Palace_of_Naples (used as a last resort). ↩

4. This synthesis follows the general literature on the artisti dei laghi, in particular Laura Damiani Cabrini, "Maestranze artistiche", Dizionario storico della Svizzera (DSS), version of 20 March 2015, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/047823/>. ↩

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