Historical Notes on the Architecture of Italian Confraternities

Francesco Lucantoni

Summary: *Historians of architecture have always drawn a distinct line between civic and religious architecture. Although this separation allows for easier classification of the vast heritage of architecture, it is not adequate for analysing certain realities that, by their very nature, fall between the two categories. An example of this is confraternal architectural production that developed extensively, in a variety of forms and environments, in the Catholic world from the thirteenth century to the present. As lay institutions with religious aims, confraternities gave birth to a special type of architecture, distinctive because of its combination of lay and religious elements, and because it was not restricted to sacred buildings. This architecture presents a complexity and an originality borne out of the close relationship to its various devotional aspects and, above all, to the social-charitable role played by these organizations.*

If the problem of the origin of the confraternal phenomenon has not yet been resolved, framing the appearance of the first architectural examples created by the first secular associations in the religious field from a historical point is an equally complex task.[1] If it is true that the origin of modern confraternities as secular associations devoted to religious and charitable institutions can be dated back to the High Middle Ages, it is also true that from an architectural perspective we can find similar architectural solutions and typological characteristics in the buildings of associations from ancient Roman times.

In the late ancient period close similarities with future confraternal complexes can be found in the meeting places of Mithraic secret societies that spread throughout Italy from the end of the first century A.D. Even if these architectural complexes were built by secular groups for an eastern pagan cult, we find in them close similarities with later confraternal oratories, for example in the *sacrarium*, a place used by followers of the Mithraic cult for secret ceremonies and banquets. The sacrarium had a rectangular shape with stone stalls where the initiates used to sit running along the longer sides; a solution similar to the arrangement of wooden stalls in the confraternal oratories of the medieval and Renaissance period. In the wall at the back of the sacrarium there was a pedestal with a statue of Mithras on it; in the confraternal oratory this pedestal was replaced by an altar dedicated to the patron saint of the association. These similarities, however, are only formal and

1 Except for some specific contributions regarding the most important Italian confraternal architectural complexes, there are few scholars who have tried to examine the confraternal architectural production as a whole in order to discover its common typological, architectural, and stylistic features. A first attempt, aimed more at explaining the meaning the confraternal premises had for the associations than the role they played in the history of architecture, was made by Black in *Italian Confraternities,* 300–309.

typological since there are so many cultural, religious, and temporal differences between Mithraic secret societies and early confraternal associations. Nonetheless, many early centres of the Christian cult were built on the very ruins of Mithraic complexes, such as the Roman basilicas of Santa Prisca or of San Clemente, and this leads us to suppose that some typological contamination did arise between the meeting places of pagan secret societies and the meeting places of early secular Christian associations.

1. Rome, The sacrarium of the God Mithra in San Clemente

The first culturally Christian space was the "supper room" or the "upper room," where, according to Scripture, the Virgin Mary and the Apostles met and prayed after Jesus' death (*Mark* 14:15, *Luke* 22:12, Acts 1:13). In all likelihood the occasional rooms and the early private worship rooms, the so-called *domus ecclesiae,* were very similar to the supper room (Testini, 553).

These spaces included rooms used by the first Christian communities for gathering and holding religious functions. Certain analogies can be found with confraternal spaces, also distinguished by the presence of rooms for confraternity services and places reserved for religious functions (churches, chapels, etc.).

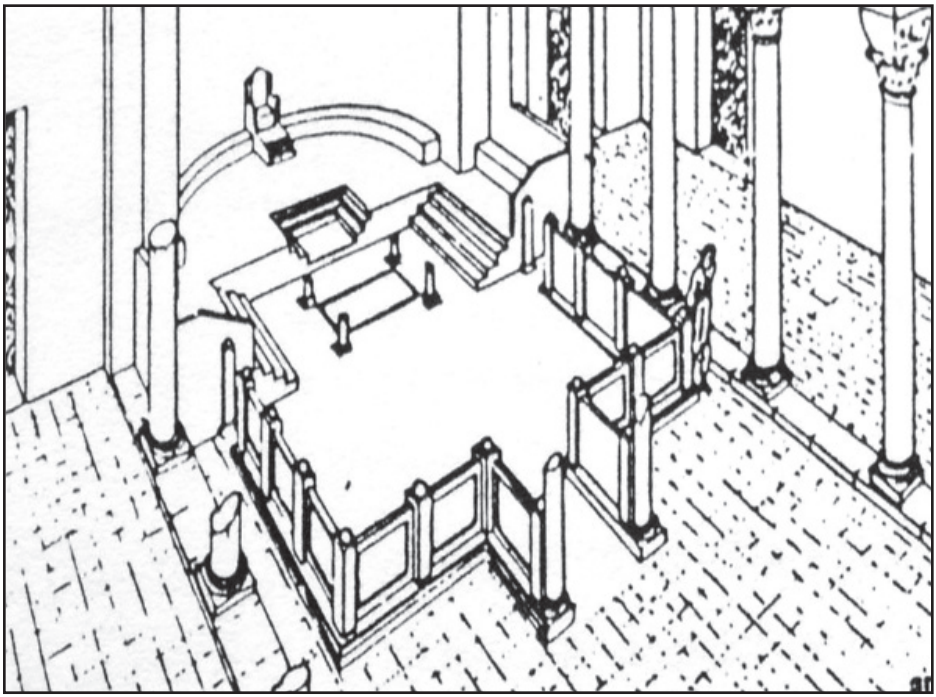
Early confraternities originated in Carolingian time among communities of monks who agreed to pray for each other. Lay confraternities emerged in imitation of their monastic antecedents and inherited from the latter their manner of praying,

their devotion towards the saints, their commitment to piety and charitable deeds, the custom of wearing their own habit, and the practice of gathering into congregations. Perhaps this is why some architectural and typological solutions present in the early Christian basilicas are later to be found in confraternal architecture. The connection, for example, between the oratory, a physical environment that assumed well defined features in the first half of the sixteenth century, and the organization of the apse of the early churches appears, therefore, very interesting. In the earliest Christian architecture, in fact, the apse is closely connected to the bishop's throne, placed in the middle of the curvature in order to express the double image of Christ's chair and bishop's chair. Next to the bishop sat the presbyters on *subsellia*, wooden or stone stalls running along the curvature of the apse and aligned in one or more rows (Testini, 582–587).

The importance of the chair, situated on top of steps and flanked by the *subsellia*—which in Christian symbolism express the link between the Church Triumphant and Militant—would be found again in confraternal oratories where the brothers sitting in wooden stalls along the longer sides of the room expressed their veneration for their patron saint represented at the altar in direct relation to where the Episcopal chair would have stood. Close analogies with confraternal oratories are also recognizable in the *Schola Cantorum*, a rectangular space, often raised and fenced in, with stalls running along the long sides, where the choir or the clergy attending solemn ceremonies sat. The connection with the confraternal oratory is confirmed by the functional analogy existing between the two spaces: both of them served to accommodate groups of singers and exploited, from an acoustic perspective, the particular layout of the stalls.

As we have already noted, however, confraternal architecture is not limited only to the oratory, but includes parts of confraternal buildings usually containing additional spaces used for a variety of purposes and wisely joined together in order to answer to the various functional needs of the associations. The *diaconiae* (Oriental religious charitable complexes that spread in Italy at the beginning of the sixth century) are very similar to these buildings. In Rome we have no information about them until the pontificate of Benedict II (684–685 A.D.), when we find that they were built in the city centre, both on top of pagan buildings and beside churches dedicated to saints of Oriental origin. They were run by a *pater diaconiae*, who could be a layman, assisted by an administrator and by *diaconitae* who dispensed supplies to the poor (Testini, 615).

Even if the origins of the confraternal phenomenon can be dated to the Early Middle Ages, it was in the thirteenth century that lay associations expanded significantly. Without a doubt the concerted pastoral action of the Mendicant Orders, which encouraged and supported confraternities by housing them in their churches and convents, contributed to the dramatic spread of confraternities in the thirteenth century. The first confraternity buildings date back to this period and so it is only at this point that we can begin to speak of confraternal architecture.



2. Example of a presbytery with a rectangular shape

When confraternities were established, they were normally allowed to meet in convents in spaces that were then adapted to the needs of the brotherhood. Only at a later stage were confraternal buildings erected, and this was done on the model of the chapter-houses of convents and of choirs in abbeys. They consisted of rectangular rooms, with rows of stalls along the two long sides of the room. Only a very few scattered traces of these first sites have come down to us and they are not enough to allow us to determine exactly the architectural and typological features of early confraternities. One reason for this scarcity lies in the modest financial situation of these organizations that did not allow them to engage in important building projects. Another is that in their early years many confraternities met in the open air, as did the Genoese brotherhoods (the so-called *"Casacce"*), so they did not need a special building. If we then consider the continuous architectural intervention of confraternities on the few medieval confraternal buildings extant, we can understand how difficult it is to determine the peculiar features of the early confraternal spaces.

The oratory of the Compagnia della Misericordia, or del Bigallo, in Florence is a case in point. Built in 1358 next to the Piazza di San Giovanni, this confraternity building consisted of a portico with three cross spans. The spans facing the Baptistery had curtained walls to house the chapel, while the span facing Corso degli Adimari was left open and was used both as a parvis and as a place to meet the poor. Above the loggia the small confraternal building contained the brotherhood's

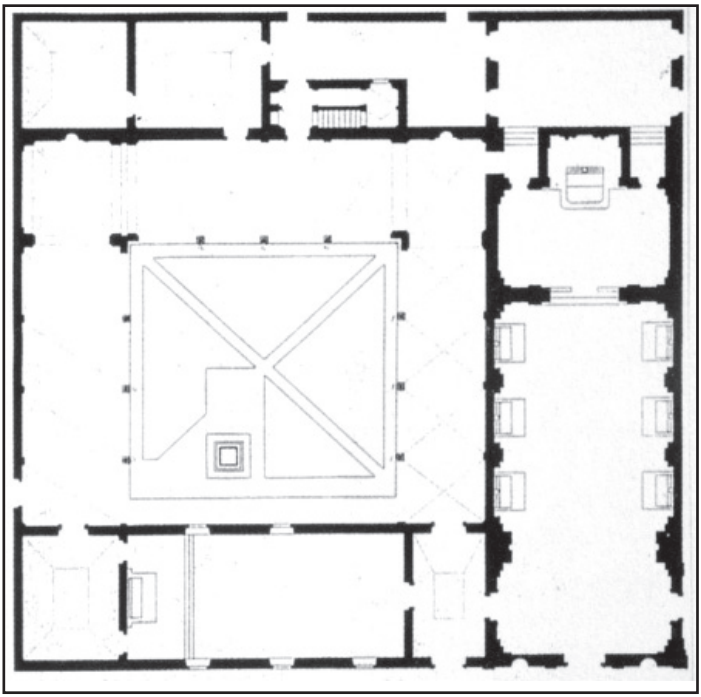
meeting rooms, which were enlarged in 1453 to accommodate the increasing number of brothers. This two-storey building with a series of windows above the entrance portico reveals the presence of several spaces responding to the needs of the association: a chapel, an entrance hall where orphans could be left, and upper rooms used for meetings.

Starting in the Middle Ages, then, confraternal buildings appear as real architectural complexes that not only consist of a church or oratory, but also answer to the varied demands of the associations they house. The simple rectangular building, the oratory and the rooms for large charitable deeds it contains would become the distinguishing features of confraternal architectural production.

As time passed, and even before the Protestant Reformation, a reforming movement emerged within the Church that involved both clergy and laity. New confraternities sprang up that, in addition to the devotional and charitable activities of their predecessors, also sought to reform the Church from its grass roots. In terms of architecture, this is the period when the rectangular plan, used up to now for functional reasons or in order to emulate the simplicity of Mendicant convents and churches, was used to reflect architecturally the reformist severity of the Pre-Tridentine confraternal movement (Benedetti, 78).The first half of the sixteenth century witnessed the spread of the confraternal phenomenon in Rome, corresponding to the widespread reformist movement before and after the Council of Trent. This is the period when the Roman Archconfraternity of the Gonfalone was created from the union of several lay groups so as to adhere to the reformist spirit that had reached Rome from the north of Italy and from the colonies of Florentines living in Rome that promoted new associations characterized by a deeper sense of social involvement. An example of this phenomenon can be found in the Confraternity of San Giovanni della Pietà dei Fiorentini, which helped the Roman population stricken by the plague of 1448. Another example is the Confraternity of San Giovanni Decollato, founded in 1448 in order to comfort the condemned and bury them after their execution, much like its model the Florentine Compagnia di Santa Maria della Croce al Tempio, called "dei Neri," whose similar statutes, organization, and activities it emulated.

The sixteenth century thus saw the erection of the most important Roman confraternities and the development of the oratory shaped as a rectangular room with an altar at the far end and wooden stalls along the sides. Among the most important confraternal buildings, that of San Giovanni Decollato spread, in the Roman area, the reformist simplicity of the early Tuscan confraternities. The brotherhood began building its own headquarters in 1488, but work was soon interrupted and did not resume until 1535 when, after some years, the church and the oratory were eventually completed.[2] The two buildings were linked to the

2 Moschini, *S. Giovanni Decollato,* 9. The presbyterial chapel was built around 1546 by the *muratore* Francesco da Sangallo, who can probably be identified as the Florentine sculptor and architect Francesco di Giuliano da Sangallo. In 1553 Vasari finished the



3. Rome, Plan of the confraternal complex of San Giovanni Decollato

adjoining cloister, giving rise to the most important sixteenth-century confraternal complex in Rome. It served as a model for subsequent architectural experiments of Roman confraternities. The San Giovanni Decollato complex thus sums up all the features of confraternal architecture: the presence of rooms for different functions and connected to each other in order to answer to the functional and ritual needs of the brotherhood; the church, for public religious functions; the oratory where the brothers met and prayed; the additional rooms and the inner cloister where the people sentenced to death were buried. With the simple rectangular plan of its church and oratory, the complex belongs to the *sintetista* (synthetical) current that permeates most of the architectural production of the sixteenth century and all of the confraternal architecture of the period (Benedetti, 79).

Distinct from the *sintetista* severity of Roman confraternal architecture, Venetian confraternities (the so-called *Scuole*) stand out for the magnificence of their buildings. Such richness of display is clearly a reflection of their extensive financial means and of the greater autonomy of Venetian sodalities. The *Scuole* were

canvas of the *Beheading of John the Baptist*, situated on the high altar, but the decoration of the building was only finished at the end of the sixteenth century. The oratory was decorated with frescos by Iacopino del Conte, Salviati and Pirro Ligorio. The decoration was implemented in successive stages and the fresco of *Beheading of John the Baptist*, probably the last painting completed there, dates to 1553.

4. Rome, The oratory of San Giovanni Decollato

self-administered sodalities which, although of religious inspiration, were not at all under Church control. Not even the patriarch of Venice had a say in their activities, but only the Council of the Ten.

The Venetian *scuole* erected their most important buildings between the fifteenth and sixteenth century. The *scuole grandi* of San Giovanni Evangelista (est. 1308) and San Marco (est. 1260) employed the most famous architects of the time, such as Mauro Codussi and Pietro Lombardo. Shortly after them, the *scuola grande* of San Rocco (est. 1478) erected the most important confraternal complex in the city. Since it needed a monumental centre proportional to its extensive financial means and to the importance achieved by Venetian society, in 1517 the Scuola di San Rocco entrusted the architect Bartolomeo Bon, a pupil of Mauro Codussi, with the task of designing their new building, which was completed in 1564. The building has the shape of a compact parallelepiped with premises devoted to different needs: the lower hall, a real ecclesiastic space with a nave and two aisles and an altar at the end; an adjoining room housing the hospice for pilgrims, and the upper room, a private space and oratory for the confraternity. From the outside the building looks like one of the many classic Venetian two-storey noble palaces, but on closer inspection the presence of the double entrance and the simple pilasters instead of full relief columns on the right side of the façade reveals the complex heterogeneous premises housed in this confraternal building.

5. Venice, The Scuola of San Rocco and its grand access staircase

What makes Venetian scuole different from the rest of the architectural production of sixteenth-century confraternities is the opulent decoration of the internal rooms. In the Scuola di San Rocco the decoration of the internal rooms was entrusted to Jacopo Tintoretto who, in about twenty years, completed the twenty-seven paintings of the ceiling and ten *teleri* on the walls in the upper oratory, as well as the paintings of the lower Hall. The Venetian *scuole*, however, are an isolated example in the Italian confraternal architectural production of the sixteenth century which, for the most part, follows the *sintetista* experience of the pre- and post-Tridentine period.

The founding of so-called archconfraternities in Rome would provide a model that brought about uniformity in confraternal architecture throughout the Catholic world. The links between the sodalities in Rome and those in the provinces, strengthened on the occasion of jubilees years—when Roman confraternities provided hospitality to associated sodalities—contributed to making the Roman confraternal complexes models for the other affiliated sodalities elsewhere.[3] To reveal the close relationships that homogenized the extensive architectural production of Italian confraternities, it is therefore necessary to examine the

3 For an analysis of the link between the Roman and Abruzzese architectural production with regard to the confraternities of Orazione and Morte and that of the Suffragio, see Lucantoni, "La chiesa di S. Maria del Suffragio dei Morti."

premises of Roman archconfraternities. A prominent role was played by the Roman archconfraternities of the SS. Sacramento and of the Rosario, both located near the Dominican conventual complex of Santa Maria sopra Minerva. These associations assembled a large number of similar sodalities that were closely associated with the high altars in provincial parish churches or in conventual churches belonging to the Dominican Friars.

From an architectural point of view the archconfraternities of the SS. Sacramento and of the Rosario, owing to their prominent devotional character, did not build large confraternal complexes, but built impressive chapels inside the churches where they had settled. These premises were the core of sodality's life and their artistic and architectural importance depended on the power and status—especially financial means—of the associations themselves. In Rome the Confraternity of the SS. Sacramento was responsible for the high altar in the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva. The Company of the Rosario was based in the charitable chapel of the Capranica family, situated on the right side of the choir. The chapel was restored and decorated thanks to the archconfraternity in the second half of the sixteenth century, and in 1579 the image of Our Lady of the Rosary, previously placed in the chapel of San Giacinto, was moved on to the new altar. This sixteenth-century architectural intervention sought to formally reorganize the space, replacing the cross vault with a Renaissance style coffered ceiling (Palmerio/Villetti, 141–254).

6. Rome, The chapel of SS. Rosario in Santa Maria sopra Minerva

In devotional confraternities, the chapel was the heart of the sodality. It was there that the brothers carried out their primary religious observances, exposed the Holy Sacrament and, most of all, collected the offerings of the faithful. When building their chapel, confraternities aimed for high artistic and architectural quality, so as to attract as many faithful as possible and thus increase the sodality's revenues. Sometime, devotional confraternities housed in conventual churches received some rooms from the friars, often in the adjacent convent. The sodalities used them for their oratory or as private spaces for their meetings, while retaining the chapel as open space for public devotion by the faithful. If the sodality did not have its own oratory, as was the case with the Confraternity of the Rosary in Rome, the brothers would meet either at the house of one of their brothers or in rooms in the nearby convent made available to them by the friars (Black, 301) .

The artistic and architectural value of confraternal buildings has always been directly related to the degree of autonomy or dependence which the brotherhood enjoyed in relation to the clergy of the church offering hospitality. Therefore, the most important confraternal architectural productions belong not so much to the sodalities closely linked to religious orders but to confraternities who had their own site, separate and independent from parishes and convents (Black, 300).

The construction of the site of the archconfraternities of SS. Crocifisso in San Marcello and of the Gonfalone, which followed the example set by the Confraternity of San Giovanni Decollato, gave a strong boost to the confraternal architectural model of the oratory. In particular, the oratory of SS. Pietro e Paolo served as a model for the many confraternities associated with the Roman Company of the Gonfalone. The oratory of SS. Pietro e Paolo, built between 1544 and 1547 on the ruins of the church of Santa Lucia Vecchia (which had been the sodality's first site), has a very simple rectangular shape, with long rows of wooden stalls facing each other running along three sides, a wooden coffered ceiling, and a monumental altar on the far end; all these elements would become standard for nearly all the most important confraternal complexes in Italy and Europe.[4]

The oratory of the Gonfalone was painted after 1568 with a fresco representing scenes of the Passion of Christ, which answered to the pedagogic and propagandistic needs typical of the cycles of painting ordered by confraternities during the Counter-Reformation. From the sixteenth century onward, the oratory thus became the centre piece of confraternal complexes. Used by the brothers for meetings and religious services, it remained a consistent feature among the various architectural spaces that served the functional needs of confraternities.

From the second half of the sixteenth century, we can notice a process of specialization that would lead to the growth of sodalities involved in a variety of

4 The other important Roman confraternal oratory of SS. Crocifisso of San Marcello, which was erected in the second half of the sixteenth century on a design by the architect Giacomo della Porta, should be seen in the same way (von Henneberg, *L'Oratorio dell'Arciconfraternita del Santissimo Crocifisso di San Marcello*, 11–47; Lucantoni, "Le Confraternite romane nell'Archivio Segreto Vaticano," 86).

7. Rome, The oratory of SS. Pietro and Paolo

charitable activities. Some sodalities attended prisoners or the sick in hospitals, others were involved in the administration of orphanages or houses for either spinsters or ill-married women, in the burial of the dead, in the suffrage of souls, while others were aimed at people in particular occupations or from the same geographic origin.[5]

Among the hospital confraternities in Rome, the most important was, no doubt, SS. Trinità dei Pellegrini e Convalescenti, founded by twelve laymen who in 1540 joined Father Persiano Rosa and St. Philip Neri in order to help convalescents recently discharged from hospitals and pilgrims who did not find a place to lodge (Maroni Lumbroso/Martini, 425). Thanks to its extensive hospitality towards members of associated sodalities, especially during jubilee years, the Confraternity of the SS. Trinità provided leadership to its affiliates, from both an organizational and an architectural perspective. In order to help pilgrims, the Roman archconfraternity was obliged to acquire suitable buildings. At first it used the church of San Salvatore in Campo, and then, in 1558, it acquired in perpetual lease the church of St. Benedict in Arenula (which was soon restored) and was able to purchase a house next to it and use it as its first hospital. In 1579, the church was given to the brotherhood

5 See, among others, Pocino, *Le confraternite romane*; Maroni Lumbroso/Martini, *Le confraternite romane;* Morelli, *Le corporazioni romane di arti e mestieri;* and Martini, *Arti e mestieri e fede nella Roma dei Papi*.

8. Rome, The confraternal complex of SS. Trinità dei Pellegrini and Convalescenti

outright. That same year, SS. Trinità decided to demolish it and erect a new church, designed by the architect Martino Longhi il Vecchio. Meanwhile, beginning in 1572 the confraternity had already started adding a new wing of the hospital, complete with a chapel, a refectory, and adjoining service rooms.

By the end of the sixteenth century the architectural complex of SS. Trinità had acquired the typical characteristics of confraternity buildings mentioned so far. In a 1597 floor plan by G.B. Maggi, we can clearly note the presence of a church with a nave and two aisles, as well as facilities suitable for the assistance of pilgrims, such as the long rectangular dining-hall with adjoining rooms running parallel to the longitudinal axis of the church, the trapezoid shaped kitchen, the dormitory, a rectangular room at right-angle to the dining-hall, several courtyards and loggias, a large garden to some extent turned into a cemetery, two rooms used as pantries, and other rooms probably reserved for the priest and the confraternity's staff. Also in the plan is the inevitable confraternal oratory, with an altar and two square chapels and annexed sacristy, built in 1570 by St. Philip Neri, the founding father of the sodality.

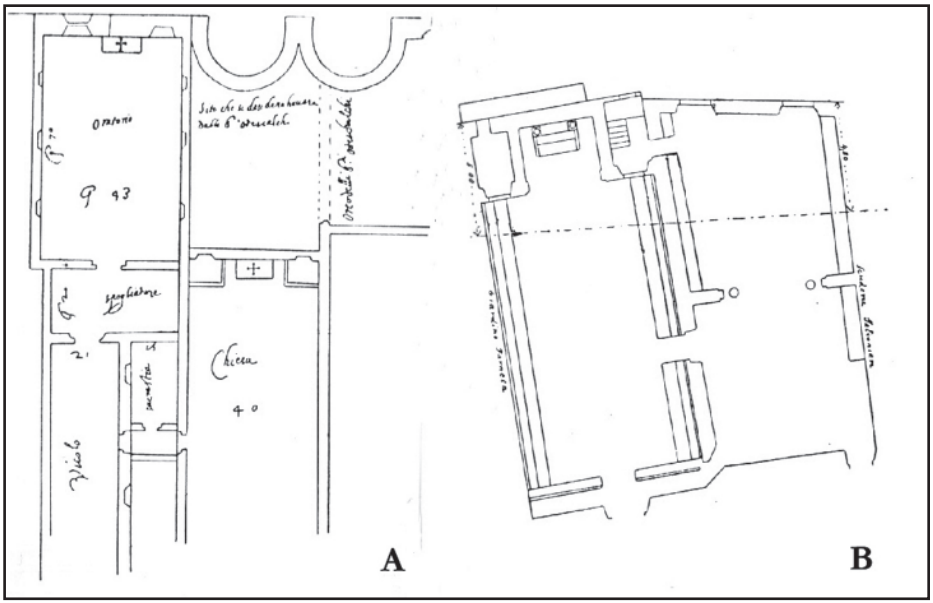
During the seventeenth century the architectural complex of SS. Trinità underwent further transformations: the church was rebuilt according to architect Paolo Maggi's design and further changes were introduced to the oratory and to the services of the hospital under the supervision of architect Giovan Battista Contini. As can be seen in drawings dating to 1680, the confraternal complex did not differ

from the sixteenth-century structure. In the new church the traditional plan with nave and two aisles was replaced by the Jesuit plan with one rectangular hall and side chapels and the premises of the hospitals were enlarged, while the oratory kept the same severe rectangular shape as the early confraternal meeting places. The latter was demolished in 1940. In the map of Rome drawn by Tempesta (1593) it is possible to see the simple façade completed by a triangular tympanum and enriched with pilasters, with a small central portal overtopped by a rose window, a solution that recurs, with some changes, also in the confraternal architecture in the Abruzzo region, as we can see in the façade of SS. Trinità in Chieti, or with pilasters and simple stone in front of the confraternal church of SS. Trinità in Sulmona, where the architectural order frames the central portal with triangular tympanum.

Among the Roman Confraternities of the seventeenth century there are some that, following the example of the fifteenth-century Confraternity of San Giovanni Decollato dei Fiorentini, devoted themselves to the burial and suffrage of the dead. The Arciconfraternita dell'Orazione e Morte, founded in 1538 with the aim of gathering the dead left unburied in the countryside around Rome, was no doubt among those that had the most affiliated sodalities and thus served as a model for them from an architectural point of view. The new architectural elements introduced by the Orazione e Morte are not to be found in its eighteenth-century church designed by the architect Ferdinando Fuga, but in its sixteenth-century confraternal complex of Santa Maria dell'Orazione e Purificazione, which did serve as a model for the many confraternities of death connected with this Roman sodality. Demolished in 1735 to be replaced by a new church, the sixteenth-century architectural complex consisted of a rectangular church, an oratory, and some service rooms. The plans kept in the Archivio del Vicariato in Rome,[6] show that the church, built in 1575, was connected with the sacristy and a service room through a small access placed along the left side wall of the church; there was no a passage, however, to the nearby oratory, which was accessible only from the outside through the narrow side alley.

The early organization of the premises underwent some changes in 1594, when the new sacristy was built behind the church on a plot purchased by the Odescalchi Family. The new room was divided transversally into two parts so that the former served as a communication room between the sacristy, the church and the oratory. The room presented four passages leading to the church, to the sacristy, and to the wardrobe, coming before the oratory and closely connected to it. In this way all the rooms were connected to one another and directly open to the outside, in order to provide for the many activities of the association. The oratory needed two access points (from outside and from inside the church) in order to allow access for the brothers even while religious services were taking place in the church. The reverse was true during processions and religious feasts in which the brotherhood

6 AVR, *Arciconfr. Orazione e Morte - Fabbrica della nuova chiesa* (1577–1614)–(1734–1737), pos. 546. The plans have been published in Bevignani, "L'Arciconfraternita di S. Maria", 53; Hager, *S. Maria dell'Orazione e Morte*, 13.



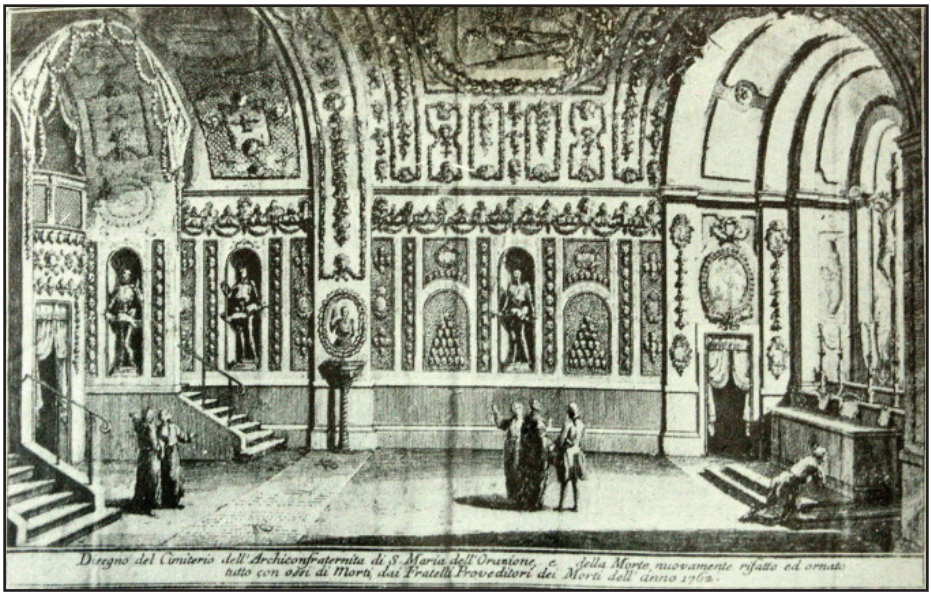
9. Rome, a) The plan of the confraternal complex of Santa Maria dell'Orazione and Purificazione (1575); b) The plan of the oratory and the sacristy of Santa Maria dell'Orazione and Purificazione (1594)

was expected to participate. Once they had donned their confraternal garments in the wardrobe, the brothers could cross the sacristy and enter the church.

The very simple rectangular interior of the church was centred on the high altar on the far wall and framed by the triumphal arch flanked by two small square rooms through which one could access the two choirs overlooking the church. The side walls of the church had no architectural elements, except, in the middle, the two side-altars devoted to St. Michael the Archangel and St. Catherine.[7] In the oratory, in place of the side-altars there were the usual rows of wooden stalls surmounted by two large oil-paintings depicting events that had occurred to the confraternity, images of theological virtues, and symbols regarding Death. The initial rectangular shape of the oratory was modified in 1594 with the building of the altar chapel, flanked by two small service rooms on the far wall.

The architectural complex of Santa Maria dell'Orazione e Purificazione described so far was similar to that of other Roman confraternal buildings, except for the fact that it included an underground cemetery, a physical space closely linked to the activity of the association. The entire architectural complex was erected

7 Bevignani, "L'Arciconfraternita di S. Maria", 14. A precise description of the building (now demolished) can be founded in the account of the apostolic visit of 1669 (Archivio S. Congregazione della Visita Apostolica, *Visitatio Ecclesiae et Archiconfraternitatis Mortis et Orationis anno 1669*, n. 53). Moreover, a miniature of the year 1676 is kept in the AVR, depicting the interior of the church and the oratory on occasion of the centenary of the foundation of the building.



10. Rome, The underground cemetery of the church of Santa Maria dell'Orazione and Morte

on ground sloping toward the Tiber River, so that the cemetery, placed under the sacristy and the oratory, had a windowed wall that ventilated the burial premises.[8] More typical of the architecture of confraternities of Death was the sodality's macabre decoration, intended to be a continual warning to the faithful, very much in line with preachers such as Girolamo Savonarola, who urged people to live *"con gli occhiali della morte"* (with death's spectacles).[9] The macabre element, used extensively by Fuga in the eighteenth-century church, was perhaps already present in the church of Santa Maria dell'Orazione e Purificazione, as the old stone plaques still in existence on the sides of the portal of the present church suggest. In 1674 a further contribution decorated the façade of the church with "panels, foliage, doors

8 Bevignani, "L'Arciconfraternita di S. Maria", 41–42. In 1762 the underground cemetery was entirely covered with human bones, by order of the confraternity superintendent (Agostino Ancidoni). The operation is closely connected to a similar operation enacted some years earlier in the premises of Archconfraternity of the SS. Stimmate of St. Francis of Assisi. See Amadei, "Un cimitero cinquecentesco nei sotterranei della chiesa delle Stimmate."

9 The macabre elements were spread in the Roman environment by Florentines living in Rome belonging to the confraternities of San Giovanni Decollato and of the Pietà, whose way of thinking appears closely connected with the reformist principles expressed by Girolamo Savonarola. The case of the most illustrious member of Confraternity of San Giovanni Decollato, Michelangelo Buonarroti, is emblematic: on a wall of his Roman house he had painted a skeleton in a coffin so as to better meditate upon death; see Benedetti/Zander, *L'Arte in Roma nel secolo XVI*, 368–369.

frontispiece, skulls of the dead, cherubs and voluted windows" designed by the architect Gregorio Tommasini.[10]

Close analogies with the building of the Roman archconfraternity of Orazione e Morte can be found in the architectural production of confraternities in the Abruzzo, affiliated with this Roman archconfraternity. The oratory of the Confraternity of Sacro Monte dei Morti in Chieti, rectangular in shape and flanked by wooden stalls, follows exactly the format of a sixteenth-century oratory.[11] Opposite the altar, on the far wall, there are three stalls reserved for the governor, his assistant, and the dean. Aside from the Roman wooden coffered ceiling, the building presents two brick cross-vaults. Following the Roman model, the chapel is connected to the sacristy and the governor's room. These rooms in turn communicate with the outside, creating an architectural complex perfectly in accordance with the confraternity's functional needs. A further link with the architecture of the homonymous Roman association was the presence of a small chapel dedicated to the Blessed Virgin of Mercy, placed under the sacristy and used, from 1734, as an underground cemetery for the brothers themselves.

Amid the remarkable architectural production of Abruzzese confraternities devoted to the cult of the dead, the Church of St. Joseph belonging to the confraternity of Orazione e Morte of Lanciano (near Chieti) is most closely linked to the Roman model. The building, whose only remnants today are the external walls and the stone portal along via dei Tribunali, was built on a steep ground. Beneath the rectangular room covered with a coffered ceiling there was a large burial space with an altar dedicated to the Madonna of Mercy that was used, when required, as a meeting room for the brothers.

During the sixteenth century, many other confraternities in Rome also settled near their churches and oratories. Among the most important confraternal complexes was that of Sant'Eligio dei Ferrari (1562) and, some years later, San Giuseppe dei Falegnami, consisting of the homonymous church which stands on the site of the ancient Mamertine Prison, and of the adjacent sixteenth-century oratory. The latter has a rectangular shape and a marvellous wooden ceiling. It was completed with wooden stalls and decoration in the first half of the seventeenth century.[12]

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10 AVR, *Arciconfr. Orazione e Morte - Documenti relativi alla chiesa di S. Maria dell'Orazione e Purificazione,* 546, cl. X. Among the letters there is a contract drawn up by the confraternity and the *muratore* Simone Arnolfi "who undertakes to build the façade according to the plan drawn up by architect Gregorio Tomassini."

11 The original seventeenth-century structure is today heavily modified by the rich stuccoes executed in 1709 by the architect Giovanni Battista Giani. On the back of wall of the chapel above the only altar, there is a painting by Neapolitan painter Paolo de Matteis (1727) portraying the Virgin and Child and the souls in Purgatory. Beneath the painting there is a niche housing the wooden statue of the Dead Christ, which is carried in procession on Good Friday. The two elements are part of a rich composition decorated with gilt stuccoes, flanked by two statues of angels, and topped by a semicircular tympanum which has, in the middle, a gilt circular medallion.

12 The oratory was built in 1569; the early stalls date to the year 1574; the wooden decora-

11. Chieti, The oratory of Sacro Monte dei Morti

These and other sixteenth-century buildings[13] should take the credit for keeping alive, in confraternal architectural production, the preference for the rectangular church and the presence of an oratory around which the different additional rooms were assembled, in response to the various cultural and functional needs of the association.

At the end of the sixteenth century Rome counted 109,729 inhabitants and 97 parishes; with the new confraternities that sprang up in the second half of the century, the number of confraternities grew to 111. In the seventeenth century 38 more were added. By the eighteenth century there were 171 confraternities (Armenante/Porro, 71), which provided a real associative net much more powerful than the parish structure, both in the number of affiliates and in their social and economic power (Paglia, 268).

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tions and cornices (frames) for the altar date to 1577. The ceiling is in pink and violet carved wood and includes, in the central lacunars, three *Stories of the Holy Family* by Marco Tullio Montagna, of 1631–37.

13 Between the end of the sixteenth and the early years of seventeenth century, the oratory of Archconfraternity of SS. Ambrogio and Carlo of the Lombardi was also completed; this association also admitted several confraternities that had by then emerged in other parts of Italy. It is possible to enter the Lombardi's oratory, rebuilt on the site of the old church of San Nicola in Tofo, from the building on the left of the façade of the church of San Carlo al Corso. The rectangular room is wrapped by wooden stalls that frame the altar with a *Deposition* in marble, a work by the mannerist sculptor Tommaso Della Porta (1583).

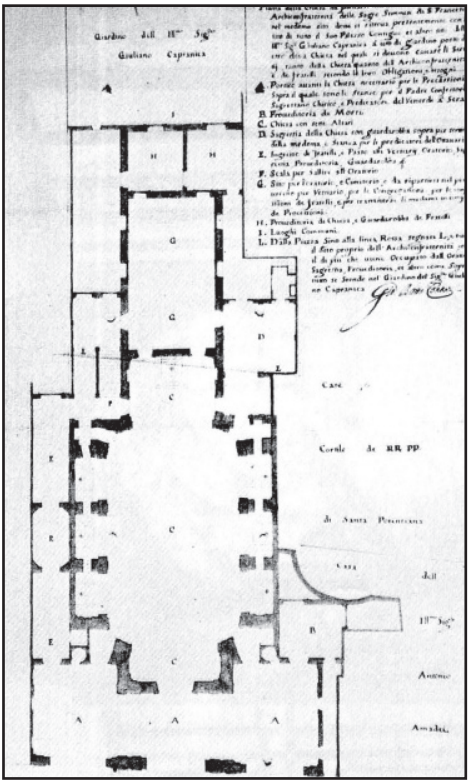
During the seventeenth century a gradual weakening of the architectural severity of the Counter-Reformation, which had characterized the previous century's buildings, can be noted. At first confraternities joined the Baroque movement only by absorbing the richness and pomposity of the decoration. The new spatial explorations of the Roman Baroque did not affect the confraternal architectural production which, during the entire seventeenth century, remained closely linked to the rectangular shape of their early sixteenth-century churches and oratories.

Sometimes the choice of traditional solutions went hand in hand with the conscious rejection of the innovative ones, as happened in the rebuilding of the confraternal complex of Santa Maria del Suffragio in via Giulia (1662–1680) (Salerno et al., 332–342) which did not accept the new spatial sensibility of the Roman Baroque. In fact the Confraternity of Suffrage preferred a more conventional Jesuit plan with a very simple adjoining oratory. The large rectangular room with one altar and wooden stalls along the sides has two different entrances: one links the oratory to the church through the sacristy and the other opens directly to the outside in via Giulia. The complex of the Confraternity of the Suffrage follows the architectural production of the sixteenth-century confraternities, giving birth to a complex consisting of church and oratory; the latter became more important since it stood on the edge of the road on the right-hand side of the façade of the church and underlines the confraternal origin of the entire architectural complex which, from the middle of the seventeenth century onward, was considered to be a model by the many confraternities affiliated with Santa Maria del Suffragio.

In Roman confraternal architecture the solutions undertaken during the pontificate of Clement XI (1700–1721) by the Archconfraternity of the Stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi, established since 1597 in the homonymous church in via dei Cestari, deserves special consideration. They consisted in rebuilding from the ground the entire confraternal complex, a project entrusted to the Roman architect Giovan Battista Contini (1641–1723).[14] Contini's plan takes into consideration not only the Jesuit model of the church with rounded corners, but also the entire confraternal complex with church, oratory, underground cemetery, and service rooms. The oratory, placed behind the presbytery of the church, communicates with the outside through the corridor running along the left hand side of the church, in order to avoid the repeated entrances of the brothers during gatherings and religious feasts, which could disrupt or disturb services in the church. At the same time, the link between the oratory and the presbytery allowed the brothers to reach the high altar easily so that they could help the priests during the religious services. The cemetery beneath, which follows the same rectangular plan of the above oratory, is very interesting.[15] Following the model of the cemetery of the Immaculate

14 Lombardi, *Roma: Chiese, conventi, chiostri,* 215. The construction of the complex of the Stigmata began on 23 September 1714 and was finished in 1729.

15 Amadei, "Un cimitero cinquecentesco", 3–4. The decorations of the wide barrel vault with a reduced arch of the cemetery are made with small bones and with a very skilful technique. They are executed in such a delicate way that they to look like real stuccoes.



12. Rome, The plan of the confraternal complex of SS. Stimmate of St. Francis of Assisi designed by the architect G.B. Contini

Conception of the Capuchins—a religious order closely connected with the lay sodality of the Most Holy Stigmata—the underground room of the confraternity has walls decorated with human bones, placed in an artistic way in order to create elegant geometric arrangements, such as occurs, in 1762, in the cemetery of Archconfraternity of Orazione e Morte in via Giulia. In the rebuilding of the new complex of the SS. Stimmate, more than two centuries after the appearance of the first Roman confraternal buildings, we still find the traditional rectangular oratory, which has not suffered from the many Baroque experimentations of the previous century that had led to the realization of alternative architectural solutions, reaching their climax with Borromini's masterpiece in the Oratory of the Filippini. In fact, beginning in the first decades of the seventeenth century, the first attempts to replace the rectangular space typical of the early oratories appear in confraternal architecture. In 1726 the oratory of the Confraternity of SS. Sacramento in Via was rebuilt, and architect Domenico Gregorini suggested a rectangular plan with

Some side panels, placed like mosaics, are made only by teeth which create a pattern. Near the entrance of the cemetery, the upturned skull of the founder of the confraternity serves as a holy-water font, as he had wanted it.

13. Rome, The oratory of SS. Sacramento in via

corners so rounded that it looks like an elliptic complex.[16] The result was that of a enveloping space, covered with an elliptic pseudo-dome with a lantern, interrupted by deep lunettes with windows that light up the room below.[17]

Something similar happened some years later in the rebuilding of the oratory of SS. Annunziata, belonging to the Archconfraternity of Santo Spirito in Saxia. This building had been erected near the premises of the homonymous hospital in 1688, following the design of the Roman architect Carlo Buratti. It was rectangular with an altar included in an apsidal cavity hollowed out of the thick far wall of the oratory. In 1731, during the rebuilding of the nearby premises of the hospital, the oratory underwent a partial rearrangement in conformity with the design by Gregorini, who had sought to realize a rectangular room for the altar and, overall, to create corner solutions with a concave dihedron that resembled the oratory of Confraternity of SS. Sacramento in Via. Some years later (1742–1746), in the radical rebuilding of the same oratory, architect Pietro Passalacqua emphasized the rounded corners of

16 The Archconfraternity of SS. Sacramento, founded in the church of St. Maria in Via in the mid-sixteenth century, at first held its meetings in an inner oratory in the convent of the Servites annexed to the parish. In 1566 the Confraternity built a simple oratory in the place where the present eighteenth-century building stands.

17 Mancini/Scarfone, *L'Oratorio dell'Arciconfraternita del SS. Sacramento*, 50. The inner wall structure of the oratory as it appears nowadays is by Gregorini. The walls are divided by 12 fluted grooved pillars with composite capitals. The decorations were entirely changed in the restoration work by the architect Tito Armellini in 1865–67.

the rectangular plan, already merged as a result of Gregorini's work,[18] creating an increasingly enveloping space. The presence of six private chapels with a grating giving onto the main church provides a theatrical tone that is characteristic of a great part of the architectural production of the time.

The new trends that emerged in Roman confraternal architectural production of the first half of the eighteenth century would be confirmed on a national scale. During the eighteenth century in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies the confraternal phenomenon showed renewed energy thanks to the statutory reform promoted by the Bourbon State, according to which confraternities acquired legal status and greater autonomy similar to ecclesiastical authority. As a result, in the architectural field, a large number of buildings belonging to confraternities picked up the ornamental richness of Baroque architecture, especially in Southern Italy.

In Naples, from the seventeenth century, the Confraternity of Pio Monte della Misericordia stands out for its realization of the homonymous monumental complex by architect Francesco Antonio Picchiatti (1658), whose style had to reflect the prestige and financial power acquired by the institution. The church of the Confraternity of Anime Sante del Purgatorio, the work of architect Cosimo Fanzago (1652), stands out in the course of the seventeenth century among the many Neapolitan confraternal buildings. In this building the macabre was used to express the dramatic force and spectacularity typical of the architectural production of the time.[19]

In the Abruzzo region, the architecture of confraternities began to speak the new Baroque language from the second half of the seventeenth century, at first adopting only the outward wealth of decoration. In the first half of the eighteenth century the first octagonal plan oratories appeared, followed around the middle of the eighteenth century by the first examples of pseudo-elliptic oratories, much like the Roman oratory of SS. Sacramento in Via. The oratory of the Confraternity of St. Maria del Suffragio in Civitella del Tronto (near Teramo), which dates back to the first decade of the eighteenth century, has walls wrapped up by wooden stalls that cover the octagonal perimeter of the small confraternal room. A few confraternal churches and oratories with an elliptic plan are to be found during the first half of the eighteenth century in the province of L'Aquila. Three years after the earthquake of 1703 the Confraternity of Concezione in L'Aquila erected its own church on an elliptic plan, followed by the oratories of San Giuseppe dei Minimi (1750–70) and of the Concezione nearby Paganica (1771–1776). In this latter case the rotation of the major axis of the ellipse, compared to church of the homonymous congregation in L'Aquila, is justified by the

18 Manfredi, *L'oratorio della SS.ma Annunziata,* 60. The intervention of Passalacqua changed the façade of the building. At first it was influenced by the adjoining buildings, but today it is much more elaborate. In it can be seen the identity of the vertical sequence: portal—oval window—curved tympanum—trapeizoidal fastigium—cross which is deduced from the façade of the Basilica of Santa Croce in Jerusalem, in Rome. Passalacqua worked together with Domenico Gregorini to implement it. See also Varagnoli, "Ricerche sull'opera architettonica di Gregorini e Passalacqua."

19 Cantone, *Napoli barocca,* 102 and Blunt, *Neapolitan Baroque,* 67.

14. Civitella del Tronto (TE), The oratory of Santa Maria del Suffragio

differing functions of the building. While the transversal expansion of the oratory in Paganica answers to the need for space necessary for placing the wooden stalls, in the case of L'Aquila the longitudinal placing of the room acts even more as an enhancer of the path from the entrance to the high altar of the church.

Apulian and Sicilian confraternities play a role of great importance in artistic and architectural commissioning during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They fully adopted Baroque decoration, bringing about a drastic revision of the architectural production of the previous centuries. In Sicily, in particular, there are marvellous examples of confraternal oratories such as those of Saint Zita or San Lorenzo in Palermo, famous for the magnificence of their stuccoes, executed by Giacomo Serpotta between the end of the seventeenth and the first years of the eighteenth century. That of San Lorenzo was built according to the plan by the architect Giacomo Amato; the painting of the Nativity, stolen in 1969, was commissioned from Caravaggio in 1609 by the Confraternity of Bardigli e Cordiglieri di San Francesco

15. L'Aquila, The oratory of San Giuseppe dei Minimi

d'Assisi; the stuccoes were executed by Serpotta (1699–1707); the gilding of the vault of the oratory is by Michele Rosciano.

In the second half of the eighteenth century opulence gave way to the elegance of late Baroque production, expressed with masterly skill in the whiteness of stuccoes, in the delicate reliefs of the pilasters, and in the winding profiles of the backs of the wooden stalls in the oratory of the confraternity of the Anime Sante del Purgatorio in Erice (near Trapani). By the end of the eighteenth century confraternal architecture had reached its zenith and began to decline slowly over the following century because of the new sanitary laws that forbade burying the dead in churches, thus nullifying the role of so many associations devoted to the cult of the dead,[20] and because of the confiscation of confraternal possessions carried out by the new Kingdom of Italy which replaced the private charity of ancient confraternities with the public assistance of state organizations.

During the nineteenth century, confraternities were stripped of their economic and managerial autonomy. In matters architectural, they were thus obliged to fall back on cheaper solutions. In the first decades of the nineteenth century many confraternities settled in the churches of abolished religious orders where they

20 Some associations, adapting to the times, furthered the building of private chapels in the new municipal cemeteries, keeping, in such a way, control on the burial practices of the dead.

16. Erice (TP), The oratory of Anime Sante del Purgatorio

limited themselves to mere maintenance or restoration works. In those cases where confraternities succeeded in building their own site, their architectural input was restricted to the building of simple oratories, single rooms devoid of the large confraternal complexes of the past. In nineteenth-century oratories we find no trace of eighteenth-century experimentalism; confraternities fell back on solutions derived from tradition, discovering the simplicity of the early sixteenth-century rectangular plans, according to the new neoclassic trends of the time.

Storia dell'Architettura e Restauro
Università "G. d'Annunzio", Chieti

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