

THE TREASURES OF VILLA ARCONATI-FAR

#4 – i monocromi di Francesco Podesti

While waiting to open the doors of our little Versailles to welcome visitors who love it so much, we take this opportunity to let you know better the "treasures" that Villa Arconati-FAR guards and that few still know.

Among the treasures that Villa Arconati-FAR holds, there are also some that speak of a century too often forgotten: the nineteenth century.

Although it is undeniable that our little Versailles is one of the best examples of the Lombard baroque, with its elegant sinuous lines, perspectives, symmetries and trompe l'oeil, it is so rich in suggestions that sometimes something risks to "escape".

The nineteenth century is perhaps the most forgotten century when we talk about the Villa, because (and who knows why?) There is a tendency to think that with the end of the Arconati dynasty in the late eighteenth century, the Castellazzo experienced a slow and inexorable decline. Nothing could be falsier.

First, we must be realistic in saying that if no one had taken care of the Castellazzo from the end of the eighteenth century to today, there would be nothing left of this "small ancient world"!

We must then understand how history is made up of periods in which grandeur and ostentation prevailed - which went hand in hand with the importance that the aristocracy had on a social level - and other centuries in which they prevailed other aesthetic canons.

Therefore, even in the Villa, rooms rich in charm in their opulence coexist, such as the Sala di Fetonte, with other rooms that reveal their beauty in a more "discreet" way.

In the first half of the nineteenth century the owners of Castellazzo were the brothers Carlo Ignazio and Antonio Busca. The latter took care of carrying out imposing restoration works inside the Palace, the Garden and the Borgo, where it is still possible to see his stylistic imprint today.

Great art lovers, the Busca Brothers enriched the Villa's collections with some very valuable pieces, including statuary works by contemporary artists Ignazio Villa and Pompeo Marchesi. Of the latter, there was even a marble copy of the famous Ebe di Canova in the Museum Hall.

One of the most important painters of the first half of the nineteenth century, together with Francesco Hayez and Giuseppe Bezzuoli, was "at home" with the Marquis Busca. We are talking about Francesco Podesti, born in Ancona in 1800, was one of the greatest exponents of historical romanticism and the last exponent of "history painting".

His marked artistic skills allowed him to attend the Academy of San Luca in Rome thanks to a scholarship given to him from his city. Canova was like a father to him and helped him in times of economic difficulty.

In his artistic training, from 1825 he undertook a series of trips to Florence, Pisa, Bologna, Parma, Venice and Milan. Here he met the Marquises Busca, for whom he made what is still considered one of his masterpieces: the double Portrait of Carlo Ignazio and Antonio Busca.

Podesti became one of the favorite painters of the Casa Busca, so much so that he made several works in the residences of the Marquises. In the palace of Milan, now known as Palazzo Serbelloni on Corso di Porta Venezia, he painted three frescoes: the Stories of Psyche, the Dance of the Hours and the Birth of Venus, both unfortunately destroyed by the bombing of the Second World War.

In his diaries, the painter cites the fact that he was a guest several times in the Villa di Castellazzo and that he left some "jokes on the wall" during his stay.

What Podesti defines as "jokes" are beautiful dry-painted works on the wall that we can still admire in the palace today!

These are four splendid monochromes, positioned in three different rooms, in two rooms on the south-east wing of the ground floor and in the reading room of the Busca Library on the main floor.

The two monochromes on the ground floor are two scenes taken from much more complex paintings by Podesti. They are both signed and bear the date of 1852. The first is a scene taken from the Massacre of the Innocents, while the other is a scene of the great historical painting taken from the episode of the Oath of the Anconetani, which is kept in the Council Chamber of the Town hall of Ancora.



Francesco Podesti, scene from *La strage degli innocenti*



Francesco Podesti, scene from *Il giuramento degli Anconetani*

The two monochromes of the main floor, on the other hand, are placed on opposite walls of the room which is immediately upstairs from the grand staircase, and which still retains part of the Busca Library. Compared to the paintings on the ground floor, which really look like sketches sketched on the wall, these are much richer in detail and represent two "finished" scenes: these are two paintings with a religious subject, made with the technique of the fake hanging picture. We find two of the pivotal moments in the life of Jesus depicted: the Madonna with the Child Jesus, Saint Joseph and Saint Anne and Jesus mocked and crowned with thorns.



Francesco Podesti, *Madonna con Gesù Bambino, San Giuseppe e Sant'Anna*



Francesco Podesti, *Gesù deriso e incoronato di spine*

The choice of religious subjects at first glance is strange, since in the Villa there are no other paintings on the wall of this theme, except for the private chapel, where we find the representation of the Virgin Mary. The reason can perhaps be explained by the fact that the Marquis Antonio Busca was appointed Knight of Justice of the Order of Malta from an early age, remained celibate and lived an existence in many ways common to that of a religious. His interest in religion is also found in some of the Marquis' volumes which are still preserved in the Busca Library.

His most important commission came to him from the Vatican, following the proclamation in December 1854 of the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

Podesti was called to fresco the walls and vault of the Immaculate Conception Room, the room that is located before the entrance to Raphael's rooms with historical-allegorical episodes regarding the event. The work lasted eleven years and still counts Podesti among the last masters of the fresco.

Unfortunately, Francesco Podesti was forgotten too soon after his death, since the advent of the new artistic currents of the avant-garde brought forward a concept of art totally different from what he represented.