

Growing up in Rome I had the chance to be surrounded by works of important sculptors<sup>1</sup> who transformed the interiors of churches into masterpieces. However, only when I visited Palermo, I started to reflect on the meaning and the power ornamentation has in the realm of architecture. Being there a couple of times gave me the possibility to observe the richness of Stucco present in the city; to be amazed by it; to admire every detail of the relief I was seeing in churches, oratory, facades. Attending Manifesta 12 in 2018 and being a witness of Matilde Cassani's work "Tutto", constituted then a moment of revelation. "Tutto draws on Sicilian baroque traditions and updates them by revealing the complexity of the new and different cultural inputs the city of Palermo experiences today."<sup>2</sup> Having knowledge of Palermo as a city that, due to its location, has been a crossroad, it's easy to imagine the amount of different influences it had. These are reflected in the architecture of the city with elements belonging to the arabic style for example. But it is also visible through the multietnich character the city has. With this regard Tutto focuses on the importance of ceremony to understand a much more complex environment. Particularly it evaluates the sincretic relationship present in the city of Palermo between christian and hindu tamil communities. They both celebrate Santa Rosalia, patron of the city.<sup>3</sup> The project "takes its cue from traditional Sicilian baroque events and engages the local residents, suggesting an official day of celebration to be added to the city's calendar of festivities. The work focuses on the idea of celebration as a tool to describe a wider system of political, social and cultural environment".<sup>4</sup> To this extent Cassani's research ends up in designing a parade in the city center. Working on the ornament as an identity for the community, the project displayed four drapes on the facades of the building of Quattro Canti.<sup>5</sup> On the drapes were represented figures of saints, origi-

5Quattro Canti in a square in city center of Palermo

nally christian, now carrying new and updated symbols.<sup>6</sup> Additional layers were constituted by colorful slips of paper with messages and images that were blasted in the air. "After the explosion all the pieces shot into the air slowly descend, dropping on the heads of the spectators, remaining partially attached to the facades of <u>the surrounding</u> buildings, clinging to a series of ropes 6http://www.matildecassoni.com/#myCarousel39





<sup>1</sup> Bernini and Borromini

<sup>2</sup> http://www.matildecassani.com/#myCarousel39

<sup>3</sup> Santa Rosalia is blessed by the hindu as well; http://www.matildecassani.com/#myCarousel39

<sup>4</sup> http://www.matildecassani.com/#myCarousel39

connecting the buildings, and finally falling to the ground." <sup>7</sup>Through this project the original way of using the ornament was enlarged and Tutto became a collective memory of the city.

To see how architecture has been used to display the identity of place astonished me. To see how ornaments were used in a broader way, to integrate passing of time and new culture touched me. What a puzzled expression my classmates must have drawn on their faces by seeing me so amazed, years later, by the Stucco inside House Dedel in The Hague. It must have been funny for them to see me jittery trying to gather information about that space.

But they weren't with me during Manifesta 12; not even the very first time I met the "Stucchi" in Palermo. It was back in 2016 during a vacation. All the reactions I had while visiting House Dedel were consequences of what that space resembled in my mind about both my times in Palermo. When I walked up the staircases of the House my eyes were jumping around from the details of natural elements to the ones of the varying relief heights of some figures on the walls. Later on I would discover those figures represent the members of the family who owned and lived at the House and were the commissioners of the stucco. Those figures are "Quello che resta" (what is left behind) of the familiar story of the house. "Quello che resta" is the expression through which the "Stucchi" in Palermo are remembered. Known all over the world. they are considered to be the most beautiful execution of that technique. Giacomo Serpotta was the author of them and indeed he is recognised as the "Maestro of the Stucco".<sup>8</sup> From facades to interiors he was the first "stuccatore" to transform a material which had been used, till that moment, only as a mere decoration of interiors into something sublime. He let

7 http://www.matildecassani.com/#myCarousel39

8 Giacomo Serpotta (1656 - 1732)was an Italian sculptor operating mostly in Sicily (region at the south of Italy) with Stucco.



Fig.3,4 Stucco by Serpotti, inside Oratorio di Santa Cita, Palermo



ig 5. Representation of how to create Stucco



the material be malleable and while looking and his sculpture I had the impression of being in front of a theatrical scene. Historically the craftship related to Stucco belonged to a low rank in the hierarchies of art.<sup>9</sup> But thanks to its materiality<sup>10</sup> it has a strong practical versatility which is combined with its stylistic potencies, reaching, with simple elements, magnificent outcomes. <u>During the seven</u>teenth century Stucco's decorative and aesthetic

9Bureau Europa, Stucco Storico the story behind a craft (Bureau Europa, 2018, Mastricht), pp 5

10 Due to its manufacture Stucco didn't belong to the field of painting, sculpture or architecture. It's versatility excluded it from being recognised as a distinct discipline. The history of its craft dates back to Roman times and the technique consists of a mixture of loam, lime, plaster and marble powder.

Bureau Europa, Stucco Storico the story behind a craft (Bureau Europa, 2018, Mastricht), pp 5

potential started to grow in appreciation. This is the time it developed from a medium formodest ornamentation, into full-fledged<sup>11</sup> art form used to enhance interiors with a visual narrative.<sup>12</sup>

The presence of Stucco inside House Dedel is slightly perceivable as one steps inside. We have been guided from the entrance to the dining room according to the circulation the owner would have used back in time to welcome a guest. The same route wouldn't probably have included the passage from the huge void up to the staircases where Stucco is located. I assume quests would have had the chance to see it on their way out. Back in the days the staircases would have been used only by the owner and the servants. I discovered later<sup>13</sup> that those staircases were the promenade to the intimacy wing of the house, leading to family member's room and servants' spaces. Nowadays the function of the house has changed. House Dedel is a public museum. Differences in routing between owners, guests and servants are an echo in the space. Visitors walk around the House freely and none of them know how and when they will encounter that huge void of Stucco.

What is then that is represented in this Stucco at House Dedel? What narratives, symbols are shown through the reliefs on those walls? I was used to seeing Stucco mainly in public space where the monumentality of this craft is admired by many. Inside House Dedel the same monumentality was used to narrate the intimate story, seen by few. The Stucco has been realized as a memorial for Dedel's wife, who died prematurely.<sup>14</sup> The fifteen

<sup>11</sup> Bureau Europa, Stucco Storico the stary behind a craft (Bureau Europa, 2018, Mastricht), pp 5 121t is clearly understandable why Stucco replaced marble on many occasions: it was cheaper and the almost same result could have been achieved.

<sup>13</sup> Martijn F. Le Coultre guided us into the House. He is the chairman of the museum and the foundation which now is taking House Dedel in charge. 14 Martin F. Le Coultre told so.



ig 7 - 10. Inside House Dedel, the void up the staricase:

meters high void up the staircases immortalize memories, feelings, images of the family. The more I walked up on those staircases the more I got the chance to observe the figures reliefs. As you know, my mind was recollecting images of the wonderful Stucco of Serpotta. The ones I had in front of me were not that elevated in terms of realization, particularly for their refinement.<sup>15</sup> Surely they have been made by one of the Italian "stuccatori" of canton Ticino who emigrated to Northern Europe in the 18th century letting the technique be spread around. I couldn't have imagined to find in The Netherlands such an intimate way of using Stucco technique in a domestic context. I see a challenge in analysing this technique as a driving force to read the space. Indeed, as specified, the relief in that void sets up a cluster of symbolism and



Fig.11 Tutto, Manifesta 12 Palermc



meaning and it stands between the intimacy of a domestic space and the power of monumentality which, more often, refers to the public realm of architecture. The tension in the space is emphasized by the lantern at the top of the void bringing beams of light on the Stucco, giving to it a holy aspect. Images of the building back in times <sup>16</sup> show the lantern was already there. The intervention with the Stucco involved the effect natural light would have had on it, playing a role in unfolding its symbolism.

To this extent both Stucco and light operate to give additional value to a specific imaginary. Often they are used to enhance the identity of the space. This concept is nowadays quite common in architecture, art, graphic. Street art, landscape art, are expressions of it. New tendencies allow the continuous exchange between imaginary and reality. Video mapping, virtual reality, or many other visual languages are layers with which architecture is now dealing. All of these are elements that can be added to the ornament, or replace it, in order to give a specific message. I don't see this being different from the lesson I learnt during Manifesta 12.

Though during the history of architecture<sup>17</sup> a huge debate has been set up to discuss whether ornaments and decorations are the same things and whether they belong to the tectonic of the building or not. <sup>18</sup>Modern movement neglected (almost) completely the notion of ornament in favour of the structure. My interest towards the Stucco inside Dedel's house doesn't aim to reach any level of this debate but for overcoming it and showing new possibilities within this realm. Especially I wish to perceive ornament and decoration from a different point of view, without falling in the mere definition of what they are and what they were, but rather using them to have a

<sup>16</sup> R, Monumenten in den haag (1ste editie),Sdu,1986

<sup>17</sup> Especially during and after the Modern Movemen

<sup>18</sup> Adolf Loo's stated his position against ornament in his Adolf Loos, **Ornament and crime** (Penguin Books, 1931, Brno)

better understanding of a place.

The whole experience of the ornament could be reviewed in the constant tension between the disguise of the building structure and the disclosure of its true nature<sup>19</sup>. Thinking about architecture nowadays I believe the debate about ornament is over. Indeed the way technology is shown in contemporary architecture represents a way to deal with the same matters: using technique beyond its necessary shape and giving to it an aesthetic value<sup>20</sup>. Ornaments keep a strong connection also with the constructive memory of a building. This is the reason why ornament and decoration represent " ciò che resta"<sup>21</sup>. If on one hand the debate has been largely discussed, on the other there is a restriction in facing this topic. For years the ornament has become a tabù. Despite or because of its importance, ornaments in architecture escape an ultimate definition. Rather than asking what ornament is, architecture nowadays should focus on how a feature of a building can perform that role. The ideas investigated by Cassani for Manifesta 12, to me, go in this direction. It is a matter of appropriation, evaluation of the historical background and adaptation of it to the recent changes a city or an environment is perceiving. Drawing past symbols with new meaning, stucking images on ornamental facades, projecting beams of light on details of the ornament, using technology to enhance the aesthetic of a building, means reconsider the architectural environment accordingly to its changes. It means including new and different meanings to the space. Reflecting on the story of changing function that House Dedel had during times, constitutes an interesting starting point to look in the future for new interpretations, appropriations and valorization of "Quello che resta" up in the staircases void.



Collotti F., Appunti per una teoria dell'architettura, (Quart Edizioni Lucerna, 2002, Lucerna), pp27 20 Collotti F., Appunti per una teoria dell'architettura, pp. 27 21 https://vimeo.com/355150236

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## List of illustration

Cover illustration: https://www.sanrocco.info/magazine/the-evencovering-of-the-field

Fig1.2 Tutto, Manifesta 12 Palermo,

https://www.google.com/search?q=matilde+cassani+tutto&sxsrf=ALeKk03CqkDZGitNk3mETx3wxg\_nC38w-3w:1610110095427&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiSzqXCr4zuAhVDzoUKHcLiCCgQ\_AUoAXoECAQQAw&biw=1517&bih=730#imgrc=s9sszrGvgRyupM

Fig 3,4 Stucco by Serpotti, inside Oratorio di Santa Cita, Palermo

https://www.google.com/search?q=giacomo+serpotta+stucchi+palermo&biw=1517&bih=730&sxsrf=ALeKk02aU1inhgfZDW-3GTX4WulE6j4M6\_g:1610118945610&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X-&ved=2ahUKEwja&rG-0IzuAhUNdxoKHeDIAe0Q\_AUoAXoE-CAQQAw#imgrc=xkB5vechSxwSwM

Fig 5. Representation of how to do Stucco https://vimeo.com/355150236

Fig 6. Inside House Dedel, the void up the staricases. By Ilaria Palmieri, December 2020

Fig 7 - 10, Inside House Dedel, the void up the staricases. By Ilaria Palmieri, December 2020

Fig 11,12,13 Fig1.2 Tutto, Manifesta 12 Palermo, https://www.google.com/search?q=matilde+cassani+tutto&sxsrf=ALeKk03CqkDZGitNk3mETx3wxg\_nC38w-3w:1610110095427&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiSzqXCr4zuAhVDzoUKHcLiCCgQ\_AUoAXoECAQQAw&biw=1517&bih=730#imgrc=s9sszrGvgRyupM