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THE BASILES. THREE GENERATIONS OF ARCHITECTS

In the mid-Nineteenth century young Giovan

Battista Filippo Basile decided to pursue his career of architecture. He didn't know he was going to be the founder of a dynasty of professionals. A dynasty that characterized the artistic culture of Sicily for about a century.

His son, Ernesto, can be inserted between the genial personalities of the European art scene of all time. He will be the protagonist of Italian Art Nouveau. Grandsons, Roberto and Giovan Battista Filippo Jr., carry the paternal language to contemporary in many works at the turn of the Second World War.

From Neoclassicism to Rationalism, through Eclecticism and Modernism, Basile architects and engineers have followed the evolution of styles from the Nineteenth to the Twentieth century. They captured significant architectural works, some of which remain among the most symbolic and representative architectures of the Italian Reign. Among them, there are great works such as the Massimo Theater in Palermo by Giovan Battista Filippo Basile, the most monumental of the peninsula, or the palace of Parliament in Rome, entirely designed by Ernesto, except for the Bernini's facade. In particular, Ernesto proved his talent as contemporary pioneer of design from magnificent buildings to individual pieces of furnishings.

In addition to this official productions there are other theaters, many buildings with offices for different institutions (like municipalities, prefectures, banks and insurance companies), private residences, noble tombs, monasteries, memorials, exhibition halls, hospitals, but also furnitures.

The successful activities of these three generations

of architects is documented by the materials of the Basile Archive, one of the richest in Europe with 8000 drawings and 13000 cards of documents.

The exhibition “Basile’s Atelier. Crossroads of Arts and Crafts” showed a selection of the Basile Archive. It led the visitors into a tour through drawings, documents and objects. The first document shown is the parchment degree (Pic. 1) that Giovan Battista Filippo Basile obtained in 1846. It is a degree in mathematics and physics, with specialization in architecture, of the Bourbon Royal University of Palermo.

The visitors have been introduced to the Basile's lives and works with a selection of honours conferred to Giovan Battista Filippo Basile. Not only is he the founder of relevant dynasty artists, but a young boy growing up in the Botanical Garden of Palermo. Giovan Battista Filippo spent his childhood in the Botanical Garden, because his father was a land surveyor in that important institution. The Botanical Garden of Palermo was the most important place for the Sicilian Enlightenment. It is the result of the collaboration between the two leading figures in Sicily of the late Eighteenth century, the French architect Leon Dufourny and the Italian botanist Giuseppe Tineo.

When Giovan Battista Filippo was a child Vincenzo Tineo (Pic. 2) managed the Botanic Garden in Palermo, succeeding to his father, Giuseppe Tineo, in the direction of that important scientific institution. Vincenzo Tineo has been a key figure in this story. He acted like a caring guide to the young Giovan Battista Filippo Basile. Thanks to Vincenzo Tineo Giovan Battista Filippo had successful studies in the humanities and continued with higher studies in architecture, becoming then a pupil of Carlo Giachery and one of the most loyal between his students.

Once he awarded a scholarship for the Master in Architecture, Basile continued his studies in Rome (1846–1848) where he attended some courses at the University “La Sapienza” and later at the San Luca Academy. During the stay

in Rome – a training must for the Sicilian artists along the centuries – the newly architect got some remarkable awards: the gold medal at the Exhibition of Architecture at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and the two gold medals for his drawings of the major monuments of the Roman and Renaissance times.

In 1850 he got his first relevant assignment: the design of the English Garden in Palermo, where he had the opportunity to work with his masters, Garlo Giachery and Vincenzo Tineo, that attended at the Commission's supervision. From that moment on, he kept having numerous professional assignments. Then he started his career at the Royal University of Palermo as lecturer at first.

In 1853 he started working on a series of architectural and urban projects for the town of Caltagirone: the cemetery, the new water pipelines, the facade of the main church, the Majorana palace, the palace and the seminary for the Archbishop.

In 1856 he received the assignment as Civic Architect for the city of Palermo. This role allowed him to design a large range of architectures: the municipal facades (1859) of the City Palace and the iron railing (1859) of the monumental ancient fountain, both in Pretoria square; the arrangement of Santo Spirito square (1859); the ephemeral architecture (1860) for the celebrations dedicated to the future first King of Italy and to Garibaldi when Vittorio Emanuele II of Savoy visited Palermo; the Garibaldi Garden (1863) in Marina square; the arrangement of Independence square and its obelisk (1866) and numerous ephemeral, memorial and burial works in the city churches.

In 1865 he also began his relationship with the municipality of Monreale for which he designed two projects: one for the district prison (Pic. 3), never realized, and one for the monumental cemetery.

In 1871, in addition to the direction of the cemetery building site (completed in 1875), he is engaged in designing the renovation of the Duomo square and Pietro Novelli street. The following year, he drew up a plan for the Pawnshop palace.

In 1867, in behalf of the City of Palermo, he visited the Universal Exhibition in Paris and wrote a publication about it. On the occasion of the other Universal Exhibition in Paris, held in 1878, Giovan Battista is the architect chosen by the national government to design the Italian pavilion (Pic. 4). In that occasion he also took part in the international jury of Fine Arts and received the Légion d'honneur as Officer of the Order.

He did not work much with private customers.

The only projects that deserve some attention are the expansion and reform of the Santocanale house near Porta Felice and the "Villino Favalloro" in Virgilio square (Pic. 5), both in Palermo.

The latter especially demonstrates his awareness of the modernity. He was an artist trained in the academy and strongly influenced by Romanticism but with an eye toward the future.

We can assume that the reasons for the reduced presence of private commissions can be attributed to two reasons. The first one is that he devoted most of his time to the research as much as teaching. The second one is his challenging work for the Massimo Theater.

Giovan Battista Filippo had his scientific debut in 1855 with his research in Soluntum and its capitals.

Then he published many works, with emphasis on the study of ancient monuments, among which we mention the "Method for the study of the monuments" (1856), "History of Architecture in Italy preceded by the notions of the ancient Egyptian, Greek and Pelasgian. Guidance for schools of Architecture and Ancient Architecture" (1884), "Curvature of lines" (1884), and finally "The architectural orders of the Italian school" (1887). He also wrote memoirs relating to his most demanding projects.

"On the construction of the Massimo Theater", for example, is given to the press in 1882 to defend himself against the accusations of illegality on costs in excess, that caused the closure of the building site until 1889.

The architecture for which this artist is remembered today, the most representative monument of Palermo still today, it is without a doubt the

Massimo Theater. The image of its facade recurs in the local advertisements and gives character to many communication strategies linked to the city and its cultural heritage, due to its importance both ethical and aesthetic. The monument par excellence of the Nineteenth century western culture was, in fact, the theater, along with the museum. Both substituted the religious architecture and became temples of culture themselves, where glorify the arts, where feed the feeling of home and of national unity, in a secular vision of the society.

The watercolor (Pic. 6), that represents the Massimo Theater's facade in its first version, shows the neoclassical formation of Giovan Battista Filippo Basile. The artist was closely linked to archeology as evidenced by the numerous reliefs of ancient monuments he made. The theater is designed in this first project like a temple in a greek revival view with clean lines and a polychrome marble covering the base. This idea of facade is quite far from the eclectic one he presented at the competition (1867) for the Opera House held in Palermo (Pic. 7).

Unfortunately, the unpleasant events that accompanied the construction of the theater forced Basile to sell the land he had purchased near the English Garden. Then he wasn't able to build his own dreamt house because of the high legal fees to defend himself. The designer of many of the Nineteenth-century architecture that put Palermo at European level died in 1891, right two years after being appointed by the City Council to resume the direction of the of Massimo Theater building site. His son Ernesto then succeeded him and completed the Theater. He was not new in the direction of huge building sites or in the design of monumental architectures. At that time he already was an established professional. He had taken on the important tasks like the project and the construction management of the National Exhibition in Palermo (1891) and the design of the new "Avenida de Libertaçao" (1888) in Rio de Janerio for the Brazilian government. Ernesto Basile was born in 1857 and he is soon

engaged in architectural works. The first one is the direction of the construction site of the family's house in Santa Flavia, designed with his father, the year before he graduated in Architecture in 1879. In 1880 he became his father's assistant at the Royal School of Application for Engineers and Architects in Palermo until 1882, when he moved to Rome, where he has been living for nine years, holding the position of university professor. The first official works are then of the Roman period during which he married Ida Negrini, from Piedmont. The task that begins his professional career is the design of the Calatafimi battle memorial in 1885 (Pic. 8), developed on the theme of the Egyptian obelisk, standing on a built reminiscence of the late ancient mausoleums. The ashlar horizontal layers – a recurrent sign in his architectures – is a tribute to the architecture of the Renaissance, often chosen as the style of the new nation. This work reflects his deep knowledge of the past used with undeniable eclectic mastery.

In 1886, he designed the Villegas cottage in Parioli, one of the more exclusive quarters in Rome. In this case he chose to join the Neo-Moorish, realizing the first and only private residence in Rome with the Islamic style and that today unfortunately no longer exists. The building was surmounted by a loggia, covered by a dome like the Sicilian-Norman ancient domes in Palermo, symbols of the strong Islamic influence of the Sicilian Middle Ages.

The 1888 is the year of his travel to Brazil, where he went for an assignment he received by the Brazilian government (the event is documented by a travel diary and a lot of notes, actually object of a PhD research), but it is also the year in which he received the commission to design the complex building for the Fourth National Exhibition to be held in Palermo in 1891–92 (Pics. 9–10). In the Roman years, he designed beautiful and magnificent projects to participate in three competitions for the courthouse and in two competitions for the parliament building, both in Rome, always being successful among the winners of the first prizes.

Immediately after his father's death, Ernesto moved back to Palermo to hold his father's teaching position left vacant at the university. Then he directed the work on the construction of the National Exhibition and he completed the decoration inside the Massimo Theater.

Between 1892 and 1893 he received some assignments to design private residences for the city's aristocracy. In 1892, he designed and manufactured furnishings and interior decorations of the "Villa Gallidoro" in Palermo (Pic. 11). The following year he was also involved in the work that concerns the extension of the "Villa Chiaramonte Bordonaro" near Croci square (Pic. 12) and the reconfiguration of internal and external facades of Francavilla Palace (Pic. 13). For both buildings he conceives interior decorations and furnishings, among these the library of Francavilla Palace is relevant and shows one of the roots in his contribute to the contemporary "floral style".

In those years, he realizes the two stands, Vicari and Ribaudò, for the sale of tobacco in Verdi square in front of the Massimo Theater. They are two examples in which he uses the iron to achieve innovation. Other works where he chooses the iron as a material to be molded in the tradition but to achieve the innovation are the gate of "Villa Sofia Whitaker" (1894) and the clock tower for the Baron Gangitano in Canicattì (Agrigento, 1897). An album with 26 drawings of extraordinary quality, called by himself "Wrought-iron works in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries in Palermo" (1896), testifies his interest on the art of all the past ages, in a time of particular indifference to the Baroque to the benefit for the Medieval or Renaissance styles. The last years of the 19th century and early 20th century were decisive in the career of Ernesto Basile. This period characterized him as the protagonist of the Italian Modernism.

For example, 1899 saw the realization of "Villa Vincenzo Florio" (Pic. 14), the sanatorium and then large hotel "Villa Igiea all'Acquasanta" (Pic. 15), and the Lanza di Scalea chapel. In these classic examples of Basile's architectural

brilliance, as well as the interior decorations, he adheres to a contemporary floral style, which he interprets masterfully, with measurement and elegance, to achieve a beautiful, free-language autonomy. These projects, which have a close stylistic consistency between architecture, decoration and furniture-design, became a real integral design. The furniture particular – manifested through the previous creations in eclectic and historicist figurative language, as in “Villa Bordonaro” and in “Palazzo Chiaramonte Bordonaro Francavilla” – is now central to the career of this artist, who manages to create perfect masterpieces that combine art and functionality. The early years of the 20th century were, in fact, Ernesto Basile’s best years in terms of furniture production. The furniture presented at the Exposition of Decorative Arts in Turin in 1902, as well as his cycle of the so-called “White Villas” of 1903, express the pinnacle of his modernity. Here, he broke completely with the styles of the past, and freed himself from academic historicism. During these years, his partnership with Vittorio Ducrot grew stronger and they both carried on creating furniture in the Golia-Ducrot style, turning it into one of the most important industries in Europe at that time. The Ducrot production will in fact be the protagonist of the Italian market, with its offices in Milan, Rome, Naples and Palermo. Masterpieces of cabinetry, with extreme high quality serial production, emerged from its factory in Palo Gili street in Palermo. Thanks to the patronage of Florio and to the collaboration with Ducrot, Basile was able to express his genius. Basile the architect, in keeping with the more contemporary concept of the term, became devoted to the aspects of furnishing and decoration, with extraordinary attention to detail, never even neglecting the lighting or wallpaper. His talent was not limited to satisfying the demands of the upper class. However, through his serial productions, his work was also made available to the masses in many Italian homes. Is the case of the chair designed for the Faraglia Coffee (Pic. 16) in Rome, an Italian

widespread model able to compete with the much more famous Thonet.

At the Turin exposition, Basile presented the furniture and decoration for three rooms, a lounge, a bedroom and a study, which seems to anticipate the rationalism of some decades later. This study is a masterpiece of production, which exhumes Basilian elegance in its geometric lines, unthinkable during this period (Pic. 17). The following year, he engaged in the design of three private dwellings called White Villas: Fassini Cottage for the Duke of Verdura, Cottage Ida Basile and Cottage Monroy, which dialogued with the School of the Viennese Secession. The compositional systems of these three pieces of architecture combine the principles of integral design and stylistic unity, meaning they perfectly manage the visible, the layout and the design of spaces and furniture in accordance with the new concepts of comfort, the actualization of the rediscovered stereometry, using typical Mediterranean colors. The agreement of these different components also has a decisive weight distribution with regard to the calibration of the elements that allow the most suitable configuration for plastic coating provided. Abandoned the imitative cladding, "Dwelling Basile" adopts the white plaster on a high base of red orthostats brick plinth, with ashlar, recalling precisely candid Mediterranean stereometry, mitigated by late Gothic subliminal quotations, devoid however stylistic imitations.

The suburban residence of Baron Alberto Fassini (today, only the entrance gate remains) opens this cycle of works (Pic. 18), although just outlined in a schematic diagram of the plant in May 1903. At this point, Basile has already conducted preliminary studies for his house, as well as for the Cottage Monroy.

Both homes are developed in two elevations on basement floors that are partly underground. The plan raised the halls of the study, to receive and the dining room, while the first floor is designed for the bedrooms and their outbuildings. "House Basile" (Pic. 19) is distinguished by the lack of a large double-height lobby with

staircase and gallery, just to minimize all those devices that were non-essential and practical. The architect designed a house for himself that was also “manifesto” of his way of conceiving architecture. He excluded the ostentation of space without any practical purpose. The dwelling is, in fact, a study of the artist: a representation on the same floor of one reception area at the entrance and another in the basement. From the entrance, there is no need to go through the rooms were accessed from the house after a large foyer to the great room of the study of representation from which you could go down to the basement the other studies. The clear distinction between the private residence and the the studio was repeated even within the domestic spaces , where the designer wanted to make a clear separation between rooms “to receive” and rooms for the family. The family area was reached through a corridor on the one hand, which opens onto all’infilata salons and to the stairwell and dining room, in a way communicating with each other. The living rooms look purposefully onto the street front, while the dining room look to the garden. The latter is conceived not as a place of ostentation for “lunch” but as the hub of home life. Even in the choice of furniture, Basile underscores the difference in character between the living and dining room furniture, realizing for the living room mahogany veneer and marquetry and for the dining room solid wood carved oak.

Leaving “Home Basile”, it is important to note that Fassini Cottage is located in the garden unlike the other two, distinguishing itself from the traditional type of construction within an isolated space, then, from road noise, were intentionally placed against the wire road. It used, so, the street fronts as margins of reference, on which it overlooked the rooms, giving breath to the garden at the back, as a closed area and not like an ostentatious and extroverted space. The facades resemble each other stylistically as well as in their finish and upholstery colors themselves. At the bottom, a row of light-colored limestone protrudes from the floor of the

sidewalk and is pushed down to the level of the first-floor window sills, coinciding with the upper limit of the boundary wall of the garden, marking the division between two different types of outer coating. Below the terminal line of the base, the coating bead, attack with the road surface and the corner elements was built in Billiemi gray stone; treated to a big clew roughing, alternating with a lighter hammering in the exhibitions of window-slits of the basement (except for "Detached Fassini" free in front of windows in the basement) and the main entrance, where the cutting of the studs softening in connection with the road surface. The combination of stone and brick gives a linear horizontal belt to the first element of the house that leads to the garden wall. For the covering of the upper part of the base, Basile provides a wonderful insight; he chose Mediterranean white, as if to recall the Serpotta's works. Enriching the crowning with plaster friezes, stylized in floral endings only in Fassini Cottage, and with color-painted tiles, in the other two cases, these decorations – always designed directly by Basile – represent his personal sign. The key element in this refined production is the "Basilian tower" – which stands slender and tall in "Villino Fassini", detached in "Villa Ida Basile", just outlined in "Villino Monroy."

The simplicity of the lines that were enriched in virtuosity floral terminations, the choice of white for the coatings, the abandonment of any symmetric setting and the decoration make the measured "Ville Bianche" an example of modernist architecture of great importance. In this project, each passing plaster ashlar constitute the base for the expression of a modern astilo style. "Ida Basile House" with its new mediterranean language made Ernesto Basile one of the protagonists of his contemporary artistic community in Italy and beyond the Alps.

The high achievement of the artist using a very modern language is confirmed in "Villa Delietta", which was built in 1909. This however marks a return to a traditional composition, with the exception of the interior decoration, the furnishings,

the majolica tiles and the lightning rods. It is a facade that marks the end of an entire season, with the return to the imitative plaster, the defeat of the new and the return to the academy.

With the dawning of the 20th century, the fate of Art Nouveau – of which Ernesto was an Italian pioneer – is marked throughout Europe. Nationalism drags the desire for novelty into oblivion in favor of an art in the service of nationalist policies. The years preceding the First World War are witnessing the return to the academic Eclecticism as an art of propaganda. In the aftermath of the conflict and with the advent of totalitarian regimes, all forms of art will be subject to the requirements of the schemes involved to manipulate the masses.

In the first decade of the 20th century, Basile is the true protagonist in the artistic culture of Sicily. His school, which repeats the language of the master and never departs from it, marks the full development of the city and leaves other important traces in other centers on the island and also in Rome, where the architect was commissioned in 1902 by the government to design and oversee the enlargement and the new hall of the Chamber of Deputies in Montecitorio Palace (Pics. 20–21). This is without a doubt the most well-known work of his career and demonstrates Basile's ability to bring Modernism into institutional architecture.

Montecitorio is symbolically the most important part of the Palace of Justice, and is the seat of the government's legislative power. Basile added and extended the work of Gian Lorenzo Bernini, the original 17th century architect of the palace. After Basile's additions, Montecitorio implemented an integrated design that allows us to admire one of the finest works of applied Italian art. Even the door handles are as elegant as they are functional. The furniture and the rich decoration are as fascinating as the notch in the wooden curtain that seems to be shrouded with many illusionary tapes.

The construction work on the palace lasted about twenty years and accompanied Ernesto

throughout his future successes – until the work was interrupted by the Fascists. The parliament hall was inaugurated in 1918, just four years before the march on Rome. His adherence to the socialist ideologies will be crucial. He publicly offended Fascism when he responded to a Fascist in Navona Square, who asked him why he was not wearing the black shirt. Ernesto said: “Black shirt, me? Let’s stop with this foolishness!” The courage to follow his own ideals under a dictatorship cost him the revocation of the imminent appointment like senator. It also made him and his father lose the planned burial at the Pantheon in Rome. Perhaps more importantly, it caused him to become increasingly isolated from art, while numerous artists grew closer and closer to the demands of the regime. This opened the era of Futurism. However, Ernesto Basile, who until his death remained the most respected exponent of the Sicilian culture, began to represent the past. The exhibition design of the artistic production of the Exhibition of Decorative Arts in Monza in 1925 is a long way from his previous experiences like in Turin (1902), or the Venetian exhibitions (1903, 1905, 1907, 1909) and the Rome exhibition (1911). He enjoyed the happy first decade of the 20th century. The second decade witnessed the birth of important works that contributed to making Palermo a capital of Modernism. In 1910, Ernesto began his work on a memorial to the fallen of 1860 in the space that forms a backdrop to the Liberty Street. In 1912, he completed the seat of the “Cassa di Risparmio” in the central Borsa Square (Pic. 22), the Kursaal Biondo (Pic. 23) for outdoor performances (now sadly used as a bingo hall) next to the Politeama theater in 1913, while in 1916 it’s built up the Ribaudo kiosk in Castelnuovo Square (Pic. 24). The career of Ernesto Basile is not just about works of architecture, but also includes important scientific publications that attest to the vast sweep of disciplines in which he was interested and engaged. He was not just an architect, but also an art historian and theorist of the restoration. In addition to the memories of the many

projects, among which we mention “For my project of the Palace of Justice” in 1884, and “the Palace of the Italian Parliament” in 1890, and articles in scientific magazines, Basile publish two important collections of his iron and wood drawings for the magazine “Per L’Arte” in 1910. In the same year is given to the press – after the most representative work of his production, published by Crudo & C in Turin, entitled “Ernesto Basile Architect. Studies and Sketches” – the monograph work about Giacomo Serpotta, the first scientific investigation on the great plasterer of Palermo.

The last years of the architect’s life were characterized by shared projects with two of the three sons, all of whom were architects or engineers. Roberto and Giovan Battista Filippo Jr. (or just Filippo) helped him in attending the projects. After the tragic death in 1928 of his loved son, Massimo, Ernesto Basile just survived until 1932. He died in his home in Palermo on August 26, 1932.

Nonetheless, Giovan Battista Filippo Basile and Ernesto demonstrated outstanding versatility. They both moved with great ease between large and small works. Their activities cover a so huge production, from theaters to cottage furnishings and, in the case of Ernesto, even to the linen monograms for his own home or to the tattoo for Vincenzo Florio.

Roberto and Filippo Basile, Ernesto’s children, showed the same versatility of their predecessors. Undoubtedly, they are two minor figures, compared with their father. However, they stood out at the regional level. Roberto, the eldest, followed in his father’s footsteps and designed of furniture. His best work is the furniture he designed for his own house in Santa Flavia, “Villa Livia”, which reveals his deep knowledge of the relationship between interior spaces, the details, the architectural shape and the landscape. He also is the author of huge constructions, such as the Cervello Hospital in Palermo or some popular condominiums in the city. Meanwhile, Filippo is engaged in the design and the construction management of numerous residential

buildings. Among which it has to be mentioned the palace in Libertà street, in Palermo.

This stands in front of the entrance to the Don Bosco Ranchibile Institute, within the Littorio district (Pic. 25).

Surely the reputation of both Roberto and Filippo was aided by their father – in terms of their relationship with their clients – but their restricted activities were also a result of Ernesto's anti-fascist choices. This reduced the works assigned to the Basiles' atelier during the 20 years of fascism in Italy. Roberto openly expressed his aversion to the regime, and impeded his teaching career at the University of Palermo. On the other hand, his brother Filippo, thanks to his diplomacy, carried on the atelier until the Second World War ended, maintaining relationships with the artists and the clients.