

THE ART OF BOMBING, THE BOMBING OF ART

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Introduction

Since 1999 Alfa Restauri has been carrying out works in the church of *Monteoliveto*, also known as *S. Anna dei Lombardi* in Naples. The building and some of the works in it suffered great damage during the Second World War from 1940 to 1945. From this experience arose the desire to reconstruct the events of the war, the effects they caused, the climate they took place in and above all to examine the relationship between war and artistic heritage.

Total War

During the ten years following the end of the first world war, progress in technology allowed the air force to develop its potential and in the space of a few years, aeroplanes and especially bomber aeroplanes, due to the fact that their operating range, speed and load capacity had more than doubled, were able to strike the enemy beyond the front line. Theories that the air force was capable of resolving all conflicts on its own started to become popular and the idea of its strategic use was considered.

In other words, in tactical bombing, the target of an air attack is any military installation, whereas in strategic bombing the target becomes the whole nation, its industrial system, means of communication, civilians and its cultural and artistic heritage. "Total war" is where the concepts of 'moral bombing' and 'terror bombing' come from. The result is that according to the concept of war that is used, there is a risk that the artistic heritage of a nation is damaged and this not only derives from actions against other targets but also from the fact that the heritage of a nation becomes itself a target as it makes up part of the opponent's identity and cultural roots. The possibility for art to survive an attack and become a war booty, which in some way is still a form of respect and acknowledgement of its value as well as a chance of survival, is denied.

On the basis of this philosophy Adolf Hitler declared he wanted to strike Great Britain with his guide book ready (the so-called Baedeker bombings) and according to the Strategic Air Force it was necessary to compile "...a list of Italian cities that should be systematically isolated and completely destroyed. (...) This list should include cities such as Rome, Naples, Florence, Genoa and Venice as they are in the hearts of Italians (1)". Almost foreseeing the bad intentions of his opponents, Mussolini expressed his concern to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ciano: "I have little faith in our race. After the first bombing of a famous bell tower or of a painting by Giotto, Italians are going to have a sentimental crisis and are going to surrender (2)".

The fact that war was going to go this far was certainly not a secret known only by the political and

military hierarchies, but was known by all, also because western countries had already been using these methods in their colonies for years.

As a confirmation of what has been said, let us consider that from 1931, the Ministry of Education started elaborating a protection scheme for the artistic heritage and in 1938 it launched a photographic campaign of the works of art so that they could be reproduced if ever they were destroyed (3). Many other countries did exactly the same.

What remains of these theories today is present and recognizable in a series of events where the intention of striking the identity of a nation by destroying its art and its historic roots is evident. Some examples are the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha in Afghanistan, of the orthodox sanctuaries in Kosovo, of the medieval bridge in Mostar and also in a less direct way, the Archaeological Museum of Baghdad.

The Pre-war climate

When Italy entered the war, the protection scheme of the artistic heritage that had been planned for a long time, was implemented.

The movable works, the archaeological heritage and the archives and books considered the most important were transferred to safer places such as underground deposits or places that were not of strategic interest.

For works indoor and outdoor that were not transportable, wooden structures were built that supported layers of mats and bags of sand and of algae. In some cases the works were covered by building a type of bunker around them. These stratagems proved to be very effective against the damages caused by fragmentation bombs but were totally useless against attacks in which both fragmentation bombs and incendiary bombs were used. The stratagem that made historic buildings recognizable by tracing big coloured signs on the rooftops and on the front that were visible from above, proved to be extremely disastrous and counterproductive. This kind of precaution could have been useful in the case of precision bombing, carried out by a reduced number of aeroplanes and at a low altitude, but certainly not in the case of carpet bombing in which hundreds of aircraft in a formation from 400m to 3.200m wide were used. On top of that, only the pointers of the first squadrons had a clear view and could release the bombs with precision. The others could only release their bombs in the smoke caused by the others.

The war and Italian art

Chronology

10 June 1940 –

Italy enters the war.

10 July 1943 –

The Anglo-American troops arrive in Sicily.

25 July 1943 –	The fascist government falls.
8 September 1943 –	Italy declares armistice with the allied armies. Subsequently the German army occupies Italy.
9 September 1943 -	The allies arrive in Salerno.
5 June 1944 -	The allies occupy Rome.
29 April 1945 -	The German army decides to surrender.

As one can deduce from this brief chronology, from the invasion of Sicily which took place on the 10th July 1943 and up to the end of the conflict, Italy became a theatre of war in which foreign armies fought for almost two years. In particular in the areas where the armies were facing each other for long periods, the devastation of the territory took on apocalyptic proportions. From the arrival in Salerno to the breaking of the *Cassino* line, the allies took 9 months to cover a distance of about 150km. After taking these events into account and the extraordinary amount of works of art on Italian territory, we can state that the amount of damages to the artistic heritage could have been much heavier. Also, the fact that Italy broke the alliance with the Germans, avoided destruction like in Japan and Germany.

Let us mention, among the worst losses, the series of frescos by Mantegna in the *Ovetari* Chapel of the *Chiesa degli Eremitani* in Padua, struck by a British bomb on the 11th March 1944. The Montecassino Abbey, completely destroyed by American bombers on the 15th February 1944, with the loss of important paintings, architectural works and sculptures, (the precious library was saved by the Germans). The bridges in Florence, especially the *Santa Trinità* bridge by Bartolomeo Ammannati which was blown up by the Germans in retreat on the 4th August 1944. The Church of *Santa Chiara* in Naples, built between 1310 and 1328, transformed in the eighteenth century and struck by fragmentation and incendiary bombs after the attack on the 4th August 1943.

But beyond this brief list, damages to the heritage took place almost everywhere.

The damages to historical buildings used as military offices by the allies and the systematic theft of works of art by the German army, deserve a chapter of their own. The recovery of these stolen works of art went on for many years after the end of the war.

The post-war period

The effects of the conflict were felt for a long time after the end of the war. For fear of a third world war in the 1950's, entire series of frescoes were removed.

The repairing of the damages to the heritage started extremely early, so much so that some works that were urgently needed started during the war, in areas where the front line had moved away.

Regarding the rebuilding of the fabric of ancient buildings, post-war architecture was neither able to refer to ancient architecture nor see into the future, with the result that today, besides a few rare exceptions, it appears dull and sometimes even an occasion for property speculating.

With regards to architectural restoration, where it was possible, a faithful reconstruction of the ancient work was chosen. This was done in order to cancel the signs of the tragic events that took place and in some way to return to normality (e.g. Montecassino Abbey and *Santa Trinità* bridge (4)).

More ancient buildings were unearthed due to the removal of layers of modifications that took place during the centuries.

This is the case of the Church of *Santa Chiara* where a fire, after having destroyed the sumptuous decorations of the eighteenth century, uncovered the vestiges of this gothic-angevin church that was then rebuilt in this style (5).

Restoration works for the consolidation and reinsertion of parts that were lost were carried out on the works of art although complete restorations were rare.

The war in Naples

Due to the strategic importance of its port, Naples, like Milan and Turin, was one of the cities that was most struck by the war.

The superintendence, acting upon ministerial advice, had implemented a protection scheme for the most important works. About 20.000 movable works were transferred to safer places, numerous immovable works were provided with accurate and complex systems to protect them from fragments. From the 31st October 1940 to the 14th May 1944, the city underwent more than 100 air attacks of various entity, both from the allies and the German side. Also a series of other events contributed in causing great damage such as the terrible explosion of an Italian ship full of munitions and combustibles, anchored to the port on the 28th March 1943 that caused damages that were equal to those of several bombings. The conflicts in the city between civilians rebelling and the German army that had occupied it after the 8th September 1943 and the last eruption of the Vesuvius in March 1944.

The reconstruction of Naples

The first urgent restoration works were carried out during the war.

With the occupation of the allies and the city's slow return to normality, the two Superintendences of the Campania region, with Dr. Bruno Molajoli conducting, implemented a protection scheme financed by the American Military Government, that set up a proper structure with Major Paul Gardner in command (Director of the Nelson Museum in Kansas City, Missouri) and with the co-operation of the Monuments and Fine Arts Sub-commission presided over by Major Ernst De Wald (Lecturer in History of Art at Princeton University).

In this first phase urgent measures were taken, especially of a preservative type, centred mainly on the removal of rubble, the reconstruction of roofs, the reinforcement and consolidation of unsafe structures whereas the restoration of single works of art, especially aesthetic restorations, was postponed.

Figures on the reconstruction of historical buildings that were damaged are quite surprising. If one

considers the terrible conditions the city of Naples and its inhabitants were in after the conflict that lasted three years and a half. By the 31st July 1944 (approx. 10 months after the front line had moved away, but still in full war) 23.500m² of roofing had been restored, 6.360m³ of brickwork had been demolished and 5.400m³ had been rebuilt. 20.780m³ of rubble had been removed and 46.500m³ of scaffolding had been built (6).

Once the most urgent restoration works had been done, the rebuilding of architectures and the reassembling of works of art were carried out.

After the completion of this first series of restoration works, many other works were left incomplete and in the succeeding decades the rhythm of the works slowed down, to the point that in the 1980's when restorations were being carried out after the Irpinia earthquake, the last works on the damages from the Second World War were also being repaired.

S. Anna dei Lombardi

This church, originally called *S. Maria di Monteoliveto* as it was part of a complex that belonged to Father Olivetani, was started in 1411 and underwent transformations halfway through the seventeenth century. In 1801 it was passed to the congregation of *S. Anna dei Lombardi* from where it got its name. It contains extremely valuable works of art, among which sculptures by Benedetto da Majano, Antonio Rossellino, Giovanni da Nola, Guido Mazzoni. Frescos by Giorgio Vasari, a painter from the School of Piero della Francesca and Battistello Caracciolo and other important wooden works of art.



Fig. 1 *Tomb of Maria d'Aragona* by Antonio Rossellino and Benedetto da Majano, 1475-1481.

The bombing on the 14th March 1944.

On the night between the 13th and the 14th March 1944, the church was struck during one of the last

German bombings (the city was occupied by the Anglo-American troops as from the beginning of October 1943). The façade, the pronaos and the bell tower were destroyed and the adjoining *Terranova* and *Piccolomini* Chapels were seriously damaged.

In a written account on that period, this event is described as follows:

"The marvellous sculptures by Benedetto da Majano and Antonio Rossellino, masterpieces from the Tuscan Renaissance and the altars by Girolamo Santacroce and Giovanni da Nola were covered by the collapse of the walls and the bell tower. They were thought to be lost and broken under the mass of rubble.

On that morning, a few hours after the catastrophe, the search and retrieval of the works of art started. Whilst the building of buttresses that supported the unsafe structures was being carried out, the rubble was removed to trace the precious masterpieces that had been buried.

It was a great relief when it was ascertained that the protections put by the Superintendence, at the beginning of the war, around each monument had overcome the hard ordeal. The bags of algae and the scaffolding with bags of sand in them had protected the fragile sculptures. They had slightly slanted due to the violent blow but had sheltered the marble that had fallen from the walls and this had left them almost intact, gleaming under the dust. It was as moving as seeing people alive there amongst all the ruins, as if by a marvel of faith. (7)"



Fig. 2 *Altar of the Nativity* by Antonio Rossellino, 1475.

Damages perceived

Indeed, when one compares the images taken in different periods, before and after the bombings, one can acknowledge that the works of art struck by the explosions underwent only slight damages.

In particular, the *Terranova* Chapel, which contains the altar of the Annunciation by Benedetto da Majano (1489), was destroyed and covered by the ruins of the façade and the bell tower. But by comparing images from before and after the events of the war, one can see

that only part of the damages present on the monument today, can be put down to the bombings.

In the *Piccolomini* Chapel, the collapse of the wall on the left can be seen, where the tomb of Maria d'Aragona is, started by Antonio Rossellino in 1475 and completed after his death by Benedetto da Majano in 1481. Other images of the chapel show a disjointedness of the walls, of the architectural marble elements and a considerable detachment of frescos done by the School of Piero della Francesca.

The façade, the pronaos, the bell tower and the wooden front door from the sixteenth century were completely lost whereas the two marble works of art (the tomb of Domenico Fontana and a marble tombstone) incredibly survived.



Fig. 3 *Mastroguidice* tomb from Gerolamo D'Auria's workshop, beginning of XVII century.

One can imagine all the works of art near to where the explosion happened, the plaster, the stuccoes, the great organ of the XVII century, the wooden decorated ceiling, the altars of the opposite façade suffered more or less serious damages.

The reconstruction

By observing the reconstruction works, it was possible to notice three types of restoration works:

- 1) A temporary structural consolidation that was urgently carried out in order to avoid further collapses. It consisted in the construction of buttresses and reinforcement walls.
- 2) The faithful reconstruction of the destroyed architectures, with the intention of reproducing them with the original shape and material. The two side chapels and the lower part of the façade were rebuilt faithfully but not the upper part and the bell tower. Also the entrance to the *Terranova* Chapel was not restored.
- 3) The restoration for the recovery of important works of art, carried out with great care. Attention was given to the reconstruction of precious renaissance sculptures and other marble works of art from the two adjoining chapels which were worked upon impeccably by Tuscan workers who also worked in the Church of *Santa Chiara*.
- 4) A more hasty restoration was carried out on works considered less important such as plastering, stuccoes, painted decorations. The intent of these restorations was most probably

to make these areas more presentable without worrying about the preservation. The damaged parts were simply demolished without an attempt to preserve them. Some examples are the artificial marble decorations in the wall opposite the façade that were completely removed, the paintings in the vault of the *Piccolomini* Chapel, the stucco cornice of the nave rebuilt in the area next to the wall opposite the façade; but also on the frescos from the fifteenth century around the tomb of Maria d'Aragona, there doesn't seem to be any attempt to recover the damaged parts.

Finally, there is a series of restorations that seem quite incomprehensible after considering the current methods of preservative restoration. A series of works of art were moved from their original location to another place. The wooden ceiling that in the images directly after the bombing appear intact has been completely removed and never put together again.

The surfaces of the stuccoes and the painted decorations on the nave have been scraped away. This partly and untidily removed the layers of colours, the whitewashing and the gilding that was placed on top of one another in time, with the result that the homogeneity of the decoration of the layers was damaged, without recovering one layer in particular. This situation made the identification of the original layers extremely difficult and also the choice for an acceptable aesthetic presentation.

Current restorations

The first restoration in the church carried out by Alfa Restauri was in 1999 and included the altar of the Annunciation by Benedetto da Majano. The restoration was carried out on the occasion of the exhibition *Michelangelo giovane* "Young Michelangelo" held in Florence, as the putto on the right, on the top of the altar, is ascribed to Buonarroti in the period when he worked in Majano's workshop.

In 2001 a bigger campaign started which regarded the completion of the *Terranova* Chapel. The architectonic framework and the other marble works of art amongst which the tomb of the *Terranova* family, all the marble works of the *Piccolomini* Chapel, the altar of the Nativity by Rossellino, the tomb of Maria d'Aragona, the cosmatesque floor and seat, in the wall opposite the façade, the frescoes by Battistello Caracciolo, the *Ligorio* altar by Giovanni da Nola and the *Pezzo* altar by Gerolamo Santacroce.



Fig. 4 *Altar of the Annunciation* by Benedetto da Majano, 1489.

In 2005, all the works of art made of marble near the *Piccolomini* Chapel were restored, including the stuccoes of the triumphal arch and the stuccoes of the cornice and the frescos of the nave.

In the near future we hope to work on frescoes from the School of Piero della Francesca, hence completing the restoration of the *Piccolomini* Chapel. The works, in the first phase were followed by Mariella Utili and Maria Ida Catalano from the Superintendence of Artistic and Historical Heritage in Naples and since 2002 by Flavia Petrelli from the Superintendence of Architectural Heritage, of the Landscape, the Historical, Artistic and Ethno-anthropological Heritage of Naples and the areas around Naples.

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- (2) Mussolini talking to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ciano on the 6th July 1941.
- (3) *Il regno del cielo non è più venuto* (p.44) by S. Villari, V. Russo, E. Vassallo. Published in Naples in **2005**.
- (4) Quotation by Cesare Brandi: "As for the *Santa Trinità* bridge which had to be restored at all costs with the original parts and not replaced by a copy". *Theory of restoration*. Einaudi.
- (5) Cesare Brandi, Quotation p.32.
- (6) *For the monuments in the Campania region damaged by the war*, Naples, **1944**. By the Superintendence of the art galleries in the Campania region and the Monuments and Fine Arts Sub-commission A.C.C.
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