Chapter 7

Ephemeral Architecture and Painted Architecture:
The Reconstruction of Baroque Illusory Space

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ABSTRACT

The object of this study is a group of architectural perspectives painted on the domes and walls of noble palaces in Apulia, in particular that the baronial palace in Botrugno, the Broquier palace in Trani, and the Manes palace in Bisceglie. The perspectives belong to the “Quadratura” genre that developed in Italy and Europe in the Baroque period, but the architectural solutions represented are specific of the Apulian regional context, of Neapolitan derivation, rather than linked to the noble models of the Emilian and Roman master experiences. These architectural perspectives can be considered belonging to that “immaterial cultural heritage,” as defined by the UNESCO Convention for the Protection of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of 2003, if we consider the cultural significance of these painting representations—as previously mentioned—for their relationship with the 16th-17th century painting season of “Quadratura,” for the massive production of treatises on perspective, as well as for the Baroque experiences and for the tradition in the use of “Festa” ephemeral architectures.

INTRODUCTION

The architectural perspectives that in the baroque period were painted on the domes and walls of noble palaces in Apulia - in the South of Italy - can be put as limit between the concepts of “tangible” and “intangible” cultural heritage. These painting representations - pertaining to the tangible cultural heritage - belong to the genre called “Quadratura”, which spreads in Italy and Europe mainly between the

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sixteenth and 18th centuries. Painted on large walls and domes of civil and religious buildings, “Quadra-
tura” paintings are representations of an illusory architecture that dilate the real/physical room space into
an illusive and “virtual” space. The perspective painters of the 15th century are the genre forerunners.
However the “Quadratura” painters of successive centuries made an extensive use of perspective to
decorate rooms in order to create spectacular inexistent spaces. To implement the prospective images
they refer to the Renaissance treatises and also to the Father’s Andrea Pozzo studies in the 17th century.

In the Baroque culture the search for surprising and wondering effects is realized in city squares and
streets space with the “Festa” arrangements composed by ephemeral and scenic architectures, which
involved directly the common spectator sensorially and emotionally.

The “gallery” becomes the place of “Mirabilia” for a rich or cultured elite where the “Quadratura”
painters work, creating a “material” spectacle on vaults or ceilings.

In Apulia, in southern Italy, “Quadratura” spreads in 18th century with results that both appear not
very refined from the technical point of view and for their formal and painting aspects (Castagnolo, 2016,
pp. 149-162), if compared with the national and the European production. However, some today known
examples are to be considered significant for the symbolic value they acquire, since they are placed both
in the halls of noble palaces and for the artistic relationship with the Neapolitan and Florentine schools.
Moreover they are inserted in the Baroque cultural context with articulated architectures in complex
volumes and marked by a large profusion of decorative themes.

These are the “Quadratura” paintings in the Broquier and Manes palaces in Bari territory and that
Botrugno Baronial palace, in Salento. Though they do not reach the figurative results of Emilian or Ro-
man masters - let us think about Mitelli and Colonna, Bibiena (Galli Bibiena, 1711) and the Father Pozzo
himself (Pozzo, 1693) - these architectural perspectives can be considered belonging to that “immaterial
cultural heritage”, as defined by the UNESCO Convention for the Protection of the Intangible Cultural
Heritage of 2003. In fact, they include “practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills that
communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage” (Tucci,
2013, pp. 183-189).

This definition can be accepted if we consider the cultural significance of these painting representa-
tions - as previously mentioned - for their relationship with the 16th-17th century painting season of
“Quadratura” in Europe, for the massive production of treatises on perspective, as well as for the Baroque
experiences and for the tradition in the use of “Festa” ephemeral architectures in Salento. The architectural
perspectives in the noble palace domes in Apulia represent an upwards dilation obtained through the
extension of the walls and the repetition of plan roofs at different heights, standing on arches and topped
by domes and semi-domes. These are multiple architectures, absolute representation protagonists where
human figures are absent. Illusory architectures are bold and often unrealizable; in their language they
allude to other painting or scenographic models rather than to real architectures, because of their unlikely
structural solutions. Not only the representation of spaces contiguous with the real ones is pursued, but
also a surprisingly rich space effect is searched just to emphasize client economic and cultural power.

This study starts with the survey of illusory architectures in the three already mentioned “gallerie”,
carried out the celerimetric support and using the photo-modeling technique.

Final aim is to reconstruct, through the perspective restitution, architectural spaces and to find the
halls morphology by covering that, in the drawings, - rather than the true vaults - with roofs and domes
represented in the painted ceilings.

With this paper it is intended to contribute to improve, from a different point of view, the studies on
the Apulian “Quadratura” paintings.