

# ART NOUVEAU

*I had never imagined Milan to be a repository of some of the finest art nouveau buildings in Italy and, indeed, Europe. In 1995 a friend involved in the teaching of English in Italy's financial centre took me for a whistle-stop tour of a selection of these buildings. I thought I knew Milan until then but was quite bowled over by what my friend pointed out to me and since then have been an aficionado of this affecting style.*



Art nouveau has its origins in several places. I like to think of the house designed for the Paris Exhibition of 1900 by Siegfried Bing, founder of the Maison de l'Art Nouveau gallery, as the real starting point of a stylistic diffusion which touched most European and several overseas countries too, and came under different names in different places: Jugendstil in Germany, Modern in Russia and Secession in Austria-Hungary. In Italy it went under the name *liberty* after the famous department store in Regent Street, London, which sold many of the designs and products of famous contemporary artists including William Morris and Rossetti.

*Lo stile liberty* was a direct reaction against the academism and eclectic revivalism of later 19th century architecture. It proposed a new style inspired largely by curvilinear forms, oriental art and floral designs. In Lucca we can see some of the highest examples of this style in Italy in the villas built from 1900 to 1930 which grace the ring avenues surrounding the city's walls.

In a delusionally more peaceful later 19th century Europe, many cities and capitals decided that the walls enclosing them were surplus to requirements. In Paris the walls were demolished to make way for the present ring system of avenues. In Vienna, too, the walls were thrown down and the Ringstrasse created, which gave rise and a name to its own style of architecture. Milan fared the same way as did (shamefully) Florence.

In the case of Lucca, it was impossible to knock down the walls since they were actually ramparts, built at a later date than other city walls and when fire-power had come into the equation. Lucca's walls are made up mainly of earth with brick facing. They were, moreover, declared a public promenade open to all Lucca's citizens by Princess Baciocchi. Lining these new avenues plots were sold off and, with the increasing enthusiasm for *liberty*, delightful and masterly villas were built in the France-imported style. Gaetano Orzali was the architect of several of them, and the majolica and mosaic ornamentation of many of these gems was designed and applied by Galileo Chini.

Orzali was born in Lucca in 1873 and died in Genoa in 1954. He studied architecture at the fine arts academy of Florence and graduated in 1897. His first buildings were still in the late 19th century eclectic style but, influenced by the Paris exhibition, Orzali's style changed rapidly. His Luccan masterpiece is, without doubt, the *Villa Ducloz* (1), which anyone coming from Mediavalle and the Garfagnana can admire when entering the city boundaries.

All the features of liberty – its flowing lines, its elegant iron lacework, its flower-like windows, its almost feminine seductiveness – are here. The *Villa Ducloz* is meant to impress more by its “newness” of design than by its scale: a newness which underwrites the age's entrepreneurial rising Luccan upper middle-classes who loved to emphasise their up-to-date mentality, their openness to a wider, less-provincial world and their ability to take risks even when designing their own house.



# LUCCA-STYLE



Luccan art nouveau is graced by Chini's decorative genius. Galileo Chini (1873-1956) was a decorative artist, designer, painter and ceramicist, also trained at Florence's Accademia. His style is tinged with eastern exoticism, thanks to a visit to the Far East where the throne room of the Thai royal palace is one of his more unusual commissions. Chini was one of Puccini's favourite stage designers. The designs for the premiere of *Gianni Schicchi*, for example, were entrusted to him and Puccini, at the time of his death, was working with Chini on the scenery for his *Turandot*.

Chini's work adorns so many of Lucca's art nouveau villas and is, indeed, one of their distinguishing points. Undeniably, the whole Tuscan region is permeated by his decorative skills: from Borgo San Lorenzo (where Chini's factory used to be until it was bombed in WWII) through Montecatini down to the Versilia coastline.

My particular favourite around Lucca is the *Villa Del Magro* (2), designed by the homonymous person in collaboration with Orzali. Thank goodness it has been recently restored and re-valued as the chef-d'oeuvre it truly is.

But there are several other buildings worthy of mention in this area – the palazzo Giorgi, for example, next to the station and with extravagant grotesque decorations.

And there are some other absolutely stunning villas which entrance with their elegant beauty, never since equalled, and hearken back to a belle époque where life (if you were well-off) was both enchanting and elegant.

After the main thrust of Luccan Art Nouveau was over, architecture turned to more “rational” lines with less decoration but still with some curves – this time in the actual floor plan – reminiscent of ocean liners (3). We are now in the fullness of Art Deco and, again, these buildings can bear dignified comparison with the main exponent country of that style – the USA.

Italian post-war architecture has regrettably suffered a considerable decline in elegance and proportion. However, I raise two cheers for the recent development on the western side of the city (4) which, at least, respects and pays homage to earlier masters of Luccan domestic building.

And my favourite *villina*? Why this one (5), on the Via Pesciatina on Lucca's east periphery.

– by Francis Pettitt

You can follow Francis' blog at <http://longoio.wordpress.com>

Click here to read an article from last month: >>

<< home

