

The Santa Croce Procession in Lucca

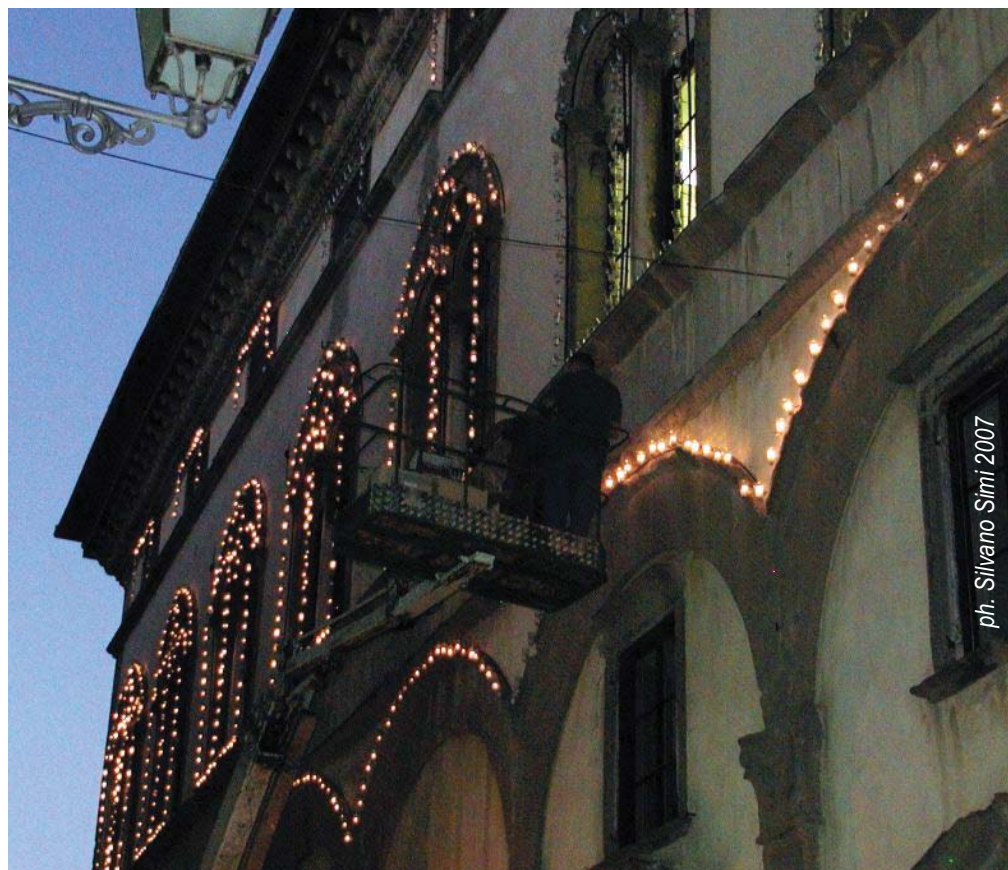


The month of September is a period of historical, cultural, and traditional events for the town of Lucca. This time of year is celebrated as **Settembre Lucchese**. Among the many attractions, the most important is certainly the Procession of Santa Croce, commonly called the **Luminara di Santa Croce**. This traditional religious event takes place every year on the evening of 13 September, celebrating the exaltation of the Santa Croce with a procession that begins at Piazza San Frediano passing through Via Fillungo, Piazza San Michele, and Piazza Napoleone, and ending inside the Cathedral of San Martino, in the square of the same name, where the **Volto Santo** is honored.

The legend of the Volto Santo (the Holy Face) tells of the arrival in 782 at Luni, in Liguria, of a statue representing Christ on the cross, sculpted in wood by Nicodemus, a disciple of Jesus. To protect the image from the risk of destruction by the barbarians, it was loaded onto a ship with a crew. They left the port of Jaffa and reached the Ligurian Sea, finally arriving at the port of Luni. The Lunesi attempts at capturing the ship were blocked by the bishop of Lucca, Giovanni 1st. After disputes between the people of Luni and Lucca, it was decided that a cart bearing the effigy would be pulled by oxen, who would choose their destination. The oxen headed towards Lucca, in this way obliging the Lunesi to renounce the image. As compensation for their loss, they received a bottle containing

the blood of Christ. Once the crucifix arrived at Lucca, it was placed in the Church of San Frediano, but disappeared during the night. It was found in a garden where the Cathedral of San Martino stands today. The Cathedral was built at a later date, to house the image of the Volto Santo.

The annual procession is composed of thousands of the faithful who together with local religious and political authorities, parish representatives, and cultural and voluntary associations walk along the entire route displaying their banners and candles.



The banner of the Volto Santo, painted in oil in 1890 by the Luccese artist Michele Marcucci, leads the procession. This is followed by a cross in flowers made by florists in Viareggio and by the cross from the Cathedral.

Among the groups participating in the procession, one of the most heartfelt is the **Lucchesi nel Mondo** association. They represent those citizens who have emigrated to the five continents, and who return to Lucca each year for this occasion.

The Luminara, which is the presence of lit candles on the facades of the palazzi, placed along the borders of the doors,

windows, and main architectural features of the buildings, is very evocative, exalting even more the ritual nature of the procession.

At the conclusion of this event, many people head towards the city walls on the north side of town. Here they can observe the fireworks (the *focli*, in the local dialect) launched from the banks of the Serchio river near Monte San Quirico. These illuminations brilliantly highlight the entire city under a splendid starry sky.

– by Gabriele Muratori

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