

Arts, crafts and manufacturing in Bassano in historical perspective

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Thanks to the friends and colleagues coordinating this beautiful project for inviting me to hold this keynote speech in Bassano, the city where I live.

I will deal with the intertwining of arts, crafts and manufacturing in a specific place, Bassano, using a retrospective approach, looking back in time using what we know about the outcome of endeavours and strategies of people in the past but also considering their perspective at the time and in that - this place.

From such a point of view, it is relevant to notice that place is as much important as time for historians, as they look at what is specific and what is not of a given *hic et nunc*. *

And Bassano, as we will see, is not a place as any other.

It is located on a hill at the outlet into the plain of the river Brenta, a natural waterway connecting the mountains and what's beyond them, the German area, with Padua and Venice, and from there to the Mediterranean. The river, and the mountains, are also borders, discontinuities: a castle, to defend a strategic position, and a wooden bridge, to connect the foothill provinces of Vicenza and Treviso, make up the traits of Bassano since the Middle Ages.

After a short moment of territorial dominance with Ezzelino the Third, the city became a periphery, if not a frontier city, for the subsequent dominations

of Verona, Padua, Milan, and finally Venice. This made of Bassano what historians call “*almost a city*”. *

Yet there are advantages in being peripheral. Being at the crossing, at the border, often means also to be neither on one side neither on the other. And in the ancient regime, freedom is often possible only as the result of having multiple rulers, as Arlequin, the servant of two masters.

Craft activities flourished then in this city because of trade and because of its almost autonomous jurisdiction. Wool and hides were the main materials worked out by artisans, obviously organised in *guilds*. *

Guilds, you know, do not enjoy good fame among economists: for classical economists, from Smith to Ricardo and so on, they were a feudal remaining, rent-seeking organisations protecting their members at the expenses of consumers.

Economic historians took quite a while to object this view, but finally identified their crucial function in apprenticeship, a precious arrangement that allowed the transmission of tacit knowledge, rewarding the learner with access to the guild membership and the teacher with temporarily cheap skilled work (Epstein). This came together with the exclusion of women, foreigners, outsiders, but made the years-long learning of know-how possible, for artisans and artists. *

Bassano in the Renaissance is also the city of artists, of an artist, or better a family of artists - and former artisans: *hides and skins* often appear in the

paintings of Jacopo Dal Ponte, in the landscape and under the *skyline of Bassano*, the surname the painter took on when he became famous. The identification of the artist with the city is not only related to its presence in his works: it was also Bassano that made of Jacopo's art a constitutive element of its identity, in an original way, as we will see. *

As said before, guilds were crucial for skill transmission but also excluding newcomers. Yet they were weaker, or were not allowed, in minor or almost cities as Bassano. This territory became then quite early, since the 1600s, a place where entrepreneurs could experiment with manufacturing outside of the guild framework, obtaining the right – or more properly the privilege – to do that by Venetian authorities. *

So it was, for instance, with ceramics, which the Manardi brothers started making in 1669 in a *manufactory* close to the log port on the Brenta river, with the approval of the Republic for substituting the expensive imports of fine maiolica. Artisans from Faenza and Lodi taught other workers the secrets of glazing and baking, and learned the art of decoration, which they would spread to other manufactories in Rivarotta and Nove in the subsequent century.

Ceramic manufacturing is here, from centuries, a showcase of *craftsmanship inside of the factory system*.

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The same was true for the most famous production in early-modern Bassano: the Remondini printing house (Infelise). Again, it was established in

Bassano to escape the interference and regulations of the guilds of printers and booksellers, and books were not its main product in the beginning. It was printed images. For *illiterate peasants* the saints, the almanacs or the calendars were much more valuable than books, and a proto-mass market was there to be exploited. In three generations, the Remondini's became the largest printing house in Europe, with more than one thousand workers hosted under the same roof in their houses on the main square (the former Piazza dei Signori, the Lords' Square), and a myriad of pedlars (based on the other side of the border, in Castel Tesino) selling their images from the Habsburgic and Russian Empires to Spain and Portugal, up to the Americas.

Printing images – and books, later – was not a job for anybody: different highly specialised skills were involved, and learning by doing inside of the manufactory was not enough for the growing complexity of such a huge organisation. The Remondinis started collecting engravings to be reproduced or taken as an inspiration (you can see the collection in Palazzo Sturm) and *started a school of engraving* open to all talented youngsters in town. Most of them were the children of workers, but, again, there was an identification between the city and the enterprise, concerning an artistic craft, or an artisanal art. *

In 1810, under the Napoleonic rule, much before the eventual closing down of the Remondini's printing house, the municipality took over in financing and organising a municipal school of artistic and technical drawing. For more than a century, the *sons of workers and aspiring artists* studied together, learning that useful things may be beautiful, and beautiful ones may be useful. Again, arts and crafts – and manufacturing - went together.

Among the school alumni there was a Baldassarre Fontana who started in 1871 a carriage factory that his sons converted before WW1 into a car body company, which produced bus bodies until the 1960s. Technical and artistic

drawing was a crucial skill also for the gold jewellery making that Luigi Balestra revolutionised in 1904 using adapted sewing machines to mechanise the production of gold chains, or for the revival of ceramic production in eclectic style which made for long the success of the local industry. **

In the *belle époque*, Bassano was indeed a city of crafts and trade. Yet what allowed most part of the population in the area to survive was *temporary emigration*. When WW1 interrupted the possibility to travel abroad, a large problem of unemployment emerged. The solution came from abroad: in 1924 a group of Austrian industrialists, the Westens, established in Bassano their factory to produce enamel cookware. The company grew from 500 to 1800 workers in 1950, making of Bassano an industrial city. Since the 1930s, it also financed a School of Arts and Crafts, where its technicians provided a professional education to young students until the institution of the unified middle school in 1963. Again, the issue of *transmitting technical knowledge* was crucial. *

The Smalterie, as they were called in Bassano, went bankrupt in 1975, were bought out by different subsequent companies and are still the largest industrial plant in town, now producing heaters. What made it possible not to close it down were the skills of its workers, who could solve technical issues elsewhere considered impossible. Again, *craft-like qualities inside of an industrial factory*.

The technical competences which developed inside of the Smalterie had also another important effect on the local economy. Most managers and

technicians who left the factory to start a company or to work for a new one focused on the production of *machine tools* and *industrial moulds*, a crucial contribution to the ongoing mechanisation of traditional craft productions as artistic furniture, jewellery, ceramics, which became competitive and expanded their exports. *

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The connection between arts, crafts and manufacturing is evident in the case of Oscar Bussandri, the son of an antiquarian who moved from Venice to Bassano and added to restoration the actual artistic reproduction of ancient furniture using the know-how of local cabinet makers. The working techniques elaborated in his workshop were spread and developed by several employees who started new activities in the production of artistic furniture, establishing a veritable industrial district. *

Another example is Lino Manfrotto, a photographer who started making his equipment by himself, with such a success among his colleagues that he needed the help of a mechanical technician, Gilberto Battocchio, to industrialise his activity making of it the world leader in photo equipment.

What is craft, then? Perhaps it is precisely the ability to keep together art and manufacturing in a creative tension, inventing new, useful and beautiful objects, be they a tripod or a piece of furniture, rather than a pair of jeans or a window frame. *

Contrary to what is often said, *it is* something you may learn at school.

If it is to develop, it must not be protected as a species the way of extinction, but cultivated as a weed; it must not be crystallized in practices and

typical products always equal, but fertilized and contaminated with new techniques and meanings.