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EDITORIAL

The MUDI museum in the realm of children and women

The new Museum of the Innocenti Hospital in Florence (MUDI), with almost 1500 square metres of exhibition space and even more room for different initiatives, has recently opened its doors. It has taken three years of renovation and restoration to reorganise it with a more effective museum layout, which now embellishes the original structure. The interplay of the beautiful and the good is one of the main features of the Hospital itself, which has been carrying on its activities for more than six centuries, confirming its role in the caring of children.

Health care in Florence

The history of health care in Florence from the early Middle Ages down to our own times is really fascinating, as it illustrates not only the changing of medical concepts, but also the significance of the political and governmental pronouncements of the city itself [1]. Starting from the Middle Ages, many health care structures had been built in Florence: they were essentially what we might call hospices, designed not only to the sick, but also to the disabled and the poor, old people, orphans, foundlings and pilgrims.

The oldest modern hospital in Florence was Santa Maria Nuova, founded in the year 1288 by Folco di Ricovero Portinari: the organisational model comprised the activity of this big hospital in the centre of the city, while the various specialisations were co-ordinated with the vocations of the individual institutions, generally supported by the Guilds, thus reflecting the relationship between the manufacturing process and initiatives of social aid.

The city was in fact involved in the realisation of a great territorial State and its prestige was openly demonstrated by a programme of significant public works, which corresponded with the consolidation of the *Arte della Seta*, that is the silk industry, as the most advanced sector of the city economy.

The Innocenti Hospital

As a matter of fact, in 1421 the Silk Guild was appointed by the Florence Comune to take charge of the construction and management of a new structure for the shelter of abandoned children [2]. One of the sponsors of this enterprise was the Prato merchant Francesco di Maria Datini, who was the first to give a significant financial support to the project.

The Hospital was constructed in different phases and only the first one (1419–1427) was under Brunelleschi's direct supervision. The portico is Brunelleschi's first organic creation: meant as an opening on to the city, it was intended

as an architectural welcoming and protective symbol. The façade consists of a colonnade with imposing columns and wide semicircular arches, and a first floor with rectangular windows.

In the spandrels of the arches, there are 10 glazed blue terracotta roundels with reliefs of babies in swaddling clothes, designed by Andrea della Robbia, openly indicating the mission of the hospital itself. The opening of the Spedale di Santa Maria degli Innocenti took place on 5 February 1444.

Parents did not have to reveal themselves, but they could leave identification symbols, to recognise their children if they had the possibility to reclaim them, sooner or later: very often, however, children died during their stay in the hospital. In its first year of activity, the hospital took in 62 foundlings. The first one was named Agata Smeralda, according to a specific strategy of nomination of the children, which used lists of similar subjects: precious stones, flowers, numbers.

Later on, officials were enjoined not to use such facetious family names, as *Innocenti* or *Degli Esposti*, which could reveal implicitly the origin of the babies. In the Historical Archive, vast documentation, collected from the 14th to the 20th century, is preserved, witnessing the life of the Hospital since its foundation and highlighting the everyday life of the institution, together with the individual destinies of every baby taken in.

The state-run “family” within the hospital

Children were accepted, recorded, entrusted to wet nurses, educated and hopefully inserted into the community. The number of babies progressively increased until, at the end of the eighteenth century, the average number of foundlings accepted each year was around one thousand. The phenomenon of abandonment of children of every age expanded significantly with the birth of the Institute, so that it became necessary to place a barred window in front of the old “pila” or holy water stoup, to prevent infants of all ages from passing through.

Originally, the management of the institute was entrusted to the Silk Guild. During the eighteenth century – along with the weakening and the suppression of the Guilds – it was taken over first by the Chamber of Arts and Commerce and later by the Grand-ducal government itself, so that various important personalities succeeded each other in ruling the institution. Different regulations were introduced to manage the institution as well as the manner in which the children were cared for changed over the centuries, depending on the

economic wealth of the structure, as well as to the policy applied by the director of the time.

From its foundation, the Hospital of the Innocenti had turned to external wet-nurses for the feeding of the infants, who spent several years in the country with peasant families who were paid to rear them. After which, they came back to the institute where their education could be more strictly supervised.

The physical and moral care offered to the foundlings continued to the age of 18 for the boys, and for girls up to the time of marriage: the boys were generally trained in order to help them to find work in some city workshop through apprenticeships; the girls could entry into domestic service in the city, while others learned to weave, hoping to find work in the silk trade.

Caring also for mothers

A great event (1756) occurred in the history of the Hospital was the founding of the chair of Obstetrics in the School of Santa Maria Nuova and the school for midwives in the Hospital of the Innocenti itself [3]. On the first floor, the Grand Duke dedicated a room to clandestine pregnant women, who had to conceal their pregnancy: after the delivery, the child could remain in the Hospital.

Midwifery skill was previously to be learned by experience: there was no formal training [4]. With the passing time, town authorities recognised the need for trained midwives in order to protect the safety of the public, asking them to attend a school and obtain a licence. The midwifery school had the aim to educate midwives, in order to prevent problems during pregnancy and delivery.

During their stay in this special room, pregnant women became a sort of guinea pig for midwives who used them as case studies: obstetrical phantoms, other kinds of devices and obstetrical waxes with mimetic function were also used.

Recent times

Despite the numerous difficulties that arose in different periods, and the high rate of mortality, the Institution has been working over the centuries as a shelter for abandoned children, helping them and their families. Today the Institute's activities include different educational and social services, promoting children's rights and culture, and providing accommodation and assistance to children in disadvantaged conditions.

MUDI

To improve the historical and artistic legacy of the old Hospital and to promote it, MUDI, the new Innocenti Museum, has been founded, with the primary goal of ensuring the coexistence within the same architectural structure, of both the museum and the everyday activities, and of bringing to light new spaces, as the "Verone", the old terrace on the third floor, where a Café is now located, meant as a meeting place in front of a superb view over the city.

In the underground, the story of the hospital is traced, showing, in a sort of *caveau*, a significant series of

identification marks: they were left together with the babies when they were abandoned, in order to identify them later when the parents would have had the opportunity to bring them back into the family.

The MUDI includes the Galleria dello Spedale (Hospital Gallery), the Historical Archive and the educational activities of the Children's Workshop. The Galleria collection consists of nearly 50 works, mostly paintings, going back to a period from the 14th to the 18th century, belonging to the Institute's artistic heritage, built up over the centuries by direct commission or through legacies or by patronate.

Particularly significant are some Renaissance masterpieces such as the Adoration of the Magi by Domenico del Ghirlandaio and the Madonna and Child by Sandro Botticelli. However, the museum does not just dwell on the past but brings visitors right up to the present—and future, housing the UNICEF's Global Office of Research, a very important library, a national centre for documentation and analysis of childhood and adolescence.

On the premises of the Innocenti Hospital, the International and European School of Perinatal and Reproductive Medicine, The PREIS School, has its headquarters. The PREIS School is held under the auspices of the European Society of Perinatal Medicine (EAPM), the World Association of Perinatal medicine (WAPM), the World health Organisation (WHO), Unicef, Emergency, March of Dimes, the European and Chinese perinatal and reproductive network (ECPRN), the European and Indian Perinatal and Reproductive Network, the International Association "Birth and Culture", the Meyer's Children Hospital and many other International Associations.

The aim of the School is the improvement of the values of scientific culture, ethics and bioethics of life sciences, promoting and enhancing the fundamental ideals of maternal infant medicine in its entire course. In the future, many other activities will be housed in the Innocenti Hospital, focussing also on pregnancy and birth, in an anthropological approach, beyond any difference of culture, origin, religion.

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