



## VILLA SAN CARLO BORROMEO

DIMORA STORICA

### THE PLEASURE OF RESTORING

Interview with Cristina Frua De Angeli



Cristina Frua De Angeli is President of the International University of the Second Renaissance Foundation, and of Villa San Carlo Borromeo. With a leading role in conferences held in the major capitals of the world over more than twenty years, she also heads the publishing house Spirali and the Brainworking Department for intellectual dispositives with entrepreneurs and bankers.

A writer herself (author of *Ma chi è questa bella principessa?*, recounting the birth of industry in Lombardy through the archives of two families: the Breda's and the Frua De Angeli's), she has edited numerous translations and is also a teacher of ciphematics. In particular, though, she has coordinated, directed and supervised the restoration of the Villa San Carlo Borromeo and its Park, and now she is about to restore another monumental complex nearby, the Villa Rasini Medolago, in Limbiate.

*As well as President of the International University of the Second Renaissance, you are a writer and Editor-in-Chief of the publishing house Spirali. When and why did you begin coordinating the restoration and the furnishing of the Villa San Carlo Borromeo?*

It's a long story. In 1983, the International University of the Second Renaissance bought the Villa and park, neglected for almost twenty years, from the Borromeo family. The terrace had collapsed, the roof was damaged, the fittings were ruined. The ivy had eroded the walls and the park was almost inaccessible. The first important restoration work was therefore aimed at salvaging the building.

Since then, restoration has continued until today, according to strictly conservationist criteria and with the help of experts, consultants, technicians, historians, philologists, engineers and architects, all under the auspices of the relevant authorities of both national and local government/the Ministry for Cultural Assets and Activities and the Department for Environmental and Architectural Assets of Milan. It has concerned the main building (10,000 square metres); the three Museums in the Park; the Ice-House Museum; the Visconti Wall and also the historical Park, reintroducing plants that had disappeared over the last two centuries on the basis of meticulous research.

Detailed and accurate historical, archeological, philological, geophysical, architectural and pictorial research has been carried out to discover the specific linguistics of this restoration work each time: sculptures, fireplaces, arches, gates, coats of arms, statues, fittings, balconies, gateways, doors, marbles, drawings, paintings. Installations, lighting, technology, furnishings, works of art, furniture: everything has been chosen and defined in every single detail, and has become an integral part of the restoration as a restitution in quality.

Recently, we finished the immense restoration work — it took four years — of the “Sala delle Muse”, once the Feasting Hall, a huge underground area that can accommodate up to 1,000 people, equipped with the most advanced technology and suitable for any kind of event: meetings, theatrical performances, concerts, parties, banquets, exhibitions, and with the equipment for simultaneous interpreting in six languages. It is the only hall of this size to be found inside a historical home.

Today, the Villa hosts the International University of the Second Renaissance, a permanent Museum and a Museum for visiting exhibitions. But it also hosts the five-star luxury Hotel Villa San Carlo Borromeo, The City Restaurant, the Borges Café, the Winter Garden. It is the site of conferences, courses,

seminars, meetings of public organizations and Italian and international companies and major events on a daily basis.

A workshop for restoring paintings, antique furniture and paper, a workshop for skilled carpenters and the "Atelier di Lisa Bini", with her team of floral designers, are run in several buildings inside the Park (the "Capanna dello zio Tom", the "Bottega di Leonardo", the "Serra di San Bruno", the "Atelier dei cubisti").

*What has such a complex restoration project entailed?*

At some point I decided to take on the responsibility and masterminding of this immense work. It needed to be supervised on a daily basis, with constant coordination and masterminding, to avoid errors, delays and wastages. This entailed working very closely with the architects, engineers, technicians, consultants; searching throughout Italy, but especially in Lombardy, for craftsmen and people with specialized skills; and studying technical and technological matters that are outside my own field of studies. I couldn't, of course, learn all these things, but I needed to be able to understand. The materials were then chosen very carefully, and only from what was already to be found in the Villa: marble, granite, painted cement, wood. We used trees from the park, cut down because they had been struck by lightning or because they were diseased, to restore the floors. In each room we introduced wood from our own trees: oak, maple, ash, pine.

From the editing, translating, book publishing and clinical work I have done, I have learned that when we translate a text we mustn't approach it with our own idea, however brilliant it might be, but try to render or give back that text in another language. We may not agree with the author, we may think we might have written a particular sentence in another way, but the book is his. The same thing happens with restoration. We approach a building and we let ourselves be guided by its architectural features, by the walls, the ceilings, the vaults, the discrepancies, the abnormalities. We go into a room and stay there for a while, with no hurry, and listen to what it has to say to us: we have to let go of our subjectivity and let ourselves be influenced by the air of that room, go along with its silence.

Initially, the defects hit us in the eye, the degradation appals us, the ugliness, the obscenity of a crack or some peeling. Then we begin to walk round it and touch it, overcoming our repulsion, the first impression. Beneath the plaster the walls are alive. That's how the story of a restoration project begins.

Naturally, our idea of perfection tends to make us exclude everything that disturbs us, that is unharmonious. Gradually, though, we are forced to become more tolerant. First of all, we can't always do the things we want to, because they are materially or technically impossible, and so we need to find new combinations.

Sometimes, it is the craftsman who suggests them: we need to be ready for the unpredictable always and to change things. What had been thought out in a certain way becomes something else, and that something else has to achieve quality, we mustn't have fixed ideas. There are errors we can make ourselves and errors made by those who carry out the work. For example, a floor whose altitude has not been measured carefully may suddenly require a step/stair/flight of steps? We need to tolerate it and accept it, make it precious, so that it becomes an indispensable architectural feature in that text. Each day something you didn't want escapes your control, something that was supposed to be done in a particular way and which is done incorrectly. At first this really upset me, I found it almost intolerable. Then I learned, by talking to the workers and the builders, to find a way, not to remediate, but to make that variation into a part of the project.

The important thing is the rhythm: to start a job and carry it through to completion, right up to the last detail. It's the most difficult part, going from the building site to the definition of details. Those who become attached to the building site always leave something unfinished, a sign of themselves. There comes a point when we need to decide to leave the room we have been working in for months and close the door behind us. Working all day with men isn't very easy. What's more I'm neither an architect nor an engineer. And yet I have to make men listen to me who usually only answer to other men.

The difficulty comes when each person does his own job, but doesn't take an interest in anyone else's. "I do the plumbing". "I do the electrical part". "I do the wiring and just go through with my wires". Parallel worlds that never meet. But when we need to conclude a job entailing the integration of all these roles, you have to make each person understand that, for a successful outcome, it's not enough for him just to do his own part, he has to help the job come to a conclusion, where his work will be seen alongside everyone else's.

You need faith, enthusiasm and determination, and to work very hard, as people work hard if they see you working hard. There need to be different and various dispositives, and a strong identification: a sense of mission. The person laying those strips of wood on the floor knows that that floor will remain after him, and even after his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, so he can be proud of his work. And if he lays a strip crooked, it will remain crooked for the next hundred years. This is also the interesting part, to say: "Take an extra half-hour over it now, but bear in mind that this is going to stay here for the next hundred years". So you can intervene by joking a little.

Then there is a whole other job, which goes hand in hand with this one, of looking for the furnishings, the furniture; and this, in the space of three years, among various collections, among private houses.

You choose the furniture, but you don't know where it's going to go. It's not like those contracted jobs where all the rooms are the same: two hundred beds, a hundred desks, and that's it. Here we gradually collected beautiful pieces of furniture, and then each piece of furniture chose its own room: you put them there, along that big corridor that's almost a gallery, one beside the other, and you begin to try out some positions: let's see if this desk looks right in the Prince's room, beneath the window, if that is its true place, or if it prefers the Ernesto Breda room. So we have had great freedom. That's how it happens in people's homes, where furniture and furnishings, objects and ornaments, books and paintings build up and integrate with each other over the years, following various combinations and stratifications, and it is those objects, those chairs, that furniture, which tell us about our loved ones.

*What is the intellectual profit you have drawn from this experience?*

This day-to-day work entailed an important elaboration for me, and is the basis for my next book. Beautiful homes are part of my story, they have been with me through the years. To make a home into a hotel is the maximum elaboration. It means the home mustn't have anything domestic about it any more, and yet it means that each guest is welcomed as he would be in a home. Sometimes I think about how the guest — the guest you don't know, who is not even a friend of yours, the unknown guest — considers these rooms, when he rests his gaze on that curtain, on a picture frame, a detail that makes him say: "See, the person who took care of this detail thought about me".

In order to work and induce others to work, I am forced to tell people as much as I can. It is a process of enhancement/exploitation/value acquisition that comes gradually. People can't work for earnings alone, of course, but I am convinced these earnings will come at the conclusion. This work will be carried forward as an example of restoration in Italy: of a restitution not in a former state, but in quality.

*What criteria did you follow for combining the architectural requirements with those of the furnishing?*

The furnishing mustn't cover the architecture, the walls are more important. The furnishing must integrate with the architecture, not cover it. I've seen beautiful palaces where the furnishing dominates. There is a beauty of the walls, and even of the matter/material. In some homes the furnishing is done with a phobia of the walls, which are covered in layers of material. Also, the Villa has a definite sobriety about it, that's its character and it mustn't be forced.

This Villa is enormous. When I began, every day I had to conquer a metre, two metres, ten metres: if I had taken it in its immensity I would have given up straight away. And anyway, here it's a matter of a linguistics of restoration. It's like when you're writing a book and during the night you suddenly think of an important sentence or image, a turn of phrase; you find yourself in a process of writing, even when you're not sitting at your desk. The same happens with restoration: suddenly, a detail and a solution you hadn't thought of, a colour, come to mind. You need to make a note, write it down, calculate, draw.

*What relations does the Villa have with business clientele?*

The Villa is a centre of international exchange for entrepreneurs and artists, bankers and writers, scientists and economists, enterprises and institutions. Our structure makes technology, intellectual services and teachers/tutors available to businesses, banks, public and private cultural organizations. We have conventions with the industry associations of countries whose companies exhibit at the Milan Trade Fair and Exhibition Centre, and conventions with national and international entrepreneurial groups. We have also strengthened and widened agreements with banks, insurance companies and public and pri-

vate institutions on an international level, always affirming the primacy of culture and art and the direct implications of these on each single company.

We don't rent rooms, we offer all those services a business coming over to Italy needs: from conference secretariat to organization of the event, to marketing, scenography and flower arrangements, from the press and public relations office to graphic and editorial products, to technological and multi-media ones, from simultaneous interpreting to and from all languages to guides for visits to the museums, to the production of art objects and limited editions at clients' request.

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