

The Museo Vincenzo Vela at Ligornetto (Ticino)

Swiss Federal Office of Culture

A – Vincenzo Vela: biography and critical fortune

The Man and the Artist

Born in 1820 in Ligornetto, where he died in 1891, Vincenzo Vela was among the leading sculptors of the second half of the nineteenth century. At the forefront of a renewal of sculpture in the direction of realism, his art was characterized by a strong sense of citizenship and a deep human sensibility, as well as by the liberal ideals advanced by the Risorgimento. His active political and social commitment – as demonstrated by his participation in the Sonderbund War in 1847 and the *Days of Como* in 1848 – is reflected in his entire output, which reveals sincere adherence to the values and ideals supported by the subjects represented.

After his brilliant education at the Brera Academy, Vela began his highly successful career first in Milan – which he left for ideological and moral reasons in order to avoid compromise with the Austrian occupier – and then in Turin, a city open to exiles at the heart of a heated and stimulating cultural and political debate. An active participant in the fertile, lively climate of renewal, including artistic renewal, that characterized the Savoy capital, he was able fully to develop his art, executing some of his most significant works, including the *Alfiere* (The Standard-Bearer) in Piazza Castello. Among the most sought-after sculptors of his time, from 1856 to 1867 he was also a respected professor at the Albertina Academy. The twenty-five years that followed his fortunate time in Turin, which came to an end in 1867 with his return to his native country, were marked by several professional disappointments, though also by a remarkable stylistic evolution that led to powerful and deeply innovative works such as *Le Vittime del lavoro* (Victims of Labour, 1882), a magnificent and moving monument to the memory of the workers who had died during the construction of the Gotthard tunnel and a masterpiece of social commitment.

B – Origins and history of Villa Vela and the nature of the collections

From home to museum

One of the most important nineteenth-century house-museums and plaster-cast galleries in Europe, Villa Vela stands out within this special and varied architectonic type for its powerful cultural value, as well as for its historical and artistic importance. Designed by Cipriano Ajmetti, an architect who was active in the court of the Duke of Genoa, and built between 1862 and 1865, the elegant residence was initially planned as a summer home for the sculptor and his family. After Vela's permanent return to Ligornetto in 1867, the building also became his studio and, from 1880, a private museum, destined to welcome friends, patrons and visitors. The heart of the building – soon renamed "Pantheon Vela" by the press, a clear reference to the Canovian Temple in Possagno – was the octagonal "hall for models", where Vela loved to receive his numerous admirers, and also the occasional traveler attracted by the beauty of the building.

Another fine architectonic feature is the porter's lodge, designed in 1881 in *châlet* style by the artist's friend and biographer Augusto Guidini. Also an integral part of Vela's *Gesamtkunstwerk* is the

extensive park that surrounds the villa, covering two and a half acres, in which a formal Italian garden and an English landscape garden complement each other perfectly.

In 1892 Vela's son Spartaco, a painter, carried out the last will of his father by bequeathing the villa and the collections to the Swiss Confederation, on condition that the building be used as a museum or an art school. Through this generous donation, Vincenzo Vela made it clear that he considered the villa to be a work of art in itself, a monument to be safeguarded. At the same time the bequest guaranteed the future of the house and its collections, gathered with shrewd foresight over many years. The donation was subsequently enlarged with the bequests of Spartaco, a fine painter and a sensitive draughtsman, and of Lorenzo Vela (1812-1897), Vincenzo's elder brother, himself a fine ornamental and animal sculptor, and a professor at the Brera Academy for over thirty years. In 1898, after some minor renovation work, the Museo Vela opened its doors, the first museum in Ticino and the second in the Swiss Confederation after the Swiss National Museum in Zurich. For many decades the Museo Vela was the only museum in Ticino, together with the Museo civico di belle arti (Fondazione Caccia). As such for a long period of time it was a favorite destination for local people, tourists, and school parties.

Conservation and restoration

The first restoration work on the house-museum was carried out in 1913. Later, in 1960-61, the collections and the museum layout were reorganized. The restoration work in 1978 was followed by a substantial restructuring of the museum from 1983 to 1987. More recently, between 1997 and 2001, the building was completely rearranged by the architect Mario Botta in keeping with modern criteria of museum design. The ground floor currently houses the permanent collection, of which the central octagon is the focal point, while temporary exhibitions are held regularly on the first floor. The exhibition space consists of 708 square meters on the ground floor, and 311 square meters on the first floor.

In the wake of renewed interest in the house-museum and the work of Vincenzo Vela from the Federal Office of Culture and, from the end of the 1970s, from researchers in the history of art, especially in Italy and the United States, careful restoration of the collections was begun. The restoration of single works, at first sporadic, accelerated between 1985 and 2000, and involved the monumental plaster casts of Vincenzo Vela, the plaster and terracotta works of Lorenzo, the paintings of Spartaco and those in the picture gallery, the drawings and the historical library.

The collections: a unique patrimony

1. The Gallery of Plaster Casts

The collections include over 5000 pieces, of which only roughly 200 are on display. The remaining works are conserved in the museum store in keeping with the most recent conservation standards.

The heart of the collection is formed by the plaster casts of Vincenzo Vela. The presence of the casts for the artist's earliest works, executed before his fertile period in Turin, leads us to believe that he was planning right from the beginning of his career to gather together the corpus of his output in a single place for the sake of posterity.

The museum houses a total of 639 sculptural works: as well as 187 original plaster casts made by

Vincenzo Vela, the collection includes 25 plaster models by Lorenzo, 19 plaster models by Vincenzo, 33 terracotta works by Vincenzo and 17 by Lorenzo, 19 marble or stone works by Vincenzo and 6 by Lorenzo, and 2 bronzes by Vincenzo.

The donation has been enlarged by the purchase of some additional works with the aim of completing the permanent collection, while the patrimony has been enriched by the donation of single pieces (paintings and sculptural works, though also documentary and bibliographical material), closely linked to the museum's original collections.

2. The Picture Gallery

The collections include the family's picture gallery, which brings together the paintings belonging to the private collections of Vincenzo, Lorenzo and Spartaco (works executed on canvas, wood, and paper in oil, tempera, watercolor, or with fresco techniques). The fruit of purchases, exchanges and gifts, the picture gallery forms the most extensive collection of nineteenth-century works from Lombardy and Piedmont owned by the Swiss Confederation. As well as a large group of works by Spartaco (136), it includes 26 works by Lorenzo and 150 by other artists, mainly from the schools of Lombardy and Piedmont.

3. The Graphic Collection

A large part of the collection of drawings, which groups a total of around 1000 sheets, is formed by the drawings made by Vincenzo Vela (356) and by his son Spartaco (130), a fine portraitist. Other drawings, received as gifts or more rarely purchased, are by artists who Vela met during his time in Milan and Turin. As well as academic exercises and preparatory studies for the monumental works of Vincenzo Vela, the collection includes drawings of various subjects – portraits, though also religious subjects – which testify to the skills as a draughtsman of the master from Ligornetto. The collection also includes around 560 works on paper executed by means of various etching techniques (engraving, lithography, woodcut, etching, photoengraving) dating between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. The works include portraits of illustrious figures and reproductions of paintings, as well as cartographical representations, diplomas and honors.

The collection of drawings can be consulted for study purposes by prior arrangement.

4. The Collection of Photographs

The museum's collection of photographs groups a total of 1067 items, including 988 original positive pictures and 79 glass plates, dating from 1846 to 1890. The collection, which is the oldest in Ticino and in the property of the Confederation, was originally formed by Vincenzo and then expanded by his son Spartaco, he, too, the author of several photos. The extensive collection is remarkable for its variety and for its historical interest, as well as for its high quality, shown for example by the salt prints of Luigi Sacchi. As well as reproductions of works of art by Vincenzo Vela and by other sculptors and painters, both contemporary to and earlier than Vela himself, it includes photographic sketches, views of cities and monuments, and pictures of a more personal nature, showing family members and fellow artists.

The collection can be consulted for study purposes by prior arrangement.

5. The Historical Library

As a result of the bequests, the Museum's collections also include the Vela family library, housed in the original bookcases. With over 882 titles (divided into 1500 volumes and pamphlets), received as gifts or purchased, the library reflects the tastes, interests and relations of the artist and his family. The historical nucleus comprises periodicals and books on the history of art, science, geography, philosophy and politics, as well as novels by great contemporary European authors, biographies of figures portrayed by Vincenzo Vela, manuals and various works of consultation.

The entire collection can be consulted online through the OPAC catalogue of the Federal Library Network, known as Alexandria, or *in situ* by appointment.

6. The Handbook Library

The consultation library, constantly enlarged by new purchases, includes manuals, catalogues and essays in various languages. The specialist collection covers subjects related to the history of art, history, culture and politics of the nineteenth century, with special focus on nineteenth-century sculpture and on house-museums and plaster cast galleries. As well as exhibition catalogues and monographs, it includes a number of series and encyclopaedic works.

Accessible online through the Alexandria catalogue, which brings together the libraries of the Federal Administration, the library is open to the public by appointment on Tuesday afternoons from 2pm to 5pm.

7. Access to the Reserves and Archives

The deposits housing part of the plaster cast gallery and the collection of paintings are accessible for research purposes by prior arrangement. All the works belonging to the museum collection are listed in a database which can be consulted by appointment in the museum offices. The archives also house material relating to the Vela bequest.

C – The Museum today

Direction and collaborators

Run by the Museums and Collection Section of the Swiss Federal Office of Culture, the Museo Vincenzo Vela has been directed since 1992 by Gianna A. Mina. Under her supervision the persons responsible of the various departments – from administration to security and reception, from research and archives to cultural and public relations – work closely together in pursuit of a common strategy: the promotion of the museum and its contents and the implementation of the values described in the Message on culture of the Swiss Federal Office of Culture.

Mission

The main aspects of the Museum's cultural mission are the following:

- Careful conservation of the artistic patrimony housed and striving towards the conservation of the historic building and park, understood as a single work of art.
- Maintenance of hardcopy and digital inventory of the collections.
- Promotion of the patrimony through an historically accurate display based on the most up-to-date criteria of museum design.
- Study of the collections through research and publications.

- Growth of public through the organization of temporary exhibitions.
- Promotion of the activities addressed to any kind of public related to the permanent collection and the temporary exhibitions through translations into the national languages of printed material, audio tours and catalogues.
- Attention to young people, fostering interest through consultation, meetings and advice.
- Active collaboration with other institutions, bodies, and cultural associations around the country.
- Particular interest for education programs and activities of outreach.

The Museum does not have a special acquisitions budget, and does not, therefore, aim to expand its collections.

Partnerships

Active in the field of art historical research, the Museum benefits from the knowledge and skills of a number of authoritative scholars to carry out further studies. Firmly rooted in the national context, the museum works frequently in collaboration with Swiss and foreign museums and institutions, especially for the organization of exhibitions, conferences and cultural events. Reflecting its collaboration with other research institutions, since 2010 the museum has housed the Contact Office of the Swiss Institute for Art Research for Italian-speaking Switzerland (SIK-ISEA). The museum's openness to the world of research and contemporary art is also reflected in the provision of accommodation in its guestrooms, for scholars and artists.

A work in progress: the catalogue raisonné of the collections

The catalogue raisonné of the museum's collections, comprising over 5000 items including sculptures, paintings, drawings, photos, volumes and other objects is currently under preparation. Conducted according to scientific criteria by a group of renowned scholars, the thorough study will provide an accurate and exhaustive description of the collections. With individual entries for each work based on in-depth historical and artistic analysis, the catalogue will present the results of the research carried out over the years on the body of works housed in the Museum, with updated overviews of the single collections.

Exhibitions

Motivated by a precise vision, rigorous yet at the same time open to suggestions from the public, the museum's exhibition activity is based on the following central planks:

1. Analysis of specific new aspects of the collections; study and display of exhibitions on leading exponents of nineteenth-century sculpture, both European and American, often organized in conjunction with other Swiss or foreign institutions.
2. Contemporary art, especially local art (and thus the promotion of artists from Ticino), through solo and collective exhibitions, including exhibitions devoted to the latest artistic developments. The dialogue between different visions and themes, covering both past and present, reveals new aspects of the museum's own collections and thus provides an opportunity for reflection. The prevalent art forms chosen are sculpture, photography and installations.

Publishing activities

The research conducted by the museum in collaboration with renowned scholars on the occasion of exhibitions and research is reflected in its publishing activities, which include various series devoted to the museum's collections and to leading exponents of nineteenth-century art ("Casa d'artisti. Quaderni del Museo Vela", "Saggi sulla scultura", and "Cataloghi del Museo Vincenzo Vela"), some also designed for children ("I Dedali del Museo Vela", "ABBECED'ARTE"). Depth of critical and historical content, fine illustrations, a coherent graphical project and attention to detail characterize the catalogues that accompany the exhibitions of the work of contemporary Swiss and foreign artists.

Educational and outreach activities

Study, education and enjoyment, according to the definition adopted by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), are the aims that museums should pursue. In line with this mandate, the Museum's Education Service, created in 2001, organizes activities that involve different kinds of public, aimed at promoting contact with the arts and at ensuring that the museum is a place of social interaction, open to intercultural relations. In keeping with the motto "encounter, listening, dialogue" the museum has inaugurated a program called "Rel-azioni, incontri di altro tipo" – in collaboration with institutions active in Ticino and in the rest of Switzerland, as well as with individual artists – the museum organizes concerts, readings, performances and cultural events. Through specific projects it provides opportunities for fertile exchange with disabled people, migrants and more recently refugees. The spacious, light-filled atelier, where Vincenzo Vela's assistants used to work marble, now welcomes school parties, special institutes, families and groups of children and adults who are able to take part in stimulating activities that allow them to explore themes related to the permanent collection and the temporary exhibitions, as well as to express feelings and to discuss broader themes.

In this domain the Museum has played a pioneering role in Ticino, through creative projects for the involvement of the whole community, interpreting the spirit that distinguishes the bequest of Vincenzo, Lorenzo and Spartaco Vela as well as the Culture-Chart of the Swiss Federal Office of Culture.

Communication

The commitment to good public relations is reflected in a policy of clear, regularly updated communication, through the use of innovative technologies and of social media, in total respect of the museum's identity. The Museum publishes a regular online newsletter on its website. It also has a Facebook page.

Gianna A. Mina, Ligornetto, 2016