



ITINERARIO LIBERTY



Italy

The European debates which had given birth to the Art Nouveau also reached Italy, but with a great delay. On the other hand the Italian situation was still extremely complex. National unity was a recent event and the attempts to impose, even in the artistic field, a fictitious cohesion did not achieve any real effect apart from rhetoric. This does not mean that there were not interesting starting points or prominent personalities who paid attention to the new ideas. However, the social and political problems, together with the economical ones, did not allow the development of the Art Nouveau in the same way as in the rest of Europe. The theorization of the link between art and industry as the prime mover of change, was almost completely lacking, because of the state of backwardness of the latter and, consequently, there was no attention to the diffusion of everyday products limited in cost. The attempt at renewal remained mainly linked, on one side, to the vivacious world of artisans and, on the other, to the rich, aristocratic elite. The popular base did not begin to be a part of the issue, in the field of intent and, even less, in fruition. This did not impede the diffusion of a certain style, linked to Art Nouveau, which regarded the middle classes.

The term Liberty, which will then come to designate the Italian experience, is really invented by the public, to indicate the style of objects and tapestry coming from the London firm "Liberty & Co." and, at a second moment, the local experiences. However, at this level it represented, precisely, just a passing fashion considering, above all, English manufacturing without any awareness of the theoretical discussion from which it originated, or of the diffusion of the debate and of the style in the whole of Europe.

The new tendencies, as in the rest of Europe, followed the way of illustration and architecture, besides that of the decorative arts. In all these manifestations Liberty was not a precise and elevated style in-depth and unequivocal theoretical studies, contaminations of styles of the past were never lacking, above all in the reference to the classical age and to the Renaissance. From the architectural point of view, Liberty buildings with different characteristics began to rise all over Italy, from the more influential Turin, in which Raimondo D'Aronco worked, to the rich Milan of Giuseppe Sommaruga, as far as the Palermo of Ernesto Basile. In general, under the Liberty classification, buildings with floral and symbolical decoration are found next to others where the influence of the Viennese Secession is clear, or in which both the motifs are mixed with medieval, monumental and classical references.

As regards the decorative arts, one cannot make a speech which is precise and at the same time unitary. On the other hand the problem of the lack of unity of the artistic experience really prevented the Art Nouveau tendencies from having a deep penetration in the country. The last ten years of the nineteenth century had seen, in the South, the re-flourishing of a realism of seventeen-eighteenth-century origin and, in the Centre, the cohabitation of the Tuscan macchiaiolo tradition with a verism on which the influence of the Spanish school weighed, especially in Rome. On the other hand, there were two stylistic centres in the North: Venice, where the canal views survived, and Milan, in which a late-romantic vein emerged next to unconventionality. Towards the end of the century a first generation of critics, amongst whom Giuseppe Cellini and Camillo Boito, began to open their minds to international debates and to feel Italy's delay with respect to the other countries, without, however, abandoning the conviction that the only valid source of inspiration for art was to be sought in the Italian tradition.

Only after 1885 the foreign production was discovered by a conspicuous number of artists and the new ideas arduously began to circulate. One of the vehicles of this diffusion was "Emporium", a magazine born from the English model "The Studio". In 1898 "Aemilia Ars" was founded in Bologna, a company inspired by the experience of Arts and Crafts, who produced glass, ceramics, wrought iron, furniture, and lace. The most significant stage for the development and diffusion of the Liberty style was, however, the 1902 Turin exhibition, desired by a restricted group of artists and intellectuals. Numerous foreign delegations took part and for the first time in Italy the decorative arts were exhibited in an independent section with respect to the

major arts. The effect of the exhibition followed in vivacious debates, one of which on the Torinese magazine "L'Arte Decorativa Moderna", which concerned the criticism to eclecticism and the need for renewal of decorative art. However, there was no agreement on the forms which this renewal should have promoted.

The season of Liberty from the Torinese exhibition was prolonged beyond World War One and was not lacking in contradictions. Already the 1903 biennial exhibition in Venice appeared as an involution with respect to the year before, for the new negation of the autonomy of decorative art which was not presented in a separate section and for the choice to still privilege regionalism. The following exhibition brought to light, on one hand, the stylistic uncertainty of Italian Liberty and, on the other, its being more and more prerogative of an elite. The years between 1910 and the end of World War One were the most uncertain and agitated. The Italian cultural climate was dominated by the figure of D'Annunzio and his decadence mixed with nationalism and, only in part this was contrasted by the influence of the Viennese Secession. The economic dealings with Austria, begun at the time of the Triple Alliance, had in some way also imposed the circulation of artistic ideas which were welcomed in these years, above all in the Roman environment.