

# Palazzo Bianco and Rosso, Genoa

## Albini and Marcenaro's productive relationship

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This study focuses on the relationship between the critical restoration carried out on the Palazzo Bianco and Palazzo Rosso in Genoa after World War II and the designs of new exhibition spaces in these buildings. The aim here is to understand how the architectural characteristics of these buildings have influenced curatorial and museographical choices and how these choices were integrated into the project to restore these historic buildings. To this end, this research has investigated in detail the role played by the central protagonists of the story, particularly those who decisively contributed to the restoration decision-making and intervention process following the bombing to which the buildings were subjected during World War II. Although the history of the two buildings has been extensively studied and described<sup>1</sup>, this research focuses on museum storage, a topic that has not yet been analysed. For both buildings, the construction of the storage facilities came about as part of the Albini-Marcenaro project executed in the post-war period. These two sets of facilities are some of the first examples of museum storage designed in Italy, along with those of Museo di Capodimonte in Naples, the Sabauda Gallery in Turin, and the Palazzo Abatellis in Palermo<sup>2</sup>.

### The restoration of the Palazzo Bianco and Palazzo Rosso after World War II

The reorganisation of the gallery of the Palazzo Bianco posed issues concerning not only the difficulties of housing an up-to-date museum in a historic building but also how to perform an intervention on a seriously damaged building, many parts of which had been irretrievably lost. After being severely bombed in 1942<sup>3</sup>, the palace was restored under the supervision of the Civil Engineering Office under the guidance of the Director of the Office of Fine Arts, Orlando Grosso.

Comments by Carlo Ceschi<sup>4</sup> about the exceptional and serious nature of the damage suffered by the building are confirmed in correspondence between Grosso and Aldo Mattei, the Chief Engineer of the Civil Engineering Office. The only option considered by both Grosso and Mattei appears to have been to perform a reconstruction of the lost parts. There was a large amount of archival material that outlined in detail the configuration of the Palazzo Bianco before the bombings and seems sufficient for the restorers to have avoided the need to make arbitrary choices, but, in reality, the story was more complex. The reconstruction was not limited to a faithful reconstruction of the irretrievably lost parts of the buildings as and where they were; it went as far as to completely cancel some of the stratifications that had accumulated on the building over time<sup>5</sup>.

Several interventions took place in this climate of restoration of the pre-war Palazzo Bianco and research into the original state of the building including the remanufacture of the external plasters<sup>6</sup>, the flooring with new materials different from the previous ones<sup>7</sup>, and the lost stuccos in a way that avoided the gilding with which they had previously been covered<sup>8</sup>, as well as the renovation of the damaged

shutters and their replacement with glass doors<sup>9</sup>. It is in this atmosphere that the building saw an intervention by Caterina Marcenaro, the Director of the Fine Arts and History Office of the Municipality of Genoa, and the architect Franco Albini.

On the other side of the Via Garibaldi (former Strada Nuova) in Genoa from the Palazzo Bianco is located the unique Palazzo Rosso, the only noble palace in the city to consist of two floors. The fact that its spaces are highly representative of the Genoese baroque and the presence of precious seventeenth-century frescoes make the Palazzo Rosso a museum in and of itself, even before one takes into account the presence of the Brignole Sale Gallery.



**Figure 1 - Palazzo Bianco, Genoa: The wooden panels used to exhibit paintings in the secondary gallery. (Photo M. Loddo, 2017)**

Despite a series of far-reaching restorations and modifications that changed its original appearance, the Palazzo Rosso still retains its character as a patrician residence due to both the architectural conformation of the floors of which the building is composed and its decorations.

### The Marcenaro-Albini restoration and design plans

Archival research<sup>10</sup> has revealed that it was Caterina Marcenaro who was responsible for decisions about the restoration of the palace and the design of the apartment of the Director of the Office of Fine Arts and History<sup>11</sup>. Her absolute control over every single aspect related to the intervention shines through, even the design of the new elements such as showcases and the helical staircase. She confirmed this after the inauguration of the palace in a personal historical-critical reading of the monument in which she maintained a strong defence of the legitimacy of her interventions, which she attributed to a perceived need to enhance the original characteristics of the monument (Marcenaro, 1961). Marcenaro's thoughts about the restoration were influenced by the writings of Giulio Carlo Argan<sup>12</sup> and particularly by Renato Bonelli's theories on critical restoration and the search for the 'true form' of artworks.

The archival documents also cover the collaboration between Marcenaro and Albini and the division of competencies in efforts such as the collection display and set-up<sup>13</sup>. It was a seemingly happy collaboration that extended to other Italian post-war museum restorations (Dalai Emiliani, 1982). However, while the museological and museographic intervention is attributed to their collaboration, the reorganisation of the Palazzo Bianco's gallery came about due to the work of others<sup>14</sup>.

Albini's decisions about the setting up of the museum were dictated by the objects to be put on display, taking into account the need to place some masterpieces in isolation<sup>15</sup> in order to educate the public through direct experiences of the artworks<sup>16</sup>. Such exhibitions were intended to help the public to focus attention on the artworks, avoiding confusion with the surrounding architecture<sup>17</sup>.

Other choices included the decision to situate large rooms in simple and physically collected environments, often through the use of wings and panels. For this purpose, light and neutral shades (e.g., ivory, white, or light grey) were used for the walls and carpets<sup>18</sup> and the paintings selected for the exhibition rooms were removed from the original

frames<sup>19</sup>, bases, and boiseries and displayed at eye level. A great deal of attention was paid to lighting; Albini used both uniform and natural lighting, regulated with Venetian curtains and diffused artificial light<sup>20</sup>.

### *The galleries and storage facilities of the Palazzo Bianco*

Marcenaro made the peculiar decision to eliminate artworks that were deemed not "very efficient for educational purposes" and to organise the remainder "in chronological order and in schools"<sup>21</sup>. To house the artefacts, two main storage areas were created and organised for the purposes of study and research (Marcenaro, 1954). Marcenaro and Albini implemented two solutions<sup>22</sup> that are still in place, although the museum authorities have modified them somewhat over the years<sup>23</sup>.

The first area is called the Secondary Gallery and it occupies the entire fourth floor. It is a mix between a storage and exhibition site, where paintings hang on wooden panels (designed by Albini) (Figure 1). If necessary, they can be moved to change the layout of the rooms<sup>24</sup>. The paintings are displayed based on the same criterion adopted for the gallery, but with a less elaborate arrangement. Bulkheads are used in the centre of the rooms to which other artworks are hung to optimise the space. Overall, 224 paintings are shown to the public, ordered in 18 rooms. There is a large selection of paintings from the Genoese school from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, followed by Italian painters and a section dedicated to Flemish, Dutch, and French works<sup>25</sup>.

The second solution was a well-organised storage facility allocated to the attic where paintings were displayed on sliding racks (Figure 2). These structures, also developed by Albini, were inspired from other fields and used materials that were easy to find on the market.

In the attic storage, Albini designed a system of painting racks hanging on hooks connected to rails, using a system similar to curtain rails<sup>26</sup> (Figure 3). For the preservation of small objects, a wooden (dating back to Albini's time) and a metal (relatively newly acquired) chest of drawers were used (Loddo, 2020, p. 43).

The attic storage and secondary gallery are still used to this day, while, since 2004, they have been equipped with safety and HVAC systems. In the same year, a number of chests of drawers were relocated to the mezzanine of the Palazzo Bianco in order to better preserve their textile



**Figure 2 - Palazzo Bianco, Genoa: Sliding painting racks in the attic storage. (Photo M. Loddo, 2017)**

artefacts. A number of drawers are located in the exhibition path and can be opened by visitors<sup>27</sup> (Loddo, 2020, p. 47). Albini's painting racks still function in the attic, but they seem to be more suitable for paintings of small dimensions that are easier to move and are less affected by vibrations, so a new structure of painting racks has been placed in the middle of the room. Compared to Albini's solution, in which the racks ran along the entire wall, exploiting the full height up to one metre, the new structure allows for better manoeuvring and makes it easier to access paintings (Figure 4). The frames of the paintings exhibited in the museum and secondary gallery are stored in a room connected to the attic storage<sup>28</sup> (Loddo, 2020, p. 47). The secondary gallery exhibits paintings but is visible only to scholars who have made a reservation in advance. There is a plan to keep it open all the time during museum opening hours, but the lack of employees does not yet allow for this solution<sup>29</sup>.

### *The galleries of the Palazzo Rosso*

The restoration of the Palazzo Rosso fell under the authority of Marcenaro, while the design of the interior layout was a result of the work of Albini and his associate Franca Helg, even though they were significantly influenced by the recommendations of Marcenaro. The setting-up of the museum was characterised by a continuous dialogue between old and new. The environment created the correct degree of isolation and attention necessary for the dialogue between the artwork and the visitor, while the rooms maintain their seventeenth-century configuration.

On the first noble floor, where the paintings gallery was set up, there are no fresco decorations; the rooms follow the pure casing sought after by Marcenaro, where the focus is mainly on the paintings. These paintings are not fixed to the walls but rather hung thanks to a series of mobile cables that run on metal rails anchored to the walls below the vault floor. The lighting, notably designed by Franco Albini, also hangs from the metal rails, giving maximal space to the exhibition area. This solution is repeated in all the rooms

intended for painting exhibitions, as well as in the second noble floor and in the Marcenaro apartment, so it can be interpreted as being Albini's general museological method (Santini, 1964, p. 55).

The floors consist of white marble slabs and the walls and vaults are painted with a dark-grey colour, which contributes to the quiet atmosphere that shows off the artworks. Some canvases are exhibited on a vertical axis with rotating support, fixed to the floor and equipped with a handle, which allows the visitors to move the paintings and see their reverse (Figure 5). Contrary to the Palazzo Bianco, each painting is exhibited with its frame to recall the patrician character of the rooms, although they are simplified in their spatiality. The decision to keep the original frames around the paintings is attributed to Franca Helg. Unfortunately, the Albinian lighting solutions lost their attraction or were limited by the lack of electrical outlets in the rooms. Some lamps have been connected to them that reduce the freedom of positioning of the lighting system and consequently of the paintings.

On the second noble floor where the walls and vaults of the rooms are frescoed, the painting exhibition appears even more spacious than on the first floor and even leaves room for the presence of furniture and sculptures that form part of the Brignole Sale collection. This detail recalls the ancient function of patrician dwelling that the second noble floor has always played. These environments were the fulcrum of the

two restoration projects outlined for the palace by Orlando Grosso<sup>30</sup> and Caterina Marcenaro<sup>31</sup>. When the seventeenth-century polychrome marble inlaid floors were uncovered, they were covered by a red felt carpet that serves as a guide path between the rooms and at the same time emphasises the baroque character of the residence.

In these rooms, the paintings are not arranged on the walls following the continuous-guide system present in the first floor; they are instead placed on the floor like the



**Figure 3 - Palazzo Bianco, Genoa: Hooks connected to rails to hang paintings. (Photo M. Loddo, 2017)**



**Figure 4 - Palazzo Bianco, Genoa: Painting racks added to the centre of the attic storage in early 2000. (Photo M. Loddo, 2017)**

furnishings and sculptures on display, with a system of beams of different sizes crossed between them. To enhance the baroque decoration, the lighting system differs from that in the first floor: a large chandelier has been installed in the living room, while in the other rooms where only furniture and sculptures are exhibited, it is mainly entrusted to natural light from the loggias<sup>32</sup> and large screened windows through white curtains.

Another museographic solution was conceived for the second noble floor in the so-called Halls of the Allegory of Spring, Summer, and Autumn. Here, tests carried out on the masonry failed to identify the presence of the seventeenth-century frescoes under the tempera of the eighteenth century.

In agreement with Albini, Caterina Marcenaro decided to cover the decorated walls with an opaque fabric of the same shade as the floor carpeting<sup>33</sup>. In these rooms, rendered neutral by the grey colour<sup>34</sup>, some paintings of the Brignole family have been displayed and the lighting system used in the first noble floor again deployed.

*The storage facilities of the Palazzo Rosso*

Albini and Marcenaro also contributed to the organisation of the storage facilities of the Palazzo Rosso<sup>35</sup>. In particular, he designed a number of storage areas scattered throughout the palace, one of which is accessible from a door in the alcove room on the second floor that opens on to the mezzanine located between the second and the first floor. It is uncomfortable to reach this area due to the narrow stairs that turn in half way, which makes it very difficult to safely handle paintings when taking them in and out (Figure 6). Although the room has never been fitted with HVAC systems, its location provides a dry and simply lit room and overall indicates a space that meets the required standards for storage (Loddo, 2020, p. 59).



**Figure 5 - Palazzo Rosso, Genoa:** Visitors can see the backs of paintings by rotating a handle. (Photo M. Loddo, 2017)

Albini designed the storage for the textile collection, which no longer exists, and similar facilities for the applied arts such as ceramic, porcelain, metal, and glass<sup>36</sup>. He also designed the chests of drawers used for the preservation of the prints and drawings collection, which are still in use today. These issues, and the fact almost the entire collection is exhibited, is the reason why the museum does not generally use these facilities anymore and, in 2004, built a new one on the ground floor<sup>37</sup> (Loddo, 2020, pp. 59-60).

**Conclusion**

What is evident from the series of interventions accomplished in the rooms of the Palazzo Rosso is the respect for historical



**Figure 6 - Palazzo Rosso, Genoa:** Staircase to access the paintings storage area. (Photo M. Loddo, 2016)

monuments displayed by both the architect and the curator, and the perfect union achieved between the architecture and the artworks (Bucci, Rossari, 2005, p. 52). This is an example of a “complete artwork”, which is a distinctive mark of an “internal museum” (Huber, 1997, p. 77) in the Italian context of the 1950s and 1960s.

Due to the critical success of the renovations and reconstructions, the solutions derived for the gallery of the Palazzo Bianco

in the 1950s were partly repeated for the Palazzo Rosso, albeit with greater attention being paid to the building’s architecture. There are a number of similarities between the interventions performed on these famous Genoese monuments in the use of a neutral colour for the vaults and walls, the decision to focus attention on the artworks, and the dematerialisation of the architecture of the rooms. In all cases, the displays of paintings involve the use of cables that run on metal rails, but this solution was improved at the Palazzo Rosso by incorporating an artificial lighting system. The main feature of the Palazzo Rosso’s layout is that it is conceived as a series of rooms, each with its own

personality (Colombo, 2001, p. 100). The relationship between the restoration and the architecture of the buildings is very strong and most solutions found to the problems that arose in the reconstructions were resolved in favour of the enhancement of the architecture. In most rooms, references to the patrician nature and history of the palaces are predominant, albeit manifested in the extreme simplicity of the architects' choices.

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1. To name a few: Aloi (1962); Botto and Tagliaferro (1977); Grimoldi (1980); Dalai Emiliani (1982); Boccardo (1992, 1998); Huber (1997); Piva (1998); Bucci and Rossari (2005); Cavalieri (2008); Mazzi (2009); Spesso (2011); Marani and Pavoni (2006).
2. This research began in the framework of my PhD in the Preservation of Architectural Heritage at the Politecnico di Milano, which has been published as a monograph (Loddo, 2020). Storage facilities are rarely examined in the literature and specific work on the subject is very limited, especially in Italy. As a direct, the methodology employed for this work involved direct experiences assisted by inspections and interviews with museum professionals and archival research.
3. On the night of December 14, 1942, heavy bombing destroyed the façade, first floor (*piano nobile*), and part of the stucco decoration (Ceschi, 1953, p. 335).
4. Carlo Ceschi was the superintendent of Liguria's monuments from 1939 to 1953. In his book *Teoria e storia del restauro*, he wrote: "Il restauro si è imposto come necessità spirituale di ritrovare l'edificio principalmente come architettura unitaria, recuperandone le proporzioni, gli spazi interni, i partiti architettonici sostanziali, il valore ambientale e la funzione sociale" (Ceschi, 1970, pp. 168-172).
5. "Questo momento del restauro in Italia fu poi chiamato 'Restauro critico', in quanto la reintegrazione del monumento come opera d'arte portava necessariamente, come detto, ad una scelta operativa tanto vasta da superare ogni norma didattica, e tale da richiedere talvolta una sintesi critica sul piano artistico e un intervento assai vicino all'atto creativo" (*Ibid.*, p. 172).
6. ASCG, Fondo Belle Arti, scat. 230, cass. 142, fasc. 20. Palazzo Bianco: restauro palazzo 1937-1949. Lettera di Orlando Grosso al dott. Brunetti titolare Impresa Generale Costruzioni e Ricuperi, 14 novembre 1946.
7. ASCG, Fondo Belle Arti, scat. 230, cass. 142, fasc. 20. Palazzo Bianco: restauro palazzo 1937-1949. Lettera di Orlando Grosso all'Ing. Capo del Genio Civile, 13 gennaio 1947.
8. ASCG, Fondo Belle Arti, scat. 230, cass. 142, fasc. 20. Palazzo Bianco: restauro palazzo 1937-1949. Lettera del dott. Brunetti titolare Impresa Generale Costruzioni e Ricuperi ad Orlando Grosso, 22 maggio 1947.
9. ASCG, Fondo Belle Arti, scat. 230, cass. 142, fasc. 25. Palazzo Bianco: locali 1930-1977. Lettera dell'Assessore alle Belle Arti Carla Mazzarello all'approvazione della Giunta Municipale, 2 maggio 1949.
10. Relevant here are archives of the Municipality and the Superintendency and also the correspondence between Marcenaro and Albini.
11. Called the "Appartamento Marcenaro", it is located on the top floor of the Palazzo Rosso.

12. At the time of the approval of the Palazzo Rosso project, Argan was the Central Inspector of the Directorate General for Antiquities and Fine Arts of the Ministry of Education. He expressed his opinion on Marcenaro and Albini's work in Argan (1951, pp. 25-28).

13. The chosen arrangement favoured formal and aesthetic aspects, to the detriment of the historical-critical framework of the artwork. One of the main criteria adopted concerns the individuality of the work (i.e., an approach that considers the work of art in and of itself, free from any external conditions) (Marcenaro, 1954, pp. 259-267).

14. Of these, Orlando Grosso, the predecessor of Caterina Marcenaro as the Director of the Office of Fine Arts and the Councillor for Fine Arts Carla Mazzarello, who played a role that was far from marginal in the decision-making process, especially in the years 1946-50, made decisions that contributed to the interventions by Marcenaro and Albini that define the image of the Palazzo Bianco's gallery to this day.

15. A good example of this in the Palazzo Bianco's gallery is the statue of the tomb of Margherita di Brabante.

16. "In the interests of education, the palace concept was abandoned and the museum criterion strictly adhered to. In other words, the works of art were treated not as the decorative part of a given setting, but as a world in themselves, sufficient to absorb the visitor's full attention" (Marcenaro, 1954, p. 266).

17. "L'architettura, spostando anch'essa il suo fuoco dall'opera esposta al pubblico, tende ora ad 'ambientare il pubblico', se così si può dire, anziché ambientare l'opera d'arte" (Albini, Casabella, 2005).

18. This is particularly true in the room with the statue of Margaret of Brabante. ASCG, Fondo Belle Arti, scat. 230, cass. 142, fasc. 27. Palazzo Bianco: tende tappeti 1950-1969. Lettera della dott.sa Marcenaro all'arch. Albini, 20 marzo 1950.

19. "Non si può dire che la cornice è necessaria oppure inutile: ma si può dire che quasi sempre è opportuno uno spazio intermedio tra quadro e ambiente, sia esso cornice, o parete, superficie di fondo, o volume d'aria assegnato al quadro, quasi zona d'influenza del suo spazio pittorico" (Albini and Casabella, 2005).

20. ASCG, Fondo Belle Arti, scatola 230, cass. 142, fasc. 27. Palazzo Bianco: tende tappeti 1950-1969. Lettera dell'arch. Albini alla dott.ssa Marcenaro, 3 maggio 1950.

21. ASCG, Fondo Belle Arti, scat. 230, cassetta 142, fasc. 21. "Palazzo Bianco: restauro 1949-1981" Verbale della Commissione per il riordinamento della Galleria di Palazzo Bianco, 14 Settembre 1950.

22. "An especially important aspect of the problem of organisation was that of items in storage. The space given over to them is even larger than that allowed for exhibits; they are housed in the upper room and in the attics. They too have been arranged in chronological order and according to school so that the students can identify them quickly and easily" (Marcenaro, 1954, p. 266).

23. Visits to the museum and storage facilities and personal communication with Director Piero Boccardo and Curator Margherita Priarone of the Musei di Strada Nuova, of which Palazzo Bianco and Palazzo Rosso form part. Palazzo Bianco, Genoa, October 5, 2016.

24. "Another consideration taken into account both in the exhibition and in the storage rooms was that of mobility. The aim was to evolve a thoroughly flexible display system so that one or more works could at any time be added, removed, or transferred [...] the pictures on the wall are hung from visible iron shafts, which are easily movable along iron slide ways. To save space in the storage room, double-side panels of unpolished plywood (beechwood surfaces) have been introduced, fitted with iron rails to which the shafts supporting the pictures are hooked" (Marcenaro, 1954, p. 266).

25. Personal communication with Margherita Priarone, Palazzo Bianco, Genoa, October 5, 2016.
26. "This method not only ensures the complete mobility of the works concerned and makes them easy to access but enables hundreds of pictures to be stored in a very small space" (Marcenaro, 1954, p. 266).
27. Personal written communication with Margherita Priarone, Palazzo Bianco, Genoa, December 3, 2018.
28. All the frames are catalogued and the curators have been able to establish to which paintings of the collection most frames belong (Personal communication with Margherita Priarone, Palazzo Bianco, Genoa, October 5, 2016).
29. *Ibid.*
30. Grosso restored the seventeenth-century frescoes on the vaults that had been damaged between 1942 and 1943. The primary cause of this was the sea water that was used to extinguish the fires caused by the bombing. Delays to the reconstruction of the roof and the subsequent infiltration of rainwater further exacerbated the damage. ASCG, Fondo Belle Arti, scat. 267, cassetto 154, fascicolo 11, Palazzo Rosso: danni di guerra 1944, 29 gennaio, Relazione sui danni riportati da Palazzo Rosso, Lettera del Podestà Gardini al Genio Civile di Genova.
31. Marcenaro decided to bring back the seventeenth-century frescoes in accordance with the decoration of the vaults. These had been hidden between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to adapt to the fashion of the time and to host the renewed collection of Brignole Sale (Marcenaro, 1961, pp. 24-50).
32. ASCG, Fondo Belle Arti, scatola 267, cassetto 154, Palazzo Rosso: nuova sistemazione dal 1950 al 1955, 19 settembre. Pareri su progetto Palazzo Rosso, Lettera del geometra Luigi Colombini, dello studio di Architettura Arch. Franco Albini a Caterina Marcenaro.
33. ASCG, Fondo Belle Arti, scat. 271, cass. 154, fasc. 48, Palazzo Rosso: lavori di sistemazione 1954-69: stanze a quadreria, lettera Marcenaro al dott. arch. Franco Albini.
34. *Ibid.*, 7 marzo 1957: stanze a quadreria (sala della Primavera, Estate e Autunno), Lettera della dott.ssa Caterina Marcenaro all'Arch. Franco Albini.
35. As above mentioned, Albini contributed to the architectural restoration of the palace, which was much debated (Boccardo, 1998, pp. 103-104).
36. This storage facility, located on the second floor and hidden behind a wall-door, was probably used by the previous owner (the Duchess of Galliera) as a palace warehouse to store furniture, personal objects, and furnishings not on display. Visit to the palace and personal communication with Margherita Priarone, Palazzo Rosso, Genoa, October 5, 2016.
37. This textile storage area was integrated with the one in the Palazzo Bianco. The painting storage area is equipped with modern painting racks and HVAC systems (*Ibid.*).

#### Abbreviations

ASCG = Archivio Storico del Comune di Genova.

HVAC = Heating, ventilation, and air conditioning system.

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