

*Two new documents on the Ospedale Maggiore,
Milan and on Filarete*

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Although the Ospedale Maggiore and Filarete have been much studied, the archives of Milan still conceal important notices on both the architect and his building. During a recent stay in Milan I was able to uncover two documents that provide us with provocative information on Filarete and the Cà Grande. One of the documents permits us to establish a slightly earlier date for Francesco Sforza's announced intention to build a new hospital for the city. Both documents, taken together suggest that the Ospedale Maggiore was one of the major and certainly one of the best known building programs of the second half of the 15th century in Italy. The documents permit us to identify the sources (and by implication the « non-sources ») of the Ospedale Maggiore. Finally both documents provide new insights into the artistic relations between Milan and Florence during the reign of Francesco Sforza.

The first of these documents does not mention Filarete by name, although there is every probability that he is the architect in question. In a long letter from Nicodemo Tranchedini da Pontremoli, Milanese ambassador in Florence, to Duke Francesco Sforza the following notice accours:

« Cosimo dice ve mandra lo inzegnero per l'ospedale dal lagheto instructo et informato apieno de omne cosa appartenente ad simile edificio et ali ordeni soy et col desegno de questo Et grandemente comenda questo vostro laudabile et sancto proposito ». The letter is dated Firenze, 27 April, 1451.¹

Previous to the discovery of this document the earliest known reference to the Ospedale Maggiore was to be found in two letters from the same Nicodemo in Rome, again addressed to the duke and dated 4 and 6 May, 1451. They have been published by Canetta, Lazzaroni and Muñoz and Biagetti.² These two letters only refer to the Pope's pleasure at Francesco's re-

solve, but the new document indicates that the Duke of Milan had already sought out a foreign architect for the important commission. The number and state of Milanese hospitals at the time of the Duke's entry into Milan as reported by Bascapè and by Biagetti³ would suggest that the decision to build the new hospital was probably taken already in 1450. Certainly the search for an architect had begun well before April of 1451.

Although the name of the architect is not stated, Filarete is a leading candidate. It is known, for example, that he was already at work in Milan in September 1451 at the Castello of Porta Giovia.⁴ How or why he came to Milan is not known. It is clear, however, that he was in Venice in 1449 from the date on his signed Processional Cross still in the Collegiata of Bassano del Grappa. A notice of 7 June, 1451⁵ from Boccaccino in Florence states that all Florentines were banished from Venetian territory and had to be out of the territory by 15 June. Filarete may well have left Venice before this terminal date, for there were already indications in 1450 that such a ban was imminent. He would clearly have been available for the work, and, since Cosimo had already recommended Luca Fancelli to the Gonzaga in Mantova, the available supply of architects in Florence must have been limited. Cosimo's function was to match the commission seeking an architect with the architect seeking a commission. If Filarete were intended from the first as architect of the Ospedale Maggiore, then his work at the Castello and at the Duomo would have been considered temporary occupations until his real work could begin. His treatise is surprisingly free of bitterness toward the shabby treatment he received at the Duomo, although he does not fail to take his revenge on the obstructionism of his colleagues at the Castello. If he knew

that an extremely important commission was to be his, he could afford the patience that we find in his letters.

The second document is even richer in its implications. It is a letter directed from Giovanni de' Medici in Florence to the Duke of Milan. It is the reply to Francesco's letter introducing Filarete and a certain mason, Giovanni di Sant'Ambrogio, to Giovanni de' Medici and requesting that they be permitted to study Florentine hospitals.⁶ The letter of introduction is dated 4 June, 1456. The reply is of 25 June, 1456. After the usual salutations the letter begins:

« E suto qui Maestro Antonio dalla porta ilquale ma narrato come la Illustrissime Vostra Signoria vole dare ordine a fare quello spedale diche altrevolte costa ragionamo. Et perche luj nabbia qualche buono exemplo Io glo fatto vedere tutto il nostro qui di Sancta Maria nuova che e gran cosa et degna. Di poi luj se partito sença fare meco altra conclusio- ne. Ma perche questa mi pare opera di grandissima spesa et importançia et digrande honore et degnita con buona fede ricordo all Vostra Illustrissima Signoria et quella conforto non vogla essere molto presta al piglarne partito et cominciare amurare. Ma vogla havere piu disegni et di diversi Maestrij Et quegli con diligentia examinati eleggere il meglio. Et perche qui sono de Maestrij assai et Valentissimi Io ho ordinato farne fare piu et diversi modellj a ciaschuno et quegli mandero alla V.S. accio che possa examinarglij et prendoro poi quello glandra meglio per lanimo perche faccendò uno hedificio di tanta spesa visi richiede uno grande et un bello ordine altremente lacosa e poi biasimata. Ne altro Raccomandemj alla V. Ill. S. Laquale infelice vita Laltissimo conservij. Florentie xxv Junij Mcccclvj. Johanne Cosme de Medicis ».⁷

Unless there is an Antonio dalla Porta who has escaped notice up to now, Filarete's pride in his bronze doors for St. Peter's in Rome was shared by his contemporaries. His frequent reference to those doors in his treatise and on such signed works as the Bassano cross and the Dresden Marcus Aurelius has often been put down as the pathetic attempt of a minor artist to build up his reputation. It is fitting, however, that his native city should choose to call him Antonio dalla Porta as it had called Castagno, Andreino degli Impiccati.

Clearly the Ospedale Maggiore was to be one of the major projects of Francesco Sforza's reign, and the existence of the project was clearly common knowledge in Italy. Giovanni de Medici had already discussed it with Francesco, perhaps in July of 1455 when he was in

Milan.⁸ Francesco Sforza was later to complain in regard to his palace in Venice that his intentions were known throughout Lombardy and the Venetian territories. It is likely that this project was equally well-known throughout Lombardy and the Venetian territories. It is likely that this project was equally well-known throughout Italy.

The form of the plan of the Ospedale Maggiore probably derives in great part from Filarete's mode of planning, but Bascapè⁹ already pointed out in 1936 that the germ of the idea is to be found in the Hospital of Santa Maria Nuova in Florence. The document verifies his brilliant intuition. Filarete studied *only* S. Maria Nuova in Florence. There is no mention of the Ospedale degli Innocenti, and we know from the treatise that he did not approve of it in any case.¹⁰ Giovanni de' Medici may have been piqued that Filarete left Florence « senza fare altra conclusione », but for Filarete his work was done.

It is interesting but fruitless to speculate on the plans Giovanni sent to Milan. Probably Michelozzo, Antonio Manetti, Bernardo Rossellino and perhaps even Alberti were consulted, but Filarete's plan was accepted. The Duke thought highly enough of his architect and his plan that by April 1457 he laid the cornerstone and began the structure.¹¹

One of the most interesting implications of this brief letter has to do with the artistic relations between Milan and Florence in the last half of the 15th century. The subject is too vast and too little explored to do more than outline at this point. It is significant, however, that Francesco Sforza had in his service two Florentines, Filarete and Benedetto Ferrini, who both made documented trips to Florence. He had access through Giovanni de' Medici to the best architectural ideas of the post-Brunelleschi generation in Florence, even though he close not to use them. I have already indicated in this periodical that the Duke of Milan made a serious effort to acquire one or more works by Desiderio da Settignano. The whole subject of Milanese-Florentine relations is open for rewarding study. We know that Pigello Portinari made frequent trips between Milan and Florence. Don Timoteo, who was entrusted by Cosimo de' Medici to build the Badia at Fiesole, was also the source of Filarete's information on the Badia. It is perhaps no coincidence that he was invited by Bianca Maria Sforza to preach the lenten sermons in Milan in 1463.¹² A final *bricciola archivistica* underlines the facility with which news and travellers could pass between the two cities, for Nicodemo Tranche-

dini reports with pleasure, and surprise, that a letter posted in Milan on 29 August 1466 arrived in Florence at the 22nd hour of 30 August.¹³ There is no doubt that an exchange of artistic ideas between the two cities existed. These two documents remind us that the Florentine

influences were often very subtle, that the source could be changed almost beyond recognition, and that the Milanese were by no means slavish followers of the Florentines.

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NOTES

¹ Archivio di Stato, Milan. Archivio sforzesco, Potenze Estere, 265 (Firenze).

² PIETRO CANETTA, *Cronologia dell'Ospedale Maggiore di Milano*, Milano 1884, p. 7. MICHELE LAZZARONI and ANTONIO MUÑOZ, *Filarete scultore e architetto del secolo XV*, Rome 1908, p. 188. VINCENZINA BIAGETTI, *L'Ospedale Maggiore di Milano*, Milan 1937, p. 10.

³ GIACOMO C. BASCAPE, « Il progresso dell'assistenza ospedaliera nel secolo XV e gli ospedali 'a crociera' », pp. 9-21, *Tecnica ospedaliera*, fasc. I, 1936. V. BIAGETTI, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-20.

⁴ LAZZARONI and MUÑOZ, p. 164.

⁵ ASM, Potenze Estere, 265.

⁶ LAZZARONI and MUÑOZ, p. 186.

⁷ Ambrosiana, Milan. Class Z Sup. 247, fol. 200.

⁸ See Ambrosiana, Z Sup. 247, fol 193 where Cosimo de Medici announces to Francesco Sforza the imminent arrival of Giovanni.

⁹ *Op. cit.*

¹⁰ *Filarete's Treatise on Architecture*. J. R. SPENCER, ed. New Haven, 1965.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 145 and note.

¹² Ambrosiana. Z Sup. 247, fol 210. Letter dated 1 March, 1463.

¹³ Ambrosiana, Z Sup. 247, fol. 220.