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“The Italian Museums of Shrines. Specificities and Relations with Pilgrimage”

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Biographies

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Abstract

Italy is a country very rich of Shrines in all her regions, destinations of more or less important local pilgrimages. A lot of them have a specific museum deeply connected with the sacred place and its history. The aim of this research is to verify in which way visiting one of those museums

is part of the pilgrimage itself, and in which way it is possible to find a link between the religious identity of the pilgrims and the cultural content of the museum. A few case-studies, chosen among museums of little dimensions and representative of different Italian regions, will be provided.

Extended abstract

Italy is, in all her regions, a country very rich in Roman Catholic Shrines, places of worship which are destinations of more or less ancient pilgrimages (informal statistics quantified them in more than 2,500). The definition of Shrine includes different types of religious places such as cathedrals, basilicas, chapels, grottos..., and the attraction of the pilgrimage can go from the international to the local (Cracco, 2006). A lot of these Shrines have a specific Museum deeply connected with the sacred place and its history.

Shrine's museums are part of the Italian Ecclesiastical Museums, and they represent a very important reality in Italy, being about 1,000 spread all over the national territory. As the Ecclesiastical Museums, also the Museums of Shrines are examples of different property (not only the Shrine itself, but also a diocese, a parish, a confraternity...); different kind (artistic, territorial, of religious objects, anthropological...); with collections of different importance (from universal artistic masterpieces to objects of everyday usage); with different social or economic impacts; and so on (Santi, 2012).

This research has a double aim: The first is to verify how visiting these Museums of Shrines could be considered part of the pilgrimage itself. In fact, the visitors of the Museum and the pilgrims to the Shrine do not necessarily correspond: quite often the pilgrims do not visit the Museum and the visitors of the Museum don't necessarily have the mental disposition of a pilgrim. Anyway, there is a recent trend to weaken the border between the two different ways of experiencing the places of worship – this is the result of the spreading of religious tourism toward traditional places of pilgrimage. Therefore, methodologies typical of museums (like cataloguing, scientific conservation and restoration, creation of narratives and temporary exhibitions) are applied to the Shrine; and actions typical of the pastoral care (like guided tours based on art and catechesis, or the musealization of the ex-votos) are applied to the Museum (Buggeln, Paine and Plate, 2017; Stausberg, 2011).

The second aim of this research is to study the link between the religious identity of the tourists and the cultural content of the Museum. Indeed, usually a Museum can have either a local dimension, if it is mainly directed towards the local community, or a touristic dimension, if the principal audience is of people coming from other places. In Italy, in the first case typically the diocese and parish Museums enforce the sense of territorial identity to the resident worshippers, insisting on the religious history and culture of their region (Bagnoli and Capurro, 2013). In the second case, instead, Shrine's Museums enforce the sense of religious identity to a community of tourists not always strictly linked with the territory itself, insisting on the shared worship towards the saint, or the relic, or the icon... held in the Shrine (Cracco and Cozzo, 2006). Nowadays, also in this case there is the trend in the Italian Ecclesiastical Museums to weaken this dichotomy, in the sense that the strong regional identity and not territorial religious dimension are both present in them (Falk and Dierking, 2013).

To ascertain this, we will provide four meaningful case-studies, chosen among Shrine Museums with these characteristics: the Shrines are dedicated to the Holy Virgin; the Museums expose different types of objects; both the Museums and the Shrines are of little dimensions; they are representative of different Northern Italian regions. Under the point of view of the methodology, we proceed with qualitative methods, such as the examination of the existing literature; contacts with privileged witnesses (managers, volunteers, associations, worshippers...); analysis of visual representations of Museums and Shrines; confrontation with the Italian Association of Ecclesiastical Museums. The four Shrine Museums chosen as a sample are:

1. “Museo del Santuario della Madonna del Bosco” (Imbersago, Lombardy) – The Shrine, a memento of the Apparition of the Holy Virgin in 1617, is one of the little places of worship of the religious path called “Cammino di Sant’Agostino”. Milanese Archbishop Cardinal Ildefonso Schuster was very devoted to it, therefore today the Museum conserves, with ex-votos, paintings, and religious objects, also the bed in which the Cardinal died in Milan in 1954. Usually, the pilgrims to the Shrine mix the experience of worship with the visit of the Museum, but there aren’t tourists going there with the intention of visiting just the Museum. The local community has always been deeply connected with the Shrine as a place of countryside leisure, but nowadays the Cammino di Sant’Agostino improves the presence of tourists.

2. “Museo Storico del Santuario” (Garessio, Piedmont) – This Museum is placed in the historical building of the Shrine dedicated to Santa Maria delle Grazie, founded during the XVII Century and that, nowadays, has been moved to a more recent building inaugurated in 1915. The collection of the Museum is composed by ex-votos and other objects representative of the history of the Shrine. The visit to the Museum is considered an experience that can complete the pilgrimage; the proximity to the Shrine, but also the free admission encourage the visit of both as complementary activities. There are many worshippers, in particular of the Piedmontese region, who visit the Shrine of Garessio for occasion of particular festivities and in recent years there are also many religious tourists who appreciate the visit of the place joined with the experience of food traditions as the polenta and chestnuts festivals.

3. “Museo di Speleologia Monte Gazzo” (Genoa, Liguria) – The originality of this Shrine Museum has to be found in the contents here exposed – stones, fossils, relief maps, and other objects relative to the speleological activity. The Shrine of the “Madonna della Misericordia del Monte Gazzo” was in fact built during the second half of the XVII Century next to Genoa on the top of a summit of 419 m where the karst landscape is very peculiar. For this reason, it’s mainly frequented by speleologists from outside but there is also a project to enlarge the Museum with a section dedicated to the heritage of the Shrine. The aim of the owner is to conjugate the speleological/touristic interests with the religious/local aspects.

4. “Museo Missionario del Santuario delle Grazie” (Rimini, Emilia Romagna) – The museum was founded in 1928 to display an interesting collection of objects coming from different part of the World and brought to the Shrine by Franciscan missionaries. The connection between the Museum and the Shrine was very weak: the worshippers didn’t have interest for the collection and the visitors of the Museum were mostly interested to ethno-anthropological issues. The severe damages of both the Shrine and the Museum during the Second World War, sprung the necessity of an almost complete renewal of the building and the weak relation between the two, led to the transfer of the majority of the pieces of the Museum collection to some other civic museums, in particular the Museo degli Sguardi just in front of the Shrine. Nowadays the narrative of the Museum recreates a connection with the Shrine appreciated by religious tourists.

As a conclusion, the provided examples confirm that nowadays in the religious tourism towards the Italian Shrine Museums there is a general trend to offer an integrated touristic supply where

the needs both of the pilgrim and the cultural tourist are satisfied. Even in the case of Shrine Museums with non-religious collections, there is the intention to combine the religious dimension of the place of worship with the diversified cultural interests of the visitors.

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