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THE RECOVERY OF THE ARTISTIC CANDELABRA OF USTICA

A symbol of the urban reform begun in the Seventeenth Century, Piazza Villena in Palermo was designed by the royal architect Giulio Lasso in the form of an octagon and soon acquired the name of "Teatro del Sole" [Theatre of the Sun] since it provided the two principal city streets with a view of the sun all through the day, from dawn

to sunset. A display of light which can be dazzling, and not only in the summer, it has caused this area to become over time the fulcrum of city life: concentrated here were fashionable cafés, highly exclusive *salles* and also a large number of bookshops.



As from the second half of the Nineteenth Century Piazza Villena was also illuminated by night, following the installation of a series of splendid cast iron candelabras produced by one of the most famous foundries of southern Italy, established in Palermo: the Fonderia Oretea.

Still today in their original location, the candelabras of Piazza Villena are illustrated on numerous period postcards and photos: lit by gas until 1920, they are characterized by their fine plinths, the façades of which are embellished with the winged eagle and the *Trinacria* (respectively the symbols of the city of Palermo and of Sicily), by the elegant column containing in its lower section the busts of three extraordinary female statues praising the cycle of nature and the harvest, and lastly by the top consisting of four lighting fixtures, of which three are supported by harmonious brackets enriched by plant-type decorations.

The simple observation of these items was followed by a careful and thorough analysis completed at the Archive of the Italian Museum of Cast Iron: among the various sources consulted, an original Nineteenth Century document gave rise to a sensational discovery. The work in question appears in a French catalogue of the *Société Anonyme des Hauts-Forneaux & Fonderies du Val D'Osne*: on table no. 358, dated

1851, an item can be seen to possess an identical column.

Bearing in mind that the Palermo candelabra were not installed earlier than 1870 it appears highly probable that the Fonderia Oretea, confirmed as the manufacturer of the items by the appearance of its signature on them, took its cue from the production of the Val D'Osne, at that time one of the most prestigious artistic foundries in the world. From the beginning of the Twentieth Century some of the items in question began to be substituted by modern lamps which were undoubtedly less elegant and refined but which were more suitable for use as electric lighting. The historical candelabra suffered a quite merciless fate: they were either recast (a phenomenon regarding a large part of cast iron urban décor of the period) or condemned to oblivion in the municipal storerooms. Only a small group managed to survive thanks to the interest of Municipalities such as Ustica, which requested no fewer than eight from the city of Palermo during the 1960s.

Placed in the principal town of the island, in Piazza Umberto I, they have undergone certain modifications over time, concerning especially the insertion of new tops with arms, replacing the originals in cast iron.



Sequence of restoration project

With the agreement of the Soprintendenza ai Beni Architettonici of Palermo and the Municipality of Ustica, at the beginning of 2007 Neri S.p.A. provided for their restoration, including a

reproduction of the original tops: as well as carrying out a scientific restoration, therefore, an attempt was made to respect and recover fully the original forms of the items.



Initial conditions



Cleaning of surfaces



Reproducing missing parts





Painting the artefacts

