

Short history of Ca' d'Oro and its Museum

The Palace

The Ca' d'Oro was built by **Marino Contarini**, a rich Venetian merchant, between 1421 and 1440, who made use of Lombard workers, headed by **Matteo Raverti** from Milan, and Venetian workers, led by **Giovanni Bon** and his son **Bartolomeo**. Alongside the extraordinarily light decorative effect of the facade, with the famous Gothic openwork of the loggias, the chromatic effect was further underlined by calling the French painter **Jean Charlier** (remembered as Zuane de Franza) to brush up the colored marbles and the profiles of the decorated parts, with red, ultramarine blue, black, white lead and gold, applying the latter also to the top of the pinnacles of the crown. Such was the splendor that the building was named and remembered, unique in Venice, not with the name of the family, but as the "golden" palace.

The Museum

The history of the museum, **inaugurated in 1927**, links its name to the founder of the Gallery - Baron **Giorgio Franchetti** (Turin 1865 - Venice 1922) – who, after years of passionate commitment as patron and collector, donated the Gothic building itself, purchased and restored by him, and the original nucleus of the art collections housed in it, to the Italian State in 1916, so that a public museum could be created.

The prestigious palace - which had been tampered with several times over the course of the centuries after alienations that had already taken place since the Renaissance period - had in fact been taken over, now dilapidated, by Baron Franchetti in **1894**, with the intention of restoring Ca' d'Oro to its former glory and making it the ideal treasure chest for his art collections, including period furnishings, tapestries, paintings, sculptures and small bronzes.

The State itself contributed to the formation of the museum's collections, adding to the nucleus of the Franchetti donation an important section of Renaissance bronzes and sculptures from the Veneto area, which includes bronzes and marble reliefs from suppressed or demolished Venetian ecclesiastical complexes and other state-owned works that completed the picture gallery.

1 - The Courtyard

The current appearance of the court of Ca' d'Oro is the result of another great work started by Baron Giorgio Franchetti towards the end of the nineteenth century, while he was in charge of restoring the entire palace to its ancient fifteenth-century morphology. As part of this intervention, the external staircase with pointed arches, typical of ancient Venetian building, was restored, because it had already been dismantled in the first half of the nineteenth century and was then recomposed, partly recovering some of the original fragments. The portal and the crowning were also restored. The original wellheaded mantelpiece, sculpted in 1427 by **Bartolomeo Bon**, was recovered on the Parisian antique market. The most suggestive element, however, remains the porticoed atrium, where the scansion of the columns matches the rich polychromy of the floor mosaic, designed by the Baron himself, and the marble covering of the walls.

The whole porticoed atrium was designed as a sumptuous lapidary, destined to house the collection of ancient sculptures. In the choice of decorative techniques and the preciousness of the materials, the aim was to synthesize the timeless idea of "Venetian beauty" that the entire palace was to embody after its nineteenth- and twentieth-century restoration.

In the short arm there is an antique **virile Bust**, inspired by the works of Prassitele, from the Franchetti collection. Here, towards the "calle" (the small street), a porphyry memorial stone marks the place where Giorgio Franchetti's ashes rest, as an ideal custodian of the building and its fate.

In the long arm that overlooks the canal and opens up at the bottom of the landing atrium, there are two sculptures: a sixteenth-century century **Flora** from the Franchetti collection and a neoclassical group by **Rinaldo Rinaldi**, a pupil and collaborator of Canova, depicting the centaur **Chirone teaching Achilles to play the cithara**.

Of great interest is also the internal facade facing the courtyard, on the walls of which there are panels and

2 - The floor mosaic

The geometries of the *opus sectile* floor were personally designed by Giorgio Franchetti and are mainly inspired by the examples of Venetian basilicas, in fact there are also many elements of contact with the cosmatesque decorations of the churches of Lazio in the 12th and 13th centuries, in turn taken from Byzantine examples: typical of cosmatesque floors are in particular the motifs with large discs and curvilinear knots. The whole floor is configured as a real "collection" of antique marbles, boldly reinterpreted in an outdoor space. To create the work Franchetti tirelessly collected precious stone fragments in order to make mosaic tesserae. He brought antique marbles especially from Rome, preferring the rarest and most precious ones (porphyry, serpentine, jasper, alabaster), and he himself, bent over the floor, took care of matching and placing each single piece according to his own design.

3 - The Mantegna Chapel

First among the interventions made in the palace by Giorgio Franchetti and heart of the collection, was the so-called *Cappella del Mantegna*, with the image of **Saint Sebastian** in the center. Around it the Baron designed an evocative architectural space, entirely covered with marble. Inspired by Venetian models (especially the church of Santa Maria dei Miracoli), he wanted to reproduce the atmosphere of a Renaissance chapel, ideally set inside a patrician residence. Above a real altar is placed the canvas, one of Mantegna's most dramatic inventions. The work, purchased in 1893, is still today the icon of the museum, maintaining unchanged the arrangement desired by the owner within a museum that over the years has undergone inevitable changes and revisions.

The martyrdom of Saint Sebastian

Andrea Mantegna had already tackled the theme of the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian in his paintings today at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna and the Louvre in Paris. The painting in Ca' d'Oro deals with the representation of the Christian hero in new and somewhat disconcerting terms of tragic individual isolation. The saint, pierced by sixteen arrows that wrap him in a sort of thorny three-dimensional cage, stands grievously in the middle of a narrow niche, framed by a fake marble frame. Below, on the right, the emblematic image of the extinguished candle that still lets a thin thread of smoke blow; around it, a scroll bears the inscription *Nihil nisi divinum stabile est coetera fumus* (nothing, except the divine, is stable, everything else is only smoke), to underline the fragility of human nature.

4 – The Double portrait of Tullio Lombardo

Little is known of the original location of **Tullio Lombardo's Double Portrait**, but what we do know for sure is that it is the first example of this type of portrait in fifteenth-century's Italian sculpture. The origin is undoubtedly to be found in classical art: in fact, even Mantegna in the fresco with St. Christopher in the church of the Eremitani in Padua reproduces double portraits taken from Roman funerary stelae. But here the author manages to create something completely new: a work imbued with an ancient but absolutely modern spirit, without any real precedent in antiquity itself, a perfect balance between the realistic definition and the idealization of the individual. The characters depicted, perhaps real portraits, perhaps

allegorical figures, are taken in the moment they are talking or singing, with their lips open and their looks turned in different directions. The hair, the modelling of the faces, the decorated dress of the female figure, the flower between the breasts, every detail remains with extreme refinement and exquisite delicacy. Under the male figure is clearly visible the signature of the author in the Roman capital, as if to suggest that the original destination was a raised position, so that it could be easily read.

5 - Madonna of the kiss

In the Carrara marble lunette, the **Madonna and Child** by **Jacopo Sansovino** are caught in a very sweet affectionate attitude, under an arch decorated with two winged angels. Originally the work was in the Church of the Zitelle in the Giudecca, to decorate the high altar. In the central figures of the relief the cultured and updated personality of the Florentine sculptor is expressed in a scene of touching intimacy. The Mother is depicted in the act of supporting the child, holding his back with her right hand, to reciprocate the kiss that the Child offers her with great naturalness. In the very human and intimate impulse that unites the two protagonists, the Virgin's left hand takes the closed book away from herself, almost as if she wanted to take away from her son the tragic fate already established. The classic pose of the two angels above, languidly resting on the cornice, underlines the vitality of the scene below. The refined drapery, the monumental layout and the calibrated balance of the composition, as well as the softness of the anatomies, betray a direct knowledge of Michelangelo's art, which the artist had acquired during his stays in Rome before moving to Venice in 1527.

6 - Loggia on the first floor

Overlook the loggia and enjoy the splendid view of the Grand Canal. The large loggia that opens on the Grand Canal on the first floor, with Gothic three-lobed arches and cloverleaf rose windows, creates a magical space dominated by a variable and ever-changing play of light and tone.

7 - Room of Tuscan paintings

A large room houses paintings from Tuscany and central Italy, all purchased by Baron Franchetti for his collection. They are fourteenth and fifteenth century works on wood and represent a true rarity in the panorama of Venetian public collections.

Unique are the two front panels of chests for the wedding trousseau, gifts that were offered to the bride on her wedding day. They are of the Florentine school of the fifteenth century and depict the *Stories of Alexander*, still in a Tardo-Gothic manner, and on the opposite wall, the *History of Lucretia*.

The "**deschi da parto**" and "**deschi da nozze**" are very rare objects:

Hercules at the crossroads (recto) - **Gentile coat of arms** (verso), wedding desks.

The *wedding desk* was donated at weddings as a gift. The polygonal shape is widespread in Florentine and Sieneese workshops in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The original practical use is transformed into a celebratory and augural function of the groom, underlining the prestige of the family (on the back are the coats of arms of the Sieneese Vieri and Tancredi families that allow the dating to 1500, the year of the wedding between Girolamo Vieri and Caterina Tancredi). Every reference is to the classical symbolism of the serenity of married life and the virtues of the couple. In this case we find the representation, rather rare among the surviving testimonies, of a Hercules "at the crossroads" between Virtue and Vice, handed down to Renaissance culture by Xenophon. A propitiatory "talismán" against future temptations and a warning to the bridegroom to always keep his promise of fidelity.

On the walls you can see a series of **Madonnas with Child**, works created as objects of private devotion. They are paintings by lesser known artists, many of them of Florentine or Umbrian-Tuscan school, in which the memories of Verrocchio, Lippi and Botticelli are evident.

