

The 'purification of the personality of Sanmicheli'

Review of:

Il Michele Sanmicheli di Antonio Morassi: La tesi all'Università di Vienna e una monografia perduta (1916-1920) by Giulio Zavatta, Treviso: Zel, 2022, 230pp, 49 col. Illus. ISBN 9788887186307 €25.00

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Antonio Morassi (1893–1976) was a highly accomplished art historian of impressive range. He published extensively on Antonio and Francesco Guardi and Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, as well as on the Genoese painter Alessandro Magnasco, but, much earlier, he had produced a book on medieval Italian goldwork. Less well known is that in 1916, while studying for a period in Vienna under Max Dvořák, he wrote a thesis in German on the sixteenth-century Veronese architect Michele Sanmicheli (1487–1559). The thesis was never published, and nor was a putative article on the architect based on the thesis and typed in Italian in 1920, with copies of both being found in the Archivio e Fototeca Antonio Morassi belonging to the Università Ca'Foscari in Venice. These had become known to Giulio Zavatta, based at Ca'Foscari, who has seen fit to publish both the thesis, translated into Italian, and Morassi's intended article, because of their intrinsic interest in respect to the Vienna 'school' of art history and to their significant and innovative insights into a great Renaissance architect operating in the Venice region.

The resulting book brings together a range of items relating to Morassi's time in Vienna. It includes an essay (by Zavatta) based on archival material which explores Morassi's interactions with Vienna, as well as the impact of Viennese art historians on Italians more generally, and another essay on the notes taken by Morassi on the lectures he attended in Vienna over the period 1912–16. Morassi's approach to the study of Sanmicheli is then covered in some detail in a third essay (again by Zavatta), which pays particular attention to the sources Morassi utilised on the architect, and to the thesis's principal elements: Sanmicheli's life, a catalogue of his works, and their final contextualisation. This is followed by a verbatim rendition of the surviving copy of the article typescript, dated to 1920 but 'never published' (intended for the series *Biblioteca d'arte illustrata*), and then a translated version of the 1916 thesis itself. At the end of the book comes a series of photographs mainly of Sanmicheli's buildings that belonged to Morassi and were obtained from the Morassi photographic archive, which serve here as substitutes for the photographs that he was hoping to publish with his article that were inadvertently lost.

Morassi was very conscious that his study of Sanmicheli was preceded by many previous writings on the architect, and, particularly in the thesis, he went to some lengths to list these works and comment on their merits. He set particular store by the 'Life' of the architect published by Giorgio Vasari in 1568,

which he judged – correctly – to be one of 'the most precise, accurate and trustworthy' of all Vasari's biographies, in spite of him concluding that Vasari's anecdote about Sanmicheli being arrested early on by the Venetians and accused of spying, just before they realised his true value and employed him officially as a military architect, was partly a flight of fancy. Writers from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including Scipione Maffei and Alessandro Pompei, are mostly dismissed as adding nothing new or, in the case of Francesco Miliza writing in 1781, as representing a view distorted by a 'dogmatic classicism', although Tommaso Temanza's biography of the architect of 1778 is commended for its new historical details and its reliable 'artistic judgment'. The three magisterial publications from the early nineteenth century that recorded Sanmicheli's works very accurately in measured large-scale engravings, by Bartolomeo Giuliani in 1815, Ferdinando Albertolli in 1815, and Francesco Ronzani and Girolamo Luciolli in 1823, attract much praise, although with important reservations, which are then expounded in some detail in a lengthy excursus. The main problem concerns the medium of representation in that, for Morassi, engravings are 'dry and linear', and they record buildings as flat rather than as 'plastic architecture'. The result is that they do not represent architecture as it really is or as it is visible in light and shade, and they show a work as an assemblage of individual 'tectonic elements' rather than as the unified form seen 'in the atmosphere' of a 'living organism'. Nor do such representations convey much of Sanmicheli's 'individual personality', that is in contradistinction to the personalities of other architects. As for subsequent writings, the one singled out by Morassi is (fairly obviously) Antonio Bertoldi's documentary study of Sanmicheli from 1874, which includes many reports the architect wrote on military and other matters that Bertoldi had retrieved from archives. Two other works from the nineteenth century, published by Giovanni Battista Da Persico in 1820–21 and Diego Zannandreis in 1891 were (as Zavatta had noted) ignored.

The Morassi thesis begins with a *Vorwort*, in the form of a statement of intention. This, Morassi explains, is to enable a 'purification of the personality of Sanmicheli', dispensing with false attributions so as to arrive at an 'image of his architecture' that is 'more vigorous and vital'. What exactly is meant by this, however, has to wait until after Morassi's examination of the previous literature, and his attentive outline of Sanmicheli's life. His biographical account relies heavily on the information on the architect provided by Vasari, Bertoldi and other writers, but it is filled out by situating Sanmicheli in the 'environment' of his time, by for example providing a description of the city of Verona, some discussion of Rome and the modern architects operating there, and some consideration of the wars in Italy during the early sixteenth century and Venice's subsequent conflict with the Ottomans, and it is within this 'environment' that Sanmicheli's work as an architect is then set out. His architectural 'personality' is largely explored in the subsequent catalogue of his works, which are organised typologically, albeit not exactly in accordance with the typological listing on the contents page. First come the religious works executed early on when he was based in Orvieto in central Italy, which are then followed by his many works in the Venetian territories. These begin with

palaces in Verona and Venice, after which come villas on the Venetian *terraferma*, religious works in Verona, gateways and city fortifications, portals and funerary monuments (this section awkwardly including the *tornacoro* enclosing the high altar in Verona cathedral), and the catalogue ends with a brief list of rejected attributions. What is immediately striking about this coverage is that it discounts very many unreliable attributions that are found in Ronzani and Lucioli's publication and other earlier works, and in this way it succeeds as a 'purification' of the Sanmicheli corpus, an aim also aided by minimising discussion of many of the military schemes executed by the architect in the eastern Mediterranean, which similarly distract from an overview of his 'style'. The thesis then finishes with a series of 'conclusions' concerning Sanmicheli's architecture and its position in relation to various aspects of architectural development during his lifetime.

The catalogue provides much insight into Morassi's way of thinking. The various entries are, for the most part, set out with commendable rigour, with due consideration given to attribution and dating, before Morassi turns to the actual architecture and deals with it in a remarkably direct manner. Attributions are hardly ever disputable, although an exception is Morassi's acceptance of the garden loggia façade of Palazzo Della Torre near Verona's San Fermo, but chronology would be more problematic. Morassi correctly linked the early Palazzo Canossa in Verona with the architecture of Rome, and buildings such as Bramante's Palazzo Caprini, and he observed a notable change between the façade of this building and that of the slightly later Palazzo Bevilacqua in Verona, although he acknowledged that the two palaces brought with them something that was 'totally new and of unparalleled importance', by comparison with earlier buildings in Verona. In Morassi's view, however, it was the later Palazzo Bevilacqua façade that revealed the real 'spirit' (*Geist*) of Sanmicheli's architecture, which was now much more attuned to the 'spirit' of Venetian art in being 'sumptuous, triumphalist and rich in plastic and decorative ornament', while also typifying the work of an architect who was 'imaginative and versatile' and loved variety, and who was now dealing with many different types of building simultaneously. At the same time, Morassi also took note of certain particular features which he saw had parallels elsewhere, such as the rusticated lower-storey order which he compared to that of the roughly contemporary Palazzo Fantuzzi in Bologna, and the spirally-fluted columns of the palace's upper storey, which he likened to those seen on Verona's ancient Porta Borsari. Later, when discussing the not-so-different façade of Palazzo Grimani in Venice, which Morassi explicitly likened to Palazzo Bevilacqua's, he took his ideas further by contrasting the design with fifteenth-century façade schemes, describing these as being decidedly two dimensional, and thus in their lack of volumetric qualities being unlike the Palazzo Grimani façade, which, as enhanced by light and shade, he characterised as growing 'from the ground like a living organism'.

On occasion, Morassi was misled by what he thought were reliable facts. For example, he knew that Sanmicheli's scheme for the inside of Palazzo Corner-Spinelli in Venice was commissioned by Giovanni Cornaro, but he

believed this figure to be somehow connected to Alvise Cornaro who had been the patron of Giovanni Maria Falconetto in Padua, and he imagined he could recognise Falconetto's influence on the Palazzo Corner-Spinelli design. He was also misled over dating, believing the Pellegrini Chapel and Palazzo Pompei in Verona to be both late works of Sanmicheli rather than very much earlier schemes. In the case of the Pellegrini Chapel, he conceded that there were features of its design that were in keeping with the 'spirit' of the Quattrocento, but he linked the scheme with the Pantheon and Bramante's Tempietto, and, later, he identified a new attentiveness to Bramante's architecture as a characteristic of what he supposed to be Sanmicheli's late approach. As regards Palazzo Pompei, he linked the design with Bramante's Palazzo Caprini, noting that Jacob Burckhardt had done so previously, but he regarded the design's supposedly newfound simplicity and plasticity as now elevating the façade to a new 'expressive level'.

Many of Morassi's findings and deductions about Sanmicheli's architecture are summed up in the thesis's final contextualising section. This first considers his architecture's relationship with the antique, Morassi concluding that, although antiquity provided his buildings with much of their character, Sanmicheli succeeded in detaching himself from the immediacy of Rome and was able to utilise the antique with great liberty. His dependency on early sixteenth-century architects active in Rome is then examined, and Morassi here takes the view that Sanmicheli distanced himself from the direction followed by Raphael in his architecture and that he initially aligned his work with that of the Sangallo dynasty before his architecture developed its own character which was more attuned to Venice. Explored next is the relationship between Sanmicheli's works and pre-existing traditions in northern Italy, with Morassi again arguing that Sanmicheli did not simply implant a Rome-orientated architecture into the Venetian territories, since he was especially concerned with adapting it to local circumstances. Finally considered is the place of Sanmicheli's work in the development of Renaissance architecture more generally, Morassi's conclusion being that Sanmicheli's achievement lay in him adapting a new style to such a wide range of buildings, rather than in him being an innovator like Michelangelo or Palladio.

The young Morassi's work on Sanmicheli was, historically speaking, a very considerable achievement – although this achievement is not seen so fully in the intended article, which is much less forthcoming than the thesis in very many areas. His achievement can best be judged if his thesis is compared not just with earlier writings on Sanmicheli's architecture, especially in view of the fact that there was nothing published on it since Ronzani and Luciolli's book which had first appeared almost a century earlier, but also with later works on the subject. Indeed, had the thesis been published even in its shortened form, then the subsequent course of writing on the great Veronese architect could well have been dramatically different. Morassi's thesis predates the first modern monograph on Sanmicheli, written by Eric Langenskiöld and published in 1938, by over twenty years, and this work very much established a format and standard for subsequent writings. In some respects, however, Morassi's work

bears a striking similarity to Langenskiöld's, the two being structured in remarkably similar ways. Like Morassi, Langenskiöld began with a chapter on the architect's life, which was then followed by chapters cataloguing his works that were arranged by type, before finally concluding with a chapter focusing on his architectural style. The differences, however, are still notable. Langenskiöld's catalogue includes very many works that have turned out to be of questionable attribution (as well as omitting some that have now been accepted), and this tendency to expand the oeuvre on no very sound basis is seen in the later books on Sanmicheli published by Piero Gazzola in 1960 (its catalogue compiled by Marcella Kahnemann) and then by Lionello Puppi in 1971. Thus, had Morassi's thesis seen the light of day not long after it was first written, then this tendency could have been stifled much sooner, and much more attention could have been given to the actual character and particulars of Sanmicheli's architecture, and to his architecture's correspondences with other architectural currents of the time, matters poorly addressed by Langenskiöld and his successors. These observational features of Morassi's writing presumably relate to what it was Morassi learned while in Vienna, which was not particularly to do with any specific adoption of esoteric perspectives or theories, even if Morassi's language sometime betrays borrowings from his Viennese tutors. It was very much more to do with how to portray architecture and its development, keeping a careful eye on rigorous method, and on how to deal with reasonable historical questions in an intelligent manner. It may be that Morassi's conclusions about the 'personality' of Sanmicheli can sometimes be challenged, especially from the vantage point of the present, but his insights are frequently engaging, and would in their time have been very valuable. It was very much to the detriment of the art history discipline, therefore, not only that that Morassi's thesis remained unpublished but also that Morassi himself would subsequently turn his back on architecture completely.

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