

GIANDOMENICO ROMANELLI

The history

The Palazzo Cavalli-Franchetti (the name currently in use) is located between the surviving section of the Rio dell'Orso (overlooked on the other side by the notable Palazzo Barbaro) and the pavement leading from Campo Santo Stefano to San Vidal, the Grand Canal and the 1856 bridge across to the Accademia. A small glimpse of its less monumental, less showy side may be seen in Canaletto's famous painting of *The Stonemason's Yard* (London, National Gallery), while its unmistakable main facade was effectively portrayed by a good number of engravers and illustrators, particularly of the eighteenth century. An attentive and inquisitive observer who bothers to make comparisons with today would not miss the differences between those pictures and the present; an impression confirmed and accentuated by looking at the first photographic records of the city's appearance begun at the end of the 1830s. The *palazzo* seems different, and the changes are not small. The dimensions and proportions are certainly the same, the distinguishing elements of the facade and the decorations remain, too. The thing that has changed is the atmosphere, the tone of the building, its amplitude, its rhythm. The great edifice previously owned by the Cavalli family has thus undergone a profound metamorphosis. We do not intend making judgements or complaints, but simply wish to register a fact.

If one then considers that this building (like others) has long been a kind of pretext for the recurring diatribes on restoration in Venice (philosophy, methodologies, ideologies, aims etc.), it is easy to share the opinion that its history, both ancient and recent, is worth examining and reconstructing.

Marcello, Cavalli, Gussoni

The origin of the *palazzo* may probably be found in the determination of the Marcello family, documented as having properties and interests in the area from the mid-fourteenth century (such that an important branch of the family called itself San Vidal).

The actual construction may be dated, for reasons of style, dimension and character, to the mid-fifteenth century, making it one of a large number of late Gothic buildings that includes the homes of the Foscari, Giustiniani, Zaguri, Soranzo of San Polo, Contarini, Morosini, Bembo families and many others. These buildings were certainly influenced by the sensational linguistic evidence of the Doge's Palace, and by the seal set on the late Gothic by the Foscari colonnade and the Porta della Carta, also at the Doge's Palace. Indeed, the subsequent period was already in the offing; the unequivocal signs of new languages, those of the Renaissance, were already appearing. 'The knell of the architecture of Venice, - and of Venice herself' could already be divined, as Ruskin was to dolefully proclaim, and the city's 'decay' begun.

But the home of the Marcello da San Vidal family rose large and luxurious and boasted an enviable view over the Grand Canal. To the east, the narrow Rio dell'Orso divides it from the Barbaro's home, while in the west it is flanked by a narrow *calle* leading to a gondola boatyard that is shown in all the seventeenth-nineteenth century illustrations and of which traces can still be seen in photos from the 1940s.

In the sixteenth century the Marcellos sold their Palazzo di San Vidal, but not all in one piece. The second floor with all its trimmings was sold to the long-established Gussoni family between 1514 and 1531; in 1569 the first floor went to a family of more recent but no less significant fortune, that of the great diplomat and knight, Marino Cavalli. The building remained under this divided ownership more or less until the end of the eighteenth century, when it changed hands once again; or rather, a real roundabout of singular fortunes began.

Habsburg and Bourbons

It was the subsequent history of the *palazzo*, however, that gave it the unmistakable signs of a 'case': an architectural and linguistic case, a historical and dynastic case, a cultural and political case. When the two families that had linked their names to the building and almost



woven their fates into its division had virtually died out, it was sold (1847) to the young archduke, Frederick of Austria, supreme commander of the imperial navy. Frederick removed the old divisions between the Cavalli and Gussoni parts to reunify the building. He then also began considerable functional modernisation work on the interior, as will be seen.

But before coming into the august hands of the prince, other events had brought our building to the attention of the press: in the law suit between the Gussoni heirs and the Jesuits (the dispute centred on the actual ownership of our *palazzo*), the Quarantia Civil Vecchia ruled against the Jesuits' claims on the basis of a strict interpretation and application of the Rules of the Company of Jesus relating to its vows of poverty. This was a sensational and much commended sentence that was to become jurisprudence in various European countries.

At the end of the eighteenth century, the second floor apartment – that of the Gussoni heirs – was rented to Count Alessandro Pepoli, who built an elegant little wooden theatre that was still in existence in 1805, though abandoned (Pepoli died in 1796). Works in prose and music, including Goldoni's *The Persian Bride* and Voltaire's *Le Duc de Foix*, were staged there under the name of the *Accademia dei Rinovati*. The count himself liked to perform in these recitals. Meanwhile, Elisabetta Anna, daughter of Lunardo, the last male of the Cavalli family, married a Nicolò Giustinian in 1811, thus bringing him the immense family fortune (which he managed to spend very quickly, as he was to do with his Barbarigo legacy, whose famous collection of paintings was sold to Tsar Nicolas II in 1850).

The works begun by Frederick of Austria (interrupted in 1847 by his premature death at the age of 27) were all modernisations of a logic and style typical of the time: gas lighting, running water and toilets ('English-style flush box with handle'); majolica and metal heaters in every room, curtains, sofas, chaises longues and flower boxes. In short the Biedermeier world made its triumphant entrance into the spaces of the old Gothic residence. A French observer summing up the Palazzo Cavalli said that 'on a métamorphosé l'intérieur pour l'adapter aux exigences modernes'.

But it was with the subsequent owner that the work took a more definite turn. Three months after Frederick's death, the building was bought by another crowned head, that of Henri-Charles-Ferdinand-Marie-Dieudonné d'Artois, the celebrated Count of Chambord, who had been appointed king of France in 1830 by the abdicating Charles X, but immediately withdrew. Another figure in the building's modern history burst onto the scene with Chambord: the architect Giambattista Meduna. He not only made a huge number of alterations, under the watchful eye of the court pundits, but also redesigned the rationale and logic of the building, in some ways setting it to become one of the emblems of the Venetian nineteenth century; a period that was long misunderstood and denigrated. It was certainly a problematic and controversial time, contradictory even, but so explicit and exemplary that it became the paradigm for the meeting of history and modernity, such as to stand as a metaphor for the epochal fate of an entire civilisation. The most original investigator into medieval Venice and the most disenchanted witness of the contradictions of the modern city, John Ruskin, grasped this with the lucidity of a genius – and often starting precisely from Meduna's Venetian works. The French presence at the Palazzo Cavalli was long and active. Chambord spent the more pleasant seasons there, though he dulled court life with tenants universally regarded as not particularly bright. The exact opposite to the other French court in Venice at the Palazzo Vendramin Calergi, that of his mother, the celebrated du Berry, knocked down by debt and a sensational bankruptcy.

Chambord left Venice forever when Veneto was annexed to Italy in 1866 at the end of the third war of independence, thanks to the intercession of Napoleon III, and sold the *palazzo* along with all his other property in the city. The price was less than half the initial estimate, but it was necessary to sell and that was that. The new owners were among the more public exponents of a new nobility, that of wealth and finance: Baron Raimondo Franchetti and his young wife Sarah Luisa de Rothschild. It was January 1878; the negotiations had dragged on for a decade.

Giambattista Meduna left the scene with the arrival of the new owners, replaced by a team of designers led by a confirmed cultural leader on the national scene: Camillo Boito. His work on the building (and garden) over the course of a laborious decade is what most gave it its



modern look, endowing it with the explicit power of a programmatic declaration, a cultural manifesto, a kind of tangible demonstration of method and merit. The Gothic building, re-read and reinterpreted in neo-Gothic style, was the subject of experimentation with the flexibility and potential of the language of architecture taken to its extreme limits of cross-fertilisation, especially in Boito's virtuoso staircase. However, it was also a kind of excessive, pretentious, philological and calligraphic exercise, particularly in the main facade, the decorations and furnishings.

The *palazzo*: origins and structure

The Marcellos were thus certainly overlooking the Grand Canal at San Vidal from the mid-fourteenth century. The land was acquired from the brothers Pietro and Nicolò Boninsegna as payment of a debt; it was a 'proprietà sive terra, e casa coperta e discoperta' (April 1365). The new building was certainly raised on the existing one in around the 1440s, and could have been completed about 20 years later (when a quarrel between the Marcellos and their neighbours the Mocenigos ended).

Its facade had the approximate proportions of a large square, which was divided into three floors and three vertical bands, producing nine squares of similar dimension but of different weight and hierarchical position. The symmetrical axis – unlike the other big contemporary buildings – is central. This means that the five-lighted window on the *piano nobile* in the centre of the composition is unequivocally the most important distinguishing element of the whole. The facade corresponds to the classical planimetric distribution of the Venetian Gothic *palazzo* seen in many upper and middle class homes. It called for a central, longitudinal hall repeated on all floors that could give sense and order to the entire management of the building, with bedrooms and services at the sides. In our case, the character and quality of the facade suggest it is by a single designer, onto which a linguistic wealth of syntactic cadences, decorative graces and codes was then grafted in construction. The final result implies close coordination of the craftsmen (master builders, bricklayers, masons, sculptors, blacksmiths, carpenters, glaziers, tinsmiths, pavers and so on).

The two, vast, five-lighted windows on the *piano nobile* have always attracted the attention of observers and art historians. They are also the feature by which the *palazzo* can be placed within the context of late Venetian Gothic. Although the motif of the interlacing round arches as generator of the Gothic arches on the first *piano nobile* window was not something entirely new, either in Venice or elsewhere, it must be said that here – as in the contemporary Palazzo Giovanelli at San Felice – it is a complete and highly successful modern formulation of ideas not yet taken to their full expressive potential elsewhere.

The same motif appears in the other, presumably contemporary, Palazzo Pisani-Moretta in the second *piano nobile* loggia, but with a considerable difference: it has six lights. This results in a different positioning of the quatrefoils in the upper part of the loggia (on the axis of the columns in the Cavalli; at the top of the Gothic arches in the Pisani-Moretta), and, above all, the central position of a column rather than an opening in the general balance of the loggia and the entire construction (in the Pisani-Moretta there is a double water door and absolute symmetry between the left and right part of the building, the axis of symmetry being constructed by a virtual line suggesting two exact and almost independent specular identities). So in the contrast between these two similar elements, at least, the Palazzo Cavalli offers greater dynamism of structure. The ogee arches, which in the Pisani-Moretta are three complete arches, or rather two central ones with two semi-arches at the sides, never form a closed design in the Cavalli. Such dynamism is evident precisely in the erudition of that central opening, which takes up the cue of the fleuron at the top of the water door, while the trefoil, again in open form, ends beside the big moulding. This trefoil originates in the interlacing of the ogee arches on the second floor loggia, which duplicate the upper part of the trefoil arch of the loggia in reverse, as in the third floor of the Palazzo Foscari.

'The upper ornament of the big central window mainly recalls that of the Doge's Palace loggias', wrote Francesco Zanotto in 1856 in his brand new guide to Venice; and continued: 'Delightfully elegant, it is distinguished by its excellent proportions, its well determined curves



and the accurate placing of the ornamental parts'. And his opinion was then considered canonical, rising as it did to the empyrean of sanctification by handbooks and tourist guides. But such a view had actually first been expressed by the leading historian of Venetian architecture in the mid-nineteenth century: Pietro Selvatico of the Marches.

'The ogee arch forms are excellently arranged and carved, but the continuous window on the *piano nobile* stands out above all the rest. The graceful columns dividing it support semi-circular arches that are exquisitely interlaced to form ogee arches...'. This was immediately followed by the controversial anti-academic verve of this professor of aesthetics: this loggia seems to be a 'real model of an elegance that is scorned by masters, who often, however, are unable to appreciate it with their 'correct' conceptions of Greek-Roman style'.

Selvatico thought this motif of interwoven arches fairly ancient and, anyway, distinguishing: 'I think the most original part of the ogee arch style in Venice is the quatrefoil opening in the upper part of the curved arches, I also think that that detail was used for the first time in the facades of the public palace (Doge's Palace), that is, after 1424, then adopted and imitated by architects in many of the elevations for the noble houses they had to build. So I think that opening is one of the decisive characteristics of the most advanced period of the ogee arch style in Venice'.

Like many of the other Gothic buildings dating from around the middle of the fifteenth century, the Palazzo Cavalli has precisely defined, distinguishing lines that limit the expansion of the facade within a solid, explicitly intended design. At the bottom the base of Istrian stone is completed with a robust, well-elevated torus of solid structural consistency. At the sides, each floor is framed by slender spiralled columns and a staggered series of alternately sized ashlar in Istrian stone. The top is closed by a good sized cornice that seemed to Arslan to be in 'exact rapport' with the whole 'in its overhang and in the intervals of its brackets' and is more balanced than that of the Ca' Foscari.

The front of the lower section, or ground floor and mezzanine, is ordered by a double row of windows. Those on the ground floor have a very flattened arch; those on the mezzanine are rectangular and larger.

But the thing that dominates this part of the facade is certainly the central square with the fine curved arch doorway and two windows onto the canal. Two other windows above the latter gave light to the *mezà* above the doorway. However, these were regarded as Baroque so were removed during the '80s restorations and replaced with two quatrefoil figures in porphyry with black and white balls and, further out, the coats of arms of the Franchetti house in indented, Gothic-style squares.

The restorers also made one of their freer interpretations on the ground floor section: the addition of an Istrian stone field around the doorway, the creation of designs between the lowered-arch windows and decoration with sheets of gilt breccia, along with squares of Catania jasper in the indented frames of the mezzanine windows and those of the two upper floors. In these same years Pantaleone di Paolo and Bartolomeo Bon were working on the Doge's Palace. Or rather, documents published by Lorenzi and studied and interpreted particularly by Paoletti show that Bartolomeo was severely reprimanded and threatened in 1463 for not being sufficiently diligent in his work; he died between 1464 and 1467. It was certainly in the context of workshops like that of the Bons, rich in its large number of craftsmen and, above all, rich in exceptional experience, which was also updated on that of the Lombard, Comacine and Luganese masters alongside whom the Venetians had long worked. So it was here that masterpieces like the Palazzo Cavalli, the Pisani-Moretta, the Giovanelli, the Loredan dell'Ambasciatore, the Contarini degli Scrigni and the Ca' Foscari matured, and neither could it have been otherwise.

It would be inexact or ingenuous, however, to unreservedly judge such architecture outdated, for the simple reason that the first – and often uncertain – trials of the languages that were to be known as Renaissance were only just beginning at the same time.

Owners and tenants

Summarising the overall situation in the building, the first *piano nobile* was registered to the ownership and use of the Cavallis; the second and the attic to the Gussonis; while the ground



floor was asymmetrically divided lengthwise in two to allow separate entrances from the *calle* toward San Vidal. This allowed the use of two independent staircases to the two floors and ensured the two owners the much-prized and sacrosanct view onto the Grand Canal at ground level. The layout of the two floors did not exactly coincide, either. The Marcello – then Cavalli – portion was extended on the western side toward Campo Santo Stefano with the acquisition of other buildings, which were subsequently joined to the main one.

Some seventeenth- and eighteenth-century inventories offer evidence, albeit shaky, of the different usages, decoration and furnishing of the *palazzo*. They note the entrance and portico, bedrooms, living rooms, kitchens, dressing rooms, scullery, vestibule, library and correspondence archive. The Cavallis also had their own little church, a big reception hall and a long, narrow gallery of paintings: all the ingredients that perfectly epitomised the family's standing, pretensions, ambitions and possibilities. Furthermore, Boschini, in his poem *La Carta del Navigar Pittoresco*, accredited the Cavallis with some important paintings, such as the one by Dario Varotari, il Padovanino, to whom the eloquently praised 'Retraton' of a family member is attributed.

After the temporary presence of tenants (like the already mentioned Pepoli, or the Grassis, who stayed here during the construction of their nearby *palazzo* at San Samuele) there were very short changes of ownership (that were actually only technical changes ensuring the involvement of middle-men and property dealers, like the noted entrepreneur Busetto Fisola and, possibly, Tommaso Rima) and, finally, the purchase by Frederick of Austria and then the Count of Chambord. This part of the building's history was also uneven and drawn out. It was marked by the uncertainties of speculation, protests and claims, to which the events of wars were added, including the revolution of 1848-9. But, in the end, Chambord found himself owner of the *palazzo* and a considerable collection of nearby buildings. These included a building block between San Vidal and the Grand Canal and other smaller buildings, but primarily the boatyard that is clearly visible in the pictures, along with the adjacent stonecutter's yard. It was on this part of the property, cleared of all remaining buildings, that the garden facing onto the Grand Canal was to be created.

Restorations: I. Giambattista Meduna

The works made during the French period were carried out, as noted, by Giambattista Meduna, a leading figure in mid-nineteenth century Venetian architecture as designer of new buildings and restorer. Starting from the situation described above, he developed a significant number of design hypotheses and formulated a whole system of operations for a triple order of works: consolidation and unification of the property from its initial expansion and division into distinct building units (this allowed the whole building to reach back to face onto Campo Santo Stefano); standardisation of style and decorations, particularly the western facade, which was the object of a careful study into the various possible neo-Gothic interpretations; creation of the garden on the Grand Canal.

The difficulties – and there were many – evidently stimulated his imagination, as he offered his client a range of variants to resolve the logistical problems and, at the same time, to conduct a refined and winking discourse with fourteenth- and fifteenth-century citations and shrewd neo-Gothic reworkings. The designs provide eloquent testimony. They culminate in the sketches for the facade looking onto the garden to which Meduna intended giving character and unity in the place of the hotchpotch of volumes and forms brought unhappily to light by the demolitions. Those ideas of Meduna that were actually brought to completion – and there were few – are legible, and in some parts still so today, in the picturesque balustrade fencing the garden off from the Grand Canal. This may also be compared with the little that remains of the same fencing around the small garden at the Palazzo Giovanelli, but more easily considered in the many variants shown in the tiny but very accurate pencil sketches of this work that have come down to us.

The three neo-Gothic facades that Meduna proposed to regularise the composite western side of the Palazzo Cavalli (the one facing onto the new garden, and those of the smaller building facing the church of San Vidal – at least this is how we think the sketches by Meduna at the



Correr should be read, in the lack of more precise clues or indications) were certainly of an irregular nature (the minor facade in particular seems the result of an eclectic mix and is overladen with lines and carelessly stacked reiterations); but the big facade onto the garden shows an appropriation of the assorted versions of fifteenth-century Gothic on the building's Grand Canal facade that is anything but negligible. If the double ramp staircase on three ogee arches giving access to the garden is excluded – being of inappropriate proportions and very confused, symmetrical drafting – then Meduna's facade is of singular composure and dignity. It is expertly divided both horizontally – according to the indications of the Grand Canal facade – and vertically. This marks a profound about-turn that is confirmed and consolidated by the continuation, after the second window, of the ashlar and curb in Istrian stone of the original corner.

In the completeness of the undertaking, the intentions manifested and the work completed, the lively Chambord-Meduna period is nevertheless a kind of bridge episode in the historic times of the *palazzo*: the landing, from any point of view, was to be the Franchetti-Boito period.

Restorations: II. Camillo Boito & Co.

In this new situation everything seemed to change pace: the size of the investments, the dynamism of the client and the efficiency of the contractors. Three hundred workers – trumpeted the local papers – have been put to work in order to finish the colossal renovation of the *palazzo* this year (1878). But to do what? With what aims and by what method and direction? It is once again the papers that respond (this use of the press was to change the actual effect of works like this: one need only think of the media interest in the controversies over Venetian restorations of the period). 'The plan is to architecturally rebuild two other facades on the model of the magnificent Grand Canal facade, one on the garden and the other onto the courtyard. The work is enormous, but Baron Franchetti wants it finished by the end of the year.'

Franchetti's works at this stage actually concerned only a minor part of the building: the ground floor, the mezzanines, the garden and part of the *piano nobile*. But the facades were remade, the garden fitted out and, above all, the celebrated monumental staircase built. When the works were finished (at least to this part of the building), the old, elegant, compact, late-Gothic *palazzo* of the Marcellos, the Cavallis and the Gussonis emerged almost unrecognisable. From the painted decorations, sculpted marbles, wrought ironwork and worked stone to the lights and furniture, everything converged to restore to the city a profoundly changed and new architecture, amid no less praise than criticism and embarrassment. There was the sense of being at a turning point.

But the overall direction and style of the new Franchetti, almost in balance between two worlds and two cultural spheres, was due more to Camillo Boito than to Matscheg, the distinguished ornamentalist, or Manetti, the scrupulous engineer responsible for all the structural and building work. Indeed, it could perhaps be said that the *palazzo* rose as a kind of grand monument to limitation and demarcation. There was no longer the crazy interpretative, flaying mania that had been evident in the rebuilding of the Fondaco dei Turchi; nor the happy romantic creativity of Meduna's Palazzo Giovanelli at San Felice; and not even the repair experiments applied at the Ca' d'Oro. The governing principle of Boito's reforms at the Franchetti was rather an attempt at a renewal in the lee of history; it is a great tribute of method and control over the linguistic media. It is also proof of the durability of a historicist approach that, although undoubtedly with eclectic connotations, was nevertheless proposed in terms not undifferentiated from the diverse periods of its history.

In addition to the emerging body of Boito's staircase, there is the other major, original recasting of an entire section of the building: the part stretching out from the courtyard toward Campo Santo Stefano, which follows the previous buildings only in its external planimetric lines. The differences between the exponents of two generations were more clearly evident in this new building: the big arches on the ground, the gigantism of the big windows and multi-lighted windows, the expansion and thickening of the design, re-marked in an accentuated



underlining of the chromatic contrasts given by the use of different materials, the geometrical squaring of the building units, revivals in the form of citations of architectural elements already present in the building and, finally, the relative inventive capacity. All this marked a clearly perceptible change.

Grandeur and linguistic accuracy seem to have governed the intentions of the baron and his associates. All this part of the Palazzo Franchetti is actually a fairly rigid exercise showing little imagination that really is a long way from Giambattista Meduna's creativity and freedom of invention and writing.

On the Grand Canal facade it seems to have been necessary to dismantle the entire central section of the two *piani nobili* for structural reasons. The unavoidable demands of the building's static condition were united from the start with those of an aesthetic nature, so 'imperious artistic reasons' coincided, chronologically and logically, with the consolidation and protection of the two facades, the repair of masonry, pillars, columns, capitals and so on. 'All these ornaments', we are assured, as if it were a question of the objects in a museum being taken out of display, 'were numbered, cleaned and carefully set aside'. The operation led to a major reordering of the building's frontage: the big dormer window with scrolls crowning the big edifice, possibly added in the early seventeenth century, was completely removed; the balcony on the second *piano nobile* was also removed, being replaced with a balustrade in the window with small, Gothic-style columns; the balcony on the first *piano nobile* was then considerably altered, by restricting its width to the three central openings and replacing the small Baroque columns with cylindrical ones in Gothic style.

One of the constants of the work was this correction of imperfections in the existing building. In other words, it was based on a presumption of returning to the first, founding reasons of linguistic choices and architectural and stylistic canons, thereby restoring a virtual, original faith in a text that probably never existed.

The landing on the Grand Canal also underwent a radical transformation. Originally constructed in very simple form, presumably at the end of the fifteenth century, with the two ends in Lombard style, it was widened and enriched with small Gothic balustrades that take up the styles of the balconies on the upper floors.

Apart from all these modifications, the effort to enrich the whole with marble slabs, coats of arms and shapes in marble and precious stone must not be forgotten. The rendering itself was also beautified with colouring and arabesques. The overall – certainly unintended – effect was that the building was emptied of all its structural and volumetric consistency. It was in a certain sense treated as a coloured illustration, a tapestry without depth, a pattern-printed paper.

The question of the works inside was different: here daily comfort and the refined pleasures of an elegant, modern lifestyle had to prevail; the signs of a distinction of class and wealth if not of non-existent aristocratic roots sunk in the mists of time. Carlo Matscheg here had the chance to let all his consummate and recognised skills as decorator, ornamentalist and furnisher flourish. In this case, too, sketches, ideas and drawings by Matscheg, along with what can still be seen and studied of the decorations and furnishings, allow us to fairly accurately appreciate the quality and sense of a project that in many ways seemed exemplary, though with differences of meaning and calibre compared to the more general architectural operations.

The works of these years were actually restricted to the layout of the ground floor and mezzanines, while the rest of the building was left in the unliveable condition it was found in in the 1920s. The only common area of the building to be given a complete and radical overhaul was the ground floor entrance hall. Elsewhere, Raimondo's ground floor apartment and that of the baroness on the mezzanine facing the Grand Canal were restored and furnished. Each of these was duly conceived and designed according to their functional and entertainment requirements.

The big ground floor entrance hall was then newly paved in vulpinite marble and yellow and white Verona marble, in a design that clearly reveals its neo-Gothic nature in the studied and allusive weave of a lanceolate motif in differing directions. The walls were panelled in inlaid oak with gilt designs, hung with the emblems of the house and with carved seats below.



Although the reasoning advising the 'perfect adaptation to style' of the *palazzo* had predominated in the entrance hall, precisely because of the very public and entertainment nature of this room, in the private spaces, in the intimacy of the private apartments, Matscheg could give free reign to his evocative, eclectic, modern creations; to the use of a range of decorators, wood carvers, modellers, founders, carpenters and cabinet makers, who prepared a domestic space of unusual and in many ways kaleidoscopic, opulent intimacy. On this floor, the baron's dining room stood out, in the corner between the Grand Canal and the Rio dell'Orso ('in Gothic style', done in walnut), as did they virtuoso billiard room ('which will be decorated in Renaissance style' – then, at the end of 1880, still under way, or only on paper). The drawings of these have come down to us, but the reasonably good conservation of the originals allows the quality and characteristics of the rooms and their atmosphere to be easily appreciated.

Camillo Boito: an ambitious staircase

In 1886 construction of the ceremonial staircase was complete. This saw Camillo Boito come onto the scene and, this time, not only as artistic consultant but as fully-fledged designer of one of the most celebrated constructions of nineteenth-century Italian architecture. The staircase is actually an extraordinary, kaleidoscopic, clever piece of prowess. Sufficiently bombastic to astound any of the Franchetti's visitors, and also retaining its nature as an almost celibate addition (it did not lead to very much at all, given that the restorations on the upper floors were never finished) until the end of their Venetian sojourn, it does not seem possible to read the staircase either outside the reality gravitating around the Franchettis, or outside all the theoretical and practical horizons of Camillo Boito.

The work is not at all easy to classify stylistically. Gothic references that are clearly connected to and possibly in homage to the original language of the *palazzo* – worked marble, columns set with stones, stuccoes and frames that even recall the Cosmati – are grafted onto a dominant Romanesque style (similar to what can be seen in the staircase at the Museo Civico in Padua). This anthology is then joined by rich materials ranging from precious marbles to stuccoes, bronzes and sculpted panels in an extraordinary continuity of tones with a refined, possibly ironic, compositional inflection; it continues up to the vaults, with lunettes and crosses, and flat ceilings blooming with a luxuriant, imaginary vegetation populated by medieval monsters, chimeras and symbolic animals.

The big landing on the first *piano nobile* is much more than a simple pause between two flights of stairs. It is rather a genuine platform suspended on a dazzlingly bright column that really does seem entirely diaphanous, almost immaterial. Indeed, this diffuse, dazzling brightness without obstacles or interceptions is what qualifies and most originally distinguishes the entire work, in many ways constituting its real key.

It may be said that the accusation of eclecticism does not stand before such an observation: the various parts that make up the multiform and possibly excessive veneer of the staircase's whole decorative ensemble (panels, sculptures, marble tablets, encrusted columns and balustrades, paintings, frames, squares, leonine brackets, dentils, leaves, along with bronzes and chandeliers) are all perfectly interchangeable because they are dematerialised or blended together according to the circumstances and the intense stream of light that crosses and triggers off the entire structure.

Certainly the walls of the cella, the screens and the approach to the second floor may in some ways seem a repertoire of artistic manufacture, a catalogue of the variety and richness of production, a corner of a universal exposition gallery. But none of this diminishes the sense and overall quality of the operation, the undisputed control that the architect evidently kept over the work as a whole, or the courage he showed by preferring architecture that was in some ways anti-Venetian to the neo-eighteenth-century solutions becoming popular at the time (for example, at the Palazzo Tiepolo Papadopoli). It was thus alienating and inventive, scandalous and ironic, risky and resolute, experimental and allusive or, in other words, perhaps despite appearances, modern. Boito here did not cite or recall, did not regret or regress. He was rather temporally and unscrupulously constructing a dialectic, creative, and at



times even sarcastic relationship with the materials of history (which he, furthermore, knew and respected and wanted preserved). He was thus zealously working in the direction of the *Nuova Italia* architecture that was certainly one of his most original theoretical formulations and his most committed civil prospect.

At the same time that Boito and his associates were building the ceremonial staircase, the other side of the *palazzo*, the part that had always been ignored and regarded as the real back of the building, was also undergoing some interesting reworking. Indeed, the design for two big metal balconies on wrought iron brackets, which were intended to release and put into communication the bedrooms in the eastern wing, was presented to the Commissione per l'Ornato di Venezia in July 1880. So the old Cavalli *palazzo* was once again to be subject to an original and unusual solution – at least in terms of dimension and functional justification. The traditional layout of Venetian *palazzi*, hinging around the obligatory hub of the *portego*, was ignored in favour of quicker internal communications and the creation of an alternative route. After these works, others were made to notably alter the *palazzo* during the decades of Franchetti ownership. The already existing fencing was extended to the other side of the garden, on the Campo and Campiello San Vidal, complete with Borro lions, lamps and metal gate. Then the following year, in May, and again following the house demolition and extension of the garden, Manetti presented another fencing design, but with a wall on the bank of the Rio dell'Orso. This consisted of five big, precisely designed Gothic arches, opened up with trefoil windows that would have allowed a glimpse of the greenery behind.

Final fires

The *palazzo* was bought by the Istituto Federale di Credito per il Risorgimento delle Venezie in 1922 and underwent new works and alterations to its functions and appearance. Various flights of internal stairs were demolished and a new staircase and lift installed; the interior was refitted with Fortuny fabrics and 'period' furniture that was not always in the best of taste; the metal balconies were adjusted for the new, official needs.

The most significant, impressive part of these works was the rearrangement of the second *piano nobile* and construction of the enormous, wood-panelled cabinet for the central records office. This was a masterly neo-Gothic library of surprising quality and effect, whose upper floor was served by two spiral staircases arranged mirror fashion at one end of the room (the library has undergone some alterations over the years: part of the shelving has been closed with shutters, the northern ends have been cut). The workmanship is accurate and refers explicitly to the lines of Boito's staircase, though perhaps a little ingenuous. It certainly accentuates some Anglo-Saxon underlining in its fairly rigid, glossy neo-neo-Gothic, which Boito would not have minded. Another period alteration is the small, wooden staircase in the ground floor entrance hall, that was certainly inspired by the medieval staircase now in the Ca' d'Oro. It leads to the balcony above the water door on the Grand Canal, thereby releasing some of the rooms on the mezzanine. So a big and bumpy series of restorations was once again made to the Palazzo Cavalli.

In the past 70-plus years the works have mainly been technical upgrading, consolidation, reinstatement of access, lightening of loads or exposure of buried or forgotten architectural fragments; in short, the conservation of a tired and often betrayed, misunderstood and forcefully interpreted building. But it is a building that has nevertheless retained many of its features; it has become the site of experimentation, the subject of debate and corroboration, and a pretext for heated controversies. And throughout all this, or because of it, the *palazzo* has come down to us and inspires us to continue making it a privileged opportunity for reflection and comparison with the signs of history.