

VINCENZO VELA

Sculpture as an expression of freedom



Texts by

Maria Cristina Brunati, Giorgio Zanchetti, Marco Marcacci, Giuliana Limiti,
Gianna A. Mina



Lincoln
187.

Vincenzo Vela Biography

by Maria Cristina Brunati*



Page 1:
Eliseo Sala,
Portrait of the Sculptor Vincenzo Vela, 1857,
pastel and charcoal on paper

Left:
Francesco Fidanza,
Portrait of Vincenzo Vela, 1879,
albumen print

On this page:
Pietro Chiesa,
Vincenzo Vela working on "The Victims of Labour"
watched over by his masterpieces, before 1906,
mixed technique on paper

Vincenzo Vela was not just a great artist who brought figurative realism to sculpture in the second half of the 1800^s, he was also a man of the times, taking an active part in the political and cultural upheavals of the 19th century. Ever willing to fight for the ideals of liberty and social justice, both as a professional and in the private sphere, he was also ready to defend his beliefs in the face of his adversaries and detractors. As a result, he gained the life-long friendship and respect of many directly involved in the Italian Risorgimento, plus the unconditional approval of his innumerable admirers.

Born on the 3rd of May 1820 in the small town of Ligornetto, not far from Mendrisio in the Canton of Ticino, Vincenzo was the last of Giuseppe Vela and Teresa Casanova's six children. Theirs was a humble existence, trying to subsist on the meagre produce of poor soil, boosted by the income from a hostelry and the children's wages, given that all the children were soon sent out to work. Vincenzo, too, was forced to start working at a very young age: he worked as a stone cutter in a local quarry in Besazio that extracted the local red granite mainly used for architectural elements and decoration. There he learnt the basics of his craft. He then started working for Saverio Franzi in Viggìù, home to another eminent sculptor of his day, Giosuè Argenti (1819-1901).

His brother Lorenzo had a brilliant career in Milan as a decorative sculptor. In 1834, Lorenzo recognised his younger brother's

artistic talent and natural aptitude for working with stone and invited Vincenzo to join him in Milan. There he was immediately employed by one of the Franzi cousins, an agent for the Corporation of Marble Masons responsible for supplying the cathedral with marble works. In fact, the Fabbrica del Duomo was the first construction site in Mi-



lan that gave Vincenzo the chance to prove himself. Franzi even allowed him two hours off each day to study at the Brera Academy of Fine Arts, where he studied decoration (*ornato*) under Ferdinando Albertolli (1781-1844), perspective under Francesco Durelli (1792-1851), painting under Luigi Sabatelli (1772-1850) and sculpture under Pompeo Marchesi (1783-1858) and Benedetto Cacciatori (1793-1871). He also started to gain recognition for his work: he won first prize in figural representation at the end of his first year at the Brera Academy and then no fewer than three prizes the following year in the three main areas of sculptural design.

Vincenzo also hung around the Cacciatori workshop, another sculptor working for the Fabbrica del Duomo and a follower of the still prevalent Neoclassical school. He was not, however, so enamoured by this style and preferred to express the real nature of his subjects, having been heavily influenced by Lorenzo Bartolini, whose *La fiducia in Dio* ("Faith in God") he had seen at the Brera Art Academy in 1837.

1842 saw Vela's *Cristo resuscita la figlia di Gairo* ("Christ Resuscitates the Daughter



Left:
Spartaco Vela,
At the Quarry,
albumen
photographic print

Right:
Carlo Felice Biscarra,
*Portrait of Vincenzo
Vela*, ca. 1855,
oil on canvas

of Jiarus”) win the sculpture competition organised by the Venice Academy of Art. This bas-relief already showed signs of what would become his individual style and led to several major commissions, the first being a full statue of Bishop Giuseppe Maria Luvini for the city of Lugano (1845, now in the courtyard of the Palazzo Civico).

The success of this new work, which even the famous painter Francesco Hayez (1791-1882) saw fit to praise, opened the doors to Milan’s art scene and the salons of the aristocracy and middle-classes, bringing Vela into contact with the ideals of the Italian Risorgimento. In fact, in the 1840^s, when Vela was still in his twenties, he rubbed shoulders with many leading intellectuals, including the poet Andrea Maffei (1798-1885), introduced to him by Hayez in 1845 (Maffei would later become one of his most enthusiastic admirers), his wife, the Countess Clara Carrara Spinelli (1814-1886), whose salon was the most prestigious of the time, the writer Pietro Rotondi (1814-1899) and the Litta brothers, Antonio (1819-1866) and Giulio (1822-1891), wealthy patrons who commissioned some of Vela’s most important works. Indeed, Giulio Litta was responsible for Vela’s *La preghiera del mattino* (“Morning Prayer”) in the small church of Santa Maria delle Selve in Milan. Now owned by the Ospedale Maggiore hospital and kept in Palazzo Morando in Via S. Andrea, this sculpture was shown in the 1846 Brera exhibition and met with the approval of both art critics and the public. Carlo Tenca, writing in the “Rivista Europea”, called it a “stupendous work and maybe the most challenging new approach to sculpture of our time”.

Vela’s success in the Brera exhibition led to more commissions, including the statues of the martyrs *Pamphius* and *Valente* for Milan’s Duomo. Nevertheless, Vela felt the need to study further and so, over the course of the next few months, he decided that he would benefit from a period of study in Rome, like so many fine artists and art-lovers before him. While wandering down the streets of the Eternal City, he breathed in a sense of newly won freedom, thanks to the recent election of Pope Pius IX (1846). There he met many young and hopeful Milanese artists, including

the sculptors Pietro Magni (1816-1877) and Giovanni Strazza (1818-1875) and the painter Giuseppe Bertini (1825-1898), who had also been Vela’s companions at the Brera Academy. However, Vela’s time in Rome was brief: having reached Rome in mid 1847, he suddenly left the city to return to Ticino and take part in the Sonderbund War. In just under a month (3rd-29th November, 1847), the seven conservative Catholic cantons who had formed the *Sonderbund* (the “separate alliance”: Lucerne, Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden, Zug, Fribourg and Valais) were defeated by the liberal cantons and so paved the way for the birth of Switzerland as a federal state with a new constitution (1848). Vela fought on the side of the liberal cantons, enlisting with the Ticino Carabinieri corps, openly manifesting his progressive and democratic beliefs, beliefs that would later influence his personal life and art. It is not, therefore, surprising that Vela also fought as a volunteer under General Antonio Arcioni in the anti-Austrian uprisings in 1848: in March that year he was in Como, and then in May on the shores of Lake Garda, fighting with the Ticino Carabinieri in the First War of Italian Independence against Field Marshal Radetzky’s retreating troops barricaded in Peschiera del Garda (18th-30th May).

Vela then spent a few months in the Canton of Ticino after the disastrous Battle of Novara (23rd March, 1849) had brought the second stage of the First War of Independence to an end, with Lombardy and Veneto still under Austrian occupation. However, he soon returned to Milan, using his art as a means to keep alive the ideals of liberty and independence. During this period Vela created one of his most famous works: *Spartaco*, which Duke Antonio Litta had commissioned after having seen the plaster model Vela had been working on in Rome. This marble statue was sent to the Brera Exhibition in 1851, together with *Desolazione* (“Desolation”), a funereal monument commissioned by the brothers Filippo and Giacomo Ciani. Vela received much acclaim for both the quality of his work and for his patriotic subjects: the noble rebellion of the slave Spartacus as he breaks his chains and the desolation of a woman lamenting Italy’s destiny.

On the 10th of July 1852 Vela was awarded a certificate of membership (*Socio d'arte*) of the Brera Academy, probably in an attempt by the pro-Austrian president, Count Ambrogio Nava, to somehow restrain the by now famous sculptor. Vela refused this honour, stating that he did not recognise the principles of art upheld by the Academy, although it is more likely that he did not wish to be officially linked to a council whose honorary members included the highest Austrian authorities in Milan: Field Marshal Radetzky, Governor Michele Strassoldo-Grafenberg and Commander General of Lombardy Ferenc József Gyulai. Vela's decision to return the certificate was seen as an explicit provocation and so he was banished from Lombardo Veneto as *persona non grata*, being accompanied to the Swiss border on the 26th of July.

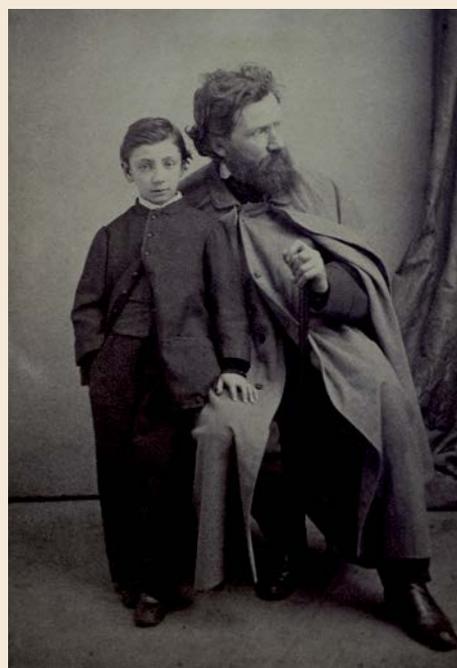
Vela returned to his hometown, Ligornetto, to a warm welcome. He even received a few commissions, including a particularly prestigious one for the funereal monument for Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848) from the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore in Bergamo, thanks partly to his friend Maffei's influence. Vela was also asked to sculpt a monument in memory of Countess Maria Isimbardi (1826-1849), the young wife of Giovanni d'Adda, to be installed in the chapel of Arcore, where he was already working on *Addolorata* ("Our Lady of Sorrows").

It was, perhaps, his desire to take an active role in the political and cultural debate of the time that was behind his decision to leave Ticino once again and go to Turin. This was the crucial "decade of preparation", which would end with the Second War of Italian Independence (1859), and Vela was met by many exiled Lombard friends on his arrival in Turin. One of these was Pietro Rotondi, who on receiving the news of his imminent arrival, wrote to Vela saying: "if this comes to be, we owe a debt of gratitude to that dear Field Marshal [Radetzky], the wise old man of the empire [...]. Then again, I strongly believe that your stay in Turin will be very profitable for this part of Italy, so little affected by the spirit of a united Italy. These people need to feel the educating influence of art, to be shaken and made to wake up; and you, working to this end, would be serving your country ad-

mirably, even this way [...]. It is not just on the battle field that we fight the enemies of liberty..." (Turin, 4th October 1852).

Vela arrived in Turin at the end of February the following year and, as his friend Rotondi had hoped, he soon attracted the attention of the elite in Turin on account of his fame as an artist, his proven track record in fighting for Italian independence and his close ties with several important Lombard nobles and businessmen. Aware that his move to Turin would be a turning-point in his career, Vela decided to make a similar change in his personal life and so married Sabina Dragoni (1826-1892) in late March. He had met his future bride in Milan many years earlier where she worked as a model at Benedetto Cacciatori's studio. There would be only one child from this marriage, Vela's son Spartaco (1854-1895).

Proof of his rapid rise in professional standing is the fact that he was made a Knight of the Order of Saints Maurice and Lazarus on the 11th of May 1854 and then appointed Professor of Sculpture at the Albertina Academy of Fine Arts on the 12th of October 1856. Vela entered into his academic



career with all the passion already seen in his civil undertakings, being convinced that art and the example of the great masters had the power to educate the people. In fact, during his first lectures of the year he would address his students and urge them to study and search for truth and beauty, as

Mazzocca,
Portrait of Vincenzo
Vela and his Son
Spartacus, 1866,
albumen photo-
graphic paper

Enrico Gamba,
*Vincenzo Vela
with his wife
Sabina and his son
Spartacus*, 1857,
oil on canvas



“these alone should inspire the work of the true artist”:

“My dear fellows, [...] I want first of all to tell you that the art to which you are dedicating your lives demands not inconsiderable sacrifices from its followers. Beware the artist who believes that art is simply a means to make money and thus lowers art to the level of mere manual labour! Beware he who makes it bend to the latest fashion! Beware he who makes art lazy, by simply copying a conventional style! [...] Let us express generous, noble, educating concepts, of use to our fatherland, and may that land recognise its value.”

Meanwhile, Vela became very much “in vogue” as an artist, given that people recognised the patriotic value of the concepts behind his sculpture. Many rich influential families, such as the Prever, Calosso, Palustrini and Provana di Collegno families, turned to him for the marble statues needed to adorn their family tombs in the cemetery of Turin. The Rosminians entrusted Vela with the funereal monument for the founder of their charity, the famous philosopher Father Antonio Rosmini-Serbati, buried in the church of the Santissimo Crocefisso (Holy Crucifix) in Stresa. He was also asked to produce many monuments in Turin, such as the statue in memory of the politician and

writer Cesare Balbo (1789-1853) in the public gardens (1856) and, most especially, the *Monumento all'Esercito Sardo* (“Monument to the Sardinian Army”), commissioned by a group of Milanese patriots to honour the Sardinians for their support in 1848. Originating from an idea conceived by Cesare Correnti, this work was clearly political in intent and was inaugurated on the 10th of April 1859 in Piazza Castello, opposite Palazzo Madama, almost as a seal of favour on Cavour’s policy of rearmament and provocation that would eventually lead to the Austrian ultimatum of the 23rd of April 1859 and the Second War of Italian Independence. Count Cavour was happy to pose for Vela, as was Vittorio Emanuele II. Indeed, Vela produced two busts of these men: that of the long-serving prime minister is now in Santena Castle, while that of the king is in the Albertina Academy.

There is no doubt that Vela’s work met with royal approval, as he also sculpted a full statue of the King (now under the portico of the Palazzo Civico in Turin), one of Carlo Alberto for the Palazzo Reale and a pair of statues in the Santuario della Consolata in memory of Maria Teresa and Maria Adelaide d’Asburgo-Lorena, the King’s mother and wife who died within a few days of each other (12th and 20th January 1855). Vela had a large circle of patrons:



private individuals, collectors, public officials, committees and brotherhoods of various kinds, coming from Bergamo, Trieste, Vicenza and the Swiss Confederation, all wanting him to immortalise in marble an idea, a concept, the effigy of an important person or the dearly departed. Surprisingly enough, commissions also came from Milan, despite the fact that he had been banished. In 1858 he received a particularly prestigious commission: a full statue of the writer and poet Tommaso Grossi (1790-1853) for the courtyard of Palazzo Brera. This was paid for by public subscription,

(confirmed also by his becoming a Commander of the Order of Saints Maurice and Lazarus), it was no surprise that Vela was quite content to remain in Turin, teaching and working, even after the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy (17th March 1861) and the transfer of the capital city of Italy from Turin to Florence (1865).

After the Unification of Italy, Vela received even more commissions for works to celebrate various aspects of the Risorgimento and its protagonists. These included symbolic works, such as the group with two female figures called *L'Italia riconoscente alla*



promoted by people such as the journalist and politician Giulio Carcano and the writer Alessandro Manzoni.

Vela had no fewer than three workshops in Turin as he needed the space to work on his many commissions; he also created work for many other craftsmen. Yet he did not spend all his time in Turin within the walls of his workshops, amidst his many drawings, sketches, plaster casts and statues in the process of being finished: Vela also enjoyed an active social life, allowing him to make useful contacts. He was quite at home in the most exclusive venues in Turin: he received invitations to balls and court events, was a member of the *Circolo degli Artisti* and often went hunting with Vittorio Emanuele II. In view of the attention he received and his position of respect

Francia (“Italy Grateful to France”) donated by the aristocratic ladies of Milan to the wife of Napoleon III, the Empress Eugénie. This was shown at the Salon de Paris in 1863, resulting in Vela being made a *Chevalier de la Légion d’Honneur*.

Towards the end of his time in Turin, Vela produced one of his most intense works: *Gli ultimi giorni di Napoleone* (“The Last Days of Napoleon”), now in Versailles. This depicts the former French emperor as a tired, ill man “wrapped up in his memories of a now distant destiny of power and glory.” Vela won first prize for this marble statue at the 1867 Exposition Universelle in Paris, having shown it together with another statue, that of Christopher Columbus, commissioned by the Empress Eugénie, one of Vela’s most illustrious admirers.

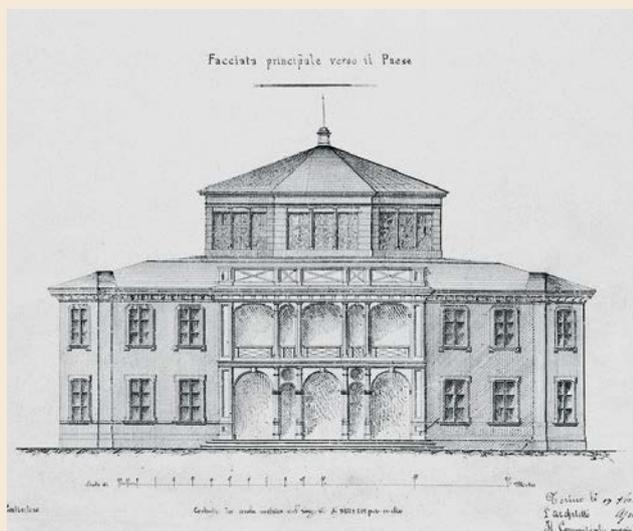
Left:
Vincenzo Vela,
*Monument to King
Vittorio Emanuele II*,
1865,
plaster, original
model, 330 x 140 x
130 cm

On this page:
Pierre Henri
Théodore (Tetar) van
Elven,
*Vincenzo Vela’s
Studio in Turin*, 1858,
watercolours

Cipriano Ajmetti,
*Perspective Drawing
 of Villa Vela, 1862.*
 Indian ink on paper

That same year, Vela decided to return to Ligornetto, thereby abandoning his teaching post at the Albertina Academy. Perhaps this was due to his disappointment at not receiving the commission for a statue of Cavour for the city of Turin. Vela had particularly wanted to sculpt Cavour, his friend, but to his great regret Giovanni Duprè (1817-1882) was asked to create the statue instead of him.

Vela and his family settled in Ligornetto in the monumental house he had had built by Cipriano Ajmetti and Isidoro Spinelli in the early 1860^s. This became the centre of his work and was much visited by his many admirers and guests, becoming almost an art gallery. It now houses the museum in his honour (cf. the essay by Gianna Mina Zeni). Vela worked ceaselessly in Ligornetto, though he also suffered a few disappointments, such as the monuments to the memory of the patriot Daniele Manin in Venice and the Duke of Brunswick in Geneva, being forced to abandon these on account of misunderstandings with his clients. He also started to cut his ties with all activities that might distract him from his work, including many invitations to be on the artistic commissions for various sculpture competitions. Albeit somewhat reluctantly, Vela did accept, however, a position on the Permanent Commission of Fine Arts for the Ministry of Public Education of the Kingdom of Italy between 1882 and 1884 and he stood for election to the Great Council of the Republic and the Canton of Ticino, where he held a seat from 1877 to 1881, together with his old friends, the liberals.



Despite the multitude of honours he received from far and wide and his public duties, Vela yearned to concentrate on his artistic research and the potential of his chosen material, regardless of external commissions. This approach was all decisive in one of his last and most meaningful works, the high relief *Le vittime del lavoro* ("The Victims of Labour"), presented at the 1883 Schweizerische Landesausstellung in Zurich (national exhibition) and destined to become an emblem of "social realism" in the field of sculpture.

In a letter to Carlo Baravalle dated November 1886, the artist outlined the basic tenets of his beliefs, as seen in this work dedicated to the workers who lost their lives while building the San Gottardo railway tunnel (1872-1882), together with the reasons why he decided to produce this work: "Now, as we waste so many millions on building monuments to kings, as we erect so many structures to the memory of the powerful, the rich and, it must be said, the martyrs of Italian independence (though these last do deserve to be remembered in this way), I feel the urgent need to commemorate the martyrs of labour. I produced this work not as a commission or because someone gave me the idea; I showed it in Zurich, I must confess, hoping that some company, some public subscription or the nations themselves would have wanted it done, not for any personal profit, but because I would be so happy to see my thoughts immortalised in bronze: that is, I believe we should pay our respects to the sufferings of mankind at the Italian entrance to one of the greatest works of science and labour ever; the Gotthard Tunnel." Vela's wish would only come true after his death: a bronze cast was indeed made in 1932 and placed, just as he wanted, at the entrance to the tunnel in Airolo. An earlier example (cast in 1893) is now in the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome, while a more recent copy was unveiled at the head offices of the Italian Workers' Compensation Authority (INAIL) on the 1st of May 2008 in the presence of the President of the Italian Republic, Giorgio Napolitano.

All Vela's last works were in the same vein: the monument to the memory of the patriot Agostino Bertani in Milan (1887-1889), with its bas-relief depicting this patriotic doctor

Ignoto,
Portrait of Vincenzo
Vela, 1860,
albumen on paper



attending Carlo Cattaneo on his deathbed, and the full statue of Giuseppe Garibaldi for the city of Como (1888-1889), where Vela shows, at its base, the Austrian army surrendering at the San Francesco barracks during the *Cinque Giornate di Como* ("Five Days of Como") in 1848. Interestingly, the latter work includes a self-portrait of the artist among the victorious revolutionaries. The same year that he produced *Le vittime del lavoro* (1883), and again with the intent to portray human suffering, Vela also made a reproduction of the *Ecce Homo* marble monument first conceived for the funereal chapel of the Giulini della Porta-Belgioioso family in Velate and then re-conceived in bronze for the Camozzi family tomb in the cemetery of Como. A copy of this statue was also placed on Vela's own grave in the cemetery of Ligornetto after his death on the 3rd of October 1891.

* **Maria Cristina Brunati**

Archivist

Sincere thanks to:

Sergio Rebora and Giorgio Zanchetti

Bibliography

GUIDINI, *Vincenzo Vela*, Tip. Prov. F. Ostinelli, Como 1893.

F. HAYEZ, *Le mie memorie*, Tipografia Bernardoni di C. Rebeschini e C., Milan 1890.

R. MANZONI, *Vincenzo Vela. L'uomo, le patriote, l'artista*, U. Hoepli, Milan 1906.

Museo Vela. Le collezioni: scultura, pittura, grafica, fotografia (edited by G.A. Mina Zeni), Cornè Banca, Lugano 2002.

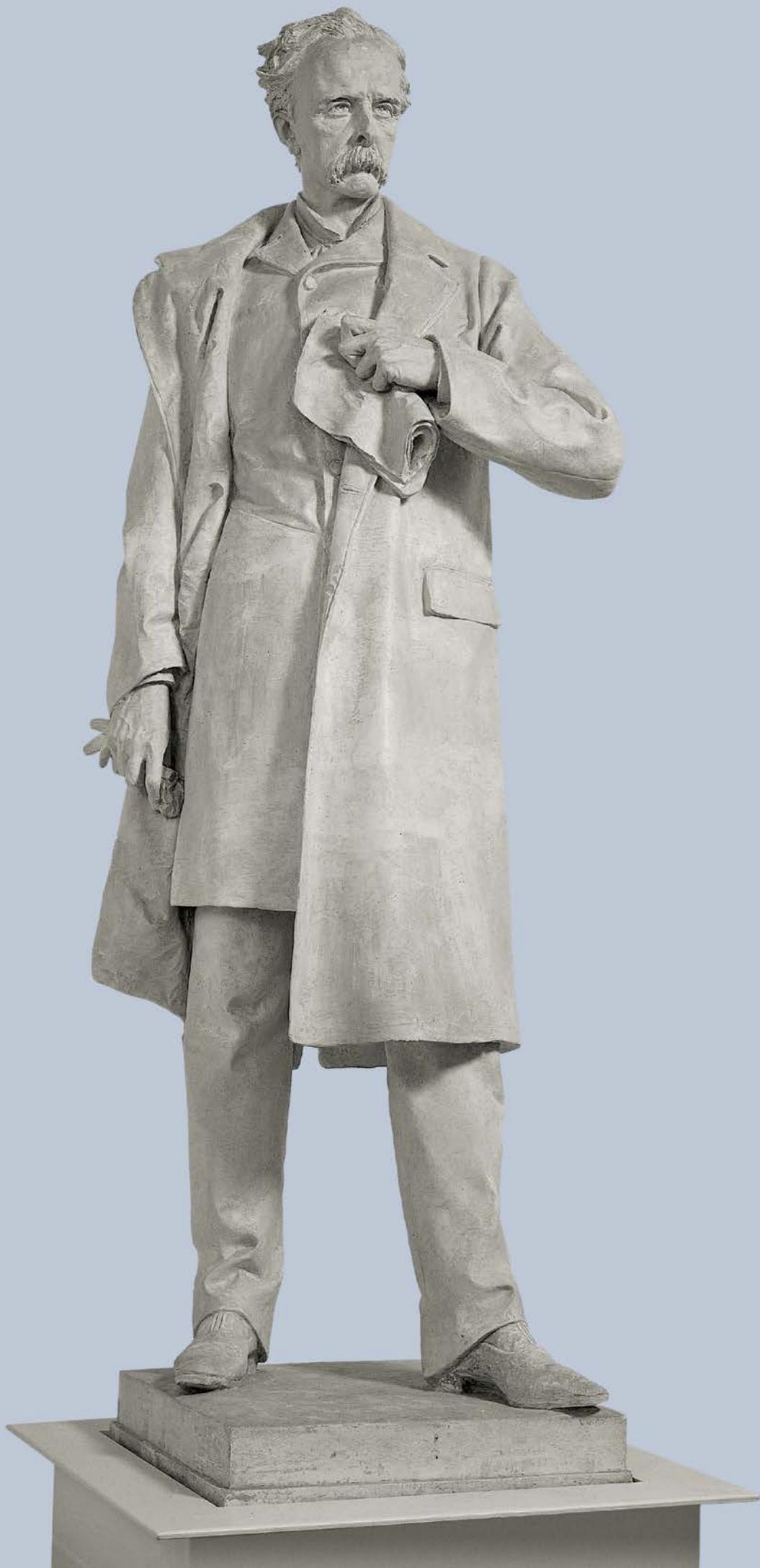
Vincenzo Vela e Giuseppe Garibaldi: ritratti e monumenti di iconografia garibaldina nelle collezioni del Museo Vela (edited by G.A. Mina Zeni), Museo Vela, Ligornetto 2007.

Intorno agli Induno: pittura e scultura tra genere e storia nel Canton Ticino (edited by Mariangela Agliati Ruggia and Sergio Rebora), Skira, Milan 2002.

N.J. SCOTT, *Vincenzo Vela: 1820-91*, London Garland Publishing, New York 1979.

G. ZANCHETTI, *Vincenzo Vela scultore (1820-1891)*, thesis for a Ph.D. in the Critical Analysis, Theory and History of Literature and Art, Milan, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, 1998.

G. ZANCHETTI, *Istanze risorgimentali e celebrazione ufficiale in scultura*, in Roberto Cassanelli, Sergio Rebora, Francesca Valli (edited by), *Milano pareva deserta... 1848-1859. L'invenzione della Patria*, Conference Papers (Milan, Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, Istituto di Teoria e Storia dell'Arte-Comune di Milano, Settore Cultura e Musei, Raccolte Storiche, 19-20-21 March 1998), Quaderni di "Il Risorgimento", n° 13, 1999, pp. 243-263.



Vincenzo Vela

Freedom of expression and liberal values in his sculpture

by Giorgio Zanchetti*



Left:
Vincenzo Vela,
Monument to Agostino Bertani, 1887,
plaster, original model,
268 x 84.7 x 87.5 cm

On this page:
Vincenzo Vela,
*La Speranza. Monumento funerario
alla famiglia Prever*, 1852-1854,
plaster, original model,
185 x 86 x 63.5 cm

The study of past trends in art is most valuable in that it affords us the chance to focus on certain central themes of a given society or era (provided we guard against absolutising the aesthetic premises and the notion of universal and eternal “good taste”, as this could result in our ignoring the essentially ethical and cultural value, and hence the historical value, of any opinion or theory of beauty). Such trends appear to be both symptomatic of their time and deeply rooted in tradition, yet at the same time aim to shock, to be anti-conformist, to offer a utopian vision of what the unknown future might hold in store. Therefore, by looking closely at Vincenzo Vela’s art and works we can get a better understanding of the ultimately victorious struggles and strife during the 50-year period (1830-1880) that proved to be so important for Italy, Switzerland and Europe as a whole.

Vela’s sculpture contains all the main innovations of the mid 1800s, often in their highest form, before their criticism and historical associations in the 20th century. Indeed, Vela could even be termed a forerunner of the Avant-Garde movement for three reasons. Firstly, because he remained true to his belief in the social, political, economic and cultural revolutions of his time (even though the very nature of his art, being on a commission basis, was more likely to reflect the views of the wealthier, more powerful sectors of society, as can be seen in his commemorative monuments). These revolutions involved mostly the middle classes and the proletariat, not just in his homeland (Switzerland) and his adopted country (Italy), but also throughout Europe. Secondly, because Vela constantly strove towards a natural evolution of the procedures and expressive language of sculpture, preferring to build on what went before, rather than break completely new ground, while at the same time producing tangible evidence of a particularly virulent period in the eternal clash between each new generation and their teachers. Thirdly, because of his ability to pass on his knowledge (from a very early age, almost at the start of his career), whilst still being explicitly against the late-Classical, Romantic and Purist tradition of nineteenth-century academia.

The Duomo di Milano construction site was

the incubator that nurtured Vela’s surprising gift for sculpture, which was first noticed when he was still a young child work-



ing in the stone quarries of Besazio and Viggìu. He then started studying sculpture in a more structured, systematic way at the Academy of Fine Arts of Brera. There he absorbed the romantic sensitivity of Pompeo Marchesi: a spontaneous and truly generous genius and virtuoso, an artist with sporadic bursts of creativity, but fully capable of using all the latest means to organise his work, to communicate and to obtain approval, a leading figure in the cultural life of Milan during the Italian Restoration. Vela soon gained the trust of Benedetto Cacciatori, Marchesi’s replacement, becoming his prize student. Cacciatori was not such an authority as Marchesi, but was paradoxically more open-minded, being an eclectic, and so embraced the innovations brought by historical Romanticism and Purism, modern customs and the early turbulent influences of Realism. The Brera Academy also gave Vela the chance to study under Luigi Sabatelli and Francesco Hayez, in the company of the future painters of his

generation, such as Giuseppe Bertini, the Induno brothers (Domenico and Gerolamo) and Eleuterio Pagliano. Here Vela had the chance to go beyond the traditional education in classical sculpture (as always, based on copying the plaster models of ancient and Renaissance statues which adorned the halls of the Brera Academy) by having the opportunity to practice his live drawing. Thanks to this and Vela's natural talent for modelling and working marble, he soon developed some of the more radical and visually innovative features of his sculpture: aspects that would leave an indelible mark on future Scapigliati (bohemian) and post-Scapigliati developments in the Lombard school, i.e. the Picturesque style and the surprisingly mimetic and tactile qualities of the sculpting, chiselling and rasping of the surface. Even the not usually generous critic Giuseppe Rovani had to admit this:

“[...] He is certain that Vela took sculpture to a level never before seen. At the time of the Davidesque School in painting, an observer could see in those colourful pictures a combination of things that seemed to constitute the attributes of sculpture rather than painting. On observing Vela's works, however, when compared to unadorned marble, the style is such that one can almost perceive the various and versatile attributes of the painter. We therefore believe that therein lies the originality of Vela's style and the characteristic performance he makes of his art”¹.

Right from his very first achievements in Milan, Vela's sculpture was inextricably linked to the liberal values of the Italian Risorgimento, values shared by the nouveau riche, the middle classes, intellectuals and businessmen alike, all of whom would become the main driving force behind the struggle for independence and Italian unification in the period from 1848 to 1860. Although he appreciated the practicality of Cavour's plan to unite Italy under the Savoia crown, like so many other Italian patriots of the time did, at heart Vela remained faithful to Mazzini and Manin's republican utopia, fully embracing the ideals of democ-

racy and social equity that were being propounded by radical left-wing politicians in Italy.

After leaving the Brera Academy and carrying out his early minor commissions and jobs Vela's first major work was his statue of Bishop Luvini (1845). Sculpted in plain stone for the atrium of the Palazzo Civico in Lugano, this statue clearly shows his extraordinary frankness, depicting his subject in a truthful, anti-rhetorical light. As a result, he attracted the attention and gained the respect of the most open-minded critics, intellectuals and artists of the time. Francesco Hayez, Andrea Maffei and Carlo Tenca supported and promoted this young Ticino artist, introducing him to the most influential cultural circles in Milan, such as that pivoting around Alessandro Manzoni and the salon of Clara Carrara Spinelli Maffei. Vela even enjoyed the protection and patronage of the statesman Massimo d'Azeglio. This led, of course, to his first important (and highly remuner-



Vincenzo Vela,
*Monument to Bishop
Giuseppe Maria
Luvini*, after 1845,
plaster, mould,
194 x 89.2 x 48 cm

ative) commissions from Cesare Giulini, Giulio and Antonio Litta, Giovanni and Carlo d'Adda² and others. All very opposed to Austria's dominion of Italy, these men clearly influenced Vela's artistic development, as can be seen in his *La preghiera del mattino* ("The Morning Prayer") and *Spartaco* ("Spartacus"). They also shaped his political leanings, as witnessed by the fact that Vela became actively involved in the 1847-1848 uprisings and was eventually banished from Austrian Lombardy-Veneto as a result. One such commission from Giulio Litta, of no particular subject, resulted in the graceful *La preghiera del mattino*, the wonder of the Brera Exhibition of 1846 and a clear reflection of Vela's new sensitivity, intimacy and naturalness. The journalist Carlo Tenca wrote:

"It is no longer marble that we have before our eyes, but something moving and alive, that deceives us with the amazing effects of chiaroscuro. His break away from the sculptor's artifice, due to his extreme love for truth, even to the detriment of the usual effects, is not merely a great act of courage, but also tells us he has a true understanding of beauty and is a veritable revolutionary artist"³.

In the months leading up to the Five Days of Milan, Vela had designed and made a plaster model of a provocative subject, the Roman rebel slave, Spartacus, but had then abandoned the project. Subsequently, Giulio's brother, Duke Antonio, commissioned Vela to turn this into a marble sculpture: *Spartaco* (1847-1850)⁴. In early 1848, Cesare Giulini and his brother-in-law Giovanni Battista Camozzi Vertova commissioned Vela with the *Busto di Lorenzo Mascheroni*, an equally provocative gift from the liberals of Milan to the city of Bergamo, as a symbol of their support for the courageous petition for reform submitted by the Bergamasque representative, Giambattista Nazari, to the Central Lombard Congregation⁵. Vincenzo and his brother Lorenzo also received a commission from Giovanni d'Adda, through the services of the architect Giuseppe Balzaretto, to decorate the funereal chapel to the memory of his wife

Maria Isimbardi at the entrance to the park surrounding Villa Arcore. The result was Vincenzo's heart-rending marble scene in the alcove depicting the pathetic agony of the young woman on her deathbed (*La contessa d'Adda negli estremi momenti di vita*, 1851-1852) as well as a statue of "Our Lady of Sorrows" (*Addolorata*, 1851-1853) for the altar, a bereavement gift from Carlo d'Adda to his brother Giovanni⁶.

Like so many other political exiles caught up in the revolutionary movement of 1848-1849 and fleeing repression in the major Italian cities, Vela decided to move to Turin, a city known for its liberal stance. In fact, Vela immediately benefitted from the strong network of support and protection among the many Lombard exiles in the capital of Piedmont. Maffei, from Milan, ensured he was awarded the prestigious contract to sculpt the Donizetti monument for the city of Bergamo (*Cenotafio di Gaetano Donizetti*, Bergamo, Santa Maria Maggiore, 1852-1855) and thus produced what is perhaps his best funereal sculpture, the elegiac figure of *Armonia* ("Harmony")⁷.

Vela spent fifteen years in Turin, producing many monuments for the city's new cemetery and its squares⁸. One in particular is worthy of special mention: the *Monumento all'Esercito Sardo* ("Monument to the Sardinian Army", 1857-1859) in Piazza Castello, a gift from the liberals of Milan under the leadership of Cavour to commemorate Piedmont's contribution in the struggle for an independent Lombardy in 1848 (and again in 1859). Two exiles, Cesare Correnti and Carlo Clerici (the latter an atypical aristocrat in that he promoted democracy and radical revolutionary thought), did not hesitate to give this commission to Vela. Giovanni Visconti Venosta points out how this statue was intended to be deliberately provocative, a protest against Austrian rule, given that clandestine photographs of Vela's drawings and model circulated in Milan on the 15th of January 1857, during an official visit by Emperor Franz Joseph I of Austria and his consort the Empress Elizabeth:

"Rumour spread throughout the day that as soon as the Emperor had reached his pavilion in Loreto, he had been informed that the City of Turin had that very day



Vincenzo Vela,
*Countess d'Adda
on her Deathbed,
Funerary Monument
to the Countess
Maria Isimbardi
d'Adda, 1851-1853,*
plaster, original
model,
384 x 242 x 147 cm

accepted the offer of a monument to the Sardinian army presented by a delegation from Milan. This might well explain the Emperor's bad mood and the curt welcome he gave the Podestà (the local authority) as reported by those present. A few days earlier, my brother Emilio had received, in secret, a pack of photographs of the monument, still kept in Vela's studio. Many of us helped distribute these photographs, making sure that mainly the Emperor's entourage received them and that the ministers would find them upon their return to their rooms and on their desks. We later discovered that the distribution of the photographs had had a most welcomed outcome"⁹.

Once again Vela adopted a deliberately avant-garde approach: he decided against commemorating the King or one of his captains, and instead chose a simple non-commissioned officer, an ensign (*L'Alfiere*), to represent the key role played by the lower classes in the fight for Italian independence¹⁰. Perhaps not surprisingly, Vela left Turin in 1867. By this time Turin was no longer the driving force at the national level as a result of a steady decline in republican values and the repercussions of events elsewhere that changed the political climate in the city. In fact, his decision to move came after the death of two of his most illustrious patrons, Cavour and Massimo d'Azeglio (honoured in a commemorative drawing copied from his death mask and exhibited in 1866



during a personal show)¹¹. Some believe it might have been due to his disappointment over losing the contract to sculpt a monument to the memory of Cavour (*Monumento a Cavour*)¹², while others feel the decisive factor was Vela's enormous success with the French court after sending his *Monumento a Cristoforo Colombo* (1864-1866, now in Colón, Panamá) and his *Gli ultimi giorni di Napoleone I* (1866) to the Exposition Universelle di Paris in 1867. Italian and international events¹³, plus his desire to be involved in the education of his son Spartaco (at the Brera Academy in Milan), led to Vela finally settling in his Swiss country residence, the villa he had had built as of 1862 in his hometown of Ligornetto¹⁴.

His retreat to Ligornetto did not, however, mean he had put down his tools. Far from it, as many of his more mature works were done in the 1860s and 1870s. These include the amazing works for the Cappella Giulini della Porta Barbiano di Belgiojoso in Velate (*Ecce Homo*, 1868, and *La preghiera dei morti*, 1874) and the *Lazzati* (1871), *Ciani* and *Kramer* (1872) funeral monuments in the new cemetery in Milan. Many successes, it is true, but there were also a few disappointments, such as his failure to be awarded the commission for a monument honouring the revolutionary Manin (*Monumento a Daniele Manin*) in Venice (1870) and, in particular, the huge mausoleum for Karl II, Herzog von Braunschweig project in Geneva (1874-1876)¹⁵. As a result, during his last



years Vela decided against bidding for public sculpture works in Italy, recognising the cronyism inherent in the awarding of these highly remunerative contracts. He felt freer and more detached, though still full of ideas and enthusiasm for his chosen art. Indeed, this was the period that he spontaneously conceived his great monument for the people, *Vittime del lavoro* ("Victims of Labour"), first shown in Zurich in 1883 as a plaster model. Here his intense, well calibrated emphasis of the limbs and facial features perfectly suits the humanitarian pathos of the subject. The result is a revival of the brutal realism of Courbet and Rude, but seen through new eyes. A new prophetic work that can rightly be said to belong to the Pre-Expressionist school.

As was the case with the *Vittime*¹⁶, Vela's last works – the monuments to *Bertani* in Milan (1887-1888) and *Garibaldi* in Como (1888-1889)¹⁷ – clearly show how he identified with and fully shared the thoughts and ideals of his subjects. In February 1887, upon hearing that Vela had accepted "with enthusiasm" to produce the *Monumento ad Agostino Bertani*, an anonymous journalist for the democratic newsletter "Mentana" related the "telling of an unknown anecdote

To the left:
Vincenzo Vela,
Project for the Monument to Duke Charles II of Brunswick in Geneva, 1888,
pencil, ink, pen drawing,
850 x 600 mm

On this page:

Left:
Vincenzo Vela,
The Last Moments of Napoleon I, 1866,
plaster, original model, 147.3 x 108.5 x 134 cm

Right:
Vincenzo Vela,
Christopher Columbus redeems America, 1865-1867,
plaster, small size plaster replica,
85.5 x 51 x 38.3 cm





concerning the artistic life” of the sculptor, which I feel sums up perfectly his independent ideas and language:

“One day he met Count Maffei in the streets of Milan, a person with whom he had always enjoyed friendly relations. Maffei approached him and told him that the committee for the monument to Napoleon III would be only too pleased to entrust him with its execution and insisted that Vela accept this commission. The patriot and liberal artist’s immediate response was a scornful refusal, followed by a request that Maffei should dissuade the committee from even writing to him about it.

(...) A worthy Vela to sculpt Bertani! Even art should preserve its own sense of modesty if it wants to avoid being called a prostitute”¹⁸.

* **Giorgio Zanchetti**

Professor of History of Contemporary Art at the Department of Cultural Heritage and Environment at the University of Milan. His studies focus on Italian sculpture of the Neo-classicism, Purism and Realism movements as well as on the interactions of the various artistic languages of the 19th century.

Endnotes

¹ ROVANI 1855-1858, pp. 513-514.

² Swiss patrons included Filippo and Giacomo Ciani – Milanese exiles after the 1821 uprisings – for whom Vela created the *Desolazione* (“Desolation”) for the commemorative monument to their parents, Carlo Ciani and Maria Zacconi Ciani (Lugano, Villa Ciani, 1850-1851); again for the Ciani brothers, Vela sculpted the *Monumento a Guglielmo Tell* (“William Tell Monument”, 1856), which stands on the Lugano lakeside in front of Hôtel du Parc.

³ TENCA 1846, p. 120.

⁴ This marble statue, owned by the Gottfried Keller Foundation, now sits in the atrium of Lugano’s Palazzo Civico. See ZANCHETTI 2005 for its history and a guide to its symbolism.

⁵ This bust was only inaugurated in 1862, in the Palazzo Nuovo in Bergamo, which now houses the Angelo Mai Library, cf. ZANCHETTI 2009.

⁶ cf. PORZIO-TEDESCHI 1991; ZANCHETTI 1997a, pp. 26-29, 40-43, no. 48-64; IDEM, *schede*, in *Museo Vela*, 2002, p. 288, cat. I.6 and I.7.

⁷ BARBARA CINELLI, *scheda*, in *Cultura figurativa*, 1980, p. 687, cat. 759; SCOTT 1979, pp. 166-171, 513, ill. 88-94; G. ZANCHETTI, *scheda*, in *Museo Vela*, 2002, p. 290, cat. I.15; PILON 2012.

⁸ *La Speranza* (“Hope”) for the Prever tomb (1852-1854); the funereal monuments for *Tommaso Calosso* (1853), *Generale Giacinto Provana di Collegno* (1857), *Tito Pallestrini* (1856; now in the Modern Art Gallery), *Cesare Balbo* (1856), *Daniele Manin* (1861), *Vittorio Emanuele II* (Palazzo Civico, 1860-1865), *Carlo Alberto* (Palazzo Reale, 1865), the two queens *Maria Adelaide and Maria Teresa di Savoia* (Santuario della Consolata, 1858-1861) and *Luigi Gallo* (Palazzo dell’Università, 1863). Vela produced the statue of *Minerva*, now in the centre of the university courtyard, for a Portuguese patron in 1858; it was kept in Vela’s studio at the Albertina Academy before being placed in front of the palace built for the 1880 Turin Exhibition and was only officially purchased by the city of Turin posthumously, in 1895 (cf. BERTONE 2003).

⁹ VISCONTI VENOSTA 1904, p. 307.

¹⁰ For details of the monument, see: CINELLI 1985; MORGANTINI 2011.

¹¹ *Painting exhibition*, 1866, p. 87; SCOTT, 1979, pp. 235, 468, cat. 37.

¹² SCOTT 1979, pp. 318-330; MASEDU 1998, pp. 45-55.

¹³ The all-decisive imperial support for the Papal troops in the Battle of Mentana (3rd November 1867) contributed to the decline in the myth of Napoleon III among Italian democrats.

¹⁴ CANAVESIO 2002, pp. 25-29.

¹⁵ MASEDU 1998, pp. 61-63; Scott 1979, pp. 387-397, 401-426, 479-485; G. ZANCHETTI, M. DEGL'INNOCENTI and G. GINEX: *schede* in *Museo Vela* 2002, pp. 292, 313, 319-320, cat. I.37, IV.7, V.25, 32.

¹⁶ See the declaration of Vela's poetry, quoted here by Cristina Brunati (p. X).

¹⁷ ZANCHETTI 1997b; IDEM, *schede*, in *Museo Vela* 2002, p. 296, cat. I.40-41; MASEDU 2007, pp. 28-36, 41, 43, 47-50.

¹⁸ *Vela e Calamatta*, in "Mentana. Foglio quotidiano", year I, n° 20, Thursday, 17th February 1887. See note 13 above for a justification of Vela's scornful refusal just a few years after the 1867 Paris Exhibition. This monument in Milan was first proposed just a few days after Napoleon III's death in early 1873; the equestrian bronze statue by Francesco Barzaghi for the *Monumento a Napoleone III* stood in the centre of the Palazzo del Senato courtyard in 1881 during the Esposizione Nazionale di Milano; completed in 1886 with the bas-relief panels by Antonio Bezzola, the monument continued to be at the centre of a bitter political debate until 1927 when it was finally placed in Parco Sempione (cf. BELTRAMI 1927; MEMORIE 1997, pp. 227-229).

Bibliography

TENCA 1846

CARLO TENCA, *Esposizione di B.B.A.A. nell'I.R. Palazzo di Brera*, in "Rivista Europea", September 1846, pp. 340-369; now in IDEM, *Scritti d'arte (1838-1859)*, edited by Alfredo Cottignoli (Lexis, III; Biblioteca delle arti, 2), Clueb, Bologna 1998, pp. 117-141.

ROVANI 1855-1858

GIUSEPPE ROVANI, *Vincenzo Vela*, in *Storia delle lettere e delle arti in Italia, giusta le reciproche loro rispondenze ordinata nelle vite e nei ritratti degli uomini illustri dal secolo XIII fino ai nostri giorni*, edited by G. Rovani, Francesco Sanvito, Milan 1855-1858, volume IV, 1858, pp. 507-514.

VISCONTI VENOSTA 1904

GIOVANNI VISCONTI VENOSTA, *Ricordi di gioventù. Cose vedute o sapute. 1847-1860*, second edition, Tipografia Editrice L. F. Cogliati, Milan, 1904.

BELTRAMI 1927

LUCA BELTRAMI, *Vicende del Monumento a Napoleone III in Milano dal 1881 al 1926*, Pirola, Milan 1927.

SCOTT 1979

NANCY J. SCOTT, *Vincenzo Vela 1820-1891*, Ph. D. thesis (Department of Fine Arts - Graduate School of Arts and Science, New York University, June 1978), Garland Publishing, New York - London 1979.

Cultura figurativa 1980

Cultura figurativa e architettonica negli Stati del Re di Sardegna. 1773-1861, edited by E. CASTELNUOVO and M. ROSCI, exhibition catalogue (Palazzo Reale - Palazzo Madama - Palazzina della Promotrice, Turin, May-June 1980), Turin 1980.

CINELLI 1985

BARBARA CINELLI, *Un monumento ottocentesco e il suo pubblico: l'Alfiere di Vincenzo Vela nella Torino sabauda*, in "Notiziario dell'Istituto Storico della Resistenza in Cuneo e Provincia", n° 28, II semester 1985, pp. 177-189.

PORZIO-TEDESCHI 1991

FRANCESCO PORZIO and FRANCESCO TEDESCHI, *Vincenzo Vela ad Arcore*, edited by the Town Council of Arcore, Grafica Comense, Tavernerio (Como) 1991.

Memorie 1997

Memorie nel bronzo e nel marmo. Monumenti celebrativi e targhe nelle piazze e nelle vie di Milano, edited by Michele Pietrantoni, Federico Motta, Milan 1997.

ZANCHETTI 1997a

G. ZANCHETTI, *La natura colta sul fatto. Un percorso per Lorenzo Vela (1812-1897)*, in "Casa d'artisti. Quaderni del Museo Vela", n° 1, June 1997, pp. 12-45.

ZANCHETTI 1997b

GIORGIO ZANCHETTI, *L'eroe in controforma. Il Monumento a Giuseppe Garibaldi e alle Giornate Comasche del marzo 1848 di Vincenzo Vela*, in "Casa d'artisti. Quaderni del Museo Vela", n° 2, October 1997, pp. 8-33.

MASEDU 1998

FEDERICO MASEDU, "...We express generous, noble, informative concepts that are of use to the fatherland, and the fatherland will come to recognise this ...". *La parabola dell'allegoria politica nell'opera di Vincenzo Vela*, in "Casa d'artisti. Quaderni del Museo Vela", n° 3, November 1998, pp. 44-69.

Museo Vela 2002

Museo Vela. Le collezioni: scultura, pittura, grafica, fotografia, edited by Gianna A. Mina Zeni, Cornè Banca, Lugano 2002.

BERTONE 2003

VIRGINIA BERTONE, *La "bellissima scultura": origini e vicende della Minerva di Vincenzo Vela*, in Vincenzo Vela, Minerva, Università degli Studi di Torino, Turin 2003.

ZANCHETTI 2005

G. ZANCHETTI, "*Non fuit majus Italiae discrimen quam a Spartaco*", in *Spartaco. La scultura in rivolta*, exhibition catalogue (Ligornetto, Vela Museum, 5th June - 2nd October 2005), edited by Gianna A. Mina Zeni in collaboration with Federico Masedu, Vincenzo Vela Museum/Federal Office of Culture (Saggi sulla scultura, 1), Ligornetto- Ligornetto 2005, pp. 10-16.

MASEDU 2007

FEDERICO MASEDU, *Vela, garibaldini e Garibaldi: una lunga simpatia*, in *Vincenzo Vela e Giuseppe Garibaldi. Ritratti e monumenti di iconografia garibaldina nelle collezioni del Museo Vela*, exhibition catalogue (Ligornetto, Vela Museum, 18th September - 25th November 2007), edited by Gianna A. Mina Zeni, Federico Masedu and Maria Foletti, Vincenzo Vela Museum/Federal Office of Culture ('Saggi sulla scultura', 3), Ligornetto-Bern 2007, pp. 29-50.

ZANCHETTI 2009

G. ZANCHETTI, "*La voce pubblica indica Vela*". *Study notes regarding Vincenzo Vela's work in Bergamo*, in *Svizzeri a Bergamo nella storia, nell'arte, nella cultura, nell'economia dal '500 ad oggi*, special edition of "Arte e Storia", n° 44, September/October 2009, pp. 314-327.

MORGANTINI 2011

FILIPPO MORGANTINI, *L'Alfiere sardo di Vincenzo Vela: l'arte verista serve la causa italiana*, in "Quaderni del "Bobbio"", n° 3, June 2011, Carignano, I.I.S. Norberto Bobbio, pp. 75-103.

PILON 2012

LUIGI PILON, *Vincenzo Vela e il monumento a Gaetano Donizetti nella Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore di Bergamo*, in "Quaderni di Archivio Bergamasco", n° 5, 2011, pp. 107-139.



Vincenzo Vela

Ticino, Italy and the Risorgimento

by Marco Marcacci*



Left:

Vincenzo Vela,
Spartacus, 1847-1849,
plaster, original model,
208 x 80.5 x 126.5 cm

On this page:

Vincenzo Vela,
Bust of General Henri Dufour, 1849,
plaster, original model,
74 x 64 x 37 cm

A degree of myth surrounds Vincenzo Vela and his works, due partly to his having played a part in the Italian Risorgimento. As often happens with out-of-the-ordinary characters, the legend and hagiography started while Vela was still alive – with the publication, for instance, of Michele Lessona's *Volere è potere*¹, which proposed the parable of the self-made man – and then grew substantially immediately after his death, thanks to publications by the late sculptors' friends and admirers, including the architect Augusto Guidini and the philosopher Romeo Manzoni². Written almost like a novel, Manzoni's "empathic" work is still the primary source used for brief biographies of Vincenzo Vela and his works³.

Today we have a dramatic and romantic picture of Vincenzo Vela's involvement in the Risorgimento: a patriot happy to put down his chisel and pick up a musket, an artist whose works depict the ideals of Italian redemption and liberation and a citizen pledged to serving his two lands: Switzerland and Italy.

Before we can look in detail at Vincenzo Vela's involvement in the crucial stages of the Italian Risorgimento, we should first understand how the Canton of Ticino and its inhabitants viewed the events that led up to the Unification of Italy. The best way to sum up their view of Italy, and that of Switzerland, is to quote the words of Giovanni Antonio Veladini, Councillor for the Canton of Ticino, during his address to the Swiss Assembly in 1848: "We are Italians... in our heart, affections, sympathies and soul; but, gentlemen, politically we are Swiss; Swiss and nothing else, because we are free"⁴. In other words, the Canton of Ticino and its inhabitants closely followed the events in Italy leading up to the 1848 revolutions for at least the following three reasons.

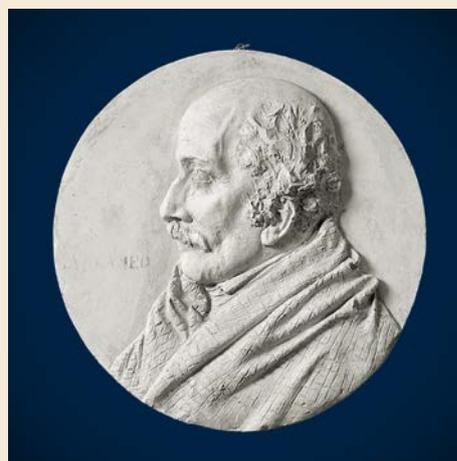
Firstly, because they shared the same culture and affections: many Ticino inhabitants worked in Italian cities, especially Milan, and the canton had close ties with Lombardy and Piedmont. The population was 100% Catholic and belonged to the dioceses of Como and Milan, and most of the wealthier families sent their sons to Italian universities.

The second reason was political, ideological: the liberal movements headed by Mazz-

ini and Cattaneo were based on political principles dear to Swiss and Ticino hearts, i.e. republicanism and federalism. Liberal thinkers in Switzerland could, therefore, understand the aspirations of Italians, who seemed almost intent on turning Italy into another Switzerland. However, no one in the Ticino region ever seriously considered becoming part of a national Italian state. Indeed, in 1798, the bailiwicks that would form the Canton of Ticino were against their inclusion in an Italian state, since they saw the Helvetic Republic as their only guarantee of political autonomy and importance. The history of Ticino is, first and foremost, the story of the construction and defence of a precise political area within the ambit of Swiss federalism.

The third reason was pragmatic and strategic: Austria was the common enemy. At the time, Lombardy was under Austria's despotic rule and this had knock-on effects for the Canton of Ticino too. Austria viewed Ticino with suspicion: after the liberal reform of 1830 and even more so after the Radicals' rise to power in 1839, it was seen as a republican and democratic "provocation", a cradle of conspiracy and a challenge to the Restoration resulting from the Congress of Vienna. Suspected of supporting the Italian patriots, the Canton of Ticino was, therefore, subjected to harassment and retaliation by its powerful neighbour, Austria, on which it depended for many of its own supplies.

Hence Italy's liberation from foreign domination was seen as necessary for the Confederation's own security. As Carlo Cattaneo said, "All our neighbours' freedom is a condition of our own"⁵. Then again, there

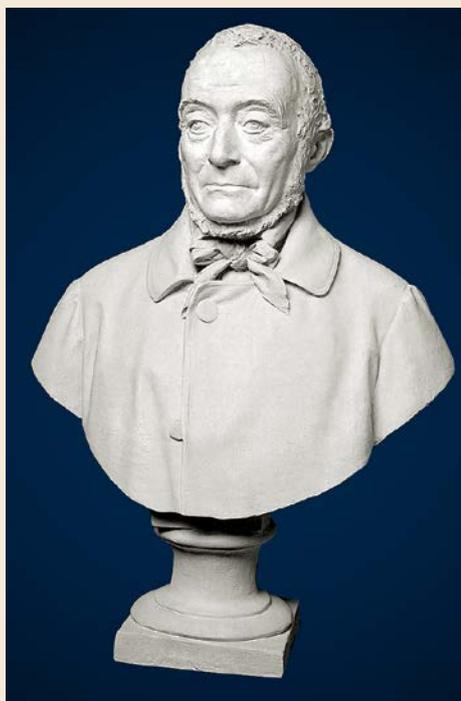


Vincenzo Vela,
Portrait of Carlo
Cattaneo, 1871,
plaster, medallion,
original model,
48.8 x 47.4 x 8 cm

Vincenzo Vela,
Bust of Giacomo
Ciani, 1869,
plaster, original
model, 80.8 x
57.2 x 33.4 cm

was widespread support throughout Switzerland for the Italians' struggle for liberty and national sovereignty, especially in light of the Swiss tradition for enlightened and liberal thought.

The anti-Austrian uprisings of 1848 saw a vast coalition of forces in Italy, including those of Pope Pius IX. It is no surprise,



therefore, that so many people from the Canton of Ticino became involved and even took up arms themselves. They put aside their own political divisions and were united in their support for the Italians' struggle to throw off foreign rule and to see a return to freedom and democracy. The First Italian War of Independence failed and Austria regained its dominion of Lombardy in the summer of 1848. It retaliated against Ticino and its inhabitants in various ways, including the expulsion in 1853 of about 5000 Ticino citizens then living in Lombardy. Austria also managed to sow discord between Ticino and the federal authorities, causing the rest of the Confederation to suspect Ticino of feeling more Italian than Swiss.

However, Ticino's enthusiasm and hopes for the Risorgimento disappeared after the Unification of Italy. A centralised state headed by the Savoy monarchy had nothing in common with the politics and culture of the Ticino region and Switzerland in general. The new nation's conflict with the Papal state, which resulted in the defeat of

Rome, ensured that the Catholics in Ticino no longer supported the new Italian state. People even stopped migrating to Italy for work, and the southern frontier became a customs barrier between two protectionist states.

The question of "*Italia irredenta*" (Irredentism) arose after the unification of Italy, i.e. the annexation of areas sharing the same Italian language and culture, but not yet part of the newly unified Italy. This mainly concerned the Trieste and the Trentino region, though some also felt that the Canton of Ticino was a political and geographical anomaly. Indeed, there were fears of annexation in 1862 after some outbursts by monarchic politicians, resulting in Ticino fiercely proclaiming its loyalty to the Confederation⁶.

As we have seen, 1848 saw the most support for the Italian Risorgimento, especially for the uprisings in Lombardy and the First Italian War of Independence. Events in Milan in March 1848 inspired great enthusiasm and hope in the Ticino people. As soon as they heard about the armed uprising in Milan on the 18th of March, people responded to the call by Giacomo Ciani and Carlo Battaglini and marched towards Lombardy. The first groups, Lombard men living in Ticino and led by some Italian refugees, such as the poet Diego Piacentini and the engineer Francesco Scalini, had already reached Como on the 19th and set off for Milan the next day. There were also two contingents of Ticino volunteers recruited mainly from members of the "Società dei Carabinieri", created after 1830 to practice shooting and to spread liberal and patriotic values. These were led by Ticino officers, such as Augusto Fogliardi, Natale Vicari and "General" Antonio Arcioni, Switzerland's very own Garibaldi, a man who had fought against the Carlists in Spain and was somewhat unwilling to accept the discipline and tactics of a regular army.

One of these troops, led by Fogliardi and Arcioni, had set out from Lugano and, after encountering the Croats at Villa dell'Olmo, finally reached Como on the evening of the 20th of March. The other troop, led by Natale Vicari, set off from Ponte Tresa and headed for Varese and then Milan. Volunteers from Lake Maggiore, including



C. Pirelli



COMO

Via S. Maria già 1^a Croce n. 255

many Ticino citizens, were led by Francesco Simonetta of Milan and joined up with Vicari's forces⁷. After Como, Arcioni and his men also turned towards Milan, reaching the city late on the 24th of March, two days after the Austrian retreat and the end of the Five Days of Milan, but in time to join the Piedmont troops raised by Carlo Alberto (who had declared war on Austria the day before, on the 23rd of March).

The volunteers from Lombardy and Ticino were sent to the Veneto and Trentino regions, entrusted with the task of cutting the Austrian lines of communication. Arcioni returned to Switzerland at the end of April, partly owing to his unwillingness to be part of the Piedmont army. After fighting alongside the Piedmont troops under General Bes, the Vicari/Simonetta volunteers were also stood down in April and most of the Ticino men went home, though some continued fighting under Captain Augusto Fogliardi of Melano until the retreat before the Austrian counter-offensive in July 1848⁸.

There is some discrepancy concerning the actual number of Ticino men who fought in the Lombard war in 1848. Some even make exaggerated claims of several thousand men. The Austrian generals were the first to inflate the number of Swiss fighters (in a war bulletin they claimed there were 4,000 volunteers), in an obvious attempt to justify their initial defeat by an irregular military force. More reliable contemporary sources give their number as several hundred: about 500 or even 700 if one counts also the Ticino-born men residing in Lombardy at the time⁹. The troop of men that reached Como under Arcioni and Fogliardi numbered about 250 men, including several Lombard refugees or Lombards living and working in the Ticino area¹⁰. We only know the names of the men in the Simonetta-Vicari troops: 221 men, including the officers, half of whom came from Ticino¹¹.

So what part did Vela play in the military campaigns of 1848?¹² The reasons given above explain why so many people in the Ticino region supported the Risorgimento and these are also true for Vincenzo Vela. As a young artist working in Milan, he must have felt a bond of brotherhood and solidarity with the Lombards. His own rad-

ical political views must have made it quite natural for him to support those actively fighting for their freedom: a member of the "Società dei Carabinieri", the sculptor often took part in the shooting matches. Moreover, he could not have been unaware of Austria's influence on matters at home in the Ticino area and Switzerland as a whole. In an autobiographical piece written in the third person he himself mentioned his voluntary participation in the Sonderbund War against the Cantons (November 1847) and then in the Lombard uprisings in 1848. Naturally, his political activities affected his work. He had been working on *Spartaco* at the time: "The artist would have sculpted it in marble immediately, had the Sonderbund War not broken out that year, reminding him that he was Swiss and owed certain duties to his fatherland. As a result, he wrapped the plaster model of *Spartaco*, sent it to Milan, exchanged his chisel for an arquebus firearm and joined the volunteers in the Lugano Bersaglieri corps. Nor did he put down his arms afterwards, as he fought as a volunteer in the Lombard War of 1848. The war having ended, Vincenzo Vela returned to his sculpture and his very first priority was to sculpt *Spartaco* in marble"¹³. Vela was one of the volunteers from Ticino and Lombardy who marched on Como. His presence was recorded by Innocenzo Regazzoni of Como: like the other survivors of the uprising in Como in 1848, Vela and Regazzoni were awarded a commemorative medal in 1889 during the inauguration of the monument to Garibaldi¹⁴. According to Regazzoni, it was precisely because Vela had taken part in the fighting that "when, many years later, the position of the monument to Garibaldi, another of his many fine works, had to be decided, he [Vela] was unmoveable in his decision to have it erected in the flat area that had been the scene of that great and yet unfathomable event, which he also intended to reproduce in the bas-relief at the base supporting the statue of the hero"¹⁵. In his depiction of the *Resa della caserma di S. Francesco* ("Surrender of the San Francesco Barracks"), on the base of the Garibaldi monument, there actually is a self-portrait of Vela among the fighters, even though this does not in itself prove that he was actually there in 1848, as the

Carlo Pozzi,
Inauguration of
the Monument to
Giuseppe Garibaldi
by Vincenzo Vela,
1889,
albumen on paper



sculptor had also included a self-portrait in his *Vittime del lavoro* (“Victims of Labour”), this time as a dead miner.

While it seems quite certain that Vela fought in Como, the same cannot be said of his fighting in Milan during the Five Days of Milan in 1848. Indeed, it has even been claimed that he was involved in the taking of the Duomo and the crucial battles of Porta Nuova. This is pure invention and easily disproved by historical data on the movements of the volunteer troops. Again, another anecdote, this time related by Guidini and Manzoni, is quite false, i.e. that Vela had sculpted some plaster models of Pope Pius IX during the ceasefires and that these had been placed on the barricades¹⁶.

Vela must have joined the Simonetta-Vicari troops, as his name appears in the list of men: he belonged to the first company of 54 men, almost all from Ticino and commanded by Giovanni Battista Ramelli from Barbengo. In 1865, when writing about the men he had led, Natale Vicari mentioned the sculptor, stating that he must have been an “acting second lieutenant”¹⁷. Vela himself, in a letter dated 1870, said that he had fought under Vicari, Simonetta and Ramelli.

Lieutenant Francesco Carloni (or Calloni) also fought in the company commanded by Ramelli. He was wounded on the 24th of July 1848 in the Battle of Sommacampagna-Custoza and died four days later, on the 28th, in Bozzolo, where he had been taken with the other injured men¹⁸. Carloni

must, therefore, have been one of Fogliardi’s men who had continued to fight with the Lombard and Piedmont troops after the Arcioni and Vicari troops had gone home. This means that Vincenzo Vela might have done the same if, as it would appear, he had been next to Carloni when the latter was wounded. However, it is obviously an invention that, as claimed by some of the early Vela biographies, Carloni died in the sculptor’s arms: while Carloni was being taken to Bozzolo, his company was marching on Cremona¹⁹.

Having laid down his arms and picked up his chisel, Vela continued to express his political and moral views through his work. He started with one of the works that best embodies his ideals, *Spartaco*²⁰. Vela had been banished from Lombardy in 1852 after refusing, on ideological grounds, to accept the nomination as honorary member of the Brera Academy offered by the Austrian government. He therefore moved to Turin in 1853 and became professor of sculpture at the Albertina Academy in 1856. There he continued to serve the Risorgimento cause by creating several monuments embodying his “manifesto”, such as the *Alfiere* (“Ensign”), the monument to Cavour in Genoa, *L’Italia dei Martiri* (“The Italy of Martyrs”), *L’Italia riconoscente alla Francia* (“Italy Recognises France’s Assistance”) and others. Vela also continued to serve the Swiss cause through his art, in his portraits of General Dufour and Stefano Franscini and in his

Vincenzo Vela,
*Surrender of the
Barracks of San
Francesco*, 1888,
plaster, relief, original
model, 71.4 x
140.8 x 12 cm

monuments to *Guglielmo Tell* ("William Tell") and Carloni. Other Swiss and Italian monuments were not so successful, being abandoned at the sketch or project stage: the monument to Cavour in Turin and that to Manin in Venice, his *Elvezia* ("in the act of stamping down on all that represents despotism and discrimination", intended for the federal palace in Bern) and the monument to celebrate Geneva's joining the Swiss Federation²¹.

It would appear that Vela began to feel less at ease in Turin after 1860: he, a radical, liberal republican at heart, had virtually become the favoured artist of an aristocratic society and monarchical state that were very different from the ideals of 1848. His disappointment with the outcome of the Risorgimento must, therefore, have

influenced his decision to leave Turin in 1867²². It would appear that he had already been planning his return to Ticino: in 1862 he decided to have a villa built in Ligornetto, to act as his home, laboratory and museum. He strengthened his ties with Ticino: he had been invited to accept the position of the Ticino Councillor for public education, a particularly important commission that assisted the Council of States in school policies. Then, in February 1867, he was elected to represent Stabio in the Grand Council, but Vela decided against this, though he did hold a seat during one parliamentary session ten years later (1877-1881). Vela remained true to his radical political beliefs: just a few months before he died he was called as a witness in the enquiry into the uprising in Bellinzona on the 11th of September 1890.



Vincenzo Vela,
*Italy grateful to
France*, 1861-1862,
plaster, original
model (larger in
comparison to
the marble version)
199 x 145.3 x
106 cm

He also strove, in vain, for the creation of a Federal Academy of Fine Arts in the Ticino region.

His constant efforts for the Swiss and Risorgimento causes, as both artist and citizen, clearly show how Vela felt he belonged to two countries²³. A dual nationality, as it were, that he himself stressed in a letter dated 1870 in response to the controversy raging in Italy about the appropriateness of asking a Swiss artist to create the monument to the Venetian hero Daniele Manin. Vela was both a Swiss and an Italian patriot on account of convictions that went well beyond mere national concerns: "My political principles are global and I will always stand up for any people struggling to gain its independence from foreign dominion and trying to advance along the path of liberty and progress"²⁴.

Rather than the citizen and artist of two countries or nations, Vincenzo Vela would thus appear to be a man of universal values, always with an eye on those social issues upon whose outcome he felt the advance of civilisation depended. This belief is summed up in his *Le vittime del lavoro* ("Victims of Labour"), the monument dedicated to the miners who died while building the Gotthard railway tunnel. Vela had actually designed and created this work on his own, without any commission, in the hope that he could "see my philosophy immortalised in bronze, which, I believe, is that of human suffering"²⁵. Like many radicals in the 19th century, Vincenzo Vela eventually became convinced that the only way to achieve his political ideals was to switch from supporting the struggle for the independence and liberty of a nation to striving for the emancipation of the working classes.

* **Marco Marcacci**

Graduated in literature at the University of Geneva, historian and independent researcher. He is a member of the editorial staff of the review "Archivio Storico Ticinese".

Endnotes

¹ MICHELE LESSONA, *Volere è potere*, Barbera, Florence 1869.

² AUGUSTO GUIDINI, *Vincenzo Vela*, Tipografia Ostinelli, Como 1893; ROMEO MANZONI, *Vincenzo Vela. L'Homme - Le Patriote - L'Artiste*, Hoepli, Milan 1906.

³ cf. Raffaello Ceschi's comments at the bottom of the reprint of Romeo Manzoni's book (Unione di Banche Svizzere, Lugano 1995).

⁴ *Atti del Gran Consiglio*, extraordinary session of January 1848, p. 144.

⁵ CARLO CATTANEO, *Cenni e reminiscenze*, edited by Alberto and Jessie Mario, Sommaruga, Rome 1884, p. 175.

⁶ See, for instance, the event caused by the "annexionist" declarations of the politician Nino Bixio, analysed by FABIO CHIERICHETTI, *Un momento di tensione nelle relazioni tra il Ticino e il Regno d'Italia: la calda estate del 1862*, "Bollettino storico della Svizzera italiana", 2011, pp. 261-292.

⁷ cf. GIUSEPPE MARTINOLA, *Testimonianze del volontarismo ticinese in Italia nel 1848*, "Rivista storica ticinese", 1939, pp. 147-150, which publishes a report by Vicari dated 1865 and the inedited *Ricordi* (Memoirs) of Leone De Stoppani.

⁸ GIUSEPPE MARTINOLA, *Il generale Antonio Arcioni*, "Bollettino storico della Svizzera italiana", 1947, pp. 1-38 (p. 20).

⁹ These estimates are based on the reliable contemporary sources mentioned by ERNST WEINMANN, *Das Anteil des Tessins am italienischen Risorgimento und die schweizerische Neutralität 1848*, "Zeitschrift für schweizerische Geschichte", 12 (1932), pp. 409-467.

¹⁰ In addition to Weinmann's essay mentioned here, see also: AUGUSTO LORINI, *L'Austria e il Cantone Ticino dal 1848 al 1855*, Grafica Bellinzona, Bellinzona 1947, pp. 17-21; ELIGIO POMETTA, *Il Cantone Ticino e l'Austria negli anni 1848-49*, Tipografia Luganese, Lugano 1928, p. 359, which believes the Arcioni troops numbered 1200 men from Ticino and Como, while the Vicari troops numbered 250 men.

¹¹ The list of names of those in the Vicari/Simonetta troops is published in GIULIO ROSSI, ELIGIO POMETTA, *Storia del Cantone Ticino*, II edition, with a preface by Giuseppe Martinola, Dadò, Locarno 1980, pp. 397-401.

¹² For a documented biography of Vela and his works, see NANCY J. SCOTT, *Vincenzo Vela 1820-1891*, Garland, New York & London 1979 and GIORGIO ZANCHETTI, *Vincenzo Vela scultore 1820-1891*, thesis, Milan, February 1998 (typewritten).

¹³ *Cenni biografici su Vincenzo Vela*, manuscript dated 1864, mentioned in GIORGIO ZANCHETTI, *L'eroe in controforma. "Il Monumento a Giuseppe Garibaldi e alle Giornate Comasche del marzo 1848" di Vincenzo Vela*, in *Vincenzo Vela. Il Monumento a Giuseppe Garibaldi*, Museo Vincenzo Vela, Ligornetto 2009, p. 9, note 5.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 12-13.

¹⁵ INNOCENZO REGAZZONI, *Vincenzo Vela. Reminiscenze postume*, Tipografia Ostinelli, Como 1892, pp. 10-11. See also G. ZANCHETTI, *Vincenzo Vela scultore*, cit., ff. 124-125.

¹⁶ A. GUIDINI, *Vincenzo Vela*, cit., p. 49; cf. also R. MANZONI, *Vincenzo Vela*, cit., pp. 77 et seq.

¹⁷ "Rivista storica ticinese", cit., p. 150.

¹⁸ "Il Repubblicano della Svizzera italiana", 27th and 31st July, 2nd August, 1848.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*. It is well known that in 1857 Vela dedicated a monument in S. Pietro Pambio, near Lugano, to Carloni and that the circumstances surrounding this ought to be investigated, starting with the name of the fallen ensign: contemporary sources say Carloni, while he was referred to as Calloni during the inauguration of the monument. See: N. SCOTT, *Vincenzo Vela*, cit., pp. 274-275; G. ZANCHETTI, *Vincenzo Vela scultore*, cit., p. 129; CARLO AGLIATI, LUCIA PEDRINI STANGA, *Il Ticino e il 1848. Politica e immagine della politica*, in *1848 il crocevia svizzero. Il potere delle immagini*, edited by Philippe Kaenel, Dadò, Locarno 1998, pp. 97-119.

²⁰ *Spartaco. La scultura in rivolta*, edited by Gianna Mina Zeni, Federal Office for Culture – Vincenzo Vela Museum, Ligornetto 2005.

²¹ *Monumento pubblico e allegoria politica nella seconda metà dell'Ottocento e in Vincenzo Vela*, edited by Gianna Mina Zeni, Federal Office for Culture, Bern 1998.

²² G. ZANCHETTI, *Vincenzo Vela scultore*, cit., pp. 170-171.

²³ DARIO GAMBONI, *Le due patrie di Vincenzo Vela*, in *Arte in Ticino 1803-2003. La ricerca di un'appartenenza*, edited by Rudy Chiappini, Salvioni-Museo di belle arti, Bellinzona-Lugano 2001, pp. 363-379.

²⁴ Vela to Carlo Pisani, Ligornetto, 17th May 1870. The author thanks the Vincenzo Vela Museum and Professor Giorgio Zanchetti, curator of the Vela papers, soon to be published, for allowing him to use the transcription of this letter.

²⁵ N. SCOTT, *Vincenzo Vela*, cit., p. 447, note 110.

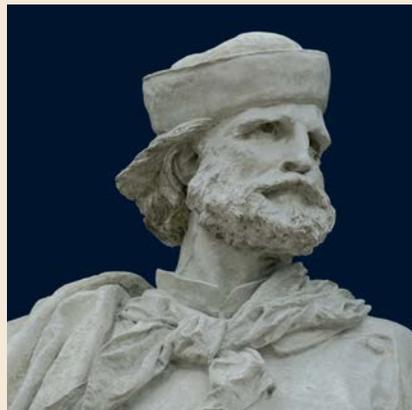


LUGLIO

Allegoria patriottica di ERNESTO FONTANA.

Vincenzo Vela, the Mazzinian

by Giuliana Limiti*



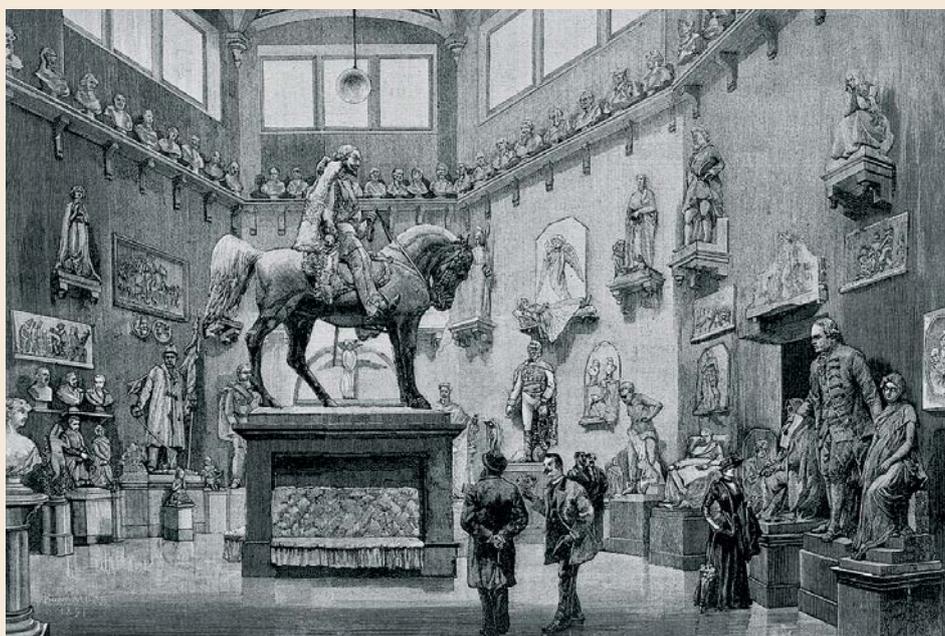
To the left:
Ernesto Fontana,
Garibaldi and Mazzini,
lithography

On this page:
Vincenzo Vela,
Monument to Giuseppe Garibaldi
(head), 1888-1889,
plaster, original model,
182 x 378 x 148 cm

The town of Ligornetto, where Vincenzo Vela was born on the 3rd of May 1820, has a museum donated by Vela himself to the Swiss Confederation. It contains all his belongings at the time of his death (his works, paintings, library, garden and studio). Vela's son, Spartaco, later added the villa to the original donation, thus creating a national monument, a sort of Swiss "Pantheon". An immensely important gift that, as Vela wrote in his last will and testament, should "be open to all and used as a museum and an educational establishment for the people".

quickly recognised his artistic talent: Sabatelli said "Vela will sail ahead" (a play on the word "vela", meaning "sail" in Italian), while Benedetto Cacciatori said "he doesn't just try to satisfy the Academy's requirements, he looks for the ideal of beauty".

Vincenzo Vela took part in the competition run by the Academy of Fine Arts in Venice (the prize was 60 gold coins), winning it with his sculpture *Gesù che risuscita la figlia di Jairo* ("Christ Resuscitates the Daughter of Jarius"). His reputation as a sculptor grew and commissions started to pour in. The city of Lugano asked him for a sculpture of



At a very young age, Vincenzo (affectionately known as Velino) left Ligornetto to earn a living as a stone cutter in the quarries of the nearby village of Besazio. He was himself an early "victim of labour": he hurt his hand with a mallet. The year after he was no longer extracting the stone, but shaping it. His creative talent was obvious to all and so people started calling Velino the "artist". His dream was to move to Milan and stay with his elder brother Lorenzo, an established decorative artist. Lorenzo taught him all he knew about decorative drawing, was a second father to the boy, got him apprenticed and helped him in his work. Thanks to Lorenzo, Vincenzo was soon working on the pinnacles of the Duomo di Como and became an apprentice in Viggiù. His brother also enrolled Vincenzo at the Brera Art School, having recognised his talent as a sculptor "and even more". His masters

Bishop Luvini. While working on this, Vela revolutionised his style by abandoning the academic canons and set ideas for all his subjects and highlighting instead the essential dominant qualities of his subjects, portraying with great precision their personality, their individuality: in other words, the true character of his subject. In a certain sense he wanted to express character through sculpture, to interpret the intimate nature of his subject. Vela did to sculpture what Alessandro Manzoni had done to literature: he went beyond Romanticism and embraced Naturalism, i.e. he placed nature before convention and allowed the senses to prevail over formulae and preconceived ideas. Vela triumphed over Canova just as Manzoni had triumphed over Vincenzo Monti. By now he enjoyed a solid reputation as an artist and was widely known. His artistic development had opened up new hori-

zons of creative freedom, based on action. Although Vela adored his homeland, Switzerland, he also shared the idea of independence that Mazzini's "Young Italy" and "Young Europe" had inspired in the hearts of many Italians, compatriots of Dante and Machiavelli. While Metternich saw Italy as merely a "geographical expression" and Lamartine called it the "land of the dead", Vela was actively involved in the struggles and fights for the Risorgimento (literally, the "resurgence") of Italy.

Vincenzo Vela and his brother Lorenzo had many friends who were close to Italian exiles, especially in the Canton of Ticino, where the presence of people such as Giuseppe Mazzini and Carlo Cattaneo had given rise to ideas of liberty, independence, unity, republicanism and a noble disinterested cause to fight for. The Ciani brothers, Giacomo and Filippo, had first met Mazzini and Sismondi in Geneva in 1831. They soon became close friends, turning the Ciani villa into a regular meeting place where the exiles could plan Italy's future. These two bankers had already taken part in the Carbonari plots of 1821 in Lombardy and the failed uprising in Savoy before they were forced to flee Italy in order to avoid persecution by the Austrians and imprisonment in Venice or Spielberg. Sismondi suggested they settle in Lugano, their home becoming an important centre for exiles (even Mazzini on occasion) to discuss the Italian situation and plan new action. In order to avoid compromising their guests, the Ciani brothers burnt all the letters they received immediately after reading them¹. They even financed a printing house, which, like many others in Capolago and the Canton of Ticino, supported the exiles' activities.

In 1847 Vincenzo Vela visited Rome. There he discovered the magnificence of his compatriots' works which helped make the Eternal City so beautiful and unique: Maderno, Borromini and, most especially, Domenico Fontana. The latter was responsible for shaping Piazza San Pietro and directing the construction of the Vatican; he built, among other things, the Quirinal palace and erected the Egyptian obelisk in Piazza San Pietro, the pedestal of which has a reference to the town of Melide: *Domenico Fontana, ex pago Mili transtulit et erexit* ("Do-

menico Fontana, from the town of Melide, moved and erected this"). Needless to say, Vela also visited the Forum and the Colosseum, which inspired him to sculpt the rebel slave Spartacus. The idea of a sculpture representing liberty was so important to Vela that he called his own son Spartaco. He saw the rebel as a symbol of his own liberal and republican thinking.

While in Rome, Vela also spent time with the artists at the San Luca Academy. Later he would tell how he was struck by three particular aspects of Rome: the women from Trastevere, "true living sculptures", Michelangelo's *Moses* and the statues of the horse-tamers at the Quirinal. Vela also took part in protests against Pope Pius IX, the so-called liberator, who had initially appeared open to the idea of reform and ready to bless Italy. The people were led by Ciceruacchio, one of Mazzini's followers and very popular with the inhabitants of Trastevere who "were burning with the desire to be free."

Upon returning to Milan, Vela continued to develop his idea of a Spartacus statue. He discussed this with his brother Lorenzo, who showed Vela some of Giuseppe Mazzini's writings, those concerning Guerrazzi's novel, *L'assedio di Firenze* ("The Siege of Florence"), which he believed was "a true battle". In this way Lorenzo urged his younger brother Vincenzo to listen to his genius and start work on the *Spartaco*, telling him that "your Spartacus will be more than a battle, it will be a victory."

Another battle awaited him in Switzerland – the Sonderbund War – where Vela fought as a simple private under Colonel Luvini, marching towards the Gotthard.

Then, in 1848, the exiles meeting in Villa Ciani received an urgent request for help in the uprising that was to become known as the Five Days of Milan. Vincenzo Vela picked up his musket and joined his Swiss friends, including Antonio Arcioni, Dr. Calvini, Leone de Stoppani and Giacomo Ciani (by then some 72 years old)².

After the fighting in Milan and Switzerland, Vincenzo would have preferred to return to Ligornetto for good, but his brother Lorenzo convinced him to go back to Milan, the city that had cultivated his artistic vocation. Lorenzo urged him to continue to preach

Vincenzo Vela,
*Monument to Camillo
 Benso Conte di
 Cavour*,
 1861-1863,
 plaster, original
 model, 183 x
 166.3 x 104.5 cm

what he had fought for through his art. Vincenzo agreed, believing that everyone felt the appeal of heroism, something he could translate into epic marble statuary.

Vincenzo completed his model for *Spartaco* and invited his friends the Duke of Litta and the great painter Hayez, much admired by Mazzini, to view it. Hayez was bowled over and cried out in admiration: "There's something of Michelangelo in this!". The Duke of Litta shook Vela's hand and told him that the sculpture was not just a masterpiece by a great artist, but the expression of the defeated soul of a people conquered, but not for that tamed or broken. Hayez and Vela were both very moved: Vela had managed to interiorise the sense of the oath sworn by the members of Mazzini's Giovine Italia and Giovine Svizzera movements. In other words, a vision of the world and life for the people and by the people.

His monument *Alle vittime del Gottardo* ("Victims of Labour") again expresses Vela's desire for social justice, as well as making some political, moral and educational points. In his own words, "Now, as we waste so many millions on building monuments to kings, as we erect so many structures to the memory of the powerful and the rich, whose merits lie in their safe, I feel the urgent need to remind generous souls of the humble martyrs, their brothers who work for all but not themselves. I produced this work not as a commission or because someone gave me the idea. I showed it in Zurich, I must confess, hoping that some one would erect it at the entrance to the Gotthard Tunnel. I did this not for any personal profit, but because I would be so happy to see this image immortalised in bronze: an image that should sadden and make all those capable of any feeling blush with shame at the sight of humanity suffering without any attempt to rebel against the injustice of it all."

On the 1st of May 2008 the President of the Italian Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, recognised Vela's artistic and social sensitivity when he inaugurated an exhibition of Vela's work in Rome, in front of the head offices of INAIL (Italian Workers' Compensation Authority). Many men died while constructing the Gotthard railway, a public work of great interest to many leading Swiss and Italian figures of the time: Mazzini, Cattaneo and



Cavour. Vela saw not just the social and political aspects, but also the conditions of the workers, especially the Italians who lost their lives while working on the tunnel. For Mazzini and his followers, labourers and their social compensation were priorities: they represented the "God and People", the "Thought and Action" that had characterised the gloriously brief period of the Roman Republic of 1849 led by Giuseppe Mazzini and defended by many of the young men Vela had first met while fighting in Milan.

Three young heroes who had fought in Milan in 1848 died while defending the Roman Republic against the French troops acting on behalf of the Papacy in 1849: Emilio Morosini, Enrico Dandolo and Luciano Manara. Their bodies were returned to land owned by the Morosini family from Lugano in Ticino and laid to rest in a small temple in Vezia, at the side of the cantonal road leading to Bellinzona. Vela and Cattaneo spoke about these events and Cattaneo expressed his admiration for Vela's statue of William Tell, appreciating how Vela had managed to combine the simple truth of the form with an irresistible power of feeling.

Vela's statue entitled *La libertà in lutto* ("Freedom in Mourning") represents his grief at the death of the Ciani brothers, two important Mazzinians. His sculpture

entitled *Agostino Bertani al letto di morte di Carlo Cattaneo* (“Agostino Bertani attending Carlo Cattaneo on his Deathbed”) commemorates these two men, while his *Bonaparte morente* (“The Dying Napoleon Bonaparte”) was inspired by Alessandro Manzoni’s poem *Cinque maggio* (“The 5th of May”), lamenting the defeat of Europe.

Vela’s correspondence contains proof of his friendship with Giulio Monteverde, a highly respected Ligurian sculptor and author of the magnificent *Monument to Giuseppe Mazzini* erected in a large central square in Buenos Aires (Argentina). The statue had been paid for by public subscription among

the Italian migrant workers and was the first monument to Mazzini in the world, being erected in 1876, just four years after his death. Another important work by Monteverde is his *Tessitore* (“Weaver”) monument of 1879, demonstrating how Monteverde was a realist sculptor who preferred to represent what he actually saw, including the humblest of subjects. He felt it was his duty to show respect for labour and recognise the dignity of sacrifice.

One of Vela’s dreams was the setting-up of an academy of fine arts in Ticino.

To this end he presented some motions to the Federal Assembly for school reform, though



Vincenzo Vela,
*Liberty, Funerary
Monument to
Giacomo e Filippo
Ciani*, 1869-1872,
plaster, original
model, 202.5 x
108 x 187 cm

Vincenzo Vela,
 Agostino Bertani
 attending Carlo
 Cattaneo on His
 Deathbed, 1887,
 plaster, relief,
 original model,
 85.5 x 72 x 9.3 cm

these were not accepted. The Catholics saw him as one of the leaders of the liberals and countered him at every turn (they even preferred to elect a tailor in Ligorretto instead of Vela). They also doubted his artistic abilities, calling him a “*faiseur de statues*” (a mere maker of statues). In his defence, Vela stated that before becoming an artist he had been and had always wanted to be a good citizen.

In 1852 Vela was accused of being a Mazzinian when he refused to accept the office of professor of sculpture at the Brera Academy. He was banished from Lombardy-Venetia and so moved to Turin, where the Albertina Academy of Fine Arts appointed him as their own professor of sculpture. Vela held this post until 1867. While in Turin he had the opportunity to meet Count Camillo Benso di Cavour and made a bust of the statesman just four years before his death. This bust has such an intense expression that it seems to be a visual memory of Vela and the Count’s meeting. It is now kept in the Chamber of Deputies in Rome (Montecitorio), at the entrance to the largest hall, the Salone della Lupa; in other words Cavour, who died in 1861, is still present in Rome, the capital city of Italy, just as he had so fervently hoped, and has been since 1870. Vela’s *Alfiere* (“The Ensign”) stands in front of Palazzo Madama in Turin (the former seat of the Senate). With an unsheathed sword and the Italian *tricolore*, this statue represents Vela’s political ideals: it stands for a republican, united and free Italy.



On his arrival in Turin, Vela sensed an air of change: many former Mazzinians had switched their allegiance to Cavour. There he met one of the Milanese nobles he had known during the Five Days of Milan in 1848: Emilio Visconti Venosta, who would later become Foreign Minister after the unification of Italy under the Savoy monarchy. Vela helped by smuggling arms from Switzerland to Piedmont³ and, although it cost him a lot in terms of conscience, he became the official sculptor for the Court of Savoy. Many of Mazzini’s disciples from the south of Italy also converted to Cavour’s vision of unity and independence under the monarchy.

Vela, professor of sculpture in Turin, was however not swayed in his educational mission. He would address his young students thus: “The blocks of pedantry are broken; a new life has opened up for art. Go forwards bravely!... free yourselves forever of the pedants who call themselves stylists, but are nothing more than mannerists. The first to break free were Bartolini in Tuscany, followed by Marocchetti in Piedmont. Follow their example and future centuries will do you justice. All paths that originate in truth are good; those that originate in theory and rules may prove to be false”⁴.

Even Mazzini was convinced that the value of art played an important role in a nation’s sense of identity and independence, in that it had the power to revive society and educate the public conscience. In 1841, while in exile in London, he wrote his famous piece for the “London and Westminster Review”, a long essay on modern painting in Italy. Mazzini recognised that Romanticism had given expression to the ideals of the century, but he felt that one needed to go further. He foresaw the revolutionary method adopted by Vela: “because every great artist is a historical figure or prophet... He is a being of love; and what is love if not the power to feel the life of others, to make it one’s own?”. The Macchiaioli painters, with their new eyes and feelings, would interpret this dimension, for instance in Silvestro Lega’s *Mazzini morente* (“The Dying Mazzini”). This shows Mazzini in Pisa on the 10th of March 1872, wrapped in Carlo Cattaneo’s check blanket. Mazzini died in Pisa, an exile, going by the false name of George

Brown, already condemned to death by the Court Martial of Alessandria. He had however been given honorary Swiss nationality by the Canton of Solothurn on account of his having made a collection of folk songs during his stay in Grenchen. This work unites Lega with Vela, in terms of their respect for Mazzini and Cattaneo and the influence that the two artists had by sharing the ideals of the Italian Risorgimento.

Mazzini lived in Switzerland for about ten years. In July 1834, while in Lausanne, he said that “I have had the concept of *Giovine Europa* for a long time, ever since I set down the foundations for *Giovine Italia*... *Giovine Europa* is much more than a sect for me: it is a coming-together, an association of intellect and applies to all branches of social activity, requiring detailed study, concentrated on language, race and historical origins, in order to find therein the mission that this new age assigns to different people and to deduce how Europe should be organised in the future, which will most certainly not be in the current manner based on kings – we need a college of minds, without having to worry about the material aspects of conspiracy, to oversee the general direction of the European movement”⁵. Mazzini worked hard on organising the *Giovine Svizzera* movement.

Vela was struck by the moral impact of the *Giovine Italia* and *Giovine Europa* oaths. His own *Spartaco* makes one think of what Mazzini wrote when some of his critics claimed he was an advocate of the ‘Theory of the Dagger’: “Holy in the hand of Judith is the sword that took the life of Holofernes; holy is the dagger that Harmodius hid in myrtle wreathes; holy is the dagger of Brutus; holy is the stiletto of the Sicilian at Vespers; holy is the arrow of William Tell”⁶. Again, “when all justice is dead and a tyrant denies and cancels with terror the conscience of a nation that God wants free, a man, free of hate and every base passion and for the sole religion of the Fatherland and the eternal right incarnate in him, will rise against the tyrant and will cry:... I will overturn that building and extinguish you”. The *Patto della Giovine Europa a Berna* was signed on the 15th of April 1834, but events outstripped the undertakings that the Italians, Poles, French, Germans and Swiss

believed they had made. One of the signatories for Italy, in addition to Mazzini, was Giacomo Ciani, the Mazzinian of Villa Ciani in Lugano.

Having no masters or kings, Mazzini saw Switzerland as the perfect model of republicanism. He wanted it to be adopted throughout Europe; he dreamt of an extended Switzerland, from Savoy to the Tyrol, a *Repubblica delle Alpi* capable of resolving the tensions between the north and the south of Europe. However, even federal and cantonal authorities were driven by local interests and a lack of national spirit and were subject to foreign pressure. Like a plague of hail, of locusts or flies on a corpse, Austria, France, Piedmont, Naples and even Russia tried to pressure Switzerland into expelling the exiles it was protecting, and especially Mazzini. In March 1836 Mazzini was even arrested and forced to leave Switzerland in January 1837 and flee to London. Despite this, he still secretly returned to Switzerland several times and protested strongly against the federal government’s restrictive rules that went against the people’s feelings and Switzerland’s traditions of liberty and the right of refuge. That is why Mazzini said: “I love Switzerland as a second fatherland.”

When Vincenzo Vela, then an old man, decided to resign from the Permanent Commission for Fine Arts, the Italian government tried in vain to get him to retract his resignation “in the name of the love that you have always shown our country”. Vela insisted on resigning, but he did explain that “it is not for a lack of affection for this Italy, which has been like a second fatherland to me”.

This, the same phrase used by both Mazzini and Vela, is evidence that the Risorgimento managed to instil a true and indelible sense of brotherhood between Italy and Switzerland.

* **Giuliana Limiti**

Honorary superintendent of the Historical Archive of the Camera dei Deputati (house of the Italian Parliament); Emeritus Professor of Comparative Education at the University of Rome.

Endnotes

- ¹ Cf. ROMEO MANZONI, *Vincenzo Vela: l'homme – le patriote – l'artiste*, Ulrico Hoepli, Milan 1906.
- ² See the essay by Marco Marcacci.
- ³ Cf. STEFANIA SUMMERMATTER, *Vincenzo Vela, il patriota e l'artista*. In: *Tracce svizzere in Italia*. Swissinfo.ch, 2012.
- ⁴ BARBIERA RAFFAELLO, *Lo Statuario della libertà: Vincenzo Vela (visitando la casa a Ligornetto)*, in *Ideali e caratteri dell'800*, Treves, Milan 1926, p. 142.
- ⁵ In UMBERTO ZANOTTI BIANCO, *Mazzini, pagine tratte dall'Epistolario. Nuova edizione a cura di Mario di Napoli e Marco Debenedetti*, Piero Lacaita editore, Manduria 2012, p. 65.
- ⁶ In UMBERTO ZANOTTI BIANCO, *Mazzini*, p. 354.

Bibliography

- GIUSEPPE MAZZINI, *La peinture moderne en Italie* in “London and Westminster Review”, 1841.
- GIOVANNI VISCONTI VENOSTA, *Ricordi di gioventù. Cose vedute e sapute (1847-1860)*, Rizzoli, Fondazione gruppo credito Valtellinese, special edition, not for sale, Milan 2011.
- ROMEO MANZONI, *Vincenzo Vela: l'homme – le patriote – l'artiste*, Hoepli, Milan 1906.
- M. CALDERINI, *Vincenzo Vela*, Turin 1920.
- RAFFAELLO BARBIERA, *Lo statuario della libertà: Vincenzo Vela (visitando la casa a Ligornetto)*, in *Ideali e caratteri dell'800*, Treves, Milan 1926.
- N.J. SCOTT, *Vincenzo Vela*, New York 1979.
- G. CASANOVA, *Momenti di Vincenzo Vela*, Lugano 1980.
- EMILIA MORELLI, *Emilio Visconti Venosta tra Mazzini e Cavour*, “Quaderni de Il Risorgimento”, Milan 1986.
- A. PANZETTA, *Dizionario degli scultori italiani dell'Ottocento*, Ed. V. Allemandi, Turin 1989.
- Romantici e macchiaioli. Giuseppe Mazzini e la grande pittura europea*, Genoa, Palazzo Ducale, Appartamento del Doge, 21st October 2005-12th February 2006.
- “Arte e Storia”, *Svizzeri a Torino*, monograph, Torino Management, Turin 2011.
- STEFANIA SUMMERMATTER, *Vincenzo Vela, il patriota e l'artista*, in *Tracce svizzere in Italia*, Swissinfo.ch, 2012.
- UMBERTO ZANOTTI BIANCO, *Mazzini, pagine tratte dall'epistolario*, new edition by Mario di Napoli and Marco Debenedetti, Piero Lacaita editore, Manduria 2012. Collezione di Studi Meridionali, founded in 1925 by Umberto Zanotti Bianco.
- Fondo Vela, Federal Archive in Bern.
- Vincenzo Vela Museum in Ligornetto: correspondence.

*Speech by the President of the Italian Republic,
Giorgio Napolitano, during the inauguration of the monument
dedicated to the victims of labour*



President Giorgio Napolitano, as he unveils the monument to the "Victims of Labour" at the central offices of INAIL (Italian Workers' Compensation Authority) in Rome

"With this monument we honour those who died for their work, those who risk death in order to survive, to provide the basics for their families, to contribute with their labour to everyone's welfare.

Vincenzo Vela was a sculptor from the Canton of Ticino who spent many years in Italy. He was also a patriot who fought for Italian national independence. As we approach the 150th anniversary of the Unification of Italy, it is only right that we remember and acknowledge those who did so much, each in their own way, to ensure that that historical goal could be reached.

Vela was also an artist who promoted the rights and dignity of labour. In his mind's eye he saw a Europe that could respect and appreciate the honest labour of poor folk and protect their health and life.

This monument depicts the terrible working conditions of those who built the Gotthard railway tunnel, conditions that led to the death of many of those workers, most of whom Italian, whether on account of accidents or a serious occupational disease, the so-called 'anemia del Gottardo' (hookworm epidemic). At the time many Italians were seasonal workers in Switzerland, although many decided to stay and become Swiss citizens.

This is, therefore, also a memorial to all Italian labour outside our national boundaries. In addition to the bronze cast, now kept in the Gallery of Modern Art here in Rome, another copy has been placed by the Swiss authorities in Airolo, at the 'Italian' entrance to the tunnel on the Ticino side.

Vela's sculpture can thus be seen as a memorial to European labourers, whether they have died within or outside their national boundaries."

Rome, 1st May 2008

Giorgio Napolitano



The Vincenzo Vela Museum

by Gianna A. Mina*



To the left:
Main facade, south

On this page:
Facade, west

After wandering down the narrow, shady streets in the centre of Ligornetto, with its unbroken lines of houses, unprepared visitors and tourists who happen to turn right towards Clivio and the Italian border are in for a surprise: an elegant, well proportioned building sitting on a hill above the village. Set in the middle of a walled park, the impression is that of a bygone age of the aristocracy and, in view of its geographical position, of a certain past importance. Yet this building enjoys an “active life”: the Swiss flag flies from the central balcony in the facade of this impressive building, indicating that this is a working federal building, while the open gates invite visitors to ascend the hill along a winding path. If they do, they pass a fountain and a small grotto before reaching the magnificent villa with its ornamental facade, the Vincenzo Vela Museum.



It is quite hard to describe this extraordinary place in words, as it was built to serve several different functions. Originally intended as a private residence for the Swiss sculptor Vincenzo Vela (1820-91) and his family, the villa later became his studio during the last 25 years of his life, as well as a private museum and, last but not least, a sort of “visiting card” for his clients and the local community. In other words, proof that despite his humble origins, Vincenzo Vela had managed to become a much respected and admired artist and public figure, though not without his political detractors. This home-cum-museum has a “multiple-form” layout, typical of such architectural buildings serving a dual purpose. Indeed, the Vincenzo Vela Museum is a prime example of these, rightly deserving its international reputation. The villa was conceived and built in 1862-65 and then do-

minated to the Swiss Confederation in 1892 as a bequest by Vela’s son Spartaco (1854-95), together with all the collections¹. There are more than 5000 items in the collections, including plaster and terracotta models, paintings, drawings, early photographs, prints and the books in the family library. The bequest did not, however, specify what use should be made of the building, but suggested that it might be used as a public museum and, at the same time, an art academy. The federal authorities chose to turn it into a museum: it was opened to the public as the “Vela Museum” (now the “Vincenzo Vela Museum”) in 1898, thus becoming the first museum in the Canton of Ticino. The building has been altered several times since then, though without altering the original layout and spaces. It was the subject of major restoration in 1997-2001, when the architect Mario Botta turned it into a “modern” museum, capable of hosting not just the permanent collection of monumental plaster casts on the ground floor, but also temporary exhibitions on the first floor (the “noble” floor) and in the park (an essential part of Vela’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*, his vision of the villa as a total work of art).

It is not quite clear why Vincenzo Vela, at the age of just forty or so, decided to build a country house (for his home, workshop and museum) in his native village of Ligornetto, far from the cities and towns in whose political, social and cultural life he was then so deeply involved². At the time he was a leading European sculptor, a favourite within the Court of Savoy and a much respected art professor at the Albertine Academy in Turin. It was there that he had developed his innovative artistic style. When the sculptor bought the land on this hill overlooking the small village on the Italian border, he probably only wanted to build a summer residence, as can easily be seen in the original blueprints now held in the archives: the building clearly has a domestic arrangement, with an *enfilade* (suite of rooms) around a central courtyard. The project was entrusted to Cipriano Ajmetti – architect to the Dukes of Genoa³ – whom Vela must have met in Turin and whose appointment must have given the project a certain touch of nobility. However, the artist himself soon made some radical changes

Vincenzo Vela
Museum,
living room
(Room XXI)

a *sacrarium* full of his works, arranged on proper bases and shelves made to measure for each item. It was a means of celebrating the genius of the artist and, through his works, recent events in Italy's history⁷.

The fact that Vela still had the plaster-casts of his early works (i.e. before his exile to Turin) leads one to think that, like many famous artists before him (Marchesi, Pacetti and Cacciatori in Milan, Bartolini in Florence⁸, Canova, Thorwaldsen and Tenerani⁹ in Rome), Vela had been willing right from the start to gather all his models in a single structure open to the public¹⁰. Today only a handful of his plaster-casts are missing, which is remarkable given his prodigious output and their many movements over the course of his career. Vela had obviously paid a lot of attention to how these fragile models were stored and handled.



Many newspapers of the time were eager to call the centre of the new villa "Pantheon Vela". An Italian pantheon on Swiss land (!), dedicated not only to the history of the unification of Italy – thanks to many portraits of the main protagonists – but also to the Italian "geniuses" in literature, philosophy, fine arts and science, through the iconography Vela conceived for the outside of the building. For instance, the niches on either side of the main entrance contain statues (by Vela, of course) of *Dante* and *GiOTTO*. There are also two medallions bearing the faces of *Raphael* and *Michelangelo*. The columns flanking the main gate have the herms of *Galileo* and *Christopher Columbus*. The gatekeeper's lodge, built in the chalet style (1880), has two frescoed tondi under the porch depicting *Titian* and *Leonardo*

da Vinci. Inside the villa, the Italian genius is celebrated by Vela's model for the tomb of the philosopher *Antonio Rosmini* (1858) from Stresa, a plaster-cast for his splendid bust of the poet *Torquato Tasso* for the city of Bergamo (1864) and the brilliant monument to the painter *Correggio* (1882) for the city with the same name. This iconography is very similar to other examples of art academies' facades in Europe. Integrated in the octagonal hall with portraits of the major figures in recent Italian history, this made the villa an "Italian Walhalla" memorial, to which Vela felt he belonged.

With his typically prompt action, Vincenzo Vela managed to capture the spirit of his time and satisfied the urgent need to remember and celebrate such an important moment in history. He chose to do so on a private basis, as a citizen, refusing to be bound by the canons of a formal, solemn, institutional celebration and instead opted for a typology that would be one of a kind: the museum-cum-home (even more than a home-cum-museum), where the universal ideals of liberty and civilisation could be proclaimed through the excellence of the works of art. Although a visitor might perceive the art and its contents more easily in an artist's studio, he can still appreciate these during a visit to this private museum. Its similarity to an atelier is not lost on the visitor: the way the statues are arranged at random in the central octagonal hall and the simple plastering of the walls¹¹. Vela himself opened the hall to the public in 1881, ten years before his death. For this private museum he even drew up a catalogue¹², published the same year, which acted as a guidebook for the growing number of visitors, explaining the events of

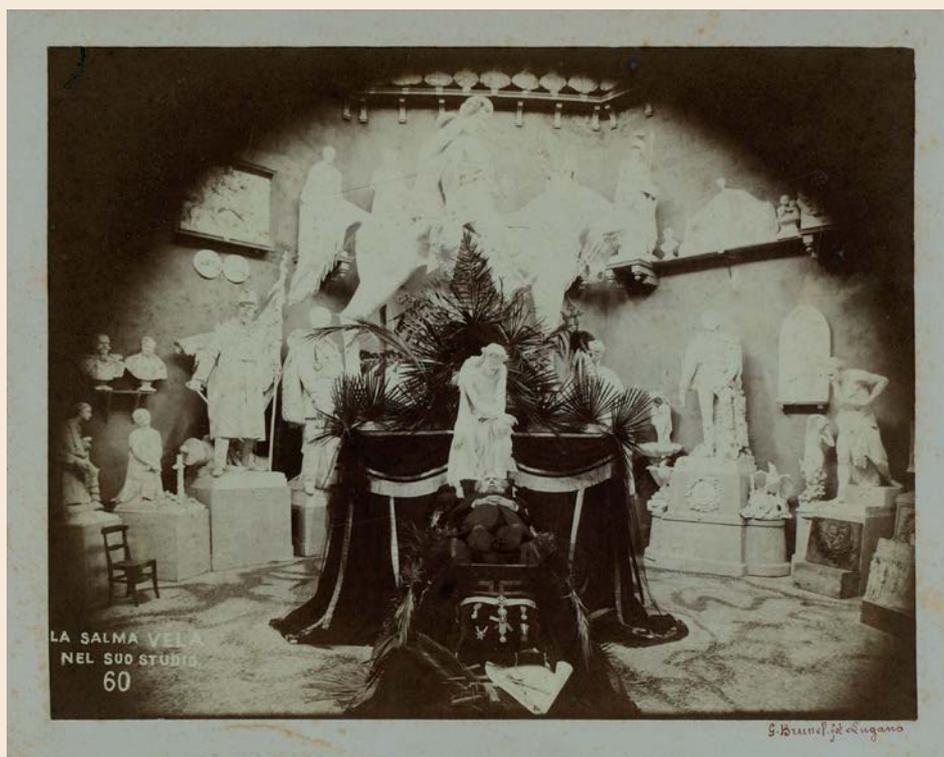


Vincenzo Vela
Museum

To the left:
Octagonal room
(Room I)

To the right:
Room of the funerary
sculptures
(Room XX)

Grato Brunel,
Villa Vela, Octagonal
room (Room I),
Corps of
Vincenzo Vela,
albumen on
cardboard



twenty years before. When the villa was bequeathed to the state, the “mosaic” was enriched with its last piece: the destiny of this home-cum-museum and the collections it contained were saved for posterity, together with the fame of the man responsible for it. With his bequest, Vela gave this villa in Ligornetto the value of a work of art¹⁸.

When Vela died, for a few days the central hall was converted into a mausoleum for the “Fidia di Ligornetto”: a lying-in-repose of his physical, political and artistic body. A photograph taken a few hours after his death (the 3rd of October 1891) shows us the extraordinary surreal scene: his corpse was arranged on a simple bier in the centre of the hall, guarded by his statues and especially his “*Ecce Homo*” (1868). The “creator” thus identified with his “creatures” and gave himself over to the collective memory. It was, one might say, an amazingly modern conceptual installation *ante litteram*.

* **Gianna A. Mina**

Art historian, Director of the Vincenzo Vela
Museum and President of the Swiss
Museums Association.

Endnotes

- ¹ For details of the history of the Museum and its collections, see M. J. WASMER, *Il Museo Vela a Ligornetto, Guida ai Monumenti Svizzeri*, Bern 2003, as well as the museum website www.museo-vela.ch. For details of the collections, see G. A. MINA (editor), *Museo Vela. Le collezioni, scultura, pittura, grafica, fotografia*, Lugano 2001. For insight into the home-cum-museum phenomenon, see the papers of the conference organised at the Vincenzo Vela Museum, G. A. MINA and S. WUHRMANN (editors), *Tra universo privato e spazio pubblico. Case di artisti adibite a museo, Casa d'artisti, "Quaderni del Museo Vincenzo Vela"*, n° 5, Ligornetto 2011.
- ² For details of the sculptor's life and works, see N. J. SCOTT, *Vincenzo Vela*, Dissertation, New York University, 1978, New York-London 1979; G. ZANCHETTI, *Vincenzo Vela scultore*, Ph.D. thesis, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan 1998.
- ³ Ajmetti and the villa blueprints, cf. W. CANVESIO, *L'edificio (dal 1862 al 1919)*, in G. A. MINA (editor), *Museo Vela...*, cit., pp. 24-35.
- ⁴ cf. C. CELIO, *La casa museo di Vincenzo vela a Ligornetto*, thesis, Università degli Studi di Firenze, academic year 1994-95.
- ⁵ In 1877 Vela gained a seat in the Ticino Council, serving with the Liberals and Anti-Clericals; from 1881 onwards he was a consulting member of the Ticino Commission on Public Education.
- ⁶ There are many descriptions (mostly favourable) of the welcome given visitors to this home-cum-museum: cf. G. ZANCHETTI, *Milano, Torino e Ligornetto: il Cicerone degli studi di Vincenzo Vela*, in G. A. MINA (editor), *Museo Vela...*, cit., pp. 39-61 and N. J. SCOTT, *Vincenzo Vela e la scultura americana del Secondo Ottocento*, in G. A. MINA (editor), *Vincenzo Vela e l'America, in Casa d'artisti, "Quaderni del Museo Vela"*, n° 4, Bern 2006, p. 14.
- ⁷ This combination of art and politics was central to Vela's work. During his amazing career as a patriot and artist, he lived and defended the concept of art as a means to work towards progress and the freedom of the people and that of the artist's duty to be directly involved in history. These concepts were clearly expressed in his "Prolusione", the sculptor's opening speech to his students at the Albertina Academy of Fine Arts (Turin) at the start of the 1856-7 academic year.
- ⁸ An early photograph of the "Stanzone fiorentino" (Bartolini's studio in Florence) in the rich collection of photographs belonging to the sculptor.
- ⁹ It is thought that Vela may have had the opportunity to visit Tenerani's studio during his brief stay in Rome in 1847.
- ¹⁰ It was probably his great success with the critics and the public in 1845 when he presented the statue of Bishop Luvini in his atelier in Milan (Ciovasso) that convinced him to put this idea into practice ("... There was no art lover who failed to visit this young modest man in his studio, a man who, unaware of having produced a masterpiece, was happy to show his statue to all and sundry in a naïve, surprised manner", from G. ROVANI, *Vincenzo Vela, scultore*, in *Lo spettatore industriale*, vol. II, pp. 242-45).
- ¹¹ Inside the villa, the master's true atelier or the "sanctuary" as Revon called it, was to the east of the main hall, connected to this by means of an opening that made it possible to carry plaster-casts through into the museum, while the roughing and sculpting of the marble – a dusty and noisy procedure – took place in a separate building in the park, away from the villa.
- ¹² *Catalogo delle opere di scultura eseguite da Vincenzo Vela ed esistenti nella propria villa in Ligornetto*, Milan 1881.
- ¹³ For details of the bequest, cf. G. A. MINA, *Il Museo Vela e le sue collezioni*, in idem (editor), *Museo Vela...*, cit., pp. 11-23.

Vincenzo Vela
Museum
Temporary exhibition
of paintings from the
collection (Room X)



Sources

The quotations accompanying the pictures in this year's Annual Report were selected by MYRIAM FACCHINETTI. They originated from DONATA MASSOLA, *Vincenzo Vela*, Edizioni Arte & Moneta, Lugano 1983, with the exception of the two quotations on pages 13 and 28, which are from letters from the personal correspondence of Vincenzo Vela.

The pictures published in this year's Annual Report are from the Museo Vincenzo Vela, Ligornetto.

Page XLIII: The photograph of the Italian President Giorgio Napolitano at the dedication of the monument *The Victims of Labour* is from the presidential historical archive.

Copyright

© Museo Vincenzo Vela, Ligornetto
Photographs MAURO ZENI, SERGIO ANDREOLI

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the management and staff of the Museo Vincenzo Vela, Ligornetto, and MAURO ZENI for their valuable assistance and the documents which they kindly made available.

Notes

These texts solely express the opinions of the authors; Banca Popolare di Sondrio (SUISSE) accepts no liability of any kind.

Banca Popolare di Sondrio (SUISSE) hereby declares that it is prepared to honour its legal obligations towards the holders of rights to pictures used herein, the owners of which could not be located or identified.

Vincenzo Vela

DEVELOPMENT

Myriam Facchinetti

TEXT EDITING

Andrea Paganini

Lecturer, author, director of "L'ora d'oro" publishers

GRAFIC DESIGN

Petra Häfliger

Lucasdesign, Giubiasco

TRANSLATION

Punto e Virgola

Zurich

Rear cover:
Vincenzo Vela,
Spartacus, 1847-1849,
plaster, original model,
208 x 80.5 x 126.5 cm,
Vincenzo Vela Museum,
Ligornetto