

Of Plaster Casts and Monks: Images of Cultural Heritage in Risorgimento Italy

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The Risorgimento and the Image of Italian Culture

Ernst Renan famously articulated the cultural, political, and social ideal of the modern nation state in his 1882 lecture “What is a Nation?/Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?” Speaking in the midst of the territorial disputes over the Franco-German border regions of Alsace and Lorraine, Renan defined a nation not by geography, race, ethnicity, or language, but rather a shared sense of moral conscience that was acutely aware of its own past. He defined this conscience as the common possession of a “rich legacy of memories” and the shared desire to honor and perpetuate its values in the present day.¹ He called this “the social capital upon which one bases a national idea.”²

A comparable question of political and cultural identity faced the nascent Kingdom of Italy in the middle of the nineteenth century. With Giuseppe Garibaldi’s conquest of Sicily and occupation of Naples and southern Italy in 1860, the Sardinian/Piedmontese monarch Vittorio Emanuele II could lay claim to the crown of a unified state that comprised most of the peninsula. The regional regime, now leading the peninsula as a consolidated political entity, would face daunting political, economic, and social challenges—including stiff papal resistance, quickly mounting debts, and popular unrest—in the coming decades. Perhaps most challenging of all, it had unified a peninsula whose regions, culturally speaking, had little in common: they did not share a political legacy, a history, or topography. One of Vittorio Emanuele II’s leading ministers, Massimo D’Azeglio, articulated the new nation’s challenge: “Italy has been made. Now it remains to make Italians.”³

Like Renan’s lecture, D’Azeglio’s statement revealed that the nascent Italian state was grappling with the comparable question of a shared past and of how to vest its citizens in this past. These questions asserted themselves prominently as the country sought to establish an administrative institution that would manage a network of monuments and sites of cultural patrimony. Key personalities helped shape this network and its mission. In Naples and then in Rome, Giuseppe Fiorelli (1823–96) (fig. 1) played a critical role in formulating national policy and establishing protocols for the excavation and preservation of antiquities. Writing from exile in England, the Venetan-born artist and connoisseur Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle (1819–97) (fig. 2) advocated reforms in education that would motivate a disinterested Italian public to appreciate its cultural past. The reforms would go hand in hand with the restoration and conservation of monuments and objects. In Modena and then in Rome, Adolfo Venturi (1856–1941) (fig. 3) envisioned a network that would facilitate the cataloguing and scholarly study of objects and monuments. Given the interests of Fiorelli, Cavalcaselle, and Venturi, the new

¹ Ernst Renan, “What is a Nation?/Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?” (lecture delivered at the Sorbonne on March 11, 1882), trans. Ethan Rundell (Paris: Presses-Pocket, 1992), 10.

² Ibid.

³ Massimo Tapparelli D’Azeglio, *I Miei Ricordi* (Florence: G. Barbèra Editori, 1867), 7.

national network could shape historical research, guide education and training, and set an agenda for conservation—facilitating the public’s familiarity with and understanding of a vast repository of objects and monuments on the Italian peninsula. But ultimately, what image of Italian culture would emerge from these initiatives?

In a nation formed from regions of differing political traditions and histories, the identification of a historical figure, a work of art, or a building as emblematic of Italian culture proved challenging. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Italian nationalists identified Dante Alighieri as an early secular patriot and epitome of cultural genius and virtue.⁴ The 500th anniversary of the poet’s death in 1818, furthermore, inspired what could be called the secular cult of Dante that extended through much of the Italian peninsula. Monuments to Dante appeared in cities and towns from Udine and Venice to Naples and Bari.⁵ The broad diffusion of monuments to Dante belied, however, the ambivalence with which some of them were unveiled to the local citizens. Tito Angelini and Tommaso Solari’s statue of Dante, erected at the northern end of the former Piazza Mercatello in Naples (the present-day Piazza Dante), was ultimately unveiled in 1871 without an inscription, leaving the monument’s association with national unity ambiguous.⁶ The episode speaks to how the association of Dante with national unity left key questions about the identity of the Italian state unresolved. Did the poet’s work truly transcend regional differences? What would be the place of the clergy in the modern and secular state?⁷

Rather than call attention to other potentially emblematic figures or monuments for the modern Italian state as focuses of encomia for the newly unified country, the present essay seeks to identify two classes of images—one an object type, the other the representation of a social class—that epitomize the identity crisis itself. Both types of images, furthermore, were closely connected to the activities of the national superintendency. The first were products of the archaeological innovation of Giuseppe Fiorelli as director of the national museum in Naples in 1863: they were the plaster casts of the ancient Pompeians who perished in the eruption of Vesuvius. The second were monks: members of the ancient regime’s privileged first estate and former residents of the ecclesiastic estates that became state property—some as national monuments—with the suppression of religious corporations in 1866.

The cast and the monk were intimately linked to the new nation’s cultural patrimony; considered together they epitomized the enormity of the Italian kingdom’s cultural heritage and the overwhelming challenge of incorporating this heritage into a vision for the future nation. This past was not just immense in the number of eras and cultures it embraced: it was a fluid temporal expanse that could be both comfortably remote and disconcertingly present. Like the casts, the past was both palpable in minute detail but temporally remote; like the monk, the past was both remote yet living among present-day citizens. The cast and the monk also epitomized the manifold and dramatic political and social transformations experienced by the newly founded state: it was a parliamentary monarchy emerging from an ancient empire, a secular nation emerging from a web of ecclesiastic and imperial regimes, and a community of equal citizens emerging from a society of stark class divisions.

⁴ Bruno Tobia, “La Statuaria Dantesca nell’Italia Liberale: Tradizione, Identità e Culto Nazionale,” *Mélanges de l’École Française de Rome. Italie et Méditerranée* 109.1 (1997): 75–87.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 78–81.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 85–86. The statue was ultimately given the following inscription in 1931: “All’Unità d’Italia raffigurata in Dante Alighieri.”

⁷ *Ibid.*, 84–86.



Fig. 1. Photograph of Giuseppe Fiorelli
(image in the Public Domain).



Fig. 2. Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle
(image in the Public Domain).



Fig. 3. Photograph of Adolfo Venturi, c. 1930
(image in the Public Domain).

The essay begins by outlining the visions of conservation, education, and research that were at the core of the national superintendency. It then observes each of the image types and how they infiltrated the public imagination—within Italy and beyond—through newspaper media, literature, public policy decisions, and painting. The essay then concludes by reflecting how these two image types—the plaster cast and the monk—embodied dilemmas that transcended the regional differences in the new nation’s cultural heritage.

Conservation, Education, Research, and the National Superintendency

Cavalcaselle, Venturi, and Fiorelli understood the complexity of understanding the objects and monuments of the peninsula as the heritage of the modern Italian state. It was Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle’s 1863 article in *Revista dei Comuni Italiani* that explicitly tied the peninsula’s artistic heritage to D’Azeglio’s vision of “making Italians.” He introduced his outline for a comprehensive program of restoration by lamenting the indifference of the Italian people to their artistic heritage and to their lack of appreciation for the “honors that were those of their forefathers.”⁸ He saw the conservation, teaching, and study of Italian art as a primary responsibility of the new state and one that could be achieved through the collaboration of art academies, gallery directors, professors, city authorities, and regional counsel. It was with the proper tutelage of its artistic tradition that the Italian nation could best appreciate the greatness of its cultural heritage, and in Cavalcaselle’s words “return to its place among great nations.”⁹ Writing nearly twenty years after Cavalcaselle, Adolfo Venturi was also troubled by the relative indifference of Italians to their cultural heritage. When noticing that French journals claimed that the Italian Renaissance had a toxic effect on their culture and cursed the name of Raphael, Venturi lamented that there was no one (certainly not any Italian patriots) to challenge such a chauvinistic assertion.¹⁰

Both Cavalcaselle and Venturi saw education as the crucial vehicle for vesting Italian citizens in their cultural heritage. Where Cavalcaselle envisioned an academic model of artistic training in which Italian artists would look at the works of the finest painters in Italian history for inspiration, Venturi had a more scholarly approach. He sought to create a series of parallel archives—one for chronology, one for iconography—that would facilitate study of Italian art, combining the connoisseurial acumen of Cavalcaselle and Giovanni Morelli, the physician who became a pioneer in connoisseurship, with the painstaking chronological research of local archivists.¹¹

The aspirations of Cavalcaselle and Venturi took institutional form in the Ministry of Public Education (*Ministro della Pubblica Istruzione*). The Ministry developed a bureaucracy for managing the newly formed country’s vast heritage of monuments, archaeological sites, antiquities, and works of art. It had four objectives: 1) the identification and inventory of sites and objects of importance, 2) supervision of restoration and preservation, 3) consultation on the

⁸ Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle, “Sulla conservazione dei monumenti e degli oggetti di belle arti,” *Rivista dei Comuni Italiani* 3.4 (1863): 33–56; 5: 25–43; 6: 33–46. <http://fonti-sa.signum.sns.it> (accessed September 4, 2015). “Finora gli Italiani si sono mostrati ben poco premurosi in fatto d’arte antica, quantunque sulla memoria di un passato grande e glorioso stimassero di potersi godere gli onoriche erano propri dei loro padri.”

⁹ Cavalcaselle, “Sulla conservazione dei monumenti,” 5: “Spetta al governo nazionale provvedere perché possa un giorno l’Italia riavere, anche col mezzo delle arti belle, quel seggio, al quale è invitata dalle sue tradizioni e dal suo genio.”

¹⁰ Adolfo Venturi, “Per la Storia dell’arte,” *Rivista Storica Italiana* 4 (1887): 230.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 249–250.

historical value of sites and objects, and 4) provision of uniform assistance to every region in the Italian peninsula.¹²

While he would not assume directorship of the central council in the Ministry until 1874, Giuseppe Fiorelli played a critical role in formulating national policy and establishing protocols for excavation and preservation from his position as director in Naples. With Fiorelli, the initiatives that shaped Italian cultural identity were forged regionally and then adopted on a national scale.

Born in Naples in 1823, Fiorelli studied law and numismatics and began contributing articles to archaeological journals by 1841.¹³ He quickly rose through the ranks of the Bourbon-administered superintendency of excavations based in Naples. By 1847, he was appointed inspector of the royal (Bourbon) excavations of Pompeii, and he quickly began initiatives for a commission for the reform of the Real Museo Borbonico. Fiorelli's extensive ties to scientific communities in Rome and Germany, his liberal political leanings, and his adamant advocacy for the reform of the Bourbon Museum aroused the suspicion of Ferdinando II's regime, and, in the immediate aftermath of the uprisings of 1848, he was jailed for nine months (from 1849 to 1850).¹⁴ With the fall of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and the establishment of the kingdom of Italy in 1861, Fiorelli returned to Naples where he was nominated professor of archaeology at the university. Soon after, he also assumed the post of inspector with the superintendency of the Excavations of the National Museum (the former Museo Borbonico), and by 1863 he was confirmed as director of the museum. In 1873 he presided over a special commission formed by the national Ministry that drafted the nation's first laws regarding the preservation and conservation of works of art and antiquities.¹⁵

Fiorelli's involvement in the 1848 ordinances to reform the Real Museo Borbonico reveal his administrative acumen and his vision to synthesize the activities of excavation and education. The ordinances included provisions for establishing the museum as a seat for the teaching of archaeology and ancient culture (with six museum-funded professorial posts) and as headquarters for the superintendency of archaeological sites.¹⁶ The chairs would also participate in the council that would oversee the superintendency along side three additional fine-arts professors (from the Neapolitan University) who would address medieval and modern art and

¹² See Mario Bencivenni, "Verso un servizio su scala nazionale (1865–1874)," in Mario Bencivenni, Riccardo Dalla Negra, and Paola Grifoni, *Monumenti e Istituzioni*, vol. 1 (Florence: Soprintendenza per i Beni Ambientali e Architettonici per le Province di Firenze e Pistoia, 1987), 190–192, 202. To these ends, the ministry created the *Giunta di Belle Arti* in 1867 and the *Giunta Consultiva di Storia, Archeologia e Paleografia* in 1872. Even though these committees merged into the *Consiglio Centrale di Archeologia e Belle Arti* in 1874, they drew a sharp distinction between the cultural patrimony of the ancient world—administered by the section of archaeology—and the patrimony of the medieval and early modern periods—administered by the section of fine arts.

¹³ His scholarly work earned him nominations and membership to prominent archaeological and antiquarian societies in Naples and beyond: he was nominated correspondent of the Royal (Bourbon) Academy of Herculaneum, the Society of Antiquarians of the North, and of the Institute of Archaeological Correspondence/Instituto di corrispondenza archaeologica of Rome.

¹⁴ A basic but thorough biography of Fiorelli: Gianluca Kannes, "Giuseppe Fiorelli," *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* 48 (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1997), 137–142.

¹⁵ Bencivenni, "Verso un servizio," 191.

¹⁶ Mario Pagano, "Una legge ritrovata: il progetto di legge per il riordinamento del R. Museo di Napoli e degli scavi di antichità del 1848 e il ruolo di G. Fiorelli," *Archivio Storico per le Province Napoletane* 112 (1994): 372–373. The six chairs would address a broad range of disciplines relevant to the material finds that could potentially be excavated. These included epigraphy, numismatics, ethnology, mythology and ancient symbolism, history of ancient art, and medieval antiquities.

archaeology.¹⁷ By the time Fiorelli assumed the responsibilities of the directorship in the 1860s, he instituted reforms in the administration of archaeological sites. These included state funding and training of site guides (replacing the former Bourbon practice of having guides paid exclusively by gratuity).¹⁸ The changes ensured greater superintendency control (and training) of guides and guaranteed admission to a broader public. Ultimately, Fiorelli envisioned the archaeological site within a larger national mission of preservation and public instruction, establishing archaeological sites and museums as central public services of the state.¹⁹ The initiatives to emphasize instruction and training and to provide broad access represent a comprehensive attempt to vest a larger public in the traditions and values embodied in archaeological excavations.

Antiquity, Plaster Casts, and the Modern Italian State

The example of Ancient Rome had yet to transform into the cult of *Romanità*, the political and moral impetus that fuelled Mussolini's fascist ideology in the 1920s and 30s,²⁰ but it was nonetheless a revered political, cultural, and even jurisdictional model for *Risorgimento* Italy. The national ministry considered adopting the Augustan administrative divisions of the Italian peninsula in 1870, after the annexation of Rome, in order to ensure uniform coverage of the entire peninsula, Sicily, and Sardinia. The Arezzo-born archaeologist and historian Gian Francesco Gamurrini championed the institution of the Augustan divisions, arguing that they were in large part preserved in Italy's present regions. He argued that "not the entire Middle Ages, nor the successive dominations until our time have changed Italy in such a way to render the naming [of regions] and the project of effecting them difficult."²¹ In addition, he argued that the historical and topographic nature of the Augustan divisions suited the new national divisions as well: "these historical and topographical criteria are still very much in effect."²² Not only would jurisdictions need to grow organically from the geography of the peninsula, but they also needed to grow from a conception of the Italian state that had a time-honored pedigree. For Gamurrini, geography and cultural history (especially jurisdictional history) were mutually reinforcing. While the ministry ultimately made use of pre-existing regional organizations, the consideration of the Augustan regions attests to the pre-eminence of Ancient Rome as a model for modern Italy.

¹⁷ Stefano De Caro, "Giuseppe Fiorelli e Gli Scavi di Pompeii," in *A Giuseppe Fiorelli nel primo Centenario della Morte*, ed. Stefano De Caro and Pier Giovanni Guzzo, Atti del Convegno Napoli 19–20 Marzo 1997 (Naples: Arte Tipografica, 1999), 11–12.

¹⁸ He also introduced a modest entrance fee to all visitors.

¹⁹ De Caro, "Giuseppe Fiorelli e Gli Scavi," 11–12, 21.

²⁰ Elaine K. Gazda, "Replicating Roman Murals in Pompeii: Archaeology, Art, and Politics in Italy of the 1920s," in *Antiquity Recovered: The Legacy of Pompeii and Herculaneum*, ed. Victoria C. Gardner Coates and Jon L. Seydl (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2007), 216–219; Romke Visser, "Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of the Romanità," *Journal of Contemporary History* 27.1 (1992): 5–22.

²¹ Gian Francesco Gamurrini, Letter to Public Instruction Minister Conestabile della Massa, 26 August 1874, in *Monumenti e Istituzioni*, vol. 1, 197.

²² Ibid. Sections of Gamurrini's original statement were published by Andrea Emiliani, "Nella Battaglia tra Pubblico e Privato: L'Istituzione della Direzione Generale e Giuseppe Fiorelli," in *A Giuseppe Fiorelli nel Primo Centenario della Morte*, 101–134, 103.



Fig. 4: Giorgio Sommer, Photograph of Human Cast in Pompeii, February 5, 1863 (Städelisches Kunstinstitut und Stadtische Galerie, image in the Public Domain).

When Giuseppe Fiorelli first injected plaster into voids in the ash at Pompeii in 1863, he revealed the form of the bodies of ancient Pompeians who perished in the eruption of Vesuvius,²³ ultimately humanizing the revered example of Ancient Rome (fig. 4). While his administrative initiatives opened the ancient sites near Naples to a broader public and helped to ensure more systematic education, the plaster casts resonated most powerfully in both the scholarly and public imagination. Discussions of the casts animated antiquarian debates about the daily life and material culture of the ancient Romans, and reflections on the nature of the casts themselves—as the form of corpses from antiquity—presented an intimate confrontation with antiquity to a broader public.

In his synopsis of the findings, Fiorelli took pleasure in his scientific achievement: “For now it is a satisfactory compensation for the most exacting labors to have opened the way to obtaining an unknown class of monuments, through which archaeology will be pursued not in marbles or in bronzes but over the very bodies of the ancients, stolen from death, after eighteen centuries of oblivion.”²⁴ While excited at the momentous nature of this discovery, his description of the nature of this find betrays a sobering realization: these were the bodies of the ancient Romans themselves, and he has exhumed a corpse.

Other observers shared in the exhilaration of discovery and the sobriety of confronting death. A French correspondent emphasized how the casts answered fundamental questions about

²³ Kannes, “Giuseppe Fiorelli,” 138–139; Eugene Dwyer, *Pompeii's Living Statues: Ancient Roman Lives Stolen from Death* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2010).

²⁴ Dwyer, *Pompeii's Living Statues*, 45–46.

clothing in ancient Rome: “The famous question of the Thesaurus of Gronovius and Graevius is settled: the Romans wore trousers!”²⁵ The German historian Ferdinand Gregorovius, who spent much time at the excavation, referred to the casts as “Pompeii’s living statues.”²⁶ The Neapolitan champion of liberalism and early nationalist patriot, Luigi Settembrini, observed that Fiorelli’s plaster casts enabled contemporary observers to view the culture of ancient Rome with unprecedented immediacy. Speaking of his visit to see the plaster casts of Pompeii, he wrote:

This morning, then, we went to Pompeii in a group to see the new miracle of our friend Fiorelli, who raises up the Pompeians and lets us see them as they were on 23 November AD 79, the last day of their unhappy town. He [Fiorelli] who goes about there collecting the final words scratched on the walls with nail, stylus, coal, or whatever, which after a time disappear because the plaster crumbles, and with these graffiti reconstructs the language spoken by the populace—now he makes us see the men themselves, with their shirts and with their sorrows.²⁷

While Pompeii was a civilization seemingly frozen in the first century A.D., the richness of the material finds, from the graffiti on the city walls to the plaster casts of the deceased, powerfully evoked the vibrancy and dynamism of this ancient town, “revealing the shirts and the sorrows of the Pompeians.” With his attention to Fiorelli’s attempts to preserve all aspects of Pompeii’s material culture, Settembrini appreciated how the directing archaeologist sought to present the world of antiquity at Pompeii not as an extinct world of a chronologically remote era, but as a vibrant, changing, and ever evolving culture.

These material finds revealed a living culture, humanizing the cultural significance of Pompeii to visitors from Naples, Italy, Europe, and beyond. Early photographs of the plaster casts appeared shortly after the American Civil War photographs of dead soldiers at the Battle of Antietam—both sets of images presented matter-of-fact images of death with unprecedented detail.²⁸ For Giuseppe Fiorelli in Naples, the casts were not statues but corpses “stolen from death.” The final phrase from Fiorelli’s quote emphasizes the chronological enormity of the discovery—the bodies of the ancients were found “after eighteen centuries of oblivion.” In their poses of anguish and in their sandal straps, the intimate features of the casts bridged nearly two millennia with the detail of a present-day coroner’s report, collapsing time.

The quotidian details of ancient life rendered visible by the casts, furthermore, fostered a newfound curiosity of modern Italians with the ancient past. In her 1876 account of her visit to Pompeii, the Florentine journalist Cesira Pozzolini-Siciliani recorded the sobering melancholy of viewing the casts followed by the festive spectacle of local couples re-enacting a Pagan wedding at the Temple of Jupiter in the Pompeii forum.²⁹ In his study on the plaster casts in Pompeii, Eugene Dwyer noted that such a re-enactment would have been unthinkable under the rigorous Christian moralizing of the Bourbon Francis II.³⁰ Italian unification marked an end to this regime, and under the guidance of Giuseppe Fiorelli, it fostered a newfound appreciation for the

²⁵ Ibid., 47–48. The correspondent was writing for the journal *l’Italie* on February 6 (a few days before Fiorelli’s letter to the *Giornale di Napoli*).

²⁶ Ibid., 72.

²⁷ Luigi Settembrini, *Giornale di Napoli*, 13 Feb 1863, in *ibid.*, 49.

²⁸ Dwyer, *Pompeii’s Living Statues*, 96–97. Dwyer observed that they were not seen to invade the privacy of the deceased to the same degree as the Civil War soldiers.

²⁹ Cesire Pozzolini’s account was paraphrased in *ibid.*, 94–96.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

material culture of the ancients. This interest took the form of rigorous scientific inquiry, giving rise to the plaster casts themselves, and even theatrical re-enactment. The performance of a Pagan wedding in particular can be seen as an expression of association between modern Italians and their ancient predecessors.

The Laws of Suppression and the Monk

As Fiorelli was reforming the excavation protocols, administrative structure, and educational mission of the museum of Naples and the sites of Pompeii and Herculaneum, the decrees of 1866 and 1867, the laws of suppression of religious orders and corporations, effected the expropriation of the property of some 1,322 monastic chapters from the Roman See.³¹ While the laws were part of Vittorio Emanuele's broader anticlerical policy against an intransigent Pope Pius IX, the decrees were enacted with a more immediate remedy in mind: selling off the newly seized ecclesiastical holdings would generate revenue to help cover the 721 million lira budget shortfall of the nation.³²

The decrees were not unexpected: with the abolition of the feudal system in many regions at the turn of the nineteenth century, several monasteries had been suppressed earlier in the century, and many of the regional governments drafted provisions regarding the protection of objects of cultural value that were formerly part of ecclesiastic estates.³³ The Italian state's expropriation of ecclesiastic assets in 1866, however, became the permanent seizure of property and objects formerly belonging to the Holy See. With the Italian state's massive sell-off of former ecclesiastical holdings underway, an estimated 24,000 religious objects of significant cultural value risked hopeless dispersion among private buyers.³⁴ While fifteen more monasteries were designated as monuments in 1869 and another seven in 1877, the Ministry was left to improvise a solution for managing this onslaught of property and objects of cultural patrimony.

Out of the 1,322 properties seized, only five monasteries—the Abbeys of Montecassino, Cava dei Tirreni (near Cava, outside Salerno), San Martino della Scala (between Palermo and Monreale), Monreale, and the Certosa di Pavia—were designated as national monuments.³⁵ The curious feature about this short list of monasteries is the concentration of institutions in southern Italy—several factors contributed to the unbalanced regional distribution. One reason was

³¹ Christopher Seton-Watson, *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism 1870–1925* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1967), 10.

³² The suppression of the religious orders coincided with Italy's war with Austria for Venetia, negating any budgetary windfall from the confiscation of ecclesiastic property. See *ibid.*, 11–12.

³³ The Kingdom of Naples abolished the feudal system on August 2, 1806, effecting the expropriation of church assets to the state. In Venice, Peter Edwards oversaw the consolidation of ecclesiastic property with the transformation of the Guild of S. Maria della Carità into the Accademia Museum after the fall of the Republic. See Tommaso Astarita, *Between Salt Water and Holy Water: A History of Southern Italy* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2005), 259–260; Polo Museale Veneziano, “Galleria dell'Accademia: Storia delle Collezioni” <http://www.polomuseale.venezia.beniculturali.it/index.php?it/145/storia-delle-collezioni> (accessed July 8, 2016).

The Lombard *Commissione d'ornato pubblico*, formed in 1807 under Austrian rule would also attend to churches deemed to be of architectural value and that needed restoration. Venice's 1818 institution of the *Commissione per la Conservazione e la custodia degli oggetti d'arte preziosi esistenti nelle chiese e in edifici pubblici*, applied to churches as well. In the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, an 1822 decree (under Ferdinand I) included churches as sites that were protected from vandalism and unauthorized removal of works of art. See *Monumenti e Istituzioni*, vol. 1, 12–13, 39.

³⁴ Bencivenni, “Verso un servizio,” 189–190.

³⁵ This provision comes from paragraph 33 of the law, published with a Royal Decree on 7 July 1866, n. 3036. Selections of this paragraph were published by Raffaello Causa, “A Proposito della Certosa di San Martino (1). Nascita di un Museo – Omaggio a Giuseppe Fiorelli,” *Napoli Nobilissima* 6, fasc. I–II (1967): 5–13, 10–11.

political: Venice and the Veneto were still under Austrian rule when the laws of suppression were enacted.³⁶ A second reason was demographic: there was a much higher number of monks and nuns resident in southern Italy and Sicily in the nineteenth century. Where Naples and its former kingdom had 11,783 clerics and 13,651 nuns, representing 1.74% and 2.02% of the population respectively, Piedmont and Liguria had 1,828 clerics (.52%) and 3,742 nuns (1.05%) of the population, and Lombardy had only 402 clerics (.13%) and 2,197 nuns (.70%).³⁷

Before the suppression, the image of the clergy—the members of the Ancient Régime’s first estate—in the public imagination of pre-unification Italy assumed a broad range of character types, many of which were inherited from earlier eras. Monks could be the worldly and learned abbot, the cadet-born aristocrat who became an enlightenment-era intellectual; they could be the reclusive and wizard-like healer of medieval and Counter-Reform hagiography; and they could also be seen as the friar in the tradition of Boccaccio’s *Frate Cipolla*, a relic-fabricating and disingenuous peddler of superstition.³⁸ They could even be seen as the religious patriots of the modern Italian state: the “Italian-ness” of Benedict of Nursia and Francis of Assisi was celebrated, and their activities of studying and preaching were deemed congenial to modern civilization.³⁹

Two literary examples from a vast repertory of representations of clergy in the early nineteenth century demonstrate the rich array of associations evoked by monks and monasteries. Alessandro Manzoni’s 1827 *Promessi Sposi* featured a monk, Frate Cristoforo, as a repentant. Before entering a Capuchin monastery, Frate Cristoforo (then known as Ludovico) was the son of a merchant who killed a nobleman in a duel. Ludovico sought refuge in a Capuchin monastery, where he felt sincere remorse for his deeds and reformed himself as a devout and pious monk. In Stendhal’s romantic novel, *The Charterhouse of Parma* (1839), Fabrice del Dongo lives a life of political idealism and amorous adventure, ultimately retiring to the Carthusian monastery of Parma as a refuge from the chaos of political intrigue of restoration Italy and the heartbreak prompted by the death of his lover Clélia and their child. As a place of spiritual reform and sentimental refuge, monasteries became the poignant foil to the political and social turbulence of pre-unification Italy.

Beyond the image of the monk in the popular imagination and in literature, the suppression of religious orders carried considerable social implications in the every day lives of Italians throughout the peninsula. With education and health care in mind, they played a large role in the operation of the social state of the new nation. Religious institutions operated over a thousand schools (primary and secondary) on the Italian peninsula, and provided personnel and resources to hospitals. Statistical studies by the Italian kingdom downplayed the harm that the suppression of religious orders would have on education. One report noted, “Whatever may have been their traditional merits [religious education], today these have suffered from intellectual decadence.”⁴⁰ Some institutions like the Dorothean Sisters who had branches in Vicenza, Bologna, Forlì, Padova, and Venice, successfully avoided suppression by claiming that they were an institution

³⁶ Venetia would not be ceded to the Italian Kingdom until October 19, 1866, while the decree of suppression had been published in July of 1866.

³⁷ Giancarlo Rocca, “Istituti religiosi in Italia tra Otto e Novecento,” in *Clero e Società nell’Italia Contemporanea*, ed. Mario Rosa (Rome, Bari: Editori Laterza, 1992), 207–256, 222.

³⁸ Mario Rosa, “Introduzione,” in *ibid.*, 14–21.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 20–21.

⁴⁰ *Statistica del Regno d’Italia. Istruzione primaria e secondaria data da corporazioni religiose. Anno scolastico 1863–1864*, XI, in Rocca, “Istituti religiosi,” 223.

of public education rather than religious vocation.⁴¹ Ultimately, many Italian courts, in apparent recognition of the problems in education that a rigorous suppression of orders would precipitate, allowed many communities to remain intact, but without the assets that had been their traditional patrimony.⁴² This said, the contemplative orders of medieval foundation, like the Benedictines and Carthusians, who did not have established programs of educational or pastoral outreach in the secular world, faced more rigorous enforcement of the suppression.⁴³

The monasteries that were preserved intact by article 34 of the suppression law began the process of cataloguing their holdings, promoting their identities as cultural centers. Both the Abbeys of Montecassino and Cava dei Tirreni published catalogues of their library holdings, both of which contained extensive medieval manuscript holdings. The archivist of the manuscript holdings of Montecassino, Andrea Caravita, did not hesitate to emphasize the monumental cultural significance of his monastery's holdings for both "our country and European civilization, counting thirteen centuries of existence from today."⁴⁴ In his history of the Abbey of Cava dei Tirreni, Paul Guillaume—a history professor at the abbey—also emphasized the cultural importance of the monastery to both Italy and Europe. Commenting on the monastery's suppression in 1866, Guillaume wrote, "the new government could not mistake the services that this monastery delivered to the sciences and to civilization for a good ten centuries without pause; and nor could it ignore the pricelessness of the artistic—and above all historical—treasures that had been collected within its walls."⁴⁵ The publication and cataloguing initiatives of these abbeys were carried out in the spirit of Adolfo Venturi's vision of the comprehensive project of cataloguing and historical inquiry. The learned abbot was alive and well at Montecassino and Cava dei Tirreni after their suppression.

Even before its preservation as a national monument, the Benedictine community sought to maneuver around its suppression by opening a lay college, the College of the Holy Trinity of Cava. This college, opened on the advice of the former Abbot Onuphre Granata and under the tutelage of the present Abbot Guillaume Sanfelice, operated out of the newly abandoned noviciate of the monastery and received approval from the civic prefecture of Salerno.⁴⁶ While suppressed as a monastic community, the Benedictine chapter remained relevant in the newly formed saeculum of the Italian state as both an educational institution and a center for cultural history.

In Naples, Fiorelli seized the opportunity presented by the decrees of suppression to transform one of Naples' premier monasteries, the Certosa di San Martino, into a national monument in 1867. As the superintendency began transferring the great monastic libraries of Naples to the Certosa, the artistic and architectural monumentality of the complex soon became

⁴¹ Ibid., 226–227.

⁴² Ibid., 224–229.

⁴³ Ibid., 229–230.

⁴⁴ D. Andrea Caravita, *I Codici e le Arti a Montecassino*, 3 vols. (Montecassino, Printed at the Abbey, 1869), 1: ii–iii.: "Questa famosa Badia, che ha avuta tanta parte nella storia del nostro paese e della civiltà europea, conta fino a oggi tredici secoli di esistenza; e per sì lunga età in essa non vennero mai meno gli studi e l'amore delle arti; ma queste più soggette a perire non hanno lasciato dietro di se che vaghe ed incompiute memorie, e delle loro opere non avanzano che quelle della fine del XV secolo e dei seguenti."

⁴⁵ Paul Guillaume, *Essai Historique sur l'Abbaye de Cava d'après des Documents Inédits* (Cava dei Tirreni: Abbaye des RR. Pères Bénédictins, 1877), 446–447: "Cependant, tout en dépouillant le monastère de Cava de ses riches domaines, le nouveau gouvernement ne pouvait méconnaître les services que ce monastère, depuis bientôt dix siècles, ne cesse de rendre aux sciences et à la civilisation; il ne pouvait ignorer le prix infini des trésors artistiques et surtout historiques qui sont accumulés dans ses murs."

⁴⁶ Ibid., 447.

apparent to the director. He recognized that the complex needed renovation and restoration. In his written request to the national superintendency (dated 26 March 1869), Fiorelli stressed the cultural richness of the Certosa and its collections. He noted how Italian and foreign artists had already been coming to the monastery to copy the works of the masters of the Neapolitan school, and he announced his intention to bring additional paintings from the Neapolitan school to complement the monastery's existing works, creating a collection comparable to the picture gallery aggregated to the Academy of fine arts in Florence. In his reference to visiting artists and to the Florentine Academy, Fiorelli saw the monument—as a place of national heritage and artistic emulation—in the vision of Cavalcaselle, and saw the Certosa as a monument that prompted interregional comparisons.

Most importantly, Fiorelli saw the monastery as a monument of Italian culture that complemented the sites of Herculaneum and Pompeii. Comparisons to the ancient sites appear throughout his correspondence. In establishing an administrative structure at San Martino, Fiorelli stipulated that the post of supervisor at San Martino should “come directly from Pompeii, as overseer of security and service.”⁴⁷ With these additions, “The Certosa di San Martino will become one of the greatest representatives of Italian civilization of the most recent age.”⁴⁸ Fiorelli's use of the term, “degli ultimi tempi [most recent age]” evokes comparisons to counterparts of presumably earlier epochs, namely Pompeii and Herculaneum. Ultimately, Fiorelli saw the Certosa as a cultural repository of national significance that would complete the arc of history, the history of the newly unified Italian state, that began with the plaster casts of Pompeii and continued into the Christian era and ultimately to the present day. For Fiorelli, the plaster cast and the monk were the emblematic figures for a cultural history of the peninsula that extended from antiquity to the “most recent age” of the pre-Risorgimento peninsula.

The conversion of these monasteries into monuments, however, also implied a change in the usage of these complexes, which could potentially induce a distortion of the original meaning of the site and its collections. In an 1895 guide and history of the Certosa di Pavia, Luca Beltrami reacted to the deadening effect of cataloguing the monastery's works of art, turning them into “the cold elements of an admiration disciplined by the catalogue.”⁴⁹ Aware of this change in meaning, Beltrami suggested that viewing these works as works of art in a museum masked a deeper historically based importance: “We do not only have in front of us, like in a museum, art for art's sake, [...] but art as a sincere and effective evocation of an entire historical period [...] when the solitary figure of the Carthusian monk animated the tranquillity of the arcades, disappearing into the shadows of the corridors.”⁵⁰ In these passages, Beltrami's guide to the

⁴⁷ Giuseppe Fiorelli, “Relazione sullo stato e sui bisogni della Certosa di San Martino,” in *Causa*, “A Proposito,” 13: “Fu indispensabile stabilirsi una guardaporta, un inserviente giardiniere, tre guardie custodi ed un sovrastante, venuto espressamente da Pompei, come capo responsabile della custodia e del servizio.”

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 12–13.

⁴⁹ Luca Beltrami, *La Certosa di Pavia* (Milan: Ulrico Hoepli, 1895), 9–11.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 10: “Non abbiamo solo, davanti a noi – come in un museo – l'arte per l'arte; poichè alla Certosa, cioè che ci commuove è l'arte nella sua estrinseca azione più complessa, più umana, più vitale: l'arte come rappresentazione sincera ed efficace di tutto un periodo storico, come affermazione di una fede profonda e secolare, come aspirazione ardente verso qualcosa di ideale, che ci sollevi al di sopra della difficoltà e delle tristezze della vita. Queste aspirazioni—intorpidite forse nel fondo dell'animo nostro, ma non spente—si ridestano, si ravvivano in quell'ambiente tranquillo, sereno, e vi trovano un momento di pace; cosicchè il pensiero nostro—che il fascino dell'arte ha saputo staccare dalla realtà della vita—vola liberamente ad altri tempi, quando dietro i scintillamenti degli sfarzosi cancelli che sbarrano, coi loro bronzi, le navate s'intravedeva la biancaveste del monaco, che s'avanzava a schiudere ai visitatori il sacro recinto: quando la figura solitaria del Certo sino animava la calma dei porticati, dileguava nell'ombra dei corridoj.”

monastery presents a critique to the cataloguing project of Adolfo Venturi, suggesting that singular attention to the process of inventory could impede a historical understanding of the work of art itself.

Painters of the *Scuola di Posillipo*, active in Naples and the Italian south in the mid-19th century, also sought to reconstruct the monastic pasts of the newly converted complexes, especially the Certosa di San Martino. The group included both local artists and painters from abroad, who painted for a tourist clientele taking the Grand Tour. Pictorially, they synthesized the lessons of the classical landscapists of Claude and Poussin with the plein-air and romantic visions of Corot and Turner.⁵¹ The Mechelen-born painter Frans Vervloet was known for painting church interiors, and exhibited an interior scene of the Treasury of the Certosa di San Martino (fig. 5) at the first Italian National Exhibition in Florence in 1861.⁵² The Naples-born Gabriele Carelli, who painted for the Duke of Devonshire in the 1840s and became a member of the Royal Society of London in 1874, depicted a scene of the Courtyard of the Certosa di San Martino (fig. 6). His paintings of the church were exhibited in the city of Naples in 1851 and again in 1860.⁵³ Both paintings of the monks in San Martino evoke an earlier era of aristocratic opulence, not of a monastery reduced to six members and shut out from the large church, as recorded in the local Neapolitan paper *Il Pongolo* in 1867 (in the midst of its conversion to a monument).⁵⁴ In their contrast from the present-day realities of the monasteries, these paintings evoke the dramatic social transformations sweeping across the new Kingdom—San Martino's life as a center of monastic opulence was past, but the complex could still evoke this not-so-distant memory for painters. Paradoxically, the recent past of San Martino became more distant than the ancient past of the plaster cast.

Conclusions

Considered together, the plaster cast and the monk evoked a series of paradoxes, complicating the prospective mission of the superintendency of providing a cultural vision of Massimo D'Azeglio's dictum. These paradoxes, however, were perhaps the most fitting way of capturing the peninsula's cultural history: they made the distant past of antiquity intimately present, and the recent past of monastic splendor a fanciful evocation. The inclusion of monasteries as sites of national heritage, however, reveal that the national superintendency, and especially Giuseppe Fiorelli, recognized that the new nation's cultural patrimony extended beyond antiquity to more recent eras.

The residents of the suppressed monasteries played a peculiar role in the formation of the cultural patrimony of the modern Italian state. While they were representatives of an old social system, they also contributed (as the catalogues of Montecassino and Cava dei Tirreni attest) to—at times presenting an intellectual critique of—Adolfo Venturi's project of inventory and cataloguing. Enlightened antiquarian, superstitious charlatan, and educator, the monk could now also be seen as the curator of cultural history for the new Italian kingdom.

⁵¹ For a review of the Posillipo School, see Renato Ruotolo, *La Scuola di Posillipo* (Sorrento: Franco Di Mauro, 2002), 5–14.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 153.

⁵³ Caroline Juler, *Les Orientalistes de l'École Italienne* (Paris: ACR Édition, 1985), 80–81. Gabriele Carelli made a trip to the Near East with the Duke of Devonshire, where he made views of the cityscapes of Cairo and Jerusalem.

⁵⁴ Extract from *Il Pongolo di Napoli in Causa*, “A Proposito,” 6.



Fig. 5: Franz Vervloet, View of the Treasury Chapel of San Martino, painting, 1848, Naples, Museo Nazionale di San Martino, Archivio Fotografico Luciano Pedicini.



Fig. 6: Gabriele Carelli, View of the Cloister of San Martino, painting, 1853, Naples, Museo Nazionale di San Martino, Archivio Fotografico Luciano Pedicini.

More recent histories of Italian art have questioned the intellectual and moral legitimacy of even attempting to define “Italian” art as a cultural phenomenon that is distinctive of the modern state of Italy. In his 1979 essay about the periodization of Italian art in the *Storia dell’arte italiana* (an anthology that updated Adolfo Venturi’s series from the early decades of the century), Giovanni Previtali questioned the pertinence of the adjective “Italian” to describe the art of the peninsula: “the Selinunte metopes, the Ravenna mosaics, the Romanesque of Padua are sublime episodes in the history of humanity, but they had no part to play in the history of Italian art “[...(until)] Italians of the decadent movement reintegrated them into their own national consciousness.”⁵⁵ In his 1983 book, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson characterized the idea of the modern nation state as a fabrication of the 19th century.⁵⁶

Of course the ministry’s effort, as represented by the initiatives of Fiorelli, Cavalcaselle, and Venturi, was a bureaucratic construction. In establishing a peninsula-wide network, however,

⁵⁵ Giovanni Previtali, “La periodizzazione della storia dell’arte italiana,” *Storia dell’Arte Italiana. Parte Prima: Materiali e problemi, Volume primo. Questioni e metodi*, ed. Giovanni Previtali (Turin: Giulio Einaudi ed., 1979) 3-95, 9. “Le metope di Selinunte, i mosaici di Ravenna, il romanico padano, sono episodi sublimi della storia dell’umanità, ma non entrano a far parte della storia dell’arte italiana nel VI secolo a.C., nel VI d.C., o nel XII, ma partire dal XVIII, quando gli italiani della decadenza li riscoprono e li integrano nella propria coscienza nazionale.”

⁵⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

they invited dialogue between regional and national audiences, and between the past and the present.