

Pellizza da Volpedo (1868-1907)

PELLIZZA'S WORLD: FROM VOLPEDO TO TORTONA

The landscapes of an artist a journey to discover the times, sites and works of the painter of The Fourth Estate

PELLIZZA'S BIOGRAPHY

Giuseppe Pellizza was born in Volpedo in 1868 into a family of small landowners. At the beginning of the nineties, having completed his academic studies at some of the most important Italian academies of his time (the Brera in Milan, the San Luca Academy and the French Academy in Rome, the school run by Macchiaiolo painter Giovanni Fattori in Florence, the Carrara in Bergamo, and the Ligustica in Genoa), he decided to move permanently back to Volpedo to live and work. While Pellizza practiced a realist style at the onset of his career, in the early nineties he began to take notice of the pointillist paintings by his contemporaries, the artists Giovanni Segantini, Gaetano Previati and Angelo Morbelli (with whom he forged links of friendship). This exposure, together with his exchanges with another pointillist, Plinio Nomellini, prompted him to explore the technique, which he quickly adopted.

The family circle is further consolidated by his marriage to Teresa Bidone in 1892, with whom he had two daughters, Maria and Nerina.

These years saw him absorbed in defining his technique, which was experimented in *In the hayloft* (1893). With his completion of *Laundry in the sun* (1895), he had achieved mastery of the method. He also merged the technique with realist narrative in *Dashed hopes* (1895), and with symbolist imagery in *The mirror of life* (1898). Concurrently, in 1892, he painted *Ambassadors of hunger*, which demonstrated his growing interest in social issues. Through the study of relevant historical and philosophical texts and by closely following contemporary events he developed his socially inclined ideals. He translated these into painting, first with *The human tide* (1895), and then with his masterpiece, *The fourth estate*, which he worked on from 1898 to 1901. Pellizza's self-awareness regarding his role as an artist and his cultural background are manifest in his *Self-portrait* (1897-99).

Having reached artistic maturity, he devoted himself to important symbolist works like *The sun* (1904) and a five-panel painting cycle on love through the stages of life. He was still working on this project when he died in Volpedo in 1907.

HIS BOND WITH HIS BIRTHPLACE

"I live the greater part of the year here in Volpedo"

"I work incessantly, here at my retreat, where I am now more comfortable than before as I have had my studio enlarged so I can work on large-scale canvases. It appears as though I live in isolation, but in truth I do not because of my friendships with colleagues and intellectuals."

(G. Pellizza to A. Callatrone, December 12, 1896).

VOLPEDO THE STUDIO

The studio is located on the western outskirts of the village. Thanks to careful restoration, carried out between 1990 and 1994, it has been brought back to its original state. It consists of a large room (7 x 8.30 x 5.60 mts), that Pellizza had built alongside his house in 1888. In 1896, it was enlarged and a skylight, designed by the painter, was added. In 1966, Maria and Nerina, the painter's daughters, donated the studio to the Municipality of Volpedo so it would be accessible to the general public and to scholars "for educational purposes." At that point in time the external staircase was added (the original entrance was from the interior of the house).

The studio still houses the painter's tools, including items from his everyday life, his books, his considerable correspondence and some significant paintings. Among these are the portraits of his parents, an oil painting of himself as a young man and another of himself at a more mature stage, a charcoal drawing on canvas which is specifically related to the self-portrait belonging to the Uffizi Gallery, as well as preparatory drawings for *The fourth estate*.

Today, the studio - one of the few nineteenth-century ateliers open to the public - is not only a place to memorialize Pellizza, but an active centre which gives visitors an in-depth understanding of Pellizza's sensitivity, culture and personality.

PELLIZZA'S SITES

Between 2000 and 2001, an itinerary dedicated to Pellizza's sites was established. In the village streets and squares there are ten large-scale copies of his paintings. They are situated in places that enable visitors to compare the real places with the paintings they inspired. The copies stand on replicas of Pellizza's easel, which he used all his life to paint en plein air. The original easel can be seen in the studio.

The itinerary, realised through collaboration between the Municipality of Volpedo, the Province of Alessandria and the Region of Piedmont, is part of the "Appreciation of artists' sites in the Province of Alessandria" project and is a veritable open-air museum in which the visitor is guided on a journey through Pellizza's Volpedo.

VOLPEDO PIAZZA QUARTO STATO (THE FOURTH ESTATE SQUARE)

"The scene takes place in a country village during the summer. It's about half-past ten in the morning. Two farmers are walking towards the onlooker, as they have been chosen to plead their common cause with the landlord by the large, ordered group of people walking behind them [...]" These were the words Pellizza used in 1892 to describe his plan for a painting with a social theme whose aim was to embody the ideal of "an art not for art's sake but for humanity's sake." This project was completed with *The fourth estate* (1898-1901), after having been developed in the *Ambassadors of hunger* and *The human tide*. Thanks to

a series of careful restorations done in the last decade, the little square, which was Pellizza's setting for this monumental painting (2.93 x 5.45 m), has the same dimensions and the same views it had in the nineteenth century. Visitors can stand where Pellizza did (the exact spot is marked by a street lamp), with the Palazzo Malaspina behind them. They can easily imagine the scene reproduced in the painting as the surroundings are more or less the same. There are also stone squares set among the cobblestones of the square to mark the positions of the three people in the foreground of the painting and those of the crowd in the background. The sun-dial, which in Pellizza's times was on the wall of the house facing the Palazzo, has been recreated (based on a design by Luciano Agnes). It still measures the passage of time in a place which maintains the same rhythms of life of a century ago, steeped in the same silences and colours.

VOLPEDO

THE MUSEO DIDATTICO

In order to present the world and art of Pellizza to students and amateur art lovers, an educational museum has been established in the Palazzo Torraglio, in Piazza Quarto Stato. Overseen by Aurora Scotti, the Curatorial Director of the Pellizza Museums, it has been especially created to present Pellizza's art and life to students and the general public.

There are six rooms to visit. Didactic texts, photographs, documents and various items present, in various sections, Volpedo and Pellizza, the painter's family and his biography, tracing Pellizza's artistic development from realism to symbolism, focusing in particular on his cycles devoted to the themes of love and nature. Special attention has been given to the "making" of a work of art, utilizing, in particular, The procession (a crucial work he painted when he was making the transition to pointillism), and The fourth estate, and including an extensive examination of Pellizza's development of this painting during the course of the nineties.

Other sections of the museum are devoted to the analysis of Pellizza's painting technique. These explore the way he worked and the materials he utilized - the pigments, the supports, the canvases, the frames - as well as his use of rhythm, form, and light within his compositions.

The Museo Didattico maintains the highest educational goals and has met with great success. Its aim is to introduce even very young students to the world of art, as well as to allow university students to conduct research at a more advanced level.

ONE PAINTER, ONE NAME, ONE LAND

When Pellizza, having finished his studies, made the difficult decision to live in Volpedo, he reinforced a tight and unbreakable bond with the people and the places of his birthplace. As a result, he painted a series of works that even today cannot be completely understood without seeing the places where they were created. Fortunately, the village of Volpedo and the area around it have had the good fortune to remain virtually unchanged since the nineteenth century. Visitors can fully comprehend how this place contributed to the artistic growth of the painter of The fourth estate, he being one of the most important Italian artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The artist's studio in via Rosano, the Museo Didattico, the Piazza Quarto Stato, and the sites where Pellizza painted his masterpieces are the key points of a visit to Volpedo, a visit which must be complemented and completed by visiting the Art Gallery of the Cassa di Risparmio di Tortona Foundation. Here one whole room is dedicated to exhibiting the artist from Volpedo, and through a silloge of many of his important works, the art lover can deepen his knowledge and appreciation, always in the same climate and atmosphere which so inspired Pellizza.

TORTONA

THE C.R. TORTONA FOUNDATION

ART GALLERY

After visiting Pellizza's studio in Volpedo, and the places which inspired the greater part of his work, one can learn more about his artistic milieu at the art gallery of the Cassa di Risparmio di Tortona Foundation.

The gallery, which opened to the public in 2001, is located in a medieval building known as the palazzetto medievale, a location steeped in history, wherein it houses a collection which testifies to the brilliance of Tortonese painters. In addition to Pellizza, these include Barabino (1883-1950), Saccaggi (1868-1934), Patri (1883-1952), Dossola (1887-1970), Boccalatte (1885-1970), Cuniolo (1903-1976), Sala (1876-1960) and Leddi (born 1930).

Here Pellizza's works, (eighteen in all between oils, sketches and charcoal drawings), the most significant number in a public collection, shows his life's journey in artistic terms and follows his artistic development from his early experiments when he was a young painter at the Brera (Self-portrait, 1885-86), to the genre painting - from portraiture to landscape - which he executed during the second half of the 1880s. Several of these presage his interest in social themes (The emigrant's wife, 1888). The Holy Family (1892) - one of the only religious images Pellizza ever painted - evidences his nascent use of the pointillist method. The technique becomes more apparent in the portraits of Giovanni Cantu and Sofia Abbati (both 1895), and in My Mayor (1903). Pellizza's working procedures in his major works, whose projection phase is realised in the drawings in which he already determined the composition and light effects, can be clearly seen in The drowned man (1894) and The dead child (1903). The recent acquisition of The countryside near Volpedo, area of San Rocco (1897, illustrated) significantly contributes to understanding the artist's growth, testifying to his predilection for the rotund shape, as well as a further interpretation of the theme of the countryside, "The canvas distinguishes itself for the tenuous tones and shadowy background, which reverberate in the foreground and where colour and light create a very soft and delicate atmosphere" The dialogue of Pellizza's paintings with contemporary cultural context has recently been enriched by the works of some Italian masters from between eighteen and nineteen hundred: "Cantiere" (1897) by Raffaello Gambogi, Veduta di Colico (1878) by Eugenio Gignous and Ultimi pascoli (1904 c.a, illustrated), an extremely representative work by Carlo Fornara.

Such a comparison is further illuminated by the presence of artists very much connected to Pellizza both in human and artistic terms: Plinio Nomellini, with Piazza caricamento a Genoa (1891, illustrated), a masterpiece of plein air painting characterised by an explicit content with pronounced social undercurrents, and Angelo Morbelli, whose painting Mi ricordo quand'ero fanciulla (1903) a mature scientific pointillist work, shows a moment of life inside the Pio Albergo Trivulzio di Milano.

These recent acquisitions indicate the beginnings of a far-reaching project, which, starting with Pellizza, aims at creating an important pointillist pole and at enriching the cultural opportunities offered by the Pellizza museums in Volpedo and Tortona.