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GENOA: LE STRADE NUOVE AND THE SYSTEM OF THE PALAZZI DEI ROLLI

"I am now in a beautiful city, a truly beautiful city, Genoa. You walk on marble; everything is marble – stairs, balconies, palaces. The palaces touch one another; walking in the street you look up and see the great patrician ceilings, all painted and gilded."

Letter to Alfred Le Poittevin, 1st May 1845 – Correspondance, Gustave Flaubert

That soul of the Republic of Genoa that, by the turn of the 16th century, decided to face the world to show off its power, is intense, almost tangible in its daring vanity. It is evoked in the frescoes overflowing with mythological celebrations of the so-called *Magnifici*, it is reflected in the mirrors multiplying the abundance of the golden decorations in the rooms, it runs along the marble staircases, to finally mingle with the flowers of a secret garden. Genoa la *Superba* – the proud – still lives inside the *Palazzi dei Rolli*, icons of its golden age, and stands out on the opulent *facades* of the palaces along the *Strade Nuove*, to get lost in the *caruggi*, in the shade of those alleyways where the boundary between noble and popular, sacred and profane is blurred. How did the system of *Palazzi dei Rolli* start? Back in 1576: the most prestigious families of the Republic had already erected their sumptuous residences in the so-called 'new streets', the *Strade Nuove* (Via Balbi and Via Garibaldi, built in the 16th century), but the city lacked a royal court suitable for lodging illustrious guests. To fill this gap, the Senate decreed a sort of 'public lodging' system delegating the hospitality for state visits to the families who owned the new palaces. For this purpose, a list, or *Rollo*, of public lodging was set up. Over a hundred palaces were classified, competing to reach an ever-higher level of elegance. Nowadays, 42 palaces are protected by UNESCO: the list and the information concerning the visits can be found on www.rolliestradenuove.it.



CULTURAL HERITAGE

UNESCO DOSSIER: 1211
PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: VILNIUS, LITHUANIA
DATE OF INSCRIPTION: 2006

CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: As a universal model of ingenious adaptation of architecture to the territory and the needs of the economic and social system, the *Strade Nuove* and *Palazzi dei Rolli* are the first case in European history where a public authority developed a consistent urban plan associated to a 'public lodging' system.





“There is a wonderful crowd in the streets. When, in the evening, you leave the hotel, the streets are full of people. Then you move aimlessly in the crowd, this way, that way, zigzagging about, you live together with the crowd, you merge with it spiritually and you start to believe that there may be in fact a universal soul.”

Inspired by the words of love Dorn pronounces in *The Seagull* by Chekhov, we delve into the streets ‘full of people’, walking along the Strade Nuove.

In Via Balbi, lose yourself in the game of mirrors of the gallery inside **1 Royal Palace**, before following the university students attending lessons under the frescoed vaults of **2 Palazzo Balbi-Senarega**. Then head to Via Garibaldi, a concentration of the best late Renaissance and Baroque residential architecture. Let’s start from Piazza della Meridiana, the square where we can easily recognise **3 Palazzo della Meridiana**, one of the palaces on the Rolli list, for the sundial painted on its facade. Our destination is **Musei di Strada Nuova**, a diffused museum whose exhibition itinerary leads to three palaces **4 Palazzo Bianco**, **5 Palazzo Rosso** and **6 Palazzo Doria-Tursi**. The collections range from painting to sculpture, from decorative

arts to numismatics, including masterpieces such as *Ecce Homo* by Caravaggio, the alluring *Saint Sebastian* by Guido Reni and the portraits painted by Van Dyck, as well as paintings by Rubens, Zurbarán, Mattia Preti, Veronese, Strozzi. These palaces also keep antiques like the Guarneri violin that belonged to Paganini. However, what is really impressive is the architecture itself, with the surprise effect of Palazzo Rosso’s mezzanine, where the ‘cave room’ and the adjacent alcove, with its scenic plaster reproduction of a draping over the bed, are a unique case of private premises in these palaces used for public lodging. Let’s continue our tour in Via Garibaldi and visit the **7 secret garden of Palazzo Lomellino**, going up the hill, hidden behind the nymphaeum. Pass

by **8 Palazzo Carrega-Cataldi**, dating back to 1561, now headquarters of the Chamber of Commerce, **9 Palazzo Pallavicini-Cambiaso**, whose facade in white marble and grey stone dates back to 1558, and **10 Palazzo Gambaro**, one of the first palaces erected in this street. Here, we will leave the *Strade Nuove* for a panoramic and poetic detour. “When I decide to go, I will go to Heaven with the Castelletto lift”, Caproni wrote in his poem *L’ascensore*. So, we also decide to ‘ascend to Heaven’ by this **11 lift** and reach **12 Belvedere Montaldo**. Once back in town, after visiting **13 Cathedral of San Lorenzo**, we dare get into the Old Town maze searching for Piazza Pellicceria, the square where our tour of the Rolli palaces will end with **14 Palazzo Spinola**, today home to the National Gallery.



GENOA, CITY OF POETRY AND MUSIC

“The vaulted red palace with its large arcade smiles: / Like Niagara falls / It sings, smiles, the rigorous symphony varies, fertile, urgent in the sea: / Genoa, sing your song!”

Orphic Songs, Dino Campana

It seems that only poems and songs have been granted the privilege to sing the complexity of Genoa’s soul. In 1914, the poet Dino Campana dedicated the last poem of his *Canti*

orfici to Genoa, to prove that this city is the ideal destination of his oneiric journey. Giorgio Caproni, who was born in Livorno but lived in Genoa by choice, in his *Genova di tutta la vita* said that: “Genoa is me. I am made of Genoa”. *La Superba* also gave birth to Eugenio Montale, who dedicated a poem to Corso Dogali, where his childhood home is. Among the several songwriters who were inspired by the lights and shadows of its historic centre are Luigi Tenco, Umberto Bindi, Gino Paoli, Bruno Lauzi, Ivano Fossati and, obviously, Fabrizio De André: the link between *Faber* (his nickname) and his home town can be found in the pages of *La Genova di De André* by Giuliano Malatesta.



"GENOA MY WHOLE CITY. / GERANIUM. POWDER KEG. / GENOA OF IRON AND AIR, / MY BLACKBOARD, SANDSTONE. / GENOA CLEAN CITY. / BREEZE AND ASCENDING LIGHT. / VERTICAL GENOA, / VERTIGO, AIR, STAIRS."

Genoa is a city that moves visitors: as Giorgio Caproni said in his poem *Litania*, even younger travellers will be amazed by its complexity. You can start the visit from the panoramic lift of **1 Bigo**, the cutting-edge

infrastructure designed by Renzo Piano, a sort of metal spider with its legs reaching up to the sky: once you reach the top, suspended at a height of 40 metres, the view of the historic centre and the piers is breathtaking. Once back on the ground, grown-ups and kids will find out that *Porto Antico* (Genoa's ancient port) is tailor-made for children, and not just for the long pedestrian promenade. The area includes the **2 Porto Antico swimming pool**, with a small pool for young swimmers, and some irresistible attractions, such as the **3 Aquarium of Genoa**, where thousands of animals and plant species float and swim in over 70 tanks, the **4 Città**

dei Bambini e dei Ragazzi, a space specifically devised for children where, through play and experimentation, they can learn more about science and technology. At the end of the pier there is the **5 Barge Island**, a floating platform where you can feel as a sea dog, and the iconographic glass bubble of the **6 Biosphere** containing a piece of rainforest. Moored among the piers you can see the vessel called **7 Neptune**: it was the set of the movie *Pirates* by Roman Polanski and anticipates the incredible collection of ancient boats, rebuilt full-size, and nautical instruments displayed inside the **8 Galata Maritime Museum**. Besides immersive experiences (you can get on board a military submarine!), the museum includes a section, both playful and moving, dedicated to the Italians who migrated overseas in order to reach the New World. The same theme is dealt with at **9 MEI – National Museum of Italian Emigration**, a new entry among Genoa's museums, where visitors can create their own passport and, with a digital wristband to access interactive stations, can set off on a journey made of videos, maps, installations and a maze. The last visit of this itinerary to discover maritime Genoa is the iconic **10 Lanterna**, the 117-metre-high lighthouse that has been guarding the port and the city since 1128 and is the tallest lighthouse in the Mediterranean sea.

Genoa has a close relationship both with the sea and the hills. In its inland, youngsters can experience the right dose of 'vertigo' starting from **11 Zecca-Righi funicular** to reach **12 Righi Adventure Park** where, safely harnessed, you can jump like Tarzan among the trees of Parco Urbano delle Mura e dei Forti. The most contemplative souls can look into the mysteries of the universe at **13 Righi Astronomical Observatory**.



GENOA in books

Reading suggestions to understand Genoa's "universal soul".

• **Palazzi di Genova**, Peter Paul Rubens (1622). Overwhelmed by the wonderful refinement of the noble residences where he was invited to stay several times between 1604 and 1606, Rubens decided to show Antwerp's aristocracy the typical Renaissance housing model that he had come across in Genoa la Superba. So, he wrote an 'operetta', according to his own words, where he reproduced the layouts and architectural sections of the palaces that particularly impressed him. Nowadays his book testifies the original structure of 31 palaces and four churches of 17th-century Genoa.

• **Correspondance**, Gustave Flaubert (1887). In this collection of letters published in Italy and edited by Giuseppe Marcenaro, the French novelist expresses his fascination for Genoa, that he finds hard to leave to carry on with his journey.

• **The Seagull**, Anton Chekhov (1895). The renowned Russian playwright visited Genoa a year before writing this play where he pays homage to the city through Doctor Dorn's words.

• **Orphic Songs**, Dino Campana (1914). *Genova* is the closing poem, a final message at the end of the troubled poet's initiation journey.

• **Sei stato felice, Giovanni**, Giovanni Arpino (1952). Arpino's first novel is a raw story set in the *caruggi* (Genoa's alleyways) and the port, taking us back to the afterwar period, when the city was in ruins, but full of energy for redemption.

• **Diario del '71 e del '72**, Eugenio Montale (1973). This collection contains the poem *Corso Dogali* dedicated to the vibrant road where the famous author of *Cuttlefish Bones* was born.

• **Genova di tutta la vita**, Giorgio Caproni (1983). This collection of poems dedicated to la Superba, a sort of author's alter ego, includes *L'ascensore* (1948-49) and *Litania* (1956).

• **Il filo dell'orizzonte**, Antonio Tabucchi (1986). Tabucchi lived and taught in Genoa for twelve years. This crime story is set in an unspecified seaside city, but the typical views of the Ligurian capital can be easily recognised. "He went to the lifts going up to the hills, beyond the frame of the buildings that are like bastions for the city."

• **La regina disadorna**, Maurizio Maggiani (1998). *Ecce Homo* by Antonello da Messina, one of the masterpieces kept in Palazzo Spinola, is mentioned in this tale set between Genoa's port and a lost island in the Pacific Ocean.

• **La Genova di De André**, Giuliano Malatesta (2019). An account of the 35 years the famous Italian songwriter spent in Genoa, his friendship with other artists and his night walks in the *caruggi*.

• **La fine è ignota**, Bruno Morchio (2023). The author, who also created the private investigator Bacci Pagano, loved by many readers, assigns to a new character, Mariolino Migliaccio, a very complicated investigation taking him from the shadows of the *caruggi* to the most sumptuous villas in Genoa.

Children's books:

• **Genova Sinfonia della città**, an animated short by Emanuele Luzzati, Sergio Noverini, Luigi Berio (2005). The extraordinary drawings dedicated by Luzzati to his hometown have been transformed into frames giving birth to a colourful and engaging 14-minute video showing Genoa's vertical architecture, symbols and port.