

**THE OBLIVION OF A RENAISSANCE MONUMENT:  
ANTONELLO GAGINI'S TRIBUNA IN THE CATHEDRAL OF PALERMO**

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This research looks at a Renaissance monument, the Tribuna, erected between 1510 and 1574 in the presbytery of Palermo's Cathedral. On account of its measures (24.5 meters high), number of life-sized statues (42) and material (Carrara marble), it was one of the most ambitious projects of its time. The Tribuna was also a unique example of its kind, for none of the other marble monuments of the period shared the same structural features. Its completion took 64 years, and involved the commitment of three generations of sculptors, all coming from the workshop of Antonello Gagini, who worked on the Tribuna until his death in 1534.

Between 1788 and 1801, the entire work was dismantled and partly destroyed in order to give the Cathedral a neo-classical look. The 42 statues and part of the decorative and architectonic elements were redistributed throughout the new interior of the church, and are still in place today. The process of re-fashioning an old building according to the neo-classical style was common at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, what is exceptional is the fact that almost the entire Tribuna was redistributed inside the building. If such redistribution certainly altered its original look, it also gave the Tribuna a new status within the refashioned Cathedral.

As a dismantled and recomposed monument, the Tribuna is a rather complex case study, which involves issues of historical reconstruction, heritage preservation and cultural identity.

## *The Tribuna and the Renaissance visual culture*

The historical information about the *Tribuna* that is available to us is sufficient to reconstruct the way it was displayed inside the Cathedral. It was a majestic structure exclusively made of Carrara marble, and divided into three tiers that covered the entire apse of the church. The 42 life-size statues were placed in niches, and arranged within an architectural framework decorated with grotesque, perspective reliefs and elaborate friezes. Only some minor parts of the white marble surface were originally painted in blue and golden yellow (most of the painting that is visible today was done during the 17<sup>th</sup> century).

Despite its uniqueness and *grandeur*, the Tribuna has been overlooked by scholars. Notable exceptions include Hanno-Walter Kruf's monographic book, *Antonello Gagini und seine Söhne* (1980), where a long section is dedicated to the Tribuna, and Marco Nobile's book, *Antonello Gagini architetto* (2010), which contains many references to the Tribuna. In 2007, Salvatore Rizzuti, together with his students of the Accademia di Belle Arti di Palermo, constructed a plaster model of the Tribuna mainly based on Kruf's reconstruction. The model, which is an extremely useful research tool, is now exposed at the Museo Diocesano of Palermo. This short list of works are a good starting point to approach the Tribuna. However, many aspects of this grand structure still await investigation, most importantly its relationship with the Italian Renaissance and the Spanish tradition.

The Tribuna is a particularly fitting case study to take up if we wish to understand the general features of Southern Italian Renaissance. The Archbishop of Palermo, Giovanni Paternò, commissioned the work, and his tomb is found in the crypt of Palermo's Cathedral. It is an elegant Roman sarcophagus on which Antonello Gagini, the author of the Tribuna, carved a lying portrait of the Archbishop. Paternò's wish to be buried into a Roman sarcophagus is a clear affirmation of his personal interest for the Classical heritage, and the choice of Antonello Gagini as the author of his portrait shows Paternò's trust in the artist's capacity to emulate the Ancient style.

The Archbishop was a powerful Sicilian aristocrat, close to the Spanish king Ferdinand II and to Pope Julius II, and it is very likely that he was aware of the great Roman and Spanish commissions of the time. By commissioning the Tribuna, Paternò surely wanted be part of this

magnificent era of art patronage under the leadership of the Pope and the crown of Spain. The Tribuna was commissioned in 1507, the same year Giulio II commissioned Bramante to project the marble shrine of the Santa Casa in Loreto, and barely one year after Michelangelo started the alas never completed Julius II's funerary monument (1506).

The Tribuna is full of references to the Classic Antiquity, both in terms of architectural features (round arches, niches surmounted with clypei, entablatures and pilasters), and in terms of style (the statues' postures, draperies and anatomies). Antonello Gagini's classicism probably came from a direct knowledge of Sicilian archeological remains, including the numerous roman sarcophaguses, which are still to be found in the Cathedral today. However, his style was also influenced by the Florentine and the Northern Italian traditions, which were important features of Antonello's artistic training. His father, Domenico Gagini, came from Bissone (Canton Ticino) and worked in Florence with Filippo Brunelleschi. Many similarities emerge also when comparing Antonello's works with Benedetto da Maiano's, whose sculptures were present in Naples and Calabria.

Another aspect of the Tribuna that is worthy of our attention is its possible relationship with the tradition of the Spanish *retablos*. As in the *retablos*, the Tribuna's monumental structure was conceived as a multi-tiered extension of the main altar, and it is very possible that Antonello Gagini generally looked at the tradition of the *retablos* when designing the structure of the monument. However, it seems to me that none of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish *retablos* could have been used as its main figurative source. Unlike the Spanish *retablos*, the Tribuna was not simply superimposed on the wall, but it became an integral part of it. From the standpoint of the nave, its general appearance was that of being perfectly merged with the architectural structure of the apse. This intimate connection between architecture and sculpture, combined with its classical features and monumental scale, makes of the Tribuna a unique work of art.

A relationship with the Spanish visual tradition might be found if we look at the Tribuna's innovative features as being themselves a source of influence for some aspects of the Spanish visual tradition. When comparing Gagini's work to some of the sculpted *retablos* produced in 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain, interesting and unexpected connections emerge. For instance,

Damián Forment's retablo in the Monasterio de Poblet in Tarragona, which was executed between 1527 and 1529, reveals many similarities both with the Tribuna and with other works executed by Antonello Gagini or his workshop.

This comparison becomes more significant in light of the fact that a few years after the completion of the above-mentioned retablo in Poblet, Forment worked in Alcaniz (Saragoza) on the funerary monument of Juan de Lanuza, a former viceroy of Sicily. Furthermore, one of the most generous financiers of Forment's *Retablo de la Asunción* in the Basílica de *Nuestra Señora del Pilar* in Zaragoza, and which had been commissioned twenty years before that in Poblet, was Beatriz de Lanuza, the mother of Juan de Lanuza. The close relationship between Damian Forment and the de Lanuza family needs to be further investigated, together with the possibility that he had knowledge of the ongoing construction of the Tribuna inside the Cathedral of Palermo during the second decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, just before starting his work on the retablo in the Monasterio de Poblet.

In 1980, Hanno-Walter Kruft pointed out the possibility that the Tribuna could have been looked at by some Spanish artists, and used as an example for the monumental Retablo of S. Benito in Valladolid by Alonzo Berruguete. The same connection of Berruguete's retablo with the Tribuna has been recently suggested by Manuel Arias Martínez (2011).

### *Reception of the Tribuna before and after it was dismantled*

During the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, local intellectuals wrote about the Tribuna as a wonder of Palermo. However, this did not help to prevent its dismantlement. Today, its 42 statues and other different fragments spread throughout the Cathedral are rarely objects of attention from scholars and institutions alike. Furthermore, because they are badly lit and covered with dust, the general public and visitors barely look at them. As part of my research, I intend to reconstruct the history of the reception of the Tribuna from its origin to the present day. In so doing, I aim to understand the reasons behind its dismantlement and unfortunate oblivion in modern times.

One of the causes for the destruction of the Tribuna could have been the Neo-classical perception of it as not being really classical, or even as being quasi Baroque (it must be remembered that parts of the Tribuna were painted in blue and gold). A different reason could explain its oblivion in Modern times. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the construction of Palermo's identity was based on the glorious Norman heritage, both by the local intelligentsia and foreign travelers (some of them expressing radical criticism towards the Neo-classical look of Palermo's Cathedral). The emphasis given to the Norman heritage, still dominant in the narrative on Palermo, could have been, and still be, the cause of the marginalization of the Tribuna both at a scholarly and mainstream level.

I truly hope that my research will contribute to bringing the importance of the Tribuna to the attention of scholars and institutions, and that it may lead to a restoration campaign, which would be crucial to preserve what is left of what used to be an extraordinary monument.