A vexillological treasure in Florence: a story in three acts

Roberto Breschi Centro Italiano Studi Vessillologici (CISV)

Abstract

A few years ago, the author of this paper found a short pamphlet dated 1869 in an antiquarian bookshop. This event has had surprising consequences. That pamphlet was in fact a catalogue of c.400 flags of cities, counties, schools, universities and various associations, brought to Florence from all over Italy in 1865 on the occasion of the celebrations of the 600th anniversary of Dante's birth, and then deposited in the San Marco Museum. A preliminary survey conducted by the CISV at the museum indicated that the flags had been lost in the disastrous flood of 1966, but some abandoned crates were subsequently found by chance in a cramped warehouse of the Pitti Palace. They contained many flags that we have unequivocally identified as those that were thought lost. Moreover, a search at the National Library of Florence led to the discovery of a manuscript with beautiful colour drawings depicting these flags. This paper describes the whole story. Images of some of the lost and recovered flags, and drawings of the manuscript in the National Library are shown for the first time outside Italy.

The story began a few years ago when I found an old booklet in an antiquarian flea market. Its cover wasn't very attractive, but its content would have looked interesting to every vexillologist, and the episode developed in a surprising way. The booklet was in fact a catalogue listing around 400 flags and standards of cities, counties, schools, universities, and various Italian associations. It was published in Florence in 1869 and consists of 26 pages with no illustrations.



Catalogue, title page

The title of the catalogue can be translated as: *Description of the Provinces, Municipalities, Academies, Universities, Institutions, Societies of Workers, etc. Which Have Donated Their Flag to the Town Hall of Florence.*

The first column of the catalogue shows the order number, the second gives a

brief description, and the third shows the inventory number associated with each flag or standard. A couple of pages are reproduced here.



Several flags or banners may appear under one inventory number; standards (gonfalons or banners) are listed separately after the flags

The title page indicates that the flags were brought to Florence from all over Italy on the occasion of the solemn celebrations of May 1865 marking the 600th anniversary of the birth of Dante Alighieri, the great poet and father of the Italian language. The most important information is this: the flags were 'deposited in the San Marco Museum' in Florence.



Catalogue, title page

In fact, apart from a large painting depicting the 1865 celebrations in Piazza Santa Croce, kept in the Palazzo Vecchio, no information on the 380 flags was available.

In total, there were 383 items (under 340 inventory numbers): 270 flags and 113 standards (banners, gonfalons).

The flags comprised: 221 municipalities, 4 provinces, 19 schools and universities, and 26 academies, societies, etc. The standards included: 90 municipalities, and 23 standards of other institutions. Thus, the majority (70.5 per cent) belong to municipalities.



Detail from 'Victor Emmanuel II at the Unveiling of the Monument to Dante in the Piazza della Signoria, Florence, 1865', Vincenzo Giacomelli (1841-90), oil on canvas

I therefore called Alfredo Betocchi, a Florentine member of the CISV, to look for the flags at the San Marco Museum. But to our bitter surprise there was no trace of the flags in the museum, and nobody knew anything about them. So a long and tiring search began, following a *fil rouge* that extended for a century and a half. Here are some steps along the path we managed to reconstruct by consulting the archives of libraries and other public and private institutions, through the patience and willingness of certain scholars. We also found some rare photographs, shown below.



Flags displayed in the Sala dei Gigli, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, 1878

From 1869 to 1878 the flags were displayed in the library adjacent to the San Marco Museum. In 1878 they were moved to the Palazzo Vecchio (Town Hall), first in the Sala dei Gigli (Hall of Lilies), then in the Sala delle Bandiere (Hall of Flags, so named for their presence). In 1908 the flags were transferred to the Risorgimento Museum. This museum changed site several times, until it was eventually dismantled in 1938. Most likely the precious collection was divided

and dispersed during this troubled period.

Around 1945-50 some flags were displayed at the Archives of the Risorgimento, a body in the complex of the former Convent of the Oblate. The storerooms of the Archives still held a dozen of the flags in fragile condition.



Flags displayed in the Archives of the Risorgimento, 1945-50

In 1953 a *Florence Capital* exhibition was held at the Palazzo Pitti. On this occasion some flags from the celebrations of 1865 were exhibited, since when every trace of the flags seemed to have been lost.



Flags displayed in the exhibition Florence Capital, Palazzo Pitti, 1953

However, after the disastrous floods of 1966 in Florence, known throughout the world, five or six flags were found. They had been reduced to rags and were thrown away. This suggested that the flags had been destroyed in the flood and so we presented this forlorn conclusion when reporting on our research at the annual CISV meeting. A disheartening end.

But this was not the end – and here the second act of the story begins.

Some two years later, I received a call from my friend Professor Alessandro Savorelli, a CISV member based in Florence. He had been asked by the director of the Fashion and Costume Museum (the Museo della Moda e del Costume) to examine 'certain old municipal flags' found in some cases kept in a cramped storeroom of the Palazzo Pitti.

There were presumed to be over 100 flags rolled up and placed in bulk in the cases. Their fabric had seriously deteriorated, and tended to tear with great ease. It was possible to isolate five examples. Two were in acceptable condition and a third was somewhat deteriorated. It was impossible to unroll the other two without destroying them. The silk tended to crumble as if it was thin glass.

But a great surprise awaited us. An inventory number was visible on the hoist of the flags, corresponding that allotted to the same subject in the catalogue of 1869. The cases contained some of the flags of 1865 that were believed lost.

The first example shows the municipal flag of Rimini (Inventory number 255). The inscription *VET(era) CIV(itas) ARIMINI* means 'The Ancient City of Rimini'. It is a silk flag, spectacular in its value and in the quality of its execution, richly embroidered and decorated in gold.





Flag of Rimini

Flag of Rimini: reconstruction

The second depicts the municipal flag of Cutigliano, a small commune in province of Pistoia, Tuscany (Inventory number 95). It is another beautiful flag, very well preserved. The sheet shows the civic colours of blue and yellow and the coat of arms painted in tempera in the centre.



Flag of Cutigliano, Pistoia



Flag of Cutigliano: reconstruction

Yet beyond the thrill of discovery, reality is far less agreeable.

This is an outstanding deposit of flags and banners, it is true.

However, we can only appreciate two or three of them. Their restoration looks very difficult and expensive.

At first glance, the flags appear to have deteriorated greatly and are extremely delicate to handle.

In addition, they require a difficult process of disinfestation (fumigation, inert gas maintenance and so on) because the presence of parasites has been confirmed. In short, few reasons for satisfaction.





Flag of Capitanata, or Foggia Province, Apulia

Flag of Capitanata: attempted reconstruction

But there is yet another act to the story. The surprises related to this find were not over. Vieri Favini, a CISV member, recalled that, during some heraldic researches at the National Central Library of Florence, he saw by chance an old manuscript with colourful reproductions of many flags, almost certainly those of the Dante celebration of 1865. In fact, this was indeed the case.

The images below allow us to admire the vibrancy and brilliance of some of the drawings.



Left, banner of Rimini; right, banner of Ascoli Piceno



Banner of Rimini (caption):the Inscription VET(era) CIV(itas) ARIMINI is omitted from the drawing but reported here



40. Município di Capolona 246. Município di Portomaggiore 93. Comune di Catigliano.

Municipal flags: Cutigliano, Capolona and Portomaggiore



San Gimignano, Milan and Cesena



Porto Maurizio, Sinalunga and Vernio



Cerreto, Sestino, Assisi



Certaldo, San Felice sul Panaro



Asciano, Viareggio, Rapolano



Figline Valdarno, Camerino, Cingoli

Note that even the finials are accurately reproduced. Many of these drawings are very important documents, for the literature on nineteenth-century Italian civic flags is exceptionally scarce.

To sum up, we now have the drawings but not yet the flags. So, to be continued ...

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