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SACRI MONTI OF PIEDMONT AND LOMBARDY

“Everyone who, whether for a short time and by chance, breathes in the air of a Sacro Monte realises that beyond the artistic forms which at first sight may seem simplistic and naive, there is much more. An impenetrable presence. [...] A ‘great archetype’: the Sacro Monte is [...] the ‘Renaissance’ Christian-Catholic and Franciscan version of the Holy Mountain.”

Andare per le Gerusalemme d'Italia, Franco Cardini

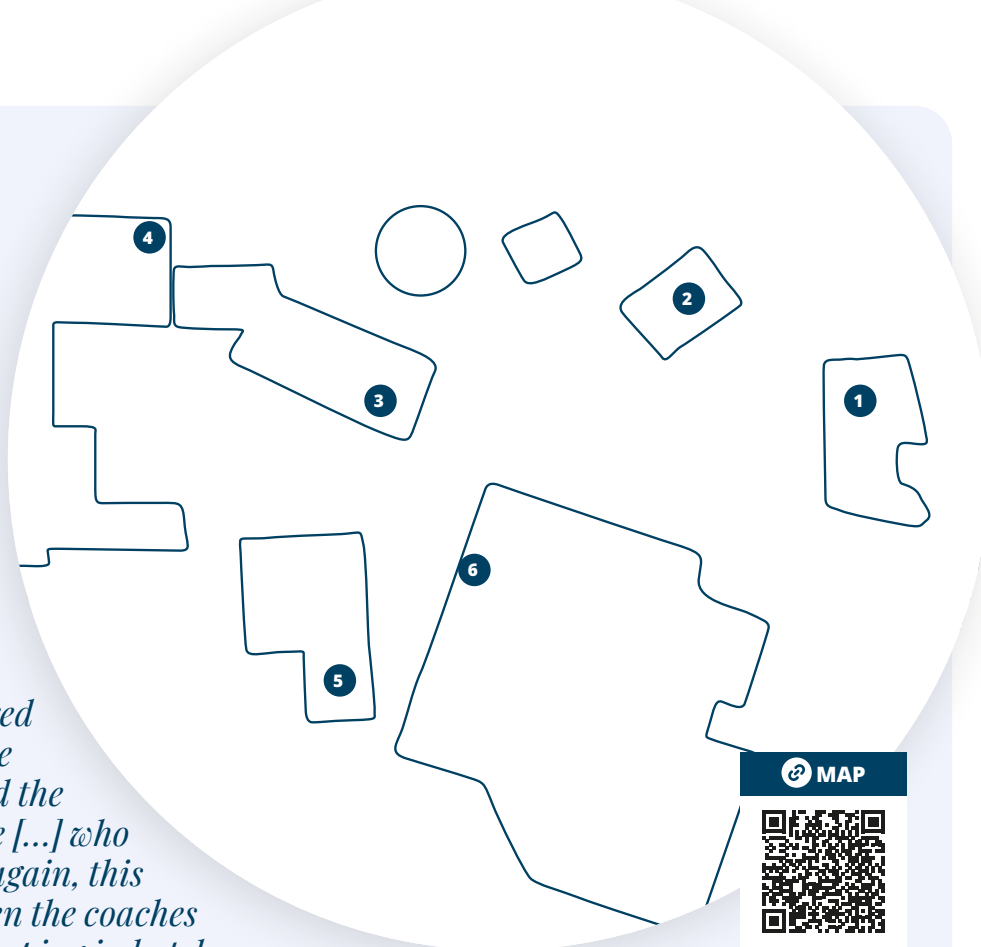
There are nine places protected by this serial UNESCO site – Crea, Domodossola, Ghiffa, Oropa, Orta, Ossuccio, Valperga, Varallo and Varese –, but overall there are 15 in north-western Italy. The phenomenon has its roots in the late 15th century, but became very popular between the 16th and the 17th centuries, in the time of the Catholic Counter-Reformation. It was the Franciscan friar Bernardino Caimi, after having spent many years in the Holy Land, who was the first to suggest a “New Jerusalem” in Varallo for all the pilgrims who were unable to take on the journey to the places of Christ. The devotional paths take advantage of the orthography of the mountainous places to evoke the landscapes and atmospheres of the Holy Land. In the chapels dedicated to the important moments in the lives of Christ, the Virgin Mary and some saints, the episodes are narrated in the clearest and most effective way possible. The *Sacri Monti* represent one of the most successful examples of a total work of art: architecture, sculpture and painting merge into something unique which has been integrated into the landscape of forests, hills and lakes. The most recent discoveries of architecture of the late Renaissance and later of the Baroque period were experimented in these complexes, developed by artists considered by Giovanni Testori as creators of “great mountain theatre.”



SERIAL CULTURAL LANDSCAPE
UNESCO DOSSIER: 1068REV
PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: PARIS, FRANCE
DATE OF INSCRIPTION: 2003



CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: The *Sacri Monti* in northern Italy represent a successful integration between architecture and art into a landscape of great beauty. Their creation, for educational and spiritual purposes, has deeply influenced the development of these architectures in the rest of Europe.



“The terracotta army of eight hundred statues which, from one chapel to the next, tell the story of the passion and the death of Our Lord [...] are the people [...] who lived in these mountains. Now and again, this silent crowd wakes up. At night, when the coaches have arrived and the tourists are sleeping in hotels and no functions are celebrated in the basilica.”

About fifty buildings on the rocky spur that dominates the town of Varallo, hundreds of sculptures (described by Sebastiano Vassalli in *Il gran teatro del Sacro Monte di Varallo*) and thousands of frescoed figures: the numbers of the Sacro Monte of Varallo, the oldest and most important of this kind of complex which dots the Western pre-Alpine arc, are impressive.

The path, which is spiritual and artistic at the same time, was conceived by Gaudenzio Ferrari, the director of an extraordinary narrative machine capable of emotionally involving the faithful, allowing them to identify themselves. Gaudenzio, and the artists that came after him in the next two centuries, mixed sacred events and popular characters using different techniques as well. Observe, for example, in the fifth chapel with the **1 Adoration of the Magi**, the wealth of the objects, the beards and the oriental robes of the figures, all life size,

whose story seems to expand on to the frescoed wall; or the crude narration of the eleventh chapel in the **2 Massacre of the Innocents**, with about thirty carved children; or even the surprising still life on the laid table of the **3 Last Supper**, with pieces in terracotta, wood, marble and papier maché. The use of contemporary clothes and physiognomies made it easier for pilgrims to identify with the scene and take part in it. As the Gospel's narration proceeds, the pathos of the representations also grows: Giovanni d'Enrico conceived the scene of

4 Ecce Homo on two superimposed levels and Pier Francesco Mazzucchelli, known as Morazzone, made his contribution by frescoing the interior with perfect illusionism. Fiction reaches its height in the chapel dedicated to the **5 Crucifixion**: here Gaudenzio Ferrari put on to the stage about ninety carved characters and, thanks to the combined use of plaster and fresco, created an immersive and vibrant atmosphere, capable of making a lasting impression. The pilgrimage ends in the **6 Basilica**, with the *Assumption of Mary* shining in its apse.



A MOUNTAIN THEATRE

“It's not making it up [...] to imagine Gaudenzio [...] wandering through the village; near evening, he stores his tools in the Chapel, [...] goes down, just before dusk, along the Sesia, when the shadows are already falling from the tops of the mountains on to the river and the plain, and [...] to imagine he feels growing in his heart the idea of a theatre, where, until then, there had only been small chapels, and with the strength with which the voice of his people was asking him, while here and there, in the woods

[...] lanterns were lit, and the women, holding their children close to them, crossed the roads on that day for the last time, already defeated by the fear of the spirits that the night would shortly have chased away from the mountains in all the paths of the Varalli villages.”

Il gran teatro montano, Giovanni Testori

Few authors have devoted such intense and passionate pages to a specific artist. From those that Giovanni Testori wrote in 1965 on Gaudenzio Ferrari, the main creator of the Sacro Monte of Varallo, there emerges the enormous charge of this new form of art which bypasses the old tradition to become a living form, of theatre to be precise.



“The Sacro Monte is a kind of ecclesiastical Rosherville Gardens, eminently the place to spend a happy day. We happened by good luck to be there during one of the great feste of the year, and saw I am afraid to say how many thousands of pilgrims go up and down. [...] The processions were best at the last part of the ascent; there were pilgrims, all decked out with coloured feathers, and priests and banners and music and crimson and gold and white and glittering brass against the cloudless blue sky.”

Set in breath-taking scenery, the complex of the Sacro Monte of Varese, described here by Samuel Butler in *Alps and Sanctuaries*, was built in the 17th century on the initiative of the Capuchin friar Giambattista Aguggiari. The main goals included fighting the Protestant Reformation, which had taken root in this frontier land from the other side of the Alps. The “sacred path” makes its way through 14 chapels splendidly conceived by Giuseppe Bernascone, each one focused on a Mystery of the Rosary. As in the other complexes protected by UNESCO, the interiors are populated by sculptures and frescoes which interact with one another, on a profoundly educational and mystic journey. Dionigi Bussola, Morazzone and Carlo Francesco Nuvolone are the names of the most famous creators.

Observe the serene domestic intimacy in the first chapel dedicated to the **1 Annunciation**, in contrast with the theatricality of the seventh one depicting the **2 Crowning with Thorns**, adorned by the frescoes by Morazzone, and even more with the dramatic **3 Crucifixion** in the tenth chapel, with the very tall cross which is about to be raised, alongside the crosses of the two thieves and surrounded by more than 50 statues. The “sacred path” ends in

the sumptuous **4 sanctuary** of the hamlet of **Santa Maria del Monte**, in the presence of a 14th century wooden statue of the *Virgin Mary with the Child*. We have to go back several centuries to discover that it was St Ambrose who brought the devotion for the Virgin Mary to this mountain and that under various strata of rock there is still a church from the Carolingian-Ottonian period (9th-10th centuries) and above all a **Romanesque crypt** which preserves 14th century frescoes. Do not leave the

hamlet without having visited one of its two artistic collections: the **5 Baroffio Museum**, if you do not want to miss any of the history of the sanctuary, or the **6 Lodovico Pogliaghi Museum**, a heterogeneous collection of archaeological, Renaissance, Baroque, exotic and rare pieces, put together by the architect and restorer of the Sacro Monte in a Wunderkammer characterised by an eclectic and fascinating “taste”.



THE MOUNT ON THE LAKE

“Varallo [...] has forty-four of these illustrative chapels; Varese, fifteen; Orta, eighteen; and Oropa, seventeen. No one is allowed to enter them, except when repairs are needed; but when these are going on, as is constantly the case, it is curious to look through the grating into the somewhat darkened interior, and to see a living figure or two among the statues; [...]. If the living figure does not move much, it is easy at first to mistake it for a terra-cotta one. At Orta, some years since, looking one evening into a chapel which the light was fading, I was surprised to see a saint whom I had not seen before; [...];

he was smoking a short pipe, and was painting the Virgin Mary’s face. [...] it was two or three seconds before I discovered that the interloper was no saint.”

Alps and Sanctuaries of Piedmont and the Canton Ticino, Samuel Butler

The devotional path between the chapels of the Sacro Monte of Orta, built on a forested plateau overlooking the lake in front of the island of San Giulio, is wholly dedicated to St Francis of Assisi. Begun towards the end of the 16th century, its construction continued until the 17th and 18th centuries, which is why the Renaissance style blends into Baroque and even into Rococo. The figure of Francis as the *alter ego* of Christ is illustrated very clearly from his birth to his canonisation, without overlooking the sacrifices, miracles and institutional events of the order.



'YOU ARE MINE YOU WHO ARE BLACK, MY BEAUTY, / AS BLACK AS THE INTENSE LAVA OF ETNA; / BEAUTIFUL LIKE ETNA'S SLOPES IN THE FINE SUNSHINE; / YOU ARE MINE, BECAUSE YOU ARE BLACK AND ARCAN E AND BEAUTIFUL, / MINE BETWEEN THE VEILS OF DREAMS AND THE IDEA, / MINE IN THE FORK BETWEEN DREAMS AND WORDS.'

When the first *Sacri Monti* were being built, Catholicism was threatened by the Protestant Reformation, which was widespread in Germany. The men of religion then decided to build some "miniature Jerusalems" to strengthen the people's faith and tell stories from the life of Christ or the Virgin Mary. There are nine *Sacri Monti* protected by UNESCO, all surrounded by gorgeous natural landscapes, forests, lakes and mountains. In this itinerary, we focus on the *Sacro Monte of Oropa*, whose sanctuary is dedicated to the Black Virgin Mary sung by Giovanni Camerana in the poem *A la statua*. In 1620, at the time when the chapels

of the **Sacro Monte of Oropa** were starting to be built and decorated, very few people could read and write: the majority of the population were illiterate. The only way to teach the people was through pictures that were easy to understand, immediate and above all of great impact, such as those described below. To get started, observe the frightening dragon placed in the **1 first chapel**: it was made of terracotta and, judging from its central position, appears to have a very precise meaning. It represents original sin. According to the Bible, Adam and Eve, the first inhabitants of the Earth, committed it, having picked the forbidden fruit from the tree in the Garden of Eden, as a snake suggested to them. The original sin would then have been cancelled thanks to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Now peep into the delightful little house in the **2 second chapel**: as Mary is being born, a whirlwind of little angels flutter right above the bed of her mother, Anna. Jump to the **3 eighth chapel**, where Jesus is finally born; again following the Bible story, the birth is set in a humble hut, similar to the one that many make for the Nativity scenes in their homes. Now go to the **4 tenth chapel** to discover the miracle of the Wedding at Cana, when Jesus turned water into wine. Observing the figures around the table, it will seem for a second that you too can take part in the banquet. Complete the visit to the *Sacro Monte* of Oropa in the **5 twelfth chapel**, dedicated to Paradise. Admire the angels playing original instruments of the time and try to spot at least Adam and Eve and the Virgin Mary. It will not be easy, as the scene is made up of no fewer than 156 statues!



KIDS



SACRI MONTI OF PIEDMONT AND LOMBARDY in books

Reading suggestions to get to know the history of the Sacri Monti.

• **Alps and Sanctuaries**, Samuel Butler (1881). The non-conformist English poet published *Alps and Sanctuaries of Piedmont and the Canton Ticino* in 1881, after having travelled in those places about ten years earlier. During his peregrinations, he discovered churches and chapels, but also met the local people whom he describes in a lively and pleasant way.

• **Versi**, Giovanni Camerana (1907). In 1894, the poet of the Scapigliatura group visited the valley of Oropa and

its sanctuary for the fourth time; seduced by the atmosphere of peace and spirituality, he dedicated a number of sonnets to the place, including one entitled after the enigmatic Black Virgin Mary.

• **Il gran teatro montano**, Giovanni Testori (1965). This volume brings together the five fundamental essays by Giovanni Testori on Gaudenzio Ferrari, *deus ex machina* of the *Sacro Monte* of Varallo. With descriptions that stick in the mind, it is the best key for anyone who wants to approach this mystical place.

• **Il mistero e il luogo**, Santino Langé (2008). The book is enhanced by the photographs by Claudio Argentiero and Umberto Armiraglio, in which the black and white images render

all the poetry of these nine extraordinary sites.

• **Il gran teatro del Sacro Monte di Varallo**, Giovanni Reale, Elisabetta Sgarbi (2009). The philosopher and historian Giovanni Reale gets into the heart of the spirituality of the place, thanks also to the photographs by Andrea Samaritani. The book is accompanied by a film directed by Elisabetta Sgarbi, in which the complex is shown in a completely new light.

• **Sacri Monti**, Guido Gentile (2019). One of the most recent books on this subject: a fascinating read which, starting from the prototype, that of Varallo, ranges over the whole corpus of the *Sacri Monti*, including those never built and the structures similar to them.