



THE OTHER OROPA

A Guide to the Monumental Cemetery of the Sanctuary

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In the ancient times at Oropa, as in many other places, people were buried under the floor of the old church: in fact many tombstones with inscribed names can be seen even now. But in 1830 burial inside a church was forbidden: therefore a new cemetery was built. It was located underground, beneath the first court of the sanctuary. The place was dark, cold and wet, and room was so limited that in practice it was impossible to build any imposing funerary monument there. So quite soon another cemetery was requested: for important people coming from Biella and surroundings being buried at Oropa was a sort of status symbol. The valley west of the moraine where the chapels of the Sacro Monte had been built was chosen for the purpose; the designer was Ernesto Camusso, an engineer from Turin. He took charge of that work in 1871 and the inauguration took place in 1877. The cemetery consisted of a chapel, a portico (about half of the present one) and an open field (much smaller than the present one) with tombs.

In 1884 Quintino Sella, the most remarkable politician ever born in Biellese, died: for his burial the engineer Carlo Maggia built a pyramid. Egyptian architecture was very fashionable in that period all over Europe, and particularly in Piedmont, especially as a sign of laicism in opposition to religion, and Sella had played an important rôle in the Italian decision to occupy Rome and put an end to the temporal power of the pope.

Therefore the pyramid – built in 1885 with blocks of local syenite – was located outside the cemetery, on the slope, in the middle of a beech wood. But very soon, following Sella's example, many important people decided to have a funerary chapel built for themselves and for their families in the same wood. So in 1888 a real, new Wood Cemetery was inaugurated and limited by a wall which at present is partly ruined. More room was requested again some decades later: the portico was made longer and in 1933-34 its two fronts, designed by Quinto Grupallo, an engineer from Biella, were built. The open field became much wider, in practice half a circle. At this point the nickname "Little Staglieno" started being used: in fact the famous cemetery of Staglieno in Genoa is rather similar because it has a portico (but a square, not a semicircular one) in its lower part and many chapels located in a wood along steep slopes.

Eventually, in 1967 a new double gallery on the left of the main entrance was built: the design, by the local architect Alessandro Trompetto, foresaw another similar gallery on the right, which was never constructed.

The cemetery of Oropa is interesting from many points of view: its location in a charming Alpine landscape, its general structure and the architecture of many private shrines, statues, paintings, burials of important people and original epigraphs.

The first group of monumental chapels built after Sella's pyramid is quite various: they show the several trends in architecture between the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries and till the end of the Second World War. In some of them (e.g. Maggia, Eugenio Bona, Righetti and Gallo tombs) sculpture dominates. In others we see an eclectic style with many Neoclassical elements (e.g. Zina, Trossi, Serralunga and Cridis chapels). Two of them are circular: Ferrua (1920) and Gualino (1922), the former designed by the architect Annibale Rigotti like a Bramante temple and the latter designed by the famous sculptor Pietro Canonica in a sort of palaeochristian style. Four have the shape of an ancient Egyptian *mastaba* mixed with Christian elements: Ugliengo (1914), Schneider (1929), Basilio Bona and Cerruti. The highest, biggest



and most eclectic one is the Rivetti chapel (1916), by Quinto Grupallo, strongly criticized at the time.

Many important architects and engineers worked here, both local (Giò Feroggio and his son Giulio, Nicola Mosso, Quinto Grupallo, Candido Porta, Arturo Rosazza) and foreign (Crescentino Caselli, Giovanni Battista Carra).

Among the tombs built after the Second World War we see two remarkable buildings: the Silvio Cerruti chapel, by the architect Michele Marelli from Milan (1953), which surprisingly anticipates many "postmodern" designs of the Eighties, such as Aldo Rossi's *Teatro del Mondo* which tried to replace the anonymous shapes of the International Style; and the Albino Botto Poala chapel, by the Ravizza designers from Milan.

During the Fifties and the Sixties an anomalous, original model of shrines becomes popular at Oropa – and almost only here, because of the Alpine environment: they are built like little mountain chalets, with roofs in wood and flat stones and with plaster outside: a way of showing that death is nothing but a continuation of normal everyday life. But wood and plaster are not so suitable here, they won't last long without frequent care: therefore that model soon gave place to a new and again monumental way of designing chapels, like the Aiazzone one by Giulio Carpano (1986) and the Savio one by Renato Boffa Ballaran (1972).

Finally, an interesting observation: the Magliola chapel (1931) is extremely similar to the Giordani Antonelli tomb in the Verano cemetery of Rome – where it catches the visitors' attention with its roof in flat stones, totally unusual there.

Among the rich heritage of works of sculpture we will point out some of the most remarkable ones. Two of the artists are of international standing: Leonardo Bistolfi from Casale Monferrato (1859-1933), the most important leader of Symbolism in Italy, and Odoardo Tabacchi from Ardena di Brusimpiano near Varese (1831-1905), who taught sculpture at the Accademia Albertina in Turin for decades and, starting from the achievements of his master and predecessor at the Albertina, the Swiss Vincenzo Vela, surpassed them with a personal interpretation of realism. Both of them left other important works in the province of Biella. To Tabacchi we owe the splendid marble group *La Carità* on the Aristide Ramella tomb: the veiled woman is both noble and sensual – in fact, he became popular all around Europe mainly for the sensual female figures he modelled so well. To Bistolfi we owe both the bronze reliefs of the Canepa tomb – notice the very feminine angels – and the two imposing marbles inside the Serralunga chapel, which at present unfortunately cannot be seen from outside: the portrait of Eugenia Savinelli Serralunga (1908) and *The family* (1922).

Two important bronze groups are commonly considered among the masterpieces of their authors, both born in Turin: the one on the Maggia tomb, by Edoardo Rubino (1871-1954), the sculptor of the huge *Victory* on the Colle della Maddalena above Turin, and the one on the Eugenio Bona tomb by Cesare Biscarra (1866-1943). That group is a singular mixture of Symbolism (the feminine figure in the back is a remarkable "laic icon" of death derived from Bistolfi's "modern Sphynx" on the Pansa tomb at Cuneo), family portraits and the history of the woollen trade. But sculptors from all the Italian regions worked for this cemetery. Among them we must point out the ones from Lombardy, besides Tabacchi: Stefano Argenti – a member of an important family of artists from Viggiù, whose best known one was Giosué – with the portraits of Fortunato Bora and especially Carlo Gastaldi; and Romeo Rota from Milan (portraits on the Cappio and Neri tombs). E. Burlando, whose works can be seen in the "real" Staglieno cemetery in Genoa, came from Liguria: he is the creator of the bronze angel on the Maggioli shrine. Sergio Vatteroni, a professor of the Academy of Fine Arts in Carrara where he was born in 1890, is the creator of the marble Christ in the Botto tomb; Giuseppe Nori from Venice (active in Turin and rather often in Biella and surroundings) modelled the portrait of Teresa Maina; Virgilio Audagna, who was born and died in France (Cannes 1903 – Menton 1994) but



worked in Turin, is the creator of the elegant bronze Christ on the Coda Cap tomb. In fact both Vatteroni and Audagna, authors of the big lateral portals of the new Oropa church, gave better proofs of their art in these funerary statues than in those rather conventional reliefs.

Gino Piccioni from Foligno, Umbria (1871-1941), who was also a good painter, for many years had his studio in Biella, where he died: many bronzes of his can be seen in the city (especially the monumental fountain *Fons vitae*) and in Biella cemetery. In the cemetery of Oropa we owe him the magniloquent bronzes of the Gallo chapel and of the Carpano-Maglioli shrine. Donato Gramegna came from Apulia and modeled the angels and the front decoration of the Albino Botto Poala chapel, carved in pink limestone; Carmelo Cappello was born in Ragusa, Sicily, where he is considered a very important artist (there is a museum of his works there), but lived in Milan and married a woman from the surroundings of Biella: many works of his can be seen in our province, and among them is the small but remarkable crucifix in the Ripa-Ronco-Blotto Baldo tomb.

Anyway most sculptures in this cemetery are by artists from Piedmont. In addition to the ones that we have already mentioned, we must remember at least Corrado Betta from Asti (1870-1935) for the woman on the Ciarletti tomb (it is not a portrait: a similar bronze stands on a tomb of Turin's cemetery), Celestino Fumagalli from Turin (1864-1941) for his quite original couple of bronze angels on the Uberti shrine, Emilio Musso from Turin as well (1890-1973) for the three imposing bronzes of the Righetti tomb (the tall woman in the middle looks like a wingless Victory), Leonardo Borgogno active in Turin (portrait of bishop Carlo Montagnini in the chapel) and Giuseppe Sartorio from Boccioleto (1854-1922), an important signature for the modest Amosso shrine.

Many sculptors who were born in Biella and surroundings worked for the cemetery at Oropa: the most remarkable ones are Stefano Vigna from Occhieppo Superiore (1884-1979: very expressive bronze portrait on the Simonetti tomb), Sebastiano Caneparo from Biella (1884-1971: portrait of the Gold Medal of the First World War Costantino Crosa, probably his masterpiece, and Gurgo-Vercellone portraits), Massimino Perino from Pralungo (1882-1954: marble portrait of Giovanni Cucco), Giovanni Coda Comotto from Cossila (1867-1938: portrait on the Caneparo tomb), Faustino Bider from Biella (1861-1968: monument to the bishop Natale Serafino in the chapel) and above all Giuseppe Bottinelli (1865-1934), the most important sculptor ever born in Biella. He was the son of Luigi Bottinelli (1836-1917), who came from Viggiù near Varese, a village that has been the homeland of hundreds of sculptors for centuries. Some works by Luigi can be seen in this cemetery: the Lombardi Clerici and the Marco Canepa tombs and above all the central monument inside the chapel, to the bishop Giovanni Pietro Losana. Giuseppe, who studied in Turin at the Accademia Albertina, largely surpassed his father: his works can be seen in Biella (starting from the Moses fountain in front of the cathedral, carved when he was twenty) and surroundings, but also elsewhere. The cemetery of Oropa shows many good specimens of his art, both in marble (Cambieri, Gurgo and G. B. Bona tombs) and in bronze (Zaffagnini, Gurgo Salice, Moretti, Aimone Gibel tombs and above all the family tomb, with an original group where the Angel of Death cuts the thread that an old spinner – his mother Giovanna – is spinning; besides stands the portrait of his father Luigi). Finally we must remember one of the best local sculptors of the last decades, Placido Castaldi, born in Pollone in 1925, for his crucifix in the Zanon chapel.

Two remarkable marbles in the cemetery raise questions as to their authors: *Hope*, in the Cantono-Baganasacco shrine, ascribed to Tabacchi by the literature but showing no signature on itself and the signature of Giuseppe Bottinelli on the surrounding stone structure; and the angel with child on the Aimonino tomb, a subject derived from the famous Pallestrini tomb by Vincenzo Vela now in the Modern Art Gallery of Turin, ascribed to Edoardo D'Elia by a contemporary paper but showing the signature "A Rossi / Torino".



As usual in cemeteries, paintings are much less common and important than sculptures: nevertheless we must remember Gino Piccioni's *Resurrection* inside the Gallo chapel, Vittorio Cavalleri's Christ on the Uberti shrine and Carlo Gaudina's *Pietà* on the Emilio Magliola chapel. Both Cavalleri (1860-1938: a good and well known author of portraits and landscapes) and Gaudina (1878-1937: nowadays his oils are often offered for sale at auction) were born in Torino. Among the more recent works we must not forget the original painting in the Deiro tomb by Francesco De Pasquale, born in Biella in 1949, the sculptor of the open air *Via crucis* on the hill next to the cemetery.

Many important people are buried in the Oropa cemetery: most of them, but not all, came from Biella and surroundings. The most famous is Quintino Sella (Mosso 1827 – Biella 1884), buried in his pyramid: he was both a statesman and a scientist. As a minister of finances (1862, 1864, 1869-73) he took unpopular decisions in order to improve the very bad financial condition of the newborn Italian kingdom. He supported the occupation of Rome in 1870 and the choice of Rome as the capital of the kingdom. He founded C.A.I., the Italian Alpine Club, he was president of the Accademia dei Lincei in Rome and he founded the professional schools in Biella.

Many other members of the Sella family, with varying degrees of kinship to Quintino, were buried in several tombs of this cemetery: among them we must remember Alfonso (1865-1907), one of Quintino's sons, teacher of physics at Rome university, who discovered the radioactivity of water; a more recent Alfonso (1913-2001), a good painter and sculptor but also a great botanist, photographer and researcher of the Biellese dialect; Corradino (1860-1933), another son of Quintino, deputy at the Italian parliament and mayor of Biella; Giuseppe Venanzio (1823-1876), Quintino's brother, who managed the family wool mills, promoted the Banca Biellese (nowadays Banca Sella is the most important private bank in Italy), became a great photographer and founded the Liceo in Biella; Massimo (1886-1959), a famous marine biologist (the city of Rovinj in Croatia, where he was in charge of the Marine Biology Institute until it became Yugoslavian, named a street in his memory); Pietro (1882-1971), a great palaeographer and sphragist; and Vittorio (1859-1943), a son of Giuseppe Venanzio, a pioneer of winter alpinism, an explorer (with the Duke of Abruzzi) and above all one of the best mountain photographers of any time.

Among the other important people buried here we must remember at least the following ones; a more complete list is in the guide.

Giuseppe Arnulfo (1797-1867), a local politician, was deputy in the national parliament from 1848 to 1857 and afterwards senator.

Augusto Avogadro di Vigliano (1832-1895) took part to the battles of the Italian First War of Independence (1848-49) at the age of 16 and 17; afterwards, as an officer of Bersaglieri, he took part in the expedition to the Crimea and fought in three important battles there; then he fought at San Martino (Second War of Independence, 1859) and Custoza (Third War of Independence, 1866), being awarded three military medals for valour.

Eugenio Bona (1854-1913) was a deputy, a manufacturer and a benefactor.

Ernesto Carpano-Maglioli (1887-1955) was a lawyer and a socialist deputy from 1946 to 1952.

Anton Dante Coda Cap (1899-1959), a member of the National Consult (1945-46), was president of the Istituto Bancario San Paolo di Torino, a very important bank, from 1946 to 1959.

Costantino Crosa (1889-1918), a hero of the First World War, was awarded the military gold medal for valour.

Mario Cucco (1896-1918) who also died during the First World War was awarded the silver medal.



Ignazio Dionisio (1863-1942), a great ornithologist, was president of the Academy of Medicine. Riccardo Gualino (1879-1964), very popular nowadays (a book was recently written and a film was made about his life), was a great entrepreneur in many different fields, from wood to cement, from artificial silk to cars and cinema. He founded many well known Italian firms like Snia-Viscosa, Rumianca, Lux Film; he was vicepresident of FIAT. He also was a great collector of fine art, and part of his collection is now in the Galleria Sabauda in Turin.

Luigi Guelpa (1843-1911) was a lawyer and a deputy at the national parliament.

Giovanni Pietro Losana (1793-1873) was the fifth bishop of Biella and the best known of all the bishops of the city because of his very intense activity. He took part in the First Vatican Council, where he was the oldest of all the bishops and one of the few that voted against the dogma of the pope's infallibility. He founded many institutions in Biella, among which are the school for girls (now Istituto Losana), the General Society of Mutual Rescue among Workers and the Cassa di Risparmio – a bank that is still active (by the way, the Cassa di Risparmio di Biella Foundation sponsored the cemetery guide). He publicised the practice of spreading sulphur on the vineyards against cryptogam. In 1859 Garibaldi was his guest.

Pietro Magri (1873-1937) was a priest and a well known musician, a pupil of Lorenzo Perosi. He wrote more than 700 musical works on religious subjects, among which there are many oratorios such as *La Regina delle Alpi* in honour of the Virgin of Oropa: he was chapel master at Oropa from 1919 to his death.

Carlo Montagnini (1863-1913), Archbishop of Larisa and Apostolic Delegate in Columbia, had a remarkable clerical career in Rome, India, Munich, Vienna and Paris.

Camillo Negro (1861-1927) was a great neurologist who taught neuropathology at Turin university and published more than 200 scientific works.

Mario Nomis di Cossilla (1874-1946), a count, was general of cavalry and senator of the kingdom.

Giuseppe Maria Pugno (1900-1984), engineer and architect, taught the science of building in Turin's Politecnico; he was in charge of the faculty of Architecture and was a member of the Superior Council of Public Instruction. He wrote many works, both scientific and about local history - the best known regarding the sanctuary of San Giovanni d'Andorno.

Ezio Oreste Rivetti (1887-1962) Count of Valcervo was a great manufacturer: he ruled Lanifici Rivetti, the largest woolmill of Biella and surroundings.

Natale Serafino (1861-1924), tenth bishop of Biella from 1913 to 1917, kept Oropa, and in particular the building of the new church, at the centre of his activity.

Giovanni Battista Serralunga (1843-1915) owned a big leather factory and was a deputy at the national parliament.

Pietro Paolo Trompeo (1824-1897) was a deputy at the national parliament from 1876 to 1897.

Last but not least, an interesting topic of the Oropa cemetery are the epigraphs, especially the oldest ones: with a language that nowadays looks very odd, they tell us a lot of happy and sad stories of people who were buried here and whose problems – quite different from ours! – could be, for instance, the choice between Italy and France after the Second War of Independence when Nice and Savoy were delivered to France. It happened to Paolo Buisson (1813-1891), who was born in Chambéry and died in Biella: "disdaining French blandishments / he chose to die as an Italian". Many of the most interesting epigraphs have been transcribed by Mario Coda and can be read in the last part of the guide.