

Recreating the Past: The Controversies Surrounding the Refashioning of the Medieval Castle of Castelvecchio in Verona under the Fascist Regime

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Castelvecchio, one of the most iconic monuments of medieval Verona, stands on the banks of the Adige River, dominating with its profile the city's urban landscape (Figure 1). The castle has been the stage of much of Verona's past and recent history. In 1944, Castelvecchio rose to international attention since it was there that Mussolini elected to celebrate the trial resulting in the execution of the five members of the Fascist Grand Council, including Mussolini's son-in-law Galeazzo Ciano. In the 1950s the castle underwent a radical and highly acclaimed transformation by Carlo Scarpa, who cleaned the building of the decoration of the prewar period and rearranged its Fascist-era collections according to the latest ideas on museum design.¹ This article focuses on Castelvecchio at a crucial point in its history: the transformation of the fortress into an ideal although fictitious medieval castle to serve as an art museum, between 1923 and 1926 during the Fascist administration. It is particularly concerned with the controversies surrounding the restoration project, the debate over the museographic criteria implemented, and the process of negotiation that unfolded between local narratives and official visions.

Traditionally, Fascist-sponsored restoration projects have been interpreted as top-down undertakings, decided and directly controlled by the central government. Only recently scholars have begun to test this thesis and show the contribution of local forces in sponsoring architectural projects.² Building on such scholarship, this research argues two points. First, the restoration of Castelvecchio was the result of a process of mediation between distinct and often contrasting groups with different interests at stake: the central government, the local preservation agency known as the *Soprintendenza*, and the socio-political elites in Verona. Verona's social elites capitalized on the interest of the central government in their city to marginalize the *Soprintendenza* and impose their personal version of the past. They sought an ideal medieval castle able to confirm their myth of identity, attract tourism, and boost a stagnant economy.

Second, studies on Castelvecchio's restoration, while focusing on the arbitrary nature of its recreated architecture, have overlooked the significance of the museum arrangement and its role in asserting the narrative of the social elites as universal narrative. In the second part of the paper, it is suggested the way objects were displayed—unprotected, free of labels, aiming at recreating the interiors of Verona's noble households—stressed the role of the upper classes as cultural identity makers and naturalized their vision of the past—a conflict-free society, dominated by the social elites—as collective narrative.

Erected between 1354 and 1357 on the perimeter of the medieval walls, overlooking the Adige River, Castelvecchio and its annexed bridge were originally designed as a home for the Della Scala family—also known as the Scaligeri—and military stronghold against outside attacks and local rebellions. The fortress was articulated in two halves divided by a portion of the twelfth-century fortification system, which became redundant after the construction of a new, wider wall by the Scaligeri in the fourteenth century.³ To the western side of the wall was a *Reggia* (or residence) around an inner courtyard and to the east an outer military zone, known as the Great Court (Figure 2). The Great Court was open towards the bridge and served both as a first line of defense for the *Reggia* and as a protection for the bridge itself. After the fall of the Scaligeri in 1387 the castle preserved its military role, with the *Reggia* being converted to a military academy.⁴ In 1799, under the French rule the complex underwent a radical transformation.⁵ The French remodeled the fortress by raising the existing walls, lowering the corner towers and eliminating the crenellations. The Great Court was altered with the construction of a wall along the river, while an L-shaped barracks was built along the north and east side of the court (Figure 3). Under Austrian rule the castle underwent limited consolidation, with little impact on its overall structure and appearance. After the annexation of Verona to the kingdom of Italy in 1866, Castelvecchio became property

¹ Richard Murphy, *Carlo Scarpa and the Castelvecchio* (London: Butterworth Architecture, 1990), 4.

² See in particular Diane Ghirardo, "Inventing Palazzo della Corte in Ferrara," in *Donatello among the Blackshirts*, ed. Claudia Lazzaro and Roger J. Crum (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 97-112.

³ Murphy, *Carlo Scarpa*, 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵ Castelvecchio was remodeled after the Treaty of Luneville (February 9, 1801), which split the city in two sections along the Adige River with the French controlling the east bank and the Hapsburgs presiding over the west bank. Maristella Vecchiato "Le fabbriche del dominio scaligero e le loro trasformazioni novecentesche," in *Suggerzioni del passato. Immagini di Verona Scaligera*, ed. Ruggero Boschi and Maristella Vecchiato (Verona: Edizioni La Grafica, 2001), 182.

of the central government which used it mainly as barracks. The restoration of the entire complex, discussed by the city's administration as early as 1910, was put on hold for lack of funds at the state level. The ascendancy of Fascism marked a turning point in the history of the castle since it provided the means for a radical transformation of the complex's interior and exterior. The plan for the refashioning of the castle was drawn up as early as 1922 by architect Ferdinando Forlati, under the supervision of Antonio Avena, director of the city's museums.⁶ Presented to the *Federazione Fascista* in the spring of 1923, and published the following year in the national monthly magazine, *Emporium* (Figure 4), the project received the enthusiastic approval of prominent citizens as well as local authorities who petitioned the central government to give the barracks to the city. The declared intention was to convert Castelvecchio into a museum to house the city's art collections and into a memorial for the city's fallen soldiers.⁷ At the state level, the request received the backing of one of the most important citizens of Verona, Alberto De Stefani, Minister of Finance under Mussolini.⁸ As a result, on November 4, 1923, the central government transferred the ownership of the castle to the city. There could hardly have been a more astute political move by the newly established Fascist administration. The granting of Castelvecchio to the city was a gesture meant to demonstrate the generosity of the regime and the civic-mindedness of its leaders, all the more effective since it contrasted with the inability or unwillingness of the previous Liberal regime to restore the complex. Restoration began in 1924 and was quickly completed in two years under the direction of Avena, assisted by a specially-appointed executive Committee of respected local figures.⁹ The project was financed by multiple sources, mostly but not all local.¹⁰ Noble and upper middle class families, along with the local bank, played a major role in the project.¹¹ They not only provided cash to refurbish the castle but also donated pieces from their private collections to the museum, an act that testifies to their commitment to

the project and that would have a deep impact upon Avena's exhibition criteria. Under the direction of Avena and Forlati, Castelvecchio was transformed into an ideal medieval castle. Outside the structure, Avena elevated the corner towers, fabricated crenellations and battlements and totally reshaped the Napoleonic block (Figures 5 and 6). In the courtyard delicate Gothic window surrounds were salvaged from demolished sites and inserted in the reconstructed façades. A three-arched loggia placed centrally in the north façade became the main entrance. The Great Court, formerly used for military training was refashioned into a formal garden divided into quadrants connecting the main entrance tower and the central loggia entrance (Figures 7 and 8).¹² Inside the castle, Avena replaced the existing vaults with coffered ceilings, installed new floors, and had the walls decorated with frescoes inspired by Renaissance and Baroque motifs (Figure 9). He furnished the rooms of the museum with pieces of different periods, mixed and matched according to his personal taste. Paintings were forced into new frames to become decorative ovals in the ceilings. New altarpieces were created by combining together canvases of different periods and authors; capitals and other architectural elements were distributed throughout the museum to function as decorative elements, sometimes to support flower pots. Avena admitted that his intention was not to isolate objects but rather present them as integral furnishings of intimate and suitable interiors. Summarizing the synthesis of his museographic program in an interview to a reporter for the national newspaper *La Stampa* Avena confided: "In Verona we could not do a museum like others. Look at this sky, this river, and these hills and tell me if it is conceivable to lock a painting in jail."¹³

Historians have interpreted the idealized medieval refashioning of Castelvecchio as a reaction to Verona's most recent history, dominated by Austrian rule, and as an attempt to reach out to the city's most glorious past, when Verona stood free and independent under the leadership

⁶ The restoration project was drafted based on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century views of the city. Avena and Forlati were later criticized by the preservationists for not taking into account an eighteenth-century scale model of the castle preserved in Castel S. Angelo in Rome. See Lino Vittorio Bozzetto, "Indagini preliminari di studio sul restauro Forlati-Avena di Castelvecchio," in *Medioevo ideale e Medioevo reale nella cultura urbana: Antonio Avena e la Verona del primo Novecento*, ed. Paola Marini (Verona: Comune di Verona, Assessorato alla cultura, 2003), 141.

⁷ However, there is no mention of a memorial in the drawings published on *Emporium* in 1924.

⁸ Gian Paolo Marchi "Per un ritratto di un protagonista della cultura veronese del Novecento," in *Medioevo ideale* (see note 6), 36.

⁹ The Committee included architect Ettore Fagioli, Count Saladini de Moreschi, and town councilor Sandro Baganzini. See Paola Marini, "Il primo allestimento museale di Castelvecchio," in *Medioevo ideale* (see note 6), 156.

¹⁰ Funding for the project was provided by the Ministry of Public Education, the province, the city, the local bank, and prominent local citizens. See Francesco Amendolagine, Arturo Sandrini, and Andrea Vivit, *Verona 1900-1960: architetture nella dissoluzione dell'aura* (Venice: Cluva, 1979), 155-157.

¹¹ Cassa di Risparmio (local bank) contributed 254.657 lira; the "best families of Verona" (le migliori famiglie di Verona) contributed 236.614 Lira, *Ibid.*, 156.

¹² Murphy, *Carlo Scarpa*, 7.

¹³ Castelvecchio's exhibiting criteria were neither new nor revolutionary. The interest for such type of choreographic displays is documented elsewhere in Italy, in particular in Castello Sforzesco (Milan, 1903) and Castello del Buonconsiglio (Trent, c. 1900). See Renato Bordone, "Medioevo ideale e medioevo reale nella cultura europea della prima metà del Novecento," in *Medioevo ideale* (see note 6), 49; Renato Bordone, *Lo specchio di Shalott: l'invenzione del Medioevo nella cultura dell'Ottocento*, Nuovo Medioevo 45 (Naples: Liguori, 1993), 179-180. In Verona, however, such interest persisted throughout the early 1940s, much longer than anywhere else.

of the Della Scala family. Although no major interventions were carried out by the Hapsburgs, the building had become by the late nineteenth century, a reminder of the despised Austrian occupation. Forlati referred to the barracks before the restoration as “a gloomy and sinister bastion of foreign oppression.”¹⁴ Avena himself spoke of “barbarian Austrian taste.”¹⁵ After the annexation of Verona to the Kingdom of Italy in 1866 the urge to get rid of all reminders of Austrian rule grew stronger along with the nostalgia among the social elites for the Scaligeri era. By returning the castle to its supposedly original appearance and devoting its interiors to house the city’s art collections, Avena and Forlati were therefore reclaiming Castelveccchio from centuries of foreign occupation and transforming it into a symbol of civic identity. There is a significant amount of literature on urban landscapes as stages for framing national and civic identity. Jeffrey Schnapp, a major scholar of Fascist Italy, has shown the relevance of architectural settings, including museums, in reinforcing national identity. By locating the public in a specific time and place in history, such settings reinforced in individuals the feeling of being part of a historic tradition while inspiring hope for the future.¹⁶ In addition, Carol Duncan has emphasized the role of museums as powerful “identity-defining machines.”¹⁷ She explains how objects that were once representative of the wealth and splendor of the social elites become, in the context of a museum, art-historical objects, embodiments of the spiritual wealth and genius of a nation.¹⁸ The redefinition of the city’s identity had important economic implications as well: until World War I, Verona functioned as a trade and military outpost and from such status the city derived its economic strength.¹⁹ With the end of the war, Verona faced the economic problems deriving from the departure of military forces. Castelveccchio along with many other architectural undertakings by the Fascist administration provided jobs to those involved in the building industry while promoting an image of Verona as a charming medieval town. The newly refurbished Castelveccchio was then a civic accomplishment meant to embody Verona’s cultural heritage, while stimulating its economy. It was a narrative, however, that favored specific social groups while marginalizing others. As discussed, Avena’s restoration transformed what originally was a fortified castle into a refined residence with an elegant internal courtyard embellished by two delicate, symmetrical façades modeled after Gothic and Renaissance examples and enlivened by a formal garden. The remodeling was meant in Forlati’s words to create “a simple and tranquil architecture.” The intent,

however, was not merely aesthetic. It introduced elements that purposefully mitigated the defensive nature of the complex, originally built as a result of the deterioration in the relationship between the Scaligeri and the city. Indeed, in Castelveccchio as in other restoration projects supervised by Avena, the complex social relations characterizing the era of the Scaligeri remained unaddressed. Moreover, the museographic criteria implemented inside, meant to recreate the interiors of noble households, and the dedication of each room to a specific noble family created a narrative which emphasized the role of the social elites in the making of Verona’s identity. The history, beliefs, and self-image of the upper classes became by extension the history of the entire community. In Avena’s museum the noble families of Verona controlled and owned the city’s historic tradition. The fact that museums are at least in principle neutral and objective environments, stimulated the receptivity of the public, making them more inclined to believe in the narrative portrayed. Also, the display privileging context over objects, purposely showing artistic items unlabeled and unprotected, while facilitating a direct, unmediated approach to the recreated interiors, also promoted an emotional, uncritical relation with the history narrated and helped naturalize the narrative of the social elites as a universal narrative. The recreated interiors portrayed an image of medieval Verona as a conflict-free, harmonious society marked by peace and prosperity and dominated by the cultural and moral authority of the upper classes.

Resistance to Forlati and Avena’s historical representation came mostly from the preservationists who were deliberately excluded from the restoration project. Their criticism focused mainly on the lack of documentary evidence supporting Avena’s architectural decisions rather than his museographic choices. Still, the opposition of the Soprintendenza represented an element of complication that Avena had to neutralize in order to carry out his vision. Indeed, Avena decided not to consult the preservation agency, as required by the law, preferring to deal directly with the central government. The architect must have felt that by bypassing the preservationists at the local level, he would speed up the process and avoid potential objections to his project. Left powerless, the Superintendent, Alessandro Da Lisca, boycotted the construction site in protest. A few years later, in 1928, the new Superintendent Venè harshly commented on the transformation of Castelveccchio. He declared himself “totally contrary to the recreation of vanished monuments [...] especially considering the criteria followed

¹⁴ Bozzetto, “Indagini preliminari,” 145.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁶ Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *Staging Fascism: 18 BL and the Theater of Masses for Masses* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

¹⁷ Carol Duncan, “Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp

and Steven Lavine (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 101.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁹ Murphy, *Carlo Scarpa*, 4-5.

²⁰ “Decisamente contrario alla rifabbrica di monumenti scomparsi [...] tenuti presenti i criteri che si sono seguiti a Castelveccchio.” Archivio

in Castelvecchio.²⁰ Negative comments also came from local intellectuals, such as the academic painter Angelo Dall'Oca Bianca and Giuseppe Trecca, a Catholic priest active in the preservation and restoration of historic monuments. In an open letter published in the local newspaper *L'Arena*, Trecca criticized Avena's decision-making style labeling him a dictator.²¹ Avena's pseudo-medieval recreation was then in contrast with the preservationists' concern for historical accuracy. Such a narrative, however, well served the specific interests of the central government. Studies have shown that in many medieval towns across the peninsula, Fascism often favored simplified narratives about the past, (re)creations in a neo-Medieval style rather than faithful restitutions of the building's multiple historical layers.²² The celebration of an idealized medieval heritage, devoid of complicating factors such as later additions, had several objectives including commemorating a historical era of military and political power, encouraging a feeling of shared national identity, and asserting Fascism as the legitimate heir of that tradition. In Verona, the regime did not oppose—and in many cases, such as Castelvecchio, openly favored—local initiatives aimed at recreating simplified versions of the architectural past. The list of monuments restored according to an idealized appearance is impressive and includes the Palazzo del Podestà, and the House and Tomb of Juliet. These highly selective and often arbitrary recreations perfectly suited Mussolini's agenda of promoting an ideal and immediate association between the Fascist present and Verona's historic tradition. Indeed, the Middle Ages, Verona's most glorious time in history and Cangrande, the legendary warrior-ruler that led the city to the apex of its political and military power, became the filters through which Fascism in Verona attempted to provide itself with historical legitimacy. The idealized medieval narrative

of the social elites gained strength as it received the backing of official visions.²³ Avena was a key figure in this process of mediation between local and official narratives: he sensed that the interests of the regime and the concerns of the city's social elites were not incompatible. He understood that the regime's attempt to legitimize itself through the appropriation of the city's historic heritage could be reconciled with the Veronese upper class's agenda to selectively use the past to support their social myth of identity, while boosting the economy of the city. Marginalized by these two groups the Soprintendenza had no other choice but to yield. Thus, it was the convergence of local and official interests that made Verona's restoration projects possible and successful.

In 1929 a "Festa Trecentesca" in honor of Cangrande was organized in Castelvecchio. Coordinated by the President of Verona's Fascist institute of culture, the special celebration featured the participation of members of the nobility, representatives of the upper class, and members of the Fascist establishment. The photographs of the event show the city's socio-political elites, dressed as fourteenth-century knights and ladies, perfectly at home in Avena's recreated interiors (Figure 10). The museum's rooms came alive through the presence of these aristocrats playing themselves while the recreated interiors justified and gave substance to their acting. Castelvecchio then emerged as a stage where historical meanings, social relations, and power relations were constituted and enacted. The 1929 event was a performance meant to underscore the continuity between present and past. It celebrated the alliance between Verona's socio-political elites and the Fascist regime over the control of Verona's historic traditions.

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della Soprintendenza per i beni architettonici e per il paesaggio di Verona, f. 91/67.

²¹ Giuseppe Trecca, "Lettera al Direttore sui lavori di Castelvecchio," *L'Arena*, October 17, 1935.

²² See in particular Diane Ghirardo, "Città Fascista: Surveillance and Spectacle," in "The Aesthetics of Fascism," special issue, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 31, no. 2 (Apr., 1996): 347-372; Ghirardo, "Inventing Palazzo della Corte"; and Medina Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected: Architecture, Spectacle, and Tourism in Fascist Italy* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2004).

²³ The controversies surrounding the reconstruction of the *Arco dei Gavi* is another example of the preeminent role played by local forces in restoration projects. The arch had been dismantled by the Napoleonic troops in 1806 and its pieces had been in storage since then. Avena had obtained from the Ministry of Public Education the authorization and the funds necessary to rebuild the arch as early as 1920. However, due to the fact that it was not possible to reach an agreement at the local level on where to rebuild the arch, the project was put on hold until 1932. See Maristella Vecchiato, "Antonio Avena 'ricostruttore' e la Regia Soprintendenza ai Monumenti di Verona," in *Medioevo ideale* (see note 6), 108-110.

Figure 1. Aerial view of Castelvechio with the Adige River. Photo © and courtesy of Enzo and Raffaello Bassotto.

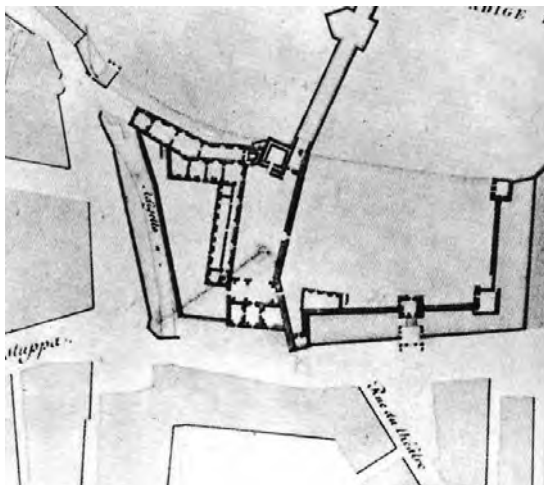


Figure 2. Plan of Castelvechio, 1801. The Great Court (right) and the Reggia (left) are divided by the Commune wall.

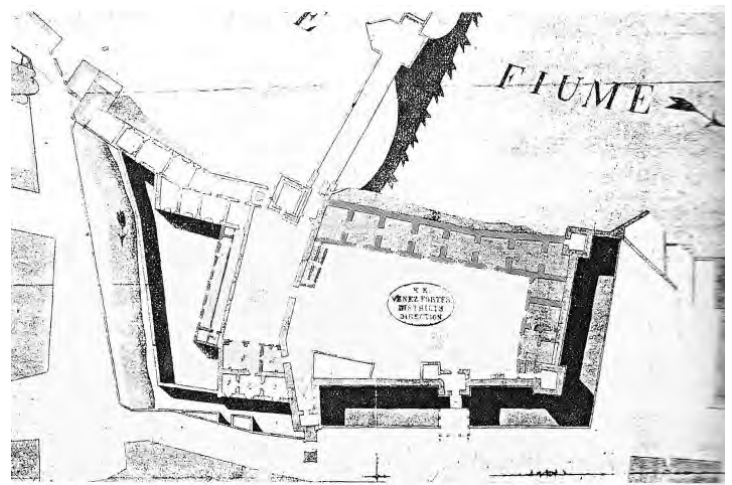
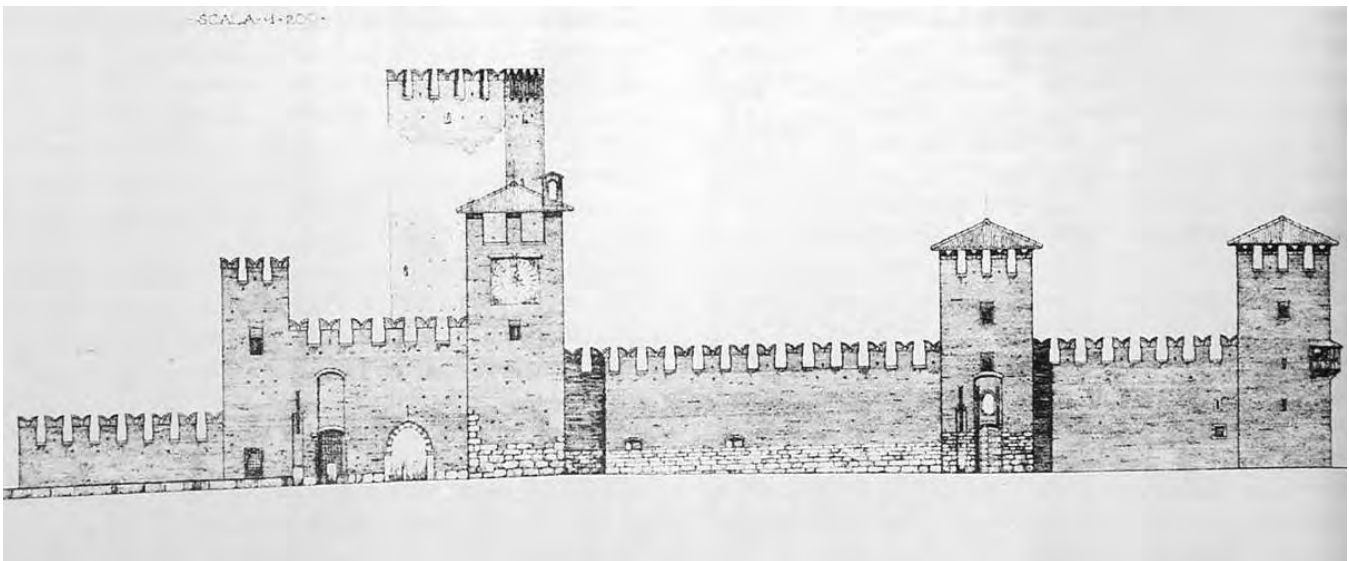


Figure 3. Plan of Castelvechio after 1806, showing the construction of the barracks block on the north and east side of the Great Court. Photo © and courtesy of Enzo and Raffaello Bassotto.



[above] Figure 4. Project for the restoration of Castelvecchio (southern elevation), published in *Emporium*, 1924.

[below] Figure 5. Castelvecchio from the southeast before the 1926 restoration.

[facing page top] Figure 6. Castelvecchio from the southeast after the 1926 restoration of the towers and battlements.

[facing page bottom] Figure 7. The Great Court with the barrack block as left by the military in 1923. Photo © and courtesy of Enzo and Raffaello Bassotto.









Figure 10: Participants to Festa Trecentesca in honor of Cangrande della Scala, organized in Castelvecchio in 1929.

[*facing page, top*] Figure 8. The Great Court after Forlati and Avena's restoration of 1923-1926.

[*facing page, bottom*] Figure 9. Room dedicated to the Marquis of Canossa.