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**Urban Elites in the 18th-Century Metropolis and Smaller Town -
Cultural Styles and Identities in a Comparative Perspective**
Specialist session

**Who is provincial? Reciprocal influences in architectural culture between
Vienna and the capital cities of the Habsburg Empire**

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At his arrival in Vienna in 1818, charged of the uneasy task of reforming the School of Architecture of the local Arts Academy, Pietro Nobile, citizen of the provincial Trieste, wrote: "The Professors lack the knowledge of languages to understand Italian and French works, and even worse, they have never seen nor studied the monuments of the best Roman architecture, on which they should extend their lectures and teaching"¹. After the first inspections, he refers that "No drawing can be found at the Architectural Academy, representing an ancient Monument, or the building of a classical architect, or a detail of good taste in the moulding or in the architectural parts"; "The library [...] does not contain any work on the antiquities of Greece, and of Rome, of Stuard and Piranesi, on the italian buildings of Palladio, of Scamozzi, ecc.[...]"²

The Academy of the arts, created in Vienna in 1692 with the name of *Akademie der Malerei-, Bildhauer-, Fortifikations-, Perspektiv- und Architekturkunst*, had been reformed for the first time under the reign of Maria Theresa and the protectorate of Count Kaunitz, with the name of *K.K. vereinigten Akademie der bildenden Künste*. Since 1812 it was under the authority of the influential Prince of Metternich.

¹ "i signori Professori mancano di conoscenza di lingue per intendere le opere italiane, francesi, e quello che è peggio non hanno veduto, ne studiato i Monumenti della miglior Architettura Romana, sopra cui si devono estendere le loro lezioni e insegnamenti"

² "Nessun disegno si trova nell'Accademia di Architettura, che rappresenti un Monumento antico, o un Edifizio di classico Architetto, o un dettaglio di buon gusto nelle modinature, e parti architettoniche"; "La Biblioteca [...] niun opera possiede sull'antichità della Grecia, e di Roma, di Stuard e Piranesi, sugli Edifizi italiani di Palladio, di Scamozzi, ecc.[...]" translation mine, from the original document transcribed and published in: Gino Pavan, *Pietro Nobile architetto, 1776-1854. Studi e documenti*, Istituto Giuliano di Storia, Cultura e Documentazione, Trieste-Gorizia 1998, documento n.2, p.179

In 1816, at the death of Ferdinand Hetzendorf von Hohenberg, Director of the School of Architecture in charge since 1773, the situation of the Viennese architectural culture was considered out of date and provincial, if compared with the European panorama.

The reform of the architectural studies at the Academy was beginning to become a priority, due to the competition in the field with the Polytechnic, established in Vienna in 1814. The new institution had been created in the capital following the example of the first polytechnical school in the territories of the Habsburg Empire, founded in 1806 in Prag³ on the model of the French *Ecole Polytechnique*.

For the position at the Academy applied some of the most well known and influential Viennese architects of the *Biedermeier* era. A provincial was chosen instead, apparently following a direct intervention of the Emperor. Nobile in his correspondence reports his request: "give me good architects as soon as possible".

The reality is that Nobile was considered an ideal connection between the Viennese milieu, which he had experienced during his education, and the taste and the technical and architectural culture which had become familiar to him both in his stays in Rome and during his service under the French administration of Trieste⁴. In this choice is shown a strong determination to raise the level of the artistic and technical education and thus to upgrade the professional practice in the territories of the Empire.

The policies enacted by the Vienna central government during the eighteenth century had created a clearly defined and diffused structure of bureaucracy, enabling a very rigorous control over the provincial initiatives, (including public buildings and urban planning) and creating an élite of state officials with similar education and competence throughout the immense territory. Many of the officers spent some years of their education in Vienna or in Prague, and the technical education model was uniform throughout the country.

The pervasive presence of a "State-organised uniformity", even in the minutest details of everyday life, and for sure in the appearance of public and service buildings, was a significant feature of the 18th century Empire, even if it might have been later exaggerated by the sense of loss and fear of chaos that followed its end, as acknowledged in this account: "The bureaucracy that Maria Theresa and Josep II had created infiltrated every corner of Austrian life. Ostensibly the administration's mission was to extend uniformity throughout the empire, westernizing the non-German peoples and regimenting everyone to obey edicts of the crown. Emblems of uniformity blanketed the empire: every courthouse, post office, railroad station bore a yellow shield emblazoned with a double-headed black eagle. In Bukovina as in Vienna, railroad officials wore identical dark blue

³ Cfr. Alfred Birk, *Die deutsche Technische Hochschule in Prag, 1806-1931*, Calvé, Prag 1931 and Walter Wagner, *Die Geschichte der Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Wien*, Verlag Brüder Rosenbaum, Wien 1967.

⁴ Nobile had been an officer of the *Imperial Regia Direzione delle Pubbliche Fabbriche* in Trieste since 1807. His career continued during the French administration of the city, between 1809 and 1813, and later confirmed at the return of the Austrians.

uniforms and rang identical bells. Cafés and hotels from Lemberg to Laibach imitated those of Vienna; tradesmen and *fiacre* drivers dressed and gesticulated in the same fashion, so that a traveller could feel no less at home on the Russian frontier than in the Italian Alps. These shared amenities and customs resulted from regulations that spanned the empire, creating an apparent unity that tantalized post-1918 romantics"⁵

In reality, even if the central control on public buildings contributed to create a sense of uniformity throughout the territories of the Empire, the role of each provincial capital was not at all the same everywhere. Each provincial city had instead a very different profile, defined mainly by the specialisation of function, received in the frame of the direct central administration of the whole domains of the Habsburgs.

In the case of Trieste, the specialisation was decided by the central government, as early as 1719, when the free port was created. The enhancement of the role of the city as a port and a market and the policy of religious tolerance of Joseph II contributed to foster the presence of a number of ethnic and religious minorities, which defined the economic and social structure of the city, the dominant characters of its cultural life, as well as its spatial and physical appearance. The creation of a nautical school (*Accademia reale o scuola Reale di Commercio e di Navigazione*, later *Imperial Regia Scuola di nautica in Trieste*) is another sign of the central government's interest to recognise the city's specificity and to exploit it.

The transmission of cultural patterns between Vienna and the provincial towns and regional capitals of the Habsburg Empire was definitely not a one-way process. Instead, the provincial élites had a very significant role in vectoring into the capital new cultural trends and achievements.

In 1770 a decree of the Emperor Joseph II secularised the properties of the Church, having as a result the dispersion of many religious archives, of valuable art objects and even more important, the complete abandon of a number of religious buildings, churches and cloisters throughout the Empire. This decree is considered, in the frame of the history of heritage protection in Austria, as a key moment, provoking a shift in the way the monuments were perceived and creating the conscience of the need for their protection. A similar phenomenon happened in France following the destruction and iconoclastic fury of the Revolution. Nevertheless in the Habsburg Empire the conservation of heritage was less due to artistic sensibility than to the interest in the conservation of the patrimony, and as such was a matter of bureaucratic organisation.

In fact heritage protection in the Empire had its root in the teresian decrees for the conservation of archives, foundings of objects and coins. The attention to the monuments of the territory of the Empire derived from the culture of Enlightenment and josephinist times, pursuing the good and rational administration of the

⁵ William M. Johnston, *The Austrian Mind. An Intellectual and Social History 1848-1938*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1972, p.45

properties of the State, and it is traditionally connected with the advances in the study and application of statistic by the Habsburg bureaucracy.

The uniform attention to the "State property", resulting from this approach, was countered or re-directed by strong local influences, which again developed mainly in the northern Italian provinces and in Prague, and were due to the contact with more advanced situations abroad.

Nobile had come in contact, during his formative years, with the most advanced architectural culture of his times, brought it with him to Vienna and tried to transmit it to his collaborators and students. He introduced in Vienna through his work and his reform of the educational path of the architects a culture of heritage protection of Roman and French provenience. The principles of the conservation of monuments were just beginning to be asserted for the first time in Italy, and particularly in Rome⁶, and in France. During his two stays in Rome, Nobile met both Canova and Valadier. Canova was at the time active as *Ispettore generale delle Belle Arti* at the service of the pontifical administration. Nobile kept a lifelong correspondence with him and earned his "recommendation" to the French administration during the occupation of Trieste. Valadier instead was already active in the field of restauration.

During his activity in the *Imperial Regia Direzione delle Pubbliche Fabbriche* in Trieste, the structure of the Habsburg administration of public buildings, at the time under French control, Nobile started a series of excavations and surveys of the antiquities of the Istrian coast near Pola. In 1813 he presented to the French authorities a *Projet relatif aux Antiquités Architectoniques d'Illyrie*, a program to conserve and restore the archeological heritage, which included the redaction of a catalogue, the indication of the more urgent measures to be taken and even the suggestion to create a Museum in Trieste to regroup the findings of the excavations. These projects were never realised for the return of the Habsburg in Trieste, but Nobile continued his work, proposing this time the constitution of a Archeological Society.

In fact the French government is considered the "inventor" of the administration for the protection of heritage on a national basis. One of the first acts of the complex history of the *Monuments Historiques* administration is the *Circulaire Montalivet*, dated 1810, and the very first act to protect valuable objects from the revolutionary fury goes back to 1790. Nobile's proposals for the protection of heritage indicate his being part of a cultural élite much ahead of its times, and with much wider references than the provincial Trieste. He is at the same time the perfect image of the state officer, a good administrator, very conscious of his social role and very much obliged to his protectors, first of all Prince Metternich. At the point that his architecture, his ideas, and his role in the education of a generation of architects have been inexorably discarded after 1848, as part of the political phase of Restoration and of its oppressive times.

⁶ Elisabetta Pallottino, *Il restauro architettonico a Roma nei primi trent'anni dell'Ottocento: note sulla nascita del problema della conservazione*, in "Ricerche di Storia dell'arte", n.16, 1981, pp.65-70

The main innovations in technical education at the beginning of the 19th century came from Italy (and through the Italian mediation, from revolutionary and later napoleonic France) and from Prague, which absorbed earlier than Vienna the inputs of the Prussian area.

This pattern is even stronger all through the 19th century, when especially Prague transmitted a very significant influence to the capital through the action of its political and artistical élites. Two aspects are peculiar of the 19th century: the influence of foreign habits and ways of life in the Austrian society was much easier to accept if it was filtered through the provinces, as it was politically difficult to admit it publicly. At the same time, the provinces tended to adopt earlier foreign models, to foster distinction and cultural independence from the capital and from the Court. This pattern later became particularly significant, together with the affirmation of nationalist claims in the provinces.