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The historical premises of the Opere Pie di San Paolo in Turin

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In the pages of the Turin-based daily *La Gazzetta del Popolo della Domenica* of October 26, 1902 an in-depth feature described the new premises of the Istituto delle Opere Pie di San Paolo. A few days earlier the building had been inaugurated in the presence of king Victor Emmanuel III, princess Letizia Bonaparte and Emmanuel Philibert duke of Aosta after undergoing a comprehensive renovation on a project by Giuseppe Pastore. ‘Not delusions of grandeur nor an unrestrained desire for elegance and splendor, but a genuine need for larger spaces and a better organization of the many services provided, sanitary considerations as well as a remarkable sense of decency’: these were the motivations that emerged from the article to explain the decision to undertake such an architectural feat at the turn of the century. Other interventions had been carried out in the past, as the Institute’s ownership extended to larger portions of the block’s property, until it came to own it in its entirety by 1930 with the goal of providing larger and more functional premises to the Monte di Pietà (pawnshop). One example was the construction of an auction room, that was built after the demolition of a number of low-rise constructions and that would later be dismantled to build the main hall. The main facade of the new building was characterized by a severe and elegant appearance. It featured three separate entrances: one for the employees, one for the Monte di Pietà, and the central one for the public that entered across a wide concourse and a peristyle with marble columns from Verona leading to the vast main hall. Each arc corresponded to a window with a teller. Looking up, an elegant balcony ran around the upper portion of the hall and the ceiling was made of glass. The flooring consisted of glass square tiles,



Auction room of the Monte di Pietà before the renovation, late 19th century. © Archivio Storico della Compagnia di San Paolo.



Ground floor hall, home to lending and treasury activities, early 20th century. © Archivio Storico della Compagnia di San Paolo.

Paolo Gaidano, 'Come dressed in purity to receive your dowry', fresco, 1909. © Archivio Storico della Compagnia di San Paolo.



through which the light reached the rooms below the ground, that housed the safety deposit boxes. These offered booths for customers, strongrooms containing 2550 smaller boxes and larger safes. The armor-plating consisted of a shield of 'sheets of unpierceable steel from the Flocart steel mill in Westfalia'. The doors were fitted with safety locks with timed combinations. The upper floor was home to the administration and president's offices, while the attic housed the archives, the registry and the general supplies offices.

The renovation works continued in the council's meeting room, designed by the architect Carlo Ceppi, who recommended the painter Paolo Gaidano for the execution of the frescoes and the decorative friezes on the walls and the ceiling. The painting cycle was completed in 1909: the themes of the compositions depicted the Institute's historical activity, from the origins of the 16th-century brotherhood to the 20th-century lending institution. A set of allegories in the upper frieze illustrated the various social and charitable work in which the Institute engaged, from providing a dowry to poor girls to commercial, industrial and agricultural property credit; from pledges and loans to the education of the needy; from assistance to the 'shamefaced' to charity to the derelicts.

The premises of the Institute, which have remained in the district historically known as Saint Felix (San Felice) since the 18th century, in the old center of Turin, have continued to characterize the city. To this day, the street where the building is located is known as via Monte di Pietà. ●



Safe deposit box room, early 20th century. © Archivio Storico della Compagnia di San Paolo.



Auction room of the Monte di Pietà, before the renovation, interior, late 19th century. © Archivio Storico della Compagnia di San Paolo.