Family Memories from Lake Como

ABSTRACT

The Villa Vigoni German-Italian Centre for European Excellence preserves the historical family collection of the German banker and art patron Enrico Mylius (1769-1854). This consists of paintings, sculptures, furniture, books, engravings and photographs, also including 8 daguerreotypes which testify to the interest that this new technique enjoyed ever since it was first announced. This paper presents some historical, artistic and iconographic annotations, assisted by a comparison with paintings and sculptures dating to the same period and with the same subject matter, in order to show how, at the time these daguerreotypes were made, the first timid and in many ways contradictory signs were emerging of a process that was still barely discernible but that would eventually lead photography to create its own representational modalities independent from the other arts.

KEY WORDS: Villa Mylius-Vigoni, Villas on Lake Como, Enrico Mylius (1769-1854), Antonio de Kramer (1806-1853), Philibert Perraud (1815-après 1863), Luigia Vitali Vigoni (1809-1884), Francesco Hayez (1791-1882), Abresch

T he Villa Vigoni cultural centre was created in 1986 by the governments of Italy and Germany after Ignazio Vigoni Medici di Marignano bequeathed two beautiful old villas in Loveno di Menaggio on Lake Como (Villa Mylius-Vigoni and Villa Garovaglio Ricci), to the Federal Republic of Germany. With this generous action, the Lombard aristocrat wished to celebrate the Italian-German past of a branch of his family and to make a valuable contribution to the already significant tradition of humanistic and scientific exchanges between the two countries. One of the two villas was particularly important as it contained the collection of Enrico Mylius (1769-1854) in addition to those of his indirect descendants, belonging to the Vigoni family.

Enrico Mylius moved to Milan from his native Frankfurt in the late eighties of the eighteenth century in order to deal with his family's business interests and he soon became well established, successfully expanding his commercial operations to include silk production and banking. At the same time as his extraordinary economic rise Mylius also funded a number of philanthropic initiatives, the most important of which was undoubtedly the foundation in 1841 of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts and Crafts (Società d’Incoraggiamento di Arti e Mestieri) in Milan, which was the first school to be set up in Italy for the training of specialized technicians, and which still exists today. A lover of literature and art, he was friends with both Goethe and Alessandro Manzoni and it was thanks to him that they got in contact and established a relationship that culminated in the translation and publication of the Milanese writer’s work in German.

Mylius was also a patron of many painters and sculptors including Bertel Thorvaldsen and Francesco Hayez. As an art collector he paid particular attention to the social relevance and allegorical meaning of the works he commissioned and acquired, and in his residence in Milan as well as in his villas at Sesto San Giovanni and Loveno di Menaggio he assembled not only paintings and sculpture but also, in accordance with the tastes and inclinations typical of his century, various curious artefacts, books and engravings. A large part of his collection is still conserved at Villa Mylius-Vigoni (ill. 1) that now belongs to the Villa Vigoni German-Italian Centre. The many objects present here include eight daguerreotypes dating to the time of Enico Mylius, consisting of seven portraits and the reproduction of a painting with a historical theme.

The popularity of daguerreotype portraits in upper-bourgeois and aristocratic families in the mid 19th century clearly shows how open they were to technical progress and novelties, such as that of photography. However, it should also be emphasized that the innovative medium, albeit with the many limitations of those years when the technology of photography was just beginning, still closely adhered to the aesthetic and iconographic canons of a long and well-established artistic tradition.

In addition to their indisputable historical and documentary value, the daguerreotypes of the Villa Mylius-Vigoni collection lend themselves very well to a comparison with the visual arts of painting and sculpture. The Portrait of Luigia Vitali Vigoni with her little daughter Teresa (ill. 2) is striking for its dramatic atmosphere of sad and poignant resignation. In the way Luigia tenderly holds her seriously ill child, we are reminded of the Christian iconography traditionally employed for the representation of the Virgin and the Christ child with a red
coral necklace. In this type of sacred painting the coral, a symbol of protection from disease, also foreshadows Christ’s Passion and death, due to its similarity to the colour of blood, just as in the daguerreotype the necklace worn by the young Teresa suggests a similar interpretation of the scene and reminds us of the sad fate of the child, who would soon die of her illness.

The typically 19th century reference to the theme of reading, as can be seen in the Portrait of Luigia Vitali Vigoni (ill. 3), it is not to be confused with Renaissance portraits of a lady holding a book. In this case a comparison with Jean-Honoré Fragonard’s famous painting La Liseuse (c. 1770) (ill. 4) suggests a French origin for this theme that was very popular during the Romantic period in Italy, and that occurs many times around the middle of the nineteenth century in works such as the beautiful marble sculpture by Pietro Magni, La leggitrice (The Reader) (ill. 5), which dates to 1856, a few years later than our daguerreotype.

The Portrait of Enrico Mylius (ill. 6) is the first known photographic image of the German banker, datable to the mid-forties. A comparison with two previous portraits of him (ills. 7 and 8) shows how, thanks to the emergence of photography, a well-established tradition of portraiture by means of paintings or engravings was both continued and renewed. While in the painting and the etching Mylius is depicted with all the official trappings that were typical of middle-class iconography, which can be seen in his pose, his clothes, the reading glasses and the letter in his hands, in the daguerreotype made by Philibert Perraud the austere and self-possessed atmosphere is softened by the sitter’s ironically amused smile. This introduces us to a more private and domestic dimension in which even a hairpiece reveals to us some unsuspected character traits of Enrico and it invites us to share in the cheerful bonhomie and sympathy that the
Unlike these portraits the last daguerreotype I will consider here is the record of a painting (ill. 9). It is an eighteenth century scene in which some churchmen are addressing a group of soldiers and civilians in front of a rustic landscape in the background that is dominated by a large windmill. A comparison with some figure studies in a sketchbook preserved in the collections of Villa Mylius-Vigoni (inv. G-45) tells us that the painter was certainly the Venetian artist Giovanni Servi (1739/1800 – 1885). The daguerreotype was made by the photographers Heyland and son, who had a studio in the central Piazza Duomo of Milan. In this case the date could be subsequent to that of the previous daguerreotypes, which were created between 1845 and 1850, since this technique for the reproduction of paintings was still used throughout the 1860s, due to its superior reproduction of details compared to photography on paper.

**SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY**


