

Vincenzo della Greca

Italian Architect
(1592-1661)

Vincenzo was born in Palermo on February 5, 1592, to master Francesco and Antonia "La Greca". His name appears for the first time in the Lives of G. Baglione and from 1642 is no longer mentioned by other historians of the 17th century.

The first biographical data, already made known in 1879 by Bertolotti, presents him as a very young man, involved in a violent incident.

In the late evening of January 8, 1616, returning from an inspection of Cardinal Borghese's vineyard at Porta Pinciana, he was attacked and wounded in the arm by a man whom Vincenzo preferred to leave anonymous. Just twenty days after the incident, Vincenzo married a young Roman woman, Doralice Ridolfi, with whom he had many children.

In 1623 he was appointed architect of Castel Sant'Angelo and participated in the notable fortification works commissioned by Urban VIII. This assignment placed him in the role of employees of the Apostolic Chamber, allowing him to pursue a not inconsiderable career. From the Chamber Registers we know that from 1 November 1627 he held the position of assistant to Maderno, following the many construction sites controlled by the famous architect. This assignment prevented him from fully disposing of his time and using it for other commissions. On 1 November 1627 he was paid for an assignment at the Reverenda Camera apostolica; on 8 January 1628, in a payment receipt of the general depository of the Apostolic Chamber, he is listed as coadjutor architect of the Apostolic Palace; it is very likely that in both these roles he acted as a collaborator of Maderno. In this capacity he participated in important public commissions in Nettuno and Castelnuovo and in the construction of the church of S. Caio attributed to him by the oldest guides of Rome. This was Vincenzo's first real enterprise in the architectural field.

In 1631, upon the death of Maderno, Vincenzo was appointed architect of the chamber workshops and of Castel Sant'Angelo, a position that lasted until 2 December 1644; he was succeeded by G. Rainaldi. In 1632, Vincenzo was called by the friars of St. Augustine to review the expenses for the high altar presented by O. Turriani because they were considered too onerous. In 1633 he appears for the first time in the documents of the Academy of St. Luke. On 25 May of the same year, the friars of St. Augustine, after dismissing Turriani, appointed Vincenzo as architect of the convent, a mandate that lasted until 1649, when he was succeeded by D. Castelli. Vincenzo was appointed supervisor of the accounts and surveyor of plans of the monastic complex and of the considerable building heritage scattered around the city.

The position of architect of a prestigious Order, such as the Augustinian one, was not highly remunerated but would have offered him the opportunity to establish useful

relationships with the most influential personalities of the time.

In April 1636, within the Accademia di S. Luca, Vincenzo was chosen "... to instruct the young people in civil and military architecture ..."; he was perhaps, therefore, the first teacher of his young son Felice. On 25 April 1638 he reached the threshold of the nomination as prince of the Accademia di S. Luca. On 20 Sept. 1638 Vincenzo, precisely because of his "... expertise and experience in architecture ...", was reconfirmed and expanded in his role as superintendent of the chamber buildings of Castel Sant'Angelo, Civitavecchia and Castelfranco. In May 1647 Vincenzo was paid for: "... having drawn up the plan of the church of Sant'Agostino with all the rest of the convent with the idea of the new building ...". Probably in the years 1647-1650 Vincenzo contributed to the modernization project of the Lateran basilica.

From 1649 Vincenzo had to retire to hide the shame of his son Felice, a murderer condemned to exile. These were difficult years for the artist, which left an indelible mark for the rest of his life. It was during this period that he became architect of the church of Ss. Domenico and Sisto, a position he would hold until his death, when he was replaced by his son Felice.

His activity with the nuns of Ss. Domenico and Sisto was not limited to the sole direction of the works for the church, but also extended to their land and building properties, in Rome and beyond. Between 1655 and 1658 he executed two drawings that are found in the Chigiano code. The first is a plan of a vegetable garden of the monks of S. Prassede, intended for urbanization. The second is a "sharpening of houses" located in front of Palazzo Venezia. It is likely that this drawing was made when in 1658 it was decided to demolish some houses in Piazza S. Marco to widen Via del Corso. Unfortunately these two drawings, which could represent a further contribution to the difficult knowledge of Vincenzo's artistic activity, being devoid of any element that could help clarify the circumstances in which they were made, remain a simple testimony of that series of multiple and repetitive tasks, carried out by Vincenzo, from which it is not possible to highlight any creative note.

The most important of the works for which Vincenzo is remembered remains the church of Ss. Domenico and Sisto. In reality the church, built between the end of the 16th and the middle of the 17th century, was a collaborative work between various architects, including Giacomo Della Porta, Nicolò and Orazio Turriani, and Giovan Battista Soria. Vincenzo took over the direction of the works in 1651 upon Soria's death. At that time the Magnanapoli complex was in a very advanced stage: the convent was now completed in its fundamental structures, while the church still needed the façade and a staircase to make access more difficult. In 1653 Vincenzo began to complete the portal and the upper part of the façade left unfinished by N. Turriani.

Vincenzo, caught in the narrow confines of an already drawn plan, was unable to give the second order of the façade the same spontaneous articulation present in the portal and in the scenographic staircase. Baroque accents are visible only in the secondary details of the façade.

According to the reading of the documents relating to Ss. Domenico and Sisto, the construction of the beautiful "ovate staircase" seems to be attributed to Della Greca

alone. But, as D'Onofrio (1973) rightly observes, in the entire Dominican complex it is possible to verify the imprint of two other architects, belonging to two different generations: Giacomo Della Porta and Orazio Turriani. The idea of the staircase was most likely Turriani's, but Vincenzo interpreted it in a completely personal way. To add charm to the already suggestive architectural solution, while the staircase was being built, he gave a layout to the courtyard (1657), which until then had been closed by a low wall with an opening on the left side.

Vincenzo designed a monumental entrance, towards S. Caterina di Magnanapoli, decorated with rusticated travertine pilasters surmounted by a broken tympanum and spaced as far apart as was necessary to frame the view of the church. Through the entrance portal there was a succession, a "line" of scenographic factors: the staircase, the church portal, the Madonna, the eye and the flames that overlook the façade, which repeated those placed on the broken tympanum of the entrance portal. Unfortunately this other element of great effect was later destroyed and today we have evidence of it only through archive sources and an engraving by Vasi, which reproduces the design. The merit of this artist is therefore not linked to the actual facade of the church, but to the creation of the scenographic framework that transformed the simple external courtyard of the monastery into a baroque "theater". All this met with the unanimous approval of contemporaries, who linked the name of Vincenzo to the entire complex, thus erasing the memory of previous architects.

Vincenzo died in Rome on December 2, 1661.

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