

# Modernist and Historicist Remnants in Italian Art Nouveau through the Works of the Wolfson Collection

Matteo  
Fochessati  
Italy



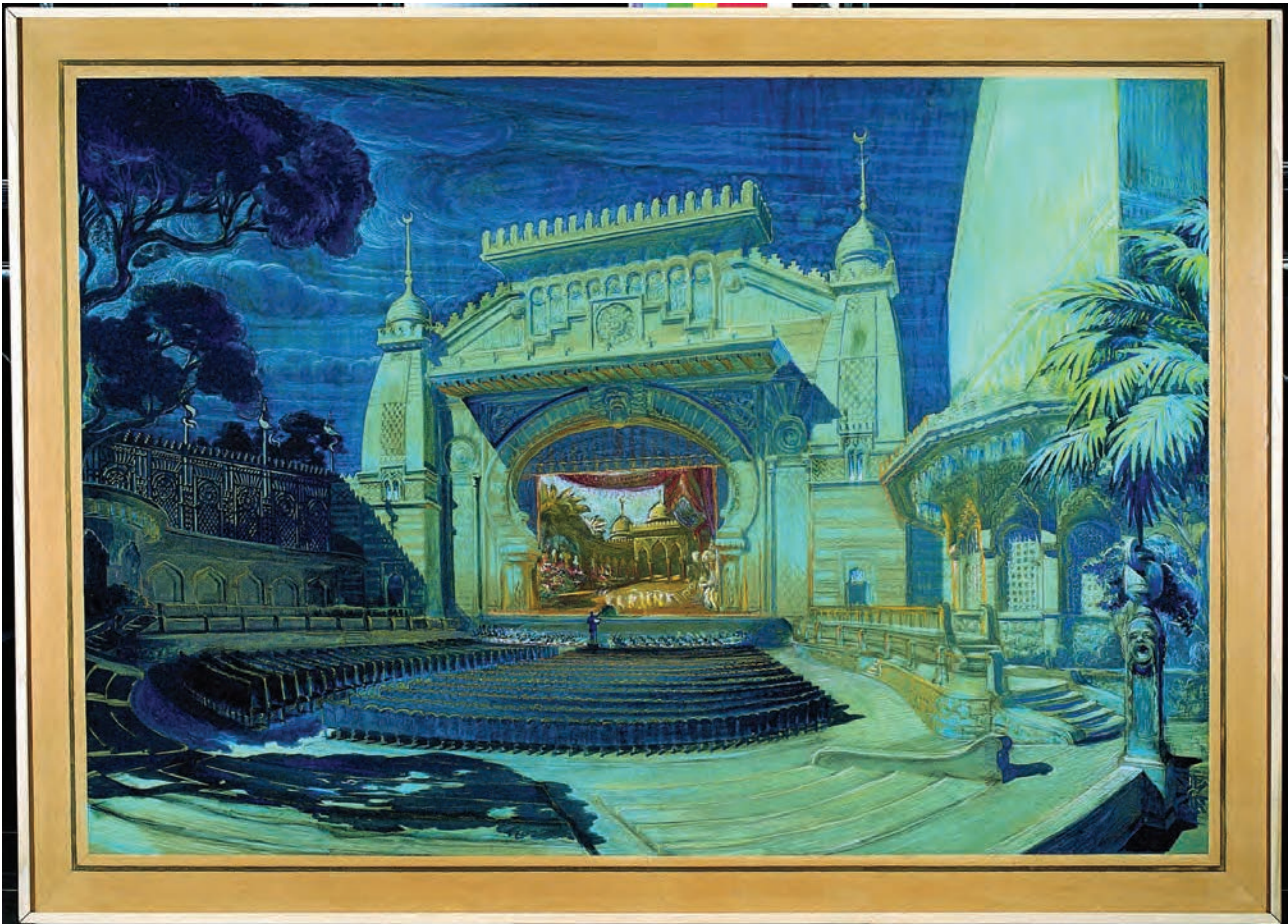
Focusing on decorative and propaganda arts from 1880 to 1945, the Wolfsoniana carries out its artistic promotion and research activities through its Museum, which was inaugurated in 2005 at the Genoa-Nervi exhibition hub of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century art, and through its Study Centre, which since 2009 has been housed in the multi-purpose complex at Palazzo Ducale.

forming Arts reflects his personal aesthetic leanings, which eschewed the concept of art for art's sake and instead supported and promoted all artistic events conceived for the sake of ideas. This particular cultural paradigm played a key role in inspiring the Wolfsoniana's multi-disciplinary aesthetic orientation and its intrinsic and fundamental educational function. Indeed, the collection carries out its educational and training activities on two interacting levels: on the one hand, the "visual" approach of the museum, which through a wide array of materials and techniques provides

Wolfsoniana, Genoa Nervi, Art Nouveau Hall (furnishings by Ödön Faragó, Leopold Bauer, and Joseph Maria Olbrich), Wolfsoniana - Regional Foundation for Culture and the Performing Arts, Genoa



The collection that the American philanthropist Mitchell Wolfson Jr. donated to the Genoa Regional Foundation for Culture and the Performing Arts reflects his personal aesthetic leanings, which eschewed the concept of art for art's sake



Adolfo Coppedè,  
*Il teatro Alhambra  
di Firenze,*  
1921,  
Wolfsoniana -  
Regional Foundation  
for Culture and the  
Performing Arts,  
Genoa

the public at large with a direct, accessible prism for examining the historical and social complexities of the historical period in question; on the other, the Study Centre provides students and scholars interested in delving into the issues touched upon by the collection with opportunities for research and popularization.

Thanks to the wealth and variety of its artwork, bibliographic, and printed documentation, the Wolfsoniana provides a comprehensive, in-depth overview of the complexity of the Art Nouveau phenomenon. In Italy -

where it was known as *Liberty* or *floral style* - Art Nouveau engendered, as the 19<sup>th</sup> century gave way to the 20<sup>th</sup>, a heated debate between the persisting historicist tendencies and the emerging linguistic leanings of modern decorative art.

In that sense, the Italian experience shared the same cultural tensions of the research paradigm which, driven by the spirit of romantic nationalism, had extended at the turn of the century to numerous European countries - from Spain to Hungary, and from Finland to



Norway - through a modernist re-interpretation of traditional motifs.

Within the Wolfson collection, an emblematic example of this trend can be seen in the studio designed by Ödön Faragó and built by József Sándor that was exhibited in the Hungarian Section of the *First International Exhibition of Decorative and Modern Art* held in Turin in 1902. Comprising two bookcases and a mahogany-and-brass desk, this studio - which had already been awarded the Hungarian gold medal for applied arts in 1901 - features a peculiar combination of secessionist tendencies and traditional Hungarian motifs. An equally significant example of this widespread tendency to re-shape the formal characteristics of Art Nouveau through stylistic motifs drawn from national or regional tradition is an oak furniture set for a legal studio, dating back to about 1912 and attributed to Gaspar Homar or another exponent of the Catalan *Renixança*, an artistic trend which, through its recurring use of floral or plant decorative motifs, was characterized by its direct references to the local autonomist culture.

The emergence of this new expressive current in Italy where Art Nouveau came to be known as *Liberty* thanks to the fact that *Emporium* magazine frequently mentioned the activities of Arthur Lasenby Liberty's renowned London atelier - generally manifested itself through frequent comparisons with the eclectic, historicist tastes that typified the arts scene in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During this historical period, the young nation of Italy, which had only become unified in 1861, had centred its search for a shared cultural identity around constant references to the main stylistic veins of its illustrious artistic tradition.



This particular research context is well represented by the artistic and professional careers of the architect Gino Coppedè and of the Casa Artistica, a renowned Florentine cabinetmaker's workshop founded by his father Mariano, and where Gino's brother Adolfo and Carlo also worked, the latter being Gino's main partner with regards to painted decorations.

Aldo Avati,  
original watercolour  
for the book  
*Fantasie di Architettura*,  
Turin 1921, Wolfsoniana -  
Regional Foundation  
for Culture and the  
Performing Arts,  
Genoa



Plinio Nomellini,  
*Il Lavoro*,  
 1903,  
 Wolfsoniana -  
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 for Culture and the  
 Performing Arts,  
 Genoa

His architectural masterpiece, which became a formal and composition model for all his subsequent work, was Genoa's Mackenzie Castle. The work was commissioned at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by a wealthy insurance broker of Scottish descent, Evan Mackenzie, who was in love with Italian - and especially Tuscan - artistic culture. In this evocative recreation of a Medieval and Renaissance dream shared by both the architect and his client Coppedè's unique aesthetic and professional

approach, rooted in historicism, and which was already known as the *Coppedè style*, reflected a direct comparison with certain expressions of modern decorative art.

This style, which bore the name of its creator, was characterised by his unbridled willingness to bring together elements from a broad and varied repertoire of decorative motifs, as evidenced by the Mackenzie Castle's architectural compound, from its tall tower, recalling Siena's Torre del Mangia, to the sophisticated, Renaissance-style wooden dining room furniture designed by Mariano Coppedè, and the monumental outfitting of the entrance salon. Here, the costume scenes painted by Carlo Coppedè played off the Genoese Medieval cultural references of the marble columns and the classicist longings embodied in the marble statue depicting the Venus of Capua, a copy of the original held at the National Archaeological Museum in Naples.

In spite of his nonchalant recourse to formal models from the past, his expressive approach remained open to influences from contemporary artistic culture. These influences are evident in the Castle's exterior - in the floral ceramic decorations from Florence's Manifattura Cantagalli and in the secessionist-inspired mosaic decorations of the Società Musiva of Venice - and in its interior, in the stone bas-relief *Il viandante e la fonte* (1901) by the Genoese sculptor Edoardo De Albertis.

The variety of the artistic and architectural sources of inspiration for Gino Coppedè's project for the Mackenzie Castle is reflected in some of his brother Adolfo's most famous works. Examples include the decorations for the interior rooms of Genoa's Palazzo della Borsa - designed by the architect Dario Carbone (1909) - and the projects for Casa Antonini





Alberto Issel,  
Piano.  
*Esposizione Internazionale  
di Arti Decorative*,  
Turin 1902, Wolfsoniana -  
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Genoa

in Florence (circa 1907) and the Alhambra Theatre (1921), which showed the exoticist tastes that the Coppedè brothers would subsequently experiment with in their showy outfitting of ships.

With its monumental, cyclopean, and fantastic characters, this taste for visionary architecture was one of the trademarks of Italian design from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup>. In the Wolfson collection, this can be seen in the eye-popping effects of Aldo Avati's *Fantasia di Architettura* (a series of

watercolours included in a book published in Turin in 1921), with its looming shapes and bizarre decorations, or in the massive structures in Ulisse Stacchini's project for Milan's Central Train Station. This project was initially conceived around 1912, and subsequently fine-tuned until the definitive solution adopted by the train station, which was inaugurated in 1931.

Genoa, the home of the Wolfsoniana, thus played a central role in the emergence of Art Nouveau in Italy. During this era, the city's



Carlo Bugatti,  
*Stipo*,  
1899,

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dynamic industrial activities were the ideal backdrop for the celebration of modernity that typified the spirit and expressive characters of the new style. In fact, it was thanks to its metropolitan celebration of modernity and technological progress that Genoa became a cultural, social, and political testing ground for the era's *zeitgeist*. Indeed, in 1901 it hosted an exhibition - the 6<sup>th</sup> Regional Exhibition which, thanks to the architect Venceslao Borziani's pavilions, became a significant precedent for the Turin exhibition in 1902, whose design, by Raimondo D'Aronco, marked the definitive celebration of Art Nouveau in Italy. Several brilliant artists who were working in Genoa at the time contributed to the exhibition's decorations. These included Plinio Nomellini and Edoardo De Albertis, whose activities, as documented in the Wolfson collection, contributed to the emergence of the new style's formal and iconography solutions.

Another leading interpreter of these trends on the Ligurian art scene was Alberto Issel. Initially devoted to outdoor painting influenced by the Grigi school, he then turned to decorative art, creating Renaissance-inspired majolica pottery which he sold in a shop he opened in Genoa in 1880. The shop's success led him and his son Arturo to open a facility that produced furniture and applied art objects. The Wolfson Collection holds several examples of his furniture, including an oak living room set and a piano exhibited at the 1902 Turin exhibition, which document effectively his shift from a historicist-influenced style to an approach that strongly reflected the composition and iconography of Art Nouveau, especially in its recurring, inlaid plant motifs.

A quintessential example of this formal evolution held in the Wolfsoniana can be



Costantino  
and Faustino Zatti,  
Desk, circa 1905,  
Wolfsoniana -  
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Genoa

found in one of Carlo Bugatti's masterpieces, a cupboard from 1899. It is fashioned - in keeping with the artist's typical expressive freedom - using bizarre and unusual materials and techniques, which adorned the walnut frame with inlays in various types of wood and metal, embossed copper tondos, and fine parchment upholstery.

The output of Alessandro Mazzucotelli, one of the most renowned 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian wrought-iron masters, appears equally split between historicist tendencies and elegant variations on the Art Nouveau style, as documented in the Wolfsoniana by a richly decorated photograph holder from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and by a candlestick from about 1910 decorated with the typical dragonfly motif.







Luigi Fontana,  
Milan, Living room,  
circa 1902, Wolfsoniana -  
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and the Performing Arts,  
Genoa

The blend of styles that characterized the emergence of modern decorative art at the cusp of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Italy can also be seen in a studio designed by the brothers Costantino and Faustino Zatti around 1905. Comprising a bookcase, a small desk, and a seat, this delicate set of fruitwood furniture featured inlays in

mother-of-pearl and various woods, and dyed and suede leather upholstery; it shows unmistakable references to the whimsy of eclectic culture in the choice of materials and sophisticated manufacturing techniques. Nevertheless, the dynamic, beguiling lines of the individual pieces, and their decorative approach as



a whole, typified by floral and plant motifs, reflect a full-fledged adherence to the new expressive forms of Art Nouveau.

Coherently aligned with the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* as theorized by the most advanced and innovative expressions of the new artistic movement, the output of Ernesto Basile - as part of his collaborative efforts with Vittorio Ducrot launched in 1898 - instead represents a pioneering form of collaboration between industry and design, oriented towards the dual production of both luxurious, richly decorated furniture sets and inexpensive ones. With his series of furniture inspired by the typical decorations and imagery of Sicilian carts, Basile developed his own personal artistic language, rooted in folk traditions, which the Ducrot company continued to adopt in its subsequent output, as evidenced by the furnishings for the Sicilian bar in the first-class section of the *Augustus* motor vessel (1927).

The gradual affirmation of a production policy based on proto-industrial models is also documented in the mahogany living room by the Milanese firm Luigi Fontana & Company. Created for a residence in Trani, Apulia, it is now a period room in the Wolfsoniana museum, and it appears to reflect the dynamic, enveloping lines of French and Belgian Art Nouveau. Similar references to Belgian and other contemporary international sources also emerge in the furniture produced by Carlo Zen's manufacturing plant in Milan, one of the most important ones of its era, which changed its name to *Fabbrica Italiana di Mobili* in 1906.

The complexity of Art Nouveau and its expressive affinities with contemporary symbolist art, which through the emergence of cultural stirrings rooted in decadentism had marked the decline of the Verismo style typical of 19<sup>th</sup> century realism, is evidenced once again in

Carlo Zen,  
Flower box, circa 1902,  
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Genoa



Giovanni Buffa,  
Guido Zuccaro;  
Artistic  
glass windows  
G. Beltrami,  
Milan,  
*Medusa*,  
*Esposizione  
Internazionale  
di arti decorative*,  
Turin 1902,  
Wolfsoniana  
- Regional Foundation  
for Culture and the  
Performing Arts,  
Genoa



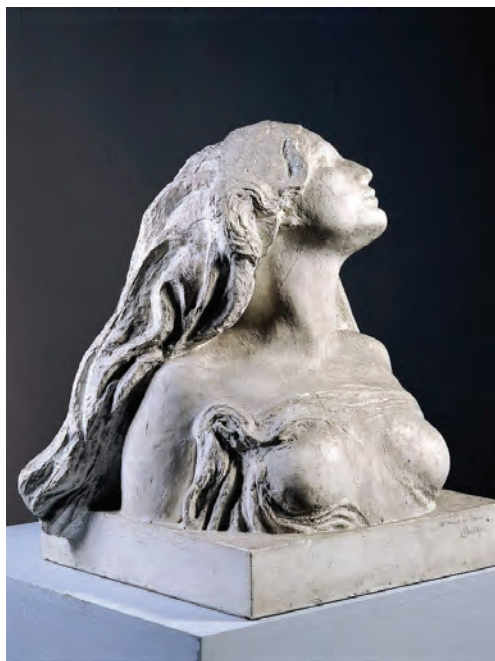
the Wolfsoniana thanks to several emblematic works. An example is the leaded glass tondo *Medusa* by Giovanni Buffa and Guido Zuccaro, crafted in 1901 by the G. Beltrami artistic glassworks in Milan and exhibited the following year during the decorative art exhibition

in Turin. A similar, secessionist-inspired formal imprinting also typifies the gesso model for *Elsa della spada del generale Caviglia*, a work from the early 1910s by the Ligurian artist Rubaldo Merello. Subsequently, from his solitary base at San Fruttuoso di Camogli; Merello



would go on to author numerous important paintings inspired by the rigorous composition of Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo and the bold colours and thick brushstrokes of Plinio Nomellini. The latter, blending his socialist-inspired political activism with Divisionist and Art Nouveau themes and models, was one of the main interpreters of the modern principles according to which art should adhere to reality.

Within this artistic context, the figurative culture of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century found one of its most characteristic expressions in the aesthetic foreboding of symbolism, as documented by the beguiling dynamism of the composition of Leonardo Bistolfi's sculpture. His *La Morte*, a gesso preparatory model for the Abegg funerary monument *La Vita e la Morte: Verso la Luce* (1913) is held at the Wolfsoniana.



After his early years as a sculptor, Giacomo Cometti, a pupil of Bistolfi and author of the monumental fountain (whose terracotta preparatory model is held at the Wolfsoniana) built at the Parco di Valentino for the Turin National Exhibition of 1898, began a successful career in the decorative arts. In keeping with his master's suggestion, he began as a cabinetmaker at the 1900 Paris World Fair. The artisanal output of his workshop, whose the archives are held at the Wolfson Collection, was characterized during the Art Nouveau era by its formally stylized furniture with inlaid decorations, which were also the hallmark of his later Art Déco and Novecento work.

This striving towards a formal and compositional simplification is also evident in a maple bedroom for young ladies that Ugo Ceruti, with Gaetano Moretti as art consultant, presented at the 1902 Turin exhibition. The relief decorations with plant motifs and the geometrical composition of the cabinets reflected the compositional rigour of contemporary secessionist works, particularly Josef Hoffmann's furnishings.

The same approach, albeit filtered through the prism of Arts & Crafts, can finally be found in the work of a group of Roman artists, part of Duilio Cambellotti's circle, who founded the magazine *La Casa* in Rome in 1908. For example, a table designed during that period by Vittorio Grassi for his own home, with its various slotted parts, exemplified a search for simple lines and types of furniture that were functional to a modern renewal of the concept of living quarters.





Giacomo Cometti,  
Cupboard, 1905-10,  
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for Culture and the  
Performing Arts,  
Genoa