GASPARE FOSSATI DI MORCOTE AND HIS BROTHER GIUSEPPE

The Fossatis were a family of local notables in Morcote in the Ticino. They included mayors and surgeons, lawyers and architects, and even a military engineer at the beginning of the 18th century. One artist in the family, who died in 1791, painted in Venice, Bratislava, Vienna and Hungary; his watercolour of a clown hangs at Windsor Castle. Another artist was buried in Santa Maria dell'Orto in 1784.

Giuseppe, the great-grandfather of the brothers Gaspare and Giuseppe, was an architect in Venice where his son built both the Teatro San Beneto and, by contrast, the prison at Rimini: both served as stages for the Commedia della Vita.

Uncle Pier Angelo was both architect and engineer and uncle Giorgio worked in St. Petersburg, fortunately as it will appear, and died in 1843. With such a lineage, Gaspare and Giuseppe were not likely to be confined to Morcote although both were ardent local patriots.

Gaspare was born on 7th October 1809; and was educated in Venice until he was 13 years old when he entered the Ornamental School of the Accademia di Brera, soon transferring to the architectural school. At the age of 15 he was winning prizes and graduated in 1827 with the Gold Medal, committed to Neoclassicism.

Gaspare might have been doomed to be an academician were it not that a lust for work had already sent him to study with a freelance architect in his spare time from the Brera. Half of 1827 was devoted to a tour of the towns of Italy, and between 1828 and 1831 he produced lithographs of Rome besides designing a catafalque for Leone XII in 1829. His sketching added excitement to his life of promise and respectability for he was arrested when drawing the Castel San Elmo and found guilty of spying, treason and humbler crimes. Fortunately, he was rescued by the diplomacy of the architect Pietro Bianchi.

Gaspare had yet to find his destiny and he continued to meander from town to town acquiring architectural knowledge such as no academy could provide although the cogs of a stereotyped education were to hamper him all life long. In 1833 he was liberated when at the age of 24 he went to St. Petersburg to work with Luigi Rusca, an Italian architect born in Russia. In St. Petersburg, Gaspare was influenced by the highly regarded Neoclassicist, Carlo Rossi who built prodigiously for the Tsar. In 1835 Rusca obtained an appointment for Gaspare in the Imperial Buildings Department; in 1836 Gaspare became an official court architect. There he agreed to draw up plans for a new Russian embassy in Constantinople, was given a Russian passport and a stipend of 3,000 roubles a year. He married Rusca's daughter and sailed from Odessa, arriving in Constantinople on 20th March 1837.

In Italy Gaspare had been frustrated by the difficulty of finding work in a country with too many gifted architects and too few commissions. Now, although owing a little to luck and patronage, he started a new life full of self-confidence. In Russia he had built the Italian Church in Moscow, another church in Kronstadt, the Bernedaki mansion on the Nevsky Prospect, a military hospital, a college, a villa, military stables in Finland and the facade of a palace besides a sarcophagus for Ferdinand I of Austria, all in some three years.

In 1837, at only 29 years old, Gaspare was master of his art and trade. His reputation was established and like other European architects working in Turkey he carried out various commissions while building the Russian embassy. When he went to Cherwon to obtain building material he designed a church there too as he did for Conte Capodistria in Corfu and in Malta. He also visited several Greek islands while awaiting the final approval of his plans for the embassy. After this, in February 1839 he recruited for assistance his brother-in-law Alessandro Rusca, his own 17 year old brother Giuseppe who had just graduated from the Brera, and also his sister's husband Antonio Fornari of Venice who was a master painter and decorator.

Giuseppe had a distinguished career in Constantinople, building the Church of Santo Spirito, a grand yali, several houses for expatriates, a cafe and billiard saloon and public baths in Bursa, all before he was 28. He also collaborated with his brother in building the Dutch embassy, the Spanish embassy, offices and various houses. In 1859 at the age of 37 he retired to Morcote with his wife whom he had married five years before, a daughter of the dragoman at the Russian legation. But the subsidence of the lakeside into the water speeded his return to work in Italy.

Gaspare had also decided to leave Constantinople although he had many commissions. In 1858 he obtained a passport for Russia but he never went there; instead, in 1862 he re-
turned to Milan and he was a member of the committee for the Galleria and the Piazza Duomo. When 60, this passionate man, who in 1849 had been enthusiastically involved in the Risorgimento, finally took Italian citizenship to die in Morcote at the age of 74 on 5th September 1853. On 28th January 1935 Milan honoured the two brothers by naming the Via Fratelli Fossati after them.

In Constantinople, Gaspare and his team rebuilt the church of San Pietro Domenicani just below the Galata tower for which he was paid 10,000 piastres and the military hospital at Sultan Bayazit besides planning a bridge across the Neva in St. Petersburg. In 1845 the Russian embassy was opened with suitable ceremonial. The young and enthusiastic sultan, Abdul-Mecit, became Gaspare’s patron in 1839 and Gaspare bought a house in Pera. Between 1845 and 1849 he built the new Ottoman university beside Hagia Sophia. The university was a very grand proclamation of the new era in Ottoman development. Materials were scarce, and he used wood to build this monument with facility, learning from wooden constructions in Russia. Nonetheless, his work was
good but not memorable as that of Raimondo d’Aronco was to be. His great contribution to architecture, the restoration of Hagia Sophia, was now to come.

Hagia Sophia, the Church of the Holy Wisdom, for long the envy of Europe and the Near East, even now — battered, looted, in and out of scaffolding — is one of the great buildings of the world. Apart from the Pantheon in Rome, possibly no other building has been so long in continuous use. In fact, Hagia Sophia was not the work of professional architects but of two great mathematicians, Anthemius of Tralles — who died before it was completed — and Isidore of Miletus, between 532 and 537 A.D. This is not the place to record the structural history of Hagia Sophia. Relevant to our subject is the building of the four huge lateral buttresses by Andronicus II in 1317 and the restoration by the Italian Giovanni Peralta that followed on the collapse of the east arch in 1346 or 1347 due to the major earthquake of 1344. The work was botched due to shortage of money although the regent Anne of Savoie raised a considerable sum. Replacing the 13 ribs of the dome without

HAGIA SOPHIA BEFORE THE RESTORATION
new centering resulted in the present jog in the cornice. As a precaution, the stones of the northeast pendenteve were clamped in iron. After an initial period of subsidence the building rested securely on Devonian rock and fundamentally it was as strong as a bulwark. It was unaffected by the huge earthquake of 1766 which brought down most of the domes in the city, and by the lesser tremors of 26th October 1802. Even so, the building was dirty and shabby and the last repair had been that of the Ottoman architect Sinan in 1573, 250 years before. But in 1839 a small dome fell and its mosaics were given away for a tip, as they had been when Lady Mary Wortley-Montagu visited the basilica in the 18th century.

The sultan approached Gaspare Fossati and asked him to take charge of a complete restoration of Hagia Sophia. Another man might have been deterred for here was a monument where its own weight when shifting to secure foundations and the brutal intervention of earthquakes, especially in the 6th and 7th centuries, resulted in no arch anywhere being a true hemisphere. Supported by his own self-confidence and his extraordinary range of experience, Gaspare willingly undertook the task. Abdül-Mecit, like his forefather Murat IV in the 17th century, admired and, indeed, loved the building. He had, moreover, the support of his Grand vizier, Raschid Pasha. The late Şeyhül-Islam, Grand Mufti of Istanbul, had died leaving his fortune of 5,000,000 piastres to his sovereign. These were no more than adequate funds and for this reason no new marble nor any other costly material could be purchased. This meant that fallen revetments in the gallery had to be replaced by slabs from the floor. The İradé, or Order-in-Council, for the work of restoration was delayed until March-April 1847 when pilgrims left for Mecca and when work could begin. Clearly, the plans had been prepared in secret for some months before.

Antonio Fornari was to supervise the massive amount of painting using stencils designed and cut by himself. This paintwork was to cover the ceilings of all lateral areas and the long west gallery of the church as well as those on the east and west. He was also responsible for the disagreeable trompe l'oeil near the exedra at gallery level and the coarse black mock windows where later buttressing had blocked the originals. The quasi-Byzantine stencilling, however, was as good as could be achieved. Mustafa Izzet Efendi, Kadasker, or Chief Justice, and the foremost calligrapher of his time, was responsible for the many inscriptions, including the famous passage on Light (from the 24th urat of the Quran, Verse 35) which covers the crown of the dome. He also created the huge levhas or circular cartoons which bear the names of God and Muhammad and of the first six caliphs.

Characteristically, Gaspare began with the most difficult task in order to win the confidence of the sultan and his grand vizier. Twelve of the columns of the exedrae leaned dangerously and had to be straightened. Each had to be moved so that their bases could be recut; the infill carried out between the last column and the wall on each side was prudently increased with some loss of to the lightness of these lyrical arcades. Many iron ties in the dome and other rim galleries had decayed and had to be replaced, and a crack in the dome which let in snow and rain had to be filled. It needed strong nerves in order to work in the dome gallery with its 30 degrees outward incline to a very low balustrade. When the Prussian W. Salzenburg, who had come to

HAGIA SOPHIA. PLAN OF PRINCIPAL CHANGES AT GALLERY LEVEL.
spend five months studying the Fossati's work, reached the gallery from an external stair, he was in such a state of terror that he had to be put in a sack before he could be carried down to ground level. It may have pleased Gaspare because he had good reason to be angry with Salzenburg whose drawings were in breach of the Fossatis' copyright.

An iron chain was bound round the base of the dome proper, and a second chain, hidden by a plaster cornice, was bound round the square base from which the superstructure springs. Two stair turrets were removed in order to relieve weight together with four small flying buttresses in the Ottoman style which had probably been added by Sinan. Adronicus' huge buttresses were cleared of debris including rotted icons hastily removed on 29th May 1453. The leads of the roof required extensive repair due to the predilection of seagulls for this viewpoint. Pigeons had also badly damaged both it and much external brickwork.

Inside, the revetments had their old clamps replaced and were supported by new cement. Some of the stucco friezes at ground floor and gallery levels had to be renewed. The three large coloured windows of the apse were also restored and the mihrab and the singing galleries refurbished along with the dais of the grand vizier and other wooden tribunes. The minbar built by Murad III had its cone heightened and was regilded. The southeast door of the Fakir was plastered over, and the large wooden doors of the narthex replaced those looted by the crusaders in 1204.

Gaspare was proudest of his new hunkar mahfile or royal box.

Previously the sultan had shivered in the northeast arch left of the apse as the superb Iznik tiles there testify. The new octagonal box was approached from withdrawing rooms by way of a gallery of gilded latticework. There were paintings of Mecca and Medina in the drawing room by Antonio, but no tiles. Gaspare believed the box itself to be a fine synthesis of Greco-Roman styles. Gaspare also designed the candelabra that fill the nave.

Meanwhile, externally the brick minaret built by the Conqueror Mehmet II had been heightened to match the stone minaret of Beyazit II and a stone festoon inset under its cap. Similar festoons were added to the extremely large minarets of the west front which were added by Sinan in the 1570s for Selim II and Mehmet III. An independent timekeeper's lodge was also built.

The external refurbishment was complete when the whole of the brickwork was painted in mustard and red stripes although Gaspare's lithograph still records it as white in the Ottoman tradition. In the days of Byzantine glory it had worn a cloak of many colours. After the earthquake of 1894 it was repainted in stripes, then orange and now in Bosphorus red.

The greatest task was to strip the plaster from five acres of Byzantine mosaics. When a sample wall was revealed to the sultan in its golden blaze he cried, according to Comte Adalbert de Beaumont: "Wretched man, you've ruined me!" When all was explained he criticized his predecessors for concealing such beauty. Later he too had to have the figurative mosaics covered to appease fanatics. Less than half those that the sultan saw survived the earthquake of 1894 when tesse-rae were shed like golden rain to be hawked for farthings. The survivors still shed glory to the amazing space, quite apart from the great set-pieces: the Virgin of the Apse, the Fathers of the Church, the Emperors and
Empresses who survive whole the Deisis in the gallery with the Baptist interceding through the Virgin to Christ in Judgement is the incomparable masterpiece of the Palæologus period. To set this scene alight, the marbles — simple Proconessian to rare jasper — were waxed and polished. Carpets were laid and the basilica was inaugurated on 13th July 1849 in splendour. Unfortunately, the Paris jewellers had failed to deliver the Fossati’s medal in time. The prize-winners of academies are not always the creative leaders of the young for to win the approbation of a past generation presupposes a certain conformity of spirit which later will not struggle free. The Fossatis were not remarkable for their worthy Neoclassical buildings or for being great creative architects. Gaspare was a superb draftsman as his watercolors make clear, but he was the master of restoration, an engineer as much as an architect. His monument is Hagia Sophia, that incomparable masterpiece which it was his destiny to save. Let us never cease to be grateful.

Godfrey Goodwin


2 Giuseppe published a paper: — Fossati G., Il Filosofo dei Alpi, Venezia, 1780, and a paper to the Academia which is in the worst sense academic. He glorifies the art of Ancient Rome as equal to those of Greece and is serîvely concerned with patronage. His fashionable list of great artists from Titian to Cignani and, presciently Kupezki, "the great restorer of Moscow" is of interest.

3 Palumbo-Fossati, op. cit., p. 139.

4 Rusca was a Neoclassicist personified, see Rusca L., Recueil des Dessins de différents batiments à Saint-Petersbourg, ... 1810. His elevation for the Horse Guards has Roman gods among the Russians in the foreground. He built other barracks and many mansions including that of Prince Volkonsky, l, pl. XXVIII. An unrealised church, H, pl. XXV, has a touch of Gothic Revival. Three mosques for Tartars have original, if unsuitable plans.

5 See Pilyavski I.V., Rossi Moscow, 1951, p. 48-49, for example of his range from some what bloated Palladianism to the coolest Neoclassicism. His ministries opposite the Winter Palace have a triumphal arch as large as any in a secular building.

6 Mango, op. cit., p. 8.

7 Palumbo-Fossati, op. cit., p. 142.


9 Thus sparing us a grandiose 19th-century palace to replace Topkapi Saray. The Turkish economic crisis must
have diminished commissions. Mango, op. cit., p. 9.

10 Palumbo-Fossati, op. cit., p. 144.

11 Ibid., p. 144.

12 Ibid., p. 143.

13 It was never used as the university but became the Palace of Justice and burnt down in 1933.

14 By crusaders in 1204, the Venetians even stripping the west front of its marble. Indeed, they took the loaf and left only crumbs for the Ottomans in 1453.

15 But they may have built the church of Ss Sergius and Bacchus five years before.

16 The original dome collapsed because it was too shallow to withstand a serious earthquake in 1558 to be rebuilt in its present hemispherical form by 1583. The architect was Isidorus the Younger, nephew of the original builder.


18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., p. 170. From the crown of the south arch to the northeast pendentive.

20 Fossati could not rectify this without demolishing the dome and starting again.

21 Emerson and Van Nice, op. cit., p. 3.

22 Mango, op. cit., p. 10.


24 Fossati G. Aya Sofya, Constantinople, as recently restored by order of the Sultan Abdul Medjid from the original drawings by Chevalier Gaspare Fossati, London, 1852, p. 1.

25 Mango, op. cit., p. 11.

26 Ibid. p. 11-12. 800 men were employed but many were useless.


28 Ibid., p. 122.

29 Ibid., p. 102-103, 107 ff. Three in each north exedra, four in southwest and two in southeast, p. 110. Fossati, op. cit., p. 2, says that 13 columns were straightened. Could one have been elsewhere? Some gallery columns still lean.


31 Mango, op. cit., p. 20. One among many visitors. His breach of copyright in publishing his inferior drawings was sustained by his royal patron. I could only go round the gallery myself on hands and knees. Clamps and protruding masonry added to the horror. The descent was made upright.

32 R.L. Van Nice, personal communication.

33 Mango, op. cit., p. 13. Two turrets at the east corner of the dome were also removed to lighten the strain on the arch. In the 1960s it was almost impossible to find anyone to clean out a newly discovered room where pigeons had nested on the corpses of their ancestors for 1500 years. See also Fossati, op. cit., p. 1ff. Today the flight of the seagulls when the floodlighting is turned on is an emotive experience.

34 Mango, op. cit., p. 10.

35 Mango, op. cit., p. 15. It stands on eight marble columns, three of which are verde antica example found lying in the courtyard of the mosque.

36 Mango, op. cit., p. 16. The festoons on the large minarets were destroyed in a gale.

37 Mango, op. cit., p.15.

38 This was a late decision, see below. In the 1960s, French archaeologists using dentists' tools and measuring the angles of each tessera cleaned and reset the wall in the southwest corner of the church. The result is alive with reflected light and gives an idea of the wonder of the whole building in the 8th century.