

SUPSI

The sculptor's mark: Plaster models in the legacy of Vincenzo Vela

The Ticinese artist Vincenzo Vela (1820-1891) is known for his sensitive and innovative approach to sculpture. He was the leading proponent of the "verismo" or "realism" style that captures a physical and emotional authenticity of subjects and represented a break with the idealized forms that characterized the popular early 19th century style of sculptors such as Antonio Canova and Bertel Thorvaldsen.

Throughout Vela's long career, he produced a significant body of work comprised of individual portraits, funerary sculpture, and monumental sculpture that can be seen today in Italy and Switzerland. His personal interest and involvement in the political struggles of the period meant that he knew and portrayed many of the most prominent figures of his time, such as Giuseppe Garibaldi, General Guillaume Henri Dufour, and King Vittorio Emanuele II.

Vela spent much of his career in Milan and Turin, as an independent artist, but also as a professor at the Accademia Albertina where he was a much loved and admired teacher. However, he always retained a strong bond with the village of Ligornetto, Switzerland where he was born.

Between 1862 and 1865, Vela constructed a villa in Ligornetto to be a house and studio, and eventually a museum where he could exhibit the plaster models that he used in creating his sculpture. In 1888, the main "salon" of the villa was opened to the public where the sculptor himself would often accompany visitors as they admired his life's work. After Vela's death, the house-studio-museum was given to the Swiss Nation and the Museo Vincenzo Vela became the second Swiss national museum, and the first museum established in Ticino.

Premise and objectives of the project

The plaster artist models that represent the majority of the objects in the collection of the Museo Vincenzo Vela today were used by the sculptor in creating sculptures in stone and bronze during his lifetime.



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Although they have been extensively studied from a historical and art historical perspective, the material and construction aspects of the models, as well as their multifaceted technical role in Vela's work has not been studied before.

Since workshop practices in this period were often not officially documented, it is only through the study of objects that they are revealed. Plaster artist models can be an especially rich source of information since they represented an important point in the sculpting process and are often considered to be more intimately connected to an artist and more reflective of their approach and working methods than the final sculptures which were usually produced with the significant involvement of assistants.

The main objectives of this project are therefore to construct a context for the models using archival information and sources of information about established artistic practices and techniques in the 19th century, to study the physical and material aspects of the models through a combination of observation-based and scientific-based investigative techniques, and to develop a fuller understanding of the practical and artistic role played by the models in Vincenzo Vela's artistic and workshop process. The study will be undertaken by an interdisciplinary group of researchers from the Institute of Materials and Construction of the University of Applied Arts and Sciences of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI-IMC), the Museo Vincenzo Vela, and the University of Zurich.

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