

**The Mediobanca Building in Milan  
History, Architecture, Decoration  
(Milan: Skira 2013, 214 pp.)**

This volume, describing the Milanese palazzo where the leading Italian investment bank has its head office, looks at the history of this prestigious building from a variety of perspectives. The section entitled “History” contains an essay on “Milan, from Military Might to Financial Power” written by Fulvio and Gabriele Coltorti. Gabriele Coltorti discusses the appearance of the Scala quarter in the Middle Ages and modern era, illustrating the concentration of churches and ecclesiastical institutions in this area, as in other parts of the city. Emblematic in this respect is the church of San Lorenzino in Torrignia, long vanished, which at one stage was adjacent to the Mediobanca building. Coltorti then describes the noble Milanese families who lived in the Via Filodrammatici building: the Archinto, Riva and Visconti Ajmi families succeeded each other in ownership of the building, which over the course of the centuries came increasingly to be seen as a luxury patrician residence in the centre of Milan. If the Archinto family was initially responsible for the construction of the noble palace, it was the Viscontis who, in the first half of the eighteenth century, carried out a major extension of the building, which then came to take on the proportions of an aristocratic palazzo among the finest in the city. Coltorti also discusses the Scala quarter’s financial vocation which developed in the course of the nineteenth century, showing how during the years of the Napoleonic Kingdom of Italy and the Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia, the buildings which lined the roads now known as Via Santa Margherita and Via Manzoni became the premises of the state’s financial offices and of numerous banking institutions. Fulvio Coltorti, meanwhile, reconstructs the steps which led to Mediobanca acquiring the building in Via Filodrammatici from the Gne-

chi Ruscone family, representatives of the late nineteenth-century upper Milanese bourgeoisie, who had come to own the property after the Visconti Ajmi family died out. The purchase was completed between December 1945 and January 1946 by a limited company known as Immobiliare Quarzo, owned 50:50 by Credito Italiano and Banca Commerciale Italiana. The company paid the Gnechi Ruscone heirs the sum of Lit. 75m to acquire the building. On 10 April 1946, the day when the Board of Directors of Mediobanca first met, the bank decided to acquire the entire share capital of Immobiliare Quarzo. Coltorti goes on to describe the developments in the groupings of buildings between Piazza Cordusio and Piazza della Scala in the course of the late twentieth century: years which saw the area’s financial vocation develop further from that witnessed at the turn of the previous century, to become the current hub of business activity.

The second section of the volume, “Architecture, Spaces, Transformations”, contains es-



says by Ornella Selvafolta, Pier Fausto Bagatti Valsecchi and Cecilia Colombo, and a chronology of events prepared by Fulvio and Gabriele Coltorti.

In her essay entitled “A Palace Tells Its Story... The Architecture, Décor and Events of a Milanese Residence”, Ornella Selvafolta reviews the building’s architectural history. The restoration work carried out by the Gnechi Ruscone reflected the stylistic trends current in the late nineteenth century, dominated by a historicizing fashion which sought to recreate the typical environments of the Lombard Renaissance in the townhouses of the wealthier bourgeoisie. In this connection, as Pier Fausto Bagatti Valsecchi points out in his essay “Building and Reconversion of the Palace, with Particular Focus on the Contribution of Fausto Bagatti Valsecchi”, an important role was played by Fausto Bagatti Valsecchi in recreating this Renaissance atmosphere. In these years Valsecchi acquired celebrity in architectural circles for the refurbishments he carried out in similar Renaissance style, together with his brother Giuseppe,

on the family home situated between Via del Gesù and Via Santo Spirito. Thus, in the years straddling the old and new centuries, the Via Filodrammatici building took on the appearance of an elegant town house, a luxury property befitting one of the wealthiest families of the Lombard bourgeoisie: an atmosphere which the photographer Luigi Bassani captures well in his photos of the Gnechi Ruscone family’s sumptuous rooms which date to this period. Some of these photos are reproduced in the section of the volume entitled “Interiors of the Gnechi Ruscone Residence in the Photographs Taken by Luigi Bassani”.

In her essay entitled “The Mediobanca Building from 1946 to the Present Day”, Cecilia Colombo discusses the various improvements which the new owners Mediobanca carried out in the second half of the twentieth century. The bank chose to retain the late nineteenth-century style, hence work was limited to restoring those parts which had been destroyed by bombing, and adapting the rooms to the building’s new mission as a bank. The furnishings were inspired by the work of the architect Enrico Monti (1873-1949), while the sculptures were commissioned and made by the artist Francesco Barbieri (1908-73). Important in this connection were also the designs made by the rationalist architect Franco Albini (1905-77) to refurbish some of the largest rooms on the first floor of the building. These designs, which were futuristic at the time, were never implemented precisely because of the decision, referred to earlier, to retain the style of the existing structures adopted by the bank.

Next in the volume comes an extensive set of photographs revealing the most prestigious courtyards, corridors and rooms of the building as they appear to this day.

In the section entitled “Milan and Via Filodrammatici 1200-1950: an Essential Chronology”, Fulvio and Gabriele Coltorti provide a chronology of the developments of the building against the backdrop of the history of Milan, providing



Coat of arms of Antonio Visconti Ajmi

dates to help the reader understand the topics discussed in the book as part of a broader context.

In the section entitled “Family Stories”, finally, the essay by Carlo Ghecchi Ruscone “The Visconti Ajmi and Ghecchi Ruscone Families in the Building on Via Filodrammatici” maps out the history of the two households, dwelling in particular on the family that owned the building from 1885 to 1946. The Ghecchi Ruscone family, entrepreneurs in manufacturing industry in the early nineteenth century, acquired their wealth through efficient management of their operations in silk production and distribution. Having built up considerable wealth in this way, in the second half of the century they carried out several substantial real estate investment projects involving not only town houses in Milan, but also villas and land in the Lombard countryside as well. The acquisition of the Via Filodram-

matici property by Giuseppina Turati for her son Francesco Ghecchi Ruscone marked the family’s entry to the most select circles of the Milanese aristocracy. Carlo Ghecchi Ruscone brings this section to a close with a summary of an essay by Silvia A. Conca Messina describing the family’s social ascent, attributable to its business successes in the silk industry and banking activities.

This book represents a new contribution to the histories of buildings that are home to prestigious financial institutions. The essays and the extensive visual material which makes up the volume allows readers to follow for themselves the links which across the centuries have bound the building in Via Filodrammatici to its inhabitants.

**Gabriele Coltorti**



*The artistic bronze gateway was designed and built by Francesco Barbieri in the 1960s, using some 40 tons of highest quality bronze melted in Verona. The gate consists of five rectangular panels, linked by six candelieri with incised decorative motifs surmounted by a sculpted allegorical monster.*