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The *Battle Of Volturno*: A Reflection Of Macchiaioli Disillusionment With Italian Unification

Giovanni Fattori's painting, the *Battle of Volturno*, depicted the battle at Porta Capua on October 1, 1860. It recalled the heroic ideals of those political leaders, soldiers, scholars and artists who fought for Italy's independence from foreign domination, and who desired to create a united Italy under Italian leadership. The *Battle of Volturno* was a complex interweaving of characters and events. It brought together the threads of two distinct periods in Italian history: the early years of the Risorgimento (1850–1860) and the years after unification (1890–1910). The painting fused the hopes and disappointments of both its painter, Fattori, and its patron – protagonist, Gustavo Uzielli, who is featured in the foreground. Beyond the images on the canvas, the *Battle of Volturno* was a symbol of the disillusionment of those who had hoped for not only a united Italy, but an Italy which would have been led by enlightened, moral, and high minded officials whose goals were the betterment of Italian life.

The significance of the *Battle of Volturno* does not lie in the period of the subject matter, 1860, but in the period of the painting's execution, 1891. Fattori's choice of Garibaldi's much heralded campaign through southern Italy reflected his strong desire to emotionally and pictorially look back to a period thirty years earlier which had been filled with hope and optimism. His desire to recreate the events of 1860 was tied to the goals of the Macchiaioli, a group of painters who emerged from the cultural and political environment of Florence in the middle

of the nineteenth century. Their name reflected their liberal attitudes, as the word *macchia* had several definitions, all of which pointed to a more progressive attitude in both their painting style and their political beliefs. The word *macchia* meant "spot" or "sketch" and connoted the preservation in painting of the quick sketch frequently made outdoors in daylight hours.¹ *Macchia* was also the term used to define the dense underbrush associated with Maremma, the coastal agricultural region of Tuscany, and a popular hideaway for bandits and other members of the lower classes.

The Florentine political situation under Grand Duke Leopold II (deposed in 1859), while authoritarian, permitted the cultivation of patriotic ideals and the vocalization of national culture and sentiment, both by artists and prominent scholars. Men such as Giovan Pietro Vieusseux (1779–1863), who founded the journals *Antologia* and *Archivio Storico Italiano*, and Massimo D'Azeglio (1798–1866), whose writings and paintings were geographically site-specific, helped to create an interest in Tuscan landscape, history and culture. Foremost among Tuscan objectives was a desire to elevate Italy to the status of nations such as England, France and Germany. The Macchiaioli painters found landscape to be the vehicle which transmitted their nationalistic spirit. Landscape enabled them to capture all aspects of modern Italian life. While the Macchiaioli painted the beauty and realism of their natural environment, they also depicted scenes of a country torn by the stresses of war, imperialism and the ravages of extreme social stratification.

Fattori was a product of this Tuscan environment. His early attempts in the *macchia* style reflected not only his interest in landscape, but also his reaction to the appearance of French troops in Florence in 1859. These scenes depicted the boredom and the absurdity of the French presence on the Cascine of Florence. It was primarily the military theme which enabled Fattori to explore the realistic avenues afforded by the *macchia* technique.

Fattori was completely absorbed in the military events of 1859–61. Along with his drawings for the painting *The Battle of Magenta*, Fattori began sketches for the painting *Garibaldi a Palermo* (1860–1862). Garibaldi and his *mille* had become the symbol of the quest for human rights to all desiring national independence. His taking of Palermo on May 31, 1860, against tremendous odds, was a battle which excited the

imaginings of people everywhere. Following Palermo, the campaign through the region of Campania to defeat the Bourbon forces and gain control of Naples was one of the last obstacles in the climactic chain of events which lead to the unification of Italy (with the exception of Rome and Venice) in 1860.

Fattori painted military themes throughout his career. Unlike most of the Macchiaioli, whose production of military subjects ended with unification, Fattori found a profitable market for this type of work and proceeded to paint his military scenes. While Fattori developed a rather predictable format for his views of soldiers on horseback or military men on maneuvers, he maintained a faithful and constant view of reality in most of his paintings. His work displayed a candid perception of military life and did not glorify warfare.

The *Battle of Volturno* is a departure from the tradition of Fattori's later works of the 1880s and 1890s. These paintings tended toward rather benign generalities about warfare and lacked the specificity found in his earlier works. The *Battle of Volturno* is one of two major battles painted by Fattori in the 1890s (the other being the battle of Cassala). In this painting he returned to the theme of the heroic *Risorgimento* battles such as the battles at Magenta, 1859; Montebello, 1862; Palermo, 1860; San Martino, 1860; and Bezzeca, 1866. The painting is a salute to the *Risorgimento* ideals of nationalism, democracy and the language of the *macchia*.

Gustavo Uzielli's first-hand account of the battle, afforded the most complete understanding of the painting. Uzielli's role in *Risorgimento* activities was a pivotal one, both as an influential member of the Macchiaioli circle and as a friend and patron to several of the Macchiaioli painters. His presence at the Caffè Michelangelo (a popular Florentine café frequented by many members of the Macchiaioli) was recorded by Telemaco Signorini in his *Caricaturisti e Caricaturati*.

Uzielli, born in 1839 to a prominent Sephardic family, was one of a number of Jews who actively participated in the Macchiaioli movement. With doctorates in both geology and applied mathematics, Uzielli's interests paralleled the landscape studies of the Macchiaioli painters. Their common objectives and the mutuality of their scientific outlook resulted in frequent interaction. Uzielli, a founder and prominent member of the *Società Geografica* established in 1867, published

numerous articles in the society's journal. The organization supported all studies devoted to increasing the knowledge of Italian soil. Uzielli was twenty one years of age when he entered the *Cacciatori delle Alpi* during the campaign of 1859 as a Second Lieutenant. It was at Pisa where a battalion of *bersaglieri* was organized along with others from Padua to join Garibaldi's ranks in the south. Uzielli's account of both his march through southern Italy with Garibaldi and the battle at Porta Capua are historically reliable.

Uzielli's article of 1909, written shortly before his death, was a salute to those who fought with Garibaldi in southern Italy and at Volturno. Featured in the article was Giovanni Fattori's painting which Uzielli did not title the *Battle of Volturno*, but which he labeled *Riproduzione del quadro del Fattori, relativo agli episodi di Porta Capua*. Below the painting, in the legend, Uzielli carefully labeled the featured participants at Porta Capua: himself, Second Lieutenant Perucco and General Milbitz.

Uzielli's account of the group's travel from Livorno to Palermo was filled with excitement and pride. These nationalist sentiments were conveyed in the painting *Garibaldi at Palermo*, painted between 1860–1862 by Fattori, which was erroneously entitled *Garibaldi at Capua*. Uzielli carefully chronicled the route from Palermo to Naples in his article, "Dai ricordi di uno studente garibaldino." It was at Naples that Uzielli's division received their orders to depart for Santa Maria di Capua nearby the Volturno River (an area long noted for its importance agriculturally and geographically).

Uzielli's regiment was positioned to the right of Santa Maria, under the command of General Milbitz, nearby the Roman arch, on the major thoroughfare leading into Capua. On October 1, two areas of explosive fighting broke out in this area as the French attempted to break up Garibaldi's strong position.² Underneath the Porta Capua two cannons were positioned at either side of the arch. Uzielli, who had been placed at Cappuccini, a short distance away, was called by General Milbitz to aid in raising the morale of the soldiers. The conflagration became so great that many of the soldiers panicked and fled. Milbitz ordered Uzielli to continually reload the cannons, where he remained for the greater part of the day. Soon after, Second Lieutenant Perucco, startled by the sudden attack, arrived to stand by the cannons. The following

day, Uzielli was called to Milbitz and shown two letters of commendation written by General Milbitz and General Tommasi, praising him for his valiant service throughout a day of crisis.

Fattori probably knew photographic images of the Porta Capua, or visited the famous Roman ruins. He placed one of the cannons in front of what visually matches photographs of the Porta Capua. His rendering of the ruined conditions of the arches, and his depiction of the small arched recesses at the sides of each arch showed his careful attention to realistic details. In addition, Uzielli must have given Fattori an eyewitness account of the battle. This is not a symbolic battle, but a real event with a specific cast of characters. Fattori carefully placed Uzielli in the foreground at the cannon with Perucco nearby. Off to the side, General Milbitz's arm is raised upward in a symbolic gesture of inspirational leadership. The painting dignified and recorded a heroic moment while it captured the Risorgimento ideals and the essence of the *macchia* pictorial language.

Fattori's depiction of the *Battle of Voltorno* was executed long after unification and several decades of political and social unrest within Italy. The annexation of Rome in 1870 completed the final phase of Italian unification. The dream of a united Italy which many had nurtured for so long became a reality, but not without a myriad of problems. Significant difficulties surfaced among the diverse provincial systems. Divergent attitudes resulted in a strong sense of regional pride, which negated the development and formation of a common national consciousness.

With the beginning of the 1870s Cavour's carefully built-up parliamentary majority had undergone much change. Inside the so-called right, there were varying opinions and personal rivalries. Mazzini had died in 1872, and his extreme republicans were no longer threat. Garibaldi had lent his name to the Socialist party, but left Italy in 1870 to fight for the French, and made only rare appearances in the arena of politics. This eclipse of the conservative right resulted in a series of unstable ministries throughout the 1880s, each of which was less liberal and enlightened than its predecessors.

Internationally, Italy was no longer protected by foreign states. Various war-scapes resulted in a costly step up of war related activities which caused patriotism and nationalism to evolve into imperialism.

Instead of focusing on internal problems, Italy became involved to its detriment with the European system of alliances.

The period 1887–91 was marked by economic crisis and depression within Italy. Foreign competition to both industrialists and agriculturalists resulted in a collapse of prices during the 1880s. Francesco Crispi imposed governmental protection and heavy tariffs on imports to encourage greater Italian independence. The results of these actions were politically devastating to Italy and isolated her economically from selling silk and wine to France. Southern agriculture was extremely depressed, rebellion broke out and important banks collapsed. The peasants who formed the vast majority of the Italian population already suffered from extreme poverty, and their social condition worsened dramatically during these years of bad harvests and trade depression.

Telemaco Signorini, a prominent member of the Macchiaioli, documented this difficult post-unification period in his work *Caricaturisti e caricaturati al Caffè Michelangiolo*, published in 1893. Signorini's book is a clever, witty description of the customers who frequented the Caffè, many of whom were members of the Macchiaioli. Through a series of anecdotes, the text revealed the clients' reactions to the Risorgimento years—its goals, its disillusionment and its failures. Signorini expressed the group's inability to expedite their more liberal goals, many of which were tied to the concept of a united Italy.

Fattori was perhaps one of the most disillusioned of the Macchiaioli artists. Fattori's letters are filled with reflections of the fighting spirit of the Risorgimento years. His letters showed a yearning for the activities of the Macchiaioli which he perceived as having become historic.³ In a letter to Diego Martelli, dated 1890, Fattori expressed his anger at the Belle Arti for the award of a military commission to another artist.⁴ In this same letter, Fattori verbalized his frustration over the academy's sanction of the new modern art and his horror at having to tolerate this in order to maintain his professorship at the Accademia in Florence.⁵ Fattori's disillusionment peaked with his observation that the political parties in power had absolutely no interest in social or humanitarian concerns.

It is Gustavo Uzielli who most succinctly phrased his disappointment over the results of Italian unification. Following the Battle of Volturno, he returned to Pisa where he continued his studies and disassociated

himself from the political confusion.⁶ It is the concluding words of his article about his experiences with Garibaldi's regiment, written in 1909, that reflect the somber times which caused Uzielli and Fattori to wish for the heroic events and ideals of 1860:

Talora, nei momenti di più grave sconforto per le sorti d'Italia, ripenso alle guerre dell'Indipendenza, ai valorosi che vi si distinsero, e allora mi appare, come se fossi ancora sulla strada fatale di Milazzo, Tito Zucconi, grondante di sangue e che dice: le palle non fanno male! e mi auguro che simili eroi sorgano numerosi nei futuri cimenti della Patria.⁷

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Notes:

1. It is enough to mention the definition of "macchia" in Filippo Baldinucci's *Vocabulario dell'arte del disegno*, Florence, 1681, p. 86, which well applies to the program of the Macchiaioli as discussed by Dario Durbè, "Painters of Italian Life" in the catalogue of the Los Angeles exhibition of 1986, pp. 21-22. See also N. Broude, *The Macchiaioli: Academicism and Modernism in Nineteenth-Century Italian Painting*, Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1967, p. 44.

2. Gustavo Uzielli, "Dai ricordi di uno studente garibaldino." *Il Risorgimento Italiano*, 1909, p. 940.

3. Lamberto Vitali, *Lettere dei Macchiaioli* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1953), p. 67.

4. Vitali, *Lettere*, p. 68.

5. *Ibidem*.

6. Uzielli, *Ricordi*, p. 944.

7. *Ibidem*.

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