Le Reggia di Venaria e i Savoia. Arte, magnificenza e storia di una corte europea
Reggia di Venaria Reale, Turin
12 October 2007–30 March 2008

Of all the Italian dynasties, the house of Savoy does not instantly come to mind as patronizing the arts lavishly—not like the Este or the Gonzaga, never mind the Medici. The Savoy did produce their crop of grandeur however; there was a pope (or rather antipope), Felix V, otherwise known as Amadeus VIII, who was also promoted from count to duke in 1416, as well as a saint (Blessed Amadeus IX), his grandson. There were also many generals serving in various armies. The greatest was probably Prince Eugene, imperial field-marshal, who had Lucas von Hildebrandt build him the Belvedere in faraway Vienna.

As the name implies, Venaria is a royal hunting lodge—though “lodge” is hardly the word to describe such a palace. The woods and grounds had been used for hunting ever since Duke Emanuel Filibert moved his capital from Savoyard Chambéry to Piedmontese Turin in 1563. Hunting was not just a pastime for the Savoy, but—as for many princes, their contemporaries—it was a simulation of, or a rehearsal for, war. The saking of the vast palace was determined by Charles Emanuel II in 1658, a year or two before Louis XIV started his works at Versailles. Amadeo di Castellamonte, his first architect, conceived the project as well as the new town that served it, which was linked by a long, straight avenue to the main royal residence in Turin. Castellamonte was enormously proud of his design, which he published in 1672, sumptuously illustrated with engravings and with a text in the form of a dialogue between himself (“the Count”) and the greatest artist of the day, Gianlorenzo Bernini (“the Cavaliere”), who was then passing through Turin, returning from his notable Parisian visit. As Bernini is shown around the buildings and gardens, Castellamonte rhapsodizes with him about the elaborate painted and sculptured emblematic apparatus, the splendors of the grounds, and the symbolism of the hunt.

Building had progressed quite a long way when it was sacked and burnt by an invading French army in 1690. But Venaria was rebuilt soon enough by Castellamonte’s successor, Michelangelo Garove, as the primary out-of-town residence of the house of Savoy. The dukes had (like several other European highnesses) ambitions to majesty that they sustained by their several dynastic marriages: imperial, French, Spanish. When Charles Emanuel’s son, Victor Amadeus II, became king of Sicily in 1713, these ambitions seemed satisfied even if he had to swap his crown for that of Sardinia five years later. His successors were to keep that second title until Victor Emanuel II became king of Italy in 1861. Though brief, the Sicilian episode was momentous for Piedmontese architecture, since a remarkable Sicilian subject, the Abbé Filippo Juvara of Messina, was commanded from Rome by the new king and he brought with him the grand manner that he had mastered there. For the same Victor Amadeus, Juvara would, around 1730, build another hunting lodge, Stupinigi, with its huge oval salon and diagonally crossing wings, its vast unified forecourt and hunting park. It became the showiest of the ring of palaces for the Savoy princes and their family around their capital—as grand if not grander than those of almost any other court: Rivoli and Carignano, Carmagnola, Moncalieri, Miraflores and Racconigi, and many others.

It is a century and a half since the court of Savoy-Sardinia left Turin, to be installed as sovereigns of the new Kingdom of Italy. They moved their seat to Florence in 1861 and to Rome ten years later. For all that, the old capital has retained its character, a character established by Carlo de Castellamonte, Amadeus’s father and predecessor, who had begun its transformation. All his many successors modeled themselves on Carlo’s beginnings and it is that character that so impressed Jean-Jacques Rousseau about 1730, as he writes in his Confessions:

“TThe exterior decorations which I saw in Turin, the beauty of the streets, the symmetry and alignment of the houses made me expect more of Paris . . . [but] entering by the Faubourg Saint-Marcellin, I only saw small streets, dirty and stinking, wretched black houses, an atmosphere of squalor and poverty. . . . [And] all that I saw later of true magnificence in Paris could not get me over that first impression.”

The dignified character Rousseau admired has been retained by the city
center through its new industrial prosperity and consequent expansion.

Though the city retained its character, the Royal Palace in Turin became a secondary, provincial residence, and funds to maintain the outlying manors were not available. Venaria had been handed to the military after the Napoleonic expulsion of the Savoyard rulers to their Sardinian kingdom, even if the royal house was occasionally mindful of its Piedmontese origins and Victor Emanuel II used the subsidiary Mandria palace as a hunting lodge after his move to Rome. For all that, the main buildings were reduced to barracks and stables, to be finally abandoned even by the army, so that the inglorious military quarters turned into draughty halls and oversize farming sheds.

In the first flush of republican enthusiasm royal monuments were neglected; but in recent decades the local government of Piedmont has turned its attention to some of these buildings. The four hundredth anniversary of the ducal move to Turin was commemorated with an extensive show of Piedmontese baroque held in the then newly restored royal palace itself in 1963. In 1999 an as-good-as-new Stupinigi housed a spectacular exhibition of baroque architecture before it moved to other locales.

The project of restoring Venaria and its adjoining town was initiated by the regional administration over a decade ago with help from various foundations, and the exhibition has been assembled in the undercrofts and various suites of rooms on the piano nobile to celebrate its reopening. As its title implies, the material is enormously varied: armor, silver, grand inlaid furniture, a great many architectural drawings (including several by the great Piedmontese quartet: Guarini, Juvarra, Vittone, Alfieri), and models as well as many paintings. The Savoy princes, proud of their achievements as builders, published a whole panoply of engraved books (of which the Teatro di Venaria of 1682 is perhaps the most sumptuous) that are well displayed here, as are many projects and some really huge models, such as the walnut one of Juvarra’s project for the Castle at Rivoli that is some 12 feet long, a scheme that was never completed but now houses a museum of modern art.

Paintings make the most conspicuously exhibits. Some are mythological and religious, though portraits are (perhaps inevitably) the most numerous. The royal personages and the wise men (such as Emanuele Tesaruo, the master of baroque rhetoric, painted by the Savoyard Esprit Granjean, whom he calls Monsi Spirito—and who was responsible for some of the painting programs) as well as generals are on display. Prince Eugene, too, large and equestrian in a portrait by Jakob van Schuppen, is conspicuous. Most of the counts and all the dukes and kings that followed them are shown here, “in majesty,” with their families, at the hunt, at war. There are many war paintings of sieges and victories, but more surprisingly, also a great many landscapes, beginning with curiously primitive “portraits” of the royal residences and culminating in the Turinese views that Bernardo Bellotto painted on his visit to the city in the 1740s. Not all of the paintings are masterpieces, though those Bellottos, as well as the Van Dycks of Emanuele Filiberto (from Dulwich)—painted in Sicily where he was viceroy—that join here the two of Tomaso di Carignano (a junior branch of the house) from Berlin and Turin, do stand above many of the others. And I must confess a surprised affection for another court painter, Maria Giovanna Battista Clementi, known as La Clementina, who painted the Savoias and their relations through the first half of the eighteenth century. All this has been illustrated in the splendidly detailed (but a little unsystematic) catalog that accompanies the show.

Still the masterpiece of the exhibition is the palace itself, and since Venaria was never completed, it is both ruder and grander than Stupinigi. In the central pavilion, stuccoed like the entry of the court, the Hall of Diana has been returned to its former splendor and the emblematic apparatus of Emanuele Tesaruo can be scouted again. Most of the other buildings have been left with a brick fair-faced exterior, notably the stupendous long gallery (misnamed “of Diana”), first conceived by Castellamonte, rebuilt by Garove, but finished by Benedetto Alfieri (another great Piedmontese figure) in the 1750s as one of the most majestic spaces in Europe. It is the glorious salle des pas-perdus of the exhibition and leads to the lithically chaste but grandiose cruciform Church of St. Hubert (patron of hunters) added by Juvarra between 1716 and 1729 and startlingly decorated by the brilliant altarpiece by Sebastiano Ricci, Francesco Trevisani, and Sebastiano Conca.

The outbuildings are on an appropriate scale: Juvarra’s orangery (La Limoniera—no English equivalent), the stables and the Mandria (the game-reserve), and the great fish pond (at 11,000,000 liters) must be as large as they come. As in all such cases, the problem is how to animate all these vast buildings. In the short term the exhibition organizers have invited the film producer Peter Greenaway to provide a simulation of life at the palace, which he has done rather discreetly and charmingly.

But the long-term animation is an economic problem. The Mandria has its own subsidiary palace, the one Victor Emanuel II so much liked, which has been organized into a luxury hotel. Other projects involve several restaurants and a congress center. Meanwhile a restoration school has been opened, which started by preparing the paintings, reliefs, and sculptures as well as the drawings for this exhibition. On a quite different tack, Venaria, where horse breeding was an activity almost as important as hunting, now has a riding school and horse-breeding center. All these enterprises should help maintain the palace as a self-supporting entity.

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Related Publications
Marcel Breuer: Design and Architecture
Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein, Germany
12 September 2003–2 May 2004
Centre International pour la Ville, l’Architecture et la Paysage (CIVA), Brussels
12 May–3 October 2004
Spazio Contemporaneo Mestre, Venice
23 October 2004–30 January 2005
Fundación Pedro Barrié de la Maza, La Coruña, Spain
5 July–16 October 2005
Fundación Istituto de Crédito (ICO), Madrid
14 December 2005–26 March 2006
Lighthouse Glasgow, Glasgow
16 June–27 August 2006
Ludwig Museum, Budapest
3 May–2 September 2007
National Building Museum, Washington, D.C.
3 November 2007–18 February 2008

A lively and sympathetic exhibition of Marcel Breuer’s work was recently seen in Washington. It had originated as one of the Vitra Design Museum’s monograph exhibitions dedicated to twentieth-century masters of architecture and furniture design (earlier subjects in the series having been Charles and Ray Eames, Frank Lloyd Wright, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Verner Panton, and Luis Barragán), and it was first staged in Vitra’s Frank Gehry–designed museum in Weil am Rhein, Germany. Its extensive travels after that included Budapest, which is less than a hundred miles from Breuer’s birthplace of Pees and where this reviewer saw the exhibition.¹ There in the Ludwig Museum it covered an area of about 1,500 square meters (about 16,100 square feet).

The curator of the Breuer exhibition, as well as of Vitra’s earlier Panton exhibition and an exhibition of contemporary landscape architecture seen at New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 2005–6, is Mathias Remmele. Remmele currently teaches design and architecture history at the Academy of Art and Design Basel (formerly known as the Basel School of Design) and teaches product design at the Kassel Kunsthochschule.

Remmele approached Breuer’s career from several points of view, including photographs and drawings of many designs. Three features in particular were distinguished by welcome surprises. A biographical introduction focusing on his early years presented several rare photographs: a young Breuer with his brother Alexander and sister Hermina; Breuer in his twenties on the bank of the Elbe with Gropius, Moholy-Nagy, Schawinsky, and other Bauhaus colleagues, all in swimming trunks (but with Gropius also in a tank top); Breuer with his first wife Martha, a textile designer; and Breuer with his second wife Constance and their two children Francesca (for whom the Cesca chair was named) and Tamas.

An extensive display of Breuer furniture was elevated above the usual by the inclusion of a number of prototypes for designs never put into production. Welds were clearly visible on some of the metal tubing. There was an early (1925) version of the Wassily steel club armchair, but with four straight legs rather than the familiar runners on either side, and there was another model with a stretcher added between the runners. The exhibition included a whole parade of four-legged side chairs and many variations on the 1928 Cesca cantilevered chair. With a few exceptions, the furniture all came from the admirable collection of the Vitra Design Museum or the private collection of the museum’s director, Alexander von Vegesack.²

Also exclusive to the exhibition were a dozen meticulously made building models, to the scale of 1 to 50 (except for the model of the De Bijenkorf Department Store in Rotterdam, which was in 1-to-100 scale). These models, uniformly white, ignored Breuer’s virtuoso play with contrasting materials—both manufactured and natural, such as wood siding and rubble stone—that so distinguished Breuer’s first work in the United States from the smooth prisms of early modernism in Europe. In compensation, however, the monochrome models emphasized Breuer’s sculptural manipulations of form, a major focus of this exhibition. They sat on ingenious pedestals containing drawers that, when pulled out, displayed site plans, building plans, and sections.

The dozen model subjects were, in chronological order: the 1946–47 Robinson house (Williamstown, Massachusetts); Breuer’s 1947 and 1951 houses for himself in New Canaan (Connecticut); the 1953 De Bijenkorf Department Store (Rotterdam, The Netherlands); the 1953–61 St. John’s Abbey Church (Collegeville, Minnesota); the 1956 Begrish Hall, New York University (University Heights, New York); the 1957–58 Staechelin house (Feldmeilen, Switzerland); the 1958–63 Annunciation Priory of the Sisters of St. Benedict (Bismarck, North Dakota); the 1961 St. Francis de Sales Church (Muskegon, Michigan); the 1963–66 Whitney Museum of American Art (New York); the 1968 Baldegg Convention (near Lucerne, Switzerland); and the 1977–80 Atlanta Central Public Library.³ None of the models depicted a building designed before 1946. Unrepresented were the Bauhaus interiors of 1926 to 1932, the 1929 Harnischmacher house (Wiesbaden), and the 1934 Dolderthal apartments (Zurich). Missing as well were his two small early American delights, the...