



Civico Museo Parisi Valle
Maccagno con Pino e Veddasca – Lago Maggiore (Varese)
The Treasure of Imperial Maccagno

1. The Immaculate Conception: the rediscovery of a painting that had been lost for sixty years

Anno 2013. During the *Census of the ecclesiastical cultural heritage of the parishes of Maccagno and the valleys* (as part of the national census of Works of Art of the Italian Episcopal Conference) and thanks to the awareness of Maurizio Isabella, a painting was found in a dusty attic of the church of S. Stefano in Maccagno Inferiore. Despite its poor condition, it showed outstanding pictorial quality. It was not difficult to identify it with the painting mentioned in a publication by Leopoldo Giampaolo in 1953. The well-known scholar from Maccagno had recognised the hand of Pietro Antonio Magatti on the occasion of the first monographic study dedicated to the painter from Varese. And so, after sixty years, the *Immaculate Conception* came back to light.

The painting and its secrets

The painting ended up in the attic during the 20th century because it had been replaced by a modern work as the side altar panel of the Crucifix. But the *Immaculate Conception* had come to Maccagno from elsewhere. In fact, it had been adapted to the dimensions of the altar by folding its lower part, which was fortunately saved on the back of the canvas. Here, an elegant writing, now restored to legibility, reads:

*Fatto fare dal Rev.do Sig.r Curato
Cassano
1729.*

In 1729, the parish priest of Cassano in Valcuvia was Don Carlo Maria Porta, who, obviously, was the commissioner of the painting. We do not know, however, if the work ever had its place in the parish church dedicated to St. Cassiano, where the only 18th-century side altar devoted to the Virgin Mary that escaped the 19th-century renovations, is of size and shape incompatible



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with the painting. The only evidence that still links the iconography of the *Immaculate Conception* to the church in Cassano (where the cult seems to have disappeared in the course of time) is a medallion frescoed in the 20th century, which is almost a faithful copy of the original painting.

For the moment, the reason why the *Immaculate Conception* found its location in the church of St. Stefano in Maccagno is unknown. Certainly, in the village devotion to the *Immaculate Conception* was particularly strong, thanks to another, more modest side altarpiece dating from 1772, with the Virgin and the Saints Julius and Philip Neri, and other minor works in the church of the Madonnina della Punta. It is most likely to assume that, after the reform of the Cassano parish church around 1835, the painting was placed on the side altar of the church in Maccagno, strengthening family and motherhood related cults and values. During the 19th century, those beliefs were at the centre of concrete actions of charity aimed at young people and adults. These included, in particular, the foundation of the *Congregation of Charity* – supported through a generous donation by Don Carlo Frapolli - with the aim of improving the health conditions of child-bearers and teenage mothers.

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Thanks to:

MIC - Ministero della Cultura
Soprintendenza Archeologia Belle Arti e Paesaggio
per le province di Como, Lecco, Monza-Brianza, Pavia, Sondrio e Varese
Diocesi di Milano, Ufficio Beni Culturali
Galleria Aversa, Torino
Numismatica Varesina, Varese
Parrocchia di S. Stefano, Maccagno Inferiore