The Madonnella of Via della Luce*[1]

by Filippo Ceccarelli



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The city of Rome is sprinkled with small, great gifts. Among them, in a period spanning the 18th and 19th centuries, are the many sacred shrines or *Madonnelle* that hang suspended in plain sight from buildings in the historic center and in Trastevere, where I have lived for over forty years. We don't really know who commissioned them; each image probably has its own separate story. Let's just say we found them already there — which makes them both mysterious and benevolent. Besides their devotional function, some of these *Madonnelle* were equipped with small lamps and therefore offered — especially to women — a certain protection in a Rome that was perhaps even darker and wilder back then. But with the

[1] Listed as Salumi 13.11 on Madonnelle.org

passage of time (*con il passare del tempo*) — a phrase we Romans pronounce with a surplus of resigned and even cheerful fatalism — the elements, pollution, and neglect have done their part, leaving those icons at the very least faded. The *Madonnella* that instinctively caught my eye was, objectively, in a pitiful state.

It sat five meters up, nestled between two windows with worn shutters, on the corner building at Via della Luce and Via dei Salumi: a sacred icon likely from the early 1800s, painted on slate by an anonymous *madonnaro*, who had rendered her with a majestic, matronly aspect. Her imagery is uncertain — perhaps the Madonna of Mount Carmel or of Hope, according to some studies — aside from a scapular suggesting that a confraternity might have commissioned it. Originally, the shrine had been protected by a wooden canopy, but no trace of it remained. Poorly restored in the 1930s, and perhaps during that time covered with glass — as suggested by a thin, now useless and greenish copper tube. In addition to the damage from rain and exhaust fumes, the icon had suffered abrasions, gaps, dust, dirt, and — *dulcis in fundo* — droppings from pigeons, seagulls, and other birds that both delight and/or infest Rome's skies. The crowns on the Madonna and Child were completely oxidized — black and unrecognizable. The marble frame appeared hopelessly grayed. But the real damage lay in a cavity that had collected water and humidity, which had infiltrated and severely compromised the Child's face. The iron lamp holder was broken off; mysterious, ancient electrical wires disappeared into the wall, leading who knows where.

I've been working on images for a few years now — exploring if and how, through their technological immersion, they've overtaken the written word; if and how, between screens and smartphones, they've paradoxically become more *real*. These fuzzy questions, useful for my work, eventually gave me the opportunity to participate in an exhibition by the well-known contemporary artist Francesco Vezzoli, on Italian politics in the 1980s. Enlarged and framed in baroque and neoclassical settings were figures like Pertini, Craxi, Andreotti, Berlusconi (his early years), Spadolini, De Michelis, and Cicciolina. I had fun writing the captions — with ease and enjoyment. In the precarious life of freelance gigs, I unexpectedly earned €5,000. I decided, image by image, to use it to restore the faded *Madonnella* I passed four or five times a day, even on holidays. To this day, I couldn't exactly say what drove me to do it. Partly civic duty — *civis romanus sum*; partly the belief that maintenance, more than anywhere else, is synonymous with civilization in the Eternal City. And in our age of individualism, I figured it made sense to act alone. But I can't deny that a family element played a role — being the grandson of Ceccarius, an illustrious scholar of Roman matters — that sense of obligation to give something back to a city that continues to provide us with so much beauty and cheerful consolation. Amen.

Unfortunately, there are no shortcuts for those who want to undertake such a project. Naively, I thought I could walk into an office with a check in hand: "Here, these €5,000 are for the restoration of the *Madonnella* at Via della Luce 13. Get to it and thank you." In reality, you really must do everything yourself: convince the authorities of the project's value, understand the sequence of steps as early as possible, and make sure your roadmap aligns with the timeline.

Afraid of making mistakes, I documented every step. Looking back now, with amused detachment, I see the list of 68 steps taken since June 2019 — with a natural pause during the pandemic lockdown. Most of them were unpleasant: supplications, approaches, reminders, bureaucratic rituals, requests and approvals, thanks, estimates, invoices, forms, protocols, postponements, mysterious last-minute documents and

stamps that turned the process into a game of chutes and ladders — always risking being sent back to the start. Added to this were my inexperience and anxiety — also, a family trait.

How much brighter now seems the final report by Simona Nobili — the person who physically restored the *Madonnella* — and how beautiful the images that captured one of the happiest experiences of my life.

I recall with joy the suspended scaffolding, designed not to block traffic and transformed into a balcony with plants and flowers; and the thrill of the first cleaning results: the painting regaining its tone and gloss, eyes sparkling with new light, hands more defined, complexions more genuine and vibrant. The frame, treated with compresses and syringes all around; the silver crowns, half-shiny and half-dirty — a kind of pop vision. And Simona, wearing a special visor helmet and wielding a scalpel, face-to-face with the painted surface. Until the final photo: commissioner and restorer smiling in front of the *Madonnella*, returned to Trastevere, to Rome, and to the world — but above all, the bearer of a revelation both human and transcendent.

The real discovery, in fact, is that *a gift leads to another gift*, and in these viral times, it's worth tracking that chain with some meticulous care. It was a gift that Marcella, a second-floor resident, helped in every way — including with Fabrizio, the building administrator and thus the *Madonnella's* official custodian, who bore the burden (more than the honor) of paperwork I tried to orchestrate behind the scenes. It was a gift that Patrizia helped with the early technical aspects; a gift that Costanza and Tommaso let me into their apartment across the street to take reference photos. In an age of commercialization, generosity is priceless. It was a gift that Marina referred me to the Capitoline Superintendence; another gift that Anna Maria showed me the technical record of the *Madonnella*; a great gift that Alessandro introduced me to Simona; and an even greater one that Simona immediately understood the spirit of the project and gifted me the restoration plan.

Without pushing it, continuing this chain of generosity, it was a gift that Simona introduced me to Alessandra at another office, and a gift that Alessandra and Eleonora offered advice and visited the site. And it was truly special that my wife Elena — a naturally warm people-person — inspired Sabrina, the then-president of the First Municipality, who in turn introduced me to Jacopo, then a city councilor, so that I could avoid paying for the public space permit. And finally, a literal gift — because I would've exceeded my budget — that Fabrizio and Claudio, local artisans, built and installed the canopy *on a Sunday*, and donated it to the Trasteverine *Madonnella*, to me, and ultimately to Rome — to everyone, including themselves.

I don't want to harp too much on this theme of "gifts." And yet, this string of selfless offerings is the innermost — and incandescent — heart of the story I'm telling. As if all those gifts redeemed today's scarcity of generosity, the fact that no one blows kisses to sacred images anymore, the astonished silence before something that changes for the better.

Because, to be honest, the artistic quality of the *Madonnella*, especially in a city of true masterpieces like Rome, is what it is. What truly matters is not only the virtuous circle of generosity and gratitude but also the possibility that this model could be replicated — even become a system. All the more so in an area emptied by B&Bs, plagued by rowdy crowds, noisy clubs, suspicious permits, and massive money-laundering schemes.

And again, I don't want to make a holy card (*santino*) out of this — although my mother literally did, with an ancient prayer on the back: *Sub tuum praesidium confugimus, Sancta Dei Genitrix…* [We fly to your protection, O Holy Mother of God…]. Rather, it's that the very idea and practice of regeneration hold a power and fascination one cannot imagine without personal experience. Something that combines physics, chemistry, intuition, art history, technology, manual skill, and common sense. And considering that the subject here is an image of a mother and child — restoring an archetype gains a spiritual dimension I'm not hesitant to link with the Spirit, with its inevitable and, God willing, unexpected journeys.

At the end of November 2021, we held a small but meaningful thank-you ceremony in the street, at the foot of the restored *Madonnella*. There was an unveiling of the plaque — lovingly done, though a bit like a sign to a dental office — and a modest refreshment: sandwiches, cake, mineral water, and coffee. But everyone who was supposed to be there *was* there: relatives and friends who had come to the site, the men and women of goodwill who had helped the project, the tenants of Via della Luce 13, neighborhood shopkeepers, some local priests, and — in their own essential way — the curious passersby. I said two words — literally just two. A former schoolmate, now a cardinal, led a Hail Mary. And that was it. At night, the little light brings a bit of brightness and warmth to the darkness and solitude — especially when the streetlights don't work. I feel that my neighbors' smiles are a bit warmer now when they see me shopping or walking the dog. I've even seen tourists photographing everything — including the *Madonnella*. Images are, indeed, a small but great gift — and here in Rome, there are a thousand ways to cherish them.

Filippo Ceccarelli (Rome, 1955) is a journalist and writer who has published several books on political history and contemporary culture. In 2015, he donated his extensive archive of documents to the Biblioteca della Camera dei Deputati.



Madonnella della Luce before and after restoration



Plaque commemorating the restoration



The Madonnella in its broader context



The restorer Simona Nobili and the author Filippo Ceccarelli on the scaffolding during the restoration