

The Comacina island



...and her treasures



The Comacina Island



The Comacina Island (which is 600 meters long and 150 meters large) is the only island of the Como Lake; its surface is about 6 hectares.

This glacial-originated island is covered with Mediterranean vegetation, just like the scenery which surround it; this area is called *Zoca de L'Oli* (a dialectical name) referring to the production of olive oil and the mild climate.

A story lost through centuries

When we see it today, it is hard to believe how this island played a leading part through many



historical events. The Comacina Island, known as San Giovanni Island, had a key role as a fortress because of its location between mountain passes and planes since the times in which *Giulio Cesare* (Julius Caesar) was head of the Romans; moreover, it is near to the so called *Via Regia*, one of the most important roads between Northern Europe and Italy. *Plinio Il Vecchio* (Pliny the Elder, a Roman author, naturalist and natural philosopher) was its minister maximum in I century a.d. According to the tradition, in V century the basilica of St. Euphemia was built over the ruins of a temple in honor of Zeus, because of the will of the bishop of Como,

Abbondio. After the fall of the Western Roman Empire the island moved under the control of the Byzantine Empire. Although it is not a big island, it was able to face the Longobards attacks; it was such a safe place that could afford to give shelter to many artists of that time, such as the *Magistri Comacini*. Autari, the Longobard's king, was very interested in the Comacina, so he stormed it. But soon the islanders recovered the losses and their prosperity thanks to the trades, activity in which they mastered. The richest citizens of Como and the towns nearby moved in the island with all of their treasures guided by a general called *Francione* who carried on the Resistance. Houses, churches and fortresses were soon built on the island. There is a legend which says that a British priest brought here the Holy Grail, that is why in that period the island was called *Cristopolis*, the city of Christ. In X

century the islanders were involved in the war between Otto I, emperor of Germany and Berengar II of Italy. During the Middle-Age the island was either enemy or friend of Como; it depended on circumstances and periods of time. In 1100 the Comacina became a Medieval Commune and reached increasing prosperity and wealth; it also expended its sovereignty on the mainland. It became so important that it could afford an alliance with Milan during the decade-long war against Como (1118-1127), which Como lost. *Federico Barbarossa* (Frederick Redbeard) took the beaten city under his wing of protection and helped it. In 1169 he invaded the Comacina and with help of Dongo, Gravedona and Sorico, he destroyed everything. Fortresses, houses and churches were destroyed and the stones were thrown in the lake. Pope Alexander III excommunicated the city of Como because of the destruction of the island and all of her churches. Accordingly Vidulfo, the bishop of Como, cursed the Comacina. In 1175 Redbeard forbade each reconstruction through a decree; nobody returned to live in the Island because of the curse. After the destruction some islanders founded a borough called "*Isola*" near Ossuccio and some other founded "*Varenna*" (town on the eastern bank of the Como lake). In XVI century a group of people built a church dedicated to *San Giovanni Battista* (John the Baptist) in the northern part of the island. According to the tradition, John the Baptist appeared to a person that lived near the island; the saint told him that there was something important on a precise point on the island; the man dug in that point and found the remains of the old church, on which he should build a new church. The old church was probably the first parochial church of the island, dedicated to *S. Giovanni* (Saint John). The legend says that St. John itself suggested to come here every year, to celebrate St John's day. Nowadays this traditional procession does still take place. The island had different owners, it has even been an episcopal property. In 1914 Albert I of Belgium inherited it from the owner of that time, Augusto Giuseppe Caprani. Not many years after, though, he returned the Comacina to the State of Italy, as long as it would become a place where Belgian and Italian artists could relax. The state of Italy entrusted this task to the Brera Academy, and three small villas were built on the island; these accommodated artists and became very important and interesting for the local culture. The XX century was characterized by an artistic rediscovery of the Comacina. The archeological campaigns directed by the archeologist Ugo Monneret de Villard in 1914 and by the architect Luigi Mario Belloni and his wife, doctor Mariuccia Zacchinelli, from 1958 to 1978, gave new birth to lots of the ruins which once were the great treasures of the island. Their extraordinary and patient work brought to a deeper knowledge of the life on the Comacina; since 2004, the regional project "*Accordo Quadro di Sviluppo Territoriale*" has been carrying out these studies, in order to retrain the South-Central area of the Como lake. The project leaded off many restorations in the archeological sites of the island, but it is also working on the XIX-century villas of the lake and the Chapels of the *Sacro Monte* (Sacred Mountain) in Ossuccio, setting up museums, exhibition halls and promoting tourism.



The Comacina Island Museum

The ancient Middle Age *Hospitalis*, a place where peregrines could rest, nearby the church of *S Maria Maddalena* in Ospedaletto, will soon become an *Antiquarium*. This means that it will be a visitor

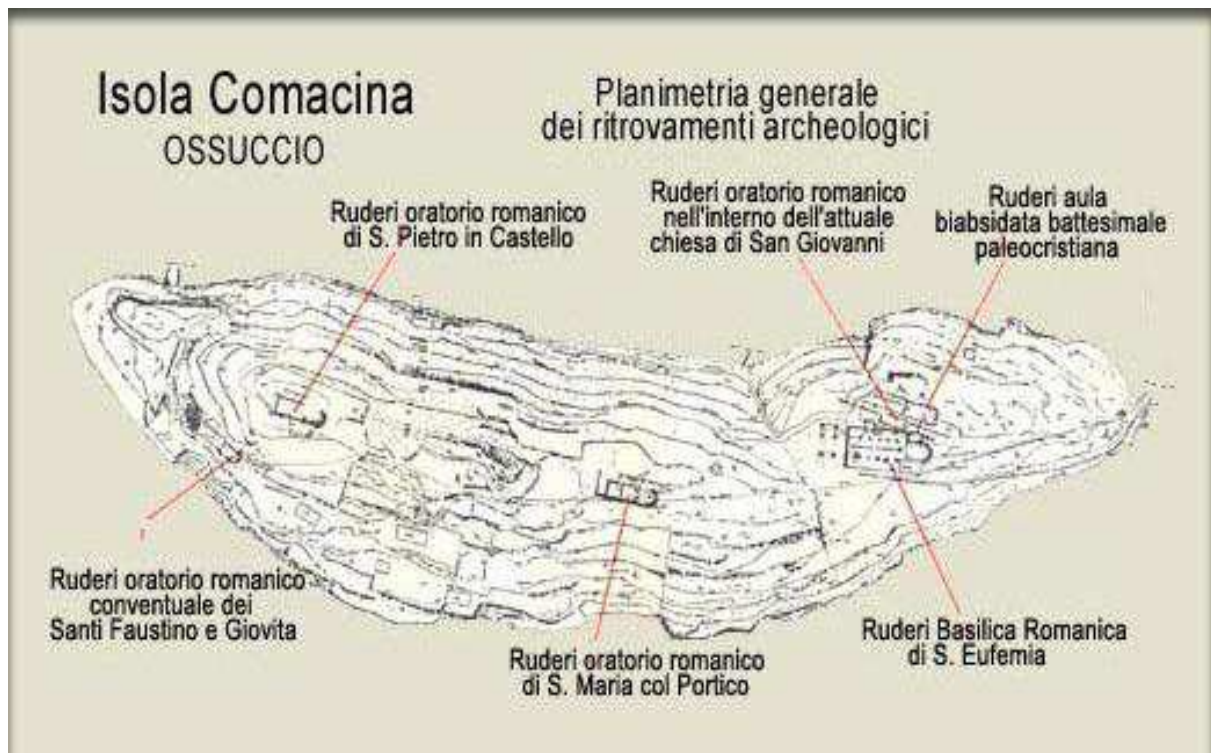


centre for the Comacina Island and a museum where to keep and enhance the archeological finds of the campaigns. After a visit to the *Antiquarium*, tourists will get much information so that they can embark themselves to the island and will be able to see its archeological sites in a more conscious way, as they will know the story behind them. Visitors will be able to follow a multimedia path which will help them understand the matter of these archeological finds; this multimedia paths will be soon available in the Antiquarium.

The museum is dedicated to the architect Mario Belloni and his wife because they found the archeological rests, collecting and cataloging them. In the museum there are marble fragments and slabs coming from the rests of the churches of the island, the *mensa ponderaria* (a proof of the existence of the law on the island), Roman ossuaries and various finds, low medieval gravestones, and some architectural remains like column's bases and a Corinthian capital from the churches of the island, and marble and soapstone manufactures.



The itinerary





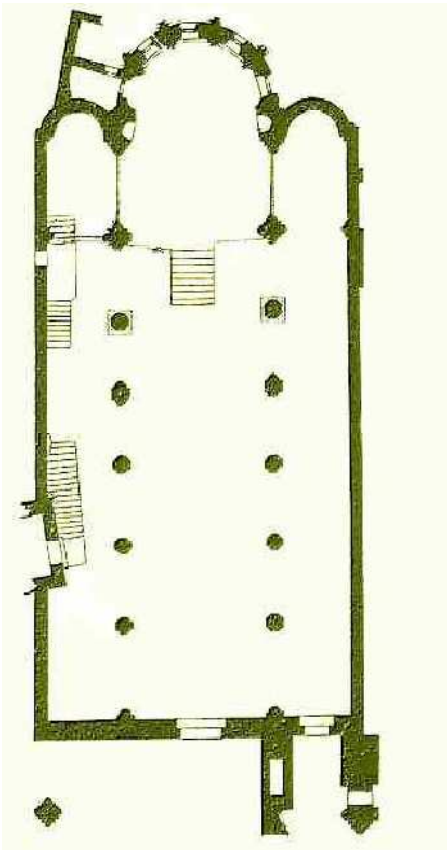
When you will land on the island you will follow *Viale del Poeta*, pathway which overlooks the lake and the front of the mainland. The walk is very suggestive and shady, it was a place loved by the artists. Here you will find the remains of an ancient house built by stones in the Middle-Age, which later became a refuge for fishermen. Carrying on this way, you will walk up a flight of steps. Is difficult to establish the original structure of the old fortifications. At the end of the pathway, you will reach a wide plain with ancient structures.

[The Basilica of St. Euphemia](#)

Today only the remains of the churches, of the constructions and of the fortresses that were on the island are visible. The remains were found by the archeological excavations conducted by Monneret de Villard in 1914 and Luigi Mario Belloni between 1958 and 1978. The Basilica of St. Euphemia is considered one of the most representative monuments of the local Romanesque and the remains are still today called "*le rovine del Duomo*", the ruins of the dome. This Basilica was built for the will of the Bishop of Como Agrippino, on the foundations of a pre-existent structure, already diocese. Sant'Abbondio, bishop and patron of Como, who lived around the 450 a.C. built the primitive church. In VII century the Basilica of St. Euphemia was restructured by the Bishop Agrippino who chose to be buried there, as an epitaph remember us. The sacred building was completely pose again in Romanesque style in XI century for the will of the bishop Litigerio. It became *collegio canoniale* in 1031 before being completely destroyed in 1169. Abbondio was the one who brought the cult of St. Euphemia in the local area (also spread by Agrippino), when he came back from Calcedonia. The Saint was important for the Tri-Chapter belief.

Architectural features

The ruins are in a stunning landscape. The structure of this basilica is still identifiable thanks to the excavations and work of the architect Belloni. It is longer than 40 meters. The original structure should be this way:



- a narthex before the entrance;
- a large portal on the facade and two doors on the northern side;
- three naves, each one ending with an apse, without transept, divided by octagonal columns (the only ones founded in Lombardy);
- presbytery combined with the chorus through an elevated span of nine steps;
- bell tower with semi-columns and pilasters located on the northern part of the basilica; in Late Antiquity this structure was a tower;
- a large crypt with a vaulting supported by eight columns and pilasters; its entrance was a mullion, a big arch divided through a column: a half as window, a half as door.

Inside of the church there was a series of blocks of stones; probably it was a place of meeting.

Besides architectural ruins, was only found a valuable capital from the crypt (situated now in the Antiquarium) and clues of frescoes that enhanced the building. Many rests, including the

gravestone inscription of Agrippino, were used from people escaped to the destruction of 1169 in the construction of another church dedicated to St. Euphemia; it is situated in Isola that is today an hamlet of the Ossuccio's common.

John the Baptist's Church



The little church dedicated to St. John the Baptist is located on one of the highest place of the island and it is the only building which we can see as it were, intact. It was built in XVI century on the ruins of an area which was destroyed in 1169, which was built on the ruins of what should be a roman temple or villa. This site has probably been sacred since the ancient times and used as burial place too (two gravestones were founded here). There is a legend about this site which says that in XV century a farmer who lived in Campo met a tired and hungry peregrine and offered him hospitality; he didn't know that the peregrine was actually John the Baptist. To thank him, he told the farmer to go on the island and where he should dig to find a temple and an altar dedicated to the precursor of Jesus Christ. The farmer did what the peregrine told him to do, and he found a marble piece of an old altar on which the Baptist was portrayed. In honor of this miracle a church was built where this archeological find was founded, the same church that we can see on the highest point of the island today. The legend also says that after this miracle, the people who lived in Ossuccio began to celebrate the Mass on the island every year in occasion of the birth of the Baptist; this would ward off

the plague. This church was renovated through the XVI and XVII centuries. Moreover, the prodigious Belloni's archeological excavations discovered worthwhile ruins of the primitive church of St. John.

Architectural features



The church of St. John has a simple structure, preceded by a portico and the bell tower. Inside of this little church (which is also dedicated to St. Peter and St. Paul) it is possible to see ruins dated back to Roman times and Late Antiquity.

It is structured this way:

- a squared Late-Antique tower basement on the right; in VI century the tower was part of a military fortification, meanwhile in the Middle-Age it was used as bell tower of St. Euphemia.
- Painting and plasters dated back to XIX-XX centuries.
- There is a painted recreation of a piece of marble on the left side of the presbytery: the words written there are referred to the construction of the church itself and to the tragic destruction of the island; the date is not quite clear: 1169 or 1160?

St. John festival



The festival of St. John is one of the most important event of the summer in the lake of Como. This festival have almost three centuries and remember the destruction of the island which happened in the 24 June 1169, by Redbeard. This festival, which take place on Saturday and Sunday attracts every year thousands of visitors. During the Saturday evening the lake is lighted with candles placed in the boats, on the houses' balcony and in a different districts. A fantastic firework show "*fires*" the island in memory of the destruction.

During the following day there is a procession of typical boats, called “*Lucie*”, picturesquely decorated and conducted by boatmen dressed up with traditional dresses. The main boat brings the priest and the “Abundi”, the relics of the saints that St. Abbondio brought on the island, and reaches the Comacina to celebrate the Mass dedicated to St. John the Baptist.

On the left side of the church of St. John we can see:

Baptismal room with two apses

This is an extraordinary example of Early Christian art. This and St. Euphemia's are probably the most important finds of the Comacina. The room was founded on the first excavations campaign (1958–1959); it has been a great discovery, though unexpected, as no study about the island had ever showed its existence. Its floors are decorated with mosaics and walls with Carolingian paintings; there are even some burials and an immersion baptismal font, proofs that this little island is rich in treasures. These finds are dated back between V and IX centuries. In the end of the 50s, through the excavations, Belloni found a little building with two semicircular apses on the east. This had been modified many times through centuries: it was first a squared room, than it got an apse and finally two apses. The wall on the left of the nave is the best preserved part of this found. Walking from here to the front, a little arched space is noticeable, as the ruins of a big built-in arch, which has the same measures of Bishop *Agrippino's* commemorative tablet (decorated with a beautiful epitaph, it has been later fixed on a wall Of St. Euphemia's church on the mainland). This Baptismal room has some unusual characteristics for the local art.

- first of all, the two-apses presbytery, in the Romanesque monastic church of St. *Faustino* and St. *Giovita* too. One of a kind presbytery.
- Another unusual characteristic of this sacred building is the presence of an immersion baptismal font in front of the right apse, which position is curious and untypical; indeed, from the first centuries of Christianity to XIII Century, the baptism rite took place outside the church. Moreover this baptismal font doesn't find itself in the center of the building, but on the right instead. The font is covered with slabs of Musso marble and *cipollino* marble (a particular variety of marble which was used by Romans). Very interesting is the octagonal shape, very popular at the early Christian times, as number eight hints at eternity.
- An interesting point is also the nave pavement, made by *cocciopesto* (a material made by crushed tiles), which was once covered with mosaics (now few tesseras are visible); the entrance pavement too, made by Moltrasio marble slabs messily arranged, is fascinating. There are rests of pavements in the apses, covered with black and white mosaics: on the left there is a six petals flower decoration, which is inscribed in a circle; symmetric decorations spread from here, also made by fragments of terracotta. An inscription is noticeable, but it is not quite clear; at first, it has been interpreted as “ABUNDI EPY”, a reference to bishop *Abbondio*, after the restauration, it would more seem to be

“BONDILAY”, maybe referred to a Longobard who has not been identified yet. The apse on the right shows a mosaic with a fish and another one with three superimposed circles, which simulate waves.

- Carolingian paintings are visible on the northern wall and on the left apse.

A.Q.S.T.'s Intervention

Considering that the condition of the Baptismal Room is demeaning, Como provincial administration provided a preservative project for the site, which has been brought to an end thanks to the A.Q.S.T. The extraordinary discover of the two-apsed room is another of the treasures of this island; it is incredible how this little island could own such cultural heritage.

Walking on the path the towards the lake, you will notice some remains which once were one of the island and a house's fortification, called:

Tower-house and houses on the Comacina Island

Architectural structure



Despite silence has been the only inhabitant of the island for a long time, today it's easy to understand that once it was inhabited and walled, simply giving it a look-over: the imposing walls surrounded the whole island (2 kilometers), whereas houses and buildings were placed on the inside. Probably the main group of inhabitants (called *Castello*) was placed on the Northern part of the island.

If you follow the path, you will find remains of walls of different levels; between these, there is a particular house which reminds to the typical example of tower-house: buildings with military and living functions,

very popular in the Middle-Age (from X century). This is a strategical structure used as a point of observation and it's covered in a modern tiles and thick walls with a small windows. The facade is

decorated with ancient architectural patterns. The only entrance is on the Western part; on the lake side you will see a little loophole.

It is supposed that the inside of this Tower-houses were structured in two floors, as the stones would fit with supporting girders (which would support the pavement of the first floor).

This house is the testimony that the island was a big Middle-Age borough; indeed, this tower-house had both military and civil functions.

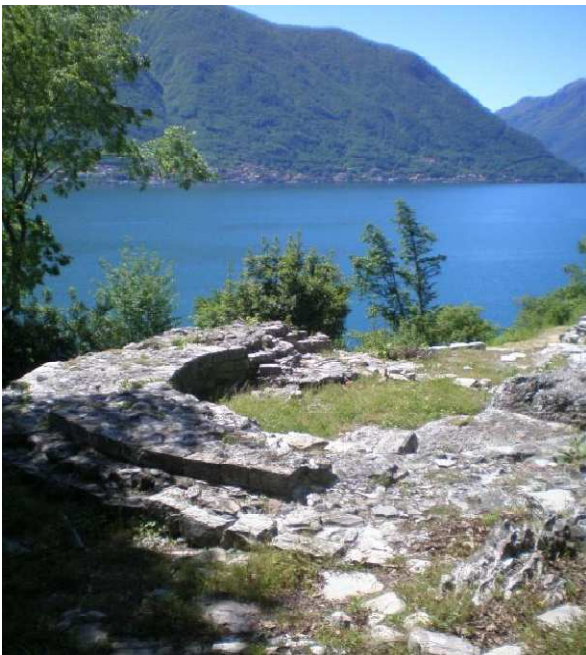
On the rest of the island have been found stonework ruins (stairs, carved stones...) which were linked to houses.

This house type is dated back between the Roman Age and the low Middle-Age, as it was popular in the Northern Italy in that period.

The itinerary continues to the highest part of the Comacina along the archeological path.

Immediately you will find another archeological site.

[Romanesque Oratory of St. Mary with Portico](#)

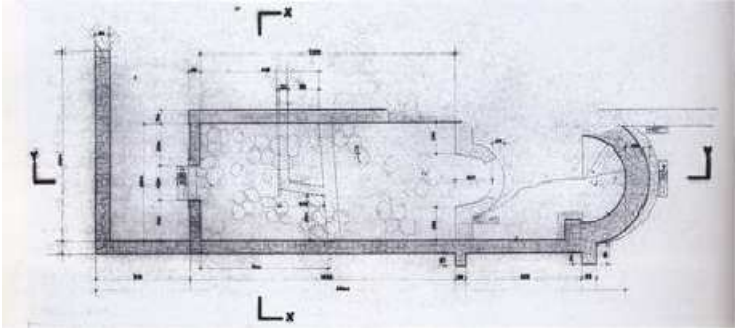


This church is the first significant archeological discovery of the Comacina island. The archeologist Belloni discovered it when he was a student in 1949 and between 1958-59 he coordinated the excavations that unearthed the remains of the Romanesque building. The existence of this church before the destruction is certificated by documents of XII century. The Romanesque church was built above an early Christian oratory. Today are visible only the plan and the remains of the perimeter wall. However, the archeological studies made possible to understand the original structure. The regional project "A.Q.S.T." forecasts new reliefs and operations for maintenance and protection of the St. Mary church, so that also the

remains of this oratory can be, with all of the other sites of the island, an appreciable touristic itinerary.

Features emerged thanks to the excavations

- The church (which is 24 meters long and 6.50 large) is composed of a single nave with apse.



- Parallel to the front's corner, about 4,30 meters far, emerges a foundation (80 centimeters large and 11 meters long); this should be what remains of the portico, from which the church takes its name.

- The floor, composed of irregular slabs of Moltrasio, is almost completely well-preserved.
- Among the materials kept in the Antiquarium museum there are some nails, crockery, ceramic's fragments and remains of a little vase.
- Inside of the apse and in front of the access of the church were found five tombs.

The church of St. Peter's Castle

A little bit of history:



St. Peter's Castle is called this way because of its location on the highest part of the island, called *Castello* or speaking dialectal *Castèl* ("Castle"); it is referred to the high walls which used to surround the whole island, not to a real castle. The first fortifications would be built by the Gauls and then by Romans, but there are no pre-Roman remains. This does not mean that, maybe, the name *castel* would remind to *castrum*, a shelter in case of attacks for the *Ausuciates*, the ancient inhabitants

of Ossuccio. St. Peter's church is probably dated back to XII century, when the island was very developed; it played a main role among the territories because of its fortifications, and also as strategic stronghold in matters of politics and religion. Thanks to the excavations campaign, Belloni found some remains which unfortunately are not enough to give us information about the building.

Features emerged by the excavations

- This building was built on more ancient walls on the island; as it does not have foundations, it is difficult to reconstruct its plan.
- The complex of this little Romanesque oratory (28,5 meters long and 7 meters large), had only one nave and a semicircular apse.
- The southern part shows medieval retaining structures (called *barbacani*) which probably supported a vault ceiling; these once separated the presbytery, the part of the church where the priests used to stay, from the rest of the church.
- Probably the Romanesque oratory of St. Peter's castle was a sacred place where people could pray and devote themselves to the private cult of families or communities. Besides the destruction of 1169, this building has been subjected to divestment which did not help with the preservation. Thanks to the fragments of glass and crocks founded nearby, we can imagine how the life there used to be.

Saints Faustinus and Jovita's Romanesque oratory



Saints Faustinus and Jovita's complex raises on an artificial terrace on the South-East of the Comacina. It is made up of ruins of a Romanesque church, built with a carefully squared type of stones; nowadays, the outer part of the apse and part of the nave, as well as the annexed ancient convent, (which has been mentioned for the first time in 1101) are visible. The archeological stratigraphy revealed the presence of a former stonework, so it may be possible that

the church has been built on the remains of a structure dated back to Antiquity or Late-Antiquity. The building has one room only with two-apsed presbytery, just like the Baptismal Room on the island. But this two different-winged apses, are visible on the inside only, as they are part of a unique

semicircular stonework outside. Some historical records dated back to 994 are referred to this building, but they only mention Saint Faustinus as patron of this church. The first mention of Saint Jovita date back to 1190, after the destruction of the island; Ugo Monneret de Villard gave the current name to this architectural complex, because of the ancient historical records. Since then, no one has ever called the name into question, even if it still seems possible to interpret it. The dating of this complex poses some problems: even if the ancient origin of Satints Faustinus and Jovita's church is for certain, the study on the stonework poses many questions about its achievement. The quality of the squared stone covering would suppose a dating to XIII, contrasting the tradition; indeed, after the destruction of Frederick Redbeard in 1169, *annus horribilis*, nothing would seem to have been reconstructed. This would mean that the artists and builders on the island were already able to built big architecture works before XIII century, exceeding their colleagues insure; otherwise, it may mean that the activities on the island would go on even after 1169. Another dubiousness is that archeological stratigraphy didn't show signs of traumatic destruction.

A.Q.S.T. "Magistri Comacini" scheduled intervention

Talking about Saint's Faustinus and Jovita's church's restauration, A.Q.S.T. didn't choose to turn back the time, when the ancient structure was recognizable, as the numerous interventions through centuries have increased the architecture value of the whole complex. Indeed, even the improper use as a farm and barn tells us about the connection between the church and the islanders. An intense intervention could impoverish the history of the island. The main aim of the intervention is to preserve the ruins and let them to be interpreted.

Artist's homes

The project

At the beginning of XX century, after a series of different owner, the island became a place of art and culture. The project for a development of the island was committed by Pietro Lingeri. This architect thought of realizing some homes where accommodate Italian and Belgian artists (the last owner of the island was the Belgium's King). Between 1937 and 1939 Lingeri elaborated a project similar to the holiday house designed by the french Le Corbusier. The architect realized three little homes in rationalist style. Lingeri combined the use of local materials such as stone from Moltrasio and wood, mostly chestnut. The three buildings blend perfectly into the naturalistic Comacina island. In the 1940 began the construction of this three artist's homes.

Features of the artist's homes



Pietro Lingeri marked these houses with the letters A, B and C. They present a local architecture in rationalist style. These houses are smaller than the French model; the outline includes:

- the ground floor: study, dining area and kitchen;
- the first floor: bedroom, toilette and a little terrace with view on the landscape. It is accessible by a wooden stair, connected to a loft which overlooks the study;
- a stonework and a simple pitch

cover;

The different positions of the elements distinguish the buildings.

- HOUSE A: it is the most simple; bedroom and study are divided by a central bearing wall, in which there is a fireplace.
- HOUSE B: its entrance has sliding walls beyond which there is the living room and an idea of a central fireplace; on the first floor there is a little wooden terrace accessible from the bedroom.
- HOUSE C: it is the biggest, it still shows the idea of a central fireplace, but the study is extended thanks to a great veranda.

All of the houses have been made with Moltrasio marble and mortar additions. The floor is boarded and stairs, doors and windows have been made with chestnut wood; the structure of the roof is in deal, varnished as if it was chestnut, whereas the windows are made with shiny semi-doubled glasses. As the houses are small, Lingeri concentrated its work on their interior and on practicalness. The houses look well adjusted in the natural landscape, not only because of the small size and the building materials (of local origins), but even because it achieves the end of involving nature on their inside.

Recent intervention of A.Q.S.T. Magistri Comacini (Comacine Masters)

These houses have been built so that Belgian and Italian artists could spend here summer stays. Since the Post-war these houses have been restored several times: walls have been strengthened and the covers of the roofs have been replaced. Frequent acts of vandalism on these buildings caused an awful preservation status; that is why the A.Q.S.T. "*Magistri Comacini*" applied itself to realize a restaure

project. It has been recently completed, so that artists and tourist can use them and also to adapt the modern complex into the natural and cultural context. The aim of this project, as the town of Ossuccio wishes to be, is to promote this area, especially the island, as place of production and offer, talking about a sort of pursuit of contemporary art.

Useful information for the tourists

How come on the island

By car

from the **motorway Milan-Como A9**,
lead to Como North
and take than the **SS.340 Regina** to
Menaggio.

By boat

The island is reached by the boats of the navigation of the Lake Como
from Como, Tavernola, Cernobbio,
Moltrasio, Torno, Urio, Pognana L.,
Careno, Nesso, Briennio, Argegno, Lezzeno, Lenno, Tremezzo, Bellagio,
Menaggio, Varenna, Bellano, Gravedona, Domaso, Piona e Colico.

Useful information on the website www.navigazioneelaghi.it

By taxi-boat from Ossuccio.

contact the Antiquarium

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