

A Staircase to Aristocratic Aspiration: Palazzo Biscari alla Marina in Catania and the *scala a nuvola*

Abstract presentation within the research school “Two Lands / Two Seas. Calabrian-Sicilian Art and Architecture in an Environmental Perspective”, organized by Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, Catania, 20/10/2023

Palazzo Biscari alla Marina is a prototypical example of Sicilian Baroque architecture, embodying architecturally the social aspirations of the aristocratic class in Catania. Constructed between 1702 and 1763 in the aftermath of the 1693 earthquake under the patronage of the Biscari family, the palace showcases a gradual evolution reflecting the personalities of its owners and displays the post-earthquake city reconstruction efforts.

Architectural changes over time were designed by prominent figures such as Giuseppe Palazzotto and Francesco Battaglia. Ignazio Paternò Castello, Prince of Biscari, played a central role in expanding the palace's influence, commissioning the construction of a museum and a grand ballroom, which served as a hub for international networks of the time. The opulence of the ballroom evokes aristocratic refinement through its emphasis on lightness and its rich decoration with refined materials such as gold and glass. In this environment dance, a central part of aristocratic life, served as a display of distinction and political allegiance.

Of particular interest is the so-called *scala a nuvola*, a rococo style staircase adjacent to the palace's ballroom and characterized by its sinuous lava stone structure resembling clouds, which has given it its name. It is precisely through meticulous attention to materials and spatial composition that the palace embodies an ideal of exclusivity and privilege, reinforcing aristocratic claims to power and distinction. In this socio-architectural narrative, the presentation argues that the *scala a nuvola* emerges as a metaphorical gateway to aristocratic aspiration and transcendence, echoing the Palazzo Biscari legacy in Catania's cultural landscape.

Nicoletta Grillo – Nicoletta.grillo@uhasselt.be



The scala a nuvola in Palazzo Biscari, Catania. Photos by Nicoletta Grillo, 2023



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