

# RED EAGLE AT THE BLACK EAGLE

## NOTES ON THE RESTORED MURALS OF THE FORMER AQUILA NERA LOCANDA IN SAN MICHELE ALL'ADIGE IN TRENTINO

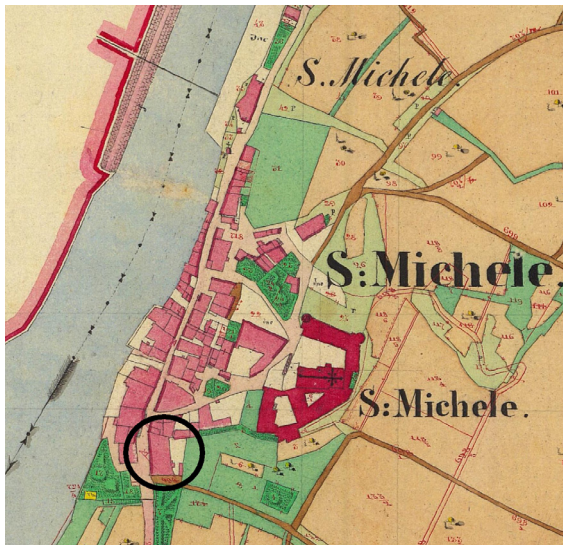
Edited by Giovanni Dellantonio



## NOTES ON THE RESTORED MURALS OF THE FORMER TAVERN AQUILA NERA IN SAN MICHELE ALL'ADIGE IN TRENTINO

Proposing an initial description and an albeit summary interpretation of a series of truly unique wall paintings a few weeks after the conclusion of the uncovering and restoration works may seem like a reckless gamble. Yet after years of painstaking work carried out by the Cultural Heritage Directorate to ensure that the initiative of the private owners of the building would come to complete fruition, this seemed entirely appropriate.

The building, subject to the works is the former *Locanda Aquila Nera* Locanda, (Tavern Black Eagle) known by everyone associated with San Michele all'Adige - once known by its German name of *Welsh Michel* - because it still maintains the role of offering hospitality to those who visited the village, located at one of the obligatory thoroughfares for all those travelling the parallel roads intersecting with the Adige river, through the territory inhabited by the mainly Italian and German-speaking populations. On the border between "Lombardia" and "Alemagna", Germany, as some travellers at the end of the fifteenth century recalled, when speaking of the guest-house, and as we are also reminded by one of the now uncovered texts that gives us, surprisingly, after six centuries, the original name of the building, namely "*Hostaria ala Aquila Rossa*", (Tavern Red Eagle). So reads the writing facing those who came from the south, held by a young page and placed in front of that by a young girl with the writing in German "*Gast Haus*" destined for those who reached the tavern from north. The more recent history of the building was reconstructed by Marco Zeni in a study published in 2014 related to residential properties in the town. The important discoveries made thanks to the restoration works are now opening a new chapter, confirming how the genuine testimonials of the past are unexpectedly close to us waiting to be rediscovered, preserved and understood.



*Cadastral map of the mid-nineteenth century*



*The former Locanda Aquila Nera today,  
seen from the south-west*



*Detail of the west-facing facade*



Several small parts from the oldest of the paintings - which will subsequently be described and compared with notable similar artwork – had already been uncovered since the sixties of the last century, but it was only on removing a layer of plaster however from the unifying walls that the original size of the building could actually be completely understood. The house, in the second half of the fifteenth century, extended over two floors and was about half as deep as it is now. After being raised up a floor and enlarged towards the Augustinian convent and the church to the east, the exterior walls of the building, probably in ongoing construction, were entirely decorated with an eye-catching, painted, diamond point ashlar in light and dark grey tones with yellow to feign the use of stone material (picture on p. 7).



*West facade, northern section, Injustice(?) or Irrresolution(?) with the flag depicting the three ravens*

### ***Injustice (?) or Irrresolution (?)***

Starting from the north and the west-facing wall - the last to be restored for practical and economic reasons - the first ancient figurative text is so mutilated as to still make its interpretation problematic. We see a young male figure, or so we can assume from the clothing, the upper part of the mutilated head, narrow and defined lips like those of a woman, the long blond hair hanging down over the shoulders, sitting on a sort of massive seat, with the legs gracefully crossed at the calves. The young man is holding a sword pointing upwards in his right hand, while in his left hand he is holding an upright flagpole upon which there are three ravens and writings that are still to be interpreted. Perhaps the figure can be understood as the representation of those who, in powerful positions, delay in giving justice, recalling the traditional meaning attributed to the crow song, interpreted since ancient times as *Cras Cras* which in Latin means "tomorrow, tomorrow."



*The mad procrastinator with his fellow crows, from Sebastian Brant, Das Narrenschiff- The Ship of Fools, Basel 1494, Chapter 31*

## Fountain of youth

Continuing south along the same west-facing wall there is a further figurative text.

Less than a sixth of what would have been the true extent of the original scene has been preserved. However in this case it is possible to identify with reasonable certainty the subject of the composition thanks also to the vertical stack that is visible in the top right corner.

This is an important and rare testimony for the era depicting the *Fountain of Youth*.

We see clearly at the top and on the right of the naked, grey-haired men that some are already immersed, while another in turn is trying to get into the large basin of a stone bath, which we imagine to be polygonal in shape. There are also women in the bath, who we can imagine are naked, some mature, like the one at the bottom centre covered by a headress and others, younger.

Following a widespread ancient belief in the Middle Ages, French and German novels throughout continental Europe believed that encounters, making love and ablutions in spa waters, served to rejuvenate the elderly. The image depicted outside and on the walls of a tavern was maybe a mischievous means of hinting at the services and comforts made available to those who took hospitality within.

The best known example in Italy depicting the theme of the *Fountain of Youth* is found painted on one of the inner walls of the so-called Baronial Hall of the Castello della Manta near Saluzzo in Piedmont, in an ostentatious area which was, however, reserved for selected guests of rank.

In the case of San Michele all'Adige however, a view of the bathroom scene with its undoubted erotic connotations, was permitted to all those traveling along the road parallel to the course of the Adige river and certainly served as an eye-catcher for the premises.



*Western facade, central section, Fountain of youth*



*Castello Della Manta, Fountain of youth, detail, first half of the Fifteenth Century*



## ***Armour Bearer, Giant Thun and Courting Couple***

At the left base of the upper register of the pictorial text found on the southern stretch of the main facade, as already mentioned, we find a couple of young pages holding two long scrolls. The male, his gaze turned toward the north, shows an inscription in the Italian vernacular, while the girl, facing respectively south, holds a scroll written in German that in part has yet to be interpreted and until now, reads “Gast Haus”, the equivalent in German of “Hostaria” (tavern) in Italian.

The young girl is looking at her companion with a mischievous gesture, laden with obvious erotic significance and seems to present herself to the boy, raising the edge of her garment with her right hand to reveal the tapered shape of her ankles.

### ***Western facade, southern section***

One of the most surprising discoveries made during the recent works was that of the revelation, albeit fragmentary, of a sort of imposing Giant, holding, on high with his right hand and down low with his left, the shields of two coats of arms, upon which no figuration is preserved.

He is an enigmatic character, with a proud and at the same time peaceful look, a moustache and full beard, facing those who were about to enter the tavern, wearing a fur hat with ruffled ear-flaps in prized squirrel fur, his voluminous dark coat standing out clearly against the pale plaster of the wall.

The right foot of the giant sports an elegant shoe resting on a kind of painted cornice that feigns moulded stone and encircles a painted fake block base, also stone, within which a narrow but real splayed jamb window opens and which was found fortuitously while extending the work of unveiling the ancient plasters where they were considered to be lost or beyond saving. The identity of the character is surprisingly however revealed from the long inscription on the nearby ensign held by a uniformed Armour bearer: it is nothing less than the mythical progenitor of the Thun family, who, according to family tradition that was still maintained during the Renaissance,



came to Trentino from Rome, following in the wake of San Vigilio, the patron saint of Trento and the diocese. Pending further investigations it is hypothesized that the painting's commissioner - depicted here as a knight in arms - can be identified with one of the Thun settled in Königsberg - Montereale Castle, probably the proud Simeone V Thun, son of Sigismund, captain of the castle and the Committee of Königsberg from 1463 to 1505.

### ***The Wild Woman and the Wild Man***

No less surprising was the discovery on the angle of the south-facing wall – immediately visible from a distance for those coming from Trento. The first of the civil buildings of St. Michael they would encounter was the compact bulk of the Aquila Rossa Hosteria - of a Wild Woman depicted with blond plaited hair under a crown of flowers and a Wild Man, his hair wildly dishevelled, holding a large stick-type branch. These mythical creatures of the forest, shown as elsewhere on buildings that offered hospitality to travellers, to exorcise the dangers along more isolated stretches and they unite with the bright colours and sections that seem to echo the methods of Nordic masterpieces in the outline of the lips and engravings reminiscent of the figures of the young courting couple, bathing naked and of the seated figure, both depicted on the adjoining wall – among the legendary apotropaic figures already present in our region.

On their right flank, from the observer's viewpoint, is a tricolour border with red, white, and green bands, further decorated with a plant motif made using stencils, which surrounded the decorated jamb of a window. Above, crowning an ashlar with corners outlined by vivacious colours is a sundial with a gnomon that was once fixed under a blazing sun with flame-like rays, marking time to the travellers' journey and rest.

**Giovanni Dellantonio \***

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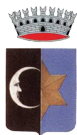


*Southern facade, angled west*



*Hans Leonhard Schäußelein, Wild man and woman, circa 1530*





District of  
San Michele all'Adige  
Department of Culture

## Greetings from the Local Council upon the conclusion of the restoration works

It is a great contentment for the Local Council to attend the inauguration of the Aquila Nera mural frescoes.

It has taken many years to get to this point, in view of the fact that the first meetings between the private owners, the Council and the Cultural Heritage Directorate of the Autonomous Province of Trento date back to 2010.

There then followed a long process for obtaining various government grants (Cultural Heritage Directorate, Council and former District, now Valleys Community), but now we can truly say that the result was absolutely worth all the effort.

Thanks are due above all to the owners of the building who believed in the historical and artistic importance of the project, the Cultural Heritage Directorate, for the care it dedicated to monitoring the works and its willingness to illustrate the results in this way, and to all the other institutions and stakeholders involved; in particular, the restorers who have so clearly demonstrated their skills and passion.



*West facade, detail of the painted ashlar*

The Council of San Michele for its part, applying the Regulation for restoring facades in historical town centres and aware of the value of restoring a richly historical building in a particularly visible location at the entrance to the town, allocated two grants for the works in question. The first grant of €23,600 was allocated to the renovation of the unpainted plaster of the three facades and the maintenance of fixtures; the second grant of approximately €8,900, supported the restoration of the wonderful frescoes that face onto Via Roma.

This is one of several measures implemented in recent years by the Local Council, always aimed at enabling the restoration and improvement of the appearance and enjoyment of our towns and villages.

Now all that's left is for us all to celebrate and toast together in honour of Aquila Nera, in memory of its flourishing past and great hopes for its future!

**The Mayor Clelia Sandri**

San Michele all'Adige, 1st October 2016

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### Notes on the restored murals of the former Aquila Nera Locanda in San Michele all'Adige in Trentino

Edited by Giovanni Dellantonio

*Special thanks to those who contributed in various times and ways to the protection project and the initial study of this building. Laura Dal Pra and Ermanno Tabarelli de Fatìs on the first front and Sonia Bertolini, Patrizia Dal Pont, Roberto Furlini, Silvia Invernizzi, Olga Kmit and Gustav Pfeifer, on the second.*

#### Notes on the works

Initial surveys on the wall facing west were conducted by the restorers

Roberto Marzadro and Roberto Furlini.

The uncovering and restoration works on the wall paintings and ancient plaster of the south-facing wall were undertaken by Roberto Furlini under the direction of Carlo Emer and Lucio Ferrai of the company EFP Restauri; those of the west wall by Roberto Furlini and Sonia Bertolini.

The wall plaster was reworked by Girolamo Ciancimino of the company Ares Srl. The works were coordinated by the engineer Giancarlo Moresco.

Architects Giovanni Dellantonio, from the Historical-Artistic Heritage Office and Giorgio Bellotti and Fabio Campolongo from the Architectural Heritage Office, monitored the works on behalf of the Cultural Heritage Directorate of the Autonomous Province of Trento.

Data relating to authorisations and grants from the Directorate are accessible on the website: [http://www.delibere.provincia.tn.it/ricerca\\_atti.asp](http://www.delibere.provincia.tn.it/ricerca_atti.asp).

#### Cover sheet:

- **Top left**, detail of the face of the legendary *Giant* progenitor of the Thun family.

- **Top right**, detail of the face of the *Wild Woman (Donna selvatica)*.

- **Bottom**, *Mathias Burgklehners Tirolische Landtafeln*, 1611, detail of the area of the current Piana Rotaliana, showing the Convent and village of San Michele all'Adige - "Welsch Michel" - and highlighted in blue, the ancient course of the Adige river and its tributaries; Noce to the west and Avisio, to the east.

#### Photo Credits:

Giovanni Dellantonio, p. 2 centre.

Mauro Bragagna, p. 6 top, p. 7.

All other photographs were taken by the photographer Remo Michelotti.

#### Sources of images from the web:

The bottom frontispiece

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#### Tags / Subjects:

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