



*Detail from 'Victor Emmanuel II at the Unveiling of the Monument to Dante in the Piazza della Signoria, Florence, 1865',
Vincenzo Giacomelli (1841-90), oil on canvas*

I therefore called Alfredo Betocchi, a Florentine member of the CISV, to look for the flags at the San Marco Museum. But to our bitter surprise there was no trace of the flags in the museum, and nobody knew anything about them. So a long and tiring search began, following a *fil rouge* that extended for a century and a half. Here are some steps along the path we managed to reconstruct by consulting the archives of libraries and other public and private institutions, through the patience and willingness of certain scholars. We also found some rare photographs, shown below.



Flags displayed in the Sala dei Gigli, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, 1878

From 1869 to 1878 the flags were displayed in the library adjacent to the San Marco Museum. In 1878 they were moved to the Palazzo Vecchio (Town Hall), first in the Sala dei Gigli (Hall of Lilies), then in the Sala delle Bandiere (Hall of Flags, so named for their presence). In 1908 the flags were transferred to the Risorgimento Museum. This museum changed site several times, until it was eventually dismantled in 1938. Most likely the precious collection was divided

and dispersed during this troubled period.

Around 1945-50 some flags were displayed at the Archives of the Risorgimento, a body in the complex of the former Convent of the Oblate. The storerooms of the Archives still held a dozen of the flags in fragile condition.



*Flags displayed in the Archives
of the Risorgimento, 1945-50*

In 1953 a *Florence Capital* exhibition was held at the Palazzo Pitti. On this occasion some flags from the celebrations of 1865 were exhibited, since when every trace of the flags seemed to have been lost.



*Flags displayed in the exhibition
Florence Capital, Palazzo Pitti, 1953*

However, after the disastrous floods of 1966 in Florence, known throughout the world, five or six flags were found. They had been reduced to rags and were thrown away. This suggested that the flags had been destroyed in the flood and so we presented this forlorn conclusion when reporting on our research at the annual CISV meeting. A disheartening end.

But this was not the end – and here the second act of the story begins.

Some two years later, I received a call from my friend Professor Alessandro Savorelli, a CISV member based in Florence. He had been asked by the director of the Fashion and Costume Museum (the Museo della Moda e del Costume) to examine 'certain old municipal flags' found in some cases kept in a cramped storeroom of the Palazzo Pitti.

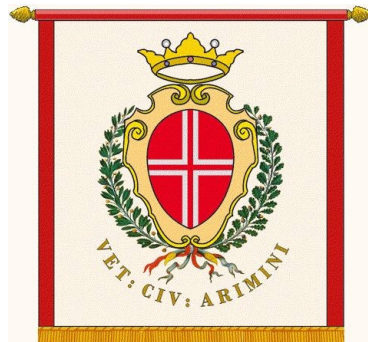
There were presumed to be over 100 flags rolled up and placed in bulk in the cases. Their fabric had seriously deteriorated, and tended to tear with great ease. It was possible to isolate five examples. Two were in acceptable condition and a third was somewhat deteriorated. It was impossible to unroll the other two without destroying them. The silk tended to crumble as if it was thin glass.

But a great surprise awaited us. An inventory number was visible on the hoist of the flags, corresponding that allotted to the same subject in the catalogue of 1869. The cases contained some of the flags of 1865 that were believed lost.

The first example shows the municipal flag of Rimini (Inventory number 255). The inscription *VET(era) CIV(itas) ARIMINI* means 'The Ancient City of Rimini'. It is a silk flag, spectacular in its value and in the quality of its execution, richly embroidered and decorated in gold.



Flag of Rimini



Flag of Rimini: reconstruction

The second depicts the municipal flag of Cutigliano, a small commune in province of Pistoia, Tuscany (Inventory number 95). It is another beautiful flag, very well preserved. The sheet shows the civic colours of blue and yellow and the coat of arms painted in tempera in the centre.



Flag of Cutigliano, Pistoia



Flag of Cutigliano: reconstruction

Yet beyond the thrill of discovery, reality is far less agreeable.

This is an outstanding deposit of flags and banners, it is true.

However, we can only appreciate two or three of them. Their restoration looks very difficult and expensive.

At first glance, the flags appear to have deteriorated greatly and are extremely delicate to handle.

In addition, they require a difficult process of disinfestation (fumigation, inert gas maintenance and so on) because the presence of parasites has been confirmed. In short, few reasons for satisfaction.



Flag of Capitanata, or Foggia Province, Apulia



Flag of Capitanata: attempted reconstruction

But there is yet another act to the story. The surprises related to this find were not over. Vieri Favini, a CISV member, recalled that, during some heraldic researches at the National Central Library of Florence, he saw by chance an old manuscript with colourful reproductions of many flags, almost certainly those of the Dante celebration of 1865. In fact, this was indeed the case.

The images below allow us to admire the vibrancy and brilliance of some of the drawings.

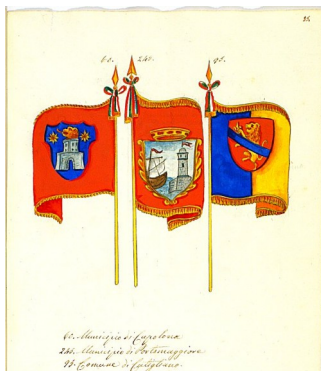


Left, banner of Rimini; right, banner of Ascoli Piceno

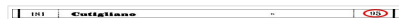


255. Rimini - Vet. civ: Arimino.
12. Ascoli Piceno.

Banner of Rimini (caption): the Inscription VET(era) CIV(itas) ARIMINI is omitted from the drawing but reported here



Municipal flags: Cutigliano, Capolona and Portomaggiore



40. Municipio di Capolona
246. Municipio di Portomaggiore
95. Comune di Cutigliano.



San Gimignano, Milan and Cesena



Porto Maurizio, Sinalunga and Vernio



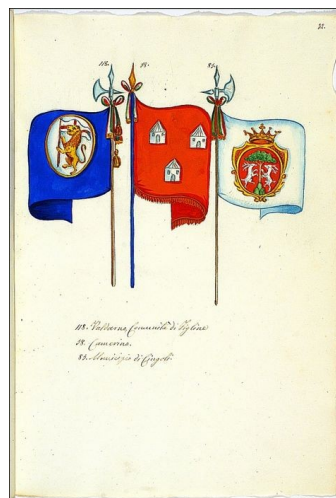
Cerreto, Sestino, Assisi



Certaldo, San Felice sul Panaro



Asciano, Viareggio, Rapolano



Figline Valdarno, Camerino, Cingoli



Note that even the finials are accurately reproduced. Many of these drawings are very important documents, for the literature on nineteenth-century Italian civic flags is exceptionally scarce.

To sum up, we now have the drawings but not yet the flags. So, to be continued ...

Acknowledgements

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This report is the result of a group effort: I am deeply grateful to the friends and members of the CISV, Alfredo Betocchi, Vieri Favini and Alessandro Savorelli. I am simply the reporter.