



THE HOLY WEEK PROCESSIONS AT MENDRISIO

Two cultural events which have been added to the official selection of Swiss candidates for the “Unesco Intangible Cultural Heritage” list.

In this picture, the old town of Mendrisio decorated with the so-called “Trasparenti”, translucent canvas paintings, lit from within, showing scenes of the passion of Christ. Below, two moments from the historical Easter Processions in Mendrisio.

The Mendrisiotto region takes its name from its main town, Mendrisio. Travellers often whizz through this area in southern Switzerland on their way to other destinations. By doing so, they miss an occasion to get to know the most genuine area of Ticino, and the one most rooted in tradition. This is a region worth discovering, since it presents a wide range of unique environmental and cultural features of international significance and boasts a large number of traditional events. Among the most distinctive events of this region are the Holy Week processions at Mendrisio, which in recent years were added to the official list of Swiss living traditions. The two processions, with origins predating the 17th century, have now been entrusted to a foundation which coordinates and manages all aspects of the events, including the recruitment of the participants, still always people from Mendrisio or its environs.

Upon reaching Mendrisio and making one’s way down the narrow lanes of the historic centre in other moments of the year, one would never guess what a unique atmosphere pervades the place at Easter time, and especially during the two representations. In keeping with tradition, during the Easter weeks in the historic centre and along the route followed by the two parades – which start at 8.30 pm – huge translucent canvas paintings are displayed, mounted on ‘crates’ lit from within. These paintings, commonly referred to as Trasparenti, create a uniquely emotional atmosphere, effectively turning the historic centre into an open-air museum. The Trasparenti, which come in different shapes and sizes, are hung on house walls along the streets of the town according to a precise layout, which assigns a specific place to each. The remarkable method of execution of the paintings is particularly complex, which makes the Trasparenti highly

valuable. The conservation of these objects – particularly the older paintings – is a challenging task for a few dexterous hands. Not all the Trasparenti which have been executed over time (400+)

may be exposed to the weather, which is why the most precious ones – such as those by the renowned artist Giovanni Battista Bagutti (1742-1823) – are displayed to the public inside the local

parish church. A unique atmosphere, then, pervades the eagerly awaited event of the two parades which take place on Holy Thursday and Good Friday at Mendrisio. While differing substantially in terms of their character and content, both parades follow the same long-established route. Starting from the church of San Giovanni, they continue through the historic centre down to the church of the Cappuccini. To this day, many points regarding the origins and history of the parades remain obscure. The Thursday procession is a popular “holy representation” – probably of medieval origin – in which no texts are recited but crowds and performers parade through the streets, retracing the road to Calvary. This procession is also referred to by the locals as the Funziun di Giüdee (Function of the Jews). This curious description is believed to be connected to the fact that, throughout the 19th century, the parade was seen as being somewhat uncivilized, since the performers would wantonly wander through the town centre from the afternoon, drinking and jesting. This eventually led to the documented choice, in the early 20th century, of lending the representation a more sober character. The Good Friday procession, punctuated by the music of four orchestras, involves no fewer than 800 participants,

including prelates, children and a few confraternities. These parade lamps (crafted with a method similar to that used for the Trasparenti) and other objects connected to Christ’s Passion. Compared to the Funziun di Giüdee, the Friday procession – formerly known as the Entierro (“funeral” or “burial” of Christ) – is older and certainly more solemn. Originally managed by clerics, it was influenced by the Spanish tradition imported into Lombardy in the 16th century. The Holy Week processions at Mendrisio are a truly remarkable event of great cultural significance, which is why the Federal Council has added them to the official selection of eight Swiss candidates for the “Unesco Intangible Cultural Heritage” list. The candidature of this unique Ticino event will be submitted to the Unesco commission in the years to come, according to the established procedure. The community of Mendrisio and its region are eager to receive the prestigious acknowledgement. However, this emotionally captivating heritage, formed by individuals and family traditions, already enjoys the acknowledgement of the local residents who have been safeguarding, nourishing and transmitting it throughout the centuries, so as to bring it back to life and display it each Easter. ■

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