Museo Ginori:
past, present and future

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When we think of a museum, we tend to imagine a silent, drowsy, orderly place—somehow far from the world. And when we picture a porcelain museum, we often envision our great-grandmother's teacups set behind glass. The Museo Ginori, however, is something entirely different: it is a museum that has fought to continue existing, a museum now undergoing a rebirth, poised to return transformed—dynamic, restless, and forward-looking.

The Museum originated alongside the porcelain factory of Doccia, conceived and founded by Marquis Carlo Ginori in 1737. Its first home was the gallery of Villa Ginori, just outside Sesto Fiorentino, a small town situated at the sixth (Sesto) Roman mile of the Via Cassia, north of Florence. There, Carlo and his descendants displayed the finest works produced by the factory. Porcelain—white gold—whose technical secrets the Germans had stolen from the Chinese, and which Carlo, in turn, managed to obtain from the Germans—had never before encountered the great tradition of Italian art.

Such an encounter could only take place in Florence, at the very moment when the glorious line of the Medici came to an end and the Lorraine arrived. That towering artistic tradition was being recapitulated before the eyes of Carlo Ginori himself, who was present as the Uffizi conducted the inventory of the Medici collections—an inventory of the history of art that, from Donatello to Michelangelo, from Giambologna to the masters of the Baroque, placed sculpture at its centre.

Carlo Ginori understood that this was the moment to give continuity to that tradition, and he did so in his own way, guided by extraordinary inventiveness. He acquired every model by the great sculptors—still living or recently deceased—that he could find on the market and, through his visits to their workshops, assembled a practical and figurative memory of sculpture, not only of the Baroque but of the entire Florentine tradition. His aim was to translate all this into porcelain—into a new, white, alluring language with an Eastern aura that, in Florence, became something else: something unmistakably ours, intrinsically hybrid, interwoven, indistinguishable between Italian and foreign.

In Carlo Ginori's hands, porcelain became something entirely different from what it had been elsewhere in Europe: not merely cups and dishes, but true sculptures—statues embodying Florence's eternal fascination with the human figure, monumental, nude, heroic. And yes, through the centuries, there would also be cups and tableware—but conceived in the grand Italian style, monumental even in miniature.

What the museum presents, narrates, and celebrates is therefore an extraordinary history of art, but also an extraordinary history of a community. The decades that followed saw the inventions of Gio Ponti—who directed the factory for many years in the twentieth century—but also a history of strikes, struggles, and grassroots movements: an intertwined story in which beauty and justice prove inseparable.

When in 1837—exactly one century after the factory was established—Leopoldo Carlo Ginori Lisci, grandson of the founder, died, the great scholar Raffaello Lambruschini composed a moving eulogy celebrating the manifold reality of Doccia. He praised the factory's products, which "he increased and diversified in such a way that, through the expansion of trade, he provided work for two hundred people living on the delightful hillside surrounding the factory—a happy population whom Ginori wished not only to make prosperous through labor, but also educated, honestly joyful, and ennobled by the fine arts that open the soul. He established at Doccia an elementary school for the workers, and later a music academy, and even a mutual aid society, so that anyone unable to work due to illness would receive daily assistance from this common fund created to support misfortune." It was a true social project. Carlo Ginori can be considered a kind of eighteenth-century Adriano Olivetti. His successors fully embraced this spirit, and a century later Doccia boasted an elementary school, a music academy, and one of Italy's first mutual aid societies. It was a vision of society—and this is why the community of Sesto Fiorentino has always felt viscerally connected to its factory and to the museum that safeguarded its finest creations.

The history of the factory was turbulent. There were many difficult moments, such as in the 1950s, when at Richard-Ginori (the new name adopted after acquisitions and mergers typical of many Italian enterprises) fears arose that the plant might leave Sesto forever—a recurring anxiety. In that instance, the City Council approved a motion recognizing that "Sesto Fiorentino, through more than two centuries of production in majolica and porcelain, has given economic impetus and prestige to Italy, and that in doing so it has created an artistic tradition that cannot be erased, because it lives on in the spirit and flesh of generation after generation." Museums rarely cite municipal motions, yet here these histories are truly inseparable. And those councillors were inspired indeed, because the history of Ginori is imprinted in the spirit—in that refinement and civilizing influence praised in the nineteenth century—but also in the flesh, as silicosis, the occupational disease of porcelain workers, left its mark on generations of Sesto's inhabitants.

This story of labor—heroic yet harsh—is one the stories the museum will tell. It will tell, for instance, how in 1953, during an assembly of Ginori workers held in those same difficult days, the prior of Calenzano arrived. His name was Don Lorenzo Milani. He had come to listen, but was invited to speak, and declared: "To tell the truth, I came to listen. But since you ask me to speak, I must admit that, as a Catholic, I feel responsible for your situation, because I voted for the party [the Christian Democrats] that governs and allows employers to dismiss workers with impunity." These were not diplomatic words, and it was alongside the Ginori workers that Don Milani imagined what he later wrote in *Obedience Is No Longer a Virtue*: that the only weapon

he recognized was the strike—like the consecrated sword of the Christian knight, but bloodless and therefore more sacred.

This is one of the highest chapters in twentieth-century Italy's civic history, and it is a story that, through highs and lows, has reached us. It culminated in 2013, when Ginori went bankrupt and was acquired by the Kering Group, which, however, did not purchase the museum. After a long period of physical deterioration—leaks, rain, mold—the Ginori collection was on the verge of being lost. A broad movement of opinion, of the press, and of ordinary citizens demanded and obtained that the Italian State—so enriched by the manufactory's contributions over the centuries—acknowledge the prestige Ginori had bestowed upon it and acquire the Museo Ginori.

Since the 1960s, the collection had been housed into a new building designed by architect Pier Niccolò Berardi, who, together with Giovanni Michelucci, had worked on the project of the Florence Santa Maria Novella railway station. The museum building indeed resembles a small Santa Maria Novella in Sesto, standing before the factory. The State purchased the museum and established a participatory foundation whose members include the Ministry of Culture, the Tuscany Region, and the Municipality of Sesto Fiorentino—as well as, in an unprecedented innovation in Italy, all citizens who wish to become popular members of the Foundation. Alongside its Scientific Committee, the Foundation also includes a Social Committee—something that exists nowhere else.

The Museum will recount this entire story once the works required to make it renewed, safe, and open to the future are completed. It is a museum that speaks of art, but also of industry, of labor, and of territory.

Its logo depicts the profile of Berardi's building—born of the highest rationalist imagination in twentieth-century Italy—and, behind it, the great water tower at the heart of the factory, so close to the museum that they seem, in perspective, a single form. The parallelepiped crowned with a sphere represents the museum itself: a symbol of its living bond with the factory and with its work. Its colors are those of the Ginori family—blue and golden yellow, recurring in the preciousness of the porcelains—but also red, the color of the labor movement and of the people of Sesto Fiorentino, who defended their museum tooth and nail and who can still call it their own today.

In 1956, the City Council of Sesto proclaimed that the history of Ginori and its Museum is imprinted in the spirit and the flesh of generation after generation. That is the purpose of a museum: to ensure that this story remains alive—in the spirit of the community and in the aspirations of new generations, throughout the world.