Monumenti storici e artistici della città dell'Aquila e suoi contorni by Angelo Leosini (1848) as an online semantic digital corpus

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This research project traces its roots back to 2007 when, as a recently appointed professor of medieval art history at the University of L'Aquila, a decision was taken to study and publish the sources for the history of the city's art — still unexplored within this specific context — involving students in the master's degree course in Cultural Heritage.

Many reasons prompted starting precisely from *Monumenti storici artistici della città di Aquila e suoi contorni colle notizie de' pittori scultori architetti ed altri artefici che vi fiorirono*, a book published in 1848 by the historian and archaeologist Angelo Leosini (L'Aquila, 1818-81), who was to become a leading personality in the history of the conservation of the Abruzzo's artistic heritage in the aftermath of Italian Unification (1861). The text was printed in Naples by the L'Aquila-based publisher Francesco Perchiazzi, during the author's 'absence from the Kingdom [of the Two Sicilies]', while engaged as a volunteer in the defence of the Venetian Republic.[1]

Emblematically, the book of the liberal Leosini came into being on the eve of the Risorgimento, the nation-building process of integrating the Italian peninsula's small states, each safe-guarding its vestiges to express its identity values. Indeed, the work represents the first systematic guide to the churches and palaces of L'Aquila, with the explicit purpose of tracing a history of its local art and artists.[2] *Monumenti* is not without defects. Nonetheless, it remains an essential starting point for contemporary scholars wishing to undertake art historical research in and around L'Aquila, if only for Leosini's work of selecting from the copious local sixteenth to eighteenth-century erudite literature, and especially from the immense, still unpublished manuscript *corpus* of the eighteenth-century historian Anton Ludovico Antinori.

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[1] 'Nella mia assenza dal Regno': Angelo Leosini, 'S. Angelo d'Ocre e alcuni autografi nel suo archivio', *Album Pittorico Letterario Abruzzese*, 1, 1859, 37-39: 39, note 1.

[2] The arrival in the Abruzzo of the first northern European travellers and scholars may have been one of the reasons that prompted Leosini to structure his book as a kind of travel guide — while disregarding the urban dimension in which churches and palaces are situated. Indeed, the only three plates accompanying the volume are taken from illustrations by the English artist Edward Lear: Leosini, *Monumenti storici artistici della città di Aquila e suoi contorni colle notizie de' pittori scultori architetti ed altri artefici che vi fiorirono*, L'Aquila: Perchiazzi, 1848, 94, note 1.

By dint of his effort and intelligence, Leosini produced an edition still indispensable today for assessing the consistency of L'Aquila's monumental patrimony on the eve of the First Italian War of Independence. It is also indicative of the reflection aroused by the rediscovery of Pre-Raphaelite art promoted by antiquarians, amateurs and Neoclassical, Romantic and Purist artists, which was to influence to a considerable degree the post-Unification approaches to conservation and restoration in the Abruzzo. Finally, *Monumenti* represents a fundamental reference today for verifying the present condition of the local artistic patrimony violently struck by the 2009 earthquake, only the latest in a centuries-long sequence of these.

Until now, Leosini's book has been underutilized for research on specific monuments or artists. In other words, *Monumenti* has not yet been studied with the wide-ranging approach nowadays crucial for the methodical examination and virtual restitution — at different levels of abstraction — of an extremely stratified artistic, architectural, and urban context. Moreover, the earlier historiographic and literary models for *Monumenti* have not been explored at all, nor Leosini's work plan, as I observed in an introductory essay on this subject.[3] The volume has not yet been adequately contextualised within the framework of the pre-Unification literature on regional monuments and works of art, nor has it been interpreted in the light of the author's later engagement in the cultural politics of the new Italy as an Inspector of Excavations and Monuments, and as a member of the Monuments Conservation Commission of the Province of L'Aquila from 1876 to 1880.
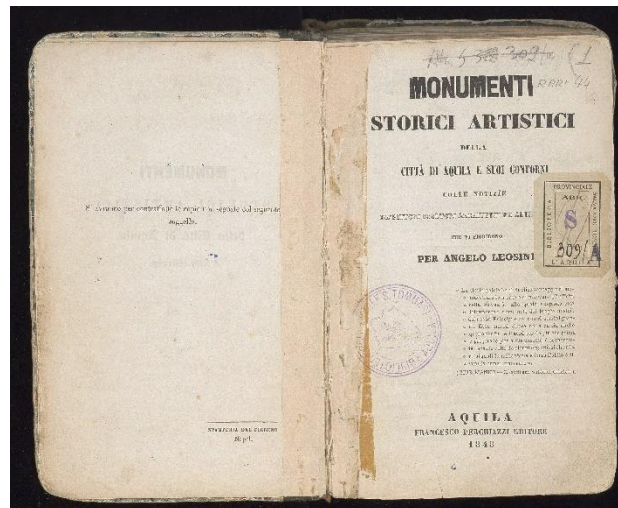

Figure 1 Title page, Angelo Leosini, *Monumenti storici artistici della città di Aquila e suoi contorni colle notizie de' pittori scultori architetti ed altri artefici che vi fiorirono*, L'Aquila: Perchiazzi, 1848. L'Aquila: Biblioteca Salvatore Tommasi, Coll. Rari 44/a.

Of exceptional importance is the personal copy of *Monumenti* preserved at the Biblioteca 'Salvatore Tommasi' in L'Aquila (Coll. Rari 44/a), which received it in 1903 as a donation from Leosini's heirs, along with the scholar's library (fig. 1). The

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[3] Cristiana Pasqualetti, 'I *Monumenti storici artistici della città di Aquila e suoi contorni* di Angelo Leosini: verso un'edizione commentata' in Howard Burns, Mauro Mussolin, *Architettura e identità locali*, vol. 2, Firenze: Olschki, 2013, 567-582.

distinguishing feature of this copy lies in the numerous annotations and corrections added in the margins or between the lines by Leosini himself, either to amend errors imputed to the printer or to clarify or corroborate his own affirmations in the light of new information and sources collected after 1848, possibly in view of a new edition, which, however, never came to be (fig. 2). Because of the hybrid nature of printed and handwritten text, this copy of Leosini's offers many important points of interest not only for art historians in the strict sense, but for a broader spectrum of humanities disciplines, from history to textual criticism.
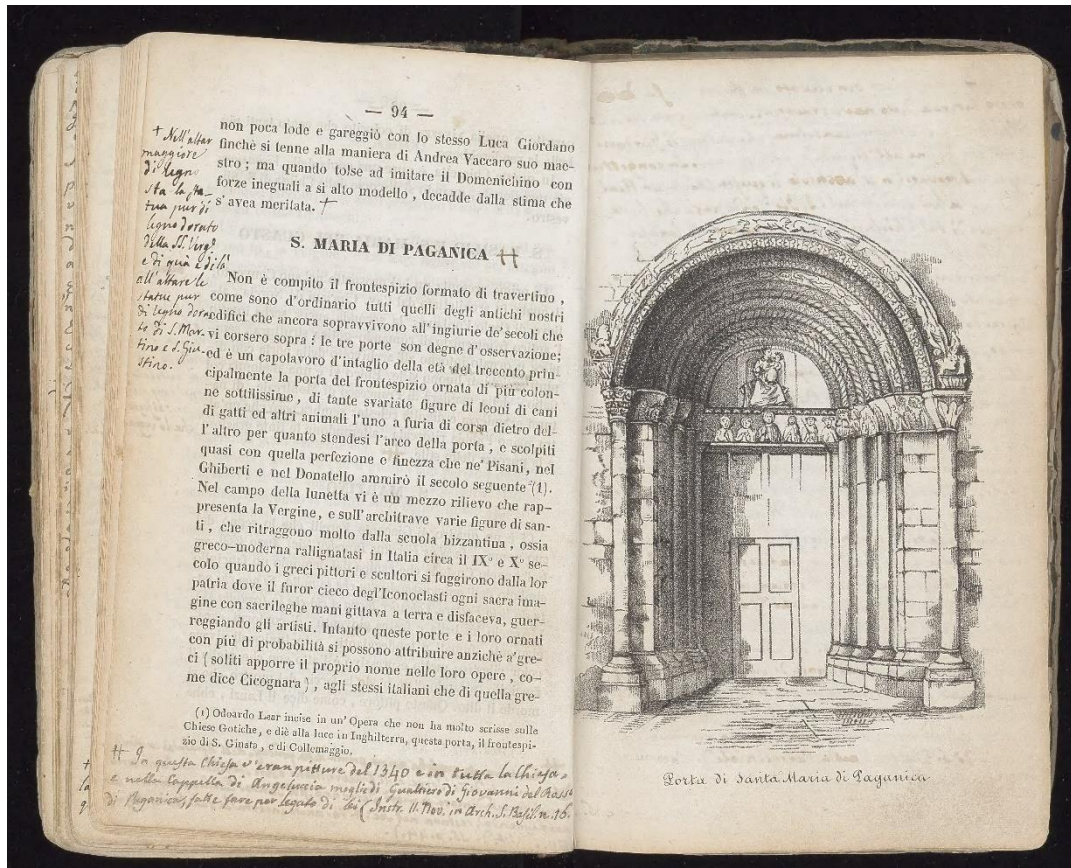

Figure 2 Angelo Leosini, *Monumenti storici artistici della città di Aquila e suoi contorni colle notizie de' pittori scultori architetti ed altri artefici che vi fiorirono*, L'Aquila: Perchiazzi, 1848. L'Aquila: Biblioteca Salvatore Tommasi, Coll. Rari 44/a, pages 94-95.

With this in mind, it was important to re-think the initial project for a traditional type of critical edition. The violent disruption of L'Aquila and its territory caused by the 2009 earthquake and the subsequent protracted inaccessibility of monuments, libraries, and archives decisively motivated me to design a digital edition, which would be particularly suited to broader research perspectives and the sharing of knowledge. After the University of L'Aquila awarded a grant to my project in 2017 a multidisciplinary research team of scholars from the University and the Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rome (Max-Planck-Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaften) was formed for the project under an agreement signed in 2019 between the two institutions. Leosini's copy in the Biblioteca

'Salvatore Tommasi' will be published online as a digital facsimile along with an annotated transcription with the support of advanced user-assistance techniques for semantic information searches. Images, sources, biographies of artists, and a bibliography will be associated with the works of art described in the text. The 'geographic' presentation of the monuments of L'Aquila and its territory, to be implemented in the information system by cartographic navigation (on current aero-photogrammetric maps and on historical maps), will allow the objects to be seen in their context, highlighting at the same time the changes they have undergone in the last century and a half.

The digital publication will also include critical essays addressing the numerous questions raised by the book: What was the purpose of *Monumenti* and who was it for? What does the text reveal about the author's historiographic and literary models? Which sources Leosini did use? What does the text say about the nineteenth-century idea of the city? Why did the author densely annotate his personal copy of the book? How many of the works described in the text can be identified? Which buildings mentioned in *Monumenti* still exist today?

Leosini's personal copy of *Monumenti* will ultimately become a hypertext that will allow both the reader and scholar to navigate intuitively through the artistic, architectural, and urbanistic transformations of the city of L'Aquila and its territory in modern and contemporary times. The open-access digital content will be updatable by the community of registered scholars through web-based collaboration and publishing techniques.

Thus re-designed, the editorial project will have substantially innovative technological features for making art-historical sources available, including the introduction of the online digital assistant for guided access to contents. The digital publication of *Monumenti* will be an efficacious tool for the offices supervising cultural heritage protection, and for teaching the art history of the territory in the schools and universities in Abruzzo. The risks deriving from land-take, natural disasters and illegal exportation would be considerably mitigated by the dissemination of knowledge and the increased local awareness of the layered and complex richness of the community's historic-artistic, monumental and urban patrimony.

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