



## **Camaiore Town Council**

# **THE SAWDUST CARPETS**

*An intangible asset of the historical and cultural heritage of mankind  
.... how they started, what they are, who makes them, the value they have...*

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## 1. THE HISTORY OF THE TRADITION

The sawdust carpets have a very long history in the town of Camaiore . A detailed description of the procession of Corpus Christi was given by the historian Giovan Battista Rinuccini who, in the tenth chapter of his 'History of Camaiore', says: *The Collegial Church and the public roads were decorated with such elegance that we had never seen anything to equal it. The Duke was present ,surrounded by public officials and the town guards. This was so edifying as it was closely linked to the compassion of human misery. Amongst this royalty the poor people found comfort for their troubled existence.*

We don't know what the citation of the decorated streets is referring to, it is probably describing the floral decorations and not the sawdust carpets. We had proof of this in 1910 , when - at the solemn celebrations of the fifth centenary of the (presumed) sermon by St. Bernadino of Camaiore, during which they organized the procession of Corpus Christi, they mention the floral decorations but not the sawdust carpets. ("*...the solemn procession left and went along all three of the town's streets which were adorned with carpets and splendid bunches of flowers at the windows and the traditional flower decorations along the entire route...*").

Therefore, even though some oral sources put the tradition of the sawdust carpets around the beginning of the 1900s, we must wait a few more years for this tradition to officially start; to be precise we must rely on the description in the historical guide prepared by Vincenzo Tabarrani, printed in 1930 by the Benedetti Printers, in which, on page 129 it says "*... the streets were strewn with myrtle and wild thyme and every so often we could see the pictures made with coloured sawdust...*"

From this moment on we have official news that the people of Camaiore created the wonderful, ephemeral works of art made up of coloured

sawdust; works of art which over time have improved both in form and technique.

Above all, in the 1950s, thanks to the effort of individual citizens and to the social sense of a few cultural groups, a strong competitive streak started and this helped the show to grow. Also the originality increased with the addition of new materials (e.g. coloured chalk).

A few local artists worked on the central part of the carpet doing the paintings in the fashion of the 'Madonnaro' with religious and symbolic scenes whilst the edges remained simple and repetitive.

During its history many generations have followed each other and the manifestation has had its ups and downs, up until 1968, when also this initiative was hit by the feeling of 'new ideals' which shook all of Italy. A group of students contested this tradition and the carpet became a 'manifesto' of social and political commitment against the war in Vietnam and world hunger. The carpets were made with sawdust of only one colour. Stones and barbed wire and colour dripped onto cardboard were added but just before the start these were removed by the police.

Today, we can jokingly say that this was Action Painting of the sawdust carpets.

Despite this unusual protest, the 'Tradition' resists because of its important religious, historical, cultural and artistic values. Since 1970 it has had a new strong impulse. The participating groups have increased and the old journeymen continue to search for new techniques.

And so today glitter is mixed in with the sawdust to give the colour more luminosity. At the moment there is talk of using the new technology and new materials so that the sawdust will change from being poor to being rich, creating a new glow in the colour and giving a more scenographic effect.

## 2 THE MATERIALS USED

The carpets made of coloured sawdust (commonly known as 'pula') are a tradition of Camaiore with an enormous religious, historical, cultural and artistic value.

The work is done in a few hours during the night but the preparation starts many months earlier. It starts with an idea, a project with reference to religion and the Corpus Christi solemnity, the techniques of the repetitive design, the geometric and floral decoration and to new themes which face up to social questions and trying new types of composition.

The chosen theme must fit the dimensions assigned each time to the group of artists, the width not more than three metres and a length, which can vary depending on the group, of up to fifty metres.

Right from the start there is a great secrecy between the artists. They wish to jealously guard the idea, the colours and the development of the carpet.

In the past the carpets were created along the streets with petals and green myrtle.

Around the 1930s historical documents said '*designs made up of coloured sawdust can be admired*'. Sawdust is a poor material which by adding aniline produces a great chromatic effect.

The sawdust from the poplar and fir tree (pale wood) become essential for making the carpets.

The artists prepare wooden frames with carved silhouettes of the desired picture in plywood. This is a difficult job because a separate frame is needed for each colour and each shadow which outlines the figures. A lot of experience is needed to calculate the various steps of laying on the colours to get the perfect chromatic effect.

One after another the moulds are placed on the ground and then, using a sieve, they spread the roughest sawdust. The finer sawdust is then coloured calculating the quantity for each colour (one shovel equals one square metre). The aniline colours are diluted in water or alcohol and then it is mixed

by hand and... "everyone kneeling on piles of sawdust, rubbing with their gloved hands, this poor material becomes the colour they want"

In attics, in garages, in cellars the groups make red, green, yellow and pink mountains which are then left to rest for several hours maintaining the right level of humidity until the evening of the event. The colours are kept in plastic bags.

Over the years the carpets have changed, often they are simple symbology with a strong religious theme but often they are connected to current events such as peace, war , violence, brotherhood and love. The event has had its ups and downs but only stopped during the war.

### 3. THE ARTISTIC VALUE

The sawdust carpets are certainly a form of art which is inspired by religion and therefore one of the most well known forms of Sacred Art.

Camaiore has one of the most important Museums of Sacred Art second only (in the province of Lucca) to the Lucca Cathedral Museum. The museum exhibits priceless works of art which date back to the 14th century.

The carpets take inspiration from various subjects, images and decorations which all come from religion. However, as we said before, the sawdust carpet acquires a deeper meaning when taken in a contemporary context and can be defined as Ephemeral Art.

We should remember that art, especially in a romantic vision, was seen as a privileged way to reach eternity, in this sense art is an incorruptable universal element thanks to which we can pass our memories on to the future generations. ("Jupiter dies but the hymn of the poet remains" wrote Carducci).

The sawdust carpet has a short life and does not outlive its creator; however the important thing is the moment of its creation because this is the meeting of the artist with the public. A parallel to this could be the mandala, which the moment it is finished is destroyed.

More important than the work itself is the act of the creation and the memory which remains in the people after it has been destroyed.

Rather than seen by the eye the carpets are described in the memory and kept in the mind.

Recently the Art of the Ephemeral has intrigued photographers and film makers who have come to capture an image, a gesture, a glance so as to be able to describe this art which is so important to the people of Camaiore.

A magic night which transforms the main streets of the town into a mass of colours and very personal works of art, images of the whole town

which participates.

Everybody becomes an "extra" even the people not involved in the making of the carpets. Some people offer bottles of water , some bring saucepans of pasta at four in the morning, others offer coffee from large thermoses at the first light of dawn.

It is a common good around which a great sense of community is created.

Visitors are fascinated by the passion and great love that each artist puts into what he is doing.

Right from the most simple things, taking the measurements carrying the frames, to the more complex things, sifting the sawdust and creating the right shades, balancing on the unstable frames, the artists are living only for the moment of completion when they will leave it to its destiny: its destruction.

To anyone who wishes to express themselves through art, any kind of art, meeting the 'tappetari' (carpet artists) and their traditions can be soothing and liberating, they teach you that the real work of art is the artist not the final result.

Anyone who manages to reach this level of harmony, between what you create and who you are has no need for one to predominate over the other.

Another important element in this event is what today is called the aesthetics of scrap.

In our society, often called post-modern, the artist doesn't use elements from nature that he has humiliated and defiled (pigments, stones , fibres, etc...) but products from the consumer society, recuperated and given a new dignity and value.

And this is the case of the sawdust carpets which use chaff and waste materials from woodworking to create the works of art.

#### 4. THE RELIGIOUS VALUE

The solemnity of Corpus Christi originated from the visions of the Blessed Giuliana born in Retinnès (Liege) in 1193 who was most devoted to the Holy Sacrament. At the age of 16 she was inspired to initiate a special holiday of the Eucharist. The first celebrations extended to the whole church through the influence of the so-called 'Miracle of Bolsena'.

In that occasion the Corpus Christi was carried in procession to Orvieto on 19th June 1264. On 8th. September the same year the holiday was fixed on the Thursday after the Sunday of the Trinity. Following the bill of Urbano IV and Clemente V (1417-1431) the cult of the Eucharist became widespread and found solemnity in the procession of the SS. Sacrament.

This important celebration has been present in Camaione since 1495, "*item per il calo et incignatura di una torcia, prese Leonardo che era capitano il giorno del Corpus Domini nostro Jesus Christi, Lire 3 soldi 12*"

The 'Compagnia del Corpus Christi and San Vincenzo Martire' were in charge of organizing the procession. The origins of this company go back to the end of the 14th century when the confraternity of the 'Disciplinati del Corpo di Cristo' was already in Camaione and was then incorporated with the 'Compagnia di San Vincenzo Martire' under the title of 'Compagnia del Corpus Domini e San Vincenzo Martire'. Finally in 1864 it included the 'Compagnia di San Michele Arcangelo' and took the name of 'Compagnia del SS. Sacramento.

In 1491 the activity of the company was already linked to the procession of the Corpus Christi as can be seen in the statute of that year, "*item la dicta compagniao sia tenuta di arauarsi e usare fuori vestiti a processione lo di della festa di San Lazzaro, lo Venerdi Sancto, lo di della festa del Corpo di Cristo e il di della festa di San Vincenti*"

It became even more important to participate in 1812 after

decrees added to the statute stated "*Anyone who doesn't take part in the holy washing on Good Friday and who doesn't take part in the procession of Corpus Christi will be fined one lira*"

## 5. THE SOCIAL VALUE

The participation of the people and the voluntary groups has been deep-rooted in the past generations and it shows in the social gatherings and the desire to be present.

The social value is in using these moments to become aware of the humanitarian and moral value of voluntary work, which becomes a great social and economic value.

This is why for many years the 'tappetari' have held courses (on behalf of the council) in the schools and in the parish to teach the technique and history of this ancient tradition.

This initiative shows the importance of passing on to the new generations this ephemeral art and thus increasing the groups of 'tappetari' with new and fresh ideas.

## 6. THE COMMITMENT OF THE ADMINISTRATION

Right from the origins of the procession the Council of Camaiore has supported this particular religious festival. There are many proceedings which show that the Administration approved its duty to participate in the procession.

The social value is expressed in the social gatherings, the diffusion of culture and to the contribution to the training of people , particularly young people.

In the devoted community of Camaiore the procession of the SS. Sacrament was mentioned in the XV century.

In the book of Administration expenses, a document which is kept in the Historical Archive of Camaiore Council, we have news of this celebration in 1495 "*item per il calo et incignatura di una torcia, prese Leonardo che era capitano il giorno del Corpus Domini nostri Jesus Christi, Lire 3 soldi 12*"

After this, Corpus Christi is mentioned in the Council deliberation "*the council and its captains must be present during the procession in the Name of Jesus and Corpus Christi*". We also have confirmation of this strong adhesion to the celebration by the local government in the XIX century

A letter sent on 18th May 1809 from the mayor of Camaiore to the Brigadier of Police in the same town ordered that "*in thanks to the Almighty God for the entrance of H.M. the Emperor of France in Vienna, the procession of Corpus Christi will be held in this town with the greatest pomp*" the letter is dated 6th June 1844, and the Sovereign of Lucca , Duke Carlo Ludovico di Borbone took part. And in the following centuries the commitment of the Administration has always been constant . Even now the financial contribution helps to keep the event alive.

## 7. LA NOTTE BIANCA (ALL NIGHT EVENT)

The sawdust carpets have been "exported", both in Italy and abroad, becoming an important showcase for the area.

Worth remembering is their presence at St. Oranna in Uberrhern, Germany, or in front of the Cathedral in Carpentras, France also in Rovigno, Croatia during the feast of the patron saint, St. Eufemia.

This tradition and its techniques have been studied by the National Museum of Traditions and Folk Art in Rome, where in the future, it may have its own space.

For the last two years they have been invited to the 'Notte Bianca' (all night event) in Florence, where they have been assigned a space in Piazza San Lorenzo. Using sawdust, they have fulfilled the given theme.

Tourists have really appreciated the fact that the work is done 'live'. In 2014 the theme was "*The Continuous City*", a city without limits projected beyond its barriers, following infinite plans. The idea was to create a new idea of space and to imagine the city as a square, a global meeting point.

The aim is to create an "*urban corridor*" which correlates places and moments as a function of its identity.

The carpet which was created in Piazza San Lorenzo (near the cathedral) developed the theme with reference to Camaiore and Versilia: the Francigena, Florence, Tuscany, Italy and Europe.

## 8.THE HISTORY OF VOLONTEERS

There is certainly something unique about this tradition, the long laborious preparation for a work of art with such a short life, the feverish night work which only ends at the first light of dawn, the use of coloured chaff , a humble waste material.

There is also something quite special about the 'tappetaro' (the artist). A minute attention to details along with a rapidity, almost chaotic, to complete the work. The desire to maintain the high quality of the work along with a jealous secrecy about the techniques used.

In all these years the techniques have been improved, the chromatic contrasts are more evident and the subjects chosen , religious or social, have become more involved.

It all starts with a line on the road to limit the area, it is filled with the first layer of sawdust, the forms are layed and details are added. It all starts at a slow pace which then becomes frenetic as the night passes and it seems impossible to finish in time.

So much love and devotion is felt that you can touch it with a hand, the hand dirtied by the aniline of the artists.

The 'tappetaro' (the person who physically creates the carpet) is a peculiar figure.

During the night he is concentrated on everything that is in his mind, from the first sketch to the completed work. Head down he has a job to do, he is reserved and introverse, his only thought along with his group is "*finish the carpet*".

It is not surprising that since the 50s one of the most qualified groups is made up of people from the local Communist Party, whereas on the other side we have a group from the Christian Democratic Party. As a result there are two carpets in the main road almost two hundred metres long.

At that time politics and opposite ideologies were often an excuse for people to get overheated and start arguments, however the reason the communists got involved in a religious event was to give it new life and thus become of a higher quality.

The animators and coordinators of this group were experienced decorators and carpenters and the new techniques are due to them. In fact it was in the workshop of one of these volunteers that the wooden forms were made, they were elaborately carved and used in a precise order.

The work of this group, in the 60s, was particularly innovative and was much appreciated. Thanks to them the use of the carved wooden forms has spread.

From that moment on the competition to participate was open. Still today the groups are increasing and getting better and better. Each member has his job to do, one checks the measurements and the drawings on the road, one spreads the first layer, one puts the first form and another does the shading. Another one fills up the colours and keeps the frames clean after they have been used.

## 9. THE LINKS WITH OTHER TRADITIONS

Camaiore is a land of important religious traditions and the carpets are part of this.

Amongst these traditions there is the solemn Good Friday procession with its illumination with oil lamps, the only one of its kind. It is held every three years in the centre of Camaiore in a very original and suggestive atmosphere.

Also the devotion to the Name of Jesus, due to the sermon of St. Bernardino of Siena when passing through Camaiore, led to a real and heartfelt cult which spread when about a thousand wonderful marble and stone monograms were placed over the main entrances to Camaiore and on many houses.

We mustn't forget that apart from the sawdust carpets there are also the floral decorations made by a specific group.

The Camaiore event of the sawdust carpets was also present at an interesting discussion in Piazza del Popolo in Rome in 2000, entitled *"International, Floral decorations in the world"* on this occasion there were many other similar events which take place to celebrate Corpus Christi and all using flowers (fresh, dried or shredded) the only exception is Camaiore, our area, the only one in the world which presented coloured sawdust.

## **10. THE IDENTITY OF THE TERRITORY AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH RELIGIOUS PROCESSIONS**

The territory of Camaiore relates strongly to religious processions. The one on Good Friday, Corpus Christi, the Holy Name of Jesus and others that are held in villages have become deeply etched in the memory of the local people.

It is notable that these religious events are not disappearing, in this area they are very important thanks to their diversity from modernity, with which they are not in conflict but they do lead people to a new reinterpretation of them as a contrast to individualism and 'social dilution'.

To re-affirm Christian values and spiritual and ethical resources therefore leads to thinking that the idea of a religion is in some way a vital fulcrum for social bonding.

In fact, the processions in Camaiore represent an idea of the local heritage. That is to say immaterial assets and traditions which together give a spiritual and cultural inheritance to a community and which, especially in these difficult times, give strength and a strong sense of identity in this period of globalization.

The identity of a place like Camaiore comes from the feeling of belonging to your community which cannot be lacking in an area which lives and expresses itself through the past.

Also the Camaiore heritage is linked to traditions with signs, symbols and images which in a social situation help the people to identify themselves in a common existence to help form the future.

Therefore, the identity of the territory and its relationship with the religious processions help to value and recuperate a rich heritage amongst generations very different from each other. In this sense the Sawdust Carpets are an undeniable element of the intangible cultural heritage of mankind.