The Court and the Cuccagna

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As far away as London, Horace Walpole was kept informed about the preparations for the great festa to be held in the capital of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. We find Sir Horace Mann, the British envoy to Florence, writing to his old friend on September 19, 1747: “Our second opera begins on Sunday and will be acted in a hurry to give time for Caffarello to get to Naples by the latter end of October to prepare for the great cantata which is to be performed among other pompous rejoicings for the birth of the Duke of Calabria, which are to last from the 4th to the 19th of November. Most of the English here will return thither.”

The event to be celebrated was one of dynastic as well as domestic importance. Though the royal alliance of Charles III and Maria Amalia of Saxony was now in its ninth year, the Bourbon succession to the throne had not been assured until the birth of Prince Philip on the night of June 13. The appearance of a male heir came as a welcome interruption to a series of five princesses, four of whom died in infancy. The period of national rejoicing that ensued was now to be consummated by this fortnight of festivities at the expense of the royal house.

When an eighteenth-century court chose to outdo itself in the matter of lavish entertainments it not only staged them but, with one eye on princely competitors and the other on posterity, published them as well. The festival has been preserved in just such a gala book which was issued in 1748 under the formidable title: Narrazione delle solenni reali feste fatte celebrare in Napoli da Sua Maestà il Re delle Due Sicilie Carlo Infante di Spagna Duca di Parma, Piacenza &c. &c. per la Nascita del suo primogenito Filippo Real Principe delle Due Sicilie.

This magnificent folio volume contains a frontispiece, twenty pages of official prose, and fifteen engravings devoted to the festival decorations by the scene designer Vincenzo Re. These show the Sala Grande of the Royal Palace, which he turned into a theater for the performance of the famous serenade (Mann’s “cantata”); the Teatro San Carlo, transformed into a huge ballroom for the masquerade; the medieval Castel Nuovo, bedizened with transparencies in the form of obelisks and urns and thus made to conform stylistically with the spirit of the age; a Temple of Public Felicity, actually a fireworks machine that would explode and burn to delight the populace; and the cucagna, the special treat for the lower orders—a landscaped pavilion constructed of foodstuffs, especially created to be demolished and consumed.

Vincenzo Re also made the drawings for the plates themselves (with the exception of the anonymous frontispiece engraved by Carlo Gregori), though the actual engraving is by other hands. Nine of the finest engravings are the work of Giuseppe Vasi, three are by Nicholas Jardin, and one each by Louis Le Lorrain, Angelo Guidici, and Felice Polanzani. The average double-paged plate measures about 19 by 22 inches, but the sectional view of the San Carlo unfolds to the astonishing length of 45 1/2 inches, while the section in elevation of the fireworks machine is 55 1/2 by 31 3/4 inches. It may be argued whether other festival books of the period might not equal or surpass the Narrazione in refinement of style, but none of them can exceed it in sheer size.

Apart from their fascination as pictorial journalism, and their artistic merit, the plates of the Narrazione comprise a considerable archaeological document. It may seem bizarre to refer to
The view of the fireworks machine erected in the Largo del Castello includes a panorama of the Neapolitan sky line punctuated by the domes and towers extant in 1747. This may seem of small importance unless one is aware that there was no Neapolitan vedute factory to compare with the service Canaletto performed for Venice, Piranesi for Rome, or, on a more modest scale, Zocchi for Florence. There is a striking paucity of town views of Naples, possibly owing to the fact that there was no real market for them. The forestieri who would gladly buy a print of the Piazza San Marco or the Palazzo Farnese had, in Naples, eyes only for the classical (Pompeii, Herculaneum) or the picturesque (Vesuvius, the Blue Grotto).

Visitors to Naples were almost unanimous in praising the splendid scenery of the San Carlo—Dr. Burney declared it to be finer than that of the Paris Opéra—but if it were not for the Nar-

**Frontispiece of the Narrazione, showing the infant prince presented by guardian angels to the nymph Parthenope and the sirens**
Razone we should have scarcely an idea of what it looked like. And still its possibilities as a tool of research are not yet exhausted, for a student of the history of costume or court etiquette could glean much information from the hundreds of carefully delineated figures in the illustrations and their placement in the royal orbit.

Nothing in the book surpasses in fascination the two spacato views which show us, respectively, the elevations of the Royal Palace and the San Carlo sliced through the middle. Views of this type had tested the skill of draughtsmen for more than a century, but these have a rare sense of grandeur conferred by the generous size of the page and the accomplished technique of the engraver Vasi. The feature which sets these views apart from similar productions is that they are inhabited. To the standard architectural rendering has been added the human interest and movement of a myriad of tiny figures in the fancy dress of the settecento. Though they are less than two inches high, there is not one that has not been characterized. As we observe the Neapolitan noblesse at play the effect is rather like one of those ant metropolises enclosed between two panes of glass.

The basic movement of the little figures, like our Western reading habits, is from left to right. Through the palace gate, up Picchiati’s staircase, past the blocked-off door into the Sala Grande, into the gaming room, through the correct door into the Sala Grande readied for a mezza gala, then down the narrow silk-hung corridor to the refreshment salons, we can follow the progress of the domino-clad guests to their ultimate reward.

Each of the excellently proportioned smaller rooms has a coved ceiling entirely frescoed in the illusionistic convention of fluffy clouds, plump putti, and goddesses waving veils. There are no chandeliers, but sconces are placed on the walls, which are closely hung with mirrors and paintings. Were there among them any of the masterpieces from the collections which Charles in-
Plate V of the Narrazione, showing the Sala Grande decorated for the serenade

...herited from his mother, Elizabeth Farnese, today the treasures of the Capodimonte gallery? One wonders, but the plate only hints at landscapes and mythologies.

We may indulge in a similar vicarious tour of the San Carlo in Plate VIII, passing through the small lobby up the winding stairs to the huge auditorium and across the temporary flooring, which we can clearly see has been laid over the backs of the chairs of the parterre, to the second ballroom which has been created on the stage. Our eye is finally arrested by a group of dancers resting on the trestled steps at the farthest point in the theater from the royal box—the appendage to the stage proper where the vanishing point of the scenic illusion is achieved.

(By comparing this plate with the ground plan it would be possible to reconstruct something of the street front of the San Carlo before the addition of the rather heavy neoclassic façade designed by Niccolini about 1810. Instead of the two-story façade with a massive arcade below and the ridotto above, there was a simple ground-floor foyer with a false front, capped by a huge crown to increase its height and dignity. On the roof of this entrance block, and adjacent to the main building, was a delightful little pavilion with a shallow cupola which housed the anteroom of the royal box.)

Plate V shows us how Vincenzo Re decorated the Sala Grande of the palace for the performance of the serenade. The same room where a Commedia dell’ Arte troupe once capered before the Spanish viceroy was again pressed into service as a temporary theater. Re covered the walls with gold damask and panels of white satin...
embroidered with flowers and arabesques, and draped the ceiling in such a way that the result was a kind of indoor tent fitted out with baldachins, crimson velvet swags, urns, bas-reliefs, mirrors, chandeliers, and sconces, with liberal trimmings of ermine and gold fringe. On the stage at the far end of the room the greatest singers of that day are performing the cantata *Il Sogno d'Olimpia*. This dramatic poem by Raniero de' Calzabigi, set to music by Giuseppe di Maio, was a highly complimentary allegory about the dream in which the mother of Alexander the Great was informed of the remarkable future in store for her son. An arrangement of bleachers on the main floor accommodates the gentlemen of the court, with additional rows of benches for the ladies and foreign guests, and stools for the Queen’s retinue. In the hierarchy of seating, only royalty may lounge in *fauteuils*. The three chairs of state are placed in the center and in the picture we can see the tricorn of the King rising over the back of one and the Queen’s headdress over another, while an empty third chair is set apart for the young Infanta who is presumably upstairs in bed.

The preparation of the San Carlo for the masked ball was an immeasurably grander undertaking and shows Re in a more inventive vein. His transformation of the theater superbly illustrates one of the basic tendencies of baroque art. The line between the audience and the spectacle was always a thin one; here Re has erased it by extending the auditorium onto the stage, or the stage into the auditorium. The ambiguity is definitely present. He has created an enfilade of three separate ballrooms, one in the auditorium and two on the stage. At the same time, theater scenery in the form of large arches decorated with the now familiar vocabulary of mirrors, masks, sconces, and festoons has been placed against the walls of boxes to create a unifying rhythm in place of the staccato repetition of the fronts of the cubicles. The fact that the serenade was repeated five times, both in the court theater and at the San Carlo, indicates some awareness of mundane economy. All the more amazing, then, that the decorations for the ball, though they had to be carried out in three days and were intended to be seen for only one night, were designed on so magnificent a scale.

The fireworks machine must have been highly regarded by its creator since it figures in no less than three of the plates. Ephemeral edifices of the same kind appear in paintings of festivals by Guardi, Cannaletto, and Pannini as well as in other gala books. While in general they all take the form of a central-plan temple, they defy description in particular, since it has been the designer’s aim to juggle the architectural elements in such a way as to produce the utmost in novel ground plans and elaborate baroque profiles. It is a part of the baroque paradox that these architectural expressions of giddy jubilation can serve, with a barely perceptible toning down of stylistic exuberance, for funeral catafalques.

Re’s machine is a lofty circular temple placed on an octagonal base. It culminates in an odd confection, with overtones of Saxon baroque,

*Detail of Re’s scenery for Il Sogno d’Olimpia*
that seems undecided whether to remain a tower or swell into a cupola. There are sculptural embellishments in the form of four river gods whose pedestals project from four sides of the base, the goddess of Public Felicity enshrined in the center, and Fame, with her trumpet, as the finial. The *coup de grâce* was supposed to be administered by a mechanical dove that slid down a wire from the royal loge and ignited the machine, which was thereupon blown into oblivion. If the building seems strangely familiar considering its remote date and exotic origin, the explanation is quite simple. One has only to repeat the Temple of Public Felicity in a Neo-Gothic vocabulary and the result is the Albert Memorial.

The celebrations in the palace and in the San Carlo, however lavish, bore a resemblance to those of any respectable European court. The opera may have been better in Naples than in Vienna or London or St. Petersburg, but it was a difference in degree rather than in kind. The Italian opera was the foremost spectacle of the era, except to the jaundiced French eye, and Naples had the good fortune to control the source. The revelers in their dominoes remind us of the pictures of Longhi, Guardi, and Tiepolo and of the Venetian carnival that ran almost nonstop throughout the century. No less ubiquitous an entertainment was the masquerade. It was at the court of Sweden, as Scribe and Verdi
serve to remind us, that the most notorious masked ball of the age was held: the one that witnessed the liquidation of that distinguished art patron of the north, Gustavus III. Illuminations and fireworks were equally widespread, and it was the British monarch who commissioned Handel to provide suitable musical accompaniment for some pyrotechnics along the Thames. Engravings of particularly choice displays were issued in sets, and fireworks achieved temporarily the status of the antiquities of Rome or the canals of Venice.

But when we come to the cucagna we strike the unique Neapolitan note in the festivities. The word has become a kind of etymologist's football, but it seems likely that the Italian paese di cucagna holds priority over the Languedoc pays de cocagné as a name for the earthly paradise of the feckless gourmand. The original Latin root cucere (to cook) developed into a land of cakes. The classic interpretation in art is, of course, the charming picture of Bruegel in which the inhabitants sprawl on the ground with all the specialities of Flemish cuisine within the most languid reach.

The Neapolitan cucagna was quite another matter; here an active concept reigned, the spirit of do-it-yourself. The genesis of the Neapolitan version is not quite clear. Some would see in it the survival of a pagan entertainment; others tell of a model Vesuvius, coated with cinders of grated cheese, spewing forth sausages, baked meats, and macaroni. The earliest eyewitness account seems to be that of John George Keysler, a scholarly Hanoverian who saw the cucagna in March of 1730:

"The peasants of this country are so slothful, as to prefer beggary or robbing to industry; but in the city of Naples there is something of an industrious spirit, and several flourishing manufactures are carried on there. It is a phrase here, that a vice-ray, to keep the people quiet, must provide three F's, namely Feste, Farine, Forche, i.e. 'Festivity, Flour, and Gibbets'; the people being excessively fond of public diversions, clamorous on the dearth of corn, and seditious unless they are intimidated by severity. Among their public entertainments . . . that which draws the greatest con-
course at Naples is the Cocagna, or Castle, built according to the rules of fortification, and faced all over with pieces of beef, bacon, hams, geese, turkeys, and other provisions, with which the imaginary country of Cocagna is said to abound; where the very branches of trees, are supposed to be Bologna sausages. This welcome spectacle is exhibited once a year, and on each side of the castle is a fountain running with wine during the whole day. A party of soldiers is posted to restrain the ardour of the populace till the vice-roy appears in his balcony, which is the signal for assault."

The cucagna was regularly held on the four Sundays of the carnival season. It was also a feature of special celebrations. On the arrival of Charles III in Naples the cucagna (designed by Nicola Tagliaozzi-Canale) represented the garden of the Hesperides in deference to his Spanish origin. The carnival cucagna were varied every week, appearing as a temple, an amphitheater, or a pyramid, while the mythological world was ransacked for such suitable themes as Mount Parnassus or Orpheus charming the brutes by his harmony.

The cucagna designed by Re in 1747 is in the style of the fantastic garden architecture of central and northern Italy. The building itself (which the caption terms a casino but the text calls una grotta) is an octagonal structure of four receding levels culminating in a statue of Abundance mounted on a stubby turret with a bell-like flare toward the bottom. The whole is strewed with decorative urns, and water spurts from lofty fountains. The effect is that of the water organ at the Villa d'Este in Tivoli or the pavilions at Cernobbio. The lumpy texture imparted by the hams, loaves, and cheeses is remarkably like the mannerist preoccupation with rusticated surfaces typical of such buildings. The text informs us that the balusters are made of caccia cavallo, a cheese that comes conveniently manufactured in this shape. The casino occupies the summit of a wooded knoll which slopes down to a parterre in the foreground. Though the latter is in the arabesque-geometrical style of Le Nôtre, it is of edible construction and features a fountain of wine in the center. The entire setting appears as bosky as a Claude, but the two masts
rising out of pools at the foot of the hill give a hint of its true function. The booty hanging from one is a complete woman’s wardrobe, from the other its masculine equivalent. The text fails to note whether or not the poles were greased.

The criterion for the true cucagna of Bourbon Naples was that it be ornamental as well as useful, but the custom was taken up in villages that could scarcely afford the luxury of the smörgåsbord landscape and, omitting such frills, they confined their efforts to erecting the pole. And so we arrive at the decadence of the cucagna and the time when the word became attached to the greased pole climbed at fairs. Even at that stage the world of art had not quite done with the cucagna, and we can find such poles figuring prominently in paintings by Magnasco and Goya.

It is important to emphasize that the cucagna was no mere nature morte but a tableau vivant as well—and it was this aspect of the entertainment that contributed to its ultimate suppression. Throughout the landscape were scattered live oxen, sheep, goats, pigs, and even, upon occasion, wild deer. Ducks and geese paddled about pools that had been stocked with fish. But the cult of sensibility was creeping south, and Lady Anne Miller writes that when Queen Maria Carolina witnessed her first cucagna “she was shocked at the cruelty of tearing the wretched animals to pieces, whose cries reached the palace” and issued commands that in the future the oxen should “be killed before the sport begins.” But that still left enough for the S.P.C.A. to worry about—and to turn the English stomach: “Amongst the boughs geese and pigeons are nailed fast by the wings . . . they tear them away unfeelingly from their fastening, so as often to leave their wings behind.”

Nor were the casualties confined to the animal kingdom. “In the midst of the riot and confusion, a Lazzeroni dropped, and was carried off by his comrades; he had received a stab in the breast by a knife from one of his brethren, who disputed with him somewhat taken off from the Cocagna. As such events are common upon this occasion, no notice was taken of it; but the man died on the spot.” One of the first official acts of Charles III had been to pension off eleven pobres Viudas que perdieron sus maridos en la Cucaña del año 1734. When the government finally put a stop to the custom the funds earmarked for further entertainments were devoted to providing dowries for “orphans of the cucagna.”

So the festa was duly celebrated and passed into history. November 4 had been carefully selected as the most auspicious day on which to begin the proceedings, as it was the name day of the King. It was exactly ten years to the day since the great San Carlo had opened its doors.

On the first morning the great gilded coaches of the nobility overflowed the piazza in front of the palace, where the opening ceremony of the
hand-kissing was taking place, and choked the narrow streets leading into it. Even the main thoroughfare, the Via Toledo, proved unequal to the throngs and an unprecedented traffic jam took place.

The serenade came off with great success, especially the duet between the two male sopranos. Our Florence correspondent covered the event: “You have heard of the great things at Naples, and the rivalship between Caffarello and Egizziello which luckily did not, as was expected, disturb the festa. Upon Caffarello’s arrival in Naples Egizziello went to make him a visit, and was received by that saucy creature upon his close-stool, where he sat during the whole visit. The affair was made up by mediators, and afterwards they appeared good friends. The Tesi fece la sua figura and was made happy by the great applause she received.”

There was one jarring note: we find the Genoese ambassador writing home that the fireworks machine caught fire prematurely on the last day. The terrified crowd panicked and many were killed or injured.

The guests returned to their estates or town houses; the famous singers scattered to the far corners of Europe; Vincenzo Re went back to designing scenery. There can be little doubt that Charles was pleased with the result. For all his likable and even touching simplicity, his plain brown clothes and his mania for hunting, he was a true heir of Versailles when it came to building and spectacles. All in all, the festa was a bargain compared to the expenditure of his father Philip V for the fountains of La Granja which gave rise to the immortal remark, “they cost me three millions and kept me amused for three minutes.”

Plate XIII, showing the fireworks machine, with the Castel Nuovo in the right foreground