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## Masterpiece

Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II (1867-78) by Giuseppe Mengoni

### A City Under Glass

*The Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II is a twinkling, operatic stage for commerce.*



*The arcade's size and inviting design set it apart from similar structures. Photo: Getty Images*

by Marc Myers

**In 1879**, Mark Twain sailed home from Europe with a manuscript nearly ready for publication. Titled “A Tramp Abroad,” the book featured the author’s observations of southern Germany, the French and Swiss Alps and the cities of northern Italy. In Milan, Twain noted, he spent most of his stay in “the vast and beautiful Arcade or Gallery, or whatever it is called.”

“Blocks of tall new buildings of the most sumptuous sort, rich with decoration and graced with statues, the streets between these blocks roofed over with glass at a great height, the pavements all of smooth and variegated marble, arranged in tasteful patterns,” he wrote. “I should like to live in it all the time.”

Twain was describing the city’s Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, a massive four-wing indoor arcade that rises 126 feet to an expansive vaulted glass ceiling. Nearly 150 years after the interior’s completion, the Galleria today remains largely unchanged—a twinkling, honey-hued backdrop to La Belle Époque and an operatic stage set of luxury retailers, restaurants, cafés, decorative arts and pedestrians.

Seen from above, the Galleria looks like a Latin cross, with its main arcade bisected by a shorter one. The four wings meet internally at an octagonal plaza capped by a glass dome 128 feet in diameter and 154 feet above the colorful marble and mosaic floor. At each end of the architectural cross is a towering arched entryway to allow for the unimpeded flow of pedestrian traffic.

What sets the Galleria apart from other glass-topped arcades built before or since is its significant volume and its inviting design and decorative touches. Upon entering the Galleria, one is stunned by the high-arched glass vaulting and five-story stone building facades that line both interior arcades.

During the day, this neighborhood under glass is bathed in a natural ochre light, while at night globe wall sconces throw off soft lemon-yellow tones. Decorative art in the Galleria includes half-moon lunette paintings, mosaic frescoes, statues and a range of ornaments.

The glass-covered retail concept originated in Paris in 1798 with the Passage du Caire. It was followed by London’s Burlington Arcade (1819), Paris’s Galerie Vivienne (1823), Brussels’ Galeries Royales Saint-Hubert (1847) and St. Petersburg’s The Passage (1848).

When Joseph Paxton’s Crystal Palace was completed in London for the Great Exhibition of 1851, new architectural technology was introduced, including an iron framework, cement and cast plate glass. The Crystal Palace’s breadth inspired the Galleria’s ambitious scope.

From the outset, the Galleria was an architectural marvel. About 350 tons of French iron and cast iron were used for the exposed arched beams that create the vaulting and support the weight of the glass panes. The Galleria’s look is both heavy and light, merging the cavernous feel of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome with the boulevard charm of Paris’s Champs-Élysées.

Milan's decision to develop a sizable commercial space moved forward in 1861, when Victor Emmanuel II became the first king of a united Italy since the sixth century. At first the city held a lottery to raise funds, but collections fell considerably short.

Meanwhile, an architectural competition went forward in 1862, and Giuseppe Mengoni was chosen in 1863. Mengoni, who was 33 at the time, had submitted a bold proposal calling for the existing neighborhood's demolition to make way for his vision for a sizable commercial space shielded from the elements by glass.

Still lacking funds in 1864, the city accepted financial help and engineering advice from a London-based company, which insisted the project be completed within two years. Mengoni set to work, installing the Galleria's foundation in March 1865 and employing roughly 1,000 workers on a daily basis to complete construction on time.

When the Galleria opened in September 1867, the king attended the inauguration. His praise likely motivated Mengoni to work on a triumphal arch to frame the Galleria's main entrance on the cathedral plaza. But nine years later, in 1876, Milan gave him a year to complete the arch.

Mounting pressure, personal debt and growing self-doubt left Mengoni despondent. On Dec. 30, 1877—the evening before the entrance was to be unveiled—Mengoni climbed the arch's scaffolding and either slipped or jumped to his death.

Ten days later, the king for whom the Galleria was named died of pneumonia. When the arch was finally inaugurated in February 1878, the new entrance completed the Galleria and both were hailed by critics and embraced by locals and tourists, including Twain.

Today, after midnight, when the Galleria's passageways are desolate and eerily quiet, it's easy to think of Mengoni, whose life was consumed by the space, and of the king who never saw the finished product. At this late hour, the Galleria appears like an empty theater, patiently waiting for the daily public drama to resume at sunrise.

—Mr. Myers, a frequent contributor to the Journal, writes daily about music and the arts at [JazzWax.com](http://JazzWax.com).

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