

# The Italian Promenade. A Cultural History.

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# Contents

Introduction	7
Promenading in Italy	7
Definition	8
Invisibility of the promenade	10
<b>1. Origin and Typology</b>	<b>13</b>
The 'Corso' Promenade	15
<i>Arcades and Galleries</i>	22
The 'Al Fresco' Promenade	24
<i>Riversides and Seafronts</i>	24
<i>Gardens</i>	28
<i>Bastions and Avenues</i>	30
<b>2. Rhythms and Times</b>	<b>35</b>
Seasonal Promenades	35
Festival Promenades	37
Sunday Promenades	38
<i>The Morning Promenade</i>	38
<i>The Afternoon Promenade</i>	39
Saturday Promenades	43
<b>3. The 'Passing Show'</b>	<b>45</b>
Sociology of the Promenade	45
Exhibition and Differentiation	49
<i>Appearance</i>	50
<i>Manner</i>	54
The Promenade as a Collective Affair	55
The Promenade as the Public Dimension of Eroticism	59
Conclusions	65
Bibliography	67



# Introduction

## Promenading in Italy

On certain days, at a certain hour, from Udine to Palermo, from Cagliari to Taranto—in fact, all over Italy—people get themselves ready, dress up for the occasion and make their way to pre-determined places to join others in performing an ancient and fascinating practice: the *passeggiata*.

It is a veritable rite—literally, a rite of passage—which is carried out collectively. Its meanings and purposes are very different to those of the introspective or contemplative solitary walk. Instead, it regularly involves hundreds or thousands of participants spurred on by the desires and pleasures of open-air leisure; socialisation; looking at others and being looked at in turn; exercising a status, economic class, and/or gender and age-class prerogatives. In spite of its worldwide importance and popularity, the collective promenade has received, with very few exceptions, a surprising and inexplicable lack of attention from academic literature and the media.

The promenade is here investigated from a cultural historical perspective, with the aim of highlighting the interrelationships between promenaders and their culture, social organisation, and physical environment. The focus

is on how this collective phenomenon has profoundly affected society in recent centuries in terms of relationships and aesthetic culture; how it has provided the stage for political protest, demonstration of public dissent and rebellion, taking advantage of its theatrical and performative dimensions; how it has played a key role in the definition and alteration of the urban socio-economic layout by influencing the distribution of leisure and commercial activities; and how it has directly concurred with the redefinition of the urban space through the appropriation and reclamation of its public use.

## Definition

Generally speaking, the promenade dealt with in this paper is a social event in which participants perform the act of covering a short distance, often back and forth, within a given space. Cultural values, attitudes, and circumstances concur to determine its historical specificity.

A first and fundamental aspect to be considered for elaborating this core definition is that the promenade is a self-organising social event. In many historical cases, the promenade celebrated a personage or a special event, without losing its self-organising character. Recreational activities have historically played a role in attracting and entertaining the promenaders—for instance, band concerts organised in public parks in the 19th and 20th centuries—but have mostly occurred in concomitance with a promenade without originating it. The same can be said for shopping, which since the 19th century has become an increasingly attractive force and a corollary activity, without ever challenging the social purpose of the promenade.

A second aspect, which also concerns the social nature of the event, is that the promenade has typically involved couples, families, and small groups. The participation of single individuals has always been generally discouraged and socially stigmatised.

A third aspect is the wide participation that has marked the promenade across class and gender boundaries, though with fundamental differences throughout the centuries. From the 19th century onwards, the promenade has become an increasingly bourgeois event. Between the 16th and



20th centuries, however, it welcomed European kings and queens, for instance, Queen Catherine de' Medici and her husband, the French King Henry II, in the 16th century, or the Italian Queen Margherita at the end of the 19th century; members of the royal families; popes, like Pius IX in the second half of the 19th century; and the aristocracy and high bourgeoisie, while lower-class participation was generally forbidden or at least discouraged in 16th-18th-century Europe.

A fourth aspect concerns the issue of means of travel, which for the 17th—19th century aristocratic and high bourgeois promenaders was mostly by carriage. A significant exception was pre-20th century Venice, where the promenade was historically carried out by boat (gondola). Walking, on the other hand, became progressively prominent from the early decades of the 20th century.

A fifth aspect is that the space in which the promenade occurs is conventionally acknowledged, established by custom, and relatively geographically bounded. Stretches of city and town roads, squares, urban park lanes, and riverbanks were—and still are—the most common sites of promenade. In all these cases, the route's length is purposely limited to increase the density of the promenaders, encourage their back and forth movement, and, in so doing, enhance their social and visual interaction. Sites for promenading were either customarily and autonomously chosen by the people—for instance, Via del Corso in Rome—or planned and implemented by rulers or urban administrations, as was the case with the Cours la Reine in 17th-century Paris or the sites created specially for the purpose in many French and Italian cities during the reign of Napoleon III.

A sixth aspect is that of the frequent presence of a public to which the performance of the promenade is addressed. Being a sort of parade, the public was very often not only that of the other promenaders themselves, but consisted of people sitting at the café tables flanking the routes and squares, or standing along the streets to watch the promenaders passing by. A seventh aspect is that the act of collective promenading is carried out on a regular basis, and on specific days and/or times of day.

## Invisibility of the Promenade

Given its long history, widespread nature and popularity all over Europe and Italy in particular, the promenade should have developed into an interesting object of social and cultural study. Instead, it has proved an invisible topic for scholars and researchers to date, and its history and meanings have thus remained virtually unexplored in both international and national literature. This remains the case in spite of the fact that walking has attracted new international attention in the first decade of the 21st century, especially through the cultural approach of the works of Alain Montandon (2000), Rebecca Solnit (2001), Francesco Careri (2006) and Frédéric Gros (2009). Most of this attention, however, has been paid to the promenade as the solitary practice of philosophers, writers, *flâneurs* and pilgrims (Montandon, Solnit, and Gros); women (Solnit); artists (Careri); or the collective practice of marching and demonstrating citizens (Solnit). Only Montandon has dedicated a chapter of his book to the worldly promenade, which he describes mostly in France in its development from a 17th-century socialite activity to an increasingly democratic phenomenon from the second half of the 18th century onward with the opening of the urban gardens to the public and the impact of the French Revolution. For Montandon (2000, p. 43), the promenade is a historical ritual serving the purpose of reiterating and maintaining social ties. In the field of history, Laurent Turcot (2007) has studied the promenaders in 18th-century Paris and London, mostly as individual walkers and *flâneurs*, but also dealing with the collective dimension of the promenade, its original hierarchical and theatrical character, and its later bourgeoisification. By considering the promenade as a social *loisir* and also investigating the influence of tourist guides on the promenade practice, Turcot's work strays into the fields of leisure and tourist studies, which have generally overlooked the phenomenon. A few anthropologists have dealt in passing with the promenade in Italy when carrying out field research in towns where it was common, as was the case of Calimera when studied by Maraspini (1968) in the 1960s and Montecastello di Vibio when researched by Sydel Silverman (1976) in the early 1970s. A remarkable exception in this field was the work devoted by Giovanna Del Negro (2004) to the social promenade in the town of Sasso in the

early 2000s and the relationships between the Italian promenade and the version practiced in North America (Del Negro 2000). Del Negro's study in Sasso takes a thorough approach to the meanings of the promenade, understood in accordance with Milton Singer's concept of 'cultural performance', described in detail, and analysed vis-à-vis the town dwellers' ideas of modernity, cosmopolitanism, and affirmation of civic unity and community spirit. To date, no Italian study has been dedicated to the promenade.



# Part One

## Origin and Typology

Tackling the issue of the typology of the promenade in Western culture entails delving into the historical depths of the phenomenon. The classical Greek and Roman world attributed a key social and cultural role to walking. The daily life of upper- and middle-class citizens in ancient Rome, for instance, was often marked by the customary practice of visiting the purpose-built places found throughout the city, either on foot (*ambulatio*) or by litter (*gestatio*). The Roman adoption of the Greek custom of walking the arcades flanking main squares led to the construction of covered walkways called *portici*. The Roman architect Vitruvius (c. 80-70 BC–c. 25 BC) explained how these sites were required to achieve the cultural and recreational aims of offering the people a pleasant and healthy environment, while aesthetically entertaining and educating them through the display of artworks (Vitruvius 1990). Colonnaded walkways were usually embellished with gardens and made available near theatres, temples, gymnasia, and public baths. Roman walkers also had a wide choice of open-air spaces, which included squares, like the Forum in Rome, where the poet Horace took his evening strolls (Dosi 2006, p. 69) and, above all, parks. It is to the classical world, in fact, that we owe the modern and contemporary concept of public parks, such as those donated

to Rome by the general and consul Pompey, the emperor Augustus, and, after his death, the dictator Julius Caesar.

Gardens and parks were characterised by the presence of water in the form of fountains and other water features—as in the garden enclosed by the Porticus of Pompey—or nearby rivers, as was the case with the Tiber flanking the Campus Martius gardens, a popular meeting place for Roman society (Grimal 1969). Thus, walking or being transported down the central avenues that crossed gardens and parks, or their multiple parallel lanes, was a refreshing activity during the long summers of the Greek and central-southern Italian latitudes. In addition to these pleasures, Roman gardens and parks were places for lovemaking and sexual encounters, facilitated by relaxed differences in social class (Gleason, 2013). Catullus, in his *Carmen 55*, meets prostitutes in the Porticus of Pompey, and Ovid, in *Tristia* and *Ars Amatoria*, mentions it as a place where women would often go to seek lovers.

With its focus on Aristotle's peripatetic school and its tradition, contemporary literature on Greek and Roman culture has emphasised the meditative and philosophical dimensions of walking, while neglecting its collective implications. The design of Greek and Roman portici and gardens provides evidence of how these places were popular stages for the performance of the social rite of the promenade. The reduced length of their covered walkways or open-air alleys was intended to concentrate promenaders, offer them a clear view of each other and increase the chances of reciprocal encounters through back and forth routes. Archaeological evidence from several Roman portici shows, for instance, how the indication of their length was traditionally given *in circuitum*, i.e. back and forth (Grimal 1969, p. 255).

The fact that there existed both designated spaces and customary periods of the day for promenading provides further evidence of the social character of the activity in the classical world. Either on foot or in a litter, traversing the portici in the winter evenings or visiting the forum at certain hours (Dosi 2006, p. 114) meant participating in the promenade, with all its social implications: meeting friends, interacting with people, performing erotic acts, looking and being looked at. In his research on walking in Roman culture, Timothy M. O'Sullivan (2011, p. 8) attributes to the activity the distinctive character of 'performance of identity', a

practice which constantly assumes an audience. Walking in places such as portici and gardens, he points out, was anything but a lone activity, starting from the fact that it was carried out in the company of one or more people—as in the modern and contemporary promenade.

It is from this classical urban context that two fundamental types of promenade seem to emerge.

The first is an everyday urban activity carried out during the day or in the evening, as a manifestation of the concept of *otium*. It is the promenade that Renaissance Italian citizens would perform in the squares, under the arcades flanking them, or along the *corso*. Its contemporary counterpart is found in the town and city promenades carried out on Sunday morning, Sunday afternoon/evening, and Saturday afternoon.

The second is hot season specific and thus usually performed after sunset. It is traditionally justified and characterised by the pleasure of ‘taking the air’—the *frigus* (fresh air) which for the Roman poet Virgil (1971, p. 76) was to be best found near rivers or holy springs and, for Aretino, whilst walking in fresh and airy places (Montemerlo 1594, p. 533).

Italian Renaissance admiration of the classical Roman world and the reinvention of its customs played a key role in the persistence of these two fundamental types of promenade and the manner in which they entered modernity. The historical development of these two models—to be identified hereafter as the *corso* and the *alfresco*—was far from linear, and implied cultural shifts and mutual exchange of practices and meanings.

## The “Corso” Promenade

This type of promenade inscribes itself within an urban space historically characterised by its performative and staging qualities. This space is usually a stretch of road in a central position, about 1–1.5 km long, as straight as possible, and wide enough to accommodate performance and audience. In the ancient Roman cities, this stretch usually coincided with the *cardus maximus* or the *decumanus maximus*, and since then it has become the public thoroughfare along which centralised powers have staged triumphs and coronations, religious processions, festivals, and races (Mumford 1966; Carlson 1989). In fact, in their revival and

reinvention of Roman tradition, medieval and Renaissance monarchs and popes introduced the *corsa del palio* horse race in several Italian cities to celebrate key feast days, and it is from these events that the corso takes its name. At the same time, the social importance acquired by the corso made it an attractive residential environment for the nobility and gentry, whose palaces began to enrich its scenography while strengthening its role in urban representation.

Thus, in addition to political events such as royal entries, the corso became the stage for festivals and carnival parades, and, from the 16th century, *corsi delle carrozze* and pedestrian promenades.

The favourite promenade street of Romans today, Via del Corso, offers an outstanding example of such a historical process. Known partly as Via Flaminia and partly as Via Lata in Ancient Rome, the street played, de facto, the key urban function of *cardo maximus*, the north-south axis, and its course has never since been changed. It linked the northern gate of the city and the nearby Campus Martius with the Capitoline Hill and the heart of the city's social life, the Forum, boasting major religious monuments like the Ara Pacis and, in great probability, portico complexes. It had five triumphal arches (Gigli 1999, p. 9), which provide evidence of the functions of displaying and parading bestowed on it by the political and military authorities from the very beginning. The changes to the urban landscape that Rome experienced in the Renaissance strengthened the importance of the street, along which the 15th-century aristocracy and high clergy began to build their fashionable *palazzi*. Among them was Pope Paul II, who relocated the carnival celebrations there in 1466. These included games and the horse races known as *corse dei barberi*, after which the street became known as Via del Corso (Moriconi 1997, p. 169). It is in this period that the street acquired its socialite character, while maintaining its functions as a route for religious processions and, above all, parades—for instance, for the entry of Borso d'Este in 1471 to receive the title of Duke of Ferrara from Pope Paul II; the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in 1536 to meet Pope Paul III; and Queen Christina of Sweden on 20th December 1655 after her conversion to the Catholic Church. During his stay in Rome in 1580–81, the French writer and philosopher Michel de Montaigne (1775, p. 41) noted that promenading was the most common activity among Romans and that there were



streets specifically chosen for this purpose, probably in reference to Via del Corso. By 1594, Rome already had 883 coaches (Massimo 1836, p. 262), and, as these gained increasing popularity in the following decades, the promenade down Via del Corso by coach—the *corso delle carrozze*—became a tradition that lasted until the early 20th century.

The *corso delle carrozze* and its concurrent pedestrian promenade thrived in the main Italian cities from the late 16th to early 17th century onwards by mostly relying on the same configuration of key elements, namely: a relatively long, straight, and wide central street; its upper-class residential character; in many cases, proximity to the cathedral; and display and parade functions historically taken on during political and religious events or key periodic festivals such as the carnival.

In 17th-century Milan, the *corso delle carrozze* was first introduced during the carnival celebration on the Corso di Porta Romana (1714, p. 55), which the Spanish governor of the city, Duke Juan Fernández de Velasco, had straightened and enlarged around 1598. The street had played the key role of *decumanus maximus* in Roman times, when it linked the city's forum to the main imperial gate opening onto the road to the capital. The noble and magnificent palaces it had acquired during the Renaissance enhanced the parading character of the street, which was part of the route of the 'magnificent' and 'solemn'<sup>1</sup> Corpus Domini procession established in 1336 (Campiglio 1831, pp. 189-90). From the 17th century, it functioned as the city's 'fashionable promenade'—as the French writer Stendhal (1980, p. 89) described it—until the Corso di Porta Orientale replaced it in the late 18th century.

In Florence, the *corso delle carrozze* took place for centuries along the route of the horse race traditionally run at least since the late 14th century on the feast day of the patron saint, John the Baptist (24th June). The route stretched from Porta al Prato to Porta alla Croce, along the former Roman *decumanus maximus*, i.e. the present-day Via degli Strozzi, Via degli Speziali, and Via del Corso (Guasti 1908, p. 106; *Notizie e guida di Firenze* 1841, p. 275). Initially associated with Carnival, the *corso delle carrozze* soon became a common winter parade between the palazzi of the wealthy families on Via del Corso and Borgo degli Albizi, though the route changed slightly throughout the centuries.

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1 All translations from Italian and French are by the author, unless otherwise noted.

Pavia in the 18th century had its *corso delle carrozze* in the Strada Nuova (Boccolari 1782, p. 66), which, in spite of the name acquired after its 14th-century reconstruction and straightening, was the ancient *cardus maximus* of the city. The street flanks the historical, religious and political centres of the city: the cathedral and the Broletto Communal Palace. In the early 19th century, the British traveller Lady Morgan (1821, p. 199) was still able to point how ‘in the evening, the Strada Nuova is the Corso, not only for the few old carriages with the few old nobles who occupy them, but the lounge of all the young students of the university’ and ‘the pedestrians of all classes and ages’.

Palermo’s winter promenade took place along Via Vittorio Emanuele, known as the Cassaro, which was the main urban axis of the Phoenician and later Arabic city, and functioned as the *cardus maximus* after the Roman conquest in 254 BC. In the 16th—18th centuries, the Cassaro’s magnificent palaces and the cathedral were the backdrop for corteges of nobles, religious processions, and Carnival celebrations that included horse races and the unique Palio di Santa Maria Maddalena, popularly known as the *Corsa delle Bagasce*: a foot race run by prostitutes (*bagasce*) (Scandaliato 1999, p. 18). The French diplomat and writer Dominique Vivant (1993) referred in 1778 to the bustle of carriages during the nobles’ promenade along the street in the early afternoon, and socialites maintained this habit throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. In present-day Palermo, the summer *struscio* has shifted to Via Maqueda, the straight street opened at the end of 16th century to cross the city from east to west along which the key historical palaces and the Teatro Massimo are found.

In other cases, the coach and pedestrian promenades developed from streets created in the 16th and 17th centuries. In Torino, for instance, the 17th-century Via Po was the broad and straight continuation of the city’s *decumanus maximus* outside the southeastern gate. In the 17th century, it became the route for the *corso delle carrozze* during Carnival, as well as for the usual winter promenade between ‘high edifices with porches of homogeneous design’ (Boccolari 1782, pp. 14-15).

In many Italian cities, the promenade still takes place on a street the display and parading functions of which are centuries and even millennia old.

The Senese promenade, for instance, is in Via Banchi di Sopra, known

in the past as the Corso, through which both the city's horse race and the corso delle carrozze took place. The medieval Palio alla Lunga was run along the north-south urban stretch of the Via Francigena—perhaps the ancient Roman *cardus maximus* of the city—from the northern Porta Camollia to the Duomo, or to the latter from the southern Porta Romana, while the corso delle carrozze was held outside Porta Camollia and between the palazzi of the eminent families on the Corso (*Pubbliche feste di gioja* 1804, p. v).

Parma has its promenade in Via Cavour, which was part of the Roman *cardus maximus* of the city and runs through the main public square—the former forum—flanking the centre of the political power, the 12th-century communal palace. It was the route of the Palio dello Scarlatto, recorded since 1314, and the celebratory thoroughfare leading to the cathedral (Nosari 2002, p. 44; Cirillo, Godi, Marchetti 1989, p. 29).

Via Toledo in Naples offers an excellent example of the overlap that historically occurred between social and religious practices. The Spanish viceroy Pedro Álvarez de Toledo had the street built in 1536 and still a century later a British traveller wrote of it that it 'excels most in Europe for its length and breadth' (Northall 1766, p. 191). As early as the mid-17th century, Via Toledo had such a 'multitude of Coaches that passe to and fro' (Raymond 1648, p. 139) that in 1704 the Spanish viceroy prohibited the circulation of carriages on Holy Thursday and Good Friday (*Letterature moderne* 1951, p. 452), when it was the tradition to visit seven churches along the street for the Adoration of the Holy Sepulchre.

Either the rustling of the silk gowns worn by the noble women or the sound made by the people as they dragged their feet along the paving stones seem to be the origin of the term *struscio*, a name first given to the event in the 18th century and still used in reference to the city promenade in Naples and many other Italian cities. The Marquis de Sade was on Via Toledo during the Holy Week of 1776 and was struck by the sight of the beautiful litters in which the noble women were carried, the valets, the porters, the pages and the richly clothed gentlemen. He remarked that the pomp and magnificence seemed to double in such a time of mortification and atonement (De Sade 1974, p. 281). He also noted that Via Toledo was covered by a layer of earth and sand for the palio horse race which still took place at Carnival and that the nobles

watched from the palaces between the Church of Santo Spirito and the square in front of the Royal Palace (Ibid., p. 280). In the 18th and 19th century, Via Toledo thus provided a key opportunity for the socialites to display their spring fashions in the struscio and to parade during Carnival, thereafter assuming its place as the site of the Saturday and Sunday promenades.

The promenade in Ferrara is still traditionally carried out on Corso Giovecca, the straight and wide street that Ercole I d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, had built in 1491 and that in the 18th century was the venue for the local palio (Greco 1773, p. 292), the Carnival festival, the parade of socialites, and religious processions, all sweeping past the churches and palazzi of the street.

The promenade of Grosseto, Corso Carducci, is part of the city's north-south axis that flanks the cathedral and that, in its southern stretch, is still called Via de Barberi after the horse race once run along it.

Perugia still stages its urban promenade in Corso Vannucci, of which the architect and cultural historian Bernard Rudofsky (1969) included a photograph in his seminal 1964 *Streets for People*, emphasising how every afternoon the corso was hosed down and closed to cars in preparation for the promenade. This wide and straight street was the cardus maximus in Roman times and the heart of the medieval city. The cathedral and several patrician palaces flank the corso, which crosses the main public square, Piazza IV Novembre—the ancient forum, in which stands the 14th-century centre of political power, Palazzo Priuli. An Etruscan triumphal arch, later known as the Arco d'Augusto, still marks the northern gate that once opened onto the corso, through which passed festival corteges, religious processions, triumphal entries—like that of Pope Pio IX in 1857—and promenaders in coaches and on foot.

In Venice, where the historical urban fabric is peculiarly intricate and compact, the absence of a straight and wide street for promenading was obviated in the 16th and 17th centuries by laying straight strips of Istrian stone across what had previously been dirt squares, such as Campo Santo Stefano, Campo San Polo, and Campo Santa Maria Formosa (Molmenti 1928, p. 277). The word *liston*, the traditional Venetian term for a public promenade, probably came from those strips or from the lines of white marble laid in the flags of St Mark's Square

in 1406 to demarcate the Saturday market stalls (Molmenti 1927, p. 49) and that came to function as a reference point for corso-like paths. The promenade was performed up and down the piazza along the east-west axis. Opening up in front of the centres of both political and religious power—the Doge’s Palace and, beside it, the basilica—the public space of St Mark’s Square became the main site for urban displays and parades from medieval times onwards. Ascension Day and Carnival Thursday began to be celebrated here in the 12th century and, before the current 18th-century pavement was laid, the square hosted horse races, jousts and tournaments (Selvatico 1852, p. 1-2).

For centuries, the Piazzetta in front of the Doge’s Palace was the meeting place for nobles to walk together discussing public affairs and setting up political alliances in a morning event traditionally known as the *broglio*, a term that is likely to derive from the word *brolo* (‘garden’ in Venetian) and that has entered the Italian language to refer to intrigue and vote rigging. St Mark’s Square, on the other hand, was the traditional promenading area of the Venetian socialites. At the end of the 16th century, the English traveller Fynes Moryson (1907, pp. 185-6) wrote that ‘there gentlemen and strangers daily meet and walke’ and promenade under the porches of the Procuratie Vecchie ‘in summer’ or ‘in the greatest raine’. In the 17th century, the English naturalist John Ray (1673, p. 198) reported that ‘the principal diversion of the Gentlemen, Citizens, and Strangers is to walk in this Piazza’, while in the following century, the British traveller John Millard, alias Henry Coxe (1818, p. 478), described it as ‘the evening promenade of those who wait for the opening of the theatre’ and remarked on the presence there of the ‘beautiful Lais’s [ladies]’. The liston in St Mark’s Square was performed until the 1970s, when the massive out-migration of citizens and inflow of tourists began to dramatically alter the social fabric of the city, putting an end to one of its more vital rites.

The liston of St Mark’s Square became the model for many cities and towns that were under the rule of the Venetian Republic.

In Padua, the liston crosses the elliptical garden at the centre of the triangular square known as Prato della Valle. The square was built in the 1770s on a vacant area used since antiquity for festivals and shows (Cappelletti 1874, p. 240-1). As late as the 1860s, it was the ‘preferred

promenade' of the Paduans (Fabi 1860, p. 292), whereas the current promenade has shifted to the stretch of street that from Piazza Garibaldi includes Via Roma and Corso Umberto I, which can be considered as an extension of the old liston.

A Belgian traveller who was in Verona in the mid-17th century reported that the nobles had a specific square in which to meet and walk (Schottus 1660, p. 51). In the late 18th century, the city had its liston built on the western side of Piazza Bra (Cantù 1856, p. 265) near the Arena, the Palazzo della Gran Guardia, many noble residences, and Via Mazzini, which is nowadays the city's promenade.

In Belluno, the liston crosses the historic heart of the city, Piazza dei Martiri, flanking the porches of the palaces on the northern side of the square.

Rovigo's liston crosses the present-day Piazza Vittorio Emanuele II, while the liston of Portogruaro stretches from Calle Beccherie to the cathedral, and was vividly described by Ippolito Nievo (1867, p. 270) in the mid-19th century as an up-and-down of lawyers wearing black capes, long rows of notaries, and cloaked, highly respected patricians.

## ***Arcades and Galleries***

In several northern Italian cities, the promenade, especially in winter, traditionally takes place under the shelter of an arcade that usually flanks a main road, like, for example, the Via Emilia in Modena and Reggio Emilia or Via Roma in Padua, or a square, as is the case of St Mark's Square in Venice. Thus, the dynamics of the corso promenade are replicated by the choice of a covered stretch of pavement on which to stroll up and down. This is the case in Brescia, for instance, where in the 19th century this evening activity was described as 'really enchanting' and involved two lines of people who 'come and go, alternating and pursuing each others like sea waves' (Menis 1837, p. 36).

A more architecturally imposing alternative to the covered street is the gallery, epitomised in Italy by the Galleria de Cristoforis (no longer extant) and the majestic Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, built in Milan in 1832 and in the mid-1860s respectively. Following an architectural trend

that had emerged in European cities, both galleries hosted fashionable cafés, restaurants and shops, thus providing the upper classes with a fashionable covered space for promenading, meeting and shopping, a role that the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II—dubbed Milan’s drawing room—still fulfils to this day. Rudofsky considered it the only modern covered street comparable in scale to the ancient Roman porticos and wrote in the early 1960s that in the ‘evenings, when the place was bathed, as the newspapers put it, in an ocean of gaslight; when row upon row of marble tables appeared on the tessellated pavement, and the sound of orchestra music merged with the drone of people’s voices, the galleria achieved a near-apotheosis of the Italian street: a theater where actors and spectators merged and became indistinguishable from each other’ (Rudofsky 1969, p. 94).

Several later Italian galleries had similar characteristics and functions, including the two Neapolitan galleries of Principe and Umberto I dating respectively to 1876–83 and the late 1880s; the Galleria Giuseppe Mazzini built in Genoa in the mid-1870s; and Turin’s Galleria Subalpina and Galleria San Federico, the former inaugurated in 1874, the latter built in the early 1930s.

For its design, pedestrian character, multifunctional features, and separation between people and goods, the Milanese gallery is considered the archetype of the downtown shopping centres that have become popular in North America and Europe since the first decade of the 20th century (Gentili 1997). The earliest examples of European galleries, such as the Galleria de Cristoforis, the Galeries St Hubert in Brussels (1846–47) and the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II certainly anticipated the promenading ground function that would later be taken on by shopping centres after their appearance in Italy at the end of the 1970s. The French sociologist Samuel Bordreuil (2000) has emphasised how there is no sociological difference between promenading and meeting each other in the aisle of a shopping centre or in any other crowded urban place. Recent research on youth recreational sites and activities in Pescara has highlighted the increasing preference given by young people to shopping centres over open-air collective urban spaces for the traditional Saturday promenade (Ulisse 2012, p. 49).

## The “Al Fresco” Promenade

### *Riversides and Seafronts*

There exists a certain consensus in the scarce historical literature on the subject to attribute the introduction of the 17th-century Parisian promenade known as the *cours* to Marie de' Medici, daughter of the Grand Duke of Tuscany Francesco I de' Medici and wife of King Henry IV of France. Around 1616, she had what would later become known as the Cours la Reine built along the Seine, just west of the Tuileries Garden. The promenade, which consisted of an alley the length of one Roman *stadium* between four rows of trees, soon became one of the most beautiful and frequented Parisian promenades, which already boasted six to seven hundred coaches in the 17th century (M. B. 1685, p. 71). However, we know from the Venetian Lippomano that a promenade already existed in Paris at the end of the 16th century and was performed under the arcade of the Palais de Justice by a 'foule de cavaliers et de dames, le roi et la Cour même' (Poëte 1913, p. 29). Later on, when the Cours la Reine had been established, the promenade was carried out by coach in Faubourg Saint-Antoine and Rue Saint-Antoine towards the Bastille and beyond, towards the Bois de Boulogne. This remained for decades the most popular promenade in Paris and counted the very same Queen Marie de' Medici amongst its participants (Auvray 1631).

The Cours that is credited to Marie de' Medici was, instead, a promenade intended for taking the air and was modelled on the Florentine garden currently known as the Cascine. The similarity between the layout of this promenade and that of the Parisian Cours la Reine is also true in terms of their summer character. Moryson (1907, p. 313) visited the park in 1594 and described it as follows: 'And towards the East [of the city of Florence] there be three other like bridges. Neere the first bridge is another gate of the City, leading towards the sea, and neere the same, is the most sweete walke that ever I beheld. It hath in bredth some five rowes of trees, on each side, and a like distance of greene grasse betweene those trees, but it reacheth in length many miles; and out of the River Arno are drawne two ditches, which runne all the length of it, one upon each side: so as the



Citizens in summer time, use to take boat in Arno, at their doores, with a basket of victuals; and so many Families of them, passing by the ditches on both sides the walke, sit downe a good distance the one from the other, and there sup and converse with great pleasure’.

The Cascine remained a distinguished and frequented summer promenade throughout the following centuries. The American painter Rembrandt Peale (1831, p. 231) visited it in July 1829 and wrote: ‘The fashionable place of resort, especially for the equipages of the Florentine and English nobility, is on the grounds laid out for a promenade, both for walking and riding, at the lower end of the city, commencing outside the gate, and extending a great distance down the river; with all the delightful embellishments of groves, avenues, shrubbery, terraces, lawns, hedges, roads, paths, fountains, and seats. In the midst of these is a neat building for the grand duke, when he chooses to spend any time here. It is called the *cascina*, or cow-farm, and really produces, for the royal benefit, the finest milk and butter in the Florentine market. I have met the sovereign Duke in his usual plain suit of black as a private gentleman, and the Duchess as a plain gentlewoman, walking in these grounds, without any guards or attendants, except three servants in livery, who followed at a distance’.

The al fresco promenade and its relationship with water have a long-established tradition in Italy. With a similar layout to that of the Cascine, the Parco del Valentino in Turin has been a popular summer promenade for more than three centuries, with tree-lined alleys running along the left bank of the River Po. It once enjoyed such a landmark status that, during his visit to Turin in mid-June 1769, the Austrian emperor Joseph II joined the King of Sardinia, Charles Emmanuel III, in promenading in coach at the park almost every evening of his stay around six o’clock (*Relazione del soggiorno* 1890, pp. 416-25).

“Taking the fresco” assumed a very peculiar aquatic meaning in the case of Venice, where the local dialect term *fresco* designated the assembly of many gondolas and small boats rowed up and down the Grand Canal (Boerio 1856, p. 288). On an ‘exceedingly hot’ evening of June 1645, the English writer John Evelyn (1908, p. 118) noted in his diary that ‘the canal where the noblesse go to take the air, as in our Hyde Park, was full of ladies and gentlemen’ and, a few decades later, the secretary of

the French ambassador in Venice, Alexandre Toussaint Limojon de Saint Didier (1891, pp. 261-2), described the impressive sight of three to four hundred gondolas travelling back and forth on a stretch of the Grand Canal near the Church of San Geremia and praised the gondoliers for their rowing skill. Over a century later, while visiting Venice in June 1756, the French writer and poet Madame Du Bocage (1764, p. 162) was told absolutely not to miss an evening tour on the Grand Canal as, in the summer heat, it would have been a very pleasant promenade. Such a practice was also performed on Ascension Day, Corpus Christi Day, the Festa del Redentore—on which it still enjoys considerable popularity—and other religious and lay events. In addition to the Grand Canal, the fresco took place on the Murano Canal, the Giudecca Canal, on the canal in front of the Church of San Pietro di Castello, in the Rio della Sensa, alongside the beach that existed in Santa Marta, and, above all, in the canal in front of the Church of the Corpus Domini, which is no longer extant and stood just south-west of the present-day railway station (Renier Michiel 1829, p. 148; Crivellari Bizio 2007). In many of these cases, the *al fresco* promenades used the same water routes traditionally taken by the boat races, thus following a historical pattern analogous to those of the urban corso promenades and horse races.

In some exceptional and amazing cases, the association between water and summer promenade was created artificially. This occurred in 19th-century Siena, where the Piazza del Campo was flooded with the water of the Fonte Gaia to allow a double promenade: in small boats at the centre of the square, and by coach around the outsides (De Brosse 1858a, pp. 330-1). In 17th-century Rome, fountains and water games were introduced in Piazza Navona, which was sometimes also partly enclosed and water-filled for the pleasure of the promenaders who visited it on foot and by coach in the summer heat (Rek 1997). Madame du Bocage (1764, p. 238) described this astonishing event in a letter written on 5th August 1757: ‘I wonder if it is in imitation of the ancients that we now turn the Circus Agonalis called Place Navonne into a *naumachia*: but every Sunday of this month, the three fountains overflowing into this long and hollow square in one hour turn it into a lake that does not quite reach the houses: the space which remains to be filled is as large as four or five rows of people’.

The square, built on the site of the Latin stadium Campus Agonis, maintained a “refreshing” function into the 19th century, when, having abandoned the water games, it continued to attract promenaders with its Fountain of the Moor and Bernini’s Fountain of the Four Rivers.

Italian coastal cities usually held their summer promenades along the seafront. The Passeggiata della Marina in Palermo was established in the late 18th century and ran between Porta San Felice and the botanical garden dubbed ‘La Flora’. The promenade was a key high-society summer event, which Vivant Denon (1993, p. 70) described in 1778 as a ‘charming promenade along the seafront, a rendezvous for the whole of Palermo, in which one can walk in the shade and in the fresh air after six o’clock. No one goes to sleep without taking a stroll on the Marina’. On 4th November 1824, Trieste inaugurated the coastal promenade of San Andrea between the city centre and the nearby Servola (Comandini 1900-1, p. 1278). In the 18th century, Genoa held its summer promenade along the high stone wall that bounded the harbour (Stolberg 1796-7, p. 221), while in the following century Coxe (1818, p. 97) wrote that: ‘The grand summer promenade for those who keep carriages, takes place every evening, beginning at the new Mole and ending at Acquasola’. The promenade near the harbour of Ancona was described as ‘pleasant’ as early as 1594 (Moryson 1907, 212), and in the 19th century Coxe (1818, p. 166) also noted that: ‘The inhabitants of Ancona are fond of the promenade, and are generally seen in groupes, in the evening, on the Mole’. Also in 18th- and 19th-century Naples, the Molo Grande (Great Pier) was a fashionable summer promenade for city dwellers and Grand Tour travellers, who had the opportunity to enjoy not only the fresh air, but also its lively atmosphere. The French writer Alexandre Dumas (1851, p. 31), who was there in 1835, compared it to the Parisian Boulevard du Temple (at a time when this was the street of theatres and café-concerts) and described the Molo as the best place to meet *polichinelles* and encounter spontaneous theatrical plays. From the late 18th century, Naples also had the Chiaia promenade, which combined the pleasures of the gardens of the Villa Reale and the seaside. With its five tree-lined alleys—two of them under the shade of trellised vines—, a large circular fountain, and statues, it was described as joyfully crowded and floodlit for two summer months a year, an hour after nightfall (Galanti 1792, p. 43).

Between the garden and the row of houses of the Chiaia neighbourhood, there was ‘a very spacious pavement for carriages, where six at least can drive abreast of each other’, which in the early 19th century hosted ‘the most fashionable promenade for carriages, where many hundreds may frequently be seen’ (Coxe 1818, 351).

## Gardens

Since classical times, urban gardens have offered promenaders a summer rendezvous, especially in landlocked cities. The Roman Villa Borghese gardens were already a key urban promenade in the 17th century (Ray 1673, p. 366) and became even more popular either by coach or on foot after their early-19th-century redesign (Baedeker 1869, pp. 111). They lie in the vicinity of the 1st-century-BC Horti Luculliani, a private garden among the earliest and the most beautiful in the city. On the former site of the *horti* of the 1st-century-BC historian Sallust lay the 17th-century Villa Ludovisi garden, which, with its numerous alleys and small orchards was described around 1740 as the most popular Roman promenade (De Brosses 1858b, p. 74). The classical Roman tradition of garden promenading underwent a first key revival during the Renaissance and then again during the 18th and 19th centuries. Renaissance pleasure gardens maintained the promenade’s social and cultural character and, as the garden historian Elizabeth Hyde (2013, p. 114) has recently emphasised: ‘A stroll in the garden was rarely a simple stroll in the garden. A promenade offered the possibility that one might interact with or be seen by other courtiers’.

The garden plays a key role in the work of Boccaccio (2013) as a place to gather, walk and narrate. The *Decameron* describes, for example, a beautiful garden on the hills around Florence that had wide, straight alleys along which one could walk even under the summer sun, as they were shadowed by grapevines and bushes of jasmine and white roses; or the garden near the church of San Gallo, to the west of Florence—where the lovers Pasquino and Simona meet on the first Sunday of the month—at a time when it drew greater crowds for the promenade than to receive the indulgence (Ibid.; Piras 2013, p. 106). Renaissance Florence

also boasted the Boboli Gardens, behind Palazzo Pitti, in which Queen Joanna of Austria, a character from a 16th century book by Girolamo Borro, promenades with her dames to take the air (Borro Aretino 1583, p. 220) and which Marie de' Medici desired to recreate in Paris, eventually inspiring the Luxembourg Garden.

Gardens for summer promenades were common at the time in many other Italian towns. The Paduan garden of the 17th-century noble knight Bonifacio Papafava, for instance, had 'Infinite numbers of Cittron and Orange Trees, which forme lovely walks to the Passengers, for beautifying whereof, of those Trees are framed Arches and Prospects to delight the eye; to whose confines is conjoynd a full stream of water brought from the main River by a curious Aqueduct [...]. Hither flock for their Pastime the Ladies and Gallants of Padova, [...] where (in the hottest Weather) the shade of the Trees, the Ampleness of the Walks, the pleasantness of the Waters, and the beauty of the site add (to their joys and delights) a fresh Ayr' (Schottus 1660, p. 28). In the same century, Vicenza had the Campo Martio, created in imitation of the Roman garden and where: 'The Ladies and Gallants resort in the summer Evenings to participate the fresh Ayr, which the surrounding Hills afford. The Arch or entrance into this field will remain as a lasting monument of Palladius who built it' (Ibid., p. 44). Ferrara had the beautiful garden now known as the Montagnola or Montagnone—from a hillock that might date to the 16th century—laid out near Palazzo Belfiore by the ruler of the city, Alberto V d'Este, in 1391 (Avventi 1838, p. 235), which has remained, despite several re-imaginings, one of the favourite local promenades ever since. Another famous Montagnola is the public garden built in Bologna in 1662 (Vianelli 1979, p. 152) on the site where the Castle of Galliera had stood at the beginning of the previous century. By the early 18th century, it was already the most celebrated promenade of the city, especially in summer, when 'coaches [ran] back and forth until the dead of the night: & then all coaches stop where they are, to allow taking the air' (Frescot 1711, p. 615).

In 19th-century Genoa, the endpoint of the urban promenade became the newly created gardens of Acquasola, which Charles Dickens (2005, p. 80) visited on a midsummer Sunday of 1844, observing how: 'The Genoese nobility ride round, and round, and round, in state-clothes and coaches at

least, if not in absolute wisdom'. A similar scene could be observed near the Castle of Udine in the elliptical garden which, according to a legend narrated by Boccaccio (2013), was magically created one night in the 14th century by turning an existing lake into 'one of the goodliest gardens ever seen of any, with grass and trees and fruits of every kind'. Promenaders of the 19th century particularly enjoyed its charms in summer, circling it by coach or strolling through the centre (Di Maniago 1839, pp. 66-7; Grande illustrazione 1861, p. 413).

The aforementioned Villa Reale in Naples, also known as Villa Comunale, became the model for the public gardens that in the 19th and first half of the 20th century were laid out in almost all major towns and cities in the south of Italy and named in its honour. Specifically designed for promenades and meetings, the Villa Reale became a landmark of town planning and reflected the Enlightenment idea of green space as a healthy social environment, no longer for the exclusive use of the upper classes. In Calabria, it marked the urbanist model that guided the post-1783 earthquake reconstruction of cities and towns such as Reggio, Mileto, Bagnara, Bianco, Palmi and many others (Valensise 2003); in Puglia, the villa comunale was a feature of 19th-century urban development; and in Sicily, it also benefitted from another seminal model, i.e. the late-18th-century establishment of the La Flora public gardens in Palermo.

## ***Bastions and Avenues***

Between the mid-18th century and the early decades of the 19th century, relative peace and prosperity—together with Enlightenment concerns for the well-being of the populace and Napoleon Bonaparte's ambition to establish himself as the 'legitimate heir of Augustus and Imperial Rome' (Dümpelmann 2016, pp. 3-4)—enhanced modernising developments in several Italian as well as European cities. Urban interventions in public spaces—such as the opening of new avenues or the widening of existing ones, the creation of new squares and green areas, and the demolition of city walls—created a climate conducive to the diffusion and intensification of promenading. Under Habsburg rule in the second half of the 18th century, the walls of Milan lost their defensive function and were turned

by the architect Piermarini into a 'long and beautiful promenade', shaded by a double row of horse chestnuts (*Manuel du Voyageur* 1818, p. 190). As a result, the city's promenade shifted from the Corso di Porta Romana to the stretch of avenue linking Porta Nuova with Porta Orientale (currently Porta Venezia).

The 19th-century conversion of city walls into promenading sites occurred in several other Italian cities, especially in the north and centre. Thus Brescia created a promenade on the walls between Porta San Nazaro and Porta Sant'Alessandro, and between the latter and Porta Torre Lunga (Menis 1837), and as early as 1645 the long walls of Lucca had 'noble and pleasant walks of trees [...], where the gentry and ladies used to take the air' (Evelyn 1906, p. 270), and were so wide that in the 1770s 'the Nobility promenades there by coach' in summer (Nave, Tironi 1775, p. 138). A similar green reconversion can still be enjoyed in Parma, on the pentagonal rampart of the 16th-century citadel; in Treviso, on the northern side of the city centre; and in Piacenza, where extant stretches of wall are still surmounted by a garden called the Facsal, after Vauxhall Gardens in London.

The demolition of the urban walls that affected many other Italian cities during the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century led to the disappearance of this type of raised-garden promenade, as was the case with the tree-lined walls of Modena and Cremona (Reichard 1819, p. 50; Fabi 1860, p. 292) and the ramparts of the citadel in Turin, where the great and good gathered at dusk after the corso at the Parco del Valentino (Savio, Ricci 1911, p. 12).

The laying out of avenues was a general feature of the urban development of Italian cities in the 18th and 19th centuries, turning existing or newly created streets into popular summer promenades. In 17th-to-early-19th-century Milan, promenaders used to *asolare* ('take the air') during the hot months along Via Marina, an unpaved avenue that underwent a thorough redevelopment in the 1780s when, to the east of the garden of the late-18th-century Villa Reale, two monasteries were suppressed during Austrian rule and their terrain turned into the city's public garden by the architect Piermarini (*Milano e il suo territorio* 1844, p. 351). Thus, by spring 1787, the street was lined by two series of five rows of trees—lindens, elms, and horse chestnuts—and flanked by white hawthorn

hedges (Zanetti 1869, p. 22). With this new green aspect, called *boschetti* (little woods), Via Marina continued to be the corso for the bourgeoisie on foot and the nobility in carriages, as it had been in the previous century. According to Misson (1702, p. 25), who was in Milan at the end of the 17th century, the street received its name from the daily practice of washing it down to aid the passage of the noble carriages participating in the corso. A more poetic explanation cited the comparison of the street to a tree-shaded shoreline with a sea of hundreds of beautiful ladies waving from their carriages (Torre 1714, p. 258). The street—actually named after a neighbourhood family—functioned as a corso until the first decades of the 19th century, when servants were still in the habit of watering the street’s surface for their employers’ carriages (*Galignani’s Traveller’s Guide*, 1824, p. 118).

A further two key 19th-century Milanese promenades took place along wide avenues: Corso Loreto (currently Corso Buenos Aires), which was in the middle of two other streets lined with poplar trees, and ‘very frequented by the common folk’ (*Milano nuovamente descritta* 1826, p. 432); and a stretch of Corso di Porta Romana outside the gate, ‘a beautiful avenue thickly planted with trees, and more than one mile in length without the gate’ that ‘serves, on Sundays, as a promenade for the “folks” living in that quarter of the town’ (Mazzoni 1836, p. 61). Another early example of the avenue promenade was the Stradone del Castello (currently Stradone Martiri della Libertà) built in Parma by the French architect Petitot in 1767 and consisting of a wide street flanked on either side by a water canal, lined by two rows of trees, and divided into three lanes, the central of which was reserved for the coach promenade and the other two for pedestrian use (Donati 1824).

Whether in the city centre or by the seaside, the tree-lined avenue with wide sidewalks featured as a landmark in the planning of Italian colonial cities in the first three decades of the 20th century. A key axis along which to erect the important public and religious buildings, it was specially conceived as the promenade ground of a city and a meeting place to centre the social lives of the colonisers and assimilated natives, in imitation of the customs of the colonial power.

One of the most beautiful examples is found amongst the palm trees and cafés of Asmara’s Harnet Avenue (the former Viale Mussolini),



which staged the imported tradition of the evening promenade until the war with Ethiopia in the 1990s and the economic crisis that followed. In the colonial cities of Eritrea, Ethiopia, Libya, Somalia, Albania, and Greece, the promenade thus became such a fundamental node in social and urban colonial life that even today, as Mia Fuller (2007, p. 219) has emphasised, those sidewalks and trees affirm the legacy of Italian rule more emphatically than the buildings themselves.



## Part Two

# Rhythms and Times

As a social rendezvous, the promenade is subject to a relatively precise timetable with which the public are well acquainted. The schedule has usually followed well-established customs which fixed periods, circumstances and times, although these have changed throughout the centuries. Among them, four types of promenade have been identified and will be dealt with in the following sections.

### Seasonal Promenades

As the two sections on the corso and al fresco promenades have shown, the great historical divide was between what is commonly referred to as the *bella stagione*—i.e. late spring and summer—and the rest of the year. In general, the rhythms and times of the promenade spontaneously adapted themselves to the seasonal changes of weather, although in some cases more precise rules were traditionally set. The season for the fresco gondola promenade in 17th-century Venice, for instance, began on Easter Monday and lasted until the feast day of St Jerome on 30th September (Saint-Didier 1891, p. 260). Palermo opened its summer promenade at

the marina on 24th June and closed in September every year, until its abandonment in the mid-20th century.

In present-day Italy, the beginning and end of the summer promenade are often dictated by the multitude of city and town administrations that every year turn specific stretches of midtown streets or waterfronts into evening pedestrian areas. Since 1997, for instance, the municipality of Rimini has usually reserved Viale Vespucci and Via Ortigara for promenaders from 1st June to 31st August, between 7.30pm and 11.30pm. The regulations of this sort that affect hundreds of Italian cities and towns every summer are the administrative response to the most manifest appropriation and reclamation of public space that the local community undertakes by means of the promenade.

Apart from the environmental context which characterises the summer and winter promenades, it is their time frames that have established their different natures. Sunset has always been the traditional watershed that the winter promenade roughly preceded and the summer promenade followed. As we will see in the section on the Sunday promenade in particular, the pre-dusk evening in the 18th to 20th centuries was the most common time for the autumn-winter promenade, which also took place before lunchtime.

On the contrary, the summer promenade invariably took place at night, when the pleasures of 'taking the air' could be enjoyed at length. The 1819 *Guide des voyageurs en Italie et en Suisse* described Roman townspeople waiting at home before joining the summer promenade on the Via del Corso in the first hour after nightfall, when the street became crowded until midnight (Reichard 1819, p. 111).

Yet the promenade did not end then for everybody. In her letter of 20th July 1757, Madame du Bocage (1764, pp. 224-5) vividly describes the nocturnal gatherings of magnificent coaches and richly dressed ladies outside Porta del Popolo, the musical performances on the streets by lantern light, and the generally joyful atmosphere in which the revellers, dressed in white, promenaded 'like gay shadows' into the small hours. In 18th-century Naples, the summer promenade at Villa Reale began one hour after sunset, while in 19th-century Palermo it took place between 9pm and 11pm.

## Festival Promenades

In past centuries, the promenade was frequently associated with festivals and celebrations. Among them, Carnival had always played a major role in establishing and ritualising forms of parade since classical Greek and Roman times. It was during the Renaissance, however, that the promenade, either by coach or on foot, became the social complement to horse races and other popular games staged during Carnival.

In many cases, masked promenades reiterated and strengthened the use of stretches of urban streets already designated for parading and scenographic functions. In Florence, the *corso delle carrozze* was introduced as a key Carnival event in the 16th century, initially following the Via dell'Acqua-Via Fiesolana route (Fantozzi 1843, p. 165). In mid-16th-century Ferrara, the masked participants in the local Carnival promenaded up and down the *Corso Giovecca* in coaches, on horseback and on foot (Solerti 1900, p. 156). Venice, which boasts one of longest Carnival traditions in Italy, relocated the traditional festival promenade from Campo Santo Stefano to St Mark's Square in the early 18th century, with the masked participants joining the *liston* every evening from early January, with particular pomp on holidays. The event reached its peak in the last weeks of Carnival, when the noble knights and ladies joined the promenade (Cronaca Veneta 1751, p. 351).

Mask-wearing and masked promenades were not limited to the present-day Carnival weeks, but lasted for about five months a year, also encompassing a period between October and December and special festivals and celebrations, including St Mark's Day and Ascension Day. It is in reference to the eve of the latter that the Venetian playwright Carlo Goldoni writes of masked promenaders strolling up and down in the *liston* (1760, p. 3). In the 17th and 18th centuries, however, it was the Roman Carnival and its masked promenade along the *Via del Corso* that excelled in splendour and popularity, as the description provided by Goethe in 1788 emphasises. With their masked owners and equipages, the carriages moved 'up one side of the street and down the other' in the stretch of the *Corso* between *Piazza del Popolo* and *Palazzo Venezia*, and, the writer highlights, 'it would be a different kind of feast if it took place anywhere else' (Goethe 1982, pp. 454, 446). As early as the 18th century,

the historical relationships between Carnival races, Carnival parades, and the promenades held on a holiday or daily basis were so consolidated as to prompt an attentive observer like Goethe to see the Roman Carnival as a 'continuation, or rather the climax, of the pleasure drives which take place on every Sunday and feast day' (Ibid., pp. 446-7).

## Sunday Promenades

Sunday has traditionally played a special role in the world of the promenade, provided two distinct promenading hours in the morning and in the afternoon of the same day.

### *The Morning Promenade*

The Sunday morning promenade emerged in the 19th century as a secular corollary of the Mass, though far less significant than that of the afternoon. While generally lacking the popularity and wide social range of the latter, the fact it followed on from Mass made it a more 'legitimate' social event that even members of the stricter bourgeois or aristocratic families could indulge in. And not only the nobility: in Genoa, from the Renaissance until the early 20th century, the Sunday morning promenade was a social right reportedly open to prostitutes, who were allowed to leave the neighbourhood in which they were confined to attend Mass (see De André 1984). Two 19th-century foreign travellers were struck by the peculiarity of the Sunday morning promenade in a provincial city—in both cases, curiously, Ancona. In his *Picture of Italy*, Henry Coxe (1818, p. 166), wrote that in spite of the fact that the inhabitants of Ancona were 'fond' of the evening promenade on the Mole, Sunday morning was 'the best time for observing the beaux and belles of Ancona'. Gretton (1860, p. 27), author of *The Englishwoman in Italy*, highlighted the pomp of the event: 'On Sundays and festas there was of course the Mass in the morning, which furnished to the women a great opportunity for dress and display, particularly at one of the churches, where the best music was to be heard and the fashionables usually congregated'.

Usually taking place between the ten o'clock Mass and lunchtime, the Sunday morning promenade was—and still is—a popular phenomenon all over the country. In early 19th-century Modena, the French traveller Millin reported the participation of women of all social classes in the noon promenade along the 'Grande-Rue (Via Emilia) up to Porta Bologna, while in Milan (1817a, p. 188) he noticed how the promenade began after Mass along the Corso di Porta Orientale. In Venice, the Sunday morning promenade took place in St Mark's Square, while the Roman Via Veneto, renamed Via Vittorio Veneto after the 1918 Italian victory, emerged in the 1920s as one of the city's most fashionable morning promenades, after Mass from 11am to 1pm (Di Pierro 2012, p. 149). Baroness Olimpia Savio recalled in her memoirs how in 19th-century Turin 'the city's best' used to walk together after the Sunday noon Mass under the arches of Via Po, on the side of Caffè Fiorio (Savio, Ricci 1911, p. 11). In 19th-century Naples there was the stroll up and down Via Toledo (1879a, p. 224), while the Riviera di Chiaia was another popular Sunday promenade not only in the afternoon, but also in the morning. The tradition lives on, to the extent that the reporter Agnese Palumbo (2008) has included the morning promenade at Villa Reale in her 2008 book on the 101 things to do in Naples at least once in a lifetime. What struck the British writer Tom Hodgkinson (2005) about the Italian tradition of the Sunday morning (and afternoon) promenade was the 'slow pace' at which entire families strolled at ease while talking of food, wine, family, and philosophy. The Italian anthropologist Del Negro (2004) recently found how family character and increased sociability sets apart the promenade which traditionally follows Sunday Mass in the small Abruzzan town of Sasso from that of weekday evenings, typically attended by small groups of friends.

### ***The Afternoon Promenade***

For centuries, in Italian cities and towns, the Sunday afternoon promenade was the busiest and most popular of the week. It was the hour at which the pomp and grandeur of the event reached its climax, often emphasised by the presence of royals and nobility. As early as the 1st March 1579,

the new Duchess of Ferrara, Margherita Gonzaga, recently married to Alfonso II d'Este, took part in the Sunday afternoon promenade on Corso Giovecca (Solerti 1900, p. xlviij). More recent examples include Francis I, Emperor of Austria and King of Lombardy-Venetia, who joined the Porta Orientale promenade with a large cortege on 27th January 1816 and participated in the promenade through the public gardens in Venice between 3pm and 5pm on 12th November 1815 (Comandini, Monti 1900-1, p. 840). Pauline Bonaparte, who had moved to Rome after her marriage to the Prince Camillo Borghese, aroused the curiosity and admiration of the people when she participated in the Corso promenade on Sunday 11th December 1803, at the reins of a new model of eight-horse coach (Ibid., p. 88).

The anonymous English author of a Grand Tour account from 1821-2 explains how the Sunday coming and going of coaches on the Roman Corso fitted perfectly into a fashionable routine that started with a visit to the 'English Protestant Chapel in the morning: Vespers in La Capella del Coro at St. Peter's at three o'clock [...], then all the world of fashion promenade the spacious, and splendid nave of the church [...] finally the fair *signore*, and their *cavalieri* mount their carriages, and away to the Corso till dinner' (*Mementoes* 1841, p. 410). In the same years, Milan had the northern stretch of its corso, Via Marina, 'most frequented on Sundays about two o'clock; [...] At four o'clock the place is deserted, except by a few handsome women who are on the look for admirers. This walk is chiefly confined to the citizens; the favourites of fortune sport their equipages at this hour in the Corso street' (*Galignani's Travellers Guide* 1824, p. 118).

About a century and a half later, the Italian anthropologist Maraschini (1968, p. 61) similarly found the promenade at the centre of another Sunday routine, though belonging to the completely different social and urban context of the small town of Calimera, in Puglia: 'the piazza comes into its own at sunset. This is the hour of the "passeggiata". It is most striking on holidays and Sundays. Then all the inhabitants of the village, dressed in their best clothes, come out, in family groups, to the piazza, where they walk up and down chatting to friends and acquaintances until it becomes dark'.

Not only was joining strangers in a promenade at the end of the day a



key social event on which the holiday hinged, but it also had the quality of an archaic rite.

In late 19th-century Rome, as Manfredi Porena recalls (1957, p. 66), the phrase ‘I have been on the Corso’ neatly condensed the delights of Sunday for the simple clerk, the student and the nobleman. On Sundays, Porena continues, the Corso was so crowded that coaches seemed to float on waves of hats (Ibid., p. 66). Another famous Sunday promenade in Rome took place in the Pincio, where, as confirmed by the 1872 Baedeker, the band played two hours before dusk for people of all social classes in coaches and on foot (Baedeker 1872, pp. 108-9). It was common, in 19th century Italian cities, to have such a soundtrack, often performed by a military band, accompanying the Sunday promenade and emphasising its popular and joyous character.

In the last decades of the 19th century, however, the overwhelmingly merry and spirited character of the Sunday promenade handed down to us in accounts began to be questioned and infringed on by art and literary works that, initially linked to the Decadent movement, increasingly stigmatised the melancholy of the event and its decaying bourgeois nature. In the European cultural scene of the time, Edvard Munch’s 1892 painting *Evening on Karl Johan Street* is one of the most visually powerful examples. In the 1960s, with the existentialist and Marxist rejection of the ideology of bourgeois society, the French playwright George Michel turned the Sunday afternoon promenade into another strong manifestation of the mediocrity and hypocrisy of bourgeois life. His play *La Promenade du Dimanche* features a bourgeois family whose members walk together entangled in negative, conformist and gross relationships with each other and the world. In his introduction to Michel’s play, Jean-Paul Sartre (1967, p. 10) stressed the universality of the Sunday promenade, a manifestation of a ‘collective ceremony’ and a representation of human life.

In Italy, Matilde Serao was among the first to look at the Sunday promenade through her veristic approach and to highlight its grotesque aspects. A character from her short story *La Domenica* (‘The Sunday’) describes the Chiaia promenade in Naples, emphasising the presence of coaches overcrowded by children, parents, relatives, and servants; antiquated coaches carrying couples ‘of Noah’s time’; multitudes of pale and astonished teenagers blocking the way; and the ‘phenomenal dresses

and monstrous hats' of the women, drawing the conclusion that on Sunday it was better to leave the corso and go to the countryside instead (Serao 1879a, p. 222). In his 1906 poem *Sera della Domenica* ('Sunday Evening'), the Crepuscular poet Sergio Corazzini (1992, pp. 201-2) portrays poor lovers walking speechless, with their little Sunday happiness buried in their hearts.

In 1922, the Catholic modernist writer Sofia Bisi Albini (1922, p. 43) published an educational novel for young women in which she emphasises the dull boredom that prevented the families promenading pompously in coaches down the Pincian Hill from enjoying the beauty of the gardens and the sunset. It also prevented them from acknowledging the foot promenaders' barbs about their hats, postures, and 'idiotic' facial expressions. The writer finally stresses the vacuity of the 'work' that women carried out during the week to prepare themselves for the the Sunday promenade, and the disappointment that regularly followed. With a tinge of nostalgia, Aldo Palazzeschi (1964, pp. 103-18, p. 108) wrote in the 1920s of the restrained and melancholic smiles that the socialites exchanged from their coaches on Sunday afternoons at the Cascine, during what the author claims to be the most special customary event to be admired in Florence—an event that Florentines attended in great numbers, at the height of their manifest or secret aspiration and human power. Piero, a character from a 1959 novel by the Italian writer and humourist Achille Campanile (1994, p. 1138), avows to his dread of Sunday, which invariably ends, he says, with he and his wife tossed adrift amongst strangers in the afternoon promenade and with feet aching after being dragged over pavements scattered with bits of paper and the debris of the holiday. Finally, we have the example of the Sunday promenade along Corso XXV Aprile in the Sicilian town of Ibla in the mid-1980s, which, according to the journalist Gabriella de Nicola (1983, p. 150), went on and on, following a ritual whose unwritten rules were 'followed unconsciously'.

The long literary wave of social criticism of the promenade eventually cease to break against a phenomenon that saw its high-bourgeois character progressively weakened by the radical changes brought about by the economic boom and the phenomenon of the car. This profoundly affected the social class and age of the promenaders. In a piece from

1969, the journalist Carlo Grenet (1969, p. 3) remarked on the continuity with the past of the six o'clock Sunday afternoon promenade in a Tuscan town, but, on the other hand, stressed how the crowd's composition had dramatically changed in favour of youth. More generally, however, since the last decades of the 20th century, out-of-town travel for leisure or to second homes and the growing allure of non-stop Sunday afternoon TV shows have, among other reasons, increasingly reduced the participation of long-term inhabitants in the Sunday promenades. At the same time, they have begun to attract people from the countryside and migrants of non-Italian origins in many northern Italian towns and cities, entailing new social dynamics and appropriations of space.

## Saturday Promenades

The general fall in participation suffered by the Sunday promenade over the last fifty years has been largely compensated for by the shift of the traditional afternoon promenade to Saturday, a day which tends to be free of family events and, in particular, much more geared towards shopping. The free Saturday was introduced in Italy at the end of the 1950s, though its general adoption by the industrial sector came only in the following two decades. Since then, the Saturday afternoon *vasca* or *struscio* has established itself as a key urban tradition throughout Italy.



# Part Three

## The 'Passing Show'

### Sociology of the Promenade

In spite of its ancient historical roots, the promenade is a living entity, performed according to tradition, but continuously finding its socio-political aspects updated. In her research carried out in Sasso, Del Negro considered the promenade as a 'cultural performance', drawing on the work of the anthropologist Milton Singer. Singer (1972, p. 71) coined this term to approach theoretically events such as 'plays, concerts, and lectures [...] but also prayers, ritual readings and recitations, rites and ceremonies, and festivals', with the purpose of analysing the set of cultural norms and values that these events imply and thus overcoming the distinction between tradition and modernity. More recently, David Guss (2000, p. 12) defined 'cultural performances' as 'sites of social action where identities and relations are continually being reconfigured' in a process that leads to 'rethinking the boundaries of a community' and to the forging of new identities. Such a process implies complex and diverse social dynamics, which involve issues related to fashion and communication, as well as the exchange and comparison of ideas. A key role is played in all this by the public dimension of the promenade,

which functions, in Foucauldian terms, as an apparatus per se. Along streets turned into panopticons (Mitchell 2014, p. 82), promenaders are simultaneously the performers of the social event and its audience. In such a context, even pedestrians, as the Italian writer Aldo Palazzeschi (1964, p. 110) remarked with reference to the first half of the 20th century, were ‘secondary actors, though very primary and indispensable spectators’ of the promenade.

Thus, on the one hand, the promenade can be seen not only as an exercise and display of social power towards classes or communities different to those of the promenaders, but also as a powerful device with which a social group of promenaders enables itself to mutually and visibly ensure that the appearance, behaviours, and social relationships of their members conform to the group’s values and rules. To facilitate and enhance this visual control, a series of arrangements—open air grounds, straight stretches of street, limited route length, reiteration of the route, physical proximity of the promenaders—have historically characterised the promenade since the 16th-17th century, when, in line with the modern scientific spirit of the time, the faculty of sight had become of paramount importance. As Foucault (2005, p. 144) emphasised in his *The Order of Things*, sight acquired the privilege of being ‘the sense by which we perceive extent and establish proof’. This had key methodological implications for the study and understanding of objects, towns, landscapes, and, particularly, human beings. The modern experience of Otherness turned the gaze from collections of domestic objects (*Wunderkammer*) to the *mirabilia* of the cities and the peoples of the world. Both modern ethnography, based on participant observation, and tourism, founded on sightseeing, trace their common origin to the 17th century. James Howell (1642, p. 12), for instance, the author of one of the earliest meta-guidebooks, opens his 1642 *Instructions for Forreine Travell* by claiming ‘the advantage, and preheminance of the Eye’, in which he strongly advocates the supremacy of the ‘Optique observations’ and their power to make the traveller ‘discerne the various works of Art and Nature’, discover new aspects of the foreign country and its people, and acquire an authoritative knowledge of them. Yet tourism, and its industry, was not the only factor in turning everything and everywhere into a centre of ‘spectacle and display’ (Urry 1990, pp. 86, 93). The Renaissance had turned Italian cities into open theatres

and arenas for the staging of feasts, *trionfi*, carnivals, and races. It is in this historical context that the promenade began to thrive as a collective show, whose fruition was maximised by its public nature. Whether along a main urban road, a public garden alley, or the central aisle of a mall, the promenade sets its invisible borders while always remaining free to all and in full sight.

On the other hand, the promenade has the power to establish a complex and diversified network of social relationships and dynamics, which, due to its public dimension, involves people of different class, gender, status, and age. Across the centuries, promenaders have become a spectacle for themselves and for an external public of non-promenaders, whose interaction with them varies according to class and distance. Historical accounts and descriptions provide evidence of the use of windows and balconies for a distant—though privileged—perspective on the promenade. Temporary covered structures were set up in urban palazzi to allow kings, nobles, high clergy and travellers to enjoy the view of the *corsi delle carrozze* in 17th- and 18th-century Rome (Rek 1997, pp. 193, 198) as well as in other major Italian cities. In other cases, as Coxe (1818, p. 287) emphasised in the case of the Roman ‘theatre of exhibition’—the Corso—in the early 19th century, ‘the windows and balconies contain the infirm and the indolent, who in turn display their persons to the utmost of their ability to attract the notice of the crowd below’. The traditional Venetian frescos, or gondola promenades, took place along relatively narrow stretches of canal to allow the people standing and sitting on the banks to better enjoy the show (Renier Michiel 1829, p. 149).

Since at least the 18th century, however, the favoured viewpoint on the promenade has become the café, the street-level position of which facilitates both observation and interaction, in addition to providing refreshments for the promenaders themselves. Since the 18th century, the Caffè Florian and Quadri have been “chairs” the Venetian liston in St Mark’s Square, in which an anonymous 1748 sonnet says that one could enjoy the evening show of a crowd of men and women promenading, standing or sitting to drink a coffee or an iced beverage (Ortolani 1926, p. 64). Also in Venice, but opening a century later, the Caffè della Calcina overlooks the promenade along the Zattere. In the summer of 1778, along the *boschetti* stretch of the Milanese corso of Via Marina, the Venetian Giuseppe

Fossati inaugurated the Vauxhall, a garden-café the great popularity of which was strongly associated with its fashionable promenade (De Castro 1887, p. 297). A manifest imitation of the London pleasure garden of the same name, the Vauxhall featured a fenced and well-lit promenade ground set out amongst pavilions and small gardens, with benches, small cafés and shops selling food, tobacco, and fancy goods (Ibid.). In 1824, the *Gazzetta di Milano* described it as one of the favourite gathering places of the Milanese (Verga 1909, p. 198), while less famous but nevertheless popular open-air ‘houses of refreshment’ flanked the evening promenade of Porta Romana in the 19th century (*Galignani’s Travellers Guide* 1824, p. 118). From the 18th century, the famous Chiaia promenade at Villa Reale had cafés at the entrance (Galanti 1792, p. 43) and, in Parma, a café was hosted in the small 1760s pavilion which still bears the name of its French architect Ennemond Alexandre Petitot at the eastern end of the Stradone promenade (Donati 1824, p. 71). In 18th-century Rome, coach promenaders would gather at a café famous for its ice creams after taking the air outside Porta del Popolo (Du Bocage, 1764, p. 224), while the most renowned viewpoint along the Corso was a 70cm-high step at the foot of Palazzo Ruspoli, the basement of which hosted the Caffè Nuovo. During Carnival, as the Italian statesman Massimo D’Azeglio (1867, p. 143) recalled in the 1860s, female socialites sat on chairs located on the top of the step, thus finding themselves eye-to-eye with the promenaders and in a position to start intimate and discreet conversations. It was the pedestrians walking or standing where the street widened who made up the public of the ‘beautiful show’ that the usual promenades staged along the Corso in 19th-century Rome (Porena 1957, p. 65). In 1867, when Milan inaugurated the famous Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II with its renowned Caffè Biffi and Caffè Campari, Mark Twain (1906, p. 240) visited it and wrote: ‘In Milan we spent most of our time 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—little tables all over these marble streets, people sitting at them, eating, drinking, or smoking—crowds of other people strolling by—such is the Arcade. I should like to live in it all the



time. The windows of the sumptuous restaurants stand open, and one breakfasts there and enjoys the passing show’.

Purposely located along the most fashionable urban promenades on streets, tree-lined alleys in public parks and gardens, galleries or colonnaded squares, cafés and bars have been providing the street theatre with a sitting public that, through the centuries, has become more and more conjoined with the promenade. From Via Veneto in 19th- and 20th-century Rome to Viale San Martino in Messina in the early 20th century, from Via Grande in 19th -century Leghorn to the arcades of Brescia and Padua, Italian cities and towns offered—and still offer—a close and direct interaction between café terraces and promenading grounds, participating in the constant reconstruction of the idea of *la dolce vita* and its association with an image of the Italian lifestyle.

In many small central and southern Italian towns, there were—and still are—promenades involving mostly young women parading in front of a male public sitting at the cafés, in a sort of gender-biased fashion show or beauty pageant. Del Negro (2004, p. 16) observed it in early 21st-century Sasso, while the poet Vittorio Boldini (1983, p. 66) implied the impossibility of the opposite by imagining a crowd exclusively composed of men promenading every evening up and down a square in sexist 20th-century Lecce.

Through its nature of spectacle, the promenade has always had the extraordinary capacity to encompass and mediate opposite social dynamics, such as the exhibition of socio-economic difference on the one hand, and the enactment of mechanisms of social integration based on the negotiation of that difference and the sharing of social codes, ideas, and values on the other.

## **Exhibition and Differentiation**

The promenade is one of the most ancient, popular, and largest non-formally institutionalised social events traditionally in existence in Italy. It has never had leaders or organising committees, statutes or regulatory structures. However, its regular and effective enactment has been guaranteed throughout the centuries by a class- or community-shared set

of informal customary values, codes, and purposes. In Bourdieu's terms (2013, p. 16), this set is the 'habitus' that enables agents to produce lifestyle practices, i.e. a sign system that is socially qualified. Following Bourdieu (2010, p. 481), the promenade can be seen as a strategy which allows the nobility or bourgeoisie to differentiate themselves from 'inferior' classes since 'social identity lies in difference'. Just as military parades are ritual demonstrations of force, promenades can be seen as exhibitions and affirmations of social identity and strength. With this in mind, it is not surprising to see that both military parades and promenades have often shared the same physical ground. In Venice, for instance, the traditional promenade ground of Piazzetta San Marco was used for military parades during the Fascist regime.

Privileges of class, wealth, status, and gender have been collectively and publicly asserted, represented, and negotiated in the promenade throughout the centuries. As in the rest of Europe, Italian history reveals upper-class dominance of the promenade from the Renaissance to the 20th century, with the middle classes taking the lead thereafter.

According to Goffman, the promenade can be seen as a performance staged in front of an audience of promenaders and non-promenaders, with a resulting interaction characterised by the concepts of 'appearance', as a sign of status, and 'manner', as an indication of role (Goffman, Erving, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh, 1956, pp. 10, 15).

## **Appearance**

Among the earliest accounts of the opportunities for social display historically provided by the promenade is that of Orazio della Rena (1900, p. ccxxv), who in 1589 described the customary practice of honouring the aristocratic guests at the court of the Duke of Ferrara by organising a promenade in the city. Courtiers and gentlemen rode in the streets with many other horsemen of high rank, all 'very well adorned', while gentlewomen in their best dresses paraded in coaches, 'without failing to show off their beauty', and accompanied the distinguished guests at the Montagnola, the city's most popular promenade ground. About a century

later, the English traveller and Catholic priest Richard Lassels (1697, p. 17), to whom the introduction of the expression ‘Grand Tour’ is credited, wrote that: ‘The Nobles and Gentlemens of Italy [...] love very much a Theatrical Pomp, and are seen very often at publick Shows, &c. and the inferiour Gentry affect to appear in publick with all possible splendor’ [...] to ‘make the *Tour a-la-mode* about the Streets of their Cities, as it is the manner of the Gentry to do, especially in Venice’. Witnessing the Venetian *broglia* gave Lassels an opportunity to observe the key role played by clothes in indicating the status of the promenaders. ‘I never saw so many proper men together, nor so wise, as I saw dayly there walking upon the Piazza of S. Mark,’ he wrote, continuing, ‘I may boldly say, that I saw there five hundred gentlemen walking together every day, every one of which was able to play the Ambassador in any Princes court of *Europe*’ (Lassels 1670, p. 378). Their distinctive clothes consisted of ‘a long black gown, a black cap knit, with an edging of black wool about it, like a fringe’, while ‘under their long gowns (which fly open before) they have handsome black suites of rich fluffs with stockings and garters, and Spanish leather shooes neatly made’ (Ibid.). In addition, Lassels wrote, their hair was ‘generally the best I ever saw any where’ (Ibid.). Ladies wore splendid dresses rivalled only by those of the French, made of silk and other precious fabrics from the Eastern countries with which Venice had close trade relationships (Molmenti 1928, II, p. 276–7).

The displayed elegance of promenading noblewomen is in fact a constantly recurring theme in national and international travellers’ accounts. Writing on the 19th-century Roman Corso, where most of the city’s aristocracy—by virtue of birth or bank account—paraded daily, Manfredi Porena (1957, p. 65) depicted the ‘very elegant ladies’ who sat ‘in full view’ in coaches that were always open, regardless of the season. Similarly, the Marquis of San Tommaso (1840, p. 7) described the ‘beautiful women elegantly dressed and adorned in jewels’ in two rows of open coaches along the seaside during the evening summer promenades in 19th-century Palermo. More recently, the few anthropological studies carried out in Italy dealing with the *passeggiata* all remark on the importance attached to clothes by middle-class promenaders. In 1960s Calimera, in Puglia, they ‘dressed in their best clothes’ (Maraschini 1968, p. 61); in 1970s Montecastello di Vibio, in Umbria, they dressed up ‘in their best’

(Silverman 1975, p. 41); and on holidays and Sundays in 2000s Sasso, in Abruzzo, women exhibited such a 'sartorial richness' as to give the promenade 'a distinctively theatrical quality' (Del Negro 2004, p. 61).

Clothes act as a powerful means of highlighting—or blurring—status differences across the social classes of the promenaders. Millin (1817, p. 188), for instance, noticed that though the majority of the promenaders on an early 19th-century Sunday in Modena were clothed in black, the bourgeois women wore the *zendado*, a sort of veil sometimes coquettishly left half-open, while the peasant women covered their head with chiffons. Frescot (1711, p. 616) remarked how, at the fashionable Montagnola and San Mamolo promenades in 18th-century Bologna, some ladies had purchased the silk for their dresses and other garments on credit through the intercession of a gentleman friend, or by getting a loan from another, better-off lady. One century later, Coxe (1818, p. 287) mentioned the practice of borrowing clothes which middle-class women would resort to in order to dress 'at their best' at the Sunday and Saint Day promenades on the Roman Corso. 18th- and 19th-century European fashion developed a predominantly bourgeois genre of promenade dress, from the mid-18th-century dresses à la polonaise to the white trained tunics worn by the French *merveilleuses* at the end of the 18th century, and, finally, to the more 'modern' *tailleur*, whose colour imitated the dark-grey of the metropolitan asphalt. In Italy, as in Parisian fashion, the popularity of the promenade dress stretched to the first decades of the 20th century; in 1910, for instance, they were characterised by tight skirts, solid colours, and full lengths (*Corriere Femminile* 1910, p. 377).

For more than four centuries, coaches were another powerful symbol of a promenader's social status. The cardinal and bishop of Milan Carlo Borromeo (1538-1584) reportedly said that to love God and to possess a carriage were the two indispensable things for one to succeed in Rome (Fagiolo dell'Arco 2001, p. 332). Lassels (1697, p. 17) wrote in the late 17th century that the Italian 'inferiour Gentry' chose to 'deny themselves many satisfactions at home, that they may better keep a Coach', and on the Roman Corso in the early 19th century, Coxe (1818, p. 287) emphasised how, especially on Spring Sundays, 'all, from the prince to the commoner, club their pence to make their appearance in a carriage according to their means'. The competition between coach owners was not

only limited to the quality of their means of transportation—describing the evening promenade at Porta Romana in early 19th-century Milan, Coxe (1818, pp. 126-7) wrote that ‘carriages of every description are seen, from the dormeuse, with its grandpapas and grandmamas, and the fathers of families with their better halves, to the smart whiskey, phaeton, and diable, driven by dashing bucks, continually attempting to rival one another in the art of charioteering’.

Promenading in a coach or on foot generally reflected a major social divide. Giovanni Parini (1793, p. 100) illustrates this expressively in his 19th-century poem *Il Mezzogiorno* with the disdainful look that the promenading young Milanese gentleman casts from the height of his coach to the crowd below.

Even in Venice, where coaches were redundant, the divide was signalled by the possession and quality of a gondola. ‘The Men of Gallantry,’ wrote Monsieur De S. Desdier (1699, p. 78) in the late 17th century, ‘do not only distinguish themselves by the neatness of their *Gondolos* and Watermen, but likewise by the small and light Bodies of the *Gondolos*, which are purposely made for the Fresque; as likewise by the charge they are at in getting these Gondoliers that are eminent for their great strength and Address’. Not everywhere, however, was promenading by coach seen as a status symbol, as was the case in mid-18th-century Florence, where we learn from Northall (1766, p. 104) that the nobility would take the air ‘some riding in coaches, and others walking a-foot’, though, in the latter case, ladies were preceded by their footmen. Also, in mountainous cities like Perugia, where ‘horses cannot drag up a carriage at all heavily laden’, the aristocracy mostly joined the mid-19th-century summer evening promenades on foot (Westropp 1856, p. 169).

Last, but not least, attending the daily promenade was, in itself, a public display of freedom from work, a privilege that characterised the aristocracy and upper classes from the 17th to the 19th century. Interestingly, the expression *essere a spasso* (literally ‘to be promenading’), meaning to be unemployed, still survives in modern Italian.

In spite of the relative “democratisation” process undertaken in the last century, the promenade continues to be a space in which visible barriers based on socio-economic status and gender are created. Even the most contemporary grounds for promenade, such as shopping centres, are

places in which social differentiation is still based on financial means and taste, and rooted in status, gender, race, and age.

## **Manner**

When it came to behaviour, class distinction in past centuries often relied on the choice of the time and place of promenade. The Italian tradition of the promenade is historically inseparable from that of public space as publicly owned and accessible to everyone. In line with the inherited Greek–Roman idea of the use of the agora and the street as civic space, Italy has generally avoided practices of exclusion from the promenades based on money. However, as Lefebvre (2009, p. 186) emphasised in the 1970s, social space has always been a social product and, as such, it entails the assignment of ‘more or less appropriated places’ to social relations. From the Renaissance onwards, the elite classes customarily turned promenading grounds into separated and appropriated territories. Not everywhere, in fact, were the spaces of the promenade as “democratic” as the Cascine in Florence, which, from the 18th century, was not only the preserve of members of the aristocracy, but also of the middle classes and the working people (Del Bruno 1757, p. 163).

In early 19th-century Genoa, for instance, the promenade for those possessing a coach began at the new Mole and ended at Acquasola; men ‘in the middle ranks of life, who have neither carriage nor chair’ walked around Piazza dell’Acquaverde; while lower-class pedestrians strolled from the Porta di San Tommaso—also known as Porta del Principe—to the square called La Cava just outside the city walls (Coxe 1818, p. 97). Milan had a variety of promenading grounds that came into use for specific classes and according to fashion: in the 19th century, the Corso di Porta Romana ceased to be one of the favourite places for the aristocratic corso delle carrozze and became instead the Sunday promenade for the “folks” living in that quarter of the town (Mazzoni 1836, p. 61). At the same time, the ‘wealth and good taste of the Milanese’ concentrated along the stretch of road between Porta Orientale and Porta Nuova (Ibid., p. 62), while only the bourgeois promenaded in the public gardens in the early 19th century (Millin 1817, p. 98). Venice had specific canals reserved

for the corsos and frescos of the nobles, such as the stretch of the Grand Canal running approximately between the churches of San Stae and San Simeon Piccolo (Crivellari Bizio 2007, pp. 50-1). In 19th-century Udine, the aristocracy and gentry promenaded in coaches around the outer ring of the circular public gardens northeast of the castle, whereas the lower-class pedestrians used the inner one (Di Maniago 1839, p. 66-7).

While customary rules allowed different classes to access the same promenading ground, though often separately, courtesans in the 17th and 18th centuries usually suffered greater limits to their promenading freedom. In 17th-century Rome, for instance, prostitutes were forbidden to frequent the places where the 'Honest Women [...] walk to take the Air' and they were prohibited from travelling by coach during daytime (*Voyages and travels* 1693, p. 125). In 17th- and 18th-century Venice, courtesans were denied the right to participate in the frescos, with the sole exception of the corso on the Rio de la Sensa, in the northern part of the city (Saint-Didier 1699, p. 79; Crivellari Brizio 2007, p. 32).

When promenading space was limited or forcefully shared, time often became a key element for the enactment of class-based behaviours in past centuries. While the Roman Corso summer promenade was generally attended by a relatively wide spectrum of the social classes, in the early 19th-century Reichard (1819, p. 112) remarked that the 'grands' were the only ones to 'seize' the street after midnight and to 'hold' it until dawn. Still in Rome, but in the interwar years, the journalist Antonio Di Piero (2012, p. 150) reports how the fashionable and class-promiscuous Sunday morning promenade along Via Veneto was, instead, studiously deserted by the gentlewomen during the afternoon.

## The Promenade as a Collective Affair

Whether it involves members of the upper or lower classes, town communities, or different gender, ethnic and age groups, the promenade has always historically been a collective phenomenon. This provides further evidence of the fact that in the promenade it is the identity of the group—its values, codes, and self-control—which are at stake. The individual promenader—alone because of their lack of social relations—

is not part of the group and, therefore, the game.

The *horror solitudinis* that affects promenaders regardless of their class, gender and age has remained unaltered throughout the centuries. The stigma that is historically attached to lone participants in the promenade has moral and social reasons. In past centuries, it would have been considered immoral for a woman to take part in a promenade alone, as such behaviour was closely associated with ill repute. Only *cocottes* would have been seen sitting alone in a coach, not to mention walking the street, and Italian as well as European etiquette recommended that a gentleman never leave a lady to promenade alone. It is for this reason, for instance, that Parini (1793, p. 104) described the 18th-century Milanese corso by pointing out how every young mother had a young gentleman or father beside her; or, in 1840s Vercelli, an American traveller complained that ‘young women cannot walk out here without a male attendant’ (Sedgwick 1841, p. 27).

Although for different reasons, the stigma has also affected men. In his 1930s novel *Fontamara*, Ignazio Silone (1998, p. 63) describes a male character performing the ‘ancient and decent assignment of *domenichino*’: accompanying, at a respectful distance, an old baron in the afternoon holiday promenades, who, in accordance with tradition, would have felt it dishonourable to do so alone. The shame of participating in the promenade alone can still be commonly observed nowadays. Anthropological research by both Silverman (1975) and Del Negro (2004, p. 31)—carried out in the small towns of Montecastello in the 1970s and Sasso in the early 2000s respectively—emphasises how the inhabitants promenade in small groups, and Del Negro adds that ‘an individual will either find companions in the piazza or phone friends ahead of time to arrange a time and place to meet’. However, it is the social nature of the promenade that makes the greatest contribution to explaining the disapproval that, irrespective of gender, falls on the lone participant. Drawing on the research of Rokach and Brock (1997), this is perceived as a personal failure due to lack of an adequate social network and, as such, Snell (2016, p. 15) has pointed out how it historically induces ‘guilt, shame, anxiety, or self-doubt in others’. The 19th-century Romantic culture implicitly emphasised this aspect by closely associating loneliness with the reflective individual walking and wandering. On the contrary, the space-constrained activity of



promenading has always played a key role in terms of facilitating relations and strengthening class or social cohesion. Literary sources provide plenty of evidence on this issue, from the 18th- and 19th-century *conversazioni* held by members of the aristocracy and gentry, to the variety of more contemporary opportunities that the promenade offers in terms of the exchange of greetings, small talk and opinions. In her research in the small town of Sasso, Del Negro (2004, p. 38) goes so far as to conclude that the promenade acts as a ‘public affirmation of civic unity and community spirit’, repressing and coercing individualistic tendencies.

In addition, the decline of the aristocracy and the rise of the middle class that—as in the rest of Europe—affected Italian society in the 19th century gradually weakened an approach to class distinction based on the time and place of promenade. The consequence was closer integration between the upper and middle classes of promenaders, and, at the same time, increased participation by the lower-income sections of society. While the promenade never ceased, in Bourdieu’s terms, to reaffirm the taste of the ruling class, its social dynamics became more complex. As early as 1880, a keen observer like Edmondo de Amicis emphatically acknowledged the promenade as a model of social harmony. Describing the crowded winter evenings under the colonnades of Via Po, in Turin, De Amicis (1991, pp. 62-3) was struck by the fact that in the space of a few square metres one could see ‘an artillery captain, a married couple, a priest, an academic, a milliner, and a labourer, all close to each other like members of the same family’, in ‘seemingly good universal agreement’. As naive or wishful as it might seem—De Amicis would soon become a socialist and was a patriot in the years in which Italy as a nation was under construction—his description reflects the changes the promenade was then undergoing in terms of appearance, manners, and, above all, popular participation.

The promenade was also—and still is—a space for the sharing of social, political and cultural values. In Risorgimento Italy, the promenade was often used to express support for independence during the Austrian domination. When King Vittorio Emanuele II opened the parliament in Turin on 18th February 1861, for instance, people in both Venice and Udine gathered in a promenade to celebrate the event and implicitly claim their liberation from the Austrian Empire (Comandini, Monti 1918-

29, p. 48). In Venice, one year earlier, the promenaders who crowded St Mark's Square on Sunday morning moved en masse to the Fondamenta delle Zattere on the Giudecca Canal as soon as the Austrian military band began to play in the piazza. And when, on 8th January 1860, a group of Austrian officials followed them to the Zattere, the Venetian promenaders moved towards the Ponte Lungo and then spontaneously split into two wings to let the officials pass while hissing and booing them (Comitato Politico Centrale Veneto 1860, pp. 89-90). Similar pro-independence protests occurred in other cities under Austrian dominion, such as Ferrara, where in 1847 the promenaders left the Montagnone at the arrival of a group of Austrian officials with their wives and moved to Corso Giovecca (*La Pallade* 1847, p. 4); and Trieste, where, on 18th August 1860, many people at the San Andrea promenade sang the patriotic chorus *Siamo tutti una sola famiglia* ('We are all one family') from Verdi's opera *Ernani*, which the Austrian authorities had banned from the local theatre (Comandini, Monti 1907-18, p. 1544). In July 1860, Italian tricolour flags appeared illegally along the Chiaia promenade in Naples as an act of defiance against the Bourbon regime (Comandini, Monti 1907-18, p. 1216).

As a heavily attended event, the promenade has always provided a key opportunity for political activists and agitators to stage protests or campaigns to struggle for political and social change. This use of the promenade has a long tradition in Europe, where it often turned to violence against the rulers or people. On 12th June 1878, for instance, the German Emperor Wilhelm I was shot and wounded in Berlin by Karl Nobiling while promenading by coach along the Unter den Linden; on 10th September 1898, Empress Elisabeth of Austria was assassinated by the Italian anarchist Luigi Lucheni on a lakeside promenade in Geneva; and, in Italy, three members of the Comitato Centrale Veneto were executed in December 1852 for their plot to kidnap the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph I during the promenade along the Riva degli Schiavoni in Venice (Luzio 1903, pp. 11-20). More recently, an Islamic State terrorist attack resulted in carnage on Nice's Promenade des Anglais on 14th July 2016. Since the 1960s, Italian promenades have offered political and social activists a key campaign opportunity through the setting up of tables and stalls for activities such as the dissemination of information, the promotion

of societies and political parties, fundraising, and petition signing. Finally, while reflecting a socio-political divide, the promenade has also symbolised reconciliation. This was the case in early-1980s Pristina, where, after the riots that shook Kosovo, Serbs and Albanians resumed the traditional promenade along the corso, albeit walking on opposite sides (Ramet 1995); or in Aleppo in 2017, where the urban population resumed the habit of the promenade along streets only recently cleared of debris after the siege (Stabile 2017).

## **The Promenade as the Public Dimension of Eroticism**

In spite of its manifestly public nature—and very often because of it—the promenade has always had an extraordinary capacity to reconfigure social relationships and identities, not only at group or community level, but also in a much more intimate sphere. Shielded by its being there for all to see, the promenade has functioned as an erotic experience not only in the “play form” of coquetry—as Simmel (1950, p. 50) has highlighted—, but also in providing a major opportunity for encounters, allowing intimacy, and facilitating sexual relationships. In this sense, analysis of the promenade provides an insight into the emotional history of a society and into sexuality as a ‘social construct, operating within fields of power’ (Giddens 1992, p. 23). It allows us to explore and identify the cultural and ethical barriers existing in a society and investigate its gender and class relationships.

In 18th - and 19th-century Italy, the erotic charm of the promenade was explicitly conveyed through the customary legitimation of married aristocratic couples attending in separate coaches, each in the company of others. This practice made a strong impression on several foreign travellers, who found it unusual and intriguing. Northall (1766, p. 104) witnessed the custom during the summer promenades in 1760s Florence, where he wrote: ‘It is never customary to see gentlemen and ladies of distinction together in these excursions, but the husband in a coach with another lady, and his wife with another gentleman’. In the early 19th-century, Coxe (1818, p. 126) noticed the same habit in the Sunday corso in Milan, where, in 1739, De Brosses (1858, p. 108) had remarked on the

fact that gentlewomen never shared coaches with other women, but were frequently seen together with groups of men, of which their husband was never one. In Palermo in 1778, Vivant Denon (1993, p. 70) celebrated the erotic charm of the Marina promenade, where ‘everybody blends in and gets lost, looks for and finds each other’, and where Sicilians seem to have forgotten their jealous character to the extent of delaying the introduction of public streetlights so as not to hinder their ‘little clandestine freedoms’. At the end of the 17th century, Saint-Didier (1699, pp. 262-3) wrote that participation in the Venetian frescos was one of the greatest freedoms that a husband could give to his wife.

Not only in Venice, but all over 18th- and 19th-century Italy, this freedom enjoyed by women was often embodied by the *cicisbeo*: the escort of a married lady who, with the husband’s consent, ‘had the public and declared task of living side by side with another man’s wife, as part of an arranged and desirable triangle’ (Bizzocchi 2014, p. 1). His presence beside the lady at a key event such as the promenade was a constant feature. In late 18th-century Florence, Northall (1766, p. 104) pointed out that the *cicisbeo* sat in the coach with the lady during the promenade, adding that the number of these attendants varied according to the lady’s qualities. In the early 19th century, Coxe (1818, p. 293) emphasised how the office of *cicisbeo*, or ‘Consolateur’ was ‘indispensable’ in Rome, and specifically counted among his tasks that of accompanying the lady to the promenade. Lady Morgan (1821, p. 252) observed the Genoese ‘*patito*, or *amatory martyr*’ accompanying his lady to the evening promenade on Strada Nuova in 1819-20, explaining how this “sufferer of Genoa” was the ‘more serviceable and enslaved’ version of the Milanese *cavalier servente* and the *cicisbeo* of Florence and Rome.

This figure was a legacy of the paladin in medieval chivalry, claimed Madame du Bocage (1764, p. 162), who had the Knight of Malta Sacramozo as her *cicisbeo* during her promenades in St Mark’s Square and her frescos in 1750s Venice.

Promenades have also always offered an important and legitimate erotic opportunity to visually express attraction or sexual intent towards another person, behaviour facilitated by the traditionally limited space of the promenading ground and the chances of frequent encounters this entailed. For instance, as Serao (1879a, p. 224) emphasised in 1870s Naples, one

could meet ‘*by chance*’ whoever one liked at least twenty times during the Sunday morning promenade in Via Toledo. The *gioco di sguardi* (“game of looks”) is an erotic social practice very familiar to Italian culture, though remarkably under-researched. Serao (1879b, p. 41) offers an amusing example of the extent to which the erotic gaze is able to pierce his character Lulù, who, questioned about her love for a man, Roberto, whom she has never met, vehemently claims to know him because she has seen him at the horse races and at the Chiaia promenade. Writing about the Venetian frescos in the 1820s, Giustina Renier Michiel (1829, pp. 150-1) describes how the elegantly dressed gentlewomen would slow their gondolas to allow the other participants to admire them or, more often, she adds, to give themselves the chance to ‘throw flattering gazes’ with the intention of ‘subjecting new slaves’. Mastriani (1843, p. 32) offers a male perspective on this same behaviour when he describes the Sunday promenade at Villa Reale in Naples, where young women ‘arm themselves with a pair of eyes terrible for the Italian hearts’. It is the male gaze and, in particular, that of the stereotyped Latin lover, however, which prevailed to represent power and the objectification of women in masculinist and patriarchal Italian society. This is illustrated, for instance, by the small group of male friends bending over to ogle every woman who passes, as typologised by Delaberrenga (1846, p. 325) in mid-19th-century Naples. This widespread Italian style of behaviour has struck many foreign travellers, as epitomised by Ruth Orkin and her famous photograph *An American Girl in Italy*, shot in Rome in 1951. Another iconic example is found in a letter written from Naples in the early 20th century by the American traveller Katherine Lynch (1912, p. 86), who, after participating in the Via Toledo promenade, warns tourists—particularly Anglo-Saxons—not to be annoyed ‘because so many of the men stand and gaze at women here in the street’ since, as she obligingly explains, ‘their look is not intended as the slightest rudeness’ but ‘is rather a sort of gallant admiration which Italian women understand perfectly’. Of a different opinion is another American traveller, Catharine Sedgwick (1841, p. 37), who, while attending a concert in a Milanese theatre, stigmatises the men’s stares and their ‘planting their eyeglasses and reconnoitring for the space of two or three minutes’ as signs of disrespect. In Taranto in the early 20th-century, the British traveller Norman Douglas (1993, p. 84) shows

off a deep understanding of the passionate looks that the young boys in the Corso Vittorio Emanuele promenade throw to the girls looking on from nearby windows and balconies: ‘They are not really in love at all, these excellent young men—not at all, at all; they know better. They are only pretending, because it looks manly’.

On a more tangible level, the promenade offers the permissible erotic gratification of bodily contact, not only with a lover, but also strangers. De Amicis (1991, p. 60), for instance, describes the warm sensation experienced in a crowded Via Po promenade in 1880s Turin, when it seems that everybody is enjoying the pleasure of being packed together.

The promenade has also provided men and women of marriageable age with a socially sanctioned opportunity for courting in the morally repressive societies of Italy past and present. The poet Gaspara Stampa (1851, p. 38) provides early evidence of this when she describes the sensual pleasures of promenading in St Mark’s Square with a certain Count Collalino in the 16th century, enjoying the intimacy and the freedom to exchange thoughts. In 1970s Montecastello, Silverman (1975, p. 196) found that when a girl accepted a boy’s courtship, they ‘started to “walk together” and began to *fare l’amore* (court) in a kind of open secret’, while Del Negro (2004, p. 16) emphasises the opportunities for flirting offered by the promenade to the women of Sasso in the 2000s.

The promenade has historically reflected society’s moral obligations as well as its gender issues and stereotypes. Thus, if on the one hand it has allowed women a certain independence and freedom, on the other hand it has induced them to conform to socially dominant concepts of beauty and femininity—as Moretti (2015, p. 55-6) observed critically in 2010s Milan. Moreover, the promenade has been a ground for perceptions and behaviours associated with masculine hegemony. Thus, promenading young women were described as ‘beautiful and free’ in Tarquinia (Bassani 2001, p. 2) or ‘husband hunters’ in Rome’s Via Veneto (Di Pierro 2012, p. 150), while those labelled socially as cocottes were made the object of young men’s ‘voracious gazes’ in late 19th-century Florence (Palazzeschi 1964, p. 108).







# Conclusions

The promenade is the most ancient, popular, and heavily frequented non-formally institutionalised social event extant in Italy, in spite of its neglect by the academic community and the media. Whether it takes place on a corso, al fresco or in a mall, it continues to affect the social life of cities and small towns, with key urbanistic, economic, and, above all, social implications. For centuries, it has shared its route—and often still does—with triumphal entrances, religious processions, and public events such as races, festivals, and carnivals, with their common nature of spectacle and parade. This spectacularity is twofold, performed towards those who participate in the promenade, and those who observe it from the outside. The peculiar social density of its location, created by schedules set by custom and physically limited spaces, has put the promenade at centre stage of a complex network of interpersonal relationships.

If, on the one hand, it has played a key historical role in manifesting, affirming, and controlling socio-economic differences across groups and classes, on the other hand it has promoted the dynamics of social integration through sociability, fashion, imitation, identity negotiation, and the consequent sharing of practices, codes, and ideas. Finally, and paradoxically, the public and collective nature of the promenade has

allowed and protected a sphere of private and intimate relationships, fostering eroticism and sexual freedom.

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