

# In Search of Babb

Every place has its own ‘cantor’, and if we have to choose who has dedicated more art to Pontedera, there is no doubt that this is Giorgio Dal Canto. Dozens of his works portray his hometown and its hamlets in almost every way possible, so much so that he has entered every home and every heart. This alone would be enough to earn him the title of ‘greatest artist of his time’, but Babb certainly did not stop there. He became an ambassador of his town, making it known everywhere as his birthplace and as the subject of his works. Giuseppe Diomelli wrote in commemoration: *‘We must all be proud of this man: a Pontederese above all, who made our city, places, countries, people, professions and so much more speak for themselves, and who, through his lens, was able to impose his unmistakable style. This allowed him, the only local artist, to be called upon to exhibit at the 2011 Venice Biennial as the highest recognition of all the many that he has received’.* The mayor Simone Millozzi echoed, on the same occasion: *‘Giorgio Dal Canto has been able to tell the story of our country, but also of our Pontedera, with intelligence, a sense of humour, and humility in a way that only the*



*great know can. His works depicted, with enthusiasm and freedom of spirit, the contradictions of our time and the loneliness of people from the point of view he liked best: that of the weakest against the arrogance of the powerful. For over 40 years, he painted and narrated his own idea, his own vision, of men, their faults and their relations, adopting the city of Pontedera and many of its places, its most picturesque corners, as stage sets, as backdrops. The duo, the church of the Misericordia di Pontedera, the Palazzo Pretorio, our monuments and some of our squares have been captured and deformed in an ironic and loving way to make them the theatre on which his actors move. (...) Babb has succeeded in being a prophet in his own country. I am convinced that there is not a house in Pontedera, a house in – ‘forderponte’ - for sure, where one cannot find a painting, a lithograph, or even a mention of his art. There is not a single person over forty who does not know who Babb is and does not know some of his drawings, his Vespa, his pinocchios, his priests, or his characters in colourful striped T-shirts from the 1960s’.*



**Morirò, ma... ho fumato tanto** (I will die, but... I smoked a lot), 2009 oil on canvas and collage 30x30 cm

*Collage composed of cigarette filters consumed by the painter with an autograph by Giorgio Dal Canto.*

However, where is it possible to 'meet' him today, in his own town?

Whether by chance or by a choice, if one walks down Viale Della Repubblica in Pontedera, one comes across a large panel depicting Giorgio Dal Canto smiling and cheerful, as is appropriate when one wants to remember a person at his best.

There you are in front of his studio, in a place that once housed the old Bandecchi & Vivaldi printing house and is now the home of Sergio Vivaldi's archive, his papers, posters and books. Reopened on 25 March 2017, it is a small museum.<sup>1</sup>

Entering and turning immediately to the right you arrive in the 'world of Giorgio Dal Canto'.

**Hotel Armonia**, 1998  
watercolor 30×40 cm



On an easel there is an unfinished painting that he was working on before he left us forever, newspaper cutouts, a palette, colours, and on the walls pictures, posters, photos... telling the story of a life. Next to his habitual seat are his eyeglasses and a packet of cigarettes, his companions in the hours of sublime creation.

If you look around, you can still find half-finished or unpublished works such as the one entitled *'Reflections of a puppet'*.

It is a piece of art 'à la Dal Canto', and is placed inside a blue binder and once again tells the story of the role of power in the life of a man-puppet. These walls were 'witnesses' to many en-

*On the following pages*

*"The pregnant mannequin"*

revised by Marco Lodola and the permanent exhibition in the garage of the Hotel Armonia

counters, even though this was ultimately a private space where there usually was only room for the artist and his vision.

Another fantastic stronghold of Babb's art is certainly the space in front of the Hotel Armonia, in Piazza Caduti Divisione Acqui Cefalonia e Corfù, or 'Piazza Duomo' as everyone calls it, citizens and outsiders alike.

Here stands a large homage by artist Marco Lodola to the genius Giorgio Dal Canto. Entitled *LodoBabb*, the five-metre-high sculpture watches over the square and the city and is a reinterpretation of the famous *'Pregnant Mannequin'* that the Pontedera artist created for the 2011 Venice Biennale.

A few steps away is the entrance to the car park of the hotel, where one can find a small underground called 'By Noselight' - underground art collection' displays a dozen reproductions of works by Dal Canto. Backlit paintings as if to return light, albeit artificial, to places that are almost always left in the dark and where light, the natural light of culture, almost never arrives.

The work was conceived by an exceptional duo in terms of flair and personality: architect Alberto Bartalini and philanthropic entrepreneur Giuseppe Diomelli, the owner of the Hotel Armonia, founded by the Magnani family, who gave it a 'musical' name, such was the passion for this art form.

At the presentation of the project, Bartalini said, *'We would like the car park to become a real meeting place where schools can visit and events can be organised. Why did we choose the Pregnant Mannequin? It is a symbol, a statement. To translate it into a sentence, one could say that it represents the old saying: the mother of fools is always pregnant'*.

24 February 2018 was the inauguration day of





**Hotel Armonia**, 1998  
watercolor 30x40 cm

1965 “the skyscraper”



the LODOLAND - City of Lights event. It was a route designed by Bartalini to unite visually and culturally connect Palazzo Stefanelli, the Town Hall, Corso Matteotti and what has become the Armonia Park, with LodoBabb as its ‘guardian angel’.

Thus, we have two recognisable points for those who want to ‘meet’ Dal Canto in Pontedera: his place of study and work, and a tribute from a prestigious artist. Nevertheless, there is something more, but this time it is ‘hidden’: his home. The place where Giorgio Dal Canto lived for many years is in Viale Italia, in the Oltrera district or as the people of Pontedera like to call

it ‘Forderponte’ (Beyond the bridge). It is a ‘village within a village’, where one used to ‘breathe a different air’. Until the 1960s, it had very few houses and, once you crossed the bridge that gave its name to the town, heading towards Florence. Before that time, one would come across a large house that obliged the traveller to either turn towards the Via Fiorentina, and then choose to go east or north, towards Lucca, or to take the road through the hills where one would enter the Valdera region, heading towards the south of Tuscany.

Later, the building was demolished and a large avenue was created to build council housing, and house a very special kind of humanity: People of blood and heart, that it was once a good idea not to irritate too much.

This district was home to the first real sports ground in Pontedera, the legendary Marconcini Stadium, whose wooden stands gave the impression of an English facility, but whose terraces, especially in the post-war period, were frequented by people who were very ‘non-Anglo-Saxon’ in nature.

Just a few metres away was the boxing gym in Piazza Trieste, where the children of ‘Forderponte’ flocked to see the great champion Sandro Mazzinghi throw punches at the unfortunate sparring partner on duty. It was a place where the ‘minimal houses’ still existed, a remnant of war that was late in being demolished, and where families lived on the edge of survival, but certainly with no lack of dignity.

It was a pile of houses that formed a hamlet, which was almost detached from the rest of the town. The two neighbourhoods faced each other on the banks of the river Era, on one side those of Crema and on the other those of Forderponte.



“Il grattacielo”

When the war ended, everything changed, but not the peculiar characteristics of the inhabitants. Almost all of them convincingly opted to serve under the banner of the Communist Party. In 1962, the church decided to set up a ‘garrison’ at the end of the avenue, protected by St Joseph and with a worthy pastor: Don Vasco Bertelli. Of the former, Libero, Babb’s father was a member. He became part of the leadership of the powerful section dedicated to Galliano Bertelli, who was killed by the fascists in 1924. He was also among the founding members of the ‘Società Semplice Fuori del Ponte’, the first nucleus of the Communist Club. How is it possible not to think that something from this place would stick with Babb? To take the side of the ‘have-nots’, the desire for liberation, the courage to mock the ‘steam masters’ not as an act of cowardice, but of defence and condemnation.

Nowadays, everything has changed, but just a few hundred metres from the magnolia trees that guard Viale Italia like sentinels, on the right you will still find what they call a ‘skyscraper’ (nothing in comparison to its overseas counterparts), the place where Babb used to live.

It is a building that ‘feeds’ on elements that may or may not be sympathetic, like those that inhab-



**Il Palazzo** (The Skyscraper), 1995  
oil on canvas cm 70×100

*The modern city is full of buildings like this one that have antennas on the roof, polluting chimneys that emit black smoke and scare birds. The building has solid foundations represented by banks and a sturdy door and crocodiles, to protect the tenants from intruders, strictly closed from the outside with a padlock almost to imprison those inside. Even the guard watches over the privacy of the tenants, with a rifle hidden behind his back. These tenants are of many species and more than anything they do not bond with each other and sometimes not even with the person who lives in the same apartment like the couple, on the third floor on the left, divided by a wall. There is one who goes hunting, one who goes fishing for steaks on the floor below, one who is curious and listens to others, one who lays out money and one who offers his services (woman on the first floor on the right) in exchange for a little power (the bowler hat on her head).*



**Convinzioni**, 1988 cm 100×80 (Rodolfo Giuntini)

it the fortress building that Babb created on canvas in 1995 ('The Building'). Here *'The building has a solid ground floor represented by banks, and a strong entrance and crocodiles, to defend the tenants from intruders, strictly closed from the outside with a padlock to imprison those inside. The guardian also watches over the privacy of the tenants with his rifle hidden behind his back. These tenants are of many kinds and mostly do not bond with*

*each other, and sometimes not even with the person living in the same apartment, like the couple on the third floor to the left, divided by a wall. There are those who go hunting, those who go fishing for the steaks downstairs, those who are curious and eavesdrop on their neighbours, those who hang up money and those who lend their services (woman on the first floor on the right) in exchange for a bit of power (the bowler hat on her head).'*

<sup>1</sup> Tommaso Silvi, *Babb lives on thanks to his refurbished workshop*, Il Tirreno 26 March 2017





**Mongolfiera** (Hot Air Balloon), 2016  
70x100 cm  
unfinished work



Villa Crastan, Giorgio Dal Canto and Riccardo Ferrucci