

THE CITY ON THE RISE

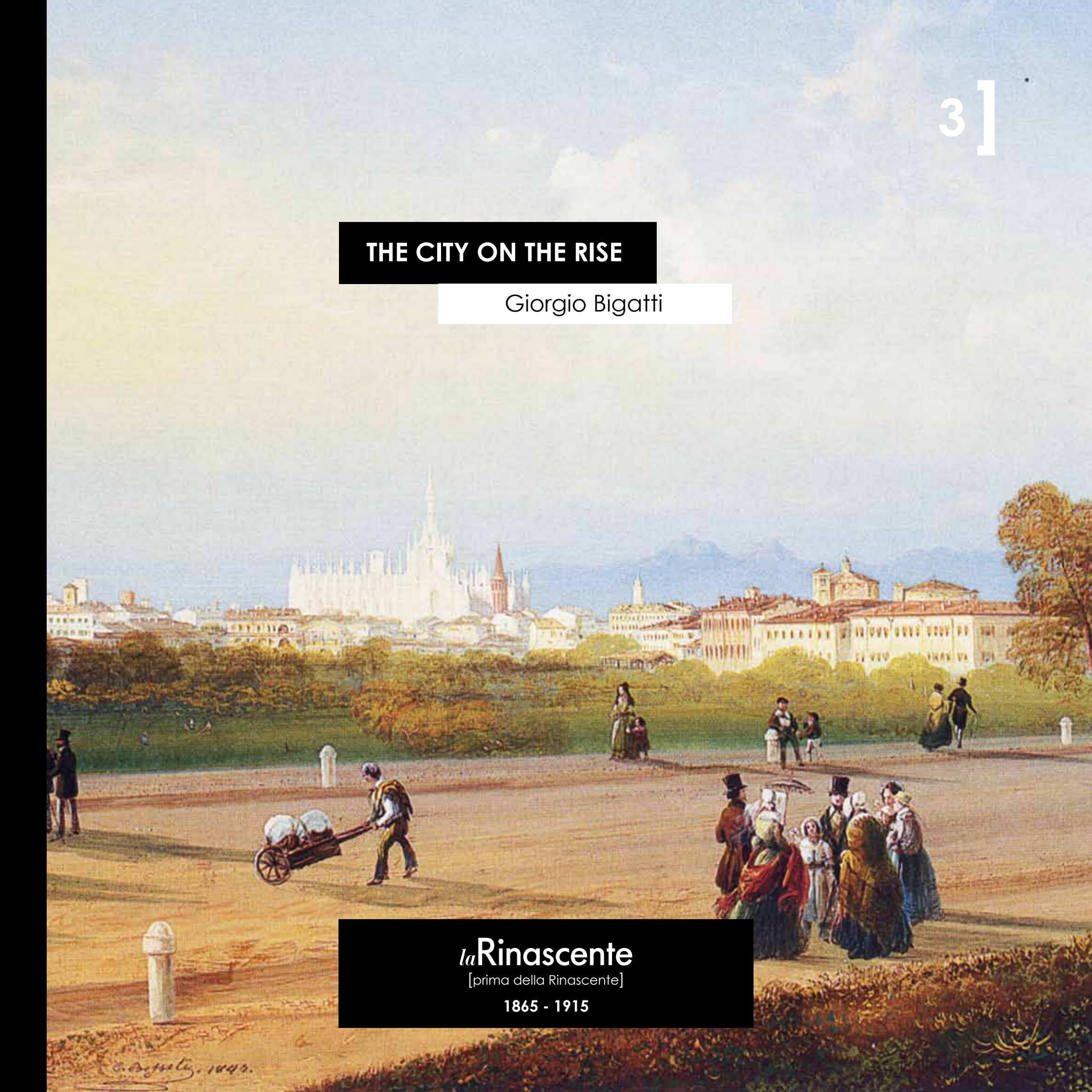
Giorgio Bigatti

*la*Rinascence

[prima della Rinascence]

1865 - 1915

G. Bigatti, 1895.



Around the second half of the nineteenth century Milan seemed about to “completely lose its peculiar physiognomy and blend in with the uniform colour of the thousands of city of the modern world”. Egidio De Magri, a teacher of grammar at the municipal secondary school of Santa Marta with literary ambitions (“condemned right from the early years of his youth to the tedious occupations of teaching”, this is what the writer Giuseppe Rovani would say about him), revealed this with a mix of expectation and fear. This short article about the transformation of a city destined to rise to become the epitome of modernity and claim for itself the rank of moral capital, as opposed to the political one, can start from here.

At first glance, Milan did not seem, at that time, very different from the way it had been described by visitors, some more illustrious than others, in the previous centuries. Buildings seemed to be tightly gathered around the old medieval nucleus where, according to an approximate estimate, resided more than half of the residents, in years in which the overall population already exceeded 150,000 people. A dense and varied network of shops and workshops was concentrated in this area with a significant extension along the main streets that reached the city gates. The city was rich in these enterprises, which were in



Porta Nuova, 1840

turn the driving force of its wealth. Even if signs of a greater urban density in some areas outside the city limits marked by the *naviglio* [canal] could not go unnoticed, such as along the Moscova avenue where the Tobacco Factory was situated with the highest concentration of workers in the city, the overall street map did not show signs of relevant change in the planning of the areas. However, if instead of just looking at the street map of the city, as we are obliged to do today, we could walk down the streets, it would not be hard to notice that behind the apparent immobility, Milan was in reality silently changing.

In a few years, as some reliable observers remind us, just under twenty per cent of urban real estate properties had undergone a process of restructuring that had brought about changes in the profile of many neighbourhoods, creating in equal

measure small pieces of a new Milan. Tiny initiatives that actively undertaken by many citizens, who aspired to getting better living quarters with all the amenities that were more and more part of domestic life but who also liked the idea of making quick profits offered by real estate speculation. Stendhal in his own way noted the building frenzy of the city: “La secrète ambition de tous les citoyens de Milan, c'est de bâtir une maison, ou du moins de renou-

veler la façade celle tiennent de leur père”. The home was a sort of calling card: “Avoir une belle maison dans la ville donne plus de considération que des millions en portefeuille” (*Rome, Naples et Florence, Paris, 1826*). It was mainly thanks to these minute building works that, even if lamenting the absence of great schemes after the Napoleonic pomp, the city seemed to be set on “completely losing its peculiar physiognomy”, steering towards an entry into modernity, emulating what the other cities in Europe had already accomplished a few decades earlier.

Some buildings that only a few years earlier had been simply unimaginable confirmed these considerations. In particular, I mean both the elegant, huge station of the Milan-Como railway line, located just outside Porta Nuova, and the gasworks near Porta Lodovica. Outposts of modernity in a city that avidly

looked at the latest inventions from beyond the Alps, gasworks and railways with their dense fumes, heralded that Milan had also entered the industrial era in its own right.

It was a challenging modernity for the elite, who found comfort in other and more seductive aspects of living, such as luxury, fashion and other means of *loisir* [leisure]. In this way, it does not surprise us that the great halls – resplendent with lights and reflec-

tions – of the brand new Galleria De Cristoforis inaugurated on 29 September 1832, were the most accredited emblem of modernity. Designed by the architect Andrea Pizzala (1798-1862) with its sixty-nine shops, cafes, a *trattoria*, a hotel and theatre, the Galleria had become one of the liveliest spots in city along the lines of the Parisian passages. The close-by Corso Francesco (today Corso Vittorio Emanuele II), after it had been straightened to mark the emperor’s visit to Milan in 1838, also became

known for its shops ‘of real luxury’, “furnished in a styles coming from the other side of mountains”. These were retail enterprises that had very little in common with the old commercial and artisan network that so defined the maze of streets around the Duomo, with names that evoked an already declining past, in which “generally on each storey of a building... the rooms mainly housed workshops or

storerooms, stocks of knick-knacks, costume jewellery, furs and hats, tailors, weavers, embroiders, passementerie workshops and etc.”.

Even if some people thought that Milan had changed over a few years, “more than what it had done in many centuries”, that which in the mid-nineteenth century simply heralded change only a few years later would become a tangible reality. In 1881, twenty years after the unification, the Industri-



Carlo Canella, Milan Cathedral and Corsia dei Servi, 1860-1865

al Exhibition would clearly show how much progress had been made by a city with over 300,000 inhabitants. A growth that was marked by the growing dualism between the centre, which had become more monumental as a result of the opening of the piazza in front of the Duomo and the construction of the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, and the suburbs that sprawled over the city walls into the surrounding countryside.

The inclination of the city centre towards trade and the tertiary sector, that was clearly represented by the resplendent halls of the department stores of the Bocconi

Brothers, juxtaposed with the completely industrial character of the neighbourhoods that had sprung up close to the factories with glorious names: such as the 'De Angeli' cotton mill in the Maddalena quarter; the 'Richard' pottery near the church of San Cristoforo along the Naviglio Grande; the Elvetica (that would become Breda) just outside Porta Nuova close to the "Naviglio della Martesana", not far from the 'colossal factory' established by Felice Grondona in the 1840s transforming the old carriage yard into a modern factory that manufactured railway materials and, finally, Pirelli whose history still goes on today.



Cesare Beruto, Milan Regulatory project plan 1884