



A program showcase

Ospedale degli Innocenti, Florence, Italy

by Michael Kalinowski

In 1294, the powerful and prosperous Silk Weaver's Guild was named by the Florentine Republic as 'Protectors and Educators' of the city's abandoned children, and eventually all local and imported silk was taxed to help pay for the guild's efforts. This led to the creation of a new orphanage, a 'Hospital of the Innocents,' dedicated exclusively to the care of those children, "who are commonly called foundlings . . . whose fathers and mothers, against the law of human nature, have deserted them" (Piccini, 1977). The facility was perhaps the first institution continuously devoted to the welfare of young children, and cared for more than 375,000 infants and young children.

The orphanage was partially designed by Filippo Brunelleschi, a member of the Silk Guild, but who became better known for his design of a new technique for a self-supporting dome of the Duomo, the Florence cathedral. Brunelleschi conceptualized the hospital as part of a Piazza della Santissima Annunziata, a unified Florentine square that would create a sense of spaciousness. However, he did not see it through to completion. His design for the hospital is now considered a masterpiece, and architectural

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historians identify it as the first truly Renaissance structure. Construction commenced in 1419.

The first arrival on February 5, 1445 was named Agatha Smeralda after St. Agatha's Day. According to hospital records, 90 infants arrived the first year. Initially babies were placed in a bowl near a window that opened to women on duty waiting to hear a baby's cry. Eventually a horizontal 'wheel of the innocents' was created, on which a parent could leave their child, who would be rotated into the orphanage anonymously.

In 1490, Andrea dell Robbia was commissioned to create 10 unique, round, glazed terra-cotta reliefs of swaddled infants to be placed between the exterior columns. The insignia of the American Academy of Pediatrics is based on one of these roundels (Kahn, 2002).

By 1500 boys and girls were segregated into separate communities within the now-extended building, and there were a church, hospital, pharmacy, dorms, school, courtyards, kitchen, and laundry. In 1560 there were 450 resident children and 870 additional children given out in the care of nurses. It was difficult to find enough women to care for the children who were usually returned to the orphanage by seven years of age. By 1681 the whole family of resident and non-resident children reached nearly 3,500 children. Boys were taught to read and write and then placed as apprentices to artisans; older boys may have been sent to ships in times of war. Girls, who were dressed in white until 25, in blue until 45, and then in black, worked primarily for the Silk Weaver's Guild. Most married or became nuns.



While the orphanage was a refuge from many things, it could not guarantee long life, and its mortality rate ranged to 20% in 1445 to almost 90% in the 1480s. Plague, smallpox, and intestinal diseases continued to take a huge toll.

In 1875 the famous 'wheel' was walled up, but even in the first half of the 1900s

the facility took in orphans and refugees during both World Wars.

This orphanage is significant for several historic firsts. It was, as noted above, the first separate foundling hospital, the first documented record of 'artificial' nursing, the first continuous provider of social services to children, the location for the first experimental vaccination, and then the first institute that supplied all Tuscan provinces with vaccines.

Currently, the Ospedale degli Innocenti has a wonderful art museum, includes a preschool (Asili Nido), and provides community child welfare services, including placement in foster care, monetary support, and a home for pregnant women. It also houses some UNICEF research offices, and the National Centre for Documentation and Analysis on Childhood and Adolescence, a landmark national and European level to promote the care of children's rights. In effect, this institution has operated continuously for five and a half centuries.

References

Kahn, L. (2002, July). The Ospedale degli Innocenti and the Bambino of the American Academy of Pediatrics. *Pediatrics*, 110(1), 175-180.

Piccini, A. (1977). The Innocenti: Art and history. In *Spedale degli Innocenti: The founding hospital and its museum* (p.3). Florence: Cooperativa Editoriale Lo Studio.



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For further information on the Institute degli Innocenti: www.istitutodeglinnocenti.it/index.jsf?sessionId=1948EDACB257254AD4593CC0EEE36902?lang=en

For information, on the museum: www.museumsinflorence.com/musei/ospedale_degli_innocenti.html

Regarding the architecture: www.greatbuildings.com/buildings/Ospedale_Degli_Innocenti.html

For a video of the Innocenti exterior and surrounding area: www.vimeo.com/755742

The Program Showcases are developed by Michael Kalinowski as a component of the World Forum on Early Care and Education. They are intended to highlight the work of particularly interesting, unique, and/or exceptional early childhood programs around the world.

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