

Dalhousie in Parma, Italy

In the centuries before Italian unification, Parma was the capital of an independent duchy and contained all the cultural attributes of a vibrant court. In the Baroque era (1600-1750), the city and its ruling Farnese dynasty pioneered the visual arts, theatre and music. In May 2017 two Dalhousie students toured the city and its vicinity in company of Prof. Gregory Hanlon, a specialist of the era who uses the city as his base in Italy. Ben Cable spent a week in Parma and nearby Piacenza in the framework of his M.A. thesis under Dr. Hanlon's direction, on the material splendor of the Farnese court as it appears in a 500-page inventory from 1695.

“Arriving in Parma I found a series of bridges connect the city's east and west sides over the Parma river, which dwindles to a small stream in the summer. This was the first landmark I recognized and I stopped to take in the view of the Apennines mountains to the south, thinking of the old city maps I had seen depicting this division of the walled city. After a year of reading about the city of Parma and its surrounding duchy I was eager to explore as much of the city as I could, and to contextualize the research I had done. The infrastructure, architecture and art displayed throughout the city contain a wide array of styles from different periods, although the influence of the early modern period can be found throughout, and many of the galleries and palaces are preserved due to their cultural and artistic significance. The Farnese palaces are for the most part still intact, and my goal was to see as many of them as I could before branching out to those outside the city. Almost every building we passed had a story, and we would often step inside to find old frescoes still viewable within the courtyards. The tour connected the early modern period to the present day, with

Dalhousie in Parma, Italy

explanations of contemporary culture interspersed with historical context.

Outside the city, the hunting palace of Colorno, now home to a culinary arts school, gives tours throughout the apartments of the old palace and the chapel, a main setting for the 1695 inventory. The diary of the ducal barber frequently describes their time spent on the vast property, and though the items found within the inventory have mostly been relocated, the interior is still decorated with frescoes from the period, which were not part of the movable furnishings. Understanding the size, layout and immovable decorations cannot be grasped from the document, and exploring the palace helps contextualize the items contained in the source. Also outside Parma, the Meli Lupi palace in Soragna is furnished and decorated with the kind of objects that I saw for the first time after reading about them in my document. The brocade textiles made with gold and silver thread stand out, including wall coverings, fireplace screens and furniture upholstery. This residence also houses an impressive portrait gallery containing many portraits of members of the Farnese dynasty, showing their connection to the surrounding aristocratic families of the era.”

Sarah Meng Li toured Parma as preparation for her Dalhousie course on Baroque Civilization taught every year at Cesky Krumlov in the Czech Republic.

“We took various walking tours through Parma, during which we visited the Cathedral, the Teatro Farnese (the first modern theatre, with its picture-frame stage), the Palazzo della Pilotta (the palace of the dukes of Parma), and Baptistery of Parma which dated to the 12th century. It was fascinating to witness how the splendid works of art were so well preserved and how they were still appreciated by its modern

Dalhousie in Parma, Italy

descendants. The trip in Parma encouraged me to study its history through reading, observing, discussing and listening; it also expanded my horizon with the breathtakingly beauty of Baroque culture. My experience in Parma enabled me to study the Baroque culture in the most tangible way. Those unique memories of us strolling along the aged town in the golden sunlight will remain fresh and prompt me to step out of my comfort zone and see the wonder of the world.”