



THE GATTONI TOWER

You can find this point of interest in Como 6 – Stage 1.

INFORMATION

Location: the Gattoni Tower is located on the corner of Viale Varese and Viale Cattaneo in Como

Paving: the tower is surrounded on four sides by a wide grassy strip separated by a stone curb of about 10 centimetres from the market area that runs along the Varese and Cattaneo avenues

Access: –

Services: parking in the dedicated area along Viale Varese; urban and suburban bus stops available in the area; ATMs in via Giulini, via Milano-corner Piazza Vittoria. Municipal Library of Como in Piazzetta Venosto Lucati

Leisure and Catering: bars and cafes in the area; public garden along Viale Varese with fountain

Other information: the tower is still owned by the Municipality of Como and is open to the public only on special occasions.

DESCRIPTION

(by Silvia Fasana)

While Giulio Cesare Gattoni (1741-1809) was attending the last year of Rhetoric with the Jesuits, in 1758, Alessandro Volta (four years younger than him), whom Gattoni had already been living for some time as a neighbour and playmate, also entered the college. The closeness in the studies deepened their familiarity and a solid friendship and collaboration was born, favoured by common interests and curiosity about physical phenomena. In the laboratory that he had initially set up in his own home, Gattoni, ordained a priest in 1765 and appointed Canon of the cathedral, frequently hosted his friend, with whom he conducted his first experiments on natural phenomena, the properties of gases, electricity and meteorology. As a result of these experiments, in 1869 Volta wrote his dissertation *De vi attractiva ignis electrici ac phoenomenis inde pendentibus*, dedicated to Giovanni Battista Beccaria and, in 1771, the text *Novus ac simplicissimus electricorum tentaminum apparatus*, dedicated to Lazzaro Spallanzani. Remembering that period, Gattoni wrote that in Volta he had found an “*indivisible companion*”, but from 1774 their relations became less close, since the latter was appointed Regent of the Public Schools of Como and, subsequently, professor of Experimental Physics at the University of Pavia. Probably around 1784 (as attested by Giovio himself) Gattoni obtained in use from the Municipality of Como (thanks to the support of Giovan Battista Giovio, then Conservator in the Congregation of Heritage), the ancient medieval tower of Porta Nuova (today better known as Torre Gattoni), to move the physics laboratory he had at his home, also creating a meteorological observatory and a museum with stuffed animals, shells, minerals, as well as weapons, armour and archaeological finds. The building marks the south-eastern corner of the city walls; it took its name from the New Castle erected at the same time as the city walls in 1158 and destroyed in 1447, at the time of the Republic of Sant'Abbondio, because it was considered superfluous. It has a pentagonal plan (like the contemporary Tower of San Vitale located at the opposite end of the

southern side of the walls) and is characterized by a slight inclination, perhaps already manifested during its construction. This museum must have been quite famous at the time, so much so that it was visited by celebrities such as the polygraph scientist Carlo Amoretti, the naturalist Candida Lena Perpentì and the Swiss mountaineer and scientist Horace-Bénédict de Saussure. On the roof of his house in Contrada di Porta Nuova he had installed a *Franklinian bar* in 1768, built in such a way as to act simultaneously as a lightning rod (most likely the first in Italy) and as an «*explorer of atmospheric electricity*», as he himself wrote; when he came in possession of the Tower, he moved it to its roof. At the beginning of the nineteenth century Gattoni opened the museum of natural sciences, the physics cabinet and the meteorological observatory to the teachers and students of the new high school (the Lyceum) in Como. Before his death in 1809, he donated his equipment twice to the same Lyceum, which in 1865 was dedicated to his friend Alessandro Volta; his donations are remembered by a plaque on the short staircase leading to the Institute's new library, erected immediately after his death by the Prefect of the Province, Michele Vismara by decree of Viceroy Eugenio Beauharnais. The dedication of the monument to electricity was subsequently renewed around the thirties of the last century, when the Tower became the site of the first electrical substation that supplied the current for the lighting of the walled city, which remained active until 1958. This is still evidenced today by the presence of the electrical panel with measuring instruments and disconnectors, as well as the transformers of the “rock-and-tilt” type.