

## Two unpublished letters of Secondo Pia about the 1898 Shroud photography

Roberto Falcinelli

Viale degli Astri, 59 cap. 00188 Rome-Italy email: coleridge@libero.it

### Abstract

*After the first photograph of the Shroud of Turin made in 1898 the lawyer Secondo Pia had extensive correspondence with many personalities and scholars throughout Europe. In particular some letter, traced in this paper, refer to contacts with which Filippo Crispolti dissertation of some technical details of unpublished and management Pia's archive. The study of this correspondence is deduced when new openings for research on the first photo of the Shroud.*

**Keywords:** Shroud exposition, photographic negative, Pia

In 1842, to celebrate the wedding of Crown Prince Victor-Emmanuel with Arch-duchess Mary-Adelaide of Austria, the Shroud of Turin was publicly exhibited in Turin. It is well known that on this occasion there was an attempted photographing of the Shroud with the daguerreotype by Enrico Federico Jest [1].

The occasion was during the exposition from a balcony of the Royal Palace, but it is reported that, due to bad weather, it was impossible to take any photographs (see figure 1).

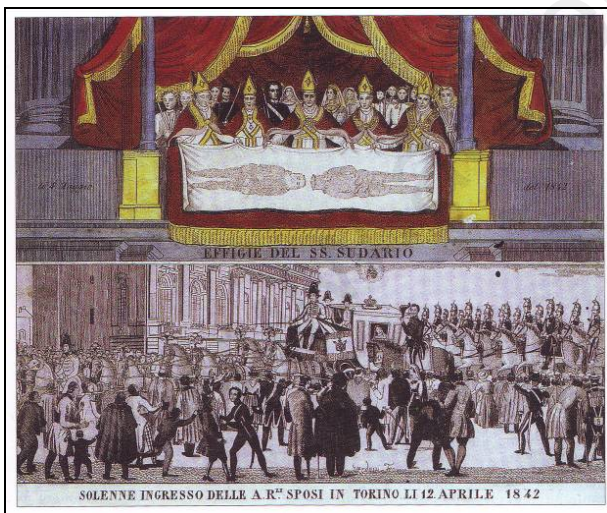


Figure 1. Commemorative print of 1842 Shroud's exhibition.

The opportunity would arise again in 1898. The 1898 Exhibition marks an important and decisive turning-point in the Shroud history and in the knowledge of the Shroud itself. Until then, the Shroud had been considered only on a devotional plane.

After the first photograph taken of the cloth had led to the discovery of the image negative properties, it became

an object of examination on a scientific plane as well. The Exhibition was allowed by the House of Savoy to solemnize the wedding between Crown Prince Vittorio Emanuele III and Montenegrin Princess Elena Petrovich-Niegos and it was part of ampler civic and religious events celebrated in Italy and in Turin.

The event that went down in history was not the Exhibition unusual duration, from May 25 to June 2, 1898, but the taking of the first photograph of the Holy Cloth. The cloth was displayed in a large and artistic frame with the consequent discovery that the imprints that could be seen on it were a perfect negative [2].

We must remember the interest and the work of the Salesian Father Natale Noguier de Malijay (figure 2).

Don Noguier made the suggestion to photograph the Shroud. To his bitter surprise, his idea was rejected, as being too "dangerous" for the Shroud.

The proposition of Don Noguier was examined by a commission set up on April 18, directed by Baron Manno and others.



Figure 2. Father Natale Noguier de Malijay

# Proceedings of the International Workshop on the Scientific approach to the Acheiropietos Images, ENEA Frascati, Italy, 4-6 May 2010

In cooperation with Secondo Pia, Baron Manno proposed to photograph the Shroud and to use the photos to promote the "Arte Sacra." Finally, king Umberto gave his permission to show the Shroud in its full length, during the "Arte Sacra" in the Cathedral of St. John.

During the development of the glass plates Secondo Pia (figure 3) noticed that the image on the photographic negative appeared as a perfect positive of a man composed solemnly in death. (figure 4) He was very amazed at his discovery but arrived at the conclusion that the image on the plate appears as a perfect positive and that the actual object itself must likewise be a perfect negative [3].



Figure 3. Secondo Pia.

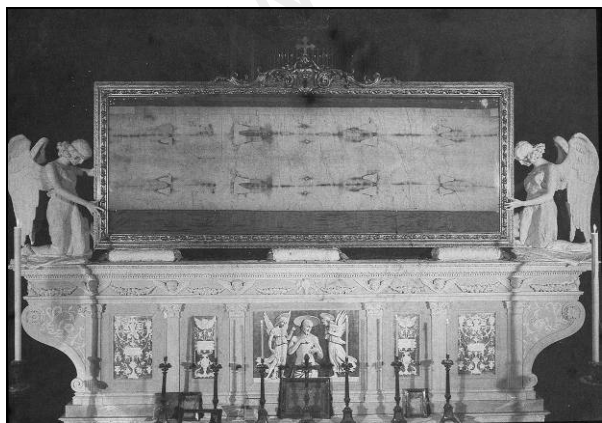


Figure 4. The Shroud in the 1898 frame.

A precise reconstruction of Pia's work was realized by his son, the lawyer Giuseppe, in an accurate article in the magazine "Sindon" (April 1961) [4] to which we refer people who want to have first-hand information.

The article quotes some documents in its appendix, among which the most important is one titled "Memory" that Pia wrote in French for Arthur Loth, who published it in the volume "*La Photographie du Saint Suaire de Turin*", printed in Paris in 1907.

Until today this is the only writing that Pia left about his work to offset skeptics and their criticisms that the photograph was not perfectly realized.

The confirmation of the results did come from photographs like the one by lieutenant Felice Fino and the one by Jesuit Father Giammaria Sanna Solaro, who published his photograph in the work "*La Santa Sindone di Torino che si venera a Torino illustrata e difesa*" (figure 5). It is also reported that Don Noguier took some successful photographs but unfortunately there is no trace of them.

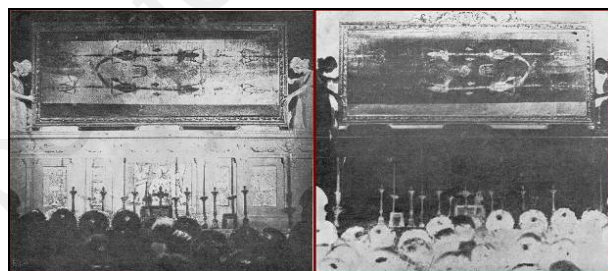


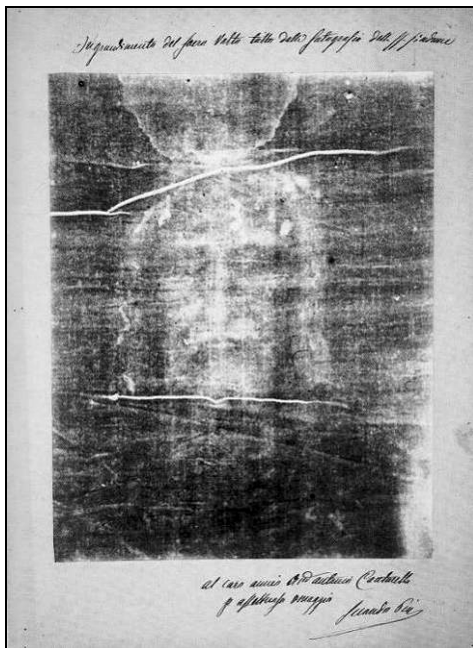
Figure 5. Negative and positive of the Sanna Solaro's photo.

The qualification of "amateur photographer" given to Pia in many subsequent writings was a distortion of reality, reestablished in its very rich objectivity through the numerous national and international recognitions given to him.

Father Antonio Tonelli, in an article published in "*Rivista dei giovani*" [5] remembering Pia's work, wrote: "*Pia told a friend of mine that once (he) placed the plate in the bath, he felt the need to jump because he was so filled with emotion and happiness*".

The other detail is remembered by an assistant of Pia's nephew in an article published in "*Collegamento pro Sindone*" [6]: "*Pia was at the threshold of the dark room. In his hands he held the big plate still dripping fixative. Once close to him, my grandfather was struck by the strange expression of his face. He looked down at the plate and saw...*" (figure 6). Two really interesting and very important articles about Pia's various photographic sessions in 1898, with original photographic documentation, were published in "*Sindon*" in 1991 and 1995, signed by Gian Maria Zaccone [7] on the occasion of the donation by Pia's son, the lawyer Giuseppe, of his father's collection regarding the Shroud: writings, documents, original photographs and plates.

# Proceedings of the International Workshop on the Scientific approach to the Acheiropoietos Images, ENEA Frascati, Italy, 4-6 May 2010



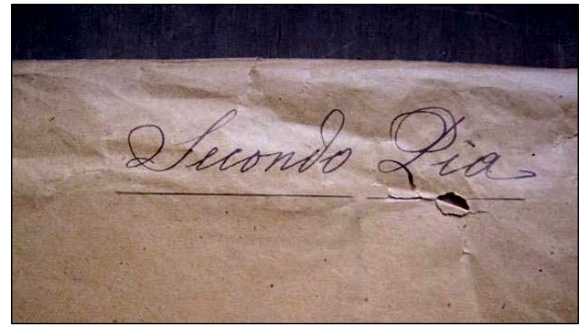
**Figure 6.** The detail of the face.

I present it here with the words of the author: "It's a fund [collection] not of great dimensions, but of notable importance. It has been munificently given by Secondo Pia's children - Giuseppe and Chiara - in successive stages, from the 60's until today. It is composed of papers, particularly correspondence, that cover a period of time from 1898 to the 1930's, and naturally, of original photographic plates, prints and reproductions of the Shroud. It also includes the large camera, whose image has become familiar to every Shroud researcher and lover, used by the photographer of Asti for the Shroud photography in 1898. The Shroud photographic section is only a small part of Pia's marvellous photographic archives created during the many years he dedicated to this new art."

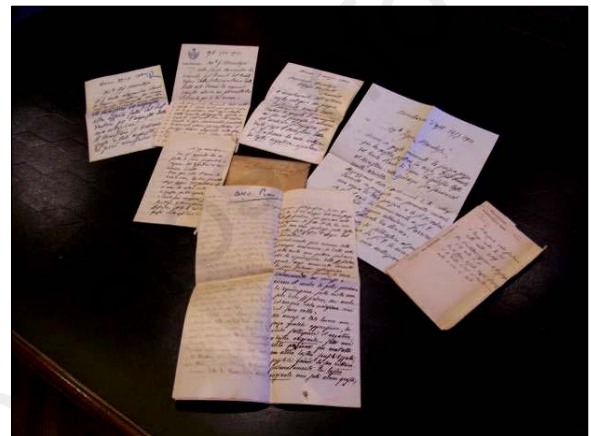
During the exposition of 1998 in Turin Zaccone edited the exhibition "The image revealed. Secondo Pia photographed the Shroud", which showed for the first time a lot of material and photographs of 1898.

Recently I was so fortunate to receive notice about some unpublished letters (see figures 7, 8, 9, 10) written by Secondo Pia kept in the Archives of the Dominican Fathers' Convent of Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome [8]. This fund that, among other things, includes a section of a certain size related to correspondence, was donated by the heirs of Marquis Filippo Crispolti.

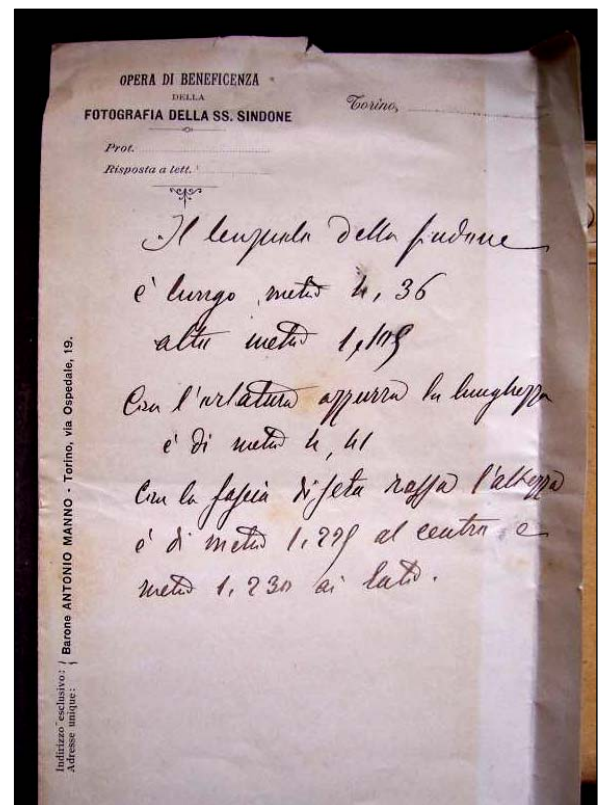
The Marquis Crispolti (figure 11) was a journalist and writer, politician, deputy and senator. He published one of the first articles about Pia's photography in a foreign magazine. An article which caused some talk. Correspondence with Pia is estimated at approximately 10 letters contained in an envelope, two of which are those that concern us more, because they deal with the photography of the Shroud.



**Figure 7.** Detail of the envelope.



**Figure 8.** All the letters of Pia to Crispolti.



**Figure 9.** Pia's measurement of the Shroud size.

# Proceedings of the International Workshop on the Scientific approach to the Acheiropoietos Images, ENEA Frascati, Italy, 4-6 May 2010

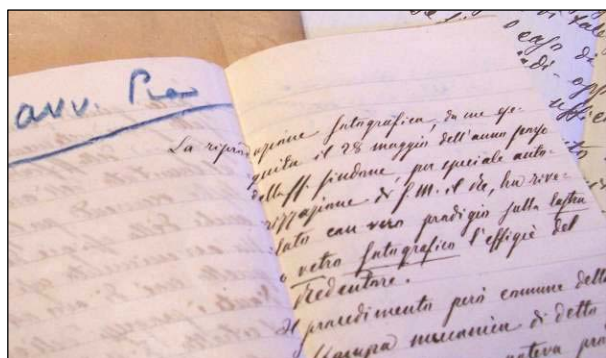


Figure 10. Detail of the first letter.



Figure 11. Marquis Filippo Crispolti.

They are not dated, but they clearly date back to 1899. In the first short letter Pia refers to a verbal interview, in which the recipient had apparently asked for precise data on the Shroud measurements, to prepare a second article. In this letter Pia mentions the request to continue a technical publication of the photos he had taken and, specifying that the administrative aspects were responsibility of another person, he recommends that the public be informed that he derives no financial profit from publication and that the only satisfaction given him by his work is moral. In the second instead Secondo Pia describes how he had obtained the enlargements of the only face, that were marketed together with those of the entire Shroud. The technical details contained in the letter are very important, because until now there has been no news of how they had been obtained. It is known in fact that Pia accomplished only the shooting of the total picture of the Shroud and nothing special.

Pia writes [9]: “*The photographic reproduction of the Holy Shroud I took on 28<sup>th</sup> May of last year under special authorization of the king has surprisingly revealed the image of the Redeemer on the photographic glass plate.*”

However the common procedure of printing such glass mechanically on paper could not but produce the reproduction of the Holy Shroud, as it had been admired during its solemn exhibition. The importance of this event made me try to reproduce on paper not only the Holy Shroud, but also the rear side of it, that is of the holy face. I started this work with apprehension, as I had to submit the negative or original plate to a certain pressure because of the contact with another sensitized plate with consequent possible break. Fortunately the original plate had no damage, therefore, as I had already done with the print of the Holy Shroud, I could furnish the Committee of Sacred Art the plates necessary to print also the image of the Redeemer. Such an unexpected event, that is obtaining the portrait of Our Lord Jesus Christ thanks to the progress of photography, didn't allow the people who were not competent in the photographic chemical process to exactly understand how it could take place: it is therefore natural and comprehensible the confusion the most even now make between positive and negative copy.

Once the photograph of the Holy Shroud, eagerly awaited by the faithful, was published, it was widely requested from every part of the Christian world: when later the photograph of the Redeemer's image was published, the requests were inferior because of the confusion I mentioned before.

It would be thus advisable that the public, in spite of the modest publications, was better informed about such new work that would complete the previous one and especially because this would spread the Holy Image in the world of the believers and the sales could go on, increasing the proceeds destined to charity by the King.

Considering the importance and the interest for history and religion of having finally found the portrait of Our Lord Jesus Christ after so many centuries, I thought I could enlarge it and after long and patient efforts (there's nothing like being modest) I succeeded.

This blow-up was carried out by me alone in my study exposing the original glass by transparency and then in larger and larger dimensions, paying attention that this enlargement didn't alter the features of the holy face in the least; and I didn't retouch anything in this delicate work as well as in the original glass, but I obtained only what my camera offered me with mathematical precision and accuracy.

The above-mentioned blow-up was executed in three different dimensions, the largest of the face only of cm 14 for a photograph of cm 21×27. The medium of cm 8 for a photograph of cm 13×18 and the smallest of cm 5 for a photograph of cm 9×12.

As I had already done previously, I prepared the plate necessary for the printing and publication of this photograph and to this purpose the baron Manno founded an office called “*Opera di beneficenza per la fotografia della SS. Sindone*” situated in via Arsenale n. 15 until June and from 1st July in Via San Francesco di Paola n. 19.”



Figure 11. The Shroud inside the Cathedral of Turin in 1898.

#### REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Capello di Sanfranco, L., *Un cenno sulla SS Sindone*, in Museo Scientifico, Letterario e Artistico 24, (1842) pp. 189-190. See also: G.M. Zaccone, *Torino 1898, l'Ostensione della Sindone e l'Esposizione d'Arte Sacra*, Gribaudo, Paravia Torino (1998).
2. G. Sanna Solaro, *La S. Sindone che si venera a Torino*, V. Bona, Torino (1901).
3. A fundamental book about the work of Pia is: G.M. Zaccone, *L'immagine rivelata. Secondo Pia fotografa la Sindone*, Archivio di Stato, Torino (1998).
4. G. Pia, *La prima fotografia della SS Sindone*, *Sindon*, III. N.5, aprile 1961, pp. 51-53.
5. A. Tonelli, *La fotografia ha deciso*, *Rivista dei Giovani*, Torino, (November 1929).
6. L. Fossati, *Un oscuro promotore della ripresa fotografica della Sacra Sindone nel 1898: il salesiano Don Natale Noguier de Malijay*, *Collegamento pro Sindone*, July\August 1988, pp. 8-42. The name of Pia's assistant is Carlino.
7. G.M. Zaccone, *La fotografia della Sindone nel 1898: recenti scoperte e conferme nell'archivio Pia*, *Sindon*, nuova serie, II, n. 3, pp. 69-101 (1991). See also: G.M. Zaccone, *Alcune note sul riordino e la consistenza dell'archivio Pia*, *Sindon*, nuova serie, VII, n. 8, pp. 91-98 (1995).
8. Minerva Archivium: Pia H III,16, busta 39.
9. This is the full text of the letter. Translation of the author.