

# THE VICTIMS OF LABOUR

26.04.2026–10.01.2027

Museo Vincenzo Vela

Ligornetto

EN

# THE VICTIMS OF LABOUR

## A Focus Exhibition

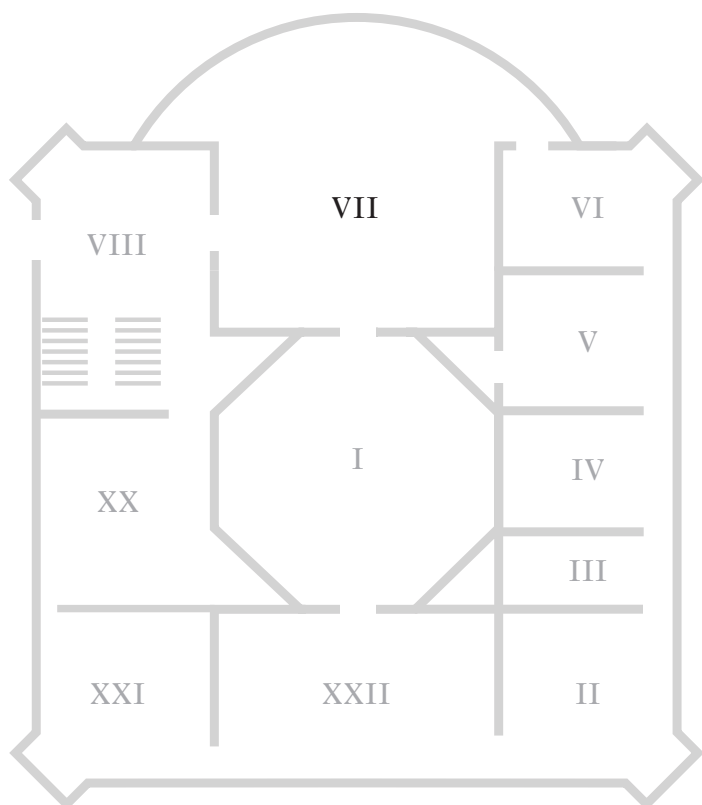
Texts: Anita Guglielmetti, Giampaolo Baragiola  
Translation: Scriptum

Tying in with Bertille Bak's show in which she turns her attention to the world of work today, the Museum presents an exhibition focusing on *The Victims of Labour* (1882–83), the key work of Vincenzo Vela's artistic maturity. This high relief shows Vela's art pivoting towards a socially-inspired realism and a civic sculpture attentive to "liberal principles" and progressive values.

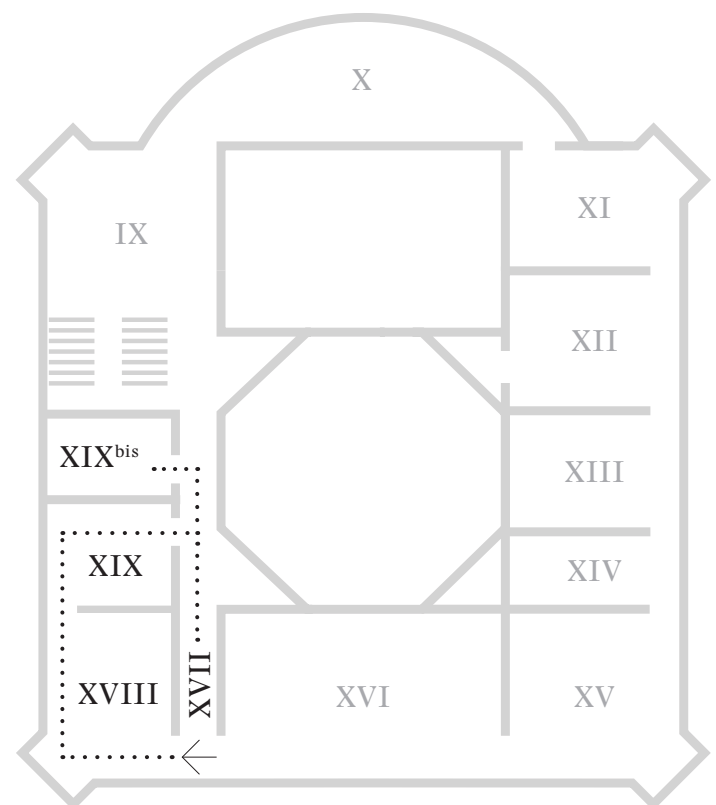
Like a south-to-north journey, the exhibition pathway follows the *Gotthardbahn* line through the evocative views made in 1881–82 by the Adolphe Braun photography studio in Dornach. The images selected from that priceless album illustrate the sheer scope of the enterprise, highlighting its strong symbolic value.

In marked contrast with this narrative is the hard daily existence of the workers building the railway who were subjected to extreme working conditions, often falling victim to disease or accidents. This harsh reality is documented by rare materials and photographic evidence from prestigious public and private collections.

Vincenzo Vela dedicates a touching tribute to these "calm soldiers of labour" with his high relief, a tribute that still preserves all of its expressive power and profound authenticity. Drawings, bozzetti, photographs, and archival papers document the birth and later fortunes of the monument displayed on the ground floor of the museum as the focal point of this exhibition.



GROUND FLOOR



FIRST FLOOR

## THE GOTTHARD RAILWAY (GOTTHARDBAHN)

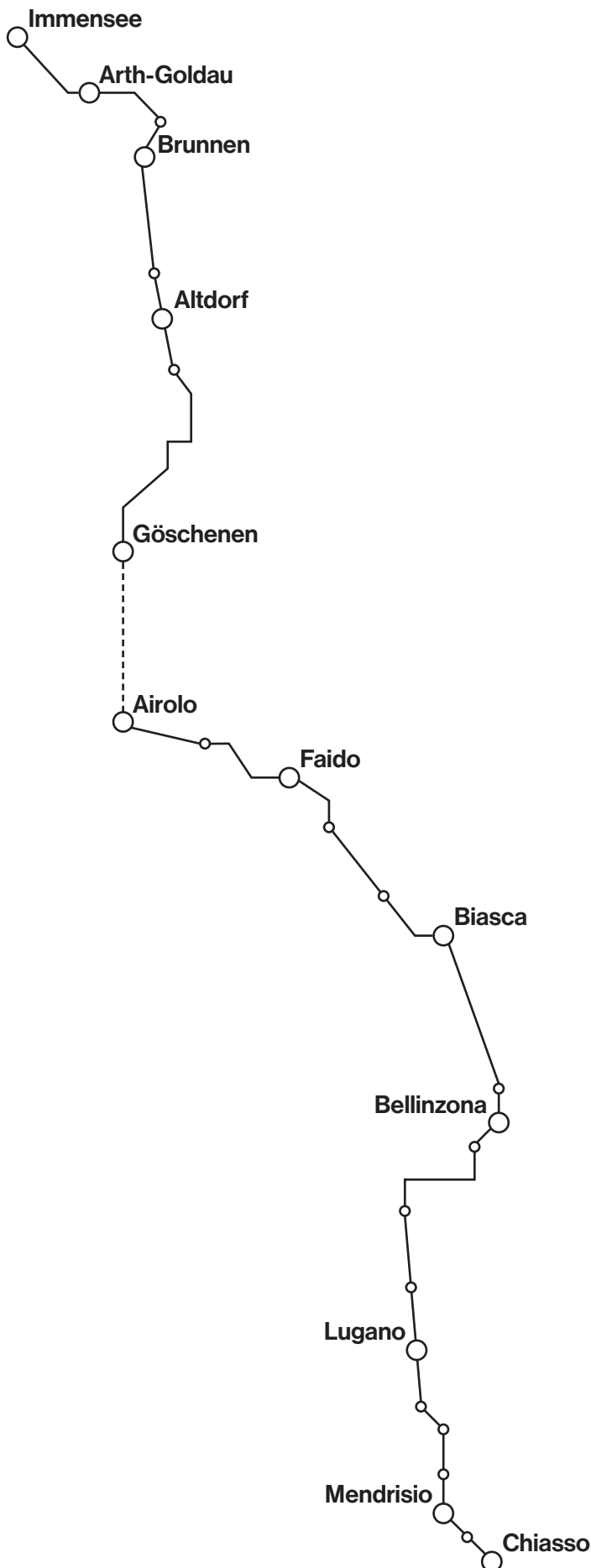
From the mid-19th century onwards, there were heated debates about which was the best railway route across the Alps. In the end, the route selected was via the Gotthard Pass, thanks also to the support of the Kingdom of Italy, the Grand Duchy of Baden, and the Kingdom of Württemberg. In 1869, the Gotthard Treaty was signed by Switzerland and Italy, followed by the German Empire two years later. In that period, the Gotthard Gesellschaft, chaired by the Zurich railway magnate Alfred Escher, founded the Gotthard railway. Despite facing both technical and financial difficulties, it built a rail network with a route length of 273 kilometres. The construction of the Gotthard tunnel and the access routes through the cantons of Uri and Ticino proved particularly complex.

Technically cutting-edge, the *Gotthardbahn* was equipped with high-performance locomotives, luxurious bogie carriages, and rolling stock with automatic brakes. In 1909, it became part of the Swiss Federal Railways.

### THE GOTTHARD TUNNEL FROM AIROLO TO GÖSCHENEN (1872–82)

The construction of the 15-kilometre-long tunnel, the longest in the world at the time, was tendered to the firm of Louis Favre, an engineer from Geneva. On the basis of over-optimistic forecasts, soon contradicted by a series of geological and geotechnical issues, he accepted what turned out to be ruinous contract conditions, proving a disaster for his company. In 1878, the firm required substantial refinancing and the entire transalpine section had to be temporarily scaled back.

Over 10,000 men worked on the construction site, living and operating in precarious conditions with inadequate safety measures. After the first few months of manual excavation, from 1873 onwards, pneumatic drills were used to drill blast holes in the main tunnel. After blasting, rock debris was transported out of the tunnel using small wagons. The same system was used to widen the tunnel, first to either side, and then downwards, until the planned floor level was reached.



## ADOLPHE BRAUN (1812–1877) PHOTOGRAPHIC ENTREPRENEUR

French photographer, designer, and entrepreneur, Adolphe Braun was born in 1812, in Besançon. In 1847, after training as a textile and porcelain designer, he founded an atelier of fabric design at Dornach, Alsace. He later moved into photography, presenting *Fleurs photographiées* in Paris and Mulhouse in 1854 – an album with over 300 photographs of flowers mainly intended for use in fabric designs. From the late 1850s onwards, he expanded his repertoire to include views, studies of animals, art reproductions, as well as documenting the devastation caused by the Franco-Prussian War, propelling his business to international success. After his death in 1877, his sons Gaston and Henri continued his thriving enterprise, focusing on Paris. In 1883, Gaston signed an exclusive 30-year contract with the Louvre for the photographic reproduction of artworks. The firm remained active until the mid-20th century.

## THE GOTTHARD RAILWAY ALBUM

Thanks to his keen entrepreneurial spirit, already in the 1850s Adolphe Braun had recognized the potential of commercial photography, an area whose development was closely linked to the rise of tourism. He therefore ensured that images of major tourist attractions were systematically added to his catalogue.

In 1881, the *Gotthardbahn* commissioned Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, now run by his son Gaston, to document the construction of the line. The contract specified that three collaborators could travel free of charge, in second class, along the entire route. It also listed the subject matter, the number and size of the prints, stipulating that the negatives would remain the property of the railway company. In June 1882, the album *Photographische Ansichten der Gotthardbahn* was published to mark the inauguration of the railway. The striking collection of images evokes the grandeur of this engineering feat as well as the scale of its impact on the landscape, the signs of a new age of technical and industrial progress.

- 1 **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
***Robasacco Bridge, 1881–82***  
albumen print  
ASTi, Bellinzona - Fototeca, Album/4.G26
  - 2 **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
***Pianturino Viaduct (under Construction), 1881–82***  
albumen print  
ASTi, Bellinzona - Fototeca, Album/4.G5
  - 3 **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
***Ticino Valley and Biasca Station, 1881–82***  
albumen print  
ASTi, Bellinzona - Fototeca, Album/4.G11
  - 4 **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
***Gotthard Railroad Bridge over Brenno River with view toward the Blenio Valley, 1881–82***  
albumen print  
ASTi, Bellinzona - Fototeca, Album/4.G18
  - 5 **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
***Lower Ticino Bridge with View of Giornico, 1881–82***  
albumen print  
ASTi, Bellinzona - Fototeca, Album/4.G12
  - 6 **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
***Fontanelle Viaduct, 1881–82***  
albumen print  
ASTi, Bellinzona - Fototeca, Album/4.G24
  - 7 **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
***Overall View of the Railroad Track in the Biaschina, 1881–82***  
albumen print  
ASTi, Bellinzona - Fototeca, Album/4.G65
- The engineers designing the access routes to the Gotthard tunnel were forced to adopt special measures because of the complex geomorphological conditions. At Biaschina, and further north in the Piottino gorge and at Wassen, they created a system of spiral tunnels to gain elevation in these relatively confined spaces. The *Gotthardbahn* would leave a profound mark on the landscape, especially in the mountain stretches of the railway. It would take many decades before nature could heal the scars that had been left.
- 8 **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
***Faido, 1881–82***  
albumen print  
ASTi, Bellinzona - Fototeca, Album/4.G17
  - 9 **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
***Stalvedro Gorge, 1881–82***  
albumen print  
ASTi, Bellinzona - Fototeca, Album/4.G2

- 10 **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
*Installation Plants in Airolo, 1881–82*  
albumen print  
Swiss Museum of Transport, Lucerne - VA-9906

The Favre company built these facilities near the tunnel entrances. In addition to the technical offices, storerooms, mechanical workshops, and compressor rooms, they included the workers' villages with dormitories, canteens, and infirmaries. Proximity to watercourses was essential because they provided the hydraulic energy needed to generate compressed air.

- 11 **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
*Gotthard Railway in Göschenen, 1881–82*  
albumen print  
ASTI, Bellinzona - Fototeca, Album/4.G3

- 12 **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
*Installation Plants in Göschenen, 1881–82*  
albumen print  
ASTI, Bellinzona - Fototeca, Album/4.G16

- 13 **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
*Compressors, 1881–82*  
albumen print  
ASTI, Bellinzona - Fototeca, Album/4.G15

In this room, turbines generated compressed air used for various purposes, including the powering of the pneumatic drills. The compressed air was stored in special tanks then conveyed into the tunnels through pipes.

## → DISPLAY CASE

- 14 **Edo Borelli, Airolo (\*1946)**  
*Workers in Front of the South Entrance to the Gotthard Tunnel in Airolo, c. 1872–73*  
copy, black-and-white photo print  
Swiss Museum of Transport, Lucerne - VA - 67247

Thousands of miners, navvies, and masons, mostly from Italy, were involved in the construction of the Gotthard tunnel. This led to a massive increase in the population of Airolo and Göschenen, causing social tensions as well as housing speculation. The Favre company did not build a sufficient number of *maisons ouvrières* to house all of the workers, forcing many of them to turn to private landlords, who rented them inadequate, insanitary lodgings. Poor ventilation, hot-bedding (sleeping in the same bed in shifts), open sewers, and disregard for hygiene led to the spread of diseases.

- 15 **Foto Aschwanden, Altdorf**  
*Entrance to the Gotthard Tunnel, under Construction, on the North Side near Göschenen, c. 1872–73*  
copy, black-and-white photo print  
Swiss Museum of Transport, Lucerne - VA - 59309

- 16 **Edo Borelli, Airolo (\*1946)**  
*Workers in front of the Gotthard South Entrance, 1882*  
copy, black-and-white photo print  
Swiss Museum of Transport, Lucerne - VA - 67248

- 17 **Photographie Gabler, Interlaken**  
*Workers in Front of the South Entrance to the Gotthard Tunnel at Airolo, next to a Locomotive Equipped with a Compressed-air Tank, c. 1875*  
copy, black-and-white photo print  
Swiss Museum of Transport, Lucerne - VA - 67249

- 18 **Foto Aschwanden, Altdorf**  
*Workers in Front of the South Entrance to the Gotthard Tunnel, with a Small Locomotive in the Background, c. 1882*  
copy, black-and-white photo print  
Swiss Museum of Transport, Lucerne - VA - 67246

- 19 **Fotografo non identificato**  
*Pneumatic drills for the Gotthard Tunnel with Worker in Airolo, 1872–82*  
albumen print on photographic cardboard  
Swiss Museum of Transport, Lucerne - VA - 42684

- 20 **Johann Adam Gabler (1833–1888)**  
*Locomotive Used in the Tunnel Excavation Work, with a Compressed Air Tank for the Boring Machines at the North Entrance of the Gotthard Tunnel at Göschenen, c. 1873–82*  
albumen print mounted on printed photographic cardboard  
Swiss Museum of Transport, Lucerne - VA - 42685

- 21 **Unknown photographer**  
*Gotthard Railway Compressed Air Locomotive No. 6 with Attached Compressed Air Tank, c. 1875–76*  
albumen print on cardboard  
Swiss Museum of Transport, Lucerne - VA - 56580

- 22 **Fotografia A. Brunel, Bellinzona**  
*A 2/2 Compressed-air Locomotive for the Construction of the Gotthard Tunnel, with a Compressed-air Tank and Rolling Stock on the Line, with Crew, 1872–82*  
copy, black-and-white photo print  
Swiss Museum of Transport, Lucerne - VA - 56906

- 23 **Giovanni Pedretti (1822–1902)**  
*First Train through the Gotthard Tunnel, at the Airolo End, with Workers, 1 November 1881*  
albumen print mounted on photographic cardboard  
Swiss Museum of Transport, Lucerne - VA - 42691

Giovanni Pedretti, from Pollegio, was one of the pioneers of photography in Ticino. In 1881, Pedretti, who had an established studio in Airolo, immortalized the memorable event. It took the “pleasure train” 50 minutes to travel through the tunnel, a journey that went smoothly, reaching a temperature – according to the newspapers of the time – of 24 degrees in the central section.

- 24 **Angelo Monotti (1835–1915)**  
*Arrival of the first train on the Gotthard line  
at the Station of Bellinzona, 23 May 1882*  
silver gelatin print

ASTi, Bellinzona, Fondo Angelo Monotti, S/7.16

The *Gazzetta Ticinese* reporter who covered the solemn celebrations for the opening of the Gotthard railway line in May 1882 described the train's festive arrival at Bellinzona station as follows: “[...] the convoy was greeted by a cannon shot fired from the ramparts of the castle of San Michele. Waiting at the station to welcome it were the Canton Government, the Town Hall, the Civic Societies with seven flags, the Philharmonic Society, and a huge cheering crowd.”

- 25 **Unknown photographer**  
*The Gotthard Tunnel entrance near Airolo,  
with workers, c. 1880–82*  
albumen print on cardboard

Swiss Museum of Transport, Lucerne - VA - 42687

→ ROOM XIX

- 26 **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
*Rohrbach Bridge, 1881–82*  
albumen print  
ASTi, Bellinzona - Fototeca, Album/4.G8
- 27 **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
*Stralloch Bridge, 1881–82*  
albumen print  
ASTi, Bellinzona - Fototeca, Album/4.G44
- 28 **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
*Middle and Lower Meienreuss Bridge, 1881–82*  
albumen print  
ASTi, Bellinzona - Fototeca, Album/4.G9
- 29 **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
*Railroad Area at Wassen, 1881–82*  
albumen print  
ASTi, Bellinzona - Fototeca, Album/4.G4
- 30 **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
*Transport Scaffolding across the Reuss  
at Meitschlingen, 1881–82*  
albumen print  
ASTi, Bellinzona - Fototeca, Album/4.G30
- 31 **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
*Chärstelenbach Bridge  
(after Completion), 1881–82*  
albumen print  
ASTi, Bellinzona - Fototeca, Album/4.G31
- 32 **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
*Sisikon, 1881–82*  
albumen print  
ASTi, Bellinzona - Fototeca, Album/4.G46
- 33 **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
*View at Gütschtunnel Exit, 1881–82*  
albumen print  
ASTi, Bellinzona - Fototeca, Album/4.G10
- 34 **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
*Mythenstein Tunnel (Lake Lucerne), 1881–82*  
albumen print  
ASTi, Bellinzona - Fototeca, Album/4.G7
- 35 **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
*Muota Bridge after Completion, 1881–82*  
albumen print  
ASTi, Bellinzona - Fototeca, Album/4.G29
- 36 **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
*Railroad Area near Goldau, 1881–82*  
albumen print  
ASTi, Bellinzona - Fototeca, Album/4.G36
- 37 **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
*Lucerne, 1881–82*  
albumen print  
ASTi, Bellinzona - Fototeca, Album/4.G42

→ DISPLAY CASE

**38** **Miner's Lamp, 1860–87**  
copper and iron  
Swiss Museum of Transport, Lucerne – VHS - 10138

**Inscription: monogram G. S.**

The lamp bears the monogram of the French engineer Gustave Seguin, the foreman at Airolo. Drawing on his experience during the Mont Cenis Tunnel, Seguin developed a new type of percussion drill, making a decisive contribution to the advancement of the work.

In the darkness of the tunnel, the only source of light came from oil lamps. Made from metal, they provided light for about ten hours. They had a long handle ending in a hook or a pointed hammer, allowing them to be attached to the tunnel supports or rock face. This overhead lighting facilitated inspections by engineers like Seguin as well as the excavation and shoring work carried out by the workers. This essential piece of equipment was not provided free of charge and miners had to pay 5 francs to purchase them, plus 30 centimes a day for the oil.

→ ROOM XIXbis

**39** **Cast from Life of a Man's Right Hand, c. 1882**  
plaster  
MVV - Ve335

**40** **Cast from Life of a Man's Right Hand, c. 1882**  
plaster  
MVV - Ve333

Vincenzo Vela used this work-roughened hand as inspiration for that of the lifeless miner lying on the stretcher. The miner's abandoned arm has a strong symbolic impact, evoking the Greco-Roman iconography of the dying Meleager being carried home as well as the Deposition of Christ.

Recent studies have led to the identification of additional hand casts connected to the genesis of the high relief.

**41** **Cast from Life of a Man's Right Hand, c. 1882**  
plaster  
MVV - Ve329

**42** **Vincenzo Vela (1820–1891)**  
**Study for "The Victims of Labour", 1882**  
pencil on paper  
MVV - Ve1200R

**Bottom right:**  
**"Victims of labour / first sketch**  
**by Vincenzo Vela / given to his**  
**pupil Gottardo Induni"**

In this study, the first graphic concept for the monument, Vela has already developed the key elements of his composition. The artist gave this sheet to the sculptor Gottardo Induni (1858-1918), his pupil and a family friend from Ligornetto. In 1883, together with Vincenzo's son Spartaco Vela, Induni supervised the installation of the relief at the Swiss National Exhibition in Zurich. He also collaborated in the realization of a monumental plaster statue of *Helvetia* for the Lugano Tiro federale (Swiss Federal Shooting Competition). Together with other pupils, he carved Vincenzo Vela's funerary monument, designed by Augusto Guidini, for the cemetery of Ligornetto.

**43** **Vincenzo Vela (1820–1891)**  
**Design for a "Monument to Louis Favre",**  
**c. 1882**  
pencil on paper  
MVV - Ve1162

In this study, Vela added a bust of Louis Favre to the relief. Unlike the model of the monument to Favre published as a drawing in the 1883 *Journal of the National Exhibition* (no. 47), the high relief is surmounted by a triangular tympanum with the coats of arms of the nations that had financed the tunnel, a feature also distinguishing the plaster bozzetto of the monument to Favre (no. 44). The half-bust of Louis Favre stands on a simple square plinth.

- 44 Vincenzo Vela (1820–1891)**  
***Design for a Monument to the Engineer***  
**Louis Favre. “The Victims of Labour”, 1882–90**  
**polychrome plaster**  
MVV - Ve109

The plastic version of the design is a reduced-scale model of *The Victims of Labour* placed in an aedicule surmounted by a tympanum bearing the coats of arms of Italy, Switzerland, and Germany. The moulded plinth is decorated with trophies in the form of tools and measuring instruments linked to the excavation of the tunnel, including a theodolite. At the centre of the plinth, placed on a projecting element, is Favre’s bust flanked by laurel and oak leaves, according to the heraldic tradition.

- 45 Augusto Guidini (1853–1928), attr.**  
***Design for the Frame of the Bronze Casting***  
**of “The Victims of Labour”, n. d.**  
**pencil and watercolour on paper**  
MVV - Ve3001

This design is attributed to the architect Augusto Guidini, a family friend who was a peer of Spartaco and a great admirer of Vincenzo Vela. The bronze relief is presented – both in frontal and side elevation – in an original, rustic frame made from wood and metal recalling railway sleepers.

- 46 Luigi Piffaretti (1861–1900), attr.**  
**after Vincenzo Vela**  
***The Victims of Labour*, early 1890s**  
**plaster**  
Museo d’arte della Svizzera italiana, Lugano. Collezione Città di Lugano

This relief was purchased in 1938 by Fondazione Caccia for the collection of the Museo civico di belle arti of Lugano, together with other works originating from the bequest of the sculptor Luigi Piffaretti. In 1893, Piffaretti – Vincenzo Vela’s great-nephew and collaborator – participated in the realization of Vela’s funerary monument at Ligornetto. Two years later, he paid further homage to his great-uncle by portraying him in a marble bust, now at the Palazzo Turconi, Mendrisio, (former Ospedale Cantonale and current headquarters of the Accademia di Architettura), portraying the master holding a bronze plaque in his right hand (now lost), depicting *The Victims of Labour*.

The attribution of this small plaster relief to Piffaretti is based on its provenance as well as its faithfulness to Vela’s original model, suggesting that this is a copy that may have been used to cast the small bronze of the monument to Vela in Mendrisio.

## → DISPLAY CASE

- 47 Antonio Bonamore (1845–1907)**  
***The Victims of Labour. Model for a monument***  
**to Favre by Vincenzo Vela**  
**Woodcut from the *Official Illustrated Journal***  
**of the Swiss National Exhibition, 1883**  
(reproduction)

In 1883, Vincenzo Vela presented his high relief in memory of the victims of the Gotthard Tunnel to the public for the first time on the occasion of the Swiss National Exhibition in Zurich. The work was met with enthusiastic comments that emphasized its strong impact and “Dantesque” feel. Johann Jakob Hardmeyer Jenny, one of the members of the organizing committee, published Vela’s design for a *Model of a Monument to Favre* in which the high relief was placed behind a commemorative bust of the Geneva engineer.

In May 1890, the engraver Francis Chomel (1833–1895) wrote to Vincenzo Vela on behalf of the committee tasked with commissioning a monument in memory of Louis Favre, to be erected in Chêne-Bourg, the engineer’s birthplace. He suggested integrating the *Victims of Labour* relief into the monument. From his letter, it is clear that Chomel misunderstood the subject of Vela’s work, describing it as a “frieze of the death of Favre”.

The artist expresses his appreciation for the idea but sets the condition that he personally oversee the bronze casting for a fee of 40,000 lire. Vela also asks for information about the overall design of the monument. While Chomel’s response is not known, we do know that Vela’s proposal was not taken up in the end. The Chêne-Bourg monument was executed by the French sculptor Emile Placide Lambert in 1893.

- 48 Unknown photographer**  
***Portrait of Louis Favre*, c. 1860**  
**albumen print**  
MVV - Ve6841

Vincenzo Vela also used photographs to ensure that his portraits were true to life. For example, this portrait of Louis Favre in the museum collection served as a source of inspiration for the half-bust depicted in the bozzetti of the *Monument to the Engineer Louis Favre*.

Born in Chêne-Bourg to a family of humble origins, Louis Favre, a carpenter by training and a self-taught engineer, was the archetypal self-made man. In 1871, thanks to the experience he had gained in various French railway construction sites, he was awarded the tender to build the Gotthard Tunnel. Due to various geotechnical and organizational issues, his firm failed to respect the terms of what was a draconian contract establishing an eight-year deadline for the completion of the project, which was launched in 1872. On 19 July 1879, Favre died in the tunnel, his firm overwhelmed by financial difficulties. The excavation was completed a few months later and the railway line was inaugurated in 1882. In the collective memory, Favre is celebrated for his pioneering genius and elevated to a heroic status verging on the hagiographic. As modern historiography has revealed, this fame is overshadowed by many instances of negligence and by a management of the project that was indifferent to the catastrophic working and living conditions of the tunnel workers.

**49** **Unknown photographer**  
***Workers Involved in the Excavation of the Gotthard Tunnel, c. 1872–80***  
**albumen print**  
 MVV - Ve6524

This albumen print, possibly the work of a photographer from Airolo, attests to Vincenzo Vela's interest in the least-advantaged social classes. While there are no direct links with the *Victims of Labour* relief, it may have served the sculptor as a source of inspiration.

**50** **Vincenzo Vela (1820–1891)**  
***Bust of Agostino Casanova, c. 1887***  
**terracotta**  
 MVV - Ve547  
 Gift of the Casanova Family, Ligornetto, 1983

This portrait of Agostino Casanova is one of the few terracotta busts in the Museo Vela collection. This work is particularly significant because, according to the deed of donation, Casanova served as the model for the stretcher-bearer depicted on the left of the high relief. Originally, the bust was placed on the family tomb in the Ligornetto cemetery. After the donation, it was replaced by a bronze reproduction. The portrait is distinguished by its vibrant modelling, characteristic of the sculptor's final decade of artistic activity.

**51** **Antonio Nessi (1834–1907)**  
***Construction of the Coldrerio Railway Tunnel, 1874***  
**albumen print**  
 MVV - Ve6206

Built in record times but at the cost of enormous sacrifices, the first three railway lines in the canton of Ticino (Lugano-Chiasso, Biasca-Bellinzona, Bellinzona-Locarno) were, in some ways, preparatory to the monumental feat of crossing the Gotthard Pass. Although these were flatland routes, the unique geological and morphological characteristics of the terrain posed major concerns and challenges for the planners, engineers, and, above all, for the workers and miners, who faced grueling shifts, a dangerous working environment, and inadequate living conditions due to poor diet, lack of hygiene, and overcrowding. Inaccurate estimates, underestimated costs, and exploitative contracts further aggravated the situation. The Lugano-Chiasso line was inaugurated on 6 December 1874. The excavation of the Paradiso, Bissone, and Maroggia tunnels proved particularly complex, and on 14 February 1874, there was a serious accident when a crate of dynamite exploded, killing four workers.

**52** **Antonio Nessi (1834–1907)**  
***Work on the Coldrerio Trench, 1873–74***  
**albumen print**  
 MVV - Ve6406

The excavation of the railway tunnel near Coldrerio proved to be an extremely difficult undertaking due to the unstable geological conditions. The sandy ground and presence of marly layers resulted in continuous water ingress and collapses. It was therefore decided to scale back the initial project and the

tunnel length was reduced from the planned 475 metres to just 96 metres. However, this change made it necessary to dig a long trench 22-25 metres deep. The huge and exhausting undertaking was carried out entirely by hand, with the labourers being forced to work day and night for months on end.

- 53**     **Unknown photographer**  
*Derailment between Balerna and Coldrerio on April 8, 1879, 1879*  
albumen print  
ASTI, Bellinzona - Fototeca/13.7

The Coldrerio trench was the site of a spectacular accident, fortunately resulting only in material damage. On 8 April 1879, a passenger train was hit by a landslide and the sudden collapse of the trackbed caused the locomotive and tender to derail and overturn.

- 54**     **Unknown photographer**  
*Derailment between Balerna and Coldrerio on April 8, 1879, 1879*  
albumen print  
ASTI, Bellinzona - Fototeca/13.6

- 55**     **Unknown photographer**  
*The Site of the Derailment between Balerna and Coldrerio on 8 April 1879, 1879*  
albumen print  
ASTI, Bellinzona - Fototeca/13.8

- 56**     **Unknown photographer**  
*Derailment between Balerna and Coldrerio on April 8, 1879, 1879*  
stampa albumen print  
ASTI, Bellinzona - Fototeca/13.9

- 57**     **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
*Tunnel Entrance in Göschenen (Before Completion), 1881–82*  
albumen print  
Swiss Museum of Transport, Lucerne - VA - 9902

- 58**     **Ad. Braun & C.<sup>ie</sup>, Dornach**  
*Tunnel Entrance in Airolo (Before Completion), 1881–82*  
albumen print  
ASTI, Bellinzona - Fototeca, Album/4.G1

## → DISPLAY CASE

- 59**     **Workers' Unrest in Göschenen at the entrance to the Gotthard Tunnel. From a sketch by engineer Georg Specht**  
From: *Illustrirte Zeitung*, 21 August 1875  
Swiss Museum of Transport, Lucerne - VA-43920

A combination of extremely harsh working conditions, squalid lodgings, low salaries, and societal prejudices led to heightened tension between the workers, the Favre company, and the local population. There were also frequent complaints about the inadequate ventilation in the tunnels.

On 27 July 1875, a group of miners who had left the tunnels after yet another blasting refused to return to work. Around a thousand workers took part in the protest, asking for higher wages as well as demanding better working conditions in the tunnels.

On the following day, in an attempt to restore order, the local authorities – also under pressure from the Favre company – sent a local militia to the site where they were stoned by the strikers. In the clashes that followed, the armed group opened fire on the strikers, killing four and injuring more than a dozen others. In his report investigating the incident, the federal commissioner Hans Hold described the unbearable working and living conditions of the miners, but most of his suggestions for improvements fell on deaf ears.

- 60**     **Investigation into the Workers' Unrest in Göschenen. Confidential Report by Hans Hold to the Department of Justice and Police, 27 October 1875**  
SFA, Bern, E53#1000/893#444\*

In the wake of the strike of 27-28 July 1874, the Federal Council appointed a special commissioner to investigate the causes. Hans Hold, a jurist and a member of the Council of States from the Canton of Grisons, authored two reports, an official report for publication, and a secret report. Hold reconstructed the events, analyzed the causes, and made recommendations for the improvement of workers' conditions. The two reports differ considerably in tone and attribution of responsibility: the official report is more measured, the secret one far more direct.

The official report  
Published in the *Swiss Federal Gazette* of 17 November 1875, this report was essentially intended to avoid scandal and safeguard the reputation of Canton Uri and Switzerland.

Hold plays down the more serious incidents, shielding the local community and authorities from accusations of negligence or incompetence, and places most of the blame on the Favre company. He describes the harsh working conditions as somewhat inevitable and minimizes tensions between Italian workers and locals. He deems the intervention of the militia as necessary and lawful.

The secret report  
In this report, intended for the Federal Council, Hold denounces abuses, incompetence, and injustices. He criticizes both the Favre company and the Göschenen authorities, citing crimes that had gone uninvestigated, failure to prosecute guilty parties, negligent doctors and engineers, often incapable

magistrates, and unscrupulous speculators. He also raises the serious suspicion that the intervention of the militia had been instigated and paid for by Favre himself. Among the measures recommended are improved ventilation in the tunnels, adequate food provisions, action against private speculation, and the establishment of an external authority to prevent conflicts.

The response to the official report was lukewarm. The secret report, which was deliberately buried, was rediscovered over a century later by the historian Konrad Kuoni. Neither report produced any concrete effect, as confirmed by subsequent investigations commissioned by the Federal Council, especially the one by Dr Jakob Laurenz Sonderegger.

**61** **Summary of Accidents that Have Occurred on the Gotthard Railway Lines Since Work Began. Line: Gotthard Tunnel, South Side, November 1880**  
SFA, Bern, E53#1000/893#455\*

The accidents that took place during the construction of the Gotthardbahn are recorded in special registers, organized according to the sections. The tunnel exacted a heavy toll in human lives: at least 199 workers lost their lives, primarily due to accidents with wagons, rockfalls, or improper handling of dynamite. Many workers were forced to leave the site due to illnesses contracted on the job. The Favre company and the authorities attributed the accidents to the workers or to chance, prioritizing the progress of the excavation before the introduction of adequate safety measures. The families of deceased workers and injured workers received a one-time payout from a relief fund, financed by the workers themselves by means of a 3% deduction from their gross wages. The compensation for the loss of a leg was 1,650 francs, of a hand, 1,350 francs, loss of eyesight, 5,000 francs, while widows with three to four children received 2,500 francs.

**62** **Edoardo Perroncito**  
**La malattia dei minatori dal San Gottardo al Sempione. Una questione risolta**  
**Torino, Carlo Pasta, 1910**  
MVV - Library

In the late 1870s, a severe anemia with mysterious origins spread among the Gotthard workers. Unable to continue working, hundreds of miners were forced to return to their countries of origin. Many of them died due to the lack of treatment. At the request of the Italian government, the Federal Council commissioned Dr Jacob Laurenz Sonderegger to carry out an investigation. His report highlighted the disastrous working conditions in the tunnel, involving poor hygiene, inadequate ventilation, high temperatures and extreme humidity. There was initially some controversy about the origins of the disease. However, doctors Edoardo Perroncito in Turin and Ernesto Parona in Varese were able to prove that this anemia was caused by a parasitic worm: *Ancylostoma duodenale* or hookworm. The tropical climate inside the Gotthard Tunnel favoured its endemic spread through the skin, via the feces that were scattered throughout the tunnel – due to the lack of latrine cars. Perroncito identified male fern extract as an effective cure. The preventive

measures and treatment developed by the Italian parasitologist stopped the disease from spreading in other European mining regions. The most compelling evidence of his success was the absence of new cases during the boring of the Simplon Tunnel (1898-1905).

Hookworms thrive in warm, moist environments with decomposing organic matter. Larvae hatch from eggs in the ground and in the water, entering the human body by breaking through the skin – typically via the hands and feet. They pass into the airways then ascend the throat, migrating into the small intestine lodging there with their hook-like mouths.

**63** **Gotthard Tunnel Company Scrips**  
**photographic reproductions**  
Villi Hermann Collection, Castelrotto

In Airolo and Göschenen, workers were given wage advances in the form of vouchers (scrip) to be used in the local company stores. This payment system, advantageous for the Favre company, caused discontent among the workers who would have preferred to be paid in cash.

In 1875, a worker earned up to 4 francs a day, a mason around 5 francs. Money was deducted from their daily wages for the relief fund and for their equipment. A bed cost 50 centimes a day, a kilo of bread cost up to 45 centimes, prices that were in line with the Swiss average. Officially, shifts in the tunnel were supposed to be eight hours, plus the time needed to reach the worksite. However, according to testimonies recorded, they often lasted much longer.

**64** **Hugues Bovy (1841–1903)**  
**To the Workers on the Gotthard Tunnel**  
**Commemorative medal marking**  
**the breakthrough, 29 February 1880**  
**March 1880**  
**silver**  
Marco Della Casa Collection, San Pietro

**65** **Jakob Hardmeyer**  
**Die Gotthardbahn, Zürich, Orell Füssli, 1882**  
**Dedication on the title page:**  
**«All'Egregio Signor Vincenzo Vela**  
**a Ligornetto**  
**L'Autore**  
**G. Hardmeyer Jenny**  
**Zurigo 20 maggio 1882»**  
MVV, Historical Library

**66** **Peter Balzer (1855–1916), drawing**  
**Swiss National Exposition Zurich 1883**  
**Diploma of participation awarded**  
**to Vincenzo Vela, 1883**  
**lithograph on paper**  
**Institute Orell Füssli & Co. Zurich**  
MVV - Ve7434

**67** **Carlo Baravalle**  
**I martiri del lavoro**  
**From: L'illustrazione italiana, no. 53,**  
**26 December 1886, p. 485**  
(reproduction)

68 **L'illustrazione italiana, no. 53,**  
26 December 1886  
MVV, Library

69 **Alfredo De Giorgio (1861–1926)**  
**The Plaster Model of "The Victims of Labour"**  
**in the Fonderia Bastianelli in Rome, 1911**  
From: *Roma primo Novecento nelle immagini*  
di Alfredo De Giorgio, Roma, Editalia, 1988  
(reproduction)

70 **Vincenzo Vela (1820–1891)**  
**The Victims of Labour, 1895**  
**bronze, posthumous casting**  
Rome, Galleria nazionale d'arte moderna e contemporanea, inv. 1357

Despite the critical and public acclaim received by the work, Vela could not find a patron willing to finance a bronze casting of the relief. The first casting took place posthumously with the authorization of Spartaco Vela at the request of the Italian government, which intended to place it in Rome's Gallery of Modern Art. In December 1893, Giuseppe Massuero, the gallery's conservator, paid a visit to Spartaco Vela in Ligornetto, together with the founder Bastianelli, in order to discuss the conditions of the casting. The bronze was installed in its intended site in July 1895, just a few days after Spartaco's death, as confirmed by a condolence telegram sent to the Mayor of Ligornetto by Minister Baccelli.

71 **Christian Schiefer (1896–1998)**  
**Installation of the monument "The Victims of Labour" by Vincenzo Vela [Giuseppe Motta],**  
**1 June 1932**  
**gelatine silver print**  
ASTi, Bellinzona, Fondo Christian Schiefer, 8.155

On 1 June 1932, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the tunnel, a second bronze casting was unveiled in the square in front of Airolo railway station. The cast was commissioned by the Federal Railways Directorate and executed by the Foundry of Mario Pastori in Carouge.

A solemn celebration took place in the presence of Giuseppe Motta, the Federal Councillor from Airolo and President of the Swiss Confederation, along with numerous authorities, including foreign dignitaries. The ceremony was documented by photographer Christian Schiefer, one of the first photojournalists active in Ticino. The festive procession included not only veterans from the Gotthard excavation but also participants in miner's costumes, unwitting interpreters of a folkloristic representation far removed from the reality of the actual events.

72 **1882 The Victims of Labour 1932**  
bronze plaque cast by Fonderie Mario Pastori in Carouge-Geneva, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the tunnel's construction, 1932  
bronze and wood  
Marco Della Casa Collection, San Pietro

73 **Christian Schiefer (1896–1998)**  
**Inauguration of the Monument Victims of Labour [participants in miner's costumes],**  
**1 June 1932**  
**photographic print**  
ASTi, Bellinzona, Fondo Christian Schiefer, 9.10

74 **Christian Schiefer (1896–1998)**  
**The Victims of Labour, c. 1932**  
**postcard**  
ASTi, Bellinzona, Fondo Christian Schiefer, 6.18

75 **Giorgio Napolitano, the President of the Italian Republic, Inaugurates a Replica of the "Victims of Labour" by Vincenzo Vela, Rome, Palazzo dell'Istituto Nazionale per l'Assicurazione contro gli Infortuni sul Lavoro (INAIL), Piazza Giulio Pastore, 1 May 2008**  
Archivio Storico della Presidenza della Repubblica, Roma

On 1 May 2008, the Italian President Giorgio Napolitano inaugurated the third casting of Vela's masterpiece, which was emblematically placed in front of the Roman headquarters of the National Institute for Insurance Against Accidents at Work. The bronze, executed by Fonderia Artistica de Carli in Turin, is a replica of the one in the collection of the National Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art, Rome. The monument pays homage to the memory of those who have lost their lives at work as well as encouraging concrete efforts aimed at the prevention of accidents in the workplace.

The subject is *The Victims of Labour* in the Gotthard Tunnel. It had been running through my mind for some time. The Zurich exhibition convinced me to bring it to life, as it seemed fitting for the occasion of the opening of this great route. I had hoped that the execution in bronze would be carried out by the Gotthard company, for it is a work that I believe turned out well and it would honour the poor victims who sacrificed themselves for the good of humanity. But my dear Correnti, things went badly and my low-relief featuring five over-life-sized figures has already returned to my studio in Ligornetto.

Vincenzo Vela, from a letter to Cesare Correnti, November 1883  
(MRMi, Archivio Correnti, Carteggio)

**Guided by liberal principles, I have always admired the worker, the oppressed classes, I have always had high esteem for the martyrs of labour, those who risk their lives not in the fanaticism or frenzy that war produces, but as calm soldiers of labour, simply to fulfil their duty and live as honest men. In these times when millions are squandered on monuments to kings, when so many memorials are erected for the powerful and rich, [...] I felt it my duty to recall the martyrs of labour. I created this work without a commission or suggestion from anyone, [...] not for my own profit, but because I would be glad to see my idea immortalized in bronze, that of a suffering humanity, placed by the Italian entrance to one of the greatest works of science and labour: the Gotthard Tunnel.**

Vincenzo Vela, from a letter to Carlo Baravalle, November 1886  
(SFA, Fondo Vincenzo Vela)

A masterpiece of Vincenzo Vela's artistic maturity, the high relief of *The Victims of Labour* is one of the high points of his successful career.

In a letter written to Carlo Baravalle in 1886, Vela points out that he executed the work entirely at his own initiative, "without a commission or suggestion from anyone". For the subject, Vela drew inspiration from events of the time. In 1882, after a decade of work, the Gotthard rail tunnel designed by engineer Louis Favre had finally been completed. This immense undertaking was carried out by thousands of labourers – mainly Italians – who were forced to work exhausting shifts and decimated by epidemics and accidents.

The scene depicts a group of miners carrying a stretcher with the lifeless body of one of their comrades. Ready to sacrifice their lives for the common good and progress of humanity, through their silent progress, these "calm soldiers of labour" embody a protest against their inhumane working conditions. The dramatic expressive power of the relief, rendered with a starkly contrasted modelling, is balanced by a careful compositional equilibrium evoking classical art and religious iconography. Through this monument, Vela gives voice to his deeply-felt need to honour the "martyrs of labour [...] who risk their lives [...] to fulfil their duty." A warning that, nearly 150 years later, has lost nothing of its universal significance.

#### Abbreviazioni:

SFA: Swiss Federal Archives

ASTi: Archivio di Stato del Cantone Ticino

MRMi: Museo del Risorgimento, Milan

MVV: Museo Vincenzo Vela

# AGENDA

## Public guided tours

**Sunday**

**10 May 2026**

**11.00**

Guided tour with Antonia Nessi,  
director

**Sunday**

**17 May 2026**

**11.00**

International Museum Day

**Sunday**

**14 June 2026**

**11.00**

Guided tour with Anita Guglielmetti,  
research associate

**Sunday**

**4 October 2026**

**15.30**

Guided tour with Pier Giorgio De Pinto,  
artist

**Sunday**

**15 November 2026**

**11.00**

Guided tour with Rebecca Maspoli,  
art historian

**Guided tours included in the admission ticket**

**Registration appreciated: [booking.vela@bak.admin.ch](mailto:booking.vela@bak.admin.ch)**

**“Con altri sguardi”**

**Sunday**

**6 September 2026**

**11.00**

Conversation around the exhibition with  
Orazio Martinetti, historian and journalist,  
and Gianmarco Talamona, head of the photography  
department at the State Archives of the Canton  
of Ticino

**Sunday**

**25 October 2026**

**11.00**

Conversation around the exhibition with  
Nelly Valsangiacomo, Professor of Contemporary  
History at the University of Lausanne, and Antonia  
Nessi

# MUSEO VINCENZO VELA

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**facebook: museovincenzovela**  
**instagram: museovincenzovela**

## **Opening hours**

Tuesday to Friday

10:00–17:00

Saturday, Sunday and public holidays

10:00–18:00

Monday closed

## **Special openings**

1 May

14 May, Ascension Day

25 May, Whit Monday

4 June, Corpus Christi

1 and 15 August

1 November

8 and 26 December

6 January

## **Closed**

24, 25 and 31 December

1 January

## **Reservations**

**booking.vela@bak.admin.ch**



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