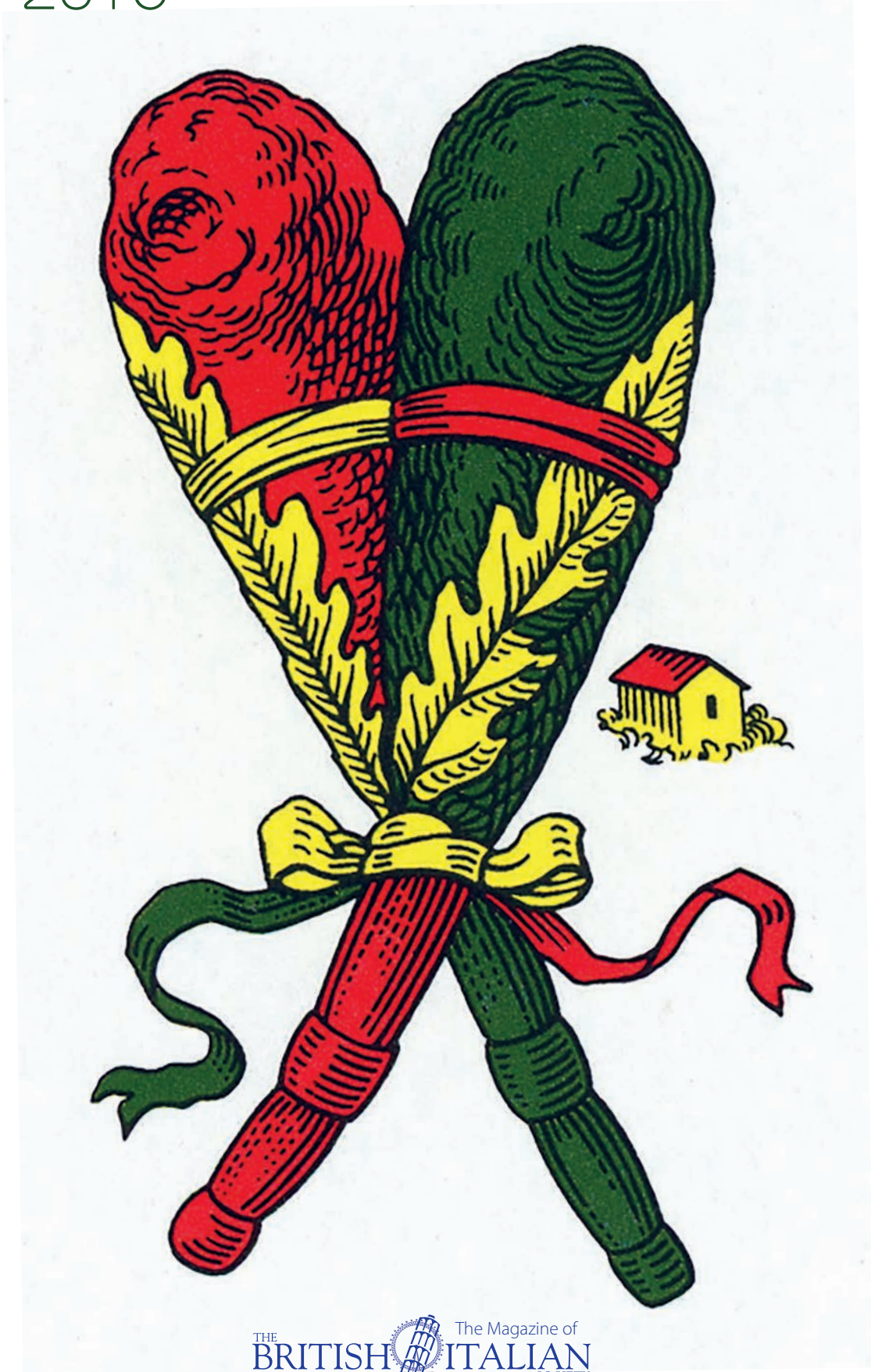


RIVISTA

2015-2016

Villa Wolkonsky
Leonardo in Milan
The Renzi Government
Guttuso at the Estorick
Baron Corvo in Venice



Dear readers

No sooner had we consigned our first Rivista to the printers, than it was time to start all over again. Staring at a blank piece of paper, or more accurately an empty screen and wondering where the contributions are going to come from is a daunting prospect. But slowly the magazine began to take shape; one or two chance encounters produced interesting suggestions on subjects we knew little or nothing about and ideas for other features developed from discussion between ourselves and British Italian Society members. Thank you to all our contributors. And as the contributions began to arrive we found some unlikely connections – the Laocoon sculpture, the subject of an excellent talk which you can read about in the section dedicated to the BIS year, made a surprise appearance in a feature about translation. The Sicilian artist, Renato Guttuso, an exhibition of whose work is reviewed on page 21, was revealed as having painted Ian Greenlees, a former director of the British Institute of Florence, whose biography is considered at page 24. We also made some interesting discoveries, for example that Laura Bassi, an 18th century mathematician and physicist from Bologna, was highly regarded by no less a figure than Voltaire and that the Milanese delight in finding unusual nicknames for landmarks

in their city. We hope that you too will make some discoveries of your own as you make your way through the pages that follow.

We are most grateful for the positive feedback we received from readers last year and hope that this, our second issue, will not disappoint.

Buona lettura!

Linda Northern and Vanessa Hall-Smith



Vanessa Hall-Smith



Linda Northern

Cover photo:

Bastoni in a Sicilian pack of cards. See further John Messenger's article at page 4. Visitors to the Goya exhibition at the National Gallery until January 2016 might be interested in looking at the pack of cards on the table in the wonderful painting of the family of the Infante Don Luis de Borbon in the first room.

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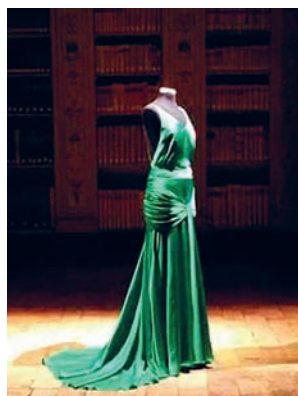
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Dealer's Choice

by John Messenger

Readers of Rivista will need little reminding that Italy is a relatively young country, an assembly of regions each with its own strongly defined characteristics. Cookery writers, for example, often tell us that there is no such thing as Italian cooking, but only Venetian, say, or Tuscan, or Sicilian. And of course it's the distinctiveness of the regions that is at the heart of much discussion about the reality of Italian unification.

However, I wonder how many readers know that Italy's inveterate *campanilismo* extends to the playing cards that locals use routinely in their bars, wine shops and presumably at home. So that in Italy there are nearly 20 different regional packs in current use.

My introduction to Italian playing cards occurred many years ago in Naples. As a student I had the good fortune to go to work in its famous *Stazione Zoologica*, with a group of scientists studying octopuses and squid. In the evenings, after a hard day's work, we would 'go to the pub', that is relax in one of the many wine-shops that, in those days, littered the narrow streets of the Chiaia district. We often shared the *vinaio* with a noisy group of 'old devils' (invariably male) playing cards – shouting, hurling their cards down on the table, gesturing as only southern Italians can and, just when one feared blood was about to be shed, bursting into peals of laughter and maybe some hugging. All this with a minimum of alcohol, for Neapolitans are modest drinkers. One evening I picked up the pack the players had left behind and to my amazement saw that the cards bore no resemblance whatever to our English cards.

Spanish Pack

Suits: cups, swords, clubs, coins
Sardegna

Italo-Spanish Packs

Suits: cups, swords, clubs, coins
Napolitane, Piacentine, Romagnole, Siciliane

Italian Packs

Suits: cups, swords, batons, coins
Trevisane (Venete), Triestine
Bergamasche, Bresciane
Trentine, Bolognese

French Packs

Suits: spades, hearts, diamonds, clubs
Piemontesi, Milanesi, Genovesi
Fiorentine Grandi, Toscane

German Pack

Suits: hearts, bells, leaves, acorns
Salzburger

I was looking at the four suits that make up a Neapolitan pack: cups (*coppe*), swords (*spade*), clubs (*bastoni*) and coins (*denari*). Each has only ten cards - ace, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, knave (*fante*), knight (*cavaliere*) and king (*re*), making a pack of 40. The colours are strong and the designs bold. The splendid *bastoni* look like those wielded by the brutal giants of children's fairy tales, and the *spade* seem both sharp and business-like. The court cards are single-ended and the figures stand on a coloured base, red for *coppe*, blue for *spade*, green for *bastoni* and yellow for *denari*. The knaves wear knee-length breeches; the knights are on horseback; and the rather shabby kings seem unconvincing monarchs. There are no queens.

Much later I learned that this was one of the four Italo-Spanish packs widely used in Italy, then and now. All have the same suits, which derive from Spanish playing cards. Of the other three, the pack closest to the Neapolitan is the Sicilian, not surprisingly perhaps, given the history of the region. One interesting difference between these two packs is that in Sicily, the colour of the base on which court-card figures stand, indicates rank not suit: red for knave, yellow for knight, green for king. Another feature of the Sicilian pack is that many of the cards carry tiny pictures of dogs, ships, houses and fencers.

The beautiful cards of Sardinia are not unlike these but are designated Spanish, being much closer to the cards of present day Spain: they have a border line and bear numerals in the corners. The designs are elaborate; the *coppe* are extravagant urns, the *spade* are in ornate sheathes, the *bastoni* look like proper clubs but are sprouting leaves! The figures on the court cards are theatrically posed on coloured engraved scenes; neither the knaves nor the knights seem to pose much of a threat to anyone, but the kings have a certain dignity. For some reason the designers of this pack lavished much attention on the Fours, which they decorated with some fascinating vignettes.

In central-northern Italy, however, the playing cards, although clearly related to the Spanish or Italo-Spanish, are sufficiently different from them to be classed as Italian. There are no fewer than six different packs in this region, based on the cities of Treviso and Trieste, Trento, Brescia and Bergamo and finally Bologna. This is surely *campanilismo* gone mad! Can you imagine the citizens of Newcastle, York, Leeds, Sheffield, Nottingham and Birmingham using different packs?

The most striking feature of these packs is the stylisation of the *coppe*, *spade* and *bastoni*. The *coppe* have become what George Beal, in his book on playing cards, calls 'ecclesiastical chalices' (although I see them as dumbbells); the *spade* are barely recognisable as such on the numerical cards and the *bastoni* are batons rather than clubs. The criss-cross arrangement of the *spade* and *bastoni* seems confusing to an outsider, which may explain the bold



(left) Sicilian pack, (above) Salzburger pack,
(right) Neopolitan pack

numbering on these suits in three of the packs.

But had my zoological education all those years ago started in the northwest of Italy, rather than in the *mezzogiorno*, I might never have become interested in playing cards. For their cards are, like ours, disappointingly French with those familiar spades, hearts, diamonds and clubs. Given the proximity to France this is hardly surprising, but it is extraordinary that Piedmont, Milan and Genoa all have slightly different French-suited cards. The splendid Florentine and Tuscan packs are more distinct: single ended, with the court cards remarkable for their distinguished kings, imposing queens and knaves somewhat advanced in years.

Of course there are obvious geographical, political and historical explanations for all these groupings so that when we come to Alto Adige (Süd Tirol), one of my favourite regions of Italy, we naturally find them using a German-suited pack: to be specific, the beautiful Salzburger pack. Here the suit-marks are hearts, leaves, bells and acorns, each suit with a king, over-*knave* (Ober) and under-*knave* (Unter). The numerical cards all include charming bucolic miniatures and there is a magnificent elephant draped with a striped blanket on the eight of hearts.

So if you've been counting the packs as we go, you should have reached the number 17. But I assume that the bridge-playing classes of Milan and Rome will be using the international French pack, so that throughout the length and breadth of the country there are no fewer than 18 packs in common use. However, I have probably missed a pack or two on my travels, so readers, please put me right.

But I hear you asking, do Italians have a Tarot pack? By now you should have guessed: of course not! They have Tarocco Piemontese, Tarocco Bolognese and Tarocco Siciliano. I rest my case.

John Messenger is a zoologist who has taught at the universities of Sheffield and Cambridge. Much of his research has been carried out at the Stazione Zoologica of Naples, and he has travelled widely in Italy

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The Renzi Government: Approaching Italy's Gaullist Moment?

by Mark Donovan

Matteo Renzi became Prime Minister in February 2014 after winning the leadership of the Democratic Party (PD) in December 2013. He had not been a Member of Parliament and was a youthful 39, compared with Berlusconi's 76. A telegenic and charismatic leader like the media multi-millionaire, Renzi was avowedly intent on generational change, 'scrapping' the old elites, not least in his own party. The PD turned to him following its failure to win the 2013 election despite the disarray of the right. This had seen the resignation of Silvio Berlusconi as Prime Minister in 2011, when he finally lost his long-haemorrhaging parliamentary majority amidst that summer's economic crisis. The meltdown of his party, which had begun in 2011, resumed after the election, leaving the right fragmented and rudderless. Indeed, from early 2015 Matteo Salvini's Northern League polled the largest share of support on the right, albeit rising to only some 15 per cent (as of June 2015).



Sergio Mattarella

The expectation of a swing of 'the pendulum' to the left in 2013 was, of course, undone by the rise of the Five Star Movement, 5SM, led by the former entrepreneurial satirist, Beppe Grillo. This upstart party-movement had gained a remarkable quarter of the vote. Its success created a 'tripolar' party system comprising: the left, led by the PD, equally with 25 per cent (whilst the left overall had 30 per cent); the right, led by Berlusconi, with 29 per cent (22 per cent for his own party); and the new anti-establishment pole led by Beppe Grillo. An immediate consequence of the three-way split was that government formation led to a coalition of left and right, previously bitter enemies, led by Enrico Letta of the PD. Another was a profound sense of crisis. Left-right cooperation, moreover, appeared to

// The expectation of a swing of 'the pendulum' to the left in 2013 was, of course, undone by the rise of the Five Star Movement

confirm the 5SM's polemical stance: that it was the only true alternative, the only real force for reform. Yet the movement was organisationally inchoate, divided over policies, and to a considerable extent a protest movement rather than a potential governing force.

In September 2013, Berlusconi withdrew his ministers from the Letta government. To some extent this reasserted the left-right dynamic as Italy's 'principal line of conflict' but the 5SM has proved remarkably resilient, maintaining around 20 per cent public support through to 2015, perhaps aided by Berlusconi having been banned from public office as a result of his criminal conviction for tax evasion. Berlusconi's abandonment of the government had also split his party, a rump remaining in coalition with a now much weakened Letta. The sense of crisis grew. With government-led reform apparently stalling, Renzi used his victory in the PD leadership contest to withdraw the PD's support from its own Prime Minister. In February 2014, Renzi thus became Prime Minister – despite not being an MP and lacking an electoral mandate.

The European elections of June 2014 saw 41 per cent of voters back the PD, slightly more, even, than the Christian Democrats had ever obtained – and they had dominated Italian politics for nearly half a century. In fact, polls had shown for many years that a large majority of Italians wanted a strong, effective political leader for their country. The appropriateness of Galileo's judgment is obvious: unhappy is the land that needs a hero. Still, that's where Italy is. Berlusconi, of course, failed in that role: his enormous concentration of wealth and media influence having rendered him hugely controversial.

Renzi set about radical constitutional overhaul immediately following his conquest of the PD. Even before becoming Prime Minister he enlisted the support of the left's arch enemy, Berlusconi, seeking to anchor reform in a cross-party consensus. The two major proposals were for electoral reform and the restructuring of parliament, alongside reform of Chapter Five of the constitution on Italy's multilevel system of government. This would end the country's extraordinary 'equal bicameralism' by significantly downgrading the role of the Senate whilst reasserting the authority of national government.

Inevitably, both reforms were controversial since they implied reinforcing the executive whilst reducing constitutional checks and balances, and this in a country where liberal principles were widely seen as weak. Renzi thus alienated his own left wing whilst, in early 2015, Berlusconi too turned against the reforms. The *volte face* occurred when Berlusconi judged Renzi to have broken the so-called Nazarene Pact between the two leaders on another matter entirely: the election of the new President of the Republic. In fact, Renzi acted independently to engineer the election of a former left Christian Democrat, Sergio Mattarella, thus helping to compact his tormented party.

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In May 2015, the electoral reform was passed, but on a simple majority rather than cross-party basis. The reform is notable for its provisions to limit the parliamentary gender imbalance whilst forcefully reasserting the majoritarian thrust of electoral revision since 1993. In fact, any single list able to obtain 40 per cent of the vote will receive 54 per cent of Chamber of Deputies' seats (340 of 615). Should no list reach this threshold, a second ballot pitches the two front-runners against each other, the winner being allocated 340 seats.

Up to the summer of 2015 a widely expressed concern was that the ballot might end up being between Renzi and the 5SM, potentially trashing the right. More recently, Salvini's rise in the leadership polls led to concerns that a new, radicalised right could triumph against Renzi, especially if, meanwhile, Greece left the EU provoking a politico-economic crisis. Such a crisis could undo Italy's recent return to economic growth after three years, 2012-14 inclusive, of shrinking GDP.

Whilst the possible impact of the first quasi-constitutional reform began to send alarm bells through the establishment, the second major reform - that of the Senate - remained in contention. Broadly speaking it envisages the reduction of the number of senators from 315 to 100 whilst removing the Senate from any role in government formation and most legislation. Instead, its role will essentially be that of coordinating and representing sub-national government, a fundamentally more administrative function which brings Italy more into line with other bicameral parliaments. These reforms are intended not only to cut costs, perhaps by €400 million a year, but also to make Italy's system of parliamentary government more efficient.

Besides these macro -constitutional reforms, the Renzi government has already carried out several lesser reforms. These include 'quickie' divorce (in just three months if uncontested); declassification of documents relating to democratic Italy's various and notorious 'massacres'; the

insertion of torture as a crime in the penal code in response to ECHR condemnation (in April 2015) of Italy's handling of police violence at the 2001 G8 summit in Genoa; a series of labour market reforms known collectively as the "Jobs Act" (legislation for which continues, through 2015) and the related "Unblock Italy" acts promoting infrastructure development and which include several judicial and public administration reforms; decriminalisation of minor crimes but toughening of anti-corruption norms, not least in reaction to the ongoing 'Mafia Capital' scandal and in July 2015 the fiercely contested reform of the country's schools was finally approved. Reform of broadcasting is currently blocked, and may anyway do little more than confirm the de facto market penetration of Sky TV as a third major provider alongside Mediaset and the public broadcaster, RAI, reflecting the reality of the public sector's declining role. In terms of public policy in the international arena, the government's major concern has been the attempt to Europeanise the migration crisis. It has met with limited success, but even this is something, in the face of widespread member state hostility.

In sum, the challenges facing Renzi have been and remain immense. This was true for the many preceding Prime Ministers of the so-called Second Republic, most of whom proved little more effective than those of the First Republic. Renzi has some successes to his credit, but he struggles to maintain the momentum that is crucial to his intended role as a transformative leader. If he keeps the reforms coming, and doesn't get overwhelmed by corruption scandals or other contingent factors, he may prove to be Italy's De Gaulle. But a leader able to transform the institutions of a modern capitalist democracy is an exceedingly rare political creature. With major reforms under way and perhaps three years to the end of the legislature in 2018, the verdict cannot be definitive. Political uncertainty, meanwhile, is exacerbated by the Mediterranean migration crisis, the growing popularity of the anti-immigrant, anti-EU, right-wing populist Matteo Salvini, and the continuing appeal of the anti-establishment Five Star Movement.

Dr Mark Donovan is a Senior Lecturer in Politics at Cardiff University. He is currently writing a chapter on the election of Sergio Mattarella as President of the Republic for the Berghahn/Istituto Cattaneo 'Italian Politics'/Politica in Italia series.



G8 Summit Genoa 2001

Lunigiana Unwrapped or Love and War in the Appenines revisited

by Sandra Fox

We were driving through a wood along the valley floor near to where we had bought a property in a mountain village in Lunigiana, 'You know this is where the Germans killed seven brothers' said the friend who was with us. 'In fact' she continued, 'initially they caught eight boys but the youngest managed to escape and hid where he could watch everything. The Germans tried to "persuade" the seven boys to tell the others where the partisans were hiding and then, when they remained silent, they shot them all. The youngest boy had to go home and tell his parents what had happened.' We were later to discover that stories like this abounded in the area. Maybe this explained why the local *contadini*, for this is, in the main, what the local villagers were, had given us such a warm welcome. Indeed, during the process of renovating our house, workmen had found some beds tucked away in the attic (an area of the house not easily accessible as we were to discover), clearly unused for some time and most probably used for hiding partisans.

The villagers never spoke about their war-time experiences, other than to comment about how they had been stripped of everything edible. They had survived on chestnuts in one form or another and still made their *testaroli*, the local pasta, from chestnut flour. These have an incredibly high calorific value and were very filling but had to be eaten with relish in order not to offend.



Weighing chestnuts in Lunigiana

Indeed, we soon discovered that much had to be done in order not to give offense, especially taking the obligatory espresso! I never escaped from Lina, the village bread maker, who baked not only bread but everything else in an outdoor wood oven despite having a modern cooker, without at least one cup of espresso. On one occasion after leaving Lina's house I made the mistake of going on to see Clementina, the source of local honey. Of course I had to have some espresso and a tour of the hives, not to mention a good look at the photos of her girls, when babies, in swaddling wraps (well it was a mediaeval village!), and ended so high on coffee that I was unfit for anything for some time.

As for buying wood for our *stufa*, my husband soon learnt that he could only accommodate about four, maximum five, loads in our *cantina*. Actually he could have taken more but D'Annuncio, who supplied the wood for the village and arrived with his caterpillar-tread, motorised wheel barrow, insisted that after every load when my husband went back to help him reload his wine had to be sampled. Sampling meant at least a tumbler full of wine. After the fifth different vintage it was difficult to stand let alone load the wheelbarrow, so that is why our *cantina* could never take more than five loads – even though the space was there.

The mountainside, we soon discovered, was as beautiful as the village welcome. The village horses used to clip clop past every morning from spring to autumn and the meadows were so abundant with wild flowers that Heidi would have run through them with joy. Butterflies of every jewelled colour under the sun roamed free, including such rarities as the swallowtail butterfly. All of this, usually, against the backdrop of distant views of the Carrara mountains. But imagine what it must have been like to sleep out on those mountains as a partisan on the run. True, it might not have been too bad in summer when the weather is milder, but the risk then is the very real danger of being bitten by vipers, not to mention scorpions.

The horses were used for the chestnut harvest. How else could you get in amongst the trees? The harvest was then collected by small pick-up lorries and vans that came up to the village in the autumn. These were all very modern but the method of weighing the harvest had not changed for generations. Two men took a balance and placed it between them on their shoulders. The bag of chestnuts was then hung from this and adjusted along the balance to find its weight. The villager, whose sack it was, supervised and agreed the weight and payment was made. This must have been going on for centuries and, if it works, I suppose there is no reason to change. It all went along with the hand presses for making wine and the village cow that lived beneath D'Annuncio's kitchen

and supplied the village with milk. Again there was the juxtaposition of new and old in both instances.

In the case of the wine, the village was too high to grow good grapes so some of the men would get together and go down to the market at Pisa where grapes were on sale from further south. These would then be mixed with the local grapes to make a palatable wine – or not as the case may be – some of it was very good for cleaning drains and some was heavenly! In the case of the cow, whilst she was milked by hand and presumably gave a certain amount of warmth in the winter to the living accommodation above, in the summer this beautiful animal with her long curly eyelashes, very similar in appearance to a Jersey cow, had to be cooled with a modern electric fan. After all, she was a source of income and had to be kept happy but I did not once see her outside her stall.

The richness of experience in the village was wide and varied. We experienced an earthquake; there was no way that a lorry could drive up the narrow *borgo* of not much more than a metre wide but this is what the noise and vibration seemed like. We later heard tales of the big, pre-WW2 quake, doubtless delicately embroidered for an English audience. We had a large trap full of rats thrust under our nose to demonstrate just how good our next door neighbour was at building them. We, fortunately, had two cats who would tackle anything. We ate *torta d'erba* made from wild leaves which was so delicious it spoils us for any other version; *cucina povera* at its best.



Swallowtail butterfly

We had packages of food thrust into our hands for the journey back to England, after all it was many miles away. We experienced the joy of Sunday mass in the local tiny oratory when the singing was a cappella and superb, as the voices divided into parts for hymns and glorias. In fact one of the congregation, Maria, could easily have been an opera singer of considerable quality.

But in the end, the isolation of being the only foreigners in this hill village became too much. The call of the sea and the thought of a boat seduced my husband and a greater range of intellectual activity seduced me, so we sold up and moved elsewhere in Italy. We still have a parcel of land there and we visit an adopted family regularly but that is another story.

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The Villa Wolkonsky — What's in a Name?

by John Shepherd

The very name Villa Wolkonsky tells you there has to be a story. There is; and its start is indeed exotic. The first heroine of the tale is a Russian princess, Zenaïde Wolkonsky. The Villa's isolated position lends charm but mystery too, feeding the still-strong local belief that the Germans imprisoned and tortured detainees there during the occupation of Rome in 1943-4.

Having enjoyed living in the Villa for three years, I wanted to find out more. Much had been written about its antiquities and statuary but no-one seemed to have written a general history of the property. Many elements of the received wisdom about the Villa did not add up but had simply acquired the aura of historical truth by virtue of repetition.

So, to sort myth from reality and fill in many blanks, I embarked on the necessary archival research. This has taken me to Rome, Berlin and London, covering the modern property's three broad phases: family property of the Wolkonskys (1830-1922), German embassy (1922-1944), and British Embassy (1947-today). That research has disposed of many myths and yielded considerable new material, but much remains to be investigated. What follows is simply a bulletin on work in progress, with emphasis on the less known Wolkonsky phase.

// Much had been written about its antiquities and statuary but no-one seemed to have written a general history of the property.

What brought Zenaïde Wolkonsky to Rome is brilliantly told in the late Maria Fairweather's fully-researched biography, *Pilgrim Princess*. As Princess Zenaïde Beloselsky, a young lady-in-waiting to the mother of the new Tsar Alexander, she 'caught the Tsar's eye' in 1809; married an aide de camp, Prince Nikita Wolkonsky and bore him a son in 1811. She then travelled as a member of the Tsar's entourage to all the key capitals, as battles and conferences ended the Napoleonic wars. Gifted, especially as a singer, she was also subject to fits of depression – not helped by her husband's blatant infidelities – and of religious fervour. But she became a very close friend and confidante of the Tsar over several years.

At court Zenaïde came into contact with senior Roman Catholics (and was later to convert to Catholicism). She



Entrance to Villa Wolkonsky

visited Rome in 1815 (when the court was in Paris), in 1817 and again in 1820-3. When she left, she promised that, if she returned, she would not leave again. She did return in 1829 and sought a summer place where she could breathe fresh air in the spirit of the *dacha*. In 1830 she bought a vineyard, Vigna Falcone, complete with Roman aqueduct and a small vine-keeper's cottage. She immediately commissioned an architect, Giovanni Azzurri, to turn the cottage into a small house – the *casino* where she was to entertain her many artistic friends from around Europe. They loved the romantic setting: the gardens dominated by roses on the aqueduct and its stunning views of two basilicas, the Aurelian walls and the Alban Hills.

Published accounts often repeat a claim that the vineyard was a gift from Zenaïde's father but there is no evidence for the assertion. Someone must have misinterpreted the way in which legal documents of the time identified the principals by reference to their fathers, with abbreviations denoting whether they were dead or alive. That is how the 1831 deed of sale was written, correctly noting that her father was dead (He had in fact died in 1809). The deed has much detail on money but, not surprisingly, no mention of a gift.

It also shows that the sellers were members of the princely Massimo family, who had bought it ten years earlier from the people habitually named in published accounts as the sellers to Zenaïde.

Zenaïde's husband joined her in 1840 but died in 1844. After that she devoted herself to charitable work, increasingly living the life of the poor. She died in 1862, leaving her property to her son Prince Alexander, by then a senior Russian diplomat for whom Rome remained home. He had taken over the *casino* with his French (catholic) wife, Louise de Lilien, when they married in 1845. Little has been written about Alexander's life, family and death. But the archives shed some light. They show how he had the aqueduct repaired in 1859 at the Papal government's expense; how, in 1862, he added to the house, but his failure to seek permission landed him in trouble with the Pope – he got off with a caution, but the upshot was the imposition of a series of conditions (*vincoli*) which govern the property to this day.

From his post at the Russian Legation in Madrid, Alexander oversaw the excavation in 1866 of what was discovered to be a burial monument (*colombario*) near the aqueduct, which can still be visited. A respected but often misguided writer about the Villa recorded that the five columns which form the little temple (*tempietto*) now at the garden's Eastern end, were dug up in this excavation. The official reports make no mention of them. Another version is that the columns were dug up when the swimming pool was built (1942). There is no report of that find, but re-erection of the *tempietto* was included in the 1942 works. The mystery of the columns' origin remains.



The *Tempietto*

// And the Germans were looking for an embassy. The Italian government, having evicted them from their then embassy in 1915, had by late 1921 failed to find them an alternative address.

Alexander's marriage remained childless and in 1867 he adopted Nadeïde, the 10-year old daughter of a neighbouring family in Russia. In 1868 he extended the Wolkonsky estate in Rome, buying land not available to his mother in 1830. This was a smart move, as the area was soon designated for development following the move of the royal capital from Turin to Rome. From his post in Madrid he then placed the estate in a trust for Princess Nadeïde in case of his death, doubtless to remove any doubts about her right to inherit as an adopted child, a gift confirmed in his will (which also made over to Nadeïde the family's properties in Russia).

After Alexander's death in 1878 Nadeïde married Wladimiro Campanari, holder of a Papal Marquisate at Veroli, whose mother was Russian. Through a mutual friend I have rediscovered the couple's direct descendent, Danilo Campanari, who has been delightfully helpful in opening up the story of this 'second front' of the Russian connection.

As the couple were to produce four children, they presciently commissioned Francesco Azzurri, son of Giovanni, to build a villa in the garden – this was to become the Villa Wolkonsky and the heart of the present residence. A credible German source records its construction as taking from 1890 to 1903. It is thought to have been financed by the sale of parcels of the land Alexander had bought – but the relevant Minister is reported to have intervened even in 1886 to prevent break-up of the estate, a ban lifted in 1896. I have found no documents yet to confirm this otherwise plausible narrative. But the neighbouring flats were put up, and the garden's vistas disappeared.

The Campanari-Wolkonsky family had gone to live in Russia by 1904, when the Villa was rented out (at least till 1912). With the 1917 Revolution they returned to Rome. But the large influx of Wolkonskys that followed them and the loss of much of the family's Russian income and property induced them to put the Villa on the market.

And the Germans were looking for an embassy. The Italian government, having evicted them from their then embassy in 1915, had by late 1921 failed to find them an alternative address. The Germans gave up waiting and bought Villa Wolkonsky privately in 1922. Most of its collection of antiquities, documents and letters was broken up and sold, though the deed of sale does include unspecified antiquities and fragments. German and Italian records for the 20s and 30s are patchy, but the received wisdom that the Germans steadily enlarged the Villa is certainly wrong. My version is that:

continued over

// Apart from an incident in early September 1943 there is little basis for Villa Wolkonsky's unsavoury reputation during this period

- The Germans built the westward extension of the *casino* to house their Chancery offices in the early 1920s but thereafter managed to do only minimal work to the Villa, for lack of funds – Germany's economy was in a parlous state.
- The first resident ambassador, von Neurath, put a lot of his energy and private money into restoring the neglected garden.
- In 1939-40, the Germans combined long-needed modernisation with a dramatic enlargement. The swimming pool was added in 1942 – and yes, Hitler was marginally involved in that; and the entrance hall received its grand marble paving in 1943.
- In 1940-43 the Germans were working up a project to erect on land neighbouring the Villa a grandiose new embassy office. The project would have involved the destruction of the *casino*.

With the German occupation of Rome in September 1943 all that came to an end, and the embassy was withdrawn. Among the few officials who remained at the Villa was a small team of 'police attachés', some of whom moved to the new security service (SD) office, half a mile away in Via Tasso (now the Liberation Museum). Apart from an incident in early September 1943 there is little basis for Villa Wolkonsky's unsavoury reputation during this period, which the Museum perpetuates with a headline display linking the Villa to the activities in Via Tasso, for which, its staff admit, they have no evidence. It is improbable that the Villa was itself a Gestapo HQ or house of torture but possible that occasional detainees were held overnight before being moved to Via Tasso. Whatever the truth of that, what gave the Italian government the pretext to confiscate the property after the liberation of Rome in June 1944 was the use of the *casino* just after the occupation as the HQ of the German garrison commander. Foreseeing the risk of eventual confiscation, the German Foreign Office had succeeded in



Print showing the Wolkonsky property in the 1850s



Villa Wolkonsky in the 1930s

evicting the army from the property by the end of 1943, but too late.

The British tenure began with a bang. The embassy at Porta Pia was blown up on the night of 30 October 1946 by Irgun terrorists. Four Power agreement was rapidly obtained to the use of the (nearly) vacant Villa Wolkonsky, and the British embassy opened for business there on 19 January 1947. The completed purchase was confirmed by Presidential Decree in 1951. Much work was done over the years to keep the Villa and offices habitable, but the usual lack of resources was accentuated by doubts about whether to retain the property, as the UK still also owned the site of the old embassy at Porta Pia.

Eventually in 1971 the offices moved back to the new Basil Spence building at Porta Pia. But the much-touted move of the Ambassador's residence to a new house on the Porta Pia site proved unfeasible. So the residence has remained at Villa Wolkonsky, and in 1980 the enlarged *casino* was well converted back to residential use as staff accommodation: as it is now.

The biggest project of the early British years was the extensive restoration of the aqueduct between 1958 and 1960. After initial reluctance the project acquired the stature of a showpiece example of the work of the UK Historic Monuments Branch, who accepted the need to respect the concept which seemed to have inspired Zenaïde's garden – that the aqueduct and the antiquities were the central feature of a romantic garden, not just a monument to be stripped of its roses and displayed as in a museum case. But the fragments of antiquities Zenaïde placed around the garden inevitably deteriorated with time; their recent splendid restoration and removal to the safety of a converted greenhouse were much-needed.

Thus, the last 100 years have, almost by accident, ensured the preservation by two foreign governments of what the first 100 years of Wolkonsky ownership created. This is the tale I have to tell.

Sir John Shepherd was HM Ambassador to Italy from 2000 to 2003

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Bianchina, 8 years old,
Palermo LNDC kennel

She cannot find the Words

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Leonardo da Vinci in Milan: A Personal Memory

by Mariateresa Wright

Milan is hosting the World Expo in 2015 and also a major Leonardo exhibition. So I would like to call this small homage: 'My personal memory of Leonardo'.

Not that I did ever meet the man, you understand. But I grew up among his works in Milan at an impressionable age. He was the pin-up of my adolescent years, the avuncular sage that provided wise philosophical mottoes to a receptive teenager: *'Non si volta chi a stella è fiso'*, *'Si come una giornata ben spesa dà lieto dormire, così una vita ben usata dà lieto morire'* and many more.

My earliest memories are of the theatrical machinery in the Duomo that lowers one of the nails of the True Cross 42 metres from the apse onto the high altar. Once a year on 3 May (this ceremony is now in September), as a very young girl I would have my nose up into the great heights whence the *Nivola* would descend amidst clouds of pervasive incense. I waited for it to happen as if from heaven. The present *Nivola* is a baroque affair highly decorated with busy cherubs, but the original contraption that required 20 men on the roof to manoeuvre was almost certainly by Leonardo, for he was paid by the Duomo administrators at least three times for work done for the Cathedral.

I remember, with my small hand in my father's, taking many a stroll along one of Milan's systems of canals to which Leonardo dedicated so much time. The canal I trotted by as a toddler leads all the way to Pavia, that marvellous and ancient university town, once the capital of the Lombard kingdom.

// My earliest memories are of the theatrical machinery in the Duomo that lowers one of the nails of the True Cross 42 metres from the apse onto the high altar.

At times, I had the added pleasure of waiting for the locks, much improved by Leonardo, to fill up and empty. Better still, occasionally I was allowed to tricycle along the canal (I can still feel the wobbling of the tiny wheels on the granite cobbles) all the way to Rozzano, riding next to fields delimited by poplar trees, and serenaded by frogs, at that time a great culinary delicacy which were served in the rural *osterie*. All have now disappeared under concrete. Or there was the thrill of going to the *Darsena* and seeing the big



San Cristoforo on the Naviglio Grande

barges coming in from as far away as the Val d'Ossola.

I can also recall the feeling of rage and impotence when the *Cascina*, where Leonardo had lived with his apprentices and servants just outside the Milan of his day, was demolished to make way for a vast bus depot. This was the building where one of his faithful servants was asked to fly from the roof, strapped to some of the wings of Leonardo's design. No need for me to spell out the result. Leonardo, a man before his time, had the right ideas but not the light materials to succeed in his aerial quests.

Nowadays, while rambling along the river Toce in Alpine Piedmont, I can imagine how Leonardo, who visited the area, became preoccupied with the power of swirling waters. Such studies kept his mind and pencil busy in his old age, and earlier in his life had led him to taking great interest in the network of canals that not only drained the soggy Lombard plain but helped the transportation of goods that turned Milan into the major port of Italy and another Venice. In the 20th century the majority of the city's canals were covered over as a result firstly of Mussolini's town-planning policies followed by the increase of traffic taking precedence over all other considerations.

And again, I remember myself, nose up in the air, during a

visit with my primary school, trying to find the Leonardo's knot in the more than intricate ceiling, designed by him, of the *Sala delle Asse* in the Castle and asking myself: why Asse? I could not see any. Obviously the Asse had kept someone warm during one of Milan's bitter wartime winters. The ceiling is a wonder of intricacy, the branches of 16 trees with thick foliage all intertwining to form a pergola under which the guests of the Sforzas were entertained.

How did the Tuscan Leonardo end up working in Milan for 20 years?

There were problems in Florence and he was in need of a powerful employer. His long application letter (1482) to Lodovico il Moro, Duke of Milan, asking for employment at Court still exists and is fascinating in the light of what we now know about Leonardo. It is ten paragraphs long: nine of which refer entirely to his ability to construct war machines, weapons, bridges or any building for the purpose of war.

It is only in the last paragraph that we recognise 'our' Leonardo. In it he writes that in peace time he can be an architect, a hydraulic engineer as well as a sculptor and painter as good as anybody else; and he promises to create an equestrian statue in honour of Lodovico Sforza's father.

In those days, even for Leonardo, finding employment was not easy. Competition was great - and what competition! He was appointed by the Duke officially as his lyre player, since all other titles were already assigned to others. This title did not stop the Duke employing him in all sorts of different jobs, such as court plumber or choreographer of the court feasts, processions and masques, where he would organise the costumes, music, poetry, and settings. One such was the celebration of *l'Età dell'Oro* during which Leonardo, overfired with enthusiasm, covered a young boy entirely in gold leaf. We now know why he should not have done it.

Painting, for which we now revere him, was just a small part of his activities. In Milan he painted portraits of the courtiers and the *Virgin of the Rocks*, the mountains in the background inspired by the nearby Alps, and of course *The Last Supper*, to the despair of future generations of restorers.

Leonardo was never satisfied with his work. He was always experimenting and, as he also did with *the Last Supper*, using the slower tempera technique instead of the standard quickly drying fresco technique; this so that he could work more slowly on it and convey to the viewer the full meaning of the event. The experiment was not a success, for even just over twenty years after its completion it needed restoration. It was not a success with me either, taken to view it with my chirruping school mates. I found it very faded, cracked, hardly visible - not surprisingly, since 'Pippo', the legendary British pilot who tormented the nights of the poor Milanese, had dropped a bomb through the roof of the refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie where it was. He certainly did a good job, destroying 60% of Milan's private and public buildings. Compounding this damage, the sand bags that had been put against the painting for protection had become soggy with the rain and transferred the damp to the wall. There have been further restorations since the war.

Leonardo must have been the despair of the friars that had

commissioned the painting as the wall remained covered in scaffolding for years. Some days he would not appear at all and on others he would just stare at it. Sometimes he would suddenly stop and go to create an apparatus for stuffing sausages, the carding machine, the shuttle (a bobbin with two pointed ends, used for weaving) or an automatic spit. It is this juxtaposition between the sublime and the mundane that is so intriguing. *The Last Supper* was the work to which he dedicated more thought than to any of his other works. Leonardo felt that intellectually this should be his most important and he should strive for more and therefore was never satisfied.

When I started returning home from secondary school, boarding the tram in Piazza della Scala, the stop was next to the monument to Leonardo nicknamed in Milanese dialect *El liter in quater* (*un litro in quattro*), which kept me company while waiting for the Number 4, one of the rarest trams, or so it seemed to a hungry school girl. Why did the irreverent Milanese nickname the statue as such? It was erected in 1872. Leonardo stands alone on a tall square base and below him at the four corners are four of his pupils: Cesare da Sesto, Marco da Oggiono, Giannantonio Boltraffio and Andrea Salaino. The whole complex is somewhat dull and unimaginative: hence 'a litre bottle of wine and four glasses' to liven it up. And don't forget that the Milanese call the great Gothic windows of the Cathedral: *El fer da stir* (the smoothing iron).

Near La Scala is the Museo Poldi Pezzoli where many works by Leonardo's pupils are displayed. They are almost indistinguishable from the Master's and since we have so few of Leonardo's paintings, it is well worth a visit to understand their technique of the Chiaroscuro and to appreciate what an outstanding tutor he had been for his pupils.

I leave you with a nugget from his thoughts: '*Colui è veramente forte che sa essere solo*'. And he certainly was *forte*.

Leonardo, more than anyone else, was a *uomo solo*. Despite the life of the Milanese Court and his servants and his pupils all around him, he was totally alone with his all-consuming genius.

Mariateresa Wright is the author of Un Sogno Luminoso, an account of Queen Victoria's visit to Lake Maggiore in 1879.



Sala delle Asse

Laura Bassi: A remarkable 18th Century Mathematician

by Richard Simpson

On 17 April 1732, the Papal City State of Bologna witnessed an unprecedented event. In the morning, a large procession wound its way to the Palazzo Pubblico and entered the Sala degli Anzani on the first floor. There most of the leading authorities of Bologna were in attendance with representatives from the University and legislature, senior church officials, members of the nobility and notable academics. Remarkably the centre of attention was a young woman, just 20 years old. She was Laura Bassi, who was to be submitted to a public examination of her prowess in philosophy and science with a view to awarding her a doctorate at the University. In modern parlance she was 'defending her thesis' although the nature of the examination would not be recognised as such today. She was of course successful – no other outcome after such an ostentatious public display was possible; the event was merely confirmation of much that had gone before. It is broadly true that the awarding of this doctoral degree to a woman was the first verifiable occasion for Bologna and the second for Italy as whole. That Bassi subsequently became the first ever female professor of physics at any university in the world indicates the presence of someone rather remarkable in any century, let alone the 18th.

Bassi was born Laura Maria Caterina Bassi in October 1711, the only child of a lawyer of modest means. By the age of 13 she was being taught natural philosophy at home by the family doctor, Gaetano Tacconi, a lecturer in anatomy and medicine at the University of Bologna and a member of the prestigious Academy of Sciences. By then Tacconi had recognised his student's exceptional abilities and was already planning her entry into the intelligentsia of the city. He broadened her curriculum to embrace logic and science, the latter including aspects of Newton's *Opticks*. This book,

based on 'reasoning verified by experiment', was quite different intellectually than many extant scientific works and must have greatly influenced the young Laura, as her adult professional life shows. Debates with noted academics took place at the Bassi home, and it was soon obvious that the Bolognese had a prodigy on their hands. A particular visitor was Cardinal Prospero Lambertini, later



Laura Bassi portrait by Carlo Vandi



Laura Bassi giving her first public lecture

to become Pope Benedict XIV who, recognising her early brilliance became her strongest supporter and patron.

In March 1732, a month prior to her examination in the Sala degli Anzani, Tacconi had orchestrated her election to the Academy of Sciences. Another extravagant ceremony on 12 May conferred the degree on Bassi. Poems were written, medallions struck, dinners given and the whole city erupted into general rejoicing – and this was not just in Bologna.

Whereas Tacconi, Lambertini and their cronies were highly successful in their promotion of Bassi, their motives were not quite what 21st century eyes might hope to see. It is not the case that this was the first step in the cause of introducing gender equality to Italian academe. Bassi was in fact a pawn in a wider political plan, which was to bring prestige to the University – and by inference to Bologna – by creating a kind of 'civic decoration' unknown anywhere else. The University and other institutions remained male dominated and obstructive to her in many respects. Bassi was finally assigned an honorary readership in October 1732. Conditions were placed on the post: Bassi could only give lectures in the Archiginnasio, where the University was housed, by order of the senate. But Bassi wanted to teach and to research, and not remain a civic figurehead to be paraded when convenient, and hidden away when not. First she took a three-year course in mathematics from Gabriele Manfredi, a pioneer of calculus in Italy, and one of her examiners in 1732. Now she could understand and build on the work of those at the frontiers of physics, the area of science that interested her most, albeit that as a polymath she embraced a wide variety of interests from medicine to ethics, and spoke several languages.

In 1738 Bassi took what was probably the best decision of her entire life - she decided to marry. She wrote to a friend:

My domestic circumstances have induced me to change my mind and make this decision. ... and you will not view it as a reason for detaching myself from the studies, I am under obligation to profess, which I had hoped quietly to pursue in this life; therefore, I have chosen a person who walks my path in the arts and who, through long experience, I was certain would not impede me from following mine.

The consort that she chose was Giuseppe Veratti, also a member of the Academy of Sciences, and as far as one can see it was an extremely successful union in all respects. They set up a teaching laboratory in their own home and for nearly 30 years she gave lessons in electrical phenomena. 1745 proved a pivotal year for her. Lambertini, now Pope Benedict XIV, decided to create a special group of academics within the Academy of Sciences - named the 'Benedettina' after him - dedicated to enhancing the quality and output of the academy. There were to be 24 members, 14 from the existing heads of sections and 10 to be elected by that 14. Initially Bassi's name was not amongst the 10, albeit that she was demonstrably superior to many of them. There was clearly still a cabal against her. She wrote to Lambertini suggesting that he create a 25th position for her, which would thus avoid having to remove someone from the list. This was an astute political move and she was duly appointed to the Benedettina. She would now be expected to attend most meetings and also present an original dissertation each year; this she did 31 times from 1746 to 1777. In 1776 the Professor of Physics died and it was decided to split his post into two. Bassi was appointed to the new Chair of Experimental Physics.

Throughout her life Bassi corresponded with many 'men of letters' and through this means became well known and respected internationally. A much-quoted letter from Voltaire in 1744 read;

Most Honoured Lady: I would like to visit Bologna so that I might say to my fellow citizens that I have seen Signora Bassi, but, deprived of this honour, I trust that I may with justice cast at your feet this philosophical homage in reverence to the glory of her century and sex. As there is no Bassi in London I should more happily enter your Academy of Bologna than the English one, even though it may have produced a Newton.

Bassi died suddenly in February 1778, aged 68, and is buried in the Church of Corpus Domini in Bologna, the same church in which that far better known pioneer of electricity, Luigi Galvani, is also interred. She had held her 'chair of physics' for barely two years.

It is hard to access Bassi's academic prowess directly because little of her work was actually published. But we can, without any misgiving, infer from the numerous reports of her fame and success, that she was a woman not only of great intellectual power but one possessed with a steely determination to succeed where many others had failed. She deserves to be very much better known.

Richard Simpson is a retired mathematics teacher, who enjoys tracking down the places associated with mathematical and scientific people born in the area in which he finds himself. He can be contacted via bsham@lagonda.org.uk.



The Archiginnasio

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Lost for Words

by Richard Bates

Groviglio laocoontico' - that's how novelist Alessandro Baricco once described a ruck in rugby. Now there's a challenge for the students, I thought to myself, as I went along to teach my advanced translation class. English is less prone than Italian to adjectivise proper names, so one would have to weigh up whether to introduce the Trojan prince in some other way, or perhaps leave him out altogether and just translate the sense of the metaphor. After all, the classical reference is probably less familiar to an English reader but, when most of the students confessed they'd had to look it up, that argument soon collapsed. Either it was duffers' night or Baricco had overstretched the cultural range of his readers.

The translation challenges that fascinate me most, though, are the ones involving wit and wordplay.

// The Italian original exploits the terseness of its imperative and, Rule 1, an English translation needs to exploit the rules of English grammar with equal wit.

I've always loved, for example, the expression *'Armiamoci e partite'* as its silent transition from first person plural to second person plural sums up so economically the casual offloading on to some other poor sod the dangerous and dirty work you are invoking as a necessity. But how does one translate it into English? We make the distinction between 'talking the talk' and 'walking the walk', but for years I could see no way of mimicking the brazen double standards of the Italian phrase. The effect of the original is due to its being concentrated into two words connected with an 'e'. Try translating it literally and the whole thing goes to pieces: *Armiamoci* - 'let's take up arms', four words already, 'and go'? But that's hopeless as it sounds as if 'let's' is governing both verbs and we're saying *armi-amoci e partiamo*. With 'let's take up arms' and then 'you go...off to war' all the punch of the original has drained helplessly away. The Italian original exploits the terseness of its imperative and, Rule 1, an English translation needs to exploit the rules of English grammar with equal wit.

I worried away at the question intermittently until I remembered a popular book from the 60s on psychotherapy by Eric Berne, called *Games People Play*. The book tried to show how much social interaction consists of a series of games whose implicit rules are understood and exploited by the parties involved. He calls one of the games 'Let's you and him fight'. In Berne's book, the game is a ploy by which a woman gets two men to fight over her so she can decide

which she wants, but remove it from Berne's argument and it gives us the same idea of the shameless outsourcing of difficulty and danger as in *'Armiamoci e partite'*.

Linguistically it couldn't be more different: there's only one verb, and it's a different verb to either of the two Italian ones, but the phrase enacts the same specious contradiction as the original, with the second-person and third-person pronouns cheerfully clashing with the bogus first-person invitation of 'let's'.

Italy's heroic dubbing industry still performs wonders of this kind for the cinema. The George Clooney McCarthy-period film of a few years back, *Good Night and Good Luck*, contains a good example. One of the characters refers to the genuine historical figure of Fred Friendly, the TV news executive, in these terms: 'I saw Fred yesterday. He wasn't very friendly.' What's to be done? No chance of that play on words working in Italian. So, Rule 2: look elsewhere. If you can't do anything with 'Friendly', can you do something with 'Fred'? You can indeed. The dubbers rose magnificently to the occasion with: *'Ho visto Fred ieri. Era un po' freddino.'*

An example from Italian into English is supplied by *Il Divo*, Paolo Sorrentino's film about Giulio Andreotti. The dialogue incorporates a number of examples of the Senator's attempts at wisdom that his flatterers insisted was wit, one of which was *'Meglio tirare a campare che tirare le cuoia'*¹ (if you want an explanation of Italy's economic problems - look no further). Here - Rule 3 - the translator must decide to which of the two phrases he wants to give priority and build his version around. In this case the effect of the *battuta* required a brutally colloquial phrase for dying that must in some way echo another phrase which could have various kinds of unheroic significance, of which survival was only one. I imagine the sub-titlers weighed the possibilities of 'bite the dust', 'croak', 'cash in your chips', 'turn up your toes', 'hand in your dinner pail', 'pop your clogs', 'go west', 'kick the bucket', 'give up the ghost', and many others before settling on 'snuff it', giving them the satisfactorily succinct 'Better to bluff it than to snuff it' - and better than the original too, I'm inclined to think.

And Baricco's *'groviglio laocoontico'*? I'm afraid in the end we ducked the challenge. 'An inextricable tangle of arms and legs' was the best we could come up with, so we didn't cover ourselves with glory there. Oh well, *'un caffè o un diciotto non si nega a nessuno'*² - now there's a phrase I'd like to be able to translate.

Richard Bates lives and works in Rome and, among other things, teaches the art of translation.

1. *'Tirare le cuoia'* is a colloquial phrase for dying

2. *'Un diciotto'* is the bare pass mark in a university exam and the expression is a cynical university lecturer's way of saying 'we may as well pass the poor chap' literally 'you can give a coffee or an 18 to anyone'.

Baron Corvo in Venice

by Charlie Hall

On the evening of 25 October 1913 Frederick Rolfe, aka Baron Corvo, left a restaurant, having put another dinner on his credit line, 'I'm running a tick at the Cavaletto, simply that I may eat and sleep' he pleaded in his final letter to the Rev Stephen Justin, his last benefactor. He walked to his apartment in the attic of a down-at-heel house, Ca' Marcello, in Santa Croce. Sitting on his bed, he bent down to unlace his boots and, with his chest constricted over a full stomach, he suffered a stroke that sprung him backwards onto the mattress.

He was found at 3 o'clock the next afternoon. His demise was cursorily reported in the *Daily Star* in London which described him as 'a character curiously interesting and always mysterious who had written several novels in which was being exhibited an extraordinary amount of erudition poorly assimilated, dotted with penetration and apparent accuracy that impressed the critics.' And *The Aberdeen Free Press* recorded that he was a man of extraordinary genius and versatility, a clever writer, musician and artist.

Little more was written about the passing of this man who had published very little during his lifetime, his *tour de force* being the extraordinary *Hadrian VII*. The work was referred to by DH Lawrence as 'a clear and definite book of our epoch' and 'a novel of genius' by Graham Greene. It had an electric effect on the unsuccessful biographer and self-confessed aesthete, AJA Symons, 'I felt that interior stir' he remembered, 'with which we all recognise a transforming new experience... a feat of writing difficult to parallel: original, witty... full of masterful phrases and scenes, almost flabbergasting in its revelation of a vivid and profoundly unusual personality.'

It was not until Symons published a peculiar and fascinating biography, *The Quest for Corvo* in 1934, that interest was sparked and the memorable and degenerate 'romance', *The Desire and Pursuit of the Whole*, saw the light of day. Horatio Brown, another writer who had lived in Venice and had known Rolfe, judged it as 'unpublishable due to the libellous nature of its contents'.

What were the contents? How outrageous could they possibly be? Reading the book now it is not only a mesmerising and eye-popping excoriation of the Edwardian pomposity that was the English colony at the beginning of the century, but also a stunning love-letter to the city of Venice, her sailors and gondolieri. This chimed with the mood set by art historian John Addington Symonds, whose love of the 'trans-class masculine comradeship' and space for 'intense forms of life in the here and now, especially among the city's working class' had been established at the end of the 19th century.



Barberini Faun

In 1889 the new Italian State had decriminalised sex between men, and Anglo-Saxon men in particular were attracted to this atmosphere of sexual freedom. As noted by Sean Brady, 'Symonds, Horatio Brown and others found in Venice, and its culture in their day a vibrant indigenous homo-sociality, which inspired in them a strongly nature-orientated sense of desire between men'.

Rolfe arrived in Venice as an impoverished writer, brought along by a patron, Professor RM Dawkins who had met him in England as a guest of his previous benefactors, the Pirie-Gordons. Seeing an opportunity to help a lame dog and secure some amusing companionship at the same time, Dawkins suggested that Rolfe should join him on a holiday in Venice and offered to provide the funds necessary for expenses. 'He was to repay me from money to be made by descriptive writing' Professor Dawkins wrote. 'I was glad enough to risk a little cash for the pleasure and interest of his company, and of course I never really expected to see it back again.' How right he was. Not only did he never see a penny, but for his troubles he was mercilessly lampooned as the 'blubber-lipped Professor of Greek with a voice like a strangled Punch' – a description that WH Auden, writing the introduction to *Desire and Pursuit of the Whole* vouched for as remarkably accurate as Dawkins 'happens to be a friend of mine.'

Venice at the turn of the century was an extraordinary city. The port, a hub of commerce, technological development and artistic production in the Middle Ages which controlled almost all trade between the Western and Eastern civilisations, had suffered once Vasco de Gama had discovered the sea route around the Cape of Good Hope in 1488. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, however,

continued over



Baron Corvo

had brought the ships back to the Mediterranean and thus back to Venice, its most northerly port.

In 1895, the Italian Government had signed a new convention with P&O, so that passengers coming from Australasia, India and Egypt would arrive in Europe at Venice.

The city experienced something of an economic boom and became a fashionable venue. That same year the Venice Biennale was launched and the Lido became a destination for travellers, but despite the regeneration Venice was perceived as a city of degeneration. The writers who came to Venice at the century's turn were perhaps attracted to a city that appeals, as the American Consul at the time, Edmund Flagg, observed, 'to one weary of the world, disappointed, chagrined, sick at heart and soul'.

This was the Venice that became home and final resting place for Frederick Rolfe, a man who adopted the name Baron Corvo following a dubious gift of the title from the Duchess Sforza Cesarini, another of his many patrons. A man whose writing talents were never in question, who lived a life in almost continuous poverty, failing to keep friends and who wrote to Richard Dawkins, the friend who brought him to Venice, 'My difficulty, however, is not to find friends as I get older, but to keep those whom the gods send me in such profusion.'

What Rolfe achieved in *Desire and Pursuit of the Whole* is what many writers of Venice have possibly wished to do. Perhaps he was spurred on by his tribulations, perhaps by a genuine case of clinical paranoia, or maybe, as AJA Symons suggests, by his struggles with his homosexuality. Rolfe identified the petty, the priggish, the failed, as well as those who sought to relaunch careers and reputations on this tiny microworld, and saw them as flaccid and deathly, feeding off

the noble body of *La Serenissima*. Those whom he attacked tried to take out his claws with acts of generosity and kindness that usually took the form of clubbing together to purchase him a first class ticket back to England. He always refused and, as John Cowper Powys wrote 'in his prolonged destitution he was a universal embarrassment; in his brief affluence a public spectacle'.

He was determined to stay in Venice where he could 'forget all scruples'. At one point he opened a correspondence with a man who had befriended him, shared his taste in young men and had become yet another benefactor. He wrote a series of letters in which he recounts various assignations with young Italian men who were perfectly delighted, it would seem, to have sexual encounters with him. These are now published as *The Venice Letters*, a slim volume described by AS Byatt as 'decadent, muscular pornography that would belong in any collection of erotica'. With a style of prose, certainly not intended for publication at the time of writing, Rolfe celebrates sex with a glorious abandon that is fantastic, daring and outrageous. Imagine the sensuous, slightly transgressive delight of the *Barberini Faun* or Caravaggio's *Amor Vincit Omnia* and you will come close.

He died as he had lived, heavily indebted to his many benefactors but maintaining with an extraordinary skill, his tightrope walk over the abyss of utter penury, maintained by his brilliance and his refusal to compromise at any moment.

Charlie Hall is an art historian, tour guide and director of the John Hall Venice Course

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Renato Guttuso: Painter of Modern Life

by Alexander Estorick

'...for this artist even the straw round the neck of a wine flask is unravelling itself in a manner positively threatening in its purpose and intensity.'

Elizabeth David

It was their curious combination of monochromatic austerity and deliberate sumptuousness that made Guttuso's (1912–1987) illustrations for Elizabeth David's *Italian Food*, the first book of Italian cookery in the English language, so appropriate to their time and audience. With publication coinciding, in 1954, with the end of food rationing in Britain, the artist offered a window into a tantalising world of plenty which belied the even greater deprivation in Italy at the time. It also underscored a very Italian refusal to compromise on quality or taste in even the direst circumstances.

The first show of 2015 at the Estorick Collection, entitled *Renato Guttuso: Painter of Modern Life*, included a number of works which similarly delighted in the rich produce of the artist's native Sicily. In both *Basket with Corncobs* (1984) and *Watermelons* (1986) the objects almost intrude on their surrounding space, an effect which is exaggerated by their saturation with colour. These images, as well as the earlier *Butchered Lamb* (1974), might easily be citations



Renato Guttuso, *La Vucciria*, 1974 (not in show)

from Guttuso's famous large-scale painting, also of 1974, of *La Vucciria* in Palermo. Now in the Palazzo Chiaramonte-Steri in that city, it is a work which has come to embody the essence of the fertile life of Sicily in its depiction of a marketplace in which people and food, lights and colours converge, in a practical symbiosis with one another. When viewed alongside the Estorick's permanent collection, Guttuso reveals the debt owed to his earlier 'revolutionary' compatriots. His eclectic style, which is nearly as varied as the many genres he worked in, tends toward a kind of swollen realism whose aggressive forms, such as the carpentry tools and oil cans of *Table and Window* (1961), hold a pregnancy of meaning analogous to the 'metaphysical' collation of objects by Carrà and de Chirico.

Given that Guttuso was a committed communist from 1940 until the end of his life, indeed one who served two terms as a party senator in the 1970s, it is difficult not to read political symbolism into all of his imagery, watermelons and all. However, Eric Estorick, who had befriended the artist twenty years earlier, recalled:

'In Guttuso I really felt that I had met a vast cosmopolitan presence in spite of the fact that he was a leading cultural figure in the communist movement of Italy, which really interested me not at all...because he was almost classless in his associations and his intellectual interests...'



Renato Guttuso, *Neighbourhood Rally*, 1975

continued over



Renato Guttuso, *Death of a Hero*, 1953

On purchasing Guttuso's *Death of a Hero* (1953), originally titled *Eroe Proletario* by the artist himself, Estorick chose to downplay its specific political connotations, interpreting the prominent red flag more as an abstract 'symbol of the allegiance of the dead man to a belief'. This view was, to some extent, supported by the visual evidence of the show, in which the imposing *Neighbourhood Rally* (1975) functioned as a kind of political analogue to *La Vucciria* painted the previous year. Here the viewer is confronted by a crowd of people, including quotations from works by Picasso as well as Warhol's Marilyn, within a provincial cul-de-sac. In the foreground a party dignitary (the artist-protagonist?) reaches out to address them. That he reaches over a raised red flag towards the spectre of Picasso

(standing on a window ledge) is a calculated attempt by the artist to cement himself within a kind of Mediterranean communist lineage. However, when viewing the work in its totality, the red flag is clearly de-emphasised by the wealth of surrounding curtains and awnings in bold greens and yellows. Colour therefore reveals the tension for Guttuso between retaining his autonomy as an artist, and so the capacity to make formal decisions free from ideology, and his figurehead status within the party.

Exhibited alongside the show were a number of large drawings in charcoal by Peter de Francia, who shared a studio with Guttuso in Rome in 1947, and who was influenced by the older artist's own series of drawings, entitled *Gott Mit Uns* (1944) depicting Nazi atrocities committed on Italian soil. De Francia himself never joined the British Communist Party, stating: 'I belonged to a generation who could not but be suspicious of the Soviets, yet I was immensely drawn to the ambitions of the Soviet Revolution. I have had to live with that contradiction, and still do.' These works, made between 1947 and 1953, are a revelation for their clarity and innocence, and unlike Guttuso, ultimately humanised by their apparent freedom from ideology.

Alexander Estorick is a trustee of the Estorick Collection in North London.

The exhibition of Renato Guttuso: Painter of Modern Life was organised in collaboration with Galleria d'Arte Maggiore, Bologna.

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LerarioLapadula: An Italian Fashion Treasure Trove



by Susan Kikoler

Bari in southern Italy is not a place one would automatically associate with an Italian fashion archive but it is where two young experts in the history of costume, Luciano Lapadula and Vito Antonio Lerario, have established their fashion treasure trove of some 6000 garments. Founded in 2008 as Atelier 1900 it is now known and consulted internationally as LerarioLapadula.

Its collection contains rare examples of garments from the Baroque period and it has a particularly fine collection of clothing from the Fascist period as well as gowns made for such vintage screen icons as Marlene Dietrich. However contemporary items are also constantly added. The green dress worn by Kiera Knightley in the film *Atonement* was on display at the Spello Film Festival, Umbria, in February 2015 in the exhibition *Siamo Donne*, a historical presentation of the role of women in international film through the creations of the major cinema fashion designers and the influence they had on everyday fashion.



Dress worn by
Marlene Dietrich

LerarioLapadula has collaborated with such major organisations as Unesco, the Sorbonne, Palazzo Morando in Milan and the University of Bari. Its archive is consulted and costumes used by many film, theatre and video companies. While individually Vito

Antonio Lerario is a stylist, designing his own clothing range and Dottore Luciano Lapadula teaches History of Costume and Social Anthropology and has published several books, both are engaged in curating exhibitions, running courses and, of course, hunting for more vintage and historical clothing both in Italy, London, Paris and New York.

Note: The Spello Film Festival will be held 26 February to 6 March 2016



Dress worn by Keira Knightley in *Atonement*

The Mussolini Canal

Antonio Pennacchi, Translated by Judith Landry, Dedalus

by Tom Richardson

Before my posting to Rome in the eighties I knew little about the reclamation of the Pontine Marshes, that long low-lying tract of land that stretches south from the capital to Terracina and the sea. I knew only that after centuries of abandonment the malaria-ridden marshes had been drained by the fascist regime and that tens of thousands of smallholders had been moved from Italy's north-east to settle the reclaimed farmland. Antonio Pennacchi's long and grandly sweeping novel - well translated by Judith Landry - tells the story of one such Veneto peasant family, the Peruzzi, through the eyes of a descendant.

The family struggles to make good in the early years of the last century, is evicted in the twenties by an aristocratic landowner, but obtains a lease of land in the Pontine Marshes because, a few years earlier, Pericle Peruzzi had done a favour for a fascist 'gerarch' and ally of Mussolini. He is Rossoni, a real historical figure and veteran syndicalist and the Duce himself makes several cameo appearances in the book. We see the already huge family, two branches each of seventeen children, expand still further - some go to fight in Spain and Abyssinia, many in World War 2 - hailstorms ruin harvests, wartime bombing destroys dikes and floods the land again, but the family, led by its powerful grandmother, tenaciously holds on. It's the story of a poor family, but it's also the story of Italy. At the end, Pennacchi half-promises us a sequel.

If he does, it will certainly sell well. *The Mussolini Canal* won the Strega Prize in 2010 and has already sold 400,000 copies in Italy, a lot by local standards. Pennacchi himself is descended from an immigrant Veneto family and has lived all his life in and around Latina. In his preface he says that this is 'the book that I came into the world to write'. Some BIS members may recall an evening a few years ago when the Italian Cultural Institute showed a documentary, *Stranieri in Patria*, about the Pontine reclamation (and of parts of Grosseto province and Sardinia too), with recollections of the period by ageing locals who still spoke with a Veneto accent. It was Mussolini's flagship enterprise and attracted huge international attention at the time.

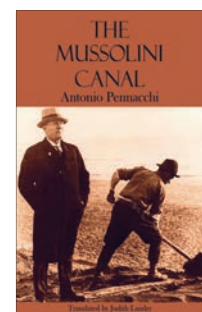
Most of the Veneto families who came south had never been further than their nearest town, let alone Rome, and most had never taken a train. The food, the dialects, the climate were all different. It has been called a mass deportation, but many families did move willingly. It's hard to realise now just how poor the Veneto countryside, and indeed much of the Po Valley, was a hundred years ago. One of the many strengths of Pennacchi's book is that its first third puts the diaspora in context: the precariously placed smallholders, the landless *braccianti*, the appeal of revolutionary socialism, the burning of homes and haystacks, the anger of returning soldiers, the alliance of landowners with fascist thugs, the Church's

equivocal role. The Peruzzi family are nowhere near the top, but they're not at the bottom either, and Pennacchi charts their gradual shift from socialism in its various forms to fascism and the Blackshirts, from slapping a priest's face to silencing one for good on Mussolini's indirect orders.

Pennacchi has been criticised for a 'moral indifference to fascism'. Most of the Peruzzis join the party, they believe in law, order and property, they owe their Pontine holdings to their regime connections, they fight the Duce's wars valiantly, and one of them, Adelchi, witnesses a massacre of Coptic priests without emotion. I think the critics exaggerate. Many Italians believed in fascism, or at least in the Duce, and it does no good to pretend, whether in post-war Italy or elsewhere, that everyone had fought for the resistance. The Peruzzis' chief concern was their own survival. The descendant who narrates their story pokes fun at fascism from the vantage point of many years later. He often accuses it of incompetence or corruption, he disapproves of the alliance with Hitler and can't understand the racial laws; but essentially he's saying, this is my family's story, take it or leave it, they're not heroes, you need to understand the world they lived in and avoid snap judgements.

And who is this descendant? We only find out, in a curious way, at the very end of the book. He tells it as one long soliloquy, broken every so often by phrases like 'What did you say?', or 'You don't agree?' - his companion never actually says a word himself. As a literary device it's very effective, and it makes for a continuity of style. But it does have the result that at times the storyteller's character shines more strongly than those of his grandparents, uncles and aunts whose story he is telling. There are so many of them, and although there are recognisable differences of personality, and two central figures, Pericle and his mother, yet the book is fundamentally the story of one tightly-knit extended farming family, the sort which dominated Italian society until relatively recent times. Not for nothing has Pennacchi been called the 21st century Verga.

I hope there will be a sequel. Of course the Pontine area has changed dramatically in the post-war era. The farms, where they still exist, are bigger, and Cassa per il Mezzogiorno money led to an explosion of small factories around Latina and Aprilia. But some things haven't changed completely. I remember sitting at a wayside inn and drinking a glass of *fragolino*, that foxy, slightly fizzy wine that Veneto farmers made with imported US rootstock after the phylloxera pest destroyed most European vines in the 1870s. They took the rootstock down to their new homes. And since the sale of *fragolino* is now officially banned in Italy, for reasons I won't go into here, the pleasure of drinking it, with the Mussolini Canal lapping past me not far away, was all the greater.



A World Apart: The Life of Ian Greenlees

Robin Chanter and David Platzer

by Mark Roberts

In the history of Anglo-Italian relations around the mid-twentieth century, Ian Greenlees was in many ways a remarkable figure. Almost single-handedly he set up Radio Bari in 1943, to broadcast anti-Fascist propaganda to the Italians during the closing stages of the war; he maintained lively contacts with an impressively varied collection of Italian writers, artists and intellectuals; and throughout the 1960s and 1970s, as Director of the British Institute of Florence, he dominated the small but vociferous Anglo-Florentine community. It is therefore all the more surprising that there is so very little information about him that is publicly available. An internet search will produce scant pickings, although there are scattered references to Greenlees in the memoirs and autobiographies of his contemporaries.

A World Apart: the Life of Ian Greenlees by Robin Chanter and David Platzer, privately printed in 2015, is therefore welcome. How easy it is to obtain, I do not know: the edition is limited to 100 copies. But anyone interested in the subject should make every effort to obtain a copy.

The genesis of this book was somewhat odd. It began in 1989, the year after Greenlees's death, as a memoir/biography of him by his long-term assistant and companion, Robin Chanter. It was then recast and re-written by David Platzer, an American journalist based in Paris who had befriended Greenlees and had already spent many months editing his autobiographical writings. Several other people were invited to contribute snippets to the book, including Chanter's wife Laura, the writer John Vernon and the journalist Nicholas Parsons. There were many delays, and meanwhile Platzer published a well-written informative essay in *The London Magazine* (January 1995). After much re-writing the book finally appeared in time for the three-day conference on Greenlees that was held in September 2014 in Bagni di Lucca.

Greenlees tended to make an indelible impression on his visitors. (My own memory is of his crumpled linen suits and floppy bow ties and the clouds of cigar-smoke that surrounded him, and of the three small Pekinese dogs that seemed always to be getting under his feet.) It was in May 1958 that he was appointed director of the British Institute, through the machinations of his friend Harold Acton, and he managed to hold onto his seat for twenty-two years. Born in 1913, and educated at Ampleforth and at Magdalen College, Oxford, he had been a *lettore* at the University of Rome and had been on walking tours in the south of Italy with the louche travel writer and

novelist Norman Douglas. During the war he served in the North African and Italian campaigns, and was mentioned in despatches. Through his work at Radio Bari, where he organised anti-Fascist broadcasts, he made many contacts among partisans and intellectuals on the Italian Left: Mario Soldati, Alberto Moravia and Elsa Morante were his friends, and his portrait in the uniform of a British major was painted by Renato Guttuso. His political opinions were both extreme and unpredictable: while he admired many Communists, such as Archie Colquhoun the translator of Manzoni, he also admired many on the Right, such as Richard Nixon. Regarding the UK he was a convinced republican, and he loathed the royal family and the public schools, as well as foxhunting, but on the other hand he was exceedingly snobbish, and a fervent defender of inherited wealth. One of his more attractive qualities, well brought out in this book, was that he was a great promoter of youth: at the British Institute he would encourage the youngest of his teachers to lecture in public, and he never patronised or talked down to the young.

David Platzer and his collaborators have gathered a wealth of detailed information about Greenlees's career and life in Italy, much of it extremely fascinating, though any reader hoping for scandalous tittle-tattle (of the sort so beloved of the Anglo-Florentines, conscious as they are of living in 'a sunny place for shady people') is bound to be disappointed.

Mark Roberts is responsible for the Cultural Programme at the British Institute of Florence where he has worked since 1977



Ian Greenlees in his office at the British Institute of Florence, ca. 1977. The silver lamp in the left foreground was used for lighting Toscano cigars. Courtesy The British Institute of Florence

Chairman's Review

September 2014 – June 2015

by Charles de Chassiron

The annual Leconfield Lecture, the Society's principal event, took place at the Italian Cultural Institute in November 2014 with a further eight talks being held throughout the year. Summaries of all the talks are in the pages that follow. We enjoyed an excellent Christmas dinner at the Rocco restaurant in west London. In May we arranged a special evening at the Estorick Gallery centred on their current exhibition of Modigliani's drawings. Some members also attended a wonderful evening at the Italian Embassy where the Southbank Sinfonia performed an exhilarating programme of music under the baton of Sir Antonio Pappano raising £17,000 for the orchestra's activities, principally at two Italian festivals in summer 2015. A private view of an exhibition of the work of artist Marco Lusini, *The Colours of the Human Soul*, to which members were invited was held at the Fiumano Fine Art Gallery in London.

The Trustees decided to continue the policy adopted in 2012/13 of devoting up to £5,000 (the investment income from the major Hawkins legacy received in 2012) to the support of worthy artistic, academic and social causes, in accordance with the Society's aims. They considered a number of applications and made grants as follows:

- Co-financing of the video 'Think Italy' produced by the Society for Italian Studies, now being used on the SIS



The BIS Christmas Party at Rocco London Restaurant © Georgina Gordon-Ham



Sir Antonio Pappano and the Southbank Sinfonia at the Italian Ambassador's Residence

- website and in secondary schools, and intended to encourage the study of Italian language and culture at university level in UK (£500).
- A grant towards the publication in mid-2015 by the British School of Rome of a study by Dr. Laura Ambrosini of the Italian National Research Council (CNR) on the collections of Etruscan objects from the Galeassi Tomb in Palestrina held in the Villa Giulia Museum (Rome) and British Museum (London) (£500).
- A grant towards the holding of an exhibition of paintings by the Tuscan painter Marco Lusini at the Fiumano Gallery in London (£250).
- A third year's funding of the London-based orchestra Southbank Sinfonia, composed of young musicians, which will again play at the Anghiari Festival in Italy in 2015 (£1000).
- A grant to the Italian School in London, partly in payment for their housing of the BIS archives (£500).

On behalf of the Trustees I would like to warmly thank Dr Charles Avery who left the Committee after a number of years of exemplary service. The Society's Trustees would like to thank our Patron, H. E. Pasquale Q. Terracciano, the Italian Ambassador, and his diplomatic colleagues, especially Minister Vincenzo Celeste, Counsellor Silvia Limoncini, and Press and Public Affairs Counsellor Nicola Todaro Marescotti (replaced in February 2015 by First Secretary Dott. Federico Bianchi) for their unstinting support during the year. We also extend our special thanks to Dott. ssa Caterina Cardona, the Director of the Italian Cultural

Institute, and her staff, for allowing the Leconfield Lecture to be held at the Institute, the Society's traditional venue, in the midst of the Institute's own highly-intensive programme, and for other acts of generous support, such as making a room available for Trustees' meetings. Dott.ssa Cardona will be greatly missed. We would however like to extend a warm welcome to her successor Dott. Marc Delogu, who arrived in July. We would also like to thank all the speakers who have so willingly and generously given the Society such a variety of interesting talks throughout the year.

Last but not least thanks go to our two excellent Secretaries, Elisabetta Murgia (Events) and John Jinks (Membership) for their dedicated and very effective work throughout the year.

Unfortunately we have also recently had to say farewell to our Treasurer Alessandro Iobbi, who decided to resign in the summer after five years in the role. We are all extremely grateful to him, and he has helped us find a worthy successor in Silvia Pieretti, who took over in August.

Finally, my Trustee colleagues and I were very sorry to learn in September of the recent death of John Cullis, who was Secretary of the Society from 1993 to 2001. I am sure that many longer-established members of the Society will remember him well, especially as he continued to attend meetings and in particular our AGMs in more recent years, and will recall his kindness, welcoming manner and keen interest in all things Italian. He will be remembered warmly.

Welcome to new members

Mr and Mrs John Allan	Dr David Holohan
Mr Federico Bianchi	Mr John Hoenig
Mrs Daphne Birch	Dr Lucy Hughes-Hallett
Dr Bonnie Blackburn	Mr Grahame Hyland
Professor Richard Bosworth	Ms Susan Hyland
Mr James Buckley	Mr David Jones
Dr Margherita Calderoni	Mr Thomas Kidman
Miss Rita Carta	Ms Janine Lees
Ms Anna Clark	Dr Jeanne Magagna
Mrs Bruna Colombo-Otten	Dr Anna Marra
Mr Peter Crossley	Professor Joseph Mifsud
Mrs Sharron Davis	Mr Richard Nathanson
Miss Anna L. Deavin	Dr Giuliana Pieri
Mr and Mrs Terry Duffy	Dr Katia Pizzi
Professor Christopher Duggan	Mr Christopher Pott
Lady Caroline Egremont	Miss Rossella Romano
Mr Michael Fishberg	Mr Alessandro Scasciafratti
Dr Hendrika Foster	Mr Stephen Senior
Miss Anne Garrihy	Ms Marjorie Stimmel
Miss Vivienne Gordon-Graham	Miss Alice Sweeney-Carroll
Mr & Mrs Marco Gubitosi	Mrs Valerie Taylor
Dr Leo Franc Halford-Stevens	Mr Massimo Tosato
Mrs Claudine Hantman	Ms Claude Vogel
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Ms Emma-Louise Hayley	Mr and Mrs Gerald Williams
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Why the Brits love Italy and the Italians flock to London



Enrico Franceschini

At the Travellers Club in September 2014, Enrico Franceschini, London correspondent of *La Repubblica*, kicked off the autumn series of talks with an entertaining look at the ties between our respective countries and the way in which we view the nationals of the other. He reminded us of the long history of English visitors to Italy, including those on the Grand Tour, as well as the many writers who found inspiration there: Byron, Shelley, Keats, DH Lawrence and EM Forster to name but a few. More recently politicians have also delighted in the country's charms, notably Tony Blair, who enjoyed a number of well-publicised holidays while Prime Minister, along with the many Britons who have established second homes in Italy. The first visitors from the Italian peninsula to Britain came many centuries earlier however. The foundations of the City of London were laid by the Romans during their long occupation of the country, with the boundary of the Roman Empire extending as far north as Hadrian's Wall. And the Italians have kept coming. Mazzini and Ugo Foscolo made their homes in London in the mid-19th century where they were supported in their efforts towards Italian unification. Both before and after WW2 Italians were settling in the areas around Clerkenwell and Soho bringing with them a new restaurant and café culture, olive oil, espresso coffee and a whole new approach to food and cooking.

Enrico Franceschini estimated that there are approximately 450,000 Italians working in London and a total of 1 million Italians in the UK overall including short stay visitors. One of the reasons that so many come is because of the perception that the job prospects are better. He told us that Italian families in London are often instantly recognisable – an elegantly dressed couple, with two children and a sweater draped over the shoulders of the husband.

And what do the English make of the Italians? Henry VIII did not think much of the Pope and Churchill initially did not take Mussolini seriously. The story goes, however, that during the Blitz, when the streets of London were empty, he came across a barber's shop displaying an 'Open for Business' sign. Churchill thanked the barber for being a good citizen and asked his name. 'Gennaro Totoro,' came the reply. Neither should we forget the hero's welcome given to Garibaldi when he came to London in 1864 – so many people came to cheer that it took him five hours to get from Victoria Station to Lancaster Gate.

While we were reminded of the contribution that Italians have made to the UK, in particular in the field of culture, with Renzo Piano being one example, Enrico Franceschini also posed a number of questions. We were asked to imagine what our respective countries would be like if it were run by the other. For example, would Italian politics become more serious or would mortadella still be thrown in the Italian Parliament? What could Italians learn by sitting in the Spectators' Gallery in the House of Commons? He then surprised us with a fascinating statistic: 22,000 people ran the British Empire – the same number as running the bureaucracy of Sicily today. He noted that Britain adapts more quickly to change than Italy and wondered whether that was one of the reasons why the British like Italy so much. He spoke of *'immobilismo'* and the theme of Lampedusa's novel *Il Gattopardo* 'everything needs to change so everything can stay the same' and also of *votagabbana* – the Italian capacity to change sides as a means of surviving.

What is beyond question, however, is that Italians will continue to flock to London and there will be no stopping the Brits love of Italy.

Vanessa Hall-Smith

Pinocchio, Puppets and Modernity: *The Mechanical Body*

Dr Katia Pizzi, began her fascinating talk by narrating the origins of the well-known story, which has deeper undertones than most of the audience had perhaps realised. Penned as a biography of a chosen log of firewood that was carved by old Geppetto into a *burattino* (puppet), it was serialised – like many a Dickens novel – in 1881 in the *Giornale per Bambini*. The author was Carlo Lorenzini (1826 - 1890), alias Collodi, from the name of the villa in Tuscany, not far from Lucca, where he worked as a pastry-cook.

Such was its success, that – only two years later – it was expanded and brought out as a book, about a puppet that had been saved from hanging on a tree, only to become eventually a little boy. The original illustrations, by Enrico Mazzanti, were reproduced in the Oxford University Press translation of the 1980s. The book has gone into 178 different illustrated editions and been translated into 260 languages (the Latin one being entitled '*Pinoculus*'), on account of its

inherent moral qualities, owing to which it has been called a 'secular bible', and 'a bible of the human heart'.

Umberto Eco regarded it as '*un'opera aperta*', one which lends itself to multiple readings, for example as a parody of the standard 'rags to riches' plot; as an allegory of the Italian character; or as an explication of totalitarian regimes.

Collodi, we were told, employed three strategies: the folk-tale (with a strong moral imperative); the fairy-tale; and the *Commedia dell'arte*. Katia Pizzi enumerated some parallels in 19th century European literature, such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, where the puppet is both human and mechanical, and pointed out how it also relied on the Renaissance idea that the body was a machine, a



Katia Pizzi

microcosm, which reflected the universe, or cosmos. In 18th century France, during the Enlightenment, she noted that things mechanical symbolised modernity.

The alluring story was first filmed by Giulio Antamoro in a silent movie of 1911, with Pinocchio played by Poldoro, and later, in 1940, by Walt Disney, with an un-mechanical Pinocchio. Just after the Millennium, Roberto Benigni produced a lavish, ironically 'Hollywood' production, with Collodi's narrative as a series of frantic adventures, running only up to chapter 15, Pinocchio's death, where the original serial had ended.

Returning to Collodi's book, Katia Pizzi noted that it is not a strongly moralistic tale in the tradition of many a folk-tale, for the puppet lies and challenges authority. The narrative seesaws from the real to the fantastic, for example, there

are not many topographical references, with descriptions of richly furnished castles and so forth.

In 1855 Georges Sand met Collodi in Florence, sharing a Mazzini-like world view, and hoping for the Unification of Italy; indeed, Collodi was involved in some of the battles of the Risorgimento and became the official censor for the Grand-Duchy of Tuscany.

Futurism exploited and promoted mechanisation, with Boccioni calling it '*machinolatry*', while Marinetti was in 1909 totally enamoured of his motor-car. Later on, Pinocchio the puppet became transmogrified into a robot and finally, in the 21st century, he responds to modern biotechnology, and the digital world of virtual reality, remaining 'relevant' for our globalised, multi-cultural society.

Charles Avery

Gabriele D'Annunzio: Poet, *Seducer* and Preacher of War

Lucy Hughes-Hallett spoke to the Society in February about the life of Gabriele D'Annunzio. She based the talk on *The Pike*, the acclaimed biography of D'Annunzio, which she had published in 2013. This book, her third, had won four literary prizes in 2014.

D'Annunzio might seem an unlikely subject for a popular biography. A gifted self-publicist, prolific writer, serial seducer, shameless demagogue and ardent nationalist, D'Annunzio's reputation has suffered both from his personal excesses and from his association with militarism and the advent of fascism. But her lecture brought his personality to life, and proved as vivid and gripping as the book. D'Annunzio himself was a larger-than-life character. Lucy Hughes-Hallett recounted his story in detail, describing his activities, achievements and motivation in literature, politics and private life, but taking care not to pass moral judgement on any of them. D'Annunzio may not have had the lasting impact on Italian literature or politics that he craved – and he was certainly not a role model; but he undoubtedly remains a fascinating subject for study. Indeed he showed a quite modern craving for celebrity status and capacity for self-promotion and public relations. Above all, he was a character who reflected the particular spirit of the times in which he lived. He took inspiration from the 19th Century Romantics, but foreshadowed the militaristic and totalitarian movements of the first half of the 20th Century. He played a role in taking Italy into the First World War, believing that Italy needed a war to prove its national honour. After the war, in 1919, he challenged the terms of the Versailles Treaty by seizing and annexing the Istrian city of Fiume.

Widely read, D'Annunzio was a prolific author. He published his first volume of poetry while still in his teens. He also wrote novels, imitating the style of Tolstoy among others. A patriot and skilled orator, D'Annunzio grew up in the shadow of Garibaldi, whom he longed to emulate. He was elected to the Chamber of Deputies, but found a conventional political role

frustrating and restrictive. Compulsively promiscuous, he took many lovers, including the famous actress, Eleonora Duse, for whom he wrote four plays.

Although he had a satisfactory income, D'Annunzio ran up considerable debts, which required him to keep one step ahead of his creditors for much of his life. Depressed and disappointed when the First World War came to an end, he gathered and led a rag-tag group of followers from Ronchi to Fiume, where he set up his own city-state, wrote its constitution and became its 'Duce' for 15 months. The town was full of political and social experiments, and attracted revolutionaries and political theorists from all over Europe. The experience of visiting D'Annunzio in Fiume influenced the thinking of Mussolini. Lenin too claimed to have learnt lessons from D'Annunzio's political experiment, which ultimately failed. Fiume's economy, under D'Annunzio, depended principally on piracy and gangsterism.

Lucy Hughes-Hallett concluded that D'Annunzio's political legacy may have been limited, though he did undermine the development of Italian democracy at a crucial moment, and that his lasting legacy, if any, is more likely to lie in his finest poetry and novels. She also discussed his reputation in modern Italy, where his life and works were finally restored to the academic curriculum in the 1980s. Finally she touched on his relationship with Mussolini, who worried about D'Annunzio's popular appeal, even after he had retired from public life in his later years to a farmhouse on Lake Garda, and treated him with wary respect.

The lecture provided a fascinating account of a remarkable life and an extraordinary personality. We were certainly convinced that D'Annunzio, for all his faults, was a subject worthy of study, that the story of his life has much to tell us about Italy at the beginning of the 20th Century, and that the best of his poetry and fiction may well be worth discovering.



Lucy Hughes-Hallett

Richard Northern

The 2014 Leconfield Lecture

Myself when young: Becoming a Musician in Renaissance Italy – or Not

Dr Bonnie Blackburn, Fellow of the British Academy, member of the Faculty of Music at Oxford University and General Editor of the book series *Monuments of Music*, addressed the British-Italian Society on the theme of whether becoming a musician in Renaissance Europe was a good idea. She noted that many great artists at that time had learned to play an instrument proficiently when they were young but preferred to follow a different profession and not be known as a musician.

The idea for her lecture came from her reading of Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* (first published in 1550), where she noted with surprise how often he mentioned artists who were talented as musicians when they were young but decided to turn to art. It made her think about becoming a musician in Renaissance Italy and whether it was a good career choice prompting a number of questions such as whether one should try to become a professional performer or play music simply for pleasure; just how far should a gentleman go in showing his musical expertise; was it acceptable for women to perform in public and how important was it for rulers to employ musicians?

She answered these questions with the aid of slides showing portraits of artists, works of art, musicians, musical instruments, music sheets and with five pieces of music written during the period and performed by the Marian Consort, the internationally renowned early music ensemble.

Her first example of the influences at play was inspired by the Renaissance artist Benvenuto Cellini's autobiography, which described the contest between him and his father, Giovanni, himself a musician and member of the city wind band in Florence from 1480 to 1514, engineer and maker of musical instruments belonging to one of the great guilds. He wished his son to follow in his footsteps and Benvenuto was forced to learn the flute as a child, but although talented, he refused to take up music as a profession and became a goldsmith and artist instead. Town musicians in those days made a lot of money welcoming important official visitors and entertaining at official banquets. However, the

job was not necessarily secure and close proximity to high officials meant that musicians, who were treated as servants and therefore largely ignored, could overhear conversations and one of their moonlighting occupations might be spying, with dire consequences if found out. An example of the latter was given in a second anecdote about a young Venetian harpsichord player Giovanni da Legge, who took his own life after mistakenly being regarded as a spy at the English court in 1526.

Dr Blackburn went on to describe how many artists and intellectuals at this time played a musical instrument and some sang as well. It just wasn't their main career. She also explored the opportunities that were open to ordinary people to study music as well as the role of women in the musical world. Some of the great musical improvisers were treated like today's rock stars and had a huge fan base.

She explained how the phenomenon of the castrato, so prominent in Baroque opera, began in the Renaissance, possibly in the court of Mantua in the 1550s. The duke, Guglielmo Gonzaga, himself a musician, was keenly interested in acquiring young men who could sing soprano securely, knew how to ornament appropriately, and didn't lose their voices when they deepened. Unfortunately for Guglielmo the best castrati were expensive and he was not willing to pay. Dr Blackburn noted that there was no evidence before the early seventeenth century that boys were castrated in order to become singers, although the operation had long been carried out for other purposes, for example, to cure a hernia. But the demand for castrati became so overwhelming, that Guglielmo's agent suggested, perhaps tongue in cheek, that if he couldn't import his castrati, perhaps he ought to get some boys and 'make his own'.

Dr Blackburn concluded the lecture affirming that being a musician was an honourable and sometimes lucrative profession, but that it was not like working at a job from 9 to 5. The world of Renaissance musicians was large: musicians, artists, poets, humanists, and noblemen all knew each other, and many had a second string to their bow, but the common thread was that they had all learnt music when they were very young.



Dr Bonnie Blackburn © Georgina Gordon-Ham



The Marian Consort © Georgina Gordon-Ham

Linda Northern

LAOCOON 1506: Rediscovery and Reinterpretation

Art Historian Hendrika Foster made an impressive start to the New Year with her talk on *Laocoon 1506: Rediscovery and Reinterpretation* held at Europe House, London by courtesy of the European Commission.

This marble sculpture depicts the Trojan priest, Laocoon, with his sons and is part of the papal collection kept in the Vatican Museums in Rome. With the exception of a brief sojourn in Paris as a reluctant guest in the booty of Napoleon (1797–1815), the magnificent sculpture has resided within the Vatican walls since its excavation in January 1506 during the pontificate of Julius II. The original Laocoon was restored with all missing limbs replaced between 1515–25 by Michelangelo's pupil, Giovanni Angelo Montorsori, at the request of Pope Clement VII.

The journey of this work of art starts in the Hellenistic period, possibly circa 140 BC or early 1st century AD. The most reliable version of the narrative is to be found in *The Aeneid* by Virgil, where the hero Aeneas describes the story of the fall of Troy to the Phoenician Queen Dido. Laocoon tried to warn his people against the Greeks but was punished for challenging the gods, who favoured the Greeks, and thus his fate was sealed. Snakes from the sea wound around him killing at least one of his sons. Some sources say the other son escaped.

It is possible that an original piece was in bronze, now lost. The marble version was mentioned by the Roman writer Pliny the Elder, who saw it in the Palace of the Flavian Emperor Titus in Rome shortly before the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79 and wrote '... the Laocoon ... a work to be preferred to all that the arts of painting and sculpture have produced. Out of one block of stone the consummate artists, Hagesandros, Polydorus and Athenodorus of Rhodes made, after careful planning, Laocoon and his sons, and the snakes marvellously entwined about them'.

What better time to reappear than in Renaissance Rome. The sculpture was excavated in a vineyard near the ancient Baths of Trajan in 1506. When Pope Julius II heard about it he sent his architect Giuliano da Sangallo to inspect it. Sangallo was an expert on Roman antiquity and classical literature and recalled Pliny's mention of the sculpture. The discovery



The Laocoon sculpture group by courtesy of Foto©Musei Vaticani.

of the masterpiece was such a great event that it was carried in procession through the streets of Rome, and placed in the Cortile del Belvedere, now part of the Pio-Clemente Museum in the Vatican.

The figures are carved from Rhodian marble using eight curved blocks, which fitted perfectly together without dowels and with no visible

joins. What was unusual was that the three artists signed it carving their names into the marble. Unfortunately, other details of its origins remain unknown, including why, where and when it was made, though scholars agree that it is likely that it was carved in Pergammon. Further excavation of the site of the palace of Titus was carried out in Rome and the right arm of Laocoon was found, and acknowledged as genuine by Filippo Magi.



Hendrika Foster © Georgina Gordon-Ham

Hendrika Foster commented on a more recent discovery in 1957 of the Grotto of Tiberius at Sperlonga shedding further light on the question of stylistic carving of the Laocoon. The grotto is a natural cave which was incorporated into an early imperial villa as a summer banqueting room. It was decorated with huge sculptural groups of figures. One of these groups, identified as the assault of Scylla on Odysseus's ship, bears an inscription on the ship:

'Athenodorus son of Hagesandros, and Hagesandros son of Paionios, and Polydorus son of Polydorus, Rhodians made this'.

She said how at last this identified the artists as the same as those who had carved the Laocoon and spoke of the uniqueness and the great carving skills of the sculptors of that period. Their accurate understanding and depiction of anatomy, the agony and tortured pose of Laocoon, the strained tendons, his contorted muscles and veins with engorged blood vessels were extraordinary details which inspired Michelangelo.

Two full-size copies were carved during the 16th century. The first, by Bandinelli for Pope Leo X now in the Uffizi in Florence and another, carved under the supervision of Primaticcio for Francis I of France now at Fontainebleau. A full-size bronze replica was modelled by Girardon in the late 17th century and acquired by Robert Walpole in 1724 for display at Houghton Hall in Norfolk.

Michelangelo called the masterpiece 'A singular miracle of art in which we should grasp the divine genius of the craftsman rather than try and make an imitation of it'. Unlike Pliny, Michelangelo knew it was not carved from one block and used the image both for painting, as in *The Hanging of Haman*, *The Healing of the Israelites by the Brazen Serpent* and the prophet *Jonah* in the vault of the Sistine Chapel and for sculpture as in *The Rebellious Slave* and *The Dying Slave*.

Hendrika Foster told us how art in the Renaissance became more and more eclectic, whereby artists drew inspiration from whatever sources they came across. The Laocoon sculpture group certainly played a role in stimulating creativity by painters and sculptors for four hundred years as each one gave Laocoon a resonance for his own time thus becoming as avant-garde as the first Rhodian sculptors.

Georgina Gordon-Ham

Italian Venice: A History



Richard Bosworth

In February 2015 the British-Italian Society held a joint meeting with Venice in Peril. The talk was given by Professor Richard Bosworth of Jesus College, Oxford and inevitably focused on Venice. However, this focus had a different twist and concentrated on Venetian history post-1797, after the fall of the Venetian Republic under the hands of Napoleon. Professor Bosworth has a

track record of writing about Italy; his most recent book *Italian Venice* was published in August 2014, and his first, published in 1979, analysed the reasons for Italy's participation in the First World War. This is reminiscent of the famous historian, AJP Taylor's book, *The Causes of the First World War*, and indeed, the speaker referred towards the beginning of his talk not only to EH Carr as an influence on his approach to history but also to AJP Taylor. As I was fortunate enough to hear the latter deliver some lectures on post-1815 history, I immediately sat up expectantly.

We were not disappointed. Professor Bosworth proceeded to disabuse us of the idea that Venice today is 'com'era e dov'era' and that, with the formation of the modern Italian state, Italian politics had come to bear on Venice in an interesting way. At the beginning of the 20th century socialism was nascent there as it was elsewhere in Italy. Given the appalling housing conditions of the poor in Venice at this time, many of whom had no running water in their homes by the beginning of the First World War, let alone any other services, such socialism is hardly surprising and class warfare could prompt strikes and demonstrations, for example the Venetian participation in the national general strike of 1904. According to *The Times* it 'completely paralysed life' in Venice; 'even the gondoliers, who reap such a rich harvest from strangers at this season, refuse to work'.

The struggles of the poor were, however, minor by comparison with the burgeoning of both cultural life and tourism in Venice throughout this period. Professor Bosworth spoke of the establishment of the Art Biennale in 1895 and later of the development of the contemporary music and theatre festivals, not to mention the Film Festival. This latter is, of course, the oldest established film festival in the world and is held on the Lido di Venezia. In this context he mentioned the early days of the development of tourism on the Lido, of the Excelsior Hotel (playground of the rich and famous) not to mention Nicelli airport with its wonderful art deco building on the north end of the island and the golf course at Alberoni at the southern end.

While the First World War demanded that Venice's purpose in wartime was to service the Italian nation, the Second World War brought a different set of problems, not least the treatment of the city's Jews, but life continued as normal with bands playing in Piazza San Marco and writers, politicians and film people swarming through the city. As I was listening to Professor Bosworth referring

to the Second World War I was reminded that many Germans stayed on the Lido on leave, especially at the Hotel des Bains (of the film, *Death in Venice*, fame) and came to convalesce from their wounds at a small hospital nearby.

Professor Bosworth brought us up to date with Venice's post-1945 history, in particular its tourism, the figures for which are mind-boggling. He told us that in 2012 unofficial estimates put the number of tourists at 30 million for that year, with trippers in August exceeding 140,000 per day. No wonder Venice is in Peril!

The evening concluded with Professor Bosworth being quizzed very entertainingly by Jonathan Keates from Venice in Peril. Questions from the floor were then taken including one from Lady Clark concerning whether or not Mestre should be separated from the historic centre of Venice. Another, from a declared true Venetian, concerned the fact that the true heart of Venice dated well before 1797, whilst Professor Bosworth was also asked, if Venice belongs to the world, should the world pay for it more than it contributes at present and, specifically, should an entrance ticket be introduced? This has been mooted recently and would require an Act of Parliament which is now under serious consideration.

Sandra Fox

Italian Venice is published by Yale University Press and is now available in paperback.



An Evening with Modigliani

On 28 April the Society met at the Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art for a private viewing of the gallery's exhibition of paintings and drawings by Amedeo Modigliani (1884 - 1920): *Modigliani – A Unique Artistic Voice*, and to hear a talk by Richard Nathanson, co-Curator of the exhibition.



Richard Nathanson

Richard Nathanson explained that Modigliani had devoted his life to an uncompromising and spiritual search for the timeless beauty and mystery of the human spirit, as the artist had explained in a manuscript French note in one of his early sketchbooks. For Modigliani, beauty, life and art were interconnected. He spent much of his life in poverty, paying little attention to reputation, wealth or material needs, driven by his obsessive mission to create beauty and venerate life. From an early age he had set



Modigliani 'L'Amazone'
1909 black crayon 30.8
x 23.2 cms

out to extract timeless truths and to rearrange and express them in his own aesthetic ideal.

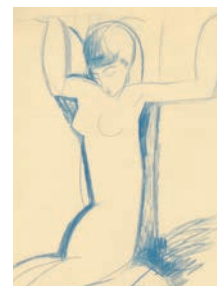
Modigliani was born near Livorno, and suffered a childhood plagued by serious illness. He spoke fluent French, which he had learned from his mother. His career as an artist really began in late 1906, when he arrived in Paris, the epicentre of avant-garde art.

The first works in the exhibition date from the period 1906 to 1911, and show how Modigliani's unique manner of expression, and particularly the way he portrayed the human face and form, took shape. His early drawings are already strikingly original. They have a purity and simplicity – with no redundant brushwork or marks on the paper – which reflect the clarity of what he saw and felt; yet they still convey real passion.

In the museums and galleries of Paris, Modigliani was able to explore works of art from different cultures and civilisations over several millennia. These had a direct influence on his work. In a series of slides, we were shown how individual works by Modigliani displayed in the exhibition had been inspired by early Cycladic statues or reflected the simplicity and grace of Egyptian gods and goddesses or the ornate decoration of Egyptian Queens. Other works mirrored the classic purity of Greek caryatids, the subtle humour of Etruscan art, the noble austerity of Roman art, the sensuality of Indian art or the serenity of Buddhist statues. Modigliani also paid tribute to his Italian legacy. His *Reclining Nude with Right Arm under her Head* (1919), for example, was clearly modelled on Titian's *Venus of Urbino* in the Uffizi Galleries. The pose of the reclining nude is identical.

Modigliani possessed a remarkable visual memory. His

patron, Paul Alexandre, whose family still hold many of Modigliani's works, wrote that the artist had been able to paint a perfect copy of a Cézanne he had seen in a gallery from memory. The artist absorbed elements from works that he admired and then re-expressed them in his own personal style and voice. Some of his sitters remarked that he drew them more from memory (fused with his own vision) than from life.



Modigliani 'Kneeling Blue Caryatid' c. 1911 blue
crayon 43 x 26.5 cms

After 1910, much of Modigliani's work shows the enormous influence that the Russian poet, Anna Akhmatova, had on his artistic development. Modigliani met Akhmatova in 1910 during her honeymoon in Paris. She returned to Paris a year later. The two were very close, kindred spirits, who shared a love of poetry. Richard Nathanson described their relationship as a 'meeting of hearts and minds'. Although the figures in Modigliani's drawings, paintings and sculptures from this later period remain anonymous, androgynous and timeless, aspects of the physical appearance and spirit of Akhmatova are clearly evident.

Modigliani, in his short life, had been a real innovator, utterly confident of his talent and vision, and independent of other schools or trends. As an artist, he was captivated by his fellow human beings and intent on portraying their inner beauty and richness of character, as the remarkable collection of works in the exhibition fully demonstrated. Modigliani remains the best known and most popular of all modern Italian painters.

Richard Nathanson himself is a professional expert on Impressionism and 20th Century art and an unrivalled authority on Modigliani's life and artistic works.

Richard Northern

Italian Post-War Fashion: Creating and Selling Italian Modernity

At the end of WWII, Paris was the undisputed capital of fashion with Dior's New Look copied worldwide. Yet by 1961 the influential American *Life Magazine* told its twenty-five million readers that in a few brief years Italy had changed the way the world looked – its cars, buildings, furniture and, most universally, its women. Giuliana Pieri's talk to the BIS following the AGM in June was designed to explore the reasons behind this development.

Italian fashion had been influential in the Renaissance. Castiglione's *The Courtier* advised presenting one's persona through elegant clothing and Venetian brocade and Italian wool were sought-after. However influence shifted to the French court at the end of the sixteenth century and France continued to dominate women's fashion until the early twentieth century when new fashion concepts began to arise in Italy: the Grecian pleats used by Spanish-born but Venetian-based Mariano Fortuny

presented clothes as sculpture while Futurism sought to liberate the body through a new all-in-one garment, the *Tuta*. Some luxury companies like Fratelli Prada (1913) and Gucci (1921) were also established in this period.

However it was the post WWII influence of the USA in Italy, through aid, culture and the use of American cotton, that was vital for the resurgence of Italian fashion. Businessman Giovanni Battista Giorgini held a widely successful Italian fashion show for American buyers in Florence in 1951 and by 1953 such was its success that it was held in the Pitti Palace, thus linking fashion to Medici nobility. In 1961 *Life Magazine* devoted its Christmas edition to a fashion shoot in Turin



Giuliana Pieri
© Georgina Gordon-Ham

continued over

highlighting both Italian industrial design and the striking colour combinations and wild prints of the new-look knitwear and stretch pants especially those of Emilio Pucci, an admirer of Futurism's unconstrained clothing and the USA.

In Rome the Fontana sisters designed the wedding dress for President Truman's daughter in 1956 and for a host of American film stars flocking to Cinecittà in the 1960s. Marcello Mastroianni's suits in *La Dolce Vita* influenced men's fashion with their narrow lapels, single-breasted jackets, slim knotted ties, smaller and more pointed collars and sleeker trousers, without turn-ups, worn lower on the waist. Famous socialites like Marella Agnelli or Lee Radziwill wore the clothes of previously unknown Italian designers to major events like Truman Capote's *Black and White Ball* in New York in 1966.

Industrial manufacturing developed. In Reggio Emilia Max Mara began producing prêt-à-porter clothes for the working modern woman especially for the USA while Missoni, in Varese, in 1953 also looked to the US market.

Cinema and celebrity, a powerful international force, were harnessed by Milan-based Giorgio Armani when his designs were used in the film *American Gigolo* to display the body in a new way – the woman more androgynous, more empowered, the man more feminine. Minimalist, Armani used grey and beige tones, creating a softer, deconstructed, shape of men's jacket by removing the interlining.

Further key figures to emerge in 1978 were Gianfranco Ferré whose designs were influenced by his training as an architect and the flamboyant Gianni Versace who created a new modern and gay aesthetic, a kind of post-modernism. Versace mixed styles from 1960s fashion, such as Pop Art or men's tight trousers or pointed shoes, with classical motifs to create an aesthetic of excess.

Also in 1978 Miuccia Prada took over the family luxury goods firm in Milan to become hugely influential in women's fashion with her austere palate of black, grey or brown. In contrast Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana (Dolce and Gabbana) in Rome in the 1980s employed the prestigious Magnum group photographer, Ferdinando Scianna, on location in Sicily to create an image that combined neo-realism and nostalgia through black and white photos of models in 'peasant' dress, playing on the idea of Italy as held abroad, combining a new modernity with the old-fashioned idea of 1950s Italy.

Today the dialogue between Italy's fashion houses, cinema and the USA continues. Italian fashion designers vie to dress stars on the red-carpet on Oscar night. Some stars become 'The Face' of a fashion house as did Monica Bellucci for Dolce and Gabbana or Cate Blanchett for Armani. Other designers are inspired by particular films like Antonioni's *Red Desert* while the Internet era has seen continued growth in the sales and influence of Italian fashion design worldwide.

Susan Kikoler

Riviera Splendour: The Hanbury Gardens at La Mortola

Once again, a lecture on garden history drew record numbers of BIS members. This time, the garden in question was that of the Villa Hanbury at La Mortola and our speaker was Charles Quest-Ritson, a well-known authority on Italian gardens and a founding member, in 1983, of the *Friends of La Mortola*. Present for the event were Thomas Hanbury's great-grandson, Daniel, and his wife Carolyn.

The talk took us through the colourful history of the property in chronological order beginning when, one spring morning in 1867, the 35-year old Thomas Hanbury first laid eyes on the craggy promontory seven kilometres to the east of Menton. The young Clapham-born Quaker businessman had made a substantial fortune developing property in Shanghai and now was on the hunt for a place of his own to develop, preferably in a more inviting climate than that of China. Legend has it that he and his pharmacologist-botanist brother Daniel had engaged an oarsman to row them along the coast on their search until they caught sight of the limestone slope which would become theirs. Voracious woodcutters and grazing goats had reduced the area to a straggly state and the ravaged 'villa' looked no more promising: mules sought refuge

there, sharing quarters with a host of bats and swallows. Yet Thomas immediately saw the potential and Daniel, equally convinced, soon was to record it in a watercolour sketch. By May, Thomas had bought La Mortola with its surrounding acres and persuaded his handsome older brother to assist in organising what would become one of the largest examples of an English garden abroad.



Charles Quest-Ritson

Daniel rose to the challenge. Given his professional background, plants with medicinal properties were of particular interest to him. Nevertheless, he seemingly fell in with his younger brother's tastes. Between them, a glorious mixture – flowers and fruit – began to be planted; the momentum would continue until Daniel's death, aged 50, just eight years after the property was purchased. Thirty-six rock rose plants brought from their father's property at Clapham, went in that July. But the two brothers, in fact, turned in other directions as well. Thomas imported from China every variety of citrus fruit then in existence. From

Morocco came Argania and from South Africa, the Natal plum. Turning to willing missionaries dotted far and wide - in Mexico, Tenerife and Madagascar - he traded seeds and cuttings, for he was extremely interested in introducing and acclimatising rare exotic plants in this new setting. But he also sourced locally: from Hyères, up the coast in France, came many varieties of acacias. Cacti - a familiar sight all along the Riviera - nestled at the very top.

To plant and look after the rapidly expanding garden, forty men were recruited and trained, all overseen by the German principal gardener - a German because in those days they were reputed to be among the most highly educated in all things botanical. Firm and fixed rules were in place: there was to be no smoking on the grounds and the picking of flowers was frowned upon.

Thomas protected one very unique and special feature: a 200-metre stretch of the Via Aurelia running across the property. It was the roadway which once linked Rome with Gaul, over which, later, Machiavelli trod in 1511, followed by Emperor Charles V (1513) and Napoleon as well (1796). Thomas had it gently weeded so that the original paving stones could be seen, then constructed a picturesque stone bridge to link the upper and lower halves of his property, leaving the Via Aurelia inviolate.

Other adornments were added, over the years. China's first ambassador to Great Britain gifted Thomas with *Oriental objets*. A bronze lotus and dragon sculpture from Japan embellished a papyrus pool. Rose-entwined pergolas went up. Lovely pathways snaked through the flower beds.

In the fine tradition of the Quakers, there was a compassionate side to Thomas Hanbury. Alongside his sizeable property portfolio, he built five schools for the local population. He beautified the principal boulevard of Ventimiglia by planting plane and palm trees. He donated land parcels that he had purchased to provide the space for a local cemetery and a public park. When the seas were too rough for boats to go out, fishermen would turn up at his gate for a day's employment. Thomas never turned them away. Youngsters, too, could count on a little spare pocket money by coming to sweep away fallen leaves from the many pathways of the garden. And he encouraged many of his more modest neighbours to set up commercial greenhouses, the vestiges of which could still be seen many decades after his death. The beneficence extended even to the way he celebrated his own birthday every year. Rather than mark it behind the doors of the Villa Hanbury, he chose to stage a large banquet for all of Ventimiglia!

As its fame spread, many came to see the wonderful gardens. Queen Victoria was enchanted and brought along her watercolours to record it on several occasions. Other royals followed. And Germans tourists came in droves.

But there was 'an afterwards'. This came in the aftermath of the deaths of Thomas and his wife, who died in 1907 and 1920 respectively. The reins then passed to their son Cecil and his very beautiful and talented wife, Dorothy (nicknamed 'Dodo') - he was a skilled botanist and she was passionate about gardens and gardening. The Great



View of La Mortola from above

War took a toll on the health and upkeep of the place. But it did not seem to dampen either the drive or the enthusiasm of this dedicated couple. Almost like a pliant sculpture, the gardens were shaped and reshaped. A marble fountain was introduced. A new avenue created. Italian cypresses added. In went a new flight of steps and statuary. Cecil and Dodo kept on planting - 6,500 varieties were counted during their watch.

World War II provoked another setback for the Hanburys, who had had to stay in England throughout the conflict. As the property was deemed to be of 'an enemy national' it was confiscated. The Germans appropriated the place and it was used as their officers' mess. Towards the end of the war, French ships out at sea bombarded the place, causing damage to both the Villa and the grounds. By then, Dorothy was remarried - Cecil had died in 1937 - and by war's end she was back at La Mortola to pick up the pieces and start anew. She gave it her all and by 1956 the garden was looking better than ever. But post-war British taxes as well as old age dealt her a cruel blow and she sold the estate to the Italian state, holding back one cottage for herself that her Hanbury descendants still use.

The final part of the talk focussed on the sad bickering, the tangles and the poor management of the Hanbury Gardens that followed Dorothy's death in 1972 and still plagues the place today. It is still a very beautiful and very magical place to visit. But with a very troubled future.

Alexandra Richardson

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