RIVISTA

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Review of the year

Richard Northern looks back on an unusual year

Little did we know, as 2020 began, what a challenging year it would prove! During the winter we had enjoyed fascinating lectures on modern Italy, Italian cinema and renaissance politics in Venice, plus a festive Christmas Dinner in Islington. But a national lockdown, introduced to stop the spread of the Covid-19 virus, forced us to suspend our programme in March.

Since then, we have managed to relaunch a monthly programme of digital lectures, beginning in June with Susan Kikoler's lively account of Saints' Days in Sicily. We have hosted webinar lectures (a novelty for all of us) every month on themes ranging from renaissance banking, female musicians and composers, Italian food and mediaeval history to the leading ladies of the Renaissance. We are delighted that so many members and friends have been able to join us for these talks, particularly since they include many who would not have been able to get to London for our regular events.

We are also grateful to Justin Ellis, who kindly organised an informal pub quiz over zoom in June, which was great fun and provided a welcome opportunity to 'meet' each other again. A rare pleasure in these socially-distanced times. Professor Martin Kemp gave us an outstanding Leconfield Lecture in November on the impact of Dante's poetry on contemporary artists.

The Society made a number of grants and donations during the year to support worthy artistic, academic and other projects in line with its aims. These included:

- £750 towards the costs of the Festival of Italian Literature in London (FILL) in Notting Hill in November 2019.
- £200 towards a conference on the Role of Women in Sardinian Culture at Cambridge University in September 2021.
- £500 to the Comitato Sapienza Camerino for a post-earthquake project to restore the University of Camerino.
- £500 to Liverpool University Press for a book of photographs as part of a transnational study of Italian.
- £200 towards an Italian Studies Conference hosted online by King's College, London in June 2020.
- £300 towards the *Canaletto: Painting Venice* exhibition and educational workshops in Bath in September 2020.

Richard Northern, BIS Chair

- £300 to the Italian School in London, partly in payment for their housing of the BIS Archives.

The Society sponsored two new national student prizes for translation from Italian in 2019. The competition was organised by Warwick University. The winners were Alex Joseland (first prize) and Jemma Henry (second prize). The scheme was a great success, and the standard of entries high. We have agreed to sponsor it again in 2021.

We are grateful, as always, to our Patron, Ambassador Raffaele Trombetta, for his support. We also thank Dr Katia Pizzi, the Director of the Italian Cultural Institute and a long-standing friend of the Society, for her active collaboration. Thanks are also due to our President, Olga Polizzi, for her wise guidance and generous support during the year.

We owe a particular debt of gratitude too to Diana Darlington and Susan Kikoler, who both stood down this year after serving for many years as Trustees. Both have made an enormous contribution to the Society's work. I would also like to thank Rhuna Barduagni, who continues to provide an excellent service to the Society and its members, and Philippa Leslie, who has managed to produce an excellent magazine in such difficult circumstances this year.

We look forward to welcoming all *Rivista* readers to our new season of events in 2021, and hope that we will be able to meet again in person before too long.

Richard Northern, Chairman of the British Italian Society, is a former diplomat

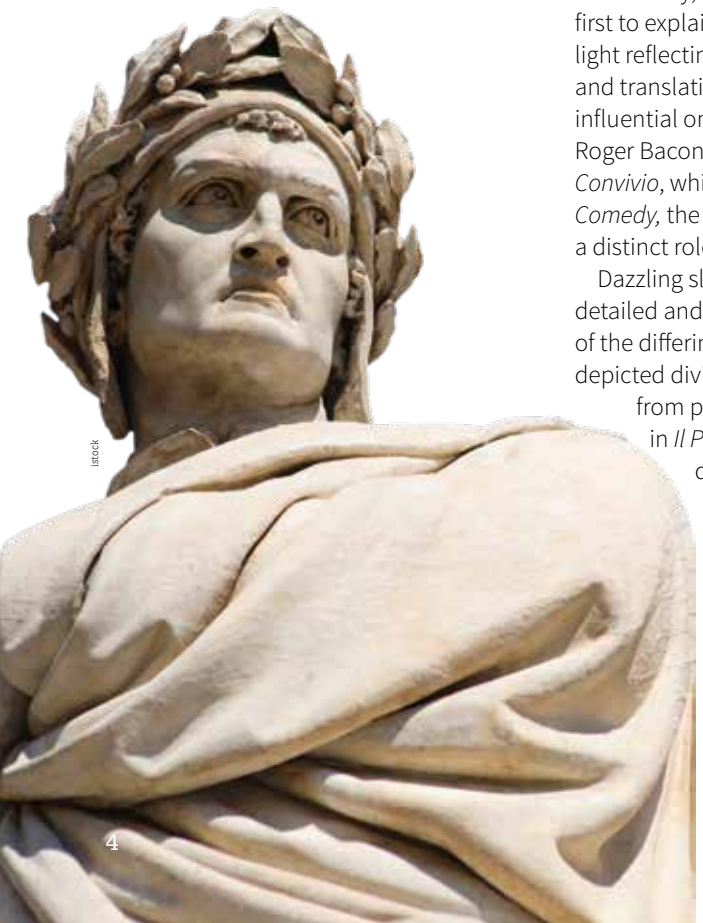
Dante's divine light:

Prof Martin Kemp was the 2020 Leconfield Lecture invited speaker

Susan Kikoler describes an enthralling talk

The Leconfield Lecture is named after the first Chairman of the British Italian Society. Hugh Wyndham, who was Chairman for 12 years in the 1940s and 1950s, became Lord Leconfield in 1952. After Lord Leconfield's death in 1963, Sir Ashley Clarke, then Chairman of the Society, inaugurated this series of annual lectures in his honour. Ever since, the Leconfield Lecture has been the main event in the Society's annual calendar, and has always been given by a speaker of particular distinction.

2021 will mark the 700th anniversary of Dante's death and, in anticipation, members of the British Italian Society were privileged to be given a preview of Professor Martin Kemp's forthcoming book *Visions of Heaven: Dante and the Art of the Divine Light,* an extended version of an earlier essay, which explores the legacy of Dante's *Il Paradiso* on visual art. In contrast to the tenebrous *L'Inferno* and *Il Purgatorio*, with its glimpses of angelic light *Il Paradiso* is infused with divine radiance before which Dante breaks down until, guided by Beatrice, he comes to a deeper understanding and finally can withstand the vision of the Holy Trinity in their rainbow orbs. At the very end even his *alta fantasia* fails. This new book is a *paragone* between art and poetry, an exploration of whether painting, using mere pigment, can compare with poetry's hold on the imagination. Can paint really capture the ineffable?



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In all Abrahamic religions light is seen as the manifestation of divinity and goodness. God often appears as a luminous cloud. In Islam, where depiction of the human form is forbidden, light plays a special role, whether radiating through windows in a mosque or in descriptive lines from the Koran on a delicate lamp. Optical science was brought to a high level of sophistication by the Arabs. Ibn al-Haytham in *The Book of Optics*, a synthesis of anatomy, physics and theology, was the first to explain that vision is the result of light reflecting from an object on to the eye and translations of this work were deeply influential on later philosophers, like Roger Bacon, and visual artists. In Dante's *Convivio*, which predates *The Divine Comedy,* the optical sensing of things plays a distinct role.

Dazzling slides then illustrated a detailed and eye-opening exploration of the differing ways Italian artists have depicted divine light and the heavens, from paintings of Dante and Beatrice in *Il Paradiso* by the Sienese Paolo di Giovanni to Botticelli's silverpoint drawings on vellum, made for his patron Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de'Medici, where the Spirits of the Blessed are depicted as flames.

Giotto, Dante's contemporary in the fourteenth century, painted divine light as radiating from a point in straight lines. Fra Angelico in the late fifteenth century depicted the massed ranks of angels on clouds. Both used the lens-like shape of the mandorla to encase the figure of Christ from which holy radiance shines. This almond-shaped aureola was at this time realised in a physical form, by means of winches and heavily lit stage machinery, also designed later by artists such as Pietro da Cortona, to form the centrepiece of religious spectacles in Florence and for the devotional ceremony of the *Quarantore,* which travelled from church to church glorifying the Eucharist.

Subsequently the use of gold for divine light was discarded in favour of a more naturalistic presentation. The figures in *The Senigallia Madonna* by Piero della Francesca are bathed in natural light which is painted in tiny atom-like spots to show the rays penetrating through unbroken glass, a metaphor for the Virgin's unviolated virginity. Dante himself describes light as dancing atoms and affirms that divine light acts differently from normal phenomena. Thus in Piero della Francesca's *Flagellation* and *Constantine's Dream* it is the protagonist alone who perceives the light as the miraculous source of God's presence. Other figures may be illuminated but they themselves are impervious to it.

> Dante himself describes light as dancing atoms

Michelangelo used light in a narrative context as an adjunct to sculpture, his most Dantesque vision being *The Conversion of Saul* where Christ is shown diving down from the Heavens, light blasting from his hand onto the protagonist below.

Raphael is the hero of this book, and was probably influenced by his father's devotion to Dante. Giovanni Santi wrote a rhyming chronicle for Federico da

Gaulli: 'Triumph of the Name of Jesus', Jesuit Church in Rome; 1669–1683

Correggio: 'Assumption of the Virgin'; 1526–1530, detail from fresco in Parma Cathedral

Raphael: 'Madonna Sixtina'; 1513-14

Domenico di Michelino: 'La commedia illumina Firenze', fresco in Florence Cathedral; 1465

Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino, in which he emulates Dante's use of the *terza rima.* Not only did Raphael, uniquely, include the figure of Dante twice in his murals, in *Parnassus* and in the *Disputa,* but some drapery sketches for the latter reveal Raphael's own attempt at poetry. In the *Disputa* and the *Sistine Madonna* Raphael's use of 'cloud' angels, seen and yet not seen, bleaching into formless light, was to be hugely influential.

The 'optical clamour'

By the Baroque period the 'optical clamour' of divine light was expressed in the decoration of soaring vaults and domes from Correggio's precocious *Assumption of the Virgin* in Parma Cathedral, with its bleached heads which disappear into a golden glow, to the work of the Florentine Ludovico Cardi (Cigoli) whose own depiction of the *Assumption* in Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome shows the Virgin standing on a moon mottled as Dante and Galileo described. Cigoli was a friend of Galileo who in turn had lectured before the Florentine Academy on the possible dimensions of the *Inferno.* Perhaps the most extraordinary vision of all is Gianbattista Gaulli's *Triumph of the Name of Jesus* in the Jesuit Church in Rome, a multi-media experience of painted and plastered figures exploding from the centre.

Gaulli, a protégé of Bernini, may have painted some of the figures in the Cornaro Chapel in Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome, which contains Bernini's sculptural masterpiece *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa.* Here too divine light is presented in a remarkable way. Natural light filters in through a hidden source, a special window built into the edifice of the church, while gilded stucco rays represent the divine apparition. Viewing the dramatic immediacy of the scene it is hardly surprising to learn that Bernini also designed for Baroque theatre and wrote an essay on theatrical lighting.

A personal journey

Concluding, Prof. Kemp confessed this study had been a personal journey for him. Studying the works of artists like Gaulli in the context of the 'Dante Dazzle' had led him to a new appreciation of their worth. BIS members and art lovers in general will be grateful for this new-found enthusiasm which provided such a stimulating lecture and the promise of a revelatory book to come.

Martin Kemp, Emeritus Professor, History of Art, Trinity College, Oxford, art historian and exhibition curator, is a leading authority on visualisation in art and science and on Leonardo.

Susan Kikoler, cultural historian with a deep love of Sicily, is Honorary Director of the BIS. After many years, she is stepping down as the celebrated events organiser for the BIS.



Forgotten women of classical music

Dr Anna Beer spoke of their 'notes from the silence'[1]

Patrizia Dina listened with much pleasure

In her talk on 20 October Dr Anna Beer explored the lives and works of some ground-breaking female composers and the exceptional, creative communities in which they worked.

Short-listed for the Royal Philharmonic Society award for her book on forgotten women composers, she focussed here on four whose lives were transformed by the experience of Italy.

Her book was inspired by her research on John Milton, whose transformative journey to Italy in the 1630s led him to encounter the earliest operas and court performances in which women participated as singers...! Dr Beer demonstrated how women have always composed classical music, and she made us question our forgetfulness of their achievements. Between 2014, when she started writing, and 2016 when the book was published, attitudes to women composers had begun to change.

Francesca Caccini, Florence in 1587-1641, was championed by her musician father Giulio, and joined him at the Medici court. Her only surviving stage work, *La liberazione di Ruggiero*, was composed at Carnival time in 1625 as a lavish entertainment – part opera, part ballet – to mark a military victory against the Ottomans and to celebrate the Medici. This was the first opera written by a female composer: she benefitted from a famous father who gave her the education and opportunities normally given to a son.

By 1625 Francesca was known as 'La Musica', the best paid musician at the Medici court, composing, training, teaching, singing and performing. She once confessed "If the Medici throw me the ball, I will catch it".

The book's second theme is the community in which these female composers lived. At the time, Florence was ruled by the sickly Cosimo II de' Medici, so two strong women – his mother Christine of Lorraine as regent and his wife Maria Maddalena of Austria – wielded the power for about 15 years, and needed a soundtrack to underline it. It was provided by Francesca, musician, servant, owned by the Medici, who would choose whom she married and where she lived…

> "If the Medici throw me the ball, I will catch it"

From a great body of work, only one other composition survives: *Il primo libro delle musiche a una e due voci*, dedicated to Signor Cardinale de' Medici, (whose name on the frontispiece is far larger than the composer's), from which Dr Beer played us a song *Lasciatemi qui solo*, a worthy rival of her contemporary Monteverdi.

Left: Francesca Caccini 'La Bella' by Palma il Vecchio, 1518-1520; Centre: Barbara Strozzi by Bernado Strozzi; 1630-1640; Right: Fanny Mendelssohn by Moritz Daniel Oppenheim, 1842

Composing in free-thinking 16th century Venice

From this late Renaissance composer we were transported to a Baroque composer in the free-thinking, liberal, often risqué Republic of Venice. Barbara Strozzi, born 1619, experienced a chain of events which led to her establishment as a recognised, widely-published composer. Giulio Strozzi – probably her natural father – took her on as his protegee and gave her his name. He was a member of the Incogniti academy, and he created a new one for music, operating from the Strozzi household. Here Barbara performed as a singer from a very early age, in a milieu where being a woman, a courtesan and a singer was quite normal. Virtue was not so highly prized in a Venice exploding with music, the nascent opera genre and the first commercial theatres, far removed from the strict etiquette of ducal courts. There is a portrait of Barbara Strozzi in the Gemaldegalerie in Dresden as *The viola da gamba player* – bosom exposed, as courtesans did – at a time when music-making was often assumed to be an intellectual asset of these ladies, although it has also been suggested that the portrait was of Barbara as the goddess Flora. Despite seeking patronage from various nobles across Europe, Barbara Strozzi would have found it hard to flourish as a composer, had Venice not been in the vanguard of publishing, so her works became known far beyond Italy. She undertook a series of eight volumes of compositions, including *Sacri musicali affetti* and *Diporti di Euterpe*, from which Dr Beer played *Lagrime mie*, with its haunting Ottoman-influenced opening wail.

Strozzi was given as a concubine to one of her father's patrons, with whom she had four children; she died in Padua in 1677 at the age of 58.

Next, a leap to the 19th and 20th centuries to two female composers who left their homelands to discover Italy.

Fanny Mendelssohn (1805-1847), born in Hamburg, grew up in Berlin, a child prodigy. Her parents discouraged both her and her more famous younger brother Felix from being mere musicians. Fanny accepted, dutifully married, had a child, but never gave up composing. In 1839-40, with her artist husband, Wilhelm Hensel, and their son Sebastian she travelled to Italy, where she felt musically invigorated and inspired. In Rome her music was admired by the young Charles Gounod, and she composed a piano cycle of the months of the year, *Das Jahr*, illustrated by her husband, each piece accompanied by a short poem.

> being a woman, a courtesan and a singer was quite normal

We heard a work she composed in Italy – a Bach-style chorale, which starts in a heavy, Germanic manner, but gradually transforms into a joyous proclamation. Back in Berlin she set her compositions aside, but published a collection of songs (as her Op. 1) and a Piano Trio Op.11 in March 1847. Fanny died that May, leaving behind over 400 compositions, which only started receiving recognition in the 1980s, and more recently in 2018, with the opening of the Fanny and Felix Mendelssohn Museum in Hamburg.

The fourth composer, Lily Boulanger (1893-1918), was a Parisian-born child prodigy from a talented musical family. Lily would accompany her older sister Nadia – the noted composer and composition teacher – to lessons at the Conservatoire. In 1912 Lily competed in the Prix de Rome, but was taken ill during her performance. She returned in 1913 aged 19 to win the prize for her cantata *Faust et Helene*, the first female winner of the competition. Because of the prize, she gained a contract with music publisher Ricordi. In Italy she completed several works, but failing health forced her home, where she died in 1918 at the age of 24.

Finding artistic release by travelling south

Dr Beer concluded by pointing out the irony that things got worse for women composers with the decline of ducal courts and convents where many girls, often orphaned or born out of wedlock, received a musical education. This coincided with the idea that women were incapable of writing great music and felt pressurised to confine their music to the family. Dr Beer remarked how so many Northern artists found release and inspiration by travelling south, mainly to Italy, and wondered if there might be a similar trend in the other direction.

Dr Anna Beer, a Fellow of Kellogg College, Oxford is an author and educator in the fields of history, literature and the arts. Her talk brought together her twin passions for music and women's history

Patrizia Dina, is a modern languages specialist, with a special focus on Italian literature. Classicly trained, she is an Italian vocal coach who has worked with all the major music colleges.

1 *Or 'Sounds and Sweet Airs: the Forgotten Women of Classical Music', in the English edition of Dr. Beer's book.*

Lily Boulanger in 1913

Understanding Ravenna

The wonder of eight World Heritage sites

Michael Starks took us on a splendid tour

Peter Crossley was there

Bill Bryson wrote: 'I can't think of anything that excites a greater sense of childlike wonder than to be in a country where you are ignorant of almost everything.' For childlike wonder you can do no better than visit Ravenna. Here you have eight beautifully restored World Heritage sites, each with a typically plain exterior giving no hint of its jewel box interior adorned with glittering mosaics. This is a town of 160,000 which in ancient times had a population of 10,000 yet had over 50 richly endowed churches. Here is a town in a quiet backwater north of Rimini on the Adriatic coast which yet has all the trappings of greatness. How did it come to pass?

On his first visit to Ravenna Michael Starks was entranced. On his second visit he began to study the mosaics in more detail. On his third visit he began to consider their historical context. Wonder is fine, but it can overload the senses. Unless we are expert in medieval iconography, making sense of what we see in Ravenna can be daunting. Michael's book *Understanding Ravenna* sets out to remedy this and informed our first talk of the year, all the better attended thanks to being broadcast online.

Location, location, location

The importance of Ravenna and its survival relatively intact over the centuries owes much to its site and location. In Roman times the city was a thriving port with good communications with the East and for this reason Emperor Augustus chose it as headquarters for the Roman navy. It was an excellent military location, being built among a series of lagoons with a marshy hinterland; difficult to besiege from inland and easy to supply from the sea. While this is important, how did Ravenna not only survive but prosper in the turbulent times as the Roman Empire disintegrated? And how is it that the World Heritage sites we see today were constructed under three different but opposed regimes; the Western Roman Empire, the Ostrogoths and then the Justinian re-conquest?

The seeds of Ravenna's greatness were sown around the start of the fourth century when the emperor Diocletian created alternative capital cities away from Rome to better defend the frontiers. He created two emperors to control warfare on more than one front. When Constantine later built his own capital in Constantinople Rome was demoted even further. By the early fifth century the empire split into two halves, each with its own emperor, court, bureaucracy, army and tax system in order to deal with threats from the west and east. Milan was chosen as the western capital but Ravenna supplanted

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it by a quirk of fate. The Emperor at the time, Honorius, was no soldier and his general Stilicho effectively ran the western Roman Empire but was unable to become emperor because his father was a Vandal. Stilicho decided the only way to keep the figure-head Honorius safe from capture by the Goths and Huns was to have him stay in Ravenna and not Milan. So began Ravenna's Roman imperial phase.

> the World Heritage sites we see today were constructed under three different but opposed regimes

Honorius was in Ravenna when Alaric the Goth sacked Rome and took Galla Placidia his sister as hostage. After a series of personal dramas Galla would later become the Empress regent and a patron of Ravenna's churches. She is associated with San Giovanni Evangelista and Santa Croce which had a chapel which is now called the Mausoleum Galla Placidia, one of Ravenna's finest monuments. This is the earliest of the World Heritage sites, probably built around AD 430. The Bishops of Ravenna were very well funded by and not dependent on royal patronage and they redeveloped the cathedral Baptistery with an enormous font to accommodate the large numbers who wished to convert to Christianity at the time. The Church was now supplanting the power and influence of the emperors so when the Roman empire finally fell to Odoacer the Church did not fall with it. Odoacer proclaimed himself king of Italy and chose Ravenna as his capital city. The death of Odoacer at the hands of Theodoric ended the Roman imperial phase of Ravenna's history and ushered in the Ostrogoth era at the end of the fifth century.

The finest mosaics

Theodoric was a remarkable Ostrogoth king who ruled over four million Romans with a retinue of only 100,000 followers. He created an era of stability in which art and architecture could continue to flourish and saw the building of four of the World Heritage sites. As Arian Christians are seen by the Orthodox Christians as heretics because of their belief that Jesus was the son of God, they built their own separate churches; a Baptistery, a Cathedral, and a Basilica Sant'Apollinare Nuovo with the

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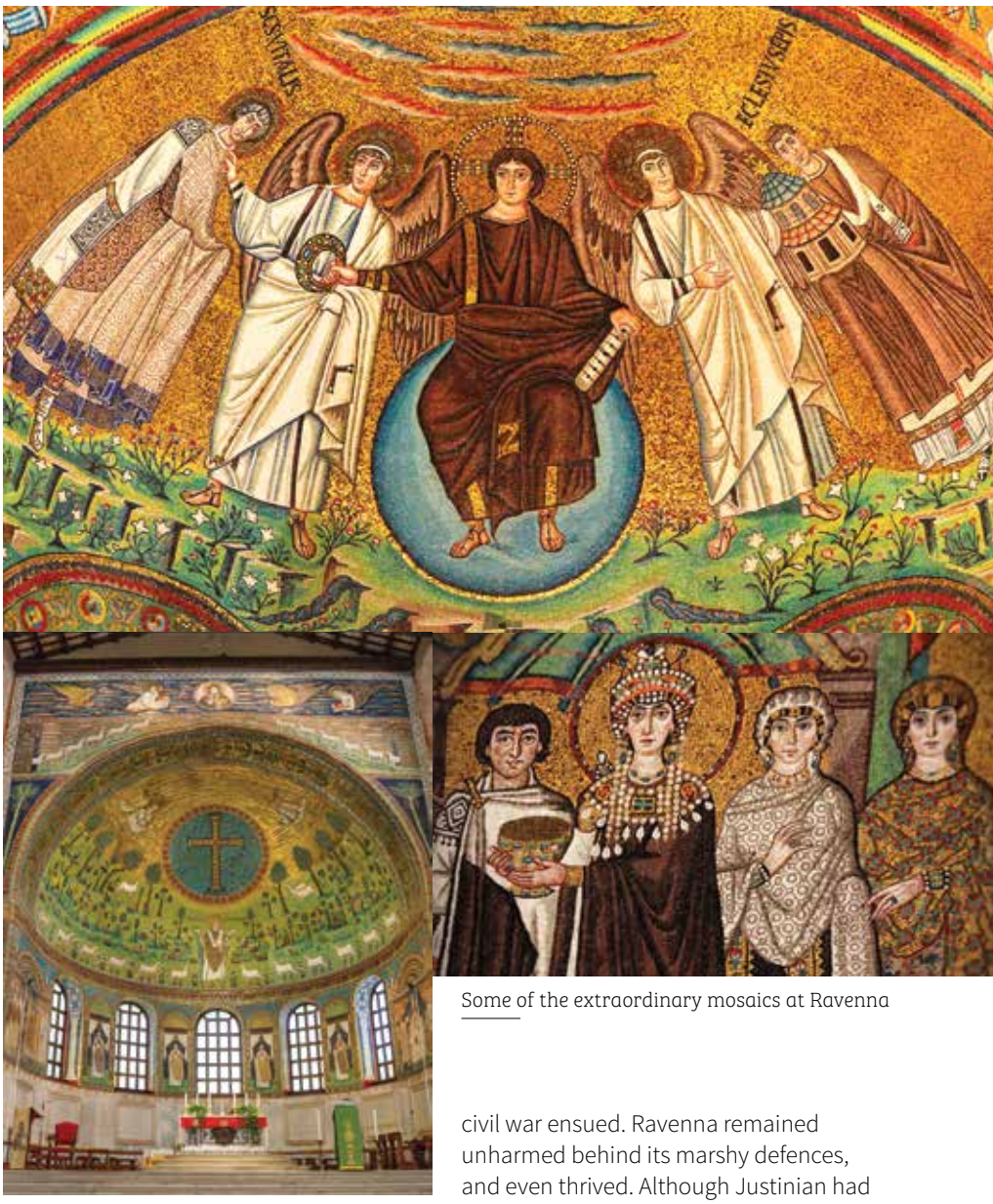

Some of the extraordinary mosaics at Ravenna

finest mosaics in Ravenna in the same Ravenna tradition probably using the same craftsmen. Theodoric was on good terms with the Pope, and the bishops in Ravenna flourished under his reign. They added a chapel to their palace – the Archiepiscopal Chapel – which is another World Heritage Site. The final site from this period is the Theodoric Mausoleum marking the effective end of the Ostrogoth phase of building.

The city's last embellishment

The final Justinian phase began when the eastern Emperor Justinian sought to throw out the Arians and restore Italy to Orthodoxy. After thirty years of peace the Romans in Italy were quite content with their lot and deeply conflicted about the idea of being taken over by the new regime. A protracted and destructive civil war ensued. Ravenna remained unharmed behind its marshy defences, and even thrived. Although Justinian had many of the Arian mosaics defaced, in Sant'Apollinare Nuovo he added more. The last embellishment of Ravenna fell to Julius Argentarius a banker and architect, who financed the finishing of construction of San Vitale, the finest church in Ravenna, as well as the last World Heritage site, the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare in Classe.

Having shown us stunning images from the sites Michael had no need to encourage us to read his book and visit Ravenna at our earliest convenience.

Michael Starks is a former BBC television producer He is an Associate of Oxford University and a member of Lady Margaret Hall. His special interests cover the countries around the Mediterranean

Peter Crossley is a retired lawyer specialised in commercial litigation and a long-standing member of the BIS

The Medici Bankers:

a political power base which was to endure for over three hundred years

Diana Darlington reviews

In this zoom talk, members attended from home, and, I am sure, most will have had a glass of Italian wine in their hands. I know I had a red produced not far from Florence, home of the Medici, as Ian Morgan, former banker and Medici expert revealed to us the reasons for Medici financial successes and failures!

The Medici family originated in the Mugello, moved to Florence in search of riches, and were first recorded in city documents in the early 13th century.

The astute bankers' position: moving out of cash

By the 1340's, Florence's economic boom was over. The Bardi and Peruzzi banks had suffered from the default by Edward II; storms in 1343 had destroyed harvests, leading to more economic misfortune and in 1348 the Black Death caused further devastation. The astute Medici suffered less than many, having moved out of cash and into land.

By the early 1400's, Florence was still a semi-rural community, with a population of around 50,000. Half were engaged in its main industry, textiles, based on the fine wool imported from the Cotswolds, financed by Florentine banks and made into cloth by the Florentines.

Instead of one central bank the Medici formed separate entities, in Rome, Naples and later Venice as well as Florence. Thus a defaulting creditor of part did not bring ruin on the whole. Strict lending rules were enforced.

> Collectors of the works of the greatest artists of the Florentine Renaissance

By the late 1380's, young Giovanni de Bicci dei Medici was a partner in the Medici Bank, assuming control of the Rome branch. Quiet, unostentatious, but very talented, his strengths lay in adapting old methods and techniques. Under his management the use of bills of exchange became common.

The Medici become papal bankers

The Rome branch established lucrative dealings with the Vatican and its cardinals. One of these, Baldassare Cossa, had been a pirate but had found favour with the Pope and been made papal treasurer. Giovanni and Cossa became firm friends and when Cossa was made cardinal, it was claimed the appointment was bought with a loan from the Medici Bank. It was noted that Cossa had absolutely no religious qualifications for the role. Nevertheless, in 1410 he was elected pope, as John XXIII. Thus the Medici became papal bankers.

Cossa died in 1419, after accusations of crimes including using the bank's money to purchase his cardinalate. Out of favour as supporters of Cossa, the Medici Bank was replaced as papal bankers by the Spini, rival Florentines. But the fortunes of the Medici Bank had been firmly established.

In 1420 Giovanni reorganised the bank, bringing his sons, Cosimo (1389-1464) and Lorenzo (1395-1440) into partnership. Cosimo took a controlling role. At the end of 1420 the Spini bank failed and the pope

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Donatello's 'Judith slaying Holofernes'

(Martin) again turned to the Medici Bank.

Cosimo was well read, shrewd and non-confrontational. Under his management the bank was taken into a different league. The use of bills of exchange was promoted and the usury laws against interest payments avoided, by treating them as gifts.

The growing political power of the Medici began to be challenged in Florence and in 1426 Rinaldo degli Albizzi attempted to stir opposition. Fearing trouble, Cosimo began transferring money to Rome and Venice. In 1433 Cosimo was charged with treason and promoting the recent war with Lucca for his own benefit. Found guilty, the Medici were exiled, banned from political office for ten years. Cosimo went to Venice, where he was treated like visiting royalty.

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Lorenzo de' Medici

The artistic benefit of creative accounting

In 1434, a faction friendly to the Medici was elected to govern Florence. Rinaldo tried to resist but was persuaded to withdraw by Pope Eugenius IV (successor to Martin), who needed to protect his lines of credit from the Medici Bank. Cosimo returned to Florence with a private army, became de facto ruler and by far its richest man, his wealth having increased by employing some creative accounting. He commissioned works of art to underline his contribution to Florence: Donatello's *David* and *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, both representing liberation from tyranny, were prominently displayed in Palazzo Medici.

In 1464, Cosimo's son, Piero ('Piero Il Gottoso' because he suffered from gout) took control of the bank on his father's death. He was reserved and lacking in charisma. A survey of the bank's finances revealed that all was not well. Piero started a period of retrenchment, loans were called in, alienating many clients. However, he maintained the bank's relationship with the Milanese Sforza family which had been fostered by his diplomatic father. A period of Florentine political unrest followed in the 1460's, during which time Piero was grooming his son, Lorenzo, to take over the business. Piero died in 1469 of complications from the gout.

The decline of the Medici bank

Lorenzo was intelligent but spoilt, arrogant, a spender, fond of the finer things in life, preferring to leave management of the Bank to others. However, he could not avoid his political responsibilities. The family's friendship with the Sforzas paid off when the Sforza candidate, Cardinal Francesco della Rovere, was elected as Pope Sixtus IV. Sixtus confirmed the Medici as bankers to the papacy. However in 1474 relations deteriorated and the bank lost the Vatican business to the rival Pazzi. The Pazzi family took advantage of the Medici family's fall from favour, aiming to crush their commercial and political power. In 1478, the Pazzi Conspiracy saw Lorenzo's brother Giuliano murdered in Florence Cathedral. Lorenzo narrowly escaped. The plot failed, but Sixtus excommunicated Lorenzo for his part in the reprisals. To avoid the unrest which followed, Lorenzo went to Naples, throwing himself on the friendship of King Ferrante. In 1480, Lorenzo returned to Florence with a peace treaty, Sixtus was forced to lift the interdict and the Medici Bank was reopened in Rome. But Lorenzo's extravagances and spending to consolidate the family's political power led to a gradual decline of the Medici Bank from which it never recovered.

Ian Morgan provided a fascinating insight into the Medici as bankers. The Bank allowed the family to establish and maintain a political power base which was to endure for over three hundred years and enable them to commission and collect works of the greatest artists of the Florentine Renaissance which enrich our lives today.

After many dedicated years, Diana Darlington has just stepped down as a Trustee and Vice Chairman of the BIS.

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Statue of Cosimo de' Medici in the Piazza de la Signoria

Wall painting from the villa of Livia at Via Flaminia

Women who left their mark on their societies:

Carla Gambescia looks at some famous names

Philippa Leslie reviews

In these digital times, we were connected to Carla Gambescia in New York for her talk on Italian women who left their mark on Renaissance Italy and influenced the concept of today's modern woman. Carla suggested the Renaissance as the turning point. Selecting some of the most legendary, she linked them to the 1970s Judy Chicago *The Dinner Party* which features place settings for 39 famous women in history.

Looking back, looking forward

In Roman times, patrician women ruled in the domestic realm with great authority, whereas highly educated, influential, shrewd Cleopatra (69-30BC) was atypical – suspect for her lavish lifestyle; then Livia (59/58 BC – 28 AD) (her wonderful dining room is now in Palazzo Massimo) wife and adviser to Augustus, mother of Tiberius, seen as the controlling mother, was later deified. Both women could only be effective because of their marriages.

With the spread of Christianity, two remarkable women emerge in Italy. In Sicily, Lucia of Siracusa, who distributed her dowry to the poor, infuriating her suitor, was persecuted and killed. In 1646 she was prayed to during the plague and believed to have saved the population from starving. In Tuscany, the ascetic St Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), a tertiary, and tireless worker for charity, wrote to Pope Gregory XI in Avignon during the Schism, requesting his return to Rome. 'Use your power – or else resign!' He returned. She is one of the most influential writers in Catholicism and a Doctor of the Church.

The Renaissance brings changes

During the Renaissance, things changed. Humanism focused on humanity's shared capacity and potential. Three examples: Simonetta Vespucci is depicted in Botticelli's Primavera and in the Birth of Venus. She had great hair! Married to a Vespucci at 16, she was celebrated as the most beautiful woman in Florence, the idealised model and Botticelli's neoplatonic muse. She died of consumption at 23. He, 34 years later, requested to be buried at her feet in the Ognissanti, the Vespucci family church.

Raphael's Margarita Luti, 1500-1522, the second muse, is very much flesh incarnate. Raphael was a super star! On commission to paint the Vatican Stanzas, Margarita, a baker's daughter, became his muse, portrayed in many of his works, eg the Madonna of the Chair and the Madonna Velata, both now in the Pitti in Florence. He died at 37 unmarried, but the La Fornarina portrait, now in Palazzo Barberini, hints that they were secretly married – a sprig of myrtle, a symbol of love, her armband which carries his name. If Simonetta was of divine inspiration to Botticelli, Margarita was for Raphael the embodiment of romantic love.

The third muse is Vittoria Colonna, Marchesa di Pescara (1492-1547), Michelangelo's soul mate, revered for her mind as much as her beauty. Their friendship – passionate, of mutual admiration – dated from her widowhood at 48. He was 63. She, a well-known poet, he a recluse, sullen, difficult. She was very devout, as was he. In the Sistine Last Judgement, Vittoria is depicted as the Virgin Mary. Michelangelo puts himself among the damned. He treasured her writings, which were by his bed when he died. To him, she was his equal in intellect, his peer in spirituality.

Three avatars

Isabella D'Este (1474-1539) of Ferrara was educated equally with her brothers – with an unparalleled classical education. Her eventful life is documented in her over 2000 letters. She married Francesco Gonzaga, Marchese of Mantua, condottiere; they had eight children.

> 'The Jackie O of the Renaissance!'

Isabella, a great patron, was painted by Leonardo and by Titian. As a style icon, she was 'the Jackie O of the Renaissance' – favouring plunging necklines, lots of fur, exotic turbans and jewellery – all widely imitated. When Francesco was imprisoned by Charles VII, Isabella became regent. She negotiated a peace treaty with France, securing Francesco's return. After his death she remained regent until her son came of age; negotiated for Mantua to become a Duchy, making it a sovereign territory; and was an effective leader – perhaps the greatest female power broker since Livia 1500 years earlier.

The first epic feminist art work

Isabella is also celebrated in an installation in the Brooklyn Museum of Art, *The Dinner Party,* by feminist artist Judy Chicago. It is a large triangular table with place settings for 39, widely regarded as the first epic feminist art work and a symbolic history of women in the western world. Isabella has her place.

The second avatar is Catherine de' Medici (1519-1589). Like Livia and Isabella, she became regent when her husband, Henry II of France, with whom she had 10 children, died. Unlike them, she had a mixed political record. Effective at retaining power, she is inextricably linked with the Massacre of St Bartholomew, when several thousand French Protestants were slaughtered. Her more positive legacy is style – the queen who refined the French! – importing Italian dance masters, ballet, high heels, fine perfumes, lingerie. She designed the gardens of the Tuileries, a wing of the Louvre, the chateau at Monceau. She introduced knives and forks, Venetian glass goblets, spices. But she isn't at Judy Chicago's *Dinner*!

Shattering the canvas ceiling

The third avatar, Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1656), was not high born, but well educated by her painter father. At 17 she completed the stunning '*Susanna and the Elders*'. Two years later, she had her 'MeToo' moment, when her father arranged for a tutor from Florence, who raped her. Although he was convicted, her reputation suffered. Thereafter she had an arranged marriage, five children. A friend of Galileo, she became an independent artist, the first woman admitted to the Florence Accademia dell'Arte e Disegno. She had shattered the canvas ceiling! Moving to Naples, she established a workshop, favouring biblical and mythical subjects of strong women.

To a prospective patron, she declares: 'I have the spirit of Caesar and the soul of a woman.' She has a central place at Judy Chicago's *Dinner*.

public domain source: commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Botticelli-primavera.jpg

Botticelli: Simonetta Vespucci as Venus in 'Primavera', circa 1480

public domain source: commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Da_Vinci_Isabella_dEste.jpg

da Vinci: Portrait of Isabella d'Este, 1499–1500

©Judy Chicago source: Brooklyn Museum, 2002.10.PS.25_plate_PS9.jpg

Gentileschi place setting by Judy Chicago

Indomitable women

Carla observed that those who left their greatest mark had the advantage of high birth, an extraordinary education or both. In classical times they were viewed with suspicion. In medieval times, they were almost exclusively from a religious context. But during the Renaissance, extraordinary women were seen as having realised their human potential, which for the first time society began to recognise: no turning back. She described their influence: indomitable!

Carla Gambescia, graduate of the Wharton School of Finance, has many years of experience in restaurant and retail operations. Her book La Dolce Vita University – An Unconventional Guide to Italian Culture was a Silver prizewinner. Her talk was delightfully unconventional too.

Philippa Leslie works in international communications and is Editor of Rivista.

How we fell in love with Italian food

Diego Zancani traced the influence of Italian cuisine in Britain in the annual Charles de Chassiron Memorial Lecture

Chloe Challis followed his journey down the ages

Charles de Chassiron, for whom this Lecture is named, was a diplomat for 35 years, noted linguist and then distinguished Chairman of the British Italian Society from 2005 to 2015.

I was delighted to be asked to write up the 'How We Fell in Love with Italian Food' talk – however, during the lecture as my interest and enjoyment grew, so did my trepidation in being able to convey how captivating and informative it was, as well as the speaker's wit, warmth and genuine passion for the subject, which came across via Zoom.

Diego Zancani managed to defy the confines of lockdown by transporting us in both time and place as he took us on a journey that looked at Italian food and its role in the cultural relationship between Italy and Britain.

The lecture highlighted the ease of finding Italian food and ingredients in Britain today. We expect a choice of brands and sizes of olive oils when we go to the supermarket. In contrast, when Diego was working at Reading University in 1969 olive oil was only available from chemists, in tiny bottles, for earache. This triggered his investigation into the contribution the Romans made to Britain. We must therefore be somewhat grateful for Britain's previous lack of olive oil variety as it can be credited with initiating Diego's research that would lead to his fascinating book, dedicated to the slow but steady success of Italian food in the British Isles and America.

Diego mentioned the three years of daily visits to libraries, particularly the Bodleian library near Balliol, his Oxford college, to gather information on the spirit of cooperation between different and diverse populations. Those visits paid off as Diego's lecture touched upon scientific, historical, cultural and culinary facts and brought moments from the past to life.

The diet of ancient Romans in Britain

We learned that the foods eaten by the ancient Romans and Romanised Britons can be revealed through the analysis of stable isotopes found in human remains. Their diet consisted of meat, and dried fruits that couldn't be grown in Britain, such as figs and sultanas imported from Spain, Southern Gaul and Italy. It was more than a few centuries later however when pasta recipes arrived.

Travel between England and Italy was instrumental in the exchange of culture and food. Anyone who had a flight to Italy cancelled due to coronavirus may have felt slightly less aggrieved after learning that the journey of Sigeric, Archbishop of Cantebury, to Rome in 993 to confer with the Pope took three months each way. At about the same time dried pasta was brought by the Arabs to Sicily (fresh pasta came from ancient Greece).

'The Forme of Cury', a recipe collection from the 14th century created by the chief Master Cooks of King Richard II, contains instructions for a type of lozenge-shaped pasta that Diego advised was probably consumed dressed with butter and cheese, with a pinch of cinnamon on top.

Italian food fit for an English king

Italian food was most definitely fit for a King, as Diego noted that in 1511 when the Pope sent galleys to London to collect tin to repair the roof of St Peter's he sent 100 wheels of parmesan with wine etc.to King Henry VIII. In 1556 the Pope sent 8 wheels of parmesan to Queen Mary. Parmesan was, as it should be, highly prized.

Knowledge of Italian culture was also promoted in Elizabethan England by Italian refugees moving away from the Roman Catholic Church. He noted that Queen Elizabeth was fluent in Italian.

Britain's love of Italy continued and the Grand Tour of 18th and 19th centuries provided many diary entries for Diego to read through. For example, Margaret, Viscountess Spencer, was able to enjoy a hearty breakfast in 1763 at Novara, which included polenta and, of course, parmesan.

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Pescherie Vecchie in the centre of Bologna old town; the gastronomic capital of Italy

All photos: istock

And not just for banquets

The lecture conveyed that Italian food was not just for banquets and tables of the wealthy. Pasta was a valuable food for the British navy, promoted by Sir Hugh Platt in the 17th century, as supplies of flour and dried pasta could be cooked with salty sea water. "I'm not sure the British navy ever had a designated Master Lasagne Maker onboard, like some Genoese merchant ships in the 13th century," Diego commented.

Pizza?

A lecture on Italian food must mention pizza. Diego highlighted the absence of pizza throughout recipe books and although the entry in John Florio's 1598 Italian-English dictionary for pizza referred to a flaky pastry with sugar and cheese, it was around the mid-18th century in Naples that pizza, as we know it, was evolving.

The lecture included an anecdote about the inventor Guglielmo Marconi's experience with the stringy cheese at *Pizzeria di Brandi* in Naples in 1899, before he headed to America. It was the immigrants from Naples who introduced pizza to America and other countries where it became popular.

In mid-20th century post-war Britain, in response to the decline in interest in the quality of food, Raymond Postgate launched the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Food. This became the Good Food Club. Italian waiters latched on to the idea of dining out as a less formal experience than was usual, and opened trattorias and restaurants to provide good quality food in enjoyable atmospheres. These venues were appropriate as, to quote Diego, "Food is sharing the joy of living."

> "Food is sharing the joy of living"

The significance of food, from the basic need for survival, through the pleasure of eating it, to the messages conveyed by giving it, as well as the intricacies between language and food, were all areas that this lecture touched on.

As Diego explained, the word 'companion' comes from the Latin *panis*, and the notion of someone whom you share bread and food with. In these times of uncertainty, where a new sense of camaraderie has evolved, it seems appropriate to take a moment to think about the importance of foods like pizza and pasta, and the comfort and happiness brought by preparing it and sharing it.

I've ordered a copy of '*How We Fell in Love with Italian Food*' by Diego Zancani and can't wait to reacquaint myself with the information from this most delicious lecture.

How We Fell in Love with Italian Food Diego Zancani, 2019, 256 pp. Bodleian Library.

Diego Zancani is Emeritus Professor of Medieval and Modern Languages, Oxford University and an Emeritus Fellow, Balliol College. His talk charted the extraordinary progress of Italian food from the legacy of the Roman invasion to today.

Chloe Challis fell in love with Italy on a school trip to Florence, studied History of Art at university and now works for the Wine & Spirit Education Trust (WSET). She is a member of the BIS.

Marco Crupi/shutterstock

Saints' Days in south-eastern Sicily

A webinar talk given on June 3rd 2020 by Susan Kikoler

Jane Everson was on the call!

Susan Kikoler's talk was the first in the Society's webinars. The technology functioned without a hitch – perhaps the saints were looking down on us; as Susan joked in her introduction, the saints often intervene in times of plague!

Susan has had contacts with south eastern Sicily for many years, and explained that in the inland villages and towns of the province of Siracusa, the traditions, customs and culture are marked by the rich and varied history of Sicily. These range from archaeological sites dating from the Greeks – and, like the Greek theatres, still used for performances – through the invasions of Arabs, Normans and Aragonese, each bringing new elements of culture and tradition, to the poverty, exploitation and mass emigrations of the 19th and early 20th centuries which in turn exported the culture of these Sicilian borghi to many parts of the world.

Susan focussed on the town of Palazzolo Acreide, a World Heritage site and runner-up for 'il borgo più bello d'Italia'. Acreide comes from the Greeks who founded a defensive settlement there in 663 BC. In the surrounding area there's a carved relief known as I Santoni but probably a prehistoric artefact showing a Phrygian deity such as the Great Mother or Demeter, invoked for a good harvest. Not far away is Pantalica, the largest necropolis in Europe: some of the tombs date from the 13th century BC.

Over the centuries Palazzolo Acreide has been destroyed and rebuilt several times, from the destruction by invading Arabs in 827 to the catastrophic earthquake of 1693, after which the town was substantially rebuilt in the Baroque style.

Devotion to a saint gave a sense of identity

Religious festivals in the life of the towns in the province are very significant, with annual celebrations for Saints Paul, Sebastian, Michael, Lucy, and the Madonna, of whom the first two are the most important in terms of emotional attachment. Devotion to one of the saints was a matter of feeling a personal connection, a sense of identity with something that had happened in the locality, some way in which the saint had intervened in the past life of the community and was thus felt to be 'one of us'. Among the instances mentioned was the miracle of the Madonna delle Milizie in Scicli, which took place during the Norman campaigns against the Arabs, and the intervention of Saint Lucy during the plague in Siracusa in 1646, when she was credited with saving the starving

Di Davide Mauro CC BY-SA 4.0, commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=81299944

Main photo: Statue of St Sebastian is carried through the streets during the festival, right: 'rival' St Paul; Palazzo Acreide.

population. But it is Paul and Sebastian who are the rival saints of Palazzolo Acreide. They inspire a fierce loyalty in their opposing adherents.

Interestingly neither Paul nor Sebastian is buried in Sicily. Paul stopped briefly in Siracusa on his journey from Malta to Rome and is believed to have miraculously revealed a spring of water. Sebastian's only contact was through a statue of the saint washed up from a wreck in the 15th century, which the townsfolk of Mililli carried to their church for veneration. The rivalry between the two saints was sparked by the Pope who in 1690 approved Paul as the patron of Palazzolo Acreide, replacing the Madonna and the patronal church. But in the earthquake of 1693 the statue of Sebastian was miraculously unscathed, while Paul was seen by the Sebastiano faction to have failed to protect the town. The rivalry continued until the 19th century with contrasting social classes supporting one or the other. Nowadays the devotion to the two saints provides for double celebrations, indeed four in the year, since each saint is honoured with two feasts, one in winter and one in summer: and both groups annually try to outdo each other in the celebrations.

The St Paul / St Sebastian rival factions continue to this day

The contrasting merits of the saints are visible in the very different images conveyed by the two statues: Paul, fierce, old and strong, with a sword in one hand and a book in the other; Sebastian, young, handsome and vulnerable. Similarly, the two churches provide a strong contrast: simplicity for Paul; ornate and heavy for Sebastian.

The festivities each year in honour of the two saints share similar patterns: processions, celebrations, a carnival atmosphere, fireworks. They begin with the unveiling of the saint's statue, normally hidden from view, and a procession from the church into the town where it is greeted with great cheers, massed bands, homemade coloured streamers and even babies stripped naked and offered up to the saint, often as fulfilment of a vow. The first procession takes place around midday, in the evening a second, which continues late into the night and culminates in massive fireworks displays.

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Among the festivities for Saint Paul are those connected with the 'ceraldi', individuals with power over poisonous snakes, who occupy a special position in the procession in gratitude for the role they once carried out protecting workers at harvest time. For Saint Sebastian, a most impressive moment comes when the procession with the statue reaches one of the town's steepest streets, and the men link arms and race up the slope as fast as they can.

> Fierce rivalry gives way to double saintly celebrations

Alas, because of the coronavirus, in 2020 these wonderful celebrations could not take place. But the talk ended by putting us into the middle of the festivities of 2017 in a specially made video, allowing us to share in the excitement and amazement of the moment when the statue of Saint Sebastian emerged from the church into the waiting crowds, to be greeted by such an outburst of fireworks that the smoke almost obscured the view. A truly dramatic and exciting conclusion to a wonderfully rich talk.

Not surprisingly there were many questions which showed just how engaged the audience had been. Questions covered the material used for streamers; whether there was any link with the devotion of Sweden to Saint Lucy; whether there were colours especially associated with each; how the celebrations were financed; whether any particular foods were eaten as part of the festivities; and the extent to which the form of the celebrations in many ways reflected pre-Christian veneration of the pagan deities.

Richard Northern thanked Susan for 'a wonderful and rich discussion providing inspiring evidence of how communities in Sicily are bound together by shared traditions.'

Susan Kikoler has been the Honorary Director of the British Italian Society since 2004, promoting Italian culture. She has served as co-ordinator of the events programme for a number of years, is a former editor of Rivista, and a regular contributor to the journal. Writer and critic, Susan taught English in Syracuse for five years and it remains her second home.

Jane Everson is Emeritus Professor of Italian Literature in the School of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures at Royal Holloway. Her focus is medieval and early modern Italian literature and culture. She has just become a Trustee of the BIS

The snowball revolt

Claire Judde de Lariviere at the Society for Antiquaries on 17 February 2020

Jane Everson reviews 'the myth of Venice'

Richard Northern, President, welcomed all and thanked Venice in Peril for their sponsorship of the event. He introduced Dr Claire Judde de Lariviere, who opened her talk explaining that Venice has handed down to us the well-known images of a city of power, luxury and art.

But as well as art, there was a flourishing maritime trade, with galleys bringing spices and other luxury goods from the East.

Dr Judde showed some well-known images of power: Bellini's portrait of Doge Loredan, painted around 1501 and Titian's 'The Vendramin Family', from the early 1540s, both now in the National Gallery in London. Such images created 'the myth of Venice.'

Venetian society in the 15th and 16th centuries

But over the last forty years, scholars offer a more nuanced depiction, with an interest in the ordinary people of Venice, and of society as a whole – for example, jewellers, dyers, artisans in general; storekeepers such as butchers, fishmongers, and fishermen, sailors and shipwrights, and artists, schoolmasters, musicians, women. There was also a significant number of unskilled servants from all over the Mediterranean, and beggars, and vagabonds. These people made up the core of Venetian society.

With regular rituals such as ducal processions and carnivals, an interaction between power (the Doges) and the populace (the ordinary people) was created. Venice in the 15th and 16th centuries was one of the largest European cities. It was a city state, the capital of an empire, governed by the Doges – the patricians representing 5% of the population, aided by families from the Libro d'Oro; other nobles and merchants worked 'for the state' in various ways, while those below that level had no political role at all.

Social unrest in Murano

But within Venetian society there were outbreaks of restlessness. On 27 January 1511, an incident took place at Murano, a separately governed island. Every 18

Main image: 'Frozen Lagoon at Fondamenta Nuove', by Gabriel Bella, 1708; right: SS. Maria e Donato and the Grand Canal

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months, the Podesta', elected in Venice, paid an official visit. On the day in question, a new Podesta', who was to take over from the unpopular Podesta' Vitturi, whose term of office was concluding, arrived and the island population – glassworkers, fishermen, peasants – assembled in front of the church of SS. Maria e Donato. The day was cold, following a heavy snowfall. The crowd gathered around Podesta' Vitturi, there to welcome the new man, Giacomo Suriano, whose task was to ask the locals to pay higher taxes. Word went around: 'The dog Vitturi has ruined Murano'.

Snowballs get out of hand

Matters snowball. Suriano joins Vitturi, they enter the church, partake in a religious ceremony and then process to his waiting boat. The crowd presses closer and suddenly launches a great barrage of snowballs at the hapless Podesta'. The atmosphere is tense. Someone in the crowd rushes forward and rings the campanile. There are skirmishes. But Vitturi manages to extricate himself and return safely to Venice.

After the Revolt, six people were arrested and imprisoned. From the documentation of the trial, Dr Judde could construct the history of Murano, a mix of different traditions and societies and which, from the beginning of the 16th century had its own Statutes.

The role of confraternities – 'Le Scuole'

From a political point of view, what did the population do in everyday life? There were confraternities – for example 'Le Scuole Grandi'; and 'Le Scuole Piccole' which were for artisans – effectively all were Guilds. The Scuole produced regulations or Statutes for the workers, called 'Mariegole', that is, rules / laws, and dictated how life would function, both from a professional and a personal point of view. They created a sense of participation and were therefore political and based on professional activities.

Prof.Judde then gave some examples of how forms of participation worked to provide a sense of political involvement.

Murano is divided by its Grand Canal, which in the 16th century was spanned by the Ponte Lungo (still is), but at that time in need of reconstruction. 93 workmen were paid by the community to carry out the work, with the group deciding who could, or could not, pay, according to his means. It was evidence that the population could gather and organise themselves.

A new light on Renaissance Venice: political life involved all social classes

In Venice, each Guild – membership by election – was led by an elected 'Gastaldo' who represented the workers. Voting took place each year on the feast day of the Guild's patron saint. The election process was the same as for the Doges. To maintain fairness, competition among the Guild members was organised by lots. Thus, these were political practices transferable between the Doges and the Guilds.

In the markets, the tradesmen had 'Fanti', officers who controlled and collected taxes; another organisational device was the fifty town criers ('commandatori') who stood on pedestals to make announcements – in Piazza S.Marco, for example. Another indication of political interaction.

Other areas where there were people in charge of certain activities included La Serenissima's boatmen. They were in contact with everyone who came to Venice, announced the regulations to the populace, and ensured circulation of news. And in Murano, another form of social control: the priests had to keep a list of who died and who was living where.

From these examples, we can see that the city's political life involved all social classes. It was not only patrician. The workers had to accept patrician order, but also helped to balance the society. It is a new light on Renaissance Venice.

The fate of the snowballers

Prof Judde's fascinating look at Venice from a less traditionally accepted perspective led to a number of questions from the audience, including: What happened to the six 'snowballers'? They weren't condemned, so the event could 'disappear'. Was the revolt of any significance? It's not nothing! There are very few events like this in Venice for which we have information. It was a starting point to find a new way of exploring history. At least 200 Guilds existed from the 13th century. They were socially and economically important.

Richard Northern expressed appreciation for the collaboration between Venice in Peril and the Society. Jonathan Keates, Chairman of Venice in Peril, then thanked Prof Judde for presenting a Venice more nuanced and varied than usually thought, and described the progress of the Fund's conservation projects, including San Nicolo' dei Mendicoli. The Fund's 2019 Aqua Alta Appeal had already raised £150,00

Mafia – machismo – fascismo

The cinema of Lina Wertmüller

A talk by Dr Silvia Angeli, Dr Valentina Signorelli, Dr Cecilia Zoppelletto

And appreciated by Silvia Badiali

Lina Wertmüller was introduced as 'Italy's most interesting and talented filmmaker'.

She was the first woman nominated for the Academy Award for Best Director, for *Seven Beauties* in 1975, and in October 2019 Sophia Loren presented her with a Lifetime Career Award, describing her as 'an unforgettable woman and artist who made history by being herself'. At which Wertmüller wittily suggested that the *Oscar* should not be male, but female, and could be called *Anna*.

Our speakers discussed Wertmüller's major works from the 1970s, through the lens of the year 2020, and showed some of the most iconic, funny and tragic clips.

The Seduction of Mimì (Mimì metallurgico ferito nell'onore) (1972) introduces the onscreen couple Giancarlo Giannini and Mariangela Melato, who worked with Lina Wertmüller on many of her films. Melato is presented as a leading lady, an actress defined by Fellini as 'A face that is a cross between an Egyptian deity and an extraterrestrial'.

The film tells the story of a Sicilian worker, Mimì, who loses his job for refusing to vote for a mafioso. Unemployed, he is forced to leave his young wife and emigrate to Turin, where he weaves a passionate relationship with Fiore, a progressive communist, who challenges his ideas and gives him a son.

Logical and modern but with an ancient revenge

When Mimì returns to Catania, he discovers that his wife is pregnant from an affair with a married Neapolitan brigadier. Because he has travelled to the industrial north, he is now seen by the Sicilians as a reasonable, open-minded modern man who would not kill to avenge his honour. So instead of killing her, he decides to seduce the brigadier's wife and get her pregnant. He is trying to be logical and modern with an ancient revenge: an eye for an eye, an illegitimate child for illegitimate child.

The film's title *Mimì metalworker wounded in honour* is lyrical, shows Wertmüller's sense of fun, but introduces important themes. Mimì is a man whose job defines him and his place in society; but that his honour is wounded demonstrates that nothing in life can matter to a man more than his pride.

Two styles: commedia dell'arte and commedia all'italiana

The director employs the classic genre of *commedia dell'arte*, which emphasises the describing of a character without words, and *commedia all'italiana*, which is not a fully-fledged genre with artistic canons. It was more a style of comedy popular between the 1950s and 1970s, whose masters were Pietro Germi, Mario Monicelli and Ettore Scola. It relies on stereotypes: strong imagery of masculinity together with the emotional insecurity of the macho man; obsession with pride, reputation, dignity, and their association with stubbornness; the depiction of the southern man and culturally backward southern Italy; the shallowness of the common individual. These elements are generally spiced up with vices and a striving for the emancipation and modernisation of post war Italy.

Swept Away by an Unusual Destiny in the Blue Sea of August (Travolti da un insolito destino in un azzurro mare d'agosto) (1974) again stars Giancarlo Giannini and Mariangela Melato.

Its plot is simple: Raffaella, a rich northern Italian, is holidaying with her husband and friends on a yacht in the Mediterranean. Among the crew is Gennarino, a Sicilian sailor who is a committed communist. Raffaella and Gennarino are immediately at odds with each other: she is spoilt, arrogant and oblivious to her own privilege, while his egalitarian aspirations are undermined by his strongly sexist attitude. From the outset they quarrel, but Gennarino has to show restraint, or risk being fired.

However, the power dynamic changes when they find

Swept Away (1974)

Clockwise from top: Seven Beauties (1975); Love and Anarchy (1973); Film poster for Swept Away (1974); Lina Wertmüller, doyenne of Italian cinema

themselves marooned on a remote island, where Raffaella has to rely on Gennarino for survival. They rather predictably fall in love, but once rescued, go their separate ways – attesting that their love wouldn't survive in 'the real world'.

Of all Wertmüller's films, this is where private and public, sexual and class politics are bound together, to the point that it is almost impossible to distinguish them. It reflects the Italian socio-political context of the time, a period that witnessed the height of the feminist movement: divorce was approved in 1970, and foundations were laid for the legalisation of abortion, passed in 1978.

The film met with mixed reviews. Critics took issue with Wertmüller's treatment of her female protagonist, which includes physical brutality and a sexual assault at the hands of Gennarino.

> I'm a court jester, a joker, a clown. I'm a storyteller'

However, while these sequences are disturbing, Wertmüller is not condoning Gennarino's violent behaviour. Indeed, we find in him a variation of the stock characters typical of the *commedia all'italiana*, built in turn on the *commedia dell'arte* tradition. Gennarino is the politicised southern macho-man, who on the one hand is fighting against class oppression, while on the other perpetuating sexual oppression. Oblivious to his own double standards, he remains narrow-minded and incapable of adapting to changing conventions. It can also be argued that only by exposing a visually fabricated and excessive dimension of the woman — whether in her sexuality, passion or motherhood role — can it be shown how absurd patriarchal society is.

Also mentioned were *Love and Anarchy* (1973) and *Seven Beauties* (*Pasqualino Settebellezze*) (1975) which, together with *The Seduction of Mimì* and *Swept Away,* represent the apex of Wertmüller's art.

Wertmüller's films are stories and political comedies that never come to a conclusion, but elicit a bitter laugh: they are funny, sometimes happy but with endings that are always compromised. They produce excitement and controversy. To some critics, her distinctive visual style and baroque *mise en scene* is not enough. They accuse her of opening discussions and exposing tensions without proposing a solution. Wertmüller has the last word (quoted from an interview with Grace Russo Bullaro, author of *Man in Disorder: the cinema of Lina Wertmüller in the 1970s)*:

'Who do they take me for, Jesus Christ? I'm not Marx, Christ or even St Francis (…) I'm a court jester, a joker, a clown. I'm a storyteller. Instead of entertaining the king I entertain everybody, or maybe I try to get them to think.'

Dr Valentina Signorelli is Senior Lecturer in Media and Communication at the University of East London (UEL) and a professional screen writer.

Dr Silvia Angeli is Visiting Lecturer, University of Westminster, London. Her research focuses on the relationship between religion and film, especially Italian cinema.

Dr Cecilia Zoppelletto has worked as a news producer for the Italian national broadcasting company RAI and as TV host for Antenna Tre Nordest. She is Visiting Lecturer at the University of Westminster.

Silvia Badiali is a professional adviser on art and finance based in London. She is a newly elected Trustee of the BIS.

A collection of collections

A first look at the restored Torlonia Marbles in Rome

Judith Harris was an early visitor

Those of us living in Rome for decades are spoiled by being able to see ancient statuary in Roman and Vatican museums, in courtyards and even atop a palazzo roof or along a roadside, as on the Via della Dataria leading up to the Quirinal Palace. Even by comparison with such abundant magnificence, the current exhibition of 96 newly restored ancient works in marble called *I Marmi Torlonia*, the Torlonia Marbles, is unique and uniquely fascinating.

The exhibition opened on 10 October 2020 in the newly renovated 16th century Villa Caffarelli, part of the Capitoline Museums. Albeit currently closed due to Covid-19 precautions, the exhibition is due to remain open through 29 June 2021 before transfer to prestigious museums outside Italy like the Louvre, the British Museum and the Getty Museum. The exhibition came about after years of complex negotiations, resulting in an agreement in 2016 between the Torlonia Foundation and the City of Rome. The Torlonia's is considered the world's most important private collection of works of Greco-Roman art, and long-range plans are to have the 620-piece collection permanently housed in a museum in Rome.

The art of acquiring collections

In the late 18th century a certain Marin Tourlonais, son of farmers from the Auvergne came to Rome through a chance introduction from his great uncle, his local parish priest. He entered the service of an influential French cleric at the Vatican, and became the founder of a new Roman noble clan which climbed rapidly into a position of power and importance in the papal domain. The Torlonia coat of arms granted by the Pope shows two rising comets, reflecting the family's rapid upward mobility. Marin's son Giovanni opened a successful textile shop in the Piazza di Spagna, and then an office for money changing before becoming involved in financing munitions, victuals and horses for Napoleon's occupying armies. By 1803 the family had italianised their name to Torlonia, acquired a papal ducal title and were rich enough to buy the town of Bracciano from the Odescalchi. Moving on as bankers for the Vatican, by the early 19th century they were one of Rome's wealthiest families. They loaned money to Roman aristocrats, who, when unable to repay their debts, would hand over their art collections. In this way the Torlonia came to acquire collections of antiquities. Their first was that of the famous master restorer and sculptor

Judith Harris

Bartolomeo Cavaceppi. Subsequently they acquired collections that once belonged to the Giustiniani and the Caetani. For this reason an exhibition sponsor is the jeweller Bulgari, whose interest in collections of antiquities dates from the same period and explains why the current exhibition is subtitled *Collezionare Capolavori* (To Collect Masterpieces). In the words of art historian Salvatore Settis, "This is less an exhibition of individual pieces than a collection of collections."

The Torlonia bankers also acquired many properties, and within some of their lands on the Appian Way and near Fiumicino, handed over to them by debtors, were exceptional Roman ruins, which the Torlonia had excavated.

> "Miserly bankers and a bit mischievous..."

For Stendhal, who knew the family well, they were "Miserly bankers and a bit mischievous... incapable of enjoying the beautiful things they have surrounded themselves with." Nevertheless, in the late 19th century Alessandro Torlonia (1800-1886), upgraded from duke to prince by a pope, decided to exhibit this enormous collection. A grain storage building they owned on Via della Lungara in Trastevere was transformed into a 77-room museum. It was open to select visitors only. Photographs of the works were taken, and a huge leather-bound catalogue was prepared in 1884; a selection of those early photos and a copy of the catalogue, which today belongs to the Ashmolean Library in Oxford, are in the exhibition.

During World War II the collection was concealed for safety reasons within storage rooms in that same Trastevere palazzo. In 1947 it was still hidden, and the famous archaeologist Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli is said to have dressed up as a street sweeper in order to have a peek at it. After 1960 the then Prince Torlonia, without consulting any authorities, had the museum spaces converted into 93 flats, which are still rented to tenants.

Creation of the Torlonia Foundation

So until today no-one has been able to see the collection, which gathered dust in part of the old grain storage area converted into a strongroom. Finally the family, long engaged in inheritance disputes, have created the Torlonia Foundation, which currently works together with Italy's Ministry of Culture for the conservation of the whole collection.

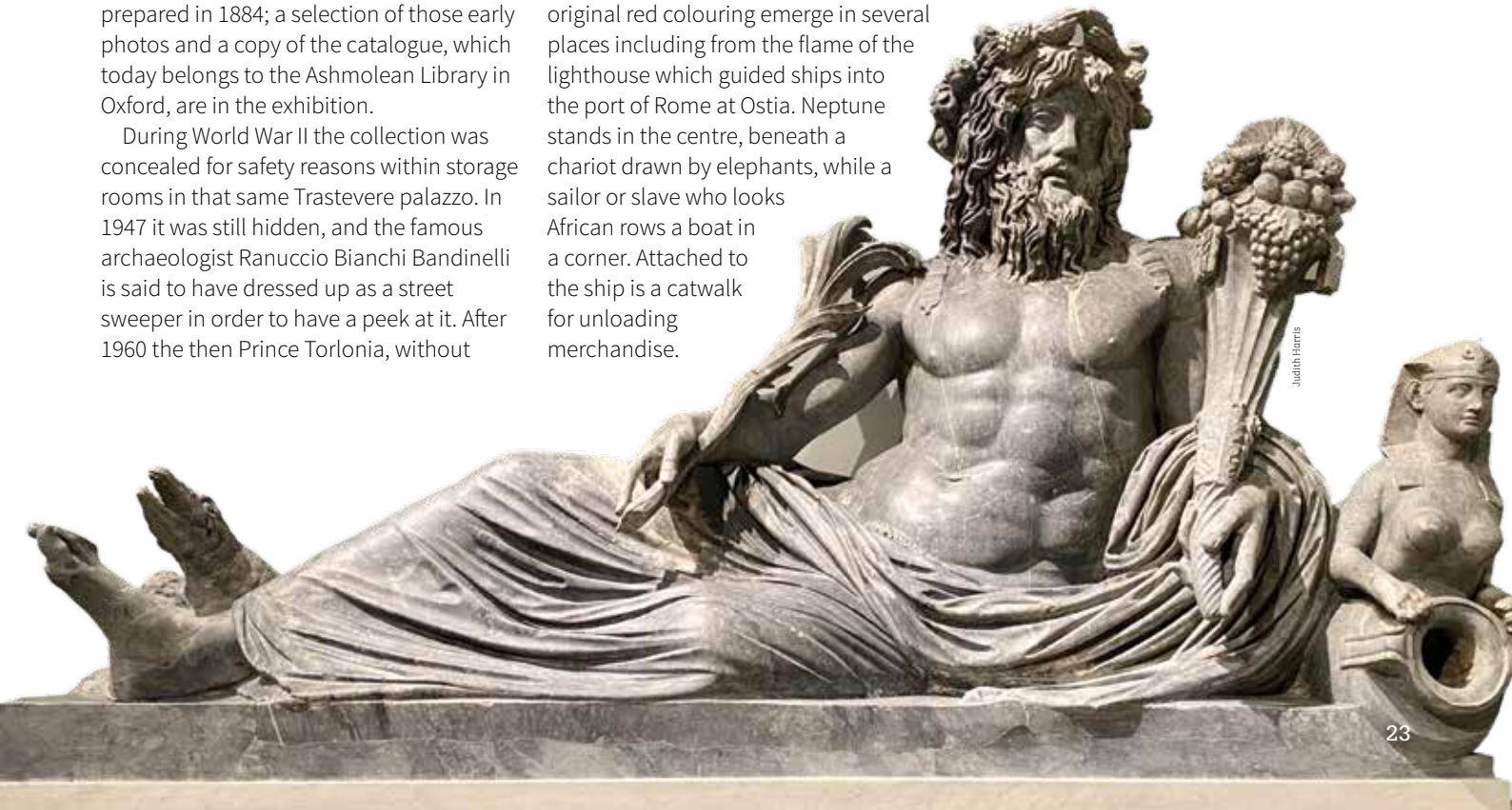
The antique marble statuary in the current exhibition includes – besides Greco-Roman busts, sarcophagi, giant basins, nymphs, warriors, and gods and goddesses – two particularly unusual panels, unusual because they amount to vivid photographs of daily life in ancient Rome. One is a marble frieze of a woman at her table in a butcher shop; behind her, dangling from pegs, are the goods she sells – a hare, pigs, and geese. The reason this panel, measuring 2.18 M wide by 1.40 M tall, exists is uncertain; it may have been a sign or a funeral monument. It bears an inscription taken from a verse in Virgil's Aeneid.

The second frieze, discovered in the vicinity of Trajan's Port, shows a merchant ship and extraordinary details, including the rope knots tied by sailors in the ancient Mediterranean world. The *Bas relief with a scene of the Portus Augusti* measures 1.22 M by 0.75 M and has been long studied for what it reveals about the history of navigation. Traces of the original red colouring emerge in several places including from the flame of the lighthouse which guided ships into the port of Rome at Ostia. Neptune stands in the centre, beneath a chariot drawn by elephants, while a sailor or slave who looks African rows a boat in a corner. Attached to the ship is a catwalk for unloading merchandise.

Judith Harris

The exhibition is on the ground floor of the renovated Villa Caffarelli, which was erected on top of one of Rome's most important archaeological sites, a renowned temple to Jupiter. Built by Ascanio Caffarelli in the 16th century, it is physically attached to the Capitoline Museum. After the Napoleonic wars the Villa became the Embassy of Prussia, until it was expropriated by the Italian state as part of German war reparations in 1923 and converted into a museum. Oversight of the renovation and exhibition design was by David Chipperfield Architects of Milan. Exhibition curators were Salvatore Settis and Carlo Gasparri, and restoration of the sculptures was courtesy of Bulgari, luxury jewellers.

Judith Harris is an author and former diplomat. Her latest book is published this year: *Reflections from a Roman lake: Trevignano Romano.* 191pp. Fonthill, UK and USA, 2020.



Judith Harris

The trulli of Puglia

Saving an architectural tradition by Antonio Sbano, architect and trulli specialist

In the strip of territory between the metropolitan city of Bari and the provinces of Brindisi and Taranto, better known as 'Valle d'Itria', in the splendid hilly landscape consisting of olive groves and vineyards lined with white walls, there are blindingly white houses with dark, conical rooves. They are linked to a truly singular agricultural past – the trulli or 'truddhu' (dialect pronunciation) – and are made of dry stone, very reminiscent of prehistoric houses. The material mainly used is limestone, which is in abundance throughout the area. A perfect house for Apulian peasants, in fact it lent itself as a functional residence for those who had to provide for harvesting or sowing on agricultural land. Initially it was used only as a kind of refuge, only later, over the years, it was often finished with attention to detail, until it became the main house for a peasant family.

Some scholars believe that the *trulli* were already present in the 14th century but it is in the 15th century that they had their maximum expansion, in conjunction with an edict of the Kingdom of Naples that imposed the payment of taxes on each new urban settlement. The ingenuity of the citizens led them to create buildings that could be easily demolished, so when the king's delegate was about to collect the taxes, it was enough to remove the keystone and the houses collapsed into piles of stones.

However, most historians agree that this building technique was mainly due to the geographical condition of the region, which abounded in the limestone used in construction.

The construction technique, a brilliant example of spontaneous architecture

Construction was carried out on a solid stone base on which the heavy and sturdy masonry was placed. Very ancient construction techniques gave life to a structure which, although constructed dry (therefore free of binders), possessed an extraordinary static capacity. The building materials were poor, in fact in the *trulli* there is no trace of cement but only local mortar and limestone. The plan of the *trullo* was generally circular (the oldest ones), but often square, with internal rooms distributed around the

central compartment. The cone rested on the thick walls, narrowing to the top, indicated externally by a pinnacle (decorative element with esoteric, spiritual or propitiatory motifs that served as a real keystone). Externally, the cone was covered with limestone slabs called chianche (or chiancole or chiancarelle) which guarantee that it is waterproof. They are arranged in overlapping rows, with a slope towards the outside, to facilitate the flow of rainwater. The considerable thickness of the masonry and the few and narrow windows ensure an optimal thermal balance, and the type of stones used for the construction guarantee a comfortable environment – warm in winter and cool in summer. The internal plastering, in lime milk on a layer of bole (red earth) containing straw, prevented insects from getting in and served as a thermal insulator. Outside, steps were often positioned on both sides of the main entrance. They led to the cornice designed to collect rainwater and then convey it into special cisterns, which were almost always in the immediate vicinity, or in some cases below the *trullo*, for the needs of the inhabitants. Without doubt they are one of the major distinctive symbols of Puglia.

The ancient craft of the 'master trullaro'

A *trullo* can only be handled by a good 'master trullaro'. This ancient craft was handed down from father to son, until it gradually dissolved. Today, finding a good master is a difficult task, even if many willing young people are gradually rediscovering this ancient craftsmanship.

The *trulli* today

Today the *trulli* are highly sought after as their characteristic style makes them ideal as holiday homes. The experience in one of these houses is immersive, in fact, the *trulli* bring the person who lives in them back into a past of tradition and simplicity. All around the agricultural landscape, of its red earth, olive groves, almond trees and vines, is the history of centuries past, where the most jealous custodians are the centuries-old monuments and in some cases even millenary ones that make it even more unique.

The story of one restoration

Ten years ago, in purchasing a *trullo* on a three-acre site, the new owner made a promise to the seller to restore the *trullo*, which had been lived in by that family for

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Opposite page: The restored *trullo*;
above: Various *trulli* roof details

generations. She enlisted the help of a local architect with a background in this kind of restoration.

As a specialist in the restoration of historical artefacts of the Apulian tradition, this is when I came into the picture. At the centre of the farm was a rustic *trullo*, dating from the end of the 19th century, with a small shelter, intended as a woodshed, and a small star-vaulted room of more recent times used as an agricultural warehouse. In the space in front sat an old thresher, relic of the ancient craft of threshing, used during the scorching month of June for the threshing of wheat for flour to make bread and pasta, cooked in a disused oven opposite, which we rebuilt with the ancient techniques of the local tradition.

The *trullo* has undergone an accurate conservative restoration, and a ventilated space inside has been created, which eliminates rising damp and leads to a comfortable living space. The original tradition of the *trullo* was kept intact, and the old fireplace was recovered – the only heat source during the harsh winters.

Alongside the more recent star-vaulted building, in full respect for the tradition with which it was built, a significant expansion with the same material, finish and construction type as the existing one, has allowed for the creation of a comfortable home.

So we find three artifacts, made at different times, but with a function that the architectural recovery of each wanted to retain. The particular value of this kind of restoration is demonstrated in the respect for this tradition of construction in stone typical of the 'Valle d'Itria'.

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A different Vatican

The year of the coronavirus in Rome

David Willey, veteran Vatican watcher and former BBC Correspondent in Rome, is the author of acclaimed biographies of both Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis and accompanied both pontiffs on many of their worldwide travels. He looks back for RIVISTA at the effect of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic on the Rome headquarters of the world's longest enduring international organisation.

My defining image of the papal year was watching Pope Francis standing in the dark almost alone, in a rainy, windswept and unusually empty St Peter's Square at an Easter ceremony on Good Friday evening.

The covid pandemic had shuttered the doors of most of Rome's 600 churches. Tourism was at a standstill. The Vatican Museums issued no tickets, depriving the Holy See of an important part of its annual income. The centuries old flow of pilgrims from around the world to the tomb of Peter had ceased. Pope Francis had been reduced to transmitting on the internet his daily Mass in the tiny chapel of his Santa Marta residence.

The Catholic Church has great familiarity with notorious pandemics of past centuries. The magnificent baroque church of the Salute in Venice was built to commemorate the end of the devastating outbreak of bubonic plague of 1630 which may have killed more than a million people in Europe.

In March Pope Francis was photographed most unusually leaving his car and walking down the Via Del Corso in Rome to pray alone at a church containing a much venerated mediaeval painted wooden crucifix. This famous image of the crucified Christ was credited with having saved the city in 1522, after being carried by believers in procession to St Peter's.

Call it by whatever name you like – Holy See, Vatican City, Roman Curia – Pope Francis' headquarters and residence, the tiny walled enclave just across the Tiber river from Rome's historic centre, is the keeper of many secrets. I have made it my business during several decades to try to fathom the behind-the-scenes politics in this unique institution which still claims the religious allegiance of just under 18 percent of the world's population.

But despite having travelled the world with three successive popes visiting Catholic flocks practically everywhere except Russia and China, it has often been very difficult for me to interpret accurately what's really going on behind those

padded double doors of the elaborately frescoed state rooms of the Apostolic Palace or, these days, in the rather modest hotel suite chosen by Pope Francis as his new home. This suite, incidentally, is inside a building originally an emergency quarantine centre for a now almost forgotten worldwide cholera pandemic panic at the end of the 19th century.

Italy, like many countries, was slow to realise the gravity of the 21st century pandemic.

The importance of global cooperation

In October Pope Francis published a much heralded 45,000-word document on brotherly love: what it means to be good neighbours in the modern world. He told people of good will, whatever their religion, that the coronavirus isn't a divine punishment. But, he said, a solution to the pandemic will come only through changes in human behaviour – meaning better global cooperation.

> 'the pope from the ends of the earth'

Meanwhile, a very different kind of virus – financial scandal – had been spreading out of control inside his very own domain. The secrets spilled out all over the front pages of Italian newspapers. 'An Earthquake Hit Vatican Finances' ran one headline, 'Francis Fooled' ran another.

A trusted Italian Cardinal from Sardinia, a former papal diplomat who had been promoted by Pope Francis himself and served for years as his Chief of Staff, was called in unexpectedly by the pope, accused point-blank of embezzling Vatican funds, and sacked on the spot, or "asked to resign" as a three-line, late night Holy See communique sardonically announced.

The Cardinal was told by the pope he would be ineligible to vote in any future papal election. Calling a press conference the following day just outside the Vatican walls, he protested that he had been guilty of no wrongdoing by allegedly wiring a large sum of money from a Vatican account to a charity run by a member of his family.

Vatican money

Coincidentally, the Vatican chose in 2020 to publish for the first time I can remember what it called a "consolidated balance sheet" of the Holy See's financial situation at the end of the previous year, complete with pie charts and detailed statistics.

Opposite page: Soldier in front of St Peter's; above: The Pope's Twitter page; David Willey presents his book *The Promise of Francis: The Man, the Pope, and the Challenge of Change*

It showed a shortfall of eleven million euros (that is, ten million pounds), significantly less than in 2018, when the figure was 75 million (or over 68 million pounds). Most of the expenditure went on communications, including the maintenance of a large international diplomatic corps. The deficit refers only to the bureaucracy which runs the central government of the Catholic Church. It excludes the operations of the Vatican's own bank, long suspected of money laundering (although never proven) and of the pension fund providing for an ever-expanding retired senior priesthood. It also excludes the financing of the City State, which has to provide essential services and utilities for the 49-hectare (120 acre) territory.

The Jesuit priest who now heads the Vatican's economic affairs department points out that, relatively speaking, the whole Vatican patrimony, including extensive real estate and shareholdings, amounts to about four billion euros (3.6 billion pounds) – not a large sum, he says, by comparison with the financial resources of many international corporations, or even some individual American or British universities.

Pope Francis is clearly rattled by the failure of his collaborators inside the Vatican to deliver the accounting transparency he had requested from the very start of his reign. The "pope from the ends of the earth", as he memorably described himself on his first appearance on the balcony of St Peter's in 2013, called to Rome from Australia, another distant point of origin, his friend Cardinal George Pell, former Archbishop of Sydney, who had an excellent record as financial administrator. Cardinal Pell, according to insiders, created intense disquiet among various heads of department in the Vatican, when he insisted on normal business budgeting and accounting methods to enable him accurately to calculate total income and expenditure.

Pell appointed the Vatican's first ever internal auditor as well as calling in external accounting advisors. But his accounting work was undone after he left Rome suddenly three years ago to face what he claimed were trumped up charges of sexual abuse back in Australia – of which he was eventually acquitted. Some suspect that Cardinal Pell was derailed by enemies he had created within the Vatican, where indiscreet eavesdroppers may still lurk behind padded doors.

The Vatican app!

Meanwhile, international papal travel has come to a total stop pending the development of a successful covid vaccine. Elderly Popes and Cardinals are considered especially vulnerable to infection and Pope Francis' long desired return visit to his native Argentina remains on indefinite hold.

However smartphone owners everywhere can now download a colourful new app to stay informed about Pope Francis' latest activities. And Pope Francis himself, an early Twitter user, has chosen a new method of communication – a bestselling commercially published book, ghost written by a British journalist, to supplement the traditional source of papal teaching, his Encyclical Letters.

An enormous privilege

'I see the role as being an ambassador for Italian culture'

Philippa Leslie interviews Katia Pizzi, Director of the Italian Cultural Institute in London

Katia Pizzi, the energetic recently appointed Director of the Italian Cultural Institute in London is fully occupied at present with the consequences of the lockdown for the Institute and all those who are touched by it – from students to academics to visiting celebrities from all cultural avenues to staff within.

However, she kindly gave time to respond to our questions for those who are yet to discover the delights of this institution and started with a brief reminder on the background to the establishment of the Institute. In 1949 the Duke of Westminster had given the property in 39 Belgrave Square to the Duke Gallarati Scotti, Italian Ambassador at the time, for it to become the Italian Cultural Institute and it was inaugurated in the same year. The Institute, since then frequented both by Italians and those wishing to know more about Italy in all its aspects, has provided a respected resource for keeping the public informed on many aspects of Italian life, history and culture.

> 'the enormous privilege of serving the country in such an essential and relevant task of spreading an integrated promotion of Italian culture'

Switching to today, Katia notes that by the end of 2019, there were about 700,000 Italians in London, many young and highly educated, but that Italians in London are not a homogeneous group in terms of age, educational qualification and cultural orientation. She sees that Italians of ancient immigration appreciate geo-political issues and those related to their territories of origin and its beauty. Younger people love academic-scientific initiatives, fashion, 'made in Italy' and movies, TV and pop stars. But, she says: 'Common to the different categories that follow us is the love of literature, the attention to the Literary Awards, translation and media – for example, the English translation of Elena Ferrante's novels and related television series.'

She reels off the offerings which always attract reliably large audiences: the extensive library, language courses, music concerts, exhibitions and conferences. Until March of 2020, these were constant events.

Katia regrets that due to the government restrictions for covid and social distancing, face-to-face possibilities are currently not permitted, and that the Institute has had to close its library and exhibition spaces.

Since lockdown, however, the Institute has moved quickly to develop its online presence, with courses and events offered through digital channels and social media.

The 2021 programme will celebrate key anniversaries

A comprehensive programme for 2021 is planned, with the added anticipation of special events, led out by 'Dante 2021' and Italy's preparations for the 700th anniversary of his death. In the lineup is a particular day – Dantedì – which will be observed on 25 March, the date given by scholars for the start of the journey to the afterlife in Dante's Divine Comedy, plus events throughout the year. There will be other anniversaries marked too – the first performance of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the birth of Leonardo Sciascia and Andrea Zanzotto as well as other exhibitions and concerts, in collaboration with local partners such as the Royal Academy of Music.

In responding to how Brexit will affect the role and tasks of the Institute, Katia is upbeat and sees it as an opportunity not to be missed. 'The Institute will be able to play a fundamental role, building bridges and consolidating the existing links between Italian and British culture – the opportunity is to make culture the driving force of the new post-Brexit configuration.'

And finally – what qualities are required to direct an Italian cultural institute abroad? Katia stops and reflects for a moment: 'Equanimity, temperance and a lot of patience and listening skills. And never to forget the enormous privilege of serving the country in such an essential and relevant task of spreading an integrated promotion of Italian culture.'

Katia Pizzi studied in Bologna before taking her PhD in Cambridge. She was lecturer in Italian Studies at London before being appointed Director of the Italian Cultural Institute in January 2020.

Philippa Leslie is Editor of *Rivista*

Artisan ceramic tradition under threat

'Each one has its own story'

Christian Biagiotti describes his family's work over three generations

In a small 'fattoria' outside Florence, a traditional artisan skill – handmade and hand painted ceramics – continues much as it has done for over a hundred years. The factory is in Ginestra Fiorentina, a small village close to Montelupo Fiorentino, which is the traditional town of ceramic artisan workshops in Tuscany.

The artisan company has been creating quality handmade pieces since the beginning of the First World War. It was, and still is, owned and run by the same founding family. The current members are Claudio Biagiotti, who runs the company and has worked in the factory since he was a boy, with his two sons, Christian (who runs the shop in central Florence) and Philip (who manages production, moulding and burning). The ceramicist specialist, Maria Paola, is Claudio's mother. She runs the lab and oversees all the painting. The designer and painter is Sabine.

Today, the company works on both classic and contemporary pieces. Christian, who handles sales and representation, explains: 'There are always clients who seek quality and refinement. And we have some secrets in the workmanship that have allowed us to distinguish ourselves over the years.'

The artisan process

He describes how their artisan process works: 'We use clay slip for small and simple casting pieces. For more outdoor pieces our special terracotta is used. The process is divided into several phases. In the first phase, we knead the material to create the object's shape and then it is dried. When almost all of the water has evaporated, the piece is baked in the oven at about 900 degrees until it reaches the 'biscuit' stage. The biscuit is porous and so it can still absorb liquids and fix the crystallines together with glazes in subsequent firings that develop the engobed (a slip coating applied to a ceramic body for imparting colour, opacity) or glazed ceramic.

'With the desired biscuit we proceed to the decoration stage. There are many techniques. Decoration can be applied freehand by skilled artists. Or repetitive and geometric motifs may be applied. For example, in the dusting technique, the main motif is traced on special tissue paper.

> 'The inspiration for one design was found in frescoes in a Medici villa in Fiesole'

The sections are then pierced with a tool. By repeatedly applying a 'sock' filled with charcoal onto the perforated paper sheet, the charcoal transfers the design, providing a guide for picking up the motif on each item. It is an age old practice. The colours we use can be lead-based or lead-free, depending on the type of decorated piece. We purchase them in powder form from specialised Italian companies in the sector.

The design element

'The decorations for our pieces are so many that each one has its own story. For example, we have a decoration which we have called 'Fiesole', because the inspiration for this design was found in frescoes in a Medici villa in Fiesole. Another classic decoration is Raphael's grotesques, reproduced in a modern key and often requested to grace a garden. And then there are the great classics, such as blue background lemons, olive decoration, sunflowers, poppies. Unfortunately we are copied everywhere, but there is nothing we can do about it, except excel at what we do!

Christian Biagiotti

'Each region has its own style, forms and colours. For example, Deruta has its own Umbrian style, as do Bassano del Grappa, the Ligurian ceramics.'

He observes: 'Regrettably, many artisan ceramics companies have closed. It is also difficult to find young people outside the family who want to learn this type of artisan work.

'Thanks to the internet we are able to sell and make ourselves known to specialised shops all over the world, although our uniqueness, our strong point, remains the historic shop in Florence. But unfortunately covid has meant a reduction in sales and is putting us to the test, like most Italian artisans. However, we hope to carry on this tradition for as long as possible.'

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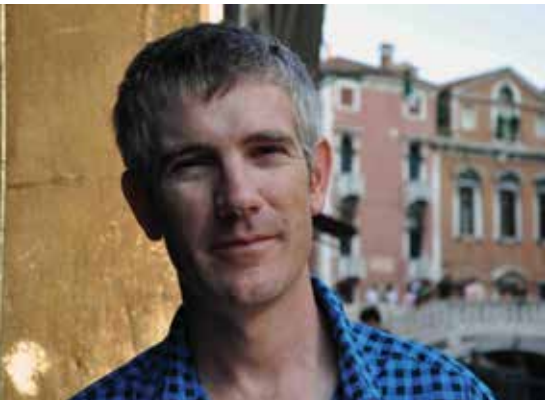
Post-war Italy:

an outsider / insider view

Vanessa Hall-Smith describes a very accessible path to understanding the complexity of Italy after 1945



In a stimulating and informative talk, Prof John Foot introduced us to his latest book dealing with post-war Italy. He explained how he had struggled to find a master key or theme, as many historians do when writing about Italy, but realised that one wasn't required. Hence the title *The Archipelago*, intended to conjure up the idea of a group of islands reflecting the range of sources, biographies and events he used to construct a history of modern Italy. It is a history as seen by someone who is both outsider and insider, and one which he acknowledged is linked to his own preferences, experiences and passions. He first went to Italy as a student in 1987, returned in 1988 to research his PhD thesis and then spent a further 20 years in the country living through significant historical events. As a non-Italian he is an outsider; as someone with deep connections to the country through long-term residence, work and family he is an insider.

Post-war 'resa dei conti'

He described how Italy had been brought to its knees by WWII and that its legacy was to be seen and felt everywhere. The capture and execution of Mussolini with his mistress in April 1945 and subsequent display of their bodies hanging upside down in Piazzale Loreto in Milan was an iconic image of the immediate post-war period and served to show that Mussolini was indeed dead. The country was divided, with some arguing that it had ceased to exist while others were saying that there would be a rebirth. It was not clear who was in charge and many were killed during the *resa dei conti* – the settling of accounts that followed.

But there were moments of celebration too: the cyclist Fausto Coppi's triumphant win of the Milan-San Remo one day race in 1946, followed by the success of his rival Gino Bartoli in the Giro d'Italia later the same year; and the return of Arturo Toscanini, who had been in exile in the United States, to conduct the Concert of Reconstruction at La Scala in Milan after an allied bomb had crashed through the roof.

At the beginning of the 1950s Italy was a relatively poor country, but by the end it was unrecognisable. These were the boom years, and while the economy took off in the industrialised north, rural Italy was in decline. The end of share-cropping, the system whereby those working the land would hand over a proportion of their yield to the landowner, was one example. As it broke down, families who had been farming the land for centuries abandoned the countryside and moved to the cities in search of work in the factories.

Birth of a new working class

A new working class was born and with it cities began to spread, creating new neighbourhoods and sprawling into the countryside. The rapid expansion in construction and development was accompanied by corruption and speculation, and the disaster at Vajont in 1963 was a tragic example of what could go wrong. Hydroelectric power was an important source of energy in a country with limited supplies of coal. In the late 50s the SADE company decided to build a dam in the Vajont area of Friuli.

> Poor at the beginning of the 1950s, by the end, Italy was unrecognisable

There were many warnings about the unsuitability of the site, but the project went ahead regardless. In October 1963 part of the mountain against which the dam was being built collapsed and water poured into the valley below. The town of Longarone was washed away and nearly 2000 people lost their lives. Further disasters were to follow: in 1966 overdevelopment in Agrigento in Sicily caused a series of landslips leaving thousands homeless and, later in the year, the forces of nature triggered catastrophic floods in Florence and Venice. The collapse of the Morandi bridge in Genoa in 2018 is a timely reminder of the need for maintenance of essential infrastructure.

ORRENDA STRAGE A MILANO
Tredici morti e novanta feriti

Una bomba fra i sei e gli otto chili è esplosa alle 16.37 nella sede della Banca Nazionale dell'Agricoltura in piazza Fontana - Il dinamitardo l'aveva deposta, racchiusa in una valigetta, sotto una sedia nella sala principale dove si trovavano numerosi clienti, per la maggior parte piccoli agricoltori - La spaventosa deflagrazione ha falciato i presenti - Una visione terrificante - Fallito un secondo attentato alla sede centrale della Banca Commerciale in piazza della Scala: un ordigno lasciato su un ascensore non è esploso

Newspaper headlines from December 1969 report the Piazza Fontana Agricultural Bank bombing

A noteworthy achievement of post-war Italy has been in psychiatry. In 1961 Franco Basaglia was appointed director of the psychiatric hospital in Gorizia. Over the next ten years he was to bring about widescale reform in the treatment of psychiatric patients, culminating in the Basaglia law in 1978. During the same period change was happening in schools and universities, as well as in the private sphere. December 1970 saw the passing of the first divorce law – a reform that was confirmed in a 1974 referendum.

During this time of radical change, there were many rumours of a return to authoritarianism. December 1969 marked a turning point, with the bombing in Milan of the Agricultural Bank in Piazza Fontana. Many on the left were arrested in the immediate aftermath. The principal suspect, an anarchist called Giuseppe Pinelli, controversially fell to his death from a window in the police station – Dario Fo's play *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* is based on his story. Pinelli was subsequently absolved of any involvement in the bombing. Despite many trials, involving defendants from all sides of the political divide, no one has ever been convicted of the bombing. This was the beginning of what became known as the strategy of tension, a series of bombings and political violence across Italy.

Democracy survived

Democracy survived the turbulence of those years, but the system was to be rocked by a series of scandals involving politicians implicated in a network of corruption –*Tagentopoli* (Bribesville) with the subsequent investigation known as *Mani Puliti* (Clean Hands). The old political class was damaged and new political movements came to the fore, including Umberto Bossi's *Lega Nord* and Berlusconi's *Forza Italia*. Berlusconi was to become prime minister in 1994 but his first government was short-lived due to investigations into his tax affairs. He would return as prime minister for two further terms in the 21st century.

These are only a few of the themes and events that John referred to in his talk. His remarkable book contains many more and provides the reader with a very accessible path to understanding the complexity of Italy after 1945. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

The Archipelago: Italy since 1945. John Foot. 2018, 512 pp. Bloomsbury Publishing.

John Foot is Professor of Modern Italian History at the University of Bristol and author of numerous books on Italian history and culture

Vanessa Hall-Smith, trained as a lawyer, is a former director of the British Institute in Florence and for five years was co-Editor of Rivista

Villa Wolkonsky

Former diplomat John Shepherd on the history of the Villa Wolkonsky

Living in Rome's Villa Wolkonsky for three years, which included a major overhaul of its interior, gave me much respect for the way it worked, largely thanks to the efforts of successive German ambassadors between 1922 and 1943. Available summary versions of its history all told how in 1830 a very special Russian Princess, Zenaïde Wolkonsky built a small summerhouse on to the ruins of the first century aqueduct and created a notable garden. But the property she created lived on after her and needed a biography of its own.

> 'Unexpectedly turning up unknown or forgotten chapters of the story was the most fun.'

Nine years after "retirement" I was able to start the research. Another nine years on and the book can appear. Writing it was only going to be worthwhile if two central mysteries which flummoxed the conventional wisdom could be unwrapped: the late 19th century origins of the house that is now the British Embassy Residence and the timing and manner of its enlargement by the German government. So I started with the German Foreign Ministry archives in Berlin. Excitingly, evidence of hitherto unknown aspects of the story soon emerged. But those files revealed almost nothing of the origins of the house and the family who created it. For that, long hours in Italian archives were needed – what better excuse for repeated week-long visits to Rome? 19th century Italian legal documents are an art-form that takes some getting used to, but slowly the fascinating story of the Wolkonsky family in Rome during the later 19th and early 20th century emerged from the State Archives – slowly because a researcher is only allowed to consult a few volumes at a time. And the Rome City Archive yielded up just sufficient material for the story of the new mansion to be put together, even the sketch plans submitted with planning applications.

Unexpectedly turning up [hitherto] unknown or forgotten chapters of the story was the most fun. The adoption of a Russian girl who would ensure that the Villa would pass on to later generations of the family; the reason why the German government needed to buy the Villa after the Great War; the origins of the little imitation Roman temple in the garden (subject of much speculation) and indeed of the swimming pool (even more speculation there!); and, biggest surprise of all, the war-time German plan to build a large new office block which I uncovered early in my researches in Berlin – all these pieces of the puzzle made for a very different tale from the one I had expected to be telling. The mysteries are not exhausted: a particular archaeological one may have the experts scratching their heads for some time to come.

John Shepherd

Villa Wolkonsky

The Fontanellato escape

John Simkins, son of an escaper, on translating from the Italian

A massive fortress slap in the middle of town, a charming 19th century theatre and a neurological rehabilitation centre that used to be a prisoner of war camp. This is Fontanellato, near Parma on the Po plain, scarcely more than a village but of great importance to members of the Monte San Martino Trust.

When, in 1989, Keith Killby set up the Trust to award English language study bursaries in Britain to young Italians, former prisoners of PG49 Fontanellato were prominent among his backers. They wanted to acknowledge the bravery of peasant farmers, the *contadini*, who sheltered Allied servicemen on the run from the Fascists and the occupying German army after Italy's surrender in September 1943. Nowhere was this generosity more in evidence than at Fontanellato. Its inhabitants brought food and clothing to the 600 escapers who were hiding on an embankment before setting off to reach Allied lines. The men had marched out of PG49 through a hole in the wire, cut on the orders of the camp's commandant, Eugenio Vicedomini.

Other areas of Italy hold significance for the Trust too, such as the Marche, where Killby himself was a prisoner. But Fontanellato remains at its heart, the memories cemented by the ex-prisoners' own accounts. An analysis of the escape's consequences for the local population had, however, been lacking in English, although it existed in Italian through historian Marco Minardi's book, *L'Orizzonte del Campo*, published in 1995.

Above: The Italian guards discover the ditch used by five escapers, as pictured by Lt.Mike Goldingham; Left: Plaque erected by the people of Fontanellato in 1983 in commemoration of the Allied prisoners of war and the Italians who helped them

At the suggestion of fellow Trust member Christopher Woodhead – the grandson of Lt. Col. Hubert de Burgh, the camp's Senior British Officer – I translated Minardi's book into English under the title *Bugle Call to Freedom*. There was personal motivation too, as my father, Captain Anthony Simkins, was an inmate of Fontanellato. I also welcomed the opportunity to test my Italian language skills. I have spent frequent, if short, spells in Italy – including a post-graduate year at the Scuola Normale, Pisa, and some months working as a journalist in Milan. I often holiday in the Aosta Valley.

> the colloquial testimonies caused a little head-scratching...

Minardi's prose was straightforward to translate, although the colloquial testimonies he had collected caused a little head-scratching and called for the assistance of another Trust colleague, Rossella Ruggeri, a former teacher of English who lives in Modena. Naively, I started by translating *back* into English the extracts from the prisoners' accounts that Minardi had put into Italian. When I realised this would take us further away from the original phrasing my colleague Julia MacKenzie painstakingly tracked down the verbatim prisoner of war reports in the National Archives.

To have eye-witness testimonies, and Minardi's research into the local anti-Fascist resistance, accessible in English enriches our knowledge of the events. Minardi continues to research the Allied presence in wartime Italy within a project launched by the Trust and the Istituto Nazionale Ferruccio Parri, which co-ordinates 50 historical institutes in Italy. Nearly 80 years on from the Armistice, the subject is as live as ever.

Bugle Call to Freedom (ISBN 978-0-9576-102-1-7) is available through bookshops and Amazon, £10.

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