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## EDITOR'S LETTER FORZA ITALIA



God, how I was rooting for the Italians! And how glad I was when they finally defeated the British team becoming the European football champions. I was rooting for them, just like for my national team. And the whole village cafe, full of Provençal French, joined me.

Italy is not far from here. It takes an hour and a half to reach the border by car or an hour by motorcycle. Many local residents have Italian surnames. They say that they are the descendants of smugglers who had been escaping poverty for centuries by dragging food on their backs. Sometimes it was expensive food, such as truffles. Here, in the French Alps, the truffles are black. They are quite expensive! But in the Italian Alps they are white. Even more expensive! The city of Alba is the world White Truf-

fle Capital. It would be nice to attend the gourmet festival this autumn...

We do not have a completely correct idea of Italy. Yes, this is a wonderful, beautiful country where you can spend your vacation in an interesting and pleasant way. But the Italians had lived poorly for centuries in the north of Italy, and in the southern part of it they were beggars.

Literally until the middle of the 20th century, Italian migrants performed the hardest low-paid jobs in the northern Europe. They worked as miners in Belgium and northern France, laborers in Germany, servants in Switzerland.

Even in prosperous Milan, poor people from the south who came to work, were treated with contempt. It was masterfully demonstrated in Luchino Visconti's film "Rocco and His Brothers".

Modern Italy is completely different. And its problems are different. We love it, but we do not know when we can go there again. Well, let us ask Signor Coronavirus, a new travel manager.

Victor Loupan

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## HIGHLIGHTS

# PASSIONATE LOVE

*Both Italians and Russians are characterised by a poetic craving for flatness, for the Baroque*

VICTOR LOUPAN,  
*Head of the Editorial Board*

I think there is no person in the world who would not love Italy. There is no country in the world to have everything as brilliant and versatile as Italy. And so that both the past and the present are organically intertwined to generate a continuous stream of civilisation.

Italian architecture is incomparable, Italian pictorial art is canonical, Italian music is unsurpassed. Modern reality is unthinkable without Italian fashion and Italian design. Italian cuisine may be less sophisticated than the French one, but there is something about its “simplicity without variegation” that makes it unsurpassed.

From my incomplete list, one can draw a not entirely correct conclusion: they say, it is good to relax in Italy enjoying the centuries-old cultural heritage, dressing beautifully and eating deliciously. This is all true. But Italians also manufacture the best and most technologically advanced cars in the world – Lamborghini, Ferrari and Bugatti, which simply have no peers. And for fans of motorcycles and fast driving, MV Agusta and Ducatti are as canonical as Monteverdi or Gesualdo for music lovers.

The influence of Italy on world culture is enormous, despite the fact that, unlike English, Spanish, French and even German, Italian is not an

international bridge language. But here is the paradox – this year the entire “civilised world”, as they say, is tremblingly celebrating the 700th anniversary of “The Divine Comedy” written by the poet Dante Alighieri. The poem is divided into three parts – “Hell”, “Purgatory” and “Paradise” – each of which consists of 33 cantos, except “Hell” which includes 34 of them to emphasize the disharmony of this terrible place. But the question here is not the analysis of the work or the great merit of Dante, who actually invented the Italian language, but the fact that “The Divine Comedy” is considered the greatest monument of global culture. There is simply no other work in the world that could compare itself to Dante’s



masterpiece, although many masterpieces had been written since then. It is just that “The Divine Comedy” goes beyond what is commonly called “literature”. There is something superhuman, mystic in it. As if, with-

out knowing it, the poet’s divine genius opened a tightly closed door and allowed us, for a moment, to look somewhere where it is very scary, but very attractive.

Almost 200 years later, at the very end of the 15th century, the great artist Sandro Botticelli illustrated “The Divine Comedy”. 92 of the initial 100 drawings have survived to us. There is no doubt that they are beautiful, brilliant. But when looking at them with admiration, one involuntarily realises that despite the artist’s genius, the pictures do not reach – and cannot reach – that unthinkable depth that Dante left us, mere mortals. Finished writing, drew a line and died.

Not only Botticelli tried to illustrate “The Divine Comedy”. The great William Blake and Gustave Doré, the best illustrator of the 19th century, took the matter up. But none of them managed to conquer Dante’s miraculous peak.

Moreover, Italian literature as such is incomparable with the great – English, French, German or Russian – literatures. The Italians themselves admit it and explain it through the fact that the Italian language was formed and established itself as a language of culture, quite late. After all, Italians still speak different dialects, sometimes even poorly understanding each other. Despite this, God granted them Dante.

It sometimes seems that Russians and Italians are alike in that “they cannot be understood with the mind”. Bourgeois restraint and bourgeois order are alien to both Russia and Italy. Such kind of it, you know, where everything is tidied up, made comfortable, calm and boring. Both Italians and Russians are characterised by a poetic craving for flatness, for the Baroque.

We often remember how Russian writers, poets and artists loved Italy. How they, arriving there, seemed to arrive in paradise. But we are less often interested in how Italians perceived Russia. As fate willed, I had the opportunity to work with a direct descendant of the architect Pietro Antonio Solari for several years, who, before coming to Russia, participated in the construction of the unsurpassed Milan Cathedral. Upon his arrival in Moscow, where he came with his assistants, Solari completed the construction of the Moscow Kremlin’s Faceted Chamber launched by Marco Ruffo. During his residence in Moscow where he stayed for only three years, Solari designed and built part of the Kremlin walls and towers, including Borovitskaya and Spasskaya Towers. A plaque in Latin still hangs above the Spassky Gate: “Built by Petrus Antonius Solarius”. It came down to us from the times of construction of the tower.

There are few surviving documents about the work of the great Italian



Gustave Doré . Illustration of “The Divine Comedy” (1861–1868)

architect in Russia. But the family of his descendants kept some letters, excerpts, notes, from which it is believed that, having got to Russia during the times of the Grand Duke of Moscow and Vladimir Ivan III, such a Renaissance man as Solari seemed to be in a wonderland. He was amazed at the scale of construction works. The Moscow Kremlin was, in his

opinion, the most powerful fortress in the world at that time. Solari admired the skill of the Russian architects with whom he had the opportunity to work together. He was also surprised by the fact that Moscow was actually a wooden city. He also lived in a wooden house and was interested in the unfamiliar technique of wooden construction. Much in



Russia, of course, surprised him, but he apparently fell in love with Russia, because, having returned home, he dreamed of going there again.

Remembering the great Italian architects who worked in Russia, we most often turn to the famous figure of Bartolomeo Rastrelli. But he came to Russia with his father at the age of 15 and lived there until his death at the age of 71. So, he was Italian rather formally than really. But the person of Solari is actually unusual.

It is also interesting to note here that Russia almost completely ignored the Renaissance. At the time when such brilliant artists as Giotto, Masaccio, Botticelli, da Vinci, Michelangelo and many others were creating in Florence and other nearby cities, there was no pictorial art in Russia at all. Russia developed icon painting art. Russian historians have preserved the names of three great icon painters of the 14th-15th centuries – Theophanes the Greek, Andrei Rublev and Dionysius. They were genius icon painters, but not “artists” in the European sense of the word.

Many European intellectuals regard the Renaissance as a matrix not only of modernity, but also of “Euro-



N. V. Gogol: “... I can write about Russia only in Rome”



peanness”. Therefore, through ignoring it, Russia remained “in the darkness of the Middle Ages” and thus separated itself from Europe. Joseph Brodsky considered this idea delusional, although he did not deny that Russia actually ignored the Renaissance. Perhaps that is why Russians are the most distinctive and unusual among all European cultures, liter-

atures, music schools and art schools. European culture is conceivable without a procession of “European” names, but is absolutely unthinkable without Dostoevsky, Gogol, Chekhov, Mussorgsky or Kandinsky.

Since the 19th century, Russian pro-Western thinkers began to travel to Italy as a pilgrimage. In a famous episode of “Anna Karenina”, Tolstoy sneers at them when, having gone with Anna to Italy, Vronsky suddenly decides to become an artist. Lev Nikolaevich ironically describes a whole circle

of Russian mediocre people, who imagine themselves smart alec simply because they “have joined the great European culture”.

And here a poem Nikolai Vasilyevich Gogol wrote about Italy:

*“Italy is a splendid country!  
The soul groans and yearns for it.  
It is all paradise full of joy,  
Where glorious love meets spring”.*

And a little further:

*“The land of love and the sea of  
enchantments!  
A resplendent garden in a worldly  
desert!  
The garden where among the realm  
of dreams  
Raphael and Torquat are still living!  
Will I see you, while being full of  
expectations?  
The soul is in the rays and thoughts  
speak for themselves.  
I am attracted and burned by your  
breath, –  
I am in heaven, I am all sound and  
flutter!..”*

The poem was criticised, and poor Nikolai Vasilyevich, realising that he was not a poet, bought the entire

circulation and wrote “Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka”, instantly becoming the most brilliant Russian prose writer of his time.

The writer’s attitude to Italy is interesting in this poem. It is not just love, it is awe. Here is what Sergei Aksakov wrote about Gogol: “He is a true martyr of high thoughts, a martyr of our time”.

“In my very nature there was the ability to imagine the world vividly only when I have retired from it. That is why I can write about Russia only in Rome. Only there it is in front of me as a whole, in all its bulk,” Gogol wrote.

Nina Berberova described in her memoirs “The Italics are Mine” in a very funny way how Gorky received her and Khodasevich like a lord in his Capri residence and how he cried in his office, reading Bunin’s stories published in the émigré press. Alexey Maksimovich was also very fond of Italy, and he lived there happily ever after, being very wealthy. But then for some reason he returned to the USSR. Apparently nostalgia tortured him.

Andrei Tarkovsky is buried in a Russian cemetery near Paris, but he did not like France. He loved Florence, especially Tuscan fabulous landscapes. He even bought a plot there and dreamed of building a house.

Another special “Russian” cult place in Italy is the Venetian island cemetery of San Michele. Three geniuses representing different generations of the Russian émigré are



Sergei Diaghilev by Valentin Serov, 1904

buried there. The famous Russian theater and art person Sergei Diaghilev, who died in 1929. Many believe that his Russian Seasons in Paris became the matrix of 20th century contemporary art. Not far from him, Igor Stravinsky, who died in 1971 in New York, is buried. He idolised Diaghilev so much that he wished to lie next to him. And that was done. Joseph Brodsky, who also died in New York but in 1996, is also buried there. Initially, the poet and the Nobel laureate had to be buried in the Russian part of

the cemetery, between the graves of Diaghilev and Stravinsky. However, it was impossible, because Brodsky was not Orthodox. The Catholic clergy also refused to bury him. As a result, he was buried in the Protestant unit, under a modest wooden cross with the inscription “Joseph Brodsky”. Now there is a monument with an inscription in Latin: “Not everything ends with death”.

With all their external dissimilarities, Russia and Italy are very similar in fact.



CULTURE

# THE RENAISSANCE ERA ARTISTS

*Six great Italian masters*

OKSANA KOPENKINA,  
*art analyst, founder of the Arts Diary & Pad website*

The Renaissance. Italy. XV–XVI centuries. Early capitalism. The country is ruled by rich bankers. They are interested in art and science.

The rich and powerful surround themselves with the talented and wise. Poets, philosophers, artists, and sculptors dialogize with their patrons every day. For a moment, it may seem that wise men really rule people, just as Plato wanted. The ancient Romans and Greeks weren't forgotten either. They also built a society of free citizens, where a person was the key value (excluding slaves, of course).

The Renaissance is related to not just replicating the art of ancient civilizations. This is a combination. Mythology and Christianity. Realistic natures and soulful images. Physical and spiritual beauty.

Renaissance artists possess great knowledge. To leave such a legacy, they had to study a lot in the field of history, astrology, physics, and so on. Therefore, each of their images makes us think. What is it shown for? What kind of message is encrypted here?

They had almost never made mistakes, since they thought out their future works thoroughly, using all the accumulated knowledge. They were more than artists. They were philosophers. By means of painting, they explained the world to us. That is why they will always be of great interest to us.

The High Renaissance period lasted only about 30 years! From the 1490s to 1527. It was just a flash. Since the beginning of high noon

of Leonardo's works and up to the looting of Rome.

A mirage of the perfect world faded quickly. Italy turned out to be too fragile. Soon, it was enslaved by another dictator.

However, these 30 years set the main directions of European painting development for the next 500 years! Up to the impressionists' movement. Realistic images. Anthropocentrism. Linear perspective. Oil paints. Portrait. Landscape...

It's incredible, but during these 30 years several brilliant masters worked at the same time. At other times, one of them can be born in 1000 years. Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael, and Titian were the Renaissance titans. However, it is impossible to miss two of their predecessors: Giotto and Masaccio, who made the Renaissance era possible.

*Giotto (1267–1337)*

The XIV century. The proto-Renaissance. Giotto is its main character. He is the master who revolutionized the art all alone. 200 years before the High Renaissance.

Without him, the era the mankind is so proud of wouldn't have ever come.

Before Giotto, there were icons and frescoes. They followed the Byzantine canons. Fronts instead of faces. Flat bodies. No proportions. A golden background instead of a landscape.

And suddenly, frescoes by Giotto appear. With volumetric bodies. With noble people's faces – old and young. Sad. Mournful. Surprised. Various.

The main Giotto's creation is his frescoes cycle in Scrovegni Capella in Padua. Giotto had



*Masaccio. Adoration of the Magi. 1426.  
Berlin State Museums*

made something unprecedented. He translated the Bible stories into a simple, comprehensible language, which made them much more understandable to ordinary people. That is exactly what will be many of the Renaissance masters characterized for. Laconic images. Live emotions of the characters. Realism. Giotto was admired. However, his innovations had no further development. The international gothic became of fashion in Italy.

It would take 100 years for a worthy successor to Giotto to appear.

*Masaccio (1401–1428).*

The early XV century. The so-called Early Renaissance. Another innovator appears on the stage.

Masaccio was the first artist to use a lin-

ear perspective. It was developed by his friend, an architect Brunelleschi.

From now on, the depicted world looked like the real one. Toy architecture was now a thing of the past.

He adopted the Giotto's realism. However, unlike his predecessor, he already knew anatomy very well. Instead of Giotto's block-shaped characters, he depicted well-built people. Just like the ancient Greeks did.

Masaccio added expressiveness not only to characters, but to their bodies as well. Human emotions can already be read by their postures and gestures. For example, like Adam's masculine despair and Eve's feminine shame on his most famous fresco.

Masaccio lived a short life. He died suddenly, like his father, when he was 27. However, he had lots of disciples. The next generations of masters visited Brancacci Cappella to learn from his frescoes. Thus, Masaccio's innovations were adopted by all the great artists of the High Renaissance.

*Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519)*

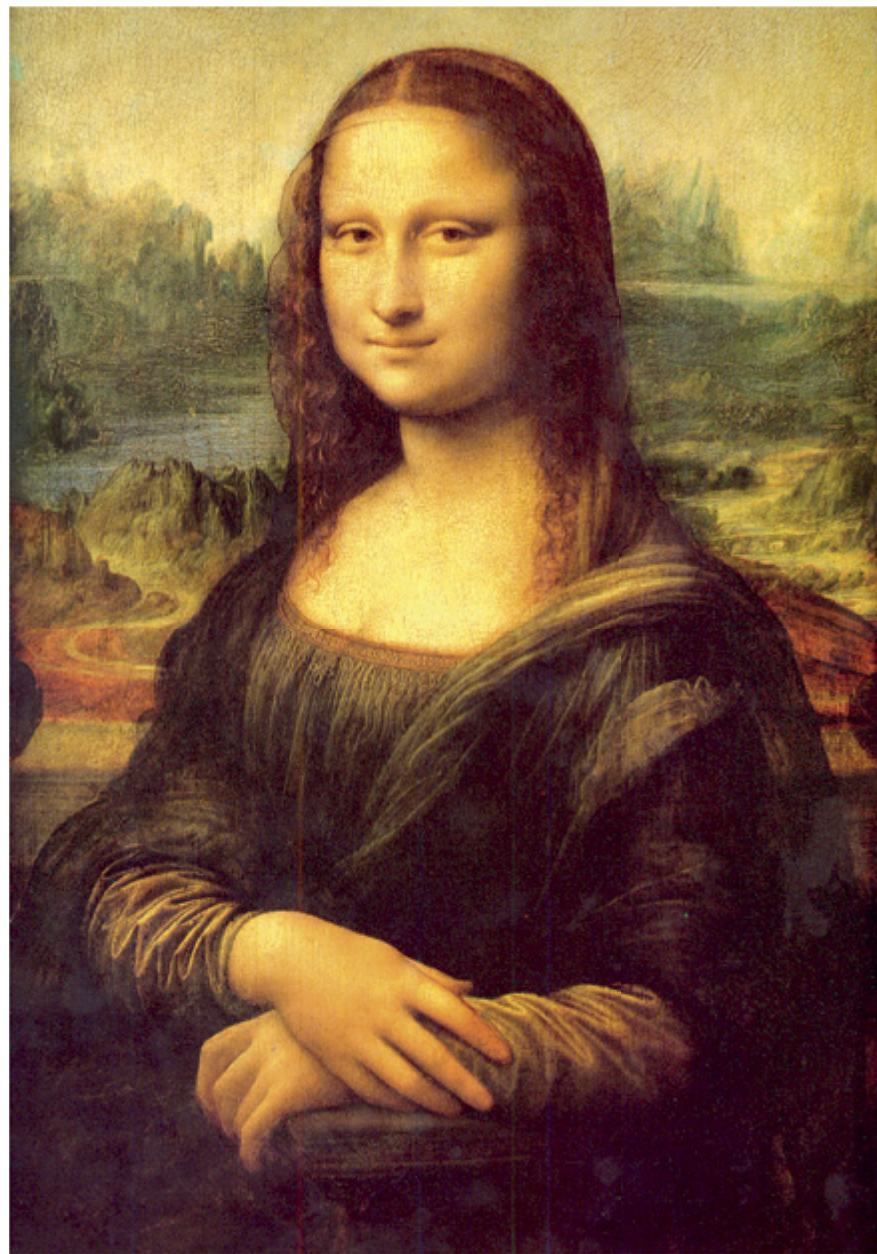
Leonardo da Vinci is one of the Renaissance era titans. He was the one to raise the status of an artist. Thanks to him, representatives of this profession were no longer simple craftsmen. They became creators and intellectuals.

Primarily, Leonardo made a breakthrough in the portraiture genre. He



*Giotto. Kiss of Judas. 1306. Scrovegni (Arena)  
Chapel. Padua. Italy*





Leonardo da Vinci. *Mona Lisa*. 1503–1519. Louvre, Paris

believed that nothing should distract from the main image. The look shouldn't wander from one detail to another. This is how his famous portraits appear. Laconic. Harmonious.

However, Leonardo's main innovation is that he found a way to make the images look... alive. Before that, depicted characters looked like mannequins. The lines were clear. All the details were thoroughly painted. A colored drawing could not look alive.

Leonardo invented sfumato method. He shaded the lines. Made the

transition from light to dark colors look extremely soft. His characters looked as if they were covered with a faint haze. The characters came to life.

Sfumato will be included in the active vocabulary of all the great artists of the future.

### Michelangelo (1475–1564)

Michelangelo thought of himself as a sculptor. However, he was an undedicated master. Like his oth-

er colleagues during the Renaissance era.

Therefore, his pictorial heritage is no less great.

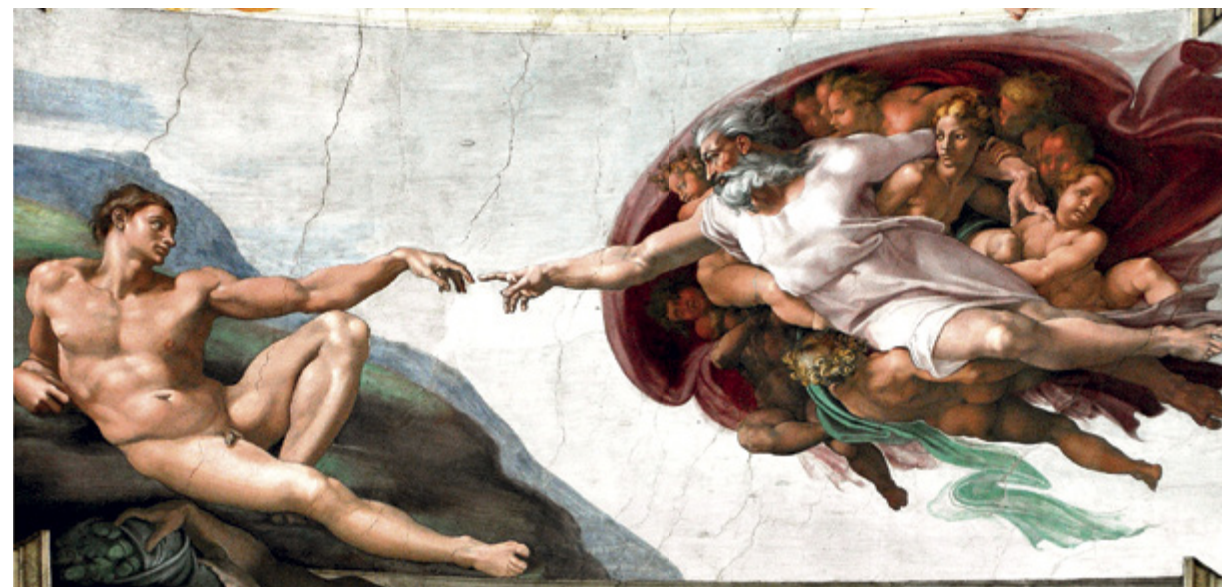
Primarily, he can be recognized by physically developed characters. He portrayed the perfect human, whose physical beauty meant spiritual beauty. That's why all of his characters are so muscular and enduring. Even women and old men.

Quite often, Michelangelo depicted his characters naked. And only after that he covered their bodies with clothes. This made them look as muscular as possible.

He painted the ceiling of Sistine Capella alone. Even though it contains a few hundred of characters! He didn't even allow anyone to rub the paint for him. Yes, he was unsociable. He had a harsh and quarrelsome character. But most of all he was unsatisfied with... himself.

Michelangelo lived a long life. He faced decay of the Renaissance. He considered it to be his personal tragedy. His later works are full of sorrow and grief.

In general, Michelangelo's artistic journey is unique. His early works praise a human hero. Free and courageous. In keeping with the best traditions of ancient Greece. For exam-



ple, his David. During his last years of life, he depicted tragic characters. He boasted stone intentionally roughly. As if we look at monuments dedicated to the fascism victims of the 20th century. How was it possible? One artist completed all the stages of art from the Renaissance era to the XX century during a single life. What was left for the next generations? To go their own way, keeping in mind that the standards have been set extremely high.

### Raphael (1483–1520)

Raphael has never been in oblivion. His genius has always been recognized: during his life and after death.

His characters embody sensual, lyrical beauty. His Madonnas are believed to be the most beautiful female images ever created. The heroines' external beauty reflects their spiritual beauty. Their mildness. Their sacrifice. Fyodor Dostoevsky said his famous words "Beauty will save the world" about Sistine Madonna. It was his favorite painting.

However, sensual images are not the only Raphael's strong point. The compositions of his paintings were extremely well-thought-out. He



Raphael. *Sistine Madonna*. 1513. The Old Masters Gallery. Dresden, Germany

was a matchless architect in painting. He always managed to find the simplest and most harmonious solution for organizing the space. It seems that there was no other way it could be.

Raphael lived only 37 years. He died suddenly of the cold he caught and the mistake the doctor made. But it's hard to overestimate his legacy.

Many artists idolized this master. And multiplied his sensual images in thousands of their canvases.

### Titian (1488–1576)

Titian was a matchless colorist. He experimented a lot with composition as well. In general, he was a daring innovator. Everyone loved him

for such an outstanding talent. He was called "the king of painters and the painter of kings".

When speaking of Titian, I feel like putting an exclamation mark after each sentence. After all, he was the one who brought dynamics to art. Pathos. Excitement. Bright and shining colors.

By the end of his life, he had developed an uncommon painting technique. With fast and thick strokes. He applied paint both with brush and fingers. This made his images even more alive and breathing and his plots – more dynamic and dramatic.

Doesn't this remind you of anything? Of course, this is Rubens' technique. And the technique of the XIX century artists: the Barbizon painters and impressionists.



Titian. *Assumption of Mary*. 1515–1518. Church of Santa Maria Glorioso dei Frari, Venice

Like Michelangelo, Titian will complete 500 years of art during one single life. That's why he is a genius.



# THE TEACHER OF GRACE, BLESSED AUGUSTINE

*The Church is called to ask for the gift of faith for unbelievers*

Dr. AUGUSTIN SOKOLOVSKI,  
*priest*

Since the August issue of Russian Mind dedicated to Italy, it seems extremely important and interesting that this theological, biblical and ecclesiastical reflection of the month, should be devoted to the personality of someone whose biography would be largely connected with this great, unique and beautiful country.

On August 28, at the end of the final summer month, the Church celebrates the memory of St. Augustine. It was on this day that the saint completed his earthly journey in the Carthaginian city of Hippo, besieged by vandals. And although the place of Augustine's birth and death was Roman Africa, the main milestones of his life are connected with Italy.

It was in Italy, in Milan, that Augustine experienced his brilliant career as an orator and teacher, here he converted to Christianity and was baptized by the bishop of Milan, St. Ambrose (340–397). In Rome, Augustine received a special revelation, which went down in the history of philosophy under the name "Vision at Ostia". He was a friend and companion of other great Italian saints: Ambrose of Milan, Jerome, Pope Damas and Celestine of Rome.

Immediately after the death of the bishop in Hippo, his body and library were transferred by his direct disciples to Sardinia, and then, in the era of the Arab conquests, at the beginning of the VIII century, it was bought for its weight in gold by the Langobard kings and has since been buried in the ancient capital of

these rulers, in the city of Pavia in northern Italy.

The Orthodox faithful are aware of the existence of the great host of saints, but they venerate only a few of them. Some of the saints we remember only by name, about others we know nothing at all. Of course, scholars will offer us their explanation. "After all, the veneration of saints," they will say, "was always dependent on something, dependent on the circumstances and needs of a particular time and a particular era".

You and I, dear readers, however, live in a different, mysterious, sacramental perspective. We know that the saints, having finished their earthly wanderings together with the wandering Church, contemporary of their own, remain in the communion of saints in heaven before



*St. Augustine of Hippo*

God, living, thinking, loving, virtuous people. And all the virtues they have acquired in this life continue to shine through them with divine light. Some of the saints, in their humility, asked the Lord to remain hidden. In contrast to the greatness and glory of the earthly achievements they accomplished. In my humble opinion, based on my own work on Augustine, one such saint, who preferred oblivion on earth in the Orthodox Church was and is St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430). So named for his service in the city of Hippo, which is in present-day Algeria and is called Annaba. This large port city today, was once called Hippo Regius, or "King's Hippo", because in ancient times it was the capital of the Phoenician kings.

Augustine is one of the great twelve Fathers and Teachers of the Universal Church, recognized as pillars of doctrine in the decrees of the Fifth (553) and Sixth (680–681) Ecumenical Councils. This means that the "Rule of Faith and the Image of Humility", i.e., "Faith and Order" – the infallible and inerrant doctrinal and moral preaching of the Church – is based on these twelve Fathers, who are like the twelve foundations of the New Heavenly Jerusalem in the Apocalypse (cf. Rev. 21:14). Among them are Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, John Chrysostom, Nectarius and Proclus of Constantinople, the Alexandrian saints Athanasius, Cyril and Theophilus, the Roman bishop Leo the Great and Hilary of Poitiers.

Augustine wrote more than all the Church Fathers of antiquity put together. Augustine was converted to Christ as he was a famous orator. He once even had the privilege of writing a solemn speech for the Emperor himself, an unprecedented honor at the time. Eventually, however, he left everything and fled the Italy that had made him famous for his home in Roman Africa, with Carthage as its capital. Many schismatics, heretics, false teachers filled these areas, but Augustine sought only one thing: seclusion in a small monastic community and to devote his life to asceticism, philosophy and penance. The great orator sought oblivion. For unlike the other Church Fathers, Augustine had been a great sinner before his conversion.

He knew life, was the father of his only son, born from a long-term concubine, whom he left in order to get together with another woman, interesting to him at that time solely for career reasons, but without waiting for her coming of age, he got together with another one. Augustine's son Adeodatus, that is, according to the literal translation of the name from Latin, Given by God, lived only 16 years. Augustine experienced his conversion to Christ in adulthood and was baptized on the eve of his thirty-third birthday. The name Augustine it-

self was extremely rare for that time. Meaning "little August", that is, as if "mini-emperor", it, from the parents who called their child so, was a rather audacious name. And much, much more, which we read about in his

Confessions ... an immortal work that inspired so many generations, among the imitators and commentators of which there were so many, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Tolstoy Nietzsche and Heidegger.



*St. Augustine. Mosaic in the St Mark's Basilica in Venice. XI*



Augustine experienced his conversion to Christ at a ripe old age and was baptized on the eve of his thirty-third birthday. The community Augustine had founded was too small in number, and in order to call to himself another congregation, he went to the city of Hippo, which we have already mentioned. When he entered the local basilica, the multitude of the faithful literally seized him, led him forcibly to the episcopal throne, and demanded that the bishop ordain him presbyter at once. Augustine protested and wept with indignation and hopelessness. What happened to him was what the practice of the ancient Church knew by the name of acclamation: unanimous election by the power of the Holy Spirit. For then the priests and especially the bishops for his Church were chosen by the Lord himself.

Thus began the work of the great Father of the Church. Augustine was ordained at the age of 36, which was unusually late even for those times. However, enough to remember that at the same age, but from quite different biographical premises, Great John Chrysostom (+407) was ordained as presbyter. Both saints, John and Augustine, brought great fruit to the Church, and, most importantly, to the Universe!

Years of Augustine's life: 354–430. For a few years he was a priest, for a little over thirty years he served God as a bishop. Augustine confronted all the delusions that existed at that time. Thus, he defeated the schismatic Donatists. For this he organized a special dispute, under the terms of which the loser of the dispute was obliged to cede all his temples to the victorious side. All the people of the Church on both sides testified to this, and the guarantor in this particular case was the secular imperial authority. Thus, Augustine always acted boldly in Christ. He wrote, preached, spoke and exhorted.

A great theologian, a great thinker, whose worldview was subsequently reckoned with by all generations of

philosophers, including our post-modern modernity. One of the greatest theologians of Modern Times, Bishop Cornelius Jansenius (1585–1638) called Augustine “The Matrix of All Conclusions” (in Latin: Matrix omnium conclusionum).

Augustine went down in history as the great Father of the Church. But perhaps least known about this saint, unknown to us 21st century Orthodox Christians, was the greatness of his pastoral ministry. His daily routine was to defend day after day the poor, the weak and the destitute, the humiliated and the offended, the poor people. For according to the laws of the time, every person could demand the judgement of the bishop and the Church instead of the secular judgement. The bishop of antiquity had to be the personification of mercy, otherwise Christianity would simply cease to exist. Indeed, the bishop of that time was obliged to decide to whom an inheritance should go, to pass his judgement on unjust wrongs, to protect the industrious and the burdened. Augustine's days and years were spent in this service.

At the beginning of his journey as pastor and bishop, the future Church Father was certain that, just as he himself had once turned to Christ with seemingly perfect irrevocability, every human being was capable of believing, being baptized and living righteously. But pastoral concerns gradually brought Augustine, day by day, to the realization that this was not the case at all. There is a mystery. The conclusion that faith is an absolute, inexplicable, divine gift. “A gift according to the gift of your Christ,” says the final exclamation of the orthodox Pre-Sanctified Liturgy. The gift is not vain or accidental. The gift is without beginning, that is, if we take the word literally back to its Greek original “anarchic” and the gift is gratuitous. A gift given by God to a chosen human being for reasons unknown and above all inaccessible to us by our own forces. At the moment of his episcopal ordination, the truth

of it was revealed to Augustine as a supernatural revelation by his own confession. The awareness of the gift at the moment of the greatest gift of the greatest teaching ministry of the Church in his episcopal ordination.

In his letters and writings, the teacher of the Church of Christ told how he saw and knew profoundly faithful people who, moreover, clung fanatically to their convictions and renounced Christ on their deathbeds. Conversely, he was a witness to those who persecuted the Church, who “killed the Body of Christ”, like Paul, and who – as Augustine wrote about it – destroyed “the earth of the new creation in Christ” (Rev.11:18) through moral depravity and dogmatic error, all his life. That is why Augustine has gone down in the memory of the Church as the “Teacher of Grace”. In old pictures he is depicted with a burning heart in his hand. A heart engulfed by a divine flame. A heart filled with the mysticism of light and the fire of grace.

At the end of his life, Augustine subjected all his works to a revision in a treatise of his own, called “Retractions”. He wrote a special explanation for each of them. He admitted mistakes and corrected many things. The particular that began with the moment of his episcopate around 397, the period of his life dedicated to a new, tragic understanding of the relationship between human freedom and divine grace, the arbitrariness of human unbelief and the gift of divine faith, Augustine wrote in his own lines. At the top of his remarks are the following words: “All my life I have tried to reconcile grace and freedom. But ... grace has triumphed”.

This victory of grace we should realise throughout our lives in such a depressive time we live in, following Augustine's example and through his prayers. So that when we sin or fall, or mistake, we immediately get up and move on. That we leave the commandments and realise that in our own strength we are quite capable of doing worse and



*St Mark's Basilica*

are infinitely talented at sinning, we should immediately turn and follow God who calls us with his voice – the Lord Jesus Christ.

Always give thanks for the gift of faith that has been given to us. Once and for no reason at all. Become that thankfulness yourself. Turn that thanksgiving into a prayer for those who do not believe. For a world that is suffering. Sick. Fearful. Panicked. Inventing false saviors, false deliverance and false gods. A world whose “sick being”, – as Till Lindemann sings, – “cries out for redemption”. So says the book of the prophet Amos, whose commemoration in the orthodox liturgical calendar surprisingly coincides with another Augustine's day in June: “The days are coming, declares the Sovereign

Lord, when I will send a famine upon the earth – not a of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord. Men will stagger from sea to sea, and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the Lord, and they will not find it” (Amos 8:11–12).

The hunger for God's word is what modernity lives by, or rather, what it ails and dies by. It is a real, unique, real, all-destroying, incurable by any human effort or antidote. The hunger for the Word of God is caused by human sin. Sin is glory lost, and sin is the failure to proclaim Jesus as Lord. A tragic, anti-humanistic and, in its hopelessness, deeply and authentically biblically based inability to believe. An inability to breathe the breath of God, which is the Holy

Spirit – that is the true, valid and real breath of the human being – the absence of which transforms existence into irreconcilability. “Therefore, so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven human, neither in this age nor in the age to come,” says the Lord in the Gospel (Matthew 12:31–32).

The Church is called to ask for the gift of faith for unbelievers. The Church is the faith of those who cannot believe. Awareness of the absoluteness of the gift of faith received in Revelation taught Augustine not to neglect those who do not yet believe, to have mercy on those whose faith is weak, to believe himself, and to pray for those who seem never will believe.



# DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES CREATING ACCESS TO CULTURE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE



**R**esearcher and Project Manager in the Culture and Innovation area, Andrea Porta collaborates with Italy's Fondazione Santagata for the Economics of Culture, which UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe has a long collaboration with, in their special programme titled Youth Empowerment for Sustainability YES! In this interview, Porta addresses the important work that helps young people get access to culture.

*What does it mean to you collaborating with the Fondazione Santagata in the YES! programme? What is your outlook for the future?*

Just after graduating with a degree in Economics of Culture, I started my collaboration with Fondazione Santagata which promotes research based on local economic development from cultural heritage and creative industries, ultimately conducting capacity-building activities. One of them, the International Academy on UNESCO Designations and Sustainable Development, was organised created together with the UNESCO Regional Bureau.

In 2017, I was involved in a project closely related to the Monviso Transboundary Biosphere Reserve and I participated in the 2017 MAB Youth Forum, organised by the MAB

Secretariat in collaboration with the UNESCO Regional Bureau. That experience gave me a plethora of motivation and new ideas, starting from the awareness of being part of a young international community that was deeply passionate about sustainable development.

In this context YES! was born, this is a programme dedicated to Youth Empowerment for Sustainability. Our first activity was conducted in partnership with the Monviso Biosphere Reserve and the Caracol professional educators, namely the MAB UNESCO Monviso Youth Camp. This 5-day residential experience in nature aims to raise awareness, en-

gage and train young people between the ages of 15 and 18, living in the cross-border territory of Monviso. It focuses on the MAB Programme and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Working as a project manager in this field gave me the unique opportunity to experiment with my ideas and competencies (and make mistakes too). The outlook for the future is to try to make a small difference, working especially on youth related projects primarily focusing on local sustainable development, trying to create a more just and equitable society.

*What challenges do you face in your work as a young person? How has COVID-19 affected your work and what has been your response to the pandemic crisis?*

As a young professional, I'm rarely heard or given credit by experts and stakeholders at the local level, especially in the institution. However, sometimes a little extra effort is what is needed to gain trust. There is still not enough room to engage young people and to fully include them in decision-making, but there is continuous hope for change. The situation is rapidly improving due to the ongoing international mobilisation for youth empowerment and the help of special programmes such as the UNESCO Youth Programme.

The COVID-19 pandemic did affect some of my work projects, but luckily, it was not as disruptive compared to other sectors such as tourism. On the plus side, it has been an occasion to rethink, reshape, and sometimes improve the way we conduct our activities.

In the field of youth engagement, in which the exchange and sharing of

ideas is a fundamental component, we developed a platform called Youth Power – The Game. It is designed as a game space for young people to share their ideas and thoughts, and participate in challenges conducted online or offline in their territories.

In this way, despite the impossibility of meeting in person, the engagement and empowerment process did not stop because of the ongoing crisis, but only moved temporarily to a digital environment.

*The Fondazione Santagata recently organised the Youth Engagement in UNESCO designated sites (YEU) event together with UNESCO, what was the event about? How significant is collaborating with UNESCO in these youth-focused activities?*

YEU – Youth Engagement in UNESCO Designated Sites is an online workshop, organised together with the Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe, it took place from 1–3 March 2021. The workshop aimed to empower young adults and enhance their education on sustainable development. The focus was on



Andrea Porta. Photo: UNESCO

the potential of UNESCO designations to involve future generations, with a cross-sectoral approach on education and culture.

The workshop, which was attended online by 25 participants from 9

countries, included a mix of activities such as presentations, group exercises, rounds of discussions and Q&A sessions, tackling three key topics: education, awareness and action.

Collaborating with UNESCO and its staff in these youth-focused activities is enriching, not only from a competence-framework point of view, but from also considering the transdisciplinary approach of these types of activities. UNESCO is more than a collector and listener of youth needs and ideas, it is a facilitator that helps make substantial change in these designated areas.

*In what way is the evolution of new digital technologies affecting access to culture, especially for young people? Do you think that the technological revolution has stirred more interest in culture from young people?*

In general, the evolution of new digital technologies has facilitated access to culture, both in terms of quantity and quality.

In my experience when it comes to young people, on the one hand, it is indeed possible to recognise a positive impact in already engaged individuals whose use of digital technologies can deepen their interests. On the other hand, there is a risk in blurring the threshold between entertainment and culture, and also education (looking at the forced distance learning in COVID-19 times) for the average young consumer.

It then becomes very important to fully understand, study, and shape this dynamic, in order to grant quality access to culture, taking into account digital technologies as an instrumental vehicle, but not leaving behind other cultural forms.



FILMS

# ITALIAN CINEMA IN VIRTUAL REALITY

MICHAEL PHILLIPS

Italy's National Museum of Cinema has reopened to the public with a renewed set-up showing CineVR, its new area dedicated to virtual reality. It was produced in partnership with Rai Cinema and is replacing the two areas dedicated to "3D" and "Amore&Morte", two out of the thirteen "chapelles" surrounding the Temple Hall, the true heart of the Museum and of the Mole Antonelliana itself, the symbol of the city of Turin.

The Museum's decision to open its doors to VR comes from the collaboration with Rai Cinema, aiming to strengthen the popularisation of digital culture, innovation and new technologies related to cinema.

"Within a constantly-changing world that has been exponentially accelerated by the pandemic, cinema has suffered no setback, productions have been increasing and experimenting new techniques and paths," says Enzo Ghigo, the president of The National Museum of Cinema in Turin. "The National Museum of Cinema must be up to date by embarking on a journey in which new languages will be approached. Our museum is able to renew itself and innovate, thanks to VR technology, which has become an integral part of the set-up, it will offer content for all age groups".

"Rai Cinema is proud to introduce virtual reality into a prestigious place such as The National Museum of Cinema in Turin, a true symbol of the seventh art," says Paolo Del Brocco, Rai Cinema CEO. "This is a further step along our way towards innovation, on the wake of a kind of

tradition which aspires to differentiation and experimentation. VR is one among multiple ways Rai Cinema has decided to go in order to meet the needs of digital literacy and to fulfil the mission to provide cinema industry with new incentives – both creative and technological".

CineVR is the first Italian permanent movie theatre completely dedicated to VR which features a non-stop daily programme, screening movies conceived and realised with this technique.

This theatre may contain every day up to 200 viewers who can enjoy audio-visual experiences, both linear and interactive for free -with their admission ticket- thanks to 6 state-of-the-art visors (namely, Pico G2 4k models and, at a later date, Oculus Quest 2 and HTC Vive).

New group screenings with VR visors will be scheduled every month as well as meetings with experts or industry professionals will be arranged in partnership with Rai Cinema. Solely upon reservation, visitors will be able to preview movies from the forty chaise longues in the Temple Hall;

those same movies will be uploaded on the visors of the two lounge rooms the following day, thus implementing a video-library whose new titles will become part of the Museum's collection.

Visitors of the National Museum of Cinema will be able to pick one of the movies available in the visors' library and reserve a viewing directly from the virtual reality desk. Movies are screened on a loop while a technologically advanced hygienic sys-



Photo: Sophia Sideri



tem allows to sanitise the visors in one minute, ensuring the standards required by present regulations.

Rai Cinema decided to donate to the Museum its earliest three VR productions: short films "Happy Birthday" and "Revenge Room" and the documentary "Lockdown" will be the first three contents of the Museum VR programme. They are innovative productions representing an editorial policy that combines technological innovation, the focus on social issues and our country's cultural

identity. Whilst never forgetting the importance of movie theatres, Rai Cinema is proud to take virtual reality into a new and stimulating context. It is an opportunity to consider new consumption models and to engage a young audience thanks to renewed, experimental forms of expressions and of new forms of cinematographic storytelling.

"The scientific rethinking of the new museum must start from the acknowledgment that the museum system and the world of moving pic-

tures are undergoing a radical transformation in terms of production, creativity and fruition," says Domenico De Gaetano director of The National Museum of Cinema in Turin. "Experiences based on the use of VR visors, projection mappings and video games are just some of the tools through which directors, designers and artists are expanding the resources of cinema. In the same way, museums are also proposing innovative methodologies to present their contents to a higher number of viewers. The National Museum of Cinema intends to take account of the future scenarios of cinema as an art, on the one hand, and of the museum form, on the other hand. Past and future, tradition and innovation: these are the two polarities around which the permanent exhibition's first change is taking place, thanks to the creation of this space dedicated to virtual reality".

"Virtual reality is an innovative, unique and fascinating variation of audio-visual technology," explains Manuela Cacciamani, producer and founder of One More Pictures. "The National Museum of Cinema in Turin acknowledges the value of these modern forms of expression which are common among the new generations, thus setting an important milestone as a result of combining cinema tradition with new forms of storytelling.



TRAVEL

# THE MOST BEAUTIFUL PLACES TO VISIT AROUND LAKE COMO

ANDREA BIFFARA

Lake Como is the third largest lake in Italy, after Lake Maggiore and Lake Garda. Divided in two by the so-called Larian, a triangle is formed by the Comasco branch and that famous “branch of Lake Como” of the area of Lecco. If you are visiting Lake Como, here are the most iconic places to go to, according to Visit Italy.



Como, Villa Olmo. Photo: Rehman Abubakr

## Como

Impossible not to start recommending a visit to the city that gives the name to the lake, Como. A little less than an hour by car or train from Milan and a few minutes from the Swiss border we find this charming town rich in art and culture.

The discovery of the city starts from its Cathedral Square with the cathedral of 400' dedicated to Santa Maria Assunta. After a long and difficult construction process, the Duomo appears as today a mix of different artistic currents, combining Gothic and Renaissance style. From here you can sneak into the historic center, completely pedestrian, absolutely recommended for a pleasant walk.

On the lake we find an important dedication to one of the most illustrious historical inhabitants of the

city. Como is in fact the birthplace of Alessandro Volta. To him was dedicated the Voltiano Temple. A real museum for the physicist Comasco, with original documents and reconstructions of his most important works and discoveries.

Always on the long lake not to be missed Villa Olmo, one of the symbols of the city. An eighteenth century villa surrounded by a large garden. From Como you can also take the funicular that will take you to the above town of Brunate. From here you can admire the lake from above in all its spectacle.

## Cernobbio

After visiting Como, it is ideal to continue on the western side of the lake for a few minutes to reach Cernobbio, an iconic place among the most evocative of the entire lake of Como. An elegant village, surrounded by lake and mountain.

Cernobbio was born, in fact, at the foot of Mount Bisbino which reaches over 1200 meters in height. To visit absolutely Villa d'Este, villa of 1500, with an inestimable artistic heritage inside and outside the hotel structure today.



Cernobbio, Villa Erba

Villa Erba is a villa located in Cernobbio, and is among the most beautiful villas on Lake Como. It was built between '800 and '900 by Luigi Erba, brother of Carlo, one of the leading Italian pharmaceutical entrepreneurs, and was the summer residence of many other famous personalities, including the famous director Luchino Visconti, who also finished the editing of his film “Ludwig” there. The villa has also been used as a location for various films, photo shoots and music videos.

The fame of Villa Erba is also due to its location in Cernobbio, a town located on the shores of the beautiful Lake Como considered as a renowned international tourist resort.

## Isola Comancina

Off the small town of Tremezzina, in the province of Como, we find the particular Isola Comancina. Accessible

by boat from the nearby hamlet of Ossuccio, it is an unusual stop to experience the lake from a different perspective.

A natural spectacle of other times, where to dive for a walk of a couple of hours. Of historical and cultural importance, on the island Comancina, over the years have been found in fact some archaeological finds now



Isola Comancina, Tremezzina

kept in specialized museums.

In the late 6th century (c. 587) the island was a remaining Roman stronghold under Francio, a subordinate of Narses; though the areas surrounding Lake Como were entirely controlled by the Lombards.

The island was besieged for a good deal of time by the Lombards under Authari who released Francio to flee back to Narses' capital at Ravenna. The Lombards found the island to contain “many riches” deposited for safekeeping by local Roman loyalists.



Varenna. Photo: Ivan Verni

## Varenna

Varenna, known as the village of lovers, is one of the most enchanting places of Lake Como. Small village on the Lecco side of the lake, at the foot of the Valsassina, is one of the most popular destinations for tourists.

Varenna is the ideal place for a romantic day on the lake shore. Here we find in fact the “walk of lovers”



that, starting from the small historic center of the village, crosses the village between narrow streets, small shops and characteristic restaurants to continue on a walkway of a few hundred meters on the water from which to best admire the beauty of Lake Como.

Not to be missed are also the two splendid villas of Varenna: Villa Monastero, with museum and Botanical Garden, and Villa Cipressi today hotel but with a splendid garden, however, accessible to the public.

## Bellagio

Bellagio, known as the “Pearl of Lake Como” is one of the most iconic places of Lake Como. Famous all over the world thanks to George Cloon-

ey who, since 2002, has chosen Villa Oleandro as his holiday destination.

Here the Hollywood actor over the years has not missed an opportunity to invite illustrious friends, such as the former US President Barack Obama sighted on the shore of Lake Como in 2019. At the top of the Lariano Triangle, a strip of land that separates the two branches of Lake Como, Bellagio is the ideal half for a Sunday trip.

To visit absolutely the old town that between narrow alleys and steps, transmits the whole secular history of the village. For those who love shopping do not miss “Salita Serbelloni” street full of boutiques and shops of all kinds.

The gardens of two of the most famous villas in Bellagio must be visited: Villa Serbelloni and Villa Melzi.

The refined elegance of gardens with unique plants on the lake shore to appreciate unique views in all seasons, we are sure to captivate you.

## Villa del Balbianello

The Villa del Balbianello is a villa in the comune of Lenno (province of Como), a province in the north of the Lombardy region of Italy, overlooking Lake Como. It is located on the tip of the small wooded peninsula of Dosso d'Avedo on the western shore of the south-west branch of Lake Como, not far from the Isola Comacina and is famous for its elaborate terraced gardens.

A number of feature films have used the villa for location shooting, including Casino Royale (2006).



Bellagio. Photo: Nirmal Rajendharkumar



Villa del Balbianello

The villa was also used for the lake retreat scenes in Star Wars: Episode II Attack of the Clones (2002).

## Castello di Vezio

Castello di Vezio is a castle located nearby Varenna and Perledo, northern Italy. Characterized in the main tower by square merlons, similar to Cly Castle in Aosta Valley, it commands the Lake Como. It was once connected by walls to the village of Varenna below.

The castle was built in the late 11th-early 12th century and was restored several times in the following centuries. [1] In the late 19th century and in 1956 remains of tombs from the Iron Age, as well as weapons and armors were found in the area.

The castle also had dungeons built during the First World War, as part of the defensive linea Cadorna planned by General Luigi Cadorna, Chief of

Staff of the Italian army, to halt any German invasion southward from Switzerland. It currently houses gardens and a group of birds of prey, raised by a local falconer.

It became open to the public in 1999. The tower houses a permanent

exhibition dedicated to Lariosaurus, an extinct sea reptile from the Middle Triassic period, which takes its name from the lake after its discover in Perledo in 1830. The castle is currently owned by the Greppi family from Milan.



Castello di Vezio



# FIRST 'VEGAN FOOTBALL CLUB' SCORING SUSTAINABLE GOALS



Dale Vince is chairman of Forest Green Rovers and owner of Ecotricity, a sustainable energy company. Photo: Forest Green Rovers/Steve Schofield

Dale Vince is chairman of Forest Green Rovers and owner of Ecotricity, a sustainable energy company. A football club in the west of England has been recognized by the United Nations for its leading role in setting goals to tackle climate change, from planning a low-carbon stadium, to selling only 100 per cent vegan food. Dale Vince told UN News that the club aims to be a beacon of sustainability in the sporting world.

"Forest Green Rovers began as a rescue mission for me in 2010. This 120-year-old club was facing closure and it happened to be located close to the town, Stroud, where I built Ecotricity, an energy company which aims to replace fossil fuels with sustainable green energy.

I'm a football fan so I thought I'd help out and just a day or so into owning the club, I started to recognize issues which really conflicted with my outlook and the way I lived. The first thing was red meat; we were serving beef lasagne to our players and I was horrified to find myself part of the trade in meat which is so

harmful to the environment. So, we stopped that. We realized we had to change just about everything to create a green football club, something that had never been done before.

We were communicating with football fans who would stereotypically be considered a very difficult audience and not interested in climate and sustainability issues. We decided to weave sustainability into the DNA of the club, putting it on an equal footing with football.

We identified energy, transport and food, biggest sources of carbon emissions in Britain which represent 80 per cent of everybody's personal carbon footprint.

So, we made installed solar panels and now the entire club is powered by 100% green energy. We provided electric car-charging points for fans. The grass of our pitch is organic, it's free from pesticides and weed killers and we collect rainwater to irrigate the pitch rather than using mains water. Our club strip is even made from a composite material consisting of recycled plastic and coffee grounds.



Once built Eco Park will be the most sustainable football stadium in the world Photo: ZHA

We have created space for nature around the stadium with eco-trails where people can learn about what we are trying to do in terms improving biodiversity. Slow worms and orchids thrive in those areas! Our modelling shows a 20 per cent increase in biodiversity on the land around the stadium

Then there was the transition to a vegan menu. This was radical 10 years

ago and so counter intuitive because football can be macho and seemed an unlikely bedfellow of veganism.

We get described as the world's only vegan football club and that has been a monster in terms of PR, in terms of making an impact by getting our message around the world.

Our next step is to build the 5,000-capacity Eco Park, made entirely from wood which will be

## 'Mistake to talk about making financial sense'

If you go back ten years, it was more expensive to be environmentally friendly than it is today. Solar panels were pricey and electric cars barely existed. Even plant-based food, which should be cheaper than meat, was more expensive.

long-term to be sustainable because of the damage we are doing to the climate, wildlife and habitats.

## Example to others

I think this club has to lead by example; that's how we bring about change. There are four Premier League clubs and some big clubs in Europe as well that, like Forest Green Rovers, have joined the UN's Sports for Climate Action initiative, which aims to get the global sports community to take action to counter climate change. I think it's human nature to see what your peers are doing and to feel that you need to join in.

Businesses are also reacting to what people want in terms of products and outcomes. I think football fans themselves are lobbying their clubs to act and they point to Forest Green Rovers quite frequently as an example to follow.

Our fans don't just tolerate this sustainability concept, they embrace it in a life-changing way. So many of them have told me their families have gone veggie or vegan, drive electric cars and have solar panels at home.

In my experience just about everything I've

focused on in my career can be done better if it is done differently. One of the keys is absolutely to start with a fresh approach.

I also think it's so important to have fun. If people see you enjoying yourself, they can feel that in your messaging and they are more likely to listen. I don't talk doom and gloom; I talk about what we can do".

the greenest football stadium with the lowest carbon footprint in the world. It's not just a football stadium and training ground but a 100-acre sustainable development project which will include a green tech business park, a new wetland restoration of a canal and parkland containing 500 trees and 1.8km of hedgerows.

I would say it's a mistake to ask whether it makes financial sense to be sustainable. People often question how quickly will a solar panel pay for itself, but they never ask the same about their toaster, mobile phone or car.

Looking at the big picture, even if it seems like it costs more on day one, it's absolutely more economic in the



# EXTRA VIRGIN OLIVE OIL: A REAL ‘MADE IN ITALY’ EXCELLENCE

ALESSANDRA FESTA

Extra virgin olive oil is one of the main Italian excellences and a true protagonist of both Italian food tradition and the Mediterranean diet.

## Oil throughout history

Olive oil, widely used in Italian cuisine, has ancient origins dating back to the dawn of the earliest civilizations, according to Visit Italy. Indeed, the first evidence of the use of oil goes back to 4000 BC in Armenia, Palestine, and even India where, beyond food feed, it was also used as an ointment, for lamps and for therapeutic purposes. Later, in 2500 B.C., the famous Hammurabi code regulated its production and marketing, encouraging its spread throughout the Mediterranean basin. As a matter of fact, the Mediterranean area offers the ideal climatic conditions for growing olives.

This extraordinary fruit plant arrived in Italy around 1000 B.C. thanks to the Greeks, but its cultivation and production are due to the Etruscans who created the first form of oil, called *eleiva*. However, it was only thanks to the Romans that the techniques of cultivation and oil production were improved and refined, allowing it to spread to Northern Europe and all the conquered territories. This meant that the “yellow” gold became an emblem in the thousand-year culture of the country, turning it into the symbol of the modern Mediterranean diet.



Photo: Gabriella Clare Marino

The Romans defined a very clear and precise classification based on oil quality: from *oleum cibarium*, of extremely poor quality, obtained from olives attacked by parasites) to *oleum caducum* of poor quality, obtained from olives picked up from the ground but in an advanced state of maturity; *oleum sequens*, second pressing oil; *oleum flos* (oil flower), first pressing oil; *oleum maturum*, produced from ripe black olives; *oleum viride*, made from olives turning colour and, finally, the “king” in terms of quality, *oleum ex albis ulivis*, extracted from green olives.

Even if different, nowadays oil classification is largely based on the Romans’ one, taking into account those standards measuring its quality.

Alongside the fall of the Roman Empire, oil also underwent a sort of decadence, and only around the year 1000, thanks to the insight of merchants and traders who realised its economic importance, it got its noble role again.

The Renaissance was the turning point and Italy became a full-fledged olive oil producer, landing on the tables of European courts and nobles who couldn’t renounce Italian

extra virgin olive oil, with its unique and inimitable taste. In Florence, the Medici city’s government gave an enormous boost to this sector, granting for free large areas of land to anyone wishing to grow olive trees.

Tuscan olive oil became famous throughout the country and continued its steady rise until the 18th century, a golden age for the Italian olive sector. During this same period, the first olive trees also reached the New World thanks to some Franciscan missionaries. However, the real oil “landing” only occurred a century later, when its marketing was consolidated through Greek and Italian immigrants.

## The tradition of Italian extra virgin olive oil

Tuscany, Liguria, Umbria, Marche, Abruzzo, Campania, Apulia, Calabria, and Sicily are the main oil producers, but almost every region can boast of its excellence with products characterized by a deep and indissoluble link with their own corresponding territories. Friuli Venezia Giulia, Veneto, Trentino, Lombardy, Emilia Romagna, Latium, Molise, Basilicata and Sardinia... a total of 42 PDO and 1 PGI certified extra virgin olive oils.

Currently, Italian extra virgin olive oil is one of the symbols of our food and wine tradition, among the most appreciated and exported products worldwide. Moreover, thanks to its content of vitamins, antioxidants, monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fatty acids, it is an essential food in the Mediterranean diet and for our health. According to several food studies, thanks to its numerous

biological properties, oil has been given the reputation of being the “elixir of life”.

An undisputed protagonist of Italian gastronomy, extra virgin olive oil is at the top of the world ranking of the best oils. This is due to the wide variety of olives, the area of origin, the climate, and the different production methods used.

Like wine, oil is not simply the product of the olive’s transformation into the precious yellow-green liquid, but rather a combination of many factors that characterize its organoleptic properties.

The climate and temperature, the soil, and elements such as the sun and the wind play a key role in the entire production process. The olive tree, generally grown in warm and temperate areas such as the Mediterranean one, needs a sunny exposure to take advantage of the sun’s rays, and soils defined as medium texture (sandy loam soils, silty loam soils, clay loam soils, and clay and silty loam soils) with an ideal Ph between 6.8 and 7.5.

Therefore, it is necessary to maintain the right balance and ensure a harmonious relationship with the surrounding environment.

## 3 major features of a quality extra virgin olive oil

Among the main characteristics to be considered when choosing a quality oil, it must undoubtedly be:

**Fruity:** EU Regulation n. 1348/2013 sets out the definition of fruity: “the set of olfactory sensations, depending on the variety of olives, characteristic of oil obtained from healthy and fresh fruit, green or ripe, perceived directly and/or retronasal”. Accord-

ing to the regulations in force, oil can be marketed only if it is fruity. As a matter of fact, a fruity product is a guarantee of the excellent quality of the olive from which it has been extracted.

**Bitter:** contrary to what one might think, bitterness is an essential feature of oil. In fact, this sensation is due to antioxidants, which are very important substances preventing oxidation of both the oil itself and the cells of the human body.

**Spicy:** this sensation, felt in the throat, is due to the presence of polyphenols (natural antioxidants). This indicates that the oil has been produced from healthy olives and, therefore, the hotter it is, the better it is for your health.

Rich in olfactory and taste scents, oils with “soul” are of excellent quality but also have beneficial properties for our health, reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease and glycaemic peaks, favouring intestinal activity, containing cholesterol levels, preventing cellular aging... and much more.

Healthy and genuine food that, in addition to enhancing the taste of dishes, plays a protective role in preserving physical well-being, a true natural panacea.



Photo: Roberta Sorge





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SOCIETY

# COVID-19 PREVALENCE RISES IN ITALY

ALEXANDER TARAKANOV



11 to 19 per 100 000 inhabitants over the week.

Despite the fact that in all regions and autonomous provinces of Italy, the occupancy rate of intensive care units as well as other departments in medical institutions allocated for COVID-19 patients, is well below the critical threshold and the national average is about two percent, the level of epidemiological danger is recognised as low only in Valle d'Aosta and Trento. It has

As a measure against the increase in the incidence of Coronavirus in Italy, the national government is considering expansion of the use of electronic COVID passes (Green Pass), which can be obtained with a certificate of a previous illness, or having undergone a complete course of vaccination, or having received a negative test result for presence of the infection in the body.

According to ANSA, we are talking, in particular, about proposals on using such passes on all types of long-distance transport: airplanes, trains and ships.

The number of cases of COVID-19 infection caused by the Delta

variant is rising in Italy. To prevent increased circulation of the virus, all these cases need to be monitored and analysed everywhere, with the achievement of “high coverage of the population with vaccination and completion of full immunisation”. AGI wrote about it on Friday, according to a report by the National Institute of Health (ISS) and the Ministry of Health following a weekly epidemiological monitoring.

According to the available data, the average prevalence rate of COVID-19 within the country increased from 0.66 to 0.91 over the last week, and the number of confirmed cases of new Coronavirus increased from

been raised to moderate in all other regions of the country.

According to the Italian Ministry of Health, there are now almost 41,000 detected virus carriers in the country. In total, 4,278,319 people have been infected with a new Coronavirus since the beginning of the pandemic in Italy, including 127,840 deaths and 4,109,579 recovered.

As of the morning of July 16, 59,966,908 vaccinations for COVID-19 have been undergone domestically, and the number of those who have completed a full immunisation course has reached 25,792,725, which corresponds to 43.5 percent of the total population of Italy.