

Indulge Your Inner Artist in Italy

I've spent many years looking and aching over masterpieces in Italy's museums and the exquisite handicrafts in the country's shops. But lately I've been hearing an enticing call to go deeper into the Italian art experience: *How about rolling up your sleeves and spending time learning these traditions firsthand?*

There are workshops all over Italy headed up by artists who teach using the age-old master/apprentice model. They're open to beginners, who simply want to explore their creative side, or advanced artists, who want to get to the source—the place where the art form that's captured their passion all began. Besides learning in dreamy environments, you get to go home with a beautiful handmade souvenir in your suitcase.



Here are workshops I've observed or friends have raved to me about. On my trip to Italy this fall, you'll find me at one of these places.

Venice: Mask Making

"We were getting burned out on museums," Sandy Osceola told me. So for a creative change of pace, Sandy and her two daughters spent a morning painting and decorating masks, Venetian style. It turned out to be a highlight of their vacation.

Tragicomica, located in the *sestiere* of *San Polo*, is one of the best spots in Venice to shop for masks or rent elegant ball gowns, hats and capes for *Carnevale*. The store is headed up by *Gualtiero Dall'Osto*, a master mask maker, who follows in the footsteps of artists who began dressing up Venetian

continued on page 4

partiers in the 13th century. His creations have been exhibited internationally, and he's designed costumes and set pieces for theaters all over Italy, including *La Scala* in Milan.

Mask Making



The Osceolas' three-hour Tragicomica workshop kicked off with an entertaining demonstration by Dall'Osto's assistant, *Allesandra*. Putting on masks, she showed how each one has a story behind it, corresponding to a *Commedia dell'Arte* character or a bit of Venetian history. Next came a chance to watch the papier mache process used to make masks, and then the Osceolas chose blank molds, and settled into the back-room workshop with paint brushes, and a great variety of feathers, sequins, and fabrics to glue on.



Sandy chose a *Medico Della Peste* or plague doctor mold. You've seen this style in lots of photos: the one with the long-beaked nose and tiny eyeholes. It originated in the 16th century when doctors would stuff the nose with a sponge soaked in vinegar to protect them from catching the plague. Her daughters, Jessica (21) and Marissa (12), went for more feminine styles, decorating their masks with designs that call to mind 18th-century ladies on their way to a *Carnevale* ball.

Now the Osceolas are home in Florida, and the masks hang on their walls,

bringing back the entertaining spirit of Venice, as well as great memories of their fun morning spent together in *La Serenissima*.

Deruta: Ceramic Painting

"It's like paint-by-number—even an absolute beginner can spend time here and come away with a beautiful ceramic," Florence Weldron told me. Florence is a retired school teacher from Tacoma, Washington and a self-

described "arts and crafts person." She and her husband now have a second home in *Umbria*, and every time guests come to visit, they bring them to this ceramics school. What great hosts!

Deruta is the most famous of all of Italy's ceramic towns, packed with hundreds of shops, making it an inspirational setting to take class.

Ceramics

Though the school here is a major institution (with lecture halls and galleries), the class set-up is free-form and casual. You can call or e-mail them a day in advance, make a reservation for however many hours of instruction you want (at least four is good for a beginner), and then get one-on-one tutoring in their spiffy workshop to learn techniques that have been practiced in Deruta since the Renaissance.

Beginners choose a design from a selection of tiles, and then get a blank tile stamped with the outline. You're taught the special methods of mixing the paints and holding the brush,

which is different from painting on canvas.

Nicola Boccini, a young critically acclaimed ceramic artist, is the English-speaking instructor at the school, who's expert at dealing with students at whatever level of experience they come in with. If you don't speak Italian, you should check to make sure that Nicola's there, as from time to time he's called away to give lectures and workshops all over the world.

The school's founder, *Romano Ranieri*, is an internationally famous ceramic painter and teacher, whose masterpieces sell for high prices and are exhibited world-wide. All that said, he's a humble man who's been teaching and painting around here for 50 years. You'll see him there—he's that



intense gentleman with the shoulder-length salt and pepper hair, working on some incredible project. He'll undoubtedly put down his brush to encourage you or give you advice. It's all in the *la famiglia* spirit of this highly professional school that buzzes with creativity.

Cortona: Reliquary Jewelry

When my friends Sheryl and Erin told me they went to *Cortona* to make reliquary jewelry, my thoughts immediately went to "reliquary," in the "finger of John the Baptist under glass" style. But these workshops are about making reliquary jewelry in the "wearable collage art" sense—meaning charms bordered in silver, encased in glass, that hold tiny mementos, bits of photos or antique fragments.

Deruta is home to over 300 co

The one-week class they took was part of a "Life and Art" workshop series put on by Stacey Matthews and Rob Friedman, a couple who live part-time in Cortona and the rest of the year in Portland, Oregon. The philosophy

Jewelry

of their company, *Arcangelo Productions*, is to bring travelers deeply into the culture of a place and have them create, incorporating the inspiration they get from their environment.

What Stacy and Erin loved about their week was that besides four days of intense workshops, there was a cooking class, wine tasting, and through their hosts they got an insider's experience of the quintessential Tuscan town of Cortona. "Wherever we went, if we mentioned Stacey or Rob's name, we got special treatment," Erin said.

Various reliquary jewelry instructors are brought in to teach, and their session was headed up by Sally Jean Alexander, who is a beloved star in this field. The first workshop day began with a visit to the antique market in Arezzo, where they gathered objects to make their reliquary—such as old buttons, lace, or crystal pieces from chandeliers. Sheryl especially loved finding faded letters, written in exquisite old-fashioned penmanship. She bought a stack of them to incorporate into her projects. Then, back in the studio (a converted convent), Sally Jean led the class in designing and soldering necklaces.



For the group of 12 students, it turned into a creative week-long party. Sheryl and Erin, both mothers of young children, who have little time at home to

pursue their craft passions, loved having the chance to focus uninterrupted in such a beautiful setting. "It was like a dream," Sheryl said.

She and Erin went back to their families rejuvenated from the artsy Italian break, wearing their pretty necklaces.

Buonconvento: Landscape Painting

When artists from France and England came to Italy in the 18th century to view Renaissance masterpieces, they were amazed by the countryside—the exquisite light, rolling hills, and architectural ruins. They lugged their easels outside, and thus began a style of open air painting, known as *Plein Air*.

So imagine yourself following this tradition, on a Tuscan hillside, in front of an easel, spending every day for a whole week capturing the landscape with your paints and brush.

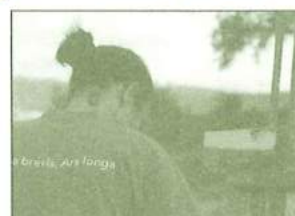
"What was so wonderful was that everything was taken care of—the only decision I had to make was what to paint and what colors to use," said Voni Schaff, a student from Minnesota. Voni had studied art in college, then put it aside for thirty years while she brought up four children. The workshop was a kick start for her to pick up where she'd left off. It turned out to be amazingly productive—she went home with a suitcase full of paintings and enjoyed the experience so much she returned for a second time.

Voni is one of many returnees to these workshops, which are expertly run by two professional landscape painters, Maddine Insalco and Joe Vinson. The couple divides their time between a home in Tuscany's *Buonconvento* and an apartment in Manhattan.

Maddine and Joe are dedicated to giving beginning to advanced students a rigorous, focused experience of the open air style of painting. Classes are limited to 12 students, so everyone gets the benefit of individual instruction from the two experts as they work.

And as Voni says, they take care of everything—providing equipment, leading constructive daily critique sessions, and morning or evening slide show lectures. Add to that Maddine's picnic lunches, which every student I talked to raved about: "The *pesto*!"

"Her *farro*, tomato and basil salad!" In sum,



Painting

it's an idyllic, nurturing set-up that allows creativity to flow.

Included in the workshop cost are bed and breakfast accommodations in a 12th-century abbey. Here, after a long, beautiful day of painting, you'll gather in the dining room with your fellow artists for a delicious meal, drinking the extraordinary local wine and talking into the night about your shared passion for painting.



continued on page 6

companies producing ceramics.

Perugia: Weaving and Embroidery

In the charming medieval town of *Perugia*, I found one of Italy's most unique classrooms: a former Gothic church, named *San Francesco delle Donne* (The Women's Church of Saint Francis). It became a weaving workshop in the 19th century and now presents itself as an airy, vast space, with high-vaulted ceilings, where nine antique looms are still in use, making a rhythmic clickety-clacking sound. Even if you're not taking class, come here to

Weaving & Embroidery

see the retail display that's set up in the area that was once an altar. There you'll find sumptuous handmade rich blue, green and red patterned cloths, along with a display of fine embroidery.



The *Brozzetti* workshop began in 1921, when *Giuditta*, a headmaster of Perugia's elementary schools, was riding around in her horse and carriage and heard that clickety-clack sound coming from the looms of surrounding farmhouses. Weaving had begun in Perugia in the 12th century, when the town became a textile-making center, turning out table coverings that were renowned all over Europe. *Giuditta* decided to open a workshop to preserve the handicraft that was dwindling away as the Industrial Revolution took hold. Local women were employed, providing them with financial independence, and their textiles revived the "Perugian Style."

These days *Giuditta's* chic great-granddaughter *Marta* (also an interior designer) teaches the weaving classes. *Marta* is passionate about the craft, and

the only one around who knows how to repair the shop's antique looms. She's also an extraordinary weaver, who recreates designs from medieval paintings where those famous Perugia tablecloths are featured. *Marta's* mother, *Clara*, whose focus is the history of weaving (she's written several books about it), leads afternoon educational sessions.

"I was in awe to be experiencing this small part of Italy's history—to be a part of that continuity," June Rogovina,

an experienced hand weaver

from California told me. She spent a week at *Brozzetti*, working first on a simple hand loom and then moving up to the more complicated Jacquard machine. "The teachers were so welcoming and patient, it was absolutely hum-

bling at times," she told me.

If you'd like to learn embroidery, *Lina Montagnoli*, who has been at it for 50 years, is the maternal, meticulous teacher. There are beginning classes as well as advanced, where she teaches intricate medieval designs. *Lina's* classes have become popular with the local women. As she told me, "They come here to enjoy it as a form of group anti-stress therapy."

Venice: Mosaics

The *Orsoni Mosaic Studio* is a hidden gem in Venice. It's tucked behind high walls in the *Canareggio sestiere*, off a *fondamenta* that wasn't even on my *Streetwise Venice* map. Since 1888, the

family-run foundry has been producing *smalti* (colored opaque glass) and gold leaf mosaics that are used to restore the world's most beautiful churches, such as *Basilica San Marco*, and shipped off to provide materials for renowned buildings such as Gaudí's *Sagrada Church* in Spain and the Golden Room in Stockholm, where Nobel Prizes are awarded.

In 2003, *Maestro Lucio Orsoni*, the great-grandson of the company's founder and a world-famous mosaic artist, decided to open the curtains of this secret place. He initiated workshops to teach what he calls "a divine art." Classes here are kept small (six maximum), so there's lots of individual attention given by instructor/artist *Antonella Gallenda*, who's been working by *Lucio's* side for 30 years.

Students come from all over the world for one- or two-week sessions to learn basics, micro-mosaics or portraiture. There are also three-day classes for those who simply want to have a taste of the craft and make a small mosaic—adding a cultural zing to their stay in Venice.

When I visited last fall, I got to see the fascinating work of the foundry, where men gather around a blazing furnace, scooping molten glass onto a rotating metal belt where the goo flattened and transformed into iridescent pancakes. There's a huge color library—rickety wooden shelves stacked with 2,000 hues of *smalti*, which are cut into pieces to make mosaic tiles. Everybody from the workers in the foundry to the staff and students who I met were especially upbeat, I'm guessing because they're surrounded by all this beautiful sparkly stuff all day.

Stopping by a two-week portraiture class, I found students hammering and

"Assisi" is a style of embroidery

Mosaics

gluing away, with a fun, creative spirit in the air.

Though all the work looked like it came from pros, the gal from Chicago whose portrait of her adorable five-year old son I admired told me she'd never done mosaics before.

And there was Connie Giacobbe, a former Kansas City hairdresser who told me she'd come here as a beginner three years ago and now was back for her third time. Her technique has advanced so much she's gotten com-



mercial commissions for her creations.

A fab feature of the program is that in the same renovated Orsoni villa as the workshop is *Domus Orsoni*, a bed and breakfast designed by mosaic

artisans where students can stay during their course. It's the only *artiturismo* I've ever seen, and when it's not filled with workshop participants it's available to visitors looking for bargain digs in an under-touristed Venice neighborhood.

Connie told me she loves staying there and waking up to the sounds of the foundry workers singing as they begin their day. Through her stays here taking classes, she's made friends with mosaic artists from all over the world. She told me, "A lot of nights after dinner, we'll go back into the workshop with a bottle of wine and some cheese and get to work. Sometimes we're up until three in the morning. It's completely relaxing."

—Susan Van Allen

Frequent Dream of Italy contributor Susan Van Allen is the author of the forthcoming book *100 Places in Italy Every Woman Should Go*.

Venice: Mask Making

Tragicomica

Calle dei Nomboli
San Polo, 2800
Venice
(39) 041 721102
www.tragicomica.it

Reservations should be made at least a week in advance. Three-hour mask-making workshop costs 96€ per person with minimum of three people attending; 120€ per person for two people and 160€ for an individual.

There are also lecture demonstration classes available, and the shop can custom-design programs. Contact for pricing.

Deruta: Ceramic Painting

International School of Ceramic Art "Romano Ranieri"

Via Tiberina Sud, 330
Deruta
(39) 075 972383
www.schoolofceramics.org

Price for basic four-hour ceramic painting class is \$120. Also offers classes in pottery-making for the same cost.

Cortona: Reliquary Jewelry

Arcangelo Productions—Art and Life Workshops

(503) 381-2433
www.arcangeloproductions.com

There are two upcoming courses in 2009. Keith Lo Bue is teaching a course between October 23rd and 30th; Jane Wynn's course is October 30th to November 6th. Each course costs \$2,850 per person and includes seven nights at a Cortona bed and breakfast, four days of workshops, a trip to Florence, a wine tasting, one cooking class with dinner to follow, and two additional dinners.

Buonconvento: Landscape Painting

LandscapePainting.com
(212) 780-3216

www.landscapepainting.com

Landscape painting fundamentals courses will be held one

week each in May, September and October 2009. See the Web site for specific dates. There are also specialized courses held in other locations around Tuscany.

The course costs \$2,000 per person (based on double occupancy) and includes seven nights accommodations at a bed and breakfast, four lunches, all dinners, art instruction, most materials and equipment, museum visit, excursions and transfers to and from Buonconvento bus or train station. There are also options for non-painters who want to accompany students.

Perugia: Weaving and Embroidery

Giuditta Brozzetti
Via T. Berardi, 5/6
Perugia
(39) 075 40236
www.brozzetti.com

Handweaving classes are offered on a daily or weekly basis. Lacemaking and embroi-

dery classes are offered in one-week sessions. Held between May and October, except for August. A one-week course costs 650€ for instruction and materials. The school provides recommendations for accommodations in Perugia.

Venice: Mosaics

Orsoni Studio

Via Cannaregio, 1045
Venice
(39) 041 24400023
www.orsoni.com

Foundry tours can be arranged by appointment. Week-long Mosaic Master Classes are offered at least once per month throughout the year, except August. Thematic workshops (micro-mosaics or portraiture) are offered twice a year, so it's best to reserve well in advance. Three-day workshops are offered this year in April, June and July.

A Master Class costs 750€ for one week, 1,400€ for two weeks. A thematic class costs 1,800€ for two weeks. The

three-day workshop is 480€. Prices include use of all equipment and materials (including 2,000 Orsoni smalti), art instruction and one or two guided tours.

Domus Orsoni

Sottoportego dei Vedei, off Fondamenta Cannareggio
Venice
(39) 041 2759538
www.domusorsoni.com

Rates: Singles rooms start at 80€ per night. Doubles range from 100 to 250€ and triples range from 120 to 280€ per night, depending on the season. Includes breakfast.

Tour Operators Who Arrange Craft Workshops

Bella Italia Tours

(303) 283-0944
www.bellaitaliatours.com

The European Connection

(516) 625-1800
www.europeanconnection.com

1 € = \$1.29 at press time

named after the Umbrian town.