

Articulation

News and views from the Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne

Glory, Glass and Gondolas: A two-week voyage in the Venetian lagoon.

Story and photos by Masterclass participant Purnima Ruanglertbutr

In January 2014, three alumni from the Faculty of Arts and I, participated in the Arts Faculty master class for alumni held in Venice – Crafting Venice: Glory, Glass and Gondolas.

As a Melbourne University Bachelor of Creative Arts(Honours) alumni, and a current staff member at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, I decided to participate in this master class for professional development, and for my research interest in art museums. In particular, to broaden my knowledge of Italian art, history, culture and politics, and to be immersed in the riches of a country I had never previously visited, and with people who would share similar interests.

I learnt more about the program's itinerary during the briefing session, where a group of interested Arts alumni gathered, eager to hear more of what the program would comprise. Dr. Andrea Rizzi, Senior Lecturer in Italian Studies at the University conducted the briefing at the University. Andrea enthusiastically shed light upon the daily excursions with the aid of a PowerPoint, painting an amorous picture of Venice; one imbued with the splendour of the past and the complex processes that went into the city's creation. We were shown grand photographs of the luxury apartment with views of the infamous Grand Canal, and recieved glimpses into the array of art and history orientated excursions, which instantaneously lured my participation.

Visiting a city for two weeks may seem too long a time. However, this prolonged duration really enabled us to be immersed in the multiple ways in which Venetians, both past and present, crafted and still craft, the literal and cultural structures of their city. Each day we learnt about a particular Venetian Craft, beginning with a lecture at Venice's Studium Generale Marcianum on the Grand Canal, followed by visits to relevent sites in and around Venice. Yet, we had free time to wander and explore the city on our own, often realizing that the only way to navigate one's way around the convoluted streets of Venice, is to get lost within it! Led by Dr Catherine Kovesi, the program enabled us to gain unique access to Venice's artiscic, artisinal and cultural life, through close encounters with the experts of the crafts themselves.

Of the countless highlights of the program, the following three experiences stand out.

At the Anzanà (Arsenale), we saw the only original 'gondola de fresco' existing in the world. It was built in 1870-1880 in the ancient boatyard we visited, and was used until 1950. The boatyard was jam-packed with everything from scale models to boats, and boat parts to tools and implements used in boat construction, and in the hunting and fishing tradition. The Gondolier association coordinator, Germano Da Preda, showed us the treasures of the boatyard, expressing his concern about the dying craft. The amount of skill required to produce a Gondola is often underestimated, with one only associating the boat to tourism. Our appreciation toward the Gondola was further deepened by witnessing Paolo Brandolisio Remer, constructing 'Forcolas' in his

workshop. A Forcola (pitchfork), is the fulcrum of the oar of a boat – the chief part that subjected to all restrictions of maneuvering and propulsion.



Paolo Brandolisio Remer specialises in the construction of the Forcola; he is pictured standing in his workshop.

Another memorable experience involved spending quality time at Gianni Basso Stampatore. Gianni is a charismatic printmaker, also known as “the Gutenberg of Venice”, who still uses printing techniques from the 1800s. We visited his petite shop comprising letterpress machines, some from the 17th century, and printing plates, which he uses to produce exquisite business cards, invitations, menus and ex-libris for clients around the world. Among his clientele, are celebrities including Hugh Grant, Ben Affleck, Angelina Jolie, Danielle Steel, whose namecards were displayed on the shopfront. I found his collection astounding – it includes both lettering sets and incised plates from specific editions of prominent 19th and 20th century books, such as his series of 35 plates from the first printing of Pinocchio, complete with illustrations. Basso was one of the last to apprentice in these techniques, studying the art of printing from age 15. What is remarkable is that that this man surrounds himself with antiquated printing presses in an age where technology threatens the future of the book as a physical object, and he disassociates himself from the Internet and from using computers.



Gianni Basso Stampatore houses six pre-industrial printers that Basso refurbished from locations around Venice; the windows and walls of his shop are lined with modern prints.

A visit to the Bevilacqua textiles company also proved a highlight of the trip. Owned completely by the Bevilacqua family for centuries, in recent years the company has developed its national and international trade, owing to the use of traditional weaving techniques of 18th century. It was exceptional to witness the historical archives of more than 3,500 pattern-designs, and to admire the women at work, who demonstrated weaving processes on original 17th century looms. All phases of the manufacturing process is manual, from the creation of the perforated cartoons that reproduce the fabric designs, to the painstaking preparation of the weft and organisation of the individual threads. I marvelled at the precise gestures of the weavers, which produced veritable works of art, refined textiles and fabrics that decorate royal palaces, theatres and famous homes.



Master artisans weave exclusive patterned silk fabrics on 18th century wooden looms in Venice's textiles company, Bevilacqua, that has been in operation since 1875.

This journey is one that I will cherish for years to come. What was most valuable was the opportunity to gain expert knowledge by Dr Catherine Kovesi; her connections with local professionals specialising in the relevant Venetian crafts offered us an enriching learning experience from the Masters themselves. I returned not only

with a heightened understanding of Italian art, culture, politics and history, but also with increased connections to new friends from different walks of life.



Day 1: Our first day involved an on-site induction, welcome drinks and bites of traditional cicchetti.



Day 2: Crafting the Myth of Venice.

Marvelled at over 8,000 square meters of gold mosaics that covered the walls, vaults and cupolas of San Marco Basilica. They represent stories from the Bible, allegorical figures, events in the lives of Christ, the Virgin Mary, Saint Mark and other saints. We experienced the interior of the Basilica lit in all its glory, exclusively for our visit. The excursion followed from our lecture about the myths that Venice created about itself in the Middle Ages, by their contemporaries and later historians. Uniquely attached to the building are its mutability of meanings, and the embellishment of its surroundings.



Day 3: The luxury trades of Venice. A tour of the Palazzo Grimani, a Venetian Renaissance Palace with a style of Roman Classicism, showcasing Giovanni Grimani’s fine collection of antiquities.



Day 4: The printing crafts of Venice. We visited the living Gutenberg of Venice, Gianni Basso and his ancient letterpress, seeing his suite of business cards, ex-libris, menus and invitations. This was complemented with a trip to explore the bookbinding crafts of Paolo Olbi, who produces handmade leather and paperwork products.



Day 5: The Lace Crafts of Venice. Tucked amid colourful houses on the island of Burano, is a startling array of lace outlets. We visited the Venice Lace Museum and the historic lace school of Burano where we saw women engage in traditional lace-making processes. The lace museum comprises hundreds of Venetian lace dating from the 16th to 20th century.



Day 6: The Textile Crafts of Venice. We witnessed weaving demonstrations by master weavers in the historical companies, Bevilacqua and Fortuny, where we also learnt about textiles as an important commodity and the key production in the Venetian economy. As machine-made fabrics became cheaper and therefore less exclusive, the art of weaving luxurious pieces almost disappeared. At the end of the 1800s, only Bevilacqua and Rubelli were continuing their production; Fortuny's printed production joined them in the 1900s.



Day 7: Crafting the City's Political Image. A visit to the Doge's Palace and its Secret Itinerary revealed to us the rooms and chambers where the most important bodies in the Venetian administration were carried out. This offered insight into the civil and political history of the Venice Republic, its public organisations, and its institutional bodies deputed to government and justice.



Day 8: The Opera. We immersed ourselves in Venetian opera at the Teatro Malibran, where we watched the visual comedy, *La Scala di Seta* (The Silken Ladder), by Gioachino Rossini.



Day 9: The Crafts of the Gondola. We learnt about the infamous Venetian craft, the Gondola; its history, changing uses, and production processes, from the master gondola builders themselves. After much practice, the group had a go at rowing a gondola down the canals of Venice.



Day 10: Crafting the beads of Venice. Our excursion to Venetian Dreams, the studio and shop of specialist bead-maker, Marisa Convento (pictured in photo above), involved us learning about the handcrafted beads of Venice; its origins, processes and aesthetics. Under Marisa’s expert guidance, we learnt how to craft our own beaded products.



Day 11: Crafting Religious Rituals.

Following a morning lecture about the religious confraternities in Venice, we visited San Giovanni Evangelista (founded 1261), and the Scuole of San Rocco (founded 1478), where we investigated their iconic symbols, architectural and decorative constructs.



Day 12: Crafting the Glass of Venice. A visit to a glass blowing school on the island of Murano enabled us learn about complex glass-blowing techniques, demonstrated by the Italian glass Maestro himself.



Day 13: Crafting the Scents of Venice. After visiting the Palazzo Mocenigo, a museum of costume and perfume, we enjoyed trialing perfumes at the Merchant of Venice, built in the historic mid-seventeenth century San Fantin pharmacy (Photo above). Merchant of Venice is a line of luxury fragrances inspired by the precious essences and spices that Venetians imported through the “mude”, who travelled through shipping lanes and points of exchange, to trade the art of perfumery throughout Europe.



Day 14: Farewell, Venice. Following from our farewell drinks and dinner, we departed Venice on the Vaporetto (water taxi), bidding goodbye to our group, and the iconic structures that craft the city. The infamous Rialto Bridge is pictured above.

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Phone: 13 MELB (13 6352) | International: +(61 3) 9035 5511

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