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HANDS-ON HISTORY

Jill Robinson gets up close and personal with historic frescoes in beautiful rural Puglia, on a volunteering holiday experience far beyond the tourist trail

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Early one morning inside a barn in Italy's south Puglia region, Tonio Creanza gives six volunteers from around the world their first fresco lesson.

“Fresco,” he explains, “means ‘fresh’ in Italian. And one of the first things we will need to do is create a base for our fresco restoration using local limestone and water, and apply it.”

The six of us begin mixing away, eager to get started on the mock wall we are using to help us practise our skills. Over the next fortnight we'll be heading out from our base at the sprawling 18th-century hunting lodge Masseria La Selva to various crypts and grottos throughout the area to put those skills into action. Under Tonio's watchful eye, we smooth a first layer – called *arriccio* – onto the cool stone wall. Soon after, a second layer (*intonaco*) is spread. “Now that we have both layers,” explains Tonio, “the pigment, and our pictures, can be applied.”

We begin delicately dabbing the smooth stone canvas with light flicks as demonstrated to us by Tonio. Unlike the grand religious tales of the centuries-old frescoes we will restore later on in the week, our pictures are light-hearted: comic-book cats, Rothko-style abstractions – even paintings of the group. “I recognise that handsome chap,” quips Tonio when he spots a man with silver hair and brown eyes with an uncanny resemblance to his own.

The group laughs as he insists the painting's artists, Laura and Lucy, snap a photo of him next to his portrait.

A happy, passionate man, Tonio has been running fresco and art restoration volunteer projects for 20 years through Messors – the cultural preservation courses operated with his 24-year-old conservation collective, Sinergie, based in Puglia. The company's authentic experiences give real insight to the Puglian people and their culture, history, food and archaeological treasures. It transcends generic tourism, by offering hands-on experiences to not only get a deeper understanding of an area's history, but to also help preserve it for future generations.

Later that week, Tonio starts to introduce us to the real frescoes of the area. He leads my group to the Madonna delle Tre Porte crypt, across a ravine from the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Matera, a picturesque town with grotto homes carved entirely from calcarenite rock. Inside, frescoes from the 13th and second half of the 15th centuries are painted across the walls in shades of sapphire, crimson and gold.

The Matera site is only an antipasto course in a rich meal of Puglia fresco history. At the 15th-century crypt of Carpentino, around 7km southeast of Altamura, we volunteers finally get to put our training to use. Sinergie, with the series of Messors workshops, has been working on the conservation of this site since 1998. In the dark crypt, a portable light illuminates a fresco from 1450, depicting the crucifixion of Christ. Dressed in our most casual clothes – and channelling with utmost focus the skills imparted to us by Tonio back in the barn – we take turns scraping lichens, mud, moss and calcification clusters off the frescos, still vibrant after centuries underground.

With an exceptionally steady hand, fellow volunteer Lucy fills the holes and missing portions of the fresco surface with a lime-based mortar, similar to what we mixed together on our first day, to recreate an even surface. These spots are touched up with watercolours (incorporating tones close to the original painting), with a technique to lessen the brightness of the new mortar.

Even though my task isn't quite as demanding, removing the calcification clusters makes me nervous. My hands run across the ancient painting, feeling the cold limestone decorated with calcified bumps that have developed over centuries.

Strike the wall too hard, and a hole in the original fresco is created, losing ancient history and making restoration more difficult. Contributing to something so grand and culturally important is extremely satisfying, and it's easy to lose track of the time, while focusing so intently on the gentle tick-tick-ticking of my tiny metal hammer and chisel.

Our grand finale is an extra special event – dinner in the crypt at the Jesce site, which is about 8km southeast of the township of Altamura. A mere visit is enough of a jaw-dropping experience –with elaborate frescos dating to three different periods: 1350, 1500-1550, and the early 1600s. The Byzantine-style fresco depicting Christ flanked by Mary on the left and John the Baptist on the right seems to ooze from the stone in colours of umber and sky, while vivid emerald and scarlet details of later artwork draw my eye to the doorway.

A crowd has gathered at the stairs leading into the crypt. Peering out of the opening from inside, I see children riding a donkey, delivering bread and wine. A line of baskets and pots are carried into the crypt, with mutton stew, local honeycomb, freshly made pecorino cheese, wild asparagus and the famous Altamura bread.

Before long, we're having a feast in the ancient crypt, with lights illuminating the vivid frescoes.

I'm meeting the butcher, cheese maker, beekeeper, plus more people who have worked with Tonio on a variety of his restoration projects. Fausta, Santina and Rosanna, whose delicious dishes have kept us more than happy all week, begin to ladle stew onto plates. The beekeeper slowly walks around the long table with a frame taken from one of his hives. He digs a spoon into the honeycomb and encourages us to taste the golden nectar. I take two.

I'm introduced to more guests from the surrounding countryside, including a gaggle of older women who chatter among themselves in Italian as they take turns patting my hand gently, like grandmothers do. It feels like a family. Then, the music starts. Guitars and tambourines are played, and these women who know all of the old songs belt out each verse, which echo in the underground chamber.

This isn't the Uffizi Gallery, I know. But then I've never seen such emotion in a museum. I reach for my phone, take a video of the scene and then gently tuck it away behind a 16th-century limestone statue of St. Francis before returning to dance with Fausta and Rosanna. ■

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govoluntouring.com, messors.com

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