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Messors

Since its founding in 1989 under the tutelage of director Tonio Creanza, Messors has worked on a host of preservation projects in the Puglia region in Italy covering archeological research, restoration projects on frescoes, wood and stone statues, decorative painting, guided tours, educational field school projects and study abroad university programs.

Puglia, which is situated in the heel of Italy right along the Adriatic coast, is a scenic, rather idyllic pocket of land rife with history and nature. Reportedly home to 50 million olive trees, it is also lined with pomegrante and plum trees, sunflowers, oaks and many underground caves and catacombs filled with Roman and Byzantine heirlooms and frescoes. Singerie, an off-shoot of Messors, is a non-profit volunteer group that was created in 1993 to work specifically on the revitalization of historic sites through the assistance of governmental and museum backing. In the same year Sinergie proposed to the municipality of Altamura, a project titled "Eutropia" to restore and promote an important historical-archeological site, Masseria Jesce, once an ancient agricultural center and Roman filling station. The educational volunteer project ran from 1995 to 2009 and hosted over 700 volunteers coming from abroad to help and learn traditional stone wall techniques of restoration. By 2009 70% of the site was restored and is now used by the community for arts and culture events. The group also organizes excursions to the neighboring provinces of Matera, Gravina, Pompei and many others in addition to an English summer school for children in La Selva.

Specific workshops such as art restoration, arts sojourn and culinary arts & shepherding are proffered under the leadership of Messors. For a taste of true Mediterranean cuisine and the Slow Food Movement way of life, the culinary workshop sheds light on cheese-making (mozzarella, bocconcini, treccia, burrata, scamorza, provolone, canestrato), charcuterie production, foraging wild, edible plants and herbs, olive oil extraction, milking sheep and preparing homemade pasta – always finished off with an epic fish feast by the sea and a two hour siesta. The shepherding program involves waking before sunrise and following the shepherd's pastoral activities from dawn to dusk, a discipline which involves close contact to nature and long stretches of solitude. All is held at the Masseria La Selva dairies, farms, restaurants, bakeries and wineries, all vital culinary facilities maintaining regional culinary traditions.

Read on below for our interview with founder Tonio Creanza.

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Wednesday, 23.01.2013

09:00 (Cet)



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Qompendium: *Italy as a country has the heritage of art, nature and culture. Do you feel there is any country at the moment with that kind of a soft power line-up?*

Tonio: Every country has a valuable commodity. It's the people of every country who offer an education – a living breathing fusion of their history, culture, art, language, traditions and valuable stories of their relationship to the land and one another. We as the traveler and participator can take home with us this knowledge which can be applied, transformed, and shared in integrative ways in our own communities and lives. Italy is fortunate for its history that provides the modern day soft power line up to the world. Historically old world countries like Italy, France and Spain's art, architecture and culture have flourished due to a long history of patronage by noble families and the influential and wealthy Catholic church. The early renaissance lent importance to the pursuit of artistic pleasures and artists were given the luxury of time and supporting funds to create masterpieces of art and inventions and to develop scientific theories. Italy is a small country with a diverse landscape north to south, and is a country unique in its concentration of monuments, arts and archeological sites curated by history. Italy's geographic position as a footstep in the Mediterranean sea has meant that it's been crossed, conquered, settled and influenced by a number of populations, cultures and denominations throughout history. Ancient tourist resorts such as Pompeii and Naples which were popular with the Roman republic, the fascination with archeology as a component of adventure travel at the turn of the century, the fashion and film industry and the catch phrase “dolce vita” – all have kept Italy relative and in vogue over the centuries. Culturally we really do as Italians. We love to share and boast about our food and design as being the best, and perhaps it's that constant positive affirmation that draws tourists to Italy. That same pride in some cases has translated into a form of cultural and artistic preservation. Especially in the south you'll see people reluctant to change their diet and rituals in the face of modernity and are generally weary of mass production. Agrotourism and the UNESCO protected Mediterranean diet are now intriguing tourists to visit the southern regions of Italy.



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Can you give us a few interesting facts about the sites you look over in the Puglia region, something off the tourist books that only a handful of locals might know?

As a child I remember my grandfather's towering shadow stretching across the wheat fields as we strode

along with a horse plowing the fields. His patient hands taught me how to tend for the land. It is meditative to learn and work outdoors in the company of the natural elements. His lessons were ingrained in me as I had a visual and scented handbook in my possession that I could refer to as I grew up. As a teenager I explored overgrown caves, curious of the faint traces of Byzantine frescoes. I saw how the natural stone could be hewn into enduring structures. I am connected to my land, art and cultural heritage by way of tangible experiences, and it is this approach of learning and immersion in the “field” that I incorporate in my workshops. What is so exhilarating and so unique about the sites we work on is that they are tangible experiences. Working to restore a piece of art in the place and environment in which it was created immediately connects you to the environment in which the artist once lived and created. The rain, sun, heat and time have contributed to the current conditions of a given fresco's state. Working in these conditions helps one to understand the contributing elements of the deterioration and the best restoration process to choose. Before one works to scrape away the accumulated salt crystals resembling barnacles, one can note the phenomenon of the osmosis created by the water that is slowing seeping and penetrating beneath the actual painted surface. The work becomes important to you, as you are standing in the spot in which the artist painted it and where the worshipers came to pray. These caves are in somewhat obscure locations, either completely forgotten, grown over or right in the middle of a small local farmer's property who is still conducting his daily routines. From 2009-2010 I worked on Francis Ford Coppola's restoration venture of Palazzo Margherita in the town of Bernalda where his grandfather was from. Of course it was cool to work in the company of a man whose films I admire, and equally exciting to work within a framework in which he was actively involved. During our recent art restoration workshops I was able to arrange a trip for our participants to see the finished results of the interior decorative paint finishes and exterior friezes my colleagues and I worked on. This past summer we went with the group to Monte Sant'Angelo on the Gargano promontory to stabilize two canvases in a serious state of deterioration painted by a nun, Livia Foglia, in 1757. What was intriguing and curious was that the paintings were signed – something you rarely see on a work created in monastery by a cloister nun, as a cloister nun renounces her birth identity and her property. She most likely signed her name with the possible aspiration of being an artist outside of her cloister and to reclaim her identity. We left the church with the stabilized canvases safely enclosed inside large 4-foot long tubes carrying them through town as the townspeople watched the “rescue mission” being carried out by participants coming from Russia, Lithuania, Canada, Norway, Brazil, Thailand and the United States. This kind of involvement and approach also gives the opportunity to the visitor to experience the local lifestyle and food in a way that can't be described and contained in a tourist book.



One of the many things you advocate is the global conservation of art history. As it relates to uncontrolled mass tourism in Venice which has been threatening the city with commodification over the years and eroding its natural infrastructure – how can the human tide of visitors be controlled without causing a plummet in the local economy?

Venice is spectacular, a creation of theatrical fiction balancing on bricks and wood pylons and floating in a salt water lagoon. It's insanely beautiful and cinematic and everyone should see it. I see mass tourism as a threat to Venice if it continues to be deprived as a model of a self-sustaining maritime city, and if it exhausts the residential community to the point of becoming a city without any Venetians living in it. It's a problem if quick fix restoration solutions are practiced with the sole aim of satisfying the tourism industry without prioritizing the local needs. It's also unfortunate that although once a great centre of commerce, much of it is now lined with stalls selling tacky trinkets. And personally I find the growing size of the insidious advertising banners offensive when I can't see the architecture and the restoration process going on underneath. Venice is not only in a critical state because it's been sinking since its conception, but because a peace treaty needs to be drawn between the tourist and the resident. The economy is relatively good in Venice due to the tourism industry, but locals in turn endure elevated living and housing costs and are called upon to cater to the tourist 24/7. I'd like cultural activities and educational itineraries to be encouraged that will attract the tourist curious in experiencing Venetian culture and history, in addition to programs that involve the tourist as an active participant and contributor to the conservation of Venetian heritage. I'm uncomfortable that the blame sometimes rests upon tourism as a key factor of deteriorating Venice. Flooding is not a new phenomenon to Venice, archeologists knew that over the centuries. Structures were often torn down and the foundations were raised; however, with the end of the Republic of Venice in 1797 and the invasion of Napoleon also came the end of a government that was attentive to the careful maintenance and cleaning of the canals and control of water levels. The industrial plantation in the area of Porto Marghera in the beginning of the 1900s upset the delicate balance of the lagoon with the building of artificial infrastructures to permit access to industrial boats—unaware of the fact that by sucking out the groundwater for the productive process they were causing Venice to sink at a faster rate. It is a massive and layered challenge with global warming causing higher levels of tide waters. Water gates are also a cause for concern as they cut off the lagoon from its natural source. Natural flooding usually helped clean out the canals and kept the ecosystem in balance, but now such pollutants are deposited into the sea and surrounding salt marshes and mud flats, which are all vital fishing areas and natural nesting habitats.



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Do you think such cities, especially Rome, can benefit from your “to do is to learn” approach rather than the traditional tourist role of just seeing and learning?

Yes any place and anyone can benefit from this approach. We learn by observing and coupled with doing, knowledge is ingrained and benefits increase. I think there are thousands of eager people who would jump at the opportunity to gain the intimate knowledge of lessons learned during Rome's evolution outside of the traditional tourist role. The city is a living school of engineering and architectural wonders conceived with the concept of durability, urban planning and artistic masterpieces all enclosed in an ancient framework that has stood the test of time. Rome and many historical sites can harness all this energy by putting the ardent visitor to work. Take away the intimation that conservation only falls in the realm of those in the profession. Yes, one may not be able to reconstruct a building or restore a masterpiece of antiquity, but involving them in the process of how something was created and how it can be restored secures the future support of art conservation efforts. There are many stages within the restoration process in which someone can contribute. The recurring sentiment I hear from the participants in my restoration workshops is how much more value and understanding they have for a piece of art work and for who created it once they've been involved in the process of conservation themselves. I want to give the chance to experience what I'm passionate about, what excites me – to be open to everyone. My restoration workshops are for those expanding their curriculum in the field of conservation and to encourage anyone curious about it.



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What kind of legwork goes into first identifying a restoration candidate and putting into effect the necessary means for recovery and maintenance?

The first concern is the current state of the art work or a site and the cultural value it has for the community. However, there is a huge portion of historical heritage that is considered minor because the author is not well-known, or was created in a rural remote environment. Works by well-known masters or works created in well-monitored environments usually receive the attention of government institutions and are given urgent recovery status. It was frescoes that I explored in the caves as a young boy growing up in Puglia that were deemed non-urgent that became the catalyst of my decision in my early twenties to establish my company Sinergie with an aim to find sustainable strategies to recover these sites, and I continue these goals with my MESSORS workshops.



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Your culinary workshop is rooted in the idea of Slow Food, while the whole Slow Movement is based on a slowing down in general, what other areas in life do you think could benefit from this?

I believe it's about engaging, connecting and returning to the source to gain rudimentary knowledge of people, places and things we are in contact with on a daily basis. Recognizing that time plays a role in

forging those contacts to achieve balance and well-being. To be consciously active and aware in our lives and our surrounding community and place. Part of the Slow Food mandate is to “defend culinary cultures, to support small purveyors from the deluge of industrialization and restore pleasure to our fast and hectic lives.” The movement has developed into subcultures giving names to basic ways of living one’s life, such as Slow Parenting: “more exploration less planning”; Slow Goods: “low production runs and on-shore manufacturing”; Slow Travel: “engaging with foreign communities and local cultures” etc. In short, all of these movements are emphasizing the same thing, returning to basics, limiting distractions and to value time. It is to know our children through play, seek local craftsmanship, know how food is grown, ask what is in it and seek to know the people in the country in which you are visiting. Taking the time to educate ourselves and to revel in the pure pleasure and reward of it. I am attracted to the life of a shepherd because he is connected and thus moved by the natural rhythms of place and time: rising with the sun, milking the ewe when her milk is made, spending daylight with his flock while they feed from the land and returning before sunset. The farmer does much the same, his tasks are guided by the changing season – to seed, to prune, to harvest – and his diet follows the natural rotation of crops. I recently watched Vasyukov and Hertzog’s film *Happy People*, a fascinating chronicle of life as a trapper in the Taiga. At the onset it seems like a solitary and arduous life, but even in the face of nature’s harsh and challenging displays, the protagonists seek to befriend the elements rather than attempt to change or obliterate them. Their life is not solitary, alternatively they form relationships with their place and time and within their immediate environment they exhibit serenity and fulfillment. Closest to my heart, as a father of a 3 1/2 year old, “the moment” is absolutely fantastical and exhilarating if we were committed to experiencing it as we do when we were 3.

With the various education programs you have in place, do you feel that knowledge for the protection of cultural heritage will be a torch for continue preservation efforts by the current youth generation?

It's very satisfying and rewarding to know that many young participants in the art restoration workshops, whether from Canada, Russia, Brazil or the US, over the years, have chosen to follow a career in the field of conservation of cultural heritage. Some of them are now teachers at universities or have developed their own conservation projects and programs that integrate the idea of learning by doing, or are artists and decorators who now use only natural materials in their works. I feel good knowing that they are inspiring youths and transferring the tools to them.



@Amanda Michas

How do the dynamics of local authorities and their say in restoration projects vs. government contributions play into your vision for the restorations?

Local authorities and city municipalities are provided many opportunities to delegate and establish restoration programs within their own localities under regional, national and European cultural heritage programs. I began as an optimistic young restoration graduate qualified by the Department of Antiquities, excited by the future and projects I wanted to undertake with the available funding. At the same time, I recognized that the allocated funding was diluted by the number of departments involved in a bureaucratic system. The investments accomplish the goal of immediately restoring a site or work, but can quickly become insular and static. A plan needs to be in place for the future of a site, for how it can continue to be in movement and pertinent by producing an onion effect in the local economy, and garnish local pride. I personally do not rely heavily on government collaboration other than following the guidelines set forth to me by the Department of Antiquities by applying for permission for the restoration of a regional art work or site. This part of the system is crucial, as it is essential for future generations of restorers to have detailed records of the restoration processes undertaken. That is about the extent of my involvement with government institutions, I do not like to wait to hear about what can't be done. I like to put my workshops into action and demonstrate what can be done. In my early twenties I created volunteer restoration programs that eventually attracted university faculties involving students studying in the field of art conservation and archeology to begin work on a dilapidated and abandoned rupestrial site called Jesce, with an aim to provide participants with a hands-on learning opportunity and to demonstrate the workforce needed for the massive undertaking of restoring a site. My hope was that it become a community arts centre. At the time, the idea of foreign volunteerism was new to my locale, and the general consensus was simply: "who is going to come here to restore what is not theirs." Over the 15-year restoration period 700 people arrived to participate as a volunteer in the Jesce project. During those years my company Sinergie was given 35.000 EUR from city hall in support of the Jesce project initiatives. The restoration work that volunteers accomplished had the value of 350.000 EUR, a cost of work that under other terms may have come from government funding or tax dollars. Moreover, and so importantly, was that these people came to Altamura as volunteers to restore Jesce eager for an educational opportunity. They were constantly posed the same question by curious locals, "ma come mai qui in Altmaura?" (but why are you here?) proudly responding, "we came here to restore Jesce." It seems to be human nature that when someone else validates what you have, that you in turn find value in it, so with each arrival of a volunteer, local pride was instilled. These 700 volunteers are now literally part of the history of the Jesce located on the ancient Via Appia that hosted centuries of other travelers on a journey. The volunteers' personal stories of their experience became the catalyst for each new crop of volunteers arriving every following summer. Hence the invested funds achieved the onion effect – the project became dynamic, progressive, far reaching and a valuable exchange for everyone involved. 20 years on I am convinced that funding can be replaced in many areas by developing educational and volunteer programs to feed the needs of the larger and future whole.



Where have you found the greatest challenge?

My greatest challenge has been and still is to get local authorities and community in general on board and supportive of my projects that seek to provide new perspectives and solutions in aiding the needs and weight of local conservation and as a mode of untraditional tourism. Even though the workshops and the projects we have focused on have received media support and an enthusiastic response from participants over the 20 years, local governments still seem weary and are slow to commit to the idea that the local cultural and artistic heritage can be used as a tool in educating foreigners in the field of restoration or cultural preservation. The results achieved over the years with the workshops are incredibly positive in terms of the amount of work done and the cultural experience that has been shared. So to say that even with the great practical results my approach is still seen as visionary within the local community.



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@Luis Valdizon

What is the quintessence of the Bel Paese and Italian heritage to you?

It is a mixture, a sum of many elements: flavors, history, landscape and cultures. It's the feeling of the abundance just before the harvest. It's the contemplation and awe while walking through Pompeii or the Etruscan tombs in Cerveteri, the theatre and fantasy of Frascati gardens and the valley of the temples in Agrigento. It's the pure pleasure of drizzling olive oil on dense durum wheat bread, spotting the shepherd and his flock on the hill, candlelit dinner in a cave and driving the tractor plow with my 3 year-old son August.