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Topic of the Year: Museum Archaeology

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INDEX

7 Editorial

Cinzia Dal Maso & Luca Peyronel

11 Topic of the Year

Excellence and craft. A network of museums to challenge post-earthquake crisis in the Marches 13

Simona Antolini & Jessica Piccinini

The Museo delle Culture and its audience: A five-year balance 25

Carolina Orsini

The museum belongs to the participating community: Social engagement experiences at the Angera Civic Archaeological and Open-Air Museum, Lake Maggiore, Italy 37

Valentina Baietti & Cristina Miedico

Ancient Near Eastern mementoes: The archaeological 'souvenir' industries between replica and invention 51

Silvana Di Paolo

Perspectives in the first person. A questionnaire on museum semiotics 61

Maria Emanuela Oddo

69 Satura Lanx

Augmented reality in Brescia: Evaluation questionnaires in San Salvatore basilica. A joint process between managers, public, and university 71

Nicola Delbarba & Francesca Morandini

Citizen participation in Cultural Heritage management: The Integrity Pact pilot program	85
--	----

Paola Liliana Buttiglione & Anna Maria Marras

99 Archaeotales

Masterpiece

Giorgia Cappelletti

Augustus of Labicana Street	101
Boxer at Rest	103
The Evening Shadow	105
Death at sea: The crater of the shipwreck	107
The Diver	109
The Trundholm Sun Chariot	111

113 News

In Jordan, public archaeology is a solid reality	115
--	-----

Marta Lorenzon

Classical Pop: A surprising exhibition	117
--	-----

Cinzia Dal Maso

Sea of Hope: A graphic novel that links together ancient and modern migrations	119
---	-----

Michela Nocita

A dive into the blue: Fighting autism at Paestum Museum	123
---	-----

Cinzia Dal Maso

125 Reviews

Art forgers in 20th century Italy. A portrait gallery	127
---	-----

Alessandra Cilio

REVIEWS

Review: Art forgers in 20th century Italy. A portrait gallery

Alessandra Cilio

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La Bottega del falsario. Storie di falsi nell'Italia del XX secolo. Eugenio Farioli Vecchioli, 2019, produced by Rai Cultura in collaboration with Mibact.

<https://www.raiplay.it/video/2019/11/italia-viaggio-nella-bellezza-la-bottega-del-falsario-dc485d37-a474-48bd-92c2-f2f62943e498.html>

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 **Keywords:** documentary, art forgery, Italy, Eugenio Farioli Vecchioli

Art forgery has always been a hot issue not only for those working in the field of cultural heritage, but also for ordinary people, because of the implications with economy, politics and society, and the big echo given by mass media in order to polarize public opinion. This topic owns the characteristics for being represented through the audiovisual, as it is proved by a conspicuous number of documentaries recently produced in the world, whose “Art and Craft” by Sam Cullman and Jennifer Grausman (USA, 2014), and “Fakes in the art world. The mystery conman” by Sönje Storm (Germany, 2016) are only a couple of examples.

Italy has given its contribution too, and at the end of 2019 Rai Storia channel screened four episodes of “Italia: viaggio nella bellezza” – a documentary-based programme by Rai Cultura in collaboration with Mibact – dedicated to Italian art forgery. They move through the centuries to show the birth and the development of this custom, from the Antiquity to contemporary times. They also bring to light emblematic cases of fakes which took place in Italy during the 20th century.

Among these audiovisuals, “La bottega del falsario. Storie di falsi del Novecento”, is probably the most engaging, both for the issue treated and for the way it has been made on a documentary. Camera moves the eye from the product to the producer, in order to outline the forger’s profile. In 54 minutes,

the documentary sifts through four stories, set in different corners of the *Belpaese*, such as Centuripe in Sicily, Rome, Siena and Livorno; it deals with several art forms and periods, such as Hellenistic, Medieval and Modern painting, and Renaissance and Contemporary sculpture.

The documentary consists of four parts; each one starts with the discovery that an important piece of art is fake. Who is the creator?

The first chapter focuses on Alceo Dossena, a sculptor from Cremona who lived in Roma during the Fascism, and became famous for his marble figures sculpted according the style of Italian Middle Age and Renaissance masters, bought as authentic even by renowned institutions like the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Also, Dossena was able to create exquisite sculptures inspired by painting; melting forms of art in personal current raised him to the level of genuine artist, essence of the italic genius.

The second part concerns Federico Icilio Joni, who lived in Siena between the 19th and the 20th century. He specialized in copying ancient masterpieces, and founded a school of forgers in his own city. His canvases referring to the Siense School misled famous art experts such as Robert Langdon Douglas, Bernard Berenson and Frederick Mason Perkins, who were mediators for the Anglo-Saxon

antiquary market. It is the touching story of an abandoned child raised in a gilder's workshop, who used his artistic skills as an opportunity of social climbing. Because of strong relationships with influential people, Joni was even elected, paradoxically, Superintendent of the Italian Fine Arts Institute in 1920.

With the third story we shift immediately before Italy took part to the Second World War. Seven painted ceramics from Centuripe – a Sicilian village known for archaeological evidences – were sent as a gift to Benito Mussolini. The Duce donated the artifacts to the Archaeological Museum of Naples, since they were considered a very rare case of Hellenistic painting. A formal celebration was made, at the presence of the main Italian authorities belonging to the world of cultural heritage and education. Nobody doubted that the 'Centuripe medallions' were authentic. Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli, Bernard Berenson and Giuseppe Maiuri believed it, and the Sicilian archaeologist Giulio Emanuele Rizzo literally fell in love for the seven ladies portrayed. Each one was given an imaginary Greek name within an enthusiastic – and barely scientific – article written in 1940. Nevertheless, the ceramics were fake. The author was the local *anticaru* – a Sicilian word meaning 'looter', art mediator and forger at the same time – Antonino Biondi.

The last story occurred in 1984, and is about the desperate attempt of Vera Durbè, director of the Progressive Museum of Modern Art in Livorno, to save her unsuccessful exhibition on the occasion of Amedeo Modigliani's centenary. The lady dredged the Royal Canal until she found three sculpted heads attributed to Modigliani when he hadn't been notorious yet, making a popular legend come true. It was a sensational discovery: the pieces made the exhibition undergo a turning point. However, they didn't belong to the famous painter. One was sculpted for joking by Michele Ghelarducci, Pietro Luridiana, Pierfrancesco Ferrucci, three students on their twenties; the others were moulded by the rebel artist Angelo Froglià, as a provocation to the art world, where critics are supposed to be incontestable in their judgments.

Although the documentary follows the expository mode, the author creates an almost-fiction setting. Cases are presented according to the style of spy-stories, as pieces of a legal

investigation. Hence, the plaster cast gallery of the Classic Art Museum in Rome evokes a police station; art forgers become defendants; scholars involved are witnesses whose depositions are accurately noted and collected into specific folders by the film director, or better saying, the investigator.

Experts list is long and heterogeneous: there are art historians such as Federica Gastaldello from Guggenheim Foundation, Alessandro Bagnoli and Gianni Mazzoni; CNR Ibam researchers such as the archaeologist Giacomo Biondi and the physicist Paolo Romano; art collectors such as Carlo Pepi and Dario Lo Bufalo. They are interviewed within their most familiar places: libraries, museums, research centers and art galleries. On the other hand, archaeologist Marcello Barbanera and art historian Enzo Borsellino have a more specific role since they empower voice-over narration. Thus, they speak inside the plaster cast gallery, and sit in front of a table where the film director reads documents and ask questions. A pale light comes from an arm desk lamp, catching the viewer's attention on scholars. Scene resembles an interrogatory, and the two professors are key-witnesses.

While cases are exposed, the author's hands put dates, names, keywords and pictures together on a wooden message board. Visual thinking fits the spy-story idea. At the same time, it is an effective communication system that helps the spectator in memorizing data.

Regarding technical aspects, steady cam, drone and slider are the main tools employed for shooting. Drone and long shot sequences, including timelapses, are very common for showing Italian historic city centers. Close up sequences succeed in showing the attentive work done by painters, gilders, restorers and pottery-makers, in order to recall the creative process of the four protagonists. Dolly and close up sequences often take place within museums, such as the National Art Gallery in Siena, the National Archaeological Museum of Naples and the Archaeological Museum of Catania University.

All the sequences are well mixed with fascinating vintage footage and pictures. Soundtrack suits video editing, giving strength and rhythm to narration. It is string music full of tension sometimes, other times it is a soft piano melody or a jazz piece played by double

bass and drums. Sometimes it is an old Italian song, which immerses the spectator in a *Belle Époque* atmosphere.

“*La bottega del falsario. Storie di falsi del Novecento*” depicts different types of forgers, revealing their traffics with international auction houses and museums, but also their most intimate sides and the inner reasons which led them to behave that way. They came out from a proverbial anonymity, dispelling the myth of the forger as a shady man, or a starving artisan manipulated by greedy people to earn a crust. They proved to have had an active role during the historical moment in which they lived, being able to interpret the cultural context of that period, with its needs, expectations and desires.

When the film gets close to the end, we feel the hunger to know more. As an instance, we would like to watch the full version of that German documentary about Alceo Dossena shot in the Thirties, or read some pages of “*Memorie di un pittore di quadri antichi*” written by Federico Joni. And we cannot but smile thinking of the great scam made by the three Livorno guys, who hardly believed to have misled famous art experts with an electric drill-made fake. Even if we know that the 20th century art forger, “a mix of genius, frustrated ambitions and megalomaniac narcissism” is far from being innocent, we finish to find him more charming than we expected, a bit like *Arsène Lupin*.

