

THE ARTISANS OF Florence

For an exquisite hand-made treasure, Florence is the place to go. Don't leave it too long though; the city's artisans have continued to vanish as the years have progressed. **Jean Di Marino** visited some of the few artisans who have remained true to their craft. **Photography by Susan Wright.**



IN A SMALL 'BOTTEGA' or workshop on Via dei Velluti in Florence, a master craftsman plies a trade handed down to him over many generations. Enrico Giannini is a book binder or 'rilegatore' and he's making what is known as 'marbled' paper that he'll use to cover a book. The technique he is using is centuries old.

Wearing a blue lab coat, the 69-year old stands over a basin filled with a substance that looks like glue but is in fact made out of seaweed from Ireland. Everything stills as he carefully spatters paint drops on the gelatinous base, one colour after another. Soon a pattern forms. Using a porcupine quill as a tool, he pecks here and there in the basin, gently expanding and nudging the paint to create an even more intricate design.

He carefully places paper on the surface of the basin. A few minutes later he peels it off and shyly displays his creation. It's a delicate fleur de lys design in blue and gold. I breathe an admiring sigh. "Molto bello."

'Marbled' paper, with its swirling, veined patterns, is a classic in Italy, adorning covers and fly leaves of diaries and albums in souvenir shops across the country. Enrico Giannini says he brought the technique back to life decades ago after it had almost disappeared and in doing so kicked off a trend.

Enrico Giannini is the fifth generation of a well-known family of book binders in Florence. Their volumes bound in vellum and parchment and decorated with intricate designs are sold around the world. Their clients boasted Popes and royalty.

But, times have changed for the master bookbinder and many of his colleagues. The artisans of Florence are vanishing from a city where once there were thousands. Over the past few decades alone, hundreds of craftsmen have fled the city centre.

Once, it was different. In the Middle Ages, Florence was a beacon for craftsmen. The promise of plentiful commissions drew them from all around Italy and overseas. Forming 'corporazioni' or trade guilds, they created a city that hummed with productivity. A network of 'botteghe' developed in which artists like Brunelleschi and Donatello were trained. Their work made 'Firenze' famous around the world.

But today, little of that network has endured. The few who remain are found mostly in the 'Oltrarno' - the 'other side of the Arno'. Not for them the golden triangle in the river's north - with its Duomo, Uffizi gallery and luxurious fashion emporia. Instead the south of the Arno is their stamping ground - the

suburbs of Santo Spirito, where Enrico Giannini is based, and San Frediano. Home to the silk workers in medieval times, the area has remained working class for centuries.

A short walk down Via dei Velluti is the workshop of master wood carver and antique furniture restorer Luigi Mecocci. He's chiselling an intricate leaf design on a wooden sconce that will go on a wall as a candelabra. By his workbench is a life-size Madonna carrying the infant Jesus. Hundreds of years old, she's missing hands and her colours have worn away. Mecocci has been painstakingly restoring her for more than 30 years.

"When you reconstruct the body of a work of art, and breathe life and soul into it again, for an artisan, it can't get any better - it's just the best," he says.

At 74 years of age, Luigi Mecocci has worked in the Oltrarno for 53 years. Most of that time has been spent in the same bottega - a treasure trove of legless cherubs and speckled mirrors. And though it's been a struggle to make ends meet, the 'restauratore' or restorer says his colleagues in the area have made it worthwhile.

"We even used to host lunches here in the middle of the street and invite all our friends and colleagues. We invited the police as well because otherwise they wouldn't let us do it...the artisans were



Artisan wood carver and furniture restorer, Luigi Mecocci, drafting antique furniture designs, in his workshop on Via dei Velluti.



Clockwise from top left: Artisan violin maker and restorer (liutaio), Aldo Santini, delicately repairs a 17th century violin; artisan book-binder (rilegatore) Enrico Giannini, at work in his workshop; and artisan wood carver and furniture restorer, Luigi Mecocci.

made like that," he laughs.

Luigi Mecocci remembers when there were 15 or 16 restorers in the area. Now there are just three. The local authorities give many reasons for the decline. The pedestrianisation of the city centre, interfering with deliveries and passing trade, landlords' desire for higher-paying tenants and the economic crisis are just a few. A more enduring problem may also be that we no longer have the taste or the time for beauty.

Still, a tiny few artisans are managing to survive, and even thrive.

'A due passi,' or a few steps away from Enrico Giannini's bookbindery, Aldo Santini is hard at work. The tones from his bottega reveal his vocation. Arpeggios and scales float up and down the street.

Aldo is a liutaio. He makes and restores violins, violas and cellos. Inside his workshop, anxious musicians put their instruments through their paces. They hover as he makes minute adjustments to a bow or bridge.

"Restoring an old instrument, if the work is well done, you bring it to new life completely," he explains in careful English. "The purpose is to make the instrument exactly as it was, respecting and not changing what it was."

And, it seems he is well paid for his time. A restored violin, depending on its maker and state of repair, can fetch from a few thousand to hundreds of thousands of dollars.



"Old violins from the 17th or 18th century are better than a new violin, if they are in good condition," he explains.

Aldo is a Colombian immigrant, who came to Florence to join his Italian wife. He vigorously defends his new home, when I repeat the local artisans' complaints.

"I think it is a problem being anything at the moment," he says. "You can be an engineer, architect or artisan. It's always the same because demand is not high so you have to be the best and offer a good product."

The artisans have been the mainstay of the Oltrarno community for centuries. They relied on each other for companionship and expertise. Their business attracted others to the area, dependent on their custom. Now as more and more doors close, there are fewer reasons for other residents to remain.

It's 7pm at the bottega and Enrico Giannini is still working. On his wooden bench lie his latest creations.

There's a jewellery box clad in shimmering blue sharkskin. Nearby is a book on Tuscany, covered in a leather mosaic. Each piece is unique. The designs are his own. The finished items are the product of hours of painstaking labour. But the beauty and originality of this work may not be enough to ensure he keeps afloat.

"Nobody wants now. They don't need desk sets or photo albums. There's the digital camera. You can put everything in your computer. So a lot of things are changing."

But, the heir of five generations of entrepreneurs is made of strong stuff.

Like the artisans through the centuries, Enrico Giannini is using the skills he's learnt over a lifetime, handed down to him over generations, to find new markets in a changing world. He hopes the products he's working on will help him survive in the computer age.

"It is different to read on the computer as to have in your hand a nice book, with its nice shape and good printing. So I hope, maybe at the end, the people will be tired of having everything virtual and they will be back. I hope so," he says with a laugh.



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