

Mary Jo Madda

Coluccio Salutati Award

I have always held a personal goal of “living my life in color,” an idea that stems from my complementary need to create art. Every project begins with creating a palette, a range of colors from which to create landscapes, portraits, and still-lives. As an art student, I always search for my next multi-faceted observation of life, my next presentation of the dichotomies of human interaction. Like many, I often allow myself to get wrapped up in the complexities of everyday life – that is, until I began to observe life through the eyes of an Italian.

When I decided to live in an apartment for the duration of the semester, I knew that I was consciously placing myself in a position that required more physical effort to integrate into Italian society, a challenge that I was more than willing to take. However, looking back on the past three months, I realize that my integration resulted less from my own effort and more from the openness of the culture surrounding me. For example, my most memorable meal was a quiet dinner with my Italian neighbors, Juge and Leonardo, who sell fresh fruits and vegetables every morning at our neighborhood market. Before dinner, I watched Juge create a multitude of new tastes with simple combinations of ingredients. Her own palette lay spread out before her, an array of what I consider to be the world’s freshest and healthiest produce, and as I watched her make culinary miracles, she shared her beliefs in the success of simplicity, the importance of allowing each individual food to speak for itself. The secret is to utilize the strengths of the ingredients rather than overpower them with a sensory overload. As I listened, I realized how poignant this idea truly was in the greater scheme of the Italian lifestyle.

Juge’s words echoed in my mind when I later met my first Southern Italian, a student named Ervis who works in a Florentine café to support his family and friends back in Puglia. Just

one look over the café counter, just one “bongiorno” led us to form a friendship that has taught me more about the versatility of Italian culture than I could ever learn from any guidebook or class. We have had conversations with subjects ranging from the value of family in Italy to the benefits of growing up in the south. Each one has led me closer and closer to the conclusion that Italian individuals function successfully as a society as a result of collectively placing importance on the basics, such as creating a good meal or holding a satisfying conversation. After telling him that his situation seemed so blissful in comparison to the complexities of the American lifestyle, I allowed his quizzical “perche” to linger in the air for a brief moment. This one word caused me to recognize the brilliant simplicity of the culture I was beginning to understand, and in turn, I knew that understanding this “minimalist” approach meant emulating these values in my own lifestyle.

As each Florentine interaction built on the previous, I found myself breaking down my study abroad experience into its most basic colors, into those shades of a country where life moves slowly. Last week, I learned that the Florentine painter Caravaggio was notorious for using only three colors in his palette to create amazing works of art. My experience of Italian culture has been the same – my palette retains only several colors, yet each one accentuates the others, furthering their brilliance. The deep red of Juge’s “pomodori,” which greet me every morning as I depart for school. The roasted brown of my daily orzo, supplemented by a discussion of the differences between northern and southern Italy. The color of the golden dusk light that bounces off of the orange facades and green shutters of stacked apartments, illuminating the Florentine cityscape on my way home. With each passing day in Florence, I put forth interest, yet it felt seemingly unconscious, a desire to integrate into this new world, as organic as a new palette of colors to experiment with on the canvas of my experience abroad.