

Elvira Ibragimova – Coluccio Salutati Essay Writing competition

Yesterday I stood in the Coliseum and looked down into the center. The exposed pit reveals the labyrinth beneath. From this labyrinth, a carefully planned network of doomed entertainers would emerge to amuse cheering masses, a few moments before their inevitable deaths. In the central bay, the top politician would sit overlooking this crafted spectacle and all around him tiered into a loose caste system, his subjects would delight in the madness of the demonstration below. How do I know this? I read it on a plaque. How did I read it? It was in English. Despite the inconsistency I still shut my eyes and tried to hear the cheers of the onlookers, the roars of lions, the screams of the gladiator slaves. I tried to smell the sweat of the excited spectators, the stink of the cooped up animals, the fear of the fighters. I tried - but it's not easy with Joe Minnesota yelling to his wife Judith to get out the map and the tour guide with a thick Russian accent speaking in English to a group of Ukrainian tourists. Earlier that day a guard repeatedly and comically shushed everyone at the Sistine chapel. I suddenly missed his presence, willing for him to be there, issuing a blanket shush policy at the colossal theater, a silence such that I could use the building and the building alone to be able to snatch a minute understanding of some remote bit of true Italian culture. I sighed and shook my head; I thought "These dreadful tourists!" and I clutched my map in anger; the hand holding the camera dropped as my view of the pit was obscured by other camera toting enthusiasts; at the time I did not fully understand that this was my thought: why can't all these annoying tourists leave so that I may be the only annoying tourist here?

I am an architecture student, and thus have mostly come here to see great ancient buildings here in Italy. These silent witnesses of history are the definitive markers symbolizing the fact that I am no longer in Brooklyn – I am in a new place, an old place and a place that holds as many mysteries as it does answers. In a city like New York, where the very magnitude of cultural dilution is what defines its nature, the thing to come and see is the diverse mass of

people. Italy is a physically magnificent museum of history – and yet every day it becomes diluted by the crowds of tourists. Coming to Italy and seeing this dilution made me seriously rethink what I assumed about the rest of the world. Globalization has covered most fronts. Every place I want to see is also available to the rest of the world, and the rest of the world is already there and has booked the best rooms and reserved the last table. At orientation they encouraged me to practice my Italian outside of class, yet all the shopkeepers speak to me in English; they warned me in my guidebooks about rude locals, yet everyone has been painfully nice; they smartly advised me to stoically ignore the unwanted attentions of pushy Italian men – still waiting. The monuments are surrounded by tourist trap eateries. The magnificent views of the city are to be navigated to through masses of people determined to see the same thing as you. A lonely graffito on the back wall of the centuries old Uffizi gallery reads, “Tourists are destroying our city.”

My experience here has been wonderful – but has it been Italian? Is the dilution what I have come here to understand? Which holds the lesson – the cupola of the Duomo that has overlooked the unfolding of incredible history or the elbows I receive in my sides from Joe and Judith as they push past me to admire the view? I have come here to see the great architecture and incredibly, find myself navigating away from it in order to appreciate it. The paradox is that I am here contributing to this peculiarity. The past three months have been spent resolving within my mind the perception I had had of Europe and the reality that I have encountered. It has been a sobering lesson in naivety and a humbling revelation about my status in the world. I am a visitor and might never truly see Italian culture for what it is or what it was; a true experience of Italian culture will never be handed to me on a silver platter. I have to work for it. Perhaps I need to reorganize my foolish assumptions and learn to love the dilution as much as I love the one in my hometown; perhaps Italy has newer things to offer me than centuries old buildings.