

Art Trails in Umbria

Carolyn Chown followed in the footsteps of Saint Francis and the great 14th century Renaissance masters while living in a medieval hill town in northern Umbria.

July 2006

Rising out of the morning mist one moment, bathed in brilliant sunshine the next, the medieval hill town of Montone in northern Umbria has a "Brigadoon-like" quality. As you climb the cobbled pathways, you look over the green landscape of Umbria.

I stayed for three weeks in May at the top of the hill, in the old Convent of San Francesco. We were nine, including our leader and mentor, Lucia Parrella who leads ART INCONTRO, a cultural program based - on this occasion - in Umbria.

Our art appreciation began at home in Montone in the old church of San Francesco. Located within the walls of our cloister, the church dates back to the 14th century and is now a museum holding many old frescoes and other treasures.

In the neighbouring town of Umbertide, we sat in a 13th century church looking at a restored altarpiece by the Renaissance painter, Luca Signorelli, while listening to free classical music concerts. On our way to Arezzo, we stopped at the tiny hill town of Monterchi to view Piero della Francesca's beautiful fresco, the Madonna del Parto. And we followed the trail of Saint Francis as well – especially to Assisi to view the great fresco cycles by Giotto and Lorenzetti.

The wonder of Umbria is the way in which art is often still located in the churches. There are country churches where, once you have asked the local farmer's wife for the key, you can stand in wonder at the fading frescoes.

In nearby Città di Castello we found much to enjoy and visited the town on two separate occasions. Our excursions took in the elegant shops on the Corso Vittorio Emanuele as well as the weekly markets in the main piazza. The wonderful old Palazzo Vitelli, which houses famous art works of central Italian masters, was another highlight.

At the local trattoria, just off the main piazza, we sampled the local truffles with homemade gnocchi. Earlier that day, we had watched women weaving traditional patterns in linen on wooden looms dating back to 1900. After lunch, we were fascinated and charmed by the printer at the Tipografia Gifani Donati, an establishment that has been operating since 1799. The collection of Alberto Burri, the renowned artist and sculptor of the Post War period and a native son of Città di Castello, was also included in our itinerary.

During our three weeks in Umbria, we followed the art trails of the old master painters; Luca Signorelli, Piero della Francesca, Lorenzetti, Giotto, Fra Angelico and Della Robbia. At the same time, we also covered much of the Saint Francis of Assisi trail. These two paths lead us to many of the celebrated places of northern Umbria and southern Tuscany - Assisi, Spello, Gubbio, Perugia, Cortona, Arezzo, Sansepolcro and Città di Castello.

The hill towns of Umbria seem locked in a time zone, yet they are still very much within the life of Italy. For a visitor to have a space in these little towns is to absorb some of that timelessness and tranquillity. It's a way of stepping off the world for a short space and absorbing the atmosphere of history.

For more information, email lucia@artincontro.com.au and request an ART INCONTRO UMBRIA itinerary.