

Art Incontro Umbria Print Workshop

For artist and printmaker, Kathryn Orton, visiting a 200 year-old print studio in northern Umbria left a lasting impression.

June 2001

In May 2000, I participated in the inaugural ART INCONTRO UMBRIA program organised by Lucia Parrella, an Australian-born Italian artist whose interest is in printmaking, artist's books and drawing. We were based in Montone, one of the beautiful hill towns of the Upper Tiber Valley. For three weeks we experienced life in central Italy, enjoying drawing the landscape, making books, looking at art and visiting workshops. One of the most important parts of the program was the opportunity to meet with and learn from local craft practitioners in the area.

One day during the program, we travelled to Città di Castello to visit a printmaking workshop, Tipografia Grifani Donati, run by Gianni and Adriana Ottaviani. Up a narrow staircase, through a modest door and entry, was the most amazing print workshop with facilities for etching, woodblock, typesetting, lithography and bookbinding. It is a commercial printery run by Gianni, a seventh generation printer, who also enjoys collaborating with artists on their work.

Gianni's family has operated the workshop since 1799. With Lucia translating for us, Gianni gave us a short history of the building which began as a church with a convent above. Next, it was a jail; the wrought iron bars have stayed on the windows; then a store house for food, and finally a print workshop with the family living in the front rooms. Today, the original church's arched doorway opens onto a fruit and vegetable market leading out to a back alley.

The front office has framed photos of the previous printers, including Leonida - Gianni's great-grandmother who, he claimed, was the best lithographer of her day and taught at the art school in Città di Castello.

The first book was printed in Città di Castello in 1538 and the workshop became involved in printing laws for the city after the powerful Vitelli family came into conflict with the church in Rome.

Today, the workshop still has drawers and drawers of lead type and an array of typeset pages bound with string ready to run. There were beautiful old woodblocks - pear and boxwood - with very detailed images carved precisely into them, arranged on one press. End grain blocks as well as long grain for large letters.

Gianni gave us a demonstration of all the print methods, inking up an alphabet set in lead type and running it through a small proofing press. Then, we were shown three other mechanical processes for wood or metal relief blocks. He inked up a small copper plate to demonstrate the intaglio process and we later discovered it was an original 18th century engraving. In another room was a beautiful Torino lithography press with a wooden star wheel and a foot lever. Framed litho prints and a whimsical series of Pinocchio woodcuts lined the walls of this room.

Adriana is the bookbinder and Lucia was able to organise for a small group of us to make a classic bound book under her instruction. It took three more sessions to complete our books, with the workshop supplying all the materials, Adriana providing the expert instruction and Lucia facilitating the process and translating. We came away from the first visit with a little portfolio of proofs. And from our bookbinding workshop, we took away a classically bound drawing book, with a cloth-covered, curved spine.

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