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In Tuscany, the Revealing of a Forbidden Love



Dave Yoder for The New York Times

Christmas Mass at the cathedral in Prato, where Fra Filippo Lippi painted the frescoes that are behind the altar.

By LAURIE LICO ALBANESE Published: March 2, 2008

PRATO'S all-time favorite scandal — the love affair of the local Renaissance painter Fra Filippo Lippi, who also happened to be a monk, and his model, a beautiful nun — has for centuries overshadowed the spectacular work that was born of their romance. But no longer. Against Prato's Tuscan backdrop of Romanesque and Gothic churches adorned with local albarese stone and rich green marble, Lippi's magnificent frescoes in the Cattedrale di Santo Stefano are newly restored after seven years under scaffolding.

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Map Prato, Italy

The luminous masterpieces depict momentous events in the lives of St. Stephen and John the Baptist. They are rich with emotion, innovative perspective and brilliant swells of color. And they are, at least for now, off the beaten path of the tour circuit.

Prato is a city few Americans visit, and it's a shame. The 30-minute bus (or train) from Florence winds through a sprawling industrial community of 175,000, but the 13th-century stone walls and watchtowers enclose a beautifully preserved pristine city that is easily walked, filled with charming trattorias and pizzerias, and host to enough small inns to make it perfectly hospitable.

The second-largest city in Tuscany, after Florence, Prato has been a capital of the thriving Italian wool textile trade for nearly 500 years and is home to the Museo del Tessuto, a leading textiles museum; the Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci, a modern art museum; and the behemoth Swabian-style castle built by Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor, in the 13th century. The city also happens to be the birthplace of biscotti di Prato (more on that later).

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Lippi arrived here in 1452 after his patrons, the Medici family, bailed him out of prison on a false swindling charge. He spent the next dozen years living and working near Santo Stefano in the center of the old city and served briefly as chaplain of the Santa Margherita convent. It was there that he first laid eyes on Lucrezia Buti, the young nun whom, according to legend, he snatched off the streets and took to his workshop where she became his lover and bore him a son, then a daughter.

Lippi's scandalous appetites have at times drawn attention away from his art. But in 2001, the Italian cultural heritage ministry put 1.25 million euros into restoring the frescoes. The restorers were careful to preserve the natural elements of aging, including the loss of details Lippi had painted after the fresco plaster had dried, while painstakingly returning facial expressions, gestures and colors to their earlier depths.

Collaborating on a historical novel about the artist, I came to Prato with my co-author, Laura Morowitz, to walk in Lippi's footsteps and study the work he'd done in a frenzy of desire, artistic discovery and fear of economic ruin. Day after day, I stood in the nearly deserted chapel behind the main altar of Santo Stefano and soaked in the detail of Lippi's six panels of fresco scenes, his lunettes and the large stained-glass window he designed. I was rarely bothered by the other visitors.

Lippi's iconic figure of Salome dancing at King Herod's banquet has been recently adopted by Prato as a symbol of the city, now seen on brochures, banners and posters. Knowing he modeled the temptress on his lover, I gazed at Salome's floating figure and contemplated what had compelled the artist to paint the same woman as both his Madonna and the girl who delivers John the Baptist's head on a platter.

On my final visit to the cathedral, I was accompanied by a local historian, Simona Biagianti, who took me on a rare climb into the old bell tower, behind the locked gates of the Cappella della Sacra Cintola and to the edge of the sacred exterior pulpit where, one day each year, hundreds of thousands of visitors throng the square below to see the belt of the Virgin Mary displayed by the bishop. This relic, the green sash the Virgin is said to have handed to St. Thomas at the moment of her assumption into heaven, has been twice venerated by the Vatican, and is kept in the cathedral under several locks and keys.

"Sept. 8, on the feast day of the Virgin, is the best time to come to Prato," said Ms. Biagianti, who lives in an apartment overlooking the Piazza del [Duomo](#), where locals congregate near the fountain and church steps during the passeggiata, the traditional stroll on weekend evenings.

I ate at a number of charming rustic restaurants in Prato, but my most memorable culinary discovery was those cookies. After four days of finding a plate of delicate almond biscotti on my breakfast table at the Borgo al Cornio B & B, I finally asked where I could buy them. I was directed to [Biscottificio Antonio Mattei](#) (Via Ricasoli, 20; 39-0574-25756), where the first biscotti di Prato on record were baked in 1848 and praised by the writer Hermann Hesse during a visit in 1901. For 7 euros a bag (\$10.50 at \$1.50 to the euro), I carried away several bags of this blue-papered local treasure and an earful on the distinction between the traditional twice-baked biscotti and the chewier cantucci.

The Pratese, it turns out, are nearly as proud of their biscotti as they are of their Lippi.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The closest major city to Prato is Florence. Trains run throughout the day from Santa Maria Novella station in Florence to Prato's **Central Station** or the **Stazione di Porta al Serraglio** in the historic district. Although Santo Stefano is open daily, most museums in Prato are closed on Tuesdays. For travel information in English, visit the helpful Web site of Monash University (www.ita.monash.edu/visit/tourist.html).

WHERE TO STAY

Borgo al Cornio B & B (Via Convevole da Prato, 30; 39-0574-440222; www.borgoalcornio.it) offers six clean comfortable rooms with rates starting at 45 euros (\$67.50 at \$1.50 to the euro) a night for two.

Hotel Flora (Via Cairoli, 31; 39-0574-33521; www.hotelflora.info) features a rooftop terrace and double room starting at 120 euros for a two-night stay. Many staff members speak excellent English.

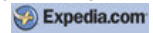
Giardino Hotel (Via Magnolfi, 2-6; 39-0574-606588; www.giardinohotel.com), just off

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the Piazza del Duomo, offers singles starting at 50 euros and doubles at 70 euros.

WHERE TO EAT

Aroma di Vino (Via Santo Stefano, 24; 39-0574-433800) is a cozy place directly behind the cathedral. Don't pass up the delicious cappuccino.

Bar Formica (Via G. Mazzoni, 9; 39-0574-24608) is primarily a tobacco shop, but you can pick up a chocolate or a sandwich, have a fresh cup of espresso and make your local calls from the public phone.

Caffè Bacchino (Via Cairoli, 56; 39-0574-401533) serves a daily pasta lunch plate for 3 euros and is open through the siesta.

Osteria Cibbè (Piazza Mercatale, 49; 39-0574-607509) is a friendly, rustic restaurant serving a delicious pappa al pomodoro, a thick tomato and bread soup that's a local specialty.

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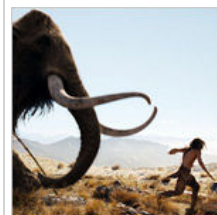
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