

OLD GROWTH FLORENCE

*by Giovanni Fusetti
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Ah, Florence!

When I tell people I live in Florence, their faces light up as if they are seeing masterpieces of Renaissance Art in front of their eyes. They literally “ahh” with pleasure, an ecstatic response. I am used to this, but I am a little annoyed every time, because they are, all, missing something.

Like all Italians, I grew up immersed in the awareness and the experience of the unique artistic heritage of my country. Italians are proud of the Renaissance, *il Rinascimento*, and of our amazing variety of *città d'arte*, cities of art. It's fascinating to realize that a huge percentage of Unesco artistic heritage sites are in Italy. The world recognizes and celebrates this heritage and this is wonderful. Italy is also home of splendid natural beauties: coasts, lakes, high mountains, forests and national parks.

I learned in school about this glorious artistic and natural heritage, and visited a lot of it. I also studied natural sciences and ecology at university. But still, just like those people responding to the word “Florence,” I was missing one crucial fact about the land I come from.

Later in life, while traveling in Northern California, I visited an old growth forest. I had studied the notion of ecological climax in books, but an old growth forest was only an intellectual concept to me. Now, as I was walking among the coastal redwoods, my mind and body went into a kind of awe and shock. I was experiencing the forest as a fact, a phenomenon, an experience of my senses. Presently, my awe turned into grief when I realized that, in my country, we have no old growth forest left. We have individual ancient trees that have survived in specific locations, often protected by the traditions, stories, and folklore that kept them safe through generations of logging and landscaping. Every region has its list of *alberi monumentali*, monumental trees. We have old regrowth forest in protected areas, but no untouched native forest. It's all gone.

I started following this question: is there a connection between being the cradle of the Renaissance and the complete loss of old growth forest?

Old growth is not just an ecological term, it is also a state of the mind and a dimension of the soul. It is a way of perceiving the world. The Italian language doesn't even have an equivalent word. We use the words “native,” “primordial,” “century-old,” or “monumental.” Same problem for the word

“wilderness.” I can’t translate to my language the field of meaning of this word. I have to explain it through a combination of other words. I eventually visited other old growth forests in North America, New Zealand, and Australia. Every time it was the same feeling of awe turning to grief.

When a student of mine came to Florence from New Zealand, he made this point: “The difference between your country and mine is that in Italy the oldest thing is a building; in New Zealand, it’s a tree.”

We have old monuments in Italy, but no old growth. What are the consequences of this to our national culture? What have our psyches lost by losing old growth? Can anyone and any culture truly grow up without elder trees?

The city of Florence invests a tremendous amount of money, effort and care into the preservation of its antiquities. At the same time, the contemporary urban and ecological system is in critical condition. Many school buildings are falling apart due to budget cuts, and the school system is obsolete due the lack of real reforms (ironically, in Florence, extracurricular activities like art are vanishing). The pollution due to city traffic ranks among the highest in Europe. The urban landscape sprawls around the birthplace of the Renaissance, consuming the land forever. The unstoppable development erodes the soil and the society that lives upon it.

We could extend this observation to the whole country: in Italy, we preserve the past but don’t care for the present. We care even less for the future.

The word “aesthetic” comes from a Greek word meaning: “the perception of the senses.” Its opposite, anesthetic, is what numbs the senses. The tourists that flock to Florence for the aesthetic beauty of the Renaissance have a distorted experience. They must be in a state of anesthesia for the entire journey, from the departure airport to the experience of airline travel itself; then landing in Florence and driving through a ring of urban vomit—the environmental disaster of post-WWII development that rings the historic center of the city. And this is the deal offered by the tourism business: a carefully packaged cocktail of anaesthetics.

As James Hillman says, this is our core problem: the numbness of our true aesthetic responses. Our ability to perceive the world and respond appropriately suffers from a kind of cognitive dissonance or, to borrow an expression from Pasolini, *una piccola e intensa malattia mentale*, a small and intense mental illness. This disturbance does not allow us to keep our senses open to true aesthetics, which would involve more than just sighs of admiration in the face of what we see. Tourists driving from the Florence airport towards the aesthetic delight of the historic center should shout in outrage at the utter ugliness of the contemporary city. The fact is, they don’t.

Florence is both the highest manifestation of the Italian Renaissance and the symbol of Italian architecture. It’s an archetype of classic civic beauty, but

there are other aspects of it we ignore. The Renaissance idea of beauty implied the superiority of man over nature. The city, the ultimate manifestation of human genius, was actively separated from nature, a space of chaos and unchained primitive forces. The Renaissance cultivated and celebrated the ability of human ingenuity to reduce the wilderness to fundamental principles and control it. Proportions, perspective, the *regola aurea*, the golden rule, all allowed man to rework nature into idealized shapes. It is a transcendent aesthetic that looks for the transposition of life into abstract forms, forms that—though beautiful—are actually rigid because they crystallize the flow into a structure.

This mindset not only made the artistic Renaissance possible, but set the stage for another fundamental Florentine historical event: the birth of the modern banking system.

It is not an overstatement to say Florence was the cradle of capitalism. Banking developed in Florence as an elaborate system to extend credit through bills of exchange. This made possible the transformation of a market of goods to a market of credits. Traders became bankers and capitalism was born. Ingenious practices were developed: interest rates, investment, venture capital, bankruptcy, fractional reserve and so on. While very practical for everyday trading businesses, these abstractions—though brilliant—laid the foundation for the colossal problem capitalism has created: a huge debt with our planet.

The priority of Financial Capital over Natural Capital is another manifestation of the Renaissance meme of the superiority of man over nature. The *Giardini all'Italiana*, the Italian Gardens, are a concrete example of this meme: the organic, chaotic flow of wild nature is subjugated into the geometry of lines, squares, and circles; human compositions that require a tremendous amount of thought and work to ensure the garden keeps that pure form.

A vision of beauty that implies the necessity of taming nature inevitably leads to the extinction of wilderness and the loss of old growth. Tuscany possesses amazing artistic beauty, but nothing has been left to its natural, primordial flow. All natural resources are managed. All the native wilderness is lost.

Nothing is more different from a managed landscape than an old growth forest, where the organic process of nature creating connections and interactions is maximized into something that, though looking very chaotic and untamed, is actually highly productive and biodiverse, resilient and self-sustaining. It manifests a different kind of harmony.

If we could recover a sense of beauty that is connected with nature as well as with human creations, we would be outraged at the destructive process of turning natural capital into pixels and pollution. We could realize that each wildflower growing in the suburban wastelands around Florence is embodying another rank of beauty, as perfect as the *Basilica of Santa Maria Novella*. And possibly even more, because that flower is alive—transforming, impermanent,

organic—in relationship with a multitude of other beings and forces, able to reproduce itself and evolve by intimate necessity.

We admire Renaissance art as a climax of beauty, aesthetics and human achievement, but we forget that this climax implies the control and eventually the destruction of all that is wild.

We have arrived at the paradox of Art being above Nature and above Life itself.

What if nature, with the vitality and fecundity of all its forms and manifestations, could return to its fundamental position in our heart, body, mind and culture? Then old growth forests would be our most precious and beautiful cathedrals, and every newborn child in Florence would be more important than all the art works in museums.

But this is forgotten, and, we live in a country with no present and no future, caring for old beauty while new ugliness is unfolding all around us.

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