

# eave of con- struction

by sam deleo

Apart from the gulfs of time and thousands of miles, I sensed the distance of beauty from my first visit to Italy this summer, which I suppose is how all beauty seems to one in retrospect — hazy, beyond most words, dreamlike, a bit melancholic.

I had stayed with the family of my friends in Ascoli Piceno, a town two hours northeast of Rome, about 30 miles equidistant from the Sibilline Mountains to the west and the Adriatic Sea to the east. Though small in scale, Ascoli represents Italy in grand style with its hospitality, architecture, culture and cuisine. One afternoon while bicycling, we came across a remarkably fit old friend of the family's peddling in the opposite direction. We parked our bikes and the old man inquired about my friend's father. The sun had creased his brown skin, but his eyes still shined out from his face like tiny pools in a desert, and he had a healthy spread of cloud-white hair.

The topic shifted, at least as near as I could tell and with the help of my friend's occasional translation, to a shop nearby that had been in the man's family for generations. He detailed how the structure had fallen into disrepair, how his family, which lived above the shop, depended on it for their livelihood. Shortly after the man's family began the project of refurbishing the shop, they discovered the ruins of a Roman-era structure underneath the shop walls, to their great dismay. The man shook his head and shrugged his shoulders while recalling this, as if he were experiencing the discovery and the family's ensuing dilemma all over again.

Government subsidies in Italy, as well as a sizable portion of funding from the European Union, are set aside for the historical preservation of architecture, art and cultural landmarks. Since the funds are allocated and readily available for this use, the laws enforcing preservation are strict and prohibit any construction or reconstruction on top of an existing historical structure. Of course, there are existing historical structures in virtually every block of the country, which doesn't make life easy for the average Italian remodeler.

When his son and other family members made their discovery, the man continued in a lower voice, they knew they had to think fast. They decided, the man said, quickly looking over his shoulder as if a spy from an Architectural Interpol might be within earshot, to fix their shop as quickly as possible, before anyone could find out what they'd done. His family could not have afforded the alternative of a long, drawn out, costly process that may have ended in them not being granted permission to do the work at all. It was a decision born out of necessity, so there was neither regret nor shame in the man's explanation of it.

The conversation turned to the architecture of the buildings surrounding where we stood, and the old man's tone now became almost exuberant. He obviously knew a great deal about the subject, and began giving us a finger-pointed tour of the neighborhood, accompanied by brief descriptions of the highlights. Finally, he pointed up to the eave of a building behind us. It was about 500 years old, he said, and had been incorporated into structures that had come and gone since then on the site. It was made of stone and had elaborately sculpted supports interspersed along its length under the roof. The lines of the stonework in the supports were both smooth and modestly ornate, adorned in leaf-like acanthus details. With the afternoon sunlight and shadows trading along its upper stretch, it seemed less a reminder of a past ideal than of how something can remain valuable when it is made with care and craftsmanship. After viewing it so many times over the years of his life, the man claimed he still often stopped to admire the eave when he passed it.

When I was young and looked at the geographic globe in my bedroom, I used to imagine that the lands of the world were somehow physically distinguished by the people that lived in them and by the languages they spoke. So that Germany's dark thickets of trees served as jagged consonants across the land's spine. Africa, complementing the skin of many of its peoples, was the kind of dark mystery you might only feel from the thick of the bush or in the pounding of one's heart, hidden but all-sustaining. Spain seemed to me a moment of sunlit dust settling in the calm after a bullfight. Italy, like the Italian language, was a fertile quarry bed peppered with moist accents of olive groves, vineyards, meadows, sunflowers, song and sun.

As I grew older, of course, I understood anthropology and geology were two separate subjects. Yet, it is possible to think of beauty not in terms of things themselves, but in our relationships to them.

When I think of all the sites I saw this summer, perhaps they seem out of a dream only in comparison to my lack of relationship to what I'm able to see around me today; maybe this is also the source of their sweet sadness.