

# Fine Art student Camilla Laing-Tate explores Italy's contemporary art scene made possible by winning the Wilhelmina Barns-Graham Travel to Italy award

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View from Torre Giunigi in Lucca, Tuscany

Camilla Laing-Tate, a BA(Hons) Fine Art student won last year's Wilhelmina Barns-Graham Travel to Italy award. Below is a summary from Camilla about her experience travelling through Italy and exploring the Italian contemporary art scene.

*Words and images by Camilla Laing Tate*

Known world-wide for its Renaissance art and architecture, Italy is definitely a regularly visited place when it comes to historic creativity. However, that's not what I went searching for when I set off to Tuscany in September. My aim was to find out what the contemporary art scene in Italy has to offer and whether work being made today is as valued and influential as work made hundreds of years ago. After travelling through Tuscany, Umbria, Rome and Turin, I can safely say that it is!

Within only a couple of days of arriving, I reached a beautiful Tuscan town called San Gimignano and was surrounded by contemporary art wherever I looked. Here, they have developed a programme called ‘Arte All’ Arte,’ which involves scattering permanent site-specific installations around the town; the philosophy being to put them anywhere and everywhere: in tunnels, in churches and in fountains. The motivation behind this programme is to continue the municipality’s traditional commitment to art by bridging the old with the new. I felt like I was going on an Easter egg hunt but rather than finding chocolate, I came across works by the likes of Anish Kapoor and the influential Italian artist Jannis Kounellis. It was fascinating to see how the different works responded directly to their environments, depending upon them for both aesthetic and conceptual reasons. It was a definite highlight of my trip and laid the ground for what was to come.



Installation by Luciano Fabro entitled ‘Italia all’Asta’ in Palazzo Duomo of San Gimignano, Tuscany

On to Umbria and the art-oozing town of Citta di Castello, the birthplace of contemporary Informale artist Alberto Burri, whose work was incredibly influential during the 21<sup>st</sup>



Century. In celebration of him, two large Foundations (one of which is an enormous ex-tobacco factory painted entirely black upon the artist's request) have been dedicated to exhibiting works which span his entire career. Everyday materials, holes, tears and sacks form his textural canvases, whilst his use of fire as a paintbrush and plastic as a surface challenge preconceived ideas of what can be defined as painting or sculpture. The sense of movement and energy that exudes from both his works and the galleries themselves creates a unique atmosphere in the spaces and shows the fascinating development of over 40 years' worth of his work. Breaking boundaries and challenging our preconceptions proved to be a recurring theme in this town and was something clearly evident in a ceramics exhibition I came across. Set in a fresco-covered villa, the ceramic works here (including two by Lucio Fontana) were driven as much by ideas as by appearance and so dissolved any distinction between them and Fine Art, whilst also highlighting the huge potential and versatility of the medium.



A piece by Michaelangelo Pistoletto in Galleria delle Arti, Citta di Castello, Umbria

Rome was the only place I had any pre-conceived ideas about when it came to contemporary art galleries and my expectations were quite high. Whilst I won't say I was disappointed (perhaps I'd been spoiled by what I'd already seen!), I didn't find the work in the main galleries as interesting as I thought I would. So I'm actually going to talk about the contemporary exhibition I stumbled across in the Vatican of all places, which was curated by none other than the Pope himself! Safe to say I wasn't expecting to see such a range of brilliant work here and perhaps this element of surprise contributed to why I enjoyed it so

much. Commissioned as part of an effort to build a 'bridge' between old and new art with religion as the binding connection, this impressive display contained work by Kandinsky, Dali, Henry Moore and of course, the ever-present Alberto Burri who is undoubtedly the seminal artist of Central Italy. I have to admit that I found some of the choices quite funny and at points ironic, especially when I saw Francis Bacon's painting of the Pope. It was as though the true meaning behind the work hadn't been fully understood but because it appeared to be religious, it had been included anyway. Nevertheless, it was interesting to see these works in this context and displayed only a few hundred metres from Michelangelo's astounding Sistine Chapel. 'Bridges' don't get much smaller than that!



Through the fountains at the Villa d'Este in Tivoli, just outside of Rome

My interest in the Arte Povera movement was a main part of why I was so excited to go to Italy. Upon arriving in Turin, where the movement was founded, I was amazed by the number of galleries dedicated not only to Arte Povera, but to contemporary art across the board. From a 'Living Art Park' to a contemporary gallery housed inside a castle just outside of the city, Turin was the perfect way to end my trip. I was lucky enough to see work after work by some of my favourite artists, such as Mario Merz and Giovanni Anselmo, all set within extraordinary surroundings and located throughout the city itself. The art section in my guide booklet told me to: 'look upwards when walking around Turin,' which proved to be wise advice and I was rewarded by discovering art everywhere.



'Igloo Fontana' by Mario Merz in the city of Turin

After six weeks of travelling, it was the abundant, active and diverse nature of contemporary art in Italy which led me to the conclusion that it is undoubtedly an important part of today's culture and furthermore, integral to the identity of the country as a whole.