

American Verismo, WWII Oral Histories, Portraiture, and the Documentary Genre

By Jerry Ross, painter

My current research interests focus on the aesthetics and the philosophical theory of “dal vero” or “direct from life.” In painting this refers to Cezanne’s dictum to “always work directly from the motif” but derives more fundamentally from the Italian I Macchiaioli School originating in Florence, Tuscany and, later, in Italian opera, in which it was called “verismo.”

My thesis is that there is a strong connection between my American verismo painting style, my WWII interviews with US Army soldiers who fought on the Gothic Line in Italy, my portraits of Italians from the same area in Italy, and the veristic documentary film genre, especially some recent films about which I will be making comments and observations. The connective thread running through these disparate topics is Risorgimento aesthetics, especially the writings of Benedetto Croce of Italy (1866-1952).

I have applied my understanding of veristic Italian painting theory to my attempt in 2003 to record and capture the experiences of veterans of the 91st Infantry Brigade and the 361st Infantry Division (WWII) who fought in Italy. Note that during WWI, the 91st Infantry division became known as the “Wild West” Division because many of the soldiers were from the American Southwest. The Division slogan was “Powder River Let ‘er Buck!”¹

The total division strength was 25,000 men. The enlisted men were mostly draftees from eight states -- Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, Utah, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming -- and Alaska Territory. An effort was made to keep the men from each state together. For example, the 361st Infantry Regiment was composed of men from Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, while the 362nd Infantry Regiment drew from Montana and Wyoming. Officers came from the regular army and reserves.

Although I primarily identify as a visual artists painting in oils, I did manage to earn a BA in philosophy during the 1960s but any possible career in philosophy was cut short by the Vietnam War and my involvement in the resistance to that war, on and off campus. In high school, I read Alan Watt’s “the Way of Zen” and became strongly influenced by Chinese philosophy, especially Taoism and Zen.

¹ “Powder River, Let ‘er Buck”: Term “Invented” by a Range Cowboy in Wyoming, Phil Roberts, http://wyomingalmanac.com/buffalo_bones_stories_from_wyomings_past_1978-2015/powder_river_let_er_buck



In addition, I recently developed an interest in Spinoza and am currently working on a book of poetry inspired by Spinoza's ideas. Spinoza's metaphysics is somewhat related to Taoism and Zen, in that his formula and proof that G-d equals Nature can be compared to "The Tao or Way." My own philosophical research into Taoism and my study of T'ai Chi (Chinese slow motion exercises/meditation) led me to appreciate the Four Taoist virtues and the Five Taoist "Excellencies."

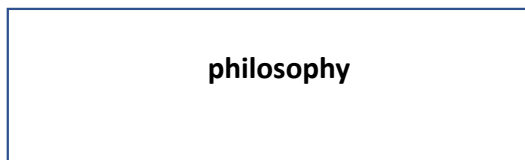
The 4 Taoist Virtues

- Remote
- Foolish
- Cranky
- Poor



The Five Taoist Excellencies

painting



calligraphy

Martial arts

Healing arts

I note that the 4 Taoist virtues might need some explanation. "Remote" means being hermit-like, trying to avoid worldly entanglements and, as much as possible, living in nature. "Foolish" means that to the outside world, one might appear like a fool, uninterested in worldly fame and fortune. "Cranky" means somewhat difficult to get along with, irascible, and cantankerous. "Poor" might not mean literally impoverished but rather not chasing money and wealth.

The “Five Taoist Excellencies” is a system of pedagogy. Painting and writing are related, in that they are ways of self-expression and artistic creation. Martial arts and healing arts are related in that if you can take a life through martial arts, you should also be able to save a life or heal through traditional Chinese medicine. Central to these four excellencies, is philosophy at the very center, which guides one in the attainment and the unity of these excellencies.

In my slide presentation for the ASA Rocky Mountain Meeting, I took a few minutes to refer to Huineng’s Platform Sutra. Namely the stanza contest set up by Hongren, the 5th Patriarch of Chan Buddhism in China (Zen). The story regarding the Platform Sutra inspired Kerouac and Ginzburg and other beat poets. Essentially, the poor peasant Huineng, employed as a cook in the monestary headed by Hongren, bested Shenxiu, in a stanza contest set up by the 5th Patriarch to see who would succeed him. Shenxiu has written:

The body is the *bodhi* tree.
The mind is like a bright mirror's stand.
At all times we must strive to polish it
and must not let dust collect.[\[note 1\]](#)

And Huineng had countered with:

Bodhi originally has no tree.
The mirror has no stand.
The Buddha-nature is always clear and pure.
Where is there room for dust?

The Dharma was passed to Huineng at night, when the Patriarch transmitted "the doctrine of sudden enlightenment" as well as his robe and bowl to Huineng. He told Huineng, “You are now the Sixth Patriarch. Take care of yourself, save as many sentient beings as you can, and spread the teachings so they will not be lost in the future.”[\[11\]](#)

The Italian filmmaker and poet, Pier Paolo Pasolini, believed that language—such as English, Italian, dialect or other— is required to express the inner truth of a certain community or socio-economic stratum. For example, he needed to write poetry in the Friuli dialect in order to express certain truths about that community of his origin and early, formative years. Later he needed the dialect of the sub-proletariat he found in the tenements of Rome, to give expression to his unique version of naturalism in cinema.

Pasolini thought that the cinema is the "written" language of reality which, like any other written language, enables man to see things from the point of view of truth. I feel that painting, especially in portraiture, requires its own “dialect” or language elements in order to reveal the inner personality and energy, the truth, regarding a subject of portraiture.

American verismo is what I call my painting style. More generally “American verismo” describes an artistic style of American literature, music, or painting influenced and inspired by artistic ideas that began in 19th-century **Italian culture**, movements that used motifs from **everyday life and working-class persons** from both urban and rural situations.

American composers, writers, painters, and poets have used this genre to create **works that contain socio-political** as well as purely aesthetic statements. In Italy, the term “verismo” takes on added meaning of contributing a strongly romantic and passionate approach that is bold and direct. It was introduced into opera in the early 1900s in **reaction to contemporary conventions that were regarded as artificial and untruthful**.

“**Verismo**” (meaning “realism,” from Italian **vero**, meaning “true”) refers to a **19th-century Italian painting style**. This style was practiced most characteristically by the “**I Macchiaioli**” a group of Tuscan painters, who were forerunners of the French Impressionists. The style and its underlying social goals related to general 19th-century artistic developments that occurred in many countries, from Scandinavia to the Mediterranean, which stemmed from nationalist movements and intellectuals' responses to the effects of industrialization.²

According to the Tate Gallery web site: “From Italian term 'verismo', meaning realism in its sense of **gritty subject matter**, verismo was as originally applied around 1900 to the violent melodramatic operas of **Puccini and Mascagni**. In painting practice this often meant **a strong, even exaggerated chiaroscuro and a simplification of shapes, the introduction of abstraction through the application of large brushstrokes or dabs (macchie)**.”

In 1998, I traveled with my wife, Angela, to Italy for a conference on “**The Use of Satellites in Education**” in **Technopolis**, Italy. There we learned that efforts were well underway to further distance and online learning. After returning home, Angela and I started the “**Open and Distance Learning Newsletter**.”

Returning to Italy many times after that first visit, we eventually made good friends with influential Italians. We were starting to study Italian more formally and starting meeting Italian students. Through Christian DeFidio, a physics grad student, we met Pier Cesare Bori, a visiting professor from the University of Bologna.

Pier Cesare Bori studied jurisprudence, theology and biblical studies, and in 1970 became a **professor at the 'Alma Mater Studiorum', the University of Bologna**, holding the position of professor of "History of Christianity and the Churches" in **the Faculty of Political Science**, and teaching also "Moral Philosophy" and "Human rights in an era of globalization."³ He was also a leading Italian Quaker and Tolstoy scholar, writing an introduction to a new edition of “War and Peace.” Bori was Director of the **“master’s degree Program in human rights and**

² American Verismo, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_verismo, accessed (01/23/2021)

³ Pier Cesare Bori, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pier_Cesare_Bori, accessed (02/14/2021)

humanitarian intervention," he held the position of "visiting professor" in the United States, Tunisia, and in Japan.

For many years Pier Cesare kept a **writing studio in Livergnano near Bologna**. This was an office constructed inside of a stone cave that, as we found out, was used as an impromptu field hospital by WWII GIs during the multi-year battle of attrition along "The Gothic Line."



Pier Cesare Bori

While in Livergnano one long summer, I was both painting and teaching **an online computer science course for Linfield College**. At one point I ran into WWII GIs who often returned to **the "Winter Line" battlefield. They were from the 91stnd Infantry Division and the 361st Infantry Regiment** that fought a 2 year-long battle of attrition against Nazi forces. The 91st Infantry Division was famously nicknamed as the "Wild West Division" with a "Fir Tree" as its Division insignia to symbolize its traditional home of the Far West. The GIs took control of the town of Livergnano after three days of intense, bloody combat.⁴

⁴ "We took Livergnano Today", <https://www.351inf.com/post/livergnano>

After returning to Eugene, OR from Italy, I was notified via email from one of the soldiers I had met in Livergnano, that a mini reunion with **a military ceremony was to be held at camp Adair, OR in Corvallis**. I was invited to participate. Angela and I attended the event and, afterwards, I asked if I could paint a portrait of their commanding officer, **Colonel Broedlow**, who had since passed away. They agreed and after completing the portrait, it was sent to their training headquarters in California.

Later I received **a grant from the 361st Infantry Regiment Association WWII** to attend their 2003 reunion meeting in and make video interviews of the soldiers. I had made arrangements to employ a local New Orleans videographer to do the camera and audio work. After arriving I made contact with him and made arrangements to conduct the interviews at the hotel hosting the reunion. I succeeded in completing face-to-face interviews with ten WWII infantrymen. There were sound problems at the hotel which required some work on the audio. Robert Constantino, a Hollywood gaffer by profession, helped in the final production of the CD recordings.

In short, I interviewed

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|------------------------|--|
| 1. Ollie Patterson | https://youtu.be/CUNutSMBn8k |
| 2. Alvin P. Bedgood | https://youtu.be/H3W3wsCf4bo |
| 3. Willard I. Jeffries | https://youtu.be/ciGQ6T25Mrc |
| 4. Mark Rayborn | https://youtu.be/d_019NEJZYc https://youtu.be/5912WuXlfal |
| 5. Arthur Peterson | https://youtu.be/2Qab0fUHoLE |
| 6. Philip Scaglia | https://youtu.be/6L-g0kMVIp8 |
| 7. Maurice Gibson | https://youtu.be/Sbt6RTUu1Kg |
| 8. Joe Salonia | https://youtu.be/AlblO9-sKNE https://youtu.be/ipjmHXIJvBU |
| 9. Ines G. Prieto | https://youtu.be/dtLUvS4MEZQ |
| 10. Elfren G. Coz | https://youtu.be/aCYppnhgG7k |

Ollie Patterson was perhaps the most memorable interview with his down home, casual speaking manner, and his great descriptive language. He **describes riding around in his jeep with a rooster tied to the hood of the vehicle** when the commanding officer sotted him. Apparently, **the rooster had “plastered” the hood pretty good** and Col Broedlow dressed him down very forcefully for this infraction of discipline “and he could do it!” Later in the interview he talks about getting wounded and word getting out to Col Broedlow who came to Ollie with tears streaming down his face and said, **“You are no damn good to me now!” and ‘he meant it.”** This combination of a cinema verité (or “verismo”) and comedy makes the oral history come alive and provides a memorable moment.



1. Ollie Patterson



2. Alvin P. Bedgood

Alvin P. Bedgood from Austin TX, right out of school was drafted into the infantry at age 17. After 4 months of training in Oregon at Camp Adair he went via Virginia to board a troop ship convoy to Algiers. and received amphibious training for the invasion of Italy. Reports being shelled outside of Anzio with German 88 (very large shells). Was machine gunned but escaped by crawling backwards slowly to the top of the hill, a process that took half a day to complete. Took scouting patrols to the Arno river looking for underwater bridges for tanks. **Al used a Thomson submachine gun when in combat.** Helped 17 soldiers escape a house that had been shelled. On a return trip to Italy he met an Italian lady who turned out to be the baby he saw during the battle. Soldiers had helped hide the woman in a nearby cave to protect her. She turned out to that baby and it was her mother they had protected. Soldiers of the **361st helped fund the restoration of the small catholic church that was destroyed in that location (Livergnano, Italy).**



3. Willard Jeffries

Willard Jeffries lives in Skokie, Illinois. He as drafted into the US Army August 15th, 1943 and received his medical exam at Camp Custer, Michigan and then shipped out to Camp Adair, Oregon for additional training. He was transferred from the 70th Division B Company to the 361st Division as a rifleman skilled in the Browning Automatic rifle (BAR). He participated in the Battle of Livergnano. He fought on the Gothic line and after K Company caught fire his platoon got isolated and killed some Germans in a cave with grenades. Fighting from inside a cave they had to surrender to the Germans who, themselves, were being shelled by American artillery. He related a long conversation he had with a German officer. He was transported to Bologna held as a prisoner of war, eventually moved to a camp in north Italy. Eventually 55 guys were in a boxcar that entered Germany. He was in the camp for 7 months. He never thought he would survive the war. The war made him a "better citizen". because the misery and suffering somehow made him more open to other people, **opened his eyes about discrimination and more tolerant of others.**



4. Mark Rayborn

Mark is from Lumberton, Mississippi and was captured in Livergnano October 10, 1944 and held captive for 7 months until his liberation May 1st, 1945. He relates how he arrived on the highway through Livergnano via back trails through the forest. He dug a “slit trench” to protect himself against artillery. Many soldiers had climbed the bluff and sought cover in various buildings but suffered casualties. Mark saw several soldiers shot just before he was captured. Mark described his transport and captivity in Bologna and then into Germany at various locations, falling ill from bad food served the prisoners. In a prison camp he was only given a small bowl of turnip soup and several potatoes and that had to last the entire day. He got down to only 100 pounds and was held with 177 men in two barns.



5. Arthur Peterson

Arthur is from Houston, Texas and trained at Camp Gruber in Oklahoma. He arrived in Italy by a troop ship and started out at a large army camp known as “Mussolini’s Dairy Farm.” He joined the 361st Infantry C Company as a replacement in Livergnano. He describes how the Germans attacked with tanks and mortars firing phosphorus. He was using mule trains for a week carrying supplies at night. Later, after reaching the Po River he got attacked by German

tanks. He was captured by the Germans and was interrogated by an officer who hit Arthur in face with a swagger stick. Arthur somehow took a pistol from a German soldier and ended up capturing 17 of the enemy and various vehicles (a truck and an armored car). He reported growing up quickly from age 18 going into combat, seeing dead bodies all around. For many years he had bad dreams but those stopped after returning to Livergnano seeing the town rebuilt after the war.



6. Philip Scaglia

Philip Scaglia is the grandson of Italian immigrants who settled in Connecticut and who had two sons. The family returned to Italy and later returned again to the USA. Philip was born in a little mountain hamlet in northern Italy and at the age of 17 months the family moved to “Little Italy” in New York City. On his 18th birthday, Philip registered for the draft and 2 months later was in the Army. He was in 2nd Battalion Company B of the 361st Regiment HQ 1. Philip had basic training in Camp Adair, Oregon and ended up in Regimental Headquarters in a communications platoon. He was moved from the 70th Division into the 91st Division in preparation for shipping out to overseas. In Europe he was shot in the back but the radio saved his life. In Livergnano along highway 65 they had to climb up the escarpment while being shelled by 88s (large shells). Towards end of the war he was given a 2 week pass to visit his Italian relatives.



7. Maurice Gibson

Maurice Gibson was in F Company 361st Infantry Division. As soon as he turned 18, he registered for the Army. Three months later he was sent for 13 weeks of basic training in South Carolina. As a child, Maurice was brought up using guns and hunting. Raised on a farm, he was familiar with horses and life stock. Maurice confirmed that the Division slogan "Powder Rover, Let 'um Buck!" stemmed from WWI when the 91st has a lot of cowboy soldiers. In a 124 ship convoy to Iran they saw combat (aerial dog fights) every day. He packed a Browning Automating Machingun (BAM) during hand to hand combat.

He tells a story of when a bank was blown up in Florence and how he and another soldier stuffed their pockets with Italian money. Later when the two of them were in a fox hole together, the other soldier was nervous about having that big bankroll of bills in his pocket and through it out a ways up the hill into the snow. After an hour Maurice said "well one of us should get some rest while the other stands guard" and offered to take the first nap. An hour later, he woke up and the other soldier took his turn. When hthe soldier was asleep, Maurice climbed out and found the money. The next morning the soldier said he wanted to see if he could find the money and Maurice said "If you stick your head out of that fox hole, why I'll shoot you myself!" (laughter).



8. Joe Salonia

Joe Salonia was born in Lawrence, Massachusetts during the Great Depression of the 1930s. He purchased a Sears and Roebuck 22mm Remington rifle when he was a kid and often went hunting. He was called “weasel eyes” because of his sharpshooting abilities. He was in the 2nd Battalion E Company of the 361st Infantry Division. He had signed up for arial gunnery but instead was shipped to tank warfare and trained as a tank destroyer gunner and was rated as a tank commander. But after a transfer to Alaska was trained in 57mm anti-tank guns.

Joe had an attitude towards officers and after “mouthing off” was moved to Newport Virginia and assigned to the Infantry (demoted “after hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of training”). Shipped to the desert area in northern Africa he was impressed by the ability of the Bedouins to steal supplies right out from under the GIs encampments. He describes the bloody fight around Anzio, Italy and his first skirmish when they accidentally caught the Germans in a crossfire situation. The “green” US troops wiped out a veteran German army group resulting in 113 enemy deaths. After walking 45 miles in one day they heard on BB radio that the 5th Army was 5 miles north of Rome but actually were 90 miles north as an indication of how fast US troops were movi .



9. Ines G. Prieto

Ines was in CN Company 361st Infantry Division. From San Antonio, Texas Ines trained at Camp White, Oregon and was assigned to Cannon Company of the 361st. Originally interested in the Air Force but not qualifying, he joined the 1st mechanized cavalry division of US Army to be trained in tank warfare. Assigned to Rio Grande City in Texas his group arrived at the camp and after seeing fenced horses asked “where were the tanks” and were told “yes we have tanks, there (pointing to the horses) are all the tanks!” About 15 soldiers were assigned to breaking in around 80 wild horses for duty with the Army. Reassigned to Cannon Company Ines’ role was to fire 105mm cannon fire in support of infantry troops fighting in Italy. Suffering a nervous breakdown after the war, Ines took a doctor’s advice to heal his nervous condition through laughter therapy.



10. Elfren G. Coz. (Note: in the video, his first name is misspelled).

Elfren is from Yuma, Arizona, and joined the National Guard on Sept 10th, 1940 and went to Fort Sil, Oklahoma. Part of the 158th Regimental Combat Team after Pearl Harbor, he was sent to Panama for jungle training for about one year, then sent to Officer Training School (OTS) in Fort Bennington, Georgia, graduating in 1943 and then assigned to the 91st Infantry Division. He trained in Bend, Oregon and then Camp White and also Camp Adair in Oregon. The training was in use of live ammunition simulating combat conditions for which Elfren was the lead instructor. He trained every squadron and all the platoons in the regiment in rifle combat. In Company G he became the platoon leader.

In 1944 he was sent to north Africa and then on to Italy. Fighting in Anzio, Rome, and then north of Rome engaged in frequent combat. He describes a battle close to Volterra and then action just prior to Livernano. Arriving at the Gothic Line on September 15th, 1944, fighting through pill boxes, mine fields, and barbed wire. He describes being shelled by 88mm artillery. Arriving at an open field, Elfren describes how German machine gun fire began mowing down US troops. Elfren went ahead on his own and “knocked out a machine gun nest” killing two and wounding three Germans with his carbine and earning the Silver Star.

American Verismo

One factor that links these WWII oral histories with my painting theories of American verismo, is a historical connection between the anti-fascist forces fighting in Europe and the artist-soldiers who fought with Garibaldi during the Italian Risorgimento. The latter also left important oral histories which were important in reconstructing what had really happened both in battle and in the ultimate resolution in terms of social forces after the war for the liberation of Italy. Both armies were attempting to expel a foreign occupation of Italy.

The Francophile bias of American art historians is revealed in the writings of **Albert Boime and his book “The Art of the Macchia and the Risorgimento, Representing Culture and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Italy.”** Boime writes that before the American obsession with Paris and French impressionists, other Americans had gone to Italy, ten years earlier, to paint with the I Macchiaioli and to study their version of impressionism. Many of these artists were followers of Garibaldi and were fighters in his army of national liberation.



My painting of a Tuscan farmer, as a “virtual mural”



The I Macchiaioli

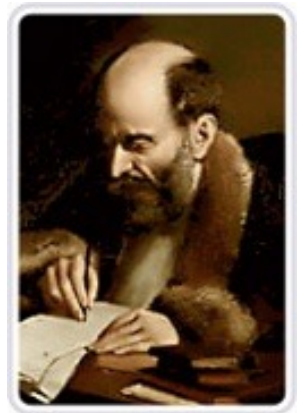
The I Macchiaioli aesthetics has been researched in a project “Le Polemiche al Caffè Michelangiolo” by *Shiri Gross*.

“Considered by theorists today to be early modernists, a movement of its own distinct from impressionism, the group distanced itself from the traditional standards of the *Accademia delle Belle Arti di Firenze* and were recognized by their community for their innovative experimentation with *plein-air* studies, tonal opposition, sketch-like effect, and a thematic focus on nature and the quotidian. Their radical identity in the realm of art is considered inseparable from their political values in support of the Risorgimento and Giuseppe Garibaldi.”⁵

Vittorio Imbriani on Macchia.

“If it lacks that first fundamental harmonious accord, the execution, the finish, no matter how great, will never succeed in moving, in evoking in the spectator any sentiment, while, on the other hand, the solitary, bare macchia, without any determination of objects, is most capable of arousing such sentiments.”

– Vittorio Imbriani



⁵ Penn History Review Vol 26 Article 2 6-6-2019 Le Polemiche al Caffè Michelangiolo

Benedetto Croce (1866-1952)

- “A Theory of the Macchia”
- “Outlaw sketchers”
- “The preservation in final paintings the qualities associated with the sketch: the light effect, the color, the verve, the movement of the brush...” Albert Boime
- “Embrionic cell” of Filippo Palizzi
- “The value of the poem, as of the painting, lies in the macchia” – Croce



The discussion of Vittorio Imbriani’s “discovery of macchia” in Filippo Palizzi’s studio and Croce’s elaboration of this discovery into a theory of aesthetics can be found in the work of Albert Boime, especially his “**The Art of the Macchia and the Risorgimento : Representing Culture and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Italy (1993)**” Basically, the juxtaposition of a few dashes of color on a scrap of paper became more interesting and impactful than a fully elaborated painting and, in that moment, modern art was born, at least in the minds of Imbriani and Croce. ⁶

I have been teaching a series of workshops and classes in Eugene, Oregon based on study of the I Macchiaioli. **I founded the group “Club Macchia,”** a group of like-minded plein air painters working in Oregon and Washington. The group had two important exhibitions in Oregon at the Newport Art Center in Newport and the Jacobs Gallery in Eugene. The exhibition at the **Jacobs Gallery in Eugene** saw the distribution of their book about the group and was well attended. This was one of the last exhibitions held at the Gallery before it went out of business in 2015.

Desiring a painting style that was truly Italian and representative of their particular cultural characteristics, loose and expressive and breaking with tradition, the I Macchiaioli began as an artistic movement. As explained by Boime, **their “sketch style” and “non finito” (unfinished) look was both modern and a clean break with academic “polish,” but also the subject matter was often political as well, featuring socio-political issues such as the plight of women, workers, and farmers.[4]**

⁶ The Art of the Macchia and the Risorgimento : Representing Culture and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Italy by Albert Boime (1993, Hardcover).

I often make the point that while line, mass, and color are important in every painting, for rapid plein air work one might be better off beginning **with a 2-value thumbnail “scribble” sketches** and small two to four values studies using the biggest brush possible for the job. **This “disegno” (design) becomes** the blueprint for the painting and establishes the “macchia” (in the sense of the harmonious overall distribution of lights and darks). **Without a strong macchia structure the work will lack “impact” (the term used by the I Macchiaioli artists) for such an imprimatur (underpainting) that becomes the basis for the final work (either through wet into wet or wet into dry approaches).**

Albert Boime’s book had a huge effect on me when I began incorporating the story of the I Macchiaioli into my class materials. I became interested in this Tuscan group of painters, many of whom **participated in the struggle for Italian socialism and national unification.** In 2013, **I wrote a "Manifesto of American Verismo," which summarized many of my ideas on the subject.**⁷

As in painting, the documentary video, or in my case **the oral histories of soldiers presented in that medium, all share the same issues of “dal vero” or “after life.”** In the case of the reunion interviews, “truth” is the factual reality of an existential combat with real German Nazis that are trying to kill you. Each soldier had his own story to tell, very often tales about survival and close calls. There is a poignancy in each story as each soldier, in turn, relates key events in their combat experiences.⁸

I Ritratti (The Portraits)

During the summer of 2006, my wife Angela and I were invited to stay in the Livergano writing studio of the Tolstoy scholar Pier Cesare Bori. About halfway through the summer, Angela had to leave me and return to the States. I remained behind and eventually met the neighbors living near the Bori writing studio.

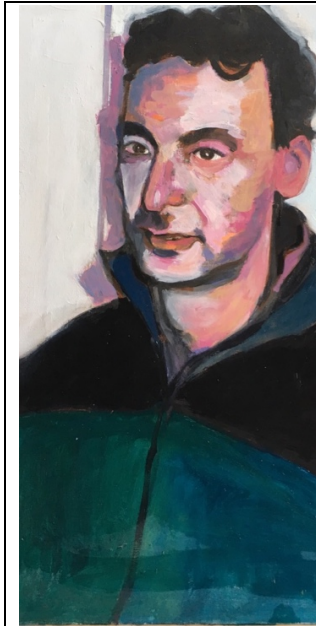
In particular, I became close friends with Andrea Guerra and Patrizia Piva. Andrea worked as a tree doctor and Patrizia as an art restorer. They were friends of Pier Cesare and also of Umberto Magnani, who was in charge of the Winter Line Museum, and his wife Patrizia. They were also friends with Carlo Bianchi a Bologna cab driver who lived closer to Loiano on Via Panoramica.

⁷ Boime, Albert (1993). *The Art of the Macchia and the Risorgimento*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press. ISBN 0-226-06330-5

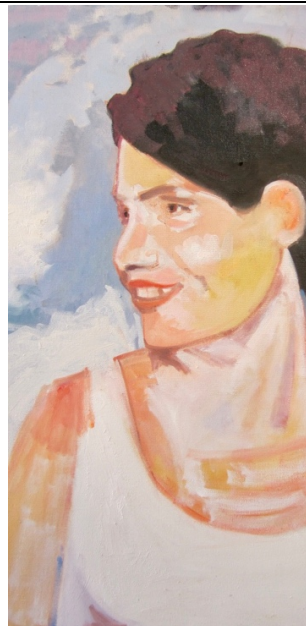
⁸ Statement by Art Historian Clarice Zdanski, Milan, Italy (2004), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Jerry_Ross_\(painter\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Jerry_Ross_(painter)) , accessed 03/01/20201



Farmhouses in Livergnano, Oil on canvas by J. Ross



Andrea Guerra



Young farmworker
from Sicily

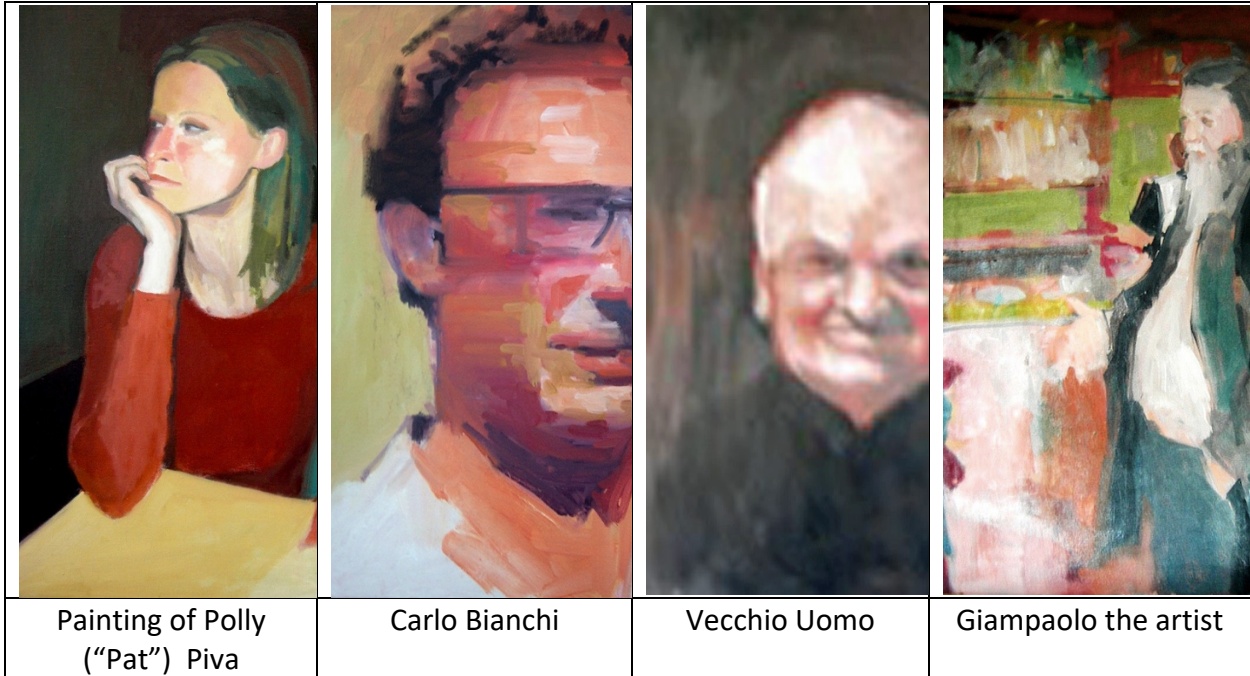


Ricardo Guerra



Sketch of Polly





All of these portraits are characteristic of my painting style; they are portraits of real people, and by no means is this all of them, who I met and interacted with while living in Livergnano and nearby Loiano. My painting efforts in Livergnano culminated in a one-person exhibit at the commune art center/library complex in Loiano, June 17th – July 2nd, in 2000. The “inaugurazione” or reception was well attended with many friends from Livergnano including Pier Cesare Bori and his wife Elena.



Pier Cesare (right) and Elena, his wife, and Quaker friends in Livergnano. Angela and I are sitting in front turning our heads towards the camera

Poster for my exhibit in Loiano, 2000



Winter Line Museum run by Umberto Magnani

In 2010 and 2014, I had the opportunity of a three-week residency at the American Academy in Rome as a “visiting artist and scholar.” Time spent at AAR’s library allowed me to read up on Garibaldi, the I Macchiaioli, and Italian impressionism. The AAR is located close to the Gianiculum Hill where one can find equestrian statues of Garibaldi and also Anita, his wife, who rode into battle alongside Giuseppe. Walking from the AAR campus to the statues, one passes through a tree-lined avenue dotted with stone busts of the Garibadini, Garibaldi’s key soldiers and officers.

My portraiture work continued while returning again and again to Italy. Portraiture (my “Nonna Toscana”, for example), became more and more veristic but not photo-realistic. photorealism, in my opinion, pays too much attention to detail and often ignores the need for “impact” and the romantic passion characteristic of verismo painting.

Regarding “Nonna Toscana”, the work inspired at least one feminist critic, Victorian Reis, to write a short essay on how the work was related to early Roman veristic sculpture. The critic stated that the portrait gave testimony to an Italian matriarch with a strong personality and

inner will but retaining her femininity and dignity as a woman, long suffering yet enduring over time.



I reproduce the critic's words verbatim here, below, so that the reader can pay attention to Reis' reference to Fred Kleiner's theory of Roman veristic sculpture.

Visual Analysis of Jerry Ross's Portrait of Fiorella -- 7 October 2012*

*Note * The original title used the name "Fiorella", actually the sitter's daughter in law. Later the title was changed to "Portrait of a Nonna Toscana".*

"Jerry Ross's Portrait of Fiorella is a depiction of a woman that defies popular femininity yet defines who she is, as a woman, boldly. The label

describes it as an oil painting of an Italian nonna from Tuscany, thereby setting up the viewer to witness her as not only female but as a matriarchal figure. However, she is depicted outside of any motherly or grandmotherly setting, standing alone, with an expression that is the antithesis of the soft, submissive, and nurturing female stereotype. The composition serves to assert Fiorella as a strong presence in conjunction with an expression that betrays an unyielding psychological force.

Ross placed Fiorella in the upmost foreground, pushed against the pictorial plane. Although her body is turned away to the right slightly, her face is shown frontally, heatedly returning the gaze of the viewer. There is no avoiding her gripping stare. Her body is heavily obscured by bulky garments that are hastily applied and incompletely construed -- even her hand is hardly distinguishable.

The most illustrative elements of her clothing are her layered collars, which flare out from her neck framing her face like the foliage of a flower. The face, the focal point of portraiture, is the most clearly articulated feature in the work. She wears a firm visage belying both age and a boldness which seems to challenge any opposition to her individual will.

Her wrinkles, sketchily applied in Ross's painterly style, accentuate her grimace. Her mouth is pursed and downturned, her brow furrowed, her cheeks sagging with years. Fiorella's sharp occhi marroni shine with light, life and ample spirit. No claim against her status as an Italian nonna could stand up to the self-assurance in her stature and expression.

The gesticulation of Ross's brushstrokes emphasizes his expressionistic use of color, the symbolism of which reaffirms the contrast between the concept of woman and the authenticity of an individualized woman. The delicate peach, salmon, lavender and rose shades, highly feminized hues, make up the indeterminate background in a patchwork of hastily applied splotches of color. The complete lack of setting or spatial reference serves to highlight Fiorella as the focal point. Nothing draws the eye from her face. The feminine color scheme is reflected in her skin tone and contrasts the sternness of her expression. Her fierce presence is juxtaposed by the soft sweetness of Ross's chosen color palette and emphasized by the texture of his strokes. These formal elements bring vitality to the surface of the work and a greater sense of the subject portrayed.

Ross's style is self-proclaimed as American Verismo. He explains it as dal vero (after life or after truth) within which he attempts to paint everyday things, people, and places with a "poetic realism" the influence for which he finds in Italian art from all ages. ² It is fitting then that the heroine in this work is Italian. His attempt to portray truth is evinced in her psychologically powerful presence as an old but firm woman backed by years of experience, the marks of which are tallied in the lines of her face.

This is reminiscent of the ideals behind Roman Republican Veristic sculpture described by Fred Kleiner as, "literal reproductions of individual faces, without any hint of an attempt on the part of the sculptor to beautify the appearance of those portrayed." ³ Signs of age were venerable proofs of a life long-lived in service of the state.

In the case of Fiorella her hard earned signs of age come from her own experience of life long-lived in service to her family as nonna and donna. Ross's depiction captures what it means to be a woman in reality. She is far from a shallow and fanciful reproduction of an ideal, but perhaps the reality Ross is trying to convey is more complex than an outright rejection of a normative female model. She is an amalgam of softness (as evoked in the color) and severity (in form and features) both coming together to form this woman's persona as understood and represented by Ross as observed dal vero."⁹

⁹ Reis, Victoria, Visual analysis of Jerry Ross' Portrait of Fiorella, <https://jerryrosspittore.com/analysis2.htm>, (accessed 02/15/2021)



In Roman art A veristic Roman head. Verism was often used by the Romans in marble sculptures of heads. Verism, often described as "**warts and all**", shows the imperfections of the subject, such as warts, wrinkles and furrows.¹⁰

The Documentary Genre

Wikipedia defines the documentary film genre as:

“a nonfictional motion picture intended to document some aspects of reality, primarily for the purposes of instruction or maintaining a historical record,” the style has become a catch-all for both a certain filmmaking style, as well as a noble cinematic pursuit of truth.¹¹

Bill Nichols, the American art critic, proposed that there were six different modes of documentary—poetic, expository, reflexive, observational, performative, and participatory—each containing its own specific characteristics.¹²

For example, Pasolini’s *La Rabbia* (Part 1) utilizes 1950s documentary clips to create a montage of left-minded images which is both poetic and observational.

More recently, *Pussy Riot* and *Summer of Love* provide a similar catharsis based on revolutionary populism, both Russian and American. While watching the latter two films this summer, I began to think of these in relation to my WWII oral histories. My interviews,

¹⁰ Kleiner, Fred S. *A History of Roman Art*, 53-54. Belmont: Thomson and Wadsworth. 2007.

¹¹ <https://www.premiumbeat.com/blog/6-types-of-documentary-film/>

¹² <https://liftoff.network/bill-nichols-6-modes-documentary/>

although not a film as such, like the documentary genre, certainly qualify as “the noble cinematic pursuit of truth.”

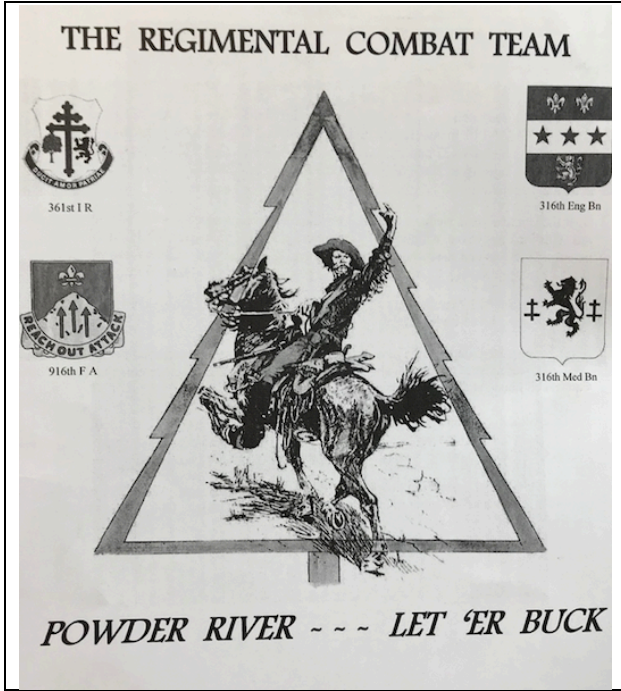
Conclusion:

The oral histories with WWII soldiers who fought on the Gothic and Winter lines around Livernano in Emilia Romagna, reveal many aspects of Italian verism or “after life” (dal vero) studies. These largely unedited “cinema vérité” recordings in the style of Pasolini’s own work, constitute a type of shared language among the GIs. This is the language of soldiers being bombed and shelled, seeing carnage and death, experiencing combat and its aftermath. Like Pasolini’s own research into the language of the people of Rome, my work capturing oral histories of soldiers, provides some level of expression to their shared language and subculture.

The aesthetics and philosophy of art defining “American verismo” are complex and require an understanding of the Risorgimento and Garibaldi, the motivations and aspirations of the Tuscan painting circle known as the I Macchiaioli, and the key principles of contemporary impressionism, namely, strong “effect” achieved by establishing the “seed” or strong understructure for painting in terms of a harmonious distribution of lights and darks.

The latter is mostly achieved when the painter has the ability to capture a scene quickly in gesture sketches that establish a strong 2-value composition in the early stages of artistic production. This “sketch mode” retains the fresh, first-impression of a figure, face, or scene and can be used, at the end of the process, to compare the final with the original impression, preventing overly finished and completed final works. This “strong chiaroscuro” along with painting in the spirit of Roman veristic sculpture showing all the “warts and all”, gives rise to a “strong effect” in the final portrait.

Likewise, in oral history and documentary film, the videographer is face to face with “the motif”, the actual person, working “dal vero” and directly from life. The final presentation of these oral histories requires both a context and a framework, as well as a humanistic empathy, on the part of the artist, in order for the work to have a proper impact. Hopefully this was achieved in the oral histories of the WWII veterans interviewed in New Orleans in 2003.



361st Infantry Association WWII Directory 2007



Interview session 2003