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ARCHITECTURAL OBSERVATIONS

A Recent Visit to Tuscany



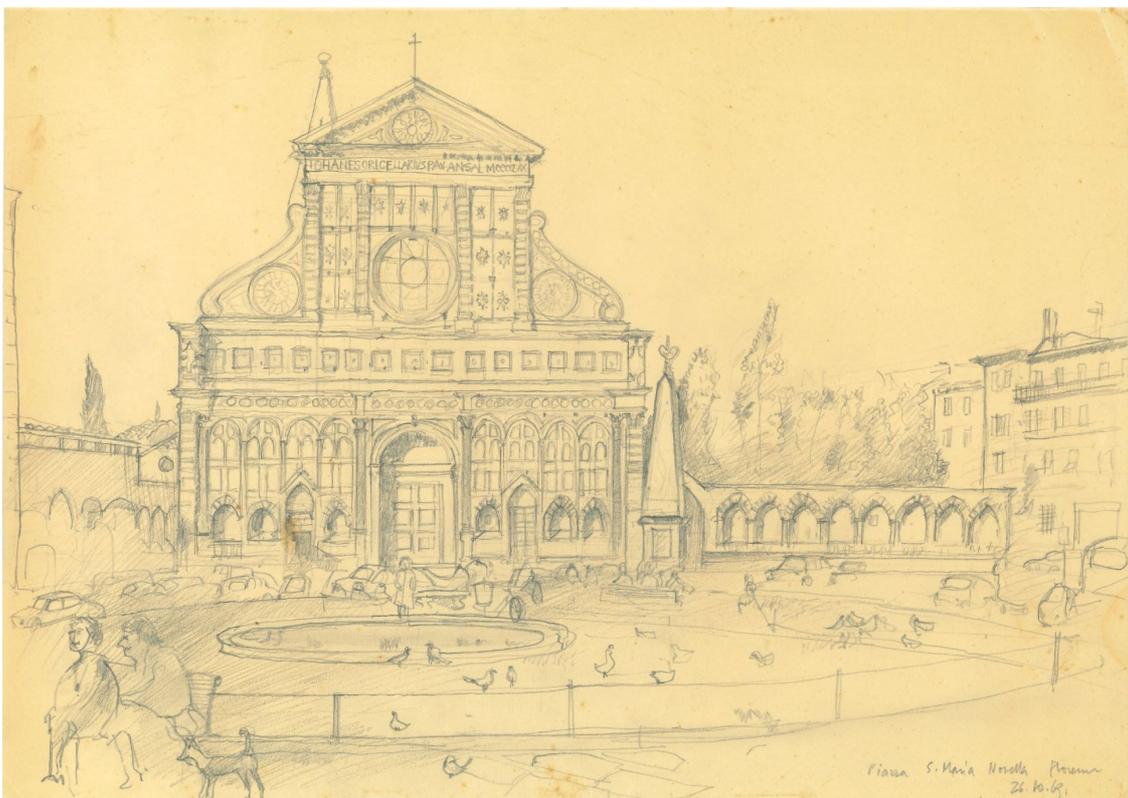
Tuscan Landscape

On a recent visit to Tuscany and the relationship of landscape to Renaissance, someone said the idea of Tuscany is a worn-out cliché. This somewhat romantic image was defined in books and movies mostly written by expatriates. There has always been a large number of expatriates (mostly British) in Tuscany who found life easier, cheaper and less morally restrictive than home. There, there was no need to keep up appearances. There are currently 275000, in a population of 3750000. This popularisation of the superficial visual vocabulary has led to a great number of imitative buildings and gardens transplanted to inappropriate settings, divorced from the original iconic landscape. This is a modest attempt, to present a counter argument, and to reassert the relevance of Tuscany, that arose after recently revisiting the region. The main tenet is the influence of the landscape on the development of the Renaissance arts and artists in the area.



Train Station Opposite Church of Santa Maria Novella

The history of the area that goes back 3000 years is complex, and it is naïve to discuss Tuscany without reference to it. My trip started in Florence, arriving by train from Venice at the wonderful railway station. The architect was chosen through a competition and completed the structure in 1934. It is thought that the approval at the time of the design by Mussolini, signalled the acceptance of modern design in Italy. The building is perfectly preserved, its noble materials unaltered and even the original signage, now inappropriate, is still there, making it very difficult to find the car hire concession. A recently constructed unsuccessful underground shopping area makes no impact, on the original concept. It is like many other Italian railway stations, that are examples of the Italian rationalism that confirmed modern Italy with the exception that timeless materials have been used throughout.



Santa Maria Novella 1969 (Julius Bokor)



Torre Del Lago

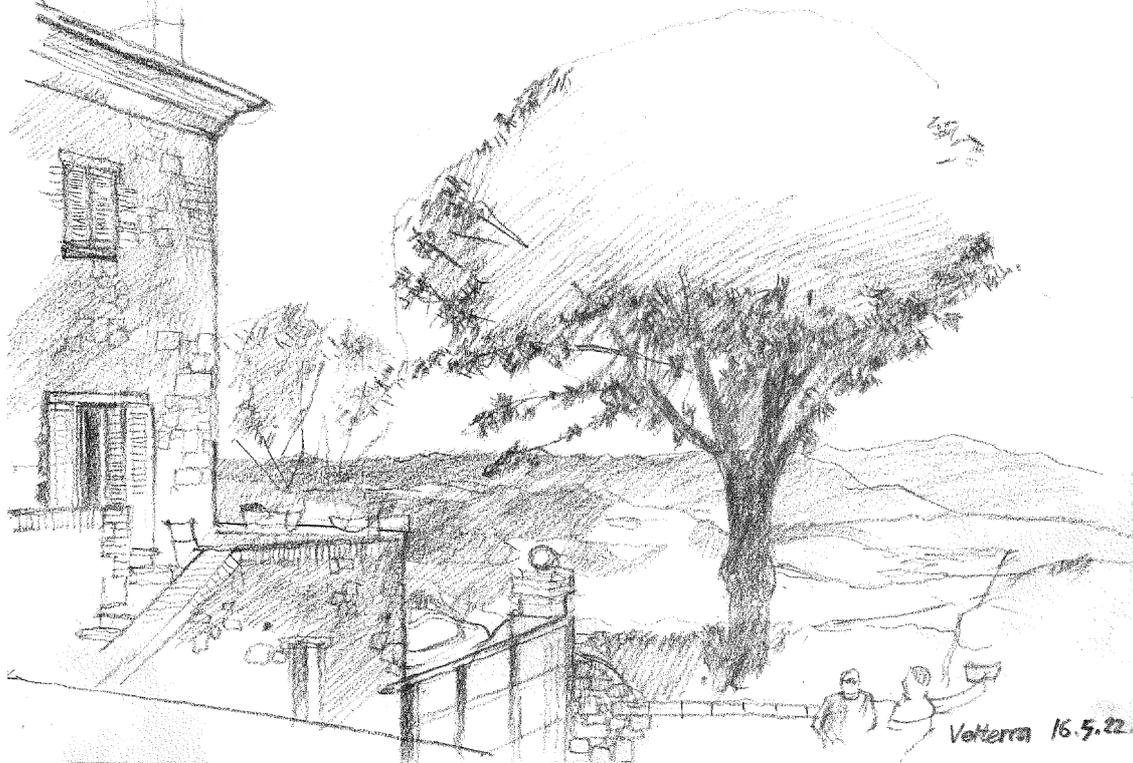
Opposite the station, is the rear of the church of Santa Maria Novella from which the station takes its name. This church, in contrast to the station, has a complicated history and palimpsest of many artistic periods, and individual artists. The last intervention is the beautiful façade by Alberti, a flat composition of geometric design, some symbolic, carried out essentially in 2 tones of marble and completed in 1456-1470. Its design is only a graphic façade and makes no concession to the style of the church behind. The visible campanile, and the other 3 sides that were completed in 1276 on the foundations of the 9th century original church. Over a long period the interior of the original church has been renovated and updated. Cloisters and chapels have been built for the many famous families that are buried there. The scientific experiments that led to the precedence of the Gregorian calendar were performed here and are preserved in the meridian line in the floor, and the aperture that allows the sun to confirm this. Originally at the edge of the city, with a monastery and gardens beyond, the site has become a traffic island. Only the square in front of the church, that was used for horse races in the time of the Renaissance by Cosimo de Medici, the obelisks marking the course, preserves the original curtilage. The plain brick medieval church is a treasure and contains an inventory of Florentine art. Works by Masaccio, Botticelli, Brunelleschi, Ghiberti, Ghirlandaio, Lippi, Uccello, Giotto, Vasari, glorify the burial places of prominent Florentine families. A chorus of works by mostly Florentine artists, not always singing from the same book, but characterised by the restraint that is Florence's hallmark. The pulpit, by Brunelleschi, is where Galileo was denounced by the church as a heretic. There was an impending rail strike, never a surprise, and this made the car hire a minor drama. However, we ended up driving a diesel Audi, with a thankfully up to date navigation system. We left Florence to travel around Tuscany then to return before catching the train to Rome.



Landscape in Art Giotto

The province of Tuscany is triangular shaped, the Apennines being the shorter sides, the Tyrrhenian Sea the longest. Access to the sea for trade and raw materials was a constant problem for the cities of Tuscany with its lack of secure harbours. We decided to start the revisit at Viareggio, the largest of the coastal Tuscan cities. The sea route for trade, easier and safer than the land route, was subjected to piracy; corsairs, who frequently even raided the province for loot and slaves. Pisa and Livorno grew rich from trade, but apparently only Lucca, in the early 1500 's, built a look out in the marshy area of Viareggio. Eventually the marshes were drained fir canals, and Viareggio, (old road), became a holiday destination. Following a fire in 1917, that destroyed the mostly timber town, it was rebuilt in the art nouveau style, smart hotels, theatres and bathing establishments along the long sand beaches, full of deckchairs to the water's edge sometimes 100 metres away. There are large shipbuilding facilities, along the canals, and Torre del Lago, probably originally part of the marshland, is where Puccini was born. Beautiful calm scenery, only spoilt by the inevitable football stadium. The long boardwalk at Viareggio has been enthusiastically adopted by cyclists. The newer areas typical of cheaply constructed holiday accommodation. Many handsome parks probably the remnant of the draining of the marshes, form the backdrop to the town.

We stayed in a hundred-year-old hotel, it's genteel charm intact. After exploring the town on bicycle, we than took the back roads to Lucca, close to the coast.



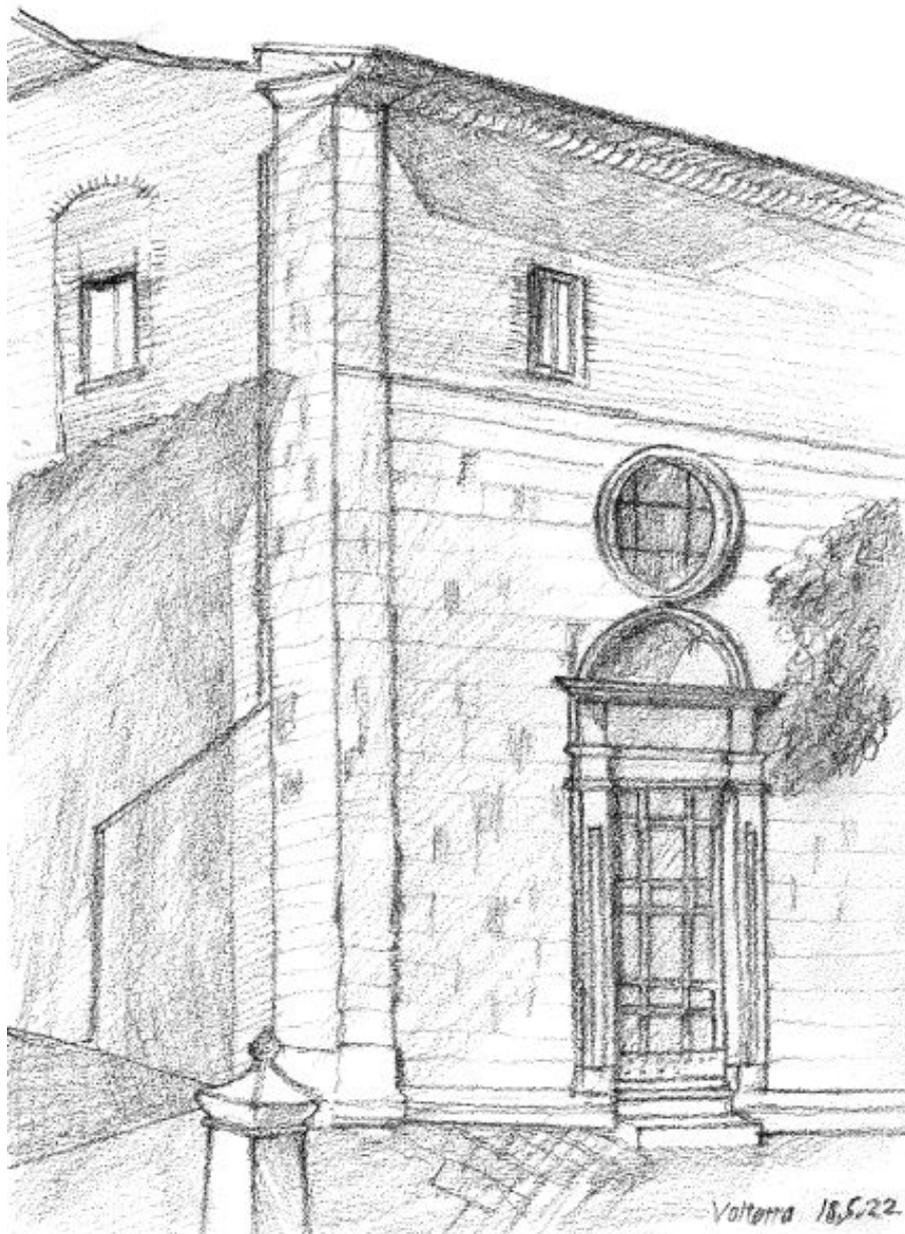
Volterra

Lucca is essentially a Roman town, established around 180 BCE. The Romans preferred towns on the plain. Although there was an earlier Etruscan settlement, the grid, as well as the amphitheatre are still visible and remain from the Roman period. A wealthy city apparently, the centre of the silk trade, it's largely Renaissance walls and ramparts are still intact. It had towers for defence and no doubt look outs, mostly built in brick. The appearance of the town and landscape did not correspond to the popular image of a Tuscan City.

Leaving the plains on the back roads, the landscape quickly changed, to the fertile rolling hills, punctuated by simple grouped buildings, marked by pines.

The harmonious relationship between, agriculture, landscape and habitation has been admired since ancient times and seems like the perfect symbiotic relationship of man to land. The beauty of the landscape was captured by the drawings of Leonardo da Vinci, himself born in a hill town, where the landscape was observed from above. It is, perhaps, no coincidence, that so many of the Renaissance artists were Florentine, their artistic sensibilities sharpened by reference to the landscape. Giotto, Fra Angelico, Brunelleschi, Donatello, Masaccio, Mantegna, Botticelli, Antonio San Gallo, Pietro da Cortona, all products of the Bottega system, where all arts were taught under the same roof. There was little distinction between, architect, sculptor, painter, even jeweller.

The term Etruscan is said to derive from the Greek word "Tusci" for tower builders. The discovery of Alum, used in fabric dyeing and finishing, and alabaster added to Volterra's wealth, but eventually it was absorbed into the Florentine state. From every side of the ramparts the view into the countryside is spectacular, the Balze here, the Roman ruins the other side, the rolling country as far as the eye can see. Evidence of Etruscan burial sites Roman Cisterns, as well as the buildings from the medieval period. The food was simple and included dishes of wild boar, and foraged foods. Other hill towns like San Gimignano rising in the distance from the countryside could be seen with the naked eye. The Etruscan Museum is second only to Villa Giulia in Rome, displaying hundreds of funerary urns, statues and artefacts of great sophistication.



Volterra

Driving on in the immersive typical magic landscape we arrived at the outskirts of Siena. Siena, unlike Volterra is a Roman town, and was built in the characteristic brick, occupying the hill, making its defences efficient. Hugely rich, since the Middle Ages it was a major centre of the fabric trade, as well a centre of banking. The Chigi and Piccolomini families amasses enormous wealth. The city however lacked a river, and convenient sea access, and eventually succumbed to its main rival Florence, which eventually came to control the whole of Tuscany. Always jealous of Florence and its river, the legend is that the Sienese are still excavating looking for their lost river. The small museum dedicated to the Palio, the famous horse race, sits on top of a maze of excavated passages, proving the myth, as explained by the volunteer guides. The cathedral, is a masterpiece in striped masonry. Internally, its graphic strength unifying the many separate artworks and library into a harmonious whole, is remarkable. There is a wonderful museum housed in the old poorhouse, Santa Maria della Scala, its displays sensitively interpreting the history of the city. We stayed a little outside the walls, in what must have been the main villa of a farm, surrounded by olives, vines, and flowers, with an iconic view of the harmonious countryside, from every window and the broad terrace.

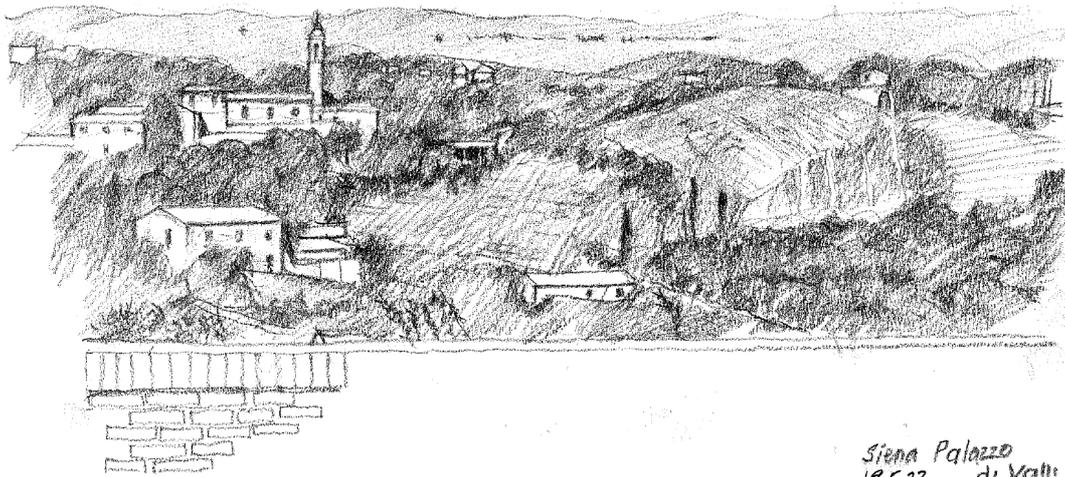


Gallo Rosso
VIEW from TABIE
2015/22

Siena Back Streets

The last town visited was Impruneta, "Amongst the Pines" an ancient town, most famous for its association with pottery. The "Forni" have been in continuous use since pre medieval times, the famous Della Robbia brothers, worked there, and many sculptors had their work transformed into clay. One of the "forni" supplied all the roof tiles for the Dome of Florence, the production supervised by Brunelleschi, who was involved in every detail of the build.

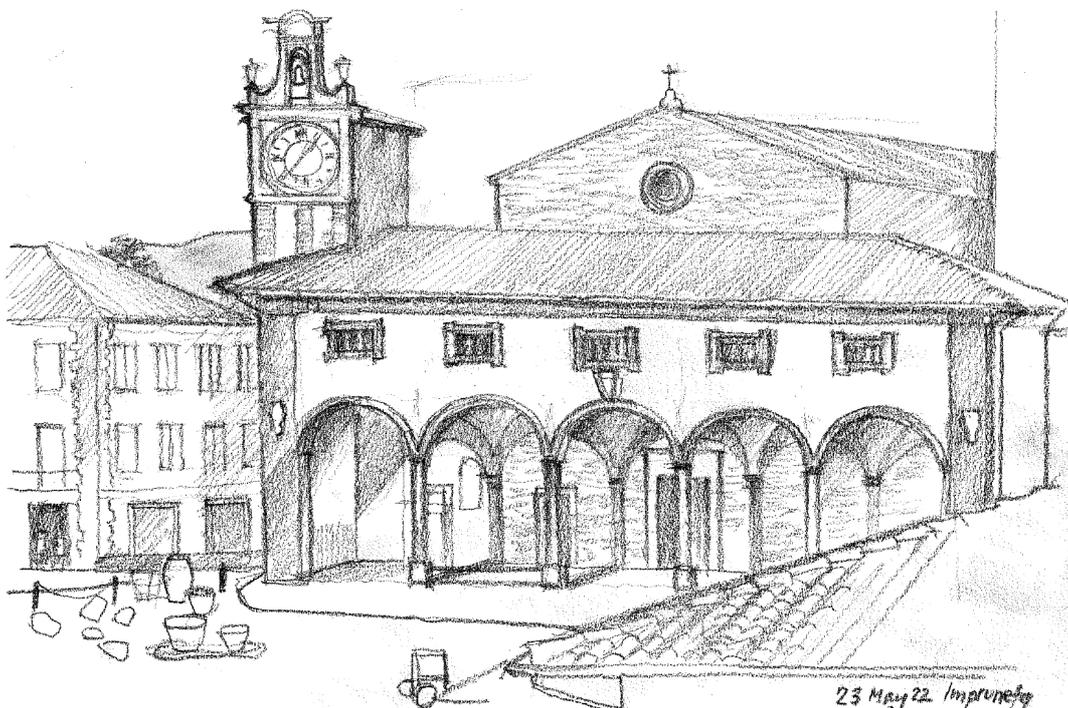
There are still many ancient "forni" producing terra cotta wares, some designs dating back to the Renaissance. There are herds of Chianina cattle, a Tuscan breed, originally bred for work, now producing the famous Bistecca Fiorentina.



*Siena Palazzo
di Valli*
19.5.22

Tuscan Landscape

Our final stop was in Florence. We caught the bus from Impruneta to Florence along impossibly narrow lanes, a different landscape revealed at every turn. We passed farms and houses, until ending up at the San tram stop in Florence, for Santa Maria Novella. Renaissance buildings in the city itself widely use the grey Pietra Serena local stone, giving a rather sombre appearance to the city. The Donatello exhibition in the austere Strozzi Palace, seemed like a tour de force of the bottega system, a culmination of everything that is unique and great in Tuscany. The exhibition showed the incredible depth of his talent, works small and large in wood, stone bronze and terra cotta. Florence was already hot in May, before the stifling heat of summer. The giant cornices of the buildings, and curtained windows were constructed to help against the heat and humidity. While the sack of Constantinople may have flooded Florence with intellectuals, most of the artists were home grown. Attracted by the wealth created by the wool trade, and banking, there have been few such intense artistic periods in European history. The man-made improvements and interventions to the fertile landscape seen from above, was an important factor in developing the character of the visual arts of this period.



23 May 22 Impruneta

Medieval Church with Renaissance Facade

Tuscany is hardly a cliché. The incredible, diverse history and antecedents, the art that flourished for centuries and defined the art of Europe to the present day, can hardly be compared to the cliché that is the faux Tuscan Villa of the rich. There is a quiet dignity to Tuscany, it is where the Italian language was born, art flourished, its importance out of all proportion to its size.

Florence was the first capital of the united Italy in 1864, the city expanding beyond its walls, easily. The tail wagging the dog.



'St. John the Baptist' Donatello

Intino

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