

The Innocents of Florence: Film captures the soul of the city few know

The city of Florence is a pre-requisite stop for just about everybody visiting Italy. The Michelangelo sculptures and paintings, the Duomo and architecture of Filippo Brunelleschi, the Medici legacy. All this we know. Yet, tucked away, behind the Duomo, is an institution that arguably has done more to make a difference to life for Florentines and create a structure for social assistance, than all of these things. It is the Innocenti Institute, a hospital an orphanage for abandoned children.

The revival of the story of this remarkable place, tied to the mystery behind the painting that once beautifully and proudly evoked the humanity of Florentines, has audiences flocking to a local theatre to bathe in the details of a history that they scarcely knew.

The Innocents of Florence, the new documentary by Italian Canadian filmmaker Davide Battistella opened recently in Florence, to large audiences and wide praise.

The story begins with a nearly 600-year-old painting which leads two art conservators in Florence on a journey that sheds light on the story of the hundreds of thousands of children, born in and around Florence, who were abandoned, and the women who saved them.

Modern-day Florence attracts more conservators than artists. Since the Arno's tragic flooding in 1966 – when Florentine women first began wearing trousers in public – it has steadily grown to be a women-dominated profession. ***The Innocents of Florence*** follow two conservators, Nicoletta Fontani and Elizabeth Wicks, as they set out to salvage the mysterious painting *Madonna of the Innocents*, a restoration sponsored by Dr. Jane Fortune, known in Florence as 'Indiana Jane' for her work as founder of the organization Advancing Women Artists.

The restoration of the painting, created as the banner for the Innocenti Institute in 1446, triggered numerous discoveries. It became the catalyst for this 90-minute feature-length documentary that explores art, motherhood, Florentine humanism and how a progressive-thinking Renaissance society created one of the first Children's hospitals in the world.

"Women and their strength continue to amaze me," says film Director Davide Battistella. "The story of women in history has not been celebrated or told enough. I hope my film changes that by recounting, through the restoration of a masterwork of art, the story of how society in Florence, Italy took on the challenge of saving its children by building one of the first Children's Hospitals on earth."

The Innocenti offered life; death was the alternative

"The first child in the register is Agata Smeralda, accepted in 1444. Since then Innocenti Institute would anonymously take in abandoned children, most of whom were girls. Some of these babies were born out of wedlock, or, they were the result of wealthy men impregnating servants so they could eventually become wet nurses for their own children. Children abandoned to the Institute were named, given Florentine citizenship and baptized," explains Battistella. "Even if they did not survive, this would 'save their souls' because, according to Renaissance thinking, unbaptized babies ended up in Limbo. Elsewhere in Italy, abandoned children were surnamed 'Foundlings' or worse, '*Bastardini*' (little bastards). In Florence, they were uniquely called Innocenti, 'Innocents' and given a chance at life."

In the words of the conservator

"Every conservation project is a journey of discovery. It is like peeling back the layers of history," explains Elizabeth Wicks. "We had no idea when we began restoring *Madonna of the Innocents* of just how much mystery we would find behind that face, and how many discoveries we would make along the way. Paintings are not always what they seem on the surface. Only the restoration process, with its accompanying research and technical study, can provide us with the clues to really understand the image, even though, sometimes, the process raises more questions than it answers." [Elizabeth Wicks Website](#)

About the filmmaker:

Davide Battistella moved from Canada to Florence in 2011. He has made several films set in Florence covering subjects of daily work, faith, art history, and photography, and the work of artisans.

[David Battistella Website](#)

Music

Original score by Paolo Vergari [Paolo Vergari Website](#)

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The Innocents of Florence, made in English and Italian, has so far screened eight times, to packed houses. Audiences have lingered, hungry to know more about a part of Florence they really didn't know.

What's next:

The filmmaker is negotiating distribution and festival screenings in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

Audience reaction

"Il film è un vero capolavoro!!!!

"This film is a masterwork!!!" - *Ginevera Giovanonni*

"May I take this opportunity to say congratulations on such a wonderful film, I really enjoyed it. I have been talking about it ever since". - *Chloe Lawlor*

"I remain without words to describe at the beauty and genius of your production. It touched me on many levels, as all good art does". - *Tina Carrari*

"Your preview last night was a huge success. *The Innocents of Florence* is beautiful in every sense and full of fascinating information both on the restoration and the institution". – *Margaret Haines*

Bellissimo ed emozionante

"Beautiful and moving" - *Valentina Bernardi*

Confermo un omaggio ai nostri avi

"A tribute to our ancestors". - *Grazia Calderai*

From the Reviewers:

"It's beautiful, and moving, and an ode to something incredible in Florence's past. It's both delicate and strong in its presentation – bravissimo". - *Christine Contrada, Professor*

"We restore things to learn, and what I believe ***The Innocents of Florence*** teaches us is that there are no excuses. The Institute's beginnings make up what we would now call a grassroots social movement".
Shauna McGinn, Magazine Editor

Innocent children, never left alone.

Battistella's documentary dedicated to the Institute of the Innocents and infant abandonment reveals "an art conservation full of surprises, from an ancient painting, recounts a lesson in civility."

"a great lesson in civility from lives that came out of tragedy" - *Corriere della Sera*

"By delving into the origins of the Ospedale degli Innocenti, the filmmaker examines the humanistic instincts behind the establishment of one of the first children's hospitals in the world, while also exposing one of the darker secrets that contributed to the necessity for such an institution". – *Wayne McArdle*

The interweaving of history, art and human ingenuity reflects the Renaissance values that made Florence the wealthiest of cities, and one that undertook to look after its most vulnerable citizens. The film is also a tribute to the women who worked at the Innocenti and were on the front line of saving the children left in their care. - *Margaret MacKinnon*

"The Innocents of Florence" asks us to reconsider why the cradle of renaissance civilization offered a cradle to its abandoned babies. - *Christine Contrada*



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