

# 2007 Travel Grant

*Sarah Holden: 2007 Travel Grant recipient. Her submission explored her trip to Italy in form of an essay and two-dimensional mixed media art examples.*



*Me, Sarah Holden, at a Hostelling International hostel in Salerno, Italy.  
This hostel was an ex-convent.*

On a hot July day in Rome, the cool dim church of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere would provide some relief. I made my way through the crumbling streets of the Trastevere neighborhood to this church, one that I had visited only shortly before. The first time I had gone there, a nun who made lace-work showed me down into the archaeological excavations below. Beneath the church were the ruins of a fine Roman house—the very house where Saint Cecilia, a third century martyr, had lived. Later the church was built above this, with her relics at the altar. A chapel off the main nave leads to the very room where Cecilia was martyred—or so it is said.



*A watercolor of lacework.*

On this particular day, as I was standing in the church with my pencil and notebook, an aging nun approached me, dressed all in white, with a purple knapsack and her rosary beads. "*Lei fa il restauro?*" she asked. ("Do you work on the restorations?") Startled, I told her no, I was just a student wandering through. "They are restoring the crucifix over there and I want to know when it will be finished. I can't see it now" she explained, only slightly disappointed that I couldn't help her. For the next hour, I stayed with her and listened as she shared accounts of miracles and mystical occurrences associated with the church. She came to Cecilia's church specifically for that crucifix, which was responsible for many miracles in her life. She told me of a dream she had that came true on the feast of Cecilia. She told me of her depressed nephew who was "cured" when he prayed at this crucifix. She told me the story of Santa Cecilia herself, and how after she was beheaded, her head still hung onto her body for three days. Cecilia's ghost, by the way, still lived in the church. "*Tanti miracoli in questa chiesa!*"

This woman shared with me a parallel universe—as foreign as it was to my daily experience, it was familiar to hers. By the time I left her, I wondered if she had perhaps been Cecilia's ghost indeed. To search for glimpses of this parallel universe was exactly why I had set off for Italy. In college I had studied art and religious studies, and when I decided to go to Italy for two months after graduation, I applied to the Los Angeles chapter of Hostelling International for a travel grant. In my letter to them I wrote of my fascination with "The Memorial of Angela of Foligno," a 13<sup>th</sup> century Italian text documenting the life of "blessed Angela." In it I witnessed an extraordinary wealth of imagery that ranged from the sublime to the bizarre—a true cornucopia of visions. Its richness contrasted so much with my impression of convent life: self-negating, minimal and stark. And so, with the help of HI-USA, I went to Italy to explore this world. In the popular imagination, nuns are often conceived of as severe and restricted, living small

lives confined to their convents. When I read the texts of these women, like Blessed Angela, or Saint Catherine of Siena, I found an incredibly expansive reality. The nun I encountered in the church of Santa Cecilia was confirmation of this.



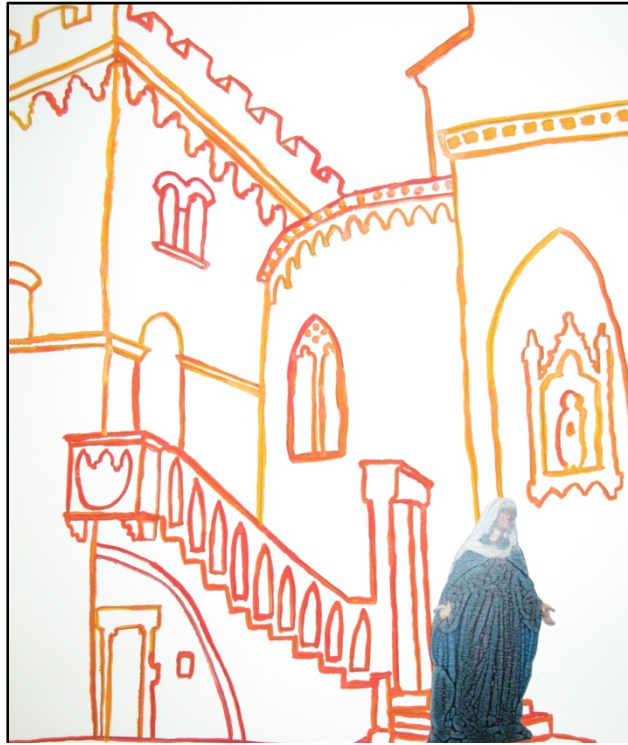
*A mixed media piece of St. Catherine*

The beauty of travel is that we are able to acquire a more profound understanding of ideas, people or places than are afforded to us through studying secondary sources. For example, visiting the convent of Santa Caterina in Siena, which had been built up around Saint Catherine's home, I realized how much the dramatic landscape of Siena must have informed Catherine's sense of the divine. Her convent, like the whole city of Siena, looks out from atop its hill onto steep, jagged cliffs that soften into rolling hills in the distance. At sunset, the landscape glows like fire. How much better now do I understand Catherine when she hears God say to her in her *Dialogue*: "In self-knowledge, then, thou wilt humble thyself, seeing that, in thyself, thou dost not even exist; for thy very being, as thou wilt learn, is derived from Me, since I have loved both thee and others before you were in existence." In the landscape of Siena, the self *does* become absorbed by the vast stretch of hills beyond it. Conversely, the self, and Catherine's home on the hill, *does* emerge from the greatness around it.



*Rose colored stones in Foligno.*

The absolute highlight of my time in Italy was my visit to Foligno, a small town in Umbria. It was the home of Blessed Angela, a 14<sup>th</sup> century Franciscan mystic who inspired me to go on this journey. The whole city is rose colored—as if Foligno had been carved from one piece of stone. While I cannot say for sure, it seemed that that little town had more churches per capita than anywhere I've been. Each church was rose colored, but each had a distinct facade or tower. I visited Angela's birth home; I visited Angela's tomb. Her body is encased in glass in a now abandoned convent. Luckily I was the only visitor to that church, and a delighted if slightly baffled janitor ("You *actually* know her? You came from America to see her?") gave me a tour of the place (which he insisted against my "aaaaah" and "*che bella*" was nothing special.)



*A mixed media depiction, "Angela descends from her ecstasy."*

Although Angela's convent had been abandoned, there was an active convent in Foligno, the convent of the Blessed Angelina! Naturally, I thought it was the same woman, but as the nun who showed me her home clarified, Angelina was a disciple of Angela. This convent had frescoes going back seven centuries on its walls and a small chapel that Angelina herself had prayed in, which has remain unchanged. What I realized here is that the frescoes were not simply painted to be beautiful artworks, but to play an active role in reminding the nuns how to behave. For example, above the head nun's table in the dining room was a mural depicting the head preparing a meal. This, I was told, is because the head nun must not forget that her rank really means that she is to be the main servant to all those she lives with.



*The dining room of the convent Casa Beata Angelina in Foligno, Italy.  
The fresco above depicts the head of the convent preparing a meal.*



*A sketch of "Foligno's churches."*



*A mixed media piece I did.  
It is taken from a photo of the chapel in which Angelina prayed,  
at the Casa Beata Angelina in Foligno.  
This room has remained unchanged for 700 years.*

While in Italy I visited convents and monasteries in metropolises like Rome, and tiny villages like Fossa Nova. I visited them in Emilia-Romagna, Toscana, Umbria, Lazio and Campania. Of all the things I recall most strongly, it is the pure, un-compromised humility that the *suore* and *frati* embody. The *idea of humility*—a virtue I have reflected on, admired, even tried to practice—is blown away by *real humility*—something that is so obviously present the air feels thick with it. Now I am back in my "normal" life in the U.S., a life characterized by material needs, busy rush, going from place to place. It is hard to believe that the lives I witnessed among the nuns and monks in Italy is *real*. That if one chose to, he or she could live a life radically different, not just in appearances but in the heart. I learned that the realities we inhabit are largely the result of our own desires and wills. I like living in the U.S., and I don't plan on becoming a nun, but I could still try to create a life as beautiful, visionary, humble, and imaginative as the nuns in Italy.

I have created some mixed-media pieces that help to illustrate my experiences in Italy. They are just a part of the huge amount of imagery that has remained with me. I am currently working on a quilt inspired by my travels. Just as the nuns in Foligno were

surrounded by frescoes to be daily reminders, I wanted to make something domestic that could serve as a sort of "memory palace" for all of the people and places I saw.



*This is the Madonna being paraded around at the Festa de' Noantri in Rome.  
It illustrates how alive the festivals are in Italy.*

(Quote from: Page 32 of *The Dialogue of St. Catherine of Siena*. Tan Books and Publishers: Rockford, Illinois, 1974.)