



“Italy is a dream that keeps returning for the rest of your life.” (Anna Akhmatova)

That Fine Italian Hand

by Paul Hofmann

Italy has attracted visitors since the earliest times of Western civilization. First came barbarian invaders who craved the lush South and its riches. They were followed by Saracen plunderers; northern pilgrims to the tombs of the Apostles in Rome; English lords on their grand tour; an endless line of artists; and honeymooners from all over Europe and the Americas.

The tender contours of the Tuscan hills with their villas, cypresses, and vineyards, and other beauty spots up and down the peninsula; the majestic ruins from antiquity; the cathedrals and the palaces; the lovely piazzas will enchant the visitor. “All soft and mellow,” as Henry James wrote. At mealtime, almost any trattoria will provide a haven with tasty food and a genial atmosphere.

A visitor to Italy will be struck by how easy it is to communicate with most Italians. They are outgoing and articulate, ready to smile and engage in small talk or gossip. A simple request for directions by a traveler who hardly knows a dozen Italian words often loosens a cascade of explanations. Verbose many Italians tend to be, but they also make friends easily with strangers whom they met only half an hour earlier.

Most Italians underline what they are saying with eloquent gestures in the Mediterranean way of illustrating spoken words with the hands. Watch that manual language when some cannot hear what is being said and don’t know whether the voices sound cordial or angry, you may be able to guess the drift of the dialogue from the play of hands – who is persuasive and who is skeptical, who wants to convey good faith (placing his hands on his chest) and who is accusing (pointing her forefinger at the other’s face.)

Some common Italian gestures will at first puzzle the newcomer: the thumb joined with the forefinger and middle finger while the hand is slowly shaken from a limp wrist expresses uncertainty, disbelief, or urgent inquiry. Such manual messages probably go back to prehistory. The famous orators of antiquity reinforced the effect of their rhetoric with ample movements of their arms and hands.

Equally ancient are the multiform tactile skills of the Italians -- their versatility and mastery in shaping, carving, crafting, refining, drawing, styling, painting, and lettering. Today's designers of elegant car bodies and casual wear are heirs to a long tradition that embraces the pottery and tomb frescoes of the Etruscans and the anatomical and engineering drawings by Leonardo da Vinci -- indeed a host of celebrated or anonymous artists and artisans going back more than three thousand years.

The penmanship of Italian Renaissance scribes and copyists before printing became generalized -- their "fine Italian hand" -- was admired throughout Europe; Western handwriting as taught to school children today developed from early fourteenth century Florentine cursive, a pencraft for speedily copying ancient manuscripts. The phrase *fine Italian hand* has long meant the particular way Italians like to do things, preferring adroitness to sheer force.

The bustling and, at times, disconcerting country that is Italy today is no quaint idyll or permanent comedy or aesthete's dream. It must be taken on the Italians' own terms. It is essentially the product of a smiling nature and of the keen minds and skilled hands of the Italians who through the centuries tilled the land; cut down most of the forests; built the towns and cities (and rebuilt them after each of many calamities); laid out the highways, canals, railroads, and *autostrade*; and created an artistic patrimony without paragon on earth.

That same resilience that enabled the Italian people to survive the recurrent catastrophes their country endured in the course of its turbulent history was displayed after the disaster of World War II. It was a tribute to both Italy's past and the nation's recent show of vitality that the birth certificate of the European Community was issued and signed in Rome in 1957. A confederation based on the Rome Protocols, Western Europe with its Mediterranean appendages is today bidding for superpower status, and the Italians, senior partners in the grouping, are among the staunchest advocates of further integration and cooperation withing the Community. That fine Italian hand is helping also to shape European dealings with the world at large.

