

UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

An
Interview
WithRea
Stavropoulos

'Italians have a way of making things come out beautifully.'

Painter and writer Rea Stavropoulos was born in Athens and raised in London. She has lived in Florence for ten years and has shown her work in various museums and galleries in Italy, Spain, France, England and Brazil. Her newest Florentine exhibition, 'Secret Gardens', is currently showing at the Galleria La Corte - Arte Contemporanea in via Coverelli 27r until May 22. The art show includes a video, three-dimensional works, 12 painted paper columns, circular sculptural books with text and images inspired by the Boboli Gardens, medieval manuscripts and botanical paintings of flowers.

The Florentine: How did you first discover Florence?

Rea Stavropoulos: My relationship with Florence goes way back. I first

came to go to the British Institute in the seventies and I fell in love with the city. My few months in Florence left me wanting to go back. I met my Italian husband in London, and in 1996 we moved to Florence. I had a room in a flat that I could use as a studio. The Duomo was on one side and the Bargello on the other.

Those first years were difficult and intimidating. They made me reevaluate my creativity and my identity. I felt somehow excluded, like I was in a tower. I felt temporary and wanted a place with a garden. I'd always go to the Boboli Gardens to explore, sketch and write...it became my creative space. Then we found a house in Tuscany and I had my first my first real contact with my own bit of land. It was then that I started reflecting on gardens.

TF: What do the Boboli Gardens mean to you?

RS: They represent a place where you can breathe. You feel peace as you enter from the busy world outside. There are mysterious paths that lead you to a place you can't see anywhere else. In Boboli, you feel like Alice in Wonderland or as if you're in the Secret Garden. It's a timeless place. You come in from the bustling street

and you realize that the amount of noise we take in is amazing. Then you go into the garden and there's bird-song—it's another world.

TF: What advice do you have about living in Florence and how to appreciate it most?

RS: For an artist, the city can sometimes be intimidating. It can be hard to find your own artistic voice due to the very strong personality of the art in the city. As a human being, it's easy to participate in Florentine life. You can experience Florence just by talking to a man in a cheese shop or a lady in a café.

TF: What is the most common misunderstanding English speakers have about Italians?

RS: First, there's the idea that all Italians are open and over-the-top. Italians often comment to me that there's order in England, whereas in Italy there's only confusion. I don't know about that. It does often seem that in Italy things are never going to quite come together. But in the end they always do. Italians have a way of making things come out beautifully. The other day I called a museum and they didn't know what their next exhibition

was going to be! I like to have everything planned in advance. Organizational administration is very boring to the Italians.

TF: If you were to describe Florence as a person or personality, who would it be?

RS: People have called her the 'grey dame'. On the outside she sometimes seems grim, uninviting. But then you look closer and you find something softer. She's friendly and encouraging, especially if you're learning how to speak Italian. As a person, Florence is open at just the right level, but not invasive.

TF: Where is your favourite place in Florence to get an aperitivo?

RS: Piazza della Repubblica. At the Hotel Savoy or Gilli.

TF: And for a cappuccino in the mornings?

RS: Vivoli. It's famous for ice cream, but the *cappuccino* is good too. And the lunch is reasonable as well.

TF: When you have guests, where do you like to take them?

RS: I take them to the Boboli Gardens, and also to the Roman Theatre in Fiesole and then to eat at Cantina di Verazzano.

TF: What do you think is the 'gift' of living in Florence? What has it been for you?

RS: For me Florence's biggest gift is her contrasting nature: ancient and modern. You are able to live in the middle of a dynamic city with fantastic architecture that connects you with 1,000 years of history. But you can experience this connection in the modern world, while you do your daily shopping. It becomes normal and easy to take its heritage for granted. Also, Florence is a small city and it's easy to walk everywhere. I love that. In London, you spend hours travelling, just to do your daily routine.



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