Ex Cathedra

President David Boren
University of Oklahoma

“My wife Molly and I have travelled to Italy several times. On each visit we discover something new: amazing art, remarkable history, exquisite food, and unparalleled scenery and beauty.

OU’s Italian program in Norman and Arezzo are poised to take off. I am envious of OU’s five fortunate students studying at the University of Siena in Arezzo this spring. They are learning about Italian culture, language, and life in the heart of Tuscany. I am also pleased that OU’s Italian language program – led by assistant professor Jason Houston – continues to grow in popularity.

This summer’s Journey to Italy program is first-rate. Dr. Susan Shaughnessy, an Associate Professor in the School of Drama will be teaching a course on “Shakespeare in Italy” where students will explore various works set in Italy such as Romeo & Juliet, Julius Caesar, and The Merchant of Venice. Dr. Randy Lewis from the Honors College will teach “Imagining Italy” in which students will discover how Italian culture has influenced writers, filmmakers, and artists from John Adams to Henry James, from Mark Twain to Martin Scorsese. Mr. Kirk Duclaux, our director of Italian programs will also teach a course focusing on Roman through Renaissance Art History, Culture and Architecture.

OU’s international programs should increasingly be tailor-made for the needs and wants of our students. Over the course of the next ten years OU’s Italy program should become one of our signature programs. I hope that the Italy program will continue to expand its offerings and amenities to our students. In Arezzo, the classroom becomes all of Tuscany! “

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OU Honors in Italy

In late 2006, President David L. Boren asked the OU Honors College to launch a new program called “Honors in Italy.” “In terms of curriculum, we were seeking something that incorporated the American Studies emphasis of the Honors College,” says Dr. Randolph Lewis, who developed a comparative course called “Imagining Italy” that charts the relationship between the US and Italy. Under the leadership of Honors College Dean R.C. Davis–Undiano, the Honors in Italy program is now gearing up for its second year.
Thank you for the many words of encouragement and the helpful suggestions pertaining to the newsletter. Based on those suggestions, this issue deals more closely with the experiences the students are having in their transformation from 'innocents abroad' to integrated international students. At the beginning of their sojourn here in Arezzo, the students were housed in a beautiful 17th c. monastery with access to a kitchen, a cleaning crew, 24-hr security, and plenty of room for relaxing – sounds perfect. However, they quickly realized that in order to learn the language and to meet Italians they had to forego the comforts of the monastery and look for living arrangements that would facilitate their desire to see the 'real' Italy. All OU students now live with other students or with an Italian family. They are much happier with this arrangement, both socially and financially.

The University of Siena in Arezzo (UNISI) is mostly a Letters and Philosophy program. The students take an Art History class taught in English, entitled 'Decorative Complexes'. The lectures entail on-site visits in various locals such as Assisi, Siena, Rome and Florence. This approach allows the students to explore Italy while earning credit. They also take courses in Italian at UNISI which apply to their majors back at OU, such as a class on Ancient Romans. Several are helping translate films for an upcoming documentary film festival. And for the first time at UNISI in Arezzo, OU students have 45 contact hours of Italian language instruction.

The students you'll read about are hard at work helping lay the ground work for future OU students and faculty sojourns.

My Arezzo Experience

Amanda Swistak
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I have found that it took about a month of being here for me to settle into the environment. The first week was all excitement with a haze of jet lag that kept me from being a functional human being. I felt like I was on an extended vacation. I had a constant feeling of nervousness because so many things were uncertain and I had to constantly tell myself that everything would fall into place. The "Decorative Complexes" class helped me to get my mind off of my homesickness and feeling awkward because I was getting to see new places and learn a lot about art and Italian history. It is extremely valuable to know some Italian history because it helps to explain why Italians act the way they do. I have found that walking around the city is very helpful also because it calms my nerves. I have done a lot of walking and a lot of observation desperately trying to find the key to unlock the door of Italian culture.

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Living in Convitto Santa Caterina was perfect at the beginning of my stay. It is safe and close to everything and the people who work there are very nice and provide an opportunity to speak Italian. Although after a month of living there, I found it necessary to start pushing myself out of my comfort zone. I now live in the basement of a fabulous Italian family. It is difficult to meet people because everyone my age hangs out with the same people that they have known since they were little, and of course there is the language barrier, so being able to be connected to a family was invaluable. They are extremely generous and very accommodating. I was and am afraid to speak Italian because I didn’t want to sound stupid, and living with them has not really given me the option to speak English. Luckily they are very patient and do not make me feel stupid for the mistakes that I make.

It is very important to have courage at the beginning of the experience and to keep a positive attitude. It was hard for me at first to put myself out there with meeting people, and it is still difficult, but the people here will generally not come up and start talking with you. Italy is a beautiful place and I am glad that the class with Kirk has given me the opportunity to learn about it as well as see different parts of it.

"It is very important to have courage at the beginning of the experience and to keep a positive attitude"
Dean Davis-Undiano envisions great things for the future of the Honors in Italy program. “The Honors College is doing everything it can to open this door of opportunity as widely as possible,” he says. “The Honors in Italy program will be the experience of a lifetime!”

Honors in Italy is designed to be a smaller, more intimate program than the larger Journey to Italy. It includes field trips and other experiences that are unique to the Honors program. “For example, the students and I go to the outdoor food markets and we cook traditional meals together,” says Dr. Lewis, who also points to the presence of his wife Dr. Circe Sturm, an Italian citizen and anthropologist whose work deals with Italian culture. “She’s a great asset to the students who get to see how an anthropologist looks at Italy.”

In its first two seasons, Honors in Italy has run parallel to the existing Journey to Italy course, so that Honors students could take advantage of Kirk Duclaux’s art history lectures in Florence, Rome, and Venice. “Students really like Kirk’s lectures,” say Dr. Lewis. “He gives them the inside scoop on Renaissance art.”

The initial student response to the Honors program has been very positive. “It was not like any ordinary class that is taught in a building at OU,” says one Honors student. “Instead, it was filled with exciting adventures at vineyards, sanctuaries, and jousts. It made the learning experience one that is unforgettable. The trip was amazing for all of us. I remember all the great times I had in and out of class.”

Now entering its second year, Honors in Italy continues to grow under the guidance of Dean Davis-Undiano. “The OU Honors in Italy program opens a door for students to discover Italy’s amazing cultural riches and to explore the many strong ties between Italian and American culture,” he says. “Prof. Randy Lewis is the perfect guide for this grand tour that will be a high point of the Honors experience for any student that participates.” Students who are interested in the program should email Dr. Lewis at rlewis@ou.edu.
Now we are finally ready to enter the Basilica. Pictures are prohibited here, which on the one hand we regret because we would like to have a reminder of this amazing church, but on the other hand this enables us to focus more on the lecture and absorbing the beautiful space. Colorful frescoes, covering most of the walls, surround us. Fortunately we have a professor who knows where the must-sees are; Kirk leads us directly to the high altar of the lower basilica. Here we see an early image of Saint Francis as well as works by Cimabue and Pietro Lorenzetti. Our next stops are the chapels of Saints Martin of Tours and Mary Magdalene. As usual, Kirk’s lecture is a blend of art critique and appreciation, which includes many technical art terms, the context of the piece, as its original setting, and a healthy dose of history, told as unforgettable anecdotes. It’s a combination that keeps us interested, as well as keeps us on our toes—it’s hard to keep up, as our pens move much slower than his lecturing! But afterwards we can compare notes; what one person misses, another is sure to have gotten.

The lower basilica is dark and solemn, meant to impress us with God’s majesty; it’s a true place for prayer. The upper basilica, by contrast, is filled with light and ornamentation, the kind of splendor that visitors love. The frescoes on the walls narrate the life of St. Francis; we spend the second half of the class making our way through the painted narration of the life of the famous preacher.

When the lecture is over, we emerge from the basilica to find, to our delight, that the drizzle has ceased; there even seems to be a possibility that the sun will emerge from behind the clouds. Kirk lets us loose for the rest of the day, so we are free to return to Arezzo or spend our time in Assisi, as we please.

Those of us who elect to stay a while longer make our way back into the center, in search of more sights and possibly something to eat. After visiting some of the other sights in the city, our noses lead us to a little bar that seems to be a good choice, as many of the locals are eating there. We sample Assisi’s piadine with prosciutto and mozzarella, and conclude, in typical Italian fashion, that they’re good, but the ones in our own city are better.

Continuing our passagiata, we catch sight of a fortress on a hilltop. A sign informs us that this is the Rocca Maggiore, and we decide it’s worth the hike. Once inside, we make our way up one of the three towers, only to discover that it’s the smallest one. Determined to get the best view, we attempt the second tower—but it’s still smaller than the third, which appears unreachable. A consultation with the woman at the ticket booth reveals that in order to reach the third and best tower, we need to go halfway up the first one and take the narrow, dark corridor to the base of the other tower.

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So that’s what we do. Halfway up the first tower; through the tiny passage, another climb up the shaky spiral staircase, and we’re there! The view is spectacular; we can see all of Assisi, including the basilica we just visited. Turning around, we can view the snow–topped mountains that surround us. The wind is whipping our hair and chilling us; we’re tired from all the walking and climbing, but this view is worth it!

We sit at the top of the tower, relaxing and enjoying chatting with other tourists. There is a father and his teenage son, who begs for “just five more minutes!” before they have to return to their tour group. An elderly gentleman, upon hearing of our ‘Giotto Non–Giotto’ lesson with Kirk, jovially quizzes us on the fresco master (or Ghee–oto, as he likes to call him). We gravely thank him for his wisdom, including the ‘fact’ that Giotto is famous for his frescoes in the upper basilica.

Descending from the Rocca Maggiore, we make our way back into the city. The less–than–balmy weather does not dissuade us from finding the nearest gelateria. No day in Italy is complete without a gelato!

Arezzo is synonymous with antiques

There are so many different aspects of Arezzo that can keep you entertained for days and days. My favorite site to see in Arezzo is the Basilica of San Francesco which houses the Legend of the True Cross by Piero della Francesca. The Basilica has so much history and the frescoes are awe–inspiring. Another Arentine must–see is Cimabue’s crucifix in the Church of San Domenico. Apart from the scaffolding, the church is a great place to see.

Simply strolling the medieval streets of Arezzo is another great thing to pass the time with, and it’s quite entertaining to see the Italian’s interact with one another, especially during the antiques fair. Il prato, or mostly known as the park at the top of Corso Italia, has the most gorgeous views of Arezzo's countryside, and the scenery there is beautiful and green. At night my favorite place to go is the piazza outside of the Basicilica of San Francesco. It is a really nice spot to sit and relax with friends, and it makes you truly enjoy the Italian lifestyle. Vita Bella, named and decorated after Roberto Benigni’s film, La Vita Bella, and is my favorite spot there, and their aperativo is excellent!

Outside of Class

Amanda Blackman
Advertising 09’

To be honest, I was surprised to learn that Arezzo is home to many popular tourist sites and popular Italian art. I thought it was just a quaint Tuscan town!