

Saturnalia

A visit to Massaciuccoli recently showed us the Roman way of life that once thrived not far from our doorsteps. Taking the Sarzanese road west over Monte Quiesa and turning left at Massarosa, we found signs leading downhill to the WWF Oasis at the *Padule* (marshlands). The lake reflected the golden, rosy hues of the setting sun (early at this time of year) as we drove along the tree-lined road. Far on the other side we could barely see Torre del Lago, where Puccini would have set out by boat to maraud the birds that are now protected on this side of the lake. Soon we arrived at the center of the tiny village, passing the Archaeological Museum on our right and excavations under a white tent on our left. In front of us was a charming little wine-bar, but that would wait until we walked up the pathway to the Villa dei Venulei.

If you have never been here, you should not hesitate to come. The ruins of the old thermal baths were everything Shelley, or Keats, might have said they were – unravished brides of quietness – especially as the sun

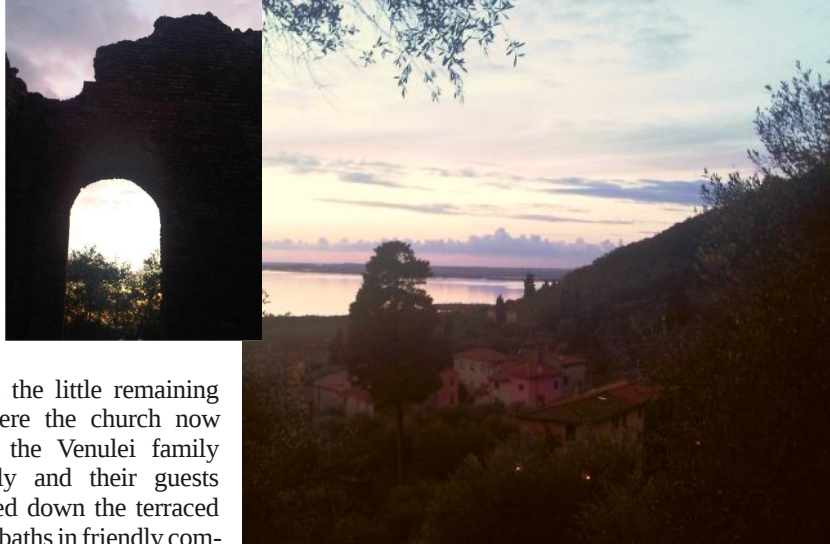
cast its shadows over them and the olives filtered the little remaining light. Above, where the church now stands was once the Venulei family home. The family and their guests would have walked down the terraced hillside to take hot baths in friendly comradeship. Under-pavement heating would have made it all quite cosy.

We would come back another day at an earlier hour to visit the museum, but this was enough to stimulate my curiosity about the Romans. We all know they were great partygoers, but I have learned that they even had their own form of Christmas.

December 17 to 23 (on the Julian calendar) was the time of Saturnalia. This was a festival of light leading up to the Solstice, with the celebration of the birth (or re-birth) of the Sun on December 25th. Saturn, the agricultural deity of the Golden Age, was propitiated with banquets, sacrifices and gift giving in the week leading up to the Solstice. Beginning in 399 B. C. (according to Livy) on the 17th the Romans had a holiday from

work. They placed the image of a deity on a couch and held a public banquet in the deity's honor. This was followed December 18-19 with domestic rituals: a suckling pig was killed, slaves were fed by their masters, and their disrespect and role reversal were tolerated in good-natured fashion by their owners. On December 23 gifts were exchanged and poems were written in honor of Saturnalia.

Throughout this week of celebration, in the streets of Rome people would greet each other by calling out "Io Saturnalia" – much as we say "Happy Holidays"! It must have been a lot of fun. When Christianity arrived, the people continued celebrating, but now it was for the birth of Christ.



Born Rebels

The Painters of the Caffè Michelangiolo

Many of the artists of the late 1800's in Tuscany were rebels. Even if they were graduates of the Accademia delle Belle Arti in Firenze, they developed their own aesthetic. In the words of Telemaco Signorini, who was one of them, *Do you know what we consider great art? It is an art that doesn't ask for historic culture from the artist, nor imaginative talent, but rather conscientious and exact observation of this nature that lives contemporaneously with us.* In other words, rather than copying the past, they decided to look to the world around them.

One of the places they turned to was Piagentina, the countryside south of Firenze, an area filled with *case coloniche* and *villie padronali*. The paintings of Silvestro Lega, a guest of the Batelli family, reflect the life and light of this region.

In 1861 the young intellectual Diego Martelli inherited some land at Castiglioncello along the Livorno coast: a hundred hectare

of uncontaminated landscape with beautiful light and magnificent colors. He invited his friends from the Caffè Michelangiolo group, near the Accademia in Via Largo, to stay and paint at his family *tenuta* (we could roughly render this with the words *farm* or *ranch* in English, although the word refers more to the land than the productive activity engaged on it).

Here the concept of *macchia* grew into an Italian School or Period of extreme importance. The *macchia* was both the scrubland and the people who lived there (some of them bandits or outlaws), and the speckled, splashing color that marked the technique of the Macchiaioli artists. The color white was an essential element of the palette, giving luminosity and suggestiveness to the paintings. The present seems to mutate before our eyes in these paintings, done with a new kind of light, in a quiet suspension of time.

In 1895 with the first Biennale of Venice, these 'Rebels' became known in the world, like the French Impressionists of the same era.

The exhibition at Lu.C.C.A. Museum (curated by Maurizio Vanni and Stefano Cecchetto) is not to be missed. A quiet and clamorous presentation of this significant epoch of Italian art.



Above: Giovanni Fattori (Livorno 1825-Firenze 1908), *La raccolta delle foglie*, 1885, 112x80 cm.

Left: Luigi Bechi (Firenze 1830-1919), *La raccolta delle conchiglie a Castiglioncello*, 1865, 100x225 cm. From the private collection of Diego Martelli.