

## FLORENCE'S WOMEN OF STONE

Whenever one visits Florence, of course the first stop is a visit to Michelangelo's David.

Who doesn't remember the huge statue of Neptune in front of the Palazzo Vecchio or Perseus decapitating Medusa.

Now I want to tell you about the Donne Fiorentine, the women of Florence, forever linked to the city not just by birth, but by love, by chance, by widowhood, by fate. They have become part of the city's history and their lives have been remembered in stone, maybe not in the likeness of great statues like David, but stone none the less. Marble plaques engraved with their stories abound in Florence and its hills.

They are women of power like Christina of the house of Lorena, wife of the Grand Duke Ferdinand, women of noble origins like Mary Magdalen of Austria or Donna Elisa Bonaparte (yes, Napoleon's sister). They are poets, literate women, patriots, benefactresses and then mothers, sisters, daughters who lived lives of honesty, modesty, fairness and thus were honored with a few words etched in stone.

So, if you are game, we can visit some by walking the streets of Florence with your noses up in the air as most of our stone women are relegated up high on the side of old mansions!

### BIANCA CAPPELLO

One of the most beautiful homes in Florence stands at #26 of Via Maggio. It was the residence of a lady by the name of Bianca Cappello. Bianca had been born in Venice, but in 1563 fell hopelessly in love with a young Florentine man and so decided to run away with him to Florence, breaking up with her family.

Her lover, as if often happens, proved to be a good for nothing man who took advantage of her and even accepted money from Francesco De' Medici (Cosimo 1<sup>st</sup> son) who, having seen her beauty, wanted her as his mistress.

A few years went by and her husband Piero was killed, some say by the jealous husband of one of his many mistresses, and now she was free to enjoy the attentions of Francesco as well as his many gifts. She also fell desperately in love with him and he with her.

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While her family tried to get her back to Venice, she refused, afraid to be confined to a convent as it often happened in those days.

In 1578 unexpectedly Francesco's Austrian wife died and finally the two lovers could marry. Bianca became the new Grand Dutchess and was pardoned by her family.

Their happiness together lasted only a few years and then illness struck Bianca. They died the same day in 1587 just a few hours from each other.

The stone marking her life says:

BIANCA CAPPELLO BEFORE SHE BECAME WIFE TO FRANCESCO I DE' MEDICI LIVED IN THIS HOUSE WHICH SHE BUILT IN 1566.

### BEATRICE PORTINARI

I wonder if we would ever have known who Beatrice was if Dante had not fallen in love with her and made her his muse.

Still very little is known of her real life, she was the daughter of Folco Portinari, a rich Florentine who founded the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova. She married the old Simone De'Bardi, an arranged marriage, and she died very young at 25, childless, thus being able to guide the poet through paradise!

The marble stone at # 31 in Via delle Forbici which used to be in the Comune di Fiesole says:

IN THIS VILLA OF CAMERATA THAT THEN BECAME OF THE ALIGHIERI, THEN OF THE PORTINARI, TO HONOR THE MEMORY OF THE DIVINE POET AND OF HIS BEATRICE, THE TOWN OF FIESOLE THIS MARBLE PLACED ON 14 MAY 1865.

It was destiny that this villa, also called Il Garofalo, strangely would belong to both families although at different times.

Then of course there is an inscription on the Palazzo Da Capparello that used to be Portinari-Salviati and that today houses the Banca Toscana in Via del Corso #6 with Dante's famous verses from the 30<sup>th</sup> Canto of Purgatory:

SOVRA CANDIDO VEL, CINTA D'ULIVA, DONNA M'APPARVE SOTTO VERDE MANTO, VESTITA DI COLOR DI FIAMMA VIVA!

(Above a white veil, adorned with olive branches, a woman appeared cloaked in green and dressed in a red flame!)

Without Dante, none of us would probably ever have known that Beatrice had lived, but without Beatrice, and her inspiration there probably never would have been a Divina Commedia.

### MONNA TESSA

Next to Beatrice mention must be made of Madonna Tessa wife of Ture and in today's Florence one would say Collaboratrice Domestica of the Portinari family (cleaning lady). She was tremendously important to the family not

just for cleaning and cooking etc. but also because she helped with the raising of the children. When Folco became a widower and his children were fully grown up, the house was no longer in need of Monna Tessa and so she dedicated herself to help the poor and the needy. She convinced Folco to build a hospital, and so in 1285 work started and the new facility was completed in 1288 and named Santa Maria Nuova. The hospital not only helped the sick, but also the poor and hungry people of the city, that could be seen going to the back entrance holding their cups to be filled with free soup. The stone commemorating this was placed in 1785, is written in Latin and it says:

“Aedificium hoc ab eximia fulci de portinariis flor. Civis liberalitate, mona tessa eius famula suadente, aegrotantium bono olim extractum, petri leopoldi magni etruriae ducis providentia perfecit anno salutis 1785”.

This building once built for the good of the sick by the great generosity of Folco Portinari, citizen of Florence, thanks to the persuasion of Monna Tessa, his servant, was completed by the greatness of Pietro Leopoldo, Grand Duke of Tuscany in the year of our Lord 1785.

After Folco died, Tessa continued to take care of the sick and the hungry, and having convinced other people to help her, she started the order of the Oblate, which still exists today and whose sisters are dedicated to caring for the sick.

#### CANDIDA QUIRINA MOCENNI

What happens to women loved by poets when the season of passion ends? Usually they disappear, remain forever beautiful and young as they were, fixed in time by the words of the poet.

In Via del Melarancio there is a large stone memorializing the “Donna Gentile” that was able to give love and peace to Ugo Foscolo.

It is written in latin and it says:

“Candida Quirina Mocenni, born in Siena on May 25, 1781, honest, prudent, charitable, distinguished herself for her sweetness and great humanity, that Ugo Foscolo honored with the Italian attribute “Donna Gentile”, dedicated to the study of art and literature, loved and honored by the men of her time: Vittorio Alfieri, Giovanni Battista Niccolini, Gino Capponi, Silvio Pellico and Ugo Foscolo.

She generously donated to all those she saw struggling and personally fed a number of poor children, clothing them with garments she herself had made. She died July 3, 1847 in this house that was left in inheritance to Didaco Martelli, her brother’s nephew, who posed this inscription in memory and gratitude”

From his exile in London, Foscolo writes to her: “Dolcissima amica mia, sacra quanto madre, pia come sorella, cara come moglie e innamorata”!  
“My sweetest friend, sacred like a mother, pious as a sister, loved as a wife and lover”

Imagine!

It's thanks to her that a lot of the poet's work was saved from destruction and has found its way to us.

### ELEONORA DUSE

At the crossroads of Via di Vincigliata and Via di Corbignano one can read:  
In this place were born – lived – visited :

Desiderio Da Settignano, Bernardo and Antonio Rossellino, Luca Fancelli, Meo del Caprina, Simone Mosca, Michelangiolo, Niccolò Tommaseo, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Eleonora Duse.

She was born in Vigevano in 1858 and started acting at the age of 4 interpreting the role of Cosetta in *Les Misérables* of Victor Hugo.

The first time she came to Florence was in 1888, already a famous actress.

But her love affair with the city or rather with the hill of Settignano is tied to the time of her relationship with Gabriele D'Annunzio from the end of 1897 to 1904.

That is when the poet rented a small villa for her and called it “La Porziuncola” like the chapel in Assisi in which St. Francis had welcomed Chiara. There they worked frantically together and loved each other passionately.

Duse, as almost everyone knows, will die in Pittsburgh in 1924 of tuberculosis just like Traviata.

### ELIZABETH BARRET BROWNING

E.B.B. is the woman who has the most stones dedicated to her in Florence. There are a total of four.

Qui scrisse e morì Elisabetta Barret Browning che in cuore di donna conciliava scienza di dotto e spirito di poeta e fece del suo verso aureo anello fra Italia e Inghilterra. Pone questa memoria Firenze grata 1861.

Here wrote and died E.B.B. that in a woman's heart was able to include the science of learning and the spirit of a poet and that made a golden ring to unite Italy and England.

If you remember the movie “Tea With Mussolini” you will remember the ladies congregating in Florence at the English Cemetery where Elizabeth is buried and where this marble plaque stands in her memory. She is a wonderfully tragic figure. Born in England in 1806 she is a gifted child, at

ten years of age she can already read Homer in Greek and at 14 she wrote her first epic poem. But she is also very sickly and so her only comfort comes from studying literature and writing both prose and poems in her self imposed seclusion. Many books are published bringing her admiration and recognition, but one in particular the Poems of 1844 which contained The Cry Of Children, a protest against child labor, caught the attention of Robert Browning, an already famous writer. After a long exchange of letters they finally met in May of 1845, obviously at her house. It was love at first sight and after just a few days Robert asked her to marry him. She refused because of her health, but he kept courting her daily and was finally able to convince her to go against her father's wishes and they married secretly in 1846. They escaped to Italy together with her maid and her cocker spaniel.

This became literally the beginning of a new life for Elizabeth. The Tuscan sun gives her back her health, her husband and her freedom give her back great joy. She absolutely falls in love with Italy and Florence in particular. She lives first in Villa dell'Ombrellino a Bellosguardo where she writes: "Dalla Toscana Bellosguardo dove Galileo di notte scrutava le stelle, osservando la terra e il cielo ci e' difficile decidere quale dei due sia piu' bello."

"From Tuscany's Bellosguardo where Galileo studied the night stars, observing earth and sky, we are hard pressed to choose which one is more beautiful".

After a while, the couple moves to Casa Guidi, in what is called Oltrarno, where today, on the side of Piazza San Felice, at the beginning of Via Maggio there is another marble dedicated to the poet by Tommaseo and this is the site that houses the Browning Institute since 1971.

#### ELISA BONAPARTE BACIOCCHI

Elisa , like her brother, was born in Aiaccio (Corsica) and her real name was Maria Anna. She married Felice Baciocchi who was much older than she was in 1797 and they benefited greatly from the fortunes of her brother both economically as well as socially. They spend their time between Aiaccio and Paris. On a personal note, Elisa gives birth to two children but they both die very young. When her brother is crowned emperor, she becomes her royal highness herself and in 1806 she and her husband are proclaimed princes of Piombino and Lucca. History books say that the new rulers governed with a gentle hand: the reality was that it was she who was in charge, and she did a good job of it. Napoleon who never missed a thing, realized this, and in 1809 proclaimed his sister Grand Duchess of Tuscany, giving her charge of the entire region. She made it a point to protect the arts and help industry and

agriculture surprising those who said that she was moving in a world superior to the one she would have been destined to by birth.

As the fortunes of her brother begin to reverse she must also leave Florence in 1815. She died in 1820 in Trieste.

The only thing that remains today to witness her memory is a small fountain located in Via Del Prato looking towards the old door through the walls circumscribing the town. The text is almost illegible but it states that this was built in 1810 by the will of Elisa when Giuseppe Fouchet and Emilio Pucci were magistrates and on this stone she is referred to as ETRURIAE REGINA, Queen of Etruria the title she had hoped to gain but never did.

### FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

Florence is remembered in three marble plaques and the first one, is situated under a bas-relief that portrays her (another distinction) in the cloister of Santa Croce, it says:

Florence Nightingale, eroina di Crimea, signora della lampada, come la chiamarono I soldati che la ebbero infermiera mirabile nelle notti di ospedale angosciose e fin d'allora animatrice con la virtu dell'esempio, a quell'opera volontaria di pietà internazionale, che poi fu la Croce Rossa, ha nella sua Firenze dove nacque e ne porto' il nome gentile, questo ricordo di venerazione ed affetto.

“Florence Nightingale, heroine of Crimea, lady of light, as she was called by the soldiers she cared for admirably during the long suffering nights in the hospital, when with her example and virtue she gave life to voluntarism and international piety that eventually became the Red Cross, has in her Florence the city of which she bore the gentle name, this remembrance of veneration and love”.

Another one is situated in Via di Santa Maria a Marignolle at number 2, on the walls of the house where she was born, Villa La Colombaia, which today houses a convent. It says:

We remember the great heart of Florence Nightingale, the Lady of the light born here 12 May 1820 that from the wounds of war and her heroic dedication, brought forth the determination to create a service of assistance worthy of a civilized world.

The third one is just her name on a list of the “straniere di Bellosguardo” the foreign women who made the hills of Florence their home.

And speaking of STRANIERI, (foreigners) Florence has always had a great number of foreigners in its midst. At the end of the SETTECENTO, the French arrived, coming fresh out of the revolution they landed on the Arno

shores, and because they were used to command they demanded things and were heard to say; Nous Voulons (we want) but the good humored Florentines ... started to call them “I Nuvoloni” (the great clouds)! In the 1800 the English arrived in great numbers, and so, any foreigner even though they might be spanish, or russian, or portuguese would be identified as the fatalistic “Gl’e’un Inglese”! (meaning, what can you expect, he’s an englishman !)

But anyway more than Englishmen it is more correct to say that Englishwomen arrived in Florence, real women, writers, noble women who actively participated in the Italian Risorgimento. Even Queen Victoria arrived for a visit and she is said to have sat for quite sometime on a stone bench on the Vecchia Via Fiesolana to better admire the view of Florence. And so, to commemorate these people there is a long epigraph that says:

Qui, dove la grazia del colle e del cielo Esalta le qualita’ del pensiero e dell’arte Soggiornarono ed operarono: (Here, where the beauty of the hills and of the sky stimulates the quality of thought and art, lived and visited)

Galileo Galilei, Ugo Foscolo

E questi eminenti figli di patrie diverse: (And these eminent sons and daughters of different countries)

James Fenimore Cooper

Nathaniel Hawthorne

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Henry James – Robert Lytton (a poet himself and then viceroy of India)–

Alfred Austin – Hans Von Bulow

Hans Von Marees – Adolf Hildebrand – Franz Brentano

Isa Blagden (Isabella was the center of a real British colony in Florence, when she bought Villa Bricheri Colombi, in her salon congregated many famous people, Henry James, Theodosia Trollope and her husband Thomas, Charlotte Cushman, the American actress etc.)

Clara Wieck Schumann (Robert S.’s wife, pianist, composer in her own right)

Ovida ( Maria Louise Rame’ writer of animal stories)

Jessie White Mario

Walburga Paget (Lady W.P. hosted also many famous people like Alfred Austin and Oscar Wilde)

Violet Trefusis, the last owner of Villa dell’Ombrellino where Galileo lived from 1617 to 1631, also a writer.

MARY ANN EVANS (George Eliot)

Florence has always been a tremendously important center of music: between 1600 and 1800 the biggest and most famous composers and musicians came there. The roman Teatro Massimo, known today as Teatro della Pergola was a veritable temple of opera that saw the primas of talents like Vivaldi, Rossini, Donizetti, Puccini and Verdi. All these people, when they came to Florence stayed at the same hotel the “Londres et Suisse” located in Via Tornabuoni, a road in the historical center of town, full of great palaces and history. You would think that such a hotel would have many inscriptions dedicated to its famous guests, but actually the only stone there is dedicated to one of those famous English women and it says:

In questa casa, albergo preferito di musicisti sommi, trascorse nel 1860 uno dei suoi primi soggiorni George Eliot (Anna Maria Evans), autrice della fiorentina “Romola” e di altri celebri romanzi.

(In this house, preferred residence of most famous musicians, sojourned in 1860 George Eliot, A.M.Evans, author of the Florentine “Romola” and other famous books)

Mary Ann Evans arrives in Florence for the first time in 1860 and after a second trip and lengthy stay between 1862 and 1863 she publishes Romola a story taking place in the Florentine 400's. After George Henry Lewes died (he was the man she lived with and loved in spite of all Victorian rules) she married J.W.Cross, twenty years her junior and her administrator, and they spent their honeymoon in Florence.

### SANTA MARIA MADDALENA DEI PAZZI

She is to Florence what Santa Caterina Benincasa is to Siena.

Maria Maddalena was born in Florence April 2, 1566 the daughter of Camillo dei Pazzi and Maddalena Maria Buondelmonti and she was baptized with the name Caterina, name that she abandoned when she entered the monastery of Santa Maria Degli Angeli in Borgo San Frediano that belonged to the Carmelite nuns since 1479. There she lived in “pura sofferenza” (pure suffering) till her death in 1607.

Today, in Borgo San Frediano, outside the walls that were her rooms she is remembered by the following:

In queste stanze visse e morì Maria Maddalena Dei Pazzi, amante dell'amore di Cristo.

(In these rooms lived and died Maria M. Dei Pazzi, lover of the love of Christ)



## LE SIGNORE DEI SIGNORI OTTO

(The ladies of the Ottos)

I signori Otto di Guardia were charged to be the custodians of Public Order in Florence from 1380 through 1777 when their magistrate was abolished. Their laws, were also ...written in stone! And they were put on the walls around the city promising whip lashes or monetary fines to those who did not obey their orders.

They seemed to take note specifically of two categories of women: nuns and prostitutes.

They were obviously very respectful of the reverend mothers and did everything they could to protect their monasteries with all sort of decrees designed to show their regard. And so, in Via Ghibellina on the walls of the Murate, here is what they wrote:

A DI 17 GIUGNO 1616, LI SPETTABILI SIGNORI OTTO DI BALIA DELLA CITTA' DI FIRENZE PROHIBISCONO CHE INTORNO AL MONASTERO DELLE MONACHE DELLE MURATE ET VICINO A QUELLO A BRACCIA CENTO NE"VI SI GIOCHI PER ALCUNO ET FANCIULLI ALLA PALLA NE A QUALSIVOGLIA ALTRO GIOCO ET DI NOTTE NON VI SI SONI NE" CANTI CANZONE ET ALTRO AT ANDORA SI PROIBISCE NON POTERE SCARICARE CALCINACCI NE ALTRA IN MONDIZIA SOTTO PENA DELLA CATTURA ET DEL ARBITRIO LORO.

(On this day, June 17, 1616 the most respectable Messers Otto, guardians of the city of Florence prohibit that around the monastery of the sisters of the Murate and no closer that 100 arms length any game of ball by any children and any other game whatsoever be played and at night that any songs or other music be sung and furthermore that no garbage or other dirt be left in the street under penalty of capture and loss of freedom)

(Murate – name born when in 1370 when 12 women had themselves closed in there to live a cloistered life, now it is a prison).

As far as prostitution goes, we know that the Otto family wrote many decrees against the women who practiced it, and had even written down a sort of list of those women they knew were involved. At the time of inscribing their name the women were given a paper that they were supposed to carry at all times. This allowed them free passage around the city and the privilege of paying a large tax. The oldest stone reminding us of this dates from 1561.

Of more interest is the following one that can be seen on the façade of the ONGISSANTI church:

PER COMANDAMENTO DI SUA ALTEZZA SERENISSIMA LI SOGNORI OTTO DELLA BALIA DI FIRENZE HANNO FATTO DECRETO SOTTO IL DI 26 DI SETTEMBRE 1635 CHE VICINO A 300 BRACCIA A QUESTA CHIESA D'OGNI SANTI NON HABITINO DONNE DI MALAVITA CON PENA A CHI NON OBBEDISCE DESSERE SUBITO CACCIATA E BUTTATEGLI LE ROBE NELLA STRADA ET A PADRONI DELLE CASE DHAVERLE SPIGIONATE PER DUE ANNI ET ARBITRIO DEL MAGISTRATO.

(It is the commandment of his highness and the Messers Otto, guardians of Florence and by this decree placed here on Sept. 26 1635 that within 300 arms length of this church there cannot live any women of ill repute, with the penalty to those who do not obey of being immediately thrown out of their house and their belongings thrown in the street, and that the proprietors of these dwellings be condemned to keep the apartment unrented for the following two years)

## MARIA

I could go on and on, but I want to end with a very special woman who has always had a wonderfully particular role throughout the history of Florence: Mary, Mother of Jesus.

The streets are full of hidden Madonnas, little tabernacles, frescoes, celebrating the Virgin.

One of the stones that celebrate this woman is most dear to me and can be read in Piazza Del Duomo where the Venerabile Arciconfraternita Della Misericordia is located. The brotherhood of the Misericordia, made up totally of volunteers, has been in existence for more than seven centuries and is dedicated to Santa Maria Della Misericordia. The words are those of Dante and are spoken by San Bernardo in the 33<sup>rd</sup> canto of Paradiso:

VERGINE MADRE FIGLIA DEL TUO FIGLIO  
UMILE ED ALTA PIU' CHE CREATURA  
TERMINE FISSO D'ETERNO CONSIGLIO  
TU SE' COLEI CHE L'UMANA NATURA  
NOBILITASTI SI' CHE IL SUO FATTORE  
NON DISDEGNO' DI FARSI SUA FATTURA  
NEL VENTRE TUO SI RACCESE L'AMORE  
PER LO CUI CALDO NELL'ETERNA PACE  
COSI' E' GERMINATO QUESTO FIORE.

(Virgin mother, daughter of your son, humble but higher than any other creature, eternal counselor, you are the one that ennobled human nature so

that his maker deigned to become so through your womb bringing love and eternal peace)