

CLASSICAL MUSIC

One Artist's Story,
With Music

Pianist Inna Faliks talks about her musical memoir, tracing her journey from then-communist Ukraine to America.

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COURTESY OF INNA FALIKS



PUBLIC DOMAIN

ESSENCE OF CHINA

An Incorruptible Official
in Ancient China

Celebrated scholar Yang Zhen was known for his honesty for very good reason.

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ARTS & CULTURE

THE EPOCH TIMES



BIANCO BIANCHI

CRAFTSMANSHIP

Art Lost, Then Found

The Story of Scagliola

Passion and perseverance in the Bianco Bianchi family workshop

LORRAINE FERRIER

PONTASSIEVE, Italy—Passion and perseverance are at the heart of the Bianco Bianchi workshop in the little town of Pontassieve, a short train ride from Florence. Bianchi (1920–2006) always had a passion for painting, and it was through his love of art that he dedicated his life to learning about and restoring the lost art of scagliola.

Scagliola is a type of gypsum known as selenite. The stone appears clear and shiny like the light of the moon. Scagliola is also the name of the technique whereby selenite is ground into a powder and then mixed with natural glues and pigments to form a paste, which

is then inlaid into slate, marble, or selenite itself.

Used since ancient Roman times, scagliola once illuminated the walls of the Circus Maximus stadium in Rome. Scagliola gained popularity in Carpi, Emilia-Romagna, in the 17th century, spreading to Florence and Tuscany in the 18th century, and then across Europe thereafter. Around the mid-19th century, scagliola disappeared.

With no living master to learn from, Bianchi began visiting churches and monasteries to learn from antique scagliola, and he began purchasing antique scagliola pieces at auctions.

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The Bianco Bianchi showroom in the center of Florence, Italy, near the Ponte Vecchio.

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BIANCO BIANCHI



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want to develop and improve myself, even now that I am pretty skilled.

THE EPOCH TIMES: How do you make the scagliola mixture?

MR. L. BIANCHI: The ground-down scagliola is mixed with water, glue, and pigment and then inserted into the slate, marble, or scagliola that was carved earlier.

ELISABETTA BIANCHI: When you mix the pigments with the scagliola powder, water, and glue, the color loses a bit of its strength. After it dries, it turns into a more natural color. The drying time depends on the season: In the summer when the temperature is high, it takes around two hours, and in the winter when it is colder and there's no sun, it may take eight hours. The finished product seems painted, but it isn't.

MR. L. BIANCHI: After the inlay has dried, the next step is sanding and polishing the surface to make it smooth. This is done by hand with a pumice stone. It's very hard work, taking many hours, and when you finish, your arms really ache.

MR. A. BIANCHI: For larger objects like tables, we have a particular sanding tool that does this work.

MR. L. BIANCHI: Then we engrave the finer details, such as feathers or the stamens in a flower. The work is never-ending; there is always something to do, from the drawing, to inlaying,

to adding color, and more inlay.

THE EPOCH TIMES: Why do you think it is important to keep up the tradition of scagliola?

MRS. E. BIANCHI: We are different from other scagliola artists. We don't just produce new things. We are very fortunate that my father collected many antique scagliola objects. Some of these objects are linked to the Italian state, so in a way they belong to Italy. We have no intention to sell them; we want to create a museum in partnership with Florence and with Italy so the pieces can belong to everyone. Then the art can be appreciated. These are historical pieces of art, masterpieces, and we need to let people know about them. Then it will be possible to preserve scagliola.

That's our dream: to have a specific museum that values the scagliola technique and the history of Bianco Bianchi. There isn't a museum in the world that has only pieces of scagliola, but you can find it here, in this workshop, in this little town of Pontassieve near Florence.

PAOLA LUPELLI BIANCHI: The fact that Bianco Bianchi did what he did for scagliola is important for new generations. He created a foundation for my husband, sister-in-law, my son, and nieces and nephews. If you have a great past, you are compelled to make a better future. So we must grow, do

(Top) The Bianco Bianchi workshop in Pontassieve, Italy, on July 9, 2018. (L-R) Silvia Berlincioni, Elisabetta Bianchi, Leonardo Bianchi, Paola Lupelli Bianchi, and Alessandro Bianchi surrounded by historic pieces of scagliola.

(Bottom left) Bianco Bianchi (1920-2006) established his scagliola workshop in 1953 and dedicated his life to preserving the art.

(Bottom right) (L-R) Alessandro Bianchi, designer Gianni Versace, Bianco Bianchi, and Elisabetta Bianchi in 1987.

more to modernize ourselves, and be open to innovate. Scagliola must exist in the future, and it must become more famous. This couldn't have been possible if Bianco Bianchi hadn't done what he did. It all started with him.

MR. L. BIANCHI: I didn't have a chance to ask my granddad about his work. I learned a lot about him thanks to my parents, my aunt, and his friends who are still alive. They always tell me that he was a great man; he had to have a great personality in order to do what he did.

I have a tattoo of his initials because I think the legacy he left is important. I am very fortunate to have been left a sort of empire. I mean to say this modestly as we could have a museum here, and be known for scagliola. I am very grateful to my granddad, even though I didn't know him much. My three cousins also share this passion, and all work here in some capacity.

Italian boys and girls don't care about what we do. That's a terrible thing for me. I'm young; I appreciate modern things: music, discos, and so on. But I am angry at my generation because they don't appreciate art, poetry, and so on.

I have friends who don't care about art. They think it's too vintage, or retro, and that you cannot make a living from it. I said to them you can earn money in art. I mean, you can do whatever you want; I don't want

to put limits on myself.

I am still young, but I won't be "Forever Young" like the song says, so I have time to learn from my father and aunt to become better, and to try to emulate my granddad. That's what I hope.

MR. A. BIANCHI: We've always loved this work, and because we were born into our father's workshop, that gave us the courage and the passion to continue the business. The passion behind this work is the momentum that keeps us fighting, because we have to fight to do this work, as nowadays it's not easy. Most of our customers are overseas.

Our traditional family business represents Florence and scagliola to the world. We hope that my son, niece, and two nephews will continue this work, so we don't lose this tradition. It would be a pity if a great thing born out of nothing disappears into the darkness.

Cicero's "De Oratore" says "Historia magistra vitae est," meaning history is life's teacher. And for us, this is fundamental to the future of our work, which is intimately linked to the past, passing from one generation to the next.

Mr. L. Bianchi acted as translator from Italian to English. This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

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Sanding down the scagliola after each inlay is a particularly arduous process.

BIANCO BIANCHI



A scagliola table showing the coat of arms of His Royal Highness Prince Michael of Kent. A commission for Kensington Palace.