

# In Italy: Muslim Art Appreciation

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Dante and Virgil encounter Mohammed in Hell – a divider of the people

By how much has the Muslim population in Italy increased since 1970? Before googling, take a guess.

In 47 years, from 1970 to 2017, the Muslim population in Italy, both of citizens and migrants, has gone from 2,000 (in 1970) to 1.6 million, at the beginning of 2017, and should reach 2 million by the end of 2018. In other words, the number of **Muslims in Italy will have increased more than one thousand times** in less than a half-century. Should we care?

Italy has always been a welcoming country, open to the world,

with a tradition of hospitality that is part of Italian culture, and a destination for people who come to admire the cradle of so much of Western civilization. But now, instead of those who come to admire its art and architecture, a new set of visitors has arrived, a very different group of people, who display no interest in the history, the art, the architecture, the music, the literature of Italy, no interest in the foundations of the culture that defines the West, with the artifacts of that culture, from Rome to the Renaissance, everywhere tangible and present. Instead, these new visitors have arrived in Italy, completely indifferent or often positively hostile to all of these achievements, and have come not to visit but to settle, and not to contribute but to help themselves to whatever benefits the generous Italian state makes available. And in taking and taking, these Muslim migrants leave less for the Italians themselves.

We know, thanks to Oriana Fallaci's memorable eyewitness description in *The Rage and the Pride* (*La Rabbia e l'Orgoglio*, 2002), how Muslim migrants disported themselves in Florence, until finally dispersed after several horrific months: They "set up their tents on the sidewalk right by the Duomo (Cathedral), where they kept their shoes and slippers that in their own countries would be lined up outside the mosques. And along with those shoes and slippers, bottles of water to wash their feet before prayer. A tent placed right in front of the cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, beside the Baptistery with the golden doors of Ghiberti ... with little seats and little tables and chaise-longues and mattresses to sleep on and to have sex on, and little portable burners to cook their food, poisoning the Piazza with smoke and stink, and with a recording device always blaring at full blast, enriched with the loud nasty vulgar voice of the muezzin that punctually called the faithful to prayers, deafening the Infidels, and overwhelming the sound of the church bells...And with all that, the yellow streams of urine that defiled the marble of the Baptistery walls" and desecrated, too, by

urinating on, the gilded bronze doors of the Baptistery, Ghiberti's famous "Gates of Paradise," one of the great masterpieces of Western art. And that was not all Oriana Fallaci saw and reported on: there were still more *"yellow streams of urine, and the fetid stink of the defecations that blocked the door of San Salvatore al Vescovo, the exquisite 11<sup>th</sup> century Romanesque church in back of the Cathedral that the Sons of Allah had transformed into a latrine."* It's a hellish picture, as only Fallaci in her full fury could paint, of Muslim migrants demonstrating their special contempt for Christianity and for the Christians who had given them refuge and succor.

And there are other memorable examples of Muslim appreciation of Italian art. Perhaps you remember those Muslims, connected to Al Qaeda, who [plotted in 2009 to destroy](#) a 15<sup>th</sup>-century fresco by Giovanni da Modena in the San Petronio Cathedral in Bologna, a fresco in which the artist follows Dante's description of Muhammad in the 8<sup>th</sup> circle of Hell, tearing at his own entrails.

Even though that plot was foiled in time, other Muslims have since called for the Catholic Church itself to [demolish, or if not that, at least to "remove,"](#) this fresco. This calling on the Church to do away with the fresco, rather than trying again to blow up all of San Petronio, might be considered by some as an improvement in Muslim behavior. The Church did not yield to this demand (this was before Pope Francis), and the fresco remains where it was. But in order for the fresco to be safeguarded, visitors must now stand at a greater distance from it than before, and a metal grate has been installed, too, so that it is now impossible to enter the dark side chapel where the fresco is located, and this obscures the view of this masterpiece even further. Thus the Muslims have won; the hated fresco is still where it was, but now it is part of Italy's art heritage that can no longer be seen and admired

because it has to be protected from Muslims.

But even works of art whose subjects – unlike the fresco of Giovanni da Modena – have nothing to do with Islam are still in danger for two reasons. First, given the Hadith that reports Muhammad's statement that "angels do not enter a house that has a picture in it," and that the word "picture" has been held to include statues as well as painted depictions of humans, much of Western art (with such obvious exceptions as landscapes and abstract art) is in permanent peril from those Muslims who take to heart, and decide to act upon, Muhammad's words. How much of the art in Italy – statues, frescoes, paintings – is potentially a target of Muslim attacks because of the prohibition on "pictures"? Surely a great deal. Second, even where there is no "picture" involved, such artifacts found in churches as crucifixes, reliquaries, candlesticks, hymnals and prayer books, are all Christian works and therefore have been, and *always will be*, targets for Muslim vandalism and destruction.

And that is exactly what happened in 2016, as in years past. Muslims continued to leave intermittent reminders of their contempt for their Christian Italian hosts, as with the statue of San Petronio (patron saint of Bologna), vandalized this past June. The Christmas season was marked by Nativity scenes destroyed or even set on fire (and of course not only in Italy), along with the by now standard destruction and desecration of precisely those "crucifixes, reliquaries, candlesticks, hymnals and prayer books," which signify Christianity and thus deserve to be destroyed whatever the season. Urination and defecation in churches, on altars, seems to be a continuing theme in these attacks. From the scene Fallaci described in 2002, through to 2013 where a group of Muslims defecated on an altar [here](#) and up to January 2015 when, after attacking a man praying in the chapel of San Barnaba in Perugia, five Muslims smashed and then urinated on a statue of Mary, described [here](#), and this kind of nauseating

behavior is not limited to Italy, for [here's](#) a recent example of Muslim migrants in Sweden, expressing their understanding of interfaith outreach.

Crucifixes, which can themselves be venerable works of art, have been destroyed in many different places all over Italy, and not only those found in churches. Last October, the crucifix at Lake Fimon in the Berici Hills was smeared with red paint for the second time in ten months. On the same day, a Ghanaian Muslim went on an orgy of destruction in four different churches in Rome, at the Basilica of Santa Prassede, San Martino ai Monti, the Basilicas of San Giovanni de' Fiorentini and the San Vitale, destroying not just crucifixes, including one that dated back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, but statues too, and reliquaries. When caught, [he insisted](#) that "it was not right that we worship in this way." And of course, in Islam, it isn't.

There is much more of this that has been underreported in the Western press – often confined to a small item in a local paper – of creches smashed or thrown into rivers, of sacred books being ripped or burned, of graffiti smeared on church walls, of destruction of religious art, and the desecration of objects of worship of every kind.. And this kind of thing has happened not only in Italy, but in France, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Spain, Greece (Crete). It is in Italy, however, that there is so much more of the Western world's art heritage protection from attack. You may scare some Muslims into not vandalizing art works with the prospect of prosecution, but how can you convince faithful Muslims to forever allow that which Muhammed himself prohibited? It can't be done. Think not only of the Bamiyan Buddhas blown up just a few years ago, but also of the long list of Buddhist temples, shrines, stupas, destroyed by Islamic invaders; think of the thousands of Hindu temples and temple complexes razed in India by Muslims; or all the Byzantine churches damaged or razed when the Ottoman Turks solidified their rule. Why should Western Europe's art be

spared, especially as Muslim numbers increase and they feel ever more emboldened to act on their beliefs? Isn't that one of the considerations that should be taken into account as the wisdom of mass Muslim migration is debated?

And even without wholesale destruction of Christian art and artifacts, demands for their removal, so as to essentially de-Christianize the public space, are worrisome. Adel Smith, a Muslim convert, founder of the Union of the Muslims of Italy, [sued to have the crucifix removed](#) from his children's school. The crucifix in Italy is not only a religious but a cultural symbol; forcing its removal, as Italian Labor Minister Maroni said at the time, "is outrageous. It is unacceptable that one judge should cancel out millennia of history." But the Muslim petitioner, who referred to the crucifix dismissively as "a small body on two wooden sticks" won his case in court. Fortunately, the Italian Council of State later overturned that decision, upholding the display of the crucifix in all government-sponsored spaces. But the brazen attempt to remove such an important cultural symbol was telling.

Perhaps most outrageous of all was the demand by the same Adel Smith to have the entire *Divine Comedy* banned from Italian schools because Dante places Muhammad in the 8<sup>th</sup> Circle of Hell (*Inferno*, Canto 28). Following conventional Christian views of Islam in the Middle Ages, Dante regarded Islam as a heretical offshoot of Christianity and Muhammad as a sower of discord; thus Dante describes him in the 8<sup>th</sup> Circle of Hell with his entrails hanging out: "Look at the maimed Muhammad" ("*Vedi come storpiato e' Maometto*"). No doubt this text infuriates Muslims, and so do any illustrations that have been made that show Muhammad in Dante's 8<sup>th</sup> Circle of Hell.. But so what? To ban Dante, Italy's greatest literary figure, central to its cultural identity, from Italian schools because of a few lines in one Canto? Are we to curry favor with Muslims by such



ensorship? That a Muslim dared to even raise the matter is flabbergasting. It would be as if Muslims in England demanded the removal of Shakespeare from the schools because of three lines in *Othello*: Othello, a Christianized Moor, in the employ of Christian Venice against the Muslim Ottomans, describes how he handled a “*malignant and a turbaned Turk*” who had “*beat a Venetian and traduced the state*”: “*I took by the throat the circumcised dog/And smote him – thus.*” Is it really so far-fetched to imagine such a demand might someday be made by a Muslim group in Great Britain, or that “in a spirit of compromise” Muslims could lower their request so that not all of Shakespeare, but “only *Othello*,” be removed? Half the interfaith-outreach vicars in England might support this, claiming that we shouldn’t give Shakespeare a pass for his “Islamophobia” just because he’s Shakespeare. Anything is possible in this absurd new world of Hypertrophied Diversity and Limitless Tolerance for the “Other” (meaning not *all* others, just Muslims). So far, Dante remains in the Italian curriculum. But would it be surprising if further Muslim attempts to ban at least Canto 28 from the school syllabus were made?

Italy is the greatest repository of art in the Western world, and the Italians have a special responsibility to protect this common heritage. Imagine what new threats and new worries about the art in its churches and its museums and its public spaces will arise, because Islam prohibits the form (i.e., “pictures”), and Muslims despise the content, of so much of that Christian art? Doesn’t history suggest that as Muslims sense their growing strength in numbers, both their demands and their aggressive behavior will increase? The continued adamant refusal of many Catholic clerics, who are the stewards of so much of this art, to link the current vandalism and destruction of art to Islam itself, is wrong, regrettable, and a dereliction of duty. With a Muslim population that by 2020 will have increased a thousandfold in less than half-a-century, how will Italy deal with Muslims when there are not

1.6 million of them, as there are now, but two or three times that number? What's to come is still unsure, but what has already been happening to the artistic heritage in Italy is cause for alarm. And given what Muslims have done when the wood is green, what will happen when the wood is dry?

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