
Erasmus: Time to share knowledge of Italian Art with Czech children

Erasmus: Time to share knowledge of Italian Art with Czech children

Paola Antonelli studies Art History at the University of Chieti (Italy). She decided to spent part of her final year at the Charles University in Prague and joined the Catholic Theological Faculty in October 2011. After the initial search for the best Czech or Czech-Italian topic for her MA thesis, Paola decided to write on the Society of Patriotic Friends of Arts, which was the foundation of the National Gallery in Prague.

While spending the majority of her time in the various Art History libraries in Prague, mainly in the Library of the National Gallery, Paola found also time to share her knowledge of Italian Art with Czech children and prepared two Europe Meets School projects for the Basic Art School Olešská, Prague 10. After her return to Italy, Paola also participated in the competition for the best Erasmus experience to the 25th anniversary of the Erasmus programme organized by the “Youth on the Move” initiative of the European Commission.

Paola, let us start with your entry for the Erasmus competition to the 25th anniversary of the programme. Could you quote your Erasmus “story” for the Erasmus anniversary for us?

Yes, sure. Here is my entry for the competition (*note from the redaction: the entry was slightly shortened and adapted by an English native speaker*): “The city of Prague and local people are definitely something apart from the rest of Europe... When I started packing, I thought “well, it’s an European capital, they’ll know English!” But no, they don’t! Which, as you can probably imagine, led to some very funny and sometimes even stressful episodes...

Czech language is really difficult for me, there is no way to learn it fast. But the Czechs have a word to say “goodbye,” the sound of which I found very musical; it’s “na shledanou.”

So one of my last days, while waiting for a train going to my hall of residence in the subway station, I started to say “na shledanou” to everything: “na shledanou” to the Staroměstská metro station, where you can see the Prague Castle just in front of you as you walk up the stairs from the station; “na shledanou” to the tastefully looking cakes in all the cafés; “na shledanou” to the Charles Bridge and all its statues: the ones that you just look at and the ones that you have to touch so it brings you good fortune; “na shledanou” to the trams, so particular that every tourist photographed them; “na shledanou” to the strange coffee they served in Prague, so very different from the Italian one; “na shledanou” to the Old Town Square, my favourite spot in the city, and it’s Astronomical Clock; “na shledanou” to the people who actually wait before they try to get on the public transport until the previous passengers get off; “na shledanou” to the Vltava/Moldau river, so wide and wild; “na shledanou” to the guy who plays the trumpet from the top of the Town Hall Tower at the Old Town Square every full hour; “na shledanou” to the nice Czech people, who were so damn nice, and “na shledanou” to the rude Czech people, who were so damn rude!; “na shledanou” to the wonderful trdlo, or trdelník, one of the best pastry I have ever eaten in my whole life; “na shledanou” to the adventures and disadventures of living in a hall of residence and sharing a miniature kitchen; “na shledanou” to the most amazing Art Nouveau, Gothic and Baroque buildings you are literally surrounded by... and finally “na shledanou” to Praha in its whole.

We’ll see each other again, in spring, when everything is in blossom and it is no longer freezing!”

Is it already known who is the winner of this competition? Have you actually participated in it for the interest in winning something – or just because you enjoyed the Erasmus programme and wanted to recommend it to the next generation of students?

Actually the competition is not yet over – there is time to post stories until 30th April 2012 (*note from the redaction: this article was prepared in late April 2012*). Then, they will select 10 best stories and publish them again so that people can vote to select the story for the first, the second and the third place.

I decided to participate because I found it really nice to show to the other Erasmus people, and young people in general, how beautiful the city of Prague is and what being there as an Erasmus student meant to me. Obviously, it would be nice for me if my story is found interesting and maybe even awarded!

I take it you still miss Prague. Would you have liked to study here longer? Did you have a good support at your host faculty and the Charles University in general?

My case is a bit particular because I arrived to the Charles University to write my Master thesis there, so I wasn’t supposed to take any classes. Certainly it would have been nice for me to be able to stay in Prague longer, but since I had passed all my exams by the time I left for Prague, it would have probably been useless for my studies to stay any longer.

As I have said earlier, I came to Prague to write on my thesis only so I had to work pretty much by myself. But it wasn't so hard, because I found a very supportive atmosphere at my host faculty, the Catholic Theological Faculty, at the Faculty of Arts and in the libraries. Unfortunately, there weren't any Art History classes in English for Erasmus students at my host faculty – I think it's because there are very few Erasmus people in that faculty; but I met the local Erasmus Coordinator (Mrs. Dana Vrabelová) there, who was really kind and helped me a lot with all the bureaucratic issues.

I wanted to attend some Art History classes in English anyway because I was interested to see a different approach in teaching of my subject. This is why I joined the Faculty of Arts for the subject "Art and Architecture in Europe and Czech Republic," being especially attracted by the focus on the Czech Republic. It was a really good choice because our teacher, Prof. Josef Záruba, took us to a different gallery in Prague every week, and it was all paid by the university! He also made himself very available for us and was interested in our studies. He totally understood my situation, too, so he kindly let me follow his class without taking the final exam and gave me advice for my thesis as well!

Did you have a good support also in the libraries you were using?

Yes, but the level of the support depended on the library. First of all, I went to the Central Library of the Faculty of Arts. I was fascinated a lot by this library: it's really modern and there were small sofas in most of the corners, so one could read books in total relax. But unfortunately, no one spoke English there. Therefore, I was only able to read the books displayed on the shelves in the reading rooms, and none of them was really useful for me.

I switched to the National Library then and I found lots of books in English there. It was pretty easy to study, order the books and make copies there, even though you cannot take the books out of the library and you have to read them on spot (note of the redaction: this is a special rule for the foreign users of the National Library; similar rules are valid for Czech scholars abroad). But they keep them for you as long as you need them, so you don't have to order them every time.

But I spent almost all my time studying in another library: it is a very small one but it has really good materials for History of Art and all people who work there were so nice and helpful! It was the library of the Šternberský Palace, the seat of the National Gallery's collection of the European art, located near to the Prague Castle.

It has taken you quite long to find a suitable topic for your thesis. I know you had initially considered a topic connected to the time of Rudolph II and the Italian artists at his court, but finally decided for a very different time period – late 18th and 19th century – and the Society of Patriotic Friends of Arts. Why have you picked up this topic and were your professors both here and in Italy satisfied with your choice?

I arrived to Prague with only a general idea of the topic I wanted to examine closely in my thesis, so I started with the Italian painters at the court of Rudolph II. The course I'm graduating in is called "Museology," so I was interested to learn how some particular Italian paintings became part of the gallery collections in Prague.

Then, I went to visit the Šternberský Palace, a part of the National Gallery where a huge number of paintings of European masters from the 15th and 16th century are exhibited, including the Italian ones. As I have said before, there is also a small library in the Šternberský Palace: when I got there, I focused my research on the National Gallery itself, trying to find some useful information about when and how those Italian paintings were acquired.

Then, during my research, I discovered that the gallery was created out of the ideas and determination of a group of Bohemian noblemen, united in an association called "Society of Patriotic Friends of Art." The topic seemed very interesting to me, because while studying the work of these men I was able to learn how the gallery was raised from nothing. This was why I told my teacher at my home university in Chieti about it and she answered that the topic I found was perfect and also something nobody has ever studied before in Italy. She encouraged me to continue my research on the Society.

As you yourself said, one of the most enjoyable parts of your stay in Prague was the opportunity to teach Czech children about the Italian art in two projects prepared in the frame of the Europe Meets School programme of the Erasmus Club of Faculty of Arts. What were your projects about?

I prepared two projects on two different Italian painters: Caravaggio and Arcimboldo. In the Caravaggio project I explained to the children the way this artist used to paint and how he reflected the reality in his still-lives, which was a very innovative thing for his time. Then I asked them to paint a real still-life by themselves, paying the attention especially to the lights and shadows, like Caravaggio did.

In the second project I introduced the painter Arcimboldo, who lived in Prague for a part of his life. He painted portraits of people, including the Emperor Rudolph II, with vegetables and fruits (or flowers, books, insects...) used as eyes, ears, mouth etc. I suggested to the children to do the same thing, drawing a portrait of a person, imaginary or a relative or friend of them, using fruits, vegetables or any other object they preferred.

Have you enjoyed teaching and the cooperation with the host teacher (Mrs. Hana Horká)? Are the Czech children similar to the Italian ones or are there differences? Are there any schools similar to the Basic Art School in Italy?

Yes, I really enjoyed teaching the children. It is indeed one of the experiences I liked the most in my Erasmus period! I cooperated really well with the host teacher, she seemed quite interested in my projects and she was very kind. The children were also amazing and they were very talented! And also quiet and polite: eventhough I spoke in another language to them, they never interrupted me or talked to each other during my classes. It is not so common to see something like this in Italian schools... Maybe it was because we were in an afternoon art school, which the children attend because they really like art.

In my home town (Chieti) we don't have any school like that for children, unfortunately... Maybe there are some similar schools in bigger cities like Rome, for example, but I'm not sure about it.

Except of sharing information on Caravaggio and Arcimboldo with the children in your host classes and painting with them in the art of these two artists, you taught your pupils also some Italian and told them about your home region. The projects were running in English or Italian, depending on the availability of interpreters for either of the languages (Erasmus Club tutors Lukáš Fík, Tomáš Otradovec and Iva Herglová). How was the cooperation with the interpreters for you? Was it a problem for you or the children?

The cooperation with the interpreters went really well. I didn't have any problems in talking in English, but I enjoyed the times when I could talk in Italian (note from the redaction: Paola could speak Italian in approximately one third of the classes which were interpreted by Tomáš Otradovec, who speaks Italian fluently) because the children's reaction to my own language was really nice: they were so curious and fascinated! It really pleased me!

I didn't have to face any particular problems in teaching, but I have to say that on my first day I noticed that my sentences were sometimes too long: I didn't pay enough attention in preparing a speech suitable for children. So I changed this for the following classes, and in this way I learnt something new, too.

The interpreters were really friendly to me, we connected well to each other, chatting about our studies and our lives also, and they supported me during the lessons. They suggested some questions to me that I could ask the children or helped me approaching them, because it was really my first experiences in teaching to children.

They also proposed to me to teach some basic Italian words to the children. It was really fun, because beside the useful words and short sentences like "Hello", "How are you?" etc., I also talked to them about the particularities of the Italian language, like the fact that we have a lot of ways to name the color "blue" (the most common ones are celeste, blu and azzurro), and I also talked in the dialect of my home region!

I can say that the children liked this! We also compared some tongue twisters both in Italian and Czech language – the Czech ones were so difficult! So in the end it was really an enjoyable, funny and useful experience, which I recommend to every Art History or Art Education student coming for their Erasmus stay to Prague.

You joined also another programme of the Erasmus Club, the Tandem Language Exchange, during your stay in Prague. We believe that this is one of the best possibilities for the Erasmus (and also other exchange) students not only to learn some Czech but also to meet and befriend Czech people, especially if you arrange more tandems. Was it also your case? I know you had more tandem partners – was the approach of each of them different? Do you keep in touch with them also now after your return to Italy?

Since I'd heard about the Tandem project I immediately liked the idea and joined it. My expectations were completely fulfilled: I met several Czech students, just like me, and I was happy to share the culture of my country with them and learning theirs. They took me around Prague and told me more about the city and the life in the Czech Republic, besides teaching me the language, of course. Our meetings were very informal; we were just meeting in cafés, chatting nicely while enjoying a cup of coffee.

I met three students, one girl and two boys, and all of them had a different approach to introduce me to the Czech language. First, I met one of the boys, who taught me some basic words and phrases, like numbers, colours, question words and so on. Then I learnt the other guy, who taught me some grammar. Finally, I got known the girl, who helped me practicing the pronunciation of Czech language by reading some local magazines.

In return, I helped them with the Italian language; they were really interested in practicing it because they were already studying it on their own. All three of them were really friendly, and I do keep in touch with them since I came back home. My days in Prague were more particular due to joining this programme.

Thank you for the interview.