

Inventing an Italian Landscape @ Columbia University's Italian Academy for Advanced Studies Distinguished Visiting Professorship

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Italian Academy Distinguished Visiting Professorship in art history, archaeology, and Italian studies at Columbia University's Italian Academy for Advanced Studies is made possible by the Compagnia di San Paolo.

Lurking with its serene and ethereal postcard images, Venice continuously becomes part of itineraries of travelers to the Bel Paese. Not many people who had the opportunity to travel to Italy have skipped the city built on water. It is hard to believe such was not the case in the eighteenth century.

"At the end of the eighteenth century, Venice is not on the maps of travelers as they follow in the classicism and antiquity and therefore end up visiting Rome, Naples and Sicily" - stated [Professor Anna Ottani Cavina](#) [2] at the inaugural lecture of the [Compagnia di San Paolo](#) [3] Italian Academy Distinguished Visiting Professorship, held on March 21st, at [Columbia University's Italian Academy for Advanced Studies](#). [4]

CU's Italian Academy CU's Italian Academy Professor Ottani Cavina is the first to hold this prestigious position established at [Columbia University](#) [5] by a generous multi-year funding from the Compagnia di San Paolo. "The Visiting Professorship in art history, archeology and Italian studies although in its first year, is already attracting a wide student audience" - pointed out Abigail Asher,



the Director of Development and Publications at the CU Italian Academy.

Professor Ottani Cavina's renown is well recognized in the art world. She was named to the "Légion d'honneur" of the French Republic in 2001, and is also Director of the Fondazione Federico Zeri, as well as a Professor of Art History in the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Bologna.

"Her Curriculum Vitae also includes being an Adjunct Professor of Italian Art History at [Johns Hopkins University SAIS Bologna Center](#) [6], and director of a famous exhibition "Louvre Paysages d'Italie. Les peintres du plein air" at the [Grand Palais](#) [7] in Paris in 2001" - mentioned [Professor Francesco de Angelis](#) [8], Columbia's Art and Archaeology Department Professor while introducing the celebrated speaker.

He spoke highly of Professor Ottani Cavina's ability to form a unique relationship with students and to ignite their scholarly curiosity, and dubbed her "an intriguing, clear and passionate teacher."

The idea behind the lecture, titled "Inventing the Landscape: Italy and Painters from [Thomas Jones](#) [9] to [Corot](#) [10]" was born from the reflection upon the aim of modern art, to often unveil the unseen, and the theory that certain artists were taking steps in this direction as early as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Professor Ottani Cavina asserted:

"I am not here to tell the story of landscape painting genre in Italy, it would be too long and complicated, instead I would like to underline how a painted landscape is never simply a mirror of what we see, but it is a landscape of ideas, an altered landscape."

Relating back to the discourse on Venice and its absence among popular visiting places in the eighteenth century, a question arises as to what exactly places a city on a traveler's map. In her lecture, concentrating on three main points: immaterial beauty of Venice, the completely ideal botanical scenery of the Roman countryside, and the sublimity of the Italian Alps, Professor Ottani Cavina suggests: "Artists revealed that which is hidden, the unseen, so that a certain Italian landscape became visible, because of the iconic transposition handed down to us by the painters."

It is therefore thanks to artists like [Turner](#) [11] that Venice, as it is known to the contemporary traveler, was born. It is the artist's eye and his/her one of the kind rendition of what they saw or experienced that put places on a map by captivating viewers and in turn stimulating them to visit the little known places.

The relationship between The Compagnia di San Paolo and Columbia University's Italian Academy resulting in the creation of the Distinguished Visiting Professorship is a promising and truly admirable initiative, which will bring scholars in the fields of History of Art, Archaeology, and Italian Literature from Italy over the course of three years.

The aim is to promote the knowledge of certain areas of Italian learning which have contributed to the development of culture. The Compagnia di San Paolo, founded in 1563, is a private, non-governmental organization which is known to generously and consistently supports education, art and the preservation and development of cultural heritage and activities, scientific, economic and juridical research, health, as well as provide assistance to the socially deprived.

The need for these types of cultural events is evident as the auditorium of CU's Italian Academy was filled to the last seat. The lecture brought to light many interesting concepts and the discussion lively continued as the evening concluded with a wonderfully catered three course dinner for special guests held in the ambience of the [library of The Italian Academy](#) [12].

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