

[The History Blog](#)

« [Gosport church's Handel Organ to be restored](#)
[Mystery stained glass mentioned by Van Gogh found](#) »

[Did restorers castrate the penis tree?](#)



In 1999, workers restoring a medieval communal fount called the Fountain of Abundance in the Tuscan town of Massa Marittima [discovered a curious mural hidden](#) behind a whitewash layer. It depicts a tree heavily laden with heavily laden phalluses under which eight or nine women stand in various poses and large black birds fly. Expert thinks the fresco dates to 1265, the same year inscribed on the fountain itself.

According to George Ferzoco, the director of the Centre for Tuscan Studies at the University of Leicester whose summer program was in Massa that year, the townspeople's initial reaction to the find was mixed.

“They considered it to be somehow dirty or erotic, one or the other. Those who saw it as erotic looked at it as being a symbol that mirrored the reality of the water and the place. Water gives life; Phalluses give life: Isn't this a unique and interesting way to portray the life-giving properties of water? The porn camp, if we can call it that, saw it as being somehow deliberately obscene and thus believed that as little attention as possible needed to be drawn to it.”

Over a decade later, that ambivalence has long gone and locals are furiously protective of their Tree of Fertility. In 2008 a program of restoration was undertaken to fully clean the mural which had suffered not just from its whitewashing but also from water damage and concretions. The restoration finally ended in early August and the public were allowed back in to view the mural, only to find to their dismay [that there were parts missing](#). Male parts.



The experts who carried out the restoration have been accused of sanitising the mural by scrubbing out or altering some of the testicles, which hang from the tree's branches along with around 25 phalluses.

“Many parts of the work seem to have been arbitrarily repainted,” said Gabriele Galeotti, a town councillor who has called for an investigation after seeing the finished work. “The authenticity of the fresco seems to have been compromised by a restoration effort that did not respect the original character of the work.”

The [restorers deny categorically](#) having painted over any phalluses. They claim any paint loss was the result of salt and calcium concretions lifting paint as they were removed during the cleaning. If any repainting gets done, restorers say, it’ll be done to put the lost phalluses back in, not to remove them.

Councilman Galeotti is not at all satisfied with that explanation.

“What the restorers say is absolute nonsense. As far as we are concerned they have compromised the authenticity of the fresco. The work was intended as a symbol of fertility with the penises being crucial to the intention of the art but now these have been removed and the message is therefore no longer there.

“We intend to make a formal complaint to the local prosecutor so that he can open an investigation into this disrespectful slaughter of an artistic work. There was obviously no intention to respect the original artist.”

Unfortunately, I can’t find any before and after images of the tree so we can assess the phallic loss with our own eyes, but judging from some of the old pictures I found ([see this one from 2003](#)), the fresco was in truly awful condition when uncovered. Recent pictures show it in far superior condition, figures, phalluses and tree.

It’s probably not actually a fertility symbol, btw. George Ferzoco’s studies suggest that the fresco is a political allegory, negative advertising, if you will, writ large in a highly trafficked location: the public fountain where people drew their water for daily use. Ferzoco notes:

“The fact of the matter is that there is, with regard to the phalluses on display in this painting, nothing whatsoever to do with fertility. It’s one thing to have a symbol of a phallus on its own. That can stand for good luck, fertility, what have you. It’s another to put it in a different context, one in which it’s seen to be quite literally growing on a tree. The Medieval culture, more than ours, was one that was extremely sensitive to what was perceived as the goodness of nature, the goodness of what is natural, and they would have put two and two together in a way which involved seeing this particular tree bearing fruit that is not natural fruit. Those two elements of the equation would have added up to be something which is not natural and hence not good.”



While the phalluses in the tree are, by the context, strange and shocking, there are other phalluses in the painting which add currency to Ferzoco’s hypothesis that this is anything but a mural celebrating fecundity. “We have an image of two women who appear to be locked in serious combat over one of these phalluses, so this supposed fertility symbol that ought to bring life and goodness is in fact bringing strife to the people fighting over it. More importantly, there is a woman on the left side of the mural, standing in what I call her ‘Lady Di’ pose, standing quite demurely, until you realise that she’s being sodomised by one of these phalluses. You can’t get pregnant by sodomy – it’s the ultimate in non-fertility. There’s something going on in the mural that subverts notions of

fertility.”

But why would one display such an extravagant, and no doubt expensive, symbol of non-fertility in such a central place? What message is it conveying? “The key to that subversion – according to Ferzoco – is shown with the symbol of one of the two competing political factions of the time, which is displayed prominently in the mural. This is the Eagle, a symbol of the Ghibelline party. The juxtaposition of this party symbol along with another symbol being used unnaturally, in a non-fertile way is meant to create in the viewer a kind of relationship between what is unnatural or not good on the one hand and the Ghibelline party on the other. It makes even more sense when you consider that during almost all of its history as an independent city republic, Massa Marittima was controlled by the anti-Ghibelline Guelph party.”

Stick with us, is the message, or prepare for a society in which perverted trees grow phallus fruit and women tear each other’s hair out trying to have non-reproductive sexual congress with them.



This entry was posted on Sunday, August 28th, 2011 at 10:59 PM and is filed under [Medieval](#), [Social policy](#), [Treasures](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.

[RSS feed](#)

11 Comments »

Comment by LadyShea

2011-08-30 15:34:59

I have to assume all that symbolism made more sense at the time.

[Reply to this comment](#)

Comment by [livius drusus](#)

2011-08-30 23:12:41

Medieval art is dense in symbolism. It was a handy conveyance of information in an era where illiteracy was widespread.

[Reply to this comment](#)

Comment by [Edward Goldberg](#)

2011-08-31 01:41:45

Somehow,I managed to miss this whole developing story. But as we say in Florence, “What happens south of Siena, stays south of Siena.” That “fertility” interpretation was pretty silly in the first place. We are talking about a Christian city state in the middle ages, not the pagan countryside a thousand years earlier. So,the principal message of a civic fountain would have focused on “the public good”. All of those eagles are intriguing (and they do look more or less like heraldic eagles.) However, there are various other bird connections that might have applied. For example, blackbirds (merli) are still emblems of foolishness in this part of the world. And in Italian (as in English), there are various word plays involving “d***s” and “d***heads”.