

# Prato from - and for - American Eyes

*by Alick M. McLean*



"The first city I visited after Florence and Rome was Prato, where I arrived at the main station, located a distance from the medieval center. As I made my way from the station, a series of new buildings greeted me with the twentieth century, when I expected the fourteenth. Although they are not particularly noteworthy as monuments, they gave me the sensation of being in a city that was very much alive. After reminding me of the present—even with a Henry Moore statue punctuating my route—Prato then thrilled me with its past, first with the white crystalline geometry of Frederick II's Castello dell' Imperatore, then with the city walls, the Piazza San Francesco, the Palazzo Datini, the Palazzo Pretorio and Palazzo Comunale, the avelli of San Domenico, and finally the Duomo of Santo Stefano and its piazza. I sensed the same vitality in these medieval structures and spaces as I felt with modern Prato, and I became curious as to what culture could have fostered such a city, and what circumstances could have caused the hiatus in its development between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries. I brought these questions to the other communes I visited during the remainder of my stay, but in no place did I note the same mix of past and present as registered in buildings spanning

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Alick M. McLean Architetto, urbanista, docente New York University e associato alla Syracuse University Massachusetts





half a millennium. The disarming charm of medieval Prato diverted me from the study of Renaissance magnificence: it showed another, more appealing splendor on the scale of the entire community, where public structures and their spaces had not yet broken from the fabric of the city, though in important cases they already showed tendencies toward the purity and classicism that were to isolate Renaissance monuments..."<sup>1</sup>

Why Prato? This was the question with which I was greeted in the summer of 1988, as I made my way through Prato during my first visit, described in the above acknowledgments to the book on the city I published twenty years later. Guards at museums, shopkeepers, bar owners all looked at me perplexed. Did I not know that Florence was right down the street filled with far more significant buildings and works of art? In a Tuscany ever more congested with tourism Prato remains an anomaly—its treasures have yet to detach

themselves from the fabric of daily life in order to grace 'best of' guides or to isolate themselves on the pages of art history surveys. Prato may have lost its autonomy to the Florentines in 1352, but even before becoming its own province in 1992, its citizens had found ways, consciously or instinctively, to reclaim mastery over their own city.

I imagine my word mastery might perplex Pratese today as much as my insistence on looking for history in Prato surprised their counterparts nearly 30 years ago. Already then the textile industry was beginning to falter as the motor of the economy, and in the meantime many citizens and even new immigrants have found at best mixed success in related industries. The city seems to have suffered more than its due from globalization, not only losing markets, but even its cultural identity, thrown into confusion by the largest proportional Chinese population of any city in Italy. These "problems" are part of what it is to be a post-industrial city anywhere in the world today, in the twenty-first century, and Pratese face these challenges in ways

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<sup>1</sup> A. M. MCLEAN, *Prato: Architecture, Piety and Political Identity in a Tuscan City-State*, New Haven, 2008, p. x

that could provide lessons to their more renowned touristic counterparts, such as Florence, Siena, or Venice. Perhaps the most profound example is that work, today, still matters. The city continues to invest in infrastructure, transit, trade and general education. The diverse industrial interests of its multicultural identity have kept sectors of the textile business competitive in new ways, focussing less exclusively on manufacturing or remanufacturing than on finishing and retail, and the entire retail sector has exploded well beyond the historical city confines.

These observations help to answer the question, why Prato? What does the city have to offer to an American historian of cities? The Pratese embrace the present without discarding the past.

Prato's cultural investments sustain a far higher emphasis on contemporary art,

culture, and architecture than any other Tuscan city with the likes of the Teatro Metastasio, Teatro Fabbricone, Museo del Tessuto, Museo Pecci, the Biblioteca Lazzarini, and the Museo di Palazzo Pretorio. And yet at the same time, Prato's historians have expanded the envelope of time far earlier than the middle ages and Renaissance with the discovery and excavation of Etruscan Gonfienti. There is no fixed concept of what Prato is that cultural institutions, industry, and tourism promote—rather Prato at once changes and adapts over time.

How can a city at once embrace new archeological origins and cutting edge contemporary art, theater, architecture, and most recently landscape design? What is it that gives this city its restless yet robust mastery over its own changing identity? Perhaps it is the same quality that made





Pratese, again, so surprised I would bother to study their history. Abstractions such as past and even contemporary appear secondary to the city's identity, even its considerable monuments of art and culture past and present. My years of academic research into the city's past and, more recently, my collaboration with the team of local and regional politicians, administrators, architects, historians, curators, videographers, graphic artists and web designers on the Museo di Palazzo Pretorio have opened to me a privileged window into Prato's culture and public life that no archival or archaeological research could have provided. The museum began with one name, the Museo Civico, and ended with another, the Museo di Palazzo Pretorio. The winning competition entry of Natalini with Guicciardini Magni began with a graphical framework for integrating the contributions of art and cultural historians, and ended up with another, an interactive touchscreen and dynamic web site. The project began with one

political administration and finished under another—if one can even use the term finished. More nearby spaces continue to provide extensions of the museum spaces, and more of the growing ground level of the museum is under continuous change with rotating temporary exhibits whether of contemporary, historical, or even future works of art. What appears in the physical form of the museum as a dynamic between fixed exhibitions and rotating ones is rather the manifestation of something else, present in the stable yet changing teams starting and now continuously animating the museum: work. The Palazzo Pretorio, now as it likely was during Prato's equally dynamic communal period, is no more than a manifestation of the constant flurry of dedicated, sometimes contested, but always active public labor by city officials, artists, builders, investors, and Pratese citizens. The art of Prato did not and does not consist primarily in paintings, buildings, even public spaces, but in the

art of work, of labor. The very process of studying Prato has changed how I view the subjects of my profession, art and architecture. This change allows me finally to answer the question the editors of *Prato Storia e Arte* have implicitly asked me when commissioning this article. Why does an American scholar look at Prato? I can only speak for myself. I no longer see

things but people. I see working folk collaborating even when contesting on contributing to their public sphere, debating just how to sustain a common space for themselves and future generations to live, work, agree and disagree, and continue to contribute. I no longer see Italian masterpieces or its Renaissance, but Italians. The fact that Prato's Italians appear to originate from around



the world, and its resources and challenges are of today as much as of the past, make Prato strangely familiar—perhaps I see parallels to my own American culture of diversity and the present, and I am drawn to my own likeness. And yet it is what's new to me at Prato, what I am missing at home, that keeps me coming back

to study, to collaborate, and to write home about: how much the city, at any point in its history, celebrates its people, invests in its culture past and present, and does so most of all by valorizing the labors of Pratese for their collective, not just individual, well being.

