

OUTSIDER ART IN ITALY

PIETER AND RITA BOOGAART

In the Introduction of our *Explorations in Italy* in Journal 16 we said that we couldn't include reports of all our experiences in the field of Italian outsider art in that journal. A number of outsider art environments were just not architectural enough for mentioning in the report, which was of course mainly about follies. Outsider art often crosses the borderline with follydom, however, or at least blurs it. That's why we did put a lot of environments in Journal 16. If somebody (always a he, never a she for some reason we're unable to fathom) transforms his house into a castle, we tend to think of him as a follybuilder. It's only natural. All the elements of a folly are represented: individualism, decoration, idiosyncrasy, humour, architecture, open-air, frivolity, passion, construction and physical effort, sometimes for years or even decades. It's a world-wide phenomenon. Italy has its fair share of it.

The anthropologist Gabriele Mina, a youngish chap compared to us, has for years been fascinated by outsider art environments and their creators. In 2011 he edited a book about his studies, published by Eléuthera. It is called *Costruttori di Babele*, which I translate as Builders of Babel. It's in Italian of course. We wrote to him in English and got a friendly letter back, giving us tips on how and where to go in Italy.

He also created a website on his area of expertise: www.costruttori dibabele.net, which we used extensively before we set out on our travels, especially since the Home page and the simple-to-use **Babel Index** of that website were also translated into English. Great. Compliments and many thanks to Gabriele for the execution of the website and for making it easily accessible.

Another source for us was the very valuable website about (mainly continental) Europe: **Outsider Environments Europe** by Henk van Es (also in English): www.outsider-environments.blogspot.nl. Excellent, also the largeish section on Italy. If you don't know it yet, go and visit.

And we have gratefully utilized the websites of many individual artists of course. Nowadays we tend to work with the internet more often than not. For addresses, details about the life of the artist and general information about the environment or artwork.

For the sake of completeness we are going to include in our list all the architectural outsider art environments in Italy that we talked about in Journal 16 as well, with the page number. The order in which they will be discussed is alphabetical per artist.

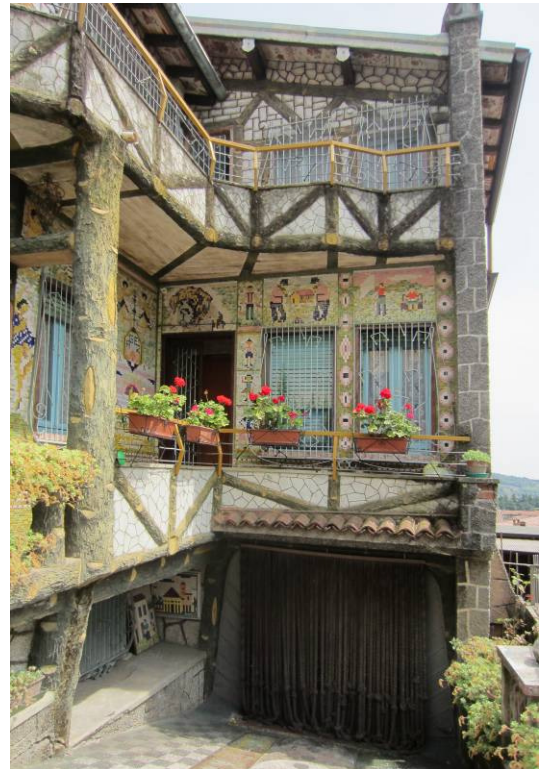
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Guerrino Antonelli: Villino Antonelliano, Antonelli's small villa, in **Botticino Sera**, Lombardia

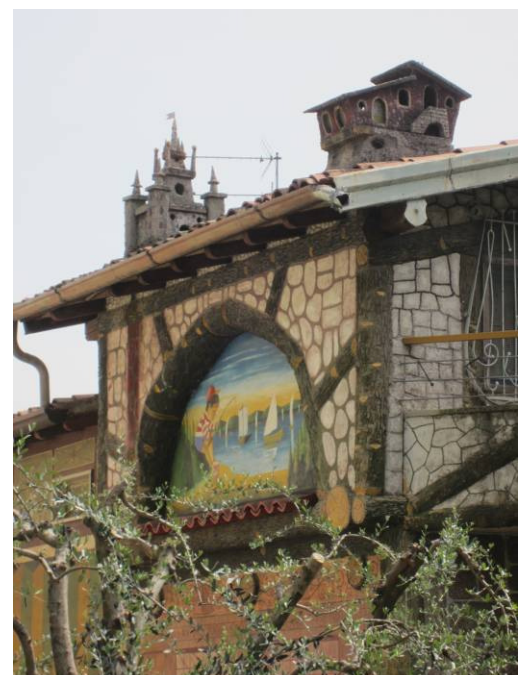
This house is extremely fanciful, in the Via Carini, and done by an expert, together with his wife Edvige. He was Guerrino Antonelli (1925-1995), a builder, painter and decorator who worked on it from 1958 to 1993. The main structures are still in remarkably good shape, considering that it was last worked on more than 20 years ago. The paint is flaking off and some of the cement is chipped, but nothing too bad. It needs a bit of patching up, shall we say. Although the three-storey house stands in a normal street, at first sight it looks a bit like a Swiss chalet, half-timbered with the landscape falling away behind it. But you soon realise that there is much more to it than that. Every square metre is decorated and there is an almost incredible variation in the techniques that Antonelli used. Mosaics, sculpture, woodwork, rocaille, wrought-iron, brickwork, you name it, it's all there. And it was all painted in glorious colours, but they are fading now. I am going to mention some of the details so that you can



get an idea of what there is to be seen on the outside. On the right going down is a garage, the door protected by ropes with some knots in them; balconies with lots of



wood and paintings in panels in between decorations. On the left down the descending path is a chimney stack, a huge Yogi-bear-type barbecue, a little shelter for firewood; an adorned low roofed wall with reliefs and openings for sculptures; a well-head; a mosaicked shed; the virgin Mary in a niche in another low wall with openings; railings with musical notes; fanciful turrets; more chimneys; more descending walls; a nest box looking like a villa; a wooden panel carved with a few faces and signed 'lode alla vita' (ode to life); gargoyles; some miniature castles and houses on top and a miniature winged boat. The wall to the left is mosaicked representing the Madonna and child and other things and among other elements a wooden panel celebrating the whole house. There are iron grills or shutters for all the windows and doors, so it is well protected. A good thing too.



Orfeo Bartolucci: il Mappamondo della Pace, the World Map of Peace, in Apecchio, Colombara, Marche

We had seen pictures of a giant globe (planet earth) in the landscape and we thought it would be fun to look it up. We also knew who had constructed it: viz. Orfeo Bartolucci (1924-2011). But finding it didn't prove easy. The globe is the most impressive feature of an art park created by the former carpenter and bricklayer Bartolucci. The diameter is 10 metres, it weighs 180 tons and is largely made of wood with fibreglass as the skin. He called it the World Map of Peace because he wanted to spread the message of peace, and it has been the object of strife ever since the local authorities saw it rotating (!) on the hills when it was finished in 1988. They closed down the whole art park. Nowadays you only get to see it with special permission from one of the many relatives that live there in the village of Colombara. We couldn't find any of them. We got as far as the neat private road that leads up to the park. This narrow driveway is



smooth and adorned by sayings in pebble stones, like Benvenuti I Buoni and Arrivederci I Bravi (Welcome, to the Good and See you later, to the Bold). We felt both good and bold, so we drove farther on it as far as the gate. Closed. So we missed almost all

of it. There seems to be a lot. Gabriele Mina's website puts it this way: 'e.g. a fountain-tower, the moon, a tree made up of 150.000 buttons, an amazing underground museum where Bartolucci had placed its infinite collections of objects (farmer's tools, calculators, musical instruments, bottles, etc.)'. There is also the tiniest of globes, 5 mm in diameter.

We had to ask ourselves the question: an enormous representation of planet earth (for a time it was the greatest ever), visible from a road in the hills and built by one single man – is that a folly? The answer was: of course it is. Even his house is: he adorned it with rows of rocket-like poles and a pinnacled belvedere tower; or is it an observatory for his Mappa in the hills?



Umberto Bonini: Museo della Galassia, Galaxy Museum (or rather Galaxy Garden) in Calice al Cornoviglio, Valdonica, Liguria



This somewhat pompous name reflects the illness of Umberto Bonini (1926-2002). While hospitalized for a nervous breakdown he had a coma in which he had certain visions. He later built his own 'universe', consisting of a castle-like house and a garden, surrounded by some towers and walkways. The boundary along the roadside shows his bright imagination. It is an artful iron fence showing messages in letters and symbols on a low wall made of white-ish river stones. The same type of rounded stones he used as the material for his buildings, embellished by stone faces, looking sad or studious, and other sculptures here and there. He shows himself particularly fond of arches and round openings. On one platform in the open air in the grounds he built his galaxy: a large stand of coloured balls,

planets, interconnected by spirals and raised on spirals to a height of several metres. Seriously weird. Like the name of the place. Museum it aint. The place is rather difficult to find, but easy to recognize along the Strada Provinciale south-east of Valdonica once you are there. We parked the car and walked up the driveway, on one side flanked by a wall with large holes in it. At the house we found someone responsible and this young man gave us the freedom of the place after we had professed our innocence and explained our business (we can look moderately harmless). Nevertheless it felt like trespassing.



Osvaldo Bottini: l'Annichetta, the Annichetta, a boat, in **Annicco**, Liguria

The Annichetta is a remarkable feature of the little town of Annicco, or rather, it is just outside it, in the Via Battisti. It is a cement ship, which is to say: made of reinforced concrete. Looks very lifelike too, with all the necessary details, as if ready to sail any minute. Railings, funnels, port-holes, lifeboats, anchor, the lot. It is 37



metres long and lies parallel to the road in the grass and can't help looking rather forlorn there. It is well taken care of by the heirs of the builder, Osvaldo Bottini (1910-1964). He was a manager at a steel mill in Milano and he thought it would be fun to build it in the birthplace of his wife. The ship is hollow. It used to be a stable for cattle, but nowadays electrical equipment is stored inside.

A cement ship. Whatever next?

Domenico Brizi: Il Grottino, the little grotto, in **Piansano**, Lazio

At one of the southern edges of the village in a narrow street is a small gate after which a staircase leads to Domenico Brizi's little plot of land where he keeps his chickens and grows things like beans. We were glad to have an interpreter handy in the shape of the artist Mario Ciccioli, for Domenico, born in 1925, is not a great conversationalist (or simply shy). He lets his work speak for itself, shall we say. (This Mario Ciccioli, by the way, was recommended to us by the author of the book and website on outsider art in Italy, Gabriele Mina. Mario showed himself an excellent host and a friend. He accompanied us for a whole day in Tuscania and surroundings.) But back to Domenico Brizi. He used to work as a famer and in Cinecittà, the film-town in Rome, before he retired. He lives in the centre of the village, but walks to his plot every day, literally up and down, maybe a bit slow and a bit scruffy, but he is ninety, for God's sake. Domenico has a grotto, originally for his wine, that you en-



ter under a roof of various sheets of corrugated iron. This grotto is embellished inside and out with human figures, animals and numerous heads. Very colourful. He has carved many wooden statuettes and afterwards painted them. He also worked in the tufa, and afterwards painted it. The whole site is pretty small and a tad slovenly, but who would blame him? We came away satisfied, laden with beans and with an invitation to have dinner together at his flat in the village, when we would come back: he would do the cooking. And we would if we could.

Enrico Capra: decorated house, the unfinished worksite in San Daniele Po, Lombardia

After having made enquiries at the town hall, we were sent help from a female relative (niece) of the creator of this decorated house in 44, Via Cantone. She showed us the inside as well as the outside. She told us that the place was for sale, and was probably disappointed that we didn't intend to buy it. But with good grace she guided us round. It is a property that will be virtually impossible to sell. A new owner would have to be as fanatic and artistic as Enrico Capra (1934-2014) was, or I fear it will all be lost, for he died before he could finish the job he had given himself.

Capra was born and had always lived in the house in question. He was a brick-layer by profession, but developed into a DIYer, carpenter, interior decorator, handyman and builder, especially after his retirement in 1994. It is difficult to say when he started – the earliest date on the wall is 1974, set in a decorative flowery pattern of terracotta tiles, which he sculpted. An ornamental little statue of the Holy Virgin is nearby, surrounded by artful brickwork in memory of his mother. That whole wall is covered with flower patterns and shells in between



the windows, ending in a rounded corner. A bit further is a flat wall with starkly contrasting colour patterns in the tiles, that encloses the outer courtyard together with an iron and brickwork fence. Pure artistry in brick. In this courtyard are other fanciful elements. The back garden of the house is characterized by a jumble of walls, turrets and peeling paintwork round a complicated



brick tower on a cupola, inspired by Russian architecture, according to the niece. Inside, the house is devoid of furniture apart from architectural elements such as benches, bas-reliefs, stucco and a hearth, and the whole looks as if Enrico Capra will come back next week to finish what he had started. Dust is swept into a corner here and there. Tools lie around waiting to be used. Capra underestimated his self-imposed task and was over-optimistic about his own health situation. It makes you sad in spite of - or rather just because of - the appreciation of the passionate workmanship. It has lasted at least forty years.



Angelo Cerpelloni: la Casa delle Conchiglie, the House of Conch-shells, in Quinzano, Veneto

We read about Angelo Cerpelloni's house in the Babel Index compiled by Gabriele Mina. Cerpelloni lived from 1923 to 2008. Just north of Verona is this village of Quinzano. So we went there knowing that



the creator of the three-storeyed shell house had died already, but there might be somebody at home so that we could maybe have a look inside at the shells and souvenirs that are supposed to be there. There wasn't, more is the pity. Maybe it is all gone. The beer-drinking group of neighbours couldn't tell us anything either.

But from the outside the house looked nice enough. The cement walls are inlaid with mostly white pebbles in playful patterns, and in between those pebbles shells are pressed into the cement, also in patterns. It looks more like a pebble house with shells than a shell house. But we don't know



how many shells were removed when the house was restored recently by unrelated new inhabitants. It is on a corner with neighbouring houses so we could only see two sides. All done by Mr Cerpelloni after his retirement as a bricklayer.

Mario Ciccioni: ephemeral structures inTuscania, Lazio

Ciccioni is an artist in his own right, in painting and making three-dimensional structures. Many of these structures are designed to make sounds; they are eolian harps, hung on reverberating strings between buildings. On the hill behind his house part of Pasolini's 1966 *Uccellacci Uccellini* was filmed. In memory of this Mario builds little huts of sticks there every year, just as shown in the film. But preferably



he calls this windy plot with an old ruin his experimental garden of sound. Wind sound, mind-blowing, in accordance with the genius loci. Beautiful shapes, often sheets of bent wood, sometimes with batteries of plastic bottles. When they deteriorate in six months of wind and weather they are moved to 'the cemetery', a silent room full of mementos of experiments and festival performances.

Left: hut, eolian harp with light ©Mario Ciccioni

Franco Ferrari: la Casa-Castello, the Castle-House in Corte Franca di Nigoline, Lombardia

As is the case with too many of these outsider artists: they are either very old or have died already. So it is with Franco Ferrari (1923-2009) and his beautiful castle-house in 17 Via Tito Speri. I call it an architectural tour de force because he built it himself as a very able bricklayer and foreman. A big fat round tower, embellished by battlements, Gothic frills and sculptures, other smaller square towers, also adorned,



stairways (covered and uncovered), arches, pergolas, columns, chimney stacks, a tiny bell tower and so on, plus an enormous acorn on an artful pedestal, which must have meant something special to him. The house itself is three stories high and shows funny details, such as the door bell, a metal monk ringing a big bell when pushed in an arch adjoining the gate. For building materials he used bricks, naturally, but more often stones, and there are bits with corrugated iron and wood that only a skilful carpenter could have supplied. Compared with older photographs some things had changed when we saw it, like the tall cone made of stones that used to stick out of the round tower, which was supposed to support a propeller for electricity. It isn't there anymore. Evidently people had been working on the castle-house. But unfortunately we couldn't get closer to the place as the gate was closed and there was nobody around. We would have loved to go inside. The interior promises to be ingenious and inventive too. Maybe one day we'll get the chance.



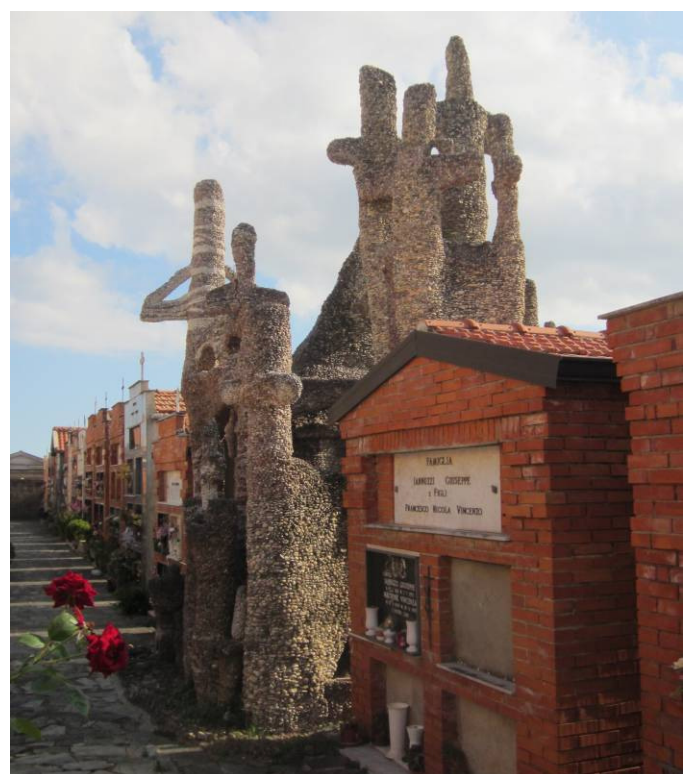
Guerino Galzerano: I Monumenti di Pietra, stone monuments in Castelnuovo Cilento, Campania



Guerino Galzerano was 80 when he died (1922-2002). His biography reads like so many life stories that we saw in Lausanne in the Outsider Art museum: poverty leads to crime leads to psychiatric treatment leads to outsider art. Only his has a relatively happy ending. He got married to a girl called Teresa and for quite some time he lived in Germany as a labourer. He came back and out of jealousy killed his wife's friend (after which Teresa returned to Germany) and was imprisoned in a psychiatric hospital near Naples. We were told about this life story by a friend of his, who had also been in Germany and spoke a few languages. After Galzerano got out, he lived alone in Cilento and started to decorate his house with pebbles. Countless pebbles which he pasted to the walls like monochrome mosaics. Not only that, he constructed also arches, arcades, walls, columns, terraces, tables, chairs et cetera. Most of the material he carted home from the beach; remarkable, if you realise that the nearest beach is ten miles away and Castelnuovo Cilento is a fortress on a mountain top.



After the visit to his house and the talk to his friend we went to see what he had made in the churchyard: his sepulchre, bulging out of the neat rows. Pebbles, pebbles and again pebbles. For twenty-five long years he pasted pebbles to surfaces. A one-track mind, one would say, if it wasn't so peculiar and attractive and impressive. There's nowt so queer as folk.



Ettore Guatelli: Museo Ettore Guatelli, museum, in Ozzano Taro, Emilia-Romagna



nails, axes, bradawls, bellows and incomprehensible little instruments, fittings, iron bits and pieces, but also little figurines, dolls' houses, dinky-toys, a complete orchestra of dolls and what not. The museum is in a big barn a bit off the Via Nazionale 562, next to the house at nr 130 and is well taken care of. We were received by an elderly lady who spoke surprisingly good, al-

Our curiosity was aroused by what we had seen of this museum both on Gabriele Mina's website and the website of Henk van Es, mainly because of the orderly and inventive way in which the exhibits were arranged. This was all done by the primary school teacher Ettore Guatelli who not only wanted to collect objects of traditional peasant life (mostly), but also took the trouble to present them in an aesthetically satisfying way. It is the beauty of the patterns he created with his collection rather than the possible interest in the objects themselves that makes his museum a fascinating one. I'm going to mention just a few examples from the huge variety in his items. Buckets, baskets, clocks, horseshoes, tools such as hammers, pincers,



most accentless English, but the secret of that was that she had lived in England for a time. She took the time to show us the over 60.000 objects in store and shared with us her enthusiasm for the man Guatelli himself (1921-2000). Maybe she had been one of his pupils, we later thought.



Luigi Lineri: La Cattedrale di Sassi, The Cathedral of Stones, in Zevio, Veneto

The term cathedral of stones may lead to confusion for this is not a building, but in some ways it looks like one. It is a collection, and an incredible one. It is an exhibition as well. Luigi Lineri (*1937) is the man responsible. He was an attendant and nurse in a local hospital but devoted almost all his spare time to prehistory and collecting stones from the gravel bed of the river Adige nearby. He was struck by the similarity of certain shapes of the stones. Animals such as fish, ducks, hedgehogs but also breasts, vulvas, phalluses and elegant little figurines. He developed the theory that these shapes had been carved by primitive, ancient people and left in the river as a sort of alphabet in forms. All these recognizable shapes he put up close together on dark cardboard and wooden panels so that they stand out and literally thousands of these panels make up his spectacular collection. All catalogued as well. The walls of his huge sheds are full of them and the spaces are further filled with planks and constructions with river stones. Some pyramids even. In his garden are more walls and little towers with stones. One cannot but venerate the dedication – there is something sacred about it.

We had come prepared. We had brought him information and photos of the work of the Belgian artist Robert Garcet, who had developed similar theories of ancient peoples carving flint into little sculptures. and who had built a huge flint tower in Eben Emael. We talked about it over drinks in the house, for Luigi and his wife are very kind, hospitable folk. He gave us a book

about his work and to me a choice of objects.

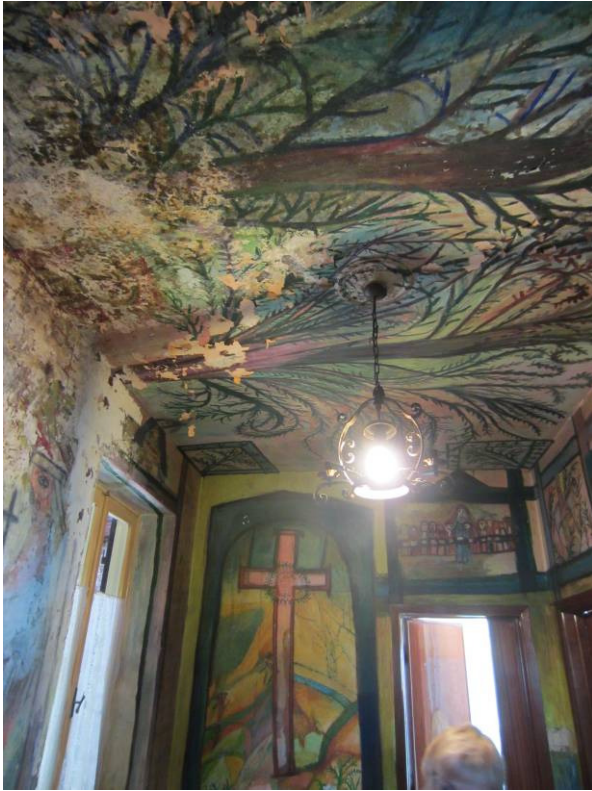
We came away with some phal-luses. Aha. How about that? They have joined my tiny



collection
of river
stones
from all
over the
world.

Bonaria Manca: la Casa dei Simboli, the House of the Symbols, in Tuscania, Lazio

One of Italy's heroes, or rather heroines that we met on our peregrinations there, is Bonaria Manca. She was born in Sardinia in 1925 and soon moved to mainland Italy to escape the feuds and narrow-mindedness. But the countryside, the animals and the farmer traditions have always remained a major part of her



memories and her work. First in the clothes and embroideries that she made and later in mosaics and paintings. She later gained an international reputation as outsider artist. She was particularly interested to hear that we had come from the Netherlands, for she had attended an exhibition of her work in our country some 20 years ago. She even remembered liking or not liking certain of the organisers. Once she started painting she couldn't stop. There are lots of paintings in frames in her house, a farm building on the Viterbo road just outside Tuscania. But most impressive is the way she painted all the walls inside, parlour, bedrooms, kitchen etc., even the loo, and the ceilings as well. With colourful allegorical and religious characters, symbols, fantasy figures, visions, houses and animals, especially goats, because as a girl she wasn't allowed to be a shepherdess, or rather goather-



dess: that was a man's work. It is all very primitive, these murals, typically amateur, but most of it is in bright colours. She showed us round, half hanging in a walker, Mario Cicciooli translating into English all the time, until she sat down, tired, and then she surprised us all by beginning to sing! In a steady voice, amazingly strong and clear for a lady of 90 years of age. A very remarkable woman. (By the way, when I first looked her up, Google translated the Italian name Bonaria Manca (which they hadn't recognised as a name) as 'benevolent ailment'.)

Pietro Moschini: Casa-Museo Pietro Moschini, House-Museum, in Tuscany, Lazio



Mario Ciccioli proved to be a keyholder of the museum of Pietro Moschini. Moschini (1923-2011) used to work as a steward for a local landowner and carved things out of wood and stone for almost all of his life. Only at the end of it he also had a house in the Via Poggio Barone of which he sculpted the doorposts. But the house-museum is in the Via della Scrofa and it was set up thanks to his heir Rosaria Moschini, our friend Mario himself and the book *Costruttori di Babele*, i.e. Gabriele Mina. It consists of only a few chock-full rooms, but the fun begins outside already, on the walls and the staircase. There we found tablets and large blocks of sandstone which he used to carve out in reliefs of all sorts of heads, figures and objects. Inside are individual sculptures of animals, a breeze-block wall carved with symbolic shapes and forms, and a smallish plaster high relief representing his living-room. But the majority of objects inside is made of wood. Sometimes arranged like a large group of chessmen, sometimes they are smaller and used as decorations. Animals, trees, superimposed heads on statuettes, what looks like Spanish noblemen or cowboys with hats, busts of kings and cardinals, walking sticks, crucifixions and the type of heads that we had also seen in stone on the churches nearby as embellishments: threefaces, where the eyes are shared left and right. The pièce de resistance in my opinion is the chair, artfully carved and well varnished. But above all what cannot escape you is feeling of joy that he must have had in creating these figures. They are fun and he had fun making them. Being rightly proud of his collection, he wanted the whole to be preserved. And we should be happy that it is now all kept safe in this museum. I fear it will attract only a minimum of visitors, but it's a gem in all its modesty.



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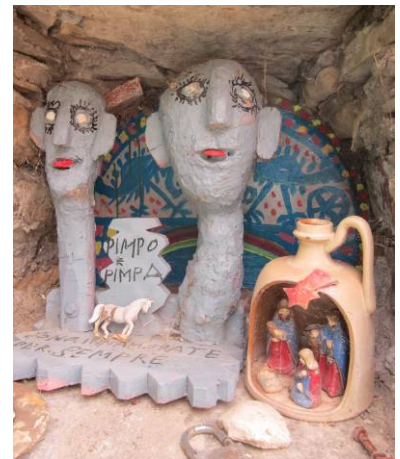


Girolamo Ricci: I Santuari in Pietra, the stone shrines, in Pievelunga di Parano, Umbria

After his retirement as a farmer **Girolamo Ricci** (*1931) built a shrine to the virgin Mary, grateful that he had survived working with tractors on the sometimes steep inclines, all his life. The shrine looks like a little chapel and of course contains a statuette of Our Lady. But then, as so often happens, he developed a taste for building and making things, and he could hardly stop in spite of his age. In the garden belonging



to his house, under a roof, and in the open air, he made small sculptures of wood, cement and stone, which he later painted in bright colours. And so there is this jumble of figures in his sloping plot of land, which you reach via some steps down, along a number of hand-painted signs in unpolished writing. The main message on these signs is that love is always victorious over envy and hatred. But other communications are about friendship or when he built things. Another shrine is for his late wife Liliana, whom he adored and misses a lot. There is more. A major theme is couples: husband and wife, dancers, often hand in hand, and Pimpo and Pimpa, whoever they are. Primitive paintings abound. Little arches, turrets, decorated bits of wall, crammed with figurines and objects. The sloppy building style is only proof of the devil-may-care pleasure he has in creating things and expressing his ideas – of which he is very proud. A sympathetic mess, created by an amiable, warm-hearted man, and it's not ready yet. He was cooking his lunch when we arrived but he told us to go ahead and look. When we said good-bye after our fruitless but cheerful attempts at speaking Italian, he told us to give his love to Gabriele Mina, whom he seemed to know very well.



Angelo Stagnaro: Parco delle Bombosculture, Cylinder Sculpture Park in Casarza Ligure, Liguria

A remarkable outsider art sculpture park is in the backyard of the house in Via V. Annunzi 31, owned by Angelo Stagnaro (b. 1940). Inside the house is a crammed museum of minerals, Parma Gemma, for which he tried to interest us, but we soon made our excuses and asked him to show us his garden. It



is chock-full, difficult to move about in, for in an inconsiderable space he has crammed since 2000 over 200 sculptures, which he calls *bombosculture*, bomb sculptures, for they are made using gas cylinders that he found abandoned. As the website says: he sections, reassembles and

paints them, enriching them with details of nails, recycled materials and tools. He can use anything made of metal. He constructs things like leprechauns, knights, giants, dragons, but also biblical and mythological figures and angels in bright colours. You can recognize Jesus and Mohammed, a chicken run and an arbour among the countless spikes, prongs, nails and barbs. These pointy bits try to grab your clothes and tear them to shreds. They had succeeded with his vest and trousers a few times when we saw him. A funny little man, friendly, but we had some difficulty understanding him. He is relatively fit now, but what will happen to a place like that when he is no longer there? In Italy they could well do with an institution like the Fabuloserie in France or the museums for outsider art in Switzerland, Belgium or the Netherlands.

