

# DRIVING *Rome's* CREATIVE FUTURE

Rome has long been a city of artists and workshops. In the hip district of Monti, young female artisans are taking some of the oldest trades – like mosaics, glass, jewellery design and candle-making – and creating something new. Story by **Isobel Lee**, photos by **Susan Wright**



**I**T'S EASY TO MISS the ancient district of Monti, hidden in a dip between two traffic lined roads above the Roman Forum. The neighbourhood can be found by heading down a flight of stone steps from Via Cavour, or cutting away from the noise and glare of Via Nazionale into the esoterically named Via dei Serpenti (street of snakes).

Monti, with its dense, uneven streets that rise steeply away from the broken plains of the Forum on its south side, is one of the city's oldest villages. Populated since ancient times, its lowest lanes, the Suburra, were home to slums and brothels in the Roman era, while more stately residences rose up on Vicus Patricius, which is today the famous Via Urbana.

In later years, Monti became quietly occupied by artists and artisans, but its central location combined with the quaintness of its streets contributed to its rapid gentrification. It's now one of Rome's hippest neighbourhoods, inhabited by a chic generation of record producers, photographers, writers and fashion designers. New bars and underground clubs keep the buzz alive after dark and the fountain on Via dei Serpenti is draped with young people day and night. Despite all this, it's still a district of artisans; perhaps unsurprisingly, they too have evolved.

Via Urbana is today a collective of art and design workshops and stores,

interspersed with cafés and restaurants perched precariously on the cobbles of its rising lane.

Twice a year, in December and April, a festival called Urbanamente celebrates this creative dynamo with a street party booming with live music and pop-up exhibitions and stalls. Workshops also fling their doors open and share some of their secrets with the public.

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One of the oldest residents on Via Urbana is Studio Cassio, a mosaic designer and restorer which transferred here in 1991. The business was originally founded in 1945 near Piazza Venezia by Fabrizio Cassio, whose father was a great mosaic craftsman and director of the

Vatican Mosaic Studio in the first half of the 20th century.

From such solemn beginnings, Studio Cassio on Via Urbana is today a mellow, open-plan work space, where mosaic-making classes are held in the afternoons and the walls are testimony not only to the studio's religious roots, but also to the pagan and modern love-affair with mosaics. Uliana Medikova, who is married to one of Fabrizio's sons, Stefano, is a talented mosaic-maker and restorer who hails from Russia and oversees much of the work. Today the studio creates anything from a grand design for a private villa to public space art, like the John Lennon Memorial in Central Park, which spells out the word 'imagine' in a black and white design inspired by a floor found in Pompeii. Uliana says she loves that the work is hands on and the opportunities it brings. “It's a beautiful job. You never know where you will work from one day to the next, or what you'll be working on,” she explains. “One day you're climbing up inside the dome of a great church, and you find yourself suspended in the air, pressing pieces of gold into the ceiling. Another day you might be in a cemetery, restoring a famous tomb, or in the house of a prince, repairing an antique floor. It's pretty heavy work too, but that's the reward of being an artisan – you get your hands dirty to make something beautiful.”



La Casa Della Luce is owned by Andrea Moraes and her brother Antonio who make candles and other products from wax.



Anna Preziosi creates pieces of art from various forms of glass in her workshop at Studio Silice.

Just across the street sits Anna Preziosi's Studio Silice, a one-woman workshop where the young glassmaker manufactures bowls, lamps and other decorative pieces, as well as doors, panels and windows to order.

After learning her trade as an apprentice, Anna opened her own studio in Monti in 2001 and hasn't looked back. From creating period replacements like the exquisite, Liberty-style window we find her working on, to her intricate signature matchsticks of glass, which are moulded and overlaid in complex geometries of light and colour, Anna works with glass as if it were cake icing. "About half of the work I do is to commission, creating great windows and panels for private houses, sometimes replacing doors, or designing a series of lamps for an interior," she says.

"Sometimes clients want to give you free rein, but I always try to get to know them, to understand their taste. Interiors are such personal things."

Originally from Florence, Anna learnt her craft in Rome, and now enjoys the freedom of being her own boss. "I love the creations which arise purely from my

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imagination," she says. "When you make something, when you fashion an idea into an object – that's what it means to be an artisan. I don't really see myself as an artist, I think that title should be reserved for the very few."

Anna's neighbour is jewellery maker Roberta Roselli, whose store *Argentia* has been on Via Urbana for the last six years. Roman-born, Roberta has been making jewellery for over 25 years and is an expert in precious stones. She makes her own designs, but also works to order for clients who bring her anything from

a sketch to a photo, or an old piece that has lost its partner or needs repairing. "Via Urbana is a really stimulating environment; but it's the whole of Rome

which inspires," she says. "It's a city made by artisans, everywhere you turn you see monuments, sculptures, churches, works of art. They all give me ideas."

But her work isn't only Roman in scope. "I suppose I see myself as part of an ancient tradition, passed down not just from the Roman era, but from the Etruscans, who were brilliant goldsmiths. Jewellery making is one of the oldest crafts in the world, with a proud heritage in Italy. There were the great workshops of Vicenza, Arezzo, Florence and Naples which all contributed to an Italian



The Cassio family has been creating and restoring mosaics for the Vatican, churches, museums and private villas all over Italy for more than 100 years.



At Argentina, Roberta Roselli makes sculptured pieces of handmade jewellery.



Studio Cassio holds regular mosaic classes.

tradition. Now I'm making that art my own.

"I do use a number of the old techniques for engraving or moulding the metal, but I'm also trying to create something new and unique."

But is it a coincidence that so many of the entrepreneurs on Via Urbana are women? "I think that women are more likely to get their act together," Roberta laughs. "Statistically, the number of female entrepreneurs in Italy is growing fast. Here on Via Urbana we just happen to be in good company."

Another female-owned business along this strip is La Casa Della Luce, founded by Brazilian-born Andrea Moraes and her brother Antonio, with the support of their mother. Andrea's passion is candles, but she also makes permanent bowls and receptacles from wax, which can be filled with water and used as candle holders.

"I grew up in a house without electricity in Rio de Janeiro so candles were very important," she explains. "You learn to light them and put them out - it's a ritual. We always put the old nubs of wax together to make new candles. When I came to Rome, wax was the obvious outlet for my art. My friends joke

that I smell of candles. I do think I have wax in my veins."

Now Andrea's workshop collaborates with chic bars and hotels, creating ambient interiors with the candles and wax vases they manufacture. "The bowls are something permanent," she says. "They're semi-opaque, so candle-light passes through them; the idea is that you fill them with water, so they don't need to be watched; they protect the flame against the wind. You can go to bed and let the candle go out by itself."

Even in the modern age, Andrea defends the importance of candles. "A room without them has no atmosphere. These days, some of the churches have replaced tea-lights with lamps that have candle-shaped bulbs. But there's no comparison with the rite of taking a candle, lighting it, guarding it from the wind. We work a lot with colour and scent. The fragrance of essential oils intensifies as they are warmed, while the colour and transparency of a candle contributes to the spectacle."

Andrea's candle designs are in constant evolution. She was recently given some Easter egg moulds from a local chocolate factory and is using

them to make great wax eggs. "For me, being an artisan is also about being an artist," she says. "Another of my passions is taking old implements and creating works of art from them." Among her sculptures, an iron hoe has been bent into the form of a woman wearing a burka; a rusty nail twisted into the silhouette of a bird. "It seems fitting that these old tools can have a new lease of life, can have some kind of artistic permanence," she says. "That's my way of paying homage to the labourers of the past, of linking art with effort."