

# Buon Giorno, Arezzo



A POSTCARD FROM TUSCANY

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Grillot, Suzette R. | Messitte, Zach P., 1968–

Title: Buon giorno, Arezzo : a postcard from Tuscany /  
edited by Suzette R. Grillot and Zach P. Messitte.

Description: Norman : University of Oklahoma Press, 2016. | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015039593 | ISBN 978-0-8061-5280-6 (paperback : alkaline paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Arezzo (Italy)—History. | Arezzo (Italy)—Description and  
travel. | Arezzo (Italy)—Intellectual life. | Arezzo (Italy)—Social life  
and customs. | Italian language—Social aspects—Italy—Arezzo. |

Architecture—Italy—Arezzo. | Art, Italian—Italy—Arezzo. | BISAC:

TRAVEL / Europe / Italy. | HISTORY / Europe / Italy.

Classification: LCC DG975.A7 B86 2016 | DDC 945/.59—dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015039593>

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Publishing Division of the University.

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Design and composition by Chris Crochetière, BW&A Books, Inc.  
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## Getting to Know the Aretines

Federico Siniscalco

**T**hrough the centuries, Italy has attracted scores of foreign travelers. In the Middle Ages, they came as pilgrims to visit St. Peter's Basilica. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, young aristocrats, accompanied by their tutors, traveled to Italy to complete their education by undertaking the "Grand Tour" of the sights and monuments of the classical world and the Renaissance. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, foreign artists and writers flocked to the Italian peninsula, attempting to follow the paths of Dante, Petrarch, Leonardo, and Michelangelo. In more recent years, enterprising tour guides have herded flocks of tourists around the country. Through all these periods, visitors have come to Arezzo, even though the stop often required a detour from the main routes connecting Florence, Siena, and Rome.

Many of these travelers from abroad created detailed records of their visits through letters, sketches, journal entries, or more elaborate travel books. Today, these records constitute a literature that offers a valuable testimonial of how foreigners viewed Italy. Most of the descriptions reflect the spirit of the age in which they were produced. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1794–1832), for example, was attracted to classical art works. Others, such as the British critic and intellectual John Ruskin (1819–1900), dwelled on medieval art by highlighting the so-called primitive painters. Almost all, however, concentrated on the sights, the artworks, and the landscapes, rather than the people. In fact, the local population was often seen as an obstacle to the proper appreciation of the arts and culture of Italy.

The way these tourists viewed Italy is similar to how they first saw Arezzo. Painters such as Vasari or other minor masters of the high Renaissance attracted early visitors to Arezzo. However, works by local artists, for example, the frescoes by Piero della Francesca—today one of the major reasons why tourists visit Arezzo—were hardly mentioned by travelers before the twentieth century. The local people were often described as ignorant and unrefined (Nathaniel Hawthorne lamented that no one knew about Petrarch's house in town), superstitious and bigoted (Lady Sidney Morgan described the city's inhabitants as religious fanatics for rebelling against the French Jacobins), or lazy and unkempt (Otto Speyer arrived in town and was so disturbed by the people he saw in the streets that he immediately headed for a friend's villa in the countryside).

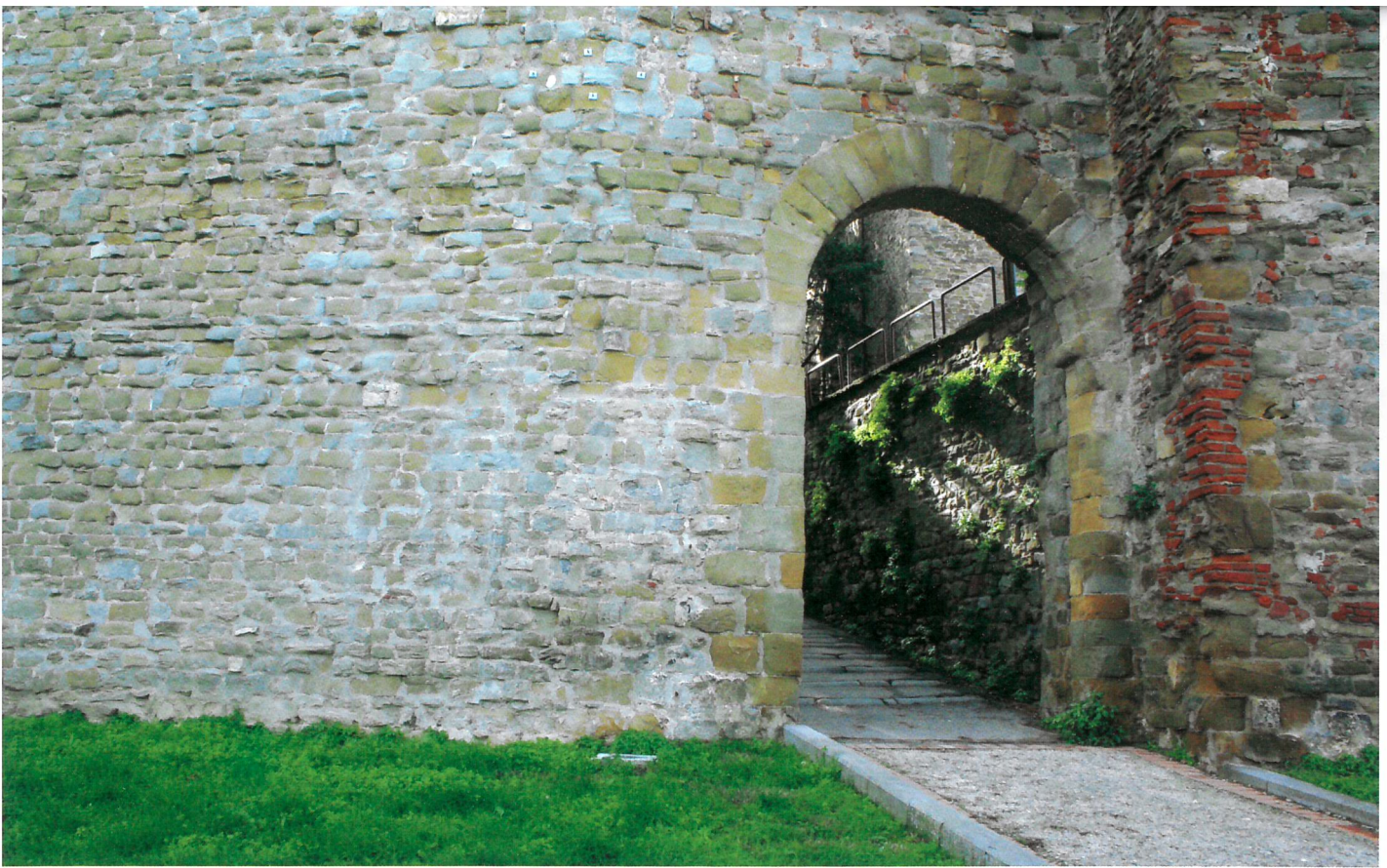
However, the literary descriptions of Arezzo and the landscape were much more generous. Henry James wrote in *Italian Hours* of his positive feelings toward Arezzo, a town with a Medici fortress turned into a vegetable garden, and an impressive cathedral surrounded by a park from where he could admire beautiful Tuscan hills, complete with cypresses, vineyards, fruit trees, and fields of wheat. Many other writers have also praised the city—among them George Dennis, Walter Pater, Vernon Lee, Edward Hutton, André Suarès—each finding remarkable history and beauty in the city's numerous works of art. Almost every travel description of Arezzo also respectfully mentions its illustrious citizens: Gaius Maecenas, patron of the arts; Petrarch; Guido Monaco, the inventor of musical notation; and Giorgio Vasari, Renaissance artist and author of the *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*.

Even though Arezzo fared well in the descriptions written by most of its foreign visitors, they

do reveal one serious limitation: those accounts were usually based on rather short visits. Most authors stopped only for a brief time and did not take the opportunity to get to really know the inhabitants of the city. Unlike other Tuscan cities such as Florence or Siena, Arezzo represented a brief respite from the real destination. Tobias Smollett, the eighteenth-century author of a famous travel book on Italy, stopped for barely two hours, just enough time for his carriage to be fixed. Today's study abroad students, or anyone else who has the possibility of a more leisurely stay, can get to know the Aretines on a much deeper level. A longer stay is the only way to get to know the *genius loci*, or the true spirit of Arezzo.

Integrating with the locals and being accepted is challenging. One of the primary characteristics of Italian towns is that, until the nineteenth century, walls surrounded them. Today, most of these walls, usually constructed during the Middle Ages, have been destroyed. However, a careful traveler will be able to see some large sections that remain standing. Arriving by train in Arezzo is not very helpful for visualizing the old city's confines, since the station stands in an area from which the original walls were almost completely removed. Any other approach, however, by car, bike, or on foot, clearly reveals the old ramparts. Most foreign writers likely approached the city by horse carriage and duly mentioned the historic walls. Today, the most striking view of the old walls is from the north, where escalators take visitors from a communal parking lot to the highest part of town, near the cathedral and the city hall.

These centuries-old walls had a great impact on Italian cities like Arezzo. To be a resident of an Italian town is to be part of an enclosed and unique community, which generates an attitude



City walls.

of suspicion and rivalry toward anyone outside that enclosed world. Belonging to a confined environment also spurred a sense of uniqueness, and the belief that the local traditions were better than those of the neighboring towns, or that local people were more industrious than those who came from somewhere else. These rivalries and suspicions go back to the hostility and warfare between the *Comuni*, the small city-states that developed in Italy during the Middle Ages. Of course, these town-centered bonds have grown weaker today as technology and transportation have shortened the distance between people and cities, but a watchful traveler can still find vestiges of the old divisions.

An outsider moving to Arezzo, even from

within Italy, is perceived as someone who belongs to a different community, a different *campanile*. The general sense of competition that the locals once felt toward neighboring cities and towns remains palpable. It is particularly pronounced against Florence, a city that defeated Arezzo at the battle of Campaldino in 1289 (where the Florentine Dante fought). Florence subjugated Arezzo for several centuries thereafter. Grudges are still held against Siena, a wealthier and more aristocratic city. There are even jealousies against Cortona, whose tourist business bloomed earlier and remains more profitable than Arezzo's smaller niche market. Generally, though, the Aretines have a good deal of self-confidence. According to the locals, everything is better in Arezzo: from



A hand-drawn eighteenth-century family tree of the Albergotti family.

the way they make *ribollita*, the Tuscan vegetable soup, to the way they organize their joust (as compared to the Siense *Palio*). Arezzo is a tightly knit community, and assimilation is difficult for anyone perceived as an outsider.

Another consequence of growing up within city walls is the tendency to develop exclusive, lifelong friendships. *La comitiva* translates as a group of friends who spend large amounts of time together. These special groups are formed among high school friends, but can often start as early as elementary school. Fairly large in size—up to ten or fifteen people—the numbers tend to grow even bigger as members develop their own families. There are many occasions for the group to get together: holidays, celebrations, and vacations. Among young people, daily outings are quite common. The organization of Italian schools also fosters the formation of these cliques. In each of the three major levels—elementary, middle, and high school—the students are obliged to sit within a single class, while it is the teachers who move from room to room. Year after year, the students who make up a class establish very strong ties, which often last beyond the school years.

Being an adult from a different town often makes it very difficult to be welcomed within one of these circles that began bonding in elementary school. The Aretines, like most Italians, are friendly and outgoing in casual interaction with strangers, but to be accepted in a group and become a permanent member with ties that go beyond a superficial level can be a challenge. Children can help break down some of these barriers, allowing for closer contact with other parents. In my own case, it was strangely my American wife who opened the most doors. She posed less of a threat to the local *campanilismo* than an Italian from another region of the

country. The stereotypes that some Italians hold about Americans—culturally naïve, not knowing how to dress, spreading their overcooked pasta on sandwiches—are less menacing than those about southern Italians such as myself (who are sometimes thought of as Mafiosi, lazy, untrustworthy, unclean, and loud).

Most Italians spend their entire life in the place where they were born. The Aretines are similarly not very geographically mobile. Indeed, those who have left their hometown have more often than not chosen to do so for economic reasons. At different times in Italian history, hardship and lack of jobs have forced people to look for opportunities far from home. Today, however, most of the young people from Arezzo look for jobs as close to home as possible. Florence is an acceptable option, but only because its distance allows for a daily commute on the train. Aretines perceive travel as a temporary, leisure, or job-related experience, rather than as a permanent relocation.

Aretines and Italians are also hemmed in by the national university system. Residential universities are a rarity in Italy, and most students live at home while studying for their degree. If their hometown has no university, young Italians will often commute on a daily or weekly basis to nearby campuses. In Arezzo, there is a small branch campus of the University of Siena with limited course offerings. Most students from Arezzo travel to Florence, Siena, or Perugia on a daily basis for their studies. Some will go as far as Bologna, where they might spend the week but still come home for the weekend to enjoy home-cooked meals and the company of their childhood friends. The experience of going away to college is rare in Italy. Graduating from high school does not necessarily coincide with leaving home.

The concept of a university campus as a self-sufficient academic community is also foreign to Italian culture. For example, the students who do enroll at the University of Siena in Arezzo (about 250 per year) limit their university experience to class attendance and examinations. They spend the rest of the time either studying at home or socializing with their high school friends. The opportunity to make new friends and broaden one's social horizons while attending college is not a part of the Italian university experience. Students rely on their own cliques and families for socializing, which only reinforces an attitude of closure towards outsiders.

Young Italians tend to live at home with their parents until well into their thirties. This is true in Arezzo as well, where the *mammoni* ("mama's boy") phenomenon is alive and well. Along with

the characteristics of Italian universities and the reluctance to move away from home, other reasons include the scarcity of jobs and the insufficiency of affordable housing. Family remains a defining institution in Italian culture, and in its extended form (siblings, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins of various degrees), it offers a sense of security to the Aretines. Large family gatherings for official holidays (Christmas, Easter) are typical. Celebrations of christenings, first communions, university graduations, and weddings are also cause for gathering and festivity. The family is sometimes more open to outsiders than the school groups. Foreigners visiting Arezzo and new immigrants who have left their own families behind are often invited to partake in family celebrations and gatherings. These are wonderful experiences and should not be missed, because they are the best way for an outsider to learn more about local customs, food, and drink.

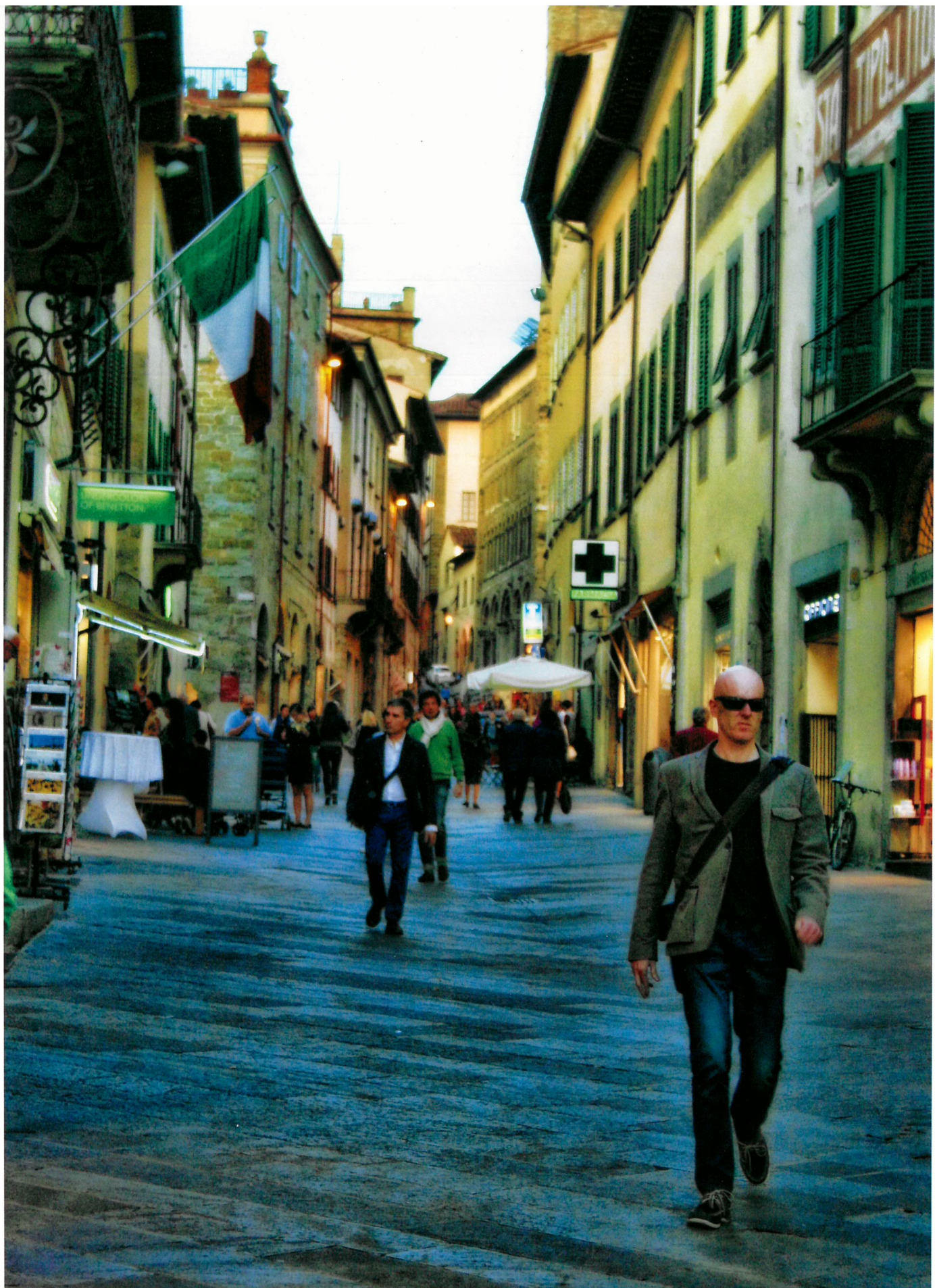
Arezzo's families help out with daily life in ways that might seem foreign to the outsider. Because schools are usually open only in the mornings, working parents often leave their children in the custody of the grandparents. Families also play an essential role in helping others when someone gets sick. It is not uncommon for family members to care for their loved ones in hospitals and clinics, which are often understaffed with nursing and personal caregivers. Family life can also be stressful. Homes are small and siblings often share bedrooms, ensuring that most family life takes place within a confined environment. Many of the local youngsters end up spending quite a bit of time in the city's open spaces: parks, piazzas, and most of all, Corso Italia, historically Arezzo's most important street. The Corso is where one of the city's most intriguing

The University of Siena branch campus in Arezzo.



(facing) Corso Italia.







Friends gather at Tuscanative, a local food, wine, and bike shop, to enjoy a drink, antipasti, and good company.

occurrences takes place: the habitual afternoon stroll, or *passeggiata*.

The custom of taking a leisurely afternoon walk in one of the local streets or piazzas is an old tradition that continues in most Italian cities and towns. Many foreign travelers who described Italy in their journals and books were taken by the phenomenon of the afternoon stroll. Nathaniel Hawthorne and his wife, Sophia, both wrote in detail of how elegant and attractive the people of Arezzo seemed as they promenaded on

the sunny and well-tended Corso. Even today foreign visitors are puzzled by the large numbers of people who gather in the afternoons to carry out their *vasche* (the term, used locally, and best translated as “pool laps” to describe the tracing and retracing of a particular stretch of a local street). People gather along the Corso around four in the afternoon and remain on the street until just before dinnertime. Though dominated by the young people who walk within their groups, there are some older and well-tailored

citizens as well. Girls walk with other girls, and boys walk with boys. While many nervous glances may be exchanged, not much else takes place. The interaction is somewhat limited, especially among strangers. This is the norm in Italy, where only after a formal introduction will people acknowledge each other in the streets. Mostly people are there to make a “good impression” or “*fare bella figura*.” Once upon a time, a passeggiata required formal dress with only the best clothes. Today, the regular stroll is more about showing an affinity to a cultural subgroup and to see one’s neighbors. In truth, some of the local youth are quite critical of the vasche and try to pursue alternative pastimes in the afternoon, such as practicing sports or getting

involved in music, theater, or other extracurricular activities.

For a foreigner planning to spend a significant period in town, or for an Italian moving in from a different city, the afternoon walk is not the best way to meet the locals. It is entertaining, however, to watch the Aretines go through their paces. An easier approach may be to seek out Aretines at restaurants, bars, and cafés. The Aretines, like most Italians, are well versed in the art of casual conversation. With a bit of persistence, and some time at one’s disposal, it is possible to break through the initial reservation. While it may take a serious effort, it will open the path to understanding to those fortunate enough to reside in this magical city.



Guido Antolini, visiting from Rome, enjoys dinner with a colleague at one of the many Arezzo restaurants.