The Decline (and Fall?) of Italy's Cultural Environment

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The poster in the North European travel agency read, "Visit Italy Now, Before the Italians Destroy It." It was not a sick joke. It was an indication of a process of degradation of art and landscape approaching a kind of national masochism. The results of that process, now chillingly documented, are being shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in an exhibition entitled "Art and Landscape of Italy—Too Late to Be Saved?" A small, important show with a very large question mark indeed, its thesis is of no less than cosmic interest to Western civilization.

An Appraisal

The exhibition is a cry for help. It demonstrates, through magnificent photos and a hortatory text, what intense industrial development, social disruption, apathy and greed have done to the natural historical and artistic patrimony of a country that has established standards of culture and beauty for the rest of the world.

Divine Individualism

This version is an updated, English edition of a show called "Italia de Salvare," prepared by a concerned group of Italian architects and planners led by Renato Bazzoni and Roberto Brambilla, that has been touring Italy since 1967 and has succeeded in outraging Italians wherever it was shown.

That is not surprising, since it says, in unminced words and incontrovertible pictures, that what is not being destroyed by economic growth is being ruined by the Italian people themselves, through apathy and greed.

The show has already aroused a belated national conscience and led to some initial planning and protective legislation. But in the country where Individualism is as divine as Dante's Commedia, and opportunism has been raised to an art as fine as that of Raffaello —whose work was recently stolen and sold to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and then returned on request of the Italian Government—there is a long way to go.

The exhibition is the inaugural event of the newly founded Italian Art and Landscape Foundation, formed in the United States through Italian efforts to help Italians "preserve a part of a universal heritage that civilization cannot afford to lose."

The show has been directed and designed by Roberto Brambilla and promoted by Italia Nostra, an Italian conservation group. It is installed in the Metropolitan's Blumenthal Patio, where it can be seen through July 4.

This is the story the exhibition tells.

In 50 years, Italy has been transformed. Rural and urban life have undergone profound changes; industry, expansion and migration have totally dislocated the traditional Italian society and scene.

The effects have been twofold: on painting, sculpture and the fine arts, and on the urban, rural and natural landscape. Together, these make the cultural environment, and together, they make Italy.

Change from an agricultural to an industrial economy has ravaged country and cities alike. Historic hilltowns and mountain villages are being abandoned to decay. Villagers flee towns of astonishing beauty and grinding poverty, glad to be free of them.

The characteristic, small-scale landscape patterns of olive and grape cultivation give way to the flat swaths of mechanized farming. Cities of baroque scale and splendor are inundated by jerry-built, unserviced, speculator highrises.

Environmentally, the cure is often worse than the disease. Urban renewal roots out art and history. Approximately 100,000 trees were felled along secondary roads from 1962 to 1964 to "promote" automobile safety. The automobile, in turn, has invaded plazas that are cultural treasures and gas stations elbow national monuments. Fina thumbs its nose at San Gimignano.

As for the arts, in the period from 1968 to 1971 more than 3,000 works or art "officially" disappeared from Italian public and private institutions. In 1963 alone more than 5,000 antique vases were illegally exported. The show's authors call it pillage.

There are 95 archeologists, 92 art historians, 107 architects and 58 technicians under the Ministry of Education's Fine Arts Administration responsible for Italy's entire artistic heritage. Compare that with an austerity staff of 761 at New York's Metropolitan Museum alone.

Horsemen of Apocalypse

The exhibition points to four agents of destruction in Italian cities: speculation, traffic, obsolescence and insensitivity. While the carnage goes on, architects and intellectuals have indulged in polemics, those sophisticated, abstract debates about form that completely ignore content.

Professionals are aware and alarmed now. But every isolated sensitive bit of urban design, the show says, is "suffocated by uncontrolled building, bureaucratic ineptitude, political cynicism and demagoguery, administrative unpreparedness and public apathy."

On Italian hillsides, silver olive trees give way to bushes and weeds, or farmers turn to less demanding timber. Natural woods, in turn, are set afire by speculators to remove obstacles to development.

About 20,000 Italian castles, unsuited to modern life, are deteriorating rapidly. Fortresses, towers, churches, convents, Tuscan and Piedmont villas invite vines and rot. Churches become auto repair shops. "Development pollution" invades mountains and lakes. And always, the subdivider comes.

Fate, the show points out, had little to do with the disasters of the Florentine flood. It was deliberate deforestation. Scientists have calculated that it would take 300 years to restore equilibrium to Italy's forests.

The Withering Pines

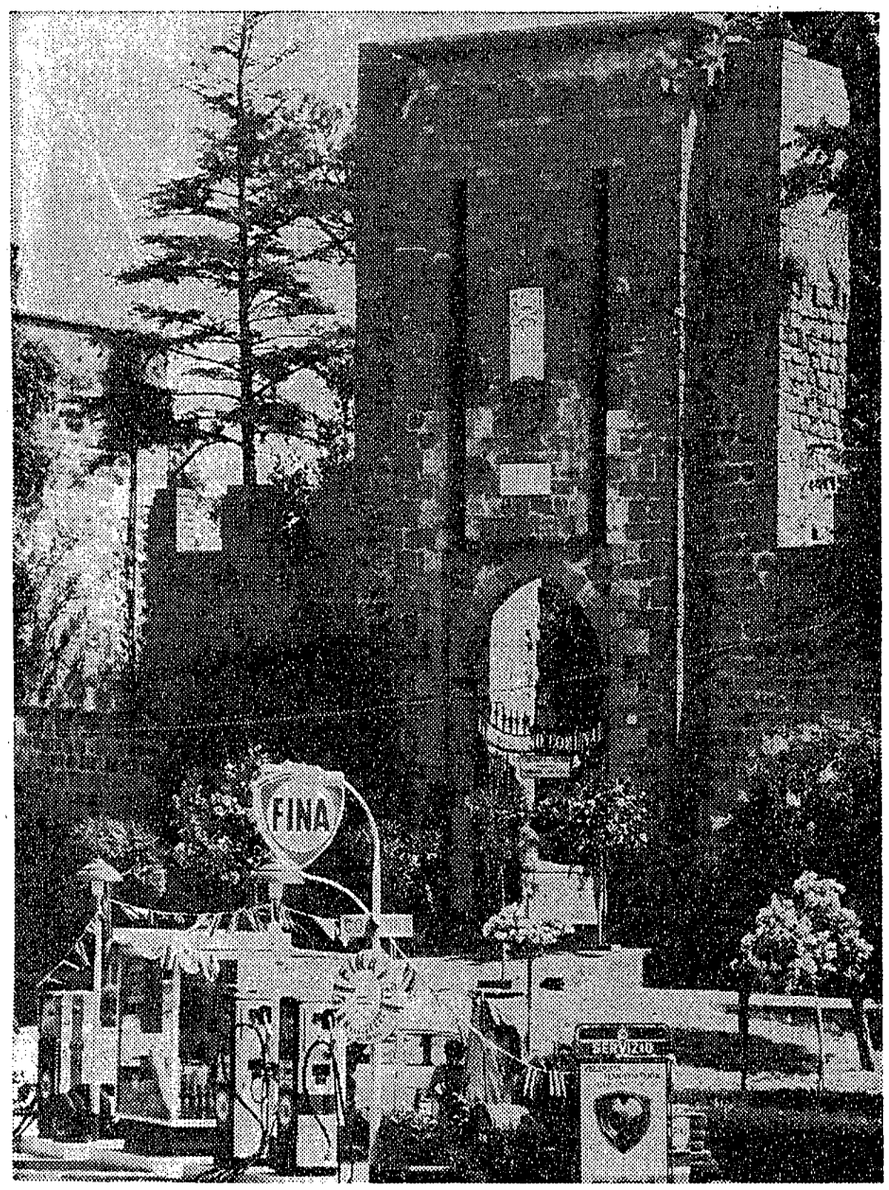
Italia Nostra estimates that half of Italy's 5,000 miles of coastline is lost—transformed into an uninterrupted linear city. The oil refinery at Portonevere, one of the classic beauty spots of the Italian Riviera, was put there by a state-owned company. Poisoned by pollution, coastal pine woods wither and die.

Italy, too late to be saved? In spite of the evidence, the exhibition's organizers say No.

It is too late for the umbrella pines of Posillipo that identified legions of Neapolitan views, cut down by a speculative builder, too late for countless stones of Venice that Ruskin considered immortal, too late for Siren rocks and black pebble beaches once luminous in lonely evening twilight and ravaged now by crowded, vulgar chic.

But it is not too late for a setting of priorities and balances, for controls in the national and international interest, for the reversal of the trend the show demands. In the Veneto, for example, low-interest state loans are now available for villa rehabilitation, and conservation legislation is being passed.

The show is a consciousness raiser. It tells us that art and beauty are more transient than enduring. Today, the barbarians come from within.



Bronzoni

Service station near entrance to the Albornoz Fortress in Orvieto, noted for its Gothic, Romanesque and Renaissance buildings. About 20,000 Italian castles are deteriorating.

La Liberta

Mutilated trees ready for felling along a road in Piacenza, central Italy. About 100,000 trees were felled along secondary roads from 1962 to 1964 to "promote" auto safety.