

Research Renaissance



Artist Deborah Lanino sits in her studio.

Record discoveries inspire a connection to artistic ancestors.

Deborah Lanino is an artist. So maybe it's no surprise that two of her earliest memories of family history are works of art: a charcoal drawing hanging in her great-grandmother's house, and a hand-carved box. The charcoal portrait was by Italian-American artist Arturo Noci, and the box was full of Italian newspaper articles and commemorations to the family.

The items were passed down the generations from Deborah's grandfather, who brought them to the United States from Rome. *His* father, Pietro of Turin, was a professor at Bologna University and the chief electrical engineer of Italy's first railroad.

Deborah—who studied fine art at the Pratt Institute—first visited her ancestral homeland of Italy at age 18. “I fell in love with the landscape, the arts, the language and the food,” she says. “I got to see the paintings and sculptures that I had only seen reproductions of in art history books right there in person in Rome and Florence.”

She also connected with relatives in Rome and Turin. Cousins sent her newspaper articles and commemorations that revealed many of her relatives were

architects and engineers throughout the 1800s, even as early as the 1700s.

While Deborah was studying in Florence a few years later, an art history professor commented on her unique surname. She learned that celebrated Renaissance artist *Bernardino* Lanino had a major ongoing exhibit in his home city of Vercelli.

Deborah knew of Bernardino's art from black-and-white reproductions in books. But seeing them in person was an entirely different experience, and made her wonder if she was related to this other artist named Lanino.

A cousin in Turin had already tried to trace the family tree back to Bernardino. The handwritten tree reached back to the 1700s—not far enough to connect to Bernardino, born in 1512. The record trail wore too thin.

Deborah thought she'd give it another try. An entire chapter of a 1985 Bernardino retrospective published in Vercelli was dedicated to documenting generations of his descendants through baptismal records.

She hired a genealogist in Italy through the Association of Professional Genealogists <www.apgen.org>.



Left: “Two Angels in Brown and Pink—Glory to God” by Deborah Lanino, inspired by the 16th-century “Due Teste di Angeli”

Below: “The Mustard Tree” by Deborah Lanino



Their work revealed that an oldest known relative was from Vercelli, a promising lead.

Then, an 1824 book *Istoria della Vercellese Letteratu Ed Arti* shared this exciting nugget (translated here): “Lanino Giacomo from Vercelli, descendant of the famous Bernardino, painter, practiced painting and architecture because of his skills, and after studying in the Royal University of Turin, he took a degree in 1796, and was registered as civil architect.”

The years, names, careers and locations in both Turin and Vercelli lined up with Deborah’s ancestors. More dogged professional genealogy work—covering some 3,000 pages of materials—turned up records at two churches in Vercelli: the Duomo and Santa Maria Maggiore. They traced Bernardino’s descendants (many of them also artists) to the year 1700.

That’s not definitive proof of her connection, but Deborah is encouraged by the progress. “*Piano, piano*,’ as they say in Italy. One step at a time,” she says. “I have a good feeling that I will eventually connect the branches.”

Meanwhile, the discovery that her artistic heritage goes back at least to the 1700s—and perhaps to the Renaissance—has inspired Deborah to create an exhibition of her own: “Reimagining: Faith, Hope and Love.” A show at the Blackfriars Gallery in Berkeley, Calif., runs this fall, and includes many paintings inspired by works of the long-ago Lanino. Learn more at <www.deborahlanino.com>. ●



Deborah in front of an exhibit showcasing the work of her possible ancestor, famed Renaissance artist Bernardino Lanino.



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