

# Bella Toscana

Once upon a time, in the beautiful country of Italy, there was a very talented young woman named Alison who had traveled there to learn the fine arts of gilding and Florentine-style furniture painting. She became so enamored with the city of Florence and the joy of producing her beautiful artworks there that one year turned into twenty, and eventually her talents provided her with the opportunity to set up her very own studio (bottega).

Fortune was smiling on her as she found the perfect little place, a former 18th-century theater, which was on a pretty little street in the San Bartolo neighborhood of Florence. But, alas, after paying to replaster the walls and ceilings, she was at a loss of time and money to transform the interiors into a place of creativity and charm. She needed the help of a prince or princess, or both! And here is where the story really begins...

## The Proposal

Alison Woolley Bukhgalter is the artist/director of a Florentine painting school, *FlorenceArt.net*, as well as the Bottega a San Bartolo, from which she produces beautiful, hand-painted and gilded furniture pieces and accessories that are sold worldwide. Alison had been coveting the photos I had been sharing of elaborate floor treatments done with Modellos and SkimStone, and we had lightly discussed the possibility of

by **Melanie Royals**



A view from the magical Fattoria di Miano, the group's home away from home.

my coming to her new studio in Florence, Italy, to teach a class there and install a floor in the process. All of this began to snowball at the SALI Convention in Chicago, 2006, where Alison had come to teach and she, my good friend Gary Lord and I began talking in earnest about the possibility of bringing a painting group of Americans over to Florence to

learn and complete a series of decorative projects there. Gary has run many successful group trips in the past to France, England and Italy. So, we were on our way!

## The Projects

We knew from the beginning that an elaborate Modello/SkimStone treatment would be going on the



The group poses for a photo at Villa Vignamaggio.



**Laying down Modello.**

main floor, and Modern Masters Inc. was very generous to donate the product that we needed. For the wall finishes though, we decided that it would be ideal to utilize lime-based plasters and products that could be purchased both in Italy (for our project) and back in the U.S. as well (for the benefit of our students). I was given the tough assignment of traveling to Florence in the spring of 2007 to view the space, the villa where we would be staying and to brainstorm with Alison on the finishes. Because her studio also serves as a showcase for her works of art, it was important that the finishes complement her art in a subtle way. She also felt it important that what we painted would tie in to the local history.

**Italian Tile Floor:** For the floor project, Alison was presented with four choices in varying colors and patterns. I was so glad that she chose my favorite! We began by skimming out the floor with a coat of Bonding Primer followed by two coats of SkimStone that allowed the first layer to peek through to add to the sense of “age.” The Modello, while large, went down very quickly with the aid of many hands working well together. Then it was just a matter of layer-

ing and applying blue, gold and terra colors in the right place at the right time. The result was something that looked like it could have been in a centuries-old beautiful Italian church or theatre! *Mission accomplished.*

**Coccio Pesto:** For the back room, we elected to use Coccio Pesto from Safra (available in the U.S. through the School of Italian Plasters). This elegant lime plaster is similar to a Marmorino, but has the unique addition of recycled, crushed Italian roof tiles. When the plaster is compressed and burnished, the terra cotta bits and their color are dispersed throughout the finish. To provide further decoration for the room, we used an allover Modello pattern to embed the design into one wall. The Modello was applied just prior to the final/burnish coat, leaving the pattern incised into

wall finish after it was removed.

This is an incredibly elegant finish that is as beautiful to see as it is to touch. Unfortunately, it’s very hard to photograph well, but the proof of its appeal is that many of the students were eager to get back and apply this finish in their own homes!

**Silk Stria:** The inspiration for this finish came from a very old and well-known silk factory in Florence, the Antico Setificio Fiorentino. Alison and I got to visit there, and we loved the heavy woven silk damasks that they still create by hand on a loom.

For our finish, we used a heavy-bodied, tintable product called Kreos from Oikos along with a special tool that is called a corduroy tool but that actually looks like a piece of bad AstroTurf. It works fabulously for creating nice randomly thick stria

lines and slubs in the finish. The way the handle is shaped also makes it much easier for pulling in vertical lines down the wall. The stria finish was patiently stenciled using the Pro Delicate Floral design from Royal Design Studio by the great group of students that worked in that room.

We used the same Kreos product for the stenciling, just tinted darker, and it holds its shape so well that we were able to roll the product on with no bleed-through under the stencil, even though the surface underneath was highly textured! The finishing touch was a water-based wax that had been tinted with a custom mix of gold mica powders to give it a soft shimmer as it catches the light.

**Lime Paint:** The front showroom was quite large and required an easy-to-achieve finish that would elegantly enhance Alison’s painted furniture. The



**The floor in progress.**



**The finished Italian floor.**

perfect option proved to be an Oikos Lime Paint, Pittura Calce Verona. This pure lime paint can be tinted to a wide range of colors and then thinned and brushed or trowelled on. Because Alison's walls were finished off with gritty texture on the surface, we chose to simply brush on three colors: a cream, light pink and gray green. Working wet-on-wet with large brushes, a large crew was able to achieve a similar look throughout the whole space: soft, luminous, subtle color.

**Faux Fresco:** As an added treat for this trip, Jeannine Dostal, Cincinnati-based decorative painter and author of *Spectacular Walls*, taught her fast and effective techniques for create faux fresco panels using stencils, tints and textural materials. Each student was able to create a uniquely gorgeous panel on canvas to take home. As is true with most classes, it was amazing to see the variety of looks that were created by various artists using just a few different colors and stencil designs from Royal Design Studio.

### The Resting Place

Our home away from home on the trip was the magical Fattoria di Milano. Nestled in the cypress and olive grove studded hills that overlook Florence, this property dates back to the 1400s. A fattoria is a large working farm/estate. The Maiano estate produces a world-renowned extra virgin olive oil, and they were just beginning to crush and extract this year's harvest on our final day there. There is a large, well-appointed villa on the property that was used as a setting for the films *A Room with a View* and *Tea with Mussolini*. We were treated to a tour that revealed beautiful painted decoration on the ceilings, walls and floors.

Our group stayed in the various apartments on the property that have been converted in various buildings that formerly housed a convent, a



The group does a lime wash.



Melanie Royals, the author, demonstrates a technique.



Jeannine Dostal shows how to do faux fresco.

school and more. Many apartments have breathtaking views of the surrounding hills, and we found the Maiano to be a delightful place to stay. Alison runs a decorative painting course a couple of times a year at the Maiano that includes room and board there. We highly recommend it!

### The Participants

Quite possibly the best part of the trip was the amazing group of participants that we were fortunate to have along with us. At 31, we were quite a large group, and our working areas were "tight," but everyone rose to the challenges and worked as an amazing team, both to complete our decorative projects and to create the samples of each finish completed onsite. Many

new friendships were formed over trowels, shared experiences, wonderful meals and shopping excursions.

Our group spanned the range of everyone from instructors to novices. We enjoyed Susan and Todd Allemand, Velvet Barton, Mary Battaglia, Mary Bolan, Jody Buss, Laura Conway, Patti Halstead,

Sandra Crissey, Anne Dever, Thersa Giffin, Debby Hayes, Nancy Jones, Eve LaRue, Jennifer Ludvik, Bob and Bonnie May, Eric Meyers, Debbie Morthland, Debbie Rye, Leslie Sexton, Barb Skivington, Lori Slusarek, Jeannine Dostal, Christine Tasheff and Marla Williams. A special thanks goes out to our most helpful friends and assistants Becky Roth and Kari Caldwell.

## The Playtime

No sane person goes to Italy just to work! There are simply too many wonderful sensory experiences to be had, and we made sure to schedule plenty of playtime. There is the amazing art and architecture to see and drink of in the museums, churches and villas. There is the wonderful Tuscan cuisine, filled with fresh ingredients and washed down (always) with red wine. The rolling hills of Tuscany, dotted with castles, medieval villages and elegant villas are a sight to never grow tired of. And then there is shopping, and more shopping, and more shopping to do. From Prada to the outdoor fresh produce markets, there is something for every taste and budget.

Our tour days included a wine-tasting and brunch trip to the lovely Villa Vignamaggio in the heart of Chianti, where they have been growing and producing wine for 600 years. Our charming guide, Sandro, taught us how to assess what story

### Resources:

[www.florenceart.net](http://www.florenceart.net)  
[www.prismaticpaintingstudio.com](http://www.prismaticpaintingstudio.com)  
[www.royaldesignstudio.com](http://www.royaldesignstudio.com)  
[www.modellodesigns.com](http://www.modellodesigns.com)  
[www.fattoriadimaiano.com](http://www.fattoriadimaiano.com)  
[www.vignamaggio.com](http://www.vignamaggio.com)  
[www.italianplasters.com](http://www.italianplasters.com) (Safra)  
[www.modernmasters.com](http://www.modernmasters.com)  
 (SkimStone)  
[www.fauxbykathy.com](http://www.fauxbykathy.com) (Oikos)



Some sight-seeing included a trip to the Leaning Tower of Pisa.



The Bella Tocana trip participants in front of the finished floor.

our wine was telling us as we absorbed the beautiful view and charm of a building that was also a movie setting for *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Other days included trips to the famous Tuscan cities of San Gimignano, Siena, Pisa and Lucca, and we were also treated to a special afternoon touring the Artisan Quarter of Florence, where we were allowed to view artisans working on lovely Pietre Dure and Scagliola pieces, as well as an accomplished silversmith.

## The Fairy Tale Ending

This story actually has more than one happy ending. On a personal note, my sweet boyfriend, Eric, pro-

posed while we were off on a side trip to Montalcino. When I announced our engagement at our farewell party, the room erupted with clapping, cheers and tears. An amazing end to an amazing trip. And they lived happily ever after... TFF



Melanie Royals is the creative force behind Royal Design Studio, an industry leader in the art of stenciling. Melanie continues to pursue the advancement of stenciling with the decorative painting industry by offering sophistication, inspiration and education to decorative paint professionals.

For more information, call (800) 747-9767, or visit online at [www.royaldesignstudio.com](http://www.royaldesignstudio.com).