



*The Indian* **EXPRESS**

JOURNALISM OF COURAGE



**THE FINANCIAL EXPRESS**

[www.financialexpress.com](http://www.financialexpress.com)

Read to Lead

## Italian rhapsody

*Shombit Sengupta*  
Oct 5th, 2014

Let me continue my experiential learning of Italian design, so full of artistic sense and elegance, through travels with my Michael Angelo's *David* sculpture look-alike Italian friend. The only difference, unfortunately, is that my friend always turns up in chic dressing style, whereas *David* exhibits his anatomical splendour sans clothes.

We first arrived in Milan and met his graceful wife, an entrepreneur scientist with her own research laboratory. What struck me on entering her workplace is simple arrangements, outstanding decor and subtle touches of orange everywhere, her signature colour. Scientists here were working on American Mac computers, their screens exposing high-tech scientific sense; but all of that was overshadowed by her Italian design touch, even in a scientific lab. I call this the Italian art of working and living. Before taking the flight to Olbia, her welcome breakfast at their urbane home was aromatic coffee and special Milanese Easter dome cake. That's when I realised the importance of different types of bread, all artistically designed, for various occasions and cuisines in Italy.

Looking down the aircraft window at Sardinia's islands over the blue-green Mediterranean Sea was exhilarating. We drove through total greenery to the entrepreneur scientist's native village in Luras village. Her 84-year-old father, Mr Meloni, explained to us how Northern, Central

and Southern Italian cultures are very different; of course Sardinia being an island has even more dissimilarities. On our first day at lunch we were served pane carasau, a thin and crisp, half-meter wide Sardinian bread, and heard of other Sardinian breads like pane con gerda, civraxiu, moddizzosu. My question to Mr Meloni was, how come there are more than 20 bread styles in Italy, in different creative shapes, sizes and ingredients including coppia ferrarese dating back to 1287, fragguno eaten on Easter Sunday, focaccia, pandoro, taralli, penia, piadina, ciabatta, cecina, grissini? Across the south, east, north and west of France we have only 3 types of bread, pain, baguette and pain a la campagne. His incisive reply was that unity had come very early to France as a nation post the 1789 French Revolution, so everybody eats the same breads. But Italy did not have this unity, different regions continue to practice their own culture. Historical phenomenon translated to social eating habits was indeed a great education. My take is that this Mediterranean wave, which starts from the daily basic staple of bread, is another reason for Italian versatility and creativity in design.

In our frequent philosophical conversations I have asked my clothed-David friend to narrate how Italian art has penetrated across Mediterranean society, from religion, art, politics to social life. Here's what he said:

"You have to go back many centuries and understand the role played by religion and the Church. At its origin, religion created its role to protect man from adversities of natural calamities supposedly created by Gods to punish mankind's misbehavior. There was no way out

in this life, so believers were asked to obey the Gods via the priests to have a better life after death. This went on for centuries till for social, political, philosophical reasons man started playing a role for himself due to commerce. Commerce brought an end to the war, fought feudalism and started to instill in people the idea that life on earth has a value in itself. The Roman Church was clever enough to proactively play a political and cultural role in that period: on one side it invested in art and culture with the marvelous pieces of art in Rome and on the other it strengthened its power and avoided any Reform at the core of its world.”

My clothed-*David* continued, “The Roman Church played a pivotal role in Italian society upto the 19th century, its political role is still extremely powerful. Although the Christian faith drives Italian society, certain ‘illuminated minds’ started to question the silent obedience to faith and the Church for a better afterlife. This started a cultural movement in Italy where an artistic environment developed around the 14th to 17th century. Called the Renaissance, this later spread to the rest of Europe and led to the neoclassic movement called Hellenism. This approach started to trickle down to lower levels but it never became public due to the power of the Church. So it was an individualistic reaction which is still strong and growing. We developed an individualist approach based on Mediterranean culture and lifestyle: individualistic which relates back to the seeds of the Renaissance, disrespectful vis-a-vis the power of the Church, and colorful based on the marvelous landscape and much better solar weather we enjoy in Italy compared to Northern Europe. ”

That such artistic pursuit engulfs every area of Italian life till today is evident from my clothed-*David*’s mother-in-law. A slim 82-year-old with lots of wrinkle lines on her face, I could not control complimenting her for being a Sardinian beauty. She looked at her Sardinian husband sweetly and said she’s from Bologne, meaning

Northern Italians are inherently more refined than rustic Sardinians. Their house with paintings was like an art gallery, her balcony abloom with varieties of orchids. Her art of sensitively nurturing the orchids, scrolling curtains to give them the correct light conjured up a beautiful scene of neo-classic Italian film after the Great War. I was never so attracted by orchids until her strong bone structure in twilight recounting stories about the character of each flower gave me the imagery of an Italian Eden island. She’s conscious about her beauty, brushing and re-clipping strands in her hair if they get ruffled, in exactly the way she wants them disciplined on her aesthetics.

I must say if Michael Angelo was there, he would surely have sculpted her fine-looking timeless face, a face that’s very appealing to artists, including me. I have to continue this artistic Italian rhapsody next week because I am totally downed in the Mediterranean sense which pervades every area of living style till today.

**—Shombit Sengupta is a global consultant on unique customer centricity strategy to execution excellence for top management. Reach him at [www.shiningconsulting.com](http://www.shiningconsulting.com) ■**