

Manifesto of American Verismo

By Jerry Ross, 2013

American *verismo* is a catch-all phrase for an artistic style that draws its main inspiration from Italian art, both classical and modern. There is an implied nostalgia for work done “*dal vero*” (after life) whether classical (Raphael, Rubens, or Caravaggio, etc.) or 19th century (the Tuscan *I Macchiaioli* school) or more contemporary.

Verismo is somewhat akin to contemporary “atelier realism” but the latter has been criticized for an academic uniformity and its over attention to details. American verismo is more poetic and linked to post-impressionism, the Milan-based *Scapigliatura* (‘wild hair’) movement, and the *I Macchiaioli*’s commitment to social issues. But like atelier realism, American verismo is associated with a painterly sketching style, use of broad brushstrokes, and the *alla prima*, “direct attack” technique of painting.

It is also linked to *al aperto* (open air) impressionist-style landscape painting. In short, to pleinairism which has become widely popular in recent years. The term “American verismo” was first introduced by Jerry Ross during several classes he taught at the Maude Kerns Art Center in Eugene and then later at the Angels Fight Road Art Center plein air retreat up the McKenzie River during the summers of 2010 and 2011.

In portraiture and figurative work, American verismo is influenced by Alessandro Milesi, Giacomo Favretto, and Ettore Tito. A “social verismo” aspect of the style is political and makes comments on society and often depicts scenes with political or moral narratives.

In “verismo” there is also the belief in the importance of making sketch studies from old master paintings and sculptures. The principle of abstraction is important in this approach to painting, and, in fact, abstraction is evident in verismo work.

An important book “The Art of the Macchia and the Risorgimento” by Boime explains the concept of “the macchia” (stain or pattern) which is key to the American verismo approach. The macchia is a quick overall sketch setting down the largest areas of dark and light, although in practice this is often executed in a sienna hue which can then work as an underpainting. One can work on top of the macchia with wet-in-wet paint but taking great care not to obliterate or stray away from the macchia. Alternatively and somewhat less precarious, is to allow the macchia to dry completely (or nearly so) and then to apply patches (spots) of color directly in *alla prima* manor, lifted from a “color pool” of pigments already on the palette. Both in the macchia production phase and in the “overpainting” phase, there is an emphasis upon gesture and calligraphic brushwork.

But regardless of technique, the followers of “American Verismo” have a passion for working directly from life (the sitter, the nude, pure nature). They have a love for drawing and sketching *dal vero*, as well. Students are urged to always have a sketch pad and pencil at hand. Moreover the sketch is highly valued as coded shorthand for a painting. This *bozzetto* becomes a plan for a painting to be executed in the studio. In other instances, the sketch is made directly to canvas and the process unfolds in *alla prima*. In addition, the sketches, when successful, are highly valued in themselves.

In summary, American verismo is:

1. Inspired and influenced by Italian art
2. Emphasizes *dal vero* or “after life”
3. Is related to the I Macchiaioli School of Tuscany
4. Uses the *macchia (stain, spot, or pattern) created by sketching*
5. Is related to plein air (or *al aperto*) and direct painting (*alla prima*)

Note: The *Scapigliatura* were the first Italian bohemian painters. "The *Scapigliati* are also famous for erasing any difference between art and life, and lived their lives of anti-conformism, anarchist idealism and a desire for transcendence to the full. Like Baudelaire and Poe, and French Symbolist poets Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine after them... The main *Scapigliati* painters

are Tranquillo Cremona, Daniele Ranzoni and Arnaldo Bocklin, and the best-known sculptor is Giuseppe Grandi. ...Their style would influence later painters such as Medardo Rosso and Mose' Bianchi. The movement was later immortalized by Giacomo Puccini, a protege' of Arrigo Boito, in his opera *La bohème* in 1896, with a libretto written by Giuseppe Giacosa. Orchestra director Arturo Toscanini was another famous figure who shared the ideals of the Scapigliatura (Wikipedia).

Followers in Oregon are members of Club Macchia: Patti McNutt, John Bennington (a sculptor), Tim Kendall, Sally Jo Schwader, Victoria Biedron, Jean Denis, Barbara Weinstein, Jaqueline Lukowski, & Angela Ross (a photographer).