

Writing I second essay
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Mr. Great but Little-known

Simple but solemn — my first impression of Villa La Pietra. I was not excited at all about the coming field trip to Villa La Pietra. The villa was not as lavishly decorated as the Duomo or the Church di S. Miniato. Neither did I expect the collections it possesses, for I had seen the *School of Athens* of Raphael and the *Mona Lisa* of Leonardo Da Vinci, and none of them astonished me after all. The only thing that intrigued me was Villa La Pietra's neat garden, which we were told that was not included in our field trip. I was not excited at all about Villa La Pietra.



We entered the red room, whose name can be easily understood from its wall color. Different versions of *Madonna and child* occupied every corner of the room. However, one piece stood out from them. It was a panel painting, the rediscovery of the body of Saint Davino.

On the painting, Saint Davino lied in a bier, a movable frame on which a corpse is placed before burial, in the center of the image, occupying the most spaces of the painting. His long body was painted out of normal size, which can be seen clearly in comparison to other figures standing beside him. By exaggerating the body size of Saint Davino, the artist conveyed the protagonist to be S. Davino and the admiration of his greatness. He lied on the bier, serenely, with a halo behind his head. His hands crossed on his belly, resembling the cross, symbolically meaning the Redemption, which was the tenet he had devoted his whole life to. And he also had a rosary that has a small cross on its end in his hand. There are two angels standing behind him, playing magic with their hands to bless him, leading his way to heaven. On the left of the painting, there was a

bishop with two monks. On the right, there was a group of clerics. They were mourning the grievous loss and praising all the achievements S. Davino had done by reading the brevity of his life. On the top center of the painting, there was a fluttering ribbon. The fluttering painted ribbon recalls the real ribbon that would have been used to connect with the lock of a chest or a coffin, in another way to add some liveliness to the painting.

Saint Davino was born in Armenia and died in Lucca. The exact year of his birth is now implicit in history while he is believed to have passed away 1051, buried in Church of San Michele in Lucca. He adopted an ascetic lifestyle and set out a pilgrimage from Armenia to Jerusalem, then Rome, and finally Lucca. During his allotted lifespan, he re-converted many citizens of Lucca to Catholicism and he cured many people who suffered from either slight or severe illnesses. After incessant years of fatigue from penance, he succumbed to a fatal malady and stopped in Church of San Michele in Lucca. It was believed that the ground he was buried grew a vine, whose fruit grapes proved to have the capability of curing illness, just like what S. Davino did when he was alive.

His name “Davino” was not an original Armenian name, it was assumed that “Davino” was a short version of “Davidino”, which in Italian means “little david”. So there was even tale saying that S. Davino was the son of David, the second ruler of Israel Republic. He was sent to heal the pain of the masses. And the manuscript that contained his Vita now in the Vatican library only described him as a man from the East but never mentioned if he was born in Armenia.

The painting was a horizontal panel painting, in the normal-sized wood board that could be used to make a chest or the front of a coffin. To come up with some assumptions on the purpose of the painting, I did some research on the history of panel painting. Panel painting is an ancient prestigious art form, originally dating back to Greece and Rome Period. Ancient panel paintings are now very precious because they are very perishable. And their flaws in portability also made them even harder to preserve. Italy had experienced a great period of panel painting in the 13th century and 14th century when panel paintings were mostly applied to religious works or altarpieces. Panel painting became more popular in the 15th century due to Europe’s increasing wealth. It started to appear on types of furniture such as chests, painted beds, and birth trays. It is the time period the rediscovery of the body of Saint Davino was painted, in 1420. In the early 16th century, canvas gradually substituted panels. Until the 18th century, painting in mediums like panel became very rare, except some cases of making furniture or to decorate coffins. It seems a

tradition to decorate furniture with panel painting in ancient Europe. However, it is not appropriate to decorate a daily-used chest with an image of death, so the front of coffin assumption is more persuasive.

I never regarded and expected myself to be a research person. But in researching Saint Davino, I had a shallow dip into the ocean of discovery. At first, it was very discouraging when I found so limited record of Saint Davino online. I even thought about abandoning him and choosing another art piece. However, there is an ancient Chinese idiom saying: “When mountain chains and rivers seem to block the way ahead, shady willows and brilliant flowers keep one more village out of sight.” I know there are many social scholars now doing their researches by interviewing people. Finding information from living people is always better than from aimlessly scanning web pages or antiquated books. So I broke traditional routines of researching and instead found a funnier and more efficient way from social media. Fortunately, I found Davini family’s Facebook page and got in touch with its descendants. They provided me much useful information about their ancestor S. Davino. I closely looked through all the phases of his life. This static unknown figure on an ancient mysterious panel painting gradually became a living person, more than just a name, in my mind. After all these works, I tasted the fun of researching. I am fascinated by the feeling and I believe I would be more willing in doing research later in my life.



Bibliography

- ❖ Facts about the painting from Acton Database. Provider: Julia Madeline McNeill
- ❖ Historical information about Saint Davino from Armenian Studies Today and Development Perspectives. Provider: Davini Family.

- ❖ History of Panel painting from Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panel_painting