

### *'A Southern Italy Sojourn, 1959'*

Traveling is so common and relatively easy nowadays, it seems like we own the world. For sure we own the cheap flights and digital equipment to document every little detail of our explorations, but does this really translate into true knowledge? Maybe not. Maybe it's limitations in time, means and instruments that are truly enlightening and stimulating. The Fornasetti's come to mind.

In the late spring of 1959 Giulia and Piero Fornasetti went on a vacation journey to Sicily. They took a boat from Livorno, Tuscany, disembarked halfway through in Naples, visited Pompei and then finally reached the island, moving from the rocky and harsh West to the equally rocky but mild East. Palermo, Cefalù, Segesta, Agrigento, Catania, Acireale and Taormina were their main stops.

The journey is documented, for purely private purposes, by a series of as-yet-unpublished b/w pictures shot by Giulia, which make up for two thick albums. According to Barnaba, the couple's only child, who was nine years old at the time and didn't join the parents, Piero, ever the lover of decoration in its most ornate and surreal forms, had the firm intention to find a baroque fountain hidden somewhere in the Sicilian countryside. This sheer, epic desire fueled a whole two-weeks trip, giving it an almost mythological flavor: Piero and Giulia were modern Argonauts in search of their wrought-out Golden Fleece. They had a good time searching, but probably never found what Piero was looking for.

Nevermind.

Piero Fornasetti was a man of many talents: a skilled draughtsman, a superb decorator, an alchemist. He was fascinated by technology, too, but could hardly deal with it. This is why, although intimately an esthetic dictator, he left the task to shoot to his wife. Giulia Fornasetti, on her turn, was not a techno geek. She simply loved taking pictures with her Zeiss Contessa. When the camera broke and she had to buy an automatic one for replacement, in fact, she just stopped.

There is no artistic pomp in Giulia's Sicilian images, which of course does not keep the quality from being less than striking. Most likely, it was the burly Piero who art-directed the whole endeavor: there are even images composed by two different photos taped together along the short side to get a kind of Cinemascope width. This, you have to remember, was happening in the thick of the analogical era, when one had to wait some time to have the roll developed and the photos printed. But that's not the point. The editing is far more surprising. For such a long trip, in fact, Giulia shot relatively few images, all of which are printed in the albums. Imagine, on the contrary, the avalanche of useless crap a trip like this would have generated in the hands of a contemporary explorer. The shift from the analogical to the digital has erased, probably forever, the ability to think before taking a picture. Abundance has become a value, while patience and concentration have been forgotten. Far, far away from the vertigo of accumulation that characterizes today's family snapshots, Giulia Fornasetti worked in reduction, never quite knowing what she would get in the end. Her intimate and familiar work is an involuntary testament to the healing virtues of restraint.

The initial question, at this point, is somehow answered. But there is more. To the eyes of this Sicilian writer, Giulia Fornasetti's images raise in fact a few nostalgic issues. In her pictures the true protagonists are not her, nor her husband, but the places: rocks, squares, gardens, ruins, almost always completely devoid of any human presence. Sicily, after all, is a land of deep solitude and wild extremes, and Giulia understood it perfectly. The island she portrays, however, does not exist anymore. Agrigento's valley of the temples, for instance, has been raped and forever trashed with all kind of illegal buildings, but Giulia had the fantastic and unique opportunity to see it before the debacle happened. Her shots in the cities' squares, on the other hand, show no sign of the ongoing homogenization that's killing the genius loci at this very moment. The patina of time, something Piero deeply loved, is well present everywhere, too, adding another layer of charm. This, sadly, is being erased today as well, thanks to the frenzy of restoration that turns everything, ruins included, into plastic props for a soap opera.

Funnily enough, the same patina of time, now, falls on the pictures. What was a journey to the South turns, while we look at the albums, into a memento of the good old times: a visual journey to a world that, probably, will never be back. A visual ruin, after all.

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Published in *Fantom* - Photographic Quarterly #5, Autumn 2010  
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