



Author Kamin Mohammadi

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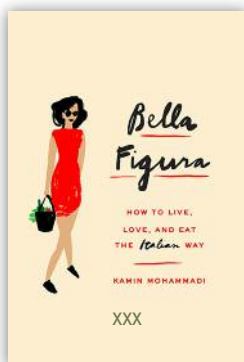
Discovering A Life of Bella Figura

Kamin Mohammadi has lived what sounds like a fairy tale: A decade ago she left her big-city, big-stress career in Manhattan, moved to Florence, met her Mr. Right, and now divides her time between his olive farm in Tuscany and London.

It sounds dreamy — until you know what went into Mohammadi's journey. She arrived in Florence overweight, stressed, unemployed and disillusioned. It took a year in Italy before she got her happily ever after, and she attributes much of her newfound health and happiness to the Italian way of life.

Her new book, *Bella Figura: How to*

Live, Love and Eat the Italian Way, is Kamin Mohammadi's love letter to Italy, Florence and the man who is now her husband, Bernardo Conti.



Each chapter is devoted to a month, its best Italian produce, and a particular Italian word or phrase, from *festina lente* (hurry up slowly) to *sprezzatura* (finesse). Mohammadi laughs when asked if everything really happened in one year.

"That's the best and craziest part!" she says. "And, I knew, at the end of that year, that I had to write about it. It just took me some time to see the significance of each step along the way."

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Casamonti Collection

NEWS, TIPS, DEALS AND EVENTS

Modern Art Comes To Florence

Florence is filled with some of the world's finest Renaissance, Baroque, and medieval art, but until now, the Renaissance city never had a public space to celebrate modern and contemporary art. Art collector *Roberto Casamonti* changed that with the recent opening of the *Roberto Casamonti Collection*, a new museum, in March, mixing modern art with an historic building.

Casamonti bought the *piano nobile* (the first floor) of the 1520s *Palazzo Bartolini Salimbeni*, which is elaborately decorated with gold-leaf ceilings, to house the collection. The three-story, Renaissance-era building overlooks *Piazza Santa Trinità* and has a central courtyard decorated with newly restored *sgraffito* on the walls — a decorative technique in which designs are scratched into the top layers of plaster to reveal a contrasting color underneath.

Florentine Casamonti, 78, is an art dealer and collector who founded *Tornabuoni Art* in 1981. His personal collection comprises more than 5,000 works by Italian masters and internationally renowned artists, such as Andy Warhol and Pablo Picasso.

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16 million people visit Florence each year.

“It’s almost as if my values recalibrate. I just kind of naturally slow down and take a lot of pleasure from just going to the market and saying I’m just going to try this kind of vegetable.”

Dream of Italy Executive Editor
Bethanne Patrick spoke with Mohammadi by phone from her home in Colognole in Tuscany.

Dream of Italy: *What do you miss about your Big New York Job? Anything?*

Kamin Mohammadi:

Yes, I miss my American Express card! I’m sorry if that’s vulgar to say, but it’s true. I could have lovely lunches out with that card. I’ve been really really lucky; I’m back with that company doing a similar job, but on a magazine that comes out just twice a year.



Florence's Duomo

indescribable to come back here and not be on the Tube and not have buildings and noise and rush and pressure and stress — and all the amazing things of London too. I’ve been spoilt. I feel like I can’t really deeply de-stress in London now. I need the big sky.

DOI: *Is it the surroundings, mainly? Or is there something else?*

KM: Right. It’s pace of life as well. As soon as I get back here everything tastes so good.

Whatever my level of stress has been I decompress, back to realizing that the point of a particular day can just be supper! It’s about the pleasure, the very simple life in Italy. In London there are many extremely pleasurable things—the one sunny day a year!—but the pleasures are quite sophisticated.

Just the quality of that blue of the sky in Florence, the palazzo, the Bardini Gardens, things so simple but so potent... It’s almost as if my values recalibrate. I just kind of naturally slow down and take a lot of pleasure from just going to the market and saying “I’m just going to try this

kind of vegetable.”

DOI: *A great deal of Bella Figura seems to focus on slowing down.*

KM: I’m so happy you’ve picked up on this point, because while people can read the book as they want, this is one of the things I wanted to say. We’re kind of killing ourselves, there’s a level of unconsciousness about this. I can’t imagine how overstimulated I was for how long. I had a sort of level of tiredness that couldn’t be cured by even two weeks away. I think back to that whole year, the first nine months, it must have been this nice slow rebalancing of things. While my daily life slowed down, my body grew healthier.

DOI: *What struck you most, in that year, about Italians in general?*

KM: Their sort of gentle lack of ambition, I don’t mean as an insult. It’s not that people are not ambitious, it’s just that the ambitions are slightly different. I sometimes stop

when I’m rushing around London and remember that it doesn’t have to be this way. I think that pace is really brutal, and where’s the space for you if you’re not able to be brutal?



Bernardo Conti

The *Uffizi* Gallery has raised its

DOI: *Did you go to Italy looking for a relationship?*

KM: No! I've always been the kind of woman who always thinks I shouldn't do things because of men. I look back and almost see my move as me floating about, a glob of universal potential. I don't know if I'd sat down and planned if I'd ever have had the guts to do it. It was stepping off a cliff, but it was sort of okay because I didn't think about it that much.

I'd been fired from my job and provided with an apartment in Florence, first for two weeks, then for another month, and so on as my friend Christobel who owned the place saw that I was making a new life for myself in Italy. I didn't have the guts to resign and move. I was just lucky!

DOI: *Besides the apartment, how did you manage to live?*

KM: I had a little bit of money because of the redundancy. The fact that nothing is coming in is quite scary. How long actually could I stay? I hadn't thought it through very thoroughly. That said, all of the things we think are so important that hold us where we are, they disappeared for me. I wasn't married and didn't have kids so I had that freedom for sure. I thought it was really going to be hard to leave everything, but it wasn't. I was really surprised by how freeing it all was for me.

DOI: *Was that due to Florence, or something else?*

KM: I think Florence really helped because people are really nice, but it was mainly the weird freedom of

suddenly realizing that it's not that hard to start again somewhere else. My decision to stay was really based on creativity, about the choices for my writing, and I was able to do that because I had a place to stay—thanks, Christobel!

I didn't have a lot of stress about what was going to happen. At the beginning, I never said "This is where I'm going to stay." But by month eight or so, I said "Why would I go back to London when this exists?" I am very practical, and I could not find an answer to that question!

DOI: *How are love and romance different?*

KM: Romance is lovely, but it's not very real. For stuff to be romantic in that overblown "Aaaahhh! Romance!" way, you need to not know each other very well. I didn't think that at the time when I was having that kind of romantic affair, with a man named Dino, but I know that in retrospect. For proper love, which is not Hollywood at all, it's much more real, it's about the stuff of life, it stops being about did he call me did he like me and becomes about real-life things instead of a slightly self-centered view of yourself. Love can be really messy.

You can get it wrong a lot, and that's okay. Actually the most romantic thing in the world is to have this man with a messy background, Bernie, who wasn't afraid to put his heart on the line again. And with someone, me, whose situation is not fantastically stable.



Kamin and Bernardo

When I met Bernie I was in month ten and that was really important too. My time in Florence was beginning to mature. It was a great time for him to turn up. I was ready for my life in Italy to have more layers.

DOI: *Why make the "bella figura," anyway? Let's talk about how this concept evolved.*

KM: Now that the book is available I've got a few Italian friends who have really questioned it, who have said what are you talking about it? Some people who are Italian hate this

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Christobel and Kamin

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Kathleen A. McCabe
Editor in Chief and Publisher

Executive Editor: Bethanne Patrick
Associate Editor: Elaine Murphy
Design: Kim Leaird
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ticket prices for summer.

concept. You could see it in a negative way, as in “keeping up appearances.” I don’t think that goes deep enough.

I’m not doing a dictionary definition of it in this book. Ultimately, the book’s written for people in America/Canada/UK, not for Italians! But I remember the whole concept of it, being really struck by it when I was dating *Dino*, with his kind of openness about who he was—glamorous, fashion-focused, living for the moment.

I was looking for consistency, but my friend Kicca said don’t look for consistency! In Italy you can have a Fascist politician who goes out with a black model, but he doesn’t see the contradiction

because she’s beautiful. That’s the negative side of bella figura, things being all for show.

DOI: *But you, of course, focus on a different, deeper side.*

KM: Yes, the deeper aspects of bella figura is about the outside, but that’s just the bit you’re showing to the world. For me and for the Italians I met who guided me, the quest for beauty can be very cosmic. What matters when you manifest beauty, whether in just swiping on lipstick or decking yourself out in a designer dress, is that you yourself feel so good you want to show it.

There’s no outer bella figura without inner bella figura. Remember, Italians are very human oriented, very community minded. It almost elevates the seeking of beauty in all its forms into a spiritual practice.

DOI: *Does this have particular meaning for women?*

KM: I’m from a culture, in Iran, where women are imposed on quite a lot. I’m not keen on that thing where you have to put on your lipstick before you leave the house but what I was saying is if you can be bothered to do whatever it is that makes YOU feel amazing, you’ll feel amazing!

If you do what you have to do with a smile on your face instead of a scowl, you only have to be a little more deliberate. And by the way, does wearing that fuchsia lipstick make you smile? Why don’t

you? What are you saving it up for? If you have beautiful shoes, enjoy them!

Find what makes you feel special. Go to that little seed inside you that exists and nurture it and grow it.

If Bella Figura gives you a way into that? *Fantastico*. A sort of mindfulness, I think. I don’t want to use

words that are used to beat us up these days. Consideration. What is that if not mindfulness? That’s how I would like to approach my version of bella figura, because the strict Italian version can be kind of restrictive. Italian society can be very restrictive for women. It’s really great to know the rules so you can decide how you’re going to fit into them. You can acknowledge your mistakes, and maybe make some of your own rules, too.



Bernardo Coniti

View from apartment

DOI: *Have you done that?*

KM: Perhaps therefore I’ll never be as elegant as a true Italian. In the same way that the food aspect is about going back to natural/whole foods, once your body’s had a chance to clear out some of the unbalance, then actually your body too will go back into balance, you reconnect with the rest of your environment.

You can start to have a little bit of confidence back. It makes you a bit less liable to the adman’s ways and all these contradictory messages we all get. What’s healthy is what’s been healthy forever. Do it the Bella Figura way. Sit down with your chocolate cake or whatever it is, enjoy it, give it your attention. Then it will satisfy you.

DOI: *What are some of the things you wish you’d known about Italy before you arrived?*

KM: For one thing: No Italian ever drinks a *cappuccino* after 10 a.m.! Coffee is a stimulant, it’s your fuel, and you don’t

need milky drinks interfering with your appetite or digestion during the day and evening. I was so accustomed to the American/English habit of ordering enormous lattes and carrying them around through commutes and meetings. It’s much more civilized to have a lovely milky coffee as you wake up, then savor an espresso, perhaps with a bit of sugar if you like it, after lunch or during an afternoon slump.

Another thing I wish I’d known:



Market fresh vegetables



Kamin

Italians never drink without eating. You won't find any Italian drinking alone, and where there is a group of Italians drinking, there is a group of Italians eating. The *aperitivo* tradition is very strong, just as eating *tapas* is in Spain—but eating doesn't have to mean heavy, filling fare. A dish of delicious *pinzimonio* (excellent olive oil dressed with lemon juice and pepper, or balsamic vinegar) and some good raw vegetables, maybe some *grissini*, and you've got a very happy hour.

Speaking of groups, I quickly discovered that while you can cook for yourself quite easily with the delicious produce available in Italian markets, my Italian friends made meal preparation into a group activity, too. One person might be cooking onions

while another sliced fennel and then someone else would hand me a can of tomatoes to open. Cooking isn't precious or mysterious in Italy. Almost everyone knows how to make a quick meal that will knock your socks off, and everyone knows how to pitch in and help get food on the table.

DOI: *Did you find yourself eating differently in Italy?*

KM: Absolutely! Yes, there's pasta everywhere, and yes, I ate pasta and I eat pasta and I'll never give it up, but it's not about the huge portions that I once saw and consumed before I lived here. Pasta might be one course, a small course, between an enormous serving of whatever's most fresh from the market and a perfectly cooked

piece of fish or beef. Also, and I have a chapter centered on this recipe: Sometimes all I would want and need for lunch would be a tangle of greens with citrus and aromatics.

Less can be very satisfying when all of the flavors are right, when all of the flavors mingle and delight you. That's why I wanted to include the recipes in this book, by the way, not because I am a food writer or professional cook, but because I want to show people how easy it is to wake up your senses with food as well as with architecture, fashion, art, and conviviality. Considering what you eat and paying attention as you eat it can change many things—and not just your weight. Every season in Italy has its *bella figura* foods and meals.

Kamin's Tips for Florence

On packing:

"Bring your prettiest clothes. You want to make la bella figura, after all!"

On what to keep in mind:

"Gelato has 30% less fat than regular ice cream!"

On Florentines:

"Florentines are charming, fun and friendly with strangers, although if you can learn some Italian, that certainly helps."

On clothes:

"The best place to buy leather gloves in all colors of the rainbow, cashmere lined, is *Madova* on *Via Guicciardini*. For other leather goods, visit the *Scuola del Cuoio* in *Santa Croce Church*. It was started by the monks to teach boys orphaned in the war a trade, and descendants of one of the founding families still makes leather accessories



and runs classes. There's a few places for vin-



tage now, my favorite is the smart

Boutique Nadine on *Lungarno degli Acciaiuoli*."

On day trips:

"You're spoilt for choice! In the winter I love to go to the natural mineral springs of *Petriolo*, off the road to Siena. Hot sulphuric water to soak in, which heals aches and pains and on-coming colds. In the summer, *San Gimignano* is always impressive, although you have to fight the crowds sometimes. *Pietra Santa* is a town famous for its marble and quarries — *Michelangelo* got his stone there and the town is still a magnet for artists. And



it's near the coast for a dip to cool off!"

On secret resources:

"The *Antico Setificio Fiorentino*

has been making silk damasks since 1786 and still use the same looms and methods in a charming factory set in a walled courtyard in the artisan's quarter, *San Frediano*. By the end of the tour, when you see the dazzling silk damasks in the showroom, you have a new appreciation for the beauty of the fabrics used in the Renaissance. It will transform your view of Renaissance art, bringing the paintings alive."

On olive oil:

"For good olive oil, go to a reputable shop and choose a good single estate Tuscan olive oil. Test the viscosity by shaking, it should be thick but with bubbles." Actually, Kamin makes a "Magic Balm" with the olive oil from her farm. You can learn more at www.kamin.co.uk

He selected 250 of those pieces for the Casamonti Collection.

The museum will cycle through two curated exhibits each year: the first focuses on art from the early 1900s through the 1960s, while the second is dedicated to post-1960s works. The first exhibit, on display until May 10, 2019, features works by *Giorgio de Chirico, Picasso, Paul Klee, Umberto Boccioni* and *Lucio Fontana*. It highlights minimalism, futurism, pop art and *arte povera*, an avant-garde movement that began in Italy in the 1960s.

In the exhibit are three paintings and a sculpture by *de Chirico*, as well as a room dedicated to avant-garde European art and featuring *Picasso, Le Corbusier* and *Klee*. There is also a space focusing on the Forma 1 group of Italian artists, who prioritized portraying the form of objects over the reality of them.

The second exhibit, which will open in May 2019, will include pieces by *Keith Haring, Anish Kapoor, Jean-Michel Basquiat* and *Alighiero Boetti*, who was a friend of Casamonti's.

Tornabuoni Art is a commercial gallery that focuses on Italian post-war art and has seven galleries in Europe. Though the museum said there will not be a direct crossover between the Tornabuoni galleries and the Casamonti Collection, Tornabuoni will loan some of its pieces to the museum.

As an art lover, Casamonti believes art should be displayed to the public so that everyone can enjoy it, and hopes the collection will draw Florentines and tourists alike. The Casamonti Collection is definitely free to the public, with a reservation, through



Maxensius. They were the first private botanical gardens in Europe, and contained sculptures, a fountain and exotic plants and birds housed in two aviaries, which the Farnese family imported from the Americas. The Farnese family also had a summer home on the site.

In the 18th century, the gardens fell into disrepair, and in the 20th century archaeologists dug up the grounds to find more ancient ruins.

"Here, in the mid-16th century, after centuries of neglect, the Farnese family built a splendid garden of delights on scenic terraces, an astonishing fusion between culture and nature," the director of the Colosseum archaeological park *Alfonsina Russo* said.

The gardens' new exhibit features multimedia and digital technology for a modern look at the historic site. Tickets are available for 25€, and also include a visit to Palatine Hill.

Farnese Gardens

Via di San Gregorio, 30
Rome
Open daily from 8:30 a.m. to 7:15 p.m.
(39) 06 47497462
Admission: 25€

May 31, 2018, but Casamonti's philosophy of making art accessible hints that it may remain free.

Collezione Roberto Casamonti

Palazzo Bartolini Salimbeni
Piazza Santa Trinita, 1
Florence
(39) 055 602030
www.collezionerobertocasamonti.com
Open Wednesday through Sunday, 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m.
Admission: Free until at least May 31, 2018.
Reservations required 24 hours in advance.

—Elaine Murphy

Historic Roman Gardens Reopen

The Farnese Gardens, on Palatine Hill in Rome, reopened to the public after a 30-year closure and a five-year restoration. The gardens, built in 1550 by *Cardinal Alessandro Farnese* for the prestigious Farnese family, will be open to the public through October 28 as part of a tour and exhibit called *The Palatine and Its Secret Garden*.



The Renaissance terraced gardens, situated among the ancient Roman ruins on Palatine Hill, overlook the Arch of Titus and the Basilica of



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New Museum Dedicated to Casanova

This month a new museum opened in Venice dedicated to its son, *Giacomo Casanova*. While his name might be synonymous with womanizing, the museum founders and staff hope to introduce visitors to a full portrait of a man whose autobiography illuminates *La Serenissima* in the 18th century—and by using the latest in technology to do so.

The Giacomo Casanova Museum and Experience is located on high and dry land, on the *Palazzo Pessaro Papafavo* in the city's mainland *Mestre* neighborhood. Director Andrea Cosentino says the new museum aims to let Casanova “be known in his entirety. . .not only as a lover but also as a man, philosopher and scholar.”

Casanova's “History of My Life” gives a wide-ranging look at all aspects of European high society in his time, from banquets to travel to yes, romance and lovemaking. Many people who know only of the latter might be surprised to discover Casanova's connections to Italian nobility, his diplomatic and financial errands and his literary aspirations, which included a Tuscan-to-Italian translation of Homer's *Iliad*.

However, those who recognize the name “Casanova” as defining sexual license will not be disappointed. As the museum's biography of its main characters states, “Bold and dissolute, hungry for culture, beauty and all that

life could offer, Casanova was looking for pleasure, joyfully and realistically, without sentimental complications.”

The six-room museum includes a bedchamber where shadows recreate a typical seduction, and that installation demonstrates the most remarkable aspect of this new institution: Many of the exhibits utilize virtual reality



offering an experience quite different from traditional museums of art and history. Visitors can read, hear, look at and watch installations that will give them a sense of how Giacomo Casanova both personified and opposed his time and its standards.

Other rooms include a gaming salon, showing the importance of card games in 18th-century Italian society (the *ludus*

was a private language communicated through playing cards), and a writing parlor, where daily correspondence took place—a vital aspect of that society.

Casanova Museum & Experience

Palazzo Pesaro Papafava
Calle de la Racheta, 3764
Venice
(39) 041 2379736
www.casanovamuseum.com

—E.M.

1€ = \$1.22 at press time

Paying To Enter Pantheon

Rome's *Pantheon*, which is currently free to enter, will begin charging a 2€



entry fee on May 2. Part of the proceeds will fund maintenance and restoration projects for the monument, which was built in 126 AD and welcomes more than 7 million tourists per year. Religious services will remain free of charge. The monument will be closed to tourists while religious services are held.

Originally built as a Roman temple, the Pantheon, whose name means “temple of all gods,” has been used as a Christian church since the 7th century. Because it is a place of worship, the Pantheon has not yet charged admission in keeping with tradition of the Roman vicariate.

The Italian culture ministry and Roman diocesan authorities have floated the idea of the entry fee for the past two years, and Culture Minister *Dario Franceschini* officially announced it in December 2017.

—E.M.



th a seminary and a prison.

A Magic Atelier in Venice

Costume and fashion designer *Susanna Lazzaro* is the owner of *Atelier Scatola Magica* in Venice, a “magic box” out of which come extraordinary clothing and accessory creations, each piece unique and authentic made in Italy.

Lazzaro’s sense of and passion for fashion came at an early age: her mother had a tailor’s shop and taught her the ropes; one of her older sisters was a dance teacher, and, when Lazzaro was a child, she recalls, there were dancers at home coming and going all the time. Another sister was a fashion designer, and a fourth one worked in advertising. “Creativity is part of the family’s DNA,” Lazzaro says.

There was a fifth sister, *Elisabetta*, who worked alongside Lazzaro before passing away. That’s when Lazzaro decided to move their tiny, 29-square-foot atelier, which she had opened in 1979, to a different location. After extensive research, she found it in *Cannaregio*, in a former cookie factory dating to the 1920s, which produced one of the most typical Venetian cookies, the *baicolo*.

The new location, which she moved into two years ago, still feels like the “magic box” that inspired the atelier’s name. Arranged on two floors, it is accessed through a lovely garden, *Ca’ Zanardi*, from a quiet *calle*. The bottom floor is where Lazzaro displays her creations, which she makes entirely herself, from start to finish, on the large open space of the upper floor.

For *Carnevale* lovers, a winter visit

“In every item of clothing I make, there’s a piece of me.”

is a feast as the atelier is filled with incredible Carnival costumes, jackets, hats, corsets and accessories. Lazzaro has a thorough knowledge of costume history and can recreate styles from the 1300s to the 1900s, through a careful application of the historic cut and her skills in corsetry, necessary to reproduce the design of clothes of the past.



Other times of the year, the atelier features dance and theater apparel and costumes, as well as Lazzaro’s regular fashion line. “Our fashion is timeless,”

Lazzaro points out. “Our dresses look great now just as they will in 10 years; they’re not tied to trends that change every year.”



To ensure that her clothing will stand the test of time, Lazzaro is strict about the quality of the materials used. She doesn’t use any synthetic materials unless she’s making technical apparel, like tulle. She prefers natural fibers, like wool, cotton, and silk, although they are becoming harder to find as many Italian companies have moved production to China.

“In Italy, we have an incredible fashion heritage, especially when it comes to textile, and we’re throwing it away,” she notes. “I love the Made



Susanna Lazzaro

in Italy and I strive to promote it, but it’s becoming increasingly difficult to find quality stuff.”

With so much of her work involving creativity, doesn’t she ever run out of ideas? “If you’re open to what’s around you, then you’ll be constantly inspired by everything you see,” Lazzaro says. “Leafing through books (I have an enormous collection of books about fashion and historical costumes), going to exhibitions, museums and markets all contribute to fueling my imagination. But it’s also just natural for me: when they ask me for a piece of clothing, a light bulb switches on, and my imagination starts working.”

Far from feeling discouraged from unusual requests, Lazzaro takes them on with enthusiasm. “The more outrageous the request, the more fun I have,” she says, laughing. From fighting angels with wings to goats displaying muscles, to giant tricorns, she has (almost) made it all.

“This isn’t a job that will make me wealthy,” Lazzaro says. “I feel rich inside though, knowing I’ve made a client happy. I love what I do and I believe it shows.”

— Silvia Donati

Atelier Scatola Magica
Cannaregio 413
Venice
(39) 041 975668
www.atelierscatolamagica.com

Venice is divided into 6 districts called *sestieri*.