

The Madonna of the Fire: the Miracle and the origin of the piadina

Forlì's Madonna of the Fire is a large fifteenth-century woodcut almost twenty inches high and sixteen inches wide. Mary is at the center, a crown on her haloed head and a flowered mantle over her shoulder, as she holds Jesus in her right arm and reaches towards him with her left. The Christ child reverses her gesture, reaching above her left hand with his right, and pulling at her neckline with his left.

The print's status as a "religious image" is inflected by certain events in what Igor Kopytoff would call its cultural biography: its recognition and enshrinement as a miracle-working image; the kinetic rituals that moved it around the city; its multiplication and dissemination. Though questions about the print's earliest history— who designed, printed, or hand-colored it, where and when it was made, who first sold or bought it—now cannot be answered, we do know that by early 1428 it was tacked to a wall in a schoolhouse in Forlì, a small city southeast of Bologna, and that the schoolboys, led by their teacher, Lombardino da Ripetrosa, regularly directed their prayers and lauds to it. On 4 February 1428, a terrible fire destroyed the schoolhouse, but the Madonna of the Fire was unharmed in the blaze. A seventeenth-century account tells us that "all the people" of Forlì witnessed this event, which was understood as miraculous, and the woodcut was taken to and enshrined in the city's cathedral. There it became the icon of a flourishing local Marian cult, and, as a fifteenth-century account says, "it makes many miracles." The chapel where the miraculous image is still preserved was built between 1619 and 1636.

Every year Forlì celebrates the miracle with a big feast that spreads throughout the entire downtown becoming a magical day. The scent of anisette along with caramelized sugar permeates the streets where many vendors offer an abundance of the so-called "Piadina of the Madonna of the Fire": a sweet bread with anise aroma and sugar or custard.

In Forlì and Romagna we name piadina anything that has a flattened shape (more famous is the savory *piadina romagnola*). Even the origin of the sweet piadina is tied to a miracle. During a year of famine (between 1650 and 1750) the priest of the Cathedral decided to use the money collected in the offertory on the day of the Madonna of the Fire to buy all the necessary ingredients to make a sweet bread: the piadina of the Madonna of the Fire. It was given to all the residents to help them face the famine and find some joy even in difficult times.

In a city that always faced fervid contentions with the Papal State it is almost a miracle in and of itself that the fest is still celebrated and the recipe of the bread was passed on for so many decades.

PRAYER

Lord, who miraculously saved us
and protected the image of
the Virgin Mother and your beloved Son
from the flames,
allow that through Her merits and intercession
we might be kindled by your Love
and saved from the fires of Hell.
Through Christ, Our Lord.
Amen.

The Madonna of the Fire & the conquest of the North Pole

The conquest of the North Pole performed by Umberto Nobile is a milestone in the history of Arctic exploration. Born January 21, 1885 at Lauro in the Irpinia region, after earning a degree in engineering he reached the rank of General. His interest in the construction of airships led him to design and refine new models, semi rigid and more reliable than those of the time. His fame crossed the borders of Europe, so that on May 10, 1926, along with Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen, aboard the airship "Norge", N-1 completely designed by him, he left Ciampino towards the Arctic. They flew to the North Pole and landed in Alaska. A well-traversed 5,300 km non-stop. The two of them did not actually touch the ground, but hung suspended above it, in the great northern skies, aboard the Norge, the airship that Nobile himself had designed for the mission.

The only form of conquest was the launch towards the frozen icefield of the Italian, Norwegian, and American flags: the flags of the three nations that had participated in the success of the venture.

On April 15, 1928 he attempted again a flight to the North Pole as commander of the airship "Italia". Umberto brought some sacred items in the cabin, among which there were two metal reproductions of the Virgin of the Fire which were sent to him by Luciano de Nardis and the population of Forli for protection in extreme conditions and the adversities of life.

Nobile reached the North Pole for the second time on 23 May 1928. Due to adverse weather conditions, once again he couldn't touch ground and when above the 90th parallel he launched the Italian flag, an image of the Madonna of Forli and a cross blessed by Pope Pius XI.

On the way home, the airship crashed on the pack ice. Ten men, including Nobile with his inseparable dog Titina were left on the ice while the airship took with it the other six crew members destined to disappear forever. The survivors were surrounded by materials such as a radio, food and a small tent. The tent was then painted red to facilitate the sighting of the rescuers and entered into legend as "The Red Tent" (which also inspired a movie where the legend is interpreted by Sean Connery). The survivors miraculously managed to remain alive for seven weeks before the icebreaker Krasin could rescue them on July 12, 1928.

Because of the political disputes that followed the rescue Nobile first moved to Russia where designed the airship USSR W6, then went to America where his ability as designer was highly recognized and appreciated.

He returned to Italy in 1943 where his figure was rehabilitated and on 27 December 1966 was honored with the title of Grande Ufficiale dell'Ordine al Merito della Repubblica Italiana. He died in Rome on 30 July 1978.

The image of the Madonna of the Fire is the sole sacred image of the Madonna to make it to the North Pole and the citizens of Forli take much pride in knowing that their devotion made it to the edge of the world.



The crew of the "Norge" celebrates in Seattle: Umberto Nobile (with dog), right beside him Lincoln Ellsworth and Roald Amundsen (with moustache).



La targhetta metallica della Madonna del Fuoco che accompagnò il comandante Umberto Nobile e il dirigibile Italia nella seconda conquista del Polo Nord nel 1928. Copia originale. Archivi della **Cattedrale di Forlì**.

