

## EUTOPIA CERTIFICATE OF INTERNATIONALISATION PORTFOLIO - FRANCESCA BIGNOTTI

### About my studies

My academic and professional journey has been shaped by a relentless curiosity about the ways in which art reflects and influences cultural identities. I am currently pursuing a Master's degree in History of Art, where I delve into how artistic expressions are deeply intertwined with societal values and historical contexts. My undergraduate studies at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, provided me with a solid foundation in the preservation and interpretation of cultural artifacts. This scholarly work has not only enriched my understanding of art history but has also underscored the importance of preserving cultural heritage for future generations.

During one of the three EUCI seminars, we explored how art and monuments are fundamental to the concept of national identity. This discussion emphasized that these cultural artifacts are not just historical remnants but essential in shaping and reflecting our understanding of nationhood and cultural heritage. Art and monuments provide tangible connections to our past and embody the values and narratives that define a nation. This insight has enriched my appreciation for the role of art in intercultural dialogue and strengthened my commitment to cultural exchange.

In parallel with my academic pursuits, my professional experiences have reinforced my commitment to cultural exchange and international collaboration. As the Head of the Tourism Office and Social Media Manager, I manage social media profiles for museums and cultural events and oversee tourism activities. These roles have offered me invaluable insights into the practical aspects of cultural promotion and the importance of effective communication in fostering intercultural understanding.

The necessity of intercultural engagement and understanding is increasingly evident in our globalized society. The challenges and opportunities presented by cultural diversity require not only individual openness but also institutional support. Entities like EUTOPIA play a crucial role in promoting these relationships, providing platforms for dialogue and collaboration that transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. By facilitating such exchanges, these

institutions help to build bridges between different cultural contexts, fostering mutual respect and shared knowledge. The EUCI program represents an exceptional opportunity to advance these goals. It offers a unique platform for students to engage with diverse perspectives and to develop the skills needed to navigate and contribute to an increasingly interconnected world. For me, participating in this program means more than enhancing my professional credentials, it represents a commitment to actively contributing to the global dialogue on culture and art.

My forthcoming thesis on the presence of African art at the Venice Biennale is a testament to this commitment. The Venice Biennale, as one of the most prestigious international art exhibitions, serves as a significant venue for exploring how African art is represented and perceived on a global stage. By analyzing this representation, I aim to highlight the contributions of African artists to the international art scene and to examine the broader implications of their inclusion for global artistic discourse. This research is intended to promote a more inclusive understanding of art that values diverse cultural expressions.

## About English

Once upon a time, English and I were not on speaking terms (literally). During middle school, English was the one subject that truly gave me a hard time. While I excelled in math, science, history and every other subject, feeling a deep sense of confidence in my abilities, English seemed like an insurmountable obstacle. My middle school teacher even prophesied that I'd never master it.

But life has a way of surprising us, often leading us down paths we never imagined. Since 2018, English has not only become a part of my everyday life, but it has also become a gateway to new worlds. Today, I speak and write in English every single day, both as a social media manager and as the head of the tourism office, organizing and guiding museum tours for foreign visitors.

Thanks to English, I've had the opportunity to travel to several countries, each trip enriching my understanding of the world. I've visited Spain, Germany, Austria, Hungary, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, France, and more. In each of these places, English was the bridge that allowed me to communicate, explore, and fully immerse myself in the local culture. Whether navigating the streets of Prague, ordering food in a quaint café in Paris, or discussing history with a tour guide in Budapest, English has been my constant companion, making these experiences possible.

Of course, my English vocabulary isn't as broad as my Italian one, but overall, I've managed quite well without running into significant challenges. I've been able to communicate effectively in both my professional and personal life. If I had to point out one recurring issue, it might be the misconception some people have about gelato and ice cream. Many assume they're the same thing, but they couldn't be more different! Explaining the difference between the two has become almost a routine part of my interactions with English speakers, but it's a fun way to share a piece of my culture.

But perhaps one of the most rewarding experiences has been the connections I've built through my work. For the past six years, every summer, a lovely couple from Boston visits Lake Garda. They book a guided tour every year, but instead of focusing on the tour itself, we end up spending our time catching up on each other's lives. They ask specifically for me, and we've built a tradition out of our annual meetings. We no longer go through the standard tour; instead, we chat about their son, who is now a professional translator, and I share updates on my own life. It's become a cherished ritual, and they aren't the only ones who return year after year. There are other visitors who come back just to reconnect, and these relationships remind me that the path I've taken is the right one. These bonds, forged through my study and mastery of English, show me that what was once my greatest challenge has become my greatest asset.

It's incredible to think that my studies have allowed me to create such meaningful connections with people from a different continent. It's in moments like these that reaffirm my belief in the power of language, not just as a means of communication, but as a bridge that brings people together, no matter how far apart their worlds may be.

## **My very first English guided tour**

In June 2018, our city had the privilege of hosting the international conference titled *Blessings and Curses in Antiquity*, which took place from June 21 to June 24. This prestigious event drew professors from around the world, coming together to delve into ancient beliefs and practices surrounding blessings and curses. The conference included a variety of seminars, workshops, and presentations, exploring these themes through archaeological and historical lenses. A notable part of this conference was hosted at the Ugo Da Como Foundation, specifically at the Castle of Lonato, one of the key sites within the Foundation's complex.

As an intern at the Fondazione Ugo Da Como, I was tasked with guiding tours of the Castle and of the House-Museum of the Podestà for the conference participants. This role came with its own set of challenges and learning opportunities, especially given that I had been interning for only two weeks before the event and was expected to conduct the tours in English, a language in which I was not entirely fluent. Until that moment, I had never had the chance to engage in an extended conversation in English, especially not with internationally renowned university professors. I had just turned 18, and even though I was the youngest intern, the director of the Foundation selected me to be their guide. As a high school intern in my penultimate year, every action I took was meticulously recorded in a portfolio that would later become part of my "student folder" for the final exam, the Maturità exam, a test dreaded by all Italian students, and one that even adults recall with trepidation. You can imagine the mix of pride at being chosen and the fear of not measuring up.

On the day of the first tour, my anxiety was palpable. As I began to guide the participants through the House-Museum of the Podestà, I was acutely aware of the language barrier and the potential for miscommunication. Despite my preparation, the experience was stressful. I was worried about my ability to convey the significance of the exhibits accurately and respond to questions effectively. One particularly memorable interaction involved a professor from a UK University who displayed a keen interest in a specific artifact related to the local history of the area, the statue of Arnaldo da Brescia. Although this artifact was not directly linked to the conference's main themes or to the museum itself, the professor's detailed questions placed me under considerable pressure. I feared that I might not be able to provide the depth of information he sought. However, with careful consideration and reference to my notes, I managed to address his inquiries satisfactorily. This experience highlighted the importance of thorough preparation and adaptability in addressing unexpected questions.

Another significant moment linked to the one I just explained, involved a Spanish professor that noticed my mounting anxiety during the questioning of the other Professor. She intervened by tactfully guiding her colleague to conclude his questioning, thereby alleviating my stress. Her intervention was a powerful example of empathy and support, demonstrating

the importance of understanding and kindness in professional settings. Her assistance allowed me to focus on delivering the rest of the tour with greater confidence.

During both visits, I had focused on Ugo Da Como's opposition to the Fascist regime and his subsequent resignation from politics, which are significant themes in the House-Museum of the Podestà. At the end of the second tour, another professor, from Germany, suggested that it might be best to avoid discussing Fascism altogether, as it could be too contentious or uncomfortable for some attendees. While I understood the professor's concern, I respectfully disagreed then and continue to do so. Addressing sensitive historical topics with respect for diverse cultural perspectives is crucial, yet we must also uphold historical accuracy. The discussion of Fascism, especially in the context of Ugo Da Como's resistance to the regime, is a vital component of the museum's narrative and historical integrity. It is important to approach these discussions with sensitivity and respect, honoring the complexities of history while confronting the significant topics that shape our shared past.

Reflecting on these experience, it is clear that the conference provided valuable lessons in both personal and professional development. Interacting with a diverse group of scholars highlighted the significance of intercultural communication. Engaging with individuals from various cultural backgrounds required me to adapt my communication style and be sensitive to different expectations and norms. When guiding the tours, discussing sensitive historical periods, such as the Italian Fascist era, required a particularly cautious approach. These topics demanded a careful balance between providing accurate historical context and being sensitive to the emotional and cultural responses of an international audience. Addressing such delicate subjects with respect and clarity was crucial to ensure that the information was conveyed thoughtfully and that participants felt acknowledged and respected. Furthermore, it became clear that different cultures have varying sensitivities regarding historical and political topics. What might be a straightforward discussion in one cultural context could be viewed as highly charged or controversial in another. This experience highlighted the need for heightened awareness and adaptability when dealing with such subjects. Being mindful of these cultural differences is essential in ensuring that discussions are handled with the appropriate degree of sensitivity and respect, fostering an environment where diverse perspectives can be engaged with thoughtfully and constructively.

The experience also reinforced the importance of preparation and confidence. Despite the challenges, being well-prepared allowed me to manage the tours effectively and respond to questions with greater assurance. The positive feedback from participants and the support from colleagues played a crucial role in enhancing my confidence and improving my public speaking skills.

Since that experience, I have conducted hundreds of guided tours in English, engaging with visitors from all over the world. This extensive experience has allowed me to interact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, broadening my understanding of various international perspectives. To better address the needs and viewpoints of my audience, I have studied the history and cultural contexts of different nations. This has enabled me to tailor my tours more effectively, ensuring that the information is presented in a way that is both respectful and relevant to each group. By adapting my approach based on the cultural and historical backgrounds of the visitors, I strive to create a more inclusive and insightful experience for everyone.

Additionally, my role has evolved from an intern to a full-time employee, a transition largely influenced by the positive feedback and compliments I received during the conference. The recognition and encouragement from that period led the museum's management to offer me a permanent position once I finished high school.

## **United Nations Training Centre courses**

Reflecting on my experience with the courses provided by the United Nations Training Centre has profoundly impacted my understanding of global inequalities. As I navigated through the lessons, discussions, and interactions with peers from diverse backgrounds, I found myself constantly confronted with the privileges and freedoms I often take for granted. This realization has deepened my appreciation of the importance of intercultural dialogue and the role education plays in fostering such understanding.

The course on the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Gender Equality* emphasized the interconnectedness of global goals and how gender equality is not just a stand-alone objective but a crucial element for achieving broader sustainability targets. This realization prompted me to reflect on how gender roles and expectations are ingrained in society, often without question. For instance, in many Western societies, gender equality is seen as a given, something that has been largely achieved.

However, this course made me realize that even in these contexts, there are subtler forms of inequality that persist, such as wage gaps, representation in leadership positions, and societal expectations around gender roles. More strikingly, when comparing these insights with the experiences shared by peers from other parts of the world, it became clear that what I might consider progress is still a distant dream for many.

In the *Gender Equality and Education* course, the focus shifted to the critical role education plays in promoting gender equality. This module resonated deeply with me, as it underscored how education, or the lack thereof, can either perpetuate or break cycles of inequality. The stories shared by peers from different countries were particularly eye-opening. For instance, while I have always considered access to education as a fundamental right, others spoke of significant barriers they faced due to their gender, whether it be societal expectations, safety concerns, or lack of resources. These discussions prompted me to reflect on the privileges I enjoy and how these privileges are not universal.

The course *Government Innovation for Social Inclusion of People in Vulnerable Situations*, tied together many of the themes from the previous courses but broadened the scope to include other forms of vulnerability beyond gender. This course highlighted the importance of inclusive governance and innovative policies that address the needs of all citizens, especially those who are often marginalized. Here, intercultural learning played a significant role in shaping my understanding. For instance, discussions with peers from various regions brought to light how different governments approach social inclusion, from policy design to implementation. These exchanges were particularly valuable, as they challenged my assumptions and offered new perspectives on what effective governance looks like in different cultural contexts.



Overall, these courses have been a journey of self-reflection and intercultural learning. The online discussions and forums created a space for engaging with others from different cultural and national backgrounds, offering perspectives I might never have considered. This intercultural interaction was crucial in developing a deeper understanding of global issues and the varied ways they manifest in different contexts. It also highlighted the importance of collaboration across cultures to address these challenges effectively.

I deeply believe in the importance of studying and immersing myself in different cultures, especially when dealing with sensitive issues such as access to education and gender equality. Engaging with these topics not only broadens my understanding of global challenges but also compels me to reflect on the privileges I often take for granted. Recognizing the value of such learning, I eagerly enrolled in a series of courses that focus on these critical issues. My expectations were high, as I sought to gain not just knowledge but also new perspectives on how different cultures navigate these complex topics.

The courses exceeded my expectations by providing a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of gender equality and social inclusion across various cultural contexts. They facilitated meaningful discussions with participants from diverse backgrounds, which enriched my learning experience and challenged my preconceived notions. Through this process, I have come to appreciate the profound impact that education can have on promoting equality and fostering intercultural understanding. This journey has reaffirmed my belief in the necessity of approaching global issues with an open mind and a willingness to learn from others' experiences.

These courses not only enhanced my knowledge of gender equality and social inclusion but also provided an invaluable opportunity to reflect on my own position within these global issues. The realization that many freedoms and privileges I enjoy are not universal has made me more mindful of the need for empathy, understanding, and active participation in advocating for a more equitable world. The intercultural exchanges with fellow students have been instrumental in broadening my perspective and have reinforced the importance of inclusive and culturally sensitive approaches in tackling global challenges.

This experience has been so impactful that I've already enrolled in additional courses to continue deepening my understanding. Moreover, inspired by the knowledge we've gained, a group of us who connected during these courses decided to take our learning a step further. Together, we've signed up for a United Nations volunteer program, where we can put our newly acquired insights into practice. This opportunity to apply what we've learned in real-world contexts not only reinforces the importance of education but also underscores the value of collective action in driving meaningful change.