

December 13, 2024

Eliot Stein on Preserving the World's Cultural Wonders

By Jen Rose Smith

On the Venetian artists' island of Burano, nearly two decades ago, Eliot Stein met the woman who changed his life. Anna, then 90 years old and slight in appearance, wore her long hair looped into a silvery bun. She invited Stein, who was 22 at the time, into her home to see a collection of fine, handworked lace with delicate designs depicting fishermen, overwater bridges, and gondoliers helming slender boats.

Anna was among the last remaining adepts of an exquisite lace-making technique called *punto in aria* ("embroidering the air"), practiced in Venice for centuries. At the time, she explained that machines were taking over Burano lace production, and she worried the tradition would soon die out. While artisans still make lace by hand in Burano, that moment stirred in Stein a lasting awareness of human fragility and resilience. Now a BBC journalist, he's spent the past seven years scouring the globe to find other near-extinct traditions and people like Anna who preserve them.

In his new book, *Custodians of Wonder: Ancient Customs, Profound Traditions, and the Last People Keeping Them Alive*, Stein profiles a woman who makes "threads of God" pasta in Sardinia, Peru's only traditional rope-bridge builder, and eight others – the last remaining caretakers sustaining these culturally significant traditions.

"These cultural custodians remind us how much there still is to discover and invite us to fall back in love with the world," he writes. In a conversation with Virtuoso, Stein reflected on the impact of his awe-inspiring trips and the importance of staying curious.

Experience the Wonder



The Place Firenze

Guests at the 20-room The Place Firenze hotel can visit workshops where artisans continue Florentine traditions such as dying and etching scagliola, a fine plaster that resembles marble. Revenue from the visits supports the hotel's nonprofit foundation, The Place of Wonders, which works to preserve Italian artistic heritage. *Virtuoso travelers receive a \$100 dining credit.*