

# GEMS IN THE JUMBLE

IN THE TANGLED CORNERS OF ITALY'S ANCIENT STREETS, **MASSIMILIANO IOCCO** FINDS BEAUTY NOT IN MONUMENTS, BUT IN THE EVERYDAY LIFE THAT UNFOLDS BETWEEN THEM. BLENDING BOLD BRUSHWORK WITH A JOYFUL DISREGARD FOR CONTROL, HE TRANSFORMS URBAN SCENES INTO PORTALS OF EMOTIONAL CONNECTION—AND A CELEBRATION OF IMPERFECTION.

by Ani Kodjabasheva



The artist recorded Rome's most prosaic architectural elements while capturing the same scene from two different vantage points. **Largo Argentina-Roma I** (watercolor on paper, 12x16), at left, was painted en plein air, while **Largo Argentina-Roma II** (watercolor on paper, 12x16), above, was painted in studio from plein air reference sketches.



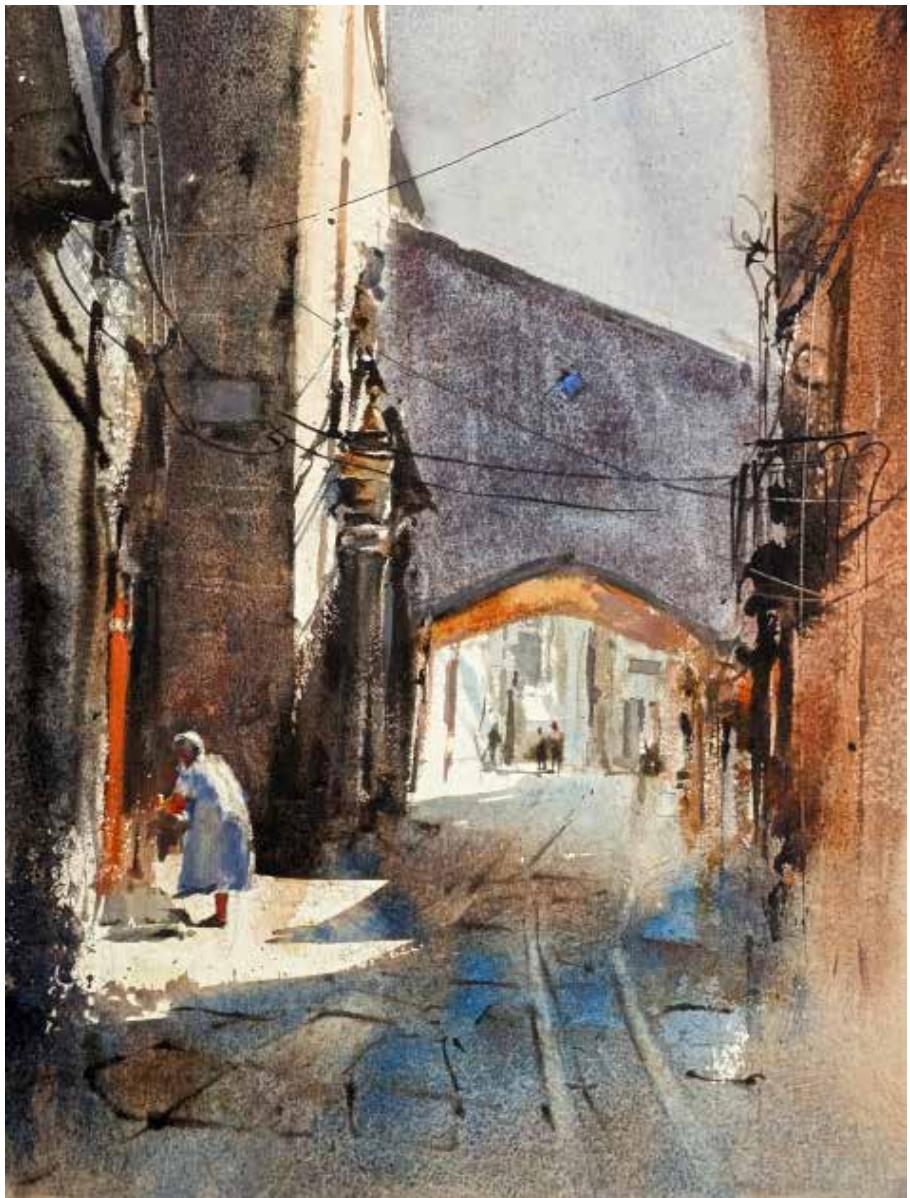
“I’m Roman. I live in Rome,” Massimiliano Iocco states multiple times during our interview, as if that explains everything. It only takes one look at his many cityscapes to see the kinship the artist clearly feels with the places and people of that city—where, he says, “Every corner is good to paint.”

How do you frame a composition while surrounded by thousands of

years of history everywhere you look? Iocco’s answer is to portray life on the street. He works in a tradition, dating back to the 1600s, of using Italy’s monuments and ancient ruins as backdrops to the less grandiose, but more interesting, activity of plazas, courtyards, cafés and markets. “I could paint the Colosseum, of course,” he says, “but that would be a bit boring for me.”

## THE BEAUTY OF IMPERFECTION

What, then, draws his eye? Shadows for one thing. In *Largo Argentina-Roma II* (above), a newspaper kiosk throws a deep shadow onto the foreground as a streetcar advances toward the viewer, moving along a sweep of wires painted in bold brushstrokes. The architecture is there to frame



“The most important rule for me is: Forget control.”

—MASSIMILIANO IOCCO

Cables complement the surface elements of the buildings, such as columns and balconies, to balance out the verticals in *Erice-Sicilia* (watercolor on paper, 16x12). Other than these few details picked out and painted in denser tones, almost all the rest of the composition is rendered in looser washes indicating light and shadow. The painting shows a narrow side street with two spots of sunshine, one in the foreground and one in back. The cables appear to stitch it all together.

the drama of kiosk, streetcar, wires and traffic signs unfolding before us. Buildings are painted sparsely. Light and shadow falling on the plaza are the main event.

On his travels in other Italian cities, Iocco captures similarly idiosyncratic spaces. *Ostuni-Puglia* (opposite) invites viewers into a private courtyard where residential buildings accumulate without rhyme or reason. A staircase in the right foreground appears to lead nowhere; it abuts the building behind it, resting against a second-floor window. Another staircase in the background starts near a corner between two buildings, turns away from the wall toward a landing at mid-height,

then switches direction and turns back toward an opening on the third floor. A silhouetted figure on the landing appears to blend into the wall, as if it's but a shadow on its unevenly stuccoed surface. Add to this the wonky metal bars on one window and the uneven, drooping eaves, and you have a monument to generations of everyday life unfolding between ancient walls.

Time and again, Iocco finds beauty in mundane features of the cityscape and in the ways they interact with more familiar aspects of Italy's heritage. Across multiple paintings, the cables strewn from centuries-old houses—an architectural sin of some southern European cities—are given

center stage, as seen in both *Erice-Sicilia* (above) and *Firenze* (opposite). While they're typically perceived as an eyesore, Iocco uses these elements to define spaces and create direction and dynamism in his paintings.

The artist admits that, in his aesthetic sensibility, he's drawn to imperfection and a measure of disorder. “I'm Roman, and there are so many interesting places in my city because they're ancient and full of history,” he says. “There are a lot of rough surfaces, but in the mess, you can find a gem. For me, if it's not a mess, it's difficult to find something interesting. In my paintings, I include both the mess and the gems.”

## CREATING CONNECTIONS

From this multilayered disorder of the city, how does Iocco choose what to paint? How does he find the gems that lead to a balanced composition? His process begins well before he puts marks on the page—by immersing himself in a place. He first needs to attune his senses to the environment. For example, when he's away from home, the artist prefers to act “not like a tourist, but like a traveler.”

For Iocco, that means establishing a genuine human connection. “We're not machines,” he says. “Before I start painting, I like to feel the life, the light, the culture of a place. I may even need a few days just to get myself artistically centered. The light is different. Sounds are different. Everything is different. So I need a little time. Only then is it possible for me to paint what I feel about a place.”

Even when painting in his home

city of Rome, the artist is observing not only with his eyes, but with all his senses, so he can capture the true spirit of a scene. Over the years, he has developed a singular practice that helps him achieve this—talking to people while he paints. “It's not easy,” he says, “because painting engages the right side of the brain, and talking, the left side. It's like a mental exercise. You have to practice a lot.”

When he does put this principle into practice, Iocco achieves a state of flow. “I don't want to be alone when I paint,” he says. “I want to make connections with people. For me, this is one of the most beautiful things about my work.”

So when he's painting on location, in the city, he doesn't discourage passersby from coming up to ask about his work. “I'm Roman; I live in Rome,” the artist repeats. “When I paint en plein air, I can't be alone because there are so many curious people constantly

coming up to me. I'm trying to paint life in that moment, so talking with people helps me get more information onto the paper.”

Interestingly, the figures in Iocco's paintings, while always there, blend organically into their milieu, instead of the composition focusing on a particular incident. As people mill about squares and sit in cafés, they remain part of the cityscape, on par with architectural features. That's because, for Iocco, even the inanimate parts of the city are essentially human—traces of lives present and past.

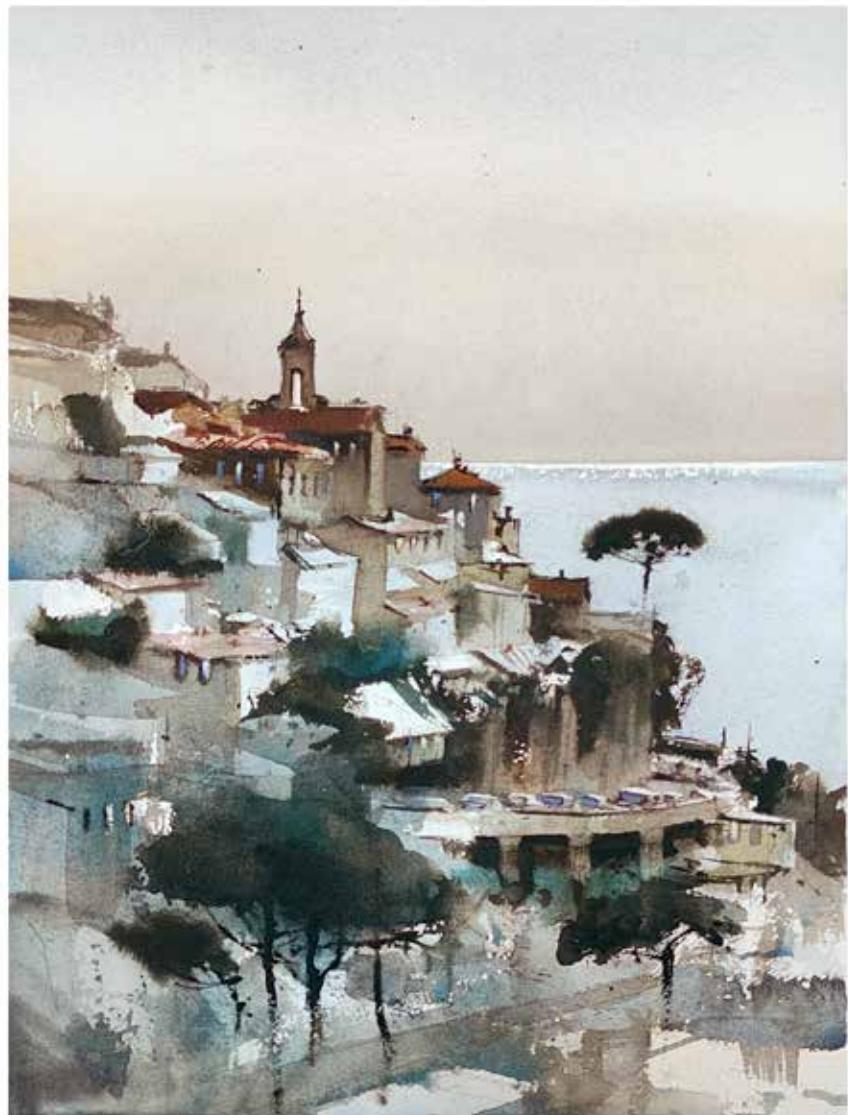
This idea also sustains Iocco's interest in fishing boats in the harbors outside of Rome, as seen in *Fiumicino Darsena* (page 00). “Those boats are a testament to a way of life,” he says. “They show the tangible reality, repeated across centuries, of the fisherman doing his work. Harbors, like buildings and plazas, tell a story that goes beyond any individual.”



In *Firenze* (watercolor on paper, 16x12), drooping cables connect chimneys to eaves to antennas, spanning sun-drenched and shadowy, dilapidated rooftops. Their sagging lines contrast with the soaring form of the world-famous Duomo in the background.



The shadowy corners and staircases in *Ostuni-Puglia* (watercolor on paper, 16x12) contrast with the luminous doorway on the left, which is framed by Doric columns supporting the round arch.



LEFT

**Positano** (watercolor on paper, 16x12) captures a historic hilltop settlement as a unified mass of buildings—clustered cubic volumes with tile roofs and a spire. As an organic part of the town's form, Iocco included the modern road winding around the base of the hill, held up on piers like a viaduct, with cars crawling along.

OPPOSITE

**Fiumicino Darsena**  
(watercolor on paper, 12x16)

*"I don't want to be alone when I paint. I want to make connections with people. To me, this is one of the most beautiful things about my work."*

—MASSIMILIANO IOCCO

Iocco's figures almost always recede into the middle ground, leaving a wide open space at front, a gateway into the composition. The artist speaks at length about the importance of empty or negative space in his paintings. In the same way he invites passersby to chat and influence his painting process, he also invites the viewer in.

He likens the idea to the art of good conversation. "If I tell too much as a painter, it leaves no space for the viewer's thoughts," Iocco says. "If I fill the picture plane with too much detail, it's as if I'm talking and talking—and you're saying, 'Mhm. Sorry, I have to go!' But if I create a connection, I give you a chance to step into my art."

### PLAYING WITH WATER

The sparse or empty spaces in Iocco's watercolors are an exercise in ceding control. Painting in a way that's loose, free-flowing and open to the unforeseen has been the main goal in his development as an artist for more than two decades. "The most important rule for me is: Forget control," he says.

This isn't how he always painted, however. Iocco didn't attend art school, and he originally trained as a draftsman. This was in the time before computer-aided design, when every detail had to be done by hand. Because of this training, perspective comes naturally to him. He views this

exactitude as limiting, though. "I had to find a medium to destroy all those lines," he says.

Iocco started out by applying his draftsman's sense of precision to his art. "Before studying watercolor, I did a lot of drawing—very hyperrealistic drawing," he says. "But, every time I'd finish one of my drawings, I felt it was too precise, too controlled. So there was a moment when I decided to find something to help me lose that control. I knew that watercolor would be the perfect medium because you can't control it—you have to give yourself over to the flow of the water. I try to establish a connection with the water and let myself lose control."

The artist enjoys the way watercolor produces a sense of immediacy, and how that encourages a connection to his surroundings, which, he says "helps my soul."

Even though Iocco still begins his paintings with an underdrawing in pencil, the way he does this is very different from his original training. The drawing is "very, very quick," he says. "I use my pencil like a sword." To demonstrate, he brandishes a pencil—during our video call—in swift, sweeping movements in all directions, causing us both to burst out laughing at his 'swashbuckling' technique.

Though he jokes, Iocco is serious about the importance of his method. "If you use your pencil in this way [holding it close to the tip], you have to draw everything. That's the wrong way for me," he says. "Holding the pencil at the top, like a sword, you have to be very quick and not so precise. I tell my students: If you draw your sketch in this way [holding the pencil close to the tip], you're building a jail for your next brushstroke. But if you draw in this way [holding the pencil near the top], the drawing will be free and your next brushstroke will be free. In this way, like a sword," he repeats, laughing.

Allowing for some amusement within a teachable moment is also part of the artist's practice. He laughs once again when my small child interrupts our conversation. "That's funny. It's life!" he exclaims. The moment seems to encapsulate exactly what it is that the artist is working to achieve in his paintings: the unpredictable nature and local color of our "messy" daily lives.

Still, Iocco insists that he paints for only one reason, and that's his own sense of joy. "Believe me, even though it's my profession now, when I paint, I paint mainly for myself," he says. "Even if I'm doing a workshop or creating a piece for an exhibition, I paint for myself—for my own happiness. You just have to be open to playing with the water. That's all."

*Ani Kodjabasheva is a writer living in Sofia, Bulgaria.*



### *Meet the Artist*

**Massimiliano Iocco** (@massimiliano\_iocco) is an Italian artist living in Rome. He has been painting professionally for the past two decades and is drawn to plein air painting in watercolor, in particular, as it forces him to approach his work intuitively and rapidly. He runs a painting school and conducts watercolor workshops around the world. "The watercolor medium offers endless possibilities," he says. "It is continuous research."



# Celleno

Follow along as Massimiliano locco breaks down his process for painting an urban landscape en plein air.



Reference Photo

## Artist's Toolkit

### SURFACE

- 140-lb. cold-pressed watercolor paper

### BRUSHES

- Chinese weasel brushes in various sizes; No. 2 rigger by Tintoretto; No. 8 round by Borciani e Bonazzi

### PAINTS

- French ultramarine blue, cobalt blue, cerulean, sepia, burnt sienna, raw sienna, raw umber, green gray, verditer, jaune brilliant, ivory black, translucent orange, lavender



## Step 3

Several different colors are used to describe the vegetation, while quick parallel lines indicate the tiled roofs. A few poles supporting electrical lines are added at the lower right. Detailing remains deliberately sparse. The strongest-lit areas, like the road, are still left blank.



## Step 1

locco begins with a “very, very quick” drawing in pencil. He holds the pencil loosely “like a sword.” This prevents him from getting bogged down in details. He also applies some thin washes, leaving the strongest-lit areas blank.



## Step 2

Darker washes are applied to define the areas of the painting with the deepest shadow.



## Final

To finish *Celleno* (watercolor on paper, 12x16), locco adds the mountains in the background using a mix of colors. The right side of the range was softened by toning down the contours with jaune brilliant, which helped convey the presence of the low clouds obscuring the silhouette of distant mountains. **WA**