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## **An Explosion of Beauty:**

### **Art and Philosophy in images: An unforgettable journey into the Italian Renaissance.**

By Maria Vittoria Solomita

Julianne Davidow is a writer and photographer from New York, with a great enterprising spirit and a profound love of art and philosophy. For about ten years she has been traveling regularly to the *Bel Paese*, studying the language and culture, especially the culture of the Venice.

Now she has published a book entitled: *Outer Beauty, Inner Joy: Contemplating the Soul of the Renaissance*, a play on visual images and literary passages. For every picture of a work of Renaissance art, the author associates a thought from a Renaissance writer. Above and beyond the evergreen Petrarch, Leonardo, and Michelangelo, Davidow has chosen quotes by Moderata Fonte and Leone Ebreo, whom some might consider minor authors.

*JD: During the time of the Italian Renaissance, both Fonte and Ebreo were major writers; the Venetian Moderata Fonte published, among other works, The Worth of Women, in which she supports women's intelligence and talent, maintaining their equality and even superiority to men. Leone Ebreo was a Portuguese doctor who had emigrated to Italy. His book, The Philosophy of Love, exerted a great influence on philosophy and culture during the second half of the sixteenth century.*

MVS:

Among the authors you've chosen to represent the thought of the day, there is also a courtesan, Veronica Franco, who took advantage of her 'friendships' for humanitarian goals. It seems her liaison with the French King Henry III gave her the clout to open a shelter for recovering prostitutes. To resort to the use of beauty as a marketing tool is quite modern, don't you think?

*JD: Veronica Franco is a very interesting figure, a kind of modern, independent woman, who lived in a society where women used their beauty and power to advance their careers. She understood how dangerous and terrible the life of a courtesan could be, and consequently she developed a social conscience. She tried to support those who wanted to change their lives.*

MVS:

So therefore it was possible to change one's life. Did writing this book change your own life?

*JD: Yes. It has helped me to find more beauty in the world, even in unlikely places. Additionally, the message transmitted from Renaissance philosophy is a life-affirming one: it can give us courage, hope, and peace. Renaissance philosophers said that each of us has a particular reason to be alive in the world, and that we are connected to all of life, forming part of a unified cosmos.*

MVS:

The subject of philosophy is decisively central to your book, above all, speaking of utilizing the holistic dimension of experience: by way of a profound knowledge of nature, of art, and of love, we can enter into contact with the Divine. How did you, as an American, become fascinated with this kind of subject?

*JD: The Italian Renaissance took a new look at many writings from ancient philosophies, and writers created a syncretic philosophy of their own. When I started reading these fifteenth and sixteenth-century writers, I understood that their philosophy had influenced the art. Because of my love of art and comparative religion, I wanted to learn more.*

MVS: Did you gather all the material on your own, or did you have an advisor during the course of your research?

*JD: In the beginning, I discovered Marsilio Ficino through books by Thomas Moore [author of the best-selling Care of the Soul, who wrote the foreword to Outer Beauty, Inner Joy]. Then I started reading books by Ficino himself. I conducted research for years, above all at the Marciana Library in Venice, personally choosing books. I began to understand how the artists incorporated the philosophy of the times into their creations.*

MVS:

The Renaissance wasn't only an explosion of art and beauty in the Western world. In addition to being a time of such great artists as as Massaccio, Donatello, and Brunelleschi, many thinkers searched for 'truth,' turning to personal study and experience. Do you think it's possible to initiate a renaissance of our own, today?

*JD: There is obviously still great intolerance and violence in the world today, and life on this planet is truly in danger. But I believe that there are many people who desire to work together for peace and for the preservation of nature for the benefit of future generations.*