

Italy: In the Shadow of Time

Photographs by Linda Butler

In the dark corners of Italian ruins, churches, and living rooms, the dead still carry on conversations with the living through the art, architecture, and objects left behind. One can palpably feel the presence of the past, since its broken and vastly altered record lies in the middle of a living culture.

From 1992 through 1996, Linda Butler explored Italy from north to south on seven one-month trips. Since modern Italy is so closely entwined with its past, she hoped to find places where reality and memory were juxtaposed. To prevent the contemporary culture from overwhelming the photographs, she worked in private homes and out-of-the-way towns. In familiar sites in Rome, Pompeii, or Venice, she sought to present an unusual point of view.

Butler used a 4 x 5-inch view camera in making her Italian photographs and worked exclusively from a tripod. Because of her equipment, she lacked the ability to respond quickly to fast-paced situations. Hence Butler used the camera meditatively, observing the subtle changes in a scene as light traveled through it. In this contemplative process, she discovered objects, textures, or reflections that most of us overlook.

The prints that result from the large negatives are detailed and richly textured. Butler tones the images after they are printed. The full-bodied blacks achieved through split toning create an evocative depth to the images. A peach color that seeps into the off-white portions of the photographs produces warmth reminiscent of Italian light.

For the last seventeen years, Butler has worked on large projects that interpret cultural or historical subjects. She focuses on interiors and still lifes to evoke the secrets of the past. One is ushered through her images by light that creeps under doors or falls on objects with a wonderful sensuality. Though people rarely appear in her work, the images exude the warmth of humanity. In the first of these portfolios, she traveled to Shaker communities in the United States, creating the book *Inner Light: The Shaker Legacy*. In the second, she explored Japan, publishing *Rural Japan: Radiance of the Ordinary*.

Butler's work has been exhibited in more than forty one-person shows and is in the collections of many major museums. Her photographs have appeared in exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the Yokohama Museum of Modern Art in Japan, and the Fondazione Querini-Stampalia in Venice. Educated at Antioch College and the University of Michigan, she is largely self-taught in the field of photography. Born in Appleton, Wisconsin, she now lives outside of Cleveland.