

## AUDIO NARRATIVE : TRANSCRIPT

### INTRODUCTION: Female Museum Voice

You are now standing in the church of Santa Chiara. Built in the 1490s this is the only Italian Renaissance chapel outside of Italy. The chancel chapel came from a Florentine convent that was home to the Franciscan order of nuns known as the Poor Clares.

The fifteenth century was a time of dramatic change, Florence was one of Europe's leading industrial cities and arguably the birthplace of early capitalism. It was common practice during this time for unmarried women, in elite society, to enter convents. By 1552 around 1 in 8 Florentine women lived in religious community. This unprecedented concentration of highly educated women transformed convents into large civic institutions with great social and political influence. However, nuns and nunneries became essential sources of labour for the booming textile industry, open to exploitation by Florentine merchants, their influence for the good was compromised. 500 years later we should not be able to draw comparisons. However, hypercapitalism is stretching the very fabric of society to breaking point. Women continue to be silenced and knowledge is no longer valued. Every form of human labour is expendable and exploitable. Those at the top take the most, while women are paid the least. This story proposes a revolution in human awareness, a breakthrough in connection, a rip in the continuum; where the dimensions of time can be crossed and parallel universes collide.

### NUNS NARRATIVE : Female Italian Voice

We each found our way to the convent and for many it was our only choice; some to escape marriage and the social restrictions placed upon us, some were sent with large dowries so that our daily prayers would bring prosperity and the assurance of heaven to families, some of us were deemed too ugly, feisty, hysterical, too assertive or clever to be tamed by the demons of patriarchy and others were simply thought of, as no use. We chose a simple life of few physical comforts but rich in contemplation, routine and work. Cloistered we had no distractions and soon a harmony came about, a camaraderie born of doing things together. We found rhythms in the repetitive work we undertook and a sense of understanding spread between us, without the need of words.

Our speciality was spinning threads and weaving cloth, first flax, then silk and finally metallic. It was while working with these metal threads that we found our thoughts were able to pass from our hands to the thread. Deep in thought, our collective labour became collective knowledge, shedding light on ways of the universe still no man understands.

Ours was a hidden world of observance, our presence always in shadow, and without direct countenance. Only from behind grills, could we see those outside our cloister.

Outside the convent the greediest of merchants wanted gold thread made by the cheapest of means. Our hours of practice had turned our threads into the most valued for their quality but we were poor and the convent needed to sustain itself. Each of us toiled diligently working the sharp strips of metal to make the finest of threads. The profits were so great that soon the merchants persuaded all the convents to make their gold threads. We were the trustworthy and reliable workers that could be paid the least. We did not mind the hard work but with it came the merchants and their men; the silk dealers and entrepreneurs, the Goldbeaters (battilori), the scissors masters (forbicciaio) and many others.



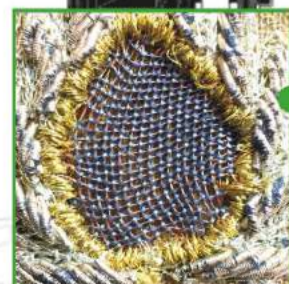
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We were no longer safe in our cloistered spaces, we could not go out into the world but the city's profiteers were free to enter ours. The civic authorities flagrantly violated church decrees and threatened the very idea of female enclosure.

Distracted by the many intrusions on our silence, our thoughts could no longer be shared. Our hands became speaking instruments, we gestured to each other the thoughts we could share, while the external world encroached on ours

The intruders observed our hands and relayed what they had seen to their masters. The masters, intrigued by the mysteries of our hands, wanted to know more and had carvers copy our gestures into stone.

People began to notice the gesturing statues and gossip spread about their meaning. The authorities, in fear of what they did not understand, ordered all hands be removed.

Afraid that this might draw more attention to our message and our gestures, the removal of hands was buried by the distraction of removing other body parts. The Pope ordered the mass castration of public statues to rid them of male nudity.

When the merchants had exhausted the supply of cheap labour they had found in our convents, they still wanted more and so moved on to the Convertites (Houses of Reformed Prostitutes), where women were equally powerless against exploitation.

We needed other ways to communicate. We took our threads and stitched them into the backs of the outermost robes of priests (the chasubles) so that, as they moved freely, from convent to convent, they would unknowingly take our coded messages with them. It took many years to learn a method of stitch that could carry our message.

Those of us with the youngest eyes became the **Readers**. They carried small magnifying glasses at the end of their beads. Their task was to read the stitched codes. The **Measurers** were entrusted with the decision of where each code started and stopped, she knew how to unpick the stitches and connect the dots.

The **Elders**, those most sensitive to time, understood the interlocking forms and how to build our network in loop-space, allowing us to pass back and forward in time, and share the mysteries of transubstantiated knowledge.

Our history has been buried in dusty archives, no one knows of the advances we made through collective thought. Men have tried to copy our methods of passing knowledge into metal thread but their magnetic cores only mark the difference between one state and another. When really, the threads are capable of passing in all directions and all at once, across time and space.



It is time to learn how to form environments that encourage openness and collective endeavor, to rid ourselves of systems that diminish us.