Flowers of Battle

Italian Martial Arts at the Birth of the Renaissance
The Arts of Mars

- Three books that never were: “Great English Recipes”, “The Big Book of German Humor”, “1000 Italian Military Victories”
- Today, people associate “martial arts” with Asian countries and the modern sport of “Mixed Martial Arts”
- The term “martial arts” literally means the “Art of Mars”, the Roman god of war.
- European countries produced a vast collection of fighting arts with and without weapons that are the equal of anything found in Asia.
- Italy was the country that revolutionized the art of the sword, and Italian swordsmen were famous for their skills for 500 years.
- Fiore dei Liberi was one such swordsman.
A Fractured Mosaic: 
Italy in the Late 14th and Early 15th Centuries

- After the death of Charlemagne and the fall of the Kingdom of the Lombards, Italy divided into three main political regions:
  - the Kingdom of Naples in the south,
  - Rome and the Papal territories in central Italy
  - a patchwork of independent city-states throughout central and northern Italy, dominated by Milan, Venice, Florence, Genoa and Sienna

- This created a culture of constant political and civil strife, dominated by tensions between the Imperial (Ghibellines) and Papal (Guelph) factions.
- Even within these factions, the individual cities competed for lucrative trade routes to the orient, particularly control of the silk, spice and dye trade, and dominance of shipping and banking throughout the Mediterranean.
War Italian Style: Italy c.1400

- The feuds between the Italian factions grew worse throughout the 14th century.
- Plague ravaged the cities, and left Sienna vastly depopulated. Florence took the opportunity to send its mercenary armies against the city and reduce it to a client.
- The ambitious Visconti family of Milan conquered most of Lombardy and brought it under their control. Giangaleazzo Visconti had the Emperor declare him a duke, but harbored the ambition of becoming the first king of a unified Italy since the fall of Rome.
- The merchant princes of Florence and Venice increasingly turned to mercenary armies, called condottieri (from condotta – “contract”) to fight their wars.
- The profession of condottiero became so lucrative that not only commoners, but knights, even landed lords, took up the profession.
- The ongoing feuds and constant change of allegiance meant that there was a perpetual need for trained fighting men, and teachers of the martial arts.
- Fiore dei Liberi was just such a man.
Fiore dei Liberi (“Flower of the Free”), lived c. 1350 – 1420.

Born in Premariacco near Cividale del Friuli to an old noble family.

Friuli was a crossroads between Venetto and Austria and fiercely independent, known as hotbed of swordsmen and fencing masters.

Fiore learned combat arts from a young age and tells us that he studied with men of many nations, at home and in his wanderings.

1383: returned to Friuli during a civil war and served under a famous commander, Frederigo da Savorgnan involving the defense of the city of Udine, commanding its crossbowmen and ballistas. Referred to as “Seignuer Fiore dei Liberi, schermitore”.

Udine prevailed, and dei Liberi must have played some notable role in its defense; to this day there is street in Udine named for him.

1384: assigned by Savorgnan to be a “rough rider”, traveling the countryside around Gemona restoring order.

1385: the Friulian civil war over, Fiore returns to the role of a wandering condottiero, and begins to gain fame as a martial arts teacher.
Fiore his art of Many and many times many Signori, Knights, and Squires have asked to learn from the aforementioned fighting and of combat in the lists fought to the bitter end.

- The details of Fiore’s life in this period are lost, but the names of the students he trained, and the feats of arms they performed, are not. Although their ranks, nationality and pedigrees varied widely, all were condottieri. Many gained great fame and wealth; few lived to old age.
- 1387: Fiore is in Pavia to oversee a duel fought by his student Lancilotto de Becharia.
- 1395: He is in Padua for a duel fought with spears between his student, Galeazzo da Montova and Marshal Boucicault of France.
- 1399: Returns to Pavia to serve as fencing instructor for Azzone for the second time.
- Sometime between 1400 – 1408 enters the service of Niccolo d’Este III
Professional Rivalry with an Edge (or two, plus a point)...

And I was especially wary of other masters and their scholars. And through envy, these masters challenged me to play with sharp swords in arming doublets, without other armour but for a pair of chamois gloves. And I endured this all because I had not wished to practice with them, nor to teach them anything of my art. And five times I was required to undergo this ordeal; and thus five times for my honor I was compelled to play in strange places, without family and without friends, and without hope in anything but in God, in the Art, in me, Fiore, and in my sword. And by the grace of God, I, Fiore, have always come away with honor and without injury to my body.

Fiore dei Liberi
Old Money and New Ambitions: the d’Este Family, Rulers of Ferrara and Modena

- D’Este were (and still are!) a very old noble family, dating to the 9th century, who were entering the height of their power in the late 14th century.
- Made papal vicars in 1332
- Held Ferrara from the 13th to 16th century
- Throughout the 14th and 15th centuries also controlled, at various times, Regio, Parma, Modena,
- Niccolo’s father founded the University of Ferrara in 1391.
- D’Este were staunch enemies of the Visconti of Milan until 1404, and leaders of the Papal forces against Milan.
Man of Action: Niccolò d’Este III, Marquis of Ferrara (1383 – 1441)

- Fiore’s final patron, and to whom the “Flower of Battle” is dedicated.
- Inherited Ferrara as an adolescent and was promptly the victim of an assassination attempt – by his uncle.
- During his teens survived three more assassination attempts – all by rival factions of the d’Este family.
- 1399: assumes rule in his own name and has his “coming out” by fighting in a passage at arms where holds the field against 12 swordsmen in succession, the travels to three different jousts around Italy, winning them all.
- Continued the family tradition as Captain General of the Papacy, but also earned additional income as a condottiero for other cities, particularly Venice.
- By 1409 has applied the lessons of his youth, adding Reggio and Parma to his lands through a combination of conquest, clever politics and assassination.
Man of Passion: Niccolo d’Este III, Marquis of Ferrara (1383 – 1441)

- Known as a patron of the arts
- One of the first “grand patrons” of the Renaissance, made his court in Ferrara a center of commerce, learning and arts and letters, attracting some of the most famous poets, musicians and painters of the time.
- Greatly expanded the University and its library, particularly with Latin and Greek works by ancient authors.
- Traveled incognito through Italy, Greece and the Holy Land with a group of household knights…collecting rare books and art.
- Equally famed through Italy for his love of women and his torrid, tumultuous affairs.
- Fathered numerous bastards, leading to the rhyme: *On both sides of the Po, all are sons of Niccolò*
- The Parasina Affair.
Il Fior di Battaglia
(The Flower of Battle)

- Composed in 1409 over a period of 6 mos.
- Fiore tells us it is the culmination of 40 years of training, containing only what he has found safest and best.
- Four distinct copies of the work survive:
  - MS Ludwig XV 13, J.Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles
  - MS 383, Morgan Library, New York
  - Pisani-Dossi MS, still in the family private collection. Also in a 1902 facsimile and edition by Francesco Novati.
  - MS Latin 11269, Bibliothèque nationale de France

- All four surviving manuscripts share common traits and may derive from the original copy presented to Niccolo d’Este.
Flower of Battle Prologue

• Introduces Fiore, son of Sir Benedetto, of the noble house of the Patriarchate of Aquileia.
• Describes his quest to master armizare (the “art of arms”) over 40 years, and the high cost he paid.
• Lists his famous students.
• Describes his five duels with rival masters.
• Outlines the organization of the manuscript.
• Describes his book’s teaching methodology.
• Ends with the eight foundational requirements of wrestling and its four guards, which are the basis of all combat.
Il Segno: the Sign of the Sword

- Segno ("sign" or "symbol") is a mnemonic diagram, denoting the qualities of a good martial artist.
- The four symbolic animals representing each virtue are linked to the idea of medieval thought.
- Fortitudo (Strength) – Elephant – South – Earth – Aegypt
- Celeritas (Speed) – Tiger – West – Water – Okeanus
- Prudentia (Prudence) – Lynx – North – Air – Hyperborea
- Audatia (Courage) – Lion – East – Fire – Jerusalem/Eden
The Eight Requirements of Abrazare

- Strength
- Quickness
- Knowledge of Pres (Grips or Grappling)
- Knowledge of Roture (breaking arms and legs)
- Knowledge of Ligadure (Joint locks and controls)
- Knowledge of Ferrire (Strikes)
- Knowledge of Dislogadure (Dislocating arms and legs)
- Knowledge of Throws
Manuscript organized into inter-related sections covering:

- Abrazare
- Dagger
- Dagger vs Sword
- Sword in One Hand
Manuscript organized into inter-related sections covering:

Sword in Armor

Axe

Lance

Sword vs Lance, More
“Oh My Crowns and Garters”: How Fiore taught

- “Crowned Masters” introduce a concept.
- “Scholars” wearing gold garters, show how to use that concept.
- “Counter Masters” wearing a crown and garter show how to defeat the techniques of the scholars.
First Master: Guards and Attacks
Second Master: Remedies an Attack
Third Master: Counters an Attack
Fourth Master: Counters the Counter
K.I.S.S:
It is all one, integrated system!