

## Colby Alums and Friends Explore Sicily's History, Culture & Cuisine



*Professor Plesch with Brother Marco & Sicily Tour Group at Santuario Santa Lucia al Sepolcro, Syracuse*

Led by Art Department Professor and Chair Véronique Plesch, a group of 20 Colby-connected people, including alums from the Classes of 1970 through 1986, joined in the equivalent of a Jan Plan for alumni, a 13-day trip Professor Plesch titled *Sicily, Crossroads of Cultures: Art, Architecture & Cuisine*. The trip came into being after Véronique was approached by Bruce Drouin '74 about leading a trip as a pre-50<sup>th</sup> reunion activity for members of his class. Bruce and his wife Janet Hansen '75 had befriended Véronique while enjoying an art, history and cuisine-focused trip she led to Northern Italy back in 2017. It turned out Véronique had a Sicily itinerary mostly mapped out in her head following her own extended visit there pre-Covid. She enthusiastically embraced the idea of becoming a tour guide and lecturer once again, and the trip was put together with the organizational help of EOS Study Tours.

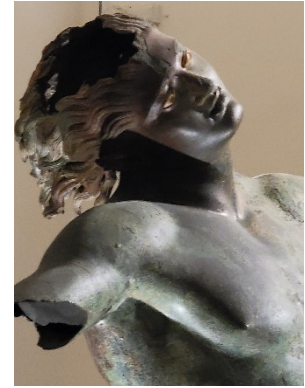
The trip entailed a near-circumnavigation of the island of Sicily to explore its many treasures and extraordinary range of cultures. A geographical crossroads, Sicily's inhabitation can be traced back to 8,000 BCE and its successive cultures and artistic styles include: Phoenician, ancient Greek and Roman, Jewish, Byzantine, Muslim, Norman, Romanesque, Gothic, Mannerist, Baroque—the list goes on! In her introductory lecture, Professor Plesch compared Sicily to a “palimpsest,” typically thought of as a reused vellum manuscript overwritten in a later age but still showing traces of the original writing. In more general terms, a palimpsest can be defined as something reused or altered but still bearing visible traces of its earlier form. Sicily was “reused” many times by successive waves of invading cultures, and indeed inherits and harbors traces of each one, which the tour group set out to explore and experience. Highlights of the trip included: the Temple of Hera in Agrigento's Valley of the Temples—a Greek temple rivaling the Parthenon; the Roman mosaics preserved at the UNESCO World Heritage Site of the Villa Romana del Casale in Piazza Armerina; the Byzantine-influenced Norman church chapel mosaics at Palazzo dei Normanni in Palermo and seeing the Greek bronze statue “*the Dancing Satyr*” and hearing about the statue's discovery story directly from fishing boat Captain Francesco Ciccio who found it at sea. To balance out the antiquities, there were also visits to the works of 20<sup>th</sup>-century artist Renato Guttuso and the monumental, site-specific, outdoor art installations in the beautiful Fiumara d'Arte area near Cefalù.



*Temple of Hera*



*Royal Chapel, Palazzo dei Normanni*



*The Dancing Satyr*

No trip with Véronique Plesch would be complete without visiting a work or two by her favorite 17<sup>th</sup>-century artist, Caravaggio, which the tour group accomplished by viewing the *Burial of St. Lucy* in the Santuario Santa Lucia al Sepolcro in Siracusa and the *Nativity with St. Francis and St. Lawrence* at the Baroque Oratory of San Lorenzo in Palermo. Another Véro requirement is a winery visit, which the group did in Noto, enthusiastically sampling the wines there—and at many lunches and dinners—made from the native Nero d’Avola and Catarratto grapes. Visits to an artisanal chocolate maker and to a hillside olive, orange and almond tree farm and artisanal olive oil manufacturer were also trip highlights that ensured everyone’s baggage heading home weighed more than on arrival. Interspersed with the antiquities and the specialty edibles came the food, lots of it featuring the bounties of the surrounding sea and local agricultural specialties such as eggplant, artichokes and, of course, pasta and olives. It was a good thing that the tour included a lot of walking and step climbing to help offset the calorie intake.

At the farewell group dinner on January 30<sup>th</sup>, there was much praise voiced for the just-completed shared experience in terms of both group bonding (bolstered by the shared Colby connections) and things seen, done, and learned. Several participants declared it “the trip of a lifetime.” There was a clamor for another trip to be put together soon, perhaps during Véronique’s next sabbatical. The Sicily trip participants will be first in line to sign-up should another Professor Plesch-led trip get organized.