

The Marche Town Where Beauty is the Real Beast



Mirko Martinelli and Gianni Aluigi

Piobbico — population 2,020 — is a tiny town with a big claim to fame as the “world capital of ugly people.” If it sounds bleak, it’s anything but.

By Mary Gray

Plenty of people say beauty is only skin deep, but for Marche local Gianni Aluigi and thousands of like-minded comrades across the world, it's a form of *schiavitù* — slavery.

Nicknamed *La Belva* ("The Beast"), Gianni is the longtime president of the Club dei Brutti, known in English as the World Association of Ugly People and founded 145 years ago in tiny Piobbico, near Monte Nerone. Though it began as a marriage agency for townspeople whose economically inconvenient singledom was attributed, fairly or not, to their physical appearances, the club has since evolved into something more like a spiritual tribe — and a local claim to fame. Even the welcome sign at the edge of Piobbico bears the club's slogan: *La bruttezza è 'na virtù, la bellezza è schiavitù* — "Ugliness is a virtue; beauty is slavery" — and proclaims the town "world capital of the ugly."

Piobbico leans hardest into this title during the first weekend of September each year, when it hosts the "Festival of the Ugly," which runs concurrently with a local food fair. Traditionally, a "parade of brutes" takes to the streets while drinkers toast with "Bruttini" cocktails (a ruder riff on the Bellini). Rotating charities and non-profit associations are given a platform throughout the event.

Ceremonial high points are the naming of a new president (spoiler: it's nearly always Gianni) and the awarding of the "No-*Bel*" prize (a play on "No-Beautiful"), recognizing someone who has worked to defend social minority groups or to eliminate violence.

THE BEAUTY IN BRUTTEZZA

"No-*Bel*" notwithstanding, the club is less about demonizing beautiful people and more about rejecting the idea of giving one's life over to the arbitrary standards assigned by society. That's the *schiavitù* piece of their slogan.

"You can become enslaved by something that ultimately doesn't last long and won't give you much satisfaction in life," Gianni says. "I mean, how long can a model work? Ten years? But life goes on for up to a hundred."

Given that appearance-related anguish is all but banned here in Piobbico, one would think that such a liberated population could survive even longer. But one of the town's most beloved residents, Gianni's predecessor and dear friend Telesforo "Lelè" Iacobelli, died at just 73. As Gianni tells it, Telesforo is the one to credit for cementing the club's social philosophy and raising Piobbico's profile on the international stage.

In 1979, Telesforo was a guest on Rai 2's *Portobello* program for a segment dedicated to people looking for their soul mates. (At the time, he'd already been married to his wife Anna for several years. In one *BBC* story, Telesforo said joining the club was what first helped him find the confidence to talk to women.)

After that *Portobello* broadcast, attention toward the club (and Piobbico and Marche with it) skyrocketed. Telesforo was inundated with letters from “people who saw the light in us,” as Gianni describes them, and who wanted to become members or affiliates. Today, there are several dozen known chapters across Europe and the Americas, and some 37,000 registered members worldwide.

“PRETTY SOON NOW, YOU’RE GONNA GET OLDER”

Prima o poi, verrai con noi. (“Sooner or later, you’re coming with us.”) That’s another of the group’s maxims, and one that Telesforo helped establish.

“Eventually, you’ll join us. Even you, if you’re beautiful,” Gianni laughs over the phone.

It’s perhaps no coincidence that the organization has caught the attention



Piobbico



of many models, Miss Universe contestants and former Miss Italia winners, like the 1979 titleholder Cinzia De Ponti, who was the first beauty queen to officially join. Though Telesforo was an outspoken critic of such pageants, he went on to become friends with some of their “queens.”

Many of today’s club members, like local restaurateur Mirko Martinelli, don’t see anything contradictory about the beauties joining the beasts. Mirko, who unseated Gianni as club president for a single calendar year back in 2022 — an ambition he admits he’d held “for a long time” — speaks fondly of the various “Misses” of the club and reiterates that it’s appearance-based discrimination and pain that the group is really fighting against, not beauty itself.

“Everyone is welcome in the Club dei Brutti, not just *brutti*,” Mirko adds.

His words track with those of the rest of the group. One post on the club’s Facebook profile proclaims it, in English, a “state of mind.”

So what does “*bruttezza* as a virtue” actually mean in Piobbico? If even certified beauties can waddle with the self-identified ugly ducklings, is there any point to the club at all?

For Gianni, there is. *Bruttezza* becomes a

virtue, he says, when a person who’s “fighting to stay afloat brings the best that they have in their soul and relies on all their other gifts.” The club is there to lift up anyone who’s ever felt alone in their struggle to do just that.

BEAUTY THAT DOESN’T DISCRIMINATE

It’s not lost on members that they’re in, well, *Italy*, the home of not only Miss Italia but of *bella figura* and Renaissance beauty canons. That the Club dei Brutti concept took flight here seems more inevitable than it does surprising.

But the club’s rejection of those things doesn’t preclude enjoying landscapes, natural marvels, artwork and monuments. (Gianni’s favorite in Marche is the Brancaloni Castle.)

And Piobbico, for all its emphasis on ugliness, is objectively beautiful: “We’ve got a magnificent mountain that’s perfect for hiking, canyoning, for any kind of activity imaginable,” Gianni says.

This is the sort of beauty *La Belva* likes to see embraced. “This kind of beauty is good for everyone, even the brutes! The beauty that defines Italy in each of its small towns is a triumph. It’s good for everyone’s hearts,” he continues. Spoken like the gentlest of beasts.