

Europe

A Sicilian Photographer of the Mafia and Her ‘Archive of Blood’

New York Times by [ELISABETTA POVOLEDO](#) July 7, 2017



Letizia Battaglia, 82, at her apartment in Palermo, Italy. Her pictures of the Mafia’s cruel campaign for control are valued as historical points of reference and as deeply moving slices of Sicilian life. Credit Gianni Cipriano for The New York Times

PALERMO, Italy — They are by turns gruesome, haunting, tragic and, often, achingly poetic. As a collective, the photographs offer an unflinching pictorial tapestry of recent Sicilian history — its people, its poverty, its folklore and, above all, its decades-long forced dalliance with the Mafia, or Cosa Nostra.

What may have been lost in the gradual transition of these black and white images from the front pages of Palermo’s *L’Ora* to a host of museums is that they were shot by Letizia Battaglia, a Sicilian woman — remarkable in itself — during one of the bloodiest crime sprees in Italy’s recent history.

Their power lies in their immediacy. As Mafia rivals waged a cruel and pitiless campaign for control of the island beginning in the late 1970s, Ms. Battaglia was unflinchingly present, unwilling to look away.

“Sometimes I look at my photos and say, ‘I was in there.’ Three people murdered. I look at them and think, ‘What a horror, three people murdered,’” Ms. Battaglia said on a recent morning in her downtown Palermo apartment. There, large-format prints of several photographs — including one of a triple homicide — leaned haphazardly against a couch, waiting to be shipped to yet another exhibit. “I can’t accept that anymore,” she said, genuine sorrow in her voice.

In years when the word Mafia was barely whispered in public, Ms. Battaglia, now 82, was chronicling its brutal activities for all to witness. In 1979, she boldly set up oversize photographs of Mafia victims in the main square of Corleone, the domain of Sicily’s most notorious and ruthless Mafia clan. She was aware of the potential consequences.

“I did exhibits against the Mafia, in Palermo, on the streets, in Corleone. I was afraid,” she conceded. “There, I said it, I was afraid. It was true.”

But fear did not stop her. Nor did the threats she received by phone. The spits that followed when she walked on the streets, the smashed cameras. Once, she received an anonymous typewritten letter advising her to leave Palermo forever, “because your sentence has already been decreed.”

“At the time, I was offered a security detail but I refused it because I would have lost my freedom,” she said. “It was too important. I felt the duty to continue, the duty not to be afraid.”

“It turned out all right in the end because they didn’t kill me,” she said matter-of-factly.

Today, those images have become a part of Italy’s cultural heritage. They have transcended their journalistic origins to reappear in museum exhibitions as well as deluxe [art books](#). They are valued both as historical points of reference and as deeply moving — or outright shocking — slices of Sicilian life captured by an especially keen-eyed observer.

“Letizia’s story is the story of our country, secured in strong images loaded with tension, loaded with pain, and full of poetry,” said Margherita Guccione, who recently was a curator for a [major retrospective of Ms. Battaglia](#)’s photos at Maxxi, Italy’s national museum for contemporary art, with Bartolomeo Pietromarchi and Paolo Falcone. The images were culled from Ms. Battaglia’s personal archives of some 600,000 photographs.

Paulo von Vacano, whose Rome-based publishing house has issued two oversize books about “one of the greatest street photographers of all time,” described Ms. Battaglia as a “hero of our times.”

“I never thought of myself as an artist, and I am still astonished to enter a museum and see my work,” Ms. Battaglia said.

“When I took the photos, no one said to me, ‘Brava,’ no one,” she said. She had just been doing her job, no small achievement for a Sicilian woman working in a predominantly male world.

“Letizia was a woman who was photographing the Mafia during the period of the bloodiest years of its history, destroying taboos. This makes her a figure that goes beyond being a photographer,” said Mr. Falcone, a close collaborator who last year curated “Anthology,” a major retrospective of her works for the city of Palermo. “Her photos were an act of condemnation. She was a photographer but more so an activist.”



Though known for her mafia-related images, Ms. Battaglia also focused her lens on women and girls, like this one photographed in Palermo in 1980. Credit Letizia Battaglia

Ms. Battaglia was just shy of 40, in 1974, when she began to take photographs full time for L’Ora, Palermo’s left-wing afternoon newspaper. But she had not planned on becoming a photographer.

Married at 16, she had three daughters by her mid-20s and left her husband 10 years later, moving to Milan. She was working as a journalist when editors began to ask for photographs to accompany her features. She taught herself, looking to photographers she admired, like Mary Ellen Mark, Josef Koudelka and especially Diane Arbus.

Back in Palermo, Ms. Battaglia found herself on the front lines of the so-called second Mafia War, which began in the late 1970s and ebbed and flowed for a decade, sparked by the incursion of mobsters from Corleone. Hundreds of Mafiosi were killed in the streets, but so were prosecutors, politicians and law enforcement officers. For years, people bought L’Ora to see who had been killed the day before.

She and Franco Zecchin, then her partner in life and photography, were often the first to arrive on the scene because they had an illegal police scanner, Ms. Battaglia said. “We were always ready, washed and clean — at night, during the day, always ready to race there,” she recalled.

“Now you have the books, and museum exhibits,” she added, “but that life as a provincial photojournalist was really exhausting.”

As she watched the Mafia destroy her island, she became an outspoken proponent of the so-called Palermo spring in the mid-1980s, when thousands of Sicilians began to speak out, even taking to the streets to denounce the Mafia, alongside Palermo’s mayor, Leoluca Orlando, who was re-elected last month for a fifth, nonconsecutive term.

Ms. Battaglia left photography to go into government, first winning a seat in 1985 on Palermo’s City Council and then sitting in the regional Parliament.

Those heady days did not last long, she said. For the most part, the enthusiasm that marked the early days of the anti-Mafia movement in Palermo has given away to the indifference that still holds sway today.

Though she is best known for her Mafia-themed photos — what she has described as her “archive of blood” — her job sent her all over Sicily, where she chronicled the island’s poor, alongside the patients of a psychiatric hospital, as well as Palermo’s nobility and intellectuals. As a feminist who also edited a women’s magazine, she focused her lens on Sicilian women, and especially young girls.

One of the few photographs that hangs in her apartment is of a Sicilian girl holding a soccer ball, staring at the camera with haunted — and haunting — eyes. “The dream of her future in her eyes,” Ms. Battaglia comments in a 2016 documentary by Franco Maresco.

Years later, Ms. Battaglia returned to the run-down neighborhood where she had snapped the photo to look for the grown woman that the girl had become, but never managed to track her down. Perhaps it is just as well, she said, “I don’t think she ended up very well.”

Ms. Battaglia has lately focused her abundant energies on opening Palermo’s first museum dedicated to photography, the Centro Internazionale della Fotografia.

“The center is almost ready, almost,” Ms. Battaglia said excitedly. She has tackled this latest project with her usual determination and grit, but the bureaucracy that has deflated many an Italian initiative has been taking its toll, and the center is still under construction.

When finally finished, the center will host an archive of photos of Palermo, and she means to put a call out to all the world’s best photographers to send her images of the city. It will be a place of “poetry, music, concerts and punk,” she said.

“I still have lots of things to do, I feel a strength inside that I didn’t feel when I was 20, 30 or 40,” she said. “Maybe I feel strong because today, I am my own master, and this gives me strength. Like Napoleon.” She laughed.