



PICTURES FROM ITALY

FirstCity Books unravels the gossamer threads that bind together **Livia Signorini**, Italy and **Charles Dickens**

A series of faint reflections - mere shadows in the water, is how the nineteenth century novelist we've all grown up reading (studying too, at some point or the other) describes this, his wordy-postcard of a book, sent from Italy. A travelogue of sorts, *Pictures from Italy* has a certain flow; in its reading, there is a sense of the river passing by. We find ourselves buoyed up by the current, at times, moving and yet unmoving, and are completely submerged at other times; attempting to cut through to the surface like Dickens, or just giving in, to the moment. There is foreboding too, just as there is awe and grandeur; a dread that keeps you company, only to give way to an all-enveloping feeling of joy. Italy, in 1844, was an interesting place, it would appear, and not just to an Englishman on a break from writing novels (*I feel that I am getting rusty. That any attempt to think, would be accompanied with a creaking noise*). V Geetha, in the Editor's Note, talks about the time and place thus: ... *shadowed by decay and mortality, poverty and ennui, it is still a landscape where life renews itself.*

Arguably, one of Dickens' lesser known works, it was only through this project idea - of visualising Dickens' *Pictures from Italy* - that the artist Livia Signorini learnt of its ex-

istence. She was at once "struck by Dickens' cantankerousness", she tells us, over an email interview, "He was so disturbed by so many aspects of Italy, and in such a British, finicky manner". Dickens' Italy, Livia shares, is "very different" from hers, even as she elaborates, "That's why it was interesting. But, in a way, I dislike many aspects of Italy too, so I loved to follow his comments with details." As a child, Livia, like most of us, had read *David Copperfield* ("delighted by the bad character, Uriah Heep... Loved the subtle evilness, the humour, the compassion"), and her favourite remains *The Pickwick Papers*. "It was no effort to read Dickens", she tells us, including *Pictures from Italy* in that observation, "He is such an interesting mind, it was more difficult to find his vision". Dickens, who paints both his characters and his landscapes with great pain, infusing great detail into every facial tic, every little bylane, has, Livia agrees,



Pictures from Italy
by Charles Dickens; Art by Livia Signorini
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"a distinct visual style", but she's careful to add that "it was not immediately easy to discern". Her very first visualising idea, as an artist, was to work on "a bird's eye view", we learn. From here, as the creative journey took over, Livia went on a trip of her own, to rediscover her country anew - amidst antique book sellers, collectors and dusty attics where she drew inspiration from books, maps, postcards and old photographs. She found herself poring over Dickens' words, and distancing herself to grasp at a bigger picture; the process evolved gradually, taking on new shape, as the pages began to breathe with a new, visual life of their own. Fleshing out, in a visceral, textural manner, what the author meant when he described Italy as *A bewildering phantasmagoria, with all the inconsistency of a dream, and all the pain*

and all the pleasure of an extravagant reality!
(Extracts in italics, and illustrations, from the book. Turn to page 55, for the FirstCity Books review of *Pictures from Italy*.)