

BENVEGNÙ HERITAGE

Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

THE ART OF THE CONTHE

L'Arte dei Seggiolai dell'Agordino

An Intangible Cultural Heritage Document
Based on the writings of Prof. Gian Pietro Zanin
Gosaldo, Belluno — August 1978

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Master Craftsman | Custodian of the Scopelament del Conza
Formerly: Benvegnù Impagliatura, Milano (1980–2003)

Foreword / Prefazione

This document preserves one of Italy's most endangered artisanal traditions: the art of the Conthe, the itinerant chair weavers of Gosaldo, in the Agordino valley of the Dolomites, Province of Belluno.

The Conthe (pronounced 'Conze') were master craftsmen who left their mountain villages each year — sometimes as young as 8 or 9 years old — to travel across Italy and France, weaving and repairing chairs with straw, cane, rush, and cord. They spoke among themselves in a secret trade language called the Scopelament del Conza, known to almost no one alive today.

This document is based on the remarkable typewritten manuscript of Prof. Gian Pietro Zanin, published in Gosaldo in August 1978 by Edizioni Voce Amica, Ospitale di Cadore (Belluno). It comprises two parts: the history and craft of the chair weavers, and a collection of proverbs in the local dialect — an irreplaceable window into the soul of this mountain people.

The Benvegnù family of Milan — Erminio and Angelo, and their nephew Bruno Pallone — were among the last to practice this art professionally in Italy. Bruno now continues the tradition in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, under the name Benvegnù Heritage, carrying a Fuset (weaving tool) dated 1905, gifted to him by his master.

"I nos veci i se a magnà la roba e i ne a lasà i proverbi."

Our elders consumed their worldly goods and left us their proverbs.

Part One: The Art of the Chair Weaver

La Mia Esperienza / A Life in the Craft

The following accounts are drawn from the testimonies of three master craftsmen of Gosaldo, as recorded by Prof. Zanin in 1978.

Gelindo Pongan (Gelindo dai Nonet) — born 1906

Gelindo was born in Gosaldo on December 25, 1906, and practiced the trade of chair weaver all his life, continuing a tradition handed down from his father and grandfather. His grandfather, born in 1841, worked without even the basic càora (the wooden sawhorse that replaced the carpenter's bench) — instead, he pressed chair components against a wall on one side, and a wooden board hung around his neck on the other. An improvised vice, made from nothing.

His grandfather died in 1892. His father traveled to France for his trade — a single 'campaign' (season of work) lasted 4 years, 4 months, and 4 days. In the 1920s a newly woven chair fetched 3–4 lire; re-weaving alone was worth half that. The work was hard and pay was poor. "For many years the chair weaver's trade was a true struggle for survival. In the middle of so many difficulties, the chair weaver was happy when the work was plentiful."

In his long career, Gelindo resorted to revenge against a customer only once: a man who refused to pay after the work was done. Gelindo slipped small pieces of lard into the upholstery of the chairs. The cat, smelling the lard, would scratch the straw cords — ruining the work in a short time. "It was a beautiful trick."

Giovanni Marcon (Moro) — born 1904

Giovanni began his apprenticeship in 1913 at the age of 8 years and 10 months. He followed his father to Parma. They slept in haylofts and stables. The working day began at 7 in the morning and ended at 11 at night. On Sundays — his one day of rest — he walked twenty kilometres to resupply straw.

"I was never able to envy the condition of employed workers. At 16 years of age, I was already independent in everything."

In France, Giovanni learned new techniques: the ribbon saw for cutting chair components, the 'gimbarda' tool, and the 'a lucido' weaving method — where rush cord is covered with coloured rye straw, producing a weave that is extremely durable and beautiful. Four chairs with this method took 16 hours. The price? More than triple that of ordinary weaving.

"Those of the 'conthe' is an art of ours that must not die."

The Tools of the Trade / Gli Attrezzi del Seggiolaio

The chair weaver, forced to constant mobility, carried only what was strictly necessary. All his tools (la feràtha) were kept in a medium-sized wooden box. The tools were few, light, and manageable:

- **La càora** — A type of wooden sawhorse that replaced the carpenter's bench.
- **La barcèla / la crath** — A type of merchant's basket for carrying materials on the back. The first term is older.
- **El manarìn** — The small axe. Used mainly to square the wooden pieces needed for chair construction.
- **El cortèl da doi man** — A two-handled knife that replaced the plane.
- **El gòbo** — A curved two-handled knife. Used to give circular shape to the chair rungs.
- **I scarpèi** — Two chisels for carving wood.
- **El cortèl da punta** — A single-handled knife for carving wood.
- **Le trivèle** — Drill bits of various sizes, with spiral points applied to the drill. Used to bore holes in the chair legs.
- **El fusèt** — A small wooden spindle used to beat apprentices who were slow or clumsy on the job.

Note: The author of this document possesses a Fusèt dated 1905, gifted to him by his master, Tita Bosol. It remains in use today.

The Conthe: Who They Were

The Conthe were the itinerant chair weavers born in the area of Tiser and the surrounding villages of Gosaldo, in the Agordino valley. For generations, this was the dominant profession of the region — entire families, entire villages, defined by this nomadic craft.

They left home each year after San Bartolomeo (August 24), each carrying a small bundle and their box of tools, walking first to the railway station at Sedico-Bribano, then spreading across northern Italy and southern France. Some campaigns lasted years. Letters were sent to a *fermo posta* address or to trusted acquaintances, as the weavers had no fixed address.

Among themselves, in front of clients, they spoke the Scopelament del Conza — a secret trade language invented so as not to be understood by outsiders. It was deliberately obscure, functional, and is today almost entirely extinct.

In 1978, when Prof. Zanin documented this tradition, it was already dying. Today, Bruno Pallone is one of the very last living practitioners.

Part Two: The Proverbs of Gosaldo

The following proverbs were collected from the elderly residents of Gosaldo and surrounding villages by Prof. Zanin in 1978, with contributions from schoolchildren who heard them from their families. They are presented here in three languages: the original Gosaldo dialect, Italian, and English.

These proverbs are the living memory of a people. They encode centuries of wisdom about weather, work, love, money, faith, and human nature — tested by generations of mountain life and nomadic labor.

1. Seasons & Weather / Tempi dell'Anno e Meteorologia

Sant'Antoni da la barba bianca, se no l'é la nef la brosa no la manca.

 Sant'Antonio dalla barba bianca (17 gennaio): se non c'è la neve, la brina non manca.

 *Saint Anthony of the white beard (January 17): if there is no snow, there will be frost.*

La Theriola, se la é nevegarola de l'invern sion fora; se no la é nevegarola sion tant inter che fora.

 Alla Candelora (2 febbraio): se nevicava dell'inverno siamo fuori; se non nevicava siamo sia dentro che fuori.

 *At Candlemas (Feb 2): if it snows, winter is over; if it doesn't snow, we are both in and out of winter.*

Fret de genaro impienìs el granaro.

 Il freddo di gennaio riempie il granaio.

 *The cold of January fills the granary.*

El vent de febraro el ingravia el granaro.

 Il vento di febbraio riempie il granaio.

 *The February wind fills the granary.*

Marth sut, apríl bagnà, beato quel contadìn che a semenà.

 Marzo asciutto, aprile piovoso, beato quel contadino che ha già seminato.

 *Dry March, wet April — blessed is the farmer who has already sown.*

Da San Roch le nosele le va de scroch e par i careghète l'é ora de far fagòt.

 A San Rocco (16 agosto) le nocciole si possono sgusciare facilmente e per i seggiolai è tempo di fare fagotto.

 *At Saint Rocco (August 16), hazelnuts shell easily, and for the chair weavers it is time to pack their bundles.*

Ros de matina, la piova se avisina. Ros de sera, bon temp se spera.

 Rosso di mattina, la pioggia si avvicina. Rosso di sera, bel tempo si spera.

 *Red sky at morning, rain is near. Red sky at night, fair weather in sight.*

El dì de Santa Lucia l'é el dì pi curt che sia.

 Il giorno di Santa Lucia è il giorno più corto che ci sia.

 *Saint Lucy's day is the shortest day of the year.*

Montanìn, montanìn: scarpe grose e thervèl fin.

 Montanino, montanino: scarpe grosse e cervello fino.

 *Mountain man, mountain man: heavy shoes and a sharp mind.*

2. Love, Marriage & Family / Amore, Matrimonio e Famiglia

Se tuti i basi i fuse busi, quanti musì sarè sbusi!

 Se ogni bacio bucase, quanti visi sarebbero sforacchiati!

 *If every kiss left a hole, how many faces would be full of holes!*

No l'é en sabo thentha sol, no l'é na femena thentha en amor.

 Non c'è sabato senza sole, non c'è donna senza amore.

 *There is no Saturday without sunshine, there is no woman without love.*

| Maridàr e semenàr l'é tut en laoràr.

 Sposarsi e seminare comportano fatica.

 *Getting married and sowing seed are both hard work.*

| En pare el é bon par set fioi, ma set fioi no i é boni par en pare.

 Un padre è capace di mantenere sette figli, ma sette figli non sono capaci di mantenere un padre.

 *A father can support seven children, but seven children cannot support one father.*

| Pare mè, mare mea: pan e aio a casa mea.

 Padre mio, madre mia: pane e aglio a casa mia.

 *My father, my mother: bread and garlic at my own home.*

| Amor de fradei, amor de cortei; amor de cugnade, amor de spade.

 Amore di fratelli, amore di coltelli; amore di cognate, amore di spade.

 *Brothers' love is like knives; sisters-in-law's love is like swords.*

| Tra suocera e nora l'é doi diaoi che laora.

 Tra suocera e nuora ci sono due diavoli che lavorano.

 *Between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, two devils are at work.*

3. Work, Money & Thrift / Lavoro, Soldi e Risparmio

| Impara l'arte e metele da parte: el temp el vegnarà che l'art la valarà.

 Impara l'arte e mettila da parte: verrà il tempo in cui l'arte si renderà utile.

 *Learn your craft and set it aside — the time will come when it will serve you.*

| I brath l'é la richetha del porét.

 Le braccia sono la ricchezza del povero.

 *The arms are the wealth of the poor.*

| A laoràr se fala e falando s'impara.

 Lavorando si sbaglia e sbagliando si impara.

 *Working, one makes mistakes; making mistakes, one learns.*

| Pitòst che star thentha far nia, lé meio laoràr par nia.

 Piuttosto che rimanere in ozio, è meglio lavorare gratuitamente.

 *Better to work for nothing than to remain idle.*

| Porét no l'é chi che no a nia, ma chi che no l'é boni de sparagnàr nia.

 Povero non è colui che non possiede nulla, ma colui che non sa risparmiare nulla.

 *Poor is not the one who has nothing, but the one who cannot save anything.*

| El bonorìf no l va mai imprést dal tardìf.

 Chi semina presto non va mai in prestito da chi semina tardi.
 *The early sower never borrows from the late sower.*

4. Religion & Providence / Religione e Provvidenza

| ***No cai na foia che Dio no l voia.***

 Non cade foglia che Dio non voglia.
 *Not a leaf falls without God's will.*

| ***Se sera na porta e se verth en porton.***

 Si chiude una porta e si apre un portone.
 *When one door closes, a gate opens.*

| ***El Signor el manda el frét secondo i pani.***

 Il Signore manda il freddo in proporzione ai vestiti che uno possiede.
 *The Lord sends cold according to the clothes one has.*

| ***Schertha co i fanti, ma lasa star i Santi.***

 Scherza con i fanti e lascia stare i Santi.
 *Jest with servants, but leave the Saints alone.*

5. Popular Wisdom / Morale Popolare

| ***A sto mondo tut vién e tut pasa.***

 A questo mondo tutto viene e tutto passa.
 *In this world, everything comes and everything passes.*

| ***Mal no far, paura no avér.***

 Chi male non fà, paura non ha.
 *Do no evil, have no fear.*

| ***Chi va pian, va san e va lontàn; chi va forte, va a la morte.***

 Chi va piano, va sano e va lontano; chi va forte, va a la morte.
 *Who goes slowly goes safely and far; who goes fast goes to his death.*

| ***Tuti i grop i vién al peten.***

 Tutti i nodi vengono al pettine.
 *All knots come to the comb. (Everything comes to light in the end.)*

| ***Ocio no l vet, cuor no l fa mal.***

 Occhio non vede, cuore non duole.
 *What the eye does not see, the heart does not grieve.*

| ***O magna sta menestra, o salta sta finestra.***

 O mangi questa minestra, o salti dalla finestra.
 *Either eat this soup, or jump out the window. (Take it or leave it.)*

| **Mai lasàr la strada vecia par quella nova.**

 Non lasciare la strada vecchia per quella nuova.

 *Never leave the old road for the new one.*

| **Chi therca, cata.**

 Chi cerca, trova.

 *Who seeks, finds.*

| **La lengua la bat andé che dol el dent.**

 La lingua batte dove il dente duole.

 *The tongue seeks the aching tooth.*

| **Rit ben chi che rit par ultim.**

 Ride bene chi ride per ultimo.

 *He laughs best who laughs last.*

| **meio en vof encoi che na pita domàn.**

 Meglio l'uovo oggi che la gallina domani.

 *Better an egg today than a chicken tomorrow.*

6. Virtues, Faults & The Ages of Man / Pregi, Difetti e Età dell'Uomo

| **A sèt an i é ptèi, a setanta i é ancora quèi.**

 A sette anni sono bambini e a settanta sono ancora tali.

 *At seven they are children; at seventy they still are.*

| **Bèl in fasa, burt in piatha; burt in fasa, bèl in piatha.**

 Bello in fasce sarà brutto da adulto; brutto in fasce sarà bello da grande.

 *Beautiful as a baby, plain as an adult; plain as a baby, beautiful as an adult.*

| **Maestri no se nas, ma se diventa.**

 Maestri non si nasce, ma si diventa.

 *Masters are not born — they are made.*

| **La superbia la va a cavàl e la torna a pie.**

 La superbia va a cavallo e torna a piedi.

 *Pride rides in, and walks home.*

| **Ghe n matha pi la lengua che la spada.**

 Uccide più la lingua che la spada.

 *The tongue kills more than the sword.*

| **Chi sa che no sa, sa de pi de chi che sa.**

 Chi sa di non sapere, sa di più di chi pretende di sapere.

 *Who knows he does not know, knows more than who pretends to know.*

| **Se l'invidia avese la flora, tuti l'avarèe.**

 Se l'invidia fosse febbre, tutti ne avrebbero.
 *If envy were a fever, everyone would have it.*

7. Miscellaneous / Vari

| **Salute e libertà l'é n tesoro che no se sa.**

 Salute e libertà sono un tesoro inimmaginabile.
 *Health and freedom are a treasure beyond imagination.*

| **Thena longa, vita curta; thena curta, vita longa.**

 Cena lunga, vita corta; cena corta, vita lunga.
 *A long supper, a short life; a short supper, a long life.*

| **El fasol l'é la carne del porét.**

 I fagioli sono la carne del povero.
 *Beans are the meat of the poor.*

| **Polenta e osèi l'é magnàr dei dei.**

 Polenta e uccelli è un cibo divino.
 *Polenta and birds is food fit for the gods.*

| **La néf l'é la lana dei prà.**

 La neve è la lana dei prati.
 *Snow is the wool of the meadows.*

| **Montanìn, montanìn: scarpe grose e thervèl fin.**

 Montanino, montanino: scarpe grosse e cervello fino.
 *Mountain man, mountain man: heavy shoes and a sharp mind.*

About Benvegnù Heritage

Benvegnù Heritage is an artisan studio based in Hamilton, Ontario, founded by Bruno Pallone — master chair weaver and last living custodian of the Conthe tradition of Gosaldo, Agordino, Province of Belluno, Italy.

Bruno trained under the Benvegnù family of Milan — Erminio and Angelo Benvegnù, whose workshop on Via del Gesù served Milan's most distinguished antique dealers and restoration specialists throughout the 1980s and 1990s. He operated his own studio in Milan from the early 1980s until 2003.

Bruno practices all traditional techniques: Thonet-style cane weaving, Vienna weave, paper cord (Danish cord), rush seating, straw weaving, and the rare 'a

lucido' method. He possesses a Fusèt — a traditional weaving tool — dated 1905, gifted to him by his master.

His wife Anna Maria de Leonardis, a graduate of the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, Milan, brings a complementary artistic vision to the studio. Her work in decorative arts, stencil design, and colour has been exhibited independently and in collaboration with leading Milan fashion designers including Mariteau Girboue.

Together, Bruno and Anna Maria offer restoration, commission work, workshops, and cultural presentations rooted in one of Europe's most extraordinary — and most endangered — artisanal traditions.

"I nos veci i se a magnà la roba e i ne a lasà i proverbi."

Our elders consumed their worldly goods and left us their proverbs.

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