

HOME // CULTURE // Monteleone di Puglia, the Lioness returns to her roots: the sculpture that pays tribute to the courage of the women of 1942 has been inaugurated.

Monteleone di Puglia, the Lioness returns to her roots: the sculpture that pays homage to the courage of the women of 1942 has been inaugurated.



Massimo Baldoni, Mayor Sebastiano Maraschiello, La Leonessa, Steven G. Kukla

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CULTURE // FOGGIA // MONTELEONE DI PUGLIA (FG) – A lioness with a proud gaze, one paw ready to defend and the other open to welcome. Starting Sunday, **August 9, 2026**, Monteleone di Puglia has a new symbol destined to recount, for generations to come, one of the most significant chapters in the history of this small town in the Dauni Mountains.

"**La Leonessa**" (**The Lioness**) , a sculpture in **Bianco Venato Carrara marble** , was unveiled . Designed by **Steven G. Kukla** , an American with deep roots in Monteleone, and sculpted by **master craftsman Massimo Baldoni** , it is a work born not simply from the desire to beautify a public space, but from a personal journey down memory lane, spanning both the ocean and more than a century of family history.

The Leonessa pays homage above all to the **women of Monteleone di Puglia** , protagonists of the historic revolt of **23 August 1942** , one of the earliest and most significant episodes of popular opposition to the fascist regime during the Second World War.

In those months, Monteleone, like much of rural Italy, lived in hunger and deprivation. Many men were far away, sent to the war fronts, and women bore the burden of supporting families, homes, and farms. The spark ignited when some pots of corn were confiscated from women waiting to be able to grind the little grain they had. The protest quickly spread to chants of "**We want bread, we want flour!** "

Hundreds of women gathered in front of the City Hall. Tensions escalated, shots were fired, and several protesters were injured. A brutal raid followed, with dozens of arrests: **96 people were arrested** , with tragic consequences for numerous families. The story, censored in Italy, reached **Radio London** , which described the rebellion as a sign of popular aversion to fascism.

A story that the scholar **Vito Antonio Leuzzi** subsequently reconstructed through documents and judicial sources in the volume *Donne contro la guerra. La rivolta di Monteleone di Puglia (23 August 1942)* , fully restoring the female protagonism of a rural community that opposed an authoritarian regime and a war that had brought misery and suffering. **And it is precisely within this memory that the Leonessa inaugurated on August 9th finds its meaning.**

From America to Monteleone, following in Grandmother's footsteps.

Behind the sculpture, there is a story within a story. That of **Steven G. Kukla** , who lives with his wife, Cynthia, in **Litchfield, Connecticut** , and has two sons and a daughter. His passions include family, travel, yoga, writing, hiking, figurative stone carving, and mineral collecting.

But above all there is a grandmother who, despite the ocean and the passing of the years, has never stopped ideally showing him the way home.

Her name was **Maria Assunta Capobianco** , born in Monteleone di Puglia in **1900** and died in 1984. She was the daughter of **Rocco Capobianco** , a shoemaker, and **Maria Maddalena Casullo** . In **1906** , when Assunta was still a child, the family left Monteleone, emigrating first to **Welland, Canada** , and later to the United States, between Little Falls and Herkimer, New York.

Assunta, however, retained memories of her hometown. She spoke of a stone house, poor and cold, and of the climb she used to walk with her mother to fetch water from a spring-fed fountain.

In 1917, she married **Angelo Gualtieri** , originally from Baranello, Molise, who had emigrated to the United States in 1910. In 1934, the two took the Americanized names of **Susan and Charles Wills** . Their life continued overseas, but in the house where Steven would grow up, profoundly Italian gestures survived: picking chicory and dandelions, roasting chestnuts, pressing grapes to make wine, making tomato sauce, and gathering around the table on holidays.

The 2024 journey and the return to the roots

In April **2024** , Kukla and his son Daniel decided to take a real **journey back to their roots** , a genealogical itinerary in the birthplace of his maternal grandparents: Monteleone di Puglia and Baranello, accompanied by **Stefano Ammirati of Southern Italy Travel** .

In Monteleone, Kukla had the opportunity to rediscover the places that had been part of her family's history and, above all, to gain a deeper understanding of the history and

identity of the community from which her grandmother had departed, over a century earlier. This encounter with her own origins went far beyond simple genealogical research and ultimately transformed into a deeply personal and creative experience.

After that trip, Kukla visited Assisi and later a friend in Carrara. On the flight back to Connecticut, he says, he was overwhelmed by a feeling of gratitude and a strong creative impulse.

From that experience was born “**Strong Roots, Good Fruit,**” a graphic fantasy novel inspired by the family history and that of Monteleone. Two digital music albums followed, and finally, the three-dimensional design of the Leonessa. The digital model created by Kukla was transformed into stone by master sculptor **Massimo Baldoni** , who sculpted the work from the precious Bianco Venato Carrara marble.

One paw to defend, one to welcome

Every detail of the sculpture has a precise symbolic value. The Lioness stands on her hind legs in a position that expresses **determination** . Her gaze indicates clarity and the ability to illuminate the path. The **left paw** , raised and with claws at the ready, represents **defense and strength** . The right paw, however, tells a completely different story: it is stretched forward, with an open palm and retracted claws. It is a gesture of **welcome, peace, compassion, and charity** .

The face remains proud, the jaws seem ready to roar. Not to attack, but, in the author's intentions, to have the courage to "**roar the truth** ." It's hard to imagine an image closer to Monteleone's story: the strength of those who, in 1942, found the courage to rebel against hunger and oppression and, on the other side, the open hand of a country that many decades later has chosen to link its name to peace, coexistence, and acceptance.

The sculpture is also a gift to the vast community of **Monteleonese who have emigrated abroad** and, for Kukla, a personal tribute to his grandmother Assunta, the little girl who left these mountains in 1906 and, more than a century later, remained the invisible thread that connected her grandson to his hometown. In addition to Kukla and Baldoni, **Stefano Ammirati, Antonio Mazzoni, Immacolata Scelzo, the current mayor Sebastiano Maraschiello, and Rosa Pollastrone** also played a role in the project, and are acknowledged by the artist himself in his acknowledgements.

And the story might not end with the statue. Kukla envisions developing an animated trailer and an immersive experience related to the Lioness in the future, even cultivating the dream that Monteleone's story could one day become an animated film, a stage play, or an operetta. Because behind this sculpture lies, ultimately, the universal story of Italian emigration: you can leave a small town, change continents, languages, and even names, but some roots silently live on.

Maria Assunta Capobianco left Monteleone as a child in 1906. One hundred and twenty years later, on August 9, 2026, something of her returned home through her grandson. It returned in the white marble of a Lioness that now watches over the town and seems to guard its memory. One paw reminds us that freedom must be defended; the other remains open to those who arrive. In between are Monteleone, its women, its emigrants, and more than a century of history. Because one can travel very far, even to the other side of the ocean, but when roots are strong, they always, sooner or later, find their way back.

Edited by Michele Ciani