

**ARMA Historical Study Guide:
Fiore Dei Liberi: 14th century Master
of Defence**

By John Clements

Unarguably the most important Medieval Italian fighting treatise, the work of Fiore Dei Liberi forms a cornerstone of historical fencing studies. Like many other martial arts treatises from the Medieval and Renaissance eras, we must look analytically at the totality of the author's teachings. In doing so we come to understand how, rather than consolidating information compartmentally, its manner of technical writing disperses it throughout.



In circa 1409, a northern Italian knight and nobleman, Fiore dei Liberi, produced a systematic martial arts treatise that has come to be considered one of the most important works of its kind on close-combat skills. Methodically illustrated and pragmatically presented, his teachings reveal a sophisticated and deadly fighting craft. It is one of the most unique and important texts in the history of fencing and of our Western martial heritage. Master Fiore's manuscript is today the primary source of study for reconstruction of Italian longsword fencing, combat grappling, and dagger fighting. It currently constitutes the earliest known Italian fencing manual and one of only two so far discovered from the era.



Figure 1.

Along with dagger and tapered longsword (*spadone* or *spada longa*), his work includes armored and unarmored grappling, poleax, mounted combat, and specialized weapons as well as unarmored spear, stick, and staff. His spear (or lance) fighting on foot is a matter of holding sword postures while thrusting or deflecting. His longsword fencing techniques include half-swording, pommel strikes, blade grabbing, disarms, trapping holds, throws, groin kicks, knee stomps, defense against multiple opponents, timed blows to push or leverage the adversary off balance, and even sword throwing. Images of four different weapons surround the opening page of both the Getty and PML editions, consisting of clockwise from the top: a dagger, a poleaxe, a spear, and lastly a special kind of “sword-axe” with a spiked pommel and cross and a spear-like tip.

Three different manuscript versions of the work of this Bolognese master of arms are known to have survived, each with different handwriting, by seemingly different artists and with somewhat

different organizational structures.¹ The spelling of terms, unsurprisingly, is inconsistent throughout. Likely, not all three versions of his treatise on “the art of fighting man to man” (*de conbatere de corpo a corpo*), as he described it, are from the same date of 1410. The somewhat briefer “Pisani-Dossi” edition (sometimes called the Novati) is partially in Italian and Latin verse of short rhyming couplets and often called the *Flos Duellatorium in Armis* (“The Flower of Battle in Arms”, or roughly “The Best of the Duelists, with harness and without, on horse and on foot”). [Figure 1] While the more extensive one now in the J. P. Getty Museum in Los Angeles, along with the similar one at the Pierpont-Morgan Library (PML) in New York, both entirely in Italian, are referred to as *Fior Battaglia*, or the “Flower of Battle.” [Figure 2] A comparative combination study of the three provides the broadest and fullest understanding of Fiore’s martial teachings.

The Getty edition (*Fior di Battaglia*. Accession Number 83.MR.183 Call Number: MS Ludwig XV 13) is presently considered to be the fullest and most definitive version, although all three manuscripts contain some information the others omit, and the Pisani-Dossi edition arguably does better in many instances at conveying movement and the motion of actions.² The translations quoted here from the J.P. Getty Museum edition of Fiore de’ Liberi da Premariacco’s, *Flos Duellatorium in Armis*, are largely by Eleonora Litta and Matt Easton (copyright 2002-2003) and used by permission. See the full work in progress at: <http://www.fioredeiliberi.org/>. One facsimile version edited by F. Novati (*Flos Duellatorium: Il Fiore di battaglia di maestro Fiore dei Liberi da Premariacco*) was published in Bergamo, Italy in 1902. Another facsimile and modern Italian translation of this was produced in 1998 by historical fencing researcher Marco Rubboli



Figure 2.

¹ The provenance of the manuscripts (or chain of ownership through the ages) is not entirely clear. The Getty Museum manuscript is the former Codex Marcello (Accession Number 83.MR.183. MS LUDWIG XV 13), mentioned by F. Novati in 1902: *Fior di Battaglia*, ca. 1410, from Venice or Padua by Fiore Furlan dei Liberi da Premariacco. The Pierpont-Morgan Library version (MS M. 383) was originally part of a larger collective binding entitled, *Arte di armeggiare a piedi ed a cavallo*, of which it composed pages “ff 241-259.” The work was split up in 1780 and its other contents are unknown. This manuscript is the former Codex Soranzo MCCLXI, and the former Sneyd manuscript first described in 1902 by F. Novati. The Sneyd describes it as a small, thin, vellum folio, pen and ink with gold highlights, and illustrations of sword and lance combat on foot and horseback. Novati stated he obtained it “from the library of the Abbate Canonici in Venice.” The earlier Soranzo Codex was bound as part of a larger work (folios 1-240), likely compiled from various sources on martial arts. The Pisani-Dossi Manuscript reprinted by Novati in 1902 is currently in a private collection. Novati described this as an unbound collection of leaves. Two other versions whose location or existence is currently unknown include: Codex LXXXIV (Ms. 84) from the former Biblioteca Estense in Ferrara. This consists of 58 Folios bound in leather with a clasp with the first page showing a white eagle and two helmets. Codex CX (Ms. 110) was last located in the same institute and consists of 15 small format folios on unbound parchment. It is not known if these represent copies of one of the other three versions or independent editions. The PML is in black ink and gold foil leaf. The Getty edition of fewer than 50 pages is on parchment in black ink with watercolor highlights and gold and silver leaf. The Pisani-Dossi edition is 68 pages in length. Almost all the unarmored longsword material in the Getty edition is covered in a mere 10 pages or so of 2-4 simple paired figures and short paragraphs or single sentences. The armored is covered in about 6. The PML edition covers this in about 18 pages, all but two presenting four pairs of figures, but two pages with only a single pair. The Getty includes approximately 10 pages on dagger fighting of more than 90 images.

² As Professor Sydney Anglo noted: “The text of the Pisani-Dossi version is cast in neat distiches; whereas the Getty manuscript has much longer descriptions set in verse so bad as to be barely recognizable as such. Yet the tidy distiches do little to illuminate the sense of the illustrations, while the incompetent verse is vastly superior both in comprehensiveness and comprehensibility.” (Anglo, *The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe*, p. 121). On many pages in each edition there are at certain locations large empty spaces as if more text or additional images were intended to be added. This may otherwise reflect something of the nature of preparing such technical literature in the age, where it was impractical to first draft a rough version, and thus space was often used inefficiently.

and published in Italy by Gladiatoria. Another entitled, *Flos Duellatorum in armis, sine armis equestor et pedester*, and designated MS.84, along with one other, MS. 110, were located in Biblioteca Estense in Ferrara. Known as the Pisani-Dossi edition, one original of these has supposedly been recently located once again.

All but the PML edition of Fiore's work [Figure 3] are dedicated to Niccolo III d'Este, Marquis of the city of Ferrara, Modena, and Parma. From the Pisani-Dossi edition's dedication to the Marquis, Fiore asserts to him that he will "never find another book" like his nor a master capable of such a book. He adds that it took considerable effort and time (some six months) to prepare, and finally, that given his age he would not be doing another as large.



Figure 3.

An Enigmatic Combat Master

What little is known about the fencing master Fiore Furlan dei Liberi da Premariacco, or Fiore dei Liberi, comes mostly from what he tells us in his own words.³ He writes he was the son of a knight from a modest noble family in the Friuli region, Benedetto dei Liberi, of Cividale d'Austria in the Diocese of Aquileia. Fiore (pronounced "fee-or-ray") was born sometime in the mid 1300's. In the late 1300's he trained in Germany under "Master Johannes, the Swabian", who was himself a pupil of "Niklaus of Toblem" from the diocese of Metz. Fiore may have also studied under Johannes Suvenus. He reveals that he studied under both Italian and German masters and his method reflects aspects of the latter.



In 1383, Fiore appears to have fought in Udine on the side of the town during the civil war there. In 1395, he was in Padua for a duel and four years later in 1399 he was in Pavia. Then in 1400 he was apparently appointed master swordsman to the court of Niccolo III d'Este, Marquise of Ferrara, and later acquired a commission as a master swordsman. Master Fiore's teachings reflect a significant example of what knightly fighting arts were being practiced within this region of Europe during the later 14th and early 15th centuries. But he clearly developed his own style, which he then taught to *signori* (knights and nobles).

Interestingly, Fiore tells us that since childhood he himself had a gift for fighting and that in his youth he wanted to learn "how to fight" with various weapons and also to learn the "features of each weapon, both for defence and for offence" and all matters of "combat to the bitter end." In the prologue to his *Fior Battaglia* ("Flower of Battle"), Fiore Dei Liberi da Premariacco stated he would reveal all the things he knew and had learned from other noblemen experts in the craft. Fiore freely admitted to having learned from them in various places he had traveled.



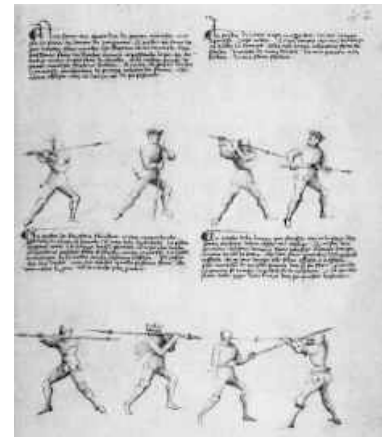
The Pisani-Dossi edition states that he learned from many Princes, Dukes, Counts and others in

³ Novati noted that historical records offer evidence of Fiore dei Liberi as being active in northern Italy in the late 14th century.

diverse places and provinces, in particular from Master Giovanni called Suveno, a scholar of Niccolo's from Metz. He also tells us that he studied the art for more than 40 years (or 50 according the Pisani-Dossi edition). As well as being able to read, write, and draw, and additionally having some other books about the craft, he expresses that he felt he was still not yet "a perfectly good master" (even though considered such by noblemen who were his students). More than once he makes reference to his opinion of the rarity of true expertise in the martial arts.⁴ He adds that he also sought to learn "amazing and secret things which are known by very few men in the world."

In fact, Fiore declares that the reasons for producing his work about "the whole art" was because there were "few masters in the world" of the art and he wanted to "be remembered." He even goes as far as to declare how he has "seen one hundred men who would call themselves Masters yet if you took all their skills added together, you would not have the makings of three good students, let alone one Master."⁵ In the Pisani-Dossi edition he declares he has seen a thousand people who called themselves masters of which he thought perhaps four were actually good scholars and none good teachers.

Interestingly, Fiore admits that in this science of combat he himself had great difficulties in order to become skillful. In the prologue to the Getty edition Fiore also states that only one of his students ever possessed another book on fencing, yet that, in classic Western tradition, it had been said, "without books no one can be a good master or a good student in this art." Fiore then tells us that he himself confirms this to be true, because the art was so vast that there is no one in the world able to keep it all in mind without the aid of books.⁶ In the Pisani-Dossi edition he expresses this idea by saying how it is "difficult to keep in one's mind this complex art without written books." That this was declared in an age of widespread illiteracy where memory mnemonics were supposedly the common means of recalling knowledge is perhaps remarkable. Finally, remarking on the satisfaction of his acquired fame and fortune, Fiore comments, "I am very content, because I have been well paid and I obtained the honour and the love of my students and of their relatives."⁷



The question has been asked as to whether Fiore's name itself might mean "flower" and that his title is possibly some play on words. Additionally, it may be that the term flower here is itself a metaphor for the bruises, or "flowers" that "bloom" like the "red roses" that swell up after

⁴ Getty Museum version, (Accession Number 83.MR.183. MS LUDWIG XV 13), Folio 3 recto.

⁵ Ibid. Folio 3, verso & recto, Folio 4 recto.

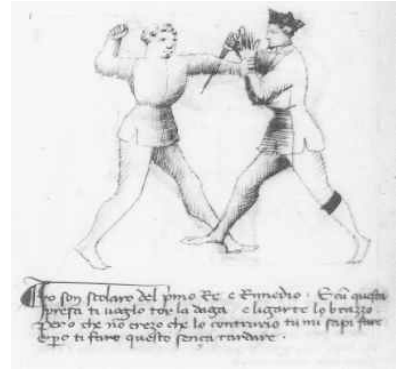
⁶ Here he wrote: "none of my students...have ever had a book about the art of combat, except for Messer Galeazzo da Mantova. Because he said that without books no one can be a good master or a good student in this art. And I, Fiore, confirm it to be true, because this art is so vast that there is no one in the world who has such a large memory to keep in mind the fourth section [on staff and spear] of this art without books." Getty Museum edition. Folio 3, verso & recto, Folio 4 recto.

⁷ Pierpont-Morgan Library version. MS M. 383. 1 Verso.

fighting practice or as a result of combat. Tournament sites were sometimes euphemistically called “flower gardens” for this reason.

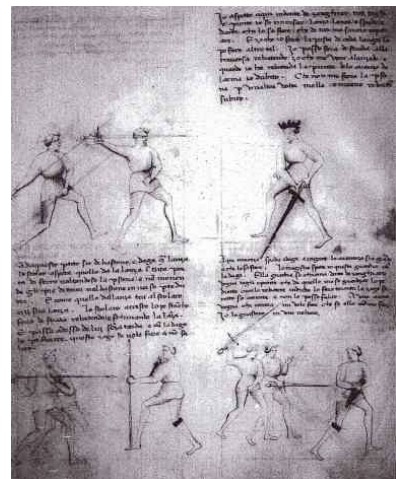
His Secret Art

As Fiore was in his mid-50s when he produced his treatise, and acquired his expertise as a youth, Fiore’s teachings in fact represent late 14th century martial skills common to knights and men-at-arms who fought in armored warfare both mounted and on foot, participated in tournament contests, and engaged in lethal judicial duels. This was in addition to living in an especially violent society where the sudden need for personal self-defence with arms or empty hands was frequent.



Like many other martial arts instructors wishing to preserve the tactical advantage of their skills as well as the proprietary nature of their teachings, Fiore dei Liberi stressed secrecy as well as the importance of teaching only righteous and upright students. Fiore states how he taught his skills to his students only in private with just their close relatives or a few trusted individuals present and that everyone had to swear not to reveal his methods. Anyone there “by grace or favor, with Sacrament” remained only by “promising with faith” to keep his techniques confidential. Fiore called his fighting techniques *archano censeo* (“secret science”) and declared how they were for nobles and the worthy only. He therefore would teach fighting skills only to nobles and knights who he felt as a class not only ruled justly but also alone had the role of protecting widows, orphans, and weak people as well as defending the faith from outside threats. Such “nonproliferation clauses” remarking on refusals to teach martial arts to those deemed of poor character was a repeated theme in the Renaissance martial arts literature. Indeed, the first prologue of the Pisani-Dossi edition specifically refers to “the peasantry, which Heaven created dull and only for the use of heavy work, like animals of burden” and comments on preventing them from learning such a “precious and secret science” as fencing, reserving it instead for those nobles entitled to it.

The secrecy by which many fencing masters taught their craft, despite writing it down, is part of the difficulty in discovering the nature of their training. Secrecy was a major component of many masters’ teachings. This is reasonable in an age when inside knowledge of an opponent’s techniques or fighting style offered an advantage in fighting or killing them. But it also had a practical value in that a master could protect to some degree the unique content of one aspect of his livelihood as well as add a certain air of mystery to it. In the 1380s the priest and master of arms Hank Döbringer tells us that the master Liechtenauer similarly recorded his teachings “in secret wordings” so that “the art would not be commonly spread” or that such a valuable craft “would not be lost and inferior teachers leave it in poor repute.” In Urbino during the 1480s, the fencing master Filippo Vadi, evidently inspired by Fiore’s earlier work, wrote in his own treatise: “Do not show the secrets of the art, or you will be



hurt for this reason.” In the 1530s the later Bolognese master Achille Marozzo advised in his *Opera Nova* that instruction and practice “must be in a place where there is no one except those you like, and especially not the students of other schools, and this I tell you to prevent the basis of your teaching being usurped.”⁸

While master Fiore essentially taught that his system of fighting should be kept secret, writing how he “strongly believed these precious secrets should be hidden” and saying that he hoped they would be exposed only to appropriate persons and not be shared with those who would not use it properly, he also claimed its techniques were actually quite easy to learn and use. At one point he declared the teachings presented in his treatise were “very true” and “of great offensive and defensive value”, but adding that they were also “things you cannot fail, as they are very easy to do.”⁹ He also states at one point for instance that the reader will “find the painting and writing is good” and that their intention has been easily laid down.

Master Fiore stated further that he had shown his art “to many Italians and Germans and other great *Signori*, who had to fight *in sbarra* [“in the barriers,” i.e., in judicial combat]. And also to infinite numbers who did not need to fight.”¹⁰ On this comment about teaching those who were not needing to fight we may wonder if he meant simply those not preparing to enter a judicial duel soon, or more generally to

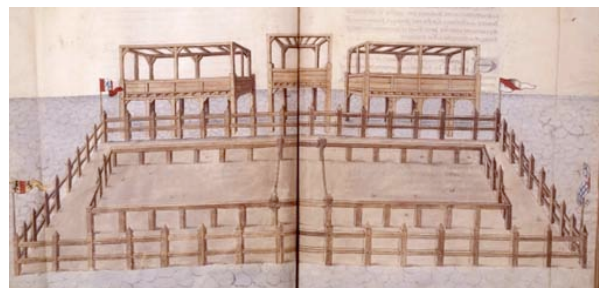


Figure 4.

individuals (perhaps older noblemen) who were not likely to engage in close-combat? It should be noted that this “fighting in the barriers” referred to combat within the “Lists” or an enclosed pen, meaning a battle-yard where single combats and tournaments were fought, also variously called a *champ clos*, *Kampfplatz*, *Kampfring*, or *Schranken*. [Figure 4] It did not mean the later 16th century knightly foot tournament of sport fighting with a separating beam or partition between the combatants (sometimes called “fighting at the barriers”), which was devised to prevent grappling.¹¹

Fiore tells us in one version that his manual was specifically written at the request of the Signore di Ferrara (presumably the Marquee) and not of his own volition, thus removing question as to the author having an entirely selfish motivation. He writes that although he “did not want to start

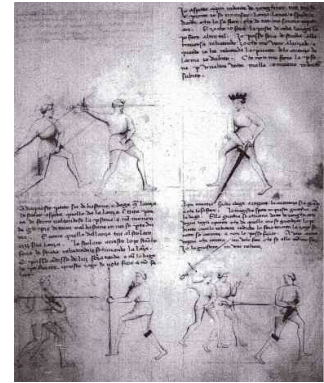
⁸ Explaining the reason for requiring an oath from students that they would not reveal what they had learned, the master Achille Marozzo in 1536 stated: “Know that this oath is required only because there are men that, as soon as they know how to hold a sword, show this to others”. He added “if you hear that some of your students show to others what they learned from you, you will not teach them anything true nor will you correct them of their faults. This way if they will rise believing they know much, and that they are masters, if they require to learn other things you will say them: ‘I am ashamed to teach to a ‘master’, as you are teaching to others, and are you not ashamed to learn from another?’ so this is the answer you’ll give them.” Marozzo, Chapter 7, Translation by Luca Porzio, 2001.

⁹ Getty Museum version, (Accession Number 83.MR.183. MS LUDWIG XV 13), Folio 3 recto.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ By the 14th century in Germany enclosed barriers became double fences, intended not only to keep the fighters in, but everyone else out. Enclosed areas with central barriers to separate mounted combatants were however not employed prior to 1400 and their tournaments use for foot combats did not evolve until the early 16th. (See Barber, *Tournaments*, p. 2 & 193).

writing this book” he realized “it was important for the survival of the art of fighting” and that he felt it “important to give support to the experts of swordsmanship who will help men-at-arms during wars, riots, or duels.” Since Fiore states he was asked to produce his work, and did so in his later years, it is unlikely his motivation had any thing to do with seeking a professional teaching position or pension from a wealthy noble patron (though, we cannot discount that he might have may have solicited himself as an author on the subject as a means of seeking a pension in his twilight years). Nor was it likely his work was only intended for the limited conditions of knightly tournament combat or even judicial duels alone. Its pragmatic self-defence value and its clear viciousness exclude the theory that it was simply devised for courtly exercise or reading entertainment on the part of his noble patron. He remarks that these teachings concerned combat “to the death.” From the first prologue of the Pisani-Dossi edition he also cautions his reader not to think that in his book “there are false or erroneous concepts” because, having removed anything dubious, he claims he describes “in it only techniques that I have invented, or seen, or tried.”



Men of this time were known to have favored books that gave them practical advantage over others and works on personal fighting arts were no exception. As one historian of technology has noted, since ancient times in Europe “Knowledge of war was largely experiential, although it was supplemented by books of military advice.” (Long, p. 277). While the early masters did frequently cloak their teachings in secrecy for practical reasons, what they wrote about was a craft that itself was not particularly unknown knowledge. Indeed, many later published works seemed to celebrate the very “know-ability” of the art and advertise the wisdom of its professionals. It may be that the secrecy surrounding actual teachings in 14th and 15th century fencing literature is in fact equaled by a longstanding tradition of martial arts authorship wherein core aspects of fighting skills were elaborated upon in detail much as military science in general was since ancient times. The use of secrecy has been described as a natural concept when it comes to preserving one’s life in the realm of violent force. Without forms of secrecy there is no way to securely guard one’s self or property from assault by aggressors. (Long, p. 280). In his fencing bibliography of 1891, Enrique de Leguina suggested for example that the rarity of some fencing texts (particularly Spanish) owed to how much they were in continual use, no doubt being prized and studied secretly.



A Unique Resource

Though his work dates from the very early 15th century, and while there was not a significant difference between the three manuscripts, we can more accurately describe his method and experience as reflecting those of the mid to late 14th century. Surprisingly, no mention is made among fencing masters in later centuries of Fiore, his teachings or any school he was a part of, and his work remained obscure until the early 20th century. The scholar and Archbishop of Ancira, Giusto Fontanini (1666-1736), did reference Fiore’s life in his 1736, *Dell-Eloquenza*

Italiana (as cited by Novati, p.89 n.14). But Fontanini was no fencer and not interested in Fiore’s method. Egerton Castle and his fellow Victorian historians of fencing were unfamiliar with the manual (at least until 1911). The well-read Italian fencing master and historian Jacopo Gelli did not mention Fiore’s treatise either in his, *Bibliografia generale della scherma* (Milan, 1895). But typical of his generation of modern fencers, in his, *L’arte dell’armi in Italia* (Bergamo, 1906), Gelli displayed all manner of misunderstanding over Fiore’s teachings and held his work in low esteem as disordered and deficient. Modern historian of Renaissance martial arts, Dr. Sydney Anglo, notes that Fiore was also not included in the second edition of Carl Thimm’s famous 1896 bibliography of fencing and dueling works. He adds, “I doubt that anybody knew anything about Fiore until Novati’s 1902 edition which is, in fact, listed in Levi and Gelli’s 1903, *Bibliografia del duello* (p.482).”¹² It has really only been since the early 1990s that serious students of historical fencing have begun to focus on careful study and reconstruction of his martial art.

In less than a hundred pages of an often disorderly presentation of orderly text and illustrations, Fiore manages to reveal a wealth of pragmatic martial wisdom. He also does so with an occasional wry sense of humor. As with other representational artwork from northern Italy of this same time, the figure illustrations themselves are approximate. They are somewhat stylized and lack perspective. They are not particularly fluid or revealing of motion, leverage, pressure, or balance, nor should they be taken literally (the crucial mistake that can be made by students).

The images and text are however combined in an integrated way so that they act as a means of presenting to a reader already familiar with the actions example techniques that convey core concepts and principles. Fiore included many small innovative elements to do this. Those figures that are the primary players are designated by garters on their legs while those who are “masters” wear crowns on their heads. This distinguishes attackers from defenders and students or scholars from masters. The paired figures often represent not specific techniques but movements and actions reflecting basic biomechanical concepts of personal combat that can be extrapolated into a much larger repertoire. (Although logical, as with similar works we cannot assume this was consciously intentional on the part of the author).

The PML edition also includes a subtle element whereby crossed swords are either drawn light or filled dark with gold leaf so that it is clear which ones is acting in what way. [Figure 5] The swords and armor illustrated are essentially those known to be common in Northern Italy and elsewhere at the time. The armor is similar to the Milanese style, and the swords of an acutely pointed and tapering form.

The variety of material in the three editions strongly suggests a depth and diversity of fighting knowledge that is only touched upon. Fiore provided advice on using the longsword against multiple opponents and illustrated several examples. He included unarmed defense against an

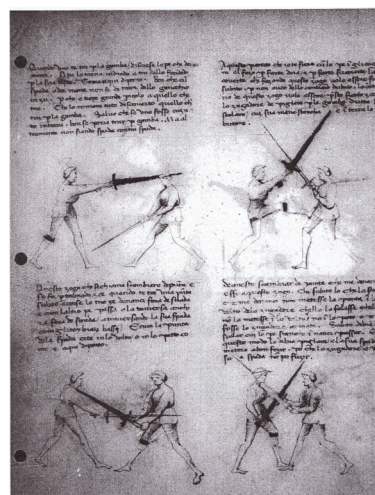


Figure 5

¹² Personal correspondence with the author, March 2006.

attacker armed with a dagger, the defense with a dagger alone against a sword attack, some on the longsword used in single hand (*spada a uno mano*), and even briefly the use of simple short clubs or sticks called bastone (“big sticks”). Stick-fighting was a not an unfamiliar means of self-defense or sporting play in Italy at the time (with some styles surviving well into the 19th century).

Master Fiore writes of the dagger: “I am the noble weapon called the dagger...He who understands my malice and my art, of every subtle combat has good part...No man can prevail against my cruel combat.” (Anglo, *The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe*, p. 179-181). His dagger fighting features a diverse array of effective unarmored techniques for dealing with under and over arm stabs from a sharply pointed knife (essentially a rondel). These include blocks, trapping holds, and working against the joints of the wrist, elbow and shoulder, along with throws, groin grabs, and various take-downs and tripping. Along with lance fighting his mounted combat also includes some rather vicious grappling and sword thrusting. The last page of the Pisani-Dossi edition depicts an unusual flail-like pole weapon with a large block at the end of a long rope seen wrapping around the legs of an opponent wielding another strange square-headed pole-arm.

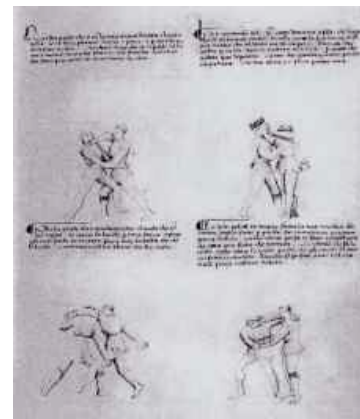


Figure 7

His hammer-like axe he calls heavy, cruel, and lethal as well as capable of greater blows than any other weapon. [Figure 8] In the Getty edition his *azza*, a block-like polaxe, is even described as able to be hollowed out and filed with a special blinding powder that can take effect when striking an opponent’s helmeted head. (See Anglo, *Ibid*, p 157). He also briefly presents a rare and special type of armoured duelling weapon that he never really names but describes as both a sword and a polaxe, with a spear-like tip on each end and a double cross guard (such a weapon alter appears in Fillipo Vadi’s treatise). [Figure 9] As well, there are instances of mounted combatants versus fighters on foot as well as armored versus unarmored opponents. While much of these were things that might be encountered in battle, others were for general self-defense. Fiore therefore clearly seemed concerned to provide well-rounded fighting skills applicable to any likely situation whether or not they were for judicial duel or war—and regardless of whether the primary training tool, the longsword, was the premier weapon of the battlefield. He did describe more unarmored longsword techniques than he did armored. Yet much of the unarmored techniques are used in armored fighting as well, and there are ones he describes as “good in armour” or that work “better in armor.”

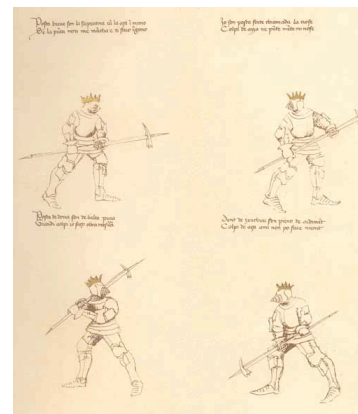


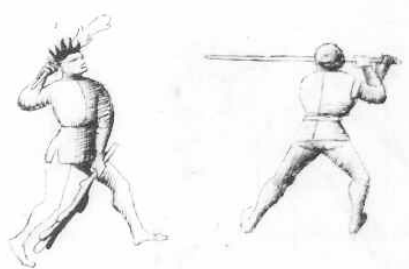
Figure 8



Figure 9

Over and over Fiore shows a variety of simple but effective moves that can be used. Only in a few instances does he present two separate pairs of figures wherein a defense technique is shown in one illustration and a consecutive follow-up counter to that shown in another. But the images are only conceptually sequential in presentation of the figures rather than literally flowing directly one from another. Curiously, in the Getty edition several figures, sometimes masters and sometime students, wear a five-circle logo in the form of a cross on the left or right breast of their tunics.

Among his teachings are shown some unique techniques not typically included in other similar works, such as: punches against attacker's wielding daggers, blade stomps, defense for attacks while sitting, and using the scabbard to block while drawing your sword. However, like many other similar works from the time, he includes nothing on how to learn or how to practice, or how to teach the craft or even exercise. He gave no advice on fitness, offered no training drills or exercises, and described really nothing about practicing in class or alone. In contrast to other fencing treatises of the age, he seemingly uses few short edge strikes (so prominent in the German style as well as the 16th century Italian schools), makes little to no mention of the importance of leverage or pressure, places no real emphasis on winding against the sword, and apparently requires no grip changes for different actions. All these remain as matters for modern students to explore.



Abstraction and Symbolism

Master Fiore included considerable symbolism and abstraction in his work, which was not uncommon within instructional literature at the time. He also employed metaphor in describing concepts and actions, particularly in the verses of the Getty edition. On one page in the Getty edition he holds two “arms” to explain how you can “disarm” an opponent and render them harmless, holds two keys to note he will unlock secrets, and in another stands in safety on a symbolically defeated opponent holding an olive branch. [figure 10]

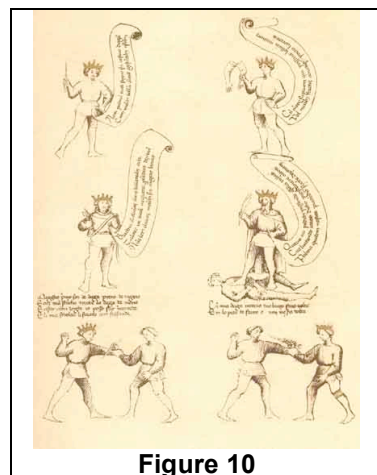


Figure 10

Uniquely, he presented a diagram of himself surrounded by four symbolic animal figures representing the four virtues or fighting qualities of prudence, audacity, strength, and speed. [Figures 11 & 12] These appear surrounding a fighting man and slightly different in each edition (the Getty edition for example featuring a crown above the man). They are represented by the Lynx (appearing to be a greyhound or deer wolf) for prudence, caution, or judgment, (*prudencia* or *avisamento*), the Tiger for celerity, quickness, or dexterity (*celeritas* or *ardimento*), the Lion for audacity or boldness and courage or bravery (*audacia*), and lastly the Elephant carrying a castle tower on its back for strength (*fortitudo* or *forteza*). These elements were stressed when fighting either unarmored or *spada in arme* (with sword in armor). But each animal can be interpreted as having both a physical and a mental attribute.

The lynx (*lovo cerviero*) which is a cautious cat carries a caliper symbolizing the measure of distance or range, and the use of timing as well as targeting or place, since “no creature sees better.” The tiger (*tigro*) carries an arrow symbolizing quickness (*presteza*), as he is “faster than lightning” and “ready to run and turn.” By this he means in the chase of the hunt not in retreating or evading (a virtue which tigers are not known for). The lion (*leone*) holds a heart under his paw symbolizing bravery or daring (*ardimento*). Of such boldness and daring, Fiore stated “courage is the virtue on which this art is based” and which “is necessary to undertake the art of arm.”

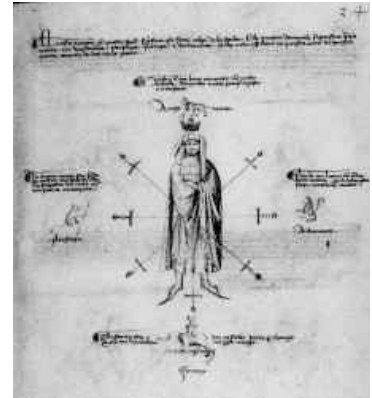


Figure 11

While audacity can mean daring or initiative it can also imply imprudence or recklessness. But we may recall in Latin the saying, *audacia in bello* or “boldness in war.” (We may note that initiative was one of master Liechtenauer’s central elements as well). Below the feet of the man image is an elephant (*ellefante*) with a castle or siege tower on its back. The elephant, he wrote, “carried all” and says that like an elephant “I do not go to my knees nor lose my footing.” Rather than being a metaphor for muscular power or physical strength, by this he meant that one must have a sound and balanced fighting stance that permitted the striking of powerful blows and agile movement --certainly a necessity given the weight of arms and armor a man was expected to carry at length as well as the danger of being forced down to a kneeling posture or on the ground in a fight.

Fiore declared the nature of these four animals was such that a man “who wants to fight us must contrast us. And the swordsman who has our virtues, will take the courage and will fight, with his heart as the art of swordsmanship requires.” Interestingly, this is reminiscent of the master Liechtenauer’s inclusion of a concept of “contraries” (which he attributed to Aristotle) in his own explanation for aspects of fighting. We can note the master Filippo Vadi in his treatise, *De Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi*, produced in Padua some 70 years later in c.1482 (and directly derived or influenced from either Fiore’s work or teachings) similarly used figures of a serpent and dog as well as a ram and a bull to symbolize aspects of swordsmanship. By contrast perhaps, Vadi made even greater use of symbolism to express elements of fighting in his work as well as greater clarification on what edge to strike with in which actions, but over all he presented fewer techniques. One 15th century German work used bird and deer elements as metaphors for skill and at least one Spanish text in the 17th century included cats, owls, and others in the same way. We may note that of all animals Fiore with good reason chose cats, superb hunters, to symbolize the need for speed and agility.

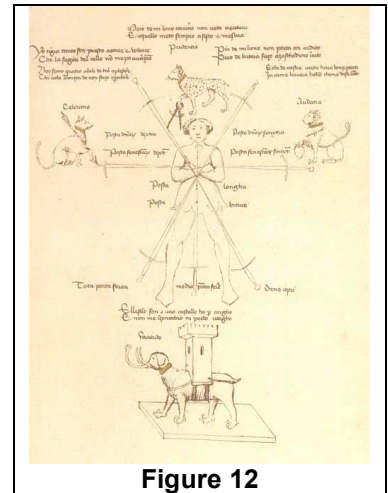
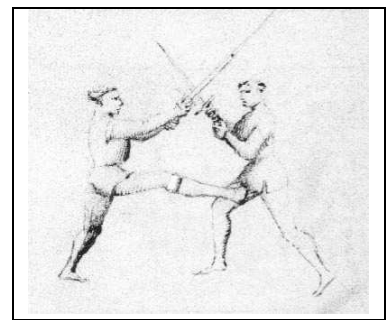


Figure 12

The elephant in Fiore hardly symbolizes that one should be slow and sluggish (something that elephants in warfare certainly are not).

The inclusion by Fiore of attributes crucial to a good fighter is a theme that was to be repeated in fencing literature throughout the next several centuries. It did not originate with Fiore. Hango Döbringer's recording of Liechtenauer's teachings from 1389 presented a range of qualities necessary to a skillful fighter or a master, listing the important elements of knowledge, courage, prudence, cunning, and wisdom. Döbringer also mentioned among those vital intangible attributes that of intelligence, secrecy, reason, determination, deliberateness, quickness, and readiness as factors permitting one to fight well. Liechtenauer declared, "your swordsmanship should go with good courage and good mind or reason, and with no fear." Famously, Liechtenauer declared, "If you are fearful, never learn any art of fighting."

Fiore noted that while considerable exertion was necessary when dealing with actual attacks, in training he took care to note that even though the actions are violent the techniques should be practiced in harmony and without real hatred toward one's *compagno* ("comrade"), essentially a classmate, companion, or practice partner. Yet, in regard to the ideal of etiquette and chivalric courtesy between noble combatants, when describing techniques for use in real combat Fiore pragmatically noted without pretense or false politeness how, "there is no man-at-arms who can use courtesy or kindness to face his enemy." He was being neither idealistic nor patronizing. He was teaching real survival skills and had no illusions about human nature when it came to fighting. The master Vadi in his treatise also warned against being overly polite or merciful to an opponent who was actively seeking your death or defeat, writing, "Be sure, as death is, that your play comes not from courtesy, against he who wants to shame [harm] you."¹³ Fiore however did include an element of mercy in his teachings, acknowledging that at times one did not want to use one's skill to cause serious injury or take life.

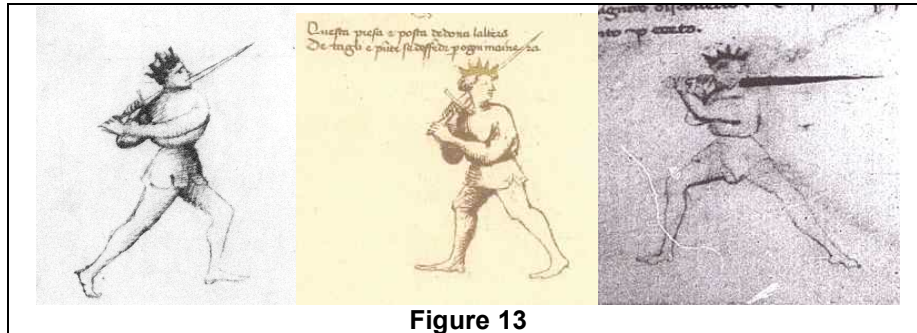


We know that an eight-lined circular diagram, or *Segno*, was often used at this time as a practice wall-target for delivering cuts (*Colpi*) and thrusts (*Punta*), and if placed on the floor, for learning foot-work. It is a convenient device for teaching and focusing of strikes. The term *Segno* means "sign", but can also mean "mark", "target", or even "score." Fiore includes what may be considered such a diagram in his material on dagger as well as longsword in order to show targeting lines or cutting angles.

Fiore tells us he supervised the drawings in his work, presumably those of only one version. Although the better artwork is in the Getty version, and conveys much even using shadow to indicate which leg or arm is behind another, there is however, no doubt that in many instances the art is stylistic. [Figure 13] In places in all three editions the perspective is far from unequivocal. There are peculiarities associated with the depiction of the orientation of feet, hips, and torsos or shoulders throughout. This was not an uncommon element of late 14th and early 15th century artwork of the human figure, including that of Northern Italy. There are

¹³ Luca Porzio. *Arte Gladiatoria -15th century Swordsmanship of Master Filippo Vadi*. Chivalry Bookshelf 2003. Chapter 3, folio 6r, p. 50.

idiosyncratic conventions of artwork from this period we must be aware of that influence interpretation of simple postures. Because the images in martial arts study guides would have served as visual reminders to people already well acquainted with the physical performance of the actions or techniques, they would not have been required to be literal.



Whether or not the images in any version of Fiore’s work can be taken as literal or as representative, we must interpret all possible meanings behind the illustrations and text, and reconcile them both with other historical sources and common sense experience. Tellingly, we can note that nowhere in his work does Fiore ever show a sword blade in anything but a flat side-on view. Blades are never depicted turned or angled even in the simplest way so as to reveal depth or show perspective. This itself strongly suggests lack of true perspective in the illustrations.

Flower of the Art of Fighting: His Knowledge and Teachings

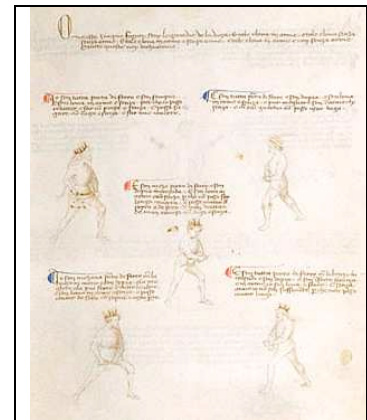
The combat teachings of Fiore are presented, he explains, in words and pictures “as the art requires.” Fiore tells us that his text contains “the most successful and useful methods, those which are strongly required with or without armor, and used for defense or personal safety.” He also states that he included in his work only the techniques he “saw, used, or created” and that he “omitted the least safe ones”. He further declares he will show those “I have seen from teachers, masters, scholars and fighters, dukes, princes, earls, counts, knights, and esquires, and from so many men coming from different provinces.”

To Fiore the craft of fighting or fencing was a science because it had certain principles that could be discerned and applied. The end of the Pisani-Dossi edition refers to his teachings as “the flower of the art of fighting.” Through a unique manner of variously identifying the figures in his illustrations as attackers, as defenders, and as counter-attackers, Fiore tells us that the whole art is more easily presented and understood in his manuscript. Still, as with other martial arts works from the age there is a certain level of vagueness and presumption to the teachings.

Master Fiore also based his fighting method logically enough on his wrestling principles, or *Arte dell’abbracciare* (“art of the embrace”). [Figure 7 & 14] Master Liechtenauer in the late 1300s also described wrestling as the very foundation of fencing. Fiore’s unarmed moves are incorporated throughout the fighting techniques of all his weapons. From the Getty edition, we read in the prologue of the importance of unarmed skills in his method as he cites the value

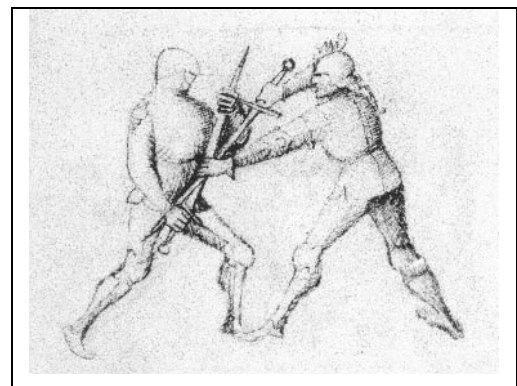
placed upon “how to gain holds as it is custom when you fight for life.”¹⁴ In this he is concerned not with just holds and throws but with strikes to “the most dangerous places” (i.e., the eyes, throat, chin, nose, sides, etc).

The Getty edition also begins with his four wrestling guards: the long point, boar’s tooth, iron door, and frontal, which later correspond to his weapon stances. Interestingly, all but the Iron Door stance are shown with the right leg leading. He refers in the Pisani-Dossi to some of these techniques being ones for “hitting, grabbing and tying” and others for “breaking and dislocating arms and legs.” The Art of Wrestling, he declares in the Pisani-Dossi, requires seven things: strength, agility of feet and arms, holds, breaks, grabs, strikes, and injuries. These are techniques he tells us that one cannot “practice with courtesy, even if they are techniques dangerous to practice.” Thus, Fiore related simple postures with the arms poised for warding and closing to those used with the sword or dagger.



While wrestling teaches the vital foundation of how to judge range and sense leverage or pressure, and how to close in, it is the sword that teaches fundamentals of how to strike, thrust, ward and deflect or parry.

From his prologue master Fiore describes how he told those students he had trained to fight armored behind barriers in judicial contests, “that fighting in the barriers is much, much less dangerous than fighting with sharp and pointed [cutting and thrusting] swords in *zuparello darmare* [with only a padded arming jacket] and leather gloves because to the one who plays with sharp swords, failing just one cover gives him death.”¹⁵ Commenting on the inherent danger of unarmored combat (in contrast with armored) he declared, “While the one who fights in the barriers and is well armoured, can be given a lot of hits, but still he can win the battle. Also there is another fact: that rarely someone dies because he gets hit.” Stressing their danger Fiore added that he himself would prefer to have to fight armored than unarmored: “Thus I can say that I would rather fight three times in the barriers [i.e., in armor] than just once [unarmored] with sharp swords...”¹⁶



Declaring his own expertise in what is evidently an impressive accomplishment, Fiore says that five times he was challenged to combat in this dangerous manner by other fencing masters, yet each time he emerged victorious and walked away with his honor intact. He tells us this occurred “because I did not want to practice with them nor teach them anything of my art.” He also

¹⁴ Pierpont-Morgan Library version. MS M. 383. Folio 3, verso & recto, Folio 4 recto.

¹⁵ Getty Museum version, (Accession Number 83.MR.183. MS LUDWIG XV 13). Folio 3, verso & recto, Folio 4 recto.

¹⁶ Pierpont-Morgan Library version. MS M. 383. 1 Verso.

remarks that each time alone he had “to fight in strange places, without relatives and without friends, not trusting others, but in God and the art and in myself, Fiore, and in my sword.”¹⁷ He does not say what became of his opponents in these challenges. The implication we may draw here is that different masters of fencing challenged one another and that for some reason Fiore dei Liberi gave them reasons to either doubt his ability or feel threatened by it.

In the prologue of the Pierpont-Morgan Library edition when referring to armored judicial combat in the enclosed barriers, Fiore also noted that, “Also, it is another thing that rare times [rarely] does anybody perish because they grab and grapple.”¹⁸ We might assume that grappling in a judicial combat would naturally lead to a position where one fighter would be pinned or immobilized so that a halt might be called by the presiding authority before any lethal thrust was made with a dagger or sword. Yet he still adds that a man having the advantages of being “well armoured and knowing the art of combat” if not valiant and victorious in such a fight will “hang himself.”¹⁹



We might recall that sometimes losers in judicial duels, even if they survived the combat, were often hung afterward. Oddly however, the descriptions he gives of his students’ combats seem to be not of judicial duels, but classic chivalric challenges to mounted jousting followed by a series of exchanged blows with different weapons. So his precise meaning of “barrier” combat here may mean simply knightly fighting in an enclosed area, whether chivalric or judicial, and possibly even sporting tournament.

There is some evidence Fiore dei Liberi was concerned with battlefield combat and not just judicial duels and personal self-defense since Fiore also provided advice on using the longsword against multiple opponents. The Pisani-Dossi edition refers to the art as “this martial discipline, which is of so great assistance to expert people in war and any other occasion.” As well, there are instances of mounted versus foot combatants and armored versus unarmored opponents –all things that might be encountered in battle. His concern as an instructor of martial arts was to provide well-rounded skills applicable to any likely situation whether or not their primary training tool, the longsword, was the premier weapon of the battlefield. Of his *la spada a doy mane*, “the two-hand sword,” master Fiore declares it “mortal against any weapon” stating that it: fights near or far, closes in for disarms and wrestling, can break and bind, cover and injure, and is a royal weapon, the maintainer of justice used to increase goodness and destroy malice [Getty 25r].

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Pierpont-Morgan Library version. MS M. 383. 1 Verso.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Postures of Defense

Although he does identify them for reference as with other fencing manuals from the time, Fiore does not place great importance or emphasis on fighting stances. Fiore defines his fighting postures, or *Posta*, as meaning “that the man guards himself and defends himself with it from the wounds inflicted by his enemy” as well as “the way of waiting for your enemy and offending him, without danger for yourself.” (Folio 4r) But this does not mean he believes a man should be passive, keep motionless or remain still in his stance.

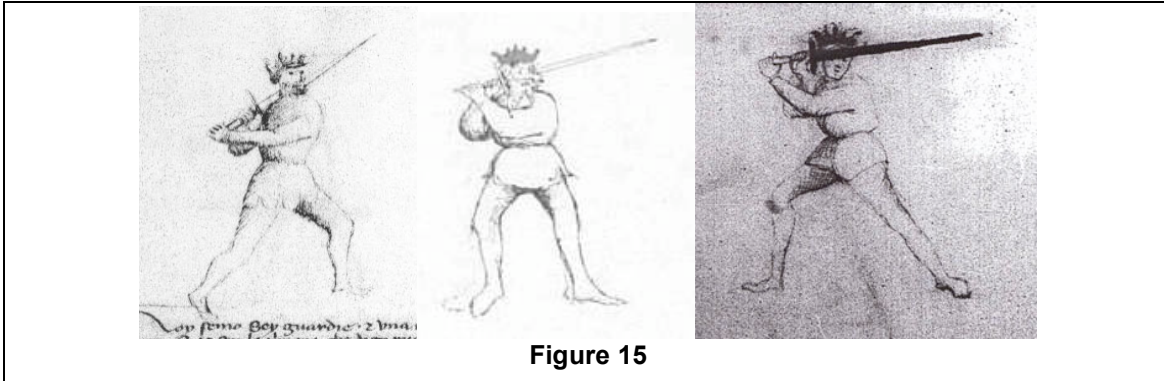


Figure 15

Fiore uses the terms *posta* or *guardia* interchangeably. Interestingly, although he calls *Posta* the “beginning of the art” Fiore does not even address fighting stances until several pages into his work. They essentially match several in other fencing works and make the most sense when we understand them not as static or rigidly fixed but dynamic, flexible ready positions from which actions are delivered but which result from actions as well. Postures in Fiore naturally correspond to many within other treatises, as there are only so many effective ways fighting men could hold and wield such weapons. As Fiore names the different guards he gives some brief explanations for the obvious utility of each. For nearly all two-hand stances his left hand always holds the pommel and he does not appear to change grips.

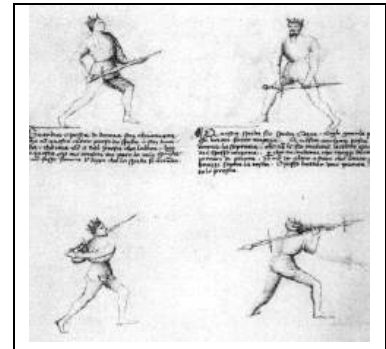
Taken altogether, Fiore has about 19 guards, five of which are half-sword positions for armored combat. Fiore Dei Liberi’s *Posta* are among the more difficult stances to discern due to the variety and inconsistency of his names within his writing and among the three different versions of his manual. On occasion Fiore will show and name only a right or left side version for a particular stance but not identify its alternate opposite side version. We might assume it is the same and that it “works on both sides,” but he names some differently depending on which side they are on and this can be confusing. The names are also slightly different from Latin to Italian in different versions.



Fiore teaches 12 basic postures for unarmored combat. His main stances are practical and familiar enough to students of historical fencing: high outside (*Posta di Finestra* or “window”), high over the shoulder (*Posta di Donna*, “Lady’s guard” or “women’s stance”), close in the middle (*Posta*

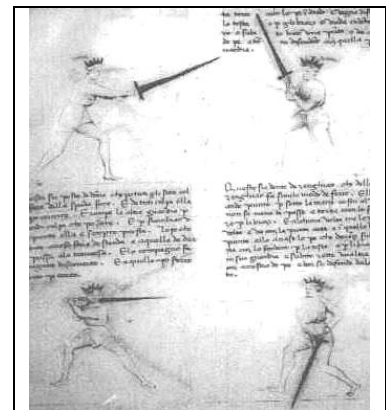
Breva or “short guard”), a long extension (*Posta Longa* or “long guard”), a raised middle (*Frontali* or *Corona*, “crown guard”), and the three low guards of *Porta di Ferro* (“iron door”) held between the legs, (*Porto di Ferro Mezzana* or “middle iron door”) held on the right outside, and finally *Tutto/Tuta Porta di Ferro* (meaning “whole” or “full”) held on the left outside (*Posta Dente de Zenchiare* or *Posta di dente chinghiale/chingiare* meaning “boar’s tooth”). Fiore essentially uses his Iron Door as a low right guard, and the Boar Tooth as a low left guard. A back or tail guard, *Posta di Coda lunga distesa* (“long lying tail”) finished out his fighting stances.

In the longer Getty edition of Fiore’s *Flos Duellatorum*, the order in which the main *posta* are given are: Iron Door, Woman’s, Finestra (right), Woman’s left, Long, Middle Iron Door, Short, Boar, Tail, Two-Horn (called *Bicornio*), Front/Crown, and then a “middle” Boar Tooth (*Posta de Dente Zenchiare Mezana*, shown with the torso and the right lead leg turned away and the back knee bent further). One of the first stances shown and referred to in the Getty edition however is, oddly enough, merely one of preparing to throw the sword.



In the shorter Pierpont-Morgan edition, the order of the stances are: Iron Door, Woman’s, Window (right), Woman’s left, Long, Middle Iron Door, Short, Boar, Tail, Two-Horn, Frontal/Crown, and then a Middle Boar Tooth (here called *Posta di Dente Cinghiare Mezzana*). In the Pisanni-Dossi edition, the order is: Iron Door, Woman’s, Finestra (right), Middle Iron Door, Long, Frontal/Crown, Woman’s Upper (right), Boar, Short, Woman’s Upper (left side, here called *Posta Stanca Di Vera Finestra*), Tail, and Two-Horn.

In the Pisani-Dossi edition the *Posta Breve* is drawn almost identically to the *Posta di Fronte* or *Posta di Frontale*, which he also calls *Corona*. The *Frontali / Corona* is equivalent to the *Kron* of the German school which is also described more as a defensive technique for binding than as a stance. This is shown as a middle position leading with the left leg and the hilt held close to the chest or abdomen with the sword point held outward pointing forward diagonally and pommel held as high as the belly. Yet, in the other editions these stances are very distinct, with the *Breve* guard closer and lower (point more diagonal) and the crown higher and farther out, the point more vertical. (In Filippo Vadi’s work, the “Frontal” guard is shown as held much closer to the body, quite high above the waist and with the point directed upward more vertically. Vadi’s *Posta Falcone* is depicted as very similar to Fiore’s *Posta Fronte / Corona*.²⁰) Such differences may be only matters of the artist, or they may reflect styles among masters. The discrepancies among his stances in the three editions are thus considerable.



²⁰ He shows it as a stance with the hilt held close in the center at chest level with the blade forward out at a 45-degree angle. While seeming to expose the hands to attack, this position is actually quite reasonable as the hilt lies in the same position it occupies while striking left to right or transitioning from one high outside posture to another. An equivalent stance to this does not generally appear in German fighting texts, although Paulus Hector Mair’s immense tome from c. 1540 also shows such a position in action.

The *Posta Longa* (“long point”), equivalent to the *Langer Ort* or *Langerorte* of the German school, is an extended middle position with the arm and blade out almost horizontally. This often results from a counter-thrust or stop-thrust and can be used for warding, threatening and attacking primarily to the throat or face. We might note curiously that Fiore does not seem to include a guard or stance equivalent to the “barrier ward” (the German *Schrankhut*, also called *das Pforten* or “the gate”) a useful position fairly prevalent in the literature. However, he does depict actions that can be interpreted as applications of this position. He does include a move equivalent to the function of a *Schrankhut*, which in the Getty text he called the *colpi di villano* or “peasant strike,” and explained as a defensive move to intercept so that the attacker’s blade is received and slides off before you then strike down. Whether this combination action is named for being like a strike “on” a peasant, or is itself the response to a strike that is “as if from” a peasant, is unclear. (Curiously, Liechtenauer called the basic diagonal strike of *Zornhau* just a “bad peasant blow.”) In the Pisani-Dossi text however, the same image is explained as a voiding move followed by a strike.

Purpose and Perspective

It must be noted how in each edition the *Posta* are not presented in the same sequence or pattern. Noticeably, all the rows of lone figures depicting the *Posta* look at one another, even though they are not facing off or intended to be engaged one against the other. Each figure on the left side almost exclusively looks in the same direction as they are facing, while each figure on the right side invariably turns their head as if to reference (look back at) the previous figure on the left. The stance figures are not presented as if the reader is expected to literally look to the other direction when assuming the fighting stance. This can be seen in most all instances for both the unarmored and armored *Posta*. The Getty and PML images are also shown more in profile while the perspective of the Pisani-Dossi appear more frontal.

When considering Fiore’s illustrations there are some core assumptions we must make about the fundamental function of fighting stances or ready postures in any combative art: Those fighting postures or ready stances are best which *both defend and threaten alternative lines of attack*. That is, they permit the natural biomechanics of the body to make the most efficient (quickest and strongest) range of offensive and defensive strikes.

Among the images of stances in the three editions there are considerable differences. [Figure 16] The rear heels are sometimes raised while in others the toes are raised and in still others the feet are flatfooted. Even in the same stance, the feet are sometimes shown sideways while at other times they are to some degree angled diagonally. This makes determining the actual alignment of the hips and shoulders (which determine the facing of the torso) particularly difficult for certain stances. Most curiously, we can note the faces of the figures are sometimes shown in profile while at other times they appear head on, and in still others we see only the back of head. The directing of a figure’s face toward the reader in an image is a familiar convention of Medieval artwork from this era wherein a figure “speaks,” as it were, directly to a reader. This can lead now to all manner of misinterpretation. In Fiore’s art we see evidence of the Renaissance art concept known as *Contrapposto* (counter postures). This can be defined as the arranged posture of the human form so that the body parts (head, arms, and legs) are set on

oblique axes, balanced but asymmetrical, turning around the body's vertical axis and resulting in the hips, shoulders, and head turned in different directions. In some instances, the very same groups of figures between the different editions of Fiore's work are shown *contrapposto* in this way with their feet turned in the opposite direction.

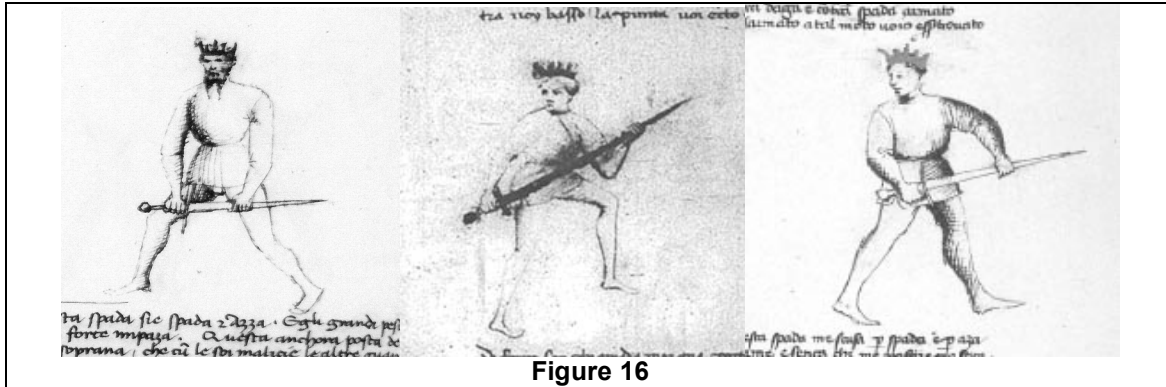


Figure 16

In the Getty edition he states about all *Posta* that, “one is contrary to the other” and that each are “similar to the other, and is its contrary.” With the exception, he adds, of those that “stay in thrust” (meaning aim their point directly at the opponent). He does not imply that any particular stance is intended to defeat any particular other. Fiore did not mean that different guards are opposed to one another or counter each other, but simply that they were each different from one another. It is a mistake to assume that because the individual figures representing his various stances in his section on *Posta* appear in two rows that they are “facing” or “engaging” one another. They are not. Each is to be considered separately. Such a mistake is the source of much confusion over the proper positioning when adopting his *Posta*. This mistake can also arise from misreading the Pisani-Dossi text which, while stating the various basic guards are contrary to one another, adds that depending on position they can be used against each other. But again it does not state that any specific guard is to be employed as a specific counter to another. When introducing the same figures representing six stances, the Pisani-Dossi edition states it simply, they are “different one from the other. One does one way, the others another.”

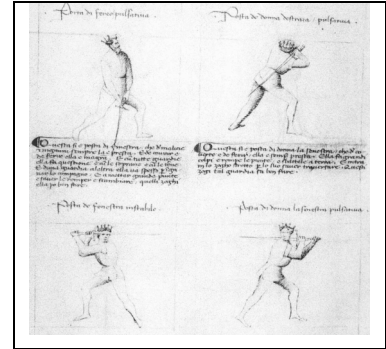
As with other works of historical European martial arts, the actual positions of several of Fiore's stances are highly debatable. The *Posta di Donna* particularly so as it appears in some cases to be horizontal or diagonal, pulled back behind the head or the neck, and even with the edge resting on the collar and seemingly held like a baseball bat. In some the cross guard seems up against the ear and in others touching the chest. There are considerable issues with regard to interpreting this stance literally. In one disparity, the Getty edition of Fiore's *Flos Duellatorum* depicts the right side “Lady's” guard (and its left version, the “Rear Royal Window”) with the blade held horizontal and seemingly resting on the shoulder, while the Morgan shows it angled and higher.



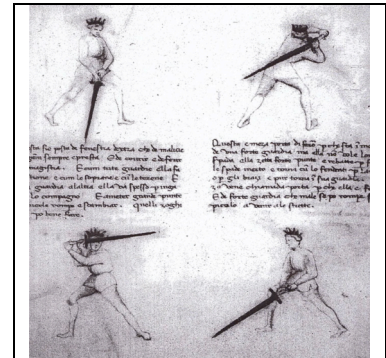
The Pisani-Dossi edition says of it, “This grip is the posta of the proud woman” and “protects against any cuts and thrusts.” Next to it the same stance is shown with Fiore's unusual polaxe-

sword weapon from an unequivocally side view and held clearly over the shoulder. This would establish the true perspective of the position as not being literally with the blade resting upon the collar and aimed behind the head or across the back of the neck. The following page then describes the guard again as “the guard of the high and proud woman” used “for all manner of defense” and rather facetiously adds that to counter it one should have a longer sword. But here it is seemingly shown from a rear view where it again resembles the German *Zornhut*.

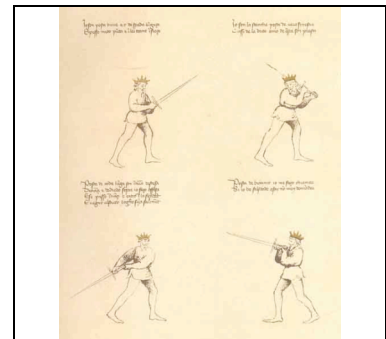
While Fiore’s “high outside” stance of *Posta reale di vera finestra* (or “true window” guard) may be compared to the German *Ochs* stance, some suggest it is not identical. (In his 1611 dictionary of Italian John Florio gave the definition of *Finestra* as “a little window” and relates it to similar terms for “a window with iron bars” as well as a hole, a spike hole, to make a little hole, and holed through.) The Getty edition also states about the *Posta di Fenestra* that it is the master of “covering and injuring” that it is deceptive and goes “from one guard to the other.”²¹ It is also described as very good for thrusting and “to break and change.” On the *Posta Finestra* from the Pisani-Dossi edition Fiore essentially states with sound reason that it is “ready for cunning and tricks” that it misleads, covers, wounds, makes great thrusts and breaks against high or low stances.



In some versions of Fiore’s work the *Finestra* is drawn horizontal while in others the point appears raised up either prominently or just slightly. Similarly, the *Ochs* position appears in artwork and text descriptions as a variety of positions, some with the point up, some with it hanging down, and is later identified in one point up version as the separate position of *Einhorn* (“unicorn”) guard. Such a “high outside” posture can naturally result from the simple act of drawing a weapon worn on the waist, and is arguably the origin of the posture, which appears in fencing arts around the world since ancient times. It has its utility in a straight thrust as well as ease of immediately cutting downward or underneath. Regardless of subtle variations, it can be confidently stated that all “high outside” stances in weapon fighting derive from this.



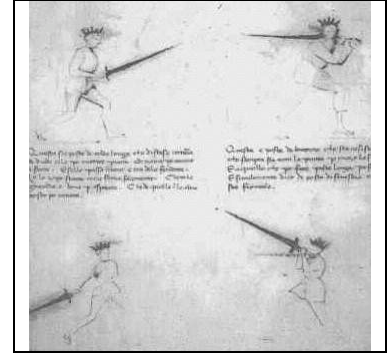
We can note though that regardless of the manner in which stances are drawn, whenever two figures are depicted engaged with weapons crossed in some way, their body postures have one leg bent at the knee and the other one somewhat stretched out. Comparing the differences among the versions and summing up the material however can determine a consistency to Fiore’s method and his stances. Tellingly, Fiore describes his stances as being either stable or unstable, or rather being active or reactive. Some stances



²¹ Fiore’s right side *Finestra* easily transitions into his left “rear window” stance by a simple passing forward of the rear right leg while turning the sword hilt so that it swings around over the left shoulder with the point aimed back.

are “unstable” positions essentially because they are not ones from which a fighter can freely provoke and ward, let alone hold indefinitely, as can be achieved with “stable” ones. They are instead specific to certain attacks. His unstable (*instabile*) guards are the Window, Long, Two-Horn, and Front/Crown.

The Getty edition of Fiore’s text depicts the “Middle Iron Door” in armor with the lead right knee bent and the left leg stretched. The “Middle Iron Door” guard is depicted as held between both legs (in Vadi’s manual it is shown as held next to the knee, outside the right leg, as opposed to between the legs as with Fiore’s. He also shows a stance equivalent to Fiore’s “Iron Door” as being *Santoria di Fero Prona Terrena*, which he also calls *Porta Di Ferro Pianna Terrena*). He notes it as being strong and good for thrusts and upward beats but not used to close. The Iron Door (*Eiserne Pforte* in the German school) properly holds the blade slightly turned away from the opponent and is indeed a very effective position for defensive countering and for safely entering in. From the Iron Door, simply raising the hilt permits it to assume a “hanging” position (which surprisingly Fiore does not address anywhere). A “hanging” position easily then transforms by a simple turn of the hilt to become a high guard. Similarly, the point may be smoothly turned back to assume a high outside stance over the shoulder, or the hilt may lower and the feet turn to assume a Tail guard. The Tail guard itself can step forward to assume the Iron Door or also rise to assume the Window posture, and so on, etc. The possible transitions between such stances are of course innumerable. In the Getty edition, the Full Iron Door (*Tutto Porta di Ferro*) is depicted as held low and centered in the middle. It is described as a strong defensive stance that covers well, is relaxed, and good for waiting to counter strike as well as for closing in.



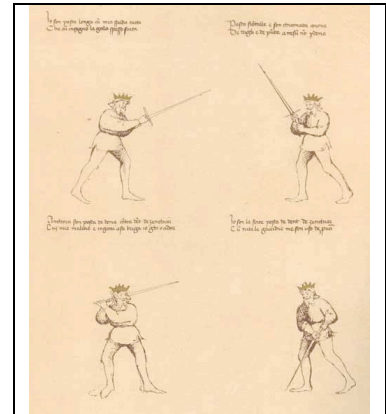
From the Getty edition one of the first images portrays a swordsman facing multiple opponents wherein Fiore displays his low or Iron Door stance describing how, “even if you were one hundred, I would wound you all, because of this guard, which is a good and powerful thing.” Curiously, Hanko Doebringer writing in 1389 on how to face multiple opponents instructed the best technique (taught by older masters) was the *Eysern Pforte* (“iron door”), a position with the blade in front pointed diagonally toward the ground and somewhat off to the side.

The Boar Tooth in the Getty (here identified as *Dente di Zengiario*) is shown as held low on the left outside, hilt next to the hip, and said to be good for thrusting. He adds it defends against closures, follows through with a downward strike, and can be used with or without a step. Oddly, in the shorter PML edition, the illustration for the Boar and Iron Door positions are extremely similar, with both showing a right leg lead with the sword held down and between the legs. The Getty Fiore shows the Boar with a much more dynamic turn of the body and shift of the feet. It may noted that the Boar appears equivalent to the *Wechsel* (“change”) ward of the German school, a position that results naturally from a diagonal right-to-left downward cut. Filippo Vadi’s Boar by contrast is shown held on the left side with the left leg leading, and is itself equivalent to his

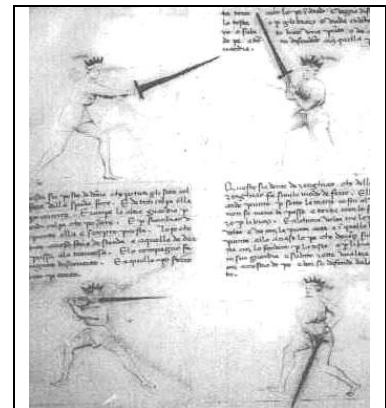


“Middle Iron Door” on the right side with the right leg leading. They appear to be only left and right versions of the same guard, but have been given entirely different names and descriptions. At another point however, Vadi depicts his “Boar’s Tooth” as held between the legs and with the right leg leading. Finally, at the end of the *Posta* in the Getty edition Fiore describes a Half Boar’s Tooth (here called *Dente Cenghiaro Mezano*), which is shown with a right leg lead, the sword held between the legs, and the hilt pulled back. He states it can thrust as well as slice.

Fiore’s *Posta di Donna Destraza* or *Posta di Donna Sovrana* (translated as “Lying Woman’s” or “Noblewoman’s” stance, “High Lady’s” guard, or even as “upper” and “upward” Lady’s guard) may be interpreted as apparently being equivalent to the German “guard of wrath” or *Zornhut*. The blade is pulled back so that it hangs down diagonally flat behind the back over the shoulder-bone and with the body turned away somewhat. This guard actually allows for a stronger cut when the sword is brought diagonally behind the back rather than straight vertically behind the back since more of the back muscles come into play in bringing the weapon around. Like the *Zornhut*, the *Posta Sovrana* is an offensive guard of “provocation” rather than “readiness.” At one point he refers to the *Posta di Donna Soprana e Altera* (or “high/proud woman’s guard”).



Yet, the terminology for the assorted variations of his guards can become somewhat confusing, especially given the subtlety of the difference in their illustration. On the *Posta de Donna Destraza, Pulsativa* (“right Lady’s stance”), Fiore states it “can do all the seven blows of the sword” plus also cover “all the blows” and “break the other guards” with its great blows. Again he makes a reference to breaking blows with other blows as he later shows in many techniques. He further adds that it is always ready to counter-thrust. Yet the posture is drawn so that it appears identical to German *Zornhut*, which while able to strike powerful cuts is hardly suited to any thrusting. He also tells us (Getty 23V) that the lead foot advances out of the way while the back *passes ala traversa* (“traversing across”) so that the opponent is exposed. His description is of it advancing, not passive or waiting defensively, saying that it can make all cuts and thrust well. The interpretation of this *Posta* that best fits this is when it is held over the shoulder and not literally behind the back or across the neck nor as in *Zornhut* (which is more restrictive in its applications).



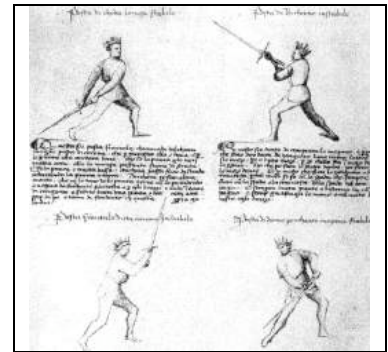
The *Posta di Donna la Senestra* (or “left Lady’s guard”) is however shown held over the shoulder on the left side (identical to German *Vom Tag* or “roof” position). Of this Fiore states in the Getty it is good for “covering and injuring” and is “always ready” to makes “great blows and breaks and beats thrusts down.” He adds that from knowledge of how to cross or traverse it permits entering very effectively. (This instruction however makes no sense if the posture is adopted as being held literally behind the head or across



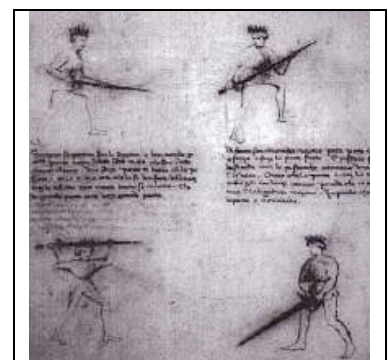
the back of the neck and the legs oriented with the body weight backward instead of evenly centered).

For his Short guard, which he says is more suited to armored fighting (no doubt because of its obvious thrusting potential) he notes that it always moves about and can enter with a thrust or with a pass. In the Getty edition's image for the *Posta Breve* the left leg leads while the left forearm and pommel are not visible but appear to be held forward the left thigh, the point up at a 45-degree angle, and the long edge toward the opponent (approximate to the German *Pflug*, which when held on the right side places the pommel in front of the hip or thigh). Yet in the PML and Pisani-Dossi editions the short guard actually appears as if held with the pommel in front of the abdomen. The Long Point he naturally characterizes as deceptive, probing, maneuverable, and very good at thrusting. The Long Tail appears to be shown with the right or long edge seemingly aimed down and the arms stretched out. It states it can thrust, cover, wound, change, close, and strike down with a pass. (That he refers to this at times as a "lying" tail, as opposed to a raised one may be of note, since there are examples in artwork from the period of swords held back behind in more horizontal or even upward diagonal positions.)

Fiore's somewhat unusual reverse gripped *Posta Bicornio* is as a defensive thrusting stance suited to transitioning to half-sword. Some say this translates as "two horned" while others, say it translates as "unicorn," the latter is certainly more logical and again has precedent in the German school with the guard of *Einhorn*. The Unicorn (or Two Horn) is shown with the left leg leading and the blade held at an upward diagonal angle, the arms still bent at the elbows, and somewhat awkwardly, the knuckles of the left hand turned back underneath to the right as they grip the pommel so that the thumb is on the left side. He states from here it keeps the point on but can thrust and strike like the Window or Frontal guards. The seemingly strange grip itself can result from either a short edge vertical cut or the reversing of a vertical descending long edge cut. Fiore shows the Frontal /Crown guard here as being with a right leg lead and he declares it good for crossing blades and thrusting.



Fiore lists 6 *Mezza Spada* ("middle sword") guards for holding one hand on the handle and one on the blade itself: *Posta Serpentino* (the "serpent"), *Posta Serpentino Superiore* ("high serpent"), *Posta Sagittaria* (the "archer"), *Posta Vera Croce* ("true cross"), and *Posta Croce Bastarda* (the "cross"). These correspond to gripping the sword at the first quarter of the blade above the hilt, gripping it higher up just below the last quarter, gripping it in a high outside (window), and in a diagonal hanging position with the hilt (or cross) up and then with the hilt down. The Getty edition of Fiore's text additionally shows another *Mezza Spada* or halfswording stance with the blade held horizontally close to the thighs, as almost a relaxed alert position.



Fiore leads with his left leg in all his *Mezza Spada* (a necessity given that the second hand (left hand) is reaching out farther to grasp the blade). His six armored combat guards as described in the Pisani-Dossi edition are: the Short Serpent, the True Cross, the Upper or High Serpent, the

Middle Iron Door, the Archer (or Arrow), and the Bastard Cross. All of these but the Iron Door are half-sword stances.

Noticeably, nowhere in Fiore's manual (or the other 15th century Italian work by Filippo Vadi) do we see a weapon held in a familiar over the head or "High" guard (both hands on the grip with the point back) as in so many other fencing works of the era. This may simply be a result of a different style and inclination, or an Italian preference for armor that provided less flexible shoulder rotation and therefore prevented the arms being raised up high. Another possibility is that Fiore's two "Women's" positions may very well in fact be the equivalent to the left and right over the shoulder guards, just drawn more idiosyncratically. But then again, it may be a conscious choice of Fiore's method to not use such a position which exposes the fighter. There were differences in temperament and general physicality between Italians and other Northern European peoples and such was increasingly recognized into the 16th and 17th centuries. These factors alone, combined with the fact that there are many different ways of fighting help explain distinctions between the Italian masters and their German counterparts.

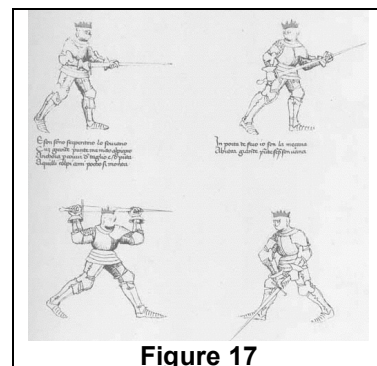


Figure 17

There are numerous peculiarities among the Posta between the three editions. Strangely, the stances in the PML edition include a page of four *unarmored* figures in postures identically the same as a group of four *armored* figures in stances from the Pisani-Dossi edition. [Figure 17] Oddly, both the Pisani-Dossi and Getty actually show one armored half-sword stance with weapon held high above and horizontally behind the head. [Figure 18] The Pisani-Dossi edition shows two armored half-sword stances, which it does not name, one with pommel gripped by the right hand, and each with a reversed left hand holding onto the last quarter of the blade. But neither of these stances is held in exactly this way when recognized in the Getty edition, where they are identified as the Short Serpent and the True Cross, the former depicted as held horizontally in the middle of the blade, and the latter held more toward the point in a reverse grip and somewhat diagonally. The "sword throwing" stance from the Pisani-Dossi, called *Posta Sagittaria* in the Getty, employs a right hand reverse grip that holds the weapon by the core of the hilt (that is, with the hand half on the blade and half on the cross).

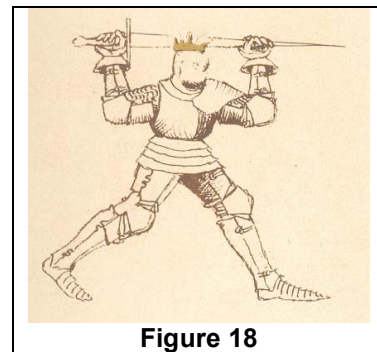


Figure 18

Taken in totality, the sum impression of his stances as they are depicted throughout the three editions are actually quite consistent with the stances familiar to most all Medieval and Renaissance fighting arts: the front leg is slightly bent and the rear slightly stretched, the lead foot pointing toward the opponent and the rear angled off, and the weapon is variously held poised to strike offensively or defensively along numerous lines of attack in a fluid transitional position that both begins and ends a strike.

Two-Dimensional Blades?

Lastly, one of the most significant issues related to interpreting Fiore Dei Liberi's teachings (particularly in the area of his fighting postures) is that of the perspective of the swords themselves. Careful consideration of these illustrations leads to the conclusion the images cannot be taken literally. We must note immediately that *every sword blade depicted in Fiore's treatise is shown only in a flat 2-dimensional profile*. Although it has gone largely overlooked among students of the material, they are all drawn in "side views" and never angled or turned. For swords to remain in such positions would naturally be impossible given the range of action any blade must go through in the course of striking, warding, and binding. Yet, throughout the editions the only time any sword is displayed in any position other than with its flat facing the viewer is in a few instances where they have been placed on the ground or dropped at the feet of the figures. Otherwise, every *posta* and every crossing of two blades has the weapons *illustrated in nearly the same identical plane*—in almost interchangeable positions. Regardless of what direction they are held, only their flat sides show and there is consequently very little indication of either edge location or relative angle of hilt and point. In only certain instances can this be inferred with confidence from the relative position of each combatant's hands and feet to one another.

This element of false perspective cannot be ignored as it significantly affects any interpretation of just what the combatants are supposed to be doing and how their weapons are being employed. Even in the cases of his longer weapons, such as poleaxes and halberds, the angulation of their shafts is barely depicted with any discernable depth. Comparison of examples of fighting stances and postures in 14th and 15th century fencing iconography with those displaying combative form and human motion within period artwork on the whole reveals certain artistic conventions from the era. These conventions reflect, to a large degree, aspects of failed perspective. Before we can address issues of physical biomechanics (or technical movement) involved in assuming the images reflect literal depictions, we have to first consider these artistic conventionalities. [This concern can be applied specifically to Fiore's images more than those from other contemporary works because of the often highly questionable interpretations of his fighting positions being promoted at present—interpretative mistakes that result directly from taking his images at literally 2-dimensional face value. This problem of perspective is particular in regard to Fiore's artwork on fighting postures more so than other fencing works from the era (or later) precisely because we have such a variety of example art from them by which to cross compare. The larger number of more realistic illustrations of stances or postures offer a greater resource pool by to which clarify those depicted in earlier artwork.]

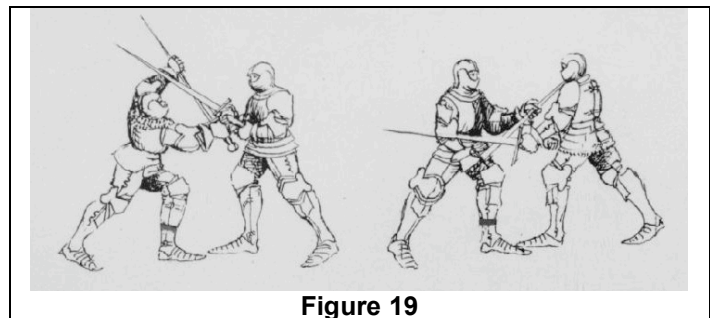
Techniques and Method

Early on master Fiore explains "there are four things in the art, which are passing, turning, advancing and retreating" which are then easily noticeable in nearly all his example plays (i.e., counter techniques to attacks). He explains his footwork simply by stating that from each guard one can perform a *Volta Stabile* ("stable turn"), a *Meza Volta* (half turn), or a *Tutta Volta* (full turn). A *Volta Stabile* he tells us is one made "when standing still," that is, with just a small turn of the hips, torso, and arms (with or without a small move of one foot). Passing forward or backward he actually terms *Meza Volta* or a "half turn." A *Tutta Volta* or "full turn" he

describes as turning around on one foot while the other remains stationary. Several times he instructs to make a simple forward step or *acresser* (i.e., advance or step forward) with a cut or thrust and mentions the use of combination attacks of thrusts and cuts delivered with forward traversing steps or passing motions. He does not address footwork more than just to state when executing a move that one simply should turn and or step.

Fiore described two essential ranges for fighting, *Gioco Largo* (“large play” or “wide play”), shown as being the techniques for when blades are crossed, and *Gioco Stretto* (“close play” or “narrow play”) or techniques for what he called “binds, breaks and wrestling.” He only addresses these two distances as being that farther out for cutting and thrusting and that closer in for seizing, disarms, and grappling. His longsword teaching is divided up into in these two areas. The first covering thrusts, cuts, counter-strikes, binding, covering, and breaks. The second covering disarms, seizures, dislocations, and grips. There are considerable examples of blade seizing and disarms in the work. Indeed, he emphasizes this kind of closing in (at *Gioco Stretto* range) to grab the opponent’s arm or hand, or their hilt or blade, followed up with a thrust. Such actions are often preceded by halfswording moves.

Within Fiore’s work there is significant use of halfswording (*Mezza Spada*), for fighting both unarmored and in armor. [Figure 19] He employs such moves primarily for working the point of his tapered blade into a stabbing position to the face or throat as well as to deflect away thrusts and cuts. Given the type of blade he is using and the bare hands of



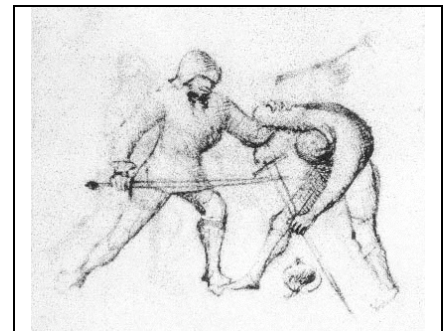
the fighters, we can assume logically his sword was sharpened far more on the final quarter of the blade. At one point he seems to imply not to employ half-swording stances against an opponent wielding only a dagger, which makes sense since it fails to take advantage of the sword’s greater reach and can permit the dagger to deflect the point and quickly slash against the hand holding the blade.

Master Fiore also described the thrust as the most dangerous of attacks and one responsible for more wounds than any other, calling it a “poisonous serpent” or “more poisonous than a snake.” He clearly recognized that thrusts were quick, problematic, and able to disrupt cuts. Fiore even acknowledges that thrusts can thwart or preempt cuts. At one point he even declared, “I have a sharp point to go through harnesses.” Fiore calls thrusts “cruel and mortal” and instructs to direct them to the middle from the groin up to the forehead, but most thrusts that he later makes are aimed at the face or throat. He describes five manners of thrusting as two downward from on high (presumably his left and right window stances), two from low under positions on either side, and finally, a center middle thrust (delivered from middle or half iron door positions or from the short guard). Indeed, a considerable portion of Fiore’s techniques for longsword directly involve thrusting, moving in to thrust, responding to cuts with thrusts, or breaking thrusts with other thrusts. Master Vadi in his own later work also wrote of the danger of thrusting attacks. When discussing sharply edged and pointed blades, as opposed to *a çugare a spade di taglio e di punta*, the prologue to Getty edition of Fiore dei Liberi’s fighting guide refers to *ferri*

moladi (“blunted blades”) as being used in practicing. Elsewhere he refers to *Spada da Zogho* or a “play sword” or practice blade. The 1475 edition of Paris de Puteo’s tome on principles of judicial duelling similarly refers to *fare a spade molate* or “to play with blunted swords.”

Curiously, Fiore Dei Liberi advised reasonably enough that, “When someone strikes to your leg, step slip with your forefoot. You retreat backwards and strike a downward cut in his head...” Indeed, he even then claimed (despite the considerable iconographic and practical evidence to the contrary from the era) that low leg hits were specifically impractical with a longsword: “With a two-handed sword you can not strike well from the knee downwards, because it is very dangerous for the one who strikes, because the one who attacks the leg remains all uncovered. Unless one has fallen on the ground, then he can injure the leg well, otherwise you can not, being sword against sword.” (Getty edition 26r). His logic was of course sound for his size of sword, and yet the longer the weapon the easier effective hits to the lower legs are in unarmored combat. (In fact, more than once he refers to swords that are “not too long” which would suggest that he held a preference for a particular length of longsword.)

It can be observed that the illustrations of sword blades in all three editions appear to alter arbitrarily in their length among the various techniques and stances, appearing at times as much as a quarter or more longer or shorter. This may simply be due to the whim of the artist. One certainly cannot make conclusive observations as to their true length or comparative dimensions as anything unusual compared to what is known to have been in use at the time or to those appearing in other similar fencing works. More importantly, the contacting blade portions between crossing swords in illustrations of techniques among all three editions do not appear to reflect a consistency of intentional blade divisions corresponding to known aspects of fencing leverage (i.e., strong and weak blade pressure). Only a few times does Fiore even mention the position of swords crossing or binding in the middle the blades.



Offense and Defense

In Fiore’s method all parries were to be made as downward or *fendente* strikes (“through the teeth). The name itself suggests a blow aimed to literally pass through the head or jaw, though it is essentially just any descending blow. Of these he declared, “they do not wait,” meaning timing was crucial in such defensive counter-striking. This is achieved by well-timed hits either to knock away oncoming blows or else quickly lower the weapon to a position where it naturally received the strike on the flat of its strong. While this kind of action is alien to modern fencers schooled in the post-Renaissance double-time style of parry-riposte swordplay, such moves are common throughout Medieval and Renaissance fencing. Performed in this manner his *fendente* parries arguably achieve the very same result as the warding off or setting aside in the German school. Though Fiore does not appear to specifically indicate they are used to simultaneously defend and offend in one motion as with the German *Versetzen* displacements or the *volarica* (“jewel of the art”) as later described by master Vadi, they can indeed be interpreted and applied this way.

Of downward cleaving blows or *Colpi Fendente*, Fiore stated: “in the art our function is to cut [through] the teeth and go to the knee with reasoning [i.e., purpose]. And [in] every ground [low] guard that is done, we go from one guard to the other without trouble. And we will break the guards with wisdom. With the blows we will make a blood sign.” He adds, “Fendente will not wait to injure, and we return in guard at every movement.” Intriguingly, this breaking of “guards with wisdom” could be interpreted as the equivalent of the hidden strikes in the German school (as first presented by Master Liechtenauer), which also break wards through simultaneous defense and offense in one strike and are later used as “Mastercuts.”

We can also note how this element of flowing from guard to guard with each move or attack to which he refers is an element included in the teachings of several other combat guides. Master Liechtenauer, as well as the Hispano-Italian master Pietro Monte in the 1490s, and the Bolognese master Achille Marozzo in 1530s, all instructed to keep in motion and not remain stationary. Fiore instructs at one point that just as the opponent charges you may strike without stepping but just turning the hips. Similar actions are common in many martial art styles.²² Range and force are achieved instead by turning the hips as necessary. But by their nature strikes without stepping are delivered in shorter time and from a much closer distance.

Master Fiore only described (and illustrated target lines for) six cuts. Although Fiore distinguished between left and right descending cuts (*dritti* and *roverso/rovescio*) he usually identifies all downward cuts as simply *fendente* whether they are vertical or diagonal. Just as with the later master Vadi, he never describes a direct vertical cut directly down the middle. All descending cuts appear to be diagonals (which are more powerful cuts than verticals). But, neither does either state “not” to make vertical cuts (however Vadi did state he did not want all cuts to be either just right or left, “but between the two, striking the head from every side.”). While vertical cuts are not shown on their segno diagrams of blows, this may be a cultural artifact of traditionally not drawing a line through a person’s face (however, Fiore does include a vertical downward stabbing line for his dagger targets).

Fiore’s six cuts are two *Fendenti* (right or left downward cuts from a high position), two *Sottani* (right or left upward cuts from a low position), and two *Mezani* (horizontal cuts to the torso, head, or arms). With the inclusion of his *Ponte* (straight thrust) he had seven blows. Fiore shows no low cuts to the legs or feet as is frequent in the German manuals, but acknowledges rising blows striking “from the knee up.” On the *Fendente* cuts Fiore notes “with wisdom” they cleave “a straight way” and “are not slow to hit,” adding that they “come back in guard from passage to passage.” He also declares that with these downward strikes “we will make a blood sign,” which may simply mean a wound or perhaps that they cut in a crossed “X” pattern.²³

²² In his treatise Vadi at one point makes nearly the same statement for his longsword, writing how he can “strike with a roverso fendente with the left foot forward, without changing foot, just turning the hips” and “also strike the dritto without moving” (Folio 17v, 2). Such a move is depicted in one edition of Paulus Hector Mair’s compendia from the 1540s as well.

²³ In his fencing treatise Filippo Vadi declared (in Chapter V, “About Thrusts and Cuts”) that for the sword there were just seven blows (a thrust and six cuts consisting of two above, two below and two in the middle), stated that essentially the whole art was sustained by mixing up downward blows with upward blows. He listed three strikes (*fendente*, *volanti*, and *rota*) each of which could be employed either left or right, along with *punte* (the thrust) to make for seven attacks.

Of the diagonal rising *Sottani* cuts delivered from a low position, he states they “always try to hit the hands” (which are closer and easier targets for such strikes) and come back as descending *Fendenti* cuts. Similarly, he refers to the middle horizontal *Mezzani* cuts as also “wounding from the knee up” as well as “deflecting thrusts out of the way.” The *Colpi Mezzani* also hit using the right (or long) edge to the right side and of the reverse (left or short) edge to cut to the left side. He refers further to “doubling” and combining blows to change from *Mezzano* to *Fendente* in order to strike effectively and “ruin opponents.” The Getty version states the *Colpi Sottani* (“under strikes”) attack from the knee to the forehead along the same path as the *Fendenti*, so that they either return or end in *Posta Longa*. (The very same is true, we might note, of striking in the German school where some cuts may end in a *Langen Ort* position with the arms extended.)

An apparent error appears in the Pisani-Dossi edition with the images showing the striking lines of *Fendente* and *Sottani* cuts in that both are presented as nearly identical illustrations, being depicted as upward pointing diagonal swords. Yet, the *Fendente* lines do appear to be drawn so that their points actually pierce through the top of the figure’s skull, extending past the crown. The Getty edition by contrast does depict the *Fendente* as diagonal downward pointing swords. The Getty also shows the figure for the *Mezzano* (middle) cuts as standing sideways while the other two editions depict this figure by frontal views.

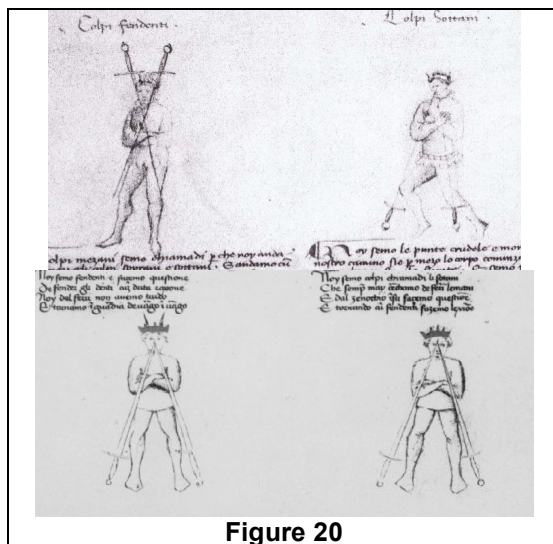
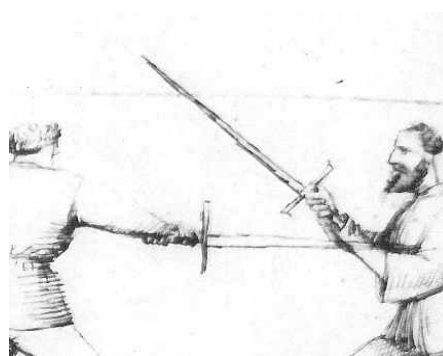


Figure 20

Mechanics of Self-Defense

In this systematic work Fiore used an effective means to display his teachings. He refers to the plays (*zogho*) of the sword meaning essentially example technique and counter-technique. After explaining core stances and a few principles, he then depicted masters and players performing at various defensive actions to key specific attacks in the form of a technique called *Remedo* (“remedy”) and then a *Contrario* (“contrary” or counter), followed at times by another *Contra-Contrario* (counter to the counter). Essentially, Fiore presented sound responses to basic attacks. He tells us that, “in this way the book may be easily interpreted” because “the pictures and the plays show the whole art in such a good way that it will be possible to understand it all.”²⁴ Master Fiore gives examples where the opponent makes an attacking action that is to be countered with another (a *Remedo*). Should the opponent manage to then counter this reaction (with a *Contrario*) he offered a way to immediately counter that technique (with a *Contra Contrario*). In other words, he attacks, you counter; if he tries to counter that by doing something; you

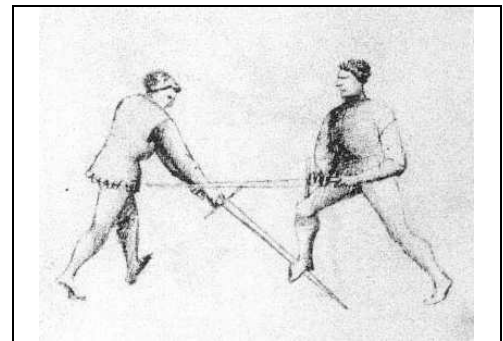


²⁴ Pierpont-Morgan Library version. MS M. 383. Folio 3, verso & recto, Folio 4 recto.

then do something else. These four actions (an attack and its remedy followed by a contrary and a counter-attack) are really just two sets of an attack and its counter.

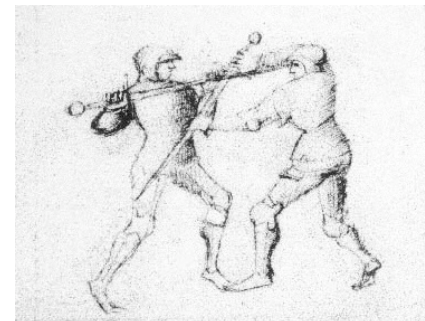
These actions, which form the basic technique and counter-technique basis of any combative art and appear in varied form throughout Renaissance martial arts literature, should not be confused with others intended to simply stifle or trap an opponent's weapon. In the master Fiore's method of fighting he described any defensive action to impede or bind the opponent's blade as *impaze* (an impasse). Fiore Dei Liberi also referred to *incrosada* (crossing the swords) for this same kind of action. *Incrossare* ("to cross"), *incrosada* or *incrociata* ("crossed") or *Incrossar a Mezzo Spada*, ("crossing the middle of the swords"). This was his term for the action of pressing with the hilt or blade against blade in defense. ("crossings of the blade" or "tied up"). Called *Am binden* or *Anbinden* in the German school, this is the engaged position where the weapons collide together in their moment of contact (and where the adversary's intentions can be perceived from his pressure). But this contact is not one that occurs by statically imposing your blade in the path of the oncoming strike, but rather from moving to intercept it.

He also writes of the *coverta* (covers or covering), a defensive intercepting action that closes the line of their attack and controls or locks the opponent's blade in order to then enter in close. However, rather than an evading motion, Fiore uses the term in regard to contact with either the opposing weapon or the adversary himself. He employs the term *rebatir* (or *rebatte*), meaning to "beat away" the adversary's cuts and thrusts in the middle of its action (essentially the fundamental concept of setting aside an attack with a short, quick hit against their



weapon). He also uses verbs like *rebatendo*, *rebats*, *rebatendola*, *rebatlerla*, and *rebatte* or *rebatte* to refer to warding off blows by beating. Fiore also writes of exchanging thrusts and of "breaking a thrust" (*rompere de punta*). All of these concepts have parallels in similar concepts of the German schools for warding off or setting aside (e.g., *Absetzen* and *Abwenden*). He also uses the word *rebatir*, meaning to "beat away" the adversary's blow in the middle of its action (*Noi colpi meçani... e rebatemo le punte fora de strada... or "mezzani the blows" and "beat thrusts out of the way"*). From the PML edition we also find the statement, "one can hardly break the *posta* without facing some serious danger on purpose."²⁵ This sounds remarkably similar to Master Liechtenauer's comment that, when striking offensively to break an opponent's ward, "no man is able to defend himself without fear." While here Master Liechtenauer referred to the inherent danger of trying to defend against an attack, the central idea is that defending by offending still involves danger.

At one point the Pisani-Dossi edition states that many techniques of greater skill and speed involve crossing the swords (which of course occur in high, middle, or low positions). This sentiment finds a counterpart in Liechtenauer's teachings about fighting from the bind or "on



²⁵ Getty Museum version, (Accession Number 83.MR.183. MS LUDWIG XV 13). 2 Recto.

the sword” and was also echoed by Vadi who stated all fencing “was merely a crossing.” The application of the varied techniques of longsword he depicts are ones that essentially seize the initiative to quickly close in to bind against the opponent’s weapon, deflecting it to one side or another and thus force a thrust, seizure, or half-sword trapping.

Overall, we can note Fiore offers no evidence of any static edge on edge blocking (as familiar in 18th and 19th century cut and thrust swordplay and its modern saber fencing derivative). Many of Fiore Dei Liberi’s generalized defensive actions are sometimes interpreted today as classical blocking movements, but are actually leveraged closures (*ligadura*) to bind and seize or throw the opponent. As well, he offers several descriptions of the timing advantage offered by using intercepting counter cuts to prevent the adversary’s responding. He does not teach “double time” parry and riposte actions, but rather uses several descriptions of simultaneous counter-striking to “cover and hit”.

For example, Fiore writes, “For my sword that has received a blow . . . with the pommel I hurt you in the face”, meaning not that he “blocked” a cut but that he reacted by covering and entering in to stifle it. In other words, he lifted his blade as he stepped in and closed the distance to stop the blow early and was immediately in range to hit. But like other masters, he never considered such an action as consisting of receiving the full force of a cut on his own edge. Several times he indicates closures and pushes where the weapon is kept in contact with the opponent’s sword. These are properly executed not as separate rigid edge on edge “parries” but as quick, fluid, single actions. In Fiore’s method we also find the *parata di croce* (“cross parry” or “parrying cross”) as being a counter-strike which defends against the opponent’s blow by hitting their blade on its forte (the strong section near the hilt). What must be understood is that this is most effectively performed using the defender’s leading edge on the flat of the attacker’s blade. This emphasis on offensive and counter-offense as the best defense over static blocking is integral to the art of swordsmanship with large cutting blades as practiced at this time.

The examples of technique and counter that Fiore offered presented not the only viable possibilities, but basic and effective ones that in themselves revealed alternative variations that could be easily extrapolated by an adequate student. The object was not to trade techniques but to defend yourself in order to successfully resolve the encounter. Logically, if the opponent’s technique is countered, it can only result in one of three things: it either ends the encounter, or the action closes-in, or the action is broken and separates. In either of the last two ways the outcome results in a new exchange.²⁶

Audacious and Cunning

Significantly, the vast majority of longsword techniques that Fiore shows start from the swords having already crossed or the combatants having closed to seizing range or a crossing position, which then separates in the action described. Many of these further involve half-swording. Further, stabbing makes up more than half the means of wounding in these. Performing such moves effectively

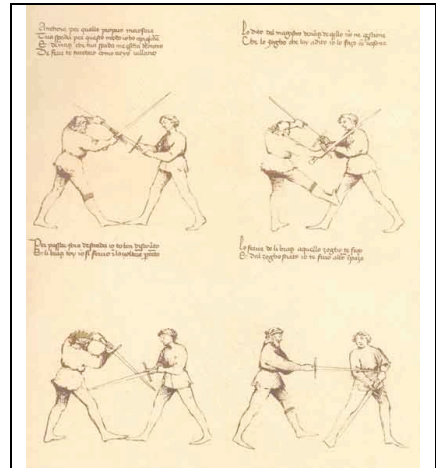


²⁶ This was, we may observe, arguably a more elegant and intuitive approach to armed combat than the Baroque method invented for the light gentleman’s dueling smallsword which, combined with the foyning rapier, formed the basis for modern Italian fencing theories now used in sport.

requires one proactively interrupt and aggressively intercept an opponent's actions, not defensively wait for them to strike.

There can be no question that closing in to bind with leverage and pressure is crucial to applying his techniques. This kind of action requires sharp awareness of both timing and range (i.e., judgment and measure). It is also possible to readily provoke the opponent into striking so that he can then be countered in this way.

Fiore's fighting style would seem to not place great emphasis on delivering diverse or multiple blows nor does he explain any particularities involved in cutting or edge strikes. Yet, when we consider his teachings in light of his cardinal elements of skill as being aggressive use of speed, strength, and cunning while remaining well guarded, it seems impossible to practice his method while remaining reactive. The suggestion that Fiore's method is somehow more defensive while in contrast to those of German masters such as Liechtenauer were more offensive does not stand closer inspection. While Fiore makes no direct instruction to repeatedly attack as does master Liechtenauer, both advised caution as well as initiative and courage. In this they are more alike than different and, despite his dissimilar style of presenting teachings, Fiore's method is arguably really no more or less aggressive. In one sense any "Art of Defense" is inherently a defensive style in that its primary concern is to keep from being incapacitated, injured, or killed. But in doing so they do not exclude the need to anticipate, intercept, or attack first.



A fighting method such as Fiore's, which involves considerable closing-in and leveraged pressing, seizure of the body or weapon, counter-strikes, stop-thrusts, and emphasizes "audacity", can hardly be called "defensive." Nor can it be construed as "less offensive" simply because he never states to make attack after attack as other teachers advised. His moves are far from static or passive reactive. It can unquestionably be applied proactively. Indeed, there is no European fighting art that really can be declared "defensive" in its orientation as Medieval and Renaissance methods of self-defense are all in some form geared toward dynamic counter-striking or outright offense as defense (the same can even be said of modern European martial sports and other combat arts such as boxing, wrestling, savate, la canne and other stick arts, or classical sport fencing, etc.). A fighting art after all may defend by being offensive, but it cannot offend by being defensive.

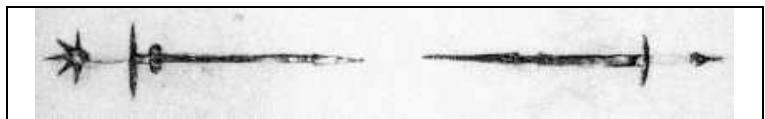
All arts of *defense* inherently are defensive yet by their nature must involve attacking. The reasoning among some students today is that since, by contrast with present understanding of the German source teachings, there is in Fiore's method no direct statement to seize and keep the initiative, no instruction to repeatedly attack with multiple strikes, and no direct mention of attacking in the middle of the opponent's action, his "style" must therefore be at the least "defensive" and at the most "not aggressive." Even adjusting for variations in fighting style resulting from differences in temperament and physicality among teachers, and distinctions in the manner of describing their craft, such reasoning is faulty. The element of audaciously attacking to *intercept* an opponent's actions is clearly present throughout Fiore's teachings even

if not stated in a manner equivalent to other selected source works. A fighting method that employs intercepting actions can hardly be considered passive.

A Lost Legacy

What is certainly clear in his method is the lack of the “parry-riposte” style of fencing developed by Baroque fencers for the smallsword and applied to later cut-and-thrust swordplay. Looking for this kind of “one-two” action and finding instead counter-striking, leveraging, and closings is probably why later generations of fencers found Fiore’s fencing so incomprehensible. Like other Medieval and Renaissance masters his is not a “double-time,” block then hit back style. Offense and defense are combined in one single action when possible. Fiore does not instruct edge bashing or static edge on edge blocking. Equally obvious is that just as with others from the age his style is not a collection of isolated “tricks” and wrestling unconnected by any higher understanding of close-combat concepts. In his longsword section Fiore even presents what could be termed a “lunge” well before it was purportedly used in fencing, albeit in this case with a longsword held in two hands, one of them gripping the blade. This thrusting technique is made with the arm extended out with a simultaneously forward passing movement of the rear foot.

Not unexpectedly, early 16th century Italian fencing works use some terms, particularly for fighting postures, similar to those employed



by Fiore but whether this reflects a common heritage or actual transmission of original ideas developed by master Fiore himself is unknown. Italian fencing masters and fencing historians in modern times have largely under-appreciated Fiore’s significance and the practical viciousness of his highly effective techniques. In 1928, the Italian classical fencing maestro Luigi Barbasetti, who admittedly was himself otherwise uninterested in (nor a student of) 15th century fighting methods (and in his writings even disparaged medieval German fencing masters as inconsequential), had recognized that Fiore’s, *Flos Duellatorum in Armis*, was: “an almost complete record of the chivalric arts of the Middle Ages presented in the form of a highly decorated methodical treatise containing many series of explanatory images that are necessary to understand this rather complicated method of fighting, which is free from any convention and tends to only one goal: to completely overcome the opponent.” But then he admitted entire ignorance of its method of a “rather complicated manner of combat.” (Barbasetti, Luigi; *L’escrime a travers les siecles et ma methode*; Paris, 1928. P. 208).

In contrast, the respected modern French sport-fencing master, Pierre Lacaze, who imprudently described Medieval weapons as “heavy” and viewed the inherent “violence” of grappling contact that is intrinsic to such fighting as “primitive,” thoughtlessly referred to the versatile and dynamic Medieval two-handed sword as being “used like an axe.” Of the sophisticated combat teachings from Fiore dei Liberi he declared them “closer to wrestling than to fencing” as if “fencing” meant only the tit for tat exchanges of single featherweight sword playing competitively against another single featherweight sword with foppish gentlemanly elegance. (Lacaze, p. 31, 23-25). As is often the case, classical fencers see Medieval and Renaissance fencing methods as more or less “tricks.” Tricks are what the inexperienced call effective fighting techniques.

Fiore's fighting method was hardly timid or defensive. His work is filled with bold closing actions and decisive weapon on weapon engagements. Before his material on the single sword in the Pisani-Dossi edition's last recommendations he instructed unequivocally: "Be audacious in the attack and let your spirit not be old. Have no fear in your mind; be on guard." He adds, "If you do not have audacity of heart, all is lost" and again declares the virtue of "audacity" is "what the art is all about." Finally he compares a fearful man to a panicky woman afraid of fighting. Fiore taught that to study swordsmanship you must "be brave in your soul and in your body" and that "Your mind should be free from fear and only in this condition you could develop your capacities and improve yourself." Both of these statements seem to echo the teachings of the German fencing masters of the age who stressed seizing the initiative to strike first as well as relentless offense.

Fighting by counter-striking or intercepting the opponent's actions is certainly not a passive or defensive tactic—particularly when the opponent can be provoked or lured into attacking, thereby making themselves vulnerable in the process. Seizing and keeping the initiative in a fight does not necessarily mean one must strike continuously or even continuously be on the offensive. Rather, simply keeping the opponent from freely acting by forcing them to have to respond to your threats or intention is enough. This can be achieved in any number of ways as one wards and moves for the reason that the dynamic of acting and reacting in a fight are so closely related.

From the Pisani-Dossi edition we can note that Fiore included the understanding that a certain amount of safe control was required in training, describing for instance how there were grappling techniques "only for practice" which were "holds of love" and not "holds of anger" (i.e., in practice as opposed to in earnest). However, when it came to earnest fighting, he recognized that sometimes it was done "for anger" and "for your life," and these are techniques that cannot be practiced "with courtesy" even if they are "dangerous to practice." Here he acknowledged not only the emotional element of such combat, but also the danger and yet necessity of serious preparation. This reflects the similar German sentiment of fighting *in ernste* as opposed to *in schimpfe* or *schulfechten* (classroom practice or school fencing). Fiore noted how when employed to overwhelm an adversary the Art of Combat "appears violent" so that combatants practicing seem to "hate each other" but that this kind of effort is what was needed for times of real attack (much as the German masters of arms had the saying, "What hurts teaches"). What he was in effect saying then was obvious: that because practice combat is not real it must be conducted safely, yet also seriously with sufficient effort because real situations demand greater effort and a different mindset.

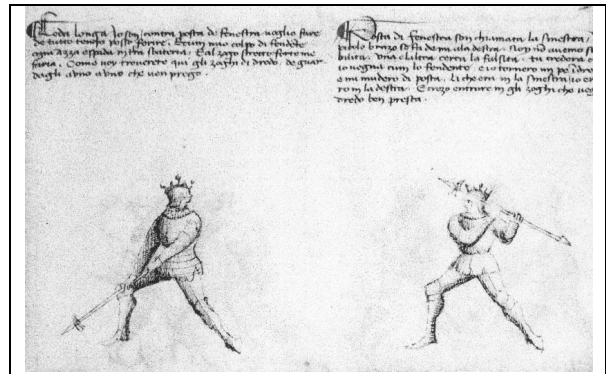
Fencing in his Shadow - the Challenge of Reconstruction

Fiore dei Liberi's "Flower of Battle" represents the major Italian contribution to 15th century martial arts literature. The three editions of Fiore's works have become major resources for modern students of historical fencing.

All three versions of Fiore's work are greatly in need of a reliable transcription, expert translation, and sound interpretation that carefully compares each edition within the context of

what is known about arms and armor, martial techniques from the era, and the biomechanics of violent personal armed combat. There are considerable elements to his work that are subjective and debatable. While his instructions are clear and obvious in some areas, in others it is very easy to draw false interpretations and develop questionable applications. Like most every aspect of historical European martial arts literature, our understanding of Fiore's teachings is tentative and subject to revision. There are different versions of *Dei Liberi's* treatise and different modern translations of these currently with different interpretations. Some of these editions and interpretations contradict one another and a definitive, reliable version is likely never going to fully materialize, as much of historical combat methods must always remain somewhat speculative.

Above all, contrary to what is often seen in so many modern depictions of Medieval and Renaissance swordsmanship, the movements and techniques presented in Fiore's manuals, as with so many others like it, are not at all cumbersome or inartistic. When correctly practiced over the long-term they can reveal fluidity, grace, and power. Yet, when trying to revive an almost 600-year old source in what is, in most in all respects, an extinct fighting art that no one has in fact practiced for centuries, we must keep our core-assumptions flexible. We must keep them open to continuous revision, especially when it comes to the proper application of lethal techniques.



As can most any work of martial arts, Fiore's treatise exists within a larger context of combative methods, reflecting collective principles for the application of range, timing, leverage, force, etc. Yet within this context it is individualistic and distinct, reflecting one experienced teacher's individual style of fighting and instructing. It can be looked on as part of a larger heritage of Renaissance martial arts, as well as a subset of Italian fencing tradition that eventually atrophied and faded with the changing requirements of military skills and of self-defense needs.

As the most important Italian fencing work of its age, master Fiore's treatise offers considerable insight into the sophistication of the highly developed knightly martial art of Renaissance Europe in the early 14th and late 15th centuries. Its teachings are only now once again being reconstituted and revived as a major part of our Western martial heritage.

As is to be expected, in his treatise there is a certain assumption at work on the part of the fighting-man reader that by personal experience or instinct they already understand the nature of fighting and handling arms, but lacked systematic examples of principles and techniques along with a coherent method of applying it all. His work was an attempt to fill that void in a confident and credible manner. Fiore does tell us he prepared the book "in a way that anyone will know the meaning easily."²⁷ Given the diversity of combat threats, describing in pictorial and textual content all possible variations of every technique for all circumstances would certainly be

²⁷ Pierpont-Morgan Library version. MS M. 383. 2 Recto.

impracticable. Manuals such as Fiore's therefore instead likely represent only a portion that conveyed essential elements to assist the student in learning and practicing.

A "method" is a collection of particular procedures and techniques that characterize a discipline or field of knowledge, and there is no doubt the information in Fiore dei Liberi's work is presented systematically and methodically with great care and forethought. There is no question that he had a combative "system" (—as did, for instance, his near contemporary the grand Fechtmeister of the German school of fencing, Johannes Liechtenauer, as chronicled in a 1389 treatise). But, given the difficulty of communicating physical three-dimensional adversarial movements in words and pictures, we may wonder if the fighting guide of Fiore dei Liberi really presents the entirety of his system as "complete"? In current interpretive-reconstruction efforts we must perhaps use caution when referring to studying "the system" of Fiore, as opposed to studying the material "on his system" as presented within his treatise.²⁸

As with similar source literature on historical European martial arts of the Medieval and Renaissance periods, exploring Fiore dei Liberi's fighting method through hands-on experimental application and reconstructive-exercise in order to replicate his style of fencing and self-defence is problematic. A problem with even applying the word "style"—when used to mean anything other than simply the way something is done, expressed, or performed—is that it can also mean the combination of distinctive features that characterized expression, execution, or performance as well as the customary manner and tradition of presenting material and knowledge. It is the latter that we now no longer have any real pedagogical connection to and must therefore interpret as best we can.

However involved or developed a fencing master's full system might have been, his surviving verses and explanatory images surely do not represent all the man knew nor everything he had to teach about fighting. Indeed, Fiore Dei Liberi tells us his work was produced at outside request for example, and we cannot expect that despite its sophistication and inclusiveness it contained all of his experience or everything the master knew of personal combat. The nature of fencing and of martial arts is such that neither words nor two-dimensional pictures alone can possibly transmit it all.²⁹ His own comment about the necessity of books as vital study aids for the learning of martial arts supports this. However, the Pisani-Dossi edition, while including some elements the other two versions do not, is not as thorough or lengthy, yet it is here that Fiore makes the claim his treatise presents his "entire knowledge and intentions" of what he has "seen from many masters and scholars and



²⁸ The idea that any comprehensive fighting treatise presents a "complete system" is really a somewhat meaningless concept, as we can never know how much may have been left out. Many historical martial arts treatises attempted to be all-in-one volumes but eventually had to admit additional material was necessary to round out their instruction. Given the brevity of Fiore's manuscript, especially compared to others much longer and more elaborate, it would be remarkable indeed if his were anything other than similarly incomplete.

²⁹ Having labored in the mid-1990s to produce a modern tome of Medieval swordsmanship as a simple introductory amalgam distilled from my own personal study and research, I know just how difficult the task can be—even with the aid of word processors and computer graphics programs. Despite its length, my effort reflected neither all I knew at the time nor everything that should have been included.

warriors” and from various nobles “from diverse provinces” along with “things that we discovered ourselves.”

Unlike well-known Asian martial arts traditions, which maintained strong connections to established fighting methods and styles, Western ones have not. Historical European martial arts of the Medieval and Renaissance periods did not survive to present times, and do not have extant traditions. While there are no masters taught by masters who were taught by masters, etc. going back to men such as Fiore, who knew their teachings, we have something else instead: dozens of technical manuals, often highly illustrated, written by the very experts who fought, and taught, and killed in earlier ages with the very weapons we study. They have left behind their invaluable thoughts, views, and advice in great detail. Thus, while we do not have a living heritage we do have something very much in keeping with Western civilization’s tradition of arts and letters and the masters themselves even tell us of the importance they placed on written study guides. The work of Fiore is among the most important. The historical influence of Die Liberi’s teachings is still being determined, but for modern students of the sword it is priceless.

Though at the time he believed few understood it well and he wished it kept secret, Fiore dei Liberi’s martial art is neither complex nor mysterious once the principles and concepts of his textual and iconographic vocabulary are unlocked. His fighting method is not “soft” and is hardly “passive”. It requires that one practice his moves with energy and enthusiasm, utilizing leverage and pressure with speed and force—just like the very qualities of the animal figures he adopted to express these elements.

My thanks to the translation efforts of Eleonora Litta, Matt Easton, and Hermes Michelini, and for the aid of my colleague Bart Walczak along with my fellow members of the ARMA as well as Dr. Sydney Anglo for invaluable efforts upon Fiore’s writings.