Vincenzo Pietropaolo, CM

Tree Portraits

Vincenzo Pietropaolo, CM
Tree Portraits

When I happen upon an ancient tree, I often feel compelled to stop, linger a bit, and reflect. Each individual tree, like humans, is unique. With its longevity and physical immensity, the tree imparts an aura of profound spiritual power. By its very presence alone, it has the capacity to give comfort, like an old friend. And like a camera, it is a witness to history — but a silent witness.

In Calabria (southern Italy), the place of my birth, centuries-old olive trees dominate the landscape. Every time I visit, they evoke countless childhood memories: farmers seeking respite from the hot sun under their canopies, the banter and laughter of a harvest meal, and the sacredness symbolized by their branches.

Closer to home, the arboreal ancients of Calabria are replaced by the towering maples and oaks of the urban forest of Toronto, or Tkaronto, which in the Mohawk language means “the place where trees are standing in the water.” The trees of Toronto portrayed in these photographs were standing well before the arrival of European settlers. But very few are left. And it is my hope that these photographs will increase our awareness of how precarious our natural environment has become in the age of climate change.

~Vincenzo Pietropaolo, CM
September 2026

Olive Tree Canopy, Calabria, Italy, 2024
archival pigment print on Hahnemuhle Baryta paper, 28 in x 40 in
Edition 1/6

Olive Grove Harvest Nets, Calabria, Italy, 2015
archival pigment print on Hahnemuhle Baryta paper, 28 in x 40 in
Edition 1/6

Sacred Grove, Calabria, Italy, 2015
archival pigment print on Hahnemuhle Baryta paper, 28 in x 40 in
Edition 1/6

Olive Tree with Red Earth, Calabria, Italy, 2015
archival pigment print on Hahnemuhle Baryta paper, 40 in x 28 in
Edition 1/6

Autumn Glory, Toronto, 2010
archival pigment print, 46 in x 60 in
Edition 1/6

Bur Oak, Toronto's Oldest Tree, 2010
archival pigment print, 40 in x 28 in
Edition 1/6

Japanese Cherry Blossoms, Burlington, c2009
chromogenic print, 24 in x 30 in
Edition 1/6

Cedar 1, McMichael Property, 2011
inkjet print on paper, 36 in x 54 in
Edition 1/6

Cedar 2, McMichael Property, 2011
inkjet print on paper, 36 in x 54 in
Edition 1/6

Cedar 3, McMichael Property, 2011
inkjet print on paper, 36 in x 54 in
Edition 1/6

Vincenzo Pietropaolo, CM

In 2025 Vincenzo Pietropaolo was appointed a Member of the Order of Canada. The citation describes him as “an acclaimed social documentary photographer” whose books on community, faith, culture and social justice provide “a valuable lens on the importance of multiculturalism.” He was born in 1951 in Maierato, Calabria, and came to Toronto as a boy with his family. For more than fifty years he has photographed people whose lives are rarely recorded: immigrants, factory and construction workers, refugees, people with disabilities, the elderly. *Canadian Geographic* has called him “one of Canada’s pre-eminent documentary photographers.”

Books are central to how he works. He has published more than a dozen, pairing photographs with his own writing, among them *Housing for All: How Toronto Built the St. Lawrence Neighbourhood* (Cormorant Books, 2025), *Toronto as Community* (Cormorant Books, 2023) and *Where Angels Come to Earth: An Evocation of the Italian Piazza* (2020). His photo essays range across Mexico, Cuba, Italy and Canada, taking in religious ritual, street life, architecture, and the seasonal migrant workers he followed between Mexico, the Caribbean and Canadian farms. His photographs of Toronto were chosen to illustrate a landmark exhibition of Jane Jacobs’s *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* at the University of Toronto’s Faculty of Architecture. Trees have held him for years: in 2012 the McMichael Canadian Art Collection showed *From the Land of Olives to the Land of Maples*, part of his ongoing Tree Project.

Pietropaolo holds a Master of Fine Arts from Toronto Metropolitan University, formerly Ryerson University. He continues to exhibit, and his work has appeared in over 100 solo and group exhibitions across North America, Latin America and Europe, including in New York, Mexico City, Havana, Rome, Amsterdam and Zurich. Since 2015 it has been continuously on view in *Defenders of Human Rights* at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. His photographs are held by the Art Gallery of Ontario, Library and Archives Canada, the Canadian Museum of History, the Canada Council Art Bank, the University of Toronto Art Centre and the City of Toronto Archives. He is an acknowledged master printer, has made his own gelatin silver prints throughout his career, and is one of very few photographers still working a traditional darkroom. He lives in Toronto.