

Beyond

The ISI Florence & Umbra Institute
Studies in International Education

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Above and Beyond

Carla Hill Galfano

I am writing this article from the quiet car on Amtrak Acela Express speeding away from Boston's South Station towards New Haven, Connecticut. This is my last trip as a courier – a museum professional, usually a registrar but sometimes a conservator, who accompanies a work of art when it travels – for the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts where I am an assistant registrar, at least through tomorrow at 5pm. When I arrive in New Haven, I will be examining a sixteenth-century lacquer portable shrine from Japan with mother-of-pearl inlays and a panel painting of the Madonna and Child that I carefully put into a crate and loaded onto a truck last week. Once determined that it is stable, hopefully with condition unchanged, I will help fit it into its custom mount and watch the Plexiglas bonnet be fitted and secured. A few quick pictures to send to the folks back home, and I will leave the shrine in the capable hands of the Yale University Art Gallery until someone else returns to retrieve it in May.

I had intended to write this article before now – studying abroad in Florence at Palazzo Rucellai (now ISI Florence) was one of the defining experiences of my life – but in January I was offered a new position as Museum Registrar at American University in Washington DC. The last several weeks have been a whirlwind of bringing as many work projects as possible to a close (including this one in New Haven), finding a place to live, and packing the two bedroom apartment where I live with my husband, two small boys, and a cat. This new position represents a significant career advancement for me, but most importantly, it allows me to rejoin a university community with its dynamic mix of students and faculty. In no small way, I feel that my experience abroad in Florence – first as an undergraduate at Palazzo Rucellai and again as a student at the Istituto per l'Arte e il Restauro (more on that later) – has

not only prepared me for new challenges, but also drives me to search for them, always excited about how far I can push myself to do new and interesting things.

When I arrived in Florence in January 2004, I was starting the second half of my junior year at the University of Connecticut where I was an art history major. I had spent the last few semesters studying the Italian language at UConn in preparation for immersing myself in Italian culture. In fact, so convinced was I of this necessity that I flippantly remarked at our information session before leaving the States that I could not believe someone who had never studied the language would be allowed to participate. Little did I know that a certain Nita Beeman (now Vitaliano) was sitting behind me. Having never studied a word before her first introductory class in Italian with David Marini at Palazzo Rucellai (now coordinator of the Italian language courses at ISI Florence), she nevertheless started speaking that very same day using freshly-minted vocabulary with enthusiasm and good humor punctuated by emphatic hand gestures. It was her fearlessness, linguistic and otherwise, that helped me find the courage to use the Italian that I knew despite its imperfections. We became best friends and remain so to this day, and, luckily, she never held my ignorant comment against me. From her and my time abroad, I also learned tolerance and patience as both were demonstrated by others towards me.

The first few days in Florence were tough. Apartments and roommates were assigned at random (unlike today) and I found myself on the *pianterreno* sharing a room with a girl whose hours differed significantly from mine. There was a nice sitting room with access to a garden in the back, but the rest of the apartment saw little light. The windows were situated very high on the walls and they faced a narrow driveway. I had trouble getting the key to work in the front door. We also had unreliable hot water for the first week. Once the water issue was resolved, I had some practice with the key, the weather started to warm, and roommates were shuffled, I really began to enjoy my stay at Via Gino Capponi. I also spent little time there, preferring the common areas at Palazzo Rucellai on



Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Door of Paradise*, Florence, Italy.

the richly decorated *piano nobile* and the open piazzas throughout the city.

My walk to school was a veritable textbook of Italian art history starting with Piazza Santissima Annunziata, bordered on one side by the Ospedale degli Innocenti, whose loggia was decorated with blue and white glazed terracotta medallions by Andrea della Robbia. Down Via dei Servi, with its dramatic views of Brunelleschi's dome, an architectural and engineering wonder, I passed between the polychrome marble facade of Santa Maria del Fiore flanked by Giotto's campanile and Ghiberti's gilded bronze Baptistery doors (a reproduction installed after the original bas reliefs were damaged in the 1966 flood and then moved to the Opera del Duomo Museum). I walked down Via dei Calzaiuoli, window shopping along the way, with an especially long and longing look at the confectionary creations in Caffé Gilli before arriving at Piazza della Repubblica, a large open square that traces its origins to the Roman city of *Fiorenza*. Passing under the oversized *Arcone* arch constructed at the end of the nineteenth century, I continued down Via degli Strozzi, named for the wealthy Florentine family whose palazzo is a masterpiece of Renaissance architecture. I crossed Via de' Tornabuoni laden with the best of Italian luxury fashion (Ferragamo, Gucci, Emilio Pucci, and more) to Via della Vigna Nuova where Leon Battista Alberti's façade unified the various structures that came together to become Palazzo Rucellai. The entrance to the school, at the time, was from the side street intoxicatingly close to the delicious aromas of *Il Latini*, a Florentine culinary institution, and up a winding stone staircase. I have yet to have another morning commute to match the grandeur of this one.

I cannot remember a time in which I did not want to study abroad in Italy. As soon as I had the opportunity, I crafted it inextricably into a plan of study for my final three semesters at UConn, a University Scholar Project on art theft in Italy during World War II. I would write a short novel, I decided, on a work of art lost during WWII and rediscovered in present day. Toggling between Florence in August 1944 when the German occupying forces abruptly and violently vacated Florence and the contemporary city, my story was informed both by research on

art theft and destruction in war and also by my own experiences living and studying in Florence. Thanks to the research office at the Uffizi and the patient guidance of Serena Giorgi (now Community Engagement Coordinator at ISI Florence), I was able to obtain the photograph of a painting that had truly gone missing – a portrait of a young girl that is reminiscent of the work of Agnolo di Cosimo (better known as Bronzino). The last entry on the painting's object card was Villa Cisterna, dated 1944. The photograph was given a simple gold frame by the *corniciaio* on Via dei Servi in the shadow of the Duomo. Until I wrapped it carefully in bubble and nestled it into a box last week, it hung on my bedroom wall.

Under the tutelage of Maia Ghatan, then professor of art history at ISI Florence, I was introduced to the *Archivio dell'Opera del Duomo* where her husband was curator (and still is to this day). She pointed me in the direction of a fresco by Andrea Castagno that had been removed from its original position in the cathedral and repositioned in the nineteenth century. I found documents describing the complicated process by which this was achieved – a series of operations that I would later perform myself while a student of art conservation at the Istituto per l'Arte e il Restauro. The goal of the operation was to “restore” a more harmonious appearance to the interior of the cathedral to make it congruent with the nineteenth-century conception of what was appropriate for a medieval building. This idea of restoration informed less by historical reality and more by nostalgia for a past that might not have really existed would become a theme of my graduate research. It was also through Maia that I discovered the competition to complete the unfinished façade of Santa Maria del Fiore in the years around the unification of Italy (*il Risorgimento*) at the time when Florence served briefly as the capital of the newly established nation-state. This topic would become my master's thesis.

To continue the research for my University Scholar project, UConn awarded me a Summer Undergraduate Research Fund (SURF) grant. I moved out of my apartment on Via Gino Capponi and into another on Via della Pergola on an upper floor as suffused with light as the first apartment had been with darkness. From my investigations of art during



WWII in Italy, I had learned that the priceless collections of Florence – those of the Uffizi and the Palazzo Pitti among others – had been spirited out of the city and ensconced in countryside villas. Despite Florence's reputation as a city of art and its designation as an open city (that is one not to be used for military ends), officials were not confident that the art would be safe within the urban walls. When the character of the war shifted to that of a slow march by the Allies from the south, liberating city after city from the Germans, it was too late to reverse the decision that had put the country's cultural heritage in the field of battle. Luckily, the Allies were accompanied by art historians and scholars (the Monuments Men of recent film fame) who helped identify and secure the art when soldiers happened upon it, but sometimes it was too late. I used my SURF-funded time in Florence to wander the hills taking pictures as inspiration for my writing.

In addition to her friendship and fearlessness, Nita is also to thank for introducing me to Foto Locchi, an optical and photography store in the center of Florence where she brought the film from her Pentax K1000 – a much-loved, fully manual, 35mm SLR – to be developed. She made friends with the proprietors, who, as it turns out, also had an historic photography archive. From them, I obtained prints of photographs taken during the visit made by Mussolini and Hitler in 1938 of the two leaders in Piazza della Repubblica (at the time still known as Piazza Vittorio Emanuele II for the King of Italy) and Piazza della Signoria. I then replicated the same shots myself and displayed the two images side-by-side when presenting my research back at UConn. My interest in the 1938 visit, however, was much more than photographic. Legend has it that it was during this tour of *Florenz*, that Hitler expressed his admiration for the Ponte Vecchio, which allegedly saved it from destruction when the retreating Germans destroyed all the other Florentine bridges. One of these, the Ponte Santa Trinita, was reconstructed after the war on the original plans by Bartolomeo Ammannati from the original stone dredged from the Arno; I wrote a paper on that for a graduate conference in 2011.

One final Florentine discovery during my time at Palazzo Rucel-

lai that would prove prophetic was that of the Istituto per l'Arte e il Restauro, known also by the name of the main building where it is located, Palazzo Spinelli. In search of information on how a painting could be obscured and then restored, I was directed to the preeminent school for conservation training in Florence. If I remember correctly, Serena accompanied me (my Italian was not sophisticated enough to convey my questions) and we met briefly with Gastone Tognaccini, a veteran art restorer who had personally treated the crucifix by Cimabue that had been all but destroyed when the flood waters of 1966 invaded the church of Santa Croce. From him I learned that spit (technically a weak enzymatic solution) is an ideal cleaning agent for oil on canvas. Not only did he confirm the plausibility of my fictional account, but more importantly, he was the tangible embodiment of the possibility of studying art conservation. It was on that visit, I later realized, that I decided to study at Palazzo Spinelli. It took me a few years, but in January 2007, I moved back to Florence to train as an art conservator. Although ultimately this would not be the career for me – after completing the two-year program, I returned to UConn to pursue an MA – living and learning abroad, this time entirely on my own, taught me self-reliance and creative problem-solving, skills for which I am grateful every day.

Not only did ISI Florence inform my professional choices, it also had a profound impact on my personal life. It was while studying at Palazzo Spinelli that I met my husband, an Italian from Marsala working in Florence. My children - accidentally - share their names with members of the Medici family, a fact I only discovered while visiting a recent Botticelli exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston when I happened upon paintings of both San Lorenzo (Laurence) and San Giuliano (Julian). In other words, it seems that Florence – its art, culture, and history – is part of my subconscious. It is not hyperbole to say that I am who I am today because of ISI Florence.

The train conductor has just announced our imminent arrival in New Haven, which also means the imminent end of this article. There are, of course, countless other moments and memories from spring 2004 that



changed my life forever – spring break with my grandmother’s cousin in Asti is certainly one – but I hope to have communicated something of the lasting power of my study abroad experience in what is written here. Before I gather up my belongings, including the portable Bluetooth keyboard on which I am typing these words, I would like to thank the staff and faculty at ISI Florence who made it all possible for me and thousands of other students. Grazie mille!