

Living Museums

Reflections on The Museum Experience Abroad

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My study abroad journey began in the United States during my sophomore year of college, two years before I arrived in Florence. I decided to take my first art history class (the Italian Renaissance) due to my general interest in art and history. Instead of simply enjoying the class and then moving on, I fell in love with the art of the Renaissance. I longed to see Michelangelo's David, Brunelleschi's Dome, and Botticelli's Birth of Venus. Seeing these works through a textbook simply was not enough, I knew I needed to go to Italy and discover this art in its place of origin. Thus, I declared my major in Art History and I began preparing to study abroad in Florence.

Over my time at the University of Virginia, I took many field trips to museums across the United States. As I chose a variety of classes on both art and curating, I became interested in the presentation and accessibility of art. Exploring further down this avenue I discovered a branch of law called Intellectual Property Law. IP Law covers a range of topics, but I was specifically interested in the idea of who owns art. When I traveled to different locations around the States, I began to take note of how art was presented to the public, especially in terms of curating, marketing, and technology. I carried this in mind as I traveled to Europe, wondering how the museums and historical sites may differ in presentation.

Finally arriving in Florence during my senior year, I spent my first weekend touring the city and visiting much of the art I had dreamed about. I almost immediately went to Palazzo Pitti,¹ the famous (and beautiful) palace once owned by the Medici family. As is well known, it now holds a vast collection of Renaissance art, much of which I had learned about in previous art classes.

1. For reasons of space and owing to the nature of this article, I will only refer readers to the official websites of the museums that I am going to mention. In this case, see <https://www.uffizi.it/en/pitti-palace>

My first impression of the museum was that it was quite different from anything I had seen before. Built in the 15th century, it was obviously much older than any building we have in the United States. Before even stepping into the museum, the expansive outside made me pause and realize the grandeur of the experience.

For the same reason, it is also very uncommon in the US to see a large art collection inside a historical building. In general, buildings are created to hold collections of art and history in America; this is not the main pattern in Europe, where many old structures have been converted to museums. These converted museums strike the common American viewer from the outside, as the historical significance is obvious before even setting foot into the museum.

Another “oddity” I observed right away was the lack of detailed information on the artworks. Each room holds a vast collection, all scattered throughout the walls and floor. Many of the frames had the artist and sometimes the title mentioned, but they did not stand out to the viewer. There were several famous pieces within the palace, yet they were not obvious to the typical museum guest. These paintings were mixed in with the other works. In the US, instead, a work of note is praised in its own separate space inside the museum; sometimes an entire room may be dedicated to it.

Despite my initial impression, as I continued to wander through the Galleria Palatina inside the Palazzo Pitti I started noticing some similarities with the Phillips Collection in Washington D.C.² The latter was started by the Phillips family in the 1920s as they collected modern art of their time and displayed it within their home. Like the Medici and many other prominent families in the Italian Renaissance, they collected artworks not only for their own private enjoyment but also to impress their guests through a strategic display of wealth. Also, before going to Florence or DC most tourists know the Uffizi or the National Gallery of Art but have never heard of the Phillips Collection or the Galleria Palatina at Palazzo Pitti. Nevertheless, these two museums manage to attract both art lovers

2. <https://www.phillipscollection.org/>

and a general audience. Furthermore, like the Galleria Palatina, the Phillips Collection (which also holds a large number of artworks in a relatively small place) provides limited descriptions of the items on display.

Venturing outside of Florence, I had the opportunity to travel to Venice during a long weekend. While visiting I stumbled upon a free contemporary art museum: the European Cultural Centre “Palazzo Mora.”³ I was intrigued by the variety of works in the museum, turning each corner not knowing what would be on the other side of the wall. Each room was dedicated to a contemporary artist; many artworks were statements about current affairs in politics and the environment. There was a diverse amount of material, most pieces using mixed media to convey their message. A unique piece was created from black and white trash in an eye catching and systematic display. As I began to walk away, I noticed that the art was actually a working QR code leading to more information about waste and the environment. Much of Europe focuses on environmental issues, sustainability and preservation; during my semester at ISI Florence I noticed this reflected in the art as well. While living abroad I have become much more aware of the environmental impact I have and how to reduce my own waste. Palazzo Mora furthered my understanding of the link between environmental and political issues in Europe.

Also, this Venetian museum seemed to reflect a conversation between artworks on the one hand and their viewers on the other. Many rooms were small, so that only a few visitors could fit in at a time. This made it a more personal experience compared to larger collections like the Museum of Modern Art in New York,⁴ which hosts similar artworks but in massive rooms swarmed with tourists. Some rooms in Palazzo Mora had activities, such as taking a quiz to see what your ideal color palette is or drawing on the walls of a funky white room. Since all of the art in the museum was recent, visitors were also provided with information on how to connect with the artists through social media, often using a QR code. Many of the artists

3. <https://ecc-italy.eu/locations/palazzomora>

4. <https://www.moma.org/>

had also chosen to include a video briefly explaining their works in the room. The integration of technology within the museum felt seamless and enhanced the visitors' personal experience. For all of these reasons, Palazzo Mora turned out to be one of my favorite contemporary art exhibitions.

An exciting part of studying at ISI Florence is being able to travel extensively on the weekends and on fall break. I chose to spend my fall break in Amsterdam, where I visited another fascinating art collection: the Rijksmuseum.⁵ As is well known, this large museum is dedicated to Dutch art throughout the centuries. Among its most famous pieces is *The Night Watch* by Rembrandt. It is also well known that – like Washington D.C. – Amsterdam has a museum district. For instance, close by the Rijksmuseum is the Stedelijk Museum,⁶ a modern and contemporary art museum. Like many other modern museums in Europe and America, the Stedelijk museum has an interesting shape and layout to display artworks. One feature of the museum that I greatly enjoyed is the free audio guide; when you walk into each room there is a new audio that plays. Personally, I believe that this makes art much more accessible to the public, as much of contemporary art can seem highbrow and may require more background knowledge to be understood. The Stedelijk Museum also has an impressive layout: instead of grouping items according to time period or style, the museum is structured around a series of themes. This helps to create a sort of “dialogue” among artists who have addressed the same topic.

My favorite part of the entire museum was a temporary exhibition which spanned the entire basement. Due to the many overlapping rooms and many directions, I became a bit lost, falling into the ways and rooms that called to me. Eventually I stumbled upon a long escalator in a bright white tube. Once I got down to the basement it was a very dark room with lockers. It invited you in with little explanation about the artist and then the museum guests were immersed in a contemporary art exhibit. Anne Imhof was given free reign of the 1100 square meter basement to

5. <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en>

6. <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en>

which she collected ideas of unsettling individuality. Throughout there were vibrant videos, disruptive sounds, and intense installations. This was my first opportunity to experience an immersive exhibition, which is not common in museums near me. It is also worth noting that the Stedjlik changes the basement exhibition every other year, often opting for a multidisciplinary immersive experience.

As the weather turned colder, my roommates and I traveled to Munich, Germany and visited yet another internationally renowned art collection: the Deutsches Museum.⁷ The Deutsches is the world's largest science museum, hosting more than 1.5 million visitors a year. Its exhibits range from interactive demonstrations of aerodynamics to the science of sound and instruments. To US students like me, one of its most interesting aspects is observing science from a German perspective rather than an American one. The Deutsches Museum has a more general focus on science, featuring important people from all over the world. This is different from the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum,⁸ where most exhibits are US oriented. For example, there is a large portion of Air and Space that is dedicated to the Space Race between the United States and the USSR, which is reduced to a single panel in Deutsches.

My favorite part of the Deutsches Museum was how interactive every exhibition was. The museum was very family oriented, encouraging friends and family to work together and learn through games and activities posted throughout. One activity in the aerodynamics exhibit had the guests create different airplane conditions to see how the plane reacts in the air. Another in the optics section shed light on the science of colors by splitting the guests' shadows into beams of light. Getting to experience the German perspective on science and learning further broadened my understanding of international museums, thus expanding my understanding of Intellectual Property.

Studying abroad in Florence has not only increased my understand-

7. <https://www.deutsches-museum.de/>

8. <https://airandspace.si.edu/>

ing of art and museums but has helped shape my future career. I have decided to pursue a career in Intellectual Property Law, which focuses on who owns and has access to intellectual property. I plan to concentrate on art specifically, with an interest in public art in museums. Before my journey to Italy, I was limited to the museums in the United States and European museums' websites. Having the opportunity to see many works of art, history and science across Europe has given me a greater understanding of intellectual property in the public sphere and how different countries in the Western world present these ideas. Studying abroad has changed the way I perceive public space and history, which I intend to use in my future career. I am incredibly thankful for my experiences and I am excited to take my new knowledge back to my studies in America.



Above left: The entrance to Palazzo Pitti.

Above right: *La Vittoria*, Vincenzo Consani, 1859.

Sala di Giove, Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti, Firenze.

Facing page: The author outside Rikjsmuseum.

