

The Cultural Marathon that is Florence OR A Princess, Two Marquis, Some Ph.D's and Me

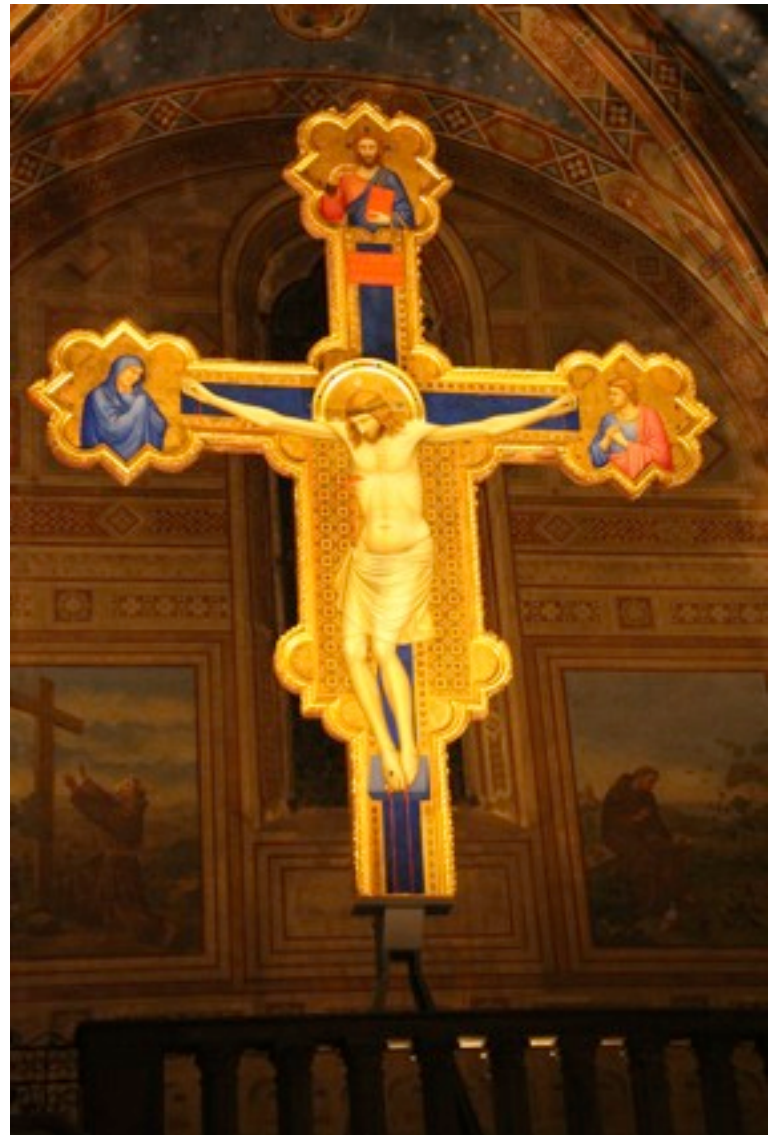
I feel back in college again! We have lectures on Florentine art not only by Ph.D's - but by the Ph.D's who write the books on what we are seeing! We have a trip coordinator - Cristina Viti - who looks like a Vogue model, her lovely and kind assistant, Elena and two lecturers, each a specialist in his field.

What I like about Road Scholar's "Hidden Treasures of Florence," is it not only offers visits to museums, churches and historic areas, but also "experiences."

On our very first day, we visited two churches - Santa Trinita (across from the Ferragamo Museum -- oh hold me back!!) and Borgo Ognisanti to see Giotto's magnificent (and recently restored) cross, as well as masterpieces by Domenico Ghirlandaio.

The magnificent Giotto Cross was under restoration for ten years. It has recently been reinstalled in Borgo Ognisanti (church).

Photo by Rochelle



We then visited with the Princess Giorgiana Corsini in her (huge) Palazzo in the middle of Florence which has even a huge-er (I know this isn't a word!) two acre formal garden.



The garden was laid out in the 16th century and the main path is lined with first and second century Roman statues! At the end of the garden, there is a block-long "lemon tree storage room" which served as the stables in centuries past.

This view is from the gardens looking at the back of Corsini home.

Photo by Rochelle

She showed us thru some of her home's palatial rooms which reminded me of museum-palaces in England. But, this is a family home, with family paintings and photographs all about.



Here the Princess point out the finer features of an exquisite crystal chandelier to me

Photo by Rochelle

And what a home it is -- here, an elephant sculpture by Bernini, over there, wall-size paintings by Florentine artists, huge bouquets of fresh flowers everywhere. There are silk-lined walls and rooms so huge it takes 4 and 6 oriental carpets to cover the parquet floors. Our buffet lunch was set out on what had to be a 30 foot long table laden with heavy silver serving pieces. The wine served was from the family's own vineyards.



The Bernini Sculpture
Photo by Rochelle



Later in the week, we visited the Marquis Gondi in his Palazzo for a tour followed by wine tasting (with snacks) in his subterranean cellar; and on our last day, we toured the largest private garden in Florence, that of the Marquis Torrigiani and enjoyed pizza and sparkling wine (from his own vineyards) with him in his huge greenhouse.

And in between these private visits, we toured museums, chapels, churches, listened to lectures, enjoyed walking tours and had some mighty fine multi-course lunches. Dinner was usually on our own, but all I ever wanted was a snack.

Some evenings we had a documentary film - perhaps on Michelangelo or the Medici Family, etc. And one night kindred spirit Rochelle, her husband and I attended "Pizza and Gelato" school, not far from our hotel. Great and yummy fun and I have recipes to share!

Our main lecturer, Giovanni Guidetti, was not only informative, but entertaining, personable, witty and nothing could stump him. Giovanni



handled all of our museum and church visits except for two. He is an expert on everything Florentine and wrote a chapter for the history of the Gondi Palace.

Road Scholar lecturers use “whispers” so that everyone can hear everything without having to stand next to the lecturer. We each have a receiver and an earpiece so as not to miss a word. Here Giovanni tells us about some of the portraits in the Vasari Corridor.

Road Scholar’s ten day “Hidden Treasures of Florence” is an amazing cultural immersion. The following might be too detailed for some, but it will help me remember locations and artwork if I ever have the privilege of returning to Florence. It is also important to note that the paintings, sculptures, etc. are magnificent but in addition, many of the museums like the Palazzo Vecchio, the Uffizi and the Pitti Palace are former homes and palaces of nobles and even if they were empty, they are spectacular buildings in themselves.

Highlights of the places we visited and artwork we learned about as a group are:

- The Medici Chapels - the old and new sacristy with sculptures by Michelangelo and the Chapel of the Princes which is inlaid with marble and semi-precious stones. Here are the tombs of Lorenzo de Medici, his brother Guiliano as well as six other Medici Grand Dukes and a whole bunch of minor members of the dynasty.



Once you know what the Medici crest looks like, you notice it everywhere. This family understood the subtleties of branding 700 years ago.



•The Galleria dell'Accademia - If you just want to see the statue of “David” then walk out, you have gotten your money’s worth. This is Michelangelo’s masterpiece along with his “Prisoners” - statues seemingly struggling to break free from their marble slabs - some say unfinished, but I think that is how he wanted to leave them. This building houses the single most important collection of Michelangelo sculptures in the entire world.

“David” - photo by Rochelle

• Uffizi Museum - Part (!) of the Medici’s magnificent collection of paintings and sculptures from the 13 to 18th centuries. The splendor (and crowds) are overwhelming. What I especially liked about this museum is that the art is displayed in chronological order. I also enjoyed having a quiet lunch on their second floor terrace with magnificent views of Piazza de la Signoria, considered the center of historic Florence. Here in this museum are housed some of the paintings we all know so well:



• Botticelli’s Birth of Venus can be considered the “start” of the Renaissance. We all know this painting -- its in every art history book every printed. And here she is, in all her glory in Hall 10/14

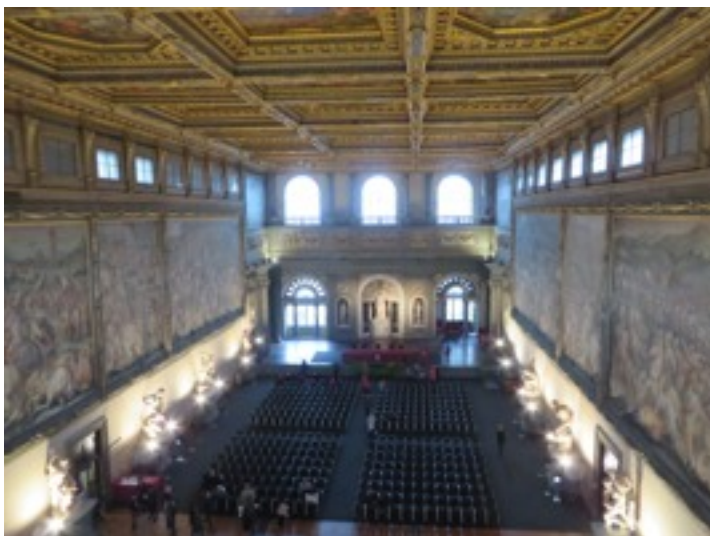
- Leonardo's Annunciation and Adoration of the Magi
- Michelangelo's Holy Family

and my favorite: Fra Filippo Lippi's "Madonna and Child with Two Angels." There is such a sad story here, Fra Filippo Lippi, a Carmelite monk, had an on-going affair with a young nun, Lucrezia Buti from the Convent of Santa Margherita, producing two children. It is said he painted the Madonna with her likeness. (She is beautiful)

Madonna with Child and Two Angels by Filippo Lippi, c.1465.



- Palazzo Vecchio - originally the home and offices of the Medici, now a museum with more of their collection of paintings, sculptures, furniture and tapestries. In addition to touring the building, we also toured its "secret" passages, going thru hidden doors, narrow passageways and treasure rooms and even climbing into the rafters above paintings suspended from the ceiling in the "Room of Five Hundred."



The "Room of Five Hundred" was the seat of Medici power. The magnificent ceiling is a series of 39 paintings by Giorgio Vasari. Our "secret tour" took us into the rafters so we could see how the paintings are suspended.

- Cenacolo di Santa Apollonia - a stop to visit the refectory of a Benedictine convent to view and learn about The Last Supper, a fresco by Andrea del Castagno (painted 1447). We were also intrigued by the restoration work taking place on the opposite wall and we watched the restorers for a short time.

Restoration work is never-ending in Florence as well as all of Italy. It is sad to think that there is not enough money in the world or artisans available to handle all the restoration that Italian churches, museums, monuments and historic homes need.



Churches:

- Brancacci Chapel (15th Century) at Maria del Carmine Church - wall-to-wall frescoes by Masaccio (a master at perspective), his teacher Masolino and sections restored by Filippino Lippi (son of the wayward monk Filippo Lippi). The frescoes portray the life of St. Peter. Our lecturer that day, Professor Mario Carniani, wrote the guidebook for this chapel which was commissioned by Felice Brancacci in the late 14th century.
- Basilica of Santa Croce - Gothic, re-built 1294, and the largest Franciscan church in Italy. It is full of Giotto frescoes, and other spectacular paintings. The church also houses the Pazzi Chapel by Filippo Brunelleschi. This is the burial place of the great and good of Florence: Michelangelo, Galileo, Rossini, Machiavelli and memorials to many others including Dante. Its Bardi Chapel is rich in frescoes by Giotto.
- Santa Maria Novella (aka: SMN) Gothic, started in 1279, completed in 1360 with a beautiful cloister and Spanish Chapel (frescoes by Andrea di Bonaiuto). This is probably the city's most important Gothic church with some chapels endowed by Florence's wealthy including the Strozzi Chapel

(paintings by Filippino Lippi) and the Tornabuoni Chapel (frescoed by Ghirlandaio). We were all in awe of the large crucifix made by Giotto and Masaccio's fresco of the Trinity.

- Antica Farmacia di Santa Maria Novella - this "pharmacy" was started by Dominican monks in the 13th century to provide herbal medicines. It is no longer connected with the church, but it manufactures many lotions and potions from the original recipes. The multi-room setting is beautiful with antique cabinets and historic displays. It is just celebrating 400 years of uninterrupted business.

- Orsanmichele - originally a grain market, it became a church in 1380 endowed by the city's guilds. The guilds also commissioned some of the city's best artists to create sculptures for the exterior. Thankfully, the originals have been removed to museums, and copies that can withstand the elements put in their place.

- Basilica Santo Spirito - with its wooden crucifix by Michelangelo. It had laid unidentified (and repeatedly painted over) for centuries but its fine qualities were discovered when the piece was sent for restoration in 1962. The crucifix was mentioned by Michelangelo's biographers as being made for the Prior of Santo Spirito church and hospital where officials turned a blind eye so Michelangelo could study anatomy on cadavers. It is thought he sculpted the crucifix in 1493/1494 when he was only 18 years old. This gothic Church was rebuilt in 1435 by Brunelleschi.

- Santa Felicita Church - this is the second oldest church in Florence, its foundations dating to the 2nd century but what we see now is from the 15th century. It is immediately past the Ponte Vecchio, just under the Vasari Corridor. Members of the Medici family could "attend Mass" using a private balcony accessible only from their exclusive walkway without having to mingle with the common folk.

- Basilica San Marco - a large church in San Marco Square, founded in the 13th century. We visited several chapels behind the main altar, and the cloisters.

- Santissima Annunziata - (15th century) the legend here is that a monk started a painting of the Virgin Mary, but it was finished by an angel that very night after he went to bed. Our Road Scholar coordinator, Cristina (who can charm anyone into doing anything) arranged for the opening of the Cappella dei Pittori di San Luca, a magnificent, seldom open private chapel. The priest was so taken by her, he began to sing!



This private chapel, just off the cloister of Santissima Annunziata Church, is in honor of St. Luke and seldom open to the public. It is small, perhaps holding 50 people, but rich in sculptures and frescoes. It was a privilege to be able to visit it.

Cristina Viti, the program coordinator has friends everywhere. Thanks to her, we had entree to this private chapel. The priest was so taken by her charm that he sang a religious song so that her friends (us) could enjoy the acoustics.



Some Special Treats:

- A Private Organ Concert by Lucia Baldacci, Giovanni's lovely wife. Lucia is a well-respected musician and lecturer herself. The evening concert was held at the Chiesa di San Francesco Poverino Church in the Piazza Santa Annunziata, which houses a 17th century organ. Giovanni introduced each piece and Lucia played selections from the 16th to 19th centuries which were composed for this type of instrument. Of special note, they still celebrate Sunday Mass in Latin at this church.



The Vasari Corridor also figures in Dan Brown's "Inferno", which is good reading and set mainly in Florence and Venice.

- The Vasari Corridor (designed by Giorgio Vasari in 1565) - we were treated to an exclusive visit to the private walkway designed at the request of Grand Duke Cosimo I to provide safe passage from the Medici offices at the Palazzo Vecchio to their residence across the river at Pitti Palace. It goes above the Uffizi Museum. It was built over the existing buildings, bridges over some streets, runs above the Ponte Vecchio (they could look down and see who is buying what), goes over Santa Felicita Church (where they could attend Mass from their private balcony), around the Manelli Tower (as that family wouldn't grant a straight passage), and finally ends at the Buontalenti Grotto within the Pitti Palace gardens.

Today the “secret” passageway is lined with rare paintings from the Uffizi’s collection including the largest group of artist self-portraits in the world. In addition to Professor Giovanni as our guide/lecturer, and Elena (Cristina’s assistant) two guards from the Uffizi accompanied us -- one at the front of the group and one at the back. They made sure we didn’t touch anything, or help ourselves to any of the smaller pieces.



You can get a glimpse of the Vasari Corrido’s small square windows as it runs over the Ponte Vecchio.

- The Scuola del Cuoio (Leather School) at Santa Croce Church -- In medieval days, the good fathers of Santa Croce Church started a vocational school for poor boys. The school (and leather factory) continues to this day. This is the place to go for beautifully designed one-of-a-kind 1500 euro purses and 1000 euro jackets. The gift shop also has smaller items, more reasonably priced, but not inexpensive.



- The Scuola del Restauro - A school that teaches restoration techniques for frescoes and paintings. Once we learned how painstaking this work is, we realized that there is not enough money in the world to pay for all the restoration work needed in Florence.

These students are restoring a painting from a church. They learn by doing. Much of their work is pro-bono, charging only for materials.

- Sunday Antique Market -- this was a surprise when we visited Santo Spirito Basilica. This lively Sunday-only market is filled with vintage jewelry, clothes, crafts and locals.

And I did these sites on my own:

- Archaeological Museum -- a good collection of Etruscan and Roman artifacts. Curators were mounting an exhibit when I visited and some of the cabinets were open with gorgeous archaeological pieces within reach!
- Museum of San Marco - this was just a five minute walk from our hotel. This 13th century Dominican monastery is filled with frescoes and paintings by Fra Angelico. This is one of those cases where you really have to know how to get into the museum. The entrance is a nondescript door with a teeny sign on a plain wall near the main door of San Marco church. After the ante-room, you enter a cloister decorated with fading frescoes, then wander around discovering rooms filled with paintings by Fra Angelico and others. The main event is "The Annunciation" which Fra Angelico painted at the top of the stairs leading to the monks' cells. There

are 44 cells each with its own small fresco by Fra Angelico or one of his assistants.



“The Annunciation” (c.1450)(above) is one of Fra Angelico’s most well-known paintings. But my favorite was the one over the door to the library.



- Pitti Palace - There are several museums within this complex, the last home of the Medici grand dukes. I bought Ticket #1 which included the Palatina (painting collection), the Royal Apartments and the “Modern Art” collection which was really 17th, 18th and 19th century art. I never had time to return and buy Ticket #2 which covers the Costume Museum, Silver Museum, Porcelain Museum and the expansive Boboli Gardens. Next time!

- Ferragamo Museum -- actually this was nirvana for me. 10,000 shoes on display including the stilettos made for Marilyn Monroe. This was an excellent collection of drawings, photos and artwork relating to footwear. It was also a great place to relax a bit as entrance is free for those over 65. It had nice squishy leather chairs to sit in and beautiful bathrooms too!

- Ponte Vecchio -- this ancient old bridge is home to Florence's finest jewelers and its displays are a complete feast for the eyes. This is the place to visit when you win the lottery. I tried on a 400,000euro (about \$510,000) necklace that I thought was pretty nice! I did buy a vintage silver and pearl pin just off the Ponte Vecchio, for considerably less.



The 400,000euro necklace. Please remember me when you win the lottery!

- Craft Market - a once a month craft market in Plaza Annunziata. There was lots of woven woolen items, handmade jewelry, soap, wooden crafts, vintage clothing and foods such as artisan chocolates.

- Antique/Flea Market - a daily market at the Piazza de Ciompi. But I thought it was a rather sad market. There are about 25 large booths filled with furniture, photographs, lots of lamps and chandeliers as well as vintage items.

When you travel, little things mean a lot and the people you meet make a huge difference. These are some of the people I'm particularly grateful for:

- the truck driver who, seeing that I couldn't cross a busy street, moved his truck into the intersection, blocking all lanes, then very gallantly signaled for me to cross!

•The man at a teeny hole-in-the-wall store who sold me the extension cord off his radio for 1euro (hotels never have plugs where you want them!)

•Rochelle - fellow participant who was kind enough to let me copy her photos from the first few days onto my computer so I could have good memories. Darn my camera's technical problems!



What I've learned about visiting Florence:

1. pick a hotel that has a restaurant that serves lunch and dinner
2. Wear the thickest-soled shoes possible -- the big cobblestones are murder on the feet.
3. even if a building looks nondescript, but has posted visiting hours, go in and take a look. Many are old monasteries which are plain on the outside, but have fabulous frescoes, chapels and courtyards inside.
4. all national museums are closed on Mondays, but often have Sunday hours until 2 or 3pm
5. for good gelato, go to a place that covers the gelato bins. This means it is artisan gelato (made in only small quantities) and is being kept at the proper temperature
6. food in Italy is heavy on carbs -- order and enjoy a green salad whenever possible
7. it is almost impossible to hail a taxi on the street. Have the hotel/ restaurant call one for you. This is especially important if you are headed for the train station or the airport.
8. Locals dress beautifully -- the police uniforms (really suits) look designed by Armani; Franciscan and Dominican monks, in their long brown robes, wear matching socks! So it is good to be a little more dressed up than at home -- sort of resort-casual (comfortable, but nice)

In conclusion, The artistic wealth of the city is overwhelming and yes, I was pretty well saturated with Renaissance art by the end of the Road Scholar program. But I realize it would take several lifetimes to truly enjoy all that

this city has to offer. Maybe I'll come back someday, if not in this lifetime, perhaps in the next.

The day the program was over, I took a train to Venice to embark on a cruise on the Adriatic. Upon exiting Santa Lucia Station in Venice, I stood in awe of the scene before me: the Grand Canal with gondolas and water taxis going every which way, centuries-old buildings set right up to the water, and a flurry of activity.

I had walked into a Canaletto painting.



Canaletto "Venice: the Grand Canal with San Simeone Piccolo" (1740, Wallace Museum, London)

This is the exact same view I saw when I exited the train station in Venice. The Antiche Figure Hotel, where I would stay for two nights after the cruise is now in the pinkish building to the right of the church.