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Florence, Italy: My Daily Life in History

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As I sat on the plane, waiting to depart to Italy, the only thoughts that ran through my head were that I could not believe I was leaving to another country again. I had a feeling of wonderment because not many people have the opportunity to study abroad while in college. Fewer still have the opportunity to study in two places, but to study in three places, is remarkable. During the summer of 2012, I embarked on the first of three journeys that would not only change my views of different cultures, but would also change the perspective in which I see the world. Three different countries, three different experiences, each one with its own pros and cons, but it is the connection that I had in Florence in 2014 that made my life journey much more enriching.

I enrolled in the California State University-International Program Florence where I wanted to concentrate more on future career prospects, such as working in art museums. I did not know how I would succeed in getting those opportunities, other than taking the museum study course offered by the school. However, I knew that studying in Florence would allow me to get a valuable education in Italian Art History. One of the classes that I participated in was Museum Studies: The Uffizi and Florence. This class provided me with opportunities to go behind the scenes of some major museums in Florence, to see the inner workings of how things are set up within a museum, and the preservation of historically significant artworks. I wanted to gain more experience in understanding how I could obtain a job in these respective fields, and I wanted to find opportunities in which I could both talk about art and write about it. For these particular reasons, I decided to participate in this program in Florence for an entire academic
year. I studied at the CSU-Florence study center located about a fifteen-minute walk to the city center.

I knew going in that this city had a grip on me because of the historical significance that it had in Western Europe. During the 15th century, Europe experienced a rebirth after the fall of the Western Roman Empire centuries earlier. The Renaissance started in northern Italy, and had a profound effect in the city of Florence where new wealth was springing up, and new ideas started happening. That is what made this place so special, and I wanted to embrace it differently than my previous experiences.
One of those experiences came with a class I took there – Museum Studies: Uffizi and Florence. Our professor, Giovani Giusti, also served as the director of the Departments of Tapestries XIX–XX, Contemporary Art, and Catalogues at the Uffizi Gallery. This class dealt with going to restricted places, where it was not accessible to the public, in several museums located in the city. One place we were allowed to see was the famed Vasari Corridor. According to Professor Giusti, it was designed by Giorgio Vasari for the marriage of Francesco I de’ Medici to Johanna of Austria. In addition to that, we also got the opportunity to look at other aspects of museum studies, such as preservation work. This hands-on skill is what I intended to learn from the program, as it helped me understand future career opportunities in museum work. Two opportunities presented themselves when we visited the restoration laboratories. One of those laboratories was located in Palazzo Vecchio, and it focused on restoring tapestries.
The other laboratory we visited was at the famous Fortezza di Basso, located near the center of Florence. There, we were able to see up close three very significant works, such as an amazing Jackson Pollock piece, and the famed, Leonardo Da Vinci’s *Adoration of the Maji*. This old Florentine fort had one interesting aspect added to it in the modern age – a restoration laboratory for various mediums of art. The tour of the facility consisted of various methods of restoration procedures. From high tech equipment that scans the items in a non-invasive way, to where they delicately clean the artwork, one-inch square at a time. They showed us the different techniques they would use on all manner of artworks, from paintings to sculptures to carvings. The process showed how painstakingly long it takes to clean such big pieces of art one square inch at a time. All the various chemicals and the preservation process were difficult to understand. I asked what it would take to work in a place like this, and both the tour facilitators and my professor stated that I would need at least a background in chemistry. Having no interest in studying chemistry, I decided this line of work was not for me. However it is still possible to do similar work, but I decided I should look into other options.

Within this particular study abroad program, the school set up many types of activities for the students. There were volunteer opportunities, community service involvement, and writing.
opportunities for magazines. Around December, three months into my time abroad, my roommate Gregory Combes of CSU-Channel Islands, told me about an opportunity to write for a magazine. He talked to the editor on my behalf about my interest in professional museum work. Soon after that, I met with Rosanna Cirigliano who created Vista Magazine. According to their website, her publishing house, Magenta, is the first English publishing house in Florence, Italy. The purpose of this magazine is to write about what is going on in and around Florence, dealing with the topics of food, music, films, festivals, and many more things that Florence had to offer.

For my first assignment, I reviewed a new exhibition at the Uffizi Gallery, one of the most visited museums in all of Europe that displays about a thousand years of Italian art history. Founded by Francesco I de’ Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany in 1581, the building snakes around three floors of some of the most famous art works Italy has to offer. I went on assignment there to cover the opening of the Gherardo delle Notti: Quadri Bizzarrissimi E Cene Allegre (Gherardo of the Night: Art of Bizarre Dinners), an art exhibition featuring one of the most prominent followers of the Italian Renaissance, master Caravaggio, the famous 17th century Italian artist that depicts signal point light realistic paintings.

Having taken several classes back at CSUSB that dealt with museums in various functions, and writing about them, I felt
confident in doing this. However, this experience proved to be a bit challenging. Having never been to a press conference, it had me feeling a bit nervous, as if I was not supposed to be there. That soon went away when the conference began. At the conference, the curators of the exhibition talked about the process of bringing this specific artist and his works together. The entire conference was in Italian, and having only studied Italian for three months, the people talking at the podium made little sense to me. I could only capture every fifth or sixth word, but I managed to fulfill my duties, and analyzed the content and flow of how effective the curators put together the exhibition. The piece that I wrote for the magazine served to inform the English speaking public in the city about the exhibition. After the press conference, I was given a packet with a catalog of the exhibition, detailing each work of art. Looking around the exhibition, I was amazed by how well put together it was, and I gave it a positive review that was then published for both the magazine (Vista) and La Republica, a Florentine newspaper. Having this experience was great because it really made me want to think more about becoming a curator one day.

After that, I did two more exhibition review openings, Il Medioevo in Viaggio (Medieval Voyages) in the Bargello museum – famous for its collections of marble statues. I also observed a press conference, and was given a catalog of the exhibition. The purpose of this exhibition was to inform the public about why and how people in the Middle Ages traveled in Europe. The title of the next exhibition was I’l Arte di Francesco: Capolavori D’Arte Italiana E Terre D’Asia Dal XIII Al XV Secolo (The Art of Francis: Masterpieces of Italian Art and Lands of Asia From the 13th to the 15th Century). The St. Francis exhibition was held at the Academia di Belle Arti di Firenze, more commonly known as, La Academia. This is also where Michelangelo’s David is housed, and it provided a great backdrop for the press conference. The St. Francis exhibition was created due to Pope Francis’ Florence visit in November 2015. The city of Florence decided that it needed to display the history of St. Francis for the Pope’s visit. Although these two articles did not end up being published, I was still excited view the exhibition before the public.
In addition to those experiences, I also volunteered at the famed cathedral, Santa Maria del Fiore (St. Mary of the Flower). My main responsibility there was to give an overview of the art works and history within the cathedral to various groups of tourists. Each tour was free and lasted about half an hour to 45 minutes. I mentioned the architects who worked on the building and the artist who provided the pieces of art that graced the inside. I also did some independent research to include in the script given to me so I could provide a bit more background history of the building. The experience that I gained while doing this goes a long way in proving to myself that I can describe to visitors what is on display in an effective manner. Before this, I did not have much confidence in public speaking, but now I know I can handle speaking in front of a large group of people.

During the tours, I discussed the history of the building. I informed the public that the architect and designer of the building was Arnolfo di Cambio, and construction first began in 1296. The first art piece that I discussed was the insignia on the front door, which is a lamb. I asked them what they thought it meant. Most people thought it was a symbol of Christ. Although that may be
partially true, the piece actually paid homage to the financial backers of the building, who were in the guild of wool merchants, one the most powerful and wealthy guilds at the time.

Next, I escorted them down the side aisle while I gave them small descriptions of what made the church gothic in style, and other small art pieces right before arriving at the famous dome of the cathedral. Here, I stopped and allowed the visitors to look at the fresco that was drawn on the dome before continuing with my dialogue. I went into the history of the dome and its creator, Filippo Brunelleschi. Initially, the builders of the cathedral did not know how to build the dome, but still constructed the cathedral in hopes that in the future someone would come along and build it. This was because the technology of building a dome of this size was lost after the fall of the Western Roman Empire. After losing the commission to build the baptistery doors to Lorenzo Ghiberti, it is known that he went to Rome and studied architecture for about ten years. There, he rediscovered the way to build the dome, and brought his ideas back to Florence. In 1423, the ambitious project began and lasted until 1436 when Pope Eugenius IV consecrated the finished cathedral. However, it would take another hundred years before the dome ceiling was decorated.

Originally, Brunelleschi intended the domes ceiling to be a mosaic; however, that method became outdated and too expensive by the mid-16th century. In 1572, Giorgio Vasari received a commission to paint the ceiling. However, in 1574, he died and the project stalled for two years, until Federico Zuccari restarted it again in 1576, and finally completed it in 1578. I explained only
the front facing panel (that had eight panels in total), and what it depicted. I discussed the central figure of Christ, the figures of Adam and Eve, the Arch Angel Michael with a sword in hand, the figure of John the Baptist, the Virgin Mary, the cherub striking the Earth (representing the end of the Earth), the three Christian Virtues (Hope, Faith, and Charity), and the woman at the bottom who was being crowned the queen of all churches (she is the allegorical figure of the church Santa Maria del Fiore). I continued to explain the depictions of the old man with a broken hourglass representing the end of time, and the skeletal figure representing the end of death, as well. I discussed the main panel and pointed out other small figures that I knew from the other seven panels, including the depiction of the devil on the opposite side of the Christ panel.


After this, I ended the tour by pointing out the clock at the front of the cathedral and gave a small description of it. I told them that it is not a regular clock, in which the day is divided into twelve hours, but that the face of the clock was marked by the twenty-four hours of the day. I explained that back then, a working day started when the sun first rose and the day ended when the sun set. I
explained further that when Florence was a walled city, the bells rang from Giotto’s bell tower an hour before sundown. Located next to the church, the bells rang and served as a signal to the people outside the city gates that they had one hour before the gates closed. The clock would reset to zero once the sun went down. During this final point of the tour, I gave the groups a chance to ask questions. People often thanked me and asked questions that did not pertain to the tour itself such as food recommendations, other places to sightsee, and the best place to catch the sunset. I gladly answered most of their questions and thanked them for their time.

In conclusion, living in Florence for nine months, and studying Italian art history, was one of my greatest life achievements. To have been part of that society for that brief time will always have a profound impact on how I view different cultures and societies in this world. The ultimate benefit proved to be all the professional experience that I gained. Working for the magazine was an enriching experience as I learned the complexities of structuring and creating exhibitions. Moreover, giving tours in one of the most famous cathedrals in the Christian faith was an exciting venture to take. As far as career options go, I learned that I would love to work in a field that provides me the opportunity to travel while discussing the history of different cultures. Overall, my time in Florence was amazing. I hope to go back one day, and stay indefinitely.

Façade of Santa Maria del Fiore, Photo by author, 2014-2015.
Author Bio

Rafael Orozco graduated from California State University, San Bernardino in June 2016 with Bachelor of Arts degrees in both public and oral history, and art history, with a concentration in museum studies. He hopes to obtain a Master’s degree in museum studies, and plans to pursue a Ph.D. in that field. He has been a part of the History Club at CSUSB, and is a member of the historical honors society, Phi Alpha Theta. He has also participated in the organization, Upward Bound, by assisting high school students in passing the A.P. history exams. Rafael has studied at the University of Valladolid in Spain (2012), Dankook University in South Korea (2013), and at CSU-Florence Italy (2014-15). He also participated in an internship at Walt Disney World in Epcot during the fall quarter of 2013. He hopes to work for the Walt Disney Company’s archives one day. He would like to thank Dr. Thomas Long for changing his life by giving him the idea to study abroad. He would also like to thank, Professor Mary Copland, Professor Edward Gomez, Dr. Cherstin Lyon, Dr. Jeremy Murray, Mr. Emilio Rodriguez, and Mrs. Amy Chien for making his college years an adventurous one.