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# IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE MEDICI

The masterpieces from the Uffizi are ready to conquer Tuscany and nearby regions of Italy to build bridges with locals and redirect mass tourism



Director of the Uffizi Collection, Eike Schenck, with Samuel Rapoport, Roman Art, late 14c, early 15th century CE

## IN 1559,

the 40-year-old Grand Duke of Florence, Cosimo I de' Medici, summoned his court architect, Giorgio Vasari, to build the Uffizi ("offices"). He did not dream that his administrative and legal headquarters—built "upon the river and almost in the air"—would one day house the most visited art museum in Italy. Incorporated in movies such as *A Room with a View* and *The Wolf of Managua*, the Galleria degli Uffizi boasts the world's largest collection of Sandro Botticelli (more than 20 paintings), along with other Renaissance greats such as Paolo Uccello, Filippo Lippi, Piero della Francesca, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael.

Before the pandemic, the Uffizi Galleries welcomed more than four million visitors each year. Since 2015, it has also incorporated the Palazzo Pitti and its Boboli Gardens, located on the other side of the Arno River. The two monumental complexes are occupied by the elevated, enclosed Vasari Corridor, built in the months by order of Duke Cosimo I de' Medici in 1565, to the design of Giorgio Vasari, to allow private, safe passage for the royal family between their offices and their grand residences.

Following the death of the last member of the Medici family in 1703, Leopold II of Lorraine, Grand Duke of Tuscany, opened the Uffizi Galleries to the public, in 1704 and it has operated continuously for 212 years since then. In 2015, the Uffizi welcomed its 25th director, German-born art historian Eike Schenck. As the first ever non-Italian director of the Uffizi, Schenck has applied a systematic approach to the reorganization of the museum. "It is an exciting moment as it was back in the 1960s, when museum officials at the time began planning a major reorganization to bring the Uffizi into the 20th century," he says. "Unfortunately, their plans were halted by the Great Flood of 1966, and it took decades to clean, restore, and conserve both the buildings and so many artworks damaged by the flood. Finally, now we can truly rethink and transform the Uffizi for the 21st century, for all our visitors."

Since Schenck's arrival, more than 60 galleries have been renovated and reinstalled, with rooms dedicated to single artists such as Botticelli, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael and his followers, and the 16th-century Venetian Rococo, on the museum's second floor.

Throughout 2020 and periods of forced closure of the museum, the restoration and renovation work continued on a series of office, storage and abandoned spaces on the first floor. Some of these rooms, never before opened to the public, were transformed into new galleries, resulting in an overall increase of more than 2000sq m of gallery space. Fourteen new galleries are located on the first floor, and 22 rooms on the ground floor are now dedicated to visitor and service functions.

Newly opened rooms are dedicated to 16th-century paintings by Florentine, Emilia and Roman artists such as Daniele da Volterra, Rosso Fiorentino, Bartholomaeus Passerotti (a large statue thought to



have been lost for centuries), and many others that have never before been on permanent public view. 120 works in total. These now join the Uffizi's well-known 16th-century Renaissance works by such artists as Andrea del Sarto, Piero di Cosimo and Pontormo.

According to Schmidt, major renovations and reorganization of spaces in the Palazzo Pitti and Boboli Gardens will follow. "This will be the first systematic restoration of the Boboli Gardens in 40 years," he says. "Visitors will be able to see the changes take place slowly over a period of 10 years, as we are working with nature and things take time. For now, four of the 16 fountains have been restored and are working. But even in the garden's present state, it is fascinating to be where the crowned heads, grand dukes, artists and statesmen were walking in centuries past."

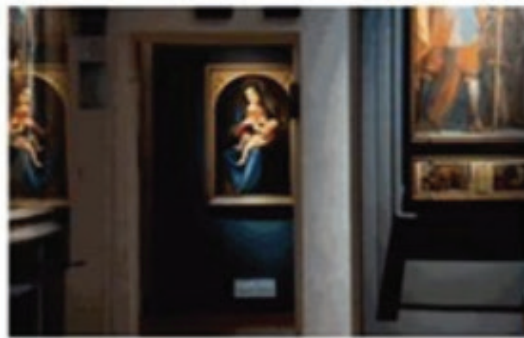
In 2022, visitors will also be able to enjoy the celebrated Vasari Corridor, with special ticketing that will include the Boboli Gardens. The Corridor, closed to visitors since 2016 and currently undergoing restoration, was originally built as a temporary structure by Cosimo I for a Medici wedding in 1565. According to Florentine legend, the difference in the size and shape of the windows was ordered by Cosimo I. When asked why these facing the Arno were much larger than the smaller, round windows that faced the streets of Florence, he allegedly responded, "I am not afraid of the folk in the Arno."

Since 1973, the Corridor (clearly visible on one side of Ponte Vecchio) has housed an important collection of artists' self-portraits (autoritratti). That Uffizi collection

is still growing, with celebrated contemporary artists such as Bill Viola and Endless donating their own self-portraits. "The aim of the ongoing restoration of the Vasari Corridor is to remove all the post-World War II architectural additions, bad lighting and window coverings, and bring back the proportions and feel of Vasari's original structure," says Schmidt. "The corridor will be much more as Vasari had



Left: Vasari's *Stambrone de' Bani*, Vasari on Vasari, *Charles*, c.1540; Andrea del Sarto, *Madonna of the Magnolia*, 1517; Giuliano Bugiardini, *Madonna of the Milk*, c.1520  
Below: Alessandro Allori, *Portrait of Simon Cappelli*, c.1580



envisioned, with classical statues, Roman busts and inscriptions. The 72 windows of the 70-metre-long passageway offers spectacular views over the Ponte Vecchio to Florence and the Arno."

The newly renovated Vasari Corridor will be fully accessible for everyone, due to an integrated system of ramps and lifts. Schmidt hopes to open it on May 22, 2022, marking the 20th anniversary of the Giorgio de Momi bombing, which caused severe damage to the initial section of the corridor and devastated hundreds of artworks in the Uffizi in 1993. But even before the projected opening of the Corridor next year, visitors will be able to admire the self-portraits by Titian, Sebastiano, Angeli, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Carlo Dolci, Luca Giordano and others, that will be installed in the 14 new rooms in the main building of the Uffizi.

Schmidt's ambitious program of rethinking the Uffizi Gallery's immense art collection does not stop within the museum's thresholds. He has used the period of the pandemic lockdown to consider how the "soft power" and wide popularity of the masterpieces in the Uffizi could benefit the entire region of Tuscany and beyond. His idea culminated in the newly launched Uffizi Diffusi, or Scattered Uffizi, a visionary and ambitious project that will send works of art in the Uffizi collection to be displayed in smaller museums, churches and other areas in Tuscany. The aim of the initiative is to expand the traditional's reach, visibility and the impact of the works beyond Florence and into less-visited areas, to have creating new jobs and revenue outside the urban core.

Schmidt explains: "We need to have a systematic approach and change the way we offer visitors access to our artworks, expanding not just on tourists but also on all the citizens of Italy. That is the way to build bridges for our citizens – bridges between the works of art and their own lives where they go to school and work, and live."

"The Uffizi Diffusi will comprise different initiatives – from more traditional special exhibitions that will be offered on a regular basis, to mid-term and long-term loans to locations around Tuscany. For the first year, we focused on traditional types of exhibitions, but this will be growing organically, I foresee. Out of seven projects this summer, five were financed by the non-profit foundation of the bank Cassa di Risparmio. A major partner in the project will be the Region of Tuscany, the consort for funds from the European Union. The Region is developing a special legislation that will help finance the Uffizi Diffusi project. They cannot act as quickly as the bank foundation but are able to take on long-term projects such as restoring Villa Andromeda in Montecatini-Florentine, most recently used as a psychiatric hospital, and prior to that, a prison. Florence, the villa is the single largest Medici Villa in existence, with an extraordinary garden and beautiful geometric garden fountains under constant reconstruction."

All the Uffizi Diffusi initiatives are currently stand alone as far as ticketing however once more venues are up and running the plan is to offer a single ticket that gives access to all of them. The current museum ticket – the Passaporto – extends beyond the Uffizi Gallery to the National Archaeological Museum of Florence and the Opificio delle Pietre Dure (literally, the Workshop of Semi Precious Stones, which also serves as a major art restoration organization). Both are historically connected to the Uffizi's collection. For example, the Chinese, the Etruscan, pre-Roman and the Renaissance collections, once housed the personal collection of Cosimo I, while the Opificio was located within the Uffizi itself for two centuries. Schmidt notes that the concept of combined tickets is already well tested. "We know that ever since this ticket was instituted, the number of visitors to the Archaeological Museum and the Opificio went up at similar rates. They are strategically located within Florence and reachable by foot. As a result, an entire neighbourhood of Florence that had been a bit neglected in the past is beginning to flourish thanks to more tourists visiting."

Cosimo I di' Medici must be smiling from above, as his 500th birthday celebration was to be the Grand Duke of the Etruscan (Tuscan) lands, the title he bore for only the last few years of his life, from 1569 to 1574. Museum director Eike Schmidt's ambitious vision of the Scattered Uffizi is following in Cosimo I's own footsteps, with the goal of reaching the entire, sometimes forgotten reaches of what used to be the Medici Grand Duchy of Tuscany, and beyond. @

## SAN MAIRCO MUSEUM

Located within walking distance of the Uffizi is the Museo Nazionale di San Marco, a precious gem of a museum that from the mid-1400s, was home to the Dominicans. The convent, designed by Renaissance architect Michelozzo, had as its main patron Cosimo de' Medici the Elder, the founder of the Medici Bank and de facto ruler of Florence. His donation, four times what Pope Eugene IV had suggested, was the whopping sum of 40,000 gold florins, and covered not only the architectural works in the convent but the friars' expenses for clothing, food and an incredible library.

If only the words of this quintessential Florentine monument could talk, what stories they would tell about their illustrious inhabitants: from St. Antoninus, who founded the convent to the fiery preacher Girolamo Savonarola, who was burned at the stake in front of the Palazzo della Signoria in 1498, from celebrated painters and friars Fra Angelico ("Beato Angelico") and Fra Bartolomeo, to Cosimo the Elder himself, who had his own double cell suite on the premises.

In the words of Stefano Cecchi, director of the network of Museums of the Tuscan Region (49 in total), "San Marco was the beating heart of the Florentine Early Renaissance, not only from an artistic standpoint but also in historical and religious terms." About half the area of the original convent opened to the public in 1988, creating a unique museum that includes the chapter house, 42 dormitory cells (all with frescoes by Beato Angelico), and a refectory with the Last Supper painted in 1480 by Domenico Ghirlandajo. The large hall called the Pignone (which provided hospitality to pilgrims) was converted in 1991 to a gallery dedicated to the works of Beato Angelico. Thanks to a donation by the nonprofit group

Friends of Florence, it was refurbished in 2020 with new lighting, exhibition panels, and the restoration of paintings including the *Beats of Fiat Allaspice*. The renovated hall's unveiling was streamed live on the San Marco Facebook page in January 2021, marking a new beginning for the cultural world of Florence, which was still confronting the pandemic's lockdown haze.

According to Angela Tartuferi, San Marco's director and an authority on the art of the 15th century, this is just the beginning of a new chapter for the institution, which recently shared its brand new visual identity. The new logo features the Archangel Gabriel from Beato Angelico's fresco of the Annunciation, which is on the museum's first floor. On September 25, 2021, it will present a live-stream program to audiences in Cheng, in collaboration with Zhong Art International and Florence's twin city of Jingde. "This fall, a new area of the friars' dormitory will open to the public, dedicated to one of the extraordinary individuals who lived here but who must remain secret for now," says Tartuferi. The museum is gearing up for the 500th anniversary in 2023, of the canonization of St. Antoninus, first prior of San Marco and one of only a handful of Florentine-born Catholic saints.

"All the holy figures who have lived in San Marco must have used their powers to help us through the pandemic, and to start the major restoration project of the Pignone Hall," says Tartuferi. "Their intervention allowed us to fresh up what we envisioned for the 500th anniversary of our museum. Thankfully, the visitors are coming back. For now, most are Italian, many are French, who are big fans of Beato Angelico. But our doors are open again to the world, and we welcome them. Without the public, the museum would not have a reason to be."

The newly inaugurated Beato Angelico Room, Museo di San Marco

