



DESTINATION
ART

THE ITALIAN ART TRIP: FUN IN THE SUN

Fine Art Connoisseur's ninth annual adventure abroad, the Italian Art Trip, delivered what it promised and much more. Conceived by FAC publisher Eric Rhoads, the tour last October proved an ideal way to mix world-class art and architecture with five-star comforts and a delightfully cohesive group of 42 travelers who shared with each other their passion for beauty, quality, and learning. Our adventure started with an optional three-night pre-trip in Milan, then the core trip (four nights in Florence and four nights in Rome), followed by an optional post-trip of four nights in Sorrento. Some guests who participated all 15 nights were dreaming in Italian by the end, and others had tans because the weather was so sunny, though not hot.

Italy was a natural choice because it features great art and architecture ranging from antiquity right through today. Even those who had previously visited our destinations discovered things they had missed before. During the core trip, I presented two illustrated lectures that set our upcoming sites (and their artworks) into historical context so they would make sense when we finally got there.

In Italy, visitors feel comfortable strolling by themselves because the locals are extraordinarily friendly, so our planning team scheduled considerable free time for guests to explore on their own. This was made easier by the fact that our luxurious five-star hotels were well-located; if you did not want to walk to your restaurant or opera performance, you could easily take a taxi there. Having said that, the program included all breakfasts and most lunches and suppers:



Peter Trippi delivers an illustrated lecture.

we are pretty sure everyone gained at least five pounds, as the meals were always delicious and plentiful.

Our logistics proved to be incredibly easy. Once they reached Milan, guests never lugged a suitcase again. On the morning of each departure day, bags set outside your door would magically disappear and turn up again in your next hotel room later that day. This abracadabra effect was enhanced by the fact that no train or bus trip took much longer than 90 minutes; Italy is blessed with a superb rail and road network.

MILAN AND LAKE COMO

Milan is a major artistic center too, sometimes overlooked in favor of more famous cities elsewhere in Italy. Those who had not visited before were amazed by the quality of art and architecture, and of course by the elegance of the residents, given Milan's status as a world capital of fashion and design. Our stay at the Hotel Principe di Savoia got off to a rollicking start with a welcome reception, including my 10-minute overview of what we would soon see.

The next day featured a panoramic drive through Milan — including a stop at the



Director James Bradburne speaks to our group on the loggia of Milan's Pinacoteca di Brera.

enormous Castello Sforzesco — on our way to the monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie. There we enjoyed a (nearly) private viewing of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*, which has been restored and perfectly lit so it can be admired properly. Our walking tour downtown brought us to the exquisite Museo Bagatti Valsecchi, a historic house filled with superb Renaissance decorative arts, sculptures, arms, and armor collected by a noble family.

At Milan's greatest art museum, the Pinacoteca di Brera, which features major examples by all of the Renaissance and Baroque masters, we were greeted by director James Bradburne. Some guests had already met him in 2012 when he headed Florence's Palazzo Strozzi; during his lively talk this year, James kindly explained how he has reinvigorated the Brera (to dazzling effect).

The next morning found us driving northeast to the town of Como, where we boarded our own boat and set sail for a full-day excursion on scenic Lake Como. Our first stop was the Villa Carlotta, which contains major sculptures by the classicist Antonio Canova. After exploring the pretty town of Bellagio, we relaxed for a delicious lunch on the terrace of Locanda dell'Isola Comacina while its merry owner regaled us with the colorful history of this private island. The big finale was the stunning Villa del Balbianello, best known for its garden and terrace overlooking the lake. Inside we gladly explored its jewel-box interiors, which feature many ethnographic artifacts brought home by the mansion's final owner, the explorer Guido Monzino. Balbianello was opened especially for us that day, so we took our time.



(ABOVE) The Villa del Balbianello on Lake Como and (BELOW) On the terrace of the Villa del Balbianello



FLORENCE

Our group had expanded in number (from 18 to 42) by the time we assembled for another welcome reception at the Hotel Savoy in central Florence. This party featured a round robin in which every guest introduced herself or himself, including comments on which places folks were most eager to see.

(FROM LEFT TO RIGHT) Monsignor Timothy Verdon makes a point at Florence's Museo dell'Opera del Duomo. ■ Dr. Rocky Ruggiero speaking in one of the Medici Chapels, Florence ■ Michelangelo's *David* at the Accademia, Florence





(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) Dr. Linda Falcone gives a talk at the Museo di San Marco. ■ Ramiro Sanchez, the Florence Academy of Art's director of advanced painting ■ Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne* at the Galleria Borghese, Rome ■ At the Piazzale Michelangelo overlooking Florence

Few guests were prepared for the extraordinary morning that followed. We walked two blocks from the hotel to the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, a museum opened a few years ago that has revolutionized the way the world sees Florentine sculpture and architecture. It contains thousands of treasures related to Florence's famous cathedral (Duomo) and the structures around it. Here we were given a warm welcome and thorough tour by its founding director, Monsignor Timothy Verdon, a fascinating American priest with a PhD in art history from Yale. It was especially poignant that one of our talented guides in Florence — Dr. Rocky Ruggiero — had studied with Msgr. Verdon himself.

This stimulating day also featured a visit to the massive complex of San Lorenzo, with

its atmospheric library, basilica, and Medici Chapels featuring sculptures and architectural designs by Michelangelo. Speaking of Florence's leading family, we also explored the Palazzo Medici Riccardi, with its brilliantly colorful Chapel of the Magi decorated by Benozzo Gozzoli.

The next morning shifted our attention to the long-overlooked contributions made by women to the Florentine Renaissance. Waiting to welcome us to the Museo di San Marco was Dr. Linda Falcone, director of the Advancing Women Artists Foundation (AWA). She kindly brought us to a closed gallery inside the museum to tell us more about the remarkable painter (and nun) Plautilla Nelli, right in front of her large depiction of *The Lamentation with Saints*. Its recent conservation was

underwritten by AWA, which had sadly — just the previous month — lost its visionary American founder, Jane Fortune.

Soon we moved to the Accademia, home to many treasures but most famously Michelangelo's *David*. No matter how many good photographs you might see, there is nothing like standing in front of this huge masterwork. The day concluded with a thorough tour of the Church of Santa Maria Novella, and then some guests headed for its renowned pharmacy nearby, in business for six centuries.

After many guests participated in Sunday Mass at the Duomo, the group regathered at the small but charming Palazzo Davanzati, which recreates the experience of living in a Florentine patrician's house during the late Middle Ages. The day's *pièce-de-resistance* was a guided tour



Gazing in wonder inside the Sistine Chapel, Vatican Museum, Rome ■ Prince Jonathan Doria Pamphilj welcomes us to his family home in Rome.

of the Galleria degli Uffizi, with its renowned Botticelli, Raphael, and Leonardo paintings.

Our final morning in Tuscany was spent at the Florence Academy of Art, founded in 1991 by the American-born artist Daniel Graves. (Please see the article about him on page 68, and also his self-portrait on page 146.) Nearly the entire faculty and leadership were on hand to welcome us to their enormous facility, opened two years ago — including Daniel himself, his wife, Anki, Susan Tintori, Tom Richards, Ramiro Sanchez, Mitch Shea, Simona Dolci, and Maureen Hyde. A special highlight was the pop-up exhibition of recent artworks by faculty and students that our guests eagerly purchased and shipped home (or carried away). Last but not least, the group headed to the renowned Church of San Miniato al Monte to

explore its remarkable interior, recently restored with support from the American nonprofit Friends of Florence. Before we bade farewell to this great city, we spent half an hour taking photos of it from the Piazzale Michelangelo.



ROME

In Rome, the Grand Hotel Baglioni Regina became our home away from home. It was also just a 10-minute walk, on our first morning, to the Galleria Borghese, the stunning collection of treasures including Gian Lorenzo Bernini's life-size sculpture Apollo and Daphne. The group was "at ease" for the rest of the day because we knew the evening would be devoted to the Vatican Museum. We arrived there as the last tourists departed; suddenly a gigantic door opened and we were ushered inside... the place was ours for more than two hours, including a whole hour in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. Instead of contending there with the usual hordes jostling

Having traveled with FAC for nine straight years, Roger Rossi was duly honored as Emperor at the Colosseum.

(LEFT) John Ochsendorf, director of the American Academy in Rome, with Claudia Clayton and Bob Wrathall ■ The farewell celebration at the Palazzo Colonna, Rome





A street in Pompeii ■ The view over Capri and the Bay of Naples from the Villa San Michele ■ Eric Rhoads, Cinthia Joyce, and Laurie Rhoads learn how to cook Italian-style at the Villa Ida in Sorrento.

shoulder to shoulder, we were able to sit and gaze upward as our guides explained every detail. It is possible that Eric Rhoads is the only person who has ever posted a Facebook Live broadcast from inside the Sistine Chapel (still viewable on his Facebook page). In fact, he filmed until a guard spotted him!

The next day was spent visiting the recently restored Colosseum, walking through the Forum, and then ascending the Vittoriano monument to survey all of Rome. After lunch we visited the always-moving Pantheon, then explored the Palazzo Doria Pamphilj, the Baroque mansion of one of Rome's grandest families. A special treat was the welcome from Prince Jonathan Doria Pamphilj, who lives there and told us why he and his sister are so proud to share it with the public. We concluded the day at the famous Fontana di Trevi, where we hurled coins into the water in hopes we will return to Rome.

Our final day in the Eternal City began in the ancient neighborhood of Trastevere visiting the Church of Santa Maria with its glittering mosaics, and also the Villa Farnesina. The latter is a Renaissance summer getaway that still thrills visitors with Raphael's famous Galatea fresco, as well as its brilliant wall decorations by Giulio Romano and Baldassare Peruzzi. Few foreigners ever make it uphill to the American Academy in Rome, an impressive building designed by McKim Mead & White in the early 1900s and now a research center where great American artists and scholars study, paint, compose, write, and choreograph. There we were welcomed by director John Ochsendorf before savoring lunch among the "fellows" and a thorough tour with longtime staffer Tina Cancemi. An extra bonus was the Academy's Villa Aurelia, which offers impressive views over the city. The day was capped by a splendid farewell celebration at the Palazzo Colonna. In one of Rome's grandest buildings, we toured its art collection before enjoying drinks on the terrace overlooking the Piazza Venezia. Dinner was served in a grand pavilion erected centuries ago for just this purpose.



SORRENTO

Our group slimmed down again (to 16) for the post-trip stay at the enchanting Hilton Sorrento Palace, set on a hill overlooking its own citrus grove and the Bay of Naples beyond. On our drive south from Rome, we explored the ruins at Pompeii, surely the most famous archeological site anywhere. Delightfully free of the crowds and heat one normally associates with them, Pompeii's houses, streets, and amphitheaters make visible the city's destruction during the explosion of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD. Our visit was not somber at all, but later Eric Rhoads mused eloquently, "Though I've traveled the world, this trip to Italy — and especially the visit to Pompeii — had a profound impact on me. In a way, it put me in my place, taking away any smugness about how good we are at things today. This trip demonstrated that life was equally rich in art and the good life in centuries past. Humanity's fate is ashes to ashes, but artworks remain to tell future generations who their creators were."

The next day found us departing Sorrento's marina on a hydrofoil headed to the fabled island of Capri. Upon arriving we boarded convertible taxis that zoomed up hairpin curves to the beautiful Villa San Michele. Set high on a mountain overlooking the sea, this was once

the getaway home of the Swedish writer Axel Munthe. After free time to explore both Anacapri and downtown Capri, we hydrofoiled back to Sorrento and headed to our private cooking class at the Villa Ida. This is a private compound where the charming host family gleefully guided us through the preparing of an entire Sorrentine meal, complete with aprons and a tasting of wines they make on site.

Alas, our weather-luck ran out the day we visited Naples. Pouring rain discouraged us from strolling its cobbled streets, but we enjoyed an intriguing visit to the reconstructed Church and Monastery of Santa Chiara, then an impressive panoramic drive along the city's coast. The day's highlight was the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, Italy's single greatest collection of antiquities, which is particularly rich with discoveries from Pompeii and Herculaneum.

On our final day came the glorious Amalfi coast, which we ogled gladly from our bus windows. We dodged rain clouds while strolling the romantic streets of Positano and Amalfi, where the sun finally emerged as we watched the huge waves crash against the cliffs. It is no wonder why this region's extraordinary juxtaposition of ocean and mountain has inspired visitors for thousands of years.

KUDOS

As always, it was bittersweet to part with friends old and new. This was an exceptionally merry group, their mood surely lightened by our peerless travel coordinator, Gabriel Haigazian (CTP Group, California), and his colleague Howard Wise.

We are thrilled to confirm that the next trip — our 10th annual — will explore Provence and the French Riviera this coming October. This region is synonymous with great art, architecture, dining, and sunshine, so we expect to have a marvelous time. For details, please contact Gabriel Haigazian at 818.444.2700 or gabriel@thectpgroup.com. Our official website, fineart-trip.com, will be active in mid-January. ●

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