

# Restoring Masterpieces

These Two Sisters are the Friends of Florence

By Danielle DeSimone



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A restorer fixes a crack in the arm of Michelangelo's David statue

**O**n a November morning in 1966, the Arno River, which winds its way through the Tuscan countryside, rose up and swallowed the city of Florence.

The flood killed 101 people, and destroyed buildings, businesses and countless works of art. Streets collapsed into the riverbanks. The world-famous statue of David stood in a lake of sludge. It was the most damaging flood in the history of Florence since 1557.

Although outpourings of sympathy and volunteers followed for decades, Florence's recovery has been slow and difficult. The destruction was so severe and funds for repairs so low, that today buildings and works of art still are waiting to be restored. For that, the city has turned to the American-founded

involved with a number of restoration nonprofits in Venice that worked to preserve the art and history of the city. Simonetta began to wonder why there was nothing like that in Florence, or even Tuscany, and soon decided to start her own restoration projects.

"Simonetta called me one day," Renee recalls, "... and said, 'I have this idea that will enable us to do good and help this beautiful city, but it will also be a great way for us to stay in touch while working together on something of value — something that's important.'"

Other American-founded nonprofit organizations have tried and failed to do what Simonetta and Renee completed in less than a year while working an ocean apart. Through arduous effort and sheer

large, well-known pieces, this can be fairly easy; Friends of Florence's current restoration project of the Botticelli room in Florence's world-renowned Uffizi Gallery only took six weeks to find funds and willing donors. "It was a frenzy," says Renee. "Every American knows Botticelli — it doesn't matter where you went to school or what you've studied. You've seen 'The Birth of Venus'." The 2004 restoration and continued upkeep of the David statue? That was funded in less than 24 hours.

Smaller projects without international reputations are more difficult, but these often need funding the most. Local chapels preserving their neighborhood history, the forgotten frescoes — these are the works that might be otherwise abandoned to decay if not



A restorer works on the feet of Michelangelo's David



Simonetta Bradolini d'Adda and Renee Gardner



Restoration of Ghiberti's Gates of Paradise

organization Friends of Florence.

Countess Simonetta Brandolini d'Adda and Renee Gardner have built Friends of Florence out of a shared love — for the arts, for their beloved city of Florence, and, as sisters, for their family.

The daughters of an American father and an Italian mother, Simonetta and Renee's lives have always been linked to Italy. They spent a majority of their childhoods living abroad in Italy and France, in addition to studying in Italy at college. During her semester studying abroad in Florence, Simonetta met her future husband. She has been living in Florence and running her own home-rental company there ever since, while her sister, Renee, heads an event-planning business in Washington, D.C.

In the 1990's, Simonetta became

will, the sisters founded Friends of Florence as an official 501(c)3 nonprofit organization in an unheard-of six months. As Simonetta puts it, "We've been going strong ever since."

Besides Simonetta and Renee, working out of their homes, Friends of Florence only has three part-time employees whose time is entirely volunteered. Yet they have saved some of the most iconic pieces of art in Florence, from basilica frescoes to Michelangelo's statue of David. The organization is inundated with weekly project proposals and restoration requests from both local and national institutions in Italy. Once its Board of Directors has approved a project and set its budget, the real work begins.

Simonetta and Renee must first find the money to restore the art. For

for Friends of Florence. Officials in Florence appreciate the preservation of these small treasures. "It makes a difference," says Simonetta, "To really maintain these pieces for the future."

The Friends of Florence organization is successful in what it does because of the passion of the people who drive it, but also because it surpasses much of the bureaucratic red tape that slows down state-funded restoration projects. Friends of Florence pays the restoration laboratory and its workers directly, rather than going through another organization or the government. This ensures that the restorations are undertaken quickly, before further damage can be done. From there, highly-trained art restorers slowly scrape away years of neglect, rust, mold and decay. ➤

Antonio Quattrone

Heather Keith

Antonio Quattrone

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Before and after David's restoration

bringing masterpieces back to life.

On their own, Simonetta or Renee might not be able to pull off the work that they do, but together, they are unstoppable. Renee's background in fundraising and marketing makes her adept at dealing with the organization's development. Based out of Washington, D.C., she is the one who works with the Board of Directors, tracks down potential donors, and keeps all the paperwork in check.

Simonetta is in charge of "the relationships" with the people in Italy. As a resident of Florence, she is on the frontlines managing the restoration projects, communicating with the mayor of Florence, the Italian government, and sometimes even the Church, ensuring that things run smoothly once the projects (usually 15 to 20 at one time) are underway.

"My sister is the one who does all the work," Renee insists, chatting at her Washington, D.C., home with her sister recently. But Simonetta interrupts to disagree, explaining that they both contribute in the non-profit's work. When they speak, it is a constant back-and-forth, each sister complimenting the

other, finishing one another's sentences, and insisting that the other sister is the one responsible for the success of Friends of Florence. Their talk about their

projects and the need to save Florence's artwork rings with fiery determination — an understood agreement that, if we don't do it, who will?

Friends of Florence fills a much-needed void in the Italian art scene. The city's public, frustrated with the lack of action by the government, has turned to these Italian American women and their organization for help. Italy, for all its beauty, often finds itself floundering in red tape and inefficiency when it comes to preserving its endless historic sites and artistic achievements. With a lack of public funds, much of its iconic monuments and museums have been propped up by private investors and organizations. The Trevi Fountain in Rome, for example, was recently renovated by the grace (and money) of the Italian fashion house Fendi. The Spanish Steps are getting a facelift from luxury goods company Bulgari. But Friends of Florence has been preserving Italian artwork and history before it was even in style.

Living on opposite sides of the world, Simonetta and Renee have managed to build a nonprofit that

in 18 years has restored hundreds of pieces of invaluable art. Connected through their dedication to Florence, they have remained close and continue to track down new projects — art and history that needs saving.

During the 1966 Arno River flood, water battered the golden Gates of Paradise that stand guard at the Battistero di San Giovanni with such force that it ripped off entire panels. For almost 26 years, the doors laid in a laboratory, damaged and incomplete.

"I like to say that it took longer to restore the Gates of Paradise than it took Ghiberti to make them," Simonetta says with a smile.

Friends of Florence became involved in the project and, a year later, the doors were completely restored, once again on display for millions of travelers and Florentines alike.

Renee and Simonetta know Italian art does not belong only to Italy. Friends of Florence's efforts are not just for Florence, for Italy, for Italians, or for Italian Americans. Their work ensures the preservation of centuries of history, art and beauty that would otherwise be lost to the entire world.

For anyone who has seen in-person a restored masterpiece such as Michelangelo's David sculpture and had to catch his breath, it is the work of organizations such as Friends of Florence that makes it possible.▲

*Danielle DeSimone, NIAF's assistant editor and social media manager, spent much of her childhood growing up in southern Italy.*

