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### A Museum Made for Lingerin...or Not

The Uffizi Gallery hopes its changes will provide a better visiting experience for tourists and connoisseurs alike.



Recent renovations aim to manage crowd flow while letting those who wish to spend more time with the art do so undisturbed. PHOTO:UFFIZI GALLERY

By **TOM L. FREUDENHEIM**

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#### *Florence*

Blessed is the museum whose collections include works that have moved from the status of art-historical gem to coffee-mug icon. Or maybe not. All those gawkers frequently result in visitor traffic jams along with potential security risks. It's a challenge most of us have encountered somewhere (trying to see the Mona Lisa in Paris), and museum directors find themselves torn

between joy of filled coffers from paying multitudes and regret about the likely attendant dissipation of aesthetic enjoyment. A fresh solution to this dilemma has recently been attempted at this city's Uffizi Gallery.

Commissioned around 1560 by Cosimo I de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, who engaged Giorgio Vasari (1511-74) to design the building as state offices, the Uffizi was a relatively late addition to the city's many architectural wonders. Entered via the historic Piazza della Signoria, the Uffizi's elegantly modest facing colonnaded facades are among the world's great art destinations. Handling the resultant crowds is both a museum director's dream and nightmare. The goal of satisfying conflicting demands of tourists with budgeted time and art lovers who long to linger may have been achieved in the Uffizi's newest iteration of gallery renovations.

The visitor's route actually commences in the mind-boggling Maestà room, designed in the 1950s specifically to house three enormous late 13th- and 14th-century paintings of the enthroned Virgin Mary by Duccio, Cimabue and Giotto. They remind us of the period when Byzantine art starts to work its way toward what we now think of as Italian Renaissance painting, which becomes even more evident as we move on to the splendors of Gentile da Fabriano's richly populated "Adoration of the Magi" (1423).

A change in display mode is evident as one moves on to the capacious newly opened galleries, where the brightness of light-washed walls seems to unite the Filippo Lippi (c. 1406-1469) paintings, inviting us to compare the subtle differences between the artist's several Madonnas, just as we notice that the only nondevotional painting in the room is Paolo Uccello's "Battle of San Romano" (c. 1435-60)—one of three related scenes (the other two are in London and Paris)—with a formal balance of three glittering white horses, seen from front, side and rear, and array of upright spears. This combination of the sacred and profane sets up an exciting visual tension that prepares us for the wholly secular next room, in which Antonio Pollaiuolo's powerful little panel depicting Hercules and Antaeus (c. 1470) confronts Piero della Francesca's iconic facing portraits of Federico da Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino, and his wife, Battista Sforza (1465-72). The duke's arresting profile remains among the wonders of Italian Renaissance art, and by setting the portraits on a pedestal, so that their painted versos can also be seen, the museum makes them feel especially accessible to visitors.

That sense of approachability continues in the following gallery, where Sandro Botticelli's "Primavera" (1482) confronts us in an ingenious huge white frame, setting the painting slightly back from a glass-covered wall. Brightly lighted, especially at the bottom of the frame, this is an installation device that the museum's newly arrived (from Minneapolis) German-born director, Eike Schmidt, told me is meant to allow gawking tour-group visitors to snap their selfies, without undue encroachment on the selfishly guarded personal space of traditional museum visitors, who might want to spend more time comparing Botticelli's two wholly contrasting "Annunciation" paintings, wonderfully installed facing each other. The smaller one (1489-90) creates a balletic, almost intimate, relationship between the Virgin and Gabriel, while the larger and earlier one—a detached fresco of 1481—has the two actors at some distance in completely different spaces from one another.

The next gallery displays Botticelli's "Birth of Venus" (1486) in the same tour-friendly accentuated giant-frame installation, but the greatest joy for this visitor was the illusion of direct access to the artist's tempera painting "Calumny of Apelles" (c. 1494-94). One can actually put one's nose up against the glass to check out the magnificent details of this exquisite tableau vivant, in which figures of Ignorance, Suspicion, Slander, Fraud, Conspiracy, Repentance and Truth interact with a donkey-eared seated King Midas. Discreet metal barriers keep visitors away from most of the works in these galleries, but their absence from a few principal paintings has an inviting psychological effect that's gratifying.

Capping off the wonder of this new installation is the final gallery of the sequence (certainly not of the Uffizi!), with the magnetic Portinari Altarpiece (1474-76) by Hugo van der Goes. So much is going on in this triptych, with its central Adoration of the Shepherds (we feel like we might know these three reverential guys, portrayed in the realistic mode of Netherlandish Renaissance art), and side panels of saints and patrons—the family of Tommaso Portinari, an Italian banker living in Bruges, who commissioned the work from the Flemish painter. This serves as a kind of symbol for the international nature of this relatively simple, yet somehow groundbreaking, gallery renovation project, which was funded by Friends of Florence, including a number of generous American patrons.

*Mr. Freudenheim, a former art-museum director, served as the assistant secretary for museums at the Smithsonian.*