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Restoring Italy's Treasured Art



An art restorer at work on "The Madonna and Child with Saint Catherine of Alexandria," part of "Offering of the Angels" exhibit.



Botticelli's "Madonna and Child" is now touring the U.S. as part of the "Offering of the Angels" exhibit co-organized by the Friends of the Uffizi Gallery.

By Jenifer Mangione Vogt

Inspiration demands the active cooperation of the intellect joined with enthusiasm, and it is under such conditions that marvelous conceptions, with all that is excellent and divine, come into being.

– Giorgio Vasari

It was an act of terrorism that shook Italy to the core of everything it holds sacred: its history, art and beauty. On May 28, 1993 a car bomb exploded in front of Florence's Uffizi Gallery. Later in the day The New York Times reported, "three works — one by the 17th-century Dutch painter Gerrit van Honthorst and two by the Italian Bartolomeo Manfredi — were destroyed." The bombing killed a family that lived across the street and left a gaping hole in the side of the museum revealing the Tuscan hillside. The Times also remarked, "If it weren't for the backdrop, the whole scene would bring to mind Sarajevo instead of Florence." Remarkably, significant works by Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Raphael, Titian and Caravaggio were spared.

Thirty other paintings, however, were badly damaged, including "Madonna della Costa," a 13th century masterpiece by Giotto, "The Death of Adonis" by Sebastiano del Piombo and works by Rubens and van Dyck. Italy's Culture Minister declared, "Gallery Closed." Thousands of Florentines gathered to protest the assault on their beloved museum, which was founded in 1560 by Cosimo I de' Medici and designed by Giorgio Vasari and remains an important tribute to the Italian Renaissance.

Another important event took place at the time of the attack that would, ultimately, herald a secure future for the Uffizi's masterpieces. A small group of concerned citizens formed Amici degli Uffizi, an Italian non profit dedicated to raising funds for the restoration of the damaged art. Founding member Contessa Maria Vittoria Colonna Rimbotti, a highly respected and influential patroness of the arts in Italy, recalls the bombings with sadness, "Italians personalized this attack on one of our greatest art institutions. Locally, it was perceived as an attack on everything that Florentines hold dear and people rallied to the aid of the Uffizi. I immediately felt compelled to action and began raising funds." Works of art as old as the ones in the Uffizi must be handled with such care and delicacy as to require substantial time and labor. In Italy art restoration is a prestigious undertaking and one that requires a significant financial investment. This is where Amici degli Uffizi proved invaluable in the Uffizi's resuscitation.

While the organization's original mission was to fund the restoration of the works damaged in the attack, today it has expanded to safeguard through restoration, preservation and education any of the Uffizi's treasured artworks. In 2006, Contessa Rimbotti further expanded the mission by helping to establish a U.S.-based sister organization, Friends of the Uffizi, a nonprofit headquartered in Palm Beach, Florida. The two organizations now work in tandem to raise funds and awareness in Italy and the U.S.

Continued on Page 5

NEWS - DO NOT DELAY - TIME VALUE DATA - EXPEDITE

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The Friends of the Uffizi Gallery funded the restoration of the Laocoön Group, a replica created in 1520 by Baccio Bandinelli of the original monumental sculpture at the Vatican Museum.

Continued from Page 1

The job of safeguarding Italy's treasures is no casual undertaking. Many consider it a sacred mission and those drawn to this work exhibit the same passion that drove Renaissance artists. The U.S. Executive Director Lisa Marie Browne, considers it a calling and has remarked, "I have found my niche in life and with this work I am placing my fingerprint on history." Among the many restorations the Friends have funded, are sculptures and paintings, including "The Adoration of the Child" for Camaldoli by Filippo Lippi and two striking portraits of Giovanni and Francesco Medici. They also funded the restoration of "The Laocoön Group," a sculpture by Baccio Bandinelli, which had been commissioned by Pope Leo X de' Medici and is a replica of the monumen-

tal marble sculpture in the Vatican. These works glean to life again as the result of their restoration.

Last year, Browne increased the Friends' reach by working closely with the Uffizi's organizer Linda Carioni under the direction of Antonio Natali, to organize an exhibit in the U.S. "Offering of the Angels," culled from works not normally on display, showcases 45 paintings and tapestries, from the Renaissance and Baroque periods, all magnificently restored.

The centerpiece of "Offering" is a work from Titian's workshop, "The Madonna and Child with Saint Catherine of Alexandria," which dates from 1550 to 1560. It is with this work that Friends of the Uffizi are able to demonstrate the fruits of their efforts. The work is shown in various stages of restoration. As Browne



Each year members of the Friends of the Uffizi meet in Florence to celebrate the Uffizi Gallery and the beautiful city that surrounds it.

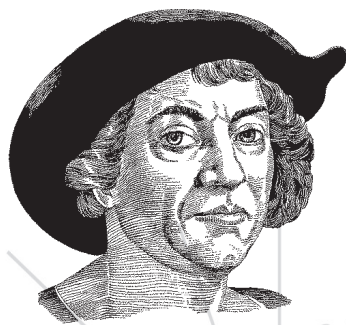
explained, "We wanted viewers to see the restoration process, so we staged a step-by-step depiction, comprised of reproductions of each phase of the restoration. It serves as a visual tutorial of the intricacy of the restoration process."

Now that the mission of restoration and conservation has been firmly established in the U.S. and Italy, the future is secured for the Italian

Renaissance and Baroque artworks that reside within the museum. Further, when "Offering of the Angels" concludes in March of 2013 it will have reached thousands of visitors with the Friends' mission. Browne sees the poetic justice, "The terrorists were on a mission to destroy. Instead, they spurred our organization's creation. The result is that the Uffizi Gallery is stron-

ger — and more vibrantly recognized and promoted — than ever before."

To learn more about the Friends of the Uffizi, or to donate to current art restoration projects, please visit www.friendsoftheuffizigallery.org. You can also find them on Facebook.com/FriendsoftheUffizi.



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