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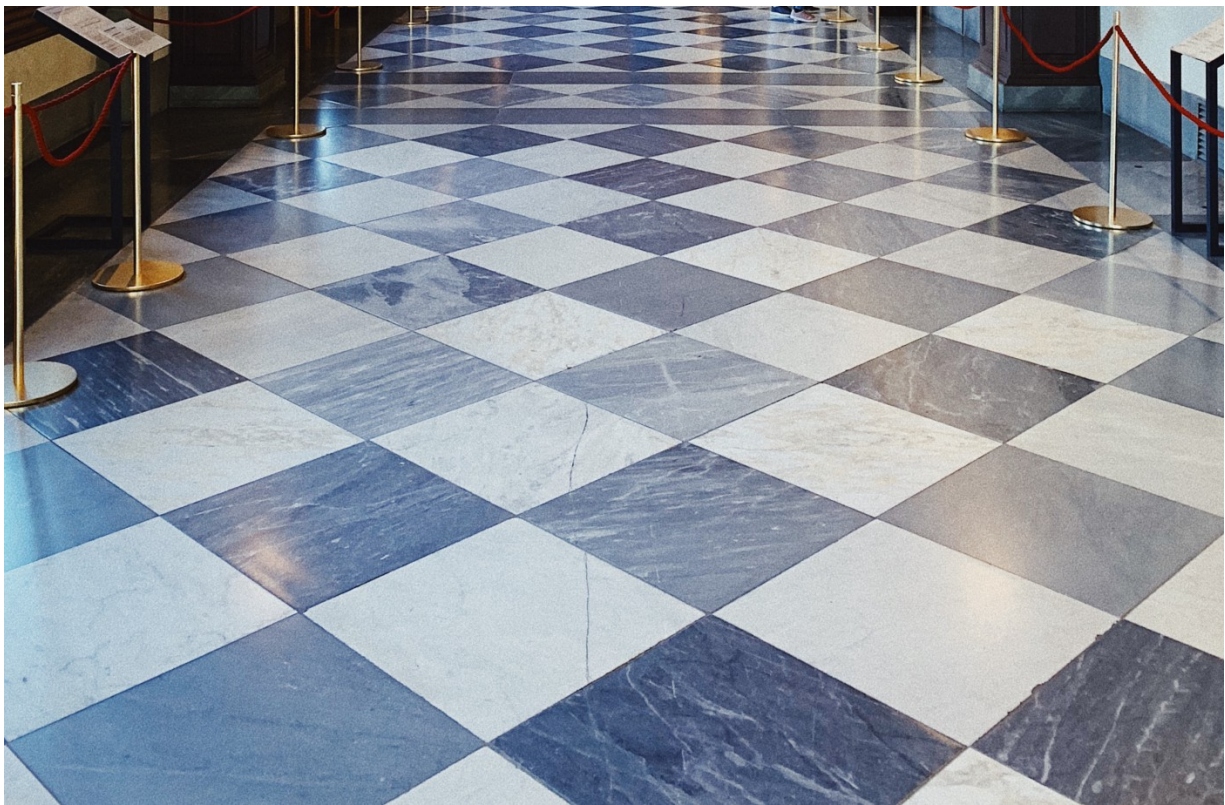
# Day 44: life in Italy under lockdown. The museum experience post-COVID



CFlisi

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Sergio Wing on Unsplash

Shouldn't an art museum be a venue of serenity and quiet reflection as visitors contemplate paintings, sculptures and drawings that stimulate thought and open up new mental horizons? Until March 8, that was the case for many museums in Italy that have flown beneath the radar of mass tourism. I am thinking of the large Pinacoteca Accademia Carrara in Bergamo, the jewel-like Museo Civico Giovanni Fattori in Livorno, and the small Museo dell'Accademia Etrusca in Cortona, among others — rich in content but surprisingly light in visitors.

The situation has been quite different at the Gallerie Uffizi of Florence, Italy's most frequented museum, with its two million-plus visitors per year and a location in the heart of Florence, one of the country's top tourist destinations. In recent decades it has become a mass market tourist attraction rather than a

must-stop for the Grand Tour beloved of 18th century nobility. Fighting one's way through the crowds, amid selfie-focused fan girls posing before a few iconic paintings (Botticelli's Birth of Venus, anyone?) is quite the opposite of quiet contemplation.

Today serenity reigns again at the Uffizi, since all museums closed at the end of the first week of March for a period as yet undecided. This downtime has given Uffizi director Eike Schmidt an opportunity to re-shape the museum experience. In effect he has been doing so since he was named director in 2015 and began encouraging the concept of "slow tourism". He introduced a new system of ticketing that assigns each visitor a specific day and time slot for entry. An algorithm calculates optimal times to avoid visitor congestion and lines. "This helps us organize the flow of traffic during the hours of opening," he explains. "Even before the corona crisis, we had calculated 22 meters of space for every guest. So we already have the technology to ensure proper spacing and traffic flow. When we re-open, it will be up to each visitor to maintain the proper distance."

Also in place is a strategy for increasing visitors during the otherwise low season, to help smooth the flow throughout the year. This effort includes economic and cultural incentives. More space was imposed around the most crowded and popular paintings. A combination ticket was created to encourage visitors to spend more time at Gallerie Uffizi and to see four other cultural centers in Florence: Pitti Palace, Boboli Gardens, the National Archeological Museum, and the Museum of the

*Opificio delle Pietre Dure* (the workshop of semi-precious stones). One ticket lasts three days and is valid for all five locations. The Uffizi measured the results and found that people were spending more time in the museums.

“It’s the opposite of a parking lot where you pay more if you stay longer,” enthuses Schmidt. “With this ticket, you pay less if you stay longer. We also introduced annual tickets, so people can come back again and again and get a deeper experience — to see and absorb the entire culture of the Renaissance.”

Closure gave the Uffizi the opportunity to enhance its digital presence. “We increased our digital communications with our public, as our visitors today are highly technological and used to social media,” observes Schmidt. “We launched our Facebook page, 15 years late, but we quickly acquired 50,000 followers.”

The museum registered steep, even exponential increases in interactions on Instagram and Twitter, and visits to its website more than doubled. Fans want new material every day, so the Uffizi posts a new text, video, or image daily. On April 19 they launched a new program of online communications in Spanish and will follow with programs in English and other languages.

Internally, the Uffizi has kept its entire staff, all working from home except for security forces. Schmidt reports that teleworking has proceeded “very well” and some processes have transitioned from real to virtual. The museum had been trying

to do some of these things for years; closure became the catalyst for achieving them. Schmidt hopes that their “great progress in digitalization” will continue after re-opening because it is “more ecological, more productive, and better.”

What won't happen — he is adamant — is the substitution of the digital experience for the real one. These are two different things, in his view, explaining that the situation is similar to what happened to theater when cinema arrived in the early 20th century. Some predicted film would mean the end of theater. Instead, the two developed as separate art forms. They have a connection, but each has its own distinct characteristics.

Another example Schmidt gives is when TV began to broadcast sports events. Some people suggested that television would be the end of sports fans at the stadium. Instead, more people than ever bought tickets to stadium events. TV makes possible close-ups and slow motion and action repeats, but people still want to go to the stadium for a different kind of sensory gratification.

By the same token, increasing digitalization will not reduce interest in visiting museums personally . . . if anything, the opposite will occur. “The digital experience of a museum reinforces a real visit to a museum and vice versa,” concludes the Uffizi director, adding, “An actual visit to our museum should become a more tranquil experience.”

Which is the way it should always be.

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