



THE POLISHING OF A JEWEL: AMERICAN COUPLE HELPS SHINE NEW LIGHT ON FLORENCE'S ARCHEOLOGICAL TREASURES

THE NATIONAL ARCHEOLOGICAL MUSEUM OF FLORENCE HAS BEGUN TO SHINE AGAIN AFTER LANGUISHING IN DISREPAIR SINCE THE ARNO RIVER FLOODED THE CITY IN 1966. WITH THE HELP OF AMERICAN PHILANTHROPISTS JACK AND LAURA WINCHESTER, SEVERAL OF ITS MAJOR COLLECTIONS NOW BOAST NEWLY RENOVATED DISPLAYS, SOME IN OUTSTANDING ROOMS NEVER BEFORE OPENED TO THE PUBLIC. THESE RECENT RESTORATIONS MAKE AVAILABLE FOR THE FIRST TIME IN OVER 50 YEARS THE MUSEUM'S UNIQUE HOLDINGS OF MEDICI AND LORRAINE ANTIQUITIES - INCLUDING THE GREEK, ROMAN AND ETRUSCAN WORKS WHICH INSPIRED ITALY'S RENAISSANCE ARTISTS.

Florence boasts over 90 museums dedicated to the Italian Renaissance. As home to the Medici, whose patronage funded the revival of artistic expression in Italy - which in turn propelled the arts throughout Europe - Florence is truly the City of Art. Tourists the world over flock to its many museums. But what escapes many

visitors is that the Medici and Lorraine collections of ancient Greek, Roman and Etruscan art also inspired the very artists the family supported. The influence of these ancient works can be seen in the art of Michelangelo Buonarroti, Leonardo da Vinci, Sandro Botticelli - to name a few.



DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH

The Medici and Lorraine not only built an extraordinary art collection - they also made sure that Florence's artistic heritage was not scattered and drew up a law to limit the exportation of artworks, "so that they do not go away and leave the City without their ornament." This is one of the reasons why today, visitors can enjoy the world-renowned collections of the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze -MAF for short- which includes Greek and Roman bronzes and marble sculptures, ancient coins, and an extraordinary Etruscan collection, with the famous Chimera di Arezzo. Housed in the striking Palazzo della Crocetta, once the home of Maria Maddalena de' Medici, this Florentine museum is second only in size to the Uffizi Gallery.

"Our collection is featured in every textbook of classical archeology in the world," notes Mario Iozzo, Director of the National Archeological Museum of Florence. However, this jewel of a museum lost its luster in the flood of 1966. Unlike other museums in the city, MAF had to invest its flood repair funds to restore its ancient collection. Its exhibition spaces and buildings have languished, and major collections have been rehoused or held in basement archives.

SHINING LIGHT

Enter Laura and Jack Winchester, Americans who spend a good part of their time in Europe and love to be immersed in Italian culture and art, particularly that of Florence. During a self-guided study of Etruscan art - a source of special pride for Renaissance Tuscans, who sought in the ancient civilization a pristine ancestry which rivaled Rome with its great antiquity, piety and strength - the Winchesters walked into MAF in 2017.

Given the marvels of the collection and the lack of English signage at the time, questions arose in their minds. As it happened, a guard on duty that day, possibly an art history student, not only offered explanations in English but toured them through the museum. She shone a light on the importance of the collection - and the Winchesters were enraptured.

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MARIO IOZZO

FAST FRIENDS

Shortly thereafter, the Winchesters met Mario Iozzo, the Director. As Laura Winchester puts it "Mario may very well be the greatest treasure at the museum. We've become friends." And for his part, Iozzo says "The Winchesters were a miracle for me. They just asked what I wanted to do to rebuild the museum. And when I told them, they said they would like to finance some of it."

With the support and comradery of the Winchesters, Iozzo led the renovation of four important parts of the MAF collections: The François Vase, the Sarcophagus

of the Amazons, the Medici bronze sculptures, and the ancient coin collection.

THE VASE, THE SARCOPHAGUS, THE BRONZES AND THE COINS

The most exquisite example of Greek black figure vases, the François Vase, is of such historical value that as Mario Iozzo tells it “to find fragments of the vase, Alessandro François moved enough earth to fill the Colosseum of Rome, even changing the topography of the land from hilly to flat.” The venerable terracotta, the Rex Vasorum, considered the encyclopedia of Greek mythology, now sits inside an elegant case in the center of a beautifully lit room. Safe and secure from any further damage, it can be seen from all sides, displayed with two other precious Athenian vases which were found in the tomb of the same Etruscan prince.

In a second room, the Winchesters provided support for the re-envisioned display of the Sarcophagus of the Amazons. “The beautifully preserved, painted marble of the Sarcophagus dates from 350 BC. It reveals the complex artistic capacities and elegant color sense of the Etruscans.”



Also on the second floor, the Museum redisplayed 151 of its most significant bronze figures. “These are the Greek and Roman bronze sculptures collected by the Medici and the Lorraine,” says Mario Iozzo. Given the lack of funding to update displays, the Etruscan bronzes collected by Lorenzo the Magnificent and his successors needed some attention as well. With the Winchesters stepping in, the figures are, at last, quite literally shown in their best light - in a logical progression, with Italian and English labels, and carefully planned, modern lighting.

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LAURA WINCHESTER

The fourth major renovation has reopened the elegant private rooms of Grand Duchess Maria Maddalena. “We redid everything, including tapestries and curtains,” recounts Jack Winchester. The rooms now show a large portion of the extensive ancient coin collection from the museum’s holdings, one of the largest and most important in the world.

VISION OF THE FUTURE

“At this point the second-floor flows really well,” says Laura Winchester “but there is so much more to do to bring this huge, historical museum to full glory. It is too important to renovate piecemeal.” The Winchesters challenged Mario Iozzo to find the very best museum architects to imagine a comprehensive redesign for the whole museum.

After a little investigation, they selected Guicciardini & Magni Architects, the Florentine firm which had redone the Opera del Duomo Museum, right there in town.

“They made a beautiful, modern museum in an ancient building. They worked on the new National Museum in Oslo, the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul, and they have projects with the Louvre in Paris,” recounts Iozzo.

A SHARED DREAM

“For our part, we have been working on museum exhibitions since architectural school. We started with small archeological museums. But it was the Duomo project that was the key to our working abroad,” says Marco Magni, a partner at Guicciardini & Magni. “When I was seven, I went to the National Archeological Museum with my school. I was impressed by the Chimera di Arezzo, the François Vase - I’ve wanted to work with the MAF ever since.”

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With the support of Jack and Laura Winchester, Guicciardini & Magni have teamed up with the museum to develop a plan for its complete restoration. In stages, the plan will bring the building back to its full glory and the collections will be presented in a series of varied, interactive and accessible displays.

The first stage of the overall renovation will create a modern entrance with a welcome area for visitors and a museum shop. Beside the beautiful building and its

astounding collections, Guicciardini & Magni will make visible the magnificent 500-year-old Medici garden, preserved and hidden within the walls of the Palazzo. The garden holds one of Mario Iozzo’s favorite Museum secrets - “a tree still growing there since before Columbus discovered America in 1492,” he says with a smile.

The team now awaits the green light from the Council of Regional Museums to begin the systematic and elegant renovation they have planned. At that point, the opportunity will open for other donors to join the Winchesters in supporting the return to glory of the astonishing Medici antiquities collection, which inspired the artistic Renaissance in Europe.

KNOWLEDGEABLE GUIDES

The Winchesters structure their giving to the Museum through the Friends of the National Archeological Museum of Florence, established at KBFUS. As Jack Winchester describes, “KBFUS really knows what they’re doing. They told us exactly how to proceed.” He adds “they guide you through all the right gates.”

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