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Venus or David

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Looking at Art in Florence with my Mother

by Dan Morey

Mother and I spent most of our first morning in Florence arguing about which museum to visit. I wanted to go to the Uffizi and look at Botticelli's Venus. She wanted to go to the Accademia for Michelangelo's David.

"I'm not paying twenty bucks to see some dude's marble schlong," I said.

"There's a lot more to look at than David," said Mother.

"There isn't! The whole gallery is three rooms. For the same price we can go to the Uffizi, one of the world's great museums."

"I don't want to miss David."

Before she left for Europe, Mother's friends assigned her a mission: Go to Florence, seek out David, take photographs—graphic ones—and bring them back.

"It's not my responsibility to help you fulfill the prurient longings of Pennsylvania housewives," I said.

"I suppose you'd make me go on my own. And get lost, or robbed, or run over by a maniac on a scooter."

We'd reached an impasse that could only be resolved by appealing to the most powerful authority known to modern-day travelers—the Internet.

"Where's the business center?" I asked the hotel proprietor, who was perched, rather prissily, on his stool.

"The what?"

"The business center. It's advertised on your website."

"Oh, that."

He gave us a password and pointed down the hall. The business center turned out to be a millennium-era laptop resting on a piece of wood that extended from the wall at an awkward, but interesting, angle. In order to type I had to lean, ever so slightly, to the left.

"Google it," ordered Mother.

I punched in "Uffizi" and showed her pictures of all the swell art it contained: Raphael, Leonardo, Rembrandt. "Look," I said. "Caravaggio's *Young Bacchus* is half naked."

"Well, that's something," said Mother.

Photos were helpful, but we needed opinions. On the Internet, where democracy reigns, a travel review posted by a blogger who calls himself "Strangler in Paradise" is just as valid as one written by an illustrious globetrotter like Rick Steves. I Googled "Accademia Gallery" and a plethora of critiques by unpaid, unaffiliated, probably unwashed, common trekkers came up. One included a picture of Michelangelo's David surrounded by four or five busloads of tourists in fanny-packs. The reviewer called the gallery a rip-off, a fraud, and a utopia for perverts. Apparently, one of the rooms contains a floor of mirrors, which creates an embarrassing situation for young ladies in miniskirts. The offended blogger lingered in this particular area for quite a while, giving his outrage plenty of time to grow.

"Maybe the Accademia wouldn't be so bad," I said.

"Forget it. It looks too crowded. And you can't take pictures."

She agreed to go to the Uffizi, with a stop at the Piazza della Signoria, where David stood for centuries before he was moved indoors in 1873. There's a replica on his pedestal now, and he's just as big and just as naked as the original. Mother posed for a series of photos, standing in the shadow of his biblical genitalia.

In the Uffizi, we checked out the fourteenth-century Siennese room first. My favorite picture was Simone Martini's Gothic *Annunciation*. The androgynous archangel Gabriel, with his cascade of golden locks, has the countenance of a schoolteacher disciplining a mischievous student. He commands Mary with a single authoritative finger, as if to say, "Get up here, missy. I've got something to tell you." Mary, sinuous and elegant in an ebony robe, turns a shoulder to him. Her frowning expression is a mixture of shock, fear, repulsion and anger—a perfectly natural reaction when you think about it. Imagine sitting comfortably in your favorite chair reading a book—not one of those naughty humanoid flies in the window and announces that you're going to give birth to the Son of God.

The next time we saw Mary, her chubby little bundle of divinity had arrived. Held aloft by two juvenile angels, He rests his pudgy fingers on her shoulder. The painting is by Filippo Lippi, a Florentine friar, and his Mary is young and attractive with a pale, delicate, utterly beautiful face.

According to Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, Lippi was far too randy for the monkish life. He quit his priory in the 1430s and embarked on a series of affairs, most famously with a pretty novice named Lucrezia Buti. Lippi was scouting for Madonna models in a nunnery when he spotted Lucrezia, took her back to his studio, and did what artists have been doing to their models since time immemorial. The nuns tried to rescue Lucrezia, but gave up after she became pregnant. Did Lippi imagine himself making love to Madonna when he bedded Buti? We'll never know, but it's hardly surprising his Mary in the Uffizi is such a hottie.

We drifted into the Botticelli rooms without even realizing it. Our ignorance was short-lived, however, for upon entering, the viewer's eye is drawn immediately to the *Birth of Venus*. The goddess of love, surfing in on her seashell, is nude, save for a tress of conveniently placed hair. She captivated me with her faraway eyes, and I went to her in a trance, bumping into another admirer en route. He laughed at my somnambulant condition and told me he'd done the same thing.

Venus' body is fine and soft and feminine, but it's really her face that pulls you in. Its porcelain beauty is flawless—as exquisite as Filippo Lippi's Madonna. Botticelli was Lippi's star pupil, and they both had an eye for pretty faces. Venus was most likely modeled on a delicious noblewoman named Simonetta Vespucci. Simonetta came to Florence with her husband Marco and instantly became the toast of the town. Giuliano and Lorenzo de' Medici, the city's rulers, fell in love with her fragile allure, as did Botticelli, and everyone else who laid eyes on her.

In 1475, Giuliano de' Medici rode into a jousting contest flying a banner designed by Botticelli. It displayed the face of Simonetta Vespucci above the words "La Sans Pareille" or "The Unparalleled One." Giuliano won the joust, and thenceforth Simonetta was celebrated as the most beautiful girl in Florence, the very portrait of Renaissance pulchritude. When she died of tuberculosis a year later, at the tender age of twenty-two, people lined up for miles to fall on her coffin and weep. Botticelli vowed to be buried at her feet, and he was, thirty-four years later.

It was with some difficulty that I tore myself away from Venus' gaze. Even on the other side of the room, I found myself glancing back to see if she was still watching me. Mother finally broke the spell with a hip check that would've knocked Wayne Gretzky down.

"Hey!" she said. "How about we move on before they close the place, huh?"

The other big Botticelli at the Uffizi is *Primavera*, his allegory of spring. Venus is at the center of this picture as well, clothed in a fluted negligee, surrounded by mythological figures doing weird things: blue-faced Zephyr chases Flora, who pukes flowers; the Three Graces dance temptingly in diaphanous wraps; Primavera picks blooms from her dress; Mercury paws at an orange tree. Above it all a tubby, blindfolded cupid hovers, launching love-arrows at the party. Spring is bursting out all over, and Venus, with her gravid tummy, looks as fertile as the vegetation.

I've always liked portraits of creepy children, and Agnolo Bronzino did some of the best. His *Portrait of Giovanni de' Medici*, son of Florence's Grand Duke Cosimo de' Medici, shows the infant prince gleefully clutching a songbird. No wonder he's happy—it's not every day a kid gets to squeeze the breath out of Tweety Bird. Then again, maybe the pampered hair is just got to dispatch avian life forms whenever he felt like it. For his parents, bird-squeezing was probably the Renaissance equivalent of putting on a Disney movie. "Give the brat another canary," said Cosimo to Eleanor. "He's getting on my nerves."

Bronzino's *Portrait of Bia de' Medici*, Giovanni's half-sister, is similarly disconcerting. She's a prepubescent girl decked out in a satiny gown with an array of glamorous accessories, including a pearl choker, gold necklace, and earrings. Her bobbed hair is parted severely down the middle, and her lips are rouged. It's all very stylish, but a bit much for a five-year-old. Even creepier is the fact that Bronzino painted the girl posthumously, using her death mask as a model, which accounts for her waxen complexion.

By the time we reached the forty-fifth and final room of the Uffizi, we were spent. Mother barely had the energy to ogle Caravaggio's *Young Bacchus*. The god of pleasure's face is effeminate, his stare come-hither, and he sports a leafy, effulgent headdress that would've made Carmen Miranda blush.

"Looks like one of Oscar Wilde's wet dreams," I said.

I left Mother to drool, and crossed the room to Caravaggio's decapitated Medusa head. The gorgon's mouth is agape with the shock of sudden annihilation, and streams of blood spurt from her severed neck.

"That's more like it," I said. "Aren't you glad we came to the Uffizi?"

Dan Morey is a freelance writer in Pennsylvania. He's worked as a book critic, nightlife columnist, travel correspondent and outdoor journalist. His writing has appeared in Hobart, Harpur Palate, McSweeney's Quarterly and elsewhere. He was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Find him at danmorey.weebly.com.

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