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BOOK REVIEW

UNSURPASSED FAIR FLORENCE

Charles Angell


Dusk and light mist. The tour bus stopped; our friend and tour leader John Heller cautioning that we had only a few minutes. Across the busy Viale Galileo Galilei and onto the Piazzale Michelangelo. There below bathed in diffused light rise Brunelleschi’s Duomo and Giotto’s Campanile tower, symbols of renaissance Florence, a city at once familiar from films and literature, yet still exotic, filled with artistic and architectural masterpieces reproduced in every art history text, all set amidst shops, markets, and trattoria that draw one along cobbled streets to some new wonder, some unexpected astonishment. Having walked, albeit too briefly, the streets of this city of enchantments, I enthusiastically began Michael Levey’s Florence: A Portrait which he tells us will “try to seize something of that entity and trace its evolution over the centuries, from medieval times into the full nineteenth century.” His portrait will be neither art or political history, or even a guidebook, but an amalgam which will try to answer: what is Florence?

Seizing Florence as an entity proves no small undertaking. Machiavelli tried it with interesting, though inconclusive results. His contemporary Francesco Guicciardini had better success writing that Florence “was sustained both by its abundant supplies and its flourishing and well-established business enterprises; men of talent and ability were rewarded through the recognition and support given to all letters, all arts, all gifts.” The casual visitor certainly desires to know why this small and, in its time, rather isolated city nourished so much genius, produced so much that is memorable. Levey explains that in its earliest times, Florence was probably best known for its streetfighting and family vendettas which grew into the prolonged partisan struggles between Guelph and Ghibelline. This unruliness did not prevent the city from prospering and inculcating in its residents a pronounced anti-monarchist sentiment. The trecento saw the Florentine Commune start the Duomo and Campanile as testimonials to the city’s wealth and status. Streetfighting, Levey suggests, may in time have transformed itself into artists competing for commissions; when the Guild of the Calimala wanted bronze doors for the Baptistery, they ordered a competition for which Ghiberti and Brunelleschi among others submitted panel designs of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac. Ghiberti received the commission and crafted the doors; Brunelleschi’s designs, no less remarkable in their dynamism, grace the Bargello.

More than half of Levey’s sumptuously illustrated portrait covers familiar ground. The great churches and chapels—Santa Croce, San Lorenzo, Santa Maria Novella, San Miniato—all receive their full discussion. Michelangelo’s Medici Chapel, Levey tells us, “speaks not of incompleteness but of accomplishment which never ceases to astonish and awe, though also to disturb.” Standing before the sinuous and dynamic marble figures, the spectator knows Death remains present in the chapel, and in their constrained facial expressions, understands its torment. Difficult to believe that the creator of these figures was also asked by his Medici patron to construct a snow sculpture in the Medici palace courtyard. Levey helps us understand these contending commercial and religious forces that powered Florentine art into the world. Speaking of the bust of Niccolo da Uzzano attributed to Donatello, he says “the longer it is studied, the more apparent becomes the fact that this bust is more than a piece of skilful realism. . . . Associations of heroism and patriotism accumulate around a likeness in no sense overtly heroic or handsome. Ultimately, [Niccolo] exists in a bifocal perspective: this is how he looked and that is what he stood for.” Describing Donatello’s much better known statue of St. Mary Magdalene, Levey terms the image one “of a wretched, reduced woman who might have been found in actuality begging on a street corner in Florence” and as such “compels anyone, learned or ignorant, so-
pontificated or naive, to recognize how closely art—contemporary art—can now mirror humanity and deepen awareness of the human condition." Levey demonstrates in _Florence: A Portrait_ how the Florentine citizens commissioned and Florentine artists painted, built, and sculpted work that spectators encountered as they conducted their daily business. These encounters still occur when tourists, Blue Guides and Baedekers in hand, find themselves immersed in the art and the living subjects it represents.

Guidebooks are ubiquitous in Florence's churches and museums and have been so since 1510 when Francesco Albertini published his _Memorionale_ ("not notably accurate yet highly significant," Levey comments) to assist the traveler's understanding of what at the time passed for modern art. Florentines knew early that their city possessed treasures that drew visitors from all over Europe and ultimately the world. Their guidebooks became increasingly sophisticated and recorded the changing fashions of these historical encounters. Today, for example, the _Eyewitness Travel Guide to Florence and Tuscany_ offers the traveler information about art, fashion, flora, fauna, accommodations, and almost every contingency the visitor might hope to encounter.

Yet, more than two-thirds along in his portrait Levey guides his readers to baroque and later Florence which he claims visitors must pretty much seek on their own. This Florence, he says, refuses to conform to the "tidy pattern-making desired by art history." Indeed, Levey's final four chapters exude an enthusiasm he can't quite seem to muster for the more familiar Renaissance ground. Though he labels Cosimo I de Medici an unprepossessing and perhaps too bureaucratically inclined Grand Duke of Tuscany, Levey admires the work Cosimo accomplished to normalize and regulate Florentine politics and foreign affairs. It was Cosimo who transformed the Uffizi into an art gallery to display the Medici treasures. The treasures of these more recent centuries give the visitor a sense of the city's continuity and stability as it survived the dynastic struggles that swept over Europe in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries. The art of these centuries resulted more from collaboration than from the vivid personalities that define the high Renaissance. Nonetheless, artists like Buontalenti, Giambologna, and—later—Gherado Silvani left their marks on the city's sculpture and architecture. Search these treasures out, Levey tells us, and encounter another Florence, equally as complex and rich in its affiliations.

But that is the problem that even a brief visit impresses upon the tourist; Florence has many incarnations, so many that one becomes distracted. Looking at one great work, one suddenly confronts another. Walking down one narrow street, one finds a side alley with something marvelous tucked away in a niche. To some extent, _Florence: A Portrait_ finds Levey gazing here, then there, trying to gather it all in for us, a literary companion to the view from the Piazzale Michelangelo. As good a guide as Levey is, he hardly substitutes for reseating oneself on the bus, descending the Viale Michelangelo, crossing the Arno, and lodging oneself in a room with a view.