CULTURAL COMMENTARY

Extreme Makeover: Renaissance Edition

Since his appointment in 2015, director Eike Schmidt has introduced changes to almost every aspect of the renowned Uffizi Gallery in Florence.

Newly reinstalled room dedicated to Leonardo da Vinci's 'Adoration of the Magi' (c. 1482) PHOTO: LE GALLERIE DEGLI UFFIZI

By Cammy Brothers
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Florence

How do you modernize a museum that is 500 years old, contains a disproportionate number of masterpieces of Renaissance painting and is beloved by visitors around the world? With great caution and small steps, one might imagine. Yet Eike Schmidt, the German-born art historian and curator who took the helm of the Uffizi Gallery in 2015, has introduced changes to almost every aspect of that institution. In particular, he has radically rethought what is on the walls, where, and how it is displayed. Visitors who know and love the galleries should prepare to be surprised.

The story of Renaissance art begins on the third floor, with the galleries housing the stunning collection of 14th-century painting: Giotto, Cimabue and others. These galleries remain intact, the pictures still in the frames made for the 1957 reinstallation by Carlo Scarpa and Giovanni Michelucci. So understated are these frames that one's attention remains firmly on the works themselves, with their bright egg-tempera colors and their first steps toward naturalism.

The changes begin a little farther in, with the Botticelli galleries. Here, one large room has been transformed into two, the first featuring his "Primavera" (c. 1478-82) and the second the "Birth of Venus" (c. 1485). With natural light flooding in from above, the paintings sparkle, and I felt as if I were seeing many of them for the first time.

Both the "Primavera" and the "Birth of Venus" are behind glass, as they were before, but it is a much improved, high-quality glass that allows the paintings to be seen without the usual glare. Antonio Godoli and Nicola Santini, architects of the reinstallation, have given them new frames, which are not hung on the walls but built into them, entombed in caverns that are beveled on all sides. The result is paradoxical: While you see the works more clearly, they nonetheless seem more distant, as if being viewed on a high-definition television screen.

The Bernini room at the renowned Uffizi Gallery in Florence PHOTO: LE GALLERIE DEGLI UFFIZI

There's another problem. Displays don't just showcase important artworks, they tell stories. An important one concerns the relation between Italian and Northern European artists. The prior installation made this obvious by including Hugo van der Goes's stunning "Portinari Altarpiece" (1477-78), which landed like a meteor in Florence in 1483, in the same gallery as the Botticellis. It allowed visitors to see how Florentine artists absorbed Northern lessons about landscape, emotion, realism and even the use of oil paint. In this new arrangement, the altarpiece is isolated in an adjacent room, severing that historical connection and raising the question of what such a work is doing in a museum of Italian art.

The Bellini room at the Uffizi PHOTO: LE GALLERIE DEGLI UFFIZI

The next dramatically reinstalled room is devoted to Leonardo's "Adoration of the Magi" (c. 1482), an unfinished work that has recently been cleaned. It feels as if a new Leonardo has been discovered. Before, one could make out little more than brown and yellow blobs. Now, thrillingly, Leonardo's composition is revealed as containing his drawings in paint: horses, suspended in action; quickly sketched portraits, enlarged versions of his vibrant ink drawings.

The most radical reinstallation, which has already generated controversy and criticism, is the Raphael and Michelangelo room. Mr. Schmidt has selected paintings with a historical link through their patron: Michelangelo's "Doni Tondo" (1505-06), a dynamic rendering of the Virgin and Child theme that is also deeply inset into the wall, is placed alongside Raphael's portraits of Angelo and Maddalena Doni, who commissioned it. Despite the labels, the relationship may elude many visitors: Visually, the portrait of Maddalena Doni relied closely on Leonardo's Mona Lisa, not on Michelangelo.

Among Mr. Schmidt's achievements has been an increase in display space, accomplished by eliminating second-floor offices to create a beautiful new sequence of rooms. The layout is well balanced, the scale intimate, the green color of the walls soothing. There is a heterogeneous mix of objects: One finds ceramics from Spain, as well as works by Giovanni Bellini, Andrea del Castagno and Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Also a success are the new Caravaggio rooms, with their deep-red walls and natural lighting.

The rest of the second floor is harder to love. These spaces were not purpose-built as galleries, and it shows. Magnificent works by Pontormo, Bronzino and others hang in rooms that retain the feel of a corridor, not least because by the time people reach this part of the galleries, they are headed swiftly out.

Do all of these changes offer an improvement? When Mr. Schmidt departs for his new position at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna in 2019, he will leave the galleries bigger and brighter than when he found them. But his touch has not been subtle, and it will take years to absorb the impact of the changes he has wrought.

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