

# WHY STANFORD IN FLORENCE?

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Why Stanford in Florence? At one level, the answer is, of course, very simple. A pithy version was given by Joan Blaeu, the great Dutch cartographer, in his *Atlas Maior* of 1665, perhaps the finest atlas ever published. In the introduction to his book on maps of Italy, Blaeu eloquently eulogizes Italy: “[This country] has such sweet charms that many forget their place of birth the better to sate their hearts with its pleasures.” He then goes on to describe the mountains clad in vineyards, crystalline streams, forests with tall trees, beautiful lakes, convenient ports, and opulent towns. About Florence in particular, Blaeu quotes a “near-proverbial” epithet by the Venetian humanist Marcantonio Sabellicus, which proclaims Florence beautiful “for the beauty of its buildings and the elegance of its broad, straight streets.”

Italy's excellence is also attested to, in Blaeu's ironic historical summary, by the “bloody wars in which the great powers of the earth each disputed its possession with the other.” “No nation has not at some time flirted with it: the Gauls, Carthaginians, Goths, Huns, Hungarians, Cimbri, Teutons, French, Basques, Navarrans, Swiss, Germans, and Spanish have all made love to it and wished to possess it, so perfectly to their taste did they find it.”

Indeed, if one wants to understand the political history of Europe, Italy is the perfect place to make an initial attempt to do so. Though I will confess that it took me a long time to grasp the apparent and the real distinctions between Ghibellines and Guelphs that were of such extraordinary importance to international politics for centuries. To this day, I have not truly penetrated the further differences between white and black guelphs, guelfi bianchi e neri. All I know in this respect, but fail to appreciate, is that, of all people, Il Sommo Poeta, Dante, a “bianco,” was exiled from Florence by the “neri.”

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For anybody who is considering a stay in Italy, what Joan Blaeu called the “sweet charms” of Italy are certainly a sufficient justification. Since I am neither a map maker nor a travel writer, I shall not dwell on sweet charms. In light of a world-wide consensus it is quite unnecessary. Instead, I should like to address what you might call a curricular matter.

Because of Stanford's Arts Initiative, the role of the arts in higher education has, of course, been very much on my mind. Florence as the birthplace of Renaissance art is the perfect location to reflect on the subject.

I have just used two words, “Renaissance” and “art,” which no layperson (and I am a layperson with respect to both subjects) can employ without running the danger of being shown up as ignorant by experts or missionaries.

Vasari was the first author to refer to the decline and subsequent renaissance (“rinascita”) of the arts. However, the term “Renaissance” as defining a particular period in European history we primarily owe to two 19<sup>th</sup> century historians: one French, Jules Michelet, and the other, even more influential, the Swiss scholar Jakob Burckhardt. Michelet summed up the age of the Renaissance as characterized—more so than all other ages—by the discovery of the world and the discovery of man. Burckhardt saw the Italian Renaissance as the beginning of modernity and, like Michelet, of the development of the individual.

The other term that I invoked—“art”—is even more dangerous. Ernst Gombrich begins his unsurpassed *Story of Art* with the statement: “There really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists.” In this sentence, Gombrich spells the word “Art” with a capital A and reminds us that art means very different things in different times and places.

Of course, the statement “there are only artists” simply shifts the definitional burden, but it does so with a twist. Gombrich writes elsewhere: “I propose to go back to earlier usage, to the time when the word ‘Art’ signified any skill or mastery .... This good old usage was replaced in the Romantic Period by the one that is still in current use according to which the word ‘Art’ stands for a special faculty of a human mind to be classified with religion and science.”

Gombrich's preference for the term art as signifying “any skill or mastery” is, of course, still expressed in the emphasis American universities, at least in theory, place on the “liberal arts.” In the Middle Ages, the term would have referred to the seven artes liberales: the fundamental, tools-oriented “trivium” (grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric) as well as to the more advanced “quadrivium” consisting of substantive knowledge in the fields of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. In addition, of course, one could study law, theology, and medicine at medieval universities. Note that with the possible exception of rhetoric, music is the only art, as we employ the term, that was part of the liberal arts canon. Its role in education goes back all the way to Greek antiquity.

Beginning with the Quattrocento, the curriculum in universities and other places of study began to change profoundly, e.g., at the Studio Fiorentina, the university of Florence: logic and mathematics continued their role in general education, but were supplemented by philosophy and the studia humanitatis—studies of humanity. Authors from antiquity, such as Cicero, were rediscovered and became an important influence, as did classical architecture. The very concept of renaissances in European history refers to a renewed focus on Greek and Roman antiquity, especially scholarship and literature.

However, I shall not discuss the seven liberal arts, the humanist curriculum, or make any effort to define the term art, with or without capital A. Instead, I shall stipulate that we generally are in agreement when we use the term art or arts, even if we have profound disagreements about artistic quality. I shall, however, admit that I have always been close to Gombrich's view that art has much to do with skill and mastery.

It has not been ordained by natural law that universities should, in addition to such subjects as the humanities, sciences, medicine, engineering, law, emphasize the arts. Many universities the world over have not in the past, and do not now, include them. Many American universities, on the other hand, especially those with undergraduate colleges, cover music, art history, studio art, drama, dance, literature, and creative writing; they have museums. I should like to spend most of my time (though not all of it) on why this should be so.

I think there are a variety of possible reasons. Permit me to be subjective about the matter. I offer you seven justifications—a holy number.

(1) The arts are about creativity: about creating worlds, about creating something new, something different, about discovering connections, about making us think, about startling us. Merce Cunningham, the choreographer, once said: "I make dances so that I can see things that I have never seen before."

Cennino Cennini, a Quattrocento painter and the author of *Il Libro dell'Arte*, a handbook on painting, begins his treatise with an account of the Fall. He suggests that science and the arts are a consequence of Adam's sin and God's injunction that Adam and Eve support themselves by their labor and exertions.

I quote a passage from Cennini that is wonderfully direct in its naivité:

Then Adam, knowing the sin he had committed, and being nobly endowed by God, as the root and origin and father of us all, discovered by his wisdom that it was necessary to find a way to live by his own manual exertions, and thus he began by digging and Eve by spinning. Afterwards he carried on many necessary arts, different each

from the other, and each more scientific than the other; .... Now the most worthy is Science; after which comes an art derived from science and dependent on the operations of the hand, and this I called Painting, for which we must be endowed with both imagination (*fantasia*) and skill in the hand, to discover unseen things concealed beneath the obscurity of natural objects, and to arrest them with the hand, presenting to the sight that which did not before appear to exist.

(2) Execution of an artistic project is about quality, about craft: painting, sculpting, making a film, designing is not "amateur hour." For Cennini, skill—"skill in the hand"—and imagination were of equal importance. The unrivaled attention Renaissance painters paid to their craft has been the subject of Michael Baxandall's singular book on *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*.

(3) The Arts are also about media and the limitations and opportunities associated with them: from clay to frescoes to the new electronic media. Cennini's handbook deals with the media needed for painting.

(4) If you want to understand the human condition—human circumstances, thought, beliefs, values, as they find their expression in different cultural traditions and at different times—studying its reflection and refraction in art is one way to do so. In his *Italian Journey*, Goethe observed: "The most definite effect of all works of art is that they remove us to the times and to the situation of the individuals that produced them."

(5) This is especially true as concerns change. One of the best ways, for instance, to grasp what happened intellectually in the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance is to study the history of European art.

(6) The arts not only capture change, they move change. The arts are about freedom to change, not simply living with the status quo. The great critic Walter Benjamin put it this way: he said art "interferes": it makes itself felt as "the cool wind of dawn."

(7) And, finally, the arts make things possible that ordinarily seem impossible. The Hasidic tradition teaches, "Through music you climb to the highest palace. From that palace you can influence the universe and its prison. Music is Jacob's ladder forgotten on earth by the angels. Sing and you shall defeat death; play and you shall disarm the foe." While music is the oldest of the muses, I willingly apply this teaching to all the other arts as well.

These seven reasons to make the arts a crucial component of the undergraduate curriculum are also seven reasons for Stanford students to come to Florence to have their minds, their imagination stretched, their creativity prodded.

Let me simply mention the names of three (another holy number) Florentine artists from the early Quattrocento—



Brunelleschi, Donatello, and Masaccio—to provide examples of what can happen when the imagination is stretched.

Brunelleschi's dome of the cathedral represents not only artistic greatness but was achieved through Brunelleschi's application of reason to every aspect of the construction from the vaulting of the dome to the loading platforms, hoists and cranes, to scaffolding for the protection of workers and to canteens for feeding them.

As Andres, Hunisak, and Turner comment in *The Art of Florence*, Brunelleschi worked on the dome more as an inventor than designer. Though Brunelleschi as a designer is, of course, also everywhere in Florence. He gave us, among others, the Spedale di Santa Maria degli Innocenti, the Old Sacristy at San Lorenzo, the Pazzi Chapel and Santo Spirito.

The same Brunelleschi also invented a system for constructing perspective images with mathematical accuracy that has had lasting consequences for architecture and painting. "The single point of view required by perspective tied the entire perceived world into a unified order related to the viewer. Man stood at the center of a world that he could apprehend intellectually." [Andres, Hunisak, and Turner]

And then there are Donatello's relief sculptures and his statuary. The British art historian Pope-Hennessy has said about Donatello's pedella for his *Saint George* at Orsanmichele that it was "one of the most remarkable advances in sheer seeing that has ever taken place." Donatello's unconventional, provocative, beautiful *David* at the Bargello continues "to interfere" with expectations to this day.

And finally, there are the marvels of the Brancacci chapel. The focus of Masaccio's and Masolino's frescoes is Saint Peter. As Anthony Molho of the European University Institute here in Florence has shown, the frescoes in their depiction of the life of Saint Peter actually address themselves to major issues concerning Trecento and early Quattrocento debates about the nature of the Church and the power of the papacy within it. You do not, however, have to be a church historian to understand, for instance, what is being articulated in the way Masaccio depicts the payment of tribute money.

Yet, it is, of course, not the socio-political significance of the Brancacci cycle that is like "the cool wind of dawn" but the independence, gravity, and grandeur of Masaccio's compositions and their emotional impact. [Cf. Andres, Hunisak, and Turner] Just think of the "drama of guilt and shame" that we experience in the *Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise*. [Martha Hollander]

In the speed-oriented video and texting culture of our age, it seems to me to be of exceptional importance that students do not lose the "arts of reading" (reading texts,

pictures, sculptures, artifacts, buildings): to read, to read carefully (less is more), to reread, to read in dialogue, to interpret, to interpret in context. Through Brunelleschi, Donatello, Masaccio the reading of art can be taught in a context that could not be more enticing to the human mind, eye, and heart.

You can, of course, "read" Renaissance art in the great museums of the world. Just think of the superb collections of the Metropolitan Museum in New York or the Louvre in Paris. However, it is one thing to go to a museum, it is quite something else to study and experience the art of the Renaissance in Florence, where not only the art is inescapable but also the historical context that led to so many extraordinary questions and developments of great consequence to Western civilization and, indeed, the world. Let me turn to that context.

As I said at the beginning, the concept of the Renaissance, as we use it, was largely put forward by Jakob Burckhardt who, in 1860, published *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (English translation in 1878: *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*). He saw in the Renaissance the beginning of modernity in general and the emergence of the autonomous individual in particular. Robert Nisbet has called this "the myth of the Renaissance." And, indeed, Burckhardt has come in for much criticism. For one, it is said that there was not only one Renaissance but several (the Carolingian renaissance and the renaissance of the 12<sup>th</sup> century). Furthermore, modernity has clearly been a gradual development.

Burckhardt employed a contrast between two ages, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, that we all still make use of but that was way overdrawn. Here is Burckhardt:

In the Middle Ages both sides of the human consciousness—that which was turned within as that which was turned without—lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion, and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen as clad in strange hues. Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation—only through some general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air; an objective treatment and consideration of the State and of all the things of this world became possible. The subjective side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual individual, recognized himself as such.

Well, Burckhardt's "veil" did not melt into air during the Quattrocento. It was no doubt lifted some but certainly faith continued (as virtually all of Renaissance art will attest to) as did the significance of membership in the social groups to which one belonged.

In *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Burckhardt devoted the entire introductory section to the emergence

of the modern state, which he called a work of art ("Kunstwerk"). What made the Italian states of the Quattrocento "modern" to Burckhardt was the fact that the older bases of legitimacy were disappearing and that brute power mattered more than ever before. States were being "scientifically organized" with a view toward assuring their continued existence.

Since the states that Burckhardt analyzed were mostly tyrannies, "art" and "science" in this context meant primarily the art of ruling as detailed, for instance, in Machiavelli's *Prince*. Burckhardt admired Machiavelli for the objectivity of his judgment. The concentration of power and its ruthless exercise were part of "modernity" for Burckhardt.

At times, though, Burckhardt put forward a more complex view of the matter, most emphatically in his panegyric to Florence as the "first modern state":

The most elevated political thought and the most varied forms of human development are found united in the history of Florence, which in this sense deserves the name of the first modern state in the world. Here the whole people was busied with what in the despotic cities is the affair of a single family. That wondrous Florentine spirit, at once keenly critical and artistically creative, was incessantly transforming the social and political condition of the State, and as incessantly describing and judging the state.

For Burckhardt, the second aspect of the modernity of the Renaissance in general, and of Florence in particular, was giving "the highest development to individuality" and then leading "the individual to the most zealous and thorough study of himself in all forms and under all conditions."

Of course, this zealous preoccupation with the self was, by no means, understood as all good. It could turn all too easily, as Burckhardt recognized, into competitive "excessive individualism." Burckhardt offers descriptions of the Italian upper classes and "victorious egotism" that, but for the slaughter that was ordinarily entailed during the Renaissance, remind us of the competitive excesses of our own age.

As much as Burckhardt was inclined to praise Florence, he could also be sobering about the city:

Florence ... was in advance of other cities. "Sharp eyes and bad tongues" is the description given of the inhabitants [of Florence]. An easygoing contempt of everything and everybody was probably the prevailing tone of society. Machiavelli, in the remarkable prologue to his "Mandragola," refers rightly or wrongly the visible decline of moral force to the general habit of evil-speaking, and threatens his detractors with the news that he can say sharp things as well as they.

In reading Burckhardt, it is striking that for our encounters with the Italian Renaissance and with Florence it does not really matter whether Burckhardt was right in every respect. Perhaps the Renaissance was, like any historical period before and after, just another transition. However, Burckhardt alerted us to features of the trecento and the quattrocento that gained special prominence then but that were also characteristic of Europe at the time Burckhardt wrote and continue to be part of our own "modernity."

What Burckhardt said paradoxically about Machiavelli's *History of Florence* applies to Burckhardt himself: "Even if every line were demonstrated to be false, the whole would still present an indispensable truth."

Florence offers us not only some of the greatest artistic accomplishments known to human history but also, in connection with these very excellences, deep insights into the human condition. Studying in Florence, studying art in Florence, if done right, serves as a most stimulating jolt to our mental composure.

I should like to conclude with a quotation from a contemporary American writer whom I knew in my Chicago days. In a letter from 1942, Saul Bellow wrote:

[T]he work of the artist cannot be expected to comprehend that of the scientist and the philosopher as well. It sets up the hypotheses and tests them in various ways, and it gives answers, but these are not definitive. However, they need not be definitive; they sing about the human situation. It is a kind of truth these answers give, the truth of sorrow and of celebration, the truth that we are stamped with immortality and the truth that we live meanly. [*The New Yorker*, April 26, 2010]

It is the truth of sorrow and of celebration that Florence teaches. We are grateful that it has done so for Stanford students for fifty years and I pray that it will do so as long as Stanford exists.





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