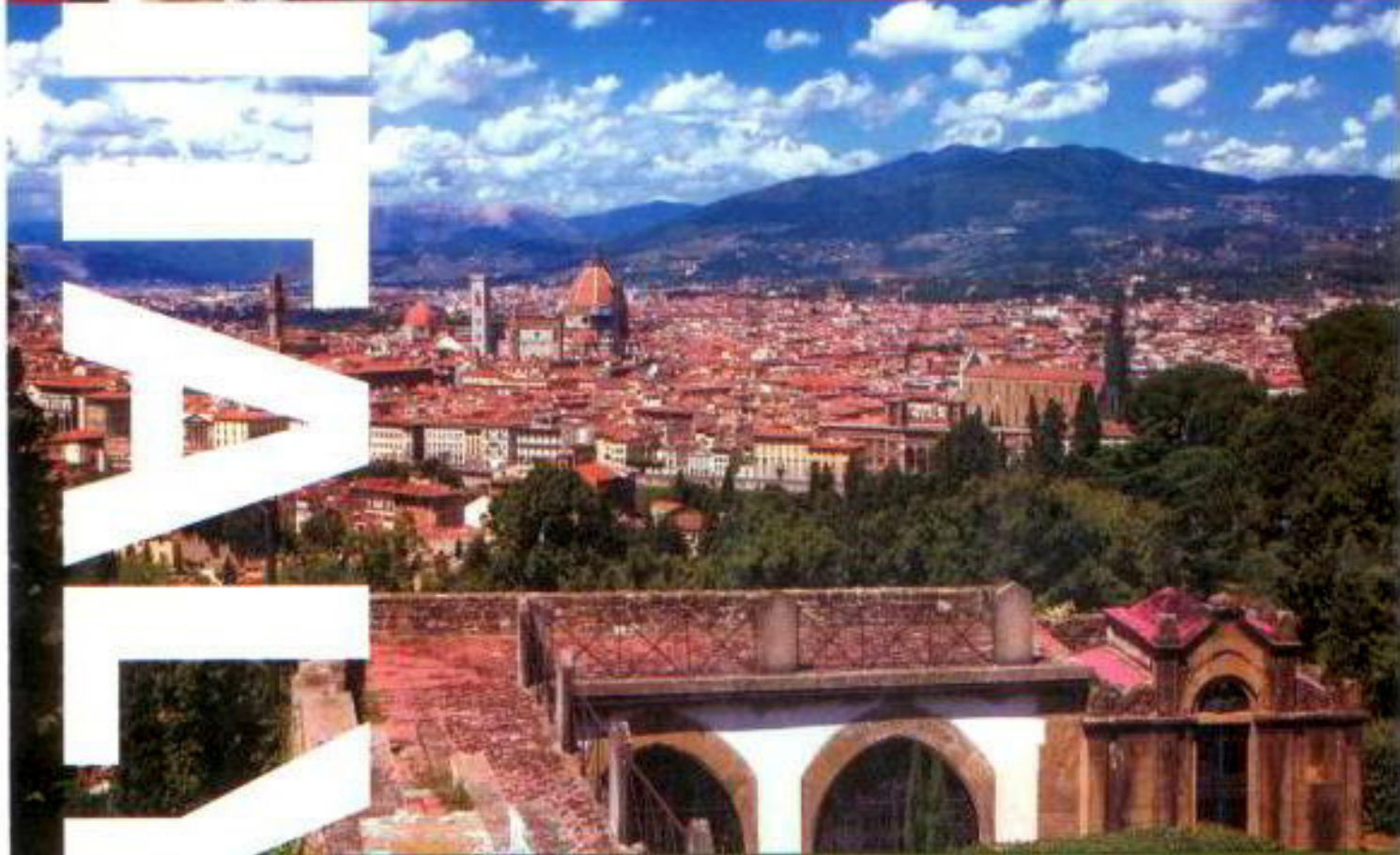




Florence

THE ULTIMATE ART HISTORY FIELD TRIP



By Lesley Bannatyne



Sandro Botticelli - The Birth of Venus
When most artworks depicted Catholic themes, Botticelli painted this pagan goddess. Botticelli's friendship with powerful patron Lorenzo de Medici was likely why Venus was not burned with other "immoral" works by the monk Savonarola in 1497.

Florence, in many ways, is the Renaissance. Walk through its cramped alleyways in the twilight of early spring and you can easily imagine da Vinci rounding the corner ahead of you, hurrying to meet a young Michelangelo.

Stand in the center of the Duomo (cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, 1436), and you feel the same chilly dampness the architect Brunelleschi must have felt as he gazed skyward, envisioning the marvel of a grand dome he'd build atop the church. Visiting Florence is like free falling back 500 years in history. What made it a perfect destination for us, two adults and one 16-year-old, is that it was easy to combine the ultimate Renaissance art-and-history field trip with teen-friendly food and shopping.

Finding Florence's treasures

The Uffizi is Florence's Louvre. Outside, and free of charge, stands a menagerie of majestic marble figures surrounded by street musicians and a cadre of costumed performers who—for a small donation—will pose for photos. If your teenager is museum-loving, allow two to three hours to tour the Uffizi's indoor galleries. If he or she isn't (like ours), head to the top floor and look up. The ceilings are a wonderland of colorful frescoes and carvings; the view out the corridor windows sweeps magically across the city's cathedral spires and down to the river Arno below.

Again, these figures are very realistic; they're not for younger children or the squeamish teen, but will fascinate anyone intrigued by physiology.

When to Go

Spring break! In early March, Florence bursts with pink apple blossoms and sunny forsythia. The Arno is a rich olive green, the air is clear, and it's 40 to 60 degrees. Come summer, the city is stifling and packed with tourists waiting in long lines everywhere, from museums to restaurants to the train station. In early spring, it's possible to walk right into the Accademia



Michelangelo - David
The stirrings of Renaissance humanism can be found in this work, sculpted by a young Michelangelo. Most sculptors depicted a victorious David after his battle with Goliath, but many believe Michelangelo sculpted the hero during his moment of decision, glorifying wit over force.

dell'Arte to see *The David*, or go to dinner in many popular restaurants without a reservation.

Where to Shop

Although Florence abounds with world-class designer shops (think Gucci and Prada), my Maggie had much more fun at the outdoor street markets. Open most every day, and usually cheaper than the tourist shops that surround the Duomo, these dense collections of market stalls offer Italian leather belts, wallets, purses, Florentine glass beads (or knockoffs), and great t-shirts in colors kids love, all starting at about 5 euros. There's a dozen-block-long market on Via C. Cavour near the area called San Lorenzo, a brief walk from the Duomo. (On Via Nazionale, near the train station, there is also a cluster of teen-friendly boutiques such as The End, an Italian version of H&M).

What to Eat

You can't describe Florence without using the language of food. Its buildings are the colors of crème caramel

and butterscotch, mustard and cumin, cantaloupe, peaches and pumpkin. Display cases everywhere are full of prosciutto and cheese, chopped basil and tomatoes. And yes, the pizza is good! Most savvy travelers will tell you to avoid restaurants with English menus, but for teens, the English is comforting, and your kids can pick out the more traditional spaghetti, eggplant parmesan or chicken cacciatore. Adventurous eaters can try the octopus and cuttlefish that materialize on many menus. The city's specialty, Florentine steak, is easy on the American palate, but can be expensive (you pay by the gram) and often comes with "rocket" which is salted, shredded arugula. For a fun meal with an easy-to-understand menu, look for the colorful lights and outdoor tables of Trattoria Za-Za. And, of course, there's the gelato. Florentines gobble gelato like Americans down lattes. Find tiramisu, coconut, dark chocolate, hazelnut or kiwi gelato displayed on street corners for breakfast, lunch, dinner and late into the night for anywhere from 1 to 4 euros. **GP**

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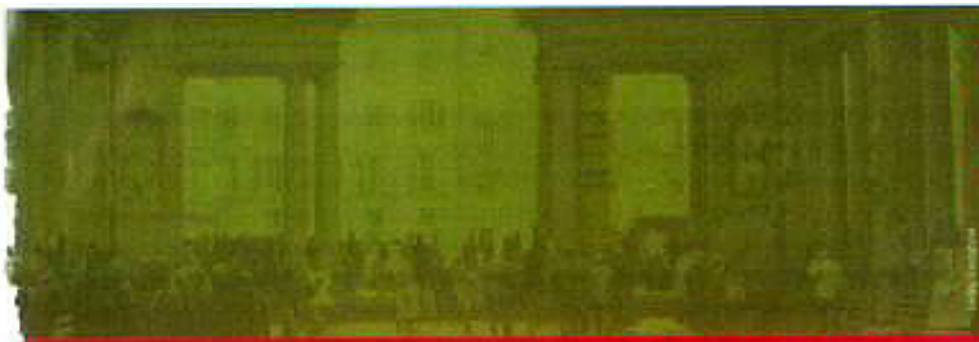
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[Above] The Uffizi Gallery in Florence. [Right] Lucca, close to 2000 years old.



Ask a museum guard to point you towards Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (1485). Five minutes with this painting can make clear what any number of slide lectures on art history can't: In a salon filled with Christian religious paintings, Botticelli's Greek goddess rises from the sea, her long blonde hair curled modestly around her hips. The first artwork of its time to feature a non-religious theme, *Venus* is synonymous with the beginnings of Renaissance humanism—with the idea that the hearts and minds of men had value outside the constrictions of the church. The Uffizi also has a room dedicated wholly to paintings by the ultimate Renaissance man—Leonardo da Vinci.

(Uffizi tickets are timed, and we bought ours at the museum on the day before our visit. This let us bypass the sizeable admissions line and walk right in.)

A short walk from the Duomo, the Accademia dell'Arte has an unassuming entryway that opens into a room full of large-scale medieval paintings. Look left. There, at the end of a second large gallery, under a domed skylight and standing 13.5 feet tall in polished white marble, is Michelangelo's *David*. It is breathtaking. Known worldwide as simply *The David*, and sculpted from 1501 to 1504, Michelangelo's rendering of the boy who brought down Goliath with a slingshot first raised the possibility that human beings are destined—not for a life of suffering—but for one of beauty. Copies of the *David* are scattered throughout the world—there are even two of them in Florence, but there is nothing like the original. It is incredible.

Also in the room are four statues-in-progress, Michelangelo's *Slaves*. Because he never finished (although he worked on them for 40 years), the four figures are frozen as they emerge from huge blocks of marble—both a profound metaphor and a unique insight into the artist's sculpting process. You can see holes the artist drilled in the stone to take measurements, as well as see exactly how Michelangelo began chiseling. The face, torso and shoulders were carved first, as if the form were inside the marble waiting to emerge. (We went first thing in the morning—8:15 a.m.—to avoid

lines. You also can go late in the afternoon to do the same.)

La Specola (or Zoological Museum) features animals from all over the world—a now-extinct Tasmanian Wolf, giant beetles, a white rhino—34 rooms of neatly arranged specimens, the largest in Italy. For the adventurous, or at least for those with a macabre bent, the last several rooms are given over to one of the most unique collections in the world, the biggest and most colorful assemblage of 18th- and 19th-century anatomical models crafted from wax. These human-sized waxworks were used to teach anatomy without corpses, and feature exposed muscles, veins and arteries, organs, brains, eyes, skeletal structure...everything. A small note at the end of the exhibit tells you that the only scientific error in the display depicts conception, where the wax models show a homunculus (small human) rather than a fertilized egg.

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Head Back to The Middle Ages

Just one hour from Florence is the medieval walled city of Lucca. Take the "Lazzi" bus (the blue busses opposite the train station Santa Maria Novella) to Lucca and back for around 5 euros each way. You'll spot the wall when you disembark. Enter any one of the dark stairways that lead to a tunnel beneath the city's battlements and climb the stairs to walk atop the wall, which was widened for carriages under orders from Napoleon's sister. You can stroll the circumference of the city in about 90 minutes, roof-eye level, with colorful stucco houses and hidden backyard gardens criss-crossed with clotheslines. It's also possible to rent bikes in the center of town and ride the distance. Drop down into the village at one of the many access points off the wall to wander the tiny warren of cobblestone streets and visit Lucca's ancient still-standing amphitheater.



Leonardo Da Vinci — *Adoration of the Magi* (1480). Commissioned in 1480 for the altar of a monastery but left unfinished, the *Adoration* is considered one of the artist's most important early works. Many think the young shepherd boy in the bottom right of the painting is the only existing self-portrait of a young Leonardo.