

ART APPRECIATION

By Lindsey Fischer

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A young American art history student is in Florence, waiting in a lineup to see Michelangelo's 'David' when things suddenly take an unexpected turn. The event that unfolds turns into a gripping reality check in which 'high art' is displaced by the circumstances surrounding a 'street painter' who churns out 'masterpieces' for the numb and dumb. We like the way symbols—masks, peddlers, art, kitsch— create a Fellini-like atmosphere and the author's effective use of the second person passive POV. Irony and even a touch of pathos lend satirical weight. Prose sparkles here and there with images that dazzle.*

The stone-paved streets of Florence are a mix of locals and tourists dressed like sunsets (orange apparently is making a comeback).

The bulky car moves at about the same pace as someone walking with a limp.

The author lists Kurt Vonnegut as one of her literary mentors and you don't have to look too closely to see his influence.

Ben fatto!

Art Appreciation

You are waiting in line outside of the Accademia Gallery in Florence, with your fellow foreign-exchange students. After three weeks in Italy, the only people you have hung out with are other Americans. But you are here now, to embrace Italian culture and see one of the most marvelous statues in all of art history. You had been talking about art, viewing slideshows and blurry printed pictures for so long in your art history class that you are excited to see the real

thing. Your phone vibrates. You ignore it. It is most likely your parents either asking if you've changed your major yet to accounting (because you used to love playing on your toy calculator when you were three) or warning you to never travel the streets alone. You have not yet told them about the other day when you walked through Florence by yourself and bought a blue Venetian mask. The street vendor had a stall with masks on the counters and hanging from the ceiling, in colors from purple to green to blue to red, and all glistening gold or silver. You wanted the red one, but you only knew the word for blue in Italian. *Azzurro, per favore.*

“Experiencing it in person is the only way to truly understand and value art,” one student said. You nod and agree. Everyone should visit Europe and practice that whole fine arts culture crass Americans lack.

You press yourself against a barred window. The stone-paved streets of Florence are a mix of locals and tourists dressed like sunsets (orange apparently is making a comeback). They push their way to markets which smell like basil from all the dangling herbs and disappear into dress stores glittering with pearls. You don't fit into either category. You are more than a mere tourist –you are a connoisseur.

Light vowels float through the air, and though it is loud, the language is like music, and the melodies intertwine as you listen. *Come sta la tua famiglia...Mi piace...Quanto costa questo... Grazie.... Prego...Saldi.* The loudest voices are street artists trying to sell paintings of the Duomo in Florence or reproductions of famous artworks in the Gallery, as well as paintings from the Uffizi. They range from five to twenty Euros depending on the size of the paintings – from a postcard to a movie poster. These reproductions are laid on white sheets on the ground, so that everywhere you look there is a miniature Florence staring back at you. You ignore these.

You are experiencing these buildings and artwork in person; you don't need these cheap souvenirs. You know what high art is and look down upon such peddlers.

The statue though! The glory of Florence! The pride of the Renaissance! This would be an experience you would regale again and again when you returned home, and the tale you would spin at the dinner that celebrated your first tenure-track art history professor job. The moment you gaze upon it, time will stop. It will be just you and David. You will not leave until the guards drag you out. Though you will not be you anymore. It would be transformative! You would come out of the Gallery, more refined, polished, chiseled.

You and the other students shift feet, anxious for the doors to open and to be let into your cultural awakening. You hear angry shouts from down the street, *vaffanculo!*

One of the peddlers has been spotted by the Italian state police. He rolls up his white sheet with the art inside and stuffs it into a leather portfolio case. He weaves through the crowded streets and is hit by the shopping bags in a woman's hand, heavy perhaps with shoes. He stumbles, but he does not fall. He runs hunched over. You can barely see him; you are not tall enough. Farther up the street in pursuit of the man is a blue police car. The bulky car moves at about the same pace as someone walking with a limp. Lights are flashing on its roof, and the men inside the car wave at the people on the street to move aside. The streets in Italy are angel-hair pasta narrow (you have been almost hit by cars more times than you care to remember) and the line for the Accademia Gallery provides an excellent opportunity for accidental civilian casualties. While you find art to be the most important cause in the world, you are not willing to die for it. Yet.

The man runs past you. You hold your breath. He jumps a traffic barrier at the end of the street. Police stop their car. The officer in the passenger side gets out in order to pursue the

man on foot, though he is already out of sight. The other officer backs the car out of the street, perhaps to cut the man off at another street.

You and the other students are speechless as you all watch the fugitive's desperate escape. All thoughts of the statue are gone.

For the next fifteen minutes, you discuss the fate of the brave artist absconding through the streets of Florence. You speculate about whether or not he had been caught; if he were caught what would happen to him? Would he go to jail? What would happen to his art career? What had he done that was so bad? Peddling? What about the other peddlers on the street: did they fear the same thing?

You want to investigate the man's story, like one of your paintings. You conjure fictions. Perhaps he was a traitor to Italy for selling the state secrets of gelato. Perhaps he was a Russian spy, deep undercover and tracking a nuclear missile code. Or even a drug lord, with cocaine laced on the inside of his paints!

More peddlers appear, attempting to sell purses, shoes, and yes, even more artwork of the Duomo. Every day these men risk their livelihoods trying to sell their work, in danger of being caught by police. It is survival really, and you hope the man escaped and is selling his art on another street.

"I'm really excited for this exhibit," a student says. The line moves and you see the wooden door.

"Oh yeah, this is one of the most famous statues in the world," you all agree. You walk forward, though your eyes linger back.

You distractedly make your way up the line, until you pass through the door of the Gallery, large and white and expansive.

As you hand over your tickets, sirens echo in the street.

You shuffle inside and for a few minutes can only see jackets and heads. A camera flashes followed by a yell from a security guard that flash is not allowed. It smells stark, like chalk. The walls are bleached white. Roman columns adorn the hallways.

You shove your way to the front of the crowd. Your visit to this Gallery is the reason for your visit to Florence. The reason you spent hours working on applications for study abroad scholarships, when your parents refused to foot the bill. Michelangelo had touched this. Made this. Caressed and agonized over it. Years of labor and sweat and tears and money and pride.

Your first thought is that it is tall. It stands erect in a domed white alcove.

The work. The mastery. Michelangelo. Renaissance. Inspiring. History. Legend.

You are pushed up against your fellow students. Your forehead is slick with sweat from the heat of their bodies. Your heads tilt back, your necks ache. The sweat runs down your nose and burns your eyes. You stare at this masterpiece for maybe ten minutes.

You turn to go and wish you had bought some art from the man on the street.

###

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Art Appreciation was inspired by my study abroad trip to Italy in college and based on a true event I witnessed on the streets of Florence. (Some details in the story are also pulled from my experience there, such as my solo trip to the mask vendor where I really did just know how to say the color blue.) In this satiric take, I wanted to play around with the idea of what you are "supposed" to do or feel when traveling and what actually makes a lasting impact on you. Our perception of what high art and culture should be versus actual lived experiences. I am influenced by satiric writers such as George Saunders and Kurt Vonnegut as well as fantastical writers like Angela Carter, Karen Russell and Kelly Link.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Lindsey Fischer graduated from Ohio University with a Masters in Creative writing, fiction. She has previously been published in Clare literary magazine and La Gazzetta Italiana, and she has a poem in Ohio's Best Emerging Poets.