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# Waiting on Botticelli

## Folk and Elite Culture at the Gates of the Uffizi

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In 1869, the English poet Matthew Arnold defined culture famously as "the best that has been thought and known in the world." By the world he meant Western Europe. Two years later, his fellow Oxonian Edward B. Tylor introduced his book *Primitive Culture* by proclaiming that, "taken in its wide ethnographic sense," culture was "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." By society Tylor—the father of British anthropology—meant any society.

They may be a bit creaky, but these quite different 19th century definitions have weathered scholarly fashions pretty well. A century and a half later, they still mark the parameters of discourse about cultural matters and suggest the terms of debate in the often venomous "culture wars." The heirs to Arnold's vision have included such neocon superstars as E.D. Hirsch, the late Alan Bloom, and Lynne Cheney. What such folks have typically felt called upon to defend is a prescriptive repertoire of elite cultural products that comprise culture with a capital C, or what I'll call Big C culture. Heirs to Tylor's more capacious understanding of culture as all the stuff human beings do in groups include most social scientists, all cultural anthropologists, and folklorists. What they (or we) often feel compelled to defend is the value of those nonelite practices—endless in their variety—that we might call little c culture.

Big C and little c culture are always intersecting and disrupting each other—culture, in Stuart Hall's felicitous phrase, is continuously being divided and redivided into preferred and residual categories. I want to talk in this paper about one such intersection. I witnessed it in Italy a few summers ago.

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The Uffizi Palace courtyard, high tourist season. In the shaded colonnade of this 16th century building, we are standing near the end of a two-hour line. Like our fellow supplicants, we have come to see the Botticellis, the must-see draws at this Italian jewel box. Once we've seen the *Primavera* and the half-shell Venus, we will have paid our proper dues to big C Culture. So we wait, muttering, shuffling. Basking in the honor.

We have already seen this town's Big C in prints back home. Big C is Bernini's Duomo and Michelangelo's David and, deep inside the sanctum of this Culture brokers' mecca, those paragons of quattrocento prettiness, the Botticelli twins. We have come here to check the validity of our copies, to see the originals, the ones exuding Walter Benjamin's aura. In another hour, maybe two, they will reward our patience.

Meanwhile, there is little c. Tylor's "customs" and "habits" in every direction. A swirl of Japanese and English ticket-holders, following tour guides: "Group 21 this way, please. Stay together." Souvenir kiosks packed with miniature Davids. Racks of gallery guides in seven languages. Caricaturists doing charcoal portraits. Flour-caked statues, posing for cameras. A pensive, copper-skinned teenager arranging plastic toys: a wind-up GI Joe shoots a wind-up walrus. Another one selling a print of Ruth Orkin's "American Girl in Italy." And every few feet, African men, laying figurines and faux Gucci bags on cardboard display tables which they can erect, like giant origami, in a matter of seconds. None of this is starred in the guidebook, but it's a good performance, and I am comforted through the long wait by John Cage's insight: "As soon as you start to think 'I'm playing music now and nothing else should be happening,' then the rest of your life is nothing but a series of interruptions."

Suddenly, the plot thickens. Somewhere in the distance squawks a *carabinieri* siren. We don't hear it, but the Africans do. There is a rush of activity, and within seconds the cardboard tables are collapsed and tucked under arms, the bags are hastily scooped up, five to an arm, and a cadre of furtive black pitchmen are on the move. Glancing over their shoulders for uniforms, they disperse to the edge of the courtyard, where they wait, bemused and vigilant. Then, on a silent all-clear signal from some unseen scout, they return just as abruptly to their pitches. The Italian for "hide and seek" is *rimpiattino*. This entire, semicomic version of that game lasts perhaps five minutes. Best show of the day.

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To parse what's going on in this little courtyard dance, let me invoke art historian Carol Duncan, who has made a convincing case for seeing art museums, particularly the large metropolitan museums, less as showcases for individual talent than as hagiographic shrines to national spirit—what she nicely calls "fixtures of a well-furnished state." Taking the Louvre as her principal example, she demonstrates how the public art museum both protects and ritually celebrates a secular patrimony to which the appropriate visitor response is not mere appreciation but a quasi-reverential awe. The museum functions as a civic temple, whose stewardship of "timeless" art—pace Arnold, the best that has been seen in the world—protects us from the recognition of mutability and conflates the nation itself with both eminence and permanence. Both as repositories and as attractions in themselves, museums exemplify the process that Dean MacCannell has called "sight sacralization."

Duncan sees this process beginning at the threshold of the edifice, with the "popular signifier" of the temple façade "calling up both secular and ritual associations." I want to build on her insight by observing that, on a behavioral level, the reverence that is enjoined on museum visitors is actually expected to kick in before they reach the threshold. We might see the threshold—Victor Turner's famous "liminal space"—as extending outward beyond the point where your ticket is punched, into the hurly burly of the courtyard, the pitchmen's space. There's a grey area here, between Art and Commerce, and we can see the *rimpiattino* as a negotiation of that turf.

Museumgoers, Duncan says, must bring with them "the willingness and ability to shift into a certain state of receptivity." You see this most blatantly in places like the Sistine Chapel, where "Please be quiet" signs are evident, and where guards are constantly hushing the more vocal gawkers; here of course the museum is also an actual temple. But an unwritten version of the decorum rule also operates in places like the Uffizi. Here a display of precontemplative calm announces you as a worthy celebrant; you earn the privilege of seeing the Botticelli by displaying receptivity.

The African hawkers' sideshow breaks that mood. It announces rambunctiously that, even as you wait to view an object that "transcends" commerce, commerce is chattering in your face, diverting your attention. After an hour or so in line, you may have

forgotten that you are about to pay twenty dollars to stand in front of the Primavera for five minutes, but the Senegalese will be sure to remind you. And by the way, if you patronize them, they will also remove from your purse some of the dollars that otherwise might be spent in the museum gift shop.

No wonder then that the carabinieri are sedulous, if periodic, in their policing. Like modern Jesuses at the doors of the Jerusalem temple, they enforce the necessary fiction that art requires worship, not exchange; and that it must remain cordoned off from the commercial activity that threatens to transform the temple into a den of thieves.

I'm insinuating that one of the reasons that Florence feels obliged to cordon off the Africans, and periodically roust them from their pitches, is municipal economics. I assume that, as in most street vending scenarios, the proper payment of a fee to the city fathers would legitimate the hawking even of faux Gucci bags—and that those who are rousted on the quarter hour from the Uffizi courtyard lack either the money or the inclination to play that game.

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But there is more to the *rimpiattino* dance than a concern for revenue. For in policing what may and may not be sold at the gates of the temple, the carabinieri are also defining a demographic border. Immigration, in recent years, has become an increasing challenge to an Italian national consensus which, after all, is barely a century and a half old. Italy, a gallimaufry of tongues and lineages and local allegiances, has now to contend not only with *paesanismo*, but with a swelling stream of legal and illegal immigrants, many of them from Africa.

This demographic threat to an imagined Italian purity has fostered exactly the same kind of political polarization with which Americans, from California to Miami, are all too familiar. An immigration restriction law passed in November of 1995 led to a handful of deportations, the energizing of the right-wing National Alliance, and a massive demonstration in Rome, the following February 3, calling for the abolition of the allegedly racist decree. Several years later, when I first witnessed the Uffizi *rimpiattino*, the issue was far from dead. Later that day, in a flea market, I came upon a second crowd of black street vendors. One handed me a flyer entitled "Assembly of the Syndicate of Itinerant Immigrants. The Antiracist Association of the Third of February." The flyer

protested police brutality, and claimed, with the matter-of-fact eloquence of all gray marketers, "We are not criminals. We are people who want to live honestly, who want to work so that we may live. But state institutions prevent us from doing this legally."

The debate continues. Just last year, after the Italian press reported the drowning of African boat people off Italy's southern coasts, Kenneth Okoth of the Migration Policy Institute reported that immigration continued to "haunt" Italy's ruling coalition. Public opinion, he wrote, "continues to be shaped by…stereotypes of the mostly Albanian and African undocumented refugees and immigrants as contributors to crime, drug trafficking, and commercial sex work." At the same time, in one of the odder examples of politics making strange bedfellows, the left demonstrates for immigrants' rights as part of a *lotta di mille colori*, while the private sector, challenged by an aging and shrinking labor force, continues to push for liberalized immigration policies, including the regularization of illegals whom they have hired sub rosa.

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To return to the *rimpiattino*. There's another thing being negotiated here that is potentially more important than either revenue or race. Florence, more than anywhere else in Italy, has successfully branded itself as the heart of the nation. The Tuscan tongue is identified, even by Romans, as the language of Dante and therefore the "purest" Italian. Unless you're a Venetian, the Italian Renaissance means the Florentine Renaissance of Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Vasari. Tuscan food now dominates American restaurants as Sicilian food did a generation ago. Siena is seen as the quintessential medieval city. In short, Tuscany has done a remarkable job of transforming itself from one of the nation's sixteen regions into the super-concentrated essence of *italianita*. Florence *is* Italy. If the face of Florence changes, there are national repercussions—among tourist boards first, but then among customers.

So: What is really being policed in the *rimpiattino* is the brand of the nation. Here's Duncan again: "What we see and do not see in our most prestigious art museums…involves the much larger questions of who constitutes the community and who shall exercise the power to define its identity." She is speaking here of what happens inside the temple, but the point is equally applicable to what transpires at the gates. Perhaps more so, because what happens in the piazza affects the image of Italy formed by

every tourist, not only those paying homage to Botticelli. By restricting the free display of a new, darker Italy, the Florentine authorities announce their allegiance to a traditional marketing strategy—Come to Tuscany and experience the Renaissance—while relegating little c culture, a culture of polyglot transnationalism, to the literal margins of what is allowed to be seen.

Of course they are not successful. And in terms of the effect on Florentine tourism, that may actually be a good thing. I say that because I suspect that, in the very act of keeping Florence "pure," the city council may be inhibiting the very activity that brings tourists to this golden city, and to tourist destinations in general, in the first place. I'd like to suggest that, conventional wisdom aside, the marked sites—MacCannell's "sacralized" attractions—are less important in the tourist experience than has typically been noted. And that the interruptions, the accidents, the diversions from plan, are what we remember.

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Tourism, as opposed to travel, is a guided activity from which the unpredictable has been deliberately bled out. It is disciplined social behavior, in Foucault's sense. Yet when you speak to actual tourists about their experiences, you often find an attraction for the unpredictable—a phenomenon most succinctly observed in the universal paradox that tourists want to go to those places where there are no tourists. We seek out distractions from the prepared agenda. The cozy restaurant up that alley that is not on the map. Those colorful gypsy beggars along the queue to the Louvre. The impromptu African dance in the Uffizi courtyard.

I'm not talking about such niche-marketing inventions as "undiscovered Europe" or Amazonian eco-tours. These are differently staged, but still insistently disciplined, performances. I'm thinking of the buskers and hawkers and pickpockets "every place you want to be." The Moroccan kid who slinks in the restaurant to sell you a rose. What gets in your way as you are making other plans. There are two ways these little c moments are culturally salient.

First, they allow each tourist to reframe the journey according to his or her uniquely improvisational experience—and thus to make it uniquely retellable back home. In the retelling, we often foreground such side shows, so that we open a feedback loop in

our listeners' minds. If I hear your voice choke with delight as you describe the Siena flea market, I may, when I next visit Siena, paddle away from the mainstream, exploring that tributary. I may for a few hours follow your idiosyncratic script in the guidebook margin.

Far from being tangential to the tourist experience, unplanned incidents enrich and personalize it. "Must see" sights become mere backdrop—"See the Tower of Pisa just behind me?"—while the off-agenda moments carry narrative value. A routine snapshot of the leaning tower becomes grist for story when you can point to it and say, "We met the Tasmanians that day, and I broke a heel."

Distractions are important secondly because, through these back-home recollections, they feed the improvisation forward, into future scripts—scripts that transform the economy at the tourist destination. They function, willy nilly, as marketing experiments. I hear about the cozy restaurant from a just-returned friend. I visit the restaurant myself, and tell someone else, who also visits it. Gradually the owner realizes that he has been discovered. And his menu changes, his self-presentation shifts. Thus the dynamic of tourist exchange is doubly engined. There is no authentic Firenze, nor ever has been. As anthropologist James Clifford has pointed out, it is all a dance of traveling cultures, of Squantos with brochures.

We do not go to Florence, really, to see the Botticelli. We have already seen that elephant in a thousand reproductions. We go in the hopes of finding something else, something that only Africans and café roses can bring us. This, the tourist experience that does not get valorized, is what actually drives the enterprise, that makes it part of a transnational dynamic in which third-world vendors, however brutalized, retain their agency. And this enriches our perception of culture as no Botticelli can.

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In the Uffizi courtyand, then, Big C and little c not only coexist, but interpenetrate and vivify each other. The Botticellis may be the necessary bait for street commerce, but the vendors also transform the "Botticelli experience." For me, that trip to the Uffizi is perfectly recollectible without the Botticellis (I had seen their likenesses before), but it becomes dramatically different if I subtract the Africans. It was their nimble, cautious hunger that defined that afternoon and that made me want to return to Italy. Their little c

performance made my two-hour wait less onerous, more interesting—and ripe for narrative reconstruction.

I doubt that I'm alone in this. There's a palpable opportunity cost, after all, in waiting in a two-hour line. I suspect that, if nothing were going on in the Uffizi courtyard but the landing of pigeons, a certain percentage of the waiting market would fall away. Diversions make anticipation less onerous. By providing that diversion, the street vendors keep paying customers in line. They are therefore actually contributing to the Florentine economy. Perhaps the city fathers should be paying them.

Fast forward to last summer, when I returned to Florence. There's now some evidence that the local authorities are becoming aware of their indebtedness to the Africans—and are modifying the rules of *rimpiattino* in order to accommodate them. Last summer, the game had changed. Now the cops are on site constantly, patrolling the courtyard. Like sentries, they walk from the David to the Arno every ten minutes. But this has absolutely no effect on the presence of the vendors. Indeed, the wink-and-a-nod aspect of the *rimpiattino* has become far more obvious than it was years ago. Now, as the guy in uniform, hands behind his back, strolls casually through the courtyard, the vendors—twenty feet in front of him and in full view—just as casually scoop up their Gucci and Botticelli knock-offs, amble off to the side, wait for the uniform to pass, and instantly replace the pictures where they had been. What four years ago had seemed vaguely threatening has become a skit that is choreographed for laughs. The rule now seems to be "We'll pretend that we are after you if you pretend to believe us."

I don't mean to minimize the gravity of the Italian immigrants' situation. It remains serious, and uncertain. But I wonder if in the softening of the patrol at this one sacralized site, we may see a modest sense of accommodation to the inevitable. Perhaps we see even an admission, on the part of Big C culture brokers, that the sights of the open streets and plazas may be at least as interesting—and as marketable—as what is shut up for more privileged viewing behind those high temple walls.