The Italian Art Cruise

A Voyage to Remember

BY PETER TRIPPI

The Italian Art Cruise, *Fine Art Connoisseur’s* third adventure abroad (October 17-24, 2012), delivered exactly what it promised, and then some. Conceived by FAC publisher Eric Rhoads, this journey proved an ideal way to mix world-class art and architecture with five-star comforts and a delightfully cohesive group of 27 passengers who eagerly shared with each other their passion for artistic beauty and quality.

On the sunny morning of October 16, this merry band of collectors, artists, dealers, and enthusiasts from the U.S. and Switzerland gathered for the first time in the sleek lobby of Venice’s Hilton Molino Stucky. Formerly a flour mill, this castle-like brick hotel stands on the Giudecca Canal overlooking the heart of Venice, to which it is linked by a speedy private water taxi. The group was met at the famous Gallerie dell’Accademia by the art historian Laura Sabbadin, who showed us how this museum’s superb collection traces her native city’s rich visual heritage. We moved on to explore the lavishly decorated Doge’s Palace, then crossed the Piazza San Marco to see the Museo Correr’s once-in-a-lifetime retrospective of the 18th-century painter of Venetian views Francesco Guardi.

Fast-forwarding two centuries, we crossed the lagoon to the island of San Giorgio, where the collectors David Landau and Marie-Rose Kahane welcomed us to the sparely elegant museum they had recently opened, *Le Stanze del Vetro* (Rooms for Glass). Here Dr. Landau walked us through this venue’s fascinating inaugural show, dedicated to the designs created by Carlo Scarpa for the local Venini firm of glassmakers between 1932 and 1947. Venice’s long association with virtuosity in glass emerged again that night, when our group entered the medieval Basilica of San Marco — reserved entirely for us — to gasp as all of its electric lights were switched off, then brought back up slowly to reveal the glittering surfaces of its famous golden mosaics.

Drunk with beauty, we fell into bed, only to awaken ready for more. Right next door to the Hilton Molino Stucky stands the brick factory of Fortuny, admired around the world for the quality of its printed cottons. Although strangers are never admitted to the workshops (for fear of the firm’s secrets being copied), our hosts Giuseppe Iannò and Marjolaine Piccio explained (almost) everything and allowed us to handle dozens of fabrics in Fortuny’s showroom, which overlooks a peaceful garden complete with swimming pool. Next up was a visit to the Renaissance-era church of San Sebastiano with Melissa Conn, who heads the Venice office of Save Venice, a nonprofit organization of art lovers around the world.
dedicated to restoring the city’s monuments. Here we admired the richly colored decorations painted throughout the sanctuary by Paolo Veronese and others in the 16th century. The conservators hired by Save Venice are doing a marvelous job bringing these dirty and damaged scenes back to life, though more funds must be raised if the project is to be finished properly. (Details are at savevenice.org/restorations/in-progress.)

ALL ABOARD
Within a few hours, we were all ensconced in our spacious staterooms on the Regent Seven Seas Voyager, a 700-passenger ship renowned for its tasteful décor and superb cuisine. Venice is a city best experienced from the water, and thus our ship’s grand departure at dusk along the Giudecca Canal and across the lagoon provided unforgettable views of the “Queen of the Adriatic” before we actually entered that sea. After a festive welcome reception featuring prosecco fermented in the nearby Veneto region, we sat for the first of our seven gourmet dinners together. Fortunately, the seating plans changed each evening so that, by the end of the week, all Italian Art Cruise participants had found an opportunity to converse with everyone else.

On our first morning of cruising, we gathered in the Voyager’s private lounge for a formal welcome by Eric Rhoads and the first of my three illustrated lectures on board. Offering detailed maps and thumbnail portraits of this region’s historical movers and shakers, these one-hour talks were intended to prepare guests for what they would encounter on shore. Also introduced was Gabriel Haigazian of Creative Travel Planners, who coordinated every detail of the voyage — in advance and on site — with both rigor and a contagious sense of humor.

The first two days of cruising reminded our group that Venice did indeed, for many centuries, control the economic and political lives of virtually everyone who lived on both shores of the Adriatic Sea. This fact was underscored by our long, sunny afternoon in the picturesque Croatian port of Dubrovnik, and by the next day on the olive-laden Greek island of Corfu. Evidence of the Venetian occupation can be seen everywhere in these enchanted places, but surely no site is more
enchanting than Corfu’s Achilleion Palace, a hilltop mansion built in the late 19th century as a getaway for the beautiful but depressive Austro-Hungarian empress Elisabeth (“Sisi”). Our group particularly enjoyed this palace’s neo-Pompeian décor and verdant gardens.

The following day brought our ship to the Sicilian harbor of Taormina. To our left the clouds occasionally parted to reveal the huge, steaming peak of Mount Etna, Europe’s largest volcano. Off to the right was the hilltop city of Taormina, best known for the remarkably well preserved Roman amphitheater that overlooks the sea. Our busy day of lunching, shopping, and church-exploring concluded with prosecco and ocean views from the terrace of the luxurious Ashbee Hotel, originally designed early in the 20th century by the English Arts & Crafts genius C.R. Ashbee for an expatriate client.

Similar juxtapositions of stunning natural scenery and quaint historical architecture dominated the next two days. Moored in the Bay of Naples facing Sorrento, the Voyager dispatched us to shore in tenders that allowed us to admire the region’s blue-green water and steep cliffs. These were particularly abundant on the island of Capri, where we explored the serene Villa San Michele, once occupied by the Swedish writer Axel Munthe, and also took chair lifts to the top of Monte Solaro. The next day featured a hair-raising bus ride up the twisting roads that lead from the port of Amalfi to the hilltop town of Ravello, famous for its music festival at the ruined Villa Rufolo. Many of us were impressed with the size and eclectic decoration of Amalfi’s cathedral.

The region of Tuscany is justly revered for its historic cities and artistic heritage, both of which were enjoyed in abundance the next day. Having docked at the port of Livorno, our group headed first to the town of Pietrasanta, home to many studios where marble from the nearby quarries of Carrara is carved to artists’ specifications by skilled artisans. Awaiting us at one of these firms were Franco and Hisayo Cervietti, who cheerfully showed us how this (dusty and noisy) process unfolds. After exploring the historic center of Pietrasanta on foot, we moved on to the unspoiled walled city of Lucca, where our guide brought us inside its unique churches and even the home of the great opera composer Giacomo Puccini. Back on the Voyager, we dressed smartly for our farewell reception and dinner, where we toasted new and renewed friendships.

Having disembarked the Voyager at Rome’s port of Civitavecchia, our group explored the historic quarter of the Eternal City, particularly enjoying opportunities to see the Pantheon, and major paintings by Caravaggio hanging in three churches. Though it is comparatively small, the Galleria Borghese contains one of the finest collections of art and antiquities anywhere, and some members of the group were equally charmed while strolling through the surrounding park. Our busy day concluded with a visit to the studio of the Australian-born painter-teacher Andrea J. Smith, and then a lecture on Italian contemporary art by Claudia Palmira Acunto, editor of Italian Journal.

The next day was unusually action-packed, featuring a customized walk through the Vatican Museums focused on their antique sculptures and cartographic murals, and of course the Sistine Chapel and Basilica...
of St. Peter. We leapt forward many centuries upon arriving at Rome’s brand-new Tiburtina station, where a sleek Italo high-speed train whisked us in first-class comfort to Florence. There we were welcomed by the local art historian Elaine Ruffolo, who led us behind the scenes of two easily overlooked, and completely fascinating, artisanal workshops in the Oltrarno quarter. First up was a demonstration of traditional papermaking techniques at Giulio Giannini & Figlio, followed by a look inside the metalworking firm of Carlo Cecchi. This busy day closed with a short drive outside the city to the Villa Il Palmerino. Here Dr. Monica Shenouda presented an illustrated lecture on a former Villa resident, the English expatriate writer Vernon Lee, followed by an account of the property’s subsequent history by one of its current occupants, Giuliano Angeli. Our group then enjoyed an authentic Tuscan feast laid on by the generous family of our hostess, Federica Paretti, and by the organic winemaker Guido Gualandi.

On our final day together, October 26, winter suddenly reached Italy. Until then, the weather had been sunny and mild, with blue skies and gentle breezes. In Florence, however, we bundled up against the drizzle, confi-
A ladies-only moment during the farewell reception aboard the Voyager.

Barbara Paul Robinson, Peggy Cleary, and Roger Rossi at supper.

Charlie Robinson celebrates his birthday aboard the Voyager.

Heidi and Arthur Woods dining with Charla and Robert Nelson.

Peter Trippi and David Orcutt in Amalfi.
dent that our final destinations were primarily indoors. First came a visit to the Palazzo Strozzi, where director James M. Bradburne explained how he and his team have transformed this once-sleepy Renaissance monument into a thriving museum and arts education center. We proceeded to the famous Galleria degli Uffizi, where Elaine Ruffolo guided us through the astonishing permanent collection and then into the rarely visited Vasari Corridor, designed during the Renaissance as a private passage for the Medici family. Here hang hundreds of self-portraits sent by artists over the past 500 years at the invitation of the gallery’s administrators. Among them is the stunning self-portrait of Anders Zorn on the cover of this magazine.

Shifting from past to present, our group moved on to the Florence Academy of Art, a large atelier of classical realism founded by the American artist Daniel Graves in 1991. Here we were oriented by Graves and his colleagues Nelson White, Ramiro (see page 59), Jordan Sokol, and Daniela Astone, who showed us how and where their students develop such outstanding technical skills. Now the rain was really pouring, so we hustled into the large, luminous apartment of the American expatriate Cindy Harding Nannarelli, whose book Tuscan Life: Food Tales & Recipes inspired the farewell feast of antipasti and prosecco she prepared for our lively group.

Since that friendly sendoff, the Italian cruisers have remained in regular e-mail contact and are sharing photos, so our journey of aesthetic discovery is not actually over. Moreover, this cruise proved such a success that a 2013 edition has now been planned on France’s Seine River for October 4-11. Please see page 129 for details on this adventure, which will actually begin on the morning of October 2 with an intensive two-day “pre-tour” in Paris. We certainly hope that you will be able to join us next fall.

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