Contemporary Art in a Renaissance Setting: The Local Art System in Florence, Italy

Stuart Plattner

Abstract:

How does a glorious artistic heritage affect the practice of contemporary art? Does a widespread societal focus on art of the past hurt or help the art of the present? The contemporary art world in Florence, Italy—the home of the Renaissance--is analyzed as a local art market. The region's dilemma consists of exploiting its unique artistic history while trying to maintain a vibrant contemporary art scene. The behavior of local artists, dealers and collectors is described ethnographically, contextualized, and compared to a representative local art market in St. Louis, Missouri, USA. The two places are dramatically different: one is rich in art history and poor in contemporary relevance, the other lacks any medieval or meaningful artistic history but forms part of the dominant art system in the contemporary world. The problems of the contemporary Florentine art system are explained with reference to the city's history and current livelihood focused on mass tourism.

Contemporary Art in a Renaissance Setting: The Local Art System in Florence, Italy

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This paper investigates the following question: how does a glorious artistic heritage affect the practice of contemporary art? The ethnographic case study focuses on the art world in and around Florence, Tuscany, Italy, a location famous as the birthplace of the Italian renaissance, which practically created Western visual art.[2] The art studied here is “avant-garde” or “museum-quality” art, meaning art intended to advance the cultural vision through original creativity. Art of this quality--painting, sculpture and architecture--was commissioned by the Medici family, who ruled the city in its period of fifteenth-to-seventeenth century glory and set a high standard for artistic patronage. While Florence also has a literary history--it was the home of Dante Alighieri who wrote "the Divine Comedy" in the 13th century, and also inspired many works by Italian and foreign writers like E. M. Forster's "Room with a View"--the enormous crowds of tourists who visit each year focus on its renaissance painting, sculpture and architecture. In this paper I focus on painting or visual art.

The city was the center of the art world five hundred years ago. Does this heritage help or hurt the market for contemporary visual art? On one hand, I assume that a society's love and respect for historical art should encourage interest in living artists. Michelangelo, Da Vinci, etc. were supported as avant-garde artists while they were alive, and did a lot of good for their society, making it internationally famous then and now. It is reasonable to think that contemporary Tuscans, who grow up surrounded by wonderful artistic masterpieces, and who see tourists come from all over the world to admire these historic works of art, would value living artists as well. On the other hand, the city's current livelihood comes essentially from merchandising its history to mass tourism. There should be resistance to the expense of any resources for contemporary art, in terms of energy and attention as well as money, since present-day art by definition takes away from the city's distinctive renaissance strong point. The purpose of this article is to evaluate these two sensible assumptions in light of ethnographic information.

The paper analyzes the contemporary art world of Florence in the context of my model of local markets in the US (1996, 1998). While the model is based on ethnographic research in St. Louis, comparative data show that St. Louis is an average US art market (Plattner 1996, appendix 5). The American system is not in any way a gold standard, and while the focus of this paper is Italy, the comparison is intended to advance our understanding of America as well. The two places, from the local to the national level (St. Louis, Missouri, USA and Florence, Tuscany, Italy) are extraordinarily different. But both countries are Western, capitalist, and developed while both cities are mid-sized with relatively healthy economies that are not the leaders or central market places of their respective societies. The most significant differences are historical: Florence has an impressively deep history tracing back at least 1000 years, and became a world art leader in the fifteenth-seventeenth centuries, yet Italian artists are part of a system that has

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1 This paper expresses the author's personal opinions and has no relation to the National Science Foundation, which is mentioned solely for identification. Italian and Vietnamese versions of this study were published in 2003 (see Plattner 2003).

2 This paper uses the terms "art system", "art market" and "art world" interchangeably to refer to the social behavior of people engaged in making, buying, selling, exhibiting and writing about contemporary art.

been practically invisible on the world stage in the 20th century. St. Louis has practically no Western history at all before its founding in the 1700s[3] and no special history of art, yet American artists are part of the US art scene which has dominated the world art market in the second half of the 20th century. Thus in the most general terms of their positions in the world art system the two places--Florence in Italy and St. Louis in the USA--are comparable-in-reverse: one rich in art history and poor in contemporary relevance, the other poor in medieval history and rich in contemporary influence.

The Setting: Florence, Tuscany, Italy

The historical art in Florence has been studied by many specialists, no doubt a complete bibliography would be enormous, multilingual, and represent several centuries of research. At present the city hosts about nine million visitors each year who come to admire its historic treasures.[4] But the Italian contemporary art market is centered in Milan and Rome. Although Florence is peripheral to this art market, it still is an interesting place for research on this topic. Aside from unique factors--the terms "Florence" and "art" are so linked that even the descriptive material will be interesting to many people--this special case allows us to advance our understanding of how strongly marked history shapes contemporary life. Contemporary anthropology takes two different positions as given: that historical context is paramount in defining meaning in present-day life, and that current issues color and recreate the meaning of historical context. The case analyzed here will help build theory to understand this contraposition.

Florence is the name of a city (*comune*, or municipality of around 400,000 people) as well as a province (*provincia*) of about 950,000, which contains another fifty smaller towns. Florence city is the capital of the Tuscany region (*regione*, like a state), which contains another nine provinces with a total population of about 3.6 million.[5] The city is located in a valley of a hilly and mild climate area along the Arno River roughly midway between the Mediterranean and Adriatic. This article is based on information primarily obtained in the city and province of Florence, and secondarily in nearby places in the region of Tuscany, specifically the adjacent provinces of Siena and Prato.

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3 St. Louis' indigenous history at Cahokia extends back several thousand years but has no cultural impact on the contemporary society.

4 The Italian national statistical institute, ISTAT, gave the population of Florence city as 356,118 in 2001 (http://dawinci.istat.it/). The tourism figures are from the province's web site (http://provincia.fi.it/…/info06-04-00ag.htm).

5 The nation of Italy has a total of 22 regions, and a population of about 58 million.

A Model of Local Art Markets

Local art markets are special cases of regular markets under capitalism, where consumers' understanding of the source of value is problematic and producers' (artists) production goals are inextricably bound up with their identity (see Table 1, p. 483 in Plattner 1998[6]). In local markets too many artists and artworks compete for the limited demand, flooding the market, depressing prices, and restricting, if not practically eliminating secondary sales.

The lack of cultural or commercial success does not dampen fine art production because of what I call the "van Gogh effect" (Plattner 1998:485; 1996:30-33), which legitimizes market failure by disconnecting it from long-term aesthetic value (van Gogh, remember, was the post Impressionist artist who sold only one painting in a brief and psychologically tortured life. His work later was judged aesthetically supreme, and one of his paintings sold for the highest price ever recorded for a painting in a public sale a hundred years after his death[7]). Contemporary artists who might worry about their failure to sell a lot of work can always take heart from van Gogh and keep their eye on the long term of art history rather than the short term of market sales. They keep producing artworks, acting as if they believed that good art doesn't necessarily sell, and art that sells is not necessarily good (Plattner 1996:33).

Avant-garde art is in fact an especially difficult commodity to sell. The post-modern nature of contemporary aesthetics, meaning there is no reigning theory of good-and-bad, weakens demand. Since value in local contemporary art is socially determined many potential consumers lacking the right cultural capital hesitate to buy, fearing that their ignorance will lead them to make fools of themselves by overpaying or buying bad art. Why pay good money for work which, when hung on their walls, might embarrassingly advertise their ignorance to more knowledgeable visitors?

This model was developed through ethnographic research in the USA, but is valid for the market I studied in Tuscany. In both places it is extraordinarily rare for an avant-garde artist to be able to subsist from sales of work. Artists seeking representation flood art galleries but most rarely succeed in exhibiting their work in galleries, much less museums and art spaces. Serious collectors are few and far between (although far more numerous in St. Louis than in Florence). While we will see that both places have a respectable number of artists and dealers, the contemporary art scene in Florence suffers under several unique dark shadows: the lack of attention and resources paid by the city and provincial authorities; the culturally deadening presence, more like an avalanche of mass tourism; and the provincial sense of distance from major art centers, primarily New York and America in general, secondarily London, Paris, and the German art centers, and finally distance from the major Italian centers of Milan and Rome. On the other hand the art scene benefits greatly from the presence of inspiring historical art and is sustained, albeit indirectly, by the income generated by mass tourism. Before going on to assess these contradictions I will briefly outline the structure and size of the market so readers will have a context.

The Contemporary Art Market in Florence - Artists

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6 Central or hegemonic art markets like those in New York, London, Paris and Cologne operate differently, along lines of "superstar" markets as analyzed by Rosen 1981 and Adler 1985.

7 Peter Watson's book (1992) gives an exciting report of the sale in 1990.

I will present figures for the province of Florence, since the city itself is a rather artificially delimited area in a zone of rapid mass and private transportation. Before I consider any figures it is important to discuss the extreme difficulty of counting artists. The status is self-defined: one is an artist if one says so. But some people might claim the status for its relative prestige without doing any work. Limiting the status to artists who really work at making art might be one good solution, but it is impossible to get this empirical information at any reasonable cost. Limiting it to artists who have had shows would be a good idea, but for the fact that in every area there are serious hard-working artists who for personal reasons do not have shows. For example I interviewed a Florence artist in his early sixties who worked on his elegant, abstract acrylics in his studio for half of every work day on a regular basis, after he worked in his small business each morning to earn his income. Years before this artist had shows in Florence, Milan, Rome, London, Paris, and other cities. But more recently he decided not to bother dealing with the art market, claiming it took too much energy, and he now sells his paintings to people in his community or gives them away as gifts. I had seen his paintings in local restaurants and in homes, and met him through mutual friends, but he would have been invisible to a study based on exhibitions.

A preliminary report of a survey done in 1995 by the regional government (Crispolti 1996) listed 162 artists in Florence province. The survey data show clearly that the researchers focused on fine artists, painters, sculptors and printmakers, and not on jewelry, craft or commercial artists.[8] According to the information I have, however, these figures are understated. I intensively interviewed 24 artists whom I selected because I knew them to be serious workers. Only six were represented in the regional government study. The omitted artists were of all types and statuses, young and old, successful and unsuccessful, recent immigrants and lifelong residents--but all were dedicated, active art producers. For example one omitted artist was an American in his late 60s who has lived in Florence for 30 years, had founded one of the most successful art schools for foreign students in the city, and currently exhibits his paintings all over Europe. Another omission was a Florence native in his mid fifties who had exhibited all around Italy including at the Venice Biennial[9], and who was well connected socially with the local art scene.

My conservative estimate would be that there are really about three and possibly four times the number of artists as the regional government's survey states, or between 450 and 600 artists in Florence province of about 1.2 million people at the present time. This is roughly similar to my estimate of about 800 artists in the St. Louis metropolitan area of about 2.5 million (1996: chapter 4). Given the likely error in the estimates, I conclude that there are roughly comparable proportions of artists in each population.

In the US the typical “museum-quality” artist earns a living from university teaching or some other employment, or relies on a spouse to provide a steady income and the all-important medical insurance. Italy has European style universal health coverage so medical insurance is not an issue, but the extraordinary cost of housing in Tuscany puts a severe constraint on artists. In industrial areas artists can find cheap space in abandoned factories, often serving inadvertently as the avant-garde for gentrification as well as for art (cf. Zukin, 1982 for this phenomenon in New York). But Florence has no industry, and the available space is expensive. Practically all the

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8 The survey explicitly stated it included resident foreign artists as well as Italians.

9 The Venice Biennial is the most famous and prestigious international art show in the world.

artists I interviewed obtained housing through some family connection, indicating the importance of a middle-class origin. They tended to live on a subsistence level, but had secure housing and health care, with the freedom to create their art in their own way.

I interviewed a couple of young artists on purchase-contract with galleries, a relation rarely seen in the US.[10] The dealers had contracted to buy work from the artists over a set period of years, with complete or monopoly representation. The Italian dealers paid a very small part of the retail price instead of the normal 50% rate, in some cases only 10-25%, and also covered the costs of catalogs, art fair shows, and sometimes even supplies and studio rent. The dealers preferred to keep their clients' identity secret from the artists who were sometimes not even sure about the final selling price. The young artists had achieved the art student's dream of focusing exclusively on making, not on marketing work. The ugly side of the dream was the intense pressure they felt from dealers to supply products in the style that the dealers preferred, which limited their freedom to freely advance their artistic vision. Artists with contracts are extremely rare however, the majority making a living in the creative ways artists find everywhere, normally with the active help of family.

The fact that many artists do not have shows in prestigious galleries or sell their work does not mean that they or their friends and relatives think less of their artwork. Aside from the van Gogh effect mentioned above,[11] Italian culture seems more comfortable with market irrelevance than the more commercial culture of the US. As one ex-patriot US painter who had lived in Italy for many years said:[12]

> *[Italians] are still a little bit romantic, its still a little bit more of the artist as a person who has something original to say, and they don't expect you to necessarily have a huge success. There are lots and lots of artists who never have a real big show, but who have sold hundreds of works, for very little money, to friends, family, friends of friends, and there is nothing humiliating about it, there is nothing silly about it.*
> *{Of course, they don't try to make a living at it}*
> *That's right, but they think that you can be a very serious person … its like being a poet. No one expects a poet to be making all kinds of money, and they really do it the same way, they say, if you are a painter, why should everyone assume that every wonderful painter is going to be discovered?* (interview in English, 11/15/99)

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10 Established artists in the US routinely have contracts establishing the gallery's right to monopoly representation on a consignment basis. Artists producing investment-quality work may also have contracts stipulating advance sales to the gallery, but not emerging artists whose work has not attained commodity status.

11 This of course is my term. Most artists would not explicitly connect their work with van Gogh, but would point out that their work is as good as work shown in prestigious galleries, that they refuse to cater to popular culture or low-class taste, etc.

12 Interviews were conducted in Italian unless specified that they were in English, and will be referred to by interview date. Translations are by the author. Material in square brackets is added to clarify the meaning of the interviewee; material in curly brackets is the author speaking during the interview. Ellipses denote omitted material. I converted currency references from Lire (£) to Dollars ($) at the prevailing rate of exchange, about £1800--2000 to $1 during the period of research.

Dealers

Galleries being public enterprises should be easier to count than artists. The regional government report lists 30 contemporary art galleries, including commercial galleries and cultural centers, which are non-profit organizations that can show and sometimes sell art. Through my research I generated a list of 62 galleries and centers. Some of the galleries on the regional government list had gone out of business;[13] others on my list had been passed over by the government survey.[14] In comparison, there were 86 places in St. Louis where contemporary art could be seen, of which 55 were points of sale, the rest being museums or art spaces which normally don't involve sales (1996:chapter 5). Given the small numbers and general flux in the gallery business, I conclude that there is roughly the same proportional number of places to show art in each place, or perhaps Florence has a bit more.

Florence seems about as well stocked with artists and places to see contemporary art as is St. Louis. Florentine dealers selling more avant-garde, less decorative work were unanimous in complaining that few of their customers came from the local area, while tourists did not buy their art, so that they worked hard to find clients from a wide region in and out of Italy. A few dealers made the effort to be represented at the Bologna art fair, the most prestigious contemporary art fair in Italy. In terms of population, Florence was represented in the 2000 Bologna Art Fair by 10 galleries (out of the 209 exhibitors). In terms of numbers of galleries from one province, the fair was dominated by the 45 firms from Milan and the 16 from Bologna. The Florentine presence was significant on a minor scale.

Other dealers did not find the expense of the Bologna fair justified, or were not accepted by the fair administrators (who were trying to upgrade from decorative to more museum-quality work). The majority of dealers made their expenses by sales to their traditional customers through the normal labor of merchandizing and networking that any art dealer is familiar with.

It is significant that most of the dealers I interviewed owned their gallery space or else had a special rental arrangement with the owner which involved less than market rent. Like artists, the dealers had to rely on special arrangements to deal with the tight real estate market in Florence.

Its difficult to succeed in the art gallery business in any society, and relatively low-level dealers often make ends meet by charging some of their costs to the artists whose work they exhibit. A gallery can receive direct payment from an exhibiting artist for the use of the space (Plattner 1996:139) which is of course a confidential and normally scandalous act. A dealer's choice to exhibit an artist's work is supposed to be an aesthetic affirmation of the dealer's faith in the quality of the work. When the dealer risks income on the gallery's ability to sell the work, the

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13 Members of the Florence art world had the same opinion as St. Louisans had of the life-span of a contemporary art gallery--about 5 years. The reasons are the same in both places: many people who own galleries tend to have a secure income from some other source, and open the gallery in order to express their passion for art. After some years the lack of support from the community makes them re-evaluate their commitment to the business of selling contemporary art--after all they don't have to make a living at it--and encourages them to follow some other expressive passion.

14 Paloscia's 1997 book on contemporary art listed 81 galleries active in Florence in the early 1970s (note 9, p. 29), of which only fifteen appeared on my list for 1999-2000. But a 19% survival rate over almost 30 years is probably better than average for small business.

aesthetic commitment is affirmed. If the dealer simply acts as a renter (the Italian phrase I heard many times is *affitacamera*, or room-renter) the appearance of aesthetic commitment is a sham. As one artist said:

> *I would never do a show with a gallery whom I had to pay, because it seems ugly, a squalid thing, also because the galleries who do that are low level. (*Interview 5/5/00)

Dealers disparaged other dealers with the term *affitacamera*, and several artists complained that dealers they had approached for a show agreed only if the artist would pay a hefty fee, $500 or even several thousand dollars. The practice devalues the meaning of shows and was mentioned more commonly in Italy than in the US. As the director of the best art school in Florence cynically said, explaining why he only looked at the work in hiring art faculty and not on their record of shows as is done in the US, "*all you need is money to have a show and make a catalog*" (1/31/00).

Collectors

In the US local art markets rely on relatively small sets of collectors who show up at openings and art events, and who are reliable supporters of the art world in general. Often the nucleus of high-end collector circles are trained and encouraged by local museum curators, which lends a non-commercial legitimacy to the collectors' activity (cf. Plattner 1996:ch. 6; Rheims, 1980) Florence has no circle of collectors of contemporary art and no museums to help cultivate their taste. All the critic-curators, artists and dealers lamented this fact. As an artist put it:

> *There are some people interested in art, there are some collectors, in quotes, because persons with a real, genuine, true interest, well there's not even one! They are like "white flies" ["mosche bianche", an Italian expression meaning extraordinarily rare]* (Interview 10/10/00)

The few dealers who specialized in avant-garde work by emerging artists complained of the traditional and un-adventurous taste of their circle of friends. One such dealer quantified it for me:

> *"my work is focused towards a collector community that is very select, of which only a small part is from Florence, the rest come from Tuscany and a bit from all over Italy. Five percent of my sales are with Florentine clients, forty percent with Tuscan clients…"*.

He went on to explain why Florentines were suspicious of contemporary art:

> *Unfortunately, Florence is not an easy city for contemporary art, because weighing on the shoulders of the whole population is … a history of a certain [high] level, that everyone knows, that makes the Florentine hostile towards contemporary art. There is a skeptical attitude towards the economic value of contemporary art.*
>
> *{Because its too risky?}*
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> *On one hand too risky, and also because the Florentine economy is not based on risk but on private wealth…Florence lives on private wealth and on tourism, its not an industrial city, it [does not have] an entrepreneurial approach … which therefore feels less risk in the acquisition of a work of art* (Interview 11/7/99).

The view of Florentines as traditionalist, risk-averse, anti-contemporary art lovers was very common. This lack of a well-defined local enthusiast-collector community is the single biggest difference between Florence and other art markets I am familiar with.

Institutions

Beyond artists, dealers and collectors vibrant art worlds are composed of museums and art spaces (public exhibition spaces with professional curators but without permanent collections), art schools, and art publications employing critic-journalists (Becker, 1982). In general Italy has relatively few contemporary art museums, and Florence, home to several of the greatest museums of historical art in the world, has none. This is a bitter fact to lovers of contemporary art, since Florence's ancient rival to the south, Siena, has recently opened a very avant-garde art space in the Palazzo Papesse, while the industrial province of Prato to the northwest has also recently opened the impressive Pecci contemporary art museum. Both accomplishments are galling to Florentines.

The Sienese are already resented for their arrogant assumption of cultural superiority over the rest of Tuscany. Their possession of a truly avant-garde art space linked to comparable places in France and Germany, in the absence of anything comparable in Florence, gives substance to their airs. The case of Prato is even worse since Florentines love to look down on the Pratese as ignorant, boorish money-grubbing businessmen (Prato has been for many years a world center for high-end textiles as well as for reprocessing woolen goods). It is harder to sustain a superior self-image of Florence as the regional center for high culture while having to go to Prato to see the first-rate contemporary exhibitions hosted by the Pecci. This insult is reinforced by the presence of a world-class private sculpture park open to the public, Giuliano Gori's Fattoria di Celle in Pistoia to the near northwest of Prato. The park contains a large selection of site-specific outdoor sculptures made by leading international avant-garde artists. It is comparable to eminent sculpture parks like Storm King in the US. Even Pisa, near Tuscany's Western coast, has recently opened the Teseco Foundation, a daringly avant-garde contemporary art space located in an industrial park. Florence city, the center of the region's population and politics, is conspicuously void of contemporary art museums.

The city of Florence ***is*** the regional center for art education. The city hosts two renowned art schools: the Accademia di Belli Arti and the Istituto d'Arte di Porta Romana. Cosimo I di Medici founded the Accademia in 1563, on the advice of the great artist-architect-art historian Vasari, with Michelangelo as its first director.[15] The school now is one of about twenty federally-supported schools in Italy comparable to colleges, enrolls about fourteen hundred students, and graduates around 250 students per year majoring in painting, sculpture, decoration or set design. The other school is the Istituto Statale d'Arte di Porta Romana, a state supported facility comparable to a high school or technical institute. The Accademia, however focuses on teaching basic principles and techniques of the craft of art. In dramatic contrast to comparably elite US art schools, which normally aim to produce graduates who will confront the leading edge of the art market, the Accademia has no intention of graduating avant-garde artists who will have an impact on the market. The director, aware that he occupies a position first held by Michelangelo, is not concerned with educating students in "post-modern" theory, whatever that may be, but in giving students a firm grounding in classical principles and practices (interview 1/31/00). Other smaller private schools exist to serve foreign students, some specializing in classical academic

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15 The roots of the Accademia have been traced to a confraternity of painters founded in 1339. The Medici/Vasari/Michelangelo institution was called the Accademia del Disegno, which became the modern Accademia when it was chartered by Grand Duke Pietro Leopoldo in 1785 (Kempers 1987:286-293; L'Accademia 1984).

painting, others in printmaking, restoration or decorative crafts, but again these have little impact on the high art world.

Critic-curators

The scarcity in Italy of contemporary art museums with their staffs of professional curators means that the roles of journalist, critic, consultant and curator are often combined whereas they are normally separate in the US. The persons in these roles assume a far more important position in the Italian art world than they usually do in the US. The most active and successful critics define new art styles based on the work of a chosen set of artists, curate the shows in public art spaces and private galleries, write the newspaper and magazine articles to publicize the new styles, and then write catalog statements affirming their worth.[16] It is common in Italy, but relatively rare in the US, for galleries to invite critics to curate shows in their spaces.

In Italy the eminent critic Achille Bonito Oliva and the *Transavanguardia* movement in Roman painting of the 1980s is the example most frequently mentioned. The critic's public relations for this small group of artists helped make them famous and successful. But the lack of institutional support for the local Florentine art world (the absence of contemporary art museums and major art journals) severely hampers critics in their efforts to advance "their" artists in particular and contemporary art in general. While the general Italian art system has the potential to give critics more power than they would normally have in an American context, the specific Florentine art world frustrates their plans. As one critic complained, *"There is no contemporary art market in Florence".*[17] The critic-journalist who, in the Italian style, also worked as a consultant-curator was in her late fifties and had a distinguished record of writing, curating shows, creating non-profit art centers and working on public commissions. She went on to criticize the local scene:

> *A system would mean museums, there are no contemporary art museums in Florence. In Florence they have spent around $16 million already on the Rifredi [a proposed contemporary art museum], and still need to spend another $20 million…The Rifredi plan began in 1982, together with Prato... Prato opened its Pecci museum in 1988, Florence is still dithering around with Rifredi... An art system would mean galleries, and there are too few in Florence… The artists leave town, they go away, where are they going to show [here]? There are too few artists, they lack publications, journals, they lack an entire system*.
> *{Why? There is plenty of money in this town, and people admire art here.}*
> *There is no interest. The city is self sufficient with its history. People come to see the art of the past, the Uffizi [Florence's major historical art museum], the masses come to see David [the famous Michelangelo sculpture which has become an icon of Florence's art treasures]*.. (interview 6/27/00).

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16 This creative type of critic is not totally unique to Italy. Clement Greenberg is perhaps the example most familiar to Americans for his role in advancing the Abstract Impressionists in post World War two New York.

17 Many Italians use the phrase "contemporary art" to denote avant-garde, post-modern, or otherwise non-traditional challenging work, using "modern art" to refer to non-challenging work by living artists. In all interviews I made it clear that by "contemporary art" I referred to any work by living artists, reserving "modern art" for work made in the first half of the 20th century.

Another critic-curator, a 34-year-old man who specialized in emerging artists, was equally critical for different reasons:

> *In Florence we're the province of a province of the empire. Milan is the province of the American [artistic] empire, and Florence is the province of the province. …*
> *The problem with this city is that there are too few galleries. On the contrary there are lots of artists, but they look for success in Milan. [In Florence] there is the Academy [the prestigious art school founded by the Medici], there is a great tradition in Florence even of contemporary art, Florence was an important center of Futurism, in 1912 … But now, Florence is isolated, anyone coming to Florence is put down, as a traditionalist, a reactionary. …*
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> *The bourgeois Florentine thinks that [the art of the 15th-16th century] was a golden moment, the height of world culture, and they are bound to that idea… that Florence was a great art center because Botticelli was here, but not because the Futurists or Visual Poetry [two twentieth century Italian art movements] were here. The Florentine, as a person, is a bit reactionary, very provincial, bourgeois, very complacent of his place in the world. This is a serious handicap. In this city there is no entrepreneurial bourgeoisie like in Milan, they are not risk-takers… They are petit-bourgeoisie who live with their worldview, isolated from the rest of Italy.* (interview 12/13/99)

The themes these critic-curators brought up were mirrored in practically every other interview. To summarize, their main complaint is that the popular conception of high art is fixed on historical art, which leaves no aesthetic space for contemporary avant-garde art. They go on to complain that the tourist business which supports the local economy focuses on the icons of historic art, so the public officials have no incentive to spend resources on contemporary art, therefore there are no contemporary art museums and few galleries.[18] There are no local art journals as the major Italian art journals like Flash Art and Arte Mondadori are edited and published in Milan. The lack of a lively literary scene focusing on contemporary art allows local people to ignore their own recent and modern art history and impedes the formation of a local collector community. These complaints of art world actors mean that Florence's past overshadows the present.

The Past in the Present

The preference for historic over contemporary art has several bases. In the first place, the attribution of aesthetic quality is easier when the art is older, as more time has passed during which the opinions of experts solidify. While this is true, the preference I saw in Tuscany included **all** historical art, not just the art validated by experts. People hung paintings in places of honor that were so blackened with time that the image was barely perceptible. The more relevant source of the preference seems simply that history is alive and highly valued in Italy, thus any connection with the past is esteemed.

For example, the fluid alternation of contemporary and historical examples in conversation is impressive to American ears. My most notable experience was when a middle-

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18 We have seen that their complaint about the simple number of galleries is not supported by comparative data, as the Florentine number seems unexceptionable. They must mean there are too few galleries specializing in avant-garde or challenging art relative to the number of artists, which by my analysis of local art markets is always true.

aged hardware store clerk gave me an impromptu lecture on sixteenth century Sienese government to support his claim that Siena (today) was a more interesting place to live than Florence. A Prato business executive who was explaining why Florence had not built a contemporary art museum effortlessly shifted from describing a meeting ten years ago to an anecdote about Florentines throwing stones at Michelangelo's David sculpture while it was first installed in the early 1500s (interview 7/22/00). A Florentine artist describing his work as "intellectual" explained that in medieval painting Florence was seen as more intellectual, focusing on linear elements, while Venice was more emotional, focusing on color (interview 5/15/00). The effortless blending of past and present revealed by these anecdotes shows the contemporary salience of the past in Tuscany.

The nature of the past is however reinterpreted to suit contemporary interests, as the commercial elite of Florence packages the cultural goods of the region into manageable tourist experiences. For example, the Uffizi museum recently reopened the "Vasari corridor", a gallery built over the Ponte Vecchio in the 16th Century. The Medici family had ordered the corridor so they could walk in privacy from the Pitti Palace across the Arno river to the Palazzo Vecchio. The gallery is hung with historic paintings, but there is no evidence that these paintings were originally displayed in this space. The work was selected by curators to give tourists paying the special fee an interesting art experience that was somewhat historical.

The Culturally Deadening Effect of Mass Tourism.

As several interviewees pointed out, there was a vibrant contemporary cultural scene in Florence before the Second World War. The major change seems to have been mass tourism. Foreign tourism in Italy goes back many hundreds of years, with professional guides and agencies like Thomas Cook and Baedecker well established by the mid Nineteenth Century (Paloscia 1994:12-17). But these catered to elite, well-educated tourists seeking out the cultural treasures of the country on leisurely schedules. Contemporary mass tourism, consisting of crowds of relatively uneducated short-term visitors organized into large tour groups visiting only the most famous destinations, is a phenomenon of the past 50 years of Western middle class success. Most people I interviewed resented mass tourism. For example, a successful local artist in his mid fifties showed me his downtown studio, a dream of a European artist's studio with high vaulted ceilings, arched doorways, eighteenth century murals and plenty of natural light. He owned this treasure because it had been his grandfather's, then his father's bookbinding workshop, so he worked surrounded by meaningful items of family history. But when he stepped outside in the street, he found himself immersed in herds of tourists. He complained bitterly about the nature of high culture in Florence:

> *Tourism hurts the soul of a person who works at anything that's not selling souvenirs. A person who lives an active intellectual life in the city is definitely hurt. There's this sense in the air of endless vacation, of shouting, drinking, it's a vulgar reality that the city feels… Its not easy to live here, more than anything in a mental sense, because the city is completely disassociated, because the tourism, the school outings, all these people in the streets, it takes away your desire to create…because its like constant death [to any effort for a sustained intellectual dialog]. …* (Interview 5/8/2000)

His complaint was repeated in many other interviews. The problem is the relentless flood of naive tourists—over twenty per year for every inhabitant!--who want to look at the same things, the statue of David, the Duomo, and perhaps half a dozen famous places. The tourists drive up the prices of restaurant food, fill the city's narrow stone streets with dreadful noisy

traffic, and impede every public transaction with their eternal ignorance of local ways. These problems drive local people away. As another native Florentine artist, also in his fifties, commented:

> *All the people you see in Florence, you think they are Florentines? They are all outsiders, from who knows where. The life of Florence is lost. Because of what I told you, everything is taken over by tourists, or tourism, or the industry, or the pizza slice [fast food eaten on the street, a disrespect for the art of eating that is particularly disgusting to Italians] and everything is geared to that. You know, we suck the money ... [from] people, and we throw …[it] into our banks… You know, I would never live in the center of the city now, there is no life there. Too much traffic, too much .... It's lost its character, its life.* (Interview in English, 11/3/99)

The tourist economy represents a flow of income that keeps the city economically healthy.[19] The tourist industry involves 60% of the city's productive activity, with tourist direct spending consisting of 9% of the total expenses of the city.[20] Several dealers openly court tourist clients, advertising in tourist brochures and hanging their artists' work with sales information in hotels. In one case an Italian owner named his successful gallery "Ken's Art Gallery" because the name seemed friendly and approachable to American tourists, no one named Ken ever having been associated with the gallery (interview 11/18/99).

The estrangement of intellectuals from the central city, the dissatisfaction with cultural life and the feeling that the civilized qualities of Italian urban life have been sold out for tourist dollars, is not just a feature of the contemporary art market. Well known writers such as Antonio Tabucchi, whose recent book introduces the city of Florence with the words *"Florence is a vulgar city"* (my translation, 1999:8) mirror the complaints that I heard many times in interviews. In spite of the fact that the city and province schedule impressive programs of music, no one, of the hundred people I formally interviewed and the many others I informally discussed my project with, ever said that they were excited with the intellectual life of the city. If that is so, why do so many artists from elsewhere in Italy as well as from the rest of the world live there?

The Love of Art.

The dismal picture of the Florence art world that I have painted is only one face of a complex reality. In fact the society is flooded with contemporary art. It is common to see original paintings and prints in local bars,[21] shops, and homes. In most cases friends or relatives of the owners do the art. In a small sample of private homes I surveyed in a middle-class town in Florence province, about 30 kilometers from the city, the average home had 18 significant

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19 Tourism in Italy since the Second World War has grown immensely. From 1950—66, for example, tourism grew 453% while the Italian population grew 12.8% and industrial production grew 271% (Paloscia 1994:72). For many years Italy has been among the world's top tourist destinations (Touring Club Italiano 1994:83-5). Within Italy, Tuscany holds second place as a tourist destination after Veneto (Venice) (Touring Club Italiano 1994:92).

20 Source: website of the city of Florence, http://www.comune.firenze.it/programmasindaco.htm.

21 Bars in Italy sell mainly coffee, pastries and snacks. They are light, bright family places and are a far cry from American bars focusing on alcohol consumption.

works.[22] It is hard to find comparable data from the US, but calculating the equivalent number from a study of 200 New York area homes done by sociologist David Halle produces an average of 8 paintings and photographs per house (1993, calculated from Table A-10, p. 216). There is a lot of original art in Florentine homes.

People obtain art by buying it and by receiving it as gifts from artists, friends and relatives as well as from organizations. In Italy it is common for public institutions to distribute original artworks to members. For example, a local artist in his late sixties told me how an industrial union distributed his editioned print to their worker-members about ten years ago:

> *And the workers have a club, … they have an art gallery, and … at the time of my show, they said, we'd like you to do a [lithograph] plate, we'll print it, and we'll distribute it to our people. They print 100 of them... the workers paid nothing, like in those days, £15,000 [less than $13 at the time], for a print, it was a numbered, editioned print signed by me, and … they do that regularly. So for them, its no big deal, they are used to having contemporary art in their homes.*
>
> > *{What you are saying, implies that the market for contemporary art is very broad here}*
>
> *Much broader, here than in most countries, yes. Its very much wider, and broader, and more open, … There are a lot of people who paint here, there is a lot of respect … for it [art, painting] as an activity." …* (interview in English, 11/15/99)

One of the 30 surveyed homes belonging to a skilled factory worker had original editioned prints hanging in his garage. When I asked why, the owner explained that he had received the prints as gifts from the blood donation organization for which he volunteered, and had no more room to display them in his home (interview 6/10/00). It was common, in fact, for people to say they had received paintings as presents on birthdays, weddings or other occasions. Art is valued, respected, and accepted as part of normal everyday life.

Contemporary Art at Home in Tuscany

Florentine homes are full of art, yet artists, critic-curators and dealers complain that there is no appreciation for serious, original contemporary art. The art that most people feel comfortable having on their walls is in fact either nondescript historical paintings or else the sort of decorative, unchallenging, unoriginal work that high-art actors disdain. A young curator who specialized in helping emerging young avant-garde artists was acidly critical about this:

> *Tuscany is a kind of oasis, so "pretty", [that] so many Americans, so many Germans come here, [because] they love the sweet countryside, the landscape is a garden, even the farm fields are gardens, this isn't heavy agriculture that stinks, it's beautiful agriculture! Here everything is sweet, picturesque, and the Florentines like pretty paintings.* (Interview 12/13/99)[23]

A 38-year-old native Florentine artist had another explanation for the lack of avant-garde work:

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[22] I sampled 30 homes stratified into 10 wealthy, 10 middle- and 10 working class families but not randomly chosen. The 18 works included 12 original oil paintings, 2 watercolor or tempera paintings, 2 editioned prints, and almost 2 drawings. The figures given omit a number of smaller, less significant works.

[23] In the high art world the term "pretty" or "decorative" is usually used as an insult to denote work catering to low-culture, popular taste.

> *In Florence, a professional buys a big, beautiful apartment in an antique building. … If you're in a fifteenth century house, you want to put fifteenth century furniture in it, … [then] you want to put fifteenth or sixteenth century paintings in it.* (Interview 5/11/00)

The extensive local history of art has thus placed contemporary artists in a tough situation. Because of this history, local people respect, admire and want to display fine art, but also because of this history, the art they want to display does not have the challenging characteristics inherent in most contemporary high art. A 59-year-old critic-art historian explained the lack of institutional support for contemporary art by reference to its "un-decorative" nature and the alienation of the bourgeoisie. The critic explained the development of the art world after the Second World War:

> *Until the end of the 1960s, there was a system of art here in Florence that was favorable, it had a social structure. There were several generations of artists. It was a provincial scene, but [at least] it was a scene.*

He described how a few local avant-garde artists working with a few exhibition spaces attracted very challenging art from out of Italy in the 1970s, which upset the comfortable provincial relation the upper middle classes had with the local artists. The critical issue was not the foreign but the difficult nature of the new work:

> *Florence has the international tourism, but it is always at a low [cultural] level. Contemporary art provokes [intellectual] questions, but the shopkeeper mentality of Florence prevailed over everything else. The shopkeepers began to determine the image of the city, since the 1970s the mass tourism …[prevents]…the thoughtful examination of art.* (Interview 5/16/00)

Thus, in summary, the mass tourism of the last quarter century depressed the level of intellectual discourse about art. At the same time the un-decorative and often aggressive nature of avant-garde contemporary art alienated the upper middle class "shopkeepers"[24] who had once been the natural and enthusiastic supporters of local contemporary art.

Conclusion

The city of Florence was an intellectual center in Italy before the Second World War, the home of notable literary magazines and visual art movements. In the second half of the century the expansion of mass tourism coincided with a decline in the creative intellectual and cultural life of the city, as government authorities focused their efforts on servicing tourism. Several interviewees contrasted the essentially conservative nature of the Florentine elite, whose livelihood comes from merchandizing the past, with the entrepreneurial nature of Prato's elite, whose success comes from creating new industrial products and markets.

The lack of government support for contemporary art in Florence did not affect the fundamental interest in and respect for art on the part of the population. People grew up surrounded by masterpieces of visual art, saw the worth of this art validated by the millions of international tourists who flood the city to see it, and developed or maintained an interest in art.

But the government disinterest probably did affect the kind of art supported. The absence of contemporary art museums with their staffs of professional curators and art journals deprived the local population of the high-level discourse that stimulates interest and connoisseurship. Thus

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[24] A term used always with scorn by respondants, even when they admitted to living from the income from family shops.

popular taste remained just that, focused on decorative art that pleased the eye rather than original art that challenged pre-existing ways of seeing.

Both of the assumptions discussed at the beginning of this paper are valid in this case: the local history does stimulate the love and support of art, while the commercial atmosphere severely constrains the nature of the art supported. The contemporary merchandizing of the artistic past seems to stifle the artistic present. While there are sporadic exhibits of contemporary art in historic sites, primarily the Palazzo Vecchio and the Palazzo Strozzi, this art has little impact on the cultural life of the city.

I do not think the relation of artistic past to present described in this paper is generalizeable in a simple way to other situations. Florence is unique in western art history, and the extraordinary scale of the tourist industry with few other sources of income is also unique. I suggest this is the theoretical importance of the Florence case, that when commercial interests focusing on the past are dominant, the cultural interests of the present will suffer.

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Notes

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