

# A bastion of tradition aims for relevance

FLORENCE, ITALY

## Florence's Uffizi Gallery mixes modern artists with its Botticellis and Raphaels

BY ROBIN POGREBIN

Walking past the Botticellis, Raphaels and Michelangelos at the Uffizi Gallery, one could understandably be surprised to come upon self-portraits by the Ethiopian artist Tesfaye Urgessa and the Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama.

At a time when museums all over the world have been examining how to tell a more inclusive story about art, the Uffizi, in Florence, Italy, has been slower to catch up, hamstrung by its legacy as one of Europe's leading classical museums and by tourists expecting to see history's greatest hits.

But since becoming director in 2015, Eike Schmidt has slowly been trying to integrate more contemporary art, to increase the presence of female artists and artists of color and to reach a younger, more diverse audience.

"The Uffizi very rarely in the past had contemporary art exhibitions," Schmidt said in a recent interview at the museum. "It was seen as intruding on these sacred halls."

"For me, it has been very important to get the dust off," he added, "and to show what is relevant."

Other Florence museums are engaged in similar efforts to broaden their reach, in part by juxtaposing the old with the new and by looking at historical artworks through a modern lens to foster dialogue between genres and eras. The Palazzo Strozzi just closed a Jeff Koons exhibition and the Museo Novecento, dedicated to newer works, is showing the British painter Jenny Saville.

Changing the public's perception of art in Florence hasn't been easy, said Arturo Galansino, the Palazzo Strozzi's director. "Most people prefer to see contemporary art," he said, "In Italy, it was the other way around. People felt more comfortable with the past than with the present."

Things began to change in 2015, Galansino said, when Koons's gilded steel sculpture "Pluto and Proserpina" was installed in the center of the Palazzo Vecchio, Florence's medieval town hall, standing between copies of masterpieces by Donatello and Michelangelo as part of the Florence International Biennale Antiques Fair. "It was a symbolic moment," Galansino said.

Koons said he has felt welcomed by Florentines and that he considered the city an ideal location, "where you're embedded in the Renaissance, but you can also have a dialogue with contemporary art."

"That's what art does," he added. "It

makes connections from our own situations to others and shows how everything is interwoven."

In upending traditional expectations of how classical art is presented, the Uffizi has also joined museums like the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Frick in New York, which have rethought the exhibition of old masters in the context of the Brutalist Breuer building on Madison Avenue in Manhattan.

"Every living artist would love to engage with the Uffizi," said Max Hollein, director of the Met. "It's a paradise."

The Uffizi recently opened an exhibition by one of those living artists, Koen Vanmechelen, a multidisciplinary Belgian artist who focuses on the relationship between nature and culture. The show, "Seduzione," which runs until March 20, features 30 artworks including huge horned iguanas, a crouching red tiger and a reimagined Medusa topped by open beaks and sharp teeth, all of which were created expressly for the hallowed halls of the Uffizi.

The museum has also recently featured shows by such living artists as the British sculptor Antony Gormley, the Arte Povera figure Giuseppe Penone and Urgessa, whose work focuses on social criticism, race and the politics of identity.

While he felt out of place at the Uffizi at first — particularly given the museum's preponderance of biblical content — Urgessa said in a telephone interview that he was welcomed by visitors there and that the institution seemed to be changing from "something from the past, like the pyramids."

"Nowadays people want to hear about a new story," he added, "a story related to their lives."

Schmidt said he is committed to dedicating at least two exhibitions a year to female artists. Last February, for example, the Uffizi presented "Lo Sregio," ("The Scar") a show that took a stand opposing violence against women by presenting Gian Lorenzo Bernini's bust of the disfigured Costanza Piccolomini Bonarelli alongside Ilaria Sagaria's photographic exhibition "Pain is not a privilege," which portrays the victims of acid attacks.

With exhibitions, the Uffizi is also trying to push past the confines of its white, male, Eurocentric history. With "On Being Present" in 2020, the museum explored Black identity in paintings, such as the wise man in Dürer's "Adoration of the Magi" and the portraits of Ethiopian kings in its Giovio Series. The same year, the Uffizi presented an exhibition on women, power and emancipation in ancient Rome.

Lisa Marie Browne, the executive director of the nonprofit Friends of the Uffizi Gallery, said Schmidt, "in a dramatic shift from the norm, has advanced the Uffizi Gallery from a Renaissance Museum into a 2022 renaissance."

The Uffizi has also been branching out in its acquisitions, last fall adding a work

by the street artist Endless, who donated it and 52 self-portraits by Italian comic book artists to its collection.

With the goal to reach "as many people as possible," Schmidt said in a statement at the time, "I am convinced that it will give rise to great results and will be the forerunner to many other 'crossovers.'"

In redefining what constitutes Uffizi territory, the museum has unbuttoned its collar in outreach efforts, a process accelerated by the exigencies of the pandemic. It started the "Uffizi Diffusi" program, which takes art out of storage and sends it to various places in the surrounding Tuscany region in a series of thematically arranged presentations.

Despite not getting a website until 2015 — Schmidt has said the museum was "in the Stone Age" — the Uffizi has become an unlikely social media phenomenon, with nearly 700,000 followers on Instagram; more than 100,000 on TikTok and nearly 128,000 on Facebook.

It also recently introduced a YouTube cooking show called "Uffizi da Mangiare" (or "Uffizi on the Plate") that features chefs making meals inspired by works in the collection.

Schmidt said he is seeing results; visitors between the ages of 19 and 25 "more than doubled" in the year leading up to 2020, he said.

Similarly, Galansino, the Palazzo Strozzi's director, said that by showing contemporary artists — such as Ai Weiwei and, next fall, Olafur Eliasson — his museum has attracted a new audience, more than 30 percent of whom are under 30 years old.

Given such efforts by museums like the Strozzi and the Uffizi, as well as Florence's convenient location between the cosmopolitan hubs of Rome and Milan, Galansino said he is convinced that Florence can become "a contemporary art city."

"I think we've convinced the public that contemporary art is as important as old masters," Galansino said. "People lost the perception of Florence as a living place, but it is still a living place. It's not just living in the past."



Un bastione della tradizione punta alla  
rilevanza







CLARA VANNUCCI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

**Koen Vanmechelen's "Black Medusa," left, and "White Medusa," right, are displayed alongside Caravaggio's "Medusa" at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy.**



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CLARA VANNUCCI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Clockwise from above: Eike Schmidt, the Uffizi's director, surrounded by works by Adriana Fincherle, Tesfaye Urgessa, Yayoi Kusama, Renato Guttuso and Marc Chagall; the courtyard of the Uffizi; "Cosmopolitan Fossil II" by Koen Vanmechelen, and Vanmechelen's "Temptation (Niobe)." Traditionally, a museum director said, people in Italy "felt more comfortable with the past than with the present."

