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INTRODUCTION

There can't be many people who love art who won't at some time in their lives find themselves in Florence, expecting to see and appreciate the incredibly beautiful paintings and sculptures collected in that little city. There are so many museums, churches and galleries there, crammed with wonderful works. But many visitors find that the sheer number of places to go and things to see makes the experience of Florence overwhelming.

The crowds, the long waits at some venues, the summer heat or winter cold and the miles of corridors to traverse can be exhausting. It's worse if the visitor, on a first trip to this magical city, has only a day or two in which to see it all. Inevitably, such a visitor leaves Florence disappointed that he or she has fitted so little in to their scheduled time, and with the feeling that Florence has only been sampled rather than fully experienced. Such a person will often be heard to say that "next time" it will be different – the stay will be longer and the rush of viewing, which makes every gallery a blur and all the churches seem the same, will be avoided. Perhaps then, the visitor says, I will really see Florence.

While this little book may be used by any visitor, it has been written principally as a kind of guide for those fortunate people who do have a "next time" – the second-time or even third-time visitor to Florence. To make good use of this book, you will need to move quite slowly through the streets and piazzas, spend hours in churches and museums, and dawdle through the galleries, letting all the first-timers pass you as they rush to the next place on their lists or back to their buses. Instead of a day or two in Florence, you may find you need a week or two – or even three. Certainly you should plan for not less than a week. When you get home you will remember where you have been and much of what you have seen. You will not have just "done" Florence like any tourist, and you may have fallen in love with her forever.

Before I last went to Florence to research this book I imagined that it might be possible to follow in the footsteps of others who have tried to identify the unusual, the out-of-the-way or the quirky things that most visitors miss. Surely, I half-supposed, as Florence's riches have been mined a thousand times before, unless one can dig up some brand-new treasures a guide like this one will serve no purpose; it will be just more of the same. Of course, I was mistaken. Yes, there are a multitude of amazing works to see outside the "name" galleries, but even for a repeat visitor, much in those famous galleries will have been missed the first time. The second-time visitor will want to go back and see what he or she failed, due to shortness of time, fatigue or the need to follow a guide at a rushing pace, fully to appreciate – or perhaps even to notice.

For that reason, I have included in this book "tours" to take, book in hand, through the Uffizi, the Accademia, the Galleria Palatina at the Pitti Palace, and the Bargello. I won't necessarily be directing you to all the best-known masterpieces: those you almost certainly saw last time, and which you won't be able to avoid seeing again this time due to their prominent presentation. Instead, I'll be helping you to look around, at your leisure, and see precious and wonderful things you might otherwise have missed.

In addition, I'll take you to many not so well-known sights: basilicas, churches, church museums, small secular museums, and all sorts of singular attractions where works of art are to be found. In each place, I have discovered marvels that will enrich your time in Florence, and I will point them out to you and talk about them in the commentary.

Throughout the book, I'll tell you a little about the artists and their times, and repeat anecdotes and gossip that may help to bring what you are seeing to life.

I have selected some works as LESSER-KNOWN TREASURES. These are works which, I think, are especially lovely and interesting things. Some are reasonably well-known, but others are open secrets which standard guide books may not mention, but which it will be worth your while going out of your way to seek out and admire.

In addition, there is a chapter which gives detailed information about where to find those iconic images of Last Suppers that most visitors miss.

Some limits must be imposed on even an indefatigable researcher, or the task will never be done. In my case, I confess to having made my job manageable by concentrating upon art which was produced in or around Florence itself, by artists who were Italian and who worked in or around Florence, and whose period begins in the thirteenth century and ends with the advent of the style which became Baroque, in the late 16th and early seventeenth century. The vast bulk of really fine work displayed in Florence fits within my limits. It includes art from the so-called Pre- or Proto-Renaissance (mostly fourteenth century), the "International Gothic" style (early fifteenth century), the Early Renaissance, the High Renaissance and Mannerist periods, and some outstanding later work which I judge to be worthy of inclusion. I haven't included much seventeenth century art – although there is a lot of it, especially in the churches which underwent a "Baroque Overhaul". I think – and this is a purely personal opinion (this is a very opinionated book) – that too much of the art of this period found in Florence is without a great deal of merit. In fact, it is boring and repetitious. To be callous, if your thing is Baroque art, spend your Italian holiday in Rome!

I have less excuse, I guess, for spending comparatively little time with the works which are the products of non-Florentine artists of great standing. Obviously, there are some Titians, Veroneses, Giorgiones and Venezianos, as well as Rubenses and Caravaggios, in Florentine collections (especially in the ducal collection in the Galleria Palatina). With a few exceptions, better examples of the works of these artists are to be found elsewhere, for

example in Venetian galleries and in the Louvre in Paris. I have noticed and mentioned some of these works, but they do not attract as much attention in this book as the works which fall within my self-imposed limits.

Throughout the book I have often anglicised the names of works and locations for ease of reference by my readers. However, some are as well, or better, known by their Italian names, and a reader wishing to learn more, for example by searching internet resources, may need the Italian names as well. I have supplied these where necessary.

While I give some information about the artists when discussing their works, I have also provided, at the end of the book, short biographies of most of the artists whose works are featured. To help keep you chronologically orientated, there is also a simplified time-line diagram.

This book is not intended as a guide to Florence itself, and so won't substitute for a standard guidebook if you are looking for information about hotels, restaurants, shops or transport. It is a guide only to the art to be found in the city. To use it, you will need a good map of the streets of the city, with an index – these are readily available in Florence, and simplified versions can be obtained free from your hotel concierge.

Now, enjoy your visit to Florence!