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NEWS & VIEWS AROUND FLORENCE

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40th Anniversary of the Florence flood

November 4th 1966

The day nature threatened culture

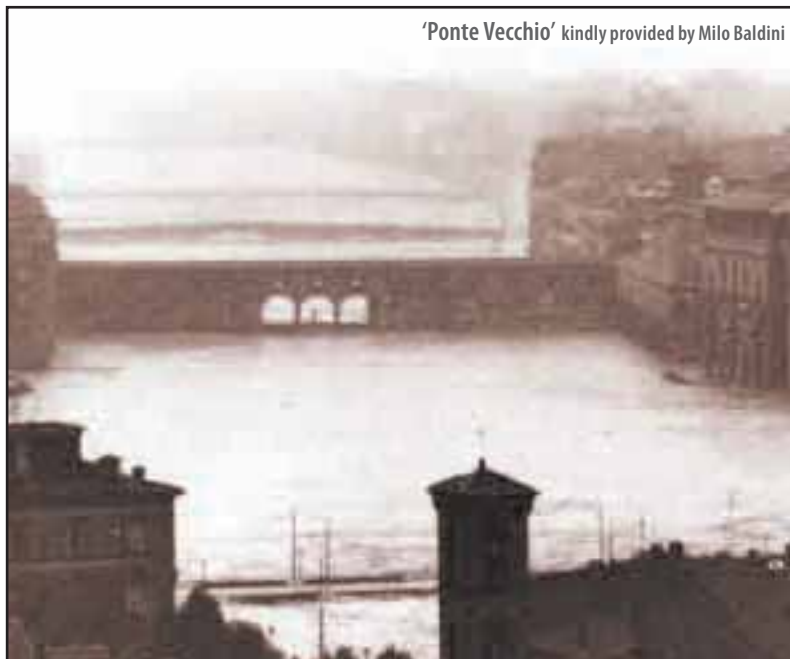


'A view of the city from Piazzale Michelangiolo'
provided by Mediateca Toscana

Last night the stars were polished diamonds accentuated by the lack of usual glow from the city. For three nights, Florence has been in stygian darkness. The twinkling diadem of Fiesole seems almost rude, taunting her over-grown daughter, sprawling wounded below. The City of Flowers is wounded worse than ever before. The flood has dwarfed the destruction of World War II.'

Horace Gibson (Nov. 7, 1966)

'Ponte Vecchio' kindly provided by Milo Baldini



WHAT'S INSIDE

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A Wave of PANIC

The flood – a chronology

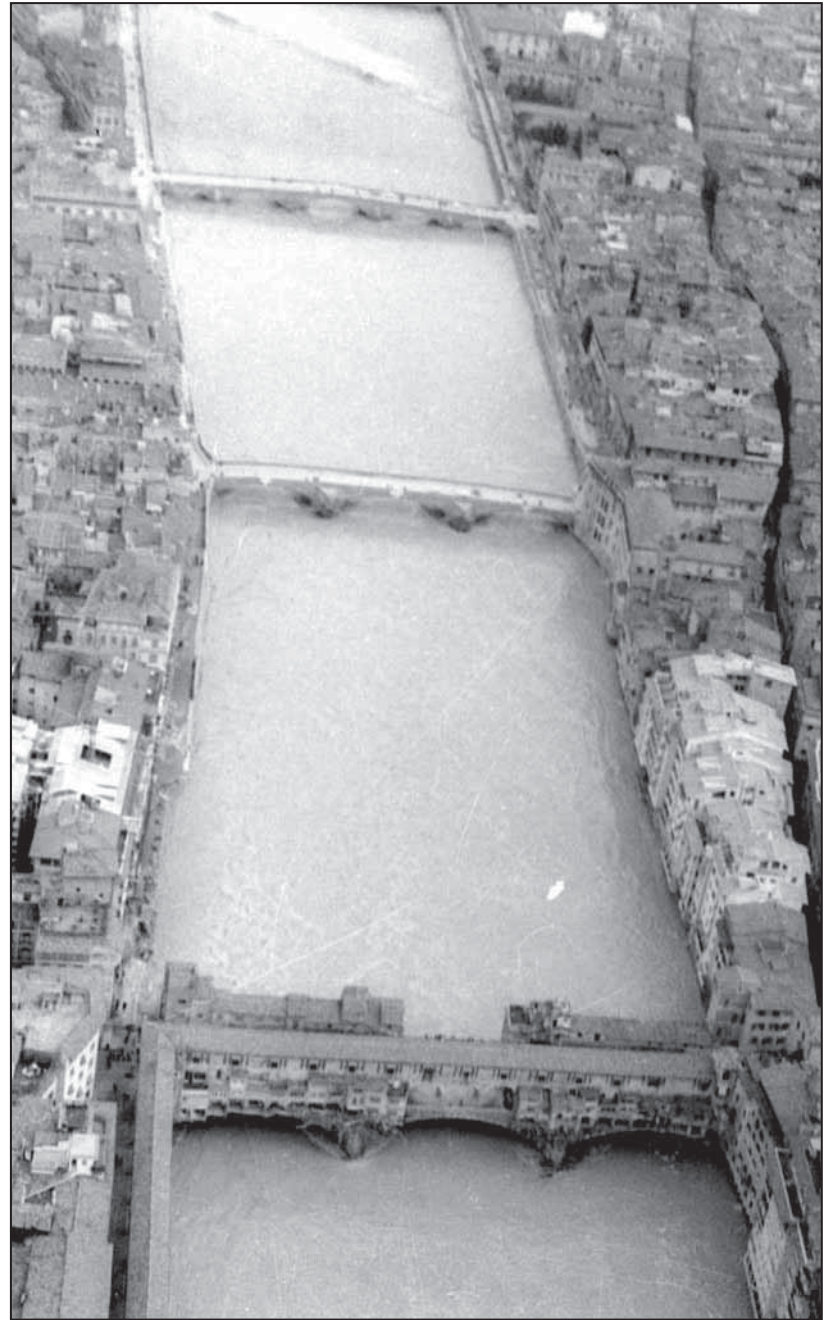
by Sarah Beck

'The Arno River' provided by Mediateca Toscana

Forty years ago the unthinkable happened and the Arno flooded Florence; it shook not just the nation of Italy but the whole world. It's a story that needs to be shared and deserves to be told.

It was Saturday, November 3, 1966, and it had been raining non-stop for over two days in Tuscany, an incredible 50 centimetres in 48 hours. The Arno basin had received more than a quarter of its annual rainfall in just 24 hours. Despite the torrential rain, the Italian army was finishing its preparations for the public holiday the following day, to commemorate an Italian victory in World War I. Life continued as normal in the city of Florence and the surrounding area. Upstream from Florence, the condition of the Arno river was giving cause for concern at the Levane and La Penna dams in the Valdarno as over 2,000 cubic metres of water per second were passing through and pouring towards Florence.

'Corner Borgo San Jacopo and via Maggio' provided by Milo Baldini



2:30 pm

After frantic meetings, the civil engineering department agreed that there was 'an exceptional quantity of water.' Reports began to reach Florence from villages further up the valley that the river was flooding and causing inhabitants to abandon their homes and seek safety elsewhere.

In Florence cellars were beginning to flood in the San Frediano and Santa Croce areas, and the force of the water was causing man-hole covers to fly off and fountains of water to gush forth. The river did not seem likely to burst through its

banks in Florence itself, however. As darkness descended on Florence, people went to bed. They woke the following morning to a very different view from their windows

4:00 am

Engineers at the dam in Valdarno released water that had been building up, as they feared the dam would otherwise burst. This water began to thunder down the valley, water that between two and three hours later would reach the outskirts of Florence, travelling by that time at a rate of 40 miles per hour.

As it was, the rainfall observed on November 4 was many times greater

than that recorded in the previous five days. In Badia Agnano, for example, 34 centimetres fell in that one day, as opposed to 16 centimetres previously. This was to prove a deadly combination in some cases.

A night watchman on the Ponte Vecchio was one of the first people to raise the alarm, it was too late for others. The first victim was a 52-year-old man who worked for the dams. His body was found two days later in a mud-clogged tunnel. The Arno first broke its banks at Piazza Poggi and a radio reporter managed to phone his colleagues to tell them that he wouldn't make it to work that day as the water gushing down via Giampaolo Orsini had just

engulfed his car. Then the phone went dead.

7:26 am

Gas, water and electricity supplies were cut off and the city's electric clocks simultaneously stopped. By this point, the 'wave' of water from the dam had arrived, and a huge part of the Arno's northern embankment had given way. As the nightmare ensued, 90 percent of Florence's inhabitants slept unawares.

At RAI radio headquarters the mayor of Florence, Bargellini, was getting ready to record the radio's first ever newflash. Despite RAI's being a public service company, it

How they saved Christ...and other works of art

Restorers confront the aftermath

by Ed Hayes



The Christ of Cimabue before the flood

The scope of the disaster

Immediately after the flood, the task that faced restorers was immense. Five panels of Ghiberti's 'Gates of Paradise' at the Baptistery were ripped out of their frames; the water-filled basement of the Archaeological Museum exploded upwards in two places; and a kind of tidal wave ran north out from the Arno along Borgo Pinti, reaching Santissima Annunziata and the University. To the west, the cloisters of Santa Maria Novella and the Ognissanti were submerged. In Santa Croce the water had risen to nearly six metres.

In the areas to the north of the Piazza del Duomo, the flood worked whimsically. At Santissima Annunziata, despite extensive flooding in the forecourt and the cloister, no serious harm was done, but the Archaeological Museum nearby suffered, in the words of John Pope Hennessy, director of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, 'more gravely than any other major Florentine museum.' Terrible was the devastation in the Etruscan galleries—a unique reference point for the civilisation that thrived in Tuscany up to the Roman conquest. A vast number of fragile objects were smashed or displaced.

In the Uffizi, right on the bank of the Arno, the floodwaters did not rise to the level of the main galleries on the second floor, but they did flood storerooms, damaging more than 1,000 medieval and Renaissance paintings, sculptures and frescoes. The ground-floor restoration rooms were also flooded, but certain major pictures under restoration—among them Filippo Lippi's Coronation of the Virgin, were rescued before being overwhelmed.

The technical challenge

In the immediate aftermath, the conservation work to be done was broad and complex. The waters of the flood, charged with corrosive oils, calcites and phosphates, had set in motion a series of physical and chemical reactions in the works they had touched. Artworks were wet and covered with mud and fuel oil. Mould was fast collecting on the frescoes. Staining black oil was sinking deeper into the marble of statues. The wooden supports of panel paintings were buckling and distorting with the damp—the paint threatening to detach itself and peel off.

Difficulties were compounded by the sheer variety of work. The Florentine Renaissance was a time of great artistic experimentation, and this translated into work that was stylistically, but also technically, varied—posing difficulties to restorers. To give one famous example, Donatello's statue of Mary Magdalene, salvaged from the Baptistery and restored by Pellegrino Banella, required much more skill than simply working with wood. The statue had gilded hair and Donatello had also used a combination of plaster and tow in its construction.



'Piazza Santa Croce underwater' provided by Milo Baldini

Frescoes posed some of the greatest technical challenges. At first, the paintings on walls seemed to have escaped lightly from the flood. However, as soon as the frescoes began to dry out, it became clear that the situation was very ugly. The phosphates, salts and nitrates carried by the waters had actually altered the chemical makeup of the frescoes which began as a slight blistering in the colour of the fresco, and turned into complete disintegration. Even months after the original cleanup effort, problems were caused by unanticipated moisture in the walls behind the frescoes due to capillary action in the porous stone walls.

'Damaged books' provided by Mediateca Toscana



Dampness attacked not only the coloured surface, but the backing plaster and the very walls which supported the fresco. Mould spread and continued to destroy the colour, threatening to destroy the entire fresco if left unchecked. To conserve the paintings, restorers had to kill the mould, treat the dampness, and sometimes detach the fresco from its plaster in order to work on the fresco and remove it from a support that had become unstable or harmful. The operation of detaching a fresco involves laying down a kind of glue which will pick up the colour, leaving the backing behind. The support and the colour can then be restored separately, and reunited, and the fresco can be remounted.

By the end of 1968, 3,000 square metres of fresco had been removed for conservation, including vast frescoes like Tadeo Gaddi's 122-square-metre Arbore Vitae from the refectory in Santa Croce. The painting was removed in one piece, restored and returned to its original wall by Christmas 1968.

As for panel paintings, their supports—made of organic material—are less physically stable than frescoes. A panel painting is mounted on a 'preparation' of chalk and glue, which is itself mounted on the wooden panel. Panel paintings expand in water, and continue to twist and warp afterwards. The colour, the preparation and the panel react differently to these processes and often become unstuck. In some cases it was necessary to remove the support entirely and remount it—an operation that requires a new mount to be constructed that mimics the tiny variations of the surface of the original. The most famous panel painting to be hit by the flood was Cimabue's Christ. Found floating in Santa Croce with 70 percent of its colour surface gone, this painting became one of the central symbols of the flood. Over the course of its restoration, the remaining colour was peeled off the mount and then treated separately from the mount. It was later toured triumphantly through Europe and America to showcase the process of conservation.

The backbone of Florence gets support

Foreign business endows artisan legacy

by Michele Brewer

Mr. Andrew Masset, President of Italian Ford announces to Mayor Bargellini that Ford Motor Company will contribute 80 thousand dollars for Flood relief

The major works of art of Florence and its libraries are the concern of the whole world. But these minor arts, which have been the blood and bones of Florence for seven hundred years must also come back to life, or Florence is a dead city, a museum.

Isis Orego

Washington Post
Dec. 7, 1966



When the raging waters of the Arno swept through the city of Florence, they almost took with them the heart and vitality that is the artisan industry of the city. Besides its destruction of museums, churches and landmarks, the oily canal of raging mud took no notice of the homes and businesses it destroyed on its way through the streets. Some 5 to 6 thousand workshops were wiped out, along with many of the tools, records, raw materials, stocks and homes of the owners. All areas of industry were effected, including silver and goldsmiths, leather workers, cabinet makers, silk and linen embroiderers, mosaic makers, bookbinders, printers and weavers. After 700 years of work, passing their skills down through generations, some 30,000 craftsmen were now out of commission, and so too seemed the city.

In response to the obviously dire situation, many companies and individuals responded. One such organization was the American Chamber of Commerce, headed by Giuseppe Fantacci. The Chamber worked in close accordance with the Italian National Buyers Association and its president Enzo Tayar. Through their collaboration, they formed the American Loans to Florentine Artisans Fund (ALFA).

This business-like plan was focused directly on rebuilding the artisan industry. The plan called for US companies and merchants,

especially those who buy substantial quantities of goods from Florence, to donate money for their rejuvenation. The foundation was inspired by William French, chairman of the board of Associated Merchandising Corporation in New York. He generously granted \$100,000 to the craftsmen as well as a complete gift of \$10,000. His donation motivated Fantacci and Tayar to organize a fundraiser directed at other American businessmen. With the help and direction of Emilio Pucci, the well-known Italian fashion designer, Italian Parliament member and affected artisan of the flood, a fund raising luncheon was organized to kick start the endowment.

Invitations were sent out to some 40 presidents of American department stores, small businesses and other prominent citizens to attend the luncheon to be held in the Regency Hotel in New York. It was held on Dec. 8 and was hosted by Fantacci and Tayar, who presented the plan and its intention to reorganize the craftsmen's shops by using the money to provide raw materials, tools and equipment: all of which were desperately needed to resume production. Fantacci was adamant about the funds' extreme importance, saying, 'If these craftsmen move away and take other jobs, we may never be able to replace them. The money pledged by American businessmen will enable people to start their trades again' (Philadel-

phia Daily News, Dec 24).

Ultimately, the businessmen and the public alike showed their appreciation of the artisans as the luncheon alone raised \$500,000: already half of the entire goal. Among those to donate were R. H. Macy and Co., \$100,000; Alexander's Inc., \$100,000; Bergdorf Goodman, \$25,000; and Plymouth Shops, \$25,000; as well as other large and smaller donations.

The money would be distributed via two Italian banks, the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro and the Banca d'America e d'Italia which is an affiliate of the Bank of America. These banks would distribute the US-

pledged money with plans to repay the amount in three years. The only thing that the pledges themselves would assume was the already lowered interest rate and the general risk involved. As it would turn out later, the donations would be made tax deductible.

With the vastly unexpected start of the luncheon, ALFA continued to grow, and, within a year, 293 firms were helped by the fund which totaled \$1,350,000. Though ALFA was primarily for those artisans who had developed business relationships with American companies, those artisans without a base for credit were also helped. The American Embassy in Rome developed a fund with a base start at \$100,000. The funds were organized by Ambassador Rhinehart.

The American Chamber of Commerce did much to contribute to the repair process of Florence following the flood. Through their generous support, the extreme importance of Florence to American fashion businesses and individuals can be seen. Not only the American Chamber, but the public, from students to high-end fashion companies, donated time and/or money to the flood relief. The fact is that the artisans represented more than just a historical base for the city; they represented its very foundation.



'Police hand deliver sustenance' provided by Mediateca Toscana

Letters from the FLOOD



Letters from the FLOOD

Reflections

'I was a medical official and that morning I left the house around seven in the morning, in full uniform, to go to the field hospital that the Scuola di Sanità had set up in Piazza Santissima Annunziata. While I was going down the Viale di Colli towards ponte San Niccolò, the water had already arrived at the corner of Via dei Bastioni. I found myself like many others at the Piazzale watching as the furious sea of yellow water covered the larger part of Florence. No one spoke. It seemed like we were having a collective dream—or nightmare. There was a great silence beyond the rushing of the water...

...About a month after the flood, La Nazione published an humorous article—by Prof. Mario Nistri, who in those days directed the psychiatric hospital of San Salvi. He analysed the state of mental health of the Florentines during and after the flood and claimed that he saw no noteworthy increase in neurosis or similar disturbances. According to Nistri, the Florentines' innate capacity to swear and take things up directly with the Almighty served as an escape valve that allowed them to live through the terrible experience without experiencing particular traumas...

...When the water level finally retreated, the cars that had been swallowed by the river eventually re-emerged. Their horns had short-circuited and continued to sound for days. Then, as their batteries started to die, the sound became weaker until it disappeared completely. It signaled 'the death of the car'...I still have that sound ringing in my ears. In the days immediately following November 4, there were very few episodes of criminality and looting. A couple of weeks later, though, the Fiat company decided give a grant to those who needed to substitute their flood-damaged cars. 'flooding centres' cropped up throughout the city.

These were places where the stagnant water had remained deep, like the one near the railway underpass in via delle Cascine. Many people started to 'drown' their undamaged cars in them, so that they could free themselves of their old cars and cash in on a new model...

Vieri Wiechmann

'It was the 4th of November.

Everyone had gone away for the holiday weekend. There was one man alone supervising the Arno's dam. He saw that the river's water level was so high that he feared a tidal wave on Florence, so he opened the dam.

The problem was that many trees had recently been cut down along the river and their trunks blocked the gateway, so he was unable to close the dam back up. Poor man. He later committed suicide.'

Susan Nevelson

'Soldiers at work' by Mario Carbone



'Soldiers helping people' by Mario Carbone

'The river lay racing by, but looking almost tame and sheepish after its rampage. But the Ponte Vecchio.

It is tattered. What a brave bridge! One cannot see quite how a bridge its age (600 years) its weight (all those excrescences) its infirmities (that awful shake-up the Germans gave in it 1944, blowing its ends), could withstand the batters.

Every goldsmith's shop was bashed right through.

There are no walls on the upstream side, and of course no windows or doors. Across the upstream side was a mass of debris, making it look like an enormous beaver dam.'

**Horace Gibson,
November 7, 1966**