November 4, 1966. Ponte Santa Trinita and Lungarno Acciauoli

Photograph © Swietlan Nicholas Koczyna
When Florence calls the World answers

In 1966 Florence was devastated by a terrible flood. Linda Falcone and Jane Fortune tell the story of what happened in the art world following the tragic event.

On November 4, 1966, the Arno flooded Florence, leaving the capital of Humanism engulfed in 600,000 tons of mud and water. The river that Dante had called the ‘damned accursed ditch’, gushed through the city, carrying animal carcasses, furniture, tree trunks, precious art works and millions of rare books.

The Florentines watched from their upper floors and rooftops, as those living on lower floors asked for hospitality from their luckier top-floor neighbours. For days, they had no electricity, no water and no food.

“Florence lay submerged in a lake whose surface stretched for forty square kilometers,” wrote Piero Bargellini, whom Florentines still refer to as ‘the flood mayor’. He was, in their minds, the flood’s first victim. His own home was located just steps from the Church of Santa Croce, the lowest point in the city, where the water and muck reached a height of over twenty feet. A popular man of letters who authored more than 120 books, Bargellini writes: “In the city, reduced to a swamp, in that long night of anguish, the only thing that was saved, not macerated by the water nor sullied by the mud, was the Civic Conscience and faith in that almost symbolic palace that, steadfast and brave, all Florentines clearly saw in their minds’ eye. Lacking every other form of communication, messages were passed from window to window, from street to street, from quarter to quarter, directed towards the Palazzo Vecchio.”

Window to window, street to street, nation to nation, ocean to ocean, the entire world—from student ‘mud-angels’ to the world’s most powerful—rallied their muscle-power or money to salvage the world’s best-loved city of the arts. Thousands flocked to Florence to lend a hand in the makeshift rescue effort, still others sent much-needed funds. Cimabue’s Christ had lost over 70 percent of its paint. Donatello’s Penitent Mary Magdalene was stained with thick brown heating oil from the city’s exploding boilers. Ghiberti’s Doors of Paradise lost half of its golden panels—ripped out by the water’s force. Twenty-seven thousand square feet of frescos in Florence’s central churches and museums were damaged by the mire. Florence, the western world’s art mecca was on its knees: over 14,000 treasures had been damaged.

Art world comes to the rescue

Pisan art historian Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti mobilized local and international artists—thanks to an initiative he called Artists for Florence. “Many artists came to me, to ask how they could best participate. Thus, the idea occurred spontaneously: to ask artists to channel their feelings in a direction that expressed their hope that Florence’s artistic life might rebound in the readiest and most vigorous way possible, by offering the stricken city artworks that would substitute those that had been lost or damaged...”

Ragghianti’s dream included a plan to exhibit the works collected by creating an “Uffizi of Modern Art.” Many of the country’s top creative personalities wished to express solidarity to the city and 247 artists answered the initial appeal. Among their ranks were significant women artists such as Daphne Maugham Casorati, Paola Levi-Montalcini and Bice Lazzari. Stefania Guidi,
one of twentieth-century Italy's most prolific figurative sculptors, donated a life-size bronze work called *Fatalità*. "To be born a woman whose destiny is to become a sculptor is a condemnation," she told us during our visit to her home-studio in the hills near Tivoli. "Nonetheless, I marched into one of via Margutta's studios with my first self-portrait bust under my arm and declared, 'Io sono scultore – I am a sculptor [in the masculine form]'! Guidi's artistic journey began in 1952 and she now has more than 800 works to her credit.

Carla Accardi, a leading figure in Abstractionism, gifted her painting *Red-Green* to the city. A founding member of the *Forma 1* movement, Accardi's goal was to free her work from symbolic or figurative content and concentrate on pure form. Her work is especially significant within the Italian context as she represents the opening up of new themes for women artists. Relegated to the creation of still-life works and portraiture for hundreds of years, women throughout history were not considered suitable for the production of large-scale symbolic works with biblical or mythological subjects. Thus, the advent of Abstractionism fomented their artistic development on the par with their male counterparts. "I believe that abstractionism was beneficial to me as a woman," Accardi commented in a 2000 interview, "because
Above: Piazza Santa Croce covered in mud, in the flood’s aftermath
Top left: Boat rescue on Via della Ninna, Florence 1966
Bottom left: Flooded books at the Central National Library
coming after many centuries with so few women artists, I would not have been able to interpret myself using iconography, because iconography, mostly represented man as a protagonist. (Orbist).”

Titina Maselli, one of Italy’s prime exponents of Pop Art also participated in the initiative. Known for “painting energy”, Maselli often depicted quasi technological city scapes using her signature colours: orange, blue and green. A champion of modernity and an artist who magnified daily objects to gigantic proportions, Maselli gifted her 1967 painting Truck.

Call for Help
Ragghianti’s call for art appealed to foreign artists as well. Antonietta Raphael, who had fled her native Lithuania to escape from anti-Semitic hate crimes in 1905, donated a unique sculpture Maternity. Credited as one of the founding members of the Roman painting movement “la Scuola di Via Cavour”, Raphael had turned to sculpture in the early 1930s so as not to compete with her painter-husband, Mario Mafai—who is also exhibited in the new museum. American painter and print-maker Sarai Sherman worked and studied at Florence’s Il Bisonte Gallery from the 1960s onward; she paid homage to the devastated city with Icarus, a 1963 oil painting. Amelia Peláez, who came from a generation of avant-garde Cuban artists intent on expressing their country’s anti-colonial identity through painting, participated with one of her trademark still-life works. German sculptress Genni Mucchi, known for her anti-war art and her courage as a dispatch rider for the anti-fascist Partisans in Milan, donated a terracotta Head of a Peasant Woman.

The twentieth century is largely undiscovered territory in Florence. The women participants of Artists for Florence, whom we spoke to or studied in our own quest for increased knowledge about the role these artists in contemporary Italy, brought us closer to the Florence that both Bargellini and Ragghianti envisioned—a city of the arts for yesterday, today and tomorrow.

All of these paintings and sculptures have been recently transferred to their “true home,” Florence’s newly inaugurated Museo Novecento, or Twentieth-Century Museum, a spin-off of Ragghianti’s original plan, that reached fulfilment in June 2014, after nearly half a century in the making. Five works by Titina Maselli, Antonietta Raphael and Carla Accardi have already been restored by the Advancing Women Artists Foundation (AWA) and chosen for permanent public display. (The AWA was founded by Jane Fortune in 2009, and it researches, restores and exhibits art by women in Florence). Yet it is our hope that the others will also receive ample recognition thanks to successive phases of the project, which include our newly published book When the World Answered: Florence, Women Artists and the 1966 Flood as well as an upcoming PBS television documentary, and the restoration and temporary exhibition of twenty eight more works to commemorate the flood’s fiftieth anniversary in 2016.

The Book
We began writing When the World Answered: Florence, Women Artists and the 1966 Flood in October 2010—just a year after the publication of Invisible Women: Forgotten Artists of Florence, the book in which we first highlighted the need to rediscover and reclaim works of art by women in Florentine museums, churches and storage facilities.

In response to Invisible Woman, a curator of Florence’s Civic Museums presented us with a list of over one hundred scarcely-known works of art by women—many of which were created by the artists we now affectionately refer to as ‘the Flood Ladies’. These women adhered to Futurism, Magic Realism, Pop Art and Abstractionism; their work is worthy of in-depth study. Yet, rather
Every small gesture helps!

One hundred percent of the authors’ royalties from the sales of *When the World Answered: Florence, Women Artists and the 1966 Flood* is donated to AWA and used for the restoration of art by women in Florence. The book is available at Amazon.com.

than to provide in-depth analysis, our intent, with *When the World Answered* is to tell these artists’ “lost stories”, for their stories must be salvaged along with their art if we are one day to understand the true significance of their contributions.

In our own small way, we have dreamed the same dream that Ragghianti so tirelessly fought for: to see the city resurge more beautifully than ever—a welcoming, ever-expanding home to art throughout the centuries. It is essential to pay tribute to the overwhelming, selfless response the city garnered from artists and art lovers all over the world after the 1966 flood. At that time, the world truly answered. May the world continue to answer time and time again, in Florence and for Florence, to protect the city’s past and to further its future.
Right: Conservator Rossella Lari restoring Maselli’s Truck

Below left: The upper logia at Florence’s Twentieth-century Museum featuring Raphael Mafai’s sculpture Maternity

Below right: Antonietta Raphael Mafai’s Maternity, Twentieth-century Museum, Florence

Above: Cimabue’s Christ, restored Santa Croce Complex, Florence

Right: The restoration of Carla Accardi’s Red-Green by Florentine restorer Rosella Lari
Money

Currency: The currency in Italy is the Euro (EUR; symbol €) = 100 cents. Notes are in denominations of €500, 200, 100, 50, 20, 10 and 5. Coins are in denominations of €2 and 1, and 50, 20, 10, 5, 2 and 1 cents.

ATMs are widely available throughout Italy. Look for the ‘Bancomat’ sign for machines with multilingual interfaces. Pick pocketing and petty thievery can be problematic in tourist areas, so take care to keep belongings secure and be vigilant when making cash withdrawals.

Credit Cards: MasterCard, American Express, Cirrus, Maestro and Visa are widely accepted.

Traveller’s cheques are widely accepted. To avoid additional exchange rate charges, travellers are advised to take traveller’s cheques in Euro, Pounds Sterling or US Dollars.

For more information please visit the Italian Tourist Board.
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