Jane Fortune is a woman whose deep love for Florence led to her championing the ‘invisible’ female painters of that city. And by finding a voice for those forgotten artists, she also found her own. Here we find out a little more about this extraordinary woman.

Tell us a little about Jane Fortune before being the Cultural Editor of The Florentine and founding the Advancing Women Artists Foundation (AWA). I lived in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania for 26 years and besides being a very involved mother, chauffeur and major cheerleader at the myriad activities my children were involved in, I was a dedicated volunteer at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA), the oldest American Art museum and art school in the United States. I was a member of PAFA’s Board of Trustees and was on the museum’s Women’s Board for many years, serving as its president for four years.

In 1992, while a Women’s Board member, I co-founded, organized and chaired an art fair called US Artists, Fine Art Show and Sale, to which the most prestigious dealers in American Art were invited to exhibit and sell their works. From the beginning, an integral part of US Artists was a program I founded for people with special needs. The goal was to make museum art more accessible to people with disabilities. It includes touch tours for the blind, ASL translators for the hearing impaired and docent-led tours of the show for visitors who are physically challenged. It was the first such program at any national arts fair. From the outgrowth of this program, the Women’s Board established PAFA’s first Special Needs Scholarship Endowment Fund for a student with disabilities to attend PAFA’s art school.

I was also the former volunteer chairman and CEO of the Deafness Research Foundation (DRF), which was in New York City. It is now called the Hearing Health Foundation and is dedicated, as DRF was, to the prevention of hearing loss and research aimed at finding its cure.

Have you always been interested in art?

My junior year abroad in Florence, Italy first inspired my serious, life-long love affair with art. Studying a piece in class, which started as just a picture in a book, and then having the opportunity to actually see it in the flesh made a profound impact on me. Viewing Michelangelo’s David in person was a moment I will never forget. (I do have to mention that during my year in Florence, not one female artist was mentioned).

Who is your favourite artist?

My favourite male artist is Italian Mannerist painter Jacopo Pontormo (1494-1557). I love his contorted, intertwined poses, swirling, elongated figures and his distorted perspective. His figures seem to float, without any concern for gravity. And his vivid colors are glorious! My favourite is his Visitation (1528-1530) in the Church of San Francesco e Michele in Carmignano, a town west of Florence. I love its intense, contrasting colors that glow, yellow, chartreuse, magenta, bright pink and sea foam green). And though somewhat unsettling, I love the two faces in the background staring at the viewer and how their features replicate those of the main characters. Pontormo’s works are simply magnificent!

My favourite female artist is Suor Plautilla Nelli (Florence, 1524-1588) She is the first recognized woman painter of Florence, yet she is virtually unknown in the art world. She was a Dominican nun and one of two women mentioned in Vasari’s Lives of Artists (1658): ‘And in the houses of gentlemen throughout Florence there are so many of her pictures, it would be tedious to attempt to speak of them.’ Thirteen years ago, I chanced upon a book about Nelli and when I asked Florentines about her, I found that no one was familiar with her. She fascinated me and I made a personal commitment to become her voice. Almost 430 years after her life, I would give her the voice she never fully had. I wanted to uncover the hidden side of Florence’s historical art scene and Nelli and other little-known works by women, visible.

In 2006, Nelli’s Lamentation with Saints, in the San Marco Museum’s large refectory became the first piece we restored.

Over the last nine years, we have restored five other paintings by Nelli as well as nine of her drawings! When we first discovered Nelli, only three of her works had been authenticated. This number included Lamentation with Saints, even though, according to Vasari, she had painted prodigiously. She has captured the heart and soul of anyone involved in the restoration of her works and has become our guiding force. The raw emotional power Nelli captures on canvas and her eye for the smallest details are gifts to the viewer. Her painterly hand tugs at my heart strings!

Why did you start the AWA?

The decision to support the restoration of Lamentation with Saints was the first step in my growing quest to protect and preserve forgotten works by women. In order to do this, I created the foundation with the mission of rediscovering a vital part of Florence’s forgotten cultural and creative heritage. Our goal is to identify, restore and exhibit art by women that’s hidden and languishing in Florence’s storerooms. Innumerable of works have been overlooked for centuries. Many are in need of restoration.

How does it feel to be restoring these ‘lost’ paintings by women artists?

Each time a piece is restored, it’s brought back to life. Finally, after centuries, it’s given its rightful place in Florence’s cultural history and exhibited on a museum wall.

What has been your best or favourite AWA project?

Besides any of Suor Plautilla Nelli’s paintings, I’d say that discovering Artemisia Gentileschi’s David and Bathsheba was particularly exciting. We restored it in 2008, after it had been...
Tell us about your association with The Florentine newspaper. How did that begin?

About ten years ago, my life partner Bob Hesse and I were having lunch with the then co-owner of The Florentine, and I was telling her that I get so many requests from friends coming to Florence, who ask what to see, where to eat, etc. She said, ‘Why don’t you write a newspaper column about these places that are special to you, and we will call it ‘Jane’s Gems’?’ (I still am writing it, once a month.) That column began my writing career with The Florentine. From these columns (which are a page in length) came my first book To Florence, Con Amore: 77 Ways to Love the City. From these columns (which are a page in length) came my first book To Florence, Con Amore: 77 Ways to Love the City. The unique thing about the column is that I’ve always had to write about whatever I’d like. The Florentine Press, part of The Florentine, has also designed and published my books.

Have you written a number of books. Which has been your favourite one to write, and why?

My dream and ultimate goal is to find a ‘space of their own’ in Florence. I’ve been talking about this for years. It’s not an easy goal, but it is an indispensable one. It would solve the city’s lack of space problem and give these historic women an artistic venue to call their own. I’m not necessarily talking about a museum – I simply mean a venue dedicated to the permanent public display of women’s art. It’d have to be a space that the state or city would be willing to lease, give or loan to AWA for this specific purpose, since the works we restore are public property. The sheer volume of paintings and sculptures in storage call for it!

Tell us about your latest restoration project.

The project is expected to be finished in the spring of 2016 and returned to the space of their own in Florence. I’ve been talking about this for years. It’s not an easy goal, but it is an indispensable one. It would solve the city’s lack of space problem and give these historic women an artistic venue to call their own. I’m not necessarily talking about a museum – I simply mean a venue dedicated to the permanent public display of women’s art. It’d have to be a space that the state or city would be willing to lease, give or loan to AWA for this specific purpose, since the works we restore are public property. The sheer volume of paintings and sculptures in storage call for it!

What area do you enjoy travelling to most? What is your favourite country? We love Istanbul and Southeast Asia, particularly Singapore and the Maldives. If you haven’t been to the Maldives, run there…don’t walk. I’d tell anyone to go before the islands disappear. They’re breathtakingly beautiful.

What has been your best travelling adventure?

Istanbul. With its minarets and the muezzins’ call to prayer, it’s a magical place where the East meets the West. Its layers of history unfold, much like the unpeeling of an onion. Being there is an extraordinary experience. The Greeks, the Persians, the Romans, and Venetians nutured its culture before the Ottomans took control for 500 years. Istanbul’s rich history can be revealed in every corner of the city. Think of its archaeological remains and monuments, like the Hagia Sophia and its dome, the Topkapi Palace, its mosque complexes, the Chora Church and its bedazzling mosaics. Then, there’s the Blue Mosque and museums like the Pera and the Istanbul Modern or the Sakip Sabanci Museum. There is nothing like Istanbul’s distinct skyline, its exotic spice bazaar with its fragrant, intensely colored spices and oh, so much more – it is a city that excites you at every turn!

Why do you love Italy so much?

I fell in love with Florence as soon as I stepped off the train at the Santa Maria Novella Station in Florence, in 1962. As I said before, I spent my junior year abroad there. I knew instinctively, at that very moment, that I had come home. That year changed my life – and when I left, I made a promise to myself that I would come back and give back to Florence, for it had given so much to me. At the time, of course, I had no idea just how I would do that. I truly fell in love with the city’s cultural heritage, its architecture, Renaissance art and its monuments. I was enchanted at the food, the glorious salmon pink sunsets, the people, the monasteries, refectories and cloisters filled with breathtaking beautiful frescoes, the palazzi, the Church of Santa Croce, the Medici… I could go on and on and on. Florence fills my soul with great joy and happiness and this is why I love it.

If you could pick your favourite archaeological site anywhere in the world that you have visited, what would it be and what makes it stand out for you? I’d say Ephesus and the House of the Virgin Mary. I love the house is described as a modest chapel made of stones. It dates back to the Apostolic Age and the space where the Virgin Mary was believed to have spent her last days. It’s a sacred and holy place and, the serenity of its interior is what stood out the most to me—it’s a place that makes one want to reflect and pray.

What do you like to read while you are travelling?

I usually read books about the place(s) we are visiting, so as to have an overview of the history, and particularly the art, there. I am always seeking out works of art by women in any city we visit! I also like to read mysteries set in the places we see.

Who is your favourite travel author? I do not have a favourite travel author, but I love books by Jason Goodwin, about Istanbul and Turkey, and his Inspector Yashim mysteries set in Istanbul. Christobel Kent also writes mysteries (Sandro Cellini series) set in Florence, as does Magdalen Naab in her Marshal Guarnacci series.

Both of these authors capture the essence of contemporary Florence. R.W.B. Lewis ‘ode to Florence’ is another wonderfully compelling book called The City of Florence: Historical Vistas and Personal Sightings (1995). Another classic is Mary McCarthy’s The Stones of Florence (1955). It’s her unique tribute to the city and she combines history, art and social observation. There are so many good books written about Florence; it is very difficult to select just a few! Since I need to do much research for my own books, I tend to read mysteries, for pleasure. I love to read and always have a book in my hands.
saw how difficult it was for them to interact, particularly in art museums. This was particularly true before the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990): Simple things were needed like having signers available for the deaf or placing descriptions next to the pictures in Braille, or providing entrance ramps and bathrooms to accommodate wheelchairs.

For almost every museum board I have sat on, I’ve tried to bring about changes aimed at making art accessible to everyone. After the ADA was passed, many of these issues were resolved, but, many buildings that have been declared historical landmarks, for example, are not completely compliant. There is a lot of work still to be done!

What would you say is your greatest achievement?
Raising two wonderful children whose giving spirits, values and ethics I am very proud of.

You have done many things in your life so far – what has been your best experience?
I have had several, but the best was meeting Bob Hesse. He and I have been together 25 years and without his encouragement and steadfast belief in me, I would never have been able to do what I am doing now. I wouldn’t have believed you, if you’d said to me ten years ago that I’d become the author of five books, two of which have been made into PBS documentaries for American Public Television. (Invisible Women, Forgotten Artists of Florence won an EMMY in 2013 and the latest PBS documentary, When the World Answered, premiered in Florence at the Odeon Theatre in October, and in Indianapolis on November 10).

If someone were to have told me that I’d become a driving force in restoring unseen works of art by women in Florence (where I am known as ‘Indiana Jane’), I would have answered: ‘Who exactly is this woman you’re talking about?’ Another profound experience was when I was awarded an honorary degree from Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana, becoming a Doctor of Humane Letters, for my philanthropic contributions.

Tell us something we don’t know about Jane Fortune.
I was a shy person, who always sat in the very last row of the classroom, hoping not to be called on for I was so scared I would give the wrong answer and look foolish. So I never spoke up very much (I listened) and was terrified to speak in front of groups. My first book was published when I was 65 years old (I am now 73). From that moment on, in order to champion these forgotten women artists, I had to speak up. And, I love it! In the process of being the voice for these invisible women artists, I also found my own voice. These days, just try and take the microphone away from me!

What is next for you?
There are more ‘invisible’ works to find, more books to write, more restorations to be done and more documentaries to be created. I want to continue as long as I can, to make these ‘invisible’ works by women artists, ‘visible’, so these women can be celebrated. We need to finally reclaim both their past and future.

Jane with co-author, Linda Falcone, who is also the Director of the AWA in Florence.