

Trip to Italy
February 19 to April 1, 2003
By
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This trip was very different from the others I have taken in the past. Although some of the places and people I visited were the same, it was obvious before I left that we were about to go to war in Iraq and that this trip would probably be colored by that event. I therefore contacted the New Orleans daily newspaper, *The Times-Picayune*, to see if they would welcome an op-ed piece on the topic of the reactions of the Italian people to the war, especially since I was scheduled to meet with some professors of political science at the University of Florence. They agreed to consider it, but the piece I wrote when I got home was entirely too long and eventually ended up covering the greater part of two pages in the independent weekly, *The National Catholic Reporter*, on May 16th. I had seen much more than I wrote and had talked to more than just Italians, and, because of a confrontation in my cousin's kitchen on the weekend before I left Italy, was forced to consider the topic of what constitutes a "just war". I won't re-visit that debate here, but if anyone is interested they can go to the NCR website, ncronline.org, to read the essay entitled: "America Through European Eyes". They may find it interesting.

In any event, I got to Rome on the morning of February 20th, slept through most of the day and on the 21st drove to Florence by way of Orvieto. While there I stopped to see Signorelli's recently restored "Last Judgment", only a portion of which is

usually reproduced in art books. It is magnificent, and it is no wonder that Michelangelo studied it carefully before painting his own version on the back wall of the Sistine Chapel in Rome many years later.

I stayed in a convent in Florence for four nights because I wanted to visit the carnival (Mardi Gras) celebration in Viareggio on the seacoast, before going to Venice the following week, and I knew I could get accommodations there for half to one third the price of a hotel room. These celebrations go on for weeks prior to Ash Wednesday, and Viareggio's is the most similar to the one in New Orleans in the way the floats are designed and constructed. Viareggio's however, is more political than mythical and allegorical, and I was surprised to see that Prime Minister Berlusconi was depicted as a liar and a thief—probably because he is the owner of most of the communications outlets in Italy and is currently being tried for corruption and conflicts of interest. (Speak of impeachment!) The most interesting float, however, was not political. It took the myth of Athena emerging full-grown from the head of Zeus and adapted it to show a huge head of Zeus opening up and the person emerging as the symbol of wisdom and power in the modern world to be, not Athena, but Bill Gates!

While in Florence I also re-visited the Casa Buonarrotti, Michelangelo's childhood home, to see not only the two marble bas-reliefs he made while still in his teens, but also to see the painting which his grandson commissioned in his honor for the grand salon by the most prominent woman artist of the Renaissance, Artemisia

Gentilleschi. I also re-visited the Palazzo del Marchese Fossi on the Via Dei Benci near Santa Croce, where I'd lived as a student forty-nine years ago. The two-storey apartment off the courtyard was still there but the façade facing the street had been cleaned to reveal several frescos from the late Renaissance to the early Baroque era. (The Palazzo was built in the 13th century.) After also re-visiting the Medici Chapels to see Michelangelo's incredible statues honoring the tombs of the two least important members of the Medici family, I left to go to Milan to see two monumental works of Leonardo da Vinci that had recently become available to public view.

On February 26th I took the Milan Metro to the "Sportello" (racetrack)—I had to walk a full kilometer from the station to get there since I hate driving in big cities in Italy. Leonardo's Horse is a huge bronze statue, 8 feet tall and weighing over 80 tons—the largest bronze equestrian statue in the world. Leonardo had intended to cast it in a single mold (a feat that is still impossible today) but his clay model was used by French archers for target practice when they invaded Milan in 1494, leaving nothing but rubble behind. The story goes that they thought it was a "Trojan horse" designed as a secret weapon! So for 500 years all we knew of his horse was the story of its destruction and his designs and sketches for the project as commissioned by Ludovico Sforza to be placed on the grounds of his palazzo. About 30 years ago an American pilot named Charles Dent became so fascinated by the story that he set up a foundation to raise money so that the "Sforza Monument" could finally see the light of day. A Japanese-American sculptor named Nina

Akamuro (the same one responsible for the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, DC, I believe) was hired to research the project and more than 25 years after the original proposal, the horse was cast in the United States and donated to the city of Milan as a gift from the people of the United States of America.

What is fascinating about this horse is Leonardo's ingenious solution to an ever-befiling problem: how to rest the entire weight of a bronze horse on two of its four legs. Since antiquity, most monuments of a much smaller size would raise one foot only, or would use a disguised tree stump or other device to support the weight of a horse rearing up on its hind legs. Leonardo's solution was to lift one leg on opposite sides of the animal, eliminating any need for additional support. Nevertheless, no one, not even Leonardo, was sure this solution would work with an 80-ton behemoth.

Well, it does! When I saw it, all I could do was clap! Not only does it prance magnificently in its own courtyard, but it was undoubtedly cast from the very mind of Leonardo! It resembles every horse that he ever painted or sketched throughout his lifetime. So, Bravo! To Dent and to Akamuro—and to the American people who funded it! Leonardo would have loved it!

The next day I went to see Leonardo's "Last Supper" (Il Cenacolo) at Santa Maria delle Grazie, whose restoration had only recently been completed. The Church had been bombed during World War II and it had taken over 50 years for the project to

get underway and finished. Unfortunately, not all the expertise and ingenuity of its restorers could make up for the fact that Leonardo's original fresco was just not suited to the cold, damp weather of Milan, nor was his inventive uses of different varnishes to fix the colors a success. It was not until the sixteen century that he and others would attempt to use oil paint on canvas for wall-paintings on the scale that the Venetians were just beginning to use extensively. This fresco, so famous for its many popular renditions, is evocative and magnificent, but still a ruin.

That same day I drove to Sirmione on Lago di Garda (Lake Garda), a beautiful resort town on a peninsula that juts out into the lake, dating back to the time of the Roman poet Catullus. While there I took pictures of the lovely 13th century Rocca (fortress) and its moat complete with kayakers paddling their way toward the lake. That evening I ended up in Vicenza just outside of Venice. While there I visited several buildings designed by Palladio: the Teatro Olimpico (Olympic Theater) based on a Greco-Roman pattern; his Basilica; the four-sided Casa Rotonda and his Palazzo Nini. Palladio not only influenced Thomas Jefferson when he built his home at Monticello, but anyone who has ever seen the Jefferson Monument in Washington DC would immediately recognize the debt it too owes to this outstanding Renaissance architect. On March 1st I went to Venice.

The streets and canals of Venice were so crowded with Carnival revelers that walking through some areas of the city took an hour instead of just a few minutes. In fact I could hardly move at all in some places, and I occasionally ended up

jammed against a wall or surrounded by people so closely packed it was like being in a New York subway during rush hour. The same situation occurred when I attended the “Parade of Costumes” on the pavilion at 5PM in the Piazza San Marco. Since there were no raised locations or bleachers for viewers, paid or not, and not even the video screens that showed the costumers on the pavilion that had been used two years ago, it was literally impossible to see anything until the participants came down and roamed through the crowds. Then the trick was to take pictures without someone else’s head or other body part getting in the way. Nevertheless the experience was frequently worth it—especially if one found a good spot where the costumers were likely to pass by. Eventually I managed to take several hundred rather good pictures all over the city, but only because I was determined not to waste the visit. Unless one is willing to pay \$400.00+ to go to a costume ball and rent a costume as well (another \$100.00+), the only way to “participate” in this event is to act like a “paparazzo”.

New Orleans is very different. Parades go on for several weeks with bleachers and sidewalks/median strips lined with people for 10-15 miles at a stretch so everyone gets a chance to see and to catch “throws” and dubloons, and tickets to balls are either complimentary or sold at a nominal \$100.00 fee with no costumes necessary, just formal attire. And every “Krewe” or Mardi Gras club parade and/or ball has a unique theme for the year as well. So every parade (50-60 in a season just in New Orleans alone, with many more in the suburbs) and Krewe is a separate show for the public, with lots of crowds but no “mobs”. And while Venice is very 17th century

baroque and formal in its presentation but difficult to experience, New Orleans is very mythological and popular, with Krewes and parades usually named after Greek and Roman Gods and Goddesses (Orpheus, Bacchus, Endymion, Rex, Zulu, Iris, etc.) but with broad participation by every class, race, gender and region of the city (even Bourbon Street has a Gay Parade on Shrove Tuesday).

But I digress. While in Venice I visited the Ca' D'Oro (Golden House) one of the most beautiful examples of Italian Gothic architecture on the Grand Canal, and the Sansovino Library and the Museo Correr to see some of the marvelous paintings by Tintoretto, Veronese and others that adorn their walls. I re-visited San Giorgio Maggiore (by Palladio) to view the Last Supper by Tintoretto. I also took a vaporetto (ferry) to the island of Murano to visit the glass factories which make the chandeliers, mosaics, millefiori, and glassware for which Venice is so famous. On March 6th I returned to Florence.

The following day I called two professors at the University of Florence and made appointments to see them the following Monday. Meanwhile I visited the church of Santa Maria Novella to see some of the most important art work of the Renaissance: Masaccio's "Trinity" (one of the first true examples of three-dimensional perspective in a two-dimensional medium—with the first realistic portrayal of a middle-aged Madonna, ever), Brunelleschi's nude "Christ on the Cross" (!), and Giotto's ground-breaking Crucifix. Later I re-visited Masaccio's series of frescoes in the Brancacci Chapel of Santa Maria del Carmine depicting "The Tribute Money",

“Adam and Eve” and “St. Peter Curing the Sick with his Shadow”—all of which served to school generations of Florentine artists in the technique of using three-dimensional perspective and the realistic re-construction of the human body. Without Masaccio there would not, could not, have been a Michelangelo or a Leonardo.

On Sunday, March 9th I drove to Sant’ Andrea in Percussina a few miles outside of Florence to re-visit the house of Machiavelli. On my last visit (2001), I had taken several pictures of this house and the tavern opposite for the book I recently submitted to Penn State Press, but all 47 rolls of film I took on the entire trip had been lost with my luggage when I left Italy. This time I was determined I would not let any of my film out of my sight throughout my journey! So, I still have the picture of the corridor where Machiavelli changed into his courtly robes to “commune with the ancients” and his study where he wrote *The Prince*, *The Discourses*, and many of his famous letters to friends and other correspondents throughout Italy, and of the tavern where he played “tric-trac” with the farmers and merchants of his village. Machiavelli truly knew how to blend in with the local population.

Later that day I re-visited San Gimignano, the small hill-top town with medieval towers in varying degrees of decapitation. After the Crusades when the knights came off their country estates to live in the towns, they didn’t leave their warring habits behind them. So whenever one family would defeat another in battle they would chop-off the top of the tower of the losing family. There are over thirty of

these towers left in the town today. I was also especially eager to see Ghirlandaio's (teacher of Michelangelo) fresco of Santa Fina in the Cathedral, so lovingly featured in the movie "Tea with Mussolini" (starring Lily Tomlin, Maggie Smith, Judy Dench and Cher). I was not disappointed.

I went early to the Via Laura offices of the University on Monday morning to thank one of the professors there who had been good enough to write a letter of recommendation for me for a Fulbright grant I had applied for last year and didn't get. (There were only two openings for the entire country and the competition was fierce!) He introduced me to another professor who had attended one of the same classes I had taken forty-nine years ago when I was a student there. We spoke for over an hour reminiscing about our mutual experiences and then went to attend a lecture on the re-structuring of the European Union by a member of the Constitutional Council. (It reminded me of all the problems we had had at our Constitutional Convention in 1789 trying to set up the United States of America.)

Afterwards I visited the Director of the Jesuit Gonzaga University in Florence program whom I hadn't seen in a number of years, and at 6:30 PM I went back to the University of Florence to visit another professor. All three of these individuals (except for the colleague from 1954) had written letters for me, and I owed them these visits to express my personal thanks.

The next day I visited the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi to see the fresco of the Journey of the Magi by Benozzo Gozzoli depicting various members of the Medici family, and the courtyard where Michelangelo had studied sculpture while living at the court of Lorenzo the Magnificent. I then walked to the Piazza della Signoria (the Palazzo Vecchio) to take a picture of the bronze memorial built into the pavement of the piazza marking the spot where the Dominican monk, Savonarola, had been burned at the stake in 1498. He had opposed the notorious Pope Alexander VI (Borgia) after setting up the most democratic system of government for Florence, the likes of which had not been seen since ancient Athens. I also re-visited Machiavelli's office in the Palazzo (which was and still is the city hall) where, following Savonarola's demise, he had years served as Second Secretary to the Florentine Republic for fifteen years.

On March 12th I went to the Uffizi to re-visit the most extravagant collection of famous art anywhere in the world. I spent four hours talking myself hoarse telling a Houston businessman and his family whom I met in the ticket line, as much about the artists and their works as I could remember. We are still corresponding about that visit by e-mail. The next day I said good-bye to the nuns at the convent once again, and reluctantly left the glorious city of Florence.

I arrived in Arezzo around 11:30 AM, visited the frescoes of Piero della Francesca and searched for the back of the church which had a crooked column built into the external side of the rear apse—as though the medieval builders had begun to carve a

column that was too long for the space but used it anyway rather than waste the stone. I had always thought this a funny sight and wanted to take a picture to commemorate it. After lunch I drove over the mountains to the hill town of Urbino near the Adriatic coast, the site of one of the most renowned palazzos built in the Renaissance by one of the most colorful condottieri (military commanders) of that period.

The next morning I visited the Palazzo Ducale designed by the Dalmatian architect Luciano Laurana for Federico da Montefeltro in the 15th century. (At that time the Dalmatian Coast was mostly under Venetian rule.) Federico's study, lined with three-dimensional appearing intarsia wood paneling depicting his desk, writing and musical instruments, gardens, birds, and even a portrait of himself, is so famous that the entire ceiling with adjacent molding was donated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City where it is on display at the Cloisters. But seeing the major portion of that room in its original setting is truly awe-inspiring.

Federico's portrait in oils is also on display in this palazzo depicting him as a true Renaissance man, wearing the armor of a knight while reading a book, and accompanied by his young son, Guidobaldo: a scholar, a family man and a soldier. If one looks closely one can also see that he had had a nick cut into the bridge of his nose after he had lost an eye in battle, so that he could still see the enemy with his one remaining eye! His library, the largest of any holding in the Renaissance, including that of Cosimo dei Medici, was donated to the Vatican after his death and

served as the basis for that institution's extensive collection of ancient and medieval manuscripts. Another portrait of him by Piero della Francesca stands side by side with that of his wife, Battista Sforza, in the Uffizi.

Later I visited the house where the artist Raffaello (Raphael) was born. Unfortunately he had left Urbino while still a young man to study with Perugino and then on to Florence and Rome (the Raffaello Stanze in the Vatican), so that only one very early and not terribly good painting of his is on display there. Everything else is just a copy of his later work or something commissioned from far inferior artists much later on. Nevertheless the house is rather charming and worth visiting.

The next morning (March 15) I left Urbino to go to Rome. However it started to snow so hard on the road down the mountain that I missed a turn and found myself going north towards Perugia instead south towards Spoleto and had to put off visiting that city until later in the week. I reached the Carpe Diem Golf Club on the outskirts of Rome at mid-afternoon and settled into the time-share condo I had traded for one of my weeks in Key West. The next day was a Sunday so after Mass I drove to the Rome Metro station and took the train to Ostia Antica, which had once served as ancient Rome's port. I rambled through the ruins taking pictures and returned to the condo exhausted.

On Mondays in Rome most museums are closed so I spent the morning washing clothes and the afternoon driving to Tivoli looking for batteries for my camera, and

a place to check my e-mail. I had been to the Villa D'Este and Hadrian's Villa in Tivoli on several other occasions so I did not stop to revisit these attractions. That night I stayed up until 2:30 AM to hear President Bush give his ultimatum to Saddam Hussein, and the next day I took the Metro once again to Vatican City to see the Pinacoteca (Art Museum).

I did not re-visit the Sistine Chapel or the Raphael Stanze this time either. Instead I saw Leonardo's unfinished painting of St. Jerome, Raphael's masterpiece, The Transfiguration, and Merlozzo da Forli's famous series of frescoes depicting angel musicians (everyone has seen multiple copies of these on Christmas cards!). There was a remarkable painting of St. Helen (the mother of Constantine) by the Venetian painter Veronese, but the bookshop did not have a copy nor was I able to find it anywhere else.

The next day I took the Metro again to the Roman Forum where I took multiple pictures of the Senate House (Curia), the Temple of Vesta, the Golden Milepost from which all roads throughout the Empire were measured, the altar where Julius Caesar's body was publicly cremated after his assassination (Romans still commemorate the event by daily placing bouquets of flowers on the altar), the Palatine Hill where the rulers of the city used to have their palaces (Livia's, the wife of Caesar Augustus, is still not open to visitors), and then I walked to Nero's enormous Domus Aurea (Golden House) of which only a small portion has been excavated and restored.

During the lunch hour while waiting to enter the building, I made the acquaintance of one of the women plasterers who was working on the restoration of this huge cave-like structure that used to be Nero's home, and she invited me to take pictures of the entire crew dressed in the white billowing pants they wore to protect their clothing. The Colosseum had been built on top of Nero's man-made lake in front of the palace by one of his successors, Vespasian Flavius, in an attempt to erase all memory of Nero's hated reign. Tiberius had even dumped mud and cement into the structure so no one would ever see it again. But during the Renaissance, some enterprising artists and marble hunters looking for items with which to decorate the homes of noble families and popes after their return from Avignon, broke into the ceiling of the structure and removed as much as they could find. And in the last 25 years archeologists have painstakingly removed much of the debris obscuring the building so that, perhaps in a hundred years, the entire structure will be open once again to the public.

The next day I visited the charming city of Spoleto, site of the "Festival of Two Worlds" founded by Gian-Carlo Menotti with its counterpart at Charleston, South Carolina. Two of the main venues of this music and arts festival in Spoleto, the Roman theatre and the medieval courtyard of the Cathedral, are open to view at all times, as is the aqueduct crossing a tributary of the Tiber River. The 14th century Rocca here is only open during regular visiting hours for Italian museums.

On March 22nd I drove south, past the city of Naples, along the treacherously narrow, winding Amalfi Coast road to the resort city of Positano, perched on a cliff overlooking the sea. I didn't think I was going to make it. Twice I found myself facing a huge blue tourist bus with a mountain on one side and a steep cliff straight down into the sea on the other. Each time I stopped to try to figure out how I was going to make it around the bus, and each time a long line of cars behind me beeped their horns furiously until one or another of the drivers got out and served as my personal traffic guard, directing me and the bus on the best way to squeeze around each other. I don't advise this technique to anyone who doesn't speak Italian because the epithets are not always civil, especially towards one who does not understand the language. I always smiled sweetly, however, asked "aiutami, per piacere", and some kind soul was always bound to respond. Maybe it was my gray hair!

This week in Positano was my second time-share trade, and the four-star room with a balcony was a delight. The restaurant at the resort served delicious meals at a reasonable price and they allowed me to leave most of my belongings in the room while I took trips into southern Italy over the next few days. The next morning I took the much safer long way around the Amalfi peninsula to the ancient Greek city of Paestum. I had been there two years earlier, but of course, none of those pictures survived, so I took more of them this time and these did make it home safely. One of the antiquities in the museum I was not permitted to photograph because of the flash on my camera, was a Greek tomb painting called "The Plunger" (or Diver)

signifying a soul “plunging” into eternity. Another I would have liked to take was a Lucanian tomb painting of a mythological animal with the head of a horse and the body of a fish. (The Lucanians were a native Italian tribe who chased out the Greeks and later surrendered the seaport to the Romans.) When I mentioned it to the museum director he refused to believe it existed until I showed it to him! Nor was there a picture of it in any of the museum’s guidebooks! However, the major Greek temples and the ruins of the homes and places of business, etc., were as spectacular as ever.

On March 24th I left Positano and drove to Foggia, near the Adriatic. I registered at the hotel there and then drove to Castelluccio Valmaggiore to see if I could find my grandfather’s birth certificate at the town hall. The Falco family that I had found on my earlier trip greeted me warmly and introduced me to the town clerk. With only his citizenship papers stating his age as 32 in February of 1917, and an entry on the passenger lists of immigrants at Ellis Island indicating he had come from Castelluccio (there are three similarly named towns in Italy), I knew I was taking a chance. But I also knew that Italians of every generation were named after their paternal grandparents (I am named after my grandmother, Maria Josephine), and his first son was Giovanni and his first daughter was Rosina, therefore my grandfather Giuseppe (Joseph) had to have been born to a Giovanni and Rosina Falco, around the year 1884/5. Within 30 minutes the lovely clerk was happy to announce that she had indeed found a Giuseppe di Giovanni Falco born in March of 1884! (In February of 1917 when he became a citizen he would have been one month

short of his 33rd birthday.) She Xeroxed the page of the birth records for me and made me a birth certificate to take home with me. Since it is highly unlikely that another Giuseppe di Giovanni was born in another Castelluccio in 1884, I think I've found him!

The next day I drove to Bari, stopping first to see the octagonal shaped Castel del Monte built in the 13th century by Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor, and after lunch, the 11th century Romanesque cathedral of Bisceglia built by a Falco di Giovanni (!). I arrived in Bari in late afternoon. A nice hotel worker on his way home drove me to the dangerous "Old City" so I could visit the Basilica of Saint Nicholas to see the tomb of Santa Claus once again.

On March 26th I drove south to see two of my favorite small towns: Alberbello with its famous "trulli" or conical houses with mystical symbols painted on their roofs, and Locorotondo (round place) or circular city painted white with all of its narrow medieval streets tracing a circular pattern. In Alberobello I bought some hand made linens to replace those that were in the luggage lost by the airline in 2001. In Locorotondo I saw a pair of traditional very large cloth dolls hanging across the narrow streets depicting old women with their shopping or sewing baskets. When I asked a few of the residents what they signified, no one could give me an answer except to say that they were always hung during the Lenten season.

I then drove a circular route down to the outskirts of Taranto (Tarentum in Latin, not too far from the ancient Greek city of Sybaris, where, according to legend, a rival Greek army defeated the Sybarites around 500 BC by playing music to confuse their war horses who had been trained to dance for certain civic festivals!), then up through the dark and rugged mountains of Basilicata past the city of Potenza so I could find a direct route back to the sea and Positano. The next day I took the bus into town, took pictures and just enjoyed the view.

On March 28th an Italian businessman who was staying at the same hotel offered to drive me to Herculaneum and back so we could both view that ancient city (he for the first time!)—the sister city to Pompeii which had also been covered in ash and lava by Vesuvius in 79AD. Needless to say, I jumped at the chance of going without having to drive that hated Amalfi coast road again. He had been a driving instructor in the Italian army and was able to do things with his car I never would have tried. Unlike me, he did not once find it necessary to ask anyone to help him maneuver around those ever-present tourist buses. On several occasions I just shut my eyes!

Some areas of Herculaneum were still closed to visitors, and others were just open on Saturdays and Sundays by reservation only, so we did not get to see those either. Nevertheless what we did see was spectacular enough, and the pictures he took with his wide-angled lens proved to be a lot better than mine. (He sent me copies a month after I returned to the U.S., and I sent him some of mine.)

The next day I drove to Paternopoli to visit my grandmother's family once again, including those whose pictures I had taken two years earlier but had to take once again for the Barbieri family here in the U.S. This time I stayed in the home of Zio Paolo Troisi and his daughter Elisa who arranged a spectacular feast for me and the rest of the family on Sunday, March 30th. We also visited with Elena Natale and her son Raffaele's family, and her daughter Rina and her husband Alfonso di Rienzo, and even found the time to drive to Avellino to re-visit the home of Paolo, Jr. and his family. We also visited the new dental surgery office being built by Paolo, Jr. in a new section of Avellino.

Before I left Paternopoli I found Grandmother Filomena's birthplace once again. It is a tiny stone house with two rooms on the main street and a third room down below facing a back street (formerly used to house farm animals). The house is still in ruins from the 1980 earthquake because the current owners did not feel the need to spend the money to restore it—even with government assistance! I asked Alfonso to try to find out what it would cost to buy and restore it. The current owners would have to apply for the government subsidy since only Italian citizens are eligible. If and when I find out anything I will let family members here know in case anyone in addition to myself is interested.

On March 31st I gave my old winter coat to Zio Paolo to give to charity then drove to Rome, and on April 1st I took the plane back to New Orleans.

