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## Elizabeth Wicks – An Art Restoration Master From Florence

Each and everyday, thousands of residents, tourist, and art lovers alike, pass through Italy's churches, museums, and galleries. All contain immaculate spectacles of artwork, collected from the monumental historical periods of the nation. Not all the works, though, have had an easy time keeping their beauty. There are countless numbers of paintings and sculptures damaged from weather, floods, or human destruction. In these instances, restoration is need to preserve these tokens, and women like Elizabeth Wicks, ensures that these pieces will back on display.

Elizabeth's studio is located on via dei Benci, nestled inside Palazzo Mellini- Fossi only a few steps from the radiant Piazza Santa Croce. Her studio is rather small in size, but houses projects that are larger than life itself. This small space has seen the presences like the Madonna of the Innocents, The Death of Saint Joseph, and the Deposed Christ. Despite the size, Wicks has the perfect amount of space for small to large projects, all being looked down upon by the ceiling frescoes, and illuminated by a sunlight peering through her large window. Wicks work consists of the curation of art, so it is primarily restoration of paintings, polychrome sculpture lines, wall paintings, paintings on canvas and table, all ranging from ancient to contemporary. These projects are led by the superintendence when it id done for public commissions, like churches or museum, and then for private clients.

"In my work I diagnose the causes of the degradation of the work, formulate a project to make the restoration work and then I carry out the restoration" Wick's love of art and its history stemmed into even generations of her family. "My father was quite a well-known a painter and an art history professor and my mother majored in art history at University, and I grew up in the artist's colony of New Hope, in Bucks County Pennsylvania. " Her career was certainly destiny. Wick's first arrival in Florence was with a study abroad program during her Junior Year with Syracuse University. Upon her arrival, she never heard of art restoration, and especially its impact in the Florentine community. "I was amazed by the love and care which had gone into rescuing the works of art. I think I decided then that I wanted to try restoration as a career". After six months, she returned back to the states to finish her degree, and to begin her career as an art conservator in Washington DC. After being awarded a fellowship to come to Florence for a year to begin her master's degree in Italian Renaissance Art History. "I ended up staying and doing a three year graduate degree in art conservation. I originally planned on moving to Australia after that, and I still haven't gotten there yet!".

The commissions Wicks works on spans far past paintings, but between a team including two other Italian women, they specialize in works ranging from easel paintings, frescos, wooden, terracotta, marble statuary, and contemporary works in an array of media. Over time, Wicks

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found herself specialized in murals on canvas. “My work has mostly been in easel paintings and frescos. I have combined this knowledge with my specialization into wall painting restoration, so I have consulted on several projects in Broadway Theaters in New York, including the New Amsterdam Theatre, The Belasco, and Radio city Music hall”.

One of Wick’s most remarkable projects was restoration of pivotal work of art in the parish of Santa Lucia sul Prato. Although it isn’t a Duomo, it has a strong community of dedicated parishioners who gravely support the restoration of its art. Included in the revival of Santa Lucia’s masterpieces is the restoration of a 17th century paper- machè statue of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. “A work which needs restoration is like a patient undergoing treatment: there’s a diagnostic phase in which we research the paintings history, assess the problems it has and decide on the best treatment” Diagnostic tests include x-raying the painting, photographing it under ultraviolet and infrared light, and microscopic analysis. With Mary, Wicks made the decision to begin with a simple cleaning test, which soon graduated into to the slow removal of layers of repaints, leading to the discover the original layer. The Madonna project was concentrated by not only Wicks, but the women of the church who pray to the statue. Upon its competition, they persisted to keep at the high altar. The Mary helps them pray contently.

Restoration has a greater impact than visual aesthetic repair, but it mends the hearts and spirits of the people who admire them so dearly. With this in mind, it is critical to be specific and delicate in the restoration process. Clear diagnostics and making decision on how much work should be done, in order to not permanently damage the art piece.

“The actual restoration process usually starts with structural work, like working on the back of the painting to consolidate damaged areas of the canvas, repairing tears and holes in the canvas, restoring the wooden stretcher, applying an edge lining or a new canvas to help support the painting, and wood restoration in the case of a panel. The final phase is surface work, which can involve cleaning off successive layers of grime, partial or total removal of oxidized varnish layers and repaints, retouching of losses and the application of a protective surface coating”. In matters like this, it is crucial to undergo maintenance and close observation of the progression in the work, including if further steps should be taken in the restoration process.

Especially if the original has been attempted multiple times to be restored, it can become a rather difficult challenge. “This aspect is tricky and it depends mainly on how old the overpaint is and whether it covers original or not. The context of the painting is important as well” Wicks is trusted by the community to restore the art works in a manner that reflects their history and conceptualization. “For a piece that is going back in to a home or into a church, the readability of the work, its visual integrity, may take precedence over a more archeological reconstruction of the work, which may expose large areas of missing or damaged paint. If the original layer is

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missing or extremely damaged it may be preferable to keep the overpaint, as it too has become part of the history of the painting”.

Most of Wick’s commission are for works of art in churches and museums, as well as private clients. The funding comes for the Italian government, or trusting sponsors. Large projects involve a team of technicians, photographers, and art historians from the Italian Ministry for Cultural Heritage. Restoration can be a competitive field, considering that it requires a particular person to be efficient and precise as possible, but there is a high need in the city of Florence, given it is an art capital. ”Being an art restorer in Florence is like being an actor in London or New York-it is incredibly competitive but also incredibly stimulating, in the sense that here we have the top professionals in the business at a global level. There is much that needs restoration here, but the funding for projects, or reaching potential sponsors, is often a challenge. ”

In the past years, Wicks has been commissioned to restore several paintings for the Museum of the Opera del Duomo and the Innocenti Museum, both of which reopened after extensive renovations. “For the Innocenti my favorite project was the restoration and research of what was thought to be their earliest painting, the Madonna of the Innocents. During the course of the restoration we actually discovered another painting underneath the surface”. This project was recorded entirely, and will soon be released in a feature documentary, The Innocents of Florence. The project is funded by the Innocenti Museum and by Jane Fortune, founder and President of AWA, the Advancing Women Artists Foundation.

AWA has shown interest in Wicks, and have even sponsored one of her latest projects: a two year restoration of a large altarpiece created in 1767 by Violante Siries Cerroti to be put in the church of Santa Maria Maddalena de Pazzi. The altar was damaged in the 1966 Flood, and later became both the subject of a book Wicks co-authored, The Lady Who Paints, and a short documentary on its conservation.

“This year I opened an exciting new chapter in my life” In March, Wicks completed a restoration of an altarpiece on canvas from the church of San Paolino in Florence, the Death of St. Joseph. It was only of the only three pieces of Tuscan art sponsored by Banca Inesa San Paolo, and to be presented at the Royal Palace of Venaria until September.

Once this project finished, Wicks began teaching “Conservation of Contemporary Art and Mixed Media” to 4th year students of the 5 year conservation degree program at the University of Viterbo. “The students have been focusing on restoring works by self taught artist Bonaria Manca, a Sardinian native who began to paint when in her sixties, who is now 93, and who decorated her entire house in Tuscania with wall and ceiling paintings, as well as paintings on canvas and mosaics. The work is exciting and stimulating!”

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Wicks has contributed far more than aesthetic preservation to the city of Florence, but her work has manifested into spiritual and cultural preservation as well. The city identifies with its art: the paintings, food, and architecture, making Florence whole a dimensional work of art itself, peering with opportunity. Florence has given me a career, a child, my family. It's given me beauty of art, the "bono" food and discovering this world of Tuscany, has given me my life". Florence has lured her since a young age, even before her feet touched the cobblestone. "I remember when I was fourteen and I was in the library at school back in the states. I was looking at a book, and I saw the Primavera for the first time. I'd never seen such a beautiful thing. This sounds corny, but I just had a feeling, I felt a connection to it. I wanted to be where this painting was." As time goes, this sensation became a reality, and an exceptional one. Wicks is a part of Florence that keeps the city's reputation alive. She contributes to its magnificence.

Currently in progress in her studio, Wicks is reconstructing the Madonna with Saints by Bastiano Mainardi (tempera and oil on panel, 1500, Church of Santa Maria Campi) The painting has been flooded twice, but an exciting discovery has been made underneath Madonna's right arm. In studio, is also the statue of the deposed Christ by il Volterrano (circa 1680, polychromed stucco, Church of Santa Lucia in Florence), which is the only known sculpture created by the artist. "In our restoration, 12 layers of overpaint, wax, glue and dirt were found covering the original surface".

These discoveries is what Wicks finds to be exhilarating in her profession "I like this sense of discovery because every work hides secrets and there are inevitably some beautiful discoveries, sometimes even not beautiful, but there is always a process of discovery during the cleaning". Restoring and priding the work of an artistic legend has its pressures, but there is a feeling of immaculacy that humbles Wicks. "Working on a fresco of the 300 in a church in Florence and thinking that I find myself on a scaffolding exactly in the same place of the artist many centuries ago, this for me is a great emotion. "

While Florence has contributed her success in all paths of life, career, family, and aptitude, she has left an impact that preserves Florence's greatness. "I hope to have given with this work that I help to maintain and safeguard the beauties of Florence, then now that I teach, I hope to pass on this respect and the ability to restore future generations". She sees past the current moment in time, knowing that more unfortunate events are prone to happen, and there needs to be future generations of people knowledgeable and competent to carry on her legacies. Elizabeth Wicks made it through the steep competition of the art restoration career industry. She is accomplishing her dreams of preserving sacred spaces of the Florentine community. She sees that each piece is significant, and that no matter what damage has been done, all works deserve to be appreciated by all, even if there is a scratch or two.

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