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Giandomenico Semeraro
Florence the rooms of the art
From Masaccio to the Macchiaioli

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**FLORENCE
THE ROOMS OF ART
from Masaccio to the Macchiaioli**

Historical Markers of Artists' Studios and Houses along the Streets



I have seen many artist's studios over the years, and I find them to be among the most extraordinary places of the world. They are extraordinary, or rather beyond the ordinary, for more than one reason.

The first reason obviously refers to the fact that works of art are created in those workshops or botteghe, as they were called in the past. Works of art are the most remarkable documents of mankind; they are the direct evidence of man's passions and strengths, his fragility in the face of life and death, and his passion for the divine.

Works of art come to life in these actual laboratories – magical and literally marvelous spaces that mirror the personality of the people who set them up and live within them. These people are not geniuses of some romantic lineage but human beings in flesh and blood who therefore, according to what they do, can be tidy, at times extremely tidy, or conversely messy, at times extremely messy.

The most appalling studio that I have ever seen was Francis Bacon's: a real pile of garbage on the sides of a space where masterpieces were born. Constantin Brancusi's atelier was quite different. It was a work of art in itself that constantly evolved through the process of creating sculpture and through the unceasing movement within the sculptures themselves.

The most gleaming? Fabrizio Plessi's studio in Venice, as polished as a living room.

The smallest? The one Bruno Querci had years ago in Prato. The canvas he painted on was rolled around a large reel that the artist would gradually unroll as his work proceeded – gradually and not too much otherwise the canvas would hit the wall in front of it.

I could continue along these lines for quite a while, even with regard to categories.

The most odorous? Painters' studios, due to turpentine and colors.

The dustiest? For obvious reasons the studios of sculptors who work with marble. Leonardo never missed a chance of pointing this out to Michelangelo.

The noisiest? Without doubt sculptors' studios.

The tidiest studios? I would say all of the studios of printmakers and graphic designers, and also those of illustrators.

And so on.

A particular, unique, and persistent scent, however, emanates from all of these studios. It remains fixed to the soul and never goes away; it reappears each time upon re-entering.

Since this fascination may seem silly and very personal, I will try to offer the reader a historical-critical frame of reference that will be able to elucidate the objective of this book and clarify it little by little.

On the first page of an essay written in 2006 André Chastel wrote:

Towards the middle of the past century André Malraux noted that 'a Romanesque crucifix was not initially a sculpture and Duccio's Madonna was not a picture'. We propose to discover what those assembled panels for the altars of Southern Europe, more specifically of Italy in the 15th century and the beginning of the 16th century, now generically known as 'altarpieces', were before becoming "pictures".¹

Well, what do these words mean? It is easy to say: Chastel explains that the paintings and statues that are conserved in museums (in order to safeguard the integrity of cultural heritage) were not created to be admired as works of art, but rather for religious worship in churches. That hic et nunc of a piece, its here and now existence that is unique and inimitable; its 'aura' as Walter Benjamin refers to it, depends on the ambiance that cloaks the specific place for which it was created. Museums, institutions of fundamental importance, separate and exclude these works from their contexts and thus alter their integrity.

The first problem, therefore, lies in respecting the purpose of a piece

1 A. Chastel, *Storia della pala d'altare nel Rinascimento Italiano*, Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 2006, pg. 1

that must be understood as an object that expresses much more than a simple form. In fact the great French historian continues:

Just think of the art lover's disappointment, accustomed to the isolated, clean, and well presented pieces in a museum, when he finds himself in front of a poorly lighted chapel in which the famous piece is scarcely accessible and seemingly indifferent not only to offering aesthetic contemplation but also indifferent to the difficulty of a visitor to pinpoint a place that the piece would occupy within the hierarchies of sacred art.²

Stepping ahead in the same direction that goes nearer, or perhaps farther from, the visitor permits us to look closer at a second problem (mentioned by Umberto Eco back in 1973 when talking about the concept of 'kitsch'³) that concerns what is actually in a museum. A dull answer that does not say much could be Art. All right, Art, but who created it? and what type of Art is it? What was conserved, which pieces were conserved, in the Uffizi in the mind of those people who cried for the art that was damaged there after the flood of 1966? Actually behind a generic word such as Art there is an emptiness that befalls even those distant classical roots which delight the same eloquent speakers who end up massacring them.⁴

Another problem, or question, that is wider than the one concerning the purpose of art, will be, therefore, the definition of the concept of art.⁵

A rather appropriate answer, that I intend to make mine, was given by that other great historian, this time an art historian, Ernst H. Gombrich. In his *Story of Art*, which is probably the most famous book that has ever been published, Gombrich opens the introduction:

There is really no such thing as art. There are only artists. Once these were men who took coloured earth and roughed out the forms of a bison on the wall of a cave; today some buy their paints, and design

2 *Ibid.*, pg. 2

3 U. Eco, *Kitsch, Kitsch, Kitsch:urrah!*, in *Il costume di casa. Evidenze e misteri dell'ideologia italiana*, Milano, Bompiani, 1973, pgs. 209, 210

4 S. Settis, *Futuro del 'classico'*, Torino, Einaudi, 2004

5 A. Vettese, *Ma questo è un quadro? Il valore nell'arte contemporanea*, Roma, Carocci, 2005, pg. 19

posters for hoardings; they did and do many other things...Art with a capital A has no existence. For Art with a capital A has come to be something of a bogey or a fetish.⁶

Good. Now that we have established that paintings were not created for museums, and that they were painted by people of flesh and blood, it would be interesting, in my opinion, to go further ahead in order to direct our attention to the workshops and/or homes of artists, those places where works of art took on a material consistency and where artists physically lived.

If we can avoid falling into the superficial idol worship of relics and fetishes typical of tourist guides (that can be summarized in whatever phrase similar to “this is the place where Dante saw Beatrice for the first time”), researching the homes of artists could provide first hand tools for putting together a ‘material’ history of art. It could also provide new elements for the history of cities from the point of view of people that passed their daily lives there – another topic that I will return to later.

Any exposition or theoretical essay must be supported by documents that sustain what is being affirmed or demonstrated. In the present case the evidence may seem unorthodox since we are not speaking about the usual archival documents that can be consulted at a later time. In short, we are talking about unusual evidence that is nevertheless very effective because of its immediacy and the accuracy of its position in the space-time grid.

I am referring to that which is visible as we walk down streets, the plaques that are on the walls near the main doors of buildings.

It should be understood that by undertaking this approach we intend to cross territories that have nothing to do with the specialization of epigraphy, from which these plaques differ in many aspects. We will instead follow the typical methods of the historical disciplines, especially and primarily those related to the history of art.

The plaques, therefore.

Before venturing out on the streets, however, it would be a good idea if we looked around for an extra foothold. In other words we will need some protection from blunders since, as we know, we do not look at things only with our eyes. Eyes must also be protected if we want to see better,

6 E.H. Gombrich, *La storia dell'arte raccontata da E.H.Gombrich*, Torino, Einaudi, 1979, pg. 3