

The Cradle of the Renaissance:  
Florence in Literature, Art and Architecture  
English 321/Art 389  
Backgrounds of European Literature/Study Abroad—Art History  
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Course Proposal for 2021-2022 Study Abroad Program in Florence

At present, these course numbers just have DH/DL status, but it would be easy (if deadlines allowed) to get a WI status for them, which I would do if chosen as Resident Director for Florence.

NOTE: The advantage of studying the Renaissance in Florence should be obvious: we can experience the Renaissance directly through its art and architecture as well as read about it. Accordingly, in this draft syllabus, I have indicated some of the key sites I would plan to visit in Florence as well as the texts we will be reading. I have also tried to match those visits with the reading. Hence, while reading Machiavelli's *Discorsi*, we will visit San Marco, the church of the Florentine religious dictator Savonarola whom Machiavelli discusses at length; at the same time, we will also read Vasari's life of the painter Fra Angelico, since Fra Angelico was also a monk at San Marco and decorated the monks' cells in what is the largest collection of his art in the world. However, it should be noted that I expect the specific itineraries to shift, both to take advantage of special opportunities—particularly special exhibitions—and also to avoid duplication of experiences the students have already had. I.e., if by April everyone in the class has already made it to the Accademia to see Michelangelo's *David* but they haven't gone to the marvelous sculpture collection in the Bargello, we would go to the Bargello instead, which has 4 works by Michelangelo in addition to Donatello's very different *David*. If the itinerary of art-related visits shifted, the assignments from Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* and Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* might also shift, as I have assigned individual lives from Vasari and arranged the assignments from Baxandall in ways that make sense given the itineraries described in the syllabus.

## Course Description:

In the long panorama of human history, certain places and times are more generative and influential than others. To mention a few examples, Tang dynasty China created a pattern the rest of East Asia followed and adapted, Christianity and Islam come from a common origin in the desert Middle East, and Periclean Athens was the cradle of democracy, philosophy and classical art. The Italian Renaissance was another such moment that gave us, among other things, the rebirth of democracy, the forms of classical music and opera, perspective painting, the voyages of discovery that led to centuries of European dominance of the world, and much, much else. We live in a world in large measure created by the Renaissance.

Florence was the cradle of the Renaissance, and Florentine artistic and cultural life from 1250 to 1550 was the crucial site of most of these developments. Being in Florence for a semester gives us an unrivalled opportunity to understand this cultural flowering, and this course is designed to take advantage of the living and learning laboratory being in Florence provides.

The Renaissance begins with a disaster, as the Black Death in 1348 which killed half of Florence's population (and devastated much of Europe in the process) was the event which catalyzed the creation of a new modern Florence. Our first text for the class, Boccaccio's famous collection of stories, the *Decameron*, is set in the period of the Black Death. As the frame for the *Decameron* involves a group of Florentines 'sheltering in place' while trying to avoid the plague, it has a particular resonance for us today in the time of coronavirus. As we will not have time to read more than a fraction of the 100 stories that make up the *Decameron*, I will select stories that show how Florence in the middle of this disaster in the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (or the *trecento*) is already rapidly 'de-medievalizing' and showing signs of the birth of the Renaissance. We may all need reminding right now that disasters may have *some* good results in addition to the obvious negative ones.

By 1400, Florence was the center of a new European culture, and this culture gave birth to new forms of politics as well as new forms of art. Florentine politics in this period was characterized by shifts—sometimes sudden ones--between popular rule and the courtly rule of the Medici. The rich cultural life of the Italian courts—in Florence and elsewhere--influenced the rest of Europe far more quickly than the rebirth of democracy, though the latter in the long run proved far more important. The one non-Florentine text we will read is Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* which presents a beautiful if hopelessly idealized portrait of the Renaissance city-state court--in this case the court of the Duke of Urbino--as a center of art and culture. Machiavelli provides a

realistic (or cynical) corrective to this in *The Prince*, the most influential and notorious work of modern political thought. Machiavelli dedicated *The Prince* to the Medici, who ruled Florence off and on during this period, but at his core he was a Humanist and a republican, and we will also read part of *The Discourses*, his treatise on republics, in addition to the (much shorter) *Prince*.

Although this legacy of political and social thought was crucial for Western culture in the centuries that followed, when we think of the Renaissance today, we think above all of art, the invention of perspective painting, the re-discovery of sculpture in the round, and the towering achievements of the churches, palaces and civic buildings of Renaissance architecture. We will study the art and architecture of the Renaissance in Florence in 3 ways: by visiting the churches, palaces, civic buildings and museums of Florence, by reading the selections from Vasari's (almost contemporaneous) *Lives of the Artists*, and by reading and discussing modern art historical discussions of the work of these same artists, specifically Michael Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*.

Art, literature, and civic life interpenetrated seamlessly in Florence during these years, so these separate threads will be woven tightly together as the semester continues. Baxandall stresses the social embeddedness of *quattrocento* art—work done for hire for specific settings and reasons—and the close connection between social practices and the way paintings are viewed and judged. Given his focus on Florentine painters, we will be in a position to see many of the works of art he discusses *in situ* such as Masaccio's frescoes in the Brancacci Chapel and Fra Angelico's many paintings in the monks' cells in San Marco.

It is perhaps the figure of Michelangelo, with whom we will end the semester, who shows these interconnections most vividly: although better known as a sculptor, Michelangelo was a great poet, the greatest Florentine poet after Dante and Boccaccio, so we will read selections from his poetry and a few letters as well as visit the Accademia to see what is perhaps **the** symbol of Florence, the *David*, and visit his major architectural project in Florence, the Medici tombs in San Lorenzo. However, although Florentine to the core, Michelangelo moved to Rome at the height of his powers at the urging of the pope. His departure for Rome marks the end of the period in which Florence is the center of artistic and cultural innovation, and indeed not long after, Italy also ceases to be the center as the cultural center of the Renaissance shifts to France, England, and elsewhere in Europe.

## Learning Objectives:

Courses in the Study Abroad Program have certain common course objectives that reflect the goals of Study Abroad. Students in a Study Abroad Program should gain 1) a deeper knowledge and understanding of other cultures and their environments; 2) different perspectives in regard to other nations; 3) increased capacity to analyze issues with appreciation for disparate viewpoints; and 4) increased respect and tolerance for differences. These goals are closely aligned with the goals of every course I teach. The first two are essentially content goals, the last two method goals. As my classes are always Socratic discussions in a seminar format, the very format of the class necessarily enhances the method goals of being able to work through complex issues with an enhanced appreciation of and ability to handle difference. With the crucial addition of other times to other cultures and other nations, students in every class I teach will gain a deeper knowledge and understanding and different perspectives on other cultures, other nations, and other periods in history. Obviously, these objectives take on particular force in a Study Abroad context: the students are gaining that deeper knowledge and appreciation simply by their experiences in a foreign country, and the cross-registration in which students from various programs would be taking courses together will present students with even more disparate viewpoints and differences than they would have at home.

So from those four objectives of Study Abroad come four overarching learning objectives for this course.

1. The student who completes the course will learn a great deal about the literature, art, architecture, culture and history of Florence between 1350 and 1550, the period called the Renaissance, which is a central starting point for the modern world.
2. Anyone in 2020 studying the Renaissance will simultaneously feel a push and pull between a recognition of similitude and a perception of difference. To put this another way, much of what we are today comes from the Renaissance yet we are also quite different. The same is true for any American (regardless of ethnicity or background) in Europe: much of what we are comes from this place, yet Europeans are different. An objective for the course would be the recognition of this push and pull and the historical reasons for it.
3. Although I have in this syllabus referred to the Renaissance in the singular as if it is one thing (or at least a coherent entity), the period was of course divided, contested, at war with itself. Machiavelli dedicated *The Prince* to the Medici, but they also tortured him. He praises absolute rule in *The Prince* but writes a central text for democratic political thought in

*The Discourses*. The understanding of the Renaissance in SLOs 1 and 2 will itself constitute an increase in one's ability to analyze issues with an appreciation of the value of disparate points of view.

4. I would certainly expect that in addition to achieving SLO #1 in terms of learning about the Renaissance, students would in this SLO also come to a greater appreciation of it. Our students will remain children of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but the semester they spend with one foot in the 14-16<sup>th</sup> centuries in this fabulous place will remain with them for the rest of their lives and permanently broaden their cultural horizons in ways that extend not just their respect for and tolerance of difference but indeed their appetite for it.

### **Course Format:**

This course will be run as a seminar in which all students are expected to come to class having done the assigned reading and come prepared to discuss that reading. There will be not be a lot of lecturing, only at those moments where some contextual background is absolutely necessary to understand the text.

In addition to seminar discussions on the reading, we will also spend a fair amount of time seeing the monuments and museums of Florence. These should also be thought of as discussions, if peripatetic ones: I will be posing questions, not delivering answers, and the key to successful visits to these sites will be your engagement with them.

### **Course Materials:**

There are six required texts for the class:

Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. G. H. McWilliam (Penguin)

Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. George Bull (Penguin)

*The Portable Machiavelli*, trans. Bondanella and Musa (Penguin)

Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Painters*, trans. Bondanella (Oxford)

Michelangelo, *Poems and Letters*, trans. Anthony Mortimer (Penguin)

Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford)

## **Grading System:**

Your grade for the course will be comprised of five components, each of which will count equally towards the final grade (so 20% each).

The first will be attendance and participation in class, which will be weighted equally. The class will be a mixture of seminar discussion of written texts and visits to key locations in Florence. Participation in discussion by all students is essential to the success of the discussion, and obviously participation is impossible without attendance. On the field trips to the location, attendance is even more essential, as there will be literally no class unless you are present.

There will be two essays assigned for the class, and each will be 20% of the grade. I expect each paper to be 5-8 pages. Regardless of your major or proposed career, the ability to produce high quality, error-free prose in English is an important life and workplace skill, so the quality of the writing in the papers will be a concern as well as the content. I reserve the option of asking for papers to be revised and resubmitted, and where I see issues with student writing, I will work with the student one-on-one to identify and address the issues.

The topic of the first paper will vary according to whether you are taking the course as an English course or an art course. The students registered in English will write their first paper on Boccaccio's *Decameron*. I would like you to discuss the frame for this collection of tales: why does Boccaccio set the telling of the tales in the period of the Black Death, with an elaborate scheme of different tale tellers across the 10 days and 100 stories? Each day has at least a brief introduction and conclusion where the frame is visible, but feel free to discuss only those parts of the framing that are relevant to your thesis. (To write this paper, you will need to read more of *The Decameron* than we are discussing in class.) The art students have a different assignment, which is to focus on one of the subjects of Vasari's lives: first, create an inventory (list the works of art, their location, subject, medium, description) of the art or architecture present today in Florence by that artist and second, compare what Vasari has to say about the work to your analysis of it. The first part of the assignment should serve as something of an introduction to the scholarly side of art history, the kind of work that goes into catalogues and the creation of exhibitions, while the second shifts to the interpretive side of the field. Are Vasari's remarks useful as an interpretive frame for the work of the artist? Are they genuinely illuminating? What do they show about how the Renaissance perceived art? Baxandall's discussion of the artist you choose should also be consulted.

The final paper will either compare Castiglione's and Machiavelli's portrait of the Renaissance court in *The Book of the Courtier* and *The Prince* or compare *The Prince* and *The Discourses*. If you take the first topic, does Machiavelli's darker portrait of Renaissance courts reveal Castiglione's portrait to be just a fantasy? Or does Machiavelli miss things that Castiglione captures? If the second, does one of these radically conflicting works represent what Machiavelli really thought? If so, which one? Or is there another way to think about and reconcile the contradictions between the two? Art history students will probably gravitate to the first topic, since Castiglione's portrait of court culture is deeply saturated in art and the value of aesthetics, while students registered for English should find either topic a useful occasion for interpretive inquiry.

Per Lorenzo de' Medici policy, there will be a midterm and a final exam for the course, and each of these will be 20% of the grade for the course.

In addition, since this is a time when you are in a learning laboratory called Florence, I am open to an extra credit assignment which would be to make a record of the historical and culture sites you visit this semester outside of class (in Florence or elsewhere if you have travel) with whatever reflections you have on these experiences. This can be a traditional paper journal or something more contemporary involving multimedia—your choice as long as it is in a form I can access at the end of the semester. I am willing to use this as a grade enhancer up to a full letter grade depending on the extent and quality of what you produce. If you are planning on submitting such a document at the end of the semester, my recommendation is that we look at what you are producing fairly early in the semester, so we can be assured that we are on the same page.

### **Class by Class Schedule:**

**NOTE:** My understanding is that Lorenzo de' Medici classes typically meet once a week, and I have assumed this schedule for this draft syllabus, and arbitrarily picked Thursday as the day the class meets.

Jan 27: Introduction & visit to the Florence of Boccaccio's time (Palazzo Vecchio, Palazzo Davanzati, Orsanmichele Church)

Feb 3: Boccaccio, selected Tales from the *Decameron*

Feb 10: Boccaccio, selected Tales from the *Decameron*

Feb 17: Visit to Il Duomo & Museo del Duomo (the great monument of *trecento* Florence); Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century*

Italy, Chapter 1 (pp. 1-28); Vasari, "Preface to the Lives" (pp. 3-6), "Preface to Part Two" (pp. 47-58), Life of Ghiberti (who sculpted the doors; pp. 84-100) and from the Life of Brunelleschi (the architect; pp. 110-138)

Feb 24: Castiglione, *Book of the Courtier*

Mar 3: Castiglione, *Book of the Courtier*

Mar 10: The art of *quattrocento* Florence: visit the Brancacci Chapel (for Masaccio frescoes), Ognissanti (Botticelli frescoes and burial place) and the Uffizi; Baxandall, first part of Chapter 3 (pp. 109-128); Vasari's Lives of Masaccio (101-109), Fra Filippo Lippi (191-200) and Botticelli (224-231)

Spring break?

Mar 24: Machiavelli, Letter #5 (pp. 66-71) & *The Prince*, Chapters 1-13 (pp. 77-124 in *The Portable Machiavelli*)

Mar 31: Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chapters 14-26 (pp. 124-166 in *Portable*); Visit to his tomb in Santa Croce (plus Michelangelo's tomb and works by many famous painters)

Apr 7: Visit to Palazzo Rucellai and Palazzo Strozzi (urban palaces from Machiavelli's time and places he would have visited; Alberti designed the first); Baxandall, first part of Chapter 2 (pp. 29-71); Vasari's Life of Alberti (pp. 178-184) and a section of the Life of Perugino (256-258) explaining why Florence was the artistic center of Italy

Apr 14: Machiavelli, from *The Art of War* (pp. 486-491), from *The History of Florence* (pp. 552-559) and from *The Discourses*

Apr 21: Visit to San Marco; Machiavelli, Letter #1 (pp. 54-58); from *The Discourses*; Baxandall, rest of Chapter 2 (pp. 71-108); Vasari's Life of Fra Angelico (pp. 169-177)

Apr 28: Visit to see the *David* at the Accademia and the Casa Buonarroti (Michelangelo's family home); selected Poems and Letters of Michelangelo and Baxandall, rest of Chapter 3 (pp. 128-153)

May 5: Visit to the Medici Tombs and the Biblioteca in San Lorenzo (both designed by Michelangelo, while Brunelleschi designed the church); selected Poems of Michelangelo; Vasari's 1550 Life of Michelangelo (in *Poems and Letters*, pp. 149-185) and from *The Lives of the Artists*, the Life of Antonello da Messina (pp. 185-190) which narrates how oil painting arrived in Italy, Preface to Part Three (pp. 277-283), and the section on Michelangelo's burial from the 1568 Life of Michelangelo (pp. 484-488).

May 12: Final Exam

## **Additional Resources:**

Participating in a Study Abroad program requires that the student abide by the rules and regulations of the Study Abroad program in addition to those that all UH students need to abide by.

If you consider that you need a reasonable accommodation because of the impact of a disability, please contact the KOKUA program (956-7511 or 956-7612). It is located in Room 013 of QLC, and although they will work with students remotely, it would obviously be better to be in touch with them before you leave O’ahu. I will be happy to work with you and the KOKUA program to meet your access needs related to a documented disability.

Please do not take this class if you cannot attend regularly and cannot be present for the entire course. I understand emergencies happen, so please let me know if you find yourself in an extraordinary situation.

I expect the written work presented for a grade to be your original work. If you draw on the work of others, that indebtedness needs to be documented through proper attribution. If you have any questions about that process or its opposite—plagiarism—please see me before you turn in work to be graded. I am not requiring the use of secondary sources in the papers for the course but many topics will be very difficult to pursue without research using secondary sources. In such a case, proper documentation of your sources is essential, and the MLA Handbook is an appropriate guide to such documentation.

Course grades for this course will be reported using pluses and minuses. The Grade Scale:

A 93-100	A- 90-92	
B+ 87-89	B 83-86	B- 80-82
C+ 77-79	C 73-76	C- 70-72
D 60-69		
F <60		

Please remember that if you are an English major and taking this as an elective, you need to receive at least a C for this course to count towards your degree requirements in English.

Incompletes will be given only if 1) you are unable to finish the final paper or take the exam because of a medical emergency or personal or family crisis; and

2) you make a written request in advance of failing to submit the work and we are able to discuss your request.