

Macey Lipman - Firenze Diary
Florence, Italy Sept. 29 – Nov. 6, 2010

Wednesday - September 29, 2010

I was going to leave the house at 1pm with a taxi picking me up. I had spoken earlier to Ron Betten who said, "You should leave earlier since international flights take longer to check in." I took his advice and made it for 12 noon. I gave the driver directions by way of La Cienega to La Tijera, but he had his own route to La Cienega that I never knew existed. It was way out of the way and took an extra 15 minutes – not a good start.

Ron Betten was right – the lines for Alitalia flights were enormously long with gobs of excess luggage, including my own. After all I was packing for five weeks and even though I tried to be considerate, I packed a 25-count pack of my brochures, a fold-over soft travel bag for my weekend in Rome, an umbrella and lots of t-shirts and sweatshirts for changes in the temperature. The line took 45 minutes to reach the counter where the polite lady informed me that I was overweight by \$100. – and I should proceed to counter #62. I waited in yet another line for 20 minutes – the lady was very courteous and I was relieved of my overweight luggage. I was still dragging my camera bag with two cameras, my brief case with all my Florence papers and my message bag with credit cards, passport, e-tickets, etc. – so I was still pretty loaded down.

Next up was security, a self-contained nightmare. Because some a-hole tried to blow up a plane by stuffing his shoes with dynamite, we all have to take our shoes off, among other things (belts, jackets...). Security spotted two fountain pens in my messenger bag and didn't know what to make of it. I had to show them how fountain pens work to prove they were not secret weapons of mass destruction. That took an added 15 minutes. All-in-all it was close to 2 1/2 hours from drop off to the gate - oh - and forgot to mention the cab driver dropped me off at the Bradley Terminal, about a 20 minute walk schlepping all my luggage to terminal two.

The seats on the wide-body Boeing 777 were OK comfort-wise, but boy, were they close. I sat on the right isle in the center section row behind the bulkhead. There were three seats in the center section and my fellow passengers were a younger couple (no rings) who were physically all over each other during the whole flight (13 hours). They literally couldn't keep their hands off of each other and at one time early in the a.m. I do believe they were in the throes of the act of sex – amazing. We didn't talk. They didn't seem to want to talk.

I tried to work the tiny screen in front of each seat, but as usual, I didn't have a technical grip on that sort of stuff. So I watched the progress of our flight across the world on the GPS system that tells you minute-by-minute progress on where you are, how fast you're going and how many more miles to Rome. It really got boring and I believe I went to sleep.

Thursday - September 30

We arrived in Rome around 12:30 pm. My connecting flight was departing at 2:20 pm, not much time between flights – so low and behold, after reaching the gate (25 minutes from touch down), you had to hop a shuttle to the B Terminal and go through another security check. These guys are sharp – they too spotted my infamous fountain pens and couldn't figure them out. Time was quickly running out. The gate was almost two miles away (seemed like). They were just boarding a special low-slung bus that ferries you to planes not close to the gate. So the whole group of passengers crowds into this vehicle and empties at the plane site. There is no second trip; it's all at one time only. We took off in less than five minutes, after everyone was seated. I sat next to a couple from Philadelphia. Always a nice way to break the ice and start a conversation. They were touring from Palermo to Florence and driving through Tuscany then to Paris. They come to Italy every year.

It was a short (40 minute) flight to Florence and I was apprehensive whether my overweight mis-sive would show up in the transfer. Sure enough it did and I plowed thru the crowd from Frankfurt and Madrid to try and find my driver from the Michelangelo Institute who was to pick me up and deliver me to my temporary hotel since my apartment/flat was still occupied until Sunday (found out upon arrival). Anyway, Paolo, my driver, held my name placard proudly so I could spot it and we were on our way to my five-week stay in Florence.

The Hotel – the horror of it all. This was a temporary arrangement by the school because the apartment I was to occupy was not available till Sunday, Oct. 3. So they booked me at the Hotel Bodoni near the school and the apartment.

It is a hustling, bustling neighborhood. The hotel room reminded me of my very early days out on the road when \$6 a night was the maximum. The room was not much bigger than a closet and the shower was in the bathroom, so if you took a shower the whole bathroom, including the sink and the toilet, participated in the shower. Needless to say, I did not take a shower for three days and stayed in the same clothes for four days... Wednesday – Saturday. The cost of the room was \$102. Fortunately I got into my apartment on Saturday, a day earlier. Thank the shower god.

My apartment/ flat is just a block away from the hotel and Paolo from the school helped me make the move. The flat is two flights up (no lift). The bedroom is yet another flight... so I'll have plenty of exercise.

It's rather cozy, only problem is the bathroom is on the first floor and the beds are rather small. There are two beds and I tried putting them together, but one is higher than the other so that didn't work out. There's a full kitchen (miniature) a table and chairs, a living room of sorts, the stairway to the bedroom and plenty of closet space.

I slept well last night for the first time. The bedroom has no windows but does have a very handy skylight with a built-in shade. The skylight opens and the noise level is average city-living decibels. Cars, sirens, some shouting (in Italian) but that doesn't bother me. For the most part it's quiet.

There's a supermarket down the street. Believe it or not it's called Billa. It's sort of like a very large mini-mart. I wouldn't classify it as a full-blown super market, but considering this crowded, compact part of Florence, it's big. I bought some stuff, corn flakes, orange juice, decaf instant coffee, bananas, bread, all with Italian labels so I had to find out what was in them. Also bought soap and good old faithful Ajax spray cleaner...had to get a few spots off the walls. The floors throughout are typical Italian brick...smooth. So I indulged and bought three bath mats, one for the living room, one for the bath and one for the kitchen. I'll probably buy one more for the bedroom and maybe a runner for the entrance. I need these personal touches to identify myself with the space I'm occupying - don't ask.

The worst part so far is eating alone and trying to strike up a conversation with other tourists. When they're in a group they are not likely to invite you into their circle.

The food here is very consistent - good - not great, but several levels of good and it's true that where ever you go you will be Italian food happy.

Friday - October 1

Did a lot of walking around, feet were killing me, but kept pushing. Shot a really great photograph of one of the important statues on the square in front of the city hall (a historic building). It's called "The Rape of the Sabine Women." I positioned the woman's hand over the clock on the tower in the background...great composition. Went to a photo store and had large prints made. It's an exceptional photograph. Forgot where I had dinner tonight, it's hard to find a bad restaurant.

Saturday - October 2

Did some exploring around the neighborhood referred to some as "the ghetto." It was once the ghetto during WWII. The streets are very narrow and bumpy and traffic is a mix of, "I dare you," by scooters, bikes and smart cars, plus taxis and small trucks. It's really dangerous. Fortunately my apartment was ready Saturday instead of Sunday, one less day in "Bodino Hell." Now a distant memory.

Sunday - October 3

Did some more walking. Went too far really. Got lost a few times and it was raining off and on. Went back to the flat and did some unpacking and ML-style cleaning (spots off the walls), rearranging furniture, waxing tops of tables, etc. Had dinner at a nearby restaurant...nothing special. Getting bored with pasta - need a change. Tonight I was looking for a restaurant called Dante's very near the writer's home, but it was closed.

You can drop in anywhere and find Italian food to please your taste buds. Jim Swindel rec-

ommended a restaurant on the other side of the Arno River. He classified it as “a joint”, but I thought it was at the top of the “good” scale. I’m definitely going back. It’s all community tables so you are “forced” to have a conversation with other people eating “solo” as they refer to it here in Firenze. As a matter of fact, I’m sitting at a community table eating solo right now. (Sunday 10:30pm). I’m the only one at the table and there’s a pretty good piano player off to my right playing standards. The restaurant is called “Yellow” - don’t know why. Had veal scaloppini with lemon gnocchi in a pink sauce, red wine, tiramisu and cappuccino. Just happened to walk by and it looked inviting a busy - always a good sign - bread was stale - everything else was good. School starts tomorrow.

Monday - October 4

There’s a Caravaggio show at the Uffizi Museum. Went over, but the lines were too long. Took a walk on the Ponte Vecchio. Saw only one store that carried a very impressive selection of Breitling watches. No other jeweler on the bridge carries watches. Shot some standard photos and had lunch on the square. School starts at 3pm.

So about school ...I stopped in to see the director, Domenico Cancellari, on Thursday the 30th He walked me over to the art facility, which is in a separate location, about four blocks from the main building. It was a hodge podge of areas - one for sculpting, one for portraits, one for general painting and one up on a mezzanine where the Renaissance technique is taught. That’s where I’ll work out of. The hours are 3pm - 5pm.

We started by gluing the cotton corners to a board with rabbit glue, then gessoed the canvas about 4 to 5 times. Then we sanded that with medium paper (and next with fine) until the surface was perfectly smooth. We attached a picture to a sheet of paper and using pushpins, punched holes on the outline of the objects in the picture. Then we dabbed the sheet paper attached to the canvas with a brown or black powder wrapped in a piece a cloth. The powder goes through the pin-size holes on to the surface of the canvas making an outline of your drawing.

We mixed basic colors using powder and egg yolk called egg tempru. Then we put small portions on a glass pane and ground the two mixtures with a heavy glass pestle similar to that a chemist would use to grind chemicals, until the powder and the egg yolk are a thick, even consistency. The mixture is put in individual jars. Using water as a medium you paint very thinly and depend on the layers of paint rather than thickness, such as traditional oil paint.

Instead of using a Renaissance painting for my subject I decided to use my photograph of the statue of “The Rape of the Sabine Women.” The teacher didn’t object. Instead of class ending at 5pm everyone continued to work past 7pm. I loved it.

I had dinner “solo” at a restaurant owned by a friend of Domenico called Dante’s which was opened this time. Domenico Cancellari, the director of the Michelangelo School, recommended it. Had a delicious filet of sole with spinach ravioli and, of course, the ubiquitous red wine. It’s not an elegant restaurant, but good.

When I decided to go to Florence, Mel Snell of my Beverly Hills figure painting class whose wife passed away fourteen days after Ruth called and told me he wanted to go Florence for two weeks. I said, "great." He was going via Air France and I as flying Alitalia so we didn't see each other until I was on the way home after class on Monday evening and we bumped into each other. It was nice to have a dinner and conversation with someone I knew.

Tuesday - October 5

Mel was having the same problems with his phone as I...couldn't receive calls. So we both went to the Michelangelo main office where we thought we might get some help. I wanted to send some emails, and my iPad, which was supposed to work everywhere, didn't. So much for hi-tech (internationally). Even with wi-fi I can't update the news or weather and who knows what else. On the phone I can make calls to the U.S. but not receive incoming calls. Even my Rome tour guide could not reach me except by email and I have to wait till I'm at the right locale.

We found out that the school was having a special social dinner on Wednesday night and a trip to Siena on Sunday - which was great for meeting fellow students. I also wanted to try out the language course, Italian, of course. The class was composed of six ladies as well as Mel and myself. The teacher, Carla, was very patient and good. It seemed that the women took to it right away and Mel bragged that he knew French and Spanish, so this should be a breeze. Me? I have very little language aptitude. The first day was some fun so I thought I'd try again on Wednesday. Art class again was the highlight of the day. Mel & I had dinner...don't remember where.

Wednesday - October 6

Went to Michelangelo to language class for a second day. Mel didn't want to go. I was forcing myself because it seemed challenging. We started with masculine, feminine, singular and plural. I lost interest at the break and decided not to continue. I felt very stressed at trying to learn a language and not being completely committed. I had lunch with Mel and had a casual conversation. He so reminds me of my Uncle Abe - can't be wrong and is opinionated. But he was company and I could tolerate it if it was only two weeks.

That night we had dinner planned by the school, didn't get the name of the restaurant but it was near the school. I wasn't too hungry, and was tired of pasta, if you can believe that. There were about 25 students and it was an eight-course dinner. All I wanted was a lettuce and tomato salad. You can't believe how good the tomatoes are here and I think that's the big difference. I did taste each course a spoonful at most. It was all delicious - just a taste mind you. I didn't have dessert. I had strawberries instead. Mel left early and I discovered that each of us was charged 18 Euros, which I think is a bargain for such a gourmet meal. I paid for Mel's since he left early.

Thursday - October 7

Started painting. The objective seems to be to not have a painting with any brush strokes. The masters of the Renaissance technique made it look as if the work was printed on the canvas. That's the primary goal. So far I'm gonna try to do it exactly as taught...of course using my own photograph. Even though it's a picture of a famous Renaissance sculpture, it makes the process somewhat unique.

Don't remember lunch, but it was light. Dinner, however, was unique at a high-end restaurant called Cibrea. A lovely room, price fix, the waiter even sits down at your table, lights a candle and tells you what's for dinner...no menu, he describes everything. Very romantic, if it wasn't for Mel. He ordered ox tail and I ordered red snapper.

The restaurant automatically starts serving a series of appetizers that are shared...small bites. After the main course Mel complained that he did not believe his entre was ox tail...too many vertebrae. I told Mel that I have never heard of a restaurant of this caliber substituting items on the menu and called the waiter over to register Mel's verdict. The waiter started laughing, and Mel said, "Stop this." I explained that I wanted the truth so the waiter brought out a tray with raw, skinned oxtails about 24" long...or what I assumed was ox tail. Mel was still not convinced..."why are you doing this?" I said I wanted to know if a very high-end restaurant would risk their reputation and offer a substitute for a meal well advertised. He said that I was purposefully embarrassing him. At that point it was becoming like a Seinfeld episode..."The Ox Tail Incident." I thought it was hilarious, Mel didn't. He also informed me that he was making arrangements to leave tomorrow at 7am. That he had decided to leave because it was physically hard on him. He had trouble walking on the uneven walkways and roads and had to stop every 20 paces to catch his breath. Altogether he was here three days - not including travel time and to return he had to go by way of Paris, Munich and Chicago to get to L.A. Almost 25 hours in the air.

Friday - October 8

Walked around the square at the Uffizi Museum. Had lunch by myself at one of the many outdoor cafes around the piazza then went to class. It actually felt lonely without Mel. I sort of missed him. Went to dinner by myself at a local restaurant fifty steps from my apartment. I took a chance and ordered a grapefruit salad with mozzarella cheese, lettuce and those wonderful tomatoes. Delicious! I also ordered at risk swordfish with grilled eggplant, one of the best swordfish I've tasted, boy did I enjoy it.

Saturday - October 9

Did shopping at the mini-mart (Billa), washed socks and underwear, tried to get into Uffizi... lines too long. Had lunch at Mastrociligia (near the apartment). Walked to the train station where we would meet on Sunday for a trip to Siena to determine how long the walk would be (25 minutes). Went back to Mastrociligia for a glass of wine and bumped into Richard Strahle

who is an advanced “Italian” class at Michelangelo. Interesting guy - an American who lived in Australia for ten years then moved to Frankfurt, Germany ten years ago and does quite a bit of traveling.

A woman sitting by herself next to us joined the conversation. She’s a professor at Columbia University in the U.S. Very interesting person - tiny in size. Then Ann Lynch joined us, too. She was one of the women in the beginners language class. She’s very Irish and lives six months in Ireland and six months in New Jersey. She’s a fun person and as is her heritage, loves to drink. She’s living with a family and she says all they want to do is feed her. She’s not too skinny and probably doesn’t need it. She was interested in buying a print of the Calvary Church. I’m not sure I have a print; I’ll email her when I get back.

That night I had dinner at Cibreo cafe. I had chicken meatballs in a tomato gelatin and three other hard-to-describe goodies. I ate outside by myself and watched the world go by...and I didn’t mind eating by myself. Ann, Richard and I made arrangements to meet at 8 am to walk to the train station the next morning for Siena.

Sunday - October 10

Richard was waiting at 8 am, but Ann was a no-show. We waited about 10 minutes and took off for the station. The group was to meet at the Farmaci and about 20 showed up, which meant we had to take public transportation instead of our own bus. The ride took one hour and ten minutes. We had a guide.

Siena is very hilly and some passageways are not easy to walk with their steps and steep grades. Visited three churches. I remembered one of them from 12 years ago. Extremely ornate carvings and paintings and frescos everywhere...on every surface. We had lunch and visited some of the very wealthy original families who built monuments to themselves and are now museums. Also interesting...the oldest bank (still operating) in the western world. Some of the houses still standing were built in 1311. About 4pm we were literally finished, but the next bus to Firenze didn’t leave till 5:40pm. So we went to a pastry & coffee house and hung out till 5pm. The tour guide lead us back to the bus station and waited till 5:40. The trip back took 2 hours 45 minutes to get back to Florence. Richard & I walked back. Stopped at IL Barrino Restaurant and had marvelous risotto with thinly sliced pears and pine nuts - super delicious. Went home.

Monday - October 11

Went to Michelangelo wi-fi room till 1pm. Tried to buy ice picks, which would be easier than using push pins on the painting project, but the school hardware store was closed. Had a light lunch - which I enjoy after eating too large and late dinners. Stopped at apartment and went on to art school. The painting is coming along slowly. All those stones on the side of the building. Whew...I won’t give up. I feel challenged because I’m painting my own photograph and the teacher pretty much leaves me alone. There is a specific goal in this technique and that is not to

show brush strokes. The surface must be perfectly flat. I'm not sure I can achieve that goal. Actually we have a substitute teacher named Monica. She's very good. Mexican married to an Italian, been in Italy for ten years...fluent in Italian. The regular teacher Sonia took two weeks off for a show in France. She returns on the 18th. Had dinner by myself at Mastrociligia. Grapefruit salad...love it...and pizza - really good pizza.

Tuesday - October 12

Got alcohol at Farmaci 4.10 Euros for a small bottle... for less than a pint that's \$6.00 U.S. Went to wi-fi room at school and Santa Croce Church to say a prayer for Fern, who passed away October 10. Santa Croce is where Michelangelo is buried. Went to small chapel that turned out to be it empty. When I sat down I noticed a sculpture of Moses staring at me holding the Ten Commandments in Hebrew. What a fitting tribute to Fern, even though it was in a church.

Had my usual lunch of a danish (smaller size than in the U.S.) and Americana coffee with extra shot of hot water or milk. Dinner by myself at Mastrociligia on the little plaza through the passageway. It's now my regular. They make good pizza...love the grapefruit salad.

Wednesday - October 13

Went to wi-fi room at school had my usual Americana coffee & crema danish - only they don't call it that. Went to class early...1:30pm. It's really cold in the studio. Painting is moving slowly. Haven't started the figures yet. I think that will be difficult and I'll need some assistance. Dinner tonight with the school at Dante's.

Thursday - October 14

Shopped at Billa Market for food. Bought two towels for bathroom. Went to studio early (1:30pm). Had dinner - grapefruit salad. Went to opera at Church - saw Figaro, but left at intermission to go home and pack for Rome. Figaro had a charming presentation in a church with piano and four costumed singers, minimum props and lighting. There was a charming host/ announcer from Austria, Franz Mozer.

Friday - October 15

I was picked up at 8am to go to the train station for the trip to Rome. It was a high-speed train and I had a first class reserved seat. Sat across from a very stoic woman who never acknowledged my presence facing her (the seats were facing each other). She read the newspaper for the whole trip. The trip took an hour and 45 minutes and was lovely, smooth, non-stop and fast (over 100mph).

I was picked up at the Rome train station by Jan Stackhouse, my personal tour guide, and her driver. Licensed tour guides spend five years in training and cannot drive and guide at the same time...so we always had a driver.

The driver was Vincent, in a Mercedes sedan. We went to the Hassler Hotel at the top of the Spanish steps. Very picturesque. Super elegant, beautiful room with a view of the garden below. I was on the fourth floor (seven floors total). I unpacked and off we went to the Spanish steps, Villa Borghese, National Gallery of Modern Art, Church of St. Andrew, Trevi Fountain, Parthenon, Vatican Museum, St. Peter's Square, Caravaggio at Santa Maria Del Popale and Rodin Chapel and Sistine Chapel.

Fun day. Quit at 6pm. Had the first dinner by myself of the trip - La Rampa Restaurant - a sideways series of steps on the side of the Spanish Steps.

Saturday - October 16

I wanted to go the countryside so we went via the Appian Way...oldest road in the world. Pretty bumpy in spots. Went to Castle Gandolio, Lake Albano and Lake Nemi. Both are volcanic lakes and very scenic. Celestine - a sanctuary high on Mt. Tivoli - Hadrian's Villa (spent 2-3 hours there) then back to Rome. Had dinner alone outdoors at Vitti - penne with salmon.

Sunday - October 17

On Sunday, the 17th, we started with the Coliseum, then did the baths of Caracalla (from the outside) the keyhole on the Aventine Hill, then went down into the Circus Maximus and saw the Roman Association of Gladiatorial Sports, performing a re-enactment of the Romans overcoming Gauls in Liguria.

We went up and looked over the Roman Forum and the Capitoline Hill, then to Largo Argentina (the hole in the ground with four republican temple ruins where Rome's cat sanctuary is, and where Julius Caesar was stabbed to death).

Then we went up to the Janiculum Hill and looked over the city and stopped at the "Fontaneone", the big fountain built by Pope Paul V to harness the old Roman aqueduct, which brings water from Lake Bracciano, north of Rome, into the city.

We walked through the Trastevere neighborhood and to the Museum of Roma to look at some old photographs of Rome. Then we went onto the Tiber Island and right across the bridge to where the Synagogue is, and then back to the hotel.

Dinner with Emilio and Suzi, Jan's husband and fellow tour guide. Went to Pier Luigi Seafood/Fish Restaurant. The owner personally waited on us he brought a tray with a sea bass a red snapper and halibut all caught that morning. We're looking at these whole fish on a tray...how

fresh can you get? So after a 10-course meal the lights in the restaurant go out. I thought it was a power outage but the owner and the waiters come in with the candles in the dessert singing-“Happy-a-Birth-a-day.” When I blew out the candles the lights came back on and everyone in the place was singing and applauding. A real Italian birthday and perfect ending to a special Roman weekend.

Monday - October 18

Got the train back to Florence. This time a local train instead of the high-speed one. I thought I was on the wrong train until the conductor punched my ticket.

Once in Florence I was picked up by Gabriella’s brother, Momissimo. Unpacked and went to Michelangelo to check my emails, then went to the art school, which I should mention is five minutes away from the main building. It’s cozy. The Renaissance class is on the balcony, the painting class is on the left as you enter the building, the sculpture class is below the oil painters. Across from the sculpture class is a live model painting class on Mondays and Wednesdays. The only problem is that it’s cold (48 degrees) in the evening and the building doesn’t have any heat.

Tonight I have dinner with the “over 50 crowd.” The school organizes and pays for it. It’s a lively group around six to ten people. I’m the only art student...the others are studying Italian or art history. Dinners usually start at 8 pm. Tonight it broke up at midnight...lots of wine and some very lively people. Ann Lynch from Dublin loves to drink...really enjoys it and makes no bones about it. After all she’s Irish.

Tuesday - October 19

Went to Michelangelo’s wi-fi room...wasn’t working. Went to a wi-fi cafe down the street and spent an hour sending and receiving e-mails.

More than ever the urge to paint has fully returned and I can’t wait to get to class. I start as early as 1:30 pm and even though the class runs from at 3 pm to 5 pm and usually stay until 7 or 7:30 pm.

Dinner was at school and supplied by the chef from the cooking class. It consisted of wine, chips, two pastas (penne pomodoro with pine nuts (pinello) and pasta twists in a pesto sauce). Better than anything on Canon Drive in Beverly Hills. For dessert...freshly made tiramisu.

Wednesday - October 20

I pretty much have a set routine. I’m up at 8am, make myself breakfast of O.J., corn flakes with banana and decaf. Then off to Michelangelo wi-fi room to do my e-mails. The wi-fi doesn’t

always work and I'm disappointed in my iPad. Most of the apps are not working including the Wall Street Journal, L.A. Times, and USA Today so I've lost touch with what's going on in the U.S.

I head for art studio around 1pm or 1:30pm and paint till 7pm. Dinner is usually at 8 or 9pm. Sometimes if you eat a big dinner you go to bed and look down at your belly with all that dinner just lying there.

This evening we went to the opera, which is held a small church (English speaking) on the other side of the Arno River (also part of the school's over 50 program. So far I've seen three operas: Figaro, La Traviata and Carmen. They're very small productions with piano accompaniment. There are usually four to five vocalists singing the primary arias and a narrator connecting the story between songs in English.

Dinner tonight at the teatro across the street from the local theatre that features Italian and international stars and shows. It's a very good restaurant that has a deal with the school. There's always wine, water (with gas), prosecco, saltimbocca and espresso. Dinners last from 8 till midnight.

Thursday - October 21

Got an email from Charia (key-ora) De Geronamo, a friend of Johnny Rivers. She would like to have coffee with me tomorrow. She's staying at the Excelsior Hotel and is doing an event for Sting, who has a villa in Tuscany. He's launching a new wine from his vineyard. Charia has a three-person crew and the event will be held on Tuesday, Oct. 26.

Friday - October 22

Met with Charia, a lovely, gracious lady. She also imports Italian wine to the U.S. and is an old friend of Johnny's. She seemed a bit frazzled by the Italian film crew who do not have the same standards as U.S. crews. Instead of a "must do it yesterday" attitude...they take their time. Went to class - I finished the building in the background and started painting the statue. Difficult, but charming painting.

Saturday - October 23

The school had a museum tour but only 3 or 4 students showed up. The tour was at the Doumo - the centerpiece of Florence. It took 125 years to complete the exterior, which is covered in three shades of marble - white, green, and red...the Italian colors.

I was actually looking for a spot Ruthie and I found when we visited here twelve years ago. She happened to be sitting on a side bench with a beam of sunlight shining directly on her. I got a

great shot of her and I was hoping to get a shot of the same bench with the same light, but it was cloudy. I stayed inside for an hour, just sitting and remembering. I lost the tour. Had dinner by myself.

Sunday - October 24

School trip to Lucca and Pisa. About 12-15 of us met at the train station at 8:30am. Donato was our guide. It was raining, but we hoped it would be better in Lucca. The train ride took about one hour and it was raining in Lucca as well. Nothing looked interesting in that weather and to make things worse there was a marathon. Runners, bikers and lots of white plastic tents in all of the plazas. The train station looked as if neglect had set in years ago, but you could see at one time it was the center of activity. Lucca is a walled city completely surrounded by wall and moat dating back to ancient times.

The walled area is quite beautiful, but the rest of the city seems seedy. Besides, we were all wet and cold and all we could think of was, "Let's have lunch and get out of the rain." Four of us bought umbrellas and as soon as we did it stopped raining until we headed back to the train station. We just barely caught the train for Pisa. The ride took about 30 minutes and the weather was much better...cloudy but warmer. It was a long walk to get to the tower. There's a saying in Pisa, "The Tower is straight, the rest of the world is crooked."

It's a beautiful setting and the area around the Tower is beautiful as well. But there was celebration of some kind so we couldn't go into the church. After a while we walked back to the station for home. It was a long walk through the center of town, which was quite active. My feet were talking...could not wait to sit down. Literally caught the train as we walked into the station and in less than two minutes we were on our way. Richard Strahle and I had dinner after a long day.

Monday - October 25

Still working on the figures in the statue. Lots of muscles in his arms and legs...very complicated. The figures are first painted in black, white and grey then glazed with very subtle greens, blues and yellows, although you may not see those colors, they're there.

There are two favorite restaurants that Michelangelo school sends the over 50 crowd for scheduled dinners. Il Teatro and Il Pinelo. My third favorite is Mastrociligga, which is very close to the apartment.

Tuesday - October 26

Can't wait to go to class. The teacher (Sonia) pretty much leaves me alone unless I ask for help. For instance, I had problems with the male arm holding the female around the hip and her right hand. Sonia redrew both improving the arm but not her hand. So I quietly re-did the hand...made

it bigger. Looks good now. Worked from 1:30pm until 7:30pm. It's cold in the studio, no heat, and it's running around 48 degrees outside. Still coughing from my cold.

Wednesday - October 27

The drive to paint continues after the wi-fi room at the Michelangelo School. I usually finish in the wi-fi room by 11:30am. I want to go paint but the art class is in a separate building and they don't open until 1pm and the teaching staff comes in at 3pm. So I have about 2 hours to kill. This morning I hung out at the plaza in front of Santa Croce Church. The streets are so narrow and the buildings are five to six stories tall and block the sun. The plaza in front of the church is as big as two football fields and lets in much needed warm sunlight.

I sat there till one o'clock and headed over to the art studio. That night the over 50 crowd had dinner at Il Teatro. It's always fun with these people. Richard, the American living in Frankfurt, Germany; Ann Lynch from Dublin; Bob & Ilene Foster from Australia and India; Francis from New Zealand, another woman from Toronto, Canada; and another from Brazil. A virtual U.N.

Thursday - October 28

Opera night - La Traviatta. Better singers than Il Figaro. Had dinner (pizza) with Richard after the opera at Mastrociligia.

Friday - October 29

Making more progress on the painting. Doesn't seem to be enough time. Still gets cold in the studio. They brought in portable heaters ...but it didn't help.

Got two mosquito bites on my face. Seems to be a problem here...got to keep your windows closed. Everyone at the school has the same problem. The good news is that they don't buzz... they're very quiet so you don't hear the dive-bombing sound.

The over 50 crowd went to dinner at Il Pinelo. Had a wonderful consume - you can hardly find noodle soup here. I was going to order a second bowl, but my filet of sole came. Unfortunately it had mucho bones and I sent it back - got veal scaloppini and artichokes instead. Very good.. I had the sole the first night I was here and it was perfect - not so the second time.

Saturday - October 30

Jan Stackhouse, my Rome tour guide, was in Florence to visit her soon-to-be married daughter. We planned a trip to the Chianti country (Greve).

I called Jan on Friday to make arrangements. Gabriella, her driver & Jan would pick me up at 9am Saturday. When you're a fully licensed tour guide you are not allowed to drive and tour at the same time - so you need a driver. Most drivers are also tour guides as well.

The weather was cloudy with a chance of rain. I suggested that I would like to check out the Villa De Vedetta Hotel on the other side of the Arno River and up a very steep hill. It was recommended by Johnny Rivers, who also suggested that we have a drink on the patio. Practically next-door is the Piazza Michelangelo, a very large plaza heavily visited by tour buses. The view is spectacular overlooking all of Florence.

So off we go. First stopping at the hotel to check out the restaurant. It was too cold to appreciate the patio and the restaurant wasn't that special, except for the view. The decor was modern streamline 40's. Jan suggested another restaurant for our dinner on Sunday night.

Gabriella was driving a Mercedes van I have never seen in the U.S. from the hotel/ Michelangelo Piazza to the Autostrada. I sat up front and Jan sat in back. It was a better vantage point to spot possible photo opportunities. Jan was constantly feeding me information. She's amazing with dates and names and people going back to ancient times.

The rolling hills of the Chianti region are blanketed with vineyards as well as olive and cypress trees (pencil pines). It's much more scenic than Napa Valley. In Italy there's always the cypress tree, a stone farmhouse at the top of a hill and a few olive trees that have a silvery green cast to them. We made a lot of stops to shoot the landscape. A charming upscale get-away hotel, a monk's sanctuary. Hope I can get something worth painting.

There was a walled village of Castellania. The walls were unique - there was a continuous tunnel running length-wise in the wall so you could walk. It was covered with narrow windows along the outer section of the wall and stores and cafes on the inside. I was cold and needed some pasta and soup. There's a typical Italian soup made with breads baked in the soup...sort of like minestrone...very hardy. And we had some ravioli and wine, of course.

I think I've had more wine here than in my entire lifetime. We went through several small villages. One stop we made for photography was a rather large building across a valley. I stopped to photograph it and Jan said it was a B&B and that we should go over and have a look. We drove down a long winding gravel road. It was formerly a mansion for a very wealthy Florentine Pope, but now it's a B&B with 12 bedrooms. We talked with a man and woman who were caretakers because the mansion was closed for the winter.

From there we headed back to Florence. They dropped me off at around 4pm. I wanted to visit a monastery not far from my apartment. Bob & Irene Foster told me about it. The monks and nuns sang high mass at 6pm. I sat in the back of the church listening to the beautiful harmonies. Between the male and female voices it was very calming and gives you a feeling of serenity. It was beautiful. From the church I walked over to the Ponte Vecchio - the famous bridge that has hundreds of jewelry stores on it. Both sides of the bridge. I had a bite for dinner at one of the many pastry and coffee shops through out Florence - and I walked over to the church that has the

operas. Since it was Saturday night the school did not sponsor this opera, they were doing Carmen. Really enjoyed it. I think it is an abbreviated version. There are minimum props such as tables, glasses, chairs and wine bottles. The singers are good and wear appropriate costumes. A very good pianist accompanies them. My friend Richard left for home today so I went alone as a matter of fact many of the other over 50 crowd left this weekend.

For our Chianti outing on the 30th we drove south on the A1 highway for around 30 minutes before heading west at Montevarchi into the heart of Chianti, where I started taking pictures of the fields.

Then we went to the Spaltenna Castle (today a hotel). We went by the Pottery showroom and workshop, Ceramiche Rampini and afterwards drove up to the 16th century mansion Vistarena with views towards Radda. We drove by Radda to Castellania in Chianti where we walked along the street of the arches and had lunch.

From there we went by the town of Panzano to Greve where we walked through the market square. We then drove up to Montefioralle, the little hill where they were picking olives. Then back to Florence.

We stopped to watch the men picking olives by shaking trees with a long pole that had sort of a vibrator attached to the end. They had a very large net lying on the ground to catch the falling olives. The olives must be processed within 24 hours of picking for best results.

Sunday - October 31

It was raining all night the night of Saturday, October 30. I could hear it on the skylight in my bedroom, and so it was raining all day. Today I kind of worked forward to staying in my cozy apartment and catch up on my diary and read the book on the iPad called "Freedom." It's a #1 best seller, but I don't think I'm really committed to the book, but I'm struggling. Today is Halloween, but you would never know it.

Tomorrow is a national holiday "All Saints' Day" and banks and schools are closed. I took a couple of short walks but it was too nasty to stay out in the rain.

Tonight I had dinner with Jan, Emillo, Lucca and Elana, Jan's daughter. They chose a restaurant high up on the other side of Florence in an area called Fiesole. It was still raining when they picked me up. Elana's fiancée just got a new Prius, which seemed huge compared to the other cars in Florence and did seat five rather comfortably.

The ride was interesting - winding, very narrow roads with high walls on both sides. Ferragamo family lives here so it is very upscale. When we reached the Fiesole it was very charming. The town square was glittering from the lights in the rain.

There are three churches on the square. One is supposed to be the oldest church in Florence...

very small and very humble. The priest was polishing little pictures of the saints in preparation for All Saint's Day. He was in his 60's, very friendly and chatty, talking church politics and history. The church was once Etruscan which goes back to the tenth century.

We walked across the street to a much larger and more ornate church. They were having an organ concert...very powerful stuff, i.e., Bach. Then we walked up a very steep cobble stone street to the restaurant, La Reggia Degli Etruschi. The view was breath taking. It was quiet in the restaurant; I had risotto with vegetables, lots of wine and good conversation...a wonderful finish to my last weekend.

Monday - November 1

It was still raining in the morning and since it was a holiday the art school was closed. But the language school was open. So I went over to use the wi-fi room to send and receive e-mails. Usually there's a break at 11am and I meet my over 50 buddies, but most were gone by now. "Z" (I don't know her full name) was leaving the same day as me and asked for a ride to the airport. "Sure, why not." She took over Mel's apartment and moved the bed into the living room because she didn't like the loft. I asked if she wanted to have dinner one night this week and we agreed on Wednesday.

After the break it was still raining and I took a walk in the rain, but I was too miserable so I went back to the apartment and cozied up to my iPad and read my book. I tried to catch up on this diary and then had dinner "solo" at the Mastrociligia across the street.

Tuesday - November 2

Lovely day finally. Not too cold. Found out that the studio opens at 9am for other classes. Bummer. If I had known, I would have come in earlier. I got to the studio at 1:30pm. Seems like I'm running out of time on the painting. I'm trying real hard to avoid bumps in the surface, but that's not my style. Other students who are copying Renaissance artists are doing fine. I build up too much paint on the surface. Painted until 7:30pm. Went to Il Teatro "solo" for dinner.

Wednesday - November 3

Went to class at 9:30am. Skipped the wi-fi room. Painted all day except for lunch. Went to dinner with "Z" and Anni (didn't get her last name). Seems like lots of people are coming here for other than cultural reasons. "Z" just found out that her husband of 23 years was cheating on her for the last twelve. She's from Connecticut and a language student. Anni escaped from the family jewelry business because her mom and sister are ruining the business and she feels rudderless.

I asked what she loves to do. She an art student and younger than the 50's crowd. She would like to write. So I suggested she write a piece about the restaurant we were having dinner at

(Cibreo...the same as the ox tail incident.) So she asked the waiter, who is the son of the owner and he said yes to an interview. The unique thing about this restaurant is that it is really five separate operations, all in and around one corner. There's the formal restaurant, the trattoria, the cafe, the pizza parlor, and the dinner teatro. The chef of a portly man over 6 feet with white flowing hair, a walrus moustache. He's on the front cover of a series of cookbooks...in other words, a celebrity chef. Dinner was superb. On Friday I bumped into Anni and she told me she's also interviewing another restaurant owner and thanked me for the push.

Thursday - November 4

Went to the studio at 9:30. Had to finish today so I can varnish first thing tomorrow. The varnish is supposed to dry in less than 24 hours. It's a very high gloss. I did complete the painting Thursday night.

Cheri Malaney, one of my fellow Renaissance art students from Toronto, a very successful high-end dress designer invited me to dinner at her apartment. She's a lovely person who painted a Caravaggio fruit basket. She, her husband, her brother, Owen and his girlfriend were at the dinner. Cheri came to Florence in July and is leaving in January. It was a terrific apartment with a garden on the first floor just up from the street from the Santa Croce Church. We talked a lot about careers. Her brother just lost his job and was trying to re-direct his energy in a useful direction. Plenty of wine and good conversation lasted till 12:30, past midnight. It was great fun. They're great people and I would like to keep up the relationship.

Friday - November 5

Went to the studio at 9:30am. Applied the varnish. Boy was it shiny...my bumps showed up even more. So I wasn't crazy about the way it looked. I went back to the apartment to start packing, ate lunch back at the flat. Went back to the studio around 5:30 to see if it dried...still tacky. Said my goodbyes to Sonia...she almost cried, so did I...almost. Took the painting back to the apartment. My intentions were to wrap it in a plastic bag that in testing, didn't seem to stick to the surface - left it out overnight to dry.

That night we had an over 50 dinner at Il Teatro, but it was sad because there were just three of us plus a representative from the school. So it was Bob & Irene Foster, Christina and me. My last meal in Florence. Bob & Irene are going to Rome and Jan is going to be their guide. Went back to the apartment and finished packing except for the painting. It's small enough to put in my fold-over suitcase.

Saturday - November 6

I arranged for Jan to have Gabriella pick "Z" and me up at 5:30am. He helped with the luggage, which was a bear. I was surprised to see so many people up that time of the morning, but I think they hadn't gone to sleep...all were young and carrying wine or beer bottles.

Off we went to the Florence airport for the short ride to Rome. "Z" told me she had root canal yesterday and was not feeling good. Incidentally, she was going to J.F.K. around the same time I was going to L.A., so it worked out OK. Maneuvering through the Rome airport is a daunting task. We landed in the B Terminal and I had to go to the G terminal, which, according to the sign should take eleven minutes. I diligently followed the signs to the G terminal and wound up on a tram to the G terminal and then some more walking. The terminal at 7:30am was crowded with people and all the upscale shops (Armani, D&G, Louis Vitton, Ferragamo, etc.) were open... found out they're open 24 hours. It felt like Las Vegas.

Finally got to my gate, checked in, and exchanged Euros. The flight was long (14 hours) and everyone kept their windows shades down so the interior of the plane was dark. We left at 10am and since we were flying east it stayed light outside all the way. Arrived in L.A. at 2:45pm Saturday. I did manage a few catnaps. Customs in L.A. took one hour 20 minutes...and I'm home. Feels good.

Postscript

Was it worth it? Absolutely. Did I learn something? Yes! Would I do it again? Without a doubt. Would I paint in this technique? No.

Although there were some lonely spots in the beginning, it was more than filled up with my new friends from the over 50 crowd and I met some wonderful characters. As for my mental state, I feel like painting again and that's my whole objective. To get back in that mood where nothing else matters, but to paint. Thanks for indulging.