

Destination: Italy

What's Up *at the* Uffizi

By HILLARY HAUSER

FLORENCE—A hurly-burly of cars and motor scooters zoomed along the narrow cobblestone streets and so did I, hurrying to meet an old friend at the Uffizi Gallery.

There never seems to be enough time to explore Florence. Here, where the spirit of the Medicis soars over dome and bell tower, over Ghiberti's Gate of Paradise and Michelangelo's magnificent marbles, over Giotto's and Donatello's and Botticelli's, there is so much to see and experience that it's easy to work oneself into a frenzy.

La città dei fiori (City of Flowers) is so rich in the spirit of the Renaissance that the question of digesting it all, I was about to learn, is a matter of time, a matter of slowing down. Even, in some cases, of leaning back.

The Galleria degli Uffizi was built by Giorgio Vasari in 1560 to house the administrative and political offices (*uffizi*) of the Medici, the powerful and wealthy Florentine family that rose to prominence during the Italian Renaissance. The gallery is the home of the most important art collection in Italy and one of the most stunning in the world. It is hard not to run wild here, there is so much to see. Where should a person go first? To Botticelli's "Birth of Venus," to Filippo Lippi's "Madonna and Child with Angels," to Da Vinci's "Annunciation"? What about Michelangelo's "Holy Family," or that Raphael over there, or that Titian, or . . . ?

That was my state of mind when I met Hannes Keller in front of the gallery. We paid our entry fees and climbed the wide Vasari Staircase to the third floor, where 45 rooms of art are arranged along three corridors. Built in the shape of a big "U," the two long prongs are the East and West corridors, connected by a short (South) corridor that looks over the Arno River. From the West Corridor there is an entrance to the long *Corridoio Vasariano* (Vasari Corridor) that traverses the top of the Ponte Vecchio bridge to the Pitti Palace on the other side of the river.

The Uffizi is one of the most heavily visited museums in the world, and the lines to get in are legendary. Hannes and I were there late on a summer afternoon, so even though it was busy, we didn't get lost in a big crowd. The Uffizi stands next to another huge tourist attraction, the Palazzo Vecchio, whose tower dominates the skyline at the opening of the Uffizi's "U."

Surrounded by wondrous art at Florence's famous gallery, one might forget to consider rising above it all

the bared derriere of a white-bearded man.

This intentionally raunchy stuff stopped me in my tracks. I sat next to Hannes on the bench and leaned back to look. The archer had foliated legs and hooves for feet. His target, draped over a simple decorative frame as if it were a solid table, wore a gay, pointed cap that looked like a houseplant.

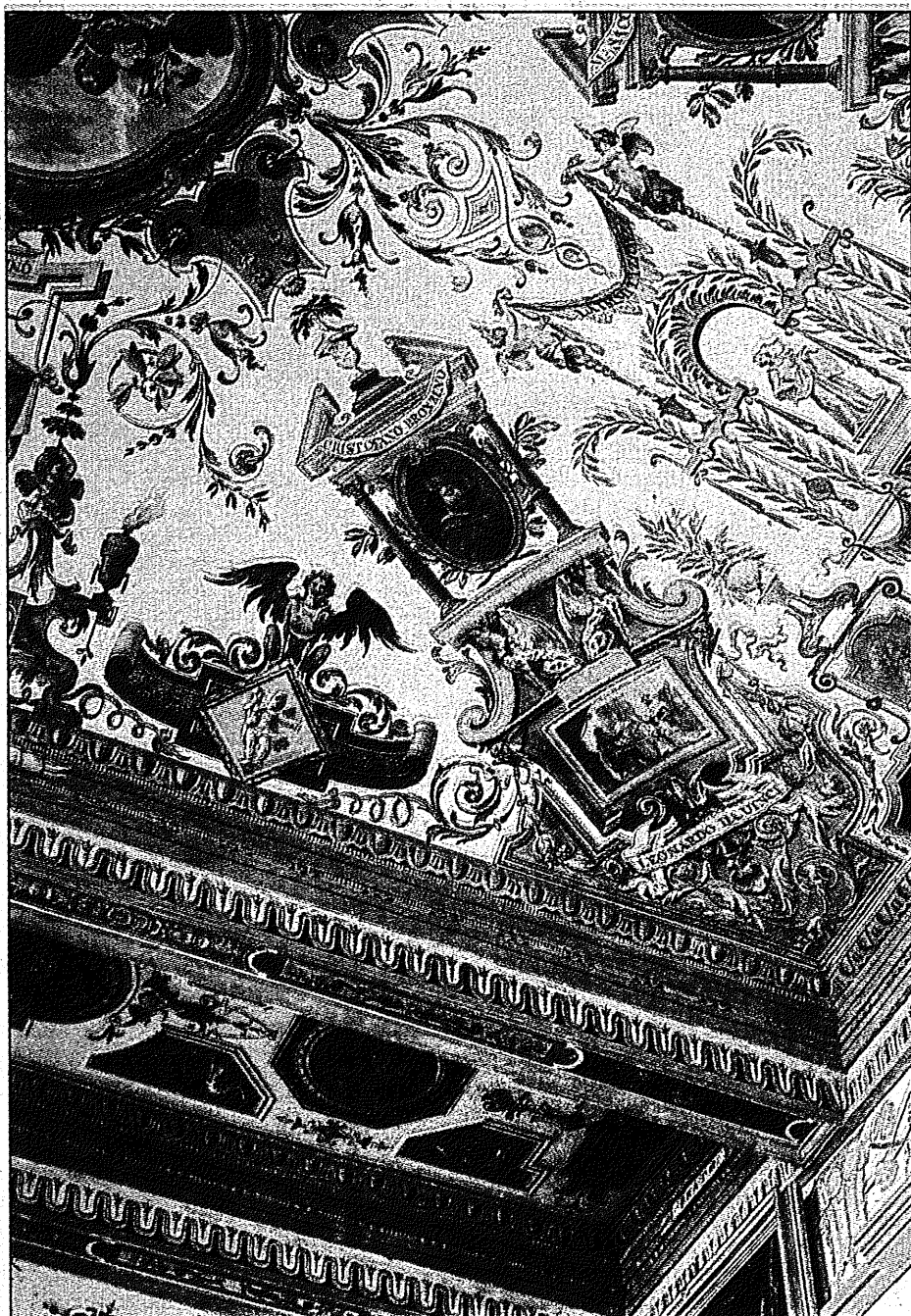
Surrounding the two characters in this fresco (frescos are paintings where watercolors are applied directly to wet plaster) were elaborate ornamental borders, some of them drapery, some of them pillars containing knobby faces with feathers for ears. There were perching birds and a kneeling woman who balanced herself on one foot on top of a painted column. Urns evolved out of clocks and fruit trees sprouted from flowering trees.

Hannes had stumbled onto one of the marvels of the Uffizi Gallery—the story of the Renaissance as told in "grotesques." I had been to the Uffizi before, but had never noticed these ceilings—maybe because they are 20 feet high, but more likely because I'd never slowed down to notice. The paintings are easy to see, if one only looks up.

Hannes and I went from bench to bench, leaning back, even lying down, to examine these frescoes. We spent almost an hour doing this, while everyone else in the gallery milled about in normal, upright fashion, oblivious to our fascination.

Divided by thick wood ceiling beams, each section of the East Corridor is devoted to one particular aspect of the Renaissance. In the "Sculptura" (Sculpture) section, names like Della Robbia, Donatello and Michelangelo are painted on the ceiling next to whimsical chisel-bearing figures; Filippo Lippi, Uccello, Verrocchio and Fra Angelico are represented in the "Pittura" (Painting) theme. There is "Architettura," "Poesia" (Poetry), "Musica," "Filosofia" and "Matematica" to consider.

The ceilings were painted in 1580 by Florentine painter Alessandro Allori and his students. Allori, an imitator of Michelangelo (and whose famous "Pearl Fishers" hangs in the nearby Palazzo Vecchio), took his cue for the ceiling paintings from the "grotesque" style that was sweeping Europe at the time. This art form had just been rediscovered in the remains of an ancient grotto underneath the Golden House of Nero in Rome. It was a fanciful, decorative type of painting that had been used in the Roman Empire, and Nero (AD



STEFANO TASSELLI



SONCIN GEROMETTA / Photo 20-20

Looking up:
Ceiling art painted in 1580, above.
At right, the East Corridor.



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On a wing: Fresco detail.

Inside the gallery, I swivel-necked my way along the East Corridor, noting the marble sculptures of emperors, the paintings of kings, queens and cardinals; the tapestries from Flanders and Medici workshops. But my mind was set on the gallery rooms with all those famous paintings.

I thought Hannes was right beside me in this rush, but when I turned around I saw him sitting down on a bench. What was he doing? I went back to find out. Pointing to the ceiling, he said with a great laugh, "How about that?" Looking up, I saw a vivid painting of a satyr-like creature taking aim with bow and arrow straight at