



IN THE NAME OF MICHELANGELO: AMERICAN DONORS HELP RESTORE THE ARTIST'S TOMB IN FLORENCE

LOCATED IN THE HEART OF FLORENCE, ITALY, THE 700-YEAR-OLD MONUMENTAL COMPLEX OF SANTA CROCE IS A GREAT CENTER OF ART AND CULTURE - A TRUE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ITALIAN ART FROM THE 13TH TO THE 20TH CENTURY. ITS BASILICA IS THE BURIAL PLACE OF SEVERAL GREAT ARTISTS, SCIENTISTS AND THINKERS LIKE MICHELANGELO, GALILEO, MACHIAVELLI, AND ROSSINI. OVER THE PAST COUPLE OF YEARS, AMERICAN DONORS MADE GENEROUS CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE AMERICAN FUND FOR OPERA DI SANTA CROCE, TO SUPPORT THE RESTORATION OF THE TOMB AND ALTARPIECE OF MICHELANGELO.

New York resident Donna Malin is a firm believer in volunteerism. For much of her 30-year legal career, most of it at the multinational healthcare company Johnson & Johnson, she spent her spare time working with homeless people and the organizations that support them.

And when she retired in 2017, Malin joined the Board of a nonprofit organization that provides safe housing, critical services, and ground-breaking programs to help homeless women and their children rebuild their lives. "That's how I embarked on my retirement," she says with a laugh. "No goofing off."

A FONDNESS FOR FLORENCE

“My first visit to Italy was as a teenager when I went with my mother,” she says. “I fell in love with Florence, as one does of course. And later as I began to be able to afford to go back, I went every year, sometimes multiple times. These days, I spend three to four months a year in the city.”

In 2014, Malin “dipped [her] toe in the water” and began supporting restoration projects at the Santa Croce. The nonprofit Opera di Santa Croce has been in charge of the upkeep of the church and monumental complex since the 14th century. To ensure that this extraordinary cultural heritage is passed on to future generations, it relies solely on ticketing and the generosity of private individuals, foundations and corporations, as it does not receive any public funding.

That year, Malin also made a donation to Santa Croce’s first crowdfunding campaign. Called #CrazyForPazzi, its purpose was to restore the loggia of the Pazzi Chapel,

which was in a critical state of decay. The results of the campaign exceeded the target and over \$100,000 was raised from 859 donors, 75 per cent of which were from the United States.

“I was invited to go and meet the restorers, climb up on the scaffolding, see how the work was going, try not to fall off the scaffolding,” she says with another laugh. “And that started a wonderful friendship with Paola Vojnovic, who approached me in late 2016 to ask me to participate in the project to restore the tomb of Michelangelo and the altarpiece of his family.”

IN THE NAME OF MICHELANGELO

Art historian Paola Vojnovic, who is in charge of External Relations for Opera di Santa Croce, holds a graduate degree in Renaissance art from Syracuse University in New York. On the crowdfunding for the restoration of the loggia of the Pazzi chapel, she said: “We did it through Kickstarter. It was very successful but the donors did not get any tax deductions. In 2016, when



we wanted to raise money to restore the tomb and altarpiece of Michelangelo, we decided to get more serious about fundraising. The Italian Cultural Institute in New York suggested we contact KBFUS, and we opened the American Fund for Opera di Santa Croce with them in February 2017.”

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PAOLA VOJNOVIC

The campaign *In the Name of Michelangelo* was launched to restore the tomb of Michelangelo and the altarpiece of the Buonarroti family, both created after the death of the celebrated artist in 1564. Sixty-six members of his Buonarroti family are buried in Santa Croce. The altarpiece, *Christ Meeting Veronica on the Way to Calvary*, was painted by Giorgio Vasari, court artist under Cosimo I the Medici, the Grand Duke of Tuscany.

The marble tomb was in dire need of a thorough cleaning and the altarpiece, measuring almost 15 feet in height and 9 feet wide, was badly damaged in a flood in 1966.

The campaign ran from February 2017 to September 2018 and raised about \$136,000, of which \$86,000 came through its American Friends Fund. The restoration project was completed in late 2018.

AN OUTPOURING OF LOVE

“Americans love Italy, they love Tuscany, they love

Florence,” says Vojnovic. “Many tell me they really find peace and serenity when they come to Santa Croce. It becomes their special place to visit every time they come to Florence.”

Vojnovic says that in Italy, raising funds from private donors is a relatively new field but it will become increasingly important in coming years.

“Italy is the country with the largest number of UNESCO world heritage sites,” she says. “There is a huge need for fundraising to become part of everyday museum management.”

“When we did the crowdfunding, people would knock on our office door and contribute even small amounts of money. There was a really beautiful outpouring of love that came from around the world.

When people care enough to send money from Australia or the United States for the tomb of Michelangelo, it actually makes Michelangelo come alive because we never stop talking about his genius.”

SUPPORT FOR WORKS OF HISTORIC VALUE

Like Malin, Phoenix resident Joan Cremin began travelling to Europe when she was a teenager. In 2016, she attended a presentation about the Michelangelo project that was given by Opera di Santa Croce at the Phoenix Art Museum.

“That piqued my interest in supporting the project,” she says. So much so, that the following year she travelled to Florence, and visited Santa Croce just as the restoration process was underway. Following that visit, she made a donation through the American Fund for Opera di Santa Croce.

A retired French literature teacher, she has donated widely to causes such as education, health, performing arts and museums.

Her contribution to Santa Croce was the first time she decided to support a project outside the U.S. "It fit very well with my interest in art," she says. "The tomb and the altarpiece are highly important in terms of artistic and historic value."

"I WAS UP ON THE SCAFFOLDING AND NEARLY EYE-TO-EYE WITH THE FIGURES IN THE SCULPTURES. I FELT LIKE I WAS IN HEAVEN."

DONNA MALIN

A SILENT THANK YOU FOR THE GIFT OF BEAUTY

"Michelangelo is my favorite artist and sculptor," Donna Malin tells us. "I've visited Santa Croce on every trip I've made over the past decades. I've stood in front of his tomb and wept and said a silent 'thank you' to him for the beauty that he created through his art and architecture.

So I was thrilled to be asked to participate in the restoration of his final resting place. I jumped right in. I had pretty active involvement in it, meeting with the restorers and learning about the process. I was up on the scaffolding and nearly eye-to-eye with the figures in the sculptures. I felt like I was in heaven."

In November 2018, at a celebration at the church marking the completion of the project, Malin was invited to speak on behalf of the 132 donors from 14 countries who contributed to the project.

"And when I was standing in that magnificent church, in front of that beautiful restoration, giving a very modest speech in Italian thanking Michelangelo for the beauty he brought to this world, it was a very emotional experience. It was a distinct honor."

Opera di Santa Croce is currently developing an international exhibition "Sisters in Liberty: From Florence, Italy to New York, New York," scheduled to open at Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration from October 11, 2019 to April 26, 2020. The exhibition will explore the long standing cultural ties between Italy and the United States. U.S. donors can contribute to this project through the American Fund for Opera di Santa Croce.

COVER: *Christ Meeting Veronica on the Way to Calvary*, by Giorgio Vasari, altarpiece of the Buonarroti family at Santa Croce.

PAGE 2: Paola Vojnovic and Donna Malin, pictured in front of the tomb of Michelangelo at Santa Croce.

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