

CULTURE ART BOOKS

After the flood, the restoration

Once thought ruined, Florentine masterpiece is getting a second life

BY RANDY KENNEDY

More than most Renaissance artists, Giorgio Vasari knew the perilous existence of human creations. In "The Lives of the Artists," the chronicle of the great quattrocento painters and sculptors for which he is best known, he describes how a stone bench, hurled off a parapet by an anti-Medici mob in Florence in 1527, "chanced, as Fortune would have it," to land on Michelangelo's "David," breaking one of its arms into three pieces.

In 1966, as fortune would also have it, one of Vasari's most imposing works met an even worse fate. The Arno overflowed its banks, flooding Florence, and Vasari's "The Last Supper," hanging in the museum of the Church of Santa Croce only a few blocks from the river, was among the many masterworks in its path. This panoramic scene, almost 21 feet long, or 6.5 meters, and 8 feet, or 2.5 meters, tall, remained submerged in muddy, oily water for at least a dozen hours, and when it was finally rescued, its poplar panels were as damp as sponges, the paint atop them peeling off.

For more than four decades, the painting sat out of view, and almost totally unviewable, covered in what looked like a pie crust of protective paper to shield its fragile surface. Some considered the painting, completed in 1546, beyond saving. But in a conservation lab a few blocks away from where the work was damaged, it is now slowly coming back to life, inch by inch. As part of an initiative by the Opificio delle Pietre Dure, one of Italy's most renowned restoration labs, and the Getty Trust in Los Angeles, whose foundation has committed over \$2 million to help train replacements for an aging generation of panel-painting conservators, the painting's five panels were recently rejoined for the first time since before the flood.

The damage to the work was grave. "One of my colleagues called it desperate, and I think that was right," said Deborah Marrow, the director of the Getty Foundation. "It was scary to look at." But the painting has now revealed itself after four years of toil to be remarkably intact in many places.

Cecilia Frosinini, a conservator on the project, said in an interview that the paint loss is estimated at 20 to 30 percent. But showing a reporter close-ups of the painting's surface recently using FaceTime with her iPhone, Ms. Frosinini pointed to many of the work's most dramatic passages — the faces of Jesus and of St. John, and the figure of Judas looming large and dramatic in the foreground — that had survived the disaster and intervening years quite well. "We were amazed, really amazed because we had expected something much worse," she said.

The back of the panels, despite being pocked with tiny wormholes and with modern wood patches in places, remains mostly original, with one of the innovative cross-supports Vasari designed still in place. "If the effort to restore this painting had been made years ago," Ms. Frosinini said, the paint would have separated from the wood, which would probably not have survived. But with technological advances to repair the wood, "we can now perform a kind of miracle, the possibility to restore it in a more accurate way," she said.



New restoration techniques have made it possible to rejoin the panels that comprise Giorgio Vasari's "Last Supper," completed in 1546.

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From the 12th century until canvas became more common in the late 15th century, wood panel was used by most artists for portable paintings. The "Mona Lisa" is on panel, as is Jan van Eyck's Ghent altarpiece, for example, but wood can be a conservation nightmare, highly susceptible to humidity and temperature changes.

On the Vasari, the conservators used animal glue, as Renaissance artists did for repairs, and wood supports to allow the painting to continue to shift depending on temperature and humidity.

"The wood never really dies," Ms. Frosinini said. "It continues to move." (Vasari painted the piece in his studio on transportable panels because its commissioners, the nuns of the Florentine convent of Le Murate, did not want a male artist working in their cloister for as long as two years.) In recent weeks,

as conservators have prepared to turn fully to the surface of "The Last Supper," they received a better-known panel painting to work on, Leonardo's unfinished "The Adoration of the Magi" from the Uffizi; it will undergo treatment next year for problems that are minor in comparison with those of the Vasari.

Carrying her phone quickly behind the Leonardo, Ms. Frosinini showed yet another painting in for a cleaning, a work on canvas that will probably never be displayed so close to its two Renaissance roommates again: Jackson Pollock's 1947 "Alchemy," one of his earliest poured paintings, from the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice.

But for now, the focus is on finishing the Vasari. Two longtime Italian panel-painting experts, Ciro Castelli and Mauro Parri, came out of retirement to help with the project and to train young conservators during the process. (Mr. Castelli's career as a conservator got its start in Florence months after the 1966 flood, and he helped to work on many of the most water-damaged pieces at the time. "Few of them were as

bad as the Vasari," he said.)

One discovery the conservators have made on the painting's surface is a previously unknown inscription near the bottom saying that the piece was restored long before, in 1594, just 20 years after Vasari's death. There is also evidence on the painting of damage from two previous floods, making its survival all the more remarkable.

A 2010 grant from the Getty Foundation of more than \$400,000 to restore the painting is now coming to an end, and conservators are looking for another sponsor to help them finish the work.

"I hope other people will support this," Ms. Marrow said. "This is a big project, and it should have partners."

Ms. Frosinini said the goal was to complete the painting's rebirth by 2016. "It will be the 50th anniversary of the flood," she said. "The river has tried to get this painting, and it would be very nice to say, 50 years later, that it did not succeed."

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BY THE NUMBERS INTERNATIONAL CULTURE



A worldwide menu of prices for Michelin-starred meal

Over the past few months, the French tire company Michelin rolled out the latest editions of its famous red guidebook series, which began in 1900 as a humble road manual for France's first motorists but has turned into a gastronomic bible, loved and loathed for its influence over haute cuisine.

The guide's highest rating, three stars, is still regarded as a crowning achievement for a restaurant, a signal to discerning travelers that they should expect a superlative meal, and a superlative bill. But the price of entry to a Michelin three-star restaurant can vary considerably from one country to the next. Not counting Switzerland, which has only two top-rated restaurants, France is on average the most expensive country in the world for a Michelin three-star meal. Paris is to blame, skewing the average with its preponderance of sticker shock-inducing addresses — like Guy Savoy, Arpège and Alain Ducasse au Plaza Athénée, where the least expensive set dinners cost more than 300 euros, or \$410, per person.

While three-star dining rarely comes cheap, this has been a good year for budget-conscious foodies, especially in Europe, where three of the four new restaurants to receive three stars offer set menus for less than €100 per person. One of them is DiverXo, Madrid's first three-star address, a 30-seat Asian-Spanish fusion restaurant where dinner lasts up to four hours and comes as a barrage of artistic small plates that the young chef David Muñoz has described as intentionally "brutal."

While the guide has incorporated in recent years restaurants, like DiverXo, that are less traditional, less expensive and less French, the results of its secret inspection and ranking process still can lead to some head-scratching. The food critic Andy Hayler recently told the South China Morning Post that the Hong Kong and Macau rankings were "extraordinarily erratic" and cited the three-star Chinese restaurant in the Four Seasons Hotel, Lung King Heen, as an example. "I could throw a stick in Chinatown in London and hit a restaurant of that standard," he said. STEPHEN HEYMAN

Average minimum price per person for a Michelin Guide 3-star dinner

NUMBER OF 3-STAR RESTAURANTS	COUNTRY	AVERAGE PRICE IN U.S. DOLLARS	AVERAGE PRICE IN LOCAL CURRENCY
2	Switzerland	\$262	232 francs
27	France	245	€177
10	United States	221	\$221
7	Hong Kong and Macau	216	1,658 H.K. dollars
3	Belgium	204	€148
8	Italy	192	€139
11	Germany	185	€134
4	Britain	183	€113
8	Spain	182	€132
28	Japan	171	¥17,762
2	Netherlands	147	€107

Note: Prices do not include drinks and tips, the cost of which can vary considerably from one country to the next. Price information for Hong Kong and the United States was supplied by the restaurants; all other price information comes from the latest Michelin guides.

Source: Michelin Guide

Toad and mole leap to big stage

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sweetness and poetry with admirable skill. (Mr. Kemp's Ratty is particularly fine, with an Edwardian fighter-pilot allure.) Mr. Robinson's narration, and his occasional wry participation in the action, is of a similarly affecting simplicity and charm, the words of a man for whom nothing is more real, or more delightful, than the invention of stories.

Children are perhaps the market for this "The Wind in the Willows," but adult concerns permeate its Edwardian world. (The costumes, by Nicky Gilibrand, are all rumpled tweed and tartan plus fours.) Social change portends in the shape of the upstart weasels, with their flashy, subversive

gear and trashing of Toad's ancestral home. The car with which Toad runs amok is the harbinger of mechanical, industrial change in the bucolic land. Toad himself — imperious, self-centered, larger than life — is the landowner bringing doom upon himself as he pursues his own way of life with hedonistic glee and the certainty of his own right to do so.

All of this is subtly suggested, if you're feeling suggestible. Otherwise, "The Wind in the Willows" is joyously innocent fun, a paean to an England that is now — and was perhaps even then — a place mostly of the imagination.

"The Wind in the Willows," Duchess Theater, London. Through Feb. 1; roh.org.uk

PEOPLE

It was the question that loomed over Broadway last spring: Would BARBRA STREISAND attend a performance of "I'll Eat You Last," the one-woman play starring BETTE MIDLER as the real-life Hollywood agent SUE MENGERS, whose falling-out with Ms. Streisand is the juicy meat of the show? Ms. Streisand never went, but her publicist confirmed this week that the singer did see "I'll Eat You Last" during its run this month at the Geffen Playhouse in Los Angeles. The publicist issued a statement from Ms. Streisand, which was first reported in the Los Angeles Times: "It was a wonderful per-

formance. Bette made me laugh in the same way that Sue did, and she touched my heart as Sue did. It isn't the whole story of course. Some of the facts are not true, but it was a very enjoyable evening." — Patrick Healy

hearsals, workshops and performances from its stars. — Patrick Healy

The work "Gong Fu Tie" was billed as a masterpiece of Chinese calligraphy created a thousand years ago, a scroll dominated by just nine characters, set with fluid brush strokes by the Song Dynasty poet SU SHI. Sotheby's put the work up for auction in New York last September, expecting it to fetch up to \$500,000. After fierce bidding it was acquired for \$8.2 million by a wealthy Shanghai businessman and collector, LIU YIQIAN. But just months before it was to go on display at Mr. Liu's private museum in Shang-



BARBRA STREISAND, BETTE MIDLER, HUGH JACKMAN, PIERRE BOULEZ

hai, three art historians have declared the work a forgery, probably produced in the 19th century using an old method for copying and retracing art works. Sotheby's issued a statement after the allegations were made saying that the auction house stands by the work and intends to investigate the matter. — David Barboza

The conductor and composer PIERRE BOULEZ has withdrawn from two weeks' worth of concert with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra between Feb. 20 and March 1 — nearly a month before his 89th birthday. The orchestra, announcing the cancellation, attributed Mr. Boulez's withdrawal to unspecified health issues.

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PHOTOGRAPHS: REUTERS, EPA, EPA, EPA

James McParland, a law unto himself

Pinkerton's Great Detective. The Amazing Life and Times of James McParland. By Beau Riffenburgh. Illustrated. 384 pages. Viking. \$32.95.

BY BEN MACINTYRE

The lobby of the Idanha Hotel in Boise, Idaho, was the scene of great excitement in the spring and summer of 1907. There, most mornings, sat a large man with a luxurious, curled mustache,

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smoking cigars and loudly holding forth, surrounded by newspaper reporters and gawping onlookers. Behind him, guarding against the threat of assassination, stood a former cowboy, armed with a Colt .45 and a 20-inch blade hidden inside a walking stick. One of those who stopped to stare was the actress Ethel Barrymore, in town with a touring company. The object of curiosity introduced himself: "I'm a Pinkerton man."

James McParland was not just a Pinkerton man. He was the living embodiment of Pinkerton's National Detective Agency, the most famous sleuth in America's first detective organization, the lawman who had smashed the Molly Maguires in the eastern coal fields and brought the Wild Bunch to justice in the West, a figure who inspired adulation and loathing in roughly equal measure.

McParland was in Boise for the trial of the leaders of the Western Federation of Miners, accused of the murder of Frank Steunenberg, who, as governor of Idaho, had crushed a miners' rebellion. McParland, the scourge of organized labor, had tracked down the suspects, extracted several confessions and planted a spy on the defense team. The case was seen as a major battle in America's ferocious labor wars. Tension was

high, and McParland was thoroughly enjoying the attention. He took Barrymore upstairs and lifted a mattress to reveal an arsenal of Winchester, remarking that "there were rifles under every mattress in the hotel."

McParland was a showman and a braggart, a bully prepared to bend and break the law in pursuit of his quarry, but he was also a man of high intelligence and remarkable courage, a supremely successful law enforcer and an intensely polarizing force in the confrontation between workers and bosses during the growth of America's labor unions. To railroad and mine owners, government officials and bank tellers in fear of armed robbery, he was a bulwark against lawlessness and union extremism. To mine workers, union members and labor leaders, he was a symbol of ruthless oppression, the hated hireling of the rich, an agent provocateur, a perjurer and a sneak. Hyperbole followed McParland everywhere. The Appeal to Reason, a pro-union newspaper, described him thus: "Were the world's supply of emetic poured down the hot throat of hell, the ultimate imp of the last vile vomit would be an archangel in good standing compared with this feculent fiend." Now that is balanced reporting.

Locating the real James McParland amid the invective, acclaim and invention (including his own) is no easy task, and Beau Riffenburgh, author of "Shackleton's Forgotten Expedition," has made good use of the Pinkerton archives to produce the fullest and fairest biography to date. Yet McParland continues to be an oddly mysterious character, obscured by his very notoriety.

He was born in, or around, 1844, in County Armagh, in the northern Irish province of Ulster, and joined the great Irish Catholic exodus to America in his 20s. After working as a laborer, police-



The detective James McParland.

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man and liquor store owner, he was taken on by Allan Pinkerton, the hard-nosed Scot whose name would become synonymous with private crime detection. McParland's big break came when Franklin B. Gowen, a railroad magnate who aimed to gain control of the coal industry, hired Pinkerton's agency to investigate (by which he meant destroy) the Molly Maguires, the shadowy Irish brotherhood of miners and tavern owners accused of a string of violent crimes in the Pennsylvania coalfields. The Molly Maguires, like McParland, have been subject to widely divergent interpretations. Some have depicted them as class warriors, standing up for miners in an era of appallingly low wages, crushing poverty and dire working conditions. In the eyes of Pinkerton, McParland and

most of America, they were thugs and terrorists, responsible for sabotage, beatings and at least 16 murders.

Mr. Riffenburgh deftly undermines the more extravagant claims made on behalf of the Molly Maguires, noting that many of their misdeeds were carried out as "responses to personal grievances" and "not as part of the larger class struggle." McParland's role in the prosecutions is deeply contentious. He was prepared to lie on the witness stand, and some of the confessions he claimed to have heard were too good to be true. Is it likely, Mr. Riffenburgh wonders, that "so many men involved in heinous crimes would have so lightly confessed to someone they had not known long" and "in such a way that no one else could hear the conversation"? The defense insisted that McParland actively encouraged crimes he then failed to prevent.

McParland rose to become manager of Pinkerton's operations west of the Mississippi. Over the next 30 years, he investigated (or, more accurately, supervised others in investigating, and then took credit for) a string of high-level cases involving train robbery, swindling and the notorious Wild Bunch led by Butch Cassidy.

The "Great Detective" was created by a feverish press and McParland's self-mythologizing. He kept his feelings to himself. "We will never know for certain what he believed, what he felt, why he acted as he did," Mr. Riffenburgh writes. It's a candid admission, but one that inevitably leaves the reader unsatisfied.

Ben Macintyre is the author, most recently, of "Double Cross: The True Story of the D-Day Spies."

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