

Dear Friends,

Greetings from Italy! As usual I have brought these greetings back with me instead of sending them from the field, as I had no laptop with me and there was always more Italy coming. But I am now safely home, and here is my electronic postcard. Read it in [Print Layout View](#), or some of the pictures may not show.

I arrived at the Florence airport on October 1. I had reserved a car and planned to drive by scenic mountain roads to my first stop in San Marino, not visiting Florence at all until the end of the trip. I thought it would be a pleasant jaunt through some of the most beautiful countryside in the world. But I didn't get to Florence until mid-afternoon. Then I had to spend an hour convincing Thrifty Rent-a-Car that while I did not really mind the 20 dents in the car they wanted to give me (up from the 14 they first admitted to), I would not accept a car with a busted tail-light that made it illegal to operate. And when I was finally able to pull onto the *Autostrada* (to bypass Florence), I headed off confidently at high speed in the wrong direction.

So by the time I got onto my first scenic mountain road, the shadows were lengthening. I was right about the beauty part – the most romantic Tuscan hillsides, valleys of oak and olive, hayfields and vineyards, stone villages and icy rushing brooks, greens and browns and yellows.



But I was wrong about how long it would take to drive to San Marino on those roads. Mountain switchbacks kept me to 20 mph. Unmapped dead ends required going back over miles already traveled. The sun went down and so did my blood sugar. The moon went up and so did my exhaustion level. I had been traveling for 20 hours

before I even started to drive, so I began to feel as if I were competing in some insane biathlon, flying first and then driving. I couldn't even get onto the *Autostrada* now because I couldn't find it – it wasn't on my map (it was on another sheet which I didn't have with me). Finally, near midnight, I made it to San Marino, my base for the first part of the trip.

The most important thing about San Marino is that it is not Italy but an independent republic, by far the oldest in the world, dating its founding (who knows how accurately) to 301 AD. Although only about the size of Manhattan Island, San Marino is a member of the United Nations. They install a new pair of leaders, called Captains-General, in a colorful ceremony twice a year, including one the day before my midnight arrival. This



kind of thing is catnip to me, as a boundary fan, and if I had known about the ceremony I would have arrived a day earlier and seen the show. As you enter the Republic there is a banner across the road reading *BENVENUTI NELL'ANTICA TERRA DELLA LIBERTÀ* [Welcome to the Ancient Land of Liberty]. When he conquered Italy, Napoleon decided to leave San Marino independent and unmolested. So did Garibaldi and Mussolini, and I felt I could do no less.

San Marino is set very dramatically on a mountain called Mount Titano, which rises from the surrounding plain like a Utah reef. The city is on top (its signature three fortress





towers shown above in idealized form on its flag), but there are other towns also, called *castelli* [castles]. San Marino City is a steep place of stone streets that seem to go up in both directions like an Escher print, a great place to be if you're an antelope but somewhat strenuous for a portly gentleman with a touch of gout.

Nevertheless I explored San Marino pretty thoroughly. I visited the *Palazzo Civico*, where the government meets under the protection of the Guardians of the Fortress [*Guardia de la Rocca*] in their

Ruritanian red and green uniforms (right). I took the cable car down the mountain to Borgo Maggiore. I had lunch high above the plain, where you could see as far as the sea. I trudged up the hilly streets and back down them again, when I could find any going down, crammed though they were with shops offering tourists the same small selection of identical gimcrack souvenirs. It has to be said that the views and the quirk of sovereignty are the main attractions of the place – an enclave with sovereignty but no bookstores has a limited appeal after a while.



But I was only there for a limited stay, so it was all right. And it was fun to be there, and a good base from which to explore the surrounding hills and hill towns. I drove a lot through the mountains and valleys – as much as I've traveled I can't think of anyplace quite as beautiful and romantic, wild and tamed at the same time. Deep colors, hills in tiers that will not quit, olive and grape and plowed fields at 45° angles, peaks and peaklets in astounding shapes, a patchwork of cliffs and pastures and woods and waste and gullies. It is beyond Krazy Kat. The hills look (unsurprisingly) like the background scenes in Italian Renaissance paintings.

I visited nearby San Leo, where a stout fortress perches on top of a mountain like the Ark on Ararat (below left), and the old Roman seaside town of Rimini, with its evil-looking



castle (above right), and dipped my tootsies in the Adriatic Sea. At Urbino (left), another



antelope city once the site of a brilliant Renaissance court; most of the furnishings and decorations are gone from the Ducal Palace, but the famous *studiolo* (the duke's study paneled with inlaid *trompe-l'oeil* shelves and cabinets) is still there (see below), similar to the one from Gubbio now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York.



And then it was time to move on to Ravenna. Ravenna was the capital of Italy from the beginning of the fifth century, after Rome became indefensible; later it was the capital of barbarian Italian kingdoms. Theodoric the Goth, who succeeded the Roman emperors in the west, was buried there in a huge stone mausoleum. Ravenna was also the center of Byzantine power in Italy during the unfortunate attempted imperial reconquest begun by Justinian. By the end of Late Antiquity the best was over for Ravenna, but the mosaics in the churches (the ones Charlemagne did not loot with the Pope's connivance) still remain as one of the official wonders of the world. Unlike many such wonders, they really live up to their reputation, and I spent several days going from one to another. Below are a starry field, from an imperial mausoleum, and a portrait of the Empress Theodora, from San Vitale. There are lots of other sights in Ravenna, too, including the tomb where



Dante was laid in 1321. [Why was Dante buried in Ravenna? They had to do it; he was dead, you see. Very old joke.]



It was in Ravenna that I made the startling discovery that I could speak Italian. Not well, of course, and without knowing a lot of the vocabulary or most of the complicated inflected verb forms, but enough to manage. For example, San Vitale stands in a sort of park, with the exit gate near a pleasant café, and I liked to have lunch at this café and then sit on a bench just inside the gate. But you can't enter without a ticket, and I had already used my ticket. How to ask the guard to let me in? I pulled my socks up around my ears and said *Per piacere, signor, ho anche visitato la chiesa, ma ora vorrei solamente sedere in quello banco la* [Please, sir, I have already visited the church, but now I would like just to sit on that bench over there]. I'm sure my Italophone friends can see the errors in this little speech, but it was all I needed, and no one could have been more surprised than I to hear myself say it. In Italy my Italian sort of grew by itself, like those toys that expand to ten times their original size when placed in water. Now it is drying out again.

The Italians weren't surprised to hear me speak Italian, and would always reply in rapid Italian themselves. Of course I couldn't understand rapid Italian, so I would have to say *per favore, può parla più adagio, io sono un' straniero* [please, can you speak more slowly, I am a foreigner]. At the start I sometimes said *andante* instead of *adagio*, which confused people. It amused me that I would have to tell an Italian that I was a foreigner. But after the first week I spoke Italian almost all the time, except in my hotel and sometimes even there. I found I could read it a lot better than I could speak it, and could read brochures and museum labels and public notices and the like without much difficulty. As with Portuguese, if you squint just right and make certain substitutions, Italian words turn into English words – *oggetti* (with a soft g), for example, for *objects* – or at least into related words such as *distintivi* for *insignia*. Even a terrifying word like *pedonalizzazione*, with its three menacing z's, swims into focus as *footliness-ization* – it means *changing an area into a pedestrian zone*, as they were doing with the Cathedral Square in Florence, according the notices at bus stops explaining why the routes were changing. I probably cannot speak Italian any longer now that I am home, but it was very convenient to be suddenly able to do it there. Thank you, Lord *Ghannescia*! Thou anointest my head with extra virgin Italian olive oil; my cup runneth over.

I had planned to make some side trips from Ravenna, but found enough to do and see in the city that I didn't want to leave, and also I had injured my foot somewhat and preferred not to drive. So I parked my car next to the hotel and did not move it until I left for Ferrara, and in Ferrara I did the same until I was ready to leave for Florence. I really didn't need the car after I got out of the hills – Ravenna and Ferrara are flat as a pool table and people get around on bicycles – and I certainly didn't need or want to drive in the cities. But there was no way to get rid of it, because I had to return it at the Amerigo Vespucci (!) Airport in Florence. I got from city to city on the *Autostrade*, which are terrific roads except for the Italian habit of zooming at 90 miles an hour to within an inch of your back bumper and then hovering there honking angrily. Personal space is a concept unknown on Italian highways, but when I turned on my flashers the tailgaters



usually dropped back. It was satisfying to cruise at 120, even though it was in kilometers and was really only 72.

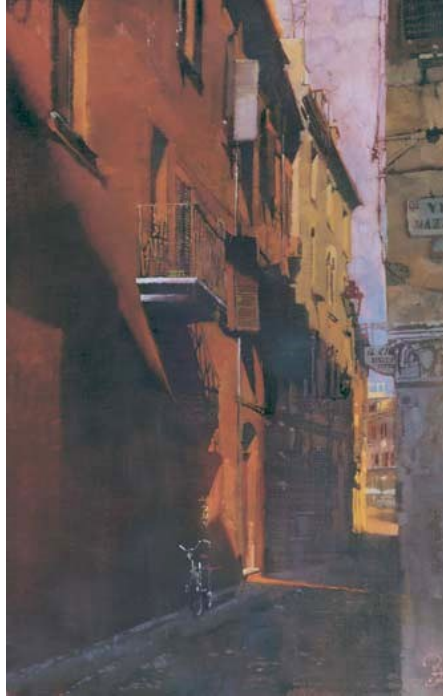
Ravenna, apart from the famous sights, is a very pleasant small Italian city, with winding ancient streets and faded bright colors and stately *palazzi* and fantastic leaning towers. Here's a view of a largish Ravenna street, and a view of the *torre municipale* reassuringly braced in modern steel.



The smaller streets, of which I can't find a good picture on the Internet (none of these images are my own), give a different feel, as if you are all alone in an orange maze, following a curving wall forever. The Italian surrealist painter Giorgio de Chirico had a good feeling for streets like this – here is his *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* (1914).



Ferrara was more beautiful and interesting as a city than Ravenna. The older sections are an ideal of a medieval city, narrow alleys and crooked squares, romantic archways and projecting jettied upper stories, some buildings still standing after 1000 years. The new (Renaissance) section is straighter but still romantic. I could have done without the egg-shaped cobblestones, though. Below are two street scenes from the old town – a photo from the Internet and a painting (*Ferrara*) by Bernie Fuchs – and one from the Renaissance addition. In the center of town is the massive Castello Estense, once the seat of another brilliant court; my hotel was a block away. Here are two views of the *castello*, and two details from a fresco in another *palazzo* (the Palazzino Schifanoia) showing that genial old gangster Duke Borso d'Este, around 1471.







They say there is no bad food in Italy. I found some, one time, but it was only luck. Usually the food in the meanest café was at least as good as in a top-drawer Italian restaurant in America, and often much better. Breakfast was always provided in the hotel, usually a liberal buffet with ham and cheese and chewy rolls and delicate croissants and lots more, and *cappuccino* for those who wanted it. I wanted it but couldn't have it, but I found an *ersatz* wheat product called *Orzo* that was very good, prepared in the same way with steamed milk. There was also *cioccolata calda*, a rich thick hot chocolate nothing like our thin American cocoa.

*Luncio*, as I came to think of it, I would have in a café on the street wherever I happened to be ready for it after the tourism of the morning. Whatever I chose, and often I chose randomly from an Italian menu whose specialized vocabulary I couldn't quite read, was always superb. I remember especially a kind of pumpkin pasta that was so good I went back the next day for more. I would add a tomato salad (or sometimes a seafood salad, always really fresh), and for dessert a scoop of the best ice cream in the world, which I allowed myself because I could prove by pedometer readings that I was three times as active as I was at home.

By dinnertime I was usually very tired from trudging around the city all day, so instead of eating in a restaurant I would buy food at a local neighborhood grocery and have a picnic

in my room. These local groceries are nothing like ours. Dozens of kinds of *prosciutto crudo* and other smoked meats sliced so thin you can see through it, unimagined varieties of cheese, delicious Italian bread and olives, fizzy mineral water, and fresh fruit (almost clear yellow grapes like fat candy globes). What more could you want? I even found a hunter's sausage (*cacciatore*) made from wild boar (very rich and sharp). The food was one of the best parts of the trip. People always say that about Italy, and they are right. You can find food in France that is just as good, but there's a lot of bad food in France too, and you can't expect delight in any random café the way you can in Italy.

Everything was very expensive because the dollar is so low against the euro. There was nothing I could do about that, so I tried to ignore it. Euros are used by more than 20 countries (a few issue them without official permission), and while the fronts of the coins are the same everywhere, the backs are different for every state. I made a game of checking my change to try to find one from each issuing country. I didn't get them all – what are the odds of finding a coin from Cyprus or Andorra – but I got most of them. Finland! Ireland! Portugal! Luxembourg!

Speaking of Ireland, I noticed that when I bought a ticket for a museum or monument, sometimes saying *Ho sessantecinqué anni* [I am 65 years old] was enough to get discount (*biglietto ridotto*) or maybe even a free pass, but sometimes it wasn't because they would demand to see my passport and then refuse me a discount because I was an American (discounts were for EU citizens only). This irritated me (discrimination based on national origin! was I not just as creaky as a European geezer of the same age?), and sure and I began to feel the blood of the warlike O'Rubinstains of County Litvak boiling within me veins. The next time, I thought, I will claim to be an Irishman (and thus an EU citizen) whose passport is back at the hotel. The fact that this was technically dishonest did give me pause, but I never had to decide whether I would really do it because magically, as soon as I thought of this stratagem, just being 65 was always enough, and I was never again denied a discount. Go figure.



After almost a week in Ferrara I drove back to the Florence airport, returned my car, and took a taxi into Florence. I had reserved a room at a small hotel on the Via Bentaccordi, a narrow curved street in the Santa Croce quarter, curved because it followed the outline of the old Roman theatre. I thought it would be convenient to stay on a street I could immediately pick out on a map. The hotel was not very good but the map part worked well. Above is a picture of my street, and below is a view of Florence, with the Palazzo Vecchio (the



ancient City Hall) to the left, Brunelleschi's famous cathedral dome on the right, and the Tuscan hills in the background.



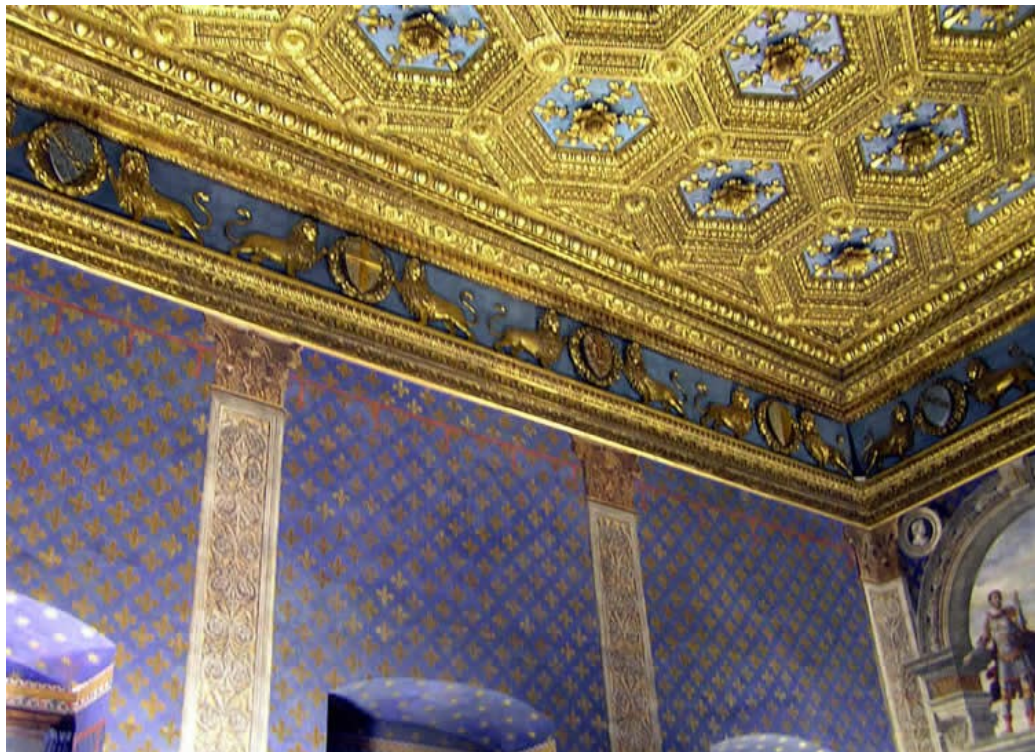
It is old news that Florence is a fascinating place, full of art and history and civilization. I had not been there for many years and it felt good to be back. Instead of seeing all the sights, I concentrated on those I wanted to see again, and on walking the streets. As in Ferrara, I found a local history museum where I figured out the layers of Florentine history as shown on the map – where the street plan followed the Roman layout, where the medieval and Renaissance walls were, to orient myself in space and time. The streets of Florence, in the old city anyway, form an intricate labyrinth; by the 1890s it had become so overgrown that the center had to be cleared out and the Roman streets restored. They didn't clear out the rest of the streets, though, and (except for the absence of cars) 19th century paintings give a better feel for the modern old city than current photographs. Below left is Telemaco Signorini's *Via Torta* (c. 1870), showing a scene a block from my hotel, and below right is Bernardo Strozzi's *A Florence Street in the Rain* (1888).



My favorite room in Florence is still the chapel in the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi which has Benozzo Gozzoli's magnificent *Journey of the Magi to Bethlehem* (1461), which contains all a person needs to know about the Renaissance. But the *Salone dei Gigli* (Room of the Lilies) in the Palazzo Vecchio is pretty good too, even though nothing came of the idea of having Botticelli paint frescoes on the walls. I show both on the next page.

I only left Florence once, to go by bus to the ancient hill town of San Gimignano (change at Poggiborsi), where a lot of the old squared-off towers (like the one in Ravenna, but a lot taller) still survive. It was picturesque, but very steep and crammed with tourists (I of course was not a tourist but a *traveler*). But this was nothing compared to Florence, where large groups of tourists plod in flocks behind tour leaders who hold flags or umbrellas for the group to follow. I have seen five or six such groups converge on the Piazza Santa Croce at the stroke of nine, waiting to be told about the church before being led back onto their buses.







It was kind of grim to watch them doing Florence in lockstep. Even in Ravenna you don't see this nearly as much, and in Ferrara not at all. They would all do much better to ditch the guide and have a *cioccolata calda* in the square.

I saw some good things in Florence apart from the monuments. There was a show on the history of the book with some evocative ancient tablets and papyri and Marco Polo's Bible. There was an exhibition of *trompe l'oeil* that would have knocked my socks off if I had been wearing socks. There was a show about *pietra dura* (pictures made entirely of closely fitted inlaid stones, but not mosaics) that was really beautiful, in the Medici Chapel which is itself decorated in *pietra dura*. The history museum had some terrific models of Roman Florence and of the congested downtown before the renovation of the 1890s. I rode a lot of buses on a three-day pass, not caring much where they went, seeing some of the city beyond the *Centro Storico* and exploring the south bank of the Arno. And I assembled a list of second-hand and antiquarian bookstores, along with a few stores selling new books, plotted them out on a city map, and trudged to every one (more than 40) looking for Italian heraldry books. I found quite a lot of them, too, beautiful things, enough to fill my carrion bag to the point where I could not have added a single leaf. Then Lord *Ghannescia*, blessed be He, cut off my supply so I wouldn't have to lug around a third bag.

Although my secretary had my itinerary in case of emergency, for all practical purposes I was completely out of communication with home for almost four weeks. I knew no one except the hotel staff, to whom I was just a passing face, and while I could speak Italian well enough to get to my park bench at San Vitale, I couldn't really talk to anyone on more than a superficial level. It was lonesome at times, but also pleasant to know that when a cell phone rang, it couldn't possibly be for me. Until I had been in Ravenna for a few days I couldn't even find a *Herald Tribune*, and so had no news of the wider world either. It made no difference at all. After about two weeks, America receded, and I began to feel as if this were my only life. I cut a headline out of the *Trib* and pasted it in my notebook – it said OVERALL, INTEREST IN U.S. IS SAID TO HAVE WANED.

But I was still glad to get into the taxi on October 24 and head for the airport and home. I did not suspect at first that the travel gods had prepared a closing farce for me, to match the opening farce of the mad biathlon to San Marino. I was scheduled to change planes at Frankfurt and fly direct from there to San Francisco, arriving in the early evening of the same day. But there was fog in Frankfurt, so the plane couldn't leave for Florence to pick me up until hours later, which meant I missed my connection. The airline said I could make my own arrangements and come back the next day, or I could fly to Frankfurt and they would put me up in a hotel, and I could continue to San Francisco the following afternoon via Toronto. Well, I thought, as many times as I've been to Frankfurt I've never left the airport, why not go there and spend the morning checking out the town?



But when I got there it turned out that Frankfurt didn't mean *Frankfurt*, exactly, it meant a hotel in Mörfelden, set in an exurban wasteland far from the city. And it soon became clear that everyone in this hotel (called the *NH*, perhaps for *no hope*) was in the same situation. Every fifteen minutes the hotel bus would bring in another load of stranded travelers, who lined up at the desk to turn in their airline vouchers. No one came any other way; no one was there on purpose; the parking lot was empty except for staff cars. It was like an existentialist novel – legions of the lost marooned together in an isolated hotel. The airline paid for meals, too, which were served in buffet style from six in the morning until midnight – cold ham and cabbage, half-cooked fish, whatever you liked! I had a dream that night that I was at the buffet and the dish on offer was pieces of dead owl with the feathers still on.

It was a comfortable enough hotel, I suppose, but there was a *Last Year at Marienbad* atmosphere I was glad to leave. I had to claim my bags at Frankfurt and recheck them, and then I had to do the same in Toronto, where I didn't even want to go, in order to clear American customs. It was 44 hours door to door by the time I got home, plus three time changes (Europe set their clocks back a week before America). Italy was terrific, but I have never been so glad to hear the Pacific surf outside my bedroom window, and the foghorns, and smell the misty salt breezes of home.

David

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