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Winter 2017

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On the cover:  
Giorgio Vasari's *The Last Supper* (1546) reinstalled in the Cenacolo, the old refectory of Santa Croce, fifty years after damage in the 1966 Florence flood, and following a major conservation effort supported by the Getty Foundation as part of its Panel Paintings Initiative. Photo: ZEPstudio/Opera di Santa Croce

The J. Paul Getty Trust is a cultural and philanthropic institution dedicated to the presentation, conservation, and interpretation of the world's artistic legacy. Through the collective and individual work of its constituent programs—Getty Conservation Institute, Getty Foundation, J. Paul Getty Museum, and Getty Research Institute—the Getty pursues its mission in Los Angeles and throughout the world, serving both the general interested public and a wide range of professional communities in order to promote a vital civil society through an understanding of the visual arts.

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The new year brings great excitement to the Getty, and great hope as we continue our good work in Los Angeles and around the world.

One exciting initiative that will launch in the fall is Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA (Los Angeles/Latin America). This region-wide exploration of Latin American and Latino art will bring together over seventy exhibitions across Southern California, along with a full slate of public programming, for a celebration beyond borders that will result in significant original research and leave a lasting legacy of scholarship. Stay tuned for updates in this magazine throughout the year.

In this issue, the Getty Foundation reports on the exciting culmination of a conservation project decades in the making. Giorgio Vasari's masterpiece, *The Last Supper* (1546), was severely damaged in the Florence flood of 1966. In 2010, the Opificio delle Pietre Dure, a premier conservation laboratory and training institution in Florence, received a three-year grant from the Getty Foundation for the structural conservation of Vasari's painting as part of its Panel Paintings Initiative. Exactly fifty years later, on November 4, 2016, the conserved painting was unveiled at the Museum of the Opera of Santa Croce, and a once-lost treasure was restored to Florence.

The Getty Research Institute (GRI) examines the history of the ancient ruins of Palmyra through its extensive collection of visual documents and publications related to the site. The destruction of Palmyra's ruins by ISIS makes these collections even more significant, and the GRI will launch its first online-only exhibition, *The Legacy of Ancient Palmyra*, in February, allowing virtual access to rare and unknown materials.

The path of conservation can lead to unusual alliances. Such is the case with the Getty Conservation Institute's work on outdoor painted sculptures, which has led to a partnership with the US Army Research Laboratory. For the military, concealment and camouflage dictate the need for matte paint coatings, while the majority of outdoor sculptures use a matte coating for aesthetic reasons. Together, the partners are formulating a new generation of matte coatings with enhanced performance and durability.

And finally in this issue, you will learn about a great French artist of the Enlightenment, Edme Bouchardon. A prolific artist who was celebrated in his time as a sculptor and a draftsman, Bouchardon was the royal sculptor for King Louis XV, creating the equestrian monument to the king that was destroyed during the French Revolution. The Getty Museum has partnered with the Musée du Louvre to



Jim Cuno

present the remarkable variety of the artist's oeuvre in the exhibition *Bouchardon: Royal Artist of the Enlightenment*, opening at the Getty Center on January 10.

I hope you had a joyous and safe holiday season, and are able to visit the Getty in the year to come. We are also always available on our website, or through Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.





## *The Last Supper* by Giorgio Vasari

Last stages of restoration at the Opificio delle Pietre Dure in Florence for Giorgio Vasari, *The Last Supper*. Photo: adicorbetta/Opera di Santa Croce

## Renaissance Masterpiece Unveiled on Fiftieth Anniversary of Florence Flood

On November 4, 2016, fifty years after the devastating Florentine flood of 1966, a crowd gathered at the Museum of the Opera of Santa Croce in Florence to witness the unveiling of Giorgio Vasari's masterpiece, *The Last Supper* (1546), after a seven-year conservation project funded by the Getty Foundation. Painted on five large wooden panels, each constructed of several planks, and measuring over eight by twenty-one feet, the painting was severely damaged in the flood five decades ago, and had been considered beyond repair. Or, at least, that was the opinion of experts up until ten years ago. Through the Foundation's Panel Paintings Initiative, a team of experts at one of the foremost conservation centers in Europe, the Opificio delle Pietre Dure (OPD) in Florence, has brought Vasari's artwork back to life.

Vasari painted the work over a six-month period for the Murate Convent, located only a few blocks from the Basilica of Santa Croce. The convent and church are located in one of the lowest parts of Florence, and the painting has been subjected to seven major floods in its 470-year lifespan. The first happened shortly after the artwork was finished, when the Arno River spilled over its banks in 1547. After 1845, the Murate Convent was repurposed as a prison, so *The Last Supper* was moved to the Santa Croce, where it continued to remain vulnerable to the Arno.

The most disastrous Florentine flood of modern times occurred on November 4, 1966. After heavy rainfall in Tuscany in October and early November, a flood wave burst into the city, covering more than seven thousand acres with water and sewage, and depositing 600,000 tons of mud and debris. The water reached heights of over twenty-two feet in the lowest parts of town, including the area of Santa Croce. Inside the basilica and adjacent museum, it swelled to well over eight feet high, damaging many irreplaceable artworks. *The Last Supper* was submerged in a slurry of water, mud, and heating oil for over twelve hours, which softened the paint and saturated the wooden support structure. When the





sludge receded, some of the paint and gesso migrated with it toward the bottom of the painting.

A heroic effort to save the artwork by a team of conservators and volunteers ensued. The rescuers tried to protect the painted surface by covering it with conservation-grade paper and, when that ran out, any type of tissue paper they could get their hands on. The sheets of paper prevented the paint from peeling off and sliding down. But this was just a first emergency response. The panels were drenched and needed to slowly dry out in a controlled environment to avoid warping and splitting. Conservators also had to carefully monitor humidity levels to avoid mold growth, which would have been disastrous. Faced with this monumental challenge, the painting's panels were put in storage, where they lay dormant for decades. Vasari's artwork was almost given up as a casualty of the flood.

### Modern-Day "Mud Angels"

As the flood water receded, Florentines, experts from neighboring cities, and a large number of volunteers from all over the world—nicknamed "mud angels"—descended on the city to rescue and perform first-aid measures to artworks, books, and historic materials. Among them was a young carpenter by the name of Ciro Castelli. His skills were desperately needed to build gurneys and crates to protect works of art as they were moved to safety. Amidst the chaos of the recovery effort, Castelli found his calling. At the OPD, he became a specialist in the structural conservation of panel paintings, and he is now one of the most respected experts in the world.

"The main focus of the Panel Paintings Initiative is to train the next generation of conservators of painting on wood," said Antoine Wilmering, senior program officer at the Getty Foundation. "The Foundation has

partnered with leading institutions in Europe and North America on projects that both offer unparalleled educational opportunities and conserve great works of art. As a premier conservation laboratory and training institution, the OPD was the ideal partner, as it represents over fifty years of experience in the structural conservation of panel paintings."

### Skillful Solutions

The Getty Foundation was fortunate to have the Soprintendente of the OPD, Dr. Marco Ciatti, serve on the initiative's international advisory committee. In 2010, the OPD received a three-year grant from the Foundation for the conservation of Vasari's painting. For the first time since the flood, conservators felt ready to face the challenge of *The Last Supper's* conservation. The intense water saturation caused the wood to soften and expand, in turn

stressing the painted surface and causing dramatic cracks and breaks. Wooden supports on the back of the artwork that kept the multi-panel object structurally sound also failed, leaving the painting in pieces. The painting's conservation treatment offered training opportunities for both mid-career and advanced-level conservators. During the course of the project, additional outside panel experts consulted with the OPD team, allowing the trainees to observe peer-to-peer decision making at the highest level. Castelli, an esteemed and dedicated teacher, led the training residencies at the OPD. He was ably assisted by Mauro Parri and Andrea Santacesaria, who benefitted from the initiative's international collaboration with conservation experts in Brussels, Madrid, London, and New York. Conservators from England, Hungary, Italy, and the United States completed training at all phases of the painting's complex structural treatment.

"The treatment steps became more complicated from a technical point of view as we encountered a significant gap between the panels and the impossibility of bringing them closer due to the paint layer bridging them," said Parri. "After some brainstorming, we decided to apply wedge-shaped inserts along the previously prepared channels with the point facing down, as wide as the gap, to recreate the foundation on

which to later set down and re-adhere the paint layers."

In 2013, the stabilization of the wood substrate was complete, and *The Last Supper's* five panels were reconnected for the first time in forty-seven years. The team's solution was based on the support system originally devised by Vasari himself, which has stabilized the painting while also allowing the wooden panels to move naturally with standard temperature and humidity fluctuations. Work on the final conservation of the painted surface was completed with the support of the Prada Foundation. A conservation team led by OPD conservator Roberto Bellucci was able to recover an unanticipated amount of the original painted surface, revealing the artist's hand in surprising detail. The most talented conservators in the field skillfully saved a significant painting that was deemed beyond repair.

With the Arno still flowing nearby, there is always the looming threat of another major flood, despite the water management dams that have been constructed upstream. As an extra safety precaution, a high-tech yet simple device was installed. If *The Last Supper* is in danger of another flood, a simple press of a button engages two winches, and the entire painting is miraculously hoisted toward the ceiling out of harm's way.

Right: OPD conservator Ciro Castelli monitoring the overall curvature of the Vasari panels during rejoining. Image courtesy Britta New, National Gallery, London

Opposite: Front of Giorgio Vasari's *The Last Supper* (1543), reassembled for the first time in nearly fifty years after the completion of the structural treatment. Image courtesy Archives of the Opificio delle Pietre Dure, Florence. © Opificio delle Pietre Dure

