Heritage in an era of Globalization and Mass Tourism

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Thank you for the invitation. The title of this session is stimulating. It puts together concepts that may seem in contradiction one with another.

Heritage relates mainly with Culture, something that has been preserved from the past and needs to be preserved for the future.

Globalization, and mass tourism, are instead related to a sociological or economic concept linked to our times. I am an economist, you are mainly art historians, museum directors, art experts. The scope of this debate is to see whether we can find some common ground, or whether our views differ totally on these two issues. The title of the conference suggests some form of tension between the two issues of heritage and mass tourism/globalization.

Is heritage – in particular cultural heritage - being threatened by globalization and mass tourism? Or is globalization an opportunity for cultural heritage?

There seems to be a fear in the art world associated with the rising tide of tourism. The fear may be that cultural heritage is more difficult to preserve with such rising demand, especially for cultural “icons”. Mass
tourism may even lead to a blurring of the overall cultural message that artistic heritage is supposed to transmit to our societies.

To be concrete, it is well known that an increasing percentage of tourists coming to Florence spend only a few hours here, and queue up at the Uffizi first, and the Accademia right after, mainly with the aim of seeing Botticelli’s Venus and Michelangelo’s David, take a picture, do some quick shopping and move on, either North – to Venice – or South – to Rome, where they will behave more or less in the same way.

Those a bit more sophisticated might spend some more time in the Uffizi and Accademia, and maybe even go to the Pitti palace and Boboli Gardens.
This is obviously a caricature, but represents the kind of mass tourism we want to discuss.

This herd of tourists create a series of externalities – a term economists use to suggest that there is a market failure – for the cities and museums that they visit. They create long queues, giving rise to a black economy and making the surroundings of museums dirty. They make it difficult for other art lovers to really enjoy their visits. They put the structures of the museums under pressure, the surveillance, the art works themselves.
As a result, many are unhappy: the visitors, because they have to wait for too long, instead of going to other museums or shopping; the other visitors because they can’t see their preferred masterpieces as they hoped. The directors of the museums are unhappy because their works are under stress; the directors of the other – less well known – museums because tourists don’t have time to go there (these less well known places in Florence include the Bargello, the Palazzo Pitti, San Lorenzo, San Marco and Santa Croce). The shopkeepers are also unhappy because if tourists queue up, they don’t shop. The Mayor is unhappy, because shopkeepers are not happy – the list goes on …
The way in which an economist would respond to such an issue is to raise the ticket price – which in the case of Florence is indeed probably too low, and not sufficiently discriminatory. This would reduce access and increase revenues, which could presumably be used to ensure better functioning of the museums. The additional funds could also be used to promote other less well-known sights. This process of self-selection, in the face of an increased demand coming from rising tourism, would probably lead over time to higher and higher entry fees.

There are not that many icons by Botticelli and Michelangelo around the world, and with a rigid supply, rising demand can only lead to higher ticket prices.

This is what happened with oil prices after all. In less than a decade they went from 20 dollars a barrel to 130 dollars a barrel! Comparing Botticelli’s Venus with a barrel of oil may be shocking. Indeed, art is not a commodity. It can’t be treated in the same way.

So the solution of restricting access by pricing only is not very popular with the people at large, with politicians, and maybe even with art experts. Art is, after all, universal. We can’t ration entry only on the basis of wealth! It is also part of the soft power that the Western world can – and should probably better – use in this increasingly global world.

Furthermore, tourism is a key source of economic growth for advanced economies. Countries like Italy can’t simply ignore this source of income.

So what is the solution?

I do not dare to give strong advice here. However I would like to raise two issues.
First, as I mentioned before, this is an issue which affects not only museums, and art, but many other aspects of our society. I mentioned oil earlier, which might not be that noble, but another aspect is education. Globalization is severely challenging public education in all countries and creating a new competition for good education, forcing schools and universities to change. It also affects companies and infrastructures, which have to deal with a much bigger market and flow of people. Think about airports, which must change, not only in size but in organization, to be able to manage the millions of people who travel. Managing airports today is much more complicated than even a few years ago and requires highly sophisticated technology to direct the flow of people and machines.

Is the association between airport management and museum management still too shocking?
To be sure, globalization is affecting everybody, and it can only be addressed by change and adaptation. The recent crisis has shown that those who do not adapt are most at risk.
This affects also the art world, the heritage world, the museum world.

It may not be a coincidence that Italy is the country with arguably the greatest cultural heritage, but at the same time the highest public debt, in proportion to its income. It is not clear whether there is any correlation between the two, or which way the causality runs.

To be sure, the Italian State has less and less money to dedicate to the preservation of our cultural heritage. This is a pity, even a scandal. But it is a matter of a fact, and denial just leads to postponing the solution. And if the solution is postponed for too long – as it will be found eventually – it will be far from optimal.
just a challenge for culture. It is the same in economics. Countries that postpone measures to put their budgets in order, end up taking the worse
decisions – so-called austerity – raising taxes and cutting public expenditures indiscriminately.

There is – to repeat – a need for change to address the challenges of globalization and of the decreasing amount of public resources allocated to culture. Change is required also in the way in which cultural heritage is managed, which means not only preserving but also increasing its value for society as a whole. This probably requires putting together at work various competencies, as it is done increasingly in other fields.

In Italy, this problem is made more difficult by two factors. The first is that heritage is composed not only of the artworks but also of the buildings that host these works, and sometimes also the way in which the artworks are related to the building they are in.

Displayed in museums to accelerate the movement of people, avoid crowding and unwanted reverse flow. I can only imagine that this is one of the main concerns of museum directors today, especially those who manage museums where the flow of visitors increases at certain specific times of the year.

This is not necessarily that easy though. Consider – just as an example – my favorite example – one of the most beautiful museum rooms in the world, the room where Botticelli’s Venus hangs in the Uffizi. It is a room with 15 paintings by Botticelli. They each deserve to be admired from the correct distance, and for a long time. But you simply can’t!

It is impossible nowadays, unless you have a private visit. Only during a private visit to the Uffizi you can get stoned, without having really inhaled. If you visit on a normal day the feeling of excitement is tainted by the annoyance of having to bump and be bumped by too many people.
A question: would it be less annoying – for a visitor – to have to queue up for some time, but then have the masterwork to oneself, as if it was an exclusive visit?
In other words – to be provocative – if I compare the two different ways in which Botticelli’s Venus in the Uffizi and Leonardo’s Mona Lisa in the Louvre are presented to the visitor, which one provides a better experience to the visitor?

The question I just asked is important in itself, because it provides a different perspective on what economists call “the demand side”. What do museum visitors want?

Not all visitors want the same thing, but it may be important to understand the differences, how the distribution is across age, for instance, country of origin, etc.
There is a need for humility here. We may wish that visitors have certain desires, concerning in particular the completeness of their cultural experience in the museum. But visitors may be very different from what we would like them to be.

I know this from personal experience. The first time I brought my kids – they were 10 and 8 years old at the time – to the Louvre, they accepted only on the condition that we would only see Leonardo’s Mona Lisa. I don’t know why they had this obsession, but they probably had heard about Leonardo’s masterpiece at school. I suggested there were many other paintings in the Louvre that were worth seeing, but they started complaining that they were tired and didn’t really feel like spending hours in a museum. Parents generally lose this type of negotiation. So we went down the main entrance, bought the tickets and started looking for the Mona Lisa direction signs, as if it was a treasure hunt. We finally found it, and started queuing up to see it. Fortunately the line was not so long, but we got a chance to see it nearly all for ourselves.
The kids were just happy, as if they had lived the dream of their life.
What now? I asked them if they wanted to see another painting by Leonardo, just around the corner, which is in fact much more beautiful than the Mona Lisa, albeit less of an icon. They were so excited that they agreed and followed me.
Then I proposed we look at other Italian paintings the French kings had stolen from Italy (I had to make it a bit adventurous!), and finally got them to explore the whole floor for more than two hours. In the end they were exhausted but happy.

This is an anecdote, and one cannot draw too many lessons from anecdotes. But I ask myself how many visitors are more in the category of my kids, in terms of ex-ante preferences, rather than mine.

The following question to ask is whether the supply should, and can, adjust to the changing demand.
Can we use museums in a different way? What is part of the heritage? The artworks, or also the way in which they are displayed? Who should decide to make the change?

It may be the case that unless the museum directors, or those responsible for preserving heritage, take such decisions, these decisions may be in the end taken by others.

The recent trend of taking an “iconic” painting and showing it out of context, as part of a “marketing” project, is becoming increasingly fashionable and attracts huge sponsoring. This is the arts at the service of business instead of business at the service of arts.

Companies are increasingly conditioning their financing to culture to this mass exploitation. Is this only the fault of the business sector? Isn’t it
partly also the result of a resistance of museums to change, to better adapt to globalization?

I would like to end with a concrete example of what we have been doing at Palazzo Strozzi, which is not a museum but an exhibition space. Since the start of the new management, we have decided to put the visitor at the center of the project. This might have been easier for us, not being a museum with a collection and having more flexibility, but the challenge was great, and still is. Is to make people come back to Florence, after they have come the first time to see the two icons I mentioned earlier, the second and third time to see all the rest – we aim at bringing people back to Florence for the fourth or fifth time and to build the desire to keep coming back regularly. So even though we do not compete with the Uffizi or the Pitti, we come on top.

How can we do this? We try to provide visitors with a special experience, being contemporary in the way we do things rather than about the things we exhibit.

In order to do this we have brought together people from different background, in the board and in the management and staff, some of them with great artistic expertise, others with very little, but with expertise in other areas such as communication, finance, fundraising and budgets. The unique nature of Palazzo Strozzi in Italy is the public-private partnership, at 50% each, in particular in terms of governance, which enables the Foundation to work at arm’s length from its stakeholders.

The public-private nature of the cooperation has enabled us to use expertise in all fields, some of which typically be found in the public sector, more related to the scholarly and curatorial aspects of cultural activity, and other expertise more associated with the private sector, such
as promotion, marketing and product development. The interaction between the two sectors has worked very well. This doesn’t mean that there haven’t been discussions, even tensions at some time, but the trade-offs have always been resolved. In the end, the need to balance the budget is a very important constraint to ensure decisions which are consistent and coherent over time.

The governance of the institution is its great strength and has helped build the necessary confidence between the various partners and stakeholders.

The reputation of the Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi relies as much on the scholarly basis of its work as on its financial solidity, and none of the stakeholders would want to do things that would undermine any of these aspects.

The business sector in particular appreciates and understands the financial benefits the activities of the Fondazione directly and indirectly bring to the city. The city appreciate the advantage of having a financially solid institution which can work together with the rest of the components of the city’s complex cultural system.

It is in the end a win-win situation, which shows how cultural barriers between public and private sectors can be overcome. It’s not by setting limits to each others’ roles but rather by working together and sharing responsibilities that create the conditions for success in the eyes of all the Fondazione’s stakeholders.

Unfortunately, this model has not proven easy to replicate, at least in Italy, at least not yet.

The reason is that the public sector is reluctant to take one step back, and the private sector is unwilling to make only one step forward. The solution is good governance, as the success of the Palazzo Strozzi has
shown, which helps build confidence. How much will it take for such a model to develop further and expand?

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