

THE PALAZZO STROZZI

An Italian Phoenix

The Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi has transformed a municipal Florentine palazzo into an enterprising 21st-century visitor experience. Apollo talks to its director, Dr James Bradburne

WRITER SUSAN MOORE

How does one gauge the success of an exhibition? Not, I contend, merely by the number of people who come to visit it. For how many of us have emerged from a once-in-a-lifetime 'blockbuster' feeling anything but exhilarated? The works of art on display may be outstanding, and the juxtapositions enlightening, but the reality is that no one is in a fit state to really *look* at anything after standing in a queue for an hour or more. And if they then find themselves shuffling along in a crush, unable to linger in front of a work or take a step back to consider it in relation to anything else, or even just to reflect quietly for a moment, then this will have been a glorious opportunity gone to waste.

A far better question would be how do you create an environment and an experience that enables visitors to really engage with, and be moved by, the works of art that they encounter? It is a question that has long been core to the practice of Dr James Bradburne, the innovating director of the relatively new Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi in Florence, an institution that can lay claim to offering not only world-class exhibitions but also the ultimate in user-friendly visitor experiences.

Revealingly, the Fondazione is itself an innovative model among Italian cultural institutions. Its great fortress of a Renaissance palazzo (Fig. 1), designed for the banker and statesman Filippo Strozzi and begun in 1489, remained in the hands of the Strozzi family until 1937. After the war, the palazzo became the home of three scholarly institutes and Florence's largest temporary exhibition space. In 1990, however, 'in a fit of Reaganomics or late Thatcherism', as Dr Bradburne describes it, 'the city decided to perform the shamanistic act of turning its exhibition-making department into a private company, believing that the magic of the markets would turn it into an efficient, market-driven organisation.' He continues: 'This "magic" has been tried in nearly every European country with more or less the same results, [and] the company went into receivership in 2005.'

And so, a failed experiment in privatisation became a *cause célèbre* at a time when the



stakeholders of Florence were debating how best to revitalise a city. The outcome, astonishingly, was the creation in 2006 of the autonomous Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi, a public/private body with board members from both sectors and funding provided by the city, the province, the chamber of commerce and an association of local and national private companies. They subsidised 40 per cent of the foundation's running costs, while the remainder was met by sponsorship and exhibition revenues. Thus the creation of the Fondazione can be seen as the first coherent expression of the city's realisation that if Florence were made a livelier place for its own citizens to enjoy, then this would improve the experience for visitors.

In another turn-up for the books, a director was appointed who was neither Florentine nor Italian but a fast-talking, larger-than-life Anglo-Canadian. As we sit in his office overlooking the palazzo's magnificent restored courtyard, now open to the public for the first time, the flamboyantly waistcoated Dr Bradburne describes the palazzo's transformation: 'Our mission is twofold: to bring international-quality cultural events

1 Exterior of the Palazzo Strozzi, which was founded in 1489 and built by the banker and statesman Filippo Strozzi, who aspired to have a grander residence than his rivals the Medicis. Photo: Palazzo Strozzi

2 Dr James Bradburne, director of the Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi, which took over the running of the building in 2006. Photo: James O'Mara



to the city and to give the *palazzo* back to Florence,' he begins. 'Our remit has nothing to do with the first-time tourist – these tourists do, and should, go to the Uffizi.'

Non solo mostre ('not only exhibitions') is the Palazzo Strozzi's new motto. The first thing Dr Bradburne did was open the courtyard every day from 8am to 8pm (Fig. 4), offering the city a new public space complete with benches, free Wi-Fi, a café/bar, a bookshop, a permanent exhibition on the history of the building and free events. In addition, the Centro di Cultura Contemporanea Strozzi (CCCS) opened beneath the palazzo's courtyard in 2007; its 12 rooms host a varied programme of exhibitions, installations, workshops, performances, lectures and debates. 'The Strozzi addresses the need for Florence to be a fully-fledged member of the 21st century,' says Dr Bradburne emphatically. 'Florence is not a stage set, but a living city.'

While the foundation's remit is particular to Florence, Dr Bradburne's attitude to his visitors is not – anyone who visits the *palazzo* can expect a warm welcome. 'We pay great attention to every link in the chain of a visit, from the moment when the visitor first walks through the great *portone* on the Via Tornabuoni, and I want every link of that chain to give you more than you expected,' Dr Bradburne explains. 'We recognise that visitors have made a courageous decision. They have decided to come to an exhibition with a friend and their children and spent maybe €40. Everything has to be right.'

Being 'right' begins with clear steps, good signage and a café staff with the authority to offer anyone queuing for over an hour a complimentary coffee or tea. There are diversions to amuse families and children while they wait. The lavatories are immaculate, and invariably contain something to read on the current exhibition – for the masterly 'Bronzino: Artist and Poet at the Court of the Medici' (September 2010–January 2011; Fig. 3, reviewed in the January issue) they featured the artist's witty erotic poetry.

As for the exhibitions, the works of art have labels written not by the curators, but



3

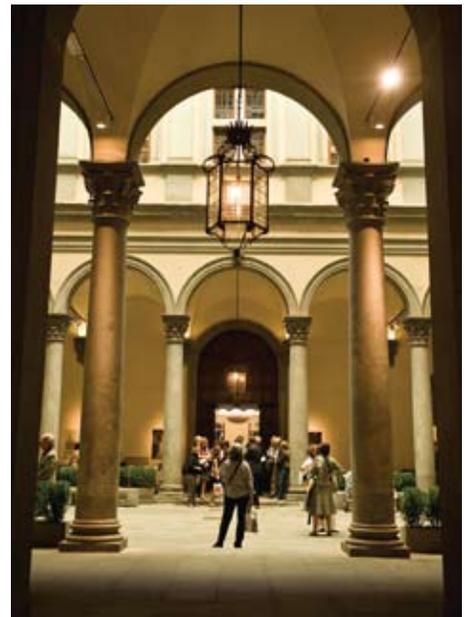
in collaboration with them. ‘Our labels acknowledge the fact that our visitors are intelligent, but we do not presume that they have a PhD in Art History,’ declares Dr Bradburne. ‘They are written in a way that encourages people to share things, on the premise that most people go to museums not only to look at paintings but also to talk about them.’ They are legible from 10 feet away, and there are also quite different labels designed to engage children, often taking the form of riddles or puns.

Not only do the exhibitions – there are three a year – determine their own unique modes of expression, but they also generate a raft of publications and events to engage various audiences. The emphasis was scenography, for example, when it came to exploring the staged works in the show ‘De Chirico, Max Ernst, Magritte, Balthus: A Look into the Invisible’ (February–July 2010). For this, the Florence International Theatre Company arranged a series of workshops for young people to write one-act plays, and a family picnic box was designed to turn into a paper theatre. For ‘Bronzino’, meanwhile, an American composer was commissioned to create a piece for madrigal choir and viola da gamba. ‘Every exhibition seeks to break down the barriers between the visual arts and other arts or science,’ says Dr Bradburne. ‘That is a constant.’

There is also a generous ticketing policy. Family tickets are valid for the duration of the entire show, CCCS tickets for a month. ‘This sends a powerful signal to those that can come back that they should come back, and they will return with a different friend,’ observes Dr Bradburne. ‘There is a slow but positive net growth in this strategy.’

Admirable, too, is the way that the Palazzo Strozzi reaches out into the city and encourages visitors to explore it. ‘Art and Illusions: Masterpieces of *trompe l’œil* from Antiquity to the Present Day’ (October 2009–January 2010), for example, generated an iPhone app that led people to various *trompe l’œil* decorations around Florence. Some might be tempted to dismiss all this extraneous activity as gimmickry, but only until they realise the seriousness and scholarship of the exhibitions themselves. The Bronzino show, for one, was that rarest of beasts: a paintings show that transformed one’s understanding about, and presented hitherto unknown works by, an Old Master.

‘If you have a profound respect for your visitors coming from where they are and not from where you are, and you manage to get most things “right”, then maybe the visitor gets to experience what the curators and I believe in, which is the transformative power of art,’ proclaims Dr Bradburne with passion. ‘This is the soul of cultural enterprise.’ 



4

3 View of ‘Bronzino: Artist and Poet at the Court of the Medici’ (September 2010–January 2011), showing the *palazzo*’s sumptuously restored interior, and the elegant way information on the exhibition is presented
Photo: James O’Mara

4 The courtyard at Palazzo Strozzi is open from 8am–8pm, and provides a new public space for the city as well as free exhibitions and events
Photo: Palazzo Strozzi