

# FRESH PAINT

ITALY'S MUSEUMS HAVE NEVER BEEN AS GOOD AS THE TREASURES THEY CONTAIN – BUT THE RENZI GOVERNMENT IS SHAKING THINGS UP, GIVING INSTITUTIONS MORE AUTONOMY AND EVEN HIRING FOREIGNERS TO BRING THEM UP TO SCRATCH.

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and archeological sites. Culture Minister Dario Franceschini has called it “turning the page” after “decades of retardation”. Last month, as the government advertised for directors for a further nine sites – including Herculaneum near Mt Vesuvius and Ostia Antica near Rome – he said, “The revolution continues.”

Bradburne is on a personal crusade to make sure transformation comes to the Pinacoteca.

“All of Milan is proud of this collection. They know it's absolutely top notch. But they don't know why it doesn't feel like the Rijksmuseum or the MOMA in New York. They feel a little embarrassed.

“The Milanese want to be proud of their Brera. They have a monument in the centre of the city but when you come in here it is not up to snuff. One of the challenges is to make this museum loved by the city.”

A short stroll from La Scala opera house in the heart of Milan, the Pinacoteca sits inside a Baroque complex which was completed in 1776. It includes a prestigious art academy, lush botanical gardens and the city's oldest astronomical observatory.

The gallery itself was conceived by Napoleon Bonaparte who dreamed of creating the “Louvre of Italy” after he swept through the country and crowned himself king in 1805. But these days the Pinacoteca sits in a forgotten corner in the centre of the city.

Just a few streets away, the former Royal Palace houses world-class exhibitions beside the city's beloved Duomo and art lovers regularly queue up at the Gallerie d'Italia, a converted bank with a far smaller collection and a must-see buzz about it.

The Pinacoteca looks drab and dated in comparison. There is very little information about its magnificent collection, which includes works by Caravaggio, Titian, Botticelli, Piero Della Francesca and Mantegna. Even the ticket office is hard to find.

“You go through a shop and you don't know where the entrance is,” says Bradburne. “It is sad, it is shabby. This is not the entrance to one of the finest collections of the country. The first impression is disappointment.”

For years Italy's galleries and museums have been victims of their own stagnation and mismanagement. Too often telephone lines don't work and websites don't

James Bradburne is sprinting down the corridors of one of Italy's most famous art museums pointing out his favourite treasures. Unfortunately there's only a handful of visitors around to share his enthusiasm as the 60-year-old art director races past colourful frescoes depicting biblical tales to rooms filled with Renaissance masterpieces.

“I love this one because it's so funky,” says Bradburne

as he sweeps across *St Mark Preaching in Alexandria* painted by brothers Gentile and Giovanni Bellini in 1507. He has a quick glance at a Veronese and a Tintoretto before coming to a halt in front of Raphael's *The Marriage of the Virgin*. “Joseph is supposed to be old – why does Raphael depict him like a young Brad Pitt? What's going on with Mary's virginity?”

Bradburne has set a cracking pace since he was appointed by the Italian government to breathe new life into the Pinacoteca di Brera and adjoining library in Milan last October.

Born in Toronto, he is one of 20 art directors – seven of them foreign – selected by the government to drive the most dramatic shakeup ever seen of Italy's museums



James Bradburne, the Canadian art director appointed to revitalise Milan's Pinacoteca di Brera



The courtyard of the Palazzo Brera with its statue of Napoleon, who founded the Pinacoteca in 1805 to be the "Louvre of Italy"

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function. Despite their vast collections, not one of the Italian sites is among the world's top 20 most visited museums (though this does not include the Vatican Galleries) and the management of individual museums has for too long been swallowed up by superintendencies responsible for several sites in their portfolio.

Until the Renzi government's recent reforms, no Italian museum had control of its own finances and revenues from donations or ticket sales were paid directly to Rome for distribution. All that has changed as the government seeks to unlock the potential of Italy's enormous cultural assets and make museums more than just repositories for the nation's heritage.

"The great revolution was to see the Pinacoteca as a museum with a board and a bank account. That's a revolution," Bradburne says emphatically. "The fact they put foreigners in charge of some of the museums is the icing on the cake."

Seated in his cluttered office, the bespectacled Bradburne talks at breakneck speed, barely pausing for breath. "There really is no example of a state museum where the experience of the visitor is at the level of its collections or even the level of the most modest expectations of an international visitor, or even a local visitor," Bradburne says.

"I recognise the Brera is one of the country's leading museums. If we get it right here we will have actually done something that will pull the country forward and the country will be able to say 'We can do it here'."

He's not without his critics. While Severino Salvemini, an economist from Bocconi University, welcomes Bradburne's can-do "Anglo-Saxon approach",

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**"This permanent collection is worth all the blockbusters you want to stack up."**

Philippe Daverio, a leading art critic and historian, is unconvinced he can do the job. "In Milan you have to know how to move, you have to have the telephone numbers in your pocket. Stephane Lissner had the right stature for La Scala but he didn't know how to embed himself with the city's wealthy. I hope Bradburne can get in with the city's trusted financiers."

Bradburne's first priority is to reinstall the works, which fill 38 rooms, in clusters of five rooms according to era, and to add new lighting, a fresh coat of paint and new labelling in Italian and English. "Sixty well-chosen words may give you a reason to stay longer and see more," he says. The website has already been transformed and selected information will eventually be provided in Russian, French, Chinese and Spanish.

Authors including Nobel prizewinner Orhan Pamuk and British writer Sarah Dunant have been invited to comment on particular works. There are

plans to buy 300 portable stools to give patrons "somewhere to park" so they may be tempted to linger. "Look longer, see more," is Bradburne's refrain. But the lively art director insists the revitalisation of the museum is not about staging temporary exhibitions, which he dismisses as "stupid blockbusters".

"We have allowed ourselves to be taken over by temporary exhibitions as a panacea," Bradburne says. "Studies in the past 10 years show the number of visitors going to permanent collections is dropping. People come for the event but they do not come to look at the incredible masterpieces. This permanent collection is worth all the blockbusters you want to stack up."

Bradburne wants to give the Milanese and other patrons a reason to come and see the gallery's permanent collection. One strategy is to create "conversations" around particular exhibits. His first major initiative in March was to bring back Perugino's *The Marriage of the Virgin*, which Napoleon took to France in 1797, and place it beside the very similar Raphael masterpiece to create a public dialogue. From November the focus will be on Caravaggio and the artists he inspired.

"Then we will hold a series of public meetings to get feedback, something that's never been done. We are kicking off a revolution – just listening is a big change ... For a state museum we are moving at the speed of light."

At the same time Bradburne is building relations with the business community and potential donors. He wants to stage an elegant annual fundraising ball, and plans to open a fine-dining restaurant with a top chef and add a chic wine bar to the courtyard, which features Canova's statue of Napoleon.



Raphael's *The Marriage of the Virgin*, right, and the recently reclaimed Perugino version of the same subject

“One of the challenges is to make this loved by the city so people say, ‘Let’s go hang out at the Brera,’” he says. “One way to do that is to start doing funky events and stay open late. We are in one of the hippest parts of the city and the doors close at 7.30pm, which is a tragedy.”

“We have two goals: to put the Brera back into the heart of the city and the user back into the centre of the experience. It has to be a must-see for the locals.”

Bradburne, who holds British and Canadian citizenship, is married to a Russian costume designer. Over the years he has gained experience at the Applied Art Museum in Frankfurt and the Nemo Science Centre in Amsterdam. His reputation was reinforced in Italy when he took over Florence’s Palazzo Strozzi in 2006 and put it on the nation’s cultural radar.

His strategy for the Pinacoteca is less about attracting foreign visitors and more about engaging locals so they identify with the museum and make it their own. Palazzo Strozzi not only staged engaging shows but offered programs catering for families, Alzheimers’ patients and the visually impaired.

“Palazzo Strozzi was Italy’s largest public laboratory,” he says. “Every single show was an experiment to make art come alive and transform the visitors’ experience.”

When he left, Lorenzo Bini Smaghi, the president of the Palazzo Strozzi foundation, said Bradburne had made an outstanding contribution. “Under James’ leadership, Palazzo Strozzi and the city of Florence was on the national and international cultural panorama as one of the most dynamic and lively cultural centres in Italy with great shows, concerts, installations, cultural

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events and educational programs,” Bini Smaghi said.

Giving sites more individual power to attract visitors and increase revenue has not gone smoothly in all cases: Pompeii was given managerial autonomy in 1997, but a decade later a state of emergency was declared there, such was the neglected condition of the site.

And there is still much central control: Bradburne says any contract worth more than €40,000 (\$60,000) still requires a public tender and approval from Rome.

“There are great obstacles in our way. We are struggling with very deep-rooted historical and structural problems, a lack of leadership and a lack of financial resources,” Bradburne says. “None of the 20 directors is so naïve as to think this is a done deal. This is like the charge of the Light Brigade. With sabres flashing we are going into the Valley of Death as the world wonders. It is not a given how many will ride out!”

At least one of the new directors has already come

under pressure for doing too much too soon. Appointed to restore the Royal Palace of Caserta outside Naples, Mauro Felicori was recently criticised by three trade unions for working too hard to revive the site and Prime Minister Matteo Renzi stepped in to publicly defend him. “The director is simply doing his job,” Renzi said on his Facebook page. “And we all stand by him, without fear. Long live culture!”

Bradburne, the son of an old Etonian, is leading the charge with such gusto he barely has time to enjoy his small personal art collection, the 8000 books he has accumulated (“It is a drug”) or the collection of 70 colourful waistcoats in his closet. “I have been doing this for decades, they don’t all fit,” he jokes. “Some are historical artefacts to my former slinness.”

For now he is working from 7.30am until 7.30pm – and often longer – to reshape the Pinacoteca as well as public perceptions of what an art museum should be.

“There’s been this logic in the marketplace to reduce the consumption of art to the consumption of hot dogs,” Bradburne says. “Numbers should never be the goal for a museum – they are confirmation that you are getting it right. We have to reclaim the poetry of our culture. We have spent too many decades thinking it can all be solved by consumption. Museums are where we rediscover ourselves as more than just consumers. We need to reclaim those values.”

Bradburne is confident that he can help make that happen. “This is a chance for Italy, which is a country with tremendous competence and talent, to beat everyone else at their own game. If you can do it anywhere, it’s got to be here.” **W**