

## **Festival and tradition in contemporary Florence**

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### **Abstract**

Certain sectors of the heritage and tourist industry argue that cities with art historical significance should be re-categorized as ‘museum cities’ because visitors intent on acquiring particular limited ‘consumer’ experiences outnumber the local population. Using the Feast Day of San Giovanni in Florence, Italy, as a focus this article questions this assumption. By evaluating the form of the fest day events and their relationship to the urban landscape, some of the historical conditions that have shaped the city are revealed. These conditions, understood as civic praxis, are accessible to everyone (to different degrees) and suggest Florence is anything but a museum.

### **Keywords**

Florence

architecture

festival

hermeneutics

civic praxis

tradition

### **Introduction**

It has been argued that the apparent conflict between the church, city authorities and the local population with heritage tourism is leading to a change in the role of civic space in Florence.

This change is characterized as a transformation from its traditional religious or agonistic function into one more like a museum:

[Cities] such as Venice and Florence have become museum cities constructed principally for tourist consumption with infrastructures that have marginalised the local population [...] leading to the fact that an increasing number of historic sites are becoming tourist destinations, a phenomenon which is largely incompatible with their traditional roles. Heritage tourism in Italy, and particularly in touristed cities such as Florence, appears to be forcing the Catholic Church to reassess the use of its sacred spaces. (Ryde 2010: 1171, 1175)

The growth in tourism in Italy in the twentieth century can be attributed to two factors. It was, in part, the result of the fascist government's ability to capitalize upon interest in cultural heritage that had grown as a result of the country's unification in the previous century, but it was also stimulated by the rise in heritage movements across Europe as a whole. When they came to power in the 1920s and 1930s, the Italian Fascists hijacked these themes in order to try to restore an idea of what it meant to be 'Italian' but also, at a local level, to develop a stronger sense of civic identity. As a part of this exercise, many historic festivals were revived (and reinvented) for the benefit of the Italians living in these historic sites, but also for tourists (from home and abroad), incorporating lavish costumes and parades that brought to life the historic pageantry of Italy. Alongside these new festive innovations, buildings, archaeological sites, and cities, were proffered as travel destinations in illustrated

papers and guidebooks in an attempt to foster popular approval and local participation. ‘By turning Italians into consumers of their own culture, such advertising enabled Italians to “reclaim” their heritage from the *forestieri* (namely, the British and Americans) that had controlled it for so long’ (Lasansky 2004: 206).<sup>1</sup>

The general association of tourism with some form of ‘consumerism’, mentioned in both texts quoted above, addresses only one way visitors to Florence, Italian or otherwise, engage with the city. The consumer is generally thought to ‘take’ but is not often credited with any ‘giving’ (except for money); their engagement with the life of the city is considered superficial, with their ‘consuming’ extending to culture as well as commodities. It could be argued that the sheer weight of numbers now visiting these ancient sites may contribute, in some ways, to the ‘marginalization’ of the local community. However, in the festive life of the city, culture and consumption are inevitably forced to come together in trade and celebration – as they have since the thirteenth century – and in the process the city is transformed into a much more ambiguous setting.

This article uses events on the Feast Day of San Giovanni<sup>2</sup> in Florence to question the proposition that city festivals are simply ‘consumed’. It traces how certain aspects of contemporary festal praxis, though often apparently dressed up as theme park pageant, still maintain links with the pre-twentieth-century past in such a way that they reinforce the current institutional order of the city and contribute to civic identity. Understood in this way the city and its festivals are not fragments of a theme park or a ‘museum’ (Fascist or otherwise) but valid contemporary articulations of traditional practice. The buildings, rooms, paintings, squares and streets of the city, along with contemporary dignitaries and spectators, all continue, to some degree, to contribute to an active festive order that has been a significant part of Florence’s identity at least since the thirteenth century. Lasansky (2004) is right to suggest that much of the current festive practice evident in Italy owes its character to

the Fascist interest in spectacle. And yet, below this superficial, instrumental, interpretation of festive activity, there is a deeper structure of belonging attuned to the ontological nature of the festival itself, as well as to the earlier festivals of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This continuity is visible both in the legacy of past events and in the historic structures of the city. It is also accessible, on a variety of levels, through festive praxis itself.

In order to reveal this layering of meaning within the cultural history of Florence the conventional procedure would be to make direct links between past and present events, noting convergences and divergences of practice in order to reveal particular synergies. The problem with this method is that it presents static, fixed and absolute points of reference that are, particularly in respect of a discourse on festival, rarely complete and do not relate to the way that festivals are conceived in the first place. Erich Auerbach explains in a discourse relating to Homeric style, that this ‘fixed’ method would be a ‘subjectivistic-perspectivistic procedure, creating a foreground and a background, resulting [only] in the present lying open to the depths of the past’ whereas in reality, the praxis of festival, like Homeric style ‘knows only foreground, only a uniformly illuminated, uniformly objective present’ (Auerbach 1957: 7).<sup>3</sup> Analysis of the same phenomenon offered by Jacques Le Goff describes the medieval perception of reality – which initiated some of the critical aspects of festive praxis still evident in the city – by saying ‘reality was not that the heavenly world was as real as the earthly world, it was that they formed one world, an inextricable mixture which caught men in the toils of a living supernatural’ (Goff 1991: 165).

In line with this, and coupled with observations made on the day in 2015, this article builds on the premise that contemporary festive and ritual practice still provides orientation in secular, globalized history. As a consequence, a ‘foreground’ of contemporary festal praxis offers an opportunity to understand twenty-first century Florence in its full depth as a ‘uniformly objective present’. This investigation is possible, not only because of the history

that underpins the events but, as Gadamer states, because festivals create their own temporality separate from the everyday:

It is in the nature, at least of periodic festivals, to be repeated. We call that the return of the festival. But the returning festival is neither another, nor the mere remembrance of the one that was originally celebrated. The originally sacral character of all festivals obviously excludes the kind of distinction that we know in the time-experience of the present; memory and expectation. The time experience of the festival is rather its celebration, a present time *sui generis*. (1979: 110)

Festivals, therefore, are in their nature both one and many, and their enactment offers different insights into the nature of reality. Through action in-the-world they make the past present in a way that ‘extends’ beyond normal theatrical pageant towards ritual, and this ‘extension’ occurs because the action is critically linked to the setting. The architecture of the city, or locus, is not, as suggested by Eade and Sallnow (2013), a neutral space where action occurs with all values supplied by protagonists or worshippers, or a museum as Hyde states in the opening quotation. Instead, urban architecture is a critical part of the event itself that contributes to the authenticity of the occasion.

In light of this, this article follows the events of the morning of the feast day celebration of San Giovanni that took place on Wednesday 24 June 2015 (Figure 1). Through various excursions, it links aspects of the historical present to activities experienced during the day itself. This hermeneutic evaluation, which attempts to mimic the narrative of festive temporality and fuse some aspects of Florentine order across several centuries, has its roots in the experience of the festival itself. As described by Gadamer above and evident in what he

calls ‘effective historical consciousness’,<sup>4</sup> this allows a fusion of past and present horizons rather than the victory of the one over the other. For Gadamer, interpretation does not relate to the closedness of signs, independent temporal isolation, or the subjectivity of the observer, but to the openness of symbols understood within a shared tradition, allowing a simultaneity of reference in any given situation. In the frame offered by this study, this ‘fusion’ necessary for festive praxis, offers a ‘uniformly objective present’ and is neither abstracted from the world nor based completely on a prior knowledge of its iconography; it is seen as inseparable from the world and is both historical and contemporaneous at the same time. In order to frame the phenomenon in this article, the excursions have three main foci; firstly locus, next institution, and finally procession, all three forming critical aspects of the praxis of festival.

### **Locus: The morning events at the contemporary Feast of San Giovanni**

At 8.30 in the morning of 24 June 2015, the Feast Day of San Giovanni Battista, mass was held in the Baptistery of Florence in honour of the patron saint of the church and city attended by around thirty people and administered by three clergy. This mass was the first of a series of events – set within the buildings, streets and piazzas of the city – which, since their emergence in the seventh century,<sup>5</sup> have been revised, developed, and adapted to accommodate the evolving requirements of Florentine civic life. The morning of the current feast day comprises:<sup>6</sup>

1. Morning mass at the Baptistery of San Giovanni
2. Collection of Candles from near the Piazza del Duomo and the gathering of the first parade including la Società di San Giovanni Battista di Firenze<sup>7</sup> (Figure 7)

3. Parade from Piazza del Duomo down Via dei Calzaiuoli to the Piazza della Signoria and the Palazzo Vecchio
4. Mayor, dignitaries and representatives of la Società di San Giovanni Battista di Firenze gather in the Palazzo Vecchio before joining the parade back up to the Piazza del Duomo with the candles, costumed flag-throwers (*Spandieratori*) and drummers (Figures 8 and 9)
5. At the Piazza del Duomo the Mayor gives the candles to the chief representative of the church (in this case the Cardinal and Bishop) who then bless the gift at the Loggia del Bigallo before the dignitaries enter the Baptistery to grant the final blessing (Figure 13)
6. Finally the mayor and cardinal enter the cathedral in a procession with the majority of the city's active clergy and mass is held attended by several thousand people including Florentines and many tourists

Although there have been many stages in the development of the feast, it was in the thirteenth century that the festival first became closely linked to civic identity in Florence. At this time San Giovanni was elevated to the role of patron saint of the city over the two incumbent saints, S. Zanobi and S. Reparata, who were perceived as too linked to local history to maintain an independent role within the developing institutions of city governance (Trexler 1991: 1ff.).<sup>8</sup> However, this development, built on the already established importance of the baptistery to the city, was not isolated to Florence. The growth in significance of baptism, which seems to have partnered this choice of patron saint, developed elsewhere across Northern Italy (Thompson 2010: 4).

The fact that the sacrament of baptism, undertaken for large numbers of catechumens, warranted the erection of large baptisteries funded by the people of the city suggests that, at

the time, baptism was more than just an initiation into Christian life; it was also an initiation into the communal body of the city (Frost 2013), a triumphal entry into the Kingdom of God and the City of God both paradigmatically and pragmatically. As Brunetto Latini in his ‘Tesoretto II’ of 1260–1266 declares, ‘every man who comes into the world is first born to his father and relatives, then to his commune’.<sup>9</sup> However, in the early fourteenth century the political landscape of these Italian cities was much more differentiated than it had been before, and so although mass baptisms were often still a part of civic life, it was the baptistery buildings and the land around them that became the primary focus of the feast in place of the rites of initiation held within. By the time of this shift towards civic representation, the size and grandeur of the new baptisteries had often already led, as in Florence, to the rebuilding of the associated cathedral<sup>10</sup> within an enlarged and highly charged urban setting; the pair becoming both the house of the bishop and the parish church of the *citade* linked additionally through processions and liturgical practice (Tacconi 2006).

As this festive praxis evolved beyond church ceremonial – evidenced by other developments such as the feast of Corpus Christi<sup>11</sup> – it became more articulated in order to accommodate new differing proprietorial claims of the city’s ruling order. As a result, the significance of the liturgies and processions within the baptistery began to be overshadowed by the processions and parades that took place in the streets and piazzas of the city. This transition was fuelled by the contemporary chroniclers of Florence who linked the Christian setting with what was understood at the time to be a Roman Republican foundation of the city – for example recounting the myth that the baptistery was built on the site of a Temple of Mars. By the fifteenth century Poliziano (1454–1494) had challenged this belief in earlier Republican origins by arguing that it was Augustus who had founded Florence (Rubinstein 1967: 104) – an image revisited by Vasari in his painting (1563–1565) in the Palazzo Vecchio (Figure 2). As such, Rubinstein claims that Vasari’s painting of an Augustinian



foundation is a ‘pictorial representation of a historical theory’ (1967: 73). He could perhaps have gone further to suggest that it was a historical theory in support of the Medici who, at the time of the painting, were more interested in an association with Augustus than the earlier Republican *triumviri*. The same could also be said of Mussolini and the Italian Fascists of the twentieth century who were instrumental in reviving many of the festivals as annual events.<sup>12</sup>

Vasari’s painting of the foundation contains five buildings which, in the sixteenth century, were thought to be significant examples of the surviving fabric from the Roman city (Rubinstein 1967) (Figure 3).<sup>13</sup> Although the exact orientation of the city in the painting is open to question (particularly regarding the northern gates), each of these buildings is recognizable in broadly the correct arrangement with the Arno in the middle of the panel and Fiesole placed in the hills beyond. This contrasts with the first known image of the city visible in the bottom section of the *Madonna della Misericordia* (Figure 4) – from the school of Bernardo Daddi, painted sometime in the middle of the fourteenth century and currently located in the Bigallo (the current location for the blessing of the candles) – where Florence is represented as a collection of significant buildings whose location with respect to each other appears to be less important, all surrounded by a wall and a river.<sup>14</sup>

In Vasari’s relatively accurate rendering of the city’s orientation and layout the left foreground is dominated by the founding *triumviri*, identified by their respective helmets<sup>15</sup> gifting a Roman *vexillum* in the form of a medieval banner to the people of Florence. In the distance Fiesole can be seen, pictured beneath a ram – the astrological sign under which Florence was founded as well as a symbol of Christ and the *Arte della Lana*/the wool guild who were one of the seven most important guilds of the city, the *Arti Maggiori*.<sup>16</sup> While Fiesole appears developed but deserted, Florence is full of activity related to the origin, laying out, and constructing of the new city, with the founder in the middle of the painting, ploughing the first furrow moving anticlockwise around the boundary. The plough, pulled by

a cow (inside) and an ox (outside),<sup>17</sup> is carefully guided by the founder, head covered, ensuring the ploughed earth falls on the inside, (probably) lifting the plough at every gate (Rykwert 2010: 65, 199). Thus the painting not only identifies the surviving remnants of the Roman city but alludes to knowledge of the likely form of its ritual foundation – a moment bridging the Republican and Imperial traditions and linking the origin of Florence with the rites undertaken in the foundation of Rome. In these two paintings we see a shift in representational priority from present to past themes but also between two different ideas of city order. The earlier *Madonna della Misericordia* offers a view of the city where, in line with contemporary iconography of geometry and orientation (Krautheimer 1942),<sup>18</sup> order is not established by mimicking real spatial relationships but by, amongst other things, ‘gathering’ the principal monuments active within civic life into the centre of the image. For example, the decorated tower to the left of the Baptistery is the demolished campanile of San Piero Maggiore, the first church visited by any new bishop of the city following their inauguration. Vasari’s later image replaces these other possible hierarchies by explicitly linking the city with its classical – not medieval – origins and subordinating all other possible hierarchies to a more accurate spatial representation in line with humanistic perspectivity. The image of the founder in Vasari’s painting indicates that the idea of ritual foundation in Florence was significant and likely to have influenced part of the annual rituals of renewal – and hypothesis supported by the anticlockwise journey of the medieval procession on the feast of San Giovanni, where the path followed the line of the old Roman *pomerium*. Significantly, this line is inside the walls that bounded the contemporary limits of the city (Figures 3, 5). The locus is the same in both paintings, and although they manifest different pictorial sensibilities, they both establish aspects of the landscape for festival praxis that is still accessible today, albeit transformed for contemporary practice.

The gradual transformation of the feast, and the city as locus for the event, has nearly always involved adaptation, rather than stasis or reinvention. For example, in 1491 Lorenzo di Medici did not suppress the San Giovanni procession but added fifteen floats re-enacting the triumphs of Aemilius Paullus<sup>19</sup> (Chrétien 1994: 11), an allegory to Lorenzo's own virtues as a leader. Later, after 1532 when the Medici finally became the Dukes of Florence, this transformation from republican to Roman civic virtue was reinforced by Cosimo I's interpretation of the 1482 fresco by Ghirlandaio in the *Sala dei Gigli* (Rubinstein 1995) (Figure 6). Even earlier, in the fourteenth century, when rites associated with baptism and republican initiation were suppressed by the rulers of the time (Thompson 2010: 9), the parades and celebrations of Feast of San Giovanni continued because they had already accommodated broader ideas of civic rule and Roman heritage. Conversely, in 1494, Savonarola appears to have banned the lavish celebrations held on the streets of Florence on the Feast of the Magi because they had become solely representative of the city, particularly the Medici, and little to do with Christian iconography (Hatfield 1970: 119). The lesson here is that in order for a feast to survive political change the representative praxis of any festival – in this context in relation to Roman and Christian republican virtue – needs to maintain a balance between pragmatic and paradigmatic order. The Feast of San Giovanni seems to have managed this by maintaining a civic iconography linked to Rome, and in doing so allowed the Commune, the *Podestà*, the *Gonfaloniere*, the princes and the Fascist governments to adapt the iconography of the feast to include their requirements as well as those of the city and the *popoli* (even if they were unaware of the layers of tradition and the order it established). In so doing they all contributed (as we still do today) to a locus that continues to establish the rich setting for the processions and parades.

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### **Institutions: A gift of candles**

In 2015, following morning mass in the baptistery, and in line with this adaptation of the medieval (and Roman) iconography, a gift of candles was made by the city.<sup>20</sup> Initially the candles were collected from the area to the south of the cathedral, the traditional location of candle makers (Fanelli 2002, II: 26), and taken to the cathedral piazza where the bearer of the gift is joined by costumed drummers and flag-throwers (Figure 7). This parade then moves south to the Piazza della Signoria where the flag-throwers perform while the gift carrier waits to greet the mayor and his entourage inside the Michelozzo courtyard of the Palazzo Vecchio (Figure 8). Once gathered, this parade leaves the Palazzo Vecchio and the Piazza della Signoria heading back north through Via de Calzaioli, towards the baptistery, the cathedral and the Piazza San Giovanni (Figure 9). This morning parade links the civic centre of the city (the Palazzo Vecchio) with the religious centre (the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore and the Baptistery of San Giovanni) and follows a north-south-north path (parallel to the Roman *Cardo*).<sup>21</sup> The route mirrors the processions Florence's medieval Rogation processions (Tacconi 2006: 112; Toker 2009: 121) which, from at least the beginning of the thirteenth century, were understood in an urban context as rituals of foundation and renewal (Frost 2009). Therefore, even though the contemporary processions no longer follow the boundary of the original Roman *pomoerium* as they did in the thirteenth century they still resonate with the idea of foundation and, therefore, rituals associated with origins.

The role of the Palazzo Vecchio in both these contemporary processions is significant. A study of the changes of the city and its civic architecture, in line with the evolution of

festive heritage discussed above, seems to suggest that developments in the form and structure of the buildings of the city often credited to Renaissance Florence were already present in the middle ages. The Palazzo Vecchio, originally the Palazzo del Priori, was begun in 1298 after the 'Priors which ruled the city and all the republic, did not feel themselves secure in their former inhabitation, which was the house of the white Cerchi behind the church of San Procolo'<sup>22</sup> (Villani 2010, VIII: 26). This palazzo, however, was not the first building built specifically to offer a republican setting for the exercise of rule and a place to resolve internecine conflicts and alliances. The Bargello (Figure 10), originally the Palazzo del Capitano del Popolo was commissioned in 1250 following the creation of the post of Capitano del Popolo in the same year (Villani 2010, VII: 40).<sup>23</sup> Although this was the first civic building in Florence this type of municipal building was not in itself a new phenomenon, northern Italian city-republics had been building palaces for their *Podestàs* since around 1200 (Rubinstein 1995: 7; White 1993: 59ff.). By 1255 the city had acquired a medieval tower formerly belonging to the Boscoli family as well as other land surrounding the Badia situated on the edge of the old Roman *pomoerium* – hence on the path of the San Giovanni Feast day processions – and began construction of the building, with the first meeting held in a room of the palace in late 1259. As Schevill<sup>24</sup> remarks, it is perhaps paradoxical that the first civic building commissioned by this new communal government, the *Palazzo del Capitano*, 'took rather incongruously the form of a feudal castle' (1936: 126; Najemy 2008: 87), a form reflecting the rule of feudal governance the Commune was trying to replace. But in reality what other 'forms' were there to take? The castle was an established architectural type designed to accommodate the feudal lord and his court with all its manners, rituals and hierarchies; it underpinned the authority of feudal power and therefore was the perfect model upon which to begin to build a new hierarchy of the *popoli* within the city walls. In the end, the development of both the Bargello and the Palazzo Vecchio (which also

resembled a feudal castle) and their ability to house the transforming landscape of Florentine civic constitutional praxis, took nearly half a century, and was undertaken at the time Aristotelian and Ciceronian civic Humanism was beginning to claim attention.

The castles and the new palazzo all shared arrangements of function rooms located on the upper floors (Figures 11, 12) with the more private apartment rooms placed higher or at the rear. The palazzo with stacked *salone* above a more practical, fortified and sparse ground floor with apartments spread over the upper floors including chambers (*camere*); a chapel; and a kitchen<sup>25</sup> are very familiar and, like the castles before them have different rules of use:

Not all guests were admitted very far into the privacy of the home. Many barely made it across the threshold. Drinking companions were apparently received in a ground-floor room off the storeroom; the upstairs living room was used for business discussions, suppers and conversations with acquaintances and associates. The bedroom was more private, though not totally inaccessible. Jesters were allowed in, as were farmers sometimes, and of course those who attended the ill: barbers, physicians, midwives, and priests with all their retinue. In the ... rural castles of the feudal nobility the bedroom often enjoyed the same prestige as in a royal palace; here nobles stored the documents on which their power was founded and in the presence of notaries and witnesses registered important contracts. (Duby 1988: 283)<sup>26</sup>

This domestic form, including rooms for entertaining guests and more private apartments, was then transformed into rooms for the new republican palaces where traditional court ceremony needed to adapt to facilitate new social strata crowned by the *priori*, the *podestà* and the *capitano* (Martines 1988: 65).

The current form of the Palazzo Vecchio relates to when the Medici family became Dukes of Florence and the resulting abolition of the *Signori* and the Gonfaloniere of Justice in 1532, but it was not until after his marriage to Eleonora of Toledo that the second Duke, Cosimo I, decided to take possession of the Palazzo as his main residence transforming the ageing civic building into one fit for a duke.<sup>27</sup> Over the next few years, as well as new staircases, the whole palazzo (including private apartments, audience halls and government offices) was adapted to make it fit for sixteenth-century court ceremony. Vasari played a major role in this development<sup>28</sup> including painting the *Foundation of Florence* discussed earlier as one of many added to the already grand *Salone dei Cinquecento*, transforming it into audience hall (1563–1581) for the Duke linked to his private *Studiolo* (decorated 1570–1575 by various artists).<sup>29</sup> The ceremonial route up to the main *Salone*, framed in part by Vasari's new staircase, was also supplemented by a grand decorative programme commissioned for the entry of Cosimo's son, Francesco de Medici, and his new wife Giovanna of Austria, in 1565. This included ornamentation to the main door, additional stucco and frescos to the first courtyard originally designed by Michelozzo in 1453.<sup>30</sup>

This transformation of the palazzo overlaid a new set of hierarchies from street to main *salone* on top of many of the old republican thresholds. Although originally a 'palace of the people' it had never been open to all; the palazzo comprised a series of boundaries crossed only by certain individuals at certain times based on their position within the government and the nature of the occasion. The relatively short periods of rule undertaken by the *Signori*<sup>31</sup> and the need for them to be separated from possible outside influence during their tenure meant that often the inner halls of the palace were only inhabited by the same person for a relatively short period. With the arrival of the duke and his court, even if the republican thresholds remained, because the building became a permanent residence, the iconography of rule needed to change. These communal buildings were then able to revert

back to their quasi-feudal origins from medieval castles and tower-houses of the city, re-utilizing many of the hierarchies cited by Duby earlier, but now articulated for the ducal court.

Judging by the various paths of the aristocratic entries to the city following the transformation of the commune into a princely domain,<sup>32</sup> the decision to move the principal residence to the Palazzo Vecchio was as much symbolic as practical. The Medici had purchased the Pitti Palace in 1549 and, once the Vasari corridor linking the palaces together was completed in 1564 – one year before the transformation of the Palazzo Vecchio into the Ducal palace was completed – the Medici could live in either building while still making clear that their rule had replaced that of the commune. Even if they spent much of their time in the Pitti Palace, for the purposes of civic representation they now permanently occupied the rooms formerly taken by the *Signori* and the *Gonfaloniere di Giustizia*.

Today, even though primary issues of justice and national policy are handled in Rome or in the outskirts of Florence in large new monumental structures,<sup>33</sup> the city council centred on the mayor<sup>34</sup> still meets in the Palazzo Vecchio in the *Sala di Dugento*, the room where the first meeting of the *Signori* was held in 1302 (Rodolico and Camerani Marri 1957: 12) Not often open to the public, this room creates a setting for the council linking the rich and varied history of governance with the identity of the contemporary city, even though tourists overrun other parts of the palace. The Palazzo continues to be both a representative of the institution as well as the history of the city and these functions are brought together on specific feast days when the partitioned building engages very differently; on feast days the internal boundaries which are normally used to separate users, become borders where different groups interact (see Figure 8).<sup>35</sup>

**The candle procession on the Feast Day of San Giovanni 24 June 2015**



On the feast day in 2015, the historically costumed flag wavers and entertainers fill the Piazza della Signoria attracting the attention of nearly all the visitors present. A few protagonists in costume, a few others in robes, and the remaining dignitaries (including the mayor in contemporary dress) wait patiently in Michelozzo's courtyard for the procession to start (see Figure 8). There is no police cordon or security-driven segregation of these people and the thousands of tourists outside. Nevertheless the various thresholds of the palace still function in a way relevant to twenty-first century civic life. The mayor, after first gathering with his entourage and dressing in his sash of office, enters the court and joins the procession behind the bearer of the candles and then processes north towards the Baptistery behind the flag wavers and drummers of the gonfalons (Figure 9). As the procession moves through the streets Florentines personally greet the mayor and then retreat back to the crowd, content that their public affinity with the mayor will secure their own status within city commerce for another year. Even though many of the tourists, seduced by the colourful parade, are unaware of the symbolic meaning of the civic ritual unfolding before them, they still contribute to the civic sense of the event.

When the candle procession arrives in the Piazza San Giovanni the mayor, Dario Nardella, in suit and sash, and Cardinal Giuseppe Betori, Archbishop of Florence in scarlet cassock and biretta, exchange gifts at the Loggia del Bigallo (1352–1358) (Figure 13). Surrounded by other eminent business and political leaders also in suits – and a number of flag bearing, drum carrying, celebrants in historical costumes who had accompanied the primary actors in this civic ritual – the mayor delivers the candles to the Baptistery. The cardinal and the mayor, along with the entire uniformed entourage, then process into the cathedral for a two-hour mass in honour of the Saint along with several thousand Florentines and tourists as well as most of the clergy resident in the city.

## **Conclusion – dramaturgy**

These significant fragments of the whole feast have gradually grown in popularity. The more the procession has become pageant and parade, accompanied by flags drums, noise and spectacle, the more visitors have become enthralled. However, it would be a mistake to condemn the feast as purely ‘commercial’ or ‘consumer driven’, as suggested by Hyde at the beginning of this article, purely because of this popularity. At least since Roman times business and trade have always accompanied city festivals;<sup>36</sup> successful commercialization does not exclude more profound cultural representation. In the contemporary feast, although some tourists saw only the spectacle, and some traders looked only for commercial gain, many of the other participants experienced belonging. Victor Turner, after Van Gennep, suggests that such festivals offer three phases of engagement; separation, transition and incorporation. The actual participants in the festival who deny their own identity are ‘incorporated’; everyone who witnesses the event is ‘separated’ into a community ‘out of time’;<sup>37</sup> and in the middle are those who experience ‘transition’, ‘a sort of limbo which has few [...] of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent profane social statuses or cultural states’ (Turner 1982: 24). Even tourists from outside Europe used to very different civic rituals would recognize some aspects of ritual representation in play and be ‘separated’ if not in ‘transition’. The 30 at first mass or the thousands at second mass were all exposed to the same motifs, rituals, symbols and values. It is a modern conceit to suggest that only full knowledge of these events and their meaning results in meaningful participation. Gadamer argues that festivals have similar characteristics as theatre and that ‘the theatrical presentation calls up something that is at work in all of us even if we are unaware of it [...] [and] makes

visible the ethical harmony of life that can no longer be seen in life itself' (Gadamer 1987: 61–62).

As witnesses to the event in Florence on this day, touched, shepherded and corralled by the participants of the procession (not the local police), everyone played their part. Even if the majority of the people attending the feast day pageant were oblivious to the rich civic iconography of the event they were still witnesses; and although 'heritage tourists' visiting specific churches continue to outnumber worshippers tenfold, they too engage in this spectacle adding to the civic identity and the agonistic functions of city life that these places, institutions and rituals still embody.

The historical sketches presented in this article as excursions to the contemporary festival are not intended to be comprehensive but to offer glimpses into the festive order of Florentine civic life from its apparent emergence in the medieval period. These origins, linked to Roman traditions (later reinterpreted by communal, ducal, princely, Risorgimento and Fascist governments) were articulated to create mechanisms through which rulers could be held accountable to the city. From the introduction of the *Calcio Storico* football match to the feast day celebrations by the Medici's in 1530s (Silvano 1971: 25) to its demise and later reinstatement as an annual event in historical costume by the Fascists in 1930, the restoration of medieval iconography and Renaissance perspectivity has always been a significant factor in how Florence sees and presents itself. The ability of the city to sustain a symbolic urban topography – even amidst its increasing secularity – is indicated by the continued use of the civic spaces shaped by the Commune as places for political protest (see Figure 10) even though many of the institutions they are questioning have long since retreated to Rome or to Florence's outer suburbs;<sup>38</sup> and is also revealed by the persistence of feast day reveries described above, mixing civic, political, Christian and Roman iconography. The symbolic topography persists even now the role of the Baptistery of San Giovanni, Santa Maria del

Fiore and the Palazzo Vecchio to the city have faded, allowing tourists and Florentines alike to appeal to the vestiges of history and tradition for civic orientation.

As Gadamer suggests, much of the stratification of this symbolic landscape, emerges from a world in which a designation of signs over the search for symbol has led to misguided prioritizations:

A person who has no horizon is a man who does not see far enough and hence overvalues what is nearest to him. Contrariwise, to have an horizon means not to be limited to what is nearest, but to be able to see beyond it. A person who has an horizon knows the relative significance of everything within his horizon, as near or far, great or small. (Gadamer 1979: 269)

Even if, in some of the costumes, banners, and music, it appears that Florence's festivals utilize aspects of historicism as a tool in their presentation, there is still enough historicity, carried on the back of extant traditions, to maintain their value to the city. As a result it can be said that Florence's festive activity plays a significant role in the city's continued engagement with civic values – past and present – and offers clues as to how, in the face of pressures brought by activities such as tourism, cities can secure their longevity in ways that cultivate cultural value over the limited understanding of 'consumerism' suggested by Hyde. As the introduction to this article suggested, participation in festive praxis is not limited to those who have knowledge of the history, values or the mimetic function the event seeks to represent. Like the history of the event itself, a festival is open to everyone in different measure because it presents a 'uniformly objective present' where tradition can be seen as both a gift from the past and a setting for the future within a temporality of a 'present time *sui generis*'.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Lasansky should also have included Germans in this list of *forestieri*.

<sup>2</sup> The Christian calendar was built up over centuries and included feast days related to particular saints (either related to their birth or death) and feasts related to particular biblical events. Feasts linked to particular dates of the year were called ‘fixed feasts’ (Christmas and saints’ birthdays for example) and those, like Easter, which varied in date according to specific cosmological conditions were called ‘moveable feasts’. San Giovanni Battista (St John the Baptist) was a biblical figure and although the date of his birth cannot be determined exactly it has been celebrated as a fixed feast on the 24 June at least since the Council of Agde in 506.

<sup>3</sup> Although Auerbach’s work was written in 1946 it is still considered a seminal work (Auerbach and Said 2013) and forms a critical part of the overall philosophical position taken in this article.

<sup>4</sup> *Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein* (Gadamer 1979: 267 ff.).

<sup>5</sup> Documented first in the thirteenth-century by Villani in his *Cronica*; Book VII (1844) (see Gori 1926: 5; Guasti 1884; Trexler 1991).

<sup>6</sup> The festival activities continue throughout the day ending in a firework display in the evening. All of the events have aspects of the ontological character alluded to in the

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introduction but the scale of this article only allows for the consideration of the morning events.

<sup>7</sup> San Giovanni is one of the four historic *Quartieri* (quarters) of the city (the others are Santo Spirito, Santa Maria Novella and Santa Croce). The city currently has 5 *Quartieri* (Centro Storico, Campo di Marte, Gavinana- Galluzzo, Isolotto-Legnaia and Rifredi). All four of the fourteenth-century *quartieri* fit inside the current Centro Storico. Since 1796 *la Società di San Giovanni Battista di Firenze* has been responsible for the planning and coordination of all the events on the feast Day of their patron saint in a similar way to how the *Compagnia de' Magi* was responsible for the organization of the celebrations of Feast of the Magi (Hatfield 1970).

<sup>8</sup> In Florence the political strife in civic life was most clearly defined in the struggle for power between the Guelfs (who supported the pope) and the Ghibellines (who supported the Emperor). S. Zanobi was from a Ghibelline family and so would not have been acceptable to Guelphs (see also Chrétien 1994: 24).

<sup>9</sup> (Latini 1824, II: 54)

*Ogn'uom, ch'al mondo viene:*

*Che nasce primamente*

*Al padre, et al parente,*

*E poi al suo Comune.*

<sup>10</sup> Santa Reparata was replaced by S. Maria del Fiore 1296–1426. For a detailed description of the building phases of the Baptistery see Frost (2013).

<sup>11</sup> Although it existed in some cities before, Corpus Christi was made an official feast in the Roman calendar at the Council of Vienne in 1311 (Rubin 1992).

<sup>12</sup> See the dedication to *Le Feste Fiorentine Attraverso I Secoli: Le Feste Per San Giovanni* (P. Gori, 1926). For example the *Calcio Storico* football match, which takes place in the afternoon of the Feast of San Giovanni was revived in 1930 (Lasansky 2004: 64).

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<sup>13</sup> The twin round turreted northern gates, the aqueduct and the reservoir it fed, the amphitheatre, and finally the temple of Mars (thought to have stood on the site of the baptistery).

<sup>14</sup> The Vasari painting is only interested in the Roman legacy (boundary) whereas this painting is interested in the identity of the medieval city through a depiction of the second set of Commune walls.

<sup>15</sup> Augustus (Capricorn), Antony (Hercules) and Lepidus (equestrian).

<sup>16</sup> The seven *Arti Maggiori* comprised (in order of importance); *Arte dei Giudici e Notai* (judges and notaries); *Arte dei Mercatanti or Calimala* (cloth merchants); *Arte della Lana* (wool guild); *Arte del Cambio* (bankers and money changers); *Arte della Seta* (silk merchants and Porta Santa Maria merchants); *Arte dei Medici e Speciali* (physicians and pharmacists); *Arte dei Vaiai* (furriers).

<sup>17</sup> The ox and cow are clearly distinguishable even if they are not the white colour they should be according to the Roman rite (see Rykwert 2010).

<sup>18</sup> This text is still the best introduction to the Iconography of the medieval period.

<sup>19</sup> Aemilius Paullus (229–10BC) was a Roman Consul and famed Republican General who defeated Macedon. A Republican who could be identified with Imperial virtues.

<sup>20</sup> Gifts of candles by various city institutions were often requested by the *Signoria* (Hatfield 1970: 109).

<sup>21</sup> The afternoon parade following an east-west path reminiscent of the Roman *Decumanus* slightly adjusted to link the two main Mendicant Churches (the Dominican Santa Maria Novella and Franciscan Santa Croce) with the civic Palazzo Vecchio. For a description of the Roman rites in setting up these two streets see (Rykwert 2010: 45ff). The north-south *Cardo* orients the city in relation to the Cosmos and the *Decumanus* in relation to the path of the sun, all four quarters joining to become the *Templum*. Thus the oriented quadrature of the

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Roman city allows the pragmatic city to recapitulate the paradigmatic celestial order (see Figure 3 for the orientation and layout of the Roman city).

<sup>22</sup> Just behind the current location of the Bargello.

<sup>23</sup> Bologna had a *Capitano del Popolo* in 1228.

<sup>24</sup> Ferdinand Schevill (Ph.D. 1892) studied history in Freiburg under Herman Von Holst. This connection led to a lifelong interest in the history of ideas common in the German tradition of historiography, which also underpins the philosophical position taken in this article. His *History of Florence* was originally published in 1936 and although there have been many works since then that have offered new insights into the topic – (notably Brucker 1962; Martines 1963, 1988; Hale 1983; Najemy 2008) – his insights into the history and development of the region are still valid. Trexler writing in 1980 suggested that Schevill's book offered the best overview of the history of Florence. Recent general histories include Baron (1966); Skinner and Skinner (1978); Jones (1997).

<sup>25</sup> Often on the top floor so that fire damage to the property as a whole could be limited to one floor if tackled swiftly.

<sup>26</sup> These spatial hierarchies are evident in Alberti's *Della Famiglia*, translated in to English as *The Family in Renaissance Florence* (1969). The first three books of which were written sometime before 1434.

<sup>27</sup> Alessandro de Medici was the first to hold the title, confirmed by Emperor Charles V in 1532 (Schevill 1936: 514).

<sup>28</sup> Vasari succeeded Giovanni Battista del Tasso as the architect of the court following the latter's death on 8 May 1555 (Muccini and Cecchi 1992: 20).

<sup>29</sup> For a list of artists see Muccini and Cecchi (1992: 53ff).

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<sup>30</sup> Michelozzo's courtyard was built following a commission by the *Opere di Dell'Opera di Palazzo* under the guidance of Cosimo de Medici (1389–1364). For a detailed description of the works completed for this occasion see Starn and Partridge (1992: 149ff).

<sup>31</sup> *Signori* held the role for two months.

<sup>32</sup> Entrance of Giovanna d'Austria in 1565; Entry of Carlo d'Austria 1569; Funeral of Cosimo I in 1574; Marriage of Cristina di Lorena 1589; Marriage of Maddalena d'Austria 1608.

<sup>33</sup> For example the *Palazzo di Giustizia* (Firenze), Rifredi Quartiere, 1999–2012 by Leonardo Ricci and Giovanni Michelucci.

<sup>34</sup> A role created in Florence in 1781.

<sup>35</sup> See Richard Sennett's 'The Open City' for a discussion on the difference between borders and boundaries. <https://lsecities.net/media/objects/articles/the-open-city/en-gb/>, accessed 15 February 2016.

<sup>36</sup> For example, the five-day *Ludi Romani in Circo* was always followed by four days of markets (see Fowler 2004) and in the early fifteenth century the Feast of San Giovanni celebrations (including market days) would last up to ten days (Trexler 1991: 240ff.).

<sup>37</sup> That is out of profane time that measures secular processes and routines.

<sup>38</sup> Florence was only briefly the capital of a United Kingdom of Italy from 1865–1871 before the national institutions were finally settled in Rome.