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Assignment 2

As I stand facing the Palazzo Vecchio with the tourist-targeted restaurants behind me, the Piazza della Signoria is buzzing with commotion. Tourists stop and stare at the 95-meter-tall tower that stands above them, amazed by the old palace, while Florentines quickly go by. Something about the building, with its militaristic tower and old stone construction, makes it appear different from a typical palace, as if it's bursting with hidden knowledge.

Construction on the Palazzo Vecchio began in 1299, with the building first being used as the seat for the Florentine Republic's Signoria. Today, the building is associated with the Medici family, since it marks the spot where they came back into power in 1530, and where the Medici Grand Dukes lived before Grand Duke Cosimo I moved to the Palazzo Pitti in 1550, giving the former palace its "Vecchio" title. The palace then went on to become one of the chambers for the Kingdom of Italy in the 1860s, and is now a museum and the town hall of Florence.

Although the exterior of the building is awe-inspiring no matter how many times I see it, the interior of the building is what truly captivates my mind; for inside this imposing structure lie several small rooms, hidden within its thick, stone walls. These hidden areas begin down Via della Ninna, a small street located to the right of the palace's main entrance. About a quarter of the way down that street, there is a small door on your left that goes into the side of the Palazzo Vecchio. One might not notice this door due to its small height of only about four feet; however, opening this easy to miss door leads to once secret stairways that were used by government officials, including the Medici, and guide you to a set of rooms designed to hide dignitaries from enemies and the commotion of the Piazza outside.

Today, the door is easily accessible from the street and doesn't appear to be much of a secret, but back when it was used by government officials, there were only a few feet of space between it and another door from the church of San Piero Scheraggio, a church that no longer stands due to the building of the Uffizi in 1560. The narrow stairs the small door leads to are made of stone, weathered by the feet of the nobles who walked on them hundreds of years ago. As I walked up them, a feeling of claustrophobia crept up, but the wonderment factor I felt quickly overrode any anxiety. After the stairs end, you enter a small room, about the size of a walk-in closet, and although it seems plain with only smooth stone walls, it turns out to be one of five bedrooms Francesco I, son of Cosimo I and Grand Duke from 1574 to 1587, could choose from when he lived in the palace. From this room, one can climb yet another set of stairs to enter a room unlike anything else I have ever seen – the studiolo of Francesco I.

Upon entering the studiolo, I was overwhelmed by the combination of the amount of art on the walls and the small size of the room. There are oval-shaped paintings, almost as tall as a person, that meet you at eye-level. These paintings surround you on wooden panels, and the door you enter, once closed, seamlessly transforms into a panel like all the others, making the room appear doorless, and adding to its Mannerist layout. Rectangular paintings, about three feet by four feet, hang above the panels and show scenes from mythology, like Perseus rescuing Andromeda and Neptune riding his sea chariot. However, mythology isn't the main theme of the room, and in order to find out what is, one needs to look at a painting by Giovanni Stradano. This painting shows men mixing things in barrels, turning levers, and studying the reactions that are taking place in what would've been an alchemist's workshop, and leads to understanding the theme of the room, its purpose, and even Francesco I himself.

Since Francesco I spent much of his life focused on alchemy, many of the paintings are linked to the ancient practice, with images of the creation of glass and the discovery of pigments painted on their canvases. The room is devoted to alchemy, and is divided into four sections that correspond to the four elements of the study: earth, water, fire, and air. Upon looking up, these elements are seen in four frescos found on the curved ceiling of the room that surround a painting found at the center of the ceiling. This painting shows Prometheus, the Titan who brought fire to man, receiving jewels from nature, and represents the room's central theme of collecting and studying nature's treasures.

After looking at all the art surrounding me, I remember one painting by Giovanni Maria Butteri that features glass blowers in a studio similar to something you might see in Venice today. Glass was a central part of alchemy during medieval times, and it represents the research-based side of the misunderstood philosophy. While many sources will define alchemy as only being focused on creating gold from base metals, many alchemists spent their lives trying to understand nature by experimenting in laboratories. Understanding nature was central to alchemists, and Francesco I was one who spent much of his time contemplating this idea, with most of that contemplation taking place in this small studiolo.

The central idea of alchemy is incorporated into every part of the room because next to each rounded painting, there is a small metal object with an opening that appears perfect for an ornamental-sized key. Once it's pointed out, you can see how each of the round paintings are not just on the wall for decoration; instead, they are each a door that opens to reveal a red velvet display area, perfectly sized for several alchemical objects that fascinated Francesco. Although they're empty now, with much of the collection going to La Specola, Florence's

natural history museum, the paintings on the front of the concealed doors, combined with the paintings above, can be used to decipher what once would've been inside the secret spot. For example, the painting that represents a medieval glass studio most likely would've had a piece of glass hidden behind it, and the painting depicting the discovery of the red pigment used to dye the red cloaks of medieval Florence might've had a vial of the pigment or a piece of dyed fabric behind the secret door.

When one comes to the realization of this, the room changes into something more than a room; it's as if you're inside someone's private, life-sized jewelry box, which ultimately leads to viewing Francesco I in a way that's different than just being the Duke of Tuscany. It shows how different he was from his father, Cosimo, who believed in a much more traditional, God-centered model of the world, and commissioned paintings depicting his victories over Pisa and Siena in the palace's Hall of the Five Hundred, very different from paintings of glass making and pigments. Cosimo didn't agree with his eldest son on the topic of alchemy, especially with how much time Francesco spent focused on the subject. Cosimo followed the Medici belief of doing things to help the family as a whole, not the individual themselves, and since Francesco used his time spent in this room to further his understanding of nature, he wasn't following the traditional Medici way. Francesco didn't want to be Duke, but being the first male born to Cosimo and Eleanora meant the role was his to take. This room represented a way of escape while he was ruling and allow him to focus on his true passion; and for me, it was opening my mind to the true meaning of alchemy, something I realized I was completely wrong about before entering this room.

Alchemy is far beyond turning objects into gold for a quick profit; it's about giving meaning to life, analyzing how the processes of nature work, and figuring out the purpose those processes have. After seeing the studiolo, I realized alchemy is about wanting more – wanting to discover more, wanting to learn more, and wanting to be a more fulfilled person. Alchemy is about interpreting the world around us in new ways; and as someone who is always looking for more answers in life, viewing this small room and learning more about alchemy allowed me to connect with the Palazzo Vecchio in a way that goes beyond just staring at its tower from my bedroom window. It has left me with a multitude of questions, but with that, I think the room has done its job in getting me to question the world around me.

The room forces visitors into a state of wonder, looking around to see if there's anything else they can decode. It begins as a nice art exhibit, representing over 30 artists from the 16th century, including Santi di Tito and Giorgio Vasari, but after these clues are given, the visual sense of the room is no longer just for pure enjoyment, for it unlocks a new way of viewing the world. The room would still be something amazing to see if no one told you about the secrets that lie within its small walls, but having to interpret the paintings and look for the tiny key holes stimulated my mind in a way that I had never experienced previously. This small room, only slightly bigger than an average dorm room, left me with a sense of amazement I hadn't felt before. To see a room so thought out with everything fitting perfectly, both physically and thematically, I have never seen something so breathtaking. It became like a modern-day escape room with having to find all of the clues, but instead of having the goal of escaping, I would rather stay in the room for hours, looking for any details I may have missed during the

few minutes I was able to be in it, possibly thinking of the same topics Francesco would've thought of hundreds of years ago in the same room.

Visiting that studiolo in the secret passages of the Palazzo Vecchio forced me to see the towering structure in a different way, to see alchemy in a different way, and to see the world in a different way. It makes me think about the realities all humans establish through interpretation, and how much our brains must make us miss as we try to simplify the complex world around us. It would be easy to only see the studiolo as a room full of art, but it goes beyond that, giving meaning to every detail, and becoming a representation of the true meaning of alchemy where everything is questioned, and the world is decoded.

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