

### The Not-So-Hidden Influence of Florence

Walking back from Palazzo Strozzi after my night class means dodging numerous couples who stand side by side, hands clasped, as they listen to a man playing Adele's *Someone Like You* on an acoustic guitar. The sun has set, so the only light in the Piazza della Repubblica comes from the neon signs of the restaurants, a few street lamps, and the carousel that always seems to be running even though few people actually ride it. The street vendors are out, throwing their purple and blue orb-like toys into the air, eager to sell the glowing objects to tourists who walk by. Others walk through the area with bunches of red roses, only focusing on the couples as they walk up and offer the blooms to a guy in a way that makes it seem like he'll break a cardinal rule if he turns the offer down.

One night when I walked home towards the Piazza del Duomo, I happened to get stuck behind a middle-aged couple, holding hands and strolling casually along the sidewalk as they gazed into the windows of the shops that were now closed for the evening. As they window-shopped, they commented in English about the clothes, which led me to think they were American based on their absence of an obvious accent. They walked in a way that reminded me of a teenage couple; eager for constant contact, as if letting go of the person means losing them forever. I especially noticed their hands as people tried to walk past them on the narrow sidewalk. They didn't seem to understand that occasionally walking single file is a sign of courtesy in this small city; and instead, they blocked most of the sidewalk as they walked on, forcing everyone else to step into the street to get by.

Seeing couples like this hasn't been a rare occurrence for me in Florence. As I walk through the expansive piazzas and narrow streets, I swerve around the couples who appear oblivious to the world around them. They walk side-by-side, taking up the entire three-foot-wide cobblestone sidewalk, occasionally stopping to comment on something they saw in a window or a landmark they recognized. Florence seems to be the city of couples, which is an aspect of the city I wasn't expecting, especially when it comes to the amount of tourist couples who are here. When I think of cities for romance, Paris, Venice, and Rome first come to mind, not Florence. While Florence is a part of Tuscany, the region of Italy that's full of rolling hills and vineyards, the city always came off as more focused on art than romance for me. Florence is home to great museums, like the Uffizi Gallery and Galleria dell'Accademia, and architectural wonders, like the Duomo and Santa Croce. The city has a history that dates back 600 years with tales of victories against other cities and families who transformed the city into the Florence travelers come to see today, and I always felt the city was focused more on beauty and genius, not love. However, I soon found that the city has a history of romance that's often connected to the most important elements of its history.

When discussing the families and history of Florence, the Medici are bound to come up; the family who has left their mark all over this small city in the form of the six-ball crest that is on virtually every corner of the Historic Center. Although the Medici are known for their political influence and patronage of artists in the city, the family also has historical romances that took place in Florence. Beginning with Cosimo I and his wife, Eleonora di Toledo, while their marriage was created to form an alliance between Italy and Spain, it ended up being one of the few marriages during that time that didn't involve any mistresses, and is regarded as

being one with true love. Cosimo and Eleonora ended up having 11 children, with the first being Francesco, the second Grand Duke of Tuscany. While Cosimo and Eleonora's relationship was considered love in a proper way, Francesco's love life was full of scandal and passion. Francesco was married to Joanna of Austria for political reasons, but he soon began having an affair with Bianca Cappello, a noblewoman from Venice who seemed to have captivated the heart of Francesco as soon as they met. The affair was far from being secret, and soon after Joanna died in 1578, Francesco married Bianca, making their passionate affair official and angering most members of the Medici family.

Looking deeper into Florence's past, there have been other historical romances that took place around the time when the idea of romantic love was being developed. Dante, author of *The Divine Comedy*, and another important historical figure of Florence, wrote about the passionate tragedy of Paolo and Francesca, two lovers who couldn't resist the lust between themselves, in his epic poem. Dante himself experienced an unrequited love full of emotion with his muse, Beatrice. While Dante most likely never spoke with Beatrice, he loved her from afar, and she became his inspiration for the idealized form of love humans have developed since the 13<sup>th</sup> century that's found in *The Divine Comedy*. While many of these historical romances took place hundreds of years ago, there is another important example of a couple transformed by Florence's appeal which took place closer to today, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning, while not traditional figures of Florence, represent a couple truly inspired and affected by the charm of Florence. The couple left London soon after they were secretly married, first settling in Pisa before realizing they needed to live in a place more stimulating; a place like Florence. Florence acted as a source of

inspiration for both writers, with Barrett Browning writing *Aurora Leigh* and Browning writing *Men and Women* while living in the city; and while these writings are an important part of who they are, their relationship is also regarded as an important aspect of their time in Florence.

Barrett Browning's father despised her relationship with Browning, which caused every aspect of their relationship to be a secret until they moved to Italy. Florence is where they were able to live out the life they wanted, and the city still celebrates this today. The house where they lived for 15 years, Casa Guidi, is a museum today and includes objects that celebrate their love, including a bronze cast of their clasped hands. Their relationship is a prime example of the part of Florence's history that includes romances full of passion, lust, and occasionally, deep, true love that has become part of the city's identity.

After living in the city for over two months, I've noticed that much of the city's atmosphere is focused on fostering intimate experiences, both for friendships and romantic relationships, and that the city's adoration for beauty, combined with its romantic history, seems to be part of why the intimacy develops. While Italian culture is stereotyped as being outwardly affectionate towards friends, family, and romantic partners, it also seems to get into the minds of American tourists who come here for a vacation, turning middle-aged, married couples into hand-holding teenagers who feel like they're the only two people in the world.

Florence especially seems to influence older couples who travel here. From the musicians playing romance-themed songs like Harry Nilsson's *Without You* and Ed Sheeran's *Perfect*, to the unique sense of calm the city gets when the sun goes down and most of the tourist groups leave, the city offers opportunities to focus on the one person you're with, with few distractions around; and many traveling couples take up the opportunities the city offers,

walking around in the evening, taking time to stop by the Duomo, Piazza della Repubblica, or the various shop windows.

Coming to a city like Florence may be a way for these middle-aged couples to take a break from their busy lives at home and only focus on the present moment through exploring a new city together, but after thinking about this topic, I realized how that can happen on virtually any vacation. Vacation is a time for people to remove themselves from the stresses of daily life and devote themselves to the few days they have in a foreign place. Vacations are also planned events, between the hotel reservations, flight and train times, and museum tickets purchased in advanced. From a psychological perspective, these planned aspects of trips mean that most needs are met, and according to Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, humans can only fulfill their need for love when the lower physiological and security needs are met. For most travel destinations, whether it's a resort in Cabo or a historical city like Florence, apart from the occasional hard-to-find bathroom, it is easy to meet these lower needs, and thus focus on the higher needs, like love and esteem. This feeling of ease, mixed with the excitement of being in a new place, or a place you've been that already has a loving sense of familiarity, allows people to unwind in these environments, which might be why couples walking in the streets of Florence always walk with hands clasped and stop to kiss on street corners.

To find out more about why Florence seems to have this effect on older couples, I asked friends and family members what they found romantic in terms of activities and travel destinations. Most older people mentioned the little things, like surprise back rubs and helping out with tasks around the house, while younger people often mentioned shared experiences, like watching the sunset and stargazing as what they found to be romantic. This is reminiscent

of research from psychologists like John Gottman and Robert Sternberg that led to the creation of two types of love, romantic and companionate. While romantic love, which decreases over time, tends to be based on mystery and intrigue, companionate love, which increases over time, focuses on caring, deep trust, and having a friendship. Because middle-aged, American couples, who most likely would be in the companionate love stage of their relationships, appear to be the most influenced by coming to Florence, the city seems to cater to this companionate love, as well as the ease that middle-aged Americans are looking for, especially while traveling.

When compared with other romantic destinations, Florence is much smaller than Paris and Rome, and doesn't require as much adaption as the canal city of Venice does. It offers places to relax and talk, museums to visit, walks along the Arno, and restaurants where you can chat for hours. While it may be easy to blame the couple's behavior on the supposed affectionate culture of Italy, it seems to be more than that between the history of the city and its unique aspect of being an incredibly easy city to navigate and vacation in.

Compared to other Italian cities, like Rome and Naples, Florence is much easier to explore. Most of the major attractions, including the Duomo and Palazzo Vecchio, are located just minutes from each other. A visitor can walk down one of the streets that branch off from the Piazza del Duomo and see the Duomo, Palazzo Vecchio, Ponte Vecchio, and Palazzo Pitti, all by simply walking straight. Florence's Historic Center is only about 2 square miles, as well, making it exceptionally walkable, apart from the bumpy cobblestones and small sidewalks. This walkability makes the city easy for tourists, but it's not the only factor contributing to the tourist accessibility, especially for English-speaking tourists. When walking into a restaurant or café in the Historic Center, while you might be greeted with a "Ciao," the conversation will most

likely continue in English. The menus are almost all translated into English, waitstaff are eager to explain dishes, and allergies are clearly listed. These factors make Florence a perfect destination for anyone looking for a fulfilling vacation without much hassle, which appears to describe those middle-aged Americans I keep coming across. A tourist who comes to Florence most likely won't need to know any Italian, worry about public transportation, or stress too much about getting lost. Florence has been developed for tourism, and is especially attractive to those middle-aged couples who come here and get turned into affectionate teenagers, as if it's a sort of art-focused, medieval Disneyland.

From its historical romances that tourists might not even be aware of to the musicians who always play romantic songs, Florence is a city with a unique combination of art, history, and adoration for love which seem to combine to foster intimate conversations and experiences in those who walk its streets. While there are young Italian couples all over the city, the middle-aged American couples are the ones who seem to be most affected by the culture and atmosphere of Florence, whether the effect is from the culture of the city itself or from the aspect of it being easy to vacation in. Florence, with its small sidewalks that keep couples close together, the absence of too much artificial light that sets a comfortable and cozy mood, and the beauty of the buildings around that put people in a hopeful state, creates the environment where even the usually closed-off Americans find themselves unable to let go of their partner's hand as they slowly walk down the small cobblestone sidewalks, on their way to stop and steal a kiss by the Duomo or listen to one of the musicians, rose in hand. Whether it's the aspect of being on vacation, or the city of Florence itself, it's hard to tell, but the one thing that's apparent is Florence has an effect on those who come here. From the passionate stories

found in its history, to the ease it offers to tourist couples who walk its cobblestone streets  
today, the city is full of love and romance, ready to influence those who visit it.



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