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# Belle of the Ball! In Venice and Paris, *Vogue's* Hamish Bowles Embarks on an Art-Filled Excursion

AUGUST 30, 2017 6:37 PM  
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The unstoppable force that is Houston's own Becca Cason Thrash, having taken a hiatus from European cultural philanthropy, plunged once more into the fray with a vengeance to chair a weeklong program that married Liaisons au Louvre IV, an American Friends of the Louvre fundraiser, with Venice's La Dolce Vita, which raises funds for the nonprofit Venetian Heritage.

Things got off to a thrilling start in Paris at the Picasso Museum, where the artist's grandson and doppelgänger, Olivier Widmaier Picasso, showed guests around an exhibition devoted to Pablo Picasso's first wife, the tempestuous Russian ballerina Olga Khokhlova. Picasso's images of Olga trace not only his astonishing artistic developments, but a poignant trajectory from love to disinterest—from scrupulously academic and tender to searingly vicious and abstract.

Across town, a (thankfully, thwarted) terrorist attack in the Champs-Élysées, yards from the Petit Palais, complicated plans for a dinner for 100 in that self-same institution later that evening. Undaunted, many guests still ventured forth for drinks in the exotic courtyard gardens (where Giambattista Valli also presented his frothing haute couture collection this season) and dinner in the vast gallery, built in 1900 by the architect Charles Girault for the Exposition Universelle. Dinner was beautifully arranged: two long banqueting tables with shaded orange and yellow roses running the length and chair cushions to match, the chairs all turned at an angle so that arriving guests were greeted with these powerful color harmonies.

On the morrow I joined a fantastically informative (and droll) tour of the decorative arts galleries of the Louvre, which showcased decorating maestro Jacques Garcia's high-impact arrangements of the superb late-17th and 18th-century furniture, pictures, and objects that make my heart beat a great deal faster—including the exquisite Saxe blue, white, and gilded-paneled drawing room from the Hotel de Villermare-Dange (on the Place Vendôme) that the Louvre's American Friends helped to restore.

The Paris trip crescendoed that evening with a gala at the Louvre that Becca themed lilac, from the so-called “red carpet” to the light that bathed I.M. Pei’s iconic glass pyramid. Naturally, *j’adored* this concept. The magic of having the Greco-Roman sculpture galleries of the Louvre (the *Venus de Milo* and the *Victory of Samothrace*, sundry beautiful youths and elaborately coiffed and draped matrons) practically to oneself—save for a bevy of beauties in frothing Valentino and Gucci gowns and diamonds that you could land a PJ on—was quite something. (Becca was suitably imperious in an ice-queen John Galliano for Dior ensemble from her archive.)

During the day temperatures had soared to 96 degrees, and it wasn’t much cooler at dusk. Somewhat miraculously, the museum managed to move the whole elaborate dinner from its planned location (under I. M. Pei’s sweltering glass pyramid) to the cool subterranean foundations on just 24 hours’ notice. In truth, this setting was infinitely more romantic, with tables set against the original medieval rampart walls now washed with mauve light. Guests were shaded by volcanic eruptions of delphiniums, and the *recherché* menu included a performative dessert that required hot chocolate to be poured onto a brittle triangle, melting a perfect hole to access the creamy glories beneath.

After dinner we headed to the pyramid for a fundraising auction, where the splendiferous lots included works by Anish Kapoor, Mat Collishaw, Christopher Wool, Retna, and a commissioned portrait by Francesco Clemente. After \$1.2 million had been raised (the week raised \$3.3 million total for the charities) we danced to Duran Duran, and long after the museum finally closed, the festivities continued at Café Marly—just a short lilac-carpeted walk away.

A day to catch the breath, and then on to the glory of Venice, where I stayed at the delightful Hotel Metropole, its bedroom corridors much enlivened with collections of fans and fascinating antique knickknacks. Very me.

Needless to say, there was no holding me back from the assortment of private palazzi whose doors had been specially opened for our merry band. First on my itinerary was the Palazzo Alvisi Gaggia, built in the 1920s, which linked earlier Renaissance structures with a series of high-ceilinged reception rooms, delightful sitting rooms, and a perfect Jazz Age bathroom, with many of these rooms embracing a terrace that framed a perfect view of the Church of Santa Maria della Salute. One could imagine the drawing room's oyster damask walls—and the dining room's collection of 18th-century Venetian porcelain—echoing to the tinkling laughter of Jazz Age revelers. Bliss.

Then to the magnificent Palazzo Giustinian Recanatì—with paintings that were commissioned for the house in the 17th century, still in situ against the damask and stuccoed walls—and the Palazzo Gradenigo, which the urbane Toto Bergamo Rossi, director of the Venetian Heritage Foundation, has spent years restoring to its harmonious perfection. In several of the rooms, restorers spent months carefully scraping away impasto layers of plaster to reveal a dainty 1730 plasterwork scheme of an elegance and lightness that takes the breath away.

Dinner that evening was served in the ballroom of the Palazzo Rezzonico, which was created by Giorgio Massari from 1751 to 1756 by knocking out a floor of the late-17th-century building. The volumes, as a result, are breath-snatchingly operatic, the effect amplified by Pietro Visconti's theatrical trompe l'oeil ceiling framing the artist Giambattista Crosato's *Chariot of Pheobus*.

Thence to explore the 57th Biennale, where I was deeply moved by the Swiss Pavilion, in which artists Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Bircher explored the life of Alberto Giacometti's lover Flora Mayo (hitherto a footnote in art history, dismissively referenced by James Lord in his hulking Giacometti biography). Mayo's trajectory from daughter of a midwestern department

store owner to near destitution was conveyed through a two-sided movie (same audio, different visuals), and the poignant recreation of Mayo's long-destroyed portrait bust of her lover. Also powerful were both the South African artist Candice Breitz, who enlisted high-profile actors including Alec Baldwin and Julianne Moore to speak the heart-wrenching words of refugees from around the world, and Mexico's Carlos Amorales, whose installation included an animation of silhouette puppets enacting the horrifying death of a migrant family. Taste guru Axel Vervoordt's curation at the Palazzo Fortuny (sadly, his last), meanwhile, was a visual feast of aesthetic echoes across the centuries—a forest of 3rd-millennium-BC figures with a Basquiat, for instance.

Onward to the Gallerie dell'Accademia to see the brace of powerful Veronese paintings from 1566 (*Saint Agatha Visited in Prison by Saint Peter* and *Saint Jerome in the Desert*) that have been restored with funds from Venetian Heritage and Bulgari. Thence to a masked ball, where we were greeted at the newly restored 16th-century Scuola Grande della Misericordia by figures out of Pietro Longhi: pantaloons on stilts, along with panniered and dominoed ladies.

I stayed in this Longhi mood to crown my trip with a behind-the-scenes tour of the city's costume museum, housed in the Palazzo Mocenigo, with the curator Chiara Squarcina. The palazzo's piano nobile has been restored and installed with riveting costumed vignettes by the revered opera director and designer Pier Luigi Pizzi. A room full of late-18th-century gentlemen's waistcoats drove me mad with covetous desire ([thankfully Google can take you there](#)). Then to Paris, Palermo, Derbyshire, Gloucestershire, and London for more work and play—but you will have to hold your breath to hear all about that.