



This time,

Exhibits Newsline

highlights two evocative exhibitions from Italy and an engaging outdoor art exhibition from Massachusetts.

Paul Orselli

Exhibition

History of the Innocenti

Institution

Museo degli Innocenti (Museum of the Innocents)

Location

Florence, Italy



fig. 1. Exterior, Museo degli Innocenti.

CLAUDIA OCELLO

I was lucky enough to get to Italy last summer, and not wanting to wait in the line for the city's more popular museums, I discovered an uncrowded gem a few blocks from L'Accademia (the Academy), which houses Michelangelo's *David*. Ospedale degli Innocenti (Hospital of the Innocents) recently reopened after a \$13.7 million renovation and expansion to the former hospital building, upgrading its museum space and preserving its historic building (fig. 1). The exhibition on the basement level documents the history of the institution and the people that lived and worked there for over 600 years. A local merchant founded the Ospedale in 1419 as the first lay institution in the world dedicated to infancy and childhood. It welcomed children who had been abandoned by their families for various reasons,

with children documented, educated, and eventually inserted into the community through apprenticeships or domestic service. The work of the Istituto degli Innocenti (Institute of the Innocents) continues today, where the building houses UNICEF's Global Office of Research; a national center for documentation and analysis of childhood and adolescence; a small first-response center for temporary care of at-risk children; management oversight for three day-care programs; a home for migrant families; and a teen center in nearby towns. All this is housed in a beautiful building with a portico designed by Filippo Brunelleschi and 80+ artworks by famous names such as Domenico Ghirlandaio, Sandro Botticelli, and Luca and Andrea della Robbia.

fig. 2. Boxes open before pulling out.



The lower level exhibit documents the history of the building and its workers and residents through multimedia presentations that include historical context, artifacts from the hospital, and most significantly, the process through which abandoned children were welcomed and documented. In addition to a rich collection of objects, some of which are highlighted in an adult and a child audio tour, “interactive” photo albums and touchscreens with historical photographs and testimonials from more recent years (including WWI soldiers and immigrants to America writing to the staff at the hospital) make the stories come to life. The room

that had the most impact featured drawers visitors can open, which embody some of the earlier residents through the objects/tokens left with them when they were abandoned at the hospital (fig. 2).

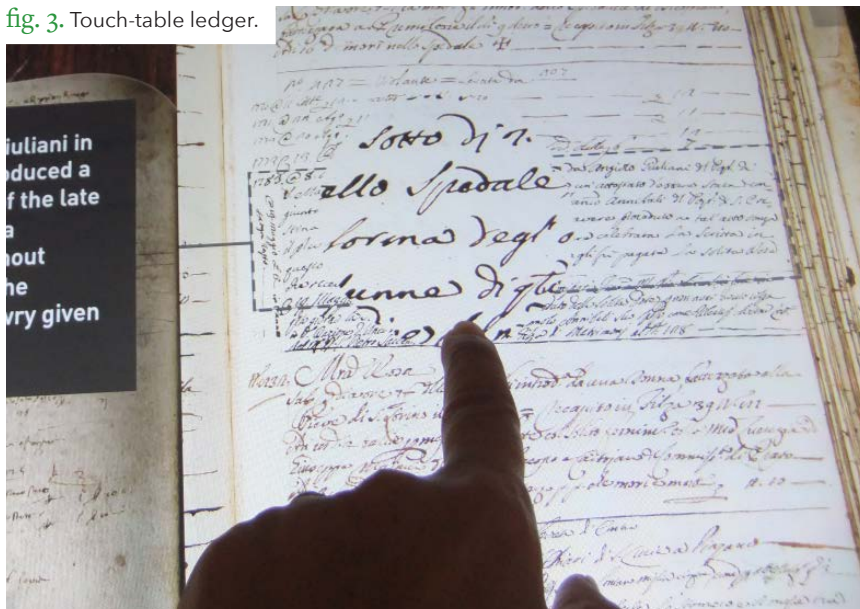
The front of each drawer has a name and date; opening it reveals a half coin or religious medal that mothers left with their child as a means of identification. Nearby are touchscreens that allow you to explore the ledgers used by staff

to record the arrivals of children, and what was left with them as well as their condition (fig. 3). I overheard visitors there saying “How powerful—very emotional” as they understood the significance of each drawer and object in this space.

Comment areas in this lower level were geared towards children but full of comments from adults, such as “In a world with so much misery it’s wonderful to learn history such as this Grazie.” And from an eight-and-a-half-year-old, “Grazie per la cura dei bambini” (Thank you for taking care of the children). The museum tells the hospital’s story respectfully and honestly and draws visitors into the history with simple yet effective techniques. Visit before the word gets out and the crowds find the Museum of the Innocents.

—Claudia Ocello is President & CEO of New Jersey-based Museum Partners Consulting, LLC.

fig. 3. Touch-table ledger.



Exhibition

The Machines and the Gods

Institution

Musei Capitolini
Centrale Montemartini
(Capitoline Museums-
Montemartini Central)

Location

Rome, Italy

fig. 4. Historic photo of electrical plant.



CLAUDIA OCELLO

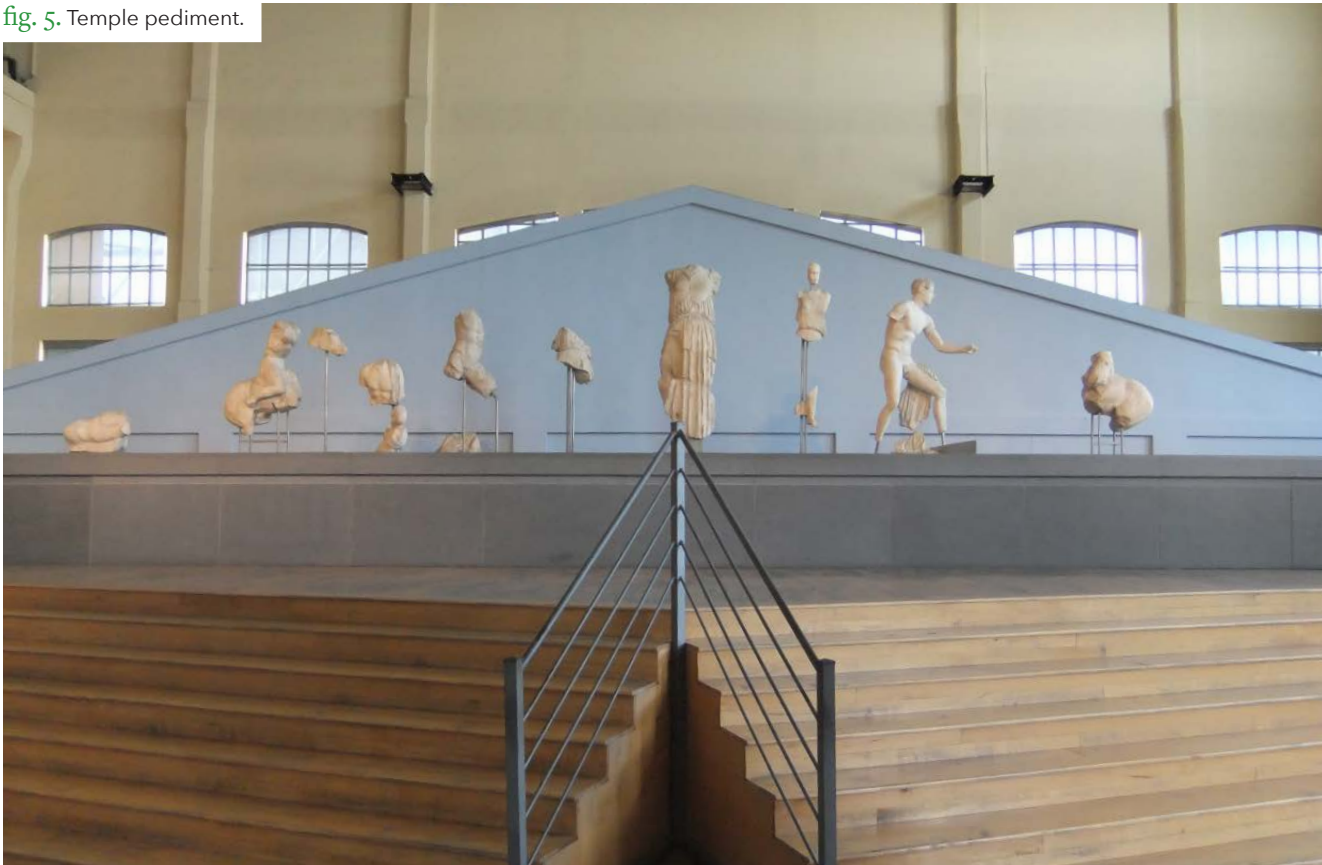
Desperate to escape the crowded tourist locales, the description of this museum online sounded intriguing—a converted industrial heritage site housing masterpieces of Greek and Roman art. The juxtaposition of giant machines

and the monumentality of ancient sculptures and mosaics is striking in the permanent exhibition, *The Machines and the Gods*.

In 1997, Italian officials viewed this site as a temporary solution for

housing hundreds of sculptures during renovations to the Capitoline complex in Rome. The building served originally as a thermoelectric plant (built 1912) and contains giant boilers and other electrical equipment (fig. 4).

fig. 5. Temple pediment.



CLAUDIA OCELLO

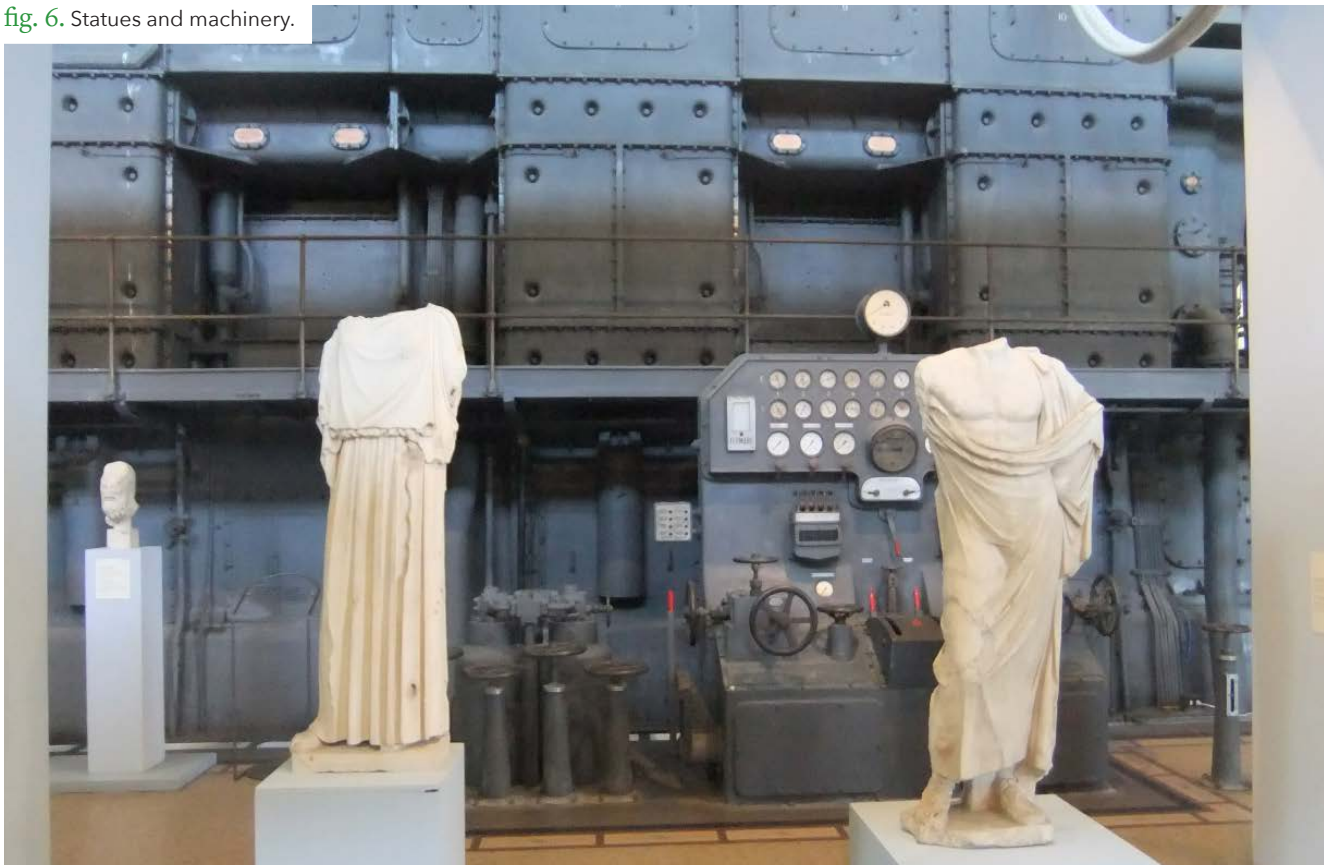
Ramps and staircases to upper levels used to service the machinery are preserved, allowing visitors to get a different perspective on the space and the artifacts contained within. The contrasts of black and white, industrial archaeology and classical archaeology, ancient and modern, can be experienced closely and from afar. I couldn't decide whether to step away from the sculptures or get closer, as both experiences were so emotionally different and equally vital. Historic photos help the visitor envision the power plant in its heyday.

Italian curators seem to be experimenting here with display, placing a reconstruction of the pediment of the temple of Apollo Sosiano at eye level rather than stories high, as it would have been viewed (fig. 5). Visitors get to walk close to statues of Heracles, Theseus, the Amazons, and the goddesses Athena and Nike, and experience them completely differently than originally intended (fig. 6). I even enjoyed seeing the backs of these statues, again a perspective not meant to be granted to visitors when they were

in situ. The playfulness of the exhibit techniques and the lack of crowds really makes this an outstanding way to get a dose of ancient and industrial history in the ancient city.

—*Claudia Ocello*

fig. 6. Statues and machinery.



CLAUDIA OCELLO

Exhibition

Secret Shelters

Institution

Heritage Museums and Gardens

Location

Sandwich, Massachusetts

What makes some exhibitions more memorable than others? A meaningful experience can delight and surprise us, and motivates us to return. I had such an experience at Heritage Museums and Gardens. Heritage has a small permanent collection of Americana, antique cars, scrimshaw, folk art, and an antique carousel, all located in several buildings scattered throughout the grounds, and a special exhibition gallery, which houses new exhibitions each summer. But it is the gardens that make Heritage Museums unique. They span 100 acres and include paved walking paths as well as unusual features, such as a flume waterfall installation, a maze, and a labyrinth. Each season, different artists are invited to build temporary installations.

Heritage offers its visitors a specific type of outdoor experience, merging the natural world with creative works. It is these outdoor installations that offer a different experience of time and place. This type of work requires full presence in order to engage with the art.

The pieces I encountered on this trip were part of a temporary exhibition entitled *Secret Shelters*. Each piece is placed into the land, bringing your attention to a specific location: surrounding a tree, set inside a grassy valley, up on a hill. Not only do you engage with the artwork, but you engage with the physical landscape. The installations set into the scale of the land allow you to fully experience the art with your whole body; art is experienced on the

fig. 7. *Eaves/Grass* by Joel Reider.



JAN CROCKER

human scale and in relation to the vast landscape.

One of these exhibits, *Outside In* by artist Yugon Kim, is a circular bench made of recycled waste wood surrounding a tree. From afar, the bench itself is enticing to the weary visitor, but as you approach, you notice how it is put together. Many hollow cubes of wood, stacked and fastened together, make up the structure of the bench, which encircles the tree. An opening on the far side requires the viewer to walk around the tree before entering and sitting. This tree, unnoticed and unseen before the construction of the bench, now becomes an object of significance. The texture of the bark, the shade of its canopy, the diameter of its trunk are now acknowledged and appreciated. In the shadow of this looming tree, standing in this place only because of the artistic intention, I realize I am just a part of the larger artistic experience. The artist's contribution to this moment is felt.

The next piece I encountered took a bit of work. I wandered off the paved pathway, through the vast Hydrangea Garden into a grassy meadow and down into a valley. I might not have seen the piece titled *Eaves/Grass* by Joel Reider—made out of living grass—had the structure not jutted out in its rectangular and pointed house-like shape, complete with a front door and side window (fig. 7). Constructed out of wood supports and covered with sod, the grass house sat comfortably into its landscape. Its attempt at camouflage unsuccessful (this is an art piece after all), it struck me as something that shouldn't exist (but it did). Once inside, I

saw the square mirror, the same size and shape of the window on the opposite wall. Looking out the window, I saw the landscape. Looking into the mirror, I saw myself in the very same landscape. This hidden gem, both seen and unseen, tucked into a secluded space, yet deliberately sought after, reminded me of what I most appreciate in a museum experience: the joy of surprise. Where else can we go expecting and yet still experiencing surprise? The artists bring the experience of the (sometimes) absurd into existence, but the viewers may not know to look for it without the presence of the museum.

These landscape pieces, especially the temporary ones, would not exist without the ability of the museum to create a space that brings artwork and viewers together. Museums create a space for artistic encounters between artists, objects, and viewers. These encounters can be emotional, visceral experiences, bringing the viewer to full attention, awakening feelings of surprise and delight. This might be described as the “mindful museum” *experience*, one that is personal, place centered, and belonging to the “here and now.” Here is a link to the museum's website, which details the exhibition *Secret Shelters*: <http://heritagemuseumsandgardens.org/exhibitions/old-east-windmill/>.

—*Kathryn Sodaitis is the Visual Arts Teacher at North Falmouth Elementary School in Falmouth, Massachusetts and a student in the Museum Studies Certificate Program at Tufts University.*

Have you seen
(or helped create)
an exhibition that
you'd like to share
with colleagues in
a future Exhibits
Newline column?
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