



## How Vernon Lee stayed current with Florentine art

Florence and its art were heavily mythologized during the 19th century. Stendhal's swooning at Santa Croce, Ruskin planning your mornings in Florence, or Henry James' descriptions of the "Florentine character" in his *Italian Hours* are just a few of the literary allusions you can make. However, a lesser-known female author who was more familiar with the city's artworks than most of her contemporaries would make a better tour guide. From the 1870s until her passing in 1935, Violet Paget resided in the city and was, in James's words, "far and away the most competent thinker in Florence." She wrote a ton of studies on Renaissance art and culture, as well as paranormal tales and travel essays that vividly evoked the "spirit of place" she detected in living landscapes. She was known by the pen name Vernon Lee, which led to confusion about her gender.

*She developed as a writer under the tutelage of Walter Pater, but she sought to expand the questions he had posed in his seminal *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), which emphasised the importance of the individual's subjective reaction to works of art. What is a work of art, Lee would question herself? She rummaged through Europe's galleries and museums, asking herself, "What does it do for us, or rather, do with us?" She started creating novel techniques in the late 1880s to study the psychological and physiological impacts of art on the body.*

Lee collaborated with Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, a close friend who had studied painting and, in Lee's opinion, demonstrated heightened physical responsiveness to art. The women's research was centred on first-hand experiences in Florence's museums, galleries, and churches, where they observed physical reactions to various sculptures and paintings, such as a quickening of the breath or a rise in body temperature. "My aesthetics will always be those of the gallery and the studio, not of the laboratory," declared Lee in 1911.



Modern museology, with audience response as its focus, was anticipated by Lee before its time. The visitor experience has received more attention in recent years from museums and galleries, which have changed how exhibits are displayed and encouraged sensory interaction through sound, immersive experiences, and even taste. Lee aimed to bring art, life, and the body together because he recognised the multimodal nature of seeing art. Over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have become more attuned to our bodies and yet more estranged from physical encounters with artworks, even as digital interventions provide a different mode of encounter. What does Lee's approach have to offer us today?

Few authors have described their physical interactions with paintings and sculptures as exactly and personally as Lee in her "Gallery Diaries." They follow her changing reactions to form, line, rhythm, and colour on her several visits to examine artwork in the Uffizi or the Bargello, among other galleries, and were written at the turn of the 20th century in a mix of autobiography, psychology, and aesthetic critique. Her "observations at the museums with particular reference to rhythmic obsessions, palpitations, and aesthetic receptivity" are documented in sections of the journals during the winter of 1903–04 in Florence.

Take one instance, for example, where she describes a synaesthetic trip beginning with Baldovinetti's *Madonna and Child with Saints* at the Uffizi:

“Coming up the stairs (no palpitations) I discover a tune in my head and which I am actually singing or whistling [...] It is Allegro of a Mozart Sonata. [...] I walk quickly and stop at the Baldovinetti Madonna and Saints. I know I like the picture and immediately get into a superficial examination. Pleasure comes suddenly with perception of bearded saint’s white gloves. I then begin to see the relief, go into the picture. Light bad; I can’t see whole well. Left-hand corner; I take pleasure in bearded man and much bulk pleasure in Saint Lawrence and his very beautiful dress, and in his flat but solid existence. Am a little worried by his wrong spatial relation to bearded man. . . . Saint Anthony (though I spotted him at once, saying how like Baron A– F–) is difficult to look at, all because he is without solidity [...] A sort of raising of my hat and scalp and eyebrows seems necessary to see this picture; otherwise it is swimmy. By the way, the lilac and crimson give me a vivid cool pleasure, like taste.”

Then she moves on to Cosimo Rosselli’s Magi, where colour also draws her. However, by the time she arrives in the Venetian Room, she is “tired, bored, and disinclined to look at anything,” and who hasn’t experienced this after hours in a museum. However, as she approaches Veronese’s Sophonisba, she is suddenly overcome by a “physical [pleasure], located almost in my mouth.” These meetings would frequently be accompanied by melodies; Lee, a fervent musicologist, recounted “secretly “sampling” monuments and photographs with “songs” .

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