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As a Nationalist Fervor Takes Hold in Italy, Foreign Museum Directors Could Be on the Way Out

Italy began hiring its first foreign museum directors in 2015, but the right-wing government may force them out with counter-reforms.

Sarah Cascone, August 23, 2019



Cecilie Hollberg, the German director of the Galleria Dell'Accademia in Florence. Photo by Sergio Garbari, courtesy of the Galleria Dell'Accademia, Florence.

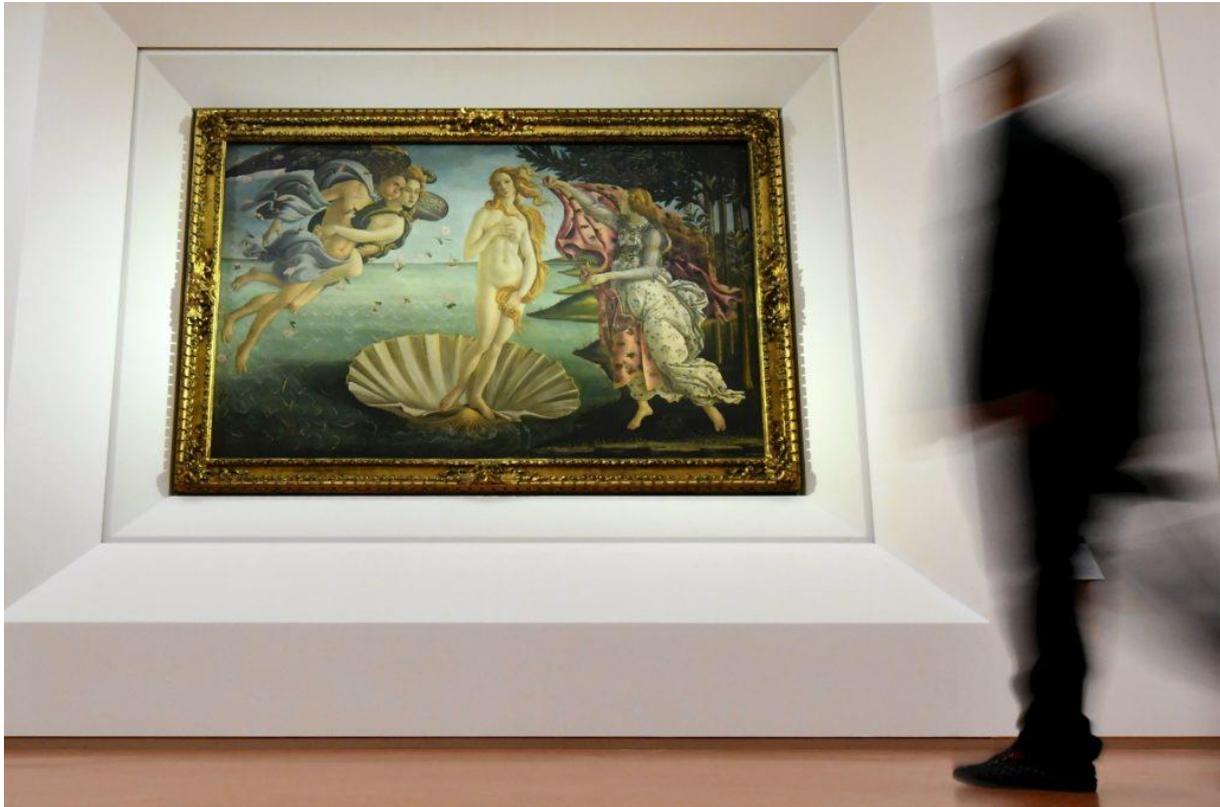
In 2015, Italy unveiled a series of reforms that had the potential to transform the country's storied museums. For the first time, foreign museum directors took the helm at major institutions across the country and all national museum directors were granted more independence than they had had in the past. Now, however, those measures have been rolled back. Under new regulations, approved in June and signed into law last week, some of that autonomy has been restored to the state culture ministry.

Such changes have been anticipated for months, with culture minister Alberto Bonisoli stating his preference for native Italian museum leadership back in January. The new rules will chip away at the reforms introduced four years ago, when Italy expanded eligibility to foreign candidates, ran job ads in the *Economist* magazine, and hired 20 new museum directors, seven of whom were not Italian. Now, their contracts are up for renewal this fall, but many are already on the way out.

Most dramatically, reports Monopol, German-born art expert Cecile Hollberg was informed earlier this month that her contract at the Galleria Dell'Accademia in Florence would come to an abrupt end on August 22, rather than at the end of November as planned. Controversially, the counter-reforms would also merge the museum, home to Michelangelo's *David*, with the bigger Uffizi Museum.

The Uffizi is also led by a German, Eike Schmidt, but he announced in 2017 that he would take over as leader at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna following his

term at Italy's most-visited museum. During his tenure, visitors have increased to 2.2 million people a year and the galleries have been revamped to make it easier to see masterpieces by the likes of Raphael, Sandro Botticelli, and Leonardo da Vinci.



Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus* (1485) at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. Photo by Alberto Pizzoli/AFP/Getty Images.

Meanwhile, two Austrians, Peter Assmann and Peter Aufreiter, have decided to take jobs in their home countries following the conclusion of their terms as directors of the Ducal Palace in Mantua and the Galleria Nazionale delle Marche in Urbino, respectively, according to the Associated Press. Aufreiter will lead the Technical Museum in Vienna; Assmann, the Austrian National Museum.

Finally, James Bradburne, a British Canadian, doesn't yet know if he'll be asked to stay on as director of the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan. "With the current turbulence in Italian politics, it is hard to know what will happen next, so we just have to wait and see," he told the Telegraph. Also unknown are the fates of French art historian Sylvain Bellenger at the Capodimonte Museum in Naples and Germany's Gabriel Zuchtriegel at the Paestum Archaeology Park.

Beyond leadership changes, the government is also stripping museums of much of their power by restoring its right to veto museum spending and to control exhibitions and international loans—of note given Italy's recent reluctance to loan works by Leonardo to the Louvre in Paris for an exhibition for the artist's 500th death anniversary. Museums' independent boards of trustees will also be abolished.

In a [press release](#), the Italian culture ministry insisted that the changes would actually strengthen museums' autonomy, and clarified that dissolving the museum boards was a way to "simplify, as their opinions were already approved by central management."



Michelangelo's masterpiece David at the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence. Photo by Franco Origlia/Getty Images.

But many see cause for concern. "With the centralization involved in this latest reform, we can see that it goes hand-in-hand with the politicization of the museum system," Schmidt told the [Financial Times](#). "I do not think there is a country in the free and western world with such a centralized politics of culture as it is being set out in Italy now."

The counter-reforms were pushed through by the country's populist, right-wing government at a time of political turmoil for the nation, which saw its parliament collapse this week.

For the past 14 months, the country has been led by a nationalist-populist coalition between the anti-establishment Five Star Movement, which took 33 percent of the vote in [the 2018 election](#), and the anti-migrant League party, under Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte. But that arrangement crumbled after League leader Matteo Salvini withdrew from the coalition and Conte tendered his resignation on Tuesday. If a new majority government is not formed, the country will hold snap elections.