World Monuments Fund Supports First Vatican Project

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■ **By Lucy Gordan**



The facade of the Poldi Pezzoli Museum

Photo courtesy of the Poldi Pezzoli Museum

The World Monuments Fund (WMF), headquartered in Manhattan's Rockefeller Center, opened its first Italian office in Milan at the end of May. Its first project there, the restoration of the Golden Room at the Poldi Pezzoli Museum, began on June 8 and the Museum reopened after summer on September 15. The Fund is a non-profit that supports the conservation of historic buildings and sites around the world. Its Italian projects date back to the floods that submerged Venice and Florence in 1966, when the founder, retired electrical engineer American Colonel James Gray, mobilized support to help both cities.

"Italy is where the history of World Monuments Fund began, and it continues to be central to several of our most important projects," said Fiorella Ballabio, Executive Director of the World Monuments Fund in Italy. "Cultural heritage is something alive and deeply human, capable of preserving memory, identity and meaning across generations. In an era where everything seems increasingly fast-paced and intangible, its value becomes even more vital."

Since 1966 the Fund has committed more than $23.5 million to 84 projects across Italy, from archaeological sites and synagogues to cathedrals and museums with major campaigns in Rome, Florence and Venice. Among its most impressive projects are The Temple of Victorious Hercules in the 1990, The Temple of Portuno (2006-13), The Galleria Carracci in Palazzo Farnese (2011-15), Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, the 6th-century church Santa Maria Antiqua containing some of the earliest surviving Christian wall paintings in the Roman Forum, and particularly its Chapels of the Medical Saints and the Arch of Janus, all in Rome, and areas of Pompeii, and the Ghetto and Scuole Grandi di San Rocco in Venice. Other (WMF) ec-

The Golden Room in 1881



Photo courtesy of the Museum

The Golden Room today



Photo courtesy of the Museum

Courtesy of the Museum



Above, the *Galleria Carracci* in *Palazzo Farnese*.
Below, Tintoretto's *Crucifixion* in the *San Rocco* in Venice



Courtesy of WMF

View in the interior of Raphael's Second Loggia
(Photo A. Branchetti - Copyright:Governatorato SCV-Direzione dei Musei)



clesiastical restorations took place in the 9th-century Abbey of San Clemente a Casauria (Pescara), the Basilica of San Pietro di Castello (Venice), and the 12th-century Romanesque Church Pieve di San Gregorio (Umbria) featuring a beautifully carved marble arch and terracottas.

A permanent Milan office is due to open in early 2027. For now, the team is based at the Poldi Pezzoli. The Museum was once the home of Giangiacomo Poldi Pezzoli, a wealthy Milanese nobleman, who died in 1879. Besides his home, he left the city an exceptional collection of jewelery, arms, armor, decorative arts and Renaissance paintings by Botticelli, Bellini, Crivelli and Pollaiolo, which opened as a museum in 1891.

Its Golden Room pioneered the period room, a display technique that recreates a complete historic interior rather than hanging works in isolation. The approach shaped the Isabella Stewart Gardiner Museum in Boston, and The Morgan Library and the Frick Collection in New York.

Allied bombing damaged the Room in 1943 and postwar repairs altered it further. The restoration aims to recover its original proportions and decoration, reuniting scattered elements and uncovering features hidden since the Second World War. The work will also uncover a *seraliana* or Palladian window, a three-part arched opening with marble and bronze detailing, concealed for decades behind a false ceiling.

For a city best known for fashion and finance, the project is a reminder that Milan guards one of Italy's quietest treasures and that preserving it is now a shared effort between a New York-based Foundation and Milan's house-museum.

Less than a month after opening its first office in Italy, the WMF announced its first project ever in Vatican City — a major restoration project of the west wing of the Second Loggia, the so-called "Loggia of Raphael," on the second floor of the Apostolic Palace, just outside the Papal Apartments overlooking the courtyard of Saint Damasus.

The $5.5 million project, to be conducted over the next five years by the Vatican Museums and the WMF and funded by the New-York-based philanthropic Stephen A. Schwarzman Foundation, will involve 20 restorers from the Vatican Museums. Past repairs used glues that shrank and damaged the paint, so the restorers will carefully strip away the glue. They will use hand-held lasers to protect delicate, water-soluble paint layers. Other plans include replacing 19th-century windows designed by Antonio Canova with UV-filtering, heat-reducing glass and installing a new lighting system, which will be paid for by the Patrons of the Arts in the Vatican Museums.

Conceived by Raphael and decorated between 1517 and 1519 by his workshop of some 50 artists for Pope Leo X de' Medici (r. 1513-21), in addition to depicting important events of Pope Leo X's papacy, its pillar and wall decorations drew heavily from the scenes that Raphael, Michelangelo and other artists of their time had observed in Emperor Nero's then-recently-discovered *Domus Aurea*. It had to be one of Raphael's last major projects, since he died in 1520, and was immediately considered one of the highest expressions of Renais-

sance art applied to architecture. Its 213-foot by 13-foot area is divided into 13 bays (also called ceiling vaults), each decorated with four Biblical stories. The first 12 bays illustrate episodes from the Old Testament: Creation, Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Issac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses in two bays, Joshua, David and Solomon, while the final bay is dedicated to the New Testament: The Nativity, The Adoration of the Magi, The Baptism of Christ and The Last Supper. The chief decorators were Giulio Romano for the Biblical scenes on the vaults and Giovanni da Udine for the botanical elements, some of the grotesques (others have been attributed to Perin del Vaga), and the stuccoes in antique style. "As a passageway (long even now) traversed by cardinals, high prelates and ambassadors visiting the Pope," explained Barbara Jatta, Director of the Vatican Museums, at the project's presentation, "admired and copied by the greatest Italian and foreign artists, it was also an essential destination of the Grand Tour." Today the corridor is closed to the general public, but digital archiving during restoration will let people view the restored art online.



A Restorer at work
(Photo: Governatorato SCV-Direzione dei Musei)

In addition to the loggia's restoration, the entire WMF initiative, "The Legacy of Raphael: The Vatican and Beyond," includes restoration training, digital documentation, dissemination and other ongoing projects in the Vatican, made possible by the remaining $8,775,000 of the generous $14,275,000 gift from the Stephen A. Schwarzman Foundation.

"Raphael's loggia is a magnificent treasure that belongs to all of humanity," commented Stephen A. Schwarzman, a co-founder of the private equity firm Blackstone, at the project's presentation. "Its restoration will bring back to life one of the highest expressions of decorative art while creating a lasting legacy through the conservators trained along the way. By training the next generation of experts in the most advanced scientific conservation approaches, we will help preserve not only this extraordinary masterpiece, but also countless other works of cultural heritage around the world for generations to come." ❍