

BREAKING NEWS

University of Missouri System Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin is leaving his post (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/university-of-missouri-system-president-tim-wolfe-resigns-1447086505>)

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/neglected-no-more-a-newly-rennovated-museo-dellopera-del-duomo-1447102564>

ARTS | ARTS IN REVIEW | ART REVIEW

Neglected No More, a Newly Rennovated Museo dell'Opera del Duomo

A museum where the religious meaning of the art can emerge.

By **CAMMY BROTHERS**

Nov. 9, 2015 3:56 p.m. ET

Florence

Some of the best sculptures in the European tradition were produced not for palaces or gardens but cathedral façades. Many important works caked with centuries of soot have now been cleaned and transferred to cathedral museums. Among the most important repositories is the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo—literally, the “Museum of the Office of Works of the Cathedral”—founded in Florence in 1891. Along with the Bargello down the street, it houses many of the greatest Italian Renaissance sculptures.

Among its treasures are Michelangelo's unfinished and emotionally raw “Pietà” (c. 1547-



Donatello's 'Penitent Magdalene' (mid-15th century), surrounded by other works at the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo.

PHOTO: ANTONIO QUATTRONE

55) and Donatello's most affecting work, the "Penitent Magdalene" (mid-15th century), whose ravaged surface of polychrome wood—one of few such sculptures to survive from the Renaissance—evokes modern associations, such as Giacometti. Other extraordinary works by Donatello are his *cantoria* (1433-39), or singing gallery, which brings out his wit, showing *putti* cavorting behind a row of columns, and his prophet "Habakkuk" (or "Lo Zuccone," 1423-25), who with his gaunt, strong features seems on the verge of speaking.

The museum also houses the original "Gates of Paradise" (1425-52), Lorenzo Ghiberti's bronze Baptistery doors (copies of which are in situ), each small panel conveying a biblical narrative with extraordinary economy. These works and others have been expertly cleaned and restored by the Opificio delle Pietre Dure, the Opera del Duomo's own team, and several other firms.

Despite these and other riches, the museum had been neglected for years. But now it has reopened after a three-year, \$49 million renovation and expansion spearheaded by director Monsignor Timothy Verdon, an American art historian, and Florentine architects Adolfo Natalini, Piero Guicciardini and Marco Magni. Between them they have created a dramatic new museum, one that demonstrates what can be achieved when the architectural team knows the collection intimately.

The new museum owes its grand scale (almost 65,000 square feet) to the fortuitous availability of a former theater next door. The architects took advantage of the theater's proportions to create an atrium, visible from multiple levels, in which the largest works are shown. The interior spaces are well choreographed in relation to one another and

the work they display. Most generously, the architects have given visitors a close-up view of the cathedral dome from a roof terrace. But beyond the surface changes is a reconception of the museum's purpose.

Art museums are generally built on the assumption that visitors come for an exclusively aesthetic experience. Msgr. Verdon has instead created an environment in which, in his own words, "the original religious meaning of the works of art can emerge." This is achieved through evocations of the works' context. Most spectacularly, Msgr. Verdon has overseen a full-scale reconstruction, in resin, of the Duomo's incomplete medieval façade, based on a 16th-century drawing and recent scholarly research. The elaborate detail of the façade distracts from the sculptures within it, however, and a similar effect might have been achieved with a drawing of the same size or the reconstruction of a single bay.

The museum is across the street from the cathedral, and organizationally part of it. In essence, Msgr. Verdon has conceived the museum as an extension of the church's devotional functions. This is a bold move, given the centuries-long process by which religious objects have been secularized through their transfer to museums.

Sometimes it goes too far. The room evoking the cathedral choir, with fantastic bas-relief wall panels by Baccio Bandinelli (1493-1560), alternating images of saints with muscular male nudes, is overwhelmed by a video projection on the ceiling, piped in music, church vestments and dark lighting.

Although most renowned for its sculpture, the museum is no less one of architecture. Brunelleschi's dome was an exceptional feat of engineering, instantly becoming the centerpiece of Florence's civic identity and making its architect a civic hero.

Brunelleschi designed an ingenious system of bricks laid in a herringbone pattern that allowed the dome to be constructed without centering, and a series of pulleys that allowed the materials to be conveyed to great heights, all preserved in the museum.

Yet the dome room feels crowded with newly made models and dominated by the sound of the didactic video. And there is little evidence of the new research that has emerged over the past decades, for example through the Years of the Cupola project led by Margaret Haines.

With the museum having spent so much on the construction of the new building, the question lingers of whether it will be able to fund a full catalog of the collection, hire specialized curators, acquire the occasional exceptional object that comes on the market (such as works by Arnolfo di Cambio and others originally for the cathedral that

are currently available in Florence), or mount the kinds of small temporary exhibitions that keep the collection fresh.

Italy's museums are in a transitional moment. For the first time, foreign directors have been brought in for many of the prominent national museums. The Museo dell'Opera del Duomo represents a provocative suggestion of directions in which they might go, with both boons and risks.

Ms. Brothers, the author of "Michelangelo Drawing and the Invention of Architecture" (Yale), teaches art and architectural history at the University of Virginia.

Copyright 2014 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.