

Reception honoring the Centennial of the Kunsthistorisches Institut Florenz

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Introductory Remarks

Irving Lavin
Institute for Advanced Study

When Max Seidel invited me two years ago to participate in the celebrations he was planning for the Kunsthistorisches Institut's centennial, my immediate reaction was that we Americans ought also to be celebrating the Institut. The Italian Art Society was quick to adopt the suggestion, and this evening's ceremony is one of the results of that decision. We are delighted that Professor Seidel has been able to join us, and honored by the presence of two distinguished members of the Institut's advisory board, Jens Peter Haeusgen and Ralph P. Odendall. For their work in organizing the occasion we are thankful to the President of the Society, Anita Moskowitz, who has labored long and hard to make this lovely reception happen, and to Edith Kirsch, of whose appointment as a foreign member of the Institut's board we are very proud.

I think of American indebtedness to the Institut as a series of three concentric circles. The innermost circle is my own. When in the early 1950's I began my graduate studies in the history of art at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York, I was lucky to have as my advisor for the Master's thesis H. W. (Peter) Janson. Janson was then deep into his famous catalogue raisonné of the work of Donatello and I undertook to study the sources of Donatello's bronze pulpits in San Lorenzo. A few years later, as I was preparing this work for publication, I was able to visit Florence and frequent for a time the library of the Kunsthistorisches Institut, which was then temporarily located in Piazza Santo Spirito. From a material point of view, it was a miserable time. Everyone was poor; there was little heat and less light (one studied with overcoat and

gloves and only in daylight hours). But the physical discomfort was more than compensated by the stimulating intellectual atmosphere and, especially for me, by the ready welcome I received from Ulrich Middeldorf, who had recently been brought back from refuge in Chicago as the first post-war Director—a brilliant appointment, healing in every way. Needless to say, he had great interest in and deep knowledge of Donatello, and in a study of the renewed appreciation of Donatello in the early sixteenth century, especially of the late work. Middeldorf had pioneered a theme that had become central to my own understanding of the pulpits—archaistic revival as a kind of subversive leitmotif in Renaissance art. Although we did not see eye to eye on everything, we had several lively discussions, and my visits to the Institut were of seminal importance in my transformation, for better or worse, from a callow student into a professional art historian.

The same sort of things could be said, I am sure, for generations of young Americans enamored of Italian art, and this is the second circle. In fact, I venture to suggest that a study of the numbers and demography of the transatlantic frequenters of the Kunsthistorisches Institut would provide a revealing and valid index to the maturation of American culture generally during the last century.

The third circle consists not of who went to the Institut but of what and who they found there. And here I include not only, perhaps not even primarily, the magnificent facilities, the generous reception and patient assistance we have all enjoyed. I refer above all to the glorious tradition of German humanistic scholarship that the Institut represents both as an institution and in the persons of the great art historians who have been associated with it throughout its history. They have been an inspiration and model for our own efforts, so much so that I can scarcely imagine—indeed, I shudder to imagine!—what the development of our discipline in America

would have been like without that wonderful place we call *tout court*, affectionately and in deep gratitude, the “Kunst.”