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Filippo Brunelleschi, inventor of perspective, creator of the first building of the Renaissance, and master architect of the first free-standing dome built since ancient times, rests today in the floor of the Duomo gift shop.

For me this anecdote is not only endlessly amusing, but it also summarizes in a nutshell my impression of Florence. It is a city of contradictions, a city which boasts some of the best art in the world alongside some of the worst commercial reinterpretations of that art – take a look at the Birth of Venus aprons in Mercato San Lorenzo if you don't know what I am talking about. We all like to complain about the tourists and to compare our favorite shops, restaurants, and piazzas, all in the quest to discover the authentic Florence. I have struggled during my semester abroad with the meaning of that word, “authentic,” and in coming to terms with it I found my place here.

When I first arrived in Florence I was determined to be as Italian as possible, to assimilate completely into my adopted country. Especially after advice from various sources about which gelaterias are authentic and which are touristy, strong warnings about the perils of cappuccino after breakfast, and other such anecdotes, I walked around in a constant state of paranoia. Is this bar authentic or not? What is the Italian to tourist ratio on this street? Finally I reached a point where I was afraid to open my mouth lest my secret identity as a foreigner be uncovered. I felt frustrated by my inability to connect with the city and I was concerned that my experience wasn't authentic enough.

Then gradually I began to notice small things, like Signore Brunelleschi's final resting place, that made me think perhaps this “real” Florence we all seek doesn't actually exist. Take the Duomo as an example: commissioned in the 13th century, its

dome was finished in the early 15th century, the inside of the dome painted in the late 16th century, and the façade added in the 19th century. Where is the authentic Duomo? Should we remove all interventions past a certain point, and declare that we have restored the original version? Many people collaborated over hundreds of years, the building that exists today is a testament to this development through time. The city of Florence itself shows layers of history, from the present surface down through the Renaissance, Medieval, Roman, and Etruscan cities below. Where is the “real” Florence? Florence has a rich history and a fierce pride in its identity, but this identity also includes frosty waves of Technicolor gelato and silly t-shirts. To know the city is to know the whole city, as I discovered.

Once I realized what a mix of different influences and elements Florence is, I stopped worrying so much about finding the one most authentic spot in the whole city and began to enjoy myself a bit more. I also realized that I do not need to speak perfect Italian or to trace my family back through generations of Tuscans to feel at home in the city. I could be part of the mix, and I could participate in the creation of the next layer of Florence. So now I don't worry as much about having the most Florentine of Florentine experiences. I am trying to take everything in, to understand all aspects of the city and to experience each part of it to the fullest. Rather than silently skulking in the corner trying to blend in, which (as you may have guessed) didn't work so well in the first place, I speak Italian to whoever will listen, no matter how rough, eat whatever gelato looks good at the moment, and pay my respects from time to time to the genius of Brunelleschi down among the postcards and puzzles in the Duomo gift shop.