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Tangible History

There are not many places in the United States where history is tangible. In the United States we have a much different understanding of history. Buildings barely one hundred years old are considered historic, the twentieth century is fast becoming history, and my father was once shocked to find his afterschool job the subject of a museum exhibit. There simply isn't any depth to history in the United States. How could there be? It has only been roughly four hundred years since a small group of settlers managed to land on the shores of Virginia, forming the first permanent English colony in North America, and what imprint have they left? The only tangible proofs of that first settlement are the remains that are pulled from the archeological digs. On the blank slate that those first colonists settled we have built one generation on top of another obliterating all that came before in the name of progress.

I believe I became a history major because I loved the stories. All of history can be understood as one long story, with characters weaving in and out of the plot, making their mark on the world before disappearing again into the mists of time. Certain places are so full of history that they cannot help but whisper their stories into the ears of those who pass through. In the United States those whispers were fleeting, needing to be clutched at desperately to be heard. My first night in Florence, however, I ventured into the piazza della signoria quite by chance, and there for the first time history was tangible. The moment I set foot in the piazza della signoria I could feel history pushing at me from all sides, breathing its stories into my ears. History was for once tangible, it did not need to be imagined, it was not an abstract concept. It was as if the stories I had chased after, blown about by the wind, had been given flesh and bone. Here people

walk the streets that had been tread by Dante, Savonarola, Michelangelo, and Leonardo. They work where they worked, they shop where they shopped, and they sleep where they slept while all around them the very buildings cry out the stories to which they have been witness.

And yet with this cacophony of history resounding from every orifice I worry that no one notices. Like standing too close to a work of art, they are unable to see the beauty of the overall picture. Living in a sea of history, every day they are assaulted by the stories that people come the world over to see, to hear. Do they tune the voices out? Ignore them as they go about their daily lives in the surroundings that have been known to them since they were little children. How often do they look up and take in a breath of air laced with the breath of names known so well in textbooks, heavy on the lips of students around the globe.

You cannot force a person to hear the voices of history. The harder you try the less they will hear. The days that I work in the Palazzo Vecchio I tell people the stories I have heard, I try to make them wonder, to make them thirsty for more so that they will open themselves to the voices around them. In the end I have come to appreciate how narrow my understanding of history was before I came to study abroad in Italy, a failing that is difficult to admit for an enthusiastic history major. History has endured in Europe unlike it ever could in the United States. The Palazzo Vecchio, majestic in the seven hundred years of experience etched into its face, has offered me an experience I could never have had without traveling to Italy. Through this great opportunity I have been able to listen to the stories, unattainable to visitors and overlooked by natives, in the very place in which they were written.