

Stronger than Brexit

The British Institute of Florence celebrates its hundred years in Florence

On 24 June the British Institute of Florence will be awarded the *Fiorino d'Oro* (Gold Florin) by Florence Mayor Dario Nardella, as an official recognition for having honoured the city and served the Italian and international community with its one hundred years of cultural activity. The Institute is celebrating its birthday with a long list of interesting events that began in September and will continue all through 2017.

Among other initiatives, there is a series of talks by leading personalities, open to members of the British Institute of Florence (membership options range from 24 hours to life), held on Wednesdays at 6 pm in the Harold Acton Library. The spring programme includes:

- a lecture on books versus facebook by former Prime Minister of Italy Giuliano Amato (1 March);
- a talk for International Women's Day by Julia Rice, Director of the Institute (8 March);
- a lecture on craftsmanship by Eve Borsook (15 March);
- a lecture on Heritage by Loyd Grossman, Patron of the Association for Heritage Interpretation (22 March);
- a lecture in Italian on the art of writing by writer Marco Vichi (29 March);
- a lecture on Shakespeare's *Richard III* by Professor Martin White of Bristol University (5 April);
- and a lecture on the English and the Uffizi by the Director of the Uffizi Gallery Eike Schmidt (12 April).

The "British 100 Film Festival" is another interesting initiative covering the whole period of celebrations. Once or twice a month, films highlighting emerging and prize-winning British directors are presented at the historic and beautiful Odeon Cinema in Florence, all in their original versions with subtitles in Italian. This month's calendar features *Trainspotting 2*, a film by Danny Boyle, from Thursday 9 March to Wednesday 15 March.

The origins of this long-lasting British institution are to be found in pre-war Florence, when the cultural elite of English and Italian residents used to meet and discuss the idea of a reading room, library and space for cultural exchange between the English-speaking world and Italy. Founded in 1917 precisely for this purpose, and granted a Royal Charter in 1923, the British Institute of Florence was the first to operate overseas and served as a model for the establishment of the British Council in 1934.

Presently based in two different buildings in the very heart of Florence, Palazzo dello Strozzi and Palazzo Lanfredini, the British Institute is today an important centre for the Cambridge English Language Assessment exams, and offers courses in English and Italian language, history of art and life drawing, as well as a number of university study abroad programmes. Palazzo Lanfredini, on the south bank of the river Arno, hosts the Harold

Acton Library, a lending collection of approximately 50,000 English books published between the 16th and the 21st centuries, which includes some rare books and many signed first editions available for consultation in the Library. The collection focuses mainly on Art History, English and Italian Literature and Language, History, Travel, The Grand Tour and Music. Every year about 500 titles are added to the collection. The Library also hosts a vast collection of periodicals, many of them dating well into the past, such as *The Times Literary Supplement* from 1918 to the present day. The Library's archives are an important source of valuable material regarding the history of the Institute and the relations between the Anglophone and Tuscan communities. With its rich cultural programme, the result of a joint effort between the Institute and several local organisations and institutions, the Library continues to be a lively point of contact between the two communities. We can easily understand why the British Institute of Florence defines itself as a "bi-cultural institution".

No doubt, the British Institute of Florence has successfully survived two world wars. In 1940, following Italy's entry into war, it was forced to close but reopened in 1946, its beautiful library still intact because during the war it had been looked after with care. Nowadays, though, there is another challenge ahead of an entirely different nature. It is called Brexit. Although it is true that a hundred years ago, when the British Institute was born, the European Union was still far in the future, and Europe was about to be disrupted by two dreadful wars that today are luckily behind us, it is also true that we now live in a highly bureaucratised world where economic interests generally prevail over the cultural ones. Brexit, which is close at hand, might affect the work of the British Institute, surely not in terms of its friendly relationship with the city of Florence, but perhaps in terms of a more complex bureaucracy and higher costs. Let's express the wish that the Institute will nonetheless be able to expand its activity and implement all its future projects.

– by Chiara Calabrese

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British 100 Film Festival:

info at <http://odeonfirenze.com/british-100-film-festival/>

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