



Dark Water: Flood and Redemption in the City of Masterpieces

Robert Clark

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This dramatic, beautifully written account of the flood that ravaged Florence, Italy, in 1966 weaves heartbreaking tales of the disaster and stories of the heroic global efforts to save the city's treasures against the historic background of Florence's glorious art.

On November 4, 1966, Florence, one of the world's most historic cities and the repository of perhaps its greatest art, was struck by a monumental calamity. A low-pressure system had been stalled over Italy for six weeks and on the previous day it had begun to rain again. Nineteen inches fell in twenty-four hours, more than half of the annual total. By two o'clock in the morning twenty-thousand cubic feet of water per second was moving towards Florence. Soon manhole covers in Santa Croce were exploding into the air as jets of water began shooting out of the now overwhelmed sewer system. Cellars, vaults, and strong-rooms were filling with water. Night watchmen on the Ponte Vecchio alerted the bridge's jewelers and goldsmiths to come quickly to rescue their wares. By then the water was moving at forty miles per hour at a height of twenty-four feet. At 7:26 a.m. all of Florence's electric civic clocks came to a stop. The Piazza Santa Croce was under twenty-two feet of water. Beneath the surface, twelve feet of mud, sewage, debris, and oil sludge were starting to ooze and settle into the cellars and crypts and room after room above them. Six-hundred-thousand tons of it would smother, clot, and encrust the city.

Dark Water brings the flood and its aftermath to life through the voices of witnesses past and present. Two young American artists wade heedlessly through the inundated city carrying their baby in order to witness its devastated beauty: the Ponte Vecchio buried in debris and Ghiberti's panels from the doors of the Florence Baptistery, lying heaped in yard-deep mud; the swamped Uffizi Gallery; and, in the city libraries, one billion pages of Renaissance and antique books, soaked in mire. A *Life* magazine photographer, stowing away on an army helicopter, arrives to capture a drama that, he felt, "could only be told by Dante" amid the flooded tombs of Machiavelli and Michelangelo in Giotto and Vasari's Santa Croce. A British student, one of thousands of "mud angels" who rushed to Florence to save its art, spends a month scraping mud and mold from Cimabue's magnificent and neglected *Crocifisso* as intrigues and infighting among international art experts and connoisseurs swirl around him. And during the fortieth anniversary commemorations of 2006 the author asks himself why art matters so very much to us, and how beauty seems to somehow save the world even in the face of overwhelming disaster.

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