

Scents and sensibility



Florence's Pharmacy Santa Maria Novella; pouring the floral wax tablets, below

Age-old alchemy at a heritage pharmacy in Florence

MARIAN McGUINNESS

Tincture of Myrrh, Compound of Devil's Claw, Extract of Bladderwrack. Treatments and teas, soaps and syrups, extracts and essences. It all sounds a little Shakespearean. And that's not too far off the mark.

In the early 1600s when the Bard was at The Globe in London winding up the witches' spell for Macbeth with "eye of newt, and toe of frog", the Dominican monks were busy in their apothecary in Florence. They grew and harvested the herbs for their infirmary around the cloisters of the Basilica of Santa Maria Novella, Florence's first

great cathedral. As the fame of their apothecary spread to Russia, China and the Indies, the monks realised the potential of their medicines, balms, oils and aromatic elixirs. In 1612, four centuries after their arrival in Florence, the monks opened for business.

Not to be confused with the other great pastel-marbled basilica, known simply as The Duomo, and where all guidebooks seem to lead, I'm pounding the less salubrious streets near Florence's main train station and the original basilica of Santa Maria Novella. And all with good reason. I'm trying to find the elusive number 16, Via della Scala, site of Italy's oldest operating pharmacy. A nonna sees me studying my map. After a little fuss and a gesticulated, "Allora! La farmacia più antica di tutta Europa!", nonna bids me to follow and I'm deposited in front of two sets of doors webbed with water pipes and wires.

The enormous outer wooden portals open onto glass ones decorated with brass. Arched overhead and beneath the fanlight, Officina Profumo-Farmaceutica di Santa Maria Novella is chiselled in the grey stone. Beside it, a small ceramic tile bears the number 16.



Then it's through the doors and into an alternative world. Ornate floor tiling, a vestibule of backlit columns and statues, a vaulted ceiling, a few stairs and all while following my nose as the fragrance of flowers and spices draws me into the mellow light of the ancient pharmacy.

The sound is hushed and hallowed. Visitors and shoppers talk in whispers in this parallel universe that 800 years ago was the chapel of the Dominican monastery. Bordered by lofty neo-Gothic walnut cabinets housing iridescent potions, and interspersed with choir stalls, a dark timbered counter stands in place of the once-decorated altar. It is laid with perfumes, powders, shampoos and shaving creams. Sales assistants in snazzy white uniforms apply and dab their prospective customers while overlooked by the eye of God, the stained-glass rose window. Shelves are stocked with the same simple essences that were distilled in the 14th century. Rosewater, now bought for perfume or aromatherapy, was originally used to disinfect houses after an outbreak of the plague which, in the mid-14th century, wiped out about 70 per cent of Florence's population. Aceto dei Sette Ladri, the Vinegar

The intriguing tale of an artist and a ballerina

THE CULTURAL TOURIST

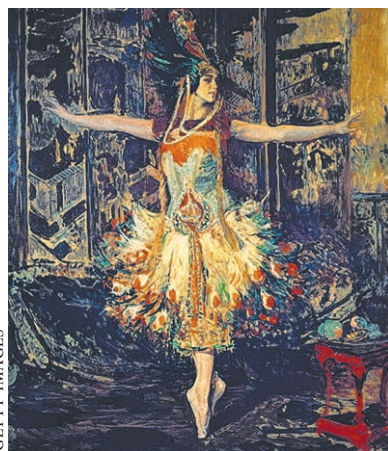
ANN RENNIE

The incidental and hidden treasures of travel are often excavated, serendipitously, in the great cities of the world. Often these finds are not on public view. They are just off the beaten track, on the periphery of popular interest, cordoned-off, in private collections or behind closed doors. Travel, as distinct from tourism, is never about the certainty of destination, but about the delights and challenges of the journey in passing — the picture discovered or the object found or a certain enchanting view of water at lilac dusk.

Travel creates small bugs of obsession — the need to find out, to solve a problem, to go back and check on something tantalisingly and briefly sighted. The traveller, once home, may be transformed into an art historian, amateur detective and rabid late-night Googler when a mystery beckons.

And so back to Opera Garnier in Paris, to chase not a phantom, but the provenance of a painting spied in a dark corridor, hung high, out of sight even to most of those who wander off to do a bit of solo exploring.

Hidden in the cavernous gloom is a portrait of a ballerina in splendid costume. Perhaps it is her swirling garment of peacock feathers that first catches my eye, or the exotic headwear and the orientalism of the background. There is something striking about the equilibrium of her pose — her hands outstretched gracefully mid-pirouette. I take a couple of photos but I am not a good snapper. Later, I discover I have amputated the ends of those delicately poised hands.



GETTY IMAGES

Russian ballerina Tamara Karsavina in *Firebird*, painted by Jacques-Emile Blanche

Over time I learn about the Ballet Russes and the Belle Epoque and eventually stumble across what I need to put a name in the frame. It is the prima ballerina Tamara Karsavina in the role she created in Stravinsky's *Firebird* in 1910.

And then I begin researching the artist, Jacques-Emile Blanche. He moved in rarefied circles and painted subjects such as Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Edgar Degas, Auguste Rodin, Colette, Claude Debussy, Thomas Hardy and John Singer Sargent. He was what some would dismissively call a society portraitist, a

dilettante, moving comfortably in a gilded milieu, the artist for whom everyone who counted wanted to sit. More research and I find that the painting has had a recent triumphant pairing with one by Blanche of Nijinsky, who partnered Karsavina in this role after Anna Pavlova refused because she thought Stravinsky's music too avant-garde.

Firebird was taken down from its cheerless corridor to dazzle audiences at an exhibition of the long-neglected Blanche's work at Fondation Pierre Bergé-Yves Saint Laurent (October 2012-January 2013).

I also find an Australian connection. Blanche painted Heidelberg School artist Charles Conder and composer Percy Grainger, whose portrait is housed at the University of Melbourne's Grainger Museum.

I love the sumptuousness of Opera Garnier with its opulence and excess, its theatricality, its centre-stage personality, its ceiling by Marc Chagall. I adore its red and gold private boxes with their whiff of history; ancient encores lingering like a fading melody in the auditorium. I imagine Degas in his regular Monday night seat, planning his rendezvous at the rehearsals of the corps de ballet where he will capture the flutter and flounce of tutus. And I see Karsavina, furred in feathers, at once dazzle, captivate and shock her elegant first-night audience in this great baroque building that crowns the 9th arrondissement.

• operadeparis.fr
• fondation-pb-ysl.net



ALAMY



OFFICINAL PROFUMO-FARMACEUTICA SANTA MARIA NOVELLA



ALAMY

Clockwise from left: tantalising wares for sale; museum-like Sala Verde (Green Room); pharmacy products and exhibits

of the Seven Thieves, was named after the band of corpse robbers who, before stealing from the poxy bodies, doused themselves in this vinegar for protection. Today it is sold as a nifty pick-me-up.

But I'm more inclined towards the 25 varieties of soaps made from centuries-old recipes. There's pomegranate for delicate skin, almond for dehydrated complexions and sulphur-based for hardy skin. They are individually moulded and aged for 60 days in a ventilated cupboard before being hand-chiselled and hand-wrapped. The pharmacy is also a time capsule of intriguing stories. On February 7, 1497, the fiery Dominican monk Savonarola

denounced the ownership of immoral items. Artworks, musical instruments, fine clothing, cosmetics, mirrors — all were cast into a “bonfire of vanities”. The pharmacy only survived as the monks claimed their products to be “medicinal”. Not long after, the 14-year-old Florentine, Catherine of Medici, married Henry, the future king of France. The monks created the citrusy, bergamot-noted Acqua della Regina, the Water of the Queen perfume, for her. It later became Eau de Cologne Classica when it was produced in Germany.

But all is not froth and bubble in this Renaissance pharmacy. Off to the left, in the Sala Verde, or Green

Room, dark portraits of past friars look down over marble busts, framed botanical prints and baskets of aromatic herbs and flowers. Gold and ivory shelves display ornate apothecary jars bearing mysterious offerings of orzo, altea, allume and ratania. Hand-written recipes circa 1761 are on view for those who can interpret the many ledgers. The museum continues through a small corridor into the Antica Speziera, the Ancient Apothecary. Here, the floor tiles are not highly polished.

These russet remnants bear the wear and tear of centuries of leather soles shuffling around the wooden presses and pyramid-shaped distillers on display. Brass scales, wicker-bound glass jars, long-stemmed vials and elegant thermometers all hold tales of the alchemists who used them.

The last room, originally the sacristy, now houses the library. The original frescoes, created in 1380 by the early Renaissance painter Mariotto di Nardo, are faded, but as a point of comparison to Da Vinci's later painting of *The Last Supper*, Nardo has painted *Christ and the Apostles* seated at a round table.

The library is still a place of consultation with its shelves of texts preserved from times past. There is also the untouchable — the Codice Dell'Anatomia, the hefty, leather tomes bearing the name Leonardo da Vinci, 1470.

The magic of these ancient alchemists is broken as I wind my way past the charming tearoom back to the sales area. I pick up the vanilla coloured parchment that lists the “essences, pomades, spirits, balms, waters and liqueurs” made in the pharmacy, and note that most of the botanicals used in the products are grown in the herb garden outside or on the surrounding hills. Even the parchment is eco-friendly, made sans chlorine.

I scan the list and find a cologne, Nostalgia, for my husband; it's based on the scent of a vintage Italian racing car. With notes of musk, patchouli and citrus, I wonder if on skin contact, they'll convert to grease, rubber and leather. Do you think they'll throw in a racing-red Ferrari with the rather pricey purchase? I'll just elbow my way to the tester.

Checklist

The 17th-century Farmacia di Santa Maria Novella is at Via della Scala, 16, a five-minute walk from Florence's Santa Maria Novella station. Open daily from 9am to 8pm. More: smnovella.com.

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FURTHER

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Hadrian's Wall, Northumberland

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