postwar miracle:

RESTORATION OF ITALY'S TREASURES

By J. D. RATCLIFF

In the final two years of World War II, Italy took a fearful artistic drubbing—possibly the worst since the destruction of ancient Greece. Among the casualties were some of the world's richest historic and artistic treasures. Bombs gutted ancient churches, crumbling frescoes painted half a millenium ago to tell Christianity's inspiring story. Priceless paintings were scattered, irreplaceable sculpture smashed by artillery fire. Incendiaries set indiscriminate torches to tank arsenals and lovely Renaissance palaces; to railroad stations and opera houses; to supply dumps and collections of ancient manuscripts.

Could the world in general, and Italy in particular, ever recover from this devastating blow to mankind's cultural heritage? Many qualified experts felt the answer was no. Events—and Italian artistic genius — are proving them wrong. Other countries gave top priority to rebuilding industry and homes. Italy placed major emphasis on recouping artistic losses—to the enormous enrichment of present and future generations.

THE LAST SUPPER

The night of August 15, 1943 was one of horror in Milan. Waves of Allied bombers dropping high explosives were followed by planes with incendiaries—it was hoped such saturation raids would knock Italy out of the war. The city was afire, even asphalt street paving was aflame. Almost inevitably a bomb fell near the refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie, once part of a Dominican friary, and home of the world's most famous painting, Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper," which depicts the sublimely dramatic moment just after Christ had spoken the words to His disciples: "One of you shall betray me."

When dawn came on August 16 a procession of saddened people viewed the result. The refectory, where monks once took their meals, was a smouldering rubble pile. The roof was gone, and a side wall. But the north wall, containing the great painting, was standing! Feebly protected by sandbags, it had somehow managed to survive the blast.

In the turmoil of war the best protection that could be immediately provided for the mural was a tarpaulin. Later a tar-paper shelter was built and, after the war, a permanent roof. But meanwhile driving rain and snow made a sodden jelly of the painting. Even the lightest finger touch made an indentation. Sand from the bags stuck to it, and a film of white fungus had grown over it.

For nearly four years an artistic controversy raged. One side contended that the painting was doomed and that any efforts at restoration would only destroy the few remnants of beauty that remained. Another group, headed by Mauro Pellicioli, Italy's greatest art restorer, disagreed. With will and skill, they felt, the painting could be brought back.

In April 1947 Pellicioli's ideas prevailed. Contributing his services free, the great restorer—a chunky little man with deep set eyes, a shock of white hair—climbed on a scaffolding, set to work. Over a period of months, heating units on either side of the painting had gradually dissipated moisture. Pellicioli started spraying and injecting the crumbling plaster with a dewaxed shellac mixed with alcohol, to bind it together. By the summer of 1952 Pellicioli, satisfied with the results of this treatment, was ready for the delicate task of cleaning and restoration.

It was known that the painting had been restored at least once each century since its completion in 1497. Many of these efforts had been bungling smears,

however. Pellicioli decided to get down to Da Vinci's original painting.

X rays can penetrate paintings done on canvas to show what layers lie hidden beneath the surface. But the technique doesn't work with paintings done on a plaster wall. Pellicioli had to rely on a surgeon's knife. Working on a few square centimeters at a time, he gently scraped away upper layers of paint, delicately swabbed the surface with cotton pledgets soaked in solvent. He summed up his problem at the time: "You scrape until you reach the real Leonardo," he explained. "The only difficulty lies in knowing when to stop."

For two difficult, demanding years the work of love continued—with extraordinary results. An early restorer had clothed Christ in a robe of a dark-red color. Da Vinci's brilliant vermilion, hidden beneath, now came into view. A new freshness came to the hands of St. James, a delicate gold tracery emerged on the robe of Judas, St. Bartholomew's sleeve came out a soft blue instead of an indifferent green.

As it stands today the painting is in better condition than before the war. Art experts believe the shellac treatment will preserve it from further deterioration; that it will remain for years to come an inspiration to the millions of people who will make reverent pilgrimages to see "one of the most sublime and dramatic works of art conceived by the human mind."

LA SCALA

The same night the refectory housing The Last Supper was taking its devastating punishment, another world-famed cultural monument met disaster. High-explosive and incendiary bombs crashed through the wooden roof of the world's most famed opera house—La Scala. With a roar the roof collapsed, and the debris was set afire with incendiaries.

To the level of second-tier boxes rubble filled the 165-year-old theater. An old watchman wept openly. "This is the end of La Scala," he said. From all appearances Milan's musical heart had stopped beating. Yet, even while a dying war still swirled around the city, plans for rebuilding got underway.

Says architect Luigi Lorenzo Secchi, who was to handle the job: "We didn't want a new theater. We wanted the old one back, exactly as it was." La Scala's great domed ceiling had been given major credit for giving the theater the world's best acoustics. Secchi rooted through wreckage to assemble fragments of old roof trusses, which would help in building a model for the new one. Fragments of velvet seat covers and swatches of silk brocade wall coverings were salvaged to serve as samples for textile manufacturers. The great crystal chandelier, originally from Bohemia, posed a problem. Totally destroyed, there was no model for it. Secchi found a photograph of it in a dentist's office which served as model for a replacement.

War ended in April 1945, and about a month later reconstruction of La Scala began. Tens of thousands of Milanese were without homes, shops and factories were smashed, utilities crippled. There was not a murmur of complaint when rebuilding of the opera house got priority over all else. Individuals, corporations, state and city chipped in funds sorely needed for other tasks. Labor worked overtime on the job. Even the Communists, busy stirring industrial strife elsewhere, gave quiet cooperation.

May 11, 1946 was a memorable and historic day. A little man with a mop of white hair and beautifully chiseled face stepped to the center of the stage in the rebuilt theater, which duplicated the old one down to smiles on faces of decorative gilt angels. To test acoustics he clapped his hands sharply, waited for the echo. "It is the same," he said. The master had spoken. Arturo Toscanini, after almost eight years of self-imposed exile from Italy in protest against Mussolini's fascism, was home again.

That night as he lifted his baton to conduct the orchestra and a 200-voice chorus containing dozens of famed opera stars, there was scarcely a dry eye in the great theater, or among the 10,000 people who jammed the square outside to listen to the program over loudspeakers. Although mountainous tasks of reconstruction lay ahead, Milan lived again. La Scala was back. From that moment onward other tasks seemed easier.

FRESCO BY FILIPPINO LIPPI

In most cases reconstruction of monuments and works of art has been the responsibility of the state. In a few cases individuals have done certain jobs alone. This happened in Prato, the beautiful little Tuscan town a few miles out of Florence. Here, 450 years ago, the great Renaissance painter, Filippino Lippi, built a small tabernacle outside his home, decorated it with one of his loveliest frescoes, "The Saints Adoring the Madonna and Child."

On March 7, 1944 a bomb leveled the house and shattered the magnificent fresco. Almost before the dust had settled a mild, soft-spoken little man was at work. With his wife Elena, Leonetto Tintori, a sculptor and restorer of paintings, was picking up fragments of painted plaster, some no larger than a fingernail. The couple packed them in sand in small wooden tubs and hauled them to their studio 2½ miles out of town. Seeking shelter whenever the bombers returned, they sorted through rubble for five days; finally collected all pieces that had not been reduced to powder.

Then began the great task of fitting together a jigsaw puzzle with upwards of 8000 pieces. The job took two years. Next came the problem of fastening fragments together. Tintori would have liked sturdy canvas. Since none was available in the immediate postwar chaos, he used bedsheets from his own home. These were dipped in hot water and pasted to the front of the fresco. Then the fresco was turned over, the plaster was scraped off down to the paint, and sheets were glued to the back. When this glue set, the sheets were delicately soaked away from the front. Today the fresco, a glory for generations to come, is installed in the Prato Museum.

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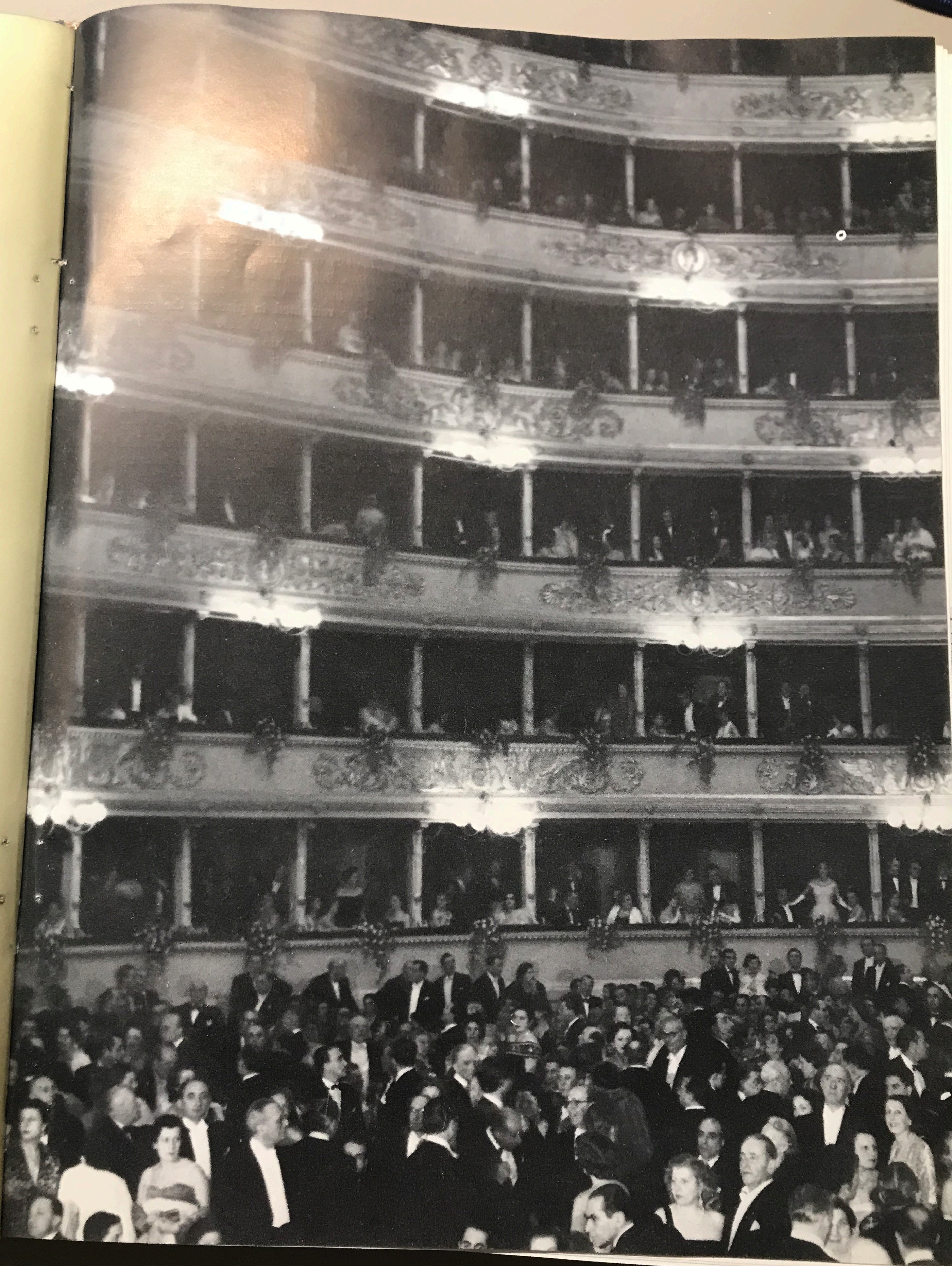
La Scala bombed (page 50) and restored (right; Wide World photo)



PONTE A SANTA TRINITA

In Florence on August 4, 1944 retreating Germans blew up four of the beatiful bridges across the Arno River, and destroyed palaces to block entrances to the fifth, the Ponte Vecchio. The greatest loss: the Ponte a Santa Trinita, generally considered the world's most beautiful bridge.
With artillery still rumbling in the distance Florentine architect Riccardo Gizdulich, clad in bathing suit, started wading through the muddy waters, dragging marble bridge decorations to safety, taking measurements of the remaining stubs of piers, numbering stones still standing. He was obsessed with the idea that the delicate, shallow arches of Santa Trinita would rise again.
At war's end two opposing factions clashed over bridge reconstruction. The Ministry of Public Works wanted a modern steel-and-concrete structure that would look like the old one but could be built quickly and cheaply. Gizdulich, ably backed by numerous Italian personalities and by American art critic Bernard Berenson, held out for nothing less than an exact copy of the original—built in 1566-69 by Bartolommeo Ammannati, with suggestions from Michelangelo.
Berenson offered to release approximately $100,000, contributed mostly by American friends, only if the bridge were rebuilt along the original lines. People of Florence were similarly adamant — their hard-earned lire contributed to a "buy-a-brick-for-Santa-Trinita" campaign should be used only for a duplicate of the original.
Under these pressures the Ministry of Public Works gave in. Meanwhile Gizdulich dug out construction notes nearly four centuries old. Existing photographs of the old bridge were enlarged to near life size and exact calculations made of curvature of the arches. For years the arches had presented an enigma — according to modern engineering theories they were so shallow that they *should* have collapsed. To be on the safe side Emilio Brizzi, engineer on the job, made models and ran static tests. The arches were strong enough to stand any loads.
In drawing plans, Gizdulich set rigorous standards for himself. The new bridge should exactly match the old one with a margin of deviation no greater than half an inch at any point! Some arches in the old bridge were slightly out of kilter. Gizdulich faithfully included these errors.
On March 1, 1956 reconstruction got underway. Wherever possible old stones were dredged up from the river bottom. To replace missing ones, quarries which provided original stone and had been closed for over three centuries were reopened. Workmen were required to cut stones by ancient methods.
In August 1957 the structure was opened to pedestrian traffic. But for one detail it is exactly as it was before. At the four corners of the bridge are statues of the four seasons. Fragments were pieced together to complete all but one. Spring's head has never been found.

MONTECASSINO

Of all the grim destruction wrought by war no job was so complete as that of Montecassino — the historic and lofty Benedictine Abbey between Naples and Rome. One of the holiest places in Christendom, it was here that the Benedictine order was founded in the sixth century by St. Benedict. While elsewhere the lamps of civilization were flickering and going out during the Dark Ages, they continued to burn brightly at Montecassino. Its great library, containing manuscripts dating to Roman times, was one of the earth's great cultural repositories—with works of Homer, Ovid, Cicero, Vergil, others.
As war crawled up the Italian peninsula, Montecassino seemed completely safe — so safe that, ironically enough, the Naples Museum sent most of its famed paintings there for safekeeping. The Abbey's stone walls, up to 11 feet thick, looked secure against any assault. Everyone underestimated the potency of modern weapons.
The Abbey, perched on top of an 1800-foot mountain, dominates the Liri River Valley. Allied commanders suspected that the Germans planned to use it as a gigantic roadblock. On Feb. 14, 1944, leaflets were dropped ordering evacuation. Seldom has the world seen total destruction on such a scale. Hardly a stone remained in place in the great rubble pile. Yet, almost by a miracle, the great statue of St. Benedict remained upright!
By good fortune the Germans had anticipated such a course of events. Four months earlier they had ordered the evacuation of art objects and precious manuscripts — and had provided 100 trucks to cart this irreplaceable treasure to safekeeping at the Vatican in Rome.
With funds mostly supplied by the Italian government, rebuilding of the Abbey got underway in April 1949. Of all the hundreds of reconstruction jobs that have been undertaken in Italy, this was the largest by far. Some 400 workmen built new roads up the mountainside, opened quarries to provide building materials. Fortunately, exact plans were available—they had been drawn in 1939 by Don Angelo Pantoni, a monk with engineering training. In September, 1952, the Benedictines reoccupied the new Abbey. The procession was led through the gates by the same cross which had led the exodus eight years earlier.
Once again, Montecassino's bells are entoning their sonorous message to the valley below. And when dusk removes the sheen from new stone the great Abbey looks exactly as it did centuries ago.
These are but a few examples of the hundreds of rebuilding jobs already undertaken in Italy during these postwar years. Others are under way. Two years ago $30,000,000 was appropriated for work yet to be done. The world owes a debt of gratitude to wartorn countries which have created a new prosperity by rebuilding mines, mills and factories. A far greater debt is owed Italy for rescuing from oblivion for future generations some of the richest elements in man's cultural heritage.

Right: The Last Supper restored, in the refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie

foto barsotti firenze

Challenging modern engineering theories, Ponte a Santa Trinita was restored with its original delicate, shallow arches, proven adequate for any load.

wide world photo

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From total destruction
Montecassino rose again,
reconstruction following
exact plans drawn by
Don Angelo Pantoni in 1939.