

## REFLECTIONS ON FREUD'S LETTER FROM FLORENCE, SEPTEMBER 7, 1896

**A**s I was preparing for the 1997 Florence symposium on psychoanalysis and art, I thought about Freud's first visit there in September 1896. Knowing that he would certainly have written or telegraphed almost daily to his family, I thought it possible that there would be extant correspondence from that trip. A search uncovered this hitherto virtually unknown letter of Freud's in the Sigmund Freud Collection in the Library of Congress. It was shown for the first time at the symposium, in the very place where it had been written almost exactly one hundred years before, during Freud's first memorable visit to Florence.

To use Freud's archeological metaphor, this fascinating recovered "antiquity" is also a statement about its author and his object world. The length and breadth of the letter, what Freud observed and selected to report, the order and acuity of his descriptions, his emphasis, attitude, and mood, his composition and organization, and his choice of audience are all very significant. Freud was a great traveler, and had just experienced an exhilarating stay in Venice. This was the city he had visited during his first trip to Italy in the summer of 1895, shortly after the Irma dream. Encouraged by Fliess to visit Italy, and following in the footsteps of Goethe, Freud made some fifteen vacation trips to Italy before World War I put a stop to them.

Complaining like many a modern traveler of the high cost of food and lodging, Freud commented on the practical issues while noting that the beauty of art and nature at times compensated for everything.

The author and editor thank Stefano Pallanti of the Istituto di Neuroscienze, Firenze, for the photos that accompany this article. Anticipating discussion of Freud's letter from Florence, he unearthed in a Florentine archive actual photos of the place where Freud stayed, showing the historical setting, and the room and objects that he saw.



VILLA E TORRE DEL GALLO, ARCHIVAL PHOTOGRAPH.

Arriving in Florence just after the ghetto had been dismantled, annoyed by the crowds and noise, he was enormously stimulated by the Florentine ambiance and landscapes, so different from the Vienna he regarded with such ambivalence. He nevertheless likened the Boboli Gardens to a "Schönbrunn of the Medicis." Freud's father was dying, and his youngest infant, Anna, had been born in December of the previous year. He left his wife and six children behind in a culturally acceptable recreational escape from family and practice, a vacation perhaps tinged with unconscious guilt. He chose to travel with his youngest sibling, Alexander Freud, whom he had named after Alexander the Great. As befit the great man and the culture, Sigmund had the larger room, and younger Alexander was given the smaller one.

The hotel-pension where Freud stayed, Villa e Torre del Gallo, was south of the Arno River, not far from the Pitti Palace. It had been inhabited once by Galileo, and then owned by Count Galetti. The count had the equivalent of a private museum in the Torre del Gallo on the Via Galileo. The building no longer exists, but records and photographs remain. In the letter, Freud reported seeing at the midday meal in the Villa e Torre del Gallo a portrait of Galileo on one side of the dining room, and one of Cardinal Francesco Medici on the other. He also described seeing there a self-portrait of Michelangelo, a letter from Cromwell to King Charles I, a Cellini autograph, and the door of Machiavelli's house. This implies his understanding that Martha Freud (and Minna Bernays) would have knowledge of these persons. Martha Freud has typically been underestimated as a simple housewife and mother, and insufficiently appreciated for her knowledge and intellect.

Freud had extraordinary powers of assimilation and integration, and the Galileo home and museum in which he stayed may have influenced both the scientific and artistic sides of his personality. He had remarkable recall of the places, art, and architecture he saw, and he preferred not to use guidebooks, relying instead on his own memory and impressions. The room where Galileo worked and studied featured an imposing bust of the scientist. Were Freud's later optical metaphors in psychoanalytic theory related to his contact with Galileo's instruments? Certainly Renaissance Florence was extremely enriching, and we know that soon after this visit, on his return to Vienna, he was decorating his own study with plaster casts of Florentine art. "Home is the most beautiful of all," he wrote to his family while immersed in Renaissance art, history, and science.

Freud returned from Florence invigorated and inspired, and proceeded upon his pioneering path of psychoanalytic development and discovery. Italy beckoned again the following summer, and his next journey was combined with a deepening of the self-analysis that had begun with the Irma dream on July 24, 1895. The Irma dream was a first step in Freud's deepening travels into the unconscious and into the realms and derivatives of creative imagination. He would later metaphorically refer to psychoanalysis as a journey.

Freud's sojourns in Italy were associated for him not only with carefree exploration and a sunnier disposition, but also with the criss-crossing of psychosocial boundaries and the breaching of barriers. Censorship was lifted, and old taboos subjected to new analytic inquiry. His first research travel had been to Trieste at the age of twenty. Italy was linked to oedipal desire, and Freud's entry into forbidden Rome in 1901 was both an oedipal victory and a preoedipal reunion. It also represented the triumph of a formerly disadvantaged and obscure Jew on the margin of a stratified and mostly Christian society. Italy was warm and inviting, a siren call and a feminine identification. Freud (1900, p. 232) recalled the dreams of a female patient about Italy (gen-Italie, i.e., *genitalia*) in his own dream associations. On a conscious level, Freud wished for wealth that would enable him to travel freely, particularly to Italy.

Stimulated by the creative artists and the immortal art in the museums he so diligently visited, Freud insightfully explored the unconscious roots of civilization and the interrelationship of conflict and culture. In Florence, and on his other cultural journeys, he further developed the application of psychoanalysis to the humanities. In the universal fantasies of art and literature he found alternatives to his formulation of traumatic seduction as a singular pathogenic agency. Like Charcot and the Florentine count who owned the Villa e Torre del Gallo, Freud became a collector: a dedicated and devoted collector of antiquities. Beginning with his Florentine acquisitions, he collected passionately and compulsively, in an overdetermined manner with erotic, romantic, and narcissistic dimensions, turning his study into a museum, and the museum into an instrument of self-analysis and the analysis of objects of the past.

## A LETTER FROM FREUD TO MARTHA FREUD

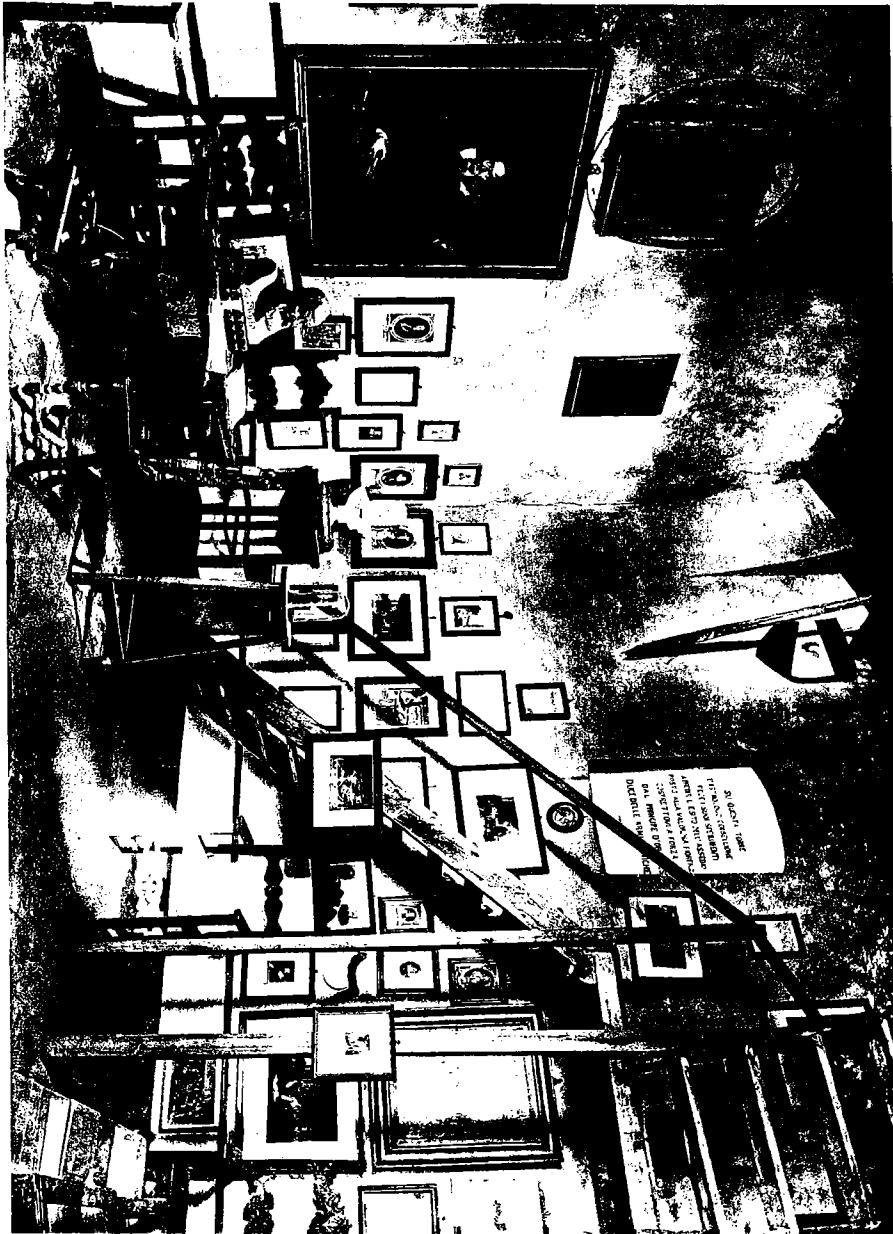
7.9.1896

Torre del Gallo  
or di Galilei  
Monday, 7 September 96

My dear ones,

Our last experience deserves a thorough report and the homey comfort that I first<sup>1</sup> found here is not unfavorable for writing. That's because this traveling in Italy is not so completely without difficulties as one might expect. Venice is nothing but joy and agreeable qualities but from there on, one finds little towns without any comfort or big cities with all their disadvantages. One misses most of that [which] one has gotten used to and that is pleasant. One has talked oneself into believing that everything must be inexpensive but nevertheless it costs money. The railroad travels are magnificent—unending tunnels, bad railroad cars, smoke to choke. The food is mostly wonderful but things to which one is not habituated. One suffers thirst, terrible thirst that appears in attacks and one spoils one's stomach in fighting against the thirst. The novelty and beauty of art and nature compensates richly for everything but as far as art is concerned, there comes a moment in which one swims in things which resemble each other, believes it must be such, can no longer reach an ecstasy when churches, madonnas, the weeping over Christ become quite indifferent and one finds that one desires something else, one doesn't quite know what. We soon reach Florence. The town presses down on one and overpowers one. The memorials

<sup>1</sup>i.e., "at last"



VILLA E TORRE DEL GALLO, INTERIOR VIEW.

stand around in half-dozens on the street. The historical memories dance around one in such a way that one cannot keep them separate. The citizens of Florence make a hellish spectacle—they yell, snap whips, bellow in the street. In brief it's intolerable. We got aching feet and didn't sleep. The meals didn't taste good anymore. Surrounding, the most beautiful green hills covered with olive trees and vineyards. The travel guide speaks of excursions, and the time is insufficient for the necessary churches. In this condition we went yesterday afternoon to Boboli Gardens, a kind of Schönbrunn of the Medicis with glorious marble groups, amphitheater, obelisk, Isle of Neptune and similar things. We then read about an overlook on the hills, the Torre del Gallo where, it is said, Galileo lived many years and observed the sky. We arrive in the dark, the custodian lights the lamp and shows us the room of Galileo, portraits of Galileo, his telescope, etc. Subsequently we hear that there are also rooms with collections, see a picture of Michelangelo, painted by himself, a letter from Cromwell to King Charles I, an autograph of Benvenuto Cellini, the door from Machiavelli's house and similar things. Then we discover that the whole thing belongs to a Count Galetti who occupies the upper floor and this year rents the lower rooms. A decision awakens in us, the dignity of the place, the peace, the view, the garden captures us, we ask for the Count<sup>2</sup>—by the way, an exceptionally handsome man—he behaves with sufficient haughtiness to indicate a rental rate that is high for Italy and moderate for Vienna. I convert; divide by two, reduce it to Gulden; in brief the next morning we move in with full board. I will describe our midday meal. Above the table hangs the famous portrait of Galileo by Fustermann across from Cardinal Francesco Medici. The appetizers are under a Madonna with child in a golden frame of the 11th century. Weapons, an hourglass, bronzes, Cromwell's letter under glass, etc. The custodian serves us. As Alexander says, the whole meal comes from the garden except the excellent beef. Fresh figs, peaches, almonds from the trees that we have already gotten to know personally. The garden stretches unevenly: half park, half vineyard, a half-hour around the house in every direction. Laurel, chestnut trees and olive trees (a variation: the so-called Caraffindelbaum, an olive tree on which they grow grapes.) Almond trees, the whole dizziness of southern beauty that we know from Lovrana. From many overlooks one sees Florence,

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now while I write an ocean of glittering lights similar to the view from Bellevue, only instead of Vienna it's Florence. We have three rooms at our disposal, the salon with the contents described already, a large room with a bed that sleeps at least three. Of course also full of pictures, [statues] and antiquities, and a smaller room for Alex, something that here is important, an especially "luogo comodo" that is furnished in an especially human manner. The whole magnificence will only last another 3 days. On Friday morning we'll telegraph our trip home, a trip during which we will probably atone for all our sins. On the grapevines that are dried up every place one can see how bad the year was. We walk under grapevines that hardly produce anything that can be called usable. To buy things is more difficult than one expects. One could spend a lot of money, but now my eyes want to close. I greet you, Martha, and all the brats. Most cordially, I admit that in all this beauty the thought often comes to me that after all it's most beautiful at home.

Your Sigm

<sup>2</sup>literally, "we let the Count come."