

The man who sparked a rural renaissance

Until Daniele Kihlgren came along, Santo Stefano was a cultural backwater. Now it's home to some of Italy's finest works of art

[Peter Popham](#)

In an expensive and logistically challenging operation, Florence's great art museum, the Uffizi, recently packed up and dispatched 23 of its treasures to the south-east, a distance of more than 390 kilometres: first down to Rome, then out and up into the wild country of Abruzzo, finishing in the ancient hill town of Santo Stefano di Sessanio. Once there, the works were painstakingly hung in local buildings where no one would expect to find a Titian or a Federico Barocci or a Giacomo Balla, including the old town jail and the former workshops of the traditional artisans.

They form a unique exhibition opening today called *Condivisone di Affetti*, "Shared Affections", which signals the revival of a remarkable relationship – and perhaps a turning point in the relationship of high Italian culture with its country cousins.

Wool was at the root of Florence's medieval prosperity, and the sheep whose coats were processed by the city's craftsmen were for centuries driven more than 1,000 metres up into the Abruzzo Mountains for their summer pasturing. Vast flocks passed this way every spring and autumn, to and from the lowlands of Puglia and Lazio. And at strategic intervals towns and villages sprang up, offering markets for the milk, cheese, wool and sheepskin which were the by-products of the *transumanza* (literally "crossing the land"), as the seasonal migrations were known. Santo Stefano was one of those little towns. Its strategic location had been recognised by the ancient Romans, and in 1579 its value was confirmed when the Medici prince Francesco I, son of the more celebrated Cosimo, purchased it. According to Uffizi director Antonio Natali, he valued the town not merely for its role in the wool trade, but as a vantage point from which his spies could keep an eye on the rival Papal States and the Kingdom of Naples, whose borders were nearby. Two years later, the same prince founded the Uffizi palace that now

houses the world-famous museum. Both properties remained part of the Medici patrimony until the family's eclipse.

Yet the subsequent destinies of Florence and Santo Stefano could not have been more different. Florence has never ceased to thrive, a compulsory stop on the Grand Tour, one of the greatest treasure troves of art in Europe. Though heavily bombed during the war, it remains a jewel, and its main problems are those of success: like Venice and Rome, it has far too many tourists for its own good, and the quality of the city's life has been coarsened as a result.

Santo Stefano, by contrast, struggled to survive the end of the transumanza trade, killed off by the arrival of much cheaper wool imported from England. It was too high in the hills for agriculture to thrive, and too far from major towns to offer alternative sources of employment. The population dwindled until, after the Second World War, it came down to two figures. Most of the townspeople emigrated to the US and Canada in search of work. The only obvious thing in the town's favour was its great beauty, but no-one saw the potential in that until a wealthy young man called Daniele Kihlgren, half-Swedish and half-Italian though born and raised in Italy, arrived 12 years ago on his motorbike, and was stunned by the harmony created by its winding lanes, terracotta roofs and Medici tower and the craggy landscape in which it was set.

Kihlgren set about saving the town, buying up the former homes of the emigrants, restoring them very conservatively and making them part of what he called an albergo diffuso, a "dispersed hotel", its rooms, restaurant and reception located in different ancient buildings clustered in the heart of the town. Quite rapidly the holiday-makers, foreigners in particular, began arriving, and Kihlgren succeeded in persuading the town's authorities that its new prosperity could only be assured by eternal vigilance.

He urged that the construction of discordant modern buildings in and around the town should be banned, permanently. It was an argument that took a lot of winning: in very few places in Italy has the rigorous northern European approach to conservation taken root. With the honourable exception of Tuscany, even the most picturesque Italian villages are too often sullied by a rash of modern structures around the fringes. Kihlgren's heavy investment, his passionate commitment and the rapid growth of the tourist trade brought the authorities round. Today Santo Stefano is again, in its rustic way, as much of a jewel as Florence.

Then, on 6 April 2009, disaster struck: a massive earthquake brought Abruzzo to its knees, killing more than 300 people and laying waste to the regional capital,

L'Aquila, and many other towns and villages. The houses and other structures that Kihlgren had restored with such care withstood the quake, but many buildings were shattered, including the Medici Tower. The quake was a catastrophe from which the region has struggled to emerge, and Santo Stefano is no exception: the main road leading to the town only reopened a little over a year ago. With many of the town's buildings still festooned in scaffolding, it was hard to persuade visitors that it was safe. So it was in a spirit of solidarity that the Uffizi decided to revive its dormant relationship with a town whose symbolic connection to Florence was shattered with the collapse of the Medici Tower.

Professor Natali points out that his museum has also had its share of tragedies, including a terrorist bomb attack in 1993 which killed six people, destroyed several works of art and came close to demolishing part of the building. "The Uffizi recovered with the help of the Friends of the Uffizi Gallery, and it was in the same spirit that we felt we could help Santo Stefano recover from the earthquake," he said yesterday.

One of the convictions driving Kihlgren's work is his belief that, while Italy has always paid homage to and preserved its classical heritage, it has been slower to appreciate the accidental, spontaneous beauty of its medieval towns and villages. "Towns which came into being with no deliberate plan were never considered important," he said. "The significance of these villages, whose real added value is that they have a relationship with the countryside, has always been dismissed." Perhaps that snobbery is finally melting. For places like Santo Stefano, this change comes not a moment too soon.