

Michelle Kwon

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To the Florence Sister County Commission:

My name is Michelle Kwon, and I am writing this letter to express my appreciation for your generous support that has helped me think openly and feel deeply within the city center and suburbs of Florence. As an Art History major with an Art + Religion concentration and an Art Practice minor at Stanford University, I have encountered a colorful canvas of fellow students, professors, travelers, and Italians who have challenged me to not only explore within the walls of my academic focuses, but to also expand my creative capabilities.

For a while, I have considered working in an art museum, where ardent individuals come together to craft exhibitions that allow visitors to understand the world beyond their perceptions. Yet, while interning at Archea Associati, an architecture/design firm, here in Florence, I uncovered my attraction towards the fairly new method of design thinking and, thus, the design world. Art History, undoubtedly, offers a combination of the conceptual and the creative. However, from what I have felt and seen through my studies and exposures, it places the questioning process and, sometimes, the question as the end result on a pedestal. Design thinking, however, through empathy, or the interaction with a client or another individual who is in need, prioritizes problem solving and constant prototyping through more hands-on approaches. My time in Florence allowed me to rediscover my passions of understanding another individual and using my hands to create through art studio classes, design thinking workshops, cooking classes, my internship, and a language exchange program with Florentines.

In terms of highlights, I remember roaming around the incredible, historic city for my first full day, while discussing self-identity with the other students in the Bing Florence Study Abroad program. How can we break down the barriers of misperceptions or misinterpretations based on our personal backgrounds and upbringings? How can we expand our understanding of the world without losing our own values and/or falling into a place of paralysis? While meditating on and struggling with these questions during our exploration, we always ended up in high-altitude, wide-open spaces, such as Piazzale Michelangelo, where we could slow down and give thanks. We all had a mutual understanding of our differences and thus could relate to each other in a more vulnerable, authentic, and safe zone. I remember having dinner with my host mom, Antonella, for the first time. In the middle of our meal, she suddenly started exclaiming and gesturing, "Il tramonto, il tramonto!" We climbed up the stairs to her recently renovated roof and were encountered by the sky painted with the most exquisite colors. I remember the slow mornings with cappuccinos, the neatly lined ornamentations of meat at Mercato Centrale, the late-night strolls along the Arno, the incorrect Italian conjunctive usages, the almost daily church visits with Art History Professor and Fr. Timothy Verdon, the rice and pistachio flavored gelato melting down my hands, the obese pigeons that seem to be fed better than most Americans, and the constant, yet tireless traveling within and outside of Italy. Even after my study abroad program in Florence with Stanford, I extended my stay there for four more weeks and took an Advanced Graphic Designing course with the Institute of European Design (IED) where I learned more about typography, brand/corporate identity, and digital publishing. This introduction to graphic design has been monumental for me in terms of my future career choice, and I cannot wait to see where I end up, maybe back in Italy.

Thank you again for this precious opportunity; it would not have been the same without your support.

Grazie mille,
Michelle Kwon