

UNLOCKING THE WORLD

One of Italy's most famous sites just reopened with a striking change

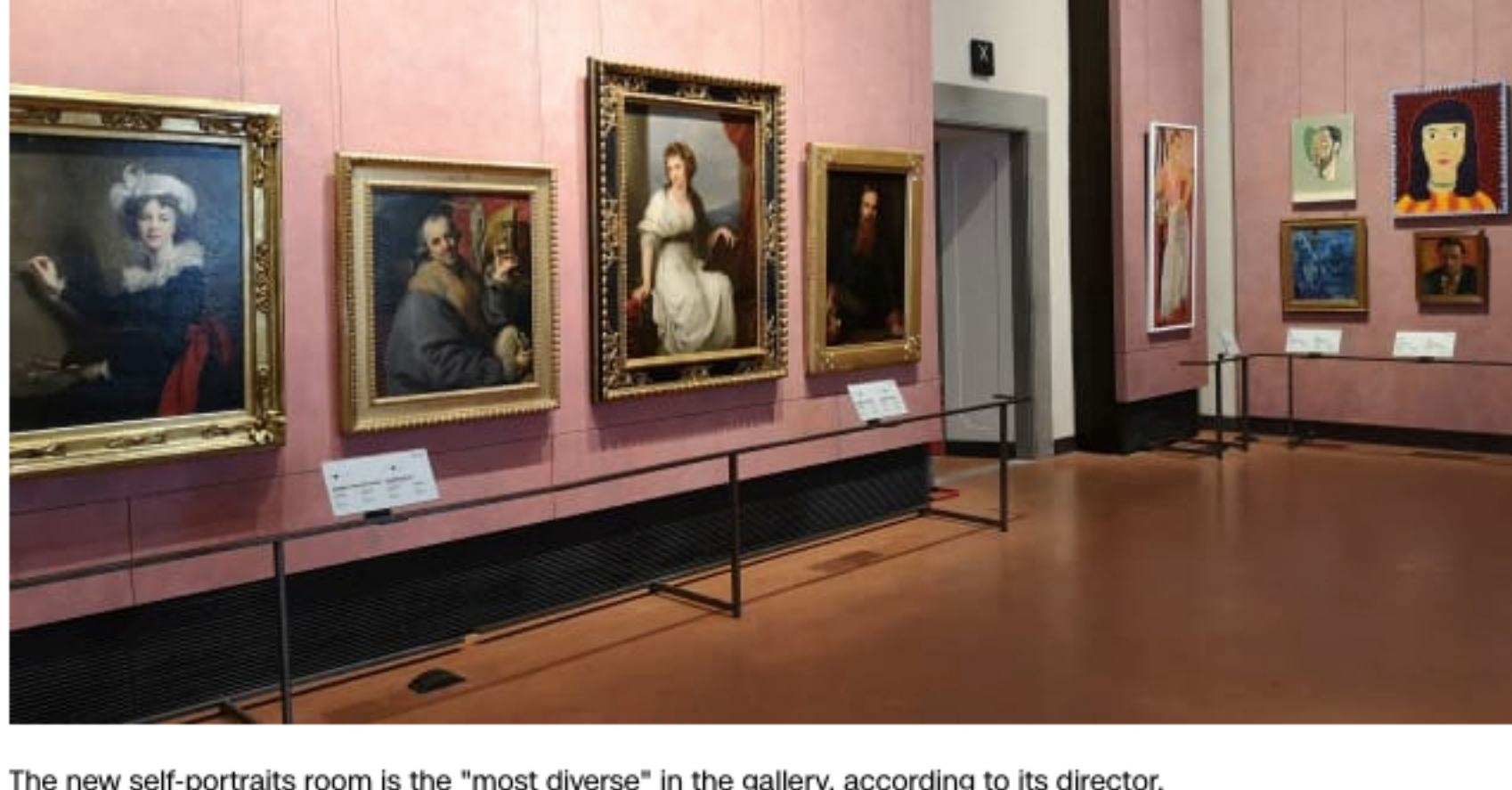
Julia Buckley, CNN • Updated 7th May 2021



(CNN) — When Florence's Uffizi gallery reopened this week after another government-imposed lockdown, it was with a fanfare.

After a six-month closure for renovations, the second floor of the gallery -- home to 15th- to 17th-century works of art by the likes of Titian, Caravaggio and Tintoretto -- has finally reopened. The area -- which makes up half the museum -- has been under steady renovation since 2015.

But there was a surprise in store for the 1,516 visitors who visited on reopening day, May 4. Not only are there 14 new rooms and 129 works of art newly on display, but the "new" Uffizi is allocating space to artists who have historically been excluded from the canon: women and people of color.



The new self-portraits room is the "most diverse" in the gallery, according to its director.

Julia Buckley

The new route around the gallery sees visitors entering the second floor via the "Plautilla Nelli Corridor" -- named after the 16th-century painter and nun, who set up a studio in her convent, and taught fellow nuns her trade.

An "Annunciation" by Nelli -- never before put on permanent display -- sits above the doorway into the new rooms.



The "Plautilla Nelli Corridor," named after the 16th-century painter and nun, leads visitors into the new rooms.

Julia Buckley

Elsewhere, Artemisia Gentileschi's visceral "Judith Slaying Holofernes" -- a subject which Gentileschi, a rape survivor, painted twice -- takes pride of place in a scarlet-painted room which also includes works by Caravaggio.

One of the first to be renovated, the room puts the artists on an equal footing with its name: "Caravaggio and Artemisia."



Artemisia Gentileschi's "Judith and Holofernes" shares a room with works by Caravaggio.

Julia Buckley

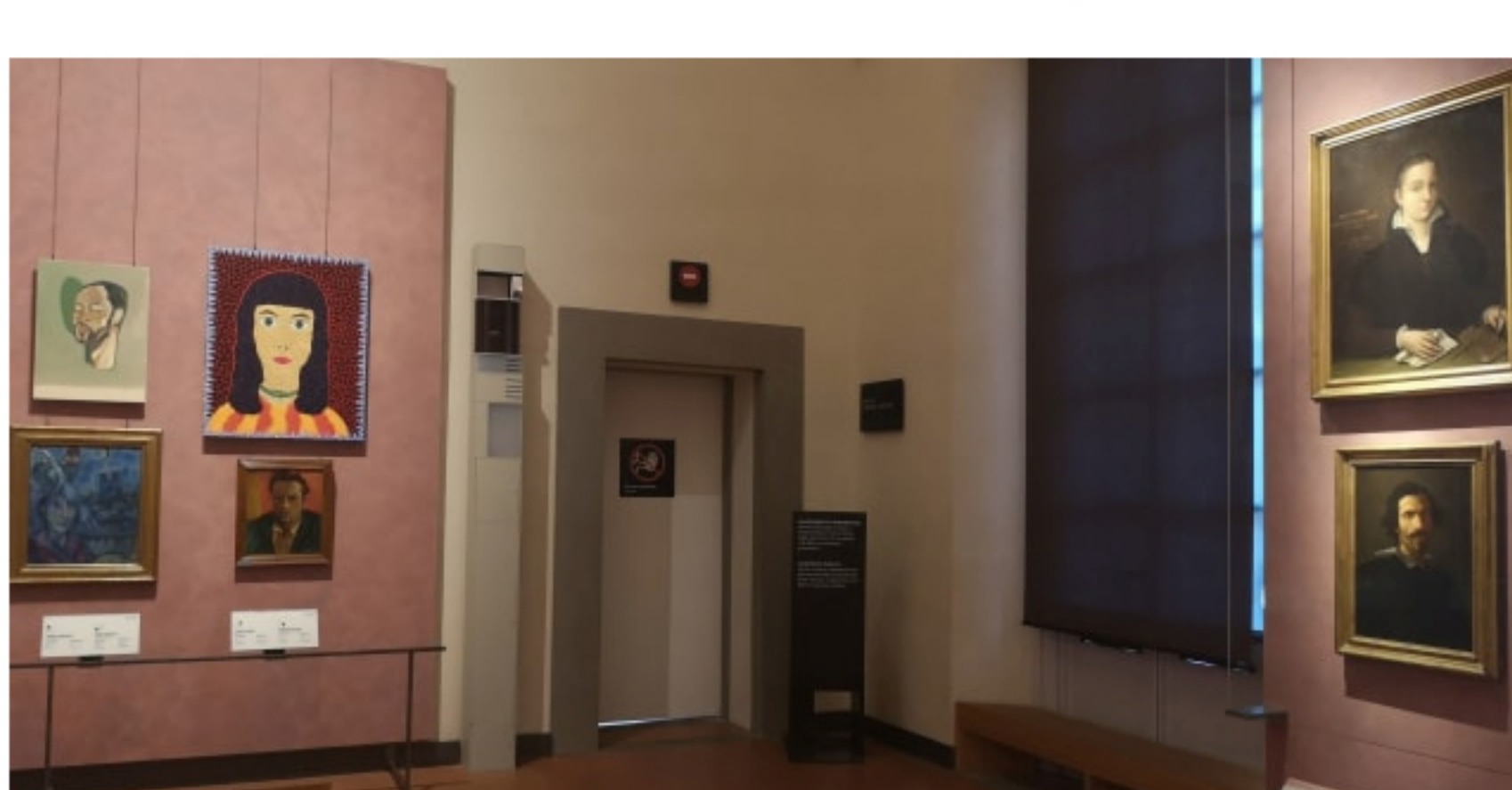
In a room dominated by the Caracci brothers sits a work by 16th-century artist Lavinia Fontana, renowned for her portraits. Gentileschi and Fontana both have other works on display.

And a brand new room of self-portraits -- which will soon expand to a larger area -- displays works by five women alongside nine men.

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On dusky pink walls, a self-portrait of acclaimed Renaissance sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini takes second place below one of little-known 16th-century painter, Sofonisba Anguissola, displaying her palette of colors.

And unlike the women in many of the gallery's best-known works, such as Titian's "Venus of Urbino" and Botticelli's "Birth of Venus," these ones are all fully clothed.



Sofonisba Anguissola's self-portrait (top right) sits above Gian Lorenzo Bernini's own work.

Julia Buckley

In what gallery director Elke Schmidt describes as "the most diverse room" of paintings in the Uffizi, self-portraits by contemporary artists Yayoi Kusama and Tsafira Ugeuxa -- from Japan and Ethiopia respectively -- sit above works by Marc Chagall and Renato Guttuso.

They are the first paintings by artists of color to go on permanent display in the Uffizi itself. Other works -- mainly in other materials -- are displayed in Palazzo Pitti, the former palace of the Medici family which is now another outpost of the Uffizi complex.

"As we get closer to the contemporary age, it's very important that paradigms have shifted, and so have our paradigms shifted," Schmidt told CNN.



The gallery renovation has added 14 new rooms to the collection.

Julia Buckley

"The Medici [the Renaissance family who founded the collection] were very much interested in works of art from other cultures. We have sculptures and work in different materials made on other continents, but very few paintings from non-European origins.

"Oil-on-canvas painting wasn't limited to Western Europe and the Americas but it flourished here. So the works we have by people of color and from different countries and continents are works in other materials, that are mostly at the Pitti Palace."

And he vowed that the gallery will increase its collection of artists of color, promising that "more will be collected as we go forward."

Under-represented artists will play a major part in the 10 new rooms of self-portraits which will open within the next year.

The suppressed female legacy



Elke Schmidt is pushing for works by women and artists of color to be given the space they deserve amid the Renaissance masterpieces.

Tiziana FABITZIANA FABIANI via Getty Images

Re-evaluating the legacy of female artists has been one of Schmidt's priorities since joining the gallery in 2015. He has run annual exhibitions on individual female artists, as well as artists of color -- from Giovanna Garzoni to Cai Guo-Qiang -- since his arrival.

But rather than displaying them to tick 21st-century boxes, he says that female artists used to be part of the canon -- and were only excluded by cultural changes in the 19th century.

"There were a number of highly esteemed women artists, and these works were all commissioned and collected by the Medici family, so the vetting has been done already," he told CNN.

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The Uffizi has the largest collection of pre-19th century works by women in the world -- Schmidt estimates there to be around 100-150 works in storage, having been relegated there in the 1800s -- and he promises that more will go on display in the future.

"Female artists were in the minority until the 19th century, so we would never reach a 50:50 split, but showing their work is absolutely necessary -- not least because the quality of their work is just as high, and in some cases higher, than their male contemporaries," he said.

Schmidt's drive to feature more under-represented artists tallies with his bid to draw in new visitors, investing heavily in the use of social media to appeal to those who might not otherwise be drawn to Renaissance art.



Al giorni nostri l'italiana Chiara Ferragni, nata a Cremona, incarna un mito per milioni di followers --una sorta di divinità contemporanea nell'era del social -- il mito di Chiara Ferragni, diviso fra feroci detrattori e impavidi sostenitori, è un fotogeno sociologico che raccoglie milioni di seguaci in tutto il mondo, fotografando un'istantanea del nostro tempo.

ENG: Beauty standards change in the course of time. The female ideal of a blonde-haired woman with diaphanous skin is a very common beauty model in the Renaissance. Masterfully expressed by the Florentine Sandro Botticelli in "The Birth of Venus" may be portraying the face of one of his contemporary, Simonetta Vespucci. A beautiful noble woman, of Genoese origin, beloved by Giuliano de' Medici, the younger brother of Lorenzo the Magnificent; she was so worshipped by Sandro Botticelli that she became his muse.

Nowadays, Chiara Ferragni, born in Cremona, embodies a role model for millions of followers -- a sort of contemporary divinity in the era of social media -- The myth and the story of Chiara Ferragni, argued by harsh critics and supported by faithful fans, is a real sociological phenomenon that involves millions of supporter worldwide and it can undoubtedly be considered a snapshot of our time.

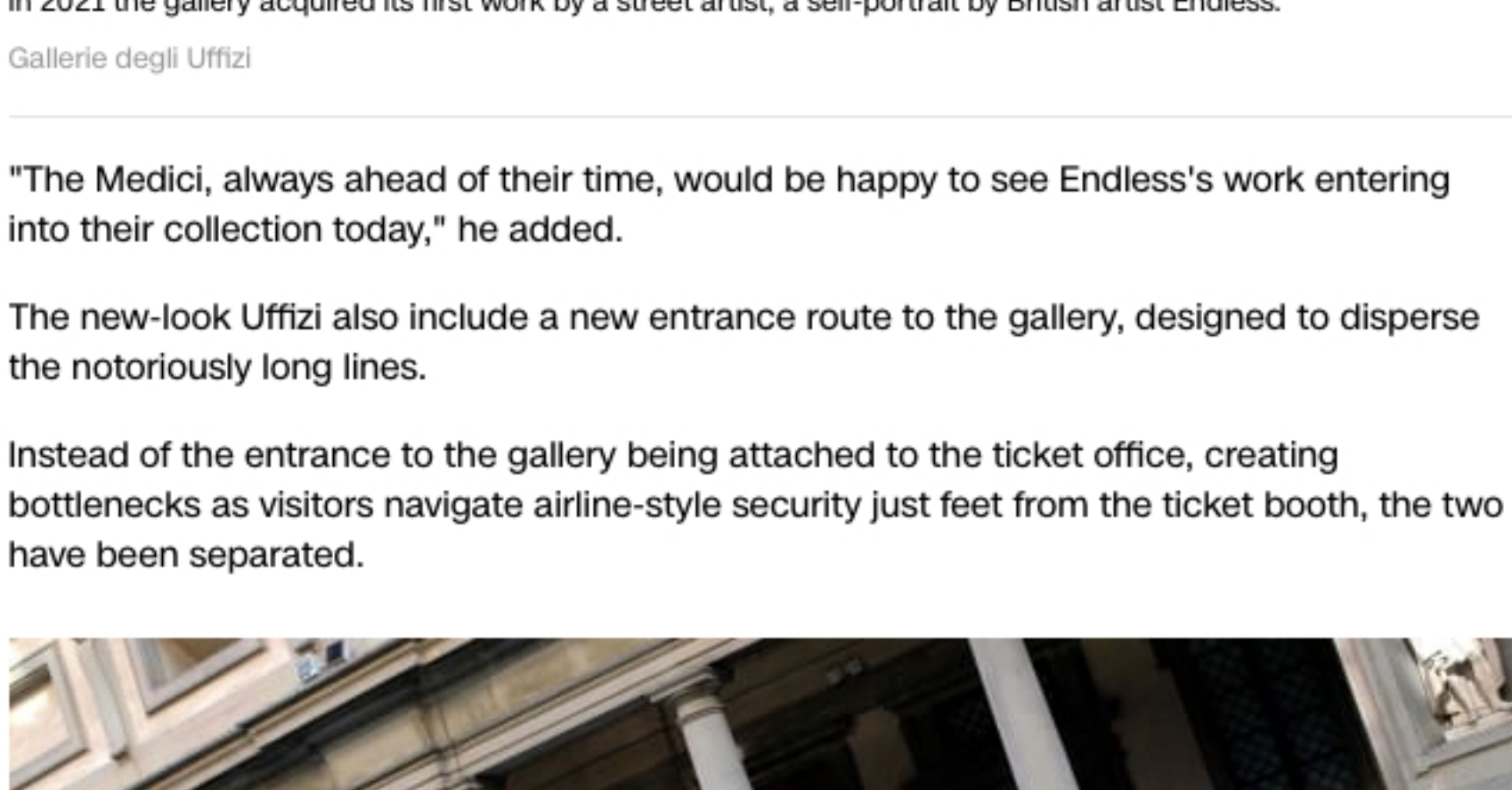
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Last year, he raised eyebrows by inviting influencer Chiara Ferragni to the gallery, saying afterward that visits by young people rose 27% the week after her Instagram posts.

And in February, he acquired a work by British street artist Endless for the collection. The self-portrait features Endless covering his face with copies of Mark Wahlberg's infamous 1990s Calvin Klein underwear adverts.

At the time, Schmidt compared Wahlberg's "crotch grab" to the stance of Botticelli's "Birth of Venus," one of the gallery's most famous works -- only with Endless inverting the traditional male gaze.



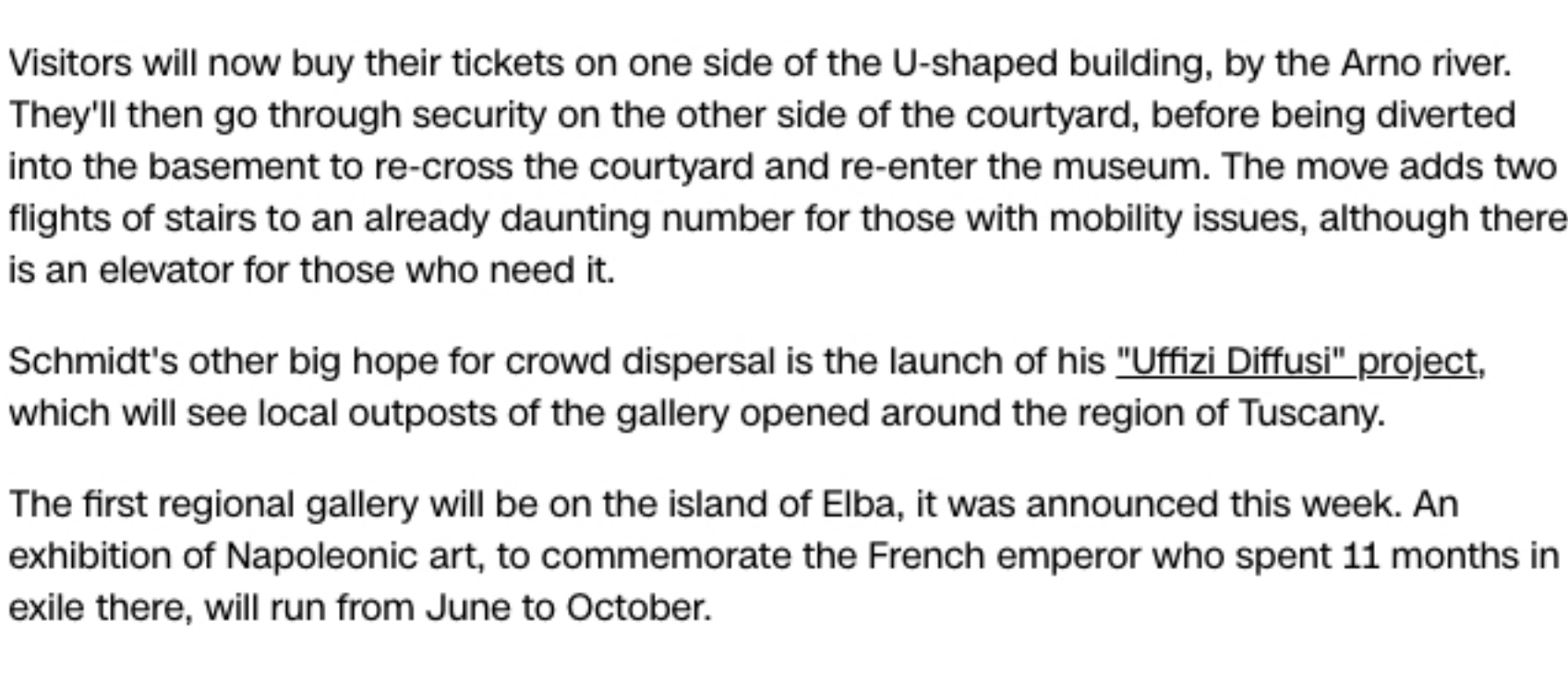
In 2021 the gallery acquired its first work by a street artist, a self-portrait by British artist Endless.

Gallerie degli Uffizi

"The Medici, always ahead of their time, would be happy to see Endless's work entering into their collection today," he added.

The new-look Uffizi also include a new entrance route to the gallery, designed to disperse the notoriously long lines.

Instead of the entrance to the gallery being attached to the ticket office, creating bottlenecks as visitors navigate airline-style security just feet from the ticket booth, the two have been separated.



The gallery has long been notorious for its long lines to get in.

Alberto PIZZOLI/AFP via Getty Images

Visitors will now buy their tickets on one side of the U-shaped building, by the Arno river. They'll then go through security on the other side of the courtyard, before being diverted into the basement to re-cross the courtyard and re-enter the museum. The move adds two flights of stairs to an already daunting number for those with mobility issues, although there is an elevator for those who need it.

Schmidt's other big hope for crowd dispersal is the launch of his "Uffizi Diffusi" project, which will see local outposts of the gallery opened around the region of Tuscany.

The first regional gallery will be on the island of Elba. It was announced this week. An exhibition of Napoleonic art, to commemorate the French emperor who spent 11 months in exile there, will run from June to October.