

With nod to mob, a museum for a crime hub

CASAL DI PRINCIPE, ITALY

Uffizi Gallery sets up a temporary exhibition in a grandiose Mafia villa

BY ELISABETTA POVOLEDO

If the Uffizi Gallery in Florence is on any must-see list of Italy, then this town, known as one of Italy's most notorious organized crime hubs, is the sort of place most tourists normally avoid.

So it was with no small dose of ambition, and with a point to be made, that the authorities decided to convert a garish villa confiscated from a local Mafia boss into a temporary museum — in a town that has never had one.

Perhaps more exceptional, the Uffizi, along with the Capodimonte Museum in Naples, has supported the effort. Together, they have lent nearly 20 paintings for an exhibition intended to help break the "military oppression of this land," as Casal di Principe's mayor, Renato Natale, called the Mafia's long-standing control over the region.

Antonio Natali, the director of the Uffizi, a state-run museum, was equally emphatic about the exhibition's significance. "It was a strong gesture, lending works from museums like the Uffizi and Capodimonte," he said. "That is how the state shows it is present."

The exhibition itself is layered with deliberate symbolism. The paintings are mostly by the followers of the Baroque artist Caravaggio, who had ties to Naples, about 24 miles south in the Campania region, long a stronghold of the Mafia group known as the Camorra.

Initially, many doubted that the Uffizi would lend nine priceless paintings to a town that not long ago was making headlines as the home base of one of the most powerful groups within the Camorra, the Casalesi clan. But, as promised, the paintings arrived under armed

guard late last month.

"People in Casal were accustomed to see the police escorting mafiosi; it was such a joy to see them escort works of art instead," said Antonella Diana, an art historian who works for the Reggia di Caserta, another cultural institution that lent a work to the exhibition, which is titled "Light Defeats the Shadows."

In keeping with the name, the show features artists who, like Caravaggio, used a distinctive chiaroscuro technique to make their figures emerge from dim backgrounds.

But the title is also a not-too-subtle metaphor for the bright future local officials envision for their town after years of darkness.

In the past, Mafia members easily infiltrated town councils, and the Casalesi clan had its fingers in a variety of enterprises, including drug trafficking, construction, disposal and even milk production. Only a few years ago, locals say, bloodshed on the streets was common.

"It's a miracle — a sign of the will to start something radically different in a territory that is a historic center of the Camorra," said Roberto Saviano, an investigative journalist who wrote a best-selling book, "Gomorra," about the central Italian Mafia.

"What is important is that they sent art, and not just any art, but art that is worth something," Mr. Saviano, who was born in Casal di Principe, said by telephone. "It means there is faith in the territory."

There is also a strong note of vindication that the loan came from the Uffizi. In 1993, the Mafia set off a bomb at the Uffizi that killed five people and damaged dozens of works in a wing that housed paintings by Caravaggio's followers.

One of those damaged works, "Concert" by Bartolomeo Manfredi, which was nearly destroyed in the bombing, is being shown here after some restoration.

Mr. Natali, the director of the Uffizi,

called the decision to loan the paintings "a calculated risk," taken only after assurances had been given that they would be secure.

Confiscated Mafia assets are often consigned to nonprofit organizations. The villa where the exhibition is being hosted once belonged to a relatively minor Mafia boss, Egidio Coppola, known as Brutus, and was taken over by the state after he was arrested nearly two decades ago.

In 2005, the villa was dedicated to Rev. Giuseppe Diana, a local priest killed by the Camorra in 1994. It was initially used as a center for foster children.

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In a region where much of the local architecture of Mafia bosses seems to have been inspired by the 1983 movie "Scarface," the villa is an ostentatious study in concrete, protected by high walls.

For the show, the structure was covered in bright red netting to mask "the false myths" perpetrated by the Camorra and replace them with "new values," said Raffaele Samonella, one of the architects who refurbished the villa.

In his book "Gomorra," Mr. Saviano describes his hometown as the "capital of the Camorra's entrepreneurial power," and the Casalesi as an affiliation of gangs from nearby towns "linked by common economic interests."

Two decades of arrests and trials have severely hobbled the organization. Even so, in March, the police arrested a dozen people accused of being affiliated with one faction of the gang on various charges, including extortion. Arrest warrants were also issued against some

members already in prison. Prosecutors accuse them of continuing to do business from behind bars.

"Today, the old chiefs that governed the clan are either in jail or are collaborating with the state," while their chief political contact is on trial, said Dario del Porto, a journalist who published a book this year on the Casalesi with an anti-Mafia prosecutor, Antonello Ardituro. The state, Mr. del Porto added, is sending a strong message "in restructuring a villa and opening a museum in a place that has never seen a tourist."

Already, the museum has drawn visitors from outside the city, bringing a modest fillip to the town's cafes and restaurants.

About 80 local youths were recruited as guides for the exhibition, but also to explain the ins and out of the Camorra and the "rebirth of the town," said Alessandro De Lisi, a consultant for City Hall. He will be general director of the project that will manage the exposition site after the current exhibition closes in October.

He estimated that if the site were able to remain active with new initiatives, it could provide about 20 jobs in the future. "Our idea is to continue and ask international museums to come," he said.

One worry, organizers conceded, is whether visitors will come. "A victory of the Camorra would be if few people went to see the show," said Mr. Natali, the Uffizi director. "That would be a sign of failure."

A majority of the town's 22,000 residents have supported the changes, Mayor Natale said. Still, he estimated that 3,000 to 4,000 local people remained "tied to a culture that opposes this climate of renaissance," meaning the Camorra. He is still working to win them over.

The exhibition, Mr. Natali of the Uffizi said, is a step toward doing that and is worth the risks. "You have to act if you want to make a point," he said. "Otherwise, nothing happens."

Alessandro De Lisi, a consultant for City Hall, at the exhibition "Light Defeats the Shadows," in Casal di Principe, near Naples. He will run the project managing the site after the exhibit.

