



Art in
the Time
of COVID-19

San Fedele
Press

Déjà Vu

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Several weeks before the coronavirus became a pandemic, when life was still fairly normal, I was giving a tour at the Library of Congress, where I'm a docent. With the goal of keeping up guests' interest, I was in the Great Hall, sharing one of my favorite stories. The Great Hall is the heart of the library with its 75-foot ceiling crowned by blue and yellow stained glass windows; marble Corinthian columns, the Roman Goddess Minerva holding a globe aloft, ornately-carved marble Putti children along the balustrade of both stairways, a majestic commemorative arch, and a zodiac-themed marble and brass floor with the Rose Compass in the center.

I used to tell guests that the Great Hall is precisely the way it was in 1897, the year the Library of Congress first opened on this site, except for one feature: two bronze busts in shallow alcoves on either side of the entrance to the Hall. The smallish busts, surrounded by fronds and ribbons, were originally drinking fountains, a tin cup placed off to the side for all to share. That is, until the devastating Spanish flu pandemic hit in 1918 when a decision was made to turn off the communal fountains.

It's an interesting story I used to share, dramatic, one of those self-contained slices of history with supporting facts and figures about the Spanish flu: how quickly it had spread and how devastating it had been worldwide with one third of the world's population affected and an estimated fifty million deaths. Tourists looked surprised for the most part by my smugly-told anecdote, a quaint piece of the past with which they seemed largely unfamiliar.

It was just supposed to be a fascinating story about something that happened more than a century ago, a clever device to capture people's attention, like talking about health challenges before the invention of penicillin, or before the polio vaccination. But then the past came crashing into the present, history repeating

itself, and the Spanish flu is now mentioned daily on the news as a cautionary tale. Faster than you can say coronavirus, it's become a flesh and blood reenactment of the past as it climbs out of the grave at breakneck speed and thrusts itself back in our lives.

We're living it 100 years later, stockpiling food and supplies, hunkering down in our homes, washing our hands till they're raw, crossing out everything on our calendars, and watching the news obsessively, fearfully. And that's life for those fortunate not to have been directly impacted thus far.

As I put cream on my chapped hands and pad around my house—and I'm one of the lucky ones so far—I can't help but wonder if, 100 years from now, history will repeat itself, with another docent at the Library of Congress weaving our present nightmare into her tour, talking about the devastation of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic when the Library of Congress—and the rest of the world—was shut down.