Florence, Lungarno Vespucci. View of the Lungarno showing the façade of Palazzo Canevaro, now home to the U.S. Consulate, in a photo from 1942 (Archivio fotografico Soprintendenza ABAP Firenze).

It is an honor for the U.S. Consulate General in Florence to be a part of this conference, hosted at the University of Florence's beautiful and historic Villa Ruspoli.

I feel a personal connection to the theme because I live and work in an historic building.

The U.S. has had a consular presence in Florence for over two hundred years. We are very fortunate to have Palazzo Canevaro, the neo-Renaissance palace, as the home of the U.S. Consulate since 1947.

The Consulate is part of a very exclusive club within the State Department, for it is one of only thirty-nine historic buildings around the world that has the honor of being listed on the Secretary of State's Register of Culturally Significant Properties. Thanks to this program, the Department of State provides professional stewardship, preservation, and most importantly, funding so that Palazzo Canevaro may receive the attention it deserves. In the past year and a half in fact, we have renovated the façade, the 'piano nobile' and are currently shoring up the stability of the Consul General residence.

The U.S. and Italy have an historic friendship and cultural connection, dating back hundreds of years.

This cultural connection has blossomed thanks to millions of personal ties – from tourists embarking on their Grand Tour during the 19th century, to the artists who studied together at the Accademia, to the soldiers and partisans who fought side by side during World War II in Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna, to the students who dropped everything to lend a hand during the Florence flood of 1966.

Just last month, on May 22, we commemorated the 108th birthday of Frederick Hartt, Italian Renaissance scholar and art historian, whose deep love for Italian art moved him to join the Monuments Men. The Monuments Men in Italy helped safeguard and recover some of the world's most treasured works of art during World War II.

After the bombing of Florence, Frederick Hartt composed an official report of the damage sustained by such notable Florentine monuments as the Uffizi, the Duomo, the Baptistery, and the churches of Santa Croce, Santo Spirito, and San Lorenzo.

In 1945, Hartt helped locate and return to Florence hundreds of works of art to public collections, particularly the Uffizi Galleries and the Pitti Palace. The works had been hidden by the Nazis in Alto Adige. For his efforts, Hartt was made an honorary citizen of Florence. He is buried in the Cimitero delle Porte Sante at San Miniato al Monte in Florence.

More recently, our cultural collaboration has taken the form of agreements regarding protection for Italian cultural property. In October 2020, United States and Italy signed a Cultural Property Agreement, which renewed a twenty-year long memorandum of understanding. This MOU concerning the Imposition of Import Restriction on Categories of Archaeological Material Representing the Pre-Classical, Classical, and Imperial Roman Periods of Italy is an example of the United States' enduring relationship with Italy in combating cultural property trafficking and preserving heritage items.

I am proud to say that one of the principal pillars of the Department of State's mission is also to help safeguard cultural heritage, through the Department's Cultural Heritage Center, a part of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, which operates a number of global programs to safeguard the patrimony of other countries. I have personally overseen cultural preservation work in Jordan, in Petra and Umm Quais.

Another recent development I was pleased to learn about, on the Italian side, is the recently inaugurated Museum of Rescued Art, designed to showcase Italy's efforts, through patient diplomacy and court challenges, to get valuable antiquities repatriated, often after decades in foreign museums or private collections. This museum is exhibiting works never seen before in Italy.

This is incredibly important work and it is notable that both U.S. and Italian cultural preservation activities continued throughout the pandemic, notwithstanding the challenges.

Thank you for the initiative you are taking today to continue a long tradition of cultural collaboration, connection and preservation, between the U.S. and Italy and I wish you the best of luck.

Ragini Gupta
U.S. Consul General in Florence