Museum management in Italy: Foreign infatuation or managerial and marketing skills?

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Abstract: The 2015 Franceschini Reform opened Italian museum directorships to international candidates, marking a significant shift in how Italian cultural heritage institutions are managed — a measure later upheld by the Council of State (2017). This paper investigates whether and how these appointments affected institutional performance, using official data from the Ministry of Culture for 2010–2024. It analyses three key indicators — visitor numbers, gross revenues, and estimated ticket prices — across six museums: Galleria degli Uffizi, Pinacoteca di Brera, Museo di Capodimonte, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Parco Archeologico di Paestum, and Palazzo Ducale di Mantova. All indicators are indexed (2010=100) and compared with the remaining museums in the annual Ministry of Culture top-30 ranking by visitor numbers. Findings reveal substantial revenue growth across all six institutions, exceeding the benchmark by 2024, while visitor numbers show mixed trends and remain below the benchmark for most institutions. The gap between visitor and revenue growth, together with a price index that significantly outpaces the benchmark, suggests that performance gains are partly driven by pricing and strategic positioning rather than footfall alone, reflecting managerial and marketing competencies. These findings will be further examined through qualitative interviews with museum directors and stakeholders.

Keywords: cultural heritage management, museum performance, international directors, Italy, marketing strategy.

1.Introduction

In 2015, the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage launched an international competitive selection process to appoint foreign directors to some of Italy's leading museums as part of the Franceschini Reform (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2014). This reform established that museum directorships fall outside the public authority exemption to EU free movement of workers, representing a significant shift in cultural heritage management and sparking considerable academic debate. More than a decade later, the question of whether and how foreign leadership has affected the performance of Italian museums remains only partially answered. Existing studies have examined the structural and organisational implications of the reform (Zammartino, 2016; Alfano et al., 2023), the role of directors' individual characteristics (Bergantino et al., 2023), and the broader relationship between managerialisation and performance (Palumbo et al., 2022).

This paper contributes to the current debate by presenting preliminary quantitative evidence on changes in visitor numbers, gross revenues, and estimated average ticket prices across six Italian museums and archaeological sites led by a foreign director following the reform. Drawing on official data published by the Ministry of Culture (MiC) for the period 2010–2024, the study adopts an index-number approach with 2010 as the baseline and compares the six institutions against a benchmark consisting of the remaining museums in the annual MiC top-30 ranking by visitor numbers. Given its exploratory nature, the study aims to identify preliminary patterns and formulate hypotheses about the effects of foreign leadership and the factors that may account for the observed changes.

2. Conceptual framework

The international literature on museum management encompasses a wide range of approaches and perspectives, developing and exploring theoretical models and managerial implications that differ substantially. From a broad perspective, the museum can be conceptualised as a complex cultural organisation—whether public or private—required to reconcile heritage preservation, accessibility, economic sustainability, public participation, digital innovation, and the quality of the visitor experience in pursuit of visitor satisfaction. However, there is no universally accepted definition or conceptualisation of the museum as an organisational unit.

In the Italian context, the debate on museum models and management has been strongly shaped by the reform of the state museum system introduced between 2014 and 2015 (also known as the Franceschini Reform). This reform transformed museums from peripheral administrative offices into cultural organisations endowed with their own organisational identity, strategic orientation, and managerial responsibility by introducing four interrelated elements: the recognition of museums as institutions with their own organisational identity; the granting of special autonomy to a group of

museums of national significance; the introduction of open international recruitment procedures for museum directors; and the regional reorganisation of museum networks (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2014).

In the international literature, two closely related perspectives have emerged, namely managerialism and agencification. These concepts refer to the introduction of private-sector managerial logics, tools, and organisational cultures into public organisations traditionally devoted to heritage protection and conservation (D'Harnoncourt et al., 1991; Hood, 1991; Zan, 2002; Lusiani et al., 2011; Placek et al., 2021; Bonini Baraldi et al., 2022). The Italian case fits well within this international debate because it reproduces, albeit with distinctive national characteristics, dynamics already observed in other European contexts, where managerialisation has introduced accountability systems, strategic planning, and marketing practices typical of the private sector into public value-oriented organisations (Lusiani et al., 2011; Zan, 2002). In this context, the Franceschini Reform exemplifies a broader global trend of redefining the relationship between the state and cultural institutions, making it a significant case for comparative international management studies.

From an organisational theory perspective, the reform can be interpreted as an attempt to rebalance the two traditional functions historically attributed to Italy's cultural heritage: protection, understood as conservation and safeguarding, and enhancement, understood as accessibility, public enjoyment, and promotion. This dichotomy reflects the broader international literature on the dual mandate of public cultural organisations, which are expected to reconcile their public mission with economic sustainability (Mignosa et al., 2021; Palumbo et al., 2022). Other management studies have identified several external determinants of museum performance, including geographical location (Cerquetti et al., 2023; Distefano et al., 2025), association with UNESCO World Heritage Sites (Cuccia et al., 2016), stakeholder value co-creation (Najda-Janoszka et al., 2023; Radiany et al., 2025), and the growing importance of sustainability (Pop et al., 2024; Shin et al., 2026).

The decade since the Franceschini Reform has also fostered a growing body of research devoted to the Italian case, highlighting several critical aspects of the reform process (Zammartino, 2016; Alfano et al., 2023). A key contribution to interpreting the reform is the distinction between governance autonomy and managerial autonomy proposed by Lusiani et al. (2011). Governance autonomy denotes the formal institutional recognition of an organisation's identity, achieved through the establishment of its own budget, director, and governing bodies. Managerial autonomy, by contrast, concerns managers' effective capacity to make operational decisions, supported by adequate human resources, competencies, and organisational procedures. Building on the analysis of the reform's incomplete implementation, several studies (Ferri et al., 2016; Bradburne, 2018; Bertacchini et al.,

2018; Alfano et al., 2023) have emphasised the persistence of incomplete autonomy and its implications for museum performance, both in terms of visitor numbers and visitor satisfaction.

This line of research has also examined the appointment of foreign museum directors, a reform measure that was among the most disruptive innovations. According to Bergantino, Intini, and Spiru (2023), museum directors' individual characteristics—including age, disciplinary background, and international educational experience—help explain differences in museum performance. However, Zan et al. (2018) argue that newly appointed directors were not granted the authority to recruit, train, or reorganise staff, thereby limiting the potential benefits of their managerial competencies. Furthermore, Palumbo et al. (2022), drawing on a sample of 4,073 Italian museums and cultural institutions, demonstrate that more managerialised museums are more likely to innovate in pricing policies, service offerings, marketing strategies, digitalisation initiatives, and inter-organisational relationships. At the same time, the authors identify a significant risk: a stronger managerial orientation may reduce attention to disadvantaged groups, thereby exacerbating inequalities in access to museum services.

Overall, the evidence suggests that the Franceschini Reform has produced a substantial transformation in the administrative culture of Italian state museums, reinforcing the view of museums as autonomous organisations characterised by strategic orientation and managerial accountability. This exploratory study examines the impact on visitor numbers and revenues of six Italian museums with special autonomy, managed by a foreign director appointed through a public international selection process following the reform — specifically: *Pinacoteca di Brera*, Milan; *Galleria degli Uffizi,* Florence; *Museo di Capodimonte*, Naples; *Galleria Nazionale delle Marche*, Urbino; *Parco Archeologico di Paestum*; and *Palazzo Ducale*, Mantua. These institutions are of general managerial level, with special autonomy granted by law and directors appointed directly by the Ministry of Culture. A comparison of their performance with the remaining museums in the annual MiC top-30 ranking by visitor numbers further supports the research goal.

3. Methodology

3.1 Choice of museums analysed

The selection of museums was based on the official list of Italian state museums with special autonomy, published by the Ministry of Culture (2023). As previously mentioned, these institutions are of general managerial level, and directors are appointed directly by the Ministry of Culture through an international public selection process. From this list, the history of each institution's directorship was reconstructed, and museums led by a foreign director for a substantial period were identified. The length of the mandate was used as the main criterion to ensure that performance data

could be accurately linked to the foreign director's tenure. Consequently, six museums were selected (Table 1).

Table 1. List of the museums considered in the study.

Museum	Place	Category	Website	Foreign Director	Tenure
Pinacoteca di Brera	Milan, Lombardy	First-tier Museum	pinacotecabrera.org	James Bradbourne	2015 – 2024
Galleria degli Uffizi	Florence, Tuscany	First-tier Museum	uffizi.it	Eike Dieter Schmidt	2015 – 2023
Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte	Naples, Campania	First-tier Museum	capodimonte.cultura.gov.it	Sylvain Bellenger	2015 – 2023
Galleria Nazionale delle Marche	Urbino, Marche	Second-tier Museum	gndm.it	Peter Aufreiter	2015 – 2019
Parco Archeologico di Paestum	Paestum, Campania	Second-tier Museum	parchipaestumvelia.cultura.gov.it	Gabriel Zuchtriegel	2015 – 2021
Palazzo Ducale	Mantua, Lombardy	Second-tier Museum	mantovaducale.beniculturali.it	Peter Assmann	2015 – 2020

Several other first-tier institutions have also been led by foreign directors. These were excluded from the analysis because directors assumed their roles after the baseline period or their tenure was too short to allow a sufficiently long pre/post comparison within the observation window (2010–2024). In the case of the *Galleria dell'Accademia di Firenze*, the institutional merger with the *Musei del Bargello* in 2023 introduced a structural discontinuity in the data, making a consistent longitudinal comparison challenging, despite the duration of the foreign directorship.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

Prior to data collection, a preliminary video interview was held with Martina Bagnoli, former Director of the *Accademia Carrara* in Bergamo, to ensure better alignment between the selected indicators and the specific features of museum management. The conversation provided valuable insights into

commonly used performance indicators, confirming that KPI frameworks in Italian museums typically extend beyond visitor counts to include donor engagement, digital resource usage, and marketing metrics such as the ratio of residents to tourists. This input informed the subsequent data collection phase, though the present study — given its preliminary and exploratory nature — focuses on the quantitative indicators available from official sources.

Data presented in this study were collected from official statistics published by the Ministry of Culture (MiC – Ufficio Statistica, n.d.), covering the period 2010–2024. The following indicators were considered:

i. Total visitors (Paying visitors plus non-paying visitors)
ii. Gross revenue
iii. Estimated average ticket price, computed in two ways: (a) as the ratio between gross revenues and total visitors, including non-paying visitors; and (b) as the ratio between gross revenues and paying visitors only. The former provides a conservative, downward-biased approximation; the latter more closely reflects the amount effectively paid by visitors

All indicators were expressed as index numbers with 2010 set equal to 100, to allow comparability across institutions of different scale. The benchmark group consists of the remaining museums in the annual MiC top-30 ranking by visitor numbers, excluding the six analysed institutions in the years in which they appeared in the ranking.

4. Findings

The data from the six museums led by foreign directors show overall increases in both visitor numbers (Tab. 2) and revenues (Tab. 3) — expressed as percentage changes relative to the 2010 baseline (index = 100). The most substantial gains are recorded at the first-tier museums: *Galleria degli Uffizi* (+57.4% in visitors; +418.5% in revenues), *Pinacoteca di Brera* (+90.5%; +199.5%), and *Museo di Capodimonte* (+51.8%; +290.2%). Among the second-tier institutions, results are more mixed: *Palazzo Ducale di Mantova* shows solid revenue growth (+209.9%) despite a more modest increase in visitors (+26.2%), while *Galleria Nazionale delle Marche* and *Parco Archeologico di Paestum* both record limited visitor growth (+18.0% and +3.8%, respectively) alongside substantial revenue gains (+240.9% and +318.0%). In both second-tier cases where the foreign directorship has ended, performance indicators remain above the 2010 baseline, though the post-mandate trajectory raises questions about the sustainability of the gains achieved. Ticket prices rose accordingly, as estimated by the ratio of gross revenues to total visitors (Tab. 4).

Tab. 2. Total visitors. Years 2010–2024. Index numbers (2010=100).

Year	Galleria Uffizi	Pinacoteca Brera	Museo Capodimonte	Galleria Nazionale Marche	Parco Archeologico Paestum	Palazzo Ducale Mantova	Other museums
2010	100	100	100	100	100	100	100,0
2011	107,0	100,2	105,1	99,4	102,2	103,0	108,2
2012	107,2	92,5	93,0	98,2	68,3	76,3	101,9
2013	113,6	87,0	93,4	90,8	59,8	76,6	109,0
2014	117,2	94,1	98,9	92,7	64,6	96,4	117,0
2015	**119,4**	**112,4**	**101,9**	**107,2**	**69,1**	**114,1**	124,1
2016	**121,8**	**119,6**	**109,2**	**108,7**	**88,2**	**169,9**	131,5
2017	**135,4**	**127,1**	**129,6**	**91,5**	**101,6**	**151,3**	133,7
2018	**121,4**	**134,7**	**343,2**	**108,5**	**98,4**	**131,3**	151,4
2019	**129,1**	**145,7**	**197,0**	**148,4**	**102,2**	**162,1**	146,6
2020	**36,0**	**39,0**	**131,5**	57,9	**33,2**	**36,8**	23,7
2021	**52,2**	**51,0**	**151,7**	56,6	**49,9**	57,2	37,7
2022	**121,6**	**138,4**	**187,4**	88,8	90,0	114,4	156,4
2023	**146,3**	**162,1**	**174,1**	99,8	116,7	134,5	230,0
2024	**157,4**	**190,5**	**151,8**	118,0	103,8	126,2	242,4

Source: own elaboration on data from own elaboration on data from MiC – Ufficio Statistica (statistica.cultura.gov.it, n.d.). Years under foreign directorship are in bold. The benchmark "Other museums" refers to the remaining institutions in the annual MiC top-30 ranking, excluding the six museums analysed in the years when they appeared in the ranking.

Tab. 3. Gross revenues. Years 2010–2024. Index numbers (2010=100)

Year	Galleria Uffizi	Pinacoteca Brera	Museo Capodimonte	Galleria Nazionale Marche	Parco Archeologico Paestum	Palazzo Ducale Mantova	Other museums
2010	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
2011	106,8	60,8	91,8	135,2	130,1	113,7	111,8
2012	107,6	72,6	99,0	116,0	113,7	70,3	112,3
2013	116,1	67,4	138,1	122,8	121,5	85,5	122,1
2014	118,9	72,0	157,6	137,3	143,2	118,1	127,9

2015	**146,7**	**84,6**	**182,8**	**166,9**	**167,9**	**184,4**	145,4
2016	**151,3**	**147,8**	**272,7**	**230,3**	**247,4**	**269,7**	161,2
2017	**167,7**	**161,6**	**415,1**	**209,4**	**292,5**	**294,6**	181,2
2018	**249,0**	**172,3**	**318,7**	**276,2**	**294,0**	**260,4**	214,6
2019	**269,5**	**186,9**	**329,5**	**376,2**	**313,6**	**352,1**	229,4
2020	**65,4**	**30,2**	**142,6**	180,5	**147,4**	**104,7**	45,0
2021	**98,7**	**79,6**	**261,2**	185,4	**229,6**	168,4	76,5
2022	**244,4**	**215,2**	**491,2**	238,8	342,1	299,8	223,4
2023	**374,5**	**266,6**	**477,9**	267,9	367,9	321,2	298,2
2024	**518,5**	**299,5**	**390,2**	340,9	418,0	309,9	361,0

Source: own elaboration on data from own elaboration on data from MiC – Ufficio Statistica (statistica.cultura.gov.it, n.d.). See Tab. 2 for notes on the benchmark composition.

Tab. 4. Estimated ticket price. Years 2010–2024. Index numbers (2010=100).

Year	Galleria Uffizi	Pinacoteca Brera	Museo Capodimonte	Galleria Nazionale Marche	Parco Archeologico Paestum	Palazzo Ducale Mantova	Other museums
2010	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0
2011	99,9	60,7	111,7	136,0	127,4	110,4	103,3
2012	100,4	78,4	112,0	118,1	166,4	92,2	110,2
2013	102,2	77,5	122,7	135,3	203,2	111,6	112,0
2014	101,4	76,5	120,2	148,1	221,8	122,5	109,3
2015	**122,9**	**75,3**	**123,3**	**155,7**	**242,8**	**161,7**	117,1
2016	**124,2**	**123,6**	**120,6**	**211,9**	**280,5**	**158,7**	122,6
2017	**123,9**	**127,2**	**127,3**	**228,8**	**287,9**	**194,7**	135,5
2018	**205,1**	**127,9**	**137,2**	**254,7**	**298,9**	**198,4**	141,8
2019	**208,8**	**128,3**	**108,9**	**253,6**	**307,0**	**217,2**	156,5
2020	**181,6**	**77,4**	**130,6**	311,9	**444,2**	**284,3**	190,0
2021	**189,2**	**155,9**	**147,8**	327,7	**460,0**	294,4	202,7
2022	**200,9**	**155,4**	**192,1**	269,1	380,0	262,2	142,8
2023	**256,0**	**164,5**	**238,2**	268,4	315,3	238,8	129,7
2024	**329,4**	**157,2**	**242,1**	288,8	402,9	245,5	149,0

Source: own elaboration on data from own elaboration on data from MiC – Ufficio Statistica (statistica.cultura.gov.it, n.d.). Years under foreign directorship are in bold. The estimated ticket price

is computed as the ratio between gross revenues and total visitors, including non-paying visitors; it therefore represents a conservative, downward-biased approximation of the actual ticket price. See Tab. 2 for notes on the benchmark composition.

Tab 5. Estimated ticket price based on paying visitors. Years 2010–2024. Index numbers (2010=100).

Year	Galleria Uffizi	Pinacoteca Brera	Museo Capodimonte	Galleria Nazionale Marche	Parco Archeologico Paestum	Palazzo Ducale Mantova
2010	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0
2011	100,3	60,8	111,7	126,2	108,7	104,6
2012	100,2	70,7	112,0	117,9	133,2	93,0
2013	100,5	71,0	122,7	127,1	138,4	104,8
2014	101,7	69,4	120,2	125,9	137,2	103,4
2015	**121,3**	**70,1**	**123,3**	**126,9**	**138,7**	**135,1**
2016	**122,3**	**107,4**	**120,6**	**163,8**	**161,1**	**136,1**
2017	**122,5**	**113,0**	**127,3**	**167,7**	**180,3**	**174,6**
2018	**210,0**	**115,1**	**137,2**	**199,8**	**180,6**	**185,4**
2019	**216,4**	**119,7**	**108,9**	**204,6**	**223,3**	**194,5**
2020	**184,2**	**139,0**	**130,6**	189,6	**234,8**	**190,8**
2021	**184,5**	**120,9**	**147,8**	189,8	**238,1**	182,5
2022	**203,4**	**124,5**	**192,1**	200,8	231,8	202,3
2023	**267,3**	**134,3**	**238,2**	249,7	245,6	212,5
2024	**336,6**	**141,2**	**242,1**	281,6	274,0	217,5

Source: own elaboration on data from MiC – Ufficio Statistica (statistica.cultura.gov.it, n.d.). Years under foreign directorship are in bold. The estimated ticket price is computed as the ratio between gross revenues and paying visitors only, excluding complimentary admissions; it therefore represents a closer approximation of the amount effectively paid by visitors than the measure reported in Tab. 4. No benchmark is reported, as data on paying visitors for the "Other museums" group are not available in disaggregated form.

Enlarging the view to include comparisons with the other museums in the Ministry of Culture's annual top-30 ranking, a consistent and striking pattern emerges. Revenue growth systematically outpaces visitor growth across the entire observation period (2010–2024), and both metrics diverge significantly from the benchmark when examined through the lens of pricing strategy. Visitor

numbers tell a more heterogeneous story (Table 2): the benchmark reaches +142.4% by 2024, while most of the six museums remain well below that threshold, with *Parco Archeologico Paestum* at +3.8% and *Galleria Nazionale delle Marche* at +18.0%. Only *Pinacoteca di Brera* (+90.5%) approaches the benchmark trajectory. As for revenues, all six institutions show substantial growth relative to the 2010 baseline. By 2024, the *Galleria degli Uffizi* reaches +418.5%, *Parco Archeologico di Paestum* +318.0%, and *Museo di Capodimonte* +290.2% — figures that comfortably exceed the benchmark of +261.0%.

This divergence becomes analytically sharper when the estimated average ticket price is introduced (Table 4). Computed as the ratio between gross revenues and total visitors — and therefore a conservative, downward-biased estimate, since it includes non-paying visitors in the denominator and, when used for benchmark comparisons, reflects the heterogeneous composition of the top-30 ranking, which encompasses institutions of different typologies with markedly different pricing structures— the price index reveals markedly different dynamics across institutions. By 2024, the *Galleria degli Uffizi* reaches a price increase of +229.4% (from €4.90 in 2010 to €16.13 in 2024), *Parco Archeologico Paestum* +302.9% (from €1.51 to €6.08), and *Museo di Capodimonte* +142.1% (from €5.09 to €12.31). The benchmark, by contrast, reaches only +49.0% over the same period, rising from €5.07 to €7.56. A more accurate picture of pricing dynamics emerges when the estimated ticket price is recalculated using paying visitors only (Tab. 5), thereby excluding complimentary admissions from the denominator. This measure more closely reflects the amount effectively paid by visitors. The results confirm the upward trend observed in Table 4, with all six institutions recording substantial increases relative to the 2010 baseline. By 2024, the *Galleria degli Uffizi* reaches +236.6%, *Parco Archeologico di Paestum* +174.0%, and *Galleria Nazionale delle Marche* +181.6% — figures that reinforce the evidence of active and deliberate pricing strategies across all institutions examined.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This exploratory paper contributes to the debate on performance management in Italian cultural institutions by examining changes in visitor numbers and revenues at Italian museums that appointed a foreign director through an international competitive selection process following the Franceschini Reform. Findings show an overall upward trend in both visitor numbers and revenues across the six institutions examined, with the sole exception of the years affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This positive evidence suggests that the management of foreign directors produced progressively improving results. However, the quantitative data alone cannot fully explain why these results were achieved. Several factors beyond managerial decisions may have contributed to the observed

outcomes, including the type and quality of the cultural offering, the broader institutional and contextual conditions in which each director operated, and the characteristics of the target audiences. The same conclusion can be drawn from the analysis of the estimated average ticket price, computed both including and excluding complimentary admissions. The latter measure, which more accurately reflects the amount effectively paid by visitors, confirms a substantial increase relative to the baseline across all six institutions — providing stronger evidence that pricing decisions under foreign directors were both deliberate and sustained throughout the observation period. Several factors may account for this increase, including the type and quality of exhibitions offered; foreign directors' greater familiarity with the pricing policies adopted in their home countries; and their awareness of the value that international visitors place on world-renowned Italian artistic masterpieces displayed by the institutions under their management. The characteristics of the target audiences may also explain their willingness to accept higher prices. Finally, renewed awareness of the value offered may have enabled these institutions to set—and successfully charge—a premium price, which also affects their market positioning (Palumbo et al., 2022).

Given the exploratory nature of this study, the factors discussed above should be regarded as plausible explanations rather than established conclusions. The analysis relies exclusively on statistical data and examines only six museums, which constrains the generalisability of the findings. Additionally, the autonomy introduced by the Franceschini Reform remains partial, and its full effectiveness depends on narrowing the gap between formal and substantive autonomy, particularly in human resource management, and on adopting performance indicators that capture the full public value generated by museum institutions. These structural constraints may have moderated the impact of individual directors' strategies in ways that quantitative data alone cannot capture.

Future research will address these limitations through qualitative studies involving the directors — or their successors — to explore: the strategic and operational foundations of their leadership; the marketing strategies they implemented; the guidelines they established for the protection, conservation and future enhancement of cultural heritage; and a comparison of the cultural offering available before and after each appointment. This approach will enable the identification of the key decisions, strategies and actions that characterise each director's management, and the development of a set of keywords to guide subsequent analysis. Cross-referencing quantitative data with qualitative evidence will then help identify possible correlations and highlight areas of convergence and divergence.

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