

# City of the Soul: Artist-Visitors to Rome, from the Nineteenth Century to Today

by Gail Leggio

Rome has haunted the world's imagination for centuries. When painters, writers, architects and photographers are confronted with the physical reality of the city, they are often transformed. As "City of the Soul: Rome and the Romantics," a recent exhibition at the Morgan Library & Museum, demonstrated, the artists also transform the city, adding fresh layers to the already unparalleled richness of Rome's legacy. As John A. Pinto writes in the show's catalogue, "the act of seeing is never unmediated," but "inflected by the intellectual and emotional experience" of past viewers.<sup>1</sup>

The title of the catalogue is taken from Goethe, who arrived in Rome in 1784. He had grown up surrounded by the prints of Giovanni Battista Piranesi, such as *View of the Ponte Sant'Angelo and Castel Sant'Angelo* (1550–51). The monuments of Rome were known to people before they traveled there—even to those who would never visit—because artists' images established the iconography of the city. Artists copy other artists, perpetuating visual tropes. The photographer Gioacchino Altobelli, in *The Tiber with Castel Sant'Angelo and St. Peter's* (1868), replicated Piranesi's composition. But Altobelli features the river, adding local color with a couple of boys fishing, and depicts a glassy expanse of water that reflects the famous buildings. (The cameras of the era had a long exposure time that gave running water an almost eerie stillness, very effective in this case.)

The Morgan exhibition explored, often through such juxtapositions, the varied responses to Rome between artistic contemporaries—painters, writers



Gioacchino Altobelli  
*The Tiber with  
Castel Sant'Angelo and  
St. Peter's*, 1868

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Jean-Baptiste-  
Camille Corot,  
*Arch of Constantine and  
the Forum*, 1843

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and photographers—in the context of the inevitable dialogue between the present and the past.

Rome is a theatrical city. Piranesi, who started his career as a stage set designer in Venice, used his skills as a scenographer to present Roman buildings dramatically. The grandiosity of some sites has been controversial. In his watercolor *Interior of St. Peter's Basilica*, J.M.W. Turner bases his view on one by Giovanni Paolo Panini, with tiny figures that make the vast space look even larger than it is and an oblique angle that makes the interior less barn-like. Turner uses cloudy light and atmospheric perspective that suggests a Romantic landscape. An engraved version of this watercolor appeared in James Hakewill's *Picturesque Tour of Italy* (1820).

St. Peter's generated controversy among nineteenth-century travelers. On his first visit to Rome in 1869, Henry James praised the Pantheon: "It makes you profoundly regret that you are not a pagan .... It's the most conclusive example I have yet seen of the simple sublime .... St. Peter's, beside it, is absurdly vulgar."<sup>2</sup> Ruskin, too, disliked the Vatican basilica, as he did the entire Baroque style.

Ruskin, however, fell in love with the Fontana di Trevi (1732–62), which he described in an 1840 diary entry: "I got on the mimicked rocks ... [and] fancied myself among the gushing torrents of my native Cumberland."<sup>3</sup> The designer of the Trevi, Nicola Salvi, showed the rocks as eroded (as if by the action of the water) and entangled in vegetation against a tableau of gods and allegorical figures, celebrating the ancient Aqua Virgo. One of the strengths of the Morgan exhibition was the inclusion of contemporaneous photographs, such as James Anderson's *The Trevi Fountain* (c. 1862), which give us a period view of Rome. The cameras of the time are ideal for architectural images, recording details with mesmerizing clarity.

As the Fontana di Trevi demonstrates, nature is a crucial part of Roman life. The Roman poet Martial called the phenomenon "Rus in Urbe," country-



side in the city. Today umbrella pines still dot the Seven Hills, lemon trees in pots grace courtyards, lush parks—municipal and princely—draw crowds. But in the Romantic era, the Forum and the Colosseum were still draped in foliage, not yet stripped by the archeologists who uncovered important finds at the loss of some picturesqueness. A century ago, Rome was a magnet for landscapists.

Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot saw the ruins of Rome not primarily as witnesses to history but as features of the landscape, structuring space and the fall of light. A master of the plein-air oil sketch, Corot, in his *Arch of Constantine and the Forum* (1843), looks at his principal subject from the side, as it carves out patterns of light and shadow. The sloping green hillock in the foreground and the trees in the distance are as important as Forum monuments like the Temple of Venus and Rome, so worn it seems to be reverting from artwork to earthwork.<sup>4</sup>

Artists responded to monuments and natural elements in different ways, depending on choice of medium and purpose of the exercise. James Anderson's photograph *The Arch of Nero* (c. 1867) depicts a portion of the aqueduct near Tivoli. Despite the presence of rough foliage on the arch, this is not a landscape. The camera examines the ruin with clear-eyed concentration. The blank white sky (typical of the era's photographs) throws the architecture into sharp relief. Many painters favored this spot, including Sanford Gifford, George Inness and Thomas Cole, but with a different purpose. Cole's *A View near Tivoli* (1832) shows the ruined arch but subordinates it to a wider landscape, with a rocky hill that suggests the enduring landscape in *The Course of Empire*. He also introduces a cloudy, wind-driven sky, asserting Nature's power.<sup>5</sup>

Finding Rome a powerful booster of creativity, many moved to the city, long-term or permanently, finding not only splendid subjects but an established international community of fellow artists. Nicholas Poussin (1594–1665) spent most of his career in Rome and established (along with another Frenchman, Claude Lorrain, and the Italian Annibale Carracci) the formula for the classical landscape, combining ruins with the naturalistic beauty of the Roman Campagna.

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Cultural pilgrims do not go to Rome in search of Poussin and company. Their paintings are scattered in museums across the world, and the Campagna has long been swallowed up by unlovely apartment buildings. But, as the organizers of the Morgan show realized, lingering influence cannot be calculated by length of stay and volume of work. Pinto writes: "In fact, the image of Rome conjured by the Romantic poets proved to be as powerful and enduring a construct as any of the city's great monuments."<sup>6</sup>

Byron spent only three weeks in Rome, but his poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage: Canto the Fourth* (1818) became an instant bestseller, *de rigueur* for

tourists, along with the guidebooks that proliferated in the nineteenth century. Byron's set pieces on the Colosseum by moonlight and the Pantheon were endlessly cited, although today's readers may find them bombastic. Byron noted that the stanzas were first impressions, reflecting his emotional response. The Romantics, however brief their time in Rome (they were a peripatetic lot), revealed the profound effect the city had not only in world history but in the life—the psychology, the imagination, the soul—of an individual.

Shelley was inspired by Rome in several important works. The five-act blank verse *The Cenci* (1819), a poetic drama, draws on the true story of Beatrice Cenci, an aristocratic young woman executed for parricide in 1599 amid accusations of incest. The facts are still contested, but the story inspired both Shelley and Robert Browning (*The Ring and the Book*, 1868–69). The poets were also influenced by an appealing portrait of a young beauty by Guido Reni, in the Palazzo Barberini, once thought to represent Beatrice Cenci.

*The Cenci* is not much read these days, but two of Shelley's greatest works have Roman roots. Shelley wrote most of *Prometheus Unbound* (1818–19) in the Baths of Caracalla. In the Preface, he describes the “mountainous ruins,” the “dizzy arches suspended in air,” the “flowery glades and thickets of odoriferous blossoming trees.” There is a lovely little picture of the scene by Joseph Severn on view in the Keats-Shelley Memorial House beside the Spanish Steps.<sup>7</sup>

Shelley's *Adonais: Elegy on the Death of John Keats* (1821) epitomizes the Romantic encounter with ancient myth—lyrical, revolutionary, philosophical, deeply personal. By identifying Keats with Adonis, a beautiful young man beloved of Venus cut down in his prime, Shelley apotheosized his friend, in the process capturing an underlying aspect of the Eternal City. Pinto articulates the theme: “Time, with its ravages and poignancies, is more palpable in Rome.”<sup>8</sup>

Time was running out for John Keats when he arrived in Rome. He spent his last three months, which he called his “posthumous life,” in a rose-colored *pensione* overlooking the Spanish Steps. Two works in the Morgan show give us some idea what the neighborhood looked like shortly after his death. The British painter Thomas Hartly Cromek depicts the top of the stairs in *The Via Sistina and Palazzo Zuccaro from the Trinità dei Monti* (1830). The watercolor's unusual perspective is notable for a capital of exaggerated size and two small peasant figures, probably models for hire. The photographer Robert Turnbull Macpherson chooses the more classic view of the Steps, sweeping down theatrically to the charming Fontana della Barcaccia. *The Spanish Steps* (c. 1856) has the clarity and long-exposure detail of nineteenth-century photography.

The room where Keats died (at twenty-five) is preserved, along with his death mask and a small collection of memorabilia, in the Keats-Shelley Memorial House, one of two shrines to the Romantics in Rome. The other is the Protestant Cemetery, where Keats is buried under the epitaph “Here lies one whose name was writ in water.” Shelley's ashes are preserved here, as are





Robert Turnbull Macpherson, *The Spanish Steps*, c. 1856

PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION W. BRUCE AND DELANEY H. LUNDBERG

other notables, including the American sculptor William Wetmore Story and his wife under his handsome Victorian sculpture *The Angel of Grief*. In the Preface to *Adonais*, Shelley wrote: “It must make one in love with death to think that one should be buried in so sweet a place.” The Protestant Cemetery is indeed one of the loveliest anywhere, with the Pyramid of Cestius (c. 12 BC) nearby, thick stands of cypress and pine trees, and a well-tended cat colony.

For nearly two centuries, Keats has remained an indelible presence in Rome. Artists have been especially intrigued, speculating on Keats’s life and art. Jane Campion’s film *Bright Star* (2000) focused on Keats’s love for Fanny Brawne, and included a scene of the poet being taken away for burial in the pre-dawn hours (as a non-Catholic was required to be).

One of the most interesting works to come out of the Keats cult was *ABBA ABBA* (1977), by Anthony Burgess. The title refers to some of Jesus’ last words on the Cross (“Father, father, why has thou forsaken me?”), the rhyme scheme of the octet of a Petrarchan sonnet, and the author’s initials. The account of Keats’s last days offers an alternative to the usual portrait of the frail and sensitive figure. Burgess emphasizes the frustration of the passionate man we know through Keats’s sensuous poems. Thwarted in his hunger for food (his well-meaning doctor and friend Joseph Severn kept him on a near-starvation diet) and sexual gratification (Burgess gives him a tantalizing dream about an encounter with Pauline Borghese, a great beauty of the era, immortalized by the sculptor Canova as Venus), Keats can only indulge his passion for language.

The novel is full of wordplay, but the pleasure Keats feels is shadowed by the knowledge he will never write a major work again.

Burgess's Keats uses language that expresses aspects of his situation not often acknowledged. When Severn shows him one of his paintings, Keats complains: "Too gentle-Jesus feathery where the iron groin should show through."<sup>9</sup> Keats's lyricism is evident in a description of him standing by the Fontana della Barcaccio: "He tried to identify himself with the water, to feel the small sick parcel of flesh that was himself liquefy joyfully, joyfully relish its own wetness and singing clarity."<sup>10</sup> Daringly, Burgess introduces someone in Keats's circle, Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli, a contemporaneous dialect poet known for his witty, blasphemous sonnets, mostly on Biblical subjects. In the last third of *ABBA ABBA*, Burgess presents his own translations of Belli's sonnets. Words perpetuate the craft of writing over centuries and build a timeless community of artists. Such conversations between past and present establish, extend and question traditions. Keats seems to inspire storytellers in a variety of mediums.

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It could be argued that film is the signature artform of the twentieth century, and Italian filmmakers—Fellini, Antonioni, Visconti—have been among film's finest practitioners. But outsiders, too, have found inspiration in Italy's extraordinary visual and storytelling opportunities.

Rome exemplifies the always rich and complex relationship between past and present. The experience of artists visiting Rome is especially fraught, since they must deal not only with the many-layered history of Rome but also with the sometimes bewildering sensibilities of a living city. In two recent cinematic fables, non-Italian writer-directors focus on non-Italian architects, who come to Rome for different reasons and meet different fates.

In *The Belly of an Architect* (1987), the Englishman Peter Greenaway tells the story of a Stourley Kracklite, a successful American architect who comes to Rome to curate an exhibition on the austere Neoclassicist Étienne-Louis Boullée (1728–99), who built little and whose designs are grandiose exercises in geometry. Kracklite is fêted at an al fresco dinner with the Pantheon as a backdrop. The contrast between the ancient monument's grace and warmth and a cake in the shape of one of Boullée's pallid designs creates a feeling of unease. Kracklite is undone by Rome: his wife falls under the sway of a brother-sister duo of decadent aristocrats; his Italian colleagues maneuver him out of his own exhibition; his health fails. The film is a tragedy, as nuanced as a novella by Henry James.

*La Sapienza* (2014), by the American-born, French-based director Eugène Green, is a tale of redemption. The protagonist, a Swiss modernist architect, has become disillusioned with his life. His latest project has been hailed as a success, but not before some humanizing touches have been eliminated in the



name of cost efficiency. He flees to Lake Maggiore, along with his equally burnt-out wife, to work on a book. The hero of the book will be Francesco Borromini (1599–1667), the most joyful and spiritual of the Baroque architects. Borromini’s stunning buildings restore his faith in architecture, among other things. He recovers the basic principle that (in the words of a young architecture student who becomes his protégé) “spaces are but emptiness, which need to be filled with light and people.”

The title of the film translates to “knowledge” or “wisdom,” quite physically manifest in Borromini’s Sant’Ivo alla Sapienza, a church set back from a Roman street, in a courtyard surrounded by State archives, once the site of a university. Here, the filmmaker’s art comes into play as we move through the courtyard into the church interior, not very large and painted plain white. But the spatial composition is exhilaratingly complex, with a graceful rhythmic pattern of concave and convex shapes, topped by a light-filled dome. Outside, we can catch glimpses of the church’s playful cupola and twisted spire.

Sant’Ivo’s soft-serve swirl of a cupola dominates *Rome Rooftop II* in Frederick Brosen’s (b. 1954) recent watercolor show at Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York City. Brosen follows in the footsteps of nineteenth-century artists, favoring relatively intimate views of meandering streets to *vedute* of grand monuments. He is also a fine colorist who relishes the faded polychrome of old buildings, and he tends to soft-toned skies, rather than the hard enameled blue of postcard backdrops.

The narrow, cobblestoned streets of Trastevere and the Ghetto are a favorite subject. *Piazza della Cinque Scole* (all exhibition works 2015) depicts the site of a building (now demolished) that housed five synagogues. The Ghetto is usually bustling at lunch and dinner times, but Brosen’s composition is uncongested. A wide-angle view of cobblestones (a space empty except for a couple of pigeons) occupies most of the foreground. From there, old buildings stretch back in steep perspective, with some umbrellaed trattoria tables in the middle distance.

In *Via del Portico d’Ottavia*, Rome, Brosen focuses on the color and texture of a façade, a collage of materials and eras. Ancient sculpture fragments—a striking lion and a gazelle—are incorporated into a mostly medieval structure. Brosen, who calls himself “a landscape and architecture painter,” is humbled and inspired by the legacy of Rome:

*One can never outdo...past Masters even though they teach us, through their own interpretations, through a profound variety of formal analyses and poetic responses. One must find his or her own formal language and creative connection in the work to attempt to find one’s own voice in the resounding visual chorus.*<sup>11</sup>

The artists who continue to visit Rome are doing more than checking items off a guidebook’s “must see” list. They are looking for epiphanies which emerge,

often unexpectedly, from the juxtapositions of styles and centuries, past and present, worldly pleasures and soulful yearnings.

#### NOTES

1. John A. Pinto, *City of the Soul: Rome and the Romantics* (New York: Morgan Library & Museum; Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2016), 11.
2. John Varriano, *A Literary Companion to Rome* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1991), 158.
3. *Ibid.*, 147.
4. For more, see Philip Conisbee et al., *In the Light of Italy: Corot and Early Open Air Painting* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1996).
5. Pinto, *City of the Soul*, 122–23.
6. *Ibid.*, 29.
7. Varriano, *Literary Companion*, 122.
8. Pinto, *City of the Soul*, 11.
9. Anthony Burgess, *ABBA ABBA* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2009, reprint of 1977 edition).
10. *Ibid.*, 6.
11. Artist's statement for "Recent Watercolors: Rome and Florence," Hirschl & Adler Modern, February 4–March 12, 2016.

It is with great sorrow that the Newington-Cropsey Cultural Studies Center notes the passing of Gail Leggio on August 26, 2016. A former Fulbright Scholar and Ph.D. in English Literature from the University of Virginia, Gail had been contributing to our journal, *American Arts Quarterly*, for over twenty-five years as associate editor and writer. She also wrote essays for *The Architectural Capriccio* (Ashgate, 2014) and *The Re-Emergence of Realism* (forthcoming), as well as individual artists' catalogues. She is survived by her husband James Leggio, and will be deeply missed by all who knew her. Her colleagues in the art world will remember her as a both brilliant scholar and critic and a most open-hearted friend.