



Flute player, detail of the Ludovisi Throne, c. 460–450 B.C.
Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano

Roman Museums

by Gail Leggio

Rome is one of the great art capitals of the world, but tracking down works scattered through the city's churches, villas and galleries—many open for only a few hours in the morning—has often been logistically daunting. Two recent events have made the museum-going experience easier. In June 1997 the Borghese Gallery re-opened after a decade and a half of reconstruction, and in December the antique sculpture collection of the Museo Nazionale Romano was presented in its new home, the Palazzo Altemps. In addition, reflecting policy changes under Walter Veltroni, Minister of Culture and Deputy Prime Minister, Italian museums are keeping longer hours and offering visitors bookshops, audio guides, and even cafes. Beginning on April 7, the hours for sixteen popular Italian museums—including the Galleria Borghese, the Uffizi in Florence and the Accademia in Venice—have been extended, with opening times from 9:00 A.M. to 10:00 P.M.

When I visited the Borghese and the Altemps in relatively tourist-free January, both museums were crowded with Romans, eager to re-acquaint themselves with a part

of their cultural heritage that had been too long inaccessible.¹ The Borghese, in fact, was still a hot ticket six months after its re-opening. Tickets, which are timed, should be purchased in advance. And because the *pinacoteca* is flushed out every two hours, it's crucial to arrive on time.

The Borghese is set in a 212-acre public park, which also contains the enchanting sixteenth-century Villa Giulia with its superb collection of Etruscan artifacts. From its inception in 1613, the Borghese was designed to showcase art. Cardinal Scipione Borghese was a prodigious collector and patron of the arts, if sometimes high-handed in his methods of acquisition. He reputedly arranged for the removal of Raphael's 1507 *Deposition* from a church in Perugia in the middle of the night. The Cardinal's booty has now been re-installed upstairs in the Borghese, encased in a rather cumbersome glass box. It's a handsome painting, with an interlocking frieze of figures based on antique models, although emotionally remote. One of Raphael's loveliest portraits, *The Lady of the Unicorn* (1508), is displayed in the same room. Dressed in rich crimson velvet and pale green silk, an opulent jewel suspended from a fine gold chain around her neck, the grave blonde beauty sits quietly, holding a unicorn in her lap. The legendary creature is as petite and demure as a lapdog. A hazy landscape is visible above the parapet behind her, and the sky is as delicate as her blue-grey eyes and the blush on her translucent skin.

Correggio's *Danaë* (c. 1532) is notable for its refined eroticism and bold off-center composition. At the left edge of the painting a luminous rectangle functions almost as an abstract shape. Danaë was confined in a tall tower, and her view here is empty sky with a token baseline of rooftop. In her austere, dusky chamber, a youthful Amor looks up to the golden cloud hovering above the pale, naked princess lying in a rumpled white bed. Two solemn little putti occupy the lower right foreground, engraving a tablet with a glittering golden arrow. The putti (one is winged, the other isn't) are sometimes interpreted as representatives of sacred and profane love. Imbued with the Neoplatonism of the period, Correggio's *Danaë* belongs to the Renaissance tradition of finding mysteries in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Barkan calls the golden cloud "sacred but indefinable" and refers to the painting as "a conundrum."²

One of the great paintings of the Renaissance, Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* (1514) is even more enigmatic. The title is a later interpolation, and we have no sure way of knowing what the nearly identical women—one naked, the other sumptuously dressed—represent. They sit on a wellhead *all' antica* which looks something like an ancient sarcophagus. The marble bas reliefs—a prancing horse, a cupid being chastized—are often read as emblems of passion tamed. Shaped like a *cassone*, a ceremonial wedding chest, the painting may be a marriage allegory. Whatever its iconographic program, however, as one explicator noted, "its poetic mood completely absorbs the philosophical construction."³ On either side of the figures, the painting extends into landscape: a secluded copse with a castle on the left, an expansive meadow with hunting scenes and a distant belfrey on the right.

In a striking painting (c. 1520) Dosso Dossi depicts an elegant, turbaned sorceress within a cabalistic circle in a verdant landscape. While once identified as Circe, the figure is now thought to represent one of two enchantresses from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, Alcina (who imprisons men's souls in animals, trees and rocks) or Melissa (who frees them).⁴ A *Last Supper* by Jacopo Bassano (1510/15–1592) is remarkable for its hot, Mannerist colors, unusual high-angle point of view and vivid genre detail. A dog and cat crouch beneath the table, where a supper of lamb's head is displayed. You can still

find the dish on the menu in Rome's traditional Jewish restaurants.

No painter is as dramatic as Caravaggio (1573–1610), and Rome is rich in his work: the St. Matthew paintings at San Luigi dei Francesi, *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt* at the Doria Pamphili, his most lyrical image, the stunning *Deposition* at the Vatican *pinacoteca*. The Borghese boasts six paintings by Caravaggio. The *Bacchino Malata* (self-portrait as Bacchus) and *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* (both 1593–94) are early works, painted not long after the artist arrived in Rome from Lombardy. The northern influence is evident in the crystalline detail of his still lifes, the ambrosial freshness of the apples, pears, figs and vari-colored grapes, the translucence of the leaves. *David with the Head of Goliath* (1605–06) is more somber. From the brown-black gloom of the background, the young hero stretches out a boldly foreshortened arm, thrusting toward us the huge head. In the starkly lit composition, our attention is focused on the two faces. The David is melancholy, rather than triumphant. Goliath (another self-portrait) is a curiously sympathetic victim, his mouth agape, his brow furrowed, his downcast eyes puzzled.

The *Madonna of the Serpent* was commissioned in 1605 by the Palafrenieri, the papal grooms. Completed in 1606 and installed in St. Peter's, it was soon removed. The Cardinals thought the depiction of the Virgin vulgar and objected to the nakedness of the boy Christ.⁵ What twentieth-century viewers find admirable in Caravaggio—psychological complexity, physical immediacy, the stripped-down realism of the settings—shocked his contemporaries, at least for public spaces. Caravaggio never lacked private patrons. Scipione Borghese bought the *Madonna of the Serpent* right after it was rejected for St. Peter's. Mina Gregori suggests that the “scandal” of the public works is rooted in Caravaggio's disregard for the hierarchical “distinctions between history and genre paintings.”⁶ The *Madonna* here is from a prosperous lower-class household. In her scarlet low-cut dress, she has an earthy beauty, despite the slender gold rim of her halo. As if teaching her son to walk, she guides the naked boy to crush the serpent. There are theological implications: with his foot on top of hers, they are co-redeemers scotching the serpent of evil. At the same time, the vulnerability of the naked child and the convincing naturalism of the sinuous brown snake convey a chill of physical menace. Complicating the iconography is an implicit reference to the infant Hercules.⁷ Caravaggio is a complex historical character, an intellectual and a brawler, a disreputable character, like the street punks who impersonate David, John the Baptist and angels in his paintings. The sexual charge of his images is unmistakable, and his bold lighting looks proto-cinematic. Yet his religious works have an urgency that is not only psychological but moral and metaphysical.

The sculpture at the Borghese is justifiably renowned, especially as a demonstration of the genius of Bernini (1598–1680). Several works were commissioned by Scipione Borghese. A self-portrait of the artist at age 25, *David* is shown at the moment just before he hurls the stone. Legs planted far apart, muscles tensed, scowling with concentration, he seems to be winding himself up, so extreme is the *contrapposto*. In *Pluto and Proserpina* (1621–22) the god's grasping fingers actually sink into the maiden's thigh as she struggles, flinging out her arms in desperation. The daringly over-topped composition is ingeniously anchored by Cerberus, the three-headed dog of hell, who snarls at Pluto's feet.

Even more miraculous is *Apollon and Daphne* (1623). Bernini is ideally suited to capture the feeling of pursuit in Ovid's description:



Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Madonna of the Serpent*, 1605
Borghese Gallery, Rome

The god by grace of hope, the girl, despair,
Still kept their increasing pace until his lips
Breathed at her shoulder.⁸

The essence of the *Metamorphoses* is change, the dangerous fluidity of nature:

In earth she stood, white thighs embraced by climbing
Bark, her white arms branches, her fair head swaying
In a cloud of leaves; all that was Daphne bowed
In the stirring of the wind, the glittering green leaf twined within her hair and
she was laurel.⁹

Bernini gives that transformation palpable form: Daphne's flailing hands burst into foliage, her smooth legs are encrusted with rough bark, her delicate toes put out roots. *Apollo and Daphne* is remarkable not only for its varied textures but also for its boldly open composition. The two bodies in *Pluto and Proserpine* are fused in

struggle. But there is air between the figures of Apollo and Daphne. The slender Apollo has only one foot on the ground as he reaches for Daphne, who leaps away from him. A small but crucial hinge between the figures is provided by a delicate, naturalistically carved spray of laurel. Beyond all this technical virtuosity, the contrast between the faces—the heedless serenity of the amorous god, the wild terror of the nymph (her open mouth a dark hollow)—is poignant.

A marvelous work in a very different style, Antonio Canova's (1757–1822) masterpiece *Venus Victrix* (1805) is a portrait of Napoleon's sister Pauline Borghese. The notoriously self-indulgent lady (she was carried to and from her milk baths by servants) reclines half naked on an Empire chaise. In the icy white marble favored by Neoclassical sculptors, Canova has rendered with equal facility her porcelain skin, fashionably crimped hair, and the slightly wrinkled fabric of her embroidered cushions.

Cardinal Borghese had a remarkable collection of antiquities as well, but they were later sold off to Napoleon and now form part of the Louvre. The Borghese Gallery still has some handsome pieces of Classical sculpture, along with intriguing fourth-century mosaics depicting gladiators and wild beasts. But to understand how Renaissance collectors approached antique sculpture, you must go to the Palazzo Altemps, located in the heart of Rome, just north of the Piazza Navona. Previously housed in a part of the Baths of Diocletian (in galleries only fitfully open), this world-class collection has now found an ideal home. In some princely collections, the sumptuousness of the decor can distract from the art. In the spacious and uncluttered rooms of the Palazzo Altemps, however, restoration architect Francesco Scoppola and the curators have struck an astute balance between antique sculpture and Renaissance architectural context.

An important component of the Altemps is the collection of Cardinal Ludovico Ludovisi, nephew of Gregory XV (Pope (1621–23), who included among his treasures the Ludovisi Throne, now the centerpiece of an elegantly installed room. Dating from c. 460–450 B.C., the marble is an original Greek work (most Greek sculptures are known from Roman copies), produced in southern Italy and found near the Villa Ludovisi. The sides show flute-playing and incense-burning priestesses. The central panel depicts the birth of Aphrodite. Born of sea foam, the goddess stepped ashore in Cypress, where she was clothed by the Seasons, an event annually re-enacted at her temples in spring.¹⁰ In the Ludovisi bas relief the half-figure goddess rises from a crescent of drapery, flanked by attendant nymphs who bend gracefully to assist her. The sea is not depicted directly but suggested by the weight and cling of the rippling drapery. Her head, in profile, is haloed by a fan of supple arms.

The colossal head known as the Ludovisi Juno, displayed in the same room, was greatly admired in the nineteenth century. Exclaiming over “the great Juno,” Henry James wrote in 1873: “These things it is almost impossible to praise; we can only mark them well and keep them clear, as we insist on silence to hear great music.”¹¹ Nearly a century earlier Goethe had been so enraptured by the work that he had a plaster cast made for himself. “This was my first love in Rome,” he wrote in 1787. “No words can give an idea of it. It is like a song of Homer's.”¹² It was in Rome, Goethe claimed, that he learned to see for the first time. The Ludovisi Juno lives up to her reputation. The Roman sculptor reputedly based her features on Antonia, the mother of the Emperor Claudius (10 B.C.–54 A.D.). She is a warmly human Queen of Heaven, majestic but not stern. The profile of the huge head is as exquisite as a cameo, and the carving of the heavy waves of her hair is unusually graceful.

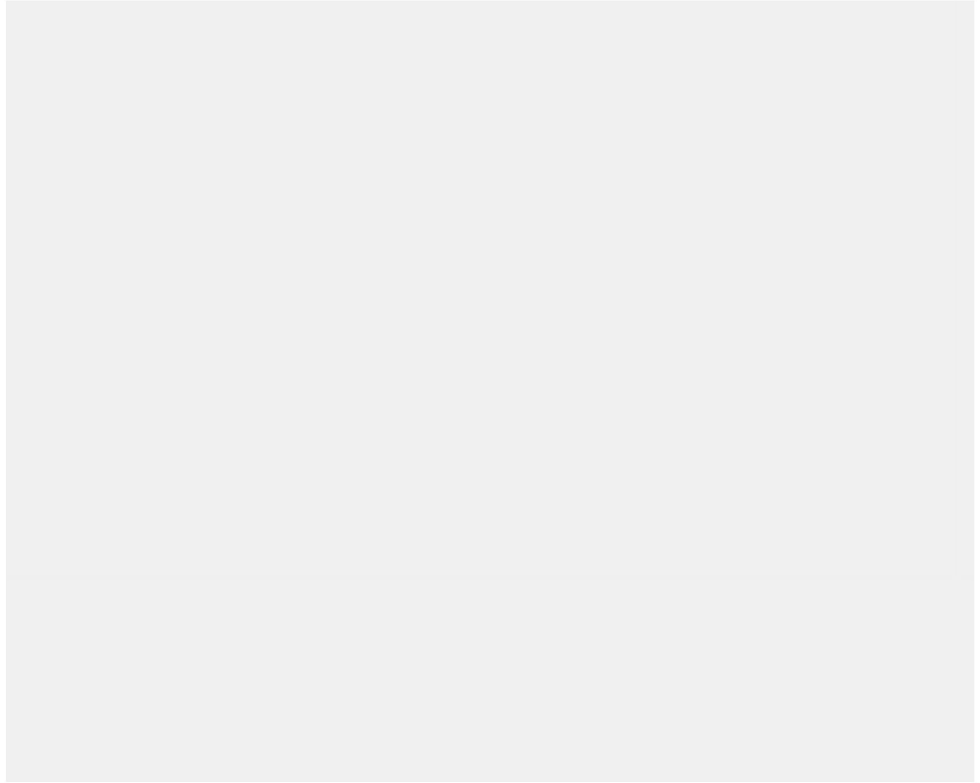
Another important sculpture here is a pyramidal composition depicting a Gaul killing his wife and himself. This superb Roman copy in marble of a third-century B.C. original is based on a bronze war memorial at Pergamum. The muscular, curly-haired Gaul is the personification of the noble enemy. With taut muscles and an expression of grim determination, he drives the point of his short sword into his chest. A spray of blood, wonderfully executed in the marble, surrounds the incision. His dying wife, who kneels on his shield, is a figure of lyrical pathos, her eyes closed, her head drooping against his leg. The contrast between his sinewy arm and her fluid one is striking. The Pergamum monument was a multi-figure composition that also included the famed Dying Gaul (a Roman copy is one of the highlights of Rome's Capitoline Museum). Only the defeated were depicted, in an unusual strategy that implicitly suggested both the power and the magnanimity of the victorious Attalids.

Among the other outstanding works in this vast, intelligently arranged collection are the Crouching Aphrodite (third century B.C.), a voluptuous figure turning to wash herself, a Hellenistic Sleeping Hermaphrodite, and dozens of Roman sarcophagi. These elaborate, deeply carved panels often depict Bacchic revels, boar hunts, and mythic subjects such as Diana and Endymion and the Labors of Hercules. One of the most dynamic was made in the second century A.D. for a Roman general in the German campaigns. He appears on horseback in the center of a mass of rearing horses, falling bodies, shields, lances and torches.

Insightful wall labels at the Altemps, in both Italian and English, include diagrams indicating restored sections of Classical originals with shading. Renaissance attitudes toward antiquity are vividly illustrated, as the visitor learns how artists and connoisseurs understood the theory and practice of restoration. Antique statues were rarely intact when discovered, and collectors often hired artists to add a missing foot, nose or hand. In a seated figure of Ares on display at the Altemps, for example, a missing foot was added by Bernini. These were not attempts to fake a more complete artifact. Restorations were usually made using a noticeably different, albeit harmonious, piece of marble. The composite work thus becomes a kind of collaboration across the centuries, a dialogue between ancient and modern artists. Baroque restorers preferred warmer shades of white, while Neoclassical artists usually prefer snowy white stone. Sometimes parts of different antique statues are combined, and occasionally a figure will be arbitrarily reidentified: a helmet and breastplate with Medusa can transform a young woman into an Athena.

The Palazzo Altemps itself offers a glimpse of the luxury and charm of privileged life in Renaissance Rome. The painted decorations are delightful: *trompe l'oeil* frescoes of tapestries, colonnades with views of countryside beyond, putti cavorting on a balustrade, even a sideboard loaded with wedding gifts. In one room, the ceiling is painted with allegorical figures representing the four seasons, and elegant decorations in the style of ancient Roman grotesques. In some places, the restorers have left layers from different periods of decoration visible. The high point is the Room of the Caesars, actually a loggia painted as a *trompe l'oeil* pergola, a covered garden walk with trellised climbing plants and putti. Standing beneath the convincingly leafy arcade, you can spy an encyclopedic array of birds perching and flitting against the luminous blue sky. This is a glorious museum, a major addition to the art-lover's Roman itinerary.

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Notes

1. During construction, a good selection of paintings from the Borghese was on view at the Conservation Institute at San Michele a Ripa in Trastevere.
2. Leonard Barkan, *The Gods Made Flesh* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 197.
3. Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (New York: Norton, 1968), p. 151.
4. Judith Yarnall, *Transformations of Circe* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), pp. 116–117.
5. *The Age of Caravaggio* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985), p. 199.
6. Mina Gregori, “Caravaggio Today,” *The Age of Caravaggio* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985), p. 39.
7. Alfred Moir, *Caravaggio* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1982), p. 104.
8. Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, trans. by Horace Gregory (New York: Mentor, 1960), p. 46.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (London: Merlin Press, 1962; first published 1903), pp. 311–312.
11. Henry James, *Italian Hours*, ed. by John Auchard (New York: Penguin, 1992), p. 191.
12. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Italian Journey*, trans. by Robert R. Heitner, ed. by Thomas P. Saine and Jeffrey L. Sammons (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 126.