

# City as Museum: Rome in the Eighteenth Century

by Gail Leggio

In other places one has to search for what is significant, here we are overwhelmed and surfeited with it. —Goethe<sup>1</sup>

For Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), the sheer density of history and art in Rome made it a city like no other. He spent a year in Rome, not overwhelmed but stimulated by its riches. He worked on his plays and poetry, sketched, collected plaster casts of antiquities and looked at art, often in the company of friends such as the Swiss painter Angelika Kauffmann (1741–1807). Even before he arrived, however, the landmarks of the Eternal City were part of his imaginative life: “Now I see all my childhood dreams come to life. I see now in reality the first engraving that I remember (my father had hung the prospects of Rome in a corridor); and everything long familiar to me in painting and drawings, copperplates and woodcuts, in plaster and cork, now stands before me.... it is all as I imagined, and yet new.”<sup>2</sup> Goethe claimed he learned to see for the first time in Rome.

The eighteenth century was a period of frantic building and urban planning, but the new city co-existed self-consciously with older versions of itself. In such a palimpsestic city, many layers of history are visible simultaneously. Isolating the specific layer that derives from the eighteenth century is a daunting and not always rewarding task. Still, this is a fascinating era, marked by changing attitudes toward art. The Grand Tour, along with more democratic forms of tourism, was recognized as crucial to a civilized education. Art history emerged as a separate discipline from the shadow of connoisseurship, although the two remain linked in complex ways. The museum became a public institution. The great villas of the princely families—Farnese, Medici, Borghese, Ludovisi—were established as semi-private museums, drawing distinguished foreign visitors and issuing catalogues.<sup>3</sup> The Capitoline was the first true public museum. Museums were an important part of the Roman visit. Goethe describes nighttime excursions to the Capitoline and the Museo Pio-Clementino, to view the sculptures by the light of wax torches.<sup>4</sup> Established during the papacies of Clement XIV and Pius VI in the second half of the eighteenth century, the Pio-Clementino signaled the Church’s renewed willingness to assume trusteeship of the pagan past. That the antique assumed a central role in this art historical campaign is made painfully clear by the fact that the architects of the new museum were willing to destroy a chapel frescoed by Mantegna that lay in their path.

The art history professional appears in the person of Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–68), who served as Commissioner of Antiquities for Rome and worked as librarian for the great collector Cardinal Albani. Winckelmann’s *History of Ancient Art* set a paradigm that celebrated Greek art as a model; ironically, he knew Greek sculpture mostly through Roman copies. Even with this caveat, it is difficult to see how Winckelmann could have conceived his groundbreaking study anywhere else. Unlike Greece (then torn by warfare), Rome had never lost touch with its own past. Winckelmann based his theories of art history on the works he lived with as a citizen of Rome. Leonard Barkan remarks that “the rediscovery of ancient sculpture is not only the place where a canon is being formed, it is also a place where canonicity itself is receiving some of its crucial modern definitions.”<sup>5</sup>

During the course of the eighteenth century, Rome seemed at cross-purposes in handling its heritage, anxious both to market antiquity and to defend the cultural patrimony.





Giovanni Paolo Panini, *Interior of an Imaginary Picture Gallery with Views of Ancient Rome*, 1756–57  
Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, Germany

Archaeology, originally compromised by the antiquities trade, only gradually evolved into a science and a strategy for preservation. “The space of Rome,” Barkan writes, “is both real and symbolic; the past is both an idea and a buried physical reality.”<sup>6</sup> In the eighteenth century more and more of that past—including Hadrian’s Villa, the Appian Way, and the Arch of Constantine—was coming to the surface. In 1802 Pius VII issued an edict banning the export of art objects and establishing a budget for museums and archaeology. The crisis that awakened Romans to the precariousness of their cultural patrimony was Napoleon’s legalized pillaging in 1799 of canonical works of antique sculpture. The Apollo Belvedere, the Laocoön, and the Spinario, among others, were carted off to Paris. They would not be returned until 1815, as part of the Treaty of Vienna, in a deal negotiated by Antonio Canova (1757–1822).

This complex century was the subject of a huge summer exhibition, “The Splendor of 18th-Century Rome,” at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. With 442 works by 160 artists, the show felt unwieldy. The choice of the word *splendor* seemed deliberate. The aesthetic merit of the works was decidedly uneven, and the whole enterprise would benefit from judicious pruning, but the extravagance of the objects was not in question. The entrance foyer featured one of the icons of Roman tourism, Giovanni Paolo Panini’s (1691–1765) *Interior of the Pantheon* (1734). A fashionable crowd socializes under the sublime dome, while a few kneeling figures remind us that this wonder of Roman antiquity is also a Christian church. Blue sky and airy clouds are glimpsed through the oculus, and the piazza is visible through the columns of the portico outside. Flanking this evocative image were an elaborate presentation case and the object it contained: a two-foot-high silver, silver-gilt and lapis lazuli inkstand depicting the piazza of the Quirinal Palace, complete with Egyptian obelisk and heroic figures reining their horses. Created in 1792 as a gift for Pius VI, by Vincenzo Coaci (1756–94),



this emblem of conspicuous consumption is a jaw-dropper.

It also illustrates the complexities of settecento art. Late Baroque, Rococo (sometimes called *barocchetto*), Neoclassical and Romantic styles co-exist and overlap. The Quirinal inkstand is dated six years *after* Jacques-Louis David's (1741–1807) austere masterpiece *The Oath of the Horatii* (1786). The four curators—Joseph R. Rishel, Ann Percy, Dean Walker (all of Philadelphia) and Edgar Peters Bowron (of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston)—are enthusiastic about Rome as a creative center in the eighteenth century. Certainly, the city is a cultural crossroads, with a heady mix of international characters. Still, too much of the art displayed was mediocre.

Roman painting was in decline, and religious art seems particularly enervated, as seen in rooms of marzipan Virgins and bland Christs. Marco Benefial's *Vision of St. Catherine Fieschi Adorno of Genoa* (1737) has at least the merit of surrealism. As the fashionably dressed young saint kneels on a cushion, Christ—accompanied by putti—drags his cross over her parlor floor, blood splashing from his wounds. The incongruity is symptomatic of a breakdown, conceptual as much as technical, a failure to integrate earthly and celestial dimensions in a single convincing space, a feat pulled off by religious painters from Van Eyck to Caravaggio. The best religious-subject painting in "Splendor" was by the Frenchman David, who was a student in Rome from 1775 to 1780, and who returned there to finish his *Horatii*. David's *Saint Roch Interceding with the Virgin for the Victims of the Plague* (1780) shows classical influence in the muscular severity of the bodies of the fallen, while the Virgin and Child, who face each other in profile, look like images from an antique cameo.

The great Italian painters were in Venice, Antonio Canaletto (1697–1768) and Giambattista Tiepolo (1696–1770). The best Italian artists in this exhibition, Canova and Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–78), were both Venetians. The most enjoyable Roman paintings belonged to Panini, like the greater master Canaletto, a canny maker of *vedute*. Panini's accomplished travelogue views were featured throughout the exhibition. Typical was a 1741 panorama of the Piazza del Popolo, which captures the play of light on the domes of the twin Baroque churches, Santa Maria in Montesanto and Santa Maria dei Miracoli, that flank the Corso.

The display of Panini in "Splendor" culminated in a pair of marvelous visual Baedekers: *Interior of an Imaginary Picture Gallery with Views of Ancient Rome* (1756–57), now in the Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, and *Interior of an Imaginary Picture Gallery with Views of Modern Rome* (1757), in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. In a city where the topographical-historical continuum is difficult to break into neat categories, he suggests that the principal attractions are ancient sites and recent architectural additions. (The stunning survivals of medieval Rome would have to wait until the nineteenth century for its admirers to make themselves heard.) Framed depictions of Roman buildings, very much like Panini's own paintings, are piled high in the lofty spaces of a gallery. The setting is significant, functioning simultaneously as museum and showroom. Connoisseurs browse among fragments, drawings, and books, surrounded by paintings and a few sculptures. *Ancient Rome* includes the Arch of Constantine, the Arch of Titus, the Pantheon and the Coliseum, along with the Laocoön, the Dying Gaul, and the Farnese Hercules. In *Modern Rome*, the Campidoglio and St. Peter's are featured, with Michelangelo's *Moses* and Bernini's *David* and *Daphne and Apollo*. Concentrating scattered monuments in a single room, Panini presents a witty compendium of art history, reminding us that Rome itself is the greatest of museums. In one sense, these images are a commentary on the commodification of a city; in another, they represent the Rome of the

imagination that visitors carry with them in their memories.

What Panini cannot duplicate is the experience of the integrated spaces of Rome, a sense of the city as a fabric. Buildings are rarely seen in isolation: piazza, architecture, sculpture and landscaping come together, the *mise en scène* for the theater of everyday life. Architecture is the most difficult art to represent adequately in this kind of exhibition, but the problem is not insurmountable. I would have liked to see large color photographs of the eighteenth century's two indispensable contributions to the Roman cityscape: the Spanish Steps and the Trevi Fountain.

Designed by Francesco de Sanctis, the Spanish Steps (1723–36) is the most famous street staircase in the world. The 137 steps rise in three stages, an allusion to the church of Trinità dei Monte at the top, dramatically silhouetted against the sky. The view from the top is equally inviting; the piazza below includes Bernini's 1629 Fontana della Barcaccia and the fashionable shopping district of Via Condotti. In the eighteenth century Piazza di Spagna was known as “er ghetto de l'Inglese,” because all the Grand Tourists were given honorary British citizenship.<sup>7</sup> The Spanish Steps is still a triumph of town planning, a magnet for flower vendors, students, musicians and tourists.

The Roman Vitruvius invented urban planning and the rational street grid. Rome itself, however, is largely (with the exception of a few pernicious Fascist avenues) a hodgepodge of neighborhoods, a labyrinth of crooked streets opening onto sun-drenched piazzas. The element of surprise is particularly effective in the Piazza di Trevi. The fountain's sheer size, its dazzling white marble, the incongruity of scale in the shallow piazza—all make for a *coup de théâtre*. “Splendor” featured competitive designs for the project; Pope Clement XII made the right choice in Nicola Salvi. Begun in 1732 and not finished until 1762, the fountain integrates gushing water and sculpture against the façade of the Palazzo Conti, a Neoclassical backdrop based on the Arch of Constantine. Oceanus, or Neptune, sculpted by Pietro Bracci, working from a design by Giovanni Battista Maini, stands on a free-form shell, accompanied by conch-blowing Tritons and splashing winged horses. Figures in the flanking niches, carved by Filippo Della Valle, represent “Abundance” and “Health.” Salvi himself explained the meaning of the program, which “makes vivid the nutritive parts necessary for the production of forms and, mitigating the excessive heat that destroys it, can call itself the only perennial cause of their maintenance.”<sup>8</sup> The dynamic action of water is brilliantly realized as organically shaped rocks seem to erode before our eyes. Even John Ruskin, whose antipathy for the Baroque verges on the pathological, was enchanted. He wrote in his diary in 1840: “I got on the mimicked rocks, among the deep pools of this most noble fountain until I fancied myself among the gushing torrents of my own Cumberland—then to raise my head, and come gradually on...the white leafage of the Corinthian capitals above; it is one of the most surprising combinations and sudden changes of feeling I have yet found.”<sup>9</sup>

One of the most compelling artists of the eighteenth century is an architect manqué, Piranesi, whose one extant built project is the complex for the Knights of Malta on Rome's Aventine Hill. Piranesi's architectural world exists in his prints, which can be archaeological or fantastic. *Views of Rome* (1748–78), *Roman Antiquities* (1756) and *Imaginary Prisons* (1745–61) create a city of the imagination at once highly personal and instantly recognizable. Piranesi understood engineering; one plate from *Roman Antiquities* lovingly renders the hoisting devices employed by the ancient builders. His prints document the archaeological history of ruins. He shows the two Corinthian columns in the Forum of Nerva half-buried; they would not be fully excavated until 1930.

Despite his careful documentation of antiquities and the influence of his much-



reprinted *vedute*, Piranesi's most original works are fantasies. His *Imaginary Prisons* telescopes Baroque and Romantic styles. The perspective skills used to depict Roman monuments run amok in hallucinogenic interiors that foreshadow the vertiginous confusion of M. C. Escher. With his formidable credentials as a classicist, canny sense of the marketing possibilities of the Roman view, and shadowy proto-Romantic imagination, Piranesi is an emblematic figure for the restlessness underlying the pomp and worldliness of eighteenth-century Rome.

If Piranesi's antiquity exists in two dimensions and the feverish intricacies of line, the sculptor Antonio Canova remakes the ancient world in the coolest kind of figurative marble. The quintessential Neoclassicist, Canova has a lucidity that looked very inviting amidst the bombast that threatened to swamp this exhibition. The most breathtaking work of art shown was Canova's *Cupid and Psyche* (c.1800–02), which traveled from the Hermitage, St. Petersburg. Executed in marmoreal snow, *Cupid and Psyche* seems to breathe in an atmosphere of innocent eroticism. The circular, inward-turning movement of the figures reflects their narcissistic love. Cupid leans his head against Psyche's shoulder (she is slightly taller) and looks down at the delicately carved butterfly she places in his palm, an emblem of immortality. The story, written by Apuleius in 125 A.D., is half-allegory, half-fairy tale. The young Psyche is taken to a mysterious palace where she is visited under cover of darkness by a lover she fears is a monster. Like Eve, she breaks a taboo by showing too much curiosity and is cast out of her paradise. To win Cupid back, she undertakes a series of tasks, falls into a deadly sleep and is revived by Cupid, who carries her to Olympus. The narrative sequence—with its culminating celebration of Cupid and Psyche's wedding—is memorably depicted in the loggia of the Villa Farnesina in Trastevere, designed by Raphael (who painted one of the Graces) and executed by Giulio Romano, among others. Canova, however, focuses on the couple in an idyllic moment, young love apotheosized in marble. The way Psyche's drapery falls to reveal her exquisite back, the crisp articulation of the curls that lie along the nape of Cupid's neck, the translucence of the lovers' tapering fingers—are all memorable details of this luminous work.

Love of the antique is a constant in Rome. During the era of the Grand Tour, aristocratic visitors liked to have themselves portrayed with celebrated antiquities as props. Pompeo Batoni (1708–87) depicts *Count Kirill Grigorievitch Razumovsky* (1766) with an assemblage of ancient sculpture: the Belvedere Apollo and Antinous, the Lacoön, and the Vatican Ariadne. Neoclassicism signaled a new phase of the romance with the past, and it had a salutary effect. The surge of energy is palpable in *Thetis and Her Nymphs Rising from the Sea to Console Achilles* (1775–78, reworked 1805–06), a marble relief by Thomas Banks (1735–1805). Batoni's red chalk drawings after the antique, such as *The Endymion Relief* (c. 1730) are passionate, eclipsing his clever portraits and conventionally graceful allegories.

Neoclassicism is not an homogeneous style. As Robert Rosenblum points out, responses to the antique in the late eighteenth century included the “invigorating simplicity” of David's moral exempla and Canova's “icily voluptuous” myths.<sup>10</sup> A drawing by John Flaxman (1755–1826), the son of a dealer in plaster casts for Neoclassical décor, is pure linearity. Flaxman lived in Rome from 1787 to 1794, and the first editions of his illustrations to Homer and Dante were published there. In contrast to Flaxman's purity, the classicism of Henry Fuseli (1741–1825) is muscular and overwrought, as befits a devotee of Michelangelo. Fuseli studied in Italy from 1770 to 1778, specializing in the convulsive ideal of ancient art.<sup>11</sup> The two large ink-and-wash drawings in “Splendor”—

*Edgar, Feigning Madness, Approaches King Lear* and *The Thieves' Punishment* (from Dante)—demonstrate Fuseli's penchant for literary subjects and bravura distillations of antique pity and terror. Missing was one of Fuseli's greatest drawings, the emblem of Rome's influence, *The Artist Moved by the Grandeur of Ancient Ruins*, 1778–79 (Kunsthaus, Zurich). A lamenting figure sits before the colossal foot and hand of Constantine, overwhelmed by the sheer immensity of the past. Once part of a forty-foot statue that stood in a basilica outside the Forum, the fragments were given to the Palazzo dei Conservatori in the Campidoglio by Pope Sixtus IV in 1471. Today wedding couples continue the tradition of posing in front of them, and they are poignantly featured in Peter Greenaway's film meditation on artistic purity and physical mortality, *The Belly of the Architect* (1987).

Rome was a formative influence on artists through the idea and physical remains of antiquity, of course, but Roman nature was almost equally prized. Poussin (1594–1665) and Claude (1600–82) were both French-born, but they lived, died and conceived their poetic visions of nature in Rome. Thomas Cole, the founder of the American Hudson River School, lived in Claude's house on the edge of Campagna during his Roman sojourn. Beyond the large-scale landscape, every artist who visited Rome seems to have been obsessed with sketching, trying to capture the effect of ruins overgrown with foliage and the transparency of the light. "Splendor" included a few drawings by Robert Hubert (1733–1808), known as "Robert des Ruines," who specialized in charming vignettes of overgrown monuments. Hubert often sketched in the gardens of the Villa d'Este, Tivoli, alongside Jean Honoré Fragonard (1732–1806), who was a boarder at the French Academy in Rome from 1756 to 1761 and returned in 1773–74. Fragonard's red chalk nature studies have a relaxed virtuosity and feeling for nature that seem proto-Romantic, in contrast to the Rococo fantasy of his subject pictures. It is a sign of the complexity of this period that artists and styles overlap so promiscuously. During Fragonard's second trip to Rome, Fuseli was there, working on his stormy subjects from Shakespeare, and David was arriving, with a Prix de Rome, to begin a six-year term. (It is hard to imagine David and Fragonard as compatible stylistically, but in the Revolutionary period David nominated Fragonard for a position as museum curator.)

The love of nature is a pervasive



Antonio Canova, *Cupid and Psyche*, 1800–02  
The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg



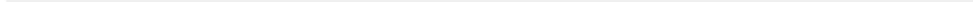
theme with visitors to Rome. In 1797 a French art critic recommended Rome to art students specifically for the scenery: “the banks of the Tiber, the hills of the city, the shape of its walls, the piling up of its immense ruins, the admirable variety of its gardens which bring the countryside inside the city walls, all will furnish the painter with motifs to study.”<sup>12</sup> With its pines and cypresses, green even in winter, its lemon and orange trees, Rome can seem Arcadian even today. All through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, coteries of international artists were making plein-air oil sketches in and around Rome, focusing not on the *vedute* favored by tourists but on skylscapes and odd corners of ruins half-buried in vegetation. Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes (1750–1819), whose sky studies suggest Constable, was represented in “Splendor” by an oil sketch of mist over the Alban hills, and there was a limpid watercolor *View of Rome* (c. 1780) by Jakob Philipp Hackert (1737–1807), whose landscapes were admired by Goethe. By the eighteenth century Rome’s major art works and monuments had already become familiar through reproduction, as Goethe makes clear when he recalls growing up with prints of Roman scenes. Yet copying remained a vital activity, for dilettante, scholar and professional artist alike. While scholars and archaeologists made drawings as records, artists could glean motifs, learn techniques and creatively interpret the older artists they admired. Drawings after antique sculpture predominate. The American Benjamin West (1738–1820) lived in Rome from 1760 to 1763. Around 1788, he advised a pupil on what to copy, prescribing a diet of the antique, Michelangelo and Raphael.<sup>13</sup> Not everyone followed this classicist regimen. Fragonard had success with a series of engravings, published as *Fragments choisis dans les Peintures et les Tableaux des Palais et des Eglises de l’Italie* (1770 on), which included plates after Poussin, Ludovico Carracci, Guido Reni, and, more surprisingly, Caravaggio and Ribera.

“The Splendor of 18th-Century Rome” was a huge and problematic exhibition. A century is an artificial construct, as the welter of styles in eighteenth-century Rome demonstrates. Still, this event was an opportunity to consider the process by which a great city becomes a living museum. Rome is the Eternal City, not because it is atemporal but because its various historical avatars continue to overlap in perennially stimulating ways. Rome remains inexhaustible, both as an idea and a living city, inspiring, seductive and rife with contradictions. The complex historical and art historical background of the exhibition is explored in a 628-page companion book, *Art in Rome in the Eighteenth Century*. Edited by Edgar Peters Bowron and Joseph J. Rishel, the book includes a catalogue with 500 illustrations, 200 in color, a chronology, brief biographies of key figures, and essays by various scholars. While some of this material will appeal largely to specialists (there is a limit to most people’s appetite for *barocchetto* ecclesiastical décor), Malcolm Campbell’s brief essay on printmaking is fascinating. Campbell shows how Piranesi’s complete control of every step of the process raised printmaking to the status of a fine art. *Art in Rome* is published by The Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with Merrell Publishers, London, and sells for \$95.00 (hardback) and \$70.00 (paper).

#### Notes

1. Nov. 7, 1786, *Italian Journey*, translated by Robert R. Heithner, edited by Thomas P. Saine and Jeffrey L. Sammons (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 104.
2. *Ibid.*, Nov. 1, 1786, p. 104.
3. Francis Haskell & Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture 1500–1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 28.
4. *Italian Journey*, pp. 352–3.

(notes continued on page 34)



(continued from page 26)

**City as Museum: Rome in the Eighteenth Century**

---

5. Leonard Barkan, *Unearthing the Past: Archeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 3.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
7. Georgina Masson, *The Companion Guide to Rome*, revised by Tim Jepson (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Companion Guides, 1998), p. 169.
8. Marco Bussagli, *Rome: Art and Architecture* (Cologne: Könemann, 1999), p. 603.
9. Cited, John Varriano, *A Literary Companion to Rome* (New York: St. Martin's, 1991), p. 147.
10. Robert Rosenblum, *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 9, p. 10.
11. Egbert Haverkamp-Beremann, with Carolyn Logan, *Creative Copies: Interpretative Drawings from Michelangelo to Picasso* (New York: The Drawing Center, 1988), p. 165.
12. Antoine-Laurent Castellan, cited, Philip Conisbee, Sarah Faunce, Jeremy Strick, with Peter Galassi, *In the Light of Italy: Corot and Early Open-Air Painting* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art; Yale University Press, 1996), p. 56.
13. *Creative Copies*, p. 163.