

# Living with the Past

ARTISTS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ROME

by *Gail Leggio*

Rome is the Eternal City, but it is not atemporal. Instead of a single time period preserved in amber, we find ever-shifting layers of history and meaning. When we speak of antiquity, are we thinking of the Republic or the Augustan Age or imperial decadence or late antiquity shading into early Christianity? Medieval Rome survives in splendid pockets, sometimes overlooked among the ambitious monuments of the Renaissance and the Baroque. Without the eighteenth century we would not have the Fontana di Trevi or the graphic monument of Piranesi's engravings. The Grand Tour made an industry of international travel. The Romantic poets and painters fed on the city and gave us indelible memories, even though we cannot duplicate their experience. Archaeologists have uncovered wonders, although sometimes at a cost to the vital jumble of



*The Portico of the  
Palazzetto of Pius IV*  
1860–65,  
by A. De Bonis  
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*Lion Fountains at the  
Base of the Capitoline  
Ramp, 1855–60*  
by A. De Bonis

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the urban fabric. The parts have been reconfigured in many ways over the centuries, and every era has its partisans. As the scholar of myths Wendy Doniger points out, the element of creative speculation cannot be erased from the historical record: “Surely history is one of the most important things for us to imagine and to realize we are imagining.”<sup>1</sup> A new book on the Forum and recent painting and photography exhibitions focus on the inexhaustible variety of Rome’s overlapping incarnations. Together, they throw into relief the interplay between the idea of Rome and the reality of the city.

David Watkin’s *The Roman Forum* (Harvard University Press, 2009) traces the physical history of that crucial locus for Western culture, paying special attention to patterns of neglect, rediscovery, exploitation and conservation over the centuries. He presents vivid pictures of the Forum at different phases of its history. The book is crammed with fascinating details about familiar monuments that were half-buried for long periods, like the Arch of Septimius Severus, seen in several views from Giovanni Battista Piranesi’s *Vedute di Roma* (c. 1748–78). Piranesi is one of Watkin’s heroes, and it is easy to see why. As an architect, he built almost nothing, but he captured in his remarkable engravings the look of the city in the mid-eighteenth century, documented classical details and created in his *Carceri* (1740s) a vision of architecture that turns Roman building prowess, in its darker manifestations, into a haunting psychological space. Watkin also parses the history of monuments that are, in part, modern reconstructions, like the Arch of Titus, shown in Piranesi’s *Vedute* as a picturesque ruin, wrapped in vegetation and buttressed by private houses. The architects Robert Stern and Giuseppe Valadier cleared away the encrustations and then rebuilt much of what was missing, using travertine instead of the original marble, around 1819–22. The Temple of Vesta was reconstructed in 1933, incorporating fragments from its 200 A.D. version.





*Narni, Arched Stairway  
in Courtyard, 1860–65*  
by Vincenzo Carlo  
Domenico Baldassarre  
Simelli (attributed)  
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The general messiness of the Forum, which well into the nineteenth century was called the Campo Vaccino because it served as a pasture for cattle and sheep, has disappointed many visitors over the last 2,000 years. But the gaps in what could be seen left room for the exercise of imagination. Watkin quotes Palladio, one of the great re-inventors of the classical architectural idiom: “The Forum offers the pilgrim not the spectacle of ancient glory but rather the possibility of re-creating it.”<sup>2</sup> What was missing was as much, perhaps more of a spur to the imagination as what remained. What remains of ancient Rome is always in flux, however, and the negotiations between past and present, the antique and the modern continue to this day. The Renaissance began with heightened awareness of those negotiations, with treasures such as the *Laocoön* (c. 50 B.C.) emerging from the debris of Nero’s Domus Aurea. Leonard Barkan explores the Renaissance epiphany that “the space of Rome is both real and symbolic; the past is both an idea and a buried physical reality,”<sup>3</sup> in his book titled *Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture*. The process of digging up Rome’s physical remains accelerated in the nineteenth century, and Watkin—an opinionated cicerone—laments the modern hegemony of the archaeologists.

It is possible to take a more sanguine view, especially if you spend time with the glorious sculpture and mosaic pavements that have been, over the last few decades, inventively installed in a variety of spaces, from the Renaissance Palazzo Altemps to the Centrale Montemartini, an art deco power plant. But Watkin makes good points about the mixed motives and effects of the archaeological campaigns of Napoleon and the popes, in the early 1800s, and the “stratigraphic excavation” at the end of the century, where much was lost because of a “dislike of all post-antique additions to the Forum, notably the

churches.”<sup>4</sup> He speaks eloquently about how churches complement—and often physically incorporate—ancient remains. Watkin is particularly fond of Baroque churches, while I prefer the medieval basilicas, like Santa Maria in Trastevere, that feature columns, *spolia*, from ancient buildings. But the principle still holds: aesthetically and historically, churches and ruins are often densely woven into the fabric of the city. In recognition of this continuity, many churches have opened their foundations to visitors, revealing early Christian chapels, Mithraic altars and ancient Roman houses. San Clemente, San Crisogono and Santi Giovanni e Paolo are of particular interest. Subterranean Rome is an evocative place, vividly reminding the visitor of the literal reality behind the phrase “layers of history.”

Watkin’s attitude makes him particularly sensitive to the responses of nineteenth-century visitors, who saw some of the most radical transformations firsthand. Sites that had long been appreciated for their “picturesque if melancholy atmosphere” were laid bare. In 1896, Émile Zola described the excavated Forum as “a long, clean, livid trench” where piles of marble remains appear “like bits of bone.”<sup>5</sup> The nineteenth-century Americans who flocked to Rome knew the city in its Romantic incarnation and were witnesses to change, as well as connoisseurs of its pictorial possibilities and philosophers of the cultural heritage. Two recent exhibitions gave us a glimpse into their experience. “America’s Rome: Artists in the Eternal City, 1800–1900,” at the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, New York (May 23–December 31, 2009), presented a hundred paintings, building on William L. Vance’s splendid two-volume study *America’s Rome*.<sup>6</sup> “Steps Off the Beaten Path: Nineteenth-Century Photographs of Rome and Its Environs,” at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, in



Thomas Cole, *Interior of the Colosseum*, 1832

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Williamstown, Massachusetts (October 11, 2009–January 3, 2010), offered insights into the everyday visual material that shaped the responses of visitors.

Vance documents the ambivalence of American travelers, who saw in Roman history both the roots of their own republican government—with a concomitant taste for classical architecture as the appropriate idiom for government buildings—and a cautionary tale about the dangers of decadence. Hudson River School founder Thomas Cole used a fantastic reimagining of an overbuilt marble-palace Rome as the centerpiece of his allegorical series *The Course of Empire*. The state of the Forum, once the beating heart of the empire, left plenty of scope for invention. Nathaniel Hawthorne's friend George Stillman Hillard described it, in 1853, as “a desolation which is not beautiful, a ruin which is not picturesque.”<sup>7</sup> If the Forum appealed to Cole the moralist, the Colosseum sparked his enthusiasm as a painter. In an 1832 notebook entry, Cole writes of the Colosseum: “It is stupendous, yet beautiful in its destruction. . . . It looks more like a work of nature than of man; for the regularity of art is lost, in a great measure, in dilapidation, and the luxuriant herbage, clinging to its ruins as if to ‘mouth its distress,’ completes the illusion.”<sup>8</sup> In Cole's painting *Interior of the Colosseum* (1832), the building indeed seems like the principal feature of a landscape. There is a sense of gentle enclosure within the curved walls, softened with richly textured foliage, open to the sky and shaped by the play of light and shadow. Cole, like painters before and after him, had fallen in love with Italian light and used the ruins as picturesque elements in landscape compositions. In 1797, a French painter rhapsodized about Rome not as a collection of famous sites but as a cornucopia of pictorial opportunities: “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. . . . There is not an out-of-the-way street, not an empty ground that does not provide the occasion to exercise his brushes.”<sup>9</sup>

This is the sensibility that underlies “Steps Off the Beaten Path.” By 1860, W. Bruce Lundberg writes in the catalogue: “photography in Rome was ripe for change. The pictorial *vedute* tradition was coming to an end. Photographers, responding to the camera's objectivity, began to focus on the understructure, on fragments, on the juxtaposition of historical layers, in short, on all that existed in between the oft-photographed ruins and basilicas.”<sup>10</sup> The photographs in the exhibition, taken between 1858 and 1873, document the look of the city just prior to the radical changes wrought when Rome became the capital of a unified Italy in 1870, when streets were widened to accommodate new urban design schemes and archaeologists stripped the Colosseum of its vegetation. The names of the photographers—Vincenzo Carlo Domenico Baldassare Simelli (1811–77), Gustave Eugène Chauffourier (1845–1919), Edmond Lebel (1834–1908) and De Bonis (known only by the stamp on the back of numerous images)—are obscure, but the photographs are important

documents and, often, handsome formal compositions. *Interior of the Colosseum*, an 1860–65 photograph stamped A. De Bonis, focuses on an elegant arrangement of arches, leading back into one of the arena's annular corridors. Cole showed the full sweep of the monument-as-landscape. This more architectural photograph reveals construction details, yet the roots and vines and sibylline shadows suggest a mysterious place.

Many of the photographs document now-lost Roman street life. *The Theater of Marcellus* (1865–75), by Chauffourier, shows tradespeople and their wares around the theater, built in the first century B.C. and used as apartments by prominent families in the middle ages. The shops disappeared when the lower arches, long buried in twelve feet of debris, were cleared in 1926–32. *The Porticus of Octavia* (A. De Bonis, 1855–60) is a formally striking image. The ancient temple complex—erected in 146 B.C., reconstructed by Augustus in honor of his sister c. 23 B.C. and reworked again in 203 A.D. by Septimius Severus—had been used as a fish market since the twelfth century. Excavation has recently uncovered bits of the temples, which have a spare beauty. The De Bonis print shows a still-medieval-looking narrow street, framed dramatically by an arch, with tattered banners of laundry making wonderful patterns of light and shade. Roman grubbiness had its charms. In his *Transatlantic Sketches* (1875), Henry James wrote: “if cleanliness is next to godliness, it is a very distant neighbor to chiaroscuro....as I walk about the streets and glance under black archways into dim old courts and up mouldering palace façades at the colored rags that flap over the twisted balustrades of balconies, I find I very much enjoy their ‘tone.’”<sup>11</sup> The photographs also record pre-restoration architecture. *S. Maria in Cosmedin* (De Bonis, 1860–65) shows the curvy eighteenth-century façade that was removed in 1894–99 to reveal the medieval church. The area is the site of the Forum Boarium, the ancient Roman cattle market, and has two small temples. De Bonis includes in his shot the round Temple of Hercules Victor (long called the Temple of Vesta). Placed on the right, in velvety shadow, the temple functions like a Claudian coulisse, establishing an inviting pictorial space.

The turn-of-the-century writer Vernon Lee observed, in her 1905 book *The Enchanted Woods*, that “the journeys richest in pleasant memories are those undertaken accidentally...that the most interesting places are those which we stray into, or just deflect towards....”<sup>12</sup> The nineteenth-century experience of great cities such as Rome included a good deal of serendipitous wandering, and out-of-the-tourist-way corners were a part of artists’ and writers’ daily lives. “Steps Off the Beaten Path” captures these epiphanies. *Architectural Fragments near Monte Testaccio* (Simelli, 1855–60) feels like the viewer has happened upon the picturesque detritus of antiquity in a pile of fluted column segments and a Corinthian capital, softly weathered shapes with great aesthetic appeal. Out-of-focus brick arches in the background add another idiomatic Roman note to the scruffy yet evocative patch of ground. *The Portico of the Palazzetto of Pius IV*



(De Bonis, 1860–65) is clearly seen with an artist's eye. The barrel-vaulted portico with elegant pilasters has been repurposed as a domestic catchall space, with a jumble of old bricks and wagon wheels and an animals' watering trough. Sunlight and shadow shape the space. The half-arch-framed view of the bright, open yard beyond works beautifully against the deep shadow of the left-hand wall. As much as the city has changed since these photographs were taken, it is still a place where a walk leads to such glimpses—through arches and gates, around corners—into the past, not as a tidy time capsule but as an integral part of present experience.

Photographers found visual opportunities both in the recognizable parts of the city and in villages in the countryside. *Lion Fountains at the Base of the Capitoline Ramp* (1855–60), by A. De Bonis, shows the familiar black granite lions at the foot of Michelangelo's Campidoglio, silhouetted against the sunlit Aracoeli steps. *Narni, Arched Stairway in Courtyard* (1860–65), attributed to Simelli, is a striking composition based on the chiaroscuro of a deteriorating, rough masonry house—modest, anonymous yet every bit as evocative as the famous bit of Roman street furniture.

One important aspect of the Roman experience enjoyed by earlier travelers, however, is largely out of reach today. The Roman Campagna, which figured in an incommensurable way in the evolution of landscape painting from Claude well into the nineteenth century, is lost to highways and suburbs. The glories of the Campagna were highlighted in the Fenimore Museum exhibition. American painters of the nineteenth century understood that their own New World landscape helped define them as a people, and they found in the Roman countryside the favorite haunts of the masters that preceded them and a host of meanings. Vance sums up the American response as “two conflicting visions. One is melancholy and moralistic, the other pastoral and transcendent.”<sup>13</sup> Often, the same sites provoked different responses. The broken spine of the Claudian aqueduct inspired a number of striking compositions. In Cole's *Roman Campagna* (1843), the aqueduct cuts diagonally across the picture plane, looming large in the foreground and stretching far into the distance, in a bold perspective line that seems to anticipate the surreal classicism of Giorgio de Chirico. George Inness's 1858 *Roman Campagna* regards the aqueduct from a more contemplative distance. The skeletal section of the structure is moved to the right side and pushed further back, holding it beneath the topline of the distant mountain. The fragment on the left is wrapped in picturesque vegetation and graced by a pine tree that rises, above everything else in the picture, into a clear sky. Cole's shadows are sharp and menacing; Inness's look cool and inviting. Cole's painting evokes Shelley's “Ozymandias”: “Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair.” Inness's painting reflects his own kind of pastoralism, not the luxuriant idylls of Claude but a more subjective spirituality. Inness, a Swedenborgian, seemed less interested in antique remnants than in the interplay between dark pine trees and burnished light, as in *Convent at Frascati* (1856)

and *The Monk* (1873), which uses the Villa Barberini, near Castel Gandolfo, the pope's summer residence, fifteen miles south of Rome, as a setting.<sup>14</sup>

Nineteenth-century visitors to the Campagna found a great deal of sun-baked desolation, but there remained bits of arcadia, preserved at Frascati, Albano, Lake Nemi and Tivoli. Cole's *The Cascatelli, Tivoli, Looking Towards Rome* (c. 1832), with its scenic waterfalls and picturesque peasant staffage, combines natural beauty and old-fashioned quaintness. Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli, the largest and richest of the imperial villas, in a splendid park, continues to hold visitors spellbound after centuries of inspiring artists. The opera director Jean-Pierre Ponnelle filmed his 1980 production of Mozart's *La Clemenza di Tito* at the Villa Adriani in Tivoli, as well as at the Arch of Titus and the Baths of Caracalla.<sup>15</sup> Ponnelle used eighteenth-century costumes for Mozart's story of intrigue in ancient Rome, and the layers of historical imagination testify to the richness of the tradition. The idea of Rome is powerful, but the reality of the city perennially challenges preconceptions. That theme runs through a host of books, including Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* and several works by Henry James, and surfaces in Peter Greenaway's film *Belly of an Architect* (1987). The protagonist of the film is an American architect who comes to Rome to curate an exhibition on the work of the austere visionary Étienne-Louis Boullée (1728–99), the disciple of a pure, impossible classicism. The American's plans are undone by the Romans' easy-going corruption, and yet he plays out his own downfall on a splendid stage that includes the Pantheon and the courtyard of the Capitoline Museum. The cultural heritage of Rome will continue to cast a long shadow, but that heritage is continually being re-invented, and the best of the re-inventions grow out of direct encounters with the living, contradictory and endlessly seductive city. The Fenimore Art Museum, 5798 State Highway 80, Lake Road, Cooperstown, New York 13326. Telephone (607) 547-1400. On the web at [www.fenimoreartmuseum.org](http://www.fenimoreartmuseum.org). Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 225 South Street, Williamstown, Massachusetts 01267. Telephone (413) 458-2303. On the web at [www.clarkart.edu](http://www.clarkart.edu)

#### NOTES

1. Cited in David Shulman, "A Passion for Hindu Myths," review of Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, in *New York Review of Books* (November 19, 2009), pp. 51–53. Shulman describes "the Doniger principle as incorporating a commitment to factuality and as assuming a clear-cut distinction between fiction and fact...—but...you have to make room for the truly effectual, pragmatic, often transformative role of myth in any historical situation and in any vision of historical patterns." That principle applies to the many incarnations of Rome.
2. David Watkin, *The Roman Forum* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 147–48.
3. Leonard Barkan, *Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 25.
4. Watkin, p. 202.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 169, 155.
6. William L. Vance, *America's Rome* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989).



7. Vance, *America's Rome*, Volume I: Classical Rome, p. 5.
8. Ibid., pp. 145–46.
9. Antoine-Laurent Castellan, cited in “Rome and Its Environs: Painters, Travelers and Sites,” *In the Light of Italy: Corot and Early Open-Air Painting* (National Gallery of Art; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 56.
10. *Steps Off the Beaten Path: Nineteenth-Century Photographs of Rome and Its Environs*, ed., W. Bruce Lundberg and John A. Pinto (Milano: Edizioni Charta, 2007), p. 10.
11. Cited, John Varriano, *A Literary Companion to Rome* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1991), p. 71.
12. Vernon Lee, *The Enchanted Woods and Other Essays on the Genius of Places* (London and New York: John Lane, 1905; reprint Elibron Classics, 2005), p. 8.
13. Vance, Volume I, p. 70.
14. See Adrienne Baxter Bell, *George Inness and the Visionary Landscape* (New York: National Academy Museum and George Braziller, Publishers, 2003).
15. Available on DVD from Deutsche Grammophon.

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