To Each His Own Rome

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A fascinating voyage through many different Romes, from early pagan Rome, where the presence of Antiquity is palpable on every corner; to Catholic Rome, which appropriated the pagan monuments for its own use; and finally to Renaissance and Baroque Rome, the city of Michelangelo, Raphael, Bernini and Caravaggio. Along his captivating tour he encourages us to jettison the timeless stereotype of the “Eternal City,” in favor of a Rome “in which we can recognize our century.”

Reverse the letters that spell ROMA and you get AMOR. Rome is the city of love. You cannot not love a city that displays its ideal so brightly. And even if 2016 will be a Jubilee Year— unespectedly called by Pope Francis ten years in advance of its traditional occurrence (the last was in 2000 and Jubilees normally occurr at 25-year intervals)—here I leave out those believers, devout pilgrims, who travel to Rome motivated by religion, faith, the “sacred love” of God. I stick to the secular reasons that each person may have to dive back into a city that offers so many subjects to relish.

Once upon a time

Once upon a time, when Europe read and studied Latin, the main attraction was the presence of Antiquity, palpable on every street corner. It is indeed a peculiarity of this city, as the ruins are incorporated into the very fabric of modern urban life. Certainly there are places that are specifically “ancient,” and as such are enclosed by fences: primarily the Forum, the political center of the Urbs during the reign of Virgil, Cicero, Caesar, Augustus; the Forum, with its temples, basilicas, triumphal arches, porticos, the small round temple of the Vestal Virgins, and many other ruins, sometimes simple columns left standing while the building collapsed, and so many other traces of this glorious past whose eloquence continues to touch us. But most of the vestiges in Rome are on the same level, so to speak, with everyday life. You don’t have to check the opening times or purchase a ticket; they are there at arm’s reach, collapsed or standing, ready to be regarded and admired.

Pagan and Catholic

You enter, for example, this rotunda-shaped church, to gather in front of Raphael’s tomb: In reality you are in the temple that Marcus Agrippa, general and advisor of Augustus, dedicated to planetary gods. The Pantheon was transformed into a church in the seventh century by Pope Boniface IV who named it “Saint Mary of the Martyrs.” Similarly, the so-called “Castel Sant’Angelo” along the Tiber is none other than the mausoleum built by Emperor Hadrian, which popes over the centuries turned into a citadel to serve as a fortified outpost of Saint Peter’s Basilica. There are countless ruses like this in Rome: the Catholic city appropriated the pagan monuments, so that the transition from one Rome to another, from one era to another, is seamless.

Here the Coliseum, there the Theatre of Marcellus, farther away the Baths of Caracalla: they are integrated into the modern city, like the Eiffel Tower in Paris. Via Appia’s silent majesty

And, if the mood strikes you to take the most romantic, most sentimental walk, the most dear to our hearts today, please don’t hesitate. Go to the Saint Sebastian doors, cut across the ramparts, and surrender yourself to the Via Appia, still paved in large uneven slabs where tanks once dug parallel ruts. The Via Appia was the road to Naples and is still lined with umbrella pines, stones, busts, and tombs, including the famous circular tomb of Cecilia Metella.

The melancholia of this plain, dotted with statues, sarcophagi and mausoleums, is unparalleled, with the remains of aqueducts that crisscross the plain in the distance. No one has better translated the poetry and beauty of the place than Chateaubriand in his famous Letter to M. de Fontanes. “Imagine something like the desolation of Tyre and Babylon, of which the Holy Scripture speaks; a silence and a solitude as vast as the noise and tumult of the men who once occupied the same soil (...) One barely meets with a tree; but everywhere are ruins of aqueducts and tombs—ruins that appear like a forest of native plants, the growth of an earth composed of the dust of the dead.” What other details could you add that wouldn’t be mere gravy? Let’s only point out, rather prosaically, that for several kilometers this route has been maintained in this state, that cars are forbidden, and that you can only travel by foot or bicycle so as not to disturb the silent majesty of these places.

Modern, Baroque Rome

Now that the study of Latin is no longer part of the traveler’s education, the expectation and the taste for it have changed. It remains sensitive to the ruin’s prestige, of course, but our époque, so distanced from this ancient serenity, is drawn first towards Baroque Rome, whose fantasy, overflowing, excesses and ornamental luxuriance immediately seduce him. No more solitude or silence here but rather expansion, convulsions, an uninterrupted din. The stone itself seems to twist and scream. Remember, the Baroque was born in Rome, initially as propaganda to fight against the reformed religions of Luther and Calvin, who called for bare, white and austere churches. The Catholic Church’s response was to do the opposite: images, more and more images that strike the imagination, an overabundance of saints, angels, cherubs, putti, deliberately made to reignite a passion for the religion preached by the Vatican. Soon, however, what had been conceived as a commercial art became an aesthetic choice, the pleasure of discovering novel ways of expression.

The world of Bernini and beyond

The rise of the Baroque as an original art form is above all credited to one man,Gian Lorenzo Bernini. He was an architect, sculptor, painter, set designer, and one-man band who filled the seventeenth

century with his creative vitality and gave Rome the face she wears today.

Of Bernini the sculptor one admires the marvelous statues housed in the Borghese Gallery: The Rape of Persephone, Apollo and Daphne, Aeneas and Anchise, David and the Slingshot, works that defy the rigidity of marble by impressing blocks of material with intoxicating movements. Bernini the architect built the Colonnade of Saint Peter, the vast semicircle of columns surrounding the square outside the Basilica, symbolizing the open arms with which the Holy Seat welcomes the faithful: Barberini Palace, built with stones torn from the Coliseum; and especially those fountains that are the glory of Rome: The Fountain of the Bees at the entrance of via Veneto; the Triton Fountain in Piazza Barberini, composed of four dolphins whose tails lift a conch shell from which a triton launches a powerful water jet; and of course, first and foremost, the famous Fountain of the Four Rivers in Piazza Navona. The latter epitomizes the Baroque grammar and spirit.

Blocks of rough-hewn rock associate nature with art; exotic plants and animals (palm, agave, crocodile, snake, American horse, lion, Indian tattoo) recall the universal vocation of the church; giant statues of the four biggest rivers in the world, one per continent—the Danube, the Nile, the Ganges and the Rio de la Plata—are there for the same reason and also represent a love of the colossal; the water that flows onto this tumult of shapes and transforms the mineral into a spectacle that changes from minute to minute displays the Baroque taste for movement, illusion and metamorphosis; finally, at the top, an Egyptian obelisk points like a finger toward the sky.

We find this finger in another, no less illustrious, part of Rome, dated the following century: the Spanish Steps. 137 steps, a real ascension for the pilgrims going up to the Trinità dei Monti church, in front of which Pope Pius VI, completing the program of spiritual elevation, erected an obelisk in 1789 that points the way forward to escape the fate of sinful humanity—a destiny represented at the bottom of the stairs by a fountain in the shape of a boat about to sink.

Caravaggio’s hell

Along with Bernini, the artist who has left the greatest mark on the Roman landscape (at least for us today), is the painter Caravaggio. No doubt we should hurry to the Vatican to see Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel and the Raphael rooms. But the Renaissance painters, isolated as they are in the formal perfection and distant nobility of their idealized characters, speak to us less than this wild, self-taught, innovative and prodigious inventor of “chiaroscuro” from Milan who burst onto the scene around 1590;

for searching the streets for his models, having prostitutes pose for the Virgin and thugs for his saints and angels; for painting them as they are, with their worn, sinister faces; and, more importantly, for his muddled manners, angry and ardent, prosecuted and imprisoned several times for fights, and finally suspected of murder, forced to flee Rome and take refuge in Naples, then Malta, then Sicily, hounded by the law until he washed up on a beach in Tuscany and abruptly died under mysterious circumstances, likely an assassination.

His violent life was much like Pasolini’s, and his work reflects the convulsions of a tortured soul. More than half of his paintings can be found in Rome: The Stories of Saint Matthew in San Luigi dei Francesi, The Martyrdom of St Peter and The Conversion of St Paul in Santa Maria del Popolo, and The Virgin of the Pilgrims in Sant’Agostino, where for the first time the fingernails of the peasants that came from afar to worship the Virgin are shown as blackened by the dirt roads.

Others are housed in the Capital, Vatican, Corsini and Barberini museums, where Judith Beheading Holofernes depicts the blood flowing from the large boils of a severed head, the first appearance of modern horror in art. Finally, at the Borghese Gallery, you can recognize Caravaggio’s own features in the severed head of Goliath, held at arm’s length by a beautiful and young David, as if the painter had had a premonition of his own death.

To each his/her own Rome. Here, I wanted to counter he cliché of the “Eternal City,” timeless and disdainful of human vicissitudes, with the Rome that moves, suffers, lives, gets its hands dirty, the

Rome in which we can recognize our century, bouncing from one crisis to another and resounding with tragedies.

Links
[1] http://test.casaitalianayu.org/files/trinitajpg