

2012

Letters from Rome: 'A Museum without Walls'

Philip Eliasoph

Fairfield University, pielasoph@fairfield.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/visualandperformingarts-facultypubs>

Archived with permission from the publisher: Venu Magazine - All Rights Reserved

<http://venumagazine.com>

Repository Citation

Eliasoph, Philip, "Letters from Rome: 'A Museum without Walls'" (2012). *Visual & Performing Arts Faculty Publications*. 24.

<https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/visualandperformingarts-facultypubs/24>

Published Citation

Eliasoph, Philip (2012). Letters from Rome: 'A Museum without Walls', VENU 12 March/April 2012, pp. 49-53.

This item has been accepted for inclusion in DigitalCommons@Fairfield by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It is brought to you by DigitalCommons@Fairfield with permission from the rights-holder(s) and is protected by copyright and/or related rights. **You are free to use this item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses, you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.** For more information, please contact digitalcommons@fairfield.edu.

CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

12

venü

March/April_CT-NY Edition \$5.99





Letter from rome: “A Museum Without Walls...”

BY PHILIP ELIASOPH, SENIOR ARTS EDITOR



Photo courtesy of: Ristorante Baccanale, Campo de Fiori, Rome

JUST WHAT FLIPS A COSMIC SWITCH in my imagination once the Alitalia jet lands in Rome is one of life's mysteries. Every time I slip inside the flickering luminescence of the Roman Pantheon, it seems to be déjà vu. This mighty antique vacuum of space – the greatest surviving domed vault of the Olympian heavens – always seems to bring one of the Grateful Dead's lyrics into the recesses of my hyper-scenographic mind.

"In the attic of my life, full of cloudy dreams unreal," they harmonized ever so sweetly on the 9th cut in that four-de-force vinyl of 1970, *American Beauty*. "In the secret space of dreams," Jerry's velvety whisper keeps whirling inside my skull "when the secrets all are told, and the petals all unfold."

That unfolding flower comes to mind spending a few relaxing days wandering aimlessly around Rome. This being my 50th trip to Rome, one would think I could begin to wrap my mind around it. Here I will resist quoting Latin scholars such as Livy, Ovid, or Plutarch to sing verses honoring Rome's perpetual insatiable. No. It's best to take Tony Soprano's elegant Jersey Shore advice: "*forgettaaabout-it!*"

With each visit, there's no getting use to it – Rome is beyond earthly comprehension. The more you see – the more you submit to its seductive powers. By now I am fully alert to an ongoing condition. With episodic regularity, I have been stricken with a psychological malaise first identified by the Frenchman named Marie-Henri Beyle – better known as Stendahl. First arriving in Italy in 1817, Stendahl experienced a medical amnesia. Literally overtaking tourists sending them out of their minds – every first aid clinic in Rome and Florence knows how to treat the delightful deliriousness of "Stendahl Syndrome."

Upon contemplation of such sublime artworks as Caravaggio's "Calling of Saint Matthew" in the Church of St. Louis of France, Gianlorenzo Bernini's ballet of the gushing "Fountain of the Four Rivers" or Gabriele Valvasso's "Gallery of Mirrors" – Rome's mini-Versailles in the private art gallery of the Genoese and Roman dynasties, within the inner sanctum of the Palazzo Doria Pamphili. (The family's ancestors did exceptionally well – including Pope Innocent X, who was also the King of Rome in the 17th century), Rome is not a string of galleries or monuments – it's hands down, unquestionably, the world's greatest "museum without walls."



The first dozen or so times as a pilgrim to the Eternal City, I felt the necessity to take instruction from a library shelf of professional guidebooks. Back in the early 1970s I started my career as a tour director escorting busloads of dollar rich, pre-Euro, Americans on itineraries between Lake Como and Capri, from Venice to Viareggio.

This creates a permanent jet-lag of soris. Often my mind is some where in a quattrocento chapel with Fra Angelico frescos while I am sitting on the Post Road sipping my "café macchiato". My office is stuffed with dog-eared copies of those snappy English Blue Guides, which introduced Anglophiles to Italy's wonders since 1918.

Over the next 30 or more trips to Rome, the obligatory walking itineraries became more burdensome and less surprising. Freed from the "must sees" I am liberated into an Italian insouciance. Instead of being over-programmed, we made it a point to simply roll out of bed and let a "*capriccioso*" serendipity blow us in whatever direction Zephyrus decides.

That wonderfully irresponsible sense of "*dolce far niente*" – the art of doing absolutely nothing is the order of the day. Returning back to suck an endless stream of milky formula, it's fun to engage in a delicious mixture of art, civilization, wine and culinary special-isms. With eyes and mouth agape "*valla Romana!*" – I am a latter day Romulus awaiting the artistic nourishment flowing from the teats of the legendary She Wolf.

Not only do "all roads lead to Rome" but the city is not really a geographical place or plane. It's more a phenomenon of layered civilizations. So let's start off by dropping into one little Google Earth grid for a ground level pedestrian experience. A good place to start is my favorite "*borgo*" – (neighborhood). Let's draw a trapezoid with four points of the compass lying across the truly antique core of the city. Try to limit yourself to very "do-able" day walks between the Trevi Fountain, the Am Peccis, the Jewish ghetto and central synagogue, and Capitoline Hill with its staggering view out in the eroding Forum Romanum.

Remember those Cinemascope "sword and sandal" Bible epics like Ben Hur, Cleopatra, Barabaz? Stand at the terrace looking out to the Arch of Tins and the Colosseum from the Capitoline Hill, designed by Michelangelo, and you'll understand why we say the world will continue as long as all of these monuments remain standing. And be assured, this is no tacky, Las Vegas Stryfoam hotel lobby. The marble here was pulled from its quarry about the time Jesus was about to give a sermon on a mount.

A critical first decision: what's an ideal hotel in the perfect location? Having stayed in almost every section of Rome's sprawling perimeter – inside the Aurelian walls – the epicenter has to be the Piazza Pantheon. Stay away from the train station districts with its roving bands of street thugs and pathetic beggars. And don't



plant yourself over by the Vatican. Makes sense to taxi over there for your pilgrimage to St. Peter's Basilica and that bric-a-brac treasure trove – about five times larger than the Metropolitan Museum – known as the Vatican Museum.

Antiquity caresses your face but boggles your mind under the Pantheon's majestic façade. You know it's ancient as the pavement actually sinks down below your feet. One understands the archaeological level of the city as the floor of this second century AD monument drops off like quick sand below the higher levels of the Baroque churches nearby.

Chalking up yet another "big zero" birthday and wedding anniversary, we abandoned all logic and decided to check in to the oldest hotel in Rome. The four star Albergo Del Sole al Pantheon [hotelsolealpantheon.com], opened its rooms in 1467. Right out of central casting, manager Sig.re Maurizio and movie star handsome concierge Sig.re Leonardo whooshed us up to one of Rome's most coveted rooms.

A cherubic bellhop opened the shutters in the Royal Suite – residence of the great opera composer Pietro Mascagni was a "pinch yourself" temporary home. With its hand-painted ceiling, terracotta floors, luxurious Frette linens, and antique furnishings (alas, the genius composer was a rather short fellow and this ex-footballer did not squeeze too well into his mini-19th century bed).

The breathtaking, bird's eye view right down in to Pantheon's never-ceasing circus of cafés, street musicians, and embracing lovers was an animated postcard. Difficult to pull away from the spectacle, we tumbled back out in the neighborhood to explore what we could find in no more than 20 minutes in each direction from the hotel. It would take a month to fully disclose all museums, churches, ancient ruins and wonders within easy reach.

We arrived a few days after the Feast of the Epiphany – when



official discounted sales begin in retail stores. A newly energized US dollar versus the crisis-driven Euro suddenly opened our eyes – and wallets – to leather boots, silk scarves, and designer goods all slashed at 50% off. It was like being at a big clearance sale at a local mall – but with products beyond one's reach in the windows of Bergdorf's or Barney's. Nothing is standardized. Every shop seemed to have its own 'hand-made' line.

January is a perfect time to visit Rome. We counted only a few random tour groups with bargain-driven Russians [with their new wealth they wear big furs, lots of big, gaudy designer monograms, but the women use excessive amounts of peroxide]. Then we encounter stern, rather somber Japanese who slip silently through the museums as if on a reconnaissance mission. I like their quiet elegance – and with their gorgeously reflective black hair the Japanese women are perfectly garbed in Burberry raincoats with low-key, but very expensive Bottega Veneta or Prada bags. Even with the pervasive, intense anti-American attitudes in the post-Iraq war era, we sensed a new sense of welcome as if our Italian friends were saying: "welcome back – we have missed you Yankees."

Here's just a sample of how we spent two full days "on the ground." As we were blessed with Primavera temperatures in the dead of winter, we quickly found lunch at the ever bustling Campo de' Fiori. This has been an outdoor fruit and vegetable market since the time when Nero decided he liked his "carcioff" fried in extra virgin olive oil – about 2,000 years. With the low angle of the winter sun tilting over the animated piazza filled with locals and tourists from around the globe, we spied a perfect table at Ristorante Baccanale.

For starters we sampled the "Prosciutto di Parma e bufala" – deliciously sliced so thin, we could almost see through its veins.



The all-important pasta course – the main event – was my favorite: "Bucatini all'Amatriciana" – a hefty dry noodle in a tomato, bacon, and onion sauce, truly to die for. My bride went for the typically Roman "Carbonara" which sent shivers up her spine – expertly cooked with ample salt and lusciously drizzled eggs, bacon, pepper and pecorino cheese.

Already sated, we poked a bit of tasty lamb – "Abbacchio alla romana" – followed by the typical "contorni" (side dishes) of perfectly dressed "insalata," "spinaci," and "cicoria" – mixed salad, spinach, and chicory. No need to drink the fat too thin and probably re-cycled "vino della casa" – we ordered a sturdy local "vino rosso"



from the nearby Roman countryside – which cost an eye opening \$9 for the bottle – almost the cost of a bottle of San Pellegrino at the latest pricey, Fairfield County pseudob-ristorante.

After lunch we scooted over to the snow white marble "Ara Pacis" – the Augustan Altar of Peace – commissioned by the Senate in 9 BC. Clad in its new sleek glass box, architect Richard Meier has updated the original Fascist era housing. Then turned around, strolling up the Via Condotti towards the Spanish Steps, we actually spotted an Italian TV show hostess stepping out of the almost mystical Armani store. Celebrating the 150th Anniversary of the founding of the Republic of Italy, the city was ablaze with Christmas/ New Year's lights which cost over \$1 million Euro in a red/white/green Italian flag inspired light show extravaganza.

The next morning we took a fascinating public tour of the central Synagogue along the Tiber River. Italian Jews – who are neither Ashkenazic or Sephardic – follow their own "Italian rituals" in special melodic incantations. A vibrant Jewish neighborhood – later "ghetto" – has existed in Rome since the second century BC; today they are woven into the fabric of the city's spirituality. Making this visit even more special was being joined by one of our dearest Jesuit colleagues from the Fairfield University community. He has recently been assigned a high-level diplomatic position for inter-faith dialogue at the "home office" of the Society of Jesus near the Vatican. We were all elevated in our hopes and prayers.

This mixing and blending – of ancient and new – of myriad traditions, faiths, is typical of Roman syncretism. If Jerusalem is considered the "navel of the world," or Paris is a feminine, seductive "wink," then Rome is its beating heart. Let's face it: New York gets the prize as the cash register.

Over intoxicated with infinite art and beauty – our beings saturated beyond decency, it was time to pull the plug. Finally, we boarded our flight back to JFK, exhausted, inspired and exhilarated after our Italian sojourn. Leaving a poetic epitaph on my gravestone, I will cherish this reality: "the purpose of living is to spend as much time in Italy as possible." □

