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Letters from Rome: 'A Museum without Walls'

Philip Eliasoph
Fairfield University, pieliasoph@fairfield.edu

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letter from rome:

“A Museum Without Walls...”

Photo courtesy of Ristorante Baccanale, Campo de’ Fiori, Rome
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 director escorting busloads of dollar rich, pre-Euro, Americans on itineraries between Lake Como and Capri, from Venice to Viareggio.

Over the next 30 or more trips to Rome, the obligatory walking Blue Guides, which introduced Anglophiles to Italy's wonders since 1918. My office is stuffed with dog-eared copies of those snappy English sure trove – about five times larger than the Metropolitan Museum – known as the Vatican Museum. Makes sense to taxi over there 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” Zephyrus decides. That wonderfully irresponsible sense of “dolce far niente” – the art of doing absolutely nothing is the order of the day. Returning 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 – I am a latter day Romulus awaiting the artistic nourishment flowing from the teats of the legendary She Wolf.

Upon contemplation of such sublime artworks as Caravaggio’s “Calling of Saint Matthew” in the Church of St. Louis of France, or Gabriele Valvasso’s “Gallery of Mirrors” – Rome’s mini-Versailles in the private art gallery of the Genovese and Roman Rivers 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, the breathtaking, bird’s eye view right down into Pantheon’s antica trapezoid with four points of the compass lying across the truly core of the city. Try to limit yourself to very “do-able” day walks between the Trevi Fountain, the Ara Pacis, the Jewish ghetto and central synagogue, and Capitoline Hill with its staggering vistas. The breathtaking, stark, uncluttered, pure beauty of Capitoline Hill, designed by Michelangelo, and you’ll understand why we say the world will continue as long as all of these monuments remain. The breathtaking, stark, uncluttered, pure beauty of every tour-de-force epics like Ben Hur, Cleopatra, Barrabas? Stand at the terrace look out to the Arch of Titus and the Colosseo 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.

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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 – exactly 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 far too thin and probably recycled “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 pseudo-ristorante.

After lunch we scooted over to the snow white marble “Ara Pacis” – the Augustean 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 nor 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 Jewish families from around the world consider the “Aricone” Synagogue along the Tiber River their spiritual home. Italian Jews wear their own distinct garb – men in black suits and caps, women in long black dresses. They are a cohesive community where families are usually very tightly knit. A vibrant Jewish community, the Synagogue is the heart of the Jewish community in Rome. The Synagogue is a beautiful, dignified building with a large open space, where young and old gather for prayer, study, and community events. It is a vital hub of Jewish life in Rome today.

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 chisel this reality: “the purpose of living is to spend as much time in Italy as possible.”