

Testata: Il Messaggero  
October 1962

**The Definitive Book  
by Milton Gendel**

In New York last spring the editor of the art magazine for which I write fell into an elegiac mood during a conversation we had one afternoon in his office. Perhaps my long absence from the city reminded him of the passage of time, for he spoke at length of opportunities missed and the importance of leaving landmarks of one's career. "Magazine writing has its value of course", he said. "but where are our works between hard covers?" A symbol of such higher pursuits was at hand, in the form of a huge volume, which he pushed across the desk to me. It was hard to lift, weighing perhaps twenty pounds, but I obediently leafed through and saw that it was Professor Arisi's monumental study of the life and art of Gian Paolo Panini. Instead of spurring me on to some grand campaign of creative scholarship, the thought of the years of research into Panini's elusive personality made me feel rebellious. I was glad that I was not embarked on any program of the sort, and during the summer the occasionally nagging thought that Professor Arisi was right to have erected his monument and so was the editor for envying him, finally dozed off into the unconscious. The same thought followed another course in the editor's mind. Instead of being put to bed full length, it was gradually reduced in size. As in the South American process of shrinking human heads by applications of hot sand, the beaches of Long Island on which the editor lay in August miniaturized the aspirations aroused by the Panini theme. He rose from the beach and sent me a cable requesting a long article comparing Panini's topographical views of 18th-century Rome, his *vedute esatte*, with their present-day aspect.

That is easy, I thought. All that's needed is a copy of the Arisi book, which reproduces probably all of Panini's *vedute esatte*, and a photographer who will go around Rome and take the same views from the same point of view. Then with both sets of pictures, useful hints from Arisi's text, and some knowledge of the Roman scene, I should be able to do the article in as much time as it takes to say "*fundamental source for the printer's contribution to culture*". The August holiday was over but most of the bookshops in Rome were still closed. Of the few that were open, at only one had they heard of Arisi's book. There it seemed to me that the clerk had a furtive air as he explained that their single copy had been sold some time before, and it was not likely they could obtain another. "You know", he said, "that is not – ah – regularly in trade. It was privately printed by the Cassa di Risparmio di Piacenza. One or two thousand copies, sent out as gifts to friends of the bank." I had often been impressed by the splendor of the art publications given away free by Italian banks, and wondered whether it could be accounted for by the Medici tradition kept up to date or some tax rebate from the government in the interest of culture. They certainly could not be dipping into the till to provide prestige editions for their clients' coffee tables. Later it was explained to me by a friendly banker that the books were simply a more sophisticated post-war version of the give-aways that used to take the form of cases of liquor, candy and paper weights.

Speculation as to motives aside, an appeal to the Cassa di Risparmio di Piacenza was indicated. I put in the long-distance call to the bank and stated my problem to the woman at the switchboard, than restated it several times to various bank officials. Finally I was connected with one of the directors, who was expeditious. "My dear Sir", he said. "It is not possibile. We have already sent a complimentary copy to the headquarters of your magazine, as yourself tell me." I explained the urgency of my need for a copy in Rome and tried to emphasize the advantage to Piacenza of having its name, the name of its native son Panini, and the name of Arisi, an ornament to the culture of the

city, magnified in such an important publication as our magazine. I concluded with the suggestion that the bank lend me a copy which I would return. He cut me short. "No, it would be spoiled. I advise you to consult it in some library." As I trudged to the Palazzo Venezia art-history library, I couldn't help thinking that it wasn't necessary to telephone to Piacenza for that kind of advice. The library was still closed for the holidays, and so I soon discovered were all the libraries of Rome, including those of the foreign academies and the Vatican. Then I thought of borrowing the book from one of the art authorities who might have received it as homage from the bank, and telephoned them methodically in alphabetical order from A to Z, that is from Argan to Zevi. They were either out of town or had not been included in the Cassa di Risparmio's list of the privileged. Stymied on all counts, I cabled the magazine in New York, explaining the difficulty and asking that the deadline on the article be deferred. A day later a message from the Alitalia air-freight office informed me that they had a package from New York waiting at the airport. I drove out to Fiumicino immediately. In front of the customs office the car's clutch gave out. I pushed the car to the kerb, which was reserved for government vehicles, and put a note on the windshield: "Engine dead. Car will be towed away today". After more than an hour of filling out forms and being quizzed as to the contents of the package, I was allowed to import, or rather re-import, the Panini book into Italy, without charge. Outside, a good distance away I could make out taxis lined up at the main terminal, but to get to them meant a long walk, with twenty pounds of book under the arm. My car sat at the kerb impassively. Next to the note on the windshield was the familiar long printed form requesting the remittance of a fine by mail. I stopped a passing truck and asked for a ride to Rome. The driver was interested in my movements and the package, so I told him the story. He had a radio going with chachacha music: and swayed in time to the rhythm occasionally realizing the wheel to snap his fingers. When he stopped at Piazza Venezia to let me out he delivered an opinion which had been maturing during the ride: "Panini? Old stuff. Why don't you write about Rome now. Via Veneto! Life!"

Life had evidently absorbed all the photographers of Rome, who turned out to be as rare at that moment as the book itself, so I borrowed the camera with a wide-angle lens and set out myself to take the views of the city from a Paninian point of view. This was easier said than done, for even in his most faithful topographical scenes Panini did not record like a camera, from a single point of view, even though he must have used a camera oscura, but combined several viewpoints and "moved" interesting buildings and monuments into his field of vision. In several cases, such as that of Piazza del Popolo, the view is bird's-eye, and can be reproduced only with the aid of a helicopter. Panini's Rome for the most part does not fall into the category of bygone Rome. On the contrary, archeology and the cult of Rome have created since his time a new Rome Recovered, particularly in the Roman Forum, where so many monuments and vestiges have risen from the ground of the old Campo Vaccino. Open views, however, are now closed by avenues of trees, as in the Via dei Trionfi, and of course such panoramas as the one from Monte Mario are today barely recognizable. Piazza Navona, Piazza di Spagna and Piazza del Quirinale have to be photographed in bits, since one cannot stand back far enough to get a full view even with a wide-angle lens, and only Piazza San Pietro satisfactorily fits itself into the camera's visual cone. Occupied with these comparisons and the documentation of the historic changes in the Roman scene - which produced such fascinating items as the fact that passersby pausing at the obelisk in Piazza del Popolo to pray and reverence are entitled to fifteen days' indulgence (many of the obelisks in Rome offer the same privilege) - I was only half way through the job of taking pictures when I arrived one morning in front of Santa Maria Maggiore. I laid the Panini book out on the sidewalk, open at the reproduction of the view of the basilica (which hangs in the Coffee House of the Quirinal) and went about approximating the painter's standpoint. Trees had grown in the way, the terrain was clad in concrete, and it took some maneuvering to find a reasonably comparable position. When I had finished and turned back to collect the book, it had disappeared. The piazza was deserted except for some German tourists sitting at a cafe. They had seen nothing. The doormen of the surrounding buildings were having

lunch. A parking attendant turned up. He appeared to think I was accusing him of theft. "I am an invalid", he said, pointing to a glass eye. "I didn't touch your book." I gave him a tip in recognition of his sincerity and asked him to make inquiries in the neighborhood and telephone me any results. There never were any.

Obliged now to follow the advice of the Cassa di Risparmio, the next day I returned to the library, which was now open, and made drawings from their copy of the book. With these laborious aids I was able to complete the photography and the article. The manuscript and pictures flew off to New York, and I thought this at last was final. Not at all. A cable from the editor informed sardonically me that the article was printable but that they could not do so until I returned the Panini book, which was needed for designing the layout. I wired back that the book had been stolen and suggested that he appeal directly to the Cassa di Risparmio, from New York. In a few days I received a two-page cable saying that the bank did not have any more copies, consultation with the Italian Embassy in Washington proved fruitless, and had I thought of putting the problem to the author of the book. The fact was that I had been saving Professor Arisi as a last resort, and unwilling to use the last chance I was making the rounds of the second-hand bookshops. The first two were opulent establishments near Piazza di Spagna, and they provided advice rather than the book. The gentleman in charge of the first said it was useless to advertise in the wanted columns of the newspapers, an idea which had suggested itself. "I have been in the business for twenty years and have never obtained a book by advertising for it. Why not? Because people evidently think that if it's worth advertising for it must be of inestimable value, and they hold on to it for a rainy day or ask you an impossible amount." The gentleman who owned the second said, "Don't say I sent you, but here are the addresses of three shops where I have sometimes found books that 'disappeared'". There was nothing in their externals to differentiate the book receivers from their honest colleagues, and aside from anodyne glimpses of the Roman book underworld the search was unsuccessful. I went to every shop listed in the phone book and interviewed the pushcart men at Piazza Fontanella Borghese and at the book fair near the station. They were obliging, and even culled through the back reaches of their store rooms, but the Panini book remained a will-o'-the-wisp. We had come to the last resort, so I telephoned Professor Arisi. He had only one copy, his own with annotations, but would lend it if the magazine promised to return it. I cabled this kind offer to the editor, who replied: RETURN IMPOSSIBILE AS BOOK BROKEN UP FOR LAYOUT. At that point, a friend familiar with my problem returned from Palermo and told me that there he had seen the Panini book on the coffee table of an acquaintance, and was sure the man had little interest in art, Rome or the 18th century. Nevertheless, when I telephoned him to ask whether he would part with his copy; he seemed reluctant. I said the magazine would gladly make a contribution to his favorite charity. He felt he had to think it over, and I was left in suspense for two days until I got a special delivery from him announcing that the book had been shipped to me for payment on delivery of 31,000 lire. Although this meant considerably less payment for the article, I had a giddy feeling of success, and that evening I boasted to friends that despite all obstacles I had pinioned the *rara avis* and it was mine. One of them said, "Do you know what I'd do with that book when it arrives? I'd get a gun and take the book up to Piazza Santa Maria Maggiore. I'd lay the book out on the pavement, hide behind a corner with the gun and shoot anyone who tried to pick it up."