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## **Roman Art Holiday**

### **12 museums reveal the city's eternal charm**

By Milton Gendel

The absence of a great encyclopedic megamuseum makes Rome an oddity among the metropolises of the world. Italy has no equivalent of the Louvre, the British Museum, or the Metropolitan Museum of Art. But then, it hasn't been out looting the rest of the world since the fall of the Roman Empire (except for the obelisk of Axum - stalled near the Circus Maximus as a trophy of Mussolini's conquest of Ethiopia).

Italy's great collections are regional, reflecting the country's political divisions before its unification in the 19th century. Venetian art is concentrated in the Academia of Venice; Florentine, in the Uffizi. Other important local collections have been transmigratory like the galleries and furnishings of the old Duchy of Parma, which wound up at the Capodimonte Palace in Naples before settling at the Quirinal in Rome.

Originally the summer palace of the popes, the Quirinal was taken over by the king of Italy as his royal residence when Rome became the capital of a united Italy in 1870. The papacy, shorn of its temporal power, shrank to the present mini-state of Vatican City, whose museums, galleries and decorations (including the Sistine Chapel and the rooms frescoed by Raphael) make up Rome's major museological concentration. When the pope retreated from Rome proper, he left behind not only the Quirinal and its contents (now open to the public), but also the Capitoline Museums of sculpture, painting and objects. These galleries, founded in the 15th century by Pope Sixtus IV and stocked by his successors over the next 400 years, remain central to any visit to Rome.

It would be quixotic, however, to try to take in too many of Rome's museums on a single visit. The whole city is a museum of its own history over more than two and a half millennia, with a good deal of that history visible in its buildings, sculptures and ruins.

The Capitoline Museums provide a rundown of masterworks from antiquity through the Renaissance and the Baroque - great Roman bronzes, the *Dying Gaul* the *Capitoline Venus*, and paintings by *Guercino*, *Guido Reni*, *Caravaggio* - all in a striking setting. The theatrical aspect of the Roman townscape has often been noted, and in fact scene-shifting is one of its constants. In designing the Capitoline, Michelangelo set the ensemble - the Senatorial Palace flanked by the two museum buildings - on a square reached by vast operatic stairs, and centered it all on the gilt bronze equestrian statue of the emperor Marcus Aurelius.

The sculpture had been preserved since the second century on its original site by the Lateran Palace. To glorify the identification of the papacy with the municipality Michelangelo moved the great bronze to the Capitoline Hill and made it the central feature of the square. Recently restored, it is now sheltered inside the ancient sculpture museum; a replica will soon be installed on the base Michelangelo designed for the original.

The Capitoline, in the middle of the old city, gives an overview of Roman history metaphorically as well as literally since the outdoor museums of the Forum and the Palatine extend from its base to

the opposite hill. But for a grasp of the complexity of the ancient city the Museum of Roman Civilization, in the outlying suburb of EUR (Esposizione Universale di Roma), is indispensable. It is usually neglected by visitors, since the collection primarily consists of replicas and casts, a form of art reproduction that has been out of favor since John Ruskin's and William Morris's cult of the genuine prevailed in art thought.

The real stuff, the main mass of it, is of course housed in the great National Roman Museum, near the railway station. Now in the process of decentralization, the museum will eventually have major branches in a neighboring turn-of-the-century pile, in the 17th-century Altemps Palace, near Piazza Navona, and in the buildings around the Crypta Balbi, just outside the temple area of Largo Argentina.

For the Etruscan side of the question (Rome was an Etruscan monarchy before the republic and the empire), the National Etruscan Museum of Villa Giulia has the best collection, giving a broader picture than the choice selection at the Vatican.

The population of Rome, which reached about three million under the empire, shrank in the Middle Ages to tens of thousands. Some monuments from the medieval city still exist, notably the colossal Torre delle Milizie, which looms over the Markets of Trajan, and half a dozen smaller defensive keeps. One of the best known is the Torre Caetana on Tiber Island, which was erected by the Pierleoni family around the year 1000 to defend the Roman bridge, the Pons Fabritius (still standing), and to charge tolls for crossing into town. In the 17th century especially during the plague of 1656, it was used as a place of quarantine for plague victims in order to limit epidemics in the city. The island's medical vocation has remained; even today the Fatebenefratelli hospital covers almost all of it.

The Pierleonis stemmed from a Jewish banking family, but in the fourth generation after their conversion to Catholicism they produced a pope, Anacletus II. His eight-year reign ended in 1138 when his rival, Innocent II, was accepted as the legitimate pontiff; Anacletus was relegated to the list of antipopes. This and the rest of the fascinating history of the place will be illustrated in the Tiber Island History Museum. Its Documentation Center, in the island's former Franciscan monastery, once only accessible to scholars, is now open to the public.

Baroque Rome, with its splendid palaces, fountains and gardens – the Rome we know - became the model for other capitals and inspired the visual aspects of *glorie*, as Louis XIV understood it. The opulent art collections were formed mainly by the princes of the church and their families. The best known and the grandest survivors are the Colonna, Doria Pamphilj and Pallavicini collections, still owned by the families and housed in their ancestral palaces. The first two are open to the public; the Pallavicini Gallery can be viewed with the owner's permission.

Rome, as the capital of the Counter-Reformation, answered the austerities of Protestantism with an outpouring of voluptuous visual extravaganzas. Borromini and Bernini, in particular, expressed the character of Baroque Rome, with its bombastic, intricate spaces and the surprise of fountains and sculptures as street furniture. Bernini's colonnade, a colossally welcoming embrace in front of St. Peter's, is his best-known architectural work. His sculptures enliven the ground floor of the Borghese Gallery, the rest of which has long been closed for repairs. The gallery's notable picture collection hangs "temporarily" at San Michele, the complex that houses the ministry of the arts on the Tiber.

Both Bernini and Borromini had a hand in designing the Barberini Palace, another landmark of papal patronage, containing half the National Gallery of Art. (The other half remains in the Corsini

Palace on the far side of the Tiber; the collection will be united when the army officers' club vacates the ground floor of the Barberini, a move that has been pending for some 50 years.) The paintings range from the Middle Ages to the 18th century, and include masterpieces by Raphael, Caravaggio and Pietro da Cortona, who also painted the spectacular ceiling fresco, *The Triumph of Divine Providence*.

For modern and contemporary painting and sculpture, the National Gallery of Modern Art has notable 19th-century holdings and an intermittent collection of works – mainly Italian — of this century. The great novelty is the newly inaugurated Municipal Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art. Presently installed in the Casa della Città, close to Piazza Barberini, it will eventually move to permanent quarters in the former Peroni beer factory at Porta Pia.

Rome has seen its museums multiply without being unduly involved in the great controversy that has pitted education and inspiration against entertainment and showmanship, especially in British and North American art institutions. They remain repositories of historic memories and educational possibilities, without going in for glitter - or, for that matter, opening bars, cafeterias, or even catalogue and postcard counters.