

ANTIQUES

THE SPLENDOR OF



BY MATTHEW F. SINGER

In the summer of 1755 Robert Adam, Charles Louis Clérisseau, and Giovanni Battista Piranesi undertook regular expeditions together in and around Rome to study, discuss, and sketch ancient ruins, seeking insight and inspiration in the Baths of Caracalla, the Forum, and Hadrian's Villa, among other her-

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ROME



alded sites. Their varying perceptions and understandings of antiquity produced a fascinating mixture of results, which ranged from measured academic reconstructions, informed by the most exacting concern with archaeological correctness, to inventive and highly romantic fantasies prompted by the city's wealth of ancient monuments. These expeditions were but one early step in a process that eventually

led to the wide international dissemination of the neoclassical style, which came to replace the sensuous superficiality of the rococo with the aesthetic austerity and moral rectitude associated with classical art and architecture. In Rome itself artists and designers turned out magnificent expressions of the new style that have heretofore not been accorded the scholarly or popular attention they richly deserve.¹

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Pl. I. Elephant centerpiece from the Ruins of Paestum table setting made by Carlo Albacini (1739/40–1813) and his workshop, Rome, c. 1805. Patinated and gilt bronze and marble; height 22 ¹³/₁₆ inches. *Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.*

Above: Pl. II. Design for the Ruin Room of Santa Trinità de' Monti by Charles Louis Clérissseau (1721–1820), c. 1766. Black chalk, ink, and watercolor on paper, 14 ³/₈ by 21 inches. *Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; photograph by courtesy of the syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum.*



Starting in the Renaissance, the study of famous antiquities was a fundamental part of the education of European artists. While Rome was not the only city in which an academic training could be obtained in the eighteenth century, it was acknowledged as the academy of Europe. In Rome artists had an unparalleled opportunity to study, sketch, paint, absorb, and emulate famous examples of antique sculpture and the venerated remains of the Roman Empire. The countryside around the city provided powerful associations with classical history and literature, in addition to the great masterpieces of Renaissance and baroque art found in the city. Every church was a gallery, and two public museums were founded during the course of the century: the Museo Capitolino in 1734 and the Museo Pio-Clementino, which opened in 1772 and housed the Vatican's collection of antiquities. The archaeological marvels that came to light in Pompeii and Herculaneum further spurred the celebration of the classical past. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Rome had become the ultimate destination of the grand tour and was the primary point of convergence for influential

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Pls. III, IIIa. Round table made for Stanislaw II Augustus Poniatowski, king of Poland (r. 1764–1795), by Pompeo Savini, Rome, 1788. Carved and gilded wood, white marble, and mosaic decoration; height 35 ⁷/₁₆ inches. The mosaic top is after a design by Wencelas Peter (1746–1829). A detail appears on the cover. *Muzeum w Lazienkach, Warsaw.*

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Pl. IV. View of the drawing room designed by Robert Adam (1728–1792) for Lansdowne House, London, 1765–1769. The designs were carried out for William Petty (1737–1805), second earl of Shelburne (later marquess of Lansdowne). *Philadelphia Museum of Art, gift of Graeme Lorimer and Sarah Moss Lorimer in memory of George Horace Lorimer; photograph by Graydon Wood.*



patrons, collectors, and progressive young artists and designers.

Adam left Rome in 1757 and took his sense of ancient Roman grandeur back to England, where he formed a partnership with his younger brother James (1734–1794). Together they “are justly credited with having created some of the loveliest and most engaging interior spaces in all of Europe during the last quarter of the eighteenth century.”² The enormously popular and influential Adam style is exemplified in the drawing room from Lansdowne House (Pl. IV), designed by Adam for Lord Shelburne, an important collector of ancient sculpture. The ceiling decorations parallel those on the ceiling of Hadrian’s Villa at Tivoli.³

The Frenchman Clérisseau, who assisted Adam in producing *Ruins of the Palace of the Emperor Diocletian at Spalato in Dalmatia* (1764), the first study of Roman domestic architecture, remained in Italy until 1767. An architect, archaeologist, and painter, he produced thousands of drawings of ancient buildings and decorative details—both real and imaginary. When Thomas Jefferson was in Paris as American ambassador he commissioned Clérisseau to design the Virginia State Capitol in Richmond, which he modeled on the ancient *Maison Carrée* at Nîmes.

Piranesi, armed with his prolific output of engraved images of antiquity, likewise cam-



paigned for the improvement of contemporary design, devising decorative arts in a style that was rooted in ancient sources while promoting the controversial idea that the creative accomplishments of the ancient Roman and Etruscan civilizations were superior to those of the Greeks.⁴ A preeminent draftsman, his four-volume *Le Antichità Romane* appeared in 1756.

The marble pedestal illustrated in Plates Va and Vb was designed by Piranesi about 1765 and acquired in Rome by Brownlow Cecil (1725–1793), ninth earl of Exeter, who also bought a chimneypiece designed by Piranesi. The details of the pedestal reflect an amalgam of ancient sources, as befitted Piranesi, whose austere and frequently columnar forms displayed an imaginative conception of antiquity and provided creative support for a host of fellow artists and designers.

Among the latter was Pompeo Savini, who in 1788 made the round table with a mosaic top shown in Plates III and IIIa, and on the cover. The wooden body is derived from models by Piranesi, including the cabriole legs ending in rams' heads on acanthus leaves and cloven-hoof feet. Other neoclassical details include the stretcher decorated with leaf carvings and a fluted vase, the frieze of medallions holding antique heads in profile, and the spectacular mosaic top, with its bull enclosed by Greek-key framing. Savini patterned the top after a design by Wenceslas Peter, a Bohemian painter active in Rome in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The table was made

Pls. Va, Vb. Pedestal designed by Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778), Rome, c. 1765–1769. Marble; height 34 ¹¹/₁₆, width 18 ¹/₈ inches. *Burghley House near Stamford, England.*

for the Polish king Stanislaw II Augustus Poniatowski, whose family heraldic symbol was a bull.

Also prominent in eighteenth-century Rome was the Valadier family, a dynasty of silversmiths who worked for the city's leading families and important foreigners. Luigi Valadier was the son of the French-born Andrea Valadier (1695–1759), who had settled in Rome in 1714, where he learned the silversmith's art. After his father's death in 1759, Luigi managed the workshop with his brother Giovanni (1732–1805). Illustrated in Figure 1 is a cast-bronze, scaled-down copy by Valadier's workshop of the celebrated Apollo that stands in the Belvedere Courtyard in the Vatican. With its mate, a copy of the Venus Callipygus that is now in the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples, it represents the kind of scaled-down copy of classical prototypes that eighteenth-century collectors proudly displayed in cabinets and on tabletops. An almost identical pair made by Valadier in 1773 and owned by Louis XV's favorite, Jeanne Bécu (1743–1793), comtesse du Barry, is now in the Musée du Louvre.

An altogether different effect is produced by the biscuit porcelain *Dying Gaul* in Plate VI, another scaled-down version of an exemplary classical sculpture. It was modeled between 1785 and 1795 by Giovanni Volpato, an engraver, antiquarian, archaeologist, and ceramist, who founded the first porcelain works in Rome.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, formal meals in Europe were



considered something of a theatrical performance, and tabletops were sometimes decorated to provide visual entertainment as well as to spur conversation. The remarkable centerpiece shown in Plate I was part of an elaborate dessert setting on the theme of the temples of Paestum, conceived by the antiquarian and archaeologist Domenico Venuti (1745–1817) for Maria Carolina (1752–1814), the queen of Naples. The three spare Doric structures rediscovered about 1746 at Paestum, just south of Naples, were the subject of numerous drawings and engravings by a host of artists, including the ubiquitous Piranesi. The centerpiece illustrated here was executed in Rome by Carlo Albacini, a stoneworker and restorer of antiquities. All the elements hold symbolic significance: the elephant is associated with Paestum itself,

the sirens with Naples, and the cameos portray members of the ruling Bourbon family.

The dramatic excavations at such places as Paestum, Pompeii, and Herculaneum prompted the influential theorist Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768) to write that the only “way for the moderns to become great and, perhaps, unequaled” was “by imitating the Ancients.”⁵ In fact, some artists and designers in eighteenth-century Rome not only imitated the ancients but actually incorporated antique elements into

Pl. VI. *Dying Gaul*, scaled-down copy made by the Volpato Manufactory founded in 1785 by Giovanni Volpato (c. 1735–1803), Rome, 1785–1795. Biscuit porcelain; height 5 1/2, length 9 7/8 inches. *Pinacoteca Capitolina, Rome.*

Fig. 1. *Apollo Belvedere*, scaled-down copy modeled by Luigi (1726–1785) or Giuseppe Valadier (1762–1839), Rome. Patinated bronze, height 40 3/4 inches. *Private collection.*





their own works. The massive bronze table in Figure 2 was made by Francesco Giardoni to display an ancient floor mosaic excavated at Hadrian's Villa. Commissioned by Cardinal Giuseppe Alessandro Furietti (1685–1764), it is one of a pair given to the recently elected pope, Benedict XIV.

Eighteenth-century artists working in Rome often employed mosaics to translate the images found on recently unearthed ancient Roman wall paintings onto furniture and other decorative objects, which visitors on the grand tour could take home as souvenirs. The pair of marble vases finished with mosaics illustrated in Plates XIVa and XIVb is attributed to Nicola de Vecchis, a mosaic specialist. Another was Giacomo Raffaelli, who specialized in so-called micromosaics, which were made up of minute tesserae (see Pls. VII–X). He was probably the most celebrated craftsman supplying works to the Vatican's mosaic workshop, and his studio appears to have made micromosaic plaques

that could be mounted on various types of boxes. The example in Plate X, with its dove holding a red ribbon in its beak, is typical of his work, which often depicted favorite neo-classical motifs.

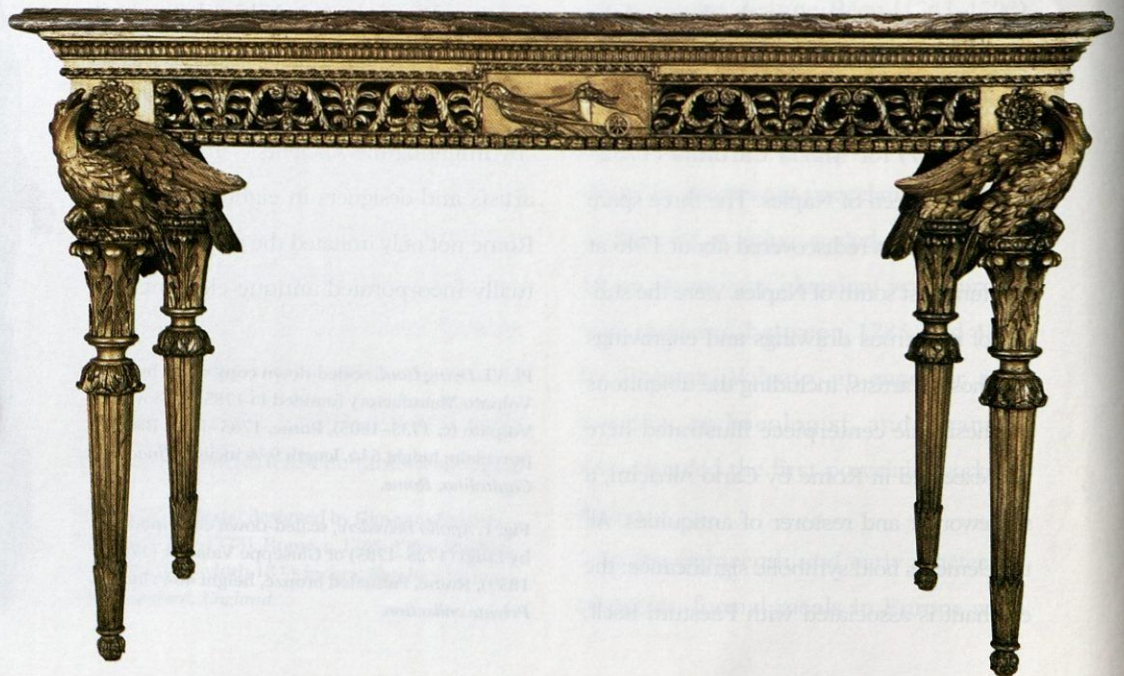
A decorative motif derived directly from the antique appears at the center of the apron of the extremely fine console table illustrated in Plate XI. Copied from an ancient wall painting reproduced in *Le Antichità di Ercolano esposte* (1757–1792), one of the most important publications of the eighteenth century, it depicts two doves pulling a grasshopper in his chariot. The carved eagles at the corners suggest that the table might have been made for the Borghese family, whose armorial bearings incorporate an eagle. The

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Pls. VII–IX. Micromosaic plaques, Rome, 1795–1805. Diameter of each, 2 3/4 inches. *Private collection.*

Pl. X. Micromosaic plaque made by Giacomo Raffaelli (1753–1836), Rome, 1795–1800. Diameter 2 7/8 inches. *Private collection.*

Pl. XI. Console table, Rome, 1775–1800. Carved and gilded wood with alabaster top; height 39 3/8, length 63, depth 26 3/4 inches. *Private collection.*



Pl. XII. Inkstand representing the *Dioscuri* and an obelisk, made by Vincenzo Coaci (1756–1794), Rome, 1792. Silver, silver gilt, lapis lazuli, rosso antico, and iron alloy; height 28 1/2 inches. See also Pl. XIIa. Minneapolis Institute of Arts, gift of the Morse Foundation.

Pl. XIIa. Case for the inkstand shown in Pl. XII. Wood covered with leather with brass hinges.





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Pl. XIII. Console table made by Vincenzo Pacetti (1746–1820), Casimiro Ponziani, Carlo Palombi, Antonio de Rossi, and Paolo Tozzi, Rome, 1780. Carved, gilded, and painted wood with marble, gilt bronze, and mosaic decoration; height 39 3/8, length 57 1/16, depth 26 3/4 inches. Private collection.

Fig. 2. Table, one of a pair, made by Francesco Giardini (1692–1757), Rome, 1742. Bronze and ancient mosaic decoration; height 40 1/8, length 74, depth 40 1/2 inches. Pinacoteca Capitolina.

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Pls. XIVa, XIVb. Pair of vases attributed to Nicola de Vecchis, Rome, c. 1795. Marble and mosaic decoration; height of each, 22 13/16 inches. Private collection.

tion project in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, and the console table in Plate XIII was definitely made for the Villa Borghese. Among its wealth of neoclassical details are the legs in the shape of inverted obelisks, the torsos of draped and winged caryatids and atlantes, and the allegorical figure (possibly Summer) in the medallion in the center of the apron.

Perhaps representing the height of the neoclassical idiom, literally embracing both ancient and eighteenth-century Rome, is the inkstand illustrated in Plate XII. It documents a rather controversial renovation in 1786 to the grand public square that adjoined the Palazzo del Quirinale, one of the pope's residences in Rome. Under directions from Pius VI (r. 1775–1799) and in a marvel of engineering, the colossal sculptures of horse tamers (*Dioscuri*) that had stood in the square since ancient times, were moved to accommodate the addition of an obelisk

one pushes the lion's head on the inkstand, the horses return to the position they held before the erection of the obelisk.

In 1991 the scholar Alvar González-Palacios remarked, half in jest, "the study of Italian decorative arts was born yesterday."⁶ It is my hope that the objects discussed and illustrated in this article will further an appreciation of and scholarly consideration of the products of neoclassical Rome.

The exhibition *The Splendor of 18th-Century Rome* is on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art until May 28, 2000. It will subsequently be shown at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, from June 25 to September 17.

¹ This article is drawn from research done for the exhibition entitled *The Splendor of 18th Century Rome*, currently on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. I am grateful to Danielle Rice, senior curator of education at the Philadelphia Museum, and Jon Seydl, research coordinator for the exhibition, for assistance in shaping the article. The exhibition was organized by the following people, who also contributed to the entries and essays contained in the fully illustrated catalogue: Joseph J. Rishel, Ann Percy, Dean Walker, Edgar Peters Bowron, Liliana Barroero, and Stefano Susinno. The decorative arts section of the catalogue was contributed by Alvar Gonzalez-Palacios and Roberto Valeriani.

² See Joseph Rishel, "The Painted Decoration," *Drawing Room from Lansdowne House*, in *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin*, vol. 82 (Summer 1986), pp. 21–29.

³ See Ian Bristow, "The Room in the Context of Robert Adam's Work," *ibid.*, pp. 13–19.

⁴ In an ironic postscript to the Greco-Roman debates in which Piranesi played so prominent a role, later scholarship determined that much of what was termed Etruscan in the eighteenth century was, in fact, Greek material found on Italian soil.

⁵ *Writings in Art*, ed. David G. Irwin (Phaidon, London, 1972).

⁶ Valadier, *Three Generations of Roman Goldsmiths: An Exhibition of Drawings and Works of Art...* at David Carré (Artemis Group, London, 1991), p. 5.



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