

# Rome According to Henry James: The Lure of the City and the American Imagination

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Henry James (1843-1916) spent much of his childhood in a house on Fourteenth Street in Manhattan. In the front parlor hung a view of Florence by Thomas Cole, the leader of the American landscape school. Nearby, was a Tuscan landscape by the Frenchman Lefebvre. A Bacchante bust by one of the many American sculptors who learned their craft in Rome also decorated the room. The James household was a cosmopolitan enclave in which Italy was the main ingredient in a recipe for securing the refinements of high culture in ugly American cities where—during the decades that preceded the Civil War—there was little distinguished architecture and few collections of important art. Full of expectations about the seductive beauties of art, the natural riches of the landscape, and the sensual experiences of everyday life, James made his first European journey in 1869. Much of this fifteen-month sojourn was spent in Italy where, in what he called a “fever of enjoyment,” the author traveled the length of the peninsula.

James would make fourteen more trips to Italy, many of a duration of six months or longer. His first journey was at age twenty-six, and by the time of his last visit, in 1907, he was sixty-four. The fondest moments of that first trip were experienced on horse-back. During his last voyage, he succumbed to the motor car and its windscreen-eye-view of the Campagna. James’s movements over Italian terrain, however, were secondary to a temporal journey past fading ancient beauty and inevitable desecration. His first glimpse of Italy predated the establishment of the first Italian Republic by one year, while his last revealed a modern country emerging out of its classical ruins. Though changes came with the years, he found “the spell, the charm, and the magic” of Italy remained. As his early excitement matured to sober nostalgia, the ever-modernizing landscape symbolized the passage of time for both the author and the western traditions he revered.

Before James went to Italy, he knew and admired the work of American writers, fortunate pilgrims like Nathaniel Hawthorne and William Dean Howells; who had already traveled to Italy and established its mystique. James Fenimore Cooper avowed that: “If there is any country out of my own in which I would wish to live, it is Italy. There is no place where mere living is such luxury.”<sup>1</sup> To young Henry Adams, a visit to Italy in 1859 was the realization of one of the ends of life.<sup>2</sup> For James, however, exploring Italy represented more than merely gratifying his fervent desire to find the “solutional Europe” which he envisioned as a boy. Consciously following an American literary tradition, he sought not only to observe the great achievements of the past, but also to awaken the creative impulse long perceived to dwell amidst Europe’s art and antiquities. The lure of Rome was not the exclusive and time-worn domain of Renaissance architects, Baroque sculptors, and romantic painters. It was an active arena for forming the American literary imagination.

For many nineteenth-century Americans, Italy represented that country which most fully and most perfectly embodied the greatest achievements in the western tradition of the fine arts.<sup>3</sup> Classical architectural antiquities and Renaissance pictures were the very stuff of which notions of western culture were made. Like so many other curious tourists, American artists went to Italy for the scenery, the light, the climate and the local color. They traveled to see Italy’s famous sights—Vesuvius, Pompeii, Capri, and Venice, as well as its artistic monuments—St. Peter’s, the Colosseum, the works of Raphael, Michelangelo, and Titian. But for professional artists, Italy was a destination unlike any other. Americans did not go to Italy for academic training, to exhibit, or to see the work of living artists. They went there to become one with tradition, for Italy had been a destination for Dutch, German, French, English and Russian painters, sculptors, and writers before them. In Florence, Dostoyevsky wrote *The Idiot*; Ibsen composed *A Doll’s House* in Amalfi; and Goethe reckoned a new birth from the day he entered Rome.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to the eighteenth-century dandies of the Grand Tour who aimed less at serious instruction than at the pleasures of historic curiosities and current fashions, the fortunate pilgrims of James’s generation brought with them powerful emotional expectations. The hardness and haste of the northern European world, ruled by Protestant ethics, melted in the glowing sunlight and luxuriant ways of the south, still tinged with its pagan legacy. Italy, as James suggested, was not merely “thick with the sense of history and the very taste of time.” It, moreover, offered liberation from the repressive social milieu of New York and Boston. Italy thus filled a psychic need for Americans who in their New World homes had lost a feeling of continuity with all that had gone before. Far from the domestic scene that valued physical mobility, progress and the future, the American in Europe and most particularly in the continuous past of Italy—above all in Rome—could find a resting place where change rarely intruded and where those severed ties with the past could be restored. Here, one could learn how to see, and how to feel. Sensations were multiplied and life became richer. For James, this tapestry of past and present which interwove the gifts of nature and the triumphs of humanity, this refuge where all things associated with culture were found, represented “the sweetest impression of life one could possibly experience.”<sup>5</sup> Every American going to Italy stepped into a hallowed, time-honored international arena, unique unto itself. The artist who went to Italy, however, would find out what it would mean and what it would take to create an American art.<sup>6</sup>

In the years following the defeat of Napoleon, Rome fell into a state best described as “half slumber, half despair.” Its fallen magnificence contrasted the prosperous American scene of the 1820s and 1830s. The contrariety of Rome amazed the stranger. Wealth and poverty everywhere rubbed shoulders; beggars plied their trade

before the portals of palaces; and peasants rushed to the doors of cardinals' coaches. A stable or a carpenter's shop frequently occupied the street level of an aristocratic mansion. A fishmonger's stall might lay in the shadow of a splendid church. Obelisks stood among collapsed arches and broken columns. The narrow streets were often dreary and ugly, their smells impossible, creating an impression of defilement that defied the heroic legacy of this capital of the ancient world. Cattle brought to the city for slaughter grazed in the Forum; fig and olive trees grew in the Colosseum. Particularly among the ruins, ladies had to hold up their skirts and carefully watch their step to avoid the human excrement on the ground.<sup>7</sup>

The allure of the ruins naturally possessed most of the artists, but so too did the enticement of the Campagna. Over this expanse traveled writers and painters who watched their shadows scurry along a moonlight aqueduct, remembering that Horace's Lydia and Ovid's Corinna had often crossed this common-land long ago. Here they drank in the beautiful lines of the Roman horizon, the gentle inclination of the plains, and the soft contours of the mountains. They knew all the little roads that once had been lined with villas, only to be destroyed later by Saracens, Lombards, Franks, or Goths. As they walked around the city, reading the story of the European world in its architecture, the painters delighted in the marble debris of the Forum, and celebrated the solitary arch of old aqueducts. Even the grimy narrow streets, gray stone balconies hung with clothes, and the yellow fruit of a lemon tree suspended over a mottled wall captured their attention.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time that Henry James was preparing for his 1869 voyage, this scene was changing radically, for the secularization of Rome was soon to occur. The rust of centuries was scoured away, ancient palaces were coated with white-wash, weeds were scraped from the Coliseum, and convents were turned into office buildings. New industry replaced the stillness to which Rome had admitted the traveler.<sup>9</sup> This new Rome was also the domain of legions of Americans: opera-glass toting spectators with red books (*Murray's Guides*, the *Guide Michelin* of their time); struggling artists in galleries; business men who frequented the cafés; and mothers who were anxious to give "all the advantages" to their daughters—girls like James's heroine Daisy Miller who cared little for "pictures and things." The lure of Rome had changed too. Travelers had begun to ignore the established paths that traced the classical world and the Campagna, choosing, instead, to explore the hill towns and byways of the late middle age. The hunger to view the works of quattrocento artists — Piero or Giotto — outstripped the American appetite for Raphaels and Michelangelos. Italy, a "must" for painters for more than a century, had become a beautiful historic land that appealed to some and not to others. To say the least, it appealed to Henry James.

Within five hours after arriving, James traversed the whole of Rome from the Lateran to the Tiber, from the Tiber to the Vatican, striding through the Forum, scaling the Capitoline Hill and the Colosseum, visiting St. Peter's and the Appian Way. Rome was "a great plum pudding;" Venice and Florence, by comparison, were mere "wholesome tapioca." Similarly, England was a "good married matron;" Italy a "beautiful disheveled nymph." For Italian painting, sculpture, architecture, and gardens, James had an insatiable appetite. With *Murray's Guide* in hand, he systematically visited galleries and churches. Although he praised the works of Tintoretto and Giotto, portraits by Raphael and Leonardo, and Michelangelo's figures for the Medici tombs, he was most impressed by architecture. His travelogues and personal correspondence are filled with seemingly breathless responses to Rome's finest buildings. Even in James's critiques of American culture, a ghost-like image of Italy surrounds his accounts of the American milieu. *The American Scene* (1907), James's chronicle of a 1905 tour of several eastern and southern states, abounds in Italian references. He compared New York's skyscrapers to Giotto's campanile in Florence, New York to Venice, and the nation's Capitol to St. Peter's. South Carolina and Florida recalled the

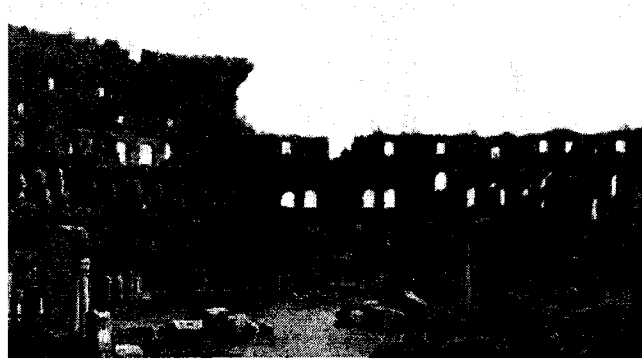


Fig. 1. Thomas Cole, *Interior of the Colosseum, Rome*, 1832. Oil on canvas, 10 x 18 in. The Albany Institute of History and Art.

atmosphere of southern Italy. This is significant, for in this his most concentrated and last attempt to identify himself with his native land, James was met everywhere by memories of the land which from boyhood had engaged him more emotionally and imaginatively than any other.<sup>10</sup>

Although James wrote his sister Alice in 1869 that "the Colosseum is a thing about which it is useless to talk — it must be seen and felt," the writer was hardly speechless about its visual power.

One of course never passes the Colosseum without paying it one's respects... I always feel as if I were seated in the depth of some Alpine valley. The upper portions of the side toward the Esquiline look as remote and lonely as an Alpine ridge, and you raise your eyes to their rugged sky-line drinking in the sun and silvered by the blue air, with much the same feeling with which you would take in a gray cliff on which an eagle might lodge.<sup>11</sup>

In Hadrian's Pantheon he saw:

By far the most beautiful piece of ancients in Rome...It makes you profoundly regret, James wrote, that you are not a pagan suckled in the creed outworn that produced it. It's the most conclusive example I have yet seen of the simple sublime.<sup>12</sup>

St. Peter's Basilica James judged vulgar by comparison. The great basilica chiefly impressed him as an assurance about man rather than as an aspiration toward god.

The mere man of pleasure in quest of new sensations might well not know where to better his encounter there of the sublime shock that brings him, within the threshold, to an immediate gasping pause, James observed. There are days when the vast nave looks mysteriously vaster than on others and the gorgeous baldachin a longer journey beyond the far-spreading ...pavement ...Then you have only to stroll and stroll and gaze and gaze.<sup>13</sup>

Of all the arts, architecture was the most symbolic of moral values. More than any other art it represented to the author "difficulties mastered, resources combined, labor, courage and patience." Only architecture could intermingle Rome's past and its present with profound effect. Sacrosanct buildings like those of the Capitoline Hill and the antique Forum, however, were also stage-sets for progress and change.

I walked down by the back streets to the steps mounting the Capitol—that long inclined plane rather broken at every two paces which is the unflinching disappointment...of tourists primed for retrospective raptures... for the first ten minutes of



Fig. 2. View of the Forum from the Capitoline Hill. Photograph by author.

your standing there Roman history seems suddenly to have sunk through a trap door...The mild incline, during winter months, is always covered with lounging sun-seekers and especially with those more constantly obvious members of the Roman population — beggars, soldiers, monks and tourists...The dwarfish look of the (Michelangelo's) Capitol is intensified ...Above in the piazzetta before the stuccoed palace which rises so jauntily on a basement of thrice its magnitude are more loungers and knitters in the sun, seated around the massively inscribed base of the statue of Marcus Aurelius...You recover in some degree your stifled hopes of sublimity as you pass beyond the palace and take your choice of either curving slope to descend into the Forum.<sup>14</sup>

After immersing himself in all the "aesthetic and esoteric life" of the modern city within Rome's walls, James sought the Campagna.<sup>15</sup> With sculptor William Story and his entourage, James enjoyed picnics in this landscape which appeared to him a "great violet ... wilderness of sunny decay and vacancy." He went for horseback rides, drinking in the white villages and gray towers that distinguished old-fashioned paintings of Italy. Of these excursions, James wrote :

I shall always remember the first I took out the Porta del Popolo... It was mild mid-winter, the season peculiarly of color on the Roman Campagna; and the light was full of that mellow purple glow, that tempered intensity which haunts the after-visions of those who have known Rome like the memory of some supremely irresponsible pleasure. ...The country rolled away around me...chequered with purple and blue and blooming brown. The lights and shadows were at play on the Sabine mountains — an alteration of tone so exquisite as to be conveyed only by some fantastic comparison to sapphire and

amber...there in the distance, among blue undulations, some white village, some gray tower, helped deliciously to make the picture the typical "Italian landscape" of old-fashioned art.<sup>16</sup>

James's reminiscence of the Campagna does indeed evoke the image of "old-fashioned art" for he had charted a course followed by Poussin and Claude during the seventeenth century. More recently the Campagna had inspired Thomas Cole—author of that painting that had seduced a younger Henry James. On his two European tours (1829-32, and 1841-42), Cole repeatedly walked the Campagna, sketching the Arco di Nerrone with the cascades of Tivoli and the Apennines beyond, and recording perhaps the single most recognizable view of Italy for Americans, the stretch of aqueducts crossing the Campagna just outside the walls of Rome. Naturally, Cole painted the Claudian Aqueduct, "the grandest ruin outside the walls of Rome," according to *Murray's Guide*. His *Aqueduct Near Rome* depicts its ruins near the Tor Fiscale, a medieval tower which marks the junction of the two branches of the aqueduct system. From the tower, the broken colonnade of arches curves across the Campagna toward the Sabine Hills. A small stream that once flowed atop the aqueduct has reverted to its original course, and now runs between the ravaged arches. The sublime pastoral landscape is shattered, however, by a human skull and several architectural fragments overgrown with weeds, painterly reminders of man's mortality.

Like many of Cole's views of Rome, *Aqueduct Near Rome* has an elegiac message. Through contrasting images of the beauty of ancient ruins set dramatically against a desolate and empty landscape, the painter makes clear his point: the glory that was Rome was merely a human vanity. Other paintings of the Roman Campagna by Cole are more romantic, gentle and luminous, showing ruins in raking morning light in the manner James's prose described.



Fig. 3. Thomas Cole, *Aqueduct Near Rome*, 1832. Oil on canvas, 44 1/2 x 67 1/2 in. Washington University Gallery of Art.



Fig. 4. Thomas Cole, *L'Allegro*, 1845. Oil on canvas, 32 1/8 x 47 7/8 in. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



Fig. 5. Thomas Cole, *Dream of Arcadia*, 1838. Oil on canvas, 39 x 63 in. Denver Art Museum.

*L'Allegro* (1845) represents a luxuriant landscape, featuring elements of Italy's fabulous architectural scenery—a hill town, a round temple reminiscent of the Temple of the Sibyl at Tivoli, and a Greek temple resembling the one at Segesta—transposed to create an Arcadian pastoral. Similarly, in Cole's *The Dream of Arcadia*, ancient trees and a range of craggy mountains encompass a valley fed by a stream and a waterfall. A Greek Doric temple, the ideal of classical harmony, commands the highest of these grassy slopes. *The Dream of Arcadia*, of course, is wholly simulated, but the painting was regarded as the reverie of all the traveling American artists and writers whose visualization of such an ideal setting could serve as a wellspring for artistic inspiration.

Henry James thought much like a painter: "We go to Italy to gaze upon certain of the highest achievements of human power," representing "to the imagination the maximum of man's creative force."<sup>17</sup> In the Italian environment, he detected a nonintellectual, aesthetic, and pagan element in human history, largely underrepresented in Anglo-Saxon surroundings. Further, Italy provided a opportune backdrop for the author's central theme: the process of self-realization which often involves a conflict between innocence—the assumption that one is free to do as she pleases, and experience, conceived of by James as the recognition of inevitability, limitation, and convention. Naturally, James made use of Italian art and architecture, with the result that his artistic references as a whole have limiting or conditioning values. Churches are visited by persons passing through crises or facing decisions. In the "dusky circle" of the Colosseum, with its tragic associations, Daisy Miller—James's heroine from Schenectady who creates scandal in Rome—contracts a fatal fever. With similar flair for seizing site for narrative glamour, James places Isabel Archer, the lady of *Portrait of A Lady*, amid the ruins of the Forum to reject her suitor Warburton. When Isabel sees Warburton next after refusing him in the Forum, they are depicted in front of the statue of the *Dying Gladiator*.

In going to Italy, the Anglo-Saxons of James fiction—like so many nineteenth-century artists and writers—are completing their experience, thus developing all their faculties. The author employed the Roman sites he knew well as vehicles through which his characters could embrace the aesthetic, and erotic, values of the classical past to realize their aspirations in Italy. Isabel Archer responds more to Rome where there is "history in the stones of the street and the atoms of the sunshine." Wherever she turned some great deed had been acted. On her first visit to St. Peter's "her conception of greatness received an extension. After this it never lacked space to soar." In the "glorious room among the shining antique marbles of the Capitoline Museum looking at "their beautiful blank faces, listening as it were to their eternal silence" she feels the effect of their "noble quietude" which slowly drops on "the spirit the large white mantle of place." But she falls into the error of idealizing Italy, of regarding it as a place apart from the common, from evil, and from responsibility. When Isabel returns to Osmond to preserve their marriage, "in the name of something sacred and precious—the observance of a magnificent form" the formal ideal to which she is committed has greater scope and vitality to him, on account of her acquaintance with the greatest monuments of the past in Rome. Later, after her breach with Osmond, it is "old Rome" which means the most to Isabel since "in a world of ruins the ruin of her happiness seemed a less unnatural catastrophe" and she comes to think of the city chiefly as "the place where people had suffered." Clearly, works of art and architecture constitute the most important single element for setting scenes in James's fiction. They represent the unity of experience—the interfusion of past and present and of the esthetic and the erotic. Moreover, they offer potent symbols for articulating James's frequent gilded-age critique: the pitting of the values of America against those of Europe.

Henry James died in 1916, just a few years after the beginning of the first world war would bring the tradition of American artists turning to Italy for inspiration to an abrupt end. By then, electric lights illuminated cafés on the Corso while Titians and Raphaels hung on museum walls in Boston and New York. After the triumph of Impressionism, Paris was the uncontested capital of the art world, and a bourgeoisie capable of patronage comparable to the middle classes of France and England was beginning to develop in Italy's northern industrial centers. Henry James, so comfortable in the curtained atmosphere of Roman salons sufficiently tarnished to avoid suspicion of modern elegance, could not possibly find contentment amid the grit and glitter of Milan, the pilgrimage center of a new cult that preferred the racing car to the Apollo Belvedere.<sup>18</sup>

The general belief of Jefferson's time that Italy lay at the center of western civilization was increasingly replaced during the twenti-



Fig. 6. Capitoline Museum, Rome. Photograph by author.

eth century by myriad competing views. America had come of age, and even Henry James sought to put the Italian experience into perspective: "It's the same world there after all and Italy isn't the absolute any more than Massachusetts. It's a complex fate, being an American, and one of the responsibilities it entails is fighting against a superstitious valuation of Europe."<sup>19</sup> If Henry James was a critical observer of this Italian scene, it was not because he posed questions about the seduction of Rome, but because he challenged accepted notions about the durability of the civilization itself. All cities change, and Rome is no stranger to transformation. Today the monuments of the forum are completely excavated, the Colosseum is free of weeds, and the imperial aspirations of this century's fascist regime are as evident in the built environment as those of the ancient Caesars. No longer is the Piazza Navonna filled with dirt, but tourists are rarely welcomed at the villas James could visit every day in the week. Few recall when Bernini's towers for the Pantheon were removed—or for that matter, when the pagan temple was dressed for Christian success.

For all its resemblance to an earthly paradise, Rome was not an ideal abode, and, as Henry James discovered, it was not so easily known. Nevertheless, Rome remained for him the supreme yet complex center of western civilization. It was, at once, the enduring site of crucial turning points in history and an ephemeral stage for the ambiguity of experience in a new and modern era. For the American learners who, like Henry James, journeyed to its sacrosanct monuments and gazed at its exemplary works of art, Italy would seem to be—and remains today—a uniquely instructive school. Traveling through Rome and across the Campagna, they journeyed through space and time alike. In so doing, they cultivated a fuller understanding of history—the ancient mystique of the past which their own country notably lacked, and of the contemporary scene—the modern progress and technologically-fueled promise of the present

which their country possessed most abundantly. In other words, they returned with a vision of what they regarded as a fully civilized society.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Cooper quoted in Robert E. Spiller, *Fenimore Cooper, Critic of his Times* (New York: Balch & Company, 1931), p. 148.
- <sup>2</sup> Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918), p. 85.
- <sup>3</sup> Benjamin West to Antonio Canova, London, May 5, 1816 cited in Paul R. Baker, *The Fortunate Pilgrims, Americans in Italy, 1800-1860* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 141.
- <sup>4</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Travels in Italy: Together with his Second Residence in Rome and Fragments on Italy* (London: Bell, 1883), p. 114.
- <sup>5</sup> Henry James, *Italian Hours* (Boston, 1909, reprint edition, NY: Penguin, 1995), pp. 202-03.
- <sup>6</sup> See Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr., ed., *The Lure of Italy, American Artists and The Italian Experience, 1760-1914* (New York: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston with Harry Abrams, Inc., 1992), pp. 19-20.
- <sup>7</sup> See George Stillman Hillard, *Six Months in Italy* (Boston, 1853), I, pp. 291-92; and Baker, *Fortunate Pilgrims*, p. 63.
- <sup>8</sup> See Van Wyck Brooks, *The Dream of Arcadia, American Writers and Artists in Italy, 1760-1915* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1958), p. 52.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.
- <sup>10</sup> See Natalia Wright, *American Novelists in Italy, The Discoverers: Allston to James* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965), p. 214.
- <sup>11</sup> Henry James, "A Roman Holiday," originally published in the

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- Atlantic Monthly* XXXII (July 1873), pp. 1-11; reprinted in *Trans-Atlantic Sketches*, 1875; reprinted in *Italian Hours*, p. 134-35.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 131
- <sup>15</sup> Henry James, "Roman Rides," originally published in the *Atlantic Monthly* XXXIII (August 1873), pp. 190-198; reprinted in *Italian Hours*, p. 140.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 139.
- <sup>17</sup> Henry James quoted in Wright, *American Novelists in Italy*, 199.
- <sup>18</sup> See Fred S. Lict, "American Artists in Twentieth-Century Italy," in Stebbins, ed., *The Lure of Italy*, pp. 129-46.
- <sup>19</sup> Henry James to Charles Eliot Norton, February 4, 1872 in Leon Edel, ed., *Henry James Selected Letters* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 93.