



ROMAN JOY

Posted on August 1, 2021 by Nicolas Kinosky



We will never tire of Rome. There is an ever-present joy in descending from the Quirinale, where the lies the mummy, Draghi, and entering the Field of Mars. A first love glows every time. You spend your day crisscrossing this heavy city, crushed under the domes, sedimented under the layers of time and ruins. Rome resembles a scraped and re-scratched palimpsest. On a speech by Cicero is inscribed a sermon by Augustine; on an elegiac poem, a lustful sonnet by Pietro Bembo. The precept of Lavoisier in chemistry becomes a rule: Nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything is transformed.

The Sol Invictus, luminous and virile divinity, was adored by the military and by Aurelian. According to Paul Valéry, this glaring fault holds within it the power of creation, the drive of life, good health. In its wake, [Saint Faith](#) of Rome, a martyr of the second century, daughter of Sophia, sister of Elpis and Agape. Hadrian arrested them, was captivated by their beauty and piety, but decided to put them to death. Faith was stripped, tortured; from the torn off breasts flowed milk. Supported by her mother in her ordeal, her head was cut off.

In Via Veneto there is the Martini sign, fizzing in the night, red-orange, like a new sun; a huge invitation to party – new rites and mysteries of a modern temple: Consumption. Rome is the concrete idea of permanence.

Visiting Rome over the years consists of constantly sifting through treasures with your eyes. First, thinking about the elementary things and then ending up moving for a painting by a 16th century painter in a church that opens only one day a week. And so begins the Roman adventure. What one has visited, one must see again. The traveler must, like a Sisyphean task, revisit what he has seen, revisit what he believes he has seen and what he would like to see again. On the next trip, everything will have to start again. A perpetuum mobile. The mystery of Rome is the closed palaces, full of beautiful things; the lit rooms that you can see from the street at night and to which you have no access; the doors of monasteries and convents that close onto rose gardens and palm trees. The city nurtures the desire, the lack and the urge always to go and see, further.

The Romans play a worldly carnival all year round. In the center, near the Palazzo Madama, a broom of officials and non-officials, carefully tied, brushes through the streets; priests from all over the world, old and western, young and Asian, flood in. The cassock is forbidden. You can still find journalists and intellectuals from the 1970s, with their unattractive physique as in Ettore Scola's [The Terrace](#). These shirt-wearing commies, with windshields as glasses, still take methodical routes through the city, a

gazette under their arm, a pipe in their mouth. Here, a beautiful mother, there, a former TV presenter finished off by the scalpel. Roman nobility rubs shoulders with the marginalized; Russian fortune tellers, bums, obese people on Vespas in vest, a cigarette butt between lips. Rome answers to the celestial and terrestrial Venus, to the great beauty, and to the Fellinian [vrenzole](#). It is torn between total luminosity and the most obvious vulgarity.

However, three Roman figures seem to me incredible in their taste of the beautiful, the good and the true.

Lucius Licinius Lucullus, after having known successes and political failures, withdrew from public life, retired, and settled in his properties to live the high life. His name remains attached to the splendid gardens at the site of the [Villa Medici](#). It is necessary to imagine a vast plain above the city, excellent orchards with numerous citrus fruits, peaches, apricots. Lucullus had the taste for fountains, porches in the shade, thermal baths lined with exquisite mosaics, deep in perspective, powerful of face. In Tusculum, above Frascati, he had planted the first cherry trees of Europe. Lucullus also excelled in the art of the table, cultivated the great refinements; what Plutarch noted with severity by recalling this anecdote. When his cook brought him only one dish, he retorted: "This evening, Lucullus dines with Lucullus." The cook thereafter made sure to always plan a banquet when Lucullus dined alone, with many dishes, bottles, and the desserts.

In the first half of the seventeenth century, [Scipione Borghese](#) was the great cardinal of pleasures. Between the nymph and the gladiator, his eminence showed himself as a great builder, restoring churches, building the great villa to which he gave his name. There he collected paintings and priceless works: a [Hermaphrodite](#) from the second century, as revealing of his penchant for men as for women; paintings by Caravaggio, and those of the [Cavalier d'Arpin](#) and Raphael. He was also the patron of Bernini, whose art culminates in [Daphnis and Chloe](#), a masterpiece of life and death frozen in fingers that transform; a body that molds itself into bark, hair that passes branches.

[Mario Praz](#), in the twentieth century, chose modest elegance. An art critic, he lived in seclusion in a Roman palace where he collected twelve hundred objects – paintings, drawings, furniture, sculptures from the last century; Napoleonic works but also neoclassical English paintings; conversation pieces; some wax bas-reliefs. [The House of Life](#) is his masterpiece, in which he speaks of his life and his work, as if they were the rooms of a house.

Rome is conducive to drunkenness and good food. Happiness is everywhere, desire flows, with all its variety – the lively joy in the sun, the relaxation in the afternoon, the light madness in the evening. What joy it was for me to befriend Julien Rochedy. How we feasted at [Al Moro](#), a landmark for ministers of the regime, on seppioline with artichokes, gamberi al pomodoro, and spaghetti alle vongole. Familiar delicacies take on a double flavor in Rome. Try Giolitti's ice cream, with almond and hazelnut, topped with panna montata. Genius. The Judeo-Roman cuisine is also excellent. In the street that leads to the [theater of Marcellus](#), admirable as a set of legos among the columns, the [Oratorio Venditorum Piscium](#), the apartments embedded in the heavy stone, you will find the Jewish kitchens, with their oriental air. Moshe will serve you fried artichokes as an appetizer, salted, crunchy to the tooth, fried brains, stew or a piquant and fragrant cod couscous.

The streets of Rome are characters. Via Giulia behind the Campo dei Fiori looks like a dowager alternating knitting and rosary beads. It is straight, austere, gray on one side, held together by official and severe buildings. A bridge crosses the street, covered with ivy, like a dark mantilla of a woman in mourning.

[Via dei Coronari](#) is a kind of woman of the century, one foot in the old world, the other in modernity. The antique stores are full of preciosities, trinkets and relics in silver and gold, official portraits of popes, swords, furniture, massive candlesticks. Proof of this strange feminine paradox, the conversation and the permeability to progress; a store sells plastic ducks dressed as the Queen of England, Michael Jackson, Trump; next to it another one sells only lead figurines of the Napoleonic empire.

[Via Margutta](#), on the other hand, is the most sensual; kind of feline, playful, whimsical, sparkling. Its walls are warm, yellow, ochre, saffron, taupe, sometimes washed out; ivy climbs up the walls, pearl-like roses. It is a young socialite, home to gallery owners, jewelers and artists. In its streets that go up and down, [André Suarès](#), even at noon, this great madman, roamed the city in search of the terrible absolute of the beautiful, the good and the true. In the evening, a French bribe-taker coming out of a cantina would fight with a cursed painter with a rapier. In the morning, the writer of the Jet-set, [Jep Gambardella](#) returns home, after a party; no more drinks, no more contact lenses, smoking, and finding on the Aventine, a monk come out of the monastery to say a final goodbye to his sweetheart.

The statues in Rome also live. In the church of [San Francesco a Ripa](#), which gave the title to a short story by Stendhal, [Blessed Ludovica Albertoni](#) is in ecstasy. She holds her chest, ready to leave it. Here, there is no fourth wall of the theater of which Henri Beyle speaks, no spectators as in the Cornaro

Chapel where [Saint Theresa is ecstatic](#) at the other end of the city. The layout is more sober, the line more sure, more incisive in the last productions of the artist. The dress is agitated, swollen by the waves of love, while her face remains virginal. Her body betrays terrible convulsions while her gaze carries the delicate vision of paradise.

In Sant'Andrea del Quirinale is the most successful work of Pierre Le Gros the Younger, a French student of Bernini. One reaches the *camera del polacco*. What is it? It is a room where is the recumbent [Stanislaus Kotzka](#), a young Polish Jesuit, who passed through Vienna, and died when he came of age in 1568. It is a baroque pearl. The [young man sleeps](#), dressed in a black marble that contrasts with his white porcelain skin. The success of the statue lies in the way the rigid cassock is rendered as if it were encased in cuttlefish ink colored marble. His face is soft but his feet are icy.

What can you say about [Michelangelo's Christ](#) in the Basilica in the Santa Maria sopra Minerva! It is a mass, a rock, extra pure. It is the Redeemer who manifests himself to us as a truth that takes up all the space in a life. Christ poses, swayed-hip, naked. The knees are so delicate that Sebastiano del Piombo said they were worth all of Rome.

But finally, [Pasquino](#), does he have something to begrudge these sculptures, the darling of the people? It is a statue from the third century. In 1501, a hand placed a pamphlet on it predicting the death of [Alexander VI Borgia](#). The term pasquinade was then derived, referring to an anonymous pamphlet often written in Roman dialect. With time, Pasquino became the first talking statue of the city, bearing popular reactions, the bloodshed and the acid laughter of the Romans. There are still salacious messages, claims and heart-felt messages: "*Berlusconi, figlio di Minghia,*" "*Nun si necessità sesso, er governo fa er culo ogni giorno!*" "*er Premier è un vampiro, certo, ma li Italiani nun hanno piu sangue, dispiacce!*"

It is more than natural, it is said, according to the custom of tourists, to sigh with admiration before the supreme beauty of the Sistine Chapel. For once, let us leave these marshmallows chewed up into liquid, sky-blue sky dishes and let us admire the Christian mosaics of the first centuries. Let's start with the [mosaics of the Basilica of Saints Como and Damian](#). After passing the courtyard and the fountain with dog heads covered with moss, you open the door and [what jumps at you](#) is a cobalt blue sky, marked by red clouds, under the feet of Christ, who descends from the sky in front of Peter, Paul, Como and Damian. The vision stops you dead in your tracks and grabs you.

Not far away is the [Basilica of St. Clement](#). The mosaics are more careful and finer. We see on the apse

deer drinking from a spring that feeds a kind of bush, representing a forest, from which grow branches, woods, trees that take up all the space and shelter monks, hermits, shepherds. [The cross in the center](#) is represented as the arbor vitae. In this religious jungle, you can see Saint Gregory and Saint Ambrose. Above the cross, in the sky, the only hand of God sends his son for the salvation of the world.

In the Rione dei Monti, there is the Basilica of Santa Prassede. You have to go to the left chapel, put a coin in the machine to turn on the light. Illumination! Largesse! The Chapel of Saint Zeno is illuminated. It looks like the miniature of a Greek [Convent of Meteora](#). A kind of gold coin box. You have never been so close to the [quivering mosaics](#), glittering like yellow, golden and blue fish scales. You have to see this simple and sober Christ supported by four angels. The faces are pretty, little sketched, almost naive, but the whole of it enfolds you with a warm joy. You even forget that Bernini delivered his first youthful work right next door.

Nicolas Kinosky is at the Centres des Analyses des Rhétoriques Religieuses de l'Antiquité. This article appears through the very kind courtesy [La Nef](#). Translation from the French by N. Dass.

The [featured image](#) shows the mosaic of the vault of the Chapel of Saint Zeno, from the 9th century.

