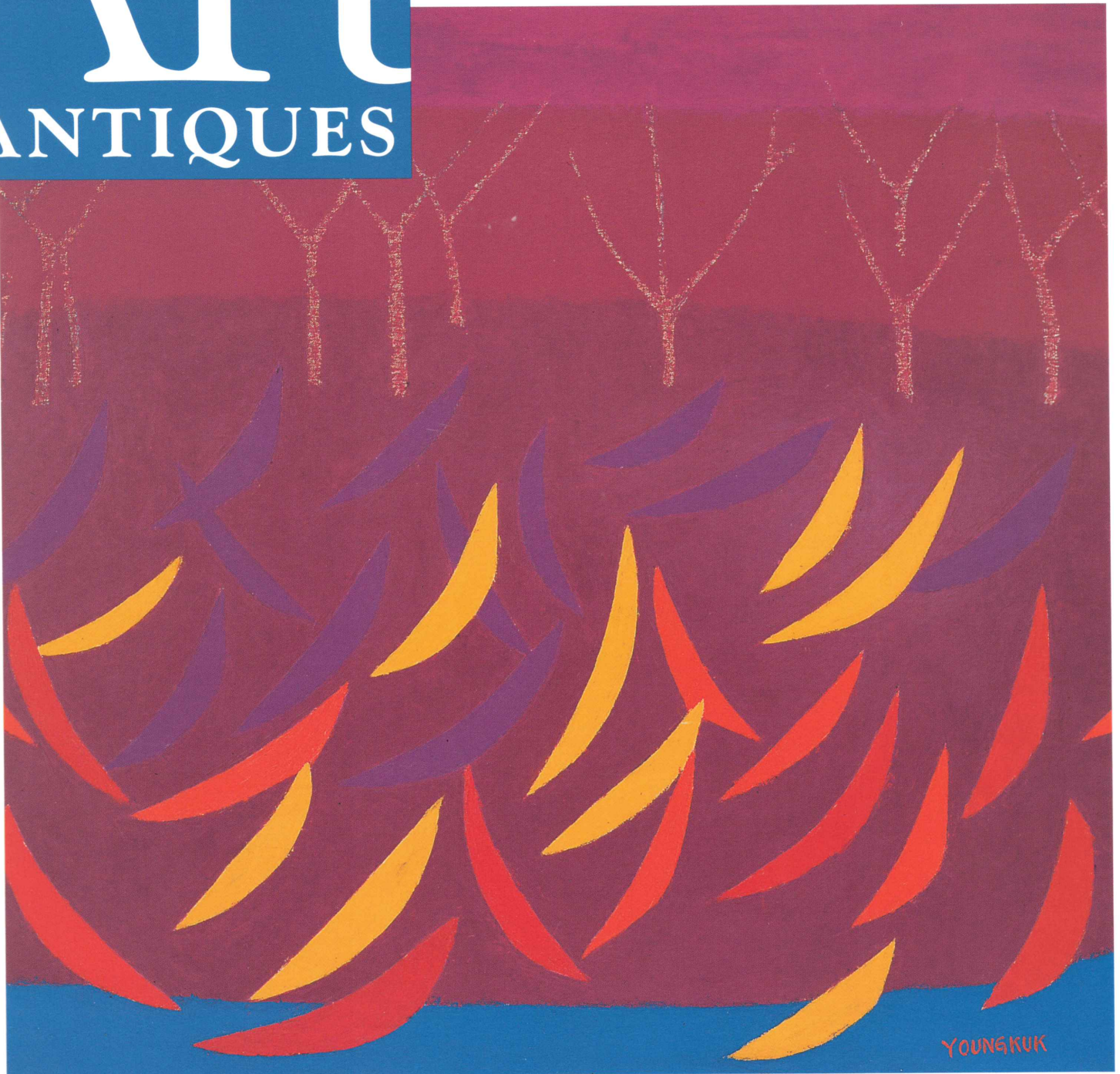


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Art & ANTIQUES

FOR COLLECTORS OF THE FINE AND DECORATIVE ARTS



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PIERRE BONNARD | DENYSE THOMASOS | RUTH ASAWA | THE HUB OF THE WORLD

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DISPLAY THROUGH JANUARY 5, 2024

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reason AND imagination

"The Hub of the World," a new exhibition at New York's Nicholas Hall, explores 18th-century Rome's rich cultural ferment

It's hard to imagine a time when the *Settecento*, as the 18th century in Rome is often termed, wasn't at least an occasional subject of interest to museums and art historians. In the not too distant past, however, the *Settecento* was viewed with disdain or ignored altogether as a kind of decadent shadow of the Baroque and High Renaissance. "The Hub of the World: Art in Eighteenth-Century Rome," on view at Nicholas Hall in New York through November 30th, reminds us of this period of disdain and of the individual who was most responsible for revivifying the *Settecento*—scholar, curator, collector, and artist Anthony Clark (1923–1976)—the centennial of whose birth is being celebrated this year.

Clark served as a curator and director at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, then as Curator of European Painting at the Metropolitan Museum, and at last as an independent scholar. He made it his mission to bring the extraordinary vitality of 18th-century Roman culture to the attention of the public. Clark also admired and studied the decorative arts of the *Settecento*, and a number of outstanding pieces can be seen

in the exhibition.

The *Settecento*, after all, was the century of Piranesi, whose engravings of Rome's glorious past—recall that excavations at Pompeii began in 1748—are rivaled by others depicting haunting, vaulted mazes and brooding, soaring buttresses that seem to spring from the dark corners of his imagination. It was a century that began in classical order, spawned revolutions and the Enlightenment; it was a century that gave us Samuel Johnson, Benjamin Franklin, Isaac Newton, Casanova, and the Marquis de Sade. Reason, the notion of the universe as a clock and God as a clockmaker, held sway atop subterranean channels of lushness, satire, the advent of dreams, the rediscovery of nature, and dark sensuality. In this tumult, Rome was, as Goethe wrote, "The Hub of the World," coining the phrase that names the exhibition.

It was also a time of extraordinary growth in the Eternal City, as it hummed with tourists and artists who were there to see and study the classical past and watch new marvels rise. It's worth noting, as the exhibition catalogue states, that Greece was under Ottoman rule at the time

By James D. Balestrieri

Opposite: Antonio Giorgetti, *Head of an Angel*, ca. 1668.





Altro spaccato per lungo della stessa bottega, ove si vedono frà le aperture del vestibolo le immense piramidi, ed altri edifizj sepolcrali ne' deserti dell' Egitto.

Disegno ed invenzione del Cavalier Piranesi

Inc. Piranesi F. 45

and was therefore all but off-limits to Western Europeans. Rome, thus, became the natural destination for antiquarians, painters, and sculptors, as well as wealthy Europeans completing their educations on what would come to be called “The Grand Tour” of the continent’s splendors.

Still, while the Settecento is better known than it once was, the artists represented in the exhibition are anything but household names. Looking at the art, though, it is clear that many of them ought to be. Further, considering the sheer number of artists who made their way to Rome to study and the number who made lengthy sojourns, the Roman Settecento, by dint of “The Hub of the World,” emerges as the crucial Neoclassical bridge between the Baroque and Romantic eras. This last fact, which concerns the number of artists in Rome who were not Roman or even Italian, helps explain the diminishment of the Settecento in art history. Because so many of the artists of Rome during the period originally hailed from elsewhere—Germany, England, and France in particular—they brought with them a profusion of styles, approaches,

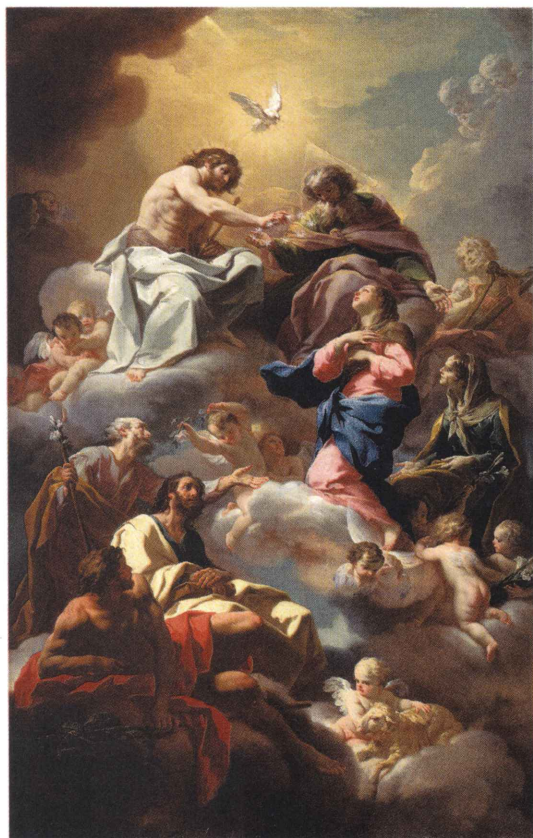
and practices that make a “Roman” facture difficult to define.

Paris-born Hubert Robert (1733–1808) spent a little over a decade in Rome, falling in love with the ruins of Rome’s imperial past. His 1759 painting, *Colonnade and Gardens at the Medici Palace*, epitomizes the Settecento. Incorporating Roman ruins on the site, the Villa dates back to the 1500s and became a *plein air* museum for tourists and artists, who can be seen in Robert’s scene. And Robert’s depiction is a work springing, at least in part, from his ruin-haunted imagination. The statues alongside the columns are Robert’s creations, fanciful renderings based on his own observations. Further, he inserts the Borghese Vase, an immense Athenian krater from the 1st century BCE crafted for the Roman market and unearthed in Rome in 1566. More than a bit obsessed with the Borghese Vase, Robert allows the artifact to make cameo appearances in his art in numerous real and fantastic settings. Here, what is interesting is that the students in their youthful tricorne hats are drawing not the Villa Medici but Robert’s *idealization* of the villa, though no one, then or now, who didn’t already

Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Mural Decoration for the Caffè degli Inglesi, Piazza di Spagna, Rome, 1769.*



Johann Zoffany, *Edward Townsend singing the 'Beggar's Ballad,'* 1796.



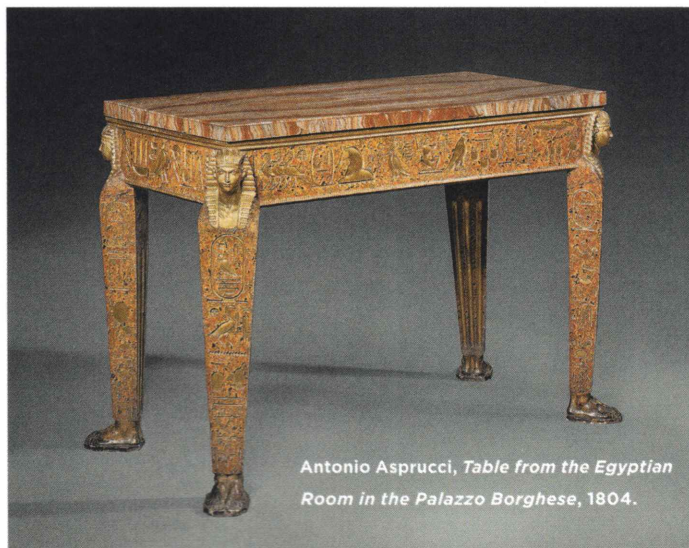
Clockwise from below: Pompeo Batoni, *Saint Louis Gonzaga*, ca. 1744.; Corrado Giaquinto, *The Trinity Crowning the Virgin*, ca. 1740.; Claude-Joseph Vernet, *A Mediterranean harbor at Sunset with Fisherfolk at the Water's Edge, a Lighthouse and a Man of War at Anchor in the Bay*, 1761.



know that; would have any inkling of Robert's winking capriccio.

Likewise, in the 19th century, Thomas Cole (1801–1848) inserted the Borghese Vase into his own compositions, including *The Consummation* panel in *The Course of Empire* series of paintings from the mid-1830s; his artistic and architectural studies in Rome and elsewhere in Italy in 1831 (especially his training in oil sketches made onsite) proved to be the most important part of his education.

If the Baroque, expressed in, say, Bernini, takes a maximalist approach to representation, while the Romantic, expressed in, say, Blake or Friedrich—or, in America, Thomas Cole—takes an allegorical, naturalistic approach, the Neoclassicism of the Settecento might be said to express an idealized vision of the past and present. Exquisite line from exquisite technique—whether one is looking at drawings, paintings, prints, sculptures, architecture, or the decorative arts—seemed to be the order of the day. It is no wonder that two of the key art forms of the Settecento were etching and engraving. *Mural Decoration for the Caffè degli Inglesi, Piazza di Spagna, Rome*, a 1769 etching by Giovanni Battista



Antonio Asprucci, *Table from the Egyptian Room in the Palazzo Borghese*, 1804.



Hubert Robert, *Colonnade and Gardens at the Medici Palace*, 1759.



Clockwise from below: John Deare, *Diana and Endymion*, ca. 1787.; Anonymous Roman artist (1st century) and Bartolomeo Cavaceppi, *The Rockingham Silenus Riding a Goat*, 1st century A.D., with restorations by Cavaceppi, ca. 1760.; Wilhelm Hopfgarten, *Cleopatra or Ariadne*, 1830.



Piranesi (1720–1778), shows the famous artist's interests extending beyond Rome to the iconography of Ancient Egypt, as he adapted the symbols of the Nile as adornments for a coffee shop where artists would gather. Thin line by thin line, Piranesi builds the image, bringing forth his ideal vision of the world of pharaohs, sphinxes, and pyramids.

Diana and Endymion, ca. 1787, a pencil and charcoal rendering on paper by English sculptor John Deare (1759–1798), who visited Rome and stayed until his death, looks like a deeply incised cameo relief as it tells the story of Selene, the Greek goddess of the moon (and identified with Roman goddess Diana), who fell in love with the shepherd Endymion and petitioned Zeus to preserve his beauty. Zeus granted Endymion eternal sleep—and, therefore, unchanging beauty—and Selene worshipped him. Eternal beauty is the perfume of Settecento art; its redolence makes its way into the aesthetic of poet John Keats, who would make it a central theme of his verse—his first, youthful run at the epic would be an adaptation of Endymion in heroic couplets.

Moving away from classical subjects, the same precision and attention to the beauty of line and form permeate the portraiture of Pompeo Batoni (1708–1787), a painter whose current fame is entirely due to Anthony Clark's keen eye and passionate commitment to bringing the Settecento out of the shadows. *Saint Louis Gonzaga*, ca. 1744, deftly combines the portrait with the vanitas paintings we associate with Dutch artists a century prior. Gonzaga cradles a crucifix in his left arm, as if it is a child, while his right arm and hand express something akin to the heart's awestruck delight. Under his left hand, a skull signifies the vanity of human life and desire while the three cut lilies symbolize death and the promise of resurrection. Even without knowing the religious





or art historical underpinnings of the painting, the delicacy of the hands and the beatific aspect of Gonzaga's gently illuminated face tell all the tale we need.

For every point, of course, there is a counterpoint, and for every thesis there is an antithesis. This is as true in art as it is in any other human endeavor. As time goes on, events expose the world as less than ideal. The very notion of the ideal accrues a certain strangeness to itself, a strangeness that art cannot help but find and convey.

Thus, for every *Saint Louis Gonzaga* there is a vital, immediate portrait like Johann Zoffany's (1733–1810) *Edward Townsend singing the "Beggar's Ballad,"* which looks as if it were painted from a photograph taken live in the theatre as Townsend performed. Take away the title, however, and the 1796 painting becomes slightly weird, forcing us to ask whether satire is operating somewhere in the vicinity. Similarly, Giuseppe Cades's (1750–1799) *Achilles Discovered by Odysseus among the Daughters of Lycomedes* (early 1770s), tells the story—a common myth in the frescoes of Pompeii—of the great hero dressing in drag to avoid having to sail to Troy to fight, while in *King David being Warned by the Prophet Nathan* (ca. 1772), Henry Fuseli (1741–1825) adds a spectral quality to the Old Testament story.



Above: Jakob Philipp Hackert, *Hemp Harvest in Caserta*, 1787.

Below: Giuseppe Cades, *Achilles Discovered by Odysseus among the Daughters of Lycomedes*, ca. early 1770s.

Anthony Clark embraced the Settecento as a whole, and the inclusion of his notebooks and journals—replete with wonderful, accomplished drawings of works he loved and prized—adds another dimension to “The Hub of the World: Art in Eighteenth-Century Rome.” That such a comprehensive exhibition should be found in a New York gallery as opposed to a museum might, at first, seem odd, but Clark’s career, passion, and mission place him outside the mainstream of art history, and, perhaps, outside the purview of the conventional museum setting. For Clark, Rome is a museum: a living, breathing cultural entity, as alive in its ruins as it was in the 18th century—and as alive as it is today.

If it were a musical composition—by Rome-born Muzio Clementi (1752–1832), perhaps—Robert’s *Colonnade and Gardens at the Medici Palace* might be titled “Fantasy on Themes from the Villa Medici.” In the end, *Colonnade* comes to light as the very essence of Clark’s profound connection to and feeling about the Settecento—that it couldn’t be contained by any one museum, any more than by reality itself could contain Robert. It is only fitting, then, that an exhibition in his honor should be housed in a gallery in one of the world’s great cities. 