

# The New Criterion

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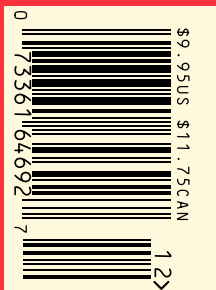
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Art

## From Rome, with art

*by Marco Grassi*

There was a time—not so long ago—when the term “art market” identified a loosely connected group of scholars, museum professionals, dealers, and collectors, many of whom knew each other well. It was a world whose coordinates corresponded chiefly with London’s Bond Street and New York’s Fifty-seventh Street, although there were lesser outposts in Paris, Florence, and Zürich. Wildenstein (referred to, not necessarily with affection, as “The Big W”) had *three* palatial venues: in Paris, New York, and Buenos Aires. Common to all these enterprises were their sumptuous “viewing rooms,” invariably outfitted in plush red velvet, with distinguished-looking staff in striped pants and morning coats hovering in attendance. A more important similarity was these firms’ stock-in-trade: earlier European paintings and works of art, often significant, even on occasion of absolutely capital importance—works that, had they not survived, would have imposed by their absence a different narrative on contemporary art history. It was not unusual to find examples by the likes of Titian, Rembrandt, or Poussin hanging on these dealers’ walls. On a regular basis the higher-profile galleries would mount themed exhibitions featuring selections from their holdings as well as items on loan from collectors and museums. Scholarly catalogues accompanied these shows, and some remain required reading on their subjects to this day. A memorable example is the gathering of Renaissance and later bronzes organized in 1961 by the “old” Knoedler Gallery in its Italian

Renaissance palazzo at the corner of Madison and Fifty-seventh Street.

By the mid-1970s, the lights had gone out in many of these galleries; other dealers—with mixed success—shifted their attention to younger fields and, eventually, to contemporary art. It appeared that the European Old Masters market was doomed, and the reason seemed clear: a generalized lack of interest in history and historical subjects combined with the inexorable migration to museums of so much material with universally recognizable, marquee labels. As the availability of works by “big names” shrank, so did the number and variety of top-tier Old Master galleries. In 2008, Agnew’s, the venerable London family firm, finally cashed in on its valuable freehold premises on Bond Street. In 1970 New York’s Knoedler Gallery moved uptown and later turned to Rothko and Pollock before being engulfed in a conflagration of skullduggery and scandal. Wildenstein soldiered on, protected by a mountain of cash, vast real-estate holdings, and miles-deep inventory. More recently, however, it too has fallen victim to changing times and tastes. After three generations, the Big W’s handsome Horace Trumbauer–designed *hôtel particulier* on Sixty-fourth Street is now home to the contemporary art gallery Lévy Gorvy Dayan; meanwhile, the Wildenstein family finds itself embroiled in a death spiral of tax-fraud accusations and inheritance issues.

Perhaps the most vexing problem facing the market for older European art is one of optics

and public perception. Not many consider an important fact: the evolution of the European art story has spanned more than five centuries, even longer if the mysterious seventh-century *Madonna della Clemenza* “icon” is considered to have been created in Rome. This vast panorama is even more complex and intriguing when seen as developing in an endless variety of local pictorial traditions: in Italy alone, at least six regional schools flourished, each one of these—and in every period—producing native artistic talents, from the most exalted and now universally recognized, to the lesser figures who nonetheless might well have been capable of creating the occasional masterwork.

This long tale of European art is aptly shown by the case of the Italian Renaissance master with the uncomfortable given name of Giulio Pippi, better known as Giulio Romano (1499–1546). Though hardly a household name, he was, nevertheless, a valued collaborator with Raphael at the Vatican and a brilliant draftsman and architect as well as a fresco innovator. Giulio’s fame was sufficient for Titian to have painted his portrait and even for him to have been mentioned by Shakespeare. And yet today, while not forgotten, Giulio survives mostly as a subject for study by art historians and specialists. His extant paintings and drawings represent but a tiny fraction of the wondrous kaleidoscope of our artistic patrimony. It is up to the perceptive observer to discover its secrets and, in the process, derive much satisfaction and bountiful intellectual as well as aesthetic rewards—on the condition that the observer be willing to devote sufficient attention, a task that requires time and no small modicum of patience. But isn’t this, after all, how genuine culture is nurtured?

An opportunity to cultivate one’s art-historical garden was afforded New Yorkers by a recent exhibition arranged in the elegant duplex premises of the Nicholas Hall gallery.<sup>1</sup> Celebrating eighteenth-century Rome and its art, the show was a combined effort by the gallery’s

1 “The Hub of the World: Art in Eighteenth-Century Rome” was on view at Nicholas Hall, New York, from October 6 through November 30, 2023.

eponymous owner and the Milan dealer Carlo Orsi. While Hall specializes in Old Masters and nineteenth-century paintings and drawings, Orsi, the president of the Association of Italian Antique Dealers, adheres rather more to the European *antiquaire* model, with a diverse stock of “flat” art as well as top-tier furniture and works of sculpture. Both dealers embody that rare combination of qualities: superior connoisseurship, consummate taste, and old-fashioned business acumen. The ambitious undertaking is also a gracious and touching tribute to the American scholar Anthony M. Clark (1923–76), who, through his groundbreaking research and publications, first revealed the vibrancy of eighteenth-century art in central Italy and, in particular, the genius of Pompeo Batoni (1708–87), one of the period’s leading lights. Curiously, there are no examples in the exhibition of Batoni’s luscious portraits of grand tourists, a genre in which he became Europe’s most famous practitioner. Rather than the expected ermine-clad grandee, the exhibition offers a smallish oval *Portrait of St. Louis Gonzaga* (ca. 1744). The adolescent saint lovingly cradles a crucifix as if it were the infant Child itself. Every millimeter of the canvas’s surface is alive with delicate brushwork accurately describing the textures being depicted: the soft flesh of the youthful cheeks, the diaphanous lightness of the surplice, the robust solidity of the dark flannel tunic.

The chosen theme of the exhibition is also indicative of the gallery’s willingness to explore a subject that is hardly the pinnacle of fashion these days; after all, the period corresponds to the European Rococo movement, often (and mistakenly) considered synonymous with frivolity and superficiality.

Hall, despite his youthful appearance, has been a presence in the field for decades. After stints with Christie’s and partners in London, he began his gallery seven years ago. It occupies two commodious floors of an Upper East Side townhouse. The space has already hosted several exhibitions, most recently one on Lombard Baroque painting. On that occasion, among the small selection of works, visitors were introduced to a veritable rarity: a panel by the visionary and bizarre Tanzio

da Varallo, a northern Italian artist who lived from around 1575 to 1633 and whose work is exceedingly rare. The example on view at Nicholas Hall may well have been the only work of Tanzio's ever to reach these shores.

Impossible to miss as one entered the gallery was the splendid "*Casino*" of Cardinal Albani on the *Via Aurelia* (1719) by Gaspard Van Wittel, called Vanvitelli (1653–1736). It is a snapshot of the teeming and brilliant life of the pope's court, for he was nothing less than a monarch whose dominions extended over most of central Italy. Moving past this wide-angle view, one could get close to the ultimate Vatican insider with the 1758–59 *Portrait of Cardinal Carlo Rezzonico*, depicting a nephew of Pope Clement XIII. The artist, Anton Raphael Mengs (1728–79), was an enterprising Saxon who made his fortune in the Eternal City being one of the first to promote the cool, controlled style now known as neoclassicism. Sure to please those concerned about the inclusion of female artists (and even those who aren't) were a pair of delightful ovals by Angelica Kauffman (1741–1807), the multitalented Swiss. Representing esoteric antique subjects, whose subtexts seem to be the victimization of women, these precious oils on copper boast a distinguished British provenance dating back to the early nineteenth century.

A selection of impressive drawings rounded out the roster of flat art. Remarkable among these was a large sheet executed in brown ink and wash by Louis-Jean Desprez (1743–1804). It depicts a religious ceremony at San Luigi dei Francesi but could easily be mistaken for a masked ball, such is the crush of elegant

figures gawking or striking theatrical poses. Among the sculptures included in the show, by far the most exciting and unusual was a terracotta group from 1765–70 titled *Love Taming Fortitude* by Claude Michel, called Clodion (1738–1814). Better known for his oft-repeated and somewhat vapid vestals and frolicking children, Clodion in this piece has an ornery little putto taming, rodeo-style, a bucking, monstrous creature only superficially resembling a lion. Nothing could do better to satisfy today's taste for the exotic than the astonishing pair of monumental candelabra by Luigi Valadier (1726–85). Dazzling with their black-and-gold finish, they are pure *Retour d'Egypte* at least twenty years before Napoleon's epochal visit. These exquisite objects could well have been a prime feature of Valadier's monographic survey a few years ago at the Frick.

No survey of the Roman eighteenth century would be complete without a smattering of Pier Leone Ghezzi's (1674–1755) memorable caricatures; what better medium than a wicked pen to puncture the pomp and pride of powerful aristocrats and sanctimonious clergymen? In this vein, by Joshua Reynolds (1723–92), is a less familiar image of four British *milordi* in spirited conversation dating to 1751; it is a witty yet mildly cartoonish take on the Grand Tour.

The diversity of nationality, artistic formation, and even religious persuasion of the talents who assembled in Rome in the eighteenth century speaks to the remarkable sophistication of the papal capital in one of its most felicitous moments. It was truly "the hub of the world."