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978-0-521-79441-1 - The Culture of the High Renaissance: Ancients and Moderns in Sixteenth-Century Rome

Ingrid D. Rowland

Excerpt

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Introduction

[È] sempre suto non altrimenti pericoloso trovare modi ed ordini nuovi che si fusse cercare acque e terre incognite.

It has always been just as dangerous to find new ways and orders of doing things as to go in search of new lands and seas.

Machiavelli, Preface to

Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius

Paradoxically, Italy's jolt into the modern era began with a long, penetrating look into the past. The fifteenth- and sixteenth-century thinkers who hailed a rebirth of ancient values in their own time did so knowing that their own era was irrevocably distinct from antiquity; indeed, all but the most fanatical wanted their Renaissance to stay in the heady realms of fiction. For the world that generated the antiquarian movement known as "humanism" was a world of rapidly developing commerce, commerce that depended absolutely on modern inventions, modern navigation, and modern mathematics. At the same time, the shapers of that modern world also felt the need to have it incorporate the best elements of their forebears' existence. With a rationality born perhaps of commercial training, they probed the past for its systems, what they called "modi e ordini" (ways and orders) or "ragione" (method), hoping to recover the abstract principles that would give their own achievements enduring value. Nowhere was this paradoxical search for higher principles more intense than in papal Rome. The suggestive atmosphere of the city, with its endless layers of civilization, inspired the officials of the late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century papacy, self-consciously charged with carrying out God's mission on earth, to believe that in their lifetimes for once humanity could muster the political means, the historical wisdom, and the

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living talent necessary to create “new ways and orders” of lasting validity, enfolding the best of all that had gone before in a truly catholic embrace.

This is the story of that concerted attempt to derive a new order for the future from scrutiny of the past. The search for systems was not itself systematic, nor did the seekers share the same idea of their goal. It was a fiction, after all, often a personal fiction. Nonetheless, a common theme unites many of the disparate activities that went into the creation of Renaissance Rome. And the paradoxical quest for a new order, by its very oxymoronic challenge, invited ingenious responses.

On occasion – most notably, perhaps, in the visual arts – this utopian project actually succeeded, producing such expressive innovations as the conscious gradations of style (*modi*) that appear in the painting of Raphael and Michelangelo, and the “orders” of classical architecture, devised in antiquity but first described as orders in sixteenth-century Rome. Yet the same search for new ways and orders also made itself felt in the world of finance, as when banker Agostino Chigi tried, like a nineteenth-century industrialist, to establish an international economic monopoly on a single commodity. Chigi’s vision took form because at the same time his pope, Julius II, was working toward another international goal: asserting a universal church that would far exceed the ancient Roman empire in scope. Indeed, Julius II was the pope who felt the synthetic drive of his epoch more powerfully than any other; the papacy of his successor Leo X provided some reflective respite from the momentum of Julius’s headlong pontificate, but it also began to reveal the fragility inherent in any synthesis of old and new.

In other respects, papal Rome’s pursuit of “*modi e ordini nuovi*” failed; the formulation of aesthetic standards for Latin and vernacular literature froze, in the hands of elegant but rigid critics like Pietro Bembo, into a triumph of superficial polish over compelling content, while papal efforts to foster new ways and orders for a reformed and truly universal religion resulted instead in violent schism.

Three characters who figure prominently in these pages have been, for various reasons, relatively little known to contemporary readers except from a handful of anecdotes. Yet each contributed significantly if not indispensably to the formulation of papal Rome’s new order. The clerical, antiquarian strain of the formula is exemplified by the papal librarian and orator Tommaso (“Fedro”) Inghirami, its forward-looking, practical side by the great merchant Agostino Chigi, and, acting as a bridge between the two, we find, alongside such a well-known figure as Raphael, the

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less well-known but no less significant Angelo Colocci, humanist, publisher, and aspiring historian of science. The various aspects of their lives and their various intertwinings, social, financial, and intellectual, are set out here in roughly chronological order.

Tommaso Inghirami was one of papal Rome's most able rhetoricians, brimming with enthusiasm for the city's creative ferment, an accomplished actor for whom the "modi e ordini" of rhetorical theory spilled over into the visual spheres of theater and art. Inghirami was also one of the very last people in sixteenth-century Italy for whom oratory, rather than print, was the most effective instrument of mass communication, and as a result the full impact of his evanescent but undeniable genius is irretrievably lost. What we see instead is the result of his absence after his death in 1516: the comparative lack of inspiration among *litterati* when artists and architects are achieving inspired new syntheses of past and present.

Banker Agostino Chigi transcended the boundaries of social class and intellectual discipline, a merchant magnate whose economic practices were as innovative as his sponsorship of the arts. He collected antiquities, promoted vernacular literature, and reserved special attention for scientific study of mathematics and astronomy. His respect for the ancient history of Italy coincided with his intense involvement in the most recent developments of politics and finance. By all contemporary accounts, his was a formidable mind, one whose impact on his contemporaries may have been as powerful as it is hard to trace from the surviving evidence, with one notable exception: the works of art and architecture he commissioned from Baldassare Peruzzi, Sodoma, Sebastiano del Piombo, and Raphael.

No resident of papal Rome may have been more instrumental in articulating the various new ways and orders of thought and creation, or in applying them across every boundary of social class and scholarly discipline, than the genteel humanist Angelo Colocci. Trained as a classical scholar, he threw himself into study of the ancient world while keeping close watch on the present. As he honed his skill in Latin, he eagerly tracked the development of Romance vernacular, not only in Italy but in Spain, Portugal, and Provence; he was an incurable universalist. A collector of ancient statues and inscriptions, he used these monuments of the past to further his study of current exchange rates and contemporary mathematics and to unlock the secrets of how God had ordered the world from the time of the Creation. A scholar of refined critical sensibilities,

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he worked closely with the “illiterate” artist Raphael (a description meaning only that Raphael had no training in Latin) to advance the theoretical underpinnings and professional practice of architecture in their own day. Few of Colocci’s contemporaries could have understood the idea of Rome’s renewal with greater depth of learning or breadth of imagination.

Our knowledge of papal Rome, as with any city, is conditioned by where we live and whom we know. The importance of print to literate culture ever since the mid–sixteenth century and the greater availability of printed sources to scholars has shaped our image of the early sixteenth-century city according to the lines drawn by printed accounts: guidebooks like Francesco Albertini’s pamphlet of 1510, the *Opusculum de mirabilibus antiquae et novae Urbis Romae*, or Andrea Fulvio’s erudite topographical study, the *Antiquaria Urbis* of 1527; essays on manners, like Baldassare Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier*, the letters of the papal secretary Pietro Bembo. These sources tend to emphasize the print-conscious papacy of Leo X (1513–21) at the expense of that pope’s immediate predecessors, Alexander VI (1492–1503) and Julius II (1503–13), for whom, more than half a century after Gutenberg, manuscripts and public speaking were still the primary means of important communication. Among manuscripts, those that are easily legible and in good condition are more likely to be used than those whose decipherment takes time; manuscript material that has been edited in print is more likely still to figure in modern discussions. Largely unpublished writers like Angelo Colocci, Egidio da Viterbo, and Tommaso Inghirami have tended to play a nebulous or subordinate role in our analysis of situations where Matteo Bandello, Pietro Aretino, or Paolo Giovio can supply a printed source of information, yet in fact the unpublished writers may have had a greater influence on what was thought, said, and done at the time. A diarist like Marin Sanuto, though he wrote copiously on papal Rome and has long been edited in print, supplies undigested reams of anecdotal information, whereas the analytical pronouncements of Castiglione’s *Courtier*, Bembo’s *Asolani*, or Paolo Cortesi’s *De cardinalatu* have already done the work of digestion, and it is tempting simply to adopt their viewpoint when we look at Rome in their day.

When the manuscript record is difficult to read and at best only vaguely allusive, as is the case with Angelo Colocci and Agostino Chigi, their entry into the historical record depends on time-consuming research, like that of Samy Lattés and Vittorio Fanelli on Colocci and that of Giuseppe Cugnoni and Felix Gilbert on Chigi. Just as unprepossessing, and just as

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demanding of hard labor, are the notarial documents of the Roman bureaucracy, with their formulaic legal language and their prosaic focus on the tangle of minutiae of life. Charles Stinger, Peter Partner, John Shearman, Christoph Frommel, Christof Thoenes, and Richard Sherr provide sterling examples of the way in which such modest remnants of the curial administration can be brought to bear, with great interpretive insight, on the re-creation of works of art, architecture, and music. These authors have made papal Rome a more physically concrete place as well as a real, functioning city.

The present work makes extensive use of unpublished sources, some previously unread, like many of Chigi's letters, along with those that are better known but always subject to rereading, like Colocci's tangled and difficult notes on measure. Inevitably, familiarity with specific personalities affects the way we look at papal Rome, much as the recent removal of several centuries' encrusted grime has given us not only a new view of the Sistine Chapel of Michelangelo and the Stanze Vaticane of Raphael but also a particular sense of intimacy with those artists. So too Paolo Cortesi opened up a new Rome to the late John D'Amico, just as Egidio da Viterbo has shed his own distinctive light on the same period for John O'Malley, Clare O'Reilly, Francis X. Martin, and Annamaria Voci; in turn, these researchers have given us new points of view through their scholarly work. From Agostino Chigi's vantage, we may find that Julius II is a far more interesting intellectual leader as pope than Leo X, because he combines ideological commitment and ready action with fiscal prudence. Tommaso Inghirami reinforces the same sense that the "Golden Age of the High Renaissance" flourished under the combative Julius rather than under his successor, despite Leo's flawless Medici pedigree. (Angelo Colocci, on the other hand, opted vocally for Leo.)

Tastes also change, and our viewpoints with them. Well into the twentieth century, scholars believed firmly in the essential paganism of the papal humanists and thought it part of their duty to decry such hypocrisy with full-throated indignation. As often, a masterful manipulator of print may have been behind it all: Erasmus, whose *Ciceronianus* of 1525 and *Julius exclusus de caelo* of 1513 both present damning portraits of papal Rome. In the same vein, Ludwig von Pastor, in his monumental *History of the Popes*, seasons his priceless manuscript evidence and painstaking analysis with a protracted sermon on the difference between the Christian Renaissance and the "pagan pseudo-Renaissance"; Pastor's tirade may be a fascinating episode in the history of scholarship, but it is factual non-

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sense. (It must be said, however, that the Vatican Library in which the Freiherr von Pastor did his research was a far cry from the ecumenical haven that the Vatican Library has become today, and perhaps only today's Vatican Library has made it possible to empathize with the expansive spirit that allowed Christian, Jew, and humanist to live side by side for a brief time in papal Rome of the early sixteenth century.)



Based as it is on a wide variety of sources, the present study remains anecdotal and highly personal, all the more so because what unites most of its protagonists with its author, and indeed with virtually every person cited in these pages, whether scholar, writer, artist, pope, parasite, whether ancient, Renaissance, or modern, is an irrational but nonetheless compelling passion for Rome. A schoolboy's graffito on the wall of his long-ruined classroom (razed in 531 A.D. to make room for the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore) says it all in a succinct little palindrome: ROMA SUMMUS AMOR. Not one of us may have understood the schoolboy's sentiment in quite the same way as the others, but we share it, just the same.

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 Chapter One 

Initiation

Voi ch' ascoltate in rime sparse il suono
 De que' sospiri ond' io nutriva il core
 In sul primo giovenil errore
 Quando ero in part' altr' om de quel che sono . . .

All ye who hear the sound in scattered verse
 Of sighs like those on which I fed my heart
 In my first wanderings of errant youth
 When I was still another man in part . . .

Francesco Petrarca, *Canzoniere* (1.1–4)

ROMAN RUINS

Sometime around 1490, a bright teenager named Angelo Colocci appeared in Rome with his uncle Francesco. They hailed from Iesi, a small city-state on the eastern coastal slopes of the March of Ancona, where the Colocci family had prospered for generations.¹ Yet however pretty their hill town, and however important their family had been to its fortunes, neither uncle nor nephew had any plan to stay there. Francesco Colocci, a scholar of Latin, had already spent his life as a diplomat at the court of Naples, a city to be reckoned with both politically and culturally in the mid-fifteenth century; its ruling dynasty of Aragonese kings kept a vast territory under control, while attracting scholars and artists from Spain as well as Italy. Angelo Colocci (1474–1549), though still a very young man, had already shown his learned uncle's talent for scholarship and conversation, and so, in the 1480s, barely out of grammar school, he set out with Francesco Colocci to try his fortune in a great courtly city such as Rome.² Even among some of Italy's most sophisticated intellectuals, the youth's ability stood out.

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Quickly, therefore, Angelo Colocci of Iesi joined the figurative nation that his contemporaries called the *Res publica litterarum*, the “Republic of Letters.” If only symbolically, the Republic of Letters provided a permanent home for a group of men (and a handful of women) whose lives often took them wandering in perpetuity. Latin served as its universal language, transcending every political, social, and regional division within the international community of peripatetic scholars. But Angelo Colocci, as it happened, never wandered far. He found Rome, and Rome, with its ancient monuments, its religious shrines, and the bustle of a modern city, bewitched him at once.

Rome also gave him and his studies a sense of purpose; the popes of the late fifteenth century took the magnificence of the past as a standing challenge to create a no less glorious present in the name of the universal Christian Church. Colocci absorbed the city’s sense of excitement; though he returned to Iesi in 1494 to settle his inheritance on the death of his father (his mother had died when he was three), by 1498 or so Angelo Colocci was back in Rome, there to remain for most of the rest of his life. He was to immerse himself with equal energy in the antiquarian past, the here-and-now of politics and finance, and the eternity of religion. Only Rome made such a life seem not only possible but necessary, for only in Rome did past, present, and eternity mesh together so naturally.

Time had dealt harshly with the city of the Caesars (Fig. 1). Sacked by Alaric and the Visigoths in A.D. 410 and preyed upon thereafter by generations of medieval armies, vast expanses of land within Rome’s ancient city walls now lay desolate, except for the shells of abandoned buildings rising among fields and garden plots. The Roman Forum had become the “Cow Pasture” (Campo Vaccino); the Capitoline Hill, site of the ancient city’s greatest temple, was now “Goat Hill” (Monte Caprino); the erstwhile palace of the emperors comprised part of a tract named the “disabitato” (the desert). Set behind a bastion, the fourth-century Basilica of Saint Peter’s and its surrounding settlement, the Borgo, commanded a bend in the left bank of the Tiber, safe behind the hulking remains of the Emperor Hadrian’s red-brick and concrete mausoleum, remodeled by medieval popes into a forbidding fortress, the Castel Sant’ Angelo. The mausoleum’s access bridge, the Pons Aelius, still led straight across the river, now carrying a street called the Via Papalis (Papal Way) into the very heart of fifteenth-century Rome. What had once been the flats of the Tiber’s floodplain, the ancient Campus Martius, now formed

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the nucleus of the papal city, a settlement stretching from the bankers' quarter just across the river from the Vatican to the various bases of the city's proverbial Seven Hills.

For centuries, this flood-prone terrain had been divided among several families of feudal landholders, the infamous "barons," each of them ensconced within a sprawling palazzo in a different section of town. Most of the popes in the Middle Ages had been supplied by two such baronial families – the Colonna, with most of their feudal holdings lying to the south of Rome, and the Orsini, with vast lands to the north. Other families, the "black nobles," had never produced a pope, but their cardinals and warriors had managed virtually every conclave and every meeting of the city government; their gangs of liveried thugs were as dangerous as the *viri strenui*, the "strongmen," who hung about the portals of the Palazzo Orsini on Monte Giordano (a hill built up from the crumbled remains of the Palazzo Orsini's previous incarnations) or the equally imposing Palazzo Colonna. By the end of the fifteenth century, Rome had yet to complete the transition from a baronial city to a papal city, although the College of Cardinals, hoping to keep the barons in their place, had begun routinely to choose popes from non-Roman families, and often families of no previous political consequence whatsoever.³

A walk through the mud and slops of a Roman street could still be a dangerous venture, when it led through baronial turf. On the most tranquil day a stroll through the city meant threading an obstacle course of soldiers, rattling carts of wine, grain, and vegetables, street vendors, prostitutes, pilgrim tourists, and endless entourages: cardinals riding to the hunt amid a retinue of yapping dogs; bankers in cavalcade on their expensive horses; popes, priests, and the faithful in solemn procession. Near Monte Giordano, Piazza Savelli, or Piazza Colonna, however, a jacket of the wrong color, the wrong badge on a hat, a swagger too jaunty, or the wrong company could bring on an attack by the neighborhood baron's toughs, the *bravi*. The meandering Tiber always flowed close by, ready to cancel the evidence, as it had once concealed many a murder in ancient Rome and carried off the carnage from the arenas.

The ruins of that ancient Rome, however, lay almost entirely outside the city's fifteenth-century focal points. Nobles, churchmen, artists, and scholars favored them instead as sites for their suburban garden plots, some of them quite extensive. The wrecked baths and palaces, like the wreckage of the Forum, had created strange artificial landscapes where a profusion of plants thrive on the compost of rotting Roman mortar (Fig.

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2). These gardens were known as *vigne* (vineyards: singular *vigna*), because no such refuge could be complete without a grape arbor to provide shade in summer and wine in fall. Unfortunately, however, the ruins also lay open to looting by collectors and by the builders who reused ancient brick, marble, and travertine in modern buildings. Lime burners fed ancient statues, inscriptions, and structural marble into their kilns to produce quicklime for the building industry as well as whitewash for walls. They worked virtually undeterred well into the sixteenth century.⁴

Yet the owners of Roman *vigne* also knew exactly how evocative their arbors could be. Reading ancient Latin poetry aloud to one another, archly quoting clever remarks passed down from antiquity, they imagined themselves back in the Rome of the Caesars. At the same time, artists pored over ancient columns, statues, stuccoes, and frescoes in search of new ideas and of communion with colleagues long dead. Wriggling down holes in the ground into half-buried buildings with candles, pens, paper, and lunch in hand, they sketched for hours in the shifty subterranean light.⁵

THE ROMAN ACADEMY

The artists were not the only motley crew to be found jostling one another in the catacombs or in artificial caverns of Roman brick. The liveliest, or at least the most dramatic, haunters of the ruins belonged to a peculiar club into which Angelo Colocci was soon to be ritually inducted – the “Roman Academy,” led by an eccentric professor of rhetoric, Giulio Sanseverino (1427–1498), who had assumed the three-part Latinate name “Julius Pomponius Laetus” – the last of which, the cognomen, typically described some distinctive personal characteristic. “Laetus” was no exception; it meant “happy.” In Italian, Julius Pomponius Laetus was known as Pomponio Leto, and as Leto he is usually identified today.⁶

The Roman Academy’s membership was almost exclusively male (Leto’s daughter Nigella provided the chief exception) and exclusively “literate,” that is, educated in Latin. As a group, we may call them “humanists,” people who had undergone the course of classical studies known in their own day as humane letters, *studia humanitatis*.

Rather than a prescribed curriculum or the subject of a university degree, humanism was more precisely an outlook on education. Humanists drew their inspiration from the Greek and Roman past rather than their more immediate medieval heritage, and they looked to that