

Ekphrasis

The man's perfectly curled ringlets, both on top of his head and on his dignified chin, are carefully carved into the smooth white marble. His face is calm, cool and collected even though he has just committed a feat of extreme bravery in the face of danger. The mouth of a ferocious lion, with teeth exposed and one fierce fang on either side, sits casually on top of the man's head, giving the illusion that the man's face is appearing in the middle of the lion's gaping mouth. Draped over his shoulders and tied around him like a sweater, the lion's defeated paws hang limply like a mocking trophy over the man's chiseled chest. His right hand is beautiful and delicate although the weapon it holds is forceful and threatening. His weapon of choice is a club that probably knocked the sad beast out with a single blow. His power is in his stillness, his face and torso as cool as the marble from which it was created.

(Statue of Commodus as Hercules, Capitoline Museum)

Space and Place (part 2 of a 3-part blog post)

I needed to escape the crowds immediately so I went to go look at the Pope's carriages in the basement. There was hardly anyone down there. No tour groups to tell me what to pay attention to, and no getting pushed around. It was not the most interesting exhibit ever, but it gave me a chance to calm myself down and renewed desire to see more of the museum. Re-entering the museum I looked at an exhibit of Aborigine Art and took my time walking around. Sounds from outside the exhibit kept invading my inner quiet, but I enjoyed myself as best I could. There was an aborigine Madonna and Child that was absolutely beautiful. I wandered up some stairs and found myself surrounded by stamps. Upon closer examination I realized I was in an exhibition about the papal postage and I almost laughed out loud. As I walked through a doorway one of the guards said "Buon giorno" and naturally I replied and smiled. A few minutes later he approaches me to ask me if I like the exhibit. I shrugged and told him how ridiculous I thought it was. He then explained he worked in the Grecian sculpture portion of the exhibit and asked if I wanted to see it. Before I know I am getting swept through the museum by the security guard who sent me a steady stream of questions about what I had and hadn't seen in the museum already...

(Vatican Museums)

Momentary Blindness

I lie on a cold stone bench with my knees in the air and allow my eyes to flicker shut. This is exactly the respite my body has so desperately needed. At this time in the late afternoon the sun does not beat my face but lightly kisses it, slowly lulling me to sleep. My lips form a tired smile as the air carries the scent of citrus right under my nose. In this sleepy state all the sounds of the park begin to blend together; voices speaking indistinct Italian in the distance, a car accelerating and whizzing by on the road below, a baby carriage being rolled closer and closer and then

Momentary Blindness — continued:

passing, the sound of its wheels against the rocks getting softer as it moves farther away. A cool breeze rolls over my body, breaking up the sun's warm rays, and as it glides over me I hear it shake the leaves in the nearby trees. The combination of the cacophony of bird sounds and my own hair tickling my neck as the breeze keeps on rolling by is doing nothing to help my lethargic state. It's decided: if the group leaves without me I may just stay in this garden forever, perpetually letting my lungs fill with the cool Italian summer air.

(Giardini degli Aranci, Aventine Hill)

Voyeur

She loves hot pink. In fact, she thought very carefully about her outfit today to reflect her favorite color. She has hot pink on her fingernails and toes, hot pink shirt (and slightly low-cut; you never know when a handsome Italian man will pass your way), and hot pink lipstick to finish it off. She heard that Italian women never wear shorts, so she wore a light blue denim skirt. Although sneakers would be practical, she wants to look sophisticated so she is wearing her favorite white espadrilles. Even though she prefers to leave it down, she had to put her brown hair up in a high ponytail with her thick, blunt bangs across her forehead. She's with her tour group at the moment. Back in Russia her friend suggested that they go to Rome to celebrate her fortieth birthday; she thought why not because, who knows, she may find her future (Italian) husband there. She knows nothing about traveling in Italy, so she and her friend had decided to pay for a tour group. She needs lots of pictures to make her friends back home jealous of her Roman adventures. She sits on the fence surrounding the fountain, angles herself slightly, and looks with a small smile at the camera her friend is holding. It takes several shots, but finally she finds one she's satisfied with. She's confused for a moment after seeing that her tour group has wandered somewhere else. She sees them across the piazza, and she and her friend walk quickly to meet with their group to go on to the next picture-worthy monument.

(Piazza Navona)

Giornali (various authors)

Today was marvelous because it was the perfect balance of history and modern culture. We met the owner of a translation company who possesses a deep appreciation of literature, specifically poetry. Her name is Alessandra, and fluent in Italian, French and knows a decent amount of Spanish as well. When we spoke in the St. John's courtyard, she said in a beautiful Italian and British accent when translating a particular poem, she interpreted a line differently than what the author originally intended ultimately reflecting the language ideology of her culture.

After hearing this I recalled a similar idea from my cultural anthropology class, a fundamental theory within linguistic anthropology called linguistic determinism where the way we think is determined by the way we speak. One of my goals was to apply what I have learned in my anthropology class to enhance my experience abroad, so to apply the latter during our talk with Alessandra was exceptionally rewarding. After our group and Alessandra became acquainted we proceeded to dinner. When we got off the metro, due to exceptional punctuality (for once), the group decided to stop at the Piazza del Popolo. This was also exciting because as a result of studying Piranesi sketches for the final exam, I immediately recognized the piazza because of the twin churches of Santa Maria dei Miracoli and Santa Maria in Montesanto, the massive Egyptian obelisk located between the latter and two fountains.

Although I accurately anticipated the Piazza del Popolo structurally, I was surprised to see how culturally diverse the crowd was. I heard a myriad of different languages; saw people in different religious dress, and various ethnicities as well. The Piazza del Popolo was a human watering hole, a place to interact, eat, listen to music or simply observe. I got pleasure from smelling a mixture of foods ranging from prosciutto to lamb kebab and listening to saxophones, guitars, and accordions while watching parents and their children dance. By merely sitting in the piazza, I felt completely immersed in Roman culture by witnessing the cultural layering of the city through its diverse inhabitants. It was also the first moment during our stay in Rome I did not feel ostracized for being a tourist and it was lovely to see other tourists appear just as comfortable, and not completely submerge into maps and guidebooks. I could not resist imagining if the United States had places like the Piazza del Popolo, and if so maybe our society would not have as many antisocial habits such as secluding ourselves by listening to mp3s, or spending hours watching television and playing videogames.

On a structural note, the Piazza del Popolo is incredibly spacious which is interesting since in most parts of Rome space is limited. The shape of the piazza also seems to appropriately affect the flow of traffic in and out of the area as well. There is also juxtaposition between classical art and architecture and the modern versions of the latter as well. For example, although the fountains, churches and statues are neo-classical, there is also modern art incorporated into the space such as a water tower disguised as a massive toxic waste jug located on top of a building with classical architecture. The Piazza del Popolo also leads to an area with an abundance of contemporary art galleries encouraging that juxtaposition previously mentioned. Today exemplified the various layers within the city culturally and structurally; I'll keep you posted if I find anything else that captures my interest. Until next time...

* * * * *

Yesterday we visited the Church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli on the Capitoline. After trekking up the inordinate number of steps to the church's door, the five of us (Sandy, Allen, Gia, Sarah, and

myself) had to pause for the sake of our aching legs. We donned our church appropriate attire, sweaters and shrugs, and ducked through the door and out of the harsh sunlight. Inside, awe hits me over the head and nearly knocks me down. The Aracoeli is a seriously ornate church. Art hangs from the walls, drips from the ceilings, and puddles on the floor. With so much going on, I hardly knew where to look, let alone where to begin. The easiest navigational method I found was to move straight in from the entrance to the back chapel, then cross to the opposite aisle, then proceed up the center toward the immense altar.

The niches in the side aisles seemed to be dedicated to prominent families. They were filled with paintings and statues and tapestries. If it were not for the gates barring the entrance, I would have liked to examine them more closely. As I shuffle from niche to niche, I almost trip over a carving in the floor. It is a man with some Latin inscriptions. His face is worn away entirely except for his nostrils. Though it must have been sharply detailed once, centuries of visitors shuffling as I am have worn him smooth. I regret this. Someone took the time to expertly carve these large tiles, and here we are spoiling their work. I wish that they were more protected; why does their low location and lack of glitter and gold diminish their value? While some paintings are faded, most of the more aerial decorations seem in great condition – the ceiling glows gold and crystal chandeliers dangle like stalactites. These things are pretty to look at for a while, but for me the carvings of people have more character.

Artistic renderings of people always interest me more than nonhuman works. Of the hundreds of statues staring at the Aracoeli's visitors, the two robed men splitting center on the altar were the most interesting and imposing. Gesticulating with pointed fingers, they seem menacing and judgmental. They make me feel ashamed of my lack of Christian upbringing. I was not christened, baptized, communion-ed, or confirmed. I believe in sleep and Bugs Bunny cartoons on Sundays. These statues are pointing me to the door: get out, you don't belong here. Visiting the Aracoeli made me wish that I was more religious. I found myself affected with a sense of calm because of the reverential attitude of the building. The other tourists disrespectfully snapping photos made me mad; cameras were forbidden just like bare shoulders. I felt protective of the relics even though they had no real meaning for me – they are just really pretty.

When we finished taking in the church, we sat down one by one in the chairs before the altar. I think that I was not the only one overwhelmed by everything that was in the Santa Maria in Aracoeli. We filed back into the glaring sun to continue with our Roman adventure.

* * * * *

Its probably a good thing I don't have a room that's next to the street or I'd spend half my time just staring out the window.

My courtyard view isn't very exciting.

Yesterday evening there was a jazz band playing on the roof of a hotel across the street. So I made myself comfortable on the window ledge of the bathroom and sat and listened, watching the cars whizz past on the street below. It smelt wonderful and I was completely comfortable.

I love the size of Roman windows, they're all so tall and hardly ever have screens. Its just you and the outside, direct contact, no need to duck or stand on your tip toes. You merely have to open the shutters and listen.

I even got the courage to stand up on the windowsill to get a better view of the musicians. It was a little dangerous, but I wasn't that scared and got this incredible feeling of freedom.

I always open the bathroom windows when I take my shower so I can listen to the birds chirp while I'm there. I would have the windows open in Liz and my room all the time, but Liz is petrified of bugs so at night we keep them closed. I honestly don't mind that much, I just like open windows.

Then this morning, I opened the windows before my shower and witnessed one of the happiest sights I've seen in a while. The sparrows were diving down from the rooftop as if they were racing, swirling around before circling right in front of my window and soaring back onto the rooftop. It was adorable. I call the sparrows starlings in my head because it encapsulates their being more. They are playful star-like birds that just trust their life to the window. They're like those trick pilots, who trust themselves so completely they never have to worry about crashing, they just go for it.

There were tons of them, at least 30, all doing circles and loops between our building and the hotel. They got so close to my face I probably could have intercepted it. Though that would have been painful for both of us. They were having so much fun, I wished I could join in. Starting their morning right with a proper flight and an adventure.

Now I notice them everywhere, these happy playful birds that like to flirt with the wind.

From this window I can occasionally see stars. In any city, this is a highly valued sight. I love the stars and the moon more than any other natural sight and not being able to see them for long stretches of time upsets me. So I spend at least a few minutes a night sitting at this windowsill. It's a silly place to sit because its in the bathroom and all, but I don't mind, its my favorite spot in this building.

* * * * *

The Campo de' Fiori has become one of our familiar hot spots here in Rome. Somehow we've found ourselves hanging around the Campo on multiple occasions during this trip. It definitely seems to be becoming one of those places that we will be especially nostalgic for when we leave; after a handful of visits we have begun to develop a true sense of ownership of the place.

The first time we experienced the Campo de' Fiori was during the daytime when the entire square was filled with an open-air market. Vendors set up their kiosks and sell all sorts of Italian products such as olive oil, pasta, and lots of different spices. The market is bustling with people browsing the kiosks and vendors shouting in broken English "Hello! Very good price!" The first time I went to the market I had the most delicious cup of assorted fruits which I bought from a particularly friendly vendor. I'm not usually a person who craves fruit or eats very much of it at all, but this fruit cup was the most refreshing and wonderful thing I could have dreamed of in that moment. I would classify it as something to write home about. After a long morning filled with walking in the heat, the Campo de' Fiori was a perfect respite; I had a lovely time strolling through the market and browsing through the various colorful food items while enjoying a cold refreshing cup of *frutta*.

My second visit to the Campo de' Fiori was at night, when the place completely transforms. It was hard to believe we were even in the same place as we were during the day. It was a Sunday night, so I wasn't expecting to see very many people out and about, but to my surprise the Camp was bustling with life. The piazza appeared much bigger with all the kiosks cleared out and the area seemed very much alive. The lights from the bars surrounding the square

and the sounds of merriment abounding gave the area such an exciting aura. That night we had been walking for quite a while, lost of course, and thus were anxious to sit down as soon as possible and have some drinks. We sat down at a bar directly in the center of the square called Sloppy Sam's ("Classy in the front, Sloppy in the back") - Excellent. Sounds great.

After ordering a bottle of wine, the stress of our hour of unintentional wandering melted away. Even though it was late and we were already tired before we even got there, we still stayed for a while and enjoyed ourselves and each other's company in true Italian fashion. While we laughed and drank and watched all the people stroll through the piazza, I felt as though we were experiencing a genuinely Italian moment. As I've discovered, taking a pause out of the stress of the day and sitting down to enjoy the company of friends is much more important here in Italia. Life in New York is often so fast paced that we often don't fully appreciate the time we spend with our friends, or we're on the phone texting the entire time. Here it's different; if you sit down to have a drink with friends, chances are you won't get back up for quite a while. The thought crossed my mind: maybe if we just attach ourselves to this table and refuse to get up, we'll never have to leave?