

## Introduction

From their formation in the early seventeenth century by Cardinal Scipione Borghese, nephew to Pope Paul V, the Borghese collections of painting and sculpture were among the most important in Rome and among the sights most enthusiastically admired by visitors to the city. The paintings, largely Italian works from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were displayed primarily in the Galleria Terrena, a suite of 12 rooms on the ground floor of the family's palace near the banks of the Tiber River. The sculptures, predominantly antiquities but including some of the masterpieces of the young Gianlorenzo Bernini, were exhibited mainly at the Casino Nobile, the principal building on the grounds of the Villa Borghese, about a mile away on the Pincian Hill, at a site then on the outskirts of the city but long since absorbed into the urban fabric. Modern tourists can still visit both of these locations. The palace remains in the possession of the Borghese family, though some of the rooms that housed the painting collection are now rented out. The pictures that hung on the walls have been removed, but the elegant ceiling decorations in painting and stucco, most dating from the late eighteenth century (1767–75), are still there. The Casino is now a great public museum, the Galleria Borghese, and the sculpture collection, although diminished after some of the antiquities were sold to Napoleon in 1807, continues to be displayed in the 11 rooms on the *pianterreno* (ground floor) that it had traditionally occupied. In the 13 rooms on the *piano nobile* (upper storey) are many of the pictures once exhibited in the Galleria Terrena.

At the Galleria Borghese, modern visitors may thus see in one place a great historic collection formerly divided between two. The collection is impressive enough in itself, but no one remains unaffected by the setting in which it is shown: the ground floor rooms of the Casino are themselves a great work of art, a masterpiece of interior decoration and one of the most magnificent museum spaces ever created. Their current decoration also dates to the late eighteenth century (1775–90): in addition to the elaborate ceiling paintings like those in the Galleria Terrena, the walls were embellished with niches and aediculae for statuary, stone pilasters and columns, gilded capitals and cornices, stucco bas-reliefs, and painted or mosaic panels; the floors, too, were

paved with richly colored marbles. Thanks to the restoration completed in 1997, modern viewers can experience the Casino in a manner that permits them to enjoy the individual sculptures exhibited there, as well as to make contact with the specific historical moment of their installation; one is invited to view these works with the eyes of the eighteenth century and to realize, as a result, how much our experience of looking at art is conditioned by the environment, both physical and cultural, in which it occurs. One is aware of witnessing a crucial moment in the emergence of a modern, self-conscious way of relating to art, the emergence of the modern museum.

The late-eighteenth-century decoration of the exhibition spaces at the Borghese Palace and villa, undertaken together with the reinstallation of the family's vast art collections, was thus one of the most significant cultural events in Rome during the age of the Grand Tour. This study examines the form and content of the decorative programs at the Galleria Terrena and the Casino, situating them within the interrelated contexts of Borghese patronage, the Grand Tour, and the evolution of modern museums. In this introduction I sketch out the relationship between these contexts and describe the organization of the book.

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The decoration of the display spaces at both the palazzo and the villa was undertaken by a single patron, Prince Marcantonio Borghese IV, and was the product of a single campaign, supervised by a single architect and designer, Antonio Asprucci. Marcantonio was one of the most ambitious Roman patrons of his day, well known to the international artistic community that gathered in the city. While the decoration of his palace and villa was the kind of project that such a patron might undertake as part of the regular renovation of his properties, the effort was also motivated by the desire to make the spaces more effective for display, to accommodate and address the ever-growing number of visitors who came to Rome not as pilgrims, but as tourists, eager to savor the city's worldly riches. The result is that Marcantonio's enterprise marks both a culminating moment in the display of private princely collections and a decisive step toward the modern public museum.

Asprucci's treatment of the spaces, especially the Casino's ground floor, makes brilliant use of a rich architectural vocabulary, drawing upon elements from traditional baroque classicism, the more modern neoclassicism influenced by recent discoveries of ancient Greek architecture, and fashionable Egyptian motifs. The overall effect, as impressive for its sophistication as its opulence, was calculated to appeal to the most knowledgeable viewers, to impress them with a sense of the continued vitality of classical style in the place of its origin and, at the same time, of its appropriateness as a vehicle for the expression of a modern, cosmopolitan culture. The thematic content of the painted decoration—also worked out under Asprucci's supervision—similarly recasts

traditional themes in a new way, making a case for the international, truly universal nature of Roman culture.

Art historians usually mark the birth of the modern museum at the moment in 1793 when the French royal collection was reconstituted, along with other appropriated objects, as the *Muséum Français* at the *Palais du Louvre* in Paris and opened to the public. In the course of the eighteenth century, public art museums had begun to appear all over Europe: often recontextualizing works from older collections, they had a deep impact on cultural life, transforming the way in which people related to art—and thus the function art came to play in the modern world—as well as contributing to the newly emergent sense of public cultural space we associate with the Enlightenment.<sup>1</sup> The museums and galleries of Italy, many of which were private but, like the Borghese collection, increasingly adapted to a public role, were an important stimulus to this process. As the most intensively visited and highly admired in Europe, the great Italian museums set a standard for what museums should be, a standard that was reflected in the early Louvre, is still visible there today, and that has made its influence felt on all subsequent art museums.

For most eighteenth-century visitors, the experience of the Borghese collections was primarily a social event; any engagement with the works of art displayed there was framed by the demands of social performance. Although the experience varied, depending upon one's gender, nationality, social class, and occupation, the intended audience was primarily aristocratic: the spaces of the *Galleria Terrena* and the *Casino* were essentially theaters for the enactment of an enlightened aristocratic ideal, for the exercise of courtesy and polite conversation, as well as for the enjoyment of a sophisticated pleasure. Those members of the gentry and newly wealthy professional classes who began to figure prominently in the *Grand Tour* from the early eighteenth century were expected to adapt themselves to aristocratic standards of behavior, and their ability to do so was a source of satisfaction to them. Even those not particularly learned or interested in art would have felt called upon to comport themselves as if they were, while for those with genuine interest, the spaces offered the possibility of an exhilarating and deeply rewarding experience. Although accommodating aristocratic prerogatives, the Borghese interiors thus helped to bring about a subtle redefinition of what real cultural entitlement might now involve.

The separation of sculpture and painting—a feature common to Roman collections of the period—could be called historical insofar as it roughly corresponded to a distinction between ancient and modern. Yet these two classes of objects also involved different habits of viewing and resulted in different kinds of experiences: the determination to thematize that difference is evident in the Borghese installations—in the fact, for instance, that early modern sculpture such as Bernini's was exhibited along with the antiquities at the *Casino*. Neither the paintings nor the sculpture was organized historically in the sense of providing a consistent chronological or geographical survey of the kind we expect to find in a modern museum. The walls of the *Galleria*

Terrena were crammed with pictures, only loosely linked thematically but offering abundant opportunity for savoring a rich variety of personal, regional, and historical styles. The antiquities at the Casino, on the other hand, were complemented by elaborate decorative ensembles in such a way as to underscore thematic associations of a literary and philosophical nature. Because this kind of separation was eventually replaced in the course of the nineteenth century by a more comprehensively “historical” approach to display, we tend to dismiss it as obsolete, and the habits of looking, thinking, and speaking associated with it as somehow less serious and self-conscious than our own.

Yet the way in which the Borghese exhibition spaces were calculated to mobilize the viewer’s responsiveness, elevating and organizing the subjective experience of art into an exercise in refined sociability, demonstrates an advanced awareness of how complex and profound the experience of art is and thus of the complex, culturally productive role a museum might serve. Magnificent in purely material terms as these sites are, their arrangement and decoration was motivated by a clear understanding that the visitors were to be the real centerpiece of the display. Where modern museums assume fewer skills on the part of the viewer, so that his or her experience is largely passive and the didactic effect largely subliminal, the Borghese spaces only made sense as the site of an active performance in which the social purposiveness of the experience was foregrounded and a conscious engagement with the forces that shape it was encouraged. The relation between exhibition strategy, discursivity, and social practice at the Palazzo and the Villa Borghese thus compels us to reconsider received notions of what constitutes the modernity of modern museums; it may even have a lot to teach us about the real role that the experience of art plays in our own lives.

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This study is divided into an introduction, five chapters, and an epilogue, followed by three appendices. The first chapter provides a general historical and conceptual framework by discussing Roman culture in the period of the Grand Tour, especially as it pertains to the visual arts, antiquarianism, collecting, and display. Chapter 2 considers the Borghese decorative project as it relates to the tradition of Borghese family patronage and the history of the painting collection, before proceeding to an analysis of the decoration of the Galleria Terrena. Chapter 3 discusses the redecoration of the Casino in relation to the history of the villa—including its extensive gardens—as well as the history of the sculpture collection and the development of Asprucci’s designs for the rooms, as documented in his drawings and other sources. Chapters 4 and 5 present an analysis of the decorative program of the Casino and the installation of the sculpture collection; considering the ensemble as a finished product, they attempt to reconstruct the kind of experience the rooms were intended to provide.

In addition to the concerns already discussed, Chapters 2 through 5 must also address other issues. The sheer mechanics of the productive process is one: Asprucci supervised and coordinated the work of a large number of artists and craftsmen. Of greatest interest, perhaps, is the contribution of the painters and sculptors enlisted for the decoration; they included many of the leading artists then active in Rome, and the variety of their styles reflects the richness and sophistication of Roman art in the transition between the late-baroque and neoclassicism. In addition, the collection of ancient sculpture and its installation occupies an important place in the history of antiquarianism. The material presented in these chapters relies upon a variety of primary sources, from payment records to encomiastic poetry, guidebooks, travel accounts, scholarly writings, journals, and letters. A selection of this material, mostly unpublished, is presented in the appendices. The largest appendix is the third, an index of contracts and payment records for the decorations in the Galleria Terrena and the Casino that is coordinated with a room-by-room summary of the ornamentation; including over 500 records, this section offers comprehensive information on the adornment of the rooms, complementing the discussion in the text. The epilogue concludes the work of the first chapter, returning to a consideration of the Borghese project in relation to other Roman museums of the eighteenth century—most notably the Museo Capitolino and the Museo Pio-Clementino at the Vatican—and its influence on the history of museums as a whole.

## Note

- 1 For an overview of Enlightenment culture in Rome, see Hanns Gross, *Rome in the Age of Enlightenment: The Post-Tridentine Syndrome and the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990). The notion of the public sphere as the distinctive achievement of the Enlightenment was proposed by Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989; original ed. 1962). For the Louvre as the archetypal modern museum, see Andrew McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics, and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994) and Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995). Recent scholarship on the museum as a defining feature of modern culture includes Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1992); Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995); and Donald Preziosi, *Brain of the Earth's Body: Art, Museums, and the Phantasms of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).