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Voyage to Italia: Americans in Italy in the Nineteenth Century

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Voyage to Italia

Americans in Italy in the 19th Century

WILLIAM HENRY FOX TALBOT, THE COLISEUM, ROME, 2ND VIEW 1846, CALOTYPE, 7 3/8 X 8 7/8, UNL-F. M. HALL COLLECTION.

SHELDON MUSEUM OF ART • MAY 7 THROUGH SEPTEMBER 5, 2010

Italy had long been a destination for American travelers, but by the nineteenth century American tourists flooded into Rome and Florence, hunted for picturesque vistas on the Bay of Naples and roamed through ancient ruins in Paestum. Armed with Baedeker guidebooks or the *Hand-Book for American Travellers in Europe, Collated from the Best Authorities,* they sought the authentic spirit of Dante, Petrarch, and Virgil, and chronicled their lengthy tours in detailed journals and letters to friends. Americans traveled to Italy for various reasons: to gain social prestige, to pursue artistic and literary interests, or simply to enjoy a beautiful country. Americans in nineteenth-century Italy sought to capture and make sense of their cross-cultural experiences. Through works of art, travel diaries, and guidebooks, *Voyage to Italia: Americans in Italy in the Nineteenth Century* documents the idealizing and critical attitudes that American tourists had about Italy.

During the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the Grand Tour was a rite of passage for wealthy, young European men, and for a few American men as well. Led by a tutor, the young men traversed the Continent for a few months to as long as five years. The Grand Tour might supplement a college education, or in some cases, replace it entirely. It was intended to give a young gentleman the polish and education he needed to fulfill adequately his role in society. During the course of their travels, these students would become immersed in the

Caravaggio (School of), *Saints Peter and Paul Discussing the Bible,* undated, oil on canvas, UNL-Gift of the Kress Foundation

Classical world of the Greeks and Romans, the artistic world of the Renaissance, and the atmosphere of royal courts and halls of diplomacy. The final leg of the trip was Rome, where visits to the Coliseum and to St. Peter's tomb were the highlights. By the nineteenth century, the Grand Tour as a cultural touchstone had dwindled in importance, but the concept of travel as an educational and cultural experience was still significant. Advances in technology, such as an extensive railway network throughout Europe, made the journey easier, and Americans had become a much greater percentage of the tourists.

THE JOURNEY

Traveling for pleasure was itself a relatively new activity for Americans. Members of a leisured class, composed mostly of business and property owners, suddenly had new money and could dedicate themselves to climbing the social ranks. They sought to establish themselves as cultured citizens—and therefore worthy members of society. While many people vacationed within the United States, only a trip to Europe could provide the sort of social cachet to be enjoyed once they returned home. Cynical writers of the time were aware of this social-climbing aspect to travel. As one pointed out, "Many of them go for no better reason than because traveling costs money, and being necessarily more or less exclusive, is approved by fashion."[1]

Many Americans had less mercenary reasons for the long, expensive, and frequently uncomfortable trip. Artists such as William Stanley Haseltine, Elihu Vedder, and George Inness traveled to Italy in search of inspiration in the landscape, the people, and the history. Average Americans also felt a strong connection with the classical past, particularly Rome, and longed to see the land they knew so well through books and art. As George Stillman Hillard said in his travel narrative *Six Months in Italy,* American tourists sought to discover "the majestic shadow of the past," which could not be found in London or Paris but which was available in Rome.[2]

GUIDEBOOKS

Most travelers came armed with guidebooks and other travel aids. These guides provided information about art history for readers not well versed in art beyond the names of Michelangelo and Raphael, and created a hierarchy of important artworks by noting which were required viewing and which could be passed by without guilt. Art of ancient Rome was prized, and art of the Italian Renaissance was adored. Everything else merited a fleeting mention or was largely ignored, as were paintings from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Early Italian art was not yet respected, with Americans regarding it as "clumsy" or lacking in technique.[3] Some travelers favorably commented on a handful of what were called "Italian Primitives" (a sweeping and ultimately dismissive category that included artists such as Giotto, Fra Angelico, and even Botticelli), but they were a minority. The early piece shown here, *St. John and St. Peter,* from the studio of Andrea de'Bartoli, would have met with the guidebooks' dismissal. Caravaggio, acclaimed today as a formative artist of the Baroque movement and praised for the drama and emotional power in his work, merited only four lines in one guidebook and was ignored entirely in others. *Saints Peter and Paul Discussing the Bible,* painted by a follower of Caravaggio, evinces Caravaggio's method of depicting religious scenes in a new way. The saints, rather than being elevated in a cloud of glory, remain quite human, without halos or other outward manifestations of inward spirituality. Almost immediately after his death, Caravaggio's work was nearly forgotten, until it was rediscovered in the mid-1900s. As for modern Italian art, it too was passed over. *Baedeker's Guide to Central Italy* of 1904 revealed the American attitude: "Since the 17th century, Rome has not given birth to nor nurtured any distinctive art life, though the past has held artists of all nations spell-bound. . . . During the last fifty years, however, she has lost much of her own importance."[4]

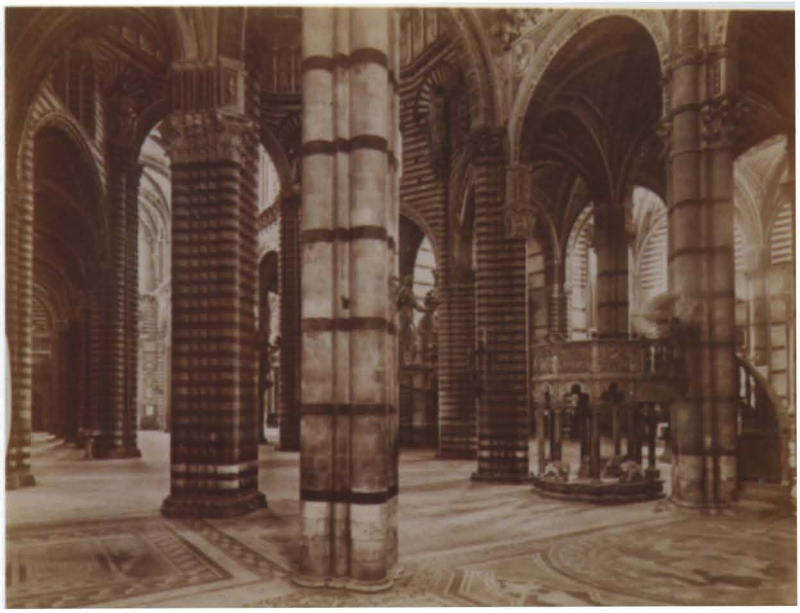
Guidebooks were also instrumental in framing the travel experience. Peasants and workers were often reduced to

Andrea de'Bartoli (studio of), *St. John and St. Peter,* about 1425, tempera on panel, UNL-Gift of the Kress Foundation

picturesque objects populating a landscape or were ignored in favor of lovingly detailed descriptions of domes, churches, and monuments. Edward Lear's lithograph *Rome from Monte Pincio* shows a typically idealized view of the city. The economic power of tourists and their intimate knowledge of places they visited sometimes combined to produce a sense of superiority. As historian William W. Stowe observed, "By encouraging the tourist to think of him- or herself as a deservedly masterful member of a deservedly dominant gender, class, and ethnic group, and by referring explicitly and disdainfully to other groups, guidebooks helped make tourist travel a profoundly empowering activity for individual Americans."[5]

TOURISTS

Many tourists kept extensive journals or wrote frequent letters home. Though most of their correspondence was personal, some people wrote to a public audience. Letters ended up as columns in hometown newspapers. Pastors whose trips had been funded by a congregation might have their words read from the pulpit for vicarious enjoyment. If a writer was ambitious, a trip journal could be turned into a privately published book. In 1881 George Colton, editor of the newspaper *Maryland Republican,* published *A Maryland Editor Abroad: What He Saw and What He Thought of It,* describing his "long-cherished desire" to "pay a visit to the Old World."[6] Julia Hedges Potwin published *Fourteen Months Abroad: A Simple Record of a Foreign Trip from July 18, 1897, to September 19, 1898.* The book, dedicated to her late husband, presents an account of her and her husband's travels, and serves as a *memento mori* of the happy time in Europe before his death. Many travelers read these and other published accounts before their own trips. As a result, many accounts were similar in tone and word choice. But some writers resisted echoing their guidebooks and instead offered narratives uncluttered with well-worn phrases.



Leopoldo Alinari, *Interior of the Cathedral of Siena, Seen from the Baptistry,* undated, albumen print, UNL-Gift of Jon Nelseon

ARTISTS AND WRITERS

Though Americans who traveled to Italy were primarily from the moneyed classes, artists and writers also flocked to the great artistic centers of Italy. When Philadelphia-born artist William Stanley Haseltine visited Rome for the first time in 1857, he found Italy full of artists who, like him, were hoping to be inspired by the art they had previously known only through reproductions, as well as by the natural beauty of the country itself. Among the artists who had established studios in Rome were Harriet Hosmer and William Wetmore Story, while Florence was home to Hiram Powers and Horatio Greenough. Rembrandt Peale and Thomas Cole spent time sketching and studying in Italy during the 1830s, although they did not become residents. American portraitist James Carroll Beckwith returned from his Italian sojourn with a great number of oil-on-panel copies of works by Tintoretto and Tiepolo, such as the ones shown here, which he created in order to learn the technique of the masters. Thomas Crawford, who modeled his sculptures after the statuary he saw all around him in Rome, became very successful in the United States. He frequently traveled back and forth to execute commissions for American clients. Seeking to return to themes and styles from the wellspring of the past, Crawford created neoclassical works such as *Truants,* in which two idealized children in rustic clothing examine a bird's nest. The smooth, serene faces of the children reflect the sculpture Crawford most sought to emulate, the *Apollo Belvedere.* As one of the most famous American sculptors established in Rome, Crawford himself became a tourist attraction. Visiting Americans would stop by his studio to look over his sculptures and works in progress and discuss their merits.

Writers went to Italy with similar goals. Nathaniel Hawthorne explored the subject of American artists working in Rome in his book *The Marble Faun,* which had been inspired by a sculpture seen in Rome's Capitoline Museum. Other residents of the city included poets Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Margaret Fuller, author and activist, would involve herself deeply with the Italian revolution, a political decision that would force her to flee the country in 1850.

BACK HOME

American travelers brought home many souvenirs. Travel accounts mention shopping for small trinkets, such as the brooches made from bits of volcanic rock, noted by Julia Hedges Potwin in *Fourteen Months Abroad.* Wealthy travelers could choose a genuine antique or perhaps a large oil painting showing themselves standing in front of a scenic vista or important monument. For tourists of more modest means, photographs purchased from a studio were popular and inexpensive mementos. Excellent examples are the photographs shown here, taken by the Alinari brothers, who formed their workshop in Florence in 1852 and began documenting important persons and capturing images of Italian art, architecture, and landscape.

Potwin mentioned a souvenir shopping trip in Siena: "We have been out walking this morning. We visited a photograph store and other stores, bought a photo of the celebrated pulpit in the cathedral, postals with views, and two tiny copper pitchers."[7] The photographs were largely of "typical views," either straightforward documentary shots of, for example, the interior of Siena's cathedral, or sentimental genre images such as one of peasant children standing alongside their donkey.

Umberto Boccioni, *Impression of Venice (The Harbor),* about 1906-07, etching, UNL-F. M. Hall Collection

Some wealthy travelers' journeys through Italy captured their imaginations in more lasting ways. Georgians William Butler Johnston and his wife, Anne Clark Tracey, honeymooned in Europe in 1851, collecting art and falling in love with the architecture and gardens they visited. Returning to their home in Macon, they built an Italian Renaissance Revival mansion (a contrast with the more common Greek Revival style then popular) and filled it with the treasures they had purchased. In essence, they brought Italy back with them to the United States.

THE ITALIANS

In the late nineteenth century, while Americans sought a true appreciation of Classical art and beauty, Italians were in the midst of enormous political upheaval. Revolts and insurrections in numerous Italian states ultimately led to Italian unification as a republic. By July of 1870 Rome was captured by General Raffaele Cadorna, and the Pope was restricted to the Vatican. National figures such as Giuseppe Garibaldi were remaking Italy, and many Americans were fascinated by the political drama. Some tourists ignored the events of modern-day Italy in order to focus on the past, but other Americans, such as Margaret Fuller, became even more involved than before.

By the early twentieth century, Italian artists were leaving behind the trappings of Classical art and embracing Futurism, a movement that embraced speed, technology, violence, and all things modern. In 1909 the Futurist Manifesto proclaimed, "It is in Italy that we are issuing this manifesto of ruinous and incendiary violence, by which we are today founding Futurism, because we want to deliver Italy from its gangrene of professors, archaeologists, tourist guides, and antiquaries." It called Italy the "great second-hand market" and warned that "to admire an old picture is to pour our sensibility into a funeral urn instead of casting it forward with violent spurts of creation and action." Embracing this outlook, artists such as Umberto Boccioni created works profoundly different from the classically influenced art still being produced by American artists in Italy. Boccioni's etching *Impression of Venice (The Harbor),* from 1906–7, does not take its cues from the classical past, but rather from Modernist artists at work in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Italy soon found itself at the center of two world wars, which would reduce many of its cities to rubble and devastate its people. And yet, after the dust settled and life began slowly to return to normal in the late 1940s, American tourists once again began to flow into the country, still seeking the same intimate connection with the past.

Americans might admire the glories of the Italian past, but when they scrutinized modern-day Italy, they frequently found it interesting but inferior. This dichotomy between admiration and criticism, between Americans' desire to share in a European cultural identity and yet to have their own unique destiny, is often revealed in both the writings and the art of American tourists.

– Genevieve Ellerbee, Associate Registrar and Curator of *Voyage to Italia: Americans in Italy in the Nineteenth Century*

[1] Robert Tomes, "Americans and Their Travels," *Harper's Magazine,* June, 1865, 57.
[2] George Stillman Hillard, *Six Months in Italy* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1853), 131.
[3] Karl Baedeker, *Baedeker's Guide to Northern Italy* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1882), xxxiv.
[4] Karl Baedeker, *Baedeker's Guide to Central Italy* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1904), lxxv.
[5] William W. Stowe, *Going Abroad: European Travel in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 47.
[6] George Colton, *A Maryland Editor Abroad* (Annapolis, Md., 1901), 1.
[7] Julia Hedges Potwin, *Fourteen Months Abroad* (Cleveland, Ohio: Burrows Brothers Co., 1911), 164.

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