



ABOVE: Julius O. de Montalant, *View from the Aventine Hill, Rome*, 1873, o/c, 39 1/2 x 78 1/4, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Museum purchase with funds provided by 'One Great Night in November, 1996.'

LEFT: James Edward Freeman, *Costume Picture*, 1857, o/c, 59 3/16 x 45 1/2, private collection.

ABOVE RIGHT: Conrad Wise Chapman, *Road Scene at Lake Albano*, 1866, o/wood panel, 57/16 x 85/16, private collection.

BELOW RIGHT: Jasper F. Cropsey, *The Roman Forum*, 1849, o/c, 33 x 51, Newington-Cropsey Foundation.



pagna is not the silence of the pristine American wilderness that most of these artists also painted. Painters responded to this landscape by evoking two contradictory visions. On the one hand they present it as the wasteland of former civilizations. On the other hand, they idealized the rural life of the present—shepherds with their dogs; goats, sheep and buffaloes; and picnics in the verdant villas of the hill towns. American artists saw the Roman countryside as both a silent reminder of past glory and a timeless and idyllic rural paradise.

Many paintings convey the “passion for excavation” that grew throughout the century, with suggestions of the life that once thrived beyond the walls of Rome: fragments of villas and temples, mosaic pavements, and unearthed statues. Still, what



remained was a vacancy suggesting lost plenitude. In picturing the Campagna as a landscape of ruins most American painters followed the example of their precursors. European artists such as Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot and American Thomas Cole focused on the magnificent remnants of the first-century Claudian Aqueduct, which stretched southeast of Rome for several miles above ground and then underground all the way to the Alban Hills some forty miles distant. The third-century Torre dei Schiavi, or Tower of Slaves, was another nearby landmark that recalled the glories of ancient Rome.

In the context of the Campagna, any ancient ruin expressed the poetry of loss, and the fragility and ultimate futility of human enterprise. No matter how diligently archaeologists dug things up, or how luxuriantly Nature covered them over and pushed herself forward in their place, what one beheld remained fundamentally a vacancy suggesting lost plenitude.

Arcadia in art and literature meant a depiction of a simple rustic paradise, largely imaginary or mythical. Writers and painters



alike tended to move away from the idea of the Campagna as wasteland toward the Arcadian ideal, derived from the writings of the ancient Roman poet Vergil and the paintings of the seventeenth-century French painter Claude Lorrain.

The artists all knew that the real pastoral life of the Campagna was anything

but idyllic, but they all knew that they were pursuing an aesthetic ideal, not the reality of Italy. Artists, writers, and patrons only wanted an Arcadia of art, and believed that the “real” Arcadia was in the West, in the forests of North America. Nonetheless, American artists pursued an Arcadian ideal in the hill towns surrounding Rome and



took great pains to seek out and paint representative Italian peasants as models. In response, rural Italian folk flocked to Rome



after the autumn harvests in the hope of obtaining modeling work in the academies or studios of foreign painters or sculptors.

By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Campagna as a theme had been exhausted, even as the Campagna as a place was being obliterated by the building of modern Rome: the meadows bulldozed and built over with apartment blocks, the marshes paved with airstrips, the monumental ruins surrounded by power lines and oil tanks, the golden air filled with the smoke and exhaust that hides the hill towns except on the sharpest of winter days.

In 1873 Henry James had a premonitory vision, as he felt “the land itself in fatal dissolution...one’s very last chance of an impression was taking place.” That is the ultimate reading of the Campagna, and—for an impression of the Campagna as it had been known, painted, written about, and remembered for centuries, whether as wasteland of death or Arcadian dream—James was nearly right, for the chance was soon gone.

All of these depictions of the characteristics of Rome from the city to the countryside, the ancient past to the present, illustrate America’s desire to define itself through art. Artists, writers, politicians, and



ABOVE: John Linton Chapman, *Claudian Aqueduct*, c. 1870, o/c, 14 x 28, private collection.

RIGHT: Childe Hassam, *Piazza di Spagna, Rome*, 1897, o/c, 29 x 23 1/4, The Newark Museum, gift of the Misses Lindsley.

ABOVE LEFT: George Inness, *Roman Campagna*, 1858, o/c, 20 x 30, New Britain Museum of American Art, Charles F. Smith Fund.

FAR LEFT AND LEFT: William Page, *Self Portrait* and *Mrs. William Page*, 1860-61, o/c, 59 x 36 and 60 1/4 x 36 1/4, The Detroit Institute of Arts, gift of Mr. and Mrs. George S. Page, Blinn S. Page, Lowell Briggs Page and Mrs. Leslie Stockton Howell.

travelers alike saw that understanding and experiencing the once great but fallen Roman civilization would ensure that the fledgling United States would emulate Roman virtues and avoid Roman vices. Rome allowed American artists to infuse their paintings with the poetry of this ancient human drama that their own country was too new to provide. Rome advanced American art while helping America better understand its foundation and its uncertain future.

—This essay is adapted from a brief summary of the arguments and analyses of the first three chapters of *America's Rome*, Volume I: *Classical Rome* (New Haven, 1989: Yale University Press) by William L. Vance, where documentation and a full bibliography may also be found.

