

Spaces of Texture

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Constructing Italy

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Growing up, one of my favorite things to do was to build forts. I used these Indian bedspreads that my parents had. They were thin and gauzy but draped particularly well. The spaces within were for just me and my cat and I enjoyed bringing snacks and pillows in there to set up my own world. The light shining through the colorful patterns of the bedspreads always appealed to me because it was enough to see my way around underneath and outsiders could not see in. Those were the forts that I made myself; temporary constructions that I knew would only last for a few hours (or a couple of days if I got my way) before my parents reclaimed the space of the small living room. When I was about 3-years-old I had a me-sized-playhouse that I could set up indoors with little plastic poles and a plastic covering with bright oranges and blues, windows and a door. Later I had a tent that covered my bed and zipped up and I loved that, too. Sometimes I feel nostalgic about these times of imagination and comfort.

Here at the villa, I've been adjusting to the new space. It's an environment where every sound is amplified; that is hard on all sides. There are no floor coverings and even the furniture is unforgiving. It's not what I would normally choose as an interior space, but I have been reveling at just that: how many other times will I inhabit such a large space? Sometimes I like to walk around at night when everyone is out at the bars or sleeping in their beds and pass through the vast shadowy rooms with their dark paintings, dark wood, and dark tile. I listen to the small sounds that are brought forward in the quiet of the night: the rustle of someone in a room next-door, the cooing hoot of an owl in the garden, the muffled pat of my own footsteps. Looking up at the paintings and frescoes during the darkest hours, I notice the highlights. These features – the face of a startled

woman, a billowing silky canopy – present themselves mysteriously. I am as close as I have ever been to living out a childhood fantasy of secretly spending a night in an art museum. A little smile crosses my face at the thrill of this circumstance.

Since arriving in Italy I have thought about photography versus writing. I have thought about painting versus history. In a visual sense I can look at a photograph and see the patterns, the compilation of shapes, line, and gradation. These textures go beyond the object, creating abstraction like a sfumato painting by Leonardo, hazy yet symbolic. In art, Leonardo da Vinci believed that "a surface is the common boundary of two bodies which are not continuous, and does not form part of either one or the other... nothingness divides these bodies the one from the other." He strove to capture the nothingness in his observations of the world. People do not have contour lines but they do have a distinction from their surroundings and Leonardo wanted to paint that energy of form. This could be just an early form of art-speak, but to me it resonates a certain appreciation for surroundings that not everyone has.

Writers also use this technique in conveying selective information that constructs their individual experience, however removed it may be from reality. Joan Didion, in her essay *Why I Write*, described this as "capturing the shimmer of things." Altered perceptions of the world yield unusual observations like the schizophrenic's drawing of a cat where the distinction between figure and ground is blurred. Nicholas Bantock, author of the *Griffin & Sabine* trilogy and multi-media artist, also communicated this response, that "I crave an art that passionately transcends the mundane." In writing, as in photography, I enjoy the texture, that which is intangible. Having time to immerse myself in books here at the villa, I've noticed the musical quality within patterns of

sentence structure and diction and how some writers can accomplish this much more effectively than others. For me texture is more obvious in visual medium, like photography or painting, but the challenge of seeing the complexity of prose seems deliciously enticing. I am still having trouble reconciling this feeling with history. Reading books about it doesn't engage me, and listening to lectures on it doesn't hold my attention. It seems like such a fundamental subject, yet always so isolated in my schema. I want to resolve this discontinuity while I'm in Italy where I have more space for contemplation and a close proximity to the strata of the past.

Twice a week, my mornings are filled with modern Italian history class. As each lecture picks up in pace, I continually feel like my professor is running a race of words and I grow out of breath sympathetically. The dates and people all have stories associated with them and I appreciate his passion for them, but I just can't get into them myself. I've never felt much of a connection to history and sometimes it's a struggle for me to grasp onto; my mind drifts to other things. I enjoy art history and historical fiction, but maybe that's because both of these bring in the key component that is missing in raw history education: a sense of imagination.

Sitting in history class, I listened to my professor instruct, his fervently cascading voice, filling up the space of the room. I looked at the way the light came through the white silk curtains on the 10-foot windows, casting an elusive light into the room. In my line of vision, the fresco behind the professor displays Greek beauties floating around below a waterfall. Soon this image came to life in my mind and I felt absorbed in the misty and dynamic ambiance of the waterfall. Words abstracted, I heard the water splashing in my ears and a lush rocky ravine with trees, moss, and orchids grew up

around me. A pause in the professor's lecture caused the resonance of his voice to dissipate abruptly; pulling over a silence that suffocated my flight of the imagination. Facing reality again, I made more of an attempt to follow the professor for the rest of the time, yet still knowing I would need more than classroom experiences to appreciate the complex accumulation that is Italian history. “The history I learnt at school seemed to have no connection with my own experience,” I realized, as the protagonist of the Italian author Sibilla Aleramo’s 1906 novel, A Woman, also did; “I never imagined that people in the past might have been like me – it was more like a tapestry, a web of fairy tales, hanging before my imagination.” I have been able to expand my perspective on history through traveling and looking at art more than I have through any courses. I need to be in the historical milieu in order to appreciate the significance of the past. Just as I started to recognize these discontinuities, I went back to Rome with the desire to delve beneath the surface.

My initial observation about the layers of the history came through the walls of buildings that I walked past as I made my way to the hotel in Rome. These walls had been painted over many times and roughly patched up. Some of the brick was exposed and parts of the walls were tagged with graffiti, covering faded markings of years past. This texture of the modern city represents more than the undying voices of the neo-communists and anarchists. It is a presentation of the accumulation of human life, something I discovered during my visit to Rome that I had not fully grasped, even after hearing so much about it, beginning with my first lessons on the ancient Romans in my sixth grade social studies class. The accretion of civilization can be followed back thousands of years as buildings and monuments linger, shadowy allusions to the past.

The modern pulse of the metropolitan city is not in opposition to the multifarious past, yet flows through it. This push of modern life led to the obliteration of ancient quarters and the construction of such portentous projects like the Via dell'Impero (now Via dei Fori Imperiali). The rushing river of society sometimes gives the ancient city a freshly sanctified importance like with the Marcus Aurelius equestrian sculpture sheltered within museum walls while a copy stands in Piazza Campidoglio, preserving the air of authority.

Walking through the streets, over the shriveled cobblestones revealing deep crevasses, I looked behind me to see a trailing line of fellow students. I was not experiencing the city as I had a month ago, with just one friend, but in a sprawling group of 60 people. I felt slightly disenchanted at having to be part of such an obtrusive crowd. I didn't think that I would be able to have my own responses to what I saw or any sense of intimacy with my surroundings, so I trudged along with the mass of students, having serious doubts about the trip.

After disrupting traffic by crossing busy streets in groups of 15, we reached the Michelangelo's slowly slanting stairs leading up to Rome's urban living room, Piazza di Campidoglio. This was my first surprise that set the tone for the rest of my trip. I had been in Rome for a couple of days in early January and felt like I saw most of the sights, but there is so much more. I had no idea how much art and culture that Rome has hiding around every turn. Looking carefully I noticed new details all around me. I noticed, just as Eleanor Clark did, that "the strolling places are all big with motion, the main sounds are laughter, easy as waterfalls, and motors, but the machines are not going out of the city... they are just expressing themselves." Rome this time was a series of face-to-face

encounters with art and architecture of the past that I have learned about, but didn't realize I would actually get to see.

The figures carrying away booty from battle suddenly seemed full of vitality as I walked up to the Arch of Titus. The history contained within the ruins of the Roman Forum was so present as I gazed into the swarm of bodies represented in stone relief. The scene depicts the triumphal procession with the spoils from the temple at Jerusalem, including the sacred Menorah and the trumpets that called the Jews to Rosh Hashanah. The bearers of the booty wear laurel crowns and those carrying the candlestick have pillows on their shoulders. Placards in the background explain the victories of Titus. These few figures, symbolizing the hundreds in the actual procession, move toward the carved arch. I felt a strange parallel between my group of American classmates and the band of Roman soldiers. In a sense, we were invading Rome and wouldn't leave empty handed.

The sheep marching along the prominent mosaic in the apse of Santa Clemente Church moved in a ring and I could somehow sense each one's personality through their unusually characterized postures. I was drawn in by their innocence and intrigued by their significance as the flock of God. Scampering around in a flock of students, I was actually glad to be part of a group seeking insight about this fascinating church from our professor-turned-shepherdess. As we descended into the depths of the church, I was able to penetrate into the rich past that lies beneath most of the modern city, like a journey backwards in time. The air was increasingly cold and damp as we went deeper. The sense that I had entered into in another era sank in as I passed through narrow passageways to see some of the surviving frescoes and mosaics. These strata are each so

unique in that they don't reflect similar floor plans or interior spaces. I was amazed that each was built directly on top of the other so successfully. The most ancient part, three levels below the current church, was once a place where Roman merchants had small shops. I imagined all of the people who must have passed through this space when it was open to the daylight and bustle of the ancient city.

The philosophers and great thinkers of Raphael's *School of Athens* in the Stanza della Segnatura presented their contemplations to me as I gazed into their expansive space. Raphael captured this perpetual pondering through symbolic gestures, creating contrasts between approaches to understanding. He separated them into two symmetric groupings, one of Aristotle's followers, the other of Plato's supporters, yet gave them an overall sense of unity. The figures' flowing poses of unhurried posturing, set them as relative equals, grounded in the grand arcading space. Through this expansive fresco I could see Raphael's own mind at work. Having all of these different ways of thinking occurring simultaneously, I appreciated the collective amount of knowledge that was gained by their assessments of the world. I saw the scene not as an individualized competition over who was right, but as a harmonious unit of ideas that only make sense in a larger context, in its proper historical milieu of the Italian Renaissance, revealing the humanist emphasis on the classical past.

While in Rome for my second time, I found myself noticing different things and gaining admiration for the city's complex history that I wouldn't have achieved if I had been trying to piece things together on my own. The process of revealing the layers of humanity that Rome encases is much more collective than I had realized it could be. The accumulation of knowledge and spread of insight to groups is something that seems so

very Roman to me. I needed a few days to sort out everything I saw and also for the impact to settle in. Back at the villa is where I felt the most connection to what I had experienced and where I was able to establish a more intimate association to the history of Italy.

When I first arrived at the villa, its unforgiving nature was especially apparent to me in all of the hard surfaces, but I soon found that it was not just because of the lack of floor covering or stiffness of the furniture, but because it was so unfamiliar to me. On my return visit to Rome, my confidence from being familiar with the city allowed me to get beyond the distractions of a completely new place. Like Rome, the villa comes with such a long history of former inhabitants and now that I've become more situated, I love to dream about all of the stories created in the spaces between its walls.

The lavish frescoes, grand paintings, and antique tables are things I previously would have only encountered in a museum. Seeing this art in the context of a villa – a home – has given me more of a connection to it. As Walker Percy noted, “the wonder and delight arose from the penetration of the thing itself; from a progressive discovery of depths, patterns, colors, shadows.” Instead of just passively observing art in a gallery, I can share a space with it. This has helped me get past the packaging of history and form a personal tie to where I live. I am gaining a sense of security in this space that is new to me. I find comfort in the sounds and textures as they become more familiar. I am starting to see myself as part of the story.