

Saturday, April 11, 2009

Rome 3 – Fellini wasn't a genius, he just lived in Rome!

We saw something quintessentially Felliniesque today. We were in a church, looking at the 'censored Jesus', a Michelangelo statue of a naked (totally naked) Jesus that had subsequently had a little brass codpiece/fig-leaf thang attached to it to hide his unmentionables. Not his best work, actually – lacked the visceral-yet-supernal muscularity of Michel's best stuff. One of the myriad street performers – human statues, came in. There's a statue of liberty, an Egyptian mummy, all sorts. This was a metallic man, all silver paint and silver clothes from head to foot. He was praying nearby, over the tomb (inset into the floor) of a female saint. He looked up at me like 'don't you dare take my picture – I'm praying!' – so I didn't. But when the silver man got back to his feet, he deftly removed one of the lilies in the vase at his patron saint's head and insouciantly sauntered past us out into the street. He looked like this is what he did every day, begged her good graces, and then stole her flowers. Surreal, delightful, and a lovely trip from devotion and gravitas to petty larceny and whimsy in 30 seconds. Now I know where Fellini got his stuff.

This place is full of contradictions. It *lives* on contradictions. In fact, a couple of days later (Saturday), we visited the Vatican museum. Of course, we didn't even get to the basement, where the really racy stuff is, but even a cursory perusal of the Vatican museum reveals the largest collection of homo-erotic art on the planet. More naked torsos, buttocks, and male genitalia per square meter than anywhere on earth. Hell, there's even a naked man's ass on the Sistine Chapel! The human instinct to suppress that which is threatening, which invariably leads to its unconscious expression, is so totally evident in the homophobic church. The fact that Michelangelo, and so many other great artists of the period and in the Pope's employ were gay only underscores this, as do the unfortunate prevalence of gay-pedophilia incidents. Gay people will point out, quite rightly, that most pedophiles are heterosexual, but in this church, the majority, vast majority of such cases involve homosexual predation by adults perpetrated against children. As one of my bumper stickers says: 'Abstinence makes the Church Grow Fondlers'. One trip through the Vatican museum makes it completely self-evident that the church itself is deeply enmeshed in a homo-erotic mystique.

But enough of such things! We're not even remotely close to the Vatican yet! But that all-powerful church, the smallest sovereign nation on earth, does cast a large shadow on the life of this city, one that the city simultaneously embraces and rejects.

So, what happened on day 3? Hmmm. It was a BANNER day among banner days! Lot's a' walking (my feet are bedraggled, pounded into tenderized whimpering appendages, and I am as suntanned as a sailor), but oh, was it worth it!

First a little shot of our street.



And a pineapple-shaped fountain Rome is full of fountains, by the way, always running. Seems like a great waste of water, but very pleasant. And the water in Trastevere is VERY good – about what I remember NYC water being like before they started chlorinating it. The guy we rented this apartment from, Philippe, says that different parts of Rome get their water from different sources, so the quality varies, but out of our apartment tap, it's really excellent.



And a sad elephant, by Bernini (who did many fountains in Rome) holding up an obelisk. There are many, many obelisks in Rome, of Egyptian origin, of course. They're sometimes capped with horrific Baroque embellishments, though – gilding the lily, as it were.



Then, the first real target of the day, Bernini's masterwork church, San Andrea Al Quirinale. Bernini was a larger-than-life character, with an ego that approximated the size of the known universe, yet it is this small, highly compressed, oddly and inventively-shaped church that may be his architectural masterpiece (we'll get to his sculptural masterpiece later). Thank god for Ellen. I was so distracted and annoyed by the visual 'noise' and clutter of the over-the-top Baroque decoration, that I utterly failed to appreciate innovative, utterly distinct and groundbreaking architecture. But my dear docent set me straight, had me sit long enough that the elegant body of the structure shown through its flashy clothing and décolletage.

Both this church, and the next, Borromini's San Carlo a Quattro Fontane, are squeezed into small spaces, and so by necessity, irregularly, almost uniquely shaped for churches. But as Ellen says, while 'Bernini perfected the power of the oval, Borromini had more interesting shapes on his mind'. But first to this oval church of Bernini's.

Sad to say, without a wide angle lens, I cannot adequately capture it, but I'll try to point out some interesting stuff. First there is the skylight/cupola in the center and the rays of 'light' radiating from it down the dome. Also note the pediment at the altar. It's much like a Roman (and so, by extension, Greek) pediment, except it's curved! The Baroque period was a wildly inventive time of melting classical shapes. Not annihilating them, just rendering them more plastic and malleable. This whole church has that aspect, a daring, sensual curving of stolid Roman temple forms.





Then, under the alter, another skylight. So that the focal point has its own source of ‘private’ illumination. Bernini used this trick to great effect often. In fact, in its own way, his astounding sculpture the Ecstasy of St. Theresa uses both the ray-like gold lines and the skylight in a quite similar manner on a very small scale. But that’ll have to wait for another day (day 7, to be exact – man am I behind schedule!). Here’s an oblique shot that shows that private rotunda/skylight structure, as well as the main cupola/skylight above. He also did something I did as a little kid. I asked my mother to have the well of the skylight in my room painted a bright yellow so it would ‘look sunny even on cloudy days’. Bernini achieved the same effect with colored glass. A golden light permeates everything in its path, a manifestation of divine illumination, and very effective ‘stage craft’.



But the church is also festooned with all sorts of decorative treacle. Cherubs and such clutter every surface, grotesquely emerging from every nook and cranny, which is why it took me so long to be able to appreciate this church. Bernini’s motto may well have been ‘nothing exceeds like excess’ or ‘too much is never enough’ – he was larger than life, and loved what I consider to be excessive decoration. I might of thought that this was true of all Baroque churches, an integral part of the Baroque sensibility, but as we’ll see from the spare, simple (decoratively, NOT architecturally) church to follow, that is not so. Borromini and Bernini seem like two polar opposites of the Baroque era. But before we leave Borromini, an example of the cancerous overgrowth of cherubim and decorative scroll-work etc.:



Talk about gilding the lily. Yuck.

OK, onto the next church, which, quite frankly, blew my mind. Both of these churches lie within a block of each other on a very busy, none-too-attractive street in the government district of town. And from the outside both are quite unassuming. However, a glance at the top of the façade of Borromini's church gave me a forerunner of a feeling I've gotten in both of his churches, almost a wave-like, organic folding of concave/convex forms which is very rhythmic:





Inside, that feeling only intensifies. All around this small church, forms undulate and caress each other, and the eye. It is simple, spare compared to Bernini's excesses, yet to my eye and soul, infinitely more sensual in an intimate, visceral way.

Then your eyes draw upward to the ceiling, and your life is changed forever. In a tour de force of mathematical rigor, an interlocking array of ovals, crosses, hexagons and octagons, he creates a hive-like, organic-seeming structure out of a severe mathematical and metrical jigsaw puzzle that just knocks my brain sideways:



I deliberately cropped the ceiling to isolate it, but look at it inside that undulating, caressing, always-moving structure of concave and convex walls and vaulting. I talked about the Rhythm of Sinan's mosques in Istanbul, but this is even more in-motion, never-resting, pulsating with captured energy.



Borromini also sought direct illumination for his altar, but in a more subtle and economical way – another ‘interior skylight’ that channeled some of that light from the central cupola directly to the altar.



A wonderful spiral staircase down to the crypts:





And the spare, but still undeniably sensual crypt below, another innovative use of complex geometry.



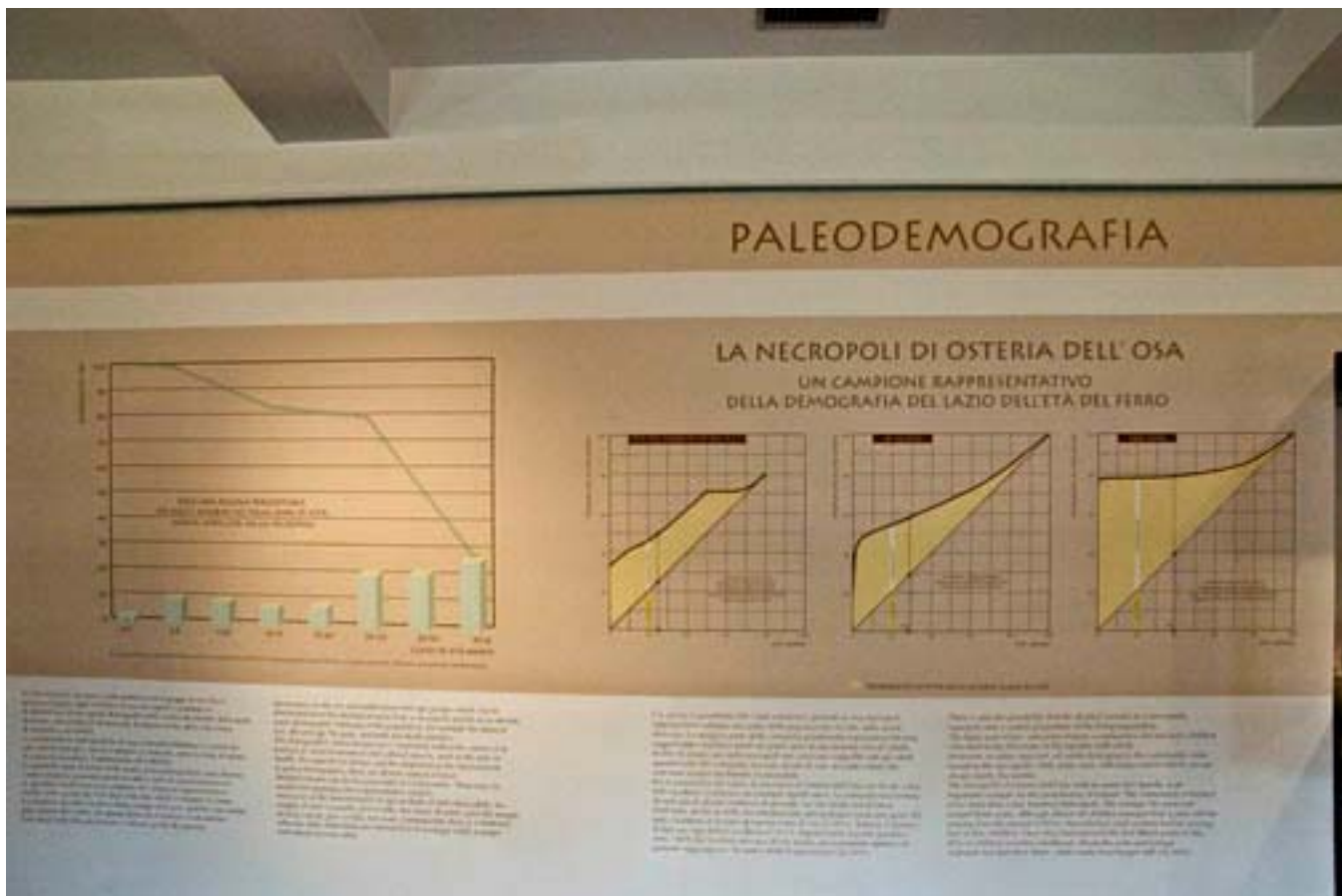
These two churches simply cannot be done justice by photographs (especially when one has left his wide-angle lens at home!) – you need to see them for yourself!

Leaving these two intoxicating high-points, we wandered through the church of San Maria Degli Angeli, which is a massive, quite unusual basilica, constructed from part of the ancient Roman Terme (baths) of Diocletian. It's a huge, stolid church, enfolding a great volume under a flat Roman roof, like St. Sabina, though much, much larger. I didn't get any good shots of it, sad to say.

Then we wandered past the underwhelming excavated portion of the rest of the baths, and entered the first of two museums, the Museo Nazionale Romano.

I was a physical anthropology/archeology major, in college, and I love the minutiae of archeology, but even I found this museum stultifyingly boring! *Only* a dedicated academic in this field could find enjoyment in this dry recitation of facts, replete with ugly displays of millions of undistinguished and often indistinguishable pot shards.

Sorry, you could print all of this in English, and still, graphs and such do not generally a good museum experience make. You need aesthetics, need them especially if you want to convey the wondrous and exciting aspects of archeology to regular folks. This ain't gonna do it:



Imagine charts like this and millions of pot shards. That's most of this museum.

We fled it, of course. But it did have a nice garden, a Renaissance courtyard designed by Michelangelo in his quiet Florentine style. Its flat, planar Renaissance geometry was a nice contrast to the writhing, undulating Baroque we'd seen earlier. Didn't hurt that there was nice statuary and... cats to flirt with!



A great rhino from the same courtyard:





So, as I said, we fled, to another nearby museum, the Pallazzo Massimo Alle Terme. Ahh, now this is a museum! Actually, it really reminded me of one of the archeological museums in Istanbul (not surprising, actually, since both are full of Roman portrait statuary). It was well laid out, with lots of intriguing stuff:



My kind of gal...



Sorry about reflections – I always forget to buy a polarizing filter.









A very cool piece of Intarsia (inlay, the stone equivalent of marquetry).



I am a sucker for all mosaics. This can't match the best I've seen, but it still quite lovely.

So, we traipsed all around this museum, and I took a bazillion pix, and then headed home, more than a bit of a walk after all of this. We stumbled along slowly on rubbery legs, stiff torsos, and very sore feet.

But we made a stop, one more stop, at the Trevi fountain, made famous by Fellini in *La Dolce Vita*. I'd thought it would be anti-climactic, since I'd seen it so many times. But no, the opposite is true. It burst upon us, a large, zany, over-the-top piece of sculptural mania (seamlessly attached to a rather normal building to boot), and there was a cast of hundreds, if not thousands – tourists, hawkers, gawkers, doubtless pickpockets and courtesans too. And a joyous hubbub of water and people, smiling people, washed over our tired bodies, salved our sore feet. What an amazing (almost) end to an amazing day!





Again, you have to see it to believe it... A camera cannot capture its sculptural exuberance, nor the exuberance it seems to engender in the crowds that throng around it.



Then, a long slow walk across the Tiber, past the Isla Tiberina:



And finally, a light dinner in our local Piazza, that of San Maria in Trastevere, where an accordion/Stand-up Bass duo and the undulating streams of people kept us amused:



G'night!