

Winckelmann and the Vatican's First Profane Museum

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It is not surprising that a professor of religious studies reading Carlo Pietrangeli's wonderfully informative book, *The Vatican Museums: Five Centuries of History* ([1](#)), would become curious about how the Vatican Museums came to be separated from the Vatican Library, and in particular about how a Museo Profano could have been created within the thoroughly religious context of the Vatican. Louis A. Ruprecht, Jr. has done just that, and he has searched the Vatican Library, the Archives of the Vatican Museums, and the Secret Archives of the Vatican Library for documents to support his growing conviction ('hunch-turned-quasi-certainty' (p. xii)) that J. J. Winckelmann was responsible for the organization of the Museo Profano, and in fact for the very idea of public art museums. Ruprecht plans to reveal how:

'the Profane was detached from the Sacred, the visual was detached from the textual, public museums were detached from private libraries, and as a result, Art was decisively detached from Religion ... This is the hidden and secret history of how such a brave new world of seeing came to be.' (p. 17)

Ruprecht is clearly eager to make his arguments accessible to general audiences. His style is characterized by frequent use of italics for added emphasis, as in 'Winckelmann's *domestication of the profane*' (p. 14), and colloquialisms employed to engage readers (Winckelmann was 'waiting on a boat to take him ...' (p. 15)). Repetitions of points made in previous chapters and allusions to topics yet to be covered are also typical of the writing. There are frequent references to Pietrangeli's book and to Wolfgang Leppmann's *Winckelmann*

.(2) Latin and Italian passages in the text and in the footnotes are provided with translations.

Although the text itself is only 135 pages long, there are eight appendices (55 pages), a 13-page bibliography, and 66 pages of notes.

In the introduction (pp. 1–17), Ruprecht lauds Winckelmann as the scholar who shifted the emphasis in the study of classical antiquity from text to sculpture. Cardinal Alessandro Albani (1692–1779) played a major role in furthering the career of Winckelmann, whom he hired as his librarian and curator in 1758, three years after Winckelmann had arrived in Rome, having just published his *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der Griechischen Werke in der Mahlerey und Bildhauer-Kunst* (Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture).

Ruprecht believes that the Villa Albani, containing Albani's personal collection of antiquities, under the influence of Winckelmann, who lived within its rooms, became the model for Clement XIII's Museo Profano in the Vatican. What is needed here is a clear chronology of Albani's activities from the 1720s onwards with regard to collecting and exhibiting classical art in Rome. The author's discussion of the décor of the Villa Albani would have benefitted from illustrations of the (ancient) Antinöos relief and of Anton Raphael Mengs's ceiling painting of *Parnassus*; the commentary on the significance of that painting belongs in the text, not the notes (fn. 25, pp. 199–200). The catalogue of the Albani collection still housed in the villa is *Forschungen zur Villa Albani*.(3)

There is little documentation for the extent of an Albani/Winckelmann collaboration regarding the Vatican. Albani secured for Winckelmann three appointments in the Vatican library. Ruprecht provides a complete translation of Nello Vian's article 'Winckelmann alla Biblioteca Vaticana' (4), which will be of special value to readers for providing a thorough and objective background to Ruprecht's more speculative work. Winckelmann's conversion to Catholicism in 1754 is another important aspect of Ruprecht's 'appreciative walking tour through the furniture of the Winckelmannian mind' (p. 17) and helps to explain his close connections with the Vatican, its libraries, and its museums.

In chapter one (pp. 19–26), Ruprecht notes the apparent contradictions between Winckelmann's interest in the classical past and in the Catholic present, between the secularizing Enlightenment and the spiritual aspects of Romanticism. And yet the Greek temple, the public art museum, and the man himself, obscured by 'all the later scribbling that has been done *in* his name and *over* his name' (p. 26) form the palimpsest that Ruprecht plans to explicate, thereby revealing Winckelmann's 'revolutionary' but undocumented ideas and plans.

Chapter two (pp. 27–43) returns to the subject of ancient art in papal collections. Already in the 16th century, 'the Belvedere gardens were ... awash in a sea of pagan statues, most of whom were entirely nude!' (p. 41) The Vatican library, with many antiquities among its contents, was of great interest to Winckelmann when he arrived in Rome. He was especially moved by the beauty of the Laoköon and the Belvedere Apollo. For thorough treatment of the discovery and earlier reception of these and other ancient statues in Rome, readers should consult works such as Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny's *Taste and the Antique*.(5)

The chronological thread of the events covered in chapter three (pp. 45–58) is illuminating. '*The age of papally sponsored public art museums*' (47: Ruprecht's italics) was an idea of Clement XI (r. 1699–1721), who established the Museo Ecclesiastico within the Vatican in 1703. In 1734, Clement XII (r. 1730–40) opened the Capitoline Museum, the first public museum in Rome containing classical art, which had come largely from Alessandro Albani's first collection. In 1754, when Benedict XIV (r. 1740–58) opened the Accademia del Nudo in the Capitoline Museum, where artists could study and sketch the ancient sculptures, he made a distinction, as it were, between the Capitoline's sacred and profane galleries. Three years later, Benedict XIV established a Museo Sacro inside the Vatican complex for papal collections of gems, medals, casts, and other small works, in part, Ruprecht states, to confirm the great antiquity of Catholicism. In 1761, Clement XIII (r. 1758–69) appointed Alessandro Albani to the post of Cardinal Librarian. Clement XIII also split the Vatican galleries into two sections, one sacred and one profane, as Benedict XIV had done in the

Capitoline Museum. Ruprecht believes that Winckelmann had something to do with the display of the classical collections within the Vatican. Once that had been accomplished, the popes could ‘display ... virtually any culture, and virtually any artifact’, particularly their collections from Egypt and Etruria (p. 57), without regard to the Vatican’s religious role.

Ruprecht makes much of how a visit paid by Clement XIII to the Villa Albani in 1765 might have affected the creation of the Vatican’s Museo Profano, pointing out that Alessandro Albani was Clement XIII’s assistant, and arguing that Winckelmann too could well have been enlisted in the plan. The only evidence that might suggest this are Clement’s Moto Proprio (decree) of 1761 calling for completion of a catalogue of the Vatican collections (appendix three, pp. 147–55), and Winckelmann’s appointments in 1763 and 1764 at the Vatican, one of them as a Scrittore for Greek in the Library, which included both textual and visual holdings (chapter four, 59–79). By 1767, classical Greek was separated from sacred and scriptural Greek, statues were separated from manuscripts, and the public museum was separated from the private library. Vatican receipts show that the Museo Profano was a separate entity, but documentation for the history of that separation is largely lacking: that is, in Ruprecht’s view, it is ‘semi-secret’ (p. 77).

In chapter five (pp. 81–93), Ruprecht argues that Winckelmann was obsessed with religion and beauty, with sensuality, or with how alive statues seem to be. For Winckelmann, art history ‘was all a soaring *spiritual* edifice, and had precious little to do with sex’ (p. 93).

Chapter six (pp. 95–108) is about the later reorganization and legitimization of classical art in the new Museo Pio-Clementino under Clement XIV (1769–74) and Pius VI (1775–99). Ruprecht describes ‘Winckelmann’s and Albani’s original *Museo Profano* ... as a semiformal annex and essential point-of-entry’ (p. 97) to the classical collections. Ruprecht believes that ‘Winckelmann’s untimely murder’ (p. 99) in 1768 was why his contributions to the Vatican’s acquisition and display of classical art were not recorded.

In chapter seven (109–17), Ruprecht briefly enters a new arena, that of the classical/profane art that gained new importance by Napoleon’s expropriation, including Winckelmann’s favorite sculptures, the Laoköon and the Belvedere Apollo. Ruprecht sees the reclamation of works from France as providing a new justification for housing profane art in the Vatican. A question that might be raised here is whether the joy associated with repatriation contributed more to solidifying the notion of eternal Rome than to justifying the continued display of classical art within the Vatican complex. The public collections of the Louvre and the British Museum are to Ruprecht ‘a somewhat borrowed idea’ from Rome, where the display of classical antiquities began in the Capitoline, and was followed in the Vatican with its ‘semi-secret’ origins (p. 116).

In chapter eight (119–30), Ruprecht argues that the Museo Profano represented Winckelmann’s way of leading visitors from the sacred area of the Library to the profane part of the museum. With reference to a passage in one of Winckelmann’s letters about Cardinal Albani wanting the two Furietti centaurs placed in niches on either side of the entrance to the Museo Profano, Ruprecht deduces that Winckelmann agreed with Albani. In the end, Clement XIII bought the centaurs, and they ended up in the Capitoline Museum. At some point after Winckelmann’s death, two lion-headed Mithraic figures were placed in the two niches beside the entrance, ‘a complex ... curatorial decision’ which is argued in the notes (pp. 247–248, fnn 15–29). In the text itself readers learn that Winckelmann’s veneration of profane images gave privilege to:

‘the Greek Classics, using them effectively as a way to sidestep the battles then raging between Protestants and Catholics. But he was the very first to decide consciously to make the visual culture of the classical world every bit as influential, and every bit as liberating, as their texts had long been ... Winckelmann’s Profane Museum with these two Mithraic images at the door secretly yet decisively trumped the sacred’ (pp. 129–30).

The contents of the Museo Profano are not discussed here, and readers will benefit from consulting guidebooks on this subject, such as Wolfgang Helbig’s *Guide to the Public Collections of Classical Antiquities in Rome*

(6), in which this room is still the ‘So-called Museo Profano of the Vatican Library,’ as it is in Pietrangeli’s book (pp. 44–47). In *Roma: Guida d’Italia* (7), the two Mithraic divinities are simply described as being at either side of the exit from the Galleria Clementina, not at the entrance to the Museo Profano.

Ruprecht’s arguments and claims tend to expand with each iteration, starting with the possible role of Winckelmann in the separation of Vatican museums from libraries, ending with his certain involvement in the birth of the modern public art museum. In chapter nine (131–5), Ruprecht recalls Winckelmann’s reference to ancient wax tablets as being palimpsests, and compares writing on top of older texts with ‘*reimagining ... the ancients*’ in the same way that ‘later accretions...were soon attached to his (Winckelmann’s) name’ (p. 134).

‘Thus ‘Museums in the Winckelmannian mode are designed to seduce us, providing forms of escape into other, presumably better, worlds. The Vatican museums came into being when the decision was made simultaneously to *juxtapose* profane and Christian things, as well as to insist on their emphatic spatial *separation*’ (p. 134).

But what exactly was Winckelmann’s role?

Appendix one contains a bibliography of works by Winckelmann (pp. 139–44); and appendix two provides a chronology of the Vatican Museums from 1700 to 1926 (p. 145). Appendix three has Clement XIII’s Moto Proprio (decree) regarding the creation of one museum that was both Christian and pagan, ‘*sì Cristiani, che Gentili*’, in contrast to another one that was totally sacred and Christian, ‘*tutto Sacro e Cristiano*’ [p. 148: Ruprecht’s italics]), and calling for a catalogue of the collections, with lengthy annotations and commentary (pp. 147–55); and appendix four contains construction accounts from 1761 and 1762 for the new museum (pp. 157–60). Appendix five (161–77) has the texts for Winckelmann’s three Vatican appointments, as Papal Antiquarian, Curator of Teutonic library-holdings, and Curator of Greek materials in the library. Appendix six, already mentioned, is Ruprecht’s translation of Nello Vian’s succinct summary of ‘Winckelmann at the Vatican Library’ (pp. 179–86).

Appendix seven (187–92) contains lists of the sacred paintings and classical sculptures that were appropriated by the French in 1796/7. Ruprecht contends that the list of sculptures confirms

‘the long reach of Winckelmann’s ideas, an influence that is nowhere more evident than in the museums that his aesthetic and historical writings were so central in shaping, and the new tastes he created that ironically so soon led to their looting and subsequent restoration. And that is precisely the half-hidden influence that this book has attempted to bring to light.’ (p. 192)

Although Ruprecht believes that Winckelmann’s writings brought fame to particular sculptures, these works were already famous, many of them since the 16th century.(8)

The supplemental appendix eight (pp. 193–4) contains a document that Ruprecht has invoked throughout the book, linking Winckelmann to the Museo Profano; it is a receipt for payments to workers in the Museo Profano: to a painter (140 scudi); an ironworker (100 scudi); a gilder (40 scudi); another painter (20 scudi); and – ‘added in another hand’ – to Winckelmann, described in this document as Scholar of German in the Library (12.50 scudi for 3 months’ work in 1764) (p. 193). What exactly did the Scholar of German do for this relatively small sum?

At the beginning of his book, Ruprecht claims that ‘The emergence of the Vatican Museums, from out of the Vatican Library, is arguably Winckelmann’s most important and enduring achievement’ (p. xiii). Although he acknowledges that the gaps in the preserved evidence ‘are unbridgeable’ (p. 134), Ruprecht has introduced an important topic. What role did Albani play in the formation of the Museo Profano? Did

Winckelmann play a 'semi-secret role' (p. xv) in its creation? And if the Museo Profano 'was Winckelmann's magnum opus' (p. 22), what was in it in his day? In what sense was the Museo Profano the first public museum? And what has been its influence?

Notes

1. Carlo Pietrangeli, *The Vatican Museums: Five Centuries of History*, trans. Peter Spring (Vatican City, 1993).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Wolfgang Leppmann, *Winckelmann* (New York, 1970, and London, 1971).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *Forschungen zur Villa Albani*, ed. Peter C. Bol (5 vols, Berlin, 1988-).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Winckelmann alla Biblioteca Vaticana,' *Strenna dei Romanisti*, 36 (1976), 432-442 (Appendix 6, 179-186).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique* (New Haven, CT, 1981).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Wolfgang Helbig, *Guide to the Public Collections of Classical Antiquities in Rome*, (2 vols, Leipzig, 1895-6), vol 2, pp. 185-7.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. *Roma: Guida d'Italia*, (9th ed., Milan, 1999), pp. 690-1.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. See P. P. Bober and R. O. Rubinstein, *Renaissance Artists and Antique Sculpture* (Revised ed., London and Oxford, 1986 and 2011).[Back to \(8\)](#)

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