

ROME

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ROME



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PROLOGUE

I have eaten, slept, looked until I was exhausted, and sometimes felt as though I had walked my toes to mere stubs in Rome, but I have never actually lived there. I only ever lived outside the city; not on the mediocre *periferia* that grew up to accommodate its population surge in the fifties and sixties, but in places along the coast to the north, like the Argentario peninsula. I quite often came into Rome itself, but rarely for more than a week or two and not often enough to qualify as a resident by paying rent to anyone but a hotel-owner or having a kitchen wall on which to permanently hang my wicker spaghetti-strainer, which remained in Porto Ercole.

For a time in my adolescence – not knowing Rome in any but the sketchiest way – I longed to be a Roman expatriate and even felt rather hypocritical, or at least pretentious, for having any kind of opinions about the city. Everyone, it seemed to me then – this being a time that began in the early fifties – knew more about Rome than I did. I was nuts about the idea of Rome, but to me it was hardly more than an idea, and a poorly formed, misshapen idea at that. I had never even been to the place. I was still in Australia, where, due to an education by Jesuits, I spoke a few sentences of Latin but no Italian whatever. The only semi-*Romano* I knew was actually Irish, a sweet, white-haired, elderly Jesuit who ran the observatory attached to the boarding-school I had attended in Sydney, and who from time to time would travel to Italy to take charge of its sister institution, belonging to the pope (Pius XII, aka Eugenio Pacelli) and situated at Castelgandolfo outside the Eternal City. From there, doubtless enriched with recent astronomical knowledge whose dimensions I had no idea of, he would bring back postcards, sedulously and with obvious pleasure gleaned from their racks in various museums and churches at ten to twenty lire each: Caravaggios, Bellinis, Michelangelos. He would pin these up on one of the school notice-boards. Naturally they were Old Masters of the chaster sort: no rosy

Titianesque nudes need be expected. I have no idea what success these gestures might have had in the direction of civilizing the robust cricket-playing lads from Mudgee and Lane Cove who were my schoolfellows. But I know they had some on me, if only because having such things in a church, however distant, seemed (and was) so exotic and therefore, if only in miniature reproduction, so attractive.

The religious art one encountered at a Catholic Australian school like mine (and, indeed, throughout Australia) was of a very different kind from this. It was made of plaster and conceived in a spirit of nauseating piety by a religious-art manufacturer named Pellegrini's, and it was all of a sweetness and sickliness that I hated then and whose remote memory I still resent today: cupid-lipped Madonnas robed in a particularly sallow shade of light blue, simpering Christs on or off the cross who looked like some gay-hater's fantasy with curly chestnut hair. I don't know how this *bondieuserie* was sold. Maybe Pellegrini's had some kind of primitive mail-order catalogue. Or maybe there was a salesman with a Holden panel van, lugging the samples from church to church: plaster Teresas and Bernadettes, virgins holding stems of plaster lilies, priced at so much per inch height. How one could be expected to pray through, to, or in front of this rubbish was an abiding mystery to me. As far as I could discover there was not one work of religious art in Australia that anyone except a weak-minded nun, and a lay sister at that, could call authentic.

Where could one see the real thing? Clearly, only in Rome. How would one know what feeling in religious art actually was authentic? By going to Rome. Come down to it, how would one know that art of any kind was any good? Mainly – if not only – by going to Rome, and seeing the real thing in the real place. Rome would be my entry-door to Italy and then to the rest of Europe. And with that would come sophistication and taste and possibly even spirituality. Not to mention all the other more earthly delights I was also looking forward to. From this distance I am embarrassed to admit that I can no longer remember their names, but to me they looked just like the girls I saw in Italian movies. If I was lucky I might even be able to latch on to some of those unbearably chic pants, jackets and thin-walled shoes from Via Condotti, though where the money would come from I didn't know.

When I finally got there, in May 1959, much of this turned out to be

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true. Nothing exceeds the delight of one's first immersion in Rome on a fine spring morning, even if it is not provoked by the sight of any particular work of art. The enveloping light can be of an incomparable clarity, throwing into gentle vividness every detail presented to the eye. First, the colour, which was not like the colour of other cities I had been in. Not concrete-colour, not cold glass-colour, not the colour of overburned brick or harshly pigmented paint. Rather, the worn organic colours of the ancient earth and stone of which the city is composed, the colours of limestone, the ruddy grey of tufa, the warm discoloration of once-white marble and the speckled, rich surface of the marble known as *pavonazzo*, dappled with white spots and inclusions like the fat in a slice of mortadella. For an eye used to the more commonplace, uniform surfaces of twentieth-century building, all this looks wonderfully, seductively rich without seeming overworked.

The very trees were springing, tender green, not the more pervasive drab grey of the Australian eucalypts I was used to. Some of them were in blossom – the pink-and-white bursting into bloom of the oleanders by the roadsides. Azaleas were everywhere, especially on the Spanish Stairs: I had been lucky enough to get to Rome at the very time of the year when florists bank the *Scalinata di Spagna* with row after row, mass upon mass, of those shrubs whose flowers were all the sweeter for being short-lived. And it was not only the flowers that looked festive. The vegetables were burgeoning in the markets, especially the Campo dei Fiori. Their sellers did not want to constrain them. Bunches of thyme, branches of rosemary, parsley, bundled-up masses of basil filling the air with their perfume. Here, a mountain of sweet peppers: scarlet, orange, yellow, even black. There, a crate filled with the swollen purple truncheons of aubergines. Next to that, a parade of tomatoes, fairly bursting with ripeness – the red egg-shaped San Marzanos for sauce, the broad-girthed slicing tomatoes, the ribbed ones for salads, the green baby ones. Even the potato, a dull-looking growth as a rule, took on a sort of tuberous grandeur in this Mediterranean light.

Then became apparent something of a kind I had never seen at home in Australia. All this vegetable glory, this tide of many-coloured life, this swelling and bursting and fullness, welled up around a lugubrious totem of Death. The piazza in which this market is held, the Campo dei Fiori, translates literally as 'the field of flowers'. There are several versions of

how it acquired this name; it was not always a garden; possibly it had never been a garden, in the sense of a place where plants were cultivated and picked. One version has it deriving from *Campus Florae*, 'Flora's square', and thus named after the (supposed) lover of the great Roman general Pompey, who (supposedly) lived in a house there.

But the male presence that dominates this beautiful, unevenly built square is not Pompey, but someone later than classical Roman: a dark, brooding figure, cowed, standing on a tall plinth, his hands crossed before him gripping a heavy book – a book, it seems, of his own writing. The whole piazza seems to circulate around him; he is its still point. He is a vertical totem of bronze darkness and melancholic gravity in the middle of all that riot of colour, and it may take a moment or two to find his name on a plaque half hidden behind the sprays of flowers. It is Giordano Bruno, and even a tyro from Australia had heard of him. He was a philosopher, a theologian, an astronomer, a mathematician and, not least, both a Dominican monk and a heretic – all told, one of the most brilliant and unorthodox Italian minds of his time, the last half of the sixteenth century. One of the thoughts Bruno proposed and taught was that the universe, far from being the tight and limited system of concentric spheres conceived by medieval cosmogony, all tied into orbit around their Unmoved Mover, was in fact infinitely large – a vast continuum consisting of sun after sun, star upon star, eccentric to one another and all in independent movement. This was the startling germ of a modern vision, and the more conservative, theologically grounded thinkers of the sixteenth century viewed it with alarm as opening an attack on the very idea of a God-centred universe.

It is difficult for anyone in the twenty-first century to grasp how radical Bruno's proposal that the stars we see at night are other suns, identical in nature to our own, seemed five hundred years ago. The idea of a plurality of worlds, which we have no difficulty in accepting, was not merely novel but threatening in the sixteenth century.

Moreover, there were other difficulties with Bruno. He was fascinated by hermetic thought and by ideas about magic. He was rumoured, and by the ignorant believed, to traffic with the Devil. This idea arose from his extraordinary, pioneering researches into mnemonics – the art of systematic memory, a widely shared obsession among Renaissance intellectuals in which Bruno was a leader. For the unorthodoxy of his views, Bruno aroused further suspicion, especially from an inquisitor

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appointed to refute them – the formidable Catholic thinker, a Jesuit and a cardinal of the Church, in himself a spearhead of the Counter-Reformation against Luther: Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621), who lies entombed in the Church of the Gesù in Rome. This was no mere bigot, but one of the great conservative intellectuals of the Church, its leading authority on the theology of St Thomas Aquinas, and he saw in Bruno a dangerous philosophical enemy. The arguments went on, back and forth, for seven years. On 17 February 1600 Bruno was brought out of the prison cell – the last of several in which he had languished while on trial for a dozen heresies – and led to the centre of the Campo dei Fiori, where a pyre had been prepared. *Maiori forsan cum timore sententium in me fertis quam ego accipium*, he said to his priestly accusers: ‘Perhaps you pronounce this sentence against me with greater fear than I receive it.’ The brand was applied to the dry wood. As the flames came roaring up to envelop him Bruno was heard to utter neither a prayer nor a curse.

Thus perished one of the true intellectual heroes of the Italian Renaissance. He was burned alive for holding erroneous opinions about the Trinity, the divinity and incarnation of Christ, for denying the virginity of Mary, and half a dozen other heretical positions including belief in ‘a plurality of worlds and their eternity’ and ‘dealing in magic and divination’. His chief inquisitor, Cardinal Bellarmine, demanded a full recantation, which Bruno refused. When the fire died down to cinders, whatever remained of Giordano Bruno was scraped up and dumped in the Tiber, and all his many writings, both philosophical and scientific, dozens of books, were placed on the Index, the Vatican’s list of forbidden texts. The statue was put up in 1889, on the advice of a committee partly Roman and partly foreign, which included such distinguished non-Catholics as the German historian Ferdinand Gregorovius, Victor Hugo and Henrik Ibsen. The fruit and vegetables of the Campo dei Fiori would renew themselves for ever, in freshness, as his best memorial.

Giordano Bruno was the most distinguished but by no means the last person to be executed for his sins in the Field of Flowers. All sorts of people, from ordinary murderers to practitioners of the black arts, paid there with their lives in the seventeenth century. A surprising proportion of them were renegade priests. This must have suited other visitors to the square very well, since public executions were always popular in

Rome – as, indeed, they were throughout Europe. Partly because of this, the Campo also supported a vigorous and profitable hotel trade. One of the best-known inns of the city, named La Locanda della Vacca ('The Cow'), which occupied the corner of Vicolo del Gallo and Via dei Cappellari, was owned by Vannoza Cattanei, the former mistress of Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia, who held the papacy from 1492 to 1503 under the name of Alessandro VI. With matchless impudence Vannoza arranged to have her coat of arms emblazoned in quarter with the Borgia pope's; they can still be seen over the entrance in Vicolo del Gallo. Rome's oldest inn, supposedly, was the Locanda del Sole, built from *spolia* salvaged from the nearby ruins of the Theatre of Pompey. It is still open for business at Via del Biscione 76 as the Sole al Biscione Hotel.

I do not visit St Peter's every time I go to Rome. The atmosphere of faith is too imposing and even becomes, as rhetorical sublimity sometimes can, somewhat monotonous. Nor do I always make a beeline to favourite places like the Church of S. Maria della Vittoria, which contains Bernini's wonderful Cornaro Chapel. Sometimes I don't even enter a museum, because in a sense all Rome is a museum inside out. But the Campo dei Fiori, with its statue of Giordano Bruno, has been holy ground to me ever since I first encountered it, in ignorance, and I seldom fail to visit it and reflect on what it represents.

For how could I not? That piazza is quintessential Rome to me: essential Rome five times over. Essential, first, because of the terrible and authoritarian memory it summons up, of the Roman Church which without qualms could burn to death one of the most brilliant men in Italy for the crimes of teaching (as Bruno apparently did) that Christ was not God but an inspired magus, and that even the Devil might be saved. (How I wish I could have known him!) A quatrain circulated:

*Roma, se santa sei,
Perche crudel se tanta?
Se dici che se santa,
Certo bugiardo sei!*

'Rome, if you're holy / Why are you so cruel? / If you say you're holy /
You're nothing but a liar!'

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Essential, secondly, because some four hundred years after killing him the city could change its mind (against the opposition of the clergy), retract its judgement and, in recognition of Bruno's individual greatness, raise a statue in his honour. A bit late perhaps, but certainly better late than never.

Thirdly essential, because Rome could build such a monument only when the Church's temporal power over the city ceased to exist, after Rome was captured in 1870 by the newly formed Kingdom of Italy and became politically a secular city. Fourthly so, because the presence of Bruno's great dark totem is such a brilliant urban gesture, and the life that goes on around it is the life of the Roman people, not just of tourism. Fifthly and last, because of the daily superfetation of fruit and flowers, and the appetites they inspire, reminding us that in the presence of Death we truly and absolutely are in Life.

For Rome is certainly a city driven by her appetites. Much of the food one ate, in and out of this piazza, was quite unfamiliar to me, for all its simplicity. In Australia I was never, as far as I remember, offered something as exotic as *baccalà*, salt cod: it was simply not a part of the Australian diet, which was hardly surprising since there were no cod in the Pacific. In Rome, of course, *baccalà fritto* was a staple of street food: soak the board-stiff slabs of cod for several days in changes of water, take off the skin, remove the bones, cut it into pieces as wide as two fingers, drop it in batter and then fry it in oil to a rich golden brown. Nothing could be simpler than this, and what could taste better with a cold glass of Frascati, consumed at a table in a foreign piazza in early-afternoon sunlight?

The fried foods of Rome, the salads, even the humble cornmeal mush known as polenta were, in every way, a revelation for a hungry young man whose experience of Italian food was as limited as mine. I had never eaten a zucchini flower before getting to Rome. Nor had I ever come across a dish like the anchovies with endive, layered in an earthenware pan and baked until a crust forms, to be eaten hot or cold. Some of these dishes were doubly exotic because of their Jewish origins. As an Australian Catholic I was all but unaware of the existence of Jewish food, and because of the tiny Jewish population of Australia its recipes had never entered the mainstream of popular cooking, as they had in America. But Rome had ancient Jewish traditions, food among them. What foreign goy could be expected to know about those? One example

was the Roman dish known as *carciofi alla giudia*, Jewish-style artichokes, which I soon learned to dote on, as any goy might. Take your artichokes, strip off their tough outer leaves, and holding them stem upright, squish and whack them down on the table until the inner leaves spread outwards. Immerse them, like early martyrs, in boiling oil. Gradually the artichokes will turn spikily golden, like the petals of a sunflower, and then a rich brown. They are almost ready. With a hand dipped in cold water, sprinkle them and they will begin to crackle invitingly. Then sprinkle again with oil, and serve.

But food wasn't all that had me enraptured on my first hungry visit to the city. In Rome, for the first time in my life, I felt surrounded by speaking water. What trees are to Paris, fountains are to Rome. They are the vertical or angled jets, wreathing, bubbling, full of life, which give measure to the city. I had never seen anything like that before. In other places fountains are special events, but in Rome they are simply part of the vernacular of civic life; you notice them, you see them as exceptions to the surfaces of stone or brick, but it seems that they are there to be breathed, not just seen. In the centre of the great city one is always aware, if only subliminally, of the presence of water. No city (or none that I know) so incarnates the poetic truth of the opening lines of Octavio Paz's poem *Piedra del Sol* ('The Sun-Stone'), evoking the continuous movement of a city fountain:

A willow of crystal, a poplar of water,
A tall fountain the wind arches over,
A tree deep-rooted yet dancing still,
A course of a river that turns, moves on,
Doubles back, and comes full circle,
Forever arriving:

The fountain is, in its very essence, an artificial thing, both liquid – formless – and shaped; but the jets of Bernini's Piazza Navona, glittering in the sun, mediate with an almost incredible beauty and generosity between Nature and Culture. Thanks to its fountains – but not only to them – the Roman cityscape constantly gives you more than you expect or feel entitled to as a visitor or, presumably, as a citizen. 'What did I do to deserve this?' And the answer seems ridiculously simple: 'I am human, and I came here.'

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Some of the most wonderful first glimpses of Rome, for me, were quite unexpected and rather close to accidental. I had meant to approach St Peter's as it is shown on the city maps – by walking up the broad direct avenue of the Via della Conciliazione, which runs straight from the Castel S. Angelo to the vast colonnaded space of Piazza San Pietro. Luckily for me, I got this wrong. I went too far to the left and approached the piazza, which I could not see, from near the Borgo Santo Spirito. After some trekking, during which I had little idea where I was, I came across what I supposed was a massive curving wall. It was nothing of the kind. It was one of the mighty columns of the piazza itself, and when I crept around it the space burst into view. No straight approach up the Via della Conciliazione could have offered this surprise. As generations of previous tourists have been, I was thunderstruck by the sight: the fountains, the vertical of the obelisk, but above all the curve of Bernini's double Doric colonnade. The idea of architecture of such scale and effort had never entered my mind before. Of course I had never seen anything like it – for the rather obvious reason that nothing else like Bernini's piazza and colonnade can be seen, in Australia or out of it. For a twenty-year-old student to go from memories of Australian architecture (which had its moments and its virtues, most conspicuously the Sydney Harbour Bridge, but none really like this) to such near-incomprehensible grandeur was a shattering experience. It blew away, in an instant, whatever half-baked notions of historical 'progress' may have been rattling about, loosely attached to the inside of my skull.

It was being gradually borne in on me by Rome that one of the vital things that makes a great city great is not mere raw size, but the amount of care, detail, observation and love precipitated in its contents, including but not only its buildings. It is the sense of care – of voluminous attention to detail – that makes things matter, that detains the eye, arrests the foot and discourages the passer-by from passing too easily by. And it goes without saying, or ought to, that one cannot pay that kind of attention to detail until you understand quite a bit about substance, about different stones, different metals, the variety of woods and other materials – ceramic, glass, brick, plaster and the rest – that go to make up the innards and outer skin of a building, how they age, how they wear: in sum, how they live, if they do live. An architect's flawless inkwash rendering of a fluted pilaster surmounted by a capital of the Composite

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order is, necessarily, an abstraction. But being an architecture student in Australia, it was all I knew about the old stuff. It has not become architecture yet, and it will really not do so until it is built and the passage of light from dawn to dusk has settled in to cross it, until time, wind, rain, soot, pigeon shit and the myriad marks of use that a building slowly acquires have left their traces. Above all it will not become architecture until it is clearly made of the world's substance – of how one kind of stone cuts this way but not that, of bricks whose burned surface relates to the earth below it. Now Rome – not the society of people in the city, but their collective exoskeleton, the city itself – is a sublime and inordinately complicated object lesson in the substantiality of buildings and other made things, in their resistance to abstraction.

This is an awareness that a student cannot really get from listening, however attentively, to lectures, no matter how skilled and sympathetic the lecturer. Nor is he or she well placed to grasp it by looking at photos, though photos are certainly a help. It needs to be got, and can only be acquired, from the presence of the thing itself. And of course the sense of it cannot come into existence, as a general characteristic of a city, unless the city has the clarity and deliberation of something that has been made, preferably by hand, and bit by bit – unless you can see that the depth of a moulding or the sculptural profile of a capital is not there by accident or habit, but by intent, by design. That it is wrought, not just slapped on. It is too much to expect that everything in a city should partake of this quality of attention and intention. But without it, you have a suburb, a mall, whatever you want to call it – not a real city. This is why Chicago is truly a city but Flint, Michigan, can never be.

Rome abounds in such realizations. Sometimes you think that every yard of every crooked alley is full of them. But for the new and uninstructed arrival, such as I was in 1959, it is naturally the very big and rather obvious ones that strike first, and for me the most decisive and revelatory of these first encounters was not in Piazza S. Pietro, that mythic centre of faith, but on the other side of the Tiber, up on the Capitol above Piazza Venezia. Its messenger was not a religious work of art, but a pagan one: the ancient bronze statue of the emperor Marcus Aurelius (reg. 161–80 CE) riding his horse, in the most noble silence and stillness, on a pedestal which rose from the centre of a twelve-pointed

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star, in the trapezoidal piazza Michelangelo designed for the Campidoglio. I had seen photographs of it, of course; who hadn't? But nothing really prepared me for the impact of that sculpture, both in its mass and in its detail. It is by far the greatest and, indeed, the only surviving example of a type of sculpture that was widely known and made in the ancient pagan world: the hero, the authority figure, the demigod on horseback; human intelligence and power controlling the animal kingdom, striding victoriously forward. There used to be twenty or so such bronze equestrian statues in Rome, and yet more throughout Italy, such as the *Regisole* or 'Sun-King' in Pavia, which was so thoroughly destroyed in 1796 that not a skerrick remains and the only surviving trace of it is a mere woodcut on paper. All were toppled, broken up and melted down by pious, ignorant Catholics in the early Middle Ages, who believed that their vandalism was an act of faith, an exorcism of the authority of the pagan world. Only Marcus Aurelius survived, and by mistake. The good Catholics mistook the statue for a horseback portrait of the first Christian emperor of Rome, Constantine the Great. But for that sublimely lucky error, Marcus Aurelius would have joined all the other bronze emperors in history's indifferent melting-pot.

I, of course, knew next to nothing of this history when, aged all of twenty on that summer evening of 1959, I saw the bronze horseman for the first time, dark against the looming golden background of Michelangelo's Palazzo del Senatore, with the bats beginning to flit around. I knew even less about horses, old or new, bronze or flesh. I was a city boy, despite sojourns in the bush, and to me these animals were 'dangerous at both ends and damn unsafe in the middle'. The very idea of scrambling up on a fourteen-hand horse touched me with reluctance, even dread. But as I circled the pedestal, looking up at the magnificently robust displacements of space and shape afforded by the limbs and bodies of horse and man, I realized that this horse and this rider were beyond and outside any sculpture, indeed any work of art, I had seen before.

It may be that Australia had some equestrian bronzes in it – war memorials, perhaps? – but if it did, I do not remember them. It probably didn't, because the fabrication of a life-size bronze man on a bronze horse consumes a great deal of metal and is prohibitively expensive in a country that had no tradition of public sculpture. It also requires a

special foundry and special skills to work in it, neither of which could have been available in my homeland.

But what really made Marcus Aurelius and his mount unique in my very limited experience was their confluence of sculptural grandeur with intimacy of detail. You can make a big generalized horse and a full-scale, generalized man without exciting the feelings that more detailed sculpture can produce. But that does not offer what Marcus Aurelius delivers, the passionate apprehension of small things combining and flowing into large ones, the ordered accumulation of details locked together in a larger image of life.

This is no rocking-horse: the lips, constrained by its metal bit, fold and grimace under the tension on the reins; they look fierce but they testify to imperial control. Marcus Aurelius' hair stands energetically up, a nimbus of corkscrewing locks, not a bit like the conventional signs for hair that plaster so many Roman marble crania. The extended right hand, in its gesture of calming power, is majestic (as befits the hand of an emperor) but benign (as a Stoic's well might be; this was the hand that wrote Marcus' *Meditations*). The different thrusts and directions of the statue's limbs are adjusted to play off one another, the raised left foreleg of the horse against the splayed legs of the man astride it, with an uncanny appreciation of movement. And then there is the colour. The bronze carries the patina of more than two thousand years. It is something that cannot be replicated by applied chemicals. It speaks of long exposure, running out beyond the scale of two dozen human generations, each contributing its small freight of patches, gold blotches, green streaks and pinhole discolorations to the venerable surface. When I first saw the Marcus Aurelius, this process had been going on uninterruptedly, like some extremely slow maturation of wine, for a very long time and was part of the simultaneous but differently scaled ageing of Michelangelo's architectural frame for the horse and rider – the crisper contours of the pedestal, the bloom and discoloration of the mellowed surface of Palazzo del Senatore.

One's interest in the past is, at age twenty, minimal – it seems so distant and irrelevant and, in so many ways, imbued with failure. The future is equally inconceivable; one is overwhelmed by the romance of possibility. But that was the magic of Rome for my younger self. The city was my guide backward as well as forward. It provided insight into beauty as well as destruction, triumph as well as tragedy. Most of all it

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gave physical form to the idea of art, not simply as something ethereal for the elite but as something inspiring, even utilitarian. For me, that first time, Rome turned art, and history, into reality.