

Time present and Time past; a very personal Florentine and Roman journey

Robin Richmond, December 18, 2019



*Masaccio: Expulsion from the Garden of Eden
c. 1425-1428, Brancacci Chapel, Florence*



*Head of a Nymph. Roman copy 138 - 190
AD of lost Hellenistic sculpture 2nd Century
BC, Palazzo Altemps, Rome*

Three centuries before the birth of Christ, which the Christian world is about to celebrate next week, the great Archimedes of Syracuse, when speaking of the principle of the fulcrum, said “*Give me the place to stand and I shall move the earth.*”

If you ask any artist to be brutally honest about their work, you will discover that their most secret ambition is to move the earth, even in the very smallest of ways. The problem is finding the place to stand. It seems to me that the history of art is the chronicle of this search, and I believe that the most effective means to find a place to stand is by looking into the past.

Last week I went to the country that formed me both as an artist and as an art historian. Like Saul lying blinded on the road to Damascus in Caravaggio's great painting of the Conversion of Paul, I suddenly saw. It's actually very simple. Artists use each other. They stand, like Newton said 2000 years after Archimedes, “on the shoulders of giants”. Artists plant their feet on their predecessors' sturdy shoulders, and there is nothing new under the sun. It's a circus act from beginning to end. From

the prehistoric cave paintings of Lascaux to Masaccio and Masolino and Lippi's 15th century frescoes in the Brancacci chapel in Florence; from the 30,000-year-old Venus of Willendorf to the statues of the Greek master Praxiteles reinterpreted in the sculpture of the 16th century maestro Michelangelo - it's all a continuous flow of energy, through and over time.

A new generation of acrobats balances on the mighty shoulders of their forbears and thus they are supported and sustained. Every artist should have the great good fortune to visit Florence and Rome to see this at first hand. Catastrophically bored with my own work, tired of my sad old habits, and alienated by the banal orthodoxies of the *avantgarde* that prevails everywhere I look, I voted with my feet. Visiting old friends in the museums, tramping the streets and offloading stacks of euros into the ubiquitous light machines in the churches was a salutary exercise, even on the sad, sad, mad day of the election in my home country. Where my actual vote counted for naught.

Ars longa, vita brevis.

Looking at Michelangelo and then looking at a Greek statue is like moving inside a three-dimensional palimpsest through the centuries. To see a Bernini head grafted onto a Roman sculpture that is a copy of a Greek statue is a perfect visual representation of the process. The marble of St. Peter's was stolen from the Coliseum. Government offices sit right on top of Roman temples. Egyptian obelisks crown baroque fountains. And so it goes on. This feat of palimpsestic historical acrobatics really hit me one very rainy afternoon in the august museum, now known as the Palazzo Altemps in Rome. As a child I used to catch the school bus outside this old ruined building that had a family trattoria on the ground floor run by Guido, a lovely man who used to be the head waiter at Dal Bolognese, a posh restaurant on Piazza del Popolo. I now know that this Renaissance building was once home to Cardinal Markus Sitticus Altemps. The restored building now houses the historic collection of the Boncompagni Ludovisi family and is a glorious treasure trove of Roman art, Renaissance and Baroque frescoes, and some very eccentric antiquarian collections.

But back in the day it was just any old building, like the one that I grew up in, which had a 16th century fresco on the wall of the ground floor garage which was optimistically known as a Raphael, and where my father parked his car. For a school science project (the school shall be nameless) a bunch of us went out on foot north of Rome and we found small clay figurines just lying on the ground. They looked like the sweet little figurines that go around the baby Jesus that you could buy from the Abruzzesi shepherds on the Piazza Navona at Christmas time for the *presepe*, or crib. We didn't know what they were.

Now I know that they were Etruscan, and this was what is called tomb robbing. I still have one of these little figures, all cracked and ruined and ancient. But it also looks like a tiny Rodin, or a Giacometti. It is softly moulded, abstract, fluid and very, very modern. Handling these little figures was like standing on the shoulders of giants and like travelling through time. I think that moment of inadvertent crime might have

been the moment I found my place to stand. I suddenly felt a connection like a current running through me. It was the moment when I decided to be an artist.

Time present and time past

Are both perhaps present in time future

And time future contained in time past

What might have been and what has been

Point to one end, which is always present.

T.S. Eliot: *Burnt Norton*