

Touring Rome with the Friends of the Bodleian, November 2014



Friends of the Bodleian at the Vatican Library.

On 2 November 2014 a group of Friends of the Bodleian travelled to Rome to explore some of the Eternal City's most interesting historical sites and libraries.

Biblioteca Casanatense

A surprisingly speedy coach trip from our comfortable hotel on the Gianicolo hill down to Centro Storico found us with time to spare before our first scheduled appointment. This allowed for a visit to the Pantheon only a few steps away. From the famous Bernini elephant obelisk in the Piazza della Minerva we were then escorted to the Convent of Santa Maria sopra Minerva where in the fresco-adorned cloisters we were welcomed by Father Ols, the Convent's Prior, and Dr Rita Fioravanti, Director of the Casanatense Library. In the beautiful 1701 gallery, designed by Antonio Borioni, our guide Margherita Palumbo gave an absorbing introduction to the history of the Library and presented some of the Library's greatest treasures. These included a 14th-century manuscript of Marco Polo's *Il milione*, a book of three-part music belonging to Isabella d'Este, illuminated Hebrew manuscripts, and a long 13th-century French scroll decorated with genealogy from Adam to Christ. We then viewed this and an additional display of Inquisition items more thoroughly and talked to the curator and her assistants.

Adjacent to Biblioteca Casanatense is Basilica di Santa Maria sopra Minerva, Rome's only Gothic church, which boasts the statue of Christ by Michelangelo, frescoes by Filippino Lippi, and the tomb of Fra Angelico.

After a hearty lunch there was free time which many of us used to wander through the Piazza Navona and to visit San Luigi dei Francesi, where there are three paintings by Caravaggio depicting the life of St Matthew.



Inside the Casanatense Library.

Galleria Doria Pamphilj

Our afternoon visit was to the Palazzo Doria Pamphilj, home to one of the most distinguished families in Italy. The Doria Pamphilj family started acquiring paintings, furniture, and statues in the 16th century and still own the collection, which was first opened to the public in 1996. The remarkable masterpieces are displayed in state rooms, including the family chapel, and in four gilded and painted galleries surrounding a courtyard. Amongst the memorable items in the collection are Velazquez' famous portrait and Bernini's bust of Pope Innocent X, and paintings by Caravaggio, Titian, Raphael, Memling, and Pieter and Jan Brueghel. The audio guide insightfully narrated by Prince Jonathan Doria Pamphilj explained the stories behind the priceless art works.

The roof-top garden of the Minerva hotel, where we enjoyed a light supper, offered a view of the city by night and a delightful atmosphere to discuss the day's highlights.



View near our hotel.

TUESDAY 4 NOVEMBER

Villa d'Este, Tivoli

Tivoli is about 20 miles from central Rome and the journey there presented an opportunity to admire many of the Eternal City's historical monuments. The reconstruction of the Villa and creation of a fantasy water garden was commissioned by Cardinal Ippolito II d'Este and completed soon after his death in 1572. Villa d'Este is now a UNESCO world heritage site. Led by (probably) the only Blue Badge guide in Rome, Stuart Harvey, we firstly viewed the Cardinal's apartments. The chief painter of the impressive vaulted ceilings and frescoes was Livio Agresti. The terraced garden, evoked by Liszt in *Les Jeux d'Eaux à la Villa d'Este*, is a profusion of cascades, jets, fountains, troughs and pools - an amazing feat of hydraulic engineering. The garden looked stunning in the early autumnal sunshine.

Hadrian's Villa

After another convivial lunch a short coach journey took us to Hadrian's Villa. Constructed in the 2nd century as a retreat from Rome for Emperor Hadrian, the complex of over 30 buildings covers at least one square kilometre and much of it has yet to be excavated. Thanks to Mr Harvey's explanations as he guided us through the site we gained some insight into the complexity of what was periodically the location of Hadrian's government, with palaces, thermae, theatre, temples, libraries, state rooms, quarters for courtiers, praetorians and slaves, and a postal service to Rome.



One of the many fountains at Villa d'Este.



Browsing the British School at Rome's collection of drawings.

The British School at Rome

Our evening tour at the British School at Rome started in the library, which is open to all students and academics as well as the School's residents, and includes collections on Italian art, archaeology, topography, ancient history and texts, the writings of travellers in Italy, and a collection of rare books, including Thomas Ashby's library. Among the items displayed and introduced by the School's Librarian, Valerie Smith, were several fine engravings by Piranesi, a 1688 description by Michael Wright of the Earl of Castlemaine's embassy to Rome, a splendid collection of drawings made by James Hakewill on his Italian tour in 1816-17, and 1778 engravings of the wall decorations at the Villa Negroni, which have now disappeared.

The library tour was followed by a lively and interesting talk by the Director, Dr Christopher Smith. The School is located on Via Gramsci in a building designed by Edwin Lutyens. It was established in 1901 'to promote knowledge of and deep engagement with all aspects of the art, history and culture of Italy by scholars and fine artists from Britain and the Commonwealth, and to foster international and interdisciplinary exchange.' The fine art awards provide artists with studios and workshop facilities. During the candle-lit dinner we had a chance to talk with some of the current holders of the awards and scholarships.

WEDNESDAY 5 NOVEMBER

Galleria Borghese

Early on the third day we arrived at the Galleria Borghese, a villa built by Flaminio Ponzio for Cardinal Scipione Borghese, who was an avid collector of art. We again toured with Stuart Harvey, who recounted some of the Cardinal's strategies to obtain works intended for other patrons. Visits to the Galleria are limited to two hours, so we were grateful for Mr Harvey's direction to five wonderful sculptures by Bernini (for whom Scipione was an early patron), paintings by Caravaggio, Raphael, and Titian, and the complex frescoes and opulent marble decorations. The current extensive collection is only a part of Scipione's acquisitions. In 1808 Prince Camillo Borghese was forced to sell the Roman sculptures and antiquities to his brother-in-law Napoleon.

A walk through the Borghese gardens led to an impressive view over the city and then to the Spanish Steps (built by the French). Our afternoon visit was to the Keats-Shelley House at the bottom of the Spanish Steps. The curator, Dr Giuseppe Albano, explained how the house was acquired in 1906 and its current function as a museum and a resource for scholars who can use its extensive library. There was plenty of time for scrutiny of the building and the interesting exhibits before a Prosecco reception on the terrace in the balmy Roman evening.



Admiring Bernini's Apollo and Daphne.

THURSDAY 6 NOVEMBER



At the Vatican Museum.

Vatican Museums, Sistine Chapel and St Peter's Basilica

So many are the treasures of the Vatican Museums that we were fortunate to have an excellent guide, John Fort, for our 3-hour visit. He expertly gave us a taste of the collections and the lavishly decorated rooms. The tour ended in the Sistine Chapel, which was a revelation for those who had seen it before the restoration (1984-94). Some of the party then followed our guide to St Peter's Basilica while others seized the opportunity to visit yet more of the galleries.

As many of us were walking off another convivial lunch, an impressive storm lit the sky behind St Peter's and we dodged hail the size of boiled sweets. We reconvened to compare how water-logged we were before our next library visit.

Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana

Leaving the tourist throng behind we passed our security checks and entered the Vatican Library under the guidance of Dr Timothy Janz, Curator of Greek Manuscripts. The newly renovated Sistine Hall was the beautiful location for Dr Janz's introductory talk. Among the items specially displayed for our group was the treatise 'Assertio Septem Sacramentorum' presented to Pope Leo X by King Henry VIII. It was because of its anti-Lutheran content that the Pope gave Henry VIII the title 'Defender of the Faith'. We were also treated to viewing the manuscript of Dante's *Divine Comedy* illuminated with exquisite miniatures by Guglielmo Giraldi, and a composite book containing Michaelangelo auto-graph poems, notes, and sketches. This was clearly one of the highlights of our trip.

FRIDAY 7 NOVEMBER

Biblioteca dell'Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei e Corsiniana

A downpour ceased just in time for a pleasant downhill walk to the library of the Lincean Academy. The Corsini library was amassed during the 18th and 19th centuries and comprised an extremely rich collection of manuscripts. It was bequeathed to the Accademia in 1883 and the Palazzo Corsini sold to the Italian state. The Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei e Corsiniana was established in 1603 by Federico Cesi and its library includes works on philosophy, mathematics, architecture, astronomy, geography, philosophy, ancient and modern literature, oriental, astrological, alchemic and hermetic texts. Ravaged during the 1798 revolutionary risings and auctioned off in 1857, a large part of it destined for the Imperial Library in Berlin was lost in a ship wreck.

The current library is in three sections: the Corsiniana; the Academic Section (including the original nucleus of Cesi's library, the archive of the Lincei, and volumes donated or purchased since); and the oriental section. It is open to the general public and accessible online. Dr Andrea Trentini treated us to a most captivating talk and presented some of the Library's treasures. The rarest book – one of only four surviving copies – was an edition of Vitruvius' *De Architectura* printed in 1487.

*Fascinating presentation
in the Corsiniana Library.*



Cimitero Acattolico

After lunch in another well-chosen trattoria our final afternoon was spent at the Cimitero Acattolico (Non-Catholic Cemetery) formally known as the Protestant Cemetery and particularly famous for the grave of John Keats and the location of Percy Bysshe Shelley's ashes. Bordered by the Aurelian Walls and shaded by pines and shrubs it is supported by a loyal band of patrons, guides, and fundraisers. Our guide was Dr Nicholas Stanley-Price, an Oxford alumnus and former Director-General of the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property. We left entranced by the fascinating story of the Cemetery.

Our revels ended, we said our goodbyes and headed for our various flights, and continents, with many thanks to our guiding light, the Bodleian's Margaret Czepiel, for a fascinating trip and for facilitating the special access to the libraries. We are also grateful to Juliet Wesley of Touriocity, whose careful arrangements had ensured a very successful week. We were so enthralled with the tour that we decided to commemorate it by sponsoring two reading room chairs in the Weston Library.

*Christine Foard
Member, Friends of the Bodleian*

*At the Non-Catholic Cemetery where we paid
homage to Keats and Shelley.*