The Americans Arrive

The unification of Italy demanded by Giuseppe Mazzini and other writers was nearly a reality when Mark Twain arrived in Rome in 1867. By then, most of the country had been unified but Rome was still under the authority of the pope, whose rule was protected by French troops. The forces of the Risorgimento were led by the Italian patriot Giuseppe Garibaldi. Twain hoped to meet Garibaldi, even pointing out in *The Innocents Abroad*, the author’s journal of his trip through the Continent, that his tour party was promised, "if practical, a call will be made... to visit the home of Garibaldi." (Twain, 19)

Later, in *The Innocents Abroad*, Twain announced that the tour ship arrived off the coast of Livorno, the home of Garibaldi, but Twain elected to pass up the trip to shore. "We are surprised with Italian cities for the present, and much prefer to walk the familiar quarter-deck and view this one from a distance," he wrote. (Twain, 198)

Evidently, the tourists who went ashore did get to meet the Italian patriots, but found themselves under suspicion of the police who believed the Americans intended to aid the patriotic cause. "A visit paid in a friendly way to General Garibaldi..." (Twain, 198)

yesterday (by cordial invitation,) by some of our passengers, has gone far to confirm the dread suspicions the government harbors toward us," Twain wrote. "It is thought the friendly visit was only the cloak of a bloody conspiracy. These people draw near and watch us when we bathe in the sea from the ship's side. Do they think we are communing with a reserve force of rascals at the bottom?" (Twain, 199)

And so, the greatest American writer of his generation missed his opportunity to meet Italy’s greatest patriot. Soon, Garibaldi would head south accompanied by 5,000 men. Garibaldi hoped to liberate Rome at the Battle of Mentana, but his forces were defeated by French troops. Another three years would pass before Rome became part of a unified Italy. In 1870, Napoleon III was forced to withdraw troops from Rome because they were needed for the Franco-Prussian War; on September 20, Italian fighters entered the Eternal City and, the following July, Rome was declared capital of a unified Italy.

By the time Mark Twain made his trip to the Continent, he had not yet written the books that would define him as a satirist, humorist, and spinner of homespun wisdom. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and The Prince and the Pauper* were all in his future. Still, at this point in his career his humorous stories had developed somewhat of a following among readers, due mostly to his story, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County."

Born Samuel Langhorne Clemens in 1835, the Missourian had worked as a journeyman printer, steamboat pilot, silver miner, and journalist. He had a deep respect for human rights and, in his later work, would find himself questioning the oppression of minorities, even though he had briefly fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War. There is no doubt, then, that even though Twain passed up the opportunity to meet with Garibaldi, he was with the revolutionary in spirit. In *The Innocents Abroad*, he constantly berated the Roman Catholic Church for what he perceived as its greed. He wrote:
Where is the wisdom in permitting hundreds upon hundreds of millions of francs to be locked up in the useless trumpery of churches all over Italy, and the people ground to death with taxation to uphold a perishing Government?

As far as I can see, Italy, for fifteen hundred years, has turned all her energies, all her finances, and all her industry to the building of a vast array of wonderful church edifices, and starving half her citizens to accomplish it. She is today one vast museum of magnificence and misery. All the churches in an ordinary American city put together could hardly buy the jeweled frippery in one of her hundred cathedrals. And for every beggar in America, Italy can show a hundred—and rags and vermin to match. It is the wretchedest, princeliest land on earth. (Twain, 202–03)

And so, it is with those thoughts in mind that Mark Twain paid a visit to the Vatican, setting foot in the center of papal authority and grandeur, the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome.

His first thought was to compare the seat of Roman Catholic authority with the U.S. Capitol, a building he knew to house a very different type of authority—one elected by the people. He reported St. Peter's is about the same length as the Capitol in Washington, but somewhat wider. The dome of the church is also higher than the dome of the Capitol, he estimated, by as much as a hundred feet or more. Still, Twain was not impressed, huffing in his journal, "St. Peter's did not look nearly so large as the capitol, and certainly not a twentieth as beautiful, from the outside." (Twain, 213)

Actually, Twain's estimates were pretty well on the mark: The Capitol is fifty-six feet longer than St. Peter's, but the church is 109 feet wider. The dome of the basilica is some 160 feet higher than the Capitol dome.

Once inside, Twain admitted to feeling very tiny while standing in the immense building. He wrote, "To stand in the door of St. Peter's and look at men down toward its further extremity, two blocks away, has a diminishing effect on them; surrounded by the prodigious pictures and statues, and lost in the vast spaces, they look very much smaller than they would if they stood two blocks away in the open air. I 'averaged' a man as he passed me and watched him as he drifted far down by the bal- dacchino and beyond—watched him dwindle to an insignificant school-boy, and then, in the midst of the silent throng of human pignies gliding about him, I lost him." (Twain, 214–15)

Twain looked up and saw workers removing flowers and other ornaments from the walls that had been decorated for a ceremony. The men were working too high up to use ladders; instead, they dangled from the balustrades and pilasters by ropes. "I had not supposed, before, that a man could look so much like a spider," he observed. (Twain, 215)

There has been a basilica on Rome's most sacred site since the fourth century A.D.; work on the current St. Peter's commenced in 1506, first under the guidance of Raphael. By 1547, the church was still under construction, having been redesigned by Michelangelo, who planned the massive dome and, of course, decorated the ceilings of the Sistine Chapel. Michelangelo was employed in this task by Pope Julius II; he spent some four years on his back atop scaffolding, paint and plaster constantly dripping in his eyes, complaining all the time about the low and infrequent pay.

Twain paid great respect to Michelangelo, but can't help but complain about his tour guide's propensity for showing off the great artist's work seemingly everywhere the Americans visited. Said Twain, "In Genoa, he designed every thing; in Milan, he or his pupils designed every thing; he designed the Lake of Como; in Padua, Verona, Venice, Bologna, who did we ever hear of, from guides, but Michael Angelo? In Florence, he painted every thing, designed every thing, nearly, and what he did not design he used to sit on a favorite stone to look at, and they showed us the stone." (Twain, 227). Finally, Twain disclosed wryly, "I never felt so fervently thankful, so soothed, so tranquil, so filled with blessed peace, as I did yesterday when I learned that Michael Angelo was dead." (Twain, 228)
Michelangelo finished the chapel ceiling in 1512 but died in 1564, twenty-six years before St. Peter’s dome was completed.

Just outside the church is St. Peter’s Square—the Piazza di San Pietro—an enormous elliptical plaza built between 1656 and 1667. It measures 1,115 feet by 787 feet. The plaza features a reddish granite obelisk, fountains by Maderno and Bernini, and a 284-column, 88-pillar colonnade upon which rest the statues of 140 saints.

The baldachinio that Twain described is the massive brass canopy that corresponds to the high altar of St. Peter’s. Designed by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, the baldachinio is bathed in light that shines through the dome windows above. It stands over the site of St. Peter’s tomb. To the right of the main altar is the brass statue of St. Peter, whose toes are kissed by Catholic pilgrims. Behind the altar stands the Throne of St. Peter, designed by Bernini, the throne is said to contain remnants of a wood and ivory chair owned by Peter.

Climbing the stairs to the top of the dome, Twain continued to find himself awed by the dimensions of the church. At the top, he was overwhelmed by the view:

From the dome of St. Peter’s one can see every notable object in Rome, from the Castle of St. Angelo to the Colosseum. He can discern the seven hills upon which Rome is built. He can see the Tiber ... About his feet is spread the remnant of a city that once had a population of four million souls; and among its massed edifices stand the ruins of temples, columns, and triumphal arches that knew the Caesars, and the noontide of Roman splendor ... (Twain, 215-16)

And yet, he found himself gazing at the Colosseum, and wondering whether there was much change between the days of the ancient Romans who fed Christians to the lions, and the days of the Holy Inquisition, when unbelievers were tortured and put to death in horrible ways:

The beasts tore the victims limb from limb and made poor mangled corpses of them in the twinkling of an eye. But when the Christians came into power, when the holy Mother Church became mistress of the barbarians, she taught them the error of their ways by no such means. No, she put them in this pleasant Inquisition and pointed to the Blessed Redeemer, who was so gentle and so merciful toward all men, and they urged the barbarians to love him; and they did all they could to persuade them to love and honor him—first by twisting their thumbs out of joints with a screw, then by nipping their flesh with pincers—red-hot ones, because they are the most comfortable in cold weather; then by skinning them alive a little, and finally by roasting them in public. (Twain, 216-17)

Later, after leaving St. Peter’s, he visited the Mamertine Prison, a dungeon where St. Peter was imprisoned. He was awed by the experience, but refused to believe that St. Peter made an impression on the dungeon wall by pressing his face against it, or that the saint’s feet made impressions in the stone floor. Looking over the evidence, Twain concluded that the face and feet were out of proportion. “The discrepancy confirmed our unbelief,” he insisted. (Twain, 217)

The Vatican includes much more than just St. Peter’s. Twain went on to visit the museums, where he admired the paintings and statues. He toured the catacombs and found them fascinating. And despite the fact that he continually made no effort to hide his contempt for the Roman Catholic Church, Twain finally—albeit somewhat reluctantly—extended a note of thanks to Pope Pius IX for letting him see it all:

I like to look at statues, however, and I like to look at pictures, also—even of mons looking up in sacred ecstasy, and monks kneeling in meditation, and monks skirmishing for something to eat—and therefore I’ll drop ill nature to thank the papal government for so jealously guarding and so
industriously gathering up these things; and for permitting me, a stranger and not an entirely friendly one, to roam at will and unmolested among them, charging me nothing, and only requiring that I shall behave myself simply as well as I ought to behave in any other man’s house. I thank the Holy Father right heartily, and I wish him long life and plenty of happiness. (Twain, 240-41)

HENRY JAMES AND THE SPIRIT OF ROME
Mark Twain may have been the grumpiest American to have visited Rome, but he wasn’t the first. The American artist Benjamin West studied in Rome in 1760 before returning to the colonies. An American named Moses Ezekiel lived in Rome, where he befriended Franz Liszt, who enjoyed practicing on Ezekiel’s piano. The American sculptor William Wetmore Story made Rome his home, and Henry James made frequent and—in contrast to Mark Twain’s experience—usually pleasurable visits to the Eternal City.

Indeed, James harbored a much different attitude toward Rome, Catholicism, St. Peter’s, and virtually all other aspects of Roman life. Simply stated, Henry James loved Rome. He loved walking the city’s neighborhoods, observing its people, taking coach rides in the countryside and exploring the Eternal City’s many hidden features. He also loved writing about the people and their neighborhoods, albeit sometimes with gritty realism. He took careful notes of all his adventures, and published them over the years in a series of essays. Later, he would blend his memories of Rome into his novels. James visited Rome as well as other cities of Italy many times between 1869 and 1907 and unabashedly trumpeted their glories. He once wrote, “It beats everything; it leaves the Rome of your fancy—you’re education—nowhere ... I went reeling and moaning through the streets in a fever of enjoyment ... the effect is somewhat indescribable.” (Shapeler, 1)

James was born in New York City in 1843 and educated in London, Paris, and Geneva. He was born an American, but would leave his native shores at the age of thirty-two, taking up permanent residence in England. A year before his death in 1916, James became a British citizen. He wrote extensively about Europe and how European culture affected Americans living abroad. His novels Daisy Miller and Roderick Hudson were based in part on James’s experiences in Italy. Here is how James described the working-class Trastevere district in Roderick Hudson.

He was particularly fond of this part of Rome, though he could hardly have expressed the sinister charm of it. As you pass from the dusty swarming purloins of the ghetto you emerge into a region of empy, soundless, grass-grown lanes and alleys, where shabby houses seem moldering away in disuse and yet your footsteps bring figures of startling Roman type to the doorways. There are few monuments here, but not a part of Rome seemed more oppressively historic, more weighted with ponderous past, more brightened with the melancholy of things that had their day. (Shapeler, 215-16)

That’s a gritty description of a Rome neighborhood, to be sure, but rest assured, Henry James had nothing but admiration and devotion to the Eternal City. One of his favorite places was the Palazzo Barberini, which served as a gallery for the national art collection. The massive baroque palace at the Via delle Quattro Fontane and Via Barberini was built between 1627 and 1633—which was, given the era, an extraordinarily short period of construction.

The palace was erected under the orders of Maffeo Barberini, who had been elected Pope Urban VIII in 1623. It was designed in part by Gian Lorenzo Bernini but other artists of the day, including Carlo Maderno and Carlo Borromini, also had their hands in the design. The papal throne room is decorated with the painting by the artist, Pietro da Cortona, Triumph of Divine
galleries and encounter the world's greatest artists and poets or ordinary citizens with whom he could share the "enclosing fact" that all they had in common was Rome, and that was all they


Luigi Pirandello's Six Characters

The drama Six Characters in Search of an Author was written by Luigi Pirandello, who was born in Sicily but, following his education in Rome and Bonn, established his residence in the Eternal City where he found fame as Italy's greatest writer of the early twentieth century. In 1934, Pirandello was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Pirandello was a novelist and a playwright. One of his best-known novels is The Late Mattia Pascal, about a hapless custodian who, while running from his troubles wins a small fortune at a casino, then reads in the newspaper about his death. Taking this mistake as a blessing, Mattia rents a room in Rome under an assumed name and falls in love with his landlord's daughter, but finds it impossible to marry the girl because he has no papers to back up his identity. So he again runs from his troubles, faking his own death by making it appear that he jumped from a bridge into the Tiber River. Then, after a period of two years, Mattia returns to his old job as a custodian.

Six Characters in Search of an Author tells the story of six members of a family who march into a theater and demand that the manager make them characters in a drama so that they may explain the crucial events of their lives. The play asks a lot of its audience—two of the characters are already dead when they enter the theater—which may explain why Roman audiences didn't know what to make of Six Characters when it premiered at the Teatro Valle in 1921. Some members of the audience applauded politely while others greeted the final curtain with hoots of protest. Still, the play has endured and has found many venues for performances.
really needed to have in common. Wrote James: “These sequences, these presciences certainly exist by the Thames and Seine and Hudson, but quite, as they become familiar, without making us thrill at their touch. Their touch (since we discriminate) is coarse; it was only the Roman touch that was fine—which is the simple moral of my remarks.” (Kaplan, 213)

EDITH WHARTON TOURS THE COUNTRYSIDE
Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley settle in for a late afternoon lunch at a restaurant in Rome. These “two American ladies of ripe but well-cared-for middle age” (Wharton, 9) enjoy a panoramic view of the Palatine, the Forum, and the Colosseum. Mrs. Ansley knits and frets about missing a bridge game at the embassy; Mrs. Slade would rather stay and enjoy her lunch. She offers this insight:

“I was just thinking,” she said slowly, “what different things Rome stands for to each generation of travelers. To our grandmothers, Roman fever; to our mothers, sentimental dangers—how we used to be guarded!—to our daughters, no more dangers than the middle of Main Street. They don’t know it—but how much they’re missing!” (Wharton, 15)

As the reader soon learns in Edith Wharton’s short story, “Roman Fever,” Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley harbor deep and long-lasting animosities and jealousies toward each other. Still, as the story heads toward its shocking climax, Wharton’s prose delivers a brief travelogue to Rome, providing details that her friend Henry James was likely to appreciate:

Suddenly, the air was full of that deep clanging of bells which periodically covers Rome with a roof of silver.
(Wharton, 15)

Later, James said Wharton is “one of those people on whom nothing is lost.” (Wright, 11)

The American author Edith Wharton traveled extensively in Rome, using the Eternal City as a backdrop for many of her stories. In addition, Wharton authored many essays about her travels, publishing her accounts in Scribner's Magazine. Book-length volumes of her Roman travel journals include Italian Villas and Their Gardens, published in 1904, and Italian Backgrounds, published in 1905. She also published essays and books about France and Morocco.

*Italian Villas and Their Gardens* explored the country’s lush greenery, much of it cultivated by groundkeepers in the employ of Italy’s richest and most powerful landowners. For example, the book takes the readers just outside of Rome to the Villa d’Este in Tivoli. The villa was built in 1550 for Cardinal Ippolito d’Este, a son of the notorious Lucrezia Borgia. Inside the villa, visitors will find frescoes and paintings by Correggio, Da Volterra and Perin Del Vaga, but it is the garden surrounding the lavish home that caught Edith Wharton’s interest:

One looks down on the towering cypresses and ilexes of the lower gardens. The grounds are not large, but the impression produced is full of tragic grandeur. The villa towers above so high and bare, the descent from terrace to terrace is long and steep, there are such depths of mystery in the infinite green distances and in the cypress-shaded pools of the lower garden, that one has a sense of awe rather than of pleasure in descending from one level to another of darkly rustling green. But it is the omnipresent rush of water which gives the Este gardens their particular character. From the Anio, drawn up the hillside at incalculable cost and labour, a thousand rills gush downward, terrace by terrace, channeling the stone rails of the balusters, leaping from step to step, dripping into mossy conchs, fishing in spray from horns of seagods and the jaws of mythical monsters, or forcing themselves in irrepressible overflow down the ivy-matted banks.
(Wright, 67)
Italian Villas and Their Gardens takes its readers next to Mondragone, a sixteenth-century palace in the hills above Frascati built for Cardinal Scipione Borghese, where Wharton found the garden dominated by sculpted “Borghese eagles and dragons” (Wright, 70), and then to the nearby Villa Aldobrandini, built in 1598, and visited fifty years later by the English writer John Evelyn, whose Diaries were a major influence on Wharton. Quoting Evelyn, Wharton's book reports that the diarist found behind the villa

a high hill or mountain all overlaid with tall wood, and so formed by nature as if it had been cut out by art, from the summit of which falls a cascade ... precipitating into a large theatre of water. Under this is an artificial grot wherein are curious rocks, hydraulic organs, and all sorts of singing birds, moving and chirping by force of water, with several other pageants and surprising inventions. In the centre of these rooms rises a copper ball that continually dances about three feet above the pavement, by virtue of a wind conveyed secretly to the hole beneath it; with many other devices for wetting unwary spectators. (Wright, 71)

The book ventures further into the Italian countryside, leading Wharton's readers far from Rome. Still, it was the Eternal City that she appreciated the most. Indeed, "Roman Fever" was one of Edith Wharton's final works of fiction, published shortly before her death in 1937.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's Unhappy Night in Rome
One of Henry James's admirers was Zelda Fitzgerald, who read Roderick Hudson in the fall of 1925 while living in the French Riviera town of St. Raphael with her husband, the American novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald. Intrigued by James's description of the city, Zelda and Scott decided to spend that winter in Rome. Alas, it would not be a happy winter for the Fitzgeralds. Scott Fitzgerald had just finished The Great Gatsby and felt emotionally drained from the work; what's more, he was making one of his many attempts to stop drinking. Writing to a friend from Rome, Scott Fitzgerald said, “Zelda and I sometimes indulge in terrible four day rows that always start with a drinking party but we're still enormously in love and about the only truly happily married people I know.” (Mizener, 179)

Certainly, the Fitzgeralds didn't spend all their time trapped in a drafty hotel in the Quirinal district. A movie company was in town filming Ben-Hur, and the Fitzgeralds spent most days on the set, where they made good friends with the film's star, Carmel Myers. Still, they found Rome disagreeable; the warm and sunny winter they expected had, for most of the winter, eluded the peninsula. In addition, Scott Fitzgerald found doing business with the Italian people troublesome; it seemed that all the waiters and taxi drivers had to be bribed to provide any sort of service. One night, they were kicked out of a hotel room to make way for a Roman aristocrat.

But that was a mild incident compared to what would happen next. “I’ve lain awake whole nights practicing murders,” Scott Fitzgerald wrote later. “After I—after a thing that happened to me in Rome I used to imagine whole auditoriums filled with the flower of Italy, and me with a machine gun concealed on stage. All ready. Curtain up. Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.” (Mizener, 180)

It seems that on one night of their stay, Fitzgerald had been drinking and found himself in an argument with a group of taxi drivers who were demanding an exorbitant fare to take him back to his hotel. The argument came to blows with Fitzgerald landing a solid punch on one of the fellows. The problem was, though, that the chap who absorbed the novelist’s punch happened to be a plainclothes police officer who stepped forward to resolve the matter. That resulted in Fitzgerald being hauled off to jail, rather roughly, where he was beaten again. Zelda and a friend came to the writer's rescue, bailing him out by paying some very significant bribes to all parties involved.

Indeed, Scott never forgot the incident but he was not one to
let it go to waste, either. Recognizing in himself his own failing—he had deteriorated to the point where he was now willing to fight taxi drivers—Fitzgerald wrote about the incident in his novel *Tender is the Night* to show how the main character, Dick Diver, was self-destructing in a similar way. Here is the scene in the police station in which Diver absorbs the full fury of the policeman:

He was clubbed down, and fists and boots beat on him in a savage tattoo. He felt his nose break like a shingle and his eyes jerk as if they had snapped back on a rubber band into his head. A rib splintered under a stamping heel. Momentarily he lost consciousness, regained it as he was raised to a sitting position and his wrists jerked together with handcuffs. He struggled automatically. The plainclothes lieutenant whom he had knocked down, stood dabbing his jaw with a handkerchief and looking into it for blood; he came over to Dick, poised himself, drew back his arm and smashed him to the floor.

When Doctor Diver lay quite still a pale of water was sloshed over him. One of his eyes opened dimly as he was being dragged along by the wrists through a bloody haze and he made out the human and ghastly faces of one of the taxi-drivers.

"Go to the Excelsior hotel," he cried faintly. "Tell Miss Warren. Two hundred lire! Miss Warren. Due centi lire! Oh, you dirty—you God—

Still he was dragged along through the bloody haze, choking and sobbing, over vague irregular surfaces into some small place where he was dropped like a stone on the floor. The men went out, a door clanged, he was alone."

(Fitzgerald, 252–253)

Henry James never found himself in such trouble, and Mark Twain, grumpy though he was, nevertheless promised to behave himself in Rome, leaving one to assume that Scott Fitzgerald's bad experience in Rome was of his own making. The Fitz COMPARE

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