

Gucci, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Caravaggio, Oh My! Hamish Bowles's Art-Filled Roman Holiday



BY HAMISH BOWLES

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Photo: Hamish Bowles

A view of the Mapplethorpe show at the grand Palazzo Corsini.

The Tuscan countryside over Memorial Day weekend was as misty as Ireland in the fall, but even with the rain it was a beautiful prelude to a week in Rome.

Rome really is a city of wonders; every visit yields new serendipities. This trip was no exception, thanks largely to the imagination of the Gucci team, who had planned an itinerary that, in the spirit of [Alessandro Michele](#), showcased the best of the designer's native city's treasures, both ancient and modern.

I began my cultural adventures before the Gucci caravansary hit town with a visit to the Palazzo Corsini, which has in various centuries been home to both the exiled Queen Christina of Sweden and the infant Elsa Schiaparelli. The palazzo's famed galleria is currently showcasing a compelling exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe's powerful black-and-white photography on the 30th anniversary of his death (see also the [Guggenheim's current exhibition](#)). *Robert Mapplethorpe: L'obiettivo sensibel*, suavely curated by Flaminia Gennari Santori, sets up intriguing dialogues with the Renaissance masterworks hanging in the permanent collection.

In the palazzo's former stables, the knitwear maven Diane de Clercq has installed her studios, and I hied there to admire her sophisticated work, available at [her chic store in town](#). Thence to a tour of the Palazzo Colonna, arranged by Gucci. In all my trips to Rome, I had never seen this absolutely breathtaking city palace, begun in the 13th century on the site of a Roman temple and now containing enfilades of rooms of great magnificence hung with breathtaking paintings and containing objects of art and furniture that often pay tribute to the Colonna family's role in the battle of Lepanto in 1571, when the Ottomans were defeated by the combined forces of the Spanish Empire and the Venetian Republic. The palazzo was made more splendid still in the early 20th century, when the Lebanese-born Princess Isabelle Colonna (née Sursock) deemed the 17th-century floors too poor and had lavish marble examples installed instead.

Inside the splendid Palazzo Colonna. Photo: Hamish Bowles

The princess died in 1984, and her stately apartments on the ground floor are maintained exactly as she left them. Small wonder that after the fall of the Italian monarchy she was by many accounts the city's de facto royal hostess, a "substitute queen" entertaining in a style to match the setting, garlanded with whopping cabochon emeralds. The theatrical effect of the series of rooms on two levels, either elaborately frescoed or hung with important pictures, culminates at the end of the tour in the Galleria Colonna: 250 feet of Renaissance splendor calculated to snatch the breath away.

Dinner that evening was at the delightful Antica Pesa, its vaulted dining room home to quirky frescoes painted by the city's prominent artists of the last few decades. I woke up early the next day to do something else that I had, shockingly, never gotten around to after decades spent in this city—visiting the three churches that contain works by Caravaggio: the Basilica di Sant'Agostino (containing the *Madonna di Loreto*), the Contarelli Chapel of San Luigi dei Francesi (*The Calling of St. Matthew*, *The Martyrdom of St. Matthew*, and *St. Matthew and the Angel*), and the Cerasi Chapel of Santa Maria del Popolo (*The Conversion of Saint Paul* and *The Crucifixion of Saint Peter*). The pictures are each astonishing in their modernity and in the naturalism of the subjects and, frankly, move one to tears.

Caravaggio's *Madonna di Loreto*, 1604, at the Basilica di Sant'Agostino. Photo: Hamish Bowles

There was a dramatic shift of mood after lunch when we visited MAXXI, the city's contemporary art museum, dynamically designed by the late Zaha Hadid and completed in 2009—although, it has to be said, already looking a little the worse for wear. The museum is showcasing the revelatory exhibition [Paolo Di Paolo: Lost World](#), underwritten by Gucci. From 1954, Di Paolo was a staff photographer for the intellectual weekly journal *Il Mondo*, and he had a brilliant eye for the tellingly off-kilter image, as his contact sheets attest.

His images reveal a country in rapid transition from the trauma and destruction of war to a fast-paced progress that threatened rural life and brought uneven prosperity to its citizens. Even when presented with the great stars of the day—Anna Magnani, Monica Vitti, Kim Novak, Sophia Loren, and Faye Dunaway among them—Di Paolo finds unexpected humanity. There was also an affectionate friendship with Pasolini, with whom he collaborated on the project *The Long Sandy Road*, which depicted Italians at play in the beach resorts around Italy. Di Paolo abruptly gave up photography in 1966, and his work would have languished unseen were it not for his daughter Silvia, who stumbled across the trove of his images in the early 2000s. (She was astonished to discover that her father had even been a professional photographer. As she recounted to us, he hardly took any photographs of her when she was a child, and when he did, he used a cheap disposable camera.) Discovering

this remarkable collection was one thing; persuading her father to allow her to bring the work to the public took a whole other layer—and many years—of persuasion. Thank goodness she did, because the work not only is aesthetically powerful but serves as a vital social document to a compelling period in his country’s history.

Thence to lunch to celebrate the 89th birthday of the preternaturally young-spirited Federico Forquet, the legendary Roman couturier of the Dolce Vita era (as well as a decorator, garden designer, and tastemaker) with clients and friends including the filmmaker Ginevra Elkann and the chic antique art dealer Alessandra Di Castro.

At dusk, we gathered on the rooftop terrace of the Pantheon Iconic Rome Hotel before setting off for the [Gucci Cruise 2020 show](#), with cocktails in the Tabularium overlooking the miracle of the Foro Romana and the collection presented in the Musei Capitolini. The museum can rarely have looked this magical, plunged into semidarkness with only some of its battalions of ancient Roman sculpted heads spotlighted to cast an immemorial eye over the collection (lit by the flashlights thoughtfully provided on each guest’s seat).

At the Musei Capitolini, the venue for Gucci’s Cruise 2020 show Photo: Ronan Gallagher

That collection paid homage to the palimpsest of Rome, with its togaed statues, decadent aristocrats, old-fashioned bourgeoisie, and hipsters rifling through the thrilling adventure of its thrift stores. A heady, compelling mix, with a powerful message about women’s reproductive rights woven—or rather embroidered—into the narrative. The after-party at the wildly over-the-top turn-of-the-century Palazzo Brancaccio featured a performance by the legendary [Stevie Nicks](#), who gave her witchy all, twirling and curtsying barely an arm’s length from where I was standing as she performed her iconic hits. Wow. She was even joined by Gucci poster boy [Harry Styles](#) (in a perfect white three-piece suit) for “Stop Draggin’ My Heart Around.” Be still my beating heart.

Harry Styles and Stevie Nicks in performance. Photo: Jacopo Raule

The following day I dined with the designing couple Antea Brugnoli and Marco Kinloch of [Roi du Lac](#) in their delightful eyrie papered with their whimsical designs, then headed to Milan for a project soon to be revealed, and returned on the morrow for lunch with the delightful Princess Olimpia Torlonia (granddaughter of Queen Ena of Spain, who was in turn the granddaughter of Queen Victoria) on the terrace of her eponymous Palazzo Núñez-Torlonia, shaded by a pergola covered with a sprawling rose so ancient that its trunk is as thick as a tree.

Lunch was followed by a visit to the ineffably chic dealer [Alessandra Di Castro’s](#) famed (third-generation) gallery of wonders in the shadow of the Spanish Steps to sigh over the exquisite micromosaic jewels and handsomely provenanced antiquities.

That evening, Rome welcomed the first international iteration of Istanbul’74, the cultural and artistic exchange festival founded a decade ago by Demet Müftüoğlu Eseli and Alphan Eşeli. The festivities began with welcome drinks at the Turkish Embassy in Rome, an Ottoman-lavish turn-of-the-century villa with stately rooms of brightly new-gilded plasterwork and 18th century-revival-painted panels. I paid far too much attention to the heaped dishes of Turkish delight, which was perhaps a mistake as the cocktail was followed by a welcome dinner hosted by Delfina Delettrez and her partner, the artist Nico Vascellari, in her mother [Silvia Venturini Fendi’s](#) art-filled house.

The scene inside Rome’s Turkish Embassy. Photo: Tommaso Salamina

Here we were serenaded with the wildly amusing and explicit queer poetry of the Iranian-American poet Jahan Khajavi, who lip-synched them to playback while dressed in the incarnation of his ancestress, the famed Qajar princess Anis Al Doleh (whose looks, as a Google search will reveal, defy words: the Shah at the time, titivated by *cartes de visite* images of Parisian ballerinas, decreed that the ladies of his court should adopt short tutu-form skirts in brazen denial of the current regional—and, indeed, acceptable—Western fashion). Quite what the Turkish ambassador made of it all I shudder to think.

The thought-provoking Istanbul’74 conference at the MAXXI the following day brought together Katerina Jebb and Michèle Lamy (who left early to prepare for her appearance later in concert with Nicolo Vascellari), Waris Ahluwalia, Enzo Cucchi, Clémence Poésy, and Francesco Vezzoli, among others, under the title “Self-Expression in the Post-Truth World.” The festivities culminated with a visit to the exhibition *Lucio Fontana: Terra e Oro* at the Galleria Borghese, featuring a room full of the artist’s early glazed ceramic crucifixes and other galleries where his more familiar punctured canvases were dynamically juxtaposed with the museum’s miraculous Bernini and ancient Greek and Roman sculptures, as well as medieval and Renaissance art. Drinks in the gardens were followed by a piano recital by the glamorous twin sisters Güher and Süher Pekinel. The scrumptious dinner that followed featured a culinary collaboration between the Italian master chef Carlo Bernardini and his Turkish counterpart Aret Sahakyan.

With heavy heart and stomach, it was soon time to leave this city of miracles.

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