

Gaspar van Wittel and the visual model of Rome by the Tiber

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Abstract

Since his arrival in Rome in 1675, the Dutch painter Gaspar van Wittel had been developing an innovative operational methodology broadly based on a massive use of a *camera ottica*: it allowed him to compose pictures considered innovative both for their form and content. As a matter of fact, van Wittel is considered the pioneer of the *veduta* and one of the first artists in Rome to orient his gaze to the Tiber and the river landscape. The hydraulic engineer Cornelis Meyer had introduced him to the river territory as well as to cartographic issues; and certainly his Dutch origins had given van Wittel a special sensitiveness toward the water landscape but the fact that at least 75 of his paintings focus on the Tiber, from at least sixteen different points of view, is also depending on the optical features of his *camera*.

Van Wittel's interest in unusual subjects and the river in particular, is strictly linked to his use of the *camera ottica* and the quantity of space it required to reduce post-production work. The Tiber offered both an unedited scenic device and a precious void in the heart of Rome. Similar technical reasons often suggested van Wittel to relegate architectures to the sides of his compositions, as lateral screens useful to frame the landscape. His paintings indirectly favoured an innovative sensitiveness toward the city as an organism as well as the river environment and certainly their wide rectangular format contributed to shift people's taste from the still point of view of traditional central perspective to the kinematic perception of the panoramic *vedute* but their visual model was followed and replicated well beyond the contingent causes that produced it, like an *image* extracted from a *picture*.

Keywords

Gaspar van Wittel, Vedutismo, Camera Ottica, Tiber, visual model

Since his arrival to Rome in 1675, the Dutch painter Gaspar van Wittel had been developing an innovative operational methodology broadly based on a massive use of a *camera ottica*, which allowed him to compose pictures that are considered innovative both for their form and content. As a matter of fact, van Wittel is considered the pioneer of the *veduta* and one of the first artists to orient his gaze to the Tiber. He painted at least 75 paintings focused on the course of the Tiber, from sixteen different points of view (fig.1): in almost each replica are elements slightly differing but the general perspectival scheme is always referring to the same preparatory drawings (Briganti *et al.*, 1996, p. 175).

Proceeding in the direction of the river flowing, the views are entitled (the number in brackets indicates the known painted versions): a. The Tiber to the Port of wood (5 versions); b. The Tiber at Prati di Castello (1); c. The Port of Ripetta (1); d. The Tiber to Castel Sant'Angelo (11); e. The Tiber under the ramparts of Castel Sant'Angelo (4); f. Castel Sant'Angelo from the South (8); g. Castel Sant'Angelo by the Tiber (2); h. Castel Sant'Angelo and the apse of San Giovanni dei Fiorentini (3); i. The river Tiber at San Giovanni dei Fiorentini and Via Giulia (8); l. The Ponte Sisto (5); m. The Tibertine Island (5); n. The Broken Bridge (8); o. The Tiber and the Aventine Hill (4); p. The Aventino (1); q. The Tiber at Ripa Grande (5); r. The Port of Ripa Grande (4).

The dates handwritten on some of these paintings testify most are elaborations after preparatory drawings made in the eighties of the seventeenth century, in a period in which the artist was working for the Sacchetti family and living in their palace in via Giulia, just a few steps from S. Giovanni dei Fiorentini and one of the most fascinating loops of the river. Certainly the Tiber was a significant presence in his long Roman stay; even an *intrusive* presence if one thinks of the many floods he likely witnessed: chronicles report a flood of the Tiber in 1686 (Nov. 3rd, approximately 16 meters at the Ripetta hydrometer) but also in 1695 and yearly from 1700 to 1703. The early collaboration with the hydraulic engineer Cornelis Meyer (Witte, 2013) possibly provided him with both a deep knowledge and original keys of interpretations of the Tiber landscape, as testified by his numerous *vedute* of the river inside and outside the Eternal City. In addition, as a Dutch he had a particular sensitiveness toward the river landscape and the amount of activities

characterising. But we believe van Wittel choose to portray Rome through the Tiber largely for the geometric features of his innovative *camera ottica*.

Camera ottica and preparatory drawing

The Rome National Library preserves some of van Wittel's preliminary drawings on which several of his Tiber paintings are based on. The drawings are actually an horizontal mosaic of many little sheets onto which a *quadratura* was traced to favour the transferring the elements onto the canvas. Authors discussed elsewhere of the likely model of *camera ottica* Van Wittel used as well as about its optical characteristics such as the reduced field of view (Carpiceci & Colonnese, 2015b): here it is worth reminding that each single sheet composing these preparatory drawings possibly resulted from a single work session in the dark *camera ottica*, in which the artist had to draw the trembling image projected onto the desk by the upper lens. When the artist rotated the upstanding mirror to frame the contiguous portion of landscape and run another session on a new sheet, he unavoidably set a different geometric scheme: a consequence of this procedure is that in each single sheet the buildings' edges run to different vanishing points. Van Wittel could obviously move the whole *camera* to shift the point of view parallel to the subject plan but its remarkable weight possibly made such an operation quite problematic.

A direct observation of preparatory drawings related to Tiber paintings revealed that van Wittel either reduced or banned vanishing points and perspective constructions, as already highlighted by Benzi (Benzi 2002, p. 30). This must not be considered a symptom of van Wittel's deficiency of skill in perspective but a precise consequence of a massive use of drawing after the *camera ottica*. Properly a certain lack of projective consistency made his *vedute* even further from the fixed-monocular perspective vision and closer to the gaze of a person contemplating the city. Such a visual model is closely linked to the operative procedure: while the horizontal size would be the outcome of the *camera ottica* progressively rotated to get a sequence of shots, the attention to detail would be not an "aesthetic choice but an optical induction" (Benzi, 2002, p. 31). Anyway, conscious or not, van Wittel produced panoramic pictures requiring a reading time both in amplitude, given the extent of the visual field that alluded to the rotation of the gaze, both in depth, by virtue of the wealth of details (Colonnese, 2012, pp. 331-333) that were perfect to catch the urban river landscape.

In those years the Roman market was filled with unnatural images of the city and its architectures: paintings and engravings were the result of fictive visions and artificial constructions conditioned firstly by the perspective rules and secondly by the need of enhancing the apparent size and magnificence of buildings and squares. Thus tall domes and long facades were frontally reproduced from impossible points of view, often after virtually widening the narrow streets before them. On the contrary, van Wittel's paintings were showing the city from actual points of view in which his customers had probably stood. His paintings, like postcards, photos or selfies before their time (Weststeijn, 2013, p. 49), offered the same image people could enjoy by walking the streets of Rome.

Rome by the Tiber

The image van Wittel elaborated for portraying Rome is the result of different elements. Initially he was probably influenced by visual models by other Netherlandish artists, like Israel Silvestre and Lievin Cruyl, as well as Viviano Codazzi (c. 1606–1670): in the drawing for the *Campo Vaccino dalla scala laterale dell'Aracoeli* (1682) the central perspective of the arched porch directly quotes a visual model replied in many of the Lombard artist's paintings. But gradually the opportunity offered by the *camera ottica* possibly changed van Wittel's way to look upon the city in order to find the most favouring places and conditions for its application.

It is likely that the fame of many Roman buildings generally chosen as a pictorial subject was not properly represented by their optical image inside the *camera ottica*: perhaps the *camera* put in light defects and degradation of buildings, while the horizontal format depressed their monumentality. "It is the invention of the format (induced by a special process of recovery of vision) that determined executive choices that could not emphasize the monument (...) but instead collocated it in context of truth that today we would define photographic." (Benzi, 2002, p. 22)

Moreover the fundamental problem of the distance must be considered. The *camera* had a narrow field of view and required a remarkable distance before the monument free of obstacles. Many of the most famous Roman buildings are generally along narrow streets and did not offer the spatial conditions for using of the camera with the optical framework perfectly vertical: a condition necessary to preserve buildings' vertical edges parallel in the drawing.

Only the depth of the scene could avoid significant marginal aberrations, which can be observed, for example, in the preparatory drawing of Piazza Navona, and freed the artist from a long post-production process for assembling and correcting the small portions by subordinating their converging lines to a unique coherent vanishing point.

Hence the decision to turn his *camera* to the Tiber. In the heart of the city the Tiber offered enough space both to put the right distance between the camera and the architectures and to widen the field of view to a panoramic format, in order to describe the architecture and the city into their natural landscape. Moreover the undulating vertical surface of the river architectures, with their facades continually changing alignment, allowed van Wittel to rotate his camera without any apparent perspectival inconvenient and provided him a very malleable rough materials for following manipulations and deformations. This aspect can be appreciate also in others of his paintings, in which architectures appear foreshortened and mainly relegated to the role of lateral screens to frame the landscape. In the *vedute* of Piazza Montecavallo, Trinità de' Monti, Villa Medici, the *Fontanone*, the Palace of Caprarola and the Villa Aldobrandini, van Wittel placed his *camera* in order to reproduce the buildings through only two sheets: the former containing the whole foreshortened face and the latter covering the frontal elevation, generally easy to correct without perspective involvement.

Such a choice caused the sacrifice of many of the architectural topics whose pictures tourists were looking for, but proposed a different idea of the Eternal City, revealed the aesthetic potentials of its river, promoted the urban space as the unedited main character of the *vedute* as well as the painter himself as a virtuoso visual interpreter of the *Gran Teatro del Mondo*.

Paintings, pictures and images

Rome people had always been quite wary of their capricious river, by relegating it to a simple way of communication and systematically addressing the noble face of their monuments to streets. Thus, the panoramic portraits of Rome by the Tiber van Wittel realized in the Sixties profoundly changed the way both to look upon the city and to conceive a urban *veduta*.

Van Wittel's paintings are the result of a peculiar process involving not only the artist's skill or the market's demands but mainly the *camera ottica's* requires and the opportunities offered by the place. Through his pictures he contributed to a sort of pictorial turn, in which a new *image* of the human space emerged to survive far beyond the death of its author as well as the original technical causes that produced the pictures themselves. As W.J.T. Mitchell wrote, "the picture is a material object, a thing you can burn or break. An image is what appears in a picture, and what survives its destruction – in memory, in narrative, and in copies and traces in other media. (...) Picture, then, is the image as it appears in a material support or a specific place" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 16). Van Wittel's pictures of Rome by the Tiber combine "on the one hand the material nature of the medium – we might say its contingency, its being a support placed in a specific time and place – and on the other its capacity to contain something that survives the destruction of its material support" (Martinengo, 2013, p. 309). It is ordinary to find it back in the works of Canaletto or someone else of van Wittel's followers but it sounds weird to discover it centuries later in the drawings of the anti-academic Le Corbusier. The recurring perspectival scheme Hubert Damisch identified in his *Carnets*, for example in the sketch of the Pecile in Villa Adriana, shows a "long foreshortened side wall perpendicular to the projection plan and far mountains closing the composition" (Damisch, 1988, p. 306), just the way van Wittel's *vedute* do; and more examples are in the *Oeuvre Complete* such as the perspective views of the Palais de Société des Nation in Genève, the garden of the Petite Maison and the *redant* project in Algeri. Le Corbusier's application of such a model has nothing to deal with the *camera ottica's* technical requires, of course, but with a pictorial scheme able to emphasize the *image* of the open space as well as to put architecture and landscape in a mutual relationship. Further examples could be found in different media, such the cinema, whose rectangular screen shows evident proportional analogies with the panoramic format of van Wittel's works (fig.2). The final sequence of Paolo Sorrentino's *The great beauty* quite unconsciously replicates the visual model established by van Wittel more than three centuries ago, demonstrating that the charm of his *vedute* did not get lost with the irreversible changes made by the tall banks planned by Giuseppe Garibaldi but somehow it is still speaking to artists.

Acknowledgements

This paper is the result of a joined effort of the authors: M. Carpiceci edited the first part up to "Camera ottica and preparatory drawing", while F. Colonnese edited the second part, from "Rome by the Tiber" to the end.

Illustrations

Fig.1 From 'a' to 'r' are the points of view of van Wittel's paintings onto Giuseppe Vasi's *Nuova Pianta di Roma in Prospettiva*, 1781 (scheme by F. Colonnese)

Fig.2 Comparison among van Wittel's paintings of the Tiber and Television and cinema formats (diagram by F. Colonnese)

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