

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

Track 'a': Conservation and transformations of dynamic landscape

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Since his arrival in Rome in 1675, the Netherland 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 innovative *vedute*.

The hydraulic engineer Cornelis Meyer introduced him to the territory of Tiber as well as cartographic issues. Van Wittel is considered the initiator of the urban view or *veduta* and one of the first artist to orient his gaze toward the Tiber. His paintings, like postcards before their time, offered customers the same image they could enjoy by walking the streets of Rome and this was a rare occurrence. In fact van Wittel's paintings offer views of the city from actual points of view where his customers had probably stood, whether they are gardens, roof terraces or river banks. No coincidence that he enriched often the foreground of his paintings with spectators watching from terraces who amplified the myth of Rome as a *Teatrum Mundi* and helped the client to identify with the audience.

But only the depth of the scene avoided significant marginal aberrations and spared the artist a long post-production process for assembling the small portions and correcting them to subordinate the portion to a single vanishing point. Beyond all possible contributing factors related to the presence of water and river activities, we believe that van Wittel chose the Tiber as both a preferential place for painting and a scenic device through which look upon the city, for the void it offered in the heart of Rome. The Tiber offered spectacular and unedited views of monuments as well as the spatial features necessary to use the *camera ottica*. Similar technical reasons suggested van Wittel to relegate often architectures to the sides of his compositions, as a lateral scene useful to frame the landscape.

Technical reasons were obviously intertwined with purely aesthetic reasons, but the fact that Van Wittel painted at least 75 paintings focusing on the course of the Tiber, from at least sixteen different points of view (Fig.8), is strictly depending on the optical features of his machine. Moreover the sheets composing his long preparatory drawings can be considered as scientific documents testifying the actual conditions of river banks. By analysing the preparatory drawings kept at the National Library in Rome through digital instruments and using panoramic immersive digital photographs, it is today possible to measure not only the level of manipulations of van Wittel's paintings but also the radical mutations affected the Tiber environment in its urban sector.

Keywords:

Gaspar van Wittel, Vedutismo, Camera Ottica, Panoramic view, Rome and the Tiber

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