

Trinity Fine Art

Caspar Van Wittel, known as Gaspare Vanvitelli
(Amersfoort, 1652/3 – Rome, 1736)

View of Piazza del Popolo in Rome

oil on canvas, 57.9 x 109.2 cm.

Signed and dated on the wall of the church bottom left: *CAS: VAN/ WITEL/ 171[/?/] ROMA*



Perfectly comprehending his contemporaries' interest in panoramic views of the city, Gaspar Van Wittel – better known by the Italian version of his name, Gaspare Vanvitelli – produced a large number of views of Rome, the city in which he had set up his own workshop. The artist's favourite view of Rome was unquestionably Piazza del Popolo, the point of entry for visitors to the city arriving from the north.

This magnificent version is both one of his most successful and one of the most useful for reconstructing the aspect of the square before Giuseppe Valadier (1762 – 1839) remodelled it in the late 18th century.

In the centre of the picture, we see the unforgettable obelisk of Seti I brought to Rome by the Emperor Augustus after his conquest of Egypt in 30 BC. Originally erected in the Circus Maximus, it was moved to its present position by Domenico Fontana, by order of Pope Sixtus V, in 1589. Behind it, the twin churches of Santa Maria di Montesanto and Santa Maria dei Miracoli stand at the head of

the three main streets, known as the 'trident', leading into the heart of Rome. The city fills the background, in which we can identify such landmarks as the Villa Medici, the tower of Santa Trinità dei Monti and the Palazzo del Quirinale. On the left of the square, we see the long wall of the garden belonging to the Augustinian church of Santa Maria del Popolo, whose façade is partly visible bottom left next to the dome of the Cybo Chapel and the convent. On the right, Palazzo Cardelli (formerly Capponi) stands alongside a handful of buildings subsequently demolished by Valadier.

The scene is filled with carriages, horses and charming small figures going about their daily business, all of which helps to imbue the scene with a feeling of vibrant activity. The atmosphere is further enhanced by the artist's decision to depict the city in the light of the setting sun, thus allowing him to juggle light and shade with considerable elegance. It comes as no surprise that Vanvitelli was so popular with his contemporaries, who were struck not only by his clarity of vision and his meticulous depiction of perspective and architecture, but doubtless also by his realistic approach to topographical representation, which was to have such a huge impact on the Italian painters of the generations that came after him.



Fig. 1: Detail showing signature and date: *CAS: VAN/ WITEL/ 171[?]/ ROMA*

The painting is signed and dated bottom left, as though the letters were engraved on the façade of the church of Santa Maria del Popolo (Fig. 1). The final figure of the date is unfortunately rather difficult to make out, but Ludovica Trezzani's suggestion that it should be dated 1718, the date on a different

yet virtually identical version of the view now in the Gallerie d'Italia in Naples, of the same size and very close in terms of the arrangements of the figures (Fig. 2), seems perfectly plausible¹.



Fig. 2: Gaspar Van Wittel, *View of Piazza del Popolo in Rome*, Naples, Gallerie d'Italia

The picture, which was not painted “from life”, is undoubtedly based on a now lost preparatory drawing whose aspect we can reconstruct thanks to an engraving by Vanvitelli dated 1683, showing the piazza in a view which is very close to that depicted in the painting (Fig. 3). The perspective view used in the painting is slightly broader than its prototype, a ploy which enabled Vanvitelli to impart greater breadth to his composition and to include part of the façade of Santa Maria del Popolo in the scene.

¹ Trezzani 2022, see literature. Whether both pictures were painted in the same year is still an open question in that they differ in terms of the amount of space taken up by the piazza, while some scholars have interpreted the date as reading 1711.



Fig. 3: Gaspar Van Wittel, *Prospect of the famed Piazza del Popolo and its Obelisk*, engraving, in C. Meyer, *L'arte di restituire a Roma la tralasciata navigazione del suo Tevere*, Rome 1683

Provenance:

With Colnaghi, London, 1983;
 Sotheby's, New York, 30 January 1998, lot 58;
 Christie's, London, 7 July 2004, lot 104;
 Sotheby's, New York, 28 June 2019, lot 26.

Exhibited:

Montreal, Museum of Fine Arts, *Italian Recollections: Dutch Painters of the Golden Age*, June – July 1990, pp. 218-19, n. 73.

Literature:

L. Laureati, in G. Briganti, *Gaspar van Wittel*, (edited by L. Laureati, L. Trezzani), Milan 1996, p. 133, n. 9.
 L. Trezzani, in *Gaspare Vanvitelli e le origini del vedutismo*, L. Laureati et al. (ed), exhibition catalogue, Rome, Chiostro del Bramante, October 2002 – February 2003 and Venice, Museo Correr, February – June 2003, p. 76, n. 2.