



Giovanni Paolo Panini

(Piacenza 1691 – Rome 1765)

Architectural Capriccio with a Sibyl in Front of the Pyramid of Cestius
Capriccio with an Apostle Preaching in Roman Ruins

Oil on canvas

The former, signed and dated left centre *I.P.P.Romae 1739*, 49.5 x 64.7 cm (19½ x 25½ in)

The latter, inscribed lower left *I.P.PANINI* (partially legible), 50.3 x 66.4 cm (19¾ x 26⅛ in).

PROVENANCE

Fabroni Collection, Pistoia

Conte Carlo Gamba Collection, Florence.

LITERATURE

S. Fermi, 'Fortune e infortuni recenti di G.P. Panini', in *Bollettino Storico Piacentino*, 1931, p. 54

L. Ozzola, 'Nuove aggiunte al Panini', in *Rassegna di Piacenza*, XIX, 1941, p. 25, fig. 2

F. Arisi, *Gian Paolo Panini*, Piacenza 1961, pp. 156-7, cat. nos 121-2, figs 172-3

E. Brunetti, 'Il Panini e la monografia di F. Arisi', in *Arte Antica e Moderna*, 26, 1964, p. 179

F. Arisi, *Gian Paolo Panini e I fasti della Roma del '700*, Rome 1986, pp. 34, 124, 210, 239, 328, 335, 336, 364, 369, 371, nos 272-3.

EXHIBITED

Venice, *Il Settecento Italiano: catalogo generale della mostra e delle sezioni*, 1929

Milan, *Giovanni Paolo Panini 1691-1765*, 1993, n°121-2.

TRINITY FINE ART

Giovanni Paolo Panini, born in 1691 in Piacenza, worked exclusively in Rome, having moved there to further his artistic studies in 1711. He trained under *quadrattisti*, set designers, figure drawers, landscape artists and fresco painters, a variety which enabled him to execute all elements of the *vedute* and *capricci* for which he is famed. In 1719, Panini was elected to the Accademia di San Luca, teaching perspective drawing and eventually rising to the role of principal. He received many commissions for the decoration of the great Roman *palazzi* and subsequently for the recording of significant celebrations, such as *Preparations in Piazza Navona to Celebrate the Birth of the Dauphin of France* (1729) and was held in such high esteem that he was accepted as a member of the Académie de France in Rome in 1732. His scenes of ruins, often animated by historical or mythological episodes, were greatly in demand amongst the Grand Tourists of the time as mementos of their travels. In this vein, Panini also turned to the ‘gallery’ genre, such as the *Gallery of Views of Ancient Rome* and *Gallery of Views of Modern Rome* (1758, 1759, both Louvre, Paris) which were commissioned by the Frenchman François-Claude de Montboissier, Abbé de Canillac. His aesthetic constructions appealed greatly to the taste of these Tourists, who must have been captivated by his blending of the ancient with the more modern, the historic with the more romantic. Panini’s ability to faithfully represent existing monuments in invented compositions of his own creation and imbue these settings with life sets him apart from other painters of the genre, assuring places for his work in great collections around Europe and beyond.ⁱ

These two fine *capricci* are excellent examples of Panini's *oeuvre*. Painted in 1739 in Rome when the artist was at his best, they are described as “gioielli di perfezione assoluta” by the art historian Ferdinando Arisi, author of Panini’s *catalogue raisonné* (see F. Arisi, 1986, p. 124). Both once belonged to the Fabroni Collection in Pistoia, and subsequently to that of the Florentine art historian Carlo Gamba.

There are two other known paintings by Panini with a similar composition, featuring a Sibyl. The first is in the Museo Civico of Piacenza and hails from the Fabroni collection in Pistoia (as does the present Sibylline *capriccio*) and the second is in Paris, at the Louvre (inv. MI 873), and was formerly part of the Caze collection. Unlike the Piacenza and Paris versions, this *Sibyl in Front of the*

Pyramid of Cestius is dated and seems to have been enlarged by the artist to create a more finished composition. Panini's treatment and use of light also give a more luminous effect to this painting. Other elements that differ are the man in armour, draped in a blue cloth, whose place in the other paintings is taken by a dog, the addition of two talking men positioned just before the pyramid and the adaptation of certain details of the monuments. The Pyramid of Cestius would have been a familiar sight for visitors to Rome as it was considered an important vestige of the city's ancient past. The columns on the left, although impossible to identify with any certainty due to their positioning, are evocative of many of the greatest monuments in Rome and the vase in the style of the famed *Medici Vase*, a component of the canon of antique art, would have been instantly recognisable to the educated Grand Tourist of the time. Panini uses warm sunlight to highlight these elements of the composition to a much greater and more effective extent than in the other versions, successfully drawing the observer into the atmosphere of the scene.



Fig. 1 – Giovanni Paolo Panini, *Ancient Ruins with the Pyramid of Caius Cestius*, oil on canvas, 50 x 65.5 cm, Louvre, Paris (inv. no. MI 873)

As noted by Arisi in the artist's *catalogue raisonné*, there exists a faithful, albeit smaller (40.5 x 49.5 cm), copy of the *Capriccio with an Apostle Preaching*, perhaps made by Panini's son Francesco (b.1738), in a private collection in Venice. He also writes of an autograph replica, dating to c.1750, which sold in New York in 1959, but unfortunately all trace of it has been lost ever since. In the present version, Panini uses light in much the same way as in the *Capriccio with a Sybil* in order to emphasize certain features of the painting. The Apostle, framed by the antique arch, is literally surrounded by relics of Rome's (pagan) past; he stands amongst the ruins of an ancient building, with column bases and decorative masonry scattered at his feet, he is observed by a statue, perhaps of a Bacchante given the presence of the pan-pipes on her pedestal, and in the foreground, a relief depicting a lion, reminiscent of the *Medici Lions*, is propped up against the rubble. Panini uses a language based on the shared knowledge of well-known examples of ancient art to create a setting which must have been at once recognisable yet exciting not only for foreign Tourists, but also for those who lived in Rome, who in his paintings could see a version of their city both 'capricious' and familiar.

TRINITY FINE ART

Together, these two paintings illustrate Panini's talents as a painter of wide-ranging skill and the individuality of his art - his tender nostalgia and hints of Romanticism tempered by the reality of history and architecture and his picturesque scenes of ruins enlivened by the action of gesturing figures setting him apart from his predecessors and contemporaries.

ⁱ For a fuller biography of Panini, see entry in the *Grove Dictionary of Art*: <https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T065056> and, in Italian, that of the *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*: [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giovanni-paolo-panini_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/?search=PANINI%2C%20Giovanni%20Paolo%2F](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giovanni-paolo-panini_(Dizionario-Biografico)/?search=PANINI%2C%20Giovanni%20Paolo%2F).