

VNY *La Voce di New York*

— *america Oggi* 1988 —

Editor in Chief:
Giampaolo Pioli

The First Italian English Digital Daily in the US

English Editor: Grace
Russo Bullaro

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“Wonders of the Grand Tour” at Milan’s Poldi Pezzoli Museum

An exhibition tracing how the Grand Tour shaped taste, art collecting, and the modern museum



Italian Hours

Lucy Gordan



Giovanni Paolo Panini. *Ancient Rome* is courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

🕒 Time: 3 mins read

Gian Giacomo Poldi Pezzoli (1822–1879) was a wealthy nobleman and patriot from Milan. In his home, near the Cathedral and La Scala theatre, he amassed an

exceptional collection of neoclassical jewelry that features the meticulous technique of micro-mosaics by Fortunato Pio Castellani, European arms and armor, decorative arts, and especially several masterpieces of Renaissance painting including works by Botticelli, Bellini, Crivelli, and Pollaiuolo.

Shortly before his death Poldi Pezzoli bequeathed and endowed his house-museum, not unlike New York’s Morgan Library and Frick Collection and Peggy Guggenheim’s Museum in Venice, for public use. The museum, well worth a visit, opened in 1881.



Poldi Pezzoli portrait. Courtesy of the Poldi Pezzoli Museum

On until May 4, alongside Poldi Pezzoli’s permanent treasures, is “Wonders of the Grand Tour,” an artistic synopsis of the Grand Tour, the cultural must-do voyage that from the late 16th century to the early 19th century introduced northern European travelers, primarily the wealthy and the already artistic, to Italian and French art. Among the most famous of these “tourists” were Hans Christian Andersen, Byron, Dickens, Gibbon, Goethe, Lear, Ruskin, Turner, Mark Twain, and Voltaire, to name a few.

The star of the exhibition, hands down, is the painting “Ancient Rome” by Giovanni Paolo Panini (Piacenza 1691–Rome 1765), on loan from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The

work, dated 1757, represents one of the greatest examples of meta-painting, in which the artist sets up an imaginary gallery containing more than fifty of his paintings of Roman ruins. The scene is populated by statues, monuments, and recognizable people, including Panini himself and the painting’s patron, the Count of Stainville, French ambassador to Rome.

Alongside “Ancient Rome” is “Interior of the Pantheon,” another earlier painting by Panini dated 1743 and acquired by the Poldi Pezzoli Museum in 2024. This acquisition represents an opportunity for Milan, as there are no other works by Panini in the city’s public collections.

The exhibition also includes two views by the father of Vedutism, Gaspar Van Wittel, better known as Vanvitelli: “Panoramic View of Rome from Villa Medici” and “Panoramic View of Rome from Trinità dei Monti.” These views of “modern” Rome at the time, and other similar ones by several different artists, were prized souvenirs of Grand Tour travelers.

The tour continues with artifacts from the “Roman” era. One is an authentic, recently restored third-century AD sarcophagus purchased by Poldi Pezzoli; another is one of many copies of the Greek sculptural group of “Laocoön and His Children”

(the ancient Trojan priest and seer and his sons Antiphantes and Thymbraeus), for copies of ancient sculptures were another favorite souvenir of Grand Tour travelers. The original had been unearthed in 1506 on Rome's Esquiline Hill and immediately put on display in the Vatican Museums, where it remains today. This copy was made in hard porcelain in 1749 by the Ginori Manufacture of Doccia near Florence and purchased by Gian Giacomo Poldi Pezzoli. During the 18th century Ginori made many porcelain reproductions of different ancient sculptures to sell.



Laocöon and His Sons. Courtesy of the Poldi Pezzoli Museum



A fan showing the Pantheon. Courtesy of the Poldi Pezzoli Museum

Also on public display for the very first time is a collection of Grand Tour fans bequeathed to the museum by collector Carlo Borgomaneri (1877–1955), a distinguished doctor from Gallarate in the province of Varese. Decorated with monuments and ruins from Rome, Naples, Herculaneum, Pompeii, and Paestum, they again testify to the taste of Grand Tour travelers and their interest in ancient art.

Completing the experience is the short film “All the Gods” by super-successful Turkish-born, Italian-adoptee film director of “The Ignorant Fairies,” “Facing Windows,” “Saturn in Opposition,” “Loose Cannons,” and most recently “Diamonds.” “All the Gods” offers a contemporary reading—a reverie located in Rome’s Pantheon—of the Grand Tour.

Hours: daily from 10 AM to 6 PM, closed Tuesday.

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Lucy Gordan

Italian Hours

Former editor at the American Academy in Rome and at the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, with journalists.

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