

PAPACY AND POLITICS
IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ROME

PIUS VI AND THE ARTS



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INTRODUCTION: ARSENALS OF ART



In January 1999 I was returning to Seattle from New York after studying Tommaso Conca's sketch for a ceiling in the Vatican Museum – a record, I argue later, of the papacy's evolving self-image in the face of changing times. As my connection was leaving St. Louis, the pilot announced that all traffic would halt while "Shepherd One," the Boeing 727 carrying Pope John Paul II on a pastoral visit to North America, departed for Rome. Excited passengers watched the jet taxi behind us, while our flight crew lined the runway in honor of the pontiff. It lasted just an instant, and the airport soon sprang back to life; Al Gore's subsequent departure in Air Force Two, by contrast, occasioned little excitement.

As my own plane lifted off I realized that it was exactly two centuries since Pius VI, John Paul's predecessor and Tommaso Conca's patron, died as a political prisoner in revolutionary France. The papacy itself must then have seemed dead, a grand historical cycle finally come to an end. Yet the papacy has survived and, arguably, prospered. Although both the Church's role in Rome and Rome's in the Church have changed since 1799, popes still command an allegiance and an authority unlike that of other world leaders. Pius VI contributed to that endurance. By resisting certain historical changes and pioneering others, Pius – like John Paul – engaged Europe's cultural and political struggles and argued for his continuing relevance. Although their technologies differed, both pursued their sacred missions by embracing secular innovations and adapting the trappings of power from the wider world they served. I wondered what Pius would think of Shepherd One and its peripatetic occupant, part global ambassador and part historical relic. I suspect the pageant-loving "Apostolic pilgrim" would thoroughly approve.

This book investigates a pope who embraced the arts at a time of social, political, and aesthetic flux. It asks how Pius VI, born Gianangelo Braschi in Cesena in 1717, used his artistic patronage to help shape political discourse, promote a cult of personality, and visualize deeply held beliefs. It also argues that Braschi was more important to the arts than is usually acknowledged. As Peter's 250th successor, Pius led the Church through some of the most dramatic changes Europe had ever undergone. During his nearly twenty-five-year reign

the monarchies of France and Naples were overthrown and replaced with republics; old political hierarchies, structures, and allegiances were questioned, while new theories asserted the inherent dignity of the individual. It was a time of particular challenge for Rome, as progressives across the political spectrum redefined religion as an arm of the civil government, and Catholic dissidents demanded changes in Church polity, doctrine, and observance. The old order was giving way and threatened to take the papacy along with it.

Against this background Pius VI consciously adopted the visual arts as a tool with which to strengthen his and the Church's tactical position. Although he was not the first to exploit the arts politically, nor did he articulate his plan in concrete terms, his dogged support of the arts against financial and political odds demonstrates his keen awareness of their persuasive potential. As his traditional power diminished, Pius used art to consolidate past gains, refine symbolic strategies, and plot new courses for the future. Reconstructing this campaign means reconnecting projects and media that are often viewed separately. The succeeding chapters thus range from medals to mosaics and from prints to palaces in an attempt to recover the scope and depth of Pius's enterprise. Collectively, they suggest how Pius used the arts as weapons in an arsenal undergoing a historic change.

By using the term "arsenal," with all its military overtones, I mean to emphasize both Pius's strategic thinking and his paradoxical position. I borrow the metaphor from Fanny Kemble Butler (1809–93), a sharp-eyed Victorian tourist and poet who tells us much about Rome's difficult transition to modernity. Looking out from her terrace in 1847, Kemble composed her "Verses on Rome" by reading the city's landmarks as indexes of its destiny. After surveying the popes' modern residence at the Quirinal ("Where, guarded round by Faith, and Hope, and Love,/The expectation of the people dwells"), she turns to their historic seat at the Vatican:

Far to the left, beyond the Angel's tower,
Rises the temple of the world, and stretch
The Vatican's glorious *arsenals of art*,
Where still abide the immortal gods of Greece,
Where worship still the tribes of all the earth.¹

Kemble's clever oxymoron offers more than alliteration, recognizing that the Vatican's art-filled corridors offer little real defense. Aware that Rome's second, papal empire is about to collapse, Kemble sees "the last/Waving and glancing of its impotent splendor/And a dim twilight fills the place it filled." Wondering if this penumbra will bring dusk or dawn, she recasts the empty Vatican as a sickroom

Where, 'mid diseases and corruptions loathsome,
Infirmary, decrepid, crippled, impotent,

Yet bright-eyed with vitality unconquerable,
At its great heart the ancient faith lies gasping.²

But if Kemble views the Vatican as both an arsenal and a morgue, she also sees it as a cradle from which Rome will rise hand in hand with the “glorious shape” and the “healing youth” of a rejuvenated Italy. My purpose is not to dwell on Kemble’s poetry or her politics, but to emphasize her acumen in understanding the Vatican – indeed, Rome itself – as a concretization of history. Whereas Rome once ruled the world by “absolute dominion and the great genius of the men she bore,” it is now “Queen of the world by reverential memory.” The poem’s final metaphor shows the extent to which the Eternal City is now one with its art. Weeping as turtle doves alight on her garden fountain, Kemble first likens their blurred forms to a Hadrianic mosaic she had seen at the Capitoline Museum, and then to a Raphaellesque Madonna that blots out Rome itself. In the magic of twilight, Kemble’s beloved “Virgin Rome” becomes a universal cycle of birth, destruction, and redemption.

Something of that cyclic vision informs this study, which challenges received notions of eighteenth-century Rome as a locus of decadence or stagnation. Professor Giorgio Spini once asked me why a healthy young American was interested in Pius VI, the very opposite of everything modern and creative. As Paolo Portoghesi has observed, “The Roman settecento remained in oblivion for years, viewed by the big-game hunters as a poor territory in which one risked wasting ammunition by following unlikely prey.”³ This situation is now changing, as scholars on both sides of the Atlantic reevaluate a century long marooned between the Baroque and the Risorgimento. As a major exhibition in Philadelphia and Houston has demonstrated, eighteenth-century Rome cannot be viewed through the lens of the seicento, nor was the papal capital uniformly backward or regressive. Although travelers routinely commented on its defects, today’s historians acknowledge that Rome led Europe in the fields of social assistance, the political theory of enlightened despotism, certain economic policies, the protection of cultural patrimony, and the practice (if not the theory) of freedom of thought and expression. Other scholars have focused anew on the Grand Tour, rereading it not just as an education for the north but as a comprehensive cultural exchange that transformed both halves of the Continent.⁴

Still, this spotlight has not always reached the settecento’s final decades, which in some sense remain a forgotten corner. Yet these were precisely the years of Europe’s maximum interest in the papal capital, as tourism expanded up and down the social scale. In no other pontificate than Pius VI’s did so many sitting monarchs, as well as artists, intellectuals, students, and hangers-on, descend on the Eternal City with such high expectations for a life-changing experience. While some were convinced papalists and others mere hedonists, the majority arrived as open-minded, if skeptical, students. Goethe described feeling “like a fish in the

water,” at home in the Eternal City but overwhelmed by its history and art. As he put it, “The school in which I am enrolled as a pupil is far too great to let me leave it soon. I must cultivate my knowledge of the arts and my modest talents and reach some sort of maturity; otherwise . . . all my striving, toiling, crawling, and creeping would have to begin all over again.”⁵ A wealth of analogous accounts reveals the extent to which visitors sought to sift competing cultural and political claims and determine the truth for themselves. In this “entrepôt of Europe,” as Christopher Johns has termed it, art’s intersection with politics turned the audience into actors in a constantly evolving drama.

As the heads and prime movers of Rome, its state, and its Church, popes set the tone for what went on in their capital. Pius VI was no exception, although he departed from precedent in governing largely by himself. His pontificate of twenty-four years and eight months, then held to be the longest since Peter’s, allowed Braschi to shepherd longer-range policies, programs, and projects than most of his predecessors and inject new vigor into traditional leadership functions. But it was conviction as well as longevity that led Pius to the arts, and my aim is to explore the ideological and practical factors that fueled this commitment. Despite a tottering economy, an entrenched bureaucracy, and uncertain political fortunes, Pius VI sought to raise the prestige of his office and his family by subsidizing art, architecture, and urbanism. He did not shy from taking credit, and no visitor could miss the riot of inscriptions celebrating his contributions. Pius relished the frequent *paragoni* with Julius II and Leo X and was the last pope to conceive of himself as an artistic doyen in the Renaissance and Baroque tradition.

That very nostalgia has alienated modern scholars, who have tended to dismiss Braschi as a chronological aberration. Pius VI is usually remembered for his “lasts” – the last pope to expand St. Peter’s, the last to erect urban obelisks, and the last to erect a sumptuous family palace. But Pius was also the first pontiff in centuries to travel willingly outside Italy, the first since 1527 to see his city invaded, and the first to transform the Vatican into something approaching a modern museum. His historical reputation is understandably mixed: whereas Ludwig von Pastor saw Braschi as “an heroic follower of Christ” in an “ungrateful world,” Italo Insolera denounced him as “more anachronistic than pathetic.”⁶ Likewise, his work in the arts has been both damned as archaic and out of touch and praised as sophisticated and forward-looking.⁷ This book takes a different view. Instead of defining Pius as an anachronism or a hero, it examines how he bridged the old and new orders by blending received conventions with Enlightenment ideals. One cannot minimize Pius’s devotion to tradition; as a defender of inherited truth he patronized little that may be called *avant-garde*, while his obsession with precedent led him away from revolutionary iconoclasts toward able practitioners who could revitalize the old in the service of the new. Much as religious historians are reviving the concept of the Catholic Enlightenment, cultural historians must be sensitive to Pius’s cautious mediation between tradition and innovation.⁸ This, too, was

modern in its way, and Braschi's conservative revivalism anticipated dominant trends of the nineteenth century.

My method in pursuing this inquiry is threefold. First, instead of focusing on one medium, artist, or location, I attempt to survey the varied ways that Pius used the arts to defend himself, his family, and his Church. Although it means treading on specialized territory, I believe that comparing buildings, tapestries, frescoes, sculptures, and museums best highlights their commonalities and differences. My study is not encyclopedic, however, especially in the provinces, and selects projects deemed characteristic of Pius's enterprise; many of these cases raise complex documentary and interpretive issues and deserve further study. Second, as a historian rather than a critic, I rate contextual importance over visual appeal, except when "appeal" is key to a project's intended function. Because my goal is not to argue for or against Pius's work but to recover its cultural and political setting, I rely heavily on contemporary evidence of his successes and of his even more revealing failures. I also limit discussion of modern reception to cases that illustrate changing generational perspectives. Third, I have attempted as far as possible to recapture Pius's own perspective as a patron, while acknowledging the independent viewpoints of his executors and his public. Since few of Braschi's artists are household names, discussion focuses on their most relevant projects rather than their overall careers. With better-known figures such as Pompeo Batoni, Carlo Marchionni, and Giuseppe Valadier, I ask why Pius chose them for specific projects, how that work relates to their other production, and how Braschi's ideals intersected with their own. I hope in this way to shed light on Pius's distinctive personality as a patron. How did Gianangelo Braschi reveal his own hopes, fears, and aspirations through the art he commissioned and inspired?

These goals entail distinct practical and conceptual challenges. Because many of Pius's artistic projects are unfamiliar or even unknown, I have relied heavily on the manuscript holdings of the Archivio di Stato in Rome (including correspondence, contracts, drawings, and payments for urbanistic projects in Rome and the provinces, as well as for the Vatican Museum); the Archivio Segreto Vaticano (including original bills and invoices for work at the papal palaces); the Fondo Lanciani at the Biblioteca dell'Istituto di Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte (an essential resource for the history and documentation of Roman topography); the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, the Biblioteca Alessandrina, the private archives of the Musei Vaticani, the Biblioteca Comunale at Forlì, and many other institutions. Much of this material is unstudied and uninventoried, and I have striven to provide sufficient documentation for future scholars while maintaining a focused argument. In other cases I have been able to draw on a growing secondary literature, much still limited to regional publications, institutional chronicles, and narrowly circulating journals. One of my aims has been to digest this heterogeneous literature and to provide a broader conceptual and interpretive framework for further research.

To balance the demands of context and focus, the book proceeds thematically. Chapter One (“Politics and Possibilities”) introduces Gianangelo Braschi and outlines the political conditions that shaped and ultimately ended his pontificate. It considers how his distinctive personality intersected with the external and internal situation of Rome and the Papal States and how it conditioned his ambitious reform program. Chapter Two (“Images of Sovereignty”) traces the ways that Pius exploited a wide range of visual expression – from painted portraits to popular prints, and from ceremonies to allegorical paintings – to present himself as a magnanimous and enlightened ruler fit for the challenges of the age. It examines Braschi’s role in shaping an iconography that articulated his complementary roles as a temporal monarch, a religious leader, and an artistic patron. It also surveys the pope’s approach to cultural politics and examines the mechanisms he used to bring the arts within his sphere of control.

The following two chapters focus on Pius’s work at the Vatican, the centerpiece of his artistic campaign. Chapter Three (“Completing St. Peter’s”) investigates Carlo Marchionni’s controversial new sacristy as a model of modern religious architecture and a prototype of Pius’s desired historical revival. It also examines Braschi’s other interventions inside and outside the basilica, marking his determination to conclude its modern rebuilding and to succeed where his predecessors had failed. Chapter Four (“The Gods’ Abode”) analyzes Pius’s single most extensive project, the expansion of his predecessor’s sculpture museum into the world’s greatest collection of ancient art, housed in stylish neoclassical halls that form a landmark in European museology. Drawing on previous sections, this chapter also probes Braschi’s transformation of the Vatican into a didactic itinerary trumpeting the popes’ role as the ultimate and proper guardians of the West’s cultural and intellectual heritage.

The remaining two chapters study how Pius extended these ideas to Rome and the Papal States. Chapter Five (“The Eternal City”) evaluates his principal contributions to Rome’s cityscape, ranging from his three reerected Egyptian obelisks to the massive palace he constructed for his nephew. By showing how these projects blend urbanistic, archeological, and metaphorical agendas, this chapter illustrates how Pius sought to make his capital the showpiece of a reinvigorated papacy. Finally, Chapter Six (“Creating a Nation”) surveys Pius’s interventions in the Papal States, key physical and symbolic lynchpins within an economic, bureaucratic, and religious project of nation building. Campaigns such as his refurbishment of remote Subiaco and the transformation of Terracina into a burgeoning Pontine capital reveal how projects overseen by local delegates and organs of the papal administration percolated Pius’s tastes and ideals to smaller cities and towns throughout his realm. The study concludes with a reflection on Pius’s patronage in the larger context of papal art, returning to the question of his motivations, instincts, and personality. It is with Braschi the man, therefore, that the story begins and ends.