

COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Giovanni Paolo Panini
(Piacenza 1691 – 1765 Rome)

An imaginary view of the Forum Romanum with the restoration of the Temple of Castor and Pollux

Black chalk, pen and grey ink and watercolour on two joined sheets of paper.
33.5 x 62.5 cm; 13 1/8 x 24 5/8 in.

Provenance

Giancarlo Baroni (1926-2007);

Sale, Sotheby's, New York, 29 and 30 January 2013, lot 25, where acquired by the present owner.



Giovanni Paolo Panini's *An Imaginary View of the Forum Romanum with the Restoration of the Temple of Castor and Pollux* reflects the continued importance and vitality of the Roman Forum in the 18th century. Beneath the towering remnants of ancient architecture, a crowd of onlookers gathers around the partially restored Temple of Castor and Pollux. Some gesture animatedly toward the scaffolding, while others pause mid-conversation to observe the scene with evident interest. Their engagement recalls the Forum's earlier role as a centre for civic and political life, where Roman senators once met to debate and deliberate. In this imagined view, Panini presents the Forum not as a static ruin but as a living space—linking ancient public life with his own era's renewed curiosity and civic awareness. His command of architectural form and composition allows him to create a scene that bridges past and present.

Best known for his engaging landscapes and architectural fantasies, Panini was a prolific and versatile artist who played a key role in popularizing classicism in 18th-century Rome.¹ Although he also painted accurate vedute, this work is a classic capriccio, emphasising the splendour of Rome through an idealized cityscape. Along the periphery of the composition, Panini includes recognizable structures such as the Temple of Venus, the Arch of Titus, the Temple of Antoninus and Faustina, the Colosseum, and the Arch of Constantine. These buildings have been repositioned for compositional effect, creating a balanced and monumental view. While some contemporaries criticized his exaggeration of scale, Panini's style was greatly admired by French artists and patrons.² His wife, Miss Gossert, had family ties to the French Academy in Rome, which likely contributed to his strong reputation among French collectors.

At the centre of the painting is the Temple of Castor and Pollux, represented by its three surviving columns. Historically, the temple served multiple civic functions—it hosted Senate meetings, political speeches, and even housed the official weights and measures of Rome.³ This blend of public and administrative use resonates with the mythological figures it honours: Castor and Pollux, the twin brothers known for their loyalty and heroism. The restoration depicted here refers to real work undertaken in 1760, near the end of Panini's life. By this stage in his career, Panini had become increasingly interested in the aesthetic potential of ancient monuments. Less focused on strict archaeological accuracy, he used these elements to structure his compositions and to convey broader themes of continuity and memory.

The idealised view of the Forum Romanum is close to several oil paintings made by the artist between 1735 and 1750. Two splendid views of the Forum, both signed and dated 1735, are in the Detroit Institute of Arts (Figs. 1-2), while another is in the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore.⁴

¹ F. Arisi, *Gian Paolo Panini e I fasti della Roma del '700*, Ugo Bozzi Editore 1986, p. 2.; Paris, Musée du Louvre, *et al.*, *Pannini*, 1992-93, p. 17.

² Paris, Musée du Louvre, *et al.*, *Pannini*, 1992-93, pp. 18-19.

³ Gartrell, Amber, *Castor and Pollux in Ancient Rome: Myth, Ritual, and Society*, Cambridge University Press 2021.

⁴ Inv. 47.93, 47.94 and 2366 respectively; Arisi, 1986, nos. 229, 230 and 376



Fig. 1. Giovanni Paolo Panini, *View of the Roman Forum*, 1735, oil on canvas. Detroit Institute of Art.



Fig. 2. Giovanni Paolo Panini, *View of the Colosseum*, 1735, oil on canvas. Detroit Institute of Art.

While many of Panini's drawings can be linked to later oil paintings, this watercolour appears to be a stand-alone work, likely created with the collector's market in mind. Drawings of this kind were highly sought after by 18th-century connoisseurs and collectors, who prized them for both their refinement and their depiction of celebrated Roman landmarks.

A comparable example is *The Lottery in Piazza di Montecitorio* (Fig. 3), a watercolour held by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.⁵ Although conceived as a preparatory study for the painting of the same title now in the National Gallery, London (Fig. 4), it shares with the present work a similar visual structure, juxtaposing monumental architecture with a dense, animated crowd.

⁵ Inv. 68.53; J. Bean and W.M. Griswold, *18th Century Italian Drawings in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, exhib. cat., 1990, no. 150, ill.



Fig. 3. Giovanni Paolo Panini, *The Lottery in Piazza di Montecitorio*, 1743-44, Pen and black ink, watercolor, over graphite. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 4. Giovanni Paolo Panini, *The Lottery in Piazza di Montecitorio*, 1743-44, oil on canvas. London, National Gallery of Art.

In Panini's time, watercolours of this quality, carefully composed and finely rendered, were often appreciated as independent works of art. Another example in the Metropolitan's collection, *Scalinata della Trinità dei Monti* (Fig. 5), likewise presents architecture on an imposing scale, its grandeur offset by the small figures below, and was similarly intended as a finished, self-contained composition.

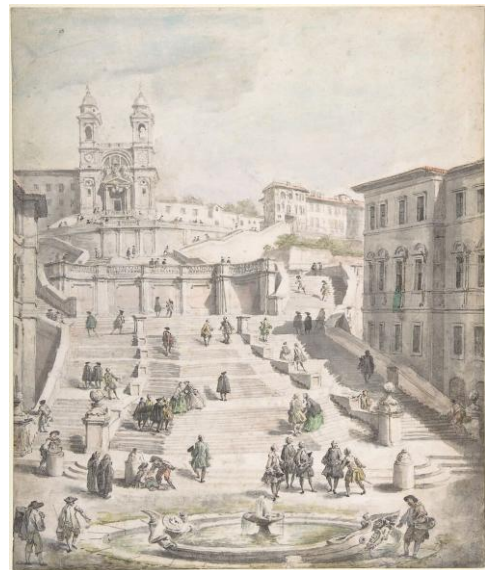


Fig. 5. Giovanni Paolo Panini, *Scalinata della Trinità dei Monti*, 1756-58, Pen and black ink, brush and gray wash, watercolor, over graphite. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.