Between the Real and the Ideal

The Accademia degli Arcadi and Its Garden in Eighteenth-Century Rome

Susan M. Dixon



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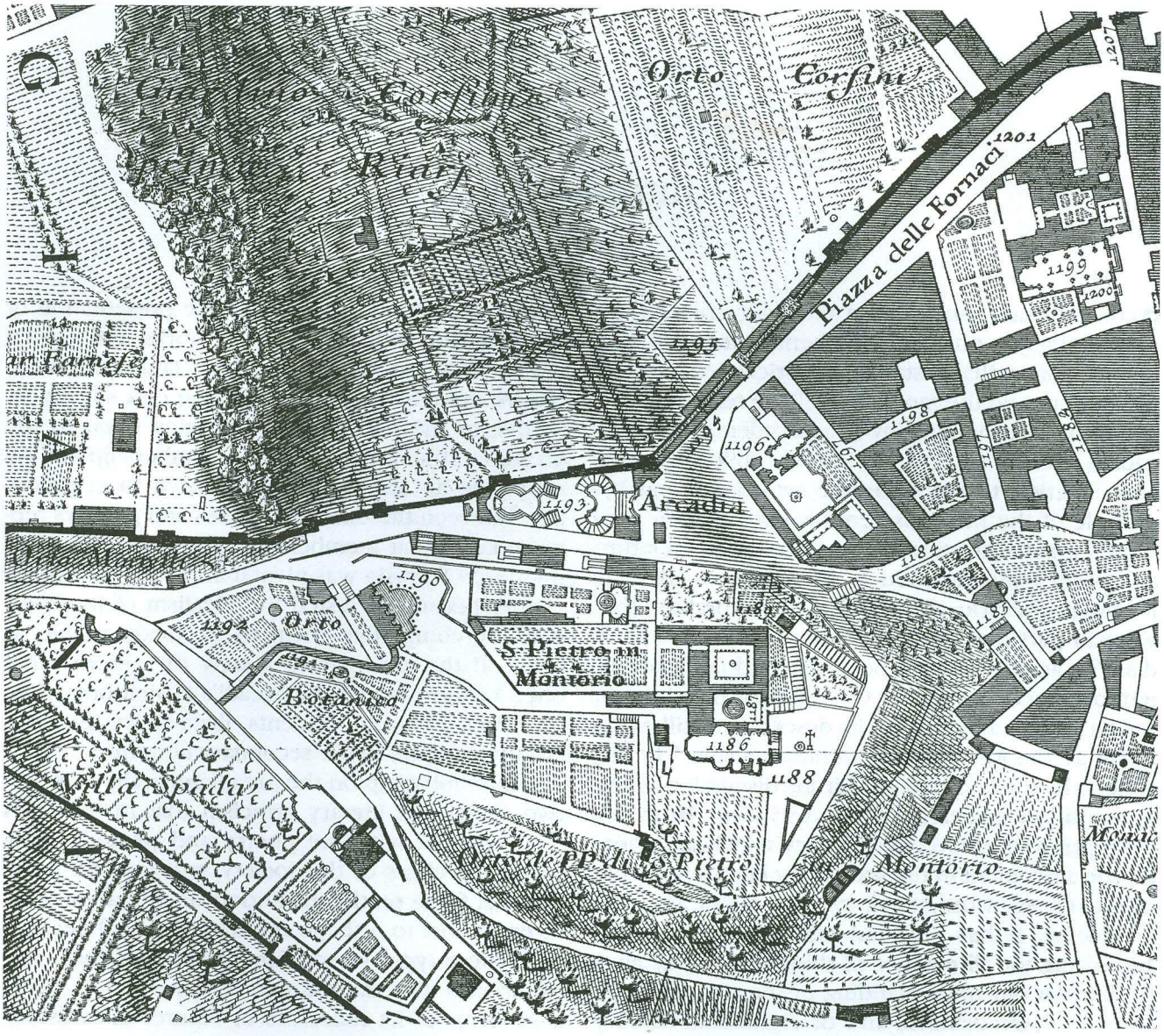
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Introduction

Some scholars use the term Arcadia to describe, if only partially, a phase in eighteenth-century Italian history, during that sustained historical between the premodern and the modern era.[1] The term refers to the reforms promoted by the Accademia degli Arcadi, a literary society founded in 1690 in Rome. As a reaction to the excessive artificiality and hyperbole of the previous century, the academy promoted a simplification or purification of literature and other cultural products. Its members adapted, if only in rhetoric, the mores of a pastoral life that were in part fashioned after those of ancient Arcadia. The academy had a pervasive and fairly persistent presence throughout the eighteenth century in Italian society at large, and its descendant still exists today as the Accademia letteraria italiana.[2] In the general histories of Italian culture, discussion of the organization is nearly always included. However, perceptions of the Accademia vary widely, and there is little agreement in the secondary literature on the effectiveness of the Arcadi to bring about any kind of change. It has received historiographic praise and blame for all manner of things. My study aims to sharpen our understanding of the phenomenon known as Arcadianism, and of eighteenth-century Rome, by focusing attention on an event in the Accademia's early history, the creation of its garden meeting place that they named after the Parrhasian Woods located in ancient Arcadia, the Bosco Parrasio.

The Bosco Parrasio is one of Rome's hidden and elusive gems (figs. 1–3). Located on a south-facing stretch of the Aurelian wall on the slope of the Janiculum Hill, this small, early eighteenth-century garden is unconventional in many ways. For one, the garden does not look like its predecessor, the sixteenth- or seventeenth-century garden, in that while it was lush and green, there was nary a geometric parterre in sight, and its water displays were modest. More significantly, from 1724 to 1726 it was created by and for the Arcadi, and not, as most Italian gardens of its age were, for a powerful wealthy patron. It was used mainly for the presentation of the Arcadians' reformed literary works. The garden was to facilitate the organization's larger and more elusive cultural aim, the fashioning of a society attentive to the public good, by being open to the Arcadi's extraordinarily diverse membership and by supplying an atmosphere conducive to conversation between the different classes and genders represented in that membership. The construction of the Bosco Parrasio was pivotal in the organization's history because it tested the idealism of its objectives by compelling them to be made visible. It exposed the academy to a slew of criticism that often acknowledged the Arcadi's aspirations while disparaging its achievements. Even today this criticism has ripples in the secondary literature.

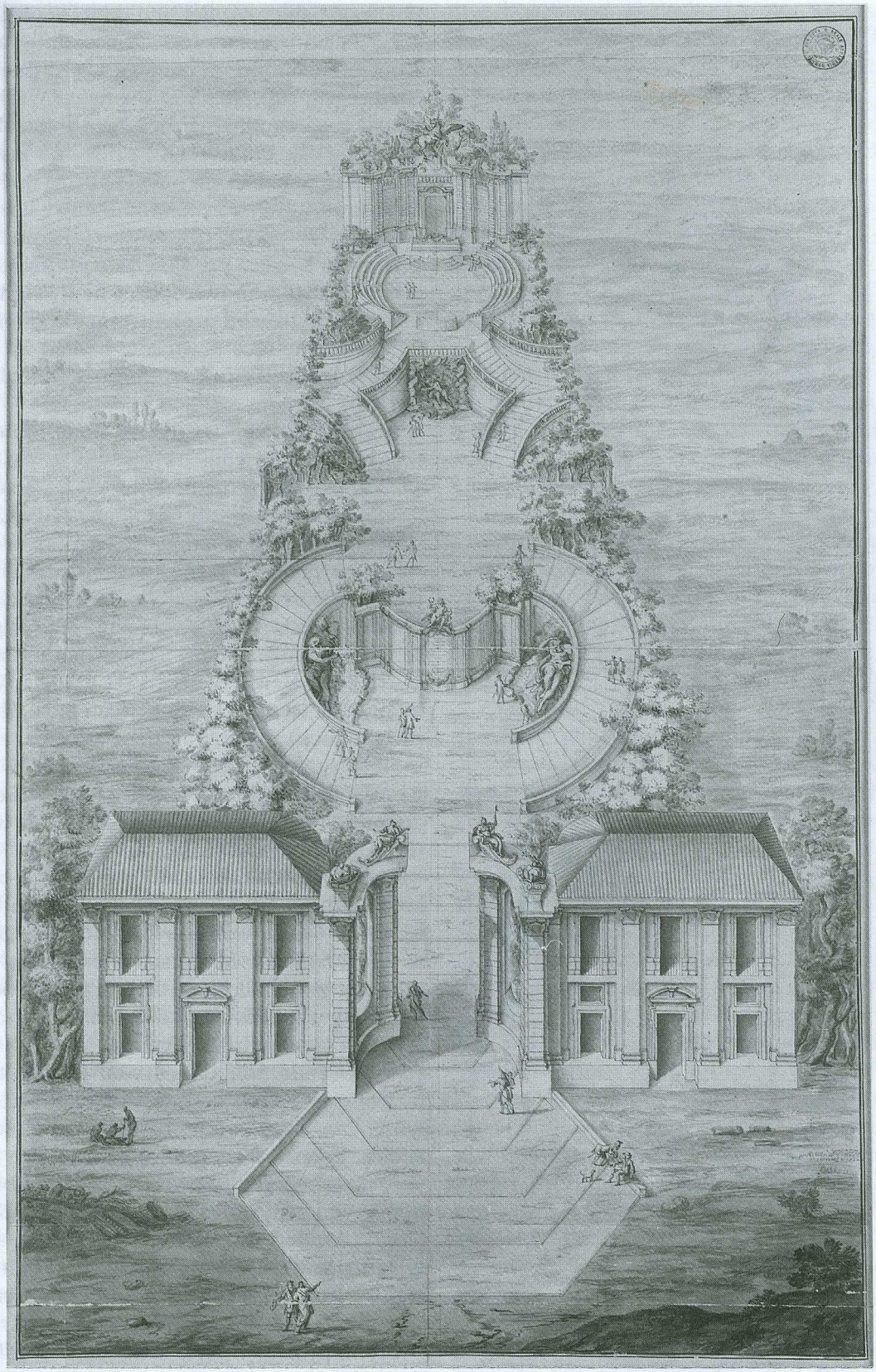
The scholarship on the Arcadi generally falls into two categories: literary criticism that in the main is concerned with the poetry and prose of individual members of the society; and cultural histories that focus on the institution, its operations, and its endeavors to reshape certain attitudes.[3] Because both these types of scholarship tend to characterize Arcadia as a transitional movement, they judge it in terms of its successes or failures in foreshadowing or engendering change. In the literary category, many nineteenth-century critics, upholders of romantic ideals, ridiculed the organization, describing its members' prose and poetry as sterile and boring.[4] But by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, literary historians were acknowledging the substantial contributions of some of the more famous Arcadian writers such as Metastasio, Luca Goldoni, Giuseppe Parini, and Vittorio Alfieri to a national cultural heritage. The merit of the Arcadi was narrowly defined by the poetry or prose of a few chosen members, a number of whom only had tenuous or contentious connections both to the academy and to each other.[5] Among some cultural historians, the organization's customs were studied and deemed ridiculous at best, and hypocritical and counterproductive at worst. The scapegoats for the



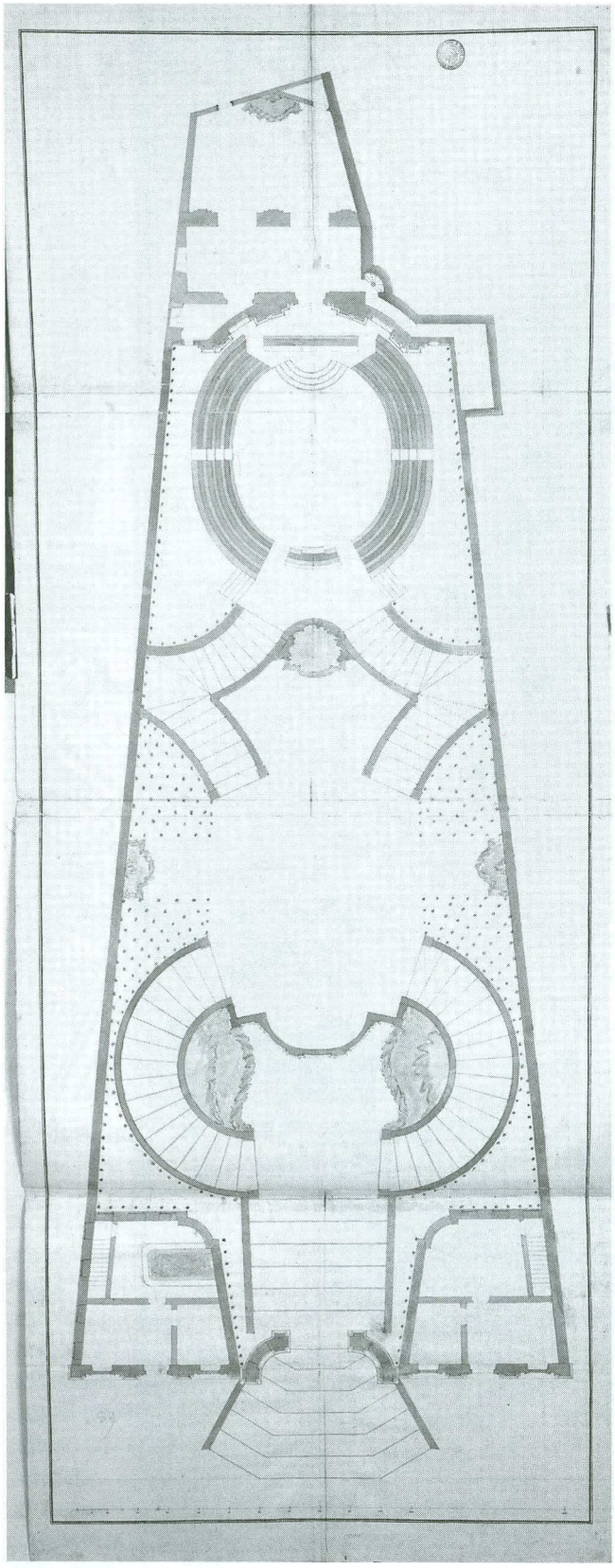
1. Giovanni Battista Nolli Plan, 1748, detail: area around the Bosco Parrasio.

Accademia's failure to enact any reform were the clergy, and in particular either the curia or the Jesuits, who, according to this scholarship, swelled the membership ranks and unduly influenced its policies and procedures.[6] In striking contrast, scholars such as Benedetto Croce credited the Arcadians with sowing the seeds of great cultural enrichment in Italy, specifically the rise of nationalism and the creation of the modern Italian state, in that it helped define and raise consciousness about a shared Italian aesthetic.[7] In 1928, in response to the plethora of historiographic perspectives on the Arcadi, Giulio Natali claimed that there were "too many Arcadias," and his statement is still apt today.[8]

The secondary literature is polarized in part because of the Janus-like character of the organization at its founding. Certain aspects of the Arcadian philosophy strove to reach back into history for guidance, and others aspired to project forward. The organization called for an emulation of some classical and Renaissance texts as models in its pursuit of literary reform. At the same time, to meet its secondary goal, the promotion of study of the sciences, the Arcadians advocated the reading and critique of recent foreign scientific inquiry. This included the work of René Descartes, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Sir Isaac Newton, and Pierre Gassendi, among others. They were well aware that after the



2. Nicola Salvi, after Antonio Canevari, Gianicolo Bosco Parrasio, bird's-eye view, pen and watercolor on paper. Reproduced courtesy of l'Accademia nazionale di San Luca, Rome (inv. n. 2121).



3. Nicola Salvi, after Antonio Canevari, Gianicolo Bosco Parrasio, plan, pen on paper. Reproduced courtesy of L'Accademia nazionale di San Luca, Rome (inv. n. 2020).

death of Galileo Galilei in the mid-seventeenth century, Italian scholars had ceased to be at the forefront of scientific investigation, and they hoped to help regain supremacy in the field.[9] With these two goals came conflicting messages about the manner in which one could revive pride and instill a sense of a shared Italian identity. On the one hand, the Arcadians' newly formulated literary aesthetic was overridingly and vehemently anti-French. On the other, the society promoted acquiring, consuming, and discussing knowledge of new scientific methods and discoveries presented in oltramontane writings. The one face of Arcadia looked up and down the peninsula; the other more externally, beyond the Alps.

Ambiguous, too, are the Arcadian founding statements characterizing its assemblage as a conversazione in the form of democratic republic or a commune. The Accademia suggested that all were welcome in the meetings regardless of the social status or gender of the participants. Their governance was in great measure democratic, and many policy decisions were voted upon at a general assembly of all members. However, the Accademia's insistence on an equal voice for all its members was by no means a revolutionary call for political or social restructuring. Rather their calls for reform were more abstract, aimed at establishing a consistent moral mindset, labeled as good taste, which united a community and ensured its smooth functioning for the common good.

The Janus-like character of all that was associated with the Accademia has its parallel in the way in which history of early eighteenth-century Italy is written. Some historians present the period as shaped by the fallout of the great religious and political sea changes that took place in the early sixteenth century. In this model, Italy is weakened, struggling for political as well as cultural authority.[10] Others characterize the century as one in which the foundations of the Risorgimento were laid, and they foreground publications in which new ideas regarding the rethinking of political, economic, judicial, and penal systems can be found.[11] This secondary literature, however, is scant, outweighed by histories of the art and culture of the eighteenth century written from an outsider's perspective, that of the Grand Tourist in Italy.

My approach to the Accademia degli Arcadi is shaped by a desire to reconcile these plural polarities by redefining them in terms of the social context in which the organization functioned. For me,

the most destabilizing opposition in the Arcadi was that it operated fully within a monarchical court system, that of the curia, while it idealistically envisioned itself as an experimental ground for the creation of something that, at least rhetorically, resembled a public sphere. The most glaring manifestation of this paradox was the side-by-side existence of the Arcadi's idealized self-representation as a social utopia, as promoted in the official publications, and the mundane accounts of its practical achievements, as found in notes kept in the Arcadian archives. The two sides of this paradox shape the structure of the following book: chapters 1 through 3 deal with the ideal Arcadi, and chapters 4 and 5 with the Arcadi's reality.

I began with two premises. The first is that history has deemed the Accademia a vehicle of the eighteenth-century papal court, something that my narrative on the creation of the Bosco Parrasio will not contradict. However, I hope that the attentive reader will realize that the statement is merely a truism. Labeling the Arcadi as a puppet organization doing the bidding of larger power does not fully acknowledge the complex nature of the papal court. Even with the pontiff at its apex, the court was not organized in a hierarchical manner, but rather it was an infiltrative entity that had an immediate presence in all classes of Roman society. This characterization differentiates it from other monarchical court systems of the eighteenth century, especially those of France and England.

Recent studies have well explored how the curia evades Elias's fundamental model for understanding eighteenth-century monarchical courts in a number of respects, specifically in regard to its structural stability.[12] Like other courts of its day, the curia was headed by a monarch who had the ability to distribute favors arbitrarily. It was a system wherein individuals attained status, power, and wealth only when they were bestowed from above. However, this practice was accelerated in the papal court wherein even the lowly born could attain offices such as cardinalships and potentially the papacy itself. But the papal court was distinguished from those of France and England in more striking ways. In this century, the pontiff was a secular ruler, albeit one of a limited domain, as well as a spiritual ruler of a much more fluid and universal realm. Because an elective process rather than heredity determined who ascended to the throne, and because that process allowed for the participation of subjects of both these domains—the Sacred College was composed of cardinals from Rome, other Italian states and foreign nations—a great deal of international politicking unseen in other eighteenth-century European courts was the norm. The bonds of factionalism and of friendship or loyalty were complex affairs because the tentacles of the papal court reached not just across classes in Rome, but outside of Roman society as well. The result was the perennial invention of original ways of doing politics.[13] In addition, individual privileges bestowed by this monarch were subject to change at the death of a pontiff, and that change could be frequent given that most pontiffs were elected as elderly men. This was particularly true for members of the papal family. To flourish in Roman society, prudence in establishing alliances and caution in marginalizing enemies were necessary; all had the potential at any time to be political allies or opponents.[14] My study of the Arcadi, then, is written in a manner that obviates the sociopolitical context of the organization's operations, and as such, it should contribute a bit of microhistory for that ambitious individual contemplating compiling a comprehensive history of the Roman court in this century.

My second assumption is that the academy saw itself as an experiment in social as well as cultural re-engineering, and that thirty years into the experiment, when the Bosco Parrasio was created, it was perceived by those outside it as a failure. The rhetoric of their idealistic experiment, with its nod towards republicanism and the creation of a class- and gender-blind society, loosely foreshadows that which emanated from European societies in which a public sphere emerged. In those societies, public opinion came to shape governmental policy rather than it being dictated from above. In his study of the transformation of that sphere, Habermas identified fundamental social indicators for this change, and only a few were found in eighteenth-century Rome.[15] In Habermas's model, the wide and uncensored dissemination of information via newspapers and conversation in the salons or academies was an essential ingredient for societal change because it allowed for opinion to be emancipated from a patron, from the ruling class. The Arcadians' stated goal was to set up the mechanisms for the dissemination of information in an environment free from traditional patronage system. Despite this, the politics of the papal court infiltrated the academy because it could not be separated from it. Whereas censorship was perhaps never fully implemented, it was also never fully relaxed, and its execution could be

arbitrary. The organization was not wholly released from a strict Catholic orthodoxy of ideas, in particular the notion that the office of the pontiff was both a secular and a spiritual one; the secular bidding of the early eighteenth-century papal court unfolded in Arcadia. Moreover, the good taste in literature and in cultured behavior that was promoted by the Arcadians was derived from the values of the ruling class and not from any consensual agreement from below.

As a trained art and architectural historian, I filter my observations through the Arcadi's visual products: the Bosco Parrasio and the various visual and verbal descriptions thereof. Among art historians as well, the organization's impact on a lasting visual aesthetic in the period between the Baroque and the neoclassical has been variously assessed in the secondary literature. Using a broad interdisciplinary approach, I define the Arcadians' impact on the visual arts as related not to style, as much of the current literature would have it, but rather to their cultural goals and their practical application.

I view the Accademia, then, at the intersection of intellectual and sociopolitical history, in the place where Arcadi existed in early eighteenth-century Rome, between the ideal and the real.

Notes

Introduction

1. E. Mazzali, *Barocco e Arcadia* (Milan: Nuova Accademia, 1964); and M. Fubini, "Arcadia e illuminismo," in *Questioni e correnti di storia letteratura,* ed. U. Bosco (Milan: C. Marzorati, 1949).

2. In the mid-nineteenth century, the organization was renamed the Accademia Romana, and its statutes were rewritten. In 1925 it was transformed again into the Accademia letteraria italiana, the name it bears today, but it is still referred to as Arcadia. The membership today is restricted to writers. For a brief history of the society after the eighteenth century, see M. T. A. Graziosi, *L'Arcadia: trecento anni di storia* (Rome: Fratelli Palombi, 1991), 48–49.

3. W. Binni, "La Letteratura nell'epoca arcadica-razionale," in *Storia della letteratura italiana*, vol. 6, *Il Settecento*, ed. E. Cecchi and N. Sapegno (Milan: Garzanti, 1968), 325, put it another way. He noted that there are two ways to research Arcadia: one by concentrating on its poetics, and the other, on the larger cultural conditions in which the literary works were produced. However, he noted that those works were inseparable from the moral and cultural milieu of eighteenth-century Italy.

4. In this category is U. Foscolo (1778–1827), *Storia della letteratura italiani per saggi,* ed. M. A. Manacorda (Turin: Einaudi, 1979), as well as nineteenth-century critics such as Giuseppe Mazzini and Francesco De Sanctis, excerpts of whose writings can be found in A. Piromalli, *L'Arcadia,* 2nd ed., Storia della critica 13 (Palermo: Palombi, 1975), 137–52. Graziosi, *L'Arcadia: trecento anni di storia*, nn. 2 and 3, cites Giovanni Berchet, who found Arcadian poetry too mannered (October 1, 1818 article in *Il Conciliatore*), and Giuseppe Mazzini,who criticized the Arcadian rhetoric as inflated, adding that there was no weight behind its sentiments, in particular its patriotic sentiment (November 1827 article in *Antologia*). Many of these notions were reiterated by Vernon Lee [Violet Paget], who stated that the poetry was "worthless," and "by no means" did the Arcadians reform literature. However, she did recognize that the Arcadi was a center for cultural activity (V. Lee, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, 2nd ed. (London: Unwin, 1907), 5 and 48, respectively).

5. E. Portal, in his *L'Arcadia* (Florence: Remo Sandron, 1922) was one of the earliest scholars to categorize the writers by chronology, outlining three distinct phases of literary achievement in the history of eighteenth-century Arcadia. He identified the most vital literature as that produced in 1728 to 1743, when the operations of the society were at their most sluggish. I. Carini, *L'Arcadia dal 1690 al 1890: memorie storiche* (Rome: Tip. della Pace, 1891), had earlier divided the history of the institution into five periods; not a literary scholar, he accounted for both writers and scholars in his periodization of Arcadian history. In 1948, Carlo Dionisotti called for a re-evaluation of the literature produced in late Arcadia, between 1766 and 1790, by writers such as Goldoni, Parini, and Alfieri. See L. Felici, "L'Arcadia romana tra Illuminismo e Neoclassicismo," *Atti e memorie dell'Accademia degli Arcadi* s. 3a, vol. 5, fasc. 2–3 (1971): 167. G. Natali, *L'Arcadia* (Rome: Istituto di studi romani, 1946) categorized Arcadian literature by genre: the pindaresque, petrarchismo, etc., as did Binni, "La letteratura nell'epoca arcadica-razionale."

6. For those who blamed the curia, and more specifically the Jesuits, for undue negative influence on the society, see L. Settembrini, *Lezioni di letteratura italiana,* 3 vols. (Turin: Unione tipografico-editrice torinese, 1927) and A. Quondam, "L'istituzione Arcadia: sociologia e ideologia di un'accademia," *Quaderni storici* 23 (1973): 389–438, who relies on demographic studies of the organization's membership to bolster his thesis.

7. B. Croce, *La letteratura italiano nel Settecento: note critiche,* Scritti di storia letteraria e politica, 37 (Bari: Laterza, 1949). See also G. Costa, "Arcadia," in *Dictionary of Italian Literature*, ed. P. Bondanella and J. C. Bondanella, rev. ed. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996), 15–16, notes that Arcadia "signals the beginning of a new era, characterized by empirical and rational thought, and . . . can be considered the first phase of the Enlightenment in Italy." Dissent among this group of scholars was over the question of whether the progress toward enlightenment was continuous throughout the eighteenth century or not. Even those authors who deem the Arcadian movement superficial posit that it "preparava la transformazione dello spirito nazionale." See F. De Sanctis, *Storia della letteratura italiana,* vol. 2, rpt. (Turin: Unione tipografico-editrice torinese, 1958), 811.

8. Natali, *L'Arcadia,* 16. The phrase is "troppe Arcadie."

9. This second Arcadian face was being phased out in the 1780s and would be completely lost by the mid-nineteenth century.

10. H. Gross, *Rome in the Age of the Enlightenment: the post-tridentine syndrome and the ancien regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). A critique of Gross's position is found in C. M. S. Johns, "The Entrepôt of Europe: Rome in the Eighteenth Century," in *Art in Rome in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. E. P. Bowron and J. J. Rishel (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2000), 21.

11. D. Carpanetti and G. Ricuperati, *L'Italia del Settecento: crisi, trasformazioni, lumi* (Rome: Laterza, 1990); S. Woolf, *A History of Italy, 1700–1860: the social constraints of political change* (London: Routledge, 1979).

12. N. Elias, *The Court Society*, trans. E. Jephcott (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).

13. M. A. Visceglia, "Factions in the Sacred College in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *Court and Politics in Papal Rome, 1492–1700*, ed. G. Signorotto and M. A. Visceglia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 103–21.

14. A. M. Ippolito, "The Secretariat of State as the Pope's Special Ministry," in *Court and Politics in Papal Rome, 1492–1700*, 134–39. The extreme reversal of fortune was a phenomenon that was unusual in a society without a significant mercantile economy.

15. J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*, trans. T. Burger (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989).