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Bartolomeo Pinelli

**The Popular Improviser  
in the Campo Vaccino**













**Bartolomeo Pinelli**  
(ome, 20 November 1781  
– 1 April 1835)

## *The Popular Improviser in the Campo Vaccino*

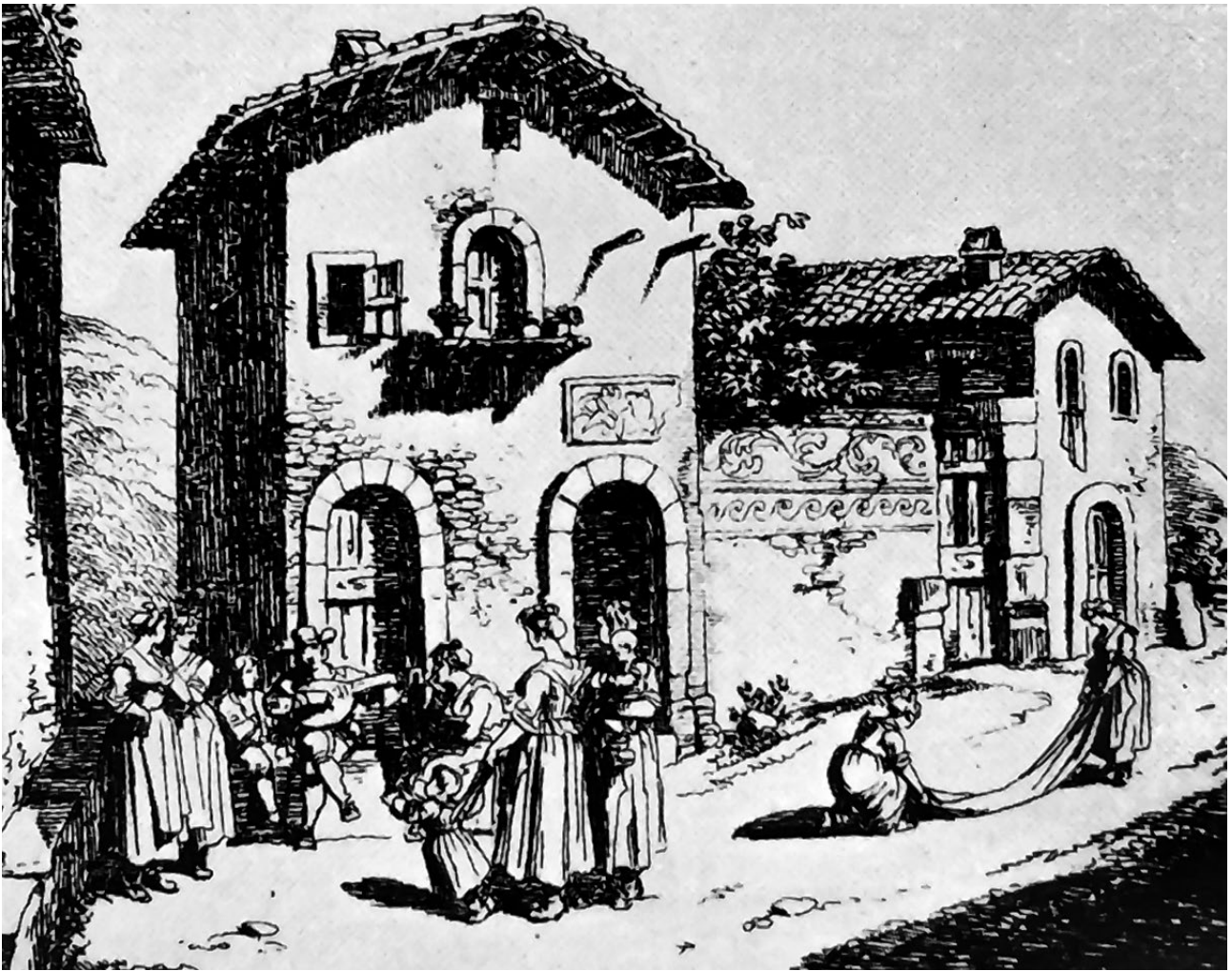
Oil on canvas; 97 x 137 cm

SIGNED AND DATED: *Pinelli 1820 Roma*

PROVENANCE: Private collection, New York; Leo F. Corrigan Jr.,  
on display in the lobby of the Adolphus Hotel, Dallas, USA.

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**I** Bartolomeo Pinelli, *View of Tivoli*, etching from *Raccolta di quattordici vedute pittoresche di Tivoli ricavate dal vero da Bartolomeo Pinelli e dal medesimo, incise all'acquaforte. In Roma, 1813*

Out in the open air, under a leaden sky, a young man seated on an ancient Corinthian capital sings and plays the mandolin. Around him, a group of people enjoys the improvised concert. The audience is composed chiefly of young women, some of them with children, and men. Only one old woman is seated in the middle ground, to the right of the improviser, while the group is completed on the right by a man on horseback. On the left, we see the ruins of a Roman building with a large grooved column and, in the centre, a modest cottage with fragments of Classical reliefs, clearly built into and around Roman ruins, while the Colosseum looms in the right background.

The subject of the blind man singing and

playing was such a favourite with Bartolomeo Pinelli that he painted several known variations on the theme. In a print dated 1813, a *View of Tivoli* (fig. 1), from the *Raccolta di quattordici vedute pittoresche di Tivoli ricavate dal vero da Bartolomeo Pinelli e dal medesimo, incise all'acquaforte. In Roma, 1813*, reprinted in 1825 with etchings by Filippo Ferrari, we find a number of elements also present in our painting, for instance the seated player with a young child behind him, the cottage with Classical friezes, the almost identical pose of the group of two women on the player's left and of the woman on the right, holding a child back by the braces as he tries to reach for the player. In our painting this woman is looking to her right, at the man on horseback, rather than at the player, as she confidentially







leans her elbow on the beast's rump. Other works of comparable subject are: a watercolour of 1822 depicting a *Blind Man Singing in Rome*; an engraving of 1816 showing a *Blind Man Singing and Playing*; and an engraving of 1830 with a *Popular Improviser (Roman Customs...*, **fig. 2**). Bartolomeo Pinelli, who was born in Rome's Trastevere neighbourhood, began his training as a sculptor under the guiding hand of his father, a modest modeller of devotional statuettes in polychrome terracotta, the artist's production in this area resulted from the outset in the creation of numerous small-format sculptures (**fig. 3**), often signed and dated. Raggi reports that "in the last few days he made many small clay groups, which also represented modern costumes, and which he sold, as usual, at a very low price. [...] Which way of sculpting, held by

him, pleases, because there is always that spirit, that fire and that candid touch, which you see in each of his works". Pinelli planned to model a thousand sculptures but, according to the sources, he only executed 29 and in 1834 he also made a series of engravings (B. Pinelli, *Picturesque Groups...*). A substantial nucleus of his terracottas are now exhibited at Palazzo Venezia, in Rome (A. Santangelo, *Museo di Palazzo Venezia...*, p. 75). Pinelli also excelled in drawing, engraving and painting.

Moving to Bologna with the family in 1792, he attracted the sponsorship of Prince Lambertini, who apprenticed him to the painter Frulli. Pinelli returned to Rome in 1799 with a letter of recommendation from the prince to Abbot Levizzari and promptly enrolled at the Accademia di San Luca. He attended Jean Baptiste Wickar's



2 Bartolomeo Pinelli, *The Popular Improviser*, from *Usanze Romane*



3 Bartolomeo Pinelli, *The Piper*, Private collection, formerly Walter Padovani

classes in Palazzo Venezia and also found the time to take part in the encounters which Felice Giani held with artists under the intriguing title of Accademia dei Pensieri, the “Academy of Thought”. These meetings were to have a huge impact both on his draughtsmanship and in fuelling his interest in the themes addressed by the Classical artists of the ancient world.

On returning to his native city at the turn of the century, he also began to work with Franz Kaisermann, painting the figures in the latter’s watercolour views, but the two men’s artistic partnership was to prove short-lived due to Pinelli’s innate reluctance to take orders from others. He began to devote his energies to drawings on Classical themes, where his ironic touch and his marked predilection for the emotional and the expressive rather than for the purely heroic revealed Giani’s deep influence on his art. He

won a prize for his drawing of *Venus, Telemachus and Cupid* (now in the Art Institute of Chicago) at the Accademia di San Luca in 1807 (fig. 4). An enthusiastic admirer of Marcantonio Raimondi’s engravings, however, he soon turned to etching and lithography, adapting his own drawings to these (for him) new techniques and achieving a considerable level of excellence.

In 1809 he published a *Raccolta di cinquanta costumi pittoreschi incisi all’acqua forte* depicting various customs of Rome and Latium, as we can see from the titles of the prints: the *grape harvest*, the *saltarello*, the *game of bowls*, the *game of mora*, *men of Trastevere quarrelling*, *women bickering* and the *pipers*. He put together further albums of engravings with genre scenes in 1810 and in 1819, but he also became involved in illustrating the *Aeneid* in 1811, various episodes from Greek history in 1812 and episodes from Roman history in 1816. 1822 saw the publication









4 Bartolomeo Pinelli, *Venus, Telemachus and Cupid*, Chicago, The Art Institute of Chicago

of *Costumi diversi inventati e incisi da Bartolomeo Pinelli* in 25 plates depicting various Roman festivities, the most fashionable games played in the papal capital and scenes of peasant life. He was to publish further collections in 1823 and in 1831. In 1823 he published *Il Meo Patacca o vero Roma in feste nei trionfi di Vienna. Poema giocoso nel linguaggio Romanesco di Giuseppe Berneri. Romano Accademico Infecondo. Edizione seconda, arricchita di num. 52 tavole inventate ed incise da Bartolomeo Pinelli romano in Roma, presso L. Fabri in Via Capo le Case n° 3*, telling the story of a mercenary, a commoner skilled in weaponry, who, on hearing that an Ottoman army led by Merzifonlu Kara Mustafa Pasha had laid siege to Vienna in 1683,



5 Bartolomeo Pinelli, *Self-portrait*, etching by Moretti





decided to organise an expedition to relieve the city. Pinelli also illustrated such great works of literature as Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* and Cervantes' *Don Quixote*.

In his drawings, the Classical ruins of imperial Rome serve very much as a backdrop for his own fellow Romans. The epic mood and the sense of heroism which pervades his working-class heroes, so conscious and so proud of their Roman birth, shine through in every one of his pictures. He is in fact the illustrator and the poet of this unquenchable *Romanitas* and he was nicknamed *Er Pittore de Trastevere*, the painter of Trastevere, the most authentically "Roman" of old Rome's fourteen neighbourhoods. The inhabitants of Trastevere were uniquely self-righteous, arrogant, bold, proud and bellicose. In fact, during the Sack of Rome in 1527 they opposed the hordes of Charles V's Landsknechter with indomitable courage and pride. Pinelli's art reflects both an

6 Bartolomeo Pinelli, *The Lopper's Nocturnal Saltarello in Piazza Barberini*, Rome, Museo di Trastevere

7 Bartolomeo Pinelli, *The Race of the Barberi Horses in Piazza del Popolo*, Rome, Museo di Roma





interest in the past, a nostalgia for the grandeur of ancient Rome, and a fascination with the present and with observation of daily life. This eccentric painter was fond of wandering the streets and alleys of Rome alone, armed only with a drawing pad and pencil to sketch the things that caught his eye or those that he found most intriguing. He sported a “huge hazelnut top hat, a full overcoat opening into broad folds to form a collar shrouded in a long cravatte, light-coloured trousers floating around his ankles, and with his hair hanging in long plaits around his face, just as Belli describes him:

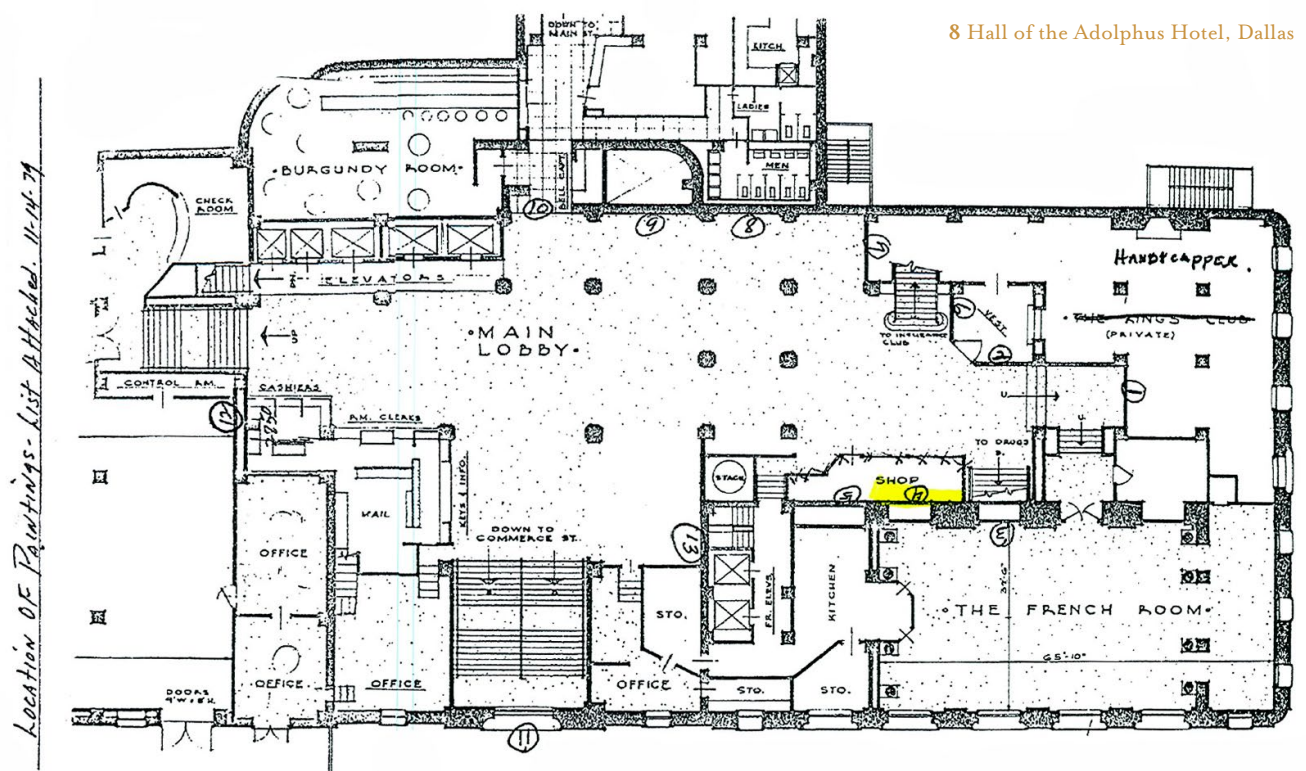
... The man who wore his hair about his snout and a goatee on his long chin....

... His attire was completed by a huge walking stick, the pommel of which was carved in the shape of a hippogrif, for which he was regularly upbraided by the police, and two inseparable mastiffs trailed along behind him wherever he went” (Ceccarius, *Bartolomeo Pinelli...*, p. 160; fig. 5). Beloved by Romans of all classes, Pinelli’s local popularity never waned; in fact a monographic

exhibition devoted to his work was held in Palazzo Braschi shortly after the first centenary of his death and was presented by Carlo D’Aloisio da Vasto in an extremely affectionate article published in “Capitolium” (C. D’Aloisio da Vasto, *La mostra...*).

Pinelli was a prolific artist, producing not only a very large number of drawings, etchings and engraving but also frescoes, for instance the figures of *St. Francesca Romana* and *St. Gregory* in Santa Maria in Cappella, a room in the Académie de France à Rome and a room on the first floor of Villa Villosesi in Sesto Fiorentino. Oil paintings on canvas, however, are something of a rarity in Pinelli’s artistic output.

In Rome in Pinelli’s day, song contests were frequently held during country jaunts, the singers competing around a set topic, quipping with one another and starting their piece with the last word of their adversary’s verse. When the contest ended, the winner received heartfelt applause and numerous offers of wine, while the loser







9 Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Portrait of Count Nikolay Guryev*, Saint Petersburg, Hermitage Museum

was drowned in wolf-whistles. But these singers were not always dragged into contests by their adversaries; often they would compose and recite, solo, a long improvised piece – on occasion, even two hundred verses long – on the first topic suggested by some passer-by. Popular improvisers were to be found chiefly in Piazza de' Termini and in the Campo Vaccino.

This painting is mentioned by Giovanni Incisa della Rocchetta (G. Incisa della Rocchetta, *Due dipinti ad olio...*, p. 29) as having once been one of a set of four oils on canvas by Bartolomeo Pinelli reported by Dr. Antonio Santangelo to have been in the possession of Armando Sabatello in New York: *The Saltarello*, *The Blind Man Playing and Singing*, *The Return of the Lopper* and *The Race of the Barberi Horses*. Not having seen all four of them in the first person, Incisa della Rocchetta writes that has been told

that only one of the four, the one depicting the *Race*, is signed and dated 1821 (G. Incisa della Rocchetta, *Due dipinti ad olio...*, p. 32); but in view of the discovery of the painting under discussion here, we may safely contend that two of them were in fact signed and that this one is earlier than the *Race*. The *Return of the Lopper* and the *Race of the Barberi Horses* were purchased by the Municipality of Rome in 1958; the *Return* is now on display in the Museo di Trastevere (fig. 6) while the *Race* currently hangs in the Museo di Roma in Palazzo Braschi (fig. 7). The *Saltarello* and *The Blind Man Playing and Singing*, for their part, were on display in the lobby of the Hotel Adolphus in Dallas. Both paintings are mentioned in a letter dated 19 November 1979 containing a list of paintings hanging in the hotel lobby (fig. 8). It is clear from the letter that at that date they belonged to Leo F. Corrigan Jr, who had bought the hotel in 1949 directly from the Bush family, in other words from the direct heirs of the hotel's founder, Adolphus Busch (1839 – 1913), a German beer tycoon and philanthropist who had made his fortune in the United States. Twelve of the thirteen paintings listed, including the two pictures by Pinelli, were bought after Leo F. Corrigan acquired the Hotel.

They are likely to have been part of a group of five oil paintings commissioned from Pinelli by "Count Gourieffe", to which Raggi refers in his biography of Pinelli penned in 1835 (O. Raggi, *Cenni...*, p. 26). Falconieri, who was a personal acquaintance of Pinelli, also discusses certain oil paintings by him in his biography of the artist: "I shall now turn to a few surviving paintings of his. Two oil paintings, fairly large and depicting Roman customs, made for the Duke of Devonshire, and five others made for the Count Gourieffe, have much expression and vibrancy in them" (C. Falconieri, *Memoria...*, p. 10). If the descriptions provided are anything to judge by, the *Stornellatore* seems more likely to have been one of the group of pictures painted for the Russian aristocrat Count Nikolay Guryev, magnificently portrayed by Ingres (fig. 9).





Via Santo Spirito, 26/A - Milan  
P. +39 02 76 31 89 07  
[www.walterpadovani.it](http://www.walterpadovani.it)

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