Victor Plahte Tschudi


Tschudi’s *Baroque Antiquity: Archaeological Imagination in Early Modern Europe* rivets the reader’s attention while covering a broad swathe of ideas and history (from antiquity to the baroque), bristling with ideas and archaeological imaginings which are rich, varied, and at times pleasingly complex; a baroque complexity befitting the author’s themes and dazzling critiques as well as straightforward accounts. Tschudi bestows on the reader something deeply considered, and—in the sense that he meditates on how in early modern Rome the past came to be understood in light of the baroque present (mostly seventeenth century) and how it might be retrieved—profound. He arrives at conclusions that are legion and deeply informed, which reflect his career as a professor of architectural history in Oslo’s School of Architecture and Design, a member of the Norwegian Institute in Rome, and a member of the Oslo Centre for Critical Architectural Studies (among other commitments). I acknowledge from the beginning that my review provides only partial treatment to the many avenues Tschudi follows in his text. Giving full attention to all his byways, highways, and in-depth readings of numerous prints and Athanasius Kircher’s remarkable works would probably result in a book-length review. Instead, in this review I will concentrate on describing what I perceive to be the author’s major goals and methods.

A key to understanding Tschudi’s approach appears in his title, where he foregrounds an “archaeological imagination,” which is, among other things, a profession of *theory*. To theorize is to “see clearly,” maintaining control over a broad corpus of texts and analytical approaches. Tschudi’s readings of print culture in seventeenth-century Rome cover broad territories of meaning and practice. A reading, as I understand that term, is what the so-called New Critics (the masters of mid-twentieth-century American literary criticism) call “close reading,” which is in a sense what Tschudi puts before us and what we as art-historical critics do when critiquing works of art. Tschudi makes clear his intended meaning when he writes that

> A theme that reverberates through *Baroque Antiquity* is the idea that printed reconstructions on their deepest level formulate early modern concepts of historical change, albeit not in any systematic fashion. Reconstructions recover the past in a number of ways, and some I shall define, such as “regeneration,” “pre-conversion,” and “reflection,” and others I will have to ignore. For some models of recovery belong to disciplines
that this book has little room to explore, such as the connection that might exist between printed reconstruction and the art of memory (17).

One approach Tschudi does indeed ignore is the psychoanalytic, for reasons that would be immediately clear to most readers: first of all, we might ask what Freud has to do with early modern art history. Well, there is a small but interesting psychoanalytic literature on one of Tschudi’s primary figures: Athanasius Kircher. There is something about Kircher and the deep past of the ancient Roman world that harkens unto one’s imagination and unconscious mind. But we put the unconscious aside for now, as it is not strictly relevant to this review (despite the obvious appeal Kircher would have had for Freud).

The seventeenth-century reconstruction of antiquity, especially of the Roman Forum, was not by-and-large based on archeological work. It did not spring from the origins of archeology (as we understand that disciplinary term today); rather, the long-hidden past manifested itself by way of early modern prints, accomplished within the purviews of print culture, using engravings for the most part. There may have been, in other words, a lot of overstatement or even misrepresentation in the prints of Giacomo Lauro, one of Tschudi’s key figures. Giacomo Lauro (1583–1650), attempted to recreate ancient Rome, an effort resulting in something remarkably (but not surprisingly) baroque in appearance and effect, not to mention affect.

Printmakers were left to their devices of enticement: they did, after all, want to make a living, and if they could do so by showing European tourists what lay in the distant and captivating past, then of course printmakers would provide to their patrons what they wanted. After all, the ancient world is gone, irretrievable, something tantamount to another country; or so they assumed.

Our twenty-first-century notion of archeology, with its specific and carefully measured procedures, had obviously not made an appearance in early modern Rome, at least not in what we think of as “modern” forms of scholarship. Giacomo Lauro would, I imagine, find himself bewildered by an archeological dig carried out in the early twenty-first century. Lauro’s “past” and modern archeology’s “past” would discover themselves to be, at the very least, strange bedfellows.

We should be hardly surprised to find that printmakers of the baroque period sought to entice their public by rendering both unique and entirely invented representations of what lay hidden in Rome’s gardens and beneath her streets. Tschudi proves to be especially deft in telling us an interesting and informative tale about how printmakers created (often enough from whole-cloth) their classical world.