

Newsletter

www.casw.org.uk

Visit our bi-lingual website for all you need to know about the Society

- illustrated history of the Society, its objectives and support for the arts
- programme of all activities for the year
- complete archive of our acquisitions since the Society's inception, with an easy search facility
- images and notes of all our acquisitions since 1999
- details of membership - including on-line application
- useful links to contact officers, museums and galleries

CHAIR CHAT 2008

D Gareth Davies CASW Chairman

Our Secretary, Jean Williams, has outlined the Society's 2008 activities leaving me the task and honour of articulating the membership's affectionate thanks and 'goodbye' to Mrs. Betty Evans. At the 70th Anniversary celebrations at Gregynog she 'bowed out' after serving CASW in one official capacity or another for over half of its existence, most recently as President. As a formal mark of gratitude she was presented with a copy of *Following Petra*, as indeed was Hugh Jones, the immediate past Chair in recognition of his significant services. Although no longer holding office we know we shall continue to receive their constant support.



In this Issue

Chair Chat

The Year in Brief

London Study Tour

Society visit to Oslo and Stockholm

Society visit to Rome

Betty has been succeeded as President by Prof. Bryan Hibbard and we have replaced one 'work horse' with another.

Stan Jones and Margaret Pyke, two longstanding members of the executive committee retired this year. We thank them for their valuable contribution to Society activities, to Stan in his role as selector for the CASW studentship and Margaret for her unique lectures, particularly those preparing us for our study tours.

2008 - The Year in Brief

2008 saw us celebrating the 70th Anniversary of CASW and again we have enjoyed a varied and stimulating programme of social and educational activities.

In this year of *Artes Mundi 3*, we began with a joint venture with the Friends of the Museum. Williams Wilkins presented a talk at the Reardon Smith on *Artes Mundi- Origins and Objectives*- indeed an insider view on the delicate and sometimes fraught negotiations on launching such a major initiative in the artistic calendar of Wales.

The Celebratory Annual Dinner held in Aberdare Hall attracted record numbers of members and friends. Our guest, Peter Lord, the eminent historian of the visual culture of Wales, presented a thought-provoking talk on some of CASW's past buyers. He reflected not only on the richness of the CASW collection but also on surprising omissions. We must once again thank Peggy and Sonia for flawless organisation of this popular annual event.

The evening lecture series re-started in January, continuing the theme *Blurring Boundaries*, with speakers exploring how the different disciplines in art, and between the arts, blend and inform one another. Simon Martin, Curator at the Pallant House Gallery in Chichester was our first contributor, presenting an engaging and beautifully illustrated talk entitled *British Art and Poetry*.

In February, the intriguing Elvis Presley quote "*I don't know anything about music. In my line you don't have to*" was the title of the artist Dick Chappell's talk, illustrated with his own work and that of modern masters. Did anyone come wearing Blue Suede Shoes I wonder?

In March, the artist and CASW member David Tress discussed how his work relates to the orthodoxy of Modernism and Post Modernism. In this talk *A painter's radical position*, David gave us an insight to his journey as an artist, illustrated of course with stunning images of his work.

The Lisvane lunches continue to attract members and friends, providing both instruction and conviviality. For the March meeting, Dr Andrew Edgar's title *Art and Philosophy: Strange Bedfellows*, may have seemed intimidating, far from it. His lively presentation explored the antagonism between art and philosophy, and using the metaphors of Plato's bed, took us on a stimulating mental and visual journey through the history of art.

In June, Maurice Cockrill RA, artist and Keeper at the Royal Academy and member of its Board and Executive Committee, gave a stimulating talk *A Return to Wales* in which he explored and explained the constantly evolving challenges that have informed his work from his student days in Wales to the present day.

A longstanding member of the Society, and former executive member, Peter Walcot returned in August to give one of his inspiring Lisvane lectures. In a lecture entitled *Rome of the Caesars* he provided a Roman feast for all and a good preparation for the Society's study tour to Rome.

November saw the return of Bernard van Lierop to Lisvane. His presentation *Beauty in Art and Nature – could there be animal artists?* posed the question does it make sense to treat beautiful birdsong or bowerbirds making beautifully decorated sculptural installations as "art", or is it all just part of "nature"? He developed

a fascinating thesis that led to a spirited question session which could have continued well into the afternoon.

In July, a weekend celebrating the 70th Anniversary of the Society was held at Gregynog. The weekend included the AGM, and the launch of the CASW commissioned print portfolio and Gwasg Gregynog Studio book edited by Tony Curtis. Members participated in a programme of activities, presentations and entertainment. Speakers included Tony Curtis, Mel Gooding, Robert Meyrick, Dai Smith, Peter Wakelin, and David Vickers. David Tress and Shani Rhys James as two of the four print portfolio artists also attended. Robert Meyrick curated a splendid exhibition of prints for the Main Hall to coincide with the launch of the print portfolio. At the Celebratory Dinner we enjoyed entertainment provided by Elizabeth Franklin Kitchen and accompanist, students of Dennis O'Neill at the Cardiff International Academy of Voice. We even managed to fit in a session of croquet under the supervision of our new President, Bryan Hibbard!

The London study tour took place in February. Starting with the Henry Moore exhibition at Kew and ending with Tutankhamun in the O² Millennium Dome. This was as varied, informative and convivial a London tour as ever.

Oslo and Stockholm in May, and Rome in September were the venues of the overseas study tours in 2008.

A day trip to London in November completed our programme of study visits. It was Tate Modern to view the Rothko retrospective and then taking the Tate boat to Tate Britain for the Bacon retrospective. Memorable experiences, with some members even fitting in the Turner Prize exhibition as well.

We continue to enjoy the services of a dedicated and skilled group of organisers in Bryan and Elizabeth, Dan and Chris, Tudor and Iris, Alan and Bronwen.

The Autumn saw the start of a new season of evening lectures. In September the artist Sue Williams in *Small talk, high heels – from Artes Mundi to Africa* presented a fascinating account of her artistic and geographical journeys following her selection for *Artes Mundi 2006*.

Paul Granjon, whose work members viewed in the Venice Biennale in 2007, was our speaker in October presenting *Art as Playful Machines*. He illustrated his talk with images and sequences that were entertaining and at times menacing.

The final Tuesday lecture in November was *Philip Sutton RA in conversation with Tony Curtis*. This event celebrated Philip's eightieth birthday, an exhibition, and a recently published biography. We enjoyed an insight into his colourful life, his refreshing ideas, his great charm and fabulous images.

We extend our thanks to Chris Evans for all her hard work in organising the successful 2008 lecture programme.

Visiting homes to see art is always a keenly anticipated event, and this year was no exception as we enjoyed the hospitality of two of our members, Glenys Cour in Mumbles and Anne Price-Owen in Sketty.

The Society continued its wider support for the visual arts in Wales this year contributing to *Artes Mundi 3*, donating a grant to *The Dictionary of Artists in Wales since 1945* and awarding a purchase prize at the *National Eisteddfod* in Cardiff. The Senedd



Llywydd, Dafydd Elis-Thomas was the selector of the Eisteddfod prize. He chose two works, the first by Manon Awst and Benjamin Walther entitled *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* and the other, *Spoonscape*, by Pete Bodenham. The works will be displayed in the Senedd. Interestingly, the CASW Eisteddfod purchase prize stimulated Lord Elis-Thomas to consider an Assembly Art Prize for future Eisteddfodau.

This year there were two studentships, the CASW - David Tinker award and the newly instigated President's prize. The first of these was presented by Dilys Jackson to Karen Coleman a second year student at the University of Newport and the President's Prize presented to Stephen Gould, a student at the University of Glamorgan, by the retiring President, Mrs Betty Evans. We were grateful that executive member Dilys Jackson was able to take over as selector from Stan Jones who unfortunately had to withdraw from the role at short notice.

On a personal note I would like once again to thank colleagues on the executive and CASW members for their support and friendship during the year.

Jean Williams
CASW Secretary

Gregynog Hall 2008 by Jean Rees



London Study Tour, Feb 2008
Pat and Ray Davies

"When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life: for there is in London all that life can afford".

So said the erudite Samuel Johnson many years ago and the same is true today. We enjoyed yet another instructive and event-packed trip organised by Alan and Tudor with considerable support from Bronwen and Iris.

En route to our comfortable hotel in South Kensington we called in to view the impressive "Henry Moore at Kew" exhibition of massive bronzes. Following a prearranged lunch we first circumnavigated the Gardens on the little train, which provided a good opportunity to see many of the sculptures in their carefully considered settings from a distance. Major temporary displays of outdoor sculpture

are rare and this show consisted of 28 pieces – monumental in both scale as well as concept. Henry Moore died over 20 years ago and it is going to be a long time before another such show can be arranged with Moore's most powerful and monumental works sited within landscape as they were originally envisioned and to which they are so ideally suited..

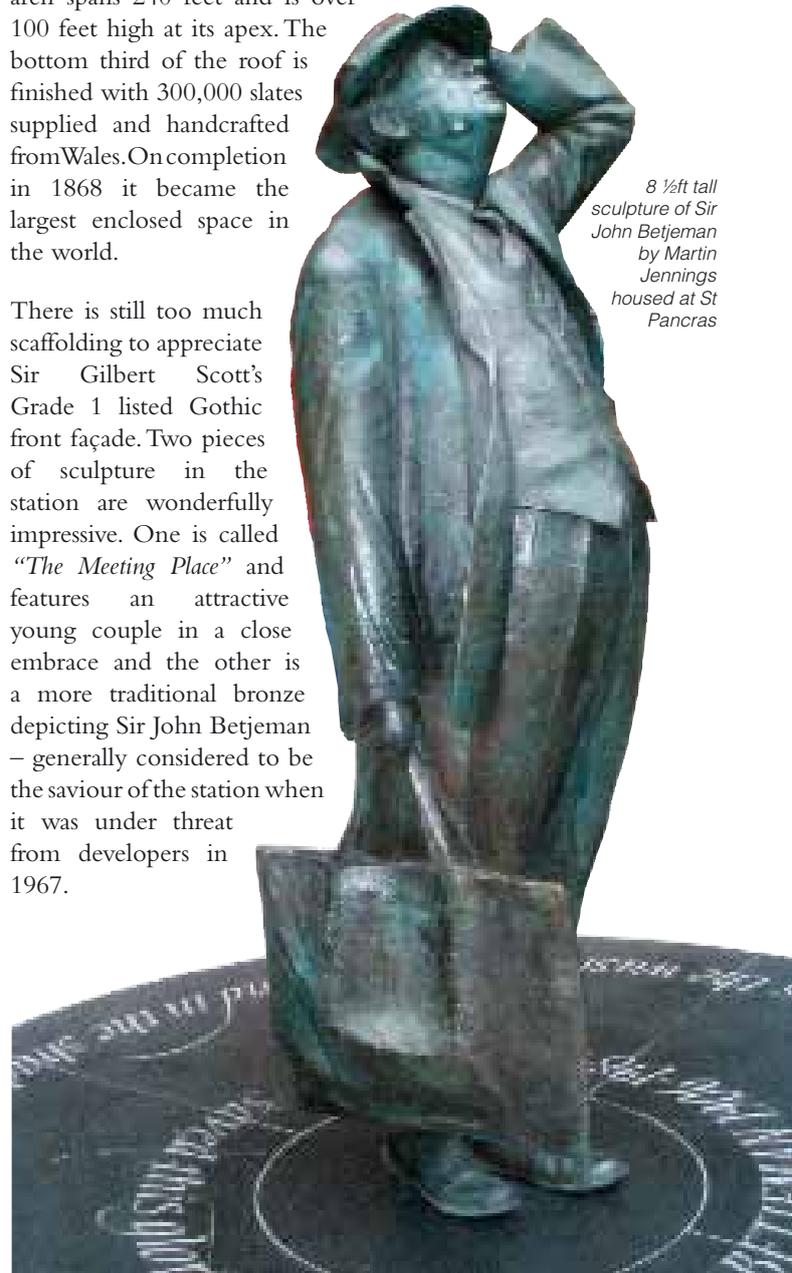
Goslar Warrior



An early start on Saturday found us viewing St Pancras Station following its £800 million pound restoration. Having never seen it before it was a special treat as it is surely one of London's greatest landmarks with a rich and colourful history. Designed by William Barlow in 1863 – work started in 1866. The famous Barlow train arch spans 240 feet and is over 100 feet high at its apex. The bottom third of the roof is finished with 300,000 slates supplied and handcrafted from Wales. On completion in 1868 it became the largest enclosed space in the world.

There is still too much scaffolding to appreciate Sir Gilbert Scott's Grade 1 listed Gothic front façade. Two pieces of sculpture in the station are wonderfully impressive. One is called "The Meeting Place" and features an attractive young couple in a close embrace and the other is a more traditional bronze depicting Sir John Betjeman – generally considered to be the saviour of the station when it was under threat from developers in 1967.

8 1/2 ft tall sculpture of Sir John Betjeman by Martin Jennings housed at St Pancras





The Meeting Place

Sadly, there was no time to savour the delights of the world's longest champagne bar. Situated where Eurostar departs, it is over 90 metres long.

There followed a visit to the Wellcome Foundation Museum to view an exhibition called *Sleeping and Dreaming*. It took us into the mysterious and still poorly understood state of sleep with considerable emphasis on the ghastly effects of sleep deprivation. I would like to return here in order to view the other galleries at some time in the future.

Lunch was followed by a viewing of *From Russia: French and Russian Master Paintings 1870–1925*. We saw over 120 wonderful masterpieces drawn from the Pushkin Museum of Fine Art, the Hermitage and other major Russian Impressionism to non-objective painting.

Although not my favourite, *The Dance* by Matisse is probably the most sensational highlight of the exhibition. It was commissioned by a Russian called Shchukin as part of an astonishingly bold scheme to decorate the grand staircase of his Moscow mansion.

Our party did our own thing on Saturday night – Pat and I went to see *The Magic Flute* at the Duke of York Theatre.

Sunday was another action-packed day starting with a visit to the fascinating Denis Severs' House at 18, Folgate Street in Spitafields. The Georgian House is a time capsule whose creator – an American artist called Dennis Severs – used his imagination as his canvas, and who lived in the house in much the same way as its early 18th century occupants. He did this for his own personal enjoyment as well as for harvesting an atmosphere, which he then employed to provide the visitor with an extraordinary experience.

The house is full of furniture and clutter that he collected throughout his short life and there is no electric light the candlelit interiors are so authentic in feel that it seems quite natural to converse in whispers. Both Tudor and I enjoyed the House's clocks as we both share the same passion.

Spitafields Market provided an opportunity for coffee and, of course for Pat to buy a silk jacket! The ever-reliable Mike then drove us to the Museum in Docklands. After an excellent pre-booked lunch at Searcy's Restaurant, we all viewed *Sugar and Slavery*. Set in a former sugar warehouse, the experience encourages one to consider enslavement and freedom both in terms of the transatlantic slave trade and what they mean for us all today. We saw the original drum table, which was used to draft the Bill for the Abolition of Slavery. Original shackles, collars and "punishment collars" were grim artefacts amongst many others.

By three o'clock we were at Tate Britain to see *The Camden Town Group* exhibition. This was a great treat for me as I am a great Walter Sickert fan. The group was founded in 1911 and had only a brief life but it heralded a new spirit in British painting. The principal artists were Sickert, Spencer Gore, Harold Gilman, Charles Ginner and Robert Bevan.

Then on to the Tate Modern to see Doris Saceldo's *Shibboleth*. The stamina of CASW members is legendary. I must confess that Pat and I sat the latter out – mitigating circumstances being the huge glasses of Chablis at Searcy's.

Sunday night was party night! We all enjoyed a drinks party on the 26th floor of the hotel, followed by a Society Dinner in the restaurant on the first floor.

Monday morning was free and was followed by an afternoon visit to *Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs* at O2. The last time Tut-mania hit London was in 1972. Now a whole new generation could experience the child-Pharaoh. The many treasures also included exhibits from other Valley of the Kings tombs. Tutankhamun ruled from 1333 to 1324B.C., reuniting a fragmented nation by restoring multi-god faith practices which his predecessor, Akhenaton, had banned. Representations of the latter always remind me of Mick Jagger!

Items on display were truly stunning and reminded me of Howard Carter's exclamation, "wonderful things!". Display cases were cleverly labelled at two different levels, which enabled one to read about the contents despite the presence of about two million rowdy schoolchildren!

Mike then drove us home in record time. Thanks are due to our leaders for their hard work and dedication in organizing such a brilliant few days. We saw an enjoyable mix of Blockbusters and lesser-known attractions. Thanks to Mike for his faultless driving and thanks to all for your company.



London images courtesy of Ray Davies



(Ole Jørgen Ness) Heni Onstad Kuntsenter, Oslo

Oslo and Stockholm June 2008

William Manning

To begin on a personal note. Why did Maureen and I choose Oslo and Stockholm for a first CASW tour? With the obvious exception of Munch neither city is celebrated for its contemporary artists nor, indeed, their collections of contemporary art. Paris, New York, Madrid, or Venice would all be more obvious choices. But there, at least in part, lies the answer. Most of those cities are major tourist centres which are easily visited whereas Oslo and Stockholm, rightly or wrongly, are less obvious, and the attraction of a tour which visited both without involving us in the effort of organising it ourselves made the tour immediately appealing. Not that the two cities lack major attractions: Oslo has two great collections of Munch's work and the Viking Ships Museum, and Stockholm major art museums, a great early twentieth century city hall and the *Vasa*, the only complete seventeenth century warship in the world. And not least there was the attraction of travelling with friends.

Oslo is surprisingly small; a ten minute drive from the centre takes you deep into suburbia, and many of the major galleries and museums were within walking distance of our hotel. The morning normally began with an invaluable talk by Margaret Pyke on some aspect of the artistic heritage of the city, after which we usually followed our own itineraries. We were fortunate in having good weather, dry and often sunny in both cities. The Norwegians were invariably friendly and helpful, and their excellent command of English made it easy to find ones way around the city.

Contemporary art is not the strongest aspect of Oslo's museums. The Museum of Contemporary Art lacks a major collection, although the current exhibition in early June, which was of hangings made from clothing, in particular stockings, had its attractions. The Astrup-Fearnley Modern Art Museum has striking interiors

but was between exhibitions; its permanent collection, which is dominated by works by Jeff Koons, although limited, contained some interesting pieces. The third major collection, the Henie-Onstad Art Centre, is someway out of the city in woodlands by the side of the fjord. But time was limited and we decided to see more of the National Gallery and the Historical Museum (the latter reflecting our archaeological interests) rather than go out to the Henie-Onstad centre. Comments of other members of the group who did go there were uniformly favourable.

The National Gallery is dominated, inevitably, by its collection of paintings by Edvard Munch, which occupy an entire gallery and include his most familiar work, *The Scream*, or, more correctly, one of the many versions of that work. It becomes even more meaningful when seen with his other major paintings; together they leave one in little doubt of the stress and darkness of his world. In many ways we preferred the collection in the Munch Museum, which is a little away out of the city centre, partly because the building is less oppressive than the heavy late nineteenth century National Gallery, but more because it displays a wider range of his work, including a large group of outstanding lithographs and woodcuts. It was



from this museum that *The Scream* was stolen in 2004, together with a version of his almost equally famous (and equally obsessively repeated) *Madonna*. A small, but fascinating exhibition shows the long, laborious, and still incomplete, process of repairing the damage done to *The Scream* when it was stolen; damage aggravated by the fact that it was painted on cardboard. It was interesting and rather delightful to see groups of schoolchildren in the gallery, some no more than five or six years old and all clearly fascinated by the (carefully selected) group of works which they were shown.

Apart from Munch's work the collections of the National Gallery reflect the rising nationalist interest in the scenery of Norway during the nineteenth century, and the greater awareness of social

issues which came at the end of that century. Both movements producing the large and imposing paintings for which the ornate building was clearly designed. The collection of artists working outside Norway was severely limited, particularly for the earlier periods, although there were a number of good works by the French impressionists and by such twentieth century masters as Picasso and Matisse. But the relative poverty of Norway before the late twentieth century is clearly reflected in the limitations of the national collection. After a thorough, but somewhat depressing, study of Munch we found that the cafeteria, impressively clad in multi-coloured marble, serves excellent pickled herrings!

If Munch dominated the graphic arts of Oslo in the early decades of the twentieth century, Gustav Vigeland was equally dominant in sculpture, so much so that in 1924 the city gave him a large park as a setting for his major works. Firmly centred on the human body, his work owes much to the influence of Rodin and is typical of many of the sculptors working in that period. The larger set-pieces are approached along a bridge flanked by over fifty bronze nudes. At the end of the bridge the ground rises to a group of statues of children, beyond which is a massive fountain and the high point of the ensemble, both literally and figuratively, a huge granite monolith, its faces covered by a contorted mass of human figures. This was one of the monuments included in the tour of Oslo which we had on the first morning, and the explanations of the guide, who to everyone's surprise, originally came from Anglesey, contributed greatly to our understanding of Vigeland's ideas.

Oslo is not only the city of Munch, but of the Vikings, and in particular of the trio of Viking ships recovered from burial mounds. Today they are housed in a vaulted concrete building on the island of Bygdøy opposite the city centre. Not only are there the ships, of which the finest is unquestionably that from Oseberg,

with its superbly decorated prow and stern, but a series of ceremonial sledges and carts from the Oseberg burial, all with intricate, decorative carvings.

From there it was to lunch overlooking the fjord and then a short ferry ride to the Fram and Kon-Tiki museums. The Fram, the first vessel built specifically for polar exploration, is housed in a giant shed, a setting as functional as the ship itself. Anyone familiar with Arthur Ransome's books will remember the awe with which the children regarded the Fram and its creator Fridtjof Nansen. The Kon Tiki Museum, which stands by the Fram, houses the series of eccentric vessels used by Thor Heyerdahl in his various voyages.

For its size Oslo has a surprisingly number of galleries, museums and public buildings, and

members of the group managed to visit an impressive number of them. Our own choice included the National Museum dominated by Viking material (somewhat disconcertingly displayed in cases enlivened by rag doll models of Vikings), but with a quite



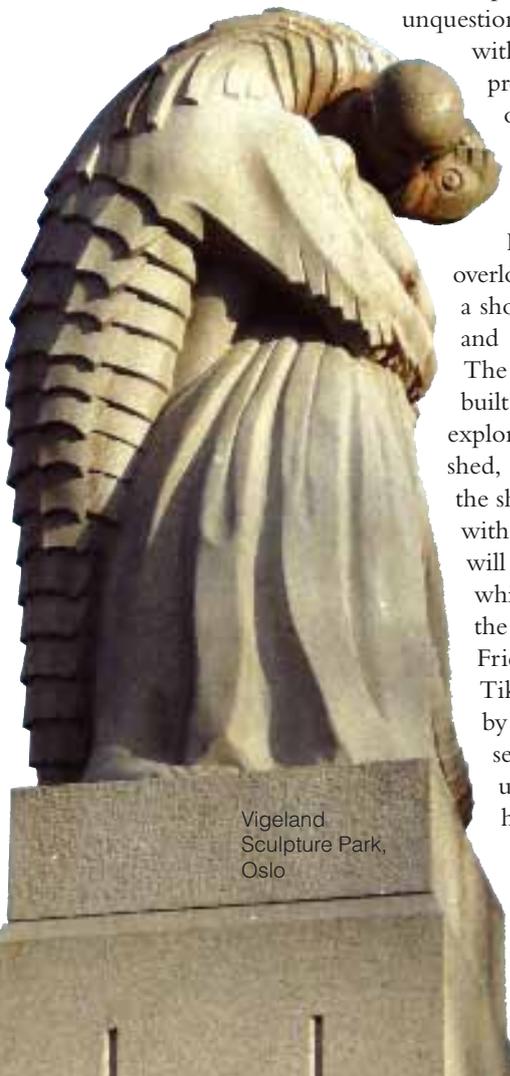
outstanding collection of medieval wood carvings, mainly from the doorways of stave churches. We also spent sometime in the Akershus, the huge fortress which commanded the harbour; lunching under the trees and watching young schoolchildren climbing all over the rock face in a way which would probably have got their teachers dismissed on health and safety grounds at home. The castle, although interesting, is heavily restored but



was wonderfully free of other tourists. The most fascinating exhibition in the complex is the Resistance Museum which tells the story of Norwegian resistance to the German occupation in World War II, with full

credit given to the help which they received from Britain. Other members of the group visited the striking, modernist Rådhus (City Hall) with its huge murals (which were highly praised by Margaret Pyke), and the Ibsen Museum in the house where he spent his final years.

The one contemporary building which everyone visited was the new Opera House, a striking construction of glass and white marble set on the edge of the fjord and apparently intended to resemble an iceberg floating in the water. Smaller than the Millennium Centre in Cardiff, it is disconcertingly accessible to the public who can wander over the steeply sloping marble cladding almost at will. The select few who went to a performance there were impressed by the auditorium; the rest of us had to be contented with viewing the public areas, or drinking in the terrace overlooking the fjord. On the final night Maureen and I had dinner in the opera brasserie, an enjoyable but expensive meal. Dining out in Norway is extremely expensive, at least by British standards, with alcoholic drinks being almost (but not quite) prohibitively costly. On the other



Vigeland
Sculpture Park,
Oslo

hand the quality of the food was excellent, and the epicures in the party vied to book tables in the finest restaurants.

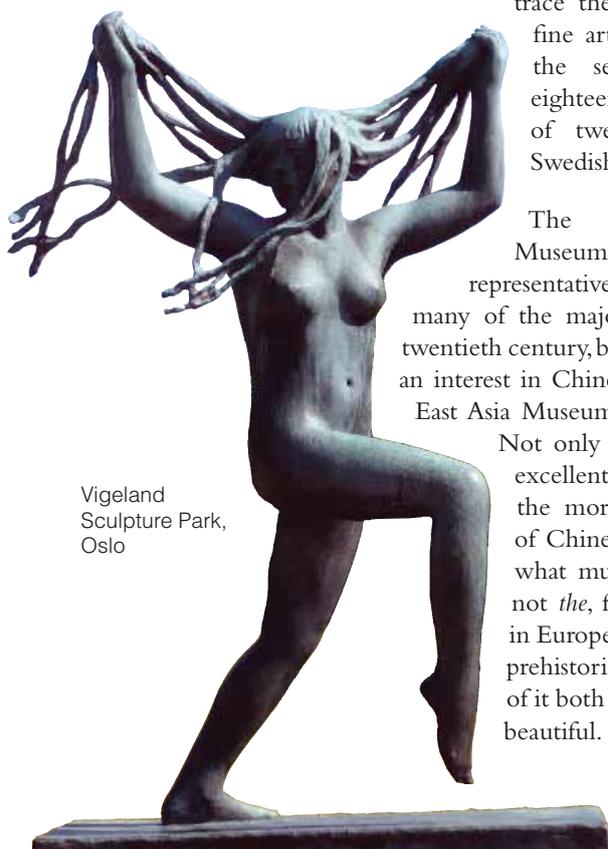
The flight to Stockholm is relatively short, and we were in our hotel by the early afternoon. The hotel (the Birgir Jarlsgarten) is some way from the waterfront which forms the centre of the city, and many members of the party went to and fro on the underground, with varying degrees of success. We preferred to walk and found that it took about fifteen minutes to reach the waterfront. The city centre, which lies partly on the mainland and partly on a series of islands linked by bridges, is dominated by a series of public buildings, the opera, the Riddarhuset (House of Nobility), and the Royal Palace, beyond which the waterfront is dominated by a long line of massive, stone-faced buildings erected in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, many in a style which is strongly reminiscent of buildings of the same period in Scotland. The majority of the city's major museums and galleries are in this area and over the next three days we visited a number of them, a few as a group, but most individually. The public buildings and collections of Stockholm reflect the fact that historically it was far more important than Oslo, a fact which is seen most clearly in the Royal Palace, a lavishly decorated baroque masterpiece, clearly designed to make a political statement. From there a few of us walked across to the Riddarholm Church where the various dynasties which have ruled Sweden erected their mortuary chapels, each trying to surpass the last and culminating in the massive block of Swedish porphyry in which Bernadotte lies.

Stockholm is a city of museums and galleries, far too many to be more than very selectively sampled in the two days we had in the city. The main public art galleries – the Modern Art Museum, the National Museum (which is actually the art gallery) and the East Asia Museum – are within easy walking distance of each other, and most members of the group went at least to the first two. The National Museum has a fine collection of paintings from the Renaissance to about 1920, with good examples of many of the major artists of sixteenth century Italy, of Rembrandt and his contemporaries and of the French impressionists, as well, unsurprisingly, of a large number of somewhat less celebrated Swedish artists. Other galleries

trace the history of the fine arts in Sweden in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, and of twentieth century Swedish design.

The Modern Art Museum has a good representative collection of many of the major artists of the twentieth century, but for those with an interest in Chinese ceramics the East Asia Museum is a revelation.

Not only does it have an excellent collection of the more familiar types of Chinese ceramics, but what must be one of, if not *the*, finest collections in Europe of pottery from prehistoric China, much of it both strange and very beautiful.



Vigeland
Sculpture Park,
Oslo

It also has a café offering an equally excellent selection of Chinese teas.

Margaret Pyke's final talk was on the Stadshuset or City Hall of Stockholm, one of the great buildings of the earlier twentieth century, which we visited as a group on the Sunday morning. Brick is the predominant material, both of the exterior and much of the interior, including the great covered entrance court where the Nobel Prize dinners are held. Here, as elsewhere in the building, the predominant influence is of late medieval and Renaissance Italy, mixed with a strong Byzantine element. Had the architect, Ragnar Östberg, been less confident the whole building might have seemed little more than a gigantic pastiche, but his handling of both the designs and materials (which includes concrete painted and gilded to look like wood) is so sure that it forms a unique and coherent whole, culminating in the final hall where all the walls are encrusted with gold and glass mosaics showing, in a stylised form, scenes from Swedish history.



The Vasa,
Stockholm

However, the unique attraction of Stockholm is not a museum but a ship, the *Vasa*, the great warship which would have been the pride of the Swedish navy had it not capsized and sunk in Stockholm harbour on its maiden voyage in 1628. By good fortune the conditions in the harbour led to its surviving almost intact, and it was raised in 1961 in one of the first, and probably still the greatest, feats of marine archaeology. After years of conservation the ship is now housed in a huge hanger-like building where surrounded by viewing platforms it creates an overwhelming effect both by its sheer size and the mass of intricate carving on the stern and prow.

Stockholm is marginally less expensive than Oslo, but the restaurants were equally good (with the exception of the hotel as various members of the party discovered), and on the last evening of the tour the whole group enjoyed an splendid smörgåsbord on the veranda (well protected by windows) of the Grand Hotel on the waterfront opposite the Royal Palace. Good food (smoked reindeer is to be recommended), good drink (beer and Brännvin) and very good company made it a memorable finale to the tour.

Did we enjoy our first CASW tour? Yes, immensely – the organisation (by Bryan and Elizabeth Hibbard) was exemplary, the company excellent, Margaret Pyke's lectures were both informative and succinct, the weather was good and the cities were fascinating. What more could we have asked for?



Left: Vigeland Sculpture Park, Oslo

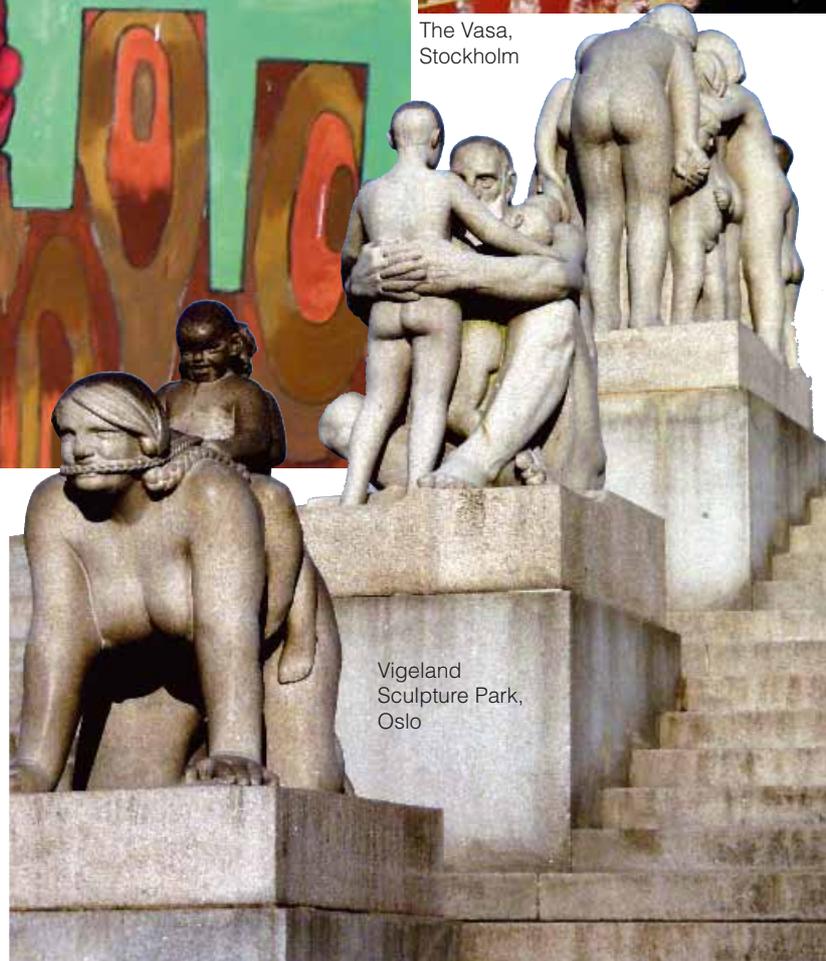


Holmen Kollen Ski Jump

IT by Carroll Dunham



The Vasa, Stockholm



Vigeland Sculpture Park, Oslo

ROME - September 2008

Liz and Clive Sowden

For Society members like Liz and I who live in West Wales, CASW tours usually start at the Holiday Inn near Newport. This allows a leisurely drive to Newport on the preceding evening and the hotel offers a secure place to leave the car for the duration of the tour. Our day started well with the prompt arrival of the coach from Cardiff, a warm welcome from our leader, Dan Evans, a helping hand from the coach driver, and the greetings of our CASW friends who were already on board. En route to Bristol airport Dan distributed an information pack containing some brochures and a pamphlet which he had compiled containing general information, our itinerary, information on public transport in Rome, and a section entitled, *The incomplete guide to finding "interesting art"*. This proved to be a most useful document.

Approaching Rome it was possible to pick out the hills and lakes in the area north of the city, which our itinerary showed we were to visit later in the week, then a glimpse of the sun glinting on the Tiber, before we made the final approach to Ciampino Airport, which lies about ten miles south of Rome. We stepped out of the plane into a hot sunny Roman afternoon. A good start. A transfer from the airport was in a number of large, sleek, black taxis with darkly tinted windows which, one might suppose, would sweep us swiftly - in VIP style - to our hotel. But our arrival coincided with the rush hour, and initial progress was slow. The driver of our taxi used his local knowledge to good effect and we turned off the dual carriage way onto a minor road where the traffic flowed quickly. Very soon this joined a straight cobbled road bearing the name 'Via Appia Antica', and there were signs pointing to catacombs and early Christian churches, and the fragmented arches of an ancient aqueduct were visible close by. In a few miles we came to the substantial remains of the 3th C Aurelian Wall at the Porta San Sebastiano, and then we were in the heart of the city. So we arrived at our hotel in a narrow street on the Viminal Hill after an uneventful but thought provoking journey. Fifty years ago the travel writer HV Morton remarked that a visit to Rome was not a matter of discovery, but of remembrance, that illustrations from books, and

postcards from friends, spring to life around us as soon as we arrive. On the very brief experience of our taxi journey to the hotel this is how it seemed to us.

As usual on a CASW tour there was an informal drinks reception on our first evening, and as usual this was a most convivial occasion.

The tour schedule fell into two parts; on the first three days there was a programme of guided visits when we were together as a group; two of these were in the morning and one was an all day affair. Two afternoons and two days were available for our own individual arrangements, and this is where Dan's *Incomplete Guide* proved to be invaluable. We were also greatly indebted to Professor Peter Walcot for his entertaining and informative Lisvane lecture in early August, *The Rome of the Caesars*. So having prepared ourselves for the cultural aspect of the visit we also looked forward to being able to sit at pavement cafes and drink the always excellent Italian coffee, sip Prosecco, enjoy ice cream, eat Italian food, and mingle with the millions of other tourists who had come to savour the Roman experience, in sunshine.

Our first group visit was to the Galleria Borghese which occupies a palace specially built by Cardinal Scipione Borghese in 1613 to house his large and rapidly growing art collection, and set in one of the largest areas of greenery in the city. It is very difficult, given the wealth of treasures in the gallery, to single out individual works, but for me personally, the sculptures by Bernini, especially his David, and Apollo and Daphne, formed a lasting impression; so also did Canova's portrayal of Pauline Bonaparte as Venus Victrix. The paintings included Titian's *Amor Sacro e Profano*, and a room with six masterpieces by Caravaggio, two of which, *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, and *David with the Head of Goliath*, could hardly be further apart in mood and colour. This artist became a kind of leitmotif for the week as group members sought his works in Rome's abundant galleries and churches. Our guide in the gallery was knowledgeable and clear in her delivery. This first visit to what has been described as 'the queen of all private collections' was an intensive and stimulating experience, but assimilating all these images was to be quite a challenge.





The next group visit on the following day was to the Vatican Museums and St Peter's Basilica where the focus of attention was the Sistine Chapel with Michelangelo's ceiling and *Last Judgement*. The total quantity - as well as the quality - of the sculpture and painting in the many galleries and passageways of the Vatican labyrinth was astonishing. Our guide led us through the Raphael Rooms, the Tapestry Gallery and the Gallery of Maps, but we sped past some smaller side galleries hung with modern art much to the disappointment of many of our party. There was just time to snatch a look at Francis Bacon's interpretation of Velazquez's *Portrait of Innocent X* - some of us were fortunate to see one version of this Velazquez on the CASW Study Tour to London in December 2006 - before we were hurried on. And so we arrived at the Sistine Chapel, where we were able to pause and marvel at Michelangelo's *magnum opus*, created in two stages, between 1508 and 1512, and between 1535 and 1541. From here there was a long multi-staired descent to the entrance of St Peter's Basilica whose voluminous interior allowed more room for the crowds to spread out - it can accommodate 60 000 people according to some estimates. Of course, Michelangelo's genius was still with us, as we now stood in the building which he created as architect between 1547 and his death in 1564, and if further evidence of his genius were needed, his *Pieta*, sculpted in 1499-1500 stands near the entrance. After a tour of the interior with its wealth of paintings, altars and statues, many by Bernini who was one of the basilica's 10 architects in the 120 years it took to build, we stepped outside into the bright sunshine and dazzling white marble of St Peter's Square with its enfolding Bernini colonnades, and as no-one in the group seemed to have the energy to wander further, we all made our way to the coach to return to the hotel. This had been another challenging visit in more ways than one.

Our final group visit was to Orvieto, a hill top town in the Umbrian countryside about sixty miles north of Rome where a number of feasts awaited us. First was the 12th C cathedral, reached by way of narrow, winding cobbled streets. Its facade

has Romanesque arches at the base, decorated with medieval bas-reliefs, these merging above into the more angular Gothic style, decorated with mosaics which were alive with gold and bright colour in the strong sunshine. Inside, there is much to see, but our main interest lay in the San Brizio Chapel where we saw frescoes by Fra Angelico, painted in 1447, and Signorelli's *Last Judgement*, painted between 1499 and 1503. Superb! Thank you Dan, for planning our programme so thoughtfully that we were able to see and compare on successive days these two superlative interpretations of *The Last Judgement* by two great masters of the Florentine School. We were fortunate again to have the services of a knowledgeable, but sometimes fleet-footed, guide to aid our appreciation of Orvieto's history and art. The next feast was literally that - the Society Luncheon in a restaurant deep inside a cave tunnelled into the rock that underlies the hill-top town. This was a most convivial occasion with good food - the risotto received much praise, and local wine. We boarded the coach, understandably replete and also physically and mentally tired, for the return to Rome, but energy revived remarkably when it was announced that we were invited to a President's Reception in the hotel bar that evening. At the reception, Charlie Burton gave an entertaining and controversial address which, among other things, challenged us to think about the kind of art which we had seen so far, and to consider how it fitted into a broader 'Art' framework.

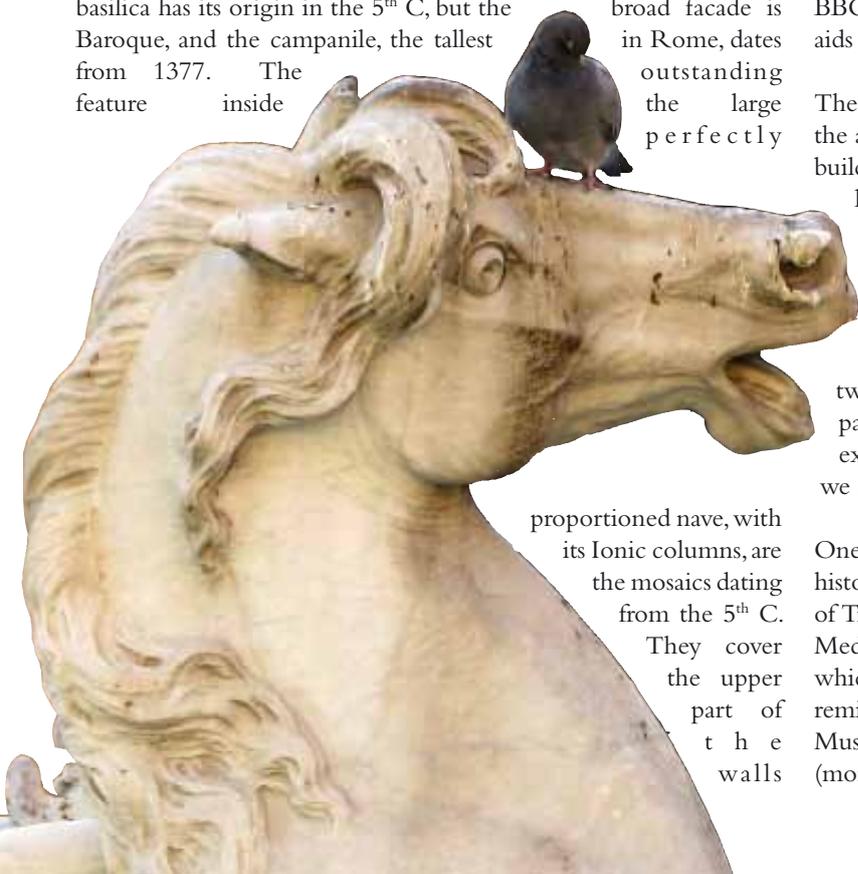
For the remainder of our stay we were free to plan our visits as we wished. Inevitably, given the enormous artistic and cultural heritage of Rome, it is possible in a week only to scrape the surface, but in what follows, we try to give a summary of the sights that left an impression on the two of us. We should be grateful that so much of Ancient Rome remains, in spite of the predatory quarrying of its temples, baths and public buildings by later generations, but there is always the 'what if' question hovering when viewing, for example, the defaced Colosseum. However, it is still a magnificent structure and when standing high in the galleries, the imagination - the remembrance as

H V Morton calls it - can set to work in an extravagant way. The Colosseum, together with the nearby Arch of Constantine form an immensely imposing approach to the Via Sacra which winds its way beyond, through the Forum towards the Capitoline Hill.

The word timeless accompanied us constantly as we walked slowly through the Forum, and when we came to the site of the Golden Milestone, we wondered whether the distance to any points on Hadrian's Wall, near which we had lived for many years, had been recorded. On another day we visited the Pantheon, another incredible building feat associated with Hadrian - how could one man create two such enduring monuments so many hundreds of miles apart almost two thousand years ago?

The sheer abundance of Renaissance and Baroque monuments and buildings in the city means that only a few can be examined in any depth in just a couple of days. We used Dan's list as one way to make choices, and since about half of of Caravaggio's paintings can be seen in Rome, we set out to look for them. This search took us into splendid churches, two near the Piazza Navona - San Luigi dei Francesci, the national church of the French in Rome, and Sant' Agostino; and a short distance away lay the Chiesa di Santa Maria in the Piazza del Popolo. These churches also contain treasures by, for example, Raphael and Bernini. The Caravaggio hunt took us to the Galleria Doria Pamphili, which faces the Via del Corso - Rome's Oxford Street. The gallery forms part of a much larger palace which has strong British connections - it houses the Anglican Centre in Rome, and the present owners are half English. It is home to one of the richest private art collections in Rome, with works by Caravaggio, Titian, Tintoretto, Bernini and Velazquez. The main attraction in the gallery is probably Velazquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, painted on his second visit to Rome in 1650, and which is an almost identical twin to the version in the ownership of English Heritage in Britain. This gallery is well worth visiting.

Within easy walking distance of our hotel were two noteworthy churches. The Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore lies on the summit of the Esquiline Hill and, like the Vatican, enjoys the privilege of extraterritoriality granted by the Lateran Treaty of 1929. The basilica has its origin in the 5th C, but the broad facade is Baroque, and the campanile, the tallest in Rome, dates from 1377. The outstanding feature inside the large perfectly



proportioned nave, with its Ionic columns, are the mosaics dating from the 5th C. They cover the upper part of the walls

and are brilliantly coloured. The ceiling shone with some of the first gold to be brought from the New World, a gift from Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. The tiled floor is equally beautiful. The spacious interior conveys a sense of calm tranquillity.

The other nearby church, Santa Maria degli Angeli, is built partly over and also within the walls of the 4th C Baths of Diocletian. Work began under Michelangelo, then in his eighties, in 1561. Michelangelo favoured a ground plan in the form of a Greek cross, as he did in St Peter's (but in that case Bernini lengthened the nave to produce the Latin cross we see today). The facade is a striking mix of ancient (the walls of Diocletian's Baths) abruptly joined to a Baroque porch in which are set great bronze doors (2006) by the Polish sculptor Igor Mitoraj. Inside there is a sense of space and light. The church has an interesting astronomical feature - a long meridian line crosses the floor of one of the transepts onto which is focussed, from a pinhole aperture high in the roof, a small moving circle of sunlight. The line is marked with the hours of daylight to record the time as the circle of light moves along it. Church clocks



in Rome were set by this sundial for much of the 18th C. The Santa Maria sundial is a type of camera obscura which functions in the same way as that described by David Hockney in his fascinating BBC 4 programme, when he argued that such devices were used as aids by Van Eyck, Velazquez and Caravaggio.

The National Gallery of Modern Art lies near the Villa Borghese in the area of parkland on the north side of the historic city core. The building, erected in 1911, is wide and low, and the interior is very light and spacious. It holds the national collection of modern art so the total quantity and range of work is wide and of the highest quality. The featured exhibition at the time of our visit was the work of Schiffano (1934-1998), born in Libya, and brought up in Italy and the USA - big dramatic canvases hung in a large light gallery close to the entrance hall. In the two ground floor wings on each side of this are displayed 19th C painting and sculpture, and above, on the first floor, 20th C art. An excellent gallery with a very attractive terrace restaurant where we met up with other members of the group.

One of our strolls through central Rome brought us to a part of the historic core that has distinctly non-Italian associations. The church of Trinita dei Monti is French property, and so is the nearby Villa Medici. They overlook the Spanish Steps and the Piazza di Spagna, which were once Spanish territory. At the foot of the steps are two reminders of British interest in this quarter - the Keats-Shelley Museum on one side, and Babington's Tea Rooms on the other (more English than the English). We spent time in both of these.



The Trevi Fountain

On Sunday morning we took a final walk up to the Piazza della Repubblica to look again at the Naiad Fountain and to browse among the second hand music and book stalls, and there we came upon a book ideal for laypersons like us, *A History of Italian Painting* by an American professor of art history, published in 1927. In the index there was a list of artists - almost one hundred in all - and their important works. But, surprisingly, there was a name missing - Caravaggio. Strange that an artist so well known now should have fallen into obscurity for three hundred years from shortly after his death until the 1930s. The book seller, on learning that we were Welsh remarked, You have the *Mabinogion*. With that reminder of our own cultural heritage we left Rome.

Our departure from the airport was delayed by an hour but was otherwise uneventful. On the coach back to Cardiff our President, Bryan Hibbard, thanked Dan on our behalf for his hard work in arranging our tour which had been 'as smooth as silicone', and presented him with tokens of our appreciation. For Bryan there had been three particular high points - Caravaggio, the Society lunch, and 'the fireworks' (Friday evening's thunderstorm). In reply, Dan thanked us all and said that the three words that summed up the tour for him were passion, enthusiasm and optimism. We all agreed it had been a memorable tour and all had gone well, *tutta bene*.

No visit to Rome can omit the dramatic Trevi Fountain, where Roman hydraulic engineering meets Baroque excess. The steps around were packed. We made an unexpected discovery as we made our way from here towards the Via del Corso. It appeared that the narrow street we were following was part of an ancient pathway, the Pilgrim's Way, that led towards the Pantheon and then beyond that to the Tiber and the Vatican. Small wall plaques at regular intervals, in Italian and English, described features of interest to be seen on the way.

CASW members on these tours will know that even if they are in pairs or small groups, there is a strong chance that they will bump into other members somewhere, and the Rome visit was no exception. This often happened in the evenings in the area around the hotel which was liberally provided with restaurants. In fact, the location of the hotel was most convenient for sight seeing.



The Swiss Guards

Rome images courtesy of Chris Evans

Dates for your Diary 2009

January 20th
 Anthony Shapland Artist
In between days. Twilight shifts in the moving image of Anthony Shapland.
 School of Architecture, 7.30 pm

February 6th
 Society Annual Dinner,
 Aberdare Hall, Cardiff