

## LEISURE &amp; ARTS

## ART

## An Anxious Modern Eyes the Eternal City

By KAREN WILKIN

In October 1970, Philip Guston and his wife, Musa McKim, left New York to spend seven months in Italy, shortly after the opening of the controversial exhibition at Marlborough Gallery that announced the acclaimed abstract painter's return to a particularly brutal kind of figuration. Guston was to be an artist-in-residence at the American Academy in Rome, and the long-planned trip, intended as a respite from the psychic energy he had expended on his urgently brushed images of hooded Klansmen clutching smoldering cigarettes, proved to be an escape, too, from the hostile reception these paintings provoked.

It was Guston's third Italian sojourn. In 1948, at age 35, he was at the Academy as a Rome Prize winner. In 1960, as a featured artist at the Venice Biennale, he stayed again at the Academy and spent three months traveling in Italy with his wife and daughter. But even though he was revisiting places that had formerly proved resonant and stimulating, Guston apparently remained anxious, even depressed, during his third stay, not returning to painting until the end of December. He worked only on an intimate scale, producing 70 remarkable paintings on paper, none more than 39 inches wide and many smaller, that are testimony both to his obsession with the nightmare world of the works shown at Marlborough and to his renewed fascination with Italian landscape and architecture, with ruins, antique sculpture and formal gardens.

About half of these small, fierce pictures constitute "Philip Guston, Roma," organized by Peter Benson Miller, on view now

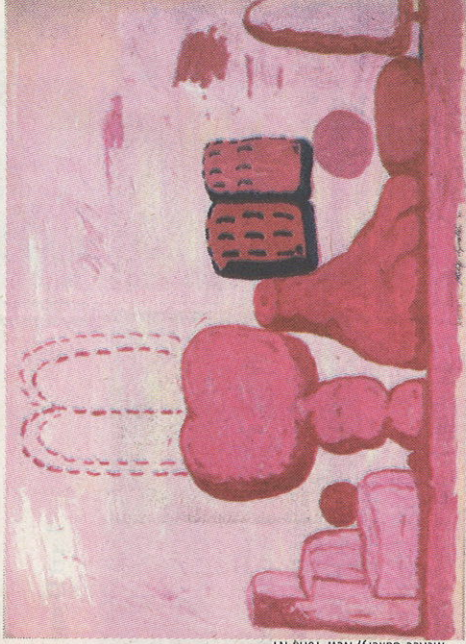
at the Phillips Collection. It's a compelling, odd exhibition, remarkable for simultaneously revealing the single-mindedness of Guston's approach and the wide range of sources for his Roman paintings. The single-mindedness hits first. Guston adopted the same near-monochrome palette throughout the series, a range of discomfiting pinks and reds, inflected and tempered by seas of dragged off-white paint and smudgy black drawing. Seeing a large group of the Roman pictures emphasizes the variations in their seemingly unchanging pinkness—the differences between rose, red, salmon and peach, for example, become important. But the cumulative effect can seem relentless, and we seize on occasional ochre or gray passages with gratitude and relief.

## Philip Guston, Roma

The Phillips Collection  
Through May 15

Mr. Miller astutely equates this insistence on a single slice of the spectrum with the ochre hues mandated by law for buildings within Rome's historic center. Like Guston's infinite shades of pink, Roman ochres can be pale or saturated, constantly changing in the brilliant light and over time. Freshly applied raucous oranges can fade to polite beige—or anything in between. Perhaps, too, Guston's pinks and reds were inspired by the city's ubiquitous piles of weathered Roman brick, the blunted, crumbling remains of ancient structures once faced with marble.

If Guston's Roman palette is deliberately limited, his imagery is not. He courts ambiguity, populating his paintings with shape-



MCKEE GALLERY, NEW YORK, NY

Philip Guston's 'Roma (Fountain)' (1971).

shifting topiary, chunks of masonry, stylized umbrella pines, fountains, city walls, column fragments, sculptures and more, including the sinister "hoods" of the paintings exhibited in New York—all of it conjured up with ham-fisted, assertive drawing and with paint-handling that ranges from elegant to slapdash. But meaning in Guston's imagery is never fixed. Allusions to antiquity are undercut with cartoon references. Topiary trees become popsciles. A rock formation pitted with ancient tombs starts to look like a tank. We notice, in a pile of unnameable forms, suggestively titled "Residue," the shoe soles that will return again and again in Guston's later paintings, as well as hints of stubbed-out cigarette butts.

A particularly evocative image, titled "Roma," presents a police lineup of massive stone blocks, a spouting fountain, a tree, a giant foot and a floating book, arrayed along a narrow horizontal base, like the stone sills that frame Renaissance Madonnas. At first glance, we read it as a kind of still life—Guston liked Giorgio Morandi's work—although the solemn,

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confrontational quality of the ensemble signals that Piero della Francesca, the master of eloquently aligned geometric figures, was one of Guston's heroes. Then, too, the image's inherent severity seems to distill the formality of Italian parks and gardens into vernacular terms. The low horizon reminds those of us who have lived in Rome that the American Academy is on a hilltop above the city. We start thinking, too, about the umbrella pines and the remains of Roman tombs along the Via Appia Antica in the slanting light of early evening, as well as the enormous marble foot, a fragment of a ruined Imperial monument, near the Pantheon. And more.

We acknowledge Guston's customary intense touch and recognize the origins of many images that he would return to for the rest of his life—he died in 1980, age 67—but we also begin to see Rome through his eyes. The iconic, layered city may never look the same way to us again.

Ms. Wilkin writes about art for the Journal.