

Candida Powell-Williams: The Vernacular History of the Golden Rhubarb
by Dr. Oren Margolis

After the fall of the Roman empire, the collapse of the aqueducts that had allowed the people of Rome to spread out across the hills and the weakening of international trade networks that had kept the city fed forced the population of the shrinking city to resettle on the low ground in the bend of the Tiber. This area was known as the *abitato*, the inhabited area. But the rest of the vast space inside the walls was inhabited by the ruins of the ancient past. In the Middle Ages, writers seeking to inflame the imaginations of lucrative Christian pilgrims produced collections of *mirabilia*, the ‘wonders’ of the city of Rome, fashioning stories that made sense of the visible past, often with very little regard for accuracy and even plausibility. A city of wonders lent itself to a suspension of disbelief.

Rome is hardly the only place in the world to have such a tradition of storytelling – a tradition of fashioning fanciful, mutable, tendentious and often imaginary pasts: Stonehenge was attributed by medieval pseudo-historian Geoffrey of Monmouth to the doings of Merlin the wizard; then, in the seventeenth century, it was reinterpreted by the architect Inigo Jones as a Roman temple – a primitive version of the Tuscan order! But Rome – capital of a world empire, a universal church, and eventually a modern nation-state (to which it has often proved an immense disappointment) – is perhaps unique in the density of its pasts and tales and of its ‘official’ storytellers. Over the years, the city has been viewed and interpreted by civic chroniclers, ecclesiastical historians, antiquarians, archaeologists, and Grand Tourists. Yet the Rome that the modern visitor encounters, with ancient archaeological remains exposed to the elements, is no more authentic than that of the medieval and early-modern tenements that were in many cases bulldozed so that the ruins would be visible and a different tale could more readily be told.

Candida Powell-Williams is a medieval *mirabilia* writer in reverse. The writer collected wonders to tell tales; Powell-Williams collects tales to make the wonders. Both need just the barest fragments to construct their fanciful edifices. Tales get jumbled up on top of tales; the signifier mixes with the signified; the *spolia* of venerable antiquity become just another point of departure. Bernini’s elephant and obelisk is mashed up with Hanno, Pope Leo X’s ill-fated white elephant, immortalized by Raphael and Giulio Romano and killed by a faulty laxative. Columns come to life, their human anxiety and even despondence seeming to mock Vitruvian principles of beauty, symmetry and order. Nondescript busts of sundry Italian worthies merge with ancient ancestor masks. Yet at the same time as revelling in the absurdity of storytelling and *lieux de mémoire*, Powell-Williams reaches out to the classical artistic tradition, and even to the twentieth century and Italian artists like Giorgio de Chirico and Arturo Martini. The result is whimsical, irreverent, very often amusing, and no less Roman for it.

An introduction by Dr. Oren Margolis, which will be published in a print and online artist book to accompany the exhibition, in February 2017.