

Arts

Empire examined

19th-century artists explore America's future in Rome's past

BY TIM KANE
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES UNION

John Linton Chapman's 1869 painting "The Apian Way" takes a panoramic view from the main road through Rome, encompassing the ruins honoring the republic's great senators, the dilapidated aqueduct sprawling across swaths of countryside where humble peasants mill about.

As the vivid centerpiece in the exhaustive "America's Rome" exhibition, the picture's vantage point keenly reflects the mind-set of a young America as it moved down the path of democracy with the spirit of Republican Rome as a guiding principal, and the expansionist Roman Empire as something to avoid.

The rise and fall of Roman civilization infatuated this country's founders as a cautionary tale of achievement and lost opportunity. Its physical decay was the source of inspiration for dozens of U.S. artists throughout the 19th century, who visually played out the debates of America's direction through the remnants of Rome's past.

Paris is often regarded as the city with the greatest influence on Ameri-

can artists, but "America's Rome" at the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown argues that Rome has had more impact than any other place. The Eternal City forged a group of American artists into the first purely American art movement — the Hudson River School.

"It's quite an impressive list of artists who went to Rome; it fueled their imagination," said Paul D'Ambrosio, chief curator at the museum. "The aqueduct represented technical superiority; the Forum, civic virtue; and the countryside was about man and nature coexisting harmoniously — all things Americans idealized. Yet the fact it was in decay led many to ask questions."

Frederic Church, Thomas Cole, George Innes and Alfred Bierstadt all spent extensive time painting ancient Rome in searing oil and canvas frames in a way that didn't always match reality. Particular places and scenes were often jumbled together into fictionalized compositions to convey the romantic notions the artists had of Rome's legacy.

With more than 100 works — mostly paintings with a few sculptures — "America's Rome" includes landscapes, portraits and archi-

tectural scenes that reflect America's hot issues of the day, including expansion westward, populism, immigration, urbanization and conservation. Rome was a mirror turned back at American shores.

To Cole, Rome was an example of unbridled expansion gone amuck. His "Interior of Coliseum, Rome, 1832" has overgrowth covering more than half the structure, suggesting that nature trumps all human endeavors, even the most powerful empires with their military might and technological superiority.

Bierstadt's contributions are devoid of humans and predate his evocative paintings of the American West, arguing for conservation of natural resources as America ratcheted up the Industrial Revolution, faced fast-growing cities and a rising tide of immigrants, and looked to colonize the Louisiana Purchase and beyond.

The spirit of the individual with humble roots is portrayed throughout the exhibition. More than half include peasants toiling or in repose, while the upper classes are nonexistent. John Gadsby Chapman pays homage to the nobleness of leading an uncomplicated life in "Shepherd

'America's Rome'

■ **Discussion:** Wednesday, Oct. 28, at noon with curator Paul d'Ambrosio

■ **When:** Through Dec. 31

■ **Where:** Fenimore Art Museum, Route 80, Cooperstown

■ **Hours:** 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday; closed Thanksgiving and Christmas

■ **Cost:** Adult, \$11; 65 and older, \$9.50; children 7-12, \$5; children younger than 7, free

■ **Info:** (607) 547-1400; <http://www.fenimoreartmuseum.org>

of the Campagna." A herder sits atop a rock alongside a dog as if a Greek statue extolling virtue.

As a whole, the first exhibit to analyze a century of New World renderings of Rome succeeds, although, if anything, it overachieves. While several frames anchor the collection, numerous examples redundantly illustrate the idea. But let's not quibble. The thorough and resourceful exhibit sheds some light on an era that cemented the American arts.

► *Tim Kane is a freelance writer from Albany and a frequent contributor to the Times Union.*

COURTESY FENIMORE ART MUSEUM

THE RISE and fall of Roman civilization fascinated many American artists in the 19th century, as evidenced in the exhibition "America's Rome" at the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown. Below is "Interior of the Colosseum, Rome," 1832, by Thomas Cole, owned by the Albany Institute of History & Art. At left is the oil-on-canvas "Shepherd of the Campagna," 1872, by John Gadsby Chapman (1808-1889).



Flavor

ORDER UP

Asian comfort

Van's Vietnamese offers the Far East's version of chicken soup

BY IRENE JAY LIU
STAFF WRITER

Van's Vietnamese Restaurant
307 Central Ave.

■ **Phone:** 436-1868
■ **Hours:** 11:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. Sunday, Tuesday through Thursday; 11:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Closed Monday.
■ **Credit Cards:** D, MC, V for orders more than \$15.
■ **Alcohol:** Small selection of beer and wine
■ **Prices:** Most of the entrees are in the \$9-\$10 range for lunch, and the \$14-\$22 range for dinner.
■ **Parking:** On street
■ **Access:** One small step to navigate, otherwise fully

One of my favorite memories as a child in St. Louis was making the 40-minute drive with my mom for pho and shrimp summer spring rolls after Saturday morning piano lessons.

It was the late 1980s, early '90s, and back then, the Midwestern palate for Asian food was only beginning to expand beyond sesame chicken and greasy lo mein. My parents would cook Chinese at home, and even owned a Chinese restaurant for a time, but the Vietnamese restaurant was my first regular interaction with an Asian cuisine that wasn't my own.

Most often, it would just be my mom and me — my baby sister left with dad on those Saturday mornings of long car commutes to the piano teacher, little hands clanging away on the Steinway, then back into the car for errands and the long drive home. The Vietnamese restaurant was a respite from the striving immigrant life for my mom, who worked through the week only to hit a weekend of ferrying us kids to piano lessons, double bass lessons, church, Chinese school

and chores.

Twenty years later, Van's offers that soothing respite from harried days for the immigrant's daughter — the quiet clinking of soup spoons against china, the comforting click of chopsticks, steam rising off of big bowls of pho — the Vietnamese staple of translucent rice noodles, thin slices of onion and cilantro simmered in a fragrant clear beef broth.

There are many types of pho, but my go-to is the classic *pho bo*, which features thin slices of beef, which are usually served rare and left to cook in the hot broth — my preference — but usually served well done at Van's. (For a delicious but pricier version with the rare beef, go to My Linh's on Delaware Avenue.)

During my first dozen trips to Van's, I ordered the same thing I did in childhood: shrimp summer rolls (\$5.50) and *pho bo*.

The summer rolls are fresh, firm shrimp, bean sprouts, mint, lettuce and rice vermicelli wrapped in translucent rice paper and served with *nuong ngoi*, a thick sweet-and-savory



LUANNE M. FERRIS/TIMES UNION

VAN'S FINISHES its grilled shrimp with vermicelli with shredded lettuce, bean sprouts, mint and cucumber, then tops the dish with shredded carrots, crushed peanuts and scallions.

Please see **ORDER 12** ►

WISDOM OF THE CROWD

The Times Union's bloggers often receive questions from the public, and blog readers are always ready to provide insight. From time to time, we'll give you a sample of their collective wisdom.

Kristi L. Gustafson received this question on her blog titled "On the Edge": "I'm getting married next August and I have been thinking about cost of the rings. I got the engagement ring at BJ's for under \$1,000, and I don't think she would mind another ring from there. But I want to see how much I should drop for her ring. I know that mine will be the cheapest thing. I was thinking of spending \$1,500 total for the set. I come from the Boston area, and while I know of some jewelry stores in your area, I don't know which ones are good. Any advice your readers can offer would be appreciated.

The readers say:
■ I have always worked with Michael at Brittany Jewelers on Central Ave in Colonie. He understands financial constraints and will work within your budget. He can also design anything you may have in mind. — Jen Smith
■ Cost shouldn't even enter your mind at this point, the first thing you need to tackle is what she likes. It's easy to overspend when you don't know what you're looking for. Hopefully you're marrying the kind of woman who will appreciate all the love, thoughtfulness

and legwork you're putting into this and not one who will ask for a laminated copy of the receipt so she can carry it around like her license. — Goosecous
■ Northeastern Fine Jewelry, no question. — Mike
■ I got married almost 3 years ago and we paid \$650 for both of our rings. We got them from Hannouss in Crossgates. They were extremely helpful and were able to meet our deadline of needing the rings in under two weeks. — H
■ I would have to say that purchasing an engagement ring/wedding band is the single most important decision a guy has to make in his life after choosing the correct woman. But the engagement ring and wedding band are two items that your wife is going to wear the rest of her life. These rings are a reflection of you and wife and the relationship you have together. Regardless of price, making the right selection is of the utmost importance. No matter if you buy your rings from Marshall's or David's Unique Jewelers in 20 Mall, the ring must match the girl and vice-versa. Surprises are not a good decision in this case. You want your wife to be excited every time she looks at the ring and excited to show it to her friends and family. — Flynn H.
■ I recently got engaged in March, and I agree the ring is very important. I think of it in a totally different light than most people. The ring is both of yours ... it's symbolic — the

woman is just the one that gets to wear it. So don't be in a rush or be cheap in this situation, purchase something you both can be proud of. — Some518Guy
■ Do yourself a favor and stay away from the "bargain" shops. I've had excellent experience at Frank Adams in Stuyvesant plaza. And remember, jewelry is very negotiable, so be sure to "work" with them on the price. Two months' salary is the old guide. — Matthew
■ Have you considered buying estate jewelry or an antique? My husband's wedding band came from Bill Vollbrecht's store, in Guiderland. My original wedding band came from an antique store in Newburyport, Mass., and I love it because it's unique and beautifully made. Buying "used" saved hundreds of dollars. Be creative and consider all your options before you buy — stilly
■ Mayfair Jewelers in Glenville, Northeastern Fine Jewelry in Schenectady and on Western Ave. I think, and make a trip to Groversville to Castiglione Jewelers. My father goes there when he buys special occasion jewelry for my mother. For the cost — even though this is the symbol of your love and you'll wear it for the rest of your lives, hopefully, you and your fiancée should decide what you would rather spend your money on. What is most important to you? A ring, a house, an expensive wedding, etc. If you buy a less-expensive (but still beautiful) ring now, you can buy something else on anniversaries and other special occasions. — Maria

LIFE STORIES

Halloween horror haunts years later

By BARBARA A. TELASKY
Special to the Times Union

When I was a kid, Halloween was a special night. We never had candy in our house, so the very thought of going door-to-door and asking for it was a mind-boggling experience for us. I remember one specific Halloween when I went dressed as Esther Williams. She was a famous movie star and swimmer back in the late '40s and early '50s. In all the movies she starred in, she was either diving off a tall diving board or swimming big graceful strokes in sync with music in the

background. I have no idea who came up with the idea that I would be named Esther Williams, but I do remember my costume: a bathing cap. Of course, it was October, so I couldn't wear a bathing suit to really look like Esther Williams. I just wore my regular clothes and the bathing cap on my head. I was absolutely mortified because I didn't want to go out trick-or-treating with that stupid bathing cap on my head! My mother told me I should be happy because Esther was a beautiful movie star, but all I wanted to do was die. As I was standing there in the kitchen crying my eyes out, she held my face in her hands and sang, "Smile though your heart is breaking. Smile even though it's breaking. When there are clouds in the sky, you'll get by, if you just smile." I remember pulling myself away from her and crying as I ran out the door. Every time I hear the song "Smile," I think of that Halloween so many years ago.

Tell us a tale

Life Stories is a weekly feature in Unwind that highlights readers' experiences. Do you have a story to tell? Email it and any related photos or artwork to Jack Leadley Jr., Life Stories editor, at leadley@timesunion.com or send it to Jack Leadley Jr., Life Stories, P.O. Box 15000, Albany NY 12212. Stories will be edited for clarity and should be no more than 550 words. Those whose stories are published will receive a free four-week subscription to the Times Union.

Barbara A. Telasky lives in Albany.

ORDER

CONTINUED FROM 10

plum sauce lightly mixed with pineapple juice. Like my mom, I always ask for a side of nuoc mam, a pungent fish sauce made from fermented anchovies and salt and finished with lime, hot pepper and garlic, that is ubiquitous in Vietnamese cuisine. Dipped with moderation, the nuoc mam enhances, rather than masks, the fresh flavors of the roll.

After the rolls are consumed, a plate of raw bean sprouts, basil, lime and chili sauce arrives, followed soon after by the piping hot bowl of pho. I add most of the bean sprouts, all of the basil, a squeeze of lime and a dab of chili sauce to the broth and let the sprouts cook just a bit before digging in.

But one can't ignore the rest of the expansive menu at Van's for long, so a friend and I recently took a weekend jaunt to try some of the other items on the menu. We started with an order of canh ga tom chien (\$6.50), which are fried boneless chicken wings stuffed with crab meat and shrimp, served with nuoc mam sauce. The three chicken wings came to the



PHOTOS BY LUANNE M. FERRIS/TIMES UNION

THE GRILLED tofu steak is marinated in lemongrass before cooking, then served with rice and vegetables.

table scalding hot out of the fryer, as they should, and golden brown. They were, in short, crispy, juicy and delicious, with bits of crab meat poking out of the well-seasoned stuffing.

My eating mate ordered the house special version of bun, which is a dish featuring cold rice vermicelli, shredded lettuce and fresh bean sprouts, served with scallions and shredded carrots, and a side of sweet pickled crinkle-cut carrot and daikon radish, finished with nuoc mam and crushed peanuts. You can order this base

topped with fried spring rolls, grilled pork, beef or shrimp, or in my friend's case, a combination.

The price was hefty at \$19.99, but the portion of fried spring rolls, grilled pork and shrimp that arrived was massive, even for my 6-foot-2 eating companion. It would be enough for two moderately hungry people who like each other enough to share. The large grilled shrimp were fresh, seasoned just enough to complement the sweetness of the shrimp and the smoky char of the grill. The grilled pork — a Vietnamese specialty — was tender and juicy, flavored with garlic and fish sauce. The fried spring rolls were dense affairs stuffed with minced pork, shrimp, carrot, onion and rice vermicelli, held together in a crispy,

chewy wrap. The strong toppings go well with the cooling vermicelli and veggies. Order the bun with the nuoc mam on the side; otherwise, the vermicelli is soaked in the potent sauce.

I ordered the ban hai with sautéed beef (\$15.99), which is a generous, two-meal portion of delicate, thinner-than-angel-hair rice vermicelli served with the curry-spiced beef and onions. The dish is accompanied by a separate plate of fresh, crisp lettuce, cucumbers, cilantro, basil and fresh rice paper wraps (the same as in the summer rolls). Take the rice paper in hand, place a few slices of beef, onion, vermicelli, lettuce, cucumber, and herbs, wrap like a mini-burrito, and dip gently into the nuoc mam. Labor-intensive, but worth the effort.

To wash it all down, I chose the fresh lemon soda (\$3), a favorite. My eating buddy ordered an avocado shake (\$3.50) — a tasty blend of avocado, ice, sweetened condensed milk and regular milk. The shake may seem counterintuitive for the Western palate, but avocados are used mostly for sweets in Vietnam.

And harkening back to childhood, one cannot leave Van's without the Vietnamese coffee with condensed milk (\$3), a sweet, strong affair that is great on ice in summer and hot on blustery fall days.

Irene Jay Liu can be reached at 454-5081 or iliu@timesunion.com.

LIFE

CONTINUED FROM 3

all she could say was, "I have two jackasses for sons."

Now, if that wasn't enough of a scare for one evening, Uncle Cheech, also a joker, pulled one on me directly. I returned to the living room and settled myself on the dark blue sofa in front of the picture window for a quiet evening. Uncle Cheech sat across from me in the red velvet barrel chair.

We chatted about the paintings he was working on, his books about Egypt and the things I was studying in my first year of high school.

Then, suddenly, Uncle Cheech looked up at me expressionless and said, "Lama, look." He motioned with a nod of his head toward the picture window behind me. I turned to look and there, staring back at me, was a face with

big coal-black eyes, and a head covered in a black bandanna. The torso was big and round and a fist knocked on the glass.

Now, I never called Uncle Cheech "uncle," but I screamed "uncle!" that night. I leaped off the sofa and ran into his arms yelling, "Uncle Cheech! Who is it?"

Gram came from the kitchen. "What happened now?" she asked.

He laughed until tears rolled down his face and he couldn't laugh any more. "It's just Antonia from the farm down the road, Ma. She's probably looking for you."

She let Antonia in the front door. In late October, this old woman was dressed completely in black, no coat and with bear-size feet was barefoot. I just smiled, my poor heart still trying to recuperate and said, "Hello."

I went back to the living room, but this time I sat in the red barrel chair facing the window.

Genevieve Wiech lives in Albany.

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The Department of Public Works will begin fall leaf pick-up the week of October 26, 2009. Leaves will be picked up every day during that week followed by three consecutive Mondays, November 2, November 9, and November 16.
Leaves must be placed in biodegradable paper bags (not plastic bags.) In addition to leaves, the town will also accept MANAGEABLE SIZE bundles of tree brush not to exceed four-foot lengths.
The cost of bags are 3 for \$1.00 and are available at the following locations:
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225 Columbia Turnpike
Rensselaer, NY 12144
Monday-Friday 8:30 AM - 4:30PM
East Greenbush Transfer Station
Ridge Road
Rensselaer, NY
Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday - 8:30am - 4:55pm
Thursday - 8:30am - 6:55pm
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The town would appreciate your cooperation DO NOT PLACE leaf bags and/or branches on catch basins, in drainage ditches or in the road.
Peter H. Partak, Commissioner
Department Of Public Works



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ASIAN COMFORT

Van's Vietnamese offers the Far East's version of chicken soup

IRENE JAY LIU STAFF WRITER

Section: Unwind, Page: UW10

Date: Sunday, October 25, 2009

One of my favorite memories as a child in St. Louis was making the 40-minute drive with my mom for pho and shrimp summer spring rolls after Saturday morning piano lessons.

It was the late 1980s, early '90s, and back then, the Midwestern palate for Asian food was only beginning to expand beyond sesame chicken and greasy lo mein. My parents would cook Chinese at home, and even owned a Chinese restaurant for a time, but the Vietnamese restaurant was my first regular interaction with an Asian cuisine that wasn't my own.

Most often, it would just be my mom and me -- my baby sister left with dad on those Saturday mornings of long car commutes to the piano teacher, little hands clanging away on the Steinway, then back into the car for errands and the long drive home. The Vietnamese restaurant was a respite from the striving immigrant life for my mom, who worked through the week only to hit a weekend of ferrying us kids to piano lessons, double bass lessons, church, Chinese school and chores.

Twenty years later, Van's offers that soothing respite from harried days for the immigrant's daughter -- the quiet clinking of soup spoons against china, the comforting click of chopsticks, steam rising off of big bowls of pho -- the Vietnamese staple of translucent rice noodles, thin slices of onion and cilantro simmered in a fragrant clear beef broth.

There are many types of pho, but my go-to is the classic pho bo, which features thin slices of beef, which are usually served rare and left to cook in the hot broth -- my preference -- but usually served well done at Van's. (For a delicious but pricier version with the rare beef, go to My Linh's on Delaware Avenue.)

During my first dozen trips to Van's, I ordered the same thing I did in childhood: shrimp summer rolls (\$5.50) and pho bo.

The summer rolls are fresh, firm shrimp, bean sprouts, mint, lettuce and rice vermicelli wrapped in translucent rice paper and served with tuong ngot, a thick sweet-and-savory plum sauce lightly mixed with pineapple juice. Like my mom, I always ask for a side of nuoc mam, a pungent fish sauce made from fermented anchovies and salt and finished with lime, hot pepper and garlic, that is ubiquitous in Vietnamese cuisine. Dipped with moderation, the nuoc mam enhances, rather than masks, the fresh flavors of the roll.

After the rolls are consumed, a plate of raw bean sprouts, basil, lime and chili sauce arrives, followed soon after by the piping hot bowl of pho. I add most of the bean sprouts, all of the basil, a squeeze of lime and a dab of chili sauce to the broth and let the sprouts cook just a bit before digging in.

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