

The First Lighting Design: Evidence in a Painting

Text: Kevan Shaw



I first saw this painting about three years ago. It's owner showed me the quotation below from Goethe's Diary of his Italian Journeys:

"The great feast of St. Peter and St. Paul has come at last. Yesterday we saw the illuminated dome and fireworks of Castel Sant' Angelo. The illuminations are spectacular, like a scene from fairy land; one can hardly believe one's eyes. Now that I have learned to see objects just as they are and not, as formerly, to supply with imagination what is not there, a spectacle has to be really grand before I

can enjoy it. On my journey I have seen, I count, about half a dozen, and this last one is certainly among the greatest. To see the colonnade, the church and above all, the dome, first outlined in fire and, after an hour, become one glowing mass, is a unique and glorious experience. When one thinks that, at this moment, the whole enormous building is a mere scaffolding for the lights, one realises that nothing like it could be seen anywhere else in the world. The sky was cloudless and the light of the risen moon softened the brightness; but when the second lot of illuminations was set ablaze, the moonlight was eclipsed. Then the blaze was over, and again the full moon softens the lights and made everything fairyland again.

The fireworks were beautiful because of their setting but they did not compare with the illuminations of the church. We are going to see both for a second time"

Considering that Goethe was probably the most visually literate philosopher there is much that we can see in this quotation, not the least of which is the power of lighting applied to great architecture.

Kevan Shaw, February 2002

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