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 ROME'S RICH ARTISTIC HERITAGE IS CAUSING PROBLEMS FOR A NEW GENERATION OF ARTISTS
 

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For the first few months after it opened five years ago, anyone near the Ara Pacis museum in Rome's historical centre was likely to encounter car horns sounding, with passing drivers often making vulgar gestures toward the glass and white marble edifice designed by celebrated architect Richard Meier.

The robust structure houses the Altar of Augustan Peace, an elaborate marble work commissioned by the Roman Senate in 13 BC. The first major public works project in Italy in two generations, the provocative Ara Pacis – like most work by the Pritzker Prize-winning Meier – sparked rich debate among art and architecture lovers around the world.

But in Rome it was almost universally panned. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi called it “a monstrosity” and Gianni Alemanno's campaign that made him Rome's mayor in 2008 was won in part because he promised to remove the building and replace it with something “more appropriate”. Both men were echoing the thoughts of rank-and-file Romans, who voiced their views on the modern-looking building with car horns and gestures.

“Romans have an idea what buildings in the centre of the city should look like, and it's clear the Ara Pacis doesn't meet that standard,” said Antonio Basso, an author and retired architecture professor from Rome's Sapienza University.

As the capital of the Roman Empire, one of the birthplaces of the Renaissance, and the depository of centuries of Papal commissions and collections, Rome is home to what is likely the largest collection of artistic and cultural riches in the world. But rather than inspire new generations of painters, sculptors, and architects, the consensus seems to be that the past can be as much of a burden as a source of inspiration. A contemporary art scene exists, but is fractured and surprisingly small.

Modern art galleries come and go, and critics report that the busiest exhibitions in Rome are still those connected in some way to classicism. Most artists in the city have anecdotes about how Romans brought up amid so much classical beauty can be tough critics.

“When I first arrived in Rome I was a little surprised to find that when I'd work in public, people

would gather and wouldn't be shy about telling me their views on how I should paint,” recalls American Wendy Artin, a painter who first moved to Rome in 1994. Ilya Gefter, a Russian-born painter who splits his time between Toronto, Jerusalem and Rome, said the beauty of the city also has an impact on a painter's choice of subjects. “Rome is inspiring as a place to learn about art, to take in the wonderful facades of buildings, sculpture and paintings,” Gefter said. “But at the same time, doing any artwork that is personal is tremendously difficult in Rome. The visual richness makes it easy to respond to what's around you, but it's not a great place to explore what's inside you.” Ricardo Harris-Fuentes, a Mexican-American painter who lived in Rome for three years, said the city's cultural touchstones represent their own challenges. “When I lived in Rome I remember feeling good about a few hours' painting I'd put in, and I'd take a break by walking around the city,” Harris-Fuentes said. “I'd step into a church and find myself studying a painting by Caravaggio. After that, the work I'd done didn't seem as great anymore.” ■