

Tiny Rome museum is shrine to 3 tempestuous English poets

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ROME — Two hundred years ago, Piazza di Spagna was the nerve centre for Britain's poets, artists and entertainers. Inspired by Rome's natural beauty and historical significance, these well-to-do craftsmen lived in Rome's prestigious Pincio, Piazza del Popolo and Piazza di Spagna, called "the English ghetto" by Italians.

Today, the celebrated Piazza di Spagna is one of Rome's fashionable squares, bordered with designer boutiques, ritzy cafes and high-priced restaurants.

The Rome that captivated the British no longer exists. The only remnant of that early period is house No. 26, which rests dignified next to the Spanish Steps. This is the very house where English poet John Keats died of tuberculosis in the winter of 1821 at age 25.

Keats spent only three months in Rome, and they were his last. His poor health kept him from writing while he recuperated in Rome, yet he is considered, even today, to be one of the most influential poets to have resided in the eternal city.

Fine library

Slated for destruction, Keats' tiny 18th century home, which had sheltered many an artisan, was purchased by a group of British and American writers back in 1906.

Completely renovated, the house became the Keats-Shelley Memorial House; it was opened to the public in 1909 by Italy's King Victor Emanuel III.

Apart from the fine library of books, the house also contains three rooms of photographic collections, personal letters and other mementos of poets Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, Leigh Hunt and of painter Joseph Severn, who took Keats' health into his care.

The memorial has preserved the memory of these English romantic poets and has served as an inspiration for literature enthusiasts who make the pilgrimage to Rome yearly.

Keats' house has retained much of its original character, although his bedroom was completely destroyed after his death. His furniture, windows and doors were burned in Piazza di Spagna to comply with Papal regulations to control the spread of disease.

The only things that remained intact were the rose-festooned ceiling and the fireplace in Keats' bedroom.

A letter written by the painter, Severn, describing the burning of Keats' belongings, is found in a glass cabinet in the library.

Severn's bedroom was complete-



P.B. Shelley

ly renovated. There you can find letters written by poets Hunt, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth.

Of special interest in this room is a reliquary (container for religious objects) that belonged to Pope Pius V and now contains a piece of poet John Milton's hair.

It is said this lock of hair inspired Keats to write his *Lines On Seeing A Lock Of Milton's Hair*.

The winding staircase leading to the memorial is lined with portraits of the four artists. Upstairs, the visitor is given a taste of what living in Rome meant for Keats and his contemporaries.

The 19th-century furniture has stood well. The hand-carved tables and hutches contain documents, pictures, manuscripts and personal letters of the poets. The rooms echo of Keats', Shelley's and Byron's tempestuous lives.

Keats' death throes are graphically described in many heart-wrenching letters written by his friend and confidant Severn.

On a table in Keats' room is Severn's letter written to Robert Browning testifying to Keats' unhappiness during his three months in Rome.

Severn writes, "His unfulfilled love to Fanny (English nurse Fanny Brawne) tormented him and his ill health contributed to his sad state."

The visitor can see Keats' only letter written from his death bed to a friend saying, "Farewell, remember me to all."

Keats' depression over his health and his frustrated love affair with Fanny Brawne consumed him to the end. He could no longer bear to read her letters, which rest in the show cabinet in Keats' room.

Keats' final words, "Don't be frightened," were spoken to Severn and rewritten three days after Keats' death in a manuscript by the painter, found hidden behind books in Keats' room.

Carefully put away is a receipt of



Lord Byron

a piano rented by Severn in 1820 to lighten up Keats' spirits by playing his favorite music, Haydn's symphonies.

The curators of the memorial have taken great pains to bring Keats' "room of death" back to life.

Assembled around the room are portraits of him, his sister and brothers, his beloved Fanny and his drawing of a grecian urn.

Above Keats' fireplace is a Severn painting of Keats reading in the doorway of his Hampstead garden where he wrote *Ode To A Grecian Urn*.

A photostat manuscript of Keats' famous sonnet, *On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer* is in the showcase in Keats' room along with a picture of Keats' boyhood school in England.

Secrets of the poets' personal lives are exposed to the visitor's curiosity.

Body burned

Placed behind volumes of books is the original marriage certificate of poet Shelley and his second wife, Mary Shelley, author of the classic novel *Frankenstein*.

There are various documents on show referring to P. B. Shelley's tragic death at Viareggio, Italy, in 1822 as a possible suicide.

A diary kept by Hunt's wife in the library details events that led to Shelley's death. It hints that Shelley's drowning at sea might have been accidental but notes that Shelley refused help when he was overtaken during a severe squall in the Gulf of La Spezia. His body washed up on a beach and was identified by his friends Byron and Hunt. It was later burned.

Shelley's biography, neatly laid out on a table, reads that his heart did not burn and was given to his wife Mary. She kept it until her death in 1851.

Drawings of Shelley's burning are on display in the memorial along with a letter he wrote to a friend 20 days before his drowning asking for a vial of prussic acid.



John Keats

The letter reads . . . "I need not tell you I have no intention of suicide at present . . . but I confess it would be a comfort to me to hold in my possession the golden key (the acid) to the chamber of perpetual rest."

This letter, along with the knowledge of Shelley's poor health, has led scholars to believe he committed suicide.

The womanizing poet Lord Byron's love triangles make for interesting reading. On display in the salon are passionate letters Byron wrote to his half-sister Augusta Leigh, with whom some people, notably Byron's wife, Annabella Millbanke, believed he was having an incestuous affair.

Next to these letters is found a copy of Byron's original draft of poems, *Hours Of Idleness*, handwritten by his Italian mistress Teresa Guiccioli.

A police report found in the kitchen shows Byron was constantly in trouble with the Italian police. He belonged to the Carbonari, a group fighting for Italy's unification.

Among Byron's possessions is a portrait of his illegitimate daughter, Allegra, borne by his mistress Claire Clairmont, Mary Shelley's step-sister. There's also a portrait of Byron dressed in Arabian dress hanging in the salon.

The saddest part of Byron's hellish life was his uncaring attitude toward Allegra. Among the numerous letters in the memorial is one written by 5-year-old Allegra to Byron months before she died.

"I should so much like a visit from my Papa . . . will you not please your Allegrina who loves you so?" the letter reads.

Byron's refusal to see his daughter is documented as saying he didn't find the letter flattering. "She wants to see me . . . to get some paternal gingerbread."

Byron abandoned Italy, his women and his writing in 1823 to fight and die for Greek liberty.