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## ***Fatti Italiani De Divertimento***

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As 1999 winds down through the remaining 70+ days, we bring to a close another century and the second millennium of current recorded history. Ignoring the exaggerated media hype about this event, let's take this opportunity to revisit our Roman history and its remarkable contributions during the last twenty centuries. Presented in two installments, I hope you enjoy this 'idealized tour' through Rome that (re)-acquaints us with twenty great sites, one from each century:

### **1<sup>st</sup> c AD - The Colosseum**

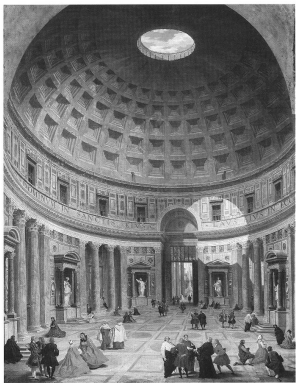


The icon of engineering and happy times, this open-air amphitheater instantly recalls Rome in gory glory. During the opening activities in 80

AD a capacity crowd of only 55,000 watched some 5,000 beasts bite the dust in a single day. Christians were later added to the mix in an extermination attempt that was deemed profitable to the State while at the same time entertaining to the public. Like most of ancient Rome, the Colosseum served as a quarry for later popes and Renaissance princes, with large sections recycled into the Farnese and Cancelleria palaces.

### **2<sup>nd</sup> c – The Pantheon rebuilt by Hadrian**

A remarkable structure, unique in the world, wondrously proportioned, a poem in geometric shapes, with a soaringly serene interior that even the most energized tour groups fail to shatter. The emperor Hadrian, who rebuilt it between 118ad and 125ad, was similarly an unusual personality - poet, philosopher, militant expansionist, part-time architect, full-time bisexual – and was given to occasional bouts of very un-Roman modesty: Instead of his own name, he adopted the inscription of Marcus Agrippa, whose temple on this spot had been largely destroyed by fire. Turned into a church in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the Pantheon has survived as the best preserved building of ancient Rome, even though the portico's bronze cladding ended up decorating the canopy of St. Peter's Basilica nine



centuries later. At least the precocious plumbing remains, and Roman drainpipes still take away whatever rain puddles beneath the daringly engineered huge oculus, with its astonishing 30-foot wide span.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> c – Arch of Septimius Severus**

Expanded and rebuilt over the centuries, the Roman Forum was the center of public life and pageantry. Plumed soldiers would have marched through this ceremonial arch, erected in 203 on the tenth anniversary of Severus' sober (thus the name) reign. He died soon thereafter, leaving the empire with full granaries and secure frontiers. And, unfortunately, also with Caracalla, a son who modeled himself on Nero. Caracalla's first imperial act was to murder his brother, Geta, and hack his name from the arch.



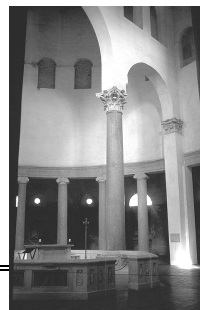
### **4<sup>th</sup> c – Basilica of Maxentius and Constantine**

Maxentius never lived to see it completed, after losing the battle of Milvian Bridge (spanning the Tiber north of Rome) to his brother-in-law, Constantine. He was Rome's first Christian emperor, whom historians would soon call "the Great". He was definitely huge, at least in ego and effigy. The Conservator's Palace Museum on the Campidoglio displays chunks of the colossal protrait-statue that once towered in one of the basilica's mammoth niches. The eight-and-a-half-foot-tall head weighs at least half as many tons. In Roman times just a large hall used for public business and meetings, the basilica became the characteristic form of the Christian church and a source of inspiration to Renaissance artists.



### **5<sup>th</sup> c. – San Sefano Rotondo**

Only 100 years after Constantine, the Roman Empire, now Christian, was collapsing. So-called barbarians hammered at the city gates until finally, in 476, Odoacer the Goth move in. (The eastern half of the empire, ruled from Byantium, survived until 1453). As Rome's infrastructure – aqueducts, bridges, bureaucracy – gradually fell apart, dim lights began to flicker in the churches of the medieval age. San Stefano is interesting for its unusual circular form and for the lurid paintings added in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, scenes



of martyrdom so graphic that they actually turned off the Marquis de Sade(!) (On a visit to Italy in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, he complained about their poor taste.) Dickens, a century later, was equally amazed by the sight of “grey-bearded men being boiled, fried, grilled, crimped, singed, eaten by wild beasts, worried by dogs, buried alive...”.

#### 6<sup>th</sup> c – Basilica of Sts. Cosmas and Damian

A pagan temple honoring Romulus as well as part of a library dating to the time of the Colosseum were recycled into this church – one of the first Christian structures erected in the Forum. The two saints, who were martyred in Cilicia, were doctors and thus invoked in this time of



plague. The church is entered from the Via dei Fori Imperiali and is distinguished by extra-ordinary mosaics. Look for the lively portrait of another saint, the handsome Theodore, showing off a smart cloak, white leggings, and delicate shoes as he

strides into hagiography holding his crown of martyrdom.

#### 7<sup>th</sup> c – San Giorgio in Velabro rebuilt

A swamp (velabro) until the construction of the Cloaca Maxima (“main sewer”), when the area became a busy center for bakers, butchers, fortune-tellers, and dancers. In the fall of Rome, the church started as a relief center for the hungry and poor, with the portico restored and the bell tower added in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. San Giorgio re-opened only in 1996, three years after a terrorist bombing.



#### 8<sup>th</sup> c – Santa Maria in Cosmedin

The charming bell tower that rises so picturesquely over this busy piazza dates to a later period, but the basilica’s austerity is essentially 8<sup>th</sup> century. Inside are handsome examples of Cosmati stonework and several beefy columns



from an earlier Roman government building, the Statio Annonae, where the city’s food-supply system was administered. But the real reason people stream to the church is the curious openmouthed marble face that once adorned a drainpipe but became mysteriously ‘trans-

mogrified’ into the *bocca della verità* – a kind of medieval lie detector. Liars who placed their hand inside its maw supposedly lost their fingers.

#### 9<sup>th</sup> c – Santa Prassede

Inside is the only chapel in Rome decorated entirely in mosaics. Pope Paschal I had it constructed by artisans from Byzantium in honor of his mother, Theodora, who appears in



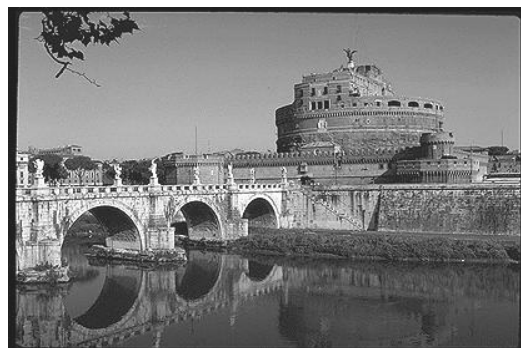
the company of the Virgin. Even now, absent the candelit-glistening illuminations of that darker and more devout age, one can see why medieval visitors thought St. Zeno’s Chapel was like a visit to Eden. A considerable part of the income of a town or diocese depended on touring pilgrims eager to behold religious relics brought from the Holy Land. Sta. Prassede was proud to show off a jasper fragment from the column at

which Christ was scourged. It is still

#### 10<sup>th</sup> c – Castel Sant’Angelo

Can a building be more things to more folks, popes included? Hardly a century went by without embellishment – torture chambers, parapets, divas – to what first saw the light of day as Hadrian’s Mausoleum in AD 139, only to be renamed in 590 after an angel

appeared above the tomb to deliver the town from plague. In the 900s, it became the power base of Marozia, senatrix of Rome, a



kind of murderous Pamela Harrington, who helped kill one pope, appointed another who happened to be her son, and was celebrating her third wedding when a second son staged a coup d’etat and locked her up in the dungeons below. Marozia was probably the inspiration for Pope Joan – the legendary female pope played on film by Liv Ullman. Later popes added a covered walkway extending to the Vatican, and Puccini contributed the aerobic diva who leaps from the parapet into the Tiber in the last act of *Tosca*.

(Adapted and revised from the March 1999 issue of Condé Nast Traveler Magazine)

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**R**esuming the tour through the last ten centuries, we continue to revisit our Roman history and its glorious artistic and architectural contributions:

### **11th c AD – Casa dei Crescenzi**



Once a city of a million-plus, Rome had shrunk to perhaps 35,000 inhabitants, all dominated by hilltop barons usually fighting each other, jumped-up popes (who would soon find temporary exile in Avignon), and various incarnation of a relatively new big shot, the Holy Roman Emperor, the papal realm's secular counterpart. Built by the powerful Crescenzi clan, the battered mansion incorporates stones from the Colosseum and other ancient monuments in a

manner more illustrative of strength than style. Cola di Rienzi, a forerunner of Italian Nationalism immortalized in Richard Wagner's operatic homage *Rienzi*, apparently lived here briefly in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

### **12th c – San Clemente rebuilt**

A remarkably preserved basilica layered like lasagna. At the crusty bottom are ruins dating to the fire set by Nero in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, topped off by an altar showing the Persian god Mithras, remnants of a church from the 4<sup>th</sup> century, catacombs from the 5<sup>th</sup>, and, at street level, the present church, dating from the 12<sup>th</sup>. Note the handsomely individualized mosaics of sheep in the apse and the bewitching early Renaissance narrative paintings by Masolino in the Chapel of St. Catherine. Not even the fiercest tortures designed by man rumple her angelic composure and perfect hair.



### **13th c – Mosaic in Sta. Maria in Trastevere**

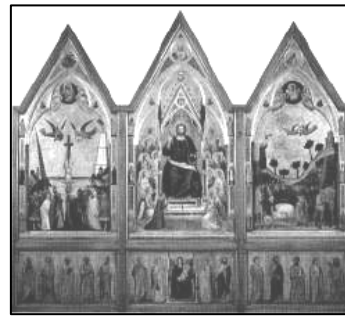
Pricier by the day, but also less frantic and fume-filled, Trastevere is crowded with smaller streets and trattorias than are found on the other side of the Tiber. Set on a surprisingly spacious piazza with open-air restaurants and a massive fountain, Sta. Maria glitters like a stage set at night,

with its illuminated campanile and arched portico invariably populated by at least one gypsy. Inside are 13<sup>th</sup>-century mosaics, including the *Life of the Virgin*, by Roman artist Pietro Cavallini, avant-garde in his era for the naturalistic style.



### **14th c – The Stefaneschi Triptych**

With the Bubonic Plague having wiped out nearly one-third of Europe during the 1300's, this century is sorely



lacking major architectural innovations. However the Florentine painter, Giotto de Bondone and his extensive school of students, were busy creating frescoes for churches and private chapels from Rome to Padua to Florence. In

1315, Cardinal Jacopo Caetani Stefaneschi commissioned Giotto to paint the triptych as an altarpiece for the old St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. It consists of three panels (Crucifixion of St. Peter, Christ Enthroned, Beheading of St. Paul) and a predella. The back is also painted, depicting St. James and St. Paul, St. Peter Enthroned, and St. Andrew and St. John the Evangelist on the three panels.

### **15th c. – Palazzo della Cancelleria**

Huge, a rival in size to the equally early Renaissance Palazzo Venezia, but more elegant, it was acquired by the cardinal Rafaele Riario with the proceeds from a night of gambling (not Bingo). But Riario lost the palace, and nearly his life, when he attempted to reach for the papal hat that the Medici pope Leo X preferred to wear himself. After evicting his rival, Leo installed the papal chancellery, thus the name.



### **16th c – New St. Peter's Basilica built**

One of the great spaces man has designed on this planet. And not just one man, but several artists and popes whose visions of a suitably awe-inspiring basilica on the site where Saint Peter was reputedly buried fused into an upliftingly overdecorated interior



topped off by Michelangelo's ornamented dome. His *Pietà* is on the right as you enter, now behind bullet- and hammer-proof glass after a madman's attack.

Carlo Maderno finished the temple-like facade in 1614; the canopy, or *baldacchino*, was added later by Bernini, who also envisioned the piazza's embracing colonnades. Rising up behind the basilica are the Vatican Museums, which include the *stanze*, or rooms, of Raphael and the Sistine Chapel with Michelangelo's ceiling, on which he labored between 1508 and 1512, mostly alone – if not on his back, like Charleton Heston. Fondly held concepts of Michelangelo's brooding genius and somber palette recently required a revision, after a cleaning peeled away layers of candle soot and age-old dust to reveal pastel sibyls and pink prophets.



### 17<sup>th</sup> c – Piazza Navona

Like Michelangelo in the Renaissance, Gian Lorenzo Bernini – architect, sculptor, planner – was the Baroque era's pre-eminent shaper of marble memories. Possessed of a florid imagination, a felicitous hand, and a mind that

turned as smoothly as the licorice-like columns he incorporated into his towering canopy in St. Peter's, Bernini sketched with a smile. Just about everything he ever touched seems to celebrate life in a bright key. His 1651 Fountain of the Four

Rivers in the piazza adds just the festive centerpiece for the constantly shifting crowds swirling around the ice-cream and knick-knack vendors. The piazza takes its shape from the stadium erected by Domitian, which offered horseracing, aquatic extravaganzas, and Christians. The Church of St. Agnes, with a facade by Bernini's great rival, Borromini, is said to rise up from the spot where she was martyred in the nude.

### 18<sup>th</sup> c – Trevi Fountain

Movies and coin-flinging clichés aside, this is still one of the great places in all of Rome – particularly magical in the evening. When you finally turn a corner and hear the camera shutters clicking, the size of the fountain and the surprising smallness of



the piazza only heighten its impact, generating the kind of buzz you sometimes get sitting down in a packed theatre on a special night. Designed in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century by Nicola Salvi, the Trevi marks the terminal of an aqueduct built in 19 BC by the Pantheon's Marcus Agrippa.

### 19<sup>th</sup> c – Synagogue

Around here was Rome's cramped ghetto, until the walls came down in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For their nocturnal incarceration (everybody was locked in) the Jewish population had Pope Paul IV to thank, though by the standard of such Roman emperors as Titus, he was all heart. (Titus proudly documented on his triumphal arch in the Forum his destruction of Jerusalem in AD70 and the removal of the most sacred treasures of the Temple of Jerusalem – silver trumpets, a seven-branched menorah – while some captives ended up as gladiatorial entertainers.) Roman anti-Semitism had none of Germany's fervor, but once the Nazis invaded Rome, some 2,000 Jews were deported to death camps and fewer than two dozen returned. The imposingly decorated, handsomely restored,



police-surrounded synagogue may be entered by ringing the bell at the security entrance. A sign on the fence explains why: In 1982, a two-year-old boy was killed and 40 people were injured in a terrorist attack. A short walk away

along the Tiber is the Teatro de Marcello, opened in 11BC, which inspired the Colosseum.

### 20<sup>th</sup> c – Vittorio Emanuele II Monument

Finished in 1911, this is a lot of monument to celebrate the unification of Italy in 1870, and its white immensity has not endeared it to the high-minded who call it "the typewriter" or "the wedding cake". Certainly there's not much modern in the festively old-fashioned panoply of chariots, goddesses, and the king himself on a 40-foot-long horse. This sure is the antithesis of the hostile metal heaps that avant-garde sculptors drop down in public spaces these days. With so many great centuries everywhere you look, there won't be much room left for adding more monumental heaps in the next millennium! 🐾



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