
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

An Eye on Rome

Rick Meghiddo · Sunday, March 12th, 2023

Rome is difficult to describe; one has to feel it through all the senses. Defined as “The Eternal City,” it implies that its past goes back to immemorial times, and yet, it is a city of an eternal present.

The accompanying documentary, *An Eye on Rome*, attempts to give the spectator a general idea of the city’s main components: history, culture, and people. It is presented from a personal viewpoint.



An Eye on Rome

History

The 2700 years old myth of Romulus and Remus, twin brothers abandoned on the banks of the river Tiber to die, fed by a she-wolf, and saved by the god Tiberius, tells us that they chose the location of the new city amid seven hills, but not why. The location is unique. The climate is

temperate, and the Tiber River reaches the close-by Mediterranean Sea, allowing boats to come and leave without fearing storms. This means that the supply of goods is unimpeded.

Early Romans learned art and philosophy from the Etruscan and the Greeks but gave them a grandiose scale to reflect the power of a growing empire. They built not just palaces and temples but buildings for entertainment and celebrations: circuses, amphitheaters, *thermae*, markets, and commemorative arches and columns.

Despite its military power, the Roman empire collapsed from within. It was conquered by a new ideology, Christianity, which was brought to Rome by enslaved people from Judea. When the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great (306-337 AD) adopted the nascent religion, the church was born as a physical institution.

The film shows some turning points of architectural evolution in the city, from Ancient Roman to Early Christian, Renaissance, Baroque, and Contemporary. The Pantheon, a temple of all the gods, remains a great example of Roman creativity. First founded by Marcus Agrippa, it was designed in 114 by Emperor Trajan's architect, Apollodorus of Damascus. A sphere of approximately forty-three meters in diameter (142 feet) defines its geometry. The large expanse of its roof is made of concrete, a Roman invention. The building's only light source is the nine-meter diameter *oculus* on the top. In 609 AD, it was turned into a Catholic church.

Santa Sabina (483 AD) tells us about the new directionality given to the Roman basilica. At one extreme, the entrance; at the other, the altar. Four centuries later, Santa Maria in Cosmedin became an elaborated typology of a church, with a tall *campanile* or bell tower as part of it. In the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere (1140-43), the *campanile* is already of Romanesque style. The interior is decorated with late 13th-century mosaics.

In 1503, Donato Bramante (1444-1514) was the first to conceive St. Peter's Basilica. After his death, several architects tried to continue the project: Giuliano da Sangallo, Raphael, and Baldassare Peruzzi. Almost forty years later, in 1547, long after painting the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo was pressured by Pope Paul III to become in charge of St. Peter's Basilica. He was by then seventy-two and worked on it until his death at eighty-eight. His most important contribution was the simplification of Bramante's plan. He devised four massive piers to support the dome instead of the many columns of Bramante's plan. He also redesigned the dome, constructed of two shells of brick. As it stands today, St. Peter's has been extended with a nave by Carlo Maderno, who also designed its façade.



Saint Peter's church and piazza



View of St. Peter's from above

Gian Lorenzo Bernini's (1598-1680) first work at St. Peter's was the baldachin, a massive spiraling gilded bronze canopy over the tomb of St. Peter. When commissioned to design the piazza, he created two massive semi-circular colonnades, resulting in an oval shape within which a gathering of citizens could witness the Pope's appearance.

The architectures of Borromini (1599-1667) and Bernini remain magnificent contributions to the city. Both being of almost the same age, they were fierce competitors with different characters.

Borromini was melancholic and quick in a temper. Bernini was a charming courtier in his pursuit of important commissions.

In 1634, Borromini received his first major independent commission to design San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, also known as San Carlino. The church is considered by many to be an exemplary masterpiece of Roman Baroque architecture. Later, from 1640 to 1650, he worked on the design of the church of Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza. The structure's geometry is a symmetric six-pointed star; from the center of the floor, the cornice looks like two equilateral triangles forming a hexagon.



Borromini's Dome of Sant'Ivo, 1642-1660

Besides being an architect and a city planner, Bernini was an extraordinary sculptor. In his twenties, he created masterpieces such as Aeneas, Anchises, and Ascanius (1619); Rape of Proserpina (1621-22); and Apollo and Daphne (1622-25). He created the Ecstasy of Saint Teresa (1651) and the Four Rivers Fountain in Piazza Navona in his fifties.

Another genial artist preceded Borromini and Bernini: Caravaggio (1571-1610). He lived most of his artistic life in Rome. Besides his skills in the dramatic use of chiaroscuro, he is considered the first independent artist to define subjects by himself. He vividly expressed crucial moments and scenes, often featuring violent struggles, torture, and death. Caravaggio's influence can be seen in the works of Rubens and Rembrandt. He died aged thirty-eight.



Bernini's Pluto and Prosperina, 1622



Bernini's Cardsharps, 1594

Culture

Italian culture is the amalgamation of thousands of years of heritage and tradition. It is steeped in the arts, family, architecture, music, and food.

Family is a significant value within Italian culture. Their family solidarity is focused on extended family rather than the West's idea of "the nuclear family," of just a mom, dad, and kids. Italians have frequent family gatherings, often celebrating around food.

For Italians, food isn't just nourishment; it is life. Italian cuisine has influenced food culture worldwide and is viewed as an art form. Wine, cheese, and pasta are essential parts of Italian meals. Family gatherings are frequent, and the extended networks of families.<

Italy takes dressing very seriously. It is home to a number of world-renowned fashion houses, including Armani, Gucci, Benetton, Versace and Prada, Valentino, Ferragamo, and Dolce e Gabbana. Italians are also great designers of automobiles and household furnishings.



Lamborghini Aventador, 2013. Designer: Filippo Perini



Sofa, Designed by Studio 65, Bocca, 1970

People

Italians think differently. The concept of “azerare,” thinking anew, combined with a deep knowledge of history, is one of the basic components of Italian creativity. Italians are also great communicators. Their body language is frequently more important than their verbal one. Their self-deprecating humor makes it difficult for someone to feel offended by a negative comment.

Personal

An Eye on Rome looks at the city as an insider and an outsider. As one who had lived in Rome for seven years, studying architecture, its monuments, its arts, and interacting daily with its people, I am aware of some aspects of the city hidden behind its facades. As an outsider, Eternal Rome remains for us a source of inspiration.



Mixed-use office-residential by architect Lucio Passarelli

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