

ROME

An Illustrated Guide to Its Monuments & Art

Piazza Navona

From Rome with Love

Robert and Karla

Photographed on site · Notes compiled for viewing

Fontana del Moro (Fountain of the Moor)

Location: Southern end of Piazza Navona, Rome



Front — the Moor faces the square, a Triton at left and the basin's front lobe below.



Side — the full lobed basin with all four Tritons, before the Palazzo Pamphilj.



Rear — the Moor's back and a marine mask; the church inscription is legible behind.



Looking north — the Moor from behind, with the obelisk of the Four Rivers Fountain beyond.

Description

A monumental Baroque fountain set in a rose-and-white marble basin of concave lobes. At its center a powerfully muscled marine figure — popularly called ‘the Moor’ — stands on a large conch shell, gripping and wrestling a dolphin whose mouth jets water. Four Tritons and marine masks ride the rim around him. The fountain stands before the Palazzo Pamphilj and the white church of Nostra Signora del Sacro Cuore; looking north up the square, the obelisk of Bernini’s Fountain of the Four Rivers rises beyond. These four views were taken around the basin to show the central group from the front, side and rear.

Inscription & Translation

**On the church facade behind: “... NOSTRAE DOMINAE A SACRO CORDE
IESV AEDES DEDICATA AN· MDCCCLXXIX”**

“Church dedicated to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, in the year 1879.” This is the facade of the church of Nostra Signora del Sacro Cuore (formerly San Giacomo degli Spagnoli), not part of the fountain. The fountain itself carries no inscription. (The ‘PRADA’ lettering in some views is a modern advertising hoarding over a building under restoration.)

Date & Age

The marble basin was made by Giacomo della Porta in 1575–76. The central figure of the Moor was designed by Bernini and carved by Giovanni Antonio Mari in 1653–55, when the outer basin was also enlarged — so the fountain combines work roughly 450 and 370 years old. Importantly, the marble figures seen today are copies made in 1874; the weathered originals were moved indoors for preservation.

Artist / Creators

The basin and the original marine masks are by Giacomo della Porta (1575–76). The central Moor was designed by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680) — the master of the Roman Baroque — and carved by Giovanni Antonio Mari (1653–55), commissioned under Pope Innocent X and funded by Olimpia Maidalchini. The Tritons and masks now in the fountain are copies made by Luigi Amici in 1874; the originals are preserved in Rome’s museum collections.

Significance

One of the three monumental fountains of Piazza Navona — with Bernini’s Fountain of the Four Rivers at the centre and the Fountain of Neptune at the north end. The square itself preserves the shape of the ancient Stadium of Domitian (1st century AD). The Moor epitomises Baroque sculpture: torsion, muscular energy and violent motion frozen in stone, and it shows how della Porta’s Renaissance fountain was transformed a century later by Bernini.

Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi (Fountain of the Four Rivers)

Location: Centre of Piazza Navona, Rome



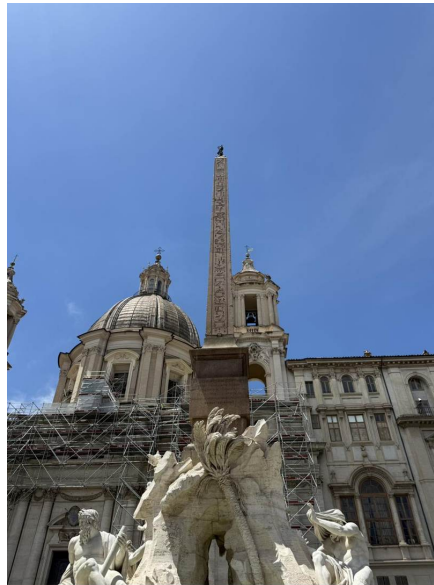
The full composition — colossal river gods around the hollowed rock, beneath the obelisk.



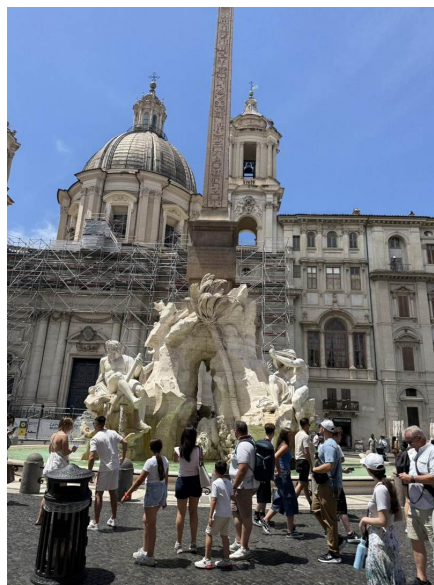
The Nile (veiled head, left) and the Río de la Plata (raised hand, right) flank the Pamphilj papal coat of arms.



From the opposite side — a horse bursts out of the travertine between the figures.



Looking up — the Egyptian obelisk crowned by the bronze Pamphilj dove with an olive branch.



Description

Bernini's great Baroque fountain at the heart of Piazza Navona. From a hollowed travertine rock rise four colossal marble river gods personifying the Nile, Ganges, Danube and Río de la Plata — the great rivers of the four then-known continents — amid carved palms, rocks and animals (a lion, a horse, a serpent). Crowning the rock is an ancient Roman-Egyptian obelisk topped by a bronze dove with an olive branch, emblem of the Pamphilj pope who commissioned it. These views move around the fountain to show the river gods, the central papal arms, the rising obelisk, and the work in its setting before the church of Sant' Agnese in Agone.

Inscription & Translation

The obelisk bears Egyptian-style hieroglyphs; marble plaques on its base carry a Latin dedication to Pope Innocent X.

The hieroglyphs were cut in Roman times, not in ancient Egypt, and the base plaques record that Pope Innocent X raised the obelisk and fountain. The lettering is not legible enough in these photographs to transcribe in full, so this is given as a summary rather than a word-for-word reading. The crowning bronze dove with an olive branch is the heraldic emblem of the Pamphilj family.

Date & Age

Designed and built by Bernini between 1648 and 1651 and unveiled on 12 June 1651 — about 375 years ago. The obelisk it carries is older still: a 1st-century AD obelisk made in Roman Egypt under the emperor Domitian, brought here and re-erected for the fountain.

Artist / Creators

Designed by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680) for Pope Innocent X. Bernini conceived the whole and supervised it, while specialists in his studio carved the four river gods: the Nile by Giacomo Antonio Fancelli, the Ganges by Claude Poussin, the Danube by Antonio Raggi, and the Río de la Plata by Francesco Baratta (1650–51).

Significance

One of the supreme achievements of the Roman Baroque. The four rivers and continents proclaim the worldwide reach of the Church under the Pamphilj pope. It is famous for Bernini's illusionistic daring — the heavy obelisk seems to balance on a rock pierced with open voids — and for figures that twist and strain as if moving like the rivers they personify. It anchors Piazza Navona, which preserves the shape of the ancient Stadium of Domitian, and faces Borromini's Sant' Agnese in Agone — the source of the old legend that the Plata recoils in horror from the church, a story impossible in fact, since the church was built after the fountain.