

ROME

An Illustrated Guide to Its Monuments & Art

The Colosseum

From Rome with Love

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Photographed on site · Notes compiled for viewing

Plate 16

The Colosseum (the Flavian Amphitheatre)

Location: Piazza del Colosseo, Rome



The great elliptical facade — three tiers of arches in superimposed orders, with the attic storey above.



Inside: the radial walls and vaults that once carried the tiered seating (the cavea).



The arena, with the modern cross that recalls the Colosseum's later use as a place of Christian devotion.



The vast interior — the cavea, the partly reconstructed wooden arena floor, and the exposed underground works.

Description

The largest amphitheatre ever built, raised by the Flavian emperors as a gift to the Roman people on the drained site of Nero's private lake. Its elliptical wall of arches enclosed tiered seating for some 50,000 spectators, who came for gladiatorial combats, wild-beast hunts and grand spectacles. These views show the three-tiered facade, the radial walls and vaults that carried the seating, the arena where a modern cross now recalls later Christian devotion, and the vast interior with its reconstructed wooden floor. A companion panel looks at the engineering and the underground hypogeum.

Inscription & Translation

No ancient inscription survives in these views, but the facade itself ‘speaks’ through its three superimposed orders of half-columns — Tuscan/Doric below, then Ionic, then Corinthian.

Its Roman name was the Amphitheatrum Flavium (Flavian Amphitheatre); the name ‘Colosseum’ is medieval, probably taken from the Colossus of Nero, a giant bronze statue that once stood nearby.

Date & Age

Begun under the Emperor Vespasian about 70–72 AD — funded by the spoils of the sack of Jerusalem in 70 AD, on the site of the lake of Nero’s Domus Aurea — and inaugurated by his son Titus in 80 AD with a hundred days of games; further work followed under Domitian. It stands roughly 50 metres tall and is about 1,950 years old.

Artist / Creators

Imperial Roman architecture of the Flavian dynasty — the emperors Vespasian, Titus and Domitian. It was built of travertine (quarried at Tivoli), tuff and brick-faced concrete, the great blocks once tied together with iron clamps. The names of its architects are not recorded.

Significance

The Colosseum is the supreme symbol of Imperial Rome and the largest amphitheatre ever built. It was also a marvel of crowd engineering: some 80 arched entrances let tens of thousands of people find their seats — and leave — quickly. Across the centuries it served as fortress, quarry and Christian shrine, and it survives today as the enduring emblem of the city.

Plate 17

The Colosseum: Engineering and the Hypogeum

Location: Beneath the arena, the Colosseum, Rome



Looking down into the hypogeum: the brick piers and channels that ran beneath the arena floor.



Part of the wooden arena floor, rebuilt over the hypogeum it once concealed.



A travertine pier riddled with holes — the sockets of iron clamps that were later prised out.

Description

With the wooden arena floor gone, the Colosseum's most ingenious feature is laid bare: the hypogeum, a two-level underground labyrinth of brick walls, passages and machine-rooms. Out of sight below the floor, lifts and trapdoors worked by winches and counterweights raised gladiators, scenery and wild animals straight into the arena. These views look down into the maze of piers and channels, show the reconstructed wooden floor that once hid it, and pick out the holes where iron clamps once bound the travertine blocks.

Inscription & Translation

No inscription — these are the bones of the building. The pock-marks across the stone are the sockets of the iron clamps (cramps) that once tied the travertine blocks together.

Those clamps were prised out and melted down in the Middle Ages, which is why the stone looks pitted today. The holes are a record of how the Romans locked the great blocks together — largely without mortar between them.

Date & Age

The hypogeum was added and elaborated under the Emperor Domitian (reigned 81–96 AD), after the amphitheatre's inauguration in 80 AD, and it remained in use for the games for centuries afterwards.

Artist / Creators

Roman engineering of the Flavian period. The structure combined travertine piers, tuff and brick-faced concrete; the underground machinery — dozens of lifts on pulleys and counterweights, with trapdoors opening into the arena — was driven by human muscle. The velarium, a vast retractable awning for shade, was worked from the top of the walls by sailors of the imperial fleet.

Significance

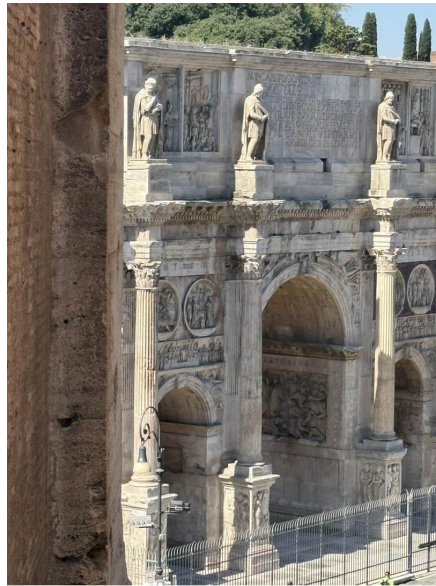
The hypogeum is one of the ancient world's great pieces of stagecraft engineering. By hiding the machinery below a wooden floor spread with sand, the Romans could make beasts and fighters appear as if from nowhere, turning the amphitheatre into an enormous theatrical machine. It is the clearest surviving illustration of how Roman builders married raw structural power — arches, vaults, concrete and iron — to showmanship and spectacle.

The Arch of Constantine

Location: Between the Colosseum and the Palatine, Rome



The largest surviving Roman triumphal arch — a triple archway thick with sculpture.



Detail: the attic inscription, statues of Dacian prisoners, and round Hadrianic medallions — much of it reused from earlier monuments.



The arch on the ancient triumphal route, the Palatine Hill rising behind.

Description

A triple triumphal arch standing between the Colosseum and the Palatine, the largest to survive from ancient Rome. The Senate raised it to celebrate the emperor Constantine's victory over his rival Maxentius and the tenth year of his reign. Famously, much of its sculpture is spolia — reliefs and statues taken from monuments of earlier 'good emperors' — set alongside newly carved Constantinian friezes, making the arch both a victory monument and a turning point in late-Roman art.

Inscription & Translation

**On the attic, repeated on both faces: “IMP CAES FL CONSTANTINO
MAXIMO P F AVGVSTO S P Q R, QVOD INSTINCTV DIVINITATIS
MENTIS MAGNITVDINE CVM EXERCITV SVO TAM DE TYRANNO
QVAM DE OMNI EIVS FACTIONE VNO TEMPORE IVSTIS REM
PVBLICAM VLTVS EST ARMIS, ARCV M TRIVMPHIS INSIGNEM
DICAVIT.”**

“To the Emperor Caesar Flavius Constantinus, the Greatest, Pious and Blessed Augustus: because, by the prompting of the divinity and by his own greatness of mind, he with his army avenged the state with just arms, at a single stroke, upon the tyrant and his whole faction, the Senate and People of Rome dedicated this arch, distinguished by triumphs.” The phrase ‘instinctu divinitatis’ — ‘by divine inspiration’ — names no particular god, capturing the religious ambiguity of Constantine’s age.

Date & Age

Dedicated on 25 July 315 AD, celebrating Constantine's victory over Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge (28 October 312) and his decennalia, the tenth year of his rule. It is about 25 metres wide and 21 metres high. Much of the reused sculpture is older still, taken from 2nd-century monuments of Trajan, Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius.

Artist / Creators

Built by order of the Roman Senate. Much of the relief is spolia reused from monuments of the emperors Trajan, Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius — the prisoner statues on the attic are Trajanic Dacians, the round medallions Hadrianic. The newly carved Constantinian friezes (the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, the distribution of largesse) are in a flatter, more frontal style that marks the shift toward late-antique and medieval art.

Significance

The arch is both a celebration and a statement. By wrapping Constantine in sculpture borrowed from Rome's most admired earlier emperors, it tied the new ruler to a golden age and legitimised his power after years of civil war. The deliberately vague 'divine inspiration' of its inscription stands on the threshold between pagan Rome and the Christian empire Constantine would foster, and the arch became the model from which later triumphal arches — down to modern ones — descend.