

ROME

An Illustrated Guide to Its Monuments & Art

Santa Maria Maggiore

From Rome with Love

Robert and Karla

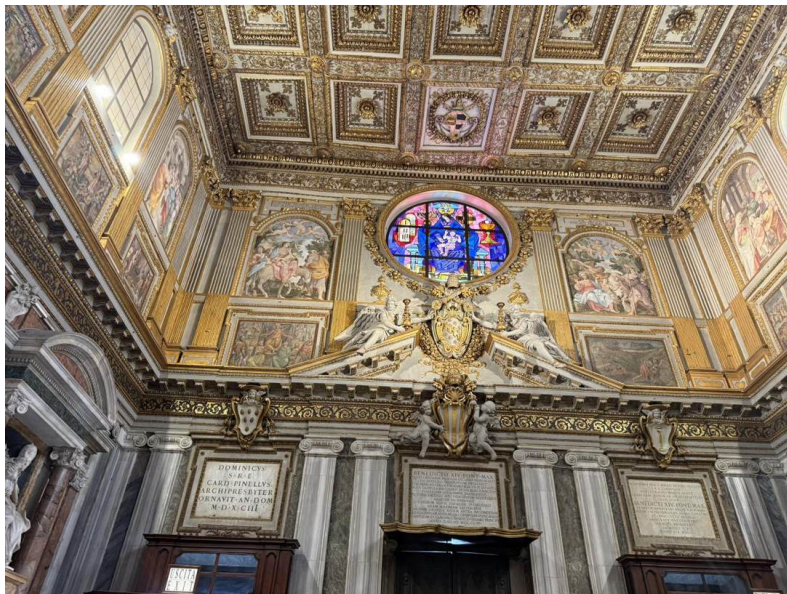
Photographed on site · Notes compiled for viewing

Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore

Location: Piazza di Santa Maria Maggiore, Esquiline Hill, Rome



The Baroque facade by Ferdinando Fuga (1743), with the 14th-century campanile behind — the tallest medieval bell tower in Rome.



The gilded coffered ceiling, designed by Giuliano da Sangallo, above the frescoed upper nave.



Inside one of the basilica's two great domed chapels, its dome frescoed with the Virgin among the apostles.



Bernini's bronze statue of Philip IV of Spain, cast by Girolamo Lucenti in 1692, in the portico.

Description

The oldest church in the Western world dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and one of Rome's four great papal basilicas. Founded in the 5th century, it still keeps its early-Christian basilica plan — a long nave divided by forty ancient columns — beneath a gilded Renaissance ceiling and behind a grand Baroque facade. These views show that facade and its medieval bell tower, the famous coffered ceiling, one of the two monumental domed chapels, and Bernini's statue of a royal benefactor in the portico.

Inscription & Translation

**On the base of the bronze statue in the portico: “PHILIPPO IV HISPANIARVM
REGI CATHOLICO ... CAPITVLVM ET CANONICI GRATI ANIMI
MONVMENTVM EREXERE A S MDCXCII.”**

“To Philip IV, Catholic King of the Spains ... the Chapter and Canons raised this monument in gratitude, in the year 1692.” Philip IV had granted the basilica a perpetual yearly gift, and the grateful clergy honoured him with Bernini’s statue.

Date & Age

Founded in the 5th century: tradition tells of a miraculous August snowfall in 358 that marked out the site, but the basilica was built after the Council of Ephesus (431) by Pope Sixtus III and consecrated in 434. The gilded ceiling is of the 15th–16th century; the present facade was added by Ferdinando Fuga in 1741–43; the campanile dates to 1377.

Artist / Creators

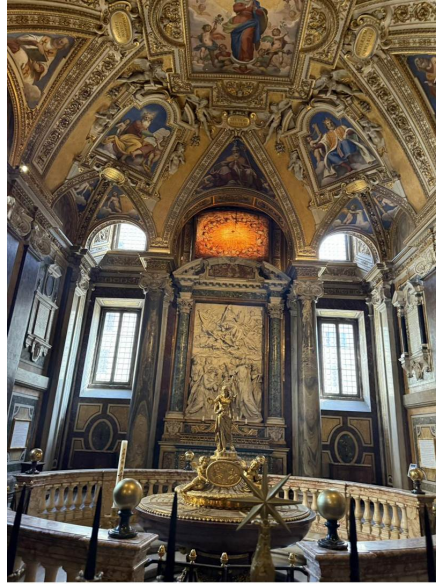
A thousand years of artists. The Baroque facade is by Ferdinando Fuga (under Pope Benedict XIV); the gilded coffered ceiling was designed by Giuliano da Sangallo; the apse mosaic of the Coronation of the Virgin is by Jacopo Torriti (1295). The basilica is also the burial place of the great sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini, whose statue of Philip IV stands in the portico (cast by Girolamo Lucenti, 1692).

Significance

Santa Maria Maggiore is the foremost shrine of the Virgin Mary in the Western Church and the best-preserved of Rome’s great early basilicas, still showing its 5th-century mosaics — the oldest Marian images in the West. Legend says its golden ceiling was gilded with the first gold brought back from the Americas, a gift of Ferdinand and Isabella to Pope Alexander VI. In April 2025 it became the burial place of Pope Francis, who chose to be laid to rest here near the icon of the Virgin he venerated.

Santa Maria Maggiore: The Baptistry and Chapels

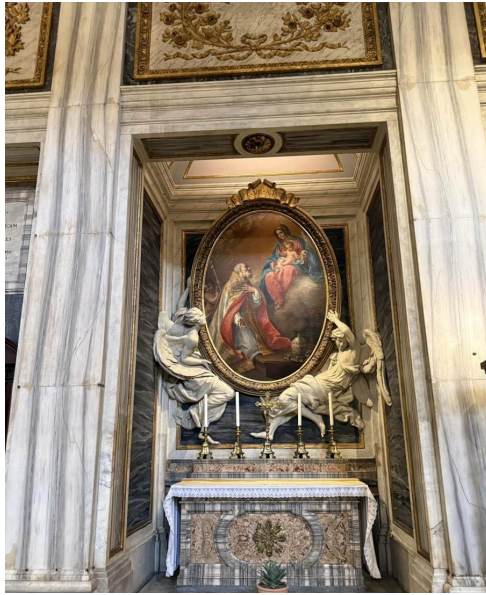
Location: Inside the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome



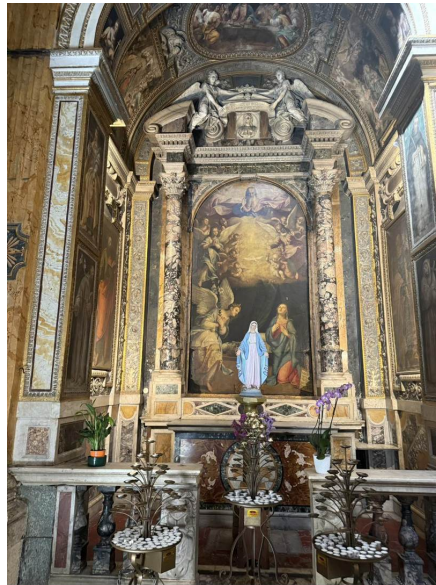
The Baptistry: the marble font by Giuseppe Valadier, with Pietro Bernini's marble relief of the Assumption behind.



The Holy Door (Porta Santa), opened only in Jubilee years; the inscription above records Pope Pius XII and the Holy Year of 1949.



A side-chapel altar: an oval painting of a sainted bishop before the Virgin and Child, flanked by two marble angels.



A Marian chapel alive with votive candles, a statue of the Madonna before its Baroque altarpiece.

Description

Beyond the nave, the basilica opens into a series of richly decorated chapels and a grand baptistery. These views gather some of them: the baptistery with its marble font and a relief by Pietro Bernini; the bronze Holy Door that is unsealed only in Jubilee years; a side-chapel altar framed by marble angels; and a Marian chapel where pilgrims still light candles before the Madonna.

Inscription & Translation

**Above the Holy Door: “PIVS XII PONT MAX A MCMXXXIX SACRI PRINC
XI.”**

“Pope Pius XII, in 1949, the eleventh year of his sacred reign.” A Holy Door is walled up between Jubilees and ceremonially opened by the pope to begin each Holy Year; this inscription marks the Jubilee

proclaimed in 1949.

Date & Age

The chapels span several centuries of the basilica's long life. The baptismal font is the work of Giuseppe Valadier (early 19th century); the Assumption relief behind it is by Pietro Bernini, father of Gian Lorenzo. The two monumental domed chapels off the nave — the Sistine Chapel of Pope Sixtus V and the Pauline (Borghese) Chapel of Pope Paul V — date from around 1585 and 1611.

Artist / Creators

The font is by Giuseppe Valadier; the marble Assumption relief by Pietro Bernini. The basilica's greatest treasures lie in the two domed chapels: the Sistine Chapel holds Arnolfo di Cambio's marble Nativity (1291) and the relic of the Holy Crib of Bethlehem, while the Pauline (Borghese) Chapel enshrines the Salus Populi Romani — the ancient, deeply venerated icon of the Virgin traditionally attributed to St Luke. The makers of the side-chapel paintings shown here are not recorded on site.

Significance

If the nave tells the basilica's ancient story, the chapels tell its living one. Pilgrims still come to light candles before the Madonna and to pray at the Salus Populi Romani, the icon that Roman tradition credits with protecting the city. The Holy Door, opened once a generation, marks Santa Maria Maggiore as one of the four basilicas of the Roman Jubilee — a place where, century after century, the devotion that built the church continues.