

ROME

An Illustrated Guide to Its Monuments & Art

San Pietro in Vincoli

From Rome with Love

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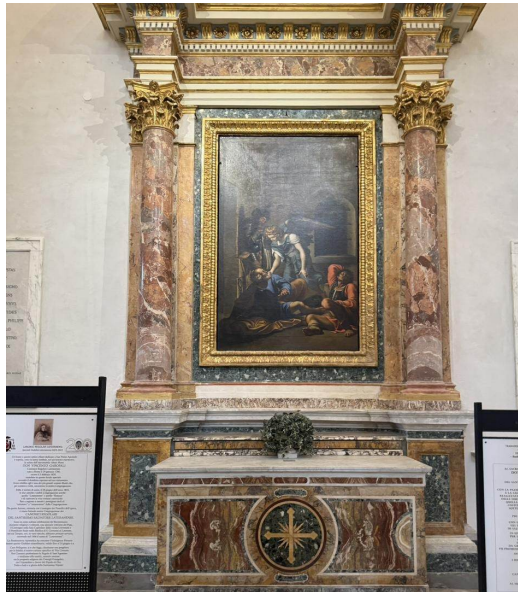
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San Pietro in Vincoli

Location: Piazza di San Pietro in Vincoli, Esquiline Hill, Rome



Saint Margaret of Antioch by Guercino (about 1644), in the right transept chapel — the saint raising a cross over the dragon she overcame.



The Liberation of Saint Peter — the angel freeing the apostle from prison — a 1683 copy by Pietro Santi Bartoli after Domenichino's original.



The Lamentation over the Dead Christ, a 16th-century altarpiece by Cristoforo Roncalli, called Pomarancio.



The tomb of Cardinal Cinzio Aldobrandini (1705–07): a winged skeleton of Death rising over the sarcophagus, carved by Pierre Le Gros the Younger.

Description

San Pietro in Vincoli — ‘Saint Peter in Chains’ — is an early-Christian basilica on the Esquiline, world-famous as the home of Michelangelo’s Moses (on the Tomb of Pope Julius II) and of the relic of St Peter’s chains. These photographs don’t reach those two great sights; instead they gather some of the church’s other treasures — the altarpieces of its side chapels and one of its most theatrical tombs.

Inscription & Translation

The basilica’s name, San Pietro in Vincoli — ‘Saint Peter in Chains’ (ad Vincula) — comes from its central relic: the chains believed to have bound the apostle Peter, one set from his imprisonment in Jerusalem and one from Rome.

By tradition the two chains were brought together here and miraculously fused into a single length — the ‘miracle of the chains’ that the basilica still commemorates.

Date & Age

The basilica was founded in the 5th century and remodelled in the 15th and early 16th. The paintings shown are of the 16th and 17th centuries: Pomarancio’s Lamentation (16th century), Guercino’s Saint Margaret (about 1644), and Pietro Santi Bartoli’s Liberation of St Peter (1683, after Domenichino’s 1604 original). The Aldobrandini tomb was raised in 1705–07.

Artist / Creators

A roll-call of Baroque Rome. The Saint Margaret is by Guercino (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri); the Lamentation by Cristoforo Roncalli, called Pomarancio; the Liberation of St Peter is Pietro Santi Bartoli’s copy of a Domenichino original kept in the sacristy. The tomb of Cardinal Cinzio Aldobrandini was designed by the architect Carlo Francesco Bizzaccheri, its arresting winged skeleton carved by the French sculptor Pierre Le Gros the Younger.

Significance

Even setting aside Michelangelo’s Moses, San Pietro in Vincoli is a gallery of Roman art across many centuries. Its chapels hold paintings by some of the finest hands of the 16th and 17th centuries, and its tombs range from the quiet dignity of the Renaissance to the Baroque theatre of a skeleton brandishing its scythe. Founded — tradition holds — by the empress Eudoxia to shelter St Peter’s chains, the church remains both a working sanctuary and a treasury of sculpture and paint.