

ROME

An Illustrated Guide to Its Monuments & Art

The Spanish Steps

From Rome with Love

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Photographed on site · Notes compiled for viewing

The Spanish Steps & Trinità dei Monti

Location: Scalinata di Trinità dei Monti, between Piazza di Spagna and the Pincio, Rome



The Spanish Steps climbing to the church of Trinità dei Monti and the Sallustian obelisk — designed by Francesco De Sanctis and built 1723–26.



The twin-towered facade of Trinità dei Monti, the French church on the Pincio, with the obelisk before it.



The view from the top, down the steps to Piazza di Spagna and out across the rooftops of Rome.



The Sallustian Obelisk — a Roman-made copy of an Egyptian obelisk, raised here in 1789.

Description

One of the most famous sights in Rome: the great staircase — 135 steps of curving travertine — that climbs from Piazza di Spagna to the church of Trinità dei Monti on the Pincio. At the top stand the church's twin bell towers and a tall obelisk; from the terraces the city opens out below. The steps take their English name from the Spanish Embassy to the Holy See, long resident in the piazza.

Inscription & Translation

Properly the Scalinata di Trinità dei Monti, the staircase is known in English as the 'Spanish Steps' after the Palazzo di Spagna — seat of the Spanish Embassy to the Holy See — which has stood in the piazza below since the 17th century.

At the foot of the steps lies the Barcaccia fountain, a half-sunken stone boat by Pietro and Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1623–26); the whole composition became world-famous on film in Roman Holiday (1953).

Date & Age

Designed by the Roman architect Francesco De Sanctis — whose project won an early-18th-century competition over rivals including Specchi and Juvarra — and built between 1723 and 1726, under Popes Innocent XIII and Benedict XIII. The church of Trinità dei Monti above is older, founded in 1502; the Sallustian obelisk was set before it in 1789.

Artist / Creators

The staircase is the work of Francesco De Sanctis, paid for in part by the legacy of the French diplomat Stéphane Gueffier. The church of Trinità dei Monti was founded by King Louis XII of France for the Order of Minims; it remains a French church to this day, often called ‘the most famous French church not in France.’ The obelisk — a Roman-made imitation of an Egyptian one, from the ancient Gardens of Sallust — was raised here by Pope Pius VI.

Significance

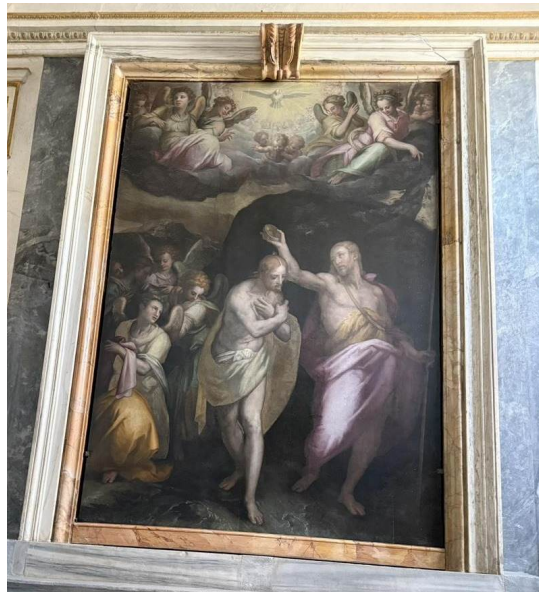
The Spanish Steps are a piece of pure theatre: a Baroque staircase built not for any practical need but to stage the climb from the city to the church on the hill, and to give Rome one of its grandest open-air gathering places. Framed by the twin towers of a French church and an ancient-looking obelisk, and looking out over the rooftops toward St Peter’s, they remain among the most beloved and most photographed places in the city.

Inside Trinità dei Monti

Location: Church of Trinità dei Monti, at the top of the Spanish Steps, Rome



The Assumption of the Virgin by Daniele da Volterra (1548–50), in the Chapel of Lucrezia della Rovere — said to include a portrait of Michelangelo among the apostles.



The Baptism of Christ by Giovanni Battista Naldini (1580), the altarpiece of the Cappella Dosio–Altoviti.



A marble Deposition — Christ taken down from the Cross — in a side chapel.



An altarpiece of the Immaculate Conception, the Virgin crowned by angels upon the crescent moon.

Description

The church at the top of the steps is a treasury of 16th-century Mannerist painting. Behind a sober single-nave interior in the French taste, its side chapels hold fresco cycles and altarpieces by pupils and followers of Michelangelo and Raphael. These views gather some of them — a famous Assumption, a Baptism of Christ, a marble Deposition and an Immaculate Conception.

Inscription & Translation

The church's single most celebrated work is not among these photographs: Daniele da Volterra's fresco of the Deposition (about 1545), painted from sketches by Michelangelo and long counted among the finest paintings in Rome.

Daniele — Michelangelo's pupil — earned the nickname 'Il Braghettone,' 'the breeches-maker,' for the loincloths he was later ordered to add to the nude figures of Michelangelo's Last Judgment.

Date & Age

The chapels are largely of the later 16th century. The Chapel of Lucrezia della Rovere was frescoed by Daniele da Volterra and his collaborators about 1548–50; the Cappella Dosio–Altoviti was painted by Naldini around 1580. The marble Deposition and the Immaculate Conception belong to the church's later, 19th-century life under its French community.

Artist / Creators

The Assumption of the Virgin is by Daniele da Volterra — in the Chapel of Lucrezia della Rovere, where he led a team of Mannerist painters including Marco Pino, Pellegrino Tibaldi and Gaspar Becerra — and the Baptism of Christ is by Giovanni Battista Naldini. The marble Deposition group and the Immaculate Conception altarpiece are unsigned on site, and are given here by subject rather than by a name I could confirm.

Significance

Trinità dei Monti is one of Rome's richest galleries of Mannerist art — the generation that came directly after Michelangelo and Raphael — and Daniele da Volterra's work here carries Michelangelo's influence straight into paint. That the church survived at all is a small wonder: closed and stripped during the Napoleonic occupation, with an attempt even made to cut its frescoes from the walls, it was restored by the French crown after 1815 and remains a French church in the heart of Rome.