

» A TRICK OF THE EYE

by Tiffany Parks

Just when you think you've seen everything in Rome, something right around the corner surprises you. Hidden alleyways, forgotten works of art, unexpected vistas waiting to amaze you at every turn. But nothing is more confounding than the Eternal City's many optical illusions. Mischievously tricking your eye, these beguiling phenomena have mystified and delighted viewers for centuries. Go in search of them, and you won't be the first –or the last– to be deceived.

Perhaps the largest –and most famous– optical illusion can be found in **St. Peter's Square**. Gianlorenzo Bernini's ingenious elliptical design is bordered on both sides by four rows of daunting travertine columns, 284 in all. But stand in a particular spot in the square and the outer three rows disappear from view and only the first row can be seen.

Inside the basilica, surely the most prized work of art is Michelangelo's first masterpiece, the moving and graceful **Pietà**, carved when he was only 23. The master's grasp of human anatomy was fiercely accurate; nevertheless, if the figures of Mary and Christ were to stand side by side, she would tower over him, at least two feet taller. This can be explained both by Michelangelo's decision to use a triangular shape for the composition, thereby necessitating Mary's overly large lower body, as well as his choice to accent Christ's weakened and vulnerable state in death, appearing small in his mother's arms.

To view St. Peter's from a different angle, hop in a cab on **Via Piccolomini**, high on Vatican hill, where the dome can be seen in all its glory. The trees that line the street create a kind of frame for the basilica, and as you drive toward it, the frame widens, and the dome appears to shrink on the horizon.

Illusions involving Michelangelo's masterpiece don't end there. Across town, on the Aventine Hill, at the villa of the infamous **Knights of Malta**, take a peek through the keyhole and the magnificent cupola can be viewed. Although it is miles away, it appears to be just on the other side of the door, nestled amongst the greenery in the villa's garden.

Illusions continue to abound inside the Vatican Museums, most particularly in the **Gallery of Tapestries**. *The Resurrection of Christ*, an early 16th-century Flemish tapestry based on designs of the school of Raphael, was woven using the technique of shifting perspective. View it from the left, and you will see Christ's head turned toward you and his eyes making contact with yours. Slowly walk toward the right and not only will his eyes follow you, but his head and body turn as well, as does

the rectangular stone he is stepping on. The illusion was achieved by double stitching: miniscule overlapping stitches that disappear behind one another depending on where you stand. Entranced by this effect, you might not notice yet another illusion on the vaulted ceiling of the same gallery. Using the *tromp l'œil* technique of painting shadows, what appears to be an intricately carved ceiling of bas-reliefs and moldings is in reality entirely two-dimensional.

Haven't had enough? The nave of **Sant'Ignazio di Loyola** near the Pantheon possesses a dramatically frescoed vault with what seem to be dizzyingly tall columns and hundreds of figures ascending straight into the heavens. More stunning still is the make-believe dome, in fact just a round canvas

stretching across the church's crossing, which –from a vantage spot marked by a marble star on the floor– appears to be a lofty, ribbed and coffered dome. Both were frescoed by master illusionist Andrea Pozzo.

Perhaps most mystifying of all is Baroque architect Francesco Borromini's baffling perspective at the **Galleria Spada** near Campo de' Fiori. Stand in the courtyard and you will see a long portico of columns that leads to a small garden and a whimsical statue. As you walk down the portico, the floor inclines upward, the columns shorten, the path narrows and the vaulted ceiling declines. The garden is just a few square feet and what seemed like a life-sized sculpture is not even as tall as your hip. You have been tricked once again!

