

➔ Rome where now

The month's top entertainment, art and attractions

» FOCUS Mosaics

by Tiffany Parks



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A tiny fragment of glass or marble. By itself it is insignificant, but arranged by a master hand, along with thousands, perhaps millions of others, it can become a glorious and inspiring work of art, surviving centuries, even millennia. Although the ancient Romans cannot be credited with inventing mosaics, they were the ones to perfect them. First using them to create durable, waterproof, and easy to clean surfaces, ideal for bathhouses, the Romans were quick to realize their potential for decoration and eventually high artistic expression. To explore this splendid art form, here's a breakdown of Rome's must-see mosaics.

Although many of Rome's ancient mosaics are no longer *in situ*, one place to find them untouched is the **Baths of Caracalla**, which features works of both geometrical sequences and black and white



maritime scenes. Other examples can be found in the city's major museums including **Centrale Montemartini**, which preserves an incomplete but vast floor mosaic representing a hunting scene with an impressive 16 species of animals. **Palazzo Massimo alle Terme** boasts dozens of examples, like the 2nd-century BC image of a muse (pictured left). One of the city's most precious mosaics, notable for its exceptionally minuscule tiles, depicts four incredibly detailed doves refreshing themselves at a birdbath, originally from Hadrian's Villa in Tivoli and now displayed at the **Capitoline Museums**. Another ancient mosaic, housed in the **Vatican Mu-**



seums' Gallery of the Candelabra, illustrates asparagus, chestnuts, fish, shrimp, squid, and a chicken, and served as the sign of a food shop in nearby Ostia.

As the empire began to collapse, happily the art of mosaic making continued full steam ahead. An exciting example of a late antique mosaic that crosses over into early medieval church decoration graces the ceiling of the 4th-century **Mausoleum of Costantia**, depicting both pagan and Christian scenes side by side. As Byzantine art burst onto the scene in the early Middle Ages, mosaics took on a new look, glittering with glass tiles, their underside painted with gold or bright colors. One of the most spectacular examples resides in **Santa Prassede's** 9th-century Shrine of San Zenone. Every inch of the tiny funerary chapel is covered with shimmering gold mosaics featuring portraits of the pope, his successor, saints, and angels. The triumphal arch and nave of 5th-century **Santa Maria Maggiore** provide some of the earliest examples of Byzantine mosaics as well as the oldest known depiction of the Virgin Mary. The resplendently flowering tree of life mosaic in the apse of **San Clemente** is a later example that would pave the way for the late medieval mosaic makers. Find more Byzantine mosaics

at the churches of **Santi Cosma e Damiano**, **Santa Pudenziana**, and **Santa Maria in Domnica**.

In the 13th century, three artists, Pietro Cavallini, Jacopo Torriti, and Filippo Rusuti, shifted away from the flat, ornamental style of Byzantine art, toward the more realistic look that came to be known as Roman Naturalism. Their masterworks can be found in the churches of **Santa Maria in Trastevere**, **Santa Cecilia in Trastevere**, **San Giovanni in Laterano**, and **San Crisogono**.

Mosaics may have gone out of style at the dawn of the Renaissance, but they enjoyed a brief revival in early 20th-century Rome and were used to great effect at the **Foro Italico**, Mussolini's athletic complex. The flawless athletes, workers, peasants, and soldiers depicted in the mosaics were used to spread Il Duce's message of the importance of virility, physical superiority, and preparedness for war.



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