

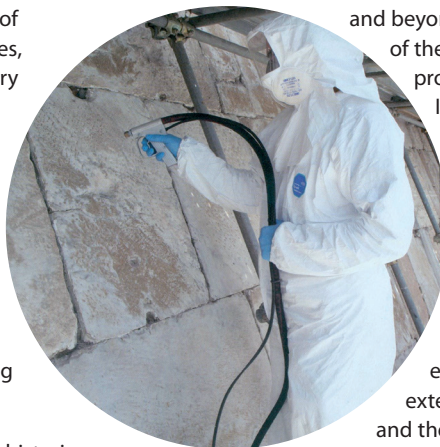
# PYRAMID IN WHITE

The 2000-year-old Pyramid of Cestius has just gotten a makeover. **Tiffany Parks** reports.

The thought of ancient Rome calls up images of pristine marble columns, enormous bathhouses, and magnificent hilltop temples. When funerary monuments in particular come to mind, you might picture the tombs that line Via Appia Antica, sarcophagi carved with bas-reliefs, or tumuli-inspired tombs like the Mausoleum of Hadrian (now transformed into Castel Sant'Angelo). Where do pyramids fit into this picture? If you assume they don't, you might be surprised. Take a walk southeast of the historic center along Via Marmorata to come face-to-face with a very Egyptian-looking monument, right here in the Eternal City.

Rome conquered Greece in 146 BC, but historians like to joke that in reality, it was the other way around. In the centuries that followed, Rome became heavily influenced not simply by the art and culture of the ancient Greeks, but by their lifestyle and philosophies as well. The same phenomenon occurred just over a hundred years later, when Rome conquered Egypt in 30 BC. Suddenly, all things Egyptian were the rage. The most obvious example of this was the Romans' passion for obelisks. Nine of these granite monoliths were shipped across the Mediterranean to adorn Rome's most important sites, and another four were carved in Rome, when supply couldn't keep up with demand.

But the most eye-catching Egyptian-inspired sight in Rome is the Pyramid of Gaius Cestius. Standing at over 120 feet, the Nubian-style pyramid is constructed of brick-faced concrete, with a travertine foundation and a facing of brilliant white luni marble, as well as an interior burial chamber lined with frescoes. In the Middle Ages



and beyond, when so many ancient sites were stripped of their stone to provide materials for new building projects, how did the pyramid survive unscathed?

In the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century, thanks to its strategic position, the pyramid was incorporated into the new city walls, making it a valuable part of Rome's defenses, and therefore inviolable. In more recent times, however, this position has led to a never-ending buildup of grime. Located at the center of five busy streets, it has spent the last hundred years absorbing the exhaust of literally tens of thousands of vehicles every day. By 2013, the lovely white marble exterior had turned an unpleasant shade of gray, and the weakened walls had allowed water to seep in, damaging the frescoes within.

With Italian budget cuts across the board, the chances of a major restoration to this little-visited site were slim to none. That's when Yuzo Yagi stepped in. A Japanese entrepreneur—owner of Tsusho Ltd, an export business that brings luxury Italian textiles to Japan—Yagi personally financed the complete restoration and cleaning of this marvelous monument, restoring it to its original shade of brilliant white, which just happens to be his signature color. The recently completed project took a mere 327 days (unthinkable for a state-funded restoration), just three days less than it took to build the monument back in 12 BC. Not only can the Pyramid of Cestius be admired in its original splendor once again, but the interior chamber is now open to the public for the first time ever. Guided visits can be arranged on the first and third Saturday morning of every month.

Booking is required; call 065743193.

