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Rome in the Round

The circle. It is nature's most perfect shape, so it's little wonder that Rome's greatest artists and architects, from ancient times to the Renaissance and beyond, have used this shape to create some of the city's most fascinating sights. Take a tour of all things round in Rome; **Tiffany Parks** explains how.

Sacred Circle

From mysterious crop circles to Neolithic stone circles; Buddhist Dharma wheels to Hindu prayer wheels; Shiva's circle dance to the yin yang symbol; the pagan oculus to the Gothic rose window: circles have been popping up in the world's sacred images throughout the entire recorded history of humanity. Islamic amulets represent the eye as a spiritual gateway to the soul, and Tibetan mandalas express the human aspiration towards wholeness and reason. Circles symbolize anything from unity to infinity, eternity, protection, or simply the all-reaching power of the sun. In the imagery of Christian Rome, the circle can be seen everywhere you look, perhaps most obviously in the soaring domes the city is so famous for. Circles are also ubiquitous in Christian iconography, from the clypeus that Christ and Mary so often appear seated in, decorating many a church apse, to the halos they wear, and the *tondi*, or circular paintings, created by Raphael, Botticelli, and Michelangelo. But long before the time of Christianity, Rome was already teeming with circles in its architecture, pottery, decorative drain covers, and everyday items like coins and shields.

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Pass the Compass

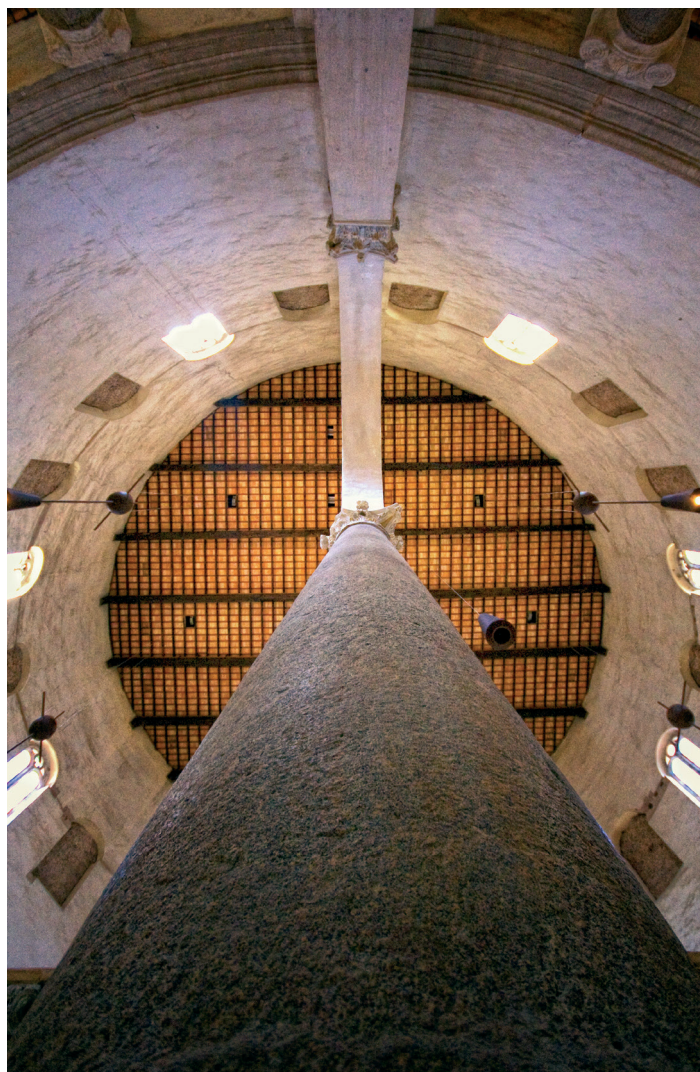
The easiest – and most obvious – place to find circles in Rome is in its architecture. Renaissance architects favored the circle when constructing churches, as it emphasized the perfection of God. Ancient mathematicians were equally fond of its flawless form, not least because the cylinder is geometry's strongest shape. The **Pantheon** (p57) (above, center) is perhaps the world's most well-known circular structure and measures the exact same width as height, making the interior space a perfect sphere. Its circular oculus illuminates the interior with a heavenly shaft of light, a feature that was the precursor to the Gothic rose window. But the legendary temple to all the gods is not the only circular place of worship in the city. A few steps



from the Tiber River, in what was once Rome's ancient cattle market, a diminutive peripteral temple (circular and surrounded by columns), dedicated to

Hercules the Victor (left) (Via Luigi Petroselli), is the oldest stone structure still standing in the entire city. All but one of the columns of this 1st-century BC temple are original. Just don't mistake it (as people have been doing for centuries) for the Temple of Vesta. Vesta's temples were circular as well, but also included an opening in the roof to allow the smoke from her sacred flame to escape. The vestiges of Rome's **Temple of Vesta** can be found in the Roman Forum (p57), although, sadly, less than a third of the structure remains. Roman mausoleums often tended to be circular as well, using the tumulus tombs of the Etruscans as a prototype. The two





most famous in Rome are the **Mausoleum of Hadrian** (later transformed into the fortress and palace that is Castel Sant'Angelo) (p57) and the **Mausoleum of Augustus** (Piazza Augusto Imperatore). While the former is now a rich and fascinating museum, the latter has unfortunately suffered the ravages of time and lack of restoration, and is presently closed to the public.

The circle went on to capture the imaginations of the early Christian church builders in the Middle Ages. The 4th-century church of **Santa Costanza** (right, above) (Via Nomentana, 349) with its perfectly round floor plan, was originally designed to be a mausoleum for Emperor Constantine's daughter. A ring of columns, a shallow dome illuminated by haunting shafts of light, and a vaulted ambulatory with a mix of Christian and pagan mosaics, create an eerily beautiful space. Inspired by the church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, the 5th-century circular church of **Santo Stefano Rotondo** (right) (Via di Santo Stefano Rotondo) was built upon the ruins of an ancient army barracks and mithraeum on the Caelian Hill. The church originally boasted three concentric ambulatories and 22 Ionic columns, but the outer circle was sadly lost when the church was revamped in the 12th century.

WHERE NOW | SIGHTSEEING

Architects like Donato Bramante brought the circle back in style in the Renaissance and nowhere is this more apparent than in his exquisite **Tempietto** (Piazza di San Pietro in Montorio, 2), completed in 1502. The miniature shrine – only 15 feet in diameter and with space inside for just three or four people – sits in the courtyard of San Pietro in Montorio church on the Janiculum Hill. The temple, commissioned by Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, was designed to do double duty as a martyrium, marking the location that was erroneously thought to be the site of St. Peter's crucifixion, and as a commemorative tomb of the king and queen's child Juan, their only son to survive into adulthood, and whose death at age 19 was a devastating blow to the Aragon dynasty. With its harmonious symmetry, slender Tuscan columns, and Doric entablature, the Tempietto is considered a work of architectural perfection.

Ancient Spheres

The legendary **Bocca della Verità** is probably the most famous circular ancient artifact in the world. Everyone who lines up to snap a photo beside it knows to put their hand inside its gaping mouth, and risk getting it bitten off if they tell a lie. But most visitors would be surprised to learn that the cracked slab of marble, decorated with the face of the Tiber rivergod, was originally nothing more than a large drain cover, and that the legend about its hunger

for fibbers dates back to the Middle Ages. For more circular stone

artifacts, take a gander at

the **Arch of Constantine**

(Via San Gregorio). Ten marble

roundels, or circular bas-relief

sculptures, depict scenes of

hunting and ritual sacrifice. Eight

of the ten roundels predate

the 4th-century arch, having

been lifted off an unidentified

monument to Emperor Hadrian.

A simple yet sublime circular

marble throne (left) from the 1st

or 2nd century BC is one of the

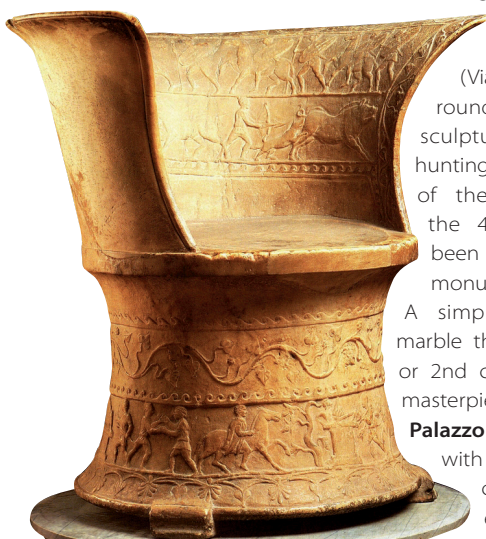
masterpieces of the collection at

Palazzo Corsini (p58), decorated

with bas-reliefs of hunting and

combat scenes. To go back

even further in time, set



Renaissance architects favored the circle when constructing churches, as it emphasized the perfection of God.

Round the Vatican We Go

Perhaps no single site in the Eternal City boasts as many majestic circles as the Vatican. Michelangelo's massive dome in **Saint Peter's Basilica** (p57) is impossible to miss. One of the widest unsupported domes in the world (a very close second to the Pantheon), it spans just over 136 feet and rises over

448 feet above the church's floor, a height still unmatched by any other dome on the planet. A climb of some 300-odd steps (and a very long line) will get you to the top to ogle an unbeatable panorama. Take a walk around the **Pinecone Courtyard** of the Vatican Museums (p57) to admire Arnaldo Pomodoro's late 20th-century sculpture, *Sphere within a Sphere*, a massive bronze orb representing the world as it revolves within the Christian faith. Around the corner, in the Vatican's Pio Clementine Museum, you'll find the enormous so-called Bath of Nero, a 6-meter-wide circular Egyptian porphyry tub whose exact use has never been widely agreed upon, although popular belief holds it to have been a receptacle for Bacchanalian food orgies. But don't be so mesmerized by the tub that you fail to notice that the room you're standing in is a miniature version of the Pantheon, oculus and all. In the very next room, an intricate (though highly restored) 2nd-century AD circular floor mosaic depicts Minerva, goddess of wisdom and strategy in battle, sporting elaborate armor that includes the head of Medusa on her breastplate. Circles will accompany you until your very last step inside the vast museum, as you glide down the circular double-helix staircase that leads to the exit

» Nearly Round

> COLOSSEUM

Contrary to popular belief, and to its outward appearance, the Colosseum is not round. The ancient amphitheater built during the Flavian dynasty in the 1st century AD is a coaxial oval. The best way to appreciate this shape is by getting a birds' eye view, but since that's not possible for most of us, climb to the highest level for the most sweeping views of the interior of the monument (p57).

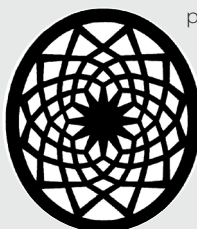
> ST. PETER'S SQUARE

When a pair of overlapping circles are pulled apart to create two distinct focal points, the result is an ellipse. This is the shape Gian Lorenzo Bernini chose when he designed the immense piazza in front of St. Peter's Basilica. While visiting, be sure to stand on one of two focal points, marked with a marble circle, that can be found halfway between the obelisk

and each respective fountain. From here you can see the remarkable optical illusion in which the four rows of the square's hundreds of columns line up perfectly; the outer three rows disappear entirely and only the first row can be seen (p57).

> CAPITOLINE STAR

It may not have been laid out until the time of Mussolini, but the pavement decoration in front of the Senate building on the Capitoline Hill was designed by none other than Michelangelo. It can be difficult to get the full effect from ground level, due to the complexity of the design and the asymmetrical position of the three surrounding buildings, so head to the upper floor of the adjacent Capitoline Museums (p59). From there you can appreciate Michelangelo's ingenious design of a 12-pointed star inside an oval.



aside a few hours to visit the **National Etruscan Museum at Villa Giulia** (p59), where you'll find a vast collection of Etruscan art and artifacts, including cistae, cylindrical bronze caskets that were used to store ladies' toilet articles, such as hand mirrors, cosmetics, and perfumes. These large, heavy objects were often decorated with mythological scenes, with handles in the shape of human figures, and most date from between the 3rd and 4th centuries BC.