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HISTORIC CENTRE OF ROME, THE PROPERTIES OF THE HOLY SEE IN THAT CITY ENJOYING EXTRATERRITORIAL RIGHTS AND SAN PAOLO FUORI LE MURA

“Rome was his passion – not the Rome of Caesars, but the Rome of Popes – not the Rome of the Triumphal Arches, the Forums, the Baths, but the Rome of the Villas, the Fountains, the Churches.”

The Child of Pleasure, Gabriele d'Annunzio

Andrea Sperelli, protagonist of *The Child of Pleasure*, summarises the grandeur of what may well be one of the vastest World Heritage properties by extension and stratification. The boundaries of the UNESCO-listed archaeological site in Rome encompass the area enclosed within the Aurelian walls (3rd century A.D.), where the civilisation regarded as the centre of the world for more than a millennium was born and thrived. It all began with a legendary she-wolf descending the wooded hills in search of the Tiber's waters, only to find two children in a basket washed ashore the riverbanks beneath a fig tree. What followed were millennia of history and characters who left their mark in the layers visible within the 1200-hectares space, from the ancient Romans to the Popes. The Aurelian walls, built at a time when barbarian incursions into the peninsula began to challenge the belief that no one would dare violate the sacred territory of the *Urbe* with weapons, ultimately fell with a cannon shot not far from Porta Pia on 20 September 1870, during a military operation aimed at annexing the remaining Papal State territory to the Kingdom of Italy, after the loss of Latium in 1860. The Pope resisted to the annexation tooth and nail, barricading himself in the Vatican. It was only in 1929 that the Lateran Treaty established the balance between the two states and the management of the Holy See's properties on Italian soil.



TRANSBOUNDARY CULTURAL SITE
UNESCO DOSSIER: 91QUATER
PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: PARIS, FRANCE; BANFF, CANADA
YEAR OF INSCRIPTION: 1980; 1990



CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: The properties include a series of testimonies of incomparable artistic value produced over almost three millennia of history.



“From black to backwards. That black is the inner view of the barrel of the Gianicolo cannon. As soon as we’re outside: BOOM. Smoke and a great explosion. All at once. The birds all fly suddenly over and towards the, unique blue, sky. It is midday, and Rome knows it now.”

These are the opening lines of the screenplay for *The Great Beauty*, the 2013 Academy Award-winning film by Paolo Sorrentino. We suggest watching it scene by scene and reading the screenplay, which was published in 2023, ten years after the film’s initial release, along with many additional features. Jep Gambardella’s Rome is as marvellous as a withered flower now plagued by parasites, set against a backdrop of dreamlike, confused, bored, and grotesque characters.

Since December 1, 1847, a 1 kg gunpowder cannon has been fired at noon every day from the **1 Gianicolo** Hill, a tradition only interrupted during World War II. This practice began to synchronize the bells of Rome’s many churches, and it is featured in the opening scene of *The Great Beauty*: “It’s noon, and now Rome knows it”. The camera pans across various characters before stopping at the **2 Fontana dell’Acqua Paola**, known to Romans as the “*Fontanone*”, the monumental terminal point of the Trajan Aqueduct. “Stefano holds the keys to the most beautiful palaces in Rome.” “Is he a doorman?” “No, he’s not; he’s a friend of the princesses.” Stefano, Jep, and

Ramona’s nighttime exploration of the “Princesses’ houses” takes them to some fascinating places. At Piazza dei Cavalieri di Malta no. 3, they visit the gate of the Sovereign Order of Malta’s headquarters, where the world’s most beautiful **3 keyhole** frames a perfect view of St. Peter’s Dome through a laurel hedge. The trio then moves on to **4 Palazzo Barberini**, where Ramona marvels at Raphael’s *Portrait of a Young Woman*. Shortly afterwards, she walks in awe through Borromini’s **5 perspective gallery** at Palazzo Spada, built thanks to the collaboration with a mathematician. Although it appears endless, it’s only 8 meters long. At dawn, while Viola’s

son closes his eyes and presses his foot on the accelerator, Ramona, Stefano, and Jep end their tour at **6 Villa Medici**, built in the 16th century at the highest point in Rome. “Don’t ever forget – a funeral is a stage.” Jep chooses Ramona’s outfit for Viola’s son’s funeral after he dies in a car crash. Jep sits on a stunning Calacatta marble bench, a work by Gaetano Minnucci, in the **7 Salone delle Fontane** at EUR. Finally, we see Jep’s home, overlooking the southern side of the **8 Colosseum** – not the most monumental view, but one that reveals the scars and suffering, showing the Colosseum’s small and defenceless side.



THE END OF AN ERA

“A report circulated that an agreement was on the point of being arrived at, that the King consented to recognise the Pope’s absolute sovereignty over the Leonine City, and a narrow band of territory extending to the sea. And if such were the case would not the marriage of Benedetta and Prada become, so to say, a symbol of union, of national reconciliation? That lovely girl, the pure lily of the black world, was she not the acquiescent sacrifice, the pledge granted to the whites?”

Rome, Émile Zola

To understand how the extraterritorial properties of the Holy See came into existence, we must travel back in time to a period when the popes were both spiritual leaders and temporal rulers. From the Middle Ages until 20 September 1870, the popes governed a vast territory known as the Pontifical or Church State, which encompassed much of central Italy, including Rome, ensuring the Church’s independence and autonomy in relation to other European powers. As nationalist

movements emerged in the 19th century, Italy gradually unified under the leadership of the Kingdom of Sardinia and the House of Savoy. On 20 September 1870, Italian troops led by General Raffaele Cadorna breached the walls of Rome at Porta Pia with the intention of annexing the Church States and their capital, the Vatican City, to Italy. Pope Pius IX declared himself a prisoner, refusing to recognize the new state of affairs, thus beginning a 60-year period of latent conflict between the Papacy and the Italian government known as the “Roman Question”, with the popes living in a kind of voluntary captivity within the Vatican, refusing any reconciliation. The signing of the Lateran Treaty in 1929 between the Kingdom of Italy, represented by Benito Mussolini, and the Holy See, represented by Cardinal Pietro Gasparri, marked a turning point. The Lateran Treaty recognised the Vatican City as an independent sovereign state, granting the pope a territory where he could exercise his spiritual authority. The territories of the Papal States had been annexed to Italy years earlier, leaving the Holy See with the Vatican City alone, which became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1984. Covering just 0.5 square kilometres, 80% of which is occupied by the Vatican Gardens, the Vatican City is the smallest state in the world. Due to limited space to house the ministries and the Roman Curia responsible for managing the Vatican state, a few buildings in Rome and beyond were granted extraterritorial rights.



“The start was sensational. [...] They covered all of monumental Rome, from Piazza Venezia to Piazza del Popolo, and then to Via Veneto, Villa Borghese, and back again to Piazza Navona, and the Janiculum, and St. Peter’s! [...] Raising his eyes, he could see statues flying with spread wings from domes and terraces, dragging the bridges in their race with their white tunics in the wind. And trees and flags spun. And characters never seen before, always of white marble, in the shape of men and women and animals, were carrying the palaces, playing with the water, sounding water trumpets, running and galloping in the fountains and around the columns...”

It’s 1946. Nino and Usepe, the two brothers who are the protagonists of *History: a Novel* by Elsa Morante, embark on a wild bike ride across the city, passing through some of the most historically significant extraterritorial properties of the Holy See in Rome.

The **1** **Basilica of Saint John Lateran** is the first of three major papal basilicas included in this itinerary – the fourth being St Peter’s Basilica in Vatican City. It is also the oldest and most important basilica in the Western world, consecrated in early 300 A.D., some thirteen years before St Peter’s. This is why a plaque between the main portal is inscribed with the words “most holy Lateran church, mother and head of all the churches in the city and in the world”. Here you will find the Holy Stairs – twenty-eight marble steps that the believers ascend on their knees. The **2** **Basilica of Saint Mary Major**, on the other hand, is the only one in Rome

that has retained its early Christian architectural design. The twenty-seven mosaic panels preserved inside, regarded as the first figurative cycle to appear in a Roman church, date from the mid-400 A.D., a time when the Western Roman Empire had not yet fallen. The papal altar in the **3** **Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls** was built directly over the tomb of St Paul, about 2 km away from the Aurelian Wall from Porta di San Paolo. In December 1787, Goethe described it in his diaries as follows: “The entrance to this church is impressive – rows of imposing columns support large frescoed walls, culminating in the

wooden weave of the roof”, providing an eloquent testimony to the basilica’s appearance before the fire that partially destroyed it in 1823. If you fancy spending the night in a UNESCO heritage site, book a room at **4** **Casa Bonus Pastor**, close to the Vatican walls. The **5** **Pontifical Villas of Castel Gandolfo**, covering 55 hectares in the Roman Castles area, enjoy the same extraterritorial rights. Serving as the Pontiff’s extra-urban residence, they were granted to the Holy See through the 1929 Lateran Treaty. The papal palace is open to visitors every Saturday.



ODI ET AMO

“I hate Rome’ answered Donatello. ‘And have good cause.’”

The Marble Faun, Nathaniel Hawthorne

Unbelievable, baffling, unescapable, hostile, boastful, disenchanted, suffering – this is Rome, perhaps the one city in Italy most widely perceived as a living creature, a millennia-old super-organism acting beyond any random, logical scheme. Many authors have written about it, yet its native offsprings have seldom done so. Before the 19th century, Rome was typically portrayed by *grand tourists* – European and American travellers whose first reaction to the city was almost always the same. Initially, they were disgusted, bewildered, even shocked by a provincial, ruined city where cardinals played *tressette* card games with cooks, and lords debated the excellence of small fishes served at fry houses with muleteers, all amidst filthy streets and sheep grazing in the imperial forums. But after a few days, other feelings would emerge – jagged stunning monuments, moments of wonder amidst the chaos, buildings bathed in the rose-tinted glow of the sunset, religious

processions, and the lack of formal rigidity would inspire pure enchantment, followed by painful farewells and declarations of eternal love for the city. Italian authors eventually began to write about Rome in the 20th century, but hardly any of them were Roman, with notable exceptions like Alberto Moravia and Elsa Morante. The Florentine writer Palazzeschi published *Roma* in 1953, which Montale called “the portrait of a patrician who rejects every single event that occurred there from 1870 on”. The first narrative experiments of another Florentine, Pratolini, took shape in Rome – *Il tappeto verde* and *Via de’ magazzini* (1941); *Le amiche* (1943); and *Family Chronicle* (1947). In 1954, Flaiano, a native of Pescara, authored *A Martian in Rome*, a short story later adapted into a TV film and a play. Calvino set *Mr. Palomar*, his last novel, in Rome. Then came Carlo Emilio Gadda, from Milan, who wrote *That Awful Mess on the via Merulana*, one of the masterpieces of the 20th century, with a title that was a masterpiece in itself. Pasolini, who moved to Rome from Friuli, portrayed the city as divine yet violent: “If you only knew what Rome is! Vice and sun, crusts and light: guys from the slums are infused with the joy of living, exhibitionism and contagious sensuality. I am lost here in the middle of all this”.



“HAVE YOU EVER BEEN TO VILLA BORGHESE? NOT THE GARDENS, CHARMING AS THEY ARE, WITH THEIR TOWERING PINES, DENSE LOW SHRUBS, SUDDEN CLEARINGS, A POND AND FOUNTAINS IN THE CENTER, THE HORSE TRACK, AND THE BELVEDERE PINCIO. ALL THESE ELEMENTS COMBINE TO MAKE IT FEEL LIKE AN IMMENSE EARTHLY

PARADISE. BUT I MEAN, HAVE YOU EVER BEEN TO THE GALLERY?”

Rome is teeming with bewildering attractions teasing the imagination of young travellers. The **1 Villa Borghese Gardens**, as depicted by Maria Beatrice Masella in *Minuti contati*, feature buildings, statues, and fountains among Baroque, neoclassical, and eclectic monuments, all nestled within age-old trees, Italian-style gardens and ponds. It is even nicknamed “the museum park”, due to the numerous

cultural institutes it hosts. Another place of wonder is the **2 Trevi Fountain**, in which roughly €3,800 in coins are tossed every day. These are periodically collected when the fountain is emptied and donated to Caritas, a religious charity supporting those in need. The unique shape of **3 Piazza Navona** traces back to Emperor Domitian’s stadium; among the statues decorating the square, **4 Pasquino** still stands. Since the 16th century, it has been a tradition to attach satirical or critical notes next to this sculpture, earning it the title of Rome’s “talking statue”. For an illuminating insight into the history of the city, visit **5 Welcome to Rome**, an essential stop for understanding how Rome evolved from a prehistoric village on the seven hills to the modern metropolis it is today. Projected images cover the walls, ceilings, and floors, while a large plaster model changes to show the city’s transformation over time. Various interactive exhibitions further illustrate the evolution of significant monuments. However, no image, no matter how beautiful, can rival the thrill of entering the arena of the **6 Colosseum**, the world’s largest amphitheatre, which once seated over 50,000 spectators. Here is Goethe’s poetic description: “The Colosseum [...] is closed at night. A hermit lives in a small chapel and some beggars have made themselves at home in the crumbling vaults. These had built a fire on the level ground and a gentle breeze had driven the smoke into the arena, so that the lower parts of the ruins were veiled and only the huge masses above loomed out of the darkness. We stood at the railing and watched, while over our heads the moon stood high and serene. By degrees the smoke escaped through holes and crannies and in the moonlight, it looked like fog”.



ROME in books

Reading suggestions into the heart of Rome’s historic centre.

• **The Marble Faun**, Nathaniel Hawthorne (1860). A novel that doubles as a travel diary. In the wake of the Grand Tour season, it tells the story of Donatello, a young artist who bears a striking resemblance to Praxiteles’ Faun, and the crime of passion he commits.

• **Rome**, Émile Zola (1896). Zola arrived in Rome in 1894 and stayed for several weeks, giving birth to *Rome*, the second novel in the *Three Cities* trilogy.

• **Roma**, Aldo Palazzeschi (1953). The fallen papal nobleman Filippo di Santo Stefano and his illiterate servant Checco, a peasant, face the transition phase between 1942 and 1950 in Rome with serene resignation, resisting as long as they can. This work offers an insightful sociological portrait of the plebeian and aristocratic worlds, both doomed to disappear.

• **A Martian in Rome**, Ennio Flaiano (1954). The Martian Kunt lands near Villa Borghese in Rome with his spaceship. This satirical sci-fi story was later adapted into a play (1960) and a TV film (1983).

• **That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana**, Carlo Emilio Gadda (1957). In March 1927, a popular building on Via Merulana is shaken by two crimes. This crime story also serves as a portrait of a city that defies logical patterns and a nation during the Fascist era.

• **A Violent Life**, Pier Paolo Pasolini (1959). In the second chapter of this novel, a group of underclass boys roams across Rome, moving from slums to shantytown, from residential districts to the historic centre.

• **History: a Novel**, Elsa Morante (1974). Rome, 1941. The tragic events of “history” involving ordinary people like Ida and her son Useppe unfold parallel to the larger “History” that sweeps over the powerless masses.

• **Mr. Palomar**, Italo Calvino (1983). Calvino’s last work features a nameless city, yet Rome is present in every line: “There is something extraordinary to be seen in Rome in this late autumn and it is the sky crammed with birds”. Indeed, the sight of starlings in the Roman sky is unique and impressive.

• **Magica e velenosa. Roma nel racconto degli scrittori stranieri**, Valerio Magrelli (2010). “Rome is filthy, but it is Rome; and for anyone who has lived there long, that filth has a charm

that the cleanliness of other places never possesses.” The author selects a quote from John Ruskin for the back cover of this collection, which captures the impressions of the city from Grand Tour travellers.

• **Suburra**, Carlo Bonini, Giancarlo De Cataldo (2013). The novel, which inspired the Netflix series and the 2015 film directed by Stefano Sollima, depicts a city where politicians, clerics, and organized crime are deeply intertwined.

• **The Great Beauty**, Paolo Sorrentino (2023). Published to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Academy Award-winning film’s release, this volume includes the original screenplay, scene photos, set design sketches and a selection of press reviews. It offers a backstage journey that becomes a physical and psychological exploration of the city and the characters who inhabit it.

Children’s books:

• **Minuti contati**, Maria Beatrice Masella (2024). An unknown visitor hands Stella and Riky, two young interns at Galleria Borghese, an enigmatic message, triggering a twisted treasure hunt and a race against time. If they fail, something terrible may happen to the museum’s artworks.