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# Rome in Bernini's Footsteps

## After seeing "Bernini" at the Villa Borghese, follow this itinerary to visit this exceptional artist's other masterpieces around Rome

by Lucy Gordan



Elephant and Obelisk by Bernini

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At the Villa Borghese in Rome several of Bernini's sculptures are on permanent exhibit, but his heritage is to be found in more sites in Rome. An easier but not chronological route, which takes about 2 hours on foot (or by hopping on and off the no. 62 bus) not including visiting time, starts at the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria with his Ecstasy of St. Teresa and

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Gianlorenzo Bernini

**Gian Lorenzo Bernini**, the most famous and important sculptor in 17th century Europe, but also a recognized architect, painter, events organizer, poet and playwright, was born in Naples on December 7, 1598 to a Mannerist sculptor, Pietro Bernini, originally from near Florence, and Angelica Galante, a Neapolitan, the sixth of their thirteen children. At the age of eight he accompanied his father to Rome, where Pietro was involved in several high-profile projects for Pope Paul V Borghese, under the important patronage of the Pope’s nephew, Cardinal Scipione Borghese, an unscrupulous art collector: the Pauline Chapel in the Roman Basilica Santa Maria Maggiore, where he carved the *Coronation of Clement VIII* (1612-13) as well as the marble relief of the *Assumption of the Virgin* (1607-10) in the Baptistry. For the Barberini Chapel in Sant’Andrea della Valle, Pietro later carved *St. John the Baptist* (1616).

From his arrival on, except for six months in Paris in 1665 at the height of his fame, Bernini seldom left the Eternal City where he received numerous important commissions from seven of the nine popes who reigned during his long lifetime: Paul V ((1605-21), Gregory XV (1621-23), especially Urban VIII Barberini (1623-44), Innocent X Pamphili (1644-55), Alexander VII Chigi (1655-67), and Clement IX (1667-69), and Clement X (1670-76). So it’s little surprise that Pope Urbab VIII said to Bernini: “You are made for Rome and Rome for you.”



The Fountain of the Four Rivers in Piazza Navona

Bernini died in Rome on November 28, 1680 and his easily-overlooked tomb, simply indicated by a pavement marker, is in the Basilica Santa Maria Maggiore. Thus, as with Caravaggio, most of whose works are also in Rome, it is fun to follow chronologically



in the footsteps of Bernini's art works. An easier but not chronological route, which takes about 2 hours on foot (or by hopping on and off the no. 62 bus) not including visiting time, starts at the church of *Santa Maria della Vittoria* with his *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* and ends in St. Peter's Square with stops in Piazza Barberini to see his fountains: *Of the Triton and of the Bees*, *Sant'Andrea al Quirinale*, a church he designed, the Trevi Fountain he inspired, *Palazzo Montecitorio* he designed in 1650 and today the seat of the Italian Parliament, Piazza Santa Maria sopra Minerva with its elephant obelisk, and Piazza Navona with his fountains: *of the Four Rivers and of the Moor*.



The Goat Amalthea, baby Zeus, and a putto

Young Bernini's talent was immediately noticed by the painter Annibale Carracci and by Pope Paul V, and, like his father, Gian Lorenzo soon gained the important patronage of Cardinal Scipione Borghese rapidly rising to prominence as a sculptor. Most of his early works: many decorative pieces for the garden of Villa Borghese such as *The God Amalthea with the Infant Zeus and a Faun*, and several allegorical busts such as the *Damned Soul* and the *Blessed Soul* as well as the *Bust of Pope Paul V* and the more famous full-length statues: *Aeneas*, *Anchises*, and *Ascanius*, *The Rape of Pwersephone by Pluto*, *Apollo and Daphne*, and *David* are all in the Villa Borghese Museum today.



Apollo e Dafne, G.L. Bernini (Copyright Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo – Galleria Borghese)

In 1621, at the age of only 23, Bernini was knighted by Pope Gregory XV; and two years later when Urban VIII became Pope, he is reported to have told Bernini: “Your luck is to see Cardinal Maffeo Barberini Pope, Cavaliere; but ours is much greater to have Cavalier Bernini alive in our pontificate.” In fact, Urban VIII was Bernini’s strongest supporter and his long pontificate (1623-44) could be called Bernini’s “Golden Age” because of his prolific production, much of which is in Vatican City today: *St. Peter’s Baldachin*, the statue of *Charity with Four Children*, the *Tomb of Urban VIII*, *Saint Longinus*, a *Bust of Urban VIII*, and *Charity with Two Children*.

Although Bernini fell out of favor during the papacy of Innocent X Pamphili (1644-1655), he designed two of his most famous works during this decade: *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* and the *Loggia of the Founders*, both in the Cornaro Chapel in *Santa Maria della Vittoria*, and the *Four Rivers Fountain* in Piazza Navona with its ancient Egyptian obelisk topped by a bronze dove with an olive branch in its beak, the symbol of the Pamphili



Detail of Pope Urban VIII's tomb

family. The four great rivers then known—the Ganges, the Danube, the Nile, and the Plate—are represented by giants. The Nile’s veiled head symbolizes the river’s unknown source, but there’s also the legend that the veil conveys Bernini’s dislike for the nearby *Sant’Agnese in Agone Church* designed by his rival Borromini. Similarly, the figure of the Plate, cringing with arm upraised, is supposed to express Bernini’s fear that the church will collapse and destroy his fountain. Luckily, these wives’ tales have no factual basis because Bernini had completed his fountain before Borromini even started work on his church.

Under Pope Alexander VII Chigi (1655-67) Bernini regained a major role in the decoration of St. Peter’s, leading to his design of the piazza and the colonnade in front of the Basilica. Like his predecessor, Alexander VII wanted an ancient Egyptian obelisk erected in a major Roman piazza — in this case *Piazza Maria Sopra Minerva* — so in 1665 he commissioned Bernini to create a sculpture to support a small obelisk. The sculpture of a baby elephant bearing the obelisk on his back was created by one of Bernini’s students, Ercole Ferrata, and finished in 1667. A popular anecdote concerns the elephant’s smile. To find out why it’s smiling, the viewer must head round to the rear of the animal to see that its muscles are tensed and its tail is shifted to the left as if it were defecating. The animal’s rear is pointing directly at the office of Father Giuseppe Paglia, a Dominican friar, who was one of Bernini’s main antagonists.



Bernini’s Grave

Bernini also continued to be held in high regard by Popes Clement IX and X. The *Ponte Sant’Angelo* was completed in 134 AD by the Emperor Hadrian to span the Tiber from the city center to his newly constructed mausoleum, transformed in the Middle Ages into a a papal fortress and prison. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance pilgrims crossed the bridge to reach St. Peter’s and in 1669 Pope Clement IX commissioned Bernini to restore it. Bernini’s project, one of his last, called for ten angels, holding instruments of the Passion. Bernini personally only finished two: *Angel with the Crown of Thorns* and *Angel with the Superscription*, both of which are in the Church of *Sant’Andrea delle Fratte* today. His last major project was probably the macabre Tomb of Alexander VII (1671-78) in St. Peter’s Basilica to the left of his *Baldachin*.

Recommended reading: *Bernini: His Life and His Rome* by Franco Marmando, an associate professor of Italian at Boston College, (University of Chicago Press, 2012), \$35.00. The author asserts this biography is the first book in English about Bernini the man rather than about his work.

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