

1 Cupola and Basilica di San Pietro

Piazza San Pietro

The long lasting works to build Saint Peter’s Basilica as we know it today, started at the beginning of the XVI century, at the behest of Julius II, whose aim was to celebrate the grandeur of the Church with a new Basilica, due to rise in the same place where the existing magnificent church, built in the IV century by emperor Constantine, already stood. Works, commissioned to various famous artists, among which Michelangelo, went on until 1626. He was commissioned by Pius III and worked at the building from 1547 until his death. The artist did not draw up an overall project but preferred to proceed in individual parts. His vision of the basilica was deeply modified by Carlo Maderno, who completed it. Michelangelo also designed the church’s imposing dome, fondly called “il Cupolone” (ndt. The big Dome) by the Romans and still today, one of the most representative symbols of the church as well as of Rome. Michelangelo was inspired by Brunelleschi’s dome of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence. Built by Michelangelo’s successors, the structure consists of an internal masonry dome and an external one in lead plates, between which is the path that allows climbing to the top of the dome to enjoy a splendid panorama of Rome. (visits on payment. Info: museivaticani.va).

2 La Pietà in the Basilica di San Pietro

Piazza San Pietro

The Pietà Vaticana is hosted in the first chapel in the right nave of the church. Michelangelo realized it between 1498 and 1499 and became one of the most estimated artists of his time thanks to the beauty and precision of his sculpture technics. He sculpted the white marble he had personally chosen in Carrara, with such a precision to obtain the effect of a true expression of the faces as well as true body and clothe details. The Virgin’s pain is enclosed in the sad expression of her young beautiful face, symbol of her purity. This is the only work Michelangelo signed on the band that surrounds the bust of the Virgin, after hearing people attributing the work to another artist.

3 Cappella Sistina

Musei Vaticani, Città del Vaticano

The chapel, dedicated to the Assumption, was built on the upper floor of a fortified area of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, under pope Sixtus IV della Rovere, between 1475 and 1481. It has always been home to Conclaves and important ceremonies. When Julius II had to carry out restoration works, following the damage caused by a landslide, he also decided to replace the starry sky painted on the vault and entrusted Michelangelo with the task. The artist worked restlessly from 1508 to 1512. Suspended on a wooden scaffolding that he himself had designed, folded in uncomfortable positions, often lit by a faint candle, he frescoed the immense surface of 500 square meters. Being a perfectionist, he often modified details or even entire figures to improve the perspective impact from below. Pressed by the pope, he succeeded in ending the frescoes, today known and admired worldwide, in just four years. The Sistine Chapel restoration ended with pope Paul III Farnese who entrusted Michelangelo with frescoing the back wall of the altar too (1536-1541). The 180 square metre surface is decorated with an imposing *Last Judgement fresco*, in accordance with the other themes. Almost 400 figures are represented while moving excitedly, generating an apocalyptic scene, maybe inspired by the artist’s advanced age and by the historical period (the Sack of Rome in 1527). Few years after the fresco was finished, the reform resulting from the Council of Trent, censored the nudes masterfully painted by Michelangelo, which were then covered with drapery by Daniele da Volterra and other painters. During the recent restoration, many of these elements were removed and the frescoes appeared again as originally foreseen by the master.

4 Cappella Paolina

Musei Vaticani, Città del Vaticano

Few steps from the Sistine Chapel, in the heart of Apostolic Palaces, is the Chapel of Saints Peter and Paul also known as Pauline Chapel, which is reserved only to the pope. The Chapel hosts the last imposing works realized by Michelangelo. After ending *The Last Judgement*, the artist, though old, could not refuse pope Paul III Farnese’s request to decorate his private chapel. He realized two big frescoes between 1541 and 1550. *The Conversion of Saint Paul*, on the right wall, pays homage to the pope’s name and at the same time reminds him of his role as keeper of orthodoxy. *The Crucifixion of Saint Peter*, on the left wall, dramatically alludes to the importance of papal morality, with the large eyes of the crucified Peter fixing the pope’s entrance door.

5 Castel Sant’Angelo

Lungotevere Castello, 50

Along the southern side of the Cortile d’Onore in Saint Angel’s Castle there is an elegant aedicule window, designed by Michelangelo between 1514 and 1516. The work was commissioned by Leo X, when the fortress was transformed into a sumptuous papal residence. The window acts as a refined facade of the “new chapel” of saints Cosma and Damiano, protectors of de Medici family.

6 Palazzo Farnese

Piazza Farnese, 67

This palace, commissioned by Alessandro Farnese (future pope Paul III) to celebrate the grandeur of his family, hosts today the French Embassy and is considered one of the most imposing and elegant palaces in Rome (visits by reservation: <https://it.ambafrance.org/-Palazzo-Farnese->). Antonio da Sangallo il Giovane was directing the long-lasting works when he died in 1546 and Michelangelo was commissioned. He thoroughly modified the original project introducing architectural and decorative elements thus creating a dynamic effect. Buonarroti defines the layout of the first two floors and adds the third one, ends the internal courtyard and inserts the massive cornice decorated with the Farnese lilies.

7 Cristo Portacroce in the Basilica di Santa Maria sopra Minerva

Piazza della Minerva, 42

The Dominican church, built on the area of the ancient *Iseum*, where Egyptian worship was practiced, houses the statue of *Christ carrying the cross* by Michelangelo. Christ, standing, while leaning on a symbolic cross because smaller than the real size, turns to look to the left. The artist skilfully represents the body twist, rich in anatomical details. Michelangelo created a first version but left it unfinished due to a defect in the marble, while the statue visible today was only sketched by him in Florence in 1518 and completed in Rome by his students in 1521. The body of Christ, originally totally naked, was later covered with a cloth made of gilded bronze, because of the censorship imposed by the Council of Trent.

8 Piazza del Campidoglio

The Piazza

The present extraordinary layout of this square, today the seat of the City Hall Authorities, was conceived by Michelangelo’s genius, commissioned by Paul III Farnese who wanted to redevelop the area on the hill so that it could worthily represent Rome’s grandeur. Works started in 1540 and went on for more than a century, directed by Michelangelo first and, after his death, by Giacomo della Porta, Girolamo and Carlo Rainaldi. Michelangelo plans the area as a work of art by changing the general layout of the square according to its new urban function. He orients it towards the modern city, abandoning the Roman Forum view and designing the scenographic *cordوناتa* (ndt. a flight of low steps allowing the transit of horses), that connects the hill to Piazza dell’Ara Coeli.

9 Julius II’s Tomb in the Basilica di San Pietro in Vincoli

Piazza di San Pietro in Vincoli, 4/a

This church houses the funerary monument of Julius II. Michelangelo was commissioned by the pope itself in 1505. A tormented work that Michelangelo itself defined “a tragedy of the burial”, whose accomplishment absorbed him for about 40 years and will accompany him in the most troubled periods of his life and career. 32 years after the pope’s death, years of works and negotiations with the pope’s family members, the sixth and final project was approved and realized. Its smaller dimensions with respect to the previous projects do not affect in any way this extraordinary architectural work. Leaning against a wall of the transept right arm, it develops on two levels. The most famous of the statues composing it, the splendid Moses, stands in the middle of the lower level. Recent restorations confirmed that Michelangelo modified the statue after ending it to make a prodigious twist, probably because of the censorship imposed by the Council of Trent.

10 Cappella Sforza in the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore

Piazza di Santa Maria Maggiore

The left nave second chapel, dedicated to Santa Maria Assunta, is the last architectural work designed and directed by Michelangelo when he was 87 years old.

11 Basilica di Santa Maria degli Angeli e dei Martiri

Piazza della Repubblica

The church was built inside the structure of Diocletian’s Baths, the largest baths in the city, at the behest of Pius IV who, as his predecessors, wanted to realize a project with a strong religious message. The pope commissioned Michelangelo to change this majestic pagan building into a place of worship. The artist utilizes the *tepidarium*, the four spaces opening on its sides and the spaces opening on the transverse axis, planning a Greek cross structure with three entrances, where the fourth arm is completed by an apsidal presbytery. The present decorations of the interior are the result of subsequent interventions that deeply changed it.

12 Porta Pia

This urban door, one of the 18 doors of the Aurelian walls, owes its name to Pius IV de ‘Medici, the pope who commissioned Michelangelo to redesign the ancient Porta Nomentana in 1561. The new access had to represent an imposing scenography on the Pia Road, which connected the papal palace of Monte Cavallo (Quirinale) with the basilica of Sant’Agnese outside the walls, in the context of an urban redevelopment. The external portal, designed by Michelangelo, was probably built by Virginio Vespignani, who totally renovated the attic in 1853. The section of the walls at Porta Pia was the scene of the historic “breach”, opened by the Italian army in 1870 to conquer Rome and annex it to the Kingdom of Italy.

13 Fontana del Gallo

Piazza del Gallo

The Fontana del Gallo, designed by Michelangelo in 1565, is a masterpiece of urban architecture. It is a fountain in the shape of a rooster, symbolizing the city of Rome. The fountain is located in the Piazza del Gallo, in the heart of the city.

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Michelangelo modifies the facades of Palazzo dei Conservatori by adding a portico, and Palazzo Senatorio with a staircase leading straight to the first floor. He then builds Palazzo Nuovo giving a slightly trapezoidal shape to the square and plans the marble basement in the middle of it, upon which Marcus Aurelius’ statue, symbol of the power, has been placed (the statue now in the square is a copy. The original one is hosted in the Capitoline Museums). The artist also designs the precious 12-pointed star-shaped pavement, which was realized, though slightly modified compared to the original one, only in 1940, when the underground gallery connecting the three palaces was excavated.

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