

DISCOVERING PIAZZA NAVONA

This square is one of the most famous sights in Rome, but it only makes a brief appearance in the film “The Great Beauty” – a night-time scene during which Jep and Orietta walk to her flat. While portraying the great attractions of Rome, Sorrentino does not overemphasise the city’s stunning beauty.

Piazza Navona is one of the most clearly representative and impressive examples of the process of stratification underpinning Rome’s urban development. Curved on the extremity toward the Tiber and square in form at the opposite end, the piazza perfectly echoes the form and structure of the Stadium of Domitian, the buried construction on which the buildings now facing the piazza were constructed.

The stadium’s steps, accommodating up to 30,000 spectators, were unearthed during the extensive demolitions which took place at the time of Mussolini (1936).

In about 86 AD, the Emperor Domitian donated a new public space to the city for sporting events. At the Circus Maximus, horse-drawn chariot races were held. Here, instead, running, wrestling and boxing events were held. These trials of physical prowess were called by the Ancients “agones”. Traces of the word remain in the names of the church, Sant’Agnese di Agone, and of the piazza itself, Navona. On the occasion of the Jubilee of 1650, Pope Innocent X Pamphilj transformed the square into a monumental complex, to extol the virtues of his own noble house. He called on Borromini to construct Palazzo Pamphilj (now hosting the Brazilian embassy) and to design the Church of Sant’Agnese. The commission for the Fontana dei Fiumi in the middle of the square went instead to Bernini. Surmounting the obelisk and on the facade of the palazzo we still see the Pamphilj doves, the symbol of a dynasty that greatly contributed to the city’s wealth of artistic treasures.

For visitors

Palazzo Pamphilj - www.ambasciatadelbrasile.it

Stadio di Domiziano - www.stadiodomiziano.com

Chiesa di Sant’Agnese in Agone - www.santagneseinagone.org

