

Keeping from a Fall. The Colosseum

Judith Harris (December 08, 2017)



Its 7 million visitors this year make the Colosseum Italy's second most important tourist attraction, and the area open to visitors has been drastically expanded. Here we meet its newly appointed director Alfonsina Russo.

ROME -- Back in the 8th century the English monk known as the Venerable Bede wrote these oft-quoted words:

"While stands the Coliseum, Rome shall stand,

When falls the Coliseum, Rome shall fall;

And when Rome falls -- the World."

Most fortunately, the [Colosseum](#) [2] is not falling despite violent earthquakes that damaged it in the



years 442 and 508. In a particularly violent quake in 851, a huge side portion collapsed, as is clearly visible today. The stone vestiges of the disasters were carted away for the construction of other Roman buildings now considered monuments: [Palazzo Venezia](#) [3], [Palazzo Barberini](#) [4], [Palazzo Farnese](#) [5] and part of the Palazzi Capitolini (today's museum). Some Colosseum stones went to build, on the Tiber River, the Ripetta port and the [Flaminia Bridge](#) [6].

By the end of this year the Colosseum will have hosted some 7 million visitors. A few were stupid, like those caught carving their initials into the stones. A few were demented, like the one calling himself "Batman," who said, before being carted away, that he wanted to overfly the Colosseum. A few were evil, like the pickpocket who demanded \$50 to give back the mobile phone he'd stolen from a tourist. A few were and are homeless, who sleep on sheets of cardboard hard by the building. And many are hucksters hustling souvenirs. Although the fake centurions in costume have been finally disallowed, a new plan for parking tour buses is yet to come.

Her participation in a book presentation in Rome Monday was archaeologist [Alfonsina Russo's](#) [7] first public appearance since being named Colosseum director on Dec. 1, having bested 75 applicants, among them 15 foreign candidates. "Piazza del Colosseo has turned into a suq [Arab market]," she complained. "On this problem I intend to work toward legality. I want to show visitors to Italy that this is a civil nation." Still, this is the function of police and city authorities: "I am not the one who has to intervene," she stressed. "The city of Rome must take measures to clean up the area around the Colosseum and restore its legality."

Russo, born in 1959, is specialized in classical archaeology and has been an official with the Ministry of Culture since 2009. She has worked on sites in Greece and, in Italy, in Molise and Lazio. While superintendent for archaeology for Southern Etruria, she launched a project called Experience Etruria, which drew town administrations in Lazio, Tuscany and Umbria to work together in promoting their cultural heritage sites.

In recent months the Colosseum has been the object of an ambitious reform that has increased the area for visitors, previously limited to the first three levels to its fourth and fifth, where a terrace 120 feet high offers for the first time a unique panoramic vision of Rome.

Russo will participate in tending to a broader Archaeological Park created last January that extends to the Roman Forum, the Palatine and the Domus Aurea. "We don't intend to detach the archaeological area from Rome, but will promote it," said [Culture Minister Dario Franceschini](#) [8]. Within the year it too will have a new director, he added.

For Russo, "It is clear that it's one thing to be the superintendent who has to tend to the protection, valorization and to the other problems of the Colosseum." Within the new situation, by contrast: "To be the director who will concentrate only on the critical central area strengthens my position," she said. "I want the Colosseum to be open to the Romans, to families, to young people." She listed her other goals "on the model of the recent reforms at Pompeii": more decorum in general, keeping visitors from jumping the line, and opening other Colosseum areas that have been closed for decades.

Restoration of the facade of the Colosseum came thanks to the \$29.6 million given by [Diego Della Valle](#) [9] of the Tod's Group (shoes, clothing), who once told me that he had to pressure three different cabinet ministers into accepting his sponsorship. "We showed that private businessmen can sustain a great restoration project without having the least return...There is a part of the business world that desires to participate in the country's revival, whose cultural offering is an extraordinary national strength." In fact, only a very small sign mentions his contribution.

Still, the polemics persisted. Just a year ago, the restored exterior -- important to avoid the possible collapse of a wall -- was formally dedicated in the presence of then [Premier Matteo Renzi](#) [10]. But the Italian finance courts nevertheless tried to limit Tod's right to use of the Colosseum image and complained about a one-month delay in the restoration work. Still, since then the Della Valle-funded restoration was extended to the underground areas of the Colosseum and to a services area that by next year will shift today's from within the building to its exterior.



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