BASILICA OF ST. PETER IN THE VATICAN

The stateliness of Carlo Maderno’s seventeenth century façade hints at the immensity of St. Peter’s Basilica inside, which today remains one of the largest churches in the world.

The old Basilica of St. Peter, whose vast size was similar to today’s, was built at around 320 by the Emperor Constantine on the site where, tradition has it, the Apostle St. Peter was buried.

Over the centuries and under a number of different papacies, the long process was launched which, within the space of about two hundred years and thanks to the genial contribution of artists such as Bramante, Michelangelo and Bernini, led to the complete overhaul of the early Constantine church.

The dome dominating the skyline is the fruit of Michelangelo’s vision. Its amazing size and harmony is best appreciated by bravely climbing its steps. Rest assured, your efforts will be rewarded by both a close up inspection of the cupola’s magnificent internal decorations and the awe-inspiring panorama waiting for you at the top.

Michelangelo’s masterpiece of Renaissance sculpture the Pietà, where many a visitor remains mesmerized by its combination of technical purity and emotional impact, arguably stands out among the St. Peter’s countless artistic attractions.

THE VATICAN MUSEUMS

The Vatican Museums (Italian: Musei Vaticani) are the museums of the Vatican City and are located within the city's boundaries. They display works from the immense collection built up by the Popes throughout the centuries including some of the most renowned classical sculptures and most important masterpieces of Renaissance art in the world.

Pope Julius II founded the museums in the early 16th century. The Sistine Chapel with its ceiling decorated by Michelangelo and the Stanze della Segnatura decorated by Raphael are on the visitor route through the Vatican Museums. In 2013, they were visited by 5.5 million people, which combined makes it the 5th most visited art museum in the world.[1]

There are 54 galleries, or salas, in total with the Sistine Chapel, notably, being the very last sala within the Museum.

The Vatican Museums trace their origin to one marble sculpture, purchased 500 years ago: the sculpture of Laocoôn and his Sons was discovered 14 January 1506, in a vineyard near the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. Pope Julius II sent Giuliano da Sangallo and Michelangelo Buonarroti, who were working at the Vatican, to examine the discovery. On their recommendation, the pope immediately purchased the sculpture from the vineyard owner. The pope put the sculpture of Laocoôn and his sons on public display at the Vatican exactly one month after its discovery.

The Museum Christianum was founded by Benedict XIV, and some of the Vatican collections formed the Lateran Museum, which Pius IX founded by decree in 1854

The Museums celebrated their 500th anniversary in October 2006 by permanently opening the excavations of a Vatican Hill necropolis to the public.

INTERESTING NOTE ABOUT THE SISTINE CHAPEL

I read Ross King’s non-fiction book, “Michelangelo and the Pope’s Ceiling”, which though very technical in nature, was nonetheless intriguing. The author delved into the intricacies of creating frescoes, Michelangelo’s reluctance and feelings of inadequacy for the task; after all, he was a sculptor, not at painter, and the vast jealousies and political intrigue of the day.

Book review from Historymedren.about.com:

It’s a familiar story: how the finest sculptor of the Italian Renaissance was coerced by the pope into a project to which he felt himself unsuited; and how after four torturous years of intense physical labor and emotional strain, he produced a
masterpiece that is often regarded as the pinnacle of Renaissance art. Familiar it may be, but fascinating it is as well, especially when approached afresh by Ross King in Michelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling.

Not content to limit his focus to the morose artist and his infamous patron, King provides a wealth of information about 16th-century Italy, the demanding art of fresco, the pope's military campaigns, the history of the Sistine Chapel, other personalities of the day, and much more. It's a lot to cover, but he manages quite well, and he does so with a great deal of attention to detail. King also supports his assertions with credible sources and provides reasonable assessments when facts are uncertain. In the process, he punctures a few myths, tells a compelling story, and offers insight into the minds of the men that made it all happen.

Some of us may like to think that artists who can produce works of extraordinary beauty and power are somehow beyond the petty emotions of ordinary men. King reminds us that this is not so. Personally and professionally, the great masters of the Renaissance could be (and often were) arrogant, ambitious, manipulative, paranoid, self-pitying, lecherous, judgmental, stubborn, sly and obsessive. Michelangelo was no exception, and he is particularly vulnerable to the author's probing gaze.

Through letters from the artist to his family as well as period chronicles, King makes us privy to some of Michelangelo's private thoughts and opinions. These include his paranoia regarding his rival Donato Bramante, his difficulty working with craftsmen and other artists, his puritanical views of some of his fellows (including the charming and randy young Raphael) and, of course, his rocky relationship with il papa terribile, Pope Julius II.

No less significant in bringing Michelangelo's masterpiece to fruition than the artist himself, Julius was a towering figure of the Renaissance. Once again King uses credible sources to illuminate his personality. Known as "the warrior pope," Julius threw himself into a rigorous defense of the Papal States against the French and put upstart Italian cities in their place. But for all his warlike ways, he is still best known as a staunch patron of the arts, fostering not only Michelangelo but hiring Raphael to paint his rooms at the Vatican and collaborating intensively with Bramante in plans to reconstruct the city of Rome.

These men of awesome ability, unfathomable genius and superhuman stature are made human and knowable in King's book. I found it an enjoyable read, and can recommend it unreservedly. My only complaints concern the artwork; black and white photos on nicely textured paper simply cannot do the original works justice, and the prints, while vivid, are all too few. But while there are many other books (and websites) where you can view these masterpieces more clearly, nowhere else can you find the story of the Ceiling told with such depth and accessibility.