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Five places in Rome every woman should go

Susan Van Allen delves into the vibrant world of art and culture in Rome, in celebration of women in all their myriad forms...



Captions clockwise from left: Caravaggio's *Madonna and Child with St Anne*, Galleria Borghese; detail of *Livia's Garden Fresco*; Raphael's *Fornarina*; statue of *Sant'Agnese*

I've been traveling to Italy for over 30 years and I always meet very happy women. When I ask them, "Why do you love Italy?" – after the oohs, and aahs, and sighs – I get the same answer: "Italy feels like home."

I understand that it feels like home when it comes from descendants of immigrants, like me. My grandparents were born in Molise and Potenza, and as a kid, I fell in love with the spirit and food of Italy at their dining room table in Newark, New Jersey. Every time I land in Italy, it feels like I've come home.

But that answer, "Italy feels like home" even comes from women who don't have a drop of Italian blood in them. So I've come to this conclusion: Italy is home to women in the bigger sense – it's a country where we

feel understood and appreciated, a place that ultimately feeds our souls.

It hits us as soon as we get off the plane. Everywhere we go we're surrounded by divine female images: goddesses, saints, madonnas. Masterpieces immortalise women, we hear amazing stories of females who have taken power – like Isabella D'Este, and we visit places where women before us came, reinvented themselves, and flourished, such as Peggy Guggenheim's museum in Venice. We feel deep inside how the whole spectrum of the female psyche has been adored here for thousands of years – from Venus, goddess of love, to the Virgin Mary – inviting us to let go and enjoy. No wonder why we love it so much!

So here are five places in the Eternal City with special feminine appeals.



1 LIVIA'S GARDEN FREScoes

The massive Palazzo Massimo alle Terme overflows with gorgeous mosaics and sculptures. The masterpiece of the entire place for me is on the top floor: garden frescoes from the suburban villa of the Empress Livia (dated as 30-20 BC). It is quite marvellous to stand there, surrounded by visions of paradise – birds, blossoms, fruit and laurel trees.

Your first thoughts of Empress Livia may be her evil reputation from *I Claudius* by Robert Graves, where she's portrayed as a conniving woman who poisoned all potential heirs to ensure her family would inherit the throne. History also shows Livia was the perfect strong mate for Emperor Caesar Augustus, taking charge of business at home while he set off to conquer distant lands. She was famously chaste, "worked wool" (made her husband's togas), and joined Augustus for their triumphant 51-year reign, where they restored monuments in the Forum and built new ones throughout the city. Though Livia and Augustus' Palatine Hill homes were simple, from the looks of these garden frescoes, it's obvious their suburban villa was a place where their wealth and power could be showcased.

2 CHIESA DI SANTA AGNESE IN AGONE, PIAZZA NAVONA

Of the many churches dedicated to female saints in Rome, this one, smack in the midst of Piazza Navona, offers an especially lovely retreat from the outside city hubbub. It was designed by Baroque master Borromini, who adorned it with splendid curves and towers. Soft music is piped through the ornate sanctuary, and everything is dripping with gold. A statue of Saint Agnes (sculpted by a pupil of Bernini), is set against a pale blue background on a side altar, featuring her caught in a transcendent, breathtaking moment.

The story of the 4th-century saint says that Agnes was such a beauty, men all over Rome were hot for her, but she turned every one of them away, claiming she was engaged to Jesus. The governor stepped in to change her mind, ordering that she be stripped naked and paraded through the streets to a whorehouse. Miraculously, right where her church now stands, Agnes' golden hair grew down to her knees, covering her, Lady Godiva style. Catholics made her the Saint of Virgins and Girl Scouts.

Besides being such a beautiful place, the Chiesa di Santa Agnese is also appealing for its evening classical music concerts, presented in the chapel and adjoining sanctuary. Programs may feature music of Schubert, Liszt, Chopin, or Brahms, played by internationally famous guest artists.



3 PALAZZO BARBERINI (NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART)

In the film *Roman Holiday*, the princess played by Audrey Hepburn escapes from this palace to end up on a romantic adventure with reporter Gregory Peck. It's sublime to play Audrey's moves backward and escape inside this opulent place, and immerse yourself in an abundance of Renaissance masterpieces.

The palace was the digs of Maffeo Barberini, who splendidly transformed it when he became Pope Urban VIII in 1623, calling in the best artists of the day, Bernini and Borromini. Most of the rooms that are now the gallery were once the apartment of Princess Anna Colonna Barberini, who married the Pope's nephew. She was the palace hostess and the most powerful woman in Rome during the Barberini's 17th-century heyday.

The gallery's collection immortalises women in such paintings as *Fornarina* by Raphael. It's a portrait of the artist's bare-breasted girlfriend, a baker's daughter, who he called *fornarina* (little oven). There is also a portrait of Beatrice Cenci, looking wide-eyed and innocent, in stark contrast to the fact that the painting was finished the night before she was executed for bludgeoning her tyrant father to death. Most striking is Caravaggio's gory *Judith Beheading Holofernes*. Here the brave biblical heroine lops off the head of her enemy's General. Caravaggio's brilliant brushstrokes convey a full range of the young woman's emotions: repulsion, curiosity, repentance, and commitment.



➤ **4 VILLA BORGHESE GALLERY**
 This 17th-century villa was designed to hold the exquisite art collection of Cardinal Scipione Borghese, and it was turned into a public museum in the late 18th century. Gardens surrounding the villa are now a beautifully landscaped park, where you can stroll, bike ride, or picnic.

Captions clockwise from top left: Raphael's *Young Woman with a Unicorn*; Caffè Atelier Canova Tadolini; Hotel Campo de Fiori; Palazzo Barberini; Villa Farnesina

Gallery treasures glorify a range of female icons. There are dramatic marble masterpieces by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, who created figures so flowing it appears as if they were sculpted in wax. Among them are Daphne and Apollo, showing the virgin water nymph escaping from Apollo by transforming into a laurel tree. There is also Pluto and Proserpina, featuring the Goddess of Vegetation fighting off the God of the Underworld.

Highlights of the painting collection include Raphael's *Young Woman with a Unicorn*, (where noblewoman Giulia Farnese was believed to be the model), Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love*, (featuring two versions of Goddess Venus), and Caravaggio's *Madonna of the Palafrenieri*, where Saint Anne stands by as Mary teaches Jesus how to conquer a snake.

Venus Victrix, a 19th-century sculpture by Canova is often used as a symbol of the gallery. Here Pauline Bonaparte (Napoleon's sister), posed as the nude goddess of love. Many found it scandalous, as she was the wife of Prince Borghese, but Pauline's comment about modeling in the buff was, "The room was well heated."

5 VILLA FARNESINA
 Le Delizie or 'the delights' was the original name of this villa, known back in Renaissance days as the best party house in Rome. It was built by Agostini Chigi, banker to the Popes, otherwise known as the richest man in the world. On the same site in 44 BC there was a villa where Cleopatra had carried on with Julius Caesar.

Chigi called in the top architects and artists of the day to create this villa, which was completed in 1506, with elegantly landscaped gardens and frescoes portraying mythological love scenes to inspire his guests. Spectacles were staged here, followed by opulent banquets, where servants tossed used china into the Tiber. What guests didn't know was that Chigi kept a net down there to catch it all.

Rome's top courtesans were the stars of Chigi's parties – fashionable women who could recite poetry at the drop of a hat and serenade admirers with lutes or violins. One of the most famous of these was Imperia, who Raphael used as a model for his fresco in the villa's Loggia of Galatea, and she is also featured in an upstairs bedroom fresco, *The Wedding of Alexander and Roxanne*, by Sodoma.

The villa's most impressive setting is the Loggia of Psyche, frescoed by pupils of Raphael. It tells the story of Amore and Psyche, a union of the divine and mortal, with Venus playing a major role, of course. R



Susan Van Allen is the Italian-American author of *100 Places in Italy Every Woman Should Go* and *Letters from Italy: Confessions, Adventures, and Advice*. When she's not traveling to Italy, she lives in Los Angeles with her husband, and makes scrumptious lasagnas. More info at www.susanvanallen.com



CONTACT DETAILS

► PALAZZO MASSIMO ALLE TERME

Piazza dei Cinquecento 67

☎ +39 0648021

www.archeoroma.beniculturali.it

Opening times 9am-7.45pm, closed Mondays

Admission €7

► CHIESA DI SANTA AGNESE IN AGONE

Piazza Navona

☎ +39 0668 192134

www.santagneseinagone.org

Opening times 9.30am-12.30am

3.30pm-7pm, closed Mondays

Classical music concerts usually begin here at 7pm. Admission is free for the church, or around €10 for music concerts. Check online for concert schedules, to buy your tickets in advance and for church information.

► PALAZZO BARBERINI (NATIONAL GALLERY OF ANCIENT ART)

Via Barberini

www.galleriaborghese.it

Opening times 8.30am-7pm, closed Mondays

Admission €7

► VILLA BORGHESE GALLERY

Piazzale Museo Borghese

☎ +39 0632810

www.galleriaborghese.it

Opening times 9am-7pm, closed Mondays

Admission €11

Please note that reservations are mandatory, so you need to book ahead for your visit.

► VILLA FARNESINA

Via della Lungara 230

☎ +39 0668 027268

www.villafarnesina.it

Opening times 9am-2pm, closed Sundays

Admission €5, €2 concessions

WHERE TO STAY

► VILLA SPALLETTI TRIVELLI

Via Piacenza 4

☎ +39 0648 907934

www.villaspallettitrivelli.com

A historic family villa converted into a luxury hotel, with elegant salons, dreamy garden, 12 beautifully decorated guest rooms, a spa with a Turkish bath, and recently added apartments for those who would like to stay longer. Modern comforts blend seamlessly with the original owner's antiques, and I especially appreciate photos of family matriarch Countess Rasponi, who resided here in the early 20th century, when she was President of the National Council of Italian Women.

► HOTEL DE RUSSIE

Via del Babuino 9

☎ +39 0632 8881

www.hotelderussie.it

A chic oasis, perfectly located between the Spanish Steps and Piazza Popolo, and backed by the Borghese Gardens. Even if you're not checked in, stop by to indulge in a treatment at the glamorous spa, for *apertivo* or dinner in the hotel's enchanting garden, or to shop at Farella, where you'll swoon over gorgeous handwoven pashminas.

► HOTEL CAMPO DE FIORI

Via del Biscione 6

☎ +39 0668 806865

www.hotelpcampodefiori.com

A romantic, boutique hotel, steps from the lively Campo de' Fiori market. The baroque décor is delightful, there's a sublime rooftop terrace, and the charming staff are super-attentive to help you make the most of your Roman holiday. They also offer apartments in the area, so you can feel genuinely at home in the historic heart of Rome.



WHERE TO EAT

► TRIMANI II WINE BAR

Via Cernaia 37b

☎ +39 0644 69630

www.trimani.com

An offshoot of the Trimani Wine Shop (which has been around since 1821), this contemporary styled wine bar is well located to relax after your Palazzo Massimo visit. Over 30 wines are available by the glass, there's a happy hour, (two glasses for the price of one), from 5-7pm daily. Top menu offerings include tasty small plates along with platters of cheeses and meats.

► CUL DE SAC

Piazza di Pasquino 73

☎ +39 0668 801094

www.enotecaculdesac.com

A perfect stop after your Piazza Navona/Chiesa di Santa Agnese visit, this bustling place has been around since Rome's wine bar boom began in the 1970s, with a list of 1,500 vintages, delicious home-made pâtés, and standards such as *involтини alla Romana* (rolled stuffed veal). No reservations are taken, so get there before 9pm to score an outside table.

► COLLINE EMILIANE

Via degli Avignonesi 22

☎ +39 0648 17538

www.ristorantebolognesearoma.com

After Palazzo Barberini, slip into this cozy spot for excellently prepared specialties of the Emilia-Romagna region, such as *tagliatelle alla bolognese*. Reservations essential.

► CAFFE ATELIER CANOVA TADOLINI

Via del Babuino 150

☎ +39 0632 110702

www.canovataadolini.com

The 19th-century studio of master sculptor Canova has been restored to become one of Rome's most beautiful eateries – filled with marble and gold-framed mirrors. A lovely stop for a coffee, the restaurant also blends well with a visit to the Borghese Galleries and Gardens, and it's very convenient for shoppers, not far from fashionable Via Condotti.

► DA AUGUSTO

Piazza de Renzi 15

☎ +39 0658 03798

Join the Trastevere locals at this budget *trattoria*, after you've had your Villa Farnesina visit. Pastas, soups, and roast chicken are delicious here, served by busy waiters who tally the bill by scribbling on your paper tablecloth.



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