

What's New at the Old Colosseum

Judith Harris (May 03, 2017)



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From plastic daggers to 3D adventures, the old [Colosseum](#) [2] is up to new tricks, which include an exhibition illustrating its lively post-combat history. Eighteen months ago a police commissioner went to war with Rome's gladiators -- the ones armed with plastic daggers who hang about the Colosseum and the Roman fora so as to be photographed together with tourists willing to pay for the privilege. Rome's Mayor [Virginia Raggi](#) [3] backed up this ousting of the faux gladiators in their gilded helmets topped with what looks like a red floor brush.

Defiant, ten gladiators, forming the association they named "Centurions Street Artists," took the case to a district court, where they pleaded that, without that income from tourists, they could not feed their families. Guess what: the centurions (the name means an officer in the ancient Roman army who commanded 100 soldiers) won the battle, and last weekend 15 or so were back at work at the Colosseum and near the [Arch of Constantine](#) [4]. "They've recognized that we are artists," one boasted to journalists.

Truth to tell, this recognition may be only temporary, for the decision in favor of the "gladiators" was



based upon a technicality, and the ban may be reimposed by the end of summer. Complaints have come to police that some have turned nasty when tightwad tourists, after being photographed with one of the self-proclaimed street artists, have paid less than the more or less standard price of Euro 5. To this the gladiators respond that they are not the offenders, and to prove it wish to have an official registry so that rough and rude outsiders cannot break into their ranks.

Colosseum combat remains in the news on other fronts. Mayor Virginia Raggi recently complained that the national government was ripping off Colosseum ticket income and thus harming Rome, which suffers from overstretched finances. The reasoning behind her complaint was that, because the Colosseum has just formally been declared a national archaeological park, its contribution to Rome's income has been slashed.

Responding in Parliament, Culture Minister [Dario Franceschini](#) [5] declared, "This is false! It does not withdraw resources from Rome or the protection of the Roman heritage. Eighty percent of the income from the Colosseum remains in the city, and 20% goes to a solidarity fund for other museums, as has always been the rule." Behind the reform, which reduces Colosseum management from three institutions to one, is an attempt for greater efficiency, he explained. Indeed, its come has increased as the number of visitors to Italian public museums and archaeological sites has surged in two years from 38 million to 45 million.

The Colosseum was built, beginning in 69 AD, on orders from the [Emperor Vespasian](#) [6]. He lived long enough to dedicate it, but before work was finished he was dead. His son Titus made a second inauguration in 80 AD with feasting and shows that went on for 100 days, during which some 5,000 animals were sacrificed. The Colosseum could hold up to 50,000 spectators, among them slaves who watched, standing up in the top gallery. Its outside wall soars 55 yards high, and its staggering size for its time still amazes engineers.

In March an innovative new exhibition, which explores the life of the monument after the last gladiatorial fight was held there in 523 AD, opened in the Colosseum and continues through January 7, 2018. During the Middle Ages the Colosseum had a lively existence, housing shops, churches and the residences of aristocratic families. The Via Crucis ritual, which began to be performed at Easter time in the 1500s, continues to this day. In the 1700s the Grand Tour poets, writers and artists discovered it, and under their influence the Colosseum became a place of romantic pilgrimage, especially by moonlight (and of malarial mosquitoes). By the end of the 18th century archaeologists had begun excavations and also restorations. The exhibition continues into the 20th century through the [Mussolini](#) [7] era, with installations, paintings, photographs, etchings, and physical reproductions.

Aside from gladiatorial combat, new under the Colosseum sun is a high-tech startup called [Tikidoo](#) [8], which is offering a real tour of the Colosseum, improved by virtual reality, aimed especially at parents arriving with children. The offer, which depends upon the contribution of 100 licensed tour guides, is actually a lesson in Roman antiquity, and involves both sophisticated teaching aids plus actual visits to the Colosseum, the [Palatine Hill](#) [9] and the [Roman Forum](#) [10], in groups of up to 12.

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