

Altar of the Fatherland – The Vittoriano Monument



The Altar of the Fatherland or Altar of the Nation represents the achievement of the Unification of the Italian nation. When King Vittorio Emanuele II of Savoy died, in 1878, it was decided to build a monument that would celebrate him and with him the whole age of the Risorgimento (the period and the movement which led to the political unification of Italy in the 19th century). King Vittorio Emanuele II was the first king of Italy and was known as the “Father of the Nation.”

The building has raised different reactions over time; until the 1940s it was appreciated as a national symbol and as an example of modern art. Primo Levi explained the choice of building the monument near the Campidoglio Hill, as he said that Italy had to build the new Rome near the old one. Later, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, the monument was highly criticized by some art critics, who thought that this building had been used to try to bring back Rome to the classical Imperial Age. Writers and journalists nicknamed the building the “Wedding Cake” or the “The Typewriter.” In addition, people criticized the choice of demolishing many medieval buildings which were near the Campidoglio area in order to build the Altar of the Fatherland on a very symbolic place. They also were upset about the choice of using Botticino marble, which was considered too bright compared to other monuments in Rome. Finally, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, the tenth president of Italy, in the year 2000, tried to restore the symbolic value of the monument as a

national symbol; in fact, he organized the reopening of the building which had precedingly been closed for many years. He proposed its new opening by calling it, in one of his speeches, the new Roman Forum.

The Vittoriano is seen today as an important step for the research of a national style, which was to characterize the the new Italian Kingdom that had been just created when construction started. Nowadays, the building is considered as the perfect artistic example of the first period of national unity and the excellent union of other artistic styles like Liberty, Eclecticism and Neoclassicism. It was built with very advanced techniques for its time in a Neoclassical style, used to celebrate the grandeur of Rome, and representing Rome as the elected legitimate capital of Italy, the unification of the country and the freedom of its people. Some of the key elements of the monument are the twin neoclassical porticos along with their Corinthian columns which protude forward at both sides of the colonnade.



Opening ceremony of The Vittoriano Monument and the beginning of construction work

Just after King Vittorio Emanuele II's death in 1878, despite the decision to start construction works to build the commemorative monument, the first stone was actually laid only on 22 March 1885. The building was inaugurated in 1911 and was finally completed in 1935. The monument, dedicated to the Father of the Nation, King Vittorio Emanuele II and the country's unification, soon became a cultural and political symbol of the Kingdom of Italy, due both to its commemorative features and to its location in the very heart of Rome, just next to the Campidoglio Hill.



The building

The monument is 81 meters tall and 135 meters wide and its total area is 17.000 square meters; it presents a dynamic and simple structure, but, because of its huge dimensions, it is very complicated in its details. The main elements of the building are the staircase and the colonnade between the two porticos.

In order to begin construction work, an international architectural competition was held in 1880 and won by a Frenchman named Néo but the project was never carried out. A second contest, for only Italian architects, was held in 1882, with precise instructions on how the project was to be developed: it had to be aligned with Via del Corso (nowadays a famous shopping street), it was to rise next to the Campidoglio Hill, there had to be a bronze equestrian statue of the king and it had to be large enough to cover the buildings behind it. Ninety-eight projects were submitted but the commission in charge of the design project voted unanimously in favour of the young architect named Giuseppe Sacconi. The monument was originally supposed to be built with Travertine, a limestone rock widely used in Rome since the first millennium BC, but eventually bright white Botticino marble was used since it was much more moldable. According to Sacconi's original design, the monument should look like a large forum on an elevated square in the very heart of the capital, as a symbol of a united Italy. Indeed, even today it is the largest national monument.

After initial work and after the death of architect Sacconi in 1905, the project was taken over by other architects: first by Gaetano Koch, then by Manfredo Manfredi and finally by Pio Piacentini. The monument was finally completed in 1935, a long time after its initial inauguration on June 4th 1911, held by King Vittorio Emanuele III during the 50th anniversary of the unification of Italy.

The monument can actually be divided into different sections: the “Altar of the Fatherland” or “Altare della Patria” (which is the most famous part of the building), the large entrance staircase leading up to the massive colonnade and inside the Central Museum of the Risorgimento, which hosts art exhibitions and a museum dedicated to the history of the unification of Italy.

The Values of the Unification of Italy

To the very right and left of the main entrance, street level at the foot of the wide flight of steps, are two fountains, allegorical representations of the Adriatic Sea (on the left) and the Tyrrhensian Sea (on the right), which are the two seas that border Italy.

Action and Thought: two sculptural groups

These two monumental bronze sculptures, about ten meters tall, also located street level at the foot of the wide staircase, were made by the Italian sculptors Giulio Monteverde (Thought) and Francesco Jerace (Action). On the left, Thought ideally helps the Italian population to rise and overcome while Action, on the right, is composed of seven figures with at its center war action. These are essential components of the monument, which lead to the Altar of the Fatherland, to the two entrances and finally to the Balcony of Cities. In between the sculptures Action and Thought we can admire the artistic railing made by Manfredo Manfredi. Its particularity is that it can slide down and disappear into the ground, therefore making the building directly connected to the city.



On the top of the staircase, under the statue of the goddess Roma, the Altar of the Fatherland begins working its way up to the very top of the monument. The goddess Rome, at the bottom part of the Altar, represents the main ideal of the Italian Risorgimento (the movement looking to achieve Unification of Italy), to have the eternal city, Rome, as the capital of Italy. On the sides of the figure of the goddess Rome, the general conception of the lateral bas-relief recalls Virgilio's "Bucoliche" and "Georgiche". The bas-relief on the left side of the altar represents the Triumph of the Labour while the second bas-relief, on the right side of the altar, symbolizes the Triumph of Patriotism, or the love for the homeland.

On the sides, six sculptural groups, the first two in bronze in the forefront and the other four, slightly in the back, in white marble, represent the six values of the Unification of Italy which were willingly highlighted: from left to right, Strength, Concord, Thought (in bronze), Action (in bronze), Sacrifice and Law. Each group is six meters high, except Thought and Action which are taller.

The plant symbols in this monument are many, but the most important ones are the palm that represents victory, the oak which represents strength, the laurel that represents peace, myrtle which represents sacrifice and the olive that represents the concord and agreement.

Balcony of the Altar - The Balcony of the Cities

Just above the terrace where the Altar is set, the staircase divides into two symmetrical stairways; both lead to two terraces where there are massive gates that take you indoor. From those terraces two other stairways start which lead to the statue of Vittorio Emanuele and to the balcony of the cities, or rather, the cities that joined Italy after the First World War or in the years immediately after (Trieste, Trento, Gorizia, Pola, Zara and Fiume); the last three cities joined Yugoslavia after the Second World War and, later, became part of Croatia. Every city is represented by an altar with their coat of arms at the bottom.

At the center of the Altar's line, engraved in the wall, there is a monumental inscription of the text of the Bulletin of Victory (the official document with which Italy's victory was announced on 4 Nov. 1918); at its bottom there are two altars with helmets. The two altars have the following saying: ET FECERE FORTIA (on the left) ET PATI FORTIA (on the right); which mean: "doing brave deeds and endurance is the attribute of a Roman." On the balcony there is a rock from the Grappa Mountain, set there to represent all the places where Italian soldiers fought during the WWI.

The tomb of the Unknown Soldier

At the foot of the figure of the goddess of Rome, stands the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, added on November 4th 1921. This is the connection between the history of the Risorgimento of Italy and that of post WWI. In fact, after the First World War, the Altar was chosen to house the tomb of the Unknown Soldier (Milite Ignoto) who was an unknown Italian soldier who died during the First World War, representing every soldier who died during the war. The unknown soldier was buried in

the monument on 4 November 1921 and since then his tomb is guarded day and night by sentinels, selected from the marine, infantry and air divisions, along with two flames that endlessly burn.



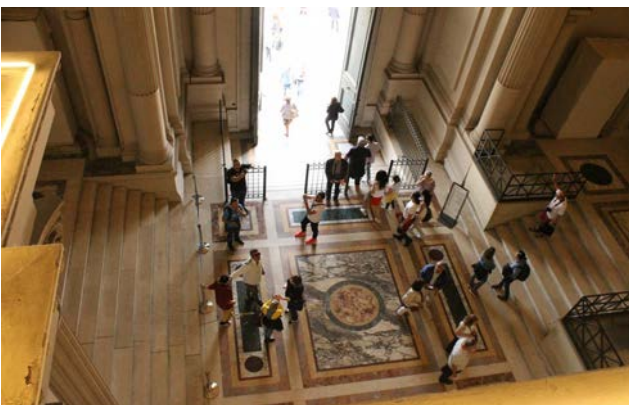
The Altar of the Fatherland

The “Altar of the Fatherland” (a name which is sometimes used to represent the entire monument) is located at the top of the first staircase. This section and its sculptures were designed by the sculptor Angelo Zanelli, who won a subsequent contest organized in 1906. In consequence, the Altar is the only architectural part of The Vittoriano monument which was not directed by the architect Sacconi, who had died few years before. It includes the altar itself and two lateral marble reliefs. From the very top of the monument, two bronze quadrigae crown the monument, the left one representing freedom and the right one representing unity. Each features a bronze chariot, drawn by four horses placed side by side, on which are placed the winged Victories. These two chariots stand above the twin porticos at either side of the colonnade. Just above the colonnade, fourteen cities of the new nation, representing the history itself of the country (Turin, Venice, Palermo, Mantova, Urbino, Naples, Genova, Milan, Bologna, Ravenna, Pisa, Amalfi, Ferrara, Florence). Below the cities, in the top section of the monument, a huge curved sixteen-column colonnade with fifteen meter tall columns, with on both sides temple-like wings. The inside of the colonnade, the portico, is decorated with murals and friezes with eagles and a cornice, along with sixteen colossal statues that symbolize the then sixteen regions of Italy (Piemonte, Lombardia, Veneto, Liguria, Emilia, Toscana, Marche, Umbria, Lazio, Abruzzi e Molise, Campania, Puglia, Lucania, Calabria, Sicilia, Sardegna).





Since June 2007 the terrace of the chariot quadrigae can be reached by using an elevator; the terrace, which offers an amazing view of Rome, can also be reached by climbing the 196 steps that start from the colonnade.



Equestrian statue di Vittorio Emanuele II

Just below, at the center and heart of the monument, the huge equestrian statue of Vittorio Emanuele II (the Father of the Nation), rests on a pedestal decorated with, at its center the figure of the goddess of Rome enshrined in the pedestal with friezes on either sides: the Triumph of Patriotism on the right and the Triumph of Labour of the left, with respectively allegorical reliefs representing Italian cities. At the foot of the figure of Rome, stands the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

The equestrian statue was commissioned by means of another competition, won by Enrico Chiaradia on 18 July 1905. The statue was finished in 1910 and inaugurated on the 4th July 1911 by Vittorio Emanuele III. Fifty tons of bronze were melted down in order to build the statue, which measures twelve meters in height and the ten meters in width. Around the base there are statues representing fourteen noble cities of Italy (sculpted by Eugenio Maccagnai), which, before the unification of Italy were the capital cities of Italian city-states, home to nobility, which, for this reason, are located at the base of the equestrian monument representing the King himself.



After decades of closure and restoration, just one year after reopening the Vittoriano Monument to the public, on the 22nd September 2001, then President of Italy, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, inaugurated the new school year from The Vittoriano Monument and invited students and teachers to visit the monument, calling it the new Roman Forum, suggesting to Italians to rediscover the monument and to reunite in feelings of patriotism, and to bring forth ideals of hope and unification, in a universal perspective of human rights and freedom for all.

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