

Even in its present ruinous condition, the Colosseum remains one of the most impressive structures of ancient Rome. Few people can fail to be astounded by its sheer size and by the technology that was needed to erect such a building. Yet there is another, darker side to the Colosseum, for few people can also fail to be repelled by the horrendous slaughters that took place in this immense arena. Indeed, if the Colosseum stands as a memorial to the architectural achievement of ancient Rome, it is also a compelling reminder of the moral degeneration that helped to destroy that civilization.

The Colosseum was originally called the Flavian Amphitheatre, its present name dating from the Middle Ages. Begun in 72 A.D., in the reign of Vespasian, the first of the Flavian dynasty, the Colosseum was completed some eight years later, and was formally opened by the second of the Flavian emperors, Titus. The Flavians had selected a very special site for their new amphitheatre: the former artificial lake of Nero's extravagant palace, the "Golden House". In fact, the palace of the hated Nero was torn down, the lake filled in with its debris, and the Colosseum set on top to symbolize the triumph of the new dynasty over the corrupt excesses of the old.

From the beginning, the Flavian amphitheatre was meant to impress by its size: it was some 1700 feet in circumference, and 157 feet in height. It would hold as many as 50,000 spectators in its four-storied shell. To erect such a structure, the Roman engineers made skilled use of concrete construction, ensuring that the sheer weight of the amphitheatre would be amply supported. Yet, since concrete by itself was too plain in appearance for such an amphitheatre, the entire Colosseum was faced with brick on its interior, and with expensive travertine from Tivoli on its exterior. Indeed, the travertine used on the Colosseum was of such quality that, during the Renaissance, workmen removed it from the pagan structure to use it in the construction of St. Peter's!

The exterior shell of the Colosseum was composed of three superimposed tiers of arches with a simpler "attic" story on top. On the ground level, every arch was in fact an entrance to the arena; these arches consequently bore Roman numerals which would correspond to the numbers on admission tickets. In this way, officials were enabled to handle the large crowds seeking admittance in a relatively organized manner. In addition, four arches on the ground level were made architecturally distinct: these were to be used by Roman VIP's.

Every arch in the exterior facade was flanked by engaged columns: on the ground level, by columns in the Doric style, on the second level, by Ionic-style columns, and, finally, on the third level by Corinthian columns. The top, or attic, story featured a row of small square windows, flanked by engaged columns in the Corinthian style; one of the main functions of this top level was to furnish support for a large awning which was stretched over the seats to provide some shade for the spectators.

The seats of the Colosseum were arranged in such a way that perfect visibility was assured. Nonetheless, some "close" seats were reserved, as is often the case today in many theatres: the lowest tiers of seats were set aside for Roman senators and distinguished public figures. To protect such important guests from the animals in the arena itself, a small wall-like barrier was placed between these ringside seats and the actual floor of the arena. After all, it would hardly do to have a Roman senator eaten by a lion.

As for the arena itself, this part of the Colosseum originally was covered with wooden planks. Today, in its denuded interior condition, the arena shows its substructure as excavated in 1928. Below the wooden planks were a series of small rooms, apparently designed for the storage of equipment and animals. When required for the events on stage, such equipment and animals would be conveyed by an elevator-like device up to the arena floor above.

The Flavian Amphitheatre, while obviously a masterpiece of Roman architecture, is famous today basically for the excessive displays of violence it featured: indeed, a famous report indicates that one celebration presented in this amphitheatre featured 11,000 wild beasts in battle, and 10,000 gladiators fighting to the death! Such mind-bending slaughter in fact continued to take place in this building until the 6th century A.D. It is certainly tragic that such a magnificent structure as the Flavian Amphitheatre was employed mainly for the spilling of blood, both human and animal. Could the Colosseum speak, the tale it would tell would undoubtedly shock those who like to think of mankind as a civilized species.