

# Domus Aurea - Nero's Golden Palace

Via della Domus Aurea, 1, 00184

9:15 AM – 3:45 PM (Every Day) 14€



Nero was licentious, cruel and, frankly, mad. He became emperor when his mother, Agrippina poisoned his step-father Claudius, and Nero in turn murdered his mother. His Domus Aurea was a step too far though. This collection of **nymphaeums**, banqueting rooms, bath houses, gardens and terraces was surrounded by a vast complex of fountains, drained from the surrounding hills. There was hot and cold running water in the baths; one of the rooms showered visitors in flower petals and perfumes as they entered, and the façade was coated in solid gold. The grounds covered a square mile and contained vineyards and game.

The Romans had enough, and Nero was forced to commit suicide in 68AD. Emperor **Vespasian** tore down large parts of the Domus Aurea, **drained its huge lake, and began the construction of the Colosseum on the lake bed. Trajan built baths** on the area and that, for a thousand years or so, was that.

But the **Renaissance** saw a reawakening of interest in long-forgotten Classical Rome. Painters, including **Raphael**, began to explore the old sites. Climbing down ladders into what they believed were caves, or grottos, they found the rooms of the old palace, walls still adorned with paintings. Imitating these in their own work, they dubbed the style **grotesque (from grotto)**. Soon, pagan designs were appearing in paintings and frescoes these Christian artists were

carrying out for the pope in the Sistine Chapel and the Logge Vaticane. And so mad, pagan Emperor Nero inspired a new course in devotional Christian art.

Tours today take in the Octagonal Room. The domed salon, with a hole at its centre, is supposed to have rotated with the passing of the day, following the movement of the sun. The building has fine frescoes, with much trompe l'oeuil work of Romans 'looking at you' through windows on the walls, and mythical beasts sporting among the vines, trees and fields. There is also a marvellous fresco depiction of Homer's story of Achilles being sent to Skyros. The tour takes you around surviving terraces and fountains and into the atmospheric underground chambers of the Domus Aurea.

**Please note:** The controlled atmosphere inside means that the temperature is always around 50 degrees Fahrenheit, with 100% humidity - Take a coat, jacket or pullover with you at any time of the year!

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**Golden House of Nero**, Latin **Domus Aurea**, palace in ancient Rome that was constructed by the emperor Nero between AD 65 and 68, after the great fire of 64 (an occasion the emperor used to expropriate an area of more than 200 acres [81 hectares] of land in the centre of the city). Nero had already planned and begun a palace, the Domus Transitoria, that was to link to the existing buildings on the Palatine Hill with the Gardens of Maecenas and other imperial properties on the Esquiline and adjoining hills. To these he added a large part of the Caelian and Oppian hills and the valley between them and the Palatine. This whole area was laid out as a park with porticoes, pavilions, baths, and fountains, and in the centre an artificial lake was made; under the emperor Vespasian the lake was drained to provide a site for the Colosseum. On the slopes of the Velia at the east end of the Forum, a grandiose colonnaded approach and vestibule were constructed, within which stood a colossal gilded bronze statue of Nero. The domestic wing of the palace stood on the slopes of the Oppian Hill facing south across the lake.

The Golden House was designed as a place of entertainment, as shown by the presence of 300 rooms without any sleeping quarter. Nero's own palace remained on the Quirinal Hill. No kitchens or latrines have been discovered.

Rooms sheathed in dazzling polished white marble were given richly varied floor plans, shaped with niches and exedras that concentrated or dispersed the daylight. There were pools in the floors and fountains splashing in the corridors. Nero took great interest in every detail of the project, according to Tacitus' Annals, and oversaw the engineer-architects, Celer and Severus, who were also responsible for the attempted navigable canal with which Nero hoped to link Misenum with Lake Avernus.

Some of the extravagances of the *Domus Aurea* had repercussions for the future. The architects designed two of the principal dining rooms to flank an octagonal court, surmounted by a dome with a giant central oculus to let in light.<sup>[1]</sup> It was an early use of **Roman concrete** construction. One innovation was destined to have an enormous influence on the art of the future: Nero placed mosaics, previously restricted to floors, in the vaulted ceilings. Only fragments have survived, but that technique was to be copied extensively, eventually ending up as a fundamental feature of Christian art: the apse mosaics that decorate so many churches in Rome, Ravenna, Sicily and Constantinople.

Celer and Severus also created an ingenious mechanism, cranked by slaves, that made the ceiling underneath the dome revolve like the heavens, while perfume was sprayed and rose petals were dropped on the assembled diners. According to some accounts, perhaps embellished by Nero's political enemies, on one occasion such quantities of rose petals were dropped that one unlucky guest was asphyxiated (a similar story is told of the emperor Elagabalus).

The extensive gold leaf that gave the villa its name was not the only extravagant element of its decor: stuccoed ceilings were faced with semi-precious stones and ivory veneers and walls were frescoed, coordinating the decoration into different themes in each major group of rooms. Pliny the Elder saw it being built and mentions it in his *Naturalis Historia*.

After Nero's death, the Golden House was a severe embarrassment to his successors. It was stripped of its marble, its jewels and its ivory within a decade.

The frescoes' effect on Renaissance artists was instant and profound (it can be seen most obviously in Raphael's decoration for the loggias in the Vatican), and the white walls, delicate swags, and bands of frieze—framed reserves containing figures or landscapes—have returned at intervals ever since, notably in late 18th century Neoclassicism.