

Designing Rome's *Trevi Fountain*

On October 2, 2013, the Museum of Design Atlanta had a design conversation on the history and historical significance of Rome's *Trevi Fountain*. I attended the lecture, which was given to the general public by Katherine Rinne, who received the M. Arch degree from UC Berkeley and specializes in urban water history. She spent much of her academic life studying the aqueducts of Rome, Roman fountains, and the Baroque urbanization of the city. She even stated in the lecture that, "The Trevi is arguably the most famous fountain in the world; noted for its gigantic scale, magnificent sculptures, complex iconography, dramatic water display, and embracing piazza." After attending and recording the lecture, I have to say that her statement is absolute.

Throughout the eras of the classical, medieval, baroque, and late-renaissance periods, cities and their subdivisions had local water sources open to the public. Many of these fountains and wells can still be seen today, whether it is in Lucerne, Krakow, Madrid, Cologne, or Rome. With Europe's geologically complex terrain, there are many different obstacles that the Romans had to face concerning water transportation into cities from outside locations and resources. Roman aqueducts transported water from local springs as well as from distant bodies of water. In the case of Rome, the local fountains were powered and distributed hydraulically by the Acqua Vergine, a natural spring located 26 meters above sea level. In Italy, there is a low pressure in these fountains compared other highly pressured fountains located throughout Europe. This is due to the lack of powerful running rivers and springs in the area. Examples of these "pool-like" fountains, or still water fountains, can be found at the *Neptune Fountain* of Florence and the Piazza Colonna fountain of Rome. The Acqua Vergine is still the current water source for the *Trevi Fountain*, which is 20 meters above sea level. With such a small decline from water source to its destination, Roman engineers used underwater piping for this specific fountain. Initially the *Trevi Fountain* was named the *Tempiesta*, which was located in the Pianta di Roma from 1593 until 1732. The *Tempiesta* acted as a local community water well, which was oriented in the east direction. This was a normal orientation during that time. Fountains and wells faced towards the local homes it provided to, which was traditionally to the east.

Throughout the 1500's and mid 1600's, experimentation with fountains in Rome began to start. Initially, fountains were locations for social gatherings. They were a place to trade, to reunite, to collect water for cooking as well as for bathing, and to relax. Over time, architects began to change the structure of fountains to tell stories to its users. The catalyst architect to do so was Gian Lorenzo Bernini in 1629 with his fountain, *The Little Boat*, also located in Rome. Another famous work he did was in the Piazza Novana, sponsored by Pope Innocent XI. It is a well-known fountain design to many historians due to its detailed and hidden meanings, as well as its superb detail to water usage and its historical interpretations of the Roman world.

Another well-known fountain design to many historians is *The Fountain of the Four Rivers*. This fountain metaphorically represents the Ganges, Nile, Rio de la Plata, and Danube rivers. At the time, these rivers represented the four major rivers in the world, one from each continent (Asia, Africa, Americas, and Europe). The four openings in the fountain poured into a central pool, known as the *Mappa Mundi*, or the Map of the World. Surrounding the statues representing the four rivers is an obelisk with a dove, the universal sign of peace, centered at the top of it. Bernini was metaphorically conveying to the public that these four rivers from four separate continents represent how far the Catholic Faith had spread to the world at the time, with a dove of peace encompassing the whole world, which was represented by the pool of the fountain. The most interesting part of the fountain though, is the flow of the water from the fountain to the pool below. Each “river” has a different flow that correlates to the actual river flow that which it represents. This was an architectural masterpiece at the time that received attention from all sides of the city of Rome, making Bernini a well-respected and acknowledged architect at the time.

In 1730, Pope Clement XII established a secret competition to have artists compete for the construction of a new and glorious fountain in the location of the *Tempiesta*. The Pope did this because he planned to re-establish the community surrounding the *Tempiesta* into his own private palace, with a beautiful fountain facing it. The two main competitors in the sponsored competition were Nicola Salvi and Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Salvi won the competition not because of the design he proposed, but rather because he did not follow the deliverables the Pope requested in the designs for the competition. Historians believe he won because of this fact, making his design completely unique and different from that of the others. The construction of the *Trevi Fountain* took thirty years to finish, which fell under the financial support of three different papal patrons: Clement XII, Benedict XIV, and Clement XIII. Over the span of the construction time, there were also three separate architects given command to design the *Trevi Fountain*: Nicola Salvi, Luigi Vanvitelli, and Gian Paolo. Because of the long span of construction with different papal patrons and architects, the final design of the *Trevi Fountain* is different from its initially intended design, giving it a very unique history as well as formality.

To begin, Nicoli Salvi changed the orientation of the new fountain to the North from its traditional eastern orientation. Papal patrons wanted a massive fountain unlike those found in other piazzas. Since Pope Clement XII wanted to switch the orientation of the new fountain, Salvi had no choice but to run an aqueduct straight through the neighborhood. Unlike previously constructed fountains, this construction phase would be extremely difficult. Neighborhoods were built around the local fountains, and the Trevi was to be built in a totally urbanized area. Salvi was inspired from the layout of the Vatican Gardens, specifically the *Scoglio*. The difference between the *Scoglio* and the *Trevi Fountain*, however, was that the *Scoglio* was in a private location within the Vatican and the Trevi was open to the public. In Salvi’s proposal, he centered the statue of Oceanus in the center of the fountain and insisted on having the water pour into the fountain pool in a rugged way. However, Salvi died during the initial construction phases

and his protégé, Panini, took over the designs of the fountain. Panini over-emphasized the designs that Salvi made for the shell like pool in his proposal, but the patrons turned down his ideas and pursued the initial designs created by Salvi. He was inspired by nature and placed influential pieces of nature in his works. If one looks very closely to the front face of the fountain, the stone is populated with almost thirty different plant species, strategically placed either close to the water line or far from it, mimicking the natural habitat of each plant species displayed in an accurate portrayal. Unfortunately, due to public use and erosion, the stone cutouts surrounding the fountain pool deteriorated over time and can rarely be seen today when compared to its original state. The best image known in archived history of the original view of the *Trevi Fountain* can be found in the Vatican Library fresco.

To conclude, Katherine Rinne discussed that characteristics found within the *Trevi Fountain*, as well as its hidden meanings and interpretations, could be traced back to a potential influence in Salvi's work from Bernini in his *Fountain of Four Rivers*. She concluded the discussion by saying that because the competition was secret, the patrons were the only ones to know whom the final winner of the competition was. She ended her discussion by saying that since there are similarities between the two fountains in underlying meanings and interpretations, Salvi could in fact have stolen ideas from Bernini to propose a new, innovative fountain design that derived from Bernini's *Fountain of Four Rivers*. There is also a theory that Salvi bribed the Pope to win the competition and use certain designs that Bernini submitted in his final Trevi design. Nobody knows for sure who won the competition, since there is no concrete evidence from either side. However, what we do know is that Salvi created one of the most famous fountains in the world, the *Trevi Fountain*.