

A COLOSSAL CLEAN-UP

CENTURIES OF GRIME ARE BEING REMOVED FROM ROME'S FAMOUS ANCIENT ARENA, REVEALING ITS SPLENDID TRUE COLOUR, THANKS TO THE GENEROSITY OF BUSINESSMAN DIEGO DELLA VALLE

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It's 7.30am in Rome and the piazza in front of the Colosseum is deserted, apart from a couple of vendors offering miniature copies of the iconic amphitheatre and tiny gladiators for the mantelpiece back home. In an hour, hordes of tourists will start pouring into the ticket booths, but few will catch a glimpse of a small army of engineers and technicians working behind the layers of steel scaffolding wrapped around a third of the 2000-year-old monument's exterior.

A dozen young technicians are gently scrubbing the thick layers of dirt and grime that have built up over the centuries on the surface of the ancient monument. Their working day began before most of the day's visitors had swallowed their first espresso.

It's the most ambitious renovation the Colosseum has ever had — the first stage of a €25 million (\$37m) project sponsored entirely by Diego Della Valle, the billionaire businessman who created the Tod's luxury leather goods empire. "The truth is, I did not choose the Colosseum restoration voluntarily; it all happened by chance," the 60-year-old entrepreneur says. "When I heard they were looking for a sponsor, I knew I couldn't hold back. I think it's an honour, indeed a duty, to give a share of my fortune back to the country."

The Colosseum needs little introduction. It is the largest Roman amphitheatre ever built and Italy's most popular tourist attraction, drawing more than five million visitors a year. Started by emperor Vespasian in AD70 and completed by his son, Titus, a decade later, it's renowned for hosting everything from bloody gladiator duels and executions to mock naval battles, wild animal hunts and spectacular theatrical shows.

It may have survived the rise and fall of the Roman Empire, earthquakes and invasions but recently the building the ravages of time, tourist traffic and pollution have taken their toll. "There's not much time to do the work," says Della Valle. "Pieces are literally falling off."

Despite an outcry from opponents about private sponsorship, the colourful entrepreneur won the support of Rome's council and powerful cultural officials, who were committed to safeguarding precious assets in the country with the highest number of UNESCO World Heritage listings in the world.

After a failed legal challenge from consumer group Codacons and lengthy bureaucratic wrangling, work finally began last October. The organisation has since founded a group called "The real friends of the Colosseum" to ensure it is not emblazoned with Tod's publicity, but that is explicitly banned in the terms of the sponsorship.

Cinzia Conti is an archeologist and restorer who heads the technical team returning the monument's surface to its former glory. As she rides the tiny makeshift elevator past three levels of arches to the panoramic top level — a lofty height of nearly 50m — she jokes about vertigo before revealing her enthusiasm for the project. "I have been a restorer for 18 years," Conti says. "On every project I discover something new and every time I feel emotional."

But this is something else altogether. With a spectacular bird's eye view of the enormous arena on one side and the Roman Forum on the other, Conti points to the Mediterranean in the distance. She says sea breezes from the south were nature's way of cleaning the monument's surface, but the winds failed to reach the other side of its exterior.

"On the north side there are deposits of dust and pollutants, so it is black, but on the south side it is white," she says. "The pollutants have been brushed off and washed away by the wind."

Several floors below, technicians dressed in overalls and hard hats are slowly working their way around the 40,000sq m surface using the simplest tools — toothbrushes and water spray. Eventually they will restore the original colour of 80 arches and the arcades that stretch for three floors above them. Inside the arcades of the monument, these experts are removing what's known as "black rust" — a minestrone of algae, fungus, pollen and traffic fumes — to return the travertine, a type of limestone, to its original creamy colour.

Tiziano Rampiconi, who has been a restorer for 12 years, is covered head to toe in plastic protective clothing as a fine water spray is released from a portable network of pipes on the grimy walls. He has been toiling for the past three hours and has eight different brushes — ranging from a household toothbrush to a large scrubbing brush — at his fingertips.

There still seems a long way to go, but he is enthusiastic. "For me it's a passion," says the Roman with a smile. "I am very proud to be part of this."

The clouds of mist are designed to soften up the grime before Rampiconi sets to work with his brushes. If brushing alone is not enough to remove the grime, he will add a small amount of ammonium bicarbonate. Anything more is too risky.

"You have to massage the wall like a baby in the bath," says Conti. "When the surface is dirty, we don't know what's underneath so we use a mist of water, never a strong jet or we could damage the stone."

Most visitors don't realise that two arcades at ground level next to the entrance — identified as 51 and 54 in Roman numerals — were restored as a trial run in 2000,

Tod's founder Diego Della Valle, bottom left, says "it's an honour, indeed a duty, to give a share of my fortune back to the country"







A fine mist of water and eight different brushes, ranging from a toothbrush to a scrubbing brush, are used to remove the grime



long before finance for the current project was found. "Before you begin any restoration, it is important to conduct tests," Conti says. "It's like ordering a suit at the tailor's. You try it on to see if there are any structural problems. We did a test and we worked out what to do and how much time it would take."

The first restoration revealed an ancient Roman treasure trove beneath the filth — graffiti and drawings, including one of a small gladiator painted on the wall, as well as traces of the red paint that highlighted the numerals on the arches to help original patrons find their seats. "It's like leafing through the pages of a book," says an excited Conti of the recent discoveries.

Once the grime is removed other experts such as Heydi Dajo, a 31-year-old technician who moved to Italy from Guatemala, begin patching up cracks that have emerged in the travertine blocks, using a limestone mortar that carefully matches the creamy colour.

Everything is done by hand, so it's no surprise that the timetable for the restoration is expected to stretch longer than the anticipated three years. But with the first five arches now complete, Colosseum director Rossella Rea says she is already thrilled with the results.

"Seeing the surface clean for the first time is the most amazing sensation," says Rea, an archeologist who has worked at the Colosseum for 30 years and has been in charge since 2008. "I am accustomed to seeing it black. To see it now makes me feel very emotional. The world will be surprised when it discovers its true colour."

The cleaning is simply the first phase of a comprehensive makeover. Eventually a new ticket office and visitors' centre will be built discreetly into a grassy incline beside the monument and the vast labyrinth of cells beneath the arena where gladiators were led to their fate will also be completely restored.

About a quarter of those subterranean tunnels, or

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hypogeum, has so far been recovered, but archeologists plan to eventually open up all of it to visitors.

As the first phase of cleaning draws to a close, Della Valle feels vindicated. "It will be exciting to see the splendour of the most beautiful monument restored again," he says. "This is the Italy that functions and the one I want to show to the rest of the world, where too often we see an image that fails to express the true essence of this country."

Della Valle, whose personal worth is estimated by *Forbes* magazine at about \$2 billion, appears to be setting a fashion trend: other big names are now clamouring to finance Italy's cultural revival at a time when government finance has dried up.

The jeweller and watchmaker Bulgari, bought by the French luxury giant LVMH in 2011, has pledged €1.5m to fund a renovation of Rome's famous Spanish Steps. This work is expected to start next year and take two years to complete. Fendi is funding a €2.18m restoration of Rome's Trevi fountain, while Della Valle's luxury leather goods

rival Salvatore Ferragamo recently committed €600,000 to renovate eight rooms in Florence's Uffizi Gallery for the display of 50 works by Renaissance masters. "We were looking for a project that would be long-lasting," says president Ferruccio Ferragamo. "This fits our objectives."

Elsewhere in Italy, Bruno Cucinelli, who built a cashmere clothing empire, is financing the reconstruction of Perugia's ancient Etruscan Arch, while the founder of the Diesel clothing empire, Renzo Rosso, is spending €5m to restore the popular Rialto Bridge that spans the Grand Canal in Venice. "I always thought that it's a civic duty to give back to the community," Rosso says. "Among my responsibilities, there is also that of preserving the cultural heritage of my country."

So far no entrepreneur has had the courage or patience to tackle the degradation of Italy's other most popular archeological treasure, the city of Pompeii, destroyed after the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD79. It has had an injection of emergency funds from the Italian government and the European Union but many people are asking whether that will be enough to save the tourist attraction from decades of mismanagement, corruption and physical decay.

Della Valle says he invited various local and foreign business leaders to join him in tackling the project, but they were thwarted by bureaucratic wrangling and other hurdles. Nevertheless, he sees great potential for Italian business to contribute to arts and culture and believes the government should also adopt a national strategy using Italy's vast cultural heritage to kick-start the nation's languishing economy.

"This is the only solution. Art and culture, like food, wine, fashion and design, are the things that we do better," he says. "Made in Italy" has been recognised and appreciated around the world and we should revive this approach. There is no other solution." 