

## NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ROME

Museo Nazionale Romano •  
Palazzo Massimo

Rome lasted a thousand years...and so do most Roman history courses. But if you want a breezy overview of this fascinating society, there's no better place than the National Museum of Rome.

Rome took Greek culture and wrote it in capital letters. Thanks to this lack of originality, ancient Greek statues were preserved for our enjoyment today. But the Romans also pioneered a totally new form of art—sculpting painfully realistic portraits of emperors and important citizens.

Think of this museum as a walk back in time. As you gaze at the same statues that the Romans swooned over, the history of Rome comes alive—from Julius Caesar's murder to Caligula's incest to Vespasian's Colosseum to the coming of Christianity.

### Orientation

**Cost:** €10 combo-ticket valid for three days, includes entry into three lesser National Museum branches: the nearby Museum of the Bath (lackluster ancient inscriptions), Palazzo Altemps (so-so sculptures), and Crypta Balbi (medieval art). The price drops to €7 without mandatory special exhibits.

**Hours:** Tue-Sun 9:00-19:45, closed Mon, last entry 45 minutes before closing.

**When to Go:** The museum is never crowded. Since it has a convenient and free bag check (even for backpacks and suitcases), consider a visit en route from the train station.

**Getting There:** The museum is in Palazzo Massimo, situated between Piazza della Repubblica (Metro: Repubblica) and Termini Station (Metro: Termini). It's a few minutes' walk from either Metro stop. As you leave Termini, it's the sandstone-

brick building on your left. Enter at the far end, at Largo di Villa Peretti.

**Information:** Tel. 06-3996-7700, [www.archeoroma.beniculturali.it/en](http://www.archeoroma.beniculturali.it/en).

**Tours:** Audioguides cost €5 and last three hours.

**Length of This Tour:** Allow two hours. If you have less time, at least do the ground floor and the first floor as far as the Discus Thrower.

**Photography:** Photos allowed without flash.

**Starring:** Roman emperor busts, the Discus Thrower, original Greek statues, and fine Roman copies.

## OVERVIEW

The Palazzo Massimo is the permanent home of major Greek and Roman statues that were formerly scattered in other national museums around town.

The museum is rectangular, with rooms and hallways built around a central courtyard. The ground-floor displays follow Rome's history as it changes from a democratic republic to a dictatorial empire. The first-floor exhibits take Rome from its peak through its slow decline. The second floor houses rare frescoes and fine mosaics, and the basement presents coins and everyday objects. As you tour this museum, note that in Italian, "room" is *sala* and "hall" is *galleria*.

## The Tour Begins

### GROUND FLOOR—FROM SENATORS TO CAESARS

• Buy your ticket and pass through the turnstile, where you'll find...

#### Minerva

It's big, it's gaudy, it's a weird goddess from a pagan cult. Welcome to the Roman world. The statue is also a good reminder that all the statues in this museum—now missing limbs, scarred by erosion, or weathered down to bare stone—were once whole, and painted to look as lifelike as possible.

• Continue straight ahead into the courtyard. The first corridor—called Gallery I—is lined with portrait busts.



#### Gallery I

##### Portrait Heads from the Republic (500-1 B.C.)

Stare into the eyes of these stern, hardy, no-nonsense farmer-stock people who founded Rome. The wrinkles and crags of these origi-

frescoes, owned by the wily wife of Augustus, immerse you in a leafy green garden full of birds and fruit trees, symbolizing the gods.

## Basement (Floor -2)

The "Luxury in Rome" rooms give a peek into the lives of Rome's well-to-do citizens, featuring fine jewelry, common everyday objects, and an eight-year-old girl's mummy.

Next, enter the **coin collection**. Find your favorite emperor or empress on the coins: Julius Caesar (case 8, #41-44), Augustus (case 8, #65-69, and case 9, #1-38), Augustus' system of denars (case 10), Tiberius (case 10, #1-16), Caligula (case 10, #17-28), and Nero (case 11, #2-33). Evaluate Roman life by studying how Diocletian tweaked the gold standard (glass case 21). In A.D. 300, one denar bought one egg. The rest of the displays trace Europe's money from denars to euros. Exhibit 59 features a more recent monetary unit that is, nevertheless, now history: the Italian lira. And finally, case 62 brings us up-to-date with Rome's latest coinage, the euro.

emperor was literally auctioned to the highest bidder. In the space of 40 years, 15 different emperors were saluted, then murdered, at the whims of soldiers of fortune.

Rome would stagger on for another 200 years, but the glory of old Rome was gone. The city was becoming a den of thugs, thieves, prostitutes, barbarians...and Christians.

• *Farther along, on the right-hand wall, find the small...*

#### Christ Teaching (*Cristo Docente*, A.D. 350)

Christ sits like a Roman senator—in a toga, holding a scroll, dispensing wisdom like the law of the land. The statuette comes from those delirious days when formerly persecuted Christians could now “come out” and worship in public. Emperor Constantine (ruled A.D. 306-337) legalized Christianity, and within two generations it was Rome’s official religion.

Whether Christianity invigorated or ruined Rome is debated, but the fall was inevitable. Rome’s once-great legions backpedaled, until even the city itself was raped and plundered by foreigners (410). In 476, the last emperor sold his title for a comfy pension plan, “Rome” became just another dirty city with a big history, and the artistic masterpieces now in this museum were buried under rubble.

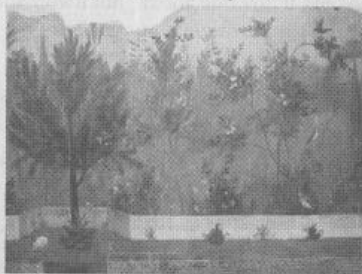


#### THE REST OF THE MUSEUM

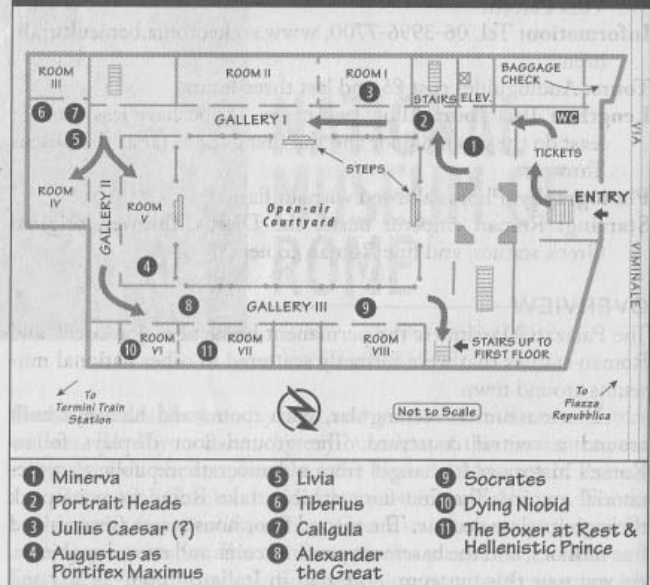
• *For extra credit, consider exploring two more parts of the National Museum.*

#### Second Floor

This floor contains frescoes and mosaics that once decorated the walls and floors of Roman villas. They’re remarkably realistic and unstuffy, featuring everyday people, animals, flowery patterns, and geometrical designs. The **Villa Farnesina frescoes**—in black, red, yellow, and blue—are mostly architectural designs, with fake columns, friezes, and garlands. The **Villa di Livia**



### National Museum—Ground Floor



nal “ugly republicans” tell the story of Rome’s roots as a small agricultural tribe, fighting for survival with neighboring bands.

These faces are brutally realistic, unlike more idealized Greek statues. Romans honored their ancestors and worthy citizens in the “family” (*gens*) of Rome. They wanted lifelike statues to remember them by, and to instruct the young with their air of moral rectitude.

In its first 500 years, Rome was a republic ruled by a Senate of wealthy landowners. But as Rome expanded throughout Italy, and the economy shifted from farming to booty, changes became necessary.

• *Enter Room I (Sala I). Along the left wall, find the portrait bust that may (or may not) be Julius Caesar.*

#### Room I

##### Julius Caesar? (labeled *Rilievo con ritratto di uomo anziano*)

Some scholars have identified this bust as representing Rome’s most famous citizen (while others disagree).

Julius Caesar (c. 100-44 B.C.)—with his prominent brow, high cheekbones, and male-



pattern baldness with the forward comb-over—changed Rome forever.

When this charismatic general swept onto the scene, Rome was in chaos. Rich landowners were fighting middle-class plebs, who wanted their slice of the plunder. Slaves such as Spartacus were picking up hoes and hacking up masters. And renegade generals—the new providers of wealth and security in an economy of plunder—were becoming dictators. (Notice the **life-size statue** with a shaved-off head, of an unknown but obviously once-renowned general.)

Caesar was a people's favorite. He conquered Gaul (France), then sacked Egypt, then impregnated Cleopatra. He defeated rivals and made them his allies. He gave great speeches. Chicks dug him.

With the army at his back and the people in awe, he took the reins of government, instituted sweeping changes, made himself the center of power...and antagonized the Senate.

A band of republican assassins surrounded him in a Senate meeting. He called out for help as one by one they stepped up to take turns stabbing him. The senators sat and watched in silence. One of the killers was his adopted son, Brutus, and Caesar—astonished that even he joined in—died saying, “*Et tu, Brute?*”

• *At the end of Gallery I, turn left and enter the large glassed-in Room V, with a life-size statue of Augustus.*

## Room V

### Augustus as Pontifex Maximus (*Augusto Pontefice Massimo*)

Julius Caesar died, but his family name, his politics, and his flamboyance lived on. Julius had adopted his grandnephew, Octavian, who united Rome's warring factions and took the name and title “Augustus,” meaning “venerable” or “protected by the gods.”

Here, Emperor Augustus has taken off his armor and laurel-leaf crown, donning the simple hooded robes of a priest. He's retiring to a desk job after a lifetime of fighting to reunite Rome. He killed Brutus and

eliminated his rivals, Mark Antony and Cleopatra. For the first time in almost a century of fighting, one general reigned supreme. Augustus became the first of the emperors who would rule Rome for the next 500 years.

In fact, Augustus was a down-to-earth man who lived simply, worked hard, read books, listened to underlings, and tried to restore traditional Roman values after the turbulence of Julius Cae-



• *Exit Room VII at the far end, cut through Gallery II, and make your way to Room XIII, where you'll find the bust of Septimius Severus.*

## Room XIII—Beginning of the End Septimius Severus (ruled A.D. 193-211)

Rome's sprawling empire was starting to unravel, and it took a disciplined emperor-warrior like this African to keep it together. Severus' victories on the frontier earned him a grand triumphal arch in the Forum, but here he seems to be rolling his eyes at the chaos growing around him.

• *Near Severus is his son...*

## Caracalla (ruled A.D. 211-217)

The stubbly beard, cruel frown, and glaring eyes tell us that Severus' son was bad news. He murdered his little brother to seize power, then proceeded to massacre thousands of loyal citizens on a whim. The army came to distrust rulers whose personal agenda got in their way, and Caracalla was stabbed in the back by a man whose brother had just been executed. Rome's long slide had begun.

• *Move next door into...*



## Room XIV—The Fall

There are a lot of serious faces in this room. People who grew up in the lap of luxury and security were witnessing the unthinkable—the disintegration of a thousand years of tradition. Rome never recovered from the chaos of the third century. Disease, corruption, revolts from within, and “barbarians” pecking away at the borders were body blows that sapped Rome's strength.

## Sarcophagus with Processional Scene

### (*Sarcofago con Corteo*, A.D. 270)

A parade of dignitaries, accompanying a new Roman leader, marches up Capitoline Hill. They huddle together, their backs to the wall, looking around suspiciously for assassins. Their faces reflect the fear of the age.

By the third century, the Roman army could virtually hand-pick an emperor to be their front man. At one point, the office of







that we can examine the inner workings of the wonder called Man. The perfect pecs and washboard abs make this human godlike. Geometrically, you could draw a perfect circle around him, with his hipbone at the center. He's natural yet ideal, twisting yet balanced, moving while at rest. For the Greeks, the universe was a rational place, and the human body was the perfect embodiment of the order found in nature.

This statue is the best-preserved Roman copy (not one member is missing—I checked) of the original Greek work by Myron (450 B.C.). (The subtle nubs on his head were aids

for a measuring device used when making copies.) Statues of athletes like this commonly stood in the baths, where Romans cultivated healthy bodies, minds, and social skills, hoping to lead well-rounded lives. The Discus Thrower, with his geometrical perfection and godlike air, sums up all that is best in the classical world.

• *Continue into...*

## Room VII

### Hermaphrodite Sleeping (*Ermafrodito Dormiente*)

After leaving the baths, a well-rounded Roman may head posthaste to an orgy, where he might see a reclining nude like this, be titillated, circle around for a closer look, and say, "Hey! (*Insert your own reaction here!*)"

This nude lying on his/her stomach possesses the perfect, lithe female form. But as you can see, she/he is equipped with both breasts and a penis. It's the Greek/Roman god Hermaphroditus—the child of Hermes and Aphrodite, and protector of bisexuals.

### Apollo (*Apollo del Tevere*)

The god of light appears as a slender youth, not as some burly, powerful, autocratic deity. He stands *contrapposto*—originally he was leaning against the tree—in a relaxed and very human way. His curled hair is tied with a headband, strands tumbling down his neck. His muscles and skin are smooth. (The rusty stains come from the centuries the statue spent submerged in the Tiber.) Apollo is in a reflective mood, and the serenity and intelligence in his face show off classical Greece as a nation of thinkers.



sar's time. He outwardly praised the Senate, while actually reducing it to a rubber-stamp body. Augustus' reign marked the start of 200 years of peace and prosperity, the Pax Romana.

See if the statue matches this description of Augustus by a contemporary, the historian Suetonius: "He was unusually handsome. His expression was calm and mild. He had clear, bright eyes, in which was a kind of divine power. His hair was slightly curly and somewhat golden." Any variations were made by sculptors who idealized his features to make him almost godlike.

Augustus proclaimed himself a god—not arrogantly or blasphemously, as Caligula later did, but as the honored "father" of the "family" of Rome. As the empire expanded, the vanquished had to worship statues like this one as a show of loyalty.

• *Nearby—here in Room V, in the hallway, and in Room IV—you'll find busts of other members of his powerful family. Start with his wife, Livia, over in Room IV.*

## Room IV—Rome's First Emperors (c. 50 B.C.-A.D. 68)

Julius Caesar's descendants—the Julio-Claudian family—ruled Rome for a century after his death, turning the family surname "Caesar" into a title.

### Livia

Augustus' wife, Livia, was a major power behind the throne. Her stern, thin-lipped gaze withered rivals at court. Her hairstyle—bunched up in a peak, braided down the center, and tied in back—

became the rage throughout the empire, as her face appeared everywhere, from statues to coins. Notice that by the next generation, a simpler bun was chic (Antonia Minore, Livia's daughter-in-law, next to Livia). And by the following generation, the trend was tight curls. Empresses dictated fashion the way emperors dictated policy.

Livia bore Augustus no sons. She lobbied hard for Tiberius, her own son by a first marriage, to succeed as emperor. Augustus didn't like him, but Livia was persuasive. He relented, ate some bad figs, and died—the gossip was that Livia poisoned him to seal the bargain. The pattern of succession was established—adopt a son from within the extended family—and Tiberius was proclaimed emperor. (The fine frescoed walls of Livia's Anzio villa are upstairs on the second floor.)

• *In the corner of the room, find the well-worn bust of...*



**Tiberius (Tiberio, ruled A.D. 14-37)**

Scholars speculate that acne may have soured Tiberius to the world (but this statue is pocked by erosion). Shy and sullen but diligent, he worked hard to be the easygoing leader that Augustus had been. Early on, he was wise and patient, but he suffered personal setbacks. Politics forced him to divorce his only beloved and marry a tramp. His favorite brother died, then his son. Embittered, he let subordinates run things and retired to Capri, where he built a villa with underground dungeons. There he hosted orgies of sex, drugs, torture, really loud music, and execution. At his side was his young grandnephew, whom he adopted as the next emperor.

• *To your right, in the glass case, is the small bust of...*

**Caligula (Caligola, ruled A.D. 37-41)**

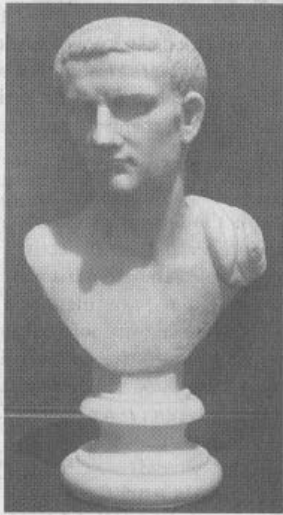
This emperor had sex with his sisters, tortured his enemies, made off with friends' wives during dinner parties and then returned to rate their performance in bed, crucified Christians, took cuts in line at the Vatican Museum, and ordered men to kneel before him as a god. Caligula has become the archetype of a man with enough power to act out his basest fantasies.

Politically, he squandered Rome's money, then taxed and extorted from the citizens. Perhaps he was made mad by illness, perhaps he was the victim of vindictive historians, but still, no one mourned when assassins ambushed him and ran a sword through his privates. Rome was tiring of this family dynasty's dysfunction.

• *Continue down Gallery II and turn left. Busts line Gallery III. Find Alexander the Great ("Alessandro Magno," outside Room VI) and Socrates ("Socrate," farther down the hall, outside Room VIII).*

**Gallery III—Rome's Greek Mentors**

Rome's legions easily conquered the less-organized but more-cultured Greek civilization that had dominated the Mediterranean for centuries. Romans adopted Greek gods, art styles, and fashions, and sophisticates sprinkled their conversation with Greek phrases.



ner of the vast empire, from Britain (where he built Hadrian's Wall) to Egypt (where he sailed the Nile), from Jerusalem (where he suppressed another Jewish revolt) to Athens (where he soaked up classical culture). He scaled Sicily's Mount Etna just to see what made a volcano tick. Back home, he beautified Rome with the Pantheon and his villa at Tivoli, a microcosm of places he'd visited.

Hadrian is flanked here by the two loves of his life. His wife, **Sabina** (left), with modest hairstyle and scarf, kept the home fires burning for her traveling husband. Hadrian was 50 years old when he became captivated by a teenage boy named **Antinous** (right), with his curly hair and full, sensual lips. Together they traveled the Nile, where Antinous drowned. Hadrian wept. Statues of Antinous subsequently went up throughout the Empire, much to the embarrassment of the stoic Romans.

Hadrian spent his last years at his lavish villa outside Rome, surrounded by buildings and souvenirs that reminded him of his traveling days (see Tivoli Day Trip chapter).

• *Backtrack through Room I and into the gallery, then turn right, down the hall that leads into the large Room V.*

**Rooms V and VI—Rome's Grandeur**

Pause at Rome's peak to admire the things the Romans found beautiful. Imagine these statues as they originally stood—in the pleasure gardens of the Roman rich, surrounded by greenery with the splashing sound of fountains, all painted in bright, lifelike colors. Though executed by Romans, the themes are mostly Greek, with godlike humans and human-looking gods.

• *At the beginning of Room V is...*

**Aphrodite Crouching (Afrödite al Bagno Accovacciata)**

The goddess of beauty crouches while bathing, then turns to admire herself. This sets her whole body in motion—one thigh goes down, the other up; her head turns clockwise while her body goes in reverse—yet she's perfectly still. The crouch creates a series of symmetrical love handles, molded by the sculptor into the marble-like wax. Hadrian had good taste—he ordered a copy of this Greek classic for his bathroom.

• *At the far end of the room, pass into Room VI, with...*

**The Discus Thrower (Discobolo)**

An athlete winds up, about to unleash his pent-up energy and hurl the discus. The sculptor has frozen the moment for us so



**Domitian (Domitianus, ruled A.D. 81-96)**

Vespasian's son, Domitian, used his father's tax revenues to construct the massive Imperial Palace on Palatine Hill, home to emperors for the next three centuries. Shown with his lips curled in a sneer, he was a moralistic prude who executed several Vestal ex-Virgins, while in private he took one mistress after another. Until...

**Domitia**

...his stern wife found out and hired a servant to stab him in the groin. Domitia's hairstyle is a far cry from the "Livia" cut, with a high crown of tight curls.

**Nerva (ruled A.D. 96-98)**

Nerva realized that the Flavian dynasty was no better than its predecessors. Old and childless, he made a bold, far-sighted move—he adopted a son from outside of Rome's corrupting influence.

• Go back to Room I and head straight to Room II, where you'll find Trajan on the left wall.

**Room II—A Cosmopolitan Culture****Trajan (Traianus-Hercules, ruled A.D. 98-117)**

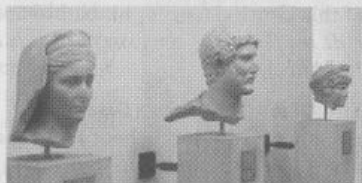
Born in Spain, this conquering hero pushed Rome's borders to their greatest extent, creating a truly worldwide empire. The spoils of three continents funneled into a city of a million-plus people. Trajan could dress up in a lion's skin, presenting himself as a "new Hercules," and no one found it funny. Romans, in the words of Livy the historian, felt a spirit of Manifest Destiny: "The gods desire that the City of Rome shall be the capital of all the countries of the world"—the Caput Mundi.

• On the opposite wall is...

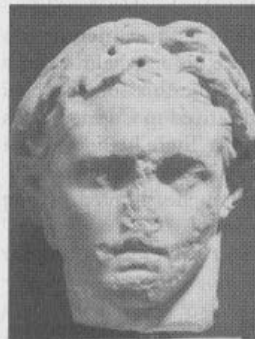
**Hadrian (Hadrianus, ruled A.D. 117-138)**

Hadrian was a fully cosmopolitan man. His beard—the first we've seen—shows his taste for foreign things; he poses like the Greek philosopher he imagined himself to be.

Hadrian was a voracious tourist, personally visiting almost every cor-

**Alexander the Great (Alessandro Magno)**

Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.) single-handedly created a Greek-speaking empire by conquering, in just a few short years, lands from Greece to Egypt to Persia. Later, when the Romans conquered Greece (c. 200 B.C.), they inherited this pre-existing collection of cultured Greek cities ringing the Mediterranean.



Alexander's handsome statues set the standard for those of later Roman emperors. His features were chiseled and youthful, and this statue was adorned with pompous decorations, like a golden sunburst aura (fitted into the holes). The greatest man of his

day, he ruled the known world by the age of 30.

Alexander's teacher was none other than the philosopher Aristotle. Aristotle's teacher was Plato, whose mentor was...

**Socrates (Socrate)**

This nonconformist critic of complacent thinking is the father of philosophy. The Greeks were an intellectual, introspective, sensitive, and artistic people. The Romans were practical, no-nonsense soldiers, salesmen, and bureaucrats. Many a Greek slave was more cultured than his master, reduced to the role of warning his boss not to wear a plaid toga with a polka-dot robe.

• Backtrack and enter Room VI.

**Room VI—Greek Beauty in Originals and Copies****Dying Niobid (Niobide Morente, 440 B.C.)**

The Romans were astonished by the beauty of Greek statues. The smooth skin of this Niobid (the term for any child of the goddess Niobe) contrasts with the rough folds of her clothing. She twists naturally around an axis running straight up and down. This woman looks like a classical goddess awakening from a beautiful dream, but...

Circle around back. The hole bored in her back, right in that itchy place you can't



quite reach, once held a golden arrow. The woman has been shot by Artemis, goddess of hunting, because her mother dared to boast to the gods about her kids. The Niobid reaches back in vain, trying to remove the arrow before it drains her of life.

Romans ate this stuff up: the sensual beauty, the underplayed pathos, the very Greekness of it. They crated up centuries-old statues like this and brought them home to their gardens and palaces. Soon there weren't enough old statues to meet the demand. Crafty Greeks began cranking out knockoffs of Greek originals for mass consumption. Rooms VII and VIII contain both originals (like the Niobid) and copies—some of extremely high quality, others resembling cheesy fake *David*s in a garden store. Appreciate the beauty of the world's rare, surviving Greek originals.

Rome conquered Greece, but culturally the Greeks conquered the Romans.

• *Move next door to see...*

### Room VII—Hellenistic and Classical Bronzes The Boxer at Rest (*Pugilatore*, first century B.C.)

An exhausted boxer sits between rounds and gasps for air. Check out the brass knuckles-type Roman boxing gloves. Textbook Hellenistic, this pugilist is realistic and full of emotion. His face is scarred, his back muscles are knotted, and he's got cauliflower ears. He's losing.

Slumped over, he turns with a questioning look ("Why am I losing again?"), and eyes that once held glass now make him look empty indeed. "I coulda been a contender."



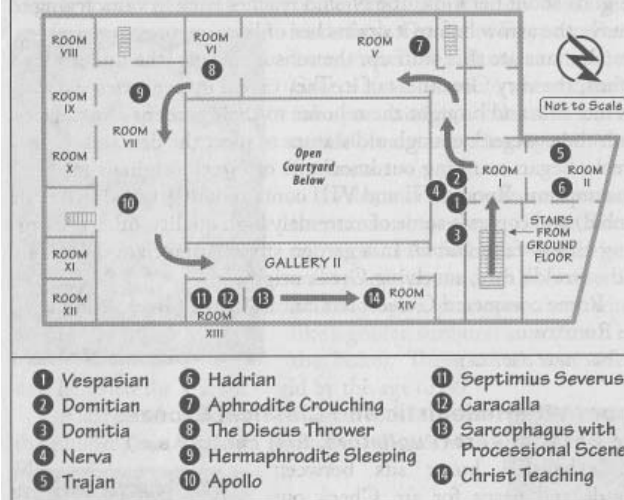
### Hellenistic Prince (*Principe Elenistico*)

Back then, everyone wanted to be like Alexander the Great. This restored bronze statue—naked and leaning on a spear—shows a prince (probably Attalus II of Pergamon) in the style of a famous statue of his hero from the second century B.C.

• *We've covered Rome's first 500 years. At the end of the hall are the stairs up to the first floor.*



## National Museum—First Floor



### FIRST FLOOR—ROME'S PEAK AND SLOW FALL

As we saw, Augustus' family did not always rule wisely. Under Nero (ruled A.D. 54-68), the debauchery, violence, and paranoia typical of the Julio-Claudians festered to a head. When the city burned in the great fire of 64, the Romans suspected Nero of torching it himself to clear land for his enormous luxury palace.

Enough. Facing a death sentence, Nero committed suicide with the help of a servant. An outsider was brought in to rule—Vespasian, from the Flavian family.

• *At the top of the stairs, enter Room I and then move into the hallway on the left. To your left is the...*

### Flavian Family

#### Vespasian (*Vespasianus*, ruled A.D. 69-79)

Balding and wrinkled, with a big head, a double chin, and a shy smile, Vespasian was a common man. The son of a tax collector, he rose through the military ranks with a reputation as a competent drudge. As emperor, he restored integrity, raised taxes, started the Colosseum, and suppressed the Jewish rebellion in Palestine.

