

The Coliseum -- Thumbs Up or Thumbs Down?

By Sharon Fabian

We can only imagine what it must have been like back in the first century A.D., the days of Ancient Rome. On the day of a scheduled event, Roman citizens of all classes poured into the Coliseum.

There were so many people that they entered through eighty numbered entrances. The emperor arrived through a separate entrance and sat in a box seat on the main floor. The senators also sat on this floor and could bring their own comfortable chairs. The next tier above the senators was for other members of the noble class. Above that were two tiers for ordinary Roman citizens, one for wealthy citizens and one for poor citizens.



The architects who designed the Coliseum used a favorite element of Roman architecture - the arch - to build this massive stadium. We can still see the three tiers of arches and a few of the numbered entrances today.

Inside the stadium, the Romans often watched gladiator fights, a favorite sport of the day. Like modern day football heroes, the gladiators entered the stadium through an underground passage. They were welcomed by a roar from the crowd. Gladiators were very popular with both men and women.

Many of them were prisoners of war who had been captured by the Romans. These young men were given the choice of living in slavery or fighting in the arena. Often, they chose to fight.

Once inside the stadium, the gladiators addressed the emperor: "We who are about to die salute you." Many of them would die that very day.

There were a variety of gladiator events. Some gladiators fought with the short sword known as a gladius. Others fought with a knife, some with a sickle, and some with a javelin. Many gladiators were killed during the fight.

Others were wounded. The wounded gladiators could ask the crowd for mercy. The audience would show the emperor *thumbs up* if they wanted to let the gladiator live. If they wanted the gladiator to die, they showed *thumbs down*.

Gladiators who won enough fights were given their freedom.

The large center part of the Coliseum was the arena in which the gladiators fought. Its wooden floor no longer exists, so modern visitors to the arena can see through to the two levels below the arena floor.

Here there are many rooms used to prepare for the gladiator fights and the other events held in the Coliseum. There are rooms for the gladiators, and there is a passageway to a separate building where the gladiators trained. There are also rooms for wild animals, since animal hunts were often staged in the Coliseum as well. These animals, including elephants, could be raised up to appear suddenly through a trapdoor in the arena floor.

Another interesting event held in the Coliseum was a staged sea battle. The floor of the arena was designed so that it could be flooded with water for this event.

The designers of the Coliseum used many advanced building techniques. They produced a building that was huge, had an impressive style, and could handle large crowds and a variety of shows. Many of the ideas in the Coliseum are used in stadiums today.

In an interesting twist of fate, the Coliseum is now the setting for a worldwide demonstration against the death penalty. Every time a death sentence is commuted and every time a country outlaws the death penalty, the lights

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that illuminate the Coliseum at night are changed from white to gold. The golden light shows that many people's ideas about life and death have changed since the days of the gladiators.

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Questions

- _____ 1. The upper class of Roman society sat on the _____ level of the Coliseum.
- A. second
 - B. top
 - C. main
 - D. basement
- _____ 2. The everyday people sat on the _____ levels.
- A. upper
 - B. basement
 - C. middle
 - D. lower
- _____ 3. An important design element used in the Coliseum is the _____.
- A. pitched roof
 - B. dome
 - C. flying buttress
 - D. arch
- _____ 4. Gladiator fights were _____.
- A. often deadly
 - B. exaggerated
 - C. not often deadly
 - D. fake
- _____ 5. The word *gladiator* comes from the name of a _____.
- A. prisoner
 - B. sword
 - C. building
 - D. helmet
- _____ 6. Gladiators were often _____.
- A. prisoners of war
 - B. senators
 - C. former sports stars
 - D. animal trainers
- _____ 7. One idea from the coliseum that is used in stadiums today is the _____.
- A. multiple entrances
 - B. gladiator fight
 - C. stone construction
 - D. sea battle



- A. give up
B. live
C. fight
D. die

A Roman prisoner of war had a difficult choice to make between a life of slavery and deadly fights in the arena. If you had been in that position, what choice do you think you would have made? Give reasons for your answer.