

Pope Pius VII

This portrait is over two and half metres high, showing Pope Pius VII seated in the red velvet Papal throne. The curved back of the throne is high, and the top of Pope Pius's head reaches only halfway up. He sits facing us, wearing a long white satin robe to his ankles and red velvet slippers. One rests on a red velvet cushion.

Pope Pius's hair is dark and wispy, brushing his shoulders. He wears a small white skull cap. His pale forehead is high and wide, dark grey eyebrows thick and arched over bright brown eyes, the gaze inquisitive, focused slightly to the right, as if looking at something or someone behind us. A hint of a smile plays on full firm lips, so perhaps we don't immediately notice that his cheeks are sunken with age, his shoulders a little stooped.

Although the Pope seems relaxed, the portrait has a careful formality. The setting is classical, in the far distance, to the left, classical marble sculptures from the papal collections stand under the immense arches of the Papal Museum, the Braccio Nuovo. Heavy red velvet curtains are swagged to either side of the chair.

The Pope's short cape is also red velvet, fastened at his throat and covering his shoulders and upper arms. His lacy cuffs protrude from its ermine trimmed hem. The Pope's smooth pale hands are elegantly draped, the left resting on the carved wooden arm of the throne, a large silver ring on the fourth finger. His other hand loosely clasps a white lace edged handkerchief and a paper. Just visible along its edge the words. 'Per Anto. Canova', a reference to the sculptor Antonio Canova.

Luigi Barnaba Chiaramonti was elected Pope in 1800. He was imprisoned by Napoleon in 1809 for opposing his plans for the annexation of the Papal States. After his triumphant return to Rome in 1814, Pius VII became a focus for the political and spiritual regeneration of Europe.