

DOMINIQUE MEMMI



SECRET CORSICA



JONGLEZ PUBLISHING

FRESCOES IN COUVENT DE SAINT-FRANÇOIS

④

A striking contrast between religious austerity and a dreamlike cabinet of curiosities

Paratella
1.5 km south-east of Vico
Open 24/7



The Franciscan monastery at Vico is known for its artworks, classified as Historic Monuments and exhibited in the church and sacristy. They include a polychrome wooden Christ on the Cross known as ‘*U Franciscone*’ (‘The Franciscan’) dating from the late International Gothic period, a tabernacle in marble marquetry which goes back to 1698, a statue of St Anthony of Padua with the Child Jesus and a 1664 chasuble (liturgical garment) attributed to Fra Bonaventura de Perelli. The aisle, however, has a stunning but little-known meeting room covered with whimsical frescoes.

This room used by Monsignor Casanelli of Istria (former owner of the monastery, see below) during his summer breaks is quite a curiosity. There are armfuls of flowers entwined around the balusters and pillars, umbrella pines alongside Egyptian pyramids, all to admire under a blue sky with exotic birds flying by. A striking contrast between the religious austerity of the monks’ cells and this dreamlike cabinet of curiosities.

The room was decorated by painter Aglaé Meuron (1836–1925), whose works can also be found at Palais Fesch–Musée des Beaux-Arts as part of *Allégorie de la Corse* (Meuron is buried in Ajaccio’s marine cemetery, see p. 194).

Sophie and Yves Toti-Lutet, heritage conservation artists, took over the restoration of the frescoes in 2015. The property is open to visitors who are asked to respect this place of worship.



The Franciscan monastery of Vico, at Paratella, was founded in 1481 by Giovan Paolo da Leca, last count of Corsica and one of the last in the struggle against the Republic of Genoa. In the 16th century the chapel of Saint Anthony of Padua was replaced by a church dedicated to St Francis and the existing buildings were restored.

The site was abandoned during the revolutionary period, but Monsignor Casanelli of Istria, owner of the monastery following its sale by the Estates (1836), donated it the same year to the congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. Monsignor Casanelli, who preached in favour of an end to the vendettas that bloodied Corsica, entrusted the restoration of the monastery to Fathers Albini and Guibert, who are responsible for its current appearance.

PLAGE DE SALECCIA

25

Corsican beach where the Normandy landings were filmed for The Longest Day

20217 Saint-Florent

Take shuttle from Saint-Florent port 9am–7pm or 4x4 shuttle from Casta village (12 km from Saint-Florent)

Despite what you might think, the iconic movie *The Longest Day* was not shot in Normandy but in the Agriates desert on the superb Plage de Saleccia.

The cult scenes of the D-Day landings of American troops on 6 June 1944 were not recreated at Omaha Beach in Normandy: the bloodiest episode of Operation Overlord was filmed in June 1961 in northern Corsica ... as proved by the unpublished photos of renowned Ajaccian photographer Toussaint Tomasi (shown only during exhibitions of the Tomasi studio once every two or three years) and film footage from producer Darryl F. Zanuck.

As too many houses could be seen from the nearby beaches, Normandy was vetoed in favour of Corsica. Saleccia had wild natural surroundings, but the good weather, blue skies and beauty of the place were out of sync with this tragic stage of the war. So Zanuck decided that the shoot would be in black and white, a choice that made the movie even more powerful.

In his book *La Corse, les Corses et le Cinéma*, Jean-Pierre Mattei, founder of the Porto-Vecchio cinema, Casa di Lume (House of Light), recalls Zanuck's arrival on the island: 'The arrival of the producer in Corsica is quite an event. The importance of the project, its international distribution, places the island in the crosshairs of the world of cinema. He personally comes to direct the landing shots ...'.

Accompanied by 18 cameramen and his team of directors, Zanuck did indeed oversee the shots of the first assault. In all, 70 boats were manoeuvring in the Mediterranean, including a replica of the famous flagship that was in Normandy on 6 June 1944.



BUILDING AT No. 1 RUE BALTHAZAR ARRIGHI

8

The forgotten story of Corsica's first university

Calanches district,
20250 Corte



Walking through Calanches district towards the belvedere, you can't miss the imposing building at No. 1 Rue Balthazar Arrighi. Between 1764 and 1768 this was Corsica's first university. Although history only records the Palazzu Naziunale, at the foot of the Citadelle, as the seat of the institutions of Pascal Paoli's independent Corsica, this building in fact held more classes.

As early as 1757, Paoli, then head of the Corsican nation, dreamed of setting up a university on the island. Worried about the large number of young Corsicans who left to pursue their higher studies in Italy, and wanting to provide access to education for young people from modest families, he launched discussions to realise his ambitious project. His goal was clear: to train a Corsican élite capable of occupying the nation's highest offices.

During consultations in Corte in 1763, the decision was therefore made to establish the first university on the island. It was to be in Corte for convenience, being halfway between Ajaccio and Bastia.

Impoverished students were offered a scholarship of 15 *livres* (pounds) per month and a room in the monastery of the Frères Mineurs de l'Observance. All course material was imported tax free. The first classes to welcome students were held on 7 January 1765 in this large house, which then belonged to the Rossi family. There were courses in rhetoric, philosophy, mathematics, criminology, ethics and theology. Soon medicine, history and geography were added.

The teaching was carried out in Latin by scholarly priests. Sometimes General Paoli attended the lessons. All hopes and dreams were allowed. But the 1768 battle of Borgo, in which French royal troops opposed the armies of the Corsican Republic, spelled the end of the university. The Rossi house was requisitioned as a hospital for French prisoners. The battle of Ponte-Novu in 1769 rang the death knell for the Corsican nation and the house, converted into barracks, was eventually sold to the Da Signori family of Brother Theophilus (see p. 136).

Today the building is privately owned and few people remember that this is where the University of Corsica originated. The present-day institution rose from its ashes in 1981 on the Mariani campus.



STELAS AT SILVARECCIU

50

The secret stones of the Carbonari

20215 Silvarecciu

17 km from Folelli

From Folelli, take direction 'La Porta' and, immediately after bridge, turn right towards Casalta. Past that village, as you arrive at Silvarecciu, on the left is a signpost for the stelas

From there, a 15-minute walk

About 15 minutes on foot from the entrance to Silvarecciu village, in undergrowth with an almost magical atmosphere, is a mysterious group of three stunning stelas engraved with esoteric symbols. These are the remains of a larger site, where in local memory there were about 16 stelas of the same type dating back to the 19th century, before the site was looted. Clerics are also said to be buried there.

The signs engraved on the remaining stones vary widely: a cross, a chalice, a sun, a compass, a heart, the letters IHS (iota eta sigma, Latin monogram of the name of Jesus), an inverted triangle and a five-pointed star with a complex meaning (see following double-page spread).

Does the site refer to a secret society like the Carbonari, present throughout Ampugnani region in the 19th century? Or to another very active secret society in Corsica at the same time, *i topi pinnuti* (bats), also linked to the Carbonari?

Interestingly, in support of the theory of stelas linked to Carbonari rites, there was an iron mine in Casalta that mainly employed Italian specialist workers. But Italian charcoal-makers (*carbonari*) were also brought in to produce the coal for the mining operations. These men may be behind the propagation of the ideas of the Carbonari.



ENTRANCE TO ÉGLISE SANTA MARIA NUNZIATA

36

A little-known masterpiece

20272 Zuani

To visit church, request key at Piantu bar, centre of village, or town hall
04 95 39 62 94



Consisting of two leaves and adorned with sculpted polychrome boxes, the entrance door to the church of Santa Maria Nunziata (St Mary of the Annunciation) in the village of Zuani, dating from the 18th century, is a true masterpiece of chestnut-wood carving. The worked patterns tell the story of the Annunciation. Above the door is the Marian crown with the Archangel Gabriel underneath, leaning over Mary, announcing that she has been chosen as the mother of Jesus. Under this cartouche two cherubs are depicted with golden wings, one with eyes open, the other with eyes closed. There are also scrolls, hearts, leaves and other decorations typical of Baroque art. This exceptional work bears the colours of the Virgin: on the faded background, which was formerly garnet in colour, you can see celestial blue alongside white details and golden angel wings. The door has been listed as a Historic Monument since 1992.

NEARBY

Statue of the pregnant Virgin

37

Another peculiarity is that the church of St Mary of the Annunciation is the only place in Corsica with a statue of the pregnant Virgin Mary: the words *Mostra te esse matrem* (Show that you are a mother / Know how to be a mother) engraved on the base leave no doubt. Dating from the 17th century, the statue is at the back of the church, to the right of the altar. At its foot, below the protruding belly, is another statue. By Santu Tignu, it represents a peasant called Tonio Botta, recognisable by the beret he's clutching. This scene relates the appearance of the Virgin to the peasant near Savona (Italy) on 18 March 1536. This statue in Zuani's church of the Annunciation is a replica of one in the Italian city. The sculptural group has been listed as a Historic Monument since 1995.



REMAINS OF HÔTEL GERMANIA 18

The former competitor of Hôtel de France

20 Cours Grandval,
20000 Ajaccio

On entering the small residential building at No. 20 Cours Grandval, you might be surprised to see the lovely old paintings in the vaulted hallway and the rosettes and four chimeras framing the *trompe-l'œil* dome. These are the last vestiges of Hôtel Germania, the first Station d'Hiver hotel that Gherhard Dietz, from Germany, had built in 1865.

The luxury hotel opened its doors to foreign guests in 1869. From then on it competed with the Hôtel de France (see p. 236) as the only establishment with a reputation the town could be proud of.

Very quickly the Germania, which had all the luxuries this wealthy and unhealthy clientele required, outstripped the Hôtel de France. Germans and British stayed there in droves and soon visitors were flocking from all over Europe, even Russia.

Because of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, the hotel was renamed Hôtel Continental. In 1880 it was sold to Swiss hotelier Théophile Hofer-Vassali. It continued to provide all the comforts of the best establishments: excellent cuisine, a library, a lounge, a smoking room for gentlemen, a rose garden and even the services of a doctor. An annex served as a ballroom.

The influx of visitors was such that the Station d'Hiver needed more establishments for guests. Other hotels soon saw the light of day, including the prestigious Grand Hôtel d'Ajaccio (current headquarters of the Collectivité de Corse / Corsican Assembly).

Hofer-Vassali then took over the management of the Grand Hôtel adjoining the former Germania, relegating it to a simple annex. The high-end clientele flocking to Ajaccio demanded even more comfort and space. The Grand Hôtel, with its 100 en-suite bedrooms and 12,000 m² park, put the Germania (now Continental) in the shade. The proximity of these two establishments only highlighted their difference in standing and the Continental began to decline. The First World War finally ended the life of the first hotel in Ajaccio's Station d'Hiver.



NAPORAMA MUSEUM

22

Napoleonic Playmobils

13 Rue Forcioli Conti, 20000 Ajaccio

info@napo-rama.com

Mon-Fri 10.30am-12.30pm & 3.30pm-7pm, Sat 10.30am-12.30pm

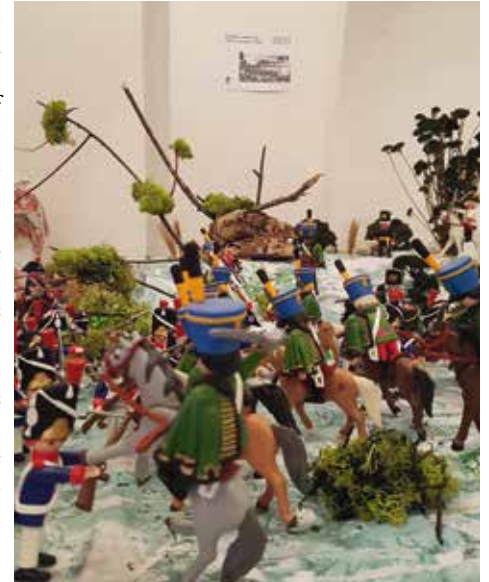


Visiting the Naporama museum is an unusual way to learn about Napoleonic history: all the stages of his exceptional destiny are shown here in a fun way. There are approximately 800 Playmobils and 18 dioramas.

You'll discover, among other things, the famous snowball battle at Brienne school (1783), the siege of Toulon (1793), the Arcole bridge (1796), the battle of the Pyramids (1798), 18 Brumaire or the seizure of power (1799), the crossing of the Grand-Saint-Bernard pass and the battle of Marengo (1800), the attack on Rue Saint Niçaise, the coronation, and much more ...

Napoleon's complex personality is illustrated by a poster with a large number of signatures, all different, that he used throughout his life. The highlight of this unusual collection is an original letter signed 'Nap'.

A plus for children: among these scenarios, the Naporama curator has hidden animals, objects and anachronistic characters for kids to discover. New themes are added to the Naporama museum every year.



BIBLIOTHÈQUE PATRIMONIALE OF AJACCIO 39

The fairytale collection

50–52 Rue Cardinal Fesch, 20000 Ajaccio
Mon–Fri 9am–midday & 2pm–5pm

Ajaccio's remarkable Heritage Library (Bibliothèque patrimoniale), in the left wing of Palais Fesch, was designed by the three architects who built the Imperial Chapel (Jérôme Maglioli, Alexis Paccard and Jean Cazeneuve). Bringing together more than 40,000 works and rare books, it opened its doors in 1868.

The large drawing room, with its impressive walnut panelling, is open to the public and regularly used for conferences. Its imposing wooden spans aligned over 30 metres in length are lit from above by 16 bays



whose dim light gives an intimate atmosphere. Huge tables are placed down the centre of this long room for the use of readers. It's not uncommon to see high-school students towards the end of the school year preparing for their exams under the library's vaulted ceiling.

The entrance has a monumental double-flight staircase, designed by Maglioli, and two plaster lions copied from originals sculpted by Antonio Canova for the tomb of Clement XIII (see previous double page). The library was listed as a Historic Monument in 1986.

Among the rare books in the library are 35 volumes of an unprecedented collection of fairy tales. This is also one of the first systematic collections to give biographical details of the authors. A monumental 41 volumes in total, compiled by Sir Charles-Joseph de Mayer (1751–1825), was published in Amsterdam in 1789 in emulation of the German *Cabinet Der Feen* (Fairy-tale Collection) of 1761. This was in line with the trend for large collections published in the 18th century.

From Perrault to Rousseau, Mayer selected and edited the list of tales, representing no fewer than 100 years of French magic. Having planned two volumes per month, Mayer published a total of 37 volumes between 1785 and 1786, followed by the last four volumes corresponding to tales from the Orient. Each has between 400 and 500 pages and three plates. In all, 31 engravers worked on 120 illustrations. The famous vignette artist Emmanuel de Ghendt alone supplied 20 of them.

Talented painter Clément-Pierre Marillier was employed to make the 120 drawings that would be used for the engravings. This was a real revolution for fairy tales: the illustrations were full page instead of being restricted to a third of the page. Needless to say, *Le Cabinet des fées* was successful from first publication. On 4 June 1785, the monthly *Le Mercure galant* wrote of an eager reception from the public, adding that the collection was made up of priceless works.

This collection based on Cardinal Fesch's bequest belongs to the city of Ajaccio. When the volumes arrived, young Ajaccians could consult them at will. They didn't hesitate to note their personal observations in certain passages. This treasure is now fiercely protected, even though from time to time the city's network of libraries and media outlets gives public showings of some of the tales, such as *L'Histoire du prince Titi*, *La Tour ténébreuse et les jours lumineux*, *Les Voyages de Zulma dans le pays des fées*, *Le Prince glacé et la princesse étincelante*, *Cornichon et Toupette ...*



GLAMPING CORSICA-STYLE

①

A village suspended in the void

L'Ospedale, 20137 Porto-Vecchio

06 19 81 06 19

casanovakarine@orange.fr – glampingcorsica.com

Four spectacular giant cocoons, dreamed up by Karine and Michel, are suspended from the rock over the void facing L'Ospedale lake. This is an unusual (and totally ecological) way for nature lovers to disconnect from the urban world.

These extraordinary bubbles, fixed by a solid system of cables and rods, can each accommodate up to eight people. They were conceived as

a kind of egg where visitors can recharge body and soul.

Access to most of the cocoons is via a suspension bridge between the trees and rocks. Only 'Cocoon 3' can be reached via a narrow dirt road.

Each room has a pretty wooden terrace with an exceptional view over the Gulf of Porto-Vecchio. The mini-village has no running water or electricity. Designed to be completely eco-friendly, the hot water is solar heated. Near the cocoons, a wooden hut has composting toilets and a shower room.

At night, the terraces and suspension bridges are illuminated by solar lamps and the sky is studded with stars.

For the more adventurous, a tree-climbing course and a via ferrata (climbing route) are right there next to the cocoons.



DOMINIQUE MEMMI



SECRET CORSIKA

Discover a forgotten fresco by Marc Chagall in a mountain village, a magnificent American villa where you can spend the night, the superb Corsican beach used as a setting for the D-Day Normandy landings in *The Longest Day* movie, remarkable paintings by a civilian First World War POW, a miniature village built with pebbles, golden hands embedded in the rock a two-hour walk into the mountains, a papier-mâché statue of the Virgin Mary, an unusual pool-table pocket bearing the image of Napoleon, an initiatory menhir in a chapel sacristy, a brick from the Holy Door of a church in Rome, a confessional cleverly hidden behind woodwork, the world's largest citrus fruit collection, the painting of an eagle under a balcony, a Bonaparte family tree made from locks of hair, a sleepover in a lighthouse far from civilisation ...

Corsica is far from the holiday clichés of beaches, mountains and gastronomy: its little-known treasures are only revealed to locals and travellers who are prepared to venture off the beaten track. An essential guide for those who thought they knew the island well or would like to discover its other aspects.

JONGLEZ PUBLISHING

320 PAGES

£14.99

€18,95

US\$21.95

info@junglezpublishing.com

www.junglezpublishing.com

ISBN: 978-2-36195-625-7

