

NICCOLÒ RINALDI AND PAOLA MARESCA



SECRET FLORENCE



JONGLEZ PUBLISHING

TRACES OF THE INTERIOR OF THE PALAZZO DELLA LANA

17

Fourteenth-century frescoes and high vaults ...

Via Calimala, 14r, 16r, 22r

The ground floor of the Palazzo dell'Arte della Lana (the Wool Guild, one of the seven Florentine arts and crafts guilds), in Via Calimala, is now occupied by a row of three shops well worth a visit as



they still have their original interiors.

At number 16r, the frescoes depict some of the stages in wool processing, all the more interesting because few such contemporary views exist.

At 22r, a small chapel is dedicated to the fifteenth-century Italian painter known as Master of the Bargello. On the whole, the rooms have been tastefully restored, in line with detailed conservation restrictions. An effort has even been made to reinstate much of the original colour to the frescoes, although sometimes the touching-up has been rather carelessly done.

At 14r, large blocks of exposed stonework form an entire wall that was part of the street in the Middle Ages, then became the inner wall of a palazzo extension before its current incarnation.

NEARBY

Column of Abundance: a persecuted statue

18

It was difficult to pay tribute to the Roman Goddess of Abundance in Florence, because the ancient statue on a column in the city centre, on the present site of Piazza della Repubblica, had been lost. In 1431 it was replaced with Donatello's *Dovizia* ("Abundance"), complete with a bell to signal the opening and closing of the Mercato Vecchio, and another bell at the end of a chain to which dishonest merchants were attached. But this statue, destroyed in 1721 by subsidence, was in its turn replaced with a work by Giovan Battista Foggini. The column was hidden by part of the market buildings, leaving only the statue visible above roof level.

This column and its statue were later dismantled and the sections dispersed. Then in 1956 a copy of Foggini's statue was erected on a new column in Piazza della Repubblica, where it still stands today, marking the point where three districts converge: Santa Maria Novella, San Giovanni and Santa Croce – the true heart of Florence.

CEILING OF THE PALAGIO DI PARTE GUELFA LIBRARY ARCHIVE

A little-known wonder

Piazzetta di Parte Guelfa

055 2616029 / 2616030

bibliotecapalagio@comune.fi.it

biblioteche.comune.fi.it/biblioteca_palagio_di_parte_guelfa

Monday–Friday 9am–10pm and Saturday 9am–1pm,

Monday 9am–2pm for consultation only

32



The 35,000-volume heritage of Palagio di Parte Guelfa library is housed in a deconsecrated church, Santa Maria di San Biagio.

It has two rooms: the reading room and the superb periodicals archive in the old chapel of San Bartolomeo, which was built in 1345 at the initiative of Canon Federigo di Bartolo Bardi.

Although incomplete, the decorations and scenes of this hall, attributed to the Giotto school, are magnificent.

On the ceiling, against a backdrop of elegant golden lilies on a field of azure (a motif found around the city in memory of its ancestral link with the reigning house of France and in particular with Saint Louis), the emblems of the crafts guilds (*arti*) surround the emblem of Guelph Florence, with the pope's coat of arms in the centre.

The name of the library comes from the neighbouring Palagio di Parte Guelfa, the former palace (*palagio*) and seat of the political faction of the Guelphs in the thirteenth century. The building was enlarged over the following centuries, apparently a project of Brunelleschi, and today it is the centre of the *calcio storico* (an early form of football) and the Florentine Republic's historical costume parade, as well as an exhibition space.

Dating back to 1308, the church of Santa Maria di San Biagio owes its name to the fact that it stood near the Santa Maria gate, one of the entrances to the city in the Carolingian ramparts (ninth century AD). The church was then modified as a meeting-place for the captains of the Guelph faction. Faithful to the papacy, by the end of the thirteenth century the Guelphs had taken over the city to the detriment of the Ghibellines, who were sympathetic to the Holy Roman emperors.

When the palace was built, the church lost its role of meeting-place while retaining its purely religious status. In the fifteenth century it was dedicated to St Blaise (San Biagio). It was subsequently deconsecrated to become, at first, a storage depot for the ceremonial carts for the Palio horse race and the fireworks intended for the traditional Scoppio del Carro ("Explosion of the Cart") Easter ritual; and then, from 1785, the Florentine fire station.

In 1944, it was also the home of Gabinetto Vieusseux, one of Florence's oldest and best-known scientific-literary cultural institutions.

THE MANDORLA DOOR OF FLORENCE CATHEDRAL

⑦

A showcase of Hermetic knowledge

Santa Maria del Fiori Cathedral



In Florence Cathedral, itself a magnificent creation in the Gothic style, sacred and profane art combine to form a tightly woven tissue whose roots are to be found in ancient mysterious knowledge. From the end of the 12th century, following the return of the first Knights Templar from the Holy Land until the start of the 16th century, the Gothic cathedrals flourishing in Europe bore testament to an order which was based on initiation and a language born of wisdom that influenced not only their structure, but also their decorative features in their entirety. Even the building of Gothic cathedrals in the shape of the Roman cross is connected to the art of alchemy – the cross is in fact a symbol of the alchemist’s crucible in which the transformation of matter takes place. In the same way, the large rose window in the centre of the façade is reminiscent of the alchemist’s fire, sometimes called “fire of the wheel”, that constantly provides light but does not burn.

The Cathedral leads us along a spiritual path which forms part of the entire orchestrated universe as we strive towards the transmutation of our inner being. Bringing this objective to fruition is achieved in successive stages, which in allegorical terms amount to carrying out the operations proper to the art of alchemy. As in all Gothic cathedrals, all the symbols hidden among the stones and marble of the Santa Maria del Fiori Cathedral clearly refer to this Royal Art. In particular, the carved reliefs of the entrance doorways form a sort of book written in stone carrying mysterious meanings. The door, by analogy with the solstitial doors of the cosmos, denotes a sort of rite of passage that leads from the profane world to the divine world. This is indicated by the images sculpted in the uprights and in the architectural framework. The figures in relief are connected by twisting vines of vegetation that adorn the marble entrance at the Door of the Mandorla, in accordance with rules inspired by paganism. To the left, on the uprights of the windows, there first appears Apollo with his viol, and then Hercules with his club pointing downwards – on the right a winged Cupid and Venus with a cornucopia are depicted. Venus and the winged Cupid celebrate the power of love, which is a quality inseparable from the alchemic work of transformation, as well as a bringer of spiritual riches, hence the significance of the goddess’s horn of plenty.

A naked man viewed from behind holding a snake in one hand and a mirror in the other is a reference to the alchemic virtue of Prudence; the mirror is a symbol of matter used in the Magnum Opus of alchemy, and the serpent is a reference to the transformation of matter, by analogy with the shedding of its skin. Further symbolic carvings can be found in the uprights. The one with most concealed meaning is on the upright on the left, consisting of four depictions of Hercules: with his club raised, with the Lernaean hydra, with Antaeus, and with the Erymanthian boar. Hercules represents a man who, after pursuing a difficult journey of puri-

CEILING OF THE OLD SACRISTY

26

Painted stars immortalising a specific date

Church of San Lorenzo
Piazza San Lorenzo
055 214042 (Opera Medicea Laurenziana)
Monday–Friday 10am–5pm
Accessible to those of restricted mobility



The star-studded fresco on the cupola of the old sacristy at San Lorenzo captures the appearance of the night sky on a specific date. Exactly the same arrangement of heavenly bodies is to be seen within the cupola of the Pazzi Chapel in Santa Croce church (see p. 216), which is all the more extraordinary as the works were commissioned for two different places by two different families (the Medici and the Pazzi, respectively). The relation between these two night skies long remained a mystery, but recent restoration work and detailed study of the position of the planets and stars, of the ecliptic and its angle, have made it possible to identify the specific night depicted.

The gilding and rich turquoise colour of this fine nocturnal view celebrate July 4, 1442, the day of the arrival in Florence of René of Anjou, the man who – it was hoped – would lead a new crusade against the Infidel. Among his various titles (King of Sicily, King of Hungary, Duke of Bar, King of Anjou and Lorraine, Count of Guise and so on), René – who was the son of the Queen of Spain and brother-in-law to the King of France – possessed a title that was even richer in evocative power: King of Jerusalem. Furthermore, in 1442, René was 33 years old, the same age as Christ when he died on the Cross. However, the hoped-for crusade was not all a question of religion: the Holy Land at the time attracted the interest of various great Florentine families, who were bankers to the papacy, Guef in allegiance (like René himself) and well-versed in overseas trade.

This “fixed” night sky was not created solely with a celebratory function but was also rich in hermetic significance (see p. 218–219). In effect, it was intended to draw on the celestial energy of Jerusalem and “crystallise” it within the vault of the sacristy. The maintenance of this energy would thus support Florence’s claim to the heritage of ancient Jerusalem and at the same time justify its temporal ambitions. The fresco has been attributed to Giuliano d’Arrigo – known as *Il Pesello* – who was famous for his paintings of animals. However, such a prodigious scheme also required the services of a highly skilled astronomer: Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli (1397–1482), who was an eminent Florentine scientist as well as being “astrologist” to Cosimo de’ Medici and a friend of Filippo Brunelleschi (architect of both cupolas). These relations between scientists and artists give an insight into the fervent religious life of fifteenth-century Florence, and partly explain the interest of these two astronomical frescoes. They are not just expressions of artistic skill but an assertion of the divinatory role of astronomy: the stars indicate “the way”, while the architectural form – in particular, the curved vault of a cupola – is seen as creating a chamber of meditation that can enclose the cosmic forces capable of exerting an influence on earthly events.

“POSTERS” AT PALAZZO VIVIANI 28

Baroque cartelloni in honour of Galileo

Via Sant'Antonio 11

This curiosity is ideal if you have half an hour to spare before your train leaves: just a short walk from the station of Santa Maria Novella, the narrow and bustling Via Sant'Antonio near the San Lorenzo market contains Palazzo Viviani, which is known as Palazzo dei Cartelloni because of its rather strange façade. Viviani was a famous seventeenth-century mathematician and he had the front of the building covered with three inscribed “posters” (*cartelloni*): one to either side and a smaller one in the middle. The Latin texts are by Viviani himself and describe and celebrate the astronomical discoveries and inventions of Galileo: the telescope, the “Medici planets” (actually moons of Jupiter), Sun spots, the resistance of solids, projectile trajectory, a proposed

solution to the problem of calculating longitude at sea. These are all depicted in the bas-reliefs that surmount the main doorway, together with a bust of the great astronomer by the sculptor Giovan Battista Foggini.

But Viviani did not use the *cartelloni* simply to praise Galileo's scientific achievements; he was also concerned to stress his faith and moral probity. Hence, these inscriptions have something of the air of a political manifesto. Having died while still suspected of heresy, Galileo had not even had the right to a proper funerary monument, and two centuries later he was still susceptible to contemptuous attacks by the Church.

Another curiosity is that this palazzo seems to have been built on the site of the home of the Del Giocondo family, who commissioned Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, also known as *La Gioconda* after the sitter's family name.



TORNABUONI CHAPEL'S GIRAFFE

③

Tornabuoni chapel's giraffe "camelopardo"

*Santa Maria Novella church
Piazza di Santa Maria Novella
Weekdays 9am–5.30pm, Friday 11am–5.30pm, Saturday 9am 5pm, Sunday
and public holidays 1pm 5pm*

The Medici, in common with other aristocrats of the time, had no hesitation in exhibiting exotic animals at public events or to entertain important guests.

Even the Marzocco, a heraldic symbol of Florence and of the Roman founding colonies, is a lion. As long as the Medici ran the city,



several lions were kept in a menagerie near the Palazzo Vecchio, still known as Via dei Leoni ("Lions Street"), representing the power and strength of Florence.

In 1487, a strange new animal came to enrich the Medici wildlife collection. Sultan Qaitbay of Egypt, on an official visit to the city, gave Lorenzo de' Medici a giraffe, described as "seven arms" high, with "feet like an ox" and so docile that it could harmlessly take an apple from a child's hand.

That wasn't the first time a giraffe had visited Florence – one had arrived in 1459, apparently for an exotic hunt. But this novelty aroused such curiosity among the citizens that the giraffe was exhibited several times in the streets before finally finding refuge in the cloister of a convent.

The latest giraffe's notoriety was such that Florentine Renaissance painter Ghirlandaio included it in his *Adoration of the Magi* in the Tornabuoni chapel of Santa Maria Novella (Andrea del Sarto did the same with his *Julius Caesar Receives Tribute* fresco in the Villa Medici at Poggio a Caiano, near Florence).

Sadly, the animal failed to adapt to Florence's harsh winter climate and died on January 2, 1488.



ISTITUTO GEOGRAFICO MILITARE ⑫

Il quartier generale della cartografia

Via Cesare Battisti 10

Consultazione su appuntamento, dal lunedì al venerdì ore 9-13

Telefono: 055 2732244

Basta una breve telefonata per fissare un appuntamento e poter visitare, in pieno centro, un ambiente che è tutto un mondo, anzi, mille mondi. Questo tesoro, raccolto tra piazza San Marco e la Santissima Annunziata, è l'Istituto Geografico Militare, gloria nazionale costituitasi a Firenze a seguito del trasferimento della capitale sull'Arno. Tra i primi compiti affidatigli, vi fu la realizzazione della prima carta topografica dell'Italia unita, in scala 1:100.000, un progetto vastissimo che fu portato a compimento in ben trent'anni. Oggi è un paradiso non solo degli amanti della cartografia, ma di tutti i viaggiatori o anche solo curiosi. Sono ormai quasi

150 anni che l'Istituto ha sede negli ampi spazi di questo palazzo seicentesco, che ospita una favolosa collezione di atlanti storici e globi. Ma c'è di tutto: duecentomila libri, un vastissimo fondo fonografico, carte non solo geografiche ma anche corografiche, idrologiche, geologiche – non solo dell'Italia e dell'Europa, ma del mondo intero. Splendido è il salone centrale dell'istituto, un tempo un vero cenacolo, con affreschi seicenteschi e arredato con due pareti di biblioteca monumentale lungo lo spazio centrale sul quale sono dislocati numerosi globi. L'istituto non è solo una biblioteca storica e un museo di cartografia, ma anche un'avanzata e tuttora attiva realtà scientifica, con compiti di aggiornamento cartografico grazie a speciali strumenti scientifici di cui dispone. Il personale militare è molto cortese, il silenzio assicurato, e i grandi locali di norma frequentati da pochissime persone. Eppure si ha la sensazione che tutto il mondo si sia dato appuntamento in questo istituto, al quale non sfugge niente, non ha perso nessuna informazione e rappresentazione del nostro pianeta e dei suoi popoli – insomma, una sorta di tempio di cosmopolitismo.



PALAZZO BARGELLINI

⑥

Among the mayor's mementoes of the flood

Via delle Pinzochere, 3
055 241724
Visits by appointment



Just a stone's throw from Piazza Santa Croce is the home of Piero Bargellini: Palazzo da Cepparello, dating from the sixteenth century, built in a style close to that of Giuliano da Sangallo and Baccio d'Agnolo.

Piero Bargellini (1897–1980), writer and historian, deputy in the Italian parliament, and mayor of Florence at the time of the 1966 flood, acquired this palazzo in 1946 as a base for his many activities. His offices are in two large rooms with high coffered ceilings, decorated with half a dozen fourteenth-century frescoes from the church of Santo Stefano alle Busche in Poggio alla Malva – itself well worth a visit. In this residence, everything strikingly evokes Bargellini's work and human presence, such as the two pianos still played by his grandson, the famous pianist Gregorio Nardi, who (with his wife) is now the curator. Then there is the library, with its tens of thousands of letters, and a vast collection of books on the history of Florence. Bargellini was one of the first historians to systematically study certain local features such as the city's *tabernacoli* (street tabernacles) and place names.

Several curious mementoes are also on display, such as the bag carried by the future mayor's wife during their Corsican honeymoon in 1929, when they travelled on foot and stayed with local people. The young couple were so emaciated on their return that their families made them take a month's cure at a specialist clinic. Bargellini's simple and sober personality is reflected above all in his extensive correspondence.

Besides testimonies of friendship with the personalities who regularly visited his home, such as René Clair, Roberto Rossellini, Carla Fracci and Jean Gabin, there are innumerable letters from Florentines who approached the mayor to ask all sorts of favours, ranging from safeguarding the city's artistic heritage (the Historical Association of Friends of Museums started life here) to help with personal matters. In their letters, some referred to agreements “made in tram No. 14” (Bargellini used public transport) or begged for money to meet their daily expenses, especially after the great flood of 1966, when the mayor asked his fellow citizens to write directly to him to circumvent bureaucratic delays.

Every detail in Via delle Pinzochere brings to life not only the great humanity of the intellectual who lived there, but also the Florentine society of his time.



SALONE DEGLI SCHELETRI

8

Museum of horrors

Museo della Specola, Via Romana, 17

msn.unifi.it

9.30am–4.30pm; closed Monday, January 1, Easter Sunday,

May 1, August 15 and Christmas Day

Admission to the Skeleton Room, requiring telephone booking (055 2346760),

Monday–Saturday 9am–5pm, according to availability



The Museo della Specola is a little gem. First there are the anatomical statues in wax by Susini and Ferrini – one of the rare collections in the world, although there are two other little-known examples in Paris and Venice (see our guides *Secret Paris* and *Secret Venice*). But this museum also has a depiction of a decomposing head, which the Syracuse-born artist Zumbo based on a real skull; some rather disturbing *teatri della peste* (plague theatres); and a collection of stuffed animals. Furthermore, in what used to be the stables on the ground floor, you can now once more visit the astonishing Salone degli Scheletri (Skeleton Room 55), an even more staggering space that has been closed to the public for years. With a name that sounds like the title of a horror film, this room has a spectacular collection of animal skeletons contained within 120 glass display cases, arranged like so many huge pieces of furniture. The largest are those of a whale (a sperm whale to be precise) and an elephant, the former suspended from the ceiling to form a sort of aerial exhibit, and the latter set in the centre of the room. There are also various human skeletons – those of a woman, several men and a number of children. The 40 metre by 7 metre space itself gives the impression of extended perspective, which means that the skeletons have an even more dramatic impact. A period loggia provides further raised exhibition space, thus heightening the impression of being completely surrounded by skeletons. The room is sometimes used for night-time performances.



THE ZODIAC OF SAN MINIATO

23

San Miniato's zodiac

Via delle Porte Sante, 34

Phenomenon can be viewed annually on June 21

Monday–Saturday 9.30am–1pm and 3pm–7pm, Sunday 3pm–7pm



The marble zodiac on the floor of the basilica of San Miniato al Monte (St Minias on the Mountain) dates back to 1207 and was long regarded simply as a decorative motif modelled on the one in the Baptistry (no longer in use, see p. 106).

In 2011, however, meridian expert Simone Bartolini discovered that this zodiac was one of the oldest solstitial markers in Europe. Although there is abundant documentation on the Baptistry and the Duomo meridians, little was known about the one in San Miniato.

The phenomenon occurs only on June 21, but emotions run so high that it's worth planning a visit on that day. At 1.53 pm, close to solar noon, the sunray that penetrates through a small window to the right forms a sword of light that slowly but accurately comes to rest on the sign of Cancer (the zodiacal division that begins around the feast day of St John the Baptist, patron saint of Florence). After a few minutes, the ray moves on and the effect disappears. This brief moment reveals phenomena such as the movement of the Earth, the perfect synchronisation of this movement with the Sun, and the remarkable layout of the building that captures the summer solstice so precisely. Some even say that the venerable zodiac of San Miniato comes alive at that moment.

Thus the zodiac on the floor in front of the altar becomes the central element of an edifice that was built in order to respond to a precise relationship with the stars, confirming the link between medieval spirituality and oriental mysticism. Remember that St Minias was himself of Greek or Armenian origin.

Indeed the cult of the zodiac had Babylonian origins before Christianity appropriated it. The basilica of San Miniato is itself oriented from west to east, like many other churches until the end of the thirteenth century, to allow worshippers to pray facing east, just as the Cross of Calvary lay to the east. Moreover, this zodiac, with the phrase *haec est porta coeli* ("this is the gate of heaven"), invites further research on the true meaning of the various demons that adorn the mosaics of the basilica, or the Holy Grail painted on the vases above the doors.

The reverential atmosphere of San Miniato makes the phenomenon even more impressive than Toscanelli's "hole" in the cathedral (see p. 80).

MASONIC SYMBOLS IN THE GARDENS OF THE STIBBERT MUSEUM ③

An open-air Masonic lodge

Via Federico Stibbert, 26

April to October 8am–7pm; November to March 8am–5pm

Closed on Thursdays, January 1, Easter Sunday, May 1, August 15 and Christmas Day



The Stibbert gardens are situated in the northern part of Florence on the gentle hill of Montughi. They are named after their creator, Frederick Stibbert, who was well-educated, liberal and a Freemason. The gardens he had laid out around his villa contain many hidden meanings. In fact, they almost constitute a sort of rite of passage, a path punctuated with sculptures, architectural objects and living plants that reveal their secrets as you progress through the stages.

The path is characterised by different levels of spiritual aspiration. Starting with a descent, the journey challenges one to become immersed in the depths of one's being in order later to progress back up towards the light in accordance with the classic formula of *ex tenebris lux*. A small grotto hollowed into the wall is a reference to the alchemical process of *nigredo*.

In the lower part, on the banks of an artificial lake, stands a small temple in the style of the Egyptian Revival, a subtle reminder of a Masonic temple. The Egyptian style serves to emphasise the sacred significance of the place because Egypt was actually considered by Freemasons to be the birthplace of the ancient mysteries, while the waters, according to Hermetic symbology, are a symbol of purification. Crossing the waters is one of the trials of initiation – in baptism it is water that saves and transforms, a symbol of dying and rebirth. On the threshold of the temple six sphinxes watch over the entrance. The building is perfectly aligned along a west–east axis and reached by a path of trampled earth located on the west side, so that on entering one is facing towards the rising sun. The path then climbs, passing between two columns, a reference to the Jachin and Boaz columns of Solomon's Temple.

At the end of the walk stands an elegant small Greek temple with eight pilasters. The number eight refers to rebirth, while the small lions' heads at the top of the columns symbolise the Sun. In the centre is a statue of Flora depicted as a young woman in the frenzy of an ecstatic dance. The blossoming of nature was attributed to Flora, who symbolised eternal youth. The goddess evokes spiritual rebirth and the expansion of consciousness, which is often compared to the blossoming of plants. Thus, Flora's dance is a celebration at the end of the initiation journey after achieving knowledge and a new interior wholeness.



NICCOLÒ RINALDI AND PAOLA MARESCA



SECRET

FLORENCE

Commune with yourself in a prison church, learn how Florence became the capital of hermeticism during the Renaissance, escape the crowds of tourists to contemplate little-known artistic masterpieces, stroll through superb private gardens that even the Florentines are unaware of, marvel at an exceptional astronomical phenomenon, learn about the esoteric symbolism of the Boboli Gardens, get your children to count the number of bees carved on the monument to the glory of Ferdinand I, look out for medieval wine counters in the streets, admire one of the city's most beautiful sculptures within a secret Templar church ...

Far from the crowds and usual clichés, Florence has many little-known treasures that are revealed only to local residents or visitors who know how to leave the beaten track far behind.

An essential guide for those who think they know the city well or for those wishing to discover its hidden aspects.

Cover photo: © Jebulon

JONGLEZ PUBLISHING

320 PAGES

£14.99

€18.95

US\$21.95

info@jonglezpublishing.com

www.jonglezpublishing.com

ISBN: 978-2-36195-561-8

