

# SECRET FLORENCE



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## TRACES OF THE INTERIOR OF THE PALAZZO DELLA LANA

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*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*

16

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

50

*A little-known wonder*

*Piazzetta di Parte Guelfa*

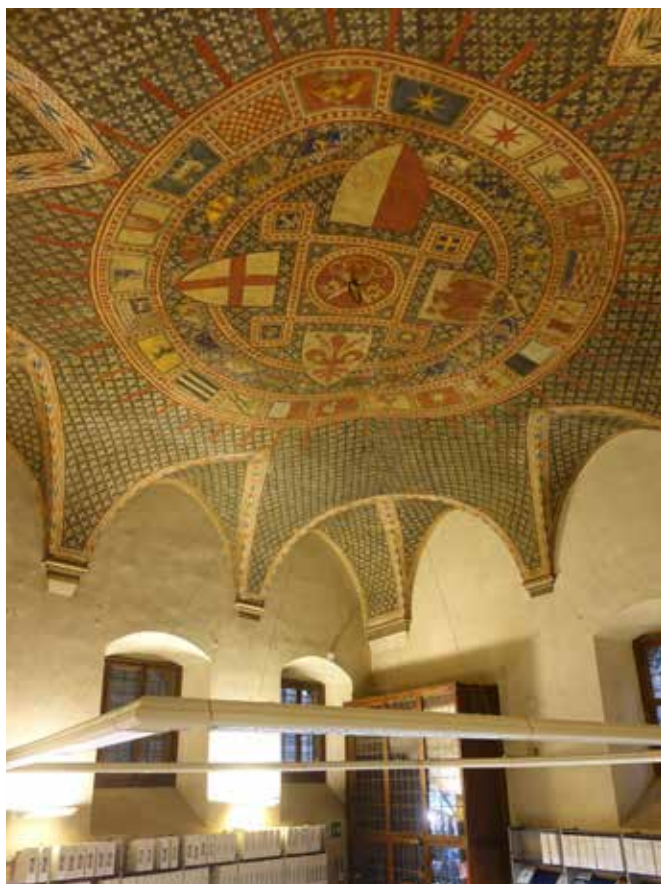
*Open Monday–Friday from 9am to 10pm and Saturday 9am to 1pm,*

*Monday from 9am to 2pm for consultation only*

*Tel: 055 2616029 / 2616030*

*bibliotecapalagio@comune.fi.it*

*www.biblioteche.comune.fi.it/biblioteca\_palagio\_di\_parte\_guelfa/*



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.

# MUSEO DI CASA MARTELLI

22

## House of marvels

Via Ferdinando Zannetti, 8

Open Thursday from 2pm to 7pm, Saturday 9am to 2pm, and the first, third and fifth Sundays of the month 9am to 2pm

Tel: 055 216725

[www.bargellomusei.beniculturali.it](http://www.bargellomusei.beniculturali.it)



What happens if a patrician mansion, concealed in a narrow street in the city centre, has no private garden? At Casa Martelli, the problem was solved by painting a salon to look like a large open-air garden. The visual effect of this multicoloured fresco, with its profusion of balustrades, fountains and panoramic views, is as exhilarating as any *trompe l'œil*. But the garden room isn't the only highlight of the museum, which holds paintings by Brueghel the Younger, Luca Giordano, Piero di Cosimo, Salvator Rosa, Beccafumi and other great masters. All the rooms have been conceived as "events" in their own right: the yellow lounge and the red lounge, the "Pucci boudoir" with its "grottoes", the bathroom with its bucolic scenes, a spectacular grand staircase, the ballroom, the chapel and the impressive picture gallery. As in the Pitti Palace's Palatine Gallery, numerous canvases are displayed in this large first-floor room: they cover the walls completely, with some unexpected juxtapositions. The current appearance of this residence dates back to the early eighteenth century, when the Martelli family commissioned architect Bernardino Ciurini, painters Vincenzo Meucci, Bernardo Minozzi and Niccolò Contestabile, and stucco artist Giovan Martino Portogalli, to create a circular itinerary to impress their guests. The uniqueness of Casa Martelli is not only due to the quality of its art collection, but the theatrical way that the works are displayed by category and dominant colour scheme. Every room has a frescoed ceiling with rigorous iconography that tells a story; complemented with period furniture and tapestries. The Martelli family was among the most important in the city, enjoying close contacts with the Medicis and the great Florentine artists. Treasures such as Donatello's *David* and the coats of arms of the House of Martelli were exhibited in their home over a long period before being transferred to the Museo Nazionale del Bargello. Other works must have been dispersed in 1986, when the last of the Martelli line, Francesca, bequeathed the palazzo to the Curia of Florence, which sold it to the Italian state in 1998.



## “POSTERS” AT PALAZZO VIVIANI 24

### *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.



## CEILING OF THE OLD SACRISTY

28

*Painted stars immortalising a specific date*

Church of San Lorenzo

Piazza San Lorenzo

Tel: 055 214042 (Opera Medicea Laurenziana)

Open Monday–Friday from 10am to 5pm

Admission €2.50; free for children under 6 years

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. 196), 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. 196-197). 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.

## TORNABUONI CHAPEL'S GIRAFFE ②

### *Tornabuoni chapel's giraffe “camelopard”*

*Santa Maria Novella church*

*Piazza di Santa Maria Novella*

*Open: weekdays from 9am to 5.30pm, Fridays 11am to 5.30pm, Saturdays 9am to 5pm, Sundays and public holidays 1pm to 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 (Street of the Lions), 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

### *Headquarters of Italian cartography*

Via Cesare Battisti, 10

Admission by appointment Monday -Friday from 9am to 1pm

Tel: 055 2732244

A simple phone appointment will allow you to visit a place which is set within the old city centre and yet is itself an entire world – indeed, universe. Concealed between Piazza San Marco and Piazza della Santissima Annunziata, the Istituto Geografico Militare is a true national treasure, set up here when Florence was capital of the Kingdom of Italy (from 1865 to 1870). Indeed, one of the first tasks undertaken by the new institute was the production of the first topographical map of a united Italy; to a scale of 1:100,000, this was an immense project that took more than thirty years' work to complete. The institute is fascinating not only for those with a

passionate interest in cartography, but also for those who are merely curious about antique planispheres and atlases; the wonderful examples here have been housed in the magnificent rooms of this seventeenth-century palazzo for almost 150 years now. The collection also contains 200,000 books and a substantial body of photographic material, as well as geographical, chorographical, hydrological and geological maps of Italy, Europe and the entire world. The large salon, which used to be the meeting-place of a famous cenacle, is magnificently decorated with seventeenth-century frescoes and lined on two sides with monumental bookcases; the space in the middle of the room is occupied with various globes. Whilst housing a historic library and museum of cartography, the place is also a fully functional scientific institution, whose task is to constantly update cartography on the basis of the scientific instruments available. The military personnel are friendly and helpful; and whilst the silence of these vast rooms reveals that they attract few visitors, you somehow get the impression that the whole of the world is gathered there.





## PALAZZO BARGELLINI

⑥

*Among the mayor's mementoes of the flood*

Via delle Pinzochere, 3  
Visits by appointment  
Tel: 055 241724



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

[www.msn.unifi.it](http://www.msn.unifi.it)

Open 9.30am to 4.30pm; closed Monday, 1 January, Easter Sunday,  
1 May, 15 August and 25 December

Admission to the museum: €6 (full price) and €3 (concessions) • Admission  
to the Skeleton Room, requiring telephone booking (055 2346760), Monday-  
Saturday from 9am to 5pm, according to availability

Cost of the (obligatory) guided tour: €30 for groups up to a maximum of thirty



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.



## BASILICA OF SAN MINIATO AL MONTE

24

### *San Miniato's zodiac*

Via delle Porte Sante, 34 • Phenomenon can be viewed annually on June 21  
Church open 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. 88).

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. 71).