

FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD

This itinerary is one of our favourites. It is entirely concentrated in a small area of the town, north of the Cathedral and develops along the axis of the Via Cavour to the Piazza San Marco and to the left of the Monastery into via degli Arazzieri. Not only is it a concentrated piece of sightseeing without dispersion of time getting from one place to another, it is also in many ways Renaissance in a nutshell.

Convent of San Marco- Piazza San Marco 3 (Open Mon-Fri. 8.15-13.50, Sat 8.15-19.30 Closed I-III-V Sunday of the month and II and IV Monday of each month. Entrance ticket 4 Euro)

The Convent stands to the right of the Church and was donated to the Dominican order by Cosimo de' Medici who confiscated it from the Silvestrian monks who had driven the place to rack and ruin during the 14th century. It is a haven of peace and a jewel. We suggest you start by crossing the cloister and go to the bookshop, opposite which on the large wall stands the magnificent **Last Supper by Domenico del Ghirlandaio**. It is the last version of three examples (the first is in a monastery in Badia a Passignano and not visible to the general public, the other, in the refectory of the Ognissanti convent). From here ascend the red carpeted steps to the first floor. Upon arriving at the top of the stairs you will be faced by the beautiful Annunciation by one of the foremost Renaissance painters, **Fra Angelico**, a monk in the Convent in the mid 15th century. This floor was assigned to the monks as living quarters and as you go from cell to cell you will be able to see the incredible job Fra Angelico and his assistant Benozzo Gozzoli did, frescoing each one. It always reminds one of the concept of posters in your room at boarding school! The frescos were meant also to have a didactic function and you will see Fra Angelico's treatment of good and evil (notice the devils squashed behind the door as resurrected Christ opens it for the good to access). In some of the chambers you will notice that a lower level was discovered after restoration works were carried out to reveal earlier frescos dating back to the Silvestrian monastery. The last chamber was the residence chamber of Fra Girolamo Savonarola, a friar from the city of Ferrara who attempted and succeeded for a while to impose a sombre rigour on the city until the Florentines had had enough and burned him! On the opposite end of the row of cells, the double chamber which had been the place where Cosimo retired for meditation and prayer. On the same floor the beautiful newly reopened room dedicated to the minatured codexes hand-painted by the monks. Returning to the lower floor you will find a large fresco of the Crucifixion by Fra Angelico and two painting museums dedicated to those artists that worked within the convent walls. However by far the most interesting is undoubtedly the one room containing the painted panels by Fra Angelico. Here many panels gold based (testifying the rich patrons that backed his work) recount the scenes from the life of Christ or the pain of the Deposition. A jewel amongst jewels is undoubtedly the wonderful substitution of the sick-leg on behalf of the Doctors Saints Cosma and Damien, the patron Saints of the Medici Family.

Walking away from San Marco it is important to understand the incredible symbolic value of this place. The Medicis assigned the refurbishment of the building to the young architect Michelozzo, up until then unknown. Later it was to be Michelozzo to build the Medici Palace on the Via Cavour and Fra Angelico's assistant Benozzo Gozzoli, to decorate the wonderful Chapel of the Magi within the palace. Here you can get a sense of Renaissance architecture, colour palette (the cream plaster, the red terracotta of the floors and grey stone of the columns and stairs); here you can sense how during those years of incredible flourishing of the arts, young artists were employed, helped, sponsored and exchanged in a creative dance which gave this city fame for hundreds of years.

Cenacolo di Sant'Apollonia - Via XXVII Aprile, just beyond the crossing with Via San Gallo. (Open Daily from 8.15 to 13.50. Entrance free.) This small museum, hidden away in what was

the refectory of the Convent of Sant'Apollonia now dismembered and part of which currently belongs to the University. The masterpiece is the **Last Supper** painted by **Andrea del Castagno** around 1450. The great fresco is dramatic and the figures dark and almost as though conscious of a dark predicament. Notice the fabulous painted fake-marble panelling along the back wall.

Chiostro dello Scalzo, Via Cavour 69. (Open Mon, Thurs, and Sat 8.15-13.50 Entrance free)

The curious name (cloister of the Barefoot) comes from the name of the Confraternity which had its headquarters here and who went in procession barefoot. This little hidden treasure is often closed but it is a unique example of grisaille fresco. **Andrea del Sarto** dedicated this cycle to scenes of the life of St John the Baptist and painted the frescos over a long period due to constant travels, between 1510 and 1526.

Cappella dei Magi, Palazzo Medici Riccardi, Via Cavour. (Open daily 9-19.00. Closed on Wednesdays. Entrance fee 4 Euro) The Chapel is on the first floor of this building which is today the official residence of the Prefect of Florence but was once the Palace of the Medici Family. The tiny Chapel was for the private use of the Medici family and was built by Michelozzo who also designed the coffered ceiling, the floor and the pews. In 1459, **Benozzo Gozzoli** painted the scene of the Coming of the Magi, but the scene is that of the parade which took place in honour of the visit of King John VII Paleologus in order to discuss a temporary reunion of the Western and Eastern Christian Churches. The result is a wonderful decoration with the effect of a magnificent wall-paper but many of the figures are in fact portraits of truly existed people.

On the ground floor in a side-room off the courtyard, is an impressive virtual presentation of the fresco, where visitors can point at figures in the painting and obtain an explanation as to their identities and the chronology of events.