

The image shows the interior of a crypt, characterized by a series of repeating arches. The arches are constructed from red brick, with the brickwork following a herringbone pattern. The arches are supported by thick, grey stone columns. The columns are topped with decorative, carved capitals. The lighting is dramatic, with the arches and columns highlighted against a dark background, creating a sense of depth and architectural grandeur.

**SAN GIOVANNI  
IN CONCA  
THE CRYPT**

In the center of Piazza Missori rise the remains of the ancient basilica of San Giovanni in Conca, an illustrious witness of Milanese history and art from the fourth- to the seventeenth-centuries. Deconsecrated by the Austrians, closed definitively by the French, and turned into a storeroom for hardware and carts, it was subjected to mutilations, theft of art works, and demolition from the Unification of Italy (1861) until the Second World War. Today, only some parts of the eleventh-century church survive: the apse, reduced in the twentieth-century to an affected ruin, and the entire crypt, one of the few examples dating to this period still extant in Milan. In the crypt, Roman and medieval finds may be admired.

Within the Roman walls of the city, arose a basilica dedicated to S. John the Evangelist in the Early Christian - or, according to some, Early Medieval - period. "In Conca" ("in the shell") was added to the name of the basilica perhaps because of the downward slope of the terrain. The basilica measured 53 x 7 meters, and its ground-plan had a single nave with a semi-circular apse, the foundations of which are still visible. It was reconstructed, using the same proportions, in the eleventh-century. After its destruction in 1162 by the emperor Frederick Barbarossa, it again was reconstructed in the thirteenth-century, but this time the basilica, flanked by a bell tower 24 meters high, had a ground-plan with three naves, a transept, and a central cupola. On the facade, a niche housed the bust of S. John the Evangelist represented as if he were in the huge pot of boiling oil in which, according to tradition, the emperor Domitian is said to have caused him be immersed, and yet the saint reportedly suffered no pain. The elegance of the church so pleased the Visconti that, in the fourteenth-century, they extended the walls surrounding their elegant residence, called the "Ca' di can" ("House of Dogs"), to include it, thereby making the basilica their own private chapel. Here, enclosed by sumptuously frescoed walls, Regina Beatrice della Scala was buried in 1384, followed a year later by her husband, Bernabò Visconti, poisoned at Trezzo d'Adda by his nephew, Gian Galeazzo.

In 1531, Francesco II Sforza donated the church to the Carmelites who built their monastery nearby, constructed a bell tower, and commissioned the decoration of the interior and the facade in the Baroque style.



Marcantonio Dal Re, engraving, 1734. The facade of the church presents the Baroque modifications of Francesco Castelli, from 1662-1668.

## THE ART WORKS FROM SAN GIOVANNI IN CONCA



Pavement mosaic, III century A.D. (Milan, Civiche Raccolte Archeologiche). A rare Milanese example of polychrome figurative mosaic, it was discovered in 1881 during the archaeological excavations conducted by Pompeo Castelfranco underneath the central nave of the church, and, like the cistern still preserved in the crypt, was part of a Roman residential zone in the area of Piazza Missori.



Sarcophagus fragment with a male, heroic nude figure, marble, III-IV centuries (Milan, San Giovanni in Conca, crypt). The relief is of unknown origin. The figure, perhaps a warrior with a mantle (chlamys) over his nude body, recalls a refined type of mythological reliefs usually tied to court circles, and is rather rare in the Milanese sphere of influence.



Sarcophagus fragment with a figure wearing a toga, marble, end of III-beginning of IV centuries (Milan, San Giovanni in Conca, crypt). The origin of this piece also is unknown. Nevertheless, the type of toga (called "contabulate" because of the articulated band across the chest) and the iconography of the person (standing, with a scroll in lowered hand) recall typical models of the period amply represented also within the cisalpine sphere of influence.



Cornice fragment with brackets and coffers from an unidentified building, marble, second half I-II centuries A.D. (Milan, San Giovanni in Conca, crypt). The balanced structural composition and chiaroscuro of the molding (a multi-level Corinthian style architrave with rosettes, acanthus leaves, dentils and astragals) displays the high quality of the decorative aspects of Roman buildings in Milan.



Opus sectile pavement fragment, white marble and basalt, IV-VI centuries (Milan, San Giovanni in Conca, crypt). The fragment of black hexagons and white triangles is the only surviving example of the pavement of the Early Christian basilica. It was discovered under the central nave of the church by Pompeo Castelfranco in 1881.



Wall of a frescoed tomb, V-VI centuries (Milan, Castello Sforzesco, Museo di Arte Antica). The fresco, one of the very few documents of Early Christian painting preserved in Milan, shows symbolic figures which allude to death and the resurrection of the soul.



Funerary epigraph, marble, VII century (Milan, Castello Sforzesco, Museo di Arte Antica). The tomb slab of the Longobard nobleman, Aldo, brother-in-law of Queen Teolinda, was discovered during the demolition of the bell tower of the church in 1885. It possibly was decorated with stone and colored glass paste intarsia.



Lombard workshop, pilaster capital with animal figures, limestone, XI-XII centuries (Milan, San Giovanni in Conca, crypt). The composition of the pilaster (upper part: interwoven design; lower part: two wild beasts facing each other) belongs to the flourishing Romanesque sculptural school which finds its most articulated expressions in the Basilica of Sant' Ambrogio.

S. John the Evangelist, marble, beginning of the XIV century (Milan, Castello Sforzesco, Museo di Arte Antica). The bust remained in the niche over the rose window of the church until 1948 when the façade was dismantled and transferred to the front of the Waldensian temple in via Francesco Sforza.



Campionesse Master, funeral monument of Beatrice Regina della Scala, marble, ca. 1385 (Milan, Castello Sforzesco, Museo di Arte Antica). The sarcophagus of the wife of Bernabò Visconti (decorated with the "Pietà of Christ Flanked by Two Angels" and "SS. John the Evangelist and Luke" on the long side, and with the "Cross" on the short side) was removed from the crypt in the nineteenth-century.



Bonino da Campione and workshop, funeral monument of Bernabò Visconti, marble, partial polychrome and gilding with gold and silver, 1360-1385 (Milan, Castello Sforzesco, Museo di Arte Antica). The sculpture, born as an equestrian sculpture of Bernabò in parade armour, and placed in the apse of the church, was added to the sarcophagus after Visconti's death. It is one of the masterpieces of fourteenth-century sculpture.

Lombard master, "Annunciation", fresco, end of XIII-beginning of XIV centuries (Milan, Castello Sforzesco, Museo di Arte Antica). Precious testimony of Lombard painting, the "Annunciation" was placed on the triumphal arch of the church whose naves were decorated with frescoes depicting the "Stories of S. John the Evangelist".



A singular and tragic destiny awaited the building of S. Giovanni in the following centuries. Deconsecrated, and turned into a store room at the beginning of the nineteenth-century, it had the honor of returning to the center of public attention in 1877, when the city decided to extend the new Via Carlo Alberto (today Via Mazzini) through the area occupied by the church. After violent discussions, the project of architect Angelo Colla was approved in which a modified version of the facade was applied obliquely to the drastically shortened church. In this "Neo-Gothic" version, the church was sold to the Waldensian community. After the Second World War, "traffic needs which cannot be disregarded" definitively condemned the building to oblivion from which only a part of the apse and crypt were saved.



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1. The church transformed into a storeroom in the nineteenth-century.

2. The shortened version of the church after the work of architect Angelo Colla, in a photograph taken after the Second World War.

3. The demolition, begun in 1948.



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Settore Cultura Musei e Mostre



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The municipal "antiquarium" with welcome center and tourist information was prepared in the crypt of San Giovanni in Conca in 1999-2000 following the restoration undertaken by Soprintendenza Archeologica della Lombardia as part of interventions for the Jubilee Year. The exhibition space also will host temporary shows.

For further information, see M. CACIAGLI, *Milano, le chiese scomparse*, Milano 1997, pp. 82-98 and bibliography.