

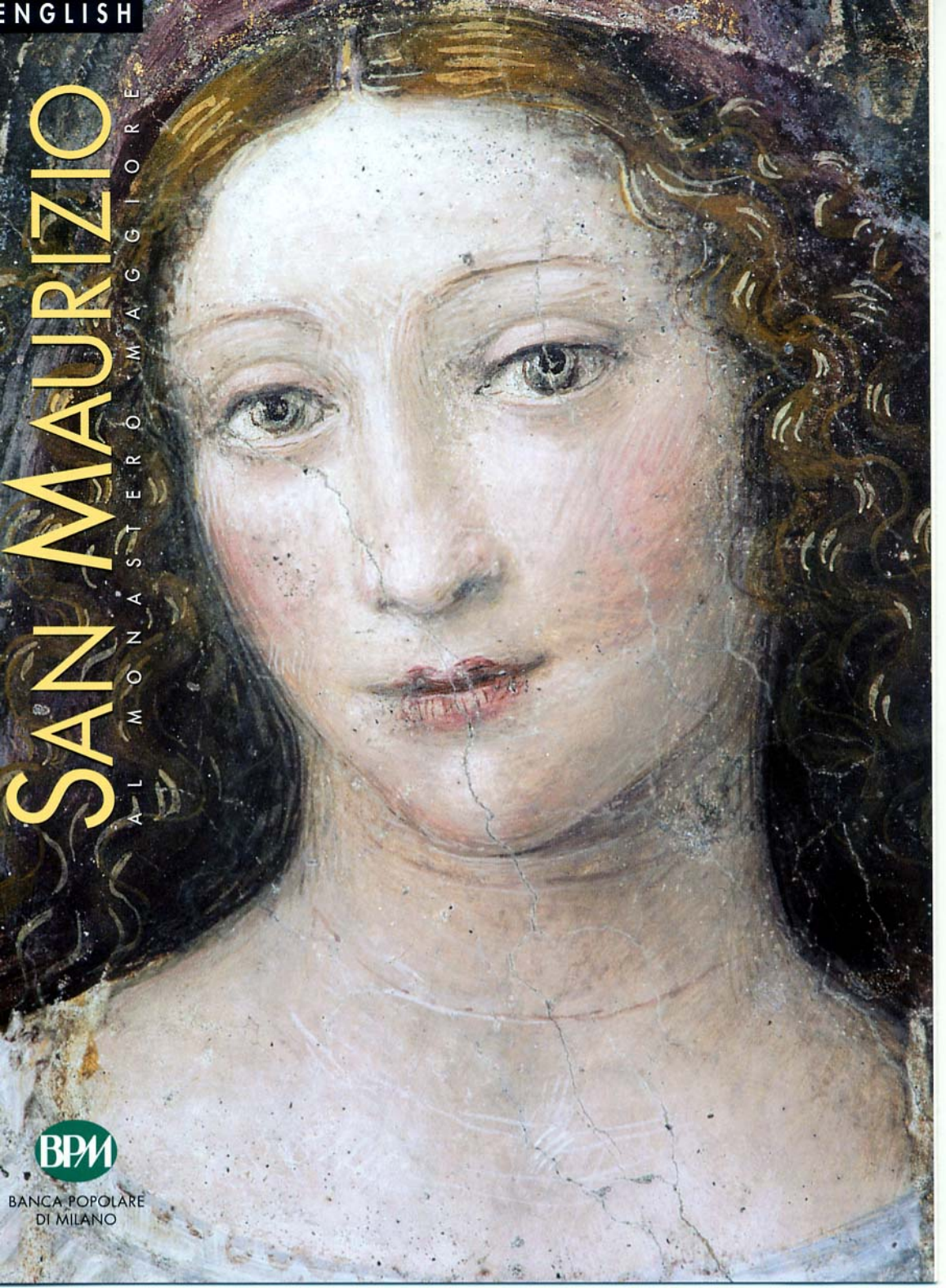
ENGLISH

SAN MAURIZIO

ALL'INTELLIGENZA
AL MONDO
AL MESTIERO
AL MANGIARCI



BANCA POPOLARE
DI MILANO



A TOUR OF SAN MAURIZIO

THE SITE

The church of San Maurizio al Monastero Maggiore hosts the most integral and exemplary decorative cycle of 16th century Milanese painting.

It stands in the heart of one of Milan's oldest and most prestigious religious complexes, the Benedictine convent known as the Monastero Maggiore.

Erected on an ancient Roman site, documented as far back as the Carolingian era, the convent was reinserted within the peripheral walls when Ansperto rebuilt them in the late 9th century.

The cornerstone of the church was laid in 1503; a subsequent reworking significantly altered the disposition of the complex with respect to the city.

Milan, capital of the duchy, had expanded beyond the convent and the adjacent artery led to the Porta Vercellina; the sanctuary was rotated slightly to the west to reconcile the existing buildings with the direction of the road.

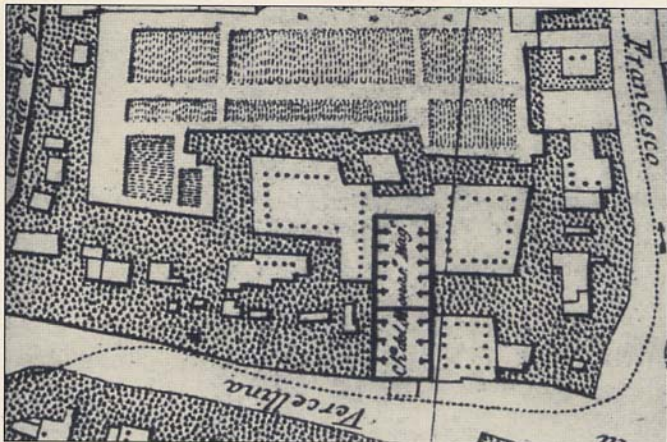
THE CHURCH

The building is composed of three parts: a crypt (now incorporated into the tour of the Museo Archeologico, which occupies a portion of the ancient convent), an ample hall belonging to the claustral area, and a smaller sanctuary for the public.

The rectangular-plan structure is divided into ten bays: the crypt below corresponds to seven of them, while the convent hall and public sanctuary occupy six and four, respectively.

Top: San Maurizio al Monastero Maggiore in a map of 1814

Right: the facade of the church



PATRONAGE

Documentary accounts of the first phase of construction do not survive, but the physical evidence tells us that the church was built by artisans of the highest caliber, and that its main function was encomiastic.

The same criteria had governed the construction of the tribune at Santa Maria delle Grazie, commissioned to Bramante by Ludovico il Moro, duke of Milan, and the Trivulzio Chapel, designed by Bramantino for Giangiacomo Trivulzio as both a family mausoleum and an extravagant new entrance for the church of San Nazaro.

We do not know the name of the patron of the new church of San Maurizio, nor can we be certain of the identities of the architect who designed it and the painters responsible for the earliest decorative cycle. However, the style and iconography of their enterprise speak to us clearly of the ideals of the Milanese aristocracy and Italian courtly culture of the early Cinquecento.

Like Santa Maria delle Grazie and San Nazaro, the intervention for

San Maurizio was effectively the 'upgrading' of an existing house of worship into a seat of aristocratic ceremony.

Art historical reconstruction allows us to imagine that, at the moment of its inauguration around 1515, the church must have appeared as a sumptuous pavillion bedecked in festive finery. Every interior wall (and parts of the exterior) was covered in brilliant, luminous colours, in keeping with the obsessive predilection for pomp that art historian Roberto Longhi identified as having been the distinguishing feature of Lombard aristocratic taste since the 14th century, a taste that obliged artists to 'see to it that His Lordship dines in gold'.





The interior of the convent hall



St. John the Evangelist, rood screen
(convent hall)

Landscape from the second cycle
(convent hall)



ARCHITECTURE

Among the names proposed for the church's architect, that of Gian Giacomo Dolcebuono finds indirect substantiation in the surviving documents: Dolcebuono, who had collaborated on the project of extrapolating a design for the Duomo's lantern on the basis of the original Gothic plan, may well be the author of the plan for San Maurizio.

The building, a sophisticated fusion of neo-medieval structures and Classical lexicon, is covered by a

barrel vault traversed by false ribs. This rests upon a series of lunettes that frame splayed rosettes which illuminate the interior dramatically from on high.

The other source of light comes from within the loggia that runs along the sides of both the convent hall and public sanctuary, contributing vitally to the definition of the volumes.

The recesses of the lateral chapels were originally blind.

THE FIRST DECORATIVE CYCLE

The church's architecture was intended from the outset to be vested in a brightly painted costume of frames, inscriptions and figuration. The first pictorial cycle, begun in the second decade of the 16th century, transformed the church into a jewel-encrusted shell. The artists who executed it were clearly attuned to the innovations of the most advanced culture of the time: on the walls of the loggia, bunches of fruit-laden branches bound by heraldic ribbons stand out against the blue of a tranquil sky and the vaults host illusionistic rosettes, frames and a variety of Classical architectural ornaments. Their refined interweaving accentuates the chromatic values of the whole, in keeping with the then fashionable practice among Central Italian painters of borrowing from the Neronian-era decorations of the

Domus Aurea. The figures of saints blend echoes of Lombard painters (Foppa, Bergognone, Boltraffio) with references to Central Italian art (e.g. Melozzo da Forlì). We do not know exactly how the church looked upon completion of the first cycle.

But we can imagine at least that the vault, now covered by a decoration in the Northern Gothic style (probably painted by Alessandro Sanquirico in the early 19th century), must have possessed the same intonation of crisp yet diffused light which still today characterises its serene space, defined in every last detail. If so, we can also imagine the highly effective fusion of religious message and worldly display typical of this moment of Lombard civilization, of which San Maurizio remains the most complete testimony to have come down to us.

THE SECOND DECORATIVE CYCLE

Some years later, the second cycle of pictorial decorations was begun. Though we still lack documentary evidence, it is far easier in this case

to identify the patrons and painters involved. The man who commissioned the decorations on the sanctuary side of the partition wall was Alessandro,



son of Giovanni II Bentivoglio, prince of Bologna until 1506. Married to the noblewoman Ippolita Sforza, he left Bologna for Milan, where he assumed important political duties and took up residence in a palazzo that became a pole of attraction for the city's most refined social circles, animated by the literary brilliance of his wife, to whom author Matteo Bandello dedicated his *Novelle*. This aspect of the couple's lives is captured in the two portraits that Bernardino Luini frescoed on the

wall behind the altar. The two protagonists of Italy's highest nobility bear witness to a sacred scene (perhaps a Crucifixion, now lost) while at the same time displaying themselves: the sacred and the profane interpenetrate to the extent that we begin to wonder if the saints in the lower register are not ladies-in-waiting, if one of them might not be the countess of Challant, whose portrait Bandello recalls as having been 'drawn from life' in the church of the 'Monistero maggiore'.



Aurelio Luini, *Adoration of the Magi* (1565), upper register of the partition wall (convent hall)

Top: Bernardino Luini, frescoes on the partition wall (convent hall)

Bernardino Luini, *Alessandro Bentivoglio with Saints* (sanctuary)



THE THIRD DECORATIVE CYCLE

All but one of the eight side altars of the sanctuary are dedicated to various members of the Bentivoglio family. The chapel to the right of the presbytery (7) celebrates Giovanni Bentivoglio, son of Alessandro's younger brother, who died in 1531 at the age of 23. Alessandro himself is commemorated in the chapel on the left (5) in 1532. The next on the right (8) was dedicated in 1530 to Francesco Besozzi, Ippolita Sforza's uncle, while its counterpart on the left (4) was taken under sponsorship in 1545 by Alfonso Carreto, father-in-law of one of Alessandro's daughters, Ginevra; the adjacent chapel (3) is registered to a member of Alfonso's family, Francesco Carreto.

Across from it on the right (9) is the chapel of the Simonetta family, relatives of Ippolita Sforza. The last chapel on the left (2) belonged to the countess Bergamina, sister of Gian Paolo Sforza, husband of another of Alessandro's daughters; its counterpart on the right (10) is the only one not associated with the Bentivoglio family.

The pictorial decorations of the chapels reflect the changes undergone by Milanese art toward

the mid-16th century.

The Besozzi chapel (8) vaunts a masterpiece by Bernardino Luini, while the two on either side of the main altar (5, 7) were painted sometime after 1550 by his sons, Aurelio and Giovan Pietro, who also decorated the Bergamina chapel (2) in 1555. The two Carreto chapels were painted by Evangelista Luini (3 - ca. 1550) and by Evangelista Luini with the collaboration of Biagio and Giuseppe Arcimboldi (4 - 1545), while the Simonetta chapel (9) was executed in 1555 by the Piazza, a family outfit from Lodi. Further from the Milanese tradition are the painters of the remaining decorations: the Genoese Ottavio Semino signed the Fiorenza chapel (10) in 1571; the Venetian Simone Peterzano, Caravaggio's master, painted the counterfacade (1) in 1572-73; Antonio Campi of Cremona is the author of the *Adoration of the Magi*, installed on the main altar after 1578 (6). The church of San Maurizio thus bore witness to 70 years of painting in Milan, from the last lingering traces of the heritage of the Quattrocento to the earliest premises of 17th century naturalism.



Wedding at Cana



The organ built by Gian Giacomo Antegnati (1557)



Frescoes by Bernardino Luini during restoration



THE YEAR 1555 AND THE ANTEGNATI ORGAN

The better part of the works executed during the third phase of decoration is concentrated around the year 1555: the frescoes of the Bergamina (2) and Simonetta (9) chapels in the sanctuary are dated 1555, while the Wedding at Cana fresco in the upper register of the convent side of the partition wall (dated February 1, 1556) and other interventions by the Luini brothers hover around that critical year. On September 4, 1554, the sisters commissioned Giovan Giacomo Antegnati to build an organ, which was installed in the convent hall on May 24, 1557. Taken together, these interventions constitute a radical transformation of the building's character, undertaken in deference to the dictates of the Council of Trent. The works effectuated at San Maurizio in the course of just a few months were

clearly a response to the climate of renewed religious rigour. Following this operation of 'ideological restyling' (which went on for approximately a decade), the church underwent only minimal modifications.

Among the interventions of that period, the organ is one of the most significant. It was constructed by Gian Giacomo Antegnati (Brescia end of the 15th century – Milan 1563), who also built the organ in Milan's Duomo. The housing of the instrument was decorated by Francesco de' Medici da Seregno and his son, Girolamo. The sound quality of the organ, drastically modified in the 19th century to accommodate the reigning musical taste, was restituted by the 1982 restoration, which the Banca Popolare di Milano helped to finance.

THE RESTORATIONS

The church's conservation problems began with the suppression of the convent on November 20, 1798: previously the buildings and land had been destined to other uses, then the laying of a road along the eastern flank of the church compromised its static equilibrium. Moreover, close to the building are a subterranean river, the Nirone, and a phreatic stratum that generate a high degree of humidity. These structural problems led to numerous interventions of maintenance and restoration over the past two centuries. In 1964, the frescoes most seriously threatened by humidity were detached and remounted; subsequently both the roof and the facade were repaired. In 1984, an anonymous bequest enabled restoration to begin on

the remaining frescoes under the direction of Paola Zanolini. The first to be treated were those by Bernardino Luini on the sanctuary side of the transverse wall. Donations from individuals or associations then made it possible to restore some of the sanctuary chapels. Funding from BPM permitted the complete restoration of the frescoes in the public sanctuary and in the convent hall, carrying out work on the chapels, the matroneum (women's gallery) and the entire ceiling. The latest interventions have disclosed important information: for example, it turns out that the landscapes in the lateral recesses of the convent hall are the result of interventions realized in the early 20th century.

"... EVEN IF I HAVE LONG CEASED TO CONCERN MYSELF WITH THE MADONNAS OF FRANCA, I FIND THE ST. CATHERINE OF LUINI FAR BETTER THAN THAT OF RAPHAEL"

JOHN RUSKIN, *MODERN PAINTERS*

BERNARDINO LUINI AT SAN MAURIZIO



Angel with Candles, partition wall
(convent hall)



Detail of St. Apollonia, partition wall
(sanctuary)

Top right: *The Presentation of Ippolita Bentivoglio* by St. Scolastica (probable portrait of daughter Alessandra),
St. Agnes and St. Catherine

Right: *The Flagellation of Christ*
with Donor Francesco Besozzi, chapel
of St. Catherine (or Besozzi) 1530

The most important pictorial presence in San Maurizio are the frescoes of Bernardino Luini. Since most of the numerous religious and secular cycles created by the Milanese painter have been dismembered or lost, it is only here that we can properly appreciate the true nature of his art. We do not know exactly when he was born, nor is there much information on his early training. His earliest known works date from after 1510 when, already at least 30 years old, he would have been active for a good decade. The stylistic features of the frescoes reveal to us an artist deeply rooted in Milanese visual culture: in the lunar tints of Bergognone's neo-Gothicism, in the full-bodied and luminous realism of Foppa, and in the archaeological Classicism of Bramantino.

But Luini was also attentive to the neo-antique current of Central Italy, with its tendency toward animated narration, to the sedate clarity and uniform luminosity of Raphaelesque Classicism, and of course to Leonardo da Vinci, resident in Milan in 1499, and again from 1509–13.

The seriousness with which the younger artist took Leonardo's lesson is evident in his appropriation and reassimilation of certain of the Tuscan master's structural and linguistic inventions.

The result is a highly personal synthesis wherein the Milanese perspective tradition overlaps the sharp corners and diagonals of Bramantino's compositions; the frontal poses, crescent-shaped drapery folds and terse emotivity of Raphael merge with the psychological endurance of Leonardo.

An apparent simplicity, in reality the fruit of carefully calibrated assimilations, thus becomes Bernardino's unmistakable trademark, as we see on the sanctuary side of the partition wall and in the St. Catherine (or Besozzi) chapel (8), where the frontal poses and 'primitive' declamatory gestures are blended with a tender, vibrant naturalism and infused with an almost corporeal light. It is this recipe that underlies the powerful attraction that Luini's art still exercises to this day.



A Entrance from
Corso Magenta

B Public sanctuary, or
Hall of the Believers

C Presbytery, or main
altar



1 COUNTERFACADE

2 CHAPEL OF THE
RESURRECTION

3 CHAPEL OF
ST. STEPHEN

4 CHAPEL OF
ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST

5 CHAPEL OF THE
DEPOSITION (BENTIVOGLIO)

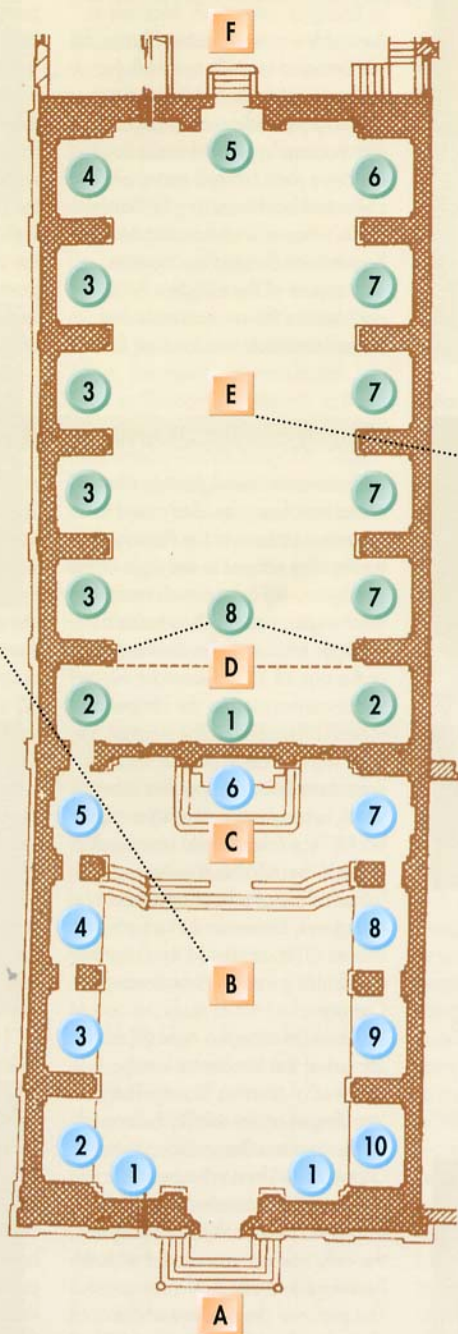
6 PARTITION WALL
(SANCTUARY)

7 CHAPEL OF THE
ECCE HOMO

8 CHAPEL OF ST.
CATHERINE (BESOZZI)

9 CHAPEL OF THE
DEPOSITION (SIMONETTA)

10 CHAPEL OF ST. PAUL



D Claustral presbytery,
surmounted by a rood
screen

E Convent hall, or Hall
of the Nuns

F Convent
entrance



1 PARTITION WALL
(CONVENT HALL)

2 PRESBYTERY
CHAPEL

3 LATERAL CHAPELS
WITH LANDSCAPES

4 CHAPEL OF NOAH'S
ARK

5 REAR WALL

6 CHAPEL OF THE
FRESCOED ALTAR

7 LATERAL CHAPEL
WITH LANDSCAPES

8 APERTURES OF
THE ROOD SCREEN



Touring Club Italiano

The opening of the Church of San Maurizio was made possible thanks to the efforts of volunteers from the Touring Club Italiano.



**BANCA POPOLARE
DI MILANO**

The restoration of the frescoes and ceiling of the church of San Maurizio al Monastero Maggiore is a gift from BPM to Milan, the city of its birth and the place where it operates, being well aware that economic development should never be separated from human and cultural progress.