

SAN LORENZO

The church as it appears today, with its unclad brick façade.

Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, in 393, and is usually considered to be the earliest church in Florence. St Zenobius, who was traditionally thought to have been present at the consecration, became bishop and was buried here when he died in 429. We know very little about the appearance of this church, which was reconsecrated by Nicholas II (who had been bishop of Florence) in the 11th century and remained the city's principal church until the late 12th century (although the bishop's seat was probably transferred to the better-located church of Santa Reparata, on the site of the present Duomo, in the late 7th century). San Lorenzo nevertheless continued to flourish as a wealthy parish church, with a hospital attached.

### The project for the façade

The west front remains in rough-hewn brick, as it has been since 1480. It had not been intended to remain thus. The Medici pope Leo X had held a competition for the façade design and the participants had included Raphael, Giuliano and Antonio da Sangallo, Jacopo Sansovino and Baccio d'Agnolo. However, in 1516 Michelangelo was given the commission. He designed a façade to rival the great monuments of antiquity, constructed entirely of marble (including huge monolithic columns on the lower part) and decorated with numerous marble and bronze sculptures. But after he had spent three years organising the quarrying of fine stone from quarries near Carrara, and transporting the stone to Florence, the pope suddenly cancelled the commission. This may have been because he feared the ever-increasing expense and wished to have Michelangelo concentrate instead on providing a fitting mausoleum for his family inside the church. For Michelangelo it was the greatest disappointment of his professional career and he wrote a long letter to the pope expressing his



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The church as it might have appeared had Michelangelo's marble façade been built.

distress and telling him that he considered his decision an insult. Michelangelo often felt constrained by the wishes and caprices of his patrons. It is tempting to wonder what would have happened if he had been freer to carry out the projects which most interested him. There is evidence that he believed the San Lorenzo façade would have been his finest work and that he was still hoping some ten years later that he would be asked to return to the project: some 35 drawings he made for it survive. The wood model is preserved in Casa Buonarroti (see p. 233). When Michelangelo died, in 1564, it was San Lorenzo that was chosen as the place to hold the memorial service, on 14th July, organised by the Accademia del Disegno.

### INTERIOR OF SAN LORENZO

The majestic cruciform interior, designed by Brunelleschi, is one of the earliest and most harmonious architectural works of the Renaissance. The plan is derived from Roman basilicas. Making much use of grey *pietra serena* against the plain white walls, Brunelleschi here devised a totally new concept of architecture. The columns, pilasters, capitals and arches all have perfect mathematical proportions and play on deliberate perspective devices, particularly pleasing to the eye. The nave columns are heightened by pulvins above the capitals so the arcades are exceptionally high, and there are delicately carved cable-fluted Corinthian pilasters between the arches of the side chapels and in the transepts. Daylight floods the building through the large windows just below the ceiling, the oculi high up in the side aisles, and the lancet windows in the transepts and flat east wall. The dominant colours of grey and white are followed in the pavement, and the white and gilt coffered ceiling enhances the light atmosphere. Very little other colour is at first apparent, as the side chapels are set back so that most

Bicci di Lorenzo, and on the right wall of the chapel there is a charming painted *Annunciation* by Neri. There is another altarpiece by Neri in the third chapel on the south side.

The next chapel has the tomb of Giuliano Davanzati (1444, attributed to Bernardo Rossellino): an early Christian sarcophagus in white marble with a relief of the *Good Shepherd* has been reused, and a lid supplied. The serene effigy repose on a cushion decorated with pompoms, and there are numerous lions. Two angels painted

in grisaille flank the lovely terracotta relief of the *Madonna and Child*, which has been attributed to Donatello since its restoration in 2015 (note the Madonna's cloak shielding also the head of the Child, and the cherubim in the background). The altarpiece of the *Coronation of the Virgin* with its predella is another lovely work by Bicci di Lorenzo. In the second chapel are good works by Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio. The vault of the first chapel has early 17th-century works by Bernardino Poccetti, Giovanni Caccini and Empoli.

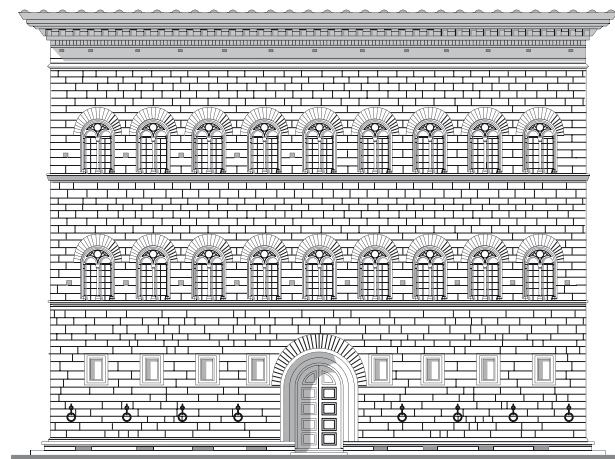
## VIA TORNABUONI

Via Tornabuoni (*map 1, 5–3*), which runs from Piazza Santa Trinita away from the river, is the most elegant street in Florence. Although its famous Café Doney, frequently mentioned in descriptions of the city in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a meeting place for foreigners, closed down in 1986, it now has the boutiques of international fashion houses, including Gucci. But it also has a number of very fine palaces, including the grandest of all, Palazzo Strozzi.

### PALAZZO STROZZI

*Map 1, 3. Courtyard open 9am–8pm (Thur 9am–11pm). Piano nobile (when exhibitions are in progress) at the same times. palazzostrozzi.org.*

This was the last and grandest of the magnificent Renaissance palaces to be built in Florence. It is a typical 15th-century town mansion—half-fortress, half-palace—with all three storeys of equal emphasis, constructed with large rough blocks of *pietra forte*, though it was never completely finished. It was begun in 1489 for the wealthy banker Filippo Strozzi, who spent the 1470s and 1480s buying up no fewer than 15 dwellings and shops on this site in order to create enough room for it. Construction involved a workforce of some 100 men and the stone had to be brought from four quarries near Florence. The most complete side faces Piazza Strozzi. It is now generally thought that Benedetto da Maiano must have been mainly responsible for the design (although Strozzi himself probably took an active part) and Cronaca is known to have been involved at a certain stage: he designed the great projecting cornice, suggested by ancient Classical examples, which was left half-finished when Filippo Strozzi's heirs ran out of money. Cronaca also built the courtyard (completed in 1503). It seems that



PALAZZO STROZZI

Baccio d'Agnolo was also called in to continue work after 1533. The very fine wrought-iron torch-holders and fantastic lanterns were designed by Benedetto da Maiano. The palace remained in the Strozzi family right up until 1937.

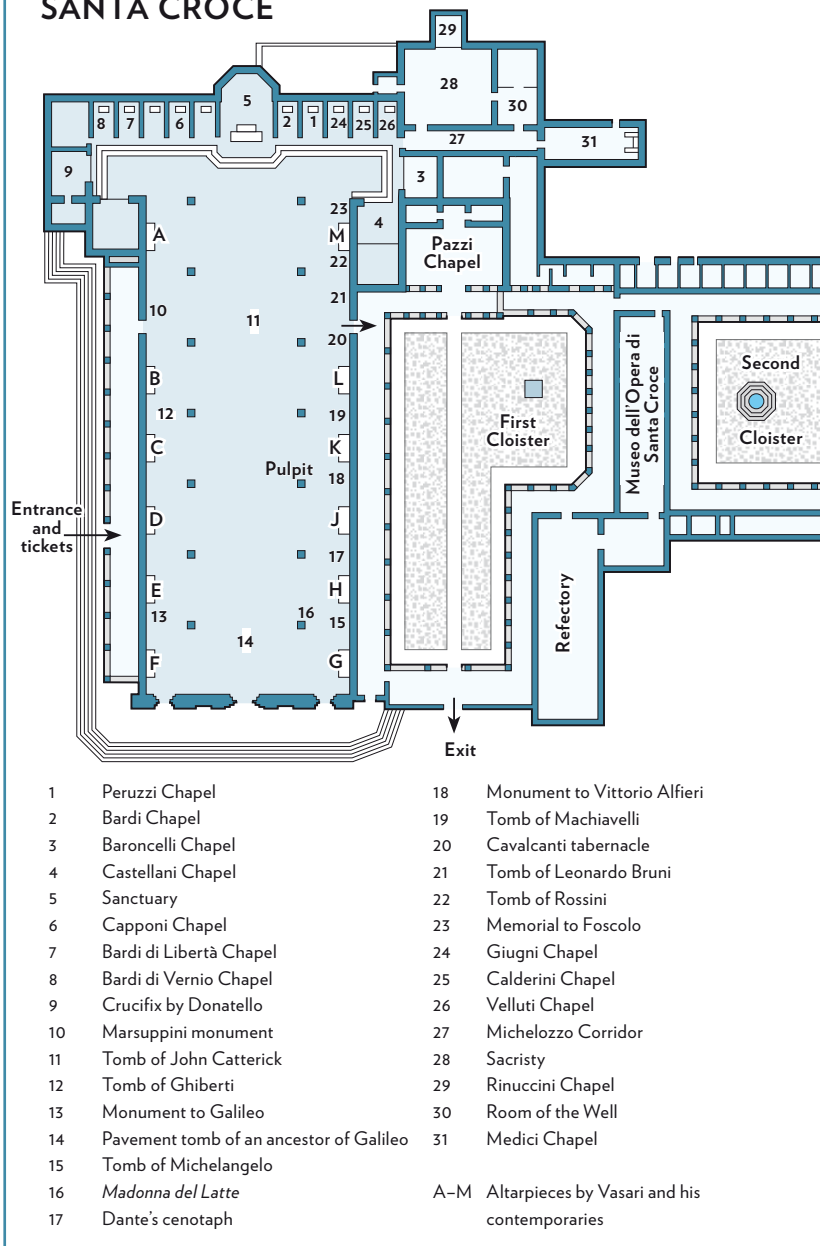
### FLORENTINE PALACES

The appearance of the medieval town, with its houses and towers clustered closely together, was radically changed when the wealthy Florentines of the Renaissance began to build their private residences in the early 15th century. Palazzo Medici (*see p. 157*) set an example for all later palaces, which were usually of three storeys, with imposing façades or portals marking their entrances, and a wide bench was often provided around the exterior. Handsome courtyards became a feature of the interiors, and there were sometimes gardens attached. The grand exteriors often had large blocks of rough-hewn *pietra forte*, the size of which (and levels of finish) might vary from floor to floor, or, more simply, the surface would be covered with *intonaco* so that the stone decoration around the windows would appear more pronounced against the flat plasterwork. In the case of Alberti's famous Palazzo Rucellai, the building material used is disguised by patterns, in a unique design on a flat surface.

#### The palace today

The interior provides the largest temporary exhibition space in Florence. Run by an autonomous private foundation with public support, usually three exhibitions a year are held on the *piano nobile* and concerts and other events are arranged in the splendid courtyard, which is kept open and has become a little urban piazza, with its café. All the exhibitions are geared to families, with labels also for children, and each show aims to provide incentives to visitors and residents to seek out other places in Florence, especially those off the beaten track.

## SANTA CROCE



The frescoes were whitewashed in later centuries and were irreparably damaged when funerary monuments were set up against the walls: when they were uncovered in the 19th century they were restored by Gaetano Bianchi and the missing parts skilfully repainted, but in another restoration in 1957–61 the controversial decision was taken to remove the repainting so that the unsightly plasterwork now disturbs the overall effect of the scenes.

On the altar is a very precious **panel painting of St Francis** with 20 scenes

from his life. This provided a unique document of the saint's life (drawing its information from the biography by Tommaso da Celano, who died in 1260) until the frescoes in the upper church of Assisi were painted. It includes (lowest left panel) *St Francis Preaching to the Sultan* surrounded by Muslims in their turbans. Considered one of the most important paintings produced in Florence in the mid-13th century, its attribution to Coppo di Marcovaldo has been confirmed since its restoration in 2015.

### Other Giottesque works in Santa Croce

A group of Giotto's followers also carried out remarkable fresco cycles here, mostly in the 1330s, including Maso di Banco and Taddeo Gaddi: this is the best place in Florence to examine their work. The frescoes by another follower, Giovanni da Milano, in the Rinuccini Chapel (29), are described on p. 226.

**(3) Baroncelli Chapel:** The frescoes are by **Taddeo Gaddi**, who worked with Giotto for many years and was his most faithful pupil. They are considered among his best works, executed in 1332–8, and reveal his talent as an innovator within the Giottesque school. You can get closer to them than those in the other chapels, which makes them particularly interesting. They illustrate scenes from the life of the Virgin beginning with stories of her parents, Joachim and Anna, as told in the apocryphal Gospel of James. In the lunette above, Joachim kneeling in deep reverence makes a sacrifice of a burnt offering, and an angel appears to him in a vision and tells him of the imminent birth of the Virgin. Below is the *Meeting of Anna and Joachim at the Golden Gate* and *The Birth of the Virgin*. On the lowest register, the *Presentation of the*

*Virgin*; The high priest Simeon orders all unmarried men of the lineage of David to present their rods at the altar, and declares that the man whose rod comes into bud (through the influence of the Holy Spirit) will marry the Virgin; *Betrothal of the Virgin* to Joseph while a contender breaks his rod in despair.

On the window wall are the much more familiar episodes of the *Annunciation* and the *Visitation* in which Mary embraces her older cousin Elizabeth (mother of John the Baptist). The two scenes of the *Adoration of the Virgin* and the *Star appearing to the Magi* are thought to be the first time an artist attempted to depict a night scene in fresco. Taddeo also painted the vault and pilasters of the chapel as well as the *Madonna and Child* in the lunette of the Baroncelli tomb, and even designed the stained glass. His skill as a fresco painter

# The North Bank of the Arno

The River Arno is a great feature of the Florence townscape. Once navigable all the way from the coast, it was of great importance to the city's livelihood: during the Middle Ages water mills were used in the wool industry, on which Florence's economy was based. As much as it brought prosperity, however, the Arno also brought devastation. Since the first recorded flood in 1177, the river has overflowed its banks no fewer than 57 times (small plaques throughout the city show the level the water reached during some of these inundations). The last great flood was in 1966, when buildings, works of art and hundreds of artisans' workshops were severely damaged. No longer the great waterway it once was, the Arno is still occasionally used for skulling.

This chapter follows the north bank of the Arno from the Museo Galileo all the way downstream to the Cascine park. The roads along the embankment, known as the *lungarni* (singular, *lungarno*), lined with handsome palaces and some elegant shops, are lovely places to walk and enjoy the magnificent open views.

## MUSEO GALILEO

*Map 1, 8. Piazza dei Giudici. Open 9.30–6, Tues 9.30–1. T: 055 265311, [www.museogalileo.it](http://www.museogalileo.it). A free app can be downloaded. On the ground floor there is an interactive area, and activities for children are provided at the weekends. Galileo's works can also be explored online: [portalegalileo.museogalileo.it](http://portalegalileo.museogalileo.it).*

The museum is housed in Palazzo Castellani, a fine medieval palace on the Arno named after its owners, an important Florentine family in the 14th century whose wealth was based on the cloth trade. A monumental sundial, with a gnomon several metres high, was built in 2007 on the enlarged pavement outside the museum entrance.

Since the days of the first Medici grand duke, Cosimo I, Florence has held an extremely important place in the history of science, a fact which has often been obscured by the attention paid to its great collections of art. Many of the contents of



View of the Arno looking downstream. In the foreground is Ponte Vecchio and the roofline of the Corridoio Vasariano. The façades of Lungarno Acciaiuoli catch the sun on the north bank.



