



Mantua And Sabbioneta PART I

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UNESCO recognizes **Mantua and Sabbioneta** as World Heritage Sites for their Renaissance urban planning, architectural achievements, and artistic legacy. These two cities are designated as a single UNESCO World Heritage Site. Mantua and Sabbioneta are municipalities in the Italian region of Lombardy. They are rich in charm, art, and history, showcasing exceptional Renaissance and Baroque architecture. The cities represent important stages in territorial planning and urban development by the Gonzagas, leaving a lasting impact on urban development and the spread of Renaissance culture during their rule.

Mantua, also known as Mantova, has a long history dating back to ancient times. Evidence of human settlement in the area dates back to the Etruscan civilization. It later became a Roman colony in the 2nd century BC. During the Medieval Period, after the fall of the Roman Empire and throughout the Middle Ages, Mantua was conquered by various rulers, including the Ostrogoths, Byzantines, Lombards, and Franks. In the 11th Century, Mantua fell under the rule of Boniface

of Canossa, Marquis of Tuscany, and one of the most powerful lords of his time. Boniface's daughter, Matilda di Canossa, was the city's last ruler, and after her death, Mantua became a free commune.

The Gonzagas ruled Mantua for 300 years and transformed it into a city that embodied Renaissance urban ideals. During the 15th and 16th centuries, Mantua underwent extensive improvements in water systems, urban planning, and buildings. Their support for Renaissance art led to significant redesigns of Mantua under architect Giulio Romano, turning it into a Renaissance masterpiece and a central hub of art and culture. Notable artists like Leon Battista Alberti, Andrea Mantegna and Pisanello contributed breathtaking works of art to the city. Mantegna is famous for his detailed frescoes in the Ducal Palace, while Pisanello is recognized for his paintings, medal-making, and detailed portraits. As a student of Raphael, Giulio Romano brought his architectural and artistic talents to Mantua, including the design of Palazzo Te, which stands as an exquisite example of Mannerist architecture.

Mantua also has a rich literary legacy, associated with the works of the influential Roman poet Virgil, who was born nearby in the village of Andes, now Pietole. Mantua proudly honors his legacy, as his works, including the "Aeneid," "Georgics," and "Eclogues," have significantly influenced Western literature.

The Gonzaga family's rule ended in 1707 when the Habsburgs of Austria seized Mantua. In the late 18th Century, Mantua fell under French control during Napoleon's conquest of Italy. However, Napoleonic rule was short-lived, as in 1814, Mantua returned to Austria. Mantua, along with the rest of Lombardy, became a part of the Kingdom of Italy in 1866 following the unification of Italy.

It has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2008 and was the Italian Capital of Culture in 2016 for representing Renaissance urban, architectural, and artistic achievements associated with the Gonzaga family.

DUICAL PALACE IN MANTUA

The Ducal Palace, also known as Palazzo Ducale di Mantova, is a complex of buildings from different eras; it comprises nine hundred rooms, including various spaces such as halls, corridors, studios, stairs, loggias, and galleries. This massive complex covers approximately 34,000 square meters. The Palace has fifteen open areas, including squares, courtyards, gardens, and courtyards. It is one of Italy's largest architectural museum complexes and the sixth-largest palace in Europe. Constructed initially in the 13th century by the House of Bonacolsi, it was later expanded by the Gonzagas. The Palace served as the primary royal residence for the Gonzaga family, who ruled the Duchy from the late 14th to the early 18th centuries. Over the centuries, various Gonzaga family members contributed to its construction, adding connecting corridors, galleries, courtyards, and expansive gardens. The Ducal Palace includes the 14th-century Castle of San Giorgio and the famous Camera degli Sposi, adorned with frescoes by Andrea Mantegna. These frescoes painted between 1465 and 1474 are celebrated as masterpieces of 15th-century Italian art.

In the late 16th century, Duke Guglielmo Gonzaga unified the previously detached buildings into a cohesive complex. The Chief of the Buildings, Giovan Battista Bertani, was tasked with this project. He created an enormous, imposing complex covering 34,000 square meters, extending from Piazza Sordello to the lower lake. After Bertani's death, Bernardino Facciotto continued the works and completed the unification of gardens, squares, loggias, galleries, exedras, and courtyards, giving the Palace its final structure. The



Palazzo del Capitano



Sala del Pisanello (Room of Pisanello)

Ducal Palace is divided into three distinct phases: the Corte Vecchia, with the Sala del Pisanello; the Castello di San Giorgio, featuring the famous Camera degli Sposi by Mantegna, and the Corte Nuova.

CORTE VECCHIA

The entrance to the Ducal Palace is located at Piazza Sordello, where you will find the Palazzo del Capitano and Magna Domus. These two buildings form the Palace's oldest section, known as **Corte Vecchia**. The Palazzo del Capitano was built in the late 13th century by Guido Bonacolsi, also known as Bottesella, who served as the "Captain of the People" of Mantua from 1299 to 1309. The façade of the Captain's Palace features battlements and six Gothic mullioned windows, which replaced the original Romanesque windows in the 14th century. Adjacent to it is the Magna Domus, a smaller building without battlements later converted into the Empress' Apartment in the 1600s, where Beatrice



Domus Nova

d'Este resided. The Magna Domus, also known as Domus Nova, was originally designed by Luca Fancelli and renovated during the reign of Duke Vincenzo I Gonzaga. The Palazzo del Capitano initially had two floors and was separated from Magna Domus by an alley. In the 14th century, a third floor was added to the Captain's Palace, and the two buildings were joined by a 300-meter-long exposed brick façade featuring a portico with pointed arches.

The current Ducal Apartment was created in 1595 by Antonio Maria Viani. The Galleria Nuova was constructed in 1778 by Giuseppe Piermarini to connect the Guastalla apartment to the Ducal Apartment. It houses altarpieces by Francesco Borgani, Carlo Bononi, Spagnoletto, and others. The Sala degli Arcieri has a famous altarpiece by Peter Paul Rubens, depicting the Gonzaga Family in Adoration of the Holy Trinity. The room leads to the Galleria degli Specchi, an open loggia with frescoes and neoclassicist decoration. Under the Duke's Apartment, Cardinal Ferdinand had Viani design the Appartamento dei nani, believed to be for court dwarves, which was a reproduction of the Scala Santa of St. John Lateran for devotional purposes.

In the early 14th century, an additional floor and an imposing arcade connecting the buildings were added. The addition included a sizeable 67×15-meter salon called Dell'Armeria ("Hall of the Weapon Room"), where the Della Dieta 1459 Diet of Mantua was held. The 17th-century Salone delle Duchesse leads to the Room of the Morone, named after Domenico Morone's painting of the Expulsion of the Bonacolsi. The Captain's Palace also includes the First Room of Guastalla, with a fresco frieze of the Gonzaga family, and the unfinished Sala del Pisanello (Room of Pisanello) featuring a majestic cycle of frescoes of Arthurian subjects (in particular, the Battle of Louverzep), aiming to celebrate the glory of the family and the virtues of Gianfrancesco Gonzaga. Pisanello's frescoes were only discovered in the 1960s when, during a restoration project, this marvelous work was found beneath the wall paintings.

In 1519, Isabella d'Este, newly widowed, moved from the Castle of St. George to the older part of the Ducal Palace, known as the "Widow Apartment"



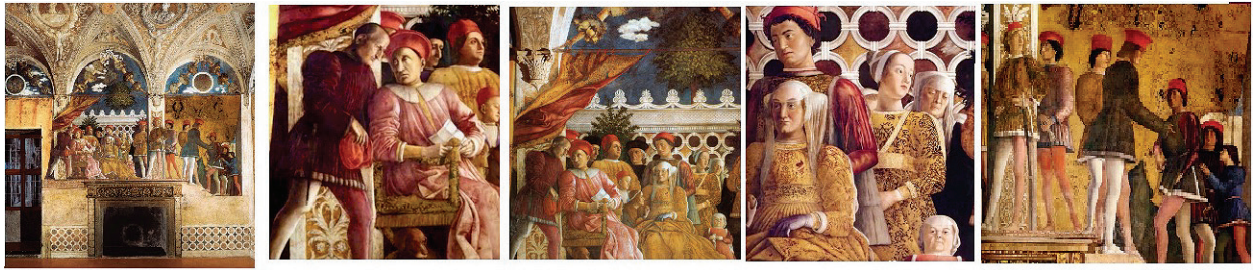
Hall of Mirrors (Sala degli Specchi)

(Appartamento Vedovile). This apartment, consisting of two wings divided by the entrance to the Cortile d'Onore, housed her renowned wooden furnishings and art collections in the Grotto Wing. This wing included significant paintings (now at the Louvre Museum) commissioned to Andrea Mantegna between 1496 and 1506 (Parnassus and The Triumph of Virtue), Lorenzo Costa il Vecchio (Isabella in the realm of Harmony and Realm of Como), Perugino (Fight between Love and Chastity) and Correggio (Allegory of Vice and Virtue). Another famous room in this wing is the Camera Granda or Scalcheria painted by Lorenzo Leombruno in 1522. The Santa Croce Wing featured additional halls like the Sala delle Imprese Isabelliane and Sala Imperiale. In the 16th century, Guglielmo X Gonzaga renovated many of the rooms in Corte Vecchia and built the Refectory overlooking the Giardino Pensile (hanging garden) and the Sala dello Specchio (Hall of Mirrors), which was used as the music room. This room, commissioned by Duke Vincenzo, features mirrors embedded in the walls and frescoes of the Olympus Gods by various artists, including the Bavarian master, Carlo Santner.



The gardens and courtyards in the Palace include the Giardino Pensile, which was where the Gonzaga horses were displayed before being sold.

Another garden, the Giardino dei Semplici or "Garden of Simples," housed medicinal herbs used by the court to perfume their clothes. The Refectory contained a Hanging Garden and later a Coffee House during Austrian rule. The Secret Garden was part of Isabella d'Este's Apartment. The Cortile delle Otto Facce, Cortile del Frambus, Cortile d'Onore, Cortile di Santa Croce, and Cortile dei Cani are different courtyards with unique features.



Court Scene



Castle of St. George

The Castle of St. George (Castello di San Giorgio) was constructed between 1395 and 1406 under the commission of Francesco I Gonzaga. It was designed by Bartolino da Novara, one of the most renowned military architects of the time. The Castle combines Gothic and Renaissance architectural styles, boasting intricate details and elegant design elements. The Castle has a square plan with four corner towers, surrounded by a moat with three entrances, each equipped with a drawbridge. Underground passageways interconnect various parts of the Castle and were utilized for multiple purposes, including secret escapes and storage. In 1459, architect Luca Fancelli, commissioned by Marquis Ludovico III Gonzaga, transformed the Castle into a noble residence for Ludovico II Gonzaga, who moved there during the Council of Mantua called by Pope Pius II to plan a crusade against the Turks. In 1459, Luca Fancelli's restoration marked the transition of the Castle from a military and defensive structure to one with other functions. The splendor of the Castle, however, is the work of the great painter Andrea Mantegna, who painted his most brilliant masterpiece here.

The Camera Picta, also known as the Bridal Chamber, is the most famous room in the Palace. It features stunning frescoes created by Andrea Mantegna between 1465 and 1475. Accessible through a spiral staircase, this square room measures 8.05 meters per side.

The frescoes in the Camera Picta are known for their illusionistic style, creating the perception of a loggia with three openings overlooking country landscapes. The scenes depict members of the Gonzaga family. Notably, these artworks showcase the first use of *trompe l'oeil*, a technique that creates lifelike three-dimensional imagery on flat surfaces using realistic details, perspective, and shading. Mantegna's artwork gives the impression of actual sculptures and architecture.

Northern Wall: Court Scene

Mantegna's Camera degli Sposi highlights include a court scene on the northern wall. Here, Ludovico III, in a pink house coat with his family dog, is interrupted by his advisor whispering in his ear. His wife, Barbara of Brandenburg, looks on with concern while their son, Federico, the heir, stands behind her. To the left is Francesco, their second son, who became a cardinal at 17, and his portrait is now in the Capodimonte Museum in Naples. An attractive woman, Ludovico's daughter, stands to the right, next to her mother and a little girl named Paolina. The scene also includes a court jester and courtiers in colored tights, depicting the royal staff.

Western Wall: The Meeting Scene

Frescoes on the Camera degli Sposi's west wall depict "The Meeting," where Ludovico III greets his son, Cardinal Francesco, returning from Rome. The scene, painted as a garden pavilion with landscape views between archways and pilasters, reads from left to right. At the far left, a dismounted horse highlights the Gonzaga family's prestigious stables. To the right, stewards hold back mastiffs while pilasters create an illusion of a continuous landscape. Above, putti with delicate butterfly wings hold an inscription plate, one of the room's best features. Putti, derived from the Italian word for "boys," are chubby male children, often depicted with wings, frequently seen in Renaissance and Baroque art. These cherubic figures are usually portrayed in playful or innocent poses, symbolizing love, divine presence, or the spirit of the arts. Ludovico and Francesco stand in profile in the final section on the right, symbolizing power, with other ecclesiastics present. This vignette emphasizes the Gonzagas' influence in both



secular and religious spheres. Proud of his work, Mantegna included his self-portrait on a grotesque-style frieze on one of the pillars.

On the other two walls (South, from which you enter, and East), Mantegna depicted closed curtains hanging from a painted bar, along with the corbels that support the vault. The bridge of San Giorgio is visible from the east wall window.



Ceiling & Oculus: Seminal Illusionist Work

The oculus, also known as the eye, is an illusionistic opening in the center of the ceiling. It is the most celebrated feature of the Camera degli Sposi as it appears to open to a blue sky. Mantegna's masterful use of foreshortening creates a striking illusion of depth. The balustrade is painted to resemble marble and is adorned with a garland, representing the heavenly interest in the Gonzaga family. The fresco also features smiling and giggling little winged putti (cherubs), servants, and a peacock leaning over a railing. In addition, a large floral plant is precariously perched on a pole, suggesting imminent chaos. The figures in the illusion look down on the viewer from a cloud-flecked blue sky. The roundels feature monochrome medallions of the first eight Roman emperors, from Julius Caesar to Otho. They seem like reliefs, but they're not. The emperors gaze directly at you. Their titles encircle the edge in a similar way to a coin. Unique for the 15th century, Mantegna's oculus



combines precision in foreshortening with playful figures, inspiring subsequent ceiling artworks, including the Sistine Chapel. In addition to the Camera degli Sposi, the Castle houses other frescoes and artworks that depict historical events and the Gonzaga family's legacy.

THIS ARTICLE WILL CONTINUE IN OUR NEXT ISSUE