



6

PIAZZA DEL DUOMO, PISA

“Finally Pisa, alive and austere, with its green and yellow palaces, its domes, its elegance along the banks of the severe Arno. All the nobility contained in this refusal to give itself easily to the traveler. A sensitive and demure town. So close to me at night, in the empty streets, that as I walk there alone my longing to weep at last finds release. The wound that lay open within me begins to heal.”

Notebooks, Albert Camus

It is difficult to resist the temptation of drawing fully from the theatrical vocabulary when in front of the sight of Piazza del Duomo in Pisa. Without the visual and spatial constrictions of an urban network, but free to breathe and move on the green stage of the grass, the monuments in the square seem summoned to dance in a choreography of stone, with the whimsical mutability of the Tuscan sky as the backdrop. In addition to its unique spatiality, the breath-taking quality of the site is the result of a feat which has lasted through the centuries and alternate stylistic phases, succeeding in harmonising its main buildings in a coherent vision. Like propaganda in marble, the square is also the materialisation of a historical phase which led the Republic of Pisa to monopolise commercial traffic in the Tyrrhenian Sea between the 11th and 12th centuries, up to the creation of an extensive trading network from the Balearic Islands to the Holy Land. Through the mesh of this net, stylistic lexicons which relate the cultural heterogeneousness of the medieval Mediterranean, with the coexistence of classical, Byzantine, Armenian and Arab influences converge towards the site of the Piazza dei Miracoli. The last major interventions date back to the end of the 13th century: in the climate of mature Gothic, the Baptistery is completed and work is started on the Monumental Cemetery, of which the magnificent cycles of frescos are one of the masterpieces of painting between the 14th and 15th centuries.



CULTURAL HERITAGE
UNESCO DOSSIER: 395
PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: PARIS, FRANCE
DATE OF INSCRIPTION: 1987



CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: Piazza del Duomo houses a complex of monuments known all over the world; these medieval masterpieces had a great influence on monumental architecture in Italy from the 11th to the 14th century.



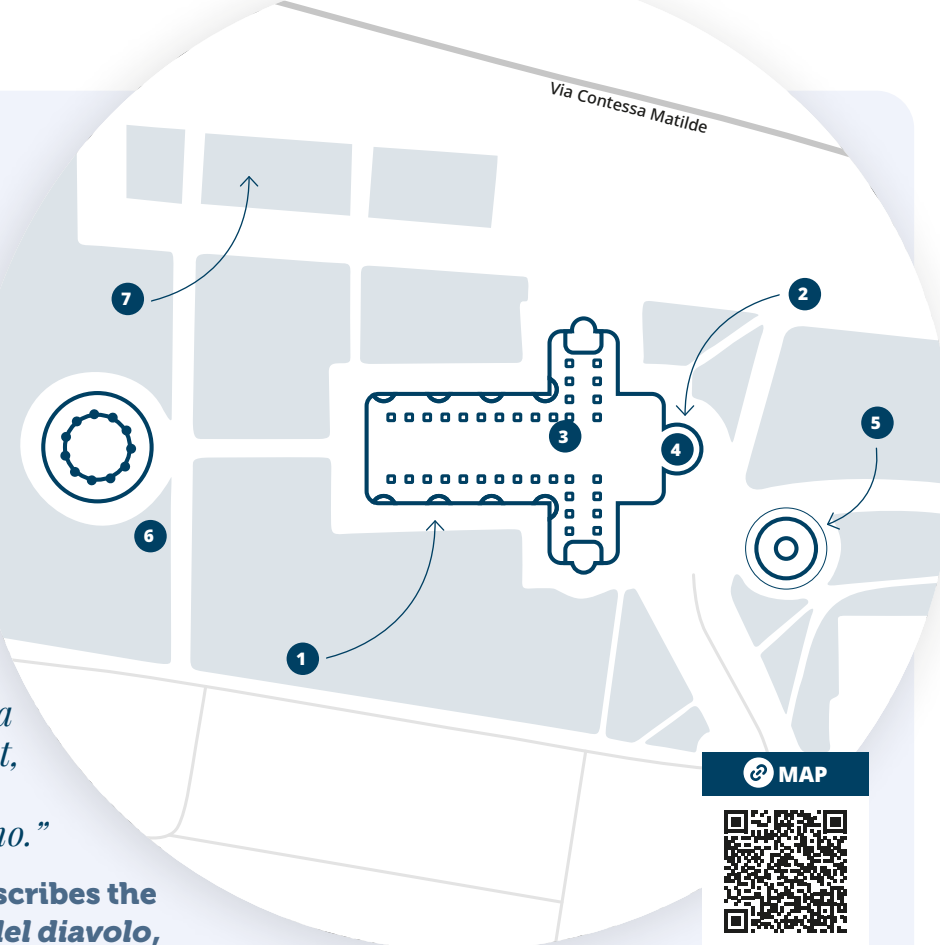
“The majestic cathedral of Santa Maria Maggiore shone in the night like a ghost, with its white marbles looted after the victory over the Saracen city of Palermo.”

This is how Francesca Ramacciotti describes the Duomo in *I custodi della pergamena del diavolo*, an impression which has resisted the passing of the centuries.

With its white marble hull docked in the green lawn and the prow of the façade facing the sea, the **1 Duomo** has a Latin cross plan with an apse on each arm. Find the composition layout adopted by Buschetto, its first architect: a structure in three orders which spreads along the whole perimeter, with blind arches, half pilasters and single-light windows, alternated with a very rich series of marble inlays. On top of the tympanum towering over the apse, the **2 Griffon of Pisa** is a Muslim work of art stolen by the Pisans during the wars against the Muslim powers in the 11th century. The treasures of the cathedral include the sculptured “flowering” of the **3 pulpit by Giovanni Pisano** and the **4 mosaic in the apse** with the *St John* by Cimabue. According to tradition, Galileo Galilei is believed

to have formulated the law of isochronism of the pendulum by observing the oscillations of a votive lamp in the cathedral which is now in the Cemetery. Immediately to the east, the **5 bell-tower**, known as the Leaning Tower, is a real celebrity consecrated by pop culture. Shortly after the start of the work under Bonanno Pisano (1173), the foundations showed the first signs of instability, giving the tower its surprising slant. Beyond the “physical defect”, its design has an extraordinary lightness, thanks to the fretwork of arcades which goes from the base to the belfry. The perfect circle of the **6 Baptistery of San Giovanni** was designed in 1153 by the architect Diotisalvi, but it was not until the 14th century that the building was finally completed with the dome, which in the

meantime had been contaminated by all the exuberance of Gothic architecture. The controlled sobriety of the interior shows extraordinary acoustics, while the pulpit, designed by Nicola Pisano in 1260, is considered one of the greatest examples of Gothic sculpture in Italy. You can conclude your visit with the last monument conceived, in a chronological sense, in the square: the **7 Camposanto**; one of the oldest funerary architectures in Europe, it takes its name from the earth brought from Mount Calvary to Pisa during the third Crusade. Like a treasure trove, the Camposanto has some of the largest cycles of frescoes of the Italian 14th century, almost a sort of encyclopaedia of the medieval imagination, which miraculously escaped the bombs of the Second World War.



THE LIGHT OF THE BANKS OF THE ARNO

“Cast your eye, if you are not dazzled, on its river glowing as with fire, then follow the graceful curve of the palaces on the Lung’ Arno [...], and tell me if anything can surpass a sunset at Pisa.”

From a conversation between Shelley and Byron quoted in *Conversations of Lord Byron*, Thomas Medwin

Surrounded by the literary evocations of the Arno’s banks, it is easier to catch from the shores and bridges the words cast into the waters of the river by generations of travellers. In 1821, Lord Byron and Percy Shelley lived in Palazzo Lanfranchi (today Toscanelli) on Lungarno Mediceo, giving birth to a group of exiled spirits known as the Pisan Circle. The banks of the Arno left a similar impression on Giacomo Leopardi, who wrote to his sister Paolina in 1827: “This bank of the Arno is such a broad sight, so magnificent, so cheerful and so smiling that he falls in love with it [...]”.



"MISTAKES ARE NECESSARY, THEY ARE USEFUL LIKE BREAD AND OFTEN ALSO LOVELY: FOR EXAMPLE THE TOWER OF PISA."

As well as being home to one of the most beautiful mistakes in the world, as Gianni Rodari writes in *Il libro degli errori*, Piazza del Duomo in Pisa is also a story in stone that the medieval imagination populated with the fantastic creatures of its bestiaries. Thanks to this "medieval safari", you can rise to the challenge of discovering it. Begin from the eastern end of the Duomo, near the apse.

It is not a real animal that dominates it, but a creature that has escaped straight from mythology and legends: with the head and wings of a bird of prey and the body of a lion, it is the **1 Griffon of Pisa**; what you can see is a copy: the original is in the Museum of the Works of the Cathedral. Continue capturing the animals that are concealed in the façade of the cathedral: keeping your eyes peeled, you will end up by finding them pretty much everywhere! Begin by listening to the roar of the **2 two lions** at the top of the columns at the sides of the main portal: they were sculpted by the workshop of Rainaldo in the 12th century.

Then look upwards and try to find the **3 wolves** that act as gutters at the sides of the first row of arches, under the sculptures of the two evangelists: they are the famous gargoyles which, like in all the best medieval cathedrals, are a must. The last animal to be found on the façade is the **4 eagle**, a symbol of the Evangelist John. It is perched at the top right: follow the inclination of the sloping roof and moving upwards you will catch a glimpse of its wings. Now let yourself be swallowed up by the vast and shadowy interior of the Cathedral. There are lots of animals here as well: now you have to find one that has not yet been "hatched". Among the rows of tall columns, cross the central nave and stop just before you catch sight of the dome. Along the dark pillar with a square base that is closest to the pulpit, under a shelf there is an **5 egg**: a beam of light lights it up at noon on 25 March, the day when the New Year was celebrated in medieval Pisa. Before going out, stop to search in the kaleidoscope of sculptures of the pulpit by Giovanni Pisano, looking for the **6 ox and the donkey** portrayed in the Nativity. Once outside, turn northwards and enter the Camposanto. This building was constructed in the 13th century as the burial place for the Pisans who, until then, had their tombs all around the cathedral. You will be immediately struck by the incredible quantity of animals which are on the coats-of-arms on the noble families' tombstones. The animal that completes your collection, however, is well hidden in what is known as the *Triumph of Death*, the most famous fresco by an artist with a very funny name: Buffalmacco; you have to find a **7 hare**, which you will recognise by its long ears.



PIAZZA DEL DUOMO IN PISA in books

Suggestions for further reading to learn more about Piazza dei Miracoli.

• **Conversations of Lord Byron**, Thomas Medwin (1824). A collection of memoirs about Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley's stay in Pisa.

• **Epistolario**, Giacomo Leopardi (1849). A collection of over 900 letters written between 1810 and 1837: a pivotal document on the poet's life.

• **Notebooks**, Albert Camus (2010). From 1935 until his premature death, Albert Camus filled many notebooks which lump together impressions, creative ideas, reflections and travel notes, "alchemical substances" which outline, together with a spontaneous autobiography, the literary work of the author.

• **My brilliant friend**, Elena Ferrante (2012). In the second chapter of the saga, *The story of a new name*, Lila and Lenù face the social and physical constraints of their neighbourhood. Lila stays in Naples but Lenù goes to

study in Pisa at the Scuola Normale Superiore, amid crucial encounters and the first seeds of student protests.

• **Etica dell'acquario**, Ilaria Gaspari (2015). When Gaia returns to Pisa after having been away for ten years, it is not only her old friends who are waiting for her, but also the ghost of a fellow friend's suicide. Between the squares and the streets in the centre and the ivory tower of the University, this philosophical *noir*, the debut novel by a graduate of the Scuola Normale Superiore, is an investigation into that mysterious death.

• **Scacco alla Torre**, Marco Malvaldi (2015). The author of the very successful series of thrillers, in which the jaunty pensioners of the BarLume are busy solving crimes in the imaginary town of Pineta, writes about his real Pisa in the laid-back and witty style that distinguishes him.

• **I custodi della pergamena del diavolo**, Francesca Ramacciotti (2019). In 1174, the architect Diotisalvi is working on the Tower. The gold from the Porta Aurea is stolen and terror invades a Pisa tormented by a series of mysterious murders. The investigations

take place on a double time level in a city which has kept an enigma secret for almost a thousand years.

• **Randagi**, Marco Amerighi (2021). Pisa is the setting for the existential crisis of Pietro Benati, who is waiting to die as predicted by a curse on the males of the family. When it is his brother who dies, however, his only strength remains his bond with the stray and rootless humanity which is the world to which he has always belonged.

Children's books:

• **Il libro degli errori**, Gianni Rodari (1964). With spelling that is quite unorthodox, but very inventive, and his usual desecrating and non-conformist spirit, Gianni Rodari compiles a manual of stories, short tales and nursery rhymes all characterised by a mistake, giving rise to a zany linguistic merry-go-round of moving poetry.

• **L'Enigma di Agata**, Roberta Baroni, Stella Robi (2022). At the Pisa Book festival, three close friends have to find the eccentric Aunt Agata who has disappeared, like the jewellery in her book.