

PRATO (about 120 km return)

This a very busy town to the west of Florence, rich with ancient monuments and also an important centre for the textile and wool industry.

The Duomo – Cattedrale di Santo Stefano



St. Stephen Cathedral is one of the most beautiful churches in Tuscany, a mix of Romanesque, Gothic and Renaissance styles. It keeps the precious *Reliquia della Cintola (Sacro Cingolo) della Madonna* (relic of the Holy Belt of the Virgin Mary), given by Mary to Saint Thomas the Apostle. Inside can also be found masterpieces of the Italian art with works by Filippo Lippi, Paolo Uccello and Agnolo Gaddi, as well as by Giovanni Pisano, Mino da Fiesole, Rossellino and Da Maiano.

Erected in the Romanesque style in the 12th-13th centuries, the church was enlarged in the 14th century with the addition of a Gothic transept. The elegant façade with its white and green marble stripes (Prato green marble) is dated 1385-1457. Above the portal is a beautiful lunette in glazed terracotta by **Andrea della Robbia** from 1498, portraying a refined *Madonna col Bambino e Santi*. On the right corner, resting on a bronze capital by Michelozzo is the famous *Pergamo del Sacro Cingolo*, the Pulpit of the Holy Belt, with the *Danza dei Putti* (Dance of the Angels) by **Donatello** on the parapet (the original work of these replicas is kept inside the **Duomo Museum** next to the church). The pulpit was created for the public exhibition of the relic of the Holy Belt which is shown to the crowd on Christmas Day, at Easter, on May 1st and August 15th, and, in a more solemn way, on September 8th, for the celebration of the Nativity of Virgin Mary. On the bronze capital, a series of concentric cornices in white marble emphasizes a centrifugal effect and the parapet simulates a small temple inside which groups of angels play a lively ring-a-ring-a-roses; an elegant umbrella canopy crowns the pulpit. On the right hand-side stands the Romanesque-Gothic bell tower from the 12th-14th centuries.

The interior has a severe Romanesque appearance with three narrow naves resting on marble columns (green serpentine). On the arches, the walls show alternated white limestone and green marble stripes. The pulpit by **Mino da Fiesole** and **Antonio Rossellino** from 1473 is situated in the central nave.

A small staircase leads to the vast transept dated from the 14th century and traditionally attributed to **Giovanni Pisano** or to one of his students (maybe to Nicola Pisano). In the transept, we can see five very high crossed vaults above the apse chapels, divided by high striped half pillars with remarkable decorated pedestals. In the centre of the choir are three important works by the

American artist Robert Morris: the *Altare marmoreo* (2000), made out of translucent marble stones from which light radiates during Mass; the candelabra and the bronze lectern (2001) made in the shape of a coat on a stone base, recalling St Stephen's stoning. On the right hand side of the transept is found the tabernacle from the Renaissance period with the *Madonna dell'Olivo* by the **Da Maiano** brothers; the [Madonna col Bambino](#) (1480) in terracotta is a work by the famous **Benedetto da Maiano**. The rich balustrade of the choir was made with polychromatic marbles in the 17th century, using some stones from the Renaissance period, displaying coats of arms and angels coming from the old choir. It gives access to the chapels. On the right hand side, the **Vinacesi Chapel** keeps a remarkable [Cristo deposto](#) from the 13th century and is decorated with precious frescoes made in the 18th century by Prato artist **Alessandro Franchi**, in the "nazarene" style. Next to it we find the **Cappella dell'Assunta** decorated with frescoes in 1435-36 by **Paolo Uccello** telling *Stories of the Virgin and of St. Stephen*. They were completed by **Andrea di Giusto** and show an extravagant fantasy through enchanted scenes with well-defined bright and elegant colours and architectural pieces in the style of Brunelleschi. In the **main chapel**, behind the altar with a beautiful bronze **Crucifix** by **Ferdinando Tacca** (1653), the walls are covered by frescoes telling *Stories of the life of St. Stephen and St. John the Baptist*. Completed in 1465, this is **the most famous cycle by Filippo Lippi** (currently going through restoration, the chapel is closed behind a big painting by Emilio Farina). Monumental in their conception, the figures with numerous lively portraits are wrapped in diaphanous draperies. In the bottom left part we see the *Esequie di santo Stefano* (St. Stephen's funeral), set in a Paleo-Christian church. Lippi depicted Pope Pius II as an imposing figure in red clothes, and added his own portrait in the extreme right hand side corner. In the front, on the opposite wall, a big scenographic room keeps the **Convito di Erode**, with the elegant composition of *Salome's dance* and the *Handing over of the Baptist's head* to the beautiful and cold Herodias (the two young people in the right corner are of extreme beauty). The stained glass window is also by Lippi. The adjacent **Manassei Chapel** was painted in the early 1400s with *Stories of St. Margaret and St. James* by one of **Agnolo Gaddi's** disciples, while on the left hand side, the **Inghirami Chapel** keeps a beautiful funerary monument attributed to **Benedetto da Maiano** and a stained glass window from the early 1700s.

Beyond the balustrade, past the **Cappella del Santissimo Sacramento** decorated with a retable by **Zanobi Poggini** (1549) and a vault decorated in the 19th century, in the left nave stands the elegant pulpit from the Renaissance period (1469-73), in white marble and shaped like a slim chalice, with a base richly decorated with disturbing sphinges. The parapet is decorated with very precious bas-reliefs; *the Assunta* and *Storie di S. Stefano* are by **Antonio del Rossellino**, the others by **Mino da Fiesole**, present *Storie del Battista*. Facing the parapet, in the opposite nave, is a beautiful bronze candelabra by **Maso di Bartolomeo**, from 1440, vase-shaped with seven vegetal stems in it. In the last row in the left is found the chapel keeping the **Sacra Cintola**, that is the belt which according to the tradition was given to St. Thomas by the Virgin during the Assumption and was brought to Prato in the 12th century. The chapel is decorated with frescoes telling *Stories of the Virgin and the belt*, painted with a perfect technique and bright colours between 1392 and 1395 by **Agnolo Gaddi**. The concise view of Prato is remarkable in the [Ritorno di Michele](#), bringing the relic into town. The belt is kept inside an elegant 18th century altar, with bas-reliefs by **Emilio Greco** and a *Madonna col Bambino* at the top (around 1301), a masterpiece in marble by **Giovanni Pisano**. The chapel is closed by a **splendid bronze gate**, a Renaissance masterpiece by **Maso di Bartolomeo** and his helpers. Maso also made the interior balcony nearby, on the internal façade, showing a beautiful *Assumption* by **Ridolfo Ghirlandaio** in the back. In front of the chapel there is another work by **Giovanni Pisano**: a very expressive small wooden crucifix.

MUSEUM OF THE OPERA DEL DUOMO DI PRATO

Piazza del Duomo, 49 - 59100 Prato (PO) Telephone: 057429339

Opening hours from April to September:

Monday, Thursday, Friday 9.00-13.00 and 14.30-18.30

Wednesday 9.00-13.00 (afternoon closed)

Saturday 10.00-13.00 and 14.30-18.30

Sunday 10.00-13.00

Closed on Tuesdays



Madonna di Carteano, Maestro di San Lucchese (1365)

Left to the cathedral, a small courtyard in front of the Palazzo Vescovile gives access to the Museum. Its first rooms were opened in 1967 and it was enlarged in 1976 to include works coming from the whole diocese as well as the prestigious bas-reliefs of Donatello's pulpit. The collection made it a real diocesan museum. In 1980 the "Volte" (vaults), set under the transept of the cathedral, were added to the museum. Other spaces were added in 1993-96 with the beginning of works, recently completed, aiming to create a unique journey, going across some rooms of the old Palace of the Proposti to the vicinity of the harmonious Romanesque cloister, ending with the "Volte" underneath the cathedral.

Room with works of the 12th and 13th centuries

The room displays important sculptures and paintings (mainly parts of polyptychs) as well as objects from the 12th century to the beginning of the 14th century, from the Prato area. The oldest work (donated by Pina and Giuliano Gori) is a *Head of Christ* (1220-30), a wooden sculpture maybe from Arezzo.

Tapestry Room

Adjacent to the first room, this one keeps illuminations, sacred ornaments, silver objects from the 16th to the 19th century. The room is named after St. Stephen's tapestry, given to the church of Prato in 1590 by Alessandro Ottaviano de' Medici (future pope Leone XI); it was made with red velvet chiseled on a golden background and enriched with remarkable embroideries. We find

displayed there: a cope, a chasuble and a beautiful embroidered screen altar, probably following a drawing by Giovanni Maria Butteri.

Room of the Holy Belt

This room displays works related to the cult through Mary's relic: silver objects from the 16th and 17th century, pieces of clothing (capas and *dalmatiche* which used to dress the *Madona della Cintura*) and precious bas-reliefs in white marble.

Archaeological Section

From the room of the Holy Belt we go down to the basement to find on the left the digging zone, made to link the first section of the museum to the rooms located along the cloister. The digs have allowed to recover remains of ceramics (placed in the display cases) from the Etruscan period (4th century B.C.) up to the 15th century, proving a human presence in this area before Lombard settlement.

The Renaissance room

From the digging area, we go into a room showing 15th-16th century paintings. Here the masterpiece is definitely **Filippo Lippi's** retable *Le Esquie di San Girolamo* commissioned by the "proposto" Geminiano Inghirami for the cathedral, around 1453 and full of emotion. Completed a few years before, the *Madonna e il Bambino tra i santi Giusto e Clemente* (1449), painted for Faltugnano by the Maestro della Natività di Castello, maybe Piero di Lorenzo di Pratese, one of Lippi's close assistants. The main characteristic feature of this painting is the throne, of classical inspiration, with the dense enamelled colours. The oldest work could be the *Trinità* (1435-45), by Andrea di Giusto; probably dated to the last decade of the 15th century is a remarkable *Crocifisso*, elegant in its proportions and the chiaroscuro effect, attributed to Botticelli, and the *Santa Lucia* shows the work of an artist with a more complex culture reminding of Ghirlandaio and Botticini.

The Pulpit Room

In the centre of the next room stands the parapet of the external pulpit of the cathedral (used for the solemn exposition of the Holy Belt), made by Donatello and artists from his workshop between 1434 and 1438. In 1970 the bas-reliefs were taken inside because of the bad preservation conditions and were replaced by copies. A laborious restoration (completed in 1999) was done by the "Opificio delle pietre dure" with innovative techniques (infra-red laser). Looking closely, one can appreciate how inventive the drawing was and how it has to be totally attributed to Donatello's creativity even though the bas-reliefs were a joined effort between several artists of his workshop. The parapet with its powerful beauty, reproduces the shapes of a circular temple on small fluted pillars dividing it in seven panels inside which crisscross dancing groups of angels full of energy. There is an absolute silverwork masterpiece associated to the relic, made by Maso di Bartolomeo: the small chapel of the Holy Belt (1446-7), where the relic was preserved until 1633. The precious golden copper case reproduces in bone and horn the model of the angels' dance in the style of Donatello, inside the columns of the small temple, topped by strong volutes in the style of Brunelleschi.

17th century Room

This room displays interesting retables and sacred objects from the 16th and 17th centuries.

Romanesque cloister

The room opens out on one remaining side of the beautiful Romanesque cloister, decorated with bicolor marble inlays, dated from the second half of the 12th century and recalling Lombard and Florentine cultures. The eleven small arches are linked together by small white marble columns and by green serpentine bigger ones topped with zoomorphic capitals full of fantasy and partially restored. In the green space in front of the cloister there is a work by Robert Morris: [*Quattro per Donatello*](#), a tribute to the Renaissance artist (donated by Pina and Giuliano Gori).

Antiquarium and "Volte"

In the small cloister, a beautiful 13th century gemed window provides light to the **sepulchral chapel of the Migliorati**, where is found a 12th century tomb; from there a modern corridor (1980) leads to the **Antiquarium**, located under the Holy Spirit Chapel of the cathedral and used as a burial site until the 18th century. Here are displayed fragments found during the 1970 digs in the area of the church and of the Bishops Palace. The corridor continues to open onto the "Vaults" (recently restored), a vast space dated from the early 1300s, covered with cross vaults. The space was used for graves from 1326 till the end of the 18th century as illustrated by the numerous stone or painted coats of arms and the sepulchral emblems.

CHURCH OF SANTA MARIA DELLE CARCERI



This church is an architectural masterpiece from the beginning of the Renaissance and was erected by **Giuliano da Sangallo** between 1485 and 1495. It is in the shape of a Greek cross and its exterior is simple with elegant polychromatic marble coating (unfinished). The interior with serene shapes in the Brunelleschi style is admirable; it shows four high arches holding a beautiful cupola with ribs; one has to notice the decoration in glazed terracotta by **Andrea della Robbia** and his assistants dated 1492.

The church is a masterpiece of symmetry and proportions, a synthesis of Brunelleschi's solutions and **Leon Battista Alberti's** postulates. It was built after the prodigious events occurred on 6 July 1484 near a *Madonna col Bambino* painted outside the old jail. Lorenzo the Magnificent chose **Giuliano da San Gallo's** project to build the church. The interior presents the most accomplished Renaissance temple with a Greek shape: its four arms, half-cubes topped by half cylinders, leave in the centre a cubic space above which is found the hemispheric cupola.

The four stained glass windows are based on a drawing by **Domenico Ghirlandaio** (1491) and the lovely white and blue ceramics frieze is from **Andrea della Robbia's** workshop, where were also made the beautiful *tondi* with the *Evangelisti* (1491), in the cupola. The **high altar**, based on a drawing by San Gallo (done in 1492 and used in 1515), is a very refined kiosk in white marble (inspired by the Pantheon one) in which is found the fresco of the *Madonna col Bambino tra S. Leonardo e S. Stefano* (1330-40). A chapel on the right hand side has a precious choir in inlaid wood (1520) while across stands a singing tribune in stone. Buontalenti is the author of the balustrade with the fanciful coats of arms (1588) on both sides of which stand two stone altars (1575) with paintings by Michele delle Colombe (*Adorazione dei pastori; Visitazione*). Some rooms of the old jail can be seen under the Sacristy where is preserved a fresco of the *Madonna dell' umiltà* by Pietro Miniati (around 1420) and inserted in the robust building of the presbytery in the Neo-Renaissance style (1787-1810).

THE EMPEROR'S CASTLE



The **Castello dell'Imperatore** is the most meaningful example for the region of northern and central Italy of the architectural style which developed around the fascinating personality of Frederick II (1194-1250), Holy Roman Emperor, member of the Hohenstaufen of Swabia family. The building is thought to date back to the years 1242-1248. The architect Riccardo da Lentini, famous for castles he had built in Sicily, worked in collaboration with Frederick of Antioch (Frederick II's son). The structure includes four big square towers the top of which indicates the cardinal points. Frederick II's death and the decline of Imperial politics in Tuscany prevented the completion of the interior of the castle which in later periods was adapted to various requirements (barracks then military jail). In the 1930s it was partially renovated. The choice of the materials used (white to grey limestone and green serpentine) recalls the typical colours of Romanesque-Gothic Tuscany, present in religious buildings. In the east side, a raised passageway (*cassero*) connected the castle to the defensive walls (Porta Fiorentina). A spiral staircase made in limestone leads to passageways where one can enjoy a vast view on the territory towards Florence and the Montalbano.

The castle has been open to visitors since 1975 and a variety of public events take place in the large interior courtyard.

Opening hours – Free entrance

1 April to 30 October: Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday: 16.00-19.00 Saturday and Sunday 10.00-13.00 and 16.00-19.00. Closed on Tuesdays.

1 November to 31 March: Friday 15.00-17. Saturday and Sunday 10.00-13.00 and 15.00-17.00

MUSEO DEL TESSUTO (Via Santa Chiara 23)

The Textile Museum is situated in the renovated premises of the old Campolmi fabric, a jewel of the industrial architecture in the 1800s, in the medieval quarters.

The museum represents the historic memory of the city and another cultural aspect of Prato, an area involved in textile production for over 800 years with today about 8000 companies employing 40.000 people, exporting in the whole world materials and innovative equipment.

Museo del Tessuto

Via Santa Chiara 24

59100 Prato, Italia

Telephone: +39 0574 611503

Fax : +39 0574 444585

Opening Hours

Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday: 10.00 -15.00

Saturday: 10.00-19.00

Sunday: 15.00-19.00 (free entrance)

Closed on Tuesdays

Last tickets sold 30 minutes before closing time.



Prato Textile Museum tells the story of a town famous around the world for its weaving. It is located in the heart of the town, inside an old factory. These rooms, filled in the past with big and noisy weaving looms, are now divided in five sections. The visit starts with various types of textiles, natural or not, and focuses on the weaving process. The historic room displays a collection of various fabrics corresponding to different periods and including pieces from China, India and Japan. The display cases are set next to the big boilers of the old factory.

To illustrate the historic presentation, a section is dedicated to Prato territory and its wool tradition which started in the Middle Ages and was transformed in the course of the centuries to end up by performing a major role in the fashion industry at the end of last century.

The last section is dedicated to the work linked to the production of modern fabrics. The museum also hosts temporary exhibitions on the textile theme.

CENTRO PER L'ARTE CONTEMPORANEA LUIGI PECCI (Viale della Repubblica 277)



Opening Hours: 10.00-19.00 every day except Tuesdays

Inaugurated in 1988, the museum was created by the Pecci family, contractors in Prato, who gave it to the town. The Centre for Contemporary Art is one of the few Italian museums dedicated to contemporary art and its rooms present exhibitions dedicated to the ferments of current artistic production. The centre also has a permanent collection with works acquired by the museum or received as gifts since its opening. The park surrounding the museum keeps artworks as well. There is displayed the symbolic piece of the structure, the *Colonna spezzata* made by the French couple **Anne et Patrick Poirier** and called "*Exegi Monumentum Aere Perennius*". Nearby we can admire an iron installation by **Eliseo Matiacchi** "*Riflesso dell'ordine cosmico*", while on the slope near the entrance there is a marble fountain by **Enzo Cucchi**.

PRATO BISCUITS: “ I CANTUCCI”



Inappropriately called *cantucci* or *cantuccini*, the **biscotti di Prato** are a true Tuscan delicacy. These are biscuits which have been around the world as much as the fabrics and one should not wonder if Italy were only renowned for Prato’s biscuits and textiles.

The best *cantucci* and undoubtedly the most famous ones are those made by the pastry shop: **Biscottificio Mattei** which has been making pastry since 1858.

Via Ricasoli, 20 (tel. 057425756/ info@antoniomattei.it)

Opening hours: Tuesday-Friday: 8.00-13.00 and 15.30-19.30

Sunday: 8.00-13.00 except in July. Closed on Mondays.

If you wish to make your own Prato biscuits, here is a good recipe. You will only need to add a bottle of the excellent **Vinsanto del Montalbano**.

This is an **old recipe** but as some may say even the best one will always miss the secret touch! It is essential, however, to have a very good oven.

Ingredients: 500 grams of self-raising flour, 250 grams of sugar, 150 grams of butter melted in a bain-marie, 200 grams of sweet almonds, 4 eggs, grated lemon zest.

Preparation: make a well with the flour, add the sugar, the eggs, the lemon zest and then make a dough incorporating the butter. The dough must be soft. Add the whole almonds and keep on mixing for a little while. Cut the dough into strips the length of your oven dish and bake in a hot oven for 15 minutes. Once cooked, cut the strips into diagonal pieces according to the traditional shape. To make crunchier biscuits, put them back into the oven for an additional 5 minutes.