

LEONARDO mai visto

MILANO, Castello Sforzesco
16 maggio 2019 > 12 gennaio 2020

Sotto l'ombra del Moro. La Sala delle Asse

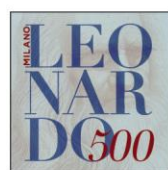
Extraordinary reopening of the Sala delle Asse during restoration works and multimedia installation
Curated by Francesca Tasso and Michela Palazzo
Multimedia Project Culturanuova Srl – Massimo Chimenti

Milan, Castello Sforzesco, Sala delle Asse
16th May 2019 through 12th January 2020

The Sala delle Asse is a square room located on the ground floor of the north-west tower of the Castello Sforzesco in Milan. An intricate tangle of branches and leaves knotted by ropes is painted on the its umbrella vault and lunettes. The coat of arms of Ludovico il Moro and his wife Beatrice d'Este is right in the centre. On the sides, there are coats of arms with inscriptions that recall Il Moro's exploits and his ties with the Emperor Maximilian I of Habsburg. The name 'Sala delle Asse' was given by the first restorer of the Castle – architect Luca Beltrami – interpreting a document kept in the State Archives of Milan and dated April 1498. In this document, Gualtiero da Bascapè, secretary of Ludovico Maria Sforza, known as Il Moro, informed the Duke that the wooden planks (*asse*) that covered the room would soon be removed to allow Leonardo da Vinci to work on it.

When the Sforza family was ruling Milan, the Sala delle Asse belonged to the Duke's apartments. Ludovico il Moro used it as a proper stateroom, where the most important meetings would take place. It is no coincidence that Ludovico il Moro asked Leonardo – the most gifted of all artists living in Milan at the time – to paint this room. In 1499, following the arrival of the French troops, and the flight of il Moro from Milan, the castle was gradually abandoned as aristocratic residence and turned into barracks by the various rulers of Milan in the following years. Some rooms, such as the Sala delle Asse, were turned into stables, and all the pictorial decorations were covered with layers of plaster. Only at the end of the 19th century did the whole Castle, now owned by the Municipality of Milan, undergo major restoration works led by architect Luca Beltrami, who, among other things, is also to be credited with the discovery made in the Sala delle Asse.

In 1898, under several layers of white lime (called *scialbo*), Beltrami found Leonardo's decorations, helped by Paul Mueller Walde, a German historian. In the subsequent restoration, carried out according to the standards of that time, the painter-restorer Ernesto Rusca mostly repainted the room. In 1954-1955, during a post-war restoration of the Castle, the restorer Ottemi della Rotta partially removed



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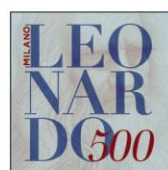
Rusca's painting, trying to find Leonardo's original one. However, the most important outcome of these mid-1950s restoration works was the discovery of the so-called *Monochrome*, painted on the firebox opening. It had already been found by Beltrami, who, however, had thought it dated back to the 17th century. Conversely, in 1954, the *Monochrome* was finally recognised as Leonardo's work. The drawing depicts a large root that splits the rock and strongly changes the perception of the room, which was then set up by the architectural firm BBPR with a wooden panelling covering the walls, thus recalling the planks after which the room had been called.

More than 50 years later, the preservation conditions of the *Monochrome* led the Management of the Castle – together with the Ministry of Heritage and Culture and Opificio delle Pietre Dure in Florence – to begin, in 2013, another round of restoration works of the whole *Sala*.

Along with the restoration works, a series of scientific tests and studies of historical, artistic and iconographic nature were conducted, designed to better understand its iconography. It was during these studies that archivist Carlo Capturini discovered that after Leonardo's intervention the room was called Camera dei Moroni, which means Mulberry Tree Room. Leonardo therefore created a very refined decoration to honour Ludovico Maria Sforza, known as *il Moro*, from the Latin *Morus*, which means mulberry tree. In Milan this tree was synonymous with wealth, because it was used in the then flourishing silk industry.

The restoration of the *Monochrome* was completed for EXPO Milano 2015, while restoration works to the rest of the room stopped to allow the Sala delle Asse to be used during the event. The *Sala delle Asse* was made accessible by partially dismantling the scaffolding. Over 450,000 people were thus able to visit the room. In order to welcome visitors in the best possible way, an innovative multimedia system created by Culturanuova srl was installed. Through projections, holograms, and light spots, it told the story of the Sala delle Asse, Leonardo da Vinci's role, and the restoration works still in progress.

However, the key discovery made by the latest restoration works is a whole segment along the walls, never investigated before, where the original late 15th century plaster was found under several layers of white lime. Through special tests, *monochrome* paintings on all sides of the room were found to be still present in this 15th century plaster. Leonardo's original decoration, therefore, was more extensive and not just limited to the portion taken up by the *Monochrome* and the vault, but it used to cover all the room walls, at least from a certain level upwards.



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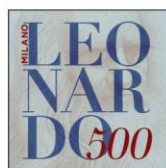


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After EXPO, restoration works were resumed again with the installation of impressive scaffolding, cleaning tests and new diagnostic tests. Since then, all the old layers of lime in that, until then unexplored, portion of wall have been removed by laser. The drawings found are amazing, in terms of style and execution technique. In some cases, they are the continuation of the tree trunks on the vault. In other cases, smaller branches are painted, perhaps depicting a forest understory. But the greatest surprise of all is the discovery of a landscape. Leonardo did not intend to represent only an arboreal pavilion: the gaze of those who entered the stateroom of Ludovico Maria Sforza was meant to wander far beyond it, to the countryside ruled by the Duke.

The Sala delle Asse is the iconic place for Milan 2019 celebrations. In order to make it available during the celebrations of the 5th centenary of Leonardo da Vinci's death, all restoration scaffolds have been completely removed. The room is now presented to the public again after yet another round of restoration works, revealing a pergola of eighteen mulberry trees designed as a giant *trompe l'oeil* to turn the large room at the base of the tower into a stateroom for the Duke. For the first time, visitors will be able to closely view the *Monochrome* from a specially designed vantage point. An engaging multimedia installation guides visitors to the discovery of the room and its importance in Renaissance time, but also of the extraordinary drawing portions recently discovered on its walls. No one, apart from insiders, had yet been able to see the knotty trunks, landscapes, branches and leaves that keep on resurfacing, thus progressively changing the room perception. Thanks to the spectacular multimedia installation *Sotto l'ombra del Moro. Sala delle Asse*, curated by Francesca Tasso and Michela Palazzo and designed by Culturanuova srl di Massimo Chimenti, visitors are guided through a better understanding of the whole room. They will be invited to look at the vault, which has been severely damaged by previous restorations and will undergo specific restoration in 2020. Visitors' attention will then be drawn to the side walls, to learn more about the idea of imitation of nature developed here by Leonardo.



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