

Conca delle Gabelle [The Gabelle Lock]

Before the filling-in of the small lake fed by the Martesana Canal in 1929, this area of the city was called Little Venice. In this slice of paradise, time seems to stand still.

Built at the end of the 15th century, the Martesana Canal, also known as Naviglio Piccolo, connected the River Adda with the centre of the city. At the point where the canal used to reach the “Tombon de San Marc” there was a significant height difference, which necessitated the construction in the 15th century of the canal lock, the Conca delle Gabelle (also known as Conca dell’Incoronata), which remains visible to this day.

During the 1490s, Leonardo devoted himself extensively to studies of hydraulics and the canal system, as evidenced by the numerous sketches in the Codex Atlanticus. He paid particular attention to the Naviglio di San Marco. Sheet 656 ra of the Codex contains sketches of the canal locks and details of their mechanics.

Many people mistakenly attribute their creation to him. In reality, this complex and sophisticated hydraulic system that allowed barges loaded with goods to enter the city was invented in 1439 by the ducal engineers Filippo da Modena (known as “degli Organi”), and Fioravante da Bologna, and was applied for the first time to the Conca di Varenna, a few steps from the where the Darsena now is.

Leonardo is responsible for perfecting the system of water inflow and outflow. His innovations enabled the lock to be managed directly from the tow-path, which speeded up the passage of the barges, lowering costs and increasing the flow of goods.

Via San Marco

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