

Sanctuary of Santa Maria alla Fontana

On 2 September 1499, the defeated Ludovico il Moro abandoned Milan and took refuge in Innsbruck with Emperor Maximilian I. A few days later, Gian Giacomo Trivulzio, commander of the French troops, entered the city through Porta Ticinese, followed a month later by Louis XII.

In December Leonardo also left the city, noting bitterly in one of his notebooks: "The Duke has lost his status, property and liberty. And none of the works he ordered were finished." This marked the beginning of a lengthy period of travel for da Vinci who moved between the courts of Mantua, Venice, Florence, Cesena and Rome, in the course of which he clashed with Michelangelo, who, unlike him, was a bad-tempered character.

In July 1508, at the invitation of Charles II d'Amboise, his friend and admirer, who had become Governor of the Duchy, Leonardo returned to Milan and placed himself at the service of the "Majesty of the Most Christian King," who held him in genuinely high regard.

During this second fruitful period in Milan with d'Amboise as his patron, Leonardo must certainly have visited the building site of the Sanctuary of Santa Maria alla Fontana, a church built on the site of a miraculous spring known since Roman times. The Codex Atlanticus includes a sketch of a section of the church, which led many to attribute the whole project to him. It was not until 1982 that the fortuitous discovery of a document in the State Archives finally put the question to rest by showing that Giovanni Antonio Amadeo was the person who designed and oversaw the building of the original nucleus.

While the arrangement of arches and columns of the loggias that encircle the church like a crown is notably harmonious, the interior of the church is even more spectacular. The pictorial cycles that decorate it, created at different times, are a triumph of composition. Under an umbrella vault with a mid-16th century fresco of the Apostles, eleven spouts continue to pour forth water from the ancient stone, and have been the object of uninterrupted devotion even though they are no longer supplied by the "miraculous" water of the original aquifer.

Leonardo did not stay long enough to see the church finished. When the young d'Amboise suddenly died on 11 February 1511, he lost not only a friend, but an incomparable protector and patron.

After two years with few commissions, with the exception of the never-realized project for a monument dedicated to Gian Giacomo Trivulzio, on 24 September 1513 Leonardo left Milan for Rome never to return. He remained in the Eternal City until the summer or perhaps the winter of 1516, when he was summoned to France by the new king Francis I who, in addition to a generous allowance, placed at his disposal the graceful manor of Clos-Lucé, a short distance from the Château d'Amboise, in the Loire Valley.

In this little paradise, Leonardo lived out the short twenty-four-month remainder of his life, in the affectionate company of Francesco Melzi, admired and loved by the King, and held in high esteem by all. On May 2, 1519 he closed his eyes for the last time, keeping faith with that note that he had written on one of his sheets some time before: "Just as a day well spent brings a happy sleep, so a life well used brings a happy death."

Piazza Santa Maria alla Fontana 7

**photos Margherita Gnaccolini
text M. Alessandra Filippi**