

## **Crypt of San Giovanni in Conca**

The bombings of August 1943 and the post-war demolitions radically changed the face of the city. One result is that the medieval remains of the apse of San Giovanni in Conca have now been today reduced to a traffic island in the middle of Piazza Missori where they have to share space with a masterpiece of contemporary architecture, the Velasca Tower, symbol of the resurgence of the city from a war that had reduced it to a smouldering heap of rubble.

At the time of the Sforzas, the basilica that stood over the crypt was still the largest church in Milan, as the Duomo was very far from being completed. Built in the 5th century along the Decumanus Maximus of the imperial city, right in front of the ancient Porta Romana, it was renovated around the year 1000, destroyed in 1162 by Barbarossa, and rebuilt in the 13th century. It underwent another transformation when Bernabò Visconti, who had built his mighty fortress nearby, decided to turn it into a mausoleum for himself. Visconti therefore had it decorated with a sumptuous cycle of frescoes, some of which are now preserved in the Sforza Castle and appointed Bonino da Campione to build an impressive funerary monument inside, which, scorning convention, he had placed behind the altar.

None of all that Leonardo da Vinci saw here remains, apart from the crypt, a rare example of Romanesque architecture and a miraculous survivor of the worst instincts of post-War city planners. Standing in the midst of the rhythmically spaced columns, surmounted by capitals of different shapes and sizes, one might well imagine oneself back in the days when Milan was a meeting place for the elect, a beacon of learning, the arbiter of style and elegance for all Europe.

**Piazza Giuseppe Missori**

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