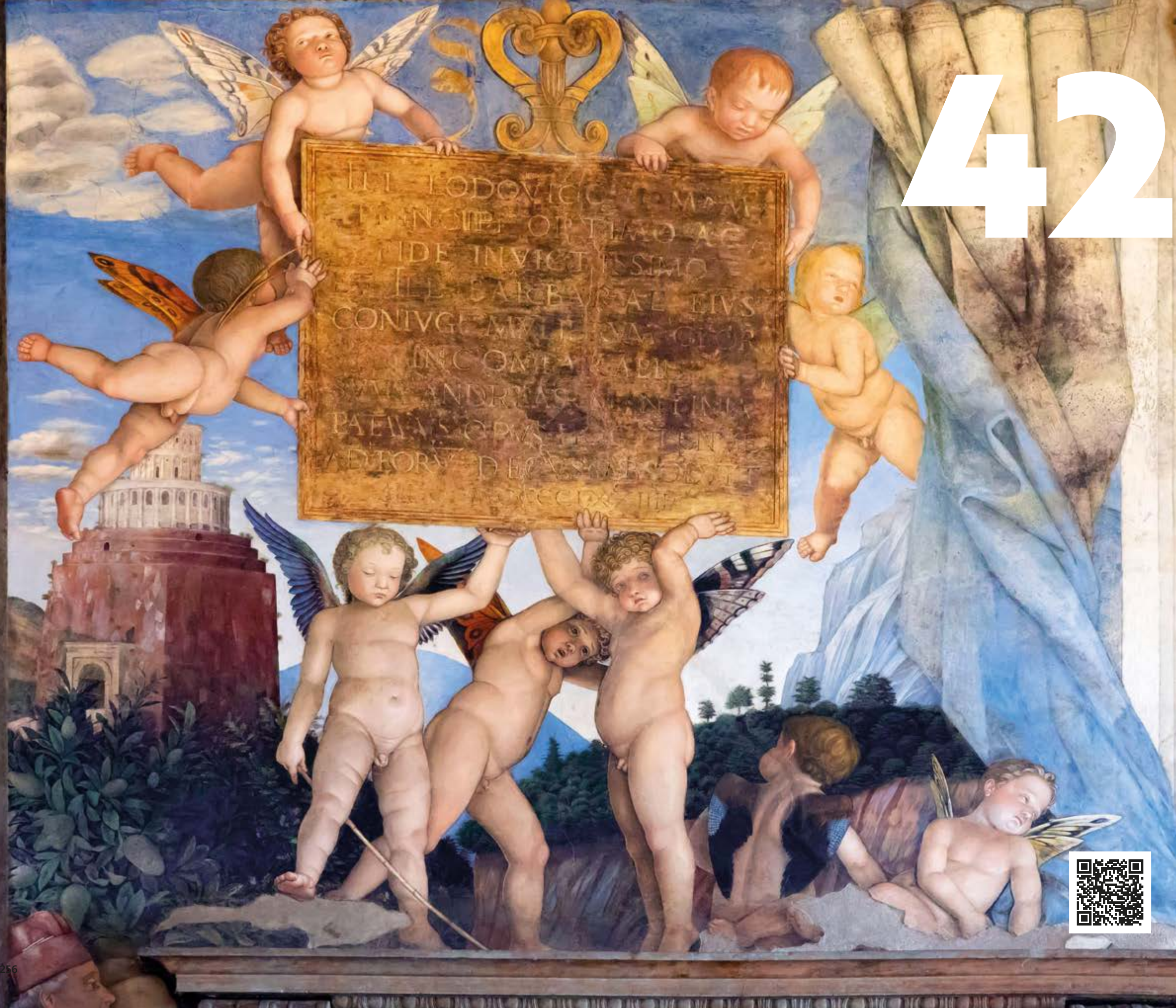




# 42

## MANTUA AND SABBIONETA

*“The best of Mantua is inside, its landscapes are inner ones, as those of the soul.”*

*Viaggio in Italia, Guido Piovene*

When you see Mantua for the first time, you need to follow the same immutable ritual: look at it as it emerges from the waters of the lakes that have marked its liquid border for ages, shaping its identity as a city-island. Mantua should be approached from San Giorgio Bridge, as the astonishing skyline that the city offers from this privileged vantage point allows visitors to grasp, at a glance, all the peculiarities of its design. Mantua's urban fabric clearly shows its thousands of years of evolution. Enclosed within the embrace of the lakes, the original Etruscan-Roman settlement lived through the chaotic spontaneity of the medieval centuries and was then reshaped according to the rational urban ideal of the Renaissance, under the impulse of the reigning dynasty of the Gonzaga. Almost a city within a city, Palazzo Ducale is the generative and symbolic pivot around which Mantua's expansion revolves. On the opposite side, at the end of the route that the princes travelled on going to the countryside, the city transforms into the hedonistic utopia of Palazzo Te. Another expression of ducal power, Sabbioneta is one of the most accomplished expressions of that same ideal that Mantua – too complex and stratified – could not fully embody. Built almost from scratch to become the small, perfect capital of Vespasiano Gonzaga's duchy in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the city is a world crystallised by human control – more mental than physical. The stories of these two different, yet complementary, cities bear witness to the same cultural heritage that the World Heritage inscription aims to promote.



### SERIAL CULTURAL HERITAGE

UNESCO DOSSIER: 1287

PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: QUEBEC CITY, CANADA

YEAR OF INSCRIPTION: 2008

**CRITERIA FOR SELECTION:** Mantua and Sabbioneta have been included in the World Heritage List for the exemplary value of their urban and territorial planning projects, carried out during the Renaissance and promoted by the Gonzaga dynasty.





*“Dora is used to beauty, because in Mantua you see a monument everywhere you turn. She has seen the Palazzo Ducale a thousand times, as it is not far from her home. But the large exedra in front of Giulio Romano’s Renaissance villa leaves her speechless.”*

**The places in Silvia Truzzi’s *Il cielo sbagliato* mirror our itinerary, which follows the route taken by the Gonzaga princes to reach Palazzo Te from Palazzo Ducale.**

Start from **1 Piazza Sordello**, where the Gonzaga, who had become lords of Mantua in 1328, began to erect new buildings around Palazzo del Capitano, to the south, including **2 Palazzo Ducale**. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the palace had expanded to the size of a small city, in whose labyrinth of buildings one of the most cultured courts in Europe flourished. Cross the Voltone di San Pietro to enter the medieval heart of Mantua, where you will find some of the buildings that symbolise the time of the *Comuni* in **3 Piazza Broletto**: Palazzo del Podestà, the Torre Comunale, Palazzo della Corporazione dei Mercanti and Palazzo dell’Arengario. Follow the arcades along Via Broletto and reach **4 Piazza delle Erbe**, a square that, as its name suggests, is deeply linked to the heritage of the Middle Ages.

The main building is the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Palazzo della Ragione, where justice was administered, while the oldest is the Rotonda di San Lorenzo, linked to the ancient pilgrimage routes. In **5 Piazza Andrea Mantegna** the façade of the Basilica di Sant’Andrea, designed by Leon Battista Alberti – the father of Renaissance urban planning – rises majestically. Follow Via Roma all the way to the **6 Rio** – an artificial canal built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century to connect Lake Superiore with Lake Inferiore – overlooked by the double arcade of the Pescherie di Giulio Romano, dating from 1536. Continue along the straight Via Principe Amedeo until Via Acerbi: here the **7 House of Mantegna** awaits you with the conceptual geometry of its courtyard. A short distance away, the **8 Temple of San Sebastiano** is another 15<sup>th</sup>-

century project by Leon Battista Alberti. From Largo XXIV Maggio you can enjoy the clean lines of **9 Palazzo San Sebastiano**, built between 1506 and 1508 as the residence of Francesco II Gonzaga. The southern limit of the ancient city ran along the canal that separated it from the countryside. After they were buried, the waterways were replaced by Viale della Repubblica and Viale Risorgimento. Lake Paiolo, drained at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was located immediately to the south. At its centre, looking almost as a small-scale reproduction of the entire city, is the island of Tejero with **10 Palazzo Te**. This “enchanted” residence was designed by Giulio Romano between 1525 and 1535 as a place of delight where princes could enjoy being idle.



## THE SALA DEI GIGANTI AT PALAZZO TE

*“[...] there are dozens of Giants (Titans warring with Jove) on the walls of another room, so inconceivably ugly and grotesque, that it is marvellous how any man can have imagined such creatures [...] are depicted as staggering under the weight of falling buildings, and being overwhelmed in the ruins [...] vainly striving to sustain the pillars of heavy roofs that topple down upon their heads; and, in a word, undergoing and doing every kind of mad and demoniacal destruction [...]”*

*Pictures from Italy, Charles Dickens*

Dickens uses powerful words to describe the frescoes of the formidable Sala dei Giganti, the most famous frescoed room in the entire Palazzo Te complex. In the space designed by Giulio Romano, the paintings depict the fury of Jupiter towards the Titans who dared to climb Mount Olympus to challenge the power of the father of the gods. The twisted vertigo of the bodies tumbling down the walls is one of the most impressive hallucinations of Renaissance painting.



**“DO YOU KNOW WHERE MY FATHER LIVED? IN A BEAUTIFUL VILLAGE, WITH STREETS CUT AT RIGHT ANGLES, SPACIOUS SQUARES, TWO BEAUTIFUL CHURCHES, MAGNIFICENT RAMPARTS, AND SIX FORTRESS BASTIONS. AND NOTHING MORE.”**

The “beautiful village” of Ippolito Nievo’s father (described in *Antiafrodisiaco per l’amor platonico*) is Sabbioneta, one of the few cities in the world created according to the

principles of the “ideal city”. It was commissioned by Vespasiano Gonzaga between 1554 and 1591 as the capital of his duchy. Sabbioneta is the dream of Renaissance architects: a city they first organised in their minds and then built; the symbol of a society as orderly and harmonious as their design. Follow this itinerary walking in Vespasiano’s shoes as he moves through the buildings, streets and walls of his capital city.

Your tour begins from outside Sabbioneta, from the imposing **1 Porta Imperiale**, the door in the walls protecting the city. Once inside, turn right along Via Colonna, which intersects Via Bernardino Campi,

dedicated to one of the painters of Vespasiano’s court. Along the straight road, just before the Church of San Bernardino, you can see the **2 Synagogue**, the place of worship for the town’s Jewish people, who, in the climate of tolerance promoted by the prince, could live freely and were integrated with the rest of the citizens of Sabbioneta. The road ends in **3 Piazza Ducale**, the city’s most central and monumental square, enclosed by the elegant lines of **4 Palazzo Ducale**, the prince’s main residence. In its frescoed rooms, you can even see Vespasiano galloping! Behind the palace is the octagonal **5 Church of the Incoronata**, the mausoleum where the prince’s remains lie.

Returning to Piazza Ducale, take Via Teatro, which is named after the wonderful **6 Teatro Olimpico**, designed by Vincenzo Scamozzi for court performances and inspired by the theatres of antiquity. You can recognise it from the Latin inscription running along the architrave of its façade, which reads: “ROMA QVANTA FVIT IPSA RVINA DOCET” (Rome’s own ruin tells how great it was). It is time to turn left into Via Vespasiano Gonzaga, which opens out into the large **7 Piazza d’Armi**, the defensive heart of the city: imagine the square full of soldiers in their shiny armour. Near the square stood the ancient castle, demolished in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. On the south side, beyond the column with the statue of goddess Athena, Piazza d’Armi is closed by **8 Palazzo Giardino**, the place that the prince dedicated to his leisure, to receiving guests and to his amazing art collections. Before visiting it, do not miss the view from the “perspective telescope” in Corridor Grande, known today as **9 Galleria degli Antichi** – the very long brick arcaded building where the prince’s statue collection was kept.



KIDS



## MANTUA AND SABBIONETA in books

*Reading suggestions to fall in love with Mantua and Sabbioneta.*

- **Pictures from Italy**, Charles Dickens (1846). The penetrating, disenchanted and telling gaze of Charles Dickens, travelling from the North to the South of Italy.
- **Antiafrodisiaco per l’amor platonico**, Ippolito Nievo (1956). Strong passions and a lucid glance at Italian society during the Risorgimento. This is the first literary experience of the author of *Confessions of an Italian*, written in 1851 and unpublished until 1956.
- **Viaggio in Italia**, Guido Piovene (1957). Piovene travelled through Italy for three years to write a unique and extremely detailed reportage, a classic of Italian travel literature. From the Alps to Sicily, through Mantua, the author’s gaze is an invitation to discover the wonders of this beautiful country.
- **La signora del Rinascimento**, Daniela Pizzagalli (2001). The life and splendours of Isabella d’Este, the woman who, more than anyone else,

grew the myth of the court of Mantua through enlightened patronage and shrewd diplomacy in the troubled years of the wars that bloodied the Italian states during the Renaissance.

• **Le righe nere della vendetta**, Tiziana Silvestrin (2011). After *I Leoni d’Europa*, the court of the Gonzaga is, once again, the inspiration for this historical thriller, set in a time caught between the light of reason and the unbreakable shadows of superstition. Unravelling the mystery is the fascinating *capitano di giustizia* Biagio dell’Orso.

• **Tre allegri malfattori**, Davide Bregola (2013). The city that during the festival Festivaletteratura becomes the literary capital of Italy is the perfect backdrop for a noir with a grotesque flavour, mixing bizarre characters – modern Carnival characters from the Po Valley – with situations that seem to pay homage to the Coen brothers’ most surreal films.

• **Le nemiche**, Carla Maria Russo (2017). Against the golden backdrop of the courts of Mantua and Ferrara, all the rivalry, passions and intrigues of two of the most influential female figures of the Renaissance: Isabella d’Este and Lucrezia Borgia.

• **Una ragazza cattiva**, Alberto Beruffi (2017). In the lazy hedonism of the 1980s, Mantua is a “sleeping beauty” where the inertia of bourgeois conventions is the best façade to hide the shadows of Collegio Santo Spirito. Forty years later, the city becomes the scene of a heinous series of murders that seem to be the pieces of one macabre design.

• **Il cielo sbagliato**, Silvia Truzzi (2022). Truzzi chooses her hometown for this all-female epic, which intertwines the lives of two women separated by the abyss of class difference, but united by the same destiny of submission and abuse. A story of emancipation spanning three decades against the backdrop of Mantua, suspended in its beauty, but headed for the violence of the twenty years of fascism in Italy.

### Children’s books:

• **I nani di Mantova**, Gianni Rodari (1980). Rodari sets one of his last tales in Mantua: it’s the story of a little big rebellion against power abuse, and it is full of confidence for a “different” and compassionate world, where physical height doesn’t matter.