

RENOVATION 2009

A new series of pictures tracing the history of the works for the construction of the new wing of the Hotel Orto de' Medici.

An effort lasted 12 long months, begun in May 2008 and finished in June 2009.

{morfeo 14} During the Middle Ages the defensive walls of Florence were enlarged, moving the city border up to North. As a result all the area between the Cathedral and the future Liberty Square become part of the city of Florence. In this area there was a monastery dedicated to Saint Gall, a 6th century Irish saint, who travelled around Europe as a hermit. In this monastery the first Franciscan monks ever visiting the city slept in 1252. The monastery was renewed at Lorenzo de' Medici's expenses and it was so famous that it gave the name to the nearby city-gate, to the street, to the architect (Giuliani Giamberti known as "Il Sangallo") and the architect's family all (the Da Sangallo's).

In Via San Gallo all the visitors, ambassadors, merchants and pilgrims used to pass by, coming from or going to the Apennine Mountain passes connecting to Bologna or Faenza. Moreover a large part of the daily traffic of peasants coming from the country to sell their product in the city used to pass from this street. In order to help and restore all this people in Via San Gallo there were many hospitals ("Spedali") and inns.

Also there were some monasteries and many green areas, as you can easily check in the "Catena map" (1470), displayed in the Museo di Firenze Com'era. This was because the area was included lately in the city borders, avoiding the intensive urban development of the Early Middle Ages. The most famous green area was the Medici garden, often named "San Marco garden" because of the nearby San Marco convent.

In this garden Lorenzo il Magnifico displayed his personal collection of Ancient Roman marbles and he decide to allow young artist to come and copy the works of art, under the tutorage of Master Bertoldo, a famous sculptor who used to be pupil of Donatello. Lorenzo offered to these young talents the opportunity to study and live in the Medici palace, a sort of scholarship. This investment was one of the most relevant in the history of Art, because from this earliest art school came out one the most important genius of the mankind, Michelangelo Buonarroti.

In the next years the area had up and downs. After the death of Lorenzo de' Medici the Academy was closed then, during the next century, the Medici family, with Cosimo 1st, moved to a new palace, Palazzo Vecchio (the former palace of the Republic), changing its area of influence: from the San Marco area to the whole city. His son Francesco 1st wanted a new residence in the area of San Marco so, some years later, he had Bernardo Buontalenti architect creating a "casino di delizie" ("delight little house") where he could keep a private laboratory for science study and where the garden was dedicated to a fantastic allegory of philosophy and alchemy.

After some years of fame, in the period of the house of Lorraine (following the House of Medici to rule the city) a process of rationalization of the city and its territory include the San Marco area. The Medici palace was already sold to the Riccardi family and the Casino became the

custom office, thanks to its favourable position on such an important street passage.

The garden of San Marco, the one where Michelangelo had used to study, was restyled as the private garden of the most gossiped "maison" in the city, the palace of Grand Duke Peter Leopold's lover Livia Raimondi Malfatti, a dancer who entered in history not due to her artistic skills.

Around 40 years later (near 1825) the new Grand Duke Leopold 2nd decided a new face for all the San Marco area: new palaces for gentlemen, new decorous street and a square with trees to walk around on Sundays. So they built the new Independence Square (ironically later called as a tribute to the independence from the Grand Duke), via San Leopoldo (the upper part of today's called via Cavour) and the restyled via San Gallo.

Between the half of 18th century and the first half of 19th century a new group of palaces was built or restored, including the old hospital buildings and other ancient houses. New façades were built in via San Gallo and in other streets. It's around this time when the Orto de' Medici palace's history starts.

The Socci family, whose coat of arms is on the arch of the main portal of the palace, created a large building on the remains of the old San Marco garden, with a main face in typical Florentine style on the street. Inside they built many separate apartments for gentlemen and families of the new Florentine bourgeoisie. Painters decorated the buildings with frescos, and around the inner garden they created a large terrace, with a frescoed room before, painted with panoramas, flowers and botanical species. This kind of decoration was typical of the rooms next to a garden, in order to "prepare" the visitors for the outside natural view and in order to artificially enlarge the room, as if the walls were covered of real windows.

On the same floor there also is a Music room, with an allegoric fresco of Music personification and fake architectural elements as "trompe l'oeil", painted in 19th century. The walls are covered of painted tapestry in Pompeian red colour. On the top you can still see the hooks for the real tapestry used to lower the volume of music in nearby rooms. The next room has a frescoed ceiling too, with flying angels and a rich frame of painted lace. In these rooms the antique wooden floors are original.

The modern use of the palace as a hotel is connected to the ancient heritage of San Gallo Street's inns and the name of Orto de' Medici ("Garden of the Medici family") is a homage to the glorious San Marco Garden. A plaque still remembers the importance of this site for the Art of Michelangelo.

Very recent is the discovery of more frescos in the building. In the main entrance hall there are two rows of painted lunettes in monochrome style, with busts and garlands. They were hidden under a layer of white lime for something like a century at least. A conservator is now starting a work of conservation-restoration of the paintings for the presentation of them during 2009.