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## PADUA'S FOURTEENTH- CENTURY FRESCO CYCLES

*"[...] since for the great desire I had / To see fair Padua,  
nursery of arts, I am arriv'd [...] And am to Padua come  
as he that leaves / A shallow splash to plunge him in the  
deep, / And with satiety seeks to quench his thirst [...]."*

*The Taming of a Shrew, William Shakespeare*

The echo of the beauty of Padua, "cradle of the arts", which reached William Shakespeare's Elizabethan England, had tentatively started to resonate almost three centuries earlier, when Giotto, the most highly praised artist of the 14<sup>th</sup> century in Tuscany, took the seeds of his figurative revolution to the city in Veneto. Starting from the Scrovegni Chapel and the other fresco cycles painted by Giotto in Padua in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, a complex cultural melting pot would develop for almost a century, where figurative arts intersected with literary production, philosophical thinking and science. This vibrant environment, just before the time of Humanism, is one of the turning points in the development of visual arts in European art history. This serial Unesco site boasts eight symbolic locations, hosting eight painting cycles created by six artists between 1302 and 1397, covering a frescoed surface area of over 3600 square metres. The fresco cycles are grouped into four parts within the area that fell within the boundaries of the walled city: Scrovegni and Eremitani; Palazzo della Ragione, Reggia Carrarese, Baptistry and the adjoining squares; Cittadella Antoniana; and San Michele. The paintings were commissioned to Giotto, Guariento, Giusto de' Menabuoi, Altichiero da Zevio, Jacopo Avanzi and Jacopo da Verona by both public and private, secular or religious patrons, who gave rise to the "building site" from which the new image of Padua would emerge.



**SERIAL CULTURAL HERITAGE**  
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**CRITERIA FOR SELECTION:** Developed on the basis of Giotto's legacy, the fresco cycles of the 14<sup>th</sup> century in Padua bear witness to the pre-humanistic cultural environment created by the interaction between figurative arts, science and literature. The fresco cycles are the expression of a pictorial language that would inspire later developments in mural painting during the Italian Renaissance and beyond.



*"[...] I entered Giotto's chapel, where the entire vault and the backgrounds of the frescoes are so turquoise that one would think that the radiant day had also crossed the threshold with the visitor [...]."*

**Like Marcel Proust in *In Search of Lost Time*, we set off to explore the fresco cycles of Padua starting from the chapel of banker Enrico Scrovegni.**

The **1 Scrovegni Chapel** is where it all began, in 1303, when the banker Enrico Scrovegni commissioned Giotto to decorate the newly built structure. Wonder at the spatial dimension of the representation and the realism with which the painter investigates the human soul, before losing yourself in the galaxy of stars on the vault's blue sky.

Reach the nearby **2 Church of Santi Filippo e Giacomo agli Eremitani**, which documents how later generations followed Giotto's lesson. The stories of St. Philip, St. James and St. Augustine, painted around 1360 by Guariento di Arpo in the main chapel, show the assimilation of Giotto's art, with its strong volumes. Only 10 years later, Giusto de' Menabuoi worked on the Cortellieri Chapel.

Cross Viale Europa to penetrate the medieval tangle of streets up to **3 Palazzo della Ragione**, between Piazza delle Erbe and Piazza della Frutta. Once you reach the top of the stairs, you enter one of the largest spaces for civil use built in the Middle Ages: the Salone is a veritable covered square in the heart of Padua. The frescoed astrological almanac, with over 300 panels, replaces the one painted by Giotto, which was destroyed by a terrible fire in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. From Piazza delle Erbe, walk along the streets of the old Jewish Ghetto, then take Via Soncin to reach Piazza del Duomo.

The **4 Baptistery** is the treasure chest of the astonishing "virtual world" painted by Giusto de' Menabuoi. The paintings cover every possible surface,

in an extraordinarily modern erasure of the boundary between reality and illusion. Retracing your steps, cross the ghetto and, once on Riviera Tito Livio, take Via Gaspara Stampa and then Via del Santo. The latter leads to the **5 Basilica of Sant'Antonio**, where you can find the earliest traces of Giotto's presence in the city, as well as the Belludi Chapel, frescoed by Guariento, and the San Giacomo Chapel, created from the collaboration between Jacopo Avanzi and Altichiero. To the right of the basilica, we find the last stop in this itinerary, which is somehow connected to the starting point: the **6 Oratory of San Giorgio**. Commissioned by the Lupi di Soragna family, it replicates Giotto's masterpiece on a smaller scale, with a magnificent fresco decoration by Altichiero.



## THE SPECOLA OF PADUA

*"They slowly walked up to the walls of the old castle. From there you could see the Torlonga, the main tower that had been used as an astronomical observatory for centuries. It was believed it had once been Galileo Galilei's study, although historians established that he had never climbed into that tower.*

*Teresa was fascinated by the immensity of the sky; she told her friend that she would love to study the stars and try to fathom the secrets of the universe. Lidia was much more pragmatic: "It would be wonderful, darling. But for us women, it's reality that matters... So how do you think we could help the other women?"*

*Vicolo Sant'Andrea 9, Manuela Faccon*

The protagonist of Manuela Faccon's novel walks towards the castle that once was the strongest medieval fortification in Padua. With the construction of the Venetian Walls in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the structure lost its importance. In the wake of the revolutionary observations made by Galileo during the 18 years he spent in the city, the main tower, known as Torlonga, was converted into an astronomical observatory for the students and professors at the university. The tower currently hosts the fascinating La Specola Museum.



**[...] I GET TEARY-EYED LOOKING AT THE SO CALLED HALL OF REASON, WHERE THE RIGHTS OF THE OPPRESSED WERE ONCE DEFENDED...**

This is how, in 1850, Ippolito Nievo, then a young student, complained about his beautiful yet melancholic Padua, recalling better times when justice was administered in the enormous hall of the Palazzo della Ragione. Within the squares of Padua, teeming with activities similar to those of Nievo's days, and of Giotto before him, your eyes too will not believe the

size of Palazzo della Ragione, a "ship to sail the skies", where you can try your hand at a treasure hunt that is nothing short of "stellar". According to the astrological beliefs of the Middle Ages, the administration of justice had to reflect the same principles governing the cosmic order. This is the inspiration for the largest fresco cycle in Padua, populated by hundreds of figures. Now it's up to you to find the ones mentioned below.

As soon as you enter, marvel at the vastness of the room, dominated by the gigantic wooden keel-vaulted ceiling, and "salute" the large **1 wooden horse** used during a great celebration in the city in 1466. Once you have

settled in, it is time to understand what the 333 panels on the walls depict: they show the constellations of the celestial vault, the planets, the signs of the zodiac and the months, forming a great astrological cycle inspired by the doctrines of the Paduan scholar Pietro d'Abano. It was painted in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century to replace the frescoes painted by Giotto a century earlier, which unfortunately were destroyed in the terrible fire of 1420.

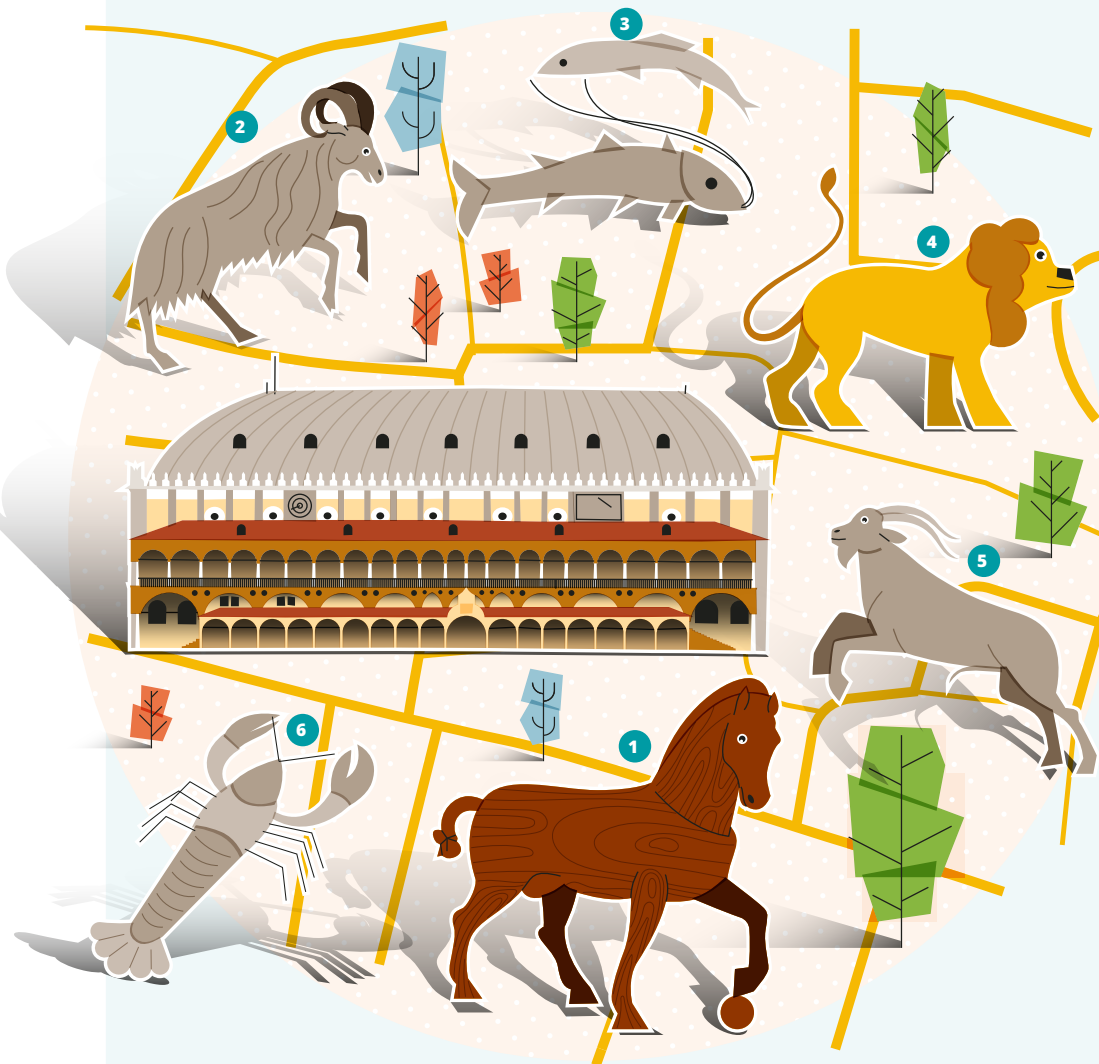
To pass the first test, you need to find the **2 month of March**. In the Middle Ages, it was the first month of the year. It is located on the south wall of the room, and you can spot it from the figure representing the constellation Aries: next to it is a panel depicting fish sellers.

Now look for **3 February**, the last month in the medieval year. You can find it by looking for the constellation Pisces: if you're struggling to choose the right fishes, look for those near the figure of Pegasus, the mythological winged horse.

Next is the hottest summer month, **4 July**. Look for the lion constellation to find it. Unfortunately, there are many lions in the room: the one you are looking for has no "wings" and is located on the west wall, near the corner with the south wall.

Now it's time for **5 December**. You will find it on the north wall: look for the Capricorn, to the left of which is a panel with four warriors in armour.

We have finally come to the last and most challenging task: the **6 month of June**. You can find it by looking for the constellation Cancer, which is exactly above the box depicting the voyage of a ship. On the boat, in addition to the helmsman, there are two passengers.



## **PADOVA URBS PICTA** in books

*Reading suggestions to get to know the treasures of Padua.*

- **The Taming of a Shrew**, William Shakespeare (1594). The Bard's only play set in Padua is a critique of social conventions, filtered through a subtle analysis of female psychology.
- **Italian Journey**, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1816-17). The "Italian Journey" par excellence, penned by "the last universal man to walk the earth".
- **Lettere**, Ippolito Nievo (1850-52). On 29 August 1850, Nievo writes a letter to his sweetheart; he expresses his indolence as a university student in search of stimulation and speaks of a ghostly Padua.
- **In Search of Lost Time**, Marcel Proust (1913-27). A monumental work, it is the author's life in a novel: the eternal, human search for what can never come back.
- **La verità dell'Alligatore**, Massimo Carlotto (1995). The first novel in the noir series starring Marco Buratti,

known as the Alligator, "born and living in Padua. Former musician and blues singer. Victim of a miscarriage of justice". Bearing the burden of an unjust imprisonment and supported by an eclectic group of outsiders, the private investigator is a creature who lives at the "margins" and will find himself tearing apart the veil of hypocrisy of Padua's good society.

• **Assassinio all'Ikea**, Giovanna Zucca (2015). Who murdered Amilcare Borgomastro, found inside the chest of drawers of a bed at Ikea in Padua? Puzzled by this question, the reader follows the investigations of the Loperfido-Esposito duo and a plot full of humour. In the background, a sleepy Padua, but only on the surface. The city comes back in *Turno di notte*, the second exhilarating investigation by the duo.

• **Eravamo tutti vivi**, Claudia Grendene (2018). The stories of a group of friends struggling with their crumbling lives, between dying utopias and personal dramas, in the years between the late 1990s and the first decade of the new century. The backdrop is Padua, a city that has always been split between the respectable façade of the bourgeoisie and a university where "we were all alive".

• **Delitto al Caffè Pedrocchi**, Alberto Raffaelli (2020). After Valdobbadiene in *L'Osteria senza oste* and Venice in *Il maestro vetraio*, the investigations of deputy inspector Giovanni Zanca reach Padua, where, in the noble halls of one of its famous cafés, a game devised by a sinister riddler inspired by Galileo is about to take place.

• **Vicolo Sant'Andrea 9**, Manuela Faccan (2023). Behind her modest ways, downtown concierge Teresa hides a secret that connects her to one of the most dramatic events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A debt of loyalty, a lost mother and a found child are the ingredients of a novel dedicated to the dignity of a woman, who is ready to take the last step towards regaining herself. All is set in a very beautiful and poetical Padova.

### Children's books:

• **Giotto. In corso d'opera**, Stella Nosella, Andrea Alemanno (2022). Specifically written to bring children closer to the value of this UNESCO site, the book is a fascinating account of fresco techniques and the amazing blue colour that dominates the Scrovegni Chapel.