

The Palazzo BLU

and its collections

Edizioni ETS





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The symbol () indicates that the subject is discussed in greater detail in a separate section.

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PALAZZO BLU

On the Lungarno Gambacorti, the riverside boulevard of the historic quarter known as Chinzica, stands the Palazzo Blu, which houses the art collection of the Fondazione Pisa and hosts temporary exhibitions in the areas of the arts, the sciences, history, archaeology, culture and society. Lecture series, concerts, and cultural events are held regularly in the palazzo's modern, fully equipped auditorium.

The Palazzo Blu is administered by the Fondazione Palazzo Blu, which was constituted for this purpose by the Fondazione Pisa (formerly the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Pisa).

THE HISTORY OF THE PALAZZO

The first traces of human habitation on this site date to the eleventh century, when the city-state of Pisa, one of the four Maritime Republics, was at the height of its power and a wealthy commercial centre. In the twelfth century a *casa torre* (tower house) made of stone rose on this site. Excavated traces of the street that skirted it can still be seen in the corridor leading to the section of the palazzo dedicated to the museum's temporary exhibitions. The street and the first constructions that rose along it can be dated to the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth centuries.

The palazzo occupied a strategic position facing the bridge that in the tenth century connected the two banks of the river, opposite the Porta Aurea which was one of the main gates to the town before it became a self-governing *comune*. Close by stands the ancient Church of Santa Cristina, where according to local legend Saint Catherine of Siena received the stigmata, while just a short distance away was the grand residence of the Gambacorta family, now the seat of the municipal council.

Over the centuries the original *casa torre* that stood on the site was dismantled and another construction went up in its place, which in its turn was rebuilt, modified, and embellished by a succession of owners, many of whom belonged to the most important families in the city. In the Middle Ages the palazzo was occupied by the Sismondi and then the Buonconte families. Giovanni dell'Agnello, the first and only *Doge* of Pisa, built his mansion on the site in the middle of the fourteenth century. Subsequently the property passed into the hands of the Sancasciano, and then the Del Testa families. The latter extensively refurbished the palazzo in the late sixteenth century and no further rebuilding or remodelling work was undertaken until the eighteenth century, when the interior was largely



refurbished. Ownership of the palazzo returned to the Del Testa family when the descendant of a branch of this aristocratic family took up residence there. It was then acquired by the Bracci Cambini, followed by the Archinto families.

The unusual blue colour of the façade was first applied in the second half of the eighteenth century, perhaps to please the wealthy tenants from Saint Petersburg who spent their winters in Pisa; the first recorded Russian tenant arrived in 1773. Much of the decoration of the interior dates to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, although faint traces of the earlier, medieval decoration are still visible. The last significant renovations to the palazzo date to the years

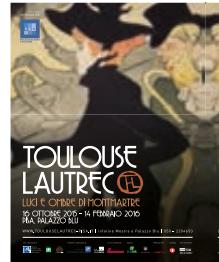
immediately following the unification of Italy and its outward aspect has not been greatly altered since. In 1864 the owner, Count Domenico Giuli, acquired from the municipal government a section of the alley running between via Dell'Olmo (now via Toselli) and what was once via del Cappello and added a new wing to the eastern side of the palazzo. This lent the façade, now graced by five large windows rather than the original four, a pleasing symmetry that it formerly lacked. With this addition the palazzo was connected to the Palazzetto Casarosa, a smaller property owned by Count Giuli, and the residence was transformed into one of the most imposing mansions along the Arno.

The family of Count Giuli Rosselmini Gualandi made the palazzo their home until the 1970s. In 2001 the building was purchased by the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Pisa (now the Fondazione Pisa), which completely restored the building and the Palazzo Blu opened its doors to the public in 2008.

THE ART COLLECTION

All of the works of art and furnishings on display in the Palazzo Blu are the property of the Fondazione Pisa. The original inspiration and unifying theme of this collection is the link between each piece and the city of Pisa or the surrounding territory, either through the artist or the work's patron, provenance or subject matter. The collection was begun by the Cassa di Risparmio di Pisa and has since been expanded with the purchase of works by such important artists as Nino Pisano, Orazio Gentileschi, Artemisia Gentileschi, Orazio Riminaldi, and il Tribolo. In addition to single works, the Fondazione Pisa has acquired entire collections such as that of the cultivated nobleman and collector Ottavio Simoneschi and the archive of photographs by Luciano Frassi, who documented daily life in the city during the second half of the twentieth century.

The collections are displayed on two floors of the Palazzo Blu. Visitors are invited to begin their tour on the second floor, where works of art dating from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries have been arranged in chronological order in a modern museum setting. In contrast, the first floor has been completely restored to recreate the ambiance of a nineteenth-century aristocratic residence with furnishings left behind by the palazzo's former owners and pieces of antique furniture, decorative objects, and artwork that once belonged to Ottavio Simoneschi. Indeed, the acquiring of the Simoneschi collection was fundamental to the renovation of the museum, because when the last owners of the palazzo left and the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio bought





the property, all the rooms except the dining room on the first floor were almost completely empty.

The ground floor as well was completely restored. There is a spacious entrance hall and two rooms with beautiful fresco decoration that are sometimes used for temporary exhibitions. At the end of the entrance hall a staircase descends to *Le Fondamenta*, the lower ground floor where artefacts found during work on the foundations and in the neighbourhood are on display.

Immediately to the left as one enters the palazzo is a corridor that leads to the section of the museum dedicated to the Palazzo Blu's annual autumn and spring exhibitions. These may feature the work of an internationally renowned artist or explore a theme of current interest in the sciences, the arts, or popular culture.



THE GROUND FLOOR AND LE FONDAMENTA

THE ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION

The ground floor of the Palazzo Blu consists of a spacious entrance hall where the ticket desk is located, and two rooms that are now used for temporary exhibitions. The rooms themselves deserve a visit because their walls are embellished with beautiful fresco decoration.

On the right side of the entrance hall is an archway that provides access to the staircase and elevator up to the piano nobile and the second floor of the museum, and another staircase that descends to Le Fondamenta or lower ground floor of the museum.

The part of the palazzo lying below street level has been restored and now houses a permanent exhibit of relics discovered during the archaeological excavation of the foundations of the palazzo and the surrounding area. This section illustrates the conspicuous place occupied by the palazzo in the history of the city.

GROUND FLOOR

The walls of the entrance hall are decorated with a *trompe l'oeil* pattern of stone masonry that was brought to light during recent restoration work and dates to the latter half of the nineteenth century.

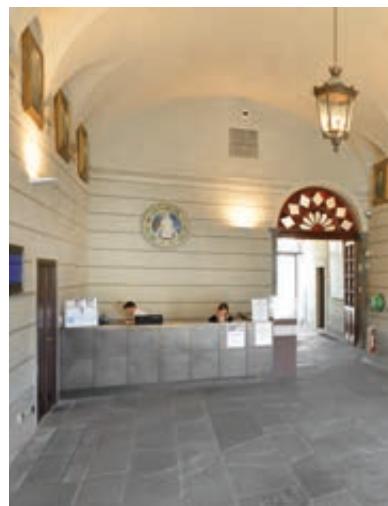
Hanging on the walls are the portraits of past presidents of the Cassa di Risparmio di Pisa, the bank that created the Fondazione Pisa and the Fondazione Palazzo Blu. They are arranged in chronological order from right to left, beginning on the right wall with the portraits of *Lelio Franceschi*, *Fabio Borghini*, *Cesare Studiati*, *Emilio Bianchi*, and *Francesco Buonamici*, all by Alvio Vaglini, and a portrait of *Francesco Orsini Baroni* by Mino Rosi.

On the opposite wall, from right to left are portraits of *Giovanni D'Achiardi*, *Luigi Guidotti* and *Pietro Studiati* by Alvio Vaglini, followed by the portraits of *Arnaldo Dello Sbarba* by Ascanio Tealdi, *Harry Bracci Torsi* by Giorgio Tabet, *Leopoldo Testoni* by Luciano Guarnieri, and *Rino Ricci* by P.L. Doni.

On the far wall is a bas-relief of *Christ's Pietà* in glazed terracotta by Benedetto Buglioni (late 15th century). Buglioni was one of Andrea della Robbia closest collaborators and faithfully modeled his work on the maestro's style and technique.

The coat of arms of the Dell'Agnello family sculpted in granite and a marble plaque with an epigraph dedicated to the Del Testa family may be seen above and to the right of the main door, reminders of two of the prominent families who took up residence in this palazzo during its long history.

A pair of walnut hall benches in the neo-Gothic style attributable to a Pisan cabinetmaker and dated 1887 stand against the right wall. These seats and other furniture were moved to the Palazzo Blu from the historic premises of the Cassa di Risparmio di





Pisa located in the former Church of Saint Ippolito and Saint Felice in via Ulisse Dini. Adjacent to the main hall is a room that once served as the family's private library and is now used for temporary exhibitions. The ceiling decoration, consisting of frescoed ornamental motifs and large ceramic plates, was designed and realized by the Pisan artist **Nicola Torricini** (↗), who signed and dated his work 1884 on a ceramic plate in the ceiling on the far side of the room.

At the end of the entrance hall is a corridor leading to an internal courtyard. On the walls hang two canvases: *Jesus Praying in the Garden* by Alessandro Loni and *God the Father with Saints* attributed to Fabrizio Boschi.

Along the corridor, to the right is a room whose ceiling and walls are decorated with a refined motif of grotesques; this embellishment was added in the early part of the nineteenth century by an unknown painter, presumably brought in by the Archinto family who were the occupants of the palazzo at the time. It is interesting to note the inclusion of some hot air balloons in the ceiling fresco. The accomplished *trompe l'oeil* decoration surrounding the doorway was the work of the architect and scenery designer Antonio Niccolini (or perhaps his teacher, Pasquale Cioffo). It was commissioned sometime around the year 1800 by the Bracci Cambini family, as is testified to by the coat of arms surmounting the doorway.

A large mirror with a beautiful gilt and painted frame (Italian, mid-19th century) from the **Simoneschi collection** (↗) also hangs on the wall.

A corridor on the left side of the entrance hall leads to the section of the palazzo where major temporary exhibitions are held. In one corner is a statue – **Harpy Astride a Toad** (1540s) – by the artist Niccolò Pericoli (known as 'Il Triboli') (↗). It originally formed part of the sculpted decoration of a fountain that stood in the courtyard of the Palazzo Lanfranchi (which subsequently became the Palazzo Toscanelli and is now the seat of the Archivio di Stato).

SECOND FLOOR

THE PINACOTECA

The second floor of the Palazzo Blu has been transformed into a modern exhibition space in order to display the Fondazione Blu's outstanding collection of medieval and early modern Italian art. The works have been arranged in chronological order and provide an overview of the art that was produced in Pisa over the course of several centuries.

A large part of the works on display belong to the original collection of the Cassa di Risparmio di Pisa, which has been enhanced by the acquisition of additional works by the Fondazione.

ROOM 1

Medieval polyptychs and panel paintings

Second floor



On display in this room are works from the Fondazione's collection of fourteenth-century *fondi oro* – gold ground paintings of sacred scenes or figures. The **Agnano Polyptich**, a masterpiece by the Pisan artist Cecco di Pietro, dominates the room. On the opposite wall is an astonishingly accurate replica painted in 1936 by the master art forger Federico Icinio Joni of Siena (☞).

On the wall to the right of the original polyptych is a *John the Baptist* also by Cecco di Pietro that was recently acquired by the Fondazione. Next to it is a *Madonna and Child Between Angels and Saints* by one of the most important followers of Giotto, Agnolo Gaddi, and a *Madonna*

and Child with Saints by the Sienese artist Taddeo de Bartolo, who completed many works for the Church of San Francesco in Pisa. These paintings exemplify the more intimate works that were produced for the private devotions of well-to-do families. In the right panel of Taddeo de Bartolo's triptych two of Pisa's patron saints – Saint Bona and Saint Ranieri – are portrayed.

The panel by Francesco Neri of Volterra is an example of religious art produced for public occasions. Painted on one side with an image of *Santa Lucia* and on the other with the *Crucifixion*, it originally decorated the processional standard of the Compagnia di Santa Lucia dei Riccucci.



Cocco di Pietro, *Polyptych of Agnano*

The true and the false

The two almost identical works on opposite walls of this room tell the fascinating story of the counterfeiting of a painting.

The original polyptych of the *Madonna and Child with Saints* is by Cecco di Pietro, one of the most interesting artists working in Pisa in the late fourteenth century. It was painted for the altar of the church of the Olivetan monastery of San Gerolamo in Agnano near Pisa.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the church building and its lands passed into the hands of the wealthy Tobler family. In the 1930s the family quietly moved the altarpiece to their private residence, probably hoping to put it up for sale. To conceal their inten-



Federico Icilio Joni, copy of Cecco di Pietro's *Polyptych of Agnano*

tions, they commissioned the celebrated painter "of antique pictures" – Icilio Federico Joni – to produce a copy. It seems that the master counterfeiter did so on the basis of a few sketches made during a single day spent in the village of Agnano, which would explain the small differences between the original and the copy.

During World War II the church was hit by a bomb and several compartments of the painting hanging above the altar were seriously damaged, while one of the spires was lost beyond repair. Miraculously, it turned out that this work was a copy, and as a result the counterfeit looks more antique than the original painting.



FIRST FLOOR

AN ARISTOCRATIC RESIDENCE [rooms **D 1-9**]
THE SIMONESCHI COLLECTION [rooms **S 1-4**]

On this floor the palazzo itself is the exhibit. The entire piano nobile, and in particular the rooms overlooking the Lungarno, have been beautifully restored, furnished and decorated in order to provide visitors with a glimpse of what the residence of an aristocratic Pisan family may have looked like in the nineteenth century. The furniture and fittings, frescoes and wall decorations, paintings and objets d'art, all of great historical and cultural interest, have been carefully chosen and arranged to create a gracious, familial atmosphere evocative of another epoch. When you descend the staircase to the first floor, your visit will continue with a tour of the historic residence (Rooms D1-D9) and, to the right of the staircase overlooking the garden (Rooms S1-S4), the section dedicated to the collections of Ottavio Simoneschi (1890-1960).

Coin and medallions from the Pisan lawyer's outstanding numismatic collection are on display in one room. In another the private study of an intellectual and connoisseur has been recreated, with bookcases containing volumes from Simoneschi's own library. The Palazzo Blu owes much to this discriminating collector, a large part of whose legacy was acquired by the Fondazione in 2006 (🔍). The tour of the piano nobile will take the visitor through a series of rooms overlooking the Lungarno; first the Game Room, the Music Room, and the grand Dining Room, and then other rooms typical of the aristocratic mansions of the period, in which the family would have received and entertained their guests. The walls and ceilings have been embellished with fresco decorations added in different periods from the 1750s to the early decades of the twentieth century, while the rooms have been furnished in the eclectic style that was in vogue at the turn of the last century. Pieces belonging to the Giulì family or acquired from other aristocratic residences complement the furniture from the Simoneschi collection, while the paintings hanging on the walls were also chosen to reflect the taste of the period and the aspirations of the family in residence.



Imagined landscapes

Gherardo Poli and his son Giuseppe were among the most brilliant painters of *capricci* and fantastical scenes working in Tuscany between the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. They collaborated closely and in their paintings explored the myriad possibilities of this genre with interesting and endlessly varied results, although their style remained consistent and unmistakeable.

It is interesting to note nevertheless that frescoes on religious and devotional subjects by the two artists have recently been discovered in Crespina, a country town located some distance from Pisa, which hints at a versatility in their work that deserves to be explored.

Long ignored by art historians, the oeuvre of Gherardo and Giuseppe Poli has been undergoing reassessment as changes in taste have led to a greater appreciation of the element of fantasy in art. While still considered singular and bizarre, critics now recognize the pleasing originality and inventiveness of the two artists' work and its uncommon stylistic and technical quality. The Fondazione's collection is the largest anywhere and illustrates the bravura of two artists who devoted themselves to the creation of impossible landscapes.



Gherardo and Giuseppe Poli, *Capriccio with an Imaginary Veduta of Venice*

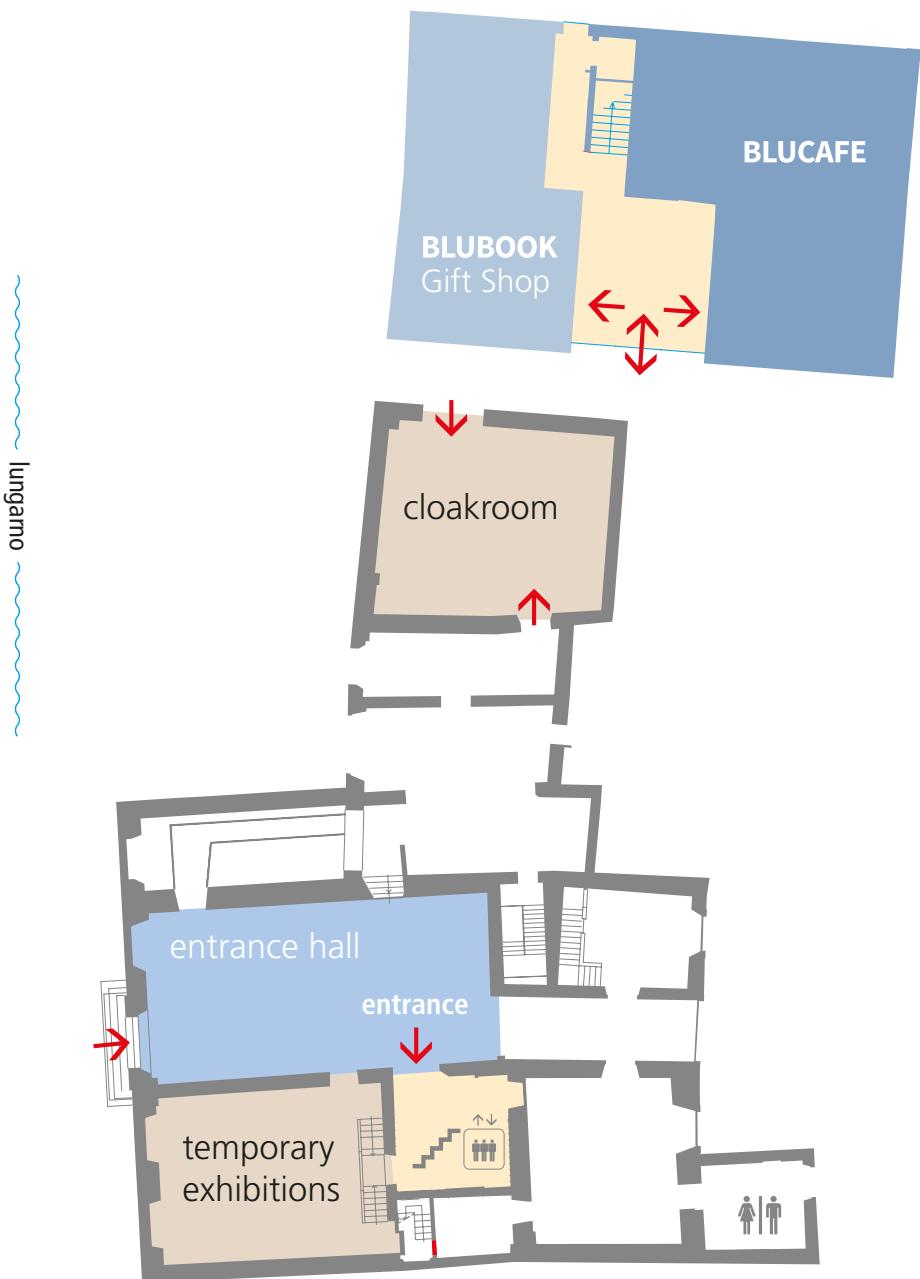


Gherardo and Giuseppe Poli, *Capriccio with Carriage and Figures*



Gherardo and Giuseppe Poli, *Capriccio with Ruins Along the Coast*

MAP OF THE GROUND FLOOR



MAP OF THE FIRST FLOOR

lungarno

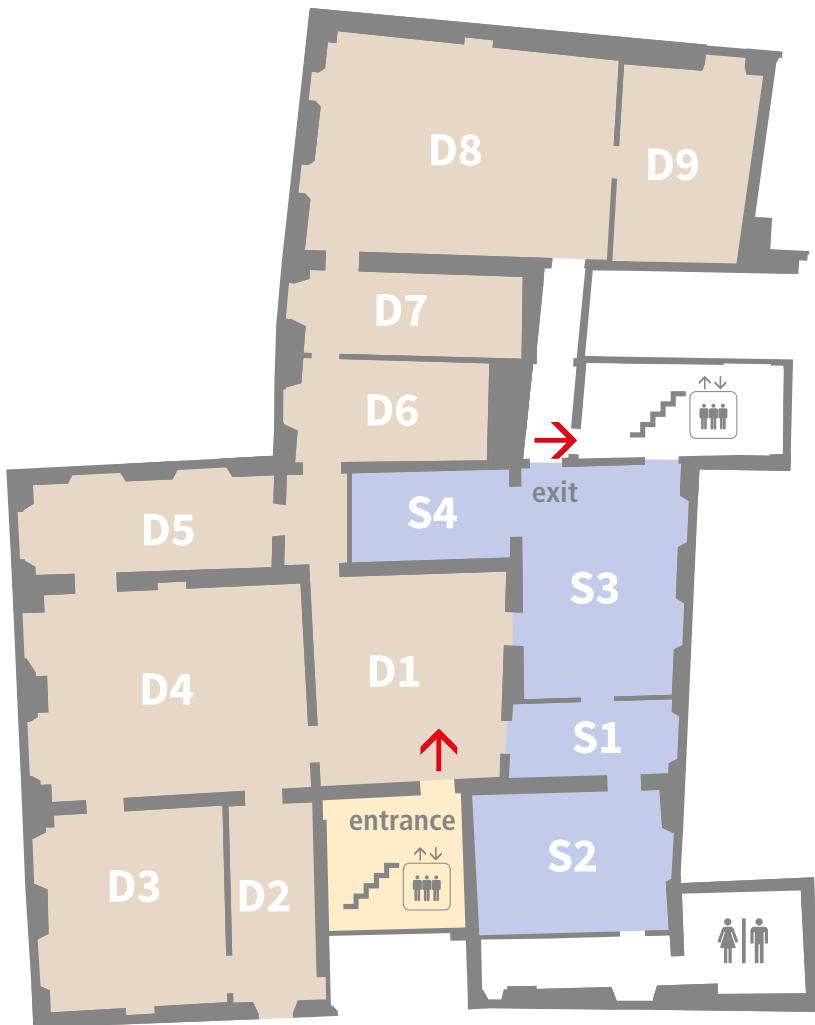


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This guidebook indicates the recommended sequence to be followed during your visit. Therefore Le Fondamenta and the museum's Archaeology Collection are presented first, followed by the Art Collection on the second floor, and the Historic Residence, Simoneschi Rooms, and Simoneschi Coin Collection on the first floor of the Palazzo Blu.

The symbol () marks a topic or work of art on which a more detailed discussion is provided further along in the text.

FIRST FLOOR

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