

## Room VIII, known as *delle Asse* *Decorated by Leonardo da Vinci*

In 1466, Galeazzo Maria Sforza (Fermo, 1444 — Milan, 1476) succeeded Francesco as ruler of the Duchy of Milan and, unlike his father who had lived in the Palazzo dell'Arengo beside the Cathedral, he decided to take up residence in what was then called the Castle of Porta Giovia. This was the original name of the Visconti building, erected between 1360 and 1370, and up till then used for military purposes. Galeazzo Maria extended it for his forthcoming marriage to Bona di Savoia (Avigliana, 1449 — Fossano, 1503), which took place on 6th July 1468. Work was undertaken to extend and decorate the ducal apartments, for which Galeazzo Maria commissioned – and sometimes designed – the subjects, drawings and style of the new frescoes that were to redecorate the Gothic rooms of the castle.

The decoration was planned for the rooms on the ground floor of the ducal courtyard, which were to be used for entertaining (receptions, audiences, meetings): the Sala Verde, the Sala delle Colombine, the Sala degli Scarlioni, the Saletta dei Ducali, the Ducal Chapel and the Tower Room or **Sala delle Asse (Room of Planks)**. The latter name was coined by Luca Beltrami, the architect who succeeded in restoring the Castle at the end of the nineteenth century, from his interpretation of parts of the Sforza manuscripts referring to the original wooden elements in the room.

The painted decoration of this room, however, was not done by Galeazzo Maria, but by the next ruler of Milan, Ludovico Maria Sforza, known as *il Moro*, or 'the Moor' (Milan, 1452 – Loches, 1508), who welcomed to his court some of the greatest painters, architects and men of letters of the day. And the decoration of this room was done by that famous Renaissance artist, Leonardo da Vinci, who painted the ceiling and the walls.

Documentary sources suggest that in April 1498 *master Leonardo* was working on the decoration of this room, planned for completion in September of the same year. His theme was one of nature, perhaps suggested by Ludovico il Moro himself – a trompe l'oeil depiction of a green pavilion, made up of 18 mulberry trees.

The mulberry (*Morus*) is known as the 'silk tree', because precious silkworms feed on its leaves. Already in 1479, Duke Galeazzo Maria Sforza had issued a decree commanding all landowners to plant five mulberry trees for every hundred Milanese *pertiche* (about 654 m<sup>2</sup>). Following this, Ludovico il Moro had established several mulberry plantations for cultivating the silkworms. It seems that his nickname derives from "*moron*", which in Lombard dialect also signifies mulberry. Another tradition holds that Ludovico was nicknamed *il Moro* (the Moor, or the dark one) because of his dark hair and complexion.



The tangled roots grow among the stratified rocks, in a unitary composition that starts realistically from ground level, developing upwards, with trunks and foliage interwoven on the vaulted ceiling.



Considering, on the one hand, the political and cultural ambitions of Ludovico il Moro and, on the other, the brilliant artistic personality of Leonardo da Vinci, including his acute observation and extraordinary interpretation of the plant world, the decoration of this room cannot be seen as simply a description of nature. The celebratory concept of Leonardo's decoration included not only the physical characteristics of the trees (vigorous roots, mighty trunk, heart-shaped leaves and purplish fruits), but also the symbolic ones, in a clear reference to the role of Ludovico il Moro in Milan. From ancient times the mulberry had been a symbol of wisdom and prudence, characteristics of the Duke and of his policies, while the striking, interwoven foliage on the vaulted roof, growing from sturdy trunks and branches, could be a celebration of the solidity of the Sforza state.



The inscriptions and coats-of-arms on the vault, first and foremost the Duke's coat-of-arms in the centre, also celebrate him. One refers to the marriage of Emperor Maximilian and Bianca Maria Sforza, niece of Ludovico il Moro, another to the request for help from Maximilian in the war against Charles VIII, and a third, to the granting by the Emperor of the highest title to which Ludovico could aspire - that of duke.

Investiture by the Emperor, however, did not guarantee that Ludovico would keep his duchy. After the French invasion in 1499, the duke had to flee Milan for Innsbruck and Louis XII, king of France, entered Milan, taking up residence in the Ducal Court of the Castle.

After various vicissitudes, in 1893 the Castle became the property of the Municipality of Milan, and thus Luca Beltrami began his work of restoration.

During this restoration, in 1897, two windows of the Sforza period were restored in the Hall of Planks. [Sala delle Asse] Then, when the thick layer of white plaster all around the room was removed, the original decoration came to light.



Later (1901), thanks to private funding, Beltrami was able to engage painter and decorator Ernesto Rusca to begin restoration. Based on some still-visible fragments and other clues, Rusca reconstructed the decorative motif of one section of the vault, going on to renovate the entire ceiling "using thick tempera".

Some critics of the time strongly protested against this kind of intervention, considering it risky to add excessive paintwork to the original project of Leonardo.

This temporary renovation of the room was completed on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1902, while the final renovation was done by 2nd June 1909, when the room had amaranth red tapestry, wooden panelling and a new marble floor.

In 1954, following another restoration by Ottemi Della Rotta, the heavy paintwork of Rusca was removed.

In 2006, research was undertaken, resulting in the restoration project set up in 2011 and still ongoing, under the direction of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs MiBAC and the *Opificio delle Pietre Dure*.