Complesso di San Francesco

Category: Museum
business description: The former Church of San Francesco is one of the most important examples of medieval religious architecture in Alessandria, together with the churches of Santa Maria di Castello and Santa Maria del Carmine. It represents the oldest and most significant surviving element—the only one dating back to the medieval period—of a monastic complex that occupies an entire city block in the historic center. Originally, it formed part of one of the most important Franciscan centers in Northern Italy. According to local tradition, Saint Francis passed through the city during the second decade of the thirteenth century and is believed to have performed several miracles there. A bas-relief in Piazza del Duomo commemorates one such episode, involving a tamed she-wolf, while one of his earliest biographers and contemporaries, Thomas of Celano, tells the story of “a piece of capon.. transformed into fish.”
Today, historians generally regard Saint Francis’s presence in the city as unlikely. Nevertheless, these accounts provide clear evidence of the existence of an ancient and deeply rooted Franciscan devotion in the area.
The construction of the church began in 1268, the year in which Pope Clement IV issued a papal bull encouraging the faithful to contribute alms towards its building. A short time later, a one-hundred-day indulgence was granted to the Conventual Franciscans to support the commencement of the works. In December 1290, Pope Nicholas IV further proclaimed an indulgence for those who visited the church and prayed there. Construction of the convent also began during this period, and the church was consecrated in 1314.
The Angevin dynasty, Counts of Provence and later Kings of Sicily, also contributed to the construction of the complex. Their rule over Alessandria was intermittent and of relatively short duration, but they played a significant role in the city’s history. In particular, King Robert II of Anjou and his wife, Sancia of Majorca, were deeply devoted to Saint Francis of Assisi. Following their involvement in Alessandria, they went on to found the Church and Monastery of Saint Clare in Naples in 1310.
The subsequent history of the church in Alessandria was less fortunate. Nevertheless, its original architectural features and the artistic evidence of its time are once again legible and remain striking, despite the extensive transformations the complex underwent in the nineteenth century: it was first converted into a military barracks during the Napoleonic campaigns, when the church was divided into two levels through the insertion of an intermediate floor supported by two large vaults. At the behest of Charles Albert of Savoy, it was later transformed into a divisional military hospital in 1833, the year in which a spacious internal courtyard was constructed. All these interventions profoundly altered the layout of the church complex and removed the sacred character of its façade. Moreover, on two occasions, in 1893–94 and again in 1952, parts of the church and convent were at risk of demolition to make way for a direct roadway connecting Piazza Garibaldi and Piazza della Libertà—an outcome that was fortunately averted. The Piedmont Superintendency of Monuments had already declared the building of archaeological interest in 1919, and in November 1989 the City of Alessandria acquired the property from the Military Administration. This marked the beginning of a new phase of recovery and transformation.
Since the late 1990s, archaeological excavations have been carried out, along with initial interventions to consolidate the building’s structures and to uncover and restore the frescoes of the vault system and the chapel at the base of the bell tower. The most recent and significant phase of work began in 2022, promoted by the Municipality of Alessandria within the framework of the Territorial Programming under the ERDF Regional Operational Programme (POR FESR) 2014–2020, Axis VI “Sustainable Urban Development – Integrated Urban Development entitled Alessandria returns to the centre". This architectural restoration project aims to recover an extraordinary cultural heritage site that had long been forgotten, preserving it and enhancing its original characteristics as much as possible.

Tours of the Complex are available on the following days and times:

- On Fridays, a morning tour starts at 10:30 a.m. and an afternoon tour at 4 p.m.

- On Saturdays and Sundays, a morning tour starts at 10:30 a.m. and two afternoon tours at 4 p.m. and 5:15 p.m.

The tours continue by appointment, at the times set out above, until November 1.

Single admission ticket €6 - Free admission for disabled visitors and one accompanying person - Free for children up to 11 years of age.

It is possible to book the tours by calling the following numbers:
- 0131/234266 from Monday to Friday from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.
- 0131/515577 during the opening times of the Complex of San Francesco
or by writing to:
serviziculturali.0220@asmcostruireinsieme.it

phone: +39 (0131) 515.777 **Phone 2:** +39 348 988.9919
E-mail: serviziculturali.0220@asmcostruireinsieme.it
other: The ancient religious building, which covers a surface area of 1250 m² now consists of three naves (at one time, there were supposed to be four). The central nave has 6 bays, the side aisles have 5 bays each. It features polystyle pillars, cross vaults defined by heavy ribbing, and cubic capitals, though these have been partially destroyed by the iconoclastic fury of the Napoleonic period. A striking and highly impressive overall composition. The central nave, double the size of the lateral aisles, ends in a square apse, a tribute to the Franciscan ideal of simplicity in architectural design. Originally, in addition to the main chapel, the building is believed to have included multiple side chapels, up to 15 according to a document from the State Archives of Milan presumably dating to the late fifteenth century. The nineteenth-century floor, inserted at mid-height, and retained in view of the building's future use as a museum and for structural reasons, allows visitors to appreciate close-up the richness and fine decorative motifs on the vault and ribs, with traces of the original black and white decoration, the impost capitals of the nave vaults and the magnificent surviving fragments of the keystones: the Agnus Dei, the Eagle, the Saint of Assisi blessing the faithful and the Fleur-de-lis, a probable reference to the Angevin presence in the region.
Finally, the conversion project has included the creation of new spaces, such as the so-called winter garden: a fully glazed structure of approximately 180 m², newly built above the rectangular block which was the entrance to the former military hospital. Its design echoes the rhythm of the courtyard arcades.
Wi-Fi: No
Guided visits: Yes

Photos

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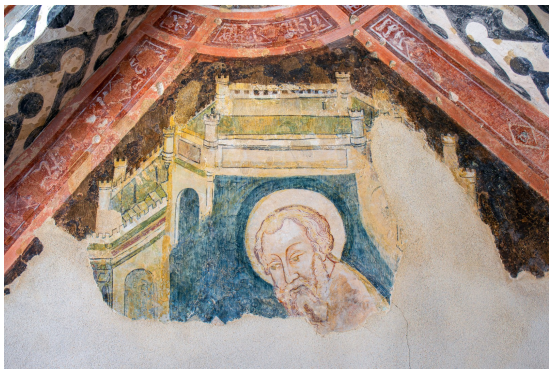

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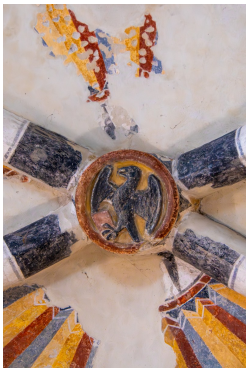
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