PRATO IN TUSCANY

history art territory

CANTAGALLO
CARMIGNANO
MONTEMURLO
POGGIO A CAIANO
VAIANO
VERNIO
Considering that I owe her everything for having created and raised me, and wishing to do her some small honor as I traveled the world and visited many fine cities where people spoke of her as do those who have never seen or known a place, curious to learn what she was like, how large, how beautiful, how civilized, how wealthy, where located, if city or castle... so I thought I would write of her for all to know...

Giovanni Minuti
Narrazioni e Descrizioni della Terra di Prato, 1394
PRATO A PROVINCE TO DISCOVER

Prato is located at the center of the northern part of Tuscany, a short distance from Florence and near the other major art cities of the region (Pistoia, Pisa, Lucca, Siena). The city, with 180,000 inhabitants, is the capital of the province that includes the town of Cantagallo, Poggio a Caiano, Prato, Vaiano and Vernio. Prato is famous for its wool textile industry, that as long ago as the Middle Ages, had an important role in the economic and social development of the entire district. Its modern factories are now concentrated in the industrial zones. But beyond this aspect, Prato offers the tourist many historical and artistic attractions of great interest, with a cultural itinerary that goes from Medieval times to the Contemporary Art.

In the center of the town, the Emperor’s Castle (the only example of Swabian architecture in northern-central Italy, built by the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II), the Cathedral with its much-venerated relic of the Madonna’s sacred belt, Palazzo Pretorio, Datini’s house, the Basilica of Santa Maria delle Carceri by Giuliano da Sangallo, the medieval churches of St. Francis, St. Dominic. St. Augustine and many patrician palaces are an architectural heritage of extreme interest. These buildings and the city museums hold works by great masters such as Agnolo Gaddi, Paolo Uccello, Filippo and Filippino Lippi, Donatello, Michelozzo and other famous artists of the 15th century and Renaissance.

The City Museum (in renovation), the Fresco Museum, the Cathedral Museum and the private Alberti Gallery (in reorganization) also contain important art collections with significant examples from Mannerist painting up to the early 20th century. The New Textile Museum, situated in an historical factory, is the only museum of its kind in Italy, totally devoted to the art and technology of the textile trade, and it is the expression of the manufacturing history of the city. It possesses a collection of fabric samples that go from the 5th century to the present time, and a collection of documents, objects and machinery from the old wool manufacture. The “Luigi Pecci” Center for Contemporary Art is an important reference point for the artistic vanguard world-wide.

The provincial countryside is full of points of interest for tourists: the necropolis and Etruscan findings in Comeana and Artimino, the recent archaeological excavation of Gonfienti, in the east periphery of Prato, Romanesque churches scattered all around Carmignano, ancient Abbeys in the Bisenzio valley, medieval villages, the splendid Medici villas, “Ambra” at Poggio a Caiano and “Fernanda” at Artimino, the Quinto Martini Sculpture Park in Seano and the nature park in Mercatale di Vernio.

There is the delightful hillside landscape of Montalbano, richly covered with vineyards and olive orchards, the impressive scenario of the massive karst formation known as the Calvana that overlooks the wooded spur of the right bank of the Bisenzio river, the Javello mount that descends as far as the Fortress in Montemurlo and Monteferriato.

People who love cycle excursions can follow the itinerary of the modern and well-equipped cycle tracks. Along these tracks it's possible to appreciate, as a sporting amusement, the embankment, nature, views and the ancient villages strung in the countryside, where there are restaurants with the best local cookery. There are also a number of well-equipped farms that offer tourist accommodations. Bikers and hikers can explore the many trails through woods, chestnut groves and hills characterizing a part of Tuscany where man has always been closely in touch with nature.
ART

The Church of St. Stephen, later CATHEDRAL, was named as early as 994 as the baptismal church of the community of Borgo al Cornio. As Prato grew in importance, that church developed from the point of view of its architectural structure. The Romanesque and Gothic aspects of its fine structure are rendered harmonious and balanced by the two-tone color scheme obtained using the pale local stone called "alberese" quarried on the nearby Mount Calvana and the green marble, also from Prato, quarried at Monteferrato. The most significant alterations were made in the 12th century along the right side of the church, with the later addition of the bell-tower which was finished in 1356. The façade was added between 1385 and 1457. Over the doorway installed in 1413 is a lunette by Andrea della Robbia made in 1439, depicting the Madonna, the Infant, St. Stephen, patron saint of the city, and St. Laurence, co-patron. The pulpit by Donatello and Michelozzo is exceptionally beautiful and stands out impressively on the right corner of the façade. It was completed in 1438 for the displays of the Sacred Belt of the Madonna that are made five times a year with particular solemnity on September 8th, during
HISTORY

The written history of Prato goes back to the 9th century when the Church of St. Stephen was built on the site of an earlier church in the village of Borgo al Cornio, probably a Lombard settlement originally towards the end of the 11th century. Borgo al Cornio merged with another village, possibly of Roman origin, that had grown up around the Alberti castle, and the combination became known as Castrum Prati.

Before that, the land around the city had been inhabited, since the 7th century B.C., by the Etruscans, who left ample evidence of their presence in the zone with the tumulus tombs of Montefortini, the necropolis of Prato di Rosello and much burial art now on view at the archaeological museum of Artimino. A special note is due to the archaeological excavation of Chienti, in the east suburb of Prato.

Subsequent colonization by the Romans in the 2nd century B.C. superimposed itself on the Etruscan culture leaving clear signs in the layout of the many settlements along the Bisenzio valley and in the plains where their centurial organization can be seen clearly in the reclaimed swamps.
...beneath the Altar of the main Chapel is the Belt of Our Lady, that Michele da Prato brought back from the Holy Land in 1191...

GIOVANNI MINIATI

"the ancient Fair of Prato", a feast that is made even more important for the people of Prato by the great Historical Procession. The inside of the church shows its Romanesque structure with three naves, exalted by a Gothic transept with chapels where visitors can admire frescoes by Paolo Uccello (the nativity of the Virgin), and Filippo Lippi (the Banquet of Herod where dancing Salome has become the symbol of the city), as well as frescoes by Alessandro Franchi and the Madonna with Child by the da Maiano brothers.

At the present time the Lippi frescoes in the Main Chapel are being restored, and to hide the scaffolding a large panel painted by Emilio Farina in the year 2000, an authentic work of art in its own right, has been placed in the chapel.

The church has been also enriched with works of art by Robert Morris, a famous exponent of minimal art: a parallelepiped shaped altar placed in the center of the transept (2000),
a bronze ambo and a bronze candlestick (2001).
The left nave contains the pulpit sculpted by Mino da Fiesole
and Rossellino (15th century); this nave opens onto the Chapel
of the Belt, enclosed in a wrought iron grate by Maso di
Bartoiozzo, and decorated with a series of frescoes by Agnolo
Gaddi (14th century, "stories of the Virgin and of the Belt").
The works of art in the Chapel of the also include a Madonna
by Giovanni Pisano (1317) and the "Dormitio Virginis"
by Emilio Greco (1983) placed at the base of the opulent altar
of fine marble and silver, built in the 18th century.

To the left of the Cathedral stands the imposing PALAZZO
VESCOVILE, with its medieval structure overlooking a delightful
Romanesque cloister, where the CATHEDRAL MUSEUM is
housed. Near the entrance of the Museum, there is an elegant
niche that frames an eighteenth-century fresco, representing
Assunta while handing the Sacred Belt to San Tommaso.
Its room devoted to 13th and 14th century works of art
contains important works on religious theme, a precious
sandstone sculpture by Girolamo da Como and a dramatic
wooden sculpture of the Head of Jesus Christ (18th century).
The adjacent Room of Vestments also contains precious
missals with miniatures from the 13th to 15th century,
the archbishop's cape called the Mantle of St. Stephen
in red velvet cut on a background of gold thread, and other
precious vestments and religious objects.
The adjacent Room of the Sacred Belt contains precious
objects related to the worship of the Marian relic (silver, reliefs
of the 14th century and precious textiles).

Looking out the window,
if I lean a little to one side,
I can see the marble
façade of the Cathedral, with
its dark green and white stripes,
and the pulpit created
by Michelozzo and Donatello,
fastened to the corner like a nest.
Curzio Malaparte

AROUND THE CHURCH OF ST. STEPHEN
(NOW THE CATHEDRAL OF PRATO) THE
TOWN BEGAN TO GROW, AND IT
BECAME AN IMPORTANT MARKET DEVOTED
MAINLY TO TRADE IN WOOLEN
CLOTH PRODUCED BY LOCAL CRAFTSMEN
WHO SET UP SHOP ALONG THE
BANKS OF THE BISENZIO RIVER. THIS IS
HOW THE TRADE OF SPINNING AND
WEAVING GOT THEIR START AND
BECAME, DOWN THE CENTURIES TO
THE PRESENT TIME, THE MAIN ECONOMIC RESOURCES OF PRATO. ANOTHER
ELEMENT THAT CONTRIBUTED TO AN
IMPORTANT WAY TO SPREAD THE FAME
AND PRESTIGE OF THE TOWN WAS ITS
RElic OF THE MADONNA'S BELT, THAT A
PILGRIM FROM PRATO BROUGHT BACK
FROM JERUSALEM EARLY IN THE 12TH
CENTURY AND THAT WAS VENERATED
The faithful when it was placed on view in the Cathedral in 1172. The relic became the focus of the religious life of Prato and people with a special devotion for the Madonna made pilgrimages from all over to see it. Important initiatives and interests developed around it, involving associations of citizens and the city government itself, while famous artists depicted it in great works of art.

...the splendid pulpit on the corner of the façade has a refined elegance that is grand and intimate at the same time.

Hermann Hesse

From the room you can reach the basement, a recent excavation, where Etruscan ceramics (4th century b.c. and 1st century a.c.) have been recovered and put in appropriate showcases. The stratigraphy of the excavation highlights the wall framing and a tomb of the 9th century. From the basement you can reach the Renaissance Room, where, among other 15th century paintings, there are the following important works of art: Esequie di S. Girolamo by Filippo Lippi, Madonna e il Bambino tra i Santi Giusto e Clemente and Madonna col Bambino, San Giovannino e due angeli, both by Pietro di Lorenzo di Pratese. The Pulpit Room holds the original of the famous pulpit by Donatello in a specially conditioned environment. The pulpit consists of a circular balcony with seven panels of dancing angels. (The pulpit now positioned outside the Cathedral is a perfect copy of the original). The Capselia (urn) of the Sacred Belt, masterpiece by Maso di Bartolomeo, works by Paolo Uccello, Filippo Lippi, Livio Mehus, Carlo Dolci and other masters, and objects from the church "Treasure" complete the important collection of art in the museum, which is visited by passing through the Romanesque cloister and Antiquarium and includes the subterranean "Vaults", ancient frescoed burial places directly under the transept of the present-day Cathedral. After visiting the works in the Vaults - that leads under the bell tower - you can exit through a passage on small square near Duomo.
On one side of the square, facing Donatello's pulpit, stands a rather overbearing, statue of Giuseppe Mazzoni, one of the heroes of Prato's industrial revolution, a Grand Master of the Freemasons and member of the Triumvirate of the 18th century Republic of Tuscany. The airy Cathedral square is surrounded by buildings of harmonious style and measure that exalt the elegant Cathedral, providing an enjoyable, ample open area at the center of which stands the charming white fountain of the Little Fisherman. Adjacent to the square is via Garibaldi, with its elegant shops. This is where the recently restored POLITEAMA THEATRE is located, and has now resumed its activity in full; a little farther on is the little Oratory called Madonna del Buonconsiglio with a splendid altarpiece by Andrea della Robbia.

Continuing down the same street, we come to the vast old Market Square (PIAZZA DEL MERCATALE) enclosed on one side by the original 14th century walls that run along the Bisenzio river. Originally this enormous space was used, early in the economic life of Prato, for negotiation the trade of woolen cloth for other goods from the countryside and nearby towns. Later, it became, up to the Fifties, the site of the weekly market, every Monday, and the annual Fair, held in September and considered "the most ancient fair in Tuscany."
A circle of walls and a series of watch-towers all around. After a period of Ghibelline domination, the Guelphs held power in the city almost without interruption. In one of the periods of Ghibelline domination (1239-1250), Prato was the seat of the imperial vicariate for Tuscany and by paternal will, Frederick of Antiochia, son of the great Frederick II, ordered a fortress built on the site of the Alberti castle to support the imperial power on the important road that ran between Germany and his kingdom in southern Italy and Sicily.

The death of Frederick II (in 1250) led to major changes in the political power structure in Tuscany. The Guelphs returned to power in Prato and at the beginning of the 14th century the power struggles between Whites and Blacks kept the life of the city in constant turmoil.

In spite of this strife, crafts and commerce prospered, however. The textile business developed thanks to the ideal environmental conditions: the complex system of canals that drew water from the Bisenzio river provided hydraulic power for the different processes; the providential hill of fuller’s earth at Galceti...
The arcades that surround the square were, until the Thirties, where craftsmen exercised the trade of beaten copper. At the point where the square opens onto Via del Carmine stands the CHURCH OF ST. BARTHOLOMEW, originally built by the Carmelites in the 14th century but destroyed by bombing during World War II and completely rebuilt in the Fifties. The square where the City Hall is located, PIAZZA DEL COMUNE, is the true heart of the city, directly connected to the Cathedral square along the central Via Giuseppe Mazzoni, and surrounded by the buildings of public power. PALAZZO PRETORIO is an imposing medieval structure with additions made in different epochs (13th-16th century) as can be readily seen from the different styles that make it up. It was the seat of the commune, the courthouse and residence of the magistrates. In modern times it has become the City Museum, with the richest collection of the city’s works of art ranging from the 12th century to the 20th. The building is now undergoing extensive restoration. The works of art have been temporarily transferred to the Fresco Museum at the convent of San Domenico and other locations. On the opposite side of the square is the CITY HALL, composed of buildings in different styles. The finest of these houses the city Council Hall, the reception rooms and the elegant, richly decorated portrait gallery. The 17th century façade is by the architect from Prato, Giuseppe Valenti, who applied his great taste and mastery to the design of many important buildings in the city. At the center of the square, Datini is an illustrious witness of the city’s business, sculpted in white

...the Palace of the Lord Mayor is grand, standing proudly isolated and framed all around in a square with a high crenelated parapet...
GIOVANNI MINIATI

ONE MAN, A HERO OF PRATO KNOWN THROUGHOUT EUROPE WAS FRANCESCO
...the little bronze cherub astride a great bowl of grapes seems to draw everlasting enjoyment from the bounteous vessel that bears him...

Armando Meoni

Datini (1335-1410), and his activity was decisive for the economic development of Prato. With his branches in different cities throughout Italy and in Central and Southern Europe, he created a commercial network such as had never existed before, through which fine wool, dyes and other products for textile manufacture reached Prato, while woolen cloth and semi-finished goods left Prato for the markets of other Italian and European cities around the Mediterranean basin. Messer Francesco was also a cloth maker, in addition to being a merchant, banker and insurer. It was he who invented the letter of credit for payments through banks in different countries, and he applied innovative accounting methods to the complicated administration of all his many branches that were so effective they are still being studied by scholars of Medieval economic history. He was also a patron of the arts and a generous citizen: in his will he left his entire fortune "to the poor folk of Prato".

Carrara marble as he shows the townspeople the papers in his hand. His will that made them all heirs of his great wealth. The square is handsomely decorated with the BACCHINO FOUNTAIN by Ferdinando Tacca (15th century), and has long been considered "the parlor of the city" for the intimate yet elegant atmosphere that pervades it. Two other historical buildings are located in the vicinity of the municipal square, now used to house the offices of the recently created Province of Prato: PALAZZO BUONAMICI in Via Ricasoli, that was the prestigious mansion of the important local family of that name; and PALAZZO NOVELLUCCI in Via Cairoli, that was the townhouse of another noble family.

The Prefecture has its offices nearby, in via dell'Accademia, in PALAZZO INGHIRAMI, one of the several owned by this family. Not far away, piazza SANTA MARIA DELLE CARCERI offers the visitor a striking view of the Emperor's Castle in white alberese stone. It was built between 1242 and 1248 by Riccardo da Lentini and is the only example of Swabian architecture in the central-northern part of Italy. It is said that the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II wished to provide support to his imperial power along the road from Germany to his reign in southern Italy. The splendid scene of the square is completed by the BASILICA OF SANTA MARIA DELLE CARCERI built by Giuliano da Sangallo (1485-92) on orders of Lorenzo dei Medici (Lorenzo II Magnifico). It is a masterpiece of Renaissance architecture laid out in the form of a Greek cross, and is considered one of the most significant examples of architecture of the time. Inside, it houses works by Andrea della Robbia, Bernardo Buontalenti and Domenico Ghirlandaio.
Oh Giuliano da San Gallo, your temple was the measure of art to me when I first admired its pure grace in the heat of my Virgilian frenzy.

GIOVANNI MINIATI

...that it was possible to build the temple so fine and pompous and well designed, as we can see from the drawing made of it by Giuliano da S. Gallo who was a very great Architect himself...

...though the city grew, though its trade expanded and prospered, political strife between the competing factions was unending and created great difficulty for the administration of power in the city, to the point that Prato placed itself (1313) under the protection of Roberto d'Anzio, the King of Naples who, at the time, enjoyed great military and political prestige in Tuscany. Subsequent unfortunate military events forced Giovanna of Naples to sell her rights over Prato (1351) to the Florentine Republic, although the commune was allowed to keep a certain amount of political and administrative autonomy.

To this man Prato owes the start of her prosperity.
Francesco di Marco Datini

Iris Origo
...the Castle rises in the middle of the town like a diadem, a reminder of its noble origins and never-forgotten vocation.

ARMANDO MENTI

Off one side of the square is via Cairoli where the METASTASIO THEATRE is located. This theatre was designed by Luigi Cambray Digny in 1820 and was declared a theatre company in 1998. From the other side of the square we can proceed to PIAZZA SAN FRANCESCO where the CHURCH OF ST. FRANCIS, built between the 13th and the 14th century, has a handsome façade in the typical Tuscan two-tone style in white alberese and green marble from Prato. On the inside are a number of Renaissance works of art and Francesco Datini’s tomb. In the inner cloister from the 15th century is the Migliorati Chapel with an important series of frescoes by Niccolò Gerini (1395-1400). Directly across from the church is the 18th century building that houses the Ronciniana Library. The Dolphin Fountain in Fiorentine sandstone by Tacca (17th century) stands at the head of via Rinaldesca where FRANCESCO DATINI’S HOUSE...
is located, a rare example of a late 14th century mansion frescoed on the outside as well as on the inside. If we turn left in the direction of the Pistoia Gate, we come to the CHURCH OF ST. DOMINIC, an elegant Gothic structure in alberese stone and brick (1284-1325).

From its cloister we enter the FRESCO MUSEUM (synopias, detached frescoes, graffiti) works of the 14th to 17th century. Among the artists: Filippo and Filippino Lippi, Niccolò Gerini, Agnolo Gaddi, Paolo Uccello, il Volterrano). The museum has graciously provided accommodation for part of the collection of the City Museum (in renovation), which is now being restored, and several pieces from the Cathedral Museum collection, under the name of “The Treasures of the City” consisting of important works of art by great masters of the 14th century and Renaissance. In front of San Domenico are two other churches, one that often escapes notice is SAN VINCENZO and the other is devoted to SANTA CATERINA DE’ RICCI (co-patron saint of Prato) decorated on the inside in Baroque style.

In the adjacent zone, amid orchards and kitchen gardens, are the ancient monasteries of San Niccolò, San Clemente, San Vincenzo and the little church of San Fabiano with a mosaic floor that goes back to the 10th-11th century. Towards the Serraglio Gate is the square of the same name, carved into the most ancient heart of the town with the 14th century CHURCH OF SANT’AGOSTINO with its structure in three naves, while in via Convivenale da Prato there is the Misericordia Chapel next to the building that housed a former Benedictine monastery.
Near Datinì's house is another fine building called PALAZZO DEGLI ALBERTI, where the local bank, Cariprato, has its headquarters, devoting part of it to an art gallery, GALLERIA DEGLI ALBERTI.

In the same section of the town is the neoclassical CHURCH OF SAN PIETRO FORELLI, built early in the 19th century, and the imposing 18th century construction that houses the CICOGNINI COLLEGE, Prato's cradle of culture for some of the great men of Italian history. Among its students were such illustrious men as Bettino Ricasoli, Gabriele d'Annunzio, Curzio Malaparte and Tommaso Landolfi and the school gave the country many valid public and military leaders.

The school is flanked by the CHURCH OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, which contains a number of important works of art (Jacopo di Cione, Filippo Lippi, G.A. Sogliani).

Between the church and the school, an adjacent area is the site of the ancient hospital, the SPEDALE DELLA MISERICORDIA and PALAZZO DEGLI SPEDALINGHI with frescoes from the 13th century.

As testimony to the devotion of the people of Prato to the Madonna, a number of Marian sanctuaries were erected between the 16th and 17th century: Santa Maria del Soccorso (Via Roma), Madonna del Giglio (piazza San Marco), Santa Maria della Pietà (S. Maria della Pietà Square).

Going back to Santa Maria delle Carceri's square, we enter into Viale Piave, where, on the right, first there is the ORATORY of S. ANNA and then the Medieval CASSERO (a covered passage for troops), that united the Emperor's Castle until the 19th century to the fortifying Florentine Gate.
Today the Cassero is a venue for art exhibitions. In the same zone, we find the new TEXTILE MUSEUM, the only museum in Italy entirely devoted to the art and technology of textiles from the origins to our own times.

The collection, which is continually growing, is made up of over 6,000 samples of fabrics and objects and machinery from the old wool manufacture.

Theater crew and technological innovations in spinning and dyeing were experimented.

The Cicognini College was founded, as were the archdiocesan seminary and the Roncionianna library.

Domenico Zipoli composed wonderful music. A harsh law decreed by the Medici to protect the decadent Florentine wool mills allowed the weavers of Prato to produce only coarse woolen cloth with a low market value. This upset all production programs and forced the mills to seek new markets and different clients. It looked like total economic disaster for the wool industry of Prato. But the mills and merchants managed the difficult reconversion and sales began to grow again, while the Florentine wool industry languished. The positive aspect of this upheaval in the history of the town was that it taught the entrepreneurs of Prato to adapt.
...I wandered the streets and squares... and found the most genuine Italian life I have ever seen until now.
HERMANN HESSE

Their production rapidly on the basis of market demands, an art that turned out to be precious in the 70s and 80s of the twentieth century.

The Lorraine dynasty ruled Tuscany in the 18th century (1737). This was advantageous for Prato, particularly under Pietro Leopoldo, who provided many incentives to encourage economic development. The industrial revolution got underway in England and soon reached Prato through the work of Giovani Battista Mazzoni who developed new machinery for the modern textile production process. For the first time, heavy woolen fabrics were made from the wool regenerated from rags. This was the beginning of the great industrial development of Prato.
In the early years of the 20th century Prato developed its economic and social structures in step with the industrial expansion that would continue with the same impetus well into the Sixties. The direct railroad line passed through the city and an imposing new station was built and inaugurated in 1934. This stimulated the development of a modern new residential zone running from Piazza San Marco to the station, with wide, tree-lined streets that lent the city additional gentility.

O charmed Bisenzio, here the golden age
On your banks is such sweet music To sing of you is to praise Tebrun and Xanthus.
Agnolo Firenzuela
...a land that, among the others in Tuscany, is one of the more beautiful and delightful, and it is called Prato....

Agnolo Firenzio

**During World War II the city and its industries were severely damaged, but as soon as the war was over, with the force of the restored democracy, the damage was quickly repaired. The conditions of the textile market were highly favorable and the resulting industrial expansion brought many immigrants to Prato from other parts of Tuscany, southern Italy and the islands. During the Seventies, the local textile production began to diversify and develop in new directions, in**

... *Senza Titolo* by Anne and Patrick Poirier (Luigi Pecci Contemporary Art Center)
- *Exeget Monumentum Aeris Perennius* by Anne and Patrick Poirier (Luigi Pecci Contemporary Art Center)
- Amphitheatre, in the close-up the fountain by A. Hien (Luigi Pecci Contemporary Art Center)
- *Square Shape with Cut* by Henry Moore (Piazza S. Marco)

Although it has always devoted great care and interest to its artistic heritage from the past centuries, the artistic vocation of modern Prato is oriented toward contemporary art, for which, THE “LUIGI PECCI” CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER is the main stimulus and privileged reference.

Built in 1988 on the broad avenue called Viale della Repubblica, designed by the architect Italo Gamberini, its operates on an international level with shows, teaching activity, documentation and information services.

It has an important permanent collection composed of works by the major artists of the last 30 years, including Massimo Barzaghi, Bizhan Bassiri, Enzo Cucchi, Albert Hien,
Franco Ionda, Sol LeWitt, Eliseo Mattiacci, Fabrizio Plessi,
Anne e Patrick Poirier, Mauro Staccioli and others.
But beyond the “Pecci” collections, the city has been arrayed
with a number of works of contemporary art
on public view, in different parts of the city, along its walls
and in its parks and squares.
In addition to the sculpture by Henry Moore
(in Piazza San Marco), there are also works by:
Ben Jacober and Yannik Vu, Vittorio Tavernari, Jorio Vivarelli,
Marcello Guasti, Salvatore, Carlo Zauli,
Giuseppe Guarguaglini, Carmelo Cappello, Emilio Greco,
Luciano Minguzzi, Matteo Balistreri, Giò Pomodoro.

RESPONSE TO THE DEMANDS OF THE MARKETS, ESPECIALLY IN THE AREA OF
QUALITY AND A WIDE VARIETY OF FINE
FIBERS.
IN JUST FORTY YEARS THE POPULATION
OF THE CITY HAS MORE THAN DOUBLED
AND IT HAS EXPANDED IN ALL DIRECTIONS. IN 1992 THE PROVINCE OF
FRATO WAS CHARTERED AND ITS CITIZENS CAN NOW LOOK TOWARD A
FUTURE WITH MORE POLITICAL AND
ADMINISTRATIVE AUTONOMY AND
GREATER CULTURAL AWARENESS, WITH
NEW GOALS FOR DEVELOPMENT IN
EVERY SECTOR INCLUDING TOURISM.
STARTING FROM THE LAST DECADE,
FRATO HAS BEEN FACING A MASSIVE
EXTRA COMMUNITARIAN IMMIGRA-
TION, ESPECIALLY FROM CHINA. THE
CHINESE COMMUNITY IS NOW LOCAT-
ED IN THE EAST PART OF THE CITY (VIA
PISTOISESE AND CONTIGUOUS STREETS),
WHERE YOU CAN FIND CHINESE
RESTAURANTS, SHOPS AND SERVICES.
PRATO
CITY CENTER

CHURCHES
1. St. Stephen's Cathedral
2. St. Mary of the Dungeons' Basilica
3. St. Augustine's Church
4. St. Dominic's Church
5. St. Francis' Church
6. Holy Spirit Church
7. The Sanctuary of St. Mary of the Lily
8. The Sanctuary of St. Mary of Mercy
9. The Sanctuary of St. Mary of Succour

MONUMENTS AND MUSEUM
10. Emperor's Castle
11. Praetorial Palace
12. City Hall
13. Datini Palace
14. Cognini School
15. Municipal Museum
16. Cathedral Museum
17. Fresco Museum
18. Textile Museum
19. Alberti Gallery
EXCURSIONS IN SURROUNDINGS

On a nice day, why not take a bicycle ride out the Serraglio gate? A bike route starts at the end of viale Galilei and goes all the way to Mezzana along the river.

Or you could continue northward, past the "Fabbricone" Theatre on the left, and watch the children at play in the modern playground Giocagiò in Santa Lucia. Following along via de Amicis, you reach the new S. Lucia's amphitheatre and the wide public garden called "Uliveta".

After travelling all the way out the avenue and taking Via Bologna and entering the residential part of Santa Lucia, try crossing the river over the little bridge and riding along the quiet roads of Canneto to Filettone, passing by the handsome Villa del Palco and down the hill into town.

Or you could turn left at the end of viale Galilei and take the road for Calci of the Natural Science Center with its vast park populated by animals that have been treated for various injuries and are undergoing rehabilitation before being returned to their natural habitats. An interesting, as well as instructive, nature tour awaits you, and the large nature park


...for Prato is a town and land of good cheer, breezy and gloial...

GIOVANNI MINNITI
that surrounds the center is a lovely place to relax and enjoy life. Another interesting bicycle route takes you out the Santa Trinita gate to the Cascine di Tavola park about 4 km away. Its paths are suitable for biking or walking.

The park was originally the farm attached to the splendid Medici villa of Poggio a Caiano. Lorenzo il Magnifico organized it as a model farm where unusual crops and exotic animals were raised. In the 16th century, Francesco I introduced the cultivation of rice, that was husked and stored in a handsome building especially constructed for the purpose and located near the singular tower used as a cistern for water. After enjoying the charm of the silent, orderly cultivated fields, a visit to the farm with the four corner towers and moat around it will be the best way to end an excursion on a sunny afternoon. This time we shall travel on foot, passing through the great Mercatale gate and stopping on the bridge to watch the V-shaped wake traced by the wild ducks, the drakes flashy in their blue and green plumage as they glide on the slow, citified waters of the Bisenzio.

We proceed down via Gobetti to the sanctuary of Santa Maria della Pietà with its somber architecture surrounded on three sides by an airy arcade. We continue toward the church of the Capuchin friars and, at the bottom of the steep hill, turn right into via Sant’Anna. This is the most delightful, romantic hillside stroll for the people of Prato: Giolica di Sotto, that takes us to a jewel of Renaissance architecture, the church of Sant’Anna. We can stop for awhile in the cool shade of its ancient arcade to bask in the tranquil atmosphere of this the lovely setting, and then proceed, and enjoy, as we go along,
the finest views of the city. Now we have to make a choice:
continue uphill to Santa Cristina a Pimonte and on
to Poggio Secco, or turn downhill immediately and end our
walk on Via Borgo Valsugana.

On our bicycle again, we head out the Pistoia gate to Malisetti
and the Bardena creek. We turn right as soon as we are
through the gate (via Curtatone), then left onto via Fabio Filzi.
The road passes through a zone crowded with buildings
where the early wool mills and warehouses were located at
the time of Prato's burst of textile development after the war.
Now the industries have moved to the modern industrial
parks and this formerly factory-studded peripheral area
is slowly changing its appearance, often in interesting ways.

After about a kilometer we turn right on via del Campaccio
and left across the Ring Road, down Via Melli to Malisetti
where many of the city's sports facilities are located, presided
over by a great geodetic dome that is one of the largest
in Europe. From here we reach the Bardena creek that flows
down from Figline and runs as far as Carmignano with
the name of Fosso Dogaia.

We head homeward along the varied, airy via Montalese.

VISITS FROM PRATO
TO OTHER ART CITIES
OF TUSCANY

While staying in Prato or one of
the towns in the province, it is
easy to reach the main art cities of
Tuscany, all of which are nearby,
either by private car or public
transportation. The distances by
road from Prato are: Florence 16
km, Arezzo 84 km, Lucca 50 km, Pisa
82 km, Siena 79 km, Pistoia 15 km.
THE ZONE

BISENZIO VALLEY

Lying between two mountainous extensions of the Tusco-Emilian Apennines, the Bisenzio Valley is the artery that joins the zone of Prato with northern Italy. It was fundamental for the development of the city as a line of communications and productivity where, along the river banks, many factories prospered. It consists of the municipalities of Vernio, Cantagalio and Vaiano: this last town, located midway up the valley, has the largest population. Montepiano (alt. 700 mt) is the northernmost town in the province of Prato.

It also marks the border between Tuscany and Emilia and is the easiest pass for crossing the Tusco-Emilian Apennines. Since the end of the 19th century it has been a renowned mountain resort thanks to its ideal geographical position, the beauty of its woods, where pleasant excursions are possible in the nearby mountains. The highest peak is Mount Scoperta at 1278 meters. Montepiano attracts tourists seeking a vacation in natural surroundings and at a moderate altitude,
in an accommodating, relaxing atmosphere. Among the interesting historical and artistic sights in the area are the Badia di Santa Maria (11th-12th century) with its unusual architectural structure in local stone. It is decorated with some very fine frescoes from the 13th and 14th centuries, including an imposing St. Christopher of the Byzantine school. On the road to the Abbey we pass the Chalet dei Villeggianti (Vacationers' Chalet) with large rooms for exhibitions and events and a children's park outside, as well as a path around an artificial lake. The road down from Montepiano towards the Bisenzio Valley passes through the little town of Luciana, tucked away in the chestnut wood to the right of the road, delightfully cool in the summer. Along this road we come to the little town of Sasseta with its chapel devoted to St. Mary of the Snow. Past the town is a crossroad leading to the ruins of the great old fortress called the Rocca di Vernio (now restored and open to the public on request) at the feet of which lies San Quirico (alt. 278 meters), on the banks of the Fiunterita river, principal town of the municipality of VERNIO.

As early as the 13th century the town was the most important fiefdom of the Alberti family, (then after 1332 of the Bardi family); this feudal landholding remained in existence until 1797. The despotic power of the feudal lords generated many legends and traditions among the people that had to submit to it, the most important of which is the Festa della Pulendina that takes place the first Sunday in Lent and is attended by large crowds of people. The festival of chestnut meal celebrates what was for centuries a staple in the diet of the population of the upper Bisenzio Valley, with other foods all based on the chestnut.

The festival was founded by an ancient, very special association called the Society of Mercy. Legend has it that the festival draws its origin from the terrible famine that followed the Sack of Prato in the 16th century, after which Count Bardi distributed his stores of chestnut meal to appease the hunger and desperation of the people. The historical buildings of San Quirico are of great interest: the Casone, now the City Hall, was the country home of the Bardi family. The Gallery that leads to the Oratory of San Niccolò, was built early in the 18th century. This is an important complex with a number of interesting works of art, all very well preserved and in use. The parish church, originally built in the 13th century, is located to the left of the Casone and is dedicated to saints Quirico, Giulitta and Leonardo. At a slightly lower elevation (alt. 269 meters) is Mercatale, where the Fiunterita meets the Bisenzio, the crossroads of a system
of roads that follows the two waterways. It is the most heavily populated town in the municipality of Vernio and, since the Middle Ages, has been an important marketplace and fairgrounds. In the 19th century it was had its own mayor and gained importance through the arrival of many textile industries that brought modern development to the valley. When a railroad station was added, near the entrance to the long trans-Apennine tunnel on the direct line Florence-Prato-Bologna, inaugurated in 1934, Mercatale achieved further growth. The structure of the former Meucci textile factory, now owned by the municipal government, has been restructured and transformed into a practical site for cultural events, recreation, meetings and conferences, with a seating capacity of over 100. There is also an interesting museum of textile industrial archaeology. The former Meucci mill is part of the Bisenio environmental park which also consists of a swimming pool and large open areas along the river, equipped for sports and recreation.

The main square, next to the Caffè Nuovo, is the starting point for a road that follows the course of the river into a wooded valley. The first branch on the right leads to Cavarzan (alt. 650 meters), very popular in the summer for its cool climate. Continuing through the chestnut woods, the road rises gradually to the Cavarzano Alp (alt. 1008 meters) where the meadows have
been equipped by the Mountain Rangers with picnic tables. The branch of the crossroad to the left goes along the Carigioia, whose cool waters and shady old trees provide refreshment for large groups of vacationers in the summer. Continuing along the Bisenzio, on the other hand, we come to Ponte alla Villa (sports facilities, a small lake for fishing, picnic grounds). From here we can take the road for Gavigno, then for Fossato, on the Pistoia side of the mountains, and descend as far as Lènula (a mineral water spring) and Acqua on the Limentra creek, that marks the north-west border of the municipality of CANTAGALLO; or we can take another road to Luicciana, the main town in the municipality of Cantagallo with an interesting open-air museum of contemporary art is definitely worth a visit. From there the road climbs to Cantagallo in the zone where the Bisenzio has its source (Barbe canal and Tragola creek). In the nearby village of Cave a fine building, specially restructured, houses an environmental laboratory.

Along the ridges of Bucciana mountain is the public forest complex called Riserva Naturale di Acquerino Luogomano. Also in this zone is the Pacini alpine refuge of Pian della Rasa (alt. 1001 meters). Hikers will love exploring the paths among these mountains, rich in vegetation, brooks and creeks, lovely views and easy climbs, where the Bisenzio has long gathered the waters to carry down the valley and power - once upon a time - mills and fulling plants and now to supply the needs of modern textile industries as well as those of a large city like Prato. Around here, where it is pleasant to stay, at least for awhile, there are lodgings available in small hotels and guest farms, and visitors can eat in restaurants and inns that lay their tables with the typical dishes redolent of the flavors and fragrances of these domesticated woods. Returning to the state highway and descending along the river, we quickly find ourselves on the road that ascends toward Sant’ippoitol (alt. 415 meters). When we reach the town the first thing we see is the ancient church (12th century). (the sacristy contains a painting on wood by Girolamo Ristori “The Adoration of the Shepherds” - 1503).
The vale where from Bisenzio's waters flow
Dante, Inf. XXX.155

In the town square, the Saturday after Ash Wednesday, the townsfolk in costume celebrate their own ancient and festive mardi gras, organized by the Honored Company of the Herring. The traditional dish is pasta with a tuna sauce. This same square houses the prestigious “Petrarca” Library, founded by Ferdinando Ricci, who developed a particular fondness for the area during his vacations there, in 1916. Sant’Ippolito is indeed the ideal place for a pleasant summer holiday. After returning to the state highway, we can follow the river to Terrigoli, in the heart of the nature reserve where a restructured farm building houses an Environment Laboratory that also takes guests during the summer. Across the bridge, we are on the left bank of the Bisenzio and can visit Montecuccoli (alt. 593 meters), borderline of the municipality of Cantagallo with the Mugello part of Tuscany. Along the road we come to Dogana and then Cerbaia where the ancient Rocca degli Alberti ruins stand starkly in watch, the ancient guardian of the valley. It is said that Dante, in his flight from Florence, knocked at its gates one stormy night, and it appears that he was rudely turned away. It should come as no surprise that the Alberti noblemen ended up in the iciest corner of Dante’s Inferno! The Fortress can be reached by crossing the bridge, built in the 14th century, and climbing a steep path. From Carmignanello, where a recent residential development stands on the site of an ancient
settlement, the road ascends to Gricigliana (alt. 353 meters) amid fine old chestnut groves, to Villa Novellucci, where we can enjoy a fantastic view of Rocca di Cerbaia. We have now left the upper valley and arrive at Usella (alt. 177 meters) (with the interesting church of San Lorenzo). Then we come to Fabbro and the Bisenzio begins to relax a little, in the brief plain after its tumbling descent from the mountains. The railroad line runs practically alongside the state highway, that almost vibrates with the speed of the Intercity trains as they roar in and out of the tunnels. We can turn right along a broad, winding road that meanders upward through forests of chestnuts that are said by the residents to be the most prolific in the valley, and reach Migliana (alt. 603 meters) at the top. This is another popular vacation town for its cool climate in the summer and the enjoyable hiking trails through the woods (that are the delight of wild mushroom seekers). During the summer a number of festivals and events are organized to amuse the vacationers. But Migliana is not the only town that organizes entertainment and food fairs; every town in the valley, through its tourist promotion board, has its own: in the summer with dishes suitable for the hot weather and in the autumn when the chestnuts are harvested and it is time for the puddings, fritters, and all the other baked, boiled and fried delights that can be made from chestnuts, not to mentioned roasted chestnuts themselves. At last the state highway brings us to VAIANO. It is the most important town in the valley. Though the settlement was of Roman origin, the first important group of houses was built around the year 1000 near the abbey. With the monks' knowledge of the use of the waters of the rivers as hydraulic energy to power processes, even in the Middle Ages there were millers and fullers in Vaiano, as well as paper mills and founders. In the latter part of the 19th century it became an important textile town and in 1949 Vaiano became a separate municipality. The most important building from the historical-artistic point of view is the Abbey, that stands in the center of town. It is a vast complex consisting of a church (with very well-made fixtures and a 16th century painting by Butteri, as well as a later one by Fidani), the former Monastery with its Renaissance cloister, that houses an interesting museum of archeology and religious art, the handsome bell tower (40 meters tall) built in the mid-13th century. The municipal buildings house the Center for Historical-Ethnographical Documentation of the Bisenzio Valley with a rich historical photographic archive. In the town and vicinity there are a number of restaurants and inns offering local cuisine. Vaiano has a railroad station on the “Direttissima” line. From Vaiano, on the right bank of the river, it is a short
climb to Schignano (alt. 400 meters). This is a vacation spot
with numerous tourist attractions, very popular in the summer.
It offers nice hikes in the woods and there is a convenient road
that goes directly to Migliana. In the town of Vaiano, on the left
bank of the river, the rough flank of Mount Calvana rises sharply.
It is bare land that was the home of shepherds and small herds
of cattle, with a wealth of ancient traditions still in use today.
Its steep trails offer wonderful views and interesting, though
rare, flora such as germander, juniper and broom. Hikes are
possible all year round, up to an altitude of 400 meters, to the
town of Solfignano (where the wine from the vineyard of Veneri,
that suns itself on these hills near villa San Guadenzio,
“cheered the heart and mind of Galileo Galilei” in the last years
of his life); Savignano, with its stone houses, was the birthplace,
in 1777, of Lorenzo Bartolini, one of the most important Italian
sculptors in the 18th century; the Romanesque villages of Fabio
and Falugianno; Meretto, the ideal kingdom of king Lutorcrena
created by the fervid imagination of Agnolo Firenzio, and
Parmigno (alt. 415 meters) where the remains of the triptych
frescoed by Antonio di Miniatto in 1438 can still be seen. If you
still feel like walking, the ridge of Calvana awaits you and will
compensate you for your fatigue with unforgettable views.
Returning toward Prato, now very close, we pass the smokestacks
that made La Briglia a unique example of a factory town in the
19th century, revolving entirely around the Forti textile mill.
While the Bisenzio collects itself in preparation for its sedate
entry into the city, we come to Madonna della Tosse at the feet of
Spazzavento mountain (with Malaparte’s tomb on the top, as he
desired). This is the wide open gateway to the Bisenzio Valley.
...lies the Land of Prato with its rich farms, fruitful and fertile, all dutifully cultivated, misty and lovely...

GIOVANNI MINIATI

MONTEMURLO

MONTEMURLO is the town with the highest number of inhabitants in the province of Prato, and is bordered on the west by the Agna river, on the north by Mount Javello, on the east by the three hills of Monteferrato and on the south by the via Montalese that retraces the ancient Cassian Way. Before the last war, it had an essentially agrarian economy, but after the war it became the fastest growing area of expansion for Prato's textile industry, particularly in the Oste area. On the hillside to the right of the town (coming from Calceiti) a number of splendid villas of noble Florentine families were built from the 16th century on. The Strozzi Villa and farm, (now owned by Marchese Pancrazi), just past Villa Focanti Druzzol, flanks lovingly tended vineyards that produce an excellent wine called Pinot nero di Bagnolo. Then come the majestic Pazzi Villa at Parugiano and the villa of the Baron. But we can already see the high point on which the great fortress was built and which is reached from a road that climbs out of the residential part of town. It is an austere, compact structure with an unusual layout, surrounded by a shady garden and a wood of holly oaks. It is now private property but the original fortress goes back to the Middle Ages, though it was restructured and transformed into a luxurious residence in the 16th century. It was the scene, in 1537 of the last unfortunate stand against the Medici troops led by Filippo Strozzi, Baccio Valori and Anton Francesco Albizzi. In memory of that tragic struggle, a historical parade is held every year at Oste, in the month of June, with various other events. The view from the park extends all the way from Florence past Prato to Pistoia. The little group of houses includes a church, San Giovanni Battista with a number of surprising works of art including an excellent Madonna with Child and Saints by Francesco Granacci (1522), and other works by Giovanni Stradano (16th century), Matteo Rosselli (17th century) and Giacinto Fabbroni (18th century). The presbytery houses a precious pole cross from the 14th century with ties to a local religious tradition the history of which is depicted in a fresco on the wall inside the façade.
Directing our gaze toward the residential zone from Via della Querce we can see a large complex with stables and a handsome building, recently restored: this is the Equitation Center at La Querce. Near Montemurlo, on the slopes of Monte Javello, in the area called Bagnolo di Sopra and on the western face of Monteferato, where the green marble was quarried (it is now a protected area with about 2500 hectares containing ophiolite outcroppings and botanical endemism of serpentine), there are lovely hiking trails whereby it is possible to reach the town of Figline, a village of medieval origin, full of charm, with the Bardena creek running through it. The Church of San Pietro contains interesting frescoes from the 14th and 15th century.

On the old road to Cantagallo you pass the Tabernacle of Sant’Anna, a 14th century work of art by Agnolo Gaddi. A few rooms adjacent to the church hold the little church museum, set up in 1973 (designed by F. Gurreri). Among other things, it contains ancient prints showing the production of terracotta, an altarpiece by the painter from Prato, Tommaso di Piero (1464-1529) and another attributable to Giovan Pietro Naldini (1530-1642), as well as various vestments and other religious objects.
IL MONTALBANO ON THE PRATO SIDE

When the sky is clear and the air is pure, from the Masso del diavolo (the Devil's Rock), a natural site for ancient rites and mysterious rituals, you can see the reissuing blue line of the Tyrhenian Sea on the horizon. This is Pietramarina (alt. 586 meters) on the Prato side of Montalbano, on the southern border of the province, in a centuries old wood of holly in an archeological area scattered with the remnants of walls that are still waiting to be deciphered. It is the ideal starting point for a visit of these sunny, fertile hills, chosen for settlement by the Etruscans, beloved and valued by the Medici, sung by Redi and painted by Soffici. Outside of each little cluster of houses, the lovingly tended vineyards spread their tendrils in the sun.

They are the main element of a landscape silvered by olive trees and punctuated by the rows of cypresses leading to a church of farmhouse. Here men have clearly found harmony with nature, where irreparable violence is unknown and everything has a human dimension. The convenient road that runs southward, beyond the provincial borders, to Vitalini and Vinci takes us northward toward Carmignano, but we must first make a stop at San Giusto (alt. 408 meters) where the little Romanesque church built in the 12th century in a clearing surrounded by a grove of holly oaks, turkey oaks and pine trees, is one of the most original religious buildings in the zone.

The inside has a single nave with a projecting transept, raised over a crypt and closed by three apses. The interesting crypt can only be reached from the outside. Returning to the road toward Carmignano we come to the village of Santa Cristina a Mezzana where the church was just recently restored.

CARMIGNANO (the high point is the fortress at 274 meters) is the capital town of its municipality. It was first mentioned in a document dated 998, but was certainly inhabited before that time. During the Middle Ages it was the battleground of the long struggle between Florence and Pistoia. Its fortress was attacked, besieged, destroyed and rebuilt, but the desire for independence of its citizens was always stronger than the power of the two main competitors. All that is left of the fortress and other ancient buildings is the tower, called "Il Campano", on the hilltop that overlooks the town and the surrounding hills that descend toward the great plain of Florence, Prato and Pistoia.

Of that purest of wines from Artimino
I could easily guzzle a barrel.
But when I then sip
my red Carmignano
my heart is filled with joy
And no gods do
I envy their nectar.
FRANCESCO REDI
In later periods of history, Carmignano became a part, with its neighboring towns and lands, of the Medici Granducy and then of that of the Lorraine dynasty. In 1802 it became part of the province of Prato. It has always had an agrarian economy based mainly on wine and olive oil, products of exceptional quality. It was also known as "Carmignano of the figs" for its famous production of small dried figs, still a popular treat.

In the last fifty years, in the flatlands, a number of textile manufacturing plants have contributed to the population growth of the town. The City Hall stands in the main square, in a large, handsome building that performed a similar function in ancient times, as the Palazzo Pretorio.

Part of the building is devoted to a Museum of Wine and Grape-growing, managed by the local Tourist Office that has also started a tourist information service. The Association "Strada Medicea del Vino di Carmignano" has its headquarters here. An elegant goblet-shaped fountain with a cherub stands at the center of the square, where for the feast of St. Michael in September the traditional donkey race is held.

The surrounding buildings are simple and graceful and fit well in the setting of the zone. The parish church of St. Michael and St. Francis, built in the 14th century but substantially restructured in the 18th and 20th centuries stands at one end of the square. The broad nave is roofed in wooden beams and decorated with six imposing altars with paintings of a good
artistic level. But the crowning jewel of the church is the famous "Visitation" by Jacopo Carrucci known as Pontormo (1494-1556) placed over the second altar on the right. This great work, perhaps the most well-known painting by Pontormo, draws large numbers of Italian and foreign tourists. To the right of the church is the opening leading to the 18th century cloister with its pleasing, airy architecture. One of the roads that lead to the Fortress starts across from the church. The complex consists of the remains of the ancient fortress with the "Campano" standing in their midst. The structure has been modified at various times in its history and a few small rooms are now used for art shows and other special events.

The hilltop road descends toward the valley to Seano, that lies along State highway 66.

Turning onto Via Baccheretana, we come to the Quinto Martini Museum Park. This is a large, tree-lined meadow of about 32,000 sq.m. where 36 works in bronze donated by the artist (1908-1990) to the community of Carmignano have been placed. It is one of the most prestigious open-air museums in Europe devoted to a single artist. The large residential zone of Seano, that appears quite modern and in fact developed largely in the last half of the 20th century, was the crossroads of many ancient trade routes and the theater of many historical events (the failed ambush in 1485 of Lorenzo dei Medici by his enemies from Pistoia, under Baldinotto Baldinotti). To complete our itinerary west of Carmignano we continue on via Baccheretana and after a brief turnoff to admire Capezzana, across thriving vineyards and tidy olive groves, we come to Bacchereto (alt. 237 meters), a charming village of ancient origins where craftsmen specialized in the production of ceramics. In September and October they hold the annual fig and chestnut festivals for the local fruits that are still cultivated there. We leave the state highway at Ponte all’Asse and turn towards Cornicana where, before entering the residential zone, we come to the extensive Etruscan area.

Near the cemetery are the remains of the Boschetti tumulus. The tomb, of moderate size, dates back to the 7th century B.C. Continuing on our way we come to the most important Etruscan tumulus in the zone, in via Montefortini, which also dates from around the middle of the 7th century B.C.
It is located on a little rise covered by a small oak wood and measures 12 meters in height and about 70 meters in diameter. Comeana (alt. 51 meters) is one of the most heavily populated towns in the municipality of Carmignano. Its main buildings are in 18th and 19th century style, but the church of St. Michael goes back to the 13th century, though it was largely restructured in later periods. Among the most popular religious traditions here is the procession in costume on Holy Thursday, celebrating the Death of the Redeemer. Continuing on this road, that soon begins to climb steeply in hairpin turns through a thick wood and then, for a short section, past terraced vineyards, we soon reach Artimino (alt. 260 meters) and enter the town through a towered gate that gives access to the medieval village, still gracious and well preserved. The surrounding countryside is exceptionally beautiful and full of fascination, the mist rising from the deep valleys subtly veils the scene. Opposite the ancient village stands the imposing structure of another Medici Villa, "La Ferdinanda" also known as the "Villa of the Hundred Chimneys". It was built by Grand Duke Ferdinando I on the top of the hill that dominates the horizon all the way to Florence, at the center of his Barco Reale hunting preserve and as a symbol of the possessions of the Medici. The project was assigned to the architect Bernardo Buontalenti who completed the villa in early in the 16th century. To one side of the villa the elegant Medici stable completes a complex of great prestige, now converted into a hotel and the site of important ceremonies and conferences. The basement rooms of the villa are now providing temporary
housing for the archeological museum of the town of Artimino with many interesting findings that testify to the importance of the Etruscan settlement in the zone. The Museum will soon be transferred to a recently restored structure in the town of Artimino. Just outside the walls of the original village is the lovely church of San Leonardo (10th century) with its original structure still intact. From the tree-lined avenue that connects Artimino to the Medici villa a road runs down to Poggio alla Malva (alt. 96 meters), extreme southern extension of the province of Prato. There, in the church of St. Stephen (16th century) we find works of well-known artists from the 15th and 16th century (Neri di Bicci, Cesare Dandini). One of the monumental 16th century gates to the enclosed Medici hunting preserve (Barchetto della Pineta) stands alone in the open countryside, near where the Ombrone river flows into the Arno.

POGGIO A CAIANO is located 8 kilometers south of Prato, where via Roma crosses state highway 66 that runs from Florence to Pistoia. The town was already well-known in the 13th century because of its importance as a river port on the Ombrone, but it became even more important when the Medici family acquired ownership of the fortified mansion of the Strozzi family where they built villa “Ambra”. As soon as we enter the town we encounter the huge structure of the Medici Stables, splendidly restored in 2000 and now consisting of structures offering hospitality for guests, conference halls and areas for exhibitions and other cultural initiatives. The stables were annexed to the villa (built by Baccio Bigio around 1540) and are part of the vast, complex territorial experiment undertaken by Lorenzo il Magnifico, including the park and farms of the Cascine. As we climb the little hill that leads to the entrance of the villa,
on our right is the 15th century city hall that was created by restructing a group of buildings annexed to the Medici property. Villa Ambra, as planned by Lorenzo and designed by Giuliano da Sangallo, represents the ideal of a lordly mansion inspired by the new, genial concept for the epoch, interpreted by Leon Battista Alberti, and was to be the model for later Renaissance villas. The building consists of two floors, with a square layout and simple, symmetrical design. At the center, instead of the traditional courtyard, there is a grand reception hall with frescoed walls by great artists of the time (Pontormo, Allori, Franciabigio, Andrea del Sarto). The other rooms are rationally conceived and also contain prestigious works of art. Lorenzo II Magnifico did not have the good fortune to see his villa completed, because when he died (1492) only a third of it was finished. During the period when Francesco I lived there (16th century) it was also the residence of Bianca Cappello who was his mistress and later his wife. The simultaneous death of the two gave rise to many strange and mysterious legends that stirred the imagination of the people and are still narrated even today. After a long power struggle and many adaptations, at the time of Italian unity the villa became the property of the Savoy family who, in turn, ordered more restructuring.
At the present time, the villa, with its garden and park, are the property and museum of the state.

In memory of the presence of the Medicis in Poggio a Caiano, where they certainly influenced the history of the town and the customs of its people, every year, in September, the local tourist promotion office organizes a festival called "Assault on the Villa" that celebrates and repeats the munificent gesture of Giovanna d'Austria, the first wife of Francesco I, who made the public fountain spout wine to thank the people for their warm welcome on her arrival there. Before leaving Poggio a Caiano we cannot omit a quick visit to Bonistallo.

There is a little hill (97 meters) that dominates the town and was probably inhabited by the Lombards before the 9th century. This is where the Barco Reale was created in the 16th century, the Medici's fenced hunting preserve that was entered through three gates. There is a church worth visiting: the 18th century church of San Francesco that stands in a privileged position and contains works of art of a good level.

In this all too brief visit to the hills of Montalbano, on the Pistoia side, we have not been able to visit other points of interest and historical buildings, or to admire its splendid scenery at our ease: we should have liked to stop at the farms and visit their cellars and olive pressing plants, perhaps buy some fine wine and fresh oil for our salad dressing; it would have been nice to stay at the guest farms and hotels; have dinner in the typical inns and restaurants. In the baker's shops we could have stocked up on almond biscuits and fragrant rolls spiced with rosemary and we might have found a shop that sells the local stuffed dried figs to take home and eat. Next time!
FOOD AND DRINK

The cuisine of Prato and its province is varied, tasty and healthy, in the best traditions of central and northern Tuscany, with special dishes closely related to the special characteristics of the zone: with its mountains and valleys that become gentle hills as they descend toward the Arno basin. The city, though seldom differing from its origins, has added more elaborate dishes to its cuisine, to satisfy the metropolitan tastes of a traditional presence of businessmen in town for the textile and fashion trade. In the rest of the zone, the cuisine is more traditional and more similar to the farm kitchen origins that emphasize the custom of serving essentials and making use of every resource available. There are inns and restaurants everywhere and each is a prodigy of flavors and fragrances that make cooking a noble art indeed, whether local or exotic. There are delicate appetizers, hearty soups reminiscent of the midday dinner on the farm at harvest time, sauces with a homemade fragrance, exquisite fillings, desserts that fill the air with the fragrance of the wood ovens they are baked in. We can order canapés of minced chicken livers, vegetable soup on a bed of crusty bread, noodles with goose sauce, stewed meat, stuffed celery (a local surprise!), sweet peaches filled with creamy custard. In addition to these suggestions when ordering at the restaurant, the local shops feature many other mouthwatering specialties such as the mortadella sausage of Prato, the almond biscuits called Cantuccini, the dried figs from Carmignano, the sugar candies from Vernio, sweets made from chestnut meal, acacia honey from the hills. And best of all the bread, the famous bread of Prato that since ancient times has always been the glory and pride of local bakers.

Fine wine, the king of the table, comes from the hills all around Prato (Pinot nero from Bagnolo) and from the even more generous vineyards of Montalbano that line the southern borders of the province, where from the great casks we can draw “brilliant Carmignano”, robust Ruspo that belies its rose color, great Barco Reale and noble Vinsanto aged in wooden kegs that are hundreds of years old. Excellent wines deserving of the D.O.C.G. or D.O.C. mark of honor, that are the pride of vintners of age-old experience.