

## San Francesco d'Assisi Church

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In 1321 Count Gilberto V Il Difensore founded San Francesco d'Assisi church in the area that during the next centuries will become Borgo Nuovo, an expansion of the urban core of the town.

Little testimony has remained of the ancient structure. Probably, just one side of the bell tower nowadays still exploits the walls of the previous church.

The building of the present church began during the first half of the fifteenth century—most likely between 1423 and 1446—when Count Gilberto demanded to be buried here. The gravestone is still visible nowadays. Around 1454 the bell tower was completed, even if the characteristic cusp on top of it was reconstructed during the nineteenth century. The apse was finished in 1470, a date which is engraved on the splendid capitals of the chapel named Cappella della Concezione. On the same capitals, some putti holding Manfredo and Agnese da Correggio's emblems pay homage to the commissioners of this work. The building complex, consisting of the church and the convent, was definitively completed in 1480 from Giacomo Magistrelli. With three naves and polygonal apses, this church has the usual features of the Lombard Gothic architecture of the fifteenth century, linked to the Franciscans. The façade is divided into three parts that remind the interior naves; it has a wide central round window and a richly decorated terracotta cornice. The side parts were added during the seventeenth century.

The interior is sober, severe and elegant. The chromatic contrast dominates; the load-bearing elements made of bricks and the decorated ribs enhance the white cross vaults. A series of terracotta columns whose stone capitals are decorated with acanthus leaves alternate with pillars bearing the three big cross vaults over the central nave. These vaults have ribs and keystones made of painted sandstone.

After its building, the complex was renovated several times and furnished with many artworks. Antonio Allegri was buried here. In 1514 he painted the famous *Madonna di San Francesco*—nowadays in Dresden—and the altarpiece of the main altar. Correggio is also the author of the famous *Rest on the Flight to Egypt with Saint Francis*—now housed in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence—that probably came with two other paintings portraying Saint John and Bartholomew the Apostle. These artworks were in the right chapel of the apse, called Cappella del Paradiso. In 1638 the *Rest on the Flight to Egypt* was taken away from San Francesco church by Duke Francesco I d'Este, who replaced it with a copy by J. Boulanger, now housed in the Civic Museum. A picture that probably portrayed Saint Anthony went lost. The duke had previously taken away from the church the *Madonna di San Francesco*, too. During the seventeenth century the side chapels were reconstructed, enlarged and furnished with new altarpieces, altar frontals made of a special stucco and other precious canvas, that are now preserved in the Civic Museum. Around the half of the next century the church underwent renovations by Francesco Cipriano Forti (1713–1779). He replaced the fifteenth-century vaults of the side chapels of the presbytery and the south nave ones with the present cupolas with roof lanterns. During the same period the altars were modified with late baroque decorations by Forti and the carver Giuseppe Casagrandi (1706–1778). During Bonaparte's domination the monks were sent away and many artworks were stolen. Nowadays part of these works are in the Brera Art Gallery in Milan. In 1832 an earthquake damaged the building, which would be restored with the handouts from the Duke and the citizenship. In 1842 the church and part of the convent were put in the Franciscans' keeping. However, from 1866, after the promulgation of the law on suppression of religious orders carried by the new Italian government, the church is in custody of the municipal government. During the First World War the building was used for military purposes. Only in 1926—after some renovations by Prof. Enrico Bertolini—the church became a place of worship again. Bertolini eliminated several baroque decorative elements, privileging the fifteenth-century features, so to lend a homogeneous appearance to the church. Some years later (1966), another earthquake seriously damaged the whole complex, requiring a great

work to renovate and strengthen the building. The rich artistic heritage of San Francesco church is preserved in the Civic Museum of Correggio, housed in Palazzo dei Principi, while waiting for the renovation work to be completed.

A great part of the convent annexed to the church has been reconstructed after the designs of Francesco Cipriano Forti. The reconstruction started in 1766 and finished—except from the south wing—in 1864.

After the earthquake in 1966, the whole convent underwent great renovations and the high school Rinaldo Corso was established there. Besides restoring the ancient seventeenth-century structure of the convent, this work recovered some parts of the original fifteenth-century building and rich decorative elements of the next century.