

# Bologna

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## REVEALED How the Vatican's hidden map of Bologna came home

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# THE LOST MAP OF BOLOGNA COMES HOME

*One of the central exhibits at the Palazzo Pepoli museum is a 'clone' of a cartographical artwork that for almost 500 years has been hidden away inside a Vatican palace. This hi-tech copy of the Sala Bologna map at last allows visitors to view a key artefact of the city's long history. By Jonathan Bastable*

**A**t some point during the jubilee year of 1575, when Rome was filled with tens of thousands of pilgrims from all over Christendom, Pope Gregory XIII commissioned a new dining room for himself. A space was set aside within his apartments, and a team of artists led by Lorenzo Sabatini was hired to decorate it with a cycle of frescoes.

The finished dining room was a perfect expression of Pope Gregory's exalted status, his worldly interests – and also his northern roots. For Pope Gregory was Bolognese, born and bred. And the centrepiece of the room was a large and scrupulously-accurate map of his home town. The gigantic perspectival map of Bologna, on the southern wall 54 ▷

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*At five metres across, the perspectival map on the south wall of the Sala Bologna is the largest city portrait of the Renaissance period. Today's Bologna is easily recognisable in the hexagonal contours of the 16th-century map, and also in the minutiae of the urban fabric (see overleaf). The two listing towers were a landmark then as now, as was the statue of Neptune. And the basic streetplan of the city has changed very little in almost half a millennium*



of the dining room, shows not just the configuration of the streets (all of which are named in neat black capital letters) but also portrays each individual building. In the mural, the roofs of all the churches are picked out in gold, as is the roof of the house where Pope Gregory was born. This is a depiction of Bologna as seen from a bird's flight, or as it might appear if viewed from the vault of heaven. Because apart from Pope Gregory at dinner, the only person able to see the city from this distance and this angle would be God himself.

So the mural map in the Sala Bologna is in fact not only an evocative, detailed streetplan, but also a lifelike portrait of a living urban entity. 'In the Middle Ages depictions such as these were actually referred to as portraits,' says Francesco Ceccarelli, professor of architectural history at the University of Bologna. 'The period in which such things were created was short. Maps were really only produced as murals during the second half of the sixteenth century; after that, maps were made to be portable. But all the cartographical frescoes

that have come down to us are extremely beautiful.' Maps on paper, made to be handled, are naturally prone to wear and fade and crumble. The Sala Bologna, on the other hand, has survived partly because it was made purely to be admired, because it is the decorative symbol of one man's rise to a position of power. 'What we have is a snapshot of the city as it was in 1575,' says Ceccarelli. 'Bologna then was one of the most significant cities in Europe. Only London, Paris and Milan were bigger. Certainly Bologna was much larger than Rome – and when the eleventh Pope Gregory came back from exile in Avignon in 1377, he seriously considered installing himself not in Rome, but here in Bologna.'

Professor Ceccarelli is looking at the map as he speaks: not the original, but a copy – the clone, he calls it – which now hangs in the foyer of the Museo della Storia di Bologna, at the Palazzo Pepoli Vecchio. Ceccarelli coordinated the project to create this full-scale facsimile of the Sala Bologna original. 'It had never been studied,' he says. 'This monument of the geography of the city,

and of its history, was an enigma. And the fact that it adorned the dining room in the pope's private apartments meant that no scholar had ever looked closely at it. Nobody even knew the exact dimensions of the map. The first time we saw it – five years ago – we realised that it was the biggest iconographic map of the Renaissance.'

Professor Ceccarelli had a series of meetings with the Prefettura dello Stato Vaticano, the department that looks after all Vatican property, and also with Antonio Paolucci, the director of the Vatican Museums. Ceccarelli's first instinct was to put together a book about the Sala Bologna, an exhaustive monograph of this hidden treasure. That book was published in due course, but in the meantime Ceccarelli had an idea that was bigger and better. 'I was in Venice with Nadja Aksamija, who is a professor of art history at the Wesleyan University in Connecticut. There we saw an amazing artefact, a modern, digitally-produced facsimile of Veronese's *Wedding at Cana*, the largest painting in the Louvre. This copy of a work on canvas was about the same dimensions as the Sala Bologna map, and it had been produced by an Englishman named Adam Lowe and his company.'

Lowe's company is called Factum Arte, and is well known in the art world. It works with many of the most respected names in modern art – Louise Bourgeois, Anish Kapoor, Marc Quinn – to engineer and facilitate their ideas. It also functions as a kind of re-creator and conservator of ancient artefacts, making museum copies of objects that are too precious or too fragile to be exhibited in the original. 'I contacted Adam,' says Ceccarelli. 'I didn't know him then, but I asked him if he would be interested in doing something for us along the lines of the Veronese project, if he would help us transpose the Sala Bologna to the city of Bologna. He said: when's the next plane?'

Ceccarelli approached the Vatican authorities with this new and far more ambitious proposal: to capture the Sala



CARLO OFSI

Francesco Ceccarelli, professor of the history of architecture at Bologna University, headed the project to clone Pope Gregory's home-town map. The result of his work is a

*fine museum exhibit; the accompanying research, meanwhile, has yielded a much better understanding of the Sala Bologna as a 'laboratory of cartography'*

The figures, right, are the only human presence on the map. They are playing a kind of football, ten a side. Research has shown that the field in question, close to

the present site of the Teatro Comunale, was used by students for their games. This whimsical detail is probably the first known depiction of a football match



FOTO © MUSEI VATICANI

Bologna with cutting-edge 3D scanners, electronic eyes that are able to perceive not just the image on the wall but the texture of the wall itself: every bump and curve in the wall, every feathered brushstroke left by the artists, and every crack and fissure that has appeared in the plaster over the subsequent 500 years. All of this would become part of the 'hard copy' that was the intended end product of the project. 'The Vatican was intrigued, because they themselves knew very little about the Sala Bologna,' says Ceccarelli. 'This was an opportunity for them to understand their own patrimony and to export it, so to speak. Nevertheless, it was hard to set up the scanning process. The present Pope lives very close by, so a time had to be arranged when our work would not disturb him. In the end we were granted a window of three days. For the *Wedding at Cana* project, Adam was given sixteen nights in the Louvre – and the Sala Bologna was his first attempt to reproduce a mural rather than a painting on canvas.'

In the allotted three days the team captured the entire room: not just the Bologna map on the south wall, but also the broader map of the Emilia-Romagna region on the west wall, the allegorical figures on the east and north walls, the

cosmographic star-map on the ceiling. The team's first intention was to reconstruct the whole room somewhere in Bologna, but that would have been too expensive, and a large, purpose-built space would have been required. (All of the digital data exists, so that grand plan could still be realised at some future time.) So for now Ceccarelli and his collaborators chose to concentrate on the south wall of the room, and the marvellous 'geo-iconographic' image that filled its expanse. 'My aim was in part to make the map available to the people of this city, of course,' says Ceccarelli. 'But there was also the academic motive: I wanted to be able to study the painting and the room in a new way – not through drawings or photography or even 3D scanning, but through reproducing the object in such a manner that we could touch and explore every inch of it. Short of a physical and chemical analysis of the materials used, our facsimile is in every respect identical to the original.'

One small but essential element of the map is man-made rather than machine-wrought: the gilded roofs. These details were applied to the cloned map by hand – after many tests and experiments aimed at getting the shade of gold exactly right. That final touch creates a margin for error to creep in,

or at least for the copy to diverge from the original. But it could be argued that this last-minute human intervention makes the clone more authentic, not less so. Like the original, it has come into contact with a brush held in the hand of a genuine artist. And paradoxically perhaps, this adds a bright smidgen of realism to the finished object, while also heightening the romance of the whole undertaking.

Professor Ceccarelli further suggests that there is an art-historical precedent for the highly-technical achievement that the map clone represents. 'Adam Lowe is in the long tradition of the copyist,' he says. 'The works he produces are not fakes, but accurate representations arrived at with contemporary technology. They are not intended to deceive, and are not for commercial use; they exist as a means of exploring and comprehending the legacy that has come down to us.' So is the facsimile hanging in the Palazzo Pepoli a triumph of cold modern technology or of warm human creativity? 'We have gone beyond mere appearance and come back to the physical and the tactile,' says Ceccarelli. 'The original Sala Bologna portrait is a beautiful late-medieval Google-map; while our clone is a post-virtual, post-digital, post-modern work of art.' ♦

## Bologna in his heart



*Antonio Paolucci, director of the Vatican Museums, explains what the Sala Bologna meant to Pope Gregory XIII*

'Ugo Boncompagni was quite old, past 70, when he was elected Pope and took the name Gregory XIII. Because of his age, many of his colleagues looked on him at first as a pope of transition who would soon make way for a younger man.

But this Pope, who was expected to last a few months or years at most, reigned for fully 13 years. In that time he proved himself to be a great pope who achieved much. Chief among his accomplishments is the civil calendar – the Gregorian calendar, as we now call it. It superseded the Julian calendar, which by then lagged ten days behind the season. This alone shows the kind of pope that Gregory was: a friend to men of science, also to mathematicians, archaeologists, artists. Pope Gregory was a true intellectual. He had himself been a professor at the University of Bologna, where he taught Roman law.

Some time after Pope Gregory was installed, he summoned his friend Egnazio Danti to Rome. Danti, a Dominican friar, was the most eminent mathematician of that time, a professor of geometry and mathematics at the University of Bologna. It was Danti who drew up the plans for the Sala Bologna – which represents an act of record and of memory, a testament to the city that the Pope knew as a young man.

On the map, every street and monument is represented. And in the map of the region on the adjoining wall, we can even see what kind of crops were growing in certain localities at the time. The man who actually



FOTO © MUSEI VATICANI

Painted the Sala Bologna, Lorenzo Sabatini, was not a renowned artist at that juncture. But he was a fellow Bolognese; the Pope loved him, and subsequently commissioned him to paint half the Vatican. We can say that the man Ugo Boncompagni always had Bologna in his heart.

As for the Sala Bologna, it turned out to be a test version, an experimental prototype for the Galleria delle Carte Geografiche, or Gallery of Maps, which was commissioned five or six years later in 1581. Egnazio Danti was the main author of this project too. It is a representation of all the Italian regions arranged along a corridor [see above: the map of Bologna as depicted in the Gallery of Maps]. It might be said – in fact, it was said

at the time – that the Pope could now walk the length of Italy without leaving his Palace. I would add that the Sala Bologna and Gallery of Maps are the masterpiece of a pontiff who had a love for his home town – but also for the greater Italian homeland, which is the garden of the Church, of religion, of the sciences and the arts.

When I heard about the plan to re-create the Sala Bologna map in Bologna itself I thought it was a wonderful idea. At the time when the book came out I discussed it with my friend Fabio Roversi-Monaco [chairman of Genus Bononiae, Musei nella Città]. I saw the project coming to life, and I am very pleased that it has been such a success.'



*Factum Arte made use of custom-built scanners to digitise every detail of the frescoed surface, and then to produce a silicone 'hard copy' in sections. The joins between the sections can be seen on the finished clone. That detail is a deliberate acknowledgment of the map's status as a facsimile version of the original map*

*The makers of the Sala Bologna map intended to create a lifelike portrait of the city. Factum Arte aimed to keep faith with those artists by making an equally lifelike copy of their work. The team took more than 9,000 photographs while inside the dining room, and hundreds of tests were done back at the studio*

*The finished facsimile of the Sala Bologna map is on display at the Museum of the History of Bologna – which is housed in the Palazzo Pepoli at via Castiglione, 8. An illustrated book about the map has been published in Italian. La Sala Bologna nei Palazzi Vaticani is edited by Francesco Ceccarelli and Nadja Aksamija*

The west wall of the dining room in Rome is decorated with a map of the hinterland of Bologna. It is in poor condition compared with the city map, but Professor Ceccarelli believes it could be digitally restored to a pristine state if ever a clone of the entire room were to be built. Some of the buildings shown on this map still stand, among them the Castle of San Martino in Sovverzano (see detail overleaf). The ornate ceiling of the Sala Bologna (pages 62–63) looks at first glance like an astrological zodiac, but it is in fact an accurate star-map, a key piece of scientific knowledge artistically yet rigorously presented





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