

# San Giovanni in Laterano

## Cloisters



The entrance to the cloisters is at the end of the left hand outer aisle near the transept. There is a small fee to enter them, two euros recently (2015), although the custodian might waive this for clerics and religious dressed properly.

These cloisters were built from new and decorated in the Cosmatesque style by the Vassallettis, father Pietro and son Niccolò. The project was begun in 1222, but work stopped when Pietro died. Cardinal Guala Bicchieri put up a large sum for their completion in 1230, and the work was finished by Niccolò in 1234. He signed the work with an inscription, which was later lost but fortunately was transcribed. If you look at the second pier from the left in the south frontage, you will see a 19th century copy which reads: *Nobilis et doctus, hac Vassalletus in arte cum patre caepit opus quod solus perficit ipse* ("Noble and learned in craft, Vassalletto began this work with his father, which he finished alone.")

The cloisters form a perfect square, 36 meters on each side and with four interconnected ambulatories or covered walkways so that you can walk all the way round. As well a four corner bays, each ambulatory has five bays which are cross-vaulted, the vaulting being simple without ribs. At the back wall of each ambulatory the vaulting springs from four wide Doric pilasters, but at the front it springs from block impostes on ancient grey granite Ionic columns.

These columns are behind four piers without capitals on either side, which divide each ambulatory frontage into five arcades each containing five identically sized arcade arches. The middle arch of the middle arcade on each side shelters a gateway into the garth or cloister garden. Above the arcades is an ornate entablature without any breaks, and above this in turn is a black wall of rubble masonry. This is topped on three sides (not the basilica side) by glazed brick arches lacking any decoration.

The vaulting indicates that the cloisters were given a second storey after an early re-fitting. It was possibly not original, but replaced a pitched roof. This is because the entablature over the arcades contain gargoyles (water-spouts), indicating that the original roofline was just above.

The present rather top-heavy superstructure of the cloisters is later. The arrangement was in place by the 19th century, and was restored in the alterations ordered by Pope Leo XIII.

### View of the basilica

The cloisters give a valuable view of the external fabric of the south side of the basilica. To the east you can see the large lunette window over the altar of the Cappella Lancellotti, the pepper-pot lantern of the Cappella Santorio and the hemispherical dome of the Cappella Corsini.

The most interesting feature is the end wall of the transept, which shows the evidence that it once contained a large round window or oculus. This is sufficient proof that the transept was not rebuilt in 1592 under Pope Clement VIII, only remodelled.

### Arcades

The glory of the cloisters lies in the arcades as viewed from the garth. Unusually for the time, the Vassalletti did not make use of scavenged ancient material for the stonework but carved the columns from new. Each arcade of five arches has four pairs of Corinthian columns standing on a continuous wall-plinth, and two pairs of semi-columns attached to the piers on each side. The capitals of these columns mostly depict acanthus leaves with the details drilled as well as carved, and no uniformity in design. However, four of the capitals depict mythological creatures including one rather alarming goat-demon. Nobody knows what these are about.

The two outer pairs of columns in each arcade are all plain, but the inner pairs and some of the semi-columns are fantastically designed with some being intertwined, some ribbed, some twisted and some spirally ribbed. Many of these are embellished with Cosmatesque inlay. The molded archivolt springs from block impostes with decorative molding, each of which is supported by a pair of columns. The spandrels in between the arches contain decorative reliefs, mostly on plant-based themes but others with rather odd depictions of mythological events, e.g. one showing a dog-fight.

The four entrances to the garth are guarded by sculptures of lions and sphinxes, and there are little animals between the two columns in the flanking pairs.

### Entablature

The entablature over the arcades is continuous, without a break, and is posted out over the piers. The narrow architrave has a Cosmatesque mosaic in geometric designs, except for the south side which has a damaged epigraph extolling the virtues of the cloister.

Above, the wider frieze has a design based around round and square insets. Most of these contain slabs or roundels in dark red porphyry or dark green serpentine, but some have intricate geometric designs in mosaic.

Above the frieze is a cornice with modillions (little brackets) and a thin strip of Cosmatesque mosaic, and above this in turn is a super-frieze having carved reliefs of plants interspersed with gargoyles (water-spouts). Most of the latter are masks of lions, but some are rather creepy human faces including one which looks like a vampire nun. The presence of these gargoyles is good evidence that the cloisters were originally built without a second storey.

Much of the mosaic inlay has been lost, and this is probably because the Vassalletti got the mix of the fixative badly wrong. However, you would have expected someone to take the trouble to remedy the problem when it became obvious that inlay was falling out. That no-one did is probably as a result of neglect during the period when the papacy was based at Avignon in the 14th century.

### Garth

The garth or central garden has had some major makeovers in the last two centuries. In the late 19th century it was a rather lush rose garden, with climbing roses trained over the arcades in places. In the earlier 20th century it was much more formal, with low box hedges. Nowadays it is mostly under grass, with a few trees and bushes.

The central well has a well-head carved from a drum taken from an enormous ancient column. It is 9th century, and has naïve relief carving featuring crosses and birds with grapes. It now stands on two circular steps, which are modern. Before the 20th century the well-head stood at ground level, and was flanked by a pair of ancient Doric columns supporting a fragment of entablature from which hung the bucket-rope. It was a pity that these were removed.

It is thought that the well-head originally belonged to the palace, where it was venerated as the "Well of the Samaritan Woman" in the early Middle Ages.

### Sculptures

There are many items of ancient and medieval sculptural work displayed here, which have been discarded from the basilica in renovations from the 16th century to the 19th. So, the outer walls of the ambulatories of the cloisters are serving as the sculpture gallery of the basilica's museum. Perhaps the most interesting remnants are the rather sad pieces of Cosmatesque work, giving a glimpse of how spectacular the interior of the mediaeval basilica must have been. Like the well, some of the items were venerated in mediaeval times as rather unlikely relics. There are many tomb-slabs preserved, some of them Carolingian (9th and 10th centuries); a group of very worn ones are in the west walk.

The cloisters are also the access for the museum's Sala Pio IX which is an overflow exhibition room.

Each ambulatory wall has seven bays (counting those in the corners), and the museum catalogue labels these with Roman numerals, I to VII, going clockwise. On entering from the basilica, you find yourself in Bay V North.

Bay VI North has a damaged frontal of an ancient sarcophagus with a mediaeval inscription in Gothic lettering, and also a fragmentary epigraph in marble reading Dom[inus] Sergi[us], thought to refer either to Pope Sergius III (904-11) or Pope Sergius IV (1009-12).

Bay VII North has an impressive triangular slab with Cosmatesque decoration including a central rose aperture and two heraldic shields.

Bay I East has a Cosmatesque tondo with a representation of Christ, part of a collection of items from the demolished Altar of St Mary Magdalen which used to stand in front of the schola cantorum in the nave of the mediaeval basilica. The work was by Deodata di Cosma, 1297. Also here are a pair of marble lion door stops of about the same period.

Bay II East has more Cosmatesque items possibly from the same altar (the heraldry is of the Colonna family, which sponsored it), as well as a long epigraph on a marble slab describing a restoration under Pope Alexander II (1061-73).

Bay IV East has an impressive Cosmatesque papal throne, which is known to have been in the apse of the basilica at the end of the 13th century. The throne itself is an ancient marble bath-chair, which is flanked by two pairs of columns supporting two crocketed pinnacles. One column in each pair is twisted, and the other spirally incised. At the ends of the plinth supporting these items are two spirally incised columns. Much of the inlay in the six columns has been lost.

Bay V East has more items from the Magdalen altar, including a slab signed by Adeodato di Cosma.

Bay I South has a shrine to St Helena the Empress, mother of the emperor Constantine. This looks as if it was confected in the 9th century, the possible date of the base. The torso of the bust is ancient, 2nd century, but the head is thought to be a depiction of an empress at Constantinople of the 6th or 7th century. The citizens of Rome still considered themselves members of the Roman Empire with its capital at Constantinople in those centuries, whatever modern historians may pretend concerning some fictional entity called the "Byzantine Empire", and this bust would have been sent to the city for civic veneration. In this bay also are fragments of what is thought to be a 13th century Paschal candlestick; a base with lions and two pieces of a broken column are preserved.

Bay II South has fragments of two semi-columns having palm frond carvings, which were venerated in mediaeval times as coming from the Palace of Pontius Pilate. That is, it was imagined that Pilate had a residence in Rome and this was pointed out in pilgrimage itineraries. The site of this edifice is now unknown, but seems to have been on the Esquiline north-east of the basilica.

Bay III South has fragments of the tomb of Riccardo degli Annibaldi, attributed to Arnolfo di Cambio c. 1276. Extant are his prone effigy, and above it parts of a frieze carved in relief showing clerics in procession. The carving is of very high quality.

Bay IV South has another silly relic, a large marble column with a polygonal iron ring formerly venerated as a column to which Christ was fixed while in custody at Jerusalem (not the Column of Flagellation, venerated at Santa Prassede). Also here are bits of the mediaeval epigraph originally on the façade of the basilica, a copy of which is on the present 18th century façade.

Bay IV West has a horizontal marble slab supported on four small marble columns with mediaeval capitals. The mediaeval tradition was that this structure gave the measurement of the stature of Christ. It shelters a porphyry slab set into the wall, said in mediaeval times to be the stone on which the soldiers diced for Christ's robes. No ancient tradition supports this claim, which seems very unlikely.

Bay VII West has two bronze panels from the gateway doors of the Lateran Palace, made in 1196 by the same craftsmen who executed the doors of the chapel of St John the Evangelist at the baptistery.

Bay I North has fragments of Carolingian plutei or marble screen-slabs, also a fragment from a 9th or 10th century altar canopy with part of an epigraph mentioning a Pope Leo (it is uncertain as to which one).

Bay II North has a large porphyry slab with a Cosmatesque border, as does Bay IV North.

**Source:**

[Roman Churches Wiki](#)