

metropoli di carta

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Barbara di Castri

Milan by subway  
yesterday and today

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*To Carlo, Nicolò, Paolo and Giovanni*





I would like to tell my nephew  
Giovanni:

“He who has poetry in his heart,  
has the sky in his soul and is the  
richest man in the world”.

Dario SALA



## Introduction

Like every great European metropolis, in recent decades Milan has grown and with it the areas of social, economic and cultural interest.

Buildings and large neighbourhoods have mushroomed and now welcome a multitude of ethnic groups, representing diverse backgrounds from around the world.

Let's start a journey to discover the city using the fastest and least polluting means of transportation: the metro. In this journey, each stop becomes a starting point to further explore Milan.

Milan's underground has witnessed everything. Under its fertile land of ideas and entrepreneurship, let us be transported to discover modern neighbourhoods reminiscent of Berlin or New York or stop to admire historic buildings in the oldest part of the city. Or all the way to the outskirts where once distant towns and farmhouses have merged into the city landscape.

The old and the new magically blend into a large mosaic full of colours and shapes, seamless and overlapped at the same time: Milan.

And even though sea breeze does not make it here, the sweet silence of the plains gently makes its way between

old facades and new architectures, losing itself on the sidewalks of short narrow streets. The same streets once prehistoric paths trodded by the Celts who founded Medhelan, the sacred city they revered. I imagine them moving around today's turnpikes that embrace the metropolis.

Every piazza, churchyard or modern building reveals a time stamp that tells us a story. It's the mystery behind the city in a region of horizontal lines and fog.

Multi-faceted Milan has the charm of the unexpected with its Gothic Duomo Cathedral next to the Museo del Novecento where Lucio Fontana's spatial lighting concept shows us a new road to the stars.

My diary is a journey made of stories that have fascinated me, together with a few suggestions: creativity, the music of the shop windows, poetry, the quick steps of those who go to work every day, philanthropic characters and the artistic avant-garde, in short, all life and movement of a metropolis that beyond the grey, beyond the rain always responds.

## Duomo

We are in the Milan of the economic boom and in the editorial staff of the “Corriere della Sera”. Writer Dino Buzzati is writing a comic book poem about the future subway. In 1957 the excavations have just begun, and the journalist goes down for a day in a gallery: a series of scary twentieth-century circles open up before his eyes: the hell of human desolation. “What strange houses down there, the bowels, the guts, the secrets of man, the uniform chalk light in these universal condos, ours and your arid solitudes”.

Not the same feeling in today’s metro as a woman with her mobile phone stuck between cheek and shoulder laughs and travels on the Red line.

The car glides silently through a tunnel, the silhouettes of the passengers bounce off the windows, floating in the shadows, in a soft dance with psychedelic lights, the field of vision widens. The car brakes. A voice announces: “Duomo stop!”. We re-emerge in the middle of the city centre, in the great city chessboard: finance, fashion, history, art, design, music. Milan.

Finally, the light and the golden statue of the Madonna above the great Gothic cathedral, against a milky sky. The statue is more than four metres high and weighs three

hundred kilos. The reddish sand and rust of its metal soul have been flying in the air and rain for centuries, but the Madonnina is the Madonnina.

The Madonnina is orientation, symbol, poetry, surprise, nostalgia, music, reunion, meeting.

Up there, among the pinnacles of the Duomo, in the midst of that white, dense population of statues, life is good, the air is crisp to the point that during the Belle Époque, those who did not have the opportunity to go on holiday could always picnic on the roof of the Duomo, especially on hot August days, says an old edition of the “Domenica del Corriere”.

From up here you can see the large square, always dotted with pigeons: the Museo del Novecento, the Zucca café, a historic meeting place and the octagonal bell tower of San Gottardo in Corte whose clock is the oldest in the city.

It stopped only once, in August 1943, when Death fell from the sky and hit Milan.

It is worth entering the small church of San Gottardo in Corte, because it houses a fresco of the Giotto school.

Near Piazza Duomo, there is Piazza Mercanti, with the Palazzo della Regione, the Loggia degli Osii, the Palatine Schools and the Casa del Panigarola. Over the centuries bankers and notaries of the city did business and closed contracts under the arches of Piazza Mercanti. After World War II one of the buildings in Piazza Mercanti hosted La Rinascente department store for seven years following the destruction of their historic headquarters of Piazza Duomo.

With a quick and determined step, we cross the Piazza Duomo and enter the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, a 19th century work by Giuseppe Mengoni.

The cafes, restaurants, shop windows, brands, people passing by, could be anywhere: in Paris, Berlin, Vienna, London or elsewhere in Europe.

A man playing the bass hints at the notes of *Come Together* by the Beatles, in a corner of Piazza della Scala.

A direct affront to the gotha of classical music?

The music here is the only real protagonist, from any era, rhythm, trend. A light mist reveals the statue of Leonardo da Vinci and the most important opera house in the world.

Every year in December the famous premiere inaugurates the music season. Months of rehearsals for artists and young seamstresses bending over costumes, I imagine them moving the damasks of kings, Don Giovanni and the troubadours of the season that is about to begin.

The day of the premiere is full of excitement. Especially on May 11, 1946, the war is finally over and for the debut a renewed Scala still smells of enamel and paint. Arturo Toscanini comes from the United States to direct the arias of Puccini, Rossini, Boito. A memorable evening for Milan.

We fly away with the notes from the theatre. Outside, a group of Russian tourists, led by a girl with her umbrella raised, listen to the same stories I write. Many have their phone in mid-air to immortalize the sacred temple of music. We go across to Palazzo Marino, the City Hall.

This architecture, built at the end of the sixteenth century, was the grandiose home of banker and tax collector Tomaso Marino, Duke of Newfoundland.

In a few years, the man became the nightmare for half of Milan, collecting ever higher taxes, the most profitable one on salt.

The terrible duke wanders around the city, sowing panic, always protected by a group of villains, the “bravi” as the Spanish would call them.

In addition, he has two murderous children and one unfortunate niece: Maria Anna de Leyva, who is cemented alive in a cloistered convent. The unfortunate nun will go down in the history of Literature as the *Monaca di Monza* (Nun of Monza, ndt) in Alessandro Manzoni’s “Promessi Sposi”.

How many stories run along the old pavement of Milan, the first pavement of the city dates back to 1265 and is the work of Napo Torriani, the great mayor.

Behind Piazza della Scala stands a rather unusual building. Its facade has eight caryatids, large male figures, miserably wrapped in fur skins. They represent the barbarian peoples conquered by the Romans. The Milanese have affectionately renamed them the Omenoni.

In the sixteenth century, the gigantic caryatids were a clear warning to stay away from the palace, inhabited by a famous artist, sculptor and medal coiner Leone Leoni, whimsical enough to win the graces of King Charles V of Spain, but violent enough to risk getting his hand cut, the death penalty and forced labour.

Palazzo degli Omenoni has been home to a prestigious private club since 1902: the Clubino Dadi.

The city pavement illuminates the city with new lights. The ancient Borough of the Garden, now Via Manzoni, becomes a large nineteenth century living room, home to the palaces of Milan’s historic families: Borromeo d’Adda, Gallarati Scotti, Melzi d’Eril, Poldi Pezzoli, the latter today is a famous museum.

Gian Giacomo Poldi Pezzoli was a great nineteenth-century collector, travelling around Europe, always in touch



with art dealers and antique dealers, with his passion for research and feverish curiosity to find and discover art. His passion for art came from his mother Rosa Trivulzio, friend of intellectuals and writers such as Vincenzo Monti and Giuseppe Parini, the *crème de la crème* of Lombard neoclassicism.

The gentleman, whose portrait can be seen at the entrance of the museum house, built his apartments in his mother's house and imagined them from the start as large galleries and rooms to contain art. Cozy and elegant rooms are the perfect framework for the works of great artists like Sandro Botticelli, Bergognone, Piero della Francesca, Raffaello, Canaletto, Bernardino Luini, Vincenzo Foppa, Andrea Mantegna and many others. And then again: tapestries, ceramics, large orifices, precious glass, weapons. The initiative was also copied in France and America, in fact Isabella Stewart Gardner gave rise to the museum in Boston.

The collections of the Poldi Pezzoli museum have been enriched over time with precious bequests such as the paintings by Venosta Visconti, the watch collection by Bruno Falk and the sundials by Piero Portaluppi.

Let's walk along Via Manzoni, among the architectures so loved by Stendhal: the large doors, with their severe wooden "pusterla" bars, protect the courts, the grace of the spaces, the statues, the gardens with boxwood hedges, the pools, the fountains.

Milan's art is like the Milanese, gentle and partly hidden, reserved, sometimes shy, never ostentatious.

Today this area is also known as the "quadrilatero della moda". The four streets that frame the fashion boutiques of internationally renowned stylists, jewellers and designers make us forget the history that precedes this fame.

At night, after the shutters are lowered the loneliness of the homeless blends into the shadows of the galleries and the smell of wine, cardboard and rags.

We reach the Grand Hotel et de Milan, a monument to the history of the city. Composer Giuseppe Verdi was the most frequent visitor to this hotel, staying for long periods during rehearsals at La Scala. He died in room 107, on the first floor. The Maestro was a great friend of Countess Clara Maffei, the animator of the most important literary salon of the Risorgimento. She lived nearby, in Via Bigli 21, in Palazzo Olivazzi Tanzi.

Her evenings were brilliant, extravagant, animated, you can meet Alessandro Manzoni who lives in nearby via Morone, near the Belgiojoso palace, or Honoré de Balzac, Franz Lizst, Gioacchino Rossini, Luciano Manara, Cesare Correnti, Giuseppe Mercadante. “Between cups of tea and a few notes on the piano, political careers and artistic reputations receive their blessing. It is a sort of academic confirmation”, wrote a newspaper of the time.

It is worth admiring the facade of the Belgiojoso palace, the work of architect Giuseppe Piermarini. The grace of its proportions recalls the Royal Palace of Caserta by Luigi Vanvitelli. The court is a superb example of neoclassical architecture. In the rooms of this palace, the Milanese ladies of the *Belle Epoque* prepared the uniforms to be sent to the front during the First World War.

I walk through the historic houses of Milan, how much beauty was destroyed during the bombings of the last war, I think of Palazzo Melzi, history books tell us that its facade, the work of Giacomo Albertoli, is an example of sobriety combined with size and magnificence. Now in its place is the gallery that gives access to the Manzoni theatre.

Even the Cova café is a good meeting place, in the early twentieth century it was between Via Manzoni and Piazza della Scala and the large glass doors of the room, always tarnished by the cold, retain Milan's pale, reserved, severe image.

The mirrors reflect the silhouettes of famous clients: writers and artists who live in Milan. Caffè Cova has welcomed the likes of Luigi Pirandello, Elio Vittorini, Salvatore Quasimodo, Anna Maria Ortese, Arrigo Boito, Giorgio De Chirico, Alberto Savinio, Giuseppe Ungaretti. All of our Italian twentieth century is reflected in those mirrors.

The enigma of their conversations remains in the portraits.

Old Milan! Passionate, austere: old photographs with trams and faded horses, the dialect of artisans in front of the shops, today's sun descends with a strange purple light.