



“Nine centuries of art and faith in Volterra Cathedral”, a temporary exhibition to launch a new cultural project entitled *The Soul of Volterra*

This month sees the launch of *'The Soul of Volterra'*, a project for the optimisation of that part of the city that best represents not only the heart of the community of Volterra but also its soul.

Piazza San Giovanni is the most significant religious space in the city and Diocese of Volterra, with the Cathedral, the Belfry, the Casa dell'Opera, the Oratorio della Misericordia, the former Hospital and the Baptistry all facing onto it. In fact, it has lent its name to the whole of this significant portion of the city's fabric, lying at the heart of the area of jurisdiction pertaining to the Bishop of Volterra which tradition would have us believe dates back to the apostolic era but which, at any rate, is certainly documented as far back as the final decades of the 5th century. The city's first episcopal church dedicated to St. Mary, situated where the Cathedral now stands, is known to have already been in existence in the age of Charlemagne. But the heart of the city is also its soul, in its dual role as the guardian both of religion and of the loftiest civic and social values (as St. Catherine explains in a letter: He who is renewed in spirit "*possesses the city of his own soul...*"), which is why the *Soul of Volterra* project is based on a single itinerary taking in all the various sites giving onto Piazza San Giovanni: the Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta, the Baptistry and the former Hospital, now the Santa Maria Maddalena Exhibition Centre.

Thus our aesthetic and spiritual itinerary sets out from the Cathedral, the community's most significant and emblematic monument with its countless masterpieces ranging from the early Middle Ages to the present day. Its earliest works of art include an imposing sculptural group depicting the *Deposition from the Cross*, termed *Opus Crucifixi* in documents and dating back to 1228, which is likely to have been carved by a master active in Pisa in the early decades of the 13th century.

The Cathedral is linked, almost entwined, with the other buildings in this area of the city not only by its location but also by the shared rituals and the loftiest values of the Christian spirit that it enshrines.

The first and foremost of these is the Baptistry with its old baptismal font, Andrea Sansovino's masterpiece carved in 1502; then we have the Hospital, another important religious foundation called the Hospital of Santa Maria but also known as the Ospedale Maggiore, now owned by the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Volterra and used as a Study and Exhibition Centre, which houses a number of collections of historical and contemporary art that various Volterranean and other Italian artists have chosen to leave to the Fondazione.

The project provides for the possibility of handling reservations for independent visits and guided tours of the sites on Piazza San Giovanni, for individuals or groups, on the basis of opening hours which can be found on the website www.animadivolterra.it and of religious services in the Cathedral. The new portal will also allow prospective visitors to buy their tickets directly on line.

A special information and reservations office with a dedicated phone number and e-mail address will be open from 8.30 am to 5.00 pm Monday to Friday. In addition to containing all necessary information on visitor access, the site will also make it possible to book guided tours within the itinerary unfolding amid art and faith.

Visitors will initially be welcomed at the entrance to the Hospital of Santa Maria, which will be the starting point for tours. Visitors may pick up their comprehensive single ticket (inclusive of audio-guide) at the welcome desk, providing access to the Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta, the Baptistry and the Antico Ospedale Centro Espositivo Santa Maria Maddalena. Visitors will also have at their disposal a variety of materials offering historical and practical information on the sites, including a new official guidebook, in a range of different languages.

The ground floor room in the Hospital of Santa Maria will house not only the visitor welcome desk but also a new bookshop serving the piazza as a whole and selling publications on the Volterra area, its history, its art and its worship of the Virgin Mary to whom the Cathedral is dedicated.

To mark the launch of the *Soul of Volterra* project, the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio and the Cathedral Basilica Parish will be opening to the public the first in a series of temporary exhibitions overtly designed to shine the spotlight on the Study and Exhibition Centre. The exhibition, entitled "***Nine centuries of art and faith in Volterra Cathedral***", celebrates the 900th anniversary of the dedication of the Cathedral Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta, which took place on 20 May 1120.

This is the first event in a programme that will be unfolding over the coming years, addressing themes associated with the city of Volterra and the loftiest values in its spiritual and material tradition.

The silver reliquary head of St. Victor donated to Bishop Rogerio of Volterra by Pope Calixtus II in 1120 is on display at the start of the exhibition, testifying directly to the Cathedral's dedication. Alongside it visitors will also be able to pore over a manuscript known as "St. Hugh's Calendar" drafted in 1161 and containing a description of the way in which liturgical celebrations were performed both inside Volterra Cathedral and on the square in front of it at the time. It is also the very first document containing a mention of the Hospital of Santa Maria, now the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Volterra's Exhibition Centre and the venue of the exhibition.

As the exhibition unfolds, every century from the 12th to the 21st will be represented by a document or an artefact which has, so to speak, "lived out its life" inside the Cathedral. Thus in chronological succession we find: a parchment dated 1228 referring to the production of the *Crucifix* for the Cathedral; a richly engraved processional cross; a large alms dish; the surviving fragment of a fresco that once formed part of the Cathedral's original mural decoration; one of the precious illuminated antiphonaries made for Cardinal Francesco Soderini in the early 16th century; a velvet missal cover with silver bosses that once belonged to Bishop Carlo Filippo Sfondrati (1677–80); a painted ceramic crater-vase; and a *palmatoria* candle-holder, a chalice, a silver votive lamp and a wonderful 19th century alabaster *Flagellation of Christ*. Each one of these exhibits is accompanied by a caption briefly explaining its history and the use to which it was put in liturgical celebrations in the Cathedral. The exhibition ends with two pieces of contemporary art produced by skilled craftsmen from Volterra: the "Saints' Crosier" commissioned for Bishop Mansueto Bianchi to mark the Jubilee in the year 2000; and the panels used as models for the Cathedral's new alabaster altar consecrated on 22 September 2019 at the start of the celebrations for the 900th anniversary of the Cathedral's consecration. The exhibition also hosts a documentary on the various different phases in the restoration or production of some of the exhibits on display.

Paying tribute to the fact that the Exhibition Centre's current Hall was once the old Hospital's church, and with a view to allowing visitors to rediscover and appreciate its former identity, a reconstruction of the altar has been set up against the back wall as it might have appeared to someone entering the church in the 19th century, with a rich apparatus for the display of the Holy Eucharist. The altarpiece is a reproduction of Rosso Fiorentino's "Madonna Enthroned with St. John the Baptist and St. Bartholomew" known as the *Villamagna Altarpiece*, painted in 1521 and thus whose 500th anniversary falls this year.

The exhibition, with the patronage of the Diocese and Municipality of Volterra, is curated by Dr. Umberto Bavoni (formerly the Director of the Diocesan Museum of Religious Art), by Dr. Alessandro Furiesi (Director of the Historical Diocesan Archive of Volterra) and by Dr. Amedeo Mercurio (with the staff of the Soprintendenza di Pisa) in conjunction with Dr. Massimo Carlesi and Prof. Lilia Silvi (members of the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Volterra's Exhibition Centre Committee) and with the organisation of Opera Laboratori.

For further information and reservations:

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