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### The Florence Duomo: 10 fascinating facts about this masterpiece of the Renaissance

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*Text: Claire Lessiau*

*Photographs: Marcella van Alphen*

It bears different names: in Italian, the Duomo di Firenze or the *Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore* (literally translated as Cathedral of Saint Mary of the Flower).

It is unmistakable though. World's fourth largest cathedral (after London, Rome and Milan) dominates the skyline of Florence. Whether from the hills across the Arno River, standing at its foot or looking at it from its bell tower or terraces, its dazzling dimensions make one feel tiny!

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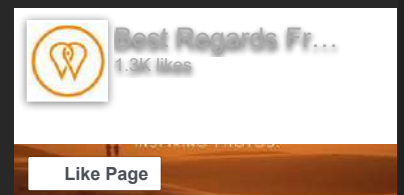
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## A Russian doll construction

Today's cathedral is the result of a giant Russian doll that started in Roman times when Florence was still called Florentia. On top of Roman structures, the 5th century Santa Reparata Basilica was itself rebuilt and enlarged three times. During the 13th century, to rival with the neighbouring city-states of Siena and Pisa, a majestic and monumental cathedral had to be built: dedicated to the Virgin Mary, Santa Maria del Fiore was built over Santa Reparata. 153 meters in length, it was to be the largest church in the world.

In 1296 the first stone was laid on the 8th of September, on Virgin Mary's birthday, after the city council approved of Arnolfo Di Cambio's design. The construction lasted for 140 years. The entire cathedral in characteristic Italian gothic style is composed of green marble from Prato (or more precisely serpentine stone) and the white marble from Carrara. The many sheep sculpted along the walls of the cathedral are a reminder that the powerful guild of wool merchants funded the construction when money ran out several years after Arnolfo's death. It also appointed the famous Giotto as architect, assisted by Pisano.

Yet, the masterpiece was still to be built: the cathedral to be was standing on the square with a 42-meter-diameter hole in its roof! Florence needed a dome to surpass its rivals. This gravity-defying task was thought to be impossible back then and no one had a clue as how to build such a large dome..



## World's largest brick dome!

Commissioned by Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore, it was the genius Filippo Brunelleschi pushed by Cosimo de' Medici who won the design contest and built the octagonal dome between 1420 and 1436. A goldsmith, he went to Rome with his friend Donatello to study the antique monuments like the Pantheon. If the construction methods had been forgotten during the dark Middle Ages, it was inspirational enough for Brunelleschi to come up with an innovative idea, winning the project without revealing his method to not be copied required a lot of convincing from the tempered man. He decided to build two domes: the inner one, a spiral of sandstone and marble, supporting the outer one made of bricks and mortar with the white lantern on top stabilizing it all. The bricks were laid using a herring-bone technique alternating their laying to lock them in place and prevent slippage.

This genius idea combined to his attention to details and broad scope of interests allowed him to succeed and complete the dome in 16 years only. The cathedral was officially consecrated by the pope in 1436 as soon as the dome was completed.

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Today, Brunelleschi's statue stands on the square looking at his dome, considered a masterpiece of the Renaissance.



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## From the dome to a yummy local food specialty

To make sure builders would not get interrupted and to prevent them from being exhausted by climbing up and down several times, Brunelleschi imported the hearty recipe of the *peposo* beef stew from the Tuscan town of Impruneta, where bricks for the dome were manufactured. This stew cooked with wine, pepper and garlic could be kept for several days and reheated at will. It was served in a canteen on top of the dome. It is still served today in local restaurants: try it out!

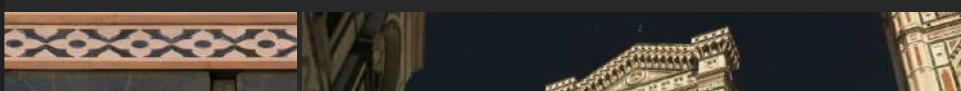


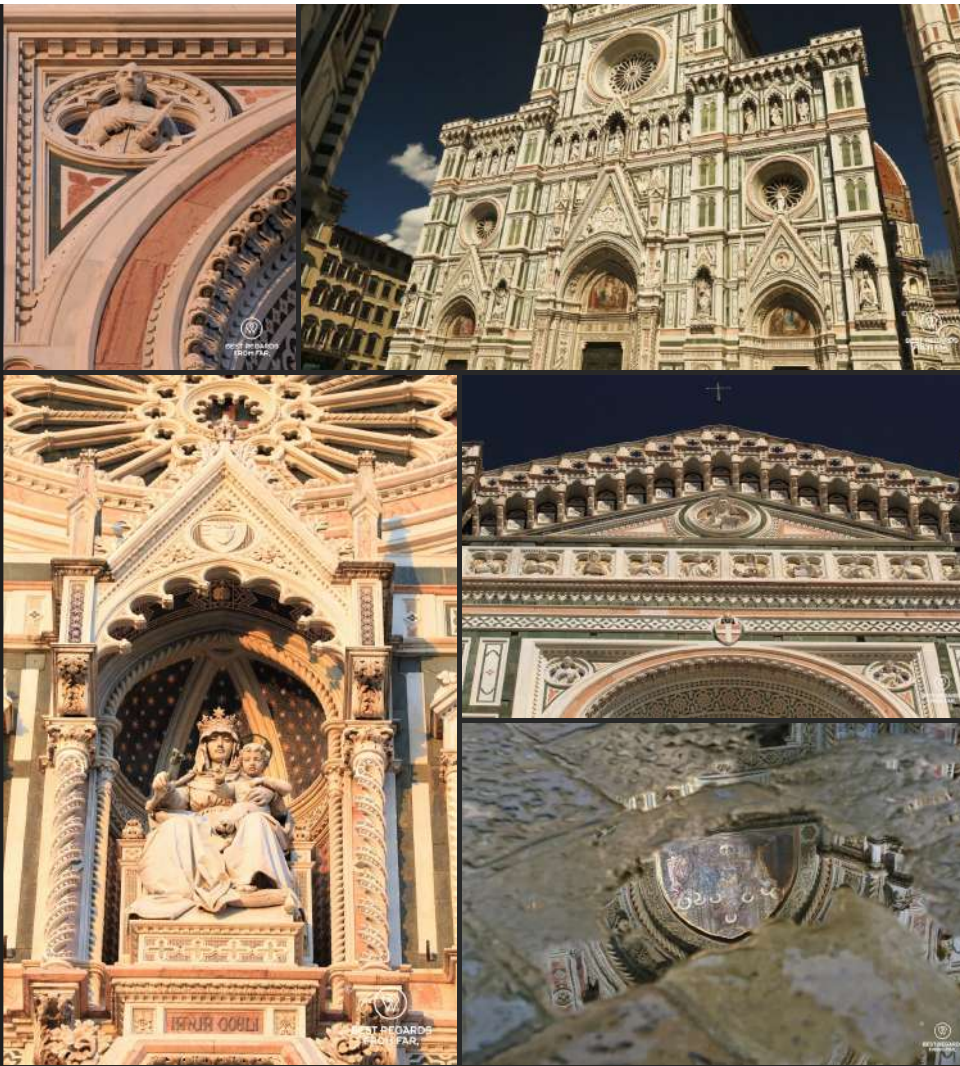
## Careful where you walk!

The golden ball (actually made of gilded bronze) on top of the lantern fell down once! Look for the white marble circle on the cathedral square commemorating this incident in which no-one got injured (and you may want to not stay too close to it!).

## A celebrity facade

The 1296 original facade by Arnolfo who was renown as a sculptor was decorated with many statues to rival with Northern European cathedrals such as Notre Dame de Paris. In Italy, only the cathedral of Siena was decorated this way. Choosing sculptures was showing the wealth and modernity of Florence as it was the most expensive form of art back then.





The 1296 facade was dismantled and replaced by the current one that was finished only in 1887. It was ordered to celebrate the unification of Italy in 1861 when Florence became the capital of the country for a few years. Pink marble from Siena, green marble from Prato, as well as the highest quality *statuario* marble from Carrara were used. The Virgin Mary is depicted as a queen sitting on a throne with baby Jesus on her laps, just below the large Rose window. Many famous people are sculpted on this facade, such as the bishops of Florence next to the apostles. Arnolfo, Giotto and Brunelleschi, the architects of the cathedral as well as famous Italian geniuses such as Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo or Dante are also honoured on the top of the facade, just below the representation of God.

Wondered what happened to the old facade? The facade has been destroyed. The Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore has preserved some of the statues of the original facade which are now exhibited in the Museum on a resin and marble 1 to 1 model of the original facade.

## A peep inside the cathedral

The inside is not as decorated as the facade. The marble floor is a noticeable element, especially from the upper balcony (accessible when visiting the terraces) as the optical illusion of its mosaic impresses.

The inside of the dome was decorated only in 1572 with Giorgio Vasari's monumental fresco of The Last Judgement. It took seven years to be completed. On Vasari's death, his student Zuccari finished the work of his master.

Above the main entrance, a clock designed in 1443 by Paolo Uccello towers delicate frescoes and mosaics. It is divided in 24 hours and the 24th hour of the day is sunset. To read the time, see where the needle points, count how many hours are between it and the 24th and you will know in how many hours sunset is.

A beautiful 1465 fresco represents Dante holding the Divine Comedy with the 9 circles of hell and Florence with the Duomo and Palazzo Vecchio as paradise.

The most important architects and artists who built Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore are honoured by their busts decorating the sides of the nave.



## The doors of paradise

Saint John who baptised the Christ is the patron of Florence. The 11th century baptistery was built in his honour.

One of its most stunning elements is the East door, facing the cathedral. Michelangelo called it the door of paradise. Its creator Ghiberti used gilded bronze and the newly discovered laws of perspective to tell the story of the Old Testament in ten panels. The original doors can be admired in the museum of the Duomo.

Past the doors of paradise, the baptistery impresses with its gigantic mosaic on its ceiling and is really worth the visit!



## The bell tower

When Siena built an imposing bell tower, Florence had to surpass it! Giotto designed it in 1334, and with the dome, it remains the most characteristic landmark of Florence to this day.

Knowing that the actual facade of the cathedral was plainer until the 18th century, the 84-meter high campanile was the most impressive feature of Santa Maria del Fiore before the dome was completed.

Only the first floor was designed by Giotto and its sculptures tell the story of the medieval professions. After his death, Pisano took care of the second floor and later Talenti completed the tower.

Climbing its 400 steps offers a rewarding view on Florence.



## The Opera Duomo Museum

The Opera Duomo Museum was built in 1800 and completely renovated and enlarged in 2015. It houses the original statues and elements of the cathedral. Its fantastic scenography really highlights the masterpieces beautifully. Here are the must-sees:

- The Virgin Mary by Arnolfo as well as many, many other sculptures by the master.
- The original "doors of paradise" (as Michelangelo nicknamed them) by Ghiberti can be admired.
- The other doors of the baptistery, one by Lorenzo Ghiberti and the other by Andrea Pisano depicts the life of Saint John the Baptist.
- La Pietà by Michelangelo that he sculpted in Rome from a single block of Carrara marble. Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene hold the body of the Christ deposited from the cross by a hooded man – a self-portrait of the artist.
- The sculptures from the first level of the bell tower are also shown here, with the representations of the planets, virtues and medieval crafts and professions.
- Relics and treasures of the cathedral are also beautifully presented along some altarpieces.





## More fascinating facts

- The famous sculpture David by Michelangelo was originally commissioned to be displayed on the buttress of the cathedral.
- The marble needs to be replaced regularly as it erodes. When you are up on the terraces, you can notice the colour differences between the new and older blocks. The cathedral requests a humongous amount of constant maintenance.
- The Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore organization was set up in 1296 and still operates!



### Travel tips:

- Every part of the cathedral can be **visited**: the campanile, the terraces, the dome, the museum and baptistery, and the cathedral itself (including the remains of the previous structures below the cathedral). A guided tour is recommended to decode all the symbols.
- The excellent afternoon walking tour of **La Bussola** spends a fair amount of time by the cathedral to learn more fascination facts about it.
- Check out this interactive map for the specific details to help you plan your trip and more articles and photos (zoom out) about the area! Here is a **short tutorial** to download it.
- To enjoy Florence in style, stay at the **Hotel Bernini Palace** in a 15th century palace full of history and luxury in the heart of the city!

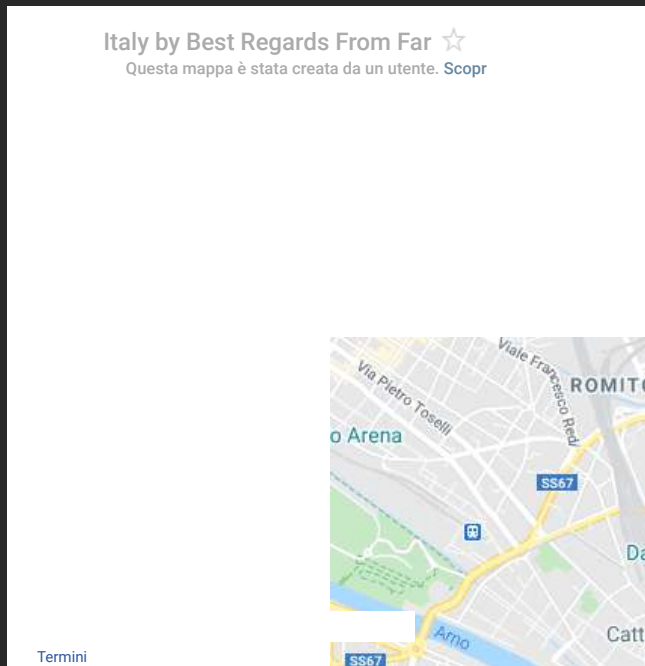




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