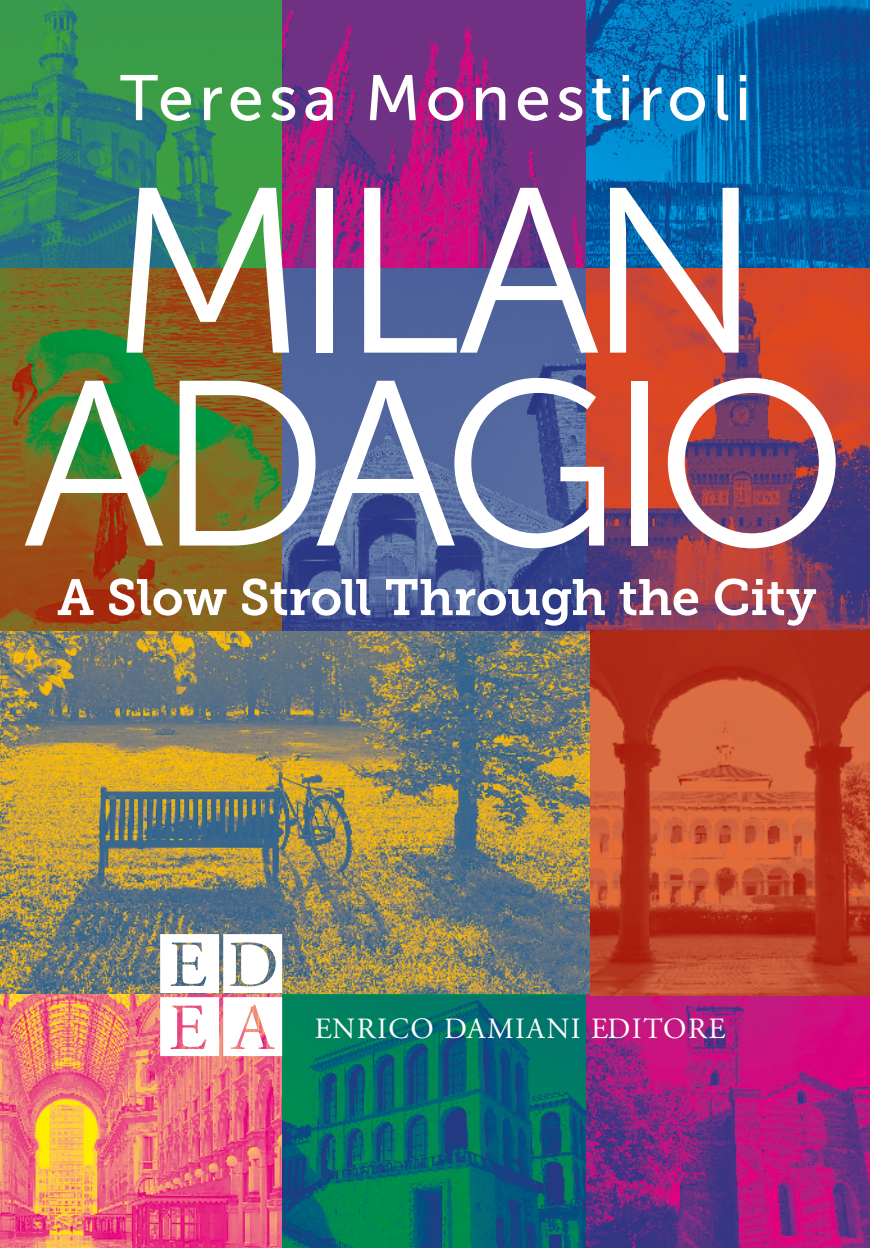




Teresa Monestiroli

MILAN ADAGIO

A Slow Stroll Through the City



ENRICO DAMIANI EDITORE

Excerpt from
Milano adagio. A spasso per la città a ritmo lento
by Teresa Monestiroli.

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INTRODUCTION

In a country with millennia of history and culture, often seemingly condemned to immutability, Milan is the Italian city that more than any other keeps changing, experimenting, and reinventing itself.

Though smothered by fashionable signage, its most authentic core endures—but you have to seek it out in the streets of ancient *Mediolanum*. Innovation, meanwhile, has been in plain sight since the early twentieth century, when Rationalist architecture marked the expanding urban fabric with memorable buildings, artistic avant-gardes conquered the world, and design took its first steps, shaping Italian homes with light, modular, affordable furnishings. Then, in the 2000s, came the era of international starchitects—with their gleaming boxes for private foundations and skyscrapers destined to upend the skyline—the era of Michelin-starred cuisine and gourmet pizzas that ushered trattorias into retirement, and

the influx of tourists, reaching the record figure of 8.5 million visits a year (2023 data).

All of this is Milan: a metropolis that runs tirelessly toward the new, constantly transforming itself—an ever-open construction site that churns out working hours, widespread cultural festivals, and rounds of tables in packed restaurants twelve months a year. But all of this can, at times, be exhausting and even overwhelming. I experienced it firsthand, working for more than twenty-five years in the frenetic newsroom of a major national newspaper, tasked with reporting on those very changes. From that experience, combined with my family background—an architect father and a restaurateur mother from whom I inherited a love of beauty and good food—my vocation for *adagio* was born, and over time it took shape in a book (*Adagio urbano*), a blog of the same name, and a calendar of events designed to offer the city in a different way: more relaxed and more authentic. At first it was a gamble—imagine what it means to make a group of people stand in front of a single painting for sixty minutes!—but over the years it proved a success, showing me above all that I wasn't the only one looking for a different rhythm amid this city's frenzy.

The journey culminated in the first edition of *Milan Adagio*, published in 2019, followed by guides to Venice, then Naples, Palermo, Brescia, Bergamo, Rome, and Turin. *Adagio* became a series and, thanks to the work of a

group of writers whom I thank, today it accompanies readers in getting to know and love each of these cities with the same philosophy. It has been five years full of intuitions, stimuli, and surprises, strengthening our original inspiration: slowing down, lifting our gaze, going deeper, and wandering are not only possible—they are increasingly necessary.

During Covid, which left us paralysed with its burden of emergency and grief, the repeated lockdowns helped us rediscover the pleasure of small things. Once the storm had passed, we deluded ourselves –I first of all– that we would treasure this intimate, reflective experience, and that *adagio* would somehow become part of our everyday habits. Instead, with the restart the pace of life immediately intensified, and the city – swept up in the phenomenon of overtourism – began running even faster than before, once again confirming itself as Italy's capital of dynamism and frenzy where, to use Luciano Bianciardi's words, "passers-by are too busy passing by" to notice what is around them.

This new guide, published five years later in an updated edition, is meant as an antidote to all this haste. It offers those who live in the city, those who come for work, and those who visit for a few days a counter-current journey at a slow pace, to discover that beyond appearances Milan, too, can offer moments of quiet. Of course, to take advantage of them we must learn to allow ourselves to do so: lifting our eyes from the phone screen, forget-

ting deadlines for a moment, ignoring everyday worries, and granting ourselves the privilege of wasting time. If we do, it won't be hard to find precious suggestions in these pages.

Milan Adagio is unlike any of the many tourist guides published in recent years: it is neither a tourist handbook with a checklist of must-sees nor an intimate diary of the streets where I was born and raised. It is a deliberately non-exhaustive guide to "my" city, inviting readers to explore its quieter, lesser-known sides—to turn down the volume on the days and offer restorative pauses. The places described were chosen on the basis of personal taste, bringing together famous monuments, secret gardens, museums, churches, cloisters, abbeys just outside the city, trees and benches, and above all trying to give readers practical pointers for avoiding the clichés of hit-and-run tourism and experiencing the city "the Milanese way". To that end, I also drew on the advice of twelve guests who, each in their own field, identified addresses, stories, and anecdotes that can, if you wish, become starting points for new walks.

To all this I have added restaurants and bars, once again selected for personal taste and for their geographical proximity to the entries they accompany, as well as a few pages we have called "thoughts", because they introduce the *adagio* philosophy that underpins the entire editorial project. Suggestions and reflections on the (residual) quality of our days, on the

dramatic scarcity of time in which we are trapped, on the poor way we manage it, and on our harmful dependence on technological devices. Words I wrote first and foremost for myself because, despite the years spent advocating a more sustainable lifestyle, I still find myself caught in a stream of stimuli from which, now and then, I struggle to resurface. I say this to reassure the sceptics: *adagio* is a point of balance between calm and strain that must be sought every day, because the pleasure of the first would not exist without the second.

I would like the new *Milan Adagio* to be a map for occasionally taking a side street and *divertirsi*, in the etymological sense of "taking another direction", granting yourself the pleasure of doing little—and doing it well—but consciously.

Everyone should choose the route that suits their tastes, slipping for an afternoon into the shoes of the modern *flâneur*.

If you too, reader, are looking for a different Milan, this is your book. Happy *adagio*.



TIPS FOR SEEING *THE LAST SUPPER*

Leonardo's *Cenacolo*

The complicated system that requires booking three months in advance has turned the *Cenacolo* into a chimera for many. Milanese locals usually don't even try, well aware that Leonardo da Vinci's work is by far the city's most sought-after artistic attraction. Not everyone knows, however, that the results of a new experiment inside the Refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie have made it possible to increase the room's capacity to forty people per time slot.

There's also a welcome new development aimed at local tourism: starting this year, every Wednesday at 12:00, additional tickets for the following week are released online. Another option remains to go to the ticket office at 8:00 a.m., when it opens, because each day a small quota of entries is reserved for direct sale without advance booking, with combined tickets that also include admission to other museums in the city.

What makes a visit to Leonardo's masterpiece so difficult is the work's fragile state of conservation, considered critically ill since the sixteenth century. The experimental technique the master chose for *The Last Supper* – treating the wall as if it were a panel painting and using very delicate pigments to best render light and the emotions on the faces of the twelve apostles – proved inadequate from the very beginning: the north-facing wall of the Dominican refectory, very damp, caused the colour to deteriorate within a few years, a process worsened by successive restorations

that altered the painting's balance, transforming it into what we see today.

What saved it from oblivion is an air-filtration system designed by the Polytechnic University of Milan that removes fine particulate matter by up to ninety-nine per cent – like an operating theatre – while constant monitoring ensures there are no changes in humidity. Over the years, the number of groups allowed into the refectory has gradually increased, reaching the current forty people per slot. Many of them are in the access corridor, where giant vacuum devices clean visitors' clothes of smog; fewer are in the great hall itself, where the masterpiece has endured since 1497.

The commission came from Ludovico il Moro, Duke of Milan, who at the end of the fifteenth century wanted to make the convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie a symbol of his power and his family mausoleum. He chose the architect Donato Bramante to renovate the tribune and Leonardo da Vinci – court painter and engineer – to create a new *Last Supper* in the refectory. Leonardo worked on it for four years, between 1494 and 1498, applying everything he had learned from his studies of light, movement, and human emotions – what he called the “motions of the soul” – and producing a mural revolutionary in technique and iconography.

In recognition of the work, the Duke gave Leonardo a plot of land opposite the basilica of Santa Maria delle Grazie, with a vineyard that was brought

back to life in 2015 thanks to a philological replanting commissioned by the then owners, the heirs of architect Portaluppi, and included in the visitor route of Casa degli Atellani. In 2023, after the Renaissance palace was sold to the Arnault family (the French LVMH group), the garden and the house closed to the public. What will happen in the future has not yet been announced. Renovation work is currently under way, awaiting (perhaps) a reopening.

If you manage to get a ticket for the *Cenacolo*, pay attention to two things: the photographs displayed along the route to the refectory, which recount one of the most dramatic moments in the life of this masterpiece—the 1943 bombings, when the superintendent at the time, Fernanda Wittgens, with remarkable foresight, protected the painting with scaffolding loaded with sandbags, saving it from destruction; and Donato Montorfano's *Crucifixion*, the fresco that has shared the space with Leonardo's masterpiece for five centuries, to the indifference of almost everyone.

The Lombard painter worked on the refectory wall in the same years Leonardo was painting his fresco, said to have finished in half the time, unaware that *The Last Supper* would eclipse it forever. And yet it is precisely by seeing them facing each other that one understands the Tuscan master's genius, able to give his apostles' movements an entirely new naturalness: by comparison, Montorfano's Calvary – with a city in

the distance and a bustling crowd in the foreground, at the foot of the three crosses that structure the space – appears rigid and stereotyped, even if rich in detail.

The visit time is limited to fifteen minutes, but it is enough to admire both.

MUSEO DEL CENACOLO VINCIANO

Piazza Santa Maria delle Grazie 2

Tuesday-Sunday 8:15 a.m.-7:00 p.m.

02 92800360

cenacolovinciano.org

IN THE CLOISTERS

Santa Maria delle Grazie

Some are inaccessible, except on rare occasions, like the former monastery cloister of the Umiliate nuns, incorporated in the nineteenth century into a building at Via Cappuccio 5/7 and privately owned for more than two centuries. Others, by contrast, are always crowded—such as the cloisters of the Università Statale, designed by Filarete (partly original, partly rebuilt), those of the Università Cattolica, built to a design by Donato Bramante, and the Conservatory cloister, which since 1807 has been home to the prestigious music school named after Giuseppe Verdi, where students perform delightful musical improvisations in the shade of an imposing magnolia. Then there are those open to everyone but still dedicated to religious contemplation, like the one already mentioned in this guide at the church of San Simpliciano, seat of the Faculty of Theology.

Cloisters are one of the places I love most when I need peace. Beyond the unquestionable beauty of Renaissance architecture, they bring a sense of well-being to anyone who feels like sitting down for a few minutes to rest, letting the city's noise soften, thoughts quieten, and the spirit awaken. Perhaps it is the effect of the prayers that have echoed beneath these vaults for centuries; perhaps it is simply that, once you step across the threshold, you feel transported into another world.

In the city, my favourite is the cloister of the Basilica of Santa Maria delle Grazie, known as the "Cloister of the Frogs" because of the four ani-



mal-shaped sculptures that decorate the fountain—designed by Bramante at the height of the Renaissance, together with the basilica's tribune. In Milan it is astonishingly little known, and even less frequented. The only people I have seen inside, on my many visits over the years, are the Dominican friars who still live in the complex and pass through it to reach the sacristy, along with the occasional foreign tourist who, after the rapture of the Cenacolo, is tempted by guides to turn the corner and poke their head into the peace. No one ever regrets it. Go in spring when the magnolias are in bloom: the sight is moving. Back in the real world, if you still have a little time, I strongly recommend a short walk in the area: the streets between Corso Magenta and Via Vincenzo Monti are among the city's most elegant.

CHIOSTRO DI SANTA MARIA DELLE GRAZIE

Via Caradosso

Monday–Saturday 7 a.m.-1 p.m. and 3 p.m.-7:30 p.m.;

Sunday 7:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. and 3 p.m.-9 p.m.

legraziemilano.it

Ricerca Vini

Ricerca Vini in via Vincenzo Monti is perfect for a classy aperitivo: a high-quality wine bar where your glasses are accompanied by platters of cured meats and cheeses.

Via Vincenzo Monti 33

Monday 4 p.m.-10 p.m.; Tuesday-Saturday 10 a.m.-10 p.m.

02 460471 / ricercavini.com

Ristorante La Brisa

A well-known restaurant with a splendid garden where, in summer, you can forget you're in the city as you dine on white tablecloths set beneath the branches of two centuries-old linden trees or in the shade of a large, fragrant magnolia. If you're looking for peace and quiet, it's best to go for lunch, as evenings can be crowded. Refined but solid menu, with Italian dishes and a few Iberian influences such as crispy suckling pig, anchovies, and prosciutto. Elegant, but not stiff, atmosphere. Prices: €60, drinks excluded.

Via Brisa 15

Monday-Friday 12 p.m.-3:30 p.m. and 7:30 p.m.-12 a.m.;

Sunday 7:30 p.m.-12 a.m.

02 86450521

ristorantelabrisa.it



HIDDEN GARDENS

Revitalised green spaces

Small, sheltered, lush—sometimes literally rescued from decay and tended by a crowd of admirable volunteers who take it upon themselves to look after public spaces on all our behalf, giving the community green oases to retreat to and places to escape the noise. These are the hidden gardens, often unknown even to those who live nearby: you have to seek them out, remember they exist, and go there on purpose. And what a joy when you find them. They may not have the sweeping grandeur of vast greenery, the space of great parks, centuries-old trees, or meticulously kept flowerbeds, but they offer a pleasantly protective feeling.

The first one I discovered was **Giardino Perego**, on Via dei Giardini: I found it during my university years – it was a perfect corner to study in peace. There was no one there then, just as there is no one there now (except at lunchtime, when the weather is nice). It feels like a private garden, given the luxury of the houses around it, and in fact it was private until 1940, when the Perego family sold it to the city. It blends in with the trees along one of Milan's greenest streets (Via dei Giardini) and was recently restored by Orticola, together with the nursery of Bollate prison (see p. 80). It is a beautiful, restful place, full of charm and history.

The one closest to my home is the tiny **Giardino di Via Scaldasole**, a narrow strip of green that lay abandoned for years and that local volunteers have successfully brought back to life. At weekends, neighbourhood parents or-

ganise children's parties, but in the morning it is deserted, quiet, and welcoming for anyone seeking tranquillity – ideal for eating a sandwich or reading a book.

The most surprising is the **WWF Oasis** behind Corso Garibaldi, on Via Tommaso da Cazzaniga: everyone who goes in thinks (and says) it doesn't even feel like Milan. In fact, even on the chaotic days of Design Week – when small installations are set up in rotation – the city becomes a distant memory, and the coolness of the greenery a relief.

Then there is the **Giardino nascosto** (hidden garden), which is called that because it truly is hidden in a small street behind the Naviglio Grande, near the church of San Cristoforo (Via Bussola, corner of Via Malaga): a shared garden, saved from neglect by the enterprising Comitato Ponti and, over the years, turned into a wonderful place. If you are lucky enough to find it open – at weekends it almost always is – take advantage of it. It feels like the countryside, with swings for children and wooden benches for adults, birdhouses, and picnics on the grass.

Cucchi

Corso Genova 1

02 89409793

pasticceriacucchi.it

For anyone who lives in the Ticinese neighbourhood, grabbing an espresso at the counter is a classic; sitting at a table, on the other hand, is a bit pricey—especially if you add a brioche. Its popularity and the change in management have made it busier, and at weekends it's hard to find a seat, but the corner on Corso Genova remains perfect for a bit of people-watching.

coffee break



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