



Courts of Northern Italy

Princely art of the Renaissance

8–15 May 2026 (MM 950)

8 days • £3,610

Lecturer: Dr Michael Douglas-Scott

4–11 September 2026 (MM 155)

8 days • £3,610

Lecturer: Professor Fabrizio Nevola

1–8 October 2026 (MM 190)

8 days • £3,360

Lecturer: Dr Sarah Pearson

Northern Italy's independent city states:
Mantua, Ferrara, Parma, Ravenna and Urbino.

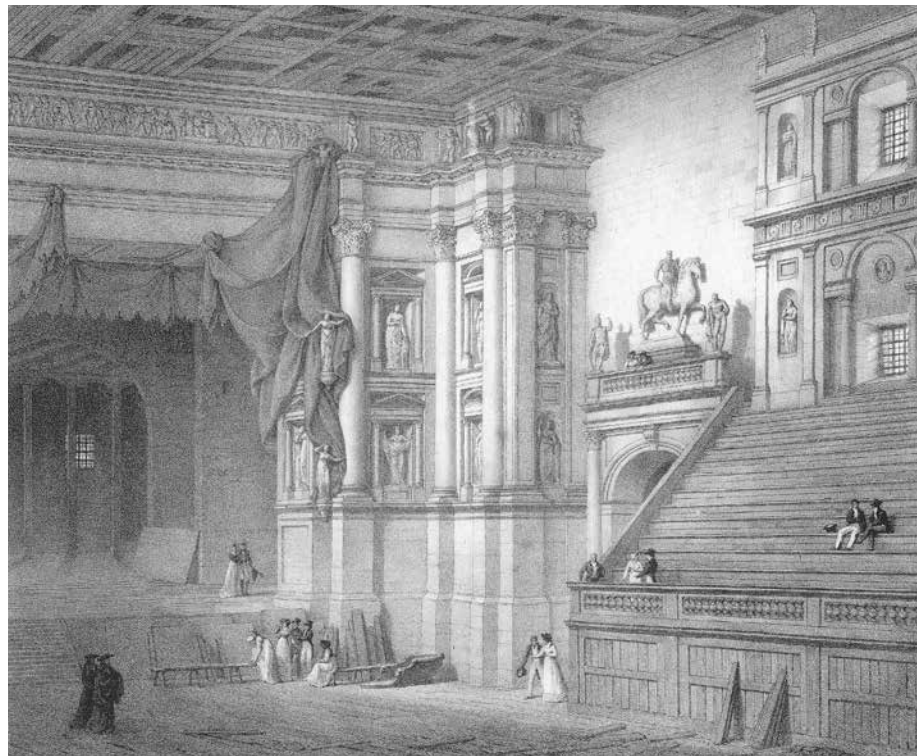
Some of the greatest Renaissance art and architecture, commissioned by the powerful ruling dynasties: Gonzaga, Este, Sforza, Farnese, Montefeltro and others.

Highlights include the most glorious concentration of Byzantine mosaics and important works by Alberti, Mantegna, Piero della Francesca and Correggio.

After the collapse of the Roman Empire, Italy gradually fragmented into numerous little territories. The city states became fiercely independent and were governed with some degree of democracy. But a debilitating violence all too often ensued as the leading families fought with fellow citizens for dominance of the city council and the offices of state. A common outcome from the 13th century onwards was the imposition of autocratic rule by a single prince, and the suspension of democratic structures: but such tyranny was not infrequently welcomed with relief and gratitude by a war-weary citizenry.

Their rule may have been tyrannical, and warfare their principal occupation, but the Montefeltro, Malatesta, d'Este and Gonzaga dynasties brought into being through their patronage some of the finest buildings and works of art of the Renaissance. Many of the leading artists in 15th- and 16th-century Italy worked in the service of princely courts.

As for court art of earlier epochs, little survives, though a glimpse of the oriental splendour of the Byzantine court of Emperor Justinian can be had in the mosaic depiction of him, his wife and their retinue in the church of San Vitale in Ravenna. It is not until the 15th century, in Mantegna's Camera degli Sposi at Mantua, that we are again allowed an unhindered gaze into court life.



Parma, theatre in the ducal palace. lithograph 1822.

Itinerary

Day 1: Fontanellato, Parma. Fly at c.10.30am (British Airways) from London Heathrow to Milan Linate. Drive to Fontanellato to visit the moated 13th-century castle with frescoes by Parmigianino. Continue to Parma where the first four nights are spent.

Day 2: Parma, Sabbioneta. Parma is a beautiful city; the vast Palazzo della Pilotta houses an art gallery (Correggio, Parmigianino) and an important Renaissance theatre (first proscenium arch). In the afternoon, drive to Sabbioneta, an ideal Renaissance city on an almost miniature scale, built for Vespasiano Gonzaga in the 1550s; visit the ducal palace, theatre, and one of the world's first picture galleries.

Day 3: Mantua. In the morning visit the Palazzo Te, the Gonzaga summer residence and major monument of Italian Mannerism, with lavish frescoes by Giulio Romano. In the afternoon, visit Alberti's highly influential Early Renaissance church of S. Andrea and Giulio Romano's uncharacteristically restrained cathedral. Visit also the Palazzo

Ducale, a vast rambling complex, the aggregate of 300 years of extravagant patronage by the Gonzaga dynasty (Mantegna's frescoes in the Camera degli Sposi, Pisanello frescoes, Rubens altarpiece).

Day 4: Parma. Free morning. In the afternoon, see Correggio's sophisticated set of allegorical lunettes en grisaille surrounding a celebration of Diana as the goddess of chastity and the hunt in the Camera di S. Paolo. Also visit the splendid Romanesque cathedral with illusionistic frescoes of a tumultuous heavenly host by Correggio.

Day 5: Ferrara. Ferrara was the centre of the city-state ruled by the d'Este dynasty, whose court was one of the most lavish and cultured in Renaissance Italy. Pass the Castello Estense, a moated 15th-century stronghold, and the cathedral. The Palazzo Schifanoia is an Este retreat with elaborate astrological frescoes. First of three nights in Ravenna.

Day 6: Ravenna, Classe. The last capital of the western Roman Empire and subsequently capital of Ostrogothic and Byzantine Italy, Ravenna possesses the world's most glorious

Courts of Northern Italy
continued

concentration of Early Christian and Byzantine mosaics. Visit the Basilica of S. Apollinare Nuovo with its mosaic Procession of Martyrs. Drive to Classe, Ravenna's port, which was once one of the largest in the Roman world; virtually all that is left is the great Basilica di S. Apollinare. In the evening, there is a private visit to the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, lined with 5th-century mosaics, and the splendid centrally planned church of S. Vitale with 6th-century mosaics of Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora.

Day 7: Urbino. Drive into the hills to Urbino, the beautiful little city of the Montefeltro dynasty. See the exquisite Gothic frescoes in the Oratorio di S. Giovanni. In the afternoon, visit the Palazzo Ducale, a masterpiece of architecture which grew over 30 years into the perfect Renaissance secular environment. See the beautiful studiolo of Federico of Montefeltro and excellent picture collection here (Piero, Raphael, Titian).

Day 8: Cesena, Rimini. The Biblioteca Malatestiana in Cesena is a perfectly preserved Renaissance library established by Malatesta Novello, and contains over 300 valuable manuscripts. In Rimini visit the outstanding Tempio Malatestiano, designed by Leon Battista Alberti for the tyrant Sigismondo Malatesta, which contains superb decoration by Agostino di Duccio and particularly fine sculptural detail. Fly from Bologna, arriving at London Heathrow at c. 6.20pm.

Lecturers

Dr Michael Douglas-Scott mixes scholarship with accessible discourse, wit with reasoned opinion, and is highly sought-after as an art history lecturer. He has lectured for New York University (London campus) and Birkbeck College, University of London, specialising primarily in 16th-century Italian art and architecture. He studied at the Courtauld and Birkbeck College and lived in Rome for several years. He has written articles for *Arte Veneta*, *Burlington Magazine* and the *Journal of the Warburg & Courtauld Institutes*.

Professor Fabrizio Nevola is the chair and Professor of Art History and Visual Culture at the University of Exeter, specialising in the urban and architectural history of Early Modern Italy. He obtained his PhD at the Courtauld Institute and has held fellowships at the University of Warwick, the Medici Archive Project, and Harvard University's Villa I Tatti (Florence). He has published widely including the award-winning *Siena: Constructing the Renaissance City*.

Dr Sarah Pearson. Architectural historian and writer specialising in Italy. Her MA focused on the architecture of Andrea Palladio and her PhD investigated convent building in Northern Italy with particular reference to the Duchy of Urbino and the Siennese architect Francesco di Giorgio Martini. Other interests include Renaissance art and English Brutalist architecture. She has taught at the Universities of Reading and East Anglia, and currently lectures at Maddingley Hall at the University of Cambridge.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £3,610 (£3,360 in October) or £3,390 (£3,140 in October) without flights. **Single occupancy:** £4,260 (£3,890 in October) or £4,040 (£3,670 in October) without flights.

Suggested train itinerary: London – Paris – Milan – Parma: 12–15 hours.

Included: flights (Euro Traveller) with British Airways (Airbus A320); travel by private coach throughout; hotel accommodation; breakfasts; 4 dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. Grand Hotel de la Ville, Parma (grandhoteldelaville.com): an elegant 5-star hotel within walking distance of the historic centre. Designed by Renzo Piano, the hotel is stylish yet functional. **Hotel Palazzo Bezzi, Ravenna** (palazzebezzi.it): a 4-star superior hotel, located on the edge of the historic centre. Despite modern decor, it retains a warm atmosphere. Some bathrooms have a bath with a shower attachment, some have only a shower. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use throughout.*

How strenuous? There is a lot of walking, much of it on steep and roughly paved streets: agility, stamina and sure-footedness are essential. Coaches are not allowed into the historic centres. Many of the historical buildings visited are sprawling and vast. Some days involve a lot of driving. Average distance by coach per day: 78 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.