

A Condensed Expression of Milanese Elegance

A tour of some of Milan's most beautiful libraries

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Discreet yet impactful, sometimes striking, the libraries of Milan encapsulate the memories of entire generations. They are a generous and democratic reservoir: here, beauty and knowledge are open to all, without exception. Spending a morning observing the melting pot that animates them, alongside the monumental architectures that house them, is a pleasure every curious traveler should indulge in. It's an exercise in wonderful "flânerie" through which one retraces the history of the city and its inhabitants. After all, it is precisely in libraries that the most authentic soul of a city is revealed—its respect for culture and its attention to its citizens. In the case of Milan, libraries represent a privileged point from which to admire some of its most majestic buildings—places where one can breathe the encounter between past and present.

Starting from the historic center, a tour of Milan's most evocative libraries could begin with a visit to the Ambrosian Library, in Piazza Pio XI. Inaugurated on December 8, 1609, and conceived as a center of study and culture, it was among the first to allow access to anyone who could read and write. Its shelves contain extraordinary treasures: over a million printed works, nearly forty thousand manuscripts (including the famous Codex Atlanticus), twelve thousand drawings by the greatest masters of all time—from Raphael to Leonardo—over twenty-two thousand engravings, and other rarities such as ancient maps, musical manuscripts, parchments, and papyri. For this reason, the Ambrosian Library is one of the most important worldwide, with a particularity that says much about the spirit of Milan: Cardinal Federico wanted it oriented towards multiculturalism and dialogue, explaining that books belonging to cultures and faiths different from Christianity could be of great benefit to all. Therefore, the library offers many texts on philosophy, Christian theology, and other religions (primarily Islam and Judaism).

Proceeding towards Brera, specifically at Via Brera 28, in the heart of the city's most creative and bohemian district, you'll find the National Braidense Library. Founded in 1786, it is housed in one of the city's most historically layered locations. Built on an ancient 14th-century convent of the Humiliati order and later passed to the Jesuits who established a school there, the palace that houses the library became

The interiors of the Ambrosiana Library and the Federiciana Room.





Founded in 1607 at the behest of Archbishop Federico Borromeo, the Ambrosiana was the first library established by a patron to be opened to the public. It houses one of the richest collections of Greek, Latin, vernacular, and Oriental manuscripts, including Leonardo da Vinci's Codex Atlanticus.

state property in 1773. Here, Empress Maria Theresa of Austria wanted to create the headquarters of some of the city's most advanced cultural institutions still existing today, including the Academy of Fine Arts, the Lombard Institute of Science and Letters, the National Braidense Library, the Astronomical Observatory, and the Botanical Garden, to which the Brera Art Gallery would later be added. The heart of the library is the Maria Theresa Hall, dedicated to the Empress herself, designed by Giuseppe Piermarini in 1785. In the hall, there is a large globe handcrafted between 1819 and 1829 by the astronomer Francesco Carlini. Don't miss the Catalog Room and the ancient Jesuit Hall, also known as the Theological Hall,

which today serves as the Reading Room. The library now houses over one million five hundred thousand volumes. Its guiding idea is to become that "ideal library" Umberto Eco spoke of—a place where one can find the book whose existence one did not suspect and which, in the end, we discover to be vital. The library also hosts a rich calendar of exhibitions, activities, and cultural events.

Staying in the center, the Sormani Library, at Corso di Porta Vittoria 6, is among the most beloved libraries by the Milanese, as well as being the central institute of the Milan Library System. Housed in a 16th-century palace, where once, among mills and laundries' shacks, stretched the gardens that supplied the Verziere market, it has a complex history, with several relocations that took it to various historic sites in the city, from Palazzo Marino to the Sforza Castle. The current building is an interesting example of architectural integration between the new and the old in post-war Milan. Inaugurated on March 10, 1956, the library emerged from the reconstruction and restoration of the prestigious 17th- and 18th-century residence conducted by architect Arrigo Arrighetti. Over the decades, the Sormani Library has remained one of the most cherished places by the Milanese, thanks also to its English garden, populated with artistic sculptures. Today, it houses about seven hundred thousand books and twenty thousand newspapers and magazines, along with a vast collection of historical and contemporary works. A curious fact: between 1945 and 1950, the library's garden hosted the Village of the Mother and Child, a welfare institution founded by Elda Scarzella Mazzocchi, a Milanese pedagogue and social worker who believed that "it takes a whole village" to raise a child.

The Brera Academy complex, in addition to the renowned Pinacoteca, hosts the Braidense Library, founded in 1770 by Empress Maria Theresa of Austria and currently the fourth largest library in Italy by number of volumes.

Continuing to Via Francesco Sforza 28, you can admire the largest hospital library in Europe: the Historical Medical Library of the old Major Hospital, which houses about one hundred thousand volumes including monographs, periodicals, miscellanies, and manuscripts spanning from the 15th to the 20th century. An invaluable heritage for medical science and beyond: here, you can find writings of great historical and cultural value, from the anatomical plates of Vesalius, considered the founder of modern anatomy, to the world's first medical book with color illustrations. Although the library's history begins with the creation of the hospital itself, it was officially established in 1846 following the bequest of Milanese doctor Carlo Dell'Acqua, later expanded through numerous donations. The splendid rooms that house the Historical Archive were built in 1637 as part of the expansion of the ancient hospital complex.

Last but not least, moving north, the Villa Litta Library is the beating heart of cultural life in the Affori district. The Villa, a magnificent example of late Baroque architecture, was built in 1687 by Pietro Paolo

Corbella, Marquis of the Feudo di Affori, and was used for centuries as a summer residence by the Milanese nobility. Surrounded by a luminous park, initially conceived as an Italian garden and later transformed into an English garden by the landscape architect Ercole Silva, the villa long hosted the splendors of Milanese nobility.

However, its fate changed drastically in the 20th century: in 1915, during the First World War, it was temporarily used as a shelter for psychiatric patients, while in the post-war period, the park's maintenance was assigned to alcoholic patients from the asylum. For this reason, the Villa and the garden were long called by locals "la cà d'i matt" and "el giardin d'i matt" (literally, in Milanese dialect: "The House of the Mad" and "The Garden of the Mad"). During the Second World War, the Villa became a refuge for evacuees. It was only in 1962 that the Villa partly regained its original majesty by hosting the current municipal library. Today, the Hall of the Arts hosts concerts, conferences, and exhibitions, and the Villa is one of the city's most frequented cultural institutions.



The Sormani Library.