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The Most Beautiful Libraries of Tuscany

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What a cathedral is for the religious, so is the library for the cultivated. A place where you can find peace, quiet and insights into earthly and otherworldly questions. The accumulated knowledge of millions of people through thousands of years are lined on the bookshelves, ready to enlighten you on whatever subject you pick down the shelf. Such a Place of Worship of Wisdom deserves a beautiful space, a place where old books sit enthroned on noble bookcases in a high-ceilinged room. Where solid, dark-wooden desks are polished by years of elbow-rubbing. Where the dusty air is a reminder of the history, that precedes us.

It comes as no surprise that Tuscany in general and Florence in particular, being the birthplace of the Renaissance, are filled with extraordinary and marvelous libraries. Some you can visit, others are only open on special occasions and others still are reserved for scholars. But right here you can discover them all.

Biblioteca Statale di Lucca



This library was founded in the 17th century by abbot Girolamo Minutoli and opened to the public in 1794. In 1877 it moved to its current location in the former convent of S. Maria Corteorlandini, incorporating this book collection in its library as well and yet again filling out the beautiful halls of the abandoned and neglected convent.

The largest and most important of these is the monumental Baroque salon on the top floor. This space was the ancient library of the convent and contains about 13,000 volumes. In addition to its notable heritage of books (about 365,000 volumes), the library contains rare editions and illuminated manuscripts of great value, various historical-scientific texts, a large collection of autographs, an important repertoire of texts on Italian history and much more.



The two globes – a celestial and a terrestrial one by Robert de Vaugondy Didier, printed in Paris in 1773 – fit perfectly in the majestic room. They are a reminiscent of a time where great scholars and bright minds were monastic and a clerical career was the only intellectual education, the common people could achieve.

The reading room downstairs is accessible if you want to study the books in their collection. The beautiful baroque halls upstairs are open on special events. Check out their website for such occasions.

- [Biblioteca Statale di Lucca website \(in Italian\)](#)
- [Biblioteca Statale di Lucca on Facebook](#)
- [About the library on Institute and Museum of the History of Science website](#)

Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana

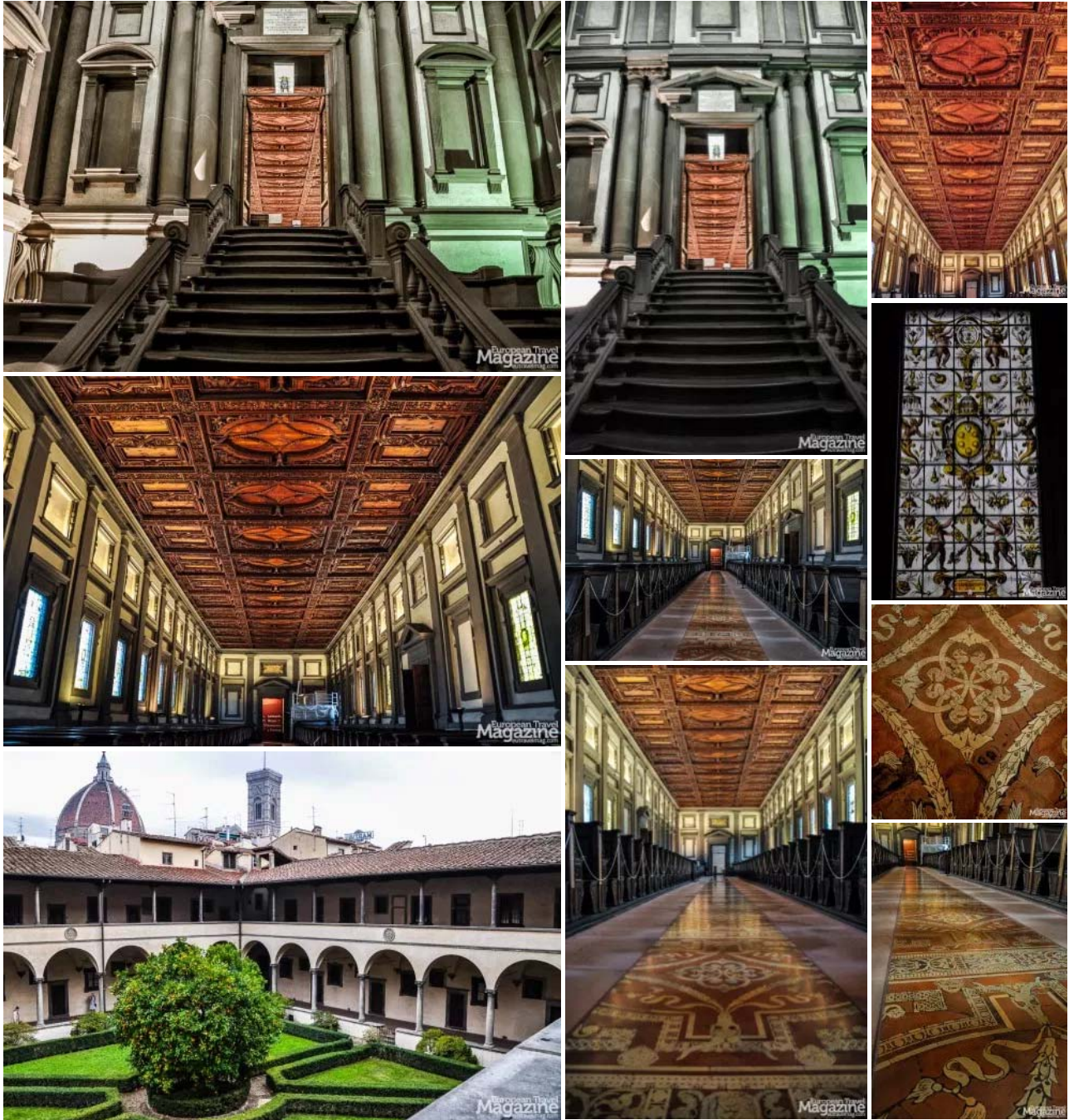


This is a space of epic proportions and its heritage echoes through the last 5 centuries. Not only the physical space commands respects, so does the collection of more than 11.000 manuscripts, 2.500 papyri, 1.681 books printed in the 16th century and a total of approx 130.000 books dating from the 17th to the 21th century.

The core collection consists of approximately 3.000 manuscripts and books which, rebound in red leather with the Medici arms, used to be chained to the *plutei* in the Reading Room in 1571 when the Laurentian Library was first opened to the public. Yes, for almost 450 years this library has served anyone wanting to feed the brain.

And if the erudite patrimony of this library isn't enough, there's another reason to visit this magnificent library: the architecture. It was designed by no other than sculptor, painter and genius Michelangelo, who worked on its construction from 1524 until he left Florence in 1534. The library forms part of the cloister of Basilica di San Lorenzo, the church belonging to the Medici family. It was pope Clement VII – also a Medici – that sponsored the construction of the library in order for it to hold the family's literate collection.

Walking from the base of the stairs, up, was meant to be a transitional passing, like walking from the Darkness of Ignorance to the Light of Knowledge. Michelangelo had envisioned the staircase to be of walnut, but when Bartolomeo Ammannati constructed it in 1559, he used the famous, grey Tuscan *pietra serena* instead, which only adds to the majestic and forceful character of the vestibule.



If the vestibule is vertical, the Reading Room is horizontal. The construction of the floor in red and white terracotta was carried out starting in 1548 by Santi Buglioni following a design by Tribolo. The dark ceiling was carved from linden tree in 1549-1550 following earlier drawings by Michelangelo. The long room features two aisles with rows of benches, the so-called *plutei*, who performed the threefold role of reading desk, seat and storage shelf for the manuscripts. Even today, at the end of each *plutei*, you can see a wooden tablet summarizing the previous content within.

While you can consult the books and manuscripts of the collection during workdays, the monumental space itself is a part of the San Lorenzo Complex and only open to the public for exhibitions.

- [Biblioteca Laurenziana website](#)
- [Complex of San Lorenzo website](#)
- [Biblioteca Laurenziana on Wikipedia](#)
- [Biblioteca Laurenziana on Facebook](#)

Biblioteca Riccardiana



This sumptuous baroque library will dazzle you from the moment you enter. Not only the walnut shelves are intricately carved and adorned with golden paint, but the ceiling itself is a fresco masterpiece by Luca Giordano portraying the “Allegory of Divine Wisdom”, which shows the human intellect released from the bonds of ignorance as it contemplates the truth . It will be hard to concentrate on the books surrounded with all that beauty. If the books were not also singular themselves.

The library holds a copy of Pliny's *Historia Naturalis* dating from the 10th century and an autographed manuscript of the *Istorie Fiorentine* by Niccolò Machiavelli. It has autograph works by Petrarch, Boccaccio and Savonarola as well as splendid illuminated codices. Furthermore, it contains numerous rare works related to the theatre, travel, history, pharmacopoeia and literature.

Although the Riccardian Library already was founded by Riccardo Riccardi back in 1600, it wasn't until the Palazzo Medici Riccardi was revamped and converted for its new masters in 1670 that the library moved here. The Renaissance palace was originally built for Cosimo de' Medici in 1485, but when the Medici family moved to Palazzo Pitti in 1549, it was neglected and later sold to the Riccardi family in 1659, who gave it its lavish Baroque style. It was opened to the public in 1715.



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When the Riccardi family fortune started to decline in the 18th century, the financial trouble affected the library, endangering the priceless collection. To avoid it getting acquired by out-of-towners, it was purchased by the City Council in 1813 and handed over to the State two years later.

Italian and foreign academics, researchers and students over 18 years of age are admitted to the Library but must present valid photo ID at the entrance and sign themselves in when entering.

- [Biblioteca Riccardiana website](#)
- [Biblioteca Riccardiana on Wikipedia](#)

Biblioteca Moreniana



A library within a library..

The Biblioteca Moreniana was established later than Biblioteca Riccardiana and moved into Palazzo Medici Riccardi in 1874 just next to Biblioteca Riccardiana. Although they share the same facilities, the two libraries are decorated very different and comprise of divergent subjects.

Moreniana specialises in the history and culture of Tuscany and its collection of books and manuscripts was begun by canon Domenico Moreni in the late 18th century. The library was named after him. In the following decades, other manuscripts of particular interest for the history of Tuscany were acquired and have become part of the library's legacy.





The library is tastefully decorated in light grey and golden colours. It has a French flair to it and can be accessed through Biblioteca Riccardiana on Via Ginori.

- [Biblioteca Moreniana website \(in Italian\)](#)
- [Biblioteca Moreniana on Wikipedia \(In Italian\)](#)

Biblioteca Marucelliana



This is the kind of library that makes you want to become a student again, just to sit in the reading room for hours and let some of the accumulated knowledge gathered there rub off. Being a public library it's open for everybody and it even hosts exhibitions, musical enactments and lectures.

Biblioteca Marucelliana is one of the few buildings that were actually constructed to house a library. Let's first go back in history, to 1703 when at his death, abbot Francesco Marucelli testamentated his books to the public. There were no public libraries in Florence at that time, and the abbot wanted to create such an institution. Fast forward to 1752 where his grandson Alessandro Marucelli commissioned the building, donated his books and employed the first librarian. From there on, the library grew steadily, also adding drawing, prints and opera librettos to the collection.

Currently, the library has expanded beyond the original premises into the adjacent buildings, but the marvellous Reading Room is still inside its original structure and looks like it first did more than 250 years ago. The just as wonderful Manuscript Room however, is located in the adjacent Palazzo Pegna and was established in 1950 using the shelves from Biblioteca Medicea Palatina in Palazzo Pitti. Those were a donation from The National Central Library of Florence when they moved their library into a new building in 1935.



The terrible flood of 1966, which destroyed many books in The National Central Library, left Biblioteca Marucelliana unharmed, and as a result, the library is an important institution for researchers about local culture because many of those books can only be found here.

- [Biblioteca Marucelliana website \(in Italian\)](#)
- [Biblioteca Marucelliana Facebook page](#)
- [Biblioteca Marucelliana on Wikipedia](#)

Biblioteca dell'Accademia di belle arti



Located between the Accademia di belle arti di Firenze (the actual academy of fine arts) and the Galleria dell'Accademia di Firenze (where Michelangelo's David statue is on display), you might miss this little library with its humble door to the right in the vaulted loggia of the academy.

The library was established in 1801 when the director of the Uffizi sponsored the purchase of the library belonging to the architect Giuseppe Salvetti, holding texts relating to the history of music and art. The reading room is quite small compared with other libraries in Florence, but with a charming ambience and some fine sculptures decorating the space.





The library and reading room is reserved for students and teachers of the Academy of the fine arts, but you can sneak a peek through the door.

- [Biblioteca dell'Accademia di belle arti website \(in Italian\)](#)
- [Accademia di Belle Arti di Firenze on Wikipedia](#)

Libreria Piccolomini

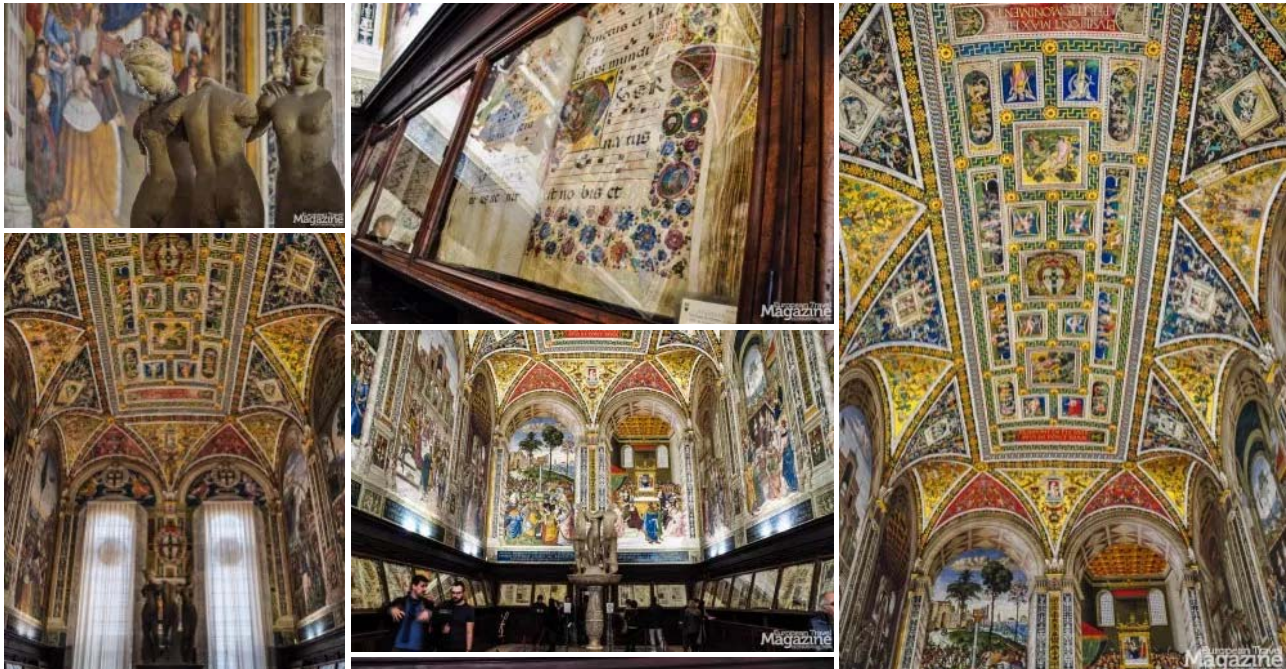


Is not a library *per se*, more like a display cabinet of the most beautiful books and the manuscripts you have ever seen. If you notice the books at all and are not permanently distracted by the stunningly colourful frescoes above. They are divine. Thus fittingly that we are in a holy place; the Cathedral of Siena.

It was cardinal Francesco Todeschini Piccolomini, archbishop of Siena and the later Pope Pius III who commissioned this library in 1492 as a library for the precious collection of his uncle, Siena's favourite son, cardinal Enea Silvio Piccolomini, who eventually became Pope Pius II.

He placed the library next to the cathedral and by doing so exemplified the Renaissance ideal of an institution that was both a centre of scholarship and an artistic expression of the "modern era". The frescoes were painted between 1502 and 1507 by Bernardino di Betto, called Pinturicchio, probably based on designs by Raphael.





If you can tear yourself away from the masterpieces above – or at least when you've got a sore neck – pay attention to the masterpieces below. The most exquisite psalters were accomplished by two famous illustrators summoned from northern Italy between 1466 and 1478 and later carried on by other Sienese illuminators.

- [Piccolomini Library on Siena Opera della Metropolitana website](#)
- [Piccolomini Library on Discover Tuscany website](#)
- [Piccolomini Library on Wikipedia](#)

Biblioteca dell'Accademia Etrusca di Cortona



Inside the vast Museo dell'Accademia Etrusca e della Città di Cortona (MAEC), on the third floor above the many halls filled with precious etruscan artefacts, renaissance paintings and archaeological relics, a 17th century library with a huge wooden table in the centre, surrounded by leather arm chairs, has been the intellectual epicentre of the Etruscan Academy.


The museum has a prominent address in the 13th century Palazzo Casali, built by the family of the same name, who ruled Cortona in medieval times and used the building as residence until 1409. After 1411, the palazzo was titled Palazzo Pretorio and occupied by the city's Florentine captains. In the beginning of the 18th century, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Giangastone de' Medici, gave the top floor of the palazzo to the Accademia Etrusca.

The Etruscan Academy was founded by local academics that wanted to “spread culture through acquisition of books of erudition and science”, not only about the ancient Etruscan culture, which the name might erroneously imply. Many intellectual notabilities such as Montesquieu and Voltaire became members of the academy, which still exists today.



You can admire the library after you have been enlightened by the very interesting museum. And after all, wasn't that exactly what the founding intellectuals intended?

- [MAEC website \(in Italian\)](#)
- [MAEC on Facebook](#)
- [MAEC on VisitTuscany's website](#)



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