

Arezzo

The city of Arezzo lies south of Florence in eastern Tuscany. Its origins go back to remote antiquity. It was one of the most important of the 12 cities of the Etruscans, and later became a Roman stronghold because of its position guarding the Appennine passes and dominating the upper and middle valleys of the Arno., the upper course of the Tiber and, to the south, the Valdichiana and the road to Rome.

From early times it was an important economic centre, rich in architectural monuments, among them the Roman Amphitheatre (see picture), of which important fragments survive. It was famous for its metal workers and for the craftsmen artists who produced red glazed vases ("corallini") by a technique which spread throughout the whole Roman world. After a period of ecclesiastical rule, Arezzo became a powerful free community, in which the ruling party was frequently the Ghibellines whose rivals were the Guephs, the rulers of the powerful city of Florence. After the Guelphs routed the Ghibellines at Campaldino (1289), near Poppi, the fortunes of Arezzo declined, and in spite of a recovery under the Tarlati, the city finally surrendered to Florence (1384). In 1535 it was incorporated, with the rest of Tuscany, into the Medici Grand Duchy.

The site of the battlefield of Campaldino, marked by a modern monument, is on the banks of the upper Arno, in the Casentino near Poppi, and easily reached from Arezzo. Arezzo is set on a hillside on the edge of a plain formed by inundations of the Arno. The Cathedral and the Medici Fortress stand on the hilltop, from which the main streets fan out towards the city gates on the plain below. The upper quarter of the city retains a distinctly medieval aspect. The lower city towards the plain has a lively modern atmosphere.

Arezzo is largely frequented by visitors interested in its typical economical and cultural aspects: a world-famous and internationally well-known gold and clothing industry, handicraft and the International Poliphonic Competition "Guido d'Arezzo".

Its geographical position, speedy connections with the national railway and high-road net together with the modern structures of a "Commerce and Meeting Center" make Arezzo an ideal town for Assemblings on the Work and Study Sector.

The Cathedral (see picture), built between the late 13th and the early 16th centuries, is one of the city's most famous architectural monuments. This delicate yet austere example of Tuscan Gothic contains valuable works of art, among them a "Magdalene" by Piero della Francesca and stained glass windows by Guglielmo de Marcillat.

Santa Maria della Pieve (12th and 13th centuries) is the largest and most beautiful romanesque church in the Arezzo region and certainly the most characteristic that sprang up in the city during the period of its independence, its tower of "a hundred holes" (so called its many double mullioned windows) is the emblem of Arezzo.

The sumptuous decoration of the façade and the apse, is tempered by the prevailing severity of the spacious interior. Behind the church is the Piazza Grande where on the first Sunday of September every year is held the Joust of the Saracen (Giostra del Saracino) (see picture), in which mounted knights representing the four districts of the city tilt at the wooden effigy of a Turk. Here also there is an antique fair on the first Sunday of every month. Because of its profusion of styles, this square has been called an architectural

anthology, and it is certainly one of the most picturesque squares in Italy. Two sides are occupied by medieval houses and towers, partly restored. The rest of the square is dominated by the rear elevation of the church and the Palazzetto della Fraternita (14th-15th-16th centuries), the palace of a lay fraternity, on the third side; and the impressive mass of the pillared Loggiato del Vasari on the fourth side.

In the Basilica of San Francesco are preserved Piero della Francesca's frescoes (see picture) of the Story of the Cross (dating from 1452). Like Masaccio, Paolo Uccello, Luca Signorelli, Michelangelo, Sansovino and Vasari, to mention only painters and sculptors, Piero della Francesca was a native of the Arezzo region. He was born at San Sepolcro.

His frescoes are a lodestone for those who see Renaissance civilisation as one of the great achievements of the human spirit.

The material in the Archeological Museum is rich and varied. It includes notable numismatic collections, Etruscan and Greek vases, sculptured and, above all, the "corallini" vases already mentioned, the latter the product of an industry which flourished in the late Republican and early Imperial Roman periods. In the Medioeval and Modern Gallery and Museum the major Aretine artists are represented, from Margheritone to Spinello, Signorelli and Giorgio Vasari, and there are excellent examples of other Italian and foreign schools up to the 20th century. In addition to the sculptures, paintings and collections of ivories, goldsmith's work, seals and coins, there are extremely rich collections of majolica which rank among the most important of Italy.

The beauty of other civic monuments testifies to the ancient civilisation of Arezzo and to the city's importance in various historical epochs: the City gates, the Church of San Domenico (with a magnificent Crucifixion by Cimabue), the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie (notable for its beautiful Renaissance portico) and the Renaissance churches of Santa Maria in Gradi and Santissima Annunziata.

