

The sliver of Rome that stretches across the Caelian Hill between the Basilica of St. John Lateran and the Colosseum is as historically significant as it is chaotic—a cacophony of whirring mopeds and rattling Fiats rumbling past tourists streaming between archeological treasures and locals going about their daily business. Yet amid all this confusion, tucked inside the massive summit fortress of Santi Quattro

Coronati, is a virtual oasis of tranquility where contemplative Augustinian sisters pray and study in a secluded garden bathed in glorious sunshine. Gentle breezes carry the scent of fresh blossoms through the arches of an adjacent cloister; the noise outside is displaced by chirping birds and the gentle hum of Gregorian chant.

# Oasis of Tranquility

Tucked within Rome's  
monastery of Santi  
Quattro Coronati,  
just steps from the  
Colosseum, a 900-year-  
old convent cloister  
blooms again.

by BARBIE LATZA NADEAU

Over the centuries, the monastery of Santi Quattro Coronati has endured wars and the ravages of time and nature. And, like other architectural masterpieces on the Caelian Hill, this meditative paradise could have just as easily become a ruin had it not been for the fierce determination of the sisters who live there and the dedicated team of architects and conservators charged with arresting its decay.

Construction of Santi Quattro Coronati began in the mid-sixth century at which time a basilica was built atop the remains of a lavish Imperial-age villa that had graced the Caelian Hill's northern summit. During the reign of Pope Leo IV (r. 847-855), the basilica was rebuilt and several chapels were added while a crypt was dug beneath its nave. Other additions included a 22-meter bell tower and a *quadriportico* with pillars and columns, originally adorned with frescoes. When the Normans sacked Rome in 1084, the basilica was burned to the ground, reduced to fragments of pillars and arches that once supported its mighty walls. In the century that followed, a much smaller version of the original basilica was erected, incorporating remnants salvaged from the original structure, while several chapels and giant halls were also built on the site.

During the first quarter of the thirteenth century, a Gothic-styled cloister was tucked in among the buildings, unifying the complex both artisti-











**OPENING SPREAD AND ABOVE, RADICAL MEASURES TAKEN TO LIMIT MOISTURE EXPOSURE AND ARREST DECAY ARE FAR FROM NOTICEABLE IN SANTI QUATTRO CORONATI'S NEWLY RESTORED AND LANDSCAPED CLOISTER. BELOW, THE ENTRANCE AND BELL TOWER OF THE MONASTERY COMPLEX.**



cally and logistically by connecting the basilica to the various architectural elements.

For all of its tranquility, Santi Quattro Coronati is steeped in its own local lore. Named for four Christian soldiers martyred under Diocletian (r. 284-305) for refusing to make offerings to the Pagan god Asclepius, nine saints are honored as patrons of the church—the latter five were sculptors who died under the same emperor for refusing to sculpt a statue of the same deity. Due to its proximity to St. John Lateran, Rome's patriarchal cathedral during the Middle Ages, papal processions once passed by Santi Quattro Coronati, with some popes taking refuge within the complex to escape an angry populace. The church is also associated with the mysterious Pope Joan, or the Papessa Giovanna, who, according to legend, was elected Pope John VIII, only to give birth to an illegitimate child on the way to the papal crowning—the story, the nuns say, is absolute nonsense.

Santi Quattro Coronati is among the first monastery complexes in Rome to be decorated in the Cosmatesque style, which takes its name from the Cosmati, a family of masons who in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries advanced a new style of *opus sectile* or cut work, which involved crafting mosaics and inlaid marble designs out of stone salvaged from ancient buildings. The cloister itself is thought



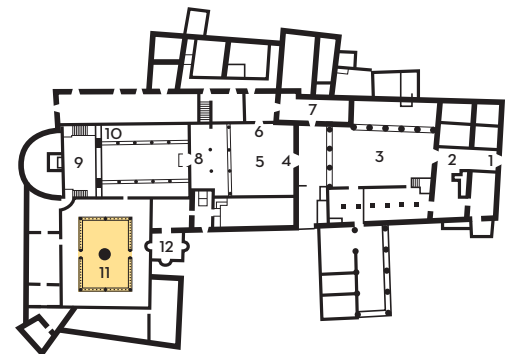
to be the work of Pietro de Maria, a Roman stonecutter. Today, local stonecutters, or *marmorari*, of which there are very few left, meet each November 8 in Santi Quattro's chapel of St. Sylvester to pray for inspiration.

It was during the papacy of Pius IV (1559-1665) that Santi Quattro Coronati was entrusted to the Augustinian nuns in whose care it remains. Under their stewardship, the complex served as an orphanage for girls, a role it maintained until the nineteenth century. Since then, the Augustinian sisters have continued helping Rome's neediest by operating a soup kitchen out of the complex's western gate.

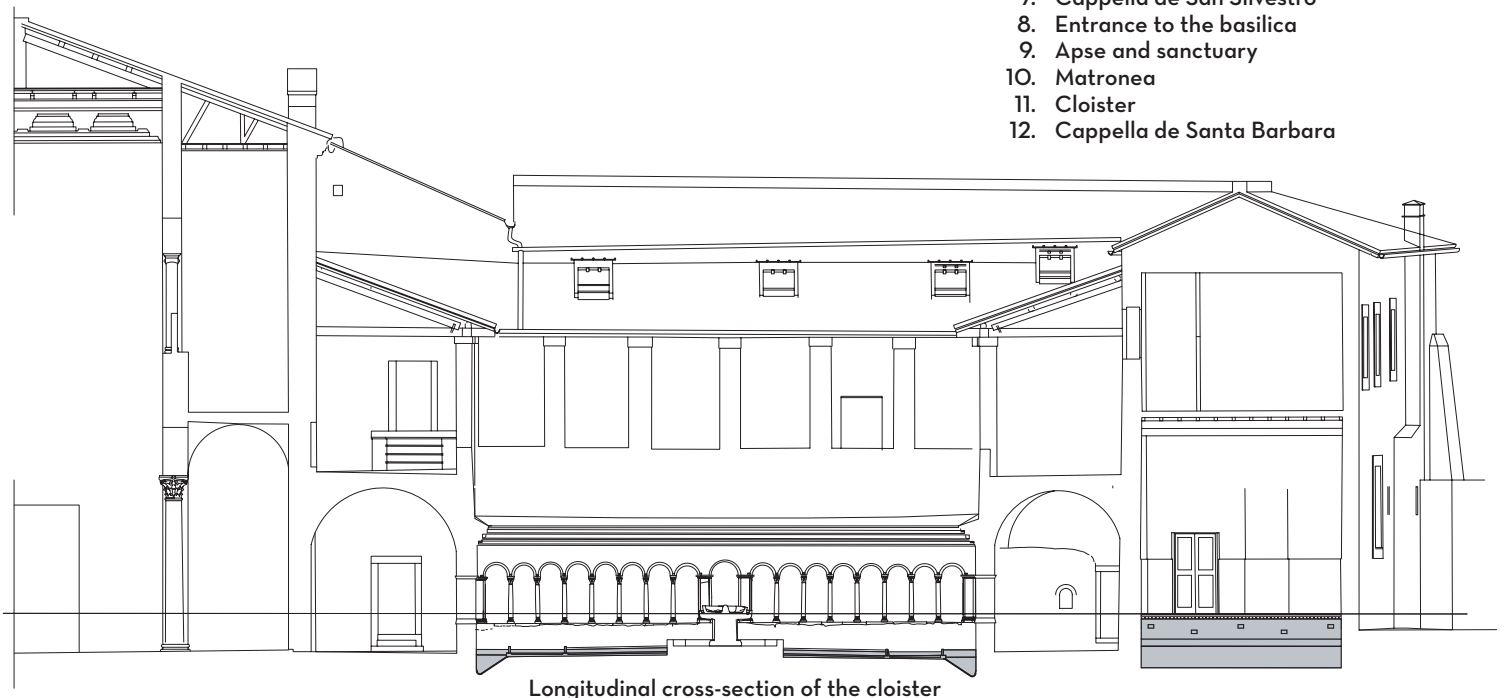
To appreciate the significance of Santi Quattro Coronati, it is vital to understand the grave threat the site recently faced.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Antonio Muñoz, at that time the local superintendent for monuments, carried out an exemplary restoration of the cloister, one that raised the bar in the history of Italian conservation. In addition, Muñoz collected some 300 artifacts during the restoration project, including notable funerary inscriptions, stones carved with poetry by Pope Damasus, and sculpture dating from the Roman period through the Middle Ages, which he had affixed to the cloister's perimeter walls. Among the most important finds he recovered was an eleventh-century marble *cantharus*, or fountain for ablutions, which still graces the center of the cloister garden today.

Despite Muñoz's careful work, it was not to last. By the late 1990s, Santi Quattro was again at risk, when moisture from humidity and unchecked pollution had begun to destroy the inner walls, particularly those of the cloister. The sisters complained of foul air; the stench of mildew growing out of the walls was so vile that tourists and pilgrims could barely stomach a visit. The culprit was, in fact, water that ran off from the roofs of the convent and basilica into a Roman cistern in the cloister's garden. Water from this buried cistern in the hillside and old Roman sewers made it almost impossible to avoid the persistent damp that clung to the columns and pillars in the cloister. Moisture from the hill was literally rotting the building from the inside out. To make matters worse, the



1. Gate
2. Romanesque belltower
3. Outer courtyard
4. Original entrance to the church
5. Inner courtyard
6. Entrance to Cappella de San Silvestro
7. Cappella de San Silvestro
8. Entrance to the basilica
9. Apse and sanctuary
10. Matronea
11. Cloister
12. Cappella de Santa Barbara



Longitudinal cross-section of the cloister









**FACING PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: AN ELEVENTH-CENTURY FOUNTAIN GRACES THE NEWLY RESTORED CLOISTER, WHILE ARCHAEOLOGICAL FRAGMENTS COLLECTED DURING A RESTORATION IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY ADORN THE CLOISTER'S INNER WALLS; THE ENTRANCE TO THE CHAPEL OF ST. SYLVESTER. THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ARCHAEOLOGISTS HAD TO EXCAVATE THE ENTIRE CLOISTER TO REACH MORE ANCIENT CISTERNS AND WATERWORKS, THE PRIMARY SOURCE OF DAMAGING MOISTURE, EVIDENT IN A COSMATI FRIEZE SURROUNDING THE COURTYARD. CONSERVATORS REMOVED MASONRY TO INSTALL TIE BEAMS.**



soot from traffic pollution settled on the site like a blanket, resulting in the medieval columns and walls being coated with a wet slime-like grit.

Because the site is operated as a religious entity, the city all but turned its back on its plight, and it was nowhere on the Vatican's list of priorities. Not to be deterred, the artful sisters of St. Augustine lobbied for Vatican attention and got it, piquing the interest of Roger Mahony, Archbishop of Los Angeles, who helped them secure funds to carry out a conditions assessment from the LA-based Getty Grant Program and the Italian company Sparaco Spartaco SpA in 1997. The complexity of the site's conservation problems also garnered the attention of one of Rome's leading restoration architects, Giovanni Carbonara, director of the University of Rome's "La Sapienza" school of monument restoration, "We looked at this not just as something we could fix," he says, "but as an opportunity to be a part of the history of Santi Quattro Coronati and, as such, of Rome."

Realizing that a full restoration of the site, including the cloister, would require substantial technical expertise and could cost millions, Carbonara, with Mahoney and the sisters, brought Santi Quattro Coronati to the attention of the World Monuments Fund, which included the cloister on its 2000 list of *100 Most Endangered Sites*. Following Watch listing, WMF was able to raise more than \$800,000 for the restoration of the cloister—the most heavily damaged portion of the complex—through its Robert W. Wilson Challenge to Conserve our Heritage, the Antiqua Foundation, and the Agnus Noster Foundation, funds that were







**PRIOR TO RESTORATION, WATER DAMAGE WAS EVIDENT IN THE FLOOR AND WALLS OF THE ARCADE SURROUNDING THE CLOISTER, ABOVE. BEFORE CONSERVATION BEGAN, ARCHAEOLOGISTS CLEANED ARTIFACTS CAREFULLY EXCAVATED FROM THE THIRTEENTH-CENTURY CLOISTER.**

complemented by support from Sparaco Spartaco SpA and the Provincia di Roma.

With funding in place to begin restoration of the cloister, Carbonara embarked on solving the unique problems presented by Santi Quattro Coronati. Not only did his team have to evaluate the site's physical vulnerabilities and water damage, but they also had to consider its historical, iconographical, symbolic, and spiritual aspects. Beyond conservation issues Carbonara and his team worked according to the stringent regulations set forth by the Italian government regarding the type of work that could be done, which materials could be used, and what sort of equipment was allowed, as well as accommodate the nuns' prayer schedule.

Careful excavations were carried out to determine the extent of the water damage and to evaluate various methods of drying out the area around the cloister. Structural engineers, chemists, and microbiologists were called in to help determine the least invasive approach to conservation and eventually restoration. It was also important to decipher the basic differences between damage wrought by previous attempts at

restoration and by the passage of time.

By the time the actual restoration began in 2000, the site had been studied and evaluated and tested to such an extent that volumes of significant information were archived, not just for future restorers, but for art historians and archaeologists. "Never before have we done this type of multi-disciplinary work in Rome," Carbonara says, adding that this research has become an integral part of his teaching material.

Test lasers were used extensively to clean the layers of pollution or "black crusts" off the structure. When the cleaning process left the original surface "too new" or removed the marks of natural oxidation from the stones, artists were brought in to re-create the exact hues and match the cleaned surfaces to the originals. "Restoration is a measured discipline," says Carbonara, noting that







one cannot always see the immediate results. “It is, in many ways, like an aged wine. A true restoration cannot be done quickly and its effects may not be seen for years to come.”

In addition to the aesthetic considerations of the site, Carbonara’s team was also careful to assess the risk of bringing in equipment to carry out the restoration and minimize any damage that might be caused by the installation of ventilation and electrical systems. Where new wiring had to be laid, ancient floor tiles were removed, numbered, and re-set rather than replaced. And where the ventilation system had to be integrated into the structure to keep the walls dry, it was designed to blend seamlessly into the surfaces. Many aspects of the overall restoration of the cloister are hardly visible except for the noted absence of damp, which Carbonara views as a success. “An ancient structure is a part of living history. We don’t want to cancel out its history, or erase its past, just grant it a reprieve for the foreseeable future.”

For Carbonara and those conservators who worked to arrest the further decay of the cloister, the case of Santi Quattro Coronati is a true success story. Not only did they save the site, but they were able to do so through the generosity of private donors, thereby avoiding so much of the governmental red tape that governs preservation in Rome. More important, the research gathered in the restoration process will prove invaluable to conservators as they complete restoration of the cloister and carry out much-needed work on the rest of the monastery complex. “With luck,” says Carbonara. “Italy’s private sector might learn a thing or two from our project, ensuring a brighter future for the rest of the monastery complex as well as many more of the city’s extraordinary architectural treasures.” ■

**A MASS CELEBRATING THE CONSERVATION WORK IN THE GARDEN OF THE CLOISTER WAS HELD IN SANTI QUATTRO CORONATI'S BASILICA THIS PAST MAY.**