



# Historic Centre Of Urbino PART I

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**U**rbino is a picturesque university town nestled in the foothills of the Northern Apennine Mountains within Italy's Marche region. It often escapes the notice of tourists. Urbino was established by the Umbrians, an ancient Italian people, in the third century BC. Located 120 miles northwest of Florence, Urbino is the capital of the Pesaro-Urbino Province. The remote hill town is located between the valleys of the Metauro and Foglia rivers. It is perched upon two hills and offers breathtaking views across lush rolling hills to the Apennine Mountains beyond. Situated 1,650 feet above sea level, the town is home to 24,000 residents, most of whom are students at the local university. A medieval wall with four gates surrounds the town, and two main roads intersect at the town's main square, Piazza della Repubblica. Urbino is renowned as the hometown of the artist Raphael and architect Donato Bramante. It owes much of its fame to the Duke of Montefeltro, the mercenary general who transformed Urbino into an important Renaissance center.

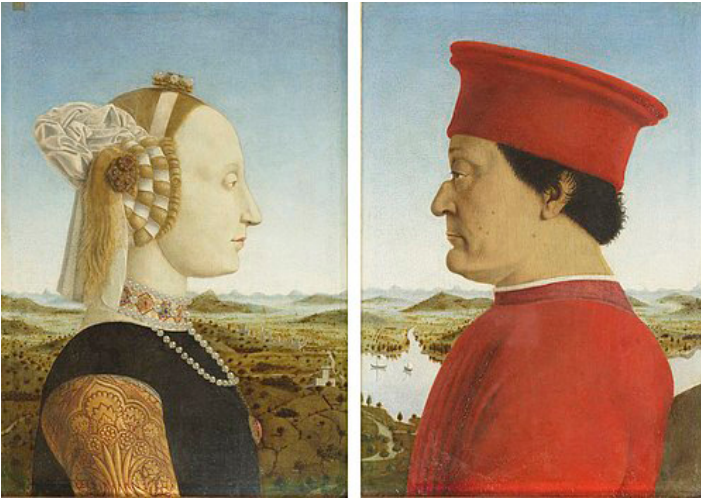
During the 15th century, the Historic Centre of Urbino experienced notable growth, emerging as a crucial player in the Renaissance movement. Urbino earned reverence for its pivotal role in the Italian Renaissance and its profound architectural and

cultural contributions, elevating it from a modest village to the esteemed status of the "cradle of the Renaissance." Urbino was recognized as a hub for Renaissance scholars and artists. It was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1998, commemorating its significance in shaping the artistic and cultural landscape of Renaissance Italy. Urbino's charm lies in its well-preserved 15th-century architecture and artworks, surrounded by Renaissance walls. The town's UNESCO World Heritage Site status is enhanced by its unique layout, with distinct upper and lower sections highlighting its cultural significance.

## HISTORY OF URBINO

The foundation of Urbino dates back to ancient times. The Umbro-Picene populations originally inhabited these lands and likely established a village here. Although limited evidence remains from this time, the city's origins can be observed in the well-preserved fortified walls that date back to the Roman era. Urbino was initially a modest Roman settlement called *Urbinum Mataurense*, meaning 'the little city on the River Metaurus.' This small settlement was officially established as a municipality in 46 BC due to its strategically important location.





Piero della Francesca's portraits of Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza is one of the iconic works of the Renaissance.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, Urbino, like many other cities in central Italy, was conquered by various groups. First, it was occupied by the Goths, then by the Byzantines, who took it by force. It then became a battleground for the Lombards, and so on, until Charlemagne's famous descent into Italy, when his mighty army brought most of the peninsula under his rule.

Urbino was given to the Church of Rome in the eighth century. However, the papal rule was more nominal than effective, evidenced by the fact that Urbino, at least initially, was a city openly supporting the Ghibellines (in favor of the empire).

In 1150, Frederick Barbarossa granted the title of Imperial Vicar over Urbino to his loyal vassal Antonio da Montefeltro for services rendered to the crown. From then on, the Montefeltro dynasty dominated the city for several centuries, experiencing both successes and setbacks. Some of the most famous rulers of the city included Guido il Vecchio, whom Dante famously depicted as a fraudulent advisor suffering in hell; Federico, who was killed during a popular uprising in 1323, temporarily ending the Montefeltro dynasty and allowing the Albornoz family, loyal to the Pope, to take over; Antonio II and Guidoantonio di Montefeltro, who later reconquered the city, expanded its boundaries, and transformed it into a hub of culture and economic progress.

In 1443, upon Guidoantonio's death, his son Oddantonio di Montefeltro succeeded him and was granted the title of Duke of Urbino by Pope Eugene IV. Unfortunately, due to his young age (he was only 17) and the influence of bad advisors, he became involved in unclear affairs, raised taxes, and oppressed the people of Urbino. These policies led to a rebellion, which resulted in Oddantonio's assassination.

The narrative surrounding the Dukes of Urbino took a dramatic turn, resembling a soap opera. The city lacked a strong leader and was under the looming threat of invasion by the Malatesta family from Rimini. In a bid to safeguard their city, Urbino turned to Federico Montefeltro, the half-brother of the assassinated Oddantonio, despite suspicions of his involvement in the murder.

Piero della Francesca's portraits of Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza is one of the iconic works of the Renaissance.

Federico da Montefeltro of Urbino was the illegitimate son of a former ruler. He became famous as a mercenary warrior leader known for his strategic skills in leading private armies to victory for the highest bidder. Federico amassed wealth as a soldier-for-hire with his own private army, participating in various battles, such as fighting for Florence against the Pope and then for the Pope against Florence. During his military career, he lost an eye and part of his nose in action, leading to his portrayal only in profile, showing his relatively good side. After becoming Duke, Federico expanded the Duchy. Leveraging his military expertise, Federico seized the opportunity to fortify Urbino's borders through diplomatic maneuvers and military actions, turning it into an Italian power. He amassed a fortune and retired to a life of a scholar and gentleman. Federico dedicated himself to scholarly pursuits, including the study of Latin and the collection of manuscripts, while also renovating the Palace. His ambitious goal was to elevate Urbino into a cultural hub rivaling Florence. This transformation, perhaps driven by a desire to legitimize his rule and assuage doubts about his past, solidified Urbino's status as a center of Renaissance culture and intellectual achievement. Federico's vision for Urbino centered around the Ducal Palace, which was to become a haven for the arts, attracting prominent figures of the era to this remote location in the Marche region. One visitor, Baldassare Castiglione, wrote a book about life here under Federico's son that became a classic profile of the enlightened Renaissance ruler: *The Courtier*.

During Duke Federico's patronage from 1444 to 1482, Urbino flourished as a prominent artistic center, experiencing a period of creative excellence. In those golden years, Urbino acquired the artistic excellence that allowed it to extend its influence to the rest of Europe. The city became a magnificent princely court, hosting the best that Italian Renaissance humanist culture had to offer at that time. He elevated the town into a Renaissance hub, fostering the development of fine art, learning, and architecture. Federico's influence positioned him as a critical figure in the Renaissance, second only to Lorenzo de' Medici.

Duke Federico da Montefeltro orchestrated a gathering of his era's most talented painters, writers, poets, and scholars within the walls of the Ducal Palace. Notable figures such as Baldassare Castiglione, author of *The Book of the Courtier*, and Piero della Francesca, renowned artists, contributed to Urbino's cultural Renaissance during this period. Giovanni Santi, Raphael's father, served as the court painter, further enriching Urbino's artistic legacy. Esteemed humanists, including Leone Battista Alberti, Marsilio Ficino, and Giovanni Bessarione, as well as mathematicians like Paul van Middelburg and Luca Pacioli, were also part of the vibrant intellectual milieu at the court of Duke Federico.

Urbino is also the birthplace of renowned artists Bramante and Raphael and one of Europe's oldest and most esteemed University of Studies, founded in 1506. These factors emphasize Urbino's significance in the arts and education.

However, in 1502, Urbino was seized by one of the most notorious figures in Italian Renaissance history: Cesare Borgia, the son of Pope Alexander VI. Together, they amassed a massive army intending to attack the Duchy of Milan, ruled by Ludovico il Moro. Their ambitions did not end there, as they expanded their influence throughout the peninsula, sparking the Italian War.

The war ended with Pope Alexander VI's death and the papal state renouncing its claims. Guidobaldo Montefeltro defended the Duchy with intelligence and valor, but unfortunately, he died without an heir. In his final years, he had the good fortune to host the renowned painter Raffaello Sanzio at his court. After his death, the Della Rovere family took over and managed to rebuild the city from the ruins of the war, but they did not take a particular interest in the city. Eventually, they moved the court to Pesaro, marking the town's decline. In 1626, the dukedom and its cities became part of the Papal States.

Urbino saw a resurgence in artistic and cultural glory in 1701, when Clement XI, a native of Urbino, became Pope and sponsored the renovation of several buildings in the city. However, this period of prosperity ended with the arrival of Napoleon's French forces at the close of the century. The city's fate hung in the balance during this tumultuous time. Ultimately, in 1860, Urbino was annexed to the Kingdom of Italy, marking a significant turning point in its history. Since then, Urbino has been an integral part of Italy, sharing in the nation's history and developments over the years.

## **HISTORIC CENTRE OF URBINO**

The historic center of Urbino is remarkably compact and features many beautiful honey-colored buildings that resemble fairytale kingdoms. It has castles,

towers, domes, winding alleyways, and breathtaking views of the surrounding area. The area also houses several buildings of exceptional quality, including the Ducal Palace, the Cathedral, the Monastery of Santa Chiara, and a network of oratories. The city's origins can be traced back to a Roman settlement on the hill where the Ducal Palace now stands. In the 11th century, as the city began to expand, new defensive walls were erected to accommodate its growth. The Alborno fortress was constructed in the 14th century; during the mid-15th century, Federico da Montefeltro expanded the city to a second hill to the north, resulting in an elongated outline enclosed by Renaissance walls. The historic town is distinct from the modern residential area, which developed outside the walls. Urbino's landmark center maintains a medieval charm and coherence, featuring a harmonious blend of medieval and Renaissance architecture.

## **THE DUCAL PALACE**



**The Palazzo Ducale** is Urbino's crown jewel. Commissioned by Federico da Montefeltro in 1470, this magnificent Palace served as Duke Federico's residence. The Palace continues to stand as a poignant tribute to this influential figure of the Renaissance. It was renowned as one of the most opulent palaces in central Italy and is one of the best examples of Italian Renaissance architecture. The Ducal Palace boasts notable features such as its twin towers, known as the Torricini, and a breathtaking courtyard that captivates visitors with its beauty. The iconic arched courtyard, located at the heart of the palace, was one of the first of its kind and served as a focal point, leading out into several stunning rooms spread across three floors.



## POINTS OF INTEREST- DUCAL PALACE OF URBINO



The Ducal Palace has been home to the esteemed National Gallery on the first and second floors since 1861. The collection is considered one of Italy's most valuable art collections, encompassing works from the 15th to the 18th century, including paintings, sculptures, ceramics, coins, drawings, and furniture. The National Gallery's most notable works include Piero della Francesca's Flagellation and Madonna of Senigallia, Raphael's Portrait of a Gentlewoman (La Muta) and Saint Catherine of Alexandria, Luca Signorelli's Pentecost and Crucifixion, and Titian's Last Supper and Resurrection. On the ground floor, visitors can explore the Archaeological Museum and collections of drawings, engravings, ceramics, and majolica from the 15th and 16th centuries. Notably, an unknown artist's mysterious painting of the Ideal City is also displayed, often used by art designers to illustrate books on the Renaissance.

**The Ducal Stables** were designed to accommodate up to 300 horses and, along with the Helical Ramp, were constructed as an extension of the Ducal Palace.



Urbino is characterized by its steep, vertical layout and narrow streets. In the 15th century, Duke Federico had a bastion constructed at the base of the Torricini of the Ducal Palace, complete with gun ports and helical ramps for defense. The semi-cylindrical spiral ramp allowed the duke to reach the stables from the Palace easily. These stairs also connect the Market area to the Theatre at the base and the Torricini (Towers) to the Ducal Palace. After neglect, the stables and ramp have been renovated in recent years.



**The Duke's Studio** is the most unusual room in the Palace. His tiny study is a square with a decorative pilaster against one wall, creating two niches on either side of it. The wood inlay walls used here are so precise that they make a fully immersive illusion of depth, landscape, and architecture, some of which are based on designs by Botticelli. Following the Vatican's, his library had the second-largest collection of books in Italy, and he made it accessible to all citizens of Urbino, making it the first public library in Italy. The Palace was completed in 1472 under the supervision of Francesco di Giorgio Martini. The Palazzo Ducale remains a testament to the ingenuity and craftsmanship of the Renaissance era. Its enduring legacy is a colossal, imposing structure characterized by geometric perfection. It symbolizes the harmonious integration of power and beauty inherent in Renaissance ideals, reflecting Federico's desire to underscore both his military prowess and the elegance of his court.

**The Sanzio Theatre** was erected in 1637 on the ground floor of the Ducal Palace, situated along the right side of the courtyard of honor. Despite a 1723 expansion, the theater remained small and uncomfortable, accommodating only 240 seats.

It served as a cultural hub until 1879, when it was demolished in 1881 to make way for 19th-century opera and music performances, necessitating more space to meet evolving technical and logistical requirements. The new Sanzio Theater was constructed in 1853 by architect Vincenzo Ghinelli and funded by the Municipality. Theater activity ceased after World War II and remained inactive for 34 years. It was reopened on November 15, 1982, following restoration by Giancarlo De Carlo.

