

The Galleria Vittorio Emanuele Secondo arcade was built in Milan about twenty years before the construction of the Eiffel tower. In the form of a Latin cross, the arcade has four arms arranged around a central octagon: the two longer arms link piazza del Duomo with Piazza della Scala, while the two shorter arms lead to two smaller side roads. The construction was assigned to Giuseppe Mengoni, winner of a contest set up by the Milan city council. Unfortunately the engineer died when he fell from scaffolding the eve of the inauguration on the 30<sup>th</sup> of December 1877, and this is recalled by a plaque that can still be seen on the left hand column of the triumphal archway facing the piazza del Duomo.

This was the period of the Belle Epoque, and below the airy iron and glass vaulted roof, the arcade immediately became the setting for the most expensive shops, the best book stores, the most fashionable cafés and restaurants. The ladies wore hats of the latest fashion and it became the salon for the musical and literary world, and walking back and forth you could see those singers whom the Milanese began to call Gigioni, with a certain dose of disdain, coining a word that soon become well known throughout Italy. These were the singers in search of a role, who, puffing out their chests, rehearse by singing opera aria, hoping to attract the attention of one of the producers sitting at a table at the Gambrinus or Campari café...

Even today it is still considered one of the elegant places to be seen in Milan, and the turn of the century atmosphere still floats in the air. Even though only the Camparino, on the left hand side of the archway has maintained the original mosaics and interior furnishings, the other stores have kept the former Liberty shop signs, painted in gold on a black background. The gallery is full of the eclectic Milanese style of the end of the century, laden with friezes, caryatids sphinxes and lunettes.

On the tops of the columns in the large central octagon, set under a glass dome that reaches a height of 47 metres, there are gigantic mosaic lunettes allegorically depicting four continents: Africa, Asia, Europe and America. The floor in the centre of the octagon shows the royal coat of arms of the Savoia family, surrounded by the emblems of four Italian cities: the she-wolf of Rome, the lily of Florence, the crossed shield of Milan and the bull of Turin. Legend has it that it was the unfortunate Mengoni himself, who decided to have the bull designed with unusually large endowments, giving rise to a traditional rite that supposedly will remove bad luck.

All the flooring was badly damaged by bombing during the Second World War, and when the restoration work was finished in 1967, the Milanese discovered to their disappointment that the bull no longer possessed his former good luck charms. In spite of this, people still place their right heel in the lucky place and turn three times around, but,...although good luck is not guaranteed- you can be certain it will make your head spin...!