

Santa Maria in Cappella



Santa Maria in Cappella is an 11th century hospice church, heavily restored, in eastern Trastevere, just to the west of the Lungotevere Ripa. The dedication is to the Blessed Virgin Mary, under the aspect of her Immaculate Conception.

History

The church was consecrated about 1090, as witnessed by an epigraph tablet preserved inside the entrance, and back then had the dedication of Santa Maria della Pigna ("Our Lady of the Pine Tree"). This seems to indicate that the founder was somebody called Damasus, who asks Christ for life after death after giving a list of relics put in the church. His patrons were two bishops, Ubald of Sabina and John of Tusculum. The

relics included items from the clothes of Our Lady, also "SS Peter, Cornelius the Pope, Callixtus the Pope, Felix the Pope, Hippolytus the Martyr, Anastasius the Martyr, Felix and Marmenia the Martyr". The discovery of some of these under the high altar during the restoration has raised some excitement - especially as regards "Peter".

More details should arise concerning the church's early history when the recent archaeological investigations under it are (hopefully) written up. However, it is already clear that the edifice stood on the site of structures of about AD 400, some remains of which are being left on view in the right hand aisle after the restoration is completed.

It seems that the present layout of a central nave with side aisles is original.

The church is not well recorded in the Middle Ages apart from church lists, but was presumably used by the merchant community attached to the river port nearby. The later hospital had a cemetery attached, which indicates that the church had been parochial beforehand, but this seems to be the only evidence that it ever was.

In 1391 the church was restored and attached to the Hospital of the Holy Saviour (Ospedale di Santissimo Salvatore), which was for poor people in the eastern part of Trastevere. The latter had been founded by one Andreozzo Ponzio, father-in-law of St Frances of Rome. The saint took an interest in the project, and the hospital was staffed by her disciples from 1401. They became the Benedictine oblate community of Santa Maria Annunziata a Tor de'Specchi, and were in possession by 1440. So, the church functioned as a hospital chapel for the next hundred years.

Something went seriously wrong in the earlier part of the 16th century, possibly owing to the Sack of Rome in 1527. The hospital was shut down, and the church became derelict. Then, in 1550 the hospital was suppressed as an institution and the church taken over by the Confraternita dei Bottai (Guild of Coopers), the makers of wooden barrels. They restored it again, and it is fairly clear that they abandoned the side aisles by walling up the colonnades and so left the edifice as a single nave. An odd reference indicates that the desecrated left hand side aisle was being used as a hay-barn. Some sort of confraternity headquarters must also have been provided, by restoring or rebuilding at least part of the old hospital.

The name Cappella is a puzzle which might be owing to the coopers. It means "chapel" nowadays, and the simplest theory is that the church was founded on the site of one. One alternative circumstantial theory is that the name is derived from the Latin word *cupa* meaning "cask" or "barrel". *Cupella* would then be a small barrel.

The Confraternita gave up on the complex by the early 17th century. The complex then formed a hospice for pilgrims from Bohemia, with a patron in Cardinal Giangarzia Mellini. The foundation was before 1629, because the cardinal died in that year. Despite some further recorded patronage, this venture failed too.

Then a garden next to the church was turned into a riverside playground, the Casino del Belvedere, in the 17th century by Donna Olimpia Pamphilj (1591-1657). She was the sister-in-law of Pope Innocent X. The purchase of the property involved the Doria Pamphilj family also buying the freehold of the church in 1653. They seem to have restored it with a Baroque façade to match the new villa next door.

The 1748 Nolli map shows the edifice as having a single nave, without aisles.

In 1797, the church was leased to the Sodalizio dei Mariani di Ripa e Ripetta, a guild of riverboatmen which oversaw another restoration.

In 1857 the family decided that a nursing home for the elderly was more needed in the area than a private pleasure garden, and so founded one. This was first such institution in Rome, and still functions as such today. It is administered by the Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul from 1858, and is now known as

the Casa di Riposo Francesca Romana. The re-founding of the hospice included the drastic restoration of the church by Andrea Busiri Vici, which was completed structurally in 1875 although the dedicatory epigraph recording it gives the date 1892. The work involved the unblocking of the nave colonnades and the restoration of the side aisles.

The garden was preserved, attached to the nursing home, and counted as one of the largest private gardens in the Centro Storico since the Doria Pamphij family remained in possession of the complex.

Unfortunately, the church edifice failed structurally in 1982 and so had to be closed down. Because it is owned privately, funding a restoration proved a problem and so the building was basically abandoned for twenty-seven years.

From 2008, part of the hospice complex was being operated as a student hall of residence.

Museum

The much-needed restoration was begun in 2011, and was approaching completion in 2017. In March of that year, the church and part of the Ospedale were opened to the public as the Museo di Santa Maria in Cappella. Visitors may also enter the garden, and view its spectacular Baroque architectural setting.

Music concerts in the church are being advertised online.

Exterior

The church has a short nave of four bays with side aisles, having pitched and tiled roofs. There is an additional shallower entrance bay, which is structurally integral with the nave although it is not part of the interior space.

The central nave upper walls have four round-headed windows on each side, but the church is abutted by neighbouring buildings and so the side elevations are difficult to view. The left hand side aisle wall has three large round-headed windows and a round-headed side exit, while the right hand side aisle wall has two such exits rather than any windows although they are fenestrated.

The sanctuary has a very shallow and narrow single bay, leading into an apse with a conch of the same width. It has no windows.

The late 11th century brick campanile is attached to the church above the right hand side of the entrance bay of the central nave. There are three "storeys", a blank one reaching the height of the nave roof and then two more identical ones each of which has a pair of tall, narrow sound holes separated by a brick pilaster on each face. Apparently the interior is a single void from the ground to the bell-chamber.

Façade

The façade faces onto a large courtyard separated from the street by a wall and gate.

The fabric is a result of the 19th century restoration. The decision was apparently made in the recent restoration to conserve it without refreshing the plasterwork, although the restoration is not yet complete and so this might change.

This façade is rather misleading, as it only fronts the central nave. The actual church frontage includes the side aisles, which hide behind the very grim and plain walls on either side. These have horizontal rooflines, and do not attempt to integrate with the central composition. The right hand wall has a side entrance.

The design is simple, being mostly a blank wall covered by discolored render (some of which has fallen off and been patched) and having a large and tall round-headed window. This window intrudes into the triangular pediment, which is decorated along the cornice and gable with modillions (little corbels). It used to be thought that this decoration was mediaeval, but investigation has shown it to be later.

Between the window and the entrance door is a tympanum surrounded by a raised and gabled shallow brick porch which is dentillated along the gable and rests on a pair of limestone brackets. The tympanum has a glazed terracotta relief of the Madonna and Child between two trees, an allusion to the former name of the church Santa Maria della Pigna. It was installed in 1966.

The patched areas conceal two vertical steel tie-bars, inserted as a response to the structural problems which shut the church in the Eighties.

Depictions survive of the church before the 19th century makeover. The previous Baroque façade had four Ionic pilasters supporting the pediment, in between which were two large frescoes depicting SS Frances of Rome and Gregory the Great. Over the entrance was no porch, but a circular tondo containing a fresco of Our Lady. This tondo and the tympanum of the pediment were embellished with curlicues.

Interior

Nave

The nave is separated from its aisles by five Corinthian columns on each side, and is slightly trapezoidal with the lines of the columns diverging. There are no arcades, but instead the columns support trabeations or horizontal entablatures. The six rectangular apertures so created on each side do not relate to any structural division of the nave into bays.

The interior decoration is entirely 19th century, with the walls horizontally striped in pink and dark grey. The recent restoration has made no attempt to re-paint or "refresh" this. The side entablatures have lost what must have been stucco adornments, and so are raw.

Over the entrance is a gallery on a pair of massive corbels, with a solid stone balustrade and a wooden fretwork screen. This arrangement is thought to be 16th century. Behind this, looking towards the entrance, are the structural elements of the entrance bay. The entrance is flanked by a pair of massive longitudinally rectangular Doric engaged piers, from which spring a short barrel vault forming an entrance lobby. Above this, behind the gallery, is a similar very deep window embrasure for the large round-headed window in the façade. Flanking the entrance vault piers are two narrower portals, the left hand one (facing the sanctuary) leading to the gallery stairs and the right hand one accessing the ground floor of the tower campanile. Hence, this bay provides the support for the campanile.

The central nave roof is open, with three transverse wooden trusses supported on stone corbels. However, the side aisles are cross-vaulted with ribs, overall in blue but the ribs in yellow. The vaults cover lunettes in the tops of the walls (including over the colonnades), which contain fresco portraits of saints.

The windows were provided with stained glass in the 19th century restoration, and the surviving panels should be on display in the museum together with the church's sacred vessels.

The colonnade columns are completely mismatched, being of different sizes and lengths. The far one on the right looks like cipollino marble. The capitals on this side are ancient, but the ones on the left look as if they were re-carved in the 19th century. Apparently there is an eleventh column embedded in the right hand side wall.

Perhaps the most interesting item on display in the church is a mosaic panel with a cross which is in the entrance lobby immediately on entering, to the right. (The 11th century dedication plaque was also here, but might have been moved permanently.)

This item was provided for the opening of the Holy Door at St Peter's at the start of the Jubilee of 1625 proclaimed by Pope Urban VIII. The bees represented come from the heraldry of the Barberini family to which the pope belonged. The importance of this piece was only recognised recently. The cross itself, in marble inlay work, is by Borromini and the mosaic surround (including the bees) is by Giovanni Battista Calandra.

The church has an interesting free-standing acquasantiera or holy-water stoup, in white marble and originally consisting of three separate pieces which were apparently put together in the 19th century but date to about 1200. The base is a standing lion, on which is a short spirally ribbed Corinthian column bearing an intricately carved basin with representations of animals and fish. The column's ribs are separated by grooves which once contained Cosmatesque mosaic work -some survives.

Sanctuary

The sanctuary area intrudes into the last bay of the nave, and here is surrounded on three sides by a restored 19th century balustrade screen in white marble. This has four vertical rectangular geometric polychrome opus sectile inlay panels, flanking two larger square panels having diapered fretwork carving. The floor within this enclosure is in black and white tiles, also diapered.

The sanctuary proper is a single narrow bay, ending in an apse with a conch. The tall triumphal arch has two solid Doric pilasters, and these, the wall to either side and the archivolt are all striped in the pink and dark grey décor. The arch keystone has a chi-rho emblem. The bay of the sanctuary is barrel-vaulted, in blue with gold stars, and the arch intrados has a monogram of Our Lady.

The original 19th century altar has been replaced with a small one having a marble relief frontal showing the Lamb of God in a ring tondo and flanked by two little Corinthian columns at the corners. This item is described as having been consecrated for the church by Pope Paschal II in 1113.

The altarpiece is a 19th century white marble statue of Our Lady holding a globe and treading on a snake. This stands on top of a cylindrical aedicule in grey marble, with a cupola and a porch having four little grey marble Corinthian columns.

The apse wall has a high dado in fresco with a rosette pattern, and above this are two angels in fresco, holding ribbons stating *Sine labe concepta, Dei Mater alma*. Flanking the angels and the statue are four palm trees, and the statue itself is given a painted mandorla.

The conch of the apse depicts a jewelled cross, surrounded by ribbons bearing titles of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit: *Sapientia, Intellectus, Fortitudo, Consilium, Scientia, Pietas* and *Timor Domini*, the last under the cross as being the most important. The Dove of the Holy Spirit is above, and below are six sheep queuing up to drink from the Fountain of Life. The archivolt of the arch reads *Virgo Potens, Ora pro Nobis*.

Two interesting items of stonework are on display at the bottom right hand end of the central nave, just outside the sanctuary enclosure. A white marble Cosmatesque quincunx, which has lost all its inlay, has been set vertically and serves as a lectern. It was found in the recent restoration. A small spirally incised white marble column seems to be an Easter candlestick.

Another discovery which should be on display in the museum is a fragment of carved marble depicting a lion, which seems to be the hand-rest of a mediaeval priest's chair formerly in the apse.

Two round-headed doorways flank the triumphal arch on the other sides of the screen enclosure, and these lead to the sacristies.

Relics

Some excitement has been expressed in the media recently about the relics found under the main altar during the restoration. These are in two glazed pots sealed with lead sheeting, and on the latter were scribed the names of the saints concerned. The same names are on pieces of lead sheeting inside the pots, but written in a different hand. The names correspond with those on the 1090 consecration tablet, so it is thought that these pots date from the same time.

The major interest focuses on the name "Peter", obviously taken to be the apostle although people should remember that other early Roman saints have had this name (see Santi Marcellino e Pietro ad Duas Lauros). Despite media reports, this "Peter" is not described as a pope in the epigraph.

Side aisles

There are two side chapels at the ends of the aisles, now screened off by curtains. The left hand one is dedicated to the Passion of Christ, and the altarpiece is a 19th century Calvary which looks like a commemoration piece for the oblation of a young woman. The marble altar is modern, without a frontal, and bears the church's tabernacle. The sanctuary light is on a portable white marble Baroque lap-stand in the form of a twisted column. However, it seems that the Blessed Sacrament was not being reserved here in mid 2017.

The right hand one is dedicated to St Vincent de Paul, and the 19th century altarpiece shows him being carried into heaven on a cloud held by three female angels.

Before the 19th century restoration, these dedications were to the Nativity and to the Purification of Our Lady.

The right hand side aisle now has a void in front of the chapel altar, which is protected by a set of iron railings. This reveals 4th century foundations. Also here used to be an altar over a sarcophagus containing the alleged relics of a spurious catacomb martyr called St Aurelia.

These two aisles are now being used to display religious pictures belonging to the Ospedale, including several featuring St Frances of Rome. In the left hand aisle is an interesting one showing the Madonna and Child being venerated by SS Gregory the Great and Charles Borromeo. It was painted in 1727, and commissioned by a Spanish military officer.

Access

The church is now open to visitors, as part of the Museum of the same name. Apart from major public holidays, the Museum is open from 8:00 to 18:00 with the last entry at 17:30. The cost of a standard ticket (2017) is eight euros. The ticket pays for entry, not for a guided tour. Music concerts in the church are also being advertised online, but these are not cheap.

Liturgy

Although the Diocese continues to list this edifice as a subsidiary church in the parish of San Crisogono, it seems that it was not reconsecrated after its recent restoration. If so, strictly speaking it remains deconsecrated and so is not a public place of worship. The point is not being elucidated publicly, but it might have been privately agreed to leave the status of the edifice unchanged. Whatever, Mass is not being advertised as celebrated here.

Info:

Location:

Coord: [41°53'14.3"N 12°28'41.4"E](#)

Address:

Vicolo di Santa Maria in Cappella 6

External links

[Roman Churches Wiki](#)

[Official diocesan web-page](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

[German Wikipedia page](#)

[Museum web-page](#)

[Nolli map](#) (look for 1116) (old church, pre-19th century restoration)

["De Alvariis" gallery on Flickr](#)

[Roma SPQR web-page with gallery](#)

["Romeartlover" web-page](#)

["Roma Segreta" web-page](#)

[Blog with photo of interior](#) (scroll down)

[Roman Despatches](#) - blog with gallery

[L'Asino d'Oro web-page](#)

[Article on the Jubilee cross](#)

[Youtube video on Jubilee cross](#)