

Sant'Eligio degli Orefici



Sant'Eligio degli Orefici is a 16th century confraternity church in the rione Regola. The dedication is to [Eligius of Noyon](#), the patron of the Guild of Goldsmiths (Università degli Orefici) which owns the church.

History:

Foundation of confraternity

The goldsmiths of the city had previously been a part of the Università dei Ferrari, the Guild of Ironworkers, who had the church of Sant'Eligio dei Ferrari, but in 1509 the guild was split after an argument. The workers in precious metals did not really want to be equated with those working in base ones, and so walked out. They founded a new confraternity and acquired a property in what was then a filthy mediaeval slum, but which was about to be gentrified by the Via Giulia scheme.

The property included a little mediaeval church called Sant'Eusterio (or Austerio), but unfortunately it was in the way of the street scheme. As a result the new Confraternity was very quickly dispossessed, in 1514, and was compensated by another property near a ferry landing on the river (too close, as it turned out). As a result, they had to build a new church; the site of the old one became occupied by Santo Spirito dei Napoletani in the Via Giulia.

New church

It is considered that Raphael was commissioned by the goldsmiths to design this church soon after the split, although the historical evidence for this is slim. Antonio Muñoz and Heinrich von Geymüller published the theory in 1884, based on architectural drawings by Giovanni Sallustio Peruzzi which they found in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. These contained a note by Peruzzi, ascribing the design of the church to Raphael. This is the only evidence available. The further

inference that Raphael was influenced in this work by the style of his master Bramante (compare it for instance with the choir of Santa Maria del Popolo) lacks documentation.

Apart from his work on San Pietro in Vaticano, this is the only church in Rome that can be attributed to Raphael with any probability.

The church seems to have been begun in 1516, and took a long time to finish. Raphael was dead by the time the roof was put on in 1522 (he died in 1520). The work had been continued by Baldassare Peruzzi, who is thought to have designed the dome and vaults. However, the Confraternity records show that the dome was built by one Jacopo di Verolo from Caravaggio who was given a contract in 1526. The façade and vaults were done by Antonio La Torre, and the dome's cornice and lantern were executed by Giovanni di Santagata; this work took place in the decade between 1532 and 1542. The last detail of the construction work was finished in 1551, when a stone doorcase was provided. Another name associated with the project is Bastiano da Sangallo.

Problems with the builders

The church's history since then has, in one sense, been uneventful. The Confraternity has been in charge to the present day, and have had their headquarters next door in a little house built with the church and called the Casa del Cantone.

In another sense, the building's history has been very difficult. The site chosen was not very suitable, since it is too close to the river, the ground is unstable and water penetration is a problem. Up the Via Sistina, the Florentines at San Giovanni dei Fiorentini solved the problem of building on a fossil sandbank by employing an architect who had been an army fortifications engineer. Here, Raphael and Peruzzi were out of their depth and the edifice was failing only a few years after its completion.

After niggling problems with cracks and water getting in, a major collapse of the right hand side of the edifice happened in 1601. This seems also to have compromised the façade. Flaminio Ponzio was called in the following year, and he worked until 1613 to put things right; the work is alleged to have involved rebuilding the dome. Then, in 1621, the new façade was built incorporating the old doorcase. Ponzio's responsibility for this is deduced from its similarity to his known work at Santa Maria di Grottapinta.

The damp problem was not solved, and restorations since the 17th century have been regular. At the end of the 19th century, the builders of the Tiber embankments took care not to affect the church but the damp still got in despite the river now being further away.

In 1864, the original brick floor was replaced with the current patterned marble one, using salvage from the burnt-out San Paolo fuori le Mura.

In the 20th century, a lot of money had to be spent. In the Twenties, the necessary work was so extensive that the church was re-consecrated in 1928. In the early Fifties, the foundations had to be underpinned after the church threatened to collapse and the interior was restored. There was further work on the interior and the dome in 1978, and another major restoration at the end of the 20th century involved re-covering the roofs and dome and repairing the façade. The cost of all this was borne by the State, which (fortunately for the Confraternity) thought the association with Raphael made the expense worthwhile.

Exterior:

Layout and fabric

The plan is based on a Greek cross, with arms of equal length but with the side arms slightly wider than the front and back ones. There is a separate presbyterium, of one bay with a semi-circular apse and conch.

The fabric is in brick, rendered in a dull orange with architectural details in white. It is not easy to see much of the exterior from the street, but over the little two-storey Confraternity headquarters you can see a three-light Venetian window (arch flanked by two rectangles, also known as Palladian) with a pair of squat Doric pilasters on each side standing on the roofline of the house. An identical window is in the opposite wall of the church.

The little house on the right, headquarters of the Confraternity, has a well-preserved fresco of the patron saint on its wall.

Dome

The design of the dome is attributed to Baldassare Peruzzi, and it looks as if he was inspired by circular ancient Roman mausolea such as that of Cecilia Metella on the Appian Way. The drum is a straightforward cylinder in brick, with eight windows, topped by a very strongly projecting limestone cornice with modillions. On this sits the lead dome, hemispherical with eight shallow and wide ribs terminating in a cylindrical lantern. The latter has eight empty little plints above the ribs, and the same number of round-headed windows separated by Doric pilasters. There is a lead cupola with a slight ogee curve and a ball finial.

Façade

The present façade was added in 1621 by Ponzio, but was completed by Ambrogio Bonazzini. It is straightforward, of two storeys. Two pairs of Ionic pilasters with swagged capitals and high plinths flank the single entrance, the doorcase of which came from the previous frontage. It has an interesting molding made up of conjoined discs, just like a stretched earthworm. Above is a raised triangular pediment on strap corbels, which is over an inscription tablet bearing the following epigraph:

Sancto Eligio templum picturis signis valvis marmore atque omni ornamento, corpus aurificum fecit et exornavit ("The body of goldsmith made and adorned with pictures, symbols, marble revetments and every ornament the temple [dedicated to] St Eligius").

The second storey has a large window with a slightly curved lintel, flanked by two pairs of Doric pilasters. These support a crowning triangular pediment with a blank tympanum and a pair of flaming torch finials at the outer corners.

Interior:

Layout and fabric

The interior layout is believed to have been designed by Raphael, with the simplicity of the architectural elements being thought to be the result of influence by Bramante. With the church of Sant'Andrea del Vignola, this church was admired in the late 18th and 19th centuries by neo-Classical ideologists. They took it as a demonstration of purity of architectural form in the Mannerist period, before the "decadence" of the Baroque set in. The "form equates to function" mantra of Modernism led to interest in the building on the part of Modernist architects in the 20th century.

If you can get in here, it is worthwhile immediately looking up on walking in. The contrast between the usual Roman Baroque domes showing an empyrean, a rayburst with lots of gilded stucco

detailing or an Escher-type tessellation could not be more absolute. There is no decoration at all, except for a gilded ring around the oculus with a text reading: 'Tu sidera pande[s et] astra Deus, nos templa damus ("You, God, arrange planets and stars, we give temples"). This ring, the dome cornice and the pendentive cornice form three concentric circles. The pendentive arches on the four side walls form tangential elliptical curves from the viewpoint of the floor. The paint scheme is a cream colour, with no fresco work or detailing.

The side arches spring from an entablature which runs around the church, supported by blind pilasters (no proper capitals) at the inner corners of the cross.

Presbyterium

The presbyterium is a barrel-vaulted bay with an apse, opening from a triumphal arch in the far wall. The arch wall and the walls of apse and presbyterium bay are all frescoed, as is the lunette over the entablature above.

Most of this fresco work was executed about 1575, and is the oldest in the church. The altarpiece, painted on the curve of the apse, shows the Madonna of Divine Providence, identified by the text in the band above the fresco. Mother and Child are being venerated by SS Eligius, Stephen, John the Baptist and Lawrence. The artist was Matteo da Lecce. The conch shows The Holy Trinity Adored by Angels (the Dove of the Holy Spirit is in the intrados of the arch above), and is by Taddeo Zuccari and his school. He also executed the other fresco work, apart from the Annunciation in the spandrels of the triumphal arch which is anonymous, 17th century.

Side chapels

There are two side chapels, in the other arms of the cross. The left hand one is dedicated to the Nativity, and the altarpiece depicting The Adoration of the Shepherds is by Giovanni de' Vecchi. There are Sibyls in the arch spandrels, by Giovanni Francesco Romanelli.

The right hand one is dedicated to the Epiphany, and the altarpiece depicting The Adoration of the Magi is by Romanelli as a replacement by the work by Zuccari destroyed in the 1601 collapse. There are two more Romanelli sibyls in the spandrels.

Monuments

The Baroque monument to Giovanni Giardini, 1721, has a good portrait bust above a bizarre skull with feathered wings. This is apparently by Pietro Bracci, an important tardobarocco sculptor.

A simple marble epigraphic slab with the year 1725 commemorates Bernardino Passeri, a founder member of the Confraternity who was killed in the Sack of Rome in 1527.

There is a 1543 wall monument to Pompilio Infortunato.

Access

This church is simply not accessible to the casual visitor, and finding the door open is an event.

However, you can visit by appointment. Ignore the times on the brass plaque on the door (such brass plaques on Roman church doors, ostensibly giving opening times, are usually mendacious). The Confraternity website advises that you should phone 10:00-13:00, Monday to Friday, in order to visit between the same times.

The number to call is 06.6868260.

Alternatively, some contemporary guidebooks suggest that you call in person at Via di San Eligio 9, which is the house to the right of the church. If you get an answer, expect to have to come back on a subsequent day. The church is liable to be closed throughout August and September, when the Confraternity staff will probably be on the beach -as is the expectation then of most Romans not involved in getting money off tourists.

The feast day of St Eligius is 1 December, when the church is liable to be open. You may find on the main altar a spectacular silver gilt reliquary bust of the saint, by one A. Pallotti of the 17th century.

Info:

Telephone: 0039 06 6868260

Open 09:30-13:00 Closed Saturday Closed Sunday

If the church is closed, you can ring the bell at 9 Via di San Eligio (within reasonable hours).

Location:

Addr 8/a Via di San Eligio, Roma

Coordinates: [41° 53' 44"N 12° 28' 5"E](#)

Links:

http://romanchurches.wikia.com/wiki/Sant%27Eligio_degli_Orefici

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sant%27Eligio_degli_Orefici

<http://www.060608.it/en/cultura-e-svago/luoghi-di-culto-di-interesse-storico-artistico/cattolici/sant-eligio-degli-orefici.html>

[Official diocesan web-page](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

[Nolli map](#) (look for 690)

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

["Juzaphoto" photo of interior vaults and dome](#)

["Romeartlover" web-page](#)

[Info.roma web-page](#)

[Confraternity website](#) (In Italian, English and Spanish.)