

Santa Caterina da Siena in Via Giulia



Santa Caterina da Siena in Via Giulia is an 18th century regional church on the Via Giulia in the rione Regola. This is the church in Rome for people from the city of Siena. The dedication is to St Catherine of Siena, Doctor of the Church and a patron of Europe as well as a secondary patron of Rome.

History:

Old church

This church is not an ancient foundation, but was established by a confraternity of expatriates from Siena -the Confraternita di Santa Caterina da Siena dei Senesi, which was officially founded by Pope Leo X in 1519 (now an Arciconfraternita, since 1604). They immediately started to plan a church with a hospice attached for pilgrims and infirm compatriots, and decided to incorporate this into the first stage of the project for a new street begun in 1509 which resulted in the present Via Giulia. This was because many of the Sienese lived locally.

The church was begun in about 1526 by Baldassarre Peruzzi from Siena, after a seven year fund-raising campaign. The greatest donations came from the banker Agostino Chigi, whose family was also originally Sienese, and from Cardinal Giovanni Piccolomini . Chigi also commissioned Gerolamo Genga to paint a Resurrection to be the main altarpiece, which was begun as soon as the church project was initiated in 1519. This work was acknowledged to have been a masterpiece, and it is a pity that it is now hidden away in the archconfraternity's private oratory.

Frescoes in the church were executed by Timoteo Viti, of the school of Raphael, and by Antiveduto Grammatica who was buried here. These have been lost.

Until 1555, the church was national because Siena was an independent republic. In that year, Siena was conquered by the Spanish and (apart from a few coastal fortresses) given to its hated rival Florence to form the Grand Duchy of Tuscany after 1669.

Rebuilding

A report was made to the Archconfraternity in 1766 that flooding by the Tiber had undermined the foundations of the church, and that rebuilding was necessary. Unfortunately, the demolition of the old church was not accompanied by much effort to preserve its artworks and was completed in the same year. The foundation stone for the new edifice was laid in the following year, the architect being Paolo Posi -from Siena, of course. He has his funerary monument here.

The church is considered to be the last in Rome to have been built in the Baroque style. It was consecrated in 1775.

Modern times

In 1798, after the Papal government was overthrown by Napoleon, the French occupiers looted the church of valuables. Later, a republican mob sacked the premises and seriously damaged the archives by selling a lot of the contents as waste paper. This had much to do with the resentment that some ordinary Romans had against the Sienese expatriate community, which had done very well under Papal rule especially in matters of finance. Perhaps they wanted to destroy evidence of obligations.

The Confraternity remains in charge of the church, and are proud of it. Their website has a good description.

Exterior:

Layout and fabric

Structurally the church has a nave with aisles, but thick blocking walls separate the aisles into two external chapels on each side of the central nave. The presbyterium is an apse, with a conch. There is a crypt, provided so as to reduce the risk of permanent flood damage to the body of the church.

Apart from the travertine façade, the fabric of the church is invisible from the street. It is in brick, with a single pitched and tiled roof for the nave and a slightly lower, separate roof for the presbyterium and ancillary accommodation. There is a very small campanile or bellcote where the two roofs join, on the right hand side, and this is invisible from the ground.

Façade

Posi addressed the problem of the narrowness of the street outside by recessing the central part of the façade, and giving the two side zones in front of the chapels a ninety-degree curve from the line of the street frontages. This is reminiscent of Borromini -compare the latter's design at San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane. Unfortunately, it is still difficult to get a good view of the composition.

There are two storeys. The first has a flight of four steps leading to a large single entrance, which has a molded Baroque doorcase. Above the lintel is a roll molding decorated in a reptile scale motif (stylized olive foliage?), and above that is a slightly oversized segmental pediment. The conch of this contains a relief sculpture featuring a flaming heart (symbol of St Catherine), a palm branch, a crown of thorns and Aaron's rod with almond blossom, all tied with billowing ribbon.

The coat of arms above this pediment is of Siena, and is very simple -two horizontal stripes, white on black. The device is called the balzana, and is connected with the foundation legend of the city (see below). An allegorical interpretation is that good (white, above) triumphs over evil (black, below), but the city's enemies in the past predictably gave it a different interpretation -the white bit being how the Sieneese talk, and the black bit how they think.

The entrance is flanked by a pair of Doric columns on very high plinths, each clasped by a pair of narrow pilasters in the same style. Their capitals are embellished with egg-and-dart. Pilasters, columns and doorway completely occupy the width of the central, flat part of the façade. Above is an entablature with a blank frieze, modillions (little brackets) on the cornice and inverted plinths above the capitals of the columns. This entablature sweeps round the curves on either side, to end over a pair of Doric pilasters at the corners. These two curved side zones each has a oeil de boeuf (horizontal elliptical) window with its own omega (Ω) cornice, between two blank framed tablets in relief the upper, smaller one of which is embellished with small swags.

The second storey has a similar pair of column and pilaster combined, but these are derivative Ionic in style with swaged volutes and a little collar of acanthus leaves -hardly big enough to make the order Composite. These support an entablature and triangular pediment stepped vertically over the capitals, and with rosettes on the frieze; within the pediment's tympanum is a pair of winged putto's heads peeping out under a gable cornice.

The side zones of this storey have a very interesting pair of relief sculptures within dished tondi, these in turn being within sunken panels with swags and palm branches. They feature a pair of toddler boys with a female wolf, and the first impression is that these are Romulus and Remus with the wolf that suckled them. This is incorrect because the boys are Senius and Ascanius, who according to the legend were sons of Remus who fled from Romulus in Rome and founded the city of Siena. The horses on which they fled were black and white, hence the city's shield, and they stole the original bronze Capitoline Wolf and took it with them. This is, of course, completely unhistorical since the town of Saenia Iulia was founded in the reign of Emperor Augustus.

The façade is crowned by four finials in the form of vases with flowers, with the traditional metal cross on the tip of the pediment.

Interior

Layout and fabric

There is a single nave, with a complex layout. The total number of bays is five, but these are of different lengths; there are three narrow bays, and two wide ones in between them. The presbyterium has one bay and then an apse with a conch.

The wide bays have chapels off each side, which are in the form of very large barrel-vaulted niches entered through high arches springing from Doric pilasters. The narrow bays have balustraded cantorie (opera boxes for solo musical performers) above large vertical elliptical tondi with molded frames embellished with garlands and curlicues; these have frescoes. A further two tondi are on the side walls of the presbyterium, making a total of eight.

The wide bays have a gigantic Corinthian pilaster on each side. These support a continuous entablature which runs round the church, and from which the barrel vaults spring.

The overall decorative scheme is in white, pale grey and gold and is very attractive on a bright day. The intricate gilded capitals of the pilasters are by Wander Elskén, other gilded stucco work is by

Pietro Tavellini, the angels in the vault are by Taddeo Kuntz and the polychrome stonework of the altars is by Andrea Dell'Oste.

Nave vault

The nave vault is divided into five sections corresponding to the bays below, and these are separated by triply molded transverse ribs with the central molding embellished with straight garlands. The vault over the two wider bays has two fresco panels surrounded by four angels each, while that over the three narrow bays is coffered in octagons and triangles. The vault has lunettes inserted which contain large windows, the ones in the narrow bays being (obviously) narrower. These lunette vaults are richly decorated in stucco, having a foliage and scallop theme.

The two fresco panels depict Angels in Heaven, and are by Ermenegildo Constantini.

Tondi

The large tondi on the side walls have the overall theme of the life and visions of St Catherine, but are by different artists.

The first four in the nave are: Christ Giving His Heart to St Catherine and St Catherine Receiving the Stigmata originally by Giovanni Sorbi, and Christ Gives Communion to St Catherine and Christ Gives a Crucifix to St Catherine which are by Étienne Parrocel. Of the Sorbi works, the first was repainted and the second retouched by Tommaso Conca.

The last two tondi in the nave depict The Teenage St Catherine at Prayer and St Catherine Chooses a Crown of Thorns, and are by Pietro Angeletti. The pair in the presbyterium show Christ Showing the Wound in His Side to St Catherine and Christ Carrying His Cross in a Vision to St Catherine and are by Gaetano Lapis.

Presbyterium

The presbyterium is sumptuously decorated, the yellow marble used being a Siena speciality. The high triumphal arch is supported by a pair of massive Corinthian pilasters, while the entablature running round the apse is supported by a pair of column and pilaster bunches similar in style to those on the first storey of the façade. Their capitals are embellished with rosettes, and they frame the large round-headed altarpiece on the apse wall. This shows The Mystical Marriage of St Catherine and is by Lapis again. Christ is showing putting a wedding-ring on the saint's finger, while an angelic chamber orchestra performs.

The enormous fresco in the conch dominates the church, and has as its theme St Catherine Welcoming Pope Gregory XI Returning from Avignon. It is by Lorenzo Pecheux, of 1773. St Catherine had campaigned tirelessly for the popes to abandon their Babylonian Captivity and return to live in Rome, and she was correct on both religious and secular grounds because this period was one of the darkest and most miserable in the city's history.

Side chapels

The four side chapels are taken in anti-clockwise order, starting from the bottom right.

The first chapel on the right is dedicated to St Bernardine of Siena, and the altarpiece depicts St Bernardine Preaching on the Name of Jesus by Salvatore Monosilio, an artist from Messina in Sicily.

The second chapel on the right is dedicated to St Bernard Tolomei, who was from Siena and who founded the first monastery of the Olivetan Benedictine congregation nearby on Monte Oliveto. The altarpiece showing The Vision of Christ to St Bernard Tolomei is by Niccolò Lapiccola.

The second chapel on the left is dedicated to the Assumption of Our Lady, and the altarpiece is by Conca.

The first chapel on the left is dedicated to Pope St Gregory VII, and the altarpiece shows the pope giving a blessing and so stopping a fire set in the Vatican by Imperial troops. This is by Domenico Corvi. In this chapel is the memorial to Paolo Posi, the church's architect, by Giuseppe Palazzi. The pope was born in Sovana, which used to be ruled by Siena.

Crypt

The low, barrel-vaulted crypt had the original purpose of preserving the fabric of the building whenever the Tiber flooded. Without a crypt, flooding could saturate the soil underneath the floor and so push the floor up. Also, the foundations would have been shallower and hence have been more easily undermined by flood water.

This used to be the burial place of some famous expatriate Sieneese before the French put a stop to burial within the city walls in the early 19th century, and requiem Masses are still celebrated on the simple altar.

Oratory

The Confraternity has its own small private oratory, up some stairs from a yard containing a statue of St Catherine. The Confraternity website seems to indicate that it is accessible to visitors, so it is worth asking. This is well worth a visit.

The intricate stucco decoration is by the same Kuntz who worked in the church, but the polychrome marble altar is by Sebastiano Dell'Oste who presumably belonged to the same family firm as the Andrea Dell'Oste who did the church altars. Several artworks from the old church ended up here, notably a stucco statue of St Catherine by Ercole Ferrata and a very fine painted terracotta statue of St Bernadine by an anonymous artist. There is also a crucifix by Rutilio Manetti.

However, the treasure here is the altarpiece of the Resurrection by Genga, which was the altarpiece of the old church. It was restored and re-hung here in 2008. The detailing and colouring are superb, and this is arguably the best thing to be seen on a visit to the church.

Confraternity headquarters

If you go round to Via di Monserrato 111, the postal address, you will find an odd brick building put up by the Confraternity in 1912. It has two doorways with molded doorcases and cornices, above which is an oval tondo containing another relief of Senius and Ascanius with the wolf. The three upper storeys have loggias each with three Doric columns, the first two arcaded but the top one trabeated. It allegedly imitates the house in Siena where St Catherine was born.

Location:

Addr: Via Giulia/Via Monserrato 62/A 00186 Roma

Coord: [41°53'44"N](#) [12°28'8"E](#)

Info:

Telephone: 0039 06 6864236 / 06 68 79 786

Week days open from 17.00 - 19.00

Festive days open from 10.30 -12.00 & 17.00 - 19.00

Links:

http://romanchurches.wikia.com/wiki/Santa_Caterina_da_Siena

<http://www.060608.it/en/cultura-e-svago/luoghi-di-culto-di-interesse-storico-artistico/cattolici/santa-caterina-da-siena-a-via-giulia.html>

[Official diocesan web-page](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

[Archconfraternity website](#)

[Nolli map](#) (look for 695) (Note that this shows the old church.)

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

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

[Info.roma web-page](#)