

Santa Croce delle Scalette alla Lungare



Santa Croce delle Scalette is a 17th century convent church north of the Palazzo Corsini in the rione Trastevere. The dedication is to the Holy Cross.

The church has the name delle Scalette, "of the steps", because of a ferry that was here before the building of the Tiber embankments. You had to go down a staircase to get into the boat. Other names used are Santa Croce alla Lungara, after the street, and Santa Croce del Buon Pastore after the nuns who used to be here.

History:

The foundation of the convent and church was related to serious concerns expressed on the part of ecclesiastical dignitaries in Rome over the number of women involved in the sex trade in the city in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. These concerns focused on several categories of so-called *donne di vita disonesta*. There were the single women actually involved in prostitution as a profession, who were liable to throw their unwanted babies into the Tiber. Then there were girls growing up in households supported by these women, and finally there were married women who found the sex trade a useful source of ready cash (the so-called *malmaritani*).

The response was to found several institutions to try and alleviate the problem. These set out to

attract prostitutes who wanted to give up the trade and live in some sort of religious sisterhood (the so-called penitente, known in the English-speaking world later as "Magdalens"), also those young women who had no real economic choice for their futures except prostitution. The malmaritani were also targeted, but (as could have been predicted) mostly made it clear that they could mind their own business.

The outreaches were not well co-ordinated, and resulted in several competing institutions which have left surviving churches. For example, Santa Marta al Collegio Romano founded by the Jesuits, Santa Chiara and San Giacomo alla Lungara (just across the road) by the Franciscans, and this church by the Carmelites.

Foundation

San Croce was founded by the Carmelite Father Dominic of Jesus and Mary (Domenico di Gesù Maria) in 1615. He was a Sicilian, and as a superior in the new congregation was instrumental in spreading the Discalced Carmelites beyond Spain. As prior of the friary nearby at Santa Maria della Scala, he also founded the convent at what is now Santa Maria della Vittoria in 1612.

His new foundation was patronised by the Duke of Bavaria and Cardinal Antonio Barberini (for the latter, there may have been an element of guilt because his sexual profigacy was notorious). After it was properly established, new buildings were erected which included the church. These were finished in 1619.

The architect is given as Baldassarre Paluzzi Albertoni, a marchese and hence an amateur (it shows). This is his only church in Rome.

Oblates

The Nolli map of 1748 shows a small convent forming a single L-shaped block facing the Via della Lungara. The church is attached to the left hand (south) side of this. Behind the convent were two large gardens, separated by two single-storey ranges which look as if they were small residences for women whom the sisters were helping.

By then, the community was known as the Agostiniane della Penitenza -in other words, they were Augustinians not Carmelites. The change occurred at the end of the 17th century. The street to the south of the convent, the Via della Penitenza, commemorates them. They had the status of oblates not nuns.

The convent was shut down in 1802, during the French occupation, and was given over to the Collegio dei Parroci which administered it as secular female reformatory under a salaried manageress.

Good Shepherd Sisters

In 1838 the complex was assigned to the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd ("Good Shepherd Sisters"). This French congregation had been founded by St Mary Euphrasia Pelletier at Angers in 1835, and had the same charism of rehabilitating women "of dissolute habits". Its strength was that the congregation was centralized, and so had the resources and management to work more effectively than an isolated institution could.

The transfer was a success, and in response Pope Pius IX ordered an extension of the convent in 1854. Two four-storey blocks were built enclosing the nearer garden, which hence became enclosed. The architect was Virginio Vespignani. This work converted the small convent into a judicial prison for women and girls as well as a refuge, and the complex was to gain a rather dubious reputation.

Several different categories of female were dealt with here under the Papal government, which caused problems. Women criminals were accommodated, as well as little girls in danger from abuse (as young as four years old), women trying to reform their lives and women seeking refuge from abusive menfolk (the last category illustrates that the Papal government recognized and addressed a problem, which it was to take secular authorities in other countries about a century more even to acknowledge). Unfortunately, among the criminals were women campaigning against Papal rule and who hence possibly counted as political prisoners.

The complex was expropriated by the Italian government in 1873, but the sisters were exceptionally allowed to remain in charge because of the importance of their work. However, the judicial prison was closed as soon as the nearby Regina Coeli prison was ready in 1895, and the institution thereafter was a reformatory for girls aged under sixteen.

There was a restoration of the church in 1924; online sources claim that it was seldom used afterwards. Presumably the sisters and their charges had a private convent chapel.

The Good Shepherd Sisters withdrew in 1950, but the institution continued as a young female offenders' reformatory until it was closed in 1970. Thereafter the property devolved to the city, which used it firstly as a help centre for young people and then as one for the elderly.

In 1983 the complex was leased to a radical feminist association known as the Casa Internazionale delle Donne. It remains their headquarters, and possession was confirmed by the city council after much opposition.

This seems now to be one of the "dark churches" of Rome.

Exterior:

Layout and fabric

The church is an integral part of the convent and prison complex, and occupies the south-east corner. To the west, on the Via della Penitenza, is Vespignani's rather overpowering prison wing with a central rusticated arched entrance topped by a large marble tablet bearing a foundation inscription. The original 17th century convent is to the north, to the right of the church. The entrance of this has a statue of Christ the Good Shepherd above it, put there by the sisters in the early 19th century.

The church and convent entrances share access via a patio accessed from the street by steps at each end. This indicates that the church is on a crypt, which would have been because of the regular flooding by the river before the embankments were built.

The fabric is rendered brick.

Façade

The plain and rather boring façade has two storeys and . The first has four Doric pilasters in shallow relief, supporting an entablature with a blank frieze and a strongly projecting cornice. This entablature is brought forward slightly over the pilaster capitals. The single entrance has a molded doorcase, over which is a floating cornice supported by a pair of lion's head corbels. In between each pair of pilasters is an empty and undecorated round-headed niche, with a recessed rectangular panel below and a blank tablet with segmental cut-outs on its long side above.

The second storey has four pilasters without capitals, supporting an entablature and a crowning triangular pediment with a lunette window in its tympanum. The pilasters flank a large square central window in a Baroque frame, above which is a panel bearing a stucco relief of a flower sway with

ribbons, This panel has its own floating cornice, and is embellished with curlicues on its sides. It's obvious that the architect was an amateur nobleman, perhaps too frightened of showing the kind of playfulness that true Baroque design requires.

Interior:

The church interior was restored in a classical style in 1854. It had a simple rectangular plan, with an apse at the sanctuary and two side altars, one on each side. Apparently the side altars have been removed. Over the high altar is Christ Carrying the Cross by Francesco Troppa, who also executed the crucifix and the Annunciation over the left-hand side altar. There was also an interesting Magdalen by Francesco Graziani (nicknamed Ciccio da Napoli) over the right hand side altar.

Location:

Addr: Via della Lungara 18

Coord: [41° 53' 40"N 12° 27' 57.6"E](#)

Links:

[Roman Churches Wiki](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

[Nolli map](#) (look for 1214)

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

[e Conservatorio della SS. Croce "Romeartlover" web-page](#)

[Rometour web-page](#)

[Info.roma web-page](#)

[Casa Internazionale delle Donne](#)