

# Santa Barbara dei Librai



**Santa Barbara dei Librai** is a church dedicated to St Barbara, virgin martyr. It is located in Largo dei Librai formerly known as Piazzetta dei Librai, which is just off Via dei Giubbonari between Campo de'Fiori and Piazza Caioli.

## History:

This small church, also known as *Santa Barbara alla Regola* after the area it is in, was founded in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The church was built into one of the vaults under the cavea (the semi-circular seating area) of the Theater of Pompey some time before 1100 AD. [1] [2]

A surviving 11th century inscription mentions Giovanni de Crescenzo and his wife Rogata as patrons of the church, and this is the first documentary evidence. The next is the famous list of churches dependent on San Lorenzo in Damaso, dating from 1186. [1] [2]

The first hard date we really have for the church is 1306, in which a formal consecration was recorded. This may have been a re-consecration, but the early history of the church is not documented well enough to know with any certainty. [1] [2]

One erroneous name on record is *Santa Barbara Anglicorum*, which is allegedly because the English community in Rome used it as their meeting-place for a period. The allegation has only one source, Francesco Albertini who wrote in 1510. There is no other documentary evidence for this. Another recorded appellation is *Santa Barbara in Satro*, a name still preserved in the small Piazza dei Satiri behind the church. That name was derived from two Pan statues recovered in the area in the 1300's, which were transferred to Palazzo de la Valle. [1]

In 1601 the church was granted to the Università dei Librai, an organization for bookbinders and printers. The Università had been founded in 1600; this is recorded in an inscription in the church. They added their patron St. Thomas Aquinas to the dedication; so strictly speaking the church should be called **Santi Barbara e Tommaso d'Aquino**. They also restored the church in 1601. [1]

It was rebuilt in 1680 by Giuseppe Passeri in the Baroque style. The large side chapels were added at this time. The process was financed by a member of the Università, Zanobio Masotti. This is recorded in an inscription on the wall, placed here by the Università in 1688. [1]

The Confraternita dei Librai (formerly the Università) had it rebuilt in 1858; the architect was Bonoli. [1]

The confraternity was wound up in 1878. The church seems to have been in use in the late 19th century, and in the first decade of the 20th, since it is mentioned in contemporary guidebooks. However, it was then deconsecrated and used as a warehouse which is why it doesn't appear on some maps of the centro storico. Some of the interior decoration shows damage resulting from this period of neglect. [1]

However, the edifice was rescued and has been used as a church again since 1980. There has been a thorough restoration, and it now belongs to the Comunità di Santa Barbara. [1]

The church is served by diocesan clergy, and is dependent on the parish church of San Carlo ai Catinari. [1]

### **Exterior:**

The little façade, possibly by Passeri (1680), is squeezed between the taller buildings on each side. It has two storeys, and is rather alarmingly crooked with the second storey leaning slightly to the right. [1]

The first storey has three vertical zones, with the two very narrow side zones being the street fronts of the nave side rooms. The single entrance has a doorcase with an interesting design of molding, and above its lintel is the inscription S[anctae] Barbarae, v[irgini] ma[rtyri] sacr[ae] ("To St Barbara, holy virgin martyr"). Over this in turn is a segmental pediment with a dentillated cornice and a winged putto's head in its tympanum. [1]

The doorway is flanked by a pair of Composite columns supporting a protruding fragment of entablature which is stepped at the outer corners and has a strongly protruding cornice. The two narrow side zones each have two rectangular windows placed vertically, the lower pair touching the ground (the right hand one of this pair is blocked). The upper pair of windows is topped by a pair of large stucco scallop shells. [1]

The second storey has an oculus window, now blocked, resting on the entrance entablature and flanked by a pair of horizontal curlicues looking rather like musical G-clefs on their sides. Above this is a round-headed niche containing a fine limestone statue of St Barbara by Ambrogio Parisi - a rare work by this obscure sculptor. She is shown holding the palm of martyrdom, and standing before a fortified tower which is her attribute. The statue niche reaches into the crowning triangular pediment, and its archivolt is crowned by a cobra-hood finial topped by a little erupting volcano device tucked into the point of the pediment. Two large flaming torch finials continue the fire theme by occupying the outer corners of the pediment, while the top finial is a plinth with a mask in the form of a woman's face. [1]

The pediment is supported by a pair of Doric pilasters, the body of each of which is formed by a recessed panel within a frame and containing a vertical drape of bellflower lilies ending in a rosette. Finally, the outer corners of this storey are bounded by a pair of elongated curlicues. [1]

A domestic building on the left has been extended, probably in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, so that it sits above the left hand nave chapel and abuts onto the church nave. [1]

An inscription below the right-hand window relates that the Università dei Librai bought the whole

street in 1638 for the sum of 400 scudi. [1]

### **Interior:**

The church originally had a single vaulted nave. At some point, two large side chapels were added extending the church into the two adjoining sub-cavea vaults making a transept and giving the church its current "Greek cross" floor plan. The interior is richly decorated with rare marbles and well endowed with works of art. The remarkable Venetian stucco altars date from the 1600s. The high altar, the oldest and certainly the most important, is a fine example of mother of pearl, ivory, agate, and other rare colored stone inlay work (intarsia decorations).

### Nave

The main vault painting, "*The Glory of Saint Barbara*" was originally painted by Luigi Garzi, and it was subsequently restored by Dominico Monacelli in the 19<sup>th</sup> century restoration. [1]

The floor was laid in 1860 by Pietro Martinori. [1]

### Apse

Above the triumphal arch of the presbyterium apse is a lunette with a painting of *The Martyrdom of Saint Barbara* by Monacelli. In the apse itself is another lunette on the right-hand wall with a painting, also by Monacelli, of the *Miraculous Escape of Saint Barbara*. The story is that the saint was being chased by her homicidal father when a hill split open to form a cave in which she could hide. The father here is portrayed as a real black-bearded villain. Below this work is a painting by Garzi of *The Madonna and Child with SS Barbara and Thomas Aquinas*. The other figures in the painting are early members of the Università dei Librai. On the left-hand wall is a lunette with a painting by Monacelli of *Saint Stanislaus Kostka*, showing him receiving Communion from an angel through the intercession of St Barbara. [1]

The altarpiece, by Garzi, depicts *Saint Barbara Venerating the Holy Trinity*. The high altar itself has a rich pietra dura frontal in which ivory, mother-of-pearl and agate are used. According to a now lost inscription transcribed by Rossini, this altar was made by a family firm of Giacomo, Giuseppe and Domenico Malagò. [1]

### Transept

In the cross-vault of the transept, in front of the apse, are frescoes by Dominico Monacelli of the *Evangelists* and personifications of *Faith, Hope, Charity* and *Divine Love*. On the walls are frescoes by Garzi of four saints: *Francis of Assisi, Anthony of Padua, Teresa of Avila* and Philip Neri. [1]

On the wall to the right side of the transept, facing the exit, are three inscriptions. The topmost indicates that Paolino Arnolfini from Lucca restored the church in 1601. The second, probably dating to the 11th Century, states that the church including all its properties was donated by Crescenzo di Roizo and his wife Rogata for the redemption of their souls and those of their relatives. The third is the funeral inscription of the Roman bookseller Antonio Gherardino, who died May 15, 1685, which notes that on his death he bequeathed his estate to the guild of booksellers. [2]

An inscription from 1306 around a mosaic cross mentions relics kept in the chapel. Here also Zenobio Masotti, the patron of the church mentioned above, is interred under a marble monument with a bust. The monument was erected by his heir Nicola Inghirlandi. [1]

### Specchi Chapel

The nave chapel opposite, on the left hand side. It was founded by Francesco Orazio Specchi, son of Alessandro Specchi the famous engraver. A painting by Giovanni Battista Bruchi (or Brugi) depicts *St Saba*, and the chapel is dedicated to him because the family had connections with the church of San Saba. The artist was a pupil of Baciccio. [1]

### Chapel of SS Thomas Aquinas and John of God

The left hand arm of the transept has a chapel dedicated to SS Thomas Aquinas and John of God. The altarpiece is by Francesco Ragusa, and depicts *The Madonna and Child with SS Joseph, Peter, Paul, Thomas Aquinas and John of God*. [1] [2]

### Chapel of the Crucifix:

The Chapel of the Crucifix is off the right arm of the transept. It has a wooden 14<sup>th</sup> century crucifix, and this is placed over a fresco with depictions of the *Madonna and St John at Calvary*. The fresco is by Luigi Garzi again, and has deteriorated badly. [1]

#### Chapel of Our Lady:

The altarpiece in the first chapel on the right-hand side is an antique wooden triptych of *The Madonna with Sts John the Baptist and Michael the Archangel*. This is dated in documentary sources to 1543, but is perhaps older. It was allegedly once in the Lateran basilica. [1]

The chapel once belonged to a pious lay confraternity called the "Society of the Most Holy Saviour of the Sancta Sanctorum", as is witnessed by the inscription on the right hand side wall. There are two other inscriptions: the higher of the two celebrates the founding, in 1600, of the Guild of Book Sellers; the second, placed by the Guild in 1688, is dedicated to Zenobio Masotti, a famous printer and book seller in Rome. It is from this inscription that we learn that Zenobio Masotti, who is buried in the church, financed the 1680 reconstruction and enhancement of the decoration of the church. [1]

The church's organ is from c. 1600, and was given by an anonymous donor. It is on a gallery above the entrance and is quite small, but very interesting as a historical piece. There are twenty-one pipes, and the keyboard has 45 keys in boxwood and ebony. [1]

#### **Special notes**

The feast of St Barbara is celebrated on 4 December.

The *Comunita di Santa Barbara* has its secretariat at 85 Largo dei Librai, 00186 Roma, tel./fax 06 168 33 474. Enquiries about access and events can be made here.

#### Santa Barbara:

There is no reference to St. Barbara in the authentic early historical authorities for Christian antiquity, neither does her name appear in the original recension of St. Jerome's martyrology. Veneration of the saint was common, however, from the 7<sup>th</sup> century. At about this date there were in existence legendary Acts of her martyrdom, which were inserted in the collection of Symeon Metaphrastes and were used as well by the authors (Ado, Usuard, etc.) of enlarged martyrologies composed during the ninth century in Western Europe. According to these narratives, which are essentially the same, Barbara was the daughter of a rich heathen named Dioscorus. She was carefully guarded by her father who kept her shut up in a tower in order to preserve her from the outside world. An offer of marriage, which was received through him, she rejected. Before going on a journey her father commanded that a bath-house be erected for her use near her dwelling, and during his absence Barbara had three windows put in it, as a symbol of the Holy Trinity, instead of the two originally intended. When her father returned she acknowledged herself to be a Christian; upon this she was ill-treated by him and dragged before the prefect of the province, Martinianus, who had her cruelly tortured and finally condemned her to death by beheading. The father himself carried out the death-sentence, but in punishment for this he was struck by lightning on the way home and his body consumed. According to legend, at her grave the sick were healed and the pilgrims who came to pray received aid and consolation. She is patron of firefighters, and in fact her other church in Rome -Santa Barbara in Via Settingiano- is the city firefighters' church.

#### **Artists and Architects:**

Ambrogio Parisi (17<sup>th</sup> cent), Italian sculptor

Ettore Bonoli (19<sup>th</sup> cent), architect

Francesco [Ragusa](#) (ca.1590- 1655), Italian painter of the late-Mannerist and early-Baroque period.

Giuseppe [Passeri](#) (1654-1714), Italian painter and **architect** of the Baroque period

Luigi [Garzi](#) (1638-1721), Italian painter of the Baroque period

Dominico [Monacelli](#) (19<sup>th</sup> cent), Italian painter

Paolino Arnolfi of Lucca (17<sup>th</sup> cent), architect

**Burials:**

Zenobio Masotti

**Location:**

Address: Largo dei Librari 85, 00186 Roma

Coordinates: [41°53'41"N 12°28'25"E](#)

**Info:**

Opening times:

Open 9.00am-12.00pm 04.00pm-06.00pm

Mass: Sun 07:00pm

**Links and References**