

Santa Maria Annunziata a Tor de'Specchi



Santa Maria Annunziata a Tor de'Specchi is a large mediaeval and Baroque convent on the Via del Teatro di Marcello, which contains an early 17th century double-decker church as well as the original mediaeval oratory. It is in the rione Campitelli. The dedication is to the Blessed Virgin Mary, under the aspect of her Annunciation.

History

The community came into being on the Feast of the Annunciation 1425, when St Frances of Rome and several of her disciples made promises as Benedictine regular oblates in Santa Maria Nova, which was then the church of an Olivetan Benedictine monastery. In 1433 the disciples acquired a small house with a tower (the "Tower of Mirrors") on the corner of Via del Teatro di Marcello and Via Montanara, and began to live there in community. The saint joined them when her husband died in 1436, and died there herself in 1440. The year 1433 is counted as the foundation year of the present nunnery.

As befitted her status as an oblate of the Olivetan Benedictines, the saint was buried in the church of Santa Maria Nova which is now also named after her, and where her shrine is to be found.

In 1485 the oratory, refectory and main staircase of the nunnery were decorated with a spectacular series of frescoes, which survive, by Antoniazzo Romano and his school. The polychrome cycle in the oratory features the life and miracles of St Frances, while the monochrome grisaille cycle in the refectory depicts her diabolical temptations. The wooden oratory ceiling is also figuratively painted.

The original house was already too small even when St Frances was still alive, so she bought two other houses and a garden to the east in 1437. These adjoined the small parish church of Santa Maria di Curte, in what is now Via della Tribuna di Tor de' Specchi.

The origins of this old church are unknown. It only begins to appear in documentary records and in the catalogues from the start of the 14th century, but was probably founded in the 10th or early 11th century.

Because the little house oratory was completely inadequate, this church was granted to the nuns for their use in 1594. They immediately rebuilt it with the orientation reversed, in two storeys known respectively as the "Lower Church" (for which the original dedication to the Annunciation was kept), and the "Choir".

The territory of the suppressed parish was the nucleus of the new parish of Santa Maria in Campitelli. The construction of a grand Baroque monastery followed, which was completed by 1615.

Next to the mediaeval house a large refectory was provided, on the first floor and forming the west wing of the so-called Baroque cloister. This was built south of the church, on the site of the garden, with a new entrance on Via del Teatro di Marcello, nuns' cells on the east and north sides and offices on the south. The access to the church is from the north-east corner. Another cloister was built to the east of this, the "Cloister of Lemons", but this is irregularly shaped and has no range to the east. Finally, a very large sacristy was provided to the west of the church.

Decoration and embellishment of the monastery continued right up to the mid 19th century, making it a treasure-house of religious art.

After 1870, the Italian government passed a law enabling it to confiscate the assets of religious institutes of consecrated life. However, in 1876 the community obtained a court decision declaring the confiscation in their case to be null and void. This was because the law defined consecrated life as entailing the making of religious vows, whereas as oblates the sisters only made promises. Thus, the community owns the monastery outright.

Up to 1982 the nunnery was completely independent, and not part of any religious order, confederation or congregation. It counted as a single-monastery monastic congregation in its own right: Congregazione delle Oblate di Santa Francesca Romana del Monastero di Tor de'Specchi. However, in that year it aggregated to the Order of St Benedict while remaining "subject in a particular way" (*modo speciali subiectum*) to the Holy See.

At present, Mass is said for the community by the Benedictine priests at Sant'Ambrogio della Massima. This takes place in the choir, and is private. The lower church is not regularly used for liturgical activities.

The number of nuns has substantially reduced in recent years owing to the deaths of several elderly ones, and there are now some rather disquieting rumours about what might happen to the property should they prove unable to carry on.

Exterior

The exterior frontage on Via del Teatro di Marcello is stark and not impressive, especially since the ground floor has retail outlets. The main Baroque entrance has an oval tondo over it containing a relief of St Frances with her guardian angel by Bergondi, 1756. The doorcase itself is undecorated. The original mediaeval entrance is near the junction with Via Montanara, and has a faded 18th century fresco over it of Our Lady with St Benedict and St Frances. Around the corner in Via Montanara, the original Tor de'Specchi has a very interesting restored mediaeval two-light window with Cosmatesque decoration, high up on the south side. Around the back (first right, right at the piazza, then right again) is the sheer brick apse of the two-storey church in Via della Tribuna di Tor de'Specchi.

Interior - Lower Church

The lower church has a wide nave with narrow aisles, separated by two rows of octagonal columns painted to resemble horizontally banded grey and white marble. These have capitals of a debased Ionic form.

The side aisles are cross-vaulted, giving a slightly Gothic effect, while the main elliptical vault has wide double-bordered ribs of white stone running between each pair of columns. False cross-ribs run from each column to join those from its neighbours, forming a series of v's in the vault that do not meet at the apex. The background of the vaults, between the ribs, is coloured blue with white stars. There is a Marian monogram in gold in the middle of the main vault.

The rich Baroque apse behind the altar has its lower course in pale green marble, with a bench running along the entire curve. Above is a small painting of the Madonna and Child of the 16th century (anonymous), set in a very complicated gilded frame containing putti and bordered by two vertical pilaster-strips. This arrangement has a marble relief on either side, occupying the rest of the apse wall at that level. Above are a central oeil-de-boeuf window flanked by a pair of rectangular ones, and then the ribbed conch with triangular panels, their apices meeting at a central relief of the Holy Spirit as a dove.

A large 17th century liturgical tabernacle, made of pressed and embossed straw, is kept here. It is intended for use as a Nativity crib or Triduum sepulchre, and originates from the former Benedictine convent at Santa Maria in Campo Marzio.

Interior - Choir

The antechamber of the choir, or upper church, is very richly frescoed, the work dating from the early 17th century. The entire ceiling is occupied by a fresco *La Vergine Laurentana è Transportata dagli Angeli* by an anonymous artist. The church entrance has an enormous Baroque doorcase in black marble, with a portrait relief of St Frances in an oval tondo above the double door. The doors themselves are carved in relief with representations of saints.

Above the entrance in the choir is an organ gallery, with the organ flanked by wall frescoes of angels playing musical instruments.

The body of the choir is occupied by the stalls of the nuns, and the walls above them are plain pinkish red. The floor is of polychrome marble, set in curvilinear patterns with spirals at the edges. The richly carved and gilded flat wooden ceiling was executed by Ambrogio Bonadini in 1610, and has a central relief of St Frances and her angel carved in the round.

The apse is extremely richly decorated, with polychrome marble work on the flanking pilasters. The painting of the Annunciation over the altar is 16th century, by Alessandro Allori nicknamed *Il Bronzino*. It is flanked by a pair of oeil-de-boeuf windows. The conch is occupied by a fresco of St Michael defeating the angel in heaven, accompanied by angels rejoicing and playing instrument, with God the Father at the apex.

The altar frontal, and the wings of the altar on either side, are entirely covered by chased figurative reliefs by Andrea Busiri, executed in the early 19th century. These are not silver-gilt, but solid gold.

Access

The monastery is only open to the public on or around the feast-day of St Frances, which is March 9th. At other times, visiting is a privilege which is very hard to obtain.

Location:

Coord: [41°53′34.9″N 12°28′50.7″E](#)

Address:

Via del Teatro di Marcello

External links

[Roman Churches Wiki](#)

[Official diocesan web-page](#)

[English Wikipedia page](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

[Nolli map](#) (look for 986)

[Community website](#)

[Info.roma web-page](#)