

## SAINT CATHERINE'S CIVIC MUSEUM IN TREVISO

The architectonic complex was built on an interdicted land at the eastern limit of the urban walls of that time. The construction started in 1346, and the structure was to host the order of the "Servants of Mary" with the church dedicated to St. Catherine of Alexandria. In 1772 the convent was abolished and this led to the cease of all religious destinations in those spaces in 1806. The buildings, including the church, were used as military barracks and warehouses. This provoked serious tampering and alterations to the architecture and decorations, as well as to the loss of the artistic heritage and furnishings in the building.

After further damages inflicted by the bombings of 7th April 1944 and 10th March 1945, and upon the discovery, in those tragic circumstances, of the treasure of frescoes which had been hidden for centuries under anonymous plaster works which covered the walls, a new life began for the ancient structure of St. Catherine complex, which was crowned with restoration works aiming at transforming it to the main seat for the rich **archaeological and artistic collection of the civic museums in the city.**

In the present time the followings can be seen:

- the FRESCOES section in the church
- the ARCHEOLOGICAL section in the convent basement and ground floor
- the gallery of MEDIEVAL, RENAISSANCE AND MODERN ARTS on the convent 1<sup>st</sup> floor
- the 19<sup>th</sup> century PAINTING exhibition, with the Lorenzon collection, in the "Ala della Scuderia" (the Stable Wing)

TEMPORARY EXHIBITIONS are also held in the underground cloister

Until 1312, the Da Camino family, nobles of Treviso, used to live in this same place, slightly far from the city centre, near via Regia. They lived in a prince's palace with magnificent gardens facing the eastern walls of the city. The most famous troubadours and poets of that time, were protagonist in this famous court, kept by Gherardo Da Camino and his children Gaia, Rizzardo and Guecello. It is nearly certain that Dante Alighieri in his "Comedy", recalled all the members of the Da Camino family, starting exactly by the "good Gherardo". After Gherardo's death in 1306, his sons could not govern the Marca for a long time: Rizzardo was killed in a noblemen conspiracy. He was killed under the loggia of this palace, near the wall. In 1312, his successor Guecello, was obliged to flee the threats of the people's revolutions, when they assaulted the palace and devastated it. The palace was in ruins, with the interdiction to rebuild, until the end of 1346 when the "Servants of Mary", from Tuscan origin, and the last among the most important conventual orders, chose this place to build their convent and big church. They largely reused the ruins of the Da Camino palace in the new buildings.

## The church

It is a big single hall-nave, simply covered with a wooden-trussed roof. The gothic style can be clearly seen, especially in the three back chapels and in the high and narrow single-lancet windows.

The building of the Church was accomplished in two successive phases. The first phase began in 1346 and started at the apsidal area. This phase suddenly stopped in 1348 when the construction reached about half its present length. This interruption, which most probably was due to the serious crisis that followed the terrible “black plague” epidemic in that year, which is the same period that Boccaccio chose as the setting for his “Decameron”, led to the building of a temporary façade made of wooden planks. This detailed characteristic was also reproduced in the internal decoration, in the fresco which represents St. Catherine holding the miniature of the city of Treviso. The work restarted at the end of the fourteenth century and was completed at the beginning of the fifteenth century, when the building got its present dimensions.

Some other chapels were added, thanks to private initiatives. The chapel to the south, so called “*degli Innocenti*” (The Innocents) survived, while the ones to the north were demolished in the nineteenth century.

Splendidly enriched with frescoes, altars and funerary monuments that go back to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the big hall had a more austere aspect after the Tridentine reform in 1590: the medieval figures were covered with plaster, many monuments were eliminated, and false architectonic altars with frescoes were built and were integrated into an altarpiece painted on canvas.

During the Napoleonic requisition, especially during the Austrian era, the church was heavily transformed to simply become military depots: the movable heritage in it was lost, the apses were demolished and replaced by a new neoclassical façade, turned towards the back square. The interior of the building was divided into three levels by means of wooden intermediate floors with trusses that made holes into the walls and frescoes, simply to host the “military trains” depot. These gloomy conditions persisted until the salvage which started at the end of the World War II.

In the meantime, the church walls, embellished with remarkable works of art, like the “Madonna and Child” attributed to Gentile da Fabriano, and the annexed chapel called “*degli Innocenti*”, are an integral part of the museum of **Frescoes**. There is also the definitive musealisation of the unequalled cycle of the “Story of St. Ursula” by Tomaso da Modena, recovered thanks to a risky detachment intervention by Luigi Bailo in 1883, which took place in St. Margaret’s church which was being demolished.

### Story of St. Ursula by Tomaso da Modena

Apart from the remarkable fourteenth and fifteenth centuries frescoes restored in-situ on the walls themselves, this church houses the frames with the detached frescoes of the famous “Story of St. Ursula”, by Tomaso da Modena, one of the absolute masterpieces in Italian Art during the fourteenth century.

These frescoes were discovered in 1882 by abbot Luigi Bailo, in a chapel of the Treviso church of Santa Margherita degli Eremitani. It was a deconsecrated church, partially demolished, and used as a stable and military depot. Between incomprehension and general indifference, hindered and blocked by the demolishers, yet, thanks to the help of Treviso youngsters, Antonio Carlini and Girolamo Botter, and with very few means and the empirical use of the detachment technique, Bailo was able to miraculously salvage almost all of Tomaso’s masterpiece, and transferred the painted plaster on movable wooden frames. In this way, he was able to transport the whole cycle of the Story of St. Ursula and turn it into a museum, which housed also other paintings from the same church, for an astonishing total of about 120 square meters of detached frescoes. The frescoed images in the original chapel, were arranged on three walls: the two main ones were at the side and the other at the back, above the altar. Those grouped on the two lateral walls were the eleven narrative images of the cycle, laid out in pairs on three superimposed registers. The last scene, that of the Martyrdom, was an exception, since it alone occupied two-times the size and was placed at the bottom of the right-hand side wall. Above the two groups, along the vaulted ceiling, there were two compartments having the shape of Gothic lunette representing the Virgin annunciate and the annunciating Angel. The first compartment only has survived.

The two lateral sets were wholly surrounded by bands of geometric compartments and vegetal friezes with a great decorative impact.

The image of “Sant’Orsola e le compagne in gloria” (St. Ursula and her companions in glory) was on the part of the wall over the altar, stuck between two high lancet windows, together with other smaller images of which only few fragments have been preserved.

The scenes, according to the popular text “The Golden Legend” by Jacopo da Varazze, narrate the story of Ursula, Christian daughter the king of Britain. She was asked for marriage by the pagan son of the king of England, and accepted this proposal, on the condition that the prince was to receive baptism, and that she could go on a pilgrimage trip to Rome together with 11.000 virgin companions. The Pope, inspired by a dream, joined this procession and reached the city of Cologne, aiming at converting the Huns who occupied that city. Ursula, refused the Hun prince who desired her, and was martyred together with the Pope and her virgin companions. The painter was able to skilfully depict this dramatic story, and create this vividly involving tale, described in details, with the female figures, poses and the finest particulars in clothing and setting. This gives a exemplary model of gothic stylistic subtleties and elegance, and reveals, still in the first place, not only the various protagonists, but also their psychological expressions through their face and hand expressions, depending on an narrative mastery, and often, an absolutely unusual and modern humour. The execution probably goes back to 1355-58

## **The conventual complex**

The palimpsest of spaces, which can still be accessed from the west wing facing the city centre, through a small characteristic cross-vaulted avant-corps of the late Renaissance period, winds around two enchanting **cloisters**, which faithfully represent the fourteenth century building style. These cloisters obtained their simple and balanced characteristics in about the middle of the sixteenth century.

The “**small**” **cloister** has graceful dimensions, and has preserved traces of the pre-existent decorations of frescoed garden. The Renaissance-style porch plot with its columns of Istrian stones and cross-vaults, is surmounted on two sides by architraved lodges. The place as a whole, resounds a harmonious “Tuscany” style. From the southern part, one can still access the **ancient refectory** which is a vast rectangular hall with traces of frescoes that simulate archivolted niches.

The “**big**” **cloister** too extends on sides of about 40 meters, and is represented with simple Renaissance architectonic lines with curved arches and cross-vaults adopted in the middle of the sixteenth century. The upper architraved lodges, which reuse the columns of the original fourteenth century porch, are found above the porch plot, on two opposite sides.

After the present restoration, and at the level of its surface, a vast underground area was created to be used as temporary galleries.

Before the sixteenth century transformation, the original **Chapter House** was supposed to be constructed to the south of the **big cloister** which originally was connected to it by means of a **door with an ogival arch**, presently closed. We refer here to the **frescoed wall** that dates back to the late fourteenth century and beginning of the fifteenth century, which shows “Christ among the Virgin Mary and St. Catherine, and saints Filippo Benizi and Pellegrino Laziosi, founders of the Servite Order”, visible in a vast opening of entresols at the level of the area that leads to the archaeological section. After this, and along this side, there are quadrangular spaces with traces of mural frescoed decorations with motifs of simplified textile derivation. The **big staircase**, completed in 1620, with its steps of Istrian stones, suggestively wasted from the use and the vaulted covering, still leads to the first floor, completely restored after the middle of the sixteenth century. Then there is a long corridor, so-called “**long sleeve**”. The orthogonal intersection of a shorter median arm, determines the cross-shaped configuration of the composition, which is entirely characterised by an accurate domical vault on corbels. In the mid sixteenth century, the friars’ cells used to overlook this homogeneous space, which now hosts the gallery of the medieval, renaissance and modern art.

## **Gallery of Medieval, Renaissance and Modern art**

On the first floor of this ancient convent, one can enjoy an experimental setting up of a gallery dedicated to the **Medieval, Renaissance and Modern Art**. Among the important paintings and sculptures that go back to the period from the thirteenth century till the end of the fourteenth century, we find outstanding works of Maestro di Vigo, Giovanni Bellini, Donatelli, Cima da Conegliano, Girolamo

da Treviso il Giovane, Lorenzo Lotto, Tiziano, Jacopo da Bassano, Paris Bordon, Pozzoserrato, Alessandro Varotari, Rosalba Carriera, Andrea Brustolon, Sebastiano Ricci, Francesco Hayez. Together with this section there is also the temporary exhibition of a selection of works by the great **Twentieth Century** artists Gino Rossi and Arturo Martini

### **Setting up of nineteenth century paintings and the Lorenzon collection**

The “Scuderie” wing temporarily hosts part of the civic picture gallery of the **nineteenth century**, together with the significant **Lorenzon collection**. A large panorama of works by the Treviso painter Luigi Serena can be particularly noticed too.

### **Archaeological section.**

The interesting **Archaeological section** has been lately completed in the basement and on the ground floor of the ancient convent. It is provided with teaching equipment to give information about the history of the local collecting methods in the nineteenth century, and particularly about the new scientific data obtained from the recent excavations in the city of Treviso and its territory. Remarkable are the bronze works from Sile to the south of Treviso, like the figured casket which goes back to the fifth century A.D. found at the necropolis of Montebelluna, the findings and infrastructure of huts which were brought to light thanks to the excavations of the ancient area in Treviso; marvellous glassworks buried during the Roman era, and the funerary monuments and mosaic flooring.