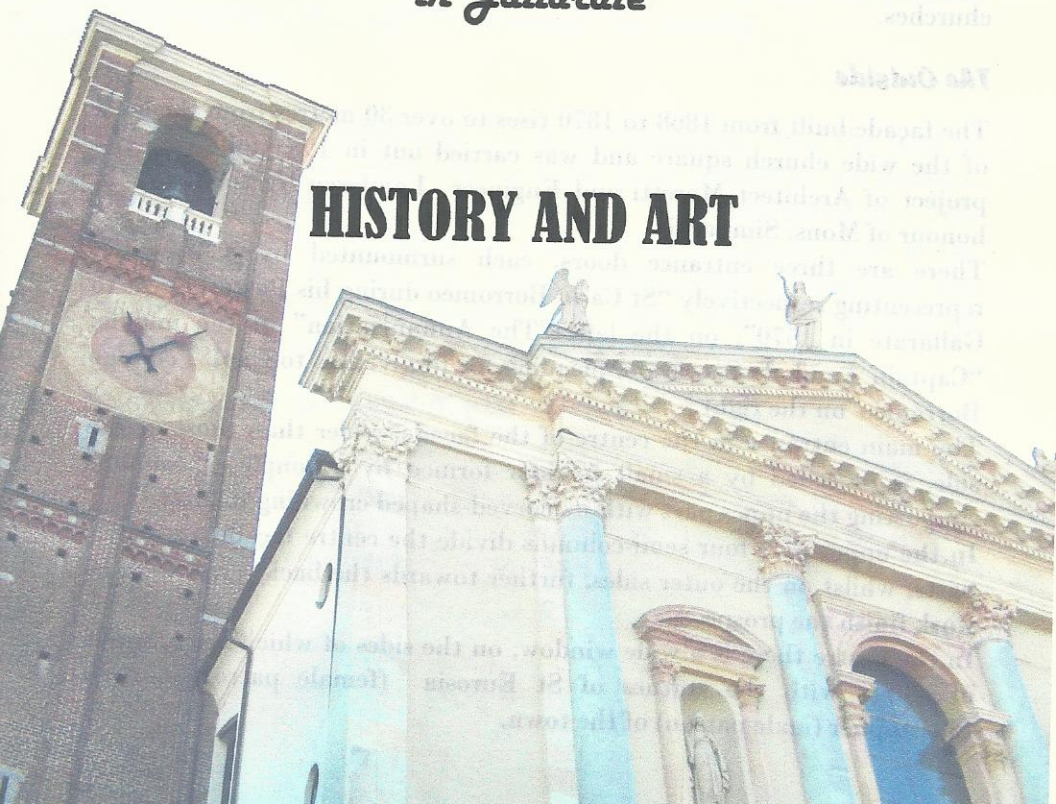




Basilica of St Mary of the Assumption

in Gallarate

HISTORY AND ART



The present day Basilica of St Mary of the Assumption rises on the area where up to the middle of the 19th century there was an old Prepositural church, probably built around the 14th century, following the deterioration of the old medieval castle, of which we know little, where there was probably a small Church dedicated to St Maria in Faidetto, quoted in a parchment of 974.

The present day temple, in neoclassical style, was built following the project of Architect Giacomo Moraglia, from 1856 to June 2nd 1861, the day of its solemn opening.

Only nine years after, however, following an interruption of the works caused also by the sudden death of the architect in 1860, the façade was finished under the direction of Architect Camillo Boito. On October 23rd 1870 it was consecrated by the Archbishop of Milan, Mon. Luigi Nazari Calabiana. In 1946, Pope Pius XII conferred on it the title of Minor Roman Basilica. In 1961, on the occasion of the first century of its opening, an accurate restoration of the church was begun also to satisfy new functional requirements. For the Jubilee in the year 2000, the Basilica of St Mary of the Assumption was included among the Jubilee churches.

The Outside

The façade built from 1868 to 1870 rises to over 30 metres from the level of the wide church square and was carried out in 1953 following the project of Architect Moretti and Engineer Lombezzi by the Town in honour of Mons. Simbardi.

There are three entrance doors, each surmounted by a bas-relief representing respectively "St Carlo Borromeo during his Pastoral visit to Gallarate in 1570", on the left; "The Annunciation" in the middle: "Captain Annibale Caccarana pleading for forgiveness to Card. Federigo Borromeo" on the right.

The main entrance in the centre of the façade, wider than those at the side, is preceded by a small corridor formed by a couple of columns supporting the upper part with its curved-shaped crowning realization. In the upper part four semi-columns divide the centre façade into three parts, whilst on the outer sides, further towards the back, vertical relief work finish the prospectus.

In the centre there is a wide window, on the sides of which are a couple of niches with the statues of St Eurosia (female patron) and St Christopher (male patron) of the town.

The upper support is a frame for all the façade, constituted by a solemn triangle-shaped crown on the summit of which there is the statue of the Virgin of the Assumption with two Angels worshipping Her.

The Bell Tower

On the left side of the façade the red brick Bell Tower rises 55 metres from street level to the Cross at the top, with the prospects subdivided by vertical elements and divided horizontally by three series of arches.

Begun in 1454, on the foundations of an ancient defensive tower, it was altered in the following centuries and made one floor higher, the one where today there is the belfry, very probably during the XVIII century.

Other frescoes can be still seen on the side overlooking the square, under the little arches floral motives and a human face are painted, all in bright colours. In the part underneath, there are two circle frescoes windows with sun rays containing the monogram of the name of Jesus, J.H.S., and the date 1494 on the ridges between the two globes. In the central part, which holds the face of the clock, some little round ceramic basins, a usage of the Middle Ages to increase the sense of red colour of the bricks, are put into the brickwork.

Some tomb stones from the years 100 BC to 100 AC, set in the bell tower, are testimony to the importance of Gallarate in Roman times.

The latest big restoration of the tower goes back to the beginning of the the Architect Giorgio Luini.

Entrance and Interior

The interior is awesome for its dimensions; the single nave is 89 metres long and 17.30 metres wide, lined by 16 Corinthian wall columns. In the centre it is dominated by the magnificent dome, one of the greatest in Lombard churches, with its diameter of 18 meters and its height rising to over 40 metres with its lantern in iron and glass. The mosaic floor designed by Architect Romeo Moretti dates back to 1925.

Along the side walls there are twelve niches containing the statues of the Apostles, and above them, just under the cornice, there are 18 high-reliefs illustrating various episodes of the life of the Virgin Mary.

On the horizontal frieze, there are 71 medallions in high-relief reproducing the faces of the Saints and the Martyrs of the Church. The plastic decorations are works by Carlo Maciachini, Celso Stocchetti and their assistants Giovanni Bertini, Antonio Soldini and Giacomo Sozzi.

Illumination is guaranteed by the sixteen polychromatic glass windows illustrating episodes in the lives of Christ, of the Virgin and the Saints, done at different times by various artists, in addition to the new electric system installed during the restoration works of 1961, and thus allowing the congregation to admire the Church in all its noble magnificence.

On the internal wall of the façade above the finely worked wooden inner door, there is a wonderful window showing "The Virgin's Assumption into Heaven", a work entrusted to the Lezner Company of Munich, Baviera. The pictorial decoration is by Luigi Cavenaghi and his pupils. The frescoes of the vault represent, starting from the entrance, "Justice", "Charity", and "The Coronation of the Virgin" near the Presbytery. The latter is probably the most exceptional of the frescoes of the Church, both for its dimensions and for the solemnity of its portrayal. Many are the symbols introduced here, such as the national colours for Mary's dress and the signs of the crucifixion, visible on the palm of the hand of the Father and not of Christ.

The four pendentives of the dome, placed above the supporting structure, represent, from left in clockwise direction - King David, Moses, Isaiah and Abraham; whilst the dome itself divided into eight parts, has in each one pictorial representations of Jesus Risen in the centre, followed in a clockwise direction, by the Saints: Apollonian, Calimerus, Catherine of Alexandria, Stephen, Lucy, Sebastian and Eurosia. Half way along the nave, the two pulpits are symmetric features in respect to the axis of the Church. Their bas-reliefs represent episodes in the lives of Jesus and Moses, and are both supported by structures ornate by statues representing the symbols of the Evangelists and the four Doctors of the Church. They are completed by their bases in red marble surmounted by two lions.

The Presbytery and the High Altar

The Presbytery, delineated by the area of the congregation by solemn stone balusters, is surmounted by a couple of symmetrical balconies where there is the impressive organ. The present instrument, built in 1987 following the phonic project of M^o Giancarlo Parodi, took the place of the previous "Balbiani" of the years 1922 and 1959. It has about 4,300 pipes, 62 registers and three keyboards.

Under the balcony on the right of the organ there is the paint of an unknown painter going back to the first half of the 17th century showing the Patron of the town, St Christopher. On the left side of the paint

particular is one of the rare portrayals of the ancient Church demolished in the mid 19th century.

The High Altar in the Presbytery, work of Odoardo Tabacchi, had been commissioned by the Ponti family, rich Gallarate industrialists. In a neoclassic chapel with eight Corinthian columns in green marble that support the hemispheric cup, there is a statue in white marble of Christ the Redeemer. At His side there are representations of "Penitence" on the left and "Innocence" on the right. The frontal in white marble, where the sacred theme is well described by Tabacchi, represents "The Deposition from the Cross". Of special note is St Mary in the act of offering the crown of thorns to a male figure identified as St John.

At the sides of the Presbytery, Cavenaghi's frescoes represent the "Eucharistic Miracle in Turin" on the left and "St Christopher" on the right.

To complete the Presbytery, along the sides of the apse, the choir stalls in wood are illuminated by three glass windows representing St Christopher on the left, St Carlo Borromeo on the right, whilst in the centre can be identified the Apostle Peter freed from prison with the help of an Angel.

Chapel of St Carlo Borromeo

At the sides of the nave there are six Chapels. Entering the Basilica, the first one on the left is dedicated to St Carlo Borromeo. Above the neoclassic Altar, can be distinguished a big picture figuring San Carlo Borromeo with the young St Luigi Gonzaga. The canvas, already having been restored, bears the signature of De Belly, 1876. Probably it is a copy of a painting which already existed and which was lost after the demolition of the ancient Church in the 19th century. Under the picture can be seen the statues of St Giovanni Bosco on the left, St Antonio of Padua and St Giuda Taddeo on the right. Beyond the vault on both sides there are frescoes by Cavenaghi representing the Doctors of the Church, St Gerolamo (on the right) and St Augustine (on the left).

Chapel of St Mary of the Assumption

The next big Chapel is dedicated to St Mary of the Assumption, a marble group of extraordinary and stupendous effect. The Altar, barocco, is probably one of the best works of the Gallarate sculptor Giuseppe Rusnati, Protostatuario of the Duomo of Milan and also a worthy architect who worked in Lombardy during the last thirty years of the

XVII century, until the beginning of the following century. This altar, commissioned to the artist on the 12th September 1697, was the biggest of those existing in the ancient Church. St. Mary rises above the statues after an angel has taken off the cover of the sarcophagus and moved the protective sacking. On the left side of the marble group, a child can be seen smiling and looking at the Virgin. This could be the son, who had died prematurely, of the sculptor Rusnati. The Chapel is illuminated by two windows representing the bust of His Holiness Pio XI and St Giovanni Maria Vianney. At the sides of the same can be found frescoes of Cavenaghi's presenting "Ester and Assuero" on the left and "Giuditta with Oloferne's head" on the right.

Chapel of St Joseph

The last Chapel on the left is dedicated to St Giuseppe. Placed in a niche, the statue of the Saint was carried out by the Varese Sculptor Odoardo Tabacchi. The group is inserted in a befitting frame of an altar of the classical forms and completed by two remarkable shrines placed at the sides of the statue.

In the upper part there are the frescoes presenting "St. Mark" on the right and "St. John" on the left.

Chapel of the Virgin Mary

This Chapel takes its name from the wooden simulacra dated back to the 18th century, which represents the Virgin placed in a niche between Corninzie columns, which hold an elegant trabeation with a high attic.

The iconography was kept in custody in the ancient Franciscan Convent, today seat of the Civic Museum in via Borgo Antico, and was transferred to the Prepositurale of that time in 1766 in an adventurous way. On the left wall of the Chapel there is a portrayal of the Annunciation, opera of the artist Leonardo Perrone. The frescoes of the extradors of the arch, complement of the decorations, represent the Evangelists St Luca (on the right) and St Matthew (on the left).

Chapel of the Crucifix

Opposite the Chapel of Our Lady of the Assumption, on the right side of the transept, there is the large Chapel of the Crucifix. The altar dates back to the end of the 600's and coming from the ancient Church, was a bequest of Pietro Dalla Porta who had brought it to Gallarate in 1803 from the town of Motta Visconti. It is in Baroque style and the altar is

enhanced by some marble angels and by an 18th century wooden simulacra of Christ, which probably came from the ancient church of St Lorenzo, demolished at the beginning of the 20th century. Under the altar there is the image of a Christ in papier-mâché of the 17th century coming from the nearby church of St Anthony. On the inside walls two pictures can be seen, St Carlo Borromeo (on the right), a work of the Gallarate artist Giuseppe Puricelli, and St Ambrosius, realized by Leonardo Perrone (on the left). On the outside walls can be seen frescoes of Cavenaghi's representing "St Ambrosius and Teodosio " and " St Helens finding of the Cross". Glass windows figuring St Teresa of Lisieux and St Margherita Maria Alacoque light the Chapel.

Chapel of St John the Baptist

The sixth and last Chapel is dedicated to St John the Baptist, with a valuable statue of Giovanni Duprè, a sculptor from Siena. On the lower part are the statues of "St Teresa del Bambino Gesù and of the Sacred Face" on the left and of "St Rita of Cascia" on the right. The frescoes, on the upper area present images of the Doctors of the Church, "St Gregorio Magno" (on the right) and "St Ambrogio" (on the left).

The New Vestry

This can be found on the right side of the Presbytery. It is also used to keep in custody and show some artistic pieces present in the Basilica. Amongst these: preserved in a crystal box, the baldachin of the '700, used they say, for the coronation of Napoleon I, King of Italy in the Milan Cathedral on May 26th 1805; and the bronze frontal with the representation of the Last Supper in its centre, where on the right of Christ there is a figure with female features.

The Chapel of the Sacred Name of Jesus

Reached from the left side of the presbytery and once used as a vestry, it is also called the "Wedding Chapel". On its altar there is a precious banner of the 18th century which figures the "Circumcision of Jesus", belonging to the Confraternity of the Santissimo Sacramento.

The New Baptistery

Built between the years 1939 and 1944 on a project of the Arch. Ambrogio Annoni, it presents the stupendous work of "The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River" by Nicolò Pisano.

The Crypt

Underneath the New Baptistery, there are the reliques of the Saints Almach and Theodore. Near them is the Shrine of those who died in War.

Other places which are part of the Minor Basilica of St Mary of the Assumption are :

- The Picture Gallery, started by Mons. Lodovico Gianazza at the end of the 1950's, in the rooms over the Vestry with the aim of protecting the artistic works of the Community and as the beginning of a Museum able to house ancient furnishings, sacred vestments, artistic and devotional patrimony, now under the interest and care of the present Provost, Mons. Ivano Valagussa.

- The Capitulary Archive where special and precious volumes and documents are protected, parts of which form part of the cultural paper patrimony of the Parish archives.