

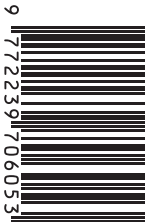
BOLOGNA

FOR CONNOISSEURS

ISSUE 6 SPRING 2014 ITALY €6 UK £4.99



artcuisinefestivalsdesign
filmmusicarchitecture
restaurantstheatrebars
museumsfashionhistory



9 772239 706053

Saint Petronius Cathedral

This cathedral, one of the largest churches in the world, houses artistic masterpieces admired around the globe. *The Felsinae Thesaurus*, or 'Treasure of Bologna', is the name of its recently completed major restoration project

by Roberto Terra



In Bologna, beneath ancient vaults, stands a monument that still resonates with the spirit of the Renaissance in the very city that inspired it. It embodies the pride of the community that built it over six centuries ago and that has preserved it devotedly until the present day.

St Petronius, one of Europe's largest basilicas, was erected in 1390. Rather than the Curia, it was the free community – the entire city – who realised what had long been a dream: a grand church, worthy of being dedicated to their patron saint, one that would express their identity and be a home for all Bolognese people. They worked hard to pay for its construction, through ad hoc laws and donations, and envisioned it as a structure vast enough to house the entire population of the time.

This achievement has deep symbolic roots. During the second half of the 14th century, the Bolognese people wished to emerge from a period of crisis and look hopefully towards the future with a common perspective: liberty and the common good. These were the basic values of the entire city.

They wanted the new basilica to be in the heart of the city, facing onto the great square that was already the cornerstone of public life. And so it was that they solemnly founded the building and blessed the first stone. Parting from traditional cathedral construction, that first stone bore the city's coat of arms.

Work began on the façade rather than the apse, on the south side of the square. This was the only side free of important buildings, occupied instead by basic housing, shops, towers and a few small churches. These were expropriated and knocked down to make room for the new basilica. This meant that the church would not face east, which was what liturgical law usually required. But this was done deliberately, to position the massive, stately structure alongside the main centres of civic life, as well as among governmental,



MAZZANTI MEDIA



ANDREA VENTURA - CAVINA TERRA ARCHITETTI



MARCO BERTI - CAVINA TERRA ARCHITETTI



MAZZANTI MEDIA

arts-based, educational, and trade buildings, in order to enhance them. The church was modelled on monasteries: a sheltered yet open place, a space for sacred, daily unity.

So the desire to create a worthy and imposing seat for the cult of Petronius became an extraordinary urban revolution and an ambitious, unprecedented undertaking in the city.

Construction was stepped up and continued for many decades until it was time to erect a large dome where the nave, transept and apse met. However, it was

never completed, and in 1663 the building was closed up. Later on, with a dose of healthy realism and a more likely aim for the project, it was eventually finished. The old, unfeasible plan was set aside, and the cathedral took the shape we see today.

The façade was adorned with a much-celebrated series of sculptures, which are not merely decorative but depict a Renaissance narrative. But even this final stage was not completed – and the top never received its marble covering.

St Petronius may be an unfinished work,

but it continues to intrigue in modern times. It is viewed as an evocative and highly significant symbol of the city's history. But it's not just its legacy that is of interest; consider the aesthetics, which are characterised by the vivid contrast between the materials – the refined marbles and rough finishes. No one has described it more poetically than Giosuè Carducci, who as early as the late 19th century sang its praises. When yet another proposal to complete the façade of the basilica was made, he openly declared himself against

it. His opinion was visionary and extremely contemporary, as he deemed it 'opportune and licit to leave the famous monument as it is, being that it is the result of history, thought and Italian art'.

Although unfinished, the basilica still stands in the city today with a harmoniously imposing air – an effect created by perfect geometric shapes that directly reference the equilibrium of the movement of the celestial spheres. The foundation, height, lines of symmetry and nave are inscribed in triangles, squares and hexagons – making



PAOLO RIGHI - MERIDIANA IMMAGINI

up a perfect circle. Its grandeur is apparent not only in the extraordinary size of the structure, but also when it is viewed up close, which reveals an elaborate beauty, especially in the specific details. Among these are the stone and brick base, the angular pillars and the large windows. These were designed by the first architect, Antonio di Vincenzo, who was an ingenious interpreter of a late Gothic period that was

heading towards new horizons. It is an elegant and refined language of harmonious proportions and soft compositions that would both charm the ancients and speak to the moderns – even to Frank Lloyd Wright, a master of contemporary architecture. When he visited Bologna he was so struck by it that he elected it the aesthetic paradigm of the sometimes veiled beauty of the city.

The three large doors are the façade's

masterpiece. Their iconographic message – a true and genuine sculpted gospel – has for centuries greeted visitors upon the threshold as they prepare to enter this sacred place.

The same message is conveyed inside the church by the vast, yet welcoming space, below the unique vaults and the broad span that make the height of the ceiling less dizzying, enthralling yet orientating visitors.

Throughout its evolution, St Petronius and the surroundings have always been the main artistic and cultural centre of Bologna. This is an area where masterpieces were made and from which they spread, destined to embellish not just the basilica but the entire city.

Each artistic period is represented in the works of masters such as Simone dei Crocifissi, Giovanni da Modena, Jacopo della

sundial traced on the floor, dating back to 1576 and enlarged in 1665.

Under these vaults, princes, sovereigns and popes were greeted and saints preached. They also hold the remains of illustrious figures such as Elisa Bonaparte, sister of Napoleon. St Petronius is the centre of public life and the seat of extraordinary events that testify to Bologna's role as the city that was at the crossroads between the Mediterranean, Rome and Europe. Many events here defined an era, for instance, the coronation of Charles V in 1530, three years after the sacking of Rome, or the extraordinary sessions of the Council of Trent in 1547.

Yearned for by the people of the city of Bologna, the Basilica of St Petronius is the crystal-clear expression of the culture and



CAVINA TERRA ARCHITETTI

Quercia, Francesco del Cossa, Ercole de' Roberti, Jakob Griesinger da Ulm, Amico Aspertini, Alfonso Lombardi, Parmigianino, Michelangelo, Baldassarre Peruzzi, Vignola, Palladio and many others. It continues with contemporary artist Giacomo Manzù. The talent of each has left a lasting mark.

The treasures housed in St Petronius are not merely limited to aspects of the figurative arts, but also encompass fields still thriving today. These include music –for instance, the archive of the musical chapel and the antique organs (1471) – and the applied arts, with valuable liturgical vestments, choir books, jewels and reliquaries. They also include technical disciplines and science, with the recently installed Foucault's pendulum and the large

the religious and civil tradition of a city that has in fact been named 'Petronian' after its ancient bishop and patron. One of the largest churches in the world, it houses artistic masterpieces admired around the globe, and is first and foremost the place that symbolises Bologna – the pride and expression of its identity.

The year 2013 marked the 350th anniversary of the completion of the basilica's construction. To commemorate the anniversary, the Council of Maintenance set up a project to restore it entirely, in order to preserve the most precious and beautiful thing the city possesses in terms of arts, spirituality, history and culture for the next generation. The name of the project is *Felsinae Thesaurus* (the 'Treasure



FACTUM ARTE DESARROLLOS DIGITALES (2)

Polittico Griffoni by Francesco del Cossa and Ercole de' Roberti (1472–1473)

of Bologna'), echoing the reference to St Petronius's reliquaries that is inscribed on the memorial slab set in the outer wall of the chapel dedicated to him. The restoration schedule was broken down into a series of special interventions, which supplemented the daily activities that have always been carried out to preserve the building and the works it houses.

Targeting the parts most badly affected due to the deterioration of materials and structures, the project included completion

of the restoration of the façade in 2013. The maintenance work, which was delicate and complex, restored both the brick wall and the extensive stone covering characterised by the precious sculptures around the *porta magna* by Jacopo della Quercia (1426–1438), and the smaller details, including works by the most important artists of the 16th century.

The restoration work combined both tried-and-tested methods and innovative techniques. There was a particular emphasis



on sustainability during the ongoing process as results were verified and gradual progress was made throughout the various stages. The worksite was entrusted to the best European experts in the field of restoration, bodies such as l'Opificio delle Pietre Dure from Florence. The works were investigated, studied and researched by specialists and the data gathered on the state of preservation was painstakingly catalogued. A full, three-dimensional relief was made of the large doors – its completion marked

one of the most extensive documentations of sculptures of this type ever, following in the tradition of other plaster casts of Jacopo della Quercia's *porta magna*, which were churned out starting in the 19th century (like the one kept in the collections of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London).

The restoration was an extraordinary cultural event for the city, a unique chance to get to know the monument and to relaunch the community values from which it originated and which it embodies.



ANDREA VENTURA - CAVINA TERRA ARCHITETTI



Among the most stimulating scientific projects developed during the restoration was the virtual reconstruction of the *Polittico Griffoni*, an extraordinary work from the 1400s. It was once housed in the chapel of the same name at St Petronius, but was taken apart and dispersed during the 1700s. Today, the surviving parts, consisting of sixteen precious painted wood panels by Francesco del Cossa and Ercole de' Roberti, are kept in nine different museums in Rome, Milan, Venice, Ferrara, Varese, Rotterdam, Paris, Washington and London. They will be copied, reassembled and put back in their original setting for the first time for over two centuries.

Thus, *Felsinae Thesaurus* has defined itself as a project with real significance for Bologna, linking up with a program of exciting cultural initiatives. Exhibitions, conferences, conventions, concerts and shows are also taking place under the aegis of the Honorary Committee (which includes representation from the main city institutions) and with the support of the Friends of St Petronius Association. ♦

www.felsinaethesaurus.it

