

# Tempietto



King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain put up the funds to construct a devotional chapel on the mythical site of St Peter's martyrdom, and Bramante was chosen as the architect in 1500. The result was the famous Tempietto, begun in 1502 and completed in 1512. This immediately became the focus of attention, more from architectural pilgrims than devotional ones. The church was made titular by Pope Sixtus V in 1587.

## History

In the first cloister of the former Franciscan friary you will find the Tempietto, a chapel dedicated to the martyrdom of St Peter the Apostle. Its full correct name is the Cappella della Crocifissione di San Pietro Apostolo, but everybody refers to it by its nickname of "Little Temple". It was built here because of the legend that this was the site of St Peter's martyrdom, but this myth has long since been abandoned.

Bramante was commissioned by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain to build it in 1500, and he began work in 1502 or 1503. The completion date was 1509 for the edifice, and 1512 for the interior decoration. The building is inspired by ancient Graeco-Roman architecture, and is "a simple, perfectly proportioned miniature Classical temple, the first true Renaissance building in Rome". As a result it has a very high profile in the architectural sub-culture, and gets many discerning visitors.

St Ignatius of Loyola often came here to celebrate Mass, but the Tempietto is not of much devotional interest nowadays.

There have been restorations in the 17th century, when the crypt stairs were provided, and in the early 20th century when the dome was sheathed in lead. It was tiled beforehand.

## **Exterior**

In Classical architectural terms the edifice is a peripteral tholos, which means that it has a central cylindrical room or cella with a dome on top, surrounded by a colonnade. Here, the colonnade has sixteen Doric columns on a ring plinth, itself elevated on three ring steps. The steps are interrupted round the back by a solid balustrade and some railings, which protect the drop into the area occupied by the stairs down into the crypt. The columns have square impostes on their capitals and support a full entablature. This has a frieze which is decorated by alternate metopes and triglyphs, the former bearing Christian symbols. Tassels hang below the triglyphs into the architrave. The ambulatory of the colonnade is flat-roofed, and the roofline is guarded by a continuous balustrade with pinched balusters which stand on the cornice.

The cella has Doric pilasters on its external wall, mirroring the columns. Three of the cardinal points have rectangular doorways (the fourth is occupied by the altar), the diagonal points have windows and the other wall sections have eight round-headed niches with scallop shells in their conchs. The main doorway is larger than the other two, is accessed by steps inserted into the ring plinth, and has a molded marble door-cass with a floating cornice. A dedicatory inscription on a rectangular tablet is above the latter. The flat ceiling of the ambulatory is coffered, with rosettes.

The second Story, above the colonnade, amounts to the drum of the dome. It has sixteen blind pilasters (no capitals), edged with double molding. These support an entablature without an architrave, but with modillions (little brackets) on its cornice. Above the cornice is a very low attic plinth on which the hemispherical lead dome sits. This has a stone finial which is intricately decorated with heraldic shields and topped with a ball, the stonework here has eroded.

The exterior of the second Story has four windows at the cardinal points (the one over the entrance has heraldic stained glass). Four rectangular niches are at the diagonal points, and eight round-headed niches matching those below.

On the entablature of this Story over the entrance is a very ornate shield of the kings of Spain.

## **Interior**

The Tempietto has two stories internally, the upper one being the actual chapel and the lower one being the crypt. These have separate entrances, the one to the crypt being round the back.

The chapel has eight Doric pilasters flanking the four windows, and these support an entablature with triglyphs on its frieze. Above the cornice is the dome drum, with four windows and four rectangular niches. The dome itself has eight wide ribs arranged to give a Maltese cross effect, with the background in blue with golden stars. It sits on a second cornice.

The four windows have arched niches above them which contain statues of the Evangelists. Two of these are topped by decayed fresco labels giving their names, which are in blue and dark red (the rest of the interior is in grey render). The altar has a statue of St Peter in an apsidal niche with a scalloped conch, within a double Doric archway (one archway set within the other).

The plinth of the statue has a bas-relief of the Crucifixion of St Peter, featuring a naked soldier

with a prominent bare behind. The sculptures are allegedly 17th century, by Giovanni Francesco Rossi.

The floor is Cosmatesque, a style which in the early 16th century was enjoying a revival in Rome. Note the aperture looking down into the crypt, which is part of the pattern. This seems to have been a devotional feature, as the corresponding hole in the crypt floor was taken to be the exact site of the crucifixion.

## **Crypt**

The crypt is now accessed by stairs round the back, but apparently was only accessible by ladder when the Tempietto was originally built. Unfortunately it is not accessible to visitors, but you can look through the doorway.

It is much more richly decorated than the main chapel. The floor is laid geometrically in polychrome marble, and the wall is revetted in polychrome in an ancient Roman style. There is richly detailed stucco work saucer-domed ceiling, in monochrome with figurative medallions and panels as well as much vine-scrolling. This work also covers the walls flanking the entrance, over which is a dedicatory inscription and a bas-relief of Our Lady with Franciscan saints.

The altar has a pair of grey marble Doric columns supporting a horizontal cornice, and contains a small statue of St Peter. The altar frontal is edged with geometric pietra dura work around a dedicatory inscription.

The central hole in the floor, the putative site of the crucifixion of St Peter, doubles as a sump to get rid of rainwater draining into here.

## **Access**

The Tempietto has different opening times. The following is from an unofficial source:  
Open Tuesday to Saturday, 9:30 to 12:30, 14:00 to 16:30 (16:00 to 18:00 summer).  
Closed Sundays and Mondays.

## **Links**

[Roman Churches Wiki](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

["De Alvariis" gallery on Flickr -Tempietto](#)

[Video on Tempietto at Smarthistory](#)

[Youtube video on Tempietto](#)