Famous Cathedrals of Italy Dedicated to Mary
Part One
By
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Anyone who has ever travelled to Italy has probably wondered how many Cathedrals exist in this one country. Almost every town seems to have had its own at one time or another. Believe it or not, there are actually 445 still in existence in Italy, some of them very famous and beautiful. In fact, 23 of them have been declared UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and 11 of those were dedicated to The Blessed Mother!! We will examine one of the most famous and beautiful in this article and follow up with some of the others later.

Perhaps the most famous of all the Cathedrals in Italy (not counting St. Peter's Basilica in Rome) is that of the city of Florence: Santa Maria del Fiore (of the Flower, in honor of the city of Florence itself). It was begun in 1296 in the Gothic style by Arnolfo di Cambio but completed in 1436 at the height of the Renaissance by Filippo Brunelleschi, a master goldsmith.

At the time it was the largest Cathedral in Europe. Like most other such sites, it was built with a companion Baptistry and a Bell Tower (Campanile) on the same square. The Baptistry alone holds some of the most memorable Byzantine mosaics of its time (artists unknown) and two sets of bronze doors constructed by Lorenzo Ghiberti, another master goldsmith, beginning

in 1401. The Bell Tower begun by Giotto in 1334 was completed by Francesco Talenti in 1359. The Cathedral itself took more than a century to be completed, in part because of the "Black Death" which struck Florence and much of Italy in 1348.

The interior of the Cathedral was constructed in the "Basilica" style adapted from the law courts of Ancient Rome: that is, it consisted of one large rectangular-shaped chamber in the center, supported by columns on both sides and arcades for side chapels, confessionals, etc. At one end was an apse where the main altar was positioned. The Cathedral of Florence was also constructed with two side apses adjacent to the main apse to create the form of a crucifix. All three apses were eventually topped with domes designed by Brunelleschi.

The most striking aspect of the Florentine Cathedral is its dome (from which the popular name "Duomo" is derived). Unlike domes constructed in the Roman style as circular reproductions of the arch with an opening in the roof (the Pantheon), Brunelleschi decided to construct an egg-shaped dome over the main apse that would not crumble to the earth when completed. He used a "lantern" instead of a hole in the center of the dome, and a cross-pattern of bricks to balance the forces of gravity against each other. In fact, he was the first to build a dome within a dome to stabilize the structure. (You can still climb the stairs between the two domes to get to the lantern.)

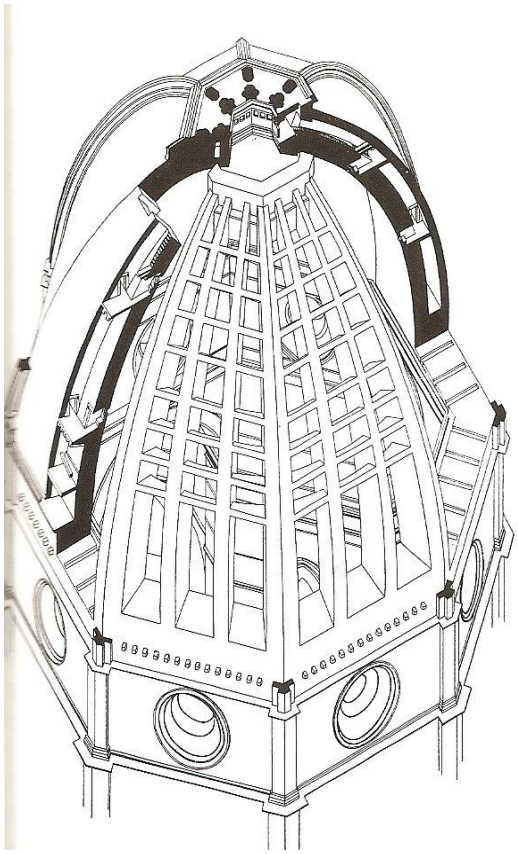
One of the reasons Brunelleschi decided on this design was because the drum itself was 140 feet wide and at this time trees could not be found that were large enough to cover an area of this size. So he built a skeleton of eight large ribs extending from the angles of the octagon to the base of the lantern, alternating with eight pairs of thinner ribs with nine sets of horizontal ties connecting both sets of ribs. He then placed two shells around the skeleton for support. When the dome had reached a third of its final height in 1425, Brunelleschi chose brick rather than heavier stone to make sure that the lower ring could support the next one up. When it was completed in 1436, the oculus or hole in the top, had to be locked down to prevent the ribs from springing outward and bursting open the walls. His solution was to position a heavy lantern atop the hole to keep the dome in place.

Brunelleschi also designed the smaller domes above the two side apses instead of flying buttresses (Gothic) to disperse the weight of the major dome.

There is a funny story told about Brunelleschi's reply when he first presented his idea about the size and shape of the dome to the council in Florence. When asked how he intended to get an egg to stand on its end, he brought forth an egg and challenged his challengers to see if they could do it. When they failed, he took the egg, tapped it on one end, and, "Behold!" it stood up.

As a goldsmith, Brunelleschi was also among the first to understand three-dimensional perspective as an instrument for depicting objects in two dimensions. Working side by side with Brunelleschi, Ghiberti also shifted from the Gothic mandorla technique used by Pisano on the first set of doors for the Baptistry, to that of the three dimensional perspective proposed by Brunelleschi. Some years later, when Michelangelo first saw the doors designed by Ghiberti, he called them "The Gates of Paradise."

It is not an exaggeration to say that, without Brunelleschi's inventiveness, neither the Dome of the Vatican (by Michelangelo), nor that of the US Congress, would have achieved this design.



Brunelleschi's Dome

One plaque from Ghiberti's "Gates of Paradise," demonstrating the use of three dimensional perspective.

Gothic Style of Pisano

Giotto’s Bell Tower

The Baptistry of St. John

Byzantine Mosaics of the Baptistry's interior