

IL DUOMO DI BOLZANO

It is Bolzano's chief landmark and at the same time a gem of Romanesque and Gothic architecture, a symbol of the sustained and fruitful meeting of southern and northern influences in Bolzano. The subject is of course the Assumption of Our Lady Cathedral, showpiece of the town's medieval centre and main square, the Walther Square.

The cathedral is best approached from the square. The ground plan was laid in early Christian times, a rectangular-shaped church was later built in Romanesque style and consecrated in 1180, dedicated to the Assumption of Our Lady.

The architects and master builders, the Schiche brothers from Augsburg gave the cathedral its Gothic appearance in the 14th century, built of reddish sandstone from Val Gardena and yellow sandstone from the south of South Tyrol. The gargoyles reminiscent of Notre Dame in Paris are artistically chiselled and masterworks of High Gothic architecture.

One of the finest achievements of the art of Gothic stonemasonry is the steeple, completed in 1517 by the Swabian Hans Lutz von Schussenried. He built a square structure with ornamental tracery on top of the Romanesque base and then a six-cornered ascent to the belfry. This is surmounted by artistically worked flying buttresses with figures.

The alternating structure of lancet windows, blind and fenestrated tracery conveys the impression of lightness. Each element tapers and produces thereby an impression of depth. When you stand directly in front of the cathedral and look upwards, the tower with its chiselled, filigreed steeple, seemingly placed on top like a helmet, appears endlessly high as it soars up to the sky. Apparently the people of Bolzano were afraid to sound the bells for decades, for fear that the steeple might collapse.

An entrance called the "Leitacher Törl" is situated on the side facing the town square. It is one of the finest High Gothic portals in the whole of Tyrol, decorated with the sign of a privilege conferred on the owner of the Leitach vineyard. He was the only winegrower allowed to sell wine there on the Sunday after Whitsun. Among the figures portrayed, the most remarkable are of two vineyard workers, a man and a woman both dressed in typical Bolzano costume.

Beside this entrance, directly beneath the tower there is a fresco dating from 1400. The vivid portrayal and depth of perspective reveal that it was painted by a pupil of Giotto's. Next to it is a picture of a pilgrim, recognisable by his walking stick, pilgrim's bag and the large money pouch on his belt (cynics say that you always needed a large money bag to visit Bolzano).

Before entering the church through the Romanesque main portal you pass a Madonna portrait named "Plappermuttergottes", painted in strong white, red and black by Friedrich Pacher. According to legend mothers whose children suffered from speech difficulties took them to this picture, after leaving a few coins in the offertory box. A few later the children began to speak.

Inside the cathedral, visitors are immediately struck by the expansive vaulted three-nave interior, built at the end of the 14th century. It is the first Gothic church with a long central nave and two side naves built in the form of a cross in the history of architecture.

The most arresting feature of the cathedral's interior is the pulpit, executed around 1507 by Hans Lutz von Schussenried. It is supported by a single pillar with a round base and is decorated with lizards. Four plaques on its hexagonal pedestal depict cherubs with stonemason's tools, while the pulpit itself is decorated with reliefs of the four Church Founders with the four evangelists.

Originally the entire interior of the church was frescoed, though only a few portrayals of saints remain, painted around 1360 - 1370 by pupils of Giotto.

In addition to the baroque high altar and the smaller side chapels with winged altarpieces from the 17th century, two further sculptures are worthy of mention: the Madonna with child in the chapel behind the high altar and a Pietà by Hans von Judenburg from the year 1424.

The so-called "Pfaffentörl" or "Priests door" is located at the back of the cathedral facing the Pfarr-Platz where the graveyard used to be. The cathedral's oldest painting is to be found in the lunette above this entrance: a crucifixion scene dating from around 1300.

At the foot of the tower the cathedral holds a literal treasure, the "Treasury Museum" containing one of the finest and richest collections of sacred items in all Tyrol, dating from the medieval and baroque periods.

A 136 centimetre-high golden monstrance, 13 kilos of gold-coated solid silver depicting the Cathedral's Gothic bell tower from 1490, precious vestments and an array of statues made of solid gold and silver, sculptures, vestments from Avignon from 1340, breviaries and bibles from the renaissance period, parchments and frescoes dating from medieval times to 1800, as well as a rare collection of relics.

In addition to traditional exhibits of goldsmith's art, vestments, gonfalons, a visit to the museum also opens pages of the town and its surroundings' history.