

SAN DOMENICO

The Dominican church of Siena, containing relics and a contemporary portrait of St Catherine of Siena. One of the most important churches (seen below from across one of Siena's many valleys).



The Dominicans, like the Franciscans, liked to build huge barn-like one-aisled churches, and San Domenico is one such, an enormous structure of red brick, begun in the 13th century and altered at various times since, following disasters such as fires, an earthquake, and occupation by the Spanish soldiery in the 16th century. It is one of Siena's most prominent buildings, visible from odd spots all over the city.

Inside, on the right at the back, is the only portrait of St Catherine painted in her lifetime, or at any rate shortly after her death by someone who knew her, the artist Andrea Vanni (c. 1332-1413). She holds her symbol, a lily, and wears Dominican robes - she was a tertiary member of the Order. An unknown admirer is portrayed at the bottom of the painting.

In the middle of the right side of the church, the Chapel of St Catherine harbours her mummified head (looking surprisingly like her portrait) in an elegant marble tabernacle (carved by Giovanni di Stefano in 1496) over the altar. But it is the frescoes, mainly by Sodoma (1477-1549) that are the artistic glory of this chapel. On the left side of the altar, Sodoma shows St Catherine mystically swooning, and on the right in ecstasy, with various

divine and holy personages watching from above. On the left wall of the chapel, St Catherine is interceding for the life of a young nun who has repented; on the right wall (this fresco is by Francesco Vanni, painted a bit later in 1596) she is exorcising a woman possessed by a devil.

Beyond St Catherine's chapel, over the steps leading down to the crypt (usually closed), there is an attractive fragment of fresco attributed to the young Pietro Lorenzetti. Further on, there hangs a Nativity by Francesco di Giorgio Martini (1439-1502), set in a typically romantic ruin.

Most of the chapels in the transept contain little of interest. But in the first chapel to the right of the altar there is a colourful triptych by Matteo di Giovanni (1435-95), of the Madonna and Child with St Jerome (with his lion) and St John the Baptist. Both saints stand in a desert landscape, contrasting oddly with the sumptuous carpeted throne of the central panel, crowded with richly clothed angels bearing flaming torches.

A most attractive marble tabernacle and angels by Benedetto di Maiano (c. 1475) stands on the main altar, distressingly overwhelmed by the garish modern stained glass and huge golden candlesticks.

In the second chapel to the left of the main altar, on the right wall, the painting of St Barbara enthroned is well worth attention. This is also by Matteo di Giovanni, perhaps his greatest work, with lovely serene Botticelli-style faces. It is rare to see a mere saint given such prominent treatment. St Barbara carries her emblem, a tower. Note also the Adoration of the Magi above. Opposite, a Madonna Enthroned by the less distinguished Benvenuto di Giovanni (1436-1518) is in the old-fashioned gloomy Sienese style, all the figures - except the smiling Child - looking thoroughly anxious.

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