

SAN NICCOLÒ AL CARMINE, ARCO DELLE DUE PORTE and PORTA SAN MARCO

A smallish out-of-the-way Church with a magnificent Beccafumi, near two of Siena's ancient gates.

In the Pian dei Mantellini, San Niccolò al Carmine (also known as Santa Maria del Carmine) is the church of Siena's Carmelite monastery. Apart from the big handsome belltower, the red-brick building itself is undistinguished, but the paintings inside are worth a look if you are nearby (Pian dei Mantellini can be reached by going up via di Citta and then on – it turns first into via Stalloregio and then Pian dei Mantellini after going through a gate in the old city wall. There are number of ancient palazzi on the way).

On the way to the church, in via Stalloregio on the left, high on the wall of a building on the corner of via del Castelvecchio, there is a tabernacle with a painting by Domenico Beccafumi, known as the “**Madonna del Corvo**”, or Madonna of the Crow. Legend has it that a crow brought the 1348 plague to Siena and that it was at this spot that it fell down dead. Unfortunately, it is difficult to see the painting through the protective glass. By the gateway out into Pian dei Mantellini, there is another another 16th century tabernacle with Madonna and saints. Tabernacles of the Virgin were much favoured as the Sienese believed that she gave the city her special protection. The gateway, known as the **Arco delle Due Porte** (Arch of two doors) because it has double arches (one blocked for centuries), is in Siena's oldest (11th century) wall built around the original nucleus of the City (as the city expanded, new outer walls had to be built). There is another tabernacle with Virgin and Child, allegedly the oldest in the city, outside the gateway to the left of the blocked arch.



Arco delle Due Porte, the very ancient double gateway at the end of via Stalloregio

The entrance to the red-brick **San Niccolò al Carmine** is on the side of the church. Over the altar

opposite the entrance, there is a huge painting by Beccafumi, Siena's chief mannerist painter (1485--1551), of St Michael the Archangel pushing Lucifer and the rebellious angels down to hell, with a fierce-looking God the Father urging him on from above (there is another version of this scene in the Pinacoteca). It has Beccafumi's usual good light effects, unfortunately difficult to appreciate in the gloom of the church.



To the right is an unfortunately damaged fresco of the Assumption with a choir of heavenly angels, attributed to the early 15th century artist Benedetto di Bindo. The angels are managing to hover in a most relaxed and convincing way, playing a variety of instruments, around the now obliterated figure of the Virgin being assumed into heaven. At the bottom left of the fresco, on one side of her empty tomb, St Lucy is carrying her eyes on a plate (one of the various attempts at martyring her involved her eyes being torn out, subsequently to be miraculously restored), and St Catherine of Alexandria stands on the other side. The figure in front of the Tomb is Doubting Thomas, to whom according to legend the Virgin dropped her belt to prove that it was really her going up to heaven.



Detail from Benedetto di Bindo's Assumption, showing the Virgin's belt dropping into the hands of the sceptical apostle Thomas

A door on the other side of the Beccafumi leads into the Chapel of the Holy Sacrament. Over the altar, there is a birth of the Virgin by Sodoma (painted about 1537), with a particularly large bevy of women fussing around the newly delivered mother. It has a handsome 16th century marble surround.

Back in the main church, next to the door into the chapel, there is 13th century byzantine-style Madonna and Child - the "Madonna dei Mantellini" inset into a larger and later painting by Francesco Vanni. The church also has a handsome 17th century polychrome marble main altar.

Next to the church, at No 44, is the old cloister of the convent. It is now part of Siena University, but still retains early 18th century frescoes illustrating Carmelite life by **Giuseppe Niccola Nasini**.

To the right of the entrance to the cloister, there stands the **Palazzo Incontri**, a large neo-classical structure built around 1800.

PORTA SAN MARCO and CAPPELLA della MADONNA del ROSARIO

Beyond the church and to the right, the via di San Marco leads down to Porta San Marco, a city gate built as part of the fifth and last wall round Siena. It dates from the 1320s, like the neighbouring Porta Tufi. It is one of Siena's least impressive entrances with no system of double gates. It was strengthened with a military fortification by Baldassare Peruzzi in the 16th century, but this has been demolished. It is also known as the Porta delle Maremme, as the road from it leads towards Grosseto and the Maremma region.



Porta San Marco from outside the city walls

A few hundred yards back up via San Marco, there is the charming baroque façade of the Cappella della Madonna del Rosario. This little chapel was built in the 1650s and gained its late baroque façade in the 1720s when the money from a Palio win was used by the local contrada – the Snail or *Chiocciola* – to enlarge it. The contrada seems subsequently to have abandoned the church and it was deconsecrated in 1820. But in recent years to has been brought back into use as a “House of the Horse” (*Casa del cavallo*) to stable the Snail horse in the run-up to the Palio, with young men of the contrada guarding it day and night to ensure that it is not nobbled by a rival.



Cappella della Madonna del Rosario

1980s; revised 2015 and 2016.