

SANT' AGOSTINO

The church of the Augustinian order with a dull exterior but some interesting paintings inside.

It can be reached by going downhill from the Pinacoteca along via di San Pietro. Not far from the Campo car-park. It used to be closed except for special occasions, but is now open from 10.30 to 12.30 in the morning and also a couple of hours in the afternoon.

This is the church of the Augustinian order. It was not a preaching order like the Franciscans and Dominicans, so it is not so huge and barnlike as San Francesco and San Dominico. But it is still a large structure on a pleasantly shaded square, the Prato (field) of Sant' Agostino.

The church took some 50 years to build, over the last half of the 1200s. It was damaged by fire in 1747 and the interior was restored in neo-classical style with lots of coloured marble and pillars. The outside of the church is difficult to see because of the surrounding trees, but as it is one of the dullest brick façades in Siena this does not really matter.

The church is chiefly of interest for a handful of interesting works of art, well sign-posted. In a chapel immediately to the right of the altar, there is a charming 15th century wooden statue of the Madonna and child, painted and gilded. Further along, in the chapel of the Bichi family, are two rather good grisaille (monochrome) frescoes by that most versatile painter/sculptor/architect of 15th century Siena, Francesco di Giorgio Martini (1439-1501). The rather damaged ceiling paintings are by Luca Signorelli (c.1450-1523). The Bichi family were obviously rich enough to employ the best artists of the day. The same two painters also painted three panels to go over the altar, which are now in the Louvre or Berlin. All of the frescoes in the chapel were covered in plaster when the church was given its neo-classical makeover after the fire, and were re-discovered in the last century. The chapel also has some rare 15th century majolica floor tiles, now rather damaged, but they must once have been wonderful.



Half-way along the right aisle, a door leads into the Piccolomini chapel. At one end there is a large painting by Sodoma (1477-1549), of the Adoration of the Magi, a rather muddled composition that is not one of his best works. Much more interesting is the small fresco in the lunette opposite by Ambrogio Lorenzetti (c.1290-1348). This is a tiny Maestà with the Virgin surrounded by saints each holding his or her symbol. The fresco was covered over when the Piccolomini family put an altar in front of it and only rediscovered in 1944. The work was restored for a Lorenzetti exhibition in winter 2017-18 and now glows with colour. . The panels describing the work in detail (in Italian and English) prepared for the exhibition have been left in place and give full explanations. Before the Piccolominis made it their family chapel, the whole room (the former chapter-house or meeting-room of the friars) was apparently covered in frescos by Ambrogio and it is tantalising to imagine what has been lost



Ambrogio Lorenzetti Maestà

The work is well worth looking at in detail, especially for the saints with their symbols. From left to right we have:

- **Saint Agatha**, who holds out her amputated breasts, cut off in revenge when she refused the advances of a high Roman official;
- **St Augustine**, one of the great Doctors or philosophers of the Christian Church, with three books;
- St Catherine of Alexandria, more often portrayed with the broken wheel which on which her persecutors tried to kill her, but here shown carrying her severed head. She wears a crown in recognition of her royal birth;
- **St Bartholomew**, one of the Apostles, traditionally portrayed with curly dark hair, carrying the knife with which he was scalped;
- **The Virgin and Child**, with goldfinch. There is much argument about the symbolism of the goldfinch, but according to one legend, when Christ was carrying the Cross, a goldfinch flew down and plucked a thorn from the Crown of Thorns and was splashed with blood, which is why goldfinches have red in their plumage to this day. The goldfinch would therefore represent a prefiguration of the Passion of Christ;
- **St Michael the Archangel in full winged splendour**;
- **St Mary Magdalen** holding her usual vase or pot of ointment, unusually with a cherub burning with love emerging from it;
- A picturesque but unidentified old hermit clutching a bunch of herbs (Tuscany was full of hermits in those days);
- **St Apollonia**, holding the tongs with which her teeth were pulled out.

Further along the right aisle there is a crucifixion by Pietro Perugino (c.1450-1523), an Umbrian painter (teacher of Raphael). The painting is quite different in style from the art of Siena, with wide open sky, and isolated figures and an immense sense of calm. Unfortunately it is badly in need of a clean. The saints by the Cross are St Monica, St Jerome, St John the Baptist and St Augustine.

The monastery attached to the church has disappeared and now there is a large 19th century neo-classical portico next to the church, leading to the Collegio Tolomei, a scholastic establishment originally set up to educate young Siennese noblemen.