

HOSPITAL OF (OSPEDALE DI) SANTA MARIA DELLA SCALA

Siena's ancient hospital, now a museum. It contains one of the best non-religious cycles of frescoes in Italy, and also houses the Etruscan collection of Siena and various other collections. The Sienese authorities have gradually been developing it as the major museum complex of the city.

Opposite the façade of the Cathedral; They keep changing the entrance: it is either through the main entrance (the door immediately to the left of the clock), or in the corner to the left of the Hospital through the neighbouring Palazzo Squarcialucci, now the tourist information office. Open daily from 10.30 to 17.00.



The hospital was one of the oldest in Europe, according to legend founded in the ninth century by a poor cobbler called Sorore, although it is only documented from 1090 and the present buildings date from the end of the 13th century. It was not only a hospital, but an orphanage and hostel for pilgrims and the poor as well. It was run by friars and lay brothers and sisters and was immensely successful and wealthy (its money coming largely from bequests and donations, especially from the possibly ill-gotten gains of bankers and merchants, no doubt hoping thus to appease the Almighty). Its success led to jealousies and conflict between the hospital management and the clerics of the Duomo who tried to control it. In 1193 the hospital obtained a Papal Bull from Pope Celestine III giving it its independence from the Duomo. In 1305 Blessed Agostino Novello (see the painting by Simone Martini in the Pinacoteca) wrote statutes for the hospital which served as a model for other hospitals all over Italy and the Holy Roman Empire.

St Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), who spent her early years at home in prayer and saintly contemplation, to the distress of her family refusing ever to go out, was finally

persuaded out of the house to nurse the sick at this hospital, presumably on the basis that this was a suitably holy occupation (having taken the plunge, she spent most of the rest of her life travelling through Europe and interfering in the affairs of both Church and State). Later, in about 1400, when Siena was hit by the plague and so many staff were affected that the administration of the hospital collapsed, Siena's other main saint, St Bernardino, then a young man of about 20, took charge of the hospital with a band of companions, apparently nursing the plague victims with great efficiency.

Siena now has a large modern hospital on the outskirts of the city, but Santa Maria della Scala (scala means steps and the hospital is so-called as it is opposite the steps up to the Cathedral) remained a working hospital for some specialities until the early 1990s, and as recently as the 1970s there were beds in the Pilgrims' Hall. The whole building has now been turned into a museum. Behind its Gothic façade, the hospital has been extended and remodelled many times since the 13th century. It now occupies an enormous site, stretching both back and down. It is still being rearranged and there are often small temporary exhibitions, so the following description of where things are (written in 2010) may be quickly out of date.

Old main entrance

Immediately inside the entrance there is a high vestibule with ancient marble tombs in the right wall. That of Giovanni Battista Tondi, who died in 1507, portrays him with his head reposing comfortably on no fewer than three pillows.

After the reception cubicle one enters another larger vestibule, with - on the opposing wall - a damaged fresco by **Domenico Beccafumi** (done in 1512) of St Joachim and St Anne, the parents of the Virgin Mary (below). It is his first recorded work, but already has his trademark luminous colours and mystical air. Beyond this vestibule is a large empty hall stretching towards the back of the hospital, with a good view from the window at the end, showing how close this central bit of Siena is to the countryside. On the right of the hall are various galleries with temporary exhibitions.



Pilgrims' Hall (Pellegrinaio)

To the left of the entrance vestibule is the Museum's star attraction, the huge Hall where pilgrims were given lodging (and which was a hospital ward until the 1970s). The walls are covered with fascinating frescoes depicting the building of the hospital, but also riveting and rare scenes of hospital life in the 15th century. They were commissioned by a 15th century Rector of the hospital to show the glorious history of the hospital and the good works that it performed. Top artists of the day were employed, including **Il Vecchietta** and **Domenico di Bartolo** (the two frescoes at the window end of the hall, however, are later and less distinguished).

The cycle starts on the left-hand end of the wall opposite the entrance with a scene showing the mother of the founder (Blessed Sorore) having a dream of succouring foundlings (shown in her dream going up a ladder to heaven). The rest of the frescoes on this wall show the building and history of the hospital; those on the opposite wall show scenes inside the hospital. All are well explained in the English texts under each fresco. Among the best are:

- **The enlargement of the hospital** (second fresco on the 'history' wall). This is a wonderfully lively scene, with a bishop on a white horse, only just avoiding trampling on an unfortunate workman engaged on the construction of the extension, with various leisured citizens watching from their balconies.
- **The nursing of the sick** (on the opposite wall). This is perhaps the most fascinating of all, showing a busy ward in the hospital, a doctor examining a specimen on the left; the hospital surgeon examining a young man with a wound in his leg; a friar taking confession from a dying man. The dog and cat squabbling in the foreground are said to symbolise the eternal dispute of physician and surgeon.



Nursing the sick (detail)

- **The distribution of alms.** The cathedral can be seen through the two doors at the back, and the Rector doffs his hat to an important visitor being shown the hospital. He gives clothes and food to beggars and the poor, elderly and maimed. Alms were given three times a week, with the Rector himself doling them out on feast days. It was ordained that when the poor of good family were brought to the hospital, they should have 'a servant to make ready their beds and dainty food and wait on them so that they may not suffer from neglect'.
- **The reception of foundlings in the hospital and their marriages.** The arrival of the foundlings as babies is at top left; below they can be seen being taught by a rather severe schoolmaster with a cane; on the right the grown girls are shown being married, in rather unlikely grand clothes. The hospital reckoned to bring up the foundlings, teaching the boys a trade and the girls domestic skills. The girls were also given a dowry. It is recorded that in 1298 there were 300 children in care; by 1618 there were 1212 foundlings, mostly fostered by families outside, vetted by the hospital. Many died, however; in the 20 years between 1755 and 1774 three-quarters of the 5700 foundlings taken into the hospital failed to survive.
- **The Banquet of the Poor,** an early soup kitchen.

Underground floors: Fonte Gaia and Chapel of the Night

Beyond the Pelligrinaio, immediately on the left, there are stairs down to the many lower levels of the Hospital. A labyrinth of rooms and mediaeval corridors is gradually being opened and filled with collections brought in from various other museums and buildings. On the first level down, a doorway on the right of the stairs leads to the **Chapel of the night**, where St Catherine allegedly went to rest and pray at night after her labours in the hospital. There is a rather beautiful 14th century marble statue over the altar, unfortunately marred by unsightly metal crowns. In the room beyond the chapel there is a good tryptich by **Taddeo di Bartolo**.

All over the Hospital there are fragments of frescoes, giving a tantalising idea of the wall-to-wall decorations that there must once have been.



Fresco in the Hospital showing labourers in a vineyard

Again on the first level down, a large subterranean hall has been given over to an exhibition of the **Fonte Gaia**, the marble fountain in the Piazza del Campo which now serves as a general meeting point for tourists. The original fountain was by the 15th century Jacopo della Quercia, one of Tuscany's greatest sculptors. By the middle of the 19th century the fountain had got so battered by the elements and events such as the Palio (during an 18th century one a large piece of the fountain was knocked down and damaged) that it was decided to replace it with a marble replica. What remained of the original sat for years on a roof terrace in the Palazzo Pubblico. It has now been moved to the Hospital and is on display at the end of the subterranean hall. Also on display are the plaster casts and gesso models that the 19th century sculptor made as a basis for the present marble copy. The original was in such a bad way that he had to use a fair amount of imagination to recreate della Quercia's masterpiece; and it is fascinating to see the plaster casts of the original and his models side-by-side.

Etruscan collection (Archaeological Museum)

Siena's **Etruscan collection** is also to be found a further floor down. It is arranged along an intestinal corridor in the bowels of the building that keeps going back on itself but finally brings you out where you started. It is arranged along an intestinal corridor in the bowels of the building that keeps going back on itself but finally brings you out where you started. The collection is not as big or good as that in Volterra, and irritatingly grouped according to where the objects were found or from whose collection they came (a lot of the stuff was donated by Sienese collectors), rather than in any sort of chronological or other logical order that would help one understand Etruscan civilization. The signing is also pretty abysmal. But the objects are individually well displayed and lit, and the collection is worth a quick whip round. Like most Etruscan collections, the display is dominated by endless funerary urns and the polished black so-called *bucchero* pottery that was an Etruscan speciality.



Etruscan funerary urn

Church of Santa Maria della Scala

After one returns to the first floor, there is a door into the main church of the Hospital, also known as Santa Maria Assunta (it also has a door onto the piazza in front of the Duomo that is sometimes open - the authorities don't seem to be able to make up their minds if the church should be treated as part of the museum or as an ordinary church open to the public). The building itself is not particularly distinguished, but it contains some sculpture worth a glance, and an interesting trompe-l'oeil fresco.

In the middle of the side walls are the gilded wooden statues of the Annunciation after which the church is called; they are early 17th century mannerist works, with both the protagonists striking typical contorted attitudes. On the right wall there is also a painted crucifix of around 1300, the oldest object in the church, probably taken from the church that preceded the present building. Further on, still on the right wall, there is a handsome early 17th century organ, one of the earliest instruments of its type. Opposite it, there is a carved "music chapel" of the same period.

The best sculpture in the church, however, is the bronze 'Risen Christ' (1476) by **Il Vecchietta** (Lorenzo di Pietro) on top of the main altar. It looks rather out of place perched on top of a false tomb forming part of the heavy baroque altar (although the latter is in its way a handsome piece of work). Indeed, **il Vecchietta** originally designed it to go on top of a high bronze tabernacle. But the latter was snatched by the Duomo, where it now stands on the main altar of that much grander church. The 'Risen Christ' (matched somewhat incongruously by a baroque marble 'Dead Christ' in bas-relief at the bottom of the altar) is a beautifully modelled piece of anatomy, reminiscent of Donatello, a marvellous achievement for an artist who was chiefly a painter; it is sad that it is so high up and difficult to see closely. Also on the altar are two handsome long-necked angel candle-bearers (1585) by **Accursio Baldi da Monte**.

The ceiling of the apse is covered in an 18th century fresco chiefly remarkable for its trompe-l'oeil pillars - from the back of the church the pillars look straight, but if one walks up the steps and goes behind the altar and looks up at them, they are bent almost at right angles.

In the passage leading from the church to the hospital, there is a tiny chapel (cappella) with a 14th century painting of the Virgin and Child by **Paolo di Giovanni Fei** over the altar.

The Old Sacristy

Beyond the church, there is the Old Sacristy, where there are some piteously damaged frescoes with symbolic scenes representing the Creed (mostly by **Il Vecchietta**) which must once have been very fine. At one end there is a "Madonna of the Cloak" by **Domenico di Bartolo** with the religious community being sheltered under one side of her cloak and the lay people under the other.

2000; revised 2010 and 2015/6.