

## CHURCH & CONVENT of the OSSERVANZA

A large red brick renaissance church overlooking Siena from a hill on the northern edge of the city, with good della Robbia figures.



The convent of the Osservanza was the home of San Bernardino until he left Siena in 1444 to die in L'Aquila (St Bernardino was a Franciscan friar who became an immensely popular preacher, the Billy Graham of his day). When he lived here, it was a small convent; but after his death, as his cult grew, a large church was erected to accommodate the many pilgrims. Since its construction between 1476 and 1490, it has suffered many changes. It was baroquified in the eighteenth century, debaroquified in the 1920s, bombed in 1944 and reconstructed after the last war. Despite all these vicissitudes, it is still an elegant example of the Renaissance. It also contains some marvellous **Andrea della Robbia** glazed terracottas, probably the best of his work to be found in Siena.

Inside the church, on each side of the main door, are tondos by Andrea della Robbia of St Louis and of St Bonaventura. On either side of the chancel arch at the other end of the church are wonderful statues of the Archangel Gabriel and of the Virgin Mary, both rendered in pure white, again by Andrea della Robbia in around 1485. Note the charmingly natural pose of the Virgin. And finally in the second chapel on the left is a magnificent della Robbia high-relief altarpiece of the Coronation of the Virgin with a predella below with scenes of her life, in imitation of a painting of the period. This was badly damaged during the wartime bombing, but has been lovingly reassembled and restored. Unfortunately, it is very badly lit, and visibility is not helped by a barrier wired to an alarm that prevents anybody from approaching too close to the side chapels.



*Coronation of the Virgin by Andrea della Robbia*

There other sorts of good things in each of the side chapels. Especially fine are the Madonna and Child by **Sano di Pietro** in the first chapel on the left (switch on the light); the 16th century group in coloured terracotta, mourning over the dead Christ in the second chapel on the right; and a triptych by Sano di Pietro in the third chapel on the right, with the Virgin between Saints Jerome and Bernardino (St Jerome, one of the great doctors or learned men of the church, as so often holds a book in which he is pretending to write, although the page already seems full; St Bernardino is instantly recognisable by his hollow-cheeked and toothless look). On the left wall of the same chapel there is a portrait of San Bernardino, painted by Pietro di Giovanni Ambrosi in 1444, the year that the saint died, so it may well have been from life. In the fourth chapel is a further triptych, this time with St Jerome (in red, not even pretending to write this time) and St Ambrose, dated 1436 by an unknown painter now known after this painting as the '**Master of the Osservanza**'.



*Triptych by the Master of the Osservanza*

If there is a monk in the church ask to be shown the sacristy (through a door to the right of the altar): it contains a further wonderful polychrome terracotta group mourning the dead Christ attributed to **Giocamo Cozzarelli**. This is more mannerist in style, with the various saints and apostles striking intensely tragic attitudes. Off the sacristy is a small museum with illuminated manuscripts; beautifully embroidered old vestments; some - mostly modest - paintings and statues (good but damaged fresco of St Michael the Archangel, originally from the crypt); and other odds and ends.

The altar and the chancel suffered most from the bombing and are a complete reconstruction.

*1980s; revised 2015*