

A Bell Will Ring

By David Stock

The beautiful city of Verona has a rich and colourful history that encompasses ancient Rome and seafaring Venice; Napoleon Bonaparte and the Austrian empire; the Bard of Avon and the evils of fascism. Its sun-dappled squares and narrow streets are familiar to members of the Australian stone industry who have travelled to Italy on numerous occasions for the Marmomacc trade fair at the local Exhibition Centre.

The most enduring cultural influence in Verona and its hinterland is the Roman Catholic Church which experienced prodigious growth and expansion in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In the High Middle Ages the number of ecclesiastical buildings in the Diocese of Verona exceeded 300 with religious sites abounding along the shores of Lake Garda, the banks of the Adige River and the historic thoroughfares of the Veneto region. The Church eventually spread across the peaks and plains of the Venetian landscape to become the most authoritative and powerful institution of the age.

Between the earliest Cathedrals of the city, which date from the fourth century, and the creation of Titian's masterpiece in the Duomo; Verona was enriched by centuries of artistic brilliance and unwavering religious devotion. Today, the most prepossessing Veronese churches offer a degree of purity and continuity seldom found elsewhere in twenty-first century Italy. Although many of the city's ecclesiastical landmarks are worthy of consideration, the unrivalled attention bestowed upon the Basilica di San Zeno, Verona Cathedral and the Church of Sant'Anastasia ensured their inclusion in this Milestones.

Basilica di San Zeno

To the west of the Castelvecchio (Old Castle) and its imposing medieval bridge – constructed to safeguard the Lords of Verona in the fourteenth century – is the equally arresting and momentous Basilica di San Zeno. Visitors to the church will immediately note its relative distance from the heart of the city, which distinguishes San Zeno from the multitude of tourist attractions centred within the tightly configured streets to the north and east of the amphitheatre. This more spacious environment accentuates the impressive scale of the Basilica and provides worshippers and tourists with unobstructed views of its intricate Romanesque exterior. The surrounding area used to be a Roman burial zone and numerous epigraphs and sarcophagi have been unearthed in recent times. Verona's earliest bishops were laid to rest in the vicinity, including the city's patron saint, a man of African descent named Zeno. He preached and performed miracles in the fourth century and eliminated the vestiges of polytheistic Paganism.

It was felt that he (and his relics) merited a church of their own and the first small structure was erected – according to legend – by Theodorich the Great, King of the Ostrogoths. Following the destructive efforts of rampant Magyars in the tenth century, a Romanesque edifice was raised in 967 with monetary assistance from Otto I, founder of the Holy Roman Empire. Devastation was wrought by an earthquake in the twelfth century, with attempts to repair and enlarge the building commencing in 1138. The reconstructed roof and Gothic-



The Romanesque exterior of Verona's Basilica di San Zeno.

style apse were complete by the onset of the fifteenth century, with the Basilica regarded as one of the purest examples of Romanesque architecture in southern Europe. San Zeno's facade has perfect architectural lines and comprises three vertical components: the central nave surmounted by a triangular pediment and two aisles with sloping rooflines. The intersections of the three parts are marked by angled pilasters ending in foliate capitals below the pediment.

Across the facade runs a shallow arcade of paired arches divided by decorative columns identical to those found above the Rose window. The pink marble arcade must once have contrasted with the cream-coloured tuff of the exterior although this effect has diminished over time. The upper facade is dominated

by a massive circular window representing the Wheel of Fortune: a concept in medieval and ancient philosophy that concerned the capricious nature of Fate. Rose windows are a distinguishing feature of the ecclesiastical architecture of the period with tremendous stone mullions and elegant tracery adorning church facades in northern France and England as well as several Italian states. The man responsible for the San Zeno design was a talented local sculptor by the name of Brioloto. His work consists of 6 human figures embodying the uncertainties and vagaries of our earthly existence with a king at the top and a man in despair at the bottom.

At the base of the columns of the twelfth-century porch – known as a prothyrum – are symbols of law and faith in the shape of two stone lions. Marble bas-reliefs either side of the



San Zeno cloister, Red marble columns

porch depict scenes from the Old and New Testaments as well as episodes in the life of King Theodoric. The spandrels of the exterior arch are decorated with bas-reliefs portraying St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist. Above the arch are The Lamb (a metaphorical reference to Christ) and the blessing hand of the God. A lunette composed of moments in Veronese history is surrounded by bas-reliefs recounting the miraculous deeds of St Zeno. The weathered tuff of the facade radiates a warm golden glow which gives the basilica its peculiar honey-like colouring. The porch leads to bronze-panelled doors which have dozens of primitive but extraordinarily vivid figures detailing biblical stories.

The central church of San Zeno comprises a nave, two aisles and a transept – which combine to create a cross-shaped



The crypt and presbytery of San Zeno

interior. Both aisles are divided by cruciform pilasters with Corinthian style capitals and zoomorphic motifs. The walls above the colonnade are polychrome and the wooden ceiling dates from the 14th century. Everything inside the basilica points to the altar – raised and distant from the body of the church – leaving space for the crypt, where the relics are kept. The sepulchre dates from the tenth century, and houses the remains of St Zeno (dressed as a bishop) in his sarcophagus. The nave and eight aisles of the crypt are supported by 49 columns; each one boasting a unique capital with fine examples of Roman and Romanesque sculpture. The entrance arches are adorned with fanciful and monstrous animals by thirteenth-century artist, Adamino da San Giorgio. The presbytery is situated above the crypt, which remains visible from the nave.

Those climbing the presbytery stairs cannot fail to see the statues – of Christ and the Apostles – positioned atop a barrier that separates the rest of the church from the altar area. The statues and frescoes date from the thirteenth century, but they are overshadowed by the magnificent triptych or three-panelled altarpiece completed by Andrea Mantegna in the 1460s. It was purloined by the French during the Napoleonic Wars but thankfully returned after their defeat in 1815. The most venerated icon in the city – a red marble statue of its patron saint – is located in the small apse to the left of the altar.

Adjacent to the basilica is a Romanesque cloister which has its origins in the twelfth century. The portico consists of a series of small marble columns which support rounded arches on two sides and pointed arches on two more – emphasising the transition from Romanesque to Gothic. The atmospheric courtyard formed part of an abbey, built over a pre-existing monastery, which was damaged irreparably during Napoleon's conquest. A defensive tower replete with frescoes is the only other section of the abbey that remains. The campanile stands as a separate



The unfinished campanile of the Verona Cathedral.



The spiral columns and marble griffins of the cathedral porch.

building, and is Romanesque like the basilica's facade. It has alternating tuff and brickwork bands and is adorned with Roman sculptures. The structure rises to 62 metres in height, and features a double-storied bell chamber and triple mullioned windows surmounted by a conical spire.

Verona Cathedral

This church was rebuilt on the foundations of ancient paleo-Christian buildings that were ruined by the twelfth-century earthquake that also damaged the aforementioned basilica. The cathedral was consecrated in 1187 and remains discernibly Romanesque despite the various modifications that have taken place throughout its history. Verona Cathedral is situated on the periphery of the old city, which was not uncommon in Roman times when such places of Christian worship were notably late additions to the pre-existing landscape; located just inside much older city walls. The importance of the Church rose appreciably during the Early Middle Ages when its authority and hierarchy superseded the decaying apparatus of the troubled Roman state. In such circumstances cities became little more than administrative centres for a Diocese with the presence of a bishop ensuring continued survival and relevance.

The rebirth of urban society in the eleventh century acknowledged and embedded the supremacy of the Church with new urban centres developing around their buildings. Verona's cathedral has remained in a largely untouched corner of the city, with expansion and redevelopment rendered improbable by the proximity of the river and the surrounding hilltops. Nearby structures ranging from the canonical museum to the bishop's residence nevertheless demonstrate the longstanding importance of the Cathedral and the adjoining network of streets. The facade of the Cathedral is composed of a pediment and a projecting, two-storied porch embellished with sculptures. These were designed by the artist Nicholaus who also decorated the San Zeno facade and the foremost religious buildings in Ferrara and Piacenza.

The spiralled Byzantine columns of the protiro porch are supported by spectacular griffins made of red Verona marble. These legendary creatures – standing guard against evil – were painted by John Ruskin in the nineteenth century. The



The polychromatic marble adorning the entrance of Sant'Anastasia.

the largest church in the city. Built to commemorate a local saint, the actual name of the church – Saint Peter – has never struck a chord with the Veronese people who have steadfastly used the title of one of the churches pulled down over seven centuries ago.

Sant'Anastasia is considered to be the finest example of Gothic architecture in the city, although the red brick facade remains unfinished. The brickwork is enlivened by a double-opening, ogival portal in polychromatic marble. The red, white and black stripes of the entrance are surmounted by scenes from Christ's life. A number of saints are carved on

distinguished art critic and social thinker admonished his contemporaries for holidaying in Florence and Venice whilst neglecting to visit his favourite Italian city. Red Verona marble (often called *Rosso di Verona*) should be considered a Jurassic red nodular limestone which to Late Roman and medieval stonemasons would have been *marmor*. Its distinctive colour patterns vary from beige and creamy white in its lowest grades to bright orange nodules set within a reddish matrix at the opposite end of the spectrum. Verona marble is similar to other breccias or conglomerate rocks in northern Italy which formed during the Jurassic when lighter-coloured fragments floated in solidifying darker mud. The city most synonymous with the prestigious red stone is neighbouring Venice which has substantial amounts of Verona marble in a variety of places; including St Mark's Cathedral.

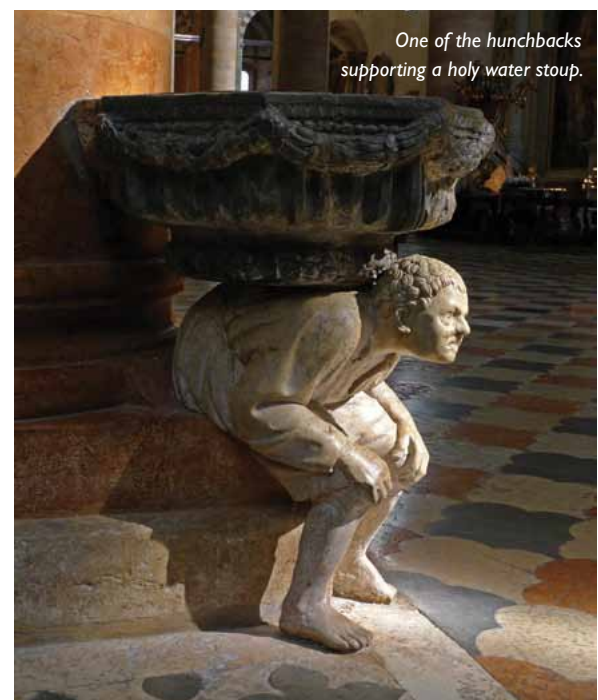
Within the Cathedral of Verona, enormous Gothic columns of the brilliant local marble separate the nave from the adjoining aisles. Crossed vaults maintain the architectural tone but the trompe l'oeil and other aspects of the pictorial decoration afford the interior a Renaissance flavour. The paintings include Titian's glorious *Assunta* as well as highly prized works by Veronese artists such as Giolfino and Cignaroli. The stone frameworks and statues of the lateral altars belie their Gothic origins; whilst a door on the left of the Cathedral leads to the smaller church of San Giovanni in Fonte. The former baptistery contains a true masterpiece of Romanesque sculpture: an octagonal font carved from a single marble block with each of its eight sides depicting Gospel stories from the Annunciation to Christ's baptism. Roman floor mosaics can be viewed close by in the chapel dedicated to St Helen. The sixteenth-century campanile (designed by Mannerist architect Michele Sanmicheli) has two orders of columns with ornate capitals and bas-reliefs. The unfinished tower is renowned for its bell – a record-breaking instrument that preserves and exhibits the traditional full-circle bellringing art developed in the city in the 1700s.

Sant'Anastasia

When the monks of the Dominican Order – the Order of the Preachers – moved inside Verona in the thirteenth century, they received two churches in the oldest part of the city. Following the bloody murder of St Peter of Verona (a celebrated preacher and Inquisitor) the order demolished the extant churches and erected a much grander edifice in his honour. Work commenced on the predominantly Gothic structure in 1290 with significant contributions arriving from the powerful Scaliger family and their trusted allies. Efforts to complete the building continued throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and the site was belatedly consecrated in 1471. Later additions blended harmoniously with the Gothic tendencies of the pre-Renaissance era and Sant'Anastasia is quite comfortably

the extremes of the architrave and the central pilaster – including Spanish priest and founder of the Dominican Order: Dominic de Guzman. Renaissance panels and a damaged lunette enhance the doorway and the facade whilst the prominence given to the windows reflects the Gothic emphasis on light. A majestic apse and slender campanile with stone ribbing and sculpted adornments make the cavernous church even bigger still. Upon entering the building, visitors are offered holy water from stoups made famous by the exhausted stone figures – beggars or mill workers – entrusted to support them. The much loved hunchbacks were sculpted by Gabriele Cagliari in 1495 and Paolo Orefice in 1591.

The interior of the church is divided into three broad aisles; which are defined and supported by twelve columns of red Verona marble. Its crossed vaults and pointed arcs are quintessentially Gothic but they coalesce beautifully (and quite surprisingly) with the decorated Renaissance side chapels. These and other parts of the church boast a multitude of frescoes by Veronese painters such as Girolamo dai Libri and Altichiero. Perhaps the most famous artwork in Sant'Anastasia is Pisanello's painting, *Saint George and the Princess*. The fresco is widely regarded as one of the finest demonstrations of International Gothic art and can be found in the Pellegrini Chapel which also houses terracotta statues by Michele di Firenze. ⁶⁵



One of the hunchbacks supporting a holy water stoup.