

# “SECOND SISTINE CHAPEL” RESTORED IN EUROPE’S OLDEST HOSPITAL

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

On July 22, Sergio Mattarella, the President of Italy, inaugurated the reopening, after a two-year restoration, of the magnificent Renaissance *Corsie Sistine* or “Sistine Ward” at the oldest still-functioning hospital in Europe, the complex of Santo Spirito in Saxia. The extensive work repaired the carved wooden ceiling, the masonry, the interior and exterior plaster and revived the huge expanse (13,000 square feet) of frescoes and polychrome painted wood.

The hospital, on the banks of the Tiber only a 10-minute walk from St. Peter’s Basilica, was founded in 727 by King Ina of Wessex on the ancient site of the gardens of Agrippina the Elder, the wife of the general Germanicus and the mother of Emperor Caligula; Agrippina’s mother was Julia, the Emperor Augustus’ daughter. This fortified citadel was known as the Schola Saxonum because it provided accommodation and assistance to English pilgrims, including several kings, until the Norman Conquest, after which Santiago di Compostela and Canterbury became even more popular pilgrim venues than Rome, so the Schola gradually fell into disrepair.

Then in 1198 Innocent III, Pope from 1198 to 1216, suffered greatly from a recurring dream: fishermen on the Tiber pulled up numerous bodies of drowned babies in their nets and presented them to the Pope. (Evidently, the babies, illegitimate, had been thrown into the river by their unwed or adulterous mothers.) The dream ended with an angel commanding Innocent to build a hospice for unwanted babies, so he commissioned the



The tower of the *Sistine Ward* admired by Italian President Sergio Mattarella (bottom) during the inauguration of the restoration. In the circle, Innocent III, Pope from 1198 to 1216

architect Marchionne D’Arezzo to rebuild the Schola as a hospital for the care of abandoned infants, the sick, the poor and the homeless.

Built in one of its exterior walls is a still-visible today “wheel of the exposed,” a wooden lazy susan behind a little door on which unwanted infants

could be left anonymously and so subsequently cared for.

In addition, on November 25, 1198, Innocent approved the Order of Hospitallers through the bull *Religiosam vitam* and put Guy de Montpelier, a Templar knight who’d already founded several hospitals in France, as well as his good works, under Vatican protection. He then created a statute of rules for the Order and entrusted the hospital’s management to Montpelier and his Order. Three years later, he endowed the hospital with considerable income; it also received numerous donations including one from the notorious King John of England (king from 1199-1216). Together these covered the cost of additional buildings for the hospital.

Less than three centuries later, in 1471, the hospital was ravaged by a fire of unknown origin (thus unlike those fires of 800s, during the papacy of Leo IV [847-855], which had been set by Saracens marauders who’d traveled up the Tiber).

Many centuries later these fires were depicted in Raphael’s fresco called *Fire in the Borgo* (1514-17) commissioned by Pope Julius II (r. 1506-13) for his apartments in the Vatican’s Apostolic Palace.

Raphael’s fresco depicts Pope Leo IV putting out a fire in 847 with a benediction from a balcony in front of the old St. Peter’s Basilica.

The newly-elected Pope Sixtus IV (1471-84) despaired of the hospital’s dark, airless ruins which he



described as looking “like a place intended for captivity rather than health recovery.” So, he ordered a full reconstruction of the facilities in anticipation of the upcoming 1475 Jubilee. The new structure, dubbed the *Corsie Sistine* (“Sistine Wards”), was the first example of Renaissance civic architecture in Rome.

Surmounted by an octagonal tower, the *Corsie* is an immense hall, 394 feet long and 40 feet wide, divided into two spaces separated by a tower or lantern designed by the Florentine architect and ebeniste Giovanni de’ Dolci. Under the lantern at the center of the *Corsie* there’s a *bal-dacchino* (a canopy with four columns over an altar), probably the only Roman work by Palladio. In the past, behind the altar there was a pipe organ to give some pleasure at least to the ill during their stay.

Of particular beauty, hence the *Corsie*’s attribution as “the second Sistine Chapel” (even if it’s chronologically a bit earlier), are its frescoed walls. Painted by Melozzo da Forlì, Domenico Ghirlandaio, Pinturicchio, and Antoniazio Romano, on facing walls they depict some 50 scenes from the lives of Popes Innocent III and Sixtus IV. Their most important episodes are the drowning of illegitimate babies in the Tiber, the fishermen showing the dead babies to Pope Innocent III, his dream, and his establishing the hospital and orphanage.

Thanks to Sixtus IV, the rest of the hospital enjoyed a rebirth. In addition to the care it provided, it became an important center for scientific research. For example, within its *Antica Spezieria* (“Ancient Spicery”) the use of quinoa bark was first experimented as a treatment for malaria. So it is not surprising that Botticelli later reproduced the hospital façade in the background of his fresco *Jesus Cleansing a Leper* (1480-1482) in the Sistine Chapel.

It wasn’t long before hospitals built on the model of Santo Saxia sprang up all over Europe. We know that before the papacy of Innocent III there were no hospitals dedicated to the care of illegitimate children, the poor and the homeless. At the end of the 13th century the Hospitals of the Santo



Above, Santo Spirito in Saxia on the banks of the Tiber; right, Pope Sixtus IV; below, Raphael’s *Fire in the Borgo*



Spirito numbered some 100. The majority were located in Latium, but others were in Umbria (Foligno), Abruzzo, Marche, Tuscany (Florence), and the Kingdom of Naples (Pozzuoli). By the end of the 15th century there were over 1,000.

To return to Rome, in 1605, to guarantee a more organized management of the hospital’s finances, Pope Paul V (1605-21), also an eager art collector and the founder of the Borghese Gallery, supported the founding of the Banco di Santo Spirito. In the 17th century the bank had its headquarters in Rome’s financial district near the head of the *Sant’Angelo* Bridge.

At the end of the 18th century, Santo Spirito had become the flagship charitable organization and main hospital in Rome, owning 37,050 acres of land on the outskirts of the city. In

1896, all of Rome’s hospitals were administered together under the corporate name *Pio Istituto di Santo Spirito ed Ospedali Riuniti di Roma*, forming the largest hospital complex in Europe. However, the corporation was dissolved in 1976 and since 1981 its endowment is administered by the City.

I remember well the mostly elderly patients who were housed in the *Corsie* because this structure has a covered walkway and small terrace where they used to sit. Sometime in the 1980s or 1990s, the *Corsie* was abandoned, and during the Jubilee Year 2000 this monumental complex became a congress center only to be closed again until now.

Today the complex belongs to the association “Historic Conference Centers of Europe” and is a supporting member of the “Healthcare Convention and Exhibitors Association.” At the inauguration of its re-opening to the public and of an exhibition of 48 photographs of healthcare worldwide during the pandemic, President Mattarella signed the *Liber fraternitatis*, an illuminated codex dating to 1446 and signed by most of the hospital’s benefactors since then. Dario Franceschini, Italy’s Minister of Culture, also announced that there are many other historic hospitals in Italy slated for restoration thanks to a new initiative by his Ministry. ○