

Site summary:

Chiesa del Gesù, Church of the Gesù.

Rome, Completed in 1580

- Construction of the church began in 1568 as the first church of the Jesuit order in Rome.
- Funded by Cardinal Alessandro Farnese to be built in a location in downtown Rome that had been previously chosen by St. Ignatius, founder of the Society of Jesus.
- Main architects were Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola, who constructed much of the church initially, and later Giocomo della Porta.

Interior:

- Layout in cross plan
- Consists of a single aisle and side chapels.
- Originally decorated simply with white-washed walls
- About a century later decorated heavily in Baroque style.
- Decorations consisting mostly of paintings, colored marble, gilding, and stucco work
- Giovanni Battista Gaulli's paintings cover much of the surfaces of the church. Notably, the ceiling painting "Triumph in the Name of Jesus", completed in 1679, which was designed to create illusion by using perspective
- High altar is from the 19th century, original by della Porta was removed

Notable side chapels include:

- St. Ignatius chapel on the left side of transept. Contains the tomb of St Ignatius as well as two statues *Religion defeats heresy* and *Faith defeats idolatry*. Chapel also has a statue of St Ignatius that is normally hidden behind a large painting but is revealed once a day when the painting slides into the floor.
- Chapel of the Madonna della Strata, left of the high altar. Altarpiece in this chapel is an original fifteenth-century fresco. Contains seven panels depicting events in the Virgin's life.

Façade:

- Designed by della Porta who reworked Vignola's original design

- Divided into upper and lower sections
- Pilasters with corinthian capitals
- Façade contains three shields, one the papal coat of arms, one with the Jesuit monogram, and one with SPQR, connecting the church to its Roman location.

Significance and Analysis:

-Because Farnese was so wealthy, Chiesa del Gesù ended up much more opulent than the main churches of other Catholic orders in Rome at the time. Farnese's funding of the church allowed him to have many of the decisions in its style. Most of the construction of the church was done by Jesuits themselves.

-The first round of decorations in the Gesù chapels, with elements created around the 1560s, are considered the last Jesuit art project of the Renaissance in Rome, and maybe the last major Renaissance art project in the city. The later decorations in the church, from the 1670s onwards, are considered more Baroque.

-The opulence of the decorative style has been linked to the style of the Jesuits in recruiting followers, with decorations that are attention-grabbing and paintings that are visually persuasive in subject matter to gain new members. This also has meant that historically many of the paintings in the Gesù have been viewed more as pieces of propaganda and considered to have less artistic integrity. However, even individual paintings in the Gesù themselves have been influential in later art.

-Even though they were not the first designs in their style, both Vignola and della Porta's façade designs for the Gesù became examples later imitated in churches from the 16th century onwards.

-This is partially because of the strong missionary influence of the Jesuits who looked to emulate the Gesù in new constructions. It is also because of the technique the designs for the exterior of the Gesù used, with tripartite divisions, to emphasize the height of the church while still using elements of classical architecture. This was an effect that was highly desired in church constructions from the Renaissance onwards.

- A feature of the Gesù that was also influential is the fact that the decorations in the chapels are related spatially. An example of this is in the nativity chapel, where angels in the vault frescos look down on the Christ sculpture in the altarpiece below.

Sources:

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