

Brunelleschi's Florence

Filippo Brunelleschi was born in Florence in 1377, and died here in 1446. Of him Vasari wrote: "He was given to us by Heaven to give new form to architecture". Inside the Cathedral is a portrait medallion, beneath which his tomb was located. Outside the Cathedral is the sculpture by Pampaloni, portraying him next to Arnolfo di Cambio. Brunelleschi is famous for having built the dome of Florence Cathedral, and for the innovative techniques by which he adapted classical forms to the spirit of his own times.



In 1401 he took part in the famous public competition (won by Ghiberti) for the commission to make the Baptistery doors; his gilded bronze panel of the Sacrifice of Isaac may be seen in the Bargello. In the church of Santa Maria Novella we can see his wooden Crucifix (1418-20) in the Gondi Chapel. He studied the science of perspective and there are panels showing the Baptistery and Piazza Signoria. In 1417 he began work on the dome, kept him fully occupied for twenty years. This dome became the focus of great hope for the future and a symbol for all Florentines; Leon Battista Alberti wrote that it seemed to cover with its shadow all the people of Tuscany.

In the Opera del Duomo Museum there are wooden models and building materials associated with the dome's construction. In 1419 Brunelleschi was commissioned by the Silk Guild to design the Foundling Hospital of the Innocenti, which with the harmonious perspective geometry of its loggia is the first masterpiece of renaissance architecture.

The Piazza Santissima Annunziata, which it flanks, later became one of the most admired urban spaces in Europe.

From here we proceed to the church of San Lorenzo (begun in 1419), whose luminous interior and nobility of form recall the basilicas of antiquity. In the centrally-planned Old Sacristy there is an evident spatial dialogue between the sphere and the cube, and an architectural language derived from the classical world.

On our way to Santa Croce we pass the Palagio del Parte Guelfa, which Brunelleschi improved: he designed the council hall on the first floor, and the delicately moulded classical window frames outside. Next to Santa Croce we come to the Pazzi Chapel, begun in 1430, a centrally-planned space with a hemi-spherical dome over barrel vaulting, its white plaster walls contrasting with the grey stone of the pilasters and entablature.



Brunelleschi's last great project was the church of Santo Spirito (begun 1436), preceded by the Rotonda of Santa Maria degli Angeli (c. 1434), not far from the Foundling Hospital, which was never finished but clearly shows the influence of classical centrally-planned buildings.

Brunelleschi had intended that the façade of Santo Spirito should face the Arno, but this scheme was altered; so too was his plan to express the curved shape of the side chapels by an undulating exterior, and his idea of having four doors instead of the traditional three; these changes were made by the architects who completed the church after Brunelleschi's death. The design of Palazzo Pitti is also attributed to Brunelleschi, though it was considerably modified in later times by the Medici Grand Dukes.

Brunelleschi's works in Florence:

The dome of Santa Maria del Fiore Cathedral, piazza del Duomo

Bargello Museum, 4, via del Proconsolo

Church of Santa Maria Novella, Gondi Chapel, piazza Santa Maria Novella

Hospital of the Innocenti (Foundling Hospital), piazza Santissima Annunziata

Church of San Lorenzo and the Old Sacristy, piazza San Lorenzo

Palazzo di Parte Guelfa, via di Carpaccio

Pazzi Chapel, Museo dell'Opera di Santa Croce, 16, piazza Santa Croce

Rotonda of Santa Maria degli Angeli, piazza Brunelleschi

Church of Santo Spirito, piazza Santo Spirito