

SANTA MARIA AUSILIATRICE COMPLEX

The complex of buildings called Ex Casa di Santa Maria Ausiliatrice in Venice is located in the Castello district, where via Garibaldi is replaced by fondamenta San Gioacchino and it is in a strategic position between Giardini di Biennale and Arsenale.

As proof of its very ancient origin, a church and a hospital were already built around 1171 by a Confraternity as a hospice to accommodate pilgrims on their way to the Holy Land. After the period of Crusades, the hospice - like other similar institutions - was permanently converted into a hospital, thus representing the oldest in the historical city centre of Venice.

The hospital soon became very important in the Venetian health organisation, leading in 1341 to the need to purchase some of the neighbouring buildings - as attested by a parchment found in the Venice State Archives - and a consequent enlargement of the church itself.

The detail visible from Jacopo de' Barbari's plan of Venice from 1500 barely reveals the very simple structure of the small church then dedicated to St. Joachim, identifiable only by the triangular tympanum concluded by the cross. In fact, the few other architectural elements, the door and window openings, could hardly lead back to the traditional image of a religious building.

The façade, which was in the shape of an oratory, overlooked the fondamenta of rio Sant'Anna, at the corner with calle San Gioacchino. The church stood on the same site as the present building, which, however, changed orientation during the 18th century modifications. The high altar, resting on the back wall, is the only surviving evidence of the Baroque intervention, while the altar covering depicting the Last Supper in bas-relief is a Renaissance work.

Behind the church, along calle San Gioacchino, it is possible to notice a long infirmary building, which limits the courtyard still existing today and is enclosed at the back by a wall that probably delimited the area used for the hospital from that for the hospice.

This was the main entrance to the hospital, as evidenced by the portal surmounted by a high relief in Istria stone in clear late Gothic style from the mid-14th century. It depicts Mary seated on a throne, with the child on her knees, handing the keys to St. Peter and a scroll to St. Paul. Remarkable are the transformations that the complex underwent during the 18th century, to which the likely enlargement of the church and the construction of the women's gallery can be traced, bringing the complex to its current appearance as compared to the New Plan of the city of Venice by Bernardo and Gaetano Combatti.

In 1860, the complex was used again as a unitary charitable institution and did not change again until it was purchased in 1993 by the Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice of San Giovanni Bosco, who founded the Santa Maria Ausiliatrice House with a kindergarten, primary schools, work and boarding school.



In 2001, the building was sold to the City of Venice, which turned it into a centre for cultural activities and a student residence, making it a suitable venue for the Holy See Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.