



Friday, August 12, 2011

Dead and Buried



Sometimes when visiting Europe's cathedrals and churches, they begin to blur together. St. Peter's in Rome is one that always stands out, and another is Santa Croce in Florence, Italy. And in this last case, it's not as much due to the architecture (which is lovely) as much as for the graves and tombs it holds.

For one thing, there are some pretty important people-of-history buried inside: Michelangelo, Galileo, Rossini are buried there (to name but three.) An artist, a scientist, and a composer. The years of their deaths span centuries, Michelangelo in 1564, Galileo in 1642 & 1737 (more on this later), and Rossini in 1868. Because so many famous Italians are buried here, the church has been known as the Temple of the Italian Glories, for these men certainly brought glory to their country. We still celebrate and marvel at their achievements.

Michelangelo was the brilliant sculptor (the David), painter (the Sistine Chapel), and architect (the dome of St. Peter's in Rome.) Irascible and driven—and pushed beyond his limit by various Popes—when Michelangelo died in Rome, his body was taken to his beloved Tuscany, to Florence, to Santa Croce for burial. Michelangelo was the Renaissance, so being buried in Florence, the birthplace of Renaissance, was very appropriate. The three figures on his tomb represent his talents: artist, sculptor, and architect.



Michelangelo's tomb



Galileo's tomb

Galileo, a talented mathematician and astronomer, pursued the notion that the earth rotated around the sun, but he added a layer. He insisted that such an idea did not contradict the Bible. The scientific idea was not new, but the church objected to him stepping out of bounds—acting as theologian in addition to scientist. It's said he was excommunicated for heresy, but others say it was more of a censure, a cease-and-desist to stop him talking as if what he said was a solid truth. A few years later (1632) Galileo wrote a book that caused his real trouble. For in it he told both sides, but in doing so, made the pope look like a fool. Not a wise thing to do. People were executed for less. He was allowed to live, yet was under house arrest until he died in 1642. This earth/sun issue was

such a hot button, that Galileo was not allowed a Christian burial until 1737. It's interesting to note that his tomb has a relief of the solar system—with the sun in the center. It wasn't until 1992 that the pope apologized for the church's treatment of Galileo.

The last tomb to mention... even if you don't know Gioacchino Rossini by name, I bet you'd recognize his music. He wrote 39 operas. The "William Tell Overture" is the theme music to the 1950's TV show, "The Lone Ranger", and there was a Bugs Bunny cartoon featuring Rossini's "Barber of Seville". Surely the composer would turn over in his grave. He was originally buried in Paris, but at the request of the Italian government, his remains were moved to Santa Croce in 1887—nineteen years after his death. Florence wanted to lay claim to this "Italian Mozart."

Beyond these grand tombs (and there are many more), I was most moved by the gravestones on the floor, grave after grave that we walked upon. Most were worn from the tens of thousands who have visited the church over the centuries. I mentioned to our guide that it felt wrong walking on them, but she said that being walked on, having their graves worn by the masses, was considered part of their penance. Don't tread on me!

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But the most intriguing graves held the outline of a person, etched in stone. These graves told an enormous story. For some of the graves had the head at the altar end, with the feet pointing toward the front door. And some were placed in the opposite way. There was an explanation for that. People who were godly had their feet at the altar end, so when Jesus Christ comes to earth again in glory (apparently through the front door) and the godly rise from their graves (as the Bible says), they will be standing *with* Him, as his children. People who weren't on good terms with the church had their head near the altar so when they rise at the Second Coming, they will face Jesus for judgment. Whoa. It appears they've already been judged by man! My question is, if they were so bad, or not "in" the church, why were they allowed to be buried there in the first place?



One other tidbit I found interesting. The walls of the Santa Croce used to be vividly painted with depictions of Bible stories so the priests could teach the illiterate poor the stories. But in Renaissance times, the priests didn't like that old style of painting so white-washed it over. Sigh. Every age thinks newer is better.

The point is, the dead do tell tales. Very interesting ones./Nancy

Posted by [Nancy Moser](#) at 7:25 AM

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2 comments:



Vince August 13, 2011 at 11:26 AM

Hi Nancy:

Have you been to the church in Montreal that is a scale model, (one 1/3 or 1/4 of the original size) of St. Peter's in Rome? If you've been to St. Peter's, it's kind of spooky going into Mary, Queen of the World Cathedral. Since memory is not perfect, it looks exactly like you're in St. Peter's. It's a unique experience.

Since you like women in history, did you read *Galileo's Daughter* by David Sobel? Galileo was a pretty nasty piece of work. His math did not work right because he said the planetary orbits were perfect circles. All the pope wanted him to do was just say his system was a theory that simplified the math. But no, he insisted he was right and then he wrote a dialogue making a fool of the pope.

Vince

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Nancy Moser August 15, 2011 at 4:25 PM

I haven't been to the Montreal cathedral you talk about, Vince. It would be odd to see a smaller version of St. Peter's. One of the reasons St. Peter's seems like the church of all churches is its enormous scale. You walk in and are in awe. It feels as if God lives there.

I also haven't read "Galileo's Daughter". You've given me two more things for my to-do list.

I'm always amazed at how scientists from hundreds of years ago figured out anything considering their limited scientific resources. They must have had unique minds that thought beyond the usual realm.

Of course, watching the DVD series "From the Earth to the Moon" (about our space program) also makes me marvel at man's ambition and imagination.

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