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Art History 155

Final Draft

The Tomb of Saint Augustine

(Arca di Sant’Agosto)

During the time of the Renaissance, it was becoming a common practice for deceased saints to be buried in elaborate and monumental tombs. This was seen throughout Europe with some of the most beautiful and intricate tombs standing throughout Italy. The tomb of Saint Augustine of Hippo is one of the most ornate tombs still standing today in the San Pietro Bascillica of Pavia, Italy.

The tomb in which Saint Augustine is buried is considered to be one of the most elaborate Italian tombs of the fourteenth century. The construction of the tomb began in the 1350’s CE. It is located at the center of the chancel and is built from marble of Carrara. It was initially commissioned by the Prior of the Augustinians and later by the bishop of Lodi, Msgr. Conifacio Bottigella. The tomb is comprised of 95 statues and stands at about 4 feet tall over the base of the tomb. It is carved on all four sides, the wider sides have three arched openings and the ends where his head and feet lie have a single arch looking into the interior of the tomb. The tomb illustrates scenes from Augustine’s life, as well as the theological virtues, and the apostles.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Saint Augustine was born in 354 CE in Tagaste, Africa. He was born into a religiously mixed family. His father was a Pagan and his mother a Christian. Although his mother was a devout Christian and encouraged her religion in his life, Augustine was not baptized as a Christian until later in his early thirties. His mother, being an important influence to the person Augustine became, is represented along the side of Saint Augustine’s tomb. Throughout his childhood, his parents ensured that he would be given a proper education so that he would have a secure career later in life. Eventually, he moved to Italy where he began teaching. [[2]](#footnote-2) This is another key piece of Augustine’s history that was represented on the walls of his tomb. Shortly after moving to Milan, Italy, Augustine became friends with Bishop Ambrose. While becoming close to Ambrose, Augustine claimed to hear a voice that came to him and told him to read the Bible. This was a turning point in his life, the passage that the Bible opened up to gave him reason enough to believe in the word of the Holy book and led to the conversion and baptism of Augustine. Yet another milestone in Augustine’s life that we can see carved into the marble of his tomb. [[3]](#footnote-3)

Soon after his conversion his mother, a huge influence throughout his life, passed away and Augustine fell into a deep depression. After his depression Augustine became a changed man. He decided to give up selfish habits and moved back to Africa where he began to focus on his spiritual life. He settled down in a town called Hippo Regius where he soon became the Bishop. He was ordained as a priest in 391 and in 396 he became the Bishop of the town. He took his new position as Bishop of Hippo with conviction and vowed to hold it until his death. He ministered to his followers with great dedication, especially during the time of the fall of the Roman Empire. During the German overthrowing of Rome, it is said that one of the German tribes, the Vandals, sailed to northern Africa where Augustine lay on his deathbed. As a final event in his life, Saint Augustine’s death is not only represented through the monument itself but also in smaller imagery on the walls of the tomb. It is documented that Augustine died while reading he Psalms as the Vandals attacked his town. He was initially buried in the Cathedral of Hippo but was later moved to Pavia, Italy where his remains were protected from Muslims who had invaded Hippo. His remains and his tomb are still held in Pavia, in St. Peter’s church, the Basilica of San Pietro in Ceil d’Oro. [[4]](#footnote-4)

The Basilica of San Pietro was built during the Lombard period in Pavia, Italy. It is located a short distance from the center of the city and it located in a quiet square. This church is significant in Pavia because it holds the remains of historical and influential philosophers, including Saint Augustine. His tomb is in the church of Saint Peter under the “Golden Sky” in the apse of the church.[[5]](#footnote-5) At the bottom, in the front of the tomb we see the virtues of faith, hope, charity, and religion. We also see pairs of the twelve apostles garmented with a band of the articles of creed including James of Zebedee and Andréa and Thomas and Bartholomew. At the center of the tomb is the representation of Saint Augustine at the time of his death. Surrounding his body are statues of those who were with him at the time of his passing. On the ceiling of the interior of the tomb is Christ the savior who appears to be jutting out towards Augustine as a sign of welcoming into heaven. Back on the exterior, the upper band depicts images of Saint Augustine’s conversion with Bishop Ambrose. Finally the top is adorned with triangular frames that illustrate the angelic hierarchies as well as some miracles obtained through the intercession of Saint Augustine. [[6]](#footnote-6)

The backside of the tomb is formatted in the same way but depicts different images than the front side. At the bottom are again some of the virtues including prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. The backside also depicts couples of the apostles who are again wearing the articles of creed. In the upper band on this face of the tomb we see illustrations of the funeral of Santa Monica, the funeral of his mother, and scenes of Saint Augustine’s life. In the upper triangles, we see depictions of three famous authors of heresy, Aruis, Donatus, and Pelagius, all carved with chicken’s feet.[[7]](#footnote-7)

On the left side of the tomb we see the carvings of the virtues obedience and chastity. Then there are the saints, Stephen, Lawrence and Paul the Hermit. At the center we see the illustration of Ambrose and Simpliciano at the funeral of Saint Augustine. In the triangle at the top of this side, there is an image that shows Saint Augustine teaching a lesson in rhetoric.[[8]](#footnote-8)

On the final side of the tomb we see at the bottom the virtues of meekness and poverty. The apostles depicted on this side are Mark, Paul and Luke, all draped with the Articles of Creed. At the center we see Saints Jerome and Magnus Greogorio attending the funeral of Saint Augustine. At the top we see illustrations of Saint Augustines body being moved by boat with King Liutprand and Bishop Peter. Also we see the procession finally entering Pavia and arriving in St. Peter’s church. In the two triangles at the top of this side we see depictions of Augustine performing a miracle as he heals a group of crippled and sick people.[[9]](#footnote-9)

According to some art historians, the style of art throughout Europe saw a significant change after the plague swept across Europe. Many works of art had reverted back to an idea of religious representation, leaving the progress of naturalism to fall behind. Through fear of falling to the hands of sin and living a longer life in purgatory, many people throughout Italy found ways to commission works of art and architecture like the Tomb of Saint Augustine. This method of worship through commissions became very prevalent in the Italian renaissance lifestyle. The commissioning of Saint Augustine’s tomb is an example of this cultural change in Italian life.

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