

Church of Santa María de Uribarri


Town:

Durango.

Location:

C/ Andramari, 1.

Access:

In the centre of Durango's old quarter.

Other places of interest nearby:
Cruz (Cross) de Kurutzia.
Durango.Palacio Etxezarreta.
(Museum of Art & History).
Durango.Casa Consistorial (Town Hall).
Durango.Arch of Santa Ana.
Durango.Church of San Pedro de Tabira.
Durango.

Conceived on a monumental scale almost without parallel in the Basque Country, the church of Santa María de Uribarri owes much to both classical and Baroque architecture.

Built on the site of an earlier church, Santa María retained something of the spirit of its late Gothic predecessor by making use of the original vaulting. Another significant survival from earlier times is the choir, the finest example in Bizkaia of what is known as the style of the Reyes Católicos, the Catholic Kings of Spain.

Santa María is unusual in many respects, particularly in the predominance of the central nave over the aisles and the highly original way the chapels are set into the apse between buttresses. But the most outstanding feature is the porch, a remarkable demonstration of the architects' mastery of elementary graphic statics, a discipline then in its infancy.

Judging by the style used in its construction, the choir almost certainly dates from between 1490 and 1510, coinciding with the building of the lower section of the tower. The upper reaches of the tower date from the first half of the 16th century.

A number of prestigious architects, including St. Juan de Urizarabala and Juan de Ansolá, took part in the reconstruction of the church, a process that lasted throughout the 17th century. The porch was executed between 1679 and 1680 to the design of Baraincua and Gabiria.

Building

Set in the old quarter of Durango, Santa María displays an odd, but not unsatisfying, combination of styles that correspond to two markedly different construction phases. The first stage, around 1500, is best described as Gothic-cum-Renaissance. This was followed in the 17th century by a mixture of the Baroque and classical idioms.

Size is the most immediately striking thing about the church. As a whole, the present design follows the primitive layout fairly faithfully; the earlier church probably had a spacious nave lined with chapels that were replaced by the present two aisles when the new church was built.

With its polygonal apse, the earlier chevet was left almost entire, as were the first chapels in either aisle. A number of features, including spans and ashlar work, still bear witness to the original outline.

Inside, classically inspired pillars faced with pilasters are linked high up by round arches. Above these, an open gallery with iron railings runs the entire length of the church.

High insloping counterforts buttress the outer walls, a function fulfilled at ground level by the porch. Nave and aisles are crowned with ribbed vaulting, although the ribbing is rather more complex over the nave.

Set over a broad segmental arch, the choir abounds with decorative motifs, including star-studded pendentives, images and a groined vault with carved keystone. The choir is not part of the reconstruction, dating from the latter phase of the original church.

Santa María has two entrances. The entrance under the porch on the south side is ordered in two registers, while the main doorway, in the west façade, is part of an austere but complex door-cum-reredos in the classical style. Access to it is gained under a great stone portico sporting an elegant frieze of metopes and triglyphs.

Rising above the church, the three-sectioned tower is crowned with pinnacles and tracery. A polygonal spiral staircase leading to a steeple serves as a sort of second tower.

An essential ingredient of the building's makeup is the south porch, a superb example of the local carpenters' craftsmanship resting on eleven solid pillars, nine pilasters and the outer wall of the church itself.

Furniture

Interior furniture and furnishings are generally of a high standard. Particularly worthy of note is the superb late 16th century Romanesque reredos by Martín Ruíz de Zubiate, one of the finest exponents of the movement anywhere in the Basque Country. Besides the reredos, the church also has some fine lateral reredoses, images and pulpits. The Rococo chests in the sacristy are also of great interest.


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