

Chapel of the Pietà

In 1534, an agreement was reached to build the Chapel of the Pietà as the church of the cathedral's *beneficiats* or benefice holders, and it was consecrated in 1544. Via an adaptation of the space of the former refectory of the canons, it was designed to have a single nave with a square chevet, four side chapels, an elevated choir at the base and a communal tomb for the benefice holders underground. Over the eastern chapels there was also a meeting room known as the Synod Room, which no longer exists today. It was reformed in a neogothic style in the early twentieth century.

The Chapel of the Pietà reveals the arrival of the Renaissance in La Seu d'Urgell. Despite the changes over time, the building itself, the works of art displayed in it and even all the music that is played there comprise one of the most unique artistic complexes in Catalonia from the sixteenth century.

The sculptor Jeroni Xanxo in La Seu d'Urgell

Jeroni Xanxo, a sculptor working between 1537 and 1575, was a driving force in the blossoming of Renaissance art in La Seu. Originally from Barcelona, his prestige led him to oversee important projects in other parts of Catalonia as well, like Lleida, Tarragona and Sant Llorenç de Morunys. Two of his most important works are conserved in the Chapel of the Pietà: the main altarpieces and the group of the Dormition of Mary or the altarpiece of the Apostles, the outcome of the same artistic impetus that had gotten underway with the building's construction.

Patriarchs and prophets

The Synod Room in the Chapel of the Pietà, which no longer exists today, was decorated with a series of paintings on canvas which are unique in the context of sixteenth-century painting in Catalonia.

They depicted sixteen biblical figures: the prophets Jeremiah, Elias and Balaam, and the patriarch Jacob and his twelve sons, the heads of the tribes of Israel. The figures were accompanied by their name and a unique attribute: each son of Jacob also had a brief painted text in Spanish with the blessing that his father gave him according to the Book of Genesis.

The sixteen paintings, envisioned based on Flemish engravings, were the work of at least two artists whose names and origins are unknown: one painted the prophets and the other the patriarchs. We know nothing about the commission of this curious set of works, but the depiction of the twelve tribes, which alludes to all of God's peoples, does not seem to be befitting for a meeting room.

Worship and memory of the bishops of Urgell

Within Catalonia, the diocese of Urgell has an exceptional tradition of saintly bishops. Bishops Justus (sixth century), Ermengol (eleventh century) and Ot (twelfth century) are still venerated today; for a certain period of time the sanctity of Felix (eighth to ninth centuries), Sal·la (tenth to eleventh centuries) and Eribau (eleventh century) was also celebrated. But the worship of Ermengol and Ot, the patrons of the bishopric and the city, particularly endured in two chapels in the Romanesque cathedral. The renovation of their sculptures in the Modern Age, which focused on the conservation of their reliquaries, sought simultaneously to reflect the importance of the cathedral, the city and the diocese. This is why they were given artistic treatments by prominent artists.

Instructed by these examples, in the late Middle Ages and the Modern Age, the bishops of Urgell were buried in more modern tombs, although they were similar to those of the holy pontiffs. The tomb of bishop Joan Despés (+1530) is inside the cathedral, but there are many others as well. The testimonies of these painted effigies enable us to reconstruct this intriguing artistic, institutional and spiritual dialogue.

Joan Brudieu, benefice holder and chapel master

Joan Brudieu (ca. 1520-1591) is one of the most prominent Renaissance composers in Catalonia. Originally from Limoges, he reached La Seu d'Urgell in 1538 and already appears as a benefice holder and chapel master of the cathedral the following year. He also worked in Barcelona for a period of time. He was familiar with the great religious polyphony of his era (Victoria, Palestrina, Morales) and introduced it into the acts at the cathedral of Urgell. A mass for the dead, called *Goigs de Nostra Dona*, still survives, along with several madrigals, but he must have composed many other works which have been lost.