

The Cathedral of Orvieto



Fig. 1 Cathedral of Orvieto, begun in 1290. Façade.

In the decades between the 13th and 14th centuries, the city of Orvieto underwent a phase of great splendour which corresponded to a large increase in the urban fabric. Orvieto was benefiting politically from an alliance made with the papacy and with the Guelph city of Florence, thus becoming a rival to the Ghibellina Siena.

In 1290 the Capitano del Popolo (appointed by the wealthiest families) and the Consiglio del Popolo (an organ of the most important guilds) decided to start work on the construction of the *Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta*. However it wasn't until 1310 that the church took on a Gothic appearance in its form, a change that coincided with the commission of "*universalis caput magister*" that was conferred on the Sienese sculptor and architect **Lorenzo Maitani**.

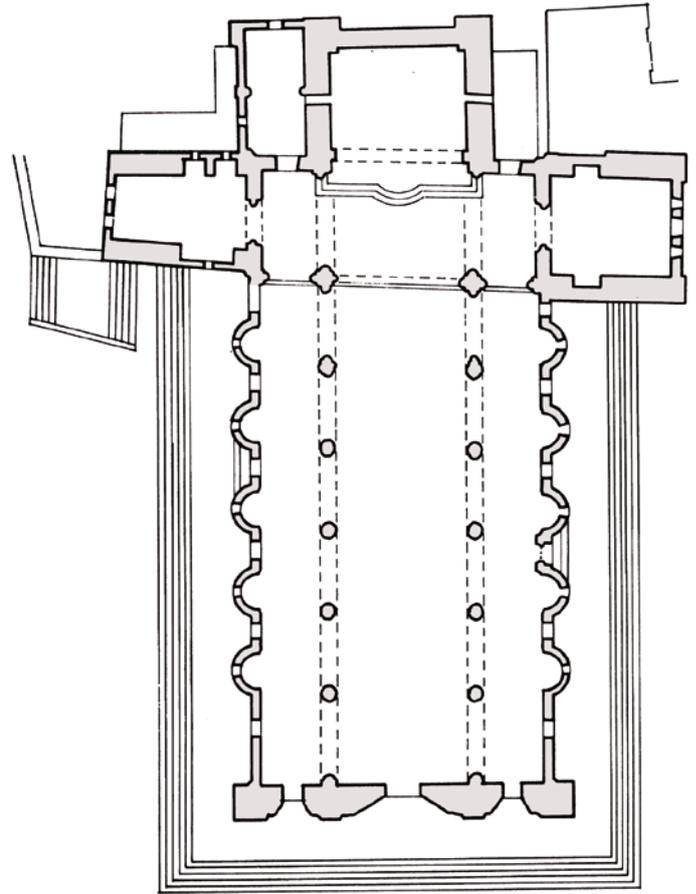
Maitani was not interested in Gothic style for the body of the structure – an aspect more typical of the great cathedrals of

Northern Europe – as much as he used it for its decorative possibilities. His first step was, however, to give the church body the vast atmosphere of the great Paleochristian Roman basilica buildings, topped by beamed ceilings and rounded arches. This was clearly a strategy that was tied politically and culturally to the Papal City. These features plus the wide centre to centre distance between the massive pilasters and smaller side naves resulted in a unitary space of majestic atmosphere.

Like all the outdoor walls (with the exception of the façade), the interior walls are marked by the two-coloured stripes of marble that are found from the Siena Cathedral to the Romanesque churches of Lucca and throughout Tuscany. The side walls take on a wavy appearance as the stripes follow the inside and outside regular movement of the semi-circular side chapels.



Fig. 2, 3 *Cathedral of Orvieto*, begun in 1290.
View of the central nave and plan.



The most modern choice that Maitani made regarded the design of the cathedral façade which he conceived as a kind of gigantic altarpiece. This conception is used to mediate the building's relationship with the city rather than to allude to the interior of the holy space.

The special nature of the façade design consists in its rigorous balance of horizontal and vertical elements, as well as of square and triangular shapes. This same sense of equilibrium guides the very rich decorative arrangement. The façade's entire surface answers to a three-part scheme, ordered by the four pilasters formed by clusters of columns, and topped by spires. The verticality of the entire composition is balanced

by the regular repetition of horizontal elements (the base line, the cornice running along the level at which the arches start to narrow, the gallery of three-lobed arches which run across the top the doorways' cusps). The cusps' triangles are repeated six times across various heights of the façade; together they are contained by an overall orthogonal design which finds its completion in the cornice's perfect square pierced, in turn, by the rose window.

Work on the façade was not terminated until the 16th century but, in spite of variations and renovations, it is still seen today as substantially faithful to the original design.