



The Royal Monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial

The Royal Monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial was built by Philip II in the 16th century and served as a royal palace, monastery and necropolis for numerous Spanish kings. The “El Escorial” is one of the most important visitor sites in Spain.

Philip II wished to commemorate the Spanish victory in the battle of St. Quentin, fought on August 10th 1557 on St. Lawrence’s day. As Philip II was devoted to this Saint he decided to build the monastery as a royal pantheon. The king decided to found a religious institution to house the pantheon of his entire dynasty, together with a place of worship, a royal palace, a community of Hieronymite monks, a seminary and a library.

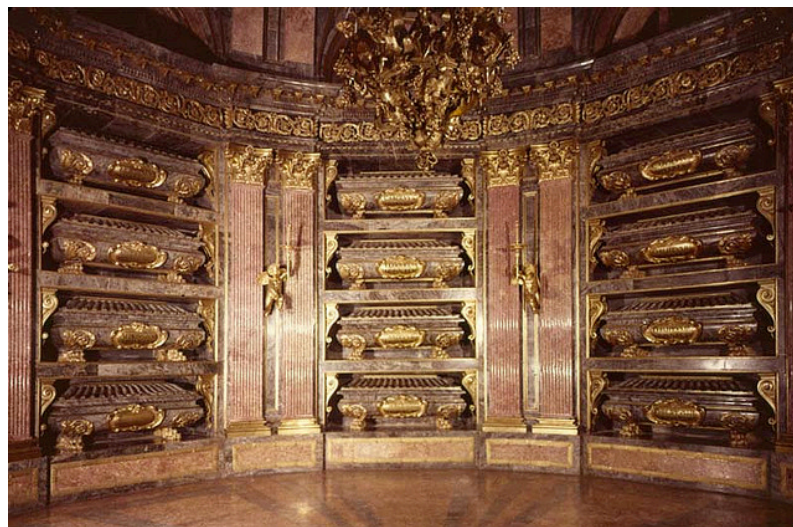
The Monastery took twenty-one years to be built (from 1563 to 1584). In the beginning the work was directed by Juan Bautista de Toledo, but following Toledo’s premature death in 1567, his pupil Juan de Herrera began to excel as supervisor of the works. Herrera took over the direction and changed it somewhat into his own personal style.

THE ROYAL MAUSOLEUM

Philip II wanted to build a crypt below the High Altar, destined for a Royal Pantheon. But he died before his wish was accomplished, and it was his son,

Philip III, who fulfilled his father's desire. Works started in 1617 under the direction of the architect Juan Gómez de Mora. On his death, the work was already well advanced but the project remained unfinished for twenty-two years. The Philip IV completed it and it was inaugurated in 1654.

The Pantheon of kings, a circular chamber, is located beneath the main chapel. It was designed by Juan de Herrera, although its rich marble and bronze decoration was not executed until the reigns of Philip III and Philip IV. All the successive kings and queen mothers of the reigning sovereigns from Charles I to Alfonso XIII are buried in here. The only exceptions are Philip V and Ferdinand VI, who wished to be laid to rest in the buildings founded by them, the Royal Site of La Granja (Segovia) and the Convent of Las Salesas Reales in Madrid.



Arranged around the chamber are twenty-six elegant sepulchral grey marble urns, twelve on either side of the altar and two above the door, the kings on the left-hand side and the queen mothers of heirs to the throne on the right – hand side.

The altar, which stands opposite the entrance door, is presided over by a gilt bronze crucifix, the work of the Italian sculptor Doménico Guidi.

LIBRARY

The Library is located above the main entrance, between the Monastery and the College. The Library is one of the most valuable possessions of El Escorial. Philip II created it and devoted a lot of work and effort to its upkeep. In its time it was one of the most outstanding libraries in Europe.

Philip II's plans went beyond the creation of a library that would contain books and manuscripts only. His vision of knowledge was universal, so that in addition to books, he also collected terrestrial and celestial globes, maps and

mathematical and scientific instruments, as well as a set of portraits of pontiffs, emperors, kings and eminent scholars.

Today the Royal library contains some forty-five thousand volumes, from the 5th century up to today, and a collection of over five thousand manuscripts arranged in order of numerical importance in the following languages: Arabic, Latin, Spanish, Greek, Italian, Hebrew, Catalan, French, Chinese, Persian, Portuguese, Turkish, Armenian, German and Nahuatl.



The books were placed with their backs facing outwards. Their titles were thus visible and they were not only easier to handle but suffered less wear and tear when taken out.

The library is located above the entrance to the Patio de los Reyes and is reached by a stairway to the right of the Patio. There is plenty of light from five large windows with balconies and smaller roof windows in the vaulted ceiling.

The shelves were designed by Juan de Herrera, and line the Library right along the walls. They are made of fine wood and were sculpted by Giuseppe Flecha. Above the shelves the ceiling, which is curved in vaults, is painted with frescos. The Painting is divided into seven parts and in each section one of the seven arts is represented: Grammar, Rhetoric, Dialectics, Arithmetic, Music, Geometry and Astronomy. They were painted by Peregrin Tibaldi. The space between the cornice and the shelves is painted with another fourteen stories relating to the arts, which form a frieze running round the gallery.

BASILICA

Entering by the main gate, facing the Patio de los Reyes is the entrance to the Basilica.

The church is laid out on a square, fifty metres each side. There is a Doric order of columns, which imitates St. Peter's in Rome. The natural light comes in through thirty-eight windows at the vaulted ceiling level. The brick

vaults are covered with lead on the outside and were previously decorated with stucco work inside, except for the vaulted ceiling over the main altar and the choir, which were painted by Luca Cambiaso. The stucco was taken away in the times of Charles II and frescos were painted by Luca Giordano.

There are forty-three altars within the Basilica, made of granite and grey marble. The floor of the church is decorated in grey and white marble from Granada and Portugal.



The richest part of the interior is undoubtedly the Main Chapel. It is separated from the nave by a huge arch supported by pilasters with twelve steps of red marble. The Presbytery is paved in red, green and white marble. On either side are the Royal Tombs or Cenotaphs and the Oratories.

The tabernacle of the High Altar is another priceless jewel. It is one of the most perfect and costly of its kind. Juan de Herrera was the designer, but it was made by the Italian craftsman Jacome Trezzo. The form is in the shape of a little circular temple with Corinthian decoration in marble and gilded bronze.

In the main chapel the altarpiece flanked by the royal Tombs on either side forms a sumptuous architectural structure of jasper and bronze based on the classical orders. Beneath the tombs are the oratories with two small chapels on either side of the altar, where the royal family used to hear mass.

On the left is the funeral monument of Charles V and his family and on the right that of Philip II with three of his four wives and his son Don Carlos. They are life size and made in bronze, copper and brass, all gilded. The sculptures were created by Pompeo Leoni.