

ST. PETER'S BALDACCHINO UNDER RESTORATION FOR 2025 HOLY YEAR

■ BY LUCY GORDAN



Above, self-portrait by Gianlorenzo Bernini (1623), now in Rome's Borghese Gallery. (Photo, Wikipedia)

Left, Bernini's Baldacchino (Photo, Wikipedia)

Below: Bernini's bust of his patron, Pope Urban VIII in Palazzo Barberini, Rome, and an anonymous portrait of his colleague, Francesco Borromini. (Photos, Wikipedia)

Gian Lorenzo Bernini was Cardinal Maffeo Barberini's favorite artist. On his ascent to the papal throne in 1623 Urban VIII remarked, "It's a great fortune for you, O Cavaliere, to see Cardinal Maffeo Barberini made Pope, but our fortune is even greater to have Cavalier Bernini alive in our pontificate." Thus, not surprisingly, the Pope immediately appointed Bernini curator of the papal art collection, director of the papal foundry at Castel Sant'Angelo, and commissioner of Piazza Navona's fountains. He also commissioned him to create the *baldacchino* or canopy over the high altar directly under the dome and directly above the tomb of St. Peter in the newly finished St. Peter's Basilica. It was similar in style to the Old St. Peter's *ciborium*, but this time made mostly of bronze not cloth.

The term "baldachin" derives from Baldac, the ancient name of the city of Baghdad in Iraq, known for its precious silk fabrics. Thus, although of bronze, Bernini made his to resemble the

richly adorned cloths with scalloped edges and long tassels of *ciboria* over the high altars of older churches.

The first of Bernini's works to combine sculpture and architecture and designed as a massive spiraling gilded bronze four-pillared canopy, topped with statues of angel and cherubs, and a cross, the *baldacchino* became the Basilica's visual centerpiece. Nearly 30 meters tall with an estimated weight of 63 tons, it cost 200,000 Roman *scudi* (about 8 million US dollars today). Its four pillars are decorated with small gilded reliefs of cherubs, flies, a lizard eating a scorpion, rosaries, and heraldic emblems of the Barberini family: bees and laurel leaves.

One curiosity: the changing face of a woman depicted at the base of the *baldacchino*'s four pillars. These four pillars rest on four 8-foot tall marble plinths decorated with eight of the Barberini's coat-of-arms, a shield with three bees. Each of the shields shows a woman's face at the top and a satyr's head at the bottom. The shields look nearly identical, but if





Details of Bernini's spiraling pillars and of Borromini's decorations atop the baldacchino's canopy.

Pietro Zander, head of the art heritage unit of the Fabbrica of San Pietro.



one looks closely one sees dramatic changes in the face of the woman. She seems to be calm, then in pain, then in intense pain. On the last column, her face is replaced by... a baby's face. There are several interpretations of the meaning of these faces. One is that the young woman is Giulia Barberini, a niece of Pope Urban VIII. The Pope loved her very much and he was worried about her difficult pregnancy. Urban VIII and Bernini were on friendly terms and Bernini represented Giulia's laborious delivery. Moving from the southeast corner clockwise to the northeast corner, the entire labor is depicted. The last face shows a little angelic baby smiling: Giulia's delivery ended well!

Bernini worked alongside his father Pietro and his brother Luigi as well as Francesco Borromini, later his rival. When Bernini completed his work 12 years later, nothing like it had ever been seen before. No wonder that after visiting the Basilica in 1873, the overwhelmed novelist Henry James said of the baldacchino: "You have only to stroll and stroll and gaze and gaze; to watch the glorious altar-canopy lift its bronze architecture, its colossal embroidered contortions, like a temple within a temple, and feel yourself at the bottom of the abysmal shaft of the dome dwindle to a crawling dot."

At a press conference on January 11, Pietro Zander, head of the art heritage unit of

the Fabbrica of San Pietro, the Holy See's department in charge of the Basilica, announced that Bernini's earliest artistic masterpiece was in a "degraded state of conservation" in spite of being cleaned twice a year: after Easter, and after Christmas. Its gilded decorations are obscured by a heavy patina of dust, grime, and mold, and paint is peeling off its wooden parts (which

account for 20% of the baldacchino). Besides natural aging, Zander explained that the large number of visitors to the Basilica, sometimes as many as 50,000 a day, alters the Basilica's microclimate, its temperature and humidity, enough to corrode the structure's bronze and oxidize its iron and causes the constant expansion and compression of its wood. He said that over the next 10 months, 2024 being the 400th anniversary of Urban VIII's commission, the baldacchino would undergo an extensive "makeover" to be completed in time for the opening on Christmas Eve of the 2025 Holy Year. The only other major restoration of the baldacchino dates to 1758.



Sister María Antonia de Paz y Figueroa (1703-1799). Below, Patrick Kelly, Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus with Pope Francis



This year's state-of-the-art restoration began on February 12, the day after Pope Francis presided over the canonization of Argentina's first female saint in a mass at St. Peter's high altar. Born in a wealthy family but who felt her religious vocation early, Sister María Antonia de Paz y Figueroa (1703-1799), affectionately known as Mama Antula, established the Daughters of the Divine Savior, evan-

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gelistic collaborators of the Jesuits. The restoration cost of 700,000 euros (US\$768,000), will be paid by the Knights of Columbus, a global Catholic fraternal order founded in 1882 to serve the needs of a largely Italian immigrant Catholic community by a young parish priest in New Haven, Connecticut, now Blessed Fr. Michael McGivney. The Knights today have 2 million members in 13 countries.

This is their latest collaboration in restoring artworks in Vatican City. The collaboration began with the construction of a new chapel dedicated to the Patron saints of Europe, Benedict, Cyril, and Methodius, in the Vatican Grottoes in 1980-81. Other collaborations in St. Peter's Basilica include the restoration and consolidation of its façade in 1985-86; renovation of two ancient rooms, "Of the Architects" and "Of the Glass," in 1987; restoration of the dome in the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament in 1992; restoration of Pope Innocent VIII's bronze funerary monument in 2010-11; of the 15th-century fresco "Madonna della Colonna" in 2012-13 (after May 13, 1981's assass-

(Courtesy of the Knights of Columbus)



Presenting the "Madonna del Soccorso" after its restoration paid for by the Knights of Columbus

sination attempt on his life, St. John Paul II had a mosaic of the fresco made and installed in St. Peter's Square); of the 12th-century fresco "Madonna del Soccorso," often restored over the centuries, in the Gregorian Chapel in 2013; and of the large wooden 14th-century crucifix in 2013.

"The three phases of restoration work," Cardinal Marco Gambetti, Archpriest of the Basilica, told the press, "will begin with provisional work and planning, continue with preliminary and onsite diagnostics and documentation using, for examples, drone videography (teamed with Microsoft to take 6,000 detailed photographs) and 3-D models using Building Information Modeling (BIM-H), and then, with 10-12 experts working every day from an all-enclosing scaffolding to be constructed over four weeks after Easter, will focus on the actual restoration and conservation.

"During this last phase, these dozen workers will undertake a deep cleaning using soft brushes and vacuum cleaners and apply surface protection to the metals and acrylic resin to fill cracks in the wood."○