

## CELEBRATING THE PAPACY OF URBAN VIII (1623-44)

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

To celebrate the 400th anniversary of Maffeo Barberini's papal election as Pope Urban VIII in 1623, on until July 30 at the National Galleries of Ancient Art in Rome's Palazzo Barberini is *The Sovereign Image: Urban VIII and the Barberini*.

"This exhibition reconstructs," said Flaminia Gennari Santori, director of the Museum and co-curator of the exhibition, at the press preview, "the cultural and political profile of the Pope who, more than any other, had an impact on philosophical thought, scientific knowledge and the arts in the 17th century. It aims to illustrate the ways in which the pontiff favored cultural hegemony as a function of political and governmental action."

"Urban VIII (r. 1623-44), together with his nephews, Cardinals Francesco and Antonio and Prince Taddeo Barberini, tenaciously pursued an ambitious political-cultural project that pervaded all areas of knowledge and artistic and cultural production. A new style was imposed, which immediately spread like wildfire not only in Rome and Italy, but throughout Europe; the Baroque was born in Rome under the Barberinis."

For the first time, more than 80 works of art collected by Urban VIII, 70 of which are on loan from over 40 museums and private collections worldwide, will be gathered in the family's sumptuous residence commissioned by Urban VIII and designed by the greatest architects of his time: Maderno, Borromini and Bernini, one of Urban VIII's favorite artists along with Pietro da Cortona, Valentin de Boulogne, and Nicolas Poussin. Among the loaners are: the Uffizi, Brera, The Capitoline, Capodimonte, Galleria Borghese, Vatican



Caravaggio's portrait of Maffeo Barberini before he became Pope.

Below, Pietro da Cortona's ceiling showing the tapestry of Constantine fighting a lion

Museums, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, The British Museum, London's National Gallery and Victoria and Albert Museum, the Prado, the Louvre, the Albertina, the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Minneapolis Institute of Art, the Metropolitan, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the St. Louis Art Museum, and New York's Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

Also on display are several volumes from Urban VIII's personal library of some 4,000 titles as well as three (one for each subject) of the 12 spectacular tapestries which once decorated St. Peter's Basilica, illustrating episodes of Christ's, the Emperor Constantine's, and Urban VIII's lives. These were produced by the Barberini Tapestry Workshop, promoted by the pontiff's nephew Francesco in 1625 and here juxtaposed for the first time with their preparatory sketches.

Displayed in chronological order in 12 sections, the exhibition proceeds from the Exhibition Space on the ground floor to the emblematic spaces of the museum which were once the family residence, such as the monumental rooms on the *piano nobile*: The Pietro da Cortona Room with its immense ceiling fresco *Allegory of Divine Providence and Barberini Power*, the Throne Room, and the Landscape Room.

Section One, "Pleasure, Good Fortune, and Strategy" focuses on the figure of Maffeo Barberini with a series of portraits and a number of artworks he collected when he was still a cardinal. Two, "Imagining the Dynasty," presents his nephews, the other protagonists of his papacy; Three, "The Factory of Saints," illustrates Urban's effort to reaffirm the universalism of the Catholic



Church through his canonization policy and via Propaganda Fide, his evangelization of continents outside Europe. Four, “Hic Domus,” showcases the masterpieces of his art collection which include Poussin’s *Death of Germanicus* on loan from Minneapolis, one of the French painter’s most famous works commissioned by the pope’s nephew Francesco in 1626; and Andrea Sacchi’s *Portrait of Marc’Antonio Pasqualini with Apollo and Marsyas* (from The Metropolitan). Five, “Family Enterprises,” explains his symbolic and allegorical universe dominated by the sun, bees, and laurel. Six, “Ancient Culture,” his activities to recover ancient art; Seven, “Modern Science,” his promotion of science which showcases *Tlamachayatl* (1534), one of the rare examples of Mesoamerican feathered textiles known today, on loan from the Museum of Civilizations in Rome; Eight, “Weaving the Weft,” The Barberini Tapestry Workshop; Nine, “Rhetoric and Poetry,” his love of literature; Ten, *Le Api Munifiche*, concerns the art commissioned by his nephews and then sent as diplomatic gifts to the courts of Paris, Madrid, London, and Vienna; Eleven, “Around the Beehive,” his collecting



The tapestry of Christ's baptism on loan from New York's Cathedral of St. John the Divine

strategy; and Twelve,” “The Theater of Amazements” recounts the scenographic dimension of *Palazzo Barberini*, which was originally used for political ceremonies and theatrical performances. On display here are two large canvases restored especially for the exhibition, executed by Andrea Camassei, Taddeo Barberini’s favorite painter and one of the greatest and most assiduous interpreters of the family’s patronage strategies: *The Massacre of the Niobids* and *The Rest of Diana*.

Outside the *Palazzo Barberini*, other Urban VIII (the only Barberini Pope and the last named Urban) commissions include his tomb, the *cathedra* and the *baldacchino* in St. Peter’s Basilica, the Bee Fountain and the Triton Fountain in Piazza Barberini, all designed by Bernini, and the glass window with the bee coat of arms in the counter-façade of Santa Maria d’Aracoeli. The fact that massive bronze girders were pillaged from the portico of the Pantheon to make the *baldacchino* led to the well-known lampoon: *Quod non fecerunt barbari, fecerunt Barbarini*, “What the barbarians did not do, the Barberini did.” ○