Visible Spirit

The Art of Gianlorenzo Bernini

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Letter to the Editor on a Review by Howard Hibbard of *Bernini and the Crossing of St. Peter's*

HOWARD Hibbard's review of recent books on Roman Baroque architecture (*The Art Bulletin*, LV, March, 1973, 127–135), which included my monograph on the Crossing of Saint Peter's, leaves an impression of the history of the baldachin that I fear may be misleading to the casual reader. He writes (pages 128 f.):

> 'Bernini's' design, preserved in the medal of 1626, in a sense contains almost no absolutely new elements: four angels, standing on twisted columns, hold a baldachin. Over the whole are crossed ribs supporting a figure of the Risen Christ. The ribs reflect Early Christian ciborium designs. If the idea of bronze twisted columns was Maderno's — or at least if it was an idea formulated under Paul V — and if the idea of a hanging that does not touch the columns or their cornice was also Maderno's, not much remains apart from the topmost statue and the scale to attribute to Bernini — but of course 'Maderno's' design may not have looked anything like the medal of 1626. In the project of 1626 the intimate combination of a ciborium with a permanent baldachin, apparently unprecedented, may be a reflection of the project reported by Borromini [i.e., Maderno's]. If one tries to envisage the Maderno project now, one inevitably sees such a combination thanks to the later developments. And that is where we seem to be left.

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From all we now know of the pre-history of the baldachin, the fact remains that at least five revolutionary concepts appeared only after Bernini entered the picture. Firstly, there is not the slightest evidence that Maderno or anyone else had thought of true columns for the supports in a baldachin; execution in bronze made it possible to preserve the tradition of twisted columns in a monument of colossal scale. Secondly, the same may be said for the angels who stand on the columns and carry the canopy by ribbons (as, later, the Fathers of the Church sustain the Cathedra Petri by ribbons); they work to link the architecture to the hanging. Thirdly, the same may be said for connecting the columns by a cornice from which tasselled lappets fall, a solution that actually preceded the 1626 medal (see further below); this was also crucial to the ultimate fusion of the elements. Fourthly, the same may be said for the basic 'point' of the monument as a whole, which is a new species comprising an architectural ciborium, a hanging canopy and a processional baldachin; it is thus a kind of summa of the three main honorific forms. All these features — the baldachin-with-columns, the cornice-canopy, the carrying angels and the triune species — are specifically referred to Bernini in the criticisms of Agostino Ciampelli, who called his design a 'chimera'. Fifthly, the same may be said for the *idea* of imitating the Early Christian form of the monument with open crossed ribs resting on spiral columns, an allusion that became fundamental to the imagery of the crossing.

Because its implications are relevant to the foregoing statements, I take this opportunity to add a new piece that helps fill a large gap in the baldachin puzzle. This is a temporary 'thalamus' built by Orazio Torriani for the procession at Santa Maria sopra Minerva on the Feast of the Rosary (October 5) in 1625, recorded in a description and an engraving (Fig. 1).[1] It was over

[1] My attention was first called to this work by the librarian at the Minerva, Benedetto Cardieri O. P. See A. Brandi, *Trionfo della gloriosissima Vergine del Santissimo Rosario celebrato in Roma la prima Domenica d'Ottobre dell' Anno Santo MDCXXV . . .*, Rome, 1625, 56–58, ill. page 61 (copy in the Biblioteca Vittorio Emanuele, Rome). I quote the description *in extenso*: 'Prima bisognò pensare à fabricare vn nobilissimo Talamo, che fusse come il carro trionfale, in cui doueua portarsi l'imagine della Vergine, & essendo in Roma il Sig. Oratio Torriani Architetto militare, &   ciuile di S. M. Catolica, molto principale, adoperato da'Signori Cardinali, & da altri Prencipi, dal Sig. D. Carlo Barberino gli fù commesso il disegno di questo Talamo, qual fece veramente ingegnoso, curioso, & vago. Era il Talamo d'ordine Ionico, alto palmi trentadue, & mezo, & a proportione largo sedici, & haueua ne'quattro angoli quattro basi, ò piedestalli alto palmi sei, & mezo, & di sopra quattro colonne di rilieuo ritorte à foggia di quelle del Tempio di Salomone, che hoggi si vedono

Esemplare del Talamo di sopra descritto

1. Orazio Torriani, "Thalamus" for the Feast of the Rosary, 1625,
   engraving (from A. Brandi, *Trionfi . . .*, Rome, 1625, 61).

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seven metres high and consisted of a perforated, ribbed cupola resting on spiral columns imitating those at Saint Peter's. Angels stood on the columns and at the apex, and tasselled flaps hung from the entablature between the columns. Torriani's design confirms the other evidence I cited to show that the cornice-canopy device, which was preserved in the final version of the baldachin, existed from the outset of planning under Urban VIII. In particular, it reflects the project for the baldachin shown in an engraving of Bernini's decorations at Saint Peter's for the canonization of Elizabeth of Portugal in March, 1625 (Fig. 30 in my book, and on p. 90 above). A significant difference is that whereas Torriani hung the flaps from the architrave, Bernini boldly used them in place of both architrave and frieze.

With this confirmation of the priority of the cornice-canopy solution the whole development of the baldachin becomes much clearer. It may be summarized as follows. From early in Paul V's reign, when it was decided to separate the high altar from the tomb of the apostles, models of two contrasting types had been juxtaposed so as to complement each other: a baldachin with staves over the tomb in the crossing, and a domed ciborium (incorporating the twisted columns from the mediaeval sanctuary) at the high altar in the choir. Later in Paul's reign Maderno introduced another,

capitello, d'ordine pur Ionico alto vn palmo, & mezo con suoi festoni, & voluti tutto messo a oro, & sopra le quattro colonne recorreua vn'architraue d'altezza vn palmo, e vn quarto, nel quale erano attaccati i pendoni a vso di baldachino dipinti con rose, & api che sono l'impresa dell' Eccellentissima fameglia Barberina, che dauano mirabil gratia a tutto il Talamo. Sopra i quattro architraui veniua alzata in luogo di cupola vna bellissima corona imperiale fatta alla grande, d'altezza di palmi otto, & mezo, con sue costole inarcate, che andauano ad vnirsi tutte insieme nella sommità. Era contornata tutta la corona di gioie, & di perle grosse vn'oncia, e meza l'vna, & le gioie erano ouate, tonde, quadre, & a ottangoli, contornate d'oro buono, & colorite di colore di smeraldi, di topazzi, carbonchi, giacinti, & diamanti, coperte di talco per renderle più lustre, che faceuano ricca, & superba mostra. Nella corona fra vna costola, & l'altra veniua posta con molto magistero vna tocca di finissimo argento fatta a gelosia, con rose incarnate, rosse, & bianche di seta, & di cambrai negli scompartimenti, & legature della mandola di detta tocca. Sopra le quattro colonne ne'quattro cantoni erano quattro Angeli di rilieuo in piedi alti palmi tre, e mezo l'vno, con le lor'ali, trauisati di tocca d'argento turchina, che teneuano da vna mano vna mappa grande di rose, & fior alla lor grandezza proportionata, dall'altra rosari, e corone. Nella sommità in mezo a detta corona, & cupola era vn'Angelo dell'istessa grandezza in atto di volare con vna mano piena di rose, & l'altra di corone, & di rosari, che parcua gli volesse gettare al popolo, & che l'inuitasse a pigliarle'.

Cf. G. Mazzuchelli, *Gli scrittori d'Italia*, 2 Vols. in 6, Brescia, 1753–63, II, Pt. 4, 2010; G. Ricciotti, ed., Giacinto Gigli, *Diario romano*, Rome, 1958, 88–91.

quite distinct tradition, that of the ceremonial cover suspended from above; at the high altar he suggested hanging a canopy above twisted columns carrying an entablature, but with no contact between them. Urban VIII then resolved finally to keep the tomb and high altar together, and gave the job to Bernini. Bernini's first proposal (as shown in the canonization engraving) was to create a coherent monument by merging baldachin and ciborium with each other and with the Early Christian prototype. The reference to the central portion of the earliest, Constantinian shrine was 'accurate', and the mixed marriage of types was 'complete'. The union was sutured by the cornice-canopy, and the result was a mysterious, hybrid creature. The next stage was that shown in the medal of 1626. This was a merger of Maderno's project with Bernini's initial design, motivated no doubt by the syntactical criticisms levelled at the first version. The cornice between the columns was eliminated and the canopy was suspended above the architecture; the angels now provided a logical link by standing on the former and holding up the latter. A new hybrid was created between hanging canopy and ciborium. The final version was in turn a conflation of Bernini's 1626 solution with his original project, motivated this time by the practical objection we know was raised, that the columns might give way under the weight of the figure of Christ. The load was lightened by substituting the globe and cross, the number of ribs was increased to add support, and their shape was changed to verticalize the thrusts. But *en revanche*, the cornice-canopy was reintroduced to serve as ties between the columns. The contradiction in terms inherent in the motif was resolved, or rather deliberately expressed through the ambiguous task the angels now perform: they hold garlands that simply disappear between the ribs and the cornice. The monument thus became equally stable, logical and mysterious. So Bernini was able to eat Maderno's cake and have his own too.[2]

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[2] Incidentally, this interpretation, including Bernini's ultimate return to his earliest design, helps to explain the latest in the series of his preserved sketches for the crown of the baldachin (H. Brauer and R. Wittkower, *Die Zeichnungen des Gianlorenzo Bernini*, Berlin, 1931, Pl. 8). Here the ribs have virtually their final shape and the cornice-canopy runs between the columns. But the angels perform no task and the ribs are draped with ribbons, as in the first project.