

The architecture of st peters



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The ruling Papacy in Rome during the 17th century was predominately concerned with spiritual its rule and an assertion of its authority, the approach of which had recently undergone a change in response to Protestantism and the Counter Reformation. The work on art and architecture at St Peters reflected the change in approaches towards religious representation, as it became more extravagant and acted as a physical embodiment of the church. The Papacy had often used visual representation as a form of religious communication; however this was a new style of display, in response to new objectives. St Peters, as a symbol and centre of symbol of the Catholic Church and its power, was extremely significant in its establishment of a visual identity.

It was modelled to 'express greatness,' and in so doing to buttress the Counter-Reformation . The Baldacchino in particular, was designed, like many aspects of St Peters at this time, by the sculptor and artist Bernini, and is extremely relevant to the discussion because of its role as a very visible symbol of the Papacy's power. Bernini's niches, and the design of St Peters square are also significant during this period as a visual expression of the church's rule. Artists in the service of the church needed to conform and apply their artworks and designs in such a way that it upheld the objective of the church in its Counter Reformation state. Artists concerned with religious imagery had to 'comply with some of the obvious demands of counter-reformatory decorum. The Papacy changed its selection in its representation of the church (such as how images are presented, the modes of representation, and subject and iconography choice) as an embodiment of itself, its authority, its power, its ideals and majesty.

Bernini, as a significant contributor and designer of some of the more visually predominant aspects of the church, aimed to proclaim the unity of the Catholic Church by combining 'all available artistic means, unifying architecture, sculpture and painting. The architecture within St Peters combined in a way to visually appeal and reach its audience in the most effective manner, and conveyed ideas of supreme authority and spiritual rule within the state. The visual impact of this combined effort reflected the authority and superiority of the church in a new but effective manner. The architecture is closely connected with 'a message which is not merely artistic but which is also a theological edifice' as the physical, and spiritual centre of the church.

In the wake of the Counter-Reformation there are no problematic nudes or overt references to paganism, (which had been part of a visual tactic used by the church in the past) the visual display and religious iconography had changed. The art found within the basilica makes us was designed with the intent of making its audience 'ponder the unfathomable mystery of Faith and the Mystical Body of Christ' through its many allegorical figures, religious texts, and sacred symbolism and repeated expressions of holy relics, such as those displayed within the basilicas niches under the dome. With this in mind, it is understood that St Peters functioned in more than one way. On the one hand, it acted as a meditative space, 'a monument to invisible ideas about memory, sacrifice and power, peopled with emblematic representations of hidden relics and deceased pontiffs,' and on the other a useful one capable of moving thousands of visitors.

There is clearly a focus in the works of St Peters to present ideas of luxury and extravagance within the church towards an ecclesiastical audience, however, it should be noted that the structural and aesthetic representation of the church was also aimed at a wider audience front, in particular, the Protestants, with whom the Catholic Church was in conflict with, and in general, those without faith. This can be viewed through the extensive use of marble decoration at St Peters, which ‘ recalls antique prototypes’ where “ coloured marbles, gilding, and precious stones combine to give an impression of dazzling splendour...” The use of different marbles could be said to follow antique precedent, or even demonstrate the surpassing of the ancients by the moderns, such as the grandeur of classical antiquity and ancient Rome. The Catholic Church, in response to emerging Protestant ideals, embraced the idea of extensive iconography as part of a pragmatic policy designed to ‘ distinguish the True Faith as sharply as possible from drab, iconoclastic Protestantism. ’ This tactic is clearly viewed through much of the art and architecture of St Peters, as a way of restabilising its visual identity in contrast to its spiritual competitors. Also, in this way the visual components of the Catholic faith could be used to resemble some sort of ‘ mystical revelation of Paradise’ as a way of making the claims of the church seem like a close reality. Another reason for this change, was that the Counter Reformation Catholicism had reworked the abstraction and ambiguity of much Renaissance theology and reverted to an almost medieval emphasis on direct, empathetic physical, and emotional aspects of worship.

Allegorical figures of various virtues and statues representing the founders of the religious considerably became the focus. Protestantism was in nature, iconoclastic, and challenged the Catholic notions of visual identity and religious iconography. The physical presence of the church emphasised its extravagant nature. A shift was needed away from tradition towards an emphasis on the heroic exemplars, on models of repentance, on martyrdom in the name of the church and saintly visionary on intimate events from the childhood of Christ, such as those found atop the colonnades outside St Peters square, or even the huge statues within the basilicas niches in the centre.

These all are a visual response exemplifying counter-reformatory iconography. The central positioning of the niches, draws the viewers attention and very effectively engages with its audience through various techniques, none the least of which is the sheer scale of these works, which embody an imposing physical presence. The nature of these works (through scale and style) easily communicates messages of faith and the mysterious, powerful nature the church holds, the outstretched arm of the figure of St Longinus reaches outward from its frame within the niche, in an imploring and signifying manner. The textual aspects of the architecture should not be ignored in relevance to the reinforcement of the authority of the church, and they were in fact used to justify it. For example the inscriptions on the dome enhance the spiritually authoritative qualities of St Peters and the rule of the Papacy for whom it was design to visually represent. The baldacchino, an extremely significant piece within the Basilica as a arker of the Popes power, physically and symbolically represents the central life of St Peters, and was

the first of Bernini's works mixing sculpture and architecture and not only acts as a symbol of the Church but enhances the sites historical and spiritual significance in that it indicates and celebrates the very first Pope, who is buried beneath it.

They are crossed by nature-inspired motifs including leaves of laurels (a symbol of victory from classical antiquity), lizards (which in its contemporary times were used as symbols of renaissance and search of God) and symbols of bees found throughout the work, which were part of the Barberini family's coat of arms, as the ruling Papal family in Rome during that period. This structure is so large that the visual effect is to create a link between the enormous dome which appears to float above it, and the congregation at floor level of the basilica and it also acted as a reminder of power and function of the church (and head) of the Papacy while emulating the extravagant style and luxurious mode of design within St Peters. The immense structure of the baldacchino with its luxurious bronze embellished with gilding reaffirms the centrality of the crossing, not only for the church " but also all Christendom. The placement of the Baldacchino (positioned above the acclaimed resting place of the first Pope St Peter himself under the dome of St Peters in the Basilica) reinforces its significance, not only historically or religiously, but also as a reflection of the new approach towards art and architecture and the part it plays in the churches regime achieved a central focus for its audience, acting as a visually symbolic centre of the Papacy itself.

Bernini succeeded in creating a structure that would draw the attention " of the faithful to precisely the most sacred point of the whole building' It is clear

that is an extremely importance structure within the church as its centrality gives it the most potential for visual impact, as a mode of representation in response and as a reflection of the authority and claims of the Papacy. Four serpentine brackets that elevate the orb and the cross, act as symbols of the triumph of the Church. The church triumphant is visually presented and communicated within Bernini's serving to support the churches claims of superiority and deserved supreme authority through the use of visual extravagance. The individual nature and design of its twisted columns are greatly enlarged versions of those believed to have come from Solomon's temple in Jerusalem which adds historical significance to the structure, connecting the religious past of the church with the religious present and in linking the two, Bernini's selection of column style impresses upon the view the significance of the contemporary authority of the church with a metaphorical link of ruling lineage between the papacy and the historical figure of King Solomon, a historical, biblical figure. The Baldacchino, with its column design and use of motif on a large scale, represents a " macroscopic seal uniting the Old Testament wisdom of Solomon, the Christian tradition of Constantine, and the rebirth of a triumphal Church under the guidance of the Berberini family. ' ' Symbolically therefore, its message was plain to all believers and the triumphant visual flourish of its huge twisting columns, buoyant scrolls and dynamic sculpture epitomizes the grandeur, flamboyance and emotionalism of the Counter-Reformation.

Trying to emotionally connect with its ecclesiastical audience, the Papacy using the approach of making the Catholic centre of St Peters (as a physical embodiment and reflection of the church) seem appealing, imposing but not

completely intimidating. Now through the use of art and architecture the Papacy was converting an audience through sheer extravagance using visual impact, allegory and historical allusions and connections. In regards to the features of St Peters, it should be understood that ' all the elements are conceptually and visually woven into a seamless fabric of associations- a grandiose conception celebrating the continuity of the Church and its triumph over the reformation' as well as personally propagating the Barberini ruling Papal family through the repeated use of symbolism with the bee iconography, as a direct connection and representation of the contemporary ruling family within the Papacy, creating personal allusions to power and authority within the church. Bernini, through his artworks, fashioned a symbolic set, able at one and the same time to ' exalt the glory of the church and the Barberini family. ' In this way the Barberini family was closely tied in a visually public manner, inarguably and significantly with the physical heart and centre of the church on one of its most sacred sites.

The personal connection between the Papacy and the Barberini family was reinforced this way. The Square of St Peters is also significant in a study of the structure as a combined and connected whole, reaching towards t the same objective. The Square includes two colonnades reaching outwards from the Basilica ' like the motherly arms of the church,' which embrace the catholic people to reinforce their beliefs, pagans and Protestants to expose and re-introduce them with the Catholic Church and also to those without faith, to enlighten them. Again raises the concept of the church trying to seduce its audience, not completely overwhelm it by frightening and

intimidating it into submission as has been the approach occasionally in the past.

But considerably, there is no subtlety here. The dramatic 'gesture', made by this architectural design, is meant to symbolise the welcome given its communicants by the Roman Catholic Church as the Baroque design is used expansively to relate to its environment like the Baldachinno, 'it is finely and knowingly tailored to its setting, and to the long history of the site. The design of the square at St Peters embodies the new approach of representing the Catholic order as it encompasses its environment and is characterised by a very extravagant, physical presence. This reinforces the argument that the church was utilizing its architecture in a not so subtle way as to enact and visually engage with the viewer.

The design and detail within the building of St Peters emphasises the relationship between the buildings aesthetic properties and the role it played within its Catholic domain and also importantly highlights, its use as a tool of the Papacy for enforcing the church as a supreme authority.