



FABBRICA DI S. PIETRO
IN VATICANO

BALDACHIN ON THE HIGH ALTAR OF ST. PETER'S BASILICA IN THE VATICAN

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Baldachin was created by the architect Gian Lorenzo Bernini for Pope Urban VIII Barberini between 1624 and 1635. Its history begins exactly four hundred years ago when Pope Urban VIII (1623-1644) directly assigned to his trusted architect the task of creating the grand Baldachin (from Baldac, the ancient name of Baghdad, where precious fabrics originated), after a kind of pro forma competition in June 1624. For the high altar of St. Peter's, from the early 1600s, there was indeed a plan for a ciborium that would evoke in its form a covering with precious fabrics. In the endeavor of the Baldachin, Bernini worked alongside his father Pietro and his brother Luigi, assisted by Francesco Borromini, specialized craftsmen, and numerous sculptors including Agostino Radi, Stefano Speranza, François Duquesnoy, Andrea Bolgi, and Giuliano Finelli. To these, we must add the name of the famous cabinetmaker Giovanni Battista Soria.

Thanks to numerous drawings, wooden models were first created using a 1:1 scale, then a version in plaster was created, and finally, the molds for casting. In the documents related to the crucial and very complex bronze casting work, the names Domenico and Gregorio di Rossi, Orazio Albrizzi, and of the gilder Simone Lagi, appear frequently. The inauguration of the Baldachin took place on June 29, 1633, but the work continued for two more years until 1635. The gilded bronze monument, which is almost 29 meters tall, rises on four slender twisted columns (which was presented in the basilica on June 29, 1627) which were inspired by the marble columns arranged around Peter's tomb in the ancient basilica. The columns were believed to have been taken from Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem and can be admired today on the four mighty pillars supporting the great dome near the so-called Loggias of the Relics. The last major and radical intervention on St. Peter's Baldachin dates back to the year 1758: a substantial team of workers and specialized craftsmen (up to sixty people per day) worked on it for about three months. The baldachin was then meticulously cleaned, the numerous parts damaged by oxidations were removed, various components were made more stable and secured, damaged or missing parts were repaired or replaced, and, above all, extensive gilding work was undertaken or redone. The documents preserved in the Historical Archive of the Fabric of St Peter provide extensive information on these works.