



FABBRICA DI S. PIETRO
IN VATICANO

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

DESCRIPTION

The baldachin is almost 29 meters tall (28.74 meters to be precise), a height equivalent to that of a ten-story building. Its estimated weight is approximately 63 tons (63,000 kg). It stands on four magnificent columns, each of which is 11.20 meters high and weighs about 9 tons. Each column is divided into three sections and to enhance its static stability, it is partly filled with concrete. The columns are placed on tall pedestals (2.60 meters) which feature the papal coats of arms with the symbolic "Barberini bees." The four bronze columns, adorned with laurel branches and cherubs, are topped with Corinthian capitals; the architrave features two different decorations: a band of grotesques and another of dolphins, while the frieze displays the Barberini symbol of the sun, along with *ovoli*, grotesque faces, and laurel leaves. The slightly concave frame has a large drapery made up of six gilded copper lambrequins on all four sides (1.56 meters x 1.12 meters), which are adorned on the outside with cherubs and bees, and on the inside with papal symbols and bees. Below the frame, there are large hanging tassels, decorative elements which evoke hanging fabrics and decorations. The author thus intended to make the work resemble a grand processional baldachin. The crowning pediment is completed with pairs of *putti* (= in the Italian history of Art a *putto* is a chubby male child usually come to represent a small angel, similar to a cherub; translator's note) supporting the symbols of Peter and Paul, while the so-called "sky" – the ceiling of the inner part – is made of painted and gilded wood. The dove of the Holy Spirit is placed at the center, within a frame with harpies, acanthus spirals, and once again, the Barberini bees. The latter is a decorative element which recurs in dozens of examples, along with many other small naturalistic details drawn from late 16th-century Roman tradition. These details can be found, for instance, at the base of the columns, namely: a papal medal or a rosary on the southwest side, a fly on the southeast side, a lizard devouring a scorpion on the northeast side, and again, a lizard and a medal on the northwest side. Fine decorations, drawn from reality, as well as the contrast between the dark colour of the bronze and the gold, make the monumental architectural structure very similar to a sublime golden artefact. The upper part of the attic features four tripartite dolphin-back volutes and large palm leaves, at the base of which are four stylized angels (about 4 meters tall and weighing approximately 2.5 tons), created between 1628 and 1633, holding laurel wreaths. The four large angels alternate – as already mentioned – with four pairs of *putti* (which are about 2.2 meters tall) bearing the keys and the papal tiara of St. Peter and St. Paul's sword and his book. The finial is dominated by the cross (which is 2.2 meters tall) which is placed on a globe, or rather, on an ovoid, in order to offer the visitor a better view from below. Initially, as the crowning element of the Baldachin, Bernini had planned a golden statue of the Saviour, which would have been 3.50 meters tall and which was worked on until just a few months before the inauguration. The baldachin can be considered a monumental multimaterial work. While it appears to be made only of bronze and gilded bronze, it was actually created using other materials as well, such as woods of different types and physical characteristics for decorative and structural parts, iron for armatures, including iron wire for bindings, copper

worked into embossed sheets in order to create figures and decorative details, marbles for the four base dice under the columns, and a concrete-like mortar to fill the columns and provide the capacity to support the weight of the large upper part. The internal ceiling is made of wood, and the dozens of different gilded bronze parts are assembled through concealed structures and iron armatures. Dozens of archival documents also specify the works which were undertaken and the materials which were used: which concrete and building materials, which types of wood and iron for the structure, which kinds of copper, bronze, and gold for the decorations.

Furthermore, we should not overlook the marble parts of the four column plinths. Their gilding was made using mercury amalgam, leaf, and contact gilding. Overall, the symbols of the Barberini family – bees and a radiant sun, along with *putti*, tree branches, leafy heads, little animals, and cherubs – recur almost obsessively in the work.