Sant’Andrea al Quirinale

At first glance, the church is a paradise of order. White marble pilasters march at regular intervals around the elliptical interior, crowned by an unbroken cornice and offset by uniform panels of rose-red marble. Overhead arcs a gilded rotunda, patterned with neat rows of hexagonal coffers.

Closer inspection, however, reveals an exuberance that defies symmetry. White stucco angels fly, float, and recline in whimsical poses over the surface of the golden dome. A heavenly throng descends on golden rays behind the altar. Around the oculus of the rotunda, bored cherubs slouch, converse, and drift out of place.

The cumulative effect is at once imposing and engaging, sophisticated and informal. Anticipating an audience familiar with the conventions of Renaissance church decoration, it sets out to surprise, delight, and engage.

Baroque architecture can be understood as an outgrowth of, and reaction to, Renaissance classicism. Baroque church design, accordingly, was characterized by both sophisticated employment of, and conscious departure from, the classical canons. This was far from a purely aesthetic development. As part of the Catholic response to the Protestant Reformation, church architecture had become more rhetorical. Church design had, of course, always been invested with deep symbolic meaning; but now every detail was calculated to engage viewers in a pageant of light and color, Catholic history and Catholic triumph. No artist was better equipped to stage such pageantry than Gianlorenzo Bernini.

Bernini was a skilled architect, a gifted painter, and the greatest sculptor since Michelangelo. His most accomplished works combined architecture, painting, and sculpture to involve viewers in visual dramas of unprecedented splendor and emotional impact. This theatricality would have made Bernini famous in any era; but it was especially well-suited to Baroque Rome, where popes, cardinals, and noblemen competed to commission splendid churches and gorgeous palaces.

Bernini, the son of an itinerant sculptor, was producing technically accomplished sculptures by the age of ten. His precocity won him the patronage of Cardinal Scipione Borghese, the cultivated and immensely wealthy nephew of Pope Paul V. When Bernini was in his early twenties, he produced a series of astonishingly virtuosic sculptures for the gardens of the cardinal’s villa. Perhaps the most famous is the group Apollo and Daphne, inspired by a story in Ovid’s Metamorphoses. According to the myth, Apollo fell in love with the nymph Daphne, who wanted nothing to do with him. Unable to escape Apollo, she prayed to her father, a river god, for help. For reasons best known to himself, her father responded by turning her into a laurel tree. Bernini’s sculpture captures the moment of transformation. Branches spray forth from her fingertips and trailing hair, and sheets of bark corrugate the slender legs. There is an overwhelming impression of barely suspended animation that instantly engages the viewer, and brings them into the moment and magic of Daphne’s transformation.
The sculptures Bernini created for Cardinal Borghese made him famous, and won him the favor of Pope Urban VIII, for whom he became a virtual court artist. Urban’s reign witnessed the completion of St. Peter’s Basilica, a circumstance that put Bernini in a position to decorate the greatest church in history.

First, aided by a massive staff of draftsmen, craftsmen, and laborers, Bernini created the famous Baldacchino over the altar. There is tremendous energy in the design. Four colossal bronze columns spiral heavenward to a gilded canopy crowned by twelve-foot angels. Though immense in its own right – the structure is nearly 100 feet tall – the Baldacchino elegantly mediates the human scale of altar and colossal rotunda overhead.

Years later, Bernini designed a spectacular gilded setting for the Throne of St. Peter, the ancient chair of the popes, in the apse behind the Baldacchino. The relic seems to hover against a backdrop of gilt stucco clouds. Four Doctors of the Church stand beneath, holding the Throne aloft; and above, rays of gilded bronze shoot from an oval window bearing the Dove of the Holy Spirit, the symbol of divine inspiration.

The death of Urban VIII in 1644 signaled a dramatic change in Bernini’s fortunes. The new pope, Innocent X, distrusted anyone associated with his predecessor, and saw no reason to give Urban’s pet artist new commissions. Innocent’s dislike of Bernini was sharpened by the scandal over the bell towers of St. Peter’s, which broke in the first years of his pontificate. In the early 1640s, Bernini had begun to build two bell towers flanking the basilica’s façade. Almost immediately, the foundations of the towers, laid decades before by a different architect, started to shift, causing massive cracks to develop in the masonry. A group of Bernini’s enemies levelled charges of incompetence against him – charges to which Pope Innocent was more than ready to listen.

Bernini’s foremost accuser was a gloomy young architect named Francesco Borromini. Borromini, trained as a mason, had come to Rome to work on St. Peter’s Basilica. Within a few years, his work ethic and brilliant drawings earned him a promotion to architect, a position that made him an assistant to Bernini during the Baldacchino project. Initially, Bernini got along reasonably well with his grim subordinate, and even incorporated some of Borromini’s suggestions into the design of the Baldacchino. Within a few years, however, Borromini began to resent Bernini’s ascendancy; and when the first cracks appeared in the bell towers of St. Peter’s, Borromini immediately began agitating for Bernini’s dismissal.

In the meantime, Borromini started his first independent commission. A minor religious order – the discaled (that is, shoeless) Trinitarians – hired him to design a small church adjacent to their monastery. The result, San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, is an intricate essay in geometry. The complex plan is at once a cross, octagon, and oval; and the famously elaborate dome is decorated with coffers in the shape of crosses, octagons, and hexagons. The cumulative effect, enhanced by the undulating façade and walls, is at once impressive and slightly disorienting, and defies easy interpretation. The restless experimentation on display in San Carlo would characterize Borromini’s architecture throughout his career. His patrons admired his inventiveness. To many contemporaries, however, his intricate, austerely-decorated churches, which virtually ignored the conventions of ecclesiastical architecture, seemed little short of forbidding.
Bernini never had that problem. In the years Borromini was working on San Carlo, Bernini – still being virtually ignored by Pope Innocent X – accepted a commission from the Venetian cardinal Federigo Cornaro to design a chapel honoring the Spanish mystic St. Teresa of Avila in the small church of Santa Maria della Vittoria. The centerpiece of this chapel, the Ecstasy of St. Teresa, was to become most famous of Bernini’s multimedia masterpieces. Teresa had experienced a vision in which an angel pierced her with a golden spear. Bernini portrays her in the moment after the spear is withdrawn. The angel looks on with a benevolent smile as Teresa writhes with toe-curving, but still apparently mystical, pleasure. Saint and angel are framed by rays of gilded bronze, which shimmer with light streaming through a hidden window.

On either side, painted portraits of the Cornaro family, ensconced in elaborate architectural frames, look on and discuss the scene. Like these figures, the viewer is drawn into the moment, becoming a witness to the mystical experience of the saint. This is baroque theater at its finest – a seamless fusion of sculpture, painting, and architecture that compels participation and astonishment.

This aesthetic, as mentioned earlier, was characteristic of Catholic churches in the Counter-Reformation period. The Counter-Reformation is the blanket term assigned to the period between the mid-sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries, which was defined by vigorous Catholic initiatives to halt, and if possible reverse, the spread of the Protestant Reformation. The movement was given impetus by a series of reforming popes, who called the long-running Council of Trent to codify the nature and sources of Catholic belief and practice.

Among much else, the cardinals and bishops assembled at Trent defined the proper nature of church art. Works that were purely decorative or in any way sexually suggestive were forbidden. Church art was to be devotional, celestial, and triumphal: in short, didactic. Only sculptures and paintings that facilitated prayer or evoked the history and vitality of the Catholic faith were permissible. These prescriptions were elaborated by Carlo Borromeo, the reforming archbishop of Milan, who composed an influential treatise suggesting that churches should be as impressive as possible, and visually focused on an elevated high altar.

Besides the Council of Trent, perhaps the most important development of the counter-Reformation was the emergence of new religious orders. The most successful of these was the Society of Jesus, better known as the Jesuits. Founded by Ignatius of Loyola in 1534, and recognized by the pope six years later, the Jesuits had nearly 20,000 members by the mid-seventeenth century. Although most Jesuits were scattered around the world, performing the teaching and missionary work for which the order was famous, hundreds lived in Rome, where their administration and university were based.

Giovanni Paolo Oliva, superior general of the Jesuits from 1661 to 1681, had a keen interest in the potential of the visual arts to stimulate devotion. He hired a young artist, Giovanni Battista Gaulli, to decorate the dome and nave of Il Gesu, the Jesuit mother church, with a series of massive frescoes. Around the same time, he decided to ask Rome’s greatest artist, the now aging Bernini, to design a new church for the Jesuit novitiate.
After completing the Cornaro Chapel, Bernini had created a series of masterful essays in sculpture and urban planning, most notably the Fountain of the Four Rivers in Piazza Navona, the sweeping colonnades of St. Peter’s Square, and a spectacular tomb for Pope Alexander VII. By 1658, when Superior General Oliva approached him with the commission for the Jesuit novitiate church, Bernini had left his stamp on virtually every part of Rome. With the exception of a few small chapels, however, he had never designed an entire building.

Yet he accepted Oliva’s commission immediately, refusing any payment as a gesture of respect for the Jesuit order.

Like all his greatest works, the church Bernini designed – Sant’Andrea al Quirinale – combined painting, sculpture, and architecture into an organic unity. The building is elliptical in plan, with its entrance and main altar located on opposite ends of the minor axis. Eight chapels, four on each side of the main altar, are framed by a regular colonnade of red-veined marble. Overhead, a dome faced with gilt stucco rises to a tall lantern.

As noted earlier, the interior of Sant’Andrea impressively combines architectural unity with decorative variety. Unity is conferred by the basic symmetry of the design and harmony of materials. But a wealth of exuberant detail fills, and occasionally overflows, this frame, as wreaths droop and putti flutter and light plays restlessly against the order of the dome.

All this humor and motion, however, is background noise. The underlying geometries of the building – the elliptical shape and the continuous colonnade and the patterned floor – are all designed to lead the eye to the altar.

The recess that houses the altar is accented by an elaborate architectural frame and illuminated by a hidden skylight. Within, over the shimmering gilded bronze of the retable, a large painting depicts the crucifixion of St. Andrew, the church’s namesake. Above the painting, flights of putti on beams of gilded stucco lay hold of the painting’s frame, lifting it.

The eye follows the converging sunbeams, up and up to the pediment over the altar, where a white stucco figure, meant to represent the soul of St. Andrew, ascends into the gilded heaven of the dome. This sacred drama in two acts confirms the altar – and thus the ceremony of the mass – as the visual focus of the church.

By a remarkable coincidence, Bernini’s Sant’Andrea is located only a few hundred feet from Borromini’s San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane. In some ways, the churches could not be more different. Sant’Andrea is color and extravagance and motion; San Carlo is timeless geometry. But in their distinct ways, colored by the very different personalities of their architects, the two churches both epitomize the ethos of the Counter-Reformation and the spirit of the Roman Baroque.