

Carlo de Dominicis

Italian Architect
(1696-1758)

Son of the master builder Bartolomeo and Anna Santa Aldini from Cesena, he was born in Rome on 26 February, 1696.

He studied at the Accademia di S. Luca where in 1716 he won the first prize in the third class Clementino competition for a "Plan and elevation of the garden door of the Famesi lords...".

At the state of the studies, his first public commission is the tomb of Cardinal Bichi in S. Agata dei Goti which can be dated shortly after the cardinal's death in 1718. The free treatment of this monument, executed in stucco, does not suggest the artist's personal sympathy for the classicist idiom of the Accademia di S. Luca. In fact in the years between 1725 and 1733 de Dominicis collaborated with the most anti-classical architect of his generation: Filippo Raguzzini, papal architect under Benedict XIII and main exponent of the rococo in Rome; the facade of the small church of S. Filippo Neri in via Giulia has been loftily attributed now to Raguzzini now to De Dominicis. On the other hand, the lively decoration of the walls, so different from the sober decoration of the Raguzzini facades, makes the possibility that De Dominicis was the author more credible.

Less certain is the nature of de Dominicis's contribution to the church of SS. Bartolomeo and Alessandro dei Bergamaschi (S. Maria della Pietà. which formerly belonged to the Spedale dei Pazzi) in Piazza Colonna; the interior renovation works began in 1728 while the facade was carried out between 1729 and 1731.

While retaining the sixteenth-century scheme, it is very original for the mixtilinear tympanum that concludes it and above all for the portal "adorned by two alveolar columns arranged diagonally with respect to the back wall... crowned by a broken tympanum in which an oval with *La Pietà*; in the architrave of the door is a group of *heads of seraphim* " (*Guide rionali di Roma, Rione III, Colonna, I*, Rome 1980, p. 30).

The origin of these details can be explained in part by the attendance, in those years, of Raguzzini, but also as a product of the contemporary reawakening of interest in the work of Borromini, whose important treatise, *Opus architectonicum*, was published for the first time in 1725.

There is no doubt that the masterpiece of de Dominicis is the church of SS. Celso and Giuliano whose construction is documented in the years 1733-35. Taking advantage of the opportunity to design a completely new structure, de Dominicis devised a transverse oval plan, with seven radial chapels.

The plan is only superficially similar to the transverse oval used three quarters of a century earlier by Bernini in S. Andrea al Quirinale: de Dominicis, increasing the size of

the chapels, corresponding to the transversal and longitudinal or ritual axes, deliberately accentuates both of these axes, thus obtaining a synthesis between oval and elongated Greek cross in a certain sense similar to that often implemented by architects of the late sixteenth century. On the other hand, the conservatism of the spatial concept is more than displaced by the dynamic sensitivity of the tectonic structure and the happiness of the applied ornamentation.

Rising from high plinths, the first order pilasters are connected through the entablature overhangs with the ribs of the vault above. The large windows and the rhythm of the Borromini-style stucco reliefs on the vault and the accentuated elevation reinforce the impression of verticality, and give the church that atmosphere of mystical ascension typical of the late Baroque. Large choir stalls are arranged above the four chapels corresponding to the diagonal axes: thus the sound of music must have contributed more and more to this exhilarating effect.

The creator of the stuccoes in the interior must have been among the most expert in the genre of his century: the starting of the washbasin in the sacristy, for example, is characterized by a richness and elegance rare in Rome. Like the contemporary stuccos in Naples, the freely conceived curvilinear forms and the vegetal ornamentation show an almost total disregard for the rules that then dominated in the Roman Accademia for the use of the classical orders.

The prospectus of the church practically dominates the narrow via del Banco di Santo Spirito onto which it opens; divided into two floors, it follows the type of Gesu which dominated Rome for more than one hundred and fifty years. But de Dominicis reinterpreted this prototype on the rococo line, basing some of his motifs, as he had already done elsewhere, on Borrominian models such as the facades of S. Carlino alle Quattro Fontane and the oratory of the Filippini. In this regard, it is interesting to note that he was undoubtedly partly inspired by some of the projects that in 1732 were presented in the competition for the facade of S. Giovanni in Laterano, and it is significant that de Dominicis preferred the classical project of the winner, A. Galilei, the more idiosyncratic, rococo, by Ludovico Rusconi Sassi.

In a *summary* of 8 Oct. 1739 "relating to an improvement tax for the rehabilitation of a sewer finished in the sewer of the square of S. Giovanni dei Fiorentini" de Dominicis, defined as "architect of the hospital for the insane", is nominated together with the most important architects of the moment, F. Fuga, F. Raguzzini and F. Rosa.

After SS. Celso e Giuliano was entrusted to de Dominicis the construction (1740-44) of S. Eligio dei Saddlei in Piazza della Gensola in Trastevere (destroyed in 1902). The plan of this small church, which can be described as an elongated Greek cross, confirms the preference of de Dominicis for the central plan that had a hint of orientation; it is presumable that the interior was more interesting and certainly more original than that of SS. Celsus and Julian. The facade can be considered among the happiest examples of Roman rococo; even if by now de Dominicis no longer had working relationships with Raguzzini, there are clear reminiscences here, especially of S. Maria della Quercia: in fact, the convex facade, the absence of applied ornament and the use of a flexed cornice in place of the more normal tympanum.

In the first two decades of activity de Dominicis completely adhered to the rococo taste, but in 1743 it seems to undergo a change of inclination because the simple "temple" facade of the small church of S. Salvatore alle Coppelle in its cold classicism is remarkably prophetic of neoclassicism imminent (on the other hand, the possibility that the appearance of the church has been changed in a later but undocumented renovation cannot be excluded). The commissions that de Dominicis received after 1740 were, for the most part, of little importance and are often documented occasionally or no longer exist. Between 1740 and 1742, as architect of the church and convent of S. Maria in Via, he designed the balustrade of the chapel of the SS. Trinity, and built houses in Piazza Fiammetta as well as in Tor de' Conti. In 1743-44 de Dominicis provided for the designs for the elegant polychrome floor of the church of S. Maria della Vittoria and in 1745-47 he readapted the small medieval church of S. Orsola at the foot of the Campidoglio (now destroyed) to whose rectangular interior you give a more centralized appearance by using an oval vault and reconstructing the elevation of the nave. In 1746 with F. Ferruzzi he designed the new high altar of S. Francesco a Ripa, where perhaps he designed the stucco decoration of the chapel of S. Giuseppe. His last documented work (1745-51) was for the church and convent of the Bambin Gesù in via Urbana,

He died in Rome on 2 October. 1758.

De Dominicis had a fervent imagination and intelligently used Borromini's decorative vocabulary more than half a century after the death of the master. Together with his contemporary F. Raguzzini he collaborated in the formulation of the basic themes of Roman rococo in architecture, even if in his last years he seems to have rejected these decorative methods in favor of that more classical taste which was then beginning to assert itself in Europe.

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