

# ALESSANDRO ALGARDI

## FROM BOLOGNA TO ROME

The sculptor Alessandro Algardi was born in Bologna on 31 July 1598.

Initiated first in literary studies by his father Giuseppe, a silk merchant, he attended the Ludovico Carracci Academy for painting and drawing, continuing his apprenticeship in the workshop of the local sculptor Giulio Cesare Conventi, where he discovered his vocation for sculpture.

In around 1619 he moved to Mantua, where he worked for the court of the Gonzaga's as a goldsmith and restorer of ancient works studying the frescoes of Giulio Romano and the stuccos of Palazzo Te.

After a brief stay in Venice, in 1625, during the pontificate of Urban VIII Barberini, the artist arrived in Rome with a letter of presentation from the Duke of Mantua to the Bolognese cardinal Ludovico Ludovisi (1595-1632), patron and passionate collector of ancient sculptures. Algardi carried out the restoration of ancient classical statues for him, completing his education with the study of the great examples of the Roman Renaissance, in particular Raphael.

Through his fellow countryman and friend, the painter Domenichino, Algardi obtained his first public commission, the stucco statues of *saint John the Evangelist* and the *Magdalene*, made by 1629 for the niches of the Bandini chapel in San Silvestro al Quirinale – free and original interpretations of the Emilian and Carraccesque poetics of his formation. But Algardi's fame and fortune were slow to arrive, as he continued to dedicate most of his time to his usual industrious production of models “of putti, figurines, heads, crucifixes, and ornaments for the Goldsmiths”, and since, even in 1630, his intervention was required only to add the legs and arms to an ancient torso that was completed as an honorary statue of Carlo Barberini on the Capitoline Hill by Bernini, who sculpted the head.

Elected as Principe dell' Accademia di San Luca in 1639, Algardi was by then an established artist who succeeded in promoting himself, obtaining increasingly frequent and important commissions. His first major affirmation in the field of monumental sculpture dates from 1640, with the marble group representing *saint Philip and the Angel* (1635-1638) commissioned by Pietro Boncompagni for the sacristy of Santa Maria in Vallicella. The success of the work, “his beautiful manner in marble”, brought him new commissions and honours.

Between 1633 and 1646 he produced for the church of Saint Paul in Bologna the *Beheading of saint Paul*, an expressive and luminous marble group set against the background of an exedra of fluted columns.

In 1644 he completed the *Monument of Leo XI* in Saint Peter's Basilica, a composition of solemn white marble, commissioned in 1634.

In 1644 Innocent X Pamphilj ascended to the papal throne, and the Barberini court was dispersed, changing the balance within. Bernini, the favourite sculptor of Urban VIII and a true dictator in the artistic field, experienced a period of decline.

The court began to favour Algardi, and thus began a triumphal decade, rich in fame and with many commissions and important works.

The cardinal nephew, Camillo, commissioned portraits and various works, of which the most prestigious was the certainly decoration of the so-called Villa Belrespiro (1644-1652) outside Porta San Pancrazio, whose superb stuccos, with fluid and undulating relief, are arranged with rhythm and a refined sensibility.

In view of the Holy Year in 1646, the artist received the commission for the large marble altarpiece depicting the *Meeting of Leo the Great and Attila* for one of the altars of Saint Peter's Basilica. Algardi, by then sick, had to work alongside Domenico Guidi on the work, greatly admired and long imitated in the marble altarpieces of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and grandiose in its complexity.

In the years 1646 to 1650 he produced the statue in bronze of the pontiff Innocent X of the Palazzo dei Conservatori, followed by the final commission entrusted to him by Camillo Pamphilj: the great altar of the Church of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino, a great undertaking realized by his collaborators and for which the master provided only the drawings.

The portraits by Algardi which accompany almost all this period in time in the artist's career are solemn, noble and perfect. Beautiful examples include the *Garzia Millini* in Santa Maria del Popolo, *Odoardo Santarelli* and *Costanzo Patrizi* in Santa Maria Maggiore, the *Prospero Santa Croce* in Santa Maria della Scala, as well as three busts of *Innocent X* in marble, bronze and bronze and porphyry, conserved along with the marble busts of *Donna Olimpia* and *Benedetto Pamphilj* in the Doria Pamphilj in Rome. Alongside these, the artist never neglected those ‘minor’ works of decorative plastic arts, to which he attended since his youth and of which he was a master: heads and reliquary urns in silver, based on his models, forms of Crucifixes, also of small dimensions, statuettes and groups of statuettes in bronze, reliquaries and ostensories are among his most original and beautiful creations.

Algardi died on 10 June 1654 in Rome, where he was buried in the church of Santi Giovanni e Petronio dei Bolognesi. Esteemed and admired in his time, raised by history to the role of the great antagonist to Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Algardi may be considered a representative and almost a symbol, for sculpture, of the important classicist current of the seventeenth century.