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St. Peter's Basilica

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With Love

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CATHEDRALS

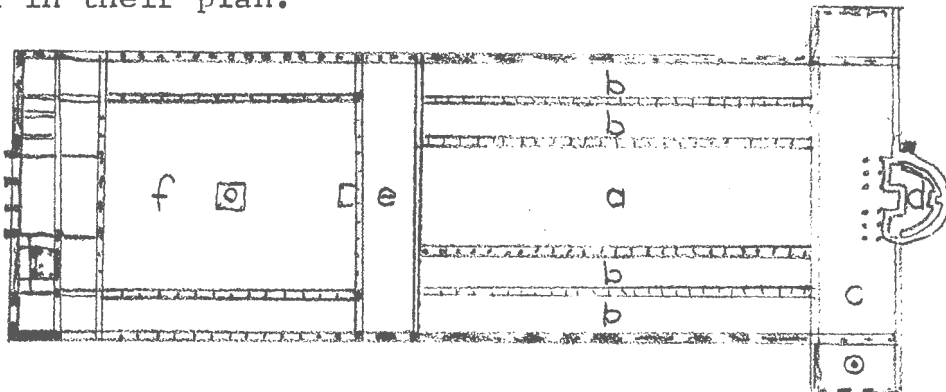
Little

ST. PETER'S BASILICA

During the summers of 1968 and 1969 I traveled in Europe touring 11 countries by bus in 68 and a major cities tour in 69. On the tours I took films with a Bolex super 8 movie camera and also bought commercial slides. My interest in Art, Sculpture, Architecture and History was enhanced by this opportunity in visiting the many museums, cathedrals and birth cities that contain within themselves the progressions of the art eras. Outstanding, of course, in places visited was Italy. In medieval times Italy was a more fertile ground for general economic and political conditions to develop. This enhanced an individualism. An inquisitiveness about their past triggered the study of antiquity. The study of the science and philosophies of their past added a realism and humanism developing classic art and culture. The inquisitiveness of antiquity adds the realism, individualism and humanism which makes Italy the cradle of the Renaissance movement. Florence cannot be overshadowed by any city as a birthplace of the Renaissance but the final phase was enacted in Rome shifting from Florence due to the death of patrons of art and political events. Standing above Rome within the walls of the Vatican City is St. Peter's Basilica, 40 stories high. Its conception and construction years spans two centuries. The idea of a new basilica to replace the old one was conceived by Pope

Nicholas V in 1447. The Old St. Peter's built in 326 by Constantine was not structurally sound but little was done then and plans remained on paper. Alberti and Sangallo were some of the first architects to plan a new basilica. Only renovation had been done until the industrious Pope Julius II came to throne. He wished to unify the church in building a structure that would overshadow everything in existence. Bramante, the architect he employed, was no less industrious. His aim was to place the Pantheon on top of the Basilica of Constantine.

Old St. Peter's was a typical Early Christian basilica, originally built in the fourth century. Its plan shows: a rectangular building entered through an open colonaded court, the atrium (f), one side of which forms the narthex or vestibule (e) the body of the church with a nave (a) low side aisles (b) an apse (d) and a transverse aisle or transept (c) placed between the nave and apse and projecting slightly beyond the walls of the nave and the aisles. This T shaped plan has been compared to the form of the cross but there is no evidence that the Early Christian builders desired to create such a symbol in their plan.



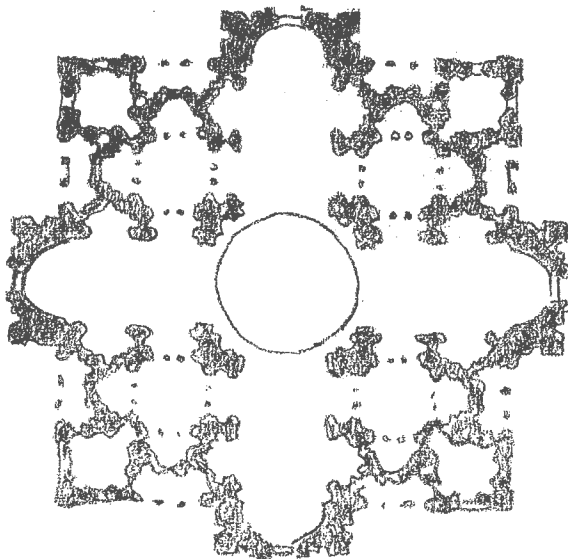
Under Alexander VI the conflict between religion and art, between Christianity and Humanism, had been resolved in a sphere of purely esthetic interests. Any ideological or moral attitude could be justified in the name of art. This state of affairs remained unchanged under Julius II, except that the latter proved to be much more openminded and generous than his predecessor, who for the most part, had lowered art to the level of a pleasant pastime, an instrument of personal enjoyment. The ambitious schemes that actuated Julius II in his temporal policy found their counterpart in the art projects he patronized. In choosing to destroy the old St. Peter's, the symbol and embodiment of a Christian tradition of a thousand years standing, and to erect in its place a new temple designed on classical lines, he set aside devotional and religious considerations, yielding to the love of art and cultural progress and to a craving for magnificence whose object was to enhance the prestige and power of the Papal State. He created the conditions for an artistic flowering such as been possible a few times in history. The Vatican, through this, became the capital of the Renaissance.

Early in his youth Bramante (1444-1514) left his native Urbino, where he had been trained as a painter, for the court of Milan. There he abandoned painting and under the influence of the works and the writings of Brunelleschi, Alberti and perhaps of Filarete and Leonardo--all of whom had been influenced by the antique--he developed the High Renaissance form of the centrally planned church. He was particularly well known as an expert in static problems and deeply versed in the

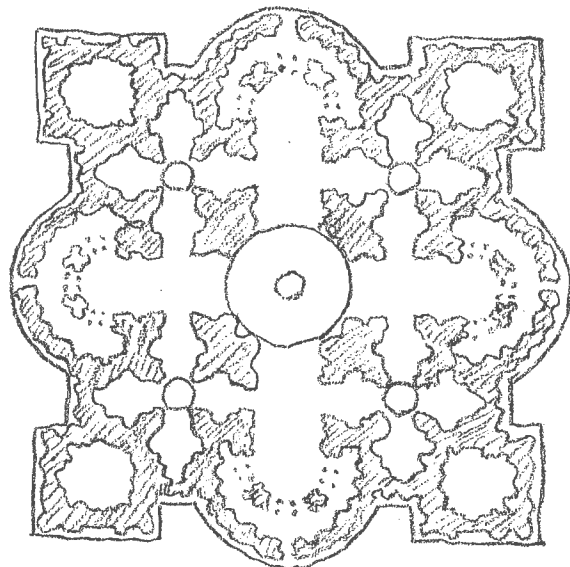
methods of constructing vaults. He was in great demand for his resourcefulness in overcoming structural problems. Around 1502 he was in Rome at work on a small round temple -the Tempietto- in the cloister of San Pietro in Montorio. The same architectural concept of Bramantes' Tempietto guided his plans for the New St. Peter's. in 1505.

Bramantes' growing reputation as an architect prompted Julius II, after his election as pope, to call him in and entrust him with a vast building program in the Vatican, involving the replanning and coordination of the various edifices erected almost haphazard from the thirteenth century on. Bramante probably conferred with Julius in the early months of 1504 , for in that same year he set to work on the project of heightening and enlarging the Loggia delle Benedizioni in St. Peters!, a project soon ended with the decision to tear down the old church. The greatest undertaking assigned to Bramante, of course, was the reconstruction of St. Peters. At the origin of this undertaking was another project, that of the tomb of Julius II which, in 1505, the pope himself commissioned Michelangelo to design and build. What the artist proposed was a mausoleum of colossal size adorned with forty statues. A problem arose in finding a suitable location for such a mighty monument. There was no room in the Old St. Peters', which was showing signs of decay even in the time of Nicholas V (who had engaged Bernardo Rossellino to design a new basilica, but the project had been carried no further than the renovation of part of the apse). To house the pope's

tomb it would have been necessary to finish the spacious tribune begun by Nicholas V, which meant that the Constantinian choir would have to be totally demolished. Then came the problem of joining this new building unit with the nave of the old basilica. For this Julius II called in Fra Giocondo, Giuliano da Sangallo and Bramante, but finally, in October 1505, he decided to tear down the old church and raise a new and greater one in its place. Bramante was appointed chief architect. His design, later modified by himself, was for a basilica on the plan of a Greek cross, made to form a square by the erection of a tower at each of the four corners, with a vast dome in the center resting on a drum with windows and four small domes on the sides. The four arms of the cross were to end in projecting semicircular apses. "The interior of the basilica was characterized by three elements developed like the themes of a fugue: wide spaces with curving walls, articulated and pierced, and domes; pillars which, owing to the large niches hollowed out in them, appear narrow, tall and powerful; and seven sources of light pouring down from above" (O. H. Forster).



Bramante's plan

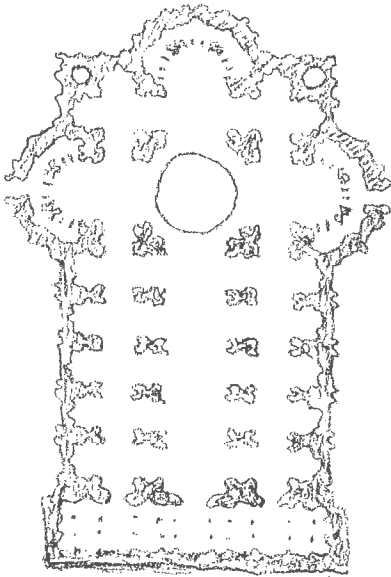


Bramante's final plan
by Forster

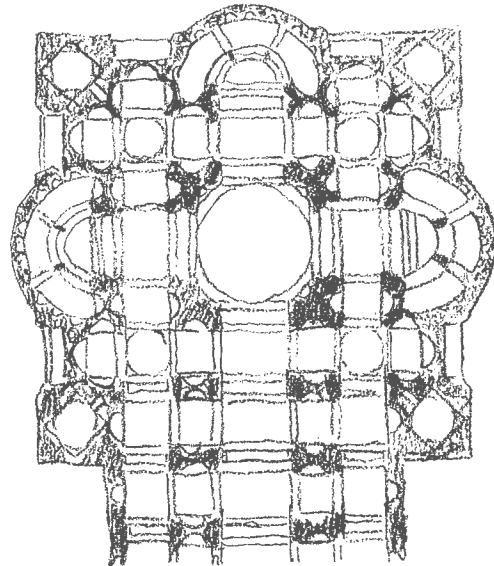
On the 18th of April 1506 the pope laid the foundation stone; by the time he died (in 1513) the four immense piers of the dome had been completed, together with the arches that spring from them. In 1514 Bramante died and Raphael was appointed chief architect of the Vatican Palace and St. Peter's and prefect of antiquities in Rome. After the death of Julius II came the war-torn pontificate of Clement VII who, in a turmoil of politics, had little time to devote to art; now, in 1527, occurred the sack of Rome by the German mercenary troops. Clement VII was succeeded by Paul III, the instigator of the Catholic restoration.

Raphael worked in collaboration with Fra Giocondo and Giuliano da Sangallo, and drew up a plan which kept essentially to Bramante's project, with certain modifications. He reduced the size of the niches to give the new plan a less organic character, in keeping with Raphael's own distributive and proportional conception of space. His chief modification lay in lengthening the nave, converting Bramante's central plan (in form of a Greek cross) into a longitudinal plan (in form of a Latin cross). In taking this step Raphael was certainly acting at the instigation of the ecclesiastical authorities, who were anxious to have a church spacious enough to accommodate the great religious ceremonies. Under Raphael the work of construction made very little progress. After his death (1520) Baldassare Peruzzi was appointed to replace him as "master of the works". He submitted a plan, in form of the Greek cross, inspired by Bramante's original conception -but with some vital

differences. Peruzzi increased the size of all the junctures and piers with the result that full spaces seemed to prevail from empty ones. The clarity of the original plan had been lost. On Peruzzi's death in (1537), Paul III put Antonio da Sangallo the younger in charge of building operations. Sangallo had just designed the Pauline Chapel in the Vatican. The wooden model prepared by him is still extant. He maintained the Greek cross, but extended it in front with a large portico. The external features proposed by Sangallo were inspired by the orders of the Colosseum and the Theatre of Marcellus. On the whole, the project is confused and over-elaborate, and fails to allow for adequate lighting within. Michelangelo objected to it and when on Sangallo's death (in 1546), he himself became chief architect of St. Peter's, he set it aside.



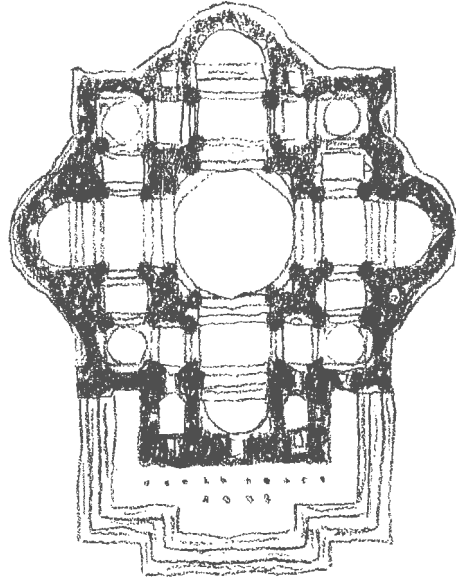
Raphael's plan



Peruzzi's plan

Michelangelo was appointed by Pope Paul III in 1546 to complete the building. The modifications that he brought to Bramante's design increased the sculptural effect of both interior and exterior and created a greater unification of space, anticipating the Baroque. The compactness and effectiveness of the building as conceived by Bramante and Michelangelo was somewhat diminished later by the lengthening of the nave and by the addition of a wide facade which cuts off the view of the dome. Only the back view of the cathedral gives some conception of the complete unity of masses which underlay Michelangelo's sculptural design. By embodying the outlying parts of the building in a continuously developing, structurally compact design, he obtained a more robust, better organized edifice. The play of forces within, instead of being broken up into isolated elements, develops in continuous interaction from the mighty piers to the peripheral masses, whose size denotes tensions at work. And all these forces, in the grip of the gravitational attraction of matter, converge on the pendentives and ribs of the dome, and from there are channeled upward, as if finally set free. Bramante's dome had been planned as a stepped up hemisphere above a narrow drum which would have seemed to press down on the church below. Michelangelo's dome conveys the opposite sensation, a powerful thrust that draws energy upward from the main body of the structure. When Michelangelo died (in 1564), the north and south arms of the transept were nearly finished, and with them a substantial portion of the drum on which the dome was to rest; and the west apse had been begun. The dome itself

and the lantern above it were built to his designs between 1588 and 1590.



Michelangelo's plan

Michelangelo's initial successor as chief architect of St. Peter's was Pirro Ligorio. Ligorio was eager to revise and modify Michelangelo's project but was met with so much opposition that, after the death of Pius V (in 1572), he was dismissed and Domenico Fontana was appointed in his place.

Fontana was an architect of great technical skill. To him Sixtus V entrusted the very difficult task of removing the great Egyptian obelisk from where it lay in the Circus of Nero and setting it up in front of St. Peter's where it still stands. An architect like Fontana, who basically was a technician, rather than a personality, was the very man required to carry out Michelangelo's plans for the dome without changing them in any essential particular. The final extended form of the nave and the facade were the work of Carlo Maderna from 1606 to 1612.

The major interior decorations and the great piazza before the church were added by Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini. The choice of an oval shape for the main piazza rather than the more stable form of a circle or a square is characteristic of the period. So also are the great colonades which enclose the space, presenting the spectator, as he crosses the area with a fluid boundary, partly open, partly closed, changing with his position. Within the piazza the obelisk and two fountains by Bernini provide minor focus attention. Bernini with the feeling of the Baroque climax remembered the piazza was only a prelude to the church and the sweep of the entablature above the colonade brings the focus to the facade of the building. Bernini sought to climax the inside of St. Peters by the construction of a huge bronze baldachino (the bronze coming from the Pantheon ceiling) placed over the high altar under the dome. Also, the eastern apse contains Bernini's Chair, a composition of apparent symbolism supported by the Doctors of the Church, who constitute the pillars of its doctrine. It encloses a wooden chair where St. Peter sat.

The first chapel to the right contains another treasure, placed there from the old basilica, in Michelangelo's Pieta. This is his most finished sculpture, a pyramidal composition constituted by the Mother -base and vertex- and the Son laid across her lap.

The statue of St. Peter sits at the last pilaster to the right. According to tradition Arnolfo di Cambio (1298) moulded it from the bronze from Capitoline Jupiter. The sculptor modeled the personage with a classic head, hair, beard and eyes and in a seated position. The hands clasp the keys and

confer a blessing fixing the personage within the bounds of Christianity and character of Peter. Humanity has paused to kiss the foot and in time consumes it.

The building, covering 18000 square yards, consists of a closely knit unit of cube and half cylinders, which in their volumes, surfaces and contours form a harmonious base (nave being 151 feet high) for the great dome, which (435feet high, 138 feet wide at base) towers above Rome like a symbol of universal authority. As many as 3000 people have stood inside, while the stupendous piazza has held over 400,000 people and I'm sure almost as many tour buses. The vastness of the basilica as well as the piazza consisting of 284 columns, 88 pilasters and 140 statues is difficult to comprehend. The statues, the carving, the lettering, as everythings size is proportitute to the building creates an optical illusion. A statue appearing to be lifesize may be 12 feet high in reality. One tends to lose the conception of the size of one's self standing inside the basilica. The total effect in an achievement like St. Peter's does make a human being feel bigger than himself, Julius II succeeded more than he might ever imagined. Film images can't capture the eye's view and words can't capture all the descriptions. I feel the real learning comes from the hours being there.

literary sources: TREASURES OF THE VATICAN by Albert Skira, HISTORY OF ART by H. W. Janson, ART THROUGH THE AGES by Crosby, ITALIAN PAINTING by DeWald, ITALIAN SCULPTURE by Godfrey, ITALIAN RENAISSANCE ART by Frederick Hart and A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO ROME by Amedeo Storti.