



ART-HISTORICAL NOTES

AN INFINITY OF LIGHTS GILDED CARVINGS OF AN ALTAR MACHINE

According to an oral tradition, the exposed wooden artefact was used to celebrate the *Quarantore* in the Pauline Chapel of the Vatican Palace, a place designated for the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament since the 16th century. For the occasion, the sacred Host was placed in an evocative setting with dozens of lights echoing the splendour of celestial glory.

Already in 1536, an apparatus for the *Quarantore* in the Pauline Chapel is documented, consisting of four statues of prophets, angels, lanterns, candles, gold lace and peacock feathers.

The first description dates back to 1573, under Gregory XIII, when the Master of Ceremonies Francesco Mucanzio recalls the machine displayed on Holy Thursday “magnificently adorned and illuminated where, after Mass in the Sistine Chapel, the Blessed Sacrament is exposed”.

A few years later, in 1628, at the height of the Baroque era, the chronicles of the time recall “A beautiful apparatus representing the glory of paradise resplendent without any light being seen because behind the clouds were hidden more than 2,000 lighted candles invented by cavalier Bernino”.

The custom continued throughout the 17th century. On the occasion of the *Quarantore* celebrated in the Jubilee year of 1650, the spectacle, which was lavishly diffused with lights and silver sculptures even in the Sala Regia, was “one of the most superb and vivid ever seen”.

Transformed and enlarged in the 18th century with a showy staircase and a tabernacle of fine crystal to reflect the light, the “beautiful machine” was destroyed at the end of the 19th century. A reminder of this Baroque construction remains in Francesco Piranesi’s engraving from 1787.

The wooden machine on display, on the other hand, probably originated as a sacred processional aedicule. In an 18th century engraving, which seems to reproduce the same artefact, a statue of the *Mater consolationis* is placed inside. The artefact, arrived in the Vatican at an unspecified time. It was more recently transformed into a *Quarantore* Machine for the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, with the addition of the Mystical Lamb in the centre and a sunburst in the background. It was probably used in the Pauline Chapel, but more certainly in the Church of St Apollinaris in Rome, where it remained from 1984 to 1991, when it was exhibited in the Historical Museum of the Lateran Palace.