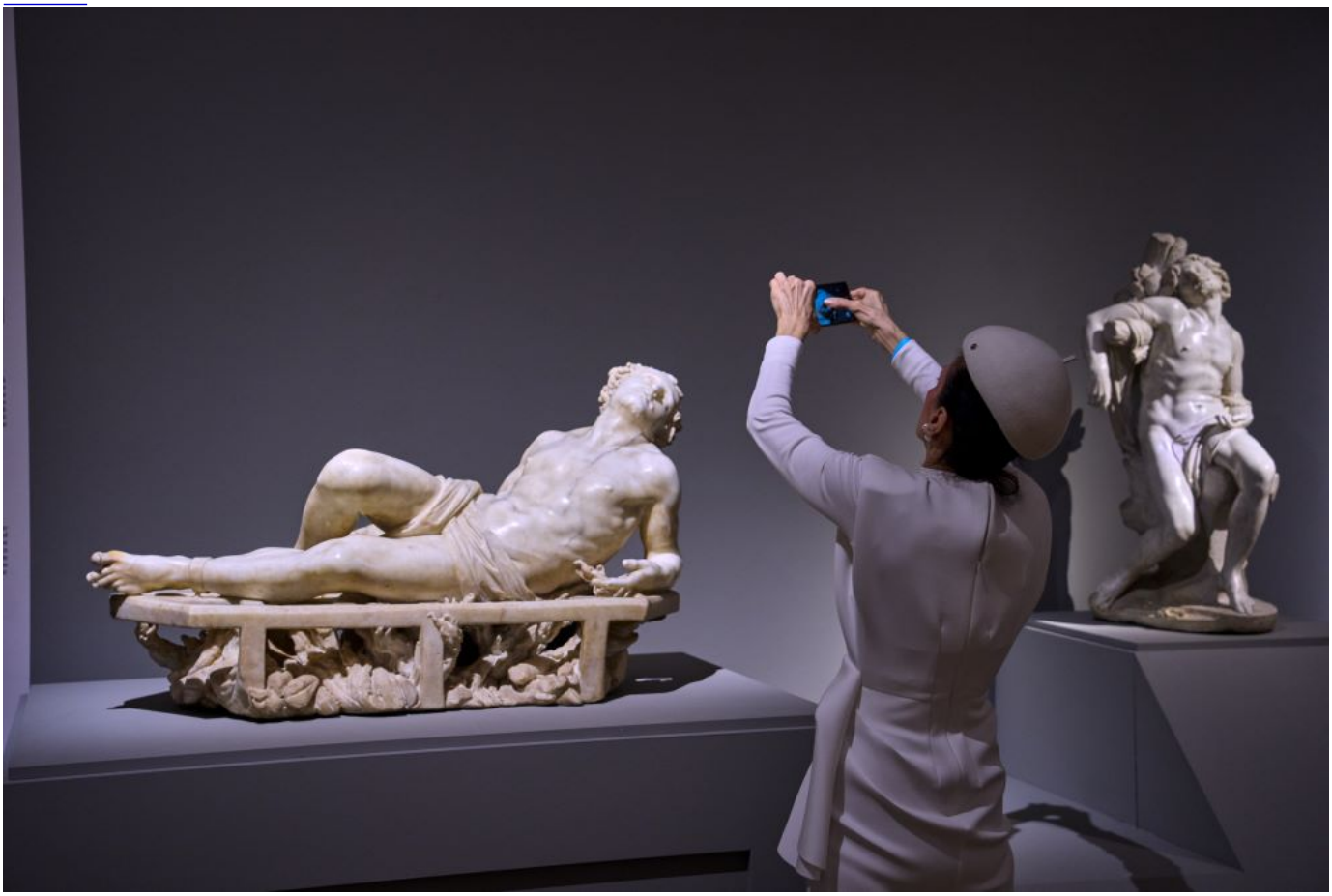
News



A journalist photographs San Lorenzo, left, and San Sebastiano, two juvenile marble statues by Italian Baroque master Gian Lorenzo Bernini, during the press preview of the exhibition "Bernini and the Barberini" at Palazzo Barberini in Rome on Feb. 11. (AP/Domenico Stinellis)

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A new exhibition in Rome is celebrating one of the most important patron-artist relationships in European history, one that propelled a young prodigy named Gian Lorenzo Bernini into a towering figure of Baroque art and architecture.

"Bernini and the Barberini," which opened Feb. 12, explores the complex relationship between Bernini and Pope Urban VIII, who ruled from 1623-1644. Urban is credited with discovering Bernini and, with him, embarking on a project to make Rome the artistic center of Christian civilization.

Urban is being celebrated in a host of Vatican initiatives this year, as the Holy See marks the 400th anniversary of his consecration of the new St. Peter's Basilica, in 1626. While the basilica was a century in the making, Urban put the finishing touches on its interior, including by commissioning Bernini to build his famous baldacchino canopy over the tomb of the saint.

Even before he was pope, though, then-Cardinal Maffeo Barberini identified in the young Bernini a talent that surpassed even that of his father Pietro, in whose artist's studio Gian Lorenzo learned his craft.

After he became pope, Urban commissioned a series of works from his young charge and "immediately realized that Bernini could become the Michelangelo of his century," co-curator Andrea Bacchi told a press conference Feb. 11 at Palazzo Barberini, where the exhibit is being held.

In the process, Bernini helped Urban assert the primacy of the Catholic Church in Europe at a time when its power was being challenged, added co-curator Maurizia Cicconi.

"Urban VIII had the intuition to govern through culture, drawing on the skills of the most talented artists," Culture Minister Alessandro Giuli said in a statement. "There is no doubt, however, that Gian Lorenzo Bernini was his favorite, a lost son to whom he entrusted the great building projects of St. Peter's Basilica along with the image and memory of his pontificate."

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Journalists attend the press preview of the exhibition "Bernini and the Barberini" at Palazzo Barberini in Rome on Feb. 11. The marble statues from The Four Seasons cycle by Pietro Bernini and his son Gian Lorenzo Bernini are on display. (AP/Domenico Stinellis)

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  Journalists attend the press preview of the exhibition "Bernini and the Barberini" at Palazzo Barberini in Rome on Feb. 11. The exhibition includes the oil on canvas "Martyrdom of St. Maurice" (1640), left, by Carlo Pellegrini and Gian Lorenzo Bernini, and the model for the bronze casing of the Throne of St. Peter (1636) by Giovan Battista Soria. (AP/Domenico Stinellis)

The exhibition limits itself to the two-decade duration of the Bernini-Urban relationship, and thus excludes some of Bernini's best-known works that, even today, define the urban landscape of Rome and the Vatican.

After Urban's death, Pope Innocent X commissioned Bernini to design the fountains of Piazza Navona, including the remarkable "Fountain of the Four Rivers" which remains one of the most important examples of Baroque sculpture in the Eternal City.

After Innocent, Pope Alexander VII commissioned Bernini in 1656 to design and build the massive colonnade that encircles St. Peter's Square.

But the exhibition, featuring loans from museums and private collections around the world, explores the origins of Bernini's experience as a papal artist and architect. And it credits Urban with having given him his earliest works, including the baldacchino canopy which just last year was restored and cleaned in time for the Vatican's 2025 Holy Year.

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Urban hasn't always been treated kindly by historians, perhaps best known for having refused to pardon Galileo Galilei, who was condemned as a heretic by the Inquisition for his beliefs that the Earth revolves around the Sun. In 1992, Pope John Paul II said the church had erred in condemning him.

It was also Urban who ordered the bronze girders from the portico of the Pantheon removed to make canons. The exhibition recalls the criticism of Urban at the time — "What the barbarians did not do, the Barberini did," it was said. But the show celebrates him for having identified a genius in Bernini.

The exhibits include sculptures, sketches, busts and paintings. Some objects have not been in Italy for centuries, and some are pairs of works never seen together before. On loan from the Vatican is a model of the bronze casing Bernini designed for the throne of St. Peter.

The show, the second in a series at Palazzo Barberini following a 2025 blockbuster Caravaggio exhibit, runs through June 14.

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