Carlo Maderno and His Architecture

Carlo Maderno was a Roman architect whose career bridged the gap between the late Renaissance and the early Baroque. He was born into a family of architects, whom he worked with in the late fifteenth century on various architectural projects around Rome. His early style reflected his training in the late-Renaissance style of Rome.

His first major project as an independent architect was the renovation of the church of Santa Susanna (1597-1603). Later, he built the nearby church of Santa Maria della Vittoria (1608-12) and completed the unfinished church of Sant’Andrea della Valle (1608-22). He is perhaps most famous for working on the design of Saint Peter’s Basilica between the years of 1603-25. He is also recognized for his work on secular buildings, most notably the Palazzo Mattei di Giove (1598-1617), the Villa Aldobrandini in Frascati (1603-21), and the famous Palazzo Barberini (begun 1628).

Although Maderno was a skilled all-around architect, he is most celebrated for his facades, which came to define the Baroque church façade in Rome. Maderno drew inspiration for his facades from the famous late-Renaissance Jesuit church in Rome, il Gesù, which is characterized by a two-story façade, scrolling volutes that connect the upper and lower levels, and a large triangular pediment at the top.
All of his buildings are quintessentially Baroque in that they are rooted in familiar classical Renaissance tradition, but the rules of Renaissance architecture are adapted to a new aesthetic. There is a greater sense of movement—even of instability—in Maderno’s buildings that anticipates the direction in which Baroque architecture would move in the coming decades. His buildings have a highly sculptural, lively quality that engages the viewer.
Works by Carlo Maderno

Santa Susanna, 1597-1603
Santa Susanna, a small church on the Quirinal Hill in Rome, was the first major project with which Maderno was independently involved. The interior of the original medieval church had been renovated in the fifteenth century, and Maderno was hired to create a new façade nearly a century later. The façade is one of Maderno’s most celebrated achievements; it includes most of the stylistic features for which Maderno’s architecture is famous. These features would heavily influence much of later Italian Baroque architecture.

The organization of the façade is typical of Maderno’s style: it is a two-story façade with a heavy triangular pediment at the top. The transition between the upper and lower stories is elegantly handled with scrolled volutes on either side, Maderno’s take on the Renaissance architectural convention seen in il Gesù. Both the upper and lower levels of the façade are themselves divided into bays divided by columns and pilasters that create a steady rhythm from the outer sides of the façade towards the central doorway and window. Notice how the doorway (in the lower level) and window (in the upper level) are accentuated by a number of architectural features that seem to project forward from the rest of the façade. The pilasters and columns are grouped closely together, and both are topped with pronounced pediments. These features create a sense of movement, and encourage the eye to move towards the central foci of the façade.

The upper and lower stories feature elements that mimic one another, creating a lively visual interplay between the two levels. Note, for example, the small triangular pediment over the central doorway that imitates the larger pediment at the roofline, and the way in which the rounded, engaged columns on the lower level (which are placed within concave recesses in the wall to create even more interest and plasticity) are mirrored by flat pilasters on the upper level. The related, but not identical, elements on upper and lower levels visually unite the two levels while keeping them distinct enough to create an engaging and well-received façade. The formula won Maderno a number of fans and would be repeated by Maderno himself as well as other Italian architects later in the century.
Shortly after completing the façade of Santa Susanna, Maderno designed the body of Santa Maria della Vittoria, a small church next to Santa Susanna. Its façade was designed by Giovanni Batista Soria. Although, in its basic form, it is similar to the façade of Santa Susanna, it lacks the sense of movement and the engaging play of depth that were present in the earlier church.
Sant’Andrea della Valle, 1608-22

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Around the same time that Carlo Maderno began work on Santa Maria della Vittoria, he also set to work on Sant'Andrea della Valle, which was originally begun in the 1590s and had remained unfinished. Maderno began work on the church in 1608 and it remained uncompleted at the time of his death. The seventeenth century construction was a collaboration between a number of local artists and architects, but Maderno is responsible for much of the design.

The façade bears all of Maderno’s trademark features, although the upper portion of the façade was completed after Maderno’s death and the lively interplay
between upper and lower stories that was evident at Santa Susanna is not present in this church.

Façade of Saint Peter’s Basilica, 1603 and After

Carlo Maderno was named architect of St. Peter's in 1603 and was tasked with developing a workable plan for the new church that would build upon earlier plans by Michelangelo and others. The preexisting plans called for a centralized church, but ultimately a basilican church—with an extended nave—suited the church's needs better and Michelangelo's plan was abandoned.

The façade is, in many ways, a quintessential Maderno façade, although it does not strictly adhere to the Santa Susanna façade type. Although there is not the typical upper-and lower-story division, there is the same division of the façade into bays with the architectural elements becoming more prominent as they move towards the central door. Once again, this technique creates a sense of movement.

Maderno’s Palazzi

Though best known for his work in the churches mentioned above, Carlo Maderno was also accomplished as an architect of secular buildings. Most of the palaces he worked on were either collaborative projects or projects that involved the completion of work begun by others earlier on. The Palazzo Mattei di Giove, 1598-1617, is the best example of Maderno’s palace design.
In many ways, this palace follows in the footsteps of Roman Renaissance palace architecture. The characteristic features that we saw in his churches, especially the central emphasis on a portal, are also found in the secular buildings on which he worked.

Maderno also worked on the Villa Aldobrandini, Frascati, 1603-21, which was begun in the late sixteenth century. Maderno’s influence is evident in the triangular pediment and small decorative volutes on either side of the uppermost part of the façade.
Finally, Maderno worked on one of the most important palaces of Baroque Rome: the Palazzo Barberini, begun in 1628.
He worked with many other architects and artists on this palace and, although his contributions are less immediately apparent, he did play a key role in its design.