

A Terracotta Model for the Royal High Altar at Versailles

BRUNO PONS

Editor's note: Bruno Pons, one of the most gifted scholars of his generation, died on June 7, 1995, at the age of forty. Among the manuscripts nearing completion at the time of his death was this one, in which he uses as his starting point the description of a model and then places the work in a broader art-historical and religious context that few if any but himself would be equipped to provide. It is typical of the generosity of his scholarship that in the process he mentions every model of the sort known to him from documents. His friends, especially Brigitte Gournay, have provided most helpful ministrations to the text and photographs; Mark Polizzotti is responsible for the translation. JDD

THE SCULPTURE COLLECTIONS of the Metropolitan Museum contain a rare small-scale preparatory model (Figures 1–4) in terracotta of an altar composed of the three traditional parts: the tomb, the gradine (or steps leading to it), and the tabernacle on top. The sarcophagus is scrolled on all sides and is unusually elegant in composition. The model, most likely a proposal submitted before the project could be approved, offers two different options. Offering the patron a choice was a time-honored practice in presentation models. Figures 2–4 show how this viability affected the appearance of the model's two sides and even its top, which has become accordingly asymmetrical. The console on the front left-hand corner of the tomb ends in a winged cherub's head, while the console on the right is purely ornamental. The frontal is embellished with a cartouche in strongly marked relief: two garlands of roses on the upper part spill over onto the palms that support the cartouche itself in the lower part, while the proposal represented by the right-hand side seems to include a spray of lilies, indicating a dedication to the Virgin.

The altar gradine also indicates two possible proposals for an ornamental frieze, incised directly into the clay and executed with great verve. Since both the right and the left extremities of the gradine have been damaged, it is hard to tell whether they were perhaps even more richly decorated than they now appear: obviously, attached or protruding objects on this kind of model would suffer most from the passage of time.

Of the tabernacle's alternative designs, a more ornate solution (albeit slightly damaged) is seen on

the left, in keeping with the design of the tomb, and a less ornate one is given on the right. The tabernacle door also features the lively carving of a "Jehovah" (symbolizing the ancient alliance) and of a mystic lamb with seven seals (symbolizing the Savior's sacrifice, as the seven seals mark the chapters of the Apocalypse). Above, on the entablature of the tabernacle, rests the crucifix stand decorated with two figures of angels. Only the base of the cross remains; the crucifix itself has broken off.

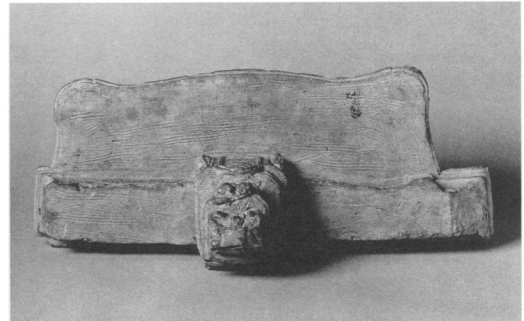
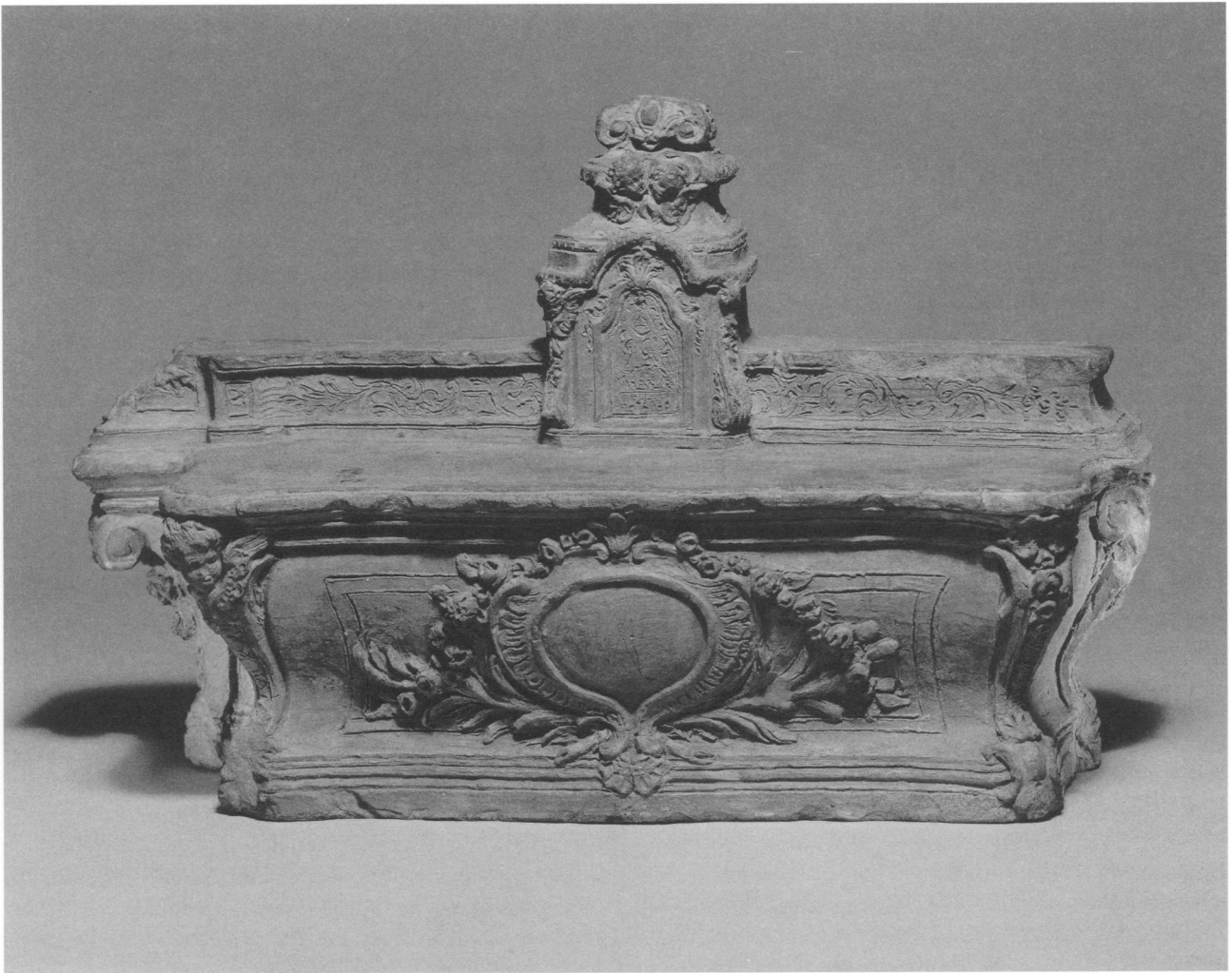
As we examine this model, we are struck first and foremost by the quality of the overall structure, the perfect skill with which the curves and reverse curves have been handled, especially on the sarcophagus, regardless of whether they are viewed from above or from the side. The consoles of the tomb in particular are placed so that they interact with those on the back of the altar—a play of space that is dynamic and vibrant from any angle.

Although it is impossible to know what materials were to be used in constructing this altar (wood, marble, bronze, precious metals), it is clear that the use of more than one was intended. Because of the tradition of architectural models with opulent ornamentation on the part of Italian artists—going back to Michelangelo—the present work has been said to come from Italy, at the end of the seventeenth century or the beginning of the eighteenth. One might think of Genoa, for example, by analogy with the beautiful high altar by Pierre Puget (1620–1694) in San Siro; for even though its tomb of San Siro is much more ornate and favors figurative sculpture, it is definitely ornamental.

However, the model is not Italian but French—the only extant one, to my knowledge—and should be counted among the works of the royal building

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The notes for this article begin on page 160.



Figures 1-4. Attributed to Agence des Bâtiments du Roi, Paris. Model for a high altar, Paris, ca. 1700-1730. Terracotta, H. 21.6 cm, W. 32 cm, D. 20.5 cm. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Ruth Blumka, in memory of Leopold Blumka, 1975, 1975.73

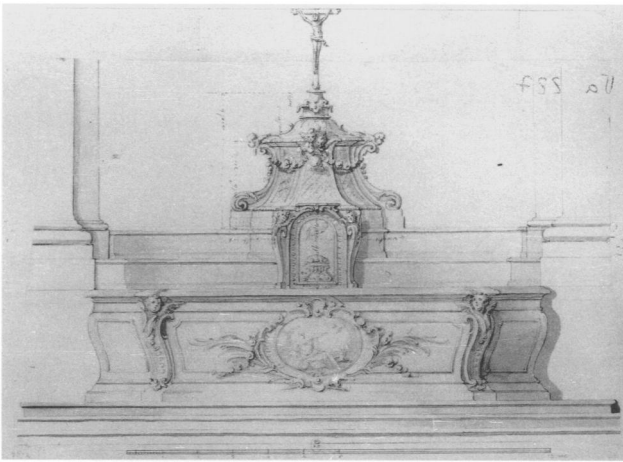


Figure 5. Agence des Bâtiments du Roi (Robert de Cotte, French, 1656–1735). Plan for a high altar for the church of Saint-Roch in Paris, ca. 1722–23. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (photo: Bibliothèque Nationale de France)

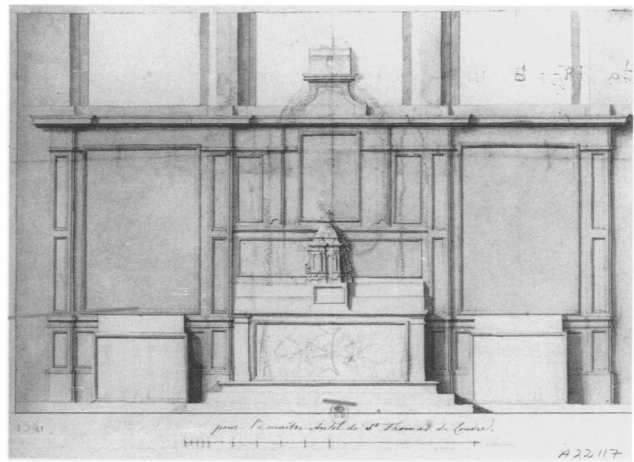


Figure 6. Drawing showing the former state of the altar of the chapel of Saint-Thomas du Louvre in Paris, before 1726. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (photo: Bibliothèque Nationale de France)

authority, the Agence des Bâtiments du Roi, at the time of the architect Jules Hardouin-Mansart and his brother-in-law and successor, Robert de Cotte—that is to say, during the first third of the eighteenth century. I shall first compare this altar with various documented projects for church decorations, particularly in Paris; then I shall give some examples of the existence of wax, plaster, and terracotta models in France; finally I shall place the work in the more general context of the decoration of ecclesiastical architecture in France from 1700 to 1730.

I. COMPARISONS WITH PROJECTS BY ROBERT DE COTTE

The Projects for Saint-Roch

The tomb is similar to a preliminary sketch found among the papers of the architect Robert de Cotte (1656–1735), which is a plan for the new high altar in the church of Saint-Roch (Figure 5). This plan shows two consoles decorated with cherubs' heads at the corners of the frontal. In comparing the drawing with the model, one is especially struck by the likeness between the central cartouches on the altar tombs. In the altar in Saint-Roch, as expected, the central medallion contains a scene from the life of Saint Roch; but the arrangement of garlands and palms supporting the

cartouche is precisely the same as in the terracotta model. The design of the tabernacle in the sketch is similar to that of the model without being entirely identical. The consoles with their cherubs' heads are more supple in the drawing than they are in the sculpted version. The principal difference resides in the importance given the crucifix stand, which is set to the rear of the altar and which in Saint-Roch is made larger and more ornate to match the larger dimensions of the sanctuary.

The construction of the church of Saint-Roch extended over many years. Jules Hardouin-Mansart (1646–1708) was commissioned to design a new chapel dedicated to the Virgin; the project was then taken over by Robert de Cotte, whose son ultimately completed the facade. Robert de Cotte's papers (which also include many of Mansart's drawings) contain several projects for the high altar, probably from different dates. The drawing that interests us here is his last one (see Figure 5). We can relate it to plans to remodel the church's main choir, which owed its funding to the generosity of John Law, founder of the French royal bank. We know that the remodeling took place between 1720 and 1725.¹

We can give a precise date for the actual remodeling, at least with regard to the sculptures intended for the cupola of the transept crossing, because in 1723, soon after the death of the sculptor René Charpentier (1680–1723), the duc d'Antin, superintendent of the Bâtiments du Roi, announced that the sculptures

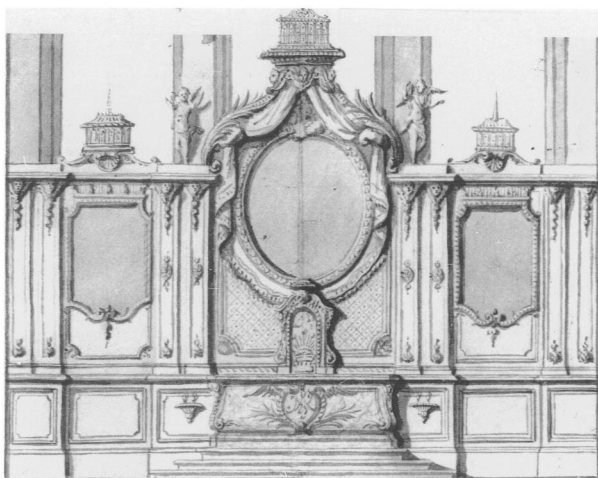


Figure 7. Robert de Cotte, for the Agence des Bâtiments du Roi. First proposal for the new altar for the chapel of Saint-Thomas du Louvre in Paris, 1726. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (photo: Bibliothèque Nationale de France)

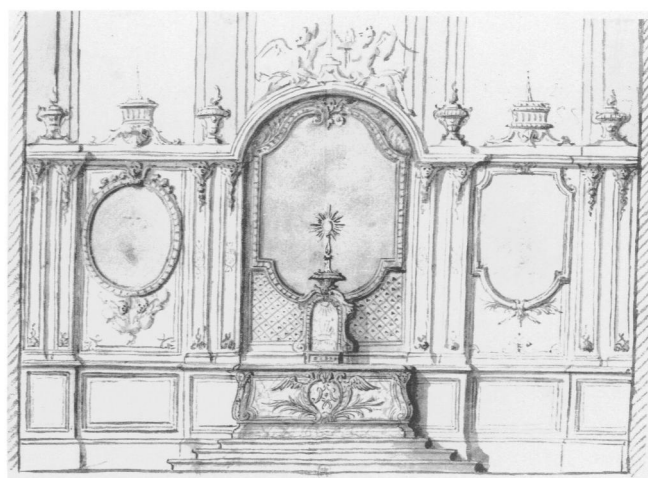


Figure 8. Robert de Cotte, for the Agence des Bâtiments du Roi. Second proposal for the new altar for the chapel of Saint-Thomas du Louvre in Paris, 1726. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (photo: Bibliothèque Nationale de France)

would be carved according to drawings that Charpentier had handed over shortly before.² Stylistically, the design of the high altar is perfectly compatible with these dates. I am tempted, moreover, to attribute the drawing to Charpentier himself.³ One might also think of François-Antoine Vassé (1681–1736), who created the ornamental designs for the new choir of Notre-Dame in Paris, but the drawing technique seems less brilliant than that in Vassé's sketches for Notre-Dame.

The Projects for Saint-Thomas du Louvre

Another set of drawings, also among the Robert de Cotte papers, provides a further basis for study: a project for the chapel of Saint-Thomas du Louvre. This small chapel was located near the Louvre, between the present Cour Carrée and the Arc du Carrousel. Many artists and craftsmen employed by the Bâtiments du Roi worked here and were lodged either in the Louvre itself or nearby, in the small houses and buildings coveted by artists who wanted to set up their studios in the neighborhood. Some of these artists worshiped at Saint-Thomas. In 1712 de Cotte's son and his wife, the daughter of the goldsmith Delaunay, were granted a pew in the church. Less commonly, but in the same period, the goldsmith Claude Ballin received authorization to set up his furnaces and forges in part of the cloister of Saint-Thomas. (This curious arrangement was facilitated by the fact that a member of his family,

Antoine-Claude Ballin, was first a priest and then canon of Saint-Thomas du Louvre.) In 1715, after Delaunay endowed the chapter with a gift of gold jewelry, he was given a pew in his family's name as a token of gratitude.

The Robert de Cotte papers also contain a drawing showing the former state of the altar in this modest church (Figure 6), in a neighborhood where there were many such churches. The retable, a simple panel with a large molded frame boasting no particular richness to speak of, stood behind a very plain altar and a tabernacle shaped like a columned temple. Set above the entablature were the reliquary shrines, which were quite visible.⁴

Two other drawings show a project for a new high altar (Figures 7, 8). The aim was to highlight the three reliquaries (above the entablature of the retable), whose function was to inspire the adoration of the faithful. If the choice of paneling differs rather significantly in the two drawings, the design of the high altar and that of the tabernacle are rather similar. As with the terracotta model at the Metropolitan, the altar's large tomb features two different corner consoles, one with and one without the head of a winged cherub. On the other hand, the central cartouche is different from that of the terracotta model—it has wings—but is nonetheless characteristic of the art produced at the Bâtiments du Roi after 1709, under the leadership of Robert de Cotte.

These drawings⁵ become more interesting still when we study the model of the tabernacle and the proposed means of exhibiting the monstrance. Here again there is an obvious similarity of style between the drawings and the model, even leaving aside the fact that the tabernacle door is decorated (as it is on the model) with a figure of Jehovah and a mystic lamb. We should note as well that the first drawing (R. de Cotte, 1342, Figure 7) sketchily indicates an ornamental frieze on the gradine and resembles the one on the terracotta model.

Perhaps an examination of these drawings as an ensemble, this time widening the scope of our study to include the decor of the paneling, would give us a more precise idea of when the model was made. With respect to the shape of the frames, the first drawing repeats solutions already used in sketches issued by Mansart's office and by its first designer, Pierre Lepautre; some of the drawings date from 1698, others from 1705. The large oval frame surrounded by heavy drapery is almost Romanesque in feeling, a surprising approach for the end of the seventeenth century.

The second drawing (Figure 8), on the other hand, shows two proposals: a large oval frame and a frame with handles, exactly like the ones built for the stalls of Notre-Dame in Paris (1710–14). At the same time, the large frame placed above the high altar, scrolled in its upper portion, is noticeably similar to the decorative pieces commissioned by de Cotte after 1715 for works of civil architecture, such as the Hôtel de Toulouse in Paris (1715–17) and the Hôtel du Grand Maître in Versailles (1724).

The few preserved archival documents related to the chapter of Saint-Thomas mention the need for significant restorations to the chapel of the Virgin in the church.⁶ The need quickened in 1717,⁷ as the charitable brotherhoods of the Holy Virgin, Saint Roch, and Saint Sébastien, which met at the Quinze-Vingts Hospital, began holding their assemblies at Saint-Thomas du Louvre. Gilles-Marie Oppenordt, the regent's architect, was asked for a permit on December 1, 1719.⁸ The drawings in the de Cotte papers are perfectly consistent with this date, although we do not know which project, Oppenordt's or de Cotte's, finally went to construction. In any case, restoration work, including the installation of new wainscoting, was under way in May 1720—placing an added burden on the chapel's impecunious chapter, which had already had the nave and the chapel of the Virgin retiled in December 1718.

Without our being able to state categorically that the terracotta model in the Metropolitan Museum was created for this project, the circumstances nonetheless

confirm the relationship between the model and Robert de Cotte's drawing, and it can be dated to about 1720–25.

II. EARTHENWARE AND PLASTER MODELS COMMISSIONED BY ROBERT DE COTTE

Although the practice of using plaster, wax, or terracotta models in the preparation of large pieces of decorative sculpture is little known in France, it can be firmly established by existing documents, even when the works themselves have been destroyed. The practice was, of course, customary for studios that produced statuary sculpture, whether marble or bronze groups or complex projects for tombs. In these domains, models are hardly a novelty. But in the late seventeenth century, notably under the influence of the work of François Girardon (1678–1715) on the Chapelle Royale des Invalides, the stress placed on

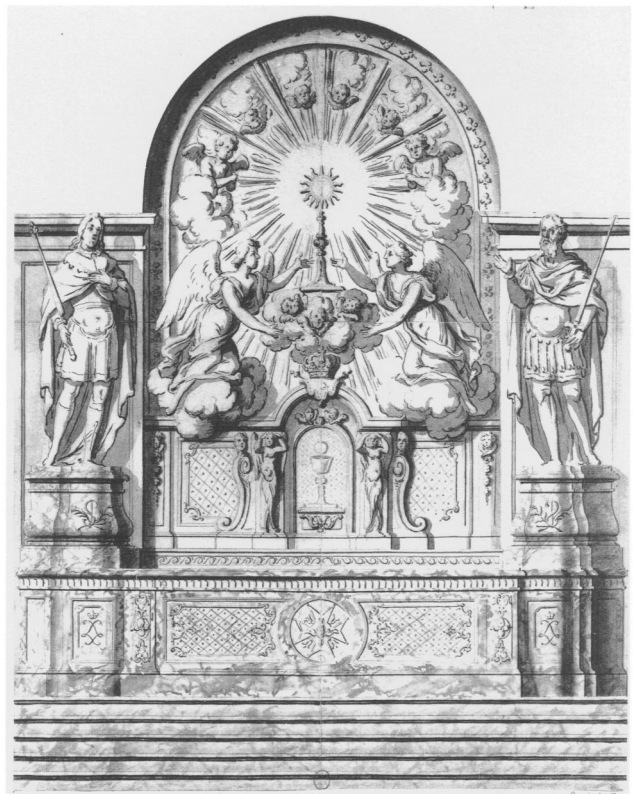


Figure 9. Agence des Bâtiments du Roi. First proposal for the choir of the Chapelle Royale at Versailles, showing two angels carrying the monstrance between the statues of Saint Louis and Charlemagne, ca. 1709. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (photo: Bibliothèque Nationale de France)

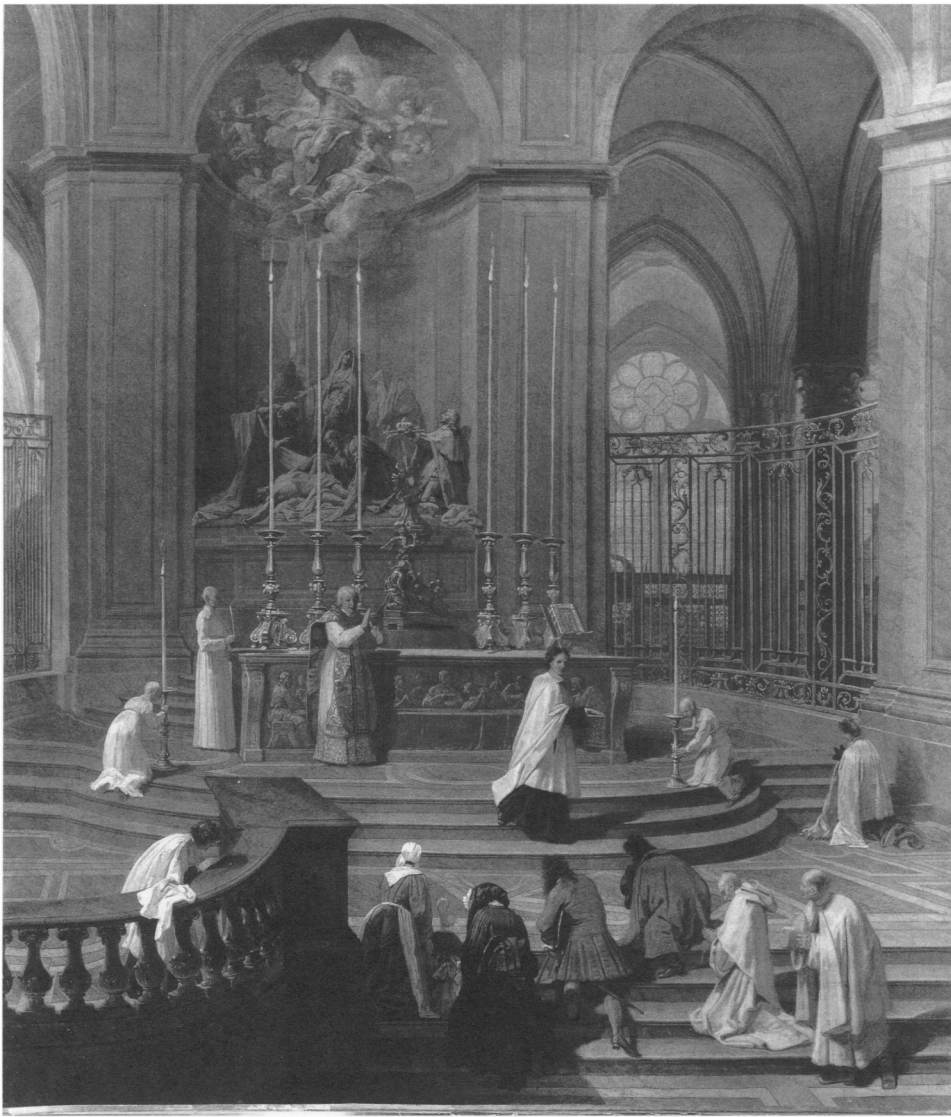


Figure 10. Jean Jouvenet (French, 1644–1717). *La Messe du chanoine de la Porte*, showing the new high altar of the cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris. Paris, Musée du Louvre (photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux)

ornamentation, and the need to use extremely varied materials and techniques, would have required the talents of numerous craftsmen. It therefore became necessary to widen the practice of offering models, especially as a means of judging the relations between different parts of projects that called for many elements to work in concert, rather than to stand on their own as individual entities.

Robert de Cotte's correspondence in 1716 with Joseph Clemens, the elector of Cologne, mentions the model of a four-sided altar for the chapel in Poppelsdorf Castle, near Bonn, meant to be built in stucco. Sent from Paris, the wax model, having been mishandled during shipment, "est arrivé tout dérangé."⁹

For the decoration of the Chapelle Royale at Versailles numerous projects were elaborated between 1700 and 1710, the year the work was completed (Figure 9). Under de Cotte's stewardship, the orna-

ments were executed with particular care, and in many ways this chapel marks the triumphant alliance of sculpture with architecture. Many large- and small-scale preparatory models were made, often more than once. In 1710 the sculptors Lepautre, René Chaveau, and Offement, under de Cotte's guidance, furnished several such works: "le modèle général en petit" of the altar for the chapel of the Saint-Sacrement, as well as several studies of details (in wax and terracotta) and a large-scale terracotta model of the glorie for the same chapel.¹⁰ Even the mosaic panel of the tabernacle was first modeled in terracotta and plaster. And for the chapel of Sainte-Thérèse the sculptors produced a small-scale model of the entire altar, along with several sketches. Corneille Van Clève created models for the high altar, notably of elements to be cast in bronze, in 1709–10. His models, which represent several proposals and variants, required sixty days of work. The stud-

ies of the cherubs' heads, so important to the decor of the chapel in that they depict the vision of Ezekiel, were routinely made of terracotta, while the models of the tabernacle bronzes were made of wax on a wooden backing.

Certain sculptors even made models of works that would ultimately be assigned to other sculptors, depending on their respective occupations and the decisions of the architectural agency. On the other hand, in 1711, François-Antoine Vassé handled not only the preparatory sketches and models but also the final execution of the large bronze ornamental sections of the high altar and the large Ferial altar in Notre-Dame de Paris.¹¹ At the same time, Philippe Bertrand (1663–1724) provided wax models for the pulpit of Notre-Dame, the execution of which was then assigned to other sculptors.¹² Such models were not strictly limited to large works of religious decoration. In 1712, for example, Vassé provided the old Louvre with a terracotta model of a console for a library.¹³

Another source of information affords a more precise idea of these practices: the posthumous inventories of certain of the sculptors who worked with Robert de Cotte, which list examples of such models that remained in the studio—models we wish we could find today.

The inventory of Vassé's effects was published by Mireille Rambaud.¹⁴ Besides studies for the statuary sculpture that we would expect to see listed, we also find models for many of the artist's religious and architectural ideas: a wooden model for the pulpit of the Invalides, a terracotta model of the fireplace for the gallery of the Hôtel de Toulouse (which was built in marble and gilt bronze), a plaster model of the cartouche on the tomb of the altar of the Virgin in Notre-Dame, studies of angels' heads in gilded cardboard, the model for Sainte-Croix d'Orléans (1729), plaster models for bas-reliefs to be cast in gilt bronze, the model in wax and plaster of the tabernacle for the parish of Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, and another for the parish of Saint-Leu, which was probably never built.

Corneille Van Clève also created numerous models, mainly for works that he was then commissioned to execute. Otherwise, it is as if for any given project a hierarchy existed between the different sculptors: those who made the models and those who executed the work itself. Still others who worked with de Cotte are known for the models they provided: Claude-Augustin Cayot (1677–1722) made plaster models of bas-reliefs for Versailles, as well as models of adoring angels for the high altar of Notre-Dame de Paris, not

to mention bas-reliefs and cartouches.

Philippe Bertrand, steadily engaged by de Cotte to prepare models, created the terracotta models of the organ for the Chapelle Royale at Versailles, a true work of sculpture; the organ was constantly being modified, even while it was under construction by the studios of Jules Degoullons. Bertrand also furnished the models for the pulpits of the Chapelle Royale at Versailles (in wax, 1709) and of Notre-Dame (1710–11).¹⁵ Remarkably, Versailles still owns his little lead model of the gilded baldachin (ca. 1705) for the Bosquet des Dômes in the park.

Another sign of de Cotte's particular confidence in Bertrand is the fact that he entrusted him with making the model of a celebrated piece of jewelry (now lost) that included both ornamental and figurative sculptures—the model was 67 centimeters high and weighed 500 pounds. Canon Delaporte, who helped finance the remodeling of the choir of Notre-Dame, decided to augment his largesse by giving the cathedral a sun (*soleil*). This piece, usually housed with the other treasures of Notre-Dame, was produced by the goldsmith Ballin *fils*. One can see it on the high altar of the cathedral as depicted in Jean Jouvenet's *La Messe du chanoine de la Porte* (Musée du Louvre; Figure 10). Up until the end of the eighteenth century, common wisdom held that Ballin's piece had been made from a model by Bertrand.¹⁶ But the agreement for this sun¹⁷ clearly stipulates that Bertrand was to work from drawings made by de Cotte himself. Thus the architect left nothing to chance in the fine-tuning of his masterwork, the choir of Notre-Dame: from paintings to trophies, from the choice of marble to the Savonnerie carpets, not to mention the crucifixes, rails, and stalls. In all likelihood it was the same for the altar candelabra—although this time it was Van Clève who provided the model.

We have proof of de Cotte's personal interest in these decorative sections and in their scrolled contours, thanks to a 1709 memoir by a sculptor named Hardy. Hardy speaks of a fireplace for which he had to provide numerous models in plaster and terracotta, "fait et refait jusqu'à ce que M. de Cotte soit content"—which seems to have been no easy task.¹⁸ The sculptors had already been put sorely to the test in 1699, when they made models for the apartments of the dauphin and others for Monsieur, the king's brother, at Saint-Cloud.

Indeed, we should not see these preparatory models as mere devices used to study the arrangement of ornaments or decorative details. Rather, we should note that they had by now become quite necessary, if not indeed indispensable. By this time, simple geo-

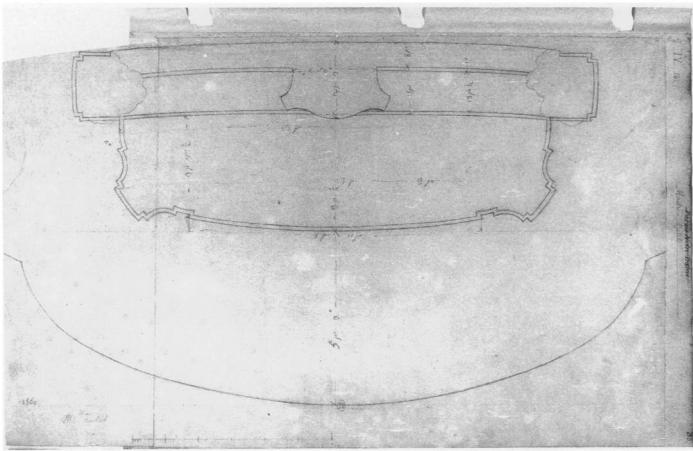


Figure 11. Agence des Bâtiments du Roi (Robert de Cotte). Superimposition of plans for the high altar of Notre-Dame de Paris. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (photo: Bibliothèque Nationale de France)

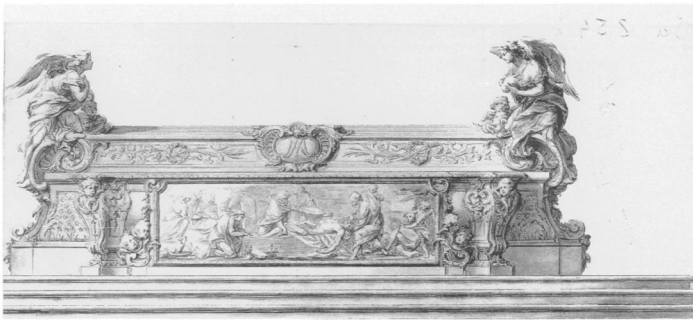


Figure 12. Agence des Bâtiments du Roi (Robert de Cotte and François-Antoine Vassé). Elevation of the tomb and gradine of the high altar of Notre-Dame de Paris, 1712. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (photo: Bibliothèque Nationale de France)



Figure 13. Unidentified artist. Study for the corner bronzes of the tomb of the high altar of Notre-Dame de Paris. Saint Petersburg, Hermitage (photo: Hermitage)

metric forms having been abandoned for more elaborate scroll-cut forms, the whole aesthetic conception had changed. The upheaval was almost as great as that witnessed by Rome in Bernini's day. It was no coincidence but rather an effect that had been deliberately sought, one that took root with greater or lesser degrees of success. Even for works as complex as the great altars of Notre-Dame or of the Chapelle Royale at Versailles, the contours were not so complicated and sculpture predominated. And yet the architects' drawings show what care they lavished on the top and side projections.

One of the assets of the Metropolitan's model is, as we have said, the perfection of the curves of the tomb when seen from above (Figure 4). We can thus compare it with the sketch of a project for the high altar of Notre-Dame (R. de Cotte, 1860; Figures 11, 12), on which plans for the gradine and the tabernacle are superimposed onto those for the tomb. Thanks to this

example of a church altar, and also to examples of new fireplace designs (some of which also called for bronze decorations), it becomes especially clear that the main concern was the workmanship of the marble. Its importance is further demonstrated in the stylistic evolution of the fireplace *à la Royale*. Before Jean Bérain (1639–1711) and Daniel Marot (1660–1712)—to name but two of the better-known artists—the true craft of marble fireplaces was shown in the cutaway drawings and orthogonal projections; the main difference lay in a new sense of movement given to the upper mantelpieces and jambs. All that changed about 1708, with respect to both the marble worker's craft and the fireplaces themselves: designers began to play with the design of the mantel shelf and the curvature of the side jambs, in order to integrate as many different shapes as possible into these new forms of decoration.¹⁹ In broader terms, as the fireplace stopped being a three-sided form and became a five-

sided one, it could no longer be represented simply by a frontal elevation and a cutaway.

The problem is exactly the same for high altars: the design of an altar in Notre-Dame, or of the altars in the great provincial cathedrals during the Rococo period, was no longer a parallelepiped. The drawings in the de Cotte papers include a front elevation, plans for the placement of the sculptures, and another plan for the placement of the ornaments that largely and efficaciously allows the cherubim to show through the sides. This graphic representation should have served as a sufficient guide to the assisting artists. Nonetheless, the Hermitage possesses a superb wash drawing in which we can easily recognize a study, or rather a quick sketch, for the corner bronzes for the tomb of the high altar of Notre-Dame (Figure 13). Could it be a sketch by the bronze founder to explain the installation, or rather the integration, of the bronze ornaments in this marvelous altar? Whatever the case, it is clear that a plan of the four sides, or one elevation and a cutaway view, was no longer sufficient. From this point on, the building of a "Romanesque" altar required plans for all six sides so that the marble mason, the goldsmith, the bronze founder, and even the painter would understand what they needed to do. And if the problem was less critical than for a Romanesque altar, choir altars posed the same types of

problems, as the Metropolitan's model now proves with its dual proposals of corner consoles and winged cherubs' heads.

III. SMALL- AND LARGE-SCALE MODELS

When it came to drawings and plans (Figures 14, 15), the royal commissions for Poissy, Paris, Versailles, Meudon, and other châteaux posed no difficulties for an architectural office that was used to such preparations—this was, after all, its function. Also, the cost of producing models and making further modifications during construction caused no serious problems. But it was another matter when a church had to renovate its choir or part of the building, for this was done under the auspices of a building committee and the clergy (sometimes the bishop). In any case, funds were limited and watched over by the parishioners.

In the context of the small model under consideration, we might now turn to models on a larger scale. For Notre-Dame de Paris, the king himself came to see the wooden model at the end of 1698. He was not pleased, and the model remained in place for three years while new options were explored.

François Souchal has shown that the new altar of the

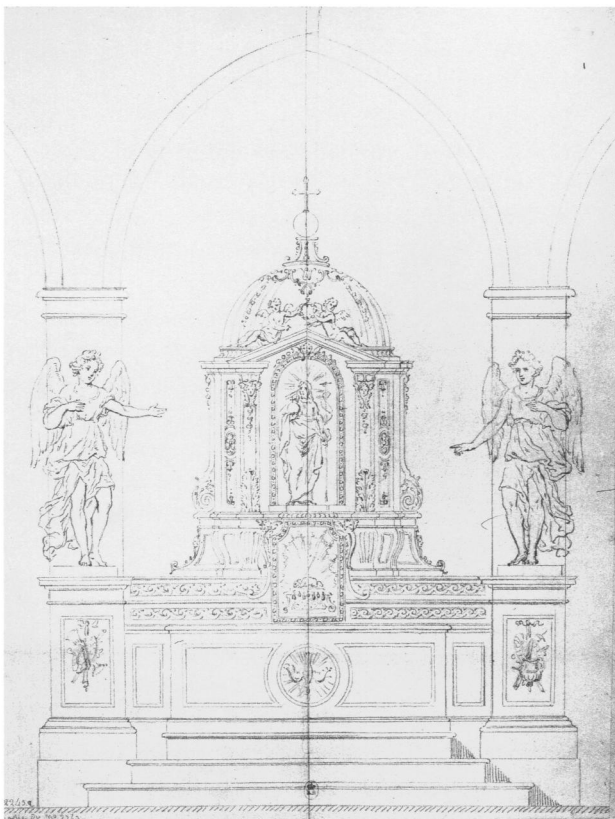
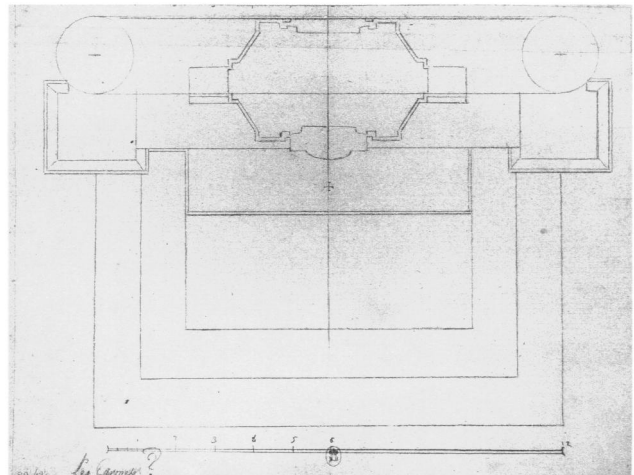


Figure 14. Agence des Bâtiments du Roi (Robert de Cotte). Elevation of the new high altar for the Royal Abbey of Poissy, formerly assigned to Les Carmes. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (photo: Bibliothèque Nationale de France)

Figure 15. Agence des Bâtiments du Roi (Robert de Cotte). Plan of the Royal Abbey of Poissy outlining the steps leading to the tabernacle. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (photo: Bibliothèque Nationale de France)



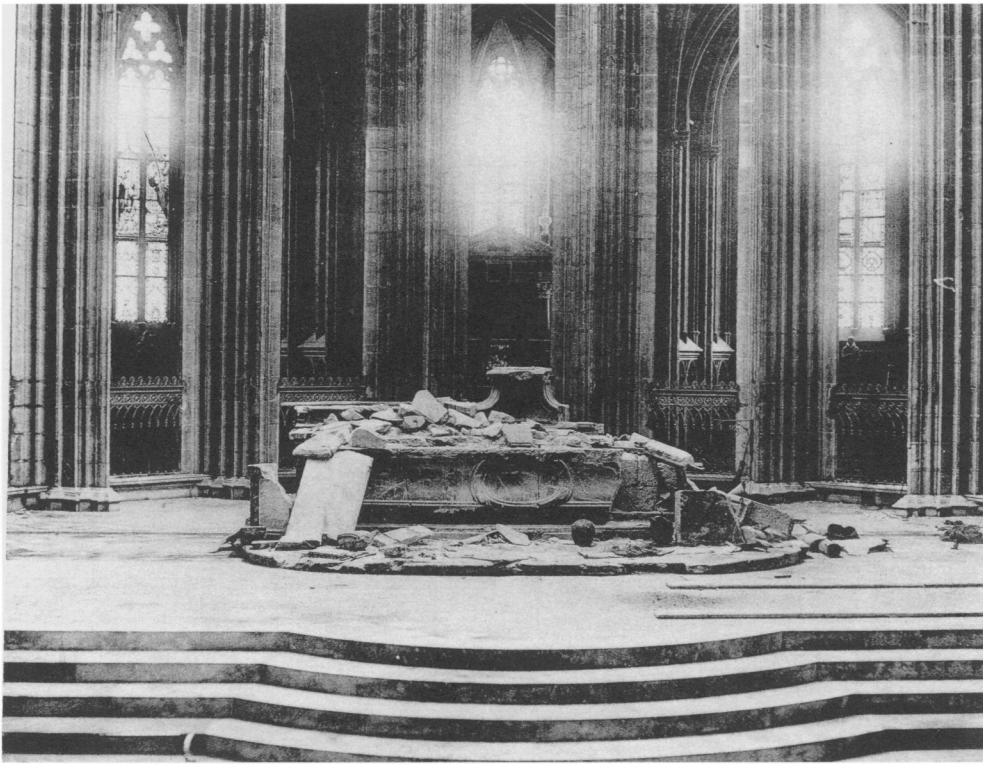


Figure 16. Robert de Cotte and François-Antoine Vassé. High altar of the cathedral of Sainte-Croix in Orléans (1721–29), photographed after its collapse in 1904 (photo: Bibliothèque Nationale de France)

church of Saint-Merri in Paris was first cast as a large plaster model, which was long exhibited in situ in the choir so that the parishioners could see how it would look as well as to forestall later criticisms—it was a period when harsh artistic judgments proliferated. In other cases, models of pulpits or glories were proposed. In fact, the incontrovertible success of the new, “modern” choir in Notre-Dame (set against the cathedral’s Gothic architecture), as well as the new decorations for Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie and Saint-Germain-des-Prés (both older churches with late-medieval or Renaissance architecture), made people aware of how timeworn the “antique” choirs looked, built as they were in the bygone style of Paris churches and provincial cathedrals, and of how obsolete the stalls and their awful sculptures appeared—in short, how utterly inadequate all this was to the post-Tridentine, Italianate spirit of glorifying God and propagating the faith. At the time, any traveler who had been to Italy would have been dazzled by the modern churches of Italian parishes or religious congregations, regardless of whether he or she belonged to the triumphant or the militant faith.

Another example is furnished by the high altar of the cathedral of Orléans (1721–29), which according to a bon mot was the “last Gothic cathedral completed by the Bourbons in the eighteenth century.” Little by

little, the construction of this cathedral came to an end: the new choir, new stalls, and new chapels coincided with the end of Louis XIV’s reign and marked the last stages of the interior decoration, before the “neo-Gothic Louis XV facade” was completed.

The final details of the interior were overseen by the duc d’Antin himself, superintendent of the Bâtiments du Roi, who, moreover, as governor of Orléans wanted to give it a Romanesque altar, which would be located in the rotunda of the transept and readily visible to all.²⁰ He agreed to pay for this altar out of his personal funds (even though it was later said to have been a gift from Louis XV; see Figure 16).

The altar, once again decorated with bronzes by Vassé, was 5 meters long and 1.8 meters high, on a platform of pink Languedoc marble measuring 6 by 3.8 meters. The marble of the tomb (still preserved) was veined green Campanian, with pedestals and tables of *sarrancolin* and gradine of *griotte*. The frontal was a mosaic of Campanian and Carrara marbles. Unfortunately, the collapse of the sanctuary vault on the night of September 8, 1904, demolished everything. The catastrophe nonetheless had its compensations. Inside the dislocated marble tomb were found pieces of the old altar of 1621–42, along with some curious chunks of plaster.²¹ Some of the latter were painted in *faux marbre*, others were simply painted or

gilded, and some bore plaster cherubs' heads: they turned out to be crushed fragments of the large-scale model of the cathedral's high altar, which had been put on view for the faithful in 1721.²²

Work on the choir renovations had begun in 1705, with the execution of the superb sculpted stalls overseen by Jules Hardouin-Mansart's office. The next stage of the renovations strictly followed the governing spirit behind the new choir of Notre-Dame de Paris (1699–1721): the main altar (dedicated to Saint Mamert) was placed completely at the rear of the church, behind the choir, and another, a Romanesque altar, was placed farther forward. The drawings for this second altar were handled by de Cotte himself:²³

Monsieur le duc d'Antin, gouverneur de cette province, nous ayant tesmoigné que son intention étoit de faire faire à ses frais et despens un maistre autel a lad. église à la moderne, enrichy de colonnes et autres ornemens de marbre, à la place de celui qui y estoite, et afin qu'il souhaitoit en faire faire un modèle en plâtre, ce qui auroit été fait, mais comme la chapelle de Saint Mamert servait d'ornement à l'ancien maistre autel, qui estoit beaucoup plus hault que le modèle qui est fait à présent, ce qui aurait causé une difformité considérable, c'est pourquoy nous avons cru qu'il estoit indispensable de faire démolir lad. chapelle Saint Mamert, pour ensuite la faire refaire bien plus basse afin de servir d'ornement au nouvel autel.²⁴

IV. ROMANESQUE ALTAR VERSUS BALDACHIN

In fact, this small modification, which one might see as deriving from a simple desire for artistic or aesthetic innovation, has a much deeper and probably theological significance. It conveys the simultaneous cultivation of fidelity to Rome, always respecting the independence on the part of the Gallican church, amid debates over whether to accept the Bull of Unigenitus after the painful business of Jansenism—all in a country that generally disliked change and that still admired Italy to the point of fascination, even as it had sought, for reasons of spite or of envy, to distance itself from Italian influence since the end of the seventeenth century.

Without a doubt, the most revolutionary concept of the high altar belonged to Bernini's Saint Peter's. It combined a magnified version of the ancient ciborium amplified by twisted Salomonic columns (1624–33) with references—which were often reiterated in the great Baroque cathedrals—to the catafalques that

heightened the worship of the faithful. Not infrequently, the placement of the high altar itself would cover an underground chapel for the veneration of a saint's relics and, in the back, another altar; the architect's talent could often be measured by his skill in making that second altar visible behind the high altar (as with Saint Peter's throne, 1657–66). The play of one object against another, rather than the independence of two single objects (to paraphrase Irving Lavin),²⁵ was a common technique in Rome; we shall see it more modestly applied by other means in France. The other important element that allows us to see things differently a posteriori is the importance of color.

For his baldachin, Bernini had commissioned a number of preparatory sketches. This brilliant work has enjoyed lasting admiration, and it would be pointless to try to say more about it here. Let us nonetheless recall that in Genoa, in his plan for a baldachin for the church of Santa Maria Assunta in Carignano, Pierre Puget was also commissioned to make preparatory color sketches.

Val-de-Grâce owned the most famous baldachin in the style of Saint Peter's to be built in France, which, following Louis XIII's wishes, was also the most faithful to its model. Bernini had been asked to do it, as had Pierre Mignard, but its paternity was soon claimed, or rather "annexed," by Mansart. It, too, was depicted in a number of preparatory sketches (probably in pen and ink) as well as in a scrupulously colored drawing, but none of them was destined to find favor. It was, moreover, very much in the same spirit that Mansart conceived his first project for Notre-Dame in 1699: a large baldachin with twisted columns. The formula also allowed him to place the pulpit very high, leaving it visible above the rood screen.

Compromises between these two elements—on the one hand the newness of columned baldachins that eventually left behind the idea of the ancient ciborium, on the other a more Gallican concept that we shall return to later—were often found in France: in the grand altar of the Chapelle Royale of the Invalides (ca. 1702–6), in Tarbes (1717; sculpted by Marc Arcis [1655–1739]), in Toulouse for the high altar of Saint-Sernin (1720–21),²⁶ and in the cathedral of Narbonne (1694; sculpted by Jean Cornu [1650–1710]).²⁷ Meanwhile, in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Oppenordt adapted a throne of Saint Peter to an altar under a baldachin, changing Saint Peter's pulpit and its brilliant scrolled form into a reliquary.

The altar, for which Oppenordt had to choose between more classical formulas, was noticed immedi-

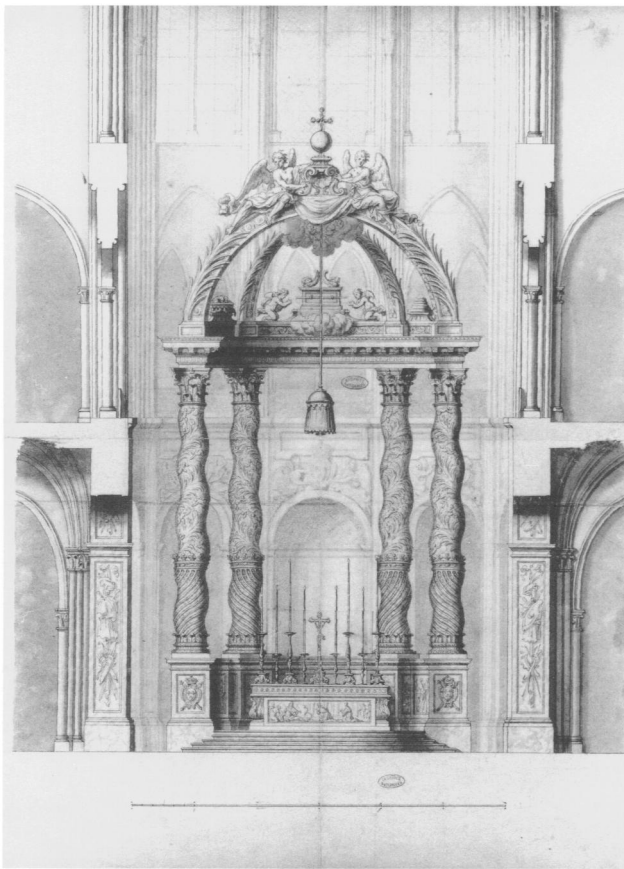


Figure 17. Agence des Bâtiments du Roi (Jules Hardouin-Mansart). Drawing for the Roman-style altar for the cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris, March 19, 1699. Paris, Archives Nationales (photo: Martine Beck-Coppola)

ately. Although the original no longer exists, a near-faithful copy was built by the father of La Trinité in Caen. It was reassembled for the church of Notre-Dame de la Gloriette in the same city. At the end of the seventeenth century, a religious order often counted architects, decorators, painters, and sculptors among its members, such as Frères Romain, André, and Bourgeois (whose creative impulses were reined in by suggestions to adapt earlier drawings).

At this time in France, there were several coexisting concepts of how a high altar should be decorated. The most common, particularly during the reigns of Louis XIII and Anne of Austria, favored paintings in the grand style, which were at once very elegant and very expensive. The favored ultramarine blue on the large retable was meant to draw the visitor's gaze from the moment he or she entered, as in Dutch or Flemish

temples or Italian churches. The high altar was divided into several layers that were separated by black (or perhaps gilded white) woodwork (this in itself would warrant an entire study).

But another trend took shape around the work of Charles Le Brun (1619–1690), a trend that is less known and seems to have lacked the strength to impose itself or resist being overshadowed by the magnificence of the Chapelle Royale of the Invalides. It gave primacy to sculpture and, as I see it, expressed a certain rivalry with François Girardon, who liked change simply for the sake of change.

Moreover, from the viewpoint of art history, it seems that what made the grand altar of the Invalides so innovative was not so much the baldachin (the model for which dated from 1691–92) as it was the concept of the praying angels. These angels might have been derived from Michel Anguier's Nativity group in the Val-de-Grâce, but in their arrangement and design, fundamentally more decorative than sculptural, they exerted an influence on a number of important drawings and structures, such as the funeral arch of the tomb of Condé in the church of Saint-Paul-Saint-Louis, the praying angels on the altar of Notre-Dame, and the gilt-metal angels in the chapel of Versailles.

In 1675–78, for the Grands-Augustins (an important building, as the knights of the Order of the Holy Spirit met there), Le Brun had sketched a large marble baldachin, a "colonnade" arranged in a circular arch supporting a sculpted half-dome that depicted an Eternal Father in Glory (and not a Jehovah). On either side were two columns on the same level, and behind the altar were four more columns. A statue of Saint Monica stood on one side and one of Saint Augustine on the other. We should note, however, that the emphasis was placed on the overall balance of the composition; the design of the high altar itself remained rather pedestrian.

During the same period, the brilliant Pierre Bullet (ca. 1639–1716) designed for Saint-Germain-des-Prés a columniated side altar dedicated to Saint Margaret in 1675 (sculpted by Laurent Magnier, 1677–79); its pendant, the altar of Saint-Casimir, was built in 1682, still following the same principles. In this instance, the pride of place was given to the sculpted depiction of Saint Margaret. Since this altar still exists, we can judge how Bullet, using fairly simple architectural effects, managed to reach virtual perfection.²⁸

There was a further reason for this infatuation with columns: the opportunity of acquiring extremely beautiful column shafts, the well-known antique porphyries from Leptis Magna (Tripolitania, Libya),

which immediately called to mind the great Vitruvius and the splendors of the (now sanctified) Roman Empire. In 1684, Le Brun, with funding from the Grande Mademoiselle, the king's niece, continued in this style with the altar of Saint-Séverin. That same year, he was asked to provide drawings for the high altar of the Dominican novitiate (Saint Thomas Aquinas), in which two groups of four columns and a gilt-wood soffit support a Resurrection figure.²⁹ One could also contrast this approach with that of Jean Lepautre, as reproduced in a series of engravings entitled *Nouveaux Dessins d'autels à la romaine*. In his examples, which did not have a very large impact on French churches, the altar and altarpiece sculptures are highlighted at the expense of the architecture surrounding them. A tremendous amount of work went into the design of the tomb, the tabernacle, and the area around the crucifix. Painting was done away with, but not so the iconography, which is devoted less to the adoration of the Holy Sacrament than to the Resurrection, the world (the globe was a frequent theme in the years around 1680),³⁰ the assembly of the faithful, the Redemption, saints triumphing over the forces of evil, the Savior, and in general those who have shown the way rather than those who invite others to find it for themselves.

Without entirely realizing it, the architectural office of the Bâtiments du Roi would soon become involved in the big business of religious architecture. It would be an exaggeration to say that this came as a complete surprise; but the preceding years, for economic reasons—and even during a reign as long as that of Louis XIV—had generally been good to a society that had seen the birth and development of financial egotism and royal power struggles. These elements cannot easily be disentangled from one another, all the more so in that the system applied not only to the royal court but had spread throughout the provinces as well.

The great religious construction projects from the end of the reign of Louis XIV, which were influenced by the monarch's advanced age (although not all of them were carried out at the same time or planned in concert), sometimes overlap in their dates of completion or execution. There had been no chapel worthy of the name in Versailles. Visitors and the court found it inappropriate for a palace to use small, successively built chapels—especially since this was the court of France, the Church's "eldest daughter," whose king was related to another Catholic monarch in Spain. The matter had been under consideration for a long time, and at first (probably as of 1680) people mainly inclined toward what they saw as the most favorable

option: a large chapel with a gallery and tiers³¹ covered in precious marble. This handsome architectural project might bespeak a lack of decorative innovation, but it was later taken up at Caserta—"les habits sont donc italiens"—and it cannot be considered a French invention. According to Dangeau's *Journal*, replacing marble revetments with those sculpted in white stone dates from December 22, 1698³² (and is surely not due to the impression of cold that marble gives). The project for Orléans was taken on by Mansart's office and construction began as of 1705, even as the office put its entire weight into blocking local projects. The stalls were assigned to the same sculptors and draftsmen who would be used for Notre-Dame. Finally, in 1699, Louis XIII's famous wish was fulfilled.³³

Anne of Austria had pledged to renovate the old choir if she bore a male heir. She kept her promise for the Val-de-Grâce, but it was her son who kept it for Notre-Dame (Figure 17). The choir was without a doubt de Cotte's masterpiece, more than Mansart's, even if the oft-mentioned projects took shape again

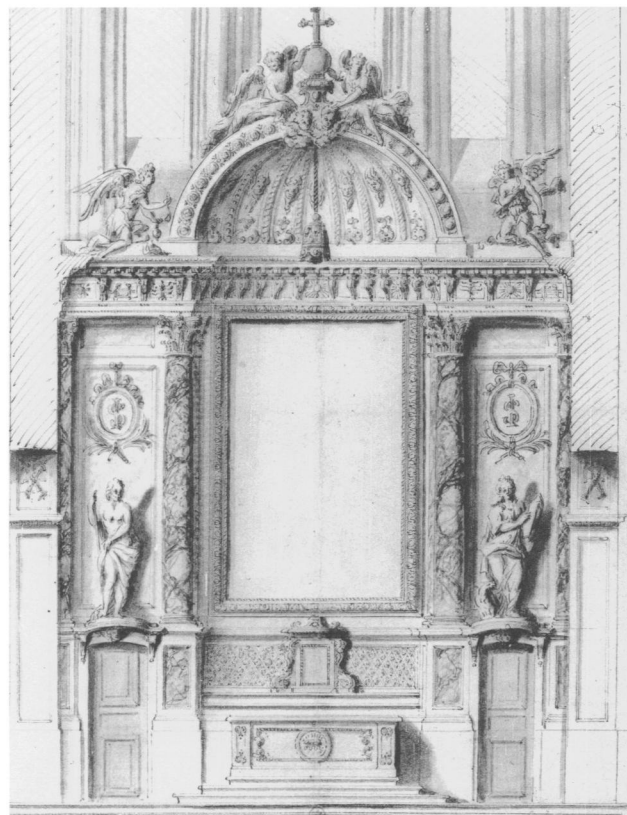


Figure 18. Robert de Cotte. Drawing for the main altar for a choir in Saint-Jean-en-Grève in Paris. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (photo: Bibliothèque Nationale de France)

beginning in 1699. We should probably also credit his office with the Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis.

The decorative portions of Mansart's large-scale construction projects, which date from the beginning of 1700, can be securely attributed to de Cotte himself. Mansart's name appears most often in Notre-Dame, but the attribution is purely academic, for at the beginning of the year Mansart had become saddled with administrative chores: he was superintendent of construction (minister, in fact) in addition to his functions as first architect. But he had certainly known since the creation of the Trianon that he could rely on his brother-in-law Robert de Cotte, an architect of true genius though one sadly neglected by modern historiography.

However, for the year 1700, we are fortunate enough to know de Cotte's own thoughts regarding the arrangement and decoration of the main altar for

a church choir that he designed and that was of an architectural work of the first importance (Figure 18).³⁴ I refer to his project for the church of Saint-Jean-en-Grève, in the place Saint-Gervais, rue du Martroi³⁵ (which would later become much more famous for its Communion Chapel, built from drawings by Jean-François Blondel of a group featuring Saint John the Baptist by Lemoyne; the project was engraved by Mariette). The caption on one of the two drawings is as precise as it is rare: "L'autel qui prend tout le fond du chœur, donne de l'importance à un retable peint; la conception architecturale est bien celle à la Le Brun ou, je préférerais dire à la Bullet. C'est le parti de l'autel de Sainte-Marguerite de Saint-Germain-des-Prés et non celui d'Oppenordt." But de Cotte retained Bullet's approach, adding more decorative elements to certain passages, as would Oppenordt three years later. We note the purely ornamental half-dome, as well as the praying angels on the superstructures. On the other hand, we cannot help observing the absence of any attempt to embellish the tabernacle and the lack of innovation in the high altar, which is the same parallelepiped found elsewhere, notably in the various plans for Versailles and Notre-Dame, as if only the superstructures were considered important, even in churches that had no rood screen. Oddly, the elevation of the side facade has been given more thought. With its composite colored-marble columns and imposing cartouche with coat of arms, it remains one of de Cotte's most striking successes. It also gives us a precise idea of one of the architect's designs for a relatively simple altar.

Such was not to be the case for Notre-Dame, where it was decided to furnish the choir with not one high altar but two: the Feria altar under the choir's rear archway for ordinary days,³⁶ embellished with an image of the Virgin, eyes turned heavenward and holding her son in her arms (Nicolas Coustou, 1715), in the style beloved by Louis XIII and Louis XIV; and farther forward, more visible despite the fact that the rood screen and rail separate the choir from the rest of the nave, a high altar for holy days of obligation, which was then embellished with the richest gold and silver objects in the cathedral treasury and the most beautiful sacerdotal ornaments. From this came the need to invent a large altar tomb, visible from all angles—the kind we have called "six-sided." In this instance it was made of Egyptian marble on a magnificent compartmented marble base, further enriched on holy days by a Savonnerie carpet. Thus, once again, we find the invention of new forms as well as an intensive investigation into the interaction of

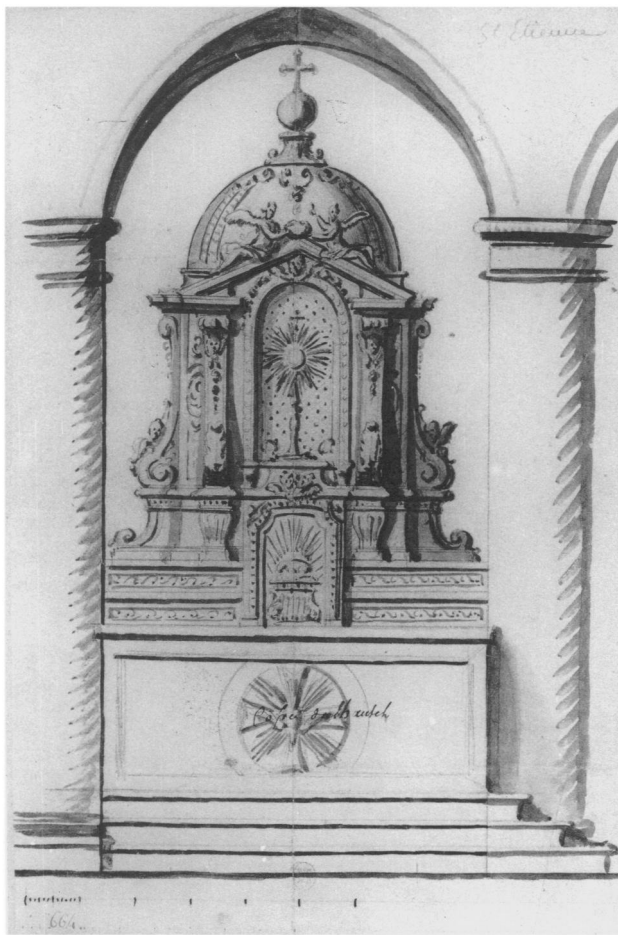


Figure 19. Drawing for the high altar of the cathedral of Saint-Étienne in Châlons-sur-Marne. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (photo: Bibliothèque Nationale de France)

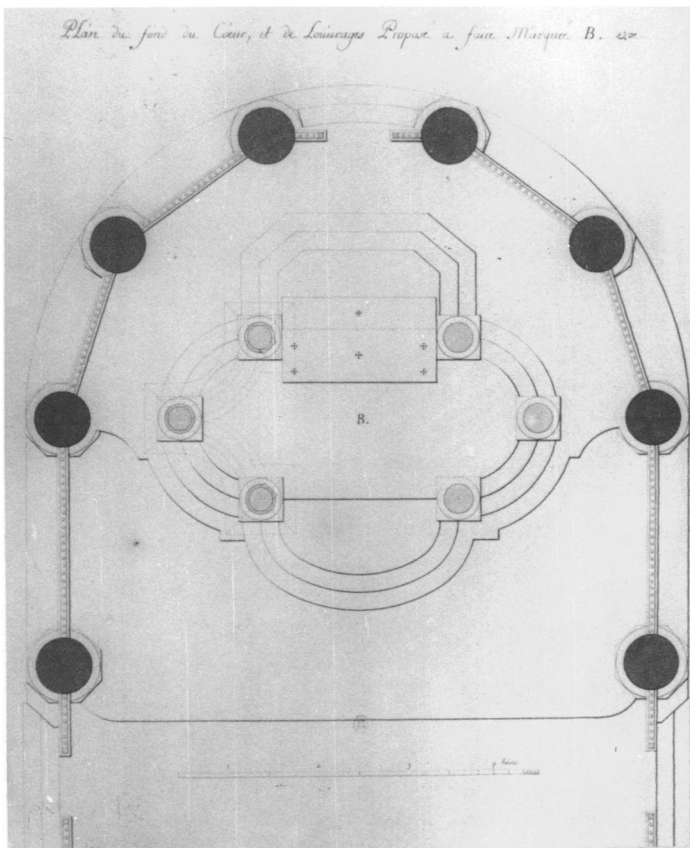


Figure 20. Plan of the choir with a Roman-style high altar, cathedral of Notre-Dame in Rouen, 1727. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (photo: Bibliothèque Nationale de France)

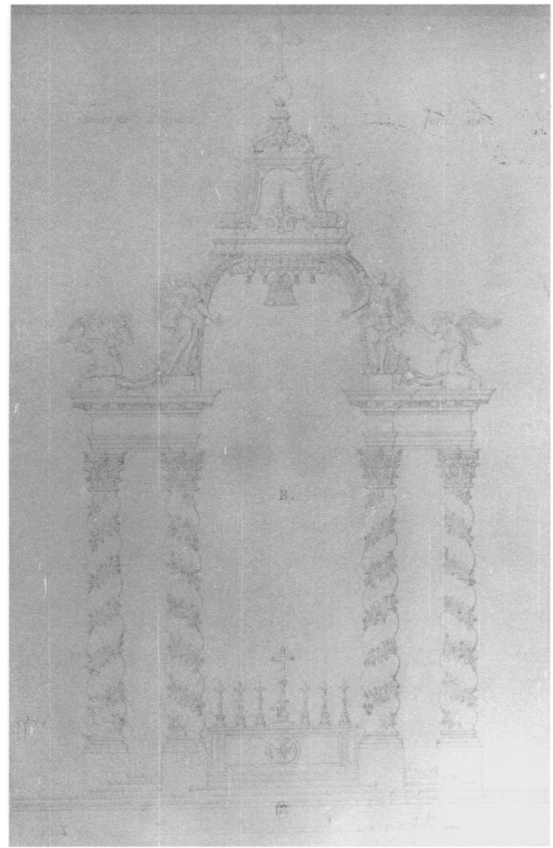


Figure 21. Elevation of the new Roman-style altar for the cathedral of Notre-Dame in Rouen, 1727. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (photo: Bibliothèque Nationale de France)

those forms, how their angles interplay, and how they work in conjunction with the wall decoration as a whole (large paintings above alternating with gilt-bronze trophies). May we not see in this an echo of Bernini's spatial (not to say dynamic) vision, even though it was a vision that de Cotte did not overly appreciate?

Thus we have seen how the new concept of the revived Romanesque altar in France, which brought the main altar forward to the crossing of the transept, or at least significantly moved it away from the back of the church, gained in importance. It was still a matter of debate in the 1730s—as was certainly the case for Saint-Sulpice—but it has generally been forgotten that de Cotte had often had occasion to plan such altars, even if he did not always see them executed. The type was almost always his choice for chapels in the palaces of princes abroad (often at their request), for example at Poppelsdorf. It was his choice for Buen Retiro in

Madrid, which should have been his masterpiece, as well as for the cathedral of Saint-Louis in Versailles; and he would have liked to use it for Saint-Roch in Paris, for Saint-Étienne in Châlons (Figure 19) (under the auspices of a member of the Noailles family, already his patron in Paris), for Saint-Jean-Baptiste in Dijon,³⁷ and for the cathedral of Rouen (Figures 20, 21). Only the Paris and Orléans projects came to be realized, however, and both of those have since been destroyed. But the idea was pursued and developed. Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier provided a sublime example of it in Saint-Sulpice, taking it further still. His high altar actually becomes transparent, making the rear of the choir visible through a group of adoring angels carrying the Ark of the Covenant. Gilles-Marie Oppenordt had similar ideas, but it was Giovanni Niccolò Servandoni who forcefully imposed de Cotte's concept by reintroducing the baldachin at Sens Cathedral (1742) and at Les Chartreux in Lyons.

NOTES

1. F. Souchal, *French Sculptors of the 17th and 18th Centuries* (Oxford, 1977) I, p. 90 n.16. See also the receipt made out to the sculptors Nicolas Monthean and Offement and Charles Rousseau, frequent collaborators of René Charpentier: Accounts of the churchwardens of Saint-Roch, *Minutier central*, CXVII 351, Nov. 17, 1725.
2. *Mercur de France* (Sept. 1723) p. 549.
3. Bruno Pons, *De Paris à Versailles* (Strasbourg, 1986) pp. 40–41, fig. 25. On Robert de Cotte, see the recent, definitive work by Robert Neumann, *Robert de Cotte and the Perfection of Architecture in Eighteenth-Century France* (Chicago/London, 1994), especially the author's chapter concerning the architecture of churches; as well as idem, "Robert de Cotte and the Baroque Ecclesiastical Façade in France," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 44 (1985) pp. 250–265, and "Projects by Robert de Cotte for the Church of Saint-Louis de Versailles in the Parc-aux-Cerfs," *Eighteenth-Century Life* (1993) pp. 182–193.
4. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, Robert de Cotte papers, no. 1341.
5. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Est, Robert de Cotte papers, nos. 1342, 1343, VA 227 (microfilm A 22118, A 22119).
6. Archives nationales, LL 445.
7. The central cartouche on the altar of Robert de Cotte's project no. 1342 shows the monogram AM, indicating a dedication to the Virgin.
8. Archives nationales, LL 445, fol. 101r.
9. Louis Réau, *L'Art français sur le Rhin au XVIIIème siècle* (Paris, 1922) pp. 147 and 149 (letters of June and Oct. 1716).
10. Archives nationales, O1 1784.
11. J. Guiffrey, *Comptes des Bâtimens du Roi* (Paris, 1901) V, col. 609.
12. *Ibid.*, col. 510.
13. *Ibid.*, col. 609.
14. M. Rambaud, *Documents du Minutier central concernant l'histoire de l'art* (Paris, 1964) I, pp. 342, 580, 703; F. Souchal, *French Sculptors of the 17th and 18th Centuries* (Oxford, 1987) III, pp. 441–442.
15. Souchal, *French Sculptors*, I, pp. 49–60.
16. L. V. Thiéry, *Guide des voyageurs* (Paris, 1787) II, pp. 113–114.
17. *Minutier central*, CV 1083, Oct. 14, 1707.
18. Archives nationales, O1 1762 B.
19. I have especially tried to show this evolution with regard to the fireplace in the gallery of the new apartment in Meudon in 1709 (decorated with bronzes by Van Clève) by stressing the parallel that can be drawn with the Boulle chests of drawers delivered to the Trianon during the same period.
20. Georges Chenesseau, *Sainte Croix d'Orléans, Histoire d'une Cathédrale Gothique réédifiée par les Bourbons 1599–1829* (Paris, 1921) I, pp. xv, 175, 216, 219, and III, fig. 111.
21. *Bulletin de la Société d'histoire et d'archéologie de l'Orléanais* XIV (1904) pp. 488–492.
22. *Bulletin de la Société d'histoire et d'archéologie de l'Orléanais* XX (1924) pp. 184–185. These fragments have not been preserved. The marble has been stored under the porch, awaiting reconstruction.
23. A deliberation of Oct. 4, 1720 (A. D. 45, C 391), specified that "the company has decided to carry out the work contained in the drawing by Monsieur de Coste, architect of the Bâtimens du Roi, which has been initialed by his Lordship [the duc d'Antin] and filed at the office of records" (document destroyed).
24. C. A. D. 45 to Orléans (C 405), lease dated March 6, 1721; quoted in Chenesseau, *Sainte Croix d'Orléans*, I, p. 217 (document destroyed).
25. Irving Lavin, *Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts* (New York/Oxford, 1980) I, p. 10.
26. Souchal, *French Sculptors*, I, pp. 18–19.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 120–21.
28. George Louis Le Rouge, *Les Curiosités de Paris, de Versailles...* (Paris, 1742) II, p. 117.
29. St. Boiron, "A Tabernacle by Boulle," *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 2:1 (1994) pp. 35–51, concerning the tabernacle of Saint-Germain le Vieux (ca. 1687).
30. THC (Tessin Harleman Collection) 8067 M. Petzet, *Art de France* (Paris, 1961) p. 315, some unpublished projects for the chapel at Versailles, 1688–89.
31. G. Walton, article D8 in *Versailles to Stockholm*, exh. cat., Nationalmuseum, Stockholm and Paris, Centre Culturel Suédois (Stockholm, 1985) p. 87.
32. M. Vloberg, *Le Vœu de Louis XIII* (Paris, 1930).
33. Another example is furnished by the altar of Les Carmes, or rather of the Dominican novitiate (Dezallier d'Argenville, *Voyage pittoresque de Paris*, p. 373): "The grand altar, designed by J.-H. Mansart, was built under de Cotte's direction. It was formed by four Corinthian columns made of green Campanian marble, whose capitals and bases are in white marble. The altar is embellished with marble figures of St. Ignatius and St. Francis Xavier, sculpted by [Guillaume] Coustou." (On the retable was the famous painting by Poussin, *St. François Xavier*. For the sculptures, see Souchal, *French Sculptors*, I, p. 140; one of them dates from 1722.) In any case, this description does not correspond to the project for the tabernacle, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Va 268 (microfilm H 47821).
34. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Est, Va 249 g (microfilm H 31338, H 31339).
35. *Description historique des curiosités de l'église de Paris* (Paris, 1773), p. 66.
36. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Est, VA 249 g (microfilm H 31339).
37. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Est, VA 269, VA 21 T. IV (microfilm H 117310). The transformation of the altar of the Gothic choir of Saint-Jean alludes to a possible transformation with an altar with a four-columned baldachin. The inscription continued by stating that certain older portions—notably the silver tabernacle—were to be preserved, modified, or reused. The statue of the Virgin and the two gilt-bronze praying angels were "newly made."