

Giovanni Battista Mola

Italian Architect
(1586-1665)

He was born in Coldrerio (Coldrè), near Como, on 9 July 1586, second son of Aurelia della Porta (Gilardi) and Giovan Pietro "della Molla", belonging to a family of experienced master masons.

The first years of Mola are difficult to reconstruct since the information provided by his first biographer is devoid of documentary evidence, according to which an initial course of study in Milan would have been followed by an apprenticeship with an unidentified king of Spain "from him the young man would have learned" the rules of geometry and civil and military architecture". Following in the footsteps of his elder brother Giacomo, M. chose to embark on an architectural career by moving to Rome, where it is documented for the first time in 1601.

In the same year, due to the death of his father, he returned to Coldrerio, where he would go again, for short stays, in 1605, 1608, 1612 and 1614. In 1607 he married Elisabetta Cortesella of Como, with whom he would have numerous children, including, the best known, the painter Pier Francesco and Carlo, who became a priest in 1642 and died prematurely in 1647.

Thanks to the web of relationships woven by Giacomo, Mola was perhaps able to carry out a sort of "apprenticeship" with F. Ponzio, at the time when the latter was directing the construction site of S. Sebastiano fuori le mura in Rome and was engaged in that of S. Maria Maggiore with the participation of other members of the Mola family; but he could also have access to a multidisciplinary training course by attending the "Academy" of O. Longhi. This is what can be deduced from the documents, which indicate him in 1616 among the master masons active in the factory of the Marian basilica.

In Rome, from 1617, Mola took permanent residence in an independent apartment of the real estate property of his brother Giacomo "ai Mattei", parish of S. Nicola dei Cesarini. In fact, in the years 1623-26 date the projects that Mola elaborated for his first autonomous commission, financed by the spouses Andrea Mauri of Spoleto, prefect general of post and customs, and Livia Zucconi of Camerino: the chapel of the Holy Icons of the cathedral of Spoleto, for the which was made in Rome, and then transferred to the Umbrian city, a precious altar with columns of ancient green, decorated with jasper and inlays of carnelian, lapis lazuli and oriental agates. In 1625 Mola also provided the design for the complete restructuring of the oratory of the Confraternity of S. Maria in Lauro Candelora still in Spoleto.

Probably at the beginning of the 1630's, when he received payments as architect of the Apostolic Chamber, Mola participated in the construction of the Urban Fort of Castelfranco in Emilia, designed by G. Buratti and almost entirely destroyed.

To confirm the acquired awareness of his own role, Mola ventured into a public test, participating, at the beginning of 1637, in the consultation organized by the

congregation of the Oratory of the Filipinos; the project he sent, however, was judged unsatisfactory due to lack of inventive originality and inadequacy of the solutions prepared for the distribution of windows. Around that same year, Mola took part in the reconstruction of the church of S. Ambrogio della Massima (or in Pescheria) presenting, with a display of "unsolicited zeal", an ambitious project, not completed, to transform the left arm of the transept into a nave with three spans; his commitment there was instead limited to the design of the stuccoes of the chapel of S. Stefano, already assigned by 17th-century sources to his brother Giacomo. In the company of the latter, and with the help of the plasterers G. Fontana and G. Ferrabosco, between 1640 and 1641 he worked on the reconstruction of the tribune and the main altar of the church of S. Eligio dei Ferrari.

The 1640s actually marked the beginning of a period of greater visibility for Mola: at the opening of the decade he received payments attesting to his collaboration with his brother for the design of the "new ward" of the Lateran hospital and to him the structure should be ascribed and decorations of the portals and the façade towards the baptistery; from 1642 to 1644, he continued the works left interrupted by N. Sebregondi in S. Maria del Pianto, designing the entire apse area and enlarging the main sacristy; in 1643, commissioned by the Duke of Acquasparta, Federico Cesi, he built the deposit of Innocenzo da Chiusi in S. Francesco a Ripa, already in the first chapel on the left and now in the pillar of the central nave to the left of the entrance. Again due to the role played by his brother, architect of the Confraternita della Ss. Trinità dei Pellegrini from 1642 to 1649, Mola intervened on that site giving a sample of his hydraulic engineering skills applied to problems relating to the sewer system. Once again, alongside Giacomo, who, presumably around the early 1640s, was involved in the renovation and expansion of the Beggar Hospital in Ponte Sisto, he created the "drain that can be seen in the River ... which previously penetrated the cellars of the Hospital".

In the mid-forties, Mola was evidently able to fall into the ranks of the most esteemed architects working in the city. In the meetings of the congregation of the Reverenda Fabbrica di S. Pietro, which took place on 9 October 1645 and February 20, 1646, in fact, was among the eight that presented plans for the erection of the second bell tower of the Vatican basilica. His proposals, however, aimed at "rebuilding the bell towers from a foundation in another place with greater dilation of the length of the facade", were judged negatively, and also the choice of the ornamental parts of the bell towers was not appreciated, in particular for the solution of the last order "too trite".

At the end of 1646, Mola was called to Sardinia, in response to a request made the previous February by the Cagliari Councilors to contact a non-local "engineer" in Rome to solve the serious water supply problems of that city.

In Rome, by the end of the 1640's, Mola returned to the construction site of S. Maria del Pianto designing, to the left of the altar of the chapel of S. Francesca Romana, the funeral monument of P. Palmieri, completed on 2 December. 1650 and, presumably, it was again he who, after a few years, provided projects for the stucco decoration of the church dome, carried out by F. Diodini.

In November 1651, Mola was indicted for having committed misconduct against the marble merchant Santi Ghetti, sentenced to exile from the city for six months and

shortly before imprisoned in the prisons of Corte Savella then placed under the direction of Virgilio Spada, councilor of Camillo Pamphili. It was probably Spada himself who convinced the Prince of the innocence of Mola, and the prince suggested that the latter make use of the architect's advice for the numerous Pamphilian factories in progress at the time. As a "family member", Mola started an activity that lasted for about a decade and which saw him engaged, in particular, in providing opinions on the state of conservation of the villa in Frascati, in works for the Pamphili palace in Neptune, in the reconstruction, between 1652 and 1657, of the church of S. Urbano ai Pantani, demolished with the opening of via dei Fori Imperiali, and in providing drawings for the church of S. Agnese in piazza Navona, which he would have liked to give a different orientation, on the north side of the square towards Tor Sanguigna. It was above all the drafting of this last project that constituted the crux of the lawsuit that Mola filed against C. Pamphili to claim the duties of "designer architect" which, compared to those of a "family member", should have been estimated and paid differently. The dispute was closed in court in 1662 in favor of Mola, who for some years had already concluded his "practical" activity and oriented his skills to the drafting of a guide to Rome with particularly detailed information on urban interventions and works of architecture, which remained unpublished while he is alive and known in a first version, anonymous, dated 1660.

Mola died in Rome on 23 January, 1665.

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