

Barry X Ball Portrait Sculpture of
Pope John Paul II

On a trip to The Vatican in the Spring of 2012, I began to consider making a portrait of Pope John Paul II. Shortly after returning to New York, I commenced concerted work on the portrait. My goal was twofold: to both pay tribute to the late Pope (and now Saint) and to develop a completely new form of portrait sculpture.

I am now 68 years old. Forty-five years ago, in 1978, as a 23-year-old recent college graduate, I drove 5,000 kilometers (3,000 miles) across the United States from the city of my birth, Los Angeles, to New York City (in my VW Kombi) in pursuit of excellence in my art. That move was a turning point in my life. In that same year, John Paul II ascended to the Papacy. The following year (1979), the Pope was given a celebratory “ticker-tape parade” through the “canyons” of Lower Manhattan. Drawn to the dynamic Pope, I attended that event – my first and only New York parade. At that time, before the assassination attempt, he rode down the street, smiling and waving, in an open car. I distinctly remember my excitement in seeing him close at hand as he passed by.

I was raised as a strict Fundamentalist Protestant Christian. Until I moved to New York City, I had never set foot in a Roman Catholic Church. Before college, I had also only been inside art museums a few times. I was finally introduced to the great monuments of art history through my college studies, and I developed a particular affinity for the art of the church, an almost-exclusively Catholic art. The Catholic union of religion and aesthetics touched me to the extent that I began to take classes, taught by a nun at the church of Francis Xavier in Chelsea, with the intention of becoming a Catholic. Although I ultimately did not convert, I have continued to spend time in Catholic churches, taking opportunities as they arise during my travels, to look at the art they contain and to bask in their palpable spirituality – so different from the severe white Protestant “boxes”, devoid of art, where I worshipped during my Southern California childhood.

As an American, I admired Pope John Paul II's position as a leader of the struggle against Soviet Communism in Europe. I avidly read about him, followed his activities in press reports, and was shocked and saddened to learn of the grievous wounds he suffered in the 1981 attempt on his life.

I have completed many portrait sculptures – until recently, all of them have been in stone. The subjects have been primarily artworld figures – artists, collectors, curators, etc. For several years, while pursuing my Masterpiece Sculptures (works inspired by specific historical antecedents), I put my portraiture “on hold”. I re-started my portrait sculpture project with the goal of completely re-inventing the genre. My portrait of the Pope is the most elaborate example of my new *modus operandi*. In fact, I intend that John Paul's portrait be – both formally and conceptually – the most complex portrait ever realized. (Please excuse my immodesty!) My approach is, I believe, appropriate for my first portrait of a revered religious figure. I'm, in effect, *sculpturally telling the story* of an extraordinary man who lived a uniquely rich life at the center of 20th century history.

When working with stone or other solid, reductively-carved substances, in the end, only the outer surface is visible. There are a few prior sculptural exceptions that have ingeniously carved sub-surface passages – for example Chinese “puzzle balls” and *// Disinganno* in la Cappella Sansevero in Napoli. More generally, however, after removing excess block material, a stone-sculptor's final effort is almost exclusively focused on refining the exterior layer of his creation. This is also true for much sculpture in other media, even “additively-created” bronzes. That's how it always has been – sculptors sculpt the outside of masses, and those outer surfaces are all we viewers see. My intention with my new portrait sculptures is to, effectively, build them from the inside out, to make their interiors visible, and to intertwine interior and exterior to an extent that there is no identifiable primary layer.

In the case of my John Paul II portrait, the work includes (and has, literally, been formed from) a panoply of elements germane to the Pope's life and stature, linked by a dense curvilinear network of freely-conceived hyper-Baroque tendrils. Visible through and on the lacy, knotted, swirling matrix that forms his head, neck, and miter, are the following recognizable figures and objects:

- Two smaller portrait busts of John Paul II (one as a vigorous middle-aged man and one as a man near the end of his life)
- The Crucified Jesus
- The Virgin Mary (with face veiled in homage to Antonio Corradini's *La Purity* and my *Purity* sculptures)
- The Keys of St. Peter
- The Papal Crown
- John Paul II's personal crest
- crossed skis in the 'X' configuration of Saint Andrew's cross (a reference to the Pope's physical vigor and one of his favorite avocations)
- a bullet (symbolizing the 1981 assassination attempt)
- a Star of David, and a Star-and-Crescent (symbols of the other two Abrahamic religions, in reference to the Pope's groundbreaking outreach to Judaism and Islam)
- Michelangelo Buonarroti (architect of St. Peter's and painter of La Cappella Sistina)
- a screaming self-portrait (Barry X Ball)

Purposely placed in a low position (of shame) at the bottom back of my Papal portrait are images of Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler, with the Hammer-and-Sickle and Swastika – all referring to the tumultuous period of world history that the Pope lived through, and the great evil that he ultimately triumphed over.

I have employed several members of my fantastic team of studio assistants to create this portrait sculpture. They deserve a lot of credit for what has been accomplished to-date. The making of John Paul II's portrait has been the most complex undertaking in the history of my studio. The digital sculpting, by multiple people, proceeded steadily for almost 10 years. The accompanying renderings of the portrait realized in 24-gold-plated solid silver reflect its current state as it nears completion (physical realization).

I worked with the renowned Italian jewelers, Damiani (of Valenza Po) in 2011-2015 to create a portrait sculpture of H.S.H. Prince Albert II of Monaco. This sculpture was fabricated of solid 18K gold utilizing a complex, unprecedented mix of cutting-edge technologies (e.g. digital modeling, 3D wax printing, and vacuum casting) augmented by a lot of highly-skilled hand labor. The Princely portrait was presented and permanently installed at the Palace on Sovereign Prince's Day – November 19, 2015.

Damiani and my studio team acquired a significant, hard-won armamentarium of collaborative expertise in the process of fabricating Prince Albert's portrait that we have applied toward realizing the considerably-more-elaborate Papal portrait sculpture. I worked with Goppion (of Milano), the world's pre-eminent museum display company, to design and fabricate the display pedestal / vitrine for the Prince Albert portrait. I have again collaborated with Goppion to create an appropriately beautiful, state-of-the-art display befitting the Papal portrait. The physical fabrication of my portrait sculpture of Pope John Paul II is nearing completion. It is made of solid silver, a traditional material for reliquaries. The silver will be plated with a heavy layer of pure 24K gold.

