

## Bernini: Soul of an Age

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IT'S NOT MUCH of a stretch to claim that only the Romans had a greater influence on Rome than Gianlorenzo Bernini. No other artist in history received such sprawling commissions: during his lifetime eight popes assigned everything from public fountains to the Papal Throne to his care. So pervasive was the man's influence that contemporaries grumbled it was impossible to work in Rome without working for Bernini. To this day, the entire city is smudged with his fingerprints. How did one individual acquire such sway? For once, prominence had more to do with justice than favoritism: men of taste backed a man of genius. As evident as that genius was to the people of his day, the case for



Bernini in our own time is hampered by geography. Bernini's primary vehicle of expression was massive sculpture, and statuary is rarely the focus of blockbuster exhibitions (no doubt for fear the blocks will bust). Even in our age of pervasive transportation, heroic sculpture is both too cumbersome and too fragile to risk moving. Consequently, like an invalid confined to his bed, the bulk of Bernini's work can be fully savored only by those willing to visit it in Rome. The mountain no longer makes house calls; Mohammed must do the trekking.

But Washington D.C. was recently the beneficiary of a fortuitous loophole in this dilemma. Marble is far too expensive and unforgiving a medium to accommo-

date artistic groping. Sculptors throughout history have adopted the practice of refining their concepts in smaller, cheaper mediums like plaster, wax, wood, or clay before tackling a final version in costly stone. Bernini frequently worked from a "bozzetto" (the clay equivalent of a sketch) without all the intermediary stages used by other artists, and many of the resulting terracottas (literally "baked earth") still exist. The Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg owns a number of these, and, thanks to a little collegial horse-swapping, agreed to loan the National Gallery a selection from its holdings in honor of the 400th anniversary of Bernini's birth. For two months, one discrete room in the nation's capital held as much of Bernini's work as

St. Peter's in Rome.

The focus and dimensions of the show were perfect for exploring first-hand the qualities that made this artist so special. Even the spectators seemed to respect the intimate scale of this vest-pocket exhibition: no obscuring crowds, no guards hawking headsets, no Saint Teresa tote bags. The pieces were mounted with comfortable perimeters, and enlarged photographs of the finished marbles obligingly appeared on the surrounding walls to facilitate comparisons. This contrast was particularly instructive. The terracotta figures in no way suffer from their diminution of scale: they are just as powerful as their marble cousins, but not as intimidating. And their petite

grandeur has a charm all its own. Without the rhetorical inflation of size, the viewer can better gauge the effectiveness of the compositions. Given the finish of these "sketches", one could even go so far as to claim the marbles were mere copies of the terracotta originals.

The first thing that strikes the viewer on experiencing multiple Berninis in a single gulp is the man's palpable virtuosity. He creates the illusion of plasticity in the least plastic of mediums: marble. What muscle was to Michelangelo, drapery was to Bernini: energy made visible. In no other artist are the creases and folds of a cloak more assertive. The charge Bernini invests material with is enough to make even a loincloth appear ostentatious. Far from display for its own sake, this approach contributes greatly to the overall impact of these figures. The turmoil of their apparel contrasts with the solid poses of Bernini's men and women of faith; it creates the impression not only that they are conflicted, but that they are strong for withstanding the conflict. The funerary monument Bernini created of Ludovica Albertoni is a prime example of this: the extended female figure is seen at the point of death, body slightly clenched, hands clasping the heart. By carefully calibrating his effects, the artist creates a sense of struggle without agony. The sumptuous agitation of the folds in the beatified Ludovica's habit present death as some deep, subterranean passion, the body wrestling to retain the soul. This visual rhythm also makes the smooth serenity of the face (resting on two tasseled pillows no less) stand out in stark relief.

The mantel once again reflects the emotional in the bozzetto Bernini created for his equestrian statue of Constantine the Great. Constantine is shown at the moment of his conversion to Christianity, gawking forward as his horse rears back. The long, tangled mane and tail of the horse blend with the emperor's twisted garment to such a point that one might take this for the image of a centaur. The horse's prominence is no accident: besides amplifying Constantine's reaction, it can be viewed as a metaphor for Rome itself. Both empire and emperor are converted at the same instant in a way that will change their direction forever.

The only time Bernini's artistic poise seemed slightly ruffled was when he essayed the figure of David. One can surmise that the examples of his two great predecessors weighed on his imagination from the way he assiduously chose an approach that separated him from them. Where Donatello's young giant killer is all lithe grace and Michelangelo's is all resolute defiance, Bernini's David is the embodiment of dynamic propulsion. Practically a human spring, this figure twists so far back onto itself before releasing the fatal stone that the slingshot itself seems superfluous. The bozzetto that has survived is a marvel of unified expression. The body of the finished statue is perfect; it's only when we get to the head that Bernini betrays his youthful misgivings. The expression on David's face is far too overwrought; the features are screwed up with a ham actor's arch-

ness. For once, we catch Bernini pushing his effects. In this regard the bozzetto has an advantage over the marble final draft in that the abuse of time has removed the offending head.

To Bernini's arsenal of virtues must be added the fact that he was perhaps the greatest storyteller in stone. The difficulty in achieving this distinction may not be readily apparent until one grasps that sculpture is almost entirely devoid of context. A painting or an etching can place a figure amidst a teeming battlefield or atop a towering cliff. Beyond the limits of a statue's body and a prop or two, however, lies a world unarranged by the artist. The deft way Bernini transcended this liability can best be seen in two sculptures not included in the show. He presented Daniel in the lion's den as a strong, semi-nude figure who raises his hands, which just touch at the fingertips in brittle appeal, for God's protection. The prophet's prayer is affectingly captured, but how does the artist portray the charmed peril that results? The head of a single lion appears at

the base of the sculpture, licking the prophet's foot. When Bernini carved an angel grabbing Habbakkuk by the forelock, he was simply following his Biblical source. But how did he convey the contentious relationship between prophet and deity? A bewildered Habbakkuk points to the right while the enigmatically bemused cherub points left. This is narrative at the highest level, narrative that exceeds mere pantomime to produce the allusive economy of great poetry.

And economy is the right word. Given such an opulent oeuvre, it's startling to discover economy to be one of Bernini's most pronounced characteristics. Here was a master of detail who always built his figures around a single, dramatically potent gesture. His "Pluto Abducting Proserpina" is a case in point. The two figures are constructed like an enormous Y, separating as the struggle rises, with Pluto all assertive muscle and Proserpina resisting softness. The bozzetto in the exhibition, although only a fragment, clearly demonstrates how all the muscles in the god's back are straining in a single direction. Charles Rosen once remarked that dramatic economy lies not in concision but clarity of action; he was speaking about the symphonies of Haydn, but could just as easily be describing Bernini. Coordinating detail, even the plethora of detail in a Baroque work, actually simplifies the basic underlying forms and makes them more apparent. For all the texture and swirl of Bernini's famous statue of Urban VIII, the benediction of that raised hand registers with unimpeded force. Despite his miter and elaborate vestments, the bozzetto of Saint Ambrose, one of the four church fathers used to support the Throne of Peter, bends away from his burden with a wonderful expression of sad deference. Few artists in history have been so willing to pursue the seemingly contradictory goal of detail in the service of simplicity.

Occasionally, the bozzetto varies significantly from the final marble;



Saint Ambrose

this is particularly revealing since the change signals the direction of Bernini's thinking. Such is the case with his famous "Ecstasy of Saint Teresa." Bernini based the sculpture on the saint's notorious dream in which an angel repeatedly pierced her heart with a gold arrow, leaving a love for God in that penetrated organ. One doesn't need to be Sigmund Freud to unmask the sexuality in this fantasy, and Bernini intuitively grasped all the erotic potential of the scene. Instead of cosmetically disguising that intent, he brings it to the fore and transforms it into metaphor. By banishing any distinction between physical and spiritual ecstasy, the man uses each to define the high level of the other. And because the artist came to the subliminal message through instinct rather than psychiatric theory, he makes this theme pervasive without being explicit.

All the changes Bernini incorporates between preliminary clay and final marble heighten the implicit eroticism of the scene. In the bozzetto, the figure of Teresa is more supine. Her eyes are closed, her lips parted enough to facilitate a snore. The arrow-wielding angel is hovering directly over her. By emphasizing the saint's passivity, Bernini stresses the dreaming aspect of the scenario. In the marble statue, however, the ecstasy is stressed. Bernini expands the division between the two: this not only gives him room to incorporate the marvelously stylized shafts of gold sunlight he sets in the background, but also creates visual parity between the figures. While keeping every fold in the saint's habit exactly where it was in the bozzetto, Bernini transforms Teresa's pose: he raises her left shoulder, lifts her chin, and allows her exposed left foot to dangle at the very base of the composition. Her eyes are half-open now, while her mouth gapes breathlessly. Even the index finger of her open right hand has a beckoning curl. If divine love resembles intercourse,

then the recipient must be a willing partner rather than a passive pawn. The slumbering saint is not only reacting here but interacting.

Despite this heightened sensuality, Bernini keeps the scene remarkably free of prurient taint. He does this in the way he characterizes the angel. All passion is confined to the mortal. The blithe, sexless angel, with its benign smile, bears more than a passing resemblance to Caravaggio's painting of Cupid. He? She? holds the golden arrow with delicately spread fingers in a limp hand, robbing a potentially



*The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*

violent act of any violence. If Bernini has made faith seem as primary a response as sex, it is only in the reaction and not in the act. Despite Teresa's enthralled pose, the viewer never doubts that this ecstasy is both deeply private and highly personal.

While Bernini justly received the exhibition's star billing, there were co-stars. Over half the terracottas on display came from the hands of contemporaries: Bernini's rival, Algardi and various Bernini assistants. At first one is tempted to dismiss these pieces as filler, but they serve a useful purpose. Certain aspects of achievement can be perceived only

through contrast: statistics and appraisals help, but if you want to fully grasp who Jesse Owens was, you need also to watch him effortlessly glide past the best athletes the world could muster. The contemporaneous works included in the exhibition portrayed the same cast of mythic heroes and mystic martyrs. They evinced a great deal of polish and no small amount of skill. But ultimately they are too careful, too measured to inspire a response that is more than measured itself. While Bernini always goes for the knockout, his coevals aspire to nothing higher than winning on points. Every artist in the exhibition had complete control over his medium, but Bernini maintained that control at a higher velocity. One of the lines of demarcation between genius and talent seems to lie in challenging one's muse rather than nurturing it.

The contemporaneous context of the exhibition also gave viewers a renewed appreciation for the Baroque age these artists occupied. In our own time, Baroque has acquired a pejorative tinge, evoking convoluted detail and empty opulence. The conventions of any epoch in art are often defined by the work of its second-tier artists since they follow procedures more because they were prescribed than because they were appropriate. To discover what those conventions were capable of, however, one looks to the first-tier. A theatrical style like Baroque requires a solid, emotional core; when an artist such as Bernini provided that, ornamentation became elaboration, surface united with center, and meaning was made manifest through every facet of a work. Those who were lucky enough to visit this exhibition know what I mean; they witnessed the cream of Italian Baroque. Like Shakespeare's London or Mozart's Salzburg, Rome is in many ways defined by what Bernini did there: each has come to embody the other. Bernini was nothing less than the soul of his age. □