

Bernini

Bernini and the Birth of Baroque Portrait Sculpture, National Gallery of Canada, www.gallery.ca, Until March 8th

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BERNINI

By John K. Grande

NOT REALLY A MYTHMAKER, MORE A POWER BUILDER WITH MALLET AND CHISEL, AND GREAT MASTERY OF HIS MEDIUM, BERNINI WAS THE QUINTESSENTIAL 17th CENTURY PORTRAIT SCULPTOR.

*Portrait of Thomas Baker, 1637-1638
Marble Victoria and Albert Museum, London*

The Getty and National Gallery of Canada are his first major North American exhibition venues, as most of Bernini's sculptures are immovable, like the famed Fountain of the Four Rivers in Piazza St. Petero, or the Baldacchino in St. Peter's Basilica. This exhibition would not have been possible without the Getty Museum's return of several dozen Greek antiquities that Italian officials claimed had been looted from sites in their country. As associate curator of sculpture and decorative arts at the Getty Catherine Hess commented "There was a moment last summer when we really were on standby. No one knew what would happen if the cultural embargo went through." Many of the works in this show, loaned from Italian museum collections, were offered after the Getty's positive initiative of returning stolen sculptures to Italy.

Walking in and around Bernini's portrait busts is an intriguing experience, for what immediately becomes clear is this incredible animation and lively interest that Bernini has in the persona of his subjects. Looking at the Portrait of Cardinal Scipione Borghese (1632) is intimidating for us centuries later, so imagine what it may have been for the sculptor, knowing full well his patrons and the Papal, or Royal power they held! As a designated child genius, Bernini became the public art sculptor supreme of his era, all

this enacted for his patrons who included Popes Urban VIII and Alexander VII, Cardinal Richelieu and the Roman and European aristocracy as his reputation extended and broadened. It is said Bernini could work a full seven hours without interruption on a block of marble, so dedicated and focused were his energies.

Not only was Bernini the mass media artist of his era, but he also had to deal with some of the most powerful figures of his times. He brought marble to life, so much so, it has been said his sculptures are more alive than the subjects they portrayed. It is that Bernini consciousness of the place of art in architecture and of the arts as an overall environmental event that made his sculptures so incredibly powerful. The projected movement in them makes them almost performative.

As architect, playwright and sculptor, Bernini personified the Baroque era in Rome. His art brought together a lot of the playful animated, multi-media characteristics of Baroque and the new approach challenged the more static, hierarchic and stoic sculpture that was around before and during his lifetime. Most interesting is Bernini's bust of Costanza Bonarelli now in Ottawa, the wife of a studio assistant and with whom Bernini was passionately in love. Lent by the National Museum of the Bargello

in Florence the Costanza Bonarelli portrait is intimate and captures the spirit of the woman. We see her at a moment of reflection, her hair slightly tousled, and the dress is partly open, as if in a domestic moment. One of Bernini's best, this sculpture is a caring unofficial portrait. Yet another very animated and imposing portrait bust of Pope Urban VIII Barberini ...

The drawings assembled from various collections around the world for this show are seldom in one place as they are for this show. And we see an early self portrait by the artist, studies for various portraits, and these compliment the sculptures in a way that brings us closer to Bernini the working artist. The paintings and sculptures by Bernini's associates and contemporaries flesh out the show, bringing greater context, colour and depth. □

EXHIBITION

BERNINI AND THE BIRTH OF BAROQUE PORTRAIT SCULPTURE

National Gallery of Canada
380 Sussex Drive
Tel.: 613 990-1985
www.gallery.ca

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