

# THEATRICALITY IN THE ARCHITECTURE OF GIANLORENZO BERNINI



by James Saywell

*L'art et l'architecture se caractérisent principalement par un engagement dramatique du participant. L'œuvre de Gianlorenzo Bernini nous permet d'étudier ces relations de tradition Baroque entre l'espace, l'objet, le participant et l'observateur.*

Theatricality, or the dramatic engagement of the participant, is a characteristic present in much of Baroque art and architecture. A discussion of the work of Gianlorenzo Bernini, although distinguished from that of many of his contemporaries by his exceptional talent, does provide a rich opportunity to discuss this relationship between space, object, and participant, observer, in the Baroque tradition in which Bernini was working.

If by the term "theatrical" we may mean many things, we nonetheless imply a portrayal which is calculated for effect. We imply the careful construction of a psychological context for an event, a story, a meaning. We understand the potential for a spectacle which is more successfully conveyed the more greatly the observer is involved, and which therefore attempts to break down the barriers between reality and imagination or memory, between the actual world of the drama. This unreal world of the "story" can transform and develop, but relies on our participation and therefore aspires to constantly command and manipulate our attention in order to tell a story. It dedicates its illusionistic powers to the idea or theme it seeks to impress upon us, the "underlying principle is illusionistic — illusionism in its very broad sense of a preoccupation with the reality of visual perception."<sup>1</sup>

The Baroque art and architecture of Gianlorenzo Bernini in Rome is, on many counts then, extremely theatrical, and his remarkable ability to engage the willing participant

greatly serves the purpose of each of his works, making "the idea of preparing for the climax with a proper context one of the most central principles in Bernini's art."<sup>2</sup>

A discussion of Baroque architecture in relation to theatricality would be incomplete without at least allusion to the urban developments in Rome during the reign of Pope Sixtus V, for it was during his brief tenure that projects were undertaken which affected both the way we see and experience the city today, and the context in which many of the masterworks of Bernini were situated. Walking through central Rome for any distance one experiences the systemization of primary urban spaces and their relationship with one another, linked by streets cut through the fabric and marked by a series of obelisks and fountains indicating the presence (in almost every case) of an important church. This in part renders accessible the route of pilgrimage, but it also serves to comprehensibly order the city in a hierarchy of public spaces. Inasmuch as the system of connected piazzas and streets involves a participant in a continuous "drama" on an urban scale, the city as a whole can be imagined as a "set piece" in which events take place. We, the participants, are both the spectators and the actors. In this sense it epitomizes the "theatricality" of the Baroque. Within this system of linked sets we can view and be viewed. The spectacle is facilitated by this conscious interconnection of dramatic components, and our place made always understandable in the larger context, in relation, that is, to the next "places". We are at every moment involved in the scenario itself, be it an actual pilgrimage, or more simply the enacting of our daily lives. We form part of that which we are watching. This ambiguous position between viewer and viewed is perhaps one of the most potent attributes of Baroque art, even at this urban scale.





Alinari

*Scala Regia, Vatican, 1663-1666*



Sansoni

*Constatine, Scala Regia, Vatican, 1654-1670*

His work in front of and within the Basilica of St. Peter's is perhaps Bernini's grandest, but a study of it in relation to the present concerns would constitute a separate treatment. One will for the moment concentrate on some of his smaller works.

Joining the Basilica with the Vatican apartments is Bernini's magnificent Scala Regia. It is here perhaps, that we witness his most explicit manipulation of illusion to affect our perceptual understanding of space. Bernini employs columns supporting a barrel vault to effect the illusion of a staircase much wider and longer than it really is. As the stairs climb, the columns step gradually closer to the wall and diminish in height. The stair is shaped like a funnel and the perspective is exaggerated, so that the stair, pinched by the constrictions of the site, appears grander than it is. A landing lit by a window breaks the ascent, while another window at the end beckons one forward, seeming much further away than it is. One would in fact reach the end of the stair more quickly than would have been expected from below. Furthermore the act of ascending toward the spot of light above, and for the Pope, into the more private regions of the Vatican Palace, metaphorically previews eventual ascension to Heaven, the ultimate conclusion to a religious life. Hence, the apparent stature of the man growing in relation to the architectural setting he is leaving below is appropriate. Bernini has transformed the act of climbing a staircase (or our imagination of that act) into a highly theatrical event. Furthermore, this "ascension" of the Pope toward the light from above ends an axis that began at the edge of the Tiber. Before the twentieth century urban transformation of the approach to St. Peter's, the street which carried one towards the piazza from the river in fact lined up with the Scala Regia, in particular with the

long hall in front of it. Upon reaching the edge of the piazza the full facade of the Basilica was revealed, and one's attention shifted toward it by the obelisk in the centre.

For those of us unable to climb the stair, it merely seems a magnificent and somewhat mysterious connection to the splendid rooms we can only imagine above. With Bernini's characteristic manipulation of dramatic effect, it seems hardly unreasonable to imagine that the stair metaphorically represents the lengthy climb of a religious life toward the lighted reward of Heaven at its end.

At its base, ending the approach from the Basilica portico, is the equestrian statue of Constatine. The sculpture masterfully inflects the procession by rearing the horse back and directing the man's gaze upward. The line of his vision and the body of the horse balance the angle of the stair to the left, reflected in the sweeping stone drapery behind the statue. The horse halts, as it were, the downward rush of the stairs and drapery in a dynamic action, seeming almost to have thundered down the stairs and suddenly reared back at Constatine's divine vision. Bernini captures this climatic instant in stone, and uses it to end the approaching vista and logically turn the participant up the stair toward that from which Constatine has come.

Another major work of Bernini in Rome is the small church of St. Andrea al Quirinale. Here again our experience is designed. The approach is necessarily from the oblique, along the Via del Quirinale, from which the church steps slightly back, effecting the first in a series of experiential inflections. We are turned and gathered by the concave curvature of the "arms" (which recall St. Peter's), from which the height and protrusion of the flat pedimented facade stands more dramatically vertical. It forms a transitional plane be-



tween the concave arms and the convex portico and steps which thrust out and are joined by two columns on skewed bases. The cartouche further leans forward, so that lured initially closer to the church by the widening of the sidewalk due to the setback and enveloping arms, we are then overwhelmed by the vertical, forward-leaning facade elements—a sensation exaggerated while ascending the steps. It is crucial that the Quirinale Palace directly in front disallows a distant frontal approach and viewpoint. We can never ponder the facade from afar, watching it grow gradually as we approach. Instead we come from the side and are therefore unprepared for the drama of its apparent height. Once inside the church we are put again at ease and involved in a surprising new drama.

The implied axis between the entry and the high altar is initially negated by a longer transverse axis, yet then reaffirmed by the solid treatment of the ends of the sides. This perceptual drama, which is completely choreographed, draws us laterally by means of the deeper sides. Finding however that their ends are in fact solid piers, we are turned back toward the main altar by a transformation in the wall plane which effects a "definition" of wall and column. The pilastered end-piers evolve into three-quarter engaged columns, and then finally step out of the wall as full columns screening the high altar. We experience, as it were, the "birth" of the column from within the wall, and the structure of the church thus builds climactically to its centrepiece in a horizontal movement swinging around the curved walls from the entry toward the altar. It is here that we began, but now we have experienced this horizontal "scan" or perceptual "journey" throughout of the church.

At this point the movement becomes vertical. Within the altar (lit from behind the screen) angels carry a painting of St. Andrew's martyrdom. The two columns divert the movement of the eye upward to the concave pediment broken by the statue of St. Andrew himself, who seems to have emerged from his martyrdom in the chapel, and from the painting into three dimensions, ascending toward Heaven or the realm of the dome. Above, windows topping the cornice putti and fisherman await St. Andrew's arrival in their midst, ready to conduct him upward toward the pinnacle and the light of God, reflected in the lantern.

The chronological drama of St. Andrew is expressed in the architecture of the church. Our understanding of the story relies upon the combination of painting, sculpture, and light in an architectural setting—the drama of St. Andrew is "reenacted" in the room in which we stand. We view it, but because we share the space in which it happens, we also become part of the drama, a real part of the earthly world he leaves. We watch him ascend, and gaze upward as he does, seeking his destination (as we would do in prayer), and we are being watched in turn by the putti. The most "separate" element of the experience is the event of St. Andrew's martyrdom, and this is appropriately represented by a painting, and distanced from us in the altar chapel. The "eternal" element of his experience however, that which is the most religious essence of his drama (his ascension), is brought much closer to us, into three dimensions above and around us. The sculpture becomes the flat painting "come to life", and suddenly we are involved unexpectedly with the figures. The putti and fisherman are both observing the religious drama and being observed by us. They are of both worlds or in a third transitional world. As a result we are once again pulled within, and the distinction between our earthly and the heavenly place is

diminished, a remarkable and appropriate achievement for an ecclesiastical space.

What is considered by many as Bernini's masterpiece, the Cornaro Chapel is another brilliant example of his ability to shrink the psychological distinction between spectator and spectacle. Essentially the chapel is made of three spatial elements interwoven into a dramatic whole, the altar tabernacle housing Teresa and the angel, the imaginary architectural spaces to either side behind the balconies holding the Cornaro effigies, and the chapel itself which houses these and joins them to the rest of the church, and to us. Bernini, in providing an aedicule within the chapel creates an in-between realm in which he places the marble observers which link us to the religious event. In twice "removing" the actual spectacle, he in fact allows us to become closer to it experientially by means of this intermediary world. We are at once both separated and invited in mentally. The chapel as a whole is presented to us almost as a tableau, the figures within seem to inhabit a church-like space linked to the real church, effected in perspective relief. They watch, pray, discuss, and gaze at us directly. Their position is ambiguous, clearly not completely within the world of Teresa's experience (which is happening at that moment), yet obviously not part of our real world, "the figures appear not as abstract busts sunk in the wall but as real people in living relationships with each other and the world around them. The monuments thus introduce still another realm communicating with the realm of the chapel, yet also independent."<sup>3</sup>

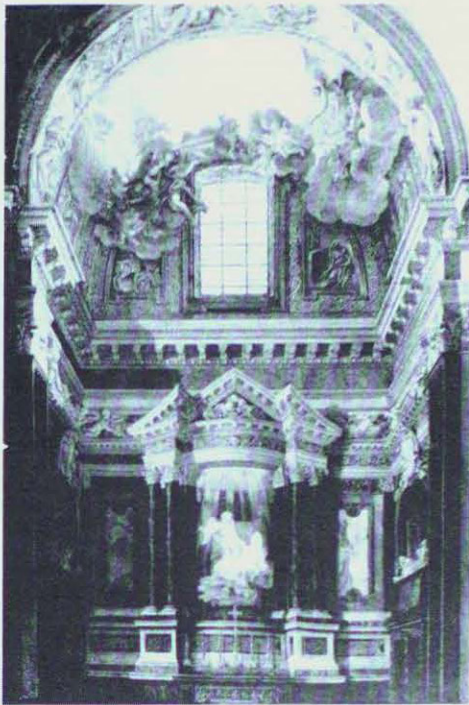
The similarity with theatre boxes is too obvious for Bernini not to have understood their effect in joining their inhabitants with the world of the spectator, or conversely, us with them. The "visitors" in these boxes are, like us, visitors to the church. The positioning of the effigies and the design of the illusionary space they are in, are calculated to affect the perceptual experience of us, the real spectator:

Because the horizon line is at eye level along the main axis of the church, the visitor approaching down the middle of the nave sees the architectural recession in the right-hand relief—where the portrait of the donor returns his glance—as continuing that of the building itself.<sup>4</sup>

The effect of the whole chapel composition and dramatic climax of St. Teresa relies upon the Cornaro reliefs; they connect themselves through gazes, gestures, the angling of their bodies with the floor, altar, and ceiling vault of the chapel, and thus bring us into the drama. They are in a sense, our sculptural hosts. Within the architecture of the Cornaro Chapel, Bernini creates for us a "pictorial scene" which includes us as witnesses and as worshippers in a religious drama that is "revealed".

A thorough study of Bernini's works would of course be lengthier than the scope of this treatment permits. His artistic achievements are no less profound in his other architectural works, or his sculpture and fountains. In these he also manipulates our perceptual experience to effect, among other things, a heightened dramatic involvement. One has, for example, only to gaze at the Scipione Borghese bust to realize Bernini's almost uncanny ability to capture in marble a moment of extreme dynamic drama, registered in the astonishing expression on the Cardinal's face. Far from the reservedness and thus separateness of much traditional classi-





Renzetti

Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria,  
*The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, 1645-1652



Anderson

Cardinal Scipione Borghese, Galleria  
Borghese, 1632-1637

cal portrait sculpture, faces such as these catch us in surprise at their active realism.

In the smallest as in the largest of his works, Bernini achieves a remarkable dynamism which is in many ways theatrical. The lifelike energy of his sculpture enthralls and involves the observer as if in dialogue. The interiors of his spaces guide our eyes in a pre-conditioned sequence toward a dramatic climax. It is in this incredible ability to involve the spectator, to transform him into a psychologically active participant in the witnessed event, and thus greatly heighten the intensity, and presumably, therefore, the understanding of the experience, that Bernini's art is most theatrical. We are unable to remain objectively separate from that which we are viewing even if an involvement comes often as a surprise. What seems more crucial however, is the fact that this theatrical ability to involve the viewer is in the service of a more fundamental goal. The dramatic experience is designed so carefully to enhance the "reading" of the event, to render its meaning (almost always religious) more profoundly comprehensible. Bernini does not employ his talents to simply fascinate us, but fascinates us to convey the meaning of the event. The marble visitors to the Cornaro Chapel are not merely curious spectators like ourselves...they draw us into the dramatically religious event of St. Teresa. Bernini devotes his remarkable genius as an artist to a purpose he realizes is far more profound.

#### NOTES :

1. Timothy Kitao, *Circle and Oval in the Square of St. Peters*, N.Y. Press, 1974, p. 69.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
3. Irving Lavin, *Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts*, Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 93.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

James Saywell is a graduate of University of Toronto, School of Architecture, who has lived and worked in Italy.