



giulio carlo  
argan.  
intellettuale  
e storico  
dell'arte

a cura di claudio gamba



d

Electa

Sotto l'Alto Patronato  
del Presidente della Repubblica

Con il Patrocinio del Ministero  
per i Beni e le Attività Culturali  
Direzione Generale per le biblioteche,  
gli istituti culturali e il diritto d'autore



Comitato Nazionale per le celebrazioni  
del centenario della nascita di  
Giulio Carlo Argan  
1909-2009



In collaborazione con il  
Dipartimento di Storia dell'Arte e Spettacolo  
Sapienza Università di Roma

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di Giulio Carlo Argan  
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**Consiglio Nazionale  
per le celebrazioni  
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## Argan's rhetoric and the history of style (*Retorica e barocco*)

Irving Lavin

It is not my purpose to speak of the substance of Argan's theory of rhetoric as a key to the understanding of Baroque art. This has been accomplished in a truly magisterial way by Claudio Gamba in his introduction to the reedition in 2004 of Argan's definitive exposition of his ideas in the famous monograph *L'Europa delle capitali 1600-1700*, first published in 1964. Instead I would like to offer a somewhat personal, and perhaps somewhat peculiar view of the role of this aspect of Argan's work in my own development as an art historian, as well as in the development of our discipline as a whole.

To this day I remember my first and most vivid apprehension of what it means to say *ROMAN*. It was on my first visit to the city as a young graduate student, when I first passed through the doors of St. Peter's into the nave of the basilica (fig. 1). The vision was of course stupendous, but coming from New York I was, after all, quite used to large spaces in large buildings with impressive perspective vistas, even in the vertical axis. What stunned me and disturbed me and disoriented me was the experience of seeing and touching, since it was at arm's length, an aquasantiera consisting of a gigantic conch shell carried by two nude winged putti as large or even larger than grown men (fig. 2). It was overwhelming, like an earthquake that suddenly and mysteriously shakes the ground underfoot. I had never seen an aquasantiera remotely like that. Suddenly the whole world had been redimentionalized, an art historical transvaluation of all values, to paraphrase Nietzsche. And I have never recovered from the experience. Only years later did I learn from Argan what had happened.

Among the innumerable and inexhaustable contributions of Giulio Carlo Argan (1909-92) to our discipline, I venture to say that perhaps the most important and influential internationally has proved to be his work on rhetoric. It was in fact that work that first brought Argan to my attention when I was beginning my art historical career in the 1950's. It was then that I, like many anglophones of my generation, came to study Italian Baroque art through the fundamental manual of Rudolph Wittkower *Art and architecture in Italy, 1600 to 1750*, first published in 1958. In the introduction to his chapter titled *The High Baroque*, Wittkower refers to Argan's by now long since famous essay *La rettorica e l'arte barocca*, just previously published (1955) in the acts of the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Congress of Humanistic Studies, in a volume called *Retorica e barocco* edited by Enrico Castelli. Two preliminary points are significant even in the context where Argan's essay appeared, not a congress of art historians but of Humanists, and under the aegis not of an art historian but of the philosopher-historian Enrico Castelli (1900-77), at the Sapienza, where Argan would soon join him. The context itself, and the roster of participating art historians (Gillo Dorfles, André Chastel, Pierre Francastel, Victor Tapié, Hans Tintelnot), signaled a marked intellectual departure



from the largely formalistic and philological drift that had theretofore characterized the discipline of art history in Italy.

A further point that deserves recognition is that Argan's paper was barely six pages long, and it remains a model of the clear, concise, yet elegantly phrased Italian prose that makes it always a pleasure to read his work, quite apart from the brilliance of his ideas. That little sketch won high praise from Wittkower, who calls the paper concise and illuminating. Acknowledging his debt to Argan, Wittkower proceeded in that introduction to interpret the Italian High Baroque entirely in terms of Argan's conception, in which the new style as a form of visual rhetoric served as a powerful tool in the art of persuasion.

For this and many other reasons, Wittkower's book had wide circulation throughout the world; it is still in print, still a leading text book in the universities, and through it many generations of art historians – including myself – have been introduced to Argan's way of thinking, interpreting and explaining the *ideas* that motivated what we see in works of art.

It could be said that that little essay, and of course Argan's major works on rhetoric that followed, brought about a vast sea-change in our discipline. By now scarcely any interpretive work in our field fails to appeal to the rhetorical tradition, citing the verbal terminology of the ancients as equivalent to visual motifs and forms, or reiterating the more or less conventional phraseology – rhetorical *topoi* in themselves – current in contemporary writing about art and artists.

The history of this rhetorical revolution may be said to have begun in 1915 with the publication of Heinrich Wölfflin's pioneering work, *Principles of Art History. The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art (Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst, Munich 1915)*, in which he sought to define the characteristics that distinguish the most extreme forms of visual expression, the limits of art history, as it were. He concluded that there were five categories of style.

1. linear to painterly (the dissolution of form)
2. plane and recession (the development from the vision of the surface to the vision of depth)
3. closed and open form (pictures were not adjusted to the line of the frame but suggested that the scene beyond the borders of the work)
4. multiplicity and unity (change from classical composition, in which single parts have a certain independence, to a feeling of unity)
5. relative clearness and unclearness (the contrast between distinctness, in which light defines form in the detail, and an attempt to evade clearness, to make the totality of the picture seem unintentional).

Wölfflin may be said to have been the first to periodize art in purely formal, visual terms. Periodize is the crucial operative word here because although Wölfflin took as the exemplification of his principles the contrasts between the "classic" art of the Renaissance and the "baroque" art of the seventeenth century, he believed that his principles operated in a cyclical way, as the extreme polar opposites of possible visual



1. Interior of nave. Rome,  
St. Peter's

expression, between which art could only oscillate. Classical and Baroque became only nominally time-bound terms for the parameters of a process that was eternal and ultimately independent of external circumstances, because built into the structure of the mind. The idea is clearly Hegelian to the depths, and Wölfflin emphasized that in formulating it he was not at all functioning as an art historian, but as a psychologist engaged in discerning the structure and operation of the mind, “modes of seeing”, as he termed them.

The influence of Wölfflin's book was enormous and it remains with us today, since no one has found a more succinct and pertinent way of defining the qualities of both classical and Baroque style than his five categories. They are still taught in school and as descriptive terms, not so much as a priori principles, they still underlie much of the scholarly discussion of the art history of the period.

Apart from the rigid framework imposed by its psycho-philosophical basis, Wölfflin's theory was subject to two difficulties, which Erwin Panofsky, who was the first to review the book in 1915, was quick to point out. The system condemned to relative insignificance the phases of the development intervening between the two antipodes, in this case the phases that came to be called the early Mannerism of the first half of the 16th century and the late Mannerism of the second half, which at times contradicted the idea of a progressive movement from one extreme to the other. The second problem arose from the evident fact that the development was related to factors other than an inherent, unconscious movement of the psyche. The development took place, after all, in a context: in the first case the crisis of conscience often related to the threatening Reformation, in the second the reactionary austerity and discipline of the Counterreformation – both of which phenomena cried out for independent status.

Subsequent studies of what is often called the “Problem of the Baroque” responded to these problems by rejecting Wölfflin's idea of an autonomous visual mindset altogether and substituting motivations from other domains of religion, culture and politics. Already in 1909 Walter Weibel (*Jesuitismus und Barockskulptur in Rom*, Strassburg 1909) had written that Baroque sculpture in Rome was essentially a Jesuit creation and this spiritual disciplinary matrix of visual expression is still a leading explanation

2. Gian Lorenzo Bernini,  
Holy Water stoup. Rome,  
St. Peter's



of how the final terms of Wölfflin's five principles came about. In 1921 Werner Weisbach (*Der Barock als Kunst der Gegenreformation*, Berlin 1921) envisioned the Baroque as a product of the Counterreformation – although it was clear that neither the Jesuit nor the Counterreformation labels were accurate since both institutions inaugurated in the sixteenth century as austere, extremely disciplined movements, the very opposite of Wölfflin's definitions of Baroque style. In 1939 Hans Tintelnot (*Barocktheater und barocke Kunst, die Entwicklungsgeschichte der Fest- und Theater-Dekoration in ihrem Verhältnis zur barocken Kunst*, Berlin 1939), grasping the great explosion of theater and opera spectacle, both secular and religious (the latter notably as part of the training of initiates in the Jesuit seminaries), proposed the search for artifice in creating such dramatic effects as a kind of cultural scenography in the creation of Baroque style. In 1952 Carl Friedrich viewed the matter politically, relating the development of Baroque style to the emergence of the modern nation state (C. J. Friedrich, *The Age of the Baroque 1610-1660*, New York 1952).

Argan entered the stage prominently against this background and with the publication of *L'Europa delle capitali* in 1964, provided a complete new groundwork for the kind of purely stylistic features Wölfflin had defined. Argan clearly invested much of himself in this book, which is preceded by an inscribed epigraph consisting of just three words that say everything Argan stood for: *Arte Idee Storia*. Through an extraordinary sequence of chapters that are purely conceptual in nature – none of them are inherently historical – Argan sweeps through vast domains of thought and expression that actually provide a panorama of what can only be called the Baroque mentality: “La forma e l'immagine”; “La funzione delle immagini”; “Poetica e rettorica”; “Lo Stato e la capitale”; “Il monumento”; “La monumentalità”; “Immaginazione e illusione”; “Immaginazione e sentimento”; “Persuasione e devozione”, etc., etc., all of which, systematically, are seen through the lens of rhetoric as the art of persuasion. The achievement is truly monumental.

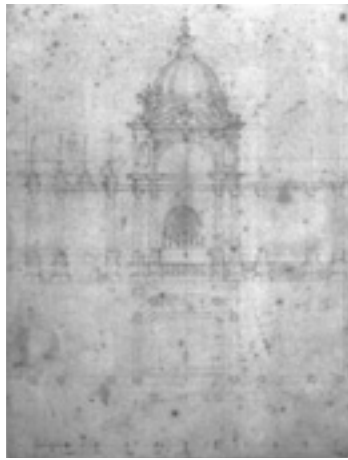
In a way, I suspect Argan deliberately returned to Wölfflin's way of seeking after fundamental principles. But whereas Wölfflin provided a mode of seeing, Argan provided a mode of analysis, and where Wölfflin argued that the history of art was inherent



3. Gian Lorenzo Bernini,  
Baldacchino. Rome, St. Peter's

4. Francesco Borromini,  
Project for a ciborium  
for the choir of St. Peter's.  
Vienna, Albertina

5. Francesco Borromini,  
Perspective study  
of the baldacchino *in situ*.  
Vienna, Albertina



in the mind and unpremeditated, Argan understood art itself as a deliberate instrument of persuasion intended to induce the viewer to believe what he sees. In effect, Argan provides a historical rationale and motivation for the development that Wölfflin thought was essentially psycho-physiological.

With his turn to rhetoric Argan did, in effect, create a modern – I mean sophisticated – equivalent of Wölfflin's "mode of seeing". We see now not with Classical or Baroque eyes, but with rhetorical eyes, which make us seem much wiser, because we see the rhetoric behind the façade the artist has deployed to convince us that what we are seeing is true, even if, or especially if it is an illusion. At the same time rhetoric also provided a methodological common denominator, an instrumental principle that subtended and underlay all the other phenomena – Jesuitism, Counterreformation, Theater – offered in explanation of the emergence and florescence of Baroque art.

My own experience at St. Peter's is a very personal case in point, as I will try to explain. I came to understand what happened when I was astounded by those gigantic aquasantieri when I read a particular passage in *L'Europa delle capitali* where Argan writes of the baldacchino of St. Peter's (fig. 3). He notes that the first projects to create a proper architectural ciborium to cover the high altar envisioned re-employing the marble spiral columns, reportedly from the Temple of Jerusalem that had been installed at the rear of the choir in the original Constantinian building). A drawing by Borromini records such a project by Carlo Maderno, who remained architect of St. Peter's until his death in 1629 (fig. 4), whereas the new pope Urban VIII replaced him de facto with Bernini in 1624. It required an entirely new mind-set to conceive, for it was a conception rather than a perception, that these columns – "normal" in size with respect to the size of a normal human being – would be dwarfed in the immense space beneath Michelangelo's dome.

Here is what Argan says that explained the utter transformation that occurred in me:

Il caso più tipico dell'illusionismo psicologico [with that simple phrase you enter the magic of Argan] si vede nel baldacchino di San Pietro. S'era invano cercato di collocare sotto la cupola michelangiolesca un ciborio in forma architettonica, quasi un piccolo tempio; ma

ogni struttura architettonica accanto alle poderose membrature dei giganti pilastri, appariva meschina. Il Bernini non ha ridotto un'architettura, ma mutato la categoria dell'oggetto: ha preso un oggetto relativamente piccolo, un baldacchino processionale, e lo ha smisuratamente ingrandito, trasformando le esili aste in poderose colonne elicoidali di bronzo. Così il Bernini che era un grande inventore di apparati scenici, mette in opera un'illusione mentale fondata sull'alterazione delle nozioni abituali delle dimensioni delle cose. Secondo quelle nozioni, un edificio e un baldacchino appartengono a due ordini di grandezze diverse, impiccolendo un edificio si provoca nella mente di chi guarda un processo riduttivo, ingrandendo un baldacchino si induce chi guarda a spostare, accrescendoli, i valori di una scala abituale di grandezza. [...] l'illusione psicologica [...] persuade [...] a immaginare. L'artista, dunque, pensa che le scale di valori sono relative e lo spazio non ha una dimensione costante; vuole muoversi con piena libertà su tutte le scale metriche.

The basic point I want to make is that Argan's observation, or rather interpretation of our observation, explains one of Bernini's famous *obiter dicta* quoted by his biographers, Baldinucci and Domenico Bernini, concerning the baldacchino, of which he said "this work succeeded by chance" (*quest'opera riuscì a caso*) without explaining what he meant. Normally, in the rhetorical mode, the statement has been taken as a typical instance of Bernini's false rhetoric of modesty, whereas in fact it was a simple statement of fact. The traditional rules of proportion had related aquasantieri to human scale, "man is the measure of all things". In this case Bernini took as his measure the church itself, by which I mean not only the fabric of the basilica of St. Peter's, but also the institutional church, the *Mater ecclesia*. For this vision the traditional rules of proportion offered no fixed scale and Bernini could only resort to what Michelangelo called the "giudizio dell'occhio". Bernini had his own formulation: i contrapposti, he called it; that is, the appearance of objects is affected by other objects in relation to which they are seen. The principle was in fact invoked throughout the process of design and execution of the baldacchino; many studies of scale and proportion were carried out, including models of different sizes, including full scale models erected on the spot (fig. 5). We shall never know exactly what rule of measure, if any, determined the final solution. But I am sure Bernini said, at least to himself, thank God; and I say here and now, thank Bernini, and thank Argan!

I must confess, in testimony to my affection and admiration for Argan, that the veritable paroxysm of rhetorical studies he helped to propagate in recent decades has brought some perversions of the rhetorical tradition by merging it with the biographical tradition of artists' lives that has been called legendary. I refer here to one of the most famous publications that emerged from the Warburg school, *Die Legende vom Künstler; ein geschichtlicher Versuch*, Vienna 1934, by Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, which, far from the historical experiment authors called it, has become a kind of biblical ur-text in the modern passion for de-heroicizing, de-flating or de-mythologizing the lives of artists as told by biographers or the artists themselves. One of the primary tools employed by Kris and Kurz in disenchanting the biographical material was to demonstrate that anecdotes of precocity and technical virtuosity were often deliberately and seemingly improbably repeated from one artist and generation to another. The same words were used for different artists, and in time such repeated locutions have come to be regarded as rhetorical *topoi*, conventional clichés devoid of substance and

-serving only to inflate the reputation of the artist to whom they were applied. A signal example of the misuse of what has itself become a deflationary rhetorical technique is provided by what I regard as a specious argument by one of the outstanding pioneers in this art-historical domain, Michael Baxandall, in his remarkably literate, perspicacious and influential work, *Giotto and the Orators. Humanist Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition*, Oxford 1971, p. 72). Baxandall develops his case in one important instance from the fact that Filippo Villani describes Giotto as equal to or even superior to the painters of antiquity. Filippo says the same sort of thing about Pagolo de' Dagomari, who surpassed all ancient and modern astronomers, and about Gonella the famous buffoon, whom he likens to Quinus Roscius Gallus the comic actor who engaged in a friendly rivalry with Cicero to try whether the orator or the actor could express a thought or emotion with the greater effect, a particularly significant comparison in the context of rhetoric as an art. Baxandall's point is that such comparison and claims of modern distinction equivalent to or surpassing the ancients were commonplace humanist literary ornaments and cannot be taken as considered opinions, or new convictions of the intellectual respectability of the moderns.

This seems to me nonsense, reducing Argan's rhetoric itself to a meaningless *topos*. If I stub my toe in English, I say "ouch!" If you stub your toe in Italian you say Uffah! We are both mouthing clichés, verbal *topoi*, purely conventional sounds hallowed by tradition in our respective languages, for expressing the same real, genuine sentiment – it hurts! And how better can I express my admiration for Picasso than to compare him with Velasquez, whose paintings he deliberately transformed into Picassos on many occasions?

One final regret I have about the profusion and sometimes degeneration of the role of rhetoric in human communication is the tendency to identify rhetoric and hence Baroque art with modern, especially political "propaganda". This term was, of course an extension of that used by the Church for the institution newly established in response to the Protestant threat, the Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide – conceived as a hollow and meretricious effort to rally support for an inherently weak, or even reprehensible cause. I find it sad that the great rhetorical tradition invoked by Argan has sunk so far into the morass of cynical anachronism.

*Progetto grafico e copertina*  
Tassinari/Vetta  
(Paolo Tassinari con Igor Bevilacqua)

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