

“Fury of Creation”

Transcript from an interview with Professor Irving Lavin by Paul Solman of the *Public Broadcasting System*, television program, **NewsHour**, airdate, April 30, 1998.

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“Fury of Creation”

SUMMARY: Rome is celebrating the 400th birthday of sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Paul Solman discusses Bernini’s style and presence in history

Transcript

PAUL SOLMAN: In Rome, they’re celebrating the 400th birthday of Gian Lorenzo Bernini, home-grown superstar by spiffing up some of his fabled creations.

Bernini was, after all, the sculptor most responsible for making Rome a city of fountains, the architect entrusted with redesigning St. Peter’s Cathedral, the man who created its piazza, and surrounded it with two colonnades—which act as welcoming arms. The heir to Michelangelo, Bernini was in his day, the greatest artist of the world.

A child prodigy, he carved the infant Jesus with pets when he was just 13. By the time he sculpted his last work, the bust of Jesus at age 80, Bernini had long since become the epitome, in some sense the creator, of 17th century Italian Baroque. But already, by the early 1800’s, he was passé, as this 1960’s PBS documentary attests.

SPOKESMAN: He said fame would not outlast him, and he was right. To the 19th century he was the apotheosis of false taste, the nadir of sentimentality. In the 20th century, so far, he has been ignored.

PAUL SOLMAN: This film was an early effort to rescue Bernini’s reputation. It lavished attention on his David, caught in a split second before downing Goliath, Apollo at the moment he overtakes Daphne and she, turns into a tree; Pluto, king of the underworld, about to violate immortal beauty.

Amazing stuff then, corn ball stuff since, but Bernini’s making a comeback. In the U.S. his sketches in clay, terracotta, are on display at Chicago’s Art Institute through this weekend, then on to Philadelphia, on loan from Russia. When Czar Paul I bought them in 1797, they were prized purchases, studies for Bernini’s major works. And to scholar Irv Lavin, these are the essence of what he’s loved about Bernini since he first saw sketches like these decades ago.

IRVING LAVIN, Institute for Advanced Study: These terracotta sketches, I fell absolutely and utterly in love with, and after 45 years, I’m still deeply in love with them. They’re such direct expressions of what we’ve now come to think of as the fury of creation of an artist.

PAUL SOLMAN: The fury of creation.

IRVING LAVIN: Absolutely. The fire, the excitement of immediate creation, these gashing away, zipping away, modeling here, and so on.

PAUL SOLMAN: In fact, to Lavin, the process of creation is what makes Bernini so significant, the self-conscious, creative act that distinguishes the artist from the craftsman, as here in a study for his David. Much of Bernini is about the creative act, says Lavin, and a key advance in the art of subjective feeling begun in the Renaissance. Consider three fabled Davids: Donatello's early 1400's; Michelangelo's, early 1500's; Bernini's, early 1600's—done when the sculptor was in his mid 20's and defining his distinct style.

IRVING LAVIN: Bernini was deliberately saying I can show David not just standing there looking like David, but acting like David, namely getting ready to toss that sling at that monster, Goliath, over there like that, so suddenly, what in the previous cases were simple statues in a certain kind of sense become—became human beings in action, in the process of making divinely created acts.

PAUL SOLMAN: Divinely created, of course, because David's slaying of Goliath is an act of God—and at the same time a self-conscious act of Bernini's. The face is actually a self-portrait of the artist as a young man. The act of creation, of transformation, you can even see it through the grainy PBS film of the 60's. The artist as miracle worker who turns marble into flesh. In Bernini's own words, says Irv Lavin—

IRVING LAVIN: That I have had the courage—courage is a wonderful word that he uses—to do something that even the ancient sculptors did not have the courage to do, and that was to treat marble as if it were pliable, malleable, as pasta.

PAUL SOLMAN: Transformation might be the secular term for what Bernini did, transubstantiation the religious one—for historically, Bernini's art was the Catholic response to the Protestant reformation, using emotions at their most extreme to counter the austerity of Protestantism. It was called the Counter-Reformation and its heroes and heroines were Catholic saints caught by Bernini in the act of conversion. The blessed Ludovica Albertoni ecstatically expiring as her soul ascends to heaven; Longinus, the Roman soldier who speared the crucified Christ, and in that instant recognized his divinity.

IRVING LAVIN: It's a standing figure but standing with passion, standing with—as though something were happening to the standing figure. That's number one. And the other has to do with the drapery enveloping the figure and giving a kind of expression to what's going on inside the person at the moment of divine revelation.

PAUL SOLMAN: This Longinus happens to be at Harvard's Fogg Museum, a study for the finished marble three times life size in St. Peter's. It's part of the Harvard collection of terracottas newly on display that Irv Lavin, the graduate student, fell in love with in the 1950's. It features this head of St. Jerome.

IRVING LAVIN: It's gouged; it's beaten; it exudes the fire of Jerome's passion and the passion of Bernini in creating the idea of Jerome's passion.

PAUL SOLMAN: Jerome's eyes were nearly closed in ecstasy. As the final work shows, he's cradling the cross. Here's a more mundane model from the Fogg Museum, a member of the

noble Cornaro family in a study for what may be Bernini's most talked about project, the Cornaro Chapel, where patrons are discussing the incredible moment the visitor is drawn to, the ecstasy, and we do mean ecstasy, of St. Theresa. That's Prof. Lavin from a 1989 PBS series "Art of the Western World." Easier than sending him to Theresa again on our tab, we had him talk about the sketch for it in Chicago.

IRVING LAVIN: St. Theresa, that's, of course, the most famous and most controversial of all the Bernini statues, and you know what it represents—a moment she describes very graphically in her autobiography when a fiery angel appeared to her and stabbed her with its spear and shoved it back and withdrew it and shoved it back. She described it very graphically.

PAUL SOLMAN: To quote St. Theresa, herself, "The pain was so great that I screamed aloud, but simultaneously I felt such infinite sweetness that I wished the pain to last eternally." This was interpreted at the time and ever since as a spiritual transport sexually expressed.

IRVING LAVIN: All you have to do is look at it. The question is how you interpret it and, above all, how you interpret the relationship between divinity and humanity.

PAUL SOLMAN: In his life, Bernini was passionate with a vengeance. His famous portrait of his mistress, Costanza Bonarelli, an assistant's wife. Less well known, when he thought she was having an affair with his brother, Bernini sent a servant to slash her face with a razor. The servant took the rap.

Bernini was fined the equivalent of something like \$100,000 in today's money, what he was paid for one of his busts. His pal, the Pope, waived the fine. Bernini was larger than life. France's Louis XIV, the hallowed Sun King, not only commissioned a bust but sat for it at least 18 times. Bernini chiseled the marble as the king posed, the court looking on.

And afterwards, throughout Europe, the rich and famous hired Bernini to do noble portraits of them. But throughout, his main loyalty was the Catholicism in the Vatican for which he worked for 56 years. One of his last great projects uniting church and state was the bridge of Sant' Angelo.

IRVING LAVIN: Bernini had this astonishing idea of creating marble sculptures with the actual sky and clouds behind them, looking as though they just descended on this bridge, carrying the instruments and the passion to remind you what Christ went through to achieve your salvation, so that when you crossed this bridge, you were passing from the everyday world of the city, the Hoi Polloi world of the city, to the divine world of St. Peter's and the Vatican.

PAUL SOLMAN: In the end, however, to Irv Lavin, Bernini's importance lies not in his role as a master propagandist for the Catholic Church but as a modern artist who elevated the creative act to its own level of self-conscious spirituality.

IRVING LAVIN: I think it's the beginning of the very modern idea we have of the act of creation as somehow sacred, and for Bernini, it certainly was sacred. God created man in his own image. And man creates angels in that image.

PAUL SOLMAN: Gian Lorenzo Bernini was the man who created the angels, and as the skeptical 20th century draws to a close, creating angels seems once again a marvelous thing to have done.