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Afterthoughts on “Bernini’s Death”

Irving Lavin

In my essay on Bernini’s death (*The Art Bulletin*, LIV, 1972, 159–86) I published what I take to be Bernini’s last and long lost sculpture, the bust of the Savior in the Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia (Figs. 1, 3, 5, 7, 9). Following the appearance of that article, Professor Eric Van Schaack of Goucher College signaled to me the existence, in the Cathedral at Sées (Orne) in Normandy, of what can almost certainly be identified as the lost copy of the *Savior* mentioned in a contemporary source (Figs. 2, 4, 6, 8, 10). Professor Van Schaack generously allowed me to publish this important discovery, which I present here together with some additional material that has come to my attention.

The copy was commissioned by the artist’s friend Pierre Cureau de la Chambre (1640–1693).¹ Cureau, who was abbé of the royal palace church of Saint-Barthélemy in Paris, had met Bernini during the latter’s visit to that city in 1665.² He accompanied Bernini on his return trip to Rome, and remained there a year, during which time he saw the artist frequently. Thereafter, their friendship continued in an exchange of letters that lasted throughout the remaining fifteen years of the artist’s life.³ In February, 1681, as soon as the news of Bernini’s death reached Paris,⁴ Cureau published in the *Journal des Sçavans* an *Eloge de M. le Cavalier Bernin* in which he mentions the bust, adding that “on verra bien-tost une belle Copie a saint Barthelemy.”⁵ Cureau planned to write a biography of Bernini, of which the Preface was delivered as an address to the Academy on

January 3, 1685, and was published separately along with a reprint of the *Eloge*.⁶ In the reference to the bust here, he notes that “nous avons icy une belle copie.”⁷ Cureau in the end kept the sculpture not at Saint-Barthélemy but in his home, where he also had other works by Bernini, including a self-portrait (cf. Fig. 12) and a bust of Cureau’s father.⁸ Nothing more is known of Cureau’s copy, although two points concerning the phraseology of his remarks are worth making. The first is that the copy was clearly begun while Bernini was still alive, since Cureau says that he wrote his *Eloge* immediately upon receipt of the news of the artist’s death, at which time the copy was nearly finished. Furthermore, there is nothing to prove that the copy was made in Italy and shipped to Paris, as has been assumed.⁹

Neither the authorship nor the provenance of the bust in Sées is recorded.¹⁰ As far as I can discover it appears only in the local literature on the Cathedral, where it is attributed vaguely to Caffieri and said to have been acquired by J.-B. Du Plessis d’Argentré (1720–1805).¹¹ D’Argentré, who had been preceptor to the grandsons of Louis XIV, was bishop of Sées from 1775 until the Revolution; he was responsible for extensive alterations and embellishments to the Cathedral.¹²

Let it be said at once that the Sées sculpture is effectively excluded as a candidate for the original by its size. Bernini’s *Savior* was recorded in an inventory of 1713 as being 103cm high (“alto palmi di passetto 4 e due terzi”). The Norfolk

¹ Cf. Lavin, “Bernini’s Death,” 171.

² Cureau is mentioned in Chantelou’s journal of Bernini’s stay in Paris, during which he visited Saint-Barthélemy (P. F. de Chantelou, *Journal du voyage du Cavalier Bernin en France*, ed. L. Lalanne, Paris, 1885, 120, 245, 256, 258). On Cureau and Bernini, cf. J. Vanuxem, “Quelques témoignages français sur le Bernin et son art au XVII^e siècle en France: l’abbé de la Chambre,” *Journées internationales d’étude du Baroque. Acts. Montauban. 1963*, Toulouse, 1965, 153–67.

³ Cureau himself described his relation with Bernini as follows: “J’ay eu l’avantage d’accompagner Monsieur le Cavalier Bernin, quand il s’en retourna de Paris en Italie. Je le pratiquay pendant un an à Rome, où je le voyais familièrement & à toute heure. J’ay depuis cultivé son amitié par un commerce réglé de lettres l’espace de quinze années, & jusqu’à sa mort,” *Preface pur servir à l’histoire de la vie et des ouvrages du cavalier Bernin* (Bibl. Nationale, Paris, K. 4280), n.d., n.p., but 1685 (see note 6 below), page 2.

⁴ “Eloge . . . que je fis pour me consoler de sa perte à la premiere nouvelle qui nous vint de sa mort” (Bernini died November 28, 1680), (*Preface*, 15).

⁵ *Journal des Sçavans*, February 24, 1681, 61.

⁶ Cited in note 3 above. For the date, see P. Bayle, *Nouvelles de la république des lettres*, January, 1685, in *Œuvres diverses*, 4 vols., The Hague, 1727–31, I, 201f.; also 362f.

⁷ Page 24.

⁸ This emerges from a passage in C. Le Maire, *Paris ancien et nouveau*, 3 vols., Paris, 1685, I, 302–03: “La Maison où demeure Monsieur L’Abbé de la Chambre de l’Académie Française, est entre l’Hostel de Conty, & le College des quatre Nations . . . l’on trouve chez luy ce qu’il y a de plus rare à voir: entr’autres trois Busts en Marbre faits par le

Chevalier Bernin. Le premier est le Bust du Chevalier Bernin mesme, fait à Rome peu de temps avant sa mort. Le second est un Bust du Christ; & l’autre est de Monsieur de la Chambre Pere . . . & des modeles en Cire de quelques Statuës de Bernin . . .” Cureau mentions the self-portrait in his *Eloge* of 1681: “. . . un buste de luy nouvellement arrivé icy, qui est parlant & comparable à tout ce qu’il y a de plus precieux & de plus achevé en ce genre-là” (page 62; it is presumably that which appears in the engraved vignette to Cureau’s *Preface*, by S. Leclerc [Fig. 12]).

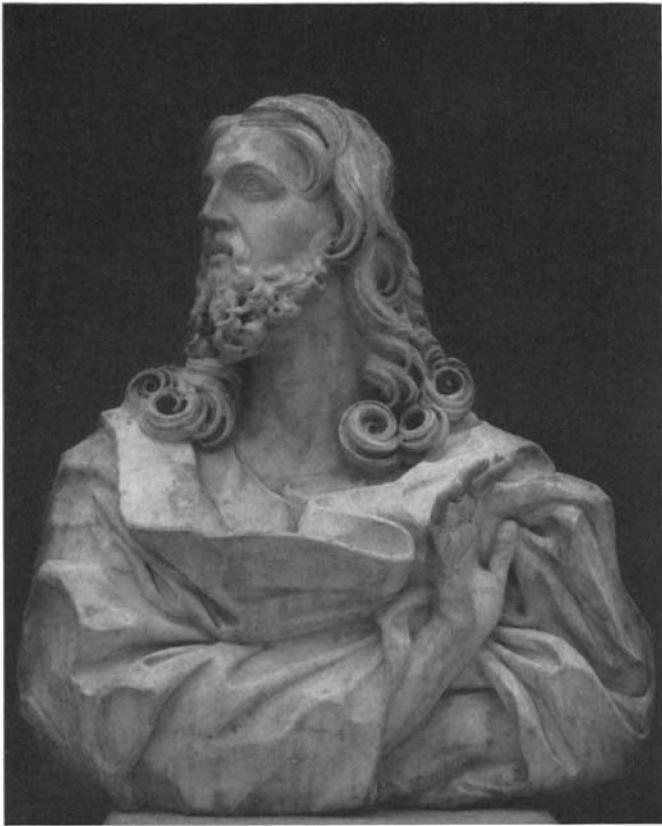
Cf. Vanuxem, “Quelques témoignages” (cited in note 2 above), 160, 162, 163 and fig. 18.

⁹ This assumption evidently originated in a misleading phrase of S. S. Ludovici (“una copia della statua era pervenuta in Francia”), who first called attention to the passage in Cureau’s *Eloge* in the *Journal des Sçavans* (ed. of F. Baldinucci, *Vita di Gianlorenzo Bernini*, Milan, 1948, 259).

¹⁰ I am greatly indebted to the Curé Flament, archivist of the Cathedral, who searched, in vain, for documentation concerning the bust, and provided the references given in the following note.

¹¹ First mentioned in L. de la Sicotiere, *Notice sur la cathédrale de Sées*, Alençon, 1844, 22: “sur le mur du pourtoir du choeur, on a placé depuis peu d’années, un buste du Christ en marbre blanc, d’un beau travail; il vient, croyons-nous, de l’ancienne salle capitulaire”; Abbé Dumaine, “Buste en marbre dans la cathédrale. XVIII^e siècle,” *Bulletin des amis des monuments ornaux*, III, 1903, 25f: “. . . attribué par quelques-uns à Caffieri . . . On croit que c’est Mgr. d’Argentré qui en fit l’acquisition, par occasion . . .”

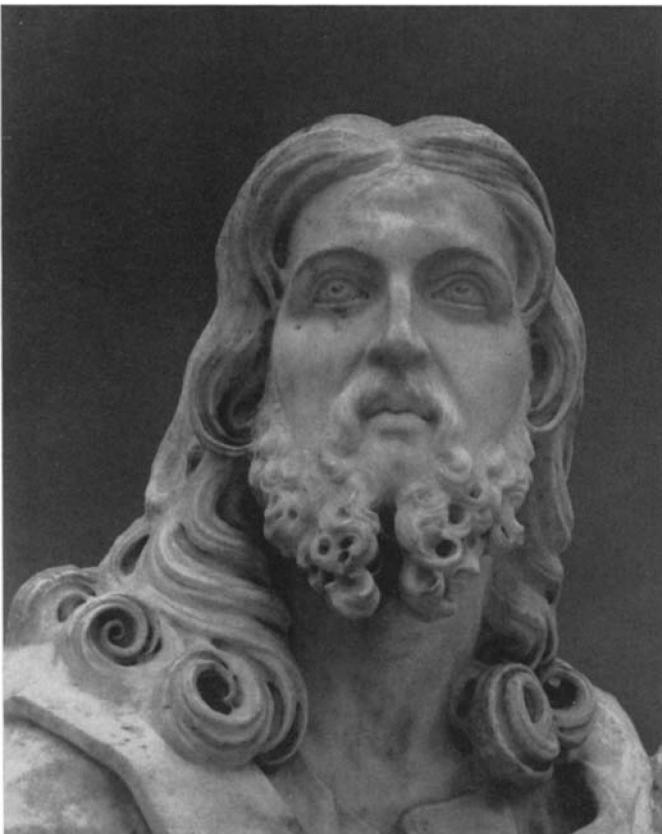
¹² On D’Argentré, cf. *Dictionnaire de biographie française*, Paris, 1929ff., III, cols. 576ff.



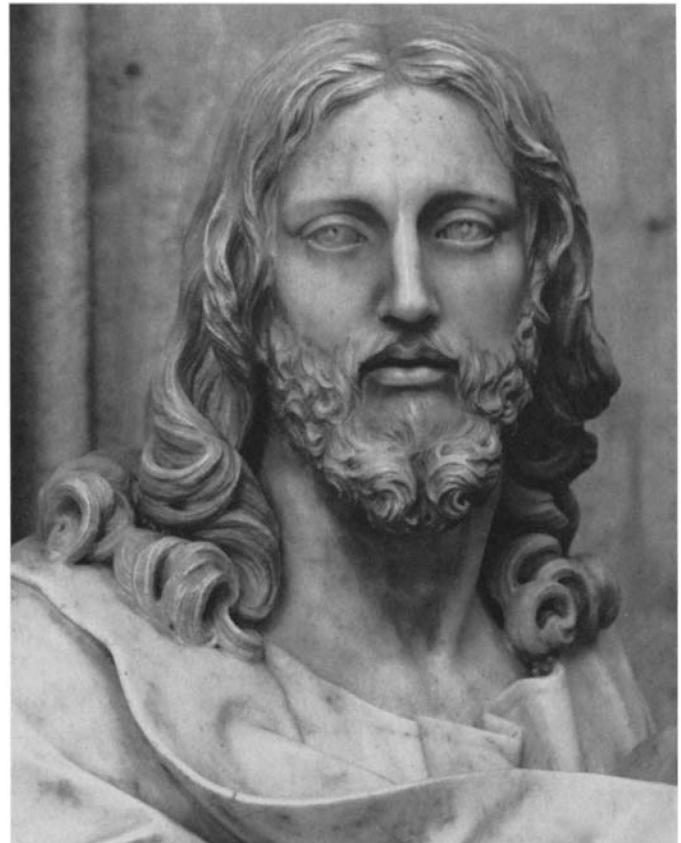
1 Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Bust of the Savior*. Norfolk, Va., Chrysler Museum (photo: R. Thornton, Providence, R.I.)



2 Copy after Bernini, *Bust of the Savior*. Sées, Cathedral (photo: Piels, Sées)



3 Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Bust of the Savior* (detail). Norfolk, Va., Chrysler Museum (photo: R. Thornton, Providence, R.I.)



4 Copy after Bernini, *Bust of the Savior* (detail). Sées, Cathedral (photo: Piels, Sées)



5 Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Bust of the Savior* (detail). Norfolk, Va., Chrysler Museum (photo: R. Thornton, Providence, R.I.)



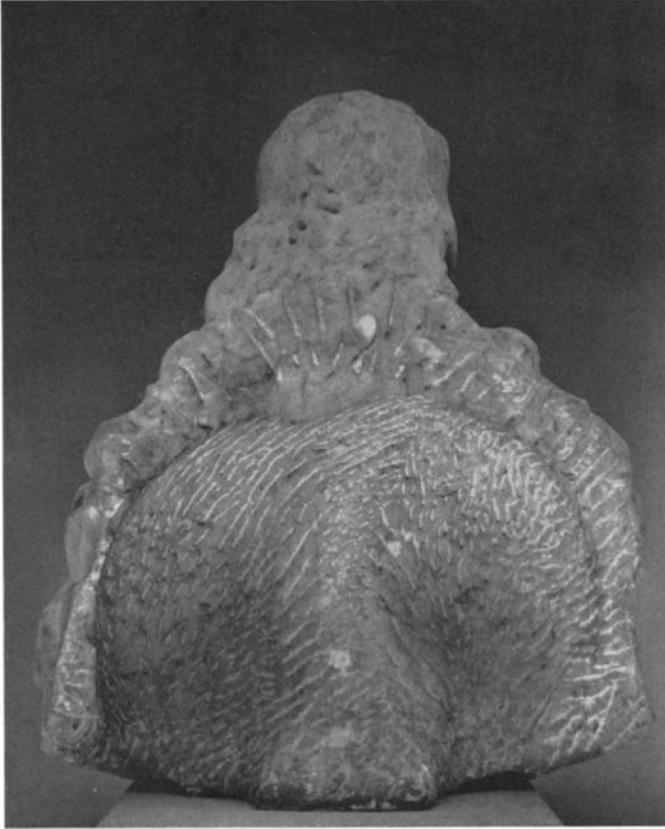
6 Copy after Bernini, *Bust of the Savior* (detail). Sées, Cathedral (photo: Piels, Sées)



7 Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Bust of the Savior* (detail). Norfolk, Va., Chrysler Museum (photo: R. Thornton, Providence, R.I.)



8 Copy after Bernini, *Bust of the Savior* (detail). Sées, Cathedral (photo: Piels, Sées)



9 Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Bust of the Savior*. Norfolk, Va., Chrysler Museum (photo: R. Thornton, Providence, R.I.)



10 Copy after Bernini, *Bust of the Savior*. Sées, Cathedral (photo: Piels, Sées)

bust is 93cm (92cm wide), that in Sées 74cm high (67cm wide).¹³ Anyone familiar with inventories of the period will realize that the former is a negligible discrepancy, whereas the latter is not.

The work is of fine quality, with neither the awkward proportions and strained pose, nor the uneven handling of the Norfolk sculpture. The surfaces of skin and drapery are polished to a uniform luster and the hair and beard are treated as a regular system of striated masses, in contrast to the lacy drill work and sharp penetrations of the marble that form the locks of the Norfolk head. Consistent with these differences are the facts that the large fold of drapery at the center is attached to the back of the right hand, and that marble struts join the fingers; in the Norfolk bust all these forms are carved free. In sum, the Sées sculpture is careful and unadventurous – exactly what one would expect from an able copyist; that in Norfolk is bold and challenging – exactly what one would expect from the aged Bernini.

In view of these considerations the Sées bust acquires an altogether unexpected interest, since it is in many respects closer to the autograph Corsini drawing (Fig. 11) than the Norfolk piece. The palm of the right hand is not turned outward in an ambiguous gesture of abhorrence and protec-

tion, but has the straightforward suggestion of benediction implied in the drawing. The head and glance are not upward, but the head looks directly to the side; the arrangement of hair and beard generally corresponds more accurately with the drawing. To be sure, there are certain details in which the Norfolk bust is closer: the locks falling on the right shoulder form fluffy, clockwise spirals, whereas at Sées they turn back in tight, counter-clockwise curls; the silhouette of the drapery at the Norfolk figure's left is also more like that in the sketch. Nevertheless, the Sées sculpture evidently represents the conception shown in the Corsini drawing, whereas that in Norfolk is a further development.

There is a simple and obvious explanation for this remarkable state of affairs, the clue to which is provided by the inscription on the drawing. The inscription – “chez S. A. M. le Duc de Bracciano” – refers to the bust and indicates that it belongs to the Duke of Bracciano (Livio Odescalchi, who inherited the work from Innocent XI, became Duke of Bracciano in 1696). The inscription is in French, whence it is apparent that the drawing was then in a French collection.¹⁴ In fact, Cardinal Neri Maria Corsini (1685–1770), the great amateur and founder of the Corsini Collection, spent years in Paris as minister of Grand Duke

¹³ A large section at the left elbow has been broken off and reattached; condition otherwise excellent.

¹⁴ There was a French librarian of the Corsini in the early 18th century, J. D. d'Inguibert (1683–1757), native and subsequently Bishop of Carpentras (O. Pinto, *Storia della biblioteca corsiniana e della biblioteca*

dell'Accademia dei Lincei, Florence, 1956, 22, 25, 40f.); but he wrote and published many works in Italian, and his handwriting was completely different from that of the inscription (R. Caillet, *Un prelat bibliophile et philanthropique. Monseigneur D'Inguibert. Archevêque-évêque de Carpentras. 1638–1757*, Audin, 1952, 101ff., ill. opp. page 80).



11 Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Study of the Bust of the Savior*, drawing, 171 × 254mm. Rome, Gabinetto Nazionale delle Stampe



12 S. Leclerc, Frontispiece to P. Cureau de la Chambre, *Préface . . .* (1685), engraving

Cosimo III, and made many acquisitions there.¹⁵ In all probability, Cureau's copy was made not from the original, but from the drawing now in the Corsini Collection. Bernini himself must have sent the sketch to his friend, before his own work was finally carved.¹⁶ The inscription was added to the drawing while it was still in France.

If this hypothesis is correct, the situation perhaps has an analogy in another work commissioned by Cureau in Paris,

reputedly after a design provided by Bernini. This is the virtually unknown tomb of Cureau's father Marin Cureau de la Chambre (1635–1669), physician to Louis XIV, in Saint-Eustache at Paris (Fig. 13).¹⁷ Immortality is represented holding a medallion portrait of the deceased.¹⁸ The Cureau tomb was executed by the Frenchified Roman sculptor Jean-Baptiste Tuby (1635–1700); there are some similarities, in the treatment of the drapery of the allegory

¹⁵ Pinto, *Storia*, 24 (cited in the preceding note); cf. F. Cerroti, *Memorie per servire alla storia dell'incisione compilate nella descrizione e dichiarazione delle stampe che trovansi nella biblioteca corsimiana*, I, Rome, 1858, preface.

¹⁶ Brauer and Wittkower had suggested, and I doubted ("Bernini's Death," 172, n. 49), that the head on the Corsini drawing was a later addition copied from the final work. Perhaps the solution is that the head was added, to show Cureau how it *would be*.

¹⁷ The work was long at Versailles, but has recently been returned to Saint-Eustache. According to another tradition, explicitly denied by M. Piganiol de la Force (*Description de Paris*, 8 vols., Paris, 1742, III, 7), the design was by Le Brun (H. Jouin, *Charles Le Brun et les arts sous Louis XIV*, Paris, 1889, 253f., 615f.). Cf. also E.-T. Hamy, "Note sur un médaillon

de J.-B. Tuby représentant le portrait de M. Cureau de la Chambre, démonstrateur au Jardin Royal (1635–1669)," *Bulletin du Muséum d'histoire naturelle*, I, 1895, 229–32; E. Soulié, *Notice du musée national de Versailles*, 3 vols., Paris, 1880–81, II, 67.

On Cureau father and son, see R. Kerviler, *Marin et Pierre Cureau de la Chambre (1593–1693)*, Le Mans, 1887, esp. 101, 118f., 124ff. On Cureau's artistic relations generally, cf. Kerviler, 127f.; he commissioned Puget's relief of *St. Charles Borromeo at the Plague*, in Marseilles (K. Herding, *Pierre Puget*, Berlin, 1970, 198f.).

¹⁸ On the tomb type, see R. Wittkower, *Art and Architecture in Italy 1600 to 1750*, Harmondsworth, 1965, 294f.



13 J.-B. Tuby, *Tomb of Marin Cureau de la Chambre*. Paris, Saint-Eustache (photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris)



14 Antique base of the *Colonna Claudius*, restored by Orfeo Boselli. Madrid, Museo del Prado (photo: Museo del Prado)

and the hair of the portrait, which suggest that Tuby might also have made the Sées bust.

Above all, I would emphasize the confirmatory evidence the Sées sculpture provides for the conceptual development between the Corsini drawing and the version in Norfolk. While the unprecedented allusion within the Salvator Mundi theme to Christ as intercessor was included from the outset, the horizontal glance and declamatory gesture of the Sées bust are distinctly extroverted; one modern observer understandably described the figure as "teaching."¹⁹ The upward glance and reversed turn of the hand in the Norfolk sculpture, by contrast, introduce a note of visionary withdrawal and exaltation. I can think of no clearer insight into the tendency of Bernini's mind as he approached the end.

* * *

On the attitude toward death in the period generally, a valuable contribution will be found in M. Costanzo, *Il "Gran teatro" del mondo*, Milan, 1964, 47ff., Pt. II, "Mors victa."

In discussing Bernini's drawing in Leipzig of the inter-

cession of Christ and the Virgin²⁰ I overlooked two important contributions to the early development of the theme, the study by M. Meiss, "An Early Altarpiece from the Cathedral of Florence," *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, n.s., xii, 1954, 302-17, and the extensive list of examples given by F. Zeri, *Italian Painting. A Catalogue of the Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Florentine School*, New York, 1971, 58f.; some later examples are discussed in B. Knipping, *De Iconographie van de Contra-reformatie in de Nederlanden*, 2 vols., Hilversum, 1939-40, II, 34ff.

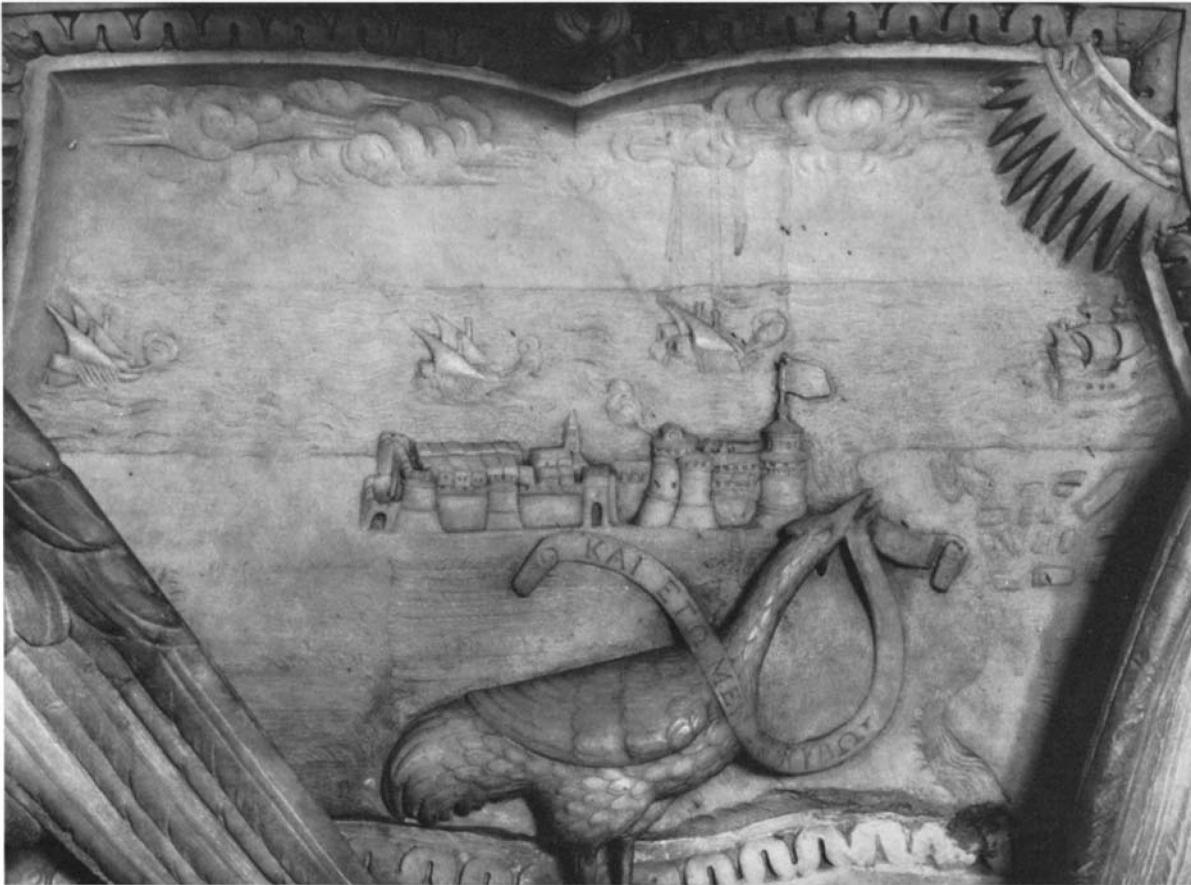
Concerning the group of drawings by Baciccio related to Bernini's *Sangue di Cristo* composition, which B. Canestro Chioventa, seconded by myself, associated with Baciccio's unexecuted decoration for the vestibule of the Baptismal Chapel in Saint Peter's,²¹ see now H. Macandrew, "II. Baciccio's Later Drawings: A Rediscovered Group acquired by the Ashmolean Museum," *Master Drawings*, x, 1972, 253ff.

In considering the sources and meaning of the bust of Louis XIV and the pedestal Bernini intended for it, which included a terrestrial globe with the words "Picciola basa," I referred to the king's *impresa* appearing on a medal of

¹⁹ R. Gobillot, *La cathédrale de Sées*, Paris, 1937, 87.

²⁰ "Bernini's Death," 169ff., fig. 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 169, n. 32.



15 17th-century pedestal of the *Colonna Claudius* (detail). Madrid, Museo del Prado (photo: Museo del Prado)

1664.²² This showed the sun rising over a terrestrial globe with the motto “Nec Pluribus Impar” (“not unequal to many”).²³ My emphasis was upon the visual analogy, but since discovering Ernst Kantorowicz’s genial study of the theme represented by Louis’s device, “Oriens Augusti – Lever du Roi,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, xvii, 1963, 117–177, esp. 165ff., it has become plain to me that Bernini’s motto, too, was an allusion to that of the king: this world is small for Louis, who is great enough to rule many. Concerning the apparent weightlessness of the bust, suspended above the globe by the wind-blown drapery, a passage in Domenico Bernini’s biography of his father documents the sculptor’s intention in this respect: “Gli sopravvenne allora da Roma un bel concetto d’ingegnoso Poeta, che in questi pochi versi volle lodar l’Artefice, l’Effigiato, e l’Opera.

*Entrò l’Bernin’ in un pensier profondo
Per far’ al Regio Busto un bel sostegno,*

²² *Ibid.*, 180, n. 68. A medal with the device bearing the date 1662 is reproduced in C.-F. Menestrier, *La devise du Roi justifiée*, Paris, 1679, 30.

²³ C. W. Faber, *Symbol und Devise Ludwigs XIV.*, Mülhausen, 1878 (*Städtische Gewerbeschule zu Mülhausen, Programm No. 427, Beilage*).

²⁴ *Vita del Cav. Giovan. Lorenzo Bernino*, Rome, 1713, 136f.

²⁵ “Bernini’s Death,” 180f. On Boselli see the excellent entry by G. Casadei in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, Rome, 1960ff., xiii, 240f.; also F. Martinelli, *Roma ornata dall’architettura, pittura, e scoltura* (ed. C. D’Onofrio, *Roma nel Seicento*, Rome, 1969, index, s.v.); A. Pugliese and

*E disse, non trovandone alcun degno,
Piccola base a un tal Monarca è il Mondo,*
e il Bernino incontante rispose con ammirazione, e lode del Rè, e della Corte:

*Mai mi sovvenne quel pensier profondo
Per far di Rè sì grande appoggio degno:
Van sarebbe il pensier, che di sostegno
Non hà bisogno, chì sostiene il Mondo.”*²⁴

(“It never entered my head to give so great a king a worthy base; the notion is vain, for he whom the world sustains needs no support.”)

Jennifer Montagu of the Warburg Institute reminded me that the *Colonna Claudius* now in the Prado, to which I attributed a significant role in the genesis of the *Louis XIV*, was restored by the sculptor Orfeo Boselli (Fig. 14).²⁵ Boselli mentions the fact in his manuscript treatise *Osservazioni della Scultura Antica*.²⁶ Although he does not say so,

S. Rigano, “Martino Lunghi il giovane architetto,” in *Architettura barocca a Roma (Biblioteca di storia dell’arte, vi)*, Rome, 1972, 180, index, s.v.

²⁶ Bibl. Corsini, Rome, ms 36. F. 27, fol. 172r. Boselli also notes that he wrote a discourse on the significance of the work.

Cf. M. Piacentini, “Le Osservazioni della Scultura Antica di Orfeo Boselli,” *Bollettino del Reale Istituto di Archeologia e Storia dell’Arte*, ix, 1939, 6, n. 3; P. D. Weil, “Contributions towards a History of Sculpture Techniques: I. Orfeo Boselli on the Restoration of Antique Sculpture,” *Studies in Conservation*, xii, 1967, 87, 97, n. 11.

Boselli may also have been responsible for the elaborate pedestal (Fig. 15) with eagles at the corners, relief landscapes representing cities, and phoenixes looking up toward radiant emblems of the zodiac.²⁷

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²⁷ On the pedestal cf. J. Villa-amil y Castro, "Grupo de mármol conocido por la Apotéosis de Cláudio que se conserva en el Museo Nacional de Pintura y Escultura," *Museo Español de Antigüedades*, v, 1875, 39ff. We may add that the image of the phoenix looking toward the zodiac recalls an emblem of the eagle gazing at the sun in G. Ruscelli's *Le imprese illustri*, Venice, 1566 (cf. F. A. Yates, "The Emblematic Conceit in Giordano Bruno's *De Gli Eroici Furori* and in the Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vi, 1943, 106) which, incidentally, appears as a religious symbol on the balustrade of the altar of the Sacrament in San Giovanni in Laterano.