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Source: *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (Sep., 1978), pp. 548-549

Published by: College Art Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3049822>

Accessed: 09/09/2008 14:30

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On the Pedestal of Bernini's Bust of the Savior

Irving Lavin

In an essay on Bernini's death and the art he made in preparation for it, I stressed the significance of the monumental support he designed for his last work, the great marble bust of the Savior, now in the Chrysler Museum at Norfolk, Virginia.¹ The pedestal is described in an early inventory as consisting of a socle surmounted by two kneeling angels who held in their hands a base of Sicilian jasper, on which the bust itself rested. The socle and angels, made of gilt wood, were nearly two meters high, the jasper base was 28cm high and 50cm wide at the bottom, and the bust is 93cm high, for a total of more than three meters. In a footnote I expressed puzzlement as to how the weight of an over lifesize marble bust was sustained in the hands of wooden angels.

I recently obtained a photograph of a splendid black chalk drawing in the Bernini codex in the Museum der bildenden Künste (Fig. 2), which is clearly an autograph study for the pair of kneeling angels and was no doubt executed in conjunction with the famous sketch for the bust in the Gabinetto delle Stampe in Rome (Fig. 1).² Although we still have no direct evidence for the lowermost part of the design, the Leipzig sketch makes several important contributions to our understanding of Bernini's conception.

The problem of supporting the sculpture was resolved by an ingenious use of drapery, which envelops the angels' arms and hands and falls in loose vertical folds to the socle below. The device should not be thought of simply as a deception; rather, in classic Berninesque fashion it makes a virtue of necessity, incorporating the ancient tradition of covering the hands of those who touch sacred things.³ In this case the ma-

terial seems to come from the shoulders and may have a liturgical, specifically Eucharistic import: the humeral veil worn during Mass by the subdeacon, who uses it to hold the paten on which the Host rests, and by the celebrant to carry the monstrance in the procession of Corpus Christi and in giving benediction with the Holy Sacrament.⁴ The top of the socle may have been stepped, as in certain comparable projects of the late period,⁵ but the sketch suggests that its upper surface was roughly domical; if so, it presumably referred to Mount Calvary, above which the image of the Savior is borne in triumph. This, too, has resonance in other works of Bernini, notably the equestrian statue of Louis XIV, which was shown at the summit of the rocky peak of Herculean virtue.⁶ The reference to the Crucifixion was echoed in the half-hidden gesture of Christ's left hand, which alludes to the wound from the lance of Saint Longinus. The base held by the angels was evidently polygonal, rather than round or square or oblong.⁷ This design, unique among Bernini's busts, serves to differentiate the portrait of Christ from those of ordinary men, and recalls the fact that the regular polygon was one of the shapes he considered most perfect.⁸ Finally, extrapolating to the drawing the dimensions given for the base, one deduces that the angels and the socle must each have been about a meter high. The angels would thus have appeared as "life-size" adolescents; placed at eye level, they provided a direct measure of the superhuman scale of the object they held aloft.

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¹ "Bernini's Death," *Art Bulletin*, LIV, 1972, 158–86, cf. 171ff.; also, "Afterthoughts on 'Bernini's Death,'" *ibid.*, LV, 1973, 429–436.

² 151 × 188mm. I am indebted for their kindness to Prof. Dr. Ernst Ullmann of Leipzig University, to Prof. Dr. Gerhard Winkler, Director of the Leipzig Museum, and to Karl-Heinz Mehnert, Curator of the drawing collection. The drawing is noted, without identification and as a workshop piece, in H. Brauer and R. Wittkower, *Die Zeichnungen des Gianlorenzo Bernini*, Berlin, 1931, 172, n. 2.

The Rome drawing measures 171 × 254 mm. The sketches are reproduced here in proportion to their actual sizes.

³ On the motive of veiled hands, see R. Hatfield, *Botticelli's Uffizi "Adoration." A Study in Pictorial Content*, Princeton, 1976, 35ff.

⁴ Cf. J. A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development (Missarum Sollemnia)*, 2 vols., New York, etc., 1951–55, II,

307; J. O'Connell, *The Celebration of Mass. A Study of the Rubrics of the Roman Missal*, 3 vols., Milwaukee, 1940–41, I, 268f.

⁵ See the sketches for sacrament altars reproduced in Brauer and Wittkower, *Zeichnungen*, pls. 131a, 133.

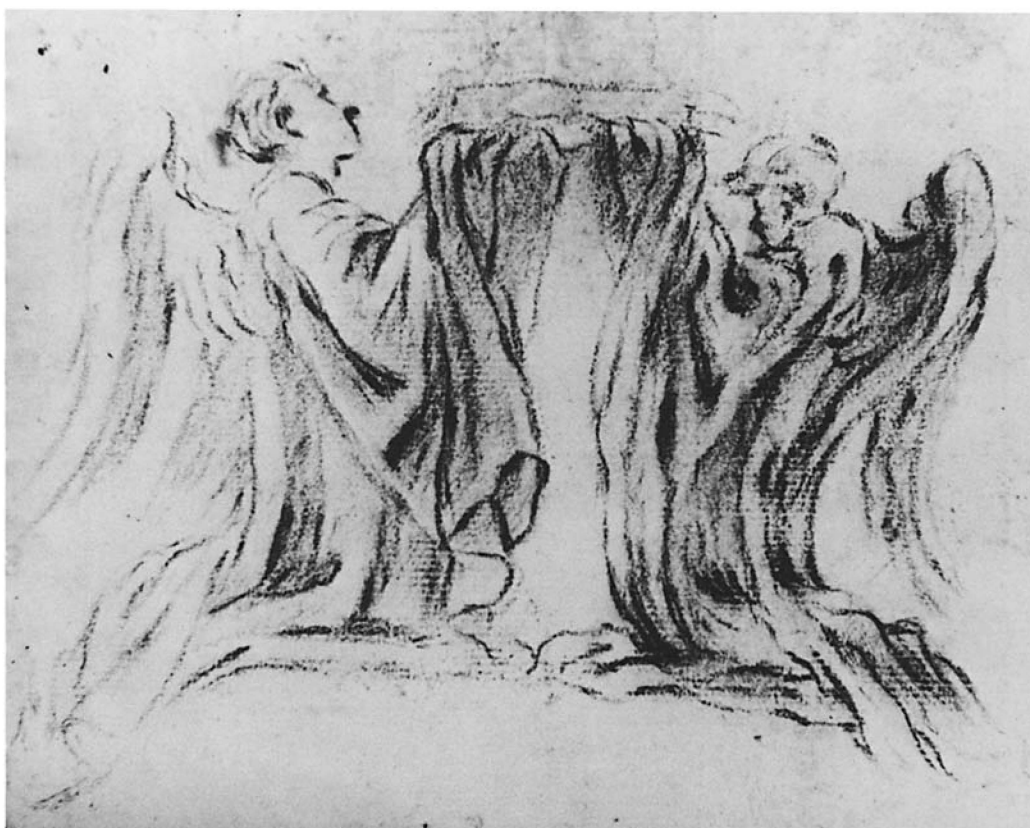
⁶ Cf. R. Wittkower, "The Vicissitudes of a Dynastic Monument. Bernini's Statue of Louis XV," in M. Meiss, ed., *De Artibus Opuscula*, XL. *Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky*, New York, 1961, 497–531.

⁷ The polygonal design of the base is reflected in that of the copy of the Savior in Sées Cathedral (partly visible in Lavin, "Afterthoughts," fig. 2).

⁸ See the record of Bernini's statement in Paris in 1665, in L. Lalanne, ed., *Journal du voyage du Cavalier Bernin en France par M. De Chantelou*, Paris, 1885, 167.



1 Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Study for the Bust of the Savior*, drawing. Rome, Gabinetto Nazionale delle Stampe



2 Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Study for the upper part of the pedestal of the Bust of the Savior*, drawing. Leipzig, Museum der bildenden Künste