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*Realms of Light: The Baroque*

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Art of the Western World  
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### Pietro da Cortona—The Barberini Ceiling

In many ways the age of the Baroque was the dawn of a new era and people were acutely aware that somehow the human spirit had received a great infusion of power. One work of art, perhaps more than any other in Italy, both displays the new spirit and at the same time celebrates its descent upon the world. This is the frescoed vault by the painter Pietro da Cortona in the main ceremonial hall of the Barberini palace, built in Rome during the second quarter of the seventeenth century for the family of the newly elected pope, Urban VIII, the man who perhaps more than any other embodied and promulgated the transformation (**Fig. 1**).

We feel its bold aggressiveness at a glance: the space of the room fairly erupts with turbulent masses of exuberant, cloud-borne and free-floating figures who perform a breathtaking aerial drama against the background of a heavy architectural vault and open sky beyond. Cortona succeeded in making even Michelangelo's mighty Sistine ceiling seem thin and fragile—a delicate house of cards populated by a series of sedate and isolated individuals, each viewed and illuminated uniformly from the front and quite

oblivious to the series of small narrative scenes that march along the ceiling in regular rhythms, without any strongly defined focus (**Fig. 2**).

Cortona instead conceived the vault as one, coherent, centrally focused unit, with four large but subordinate narrative panels along the sides, framing a single opening to the sky. The narratives are not confined within their frames but spill out and become part of the decoration of the vault itself. The illumination is not uniform; Cortona fills the whole field of vision with billowing contrasts that are created by light streaming down from a single source in the distant heavens. The accompanying figures are no longer attached to the architecture but seem to have freed themselves and taken flight, all viewed from a single standpoint below and all participating in a single event taking place at the apex. The figures are not simply noble and muscular; they seem to be inflated by some superhuman principle of vitality that incorporated the urgent and heroic message of which they are the inspired agents.

The message is also a kind of intensification and concentration of that of the Sistine Ceiling. Christianity regarded itself as the successor to the two great religions of antiquity: Judaism and paganism. The Sistine ceiling recites the sequence of events that led through the promise of the Old Testament up to the fulfillment in the New. The Barberini ceiling expresses essentially the same idea with respect to pagan mythology, except in a more structured way and with a more precise aim. The episodes that decorate the sides of the vault—such as Hercules dispatching the Harpies, and Minerva defeating the Giants—are not told sequentially but are selected and arranged, like the design of the vault, in a coherent system of values. The moral significance of these events from the pagan past for the Christian present is embodied in the airborne personifications of

Justice, Wisdom, Peace, and so on, who occupy the real space of the room, and testify that those ancient presagements have indeed been subsumed beneath the infinitely greater power of the Christian virtues that now inhabit the world.

The new regime of beneficence was inaugurated the day Urban VIII was elected pope, the event celebrated in the open center of the vault where the crucial interchange between the earthly and heavenly realms takes place. There the grandiose figure of Divine Providence, the heroine of the drama, sits on a throne of clouds, her head radiating light; she points toward a chorus of floating maidens who carry aloft an emblem of the pope's coat of arms: a flight of three enormous bees—the famous Barberini bees—plus the crossed keys to heaven that Christ had given to St. Peter, the first pope, and the papal tiara poised for the coronation of Peter's latest successor (**Fig. 3**). The miracle-working bee, which transforms nectar into honey, was a traditional symbol of Divine Providence. But what motivates the whole conception of the vault, giving it a kind of inner vibrancy of meaning analogous to the dynamism of the fresco itself, is the allusion to a wondrous thing that happened during the conclave of cardinals at which Urban was elected. A real swarm of bees actually flew into the Sistine Chapel, where papal conclaves are always held. Of course, the outcome of every papal election, no matter how fraught with controversy and political maneuvering, is the expression of God's will. But the descent of a flight of bees at the election of a man whose own personal emblem was studded with a trinity of bees, must have seemed truly heaven sent—a resounding herald of the new era of spiritual and material well-being in which, under Urban VIII, peace, prosperity and the virtues of Christianity would reign supreme.

### **Gianlorenzo Bernini—Chapel of St. Teresa**

It is your good luck to see Maffeo Barberini pope, but we are even luckier in that the Cavaliere Bernini lives at the time of our pontificate. He is a rare man and a sublime artist born by divine disposition, and for the glory of Rome.

These statements by the great pope about his favorite artist are significant in two ways. They were prophetic of the prodigious role Bernini would play in his works for Urban and the succeeding popes for a period of 60 years; Rome was transformed into a modern city, replete with public monuments meant not just for the elite but for everyone to admire and enjoy. The open arms of the vast porticoes in front of St. Peter's convey exactly this sense of outreach beyond the traditional bonds of society to include every individual in a universal embrace.

Urban's words also reflect the awareness, expressed in the Barberini ceiling, that there was something extraordinarily, even supernaturally propitious about the period and the people born to give it form. This dual concern for incorporating the individual into a comprehensive world order of divine perfection is made visible in what Bernini rather archly described as his "least bad" work: the Cornaro family chapel, dedicated to the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic St. Teresa of Avila, which Bernini created about 1650 in the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome (**Figs. 4, 5**). Here Bernini gave entirely new expression to the Church's offer of succor in man's deepest and darkest moment of need. He used the mortuary chapel to define the inner relationship between the death of ordinary mortals who yearn for help, the death of sainted mortals who may

intermediate on our behalf, and the death of Christ through which the salvation of all mankind was assured.

The process begins at the entrance to the church, when our eyes are met by those of the cardinal patron who looks out from among his ancestors and accompanies the visitor down the nave to view the chapel from the center of the crossing. There we are confronted, in the relatively modest and confined space of the chapel, with a spectacle of truly cosmic proportions. In the pavement before the altar gesticulating skeletons rise from the lower depths to face their maker at the end of time (**Fig. 6**). At the sides the members of the Cornaro family appear in balconies with architectural backgrounds whose perspectives merge with that of the church—from this vantage point their space becomes indistinguishable from ours (**Fig. 7**). Separately and together they consider, study, discuss, describe, indicate, and thereby bear witness to a mysterious event in which they participate, encouraging us to join them.

The vault of the chapel has scenes from St. Teresa's life in real, not feigned stucco relief; unlike Cortona's Barberini vault there is no opening here. By superimposing a layer of painted molded plaster over the raised relief, Bernini makes a chorus of winged and cloud-borne angels, singing, playing instruments and strewing flowers, seem to filter through the solid vault, filling the chapel with their fragrant hymns of praise and celebration.

What the pavement, the side walls, and the ceiling all celebrate is the two-fold miracle event taking place at the altar, the Institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, represented on the front of the altar, and its counterpart in the Glorification of St. Teresa represented above. Here Bernini created a visual sensation by making a public spectacle

of a literal portrayal of a woman in ecstasy. Teresa is shown reclining on a cloud, her limbs dangling limp, her head thrown back, her mouth open in an anguished groan. Before her a curly headed cherub with an almost compassionate smile, delicately lifts the hem of her robe and thrusts the fiery dart. Teresa's abdomen contracts in a paroxysm of receptivity. Her very drapery seems to crackle with the consuming ardor of the angelic touch that raises her heavenward.

The overt sensual content of Bernini's altarpiece has been the subject of untold controversy. Teresa's visions have themselves been interpreted as hysterically induced eroticism, and Bernini was accused even in his own day of reducing her experience to the level of vulgarity. Whether or not Teresa was hysterical or Bernini vulgar, the group evinces a physical eroticism it would be wrong to deny. From time immemorial, beginning with the Song of Songs of the Bible, mystics have used the vocabulary of earthly love to convey their feelings to others—communion with God is like communion with the lover, only infinitely more so.

This is the path Bernini boldly followed in helping ordinary mortals to perceive, however faintly, a state of being of which our earthly experience is but a pale reflection. Indeed the pure white image, glowing softly in the shower of half-light, hovers before us like an apparition midway between nothingness and reality.

Bernini's altarpiece fuses three episodes in Teresa's spiritual life that together embody the quintessential nature of her sainthood. One of these was the famous vision of the Transverberation, which she describes in her autobiography. "In the angel's hands I saw a long golden spear, and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he pierced my heart several times so that it penetrated my entrails. When he

drew it out he left me completely afire with a great love for God." The second event was an occasion when, upon receiving communion at mass, she was seen to levitate, actually rising several feet above the ground on a cloud. The third was Teresa's death which, it was reported by those present, did not occur from natural causes; after receiving her last communion, the elderly and rather homely woman suddenly became young and radiantly beautiful, and expired in a transport of love, uttering terms of endearment to her heavenly spouse. In other words, Teresa was a martyr, not in the sense of dying for her faith but in the sense of dying of her faith. This mystical marriage to God is the key to Teresa's sainthood, the key to her role in salvation, and it is the key to the chapel's design. Never before had a volume of space been treated with such pervasive and encompassing unity; all the parts—the floors, the side reliefs, the vault and the altarpiece—are not only related to one another, they interpenetrate, to the point where we can no longer distinguish the media from one another: is the floor a pavement to be walked on or a painting to be looked at? Are the side reliefs sculpture or architecture? Is the vault apparition painting or molded stucco? Is the altar tabernacle a little temple or a niche in the wall? Is the altarpiece illuminated by the light from the small window above or by the coagulated golden rays behind? Is the altarpiece a relief or free-standing sculpture?

It is as though Bernini sought to give visual form to Teresa's union with God by the unity of his chapel design; to suggest the fusion of our nature with Teresa's and hers in turn with her spouse's, by the fusion of architecture, sculpture, and painting into one seminal substance of creation. Love, in the form of charity, is the prime Christian virtue, and love is the ultimate principle of creation. The prime tenet of Christianity is that God created the world out of his love for humanity. Imitating God, Bernini made love and



creation the key to his chapel: he as much as said so when he placed at the apex of the entrance vault a pair of angels who carry Teresa's wedding (bridal) wreath, and an inscription bearing the beautiful words Christ spoke to Teresa in another of her visions: "If I had not created heaven, I would create it for you alone."

In a way, the Teresa chapel can be understood as a kind of sublime theater spectacle. The Baroque was indeed a great age of illusionism in the theater, and Bernini was himself renowned as a theatrical producer, playwright and inventor of wonderful stage effects. His tricks, however, were of a different order than those of his contemporaries. In one play, for example, an actor with a torch "accidentally" sets the scenery on fire, threatening to burn the theater down; in another, the bank of a river scene on stage suddenly gives way, threatening to submerge the audience in a flood. The secret of Bernini's success was that upon the illusion normally expected in the theater, he superimposed another illusion that was unexpected and in which the audience was directly involved. In an instant, each individual spectator became an actor, conscious of himself as a passionate participant in a universal happening. So it is in the Teresa chapel, where Bernini made of his own creation the image of all creation.





Fig. 1 Pietro da Cortona, vault, ceremonial hall. Palazzo Barberini, Rome.

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Fig. 2 Michelangelo, Sistine ceiling. Sistine chapel, Rome.

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Fig. 3 Pietro da Cortona, *Divine Providence and the Coronation of Urban VIII*. Palazzo Barberini, Rome.





Fig. 4 Bernini, Chapel of St. Teresa. Cornaro Chapel, S. Maria della Vittoria, Rome.

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Fig. 5 Bernini, Ecstasy of St. Teresa. Cornaro Chapel, S. Maria della Vittoria, Rome.

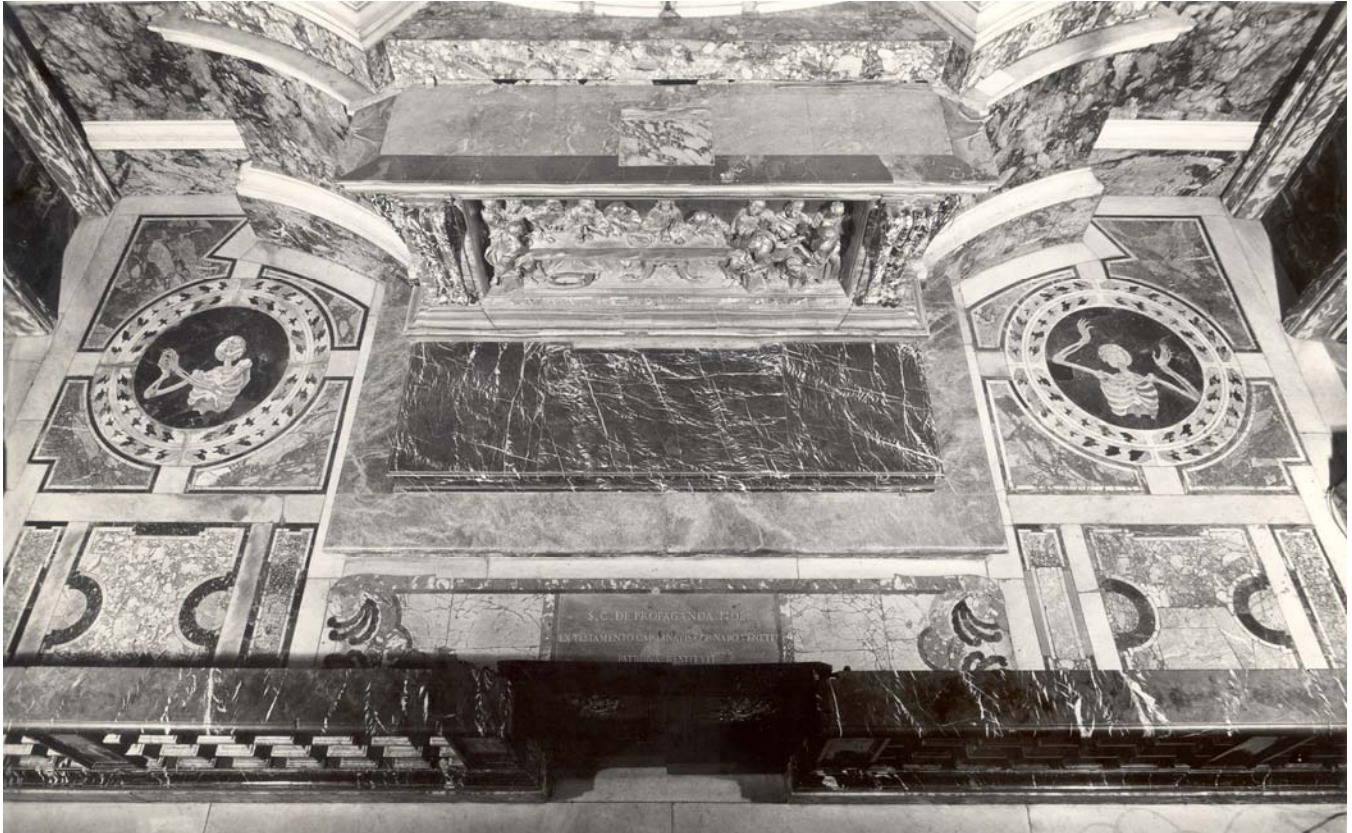


Fig. 6 Bernini, Chapel of St. Teresa. Cornaro Chapel, floor, S. Maria della Vittoria, Rome.





Fig. 7 Bernini, Chapel of St. Teresa. Cornaro Chapel, side panels, S. Maria della Vittoria, Rome

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