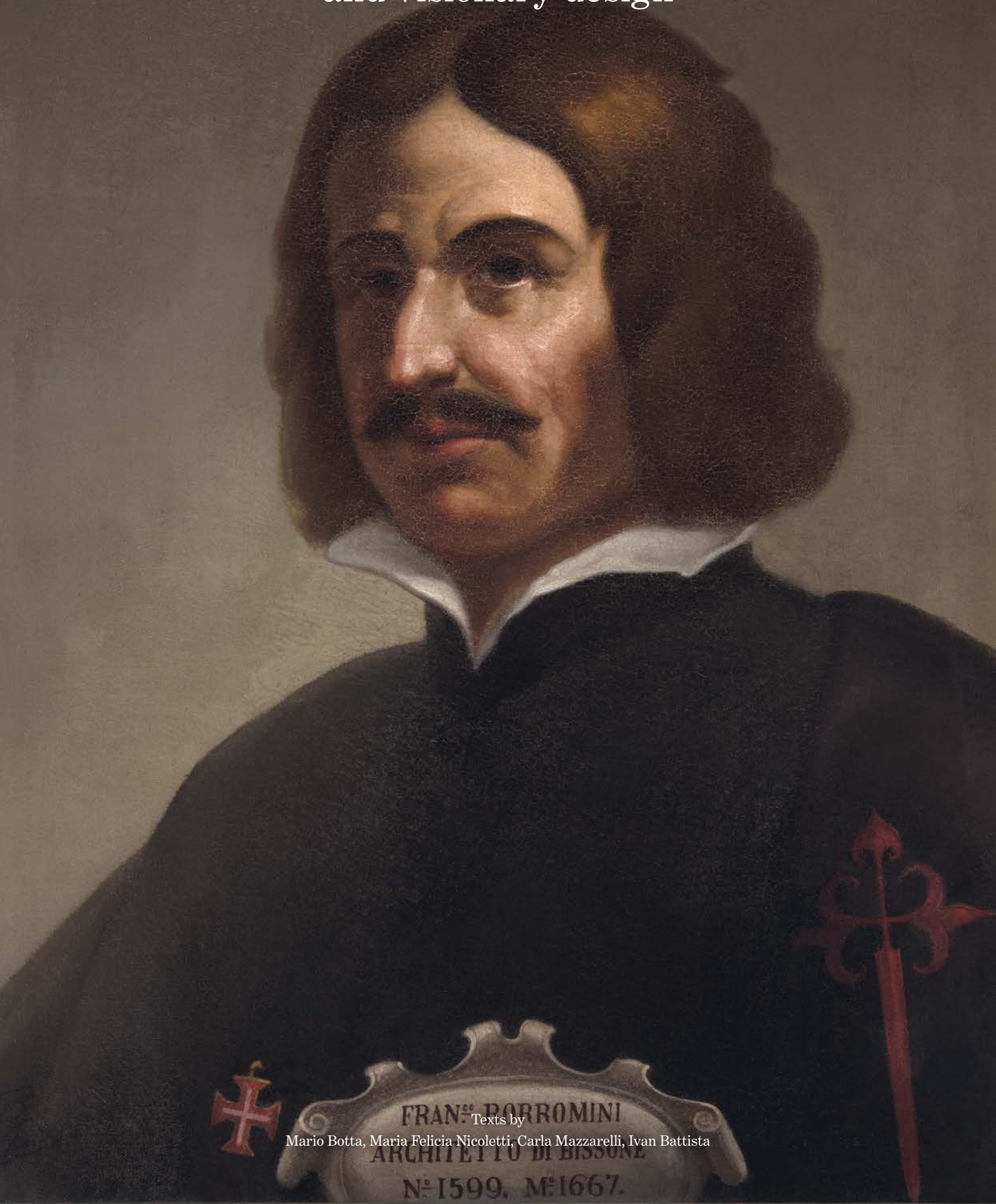


FRANCESCO BORROMINI

Severity as a source of innovation
and visionary design



Texts by
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Introduction

Francesco Castelli, also known as Borromini, was born in Bissone on 27 September 1599. As a young boy, he studied at the cathedral school in Milan and subsequently in Rome, where he met Carlo Maderno. Between 1637 and 1641, he built San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane for the Order of the Discalced Trinitarians in Rome. The church is considered a Baroque masterpiece and a perfect example of a new work being woven into the city's historical fabric.

1999 marked the fourth centenary of Borromini's birth, with three European cities celebrating the occasion with events and exhibitions dedicated to the architect:

- Rome, the proud home of the master's works;*
- Vienna, which holds the majority of his sketches at the Albertina;*
- Lugano and its lake, the architect's birthplace.*

In addition, the University of Lugano (USI) was being established at the time and it seemed fitting for the Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio to take part in the event as a tribute to the memory of the architectural genius of the Baroque era. It was a way of settling a debt of gratitude to those architects and builders who had left these parts and emigrated to all four corners of the world, as well as bearing witness to the country's new institutional commitment to the Academy of Architecture, which in all likelihood would never have had reason to exist were it not for Borromini and the great emigrant artists. We therefore conceived of the idea of constructing a wooden replica of Borromini's early masterpiece beside Lake Lugano: a "rational work of folly", as the then cantonal councillor Giuseppe Buffi described it. The project took its inspiration from a surprising claim made by Carlo Dossi, a writer from Como who, in his "Note Azzurre" (Memoirs in Blue), maintained: "Architecture in general takes its dominant themes from shapes found in the natural world (landscape) surrounding the artist." We wanted to prove this apparent "correlation". Is there a direct link between the shape of the landscape as seen by the young architect and the reality of an architectural work like San Carlino? How did he develop and then model his first glimpses of the view over the mountains and lake? What did he feel when he first saw them? How did he come to define the spatial relationships between solid masses and empty spaces? What makes decontextualising a piece of architecture (in this case from Rome to Lugano) so fascinating is that it presents a distinct ambiguity in that, on the one hand, the work comes across as a true and accurate representation (San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, reproduced in its original form based on the relief), while, on the other hand, it constitutes a new reality which, built true to scale at a height of almost 33 metres, becomes an authentic element to be compared against the buildings on the lakeside. In the years following, Borromini "returned" to the Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio thanks to the introduction of a biennial teaching post in history of architecture that bears his name.

Page 1:
Anonymous,
Portrait of Francesco
Borromini, undated,
oil on canvas.

Left:
Mario Botta, a
life-size wooden
reconstruction of
San Carlino on Lake
Lugano, 1999.

Mario Botta
Architect



EQUES FRANCISCUS BORROMINIUS COMENSIS
HUIUS ECCLESIAE ET CONUENTUS S. CAROLI AD QUATUOR
FONTES PRÆCLARISSIMUS ARCHITECTUS ATQUE
INSIGNIS BENEFACTOR OBYT ROMAË 1667.

“Full of ideas and invention”: Francesco Borromini (1599-1667)

by Maria Felicia Nicoletti*



Left:
Anonymous, *Portrait of Francesco Borromini*,
undated, oil on canvas, *San Carlo alle Quattro
Fontane*, 114x88.5 cm, Rome.

This page:
Unknown, *View of Bissonne from the Lake*,
undated, oil on wood, 20x30 cm

“Utterly immersed and engrossed in continuous thought.”¹

“[...] grasping for a dress sword, which he took from between the blessed candles at the head of the bed, he thrust it upwards into his body towards his back and, thus curiously wounded and pierced by the blade, he fell from the bed onto the ground.”

Thus, on 3 August 1667, one of the most brilliant and controversial figures in the history of architecture breathed his last: Francesco Borromini, so revered by his admirers and so despised by his critics, yet nevertheless remembered and appreciated in perpetuity for his indisputable talent.

He had been “plunged into a state of extreme hypochondria” for some time,² aggravated by the sudden death of Fioravante Martinelli, one of his closest friends with whom he shared an ambitious publishing project.³ It was a huge loss that only added to the frustration caused by a string of professional failures over the past few months.⁴ The “bewildered eyes” that frightened his acquaintances were a window onto the anguish that tormented him, forcing him to shut himself in at home “in continuous thought”. Unable to sleep on that long summer’s evening, he had asked his assistant for a candle to write by, but his categorical refusal on the grounds that “the doctor requests that you rest, my lord”⁵ had turned his “impatience” into desperation, to the point of performing that extreme act, which comes across almost as an attempt to oppose any kind of compromise. He had been obstinate his entire life after all, prepared even to defy the Pope, the greatest religious and political authority of the Papal States, whenever he felt that his own dignity and, especially, his professional abilities, were being called into question.

During the prolonged agony he experienced before his death, he gave very particular instructions for his last will. In particular, he asked to be buried in the church of *San Giovanni dei Fiorentini* in Rome in the tomb of architect Carlo Maderno, and named his nephew Bernardo heir to all his fortune, on the condition that he marry Maderno’s niece.

This was not merely an expression of the close bond that tied him to his once master, who at this point had been gone for almost forty years (Maderno died in 1629), but was rather a sort of return to the past or, more accurately, to his roots, both having trodden the same path which, at different times, had led them from Lake Lugano to find their fortunes in the Eternal City, just as hordes of people from Ticino had done before and continued to thereafter.

Family tradition

Francesco Castelli Borromini was born on 27 September 1599 in Bissone, a village by Lake Lugano that had been annexed to Switzerland since 1515 but was still a part of the extended diocese of Como.

For hundreds of years, a phenomenon of migration characterised the so-called region of lakes nestled between Italy and Switzerland (Lakes Como, Lugano and Maggiore) whose residents, driven by a desire to improve their socio-economic status, moved, either temporarily or for good, to wherever the work called them, specialising particularly in professions connected to construction.⁶ Bricklayers, plasterers, stonemasons, painters and architects, often members of the same family, organised themselves into efficient building enterprises, whose greatest strengths were their speed and technical reliability and contributed to their success in the competitive landscape of the building industry. A great many labourers came from the Intelvi, Arogno, Bedano, Coldrerio, Maroggia, Melide, Morcote and Rovio valleys as well as from numerous other villages. They were often entrusted with the major commissions, establishing a real monopoly that crushed local workers.

Francesco’s home town was a typical example of this: Bissone was in fact home to various families who supplied specialist manual labour to numerous building projects across Europe, among them the Bussi family (who worked in Austria, Hungary and the Kingdom of Bohemia), the Caratti family (Kingdom of Bohemia), the Gaggini family (Italy and Spain), the Porri family (Poland, Germany and Sweden) and the Tencalla family (Kingdom of Bohemia, Poland and Germany). Closing the loop even further, the building industry formed the

Giovanni Antonio Magini, *The Alpine Part of the Duchy of Milan Showing Lake Maggiore, Lake Lugano and Lake Como*, map published in 1620. 35.2x48.3 cm.



professional sphere of his own family:⁷ his father, Giovanni Domenico Castelli, also known as “il Bissone”,⁸ was an architect in the service of the noble Visconti Borromeo family. His mother, Anastasia, came from the Garvo (or Garovi) family, who had consolidated their socio-economic status with the help of two brothers, Leone (Anastasia’s father and Borromini’s grandfather) and Francesco, both admired architects in the far-flung regions of Moravia and Bohemia. Among the many relations connecting the Garvos to other local families of artists,⁹ the most notable were the Madernos living seven kilometres south of Bissone in Capolago. Leone Garvo, Francesco Borromini’s cousin, had in fact become the nephew-in-law of Carlo Maderno (1556-1629) after marrying Cecilia Garovaglio, daughter of the architect’s sister, Marta Maderno.¹⁰ Maderno was a distinguished relative who would go on to have a significant impact on the lives of the two cousins and on their future career choices. Maderno was not only one of the most prominent architects in Rome, holding some of the highest positions in the city,¹¹ he was also rightly considered the successor to the Fontana brothers, his uncles Domenico and Giovanni. Having arrived in Rome in the 1560s, the two brothers gradually established themselves on the Roman scene before taking complete control of public building work during the

pontificate of Sixtus V (1585-1590). The role of “principle architect in charge of all construction work”,¹² which the Pope awarded to Domenico Fontana after the incredible erection of the Vatican obelisk in St. Peter’s Square (1586), was an achievement which reinforced his superiority. News of his fame had certainly reached his ancestral homelands and one can assume that it flourished right up until Borromini’s time thirteen years later, spreading from Fontana’s birthplace of Melide on the opposite shore of Lake Lugano from Bissone.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Francesco Borromini inherited the call to emigrate and the passion for architecture, choosing to specialise in the art of stone carving. His physical constitution with “strong and robust limbs”¹³ was well suited to the arduous work of a stonemason.

Milan at the time of Saint Charles Borromeo

To ensure that he gained a reasonable education, Francesco faced his first move away from home at the tender age of nine, relocating from his native village by Lake Lugano to Milan, one of the richest and most populous cities in Europe and capital of the eponymous Duchy, at that time under Spanish rule.¹⁴ His arrival there coincided with the canonisation of Saint Charles Borromeo (1610), the most influential citizen of

Francesco Borromini.
Façade of the Oratory
of Saint Philip Neri,
drawing,
40.4x33.8 cm.

the second half of the 16th century, whose pastoral spirit, driven by a keen sense of obligation, had made a significant mark not only on the religious but also on the artistic and architectural worlds. His reforming work had found a faithful follower in the form of his cousin, cardinal Federico Borromeo, who became the champion of an extraordinary project: the opening of the *Biblioteca Ambrosiana* (1609), one of the first public libraries and home of the cardinal's beloved collection of manuscripts in Greek, Latin and the vernacular. In those years, the mathematician Muzio Oddi, a friend of Galileo Galilei's, began lecturing in mathematics, perspective and architecture, adding to the city's varied educational programme. The atmosphere in Milan therefore offered a wealth of religious debate and intellectual stimulation, which clearly influenced the inquisitive and receptive personality of the young boy from Ticino. The architectural world was also characterised by a fertile experimentalism thanks to the work of Galeazzo Alessi, Pellegrino Tibaldi and Francesco Maria Ricchino. This was the same Francesco Maria Ricchino who had worked on the cathedral construction project, the most important in the city, at the time Francesco was completing his apprenticeship with Gian Andrea Biffi. The renowned sculptor ran a school of design

inside the same cathedral, training future sculptors and architects in stone carving and the art of sculpture. Biffi's professional work was aimed at the most prestigious patrons and his works were often to be interpreted symbolically, as was typical for the cultural scene in Milan, which exerted a considerable influence over his apprentice. Ultimately, Borromini's stay in Milan was a hugely fruitful time and in the years following, after becoming fully established in Rome, he would continue to identify as *mediolanense* – Milanese – claiming an affinity with the city that had moulded his character. Moreover, he had acquired a remarkable aptitude for stone cutting and a rare mastery of design coupled with an in-depth knowledge of local art. Equipped with this solid grounding, he was ready to “go to Rome to see the great things of that city he had heard so much about”.¹⁵

Continuing to learn

Borromini's training had by no means come to an end, however: the monuments of ancient Rome and the Renaissance presented themselves for the edification of the young aspiring architect, who had great ambition and a thirst for knowledge. His motto, “those who follow on behind will never get ahead”, was a challenge to his unrivalled role model, Michelangelo Buonarroti, whose bust had pride of place in his house.¹⁶ Borromini thus had a very clear mission in mind that had forced him to leave Milan unbeknown to his parents, paying his way with money stolen from his father (1619).

The first step towards his goal was to establish himself on the scene in Rome under the protection of relations already living in the city, as was the usual practice for Ticinese workers. In fact it was his cousin, Leone Garvo, who took him into his own home and got him a job on the construction project of St. Peter's Basilica, where he took on the role of master stonemason. As in Milan, Borromini also had the good fortune (and ability, of course) in Rome to work on the city's most important construction project, which he studied in scrupulous detail. While the other stonemasons

“went to eat or play tiles during their break for lunch, he entered the great



Francesco Borromini.
Solomonic column for
the ciborium of
the altar of the
Confessione at Saint
Peter's, pen and
sepia wash on paper,
49.6x21.4 cm.

basilica, where he set about sketching figures, measuring architectural features and carrying out other studies of this kind. From all of this work, which, astonishingly, you can glimpse as you enter the cathedral, came his incredible genius.”

There, in the vast and lonely basilica, hunched over sheets of drawings, the architect of the Fabric of St. Peter, Carlo Maderno, encountered the young man and his exquisite designs. The two Ticinese men, whose requirements complemented each other perfectly, had an excellent working relationship thanks to their family ties. For Maderno, now an old man suffering from ill health, the aspiring architect with his wealth of ideas and talent was a valuable support on the demanding construction projects that he supervised. For Borromini, on the other hand, the partnership with this celebrated relation meant access to the best teacher in Rome, who had managed the most challenging construction projects of the last 35 years and had no doubt kept hold of all the drawings, contracts and expertise. Carlo had in fact trained on the construction projects of Borromini's Fontana uncles, taking over the family business when Domenico moved to Naples (1594) and continuing to work alongside Giovanni, who had died just a few years earlier (1614). In addition to this, there were also several commissions inherited after the deaths of two other leading architects in Rome: Francesco da Volterra (1594) and Giacomo della Porta (1602).¹⁷ Carlo's depository of incomparable technical expertise, which had enabled obelisks and columns to be erected in piazzas across Rome, his knowledge of hydraulics required to build aqueducts, fountains, water features in the city and suburban villas and, finally, his organisational abilities, which had allowed him to manage multiple projects at once, were now all at Borromini's disposal, who would not fail to make them his own and apply them in his future professional work. To the experience he inherited from Maderno, Borromini would add his own talent for invention, a virtue that he would dedicate his entire life to pursuing, both in his more contemplative moments and while working,



despite being aware that “if your work involves inventing something new, you do not see the fruit of your labours until much later, if indeed at all”.¹⁸ His well-stocked library bears witness to his intensive theoretical study. It contained an impressive 917 books by the time he died, which were spread across his study and bedroom and far surpassed not only the libraries belonging to his relatives (Domenica Fontana had 96 books and Carlo Maderno only 23) but all those belonging to his fellow architects in Rome.¹⁹

As well as reading, Borromini also continuously practised his drawing, an expression of his creativity which he used to investigate all the possible alternatives for a project before settling on a solution. Moreover, his drawings represented a powerful means of communication directed firstly at the workers, giving clear instructions for managing the construction project, and secondly at

the patron who was in a position to articulate the full groundbreaking force of his projects. The care with which he crafted his designs, which he considered to be “his children”, is also evident from the various pieces of equipment that he owned:²⁰ the “desk for drawing”, “two drawing pens, an awl and a brass ‘tocca lapis’ [a special architect’s pencil], a “large iron set square”, “a little case containing various paints” and, above all, numerous pairs of compasses (eight pairs of brass “proportional and mathematical compasses”; three brass pairs, “one double and two simple”; one “expertly crafted pair made of iron”). The compass was at the time the very symbol of architects, who were invariably depicted holding a pair.

In addition to his two-dimensional drawings, Borromini also used three-dimensional models to test his projects. He “made them out of wax, sometimes earth, with his own hands”. At home, he even kept a small case of *abele*²¹ containing “various pieces of wax tablets for modelling” ready to use. Wax and clay: malleable materials that could easily be used to recreate the undulating lines that characterise his work. His inquisitive nature led him to collect all manner of different objects, including equipment for his work such as the “brass mathematical instrument” and the “mirror for drawing from a distance”, which refers to the study of perspective that was very much in vogue in the seventeenth century.

Architecture as a vocation

Borromini’s profession initially progressed along two parallel yet seemingly incompatible tracks: he practised both as a stonemason, cutting tough and heavy stone blocks, and as a designer, swapping his chisel for a pencil that he moved dexterously over the pages of his sketchbook. The former secured his financial independence, while the latter opened up the way to becoming a professional architect.

The sudden death of his cousin Leone as the result of an accident at St. Peter’s Basilica (1620) finally brought his freedom: the following year, under Maderno’s supervision, he inherited his cousin’s marble and other effects, establishing a business with stonemasons Girolamo Novo and

Bernardino Daria, both of whom came from the diocese of Como and had been in Rome for some years. He is recorded as being involved in various Papal projects a few years later, accompanied by a Ticinese man, Battista Castelli, and two Tuscans, Carlo Fancelli and Agostino Radi, demonstrating that he was no longer moving exclusively in Ticinese circles. Among other things, Agostino Radi was the brother-in-law of the young sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Borromini’s contemporary, who at the time had already won over the Papal court and had been given the momentous task of building the bronze baldachin (1624) to be placed beneath the dome of St. Peter’s.

Recorded as the official master stonemason at the *Università dei Marmorari di Roma* (the university of marble workers in Rome, 1628),²² Borromini provided multiple designs for construction projects supervised by Maderno during the same period, including that of the dome that he sketched out “on the wall” for those working on the church of *Sant’Andrea della Valle*.²³ The professional and personal relationship that had grown between Borromini and Maderno did not cease until the latter’s death, by which time Borromini was ready to take the leap of faith and become an architect. Borromini’s outrage was inevitable, then, when Pope Urban VIII did not appoint him architect of the Fabric of St. Peter and successor to Maderno after many years as his assistant. Instead, the Pope opted for his favourite artist, Bernini, despite the latter having little experience of the world of architecture.

Rivers of ink have been spilled over the bitter rivalry that set these two geniuses of the seventeenth century against each other: on the one hand, the brilliant and versatile Bernini so adored by his clients; on the other, the “difficult and inflexible”²⁴ Borromini, who threatened to leave the construction project if his orders were ignored, sometimes provoking irreconcilable arguments with his patrons.

Indeed, although the competition between the two ambitious young men could not perhaps be avoided, it was exacerbated by the conflict that had existed on Rome’s artistic scene for decades, placing architects whose training was based on drawing

at odds with those with a predominantly practical training focused on construction projects. Even if Borromini showed a flair for design that prompted Bernini to involve him as an assistant on his first projects, in reality, Bernini and his circle still saw him as the Lombard stonemason and successor to the Fontana brothers, who were “brilliant with stone” but not exactly *talented* architects, as they were rather unflatteringly branded at the end of the 16th century.²⁵ This was a prejudice that Borromini would disprove with his work, creating projects that brought together his knowledge of construction and virtuosity for design, never an end in itself, but always sensitive to his patrons’ requirements.

It was Bernini himself who, at the request of Francesco Barberini, recommended “Maderno’s nephew”²⁶ for the position of architect at the *Sapienza*, the University of Rome (1632): his first role as an architect. This appointment granted him access to a refined cultural circle including collector and antiques dealer Cassiano Dal Pozzo and mathematician Benedetto Castelli, an apprentice of Galileo’s. As well as influencing his understanding of architecture as a “study in applied mathematics”,²⁷ the input he received from them found expression in the eccentric church of *Sant’Ivo della Sapienza*, which presented itself as a *unicum*, a unique specimen in the history of architecture.

Its unique character is something that his contemporaries also highlighted in the church of *San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane* (1634), which

“all believe to be so rare that it seems it will not find its like in artifice, playfulness and singular, extraordinary character in all the world. The many different nations will bear witness to this, who request his designs as ceaselessly as they descend upon Rome.”²⁸

While he supervised work on *San Carlo*, Borromini was also appointed architect for the Congregation of the Oratory (1637), founded by Saint Philip Neri who played a leading role in Rome’s social and religious life. Borromini held the position for thirteen years, redesigning the entire Philippine

complex and establishing a fruitful collaboration with the oratorian Virgilio Spada, who took it upon himself to compose an accurate description of the work performed in Borromini’s name, clarifying the reasons for the choices he made.

Having gained some respect on the Roman scene, the high-profile commissions began flooding in, including some for more modest clients. Work for these clients never passed unnoticed, however. Other religious orders, eminent cardinals, rich merchants and members of the Roman nobility called on Borromini to design churches and convents, imposing palaces and sumptuous



chapels, including outside Rome.

His success reached its peak during the papacy of Innocent X (1644-1655) who, unlike his predecessor (Urban VIII) and successor (Alexander VII), preferred him over Bernini. He secured the appointment of architect to the rich and powerful Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith – *De Propaganda Fide* – winning involvement in the main Papal commissions and, above all, the most prestigious position of his entire career: the reconstruction of the basilica of Saint John in Lateran, which respected the existing features and kept to the non-negotiable deadline of the jubilee proclaimed by the Pope (1650). Innocent’s satisfaction with the results earned Borromini

Roman engraver,
*San Carlo alle Quattro
Fontane*, c. 1680 –
1699, etching,
49x39.6 cm.



the Supreme Order of Christ, which granted him the right to the honourable title of knight and a substantial grant of 3,000 scudi, “which was extremely useful capital and added a little comfort to his life”.²⁹

Despite living a dignified life with the money he earned from his profession, Borromini did not seek to increase his assets. Unlike Fontana and Maderno, who diversified their income with activities relating to construction projects (for example transporting materials) or financial investments (loans in businesses, public debts known as “luoghi di monte”, interest income), Borromini, apart from a few loans granted in the 1630s,³⁰ limited himself to depositing his savings at the *Banco del Monte di Pietà*, leaving behind an inheritance of 9,450 scudi on his death.³¹ His main expenditure was probably dedicated to acquiring the books, paintings and various objects that adorned his house, which was situated close to the church of *San Giovanni dei Fiorentini* but must have been rather modest.³² Furthermore, his clothes were out of fashion and his food simple. He never married and was no womaniser. He led a modest life, then, seemingly detached from any excess and utterly devoted to “his art, for the love of which he never ceased to work”.³³

There was no shortage of dark moments, however: his dismissal from the *Sant'Agnese* construction project (1657) or the murder of Marco Antonio Bussoni (1649), who, having been caught damaging the marbles of the Lateran basilica, was imprisoned by the workers on Borromini's orders and beaten to death. Episodes that are attributable to the passion the architect had for his work, which grew uncontrollable at times and ruled out any disagreement.

Yet, just like two sides of the same coin, it was that same passion that was the driving force behind his work. His daily presence on the construction site was recorded during the works on the dome of *Sant'Ivo*: “Borrominus architectus quotidie assistit”.³⁴ He probably went so far as to approve the work of the stonemasons who had the gruelling task of making his complex projects a reality. During the restoration of the Basilica of St. John, Borromini appeared at the site armed with a sword so as to make quite sure that the work was in safe

hands.³⁵ It can be no coincidence that numerous Ticinese workers appeared on his construction projects, where the architect would later employ his nephew, Bernardo, whom he had brought to Rome especially.³⁶ From design through to execution, Borromini's focus on, or rather his dedication to architecture seemed all-encompassing and was his very *raison d'être*. And just as Maderno had admired the young man hunched over sheets of drawings in St. Peter's, so the procurator of *San Carlo* depicts him bearing down over his workers:

“Borromini steered the bricklayer's shovel, straightened the plasterer's trowel, the carpenter's saw, the stonemason's chisel and the blacksmith's file.”³⁷

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Unknown, Portrait of Carlo Maderno, early 17th century, oil on canvas, 125x100 cm.

Notes

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, quotations are taken from the biography written by Filippo Baldinucci, who consulted Borromini's relatives and acquaintances when writing his book: in *Delle Notizie de Professori del disegno [...]* (Notes on the masters of design [...]), Tomo XVII, in Florence 1773, for Gio. Battista Stecchi and Antonio Giuseppe Pagani, pp. 61-71.

² As diarist Carlo Cartari remembers in MARCELLO DEL PIAZZO (ed), *Ragguagli borrominiani. Mostra documentaria* (Accounts of Borromini, documentary exhibition), in the catalogue of the exhibition, Ministry of the Interior, Rome 1968, p. 32, doc. 24.

³ JOSEPH CONNORS, *Francesco Borromini: la vita (1599-1667)* (The life of Francesco Borromini, 1599-1667), in Richard Bösel – Christoph L. Frommel (ed), *Borromini e l'universo barocco* (Borromini and the Baroque universe), catalogue of the exhibition held in Rome (Palazzo delle Esposizioni, 16 December 1999 – 28 February 2000) and in Vienna (Graphische Sammlung Albertina, 12 April 2000 – 25 June 2000), Electa, Milan 1999, p. 18: Martinelli (1599-1667), buried on 24 July, had written a monograph on the complex of the Sapienza, the University of Rome, to be accompanied by Borromini's drawings.

⁴ In particular, his failure to win the commission for the tomb of Innocent X, Borromini's most influential patron. A detailed reconstruction of the architect's suicide and the circumstances leading up to it can be found in MARTIN RASPE, *The final problem. Borromini's failed publication project and his suicide*, in "Annali di Architettura. Rivista del Centro Internazionale di Studi di Architettura Andrea Palladio" (Annals of Architecture. A periodical by the Andrea Palladio International Centre for the Study of Architecture), n. 13, 2001, pp. 121-136.

⁵ These were Borromini's own words in an account that he dictated before he died: in MARCELLO DEL PIAZZO, p. 30, doc. 20. The architect attempted suicide on the morning of 2 August, dying a day later.

⁶ For a detailed overview of the phenomenon: STEFANO DELLA TORRE – TIZIANO MANNONI – VALERIA PRACCHI (eds), *Magistri d'Europa: eventi, relazioni, strutture della migrazione di artisti e costruttori dai laghi lombardi* (European masters: events, relationships and structures surrounding the migration of artists and builders from the Lombard lakes), Collection of conference papers, Como, 23-26 October 1996, Nodo Libri, Como 1997.

⁷ For more on the origins of Borromini's family: NICOLA NAVONE, *Le origini familiari di Francesco Borromini: note a margine di alcuni documenti inediti* (Francesco Borromini's family origins: notes in the margins of some previously unpublished documents), in Manuela Kahn-Rossi – Marco Francioli (eds), *Il giovane Borromini. Dagli esordi a San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane* (The young Borromini: from early beginnings to San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane), in the catalogue of the exhibition (Museo Cantonale d'Arte, Lugano, 5 September – 14 November 1999), Skira, Milan 1999, pp. 33-39.

⁸ FRANCESCO REPISHTI, *I Castelli: ramificazione di una famiglia. Schede* (Castles: the expansion of a family. Notes), in Manuela Kahn-Rossi – Marco Francioli, p. 83. Francesco was also known as Castelli at first, only later adding to his paternal surname the name "Borromini", which would eventually completely replace Castelli from the 1630s. JOSEPH CONNORS, p. 7. The complex issue of the double surname has been the subject of various interpretations, see also: MARCELLO DEL PIAZZO, pp. 159-161; FRANCESCO REPISHTI, in particular pp. 83, 86.

⁹ One of the witnesses at the wedding of Francesco's parents (1589) was, for example, Pietro Tencalla; his godfather was Donato Garovaglio; his sister Lucrezia married Giulio Perlasca (1617): see MARCELLO DEL PIAZZO, pp. 19-20, 1/a, 1/b, 2.

¹⁰ Leone was the son of Tommaso, Borromini's uncle on his mother's side; for more on his marriage to Cecilia: Marcello Del PIAZZO, pp. 186, doc. 45; 192, doc. 55.

¹¹ Architect of the Fabric of St. Peter (1602), of the Tiber (1610), of the sacred palaces (1623), of the Roman people (1623): MARIA CRISTINA LOI, Maderno, Carlo, in DBI, vol. 67, Rome 2006, abbr. online version: [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/carlo-maderno_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/carlo-maderno_(Dizionario-Biografico)/).

¹² GIOVANNI BAGLIONE, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori et architetti. Dal pontificato di Gregorio XIII. del 1572. In fino a' tempi di Papa Urbano Ottavo nel 1642. Scritte da Gio. Baglione Romano e dedicate all'Eminentissimo, e Reverendissimo Principe Girolamo Card. Colonna* (The lives of painters, sculptors and architects from the pontificate of Gregory XIII in 1572 until the time of Pope Urban VIII in 1642. Written by Gio. Baglione Romano and dedicated to His Most Eminent Highness Prince Girolamo Card. Colonna), in Rome at the d'Andrea Fei printing house, 1642, p. 84. On the enviable success of the Fontanas, see in

particular MARCELLO FAGIOLO – GIUSEPPE BONACCORSO (eds), *Studi sui Fontana: una dinastia di architetti ticinesi a Roma tra Manierismo e Barocco* (Studies on the Fontanas: a dynasty of Ticinese architects in Rome between Mannerism and the Baroque period), Gangemi Editore, Rome 2008 and GIOVANNA CURCIO – NICOLA NAVONE – SERGIO VILLARI (eds), *Studi su Domenico Fontana 1543-1607* (Studies on Domenico Fontana, 1543-1607), Mendrisio Academy Press – Silvana editoriale, Mendrisio – Milano 2011.

¹³ On the subject of his physical appearance, Baldinucci also described him as a “tall and handsome man” with “a sturdy constitution”.

¹⁴ For more on Borromini’s time in Milan: AURORA SCOTTI – NICOLA SOLDINI, *Borromini milanese* (Borromini the Milanese), in Manuela Kahn-Rossi – Marco Francioli, pp. 53-75.

¹⁵ These were the words of Borromini’s nephew Bernardo to describe his uncle’s move to Rome and his reasons for going: HEINRICH THELEN, *Francesco Borromini. Personalità, disegni giovanili* (Francesco Borromini. Personality and early drawings) in Manuela Kahn-Rossi – Marco Francioli, p. 17.

¹⁶ As recorded in the inventory drawn up after his death: MARCELLO DEL PIAZZO, p. 167.

¹⁷ For more on Maderno’s career: HOWARD HIBBARD, *Carlo Maderno*, edited by Aurora Scotti Tosini, Electa, Milan 2001. See pp. 51-52 in particular.

¹⁸ One of Borromini’s most famous sayings, reproduced for example by RUDOLF WITTKOWER, *Francesco Borromini: Personalità e destino* (Francesco Borromini: Personality and destiny), in *Studi sul Borromini. Atti del Convegno promosso dall’Accademia Nazionale di San Luca* (Studies on Borromini. Conference papers supported by the National Academy of Saint Luke), vol. I, De Luca Editori d’Arte, Rome 1970, p. 33.

¹⁹ Onorio Longhi also had a well-stocked library, the precise size of which is unknown, however, while Francesco Peparelli had 180 books in 1642. For more on architects’ libraries in the seventeenth century: MARGHERITA FRATARCANGELI, *Libri sugli scaffali: architetti romani del Seicento* (The books on their shelves: Roman architects of the 17th century) in GIOVANNA CURCIO – MARCO ROSARIO NOBILE – Aurora Scotti Tosini (eds), *I libri e l’ingegno: studi sulla biblioteca dell’architetto (XV-XX secolo)* (Books and genius: studies on the libraries of architects from the 15th to the 20th century), Caracol, Palermo 2010, p. 56 in particular.

²⁰ The objects cited here are listed in the inventory drawn up after his death: MARCELLO DEL PIAZZO, pp. 164, 167, 169, 175.

²¹ Abele is a variety of poplar: white poplar or *Populus alba*.

²² The notarial deeds relating to his career as a stonemason and quoted here are taken from MARCELLO DEL PIAZZO, pp. 22 (doc. 6), 52 (doc. 63), 56-57 (doc. 72), 69 (doc. 94).

²³ Payments from 11 and 20 July 1622: Marcello Del Piazzo, p. 76.

²⁴ Because of his “difficult and inflexible” nature, Borromini was dismissed from the *Sant’Agnese* construction project (1657): RUDOLF WITTKOWER, p. 30.

²⁵ These were the words of Giacomo Della Porta in 1593: ISABELLA SALVAGNI, *La crisi degli anni Novanta: l’Accademia di San Luca e gli architetti* (The crisis of the 1590s: architects and the Academy of Saint Luke), in Giovanna Curcio – Nicola Navone – Sergio Villari, p. 247, which also describes the debate on Rome’s artistic scene, as well as: GIOVANNA CURCIO, “*Veramente si possono gloriare d’havere sì valentuomini*”. *I maestri dei Laghi e Francesco Borromini tra Corporazioni e Accademia in Roma all’inizio del Seicento* (“They may well boast of having men of good standing”. Masters of the lakes and Francesco Borromini from corporations to academies in Rome at the beginning of the 17th century) in Manuela Kahn-Rossi – Marco Francioli, pp. 194 ff.; JOSEPH CONNORS, p. 10.

²⁶ As Borromini was known: MARCELLO DEL PIAZZO, p. 131, doc. 197.

²⁷ ROBERT STALLA, *L’opera architettonica di Francesco Borromini nel contesto politico, culturale e storico del Seicento romano* (Francesco Borromini’s architectural work in the political, cultural and historical context of 17th-century Rome) in Richard Bösel – Christoph L. Frommel, p. 30.

²⁸ These were the words of the General Procurator of the Spanish Trinitarians, patrons of the *San Carlo* church and convent complex.

²⁹ GIOVANNI BATTISTA PASSERI, *Vite de’ pittori scultori ed architetti che anno lavorato in Roma morti dal 1641 al 1673 di Giambattista Passeri pittore e poeta* (The lives of painters, sculptors and architects who worked in Rome and died between 1641 and 1673, by Giambattista Passeri, painter and poet), first edition, in Rome 1772, from Gregorio Settari, bookseller at the Corso all’insegna d’Omero, p. 386.

³⁰ Between 1638 and 1639, Borromini granted three loans of 200 scudi each to Papal envoys, all paid back in 1641: Marcello Del Piazzo, pp. 25-27, docs. 13-15.

³¹ MARCELLO DEL PIAZZO, p. 34, doc. 27.

³² For more on Francesco Borromini's house: GIUSEPPE BONACCORSO, *L'abitazione di Francesco Borromini al vicolo dell'Agnello: ambienti, oggetti e personaggi* (Francesco Borromini's house in Vicolo dell'Agnello: rooms, objects and people) in Christoph L. Frommel – Elisabeth Sladek (eds), *Francesco Borromini*, Collection of papers for the international conference in Rome, 13-15 January 2000, Electa, Milan 2000, pp. 171-180.

³³ As Baldinucci reports, p. 70. Detailed information can be found on his clothing in: GIOVANNI BATTISTA PASSERI, p. 389.

³⁴ 14 April 1652: MARCELLO DEL PIAZZO, p. 134.

³⁵ JOSEPH CONNORS, p. 14.

³⁶ HEINRICH THELEN in Manuela Kahn-Rossi – Marco Francioli, p. 13.

³⁷ EBERHARD HEMPEL, Francesco Borromini, authorised Italian edition with a foreword by Corrado Ricci, Società editrice d'Arte Illustrata, Rome-Milan – Anton Schroll & Co, Vienna [1922?], p. 31.

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Borromini's influence on contemporary architecture and the history of modern art

by Carla Mazzearelli*



Left:
Ivan Kunz, Wooden model
of the replica
of *San Carlino*
constructed on
Lake Lugano, 2010.

This page:
Guggenheim Museum,
New York.

He was not at all dominated by a desire for material possessions, which was always subordinate to his desire for glory [...] Borromini the gentleman was worthy of great praise and he learned a good deal from the excellent art of architecture, as did others with the varied and beautiful style of their magnificent buildings, both within and outside the most noble city of Rome, but he practised the art with a nobility and decorum that had never been seen before.¹

These were the words that the historian Filippo Baldinucci used to describe Francesco Borromini in his *Notizie de' Professori del disegno* published in Florence in 1681 around twenty years after the death of the acclaimed architect from Ticino. The portrait that Baldinucci paints of Borromini is intended to assert and exemplify the dignity of the architect: the artist who, in the eyes of his contemporaries and of posterity, established his own fame and authority, not only because of the exceptional value of the buildings he designed but because of the power of his mind and the tenacity of his creative process that meant neither force nor mere money could persuade him to make any compromises.

“A tall and handsome man with strong and robust limbs, a tenacious spirit and lofty and noble ideas”: according to Baldinucci, the architect’s character united an acute sense of morality and an ascetic lifestyle with an extreme self-consciousness and awareness of the creative value of his own ideas, to the extent that he dreaded his work might be trivialised or exploited after his death. Shortly before Borromini took his own life, Baldinucci again tells of how he burned the majority of his drawings in order to preserve their originality. On the other hand, the historian also writes:

His food was plain and he lived a chaste life. He had a very high regard for his art, for the love of which he never ceased to work [...]. He guarded his work with scrupulous care, rendering it impossible for any other architect to make drawings in order to compete with

him. He claimed that his sketches were his children and he did not want them to go begging for praise around the world in case they received none, a fate which he had sometimes seen come to others.²

Borromini, as only Michelangelo Buonarroti had done before him, resembled the modern man: restless and at times hostile, downcast and solitary. “He often suffered from melancholy,” Baldinucci continues. “In the course of time, he found himself utterly engrossed and immersed in continuous thought, avoiding all conversation with other people wherever possible and staying at home alone, occupied with nothing but a continuous barrage of tormenting thoughts.”³

A temperament that almost seems a necessity for someone who – in the words Vasari used to describe Buonarroti – had broken “all ties and shaken off the shackles of material things,” instead living “quite differently from the conventions of other men in terms of boundaries, order and rules,” and, who just like Michelangelo but to a more radical extent, essentially subverted the systems of the classical tradition, unlocking the enormous expressive potential of the new “fantasies” brought to life by his “creations”.⁴

Moreover, Borromini painted this same portrait of himself when, according to an episode described in *Opus architectonicum*, the Oratorian Fathers requested him to deliver a project for the Oratory of Saint Philip Neri and his response was said to have underlined the necessary primacy of *inventio* over any existing models: “Those who follow others will never get ahead. And I would certainly never have pursued this profession with the aim of becoming a mere copyist.”⁵

Yet despite his determined defence of his own originality, there were already numerous imitations of Borromini’s architecture at a planning level by the end of the 17th century. For instance, a true copy of the church of *San Carlino alle Quattro Fontane* was built in Gubbio in Umbria between 1662 and 1674. This was the church of *Santa Maria del Prato*, which uses the geometric design of the church of *San Carlino*, albeit in a noticeably simplified form. We know that the church of

San Carlino received enthusiastic visitors from all over the world since it was built and that the same Trinitarians who were patrons of the church and convent requested Borromini to disclose and publish the plans. The architect, who never published any of his own plans in his lifetime, once again refused in order to safeguard the originality of his own *inventio* but, at the same time, it is precisely this originality that has triggered the process of imitation over such a long period.⁶

The respect and prestige that Borromini enjoyed during his life were not so evident to those who came after him, particularly in academic and classicist circles, but triumphed in “European” culture over the course of the 18th century and for a large part of the 19th. The fate of an architect and his influence on the culture following him can also be measured by considering his misfortunes at various times and in different contexts. Particularly symbolic in this sense are the words of Francesco Milizia (1725-1798), who dedicated his theory of architecture to Borromini in his *Memorie degli architetti antichi e moderni* (Recollections of architects both ancient and modern) at the end of the 18th century. This was a severe criticism aiming to reinforce the argument that those features of Borromini’s architecture which he described as eccentricities and oddities were flawed, precisely because they subverted the norms and proportions of Renaissance architecture:

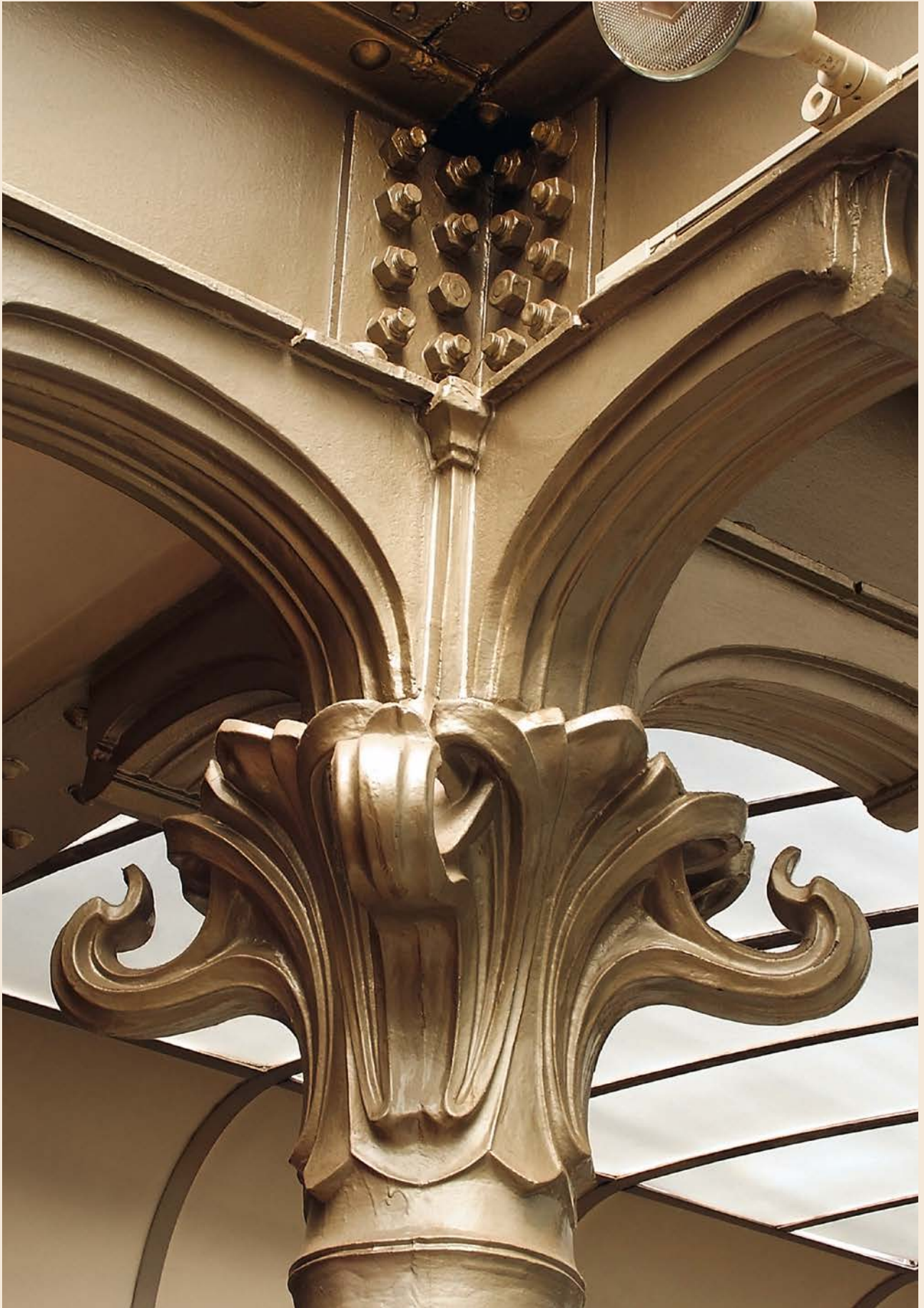
Borromini was one of the greatest men of his century for his extraordinary genius, which was offset by the absurd use he made of it. He was to architecture as Seneca was to literary style or Marini to poetry. He had always been an excellent copyist but as soon as he turned his hand to creating his own designs, prompted by a rampant desire to achieve greater fame than Bernini, he became a heretic, so to speak. And he resolved to win acclaim through innovation. He did not understand the essence of architecture and so escaped by means of his own undulating, zig-zagging style and his great love for the ornate, far removed from the simplicity that underpins beauty,

giving free rein to his obsession for using cornices, engaged columns, broken pediments and all manner of other extravagances. However, even his most preposterous works exude a certain greatness, harmony and intent that testify to his sublime talent. This said, if his genius had penetrated to the heart of architecture; if amends had been made for the abuses that went unnoticed by so many discerning men of standing who were blinded by habit; if he had looked for true and proper proportions, which he seemed not yet to have discovered considering the various characteristics of his buildings, and had sought to educate those members of the orders who were capable of enlightenment, he would have discovered innovations that would have proved of some use to posterity, and surpassed all the more conspicuous of his predecessors, not least Bernini.⁷

As Francesco Milizia saw it, Borromini’s subversion of the canons of architecture could not have been the result or effect of a deviation of thought, a sign of madness, as clearly expressed in his *Dizionario delle belle arti del disegno* (Dictionary of the Fine Arts of Design): “Borromini’s architecture is architecture turned on its head.” And again: “It is a good thing to see his works and loathe them, for they serve to demonstrate what ought not to be done.” Thus, when describing the architecture of *San Carlino alle Quattro Fontane*, Milizia highlights:



Ivan Kunz, Dome of the wooden model of the replica of San Carlino constructed on Lake Lugano, 2010.



Borromini's greatest delirium is the church of *San Carlino alle Quattro Fontane*. It is truly lamentable to see so many obtuse, convex and right angles with columns upon columns of different shapes and windows and recesses and sculptures, all in such a small area. The House of the Oratorians adjacent to *Santa Maria in Vallicella* also has a mixed orbicular and angular façade; everything is disordered and thrown into confusion, just like the mind of the poor architect.⁸

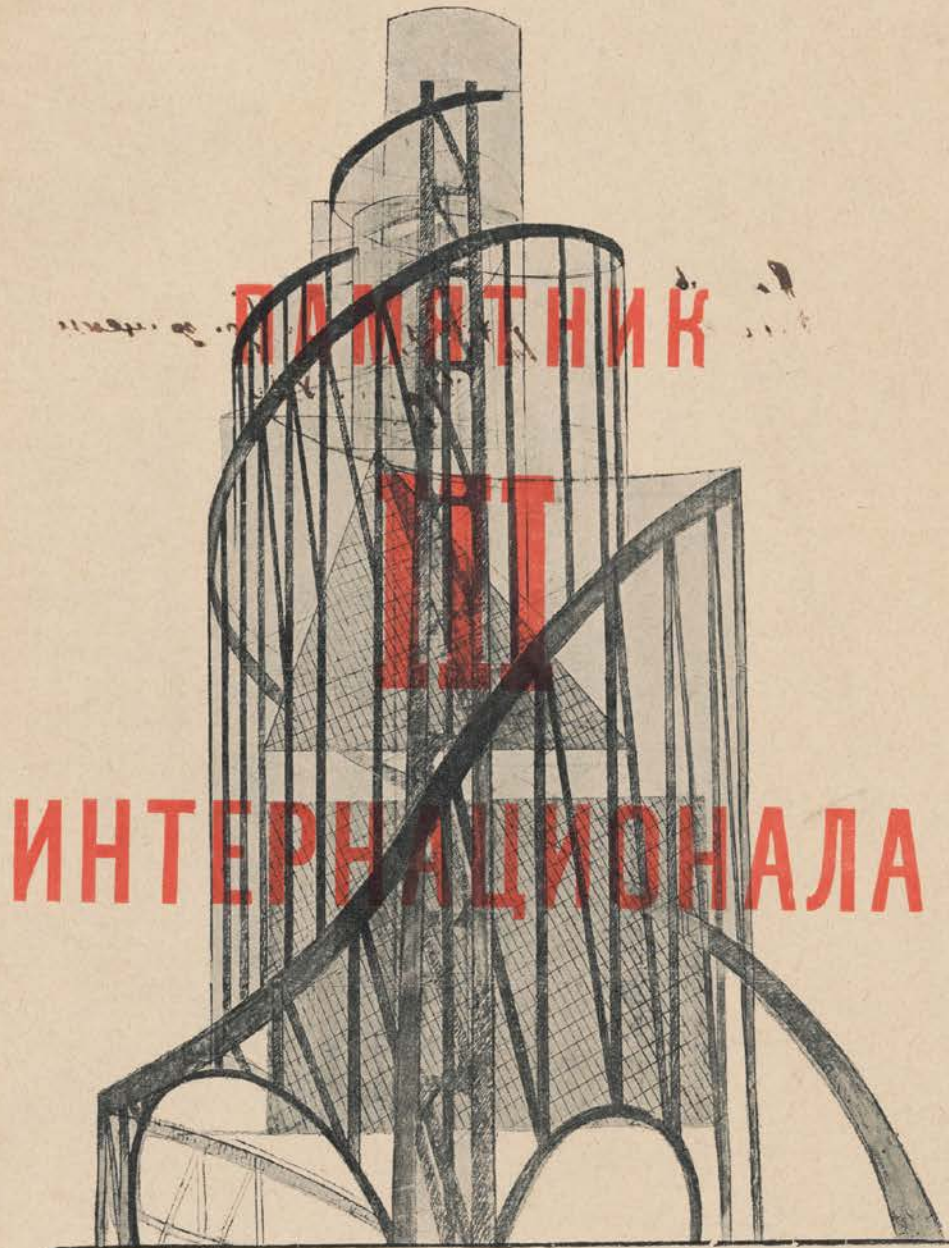
If Borromini's influence is therefore immediate and far broader than the world of neoclassical theory would have us believe, it was not until the end of the 19th century that the architect underwent a critical revival, coinciding with that of the Baroque as an official stylistic category. Considered a mere anomaly or peculiarity in the 1700s and thus a symptom of the decadence of Renaissance culture, it was the reinterpretation of the Swiss historian Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945), which came to see the Baroque as "a powerful manifestation of art" and "an irresistible force of nature", recognising its revolutionary potential and enhancing its linguistic details, that finally restored its reputation; Borromini's architecture then regained its place in history and went on to be frequently quoted in modern critical literature as a precursor to examples of the language of contemporary architecture during the first half of the 20th century.⁹ Between the late 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th, Borromini was rediscovered in both historiography and European criticism, as well as in the formal language of architecture, as a "revolutionary" and defender of freedom of expression when it came to the "constraints" of the classical code. Elements of Borromini's style appear as early on as in eclectic architecture and in notable examples of architecture from the art nouveau period. This is the case, for example, with buildings designed by Victor Horta, whose architectural vocabulary makes very direct references to that of Borromini.¹⁰ Taking Wölfflin's reflections as his point of departure, the scholar Sigfried Giedion (1888-1968) highlighted how certain recurring themes in Borromini's architecture – his rhythmic alternation between

empty and full, his integration of various levels into one unique whole, his sublime use of chiaroscuro and the twisting lines that make the stone seem malleable – form part of the "four-dimensional revolution" in architecture which aimed to transform the static space of the Renaissance into a fluid space, a forerunner to the free-form style that was to come. The Baroque, and Borromini's architecture in particular, therefore represent the first attempt at a new spatial interpretation in which man moves around in a sequential continuum punctuated by undulating walls that do not divide the space but unite it. In this way, Borromini offers "a new power to mold space [...] and to produce an astonishing and unified whole[...]", the façade of *San Carlino* in particular "embodies a conception that was of a great influence in the time that followed and it persists in contemporary architecture."¹¹ Indeed, editions of monographs from the 1920s and 1930s and publications containing drawings and photos of Borromini's buildings sparked even greater interest in the Ticinese architect. Some of his insights into spatial composition were revived in expressionist and rationalist architecture which, although coming from a very different angle, made a highly detailed study of curvilinear morphology, which it exploited in order to bring to life a new concept of space shaped by the surfaces of walls. In the field of rationalist architecture in particular, Giuseppe Terragni's debt to Borromini, for whom the architect, hailing from Como, had a real passion that was further fuelled by their shared Lombard origins, is quite obvious. As Paolo Portoghesi noted (1931), echoes of Borromini's art can thus be identified in works by Terragni such as the Monument to the Fallen in Erba and the Stecchini and Pirovano tombs.¹²

In 1951, artist, critic and contemporary art theorist Gillo Dorfles (1910) gave Borromini's architectural language a privileged position in his book which bore the appropriate title of *Barocco nell'architettura moderna* (Baroque in modern architecture). In keeping with the aesthetic theory of Luciano Anceschi (1911-1995), he considered this language to be "a necessary moment and active component of the preface to the

Left:
Victor Horta,
Comics Art Museum,
detail, Brussels.

Н. ПУНИН



Проект худ. В. Е. ТАТЛИНА

ПЕТЕРБУРГ

Издание Отдела Изобразительных Искусств Н. К. П.

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contemporary world; the present world; our world.”¹³ A forebear of the avant-garde of the 20th century, Borromini’s work is thus considered a precursor to modern-day architecture. Dorfles felt that, just like Caravaggio’s painting or Bach’s music, the Ticinese architect’s almost pictorial use of chiaroscuro rhythmically transformed the dissonances of space, making him a contrapuntal musician of stone which grew into a living and dynamic organism and instilled movement and flexibility into the entire body of architecture.

[...] a style of architecture that is not only a function of space but also of time and cannot be understood except by those who come after it, like a peculiar drama of loads and supports, forces and shapes, levels and lines.¹⁴

In this view, the avant-garde architecture of Mendelsohn and Steiner, for example, and that of Alvar Aalto and Carlo Mollino, reveal a strong affinity with the plastic architecture of Borromini, to the extent that Dorfles discerned hints of the neo-Baroque in organic contemporary architecture:

[...] in the more positive sense of the word: understood as dynamism as opposed to staticism; elastic shapes as opposed to geometric ones; something of a human and organic nature as opposed to frigid mechanisms and dry technicalities; ultimately, a kind of rejuvenated monumentality.¹⁵

Between the 1950s and 1980s, the “militant” criticism of the modernist movement systematically highlighted the points of contact between the spirit of the Baroque and the grand, plastic, anti-classical architectural expressions depicted by a period and society undergoing radical transformation. In Giedion’s text quoted above and edited in 1962, the entire dome of *Sant’Ivo* is compared to a “dynamic” sculpture by Boccioni in 1901;¹⁶ researching the modern language of architecture in an essay of the same name published in 1974, Bruno Zevi (1918–2000) showed how the upward movement that penetrated each section of *Sant’Ivo* can be seen in the plastic tower of the 1920

painting by Russian constructivist Tatlin, which spirals upwards, coiling around itself and, just like the “undulating walls” of Borromini, appearing to directly reference the modern surfaces of Alvar Aalto, or residential complexes like the Crescent in Bath or the more recent student accommodation in Cambridge, where the abrupt contrasts between light and shade have been replaced by a gradual, flowing transition from dark to light, allowing the grand building to blend with nature. The recesses and protrusions which the Baroque architect crafted into his walls to give new shape to the lifeless stone remind the modern critic of “the hollows and bulges” of Steiner’s *Goetheanum, Casa*



Milà in Barcelona or the Einstein Tower in Potsdam, which “gushes up from the ground like a volcanic jet”. During an exhibition dedicated to Frank Lloyd Wright at Palazzo Strozzi in Florence in 1951, Bruno Zevi accompanied the American architect on a visit to Rome to see the architecture of *Sant’Ivo* and *San Carlino*. Zevi himself would go on to assert in *Architettura e Storiografia* (Architecture and Historiography, 1950) how all of *Sant’Ivo* was a more “modern” building than many contemporary works of architecture, comparing it to the interior of the Guggenheim Museum in New York designed by Wright.¹⁷ Indeed, a master of the modern period like Frank Lloyd Wright considered the closed spaces of Mannerism and the Baroque loaded with tensions as a basic principle for his own architecture. Most of all, however, it was the common inspiration gleaned from nature as the leading “master” for

Left:
Vladimir Tatlin,
*Monument to the
Third International*,
1920, cover
with typographic
illustration
28x21.9 cm.

This page:
Norman Foster,
City Hall, helical
staircase, London.



constructing shapes that formed a bridge between such architects and the poetics of Borromini. The architecture of the second half of the 20th century and of the contemporary period continued to find a steady source of inspiration in the Ticinese architect. When Robert Venturi (1995) published his volume entitled *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1925), he compared examples of Borromini's architecture with the complexities of relativism and the spatial ambiguities of modern architecture, such as that of Charles Moore or Robert Stern. The name Borromini has also been called to mind recently in explicit references made by architects like Frank Gehry, who is said to have taken direct inspiration from Borromini's architecture for the Loyola Law School built in Los Angeles and had visited Rome especially to see it; thus Richard Meier also declared his indebtedness to Borromini for inspiring the Jubilee Church project in Tor Tre Teste on the outskirts of Rome.¹⁸

By virtue of the originality of his projects, Borromini is still so often referred to as a source of inspiration and an undisputed master in the third millennium by architects from all over the world. His name is therefore undeniable proof of the longevity of his success. Yet it is not in mere references to more or less conscious imitations of a repertoire of "given" forms that his influence still so steadily endures today. Borromini's current relevance lives on in the intellectual consciousness that prompted him to experiment with and subvert past models; a consciousness fed precisely by a deep historical and intellectual awareness of architecture as a discipline, understood in all of its complexities as a Humanist discipline. To mark the four hundredth anniversary of the Ticinese architect's birth and to coincide with the major exhibition that, on this occasion, was dedicated to Borromini at the *Museo cantonale di Lugano*, architect Mario Botta designed a true-to-scale model of a section of *San Carlino alle Quattro Fontane*. The wooden model, completed in an atelier or studio at the Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio, part of the University of Lugano, was placed on the bank of Lake Lugano. Although decontextualised, Borromini's building was returned to its place

of origin, to the lake and mountain which the architect from Bissone had left before reaching the Papal capital. In fact, the work turned out to be one of the most convincing studies on the significance of Borromini's architecture, on his perception of space in relation to its surroundings and, in a broader sense, having also involved students from the Faculty of Architecture for teaching purposes, on the value of historical memory as a basis for contemporary projects. In 2012, the Academy of Architecture and its Institute for the History and Theory of Art and Architecture also began dedicating a two-year high-level guest professorship in the humanities to Borromini – the *Cattedra Borromini* – that involves giving a series of public conferences in addition to teaching students at Master's level. The presence of philosopher Giorgio Agamben (2012-2013), archaeologist, art historian and antiquarian Salvatore Settis (2014-2015) and, finally, architectural historian Jean Louis Cohen this year (2016-2017), is clear evidence that Borromini's name has come to be associated with the humanities. In a broad sense, it demonstrates the integral role that the latter have played and continue to play in artistic and architectural output in keeping with the "dignity" of the Ticinese architect, who was mentioned by Filippo Baldinucci in positive terms during his own lifetime – a genuine testament to the fact that he still remains a role model for future generations today.

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Left:
Richard Meier,
Jubilee Church,
sails, Rome.

Richard Meier,
Jubilee Church, view
of the whole building,
Rome.



Notes

¹ FILIPPO BALDINUCCI, *Delle Notizie de' Professori del disegno da Cimabue in qua* (Notes on masters of design from Cimabue to the present day) (1681), Batelli, Florence 1845-1847, p. 62.

² Baldinucci, p. 62.

³ Baldinucci, p. 62.

⁴ GIORGIO VASARI, *La vita di Michelangelo nelle redazioni del 1550 e del 1568* (The life of Michelangelo in the 1550 and 1568 editions) [1550 and 1568], edited by Paola Barocchi, vol. 2, Ricciardi, Milan-Naples 1962, pp. 58-59.

⁵ FRANCESCO BORROMINI, *Opus architectonicum*, edited by Joseph Connors, Il polifilo, Milan 1998.

⁶ JOSEPH CONNORS, *A copy of Borromini's S. Carlo alle Quattro Fontane in Gubbio*, in "The Burlington magazine", 137, 1995, pp. 588-599.

⁷ FRANCESCO MILIZIA, *Memorie degli architetti antichi e moderni* (Recollections of architects both ancient and modern), Remondini, Bassano 1785.

⁸ *Ibid.*, *Dizionario delle belle arti del disegno: estratto in gran parte dall'Enciclopedia metodica* (Dictionary of the Fine Arts of Design: an extract mostly taken from the Encyclopédie Méthodique), Remondini, Bassano 1797.

⁹ HEINRICH WÖLFFLIN, *Rinascimento e Barocco: ricerche intorno all'essenza e all'origine dello stile barocco in Italia* (The Renaissance and the Baroque: studies on the essence and origins of the Baroque style in Italy) with 20 plates and 15 illustrations, Vallecchi, Florence 1928.

¹⁰ PAOLO PORTOGHESI, *Borromini e l'architettura moderna* (Borromini and modern architecture) in

Richard Bösel and Christoph L. Frommel (eds), *Borromini e l'universo barocco* (Borromini and the Baroque universe), in the catalogue of the exhibition held in Rome between 1999-2000) Electa, Milan 1999, p. 129.

¹¹ SIGFRIED GIEDION, *Raum, Zeit, Architektur*, 1941 (Space, Time and Architecture: the Growth of a New Tradition, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1962, p. 79.).

¹² PAOLO PORTOGHESI, p. 130.

¹³ LUCIANO ANCESCHI, *Le poetiche del Barocco* (The poetics of the Baroque), Edizioni alfa, Bologna 1963.

¹⁴ GILLO DORFLES, *Barocco nell'architettura moderna* (The Baroque in modern architecture), Tamburini, Milan 1951.

¹⁵ GILLO DORFLES.

¹⁶ SIGFRIED GIEDION.

¹⁷ BRUNO ZEVI, *Architettura e storiografia: le matrici antiche del linguaggio moderno* (Architecture and historiography: the ancient patterns of modern language), Einaudi, Turin 1974.

¹⁸ PAOLO PORTOGHESI.

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The snake and the she-wolf. Francesco Borromini from Bissone to Rome

by Ivan Battista*



Left:
Francesco Borromini,
Dome of *Sant'Ivo alla
Sapienza*, Rome.

Anonymous,
*The Wolf Fighting the
Serpent*, pencil dra-
wing on paper.

If it is really the case that life is a journey, then there can be no doubt that each of us must travel our own. It is the journey that takes care of us and not the other way around.¹ Now, you can declare when you plan to return from a journey; life's return is the *status quo ante*. Books and novels featuring a journey as the “underlying protagonist” have been written in every period of literature. From Homer's *The Odyssey* to Stefano D'Arrigo's *Horcynus Orca* (Killer Whale); from Xenophon's *Anabasis* to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, great authors have always been fascinated by the theme of journeys. If there is no return from the journey, it becomes a relocation or migration. Journeys are at the heart of narration; emigration is not. When man was still a hunter-gatherer, he “travelled” and always returned to his “home” to tell of what he had seen and learned, with the aim of increasing knowledge for the common good. Yet the cloak in which every migrant wraps himself is not woven from the tale but from nostalgia. Embarking on and narrating journeys are therefore therapeutic, healing processes. Emigration, by contrast, opens up wounds caused by nostalgia and the misery of loss.

Francesco Castelli from Bissone (known as Francesco Borromini in the art world) did not go on a journey but instead emigrated at the age of nine. It is easy to speculate, then, that psychological wounds also penetrated Borromini's psyche, or, as Michael Balint would have it, a *basic fault*,² giving rise to many of his behaviours and “impassioned”, pain-filled responses to the events in his life; and it is not untoward to see his rather extraordinary architectural works as one of these responses. Borromini left at the age of nine and broke his “journey” in Milan at the house of the sculptor Andrea Biffi (1560-1631), an acquaintance of his father's. As a stonemason apprentice, Francesco Castelli worked with many other skilled craftsmen for the *Veneranda Fabbrica del Duomo* under the supervision of the architect Francesco Maria Ricchino (1584-1658).

The Ticinese architect's first taste of the working world would lay the foundations for his astonishing skill. His first psychological experiences, however, including

his premature “emigration”, would trigger the formation of his introverted, difficult character so prone to depression. Unlike a journey that turns storytelling into an experience – a moment of sharing and communion, emigration endows the major loss of your native land and sorrowful solitude with something that cannot be shared: unutterable pain. We are buffeted by extraordinarily powerful forces that are beyond our rational understanding, just as Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) and Carl Gustav Jung argued. Genius is often an expression of internal suffering: genius is a result of suffering and not the other way around.³ Genius is also characterised by its “active” component of action – of movement and change. Borromini left Milan in 1619 at the age of 20, this time of his own volition, and headed for Rome, the Eternal City and home of the great patrons of Catholicism and the Counter-Reformation – never Gothic or Lutheran. He took control of his own life and, by means of a “betrayal” of his father's trust (it seems he cashed in a loan owed to his father without telling him), set a course for the then “Eldorado” of the art world; the Papal city; the *caput mundi*. The story of humanity and that of every individual always grows and develops by means of an act of courage and often also through a betrayal of the greatest trust. The Latin for “to betray”, *trādĕre*, comes from a Roman military verb meaning “to bring into the presence of the magistrate”. Betrayal brings us face to face with what we are, for better or for worse.

Francesco Castelli's “betrayal” gives us a glimpse of one quality of his character: ambition. Now, ambition can be underpinned by vanity or by a legitimate sense of self-assertion. In Borromini's case, we can speak with absolute certainty of legitimate self-assertion. Despite what the pseudo-Sallust affirmed when he stated: “*Faber est suae quisque fortunae*”,⁴ that is, every man is the architect of his own fortune, sometimes in life, fortune – not in the sense of destiny but as a coincidence of positive and negative forces – has other ideas.

Some people are so poor that all they have is money. Francesco Castelli was always “rich”: he was not so much interested in

money as in the opportunity to express his own “visionary” art. The skill he developed during his formative years on his path from Bissone to Milan and on to Rome was truly astonishing. With a thirst for knowledge that is often a trait of those who have not been given much in life, Borromini learned everything. He began at the bottom and worked his way up the ladder, learning every single element that went into construction, from humbly chiselling the foundation stone through to designing and planning an entire palace. He was brilliant at everything because everything had to be under his control in order to bring his idea to life just as he had imagined it. For Borromini, not succeeding in this could have meant failure

suffered from too little pay; he suffered from too little love.”⁵ The century in which Borromini lived did not enjoy the benefits of paediatrics or modern pedagogy in particular. The culture of care during infancy came about with the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and continued with the great Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (two exceptional Swiss figures themselves) before arriving at today’s educators. Borromini was plunged into the torrent of life away from his family when he was a small child, probably by necessity. If we imagine a nine-year-old child being sent by his parents to a workshop to learn a trade in order to survive, it is not difficult to understand the pain and suffering that such a decision might induce:



and therefore a lack of recognition for his innovative genius – an option that was out of the question. For this reason, he was always present on the building site when work was being done on one of his projects and if a worker failed to carry out even the very simplest task as Borromini envisaged it, he replaced the worker and finished the task himself. This yearning to be recognised as a brilliant architect did not flow so much from an urgency to obtain success and glory as from a necessity in his soul, which bore the wounds of one who was unloved. What Borromini was looking for was love. To be loved by his peers and, above all, loved by God. Writing about the formation of Borromini’s personality, Étienne Barilier puts it this way in his fascinating book *Francesco Borromini. Le mystère et l’éclat* (Francesco Borromini. The Mystery and the Majesty): “He never

no longer in the family home or under the protection of the love of your mother, father or closest relatives. Go on your way, my child; all I can guarantee is a roof over your head where you can set about earning your living. Borromini left and went to earn his bread. Most people would have done what was requested and stopped there. But not our gifted architect. He responded. He not only learned what he was taught to do but he watched, he scrutinised, he compared and absorbed everything there was to learn. Borromini’s soul was filled with bitterness because he had had his first taste of being torn away from all kindness and “cold” Milan was not to his liking. So he headed for Rome, where he knew he could rely on the affection of his maternal uncle, Leone Garovo. Leone welcomed him into his home in Vicolo dell’Angelo between the bridge of

Arnaldo Ciarocchi,
Four Views of Rome,
Piazza Navona, 1956,
etching, 22x31.8 cm.

Saint Angelo and the church of *San Giovanni dei Fiorentini*. The principle of “*fortuna audacibus juvat*” (fortune favours the bold) and Borromini’s “melancholic” audacity were of great help to him. Leone Garovo’s father-in-law was in fact the distinguished architect Carlo Maderno (1556-1629, creator of the façade of Saint Peter’s, for instance). The young Francesco, son of Anastasia Garovo, the sister of Carlo Maderno’s son-in-law, was presented to him and it was not long before the great structural engineer recognised Borromini’s extraordinary propensity for learning everything to a high level, most of all drawing and design. It goes without saying that a relationship blossomed between the two that was not just professional but profoundly devoted. The fact that Borromini revoked his will just before he died and arranged to be buried next to Carlo Maderno at the church of *San Giovanni dei Fiorentini* and no longer at *San Carlino alle Quattro Fontane* says a lot about their relationship. Maderno protected Borromini in a very literal sense and passionately taught him all there was to know about the trade, contributing a great deal to refining the young man’s exceptional skill and turning him into an architect in his own right.

The “journey of our life” as Dante had it is shaped by the landscape. For those who do not dare face life and remain immobile, clinging to the same place, the view is always the same. This might well help provide a sense of belonging and security but it certainly does not provide the necessary catalysts for a change in outlook or the wonderful variety of environments that we encounter. *Homo sapiens sapiens* was born and developed on the Horn of eastern Africa (Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea). Following the last glacial period around nineteen to twenty-five thousand years ago, the climate in that area changed and became drier. The *sapiens sapiens* were still hunter gatherers and they moved east in search of a better climate to live in. They arrived in the Middle East across the edge of Suez and onwards to the south, passing through the strait of Bab El-Mandeb (Gate of Tears) that measures 37 km today but at the time was around 7 km wide thanks to the last ice age. David Caramelli, a molecular anthropologist at the University of Florence,

published a large study on the history, emigration and evolution of ancient Europeans in “Nature” in 2007, in which he shows in simple terms how decisive a role the environment played in changing the physical characteristics of the human race. The *sapiens sapiens* were tall and black but, when they moved to the Middle East and veered west into Europe, they lost their specific somatic characteristics: their skin lost its pigment and became lighter, their eyes turned blue and they grew shorter. If it is really the case that the specific features of a place influence the evolution and physical development (particularly of the brain), it is easy to conjecture that they also shaped the underlying psychological identity that would ultimately go on to characterise their artistic expression.⁶ In classical music, we have at least two examples of this in the form of Finnish composer Jean Sibelius’ Valzer Triste and the symphonies of Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg.

Bissone and its geographical and atmospheric conditions, together with myriad other peculiarities, may have conditioned the early development of the extraordinary Ticinese architect. The small town nestles at the foot of the Sighignola, a mountain which, on the side facing Switzerland, juts out into the lake with a “suicidal” leap of around 1,000 metres. The landscape is distinctive, very charming but at the same time exudes exasperation and stark contrasts. Clutched in the grip of the lake, Bissone has a limited layout and is home to no more than two major roads.

“Its alleyways, called *contrade*, and vaulted stone promenade along the town’s main street, which roughly parallels the lakeshore, are attractive but not worth a special visit. In fact, the village provokes a certain tension, even anxiety, in a visitor. [...] But it is really the mountains that disconcert. They tower over the town, sheer, heaving walls of stone, softened only slightly by the cypress and palm trees that grow on them. Their damp, omnipresent shadows besiege Bissone like silent warriors.”⁷

Francesco Castelli was no exception to this rule. He grew up in an environment of exasperated opposites; of the harsh together



Irton and Thomas Prior, *View of Bissonne from the Road to the North of Maroggia*, 1841, steel engraving, 12.3x18.9 cm.

with the luxuriant, where the mist hangs more thickly than in Naples and the people range from introverted to friendly but never intrusive. Its artists, stonemasons and master masons were skilled and proud and for many years helped build palaces, churches and great works all over Europe, from Vienna to Palermo and Prague to Istanbul. It was also thanks to his contact with this “pride in construction” that Borromini’s character was formed. In *Proverbios y cantares* (Proverbs and Songs) from the collection entitled *Campos de Castilla* (Fields of Castile),⁸ the Sevillian poet Antonio Machado wrote: “Al andar se hace camino”, meaning: “walking makes the road”. Life unfolds as we live it. In the same way, Borromini’s life took shape one step at a time, following his decisions, his actions and his “walking”. Therefore, from Milan, the city of Saint Charles Borromeo, Borromini set out along a new path for Rome. A little while after arriving there, he changed his surname from Castelli to Borromini, it seems because the surname Castelli was very popular in Rome at that time. In order to distinguish himself, mindful of his first, formative experience in Milan, he chose to make reference to Saint Charles Borromeo as the one to whom he perhaps appealed in his dark moments of sadness. Borromini, therefore, came from “Borromeo”. Everything that came before him and all his actions in the world influenced him in the same way that this principle conditions all of our lives. Our origins also form part of the “journey” of our lives. It is reasonable to believe that Borromini’s psychological origins were shaped by a fear of abandonment. Borromini’s parents thrust him into

the world prematurely and he began standing on his own two feet. However, the sense of abandonment at the heart of his personality kept him company, almost like a *paredros*, a minor deity who accompanied and sat behind the greater and more powerful god that was his creativity. It was precisely the initial formation of his personality that would cause his life to flow into a dramatic existential rut. Gradually, as his journey presented him with certain situations that were difficult to manage, his natural response was full of vehemence and lacking diplomacy. Any challenge to his projects or his work, however gentle, was met with painful pride. Scarred by abandonment, his personality reacted badly to any kind of negative criticism because he saw it as an expression of rejection and separation. Borromini could not bear the degradation brought by this criticism because it lacked recognition and, above all, because it lacked love, something he never stopped longing for. A “fiery” character, as the Tuscans had it, reminiscent of the “wild” personality of another great Baroque artist who had also left the misty north for sunny Rome to seek his fortune: Michelangelo Merisi, better known as Caravaggio.

This move seems to have been a common choice for many artists at the time, who with their tender hands and innovative intellects have bequeathed us elegance and beauty. Borromini invented, imagined, designed, dismantled and blended, then composed, raised, brought to life and committed his creations to the whole world which, at the time, was always shocked (by virtue of their novelty) and amazed (by virtue of their beauty); then he began the whole process again before his soul “frosted over”. The sacred fire of Borromini’s creativity was the only “warmth” that managed to penetrate far enough into the artist’s life. Along the journey of his life, there were few things on which Borromini could rely to bring him in from the cold. The first was without a doubt the “hearth of his creativity”, which would often cause his soul to overheat, and the second was the love of God that would never betray or abandon him, not even in the most extreme moment of his tragic death, because this granted him the opportunity

to repent and purge himself of the sin of taking his own life. Our architect from Ticino worked fanatically – ceaselessly – in his study on his plans and projects scribbled onto the papers that were his companions, his only “children”. He never married but I am not personally convinced of the allegation brought by some critics that he was homosexual. Rather, it is more fitting to show that all of this hyperactivity, this involvement in structural disputes, this inability to ever relax, is typical of certain personalities that are prone to depression. His genius was often saturnine, given to melancholy. One could argue that this innovative and visionary hyperactivity bordered on depression, which was approaching or already taking root, and he tried to contain it. As with all innovators, Borromini too attracted the condemnation, and sometimes even the fury, of his contemporaries – more orthodox architects, some of whom described him thus:

“The abomination of our century, he is a master of the art of destruction, lacking all social grace; his art is the fruit of delirium, of the most absurd fantasies.”⁹

In the short volume entitled *Opus architectonicum*, written in the middle of the 1600s by Francesco Spada discussing the source of his inspiration, Borromini warns his readers:

“[...] I would beg to be remembered when sometimes I stray from the common designs by that phrase of Michelangelo, Prince of architects, who said that ‘those who follow others will never get ahead’.”

And again:

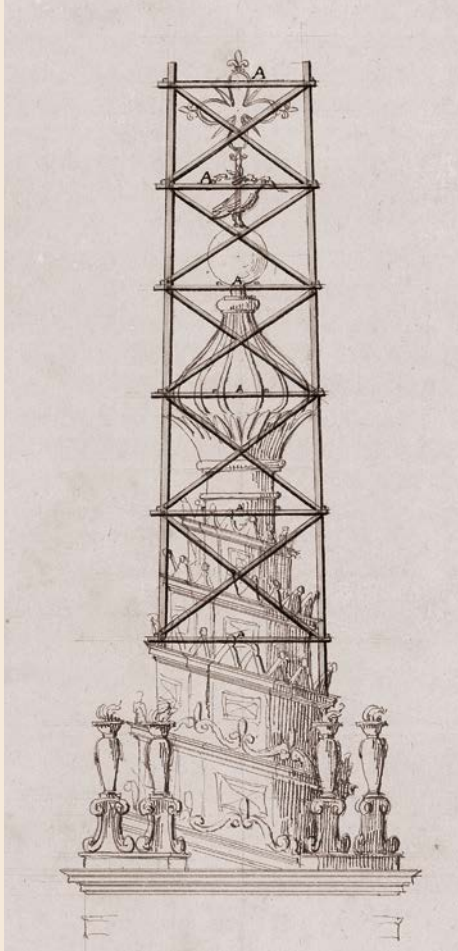
“and I would certainly never have pursued this profession with the aim of becoming a mere copyist [...] the invention of new things does not reap the fruits of the labour; or does so tardily; given that the same Michelangelo did not receive it when in reforming the architecture of the great Basilica of Saint Peter he was attacked for the new forms and ornamentations that were censured by his contemporaries, with the result that

they managed to deprive him of the role of architect of St. Peter’s several times, but in vain, and time has now testified how all of his works have come to be considered worthy of imitation and admiration. And may God save you”.¹⁰

One can quite easily read his mind and imagine him talking to himself alone in his studio: “But I will be the one to find new solutions and to subvert in my own way with palaces, churches, domes and basilicas.”

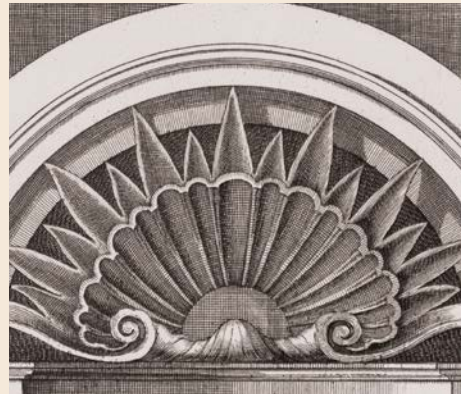
Borromini continued his journey and, having arrived in Rome, he never stopped. Although he remained in the Eternal City – essentially until his death – the journey of his creativity knew no rest, even when commissions were scarce or interrupted. One could argue that, having arrived in the city of seven hills, his journey continued *in loco*. No longer a single relocation from the cold fog of the north to the warm sun of the south, but several smaller journeys from one district of Rome to another. Borromini travelled from his home to the residences of his patrons, the Pope *in primis* and then the cardinals and the noble gentlemen that appreciated his genius and great skill. Some who had direct dealings with him, however, were rather less appreciative of his introverted and proud character. With a little imagination, we can picture all of his comings and goings along the streets of Rome. Representing each movement in red, we can visualise a labyrinth of lines from one door to another; over cobblestones and along alleyways, through vast piazzas and down shadowy streets. A spider’s web created by his movements that also traces its final “thread” up to the door of his house, from which he would never emerge again alive. A “spider’s web” that each one of us produces, almost as though we were all spiders ourselves, and in the centre or on the edges of which each of us will reach our journey’s end, just as Francesco Borromini did.

Speaking of movement in particular, we cannot fail to observe that this is the central feature of the Baroque period. We find it in the swirling ornaments as well as the subjects themselves, whether architectural, sculptural or figurative; from the concave



and convex façades of the churches and palaces to the saints and colours depicted in sculptures and paintings. No more hieratic staticism or divine immanence but action and movement in their moment of truth. If Caravaggio (1571-1610) is the Baroque period's leading proponent of movement in painting and Bernini (1598-1680) in sculpture, then Borromini is the equivalent in architecture. His non-conformist architectural route always took highly geometric plans as its point of departure; plans which were obsessively precise but which gradually developed into an upward motion of convex and concave shapes and contrasting straight lines. We could compare the journey of Borromini's life to the contrast between these precise plans and the way the motion of his architectural elements developed along façades and sides until it reached a "disordered" climax, be it a dome or a roof lantern. Coming from a place of greater rigidity and simplicity, Borromini's path took him via Milan into the explosion of the "eroticism" that characterised the Baroque period in Rome. There is no doubt

that his art found its expression through a skill driven by logic but also by emotion, beginning at one kind of infinity and ending up at another, like a bridge with its supports suspended in the unfathomable. The roof lanterns placed on the domes of his churches, so disparaged by his critics, do indeed serve to illuminate the interior; but on the exterior they feature spiralling upward motion – why? Was this just a technical solution? Why not fashion the ascent at angles with a parallelepiped tower – a shape which, among other things, would have been far easier to build? I am convinced that Borromini did this precisely because the helical ascents form a spiral, a shape he felt very much at home with. The helical staircase of the Palazzo Barberini bears the unmistakable marks of one of Borromini's projects, even though at the time, the one in charge of the commission, Carlo Maderno, was strongly influenced by Bernini – the new rising star of architecture who enjoyed great



favour with the Pope. We know that Borromini collected shells his whole life. The inventory of his possessions taken upon his death includes a large shell "mounted on a pedestal shaped like the claw of an eagle".¹¹ In every religious culture of every kind throughout time, the spiral has always been symbolic of God's knowledge of man and man's of God. The spiral has always been a picture of the infinite. The state-of-the-art technology of space telescopes (Hubble, Kepler) in the hands of astrophysicists gives us incredible images of the universe we live in. It is believed that the universe began with an unimaginable explosion as the result of an uncontrollable concentration of gravity in a single point. The noise of this deflagration can still be heard today. Arno Penzias and Robert Woodrow discovered this noise

Above:
Unknown, Dome of
Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza,
engraving.

Below:
Roman engraver, after
Francesco Borromini,
Various adornments
in the church of San
Carlo alle Quattro
Fontane, detail, 17th
century, etching,
50x37 cm.

in 1964 and called it “cosmic microwave background radiation” (CMBR), winning the Nobel Prize for their work in 1978. Our galaxy is a barred spiral with a black hole at its centre that seems to draw in whatever enters its immense gravitational field. An inconceivable hole blackened by gravity, so powerful that not even light can escape it, rendering it plunged into utter darkness; a place so dominated by the force of gravity that even space and time become warped inside it. Everything in orbit around a black hole as far as its “event horizon” is illuminated by the light of an infinite number of stars. It is not held in a flat plane but it is shaped rather like a spinning top. The spiral of this immense top that forms our galaxy follows two different paths: if you look at it from one side, it appears to rotate clockwise but observed from the other, it seems to change direction and rotate anticlockwise. In the religious interpretation, the spiral symbolises how time stretches into infinity in two directions, from God to man and from man to God. Hence Borromini’s decision to fashion the rise in his lanterns in the shape of a spiral. For the lantern is the zenith of the dome. Above it is the sky, the seat of the wisdom of the heavenly deity. The ascent leads up to it and, conversely, it also leads down to the nadir of the human condition, the end point of God’s love. We must not forget that Francesco Borromini was a Catholic believer who, like Gian Lorenzo Bernini, was also awarded the Papal knighthood of the Supreme Order of Christ.

“Borromini’s architectural work instantly amazed and captured the imagination of the most prepared and sensitive minds because it was less distracted by the anxiety associated with managing the sums of money that had to be requested, received or maintained. His architecture was the expression of pure, concentrated, “unadulterated” art. The projects devised by the innovative Ticinese architect show how the shapes of his churches and buildings expressed a twisted but also highly calculated form of reasoning; subversive and intolerant yet traditionalist and tender; cautious yet generous; evocative yet rational and composed; introverted yet

open to reality, especially if it was competitive – just like his personality. All of this consigned him inexorably to a life of loneliness. Bruno Zevi has written that ‘Borromini’s case was unique and cannot be repeated; it consisted in his heroic, almost superhuman endeavours to bring about an architectural revolution in a closed and inaccessible social context despite the new directions science was taking. His grasp of styles from late antiquity, Gothic architecture and the work of Michelangelo was not just an attempt to justify his heresies by masking them with authoritative references but also a personal, desperate way of seeking a dialogue with others.’”¹²

Francesco continued his journey but, as Carl Gustav Jung wrote in *Aion*: “When an inner situation is not made conscious, it happens outside, as fate.”¹³ As I have attempted to explain in this essay, what signalled the end for Borromini had its origins in the early events of his life. The imprinting of his character could be attributed to the loss and the vacuous result of a solitary journey which began all too early. He had difficulty relating to the needs of others and his opinion of how his art should be was inflexible as he held fast to his own ideas. Intolerant of others’ criticism, he was instead forced to live in a historical period that demanded obedience. His melancholy, a typical trait of a genius, together with his tendency towards paranoia and suspicion made him a thorny character to deal with. He had an acute sense of honour, exploded at the slightest hint of an attempt to invalidate him and was always intolerant of any criticism directed at his work. Yet according to Father Virgilio Spada of the Roman Congregation of Oratorians of *Santa Maria in Vallicella* (one of Borromini’s few protectors who was a consistent supporter even in the artist’s most difficult moments), if dealt with in the right way, Borromini proved to be docile and courteous like a puppy in need of some affection. A final but by no means insignificant peculiarity in Borromini’s personality was his frankness which, coupled with his lack of greed for money, predetermined his destiny. In any case, we cannot think that this incredible

Ticinese architect was completely naive. According to the biography of Francesco Borromini published by Giovanni Battista Passeri in 1772,¹⁴ Francesco was left baffled by an encounter with the dishonesty of others. When Maderno had been replaced by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (another genius of Baroque Rome) as head of the Fabric of Saint Peter, the need for supplies of marble and stone for the basilica continued to be as great as the basilica itself. Borromini joined forces with Agostino Radi, Bernini's brother-in-law, since the great sculptor had entrusted the two with the task of supplying a large proportion of the marble and stone required for decorating the magnificent church dedicated to Christianity's first Pope. The transaction did not prove as advantageous as it should have been, however. Borromini's suspicious character craved the truth and he discovered that Gian Lorenzo Bernini and Agostino Radi had secretly agreed for Radi to give Bernini a substantial portion of the business's profits in return for the honour of procuring the marble for the "head architect of Saint Peter's". Bribes are clearly not a phenomenon of modern Rome alone. Passeri's biography tells how, upon discovering the deceit, Borromini immediately and single-mindedly "abandoned all of his (sculptural) work, Bernini's friendship and the Fabric of Saint Peter in order to devote himself entirely to architecture".¹⁵ If it is indisputable that Borromini and Bernini collaborated for around nine years, it is likewise certain that from then on, their paths diverged for good and they became "rival geniuses". Although he often described himself as Florentine, Gian Lorenzo Bernini was born in Naples to a Neapolitan mother and a father from the Florentine municipality of Sesto Fiorentino (Pietro Paolo, who was himself an excellent sculptor: the longboat fountain in Piazza di Spagna and the bas-relief of the assumption of the Virgin Mary in the Pauline chapel of *Santa Maria Maggiore* are among his best-known works). Other than their supporters (Borromini's patron was Carlo Maderno, head architect of Saint Peter's for the longest time, while Bernini's was the Papal court, with which his father had close connections), what distinguished the two men's artistic "journeys" and lives was their personalities: the former was

introverted, gloomy, irksome and solitary; the latter extroverted, jovial and with an outstanding ability to give the world what it wanted and to cultivate public relationships (throughout his long artistic career, Bernini worked with ten Popes to varying degrees of success but almost always to his profit). One died young and alone, committing a desperate suicide as he threw himself on his own sword; the other – it goes without saying – died of natural causes at an old age, still willing and able to communicate with the many people around him to the very end.

In Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, Ippolit asks Prince Myshkin: "Is it true, Prince, that you once declared that beauty would save the world?"¹⁶ To conclude this short and necessarily incomplete essay on Borromini and the journey of his life that took him from Bissone to Rome via Milan, all that remains is to testify how much this Ticinese architect – one of the most extraordinary structural geniuses ever to walk the Earth – has contributed and, to a greater or lesser extent, continues to contribute to the salvation of Rome with the "great beauty" of his works to this day. In stark contrast to the events of Dostoyevsky's novel, beauty as created by Francesco Borromini heals and saves. When faced with his works, no-one with any artistic sensitivity could fail to behold aghast and warmly embrace his incredible creativity, finding healing and protection from pernicious ugliness. For myself, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude for the esoteric treasure Borromini has bequeathed us: a precious gift entrusted to us by the careful hands of a matchless yet melancholy artistic genius.

***Ivan Battista**

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Francesco Borromini,
Palazzo Barberini,
helical staircase,
Rome.

Notes

- ¹ Ivan Battista, *Kentauros, istinto e ragione nella psicologia del motociclista* (Kentauros, instinct and reason in the psychology of motorcyclists), Pieraldo, Rome 1995.
- ² Michael and Enid Balint, *La regressione* (Thrills and Regressions), Raffaello Cortina, Milan 1983.
- ³ Aldo Carotenuto, *Trattato di psicologia della personalità e delle differenze individuali* (Treatise on personality psychology and individual differences), Raffaello Cortina, Milan 1991.
- ⁴ Gaius Sallustius Crispus, *Appendix sallustiana* (Appendix on Sallust), vol. 1, *Epistulae ad Caesarem senem de re publica* (Letters to Caesar, an old man of the Republic), 1,1,2, edited by Alfons Kurfess, B. G. Teubner, Leipzig 1970, 7th edition.
- ⁵ Étienne Barilier, *Francesco Borromini. Le mystère et l'éclat* (Francesco Borromini. The Mystery and the Majesty), Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes, "Le savoir suisse" collection, Lausanne 2009.
- ⁶ Frederic Vester, *Il pensiero, l'apprendimento e la memoria* (Thinking, learning, forgetting), Giunti, Florence 1987.
- ⁷ Jake Morrissey, *Geni rivali. Bernini, Borromini e la creazione di Roma barocca* (The Genius in the Design. Bernini, Borromini, and the

Rivalry That Transformed Rome), Laterza, Bari 2010, p. 37.

⁸ Antonio Machado, *Campos de Castilla* (Fields of Castile), edited by Francisco Jose Arenas Martínez, Editorial Bruño, Madrid 2012.

⁹ FRANCESCO BORROMINI, *Opus architectonicum* (1725), edited by Roberto De Benedictis, Edizioni De Rubeis, Anzio (Rome) 1993.

¹⁰ Marta Lonzi, *Autenticità e progetto* (Authenticity and design), Editoriale Jaca Book, Milan 2006, p. 12.

¹¹ Joseph Connorsin Richard Bösel and Christoph L. Frommel (eds), *Borromini e l'universo barocco* (Borromini and the Baroque universe) (in the catalogue of the exhibition held at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome between 1999-2000), Electa, Milan 1999, p. 19. The online version of the essay was consulted at www.columbia.edu/~jc65/cvlinks/vita.html, 2000, but is no longer available.

¹² Bruno Zevi, *Attualità di Borromini*, (Borromini's current relevance), in "L'architettura, cronache e storia" (Architecture, chronicles and history), 519, January 1999. The passage is also included in my article entitled *Francesco Borromini. La melanconia del genio* (Francesco Borromini: the melancholy of genius), in the online magazine "Animamediatca", 8 January 2015.

¹³ Carl Gustav Jung, *Aion: ricerche sul simbolismo del sé* (Aion: researches into the phenomenology of the self), in *Opere* (Works), vol. 9**, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin 1991.

¹⁴ Joseph Connors

¹⁵ Joseph Connors

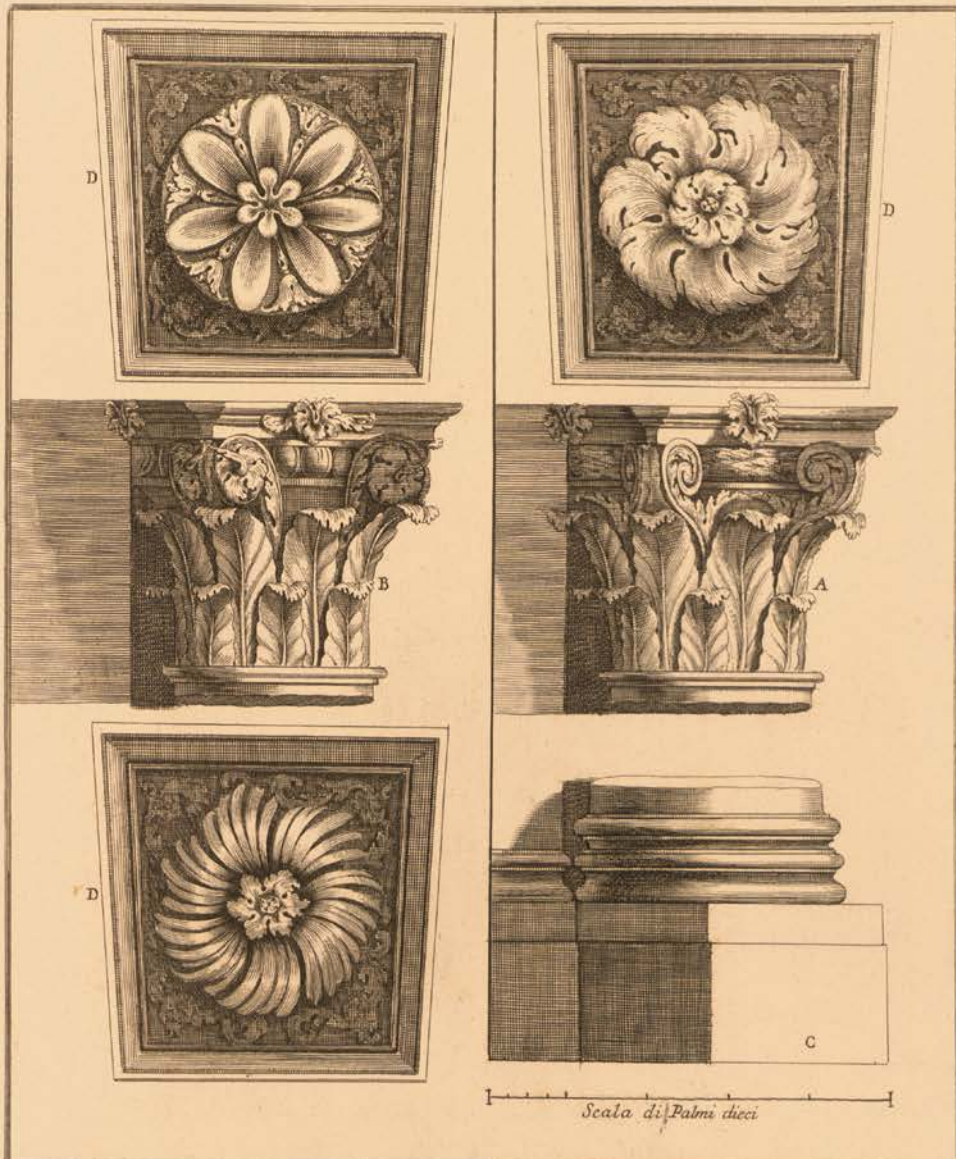
¹⁶ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, Newton Compton, Rome 2010.

100 Swiss franc note, 7th edition, with a portrait of Francesco Borromini on the front.



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A. Capitello in grande
B. Altro Capitello
C. Base dei medesimi Capitelli

D. Tre rosoni in grande dei cassettoni sotto il soffitto
dell'arco sopra alli frontespizij

In Roma nella Stamperia di Domenico de Rossi erede di Gio. Giacomo alla Pace con privilegio del Sommo Pont. 22

Roman engraver, after Francesco Borromini, *Various adornments in the church of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane*, detail, 17th century, etching, 50 x 37 cm.

This page: Plaque on Francesco Borromini's house in Bissone.



Source of quotations

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