



## **Bernini and the Remaking of Rome**

**Dr Loyd Grossman**

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It seems as if we haven't been able to travel for a very long time, so I hope, this evening, you will enjoy a brief trip to Rome. Does anyone remember TWA? An airline so bad it was known to stand for Try Walking Across. But like many other airlines of that period, they had these very alluring and seductive travel posters, and one of the most alluring cities in the world is Rome. Now is quite an interesting time to look at cities, for a couple of reasons. First, post pandemic, everyone is questioning whether cities survive with everyone working at home. London has been remarkably robust. Another reason to think about cities now is the fact that, for the first time in history, over half the population of the world lives in cities, and it's a good time to question, what makes a city great, what makes a city beautiful, what makes a city workable? And one of the most beautiful and magnetic cities in the world, of course, is Rome. For those of you who have been to Rome, and those of you who are yet to go to Rome, it's important to think of Rome as a great theatrical city. Indeed, during the period that we're going to talk about this evening, late 16th, early 17th century, Rome was often known as *Theatrum Mundi*, the Theatre of the World. And indeed, it has a certain stage set quality. Wherever you go in Rome, you feel as if you're taking part in some drama that has great significance. And it shows the power of architecture and design to enhance everyday living. Whatever you do in Rome, you feel as if you're playing a part. And it was very commonplace of the 16th and 17th century to think of the city as a theatre, the world as a theatre, and everyone as a player. So, when Shakespeare wrote "all the world's a stage," he was beautifully expressing what was a commonplace thought.

So, Rome as this great theatre, constructed to highlight the importance of civic, political, and religious ritual. Unsurprisingly, it features immensely in the history of the cinema. Most recently, many of you may have seen "La Grande Bellezza," - "The Great Beauty." People of a slightly older generation will remember the scene when Anita Ekberg had her famous bath in the Trevi Fountain in "La Dolce Vita." So, Rome has this extraordinary power to enhance our daily experience, and also to enhance the imagery of cinema and television.

It's very important, when you go to Rome, to prove that you've been to Rome, hence it's been one of the world's great tourist traps and sources of souvenirs for ages. I'm particularly fond of this collection of nodding-head gladiators, which I think could enhance almost any household. Previously, the souvenirs on offer in Rome were perhaps a little more sophisticated. This is a wonderful capriccio by Panini of an imaginary picture gallery full of the great sights of ancient and modern Rome, and it was painted for the Duke de Choiseul, the French ambassador to Rome, who wanted to take it home as proof that he had immersed himself in Rome, because a familiarity with Rome showed that you were a member of the elite, that you were sophisticated, that you were at the top of society. Even people who were never going to go to Rome wanted to show that they were familiar with the importance of the city. This is the great Falda map of Rome, which was made in the 1670s. In its full version, it is a huge map, it's about four times the size of this image, and this particular map hung on the wall of Samuel Pepys' study. Samuel Pepys was never going to go to Rome, he'd never been to Rome, but having this map of Rome was a great mark of his sophistication and his intellectual prowess.

17th century Baroque Rome, is where we're going to spend a little time this evening. It's worth asking, what's baroque? Baroque is easier to recognize than it is to define. An analogy with music might be that baroque is jazz when compared to classical music. It's also a half joking definition: baroque is when you choose to draw a curlicue instead of a straight line. For example, this is the famous University Church St. Ivo of the University of La Sapienza in Rome, by Borromini, very well known for its crazy spire - that's straight out of a pastry shop, isn't it? And of course, the baroque flourished not only in Italy, but perhaps even more extremely in

Central Europe and Southern Germany. This is the Würzburger Palace Chapel. It is all the antithesis of the Bauhaus idea of less is more, and you can think of baroque as being a more is more style of architecture. Unsurprisingly, it came between two very rules-based types of architecture, Renaissance on one side and neoclassicism on the other, and it was adopted, as it were, as the house style, the aesthetic style of the Catholic Church, and this all happened at the Council of Trent, which I will talk about momentarily.

Baroque, of course, came to England, and it gained a foothold. This is one of the finest, most obvious examples of English baroque, Blenheim Palace. And of course, here is our greatest baroque cathedral (there are two) this is the greatest one, this is St. Paul's Cathedral. The English baroque is rather restrained. And this is because the baroque style was regarded in England as being too closely identified with Catholicism and with authoritarian government, so in fact, Christopher Wren was not exactly vilified, but he was certainly very savagely criticized for the Italianate style of St. Paul's Cathedral, which we now regard as a quintessentially English building.

So where does this baroque style get its impetus? Well, it gets its impetus from the Council of Trent. The Council of Trent is the great beginning of the fight-back by the Catholic Church against the Reformation. For nearly 20 years in the middle of the 16th century, all the top Catholic clerics of Europe gather at Trent, in Northern Italy, to figure out what to do about Protestantism, how do we face this new religion, which, in the space of 30 years, has turned the world upside-down? And part of the fight-back against Protestantism involves the use of art, of music, sculpture, and architecture. The great historian of the Council of Trent is a 17th century Jesuit called Sforza Pallavicino, and he writes very explicitly, this is the real explanation why the baroque took hold in the Catholic countries. He says, "God gilded heaven with light "to enamour mortals of it, "so it is fitting that churches "should be illuminated with gold "so that people fall in love with them "and run towards them." And then he goes on to say, "The people want theatres, "so it's imperative to make the theatres curing sin "more sumptuous than the theatres "where sin goes to feed." So, there we have it, the baroque is going to be a powerful element in the Catholic revival of the late 16th and early 17th century.

Another way to get to the essence of the baroque is to look at two works, the same subject, "David", created 100 years apart. Everyone knows this version - everyone has the fridge magnet, the T-shirt - Michelangelo's "David", a fantastic evocation of idealized male beauty, incredibly well carved, serene. I think it's a bit of a bore, and that's not just because one's been overexposed to it, I think it's a bit of a bore when you compare it to this "David", done 100 years later: full of blood, full of dynamism, full of action, full of danger. Because what Bernini does, and Bernini is the sculptor of this "David", is that instead of capturing "David" at rest, he decides to capture "David" at the critical moment in his career. "David" is twisting, he's just about to throw the rock, which is either going to kill Goliath, and make him one of the greatest heroes of history, or it's all going to end quite badly. So, this is full of drama and life, it's an incredibly powerful piece, and that, to me, is the major difference between Renaissance and Baroque art.

So, let's look at our hero, Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Here are two self-portraits, on the left, in his youthful "Pirates of the Caribbean" type look, and on the right, a much more introspective, finely drawn self-portrait of the aged Bernini. In his lifetime, Bernini was regarded as unquestionably the greatest artist in Europe, and his lifetime produced a lot of other great artists, amongst his contemporaries, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Velasquez, not a bad bunch, yet he was regarded as towering above all his rivals. So, a little bit about him: he's born in 1598, his father is a good, but not overly good sculptor who comes from Florence. There's a lot of work going on in Naples at the time, a lot of church building going on in Naples, and, hard for us to imagine now, but in the late 1590s, Naples was the biggest city in Europe. So Old Man Bernini, Pietro Bernini, is enticed to go to Naples to work on churches, his son Gian Lorenzo is born there, and then five years later, Old Man Bernini goes to Rome because he's employed to work at Santa Maria Maggiore. Young Bernini grows up at the feet of his father, the sculptor, his nursery is the sculptor's studio, he grows up amongst the marble dust and the chisels of sculpting, and he becomes a sort of Mozart of sculpture.

So, let's look at one of his early works. This is a funerary bust of the papal courtier Santoni, it's in a little church called Santa Prassede, which is just around the corner from the great Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore. It's a fabulous church and it has some of the best early Christian mosaics in Rome, and it also has this wonderful bust, which is a beautifully carved likeness and is really not bad for the work of a 12-year-old. So you can see that Bernini began to attract a great deal of attention as a youth, and there's a big step forward with his next major work, which is another funerary bust: this is of the Florentine physician Coppola, and this is an extraordinarily mature work, it has a lot of psychological insight, it seems to be the bust of a real person, a real individual type, highly individuated, and it also references ancient Roman sculptures, a very, very sophisticated work of art, and once again, pretty good going for a 14 year-old.

So, this prodigiousness brings Bernini to the attention of the great princes of the Church, because the Church, as we mentioned earlier, is on a great campaign to use the arts to enhance its status and also attract more devoted worshippers. One of the greatest princes of the Church is Scipione Borghese, and he becomes Bernini's first great patron. He builds something called the Villa Borghese, which many of you have probably visited in Rome, not built as a house, but built as the sort of place where he could entertain his friends and display his art collection. He commissions the young Bernini to do three great works. The first is "The Rape of Proserpina," with Pluto on the left and his victim on the right, the second, which is the most revolutionary, is "Apollo and Daphne," and once again, rather like the "David" that we saw previously, it's a cinematic, and it captures the instant where Apollo is just about to abduct Daphne, Daphne prays to the gods to save her by turning her into a laurel tree, and you can see her fingers are turning into branches and leaves, it's a thrilling moment, and this is the work of art that makes Bernini an overnight success. Contemporary people say that the day after this is first exposed to members of the Roman elite, Bernini is stopped in the street, he becomes a celebrity with this work.

So, he does these three great works for Borghese: the David, the Apollo, and the Pluto and Proserpina. Borghese is a person who thrusts Bernini right into the spotlight. He has an incredibly powerful position in Rome: he is the nephew of Pope Paul V, and cardinal nipote, from which we get our word nepotism. It is a very powerful position because the popes need someone from their family to run the show, as it were, he's papal secretary of state, he runs the whole mechanism of the Church, and usually, a nephew is chosen to be someone that the pope could trust. He also amasses a very significant fortune in the process, and he becomes someone who is not only an arbiter of good taste, for example he's one of the original patrons of Caravaggio, and he is very much concerned with pushing Bernini forward. This is a wonderful bust of him, and although it looks quite serious to us, it was regarded as rather daring in the 1620s, because the cardinal is shown with his vestments lightly ruffled, one of the buttons is half undone, and he looks as if he's just about to speak, he's just on the verge of saying something, and these busts by Bernini, which were known as talking sculptures, were regarded as an incredible innovation within the context of 17th century sculpture. Bernini had a very close relationship with him, and you can see it in this portrait, which reminds me of one of those 1940s, 1950s "New Yorker" caricatures. Bernini is one of the fathers, if not the absolute inventor of the modern art of caricature, he does a lot of caricatures of the great people of Rome, and the great people are attracted to him because he is immensely talented, and he has a charismatic personality.

When he's carving this sculpture of David, Bernini is assisted by the young Cardinal Maffeo Barberini, and what Barberini does to help Bernini make this sculpture. This is a self-portrait of Bernini, and we know from contemporary accounts that Barberini goes to the studio and he holds up the mirror so that Bernini can see himself clearly. So, the idea that one of the greatest princes of the Church, Borghese, is his principal patron, and another of the great princes, Barberini, is helping just shows the incredible position that Bernini got himself into by the time he was 24 or 25 years old. Barberini becomes Pope Urban VIII, he's pope for just over 20 years, and he decides that Bernini is going to be, as it were, the artistic dictator of Rome, he makes him architect of St. Peter's Cathedral, St. Peter's Basilica, and he gives him lots of other important positions.

It's probably worth reminding ourselves a little bit about the nature of the papacy back in the 17th century. Here's Italy, and we remember Metternich's famous observation that Italy is not a country, it is merely a geographical expression, and here it is made pretty obvious, because if you look at it, it's kind of a tossed salad of principalities, and duchies, and kingdoms, and city states, it's all a bit of a mess. The big, purple bit going across the middle of it diagonally is something called the Papal States. The Papal States are the secular, political realm of the pope. So, the pope, unlike any of the other bigwigs of Europe, has this dual role: he is the spiritual leader of the Catholic Church and he's also a secular monarch. This secular monarchy gives him great strategic significance and is also a considerable source of income. And unlike most other monarchs, most other sovereigns in Europe, the papacy is not hereditary, so every time the pope dies, there is a complete revolution in Roman society, Roman politics, and the Roman artistic establishment, because every pope arriving in Rome brings with him a new entourage - he brings with him his favourite poets, his favourite musicians, his favourite architects, his favourite painters, and of course his family, and all of these people have to be enriched. So, Rome becomes this very fluid society, it goes topsy-turvy every time a pope dies, and the death of popes is fairly frequent, because quite often, they're not elected until they're quite old, and not expected to reign for very long.

Pope Urban VIII gets to work right away with making major investments in the improvement of St. Peter's Basilica, and the first thing he commissions Bernini to do is the great Baldacchino of St. Peter's. It is a symbolic sort of shelter for the high altar of St. Peter's, and it is a sort of mediation between the huge space of St. Peter's and this smaller human scale of those who are celebrating mass and witnessing mass. It takes

11 years to create, and it is a sensation. It is described as something completely new to the viewer, something they'd never dreamed of witnessing. This shocks people, they don't really know what it is - is it sculpture, is it architecture, is it a knick-knack, is it a bit of interior decoration? And with this, Bernini begins to break down the barriers between all the different art forms. This is a significant artistic achievement, it's also a great managerial achievement because it takes 11 years to build. It remains the largest bronze structure in the world - it's 30 meters high, and it is an object of wonder of beauty, and a testimony to Bernini's organizational abilities. So he can manage things, and the fact that he can manage projects makes more and more people want to commission him to do major things. Here's a little detail of it - you can see it's been decorated with the Barberini heraldic symbol, the Barberini bees, and you see an enormous number of bees when you look around Rome. One day, some PhD student will count them, but there must be hundreds of thousands of them. Funnily enough, originally, the coat of arms of the Barberini did not have bees on it, it had horseflies, and as the family became grander and grander, they decided that horseflies were not the thing for a grand family, so they changed them to the famous Barberini bees.

What is Bernini like as a human, as a man, what is he like? We know about his art, we know very little about his private life, but perhaps the most emblematic episode, or the most revealing episode is when he falls passionately in love with a woman, Costanza Bonarelli. Bernini is in his late 30s at this stage, and he's unmarried, which is slightly unusual for the time, and he is passionately in love with Costanza. However, there are two difficulties: number one, she is married to his assistant, and number two, Bernini's brother is having an affair with her as well. So, there is a very uncomfortable three-way relationship going on. When Bernini finds out about his brother, he becomes enraged and chases his brother with a drawn sword through the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore – he doesn't kill him but breaks some of his ribs. This creates an enormous scandal, so what happens next? Well of course, in 17th century Rome, guess whose fault it is? The woman's, because it's always the woman's fault in 17th Rome. So, Bernini's brother is told to leave Rome, and exiled. Bernini hires a thug to go to Costanza's house and slash her across the face with a razor as punishment for her perfidy, after which she is ordered to go into a home for fallen women, and then shut away for two or three years. Bernini's punishment is he's ordered to get married to someone respectable, which he does. But this testament to his relationship with Costanza is one of the most singular works of art in the whole history of Western art, because a marble bust is something that has hitherto only been reserved for sovereigns, great aristocrats, gods and goddesses, and mythological heroes, because a marble bust is very expensive to create, and in the hierarchy of the arts, it's at the top. This is the first time in the history of Western art that an ordinary woman gets the dignity of a marble bust, and this, as I say, is a powerful testimony to Bernini's passion for this woman. It's one of the only major Berninis that is outside of Rome, this is in the Bargello, in Florence.

When Pope Urban VIII dies, Bernini is terrified that the new papal regime will cease to employ him, and the new pope is not the friendliest looking person one's ever seen - Pope Innocent X, the Pamphili pope. This is the famous Velasquez of him. He is determined that he will not employ Bernini because he hates the Barberini family who have preceded him. He gets rid of most of them, he brings in his family, he wants to enrich his family, and while not as corrupt as the Barberinis, he still does manage to amass a very considerable fortune. But he ends up having to employ Bernini because Bernini is the best, and Pope Innocent X wants to enhance his neighbourhood, Piazza Navona - now one of the great tourist magnets of Rome, a place in which you should never order a pizza, by the way. Piazza Navona becomes the neighbourhood powerbase of the Pamphili family, and in order to enhance the square, he wants to commission a new fountain for the square. All the architects of Rome are invited to take part in this competition except for Bernini. However Bernini manages to get a friend to present his design to the pope, and the pope says 'well I have to employ Bernini, because Bernini's ability to be the most powerful papal propagandist is unequalled by any other artist.' The result is the Fountain of the Four Rivers, which is a great work of art, and also a pretty significant work of engineering, because what it takes an ancient Egyptian obelisk, weighing about the same amount as a jumbo jet, and it balances it on four pillars above a void. This causes an immediate sensation, it's such a powerful image of papal munificence that Pope Innocent X commissions a number of very large silver models of the fountain, which he sends around to the various crowned heads of Europe as a statement of his power, and generosity, and good taste. It remains, to me, the most beautiful fountain in Rome, maybe in the world, and if you look closely at the image on the right-hand side, you'll see why myself and some others think that it was also the inspiration for the Eiffel Tower, so this is Bernini's influence echoing through the centuries.

The greatest tragedy of the 17th century is the Thirty Years' War, and this affects Bernini. Between 1618 and 1648, Europe is torn apart as the Protestant states and the Catholic states wage war against each other,

although some states find themselves allied not with their co-religionists, but with the opposition. It's one of the first wars that is waged against a civilian population, and there are hundreds of thousands of casualties. This is one of Jacques Callot's famous images of the savagery of the Thirty Years' War. It seems to be impossible to bring the war to an end. The pope, usually regarded as Europe's preeminent peacemaker, of course has lost traction, because the Protestant states don't want to have anything to do with him. Eventually, diplomats convene in Germany, and they spend two years in discussions trying to end the war. It's complicated by the fact that the Protestant diplomats will not stay in the same city as the Catholics, and vice-versa. The chief Catholic diplomat sent to sort things out is the remarkable Fabio Chigi. He is a descendant of one of the significant families of Siena, his great-uncle was one of the most important papal bankers of the 16th century. Chigi is a very talented Latin poet, he's got extraordinarily good taste and he's very interested in the arts, but he ultimately fails as a diplomat. When the Thirty Years' War is drawn to a conclusion in 1648, it's kind of just a qualified win for the Protestants, so the Church is feeling rather battered. Nonetheless, when he comes back to Rome, he is eventually rewarded by being elected as pope, and he has to figure out how to regain the prestige of the Church following what was more or less their defeat in the Thirty Years' War. He looks to some of his predecessors, what did they do and how he can assert papal grandeur? He looks to this rough looking character, the pope with the best name ever, Pope Sixtus V.

Sixtus V is a very visionary pope because in the mid to late 16th century, he re-plans Rome. Part of the big business of Rome are holy years. Holy years originally happened every 100 years, and they attracted very, very large crowds of pilgrims to Rome. This was very good because it increased donations for the Church, increased business for the innkeepers, the horse hirers, the souvenir peddlers, the guides, such a success that someone said, well, this holy year is a wonderful thing, let's do it every 50 years. So, they start doing holy years every 50 years, and then eventually they start doing them every 25 years. And Sixtus's innovation is to connect the seven great pilgrimage churches with a network of straight roads. He also starts digging up ancient Egyptian and ancient Roman obelisks and planting them in front of the pilgrimage churches, so that even the most illiterate visitor to town can find their way around by just looking for the next obelisk. So, he uses obelisks and straight roads to make Rome a very attractive place for pilgrims to navigate around. This is one of his most famous obelisks, this is the wonderful obelisk in front of the Lateran Palace. So that's why you see so many obelisks planted around Rome.

Fabio Chigi, as Pope Alexander VII, decides to continue with this program of urban improvement. He knows Bernini quite well because he's previously commissioned Bernini to do the family chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo. Sometimes people overlook this chapel because they're drawn instead to the Caravaggios at the other end of the church, but this is a wonderful space, and it's a collaboration, although they never met, it's a collaboration between Raphael, who designed the chapel, and Bernini, who did the finishing touches, like the pyramid and the side sculptures. So, the pope commissions Bernini to do a major series of interventions around the Roman landscape.

It's good to talk about money: how did Bernini earn a living? There was no market for art, really, there wasn't a commercial market for art. Bernini had a very interesting method of doing business. Here is Francesco d'Este, the Duke of Modena, the richest aristocrat in 17th century Italy. So of course he writes to Bernini, and he says 'I'd like you to do a portrait of me', and he also writes to Bernini's great rival, Alessandro Algardi, and says 'I'd like you to do a portrait of me, can I have your terms?' Algardi writes back immediately and says 'yes, I will do a portrait of you, it's 150 scudi, which is the major unit of currency, and I'll do it in a year'. And Bernini writes back and says 'I'm not interested.' This gets the duke rather excited, and he writes back to Bernini and says 'no, will you just tell me how much and how long?' And Bernini says 'no, I don't take commissions from people I don't know, I can't possibly do it.' Eventually, Bernini decides that he will do it, it takes him nearly two years, and of course he doesn't quote a price because he wants to see how much the duke will give him. The duke ends up paying him 3,000 scudi, which is 20 times as much as Bernini's rival quoted. So, Bernini often relied on, as it were, the propensity of many of his great clients to show off, and to enrich him way beyond what any contemporary artist would choose to be paid. For example, when he carves a bust of Cardinal Richelieu, once again, he doesn't quote a price, but he's given a diamond-encrusted picture frame as payment, and a bag of gold as well. So, Bernini very much relied on his clients to determine the price of his works.

Bernini becomes so famous not only in Rome, but outside of Rome, that he soon becomes part of 17th century power politics. The rising star of Europe in Bernini's lifetime is Louis XIV, who decides that he wants Bernini to come to Paris to work for him. He writes to the pope to say 'will you lend me Cavaliere Bernini?' The pope says 'I can't, he works for me, we've got a lot of stuff to do', Louis says 'no, no, I don't think you've really understood what I was saying, would you lend me the Cavaliere Bernini?' the pope says, very politely,

'I can't really', and Louis then moves a French army to the borders of Italy. The pope, unsurprisingly, relents, and Bernini is sent to Paris. He's in his late 60s, he doesn't really want to go there, he doesn't like the French, but he goes to Paris, and he comes up with this design for the new facade of the Louvre, for the western facade of the Louvre, just by the Cour Carree. The French don't like it at all, and they don't like him because they think that he is constantly criticizing their taste. And the king's principal artistic advisor, who is called Charles Perrault, says to Bernini 'this just won't do at all', and Bernini, with fabulous tactlessness, says to Perrault 'you are not worthy of wiping the dust off my shoes.' That doesn't really go down very well in the court of Louis XIV, and Perrault, as they would say now, briefs heavily against Bernini, and unsurprisingly as well, the commission for the new facade of the Louvre goes to Charles Perrault's brother, Claude Perrault, who does something not a baroque extravaganza, but something that is a great example of French classicism, very soothing to French taste, but not really terribly innovative.

I suppose it's worth mentioning that Charles Perrault's other great achievement in history, aside from stopping Bernini from building something in Paris, he is also the author of the modern fairy tale, and he writes "Cinderella," and "Sleeping Beauty," and things like that, so he has made a major contribution at any rate.

Bernini goes back to Rome, and amongst the many works in Rome that we can see that exemplify the genius of Bernini, one of the most remarkable is "The Ecstasy of St. Teresa of Avila" in the Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria, commissioned by a Venetian family, the Cornaros, for their chapel in Rome. And it pictures the moment when St. Teresa is approached by an angel of God and is about to be pierced by the arrow of divine love. And for a work of religious sculpture, it is regarded as being pretty erotically charged. And as someone said, 'if that's what religious ecstasy is, I'd like quite a lot of it.' It's a fabulous work of art, it's a fabulous composition, because, once again, you can see how Bernini utilizes all the arts to create a splendid theatrical effect, it's architecture, it's sculpture, it's interior design, it's lighting. It has fantastic lighting, Bernini was very good with lighting. Wherever you look in Rome, you see major contributions by Bernini in terms of what we would now call street furniture or public art. The famous Triton Fountain in the Piazza Barberini just shows the power of a work of art to not only enhance, but to inspire and to make city life an adventure, because every time you look around the corner in Rome, you do see something fascinating, and beautiful, and engaging.

Bernini's own favourite church is this one, Sant'Andrea al Quirinale, just across the street from where the president of Italy lives. But I suppose Bernini's most significant contribution to not only the cityscape of Rome, but to urban design in general, is the wonderful Piazza of St. Peter's. And when you see it from this angle, you can understand why Bernini said he wanted the piazza to be like the embracing arms of the Church, welcoming the faithful and enticing those who are yet to have found faith into the Church. It is, to me, one of the great urban spaces in the world, and I think, whether people are of deep faith, a little faith, or no faith at all, it is impossible to stand there and not feel uplifted and inspired, and many other cities have been inspired by this particular design.

I'd just like to finish with a look at Bernini's relationship with Pope Alexander VII, because of course, we talk about Bernini and the making of Rome, the remaking of Rome, but no single person can remake Rome, and of course, within the context of the 17th century, no artist could do anything without a great patron, and the greatest patrons of all were the popes, and the greatest patron of the 17th century popes was this man, Alexander VII. This is a very intimate, little terracotta sketch of Alexander VII, it's in the V&A, who have a very nice collection of little Bernini terracottas, and this was designed for Alexander VII's tomb. But the work of art that most significantly represents the relationship between Bernini and the pope is this one, The Elephant of the Piazza della Minerva. The Piazza della Minerva is an exceptional Roman square because it's one of the few Roman squares that doesn't have either a cafe or a fountain. What it does have, and this is unique among the 800-and-some-odd churches in Rome, is a Gothic church, which is the only Gothic church in Rome, Santa Maria Sopra Minerva. It was very much a church used by the Florentine communities. For example, Fra Angelico is buried there, and next door to it, that narrow building to the left of it, is the entrance to a Dominican monastery, and this Egyptian-Roman obelisk was found in the garden of the Dominican monastery. It of course became the property of the pope, because it was a valuable piece of archaeology, and the pope asked Bernini to do something with it. Bernini said 'well I know there's a very famous book called "The Dream of Poliphili," which has an illustration of an elephant carrying an obelisk, and I think that would be quite an interesting to do, and in fact, I came up with an earlier design based on this for the Barberini, but I've always wanted to put an obelisk on the back of an elephant, so I'll hope you'll let me do it.' And the pope says 'yes, that sounds like a splendid idea', and Bernini goes off and does this. When I first saw this, and I think anyone walking through this square, your first question is, an elephant? And of course, in the 17th century, any educated person walking through this square would say 'oh, an elephant?'

Yes, it's a symbol of religion, because elephants were widely regarded to be symbols of piety and religion in the 17th century, and the whole ensemble is a tribute to Alexander VII, the pope.' It says, "It takes a robust mind to bear divine wisdom," so it's very much a personal tribute by Bernini to his friend Pope Alexander. And if you look at the elephant a bit more closely, you can see it's not really a David Attenborough type elephant, it's got a very human look, and some people do regard it, I think with some plausibility, as a caricature of Alexander VII. Unfortunately, Alexander VII dies two weeks before the elephant is unveiled, he never gets to see it, but it remains a touching, and very beautiful, and very entertaining tribute to him.

It also shows us something really interesting about people in the 17th century, because you sort of have the mis-impression that people in the 17th century spent a lot of time praying, and writing poetry, and being terribly serious, and being very worthy, and high-brow, and elitist, and so on, but we know that the Roman population, even the Roman elite at the time of Bernini, were very earthy. They had a tremendously scatological sense of humour. One of Bernini's favourite pastimes was writing slightly risqué plays, which were performed for the elite of Rome. And when they were deciding where to place the elephant, and thinking, should it be facing towards the church, away from the church, this way, that way? Bernini insisted that the elephant's bum should be facing the Dominican monastery, because he didn't like the Dominicans. All of Bernini's friends were Jesuits, he didn't like the Dominicans at all. And then at the last minute, he also changed a bit of the sculpture, where the elephant's tail in the original is hanging down, and as executed, the elephant's tail is lifted to the side, as if he's about to defecate in the direction of the Dominican monastery. And this was regarded as a sort of huge joke. We probably don't get it quite as much as the average 17th century Roman did, but I think what it shows is that this civilization which produced such great art, so much, so beautiful, so profound, such moving art, was also full of people who were full of flesh, and blood, and joy, and humour.

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