

THE CORNARO'S CHAPEL

Gianlorenzo Bernini (Napoli 1598 – Roma 1680) was undoubtedly the most important sculptor of the Baroque period, but he was also an architect, painter, wrote plays, and staged spectacles.

Bernini's *Saint Theresa in Ecstasy for the Cornaro* chapel in the church of Saint Maria della Vittoria (1645-52) in Rome brings together architecture, sculpture and theater into one grand conceit.

Saint Theresa, the focal point of the chapel, is a white marble statue surrounded by a polychromatic marble architectural framing concealing a hidden window to light the statue from above with a dramatic effect. The donors are portrayed along the side walls of the chapel, where two sculpted figure-groups carved in shallow relief, look at the altar leaning from two sort of opera boxes.

St. Theresa of Avila, a popular saint of the Catholic Reformation, wrote narratives of her mystical experiences that had become popular reading among people interested in pursuing spirituality. She once described the love of God as piercing her heart like a burning arrow. Bernini literalizes this image by placing St. Theresa on a cloud in a reclining pose; what can only be described as a Cupid figure holds a golden arrow (the arrow is made of metal) and smiles down at her. The angelic figure is not preparing to plunge the arrow into her heart, rather he has withdrawn it. St. Theresa's face reflects not the anticipation of ecstasy, but her current fulfillment.

The blending of religious and erotic was part of the genius of the Baroque. Bernini, who in life and writing was a devout Catholic, is not attempting to satirize the experience of a caste nun, but to embody in marble a complex truth about religious experience, an experience that takes place in the body.

The Cornaro family promotes itself discreetly in this chapel. As in an opera house, the Cornaro have a privileged position in respect to the viewer, in their private reserve, closer to the saint. The viewer, however, has a better view from the front. Paradoxically, the boundaries between sculpture, theater and architecture are blurred to stage a vision and make tangible an image, that, unlike sculpture, is conceived to be seen only from the point of view of the audience.

You can see a similar baroque interaction of light, sculpture, painting and architecture at Palazzo Ducale in Genoa. The altar of its chapel, designed for holding a sculpture by Francesco Schiaffino use a hidden window to achieve a special effect of light that echoes what Bernini set up previously in Rome.

<http://www.palazzoducale.genova.it/naviga.asp?pagina=8070>