

May 2007

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### Recommended Citation

Vacherot, Damien 2010 (2007) "The Cornaro Chapel or the Culmination of Bernini's Bel Composto," *Colgate Academic Review*. Vol. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://commons.colgate.edu/car/vol1/iss1/5>

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## The Cornaro Chapel or the Culmination of Bernini's *Bel Composto*

Damien Vacherot '10

ARTS 226

*How does one achieve unity, both of form and meaning, in the visual arts? Gian Lorenzo Bernini's Cornaro Chapel in the Carmelite church of Santa Maria Della Vittoria, Rome, surely comes close to answering this question. Indeed, it represents the culmination of the art historical concept of the *bel composto*. The term, which can be translated as "beautiful whole," refers to the simultaneous use of painting, sculpture and architecture to enhance the viewer's experience of the piece represented. I was particularly fascinated by the spatial and rhetorical relationship between the different mediums used in the chapel. The techniques Bernini used are so different, yet they unite to form a coherent whole that can be referred to as an indivisible unit both in space and in meaning. This is perhaps due to the fact that Bernini employed these different mediums for a common purpose, namely to lead the viewer to experience a greater sense of devotion through wonder and astonishment. The awe one feels when looking at the chapel is such that it is fair to say he achieved this goal. I was drawn to analyze the holding stone that enables the viewer to enter the indivisible unit depicted in the chapel and to comprehend its meaning. That holding stone can be found in a sculpted group located on the left and right wall of the chapel. To understand the way in which this group acts as such, I had to visualize the way in which an actual visitor would experience the chapel. This analysis truly reveals the sheer brilliance of Bernini's design for the Cornaro chapel. The meaning conveyed by the chapel, the salvation of mankind, is represented in such a way that the visitor cannot remain indifferent.*

Gian Lorenzo Bernini's extraordinary works both as an architect and as a sculptor had a powerful impact on the artistic world of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. His most impressive innovation is undoubtedly the articulation of the concept of the *bel composto* or beautiful whole. This vision was never so greatly expressed as in the Cornaro Chapel built in the 1650's in the small Carmelite church of Santa Maria della Vittoria. The chapel was commissioned by the Venetian Cardinal Federigo Cornaro who had selected this emplacement for his

sepulchral chapel. Bernini included the cardinal's portrait bust along with those of other well known members of the Cornaro family on the side walls of the chapel. This discussion will demonstrate the importance of these sculptured portraits to the viewer's experience of the Chapel in the context of Bernini's *bel composto*.

To discuss any of Bernini's chapels, one must first understand the concept of the *bel composto* because it had such a central role in their conception. The phrase was first used by Bernini's biographer, Filippo Baldinucci, who writes

that "Bernini was the first to attempt to unite architecture with sculpture and painting in such a manner that together they make a *bel composto*" (Careri 1). The term therefore refers to the simultaneous use of painting, architecture, sculpture and decoration, to create an indivisible unit that enhances the viewer's experience of the subject represented. It is easy to understand the birth of this idea in the context of Baroque art. According to Anthony Blunt, "one of the chief aims of Baroque artists was to arouse wonder and astonishment, and ... illusionism was the most powerful weapon which they used to arouse it" (67) because it creates "surprise, an important ingredient in the feeling of wonder" (69). Similarly, in the words of Rudolf Wittkower, "Bernini endeavored to eliminate the barrier between the work of art and the beholder" (24). The *bel composto* can therefore be seen as a way to strive for greater illusionism and wonder because it presents the three arts in an articulated ensemble so as to create a stronger impression on the viewer. However, in the Cornaro chapel, Bernini used the *bel composto* not solely to arouse wonder, but so that this wonder would lead the observer to experience a greater devotion.

With this chapel, Bernini was for the first time given the opportunity to develop his *bel composto*. Indeed, Wittkower says, that the chapel enabled him to carry out "not only a part within an existing structure, but a whole, consisting of architecture, sculpture, decoration and painting" (24). The result is, according to him, an "indivisible unit from floor to ceiling" (25). The most prominent part of the composition is undoubtedly the marble group representing the *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa*. The sculpture is located in a niche decorated with colored marble, which focuses our attention on the central component of the chapel, but also isolates the group from the space in which the

viewer is standing. The piece is illuminated by a hidden window which endows it with a visionary quality. In search for that mysterious source of light, our eyes wander up towards the vault where we contemplate a fresco of the Holy Spirit surrounded by angels. Below the *Ecstasy*, the altar is engraved with a low-relief of the Last Supper, and two skeletons are inlaid in the floor of the Chapel. On the left and right walls, Bernini carved the portrait of Cardinal Cornaro accompanied by seven of his ancestors. It is their role in the *bel composto* of the chapel that I want to analyze to demonstrate that they enable the viewer to access the meaning of the chapel.

As mentioned above, Bernini created the Cornaro chapel as a single unit. What makes the Cornaro portraits so important to the chapel is that they enable the viewer to enter that indivisible unit and become an active participant in the action unfolding in front of him. In the chapel, Bernini created what Blunt calls four different levels of reality (74). The viewer's space in itself is the first level. The Cornaro cardinals are meant to be understood as part of the viewer's own space and level of reality. As such, they provide him with something to identify with in the chapel. While there is some debate as to what the cardinals are actually doing, it remains certain that their actions are related to the Theresa's vision. By isolating the Theresa group in its niche and by illuminating it with a mysterious light, Bernini effectively creates the second level of reality: the visionary realm. Once the viewer identifies with the Cornaro, he is able to grasp the visionary quality of the group, that is, he is able to recognize that the altarpiece is located in a different level of reality. Through that vision, he can then access its source, the heavenly realm

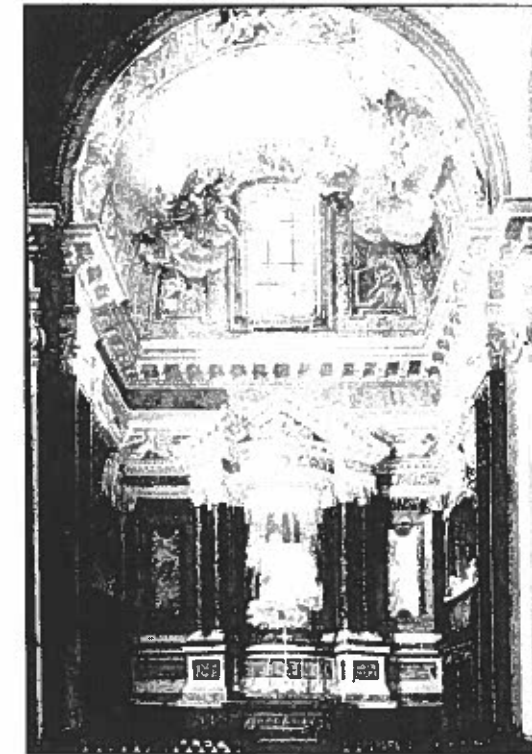
depicted on the vault, which consists of the third level. When the viewer steps closer, he then observes the two inlaid skeletons, representing Death or Purgatory, and accesses the fourth level of reality. Once he realizes that the skeletons lie over the tomb of the cardinal, his attention is brought back to the Cornaro figures. Hence, the viewer has gone full circle and traveled through the four different realms or levels of reality of the chapel. The Cornaro portraits are the pictorial element that enables him to enter that circle and as such to comprehend the meaning of the *bel composto* of the chapel.

The Cornaro figures also essential because they contribute to the effect of surprise the chapel has on the viewer. Indeed, as the viewer progresses through the nave, the only things he can see are the Cornaro portraits located on the right wall of the chapel because the *Ecstasy* is hidden by its niche. The excited discussion of the figures gives the viewer a sense that something is happening. When he finally realizes the cause of the cardinals' emotion, the surprise is such that he cannot help but be seized by wonder too. He, for a brief instance, has also had a vision. And what that vision articulates is salvation for all humans through Saint Theresa and the Eucharist, and its triumph over death (Montagu 241). For a pious 17<sup>th</sup> century viewer, this vision is enough to bring him to his knees in prayer. By increasing the

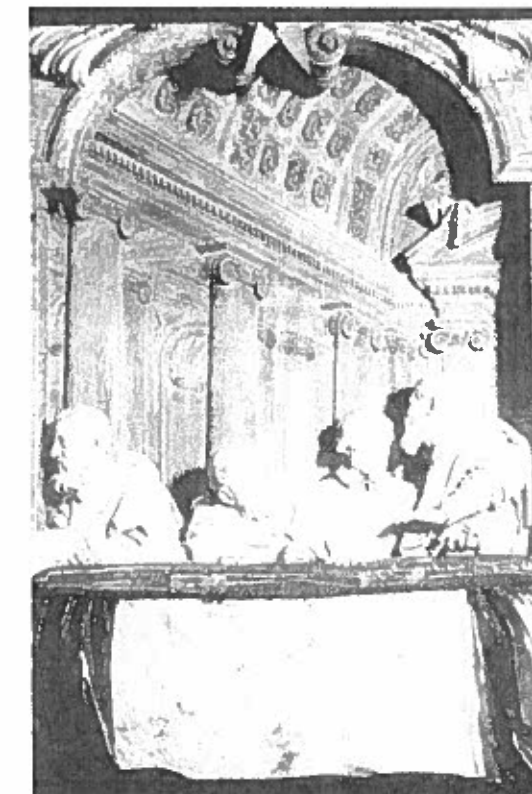
surprise of the viewer, the Cornaro figures also enhance his wonder and devotion, which was one of the chief goals Bernini aimed to attain.

The Cornaro portraits are an essential part of Bernini's *bel composto* in the Cornaro Chapel because they provide the viewer with a way to enter the indivisible unit of the chapel. Without them, much of the effect and meaning of the chapel is lost. Indeed, if the viewer had no way to identify with figures located in the same level of reality as him, it would be much harder for him to realize that the altarpiece represents a vision. Much of the surprise effect would be lost too because the attitude of the Cornaro portraits would not trigger his curiosity as to what may have caused it. Most importantly, the chapel would lose its meaning because without the cardinals, there would be no one to be saved. It seems logical to conclude that each part of the *bel composto* has its importance without which the effect and meaning of the entire whole are lost. In fact, this is exactly what the meaning of *bel composto* suggests. Through the Cornaro Chapel, Bernini, for the first time, emphasized the ensemble over its individual components. By doing so, he paved the way for the *bel composto* to become a hallmark of Baroque art and architecture.

Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria.



Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria. Detail of Cornaro Cardinals.



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## Understanding Place Through Archaeoastronomy:

## A Cognitive Approach

Kristin V. Landau '07

SOAN 452 Senior Thesis

*This investigation argues for the establishment of theoretical foundations in the field of archaeoastronomy and its implications in furthering the study and understanding of ritual place of the ancient Maya. First, I assert that archaeoastronomy may be used as a tool in a cognitive approach to archaeology – that is, through archaeoastronomy and the study of material remains we can understand how the Maya conceived of and thought about objects and events in their world – because the finding of archaeoastronomically significant features can strengthen previous hypotheses and add additionally evidence about how societies conceived the cosmos.*

*Second, I assert that archaeoastronomy is also an extremely useful, but slighted tool for the understanding of space and how it may be constructed as a sacred, ritualized place. More often than not monuments and ceremonial structures within an ancient Maya city (and some argue the entire city itself) are oriented to some astronomical event, connecting land and cosmos, center and periphery. This thesis attempts to show how one can discover the use, meaning and sanctity of a place through the sacred association between earthly structures and the heavens.*

*The process is exemplified with a case study that tests the archaeoastronomic relationships among the monuments of the Great Plaza at the site of Copán, Honduras. Based on prior investigations of this space, I proposed it was a Solar Calendar that separated the year into four significant parts and was primarily used to predict important dates in the agricultural cycle, in line with other devices; however, further analysis proved the astronomy and thus my conclusions partially inaccurate. Now, I again explore the Great Plaza with a consideration of how its archaeoastronomy may be a cognitive window onto the Maya conception and use of that space.*

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