



## BIOGRAPHY

### Gian Lorenzo Bernini

*He is of modest height, but well-proportioned, and if anything thin rather than fat, with a temperament that is all fire. His face is eagle-like, especially the eyes. His eyebrows are long, his brow large, with slight projections over the eyes. ....*

*One could say that his mind is one of the most beautiful ever made by nature, since, without having studied, he has most of the advantages that knowledge can give a man. He has, as well, an excellent memory, a quick and lively imagination, and his judgement seems clear and precise. He is a very acute conversationalist, and has a very special gift of expressing things in words, with his face, and by gesture so as to make you see as easily as the greatest painters do with their brushes. ...."*

Paul Fréart de Chantelou,  
*Diary of Cavaliere Bernini's Visit to France.* (1665)  
translated by Margery Corbett

His contemporaries called Bernini "a new Michelangelo" - and like Michelangelo, he was not only a sculptor, but also a painter and architect. Bernini came to dominate the Roman art world, and to influence the course of the arts across Europe.

Gian Lorenzo was born in Naples in 1598; his mother, Angelica Galante, was a Neapolitan, his father, Pietro Bernini, a successful sculptor from Florence. The family moved to Rome in 1605 when he was about eight years old. During his youth he worked alongside his father, and soon showed enormous talent as a sculptor. Portrait busts were among his earliest works, and helped establish his reputation.

Early in his career Bernini attracted the patronage of Cardinal Scipione Borghese, nephew to Pope Paul V. The cardinal was a great patron of the arts and a voracious collector, and among his commissions to the young sculptor were *Apollo and Daphne* (1622-24) and *David* (1623-24). The god Apollo chases after the nymph Daphne. She calls upon her father for help; he turns her into a laurel tree, allowing her to escape Apollo. We witness the scene happening before our very eyes: just as Apollo is about to capture her, Daphne's flesh and hair transform into leaves, twigs, bark, and roots. The marble is carved with such skill as to be miraculous, just like Daphne's transformation. *David* is about to sling his rock at Goliath: the rope is stretched taut by the force, and we see the tension written in every muscle of the hero's body. *David's* face is a self-portrait, a witty joke - Bernini is himself a kind of giant-killer, triumphing over the marble. Carved when Bernini was in his early twenties, these works revealed the young man's incredible talent, and laid the foundation for his later success.

Recognizing Bernini's inventive genius, Pope Urban VIII and his successors employed him to embellish the city, its churches and palaces. He was responsible for most of its decoration, including the *Baldacchino* (1624-35) - the enormous bronze canopy marking the apostle's tomb. A hybrid of sculpture and architecture, the work has become iconic and replicated around the world - for example, in Montréal's cathedral S. Marie-Reine-du-Monde. He would later add the *Cathedra Petri* (1657-66), an immense bronze sculptural group enclosing the ancient relic of St. Peter's throne.

Bernini also worked on a smaller scale. His son Domenico claimed that "in every work, of whatever kind, that he was asked to do, no matter how small it was, he would devote to it all his application, and in its own way a design for a lamp would receive as much study as a noble building, because he held that in their perfection all the arts are equal, and that whoever could achieve beauty in a minor or little object, would achieve equal beauty in a major or large undertaking." (Translation Jennifer Montagu.)

His designs for chapels and tombs commissioned by lesser patrons are among his most inventive. Of all his many works, his masterpiece may well be the Cornaro chapel, famed for *The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa of Avila* (1647-51). The chapel best exemplifies Bernini's "bel composto" - the unity of painting, sculpture, and architecture in a work of art, in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

He also left his mark upon the city, building churches, palaces and squares. He decorated the principal city squares with highly original fountains, the most famous being the spectacular Fountain of the Four Rivers in the Piazza Navona. It incorporates an ancient Egyptian obelisk raised high over a hollowed out rock - seemingly defying gravity.

Bernini dominated art in Rome, and his fame soon spread across Europe: King Charles I of England commissioned a portrait bust in 1635; in rivalry, Cardinal Richelieu, prime minister to Louis XIII of France, commissioned his own in 1640. Louis XIV summoned him to France to redesign the Louvre palace, and Bernini spent some five months in Paris in 1665. His plans for the Louvre were rejected, but during this time he carved the marble bust of Louis XIV, among his most iconic works.

He died in 1681, shortly before his 82<sup>nd</sup> birthday. He had transformed the art of his time.

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This is the “official” history of the artist. Its sources include laudatory biographies by Filippo Baldinucci, a Florentine art historian, and Bernini’s own son Domenico. It ignores the complexities of the man himself - at times jealous, vain, and sudden in anger. “Stern by nature, steady in his work, passionate in his wrath.”

Bernini’s most famous portrait is of Costanza Bonarelli, née Piccolomini; it is also the most tragic. Bernini was infatuated with Costanza, the wife of the sculptor Matteo Bonarelli, one of his assistants. He began an affair with her, and during this time carved her portrait. The work is remarkable, a record of the artist’s passion for his lover. He grew jealous, and spied upon her, discovering her together with his own brother Luigi. Overcome by rage, Bernini chased down his brother and beat him, badly injuring him. He gave a servant a razor and ordered him to slash Costanza’s face. Bernini was fined, Luigi was temporarily banished, and Costanza shamed. Pope Urban VIII pardoned Bernini, justifying his act by praising the artist as a “rare man, sublime genius, born according to divine plan for the glory of Rome and to bring light to this century.” Bernini had escaped the consequences of his crimes, and soon parted with the bust. At the pope’s urging, he married Caterina Tezio; their marriage lasted 34 years, and they had 11 children. Costanza remained with her husband, living in Rome; she died in 1662.