Vernon Hyde Minor

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“Ut pictura poesis,” “as is painting so is poetry,” typified the Horatian proposition implicit in the theorizing of baroque rhetoricians such as the Jesuit Emanuele Tesauro (1592–1675).

Taking the unity of the visual with the rhetorical arts as his methodological premise, Vernon Hyde Minor has chosen, as the subjects of this thematically bound set of distinct essays, a number of artists mostly working in Rome in the age of Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680) and later. The result is an exercise in what I am tempted to call visual exegesis, involving the close reading of a selection of artworks, conspicuous, oftentimes, for their awe-inspiring beauty as well as for their meticulous attention to narrative detail.

The central figure, and by far the most eminent artist of the group, is, of course, Bernini himself, credited some time ago by Irving Lavin, in a study of the Cornaro Chapel at Santa Maria della Vittoria, with having carried forth Michelangelo’s mastery of the three visual arts into new realms, and more recently the object of a biography by Franco Mormando, *Bernini: His Life and His Rome* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011). Here, among other works, we are introduced to the *Cathedra Petri*, sculpted for the apse of St. Peter’s basilica to contain a relic of the Chair of St. Peter, “at once a summation of the millennial relationship between art and religion, a complex of signs, symbols and metaphors that brings to mind a wealth of associations and meanings sometimes older than the church itself, and a conceitto for a mystical theology that provides the mind’s road to God” (134) as adumbrated in the underlying text by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (fl. 5–6 cent.). Tombs play a major role in a study largely devoted to a church where there are so many. Moreover the analyses of those built for Urban VIII (r.1622–44) and Alexander VII (r.1655–67) evoke the dense concentration of themes concretized in a polychrome medium carved and molded to miraculous perfection.

However, our admiration for these and other works by the same artist (we learn here) ought not to diminish the respect due for instance to arch-rival Francesco Borromini (1599–1667), whose Church of St. Ivo alla Sapienza featured a scarcely inferior medley of scenographic forms, turning stone into a flowing liquid running along voluptuous curves. The same goes for Giovanni Battista Gaulli called Baciccio (1639–1709), whose ceiling fresco in the Church of the Gesù glorifies the holy name of Jesus in a whirl of many-figured angels gracing a firmament far above the edges of a searing hellfire seeming to spill alarmingly into the nave, the writhing bodies a stark reminder to focus the

mind on those words by St. Ignatius in the *Spiritual Exercises* regarding contemplation of the wages of sin.

The author is careful to situate his approach at the intersection of various disciplines, where important explicit reference points include Jacques Derrida, Paul De Man, and Michel Foucault as well as Erwin Panofsky, Aby Warburg, and Mieke Bal. A sparkling erudition interprets the folds in Urban VIII's robe, on the tomb in St. Peter's, in the light of Gilles Deleuze's reading of Leibniz's *Monadology* (1714). Immanuel Kant's notion of the sublime in art is used to inform a reading of the Baldacchino or canopy over the Tomb of St. Peter. Sigmund Freud's notion of the uncanny unlocks the visual impact of the cherubs on Filippo della Valle's tomb of Innocent XII (r.1691–1700), where the relation to Bernini also suggests a case of the anxiety of influence theorized by Harold Bloom. Vladimir Nabokov on objects and their history, as applied by Bill Brown to "thing theory," comes up in regard to the titanic series of apostle sculptures in St. John Lateran, by Camillo Rusconi (1658–1728) and others. Martin Heidegger comes and goes in these pages, keeping in mind the interpretation by Gianni Vattimo, for the concepts of truth, being and presence applied to, for instance, work by French painter Philippe de Champaigne (1602–74), relevant here because of the Jansenist connection.

Indeed, if a single context, other than the repertoire of parallel narrations in which a particular visualization may be situated, is conspicuously evident in this book, that is the Jansenist controversy of the latter half of the seventeenth century, covered in the longest (eleventh) chapter. In spite of the Flemish roots, the controversy engaged an international audience and eventually placed the Jesuits, sworn enemies of the movement, at odds with an influential segment of intellectual life, surely a prelude to the strife that helped precipitate the temporary dissolution of the order by Clement XIV (r.1769–74), in episodes that Hans Gross has placed at the center of his interpretation of eighteenth-century Rome, referenced here. A discussion ranging from Descartes to the *Logic of Port Royal* to Pascal's *Provincial Letters* thus necessarily precedes the analysis of a group of paintings that once hung in a convent of nuns inspired by Jansenist principles.

Such attention to the worlds inside as well as around the artworks, including academies, educational institutions, and the very particular patronage personalities of (especially) Urban VIII, Innocent X, Alexander VII, advances this interpretation of Roman art further along the paths already indicated in studies by Torgil Magnuson (*The Age of Bernini*, 2 vols. [Stockholm: 1982–86] and Richard Krautheimer (*The Rome of Alexander VII, 1655–1667* [Princeton: 1987])). To be sure, we find here no significant echoes of the factional strife among the Roman *popolo*, nor of the political and military catastrophes taking place among states near and far, during one of the most violent and most formative

centuries in European history. But culture is seen in a perspective including both depth and breadth. "The discourses of art and rhetoric have to make sense of the interrelation of artist and his or her cultural context," the author explains, whereas this happens to be "an undertaking that in the early-modern period was fraught with questions of personal and national identity, taste, pastoral duty, papal authority, contentious social organizations, piety, dogma, a pared-down rhetoric, and the history of ideas" (153). Whatever is excluded from this range of influences does not detract from the value of the author's conclusions, nor from one's admiration for a project of such daring carried off with all difficulties seemingly vanquished.

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