BERNINI DOUBLE-TAKE

Saturday March 7, 2009  10am-5:30pm University of Toronto
John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Design Auditorium, 230 College Street, Toronto

symposium speakers: Maarten DELBEKE (Ghent-Leiden), Evonne LEVY (Toronto), Carolina MAISONNE (Toronto), Nancy MONDESPERERI (Berlin), Sebastian SCHUETZE (Kingston), Philipp ZITZLSPERGER (Berlin)

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The ‘Bernini Double-Take’ conference, which took place on 7 March 2009 at the University of Toronto, brought together a group of Bernini scholars with longstanding preoccupations with the intersection of sculpture, art theory and poetics. The conference was organized in conjunction with a series of seminars on ‘Bernini and the Portrait’ being taught at the University of Toronto around the Ottawa venue of the Bernini and the Birth of Baroque Portrait Sculpture exhibition.1 This introduction attempts to capture some of the discussions and research of the participants in this semester-long focus on Bernini’s portraits, to comment on the questions that arose, and to suggest new directions for research.

‘Bernini Double-Take’ asked participants to do a double-take on the subject of Bernini’s portraits: to tease out the various layers of verisimilitude in Bernini’s portrait practice, to challenge Bernini’s reputation as a singular artist and his works as singular performances. John Massey, a Toronto artist, very generously responded to the ‘Double-Take’ provocation with an intriguing photo-based work featuring the Art Gallery of Ontario’s bust by Bernini of Gregory XV which served as the image for the conference poster (fig. 1). Most speakers chose to engage with the portrait discourse, focusing on a body of French and Italian writings of the period, some brought to light on the occasion. Sebastian Schütze, who co-organized the event, presented his discovery of an unpublished 36-page manuscript of poetry written for Cardinal Mazarin around the commissioning of his portrait from Bernini;2 Rudolf Preimesberger, whose essay appears here, did a tour de force reading of Lelio Guidiccioni’s letter to Scipione Borghese about the production of Bernini’s portrait of Urban VIII; Carolina Mangone, in a paper entitled ‘Becoming Bernini’, fleshed out Bernini’s self-portrait as David, as well as the Aeneas group, as a critique of Michelangelo’s lifeless, immobile Risen Christ and therefore as an apt figure for Bernini’s own emerging identity as an artist;3 and in ‘Speaking of Likeness’ Maarten Delbeke showed how Bernini’s image of Louis XIV was embedded in a web of late seventeenth-century theoretical writings which focused not on the artist but on the image of the ruler.4 Philipp Zitzlsperger, whose paper appears here, interpreted anew a crucial document that indicated that the bust of Gregory XV on display at the family palace was draped, thus opening up a cultic use of the portrait of the pope. Finally, I contributed a

paper, included in this volume, on Bernini’s numerous versions of the same portrait, of the portrait as twice a copy: as a copy after nature, and as a repetition of an image already made. If two governing themes of the day were to be identified, they would have to be the reinfusion of magic around the portrait image, and the embeddedness of writings on Bernini’s portraits in a larger European portrait discourse – which is to say that, in terms of its reception, a portrait bust constitutes above all an opportunity, as Delbeke put it, to speak about likeness.

Anyone familiar with the bibliography on Bernini’s portraits will be aware that the study of Bernini portraits as a distinct issue was set in motion by Rudolf Wittkower with a short chapter in his monograph of 1955.1 In it and other essays, especially his 1951 article on the portrait bust of Louis XIV,6 he established the themes that would dominate the study of Bernini’s work in this genre: the speaking likeness, Bernini’s method of studying his subject while moving (captured in the many passages on the making of the bust of Louis XIV in the Chantelou diary), and the artist’s reliance on an image in his mind rather than on preparatory drawings as an antipathy to the referentiality of the genre itself. Irving Lavin, who in a review of Wittkower’s monograph in 1956 correctly predicted that Wittkower’s portrait chapter and related catalogue entries might easily be the most enduring scholarly contribution of Wittkower’s monograph,7 made equally enduring contributions with his work on Bernini’s early and state portraits and on genealogies of the understanding of the form of the portrait bust as a whole (rather than a fragment), which extended Wittkower’s preoccupations to the historical development of the genre. Lavin’s contributions, especially his work on Bernini’s precocious early busts and the question of his relation to the work of his father, and on the later ruler portraits, Francesco d’Este, Louis XIV and the late bust of Christ, remain very much at the centre of discussion in part because the questions around them remain among the most intractable.8 Jennifer Montagu’s essential work on Alessandro Algardi’s portraits set Bernini’s own in a larger milieu,9 while underscoring the differences between Bernini and other sculptors both in his approach to the genre and his exceptional pricing structure.10 To a large extent the Getty exhibition and catalogue followed the lines of inquiry of Wittkower, Lavin and Montagu while placing Bernini’s portraits, happily and spectacularly, in the context and company of this larger milieu, which can be better reconstructed with the new monographs in hand.

The sheer event of viewing such a large number of busts by Bernini and his milieu together in an exhibition is exactly what was needed to think beyond the themes and problems established by Wittkower, Lavin and Montagu, important as they remain, and to start to pose new questions. Features of the busts that are not usually reproduced immediately raised questions. It has not been noticed, for instance, that Bernini has carved on the crown of the head of most of the early busts of ecclesiastics such as Cardinal de Sourdis, the bronze Paul V, all versions of Gregory XV and Cardinal Montalto (fig. 2) a smoothed round area as if the hair had been flattened by a skull cap (or even tonsured), but also opening up the possibility that Bernini designated a spot on the sculpture for a real skull cap. The carving is sufficiently ambiguous that any of these seem possible. Was the
intention that these busts be dressed, thus substantiating and extending Zitzlsperger’s argument for the bust of Gregory XV? It was also striking that, with one exception, in spite of the rough treatment of the marble in the t-shaped hollows that constitute the backs of the busts, all of the heads were finished completely in the round (fig. 3). It cannot be the case that in all cases the heads would have been visible and the rest not. Why would it be tolerable to see a roughly carved hollow back to the torso, but not a head hollowed out and roughed in? There must have been some notion of the inviolability of the head in operation. Interestingly, the only exception to this rule, and not just in busts by Bernini, was the bust of Louis XIV, both in the marble and bronze versions (fig. 4), as Philipp Zitzlsperger confirmed from his inspection of the marble bust at Versailles. Was there some sort of subversion involved in this very unusual decision to leave this particularly exalted head incomplete?

Seeing the busts together made obvious a shift in scale between the busts of the 1620s and the busts of the early 1630s which are not only more lively but simply bigger. The radical change in the finishes of the bronzes also came into sharp focus. The early papal bronzes of Paul V (pl. 4) and Gregory XV (pl. 5) were highly chased, but with the head of Urban VIII (possibly as early as 1632; pl. 8), Bernini’s treatment of the medium is in a new category altogether. These usually overshadowed multiples which, it is assumed, are executed at arm’s length from the artist by specialist casters emerged in the exhibition as among the most immediate, painterly, gestural, the most autographic works of all. Set in the same room as Ottawa’s marble bust of Urban VIII, the bronzes, with the graphic marks left in the clay from which the casts were made in clear view, seemed more pliant, more modelled, in short, softer in spite of the darkness of the material about which Bernini complained. It seems that Bernini’s efforts to master the medium for the Baldacchino had a profound effect on his works in portraiture, for in these portraits Bernini overcame the hardness of stone, modelling Urban’s face directly in clay, the traces of the softness of which is undiminished by chasing.

In rethinking Bernini’s portraits post-exhibition we will be building upon several relatively recent and important interventions on the subject. In the decade leading up to the exhibition three contributions to Bernini studies which have yet to be fully felt in the literature reached important conclusions and pointed in several fruitful directions. The first is Diane Bodart’s intelligent essay in which she situated Bernini’s theory of the portrait in the context of the well-developed portrait discourse. It is an essay that will be cited for decades to come, for she is the first to give comprehensive theoretical weight to the important anecdotes about portraits that form the backbone for such a theory and to work against the isolation of Bernini’s stories from a well-developed idea-milieu. To some extent
the literature on Bernini’s portraits has been tied not just to Wittkower’s narrative, but to the straitjacket of the Bernini biographies, which have had a singular hold on the stories art historians have been able to construct around Bernini’s work. Where the portraits are concerned it is not hard to understand why the biographies are so influential, since the anecdotes around Bernini’s portraits are sophisticated contributions to a theory of portraiture and have high anecdotal value. But, as Sarah McPhee’s work on Costanza Bonarelli has shown, the biographical image is so strong that it has often prevented scholars from considering alternative narratives and alternative questions.

McPhee, who is preparing a book on Costanza Bonarelli, has argued that Bernini represented Costanza in his bust as a multi-faceted woman: at once an object of desire, in her open chemise, at once a woman of the nobility, with her elegantly braided hair (pls. 16–17). This new biographical opening on the person represented needs to be taken a step further to consider even the most conventional questions about the sub-genre of portraiture – the bust of the beautiful woman – to which it belongs. Seen alongside the Getty bust of Maria Capranica (pl. 2), and with Finelli’s bust of Maria Barberini Duglioli in the Louvre (pl. 10) in mind, Bernini’s lack of reliance on costume and jewellery to ennoble the bust of Costanza stood out. But as important is the exceptional treatment of the joint of the head to a sinuous neck-like base in the form of an exquisitely curved ionic capital, with a uniquely highly finished back to the bust. As such the bust reads as a capital: Costanza’s head, on top of an inverted capital, the ionic base, the curls of hair resting on her neck and brow echoing the curl of the ionic capital. In devising the unique base Bernini may have been likening Costanza to the intelligent lover (not-wife) of Pericles, Aspasia, for which Lucian used as a model an ‘ionic’ figure ‘wrought by Aeschines, the friend of Socrates, and by Socrates himself’.

The second recent intervention on the subject of the portraits is comprised by a cluster of studies of Bernini’s biographies initiated by Tomaso Montanari and Maarten Delbeke, the consequences of which were taken up at some length and with particular implications for the portrait anecdotes in Bernini’s Biographies: Critical Essays. In reading the Bernini vite as texts rather than, as had become habitual, as archival sources, strides have been made in understanding the portrait discourse and its centrality to the image of Bernini that the biographers wished to impart. Since the biographies have a strong hold on the interpretation of Bernini’s work even today, it is crucial that such readings, based on a knowledge of the entire text and not fragments, take into full account the rhetorical, theoretical and historical terms and spirit of these at once individual and historic-fictional accounts.
The third important study – and in reality the only full-fledged study of Bernini’s portraits as such – is Philipp Zitzlsperger’s book on Bernini’s papal and ruler portraits. This landmark study took seriously for the first time the iconography of dress, with important consequences for our most basic understanding of Bernini’s papal portraits.21 Zitzlsperger, who has gone on to work more broadly on both the image of the cardinal and the iconography of costume, argued that from 1632 Urban VIII was represented exclusively in the *camauro* and *mozzetta*, that is, as a head of state rather than as spiritual leader of the Church. This decision was less an artistic decision than a political response to a crisis in Urban VIII’s papacy during the Thirty Years War. This crucial and original contribution to the literature on Bernini’s portraits should become a fundamental point, but curiously was not taken up in the two exhibition catalogues.22

Viewed in this context, the three busts of Urban VIII shown in Ottawa – the marble from the National Gallery of Canada, the bronze (Florence, private collection) and the porphyry bust with a bronze head (Rome, private collection; pl. 18) – took on a different meaning. For the shift to the *mozzetta* would have underscored the absence of one of the most important signifiers of papal dignity: the colour red, which dominates the classic painted portraits of popes as head of state by Raphael and Titian. With Andrea Sacchi’s full-length portrait of *Cardinal Lelio Biscia* (1631),23 swimming in red and hanging in the same room of the Ottawa exhibition with the busts of Urban, we were reminded that the stakes were high in Bernini’s ability to overcome the colourlessness of stone in the representation of ecclesiastical dignitaries who had earned the right to be represented by a colour.24 One wonders whether his preoccupation with the absence of colour in marble may even be tied more concretely to commissions for high-ranking ecclesiastics. Was Bernini’s unique foray into porphyry to render the papal *mozzetta* in red (as many cardinals had been represented in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries) a sign of anxiety about the limits of white marble? Is the unusually high polish of the *mozzetta* on his bust of Scipione Borghese to be understood specifically as silk, the cloth only popes and cardinals were permitted to wear? In her essay, Cecily Boles considers the possibility that we have overlooked an even more complex sign system in the *mozzettas* of many of Bernini’s busts of cardinals. The juxtaposition in the Ottawa exhibition of the two nearly contemporaneous busts of Scipione Borghese by Finelli (fig. 5) and Bernini (Levy, ‘Repeat Performances’ fig. 1 and pl. 15) also suggested that we need to pay more attention to the significance of dress. As Philipp Zitzlsperger reminded us while in the exhibition, the cardinal wore just the *mozzetta* in his own jurisdiction, as Bernini has represented him, but was required to wear the white *rochet* underneath his

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mozzetta, as Finelli has shown him, when in the presence of the pope. Finelli’s bust of Scipione Borghese – with its elongated torso – may therefore allude to the presence of the pope, as may his bust of Cardinal Montalto, with its conspicuous show of the rochet: the lacy cuffs of the sleeves, at least four inches of rochet folds below the mozzetta, and its lace tassels messily emerging from the openings between the buttons. In contrast to these busts, Bernini’s Scipione is conspicuously rochet-free. Even if this case constituted an artistic or semantic decision – the mozzetta was the perfect way to mask the cut-off edge of the body – it also perfectly aligns with an extremely important sign system: for Bernini chose to represent Scipione independently, non-subordinate, as if in his own realm of jurisdiction, his own space. The only cardinal portrait by Bernini that includes the rochet is that of Cardinal Bellarmine for his tomb in the Gesù (a
project in which Finelli had a role). Was this unique inclusion of the rochet by Bernini intended as a sign of the Jesuit’s special fourth vow of obedience to the pope?

The bust’s edge is a preoccupation of Rudolf Preimesberger who reconsiders the status of Bernini’s busts as fragments of a person or as fictive representations of wholes. Since Lavin’s interventions on the typology of the portrait bust from antiquity to the Renaissance called attention to the paradigms available to early modern sculptors for the treatment of the bottom edge of the bust it has been taken for granted that Bernini was part of a post-Renaissance generation that restored to the bust the ancient understanding of the bust as a whole. Preimesberger reconsiders this formulation specifically with regard to the bust of Innocent XI, observing that because Bernini does not stress that the aesthetic border (determined by the artist) is identical with the border of the mozzetta (which Algardi by contrast does stress by representing the seam), the bust is understood not as a whole but as a fragment. What is more, though he is himself, as he puts it, an ‘Antimimetiker’, Preimesberger in his reading of Guidiccioni’s comments on the implied movement of the pope’s arm suggests an audience or some other open-ended contact with a spectator. This helps to move us towards a fuller iconography of the papal portrait. Such a reading could head in the direction that Tomaso Montanari is taking in reading Bernini’s portraits as historie. Or it could, when thought together with Zitzlsperger’s observations on the very significant choice of dress for the portrait, implicate the busts further in the rituals and hierarchies of power that have remained extremely vague for this genre. Zitzlsperger’s contribution to this volume presents a rare instance in which we actually know something about the placement, appearance and ritual implications of a bust in situ. If Bernini’s busts are to be understood as speaking likenesses, it is important to ask: to whom do these effigies speak?

Seeing all of the busts displayed at eye level on pedestals in the round emphasized the human scale of the portrait busts and their individual axes, and also made visible another shift in Bernini’s portrait thinking precisely about this axis during the papacy of Urban VIII. A round socle pivots; it mimics the skeletal framework of the human being, specifically its ability to turn. Bernini placed most of his busts prior to Urban’s papacy on round socles, encouraging us to think of the bust as person-like, on a spine, mobile itself and also welcoming our movement around it in 360 degrees. But in the 1630s Bernini started to use a planar base more systematically for his free-standing busts – busts in niches had often used a planar front – and to enlarge it: conspicuously so in the enlarged busts of Louis XIV, Francesco d’Este and Innocent X. The square or rectangular socle enters into a paragone debate, reconstituting the picture plane, if only, as in the case of the Louis XIV, to break it again. It combats the human referentiality of the round socle by creating an illusionistic, if false, surface. In setting the plane, a boundary between spectator and bust, and immobilizing the viewer before it, the planar socle established a fixed position for viewing and no longer implies or encourages the mobility of the spectator around the bust. This raises another question around the adequacy of the sculpture bust to represent the key aspects
of papal ceremonial and iconography: the hierarchy and respect signalled by the pope or ruler enthroned. For in painted portraits the pope is almost invariably represented seated, surrounded by people standing. Is it possible that the shift to the large planar base is another way in which Bernini reinstated hierarchy in a genre that has only the elevation of the pedestal, exactly contrary to the lower position of the seated pope, on which to rely? And is it possible that Bernini’s introduction into almost all of the papal busts, starting with Urban VIII, of a canted and asymmetrical mozzetta may allude to the position of both of the pope’s arms, one blessing or greeting, one resting on an arm rest, specifically when seated? Taken together, the rethinking of the round socle, the change in the dress of the pope, the ways in which Bernini seemed to be thinking about colour and the specific materials of papal and cardinals’ dress, and the possibility that he alluded to the pope enthroned all suggest something of a crisis of authority for the portrait bust.

Finally, the exhibition brought home just how endemic to portrait studies the desire is to read expression as a depiction of character, and how impossible it is to be right. Only with the busts before us could we make the point about the vagaries of our own projections. This stimulated an experiment which we called ‘The Projection Project’, taken on by one of my undergraduate students, Suzy Fink. Suzy distributed a questionnaire asking students to record their impressions of the character or personality of the person represented in the busts with a few words. The answers were as revealing about the projections onto the busts as they were about the people doing the projecting, although it was impossible to analyse those surveyed. For busts to which there was a strong narrative already attached to the person portrayed, like Costanza Bonarelli, the descriptions were predictably tied to that narrative: ‘passionate’, ‘fertile’, ‘womanly’, ‘attainable’, ‘seductive’, ‘lustful’, ‘scandalous’, ‘scared’ and ‘startled’. Having read Sarah McPhee’s work on Costanza’s career as an art dealer and noble lineage, some were inspired to see her as ‘confident’, ‘intelligent’, ‘intellectual’, ‘strong’ and ‘classy’. When nothing in particular was known of the figure’s character, people tend to project on their station, especially for figures of authority. Cardinal Escoubleau de Sourdis (pl. 13) is a good example. From the Getty exhibition catalogue entry on this figure the students had learned that de Sourdus was an ‘ardent promoter’ of the Counter-Reformation in France, and that Bernini had rendered an ‘intense and thoughtful gaze that communicates the cardinal’s piety and religious commitment’. Some students described him as ‘pensive’, ‘wise’, ‘arrogant’, ‘austere’, ‘determined’, ‘scholarly’, ‘cold’, ‘sinister’, ‘confident’, ‘focused’, ‘condescending’ and ‘disappointed’. But how is it possible that the expression on the bust was also interpreted as ‘friendly’, ‘good-natured’, ‘engaged’, ‘attentive’, ‘pleasant’, ‘sunny’, ‘cunning’, ‘bemused’ and with ‘a touch of humour’? In this case many students based their understanding on what little they knew about the figure, or they projected feelings about the cardinal as a type. Some seemed to vault over those preconceptions to an open view of an individual character, or they were influenced by their professor’s challenge to see him differently. Is Urban VIII tired or concerned? Attentive or pensive? Charismatic or passive? Approachable or intimidating? All of these words were used to describe the Ottawa bust, suggesting
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1 I taught the graduate seminar and an undergraduate seminar on the Mississauga campus and Susan Elliot Beatty, who is finishing a dissertation on Bernini’s bust of Louis XIV, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991.

2 I taught the graduate seminar entitled ‘Bernini as the Seicento Michelangelo: Imitation and Identity in Art, Architecture and Biography’, University of Toronto, 2011–12, to be published elsewhere.

3 The lecture, part of a dissertation entitled ‘Bernini as the Seicento Michelangelo: Imitation and Identity in Art, Architecture and Biography’, University of Toronto, 2011–12, is to be published elsewhere.

4 A version of the talk is to be published as M. Delbeke, ‘Bernini and the measure of greatness. The bust of Louis XIV and its pedestal seen by La Chambre, Lemée and Bouthours’, conference proceedings of ‘Der Späte Bernini (1655–1680)’, Bibliotheca Hertziana.


11 The exception is Bernini’s bust of Urban VIII’s mother, Camilla Barberini, but as the figure is veiled the head is not literally violated.


17 Now convincingly attributed to Algardi; see A. Bacchi and C. Hess in this issue.

18 See E. Levy, in this issue.


20 Delbeke et al., as at note 16. See especially the essays by Preimesberger and Levy for the question of portraits in the biographies.


22 Although Zitzlsperger’s work is cited, the observation about the change in costume was made without reference to him, while omitting its meaning and the political motivation for the shift, in Hess and Bacchi, ‘Creating a new likeness: Bernini’s transformation of the portrait bust’, in Bacchi et al., as at note 12, pp. 34–35. The observation as formulated in their essay was in turn cited by Montanari, who interpreted the change in dress as a sign of Bernini’s intimacy with the pope, a conclusion that is not warranted if his dress is understood as in Zitzlsperger, as the dress of the head of state. T. Montanari, ‘Il colore del marmo. I busti di Bernini tra scultura e pittura. Ritratto e storia. Funzione e stile (1610–1687)’, in A. Bacchi, T. Montanari, B. Paolozzi Strozzi and D. Zikos (eds), I Marmi Vivi. Bernini e la nascita del ritratto barocco (exh. cat.), Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, 2009, pp. 101–02.

23 Bacchi et al., as at note 12, cat. 2.10, pp. 154–55.

24 See C. Boles in this volume.


26 Montanari, as at note 22, pp. 93–98.

27 C. Hess in Bacchi et al., as at note 12, cat. 1.7, pp. 107–09.