Gian Lorenzo Bernini

The Bust of Pope Urban VIII Barberini

Carlo Orsi
September 2019
Contents:

The Bust of Pope Urban VIII Barberini
p. 4

Cataloguing notes
p. 19
Perhaps no other patron-artist relationship of the 17th century (to adopt a well-known critical category studied by Francis Haskell) led to the creation of so many busts, in marble and bronze, as that between Gian Lorenzo Bernini and Urban VIII. Surprisingly, though, the two biographies of the great artist of the Roman Baroque say little about these masterpieces. Domenico Bernini reports that:

[...] at the same time the Pope ordered from him his portrait in marble, and in metal, from which he later drew numerous others.¹

The two busts, in marble and bronze, were almost certainly those mentioned by Girolamo Teti in the Aedes Barberinae (1642);² they can in turn be identified as one now in Palazzo Barberini (Fig. 2) and that in the Vatican Library (Fig. 4). Filippo Baldinucci does not even mention Bernini’s portraits of Urban VIII, but in the list of the artist’s works published as an

---

appendix to his biography, based on a list of around 1675 made available to the author by Pier Filippo Bernini,\(^2\) we find mentions of:

Two of Pope Urban VIII
Another of the same
Another in metal.\(^4\)

The first two were evidently two versions of the same invention, whilst the “Another of the same” must have looked different: Baldinucci thus implied that the first two were superimposable, almost indistinguishable, with respect to the third.\(^5\) The other autograph version of the first invention

\(^1\) C. D’Onofrio, Roma vista da Roma, Rome 1967, p. 434.


Fig. 1: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Portrait of Pope Urban VIII Barberini, ca. 1632, marble. H: 83 cm (32 3/4 in), Rome, Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini
must be the bust now in the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa (Fig. 3); whilst the third bust in marble might be that which, unlike the other two, shows the Pontiff with the mozzetta and stole, also in Palazzo Barberini today (Fig. 1). Other bronze casts, including that presented here, are thought to have been drawn precisely from this latter invention.

The bronze bust of Urban VIII from the Corsini collection (height 101.5 cm; width ca. 78 cm) presents gilding on the pedestal and on the small bee above it, a heraldic allusion to the Barberini family (Fig. 6). The quality of the casting, though it was not meticulously finished in every detail, is nonetheless remarkable, and the sculpture maintains all the expressive

---


6 D. Fiske, entry in Bernini and the Birth of Baroque Portrait Sculpture, Los Angeles and Ottawa 2008-2009 (see literature), pp. 135-136, no. 2.5.


Fig. 2: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Portrait of Pope Urban VIII Barberini, ca. 1642, marble, H: 83 cm (32 1/2 in), Rome, Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini
power of a terracotta work. Executed with a studied nonchalance aimed particularly at ensuring that every tiny chromatic shift was apparent even in the bronze, the bust combines descriptive subtleties such as the small raised veins beneath the eyes with details rendered concisely but to great effect such as the barely outlined eyebrows or the fur trim of the mozzetta and camairo, executed in an almost impressionistic manner. The portrait is owned by the princely Corsini family in Florence, where it arrived in the second half of the 19th century following the marriage of Anna Barberini and Tommaso Corsini (1835-1919) in 1858, though it is impossible to establish precisely when the work left Rome (the issues
surrounding the Barberini Corsini inheritance were still not fully resolved in the 1930s). First mentioned by von Pastor in his *Storia dei Papi,* the bust has not attracted significant attention in the scholarship on Bernini. For Valentino Martinelli, it was merely a “mediocre replica” of the bronze bust in the *Louvre* (Fig. 5) and Rudolf Wittkower also classified it, together with the lost work known from a plaster copy in Santa Maria di Monte Santo in Rome, as “casts from Bernini’s model corresponding to the Louvre bust.”

The latter was commissioned from the sculptor between 1655 and 1656 by Antonio Barberini, and was later given to the king of France. In a letter of
11 November 1655, the cardinal wrote to Gian Lorenzo “Please [...] have a cast made for me of the other head of Urban of Most Serene Memory” (Barberini’s letter to the sculptor, mentioned by Sandrina Bandera Bistoletti in 1999, was transcribed by Anne Lise Desmas, and published in full with a commentary for the first time by Tomaso Montanari in 2009). The cardinal asked that “the other head” of Urban VIII be cast, and in a second missive of March 1656 mentioned the work again “I still wish you to make arrangements for the second casting of the head of Pope Urban of holy memory.” The bronze from the Corsini collection was one of these two casts, whilst the other can be identified as the work now in the Louvre. The two bronzes can be connected to a payment ordered by Bernini himself in July 1658, in favour of “Jacomo Erman, Cabinet maker [...] for the workmanship and ebony for a Stool for His Highest Eminence Cardinal Antonio Barberini... to place upon it a half-length statue in bronze representing the likeness of Urban VIII of glorious memory.” Montanari has noted that the same inventory of 1671, which for the first time mentioned a bronze bust of Urban VIII by Bernini with its ebony stand, also lists another “Portrait of Urban VIII of Happy Memory in metal” (not explicitly attributed to Bernini and valued at 50 scudi, whilst the other, with its valuable base, was worth the much larger sum of 260 scudi). This second piece was kept in the “Vigne”, which, as stressed by Montanari, was also home to other important pieces: the two versions of the Bust of Carlo Barberini (one executed by Francesco Mochi and identified as such in the inventory, now in the Museo di Roma; the other probably a copy, now in a private collection, valued at 200 and 60 scudi respectively) and the Bust of Antonio Barberini, again by Mochi (but the inventory, which nonetheless recorded a valuation of 150 scudi, did not
specify this, perhaps because the same attribution as the preceding work was implied) now in the Museum of Art in Toledo.\textsuperscript{17}

It cannot be established with certainty which of the two was the bronze sent to France as a gift to Louis XIV in 1672, immediately after Cardinal Antonio’s death.\textsuperscript{18} In the 1684 inventory of the royal collections, that bust was described as being mounted on an ebony stand with three metal bees, just like that ordered by Bernini himself in 1658.\textsuperscript{19} However, as we have seen, the work that was still in Rome in 1692 also had an identical base: we can thus deduce that a second version was made so that both of these identical bronzes could have an equally precious base. The bronze mentioned in the 1692 inventory can be identified as that seen just a few years earlier in the Palazzo alle Quattro Fontane (in the “audience hall of cavaliers and prelates”) by Nicodemus Tessin during his stay in Rome in 1687-1688: “by Cav. Bernini... Urban VIII in bronze.”\textsuperscript{20} This bust, not coincidentally, was placed next to the aforementioned marble bust of the Pope’s brother, Carlo Barberini, which the Swede also believed to be by Gian Lorenzo but was in fact by Mochi. Despite the very different valuations of the two pieces in the 1671 inventory, the histories of the busts in the Louvre and that in the Corsini collection are practically identical; furthermore, the two letters

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Annibale Lavin 1975, cit., p. 333, nos 986-989.}
\textit{S. Peruzzi, I busti degli avv进博会 collezioni seicentesche dei Barberini (con una revisione della cronologia dei ritratti di Bernini degli anni Venti), in “Bollettino d’arte,” LXIII/VI, 2013, pp. 42-45.}
\textit{Montanari 2009, cit., pp. 6-8.}
\textit{Montanari 2009, cit., p. 8, note 109.}

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{MonTanari 2009, cit., pp. 6-8.}

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{MonTanari 2009, cit., p. 25, note 109.}

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{M. Lane and B. Magnusson (ed.), Nicodemus Tessin the Younger. Sources Works Collections. Travel Notes 1673-77 and 1687-88, Stockholm 2002, p. 305.}
of 1658–1659 demonstrate unequivocally that both were commissioned directly by Cardinal Antonio from Gian Lorenzo.

The fact that the stand, executed on Bernini’s orders, was made in 1658 might suggest that the bust too dated to this time. However, there is no doubt that the model for this composition was one of the portraits of the Pope executed by Gian Lorenzo in around 1630. As late as 1681, there were two terracotta busts of the Pope in Bernini’s house, one listed in generic terms, the other described as: “a portrait of Pope Urban the Eighth made of fired clay consisting of a bust and a gilded pedestal.” Perhaps one of these was the very model from which Bernini drew various bronze versions over the years. The Pope’s face resembles that of the aforementioned bust in the Vatican Library (which can probably be connected to a 1632 document) and that of the porphyry bust of the same period. Yet the structure of the bust, with the stole adorning the mozzetta, is similar – though not identical – to that of the marble now in Palazzo Barberini. According to Montanari, this bust is later (and not by Bernini’s own hand), linked to the portraits of Alexander VII also executed by Bernini. In other words, we are dealing with an updated version of that formula for portraiture developed by Gian Lorenzo in the 1630s specifically for Urban VIII, renewed for this new era. Whilst in material terms the bust in Palazzo Barberini might not be entirely autograph, the new invention was equally exceptional and successful, whether it was developed already in the fourth decade or in the sixth, but nonetheless under Bernini’s direction. The two bronzes commissioned by Cardinal Antonio were similarly cast under his direction, as attested unequivocally by the aforementioned letters, and were perhaps of even greater quality than the marble work in Palazzo Barberini, their probable model.

Provenance
Corsoni collection, Florence

Exhibited

Literature