

BERNINI AND THE BARBERINI

■ By Lucy Gordan

On until June 14 at the *Gallerie Nazionali di Arte Antica* is the blockbuster exhibition, “Bernini and the Barberinis.” It follows the Jubilee year’s smashing success there of “Caravaggio 2025,” which welcomed over 400,000 visitors. But this time the location is particularly appropriate because the *Gallerie*, better known as *Palazzo Barberini*, was built by Maffeo Barberini as the family headquarters in 1627, four years after he was elected Pope Urban VIII.

“Bernini and the Barberinis” celebrates the 400th anniversary of the consecration of the new Basilica of St. Peter in 1626, one of the high points of the Roman Baroque and of Bernini’s work as an artist: specifically, as a sculptor, architect, urban planner, painter and stage director. The exhibition’s some seventy artworks are almost all loans from European churches and museums, Vatican City and American Museums, as well as private collections; many have never been displayed before in Italy.



Pietro Bernini’s *Adam, Eve and the Serpent*. In the circle, Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s *Self-Portrait*. Below, *The Four Seasons*, along with (appearing on the right) *St. Lawrence*. (All photo credits are courtesy of Palazzo Barberini)

Among these loaners are the *Accademia Carrara* in Bergamo, the *Albertina* in Vienna, the *Uffizi* and *Bargello* in Florence, the *J. Paul Getty Museum* in Los Angeles, the *Louvre* and the *Musée Jacquemart-André* in Paris, the *Museo Diocesano* in Spoleto, *Museo Thyssen-Bornmisza* in Madrid, the *Vatican Museums*, the *National Gallery* and the *Victoria and Albert Museum* in London, the *National Gallery* in Washington D.C., *Statens Museum for Kunst* in Copenhagen, and the *Morgan Library* in New York.

The exhibition’s six sections explore the symbiotic relationship between **Bernini** (1598-1680) and **Maffeo Barberini** (1568-1644), his most important patron. This is confirmed by Domenico Bernini, in his biography of his



father, published in 1713, who recounts that “on the very same day as his accession [August 6, 1623], the Pope had [Bernini] summoned to him and spoke to him as follows: ‘It’s a great fortune for you, O *Cavaliere* [Knight], to see Cardinal Maffeo Barberini made Pope, but it is an even greater fortune for us to have *Cavaliere* Bernini living in our pontificate.’” All six sections focus on the masterpieces born out of their relationship and highlight how their collaboration, which **Galileo Galilei** called a “marvellous conjuncture,” helped to define one of the most important periods in European art history: the Baroque.

The first section, “Claiming him as His Own,” covers Barberini’s discovery, a decade before he was elected Pope, of Bernini, still a young child prodigy, and how his support emancipated Bernini from his father Pietro’s workshop so he could develop his own independent artistic style. On display here, alongside sculptures by Pietro, such as “Andromeda” and “Adam, Eve and the Serpent” (*Musée de Tessé, Le Mans*), are works that the young Bernini sculpted in collaboration with his father. They include the “Four Seasons” (*Aldobrandini Collection*) and “Cherub with Dragon” (*J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles*).

There are also masterpieces by the young Gian Lorenzo alone: “St. Lawrence” (*Uffizi*) — his namesake and favorite saint — and “St. Sebastian Barberini” (private collection), displayed here in dialog with the monumental “St. Sebastian” (*Church of St. Martin, Jouyen-Josas*) attributed to him. According to the press release: “The *St. Sebastian Barberini*, paid for by Maffei Barberini in 1617, marks a crucial watershed: his natural pose, the sensual rendering of the marble and the way viewers are directly engaged with the piece foreshadow a new conception of sculpture, based on emotional immediacy and the vitality of form.”

The second section, “*Ne Plus Ultra: The New St. Peter’s*,” is dedicated to Bernini’s work on St. Peter’s Basilica, a site where the alliance between now-Urban VIII, known as the “Poet Pope,” and Bernini is complementary. After the consecration of the new Basilica, the Pope,



Above, a bust of Urban VIII.
Below, Guido Reni’s *Sleeping Cupid*



who had the intuition to govern through culture, and his favorite artist, now architect as well as sculptor although only 25 years old, set about reinventing the interior. This section’s highlights are drawings, models, engravings and carvings for the *baldacchino* under construction above the altar, as well as studies for the statue of St. Longinus, not to omit preparatory drawings for the elaborate tomb of Urban VIII, also in the Basilica.

The third, “Bernini as Papal Portraitist” begins with marble busts of Urban VIII’s immediate predecessors: Paul V Borghese (r. 1605-21) and Gregory XV Ludovisi (r. 1621-23), flanked by bronze portraits of the same pontiffs, showing how Bernini assimilated models from ancient sculptures. These are followed by several marble busts of Barberini family members: Maffeo’s uncle Francesco, his older brother Carlo, and his younger brother Cardinal Antonio Barberini the Elder, and then by a series of eight bronze and marble busts of Urban VIII, on loan from several museums and never exhibited together before.

The fourth, “The Barberini Palace: A Choral Masterpiece,” documents the genesis of one of the earliest examples of Baroque architecture. Here Bernini, his traditional rival Borromini and Pietro da Cortona collaborated, and at the same time, competed, in transforming a suburban villa into an urban palace. On display are some architectural plans by Pietro da Cortona, decorations by Bernini and paintings by Guido Reni, the Barberinis’ beloved painter, that have always remained *in situ*.

The fifth, “*Apes Urbanae: Faces of Barberini’s Rome*,” offers an anthology of busts, a cross-section of 17th-century Roman society: cardinals, intellectuals, courtiers and eccentric figures at Urban VIII’s court. Alongside works by Bernini are sculptures by Algardi, Finelli’s “Bust of Michelangelo Buonarroti the Younger” (the writer) and Duquesnoy’s “Bust of Michel Magnan, dwarf de Duke of Créquy.”

The last section, “Bernini’s Freedom, Urban VIII’s Power,” explores Bernini’s self-liberation from Urban VIII’s all-encompassing patronage. Here are rarely-displayed busts, none commissioned by

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the Pope, and paintings, including a self-portrait that Bernini created for his own pleasure.

The section's highlight is the bust of **Costanza Bonarelli** (*Museo Nazionale del Bargello* in Florence), Bernini's only sculptural portrait without a commissioner. Costanza Bonarelli, the young bride of Matteo Bonarelli, one of Bernini's assistants from Lucca, was Bernini's mistress from 1636-38. She was 22 years old; Bernini was 38.

Just a few months after Bernini sculpted this bust, he discovered that his younger brother Luigi was also Costanza's lover. As revenge, Bernini, trying unsuccessfully to kill his brother with an iron bar, nonetheless seriously injured him. He also paid his servant to slash Costanza's face with a razor, its scar ruining her beauty and her reputation forever.

Consequently, the servant was jailed; Luigi was exiled; Costanza was arrested for adultery; and Bernini was fined, but pardoned by Urban VIII, who ordered him to marry immediately. Less than a year later he obeyed and married another beauty, **Caterina Tezio**,



Bust of Costanza Bonarelli

who, after forcing Bernini to give away Costanza's bust, bore him 11 children.

Costanza was strong enough to survive a year's harsh confinement with little food, in the *Casa Pia* monastery for adulterous women, to return to her husband and manage his business in the art market after his death.

If Caravaggio is Rome's most beloved painter, Bernini is certainly the Eternal City's most beloved sculptor. Two of his most famous works, "The Triton" and "The Bee Fountain," are only a short walk from the Palazzo Barberini. Among his most famous works are those already mentioned in St. Peter's Basilica and the colonnade outside; the "Moor" and the "Four-River Fountain" in Piazza Navona; his elephant with the ancient Egyptian obelisk outside the church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, and his many mythological sculptures in the Villa Borghese Museum.

For a complete list of Bernini's works see wantedin-rome/news/where-to-see-bernini-masterpieces-in-rome.html. You can also pay your respects at his tomb in *Santa Maria Maggiore*, near that of Pope Francis.○