

Bernini Breaking Barriers – Sensuality Sculpted in Stone

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Abstract

This paper will attempt to demonstrate that with his virtuosity, the Baroque sculptor, Gian Lorenzo Bernini managed to challenge the barriers which the medium he worked with, namely stone (marble) offered, to produce dynamic, lifelike and realistic works that also managed to express a previously unknown element in sculpture, that of sensuality. It will try to highlight how the spiritual and physical could come together in his works. The first masterpiece that will be focused upon will be the portrait bust of Bernini's lover Costanza Piccolomini, a private work Bernini sculpted when he was thirty-nine years of age, chosen to represent the passion and worldly love that he felt for this woman. By way of contrast, the second masterpiece studied in this paper is the figure of the Blessed Ludovica Albertoni, one of his last works, chosen to represent Bernini's concept of the culmination of spiritual love that also incorporated a sensual element. The third and final masterpiece is the ecstasy of St. Teresa of Avila found in the Cornaro Chapel in the Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria, considered by many as his greatest work, as an example of how mysticism also has a sensual element to it.

Keywords: Baroque sculpture, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, sensuality, Costanza Piccolomini, Ludovica Albertoni, St Teresa d'Avila.

No one can deny that Gian Lorenzo Bernini had the extraordinary technical skill and expertise to sculpt anything that he visualised or saw. The numerous works of art that he continued to create into his maturity and almost up to his death are evidence of this. His outstanding ability to capture emotion in motion, to sculpt intense and unforgettable faces and figures and design *bel composti* made him the greatest sculptor of his time. Another reason for his great success was that the innovation in his work. Although there were many sculptors before him who were also extremely talented, among them the great Michelangelo, Bernini's works broke barriers, defying the solidness of marble to make it look plastic, soft, pliable and fluid. In his sculptures, flesh looks like real flesh, drapery falls in soft folds, and facial expressions and body movements are so real that they stimulate in the viewers very intense emotions up to this day, making his work unforgettable. A previously

unknown quality that Bernini manages to portray is sensuality, as this paper will attempt to analyse and demonstrate.

During the Renaissance, the sculptures being executed were inspired by the realism and sophistication of the Classical sculptures of human figures and busts. They were also a synthesis of the works produced in the Middle Ages. But the transition in sculpture between Higher Renaissance and the Baroque was an even greater leap. The most innovative characteristics introduced were movement and dynamism and a greater life-like quality. Bernini's virtuosity took these characteristics to new heights, managing to combine a spiritual element with the physical while at the same time making his figures look sensual. Sensuality is very hard to define, let alone portray in sculptures made of stone or marble; yet, Gian Lorenzo Bernini managed to do this. Most commonly defined as pleasurable sensations felt through the senses of touch, taste, scent, sight or sound, sensuality is often confused with sexuality, especially in modern times when so much importance is given to sexual gratification. It is true that sensuality may lead to sexuality, but it cannot be considered as being the same thing. Sensuality can go much deeper than the physical; it is also about unconditional love, a deep intimate connection that may even be spiritual and emotional. Three examples have been chosen to illustrate how Bernini with his virtuosity managed to portray sensuality in stone.

Costanza Piccolomini - Sensuality and Profane Love

The first example to be analysed is the portrait bust of Costanza Piccolomini. Although better known as Costanza Bonarelli and referred to as such in most prominent publications on sculpture, her aristocratic maiden name was Piccolomini, as has been brought to light by her last will and testament (McPhee, 2012). At the time she was the twenty-two year old wife of Matteo Bonarelli, a sculptor who worked in the *bottega* of Gian Lorenzo Bernini as his assistant. She became Bernini's lover for a period of time (Hibbard, 1965). Domenico Bernini refers to the affair in his father's biography, observing that 'Both the painted and the marble portrait of Costanza are done in such a fine style and lively manner that even in these copies of her likeness the *Cavaliere* revealed how much he was in love with the original (Bernini, 2011, p.113) (Fig.1)



Figure 1: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Detail of Portrait Bust of Costanza Piccolomini, 1636-37, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence. (Photo Scala, Florence – courtesy of the Ministero Beni e Att. Culturali e del Turismo)

The bust of Costanza was not a commission, but a private work that Bernini made for his own pleasure. Surviving portraits of other women made by him, preceding the one of Costanza were those of pious and veiled women and, save for the one of Cardinal Scipione, portrayed expressions that were serious, pensive and introvert, albeit extremely realistic. But in this portrait bust, Bernini had no regard whatsoever for the dress code and the facial expression usually deemed as appropriate for such works (Wittkower, 2013, p.88). If one had to compare, for example, Giuliano Finelli's earlier bust of Maria Barberini Duglioli with that of Costanza, one would observe a remarkable resemblance in their facial features, to the point that they could easily be considered siblings, but the likeness between the two works of art stops there. Whereas in the Finelli portrait, the *bravura* of the artist is apparent in the intricate detail of her curls, the flowers in her hair, the elaborate lace collar and the jewellery (Boucher, 1998, p.65), one is struck by Maria's blank neutral expression, an immense contrast to the piercing look of Costanza's portrait that makes eye contact with the viewer (Fig.2 and Fig.3). Bernini seems to have sculpted his lover as she would have looked at him in an intimate moment, choosing, as is usual with him, that particular instance that manages to convey the most about the sitter and in this case also about the relationship between them.



Figure 2 and 3: (left) Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Portrait Bust of Costanza Piccolomini c. 1636-37 and (right) Giuliano Finelli, Portrait Bust of Maria Barberini Duglioli 1626-27 (Photo Scala, Florence – courtesy of the Ministero Beni e Att. Culturali e del Turismo/ Web Gallery of Art)

He portrayed Costanza's sensuality through the way he sculpted her clothing (Fig.4), the way her hair was styled (Fig.5), and her parted lips (Fig.6). Wearing a simple and flimsy chemise open at the front to reveal part of her right breast and her cleavage, Costanza's head is turned naturally to look straight ahead (Fig.7). Her hair is styled in a double-coiled braided bun at the back of her head, an endearing tendril falls on



Figure 4: Detail of Costanza's neckline. (Photo Scala, Florence – courtesy of the Ministero Beni e Att. Culturali e del Turismo)



Figure 5: Detail of Costanza's hairstyle. (Photo Scala, Florence – courtesy of the Ministero Beni e Att. Culturali e del Turismo)



**Figure 6: Detail of Costanza's lips
(Photo Scala, Florence – courtesy of the Ministero Beni e Att. Culturali e del Turismo)**



Figure 7: Detail of Costanza's piercing gaze (Photo Scala, Florence – courtesy of the Ministero Beni e Att. Culturali e del Turismo)

Costanza's smooth forehead whilst others curl at the nape of her neck. Her lips are parted. This emphasis on the lips is an important characteristic in Bernini's sculptures exploited in both the bust of Costanza and those of both St. Teresa of Avila and the Blessed Ludovica (Boucher, 1998, p.60). Costanza's parted lips were a break in Baroque decorum for Baroque sculpture busts, although it seems that Bernini might have been referencing an older tradition in which goddesses were often depicted open-mouthed. In parting her lips, Bernini may have been trying to place her in the realm of goddesses (McPhee, 2012, p.42). Costanza seems to be speaking or breathing heavily through her mouth and this makes her look sensual, as do her peachy cheeks and rounded chin. Although rendered in marble, she looks passionate yet pensive at the same time, looking so lifelike that the observer feels that communication with her is not impossible. This is what Bernini intended and managed to achieve, a portrait of his beloved that also expressed his passion for her youth and beauty as well as her sensuality (Schama, 2009, p.105).

Costanza's gaze is that of a remarkable, young and intelligent woman who managed to capture the heart of Bernini. Her intelligence is documented and became particularly evident after her disfigurement, an atrocity commissioned by Bernini himself after he discovered that she had betrayed him with his younger brother Luigi. This incident brought out the dark side of Bernini, although one has to analyse this within the context of the culture of seventeenth century Rome, where the *sfregio* was meant to inflict a sign of shame on the face that was considered as the mirror of honour. Face cutting and nose slashing were also common as legal punishments for adultery, so much so that, in surgical books, there was more than one method of reconstruction, referred to as Vigo's or Paré's methods (McPhee, 2012, pp.44-45). After the prison sentence for adultery, she made her way out of poverty, withstood illness and managed to keep up her husband's business after his death. She even learnt how to read at a time when very few women did (McPhee, 2012, pp.137-138).

The Blessed Ludovica Albertoni – Sensuality and Spirituality

The second example to be analysed is the marble and jasper Blessed Ludovica Albertoni on her deathbed. Bernini executed this work for Cardinal Altieri in 1671 as a family penitence for his now middle-aged brother Luigi's crime of sodomy on a much younger man inside the Vatican (Schama, 2009, p.125). Ludovica Albertoni, a noble woman born in 1473, was married and had three daughters whom she raised in the area of Trastevere in Rome. When her husband died, she became a member of the lay order called the *Penitenti* and from then on attempted to live a frugal life of mortification. There was a great devotion for her when she died and the cult grew with time until during the year she was to be beatified, a decision was taken to have a tomb sculpture by the great Bernini for the Altieri chapel in S. Francesco a Ripa in Rome, where her remains lay (Perlove, 1990, p.4).

It is documented that the Blessed Ludovica would levitate during her prayers. Bernini seems to have done his background reading, as he was apt to do before proceeding with his work. Presumably in the case of Ludovica, he would have been familiar with a publication which followed her beatification ceremony in 1670, as well as with the book *Vita* written in 1672 by Fra Paulo, who was the postulant of her case. He was probably also acquainted with *I voli d'amore*, a panegyric to Ludovica written by Bernardino Santini which, although recited in 1673 after the work had already initiated, could easily have been available to Bernini through his close contacts with Cardinal Altieri. A good example which highlights this association is the reference to the gesture of Ludovica pressing against her breast from each of these four sources and a recurrent reference to her heart which was inflamed with love (Fig.8). In a passage of the panegyric by Santini, he refers to the 'amorous exhalation of the flame nurtured in her bosom' (Perlove, 1990, p.30). Bernini's representation seems to be the visualisation of what was written in these texts.



Figure 8: Detail of the Blessed Ludovica Albertoni
(Photo Scala, Florence/Fondo Edifici di Culto - Min. dell'Interno)



Figure 9: Detail of the Blessed Ludovica Albertoni, c 1667-1674, Altieri Chapel, San Francesco a Ripa, Rome rotated by 90° clockwise. (Photo Scala, Florence/Fondo Edifici di Culto - Min. dell'Interno)

When he came to sculpt the face of the Blessed Ludovica, Bernini chose to represent spiritual love through more classical and delicate features than those of Costanza (Fig.9). He portrayed her with a much slimmer face and nose, as well as having high cheekbones more reminiscent of Michelangelo's Madonna in *La Pietà*. His work on the Blessed Ludovica is indicative of how, in the last fifteen years of his life, Bernini became fervently religious. His friend and spiritual director Padre Giovanni Paolo Oliva, Superior General of the Society of Jesus, had lengthy theological discussions with him that left him impressed with Bernini's depth of understanding of religious matters (Perlove, 1990, p.1). Bernini attempted to represent this intensity and his search for eternal salvation in this work, considered one of his finest. One cannot, however, help feeling that his experiences in worldly love would have also been influential in the level of perfection seen in the rendering of the Blessed Ludovica. Through his own experience of worldly love, together with his spiritual formation and his efforts to lead a holy life, he reached a climax with this work that further synthesised his previous works.

With the Blessed Ludovica, Bernini fashioned what many consider to be the most moving and engaging work of his artistic career. He laid her slender agitated body on a mattress with her hips raised and her back arched. Her delicate hands press into her right breast in a gesture so lifelike that one can almost empathise with the raw pain the saint was experiencing in this most crucial moment, when her soul was about to leave her body. Her lips are parted as she gasps in pain, pleasure or both and her eyes roll upwards in an ecstatic moment, expressing the intense spiritual love felt by the saint for God. The light streaming from a side window onto her face is also a contributing factor to the sensual aura created (a tactic Bernini had previously used with St. Teresa in ecstasy). This masterpiece is a personification of

death about to happen and the salvation that will ensue. It is about this saint's agony and ecstasy. When working on the Blessed Ludovica, another influential factor could have been the growing cult around St. Rosa of Lima, the first saint canonized from the New World. Moreover in 1665, a work by Melchiorre Cafà, the first sculptor to depict a saint on her death bed with an angel comforting her, had taken Rome by storm, in line with the focus on the art of dying that was so popular in the Baroque age (Boucher, 1998, p.11). According to Sciberras (2006, p.9), this masterpiece must have surely influenced the great Bernini.

The Blessed Ludovica's tunic is in compressed, irregular folds under her left hand other folds fall down her right arm and others flow down between her legs. These movements, together with the contrast between her neck abandonment and the strain in her left hand, create an atmosphere of ambiguity (Careri, 2003, pp.86-87). The figure comes alive to its viewers, seemingly squirming with the sensations being felt. Sensuality is here being portrayed by Bernini during the throes of a spiritual experience through an ensemble of details which together create an aura of sensuality closely linked with spirituality.

St Teresa of Avila – Sensuality and Mysticism

The third example to be analysed is the marble and gilded bronze depicting the Ecstasy of Saint Teresa of Avila found in the Cornaro Chapel inside the Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome, considered by many as his greatest work. (Fig. 10) The work is based on the saint's writings when she describes in detail the instance when a seraph thrust an arrow repeatedly straight to her heart, a gesture that represents St Teresa's mystic union with Christ. In this masterpiece sensuality is not only portrayed through the facial features, and the position of St Teresa's head and body but also through the expression on the seraph's face (Fig. 11) and his involvement in the scene. The subtle light that falls on the two figures, faces and on the golden rays behind them from a hidden window above them also contributes to the sensual atmosphere that Bernini created with another of his extraordinary design ideas.

There are many similarities between the facial features of St Teresa and those of the Blessed Ludovica but also some differences. St Teresa's lips are also parted but the eyes are almost completely closed, with her eyes rolling down not up (Fig.12). Her head is also thrown back, her body arched back but her arms are falling limply by her side in complete abandonment. In the eighteenth century, Chevalier de Brosses commented, tongue in cheek, that he himself had experienced the type of divine love that Bernini was representing (Schama, 2009, p.80). Many modern reactions are also in this vein but interpreting these works so superficially shows a misunderstanding of the importance of metaphor in the culture of the Baroque where spiritual ecstasy was represented by physical ecstasy. Metaphor in the Baroque age was found in all forms both in literary works, such as the writings of John

Donne, Richard Crashaw and Bernini's contemporary Giambattista Marino as well as religious ones as indicated above which borrowed from physical manifestations of passion, sensuality and eroticism to represent the heights reached even in the experience of divine love. It was an age when many yearned to be possessed by the Divine and when this type of possession was believed to involve extreme sensations of the body (Schama, 2009, p.78). Bernini seems to have succeeded in representing all of this, drawing from his experiences as a husband and lover, synthesising them with his own religious knowledge and spirituality.

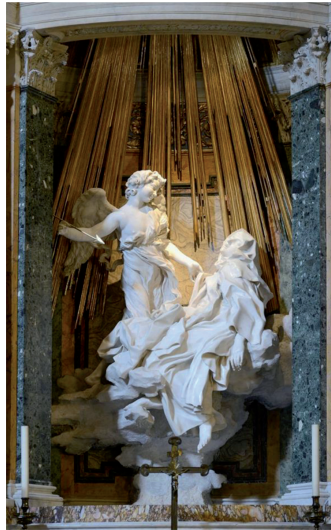


Fig. 10: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Ecstasy of St Teresa, Cornaro Chapel, Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome. (c. 1647—1652) (Photo Eric Lessing/Art Resource)



Figure 11: Detail of the Ecstasy of St Teresa (Photo Eric Lessing/Art Resource)

Conclusion

An artist can never express in his art what is not an integral part of his mind and soul and what he has experienced in life, what he has read and what he believes in and Bernini expressed this in the above three examples. It would be presumptuous to conclude that his experience with his lover Costanza and later with his wife Caterina Tezio were the only or the strongest influence in his later works. Having eleven children with his wife of longstanding would presumably have augmented his sensual knowledge. But he also gave importance to his spiritual formation. Besides his discussions with Padre Oliva, the books he read must also have influenced him. From Chantelou's diary entries on Bernini's visit to Paris, among the great sculptor's favourites books were the *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis and the *Introduction to a Devout Life* by St. Francis de Sales, both religious texts popular with those who wished to follow in the steps of Christ (McPhee, 2000, p.443).

In fact, so many other factors could have influenced Bernini in portraying so much sensuality in his art, but this paper has shown that although worldly and spiritual love seem so far apart, spirituality and mysticism do borrow from corporeal manifestations of love. No mystic can escape from the constraints of the physical body while still on this earth and intense feelings are expressed through the same facial and body language used in much more erotic situations such as those during the physical union of two lovers. When it comes to mysticism and spirituality, there could be different levels of depth but one way of expressing it: the physical way. St. Teresa knew no man, yet, in her writings, she describes her experience with God like a woman in the throes of a passionate union with one, and this is how Bernini represented her. Some have spoken of orgasm when seeing her in ecstasy in the Cornaro Chapel, but Bernini has done justice to St. Teresa and the Blessed Ludovica, because although the expression on their face might seem both erotic and sensual, it does not detract from the nobleness of their spirit. It would indeed be sad to interpret Bernini's works so superficially when they were meant to symbolize the perfect union with God.

The sensual abandonment, in the opinion of some, verging on the eroticism, of both the Blessed Ludovica and St Teresa of Avila is so evident that many have felt that it clashes with the holiness of the churches in which they are found. Art historians have felt the compulsion to remind spectators time and time again that Bernini was a very religious and pious man and that these have to be seen and analysed not with the criteria of the present day but of those of the seventeenth century when the spiritual and the sensual could coexist. During mystical experiences the body and soul are believed to be, temporarily separated, but that the physical body is involved in the ecstatic phenomena is a fact that Bernini managed with his virtuosity to portray sculpting in stone (Careri, 2003, p.81).

Bernini had studied and drawn from classical models for years, as all sculptors do to learn the rules, but is famous for breaking these same rules, as he does in his choice of the exact moment to capture the personality and character of his subjects

by getting to know them personally or through their writings. He broke other barriers too, by making his work represent not one, but multiple images from different perspectives, as with the Costanza bust, by trying to 'uplift' his works, defying the nature of the heavy material he worked with, and by sculpting figures that seem to want to break free from the pull of gravity. He also broke barriers by using several art forms together to create spectacular, elaborate and dramatic settings, as in his Blessed Ludovica and St. Teresa works. The list seems endless, but one trait that is found in all his sculptures, from his earliest works at the age of eight up until his last works, and that has been illustrated here with the sculptures of three women (who in their time had also broken some of their own barriers albeit in very different ways), is the underlying sensuality that involves the viewer as an active participant. This paper shall end with a quotation of the great Bernini himself that seems to have guided him in his work till the very end: 'those who never dare to break the rules never surpass them' (Schama, 2009, p.85).

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Bio-note

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