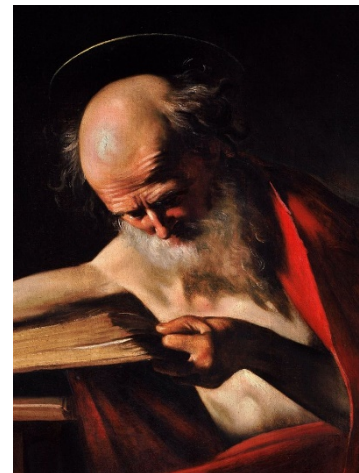


Sovereign of Art: The Role of Light in Selected Works by Gianlorenzo Bernini



In the history of Italian art, no artist has so fully embodied the spirit of his age as Gianlorenzo Bernini did with the Baroque. Through his sculpture, architecture, and urban planning, Bernini radically transformed the fabric of both the city of Rome and the Italian artistic tradition. However, while his works on the urban scale (e.g. Piazza San Pietro, Sant'Andrea al Quirinale, the fountains of Piazza Navona) are breathtaking in their grandeur, some of the most powerful effects of his works come in conversation with the smaller, more personal of them: the sculptures which populate all corners of Rome. These works, often of human scale, live in all manners of residence, from otherwise forgotten family chapels to crowded museums, but they all share one thing in common: the life breathed into them by their creator that still entralls visitors 400 years later. One of Bernini's most powerful tools in creating these masterpieces, of equal importance to the marble itself, is the light which illuminates them, which Bernini sculpted with equal skill to capture the spirit of the divine which permeates his works.

Light has, since antiquity, been associated with the divine. Sun worship dates back to at least ancient Egypt, if not further, and even just looking at the Judeo-Christian faiths, the concepts of God and light have been tied together ever since He said "Let there be light." Since then, light as symbol of divinity has been present in one form or another in most works of Christian art, from the ever-present halo depicted in painting to the light of revelation described in countless written works. Sculpture, however, faced a unique issue: to attempt to depict light as a physical part of a sculpture is to take away its defining feature. Light is ethereal and ephemeral; one can sense it briefly, but it cannot be contained or felt. These qualities are easily depicted in painting, where a single brushstroke can capture a scene, or writing, where the reader's imagination is able to supply the necessary emotions, but to depict light in sculpture is to make it solid, immutable, and above all, physical—in short, its own antithesis. The only way around this handicap, as Bernini demonstrates in his works, is to incorporate light itself into the work.



*Figure 1: Detail of Caravaggio's St. Jerome Writing, showing halo*

Bernini does this in a variety of ways, and each work is unique in how it deals with the problem, but as a whole his solutions can feasibly be condensed into a few main strategies. First, on the macro scale, when Bernini has control of the surrounding architecture, he capitalizes on it, creating a unified gestalt of experience with the sculpture itself as the main element. For an example, a visitor to the Cornaro Chapel, on the left transept of Santa Maria della Vittoria, will see *the Ecstasy of St. Teresa* lit with a miraculous light from above, emanating from source unknown just as the divine light of St. Teresa's visions. In actuality, a skylight hidden behind the projecting aedicule provides this mysterious source of light, but to the viewer, the power of the effect allows a suspension of disbelief (aided by the gilded rays of light behind the statue and the heavenly frescos above) to the point where it's difficult to say where the light stops and the marble begins.

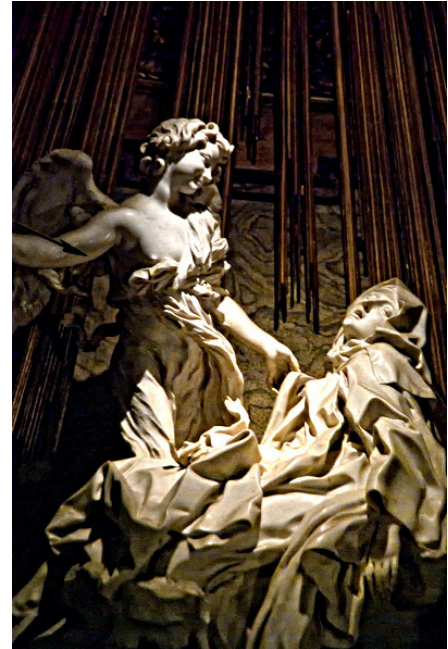


Figure 2: *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria Della Vittoria



Figure 3: *Blessed Ludovica Albertoni*, Altieri Chapel, San Francesco a Ripa

Bernini uses a similar effect in the Altieri Chapel of San Francesco a Ripa to light his sculpture of the *Blessed Ludovica Albertoni*, with a hidden window to the viewer's left, but this example is more important in how it highlights Bernini's second strategy of incorporating light into the work: on the scale of the sculpture, in the drapery of the carved fabric. *Albertoni's* garments, to which the laws of gravity seem not to apply, create a dramatic play of light and shadow where each slides into the other ceaselessly, dependent on the light conditions outside to the point where every visit yields a new experience. This ambiguous lighting condition can be seen as representation of the unknowability of the divine, and is present in many of Bernini's

other works, from the above discussed *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* to his earlier *Santa Bibiana*, to the next subject of discussion: *Saint Longinus* in Saint Peter's.

*Saint Longinus* is different from the previous works in both scale and location: it stands in one of the crossing piers of Saint Peter's at rather larger than life size, but it is brought up here due to the unique way in which it handles Bernini's third strategy of lighting: on the detail scale, in the surface treatment of the marble. Where most of Bernini's works are finished to a high level of polish, *Saint Longinus* is much rougher in treatment, its whole surface striated with grooves varying in thickness depending on the surface being depicted. This finish, while unusual at close inspection, comes into its own at long range, where the



Figure 5: *Saint Longinus*, Crossing Pier, St. Peter's Basilica



Figure 4: *Bust of Cardinal Montalto*

grooves, which capture more light, fade into a richer texture than the other three differently authored statues, whose more conventional polish tends to become muted at longer viewing points. While this specific example may be unique in execution, Bernini was an expert in working the marble to capture the most minute details of his subject, from the bark of *Daphne's* transformation, to the flesh of *Proserpina's* thigh, even to the smallpox scars on his bust of *Cardinal Montalto*. Through these little interactions between the hand of the author and the light which illuminates his work, the stone comes alive.

The works covered here are only a small subset of the products of Gianlorenzo Bernini's storied career, which include works gargantuan and miniscule, sculpted and painted, built and unrealized. These artworks may vary in many respects, but they all share one material in common: the light which illuminates them, and all else.