

Pietro da Cortona

Triumph of Divine Providence, 1633-1639

Cardinal Francesco Barberini, nephew of Pope Urban VIII, entrusted **the decoration of Palazzo Barberini's main hall** to **Pietro da Cortona** in 1632. It took Cortona and his assistants six years to finish the work which covers over 336 square metres of the hall's vaulted ceiling. Their fresco composition celebrates **the greatness of the Barberini family and of Urban VIII** as both Pope and as a man of culture.

The main model that Cortona referred to for this project was the vault that Annibale Carracci had painted in *Palazzo Farnese*. Just as Carracci had done, Cortona here uses *trompe l'oeil* architectural frames to divide the pictorial space. He simulates a stucco cornice complete with figurative supports called atlantes, decorative details and bronze medallions. The five framed fields are not strictly divided, however. Rather they share the same sky and all the figures and natural elements overlap the artificial framework and even extend freely beyond the painted boundaries. In this way **real and fictional painting space** are purposefully confused in order to communicate a single *spectacular composition*.

The main scene of the *Allegory of Divine Providence* is centrally located. Around it on the sides of the vault episodes of pagan mythology are represented with great emphasis: *Hercules Driving out the Harpies*; *Peace*; *Fury and the Cyclops*; *Religion and Knowledge Triumph over Licentiousness and Drunken Silenus*; *Minerva Driving out the Giants*. All these scenes allude to the virtue and power of the Barberini family who gave prosperity and peace to the people thanks to the primacy of intelligence over force. The concept is repeated in the medallions which represent allegories of the virtues: *Temperance*, *Justice*, *Fortitude*, and *Prudence*.

At the centre of the ceiling the highly animated 'spectacle' of the *Allegory of the Barberini Family* takes place against an open sky where the figures are projected in perspective against an infinite space. To the left the three theological vir-

tues are portrayed holding up a laurel-leaf crown (symbol of poetry) which encircles three gigantic bees, an emblem of the house of Barberini and a symbol of Knowledge. Above them *Religion* holds up the gold keys signifying papal authority while the figure of Rome holds a tiara crown over Urban VIII to highlight the pope's temporal and spiritual power. The moving group forms a circle to the side while the figure of *Charity* marks the centre of the large rectangular frame. Moving across from *Charity* we see, just off-centre, *Divine Providence* at the apex of a pyramidal arrangement based on the frame's short side. *Providence* herself appears against a brightly lit background and she is held up by Saturn and Fate while around them appear other figures like Truth and Eternity who represent the triumph of religion and the papacy. Next to her a winged Immortality proffers a crown of stars as she flies towards the Barberini family symbol.

From a stylistic point of view the fresco represents **one of the culminating moments of Baroque painting** because it contains a concentration of the period's main aesthetic principles. The **exaggerated dynamic space** in which a mass of figures, connected among themselves, are depicted in movement, the use of intense colour and strongly foreshortened perspectival illusion create a highly exciting work that doesn't ask the viewer to comprehend the action but rather to be amazed by the spectacle, by the ingenious play of metaphor, and the artist's *virtuoso* technique and skill. The work is also Baroque because the main protagonist is **movement**, energy in a continual transformation that confuses the scenes and loses itself in an infinite vastness that seems similar to a vortex. This is why the fresco composition lacks any strong centre and the viewer is distracted by the multiplicity of scenes and characters. The whole art work expresses Man's deep existential disorientation as it was felt in the 17th century but ably concealed under the appearances of a luxurious stage set.

Fig. 1 Pietro da Cortona, *Triumph of Divine Providence*, 1633-1639. Fresco, 14x24 m. Rome, Palazzo Barberini.

