

Gian Lorenzo Bernini

Cornaro Chapel and the Ecstasy of Saint Teresa, 1645-1652

Cornaro Chapel

The Venetian nobleman and cardinal Federico Cornaro commissioned Bernini to make his family's chapel in the left transept of the Carmelite *Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria*, a project that actively occupied the master between 1647 and 1651.

The idea underlying Bernini's whole conception for the chapel was the effect his work would have on viewers; he wanted to give the amazing illusion that the observer was witnessing the miraculous event as it happens in front of his eyes on the altar, thus involving his emotions in an almost theatrical way. To create this effect **architecture, sculpture and pictorial decoration all work together** and meld into **a single perceptive strategy**.

The chapel's walls, columns and architectural elements are faced by seventeen different types of coloured marble, much of which was taken from ancient ruins. The marble together with other various materials from bronze to wood, from glass to stucco concur together to compose a balanced overall polychrome composition, in which architecture, sculpture and painting form an indivisible unity of representation.

The chapel's focal point is the aedicula above the altar, bordered by columns of blue marble and topped by a tympanum with a broken convex frame. This is where the miracle of the ***Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*** occurs. Thanks to a window hidden behind the aedicula's pediment, the event's setting is illuminated by **natural light falling from above** and directed, via a series of gilt rays, onto the marble figures.

Therefore the architecture re-proposes, on the one hand, the idea of the tabernacle and, on the other, it alludes to a real place where the mystical event is occurring. The site is not contained by the aedicula's columns and tympanum but extends throughout the *Chapel* vault's stucco decorations and frescoes. As one writer of Bernini's period affirmed, it is "a

glory in the middle of which the Holy Spirit appears in the form of a dove, in the midst of an abyss of splendour: alive and so luminous that it almost confounds viewers, blinding their sight."

As if in a Holy Theatre

The holy scene enacted on the altar is carefully witnessed and commented on by Federico Cornaro and six members of his family as well as by his father, the Doge of Venice. They are portrayed as seated in side boxes; behind them a grey marble backdrop is sculpted in a perspective that converges toward the altar, thus accentuating the architecture's depth.

These seating boxes dilate the chapel's space laterally, thus making the scene **a kind of total spectacle** in which **the threshold between reality and fiction has been overstepped**; the mystical event seems on the point of materialising in front of the viewer, transporting him inside the fantastic world described by Bernini's art.

Saint Teresa between the Spiritual and the Sensual

The sculpture grouping of figures, all carved from a single block of Carrara marble, represents the moment of the Saint's transverberation: that is, as Teresa is about to be pierced by the golden arrow of God's love. Overcome by ecstasy, she reclines back on clouds in an image of her supreme union with Christ that is suspended between spirituality and sensuality. In this way Bernini respects the narrative as the Saint recounted it in her writing, "*God wanted me to see on my left an angel in bodily form. It wasn't large but it was very beautiful. In his hand he held a long golden dart and a flame rose from its iron tip. He immediately struck my heart right down to the deepest fibres and, when he extracted it, it seemed to me that he took pieces of my heart with it. Then he left me completely*



Fig. 1, 2, 3 Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Cornaro Chapel*, 1645-1652. Rome, Santa Maria della Vittoria. To the sides, details of the Cornaro family members as located on the side walls.

on fire with the love of God. The pain was so great as to tear sobs from me. This suffering is not bodily but spiritual, even though the body is not completely alien to it.”

Against an iridescent backdrop of alabaster the Angel and the Saint are suspended on a thick but light cloud which blends into the swirling drapery of Teresa’s garment. Indeed **the whole forms a bright, weightless mass** that absorbs the body of the saint as she lies languidly back, only her face and her left hand and foot emerge. Her edges are soft and blurred because the marble has been worked in such a way as to give the viewer the visual and tactile impression of flesh and fabric.

The Saint’s face and position express a state of exaltation in which **the mystical ecstasy involves the spirit and the flesh**. Blinded by God’s splendour, Teresa offers her body to the dart of divine love. The natural light, which is an integral part of the art work, strikes the two figures and gives the event a sense of instability. As the German critic Rudolph Wittkower wrote, “[...] *This directed light seems fleeting, transient, impermanent. Impermanence is its very essence. Directed light, therefore, supports the beholder’s sensation of the transience of the scene represented: we realise that the moment of divine ‘illumination’ passes as it comes. With his directed light Bernini had found a way of bringing home to the faithful an intensified experience of the supra-natural.*”

The chapel’s inauguration in 1652 was met with enthusiasm and the public immediately recognised **the work’s revolutionary novelty** as well as its aesthetic value. Bernini’s first biographer was his son Domenico, who wrote, “*It was everyone’s opinion that no marble had ever been better worked nor any design been better conceived than this one.*” He continued, “[They agreed that] *in that sculptural group the Master had surpassed himself and triumphed over art with a rare Object of Wonder.*” He later admitted that “*this was the least poor Work that he had ever done.*”

Fig. 4, 5, 6 Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Ecstasy of Saint Teresa of Avila, 1645-1652. Marble, stucco, gilt bronze and fresco, h. 350 cm. Rome, Santa Maria della Vittoria. Top: two details.

