THE BIBIENA FAMILY

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The large collection of Italian baroque drawings given to the Museum by Cornelius Vanderbilt in 1880 includes an exact and detailed rendering of a stage set drawn in bistre ink with a fine quill and then brushed with a greenish wash. This turns out to be a sketch for an etching in *Varie opere di prospettiva* by Ferdinando Galli Bibiena, a copy of which is in the Museum’s Print Department. One important fact, that the etching copies the drawing and not the reverse, is made certain by the etcher’s having boggled the entablatures to the right of the arch by giving the arch two moldings instead of the three in the drawing. Several years later, in 1711, Ferdinando’s drawings were again badly copied in his *Architettura civile* (there is also a copy of this in the Print Department) because, says he, “My frequent travels and undertakings kept me from supervising the illustrations.”

Some families stamp all their members with a resemblance so marked that the world at large gives up trying to distinguish individuals and recognizes only a composite entity. The Hapsburgs, with their overripe underlip and the Marx brothers with their beak and glaring eye are not more alike than the Bibiena family, who, under eight names, created theatrical designs dating from the 1680’s to the 1780’s in a style so constant that their whole work looks at first glance as though it might have been done by one man at one time. The story of the Bibienas is a story of family genius working through eight men whose Christian names matter less to us than their family name. When we cannot help confusing one Bibiena with another, it is a consolation to read that their own fellow towns- men and acquaintances did the same.

Three generations of supremacy in a specialty of art is as exceptional in individualistic Europe as it is common in the East among, for instance, the dynasties of armorers and lacquerers attached to the feudal houses of old Japan. The Bibienas were helped in maintaining their century of brilliance by becoming a sort of feudal appanage of the house of Austria and its connections. When some Bibiena prepared to retire from his post as theatrical engineer, he would introduce a brother or a son to take over where he left off, thus encouraging the younger members of the family to train for an assured career. It is curious that when Maria Theresa died in 1780, and her successor’s economies put an end to the vast festivities of the Viennese court, the Bibienas had wandered far from Austria and their great works had ended. As the resources of the old order declined throughout Europe, so did the imperial splendor of the Bibienas’ imagination.

Confusing as their family history is, some attempt must be made to trace it in order to show where their wanderings contributed various elements to their art. They sprang originally from Florence, whence a certain Galli was sent to govern the Tuscan hill citadel of Bibbiena. It may have been this podestà from Macchiavelli’s home town who endowed the Bibienas with the political sagacity that was to steer them through the intrigues of most of the courts of Europe. When his son, Giovanni Maria Galli, wanted to become an artist, he was not sent to his father’s birthplace of Florence, some forty miles to the west, but sixty miles north across the Apennines to Bologna—so low had art sunk in the city of Giotto and Michelangelo. Yet in spite of the fact that none of the Bibienas ever studied in Florence, they showed their origin by their passion for the two great Florentine inventions of perspective and the grand manner.

Bologna, where Giovanni Maria Galli and his footloose descendants rightly made their home for a century at least, had become the
center of the then modern, or baroque, school of painting, which attempted to combine all that Italian art had achieved since the High Renaissance. When he entered the studio of Francesco Albani as apprentice, he was put through the Bolognese course of study to develop technical mastery and a knowledge of the accepted masterpieces of Italian and Graeco-Roman art and literature. He was probably unequal to so strenuous a curriculum, for he spent the rest of his life painting running water and fountains in Albani’s pictures, earning the nickname Il Fontaniere. As if to rub in his obscurity, Albani’s large workshop included another helper by the same name, so that our Giovanni Maria Galli, by a common Italian usage, added a place name to his family name. But it is noteworthy that, instead of calling himself II Fiorentino to recall his family origin, he followed the custom of a seigneur and took, as a family name, not as a qualifying adjective, the name of the place where his family had had power.

It was Giovanni Maria Galli Bibiena’s son Ferdinando who originated the family’s style and founded their fortunes. Ferdinando, who was seven when his father died, was instructed and practically adopted by his father’s fellow pupil, Carlo Cignani, the last great Bolognese painter. Since painting was only part of his true bent, he turned to the study of architecture under some of the heirs of that once revolutionary North Italian school which had trained so many of the builders of baroque Rome. He then completed his education by painting scenery in Bologna for a Captain Ercole Rivani, who had worked as a theatrical engineer for Louis XIV when some of the most enormous stage machinery of the age was being devised for Versailles.

In his mid-twenties, with a sound training in draughtsmanship, architecture, and mechanics, Ferdinando began to design theater sets, wall decorations, buildings, and formal gardens in and around Parma for the Farnese family, who held the most powerful court near the papal city of Bologna and had been one of Italy’s most lavish patrons of the theater for almost a century.

Ferdinando’s introduction to the Hapsburgs occurred in Barcelona in 1708, when he supervised the celebrations for the marriage of the pretender Charles III of Spain and was made his first architect and painter of festivities, or, as he politely worded it to Charles, “You put my poor hand under contribution for Your ingenious pageantry . . . and designed to inscribe on my dust the Titles of Your Beneficence.” This first effort in the great world which he and his family were to dazzle for three generations succeeded so well that as soon as Charles went to Vienna to become the Emperor Charles VI of Austria he called Ferdinando to him. In 1712 Ferdinando took two of his sons, Alessandro, aged 24, and Giuseppe, aged 15, with him to Vienna, where they joined Ferdinando’s younger brother Francesco, who had come to the Austrian court about eight years before. This reunion established the Bibienas in Vienna, with the result that as a family they created temporary settings for celebrations of life and death in the court during a generation. To the world at large their drawings and the operas that Mozart wrote later on are the most vivid witnesses we have of the first heyday of Vienna’s prodigality and verve.

Though most of the family used Vienna for their headquarters and Bologna for their home, their work kept them all wandering. Yet for all their travels and foreign marriages, they liked each other so much that when a lot of them chanced to be home in Bologna in January, 1744, they celebrated the reunion by fitting up a stage in the salon of their handsome arcaded house and giving an opera performed by and for the theater-loving gentlefolk of the city. They constantly showed their family loyalty by recommending each other to influential people and by helping each other on orders that had to be rushed for some impatient patron. Working often shoulder to shoulder, they not only drew very much alike, but must often have collaborated on the same drawing, like members of any architectural firm today. Such family collaboration was a tradition in Bologna, where the three Carracci used to say that a given paint-
The completeness of Giuseppe's achievement was for his son Carlo, the last Bibiena of the stage, both a prison and a patrimony too profitable to be discarded, even though he did his best to meet the taste for classical balance of the late eighteenth century. He drew with the correct dullness of a good pupil.

These deductions or guesses are mostly based on drawings finished in every detail for the engraver or the scene painter, which were but one step in the process of creating a stage set, as described by Ferdinando. “When you are trying to conceive a project,” he says, “your imagination will open more easily in the dark, or in bed, lying awake and alone.” Then came those first inimitable lightning sketches which can rarely be attributed be-
cause almost none of them are signed, and the quill's instinctive swiftness bears no relation to the draughtsmanship by ruler and compass on the final renderings from which the actual sets were constructed. Sometimes the Bibienas also helped their assistants to draw and paint in water color on the canvas wings and drops as they lay flat on the floor. In most old theaters the only clear floor big enough for this work was the stage itself, though the Turin Opera House, opened in 1740, provided a vast daylighted attic over the stage and auditorium. Ferdinando says with pardonable complacency that many of his predecessors helped their weak perspective by painting sets in place so as to be able to rule all horizontal lines from a string nailed to the vanishing point.

It is hard to estimate how well the Bibienas were paid. Their fees must often have seemed high, for Francesco had to haggle for months to get his price of 8,000 florins for designing an opera house in Vienna. In 1733 in Bologna he designed a new set for the last act of an opera for 200 lire, or very slightly more than the prima donna received for each performance in a run of twenty-six nights. Painting the set cost over twice, and the raw materials almost five times, as much. To make money for their travels, their handsome home in Bologna, and the rich clothes they needed to be presentable at court in an age when a good suit cost as much as an automobile today, the Bibienas turned their hand to a vast variety of work for the Church as well as for the laity.

In the English-speaking world, where the age of reason began as early as Bacon, it seems strange that churches should have employed theater decorators in the full eighteenth century. But in Italy, Austria, and South Germany both Church and State looked backward to the preceding age of the Counter Reformation, when Loyola's soldiers of Jesus had battled to turn back the Turk and had routed the heretic by striking at the emotions through the ear, the eye, and even the nose. This assault on all the senses had been so vital a weapon in reconquest that it was held over for the occupation. Eighteenth-century Jesuit seminaries often had theaters where acting in sacred plays trained prospective preachers in dramatic delivery. In St. Peter's, that most sumptuous of sacred theaters, when a new saint was canonized his portrait was made to appear during the benediction in the center of the hundred-ton gold-bronze glory that enshrines the chair above the high altar. Not far away, in San Francesco a Ripa, a central mechanism like that once used in theatrical transformations for shifting all the wings and the backdrop in unison, still functions to open up panels and pilasters and display 18,000 relics.

In Italy and Austria the Jesuit father Andrea Pozzo paved the way for the Bibienas by painting great perspectives in churches—canvas decorations of angels swarming upward toward the crown of the vaulting, where the latest Jesuit martyr swooned in ecstasy, or ceilings broken open through clouds to a blue so profound that only the saints of a reinvigorated Church could dwell there without giddiness. But of all these baroque decorations, those that kept most of the spirit of the mediaeval mystery plays were the colossal peep shows, or theatra sacra, that Giuseppe Bibiena constructed yearly for the court at Vienna. Each feast of Corpus Christi brought a fresh variation on the theme of wide ramps of stairs converging on a balustraded platform where the Man of Sorrows stood under a vast arch opening on lofty architectural distances.

Since these theatra sacra were often viewed in narrow chapels and from one level, their perspective could be much more rigorous and elaborate than that of theater sets which, in spite of being calculated to look their best from the prince's central box, also had to look at least passable from right and left, above and below.

This age that venerated the family tree next only to the Cross staged some of its most striking church spectacles for the funerals of princes. Nothing today—not even the Pompes funèbres première classe—can approach the black and silver grandeur of baroque catafalques. For the court of Vienna Giuseppe Bi-
bienia alone constructed over thirty castra doloris, colonnaded towers burdened with urns from which heavy flames smoldered about the uplifted, draped sarcophagus and the skeleton flashing its scythe. The exaltation of worldliness by which the absolute prince stormed heaven complete with sword and scutcheon was not viewed kindly by old-fashioned eyes. About 1614 Webster wrote in The Duchess of Malfi, “Princes’ images on their tombs do not lie, as they were wont, seeming to pray up to heaven; but with their hands under their cheeks, as if they died of the toothache: they are not carved with their eyes fixed upon the stars; but as their minds were wholly bent upon the world, the selfsame way they seem to turn their faces.”

But the Bibienas served the ambitions of the absolute monarch in life even more than in death. Like modern dictators, the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century rulers dramatized themselves with the aid of stage technicians who acted as a sort of bodyguard of the imagination. Pascal put his finger on the motive when he described Louis XIV in terms of a Bajazet: “Judgment must be clarified indeed to see just another man in the great lord surrounded, in his superb seraglio, by forty thousand janissaries.” By dint of inhabiting a stage setting, the monarch became himself a creature of the stage, like Louis XIV dancing in the center of his vast ballets, or Maria Theresa, called by her husband Europe’s greatest actress, appealing to the Bohemian diet by presenting herself before them with her newborn son in her arms. Ferdinando Bibiena knew such rulers’ need for theater technicians when he wrote to Charles VI, “Allow my lowliness to serve Your Palms by contrast, as cropped grass serves the design of a great Garden.” As if to recognize the political value of a man like Giuseppe Bibiena, the margraves of Bayreuth allowed him to bracket his name with theirs in the ornate cartouche that crowns the ducal box in the Bayreuth opera house that he decorated. The Bibienas’ theatrical designs, even when viewed at their lowest level as mere accumulations of luxurious intricacy, enhanced a prince’s importance by demonstrating what endless man-hours he commanded for his momentary pleasure.

The great autocratic courts of the north were the Bibienas’ richest secular patrons, but they did not provide the keenest or most interested audiences. Ferdinando, Francesco, and Antonio spent half their lives working in the Italian community theaters, which were often built by public subscription. The Italian spectator who appeared in the auditorium not by princely command invitation but because he had paid his share for the show, came, according to the French ambassador to Venice in 1795, “to listen, not to talk as we do.” Italians cared so passionately for the theater that in 1763, when Antonio Bibiena’s Teatro Comunale was opened, every available bed in Bologna was bespoken for weeks beforehand, and the Bolognese were waging a civil war of pamphlets and “letters to The Times” for and against every detail of the building. Indeed, the voluminousness of the old Italian literature on the construction and acoustics of theaters is alone enough to prove the passion for the arts that existed in these Italian cities, where our pattern of urban life was first discovered and where the first modern men outside a court or church achieved the intelligent use of leisure. In these communities of free individuals the men of letters, the cognoscenti of the arts, and the gentlemen musicians had first combined declamation, scenery, and music to delight the heart, the eye, and the ear with opera. This Italian synthesis developed modern forms of stage scenery, which were adopted by drama when strolling players stopped acting on trestles in the market place and settled down indoors.

Wonders were performed on these opera stages, often a hundred feet deep, but narrow and low-ceiled. In Mazarin’s Salle des Machines at the Tuileries many of the transformations were effected by wooden machines, forty feet wide and sixty feet long, that rolled back and forth on a stage 132 feet deep. The Renaissance changed scenes by reviving the antique system of revolving prisms. This lim-
ited and bulky machinery gradually gave way, after 1600, to the Italian scheme of lowering a backdrop from an overhead drum while the wings, being roped to a central capstan under the stage, simultaneously slid back in grooves to reveal a different set of wings behind.

When the stage machines were set in motion, the actors should not distract from the marvel in progress by speaking, wrote Hédelin d’Aubignac in 1657. It was in England that stage spectacle met the only literature free and bold enough to combat it with success, despite the fact that an Englishman, Inigo Jones, was the first northerner to practice Italian stagecraft. “Painting and carpentry are the soul of masque” was an outcry that Ben Jonson belied by writing the only drames à machines that still find readers—unless, indeed, The Tempest may be considered a northern example of this Italian form. The war to extermination between the dramatist and the theater engineer must be one reason why stage spectacle flourished most freely where writers were most strictly censored by the Counter Reformation and absolute autocracy.

Working in the reactionary German and Austrian courts and in the Italian states surviving on their past, the Bibienas introduced their novelties under a mask of tradition, just as the painters of their native Bologna created a new style out of old elements. Yet the Bibienas’ consistent use of architectural detail fifty to a hundred years old seems conservative even in the theater, which seldom welcomes ideas while new. Ferdinando, the great teacher of the family, proudly rejected innovations like the rococo, because, according to his friend Zanotti, he admired and taught “true architecture without cartouches and sprays and modern frippery.”

But the Bibienas could not have astounded their blâsé audience of princes without real innovations. While the whole family, for instance, designed what were known as palais à volonté, or sets used for any action that called for a palace and as generalized as the woodcuts repeated indiscriminately in old books wherever “the author writes of a city,” Giuseppe Bibiena sometimes created sets that seem to fit some one action only. In his remarkable Gothic designs he started the study of exotic local color that was to develop shortly after 1800 at La Scala in Sanquirico’s romantic studies of Russian log houses, Arthurian castles, Muslim tombs, and Tahitian huts. But Giuseppe’s excursions into historical accuracy were too much in advance of the times to make them the family’s most admired novelty. The Bibienas’ contemporary fame was founded rather on several innovations by which they achieved the most complete known mastery of the illusion of immensity.

It was in the early seventeenth century that the Euclidian definition of parallel lines as lines that never meet was changed to lines that meet at infinity, because infinity was being thought of as something different from the largest conceivable number. Shortly after Ferdinando Bibiena took service with the house of Parma, Newton’s Principia obsessed the next half century with the nightmare of interstellar space. The age tried to fulfill its dreams of loftiness and space in all sorts of odd ways. In Sweden, for instance, Queen Christina’s French gardener prolonged alleys to the horizon by canvas perspectives that could be removed in wet weather.

This desire for space was partly satisfied by an innovation through which the Bibienas achieved a new thoroughness and exactitude in drawing architectural perspective. They were probably helped to this new pitch of skill by being brought up in Bologna, where no observant man can escape having a sense of architectural distances forced on him by the endless arcades that shelter the city from its raw snows. One of these arcades alone runs for nearly two miles in an unbroken flight of 666 arches. A childhood of wandering down such vistas could not but contribute to the ability to draw exactly a row of identical objects repeating themselves indefinitely into the distance—an ability that is practically a trademark of the entire Bibiena family. In their balustrades and their friezes of rich ornament the development of a shape disappearing toward the vanishing point is pursued with the
Scena per Angolo, pen and wash drawing, possibly by Giuseppe Galli Bibiena. Gift of Cornelius Vanderbilt, 1880

Relentlessness of a Bach fugue. Indeed, the Bibienas' perspective demonstrated how to develop shapes in space as ably as Bach's contemporary counterpoint demonstrated how to develop themes in time. These skills that distinguish all members of the Bach and the Bibiena families were doubtless the product of inherited aptitude developed by constant family collaboration. Ferdinando Bibiena thought this exact diminution in scale so essential to creating the illusion of space that he used to calculate the apparent depth of his vistas in real measurements so as to draw all distant details in perfect proportion. Then, with the actor at the footlights to give the scale, the completed stage set preserved the immensity sensed in the first imaginative sketch of the idea.

The Bibienas' most radical innovation, on which the family traded for a century, completely broke the traditional stage picture. The renaissance stage suggested depth by a perspective of houses built on either side of an upward-sloping street or avenue that prolonged the central aisle of the orchestra. The strict axial symmetry of antique architecture must have seemed mandatory for a form like opera, which started as a baroque "revival" of Greek and Roman tragedy. Niccolo Sabbattini says that when this single central vista
was varied by opening up side avenues like those in the wide Teatro Olimpico at Vicenza, the narrowness of the usual early stage made the result like "a battle of flies." Ferdinando founded the fame of the Bibienas by replacing this set axial formula with a simple and flexible scheme that gave a much more imaginative illusion of distance. This is the only thing in his Architettura civile that he claims as his own invention, though it is really Pozzo's slanting perspective developed to its logical conclusion. Ferdinando opened even the tiniest stage to hitherto undreamed of space and loftiness by painting architecture seen at about a 45° slant. A ground plan of these painted buildings would resemble the V of the angle of a building driving at the audience like the prow of a ship, or the upper half of a corner of a room extending its walls to embrace the auditorium, or both plans combined in an X of intersecting arcades that spread outward toward the proscenium arch and also lead back through fleeing colonnades. These restless flights of architecture running diagonally offstage toward undetermined distances revolutionized and dominated scenic design for half the eighteenth century.

Actors and audience were drawn together by the equal illumination that the candles spread over the stage and the auditorium. If we today could leave the fixed electric brilliance of our night life to go into one of the old candelit theaters we should be charmed by the warm and gentle lights flickering over all the volutes, rippling over the swirls and garlands, and dimpling the cups. It takes the uncertainties of candlelight fully to animate the ornamental flow of baroque rooms. In the early theaters, where the lighting fixtures were not readily accessible, the candles were made to last out the performance by not being lighted until the scene was about to be disclosed. "When everybody is seated," says Sabbattini, writing in 1698, "and the performance is ready to start, then light the lights, first in the house and then on the stage, and be as quick as you can, for the audience is restless." He adds that the candles, their wicks wetted with petroleum to speed ignition, were lighted from a taper on the end of a reed, or, for finer effect, by fuses running from wick to wick all over the house. In the better-equipped theaters of the eighteenth century the audience assembled under a blazing chandelier that ascended through a hole in the ceiling or the proscenium arch when the performance was about to start. When the auditorium was at its brightest for gala, or a giorno, evenings, the heat from hundreds of little flames and from human beings often softened the candles until they toppled over and splashed tallow on people below. Oil lamps hardly improved matters by smelling when extinguished, even when the oil was perfumed, and Sabbattini goes on to say, "Footlights of oil lamps, instead of lighting the scenery better, darken it by smoke as dense as a fog, which shuts off the stage and blots out all details of the sets while suffocating the audience with stink. Though the actors' and dancers' costumes can be seen better, their faces look as pale and hollow-cheeked as though they had just risen from a fever."

Under cover of the dimness what wonders became possible! Clouds forever lowered gods or snatched hard-pressed mortals up to heaven. Men turned to stone as painted cloths were pushed up around them from under the stage. Cardboard ghosts were shoved up through cracks in the floor and then swelled or shrank, since they were made, says Sabbattini, "with ribs like an umbrella." Live actors catapulted through a trap from a seesaw below when two men jumped on the other end. Temples melted into stormy seas, and seas dissolved into imperial audience halls that burst into flames and ruin.

Such stage wonders reflected a new confidence in man's ability to bend nature to his will. So do the vistas at Versailles and the avenues that cross whole counties of England to converge on some Palladian house, for these are still the largest geometrical decorations ever imposed on the earth. The age that laid the foundations for modern science, that harnessed natural forces by exploring their formal laws, could no longer accept miracles
with mediaeval matter-of-factness as a continuous function of the everyday world. The baroque painter, aware of two incompatible worlds, clothed a miracle in every possible realistic detail so as to lead the reason as far as possible along natural laws before being confronted by their violation. In the same vein the Bibienas made all their stage architecture strictly constructible and never played, like Pillement when the old order was undermined, with a denial of gravity. Their stage settings dazzle with the glamour of architectural renderings designed to allure the baroque ruler to build in marble. Here and there some fantastic autocrat actually had the money to put a stage dream in lasting form. Less than a century after Palladio and Scamozzi had built the permanent stage set in the Teatro Olimpico at Vicenza, Bernini and his fellows adapted its three perspective streets by cleaving the heart of Rome into three far-reaching avenues that converge on the Piazza del Popolo and frame twin churches. The airy, vast pageant ground of the Zwinger at Dresden is, or more probably was, another series of perspectives that could be walked into.

Lack of money may not have been the only reason for building so few of these grandiose stage settings. The baroque was the supreme age of illusion. Even its mathematicians, discovering infinity as the place where parallel lines meet, must have visualized some optical illusion like that of looking down railroad tracks. Seventeenth-century painting, by creating new illusions of roundness and new subtleties of expression, became the master art that impelled the sculptor to carve draperies that no blind man's hand could interpret and the architect to merge his solid building into perspective enlargements. The wise heads of the time must have seen that the visions of the great painter architects, however constructible they might seem, could not but become vulgar in the exactitudes of stone. As the most optical of architects, the Bibienas fell heir to all the baroque, to all that Bernini and Borromini had dreamed but had had to leave undone. Indeed, at their drawing boards, unhampered by the expense of marble, the delays of masons, the whims or death of patrons, the Bibienas' achievement summed up the great emotional architecture of the baroque.