Melchiorre Cafà’s Bust of Alexander VII

by R. WITTKOWER

Whenever a baroque sculpture appears in the art market, it is almost invariably given the generic name “Bernini.” Only on relatively rare occasions did baroque sculptors safeguard their posthumous reputations by signing their works. For the historian such signed pieces are, of course, of immense value because the problem of authorship is settled with irrefutable finality. A short while ago the Metropolitan Museum acquired a large bronze bust of the Chigi Pope Alexander VII which an inscription on the back, cast with the bust, certifies as a work by Melchiorre Cafà. This bust has never been published before and, though it presumably comes from a branch of the Chigi family, its pedigree prior to its purchase from a New York dealer leads only to the collection of the Baron Gustave de Rothschild. The importance of the find hardly needs stressing; the new bust does not only settle a problematic chapter in the history of Roman baroque sculpture but is also a most impressive and powerful work in its own right.

It is only fairly recently that the Maltese Cafà has attracted attention and that some of his works have been rediscovered and discussed. Our knowledge of him is mainly derived from the biographies by his well-informed contemporary Filippo Baldinucci and by Lione Pascoli, who wrote somewhat later but could probably have made use of personal recollections of the sculptor Giuseppe Mazzuoli (1644-1725), at one time Cafà’s pupil. Pascoli gives 1635 as the year of Cafà’s birth and Baldinucci asserts that he died at the early age of about thirty. The last document in which he is mentioned alive dates from August 23, 1667; the next document, of May 1668, concerns claims of his heirs. By combining this evidence one is led to conclude that he was born in 1635 and died, aged thirty-two or thirty-three, probably in the spring of 1668. When still very young, he left Malta for Rome, there to join the studio of Ercole Ferrata (1610-1686). The latter, a rather pedestrian but solid sculptor from the area of Lake Como, had started his career in Rome under Bernini in the late 1640s. While Ferrata soon opened a flourishing studio of his own, he yet remained to a certain extent dependent on Bernini, who employed him for many great undertakings over a number of years. This rather complex tissue of studio organization in Bernini’s circle must be considered in order to understand how it could come about that Ferrata never fully absorbed Bernini’s grand baroque manner but always felt drawn toward Algardi’s “baroque classicism,” and that Ferrata’s pupil Cafà never accepted his master’s manner but was immediately fascinated by Bernini’s exalted style. In fact, within the brief span of less than ten years Cafà produced a remarkable number of large works higher in quality and closer to the spirit of the late Bernini than those of any other master of his own generation. When Cafà died

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First bronze cast of the bust of Pope Alexander VII, by Melchiorre Caffa. Height 29⅛ inches
Chapman Fund, 1957

ON THE COVER: Detail of the Museum's bust of Alexander VII
as a result of an accident in the studio, of his works in marble only the huge, magnificent relief of the Ecstasy of Saint Catherine in Santa Cate- 
rina da Siena a Montemagnanapoli and the re- 
cumbent figure of Santa Rosa in Santo Domingo 
at Lima remained entirely finished by his hand.

Other works, above all the relief of Saint 
Eustace in the Lion's Den in Sant' Agnese in 
Piazza Navona, the large group of Saint Thomas 
Distributing Alms in Sant' Agostino, and the 
over life-size statue of Pope Alexander III in 
the cathedral of Siena, were in different stages of 
execution at the time of his death and were com- 
pleted by his teacher Ferrata. This fact shows 
that he maintained close contact with his master 
to the end; but it must be emphasized that all 
these commissions had gone to him and not to 
Ferrata, the head of the studio. Another mono-
umental work, the Baptist of Christ for the high 
altar of San Giovanni in his Maltese home town 
Valletta, was in the model stage when he died; 
actually it was a part of this large model that 
fell and hit him and caused his premature death. 
Its execution in marble was handed on to Giu- 
seppe Mazzuoli who had worked under Cafà in 
Ferrata's studio. Mazzuoli, however, does not 
seem to have adhered slavishly to his master's 
model, and this is understandable, for it was not 
till thirty-five years later that the group was 
finished and shipped to Malta. The bust of 
Alexander VII takes up a special place within 
the series of works Cafà left behind finished or 
unfinished, for it is his only work planned in 
bronze on a monumental scale.

Before this bust is discussed it seems relevant 
to mention that a comparatively large number 
of Cafà's models are extant. This is noteworthy 
because small models made in preparation for 

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The Baptism of Christ. Bronze group after a model 
by Melchiorre Cafà, 1667. Height 17 ½ inches

Dodge Fund, 1934

large marble and bronze works are rare, while 
full-scale models (denoting the penultimate stage 
in the working process) are even rarer. No less 
than three terra-cotta bozzetti, or models, sur-
vive for the relief of Saint Eustace alone, one of 
them for the entire composition as planned by 
Cafà (Museum of the Palazzo Venezia, Rome) 
and two others showing single figures (Städtische 
Galerie, Frankfort, and the collection of the late 
George Swarzenski); some time ago a beautiful 
bozetto for the group of Saint Thomas of Villa-
ova was purchased for the Museum at Valletta, 
and the bozetto for the Baptist of Christ is 
exhibited in the Vatican. This list could be ex-
panded but may suffice in the present context. 
How highly these little models were valued in 
Cafà's own circle is proved by the fact that the 
inventory of Ercole Ferrata's studio, published 
by Vincenzo Golzio, enumerates over twenty 
such works in terra cotta and wax by his hand. 
His brilliance of invention, acclaimed by the 
sources, was of course the reason why these easily 
perishable objects were so much treasured. Some 
of his small models were cast in bronze and en-
joyed considerable popularity. Thirty years ago 
I myself published a number of bronze casts 
made from the Vatican model of the Baptist. 
During the intervening years more casts of this 
group have come to light and one of them is now 
in the Metropolitan Museum. 

In the case of the bust of Alexander VII it is 
not the small bozetto but the full-scale model 
that survives. The seventeenth century hardly 
rated such models as works of art. They had a 
clearly defined utilitarian purpose and, when 
made to serve for casts in metal, were usually 
destroyed after a mold had been taken from 
them. But once again, Cafà's model made of 
humble material was deemed worthy of being 
preserved and exhibited in the princely Chigi 
collection. For a long time now it has had a place 
of honor in the Palazzo Chigi at Ariccia near 
Rome. Cafà's authorship is proved by the almost 
complete correspondence between the model and 
the signed and dated bust of the Metropolitan 
Museum. Welcome confirmation, moreover,
comes from Cafà’s biographers; according to Baldinucci—whom Pascoli followed—“Cafà left at his death a beautiful model of the portrait of Alexander VII, which model had served for the casting in bronze and remained in the Palazzo Chigi.” Both writers also maintain that the same model served for many later casts.

Now a document published by Golzio tells us that on August 8, 1667, that is, not long before his untimely death, Cafà received a payment of two hundred scudi for the finished bust of Alexander VII which had been cast in bronze by Giovanni Artusi (from Piscina in the Abruzzi and therefore called Giovanni da Piscina), the expert papal bronze founder whose supreme job had been the casting of the bronzes of Bernini’s Cathedra Petri. Is then the bust of the Metropolitan Museum the one referred to in the document? The answer is in the negative, for the document expressly states that six zecchini (gold coins) were used for the gilding of the papal stole, and the bust in the Metropolitan Museum is of uniform dark bronze. But a second bust cast from the same model, formerly in the Palazzo Chigi and now in the cathedral of Siena, does have a gilded stole and must therefore be the bust mentioned in the document. Since it was the Siena cast that was supervised by Cafà himself and since he died soon afterwards, it would seem logical to conclude that the Metropolitan bronze was one of the many casts of which the sources speak, made some time after Cafà’s death from the mold kept in the Vatican foundry. If this were so, the Metropolitan bronze would be of minor interest as a work of art though still important enough because its inscription clinches the hypothesis recently put forward that the document of August 8, 1667 refers to the Siena bust. This common-sense explanation of the place of the Metropolitan bust will not do. Evidence of a technical and stylistic nature contradicts a late origin.

We have mentioned before that the Metropolitan Museum bronze is signed and dated. The inscription, rendered in beautiful majuscules at the back on the lower right-hand end of the mozzetta, or short robe, reads: "MELCHIOR. CAFA/ MELITENSI/ FAC AN. DOM./ MDCLXVII.

It is of course technically possible to engrave an inscription into a bronze after it has left the foundry. A careful investigation, however, proves that in our case the inscription was cast; it must
therefore have been both on the model and the mold. The conclusion is inescapable. But neither the Ariccia model nor the Siena bronze has an inscription. We are thus forced to assume that the Siena and the Metropolitan busts cannot have been cast in the same mold; on the other hand, the same model could have been used provided that the inscription was erased before a new mold was made. This, I submit, is what happened in fact.

The next step of this investigation lies with the Ariccia model; we would have to check whether any erasure is visible at its back. But here I have to report a sin of omission, for when I examined the model some time ago, the problem which I have just submitted to the reader was not sufficiently clear to me, and while I would have noticed any blatant change of the surface, I may have overlooked the slight indications of an alteration which one would see only when expecting it.

In any case, if the same model was used for the molds of the Siena and Metropolitan bronzes, which seems to be proved by the visual evidence as well as the identity of measurements, the Metropolitan bust must have been the earlier cast of the two. This much is certain. Now a technical scrutiny reveals—as Mr. John G. Phillips pointed out to me—that the Metropolitan bronze was an unsuccessful cast. It came out of the furnace more or less in two parts. The break, which is almost invisible from the front and which cannot be detected in reproductions, runs through at about half the height of the body of the bust. The two parts were so skillfully joined that the fault can be fully gauged from the back only. We must assume that on the occasion of this cast the mold was also ruined and had to be replaced. Bronze casting is always a risky undertaking and even the collaboration of such an experienced technician as Giovanni Artusi was not a guarantee of success. In the autumn of 1661, while working on the Cathedra Petri, he had to face defeat of such magnitude that by comparison the faulty cast of the papal bust shrinks to insignificance: his first cast of Saint Augustine, one of the four monumental

*Details of the Museum's bust of Alexander VII*
Fathers of the Church, turned out to be a complete failure; even the second was only a partial success. As the evidence shows, the first cast of the papal bust was worth saving, but the artist could not offer it to his patron, Cardinal Flavio Chigi. It had to be replaced by a perfect one, and it is this second cast that is preserved in the Siena bust.

Why Cafà erased his proud signature on the model is difficult to account for. The sources describe him as of melancholic temperament; after the faulty cast he may have felt that self-gloration was not called for in any form. But since other reasons may have prevailed, a non liquet is the wisest verdict for the time being.

It remains to assess the relationship between the Metropolitan and the Siena busts. The result of a stylistic scrutiny adds to the technical evidence. The loving care with which the detail of the face was treated despite the faulty cast, the meticulous work with the rasp enlivening the entire surface of the papal cope, the differentiation in the treatment of such various textures as fur, beard, and foliage—all this reveals the hand of the same master who finished the Siena bust. In every single case of casts made later from this or, for that matter, from any other mold kept in the papal foundry, it is easy to note that the quality of the surface treatment falls sharply. A case in point is a third bronze made in Cafà’s mold, one formerly in the W. von Dirksen collection in Berlin and sold at Lepke’s in April 1931; here the generalized treatment of the forms lacks all freshness. In sum, the posthumous character of such works is usually revealed by a certain neglect of the vitally important surface treatment which follows the casting.

The careful reader will not have overlooked the fact that there are a number of minor discrepancies between the Siena and the Metropolitan busts. For instance, in the New York bust the third button of the mozzetta is partly unbuttoned, whereas this is not the case in the Siena bust. It is interesting that this minutia is to be found in the model. Minor discrepancies between bronzes from the same mold are the result of chasing. After the bronze casts have left the foundry artists still have considerable freedom as regards execution of detail.

The comparison with the von Dirksen bust makes it all the more evident how closely related the other two busts are. But I believe that one can even go a step further. The Metropolitan bust has a crispness and vitality superior to the Siena bust. The case seems not unlike that of Bernini’s bust of Scipione Borghese. It may be recalled that the marble of the first Scipione Borghese bust was found faulty at a time when the work was far advanced. Bernini thereupon copied his own work, but the repetition lacks the intense life of the first version. Similarly, yet cum grano salis, Cafà’s first faulty bronze seems richer in surface qualities than the official second version.

In conclusion, a word must be said about the debt Cafà owed to Bernini for the interpretation of his portrait. First, the strange fact should be noted that among the many surviving busts of
Alexander VII none can be attributed to Bernini with any degree of certainty, although the sources are explicit about the number of busts he made. But Bernini’s conception of the pope is well known from two engravings, one by Francesco Poilly probably from 1655 and the other by P. de Jode dated 1659. In both cases the head is off axis and the pupils are placed in the corners of the eyes. By such means a vivid movement and countermovement is created, and one would imagine that Bernini incorporated similar features into his Alexander busts. As early as the 1630s it became his urgent concern to endow his portrait busts with the illusion of movement. He tried to solve this problem not only by enlivening the surface and letting flickering light play over it but above all by attacking the most problematical aspect of portraiture in three dimensions, namely how to reconcile the fortuitous cut through the upper part of the body with the evocation of real and pulsating life. We are so much used to sculptured portrait heads emerging from lifeless stumps of bodies that the convention rarely strikes us as odd or even ridiculous. Now from about 1640 on Bernini found a theretofore unknown approach to the traditional rendering of portrait busts. The bodies of all his later portrait busts seem in contrapostal movement; one is led to imagine that one arm is coming forward and the other moving back or at rest. Thus instead of contemplating a truncated chest, the beholder is stimulated to observe, as it were, a person in action.

Cafà found himself in full sympathy with Bernini’s revolutionary ideas and accepted them to such an extent that—somewhat paradoxically—his Alexander VII should be called the most Berninesque papal portrait bust of the second half of the seventeenth century. The superb arabesques resulting from the deep folds of the mozzetta enhance the chiaroscuro and punctuate the ever-changing light effects playing over the surface. At the same time the body under the vestment seems in contrapostal movement—one fancies that a blessing right hand might appear from under the ruffled garment. Berninesque also is the relationship of the head to the bust: in spite of the importance of the body, the head commands our prime attention. Moreover, no other portrait, sculptured or
painted, renders so convincingly the mild and intelligent features of this pope to whose tenacious devotion the world owes the Piazza of Saint Peter's, the boldest of his many vast projects.

**Documentation**

**Sources to Cafa's Life:**

**Modern Contributions:**
Oskar Pollak's article in Thieme-Becker's *Künstler-Lexikon*, V, 1911, contains the first modern summary of the then available material.
John Fleming, in *Burlington Magazine*, 89 (1947), on the Santa Rosa at Lima.
A. N. Cellini, in *Paragone*, 7 (1956), No. 83. Attempt to add to Cafa's oeuvre.

**Documents:**
V. Golzio, in *Archivi d'Italia*, I (1933/4), on the relief of Saint Eustace in Sant' Agnese in Piazza Navona; in *Archivi d'Italia*, II (1935), the inventory of Ferrata's studio; Documenti artistici sul Seicento nell'archivio Chigi, 301 (Rome, 1939), payment for the bust of Alexander VII.

**Bozzetti:**

**Bust of Alexander VII:**

**The Model at Ariccia:**
Height without base 29½ inches, which corresponds with the bronzes. Terra cotta; some breaks at the collar and the lower edge of the bust have been replaced in plaster. Remains of brownish red paint are visible. The model was probably entirely painted to give it a feigned bronze patina. Michel Angelo Marullo was paid fifteen scudi on February 4, 1669 for painting it (see Martinelli, *I ritratti*, 45, note).