

# BOOKS

## Reviews

# A portrait of Rome in four biographies

Research results in rich life stories of Bernini, Costanza Piccolomini and Cardinal Camillo Massimo

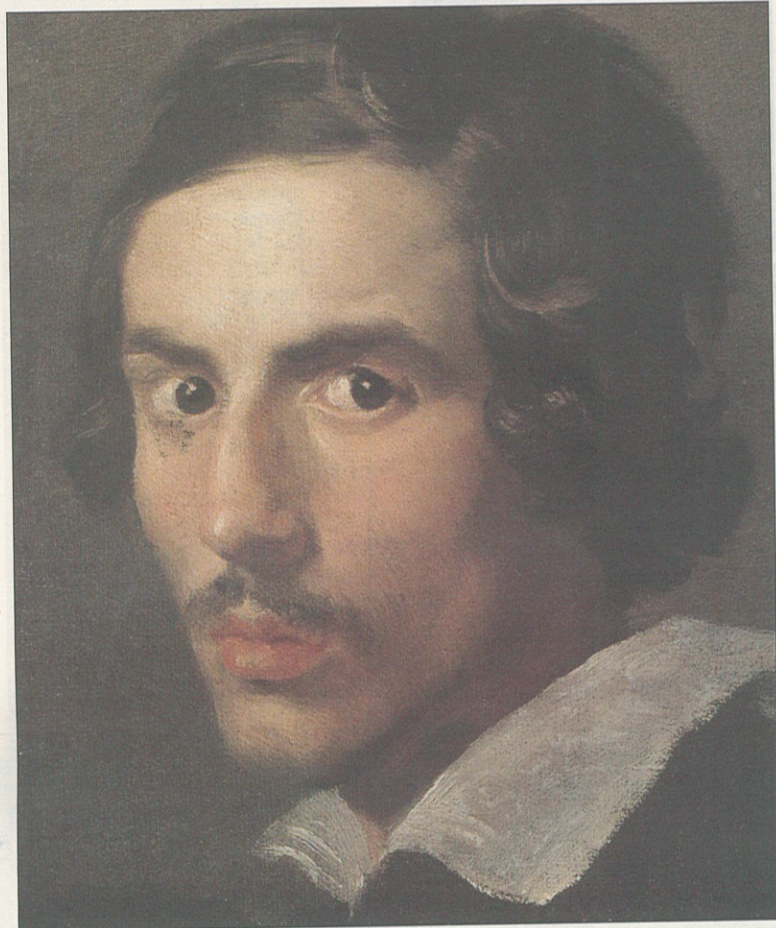
### ITALY

One is struck, when reading the books under review one after another, by the wealth of information that patient scholarship can turn up about people and their times. Here we have two biographies of the ever-green, canonical Bernini along with two of a couple of lesser, almost forgotten figures. Taken together, they make a kind of "thick description" of Rome from the 1620s to around 1680.

Franco Mormando's translation of Bernini's life by his son Domenico is the first in English of Domenico's text which, until recent years, had been considered biased and neither as credible nor as useful to scholars as Baldinucci's 1682 *Life of Bernini* or Chantelou's observations in his *Journal*. However Mormando makes a convincing case for Domenico's biography to be taken much more seriously, seeking to prove that a first version may have been written by him many years earlier than the publication date of 1713, so predating Baldinucci's biography, until now thought to be the first. Mormando suggests that Domenico's text may have been the basis for Baldinucci's biography, but there may never be conclusive proof on this point. Particularly interesting are Mormando's concluding two sections. The first of these discusses the traditional ideas and Mormando's own differing views concerning Bernini's attitudes to religion, which have been considered to have had an important bearing on his work.

The second discusses the pitfalls and concerns facing a translator of 17th-century Italian for modern readers. Following the translation two short appendices are included. The first is a very short summary of Bernini's life thought to be by his eldest son, Pietro Filippo Bernini and the second is the first eulogy to be published in Paris three months after Bernini's death in January 1681 by Jean Donneau de Visé in the monthly *Le Mercure Galant*. This periodical provides evidence for Mormando's reappraisal of Bernini's standing at court at the time of his death.

*Bernini: His Life and His Rome* is Mormando's other recent book. It is a biography for the general reader. Indeed, the opening chapter, entitled "A Twelve-Year-Old Pregnant Bride" and the first word of the first sentence, "Pedophilia" are an intentional gambit to engage readers used to daily sensationalism. The racy literary style continues throughout. Nonetheless, the biography is underpinned by Mormando's immense and



Bernini, *Self-portrait*, around 1623 (left); Velázquez, *Portrait of Monsignor Camillo Massimo*, 1650 (above); Bernini, portrait bust of Costanza Piccolomini, 1636-37

serious research and is packed with information, some of which may be of interest to students and scholars of art history, although there are shortcomings when it comes to supporting evidence for Mormando's quotations and evidence for the thoughts and actions of Bernini and others. At times these are identified in footnotes, but very often the reader has to trawl through the footnotes to find the evidence.

With *Bernini's Beloved: A Portrait of Costanza Piccolomini*, the Bernini expert, Sarah McPhee, excels herself. The book uncovers and probes the person and the life behind Bernini's bust of his mistress, until now known as Costanza Bonarelli, the surname being that of her husband, Matteo, one of Bernini's leading assistants. Previous scholars, while recognising the originality of Bernini's approach in the momentary realism of a "speaking likeness" of his mistress and usually relating the famous incident of the slashing of her face at the behest of the furious Bernini, remain silent in every other respect.

McPhee corrects her surname to that of her family, Piccolomini, by which she had expected to be known, and unravels thereby, through the patient trawling of the archives, the mysteries surrounding her subject's life. Costanza Piccolomini did not disappear without trace but, after a period of "correction" in the Monastero di Casa Pia, following her affair with Bernini and the slashing incident, she returned to her husband to run

his household and help with his business, until his death in 1654. Furthermore, McPhee has provided valuable information about Costanza's involvement in her husband's successful business of selling antiquities, collecting and dealing in paintings until her own death, as a wealthy woman, in 1662. For example, she arranged completion and delivery of four gilded bronze lions to Philip IV of Spain, now in the Prado, and she sold Poussin's *Plague of Ashdod*

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to Cardinal Richelieu in 1661 for the high price of 1,000 scudi.

Much more information concerning Costanza's husband, Matteo Bonarelli, or Bonucelli as he should more properly be known, also emerges; not only of his association with Bernini, but of his own career as a sculptor. One of the most fascinating sections of the book deals with the couple's house, often visited by leading connoisseurs and artists such as Félibien, Poussin and Velázquez. Although not a large book, the illustrations are exemplary and placed closely to the text where they are referred to. This book is essential for all scholars of 17th-century Rome and Bernini, as well as for the general reader.

Lisa Beaven's *An Ardent Patron* introduces us to a leading figure of Roman patrons in the third quarter of the century, Cardinal Camillo Massimo. She describes in detail his life, achievements and contribution as an antiquarian, collector and

patron of art and architecture, and her book is a vital contribution to 17th-century Roman studies. It is a heavy but handy volume, structured clearly in seven chronological chapters, beginning with Massimo's birth in 1620 into the prestigious Roman Massimi family and ending with the final most successful six years of his life as advisor on artistic matters to the Altieri family of Pope Clement X and as a promoter of the art intervening Gian Pietro Bellori. In the intervening chapters Pietro Beaven discusses Massimo's early patronage of Poussin, Claude and Velázquez, his tribulations as papal nuncio to the Spanish Court and his exile to his estate at Roccasecca dei Volsci, before his return to Rome and reinstatement in papal circles. Cardinal Massimo's passion for and display of his antiquities appears to have helped to create taste and ideas in the 18th century concerning antiquity. Although his collection of paintings was broken up at his death, many of the antiquities remained as he had displayed them in the Palazzo Massimo (now Palazzo del Drago) until Cardinal Albani and his librarian, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, took possession of the palazzo in the mid-18th century.

This book is packed with scholarly research and the illustrations are exemplary in their clarity and pertinence to the text.

Clare Ford-Wille

**The Life of Gian Lorenzo Bernini**  
**Domenico Mormando**, translated by  
**Franco Mormando**

Penn State University Press, 464pp,  
\$99.95 (hb)

**Bernini: his Life and his Rome**  
**Franco Mormando**

University of Chicago Press, 456pp,  
\$35 (hb)

**Bernini's Beloved: a Portrait of**  
**Costanza Piccolomini**

**Sarah McPhee**  
Yale University Press, 280pp, £35 (hb)

**An Ardent Patron: Cardinal**  
**Camillo Massimo and his**  
**Antiquarian and Artistic Circle**

**Lisa Beaven**  
Paul Holberton Publishing, 440pp,  
£40 (pb)

