A portrait of Rome in four biographies

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

BOOKS
Reviews

ITALY

One is struck, when reading the books under review one after another, by the wealth of information that patents scholarship can turn up about people and their times. Here we have two biographies of the evergreen, canonical Bernini along with two of people almost forgotten figures. Taken together, they make a kind of "thick description" of Rome from the 16th to the 18th century.

Francesco Mordomo'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 unclear as credible as useful to scholars as Baldi's "Life of Bernini" or Chantelou's observations in his Journal. However Mordomo makes a convincing case for Domenico's biography to be taken more seriously, suggesting that a first version may have been written by him many years earlier than the publication date of 1773, predating Baldi's biography, until now thought to be the first. Mordomo suggests that Domenico's text may have been the basis for Baldi's biography, but there may never be conclusive proof on this point.

Particularly interesting is Mordomo's concluding two sections. The first follows the traditional ideas and Mordomo's own differing views concerning Bernini's art and life, offering possible solutions which have been considered to have an important bearing on Bernini's work.

The second discusses the pitfalls and requirements of being a 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 essay to be published in Paris three months after Bernini's death in January 1681 by Jean Dominique de Vrel in the monthly Le Mercure Galant. This periodical provides evidence for Mordomo's overlooked character of the standing at court at the time of his death.

Bernini. His Life and Work is Mordomo's other recent book. It is a biography for the general reader. Indeed, the opening chapter entitled "A Twelve-Year-Old Pregnant Bride" is the first word of the first sentence, "Papaghina" is an unenthusiastic gambit to entice readers used to daily new sensational news. The noisy literary style continues throughout. Nonetheless, the biography is underplayed by Mordomo's immense and serious research and is packed with information, some of which may not interest to students and scholars of art history. Although there are shortcomings when it comes to supporting evidence for Mordomo'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 travel through the footnotes to find the evidence.

With Bernini's Shadow. A Portrait of Costanza Piccolomini, the Bernini expert, Sarah McFie, excels herself. The book uncovers and probes the person and life behind Bernini's best of his mistresses, until now known as Costanza Bonarelli, the true name of her husband, Mathieu, one of Bernini's leading assistants. Previous scholars, while recognising the originality of Bernini's approach to the momentary realism of a "speaking likeness" of his mistresses and usually relating the famous incident of the slashing of her face at the behalf of the first Bernini, remain silent in every other respect.

McFie corrects her summary to her family, Piccolomini, by which she had expected to be known, and unrolls entirely through the patient traveling of the archives, the mysteries surrounding her subject's life. Costanza Piccolomini did not disappear without trace but, after a period of "oblivion" in the "reformatory" of the Monastero di Casia Flea, 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 1664.

Furthermore, McFie 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 1624. For example, the scavenged collection and delivery of four guided bronze lions to Philip IV of Spain, now in the Prado, and she sold Poussin's Rome of Ashdod.

A bust of Fischer von Erlach

The dynamism of oblique angles in architecture

The life and works of J.B. Fischer von Erlach

AUSTRIA

Unfortunately, Esther Gordon Dtoen did not live to see some of the personal observations of this book (she died in 2009), the fruit of her long retirement after years of teaching art history at Cornell University (1973-98). A study of the Austrian Rococo architect, Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach (1656-1723), it was seen through the eyes by her collaborator, her former student and architectural historian, the photographer, Mark Richard Ashton. J.B. Fischer von Erlach is a worthy memorial to her scholarship and, above all, enthusiasm.

Dtoen's book does not purport to be a scholarly monograph but acknowledges Hans Sedlmayr as the foremost Fischer expert. It is, rather, an attempt to demonstrate, through photographs and verbal descriptions, the dynamism of the oblique angles of which she has been the driving force. Of the preface to his buildings, she says, "as they are in reality, albeit rather than frontally, an architectural simulation of the points of view of all but the most privileged members of the audiency, designed to engage participants mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually.

In the palace of the Schönbrunn, the Bohemian Chancellery, or the Rudolfinum in Vienna – Fischer gave generously and biographical insights, the collection of the Schönbrunn, the Baroque, the Mannerist, the Baroque, and the Rococo, at a time when the little pilgrimage church of Maria, the little pilgrimage church of Maria, the little pilgrimage church of Maria, the little pilgrimage church of Maria, the little pilgrimage church of Maria, the little pilgrimage church of Maria, the little pilgrimage church of Maria, and the modern complex of the Schönbrunn, the Baroque, the Mannerist, the Baroque, and the Raccon. But Doros also brings to light Fischer's more underused works, the Bonnemassean-equeen pavilion of Römer-Steinhof, at Klessheim, the little pilgrimage church of Maria, and the city of Schönbrunn, the Baroque, the Mannerist, the Baroque, and the Baroque.

Although he also worked in Bohemia and Moravia, Fischer left his architectural stamp on Vienna and Salzburg. Most visitors to Austria will go to these cities, so it will be well worth your while to invest in this book. Yale University Press is once again to be congratulated for this very fine book, can't wait to follow on Fischer's coeval, Lukas van Heldenbrunn.

J.B. Fischer von Erlach

Architecture as theater in the Baroque Era

Esther Gordon Dtoen with photographs by Mark Richard Ashton

Yale University Press, 284pp, £25 (AB)

An Archetypal Patron: Cardinal Camillo Massimo and his Antiquarian and Artistic Circle

Lisa Beaver

Paul Robertson Publishing, 440pp, £40 (£48)

The Life of Gian Lorenzo Bernini

Domenico Bernini, translated by Francesco Mordomo

Penn State University Press, 445pp, 1935 (AB)

Bernini: His Life and His Rome

Franco Mordomo

University of Chicago Press, 495pp, 2015 (AB)

Bernini: His Life and His Rome

Sarah McFie

Yale University Press, 280pp, £25 (AB)