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BORROMINI AND MICHELANGELO: SOME PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS ON THE FACADE OF S. CARLINO

Frances Huemer

When Borromini arrived at St. Peter's c. 1620, he started by working on minor tasks instrumental in the completion of Maderno's building, and he was to continue to assist Maderno on increasingly more important projects until the latter's death in 1629.[1] By that time, he had become a highly trained professional, and thereafter he "assisted" Bernini until 1633. As an architect favored by Maderno, not only did he learn firsthand the problems confronting Maderno in assimilating the nave and facade into Michelangelo's building, but he had the extraordinary opportunity of studying the entire building in situ while he worked. There is no question that Borromini knew every detail of the architecture of St. Peter's from top to bottom. Thelen, in his monograph on the baldacchino, points out that the relatively high payments made to Borromini to retain his services for the work on the baldacchino indicate how well informed he was as far as the architecture of the basilica was concerned.[2] Certainly, we know now that Borromini's role in St. Peter's was much greater than previously thought. What young architect had the architecture of Bramante, Sangallo, and Michelangelo all around him to study? The radical innovations of Michelangelo must have stunned him. While others were denigrating Michelangelo's architecture, he saw its future possibilities. Later, Passeri tells us, "during his lunch and dinner breaks . . . he carefully drew many parts of the famous temple of St. Peter's, for, he said, he was enamored of the ingenious architecture of Michelangelo Buonarroti, and he made a special study of it."[3] Borromini writes, later, what is almost his credo:

> I would beg to recall to them [the readers] when I appear to diverge from common rules the saying of Michelangelo, the Prince of Architects, that he who follows others does not himself advance, and I should never have entered this profession with the sole aim of becoming a copyist. Nevertheless I know that the inventor of new things does not receive the fruit of his toil till late, as did Michelangelo himself, who, when he was reforming the design of the Great Basilica of St. Peter's was attacked for the novelty of his forms and ornament, which were censured by his rivals. These latter tried to deprive him of his post of Architect of St. Peter's, but in vain. Time has shown that all his work is worthy of admiration.[4]

We know that Borromini owned a treatise on architectural principles by Michelangelo and that he had a bust of the sixteenth-century architect in his house. The early drawings for St. Peter's are mainly concerned with commissions, but it was the drawings he made in his spare time that brought him to the attention of Maderno. The drawings

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that Borromini made after Michelangelo in St. Peter's, the Palazzo Farnese, and the Cappella Sforza have been analyzed by Thelen,[5] but they are just the tip of the iceberg. Any study of the influence of Michelangelo on Borromini has to begin with Thelen's discussions on the drawings, but one can be sure Borromini made drawings after every part of the building, and from that premise one should begin. Recently, Chandler Kirwin has extrapolated even further conclusions following Thelen's that there was an extended collaboration on the baldacchino and that the final solutions were worked out by Bernini and Borromini together.[6]

What St. Peter's looked like on the interior when he arrived we now have some idea from the anonymous painting in the James Lees-Milne Collection (1619–1626).[7] Standing there under the crossing was what looks like the provisionary altar of Paul V. The baldacchino had a square tasseled canopy supported by staves and four standing angels, and it had a certain fragility and elegance against the great crossing space. At the entrance to the west arm, the ciborium crossed the nave, with its ancient twisted columns and their associations with the Temple of Solomon. The *colonna santa* was still in the northeast pier. The great piers of the crossing had angled pilasters flanking two large and plain niches, one above the other, the upper one having a balcony set on consoles and a coat of arms. Standing in the crossing, Borromini could look down to the tribunes of the south, north, and west arms, where the exposed travertine of Michelangelo's vaults, which Vasari had praised as appearing to be made of one piece, formed a contrast with the gilded stucco barrel vault coffering of Sangallo, and the a/b/a wall system of Bramante. The crossing was filled with light coming from the terminals, and Borromini would not only have marveled at the close fitting of the travertine blocks in the vaults that Vasari had praised, but he would have been amazed at the way Michelangelo had transformed the given elements into an architecture both revolutionary and powerful, still devoid of the later ornamental stuccos which have hidden its beauty. One can still see something of this in the uniform coloring of the travertine in the west apse in the Lees-Milne painting. Millon and Smyth have helped us to visualize Michelangelo's architecture in the Cappella del Ré.[8] The three fundamental features that they point out—the billowing vault, the vertical continuity, and the skeletal structure—were all innovations that Borromini would use. Thelen understood this in talking about Borromini's part in the baldacchino.[9] There, the composite capitals were certainly derived from Michelangelo's use of them in the tribune over the *colonne gialle,* and they had probably been used in Maderno's lost drawing for the baldacchino since he had imitated them in two side chapels of the nave. Further, when Borromini made drawings with detailed numerical equations to investigate the effect of the baldacchino in the crossing space, and in order to judge the proportions of the high altar to the wall articulation of the crossing, he inserted a huge entablature block over each capital to raise and articulate the entablature so that the crowning could be conceived as a monumental framework zone. Thelen, and Brauer after him, saw this as coming from Michelangelo's tribune.[10] While others were denigrating Michelangelo's inventions, Borromini recognized their revolutionary significance.

It has often been said that the combina-

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tion of giant and small orders on the facade of S. Carlo alle Quattro Fontane goes back to Michelangelo's Palazzo dei Conservatori (Fig.1). Borromini, however, would have been more aware of the problems that Maderno had completing the facade of St. Peter's. There, Maderno had to assimilate Michelangelo's portico and elements of the Palazzo dei Conservatori to his own gradation of bays in relief, leading up to the 7/8 columns under the pediment.[11] Both Maderno and Borromini were conscious of the column as a north Italian element. Palladio had used smooth column shafts under a triangular pediment on the facade of S. Giorgio Maggiore but on very high bases and against a flat secondary system, and Sansovino and Palladio had used a double level of *paired* columns on their facades (S. Geminiano and Sta. Maria della Misericordia). Every textbook mentions the fact that the facade of S. Carlino is undulating, the first in Rome. To my mind, equally striking is the double level of nearly equal-in-height smooth-shafted columns, so that the whole looks, as often has been said, like a Hellenistic tomb or gateway. Borromini's facade is unique as far as the placement of the columns is concerned. They stand as sculptural elements arbitrarily dividing the bays, and they are not buried as they are in the early Filomarino altar. The only comparable example before Borromini is the center of one of Michelangelo's drawings for S. Lorenzo, where there are two equal stories of four columns without high bases (Casa Buonarroti, 47A, recto).

On the facade of S. Carlino, the smooth-shafted columns towering one level above the other not only become a great structuring element against the moving intervals of the wall, but they become a space-forming element. In his discussion of the principles of the column in Borromini, Raspe points out that the column, in addition to being a structural element limiting the space or an added ornament expressing the inherent harmonious proportion of the wall, has organic volume that has an effect on space.[12] By using the smooth-shafted columns, which have a rotating quality and no direction in themselves—Portoghesi called them "rotating pivots"—Borromini gave them direction by the diagonal placement of the capitals. Raspe observes that the column on the left is placed diagonally by its capital and base toward someone approaching from the crossing of the Quattro Fontane, that the neighboring bay bends toward the same beholder until the next juncture, where a second column's capital also turns toward the Quattro Fontane. The two on the right side are symmetrically and diagonally placed, only this time oriented to the spectator coming along the Strada Felice. Both pairs are bridged in the center by the curve of the wall. Raspe observes that nowhere else does Borromini make it so clear that all the movement of the wall originates from the forming power of the columns. Usually you have a bay in between a support, but in S. Carlino the columns are dividers of spaces supporting the flaring entablature. By the diagonal placement of their bases and capitals, they contact the surrounding space of the oncoming viewer.

The unusual diagonal placement of the columns came as the result of Borromini's observations in Michelangelo's Cappella Sforza in Sta. Maria Maggiore, where he made drawings. There, the smooth-shafted columns are projected diagonally into the center space, and that unique placement freed Borromini to use the columns as both a spatial and sculptural element. The Cappella Sforza, with its segmental transepts

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Fig. 1 Facade, S. Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, Rome. (Photo: Alinari)

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and sail vault, was another place where Borromini profited architecturally from the fundamental changes of Michelangelo's late style. The diagonal placement of the columns at S. Carlino and elsewhere, as in the portal of the Propaganda Fide, is a feature taken from Michelangelo. Further, Thelen points out that the capitals of the large columns of the facade of S. Carlino are based on the disposition of capital and entablature that Michelangelo favored in the Cappella Sforza and at St. Peter's, the type of capital begun on the Arch of Titus.[13] Borromini's drawing made in the Cappella Sforza is an exact, measured study of the base and elevation of Michelangelo's composite capital. So, too, his careful study of the composite capital of the *colonne gialle* in the central apsidiole of Michelangelo's tribune in St. Peter's (Thelen, C81).

Certainly, on the exterior of St. Peter's, the paired pilasters, with niches in between, and the alternating broad and narrow bays take over the formulation of the interior; but the Bramante system of an a/b/a rhythm against a flat wall, the so-called *"rhythmische travée,"* has been radically changed by Michelangelo.[14] On the rear facade of St. Peter's, the giant travertine pilasters, incorporating between them a narrow bay of three niches, are decisively paired by the heavy cropping in the entablature above them, and their projecting blocklike volume is further enhanced by the backing pilaster strips, which create a repetition of vertical elements. However, that regularity of the sequence of supports is broken by the alternating of broad and narrow bays and by the fact that two different systems appear in the rounded and squared endings. The supports are closed and rigid, the bays are open and movable. From certain views (Anderson 17594), they even seem to expand and contract. In between, the oblique angles created by Michelangelo to bridge these two endings contribute to a major dynamic transformation of the wall system, and it is one that is fundamental for Borromini. Where the squared or apsed endings meet the oblique angle, there is an "angled" (i.e., folded or bent) pilaster. Consequently, there is a compressed, accordianlike clustering of vertical elements since they, too, have backup pilasters, and the cropping adds strong vertical shadows. Nevertheless, Panofsky pointed out long ago that Michelangelo was never able to bind the dynamism of bodily masses with the notion of air- and light-filled space, that his modeling remained that of a compact wall mass.[15]

In addition to the oblique angles, there is a further horizontal continuity of the wall resulting from the banding pilasters, the simplicity of the entablature and its horizontal moldings, the attic, and the heavy base. Present-day published photographs do not show the twelve-foot base as it appears in the Dyson-Perrins drawing or on the medal of Gregory XIII. In aerial views, it is greatly diminished. The base is also a continuous horizontal element, clearly visible in Michelangelo's building, and Borromini includes it in his elevation drawing of St. Peter's (Thelen, C71). He saw the paired pilasters of St. Peter's as forming a powerful structural element in contrast to the powerful sculptural movement of the wall, a system that departed from Bramante. Borromini used that solution in the facade of S. Carlo. There, the smooth-shafted columns, despite the orientation of their capitals, become the stabilizing force against the moving intervals of the wall. One can draw a straight line through their

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centers. The facade of S. Carlino is the ultimate development of Michelangelo's revolutionary animation of the wall, but the conflicts of Michelangelo are dispelled by the pictorial carving of the details and by the movement: the wind-blown capitals, the hair of the angels blown by the wind, the rustling of palms, the richness of light and shade. However, in the fusion of architecture and sculpture, it parallels Michelangelo.

The second issue I would like to address regards the upper part of the facade. Portoghesi, Steinberg, and Blunt all object to the oval panel that is the crowning feature of the facade. It goes back to an article of 1932 by Gerald Wellesley, who found the oval painting not to his taste and somewhat cavalierly said so.[16] To be equitable, I quote all three:

> In the upper order, which Borrromini must certainly have planned in detail but perhaps did not define in its every part, the tension diminishes. Certainly the insertion of a cylindrical volume containing the major window is convincing in this context, and the design of the final cornice, that viewed in its concavity seems to stretch out over the observer below, is a felicitous one. But in the large medallion of the crowning and the decoration above the niches there is a lowering of tone and a marked heaviness attributable to the intervention of the architect's nephew Bernardo. [Portoghesi][17]

> The effectiveness of the wheelcross emblem in the wings of the upper facade is sadly diminished by the one detail of the facade which is certainly not of Borromini's design: the angel-borne oval at top center—an unimaginative Berninesque pastiche, as out of character as it is out of scale. [He then quotes Wellesley.] [Steinberg][18]

> Many critics have noted the weakness of the painted oval panel and the curious scroll-like feature over it which forms what should be the climax of the whole design, but it has never been pointed out that this element is directly taken from designs by Bernini, to be precise from the altars at Castel Gandolfo . . . and in the Fonseca Chapel at S. Lorenzo in Lucina. Bernardo (Castello) would have known both of these and might have used them, but it is inconceivable that Borromini would have borrowed a motive of this kind from his great and hated rival. [Blunt][19]

I do not think it likely that Bernardo Castello would change Borromini's design, particularly since we know that Borromini left a wax model of the facade.[20] Unlike Blunt, I find the design of the upper facade characteristic of Borromini. It is hard to believe that Antonio Raggi, who had a workshop with many assistants, was not in charge of the sculptural decoration after Borromini's death. Raggi was a countryman of Borromini and collaborated with him in S. Giovanni in Laterano, was a witness to the inventory of Borromini's estate, and, as Steinberg says, probably took over the model of the facade. He was obviously a man whom Borromini trusted. He was also a gifted sculptor, as the statue of San Carlo Borromeo and the angel herms attest. (They are in a style similar to Bernini's with

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a typical Correggesque sweetness.) Westin writes that the requirements of the contract for the statue of San Carlo "were very specific, indicating that a comprehensive plan for the decoration of the church facade existed."[21] Raggi had worked for twenty years under Bernini on the most important projects in Rome. He did the Danube for the Fountain of the Four Rivers in Piazza Navona, was in charge of the sculptural decoration of the Gesù, and worked with Bernini in St. Peter's, Sta. Maria del Popolo, S. Andrea al Quirinale, on the Ponte San Angelo, and at Castel Gandolfo. He may very well have suggested the angels under the oval that appear, as Blunt points out, at Castel Gandolfo and Sta. Maria del Popolo. They seem to be close to his style.[22] However, the scroll over the oval does not appear at Castel Gandolfo.

The formal elements at the apex of the facade are, in my view, by Borromini. A facade terminated by a balustrade is typical of Maderno (Sta. Susanna), and the "onion volute" of the pediment (Wittkower's term)[23] Borromini had used before, also in connection with a balustrade—on the rear facade of S. Ivo (Fig. 2a and b). More significantly, he used it in two early sketches for the monastery facade of S. Carlo alle Quattro Fontane (Alb. 200 and 201), where the chimneys profile the merlons of the Porta Pia; but instead of the Ionic volute (Fig. 4a), an onion volute is substituted (Figs. 3 and 4b). He retains the Medici *palla* as an indication that he was thinking of the Porta Pia, and about Michelangelo. In the early Filomarino altar, he works with a latitudinal oval beneath a pediment (Fig. 4c); in a facade drawing (Alb. 187), he uses a vertical oval (Fig. 4d); and the combination at S. Carlo (Fig. 4e) is the ultimate conclusion. Further, the fact that the oval, a form Borromini had exploited at S. Giovanni in Laterano, is tilted forward to make the painting more visible to the spectator on the street below—creating what Raspe called the "top heavy" facades of Borromini—has a tradition in Michelangelo and in Florentine sculpture, where sculpture high in niches was adjusted to the viewer below, or even in Brunelleschi's column architecture on the exedrae on the Duomo. It is exactly what Michelangelo did in his wooden model for the cornice of the Palazzo Farnese, much to the dismay of the *setta sangallesca*. The onion volute echoes beautifully the wings of the angels below and the same curving lines of the palms around the oval in the altars of the first story. The whole upper part fits with the flaring out of the main entablature, and the bold swinging balustrades match the two bases under the main columns. In its tilting before a balustrade, it repeats the oval tomb in S. Giovanni in Laterano of Pope Boniface VIII. In its exaggeration, it is reminiscent of the Palazzo Farnese cornice. Howard Hibbard says that "an optical point of view" differentiated Borromini from Maderno.[24] The scroll seems to be the ultimate form for a Borromini pediment, even a little reminiscent of the baldacchino crowning.

I am not sure at this point, but the connections with Michelangelo and the early dating of the column drawings, in St. Peter's and the Cappella Sforza, may support an early dating of the facade. It is foolish to assume that because the funds for the building were halted, Borromini would not have completed his drawings and models for the entire building, and it is likely that the scheme for the facade does go back to the 1630s.

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Fig. 2a Rear facade, S. Ivo della Sapienza, Rome. (Photo: Courtauld Institute of Art)

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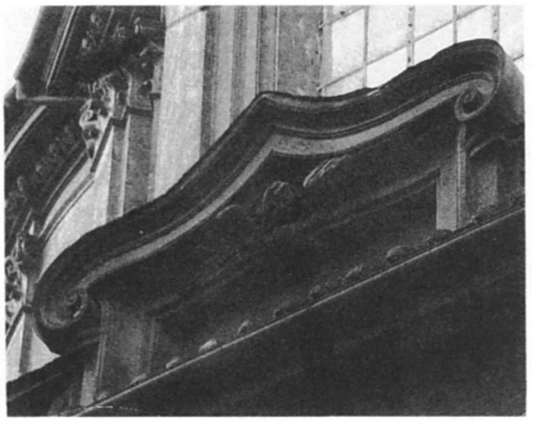

Fig. 2b Rear facade of S. Ivo della Sapienza, detail. (Photo: author)

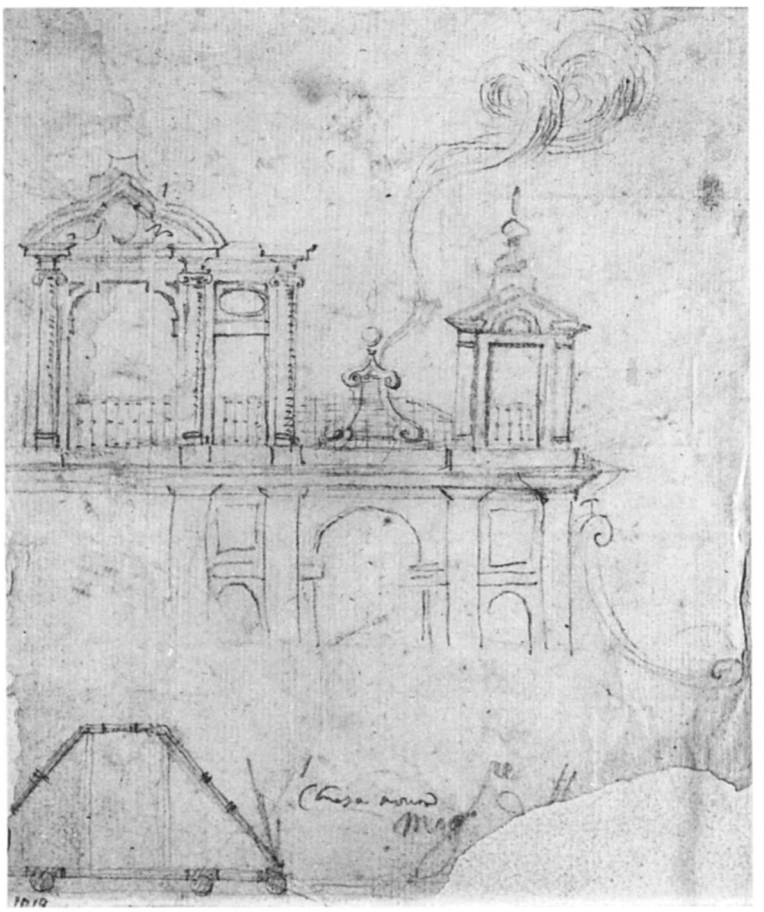

Fig. 3 Borromini, drawing of the chimneys of the monastery, S. Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, Rome. (Photo: Albertina)

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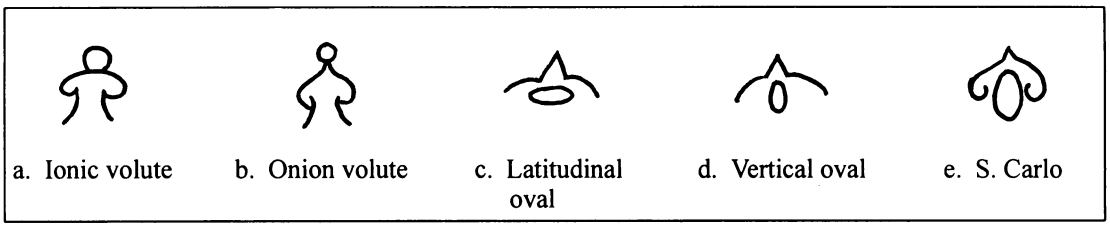

Fig. 4 Architectural elements, S. Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, Rome

NOTES

1. This brief experimental essay precedes what will be a series of essays on the relationship between Borromini and the late architecture of Michelangelo.

2. H. Thelen, *Zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Hochaltar-Architektur von St. Peter in Rom* (Berlin: 1967), p. 60.

3. J. Hess, *Die Kunstlerbiographien von Giovanni Battista Passeri* (Leipzig and Vienna: 1934), p. 360.

4. Borromini, *Opus Architectonicum* (1725; Gregg reprint, 1965), p. 5.

5. H. Thelen, *Francesco Borromini: Die Handzeichnungen,* 2 vols. (Graz: 1967), I, text volume, C1–C82.

6. Thelen, *Zur Entstehungsgeschichte,* p. 67, and now W. Chandler Kirwin, *Powers Matchless* (New York: 1998), who places the baldacchino in the context of the role of Urban VIII.

7. I am looking at the reproduction in *The Renaissance from Brunelleschi to Michelangelo*, ed. H. Millon (London: 1994), p. 40. The altar appears in a fresco of 1610, in a medal of Paul V of 1617–1618, and in an engraving by Giovanni Maggi of c. 1620. See L. Rice, *The Altars and Altarpieces of New St. Peter's* (Cambridge: 1997), Fig. 50, and F. Ackermann, "Berninis Umgestaltung des Innenraums von S. Maria del Popolo," *Römische Jahrbuch der Bibliotheca Hertziana* 31 (1996):398.

8. H. A. Millon and C. H. Smyth, "Michelangelo and St. Peter's: Observations on the Interior of the Apses," *Römische Jahrbuch* 16 (1976):137–206.

9. Thelen, *Zur Entstehungsgeschichte,* p. 67.

10. *Ibid.*, and H. Brauer, "H. Thelen, *Francesco Borromini, Die Handzeichnungen,*" *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 32 (1969):74–83. Brauer's important review has been ignored by American scholars.

11. For the connections between the facade of St. Peter's and the facade of S. Agnese, see M. Raspe, "Borromini und Sant'Agnese in Piazza Navona," *Römische Jahrbuch* 31 (1996):315–368.

12. M. Raspe, *Das Architektursystem Borrominis* (Munich: 1994), pp. 37 ff.

13. Thelen, *Borromini,* I, C82. In the text volume, p. 45, n. 5, he points out Borromini's fascination with Michelangelo's Cappella Sforza.

14. L. H. Heydenreich and W. Lotz, *Architecture in Italy, 1400–1600* (New York: Penguin, 1974), pp. 254 ff.

15. E. Panofsky, "Bemerkungen zu Dagobert Freys 'Michelangelostudien,'" *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst* 5 (1920–1921):39.

16. G. Wellesley, "Francesco Borromini," *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects* 19 (1932): 386.

17. P. Portoghesi, *The Rome of Borromini* (New York: 1968), p. 300.

18. L. Steinberg, *Borromini's San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane* (New York and London: 1977), p. 437.

19. A. Blunt, *Borromini* (Cambridge and London: 1979), p. 77.

20. *S. Carlino alle Quattro Fontane, Il Restauro della Facciata*, ed. N. C. Gammino (Rome: 1993), p. 62.

21. R. H. Westin, "Antonio Raggi" (Ph.D. diss., Penn State University, 1978), 11.

22. In regard to the two angels supporting the oval, the first contract with sculptors Giovanni and Cesare Doni speaks of "uno o piu angeli" (rif. 12), but on 4 April 1676 the artists are paid for a single statue by the Fathers of S. Carlo. The other angel, of slightly different dimensions, would be carried out by Francesco Fontana (rif. 13). See *San Carlino . . . , Il*

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Restauro della Facciata, p. 66. I do not know if the relationship between sculpture and Borromini's architecture has been treated, but the relationship between the Bernini-Raggi type of sculpture, with its particular style and sweetness, and Borromini's works presents a very interesting problem.

23. R. Wittkower, *Art and Architecture in Italy 1600–1750* (New York: Penguin, 1980), p. 205.

24. H. Hibbard, *Carlo Maderno* (London: A. Zwemmer, 1971), p. 90.

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