

Arne Karsten. *Bernini: Der Schöpfer des barocken Rom: Leben und Werk*. Munich: C. H. Beck, 2006. 272 pp. index. illus. map. chron. bibl. €24.90. ISBN: 3-406-54085-6.

Believe it or not, Arne Karsten's *Bernini: Der Schöpfer des barocken Rom* provides the first biography of the artist ever written in German. One of Karsten's main concerns is thus to introduce Bernini to a general audience, whose attention the Roman Baroque has largely escaped, due, for the most part, to the influential disdain held by the Protestant Jacob Burckhardt for the luscious splendour, pomp, and corruption at the papal courts. Yet rather than mitigating Burckhardt's verdict, Karsten fully embraces it, minus the former's moralistic overtones. He situates Bernini in the midst of the wasp's nest of vanities and power struggles at the papal court, not as a passive player but rather as a protagonist who knew full well how to operate the system, flatter patrons, and ruthlessly eliminate rivals. Karsten is thus less interested in the evolution of the artist's formal accomplishments than in his negotiation of his social circumstances: indeed, he does not even discuss all of

Bernini's masterworks. Instead, he focuses on spectacular cases of patronage and curious episodes of Bernini's life, with a sure sense for hidden irony and successful punchlines. Because Karsten is such a brilliant and witty narrator this makes for an immensely entertaining and pleasant read, which, hopefully, will achieve the author's overarching goal of facilitating a more openminded popular response to Bernini and the Roman Baroque in general.

Karsten, who has published extensively on Roman art and patronage in the seventeenth century and, together with his colleague Philipp Zitzlsperger, runs an important project on papal and cardinal tombs, has a great command of his material. Thus, despite the book's populist-broad approach, it is filled with highly original interpretations and buttressed by obviously substantial archival research. Karsten's originality is particularly evident in his reading of the well-known group of sculptures Bernini produced for Scipione Borghese in 1622–25. Shrewdly linking Bernini's stylistic innovations to the personal agenda of his first major patron, Karsten offers crucial insights into the instrumentalization of art in seventeenth-century Rome. Bernini's dramatic *Rape of Proserpina* (1622), for example, is shown not only to attempt to outdo the expressionless elegance of Giambologna's *Rape of a Sabine Woman* (which Karsten, however, does not discuss), but, as an allegory of the crudity of death, to serve as a reminder of the continuously changing power relations at the papal court. For Scipione Borghese commissioned the sculpture only after his uncle Pope Paul V's death: that is to say, at a time when his family's fortune came under serious threat from the hostile new pope, Gregory XV Ludovisi. According to Karsten, Scipione therefore gave Bernini's sculpture as a gift to Gregory XV in order to admonish the new pope not to push his hostility towards the family too far, for otherwise the latter's own family would run the risk of suffering similar problems after his death. The famous *Apollo and Daphne* from 1625, meanwhile, is read by Karsten as a bitter reminder to the old Scipione that all his attempts to remain at the center of power after his uncle's death were futile — for just as Apollo's object of desire transforms herself into a laurel tree just as he seems able to gain possession of her, so all of Scipione's intrigues and networking proved utterly unsuccessful in the face of unexpected political developments.

Karsten frames these and other readings of Bernini's work as a sculptor and architect (he almost completely brackets Bernini's paintings) with insightful characterizations of the historical circumstances in Rome and Europe at the time. While in most cases these contextualizations are necessary for Karsten's iconological interpretations, at times they become too detailed for a monograph of such limited dimensions. In order to gain an idea of the heated and complicated proceedings of conclaves, for example, one does not need to know that during the heat wave of the conclave of 1644 the cardinals seriously considered assembling in the Quirinale palace, especially since eventually they in fact decided against it. Similarly unsatisfying is Karsten's tendency towards generalizations and flashy phrasing. It never becomes entirely clear, for instance, what exactly he intends by

calling Bernini the “creator” of baroque Rome — as the title of the book apodictically suggests — for he never seriously discusses how Bernini’s works shaped the urban fabric of the city. Similarly, Karsten repeatedly characterizes Bernini’s formal accomplishments as “revolutionary” without ever fully explaining how this is meant — a bit of linguistic license that, especially in a study so little invested in stylistic comparisons, becomes simply empty hypertrophy.

This is not to say, however, that Karsten entirely dismisses formal concerns. On the contrary, he is at his best when tying together formal descriptions with larger sociopolitical matters. In this regard his discussion of the waving drapery and idealized physiognomy of the bust of Francesco I d’Este (1650/51) and of Louis XIV (1665) as visual expressions of the new concept of the absolute ruler floating above his subjects is exemplary. In these and many similar passages Karsten’s analysis is gripping and illuminating; it lets one hope that not only sensationalist esotericism in the vein of Dan Brown’s bestselling *The Da Vinci Code* can raise popular interest in the early modern period, but serious and ambitious scholarship as well.

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