

An study on the Bernini's  
theoretical concept on art and archi-  
tecture

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0.0. In this paper the theoretical concept of Gian Lorenzo Bernini, who was one of the greatest architects in the Italian baroque artists, will be clarified, based on the diary<sup>1)</sup> written by Chantelou who was the interpreter, good connoisseur in arts and intimate friend of Bernini, and the books written by Baldinucci<sup>2)</sup>, D. Bernini<sup>3)</sup> and others<sup>4)</sup>. In these books there found three words, "Disegno", "Concetto", and "Contrapposto", actually spoken by Bernini. They seem the key words when the theoretical concept of Bernini will be studied. The words stated by him are not so many, and not consistent ones. Still more they are rather on sculpture and painting than on architecture. But they suggest and indicate the fundamental concept and important method of his idea on architecture.

I.0. In general disegno means drawing, design, pattern, intention, plan, scheme, composition, but in Bernini it is thought that "Disegno" is used in special meanings. Therefore in next context Bernini's "Disegno" will be clarified one by one.

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I.I. Disegno-nature, practice.

While in France<sup>5)</sup>, Bernini was asked why some works of art please at first, but then considered for a while or reviewed next time they palls, while others impress little, but seem get better and better and at last fascinate us. He responded as this; the reason lies in good principles and in having a grounding in "Disegno". Lacking this, there remains only colour and ephemeral effects that please the eye but not the mind. "Disegno" is found only in the works executed with the exact observation of good rules and full intelligence and of knowledge. The north Italian painters are great, he said, but lacked "Disegno".

Baldinucci described as this; Bernini wanted his student to love that which was most beautiful in nature. He said that the whole point of art consisted in knowing, recognizing, and finding it. He therefore did not accept the thesis of those who stated that Michelangelo and other ancient masters of Greece and Rome had added a certain grace to their work which is not found in the natural world. Bernini said, nature knows how to give to every part its commensurate beauty, but one must know how to recognize it when the opportunity arises. In this he used to relate that in studying the Medici Venus he had at one time come to the same conclusion in observing her most beautiful gesture. But since that time having made profound studies of nature he had clearly observed exactly the same gesture on many occasions.

Meanwhile he said one must love that which was most beautiful in nature, he added the procedure to recognize it was not through nature. He used to say about the education of the young as this; if set to draw first from nature, the young would be ruined losing standpoint, for nature is almost always weak and insignificant <sup>6)</sup>. For this reason they should be instructed through drawing from the great works of antique in order to form a first idea of beauty that would serve them all their lives. In <sup>7)</sup> the latest work of Bernini, "Salvator Mundi", he proved the truth of his familiar axiom, that the artist with a truly strong foundation in drawing and design need fear no diminution of vitality, sensitivity or other good qualities in his work when he reaches old age: for thanks to this sureness in design, he is able to make up fully for those defects which tend to perify under the weight of years. This, he said, he had observed in other artists. He was educated by his father in this way, therefore, his education and his own practice confirm his faith in this method. In drawing he possessed in high measure skill. This is demonstrated by the works he executed in sculpture, painting and architecture and by the infinite number of his drawings of the human body. In these drawings one notes a marvelous symmetry, a great sense of majesty, and boldness of touch.

Drawing and the study of the antique were for Bernini the bases of art; from first to last he relied on ancient examples as the source of his inspiration. In some works this is apparent as in the Apollo or in the church at Ariccia, in his mature sculpture the antique source can be found by reconstructing his creative

process by means of preliminary drawing that happen to survive. And although the form of Bernini's architecture often seems less evolved from its model than sculpture, he changed its meaning. This alteration of meaning will be examined in the chapter of "Concetto".

His method of study is, as Portoghesi<sup>8)</sup> described, acquired through the alternation of "creation and imitation", of "action and contemplation. Bernini himself used to advise as this; *non abbandonarsi a disegnare e modellare senza mettersi, quasi nello stesso tempo, a lavorare sia di scultura che di pittura, alternando la creazione e l'imitazione o, per così dire, l'azione e la contemplazione, da cui deriva un grande e meraviglioso progresso.*

As above mentioned, for Bernini nature is deferent from art, the truth of nature is the always changing phenomenon, in this meaning it is weak and insignificant. But this phenomenon has the beautiful instance which can be insghted through the practice and contemplation. For him art consists in grasping the secret of nature.

## I.2. Disegno-imitation

In relation to imitation Bernini insisted that students mix production with imitation so as not to become servile copyists. His three precepts for success were; see the antiquity early and become accustomed to it; work hard, get good criticism. One should correct defects by their opposites.<sup>9)</sup>

He used to say that all the delight of our senses is in imitation. As an example of this he pointed out the great enjoyment that comes from seeing fine painting of a rancid and loathsome old woman who in the living and breathing flesh would nansat and offend us<sup>10)</sup>.

In his meaning of imitation we can see his attitude, so to say, re-creation of the substance immanent to reality or nature.

### I.3. Disegno-criticism

He was accustomed to praise the good and to remain silent about what was lacking, and if there was nothing to praise, to invent ways of speaking without committing himself. To a question why Bernini criticized only beautiful things, he replied that there was no need to criticize ugly things, but rather the blameworthy aspects of beautiful things, thus seeing the perfect by the reflection of the good on the defects<sup>11)</sup>.

We can see here that Bernini recognized how to see the truth of nature, and that "seeing" is recognizing, through the art of sculpture. Just as M. Ponty<sup>12)</sup> described about painters; they see what is lacking in nature so that nature becomes a tableau, then they see what is lacking in the tableau so that the tableau becomes the true tableau, Bernini pursued the secret of visibility, searching for the more perfect one in the beauty.

### I.4. Disegno-painters.

Baldinucci described as this; he placed the most famous painters in the following order; the first and most important he said was Raffaello whom he called a bottomless vessel that collected water from all the spring; that is to say Raffaello possessed the most perfect aspect of all the other together. After him he put Correggio, then Tiziano, and finally Annibale

Carracci. He gave first place of excellence among Raffaello's works to the room of Papa Paolo, that he painted and the room of Pace and the beautiful portrait of Bindo Altovini... Bernini said that Guido Reni had a style enriched by such fine concepts that his paintings delight not only skilled artists but also the uneducated <sup>13)</sup>.

At Paris when he was introduced the paintings of Nicola Poussin by Chantelou, he praised saying, "*Il Signor Poussin é un pittore che lavora di là* , "*O il grande favoleggiatore*",<sup>14)</sup> This means Poussin was a painter who worked based on idea and a painter of mythology. The common character of these painters above mentioned is that they relied on composition rather than colour, drew from antiquity and widely speaking, drew based on cerebral and rational composition rather than intuitive. Especially it is interesting that Bernini's most favorite painter was Raffaello who had evolved the Renaissance art into the ideal harmony through his own method of generalization, and had expressed the tendency to the baroque in his last work, "Trasfigurazione", in which the whole dynamic composition and the emotional expression of the group in the lower part enhanced by *chiaro-scuro* are synthesized in harmony.

#### I.5 Disegno-rule

Generally speaking Bernini was the first to attempt to unite architecture with sculpture and painting in such a way that together they make a harmonical whole. This he accomplished by removing all repugnant uniformity of poses, breaking up the poses sometimes without violating good rules although he

did not bind himself to the rules. His usual words on this subject were that those who do not go outside the rules never go beyond them, he thought, however that those who were not skilled in both painting and sculpture should not put themselves to that test but should remain rooted in the good precepts of art<sup>15)</sup>. He knew from the beginning that his strong point was sculpture. Thus he felt a great inclination toward painting, he never wished to devote himself in it.

By this attitude he could lead the art into the infinite possibility of the gradual liberality, and could acquire the moment of the absolute freedom in the allegorical interpretation of art, through the profound study of a point of contact between "seeing" and rules, or the boundry of art never tried before.

#### I.6. Disegno-architecture

Bernini had splended precepts concerning architecture; first of all he said the highest merit lay not in making beautiful and commodious building, but being able to make do with little, to make beautiful thing out of the inadequate and ill-adapted, to make use of a defect in such a way that if it had not existed one would have to invent<sup>16)</sup>. This is apparent in the works of Bernini for example, the coat of arms of Urbano VIII at the church of Aracoeli, the tomb of Alessandro VII, Scala Regia etc. Furthermore in this way his ingenuity made it possible that the classical Rome turned into baroque Rome in such a way inserting buildings and fountains in *piazza*.

Once to the opinion that the geometry is the foundation of architecture, he opposed, saying that the foundation is the eye for things cannot be seen

by itself but in relation with the other things near them<sup>17)</sup>.

In other time concerning to Michelangelo he said as this; Michelangelo was a great painter and sculpter, but above all a divine architect since architecture is based on "disegno" <sup>18)</sup>. For Bernini architecture consists in *semplicità* and *varietà*, *grandiosità* and *nobiltà*. These qualities can be acquired through "disegno". In this meaning "disegno" means the possibility of architecture.

#### I.7. Conclusion

Fragments of words stated by Bernini have been collected. In these words we can see the classical concepts of Alberti and Palladio, but the difference between the classicists and Bernini is seen in the meaning of "seeing", this is proved by his words that the foundation of art is in the beauty of nature, but the nature is almost always weak and insignificant. The contradiction, as he said, can be solved when the nature is seen or enjoyed through the filter which is acquired by the way of learning from the antiquity. Without this filter the relation between the nature and the art would become dangerous. This means that, as Argan <sup>19)</sup> said, in the territory of Idea the Baroque reactioned against the philosophy of Idea or Neo-Platonism, and returned historical empiricism as the revolution to the Aristotle's philosophy of experience. Bernini's concept about art attaching importance to the antiquity is also in this current. For him "disegno" means not only mere sketch, design and composition but also the profound spiritual meaning through the essence of "seeing".

## Reference and notes

- 1). M.de Chantelou; Journal de Voyage de Cav. Bernini en France, 1885; translated in italian by S. Bottani; Bernini in Francia, Roma ,1946.
- 2). F. Baldinucci; Vita del Cav. Gio. Lorenzo Bernino, Firenze, 1682; translated in english by R. Engass,1966.
- 3). D. Bernino; Vita del Cav. Gio, Lorenzo Bernino, Roma, 1713; he was the son of Bernini.
- 4). H. Hibbard; Bernini, England,1965  
M. & M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, Bernini-una gran introduzione al teatro del barocco, Roma, 1967
- 5). About this conversation, Hibbard said that it was done at the Accademy at Paris but in the diary of Chantelou on the 8th of June, it was done at the lodging of Bernini with il Nunzio.
- 6). This is also described in the diary of Chantelou; *mettere i giovani fin dal principio davanti al vero e come perderli, perche in sè il vero è inefficace e meschino, e se la loro immaginazione si riempie soltant di esso, mai i giovani potranno produrre qualcosa che abbia del bello e del grande; tanto l'uno che l' altro non si trovano infatti nel vero.*
- 7). Baldinucci; Vita.op. cit., P.66. Now "Salvatori Mundi" is lost.
- 8). P. Portoghesi, Roma Barocco, Rome, 1966.
- 9). Chantelou, op. cit. on the 5th of September; *Per ben riuscire nella scultura e nella pittura bisogna tenere ben ferme tre cose: vedere il bello fin dallo inizio e abitarvisi, lavorare molto e avere buoni consigli.*
- 10). Baldinucci, op. cit. P78.
- 11). Ibid, p76.
- 12). M.M.Ponty, L'œil et l'esprit, Paris, 1964, translated in japanese 1969.
- 13). Baldinucci, op. cit. p78-79.
- 14). Chantelou, op. cit. on the date of the 10th August, and several times about Poussin is described.
- 15). Baldinucci, op. cit. p74.
- 16). Ibid, op. cit., P.80.
- 17). Chantelou, op. cit., on the 25th of August: *uno dei più importante e di possedere un buon occhio per ben giudicare dei contrapposti, perché le cosenon appariscono soltanto come sono ma anche in rapporto a ciò che è loro vicino, rapporto che cambia la loro apparenza.*
- 18). Ibid,op.cit., on the 25th of June: *Michelangelo era un grande scultore e pittore ma soprattutto un divino architetto dal momento che l'architettura è tutta fondata sul disegno.*
- 19). G.C. Argan; The Europe of the Capitals.

ABSTRACT

In the age of Baroque we cannot find manuscripts or books concerning the theory of architecture. Fortunately there remains a few books and a diary about Gian Lorenzo Bernini, who was one of the greatest architects in the Baroque. From his words the theoretical concept can be traced and reconstructed. One of the key words of his is "Disegno". For Bernini it could be acquired through studying the antiquity and practice, so to say, through the alternation of "creation and imitation", of "action and contemplation". Further more "Disegno" connotes the profound spiritual meaning through the essence of "seeing".