

VISIBLE SPIRIT
THE ART OF
GIANLORENZO BERNINI

VOL. II

IRVING LAVIN



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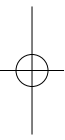
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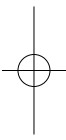
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XIX**The *Roma Alessandrina* of Richard Krautheimer**

I WANT to thank the organizers of this commemoration of Richard Krautheimer for inviting me to participate, and in particular to discuss the volume on the Rome of Alexander VII. Unbeknownst to them, the occasion closes a circle in my *vita krautheimeriana* that opened when I was a beginning graduate student in New York more than forty years ago. I longed to study with Krautheimer, whom I had never met but whose reputation for intellectual stimulation and personal warmth was already legendary. There was a serious risk of my becoming an architectural historian had my dream come true, but it was fated not to be. He did not come to teach at New York University while I was studying there, and when he did come, I had left. My wish was at least partially granted some fifteen years later, when I myself became a professor at the Institute of Fine Arts. At last it was possible for me to take a course with Krautheimer; which I did, along with many of the students in my own class, in the spring of 1968. What makes the present occasion so special is that the subject of the course we followed was none other than Baroque Architecture in Rome. The course contained the nuclei of many ideas that appear in the book he wrote twenty years later.

Of the many *obiter dicta* for which Krautheimer was famous one of the most recent seems particularly relevant to my assigned task of discussing his last major work of art historical scholarship, the book on *The Rome of Alexander VII* published in 1985. In his last years, when he was well into his nineties, he was fond of saying that he was too old to undertake any more small projects! The large project he had in mind was surely the three volume history of Rome, the first of which was devoted to the medieval city

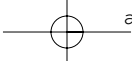


from Constantine to the Avignon captivity: *Rome: Profile of a City, 312–1308*, Princeton, 1981. The second volume would have dealt with Rome in the Renaissance, 1300–1560, the third with the period 1560–1700, *Roma Barocca*, or *Roma Moderna*, as contemporaries called it. Contemporaries, however, used the term Modern chiefly in the Petrarchan sense of postmedieval and in contrast to the ancient city, whereas Krautheimer saw in this period the emergence of features that characterized the transformation of the chaotic and squalid medieval town that remained at the end of volume I, into the grand new, modern city we know and — despite everything — love today.

With his usual sagacity and prescience, he ultimately struck a bargain with the inevitable and, renouncing the second volume altogether, he extracted from the third the architectural personality and ideas, realized and projected, of the crucial figure and instigator of the transformation, Pope Alexander VII (1655–1667). Alexander, of course, was by no means the first pope with a passion for building, nor was he the first to regard the city as a projection of himself and of his office. But whereas Sixtus V, for example, still conceived of the city in largely symbolic terms — the avenues connecting the patriarchal basilicas were seen as a starshaped pattern reflecting his family emblem, as well as the star of Bethlehem — Alexander's view was functional, in that the city and its monuments served an urgent, contemporary ideological and strategic purpose.

Alexander thus embodied the essence of what Krautheimer had to say in the final and culminating portion of his large project. And the volume aptly culminates Krautheimer's intellectual and scholarly life, not just in the chronological sense that it was his last great work, but in the substantive sense that it expressed his conception of the link between the past and the present, between the ancient and the modern, in terms of the physical history of the place where, more than any other, that link was forged. One might say that the book embodies the contemporary *relevance* of the historian's mission. Moreover, it recounts a story that only an architectural historian could tell, so that it might be said to fulfill the mission of Krautheimer's professional *métier*, as well.

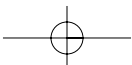
Perhaps the main contribution of the book is Krautheimer's perception of a comprehensive significance underlying the building mania that has always been regarded as Alexander's chief strength — or weakness, depending on whether one gives greater importance to its effect on the city or its effect on the papal treasury. Krautheimer realized, first of all, that Alexander

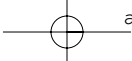


was not just a Maecenas in the popular sense of a vulgar Renaissance tyrant bent on a vulgar display of wealth and power, but a man of rare intelligence and refined taste who, moreover, followed the work personally, participating in the most minute details of planning with a passion that can only have been borne of an innate gift and cultivated interest. In a sense, I suspect that this last may have been one of the mainsprings of Krautheimer's own interest, arising from his study and ultimate publication of the passages dealing with art and artists from Alexander's personal diary.¹ This document is in itself utterly extraordinary: I am not aware of a comparable personal record of any previous pope. No less astonishing, however, is the amount of time and effort Alexander devoted to these matters. Bernini and Alexander were together constantly — consulting, discussing, planning, designing — often for long periods on a weekly basis, sometimes even more often. In this respect, too, Alexander was unprecedented and Krautheimer perceived that not only was the pope mad about architecture, but that his madness encompassed the whole of the city. Alexander's improvements were not only focused on the obvious, major places and monuments in the heart of Rome, but also extended to the outskirts, the *disabitato*, to use the term Krautheimer preferred, although it was often populated with the poor, the dispossessed and vagabond gypsies. I myself came to appreciate from the book that the *Cathedra Petri* was only the last stop on a physical and conceptual pilgrimage that began at the Porta del Popolo. The sharpness and comprehensiveness of Alexander's vision is attested in many subtle ways beyond, or underlying, the works themselves — the new accuracy and comprehensiveness of the maps of Alexander's Rome, the lists of his works compiled and portrayed in illustrated series of engravings. But perhaps there is no better index both to the intimacy and the comprehensiveness of Alexander's vision than the fact that he kept in his private chambers a model of the city. (It is interesting to speculate where Alexander's miniature Rome fits in the history of city models;² it was, I suppose, as complete and accurate as the maps of Alexander's Rome, and it is the first model I can recall

¹ Richard Krautheimer and R. S. B. Jones, 'The Diary of Alexander VII: Notes on Art, Artists and Buildings,' *Römisches Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, 15 (1975), pp. 199–233; supplemented by G. Morello, 'Bernini e i lavori a San Pietro nel diario di Alessandro VII,' in: *Bernini in Vaticano*, exhib. cat., Rome, 1981, pp. 321–340.

² See M. Aronberg Lavin, 'Representation of Urban Models in the Renaissance,' in: *The Renaissance from Brunelleschi to Michelangelo. The Representation of Architecture*, exhib. cat. ed. H. Millon and V. Magnago Lampugnani, Milan, 1994, pp. 674–678.

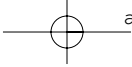




made for the purpose of urban planning; evidently, the pope not only thought about the city in a modern, comprehensive way, he also had a modern, comprehensive way of representing it — a new kind of ‘three-dimensional’ urban consciousness, one might say.)

As Alexander’s vision was global, so was Krautheimer’s, as he extends the normal purview of architectural history itself, and this in two senses. He is at pains to consider not only individual buildings but also to relate them to their contexts, their immediate surroundings as well as their interlocking connections with other works throughout the city, and even beyond. Moreover, architecture itself is no longer conceived in terms of permanent structures, but includes city squares and public spaces of all sorts — market places, theater sets and ephemeral spectacles, gardens, streets, and tree-lined allées — everything we tend to call, for want of a still more comprehensive term, the built environment. A vast panorama is deftly captured in what is, after all, a relatively brief text.

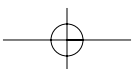
Considered thus, the book itself is a compromise: ‘profile’ would have been an even better title here than for the earlier volume, since the term alludes to specific personalities and suggests the thin line drawn in this work between the genres of building history and urban history. The ten chapters carry the reader through a sequence of ideas, beginning with the career and character of Alexander VII: his family, his education, his learning, his wit, his financial nonchalance, his love of architecture. The second chapter deals with what Krautheimer calls the urban substructure: the pope’s efforts to widen and straighten the city’s messy tangle of medieval ‘ways,’ partly to make them grand and beautiful, and partly to accommodate the growing traffic problems created by that monstrous newfangled conveyance, the horse-drawn coach; and his campaign to clean up the equally messy and unsightly markets that encumbered public spaces of high visibility, like the Forum and the Pantheon, by confining the vendors to less conspicuous locations and/or providing new, more efficient accommodations. Chapter III deals with the pope’s architects and some of their major projects. The central figure, of course, is Bernini, followed by Pietro da Cortona; Borromini, Krautheimer observes, was such a difficult character that Alexander wanted as little as possible to do with him! Chapter IV explores the contemporary notion of ‘Teatro,’ not in the narrow sense of a spectacle but in the large sense of any global, encompassing idea, especially as the term applies to churches and the spaces before and around them. Cortona’s Santa Maria della Pace, Bernini’s Sant’Andrea al Quirinale and St. Peter’s,



both the square and the Cathedra, are cases in point. Chapter V concerns 'Overall Planning and Opposition', primarily the careful control Alexander exercised, at vast expenditures of his own time and energy, over his projects and those of other patrons (who sometimes resisted) throughout the city. Chapter VI, called 'Prospects' deals with unrealized projects that give some idea of what Alexander might have achieved had he lived longer and had more money, but which also testify to the colossal scale of what he did manage to carry out. Chapter VII, called 'Roma antica and moderna,' deals with the treatment of the classical remains, showing that while ancient works could be treated cavalierly on occasion, the principle objective was to integrate them into the modern city so that they, too, could contribute *Ad Maiorem Gloriam Dei*. Chapter VIII is devoted to Piazza del Popolo as a deliberately theatrical, that is, emulating contemporary stage designs, reformation of the principal entrance to Rome from the North. The *piazza* was the prelude to a whole series of works intended to embellish and aggrandize the processional way through the city to St. Peter's and the Vatican. Chapter IX, 'The Reverse of the Medal,' is devoted to the seamier side of Rome, the part which the kind of audience Alexander had in view was not supposed to see. Alexander's Rome may have been beautiful, but for many people it was not a very nice place in which to live.

Together, these chapters amount to a recitation of the main types of monumental urban and architectural projects undertaken under Alexander's direct or indirect control. Although richly informative, awash with stimulating observations, and written in Krautheimer's inimitably lively informal style, they are essentially repetitions of the same theme — Alexander's passion for building and the grandeur of his ideas, as aided and abetted by his favorite artist-entrepreneur Bernini. From a formal point of view, the accent is on the perspective vista, the dramatic focus, and majestic scale. Except for Chapter IX, there is nothing about what we would today call the urban infrastructure — utilitarian projects (other than public markets), such as sewage and sanitation, ordinary housing and the like. When Alexander said, let nothing built in honor of the Virgin be anything but great, it matched Bernini's statement when he reached Paris to redesign the Louvre for Louis XIV let no one speak to me of anything small.³ And Krautheimer gives a corresponding vision of grand ideas on a grand scale

³ P. Fréart de Chantelou, *Journal du voyage du Cavalier Bernin en France*, ed. L. Lalanne, 1885, p. 15 (June 4th, 1665).



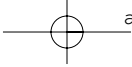
that defined Rome as a special place with a special role to play on the world stage. True to his subjects — Alexander VII, Bernini, and Rome — Krautheimer did not write microhistory!

If all this sounds very Baroque, the architecture of Krautheimer's book is itself rather Baroque. In fact, this sequence of *contrapposto*-like repetitions and variations on a dominant theme creates an increasing feeling of suspense as one wonders what, in the end, is the point. The point appears dramatically in the last chapter, 'City Planning and Politics: The Illustrious Foreigner,' where Krautheimer presents what he considered to be the guiding principle — the 'political' motivation — that lay behind Alexander's urban enterprises, which were concentrated primarily along the principle ceremonial route throughout the city, and intended primarily to impress the illustrious foreign visitor. Here it is important to bear in mind that in a 'Bibliographical Note' Krautheimer explicitly disclaims competence as a historian, declaring his dependence in such matters on von Pastor's *History of the Popes* and others standard works on the period.

And his political motivation turns out to be the standard one, familiar to all students of Italian Baroque: the victories of the Protestants and the rise in the industrial and mercantile power of the North, the establishment and hegemony over European affairs of the great national states, especially France, Spain and the Hapsburgs — all these factors had led to a drastic diminution in the real power of the church, in the face of which pope Alexander adopted what might be described as a policy of 'overcompensation,' seeking to aggrandize and embellish the physical power of the city to make up for the loss of political power. He sought to convince the world that the papacy remained a factor to be reckoned with, by transforming Rome into a great, modern city, or at least the appearance of one.⁴ This perception of a 'diplomatic' rationale underlying and motivating Alexander's architectural mania, may be Krautheimer's most original contribution in the book.

Paradoxically, then, the modern city is created not from any fundamental shift in attitude or values, but as an act of deception. At bottom, from a strictly art historical point of view, the ultimate argument of the book is rather conventional. The effect is to 'instrumentalize' the Baroque, which

⁴ The notion of Alexander's Rome as Roma Moderna, articulated in the publications of the period, stems from von Pastor, *The History of the Popes from the Close of the Middle Ages*, 40 vols., London, 1923–53, XXXI, p. 312.



becomes an art of propaganda and representation, rather than the expression of a new world view, which the idea of modernity would suggest. This conception of the Baroque as an artificial, bombastic, overcompensatory reaction to the challenge of Protestantism, an art of rhetoric, display, and theatricality — coincides with the equally conventional, absolutist conception of political consciousness in the seventeenth century.⁵ Alexander's was preeminently an urban renewal program conceived as 'of the elite, by the elite and for the elite.'

* * *

There was another side to the medal, however, partly, but only partly perceived by Krautheimer — a reverse, not less important, in my view, than the obverse. Alexander's new urbanism had what I should call a subversive, underground aspect, of which Krautheimer caught glimpses but the implications of which he did not fully perceive. The point begins with the fact that the urban population of Rome was, after all, a very powerful force, moral, economic and political. In this sense, Rome was like many other cities in Europe, where there was a growing consciousness of and concern for social problems that had no doubt long existed. Krautheimer is aware of this background to the extent that he devotes the next-to-last chapter, 'The Reverse of the Medal,' to a remarkable document written by an absolutely minor and otherwise insignificant administrative employee, one Lorenzo Pizzati from Pontremoli, in which he details the execrable conditions of everyday life in the city and the pitiable state of its underprivileged population, along with drastic and utopian suggestions for alleviating them. For Krautheimer the report simply reveals an underlying reality for which Alexander's urban program was a kind of cosmetic cover-up for the benefit of visiting dignitaries. However, the improvements were surely meant for the edification of the people of Rome, as well, and not only as embellishment. For example, more than once it is reported that an important function of the vast expenditures for the Piazza San Pietro was as a public work program to provide employment for the indigent, especially the unskilled.⁶

⁵ See on this point my introduction to Panofsky's essay 'What is Baroque?', in: I. Lavin ed., *Erwin Panofsky. Three Essays on Style*, Cambridge, MA, 1995.

⁶ See pp. 70, 80, 174; von Pastor, XXXI, p. 291. I think a good case could be made that this attitude originated with Bernini himself, who certainly promoted it. A primary source is a remarkable document prepared by Bernini in response to objections to his project, in

When it is said, rightly, that Alexander's program nearly ruined the papal finances, it was not merely a vanity and extravagance, it was also the result of what today would be called a program of social welfare and rehabilitation, the cost of which was ultimately beyond the reach of the economic system on which it was based. The proof of this point lies in the fact that Alexander was specifically opposed to outright gifts to the poor, not only because it engendered dependency on the dole but also because it was an indignity; instead, he favored helping the poor by providing work for which they could be paid and so retain their Christian pride.⁷

The great weight and force of the populace is portrayed in full force in a fundamental source that is overlooked in Krautheimer's *Roma Alessandrina*: an official document, deliberately compiled at the pope's behest. I refer to the apostolic visitations commanded by Alexander VII to all the churches and dioceses of Rome. Apostolic visits had a long history, to be sure, and earlier in the century Urban VIII had ordered one that fills three very substantial volumes. But none of these precedents even remotely approaches the scope, depth and systematic coverage of Alexander's effort to gather and organize information about what ultimately mattered, the spiritual conditions of the people of Rome. Alexander's apostolic visitation — which continued throughout his reign — has been described as the most comprehensive in the modern history of Rome.⁸

My reasons for emphasizing this reverse of the medal are two. I am not concerned to reveal the existence of this social substructure of the city and its problems in Alexander's Rome; they had existed for a long time. What is important for the notion of Alexander's modernity, and the scope and meaning of his vision for the city is that he was aware of their existence; he

which he eulogizes Alexander's efforts to deal with precisely the problems of homelessness and unemployment described by Lorenzo Pizzati (Bernini's statement was published by H. Brauer and R. Wittkower, *Die Zeichnungen des Gianlorenzo Bernini*, Berlin, 1931, p. 70, who date it 1659–60, whereas Krautheimer, p. 174, gives 1657–58; Pizzati's diatribe was composed 1656–59, as noted by Krautheimer, p. 191). This was also the basic philosophy of a major papal welfare program developed subsequently, with which Bernini was closely associated. In particular, Pizzati proposes establishing a hospice for the poor in the Lateran palace, a project for which Bernini was later reportedly engaged, and which was eventually actually carried out (I deal with these matters in a forthcoming essay, 'Bernini's Bust of the Savior and the Problem of the Homeless in Seventeenth-Century Rome').

⁷ This attitude is emphasized by Alexander's friend and biographer, the Jesuit Sforza Pallavicino, *Della vita di Alessandro VII*, 2 vols., Prato, 1839–40, II, pp. 177 f.

⁸ L. Forlani, 'Le visite apostoliche del cinque-seicento e la società religiosa di Roma,' *Ricerche per la storia religiosa di Roma*, 4 (1980), pp. 53–148, cf. p. 133.

perceived the conditions in the city, not only as a physical but also as a social and moral whole; he sought to grasp them by studying them carefully and in detail, and to do something about them in a conscious, and comprehensive way. I do not want to overstate my case. Alexander was a product of his age, not ours. He had his own failings, he failed to realize many of his projects, and many of the projects he did complete failed to achieve their purpose. But just as his urbanistic projects on the obverse of the medal bore fruit in the subsequent history of architecture and urban planning, so did his ideas on the reverse. Alexander was the first pope in modern times to make a serious effort to end the tradition of nepotism, and his effort was a direct inspiration for Innocent XI, who actually did finally break the tradition.⁹ And the social need for reform of which Alexander became explicitly aware, engendered a sequence of developments later in the century that established institutions and programs of social welfare whose history can be traced thereafter down to our own time. My point here is that the obverse and reverse belong to the same medal, after all. Alexander's collective awareness of his distinguished, aristocratic visitors from abroad was part and parcel with his equally collective awareness of his ordinary, often underprivileged subjects at home. In this sense, too, he helped transform Roma Antica into Roma Moderna.

My second, and final, point is to pay homage to *The Rome of Alexander VII* with the praise I think Krautheimer would have appreciated more than any other: 'Fa pensare.'

⁹ Alexander's effort, and ultimate failure, to break the tradition of nepotism, are described by von Pastor, XXXI, pp. 24 ff.