The Fabric of the *Bel Composto*:
Bernini's Draperies and the Redefinition of the Arts

by

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Class of 2012

An essay submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in Art History

Middletown, Connecticut

April, 2012
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the faculty of the Wesleyan University art history department for giving me the opportunity to pursue an honors essay under special circumstances. It has been the most rewarding semester of my Wesleyan career but it would not have been possible without your support.

My advisor Nadja Aksamija, your confidence in my abilities has been invaluable – without it this essay would not exist. Thank you for your encouragement, your meticulous attention to detail, and for having challenged me this past year to become a better thinker, researcher, and writer.

John Paoletti, for your generosity in meeting with me in the beginning stage of this project. Your comments helped me understand the expectations of an undergraduate research project and made me realize how far I had to and could go.

Iris Bork-Goldfield, I cannot express how much you have inspired me during my four years at Wesleyan. I admire you enormously – thank you for believing in me and going above and beyond your duties as professor. Vielen, vielen herzlichen Dank!

Esther Moran, for your help and cheerfulness through the series of bureaucratic difficulties I have encountered.

My family, for your infinite faith in me, your reassuring pep-talks at all hours of the day, and for supporting me in every endeavor I have ever pursued.

My friends and housemates, without you this process would have been miserably lonely. Cheers, and congrats to us all!
INTRODUCTION

Sculptures of bronze, marble, and stucco merge with each other and with the architecture of the choir into one almost visionary spectacle, and not only the borderline between the various units and media, but also the borderline between art and nature is thoroughly obliterated.¹

In his 1934 lecture titled “What is Baroque?” Erwin Panofsky highlighted a fundamental component not only of the Italian Baroque visual arts but also precisely of that aspect of Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s oeuvre that has been called the bel composto. The term, coined posthumously by the artist’s biographers Filippo Baldinucci and Domenico Bernini to describe a quality unique to Bernini’s works, refers to the beautiful composite whole that results from the conscious unification of painting, sculpture and architecture. Though the topic has been a subject of extensive art historical research, Panofsky’s quote about Bernini’s Cathedra Petri underscored an aspect of the bel composto that has been neglected in previous studies. Bernini went far beyond simply incorporating painting, sculpture and architecture into comprehensively designed spaces; he obfuscated the boundaries between them and along the way radically redefined the basic properties and function of each art.

Bernini trained and self-identified foremost as a sculptor², and it was through his experimentation in that field that the blurring of boundaries, the melding of mediums, and ambiguity of type becomes most apparent. A major impetus for Bernini’s reevaluation of artistic conventions, as they were detailed in Leon Battista

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² Filippo Baldinucci, The Life of Bernini, trans. Catherine Enggass with a forward by Robert Enggass (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1966), 74. Domenico Bernini also stated in the first chapter of his biography that his father’s identity as an artist was grounded in sculpture.
Alberti’s treatises of the fifteenth century, was the artist’s engagement with the *paragone* debates. The question of the relative superiority of painting or sculpture occupied a significant place in art theory during the century before Bernini’s birth. Sculpture was commonly deemed to have reached its apex in Michelangelo’s work. 3

Though Bernini never wrote expository texts on his works or art theory in general, like sixteenth-century predecessors Leonardo da Vinci and Benvenuto Cellini, he actively joined the debate by means of his own artistic production, which served as evidence for sculpture’s recaptured preeminent position. 4 On these grounds, this paper refutes the overwhelming majority of art historical scholarship that has not considered Bernini as an intellectual artist. 5

Bernini’s early works demonstrate the desire to adapt painterly techniques for sculptural purposes. His first marble sculpture of an adult religious figure, *The Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* from 1613 (fig. 1), provides an excellent example of how ideas regarding naturalism in painting influenced Bernini’s sculpture. In this essay, the term “naturalism” will refer to art that strives to avoid idealization or overt stylization in favor of a direct representation of an object or person from nature. 6

Naturalism is manifested in the *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* – and in many of Bernini’s other works – in the following ways: the novel attempt to portray immaterial flames in hard stone, the variation of texture and degree of polish to


5 Hibbard, *Bernini*, 50.

differentiate between objects and achieve verisimilitude, and the evocation of intense
emotion and pain achieved through the actual burn that Bernini inflicted upon himself
in order to empathize with and most realistically depict the torture of his name saint.\(^7\)
Thus, not only did Bernini aim to imitate painting but also life’s natural forms and
abstract feelings, too.

Bernini's interest in naturalism was grounded in a philosophy that everything
born from nature possessed beauty, and it was the artist's job to seek those qualities in
nature and reproduce them through his artistic medium. This philosophy received
harsh disapproval from art critics and historians, particularly those writing after
Bernini's death, who expected artists to portray ideal beauty as based on the works of
antiquity.\(^8\) Paradoxically, Bernini did spend enormous amounts of time studying the
ancient models in Rome and learning from revered artists such as Raphael and
Annibale Carracci who epitomized the classical style.\(^9\) Furthermore, though some of
Bernini's portrait busts were faithful to nature's unfortunate markers of old age and
appearance, others – especially those depicting absolute rulers such as Louis XIV –
were deliberately idealized to convey symbolic power.\(^10\) Though the artist's use of

\(^7\) Domenico Bernini, *The Life of Gian Lorenzo Bernini*, trans., introduction and commentary by Franco
Mormando (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 102-103. The episode was
described as follows: “In order to adequately reflect in the saint’s face the pain of his martyrdom and
the effect that the fire must have had on his own flesh, he places his own leg and bare thigh near the
burning coals. Thus coming to feel in himself the saint’s suffering, he then drew with pencil, before a
mirror, the painful contortions of his face and observed the various effects that the heat of the flame
had on his own flesh.” Domenico Bernini recounted how the artist’s father (Pietro Bernini) happened
to walk by at that moment and was so overwhelmed that he began to cry.

\(^8\) Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and


\(^10\) Charles Avery and David Finn, *Bernini: Genius of the Baroque* (Boston: Bulfinch, 1997), 244.
naturalism was not universal in all of his works, his interest in that style can be seen as fulfilling a need of the _bel composto_. As an artist, Bernini was indebted to the materials with which he created art, materials that often came directly from nature (such as marble from quarries). Through material, nature became a subject of Bernini's art. Bernini's artworks are by definition artificial because they are man-made, but they are nevertheless also natural by virtue of his employing natural materials and choosing a model of beauty based in nature's own forms. This theme will be addressed later in this essay in relation to his _Baldacchino_.

Naturalism was not the only characteristic of painting that Bernini reconceived as relevant to sculpture. While for Alberti painting was essentially a play of light, shadow and color, sculpture was culturally linked to white marble and thus inherently void of color. Even sculpture in bronze, _terracotta_, or precious metals was typically carried out in just one material, leaving little room for polychromatic experimentation. Bernini consequently set out to investigate how color, light, and shadow could also inform sculptural problems. One solution was to involve the space which sculptural works inhabited, thereby directly implementing and manipulating architecture and spatial principles. Bernini’s works thus took on another mutation and developed into painting-as-sculpture-as-architecture. Works such as _The Vision of the Emperor Constantine_ (fig. 2) installed in 1669 at the base of the Scala Regia in the

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Vatican Palace suggest how Bernini dealt with the painterly concerns of light and shadow in an architectural fashion. The artist strategically placed his statue under the natural light source – with Constantine’s head titled towards the rays – to both make reference to the narrative depicted and to heighten the emotional response of the viewer. Furthermore, he cleverly designed the starkly angular drapery to intensify the contrast between light and shadow and to allude to depth in a work that is deceptively a relief.

Though these types of formal inquiries pervaded much of Bernini’s oeuvre regardless of type, function, patron, and medium, this paper uses the artist’s engagement with sculpted drapery as a paradigm through which to investigate and expand the notion of the bel composto. To date, there has been no comprehensive examination of Bernini’s draperies, though they are featured abundantly, and indeed controversially, in his works. His treatment of fabric provided a poignant area of critique for art theorists and historians since Gian Pietro Bellori. The dominating classicist and positivist modes of art understanding and appreciation rejected Bernini as amoral and his works as a “licentious assault upon the senses.”

It was not until the late nineteenth century that the artist and the era that he came to epitomize have been reconsidered and re-legitimized. Modern scholarship, however, has primarily dealt with his drapery in its relation to the figure and has not attempted to understand its broader function.

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It is easy to see that this is insufficient when one considers, to isolate one example, *The Tomb of Pope Alexander VII*, completed in 1677 (fig. 3). Here, the drapery’s purpose cannot be understood simply as a visual representation of interior emotional states because the commodious jasper pall is not an article of clothing. In addition, the way in which it is sculpted drastically departs from the methods used for the sculpted fabric that clothes the pope and the four Virtues. It must be understood as part of the architecture; the color of the pall unifies it with the adjacent white-veined pink columns, its size ensconces the entire niche, and the sharp diagonals form a type of de-classicized, triangular pediment over the doorway below.

Bernini’s drapery needs to be analyzed under different terms and with a vocabulary that has yet to be articulated. The first section of this essay offers a brief historiography of scholarship on Bernini with a particular focus on how historians have thought and written about his translation of textiles into sculpture. The second section deals with how Bernini reinterpreted pictorial conventions to suit the needs of sculpture. Sculptural conventions are examined in the third section, which demonstrates how Bernini revolutionized that art form by renegotiating the use of materials. Finally, the last section looks specifically at how draperies function under painterly, sculptural, and architectural auspices, completing the *bel composto*. 
1. HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE BEL COMPOSTO AND BERNINI’S DRAPERY

The first documented use of the term *bel composto* comes from Filippo Baldinucci’s biography of Bernini entitled *Vita del Cavalier Gio. Lorenzo Bernini*. Though published two years after the artist’s death in 1682, recent scholarship has argued that it was actually modeled after the artist’s son Domenico Bernini’s biography, which was already underway in the 1670s.\(^\text{14}\) Despite the fact that Baldinucci’s text is clearly propagandistic with a goal of aggrandizing and securing the artist’s reputation (including an entire final chapter dedicated to defending the artist’s commonly perceived catastrophic Bell Towers project), it offers important insights into how the artist was perceived by his contemporaries. Furthermore, Baldinucci’s account is crucial for understanding the historiography of Bernini’s *bel composto*. Baldinucci writes:

> The opinion is widespread that Bernini was the first to attempt to unite architecture with sculpture and painting in such a manner that together they make a beautiful whole [*bel composto*]. 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 works on the subject were that those who do not sometimes go outside the rules never go beyond them.\(^\text{15}\)

There are a few points to be made about Baldinucci’s ideas. On the most basic level, it is significant that he, as well as Domenico Bernini, confined Bernini’s field of exploration to architecture, sculpture, and painting; this assertion reveals the biographers’ seemingly conservative and narrow understanding of the artist’s oeuvre.

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\(^{15}\) Baldinucci, *The Life of Bernini*, 74.
that will be addressed in this study. Second, the reader should take seriously the claim that Bernini was the first artist to undertake a totalizing artistic program. Domenico Bernini added that even in antiquity nothing of comparable ambition or scale had been attempted. Both biographers considered this innovation to be radical and a testament to Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s genius. Domenico Bernini commented, rather pretentiously, that the bel composto was not a style that should be, or could be, imitated by just any artist. These comments imply that, though there were certainly precedents to and influences for Bernini’s artistic choices in each medium, there existed no vocabulary prior to him to address the unification of the arts.

Though the bel composto seems to have been entirely Bernini’s invention, both Baldinucci and Domenico Bernini brought attention to the codified artistic rules that the artist worked within and then dismantled. His bel composto was thus directly related to the ways in which he transgressed artistic conventions. Therefore, one can deduce that Bernini intensively studied contemporary art theory; even if he had not read any of the written treatises on the subject, he is known to have devoted considerable time to contemplating famous ancient and contemporary works in which those theories concretely manifested themselves. According to Baldinucci’s text cited above, Bernini was able to distinguish “good rules” from ones that did not pertain to his interests or needs, a statement that alludes to the fact that the artist indeed

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17 Ibid, 117.

18 Baldinucci and Domenico Bernini both cited Bernini’s influences from specific artists. His favorite painters included Raphael, Annibale Carracci, Antonio da Correggio, Titian, and Guido Reni. Domenico Bernini asserted that during Bernini’s intensive three-year study of painting and architecture, he focused solely on the paintings by Raphael and the buildings from Roman antiquity.
formulated critical opinions on the individual arts and consequently fashioned his own theories on how the arts could intertwine. Interestingly, Domenico Bernini’s account gave a slightly different impression of Bernini’s methodology. He claimed that Gian Lorenzo “arrived at this state of perfection by means of indefatigable study and by sometimes departing from the rules without, nonetheless, ever violating them.” The subtle variation lies in the fact that, according to Domenico Bernini, bel composto was entirely in accordance with contemporary artistic conventions, while simultaneously expanding the possibilities of what art was and could be. I will return to this question of boundaries later in this essay.

Antiquarian and artist biographer Gian Pietro Bellori’s account Le vite de’ pittori, scultori, et architetti moderni was published in 1672. Contemporaneous with the biographies of Bernini, the introduction to this collection of the lives of most prominent artists of the era (from which Bernini was famously excluded due to divergent artistic tastes) was adapted from a lecture Bellori gave in 1664. Despite the fact that Bernini was not directly mentioned, Bellori clearly attacked the artist when he stated:

> When the Greeks instituted the norms and the best proportions for it, these, confirmed by the most educated ages and by a consensus and succession of learned men, became laws of a marvelous Idea and an ultimate beauty, which being unique to each species cannot be altered without being destroyed. Hence, regrettably, those who transform it with innovations deform it.

Like Baldinucci and Domenico Bernini, Bellori agreed upon a set of artistic principles that derived from antiquity. His emphasis on proportions in effect

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addressed the same idea as Baldinucci’s notion of “poses”; both alluded to systematized regulations of which proportion and arrangement of bodies was undoubtedly of prime importance. Interestingly, in designing his works Bernini was greatly concerned with correct proportions and believed that beauty was derived from the proper assimilation of various individual parts inspired from nature.\textsuperscript{21} The main point of dissent, however, was that for Bellori, the ancients had attained perfection; the implication was that the \textit{bel composto}, in its development, extension, and reinterpretation of the Greeks’ painterly, sculptural, and architectural models was inherently heinous. Bellori's critique that innovation deformed beauty applied not only to Bernini’s aesthetic but also his character, his fundamental nature; despite Bernini's devout belief in the Christian faith – especially in the second half of his life – he was later often seen as an egregious artist who made scandalous artworks.\textsuperscript{22} Bellori’s privileging of the classical ideal refused to acknowledge that naturalism in the arts was legitimate and blinded him to any similarities that he and Bernini shared.

\textsuperscript{21} Baldinucci, \textit{The Life of Bernini}, 77. Baldinucci discussed how, in talking to his students, Bernini would assert that beauty was in nature, and one must simply learn how to recognize it. Furthermore, the biographer stated that Bernini believed that the various parts of nature were not beautiful unto themselves, but only in their beautiful relationships to other parts.

\textsuperscript{22} A comparison can here be made to Caravaggio. Both artists had committed serious crimes during their lifetimes, though Bernini's violent episodes were not emphasized by his biographers. Baldinucci, for instance, entirely omitted the incident involving Bernini’s mistress, Costanza Bonarelli, in which Bernini ordered a servant to slash her face with a razor after Bernini caught her sleeping with his brother. Sohm’s essay touches on the ways in which Caravaggio’s biographers tried to interpret the artist’s works based on his – often mythologized – criminal reputation and threatening demeanor. On the subject of physiognomics Sohm writes: “[Physiognomics] thus functioned in the seicento as a semiotic system that structurally resembled style analysis: if inner realities of character are projected outwards –“all animate bodies are material portraits of their souls” – then the process must work in reverse, and the inner reality therefore can be adduced by examining external form.” Philip Sohm, “Caravaggio’s Death,” \textit{The Art Bulletin} 84 (2002): 453. Bernini’s works, often overtly sensual, were thus seen as reflections of his character. Sohm also draws parallels between Caravaggio’s naturalism and narcissism, a notion that may be applied to Bernini as well.
Bellori’s influence proved widespread, and a profound abhorrence for all things considered “baroque” came to dominate the art world for over a century to follow. Francesco Milizia was just one of the many to adhere to the view pioneered by Bellori and by the prominent thinkers such as Johann Joachim Winckelmann. In Milizia’s *Dictionary of the Fine Arts: Bernini*, published in 1787, the author rallied against the idea of the integration of the arts and spelled out specifically the transgressions that sculpture had committed against painting: the attempt to integrate color, the neglect of the primacy of the nude, and the privileged role of the intrigue of draperies.  

Though Milizia commented on Bernini’s drapery, he did so in its correlation to antiquity and apart from his unification of the arts.

Milizia continued his scathing critique:

He renounced [the masterpieces of antiquity] so completely, it is as if he had never seen them. He renounced that beautiful simplicity; indeed he trampled upon it, and instead embraced affectation. With his abundant talent, he impetuously scorned the laws established by the sage, ancient artists to devote himself entirely to his caprices.

It is significant that Milizia, unlike prior writers on the subject, cited “affectation” – the arousal of the emotions and of psychologies – as both integral to Bernini and antithetical to the classical ideal. Though the present study focuses primarily on formal characteristics of the *bel composto*, it is important to acknowledge that one intention of this procedure was indeed to involve the spectator through an unprecedented, visceral immediacy. Though Milizia negatively judged this aspect of Bernini’s work, others later argued for its potent role in meeting the shifting needs of

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the Church. Furthermore, by not using the term *bel composto*, Milizia, who in all likelihood was familiar with the concept, dismissed it as an incoherent, unrespectable, and dangerous theoretical proposition.

Almost a century later, art and cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt wrote a guide to Bernini’s Italian oeuvre. He was equally disparaging about Bernini’s totalizing tendencies, maintaining that each art held intrinsic properties that demanded specific forms and functions. After elaborating on the superiority of painting over sculpture in Bernini’s epoch, he singled out sculpture’s offensive osmosis of painterly principles. Burckhardt argued that, whereas painting was great because of its “naturalism of the forms and of the conception of events” and its “use of emotion at any price,”25 sculpture should have concerned itself solely with “the self-contained representation of the human figure according to fixed laws of equilibrium and contrast.”26 The anthropocentric attitude proposed by Burckhardt was in direct conflict with Bernini’s engagement with drapery. Significantly, Burckhardt recognized Bernini’s intellectual understanding of the antique, citing the artist’s appreciation of the *Pasquino* (a sculptural fragment showing the upper half of a figure, which dated from the third century BCE and was recovered in Rome in the fifteenth century) and settled upon the conclusion that Bernini had simply decided to take his art in a different, albeit unfortunate, direction.27


27 Ibid, 64-65.
In his analysis of Bernini’s art, Burckhardt spent an exaggerated amount of
time discussing precisely his treatment of draperies:

The drapery is altogether a truly deplorable side of this style. How Bernini, in Rome,
in the presence of the most beautiful draped statues of antiquity, went so astray
remains a riddle...he dealt with nothing but movemented, emotionally charged motifs
which in Antiquity are represented almost exclusively by nude figures...He
composes it, that is, entirely according to painterly principles and completely
relinquishes its noble, sculptural value in the elucidation of bodily motifs.28

This quote demonstrates Burckhardt’s utter disgust towards Bernini’s sculpted
textiles; the attack veered from academic language into that of colloquial gossip,
vividly evocating his lack of respect for Bernini’s style. Burckhardt shared many of
the same views as Bellori and Milizia in his dismisal of Bernini’s sculpture based on
its apparent rejection of antique motifs, though he astutely drew attention to yet
another facet of Bernini’s work: its movement. This is essential in analyzing how
Bernini composed his bel composto and will be explored later in this paper. In
attempting to animate his sculpture and make it dynamic, Bernini rebelled against the
static nature inherent in the medium of marble. By doing so, he implicitly crossed the
boundary between sculpture and its sister arts, conspicuously tipping into the realm of
life.

For all of his disapproval, Burckhardt did commend Bernini in some of his
efforts. This positive recognition of the artist was reflective of a new trend in art
history that took place mid-nineteenth century and reignited praise for Bernini’s
work. Stanislao Fraschetti was one scholar who inherited this interest in Bernini. He
completed a monograph of the artist in 1900, and in it offered wildly contradictory
claims to the artist’s positive and negative qualities. Fraschetti ascertained that

28 Ibid, 66.
Bernini’s *Apollo and Daphne, St. Bibiana,* and *St. Teresa* (fig. 4.1) all had exceptional merit, but felt that his *Tomb of Alexander VII* had reached the epitome of “baroque gaucherie”. On the subject of the tomb he claimed:

> Art for him no longer has rules or aesthetic perfection, but, in a fantastic accumulation of bizarre and disparate forms, it strives, torments itself to achieve effects never seen before, which more than soothing the eye with their harmony and stimulating thought, are to disturb with strange and coarse contrasts.”

Fraschetti suggested that, at certain stages in his career, Bernini was indeed successful in unifying disparate entities, but it was both the allegedly unbelievable and irregular individual parts and their disagreement with each other that affronted all conventions in his late work.

Interestingly, Fraschetti applauded the artist’s linear composition, harmonious decoration, and incorporation of movement. It seems as if his critique of the work rested upon Bernini’s *bel composto*, his perceived inability to create that desired beautiful whole, though the author did not identify his problem with the piece as such. Considering this view, it might seem strange that he appreciated the *St. Teresa*, a work overwhelmingly associated with Bernini’s successful unification of the arts, but it is worth noting that he cited only the central sculptural group, a small fraction of the elaborate Cornaro Chapel which Bernini designed in its entirety.

It was not until Rudolf Wittkower’s 1955 publication of the catalogue *Bernini: The Sculptor of the Roman Baroque* that another entire book was devoted solely to the artist. This contribution by the renowned art historian paved the way for further Bernini scholarship. Far from a comprehensive study of Bernini’s entire

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oeuvre, however, this publication focused on the artist’s sculptural body of work, of which the variety, as Wittkower claimed, was unparalleled.\textsuperscript{30} Though he did not directly treat the \textit{bel composto}, it is evident that the art historian could not discuss his sculpture without making reference to either painting or architecture. Wittkower’s discussion of the Cornaro Chapel, for instance, contains many of the themes that appear most prevalently in the art historian’s writings on Bernini: fragile borderlines between reality and illusion, the involvement of the spectator, and comparisons with the theater. Wittkower wrote:

Bernini created a supra-real world in which the transitions seem obliterated between real and imaginary space, past and present, phenomenal and actual existence, life and death. In both cases an emotionally stirring and often overwhelming chain of ‘true’ impressions induced the beholder to forget his everyday existence and to participate in the pictorial reality before his eyes. This urge to use all the means of illusion in the theatre as well as in religious imagery, to try and transport he individual into another reality, seems ultimately connected with the polarity between self-reliance and authority, reason and faith…\textsuperscript{31}

Wittkower here described the chapel as a “pictorial reality”, and in another section of his book asserted that it was conceived of as “one giant picture”, concluding that the sculptural and architectural elements may as well have been painted.\textsuperscript{32} While this framework offered valuable information about how Bernini theorized and manipulated light, it simplified and homogenized his style and techniques in a way that did not do justice to the enormous complexity of his interrelation of the arts. Wittkower’s description rendered the chapel flat and uniform and did not account for

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\textsuperscript{31} Ibid, 160.
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\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, 193.
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the impressive diversity of materials and spatial depths, as well as the active dialogue between the various parts.

Wittkower consistently discussed the theater, a field that Bernini was also active in as a stage designer, playwright, director, and occasionally an actor. The theater offers a tempting analogy to Bernini’s *bel composto*, and art historians have often connected the two. There certainly exist some commonalities between the theater and the visual arts, such as the spatiality of the stage and the chapel, the dynamic and participatory elements of both actor and viewer, the emotional responses provoked, and the involvement of multiple forms and processes of communication and meaning. However, the analogy ceases to be sufficient when one considers the temporal limitations of a theatre piece. Whereas a play has a definite beginning and end, Bernini’s works are eternally frozen in their performative liveliness, fluid in their “supra-real” visuality.

The theater aside, there is another way in which the aforementioned citation from Wittkower elucidated the concept of the *bel composto*. The art historian was correct to emphasize Bernini’s technique of utilizing visual illusions to deceive the audience and arouse their emotions. In the same way that Bernini consciously blurred the boundaries between the supposedly concrete art forms of painting, sculpture, architecture, and nature, he also confounded the basic understandings of “real space” versus the space designated as art or monument. Though Wittkower did not attribute the success of these techniques to the *bel composto*, they are surely related.

Wittkower organized his text chronologically and thematically and included a final chapter that situated Bernini within his time period, explained the workings of
his studio, and touched on his theory. Wittkower explicitly stated that Bernini was not a theorist, though he reinstituted sculpture as the superior art form, a trend that Wittkower argued lasted for fifty years after Bernini's death.\(^{33}\) He wrote:

> Decorum, which Alberti and Leonardo had defined as the appropriateness of age, sex, type, expression, gesture and dress to the character of the figure represented, dictates Bernini’s approach to the subject whether a mythological group, a saint like *St. Bibiana* or the portrait bust of the French King.\(^{34}\)

The relationship between Bernini and the two Renaissance theorists and painters will be elaborated shortly, and it will be shown that, in terms of drapery, Bernini in fact renounced their principles entirely. While Alberti and Leonardo certainly informed Bernini of certain principles, Wittkower’s incessant desire to draw causal links between them cannot be justified in all instances.

Not until Irving Lavin’s monumental study *Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts* from 1980 did an art historian attempt to comprehensively write about Bernini’s *bel composto*. The way in which Lavin approached the intermingling of the arts is instrumental for the present study. His book is divided into three main parts: an amalgamated exploration of works primarily carried out by the artist between 1640-1647, an complex chapter dedicated entirely to the Cornaro Chapel (fig. 4), and a concluding section thematizing Bernini’s work in the theater. Lavin believed that Bernini conceived of the unification of painting, sculpture, and architecture solely based on their visual and physical properties.\(^{35}\) Though more recent scholars have

\(^{33}\) Ibid, 190.

\(^{34}\) Ibid, 194.

found evidence for iconographical, biographical, and literary components of Bernini's *bel composto*, Lavin's emphasis on their formal aspects has influenced the methodological approach of the present study. For example, in citing Bernini’s comment that his greatest success was his ability to metaphorically convert stone to wax, Lavin pointed out that Bernini’s sculpture was in fact a novel innovation that effectively created a completely new medium.\[^{36}\] He later detailed how architecture and sculpture, in the Cornaro Chapel, function co-dependently to convey a singular, coherent meaning. These are only two of many examples in which Lavin discussed Bernini’s transgression of the traditionally delineated artistic boundaries.

What lacks in Lavin’s study is a consideration of the drapery as an integral part of Bernini’s unification of the arts. Lavin discussed drapery as a mnemonic device (in the case of D’Aste epitaphs\[^{37}\]) as a trick to distract from the incompleteness of a portrait bust (in Cardinal Gregorio Naro’s tomb\[^{38}\]) and as a function of narrative. With regards to *St. Teresa*, he wrote: “The arrangement of the drapery, therefore, is not determined simply by the actions of the figures, nor does it merely heighten the drama of the event. It is a specific embodiment of the quintessence of Teresa’s experience.”\[^{39}\] Though that may be true, Lavin curiously neglected to discuss the polychromatic banners under the Cornaro family busts (figs. 4.2-4.3), for example, as well as all other instances of drapery functioning apart from the human figure. The present study thus takes Lavin’s arguments to their next logical level. His exclusion

\[^{36}\] Ibid, 12.

\[^{37}\] Ibid, 66.

\[^{38}\] Ibid, 68.

\[^{39}\] Ibid, 111.
of works from years not pertaining to his study also begs for reconsideration regarding the bel composto. Lavin’s main goal was to use early chapels to explain the unification of the arts in the Cornaro Chapel. He failed to recognize Bernini’s broader objective in manipulating sculpted drapery that spanned nearly his entire career.

Fifteen years after Lavin, Giovanni Careri published his ambitious book *Bernini: Flights of Love, the Art of Adoration*, which tackled the notion of the bel composto in a relatively narrow manner. Careri has argued that each ensemble functions under a unique set of rules and thus must be analyzed individually.\(^4^0\) He took under serious consideration the specific devotional requirements of each work, while simultaneously minimizing the importance of iconography. While this attention to precise detail offered profound insights into the three works that he investigated, there are certain generalizations that can be made about Bernini’s use of materials and the distinct way in which drapery served as an important connecting agent between the different components.

The three works that Careri discussed are the Fonesca Chapel, the Albertoni Chapel (fig. 5), and the altar of Sant’ Andrea al Quirinale. He employed the paradigm of montage, a term borrowed from the language of film. This theoretical framework privileged the spectator’s essential role in deriving meaning from the works, though in a very different way than Wittkower's approach, which resulted in an emphasis on Bernini's engagement with movement. Careri stated:

Bernini understands that the linking together of several arts in a composto is successful only when the uniqueness of each one has been preserved in the montage and only when the shift from one to another has been calculated according to the

cognitive and pathetic effects that the artist wishes to create in the spectator. The *bel composto*, like Eisenstein’s theory of montage but using special and always diverse procedures, is an aesthetic operation in which the heterogeneous multiplicity of the ensemble is taken apart and recomposed by the viewer himself.\(^{41}\)

I fundamentally disagree with the heterogeneity of the arts that Careri proposes as a main tenet of Bernini’s *bel composto*. Conventional artistic principles of each art were consistently reintroduced, altered, conformed, and ignored throughout Bernini’s career. As detailed in the introduction, sculpture was both designed using painterly techniques and it functioned architecturally. Furthermore, what Careri later described as the “leaps and shifts” required of the viewer to process Bernini’s ensembles does not allow a role for the sweeping draperies – particularly those sculpted from colored marbles – that are not isolated in singular components but are rather overarching, ubiquitous features. Though the entirety of Bernini’s chapel designs cannot be taken in all at once, there are several unifying elements that are conveniently and conspicuously strewn throughout.

The most recent piece of scholarship devoted to the *bel composto* is an essay by Martin Delbeke titled “Gianlorenzo Bernini’s *BEL COMPOSTO*: The Unification of Life and Work in Biography and Historiography” from the 2006 volume *Bernini’s Biographies: Critical Essays*. Delbeke critiqued the way in which art historians have dismissed the differences between Baldinucci’s and Domenico Bernini’s definitions of the *bel composto* and have indiscriminately applied the term to epitomize Bernini’s theory of art instead.\(^{42}\) Through a close textual analysis, Delbeke has demonstrated

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\(^{41}\) Careri, *Flights of Love*, 5.

that the concept is threaded throughout the entire biographies, in different ways by the
two writers, for example in their descriptions of imitation and genius. Delbeke has
therefore drawn the conclusion that it is reductive and inaccurate to employ the term
without considering the entire biographical context.\textsuperscript{43} He summarized the difference
between the two conceptions of the \textit{bel composto} as follows:

For Domenico, Bernini masters the three visual arts (like any other art of science) by
leaving behind the rules; for Baldinucci, Bernini can leave the rules behind because
he masters the three arts. In Domenico, this capacity to break the rules is rooted in an
innate ability of Bernini’s that transcends the specificity of all human arti; in
Baldinucci, Bernini’s equaling of Michelangelo provides him with the license to
transcend the specific rules of the three visual arts and unite them in one work.\textsuperscript{44}

By problematizing the historical construction of the term and its subsequent
exploitation by scholars, Delbeke has expanded the notion of the \textit{bel composto}
behind it simply meaning the unification of the arts. His research was rigorous and
convincing, but he divorced the concept entirely from the works themselves. The
term, including all of its complexities and presuppositions, still describes an intrinsic
quality found in Bernini’s oeuvre. This study focuses on expanding the meaning of
the concept by way of analyzing their material, formal ambiguities. In a sense, then, I
am appropriating a term utilized by art historians and molding it to fit the specific
needs of this project, thus exposing it anew.

In the past couple of decades there has been a tendency in scholarship to turn
away from the theme of Bernini’s unification of the arts in favor of concentrating on
individual artworks, particularly on his architecture. In 1997 Tod Marder compiled
extensive documentation on the artist’s design for the Scala Regia at the Vatican; in

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, 265.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, 264.
the same year Chandler Kirwin published his impressive study on the *Baldacchino* of St. Peter's. In 2002, Sarah Mcphee wrote a book on what was generally considered to be one of Bernini’s only artistic disasters – his Bell Towers. These three studies have investigated the overtly political aspects of Bernini’s art, specifically how much and what kind of influences his papal patrons exercised over the artist's artistic choices.
2. EARLY IMITATION: PAINTERLY PRINCIPLES AND INFLUENCES

In order to ascertain to what degree and in what manner Bernini transgressed codified artistic conventions, the original sources for those conventions must be considered first. Aside from ancient texts, and of course the monuments of antiquity themselves, the most relevant authors for the Renaissance and Baroque artist would have been Leon Battista Alberti and Leonardo da Vinci. Though written well before Bernini’s own era, their texts were the standard reference points throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In addition to being theorists, both Alberti and Leonardo practiced painting, a significant fact given that both of them argued for painting’s supremacy in the visual arts.

Not only did Alberti argue for painting’s superiority, but he claimed that all of the arts, from the most humble to the most grandiose, borrowed from the principles of painting, such that “any beautiful thing there is in objects [he claims] is taken from painting.”\(^45\) This argument in part stemmed from contemporary observations about how vision functioned; Alberti cited Aristotle and Plato’s belief that an object could not be processed by the eye if not in light and color.\(^46\) For these authors, black and white were not true colors, but rather the modifiers with which – through a process of mixing – every other color was created.\(^47\) White signified light, black signified shadows, and everything else was a signifier of substance and mass.\(^48\) The addition of colors, however, was the last step in creating a painting. The first was to ahead of


\(^{46}\) Ibid, 31.

\(^{47}\) Ibid, 31.

\(^{48}\) Ibid, 68.
time thoroughly prepare the work to be fabricated, to plan it theoretically before creating it manually.\textsuperscript{49} Next, the artist was to observe the object he chose to depict and, delineating the space that the object occupies, draw its profile.\textsuperscript{50} Finally, he was instructed to determine how best to put the objects depicted in relation to one another, i.e. compose the unity of the painting.\textsuperscript{51} Only then did the colors of the surfaces enter the formula by means of light reception.\textsuperscript{52}

Also extremely significant for Alberti was that every part accord with its true nature. Thus, living things were supposed to be depicted as if they are alive and dead things appear lifeless.\textsuperscript{53} Furthermore, each figure’s body, posture, dress, expression, and action should correlate with that figure’s age, gender, and type.\textsuperscript{54} To accentuate the inner qualities of a figure, to reveal its character, Alberti pointed out that the painter should do this by manipulating the physical body.\textsuperscript{55} On drapery, he wrote:

> And let one apply this very thing in the folds of fabrics in a way that, as from the trunk of a tree the branches spread in all direction, so from a fold the [other] folds spring according to their own ramifications. And in these, let all the same movements develop also in such a way that there is not any extension of fabric in which there are not almost all the same movements. But, let motions be – what, most of the times, I advise – temperate, practicable, and let them show grace rather than the admiration of labor.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid, 81.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid, 48.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid, 56.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid, 50.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid, 57-58.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid, 59.
\textsuperscript{55} Alberti, \textit{On Painting}, 64.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, 67.
The ultimate objective of painting was to depict ideal beauty such that it captivated the eyes and hearts of the observers and made “hearts palpitate.”\textsuperscript{57} Draperies’ role in that endeavor was to be minimal, descriptive at most. Although Alberti cautioned against uniformity of shape in draperies, he also advised against designing draperies that looked unnatural, that is as if they had required extensive energy to fabricate.

Alberti treated the subject of sculpture in another text in which he argued that it was the easier and more secure of the arts because it required less intellectual involvement on the part of the artist.\textsuperscript{58} Much shorter and seemingly incomplete, this treatise focused mainly on the mathematical dimensions of the art, explaining in detail how to accomplish \textit{dimensio} – literally the precise dimensions of objects\textsuperscript{59} – and \textit{finito}, the means by which curved lines, angles, and concave and convex structures were measured\textsuperscript{60}. For Alberti, the goal of sculpture was to achieve verisimilitude to objects found in nature.\textsuperscript{61}

Bernini certainly succeeded in mesmerizing his audience with the emotional effectiveness of his works,\textsuperscript{62} but he did not adhere exactly to Alberti’s prescribed

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid, 74-75.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, 80. Alberti wrote: “Or, if it is useful to imitate works of others because objects that must be displayed in front of oneself assure an appearance firmer than living creatures, I prefer that you plan to imitate an object poorly sculpted rather than excellently depicted. In fact, from depicted things we accustom hands to realize only a certain resemblance. Whereas from sculpted ones we learn how to deduce both resemblance and true illumination...furthermore, it will perhaps be useful to exercise modeling as much as [practicing] with the brush. Sculpture, certainly, is more secure and easier than painting.”


\textsuperscript{60} Ibid, 129.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid, 121.

\textsuperscript{62} Domenico Bernini commented extensively on the honors his father received from local neighborhoods on the road to Paris to work for King Louis XIV. He wrote: Bernini’s brief stops at
rules of painting or of sculpture. It is obvious that for Bernini sculpture was far more than simply a means to recreate nature. It should be noted that Alberti’s definition of nature changed between the two texts: in *De pictura* (1435), the artist uses nature as a template from which to create the ideal; in *De sculptura* (1462), he blindly imitates nature’s forms. This difference can be attributed the fact that the later text was in all likelihood only a draft, the rough beginnings of a treatise that had yet to be fully developed. This discrepancy could also relate to the perceived intellectual capabilities of the painter. Distinguished from the other arts as not being produced by artisans, painting was the occupation reserved for the most exquisite genius. Bernini was certainly described by his biographers as possessing a genius mind capable of succeeding in any discipline, and it is evidenced from his works that he did not confine himself to Alberti’s reductive and biased notions of the sculpture’s potential.

Aristotle and Plato’s claim that objects could only be perceived under light and color reached far beyond the painterly sphere of relevance; it was clearly a major tenet for artists working in any medium. Whereas sculptors would not have had to use color and light to give the impression of volume or mass (given that sculpture is by its very nature endowed with the gift of corporeality), Alberti’s insinuation that black and white connoted immateriality would have seemed antithetical to the sculptural

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64 Ibid, 48.

agenda. It is possible that Bernini perceived this paradox and made use of color as a way to emphasize the mass of an object, to make it more present and dominant in an architectural space. In addition to emphasizing the mass of an object, adding color to an otherwise untreated surface could also have the effect of making that object come to life. A perfect example of how Bernini incorporated this technique is in his meticulous attention given to the irises of the eye. In ancient times the eye was often left untouched by the chisel and then occasionally painted over. But by granting the eye a variation of depth (between the iris, pupil, and whites) Bernini made it catch the light to varying degrees and thus give off the impression of color. For example, Pope Gregory XV’s eyes appear to shimmer light blue because of the dark recess of the pupil whose contrasting depth gives rise to a change in color perception (fig. 6).

Though Bernini abided by some of Alberti’s conventions of painting (albeit by breaking the rules of sculpture), his treatment of draperies directly conflicted with them. Even in his Apollo and Daphne (1622-1624), an early masterpiece that is generally considered to be rather classicizing in form, draperies and hair are flung and whipped around in patterns that are not naturalistic or even intuitive based on the narrative, nor are they temperate or practicable (figs. 7-7.1). Daphne’s hair extends outwards and upwards, exaggerating the action inherent in the story and mimicking the direction of the growth of leaves and branches from her fingertips. Similarly, Apollo’s drapery barely clothes him; it takes on a life of its own, forming its own curvaceous shape beyond the body of the figure. It snakes its way around the young

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god and whirls behind him almost horizontally. These features do more than illustrate Ovid’s fantastical account; in their provocative movement, they become quasi-independent elements that evoke their own sense of emotive vivacity.

Leonardo would have been especially disturbed here by Bernini’s portrayal of draperies. He had taken Alberti’s description of ideal draperies even further, asserting that their main function was to highlight the human form they enveloped. An example of what Leonardo would have approved of is certainly the *Augustus of Primaporta* (ca. 10 CE), a Roman copy of a bronze sculpture from ca. 20 BCE (fig. 8). Here, the emperor’s abdominal and chest muscles are clearly visible through the breastplate, and the piece of drapery slung across his body conforms to it and hangs gracefully from his arm. According to Leonardo, modern painters were guilty of ignoring such good principles of drapery:

> A fault of many painters, who, enamored of the quantity and variety of folds, have encumbered their figures, forgetting the intention of clothes, which is to dress and surround the parts gracefully wherever they touch; and not to be filled with the wind, like bladders puffed up where the parts project. 67

That is precisely, however, what Bernini did with Apollo’s clothes; he filled them with wind and let them soar. Winckelmann acknowledged that part of this modern trend in draperies was due to changing clothing styles; though he most valued the Greek model of depicting textiles, he discerned modern exceptions to the rule, as witnessed in the paintings of Carlo Marrati and Francesco Solimena. 68 Bernini’s depiction of Apollo, however, suited neither the antique model nor the modern one.

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Bernini’s rejection of Leonardo’s ideas on drapery manifested itself vividly very early on in his career. Later, his draperies served a function entirely divorced from the human form.

Another maxim of Leonardo’s treatise on painting concerned the questions of weight, equilibrium, and movement. He ascertained that any object not in total, balanced repose was in effect in motion. The farther off the object was from its center of gravity, the stronger the force and the more intense the result of that action. To take another look at Bernini’s Apollo and Daphne, it becomes apparent that the entire sculpture is in motion. Even the rocky ground upon which the figures stand appears agitated as it projects upwards along a strong diagonal. While Leonardo did not take a stance on whether movement was a positive quality in painting, he advocated that expressive motions were more evocative and more efficiently didactic than words, provided that they were appropriate for the subject depicted. He wrote, “A mere thought, or operation of the mind, excites only simple and easy motions of the body; not the way, and that way, because its object is in the mind, which does not affect the senses when it is collected within itself.” Bernini’s draperies that embodied spiritual affectation, such as St. Teresa, also went against this principle.

In Part One of his treatise, Leonardo rallied vehemently against sculpture’s valor primarily on the basis that the sculptor did not have to learn to manipulate light,

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69 Da Vinci, A Treatise on Painting, 100.

70 Ibid, 165.

71 Ibid, 131.
color and perspective – painterly skills that required great intelligence.\textsuperscript{72} For him, painting was noble in its artifice, and sculpture weak in its reliance upon nature and external environment.\textsuperscript{73} Sculpture was a mechanical art that required bodily, physical exertion, unlike painting, which demanded almost entirely mental work.\textsuperscript{74} The only concession that Leonardo granted sculpture was that it was, in most instances, more durable and long lasting than painting.\textsuperscript{75} Thus the merits of that art form were, according to Leonardo, based purely in the medium itself that derived from nature, and not from the nature of art or from the artist himself.

In the seventh book of Alberti’s \textit{On The Art of Building in Ten Books} devoted to ornament to sacred spaces, Alberti once again mentioned sculpture, here in relationship to architecture. He argued, "The greatest ornament of all is the statue. It may serve as ornament in sacred and profane buildings, public and private, and makes a wonderful memorial to man or deed."\textsuperscript{76} Sculpture's merit, according to Alberti, stemmed from its function within architectural spaces. Its presence could greatly heighten the artistic beauty of a building. Furthermore, the theorist emphasized sculpture's versatility, its ability to perfectly suit a vast number of contexts, functions and needs. However, sculpture remained dependent on and in service to architecture; as a detached entity it lost all value. For both Leonardo and Alberti, sculpture was at

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\textsuperscript{73} Ibid, 33.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid, 35.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid, 42.

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the bottom of the hierarchy of the visual arts. By reconfiguring the relationship of the arts, absorbing both painting and, as will be shown later, architecture into sculpture's concerns, Bernini redefined the *paragone* debates, placing sculpture at the apex.
3. THE PROBLEM WITH MARBLE: MEDIUMS RE-EXAMINED

It is not enough to content ourselves solely with the discussion of painting’s influence on Bernini’s sculpture, because it was only one facet of Bernini’s sculptural ambitions. Not only did Bernini expand the notion of the bel composto by blurring the edges between painting and sculpture, he also redefined what sculpture was in and of itself. It remains a fact that almost all of his draperies that did not serve the role of clothing were not made of white marble. What were white marble’s disadvantages? Why was this truest sculptural medium insufficient? Bernini’s use of chromatic marbles, bronze, wood, and gilded materials – often incorporated into different elements of one work – broadened the scope of what sculpture could achieve. These alternative materials, less steeped in the Renaissance sculptural tradition, presented Bernini an opportunity to express his creativity in novel ways.

Bellori’s 1672 poem on sculpture is relevant for the present discussion because it establishes the culturally determined significance attributed to the noble marble. He wrote:

Nature extracts my soul in vain, and though is encloses me in alpine stone, my art dissolves me, and opens mountains, gives me life, and makes me soft: human wishes breathe life into me in the hard stone, yet I have not frail life, for its hardness makes me immortal.78

77 Michael Cole writes: “In most of Italy, however, unlike other parts of Europe, neither sculptors nor their patrons wanted sculptured quite to go down painting’s path. They avoided polychromy and they continued to favor precious materials like marble and bronze that viewers could not help but admire in their own right.” Michael Wayne Cole, Ambitious Form: Giambologna, Ammanati, and Danti in Florence (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 93. Bernini also favored precious metals and marbles, and when he opted to use lesser materials he disguised them to look as if they were indeed precious (as will be shown below regarding the Baldacchino). However, the difference comes from the fact that Bernini was greatly intrigued by the possibility of polychromatic sculpture. His works consciously meshed various materials with contrasting colors and textures.

This poem reflected Bellori's belief that sculpture was linked uniquely to marble. He solicited images of the Apennines – from which the marble was excavated from quarries – and of the veins that run throughout the stone. In comparison to his poem on painting, which highlighted painting's ability to deceive, and his poem on architecture, focused on the humans’ relationship to buildings, sculpture's meaning was supposedly tied to the medium itself. The sculptor's role was to give the marble eternal life by liberating the form from the stone, thus turning a natural material into art. This stereotype typified the standard of art making based on Michelangelo’s work that predominated in Italy. Indeed, Michelangelo’s influence on Bernini is of great importance in understanding the forces at play in his bel composto.

The biographers attributed Bernini’s chosen art form – sculpture – to the fact that it was his father’s profession. Tuscan native Pietro Bernini’s work can be characterized as mannerist, and his primary medium was marble. The privileged access to those materials, the workshop, and the rudimentary techniques absorbed through studying under his father from a young age certainly influenced Gian

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79 Ibid, 66. The poem on painting reads: “I have not life or spirit, yet I live and breathe; I lack movement, yet with every act I always move; I can feel no emotion, yet I laugh, I grieve, I love, and grow enraged. Marvel of art? My eloquence is silent, I was born mute, I speak not, yet am loquacious. I feign, I am mendacious, and yet I display the truth in every part; I am a shade and yet am wont to temper rays on canvases and create light.” In many respects, this poem seems to adhere to Bernini’s style of art making. He was known for creating works that were incredibly life-life such as his portrait of Pedro de Foix Montoya. Domenico Bernini recounted the episode in his biography of the artists, in which a jest was made that the portrait bust was more “real” than Monsignor Montoya himself. See Andrea Bacchi and Catherine Hess, "Creating a New Likeness,” 25.


81 Bernini, The Life of Gian Lorenzo Bernini, 95. Domenico Bernini asserted, however, that Bernini was of such great intelligence that he could have chosen any path he had desired. Both Domenico Bernini and Baldinucci repeatedly made reference to Bernini’s genius, a fact that Delbeke has argued played a role in the biographers’ conception of the bel composto.
Lorenzo Bernini to commence his career as a sculptor in marble. Pietro, upon having recognized his son’s talent at a young age, decided to move the family to Rome where the younger Bernini could undergo exceptional training and make connections with the most influential of patrons. For example, in 1618 Cardinal Scipione Borghese, the nephew of Pope Paul V, commissioned Bernini to produce a group of four works, three of which still reside in his Villa Borghese. In chronological order, these pieces included *Aeneas, Anchises, and Ascanius* (1618-1619), *The Rape of Proserpina* (1621-1622), *Apollo and Daphne* (1622-1625), and *David* (1623-1625). The overwhelming accomplishment (he produced the group of sculptures in less than eight years) incited the patron’s remark that the artist was a “monster of a genius.”  

Baldinucci remarked that Bernini’s *David* (fig. 9) garnered the success it did because the artist “devoured the marble and never struck a false blow.”  

Bernini’s mastery at such a young age, for he was twenty-five when he completed the *David*, caught the attention of Pope Urban VIII Barberini who instructed Bernini to start studying the arts of painting and architecture. The pope desired his own Michelangelo, an artist of equivalent or greater talent who could propel the pope’s reputation and ensure his immortal legacy.  

This link to Michelangelo is crucial. He was commonly considered to be the greatest Renaissance artist in part because he had mastered painting, sculpture, and architecture. Bernini thus had to study all of those disciplines – and demonstrate

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82 Ibid, 106.


exceptional talent in them all – in order to rival the Renaissance artist’s greatness.\textsuperscript{85} While Michelangelo was indisputably a remarkable artist, he did not attempt to unite the arts in any overt, conscious way, and indeed he identified foremost as a sculptor of marble, which was surely a source (even if subconscious) for Bellori’s poem. Thus Bernini first had to demonstrate an extraordinary proficiency in marble before going forward in elevating his own reputation and that of the pope. Bernini daringly invited the direct comparison to be made between his marble version \textit{David} and Michelangelo's sculpture of the same subject (fig. 10), a bold move for such a young artist. But Bernini's talents exhibited in those early Borghese sculptures were exceptional. The desire to surpass Michelangelo in prestige and fame – a goal not just of the pope, but of the artist himself\textsuperscript{86} – would have at that moment become a possibility. Given the pressures on and expectations of Bernini, it makes sense that he would have tried to take his career in a different direction than his Renaissance predecessor. This interpretation could explain at least in part Bernini's interest both in the \textit{bel composto} and in materials other than white marble.

Besides white marble’s inevitable association with Michelangelo, there were several perceived limitations to the medium. To begin, contemporaries saw the material as hard, insensitive, and bloodless.\textsuperscript{87} Bernini took on its challenge through

\textsuperscript{85} Cole, \textit{Ambitious Form}, 1. Cole opens his study on sculptor Giambologna (1529-1608) with the statement that it was a fact of life for every late sixteenth-century sculptor to have to measure up to Michelangelo's precedent. Cole argues, however, that a direct comparison between Giambologna’s and Michelangelo’s works should be drawn, because that approach is too reductive and fails to understand the context within which Giambologna was working. The same can be said for Bernini, though Michelangelo represented the status and acclaim that Bernini aspired to attain.

\textsuperscript{86} Throughout the biographies on Bernini, numerous stories are recounted that demonstrate his dedication to his work and ambition for success.

\textsuperscript{87} Alberti, \textit{The Art of Building}, 242.
his facile manipulation of the hard stone that negated its disadvantages. A famous passage from Baldinucci’s biography reads:

He demonstrated that he had overcome the great difficulty of making the marble, so to say, flexible and of finding a way to combine painting and sculpture, something that had not been done by other artists. This was the case, he said, because they did not have the courage to render stones as obedient to the hand as if they were dough or wax.\textsuperscript{88}

This quote implies that Bernini was seen as possessing a supra-human ability to alter stone’s basic nature. Given his dexterity in working with marble, it seems logical that the artist would have felt confident enough to test his sculptural skills in other mediums. As his biographers assert, not only was Bernini in a constant (though perhaps not always conscious) rivalry with Michelangelo, he was also always in competition with himself.\textsuperscript{89}

In addition to being “hard”, the meaning of marble was in some ways predetermined. It was traditionally considered a source of artistic pride to carve a sculpture from one single block.\textsuperscript{90} Moreover, the bigger and more involved the piece – for example, a work that incorporated multiple figures into the composition – the more impressive the accomplishment. Conveying correct proportions and designing beautiful compositions proved especially difficult when working on a monumental scale.\textsuperscript{91} Mistakes made in marble were hard to correct, and the material itself was not

\textsuperscript{88} Baldinucci, \textit{The Life of Bernini}, 75.

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid, 10.

\textsuperscript{90} Charles Avery and David Finn, \textit{Bernini: Genius of the Baroque} (Boston: Bulfinch, 1997), 101.

\textsuperscript{91} Alberti, \textit{The Art of Building}, 241.
easy to attain because of its preciousness and related costly expenses. Also, since
the literal shape and size of the block that was delivered to the artist was not standard,
the composition depended on the form and quality of the stone. Another disadvantage
to using marble was that the block of stone, as Michael Cole has argued, was always a
“found object.” It carried with it the “recollection” of its origins in some far-off
mountainside and was consequently inextricably bound up in its earthly physicality
and local specificity.

With these medium-specific obstacles in mind, it becomes understandable
why an ambitious and multi-talented artist such as Bernini would have sought after
possibilities to experiment with other types of stones and metals. Especially after
having demonstrated his mastery of marble in his early commissions for Scipione
Borghese, Bernini had earned the right to begin experimenting within and outside of
the medium as it had been traditionally defined. He defied the one-block norm in his
*St. Longinus* (figs. 11-11.2), a massive fourteen feet tall statue designed to occupy
one of the niches in the crossing of St. Peter’s. The size of this sculpture necessitated
the use of four different blocks, but Bernini employed them to his advantage. The
saint is impressively expansive horizontally; his arms stretch outwards unsupported
by buttressing structures in an unparalleled audacious way. The liberation of the
limbs from their marble core earned considerable praise from his patrons and
contemporary artists and art critics for its technical difficulty. The breadth of the

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93 Ibid, 102.


95 Cole, *Ambitious Form*, 103.
arms, the staff, and the diagonally sweeping drapery create an almost equilateral triangle, a visual technique that unifies the various blocks of stone into one congruent composition. The diagonals of the triangle contrast with the stark verticality of the saint’s body, from his left leg up to the crown of his head. This juxtaposition of geometrical angles embeds the work with a sense of emotional intensity reminiscent of the saint’s tormented personal story. Hatch-marks, like those used in drawings, were worked into the stone to absorb light (fig. 11.2). The artist here used variation of texture to suggest color, defying the lack of actual pigment. By explicitly redefining the conventions of marble sculpture, Bernini was able to create works such as *St. Longinus* that epitomized equilibrium and correct proportions. As discussed previously, the culturally accepted goal of sculpture was to reproduce nature; proportion was a critical, if not ultimate measure by which greatness was determined. Bernini's *St. Longinus* represents one example in which the artist achieved the goals of marble sculpture by using unconventional methods.

In addition to the drawing of the torso, there exist numerous others that Bernini executed for his *St. Longinus*. They are the study of an article by Ann Sutherland Harris. In it she made several points relevant to the present study. First, she noted that the abundance of drawings of drapery attributed to Bernini far surpass

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97 In the close-up of the statue, thin rake-like lines are worked into the stone. Though they are not able to be seen from afar, they alter the way in which light interacts the sculpture. In Bernini’s drawing of the same work, similar lines are incorporated into several sections of the torso. They do not appear to correspond to shading, modeling, or outline. The lines thus can be interpreted as an investigation into what would be the surface of the sculpture.

the number typical for a painter of his era.\textsuperscript{99} This reemphasizes the importance of draperies in Bernini’s oeuvre. Harris observed that, although there is little variance in the studies of the saint’s torso, there is significant alteration in the draperies, implying that Bernini spent a disproportionate amount of time perfecting that feature. Harris even asserted that the drawings of drapery must be autograph because Bernini would never have delegated such an integral part of his design.\textsuperscript{100} Harris also noticed that the drawing style mimics the chiseling of a block of stone.\textsuperscript{101} This comment shows that not only did Bernini’s drawing practice influence his sculpture designs (as mentioned above), but that the inverse is also true.

Perhaps one of Bernini’s greatest accomplishments in terms of proportion was the \textit{Baldacchino}, located at the center of the crossing of St. Peter’s (fig. 12). That conceptual ideal for marble sculpture was realized here, however, in bronze, and in a structure that defies categorization by type. The word “baldachin” means canopy over an altar or throne. Such objects were originally fabricated from cloth, but later became permanent architectural features in churches and palaces.\textsuperscript{102} Bernini’s \textit{Baldacchino} demarcated the tomb of St. Peter in the crypt below. The four columns, each approximately sixty-six feet tall, borrow their spiraling form from Carlo Maderno’s design for the same structure in Old St. Peter’s.\textsuperscript{103} Abrasively anti-

\textsuperscript{99} Anne Sutherland Harris, "New Drawings by Bernini for "St. Longinus" and Other Contemporary Works," \textit{Master Drawings} 6 (Winter, 1968): 384.

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid, 388.

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid, 388.

\textsuperscript{102} Hibbard, \textit{Bernini}, 79.

\textsuperscript{103} Avery, \textit{Bernini: Genius of the Baroque}, 95.
classical, they bulge and twist as they ascend and taper toward the top where they are crowned with cornices. Two of the columns rotate clockwise, and the other two counter-clockwise, enhancing the effect of dynamic tension. The top portions of the columns are adorned by leafy gilded vines, which were life-cast from real plants (fig. 12.1). This "freezing" of nature – turning something perishable into something immortal by means of an artistic process – obfuscates the delineations between life and art in a similar fashion to Bernini’s portrait busts that seem life-like, or his *St. Lawrence* that projects first-hand, lived human emotion into stone.

The baldachin is crowned by a massive architectonic structure. Four ribs curve upward like paisley towards a globe that perches on the apex. Above each column stand four giant angels, and smaller figures of *putti* appear to be playing alongside them. Incorporated into the baldachin is a variety of forms: part purely abstract, geometric shapes, part life-as-art in the laurels, part mythological and religious figures. Other crucial elements of this work are the lappets that hang down from the top (figs. 12.2-12.3). They recall the cloth canopy that was in line with the original way the baldachins were made, but are in fact highly deceptive. They "pretend" to be fabric and are quite convincing in this deception because of the precision of detail included, such as the little tassels. Despite what the viewer knows they are imitating, he/she is also conscious that the lappets look as if they are made of gilded bronze, in accordance with the aesthetic unity of the piece. The "fake" fabrics are, however, actually made from wood and repoussé copper, a lighter and more economical alternative to the real thing.\(^{104}\) Despite those practical factors, it is clear that Bernini

\(^{104}\) Avery, *Bernini: Genius of the Baroque*, 95.
used the draperies as a vehicle for investigating and challenging the notions of illusion, viewer expectations, and medium itself. The effect is coherent and effective. Bernini succeeded completely in imitating simultaneously real cloth canopies and sculpted bronze canopies, demonstrating his ability to manipulate materials on several conceptual levels. This work served as a major precedent for his later sculptures in which the same features were at play, but on a much larger, even more radical scale.

The final observation to be made about the Baldacchino is a relatively small aspect of the work that is often ignored by scholars. The pedestals upon which the columns rest are comprised of four sides, each inlaid with patterned orange, brown, and yellow marbles. The sides that face outwards are covered with the coat of arms of the Barberini family (fig. 12.4), but the ones that face inwards, towards the altar, display vertical, sharply ovular shapes. This type of marble work is featured prominently on columns and architectural siding found in Bernini’s chapel designs. Lavin suggests that these panels, often bordered by marble, are reminiscent of jewels set in a secure box.¹⁰⁵ Paintings, however, seem to be a more relevant point of reference. They too are isolated in a frame, valued as precious, and put on display for the admiration of the viewer. This notion has roots in Alberti’s and Leonardo’s treatises. Alberti wrote, for example, that “nature herself takes pleasure in painting. We often see, in fact, that [nature] makes in marbles hippo-centaurs and bearded

¹⁰⁵ Lavin, *Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts*, 51. Lavin made this statement in discussing Bernini’s design of the Caetani chapel in Santa Pudenziana. He contrasted that design with Bernini’s apse and high altar works in Santa Maria in Via Lata. In the latter, Lavin argued that the polychromatic marbles correspond to the structural and architectural organization of the piece.
faces of the kinds.”\footnote{106} Leonardo went further and suggested that artists could find inspiration in these natural patterns found in the materials of art:

By looking attentively at old and smeared walls, or stones and veined marble of various colours, you may fancy that you see in them several compositions, landscapes, battles, figures in quick motion, strange countenances, and dresses, with an infinity of other objects. By these confused lines the inventive genius is excited to new exertions.\footnote{107}

In a way then, Bernini was extracting natural paintings and incorporating them, architecturally, into the Baldacchino. Not only did this technique add color to the overall ensemble, consequently intensifying the emotional reaction to the space, it quite literally enforced the bel composto. Bernini’s definition of painting is broadened to not exclude based on medium. Paints are no longer required to make a painting; instead, the traditional mediums of the architect and sculptor are manipulated to make two-dimensional abstract pictures that bridge art and nature.

The Baldacchino’s treatment in primary sources is astonishing. The story, almost mythologized by Bernini’s biographers, highlighted how the Baldacchino related to the concept of the bel composto. Domenico Bernini asserted that a description of the visual appearance of this structure would have been impossible to write because words could not do it justice:

The human eye, therefore, can be its only worthy judge, taking in, all at once, the site, the structure, the vastness of the surrounding space (which the work fills without encumbering it), the beauty of the reliefs, and the richness of the materials. Seeing all that it is and its proportions, in harmony with everything around it, the eye remains gratified and content.\footnote{108}


\footnote{107} Da Vinci, \textit{A Treatise on Painting}, 164.

\footnote{108} Bernini, \textit{The Life of Gian Lorenzo Bernini}, 121.
Domenico Bernini’s emphasis on harmony and unification of a literal and metaphorical multidimensional space is applicable to both Bernini’s later architectural works and his concept of the bel composto. The importance of the crossing of St. Peter’s and of Bernini’s commission to be the head artist for such a prestigious and ambitious project was a major milestone in the artist’s career. The proportions of the Baldacchino itself and of its relationship to the enormous building that encloses it were, for Domenico Bernini, at the crux of its magnificent nature. This accomplishment, he claimed, was attributed directly to Bernini’s abandonment of the rules of measurement, which allegedly would have served no aid in his task, and resulted in a “chance” arrival at the exact right dimensions.\(^{109}\) Though Chandler Kirwin has been especially critical of the idea that Bernini would have been the primary artist working on the piece (considering that he was still in his twenties without any previous architectural experience),\(^{110}\) Bernini is still credited for the overall artistic conception, the design whose beauty came directly from the proportions.

Domenico Bernini claimed that his father chose to use bronze because it was suitable to the “majesty” of the temple, recalling the preciousness of the material

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\(^{109}\) Ibid, 122.

\(^{110}\) Kirwin writes: “…by February 1625, when the final contract was signed with the foundrymen for the manufacture of the four columns, Bernini had obtained virtually no direct experience of the complicated bronze-foundry process. Nor, for that matter, had he completed an apprenticeship as an architect. His primary professional activities up to that time were as a sculptor. Consequently, his supervision of the Baldachin, which would last almost nine years, was his on-the-job training. Considering the unique technological and engineering requirements of the final design, Bernini needed all the expert professional help he could get.” William Chandler Kirwin and Philipp P. Fehl, *Powers Matchless: The Pontificate of Urban VIII, the Baldachin, and Gian Lorenzo Bernini* (New York: P. Lang, 1997), 8. Kirwin also cites the aid of Bernini’s eventual artistic enemy Francesco Borromini (1599-1667) as particularly significant. He argues, moreover, that Urban VIII exerted a huge amount of influence over the project.
itself. Kirwin is critical of this notion, and draws convincing connections between the rearmament of the Vatican, the pillaging of the Pantheon for its bronze, and the choice of the material for the *Baldacchino*. The bronze would have been seen, he argues, as a reference to the pope’s military exploits. Yet another possible advantage to using the metal alloy would have been to implement an unavoidable contrast to Michelangelo’s surrounding architecture. The Renaissance artist's linear, fluted, enormous white marble pilasters made Bernini’s flamboyant golden and bronze baldachin starkly stand out. Though marble is luminous in its whiteness, the gilded bronze *Baldacchino* radiates in golden brilliance, stealing the gaze of the viewer away from Michelangelo’s comparatively austere architecture. This project secured Bernini’s position as the preeminent artist working in Rome, and his legacy remained tied to it. The *Baldacchino* demonstrates Bernini’s clever manipulation of materials, dynamic integration of nature into art, and subtle yet profound unification of painting, sculpture, and architecture.

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4. MEDIUM MIXING: DRAPERIES’ RELATIONSHIP TO THE WHOLE

Despite Bernini’s interest in working with sculptural materials other than white marble, he never stopped using it during his career, and indeed it was still employed in nearly all of his works. However, it occupied a specific role in the bel composto, just like draperies carved from colored marble and lively skeletons cast from bronze also had their specific functions within it, particularly in tombs and funerary monuments. Draperies took precedence in these works unlike in anything previously created. They became the primary subject of the works, not necessarily in a narrative sense but rather in an artistic one, in tune with the paragone debates and as part of the redefinition of artistic boundaries.

The Tomb of Maria Raggi (fig. 13) in S. Maria sopra Minerva is telling of how draperies functioned in Bernini’s conception of memorials more generally. Maria Raggi was born in 1522 into noble family who forced her to marry against her wishes at the age of twelve. Even as a child she inflicted injuries upon herself as penitence for her sins, reflecting her intense piety and devotion to Christ, which continued throughout her life.114 At the age of eighteen Maria’s husband died and she subsequently requested the habit of the Tertiary, devoting the rest of her life to the pursuit of humility, purity, and salvation.115 Maria was allegedly able to perform miracles, such as become invisible, bring dead children back to life, and cause massive floods. After her death in 1600, requests for her beatification were sent to the pope, but she was never granted the title. The monument in her honor was bequeathed

115 Ibid, 246.
by her male relative Ottaviano Raggi, but it was not erected until 1647-1653 by another relative, Tommaso Raggi.\footnote{Ibid, 248.}

Maria's tomb is notable for the fact that only a black shroud with an orange marble border serves as the agent of commemoration. Judith Bernstock has commented on the similarity between the form of this sculpted monument and the actual black shrouds used in funeral ceremonies, particularly in the way they aided in creating an enclosed environment within the church itself around a catafalque.\footnote{Judith E. Bernstock, "Bernini's Memorials to Ippolito Merenda and Alessandro Valtrini," \textit{The Art Bulletin} 63 (1981): 225. Oxford Art Online defines catafalque as follows: "Large, temporary structure erected to commemorate the death of an important person. Designed to display a symbolic coffin for the deceased, catafalques were the visual and theological focal point of elaborate obsequies involving prayers, orations, a requiem mass and absolution rites. Their architectural forms and profuse decoration permitted complex iconographic programmes that glorified the deceased." A. S. Arbury, "Catalfale." In \textit{Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online}, http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T014842 (accessed April 4, 2012).} This demonstrates, much like the \textit{Baldacchino}, how Bernini conceived of materials in a theoretical manner. He reinterpreted literal textiles with specific historical and religious meanings as central subjects of his sculpture.

The marble shroud hangs from a pillar, giving the impression that it is blowing in the wind. Because of its unusual placement it becomes hard to discern whether the object should be considered sculptural, though it is not really freestanding or in relief, or architectural, though it serves no structural or practical function. The cross is cleverly employed as if pinning the shroud to the pillar, thus its function is in part related directly to the shroud itself and not included solely for iconographical purposes. The shroud serves as the surface onto which the inscription is etched. The words, like the cloth, undulate vivaciously. In their animation they
seem to correspond both to the ideal of spiritual life in heaven\textsuperscript{118} and the concept of transience of earthly life. Indeed, the sculpted cloth itself appears livelier – and is much larger – than the image of Maria Raggi portrayed in relief set in a medallion. It is as if the shroud is endowed with powers superior to that of mere mortals. Robert Williams articulates this notion:

Bernini seems to hold out for another way of knowing, a recognition of the possibility that any particular thing might have a direct, unmediated relation to the absolute, and thus a significance inaccessible to reason…The artist’s task is made to seem less like the forceful superimposition of ideal forms than as revealing his understanding of a hierarchy of being in which even imperfection has its place, in which no least thing is denies its possible relation to God.\textsuperscript{119}

Though this quote refers specifically to Bernini’s portrait sculpture, it is absolutely relevant to the discussion of draperies. Williams points out that, in Bernini’s theories on art and life, even cloth could signify something beyond itself, and that through draperies a higher meaning could be conveyed.

The tomb of Pope Alexander VII, located in St. Peter’s, takes this idea even further. Surprisingly, scholars who have written on the tomb have had in general very little to say about the enormous pink jasper pall and have seemed not to recognize its significance in relation to the bel composto. Wittkower argued that it functioned simultaneously as a barrier and a link between public, human sphere and private spiritual tomb. The pall distanced the work of art from the profane and mundane spaces of the everyday, while also uniting it with its environment.\textsuperscript{120} This remark is

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid, 227.
\textsuperscript{120} Wittkower, \textit{Bernini: The Sculptor of the Roman Baroque}, 123.
\end{flushright}
curious and very valuable to the expanded definition of the *bel composto* that this study has strived to articulate. Wittkower implied that the pall, as mediator of space, functioned as architecture. Far more than just colorful, dynamic, sculpted drapery, it is largely through this shroud that the piece communicated with the space around it and with its audience.

Charles Avery took this thought further and described specifically the pall’s relationship to its surroundings. He wrote:

The whole composition is bound together by the strong diagonals along the crumpled edges of the pall, most of which leads upwards to the isosceles triangle of the kneeling pope at the apex. It is also unified by the riot of color, gilding and patterned intarsia in its surroundings, against which the five figures in white marble stand out bravely.121

Both art historians agreed that the pall acts as a collating agent, the means through which the work achieves harmony despite the potential dissonance that such varied materials, colors, and figures could provoke. It seems only clear, then, that this unifying agent should play a role in Bernini’s theoretical unification of the arts. Unfortunately, neither Lavin nor Careri seem to have made that connection, because the tomb is absent from their studies on the *bel composto*.

Despite Avery’s astute observation about the pall’s function, he relegated Bernini’s decision to include it at all to the fact that the space of the niche was irregular and awkward.122 The artist was known for turning defects into key aspects of a composition, and it can indeed be inferred that the pall functioned here as a remedy to both the shape of the niche and the interfering doorway. Interestingly, in

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Baldinucci’s biography, this penchant for making undesirable elements useful and beautiful was tied directly to Bernini’s architecture.\textsuperscript{123} Though Baldinucci’s passage did not directly address Alexander VII’s tomb, it suggested that the pall functioned architecturally, even though the inspiration came from an object (funeral shroud) that had no historical connection to permanent architectural structures. The use of a sculpted shroud as an antidote to the irregular shape of the niche lacked precedence in chapel design; it was purely Bernini’s innovation. Avery’s interpretation of the pall as merely a concealer of imperfection does not suffice.

It is important to note the role of the figure of Death in this ensemble, represented in the guise of a bronze skeleton that dangles in the doorway, poking his arm out with the hourglass that announces the end of Alexander VII’s time on earth (fig. 3.1). Avery wrote that the figure of Death’s literal position “increases the ambiguity of ‘real’, as opposed to ‘pictorial’ space. Is this alarmingly natural-looking skeleton really exiting in flight from the (real) sacristy door, or does it belong to the heavenly vision above? Fiction, allegory, and belief all enter into Bernini’s conception.”\textsuperscript{124} Not only does the pall serve to complicate the perception of space, so too does the strange yet lifelike skeletal figure. Its bronze bones underscore death’s conceptual relationship to darkness, whereas the figures of the Virtues and the pope – made out of white marble – are meant to be associated with heaven and lightness. The

\textsuperscript{123} In describing Bernini’s architecture, Baldinucci wrote: “First of all Bernini said the highest merit lay not in making beautiful and commodious buildings, but in being able to make do with little, to make beautiful things 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 it.” Baldinucci, \textit{The Life of Bernini}, 80.

\textsuperscript{124} Avery, \textit{Bernini: Genius of the Baroque}, 137.
skeleton spills into the spectator’s space, as does the jasper drapery below the figure of Truth, blurring the boundary between art and life, the natural and the supernatural.

Like the marble inlay on the *Baldacchino*, the polychromatic intarsia here can also be read also as mimicking painting, this time, however, by transferring that material from a framed setting into a three-dimensional sculpture in the form of a funerary shroud. Certainly the adjacent walls feature this sort of marble work. Also significant in this piece, below the shroud to the right and left of the doorway, is black marble with triangular white shapes that actually point upwards, as if to direct the viewer’s attention to what is taking place above the doorway. Thus, the drapery functions as painting, as architecture, and also as sculpture.

The final issue to discuss is how the pall interacts with the figures on the tomb. It has already been noted that the diagonals guide the viewer’s gaze towards the figures, but the various shapes and lines also help to accentuate them. Charity and Truth, in particular, are encased within the sculpted fabric; their bodies fit precisely yet somewhat jarringly in its folds. In addition to acting as a frame, the drapery also acts as a cushion, an object on which the figures can prop themselves up, as is the case with the figure of Prudence. A bulbous bunch of fabric encroaches upon Truth’s lap, but its color, shape, and texture are so distinctively different from the clothing that the figure of Truth seems more pronounced (fig. 3.2). Interestingly, the drapery that covers Truth is not actually marble; the pontiff found her original nudity distasteful, and Bernini had to fabricate a bronze covering for her that he then tinted to appear like marble, much like the wooden canopy of the *Baldacchino* that
"pretended" to be bronze.\textsuperscript{125} Regardless of this illusion, by becoming architecture, the pall actively accentuated the whiteness of the marble. The figures are unequivocally sculptures, and their identity as such is reinforced by the fact that the drapery here functions primarily as architecture. Paradoxically, the sculptures, as we have seen, borrowed from painterly principles in their naturalism, particularly in the figure of the pope, and their evocation of human emotion, particularly in the figure of Charity. The \textit{Tomb of Alexander VII} exemplifies Bernini’s \textit{bel composto} in its ultimate intermingling of the art forms and its transgression of definite artistic conventions, functions, and forms.

\textsuperscript{125} Bernini, \textit{The Life of Gian Lorenzo Bernini}, 225.
CONCLUSION

Though this study has chosen to focus on drapery’s role in the *bel composto*, there are other aspects of Bernini’s oeuvre that likewise bend conventional notions of medium and the boundaries between art and life. A poignant example is the way in which Bernini attempted to depict light, inherently immaterial, using gilded bronze in the form of linear rays. They imitate the sun, allude to God, and reify Bernini’s artwork. The *Cathedra Petri* (fig. 14) is one of the most ostentatious examples of this technique, but Bernini used it early in his career, too. For instance, under the canopy of the *Baldacchino*, visible only when the viewer stands beneath the structure, are thin golden rods that emanate from a winged dove. In this work, the rays are confined to the architectural plane to which they are applied, hidden in the shadows; in the *Cathedra Petri* they burst from the window above the high altar – creating a direct parallel between the artistic golden rays and the external natural rays of sun – and partially cover the adjacent white pilasters. Similarly to the draperies, they function both sculpturally and architecturally, again demonstrating Bernini’s creative illusionism and interest in experimenting with materials. They comprise yet another element of the *bel composto* that has been proposed in this essay.

In the final section of his *Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts*, Lavin returned to the idea of wholeness implicit in Baldinucci and Domenico Bernini’s definition of the *bel composto*. He reminded the reader that Bernini did not simply merge painting, sculpture, and architecture; the resulting effect of the *bel composto* produced a monumental entirety in which every part is thoroughly integrated, both
visually and conceptually, through material, technique, design, color, and form.\textsuperscript{126} Heinrich Wölfflin had argued that unity was the primary aspiration in both Baroque and Renaissance art, though each era had its own specific criteria for what unity meant and how to achieve it. He articulated the difference as follows:

> In the [case of sixteenth century art] unity is achieved by a harmony of free parts, in [the case of seventeenth century art], by a union of parts in a single theme, or by the subordination, to one unconditioned dominant, of all other elements.\textsuperscript{127}

The \textit{Tomb of Alexander VII} perfectly illustrates Wölfflin’s idea. If the piece was to be taken apart and each element displayed individually, the outcome would be a series of incomplete fragments. The figures of Prudence and Justice would be awkwardly truncated across their mid torso in poses unheard of for portrait busts. All of the Virtues would topple over without the support of the drapery to secure them in place, as would the skeletal figure of Death, who would comically dangle in space, faceless and purposeless. Even the figure of Pope Alexander would appear stripped of priestly majesty when not perched on top of the platform, high above the jasper pall, Virtues, and Church below.

Though the overall theme of this work is tied to its religious purpose as a tomb, the “unconditioned dominant” that subordinates all other elements is clearly the pall. It serves as the compositional unifier through which the entire work is bound together. As has been demonstrated, embedded in the drapery itself are painterly, sculptural, and architectural principles. The means of achieving the \textit{bel composto} – and the most latent embodiment of that very notion – is the drapery.

\textsuperscript{126} Lavin, \textit{Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts}, 143.

This essay has used the *Tomb of Alexander VII* as a chief example to support its argument. It is a work that was produced late in Bernini’s career, and thus represents the mature phase in his artistic development when his ideas on materials and their visual unity had been fully formulated and executed. Though the prominence of the pall is surely most exaggerated in Alexander VII’s tomb, there are numerous other works in which drapery’s function within the composition is equally essential. Even in Bernini’s late portrait busts textiles play a significant role. In his *Bust of Louis XIV* (1665), for example, the draperies exude strength and determined power, giving the French Sun King an air of absolute heroism and nobility (fig. 15).\(^{128}\) The fabric gives the sculpture a sense of completeness that inherently lacks in the portrait bust type. Furthermore, the way in which the drapery sweeps to the right imbues the work with stability by counterbalancing the opposite movement of the head. The draperies thus simultaneously contribute to the works unity and demand that the viewer acknowledges the superiority of the monarch.\(^{129}\)

Another example is his unfinished sculpture from 1647-1652, *Truth Unveiled by Time* (fig. 16).\(^{130}\) Bernini designed this work during the most difficult time of his

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129 Ibid.

130 The figure of Time was never completed. Domenico Bernini’s comments on the matter are fascinating; he philosophized the story of the unfinished figure, writing: “Although the Cavaliere had seen to the procurement of a large and most splendid block of marble in order to create the figure of Time, the marble, however, remained unused, having been quarried in vain. This was either because of the disdain of Time itself, which of its own nature is ever in motion and thud did not wish to be fixed eternally through the hands of Bernini, or to some other serious occupation that took the Cavaliere away from this project.” Domenico Bernini, *The Life of Gian Lorenzo Bernini*, 157. The project that interrupted his work on *Truth Unveiled by Time* was the design of the *Four Rivers Fountain* in the Piazza Navona in Rome. Interestingly, Baldinucci was also fascinated by the metaphorical facets of the unfinished Time figure, which inspired him to write a poem about the sculpture from the perspective of the unused marble.
career, that is after the disaster of his Bell Towers, as revenge against what Bernini perceived as libelous fallacies committed against him by clergymen and jealous artists. Through this work Bernini wittingly proclaimed that his art, allegorically represented by the figure of Truth, possessed eternal relevance and beauty. Not surprisingly, the work – of massive personal importance to the artist – features drapery as the central element. The fact that the drapery was worked on before the figure of Time suggests that, for either narrative or artistic reasons, Bernini believed it to be of particular importance. In the sculpture’s unfinished state, the drapery looks curiously like a giant flame. Its folds ripple in a wave-like manner in the shape of an “S”, sneaking in between Truth’s voluptuous thighs to hide her private areas. Once again, a sculpted textile acts as the agent that binds the two figures together.

Furthermore, it is through the process of unveiling that Truth is revealed to the world. The drapery holds the power to both conceal and to exalt.

Draperies were an outlet for Bernini to investigate the principles of the arts. In his works, they do not simply cover nude figures; they blow in the wind, deceive the viewer, and unify the total work of art. Moreover, Bernini’s redefinition of the boundaries between the arts is manifested within them. Painting, sculpture, and architecture are no longer relegated to their own isolated spheres, and in several cases they cease to exist independently at all. For Bernini, artistic conventions represented vague departure points, and the concerns of each art became tools, sources of inspiration, that he could freely employ in all of his endeavors. Considering the sensuality and realism of Bernini’s figures, the richness and variety of materials employed, and the spectacular performativity inherent in each work, draperies are

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hardly the first thing that is noticed. The sculpted textiles, however, are at the heart of Bernini’s innovation, the epitome of his *bel composto*. 
Figure 1. Gian Lorenzo Bernini. *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*, 1613. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, Italy.

Figure 2. Gian Lorenzo Bernini. *The Vision of Emperor Constantine*, ca. 1654-1669. St. Peter’s, Vatican, Italy.
Figure 3. Gian Lorenzo Bernini. *Tomb of Alexander VII*, 1671-1678. St. Peter’s, Vatican, Italy.
Figure 3.1. Detail of the figure of Death on the *Tomb of Alexander VII*.

Figure 3.2. Detail of the figure of Truth on the *Tomb of Alexander VII*. 
Figure 4. Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Cornaro Chapel, 1647-1651. S. Maria della Vittoria, Rome, Italy.
Figure 4.1. Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Detail of *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa of Ávila*. Cornaro Chapel.

Figures 4.2, 4.3. Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Details showing the members of the Cornaro family on the left and right walls, Coronaro Chapel.
Figure 5. Gian Lorenzo Bernini. *Death of the Blessed Ludovica Albertoni*, 1671-1674. Albertoni Chapel, S. Francesco a Ripa, Rome, Italy.

Figure 6. Gian Lorenzo Bernini. *Bust of Gregory XV*, 1621. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. J. Tanenbaum, Toronto, Canada.
Figure 7. Gian Lorenzo Bernini. *Apollo and Daphne*, 1622-1624. Galleria Borghese, Rome, Italy.
Figure 7.1. Gian Lorenzo Bernini. *Apollo and Daphne*, 1622-1624. Galleria Borghese, Rome, Italy.

Figure 8. *Augustus of Primaporta*, ca. 10 CE. Museo Chiaramonti, Vatican, Italy.
Figure 9 (left). Gian Lorenzo Bernini. *David*, 1623-1624. Galleria Borghese, Rome, Italy.

Figure 10 (right). Michelangelo. *David*, 1501-1504. Galleria dell’Accademia, Florence, Italy.

Figure 11. Gian Lorenzo Bernini. *St. Longinus*, 1638. St. Peter’s, Vatican, Italy.
Figure 11.1. Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Detail of *St. Longinus*.

Figure 11.2. Gian Lorenzo Bernini. *Study for Torso of St. Longinus*. ca. 1629. Kunstmuseum, Düsseldorf, Germany.
Figure 12. Gian Lorenzo Bernini. *Baldacchino*, 1624-1633. St. Peter’s, Vatican, Italy.
Figure 12.1. Detail of the columns and the gilded life casts on the Baldacchino.

Figures 12.2, 12.3. Details of the edifice and canopy on the Baldacchino.
Figure 12.4. Detail of the marble inlay with Barberini family crest at the base of the columns of the Baldacchino.
Figure 13. Gian Lorenzo Bernini. *Monument of the Venerable Maria Raggi*, 1643-1647. S. Maria sopra Minerva, Rome, Italy.
Figure 14. Gian Lorenzo Bernini. *Cathedra Petri*, 1656-1666. St. Peter’s, Vatican, Italy.

Figure 15. Gian Lorenzo Bernini. *Bust of Louis XIV*. 1665. Musée nationale de Versailles et des Trianons, France.
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