

Bernini

The Artist Who Breathed Life into Marble

By Taylor Young



If you have ever been to Rome or the Vatican, you have definitely seen Bernini's work. He is a sculptor and architect from the 17th century, who has impacted the artistic and cultural image of Rome under patronage of cardinals and 8 Popes. He grew up with sculpture in his father's workshop and showed promise early in his life. It is said that, when he was just 8 years old, Bernini first made a sculpture that amazed everyone who looked at it (later on, it was suggested he was actually a few years older than that). From there, he was commissioned by several Catholic Church authority figures throughout his life. His work has amazed and splendidly decorated Rome, and Bernini has been deemed the artist who epitomized the Baroque architectural and artistic movement. Of course, no famous art is without controversy. Some of his works are more known for the scandal they created than for their actual craftsmanship.





Works under Cardinal Borghese

In his early 20s, Bernini was hired by Cardinal Borghese to adorn the garden of his villa, Villa Borghese. He soon gained enough repute at age 22 to create the bust of Pope Paul V. Bernini then established his wonderful mastery with marble through capturing four tense moments in Roman mythical history. One of them, called *Apollo and Daphne*, captures the moment in the classic myth when Daphne transforms into a tree. What was revolutionary about the way Bernini portrayed this event and many others is that he captures it as if the moment was happening, rather than a more posed style of previous sculptors. In addition, the detail and use of light in the location this statue was placed in adds to the drama and theatrics of the sculpture itself. Bernini was skilled at theatrics of myth and religion, and *Apollo and Daphne* is definitely a great example.

Works under Pope Urban VIII

Under Urban VIII, Bernini was given several titles and commissions that allowed him to expand his horizons and make his marks all over the city of Rome. The most famous of this is the canopy he designed to stand above St. Peter's tomb, called *Baldacchino*. He created this while he was appointed Chief Architect of St. Peter's Basilica. Made of bronze and standing 30 meters tall, *Baldacchino* is meant to be the stunning centerpiece of the symbolic heart of Rome. Of course, Bernini also left room for some of his statues to be placed. This work is one of the first landmarks Bernini created that tourists from all over

the world come to see, and it certainly wasn't his last.

Works under Pope Innocent X

Just before he worked under Pope Innocent X, Bernini designed two bell towers that were to be built on the façade of St. Peter's Basilica. When the first tower was erected in 1641, however, cracks began to form and the tower was eventually torn down. Bernini's reputation was tarnished for a while, and the event impacted his finances as well. But he never lost patronage, and Pope Innocent X allowed Bernini to keep his jobs and commissions. Bernini was also given many commissions for funeral memorials and chapels.

One chapel he was commissioned to design, called the *Cornaro Chapel*, is his most controversial work when it came to chapels. This chapel features his best example of blending architecture and sculpture into one cohesive creation. The centerpiece of this chapel is the sculpture called *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* that depicts the spiritual overwhelming of the Spanish nun Teresa of Avilla. What stands out about this piece is how the smiling angel holds an arrow aimed at the swooning Teresa and where exactly he was aiming it. It wasn't pointed at her heart, the place of the soul, but it was aimed lower, a lot lower. The aim of that arrow caused controversy among viewers of the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. However, that didn't stop this work from becoming one of Bernini's most famous sculptural works, using a lot of the same methods he used with *Apollo and Daphne* to create the dramatic, theatrical feel that was his signature.





Works under Pope Alexander VII

While working under Pope Alexander VII, Bernini made his mark even more

in the streets of Rome when the new Pope commissioned massive architectural changes in the city. Bernini's biggest contribution during

this time period is the piazza leading to St. Peter's Basilica. Bernini was the one who designed two iconic semi-circle colonnades that have created the arena from which the world can see appointments of new Popes and many other historic appearances from the Pope. Bernini's use of columns and structure reins in the giant space that was previously wide open, and it brings focus to the Vatican's greatest landmark.

Beyond the Papacy

Along with his works around Rome, Bernini received commissions from all over Europe, from French royalty to English nobility. Bernini has created many busts of famous, sculpted fountains, and has done hundreds of works beyond what's described in this article. Bernini was a highly sought artist, not just because of his style and skill, but also because of his diligence. The number of works he produced along with his apprentices is astonishing. It is said that if you put together all the hours he spent on meals and sleep in his lifetime, it couldn't

amount to a full month. Bernini ate very little, and he spent little time in sunlight due to migraines. His self-discipline showed his dedication to his craft, and it is due to his effort that he is a permanent part of the cultural history of Rome, right along with the great Michelangelo.

I remember covering Bernini's life and career in one of my art classes in college, and was amazed by his work the most. Bernini's work definitely makes me want to travel to Rome, and be among the millions who have had the pleasure to view his Baroque dramatics in person.

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