

Bernini's Final Act of Gratitude: The Message of the Tomb of Pope Alexander VII

Formal Analysis of the Tomb of Pope Alexander VII by Gianlorenzo Bernini

All Roads Lead to Rome

Satisfying Fine Arts Requirement

Professors Cachey and Rowland, with Adam Foley

University of Notre Dame du Lac

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Michael Junker

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Nestled in the south transept of St. Peter's Basilica stands a monument unlike any other in the church. It features an oversized Pope Alexander VII in white marble kneeling in reverent prayer surrounded by four women in white marble. From their expressions, it is clear they are mourning, and it eventually becomes apparent that this is a tomb for Pope Alexander VII. But what gradually catches the attention of the viewer is the presence of a magnificently large gilded skeleton that lies beneath the Pope, holding up an hourglass and pulling back the red marble drapery covering him. This shocking piece of art so close to the high altar intentionally evokes an emotional response from the viewer of fear, wonder, and respect for the Pope figure. The master behind this tomb is none other than Gianlorenzo Bernini. An in-depth artistic analysis of this piece shows that Bernini created it in order to provide a lasting rebuttal to Alexander VII's critics, validating his reputation and character in a final act of gratitude to a close friend and his most prominent benefactor.

Now to understand the motivation behind this piece and its relevance to Bernini and his audience, it is necessary to provide some historical context and explore Bernini's relationship with Alexander VII. The election of Fabio Chigi to the papacy, after which he took the name Alexander VII, occurred with some surprise. Magnuson provides a vivid description of the unfolding of the contentious vote from which Chigi emerged victorious.<sup>1</sup> From the outset of the conclave of 1655, there were three main factions within the College of Cardinals worthy of note: those loyal to the French crown, those loyal to the Spanish crown, and a third group that was determined to vote for the best candidate for the papacy, regardless of his nationality.

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<sup>1</sup> Torgil Magnuson, *Rome in the Age of Bernini*, (Trans. Nancy Adler, Vol. II. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1986, Print) 126-127



1. Left: full view of tomb with Alexander VII kneeling at center above other figures. Right: Detail of foreground with Charity, Death, and Truth from left to right with open door behind Death.<sup>2</sup>

This final group was nicknamed the *Squadron Volante*, or Flying Squad, because of their independence. The French-supported Cardinal Sacchetti emerged as an early favorite followed closely by Chigi and Carafa, but the Spanish utilized a veto to permanently block his election. Outraged at the Spanish, a stalemate ensued as the French were instructed not to support Chigi due to his clear anti-French stance earlier in his attempt to broker peace for the Treaty of Westphalia. Sacchetti convinced his French backing that Chigi was in truth the best candidate, and with no great urgency the French, Spanish, and *Squadron Volante* eventually joined in support of Fabio Chigi. With only one dissenting vote (his own!), Fabio Chigi was elected Pope, taking the name Alexander VII.<sup>3</sup>

Although his odds at achieving the papacy initially were slim, Magnuson relates that Alexander VII's election was "greeted with such joy and high hopes" due to his reverent and

<sup>2</sup> All images courtesy of: Rudolf Wittkower, *Bernini: The Sculptor of the Roman Baroque*, (Fourth. New York: Phaidon Press Inc., 2010, Print) Plates 174-178 p 214-218

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 123-127

learned personality.<sup>4</sup> He was “distinguished by a profound piety, in which humanist learning was combined with a deeply serious disposition.”<sup>5</sup> Such traits led him to be a vocal opponent of nepotism and corruption that had begun to rear its head at the Vatican, and this played a major role in winning over the support of the *Squadrone Volante*. Unfortunately, he was also prone to sickness, chronically suffering from gallstones and the excruciating surgery they necessitated (*sans* anesthesia, certainly). His executive will began to falter because of either his poor health or his excessive academic nature, and his reputation was established as a Pope that “had little inclination to make decisions on his own... (who’s) reign is consequently marked with a lack of resolution.”<sup>6</sup> This indecisiveness began to wear on his previously strict sentiments towards nepotism, and by the last years of his papacy he had spent over an incredible 600,000 scudi on land and titles for his favored nephews. While they did not achieve political influence, the nepotistic spending habits of Alexander VII rankled Romans and curia alike who had such great hopes for a strong renewal of the church under this Pope.<sup>7</sup>

Despite this ill-will, many contemporaries of Alexander VII (and millions more since) appreciated his loose purse-strings. Among these was possibly the single greatest beneficiary of Pope Alexander VII’s combined generosity with Vatican funds and appreciation for art: Gianlorenzo Bernini. Having been acquainted before Chigi’s election, Alexander VII and Bernini wasted no time becoming close friends.<sup>8</sup> Alexander maintained Bernini as “architect of St. Peter’s, but the Pope made him his personal architect as well as architect of the *Camera*—an unmatched sign of papal favor... (and) Bernini became the undisputed artistic arbiter in Rome.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 126-131

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 126

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 127

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 128-131

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 162

<sup>9</sup> Jake Morrissey, *The Genius in the Design*, (New York: Harper-Collins, 2005, Print) 227-228

Mormando goes so far as to even call them a “dream team” that was “at work—and at play—in the streets, churches, and public squares of Rome...(and) the city, already a dazzling ‘theater’ of marvels and delights, received a further spectacular dose of Baroque urban renewal and embellishment unmatched by any other pontificate.”<sup>10</sup> The reader cannot avoid being moved to wonder at imagining this magical period in Rome, when some of the most famous monuments began popping up all over the city at the hands of one of history’s greatest artists.

As for Alexander’s personal collections, he commissioned Bernini for three pieces at the very outset of his rule. All of these were *memento mori* (pieces that, literally translated, remind you that you must die) including: a marble skull which he kept on his desk, a lead coffin that sat in his bedroom at all hours, and designs for Alexander VII’s funerary monument (mentioned in Papal diary AD 1656).<sup>11</sup> Such orders demonstrate that Bernini was effectively a general contractor for Alexander; if he needed any piece of art, Alexander would pass it to Bernini who would then organize his studio and network to make the pope’s wishes a reality.<sup>12</sup> Alexander’s clear focus on death was an obvious inspiration for his tomb design. Bernini’s familiarity with Alexander’s meditation on mortality and his use of his studio to produce massive amounts of high quality sculpture both came to influence Alexander’s final resting place.

The execution of Alexander’s most important piece fell to Bernini, certainly, but there were many contributors to its completion. Although Alexander had communicated his desires as early as 1656, the tomb was not finished until 1678, by which time the Pope had been dead for eleven years. Alexander’s nephew, Cardinal Flavio Chigi, gave the official commission, and

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<sup>10</sup> Franco Mormando, *Bernini: His Life and his Rome*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011, Print) 195

<sup>11</sup> Magnuson, 126, 181

<sup>12</sup> Mormando, 200

Clement IX pushed for the memorial to be adjacent to his in Santa Maria Maggiore.<sup>13</sup> This plan was scrapped, and St. Peter's was chosen for the site of the memorial. It stands there today thanks to the work of a handful of stonemasons, sculptors, polishers, and apprentices of Bernini's studio that did the majority of the work.<sup>14</sup> Finding that Bernini did not carve every bit of the tomb should not detract from the impact of the piece; the fact is that Bernini had extensive oversight in the design and finishing process, and he had developed his team in the studio to a high level of skill and subdivision in order to produce high quality art with less effort.<sup>15</sup>

Coming back to St. Peter's, quick inspection shows that the monument itself is overflowing with symbolism, color, and complexity. In order to avoid being overwhelmed, it is best to consider the work as a whole, and then move to a more detailed analysis of each major component, namely, the figures and the drapery. The piece is fit into a rectangular niche in the narrow passage of the south transept with a brown wooden door at its center.<sup>16</sup> On its extreme vertical borders it is bounded by two red marble fluted columns with Corinthian capitals (see 2, below). The red material is referred to as both "red marble" and "*diaspro di Sicilia*" (Sicilian jasper), and so will be referred to as jasper to respect the original construction notes.<sup>17</sup> The upper-most horizontal border holds Alexander VII's coat of arms featuring the tell-tale Sieneese Chigi mountains. Within these boundaries, starting from the floor, two rectangular blocks of black marble buffer the door. On the front of the top surface of these blocks stand two female figures, one on each side of the door. They are in turn framed by an arch which stands behind them supporting a half-dome. This dome provides cover over the head of a kneeling Alexander

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<sup>13</sup> Rudolf, Wittkower, *Bernini: The Sculptor of the Roman Baroque*, (Fourth, New York: Phaidon Press Inc., 2010, Print) 296

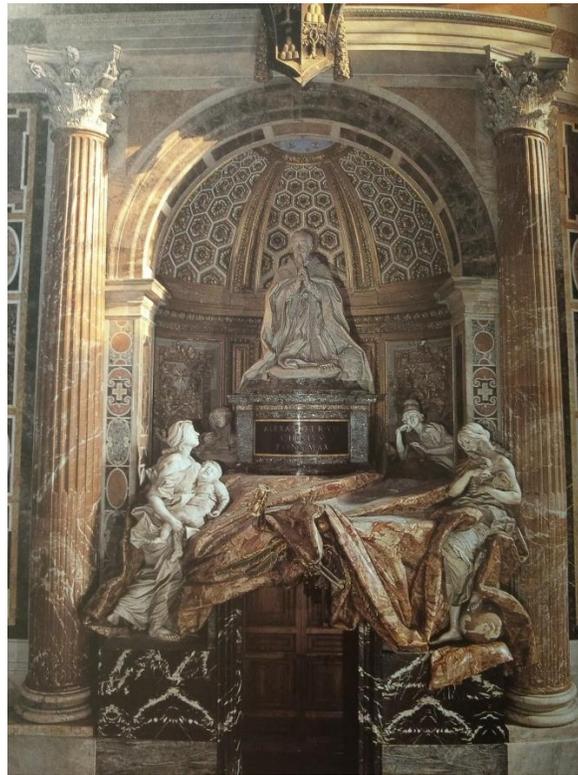
<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 296

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 296

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 296

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 296

VII in white marble, the apex and focal point of the sculpture. Alexander is flanked by two additional female figures in the background. A gilded skeleton, referred to as Death, emerges from a flowing drapery of jasper positioned between the top of the door and the bottom of Alexander's pedestal (see 2).



2: Clockwise from left: Charity, Prudence, Alexander VII, Justice, Truth, and Death in center

The white marble of the figures evokes purity that is central to Catholic doctrine. The red of the drapery enlivens the figures, and is reminiscent of Bernini's stonework in *Sant'Andrea al Quirinale* which signaled martyrdom. Could this coloration be a similar allusion to the blood of man that is so closely associated with death? The gold of the skeleton Death provides a visual counter to the focal point of Alexander, and the gilding is almost necessary as Death may go unnoticed from certain angles, obscured by the drapery, such as in 2. The coffering in the dome provides a sense of fractal infinitude with the varied scaling of its hexagons from bottom to top.

Also of note are the seven rectangular inlays in the arch. This number could be a dual reference to the Biblical interpretation of seven as a godly number as well as a nod toward Alexander's designation as the seventh pope with his name. Having a basic sense of the sculpture, it is now possible to move into a detailed analysis of the figures.

The identity of the figures is of little dispute. Wittkower (and his sources) identify the women in the foreground as Charity (holding a child, left of Alexander VII), and Truth (holding the sun in her arms with her foot on the globe, to the right of Alexander).<sup>18</sup> Prudence reclines in the background behind Charity (gazing into a mirror, to the left of Alexander), and Justice rests behind Truth with her head in her hand (wearing a helmet, to the right of Alexander).<sup>19</sup> Death is the name given to the skeleton, which wields an hourglass in one hand and raises the flowing cloth with the other. Having these personified virtues, or allegories, was a common theme in Baroque funerary monuments. They are used to show the virtues the deceased exemplified and their "activated" engagement serves as an inspiration to the viewer to pursue virtue more passionately in the face of death.<sup>20</sup> The allegory of Truth in Alexander VII's tomb is one of the least traditional, and overt flaunting of norms by Bernini here. This subject of discussion will be returned to after considering the last macro-level analysis of the tomb: the visual narrative created by Bernini's use of space.

The sizable number of figures squeezed into this narrow niche demanded thoughtful and intentional placement within the rectangular frame by Bernini. He does this with the utmost effect by fitting them all in a nearly equilateral triangle extending from the vertex on Alexander VII's head to a vertex on Charity's strong right side and ending at the last vertex directly on

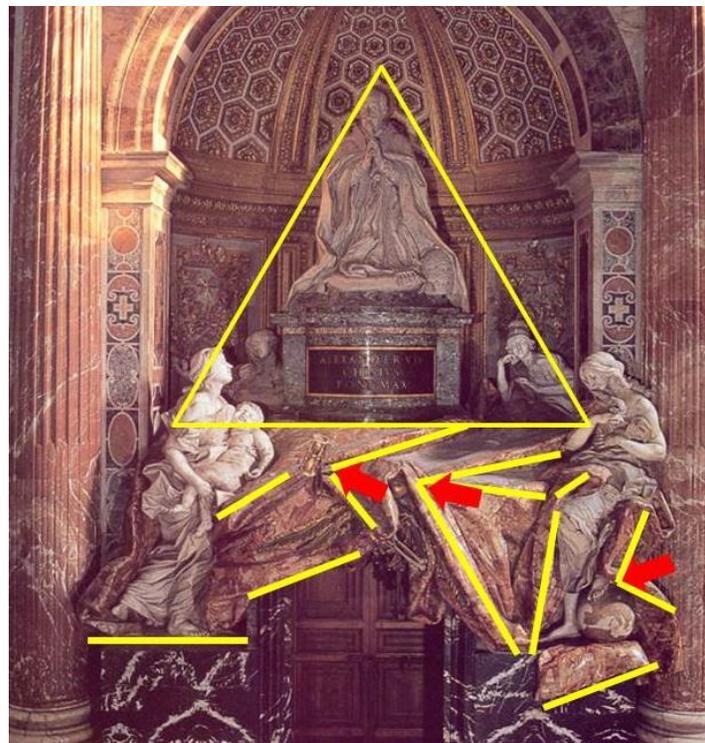
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<sup>18</sup> Wittkower, 296-297

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 296-297

<sup>20</sup> Irving Lavin, *St. Peter's in the Vatican*, (Ed. William Tronzo, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, Print) 176

Truth's heart (see 3, below). Prudence on the left behind Charity fits (prudently) within her region of the triangle, and Justice, on the right behind truth, follows the right guideline (as one would expect of Justice, always following rules) with her body at the same angle as her respective edge of the triangle. This arrangement creates a bottom-heavy balance that shows stability and points to heaven.<sup>21</sup> The foreground figures share a compelling relation with this triangle. Death, for one, is not included whatsoever. To get to Death from the triangle, the viewer must first consider the relationship between the foreground figures and the triangle.



3: Annotated tomb showing the triangular balance which communicates the narrative nature of the piece, as well as the major contours of the drapery directing the eye to accent points.

The natural starting-point in this exercise is at the bottom left corner at Charity. This could be justified by considering that Charity is moving in a way similar to visitors to the

<sup>21</sup> Much to the author's satisfaction, Lavin also takes a similar interpretation, noting it as pyramidal, though, and not a simple triangle: "The pyramidal form with the raised effigy flanked by pairs of allegories echoes the apsidal monuments of Paul III and Urban VIII." While the positioning is surely pyramidal, the impact on the viewer is certainly triangular and two-dimensional. The harmony of the rear allegories in this triangle affirms this.

Basilica. On entering through the main doors and approaching the sculpture, the viewer will be walking in the same direction as Charity and she will be the allegory closest to the viewer physically. She is the only virtue who gazes at the pope, she moves with her bodyline along the edge of the triangle, and all the major contours of the drapery on her side of the door point up, creating an overall motion towards the Pope. The eye proceeds to Alexander, and is then redirected down and right to the heart of Truth. Truth looks down her right arm at the sun she is holding, and a contour of the red jasper fabric extends from her right elbow to meet with two other major reflective lines, creating a vertex indicated by the middle red arrow superimposed on 3. All contours of the drapery on the right side of the door originating from Truth slope downwards towards Death, opposite of those upward lines paired with Charity. The remaining contours on Truth's side point to Death's hourglass and Truth's foot on the globe (left- and right-most red arrows superimposed on 3, respectively). The accuracy of these contours in pointing out secondary and tertiary focal points of the tomb affirms their intentional placement. The placement of Truth just outside of the triangle, and her direction of the viewer's gaze towards Death is the key to how Death is incorporated with the other figures. The critical gaze flows from Charity, to Alexander VII, to Truth, who then redirects the eye to Death. Not much more can be said on this interpretation except that it is relevant that Charity, the starting point of all this, holds a child which represents the opposite of Death. The relation between Truth and Death that this analysis reveals also is indicative of Bernini's widely used motif of Truth and Death as closely related phenomena (further analysis of Charity, Justice, and Prudence can be found in Wittkower, and will be left to the reader's interpretation).

Bernini explored this theme with *Truth Unveiled*, an unfinished piece he began in 1646 to vent his rage after the Congregation of St. Peter's toppled his towers on the façade of the same

basilica when his opponents (including Borromini) wrongly accused him of design failure causing structural instability.<sup>22</sup> *Truth Unveiled* was intended to be a figure of Time (portrayed as a skeleton, closely related to Death) pulling back a drapery from a nude Truth, which had the effect of “combin(ing)...the two traditional concepts of Time, the revealer of Truth and the relentless destroyer.”<sup>23</sup> Wittkower explains that this sculpture was Bernini’s rebuttal to his critics, telling them that with Time, he would be vindicated as the Truth was revealed. Considering Alexander’s tomb again, the other virtues are typical for graves, but Truth’s placement on Alexander’s tomb was highly unusual. This leads to the belief that Bernini placed



4: *Detail of Truth, with features similar to Queen Christina of Sweden’s, close friend of Bernini* her there in a similar protest on Alexander’s behalf; his critics hounded him for perceived nepotism and wasteful spending on his building mania, but Bernini believed that, with Time, the truth would be revealed and his good friend Alexander would be remembered for his piety (the other three virtues surrounding him) and contributions to art in Rome.<sup>24</sup> Manguson affirms Alexander’s nepotism, but also notes that his relatives achieved no real political power, perhaps a

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<sup>22</sup> Wittkower, 268

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 268

<sup>24</sup> Mormando, 224

conclusion that reflects the more favorable view of the Pope adopted with the passage of time.<sup>25</sup> It is also interesting to notice that Truth closely resembles Queen Christina of Sweden (in the eyes, nose, and chin) who was close friends with Alexander and Bernini, and a jewel for the church as a “trophy convert” from a vehemently Protestant nation (see 4, above).<sup>26</sup> Truth’s foot rests north of continental Europe, with Lavin saying this shows Protestant England as downtrodden; in light of her likeness to Christina, though, Mormando’s interpretation is preferred in that he considers it a nod to Sweden to hint at Alexander’s victory of welcoming such a high-ranking Protestant into the flock.<sup>27,28</sup> Any contemporary detractors of Alexander VII would be forced to recognize his success in this regard, as with the passage of Time this would become one of his most well-known achievements (the Truth revealed).

Death is the final character of interest. Per Wittkower, Death, Like Truth, is also an innovative piece by Bernini in his break from tradition, foreshadowed by Bernini’s tomb of Alessandro Valtrini where Death featured the same six-feathered wings (d. 1639).<sup>29</sup> Bernini creatively cast Death as the *agent* of death and not just a symbol, “raising an hourglass...triumphant over life.”<sup>30</sup> Lavin also notes the placing of Death firmly within the Western tradition of depicting Hermes as leading the dead through a half-open door to the afterlife with winged helmet and carrying a staff—here the staff is converted to an hour-glass and the winged helmet to literal wings which lift Death out of the physical doorway behind him.<sup>31</sup> The effect of Death is to draw the viewer into their own *memento mori* (recalling Alexander’s coffin and skull), as he is the furthest point forward on the sculpture, “gestur(ing to

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<sup>25</sup> Magnuson, 130-131

<sup>26</sup> Lavin, 224-225

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 224-225

<sup>28</sup> Mormando, 179

<sup>29</sup> Wittkower, 261, 262

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 261-262

<sup>31</sup> Lavin, 178-179

the viewer) just as menacingly as toward the Pope.”<sup>32</sup> This action, combined with Death pulling back the drapery and his



5: *Left: Detail of Death with hourglass. Right: hourglass as leading point of sculpture on right.*

close association with the metaphors of Time and Truth, shows Bernini’s visceral appeal to the viewer to adopt Alexander’s concentration on mortality. Doing so, the viewer draws closer to Alexander’s more noble traits, and hopefully with time, will see the truth of Alexander VII as a positive force in Rome.

The symbolism and organization of the tomb of Alexander VII convert into stone Bernini’s affection for the Pope and his desire to rectify Alexander VII’s reputation for posterity. While this tomb may not be considered Bernini’s greatest work due to its specific purpose and restricted focus on one man, there is no doubting its mastery of story-telling and use of captivating forms to evoke emotion. Bernini told of his love for Alexander here by the holistic approach taken; Lavin describes the work as a whole as “a kind of summa of papal tomb types: a

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 181-182

‘freestanding’ monument with four ‘activated’ allegories, surmounted by a kneeling effigy”<sup>33</sup>, showing that while other popes only received one of these traits in their monuments, Alexander receives all of them at once. Also contributing to honor Alexander VII is the presence of the innovative figures of Truth and Death. These set Alexander’s tomb apart and make a reference to the hope Bernini had of Time mending Alexander’s reputation for nepotism and excessive spending. Bernini hoped this tomb would reveal and reinforce the Truth of Fabio Chigi’s pious nature and the wisdom he had in filling Rome with sculpture. Almost 500 years later, Bernini’s plan seems to be working. Any viewer not familiar with Chigi sees a humble, pure servant of God kneeling in reverence before the high altar of St. Peter’s Basilica. His companions’ mourning for him reinforces his virtue, and the flying Death provides gravity to a funeral monument proper for an important individual. The tomb of Alexander VII reflects Bernini’s need to show a final act of gratitude to his great patron.

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<sup>33</sup> Lavin, 176

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