



walterpadovani.

Bernardino Cametti

Nativity







Bernardino Cametti
(Rome, 1669 - 1736)

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Terracotta, 51 x 66 x 64 cm

PROVENANCE: around 1846 Forti family, Rome; acquired around 1887 by Prince Camillo Massimo, Rome; sold around 1930 by Camillo Francesco Massimo to Carlo Vangelli, Rome; acquired by the present owner in 2009.

EXHIBITIONS: *La Passione di Cristo secondo Bernini: dipinti e sculture del Barocco romano*, Rome, Palazzo Incontro, April 3rd - June 2nd 2007; *Sfida al Barocco. Roma Torino Parigi 1680 - 1750*, Reggia di Venaria, Citroniera, March 13th - June 14th 2020.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: S. Frascchetti, *Il Bernini: la sua vita, la sua opera, il suo tempo*, Milan 1900, p. 415; G. Morello, F. Petrucci, C. M. Strinati, *La Passione di Cristo secondo Bernini: dipinti e sculture del Barocco romano*, Rome 2007, pp. 41- 43, n. 1.; M. Di Macco, G. Dardanella, *Sfida al Barocco. Roma Torino Parigi 1680 - 1750*, Genoa 2020, pp. 303-305, n. 63, ill.

Long known to scholars, this complex group in terracotta was published in 1900 by Stanislao Frascchetti, when it was owned by the princely Massimo family¹. Illustrated in the first monograph on Bernini as a work by the school of the sculptor, it was later displayed at the exhibition *La Passione di Cristo secondo Bernini. Dipinti e sculture del Barocco romano* held in Rome at Palazzo Incontro in the spring of 2007. Studied for the occasion by Francesco Petrucci, who provided a detailed reconstruction of its collecting and

1. S. Frascchetti, *Il Bernini. La sua vita, la sua opera, il suo tempo*, Milan 1900, p. 415.

conservation history, the *Nativity* was owned in around 1930 by the Massimo family, who sold it to the antiquarian Carlo Vangelli². As concerns its earlier history, the group should probably be identified as the “Nativity scene set up in former times in Trastevere” mentioned by Fraschetti himself in another passage of his monograph as a work by the school of Gian Lorenzo³. In the 19th century, the *Nativity* belonged to the Forti family (Bernini’s present-day descendants) who must have sold it to Prince Camillo Massimo in around 1887, at the same time as they sold the Anguillara Tower in Trastevere, where the *Nativity* was displayed for the Christmas celebrations, to the Municipality of Rome. According to Petrucci, the Forti family still possesses a 19th-century photograph of the group, confirming its identification as that under discussion here. Finally, it should be borne in mind that its ownership by the Forti family in the 19th century does not imply any connection with Bernini since Caterina Giocondi, Prospero Bernini’s great-granddaughter, only married Francesco Forti in the 20th century.

After the careful conservation work conducted in the summer of 2009 with the removal the brown repaintings, still present at the 2007 exhibition⁴, the terracotta has regained the authentically velvety appearance of the surfaces, making a better reading of its style possible (even after cleaning, it remains impossible to decipher an inscription, perhaps a name, incised in the clay before firing and placed on the base in front of the St. Joseph). In my opinion, there is no doubt that the 18th-century offshoots mentioned by Petrucci are actually indicative of the true date of this work,

2. F. Petrucci, *Scuola romana, XVII secolo, Natività*, in G. Morello, F. Petrucci, C. M. Strinati, *La Passione di Cristo secondo Bernini. Dipinti e sculture del Barocco Romano*, catalogue of the exhibition, Rome 2007, pp. 40-45.

3. Fraschetti 1900 cit. p. 407.

4. It is uncertain if these traces of paint were part of or replaced the polychromy (evidently postdating the execution of the sculpture) clearly visible in the photograph published in 1900 by Fraschetti.



I Bernardino Cametti, *Portrait of Taddeo Barberini*, Rome, Museo di Roma.

which should be fixed at the start of the 18th century and thus without any direct connection to Bernini and his school.

In fact, as we shall see, numerous clues suggest an attribution to Bernardino Cametti, born in Rome in around 1669 to a family of Piedmontese origin. He became one of the greatest sculptors of early 18th-century Rome alongside Camillo Rusconi, Angelo de Rossi and the Frenchmen Pierre Etienne Monnot, Jean Baptiste Théodon





and Pierre Legros⁵. A student of Lorenzo Ottoni, Cametti executed his first public work, the large marble relief of the *Canonization of St. Ignatius*,

5. On the sculptor see U. Schlegel, *Bernardino Cametti*, in 'Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen', 1963, pp. 44-83; 151-200; R. Enggass, *Cametti Bernardino*, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, 17, 1974, pp. 198-200; Id. *Bernardino Cametti*, in *Early Eighteenth-Century Sculpture in Rome*, University Park-London 1976, pp. 149-158; S. Walker, *Bernardino Cametti*, in *Art in Rome in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. E. Peters Bowron, J. Rishel, Philadelphia 2000, pp. 232-233.

between 1695 and 1698 in the context of the most important sculptural worksite of late 17th-century Rome, the decoration of the chapel dedicated to the Spanish saint in the church of the Gesù. Subsequently the sculptor was constantly engaged not only in the churches of Rome but also in Orvieto, Bologna, Turin and Madrid.

Since his production in terracotta is at present essentially limited to the model for the portrait of *Taddeo Barberini* of 1704 (Fig. 1), now in the Museo di Roma, the most significant parallels for establishing his execution of the *Nativity* are with his marble works. Already in the youthful relief in the Gesù, the drapery of the Jesuit kneeling at

2 Bernardino Cametti, *Canonisation of St. Ignatius*, Rome, Chiesa del Gesù.

3 Bernardino Cametti, *Maria Colomba Vicentini Muti*, Rome, San Marcello.





the feet of the Pope (Fig. 2) presents solutions resembling those we see in the garment of the Virgin. Equally telling is the comparison of this detail to the garments of *Maria Colomba Vicentini Muti* in San Marcello (1725; Fig. 3), which present a fairly similar rich *chiaroscuro*, developed by Cametti by studying his French colleagues and particularly Legros. Naturally, to stay with the figure of the Virgin, it is no less telling to imagine her next to the later Virgin Annunciate

in the relief with the *Annunciation* for the Basilica of Superga in Turin (1729; Fig. 4), similar in the compositional arrangement and in the dynamism of the fabrics, rendered by means of an incessant succession of folds, some delicately carved, others deeper and rich in shadows.

On the other hand, whilst the facial features of the St. Joseph recall those of the *St. Simon* in Orvieto (1714), the rich and exuberant drapery falling in abundance to the ground in soft but insistent

4 Bernardino Cametti, *Annunciation*, Turin, Basilica of Superga.



5 Bernardino Cametti, *Almsgiving*, Rome, Monte di Pietà.





rhythms can be compared to the billowing garments of St. Peter in the relief with the *Boat of St. Peter* on the façade of Frascati Cathedral (1703), to those of *Fame* in the *Monument to Antonio Barberini* in Santa Rosalia at Palestrina (1704), and ultimately also to the cloak of *Almsgiving* at the Monte di Pietà (1721-1724; Fig. 5). In any case, the *Nativity* under discussion here is an excellent example of “Cametti’s predilection for delicate and slightly undulating rhythms” rightly identified by Robert Enggass⁶ as one of the salient features of his style.

As for the function and original destination of this sculpture, Petrucci’s theory that it was not a model for a larger work remains wholly valid. Indeed, the extraordinary finishing coupled with the vivacity of every detail (from the straw on which the Child lies to the vegetation on the architectural features and the Virgin’s foot in the foreground) suggest that it was intended for a prestigious collection.

In this context, we should not forget the two marble groups (the *Adoration of the Shepherds* and the *Deposition from the Cross*, Pistoia, Biblioteca Fabroniana), slightly larger in size than our work, sculpted by Agostino Cornacchini between 1714 and 1720 for the Roman palace of Cardinal Agostino Fabroni. These two groups, alongside the bronzes executed at around the same time by various Florentine sculptors for the Electress of the Palatinate, testify to the popularity among collectors of sculpture groups with several figures on a non-monumental scale in the first quarter of the 18th century. In the absence of documentary evidence, it is currently difficult to suggest an exact date for our *Nativity*, but it must in any case have been executed in the first twenty years of the 18th century.

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6. Enggass 1974 cit. p. 198.



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