

walterpadovani.

Pietro Bracci

Baptism of Christ









Pietro Bracci

(Rome, 1700 - 1773)

Baptism of Christ,
1734

Terracotta, 18 x 18 cm

Preparatory model for the marble bas-relief on the façade of San Giovanni Battista dei Fiorentini in Rome.

The figure of Christ is placed in the centre of the terracotta relief, in an unusual pose for the depiction of Baptism: on bended knees, his left hand holding that of John the Baptist, who is in the act of pouring water from the River Jordan over his head, the other holding the hand of one of the two angels. Christ is represented in a pose of complete surrender to the solemn moment he is experiencing, welcoming the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove (**fig. 1**).

Compared with the final marble relief (**fig. 2**),

where the bodies acquire volume, the draperies fill with lightness and the scene becomes a solemn representation, here the composition is sketchy and sparse, but still manages to render the idea of the rhythm of the figures within the compressed space of the square, forming a central seamless line formed by the hands joining in an act of faith.

The basilica of San Giovanni Battista dei Fiorentini in Rome is dedicated to the patron saint of Florence (**fig. 3**).

Built in 1448, with architecture by Giaco-

1. Pietro Bracci, *Baptism of Christ*, preparatory model



2. Pietro Bracci, *Baptism of Christ*. Rome, detail of the facade of San Giovanni dei Fiorentini

3. Rome, San Giovanni dei Fiorentini

mo della Porta, it was declared a parish church for all Florentines living in Rome by Leo X in 1519. Between 1732 and 1733, another Florentine pope, Clement XII, commissioned the construction of the façade, entrusting the project to the architect and compatriot Alessandro Galilei.

The travertine façade features a sober sculptural decoration, with four quadrangular reliefs depicting stories from the life of John the Baptist, placed in the spaces between the columns, above the niches, on either side of the three portals. Archive research, conducted by Vittorio Moschini and published in 1925 (Mo-







4. Rome, detail of the facade of San Giovanni dei Fiorentini

schini 1925, p. 271), revealed that Galilei commissioned the reliefs from four sculptors. The document was signed on 6 September 1734 by Pietro Bracci for the *Baptism of Christ*, Filippo Della Valle for the *Preaching of the Baptist*, Domenico Scaramuccia for the *Beheading*, and finally, Paolo Benaglia for the *Visitation*, with the com-

mitment to make the model 'to the satisfaction' of the patron and to finish the work within six months of receiving the marble in the studio (fig. 4).

Filippo Della Valle's terracotta sketch with the *Preaching of the Baptist*, more or less the same size as ours, is kept in the Museo Nazionale del Palazzo di Venezia (Giometti 2011, pp. 96-97, no. 96). In 1924, Brinckmann published it together with the *Baptism*, attributing both works to Della Valle (Brinckmann 1924, II, pp. 118-119 fig. 5a,b), when the monograph of Pietro Bracci by Costanza Gradara already correctly reported its authorship (C. Gradara 1920, p. 38).

Pietro Bracci was the most prominent sculptor in the panorama of Roman late Baroque sculpture. He entered at the workshop of Giuseppe Bartolomeo Chiari to study drawing while at the same time studying sculpture in that of Camillo Rusconi, and he showed from



5a. Filippo Della Valle, *Preaching of the Baptist*, preparatory model



5b. Pietro Bracci, *Baptism of Christ*, preparatory model

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6. *Capitoline Antinous*. Rome, Capitoline Museums

7. Pietro Bracci, *Bust of Clement XII*. Rome, Borghese Gallery

the very beginning of his career an interest in the culture and tradition of painting. In 1724, he married Faustina, daughter of the painter Francesco Mancini, and opened his studio in Piazza Trinità dei Monti the following year. Favoured by Cardinal Albani, he became portrait painter to the papal court, and, always for Cardinal Albani, in 1734, he restored the famous *Capitoline Antinous*, integrating two fingers of the right hand, the left arm, the left foot, the right leg, the trunk of the tree and the plinth (fig. 6). To a marble torso in the Albani collection, Bracci added the head, arms, thighs and legs,



8. Pietro Bracci, *Oceanus*.
Rome, Trevi Fountain

drapery and a base with the trunk in 1742, making it an *Apollo* (Rome, Villa Albani). As a young man, he was admitted to the Arcadia and later to the Accademia di San Luca, of which he became *Principe* in 1756.

Aside from his portraits (fig.7), he was known for his monumental sculptural works, characterised by a combination of dynamism and classicism. His major works include the statue of *Oceanus* at the Trevi Fountain in Rome (fig. 8), and the statue of *San Vincent de Paul* (fig. 9) in the St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

His style is distinguished by his ability to capture vivid expressions and natural move-



9. Pietro Bracci, *St. Vincent de Paul*.
Rome, St. Peter's Basilica

ments in his sculptures, along with detailed attention to anatomical details and rendering of fabrics. Bracci contributed significantly to the artistic landscape of his time, leaving a lasting imprint in the field of Baroque sculpture.

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