

The Other Bonaventura

Ann Sutherland Harris

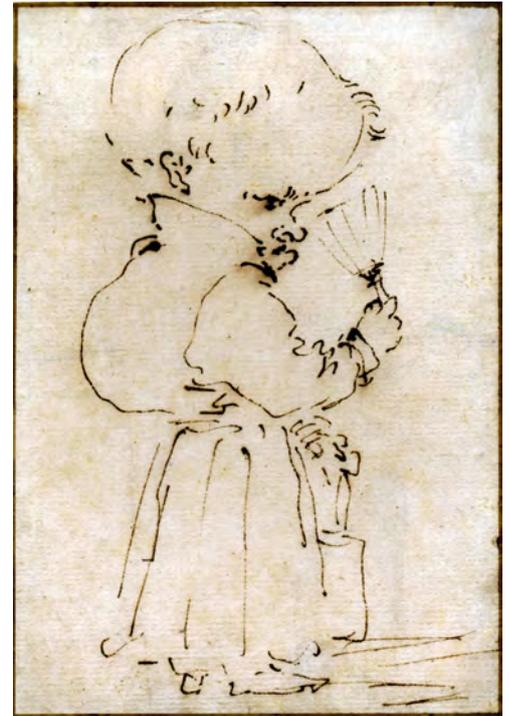
In June 2012, Irving Lavin sent me E-mail and the final draft of a substantial article written in 1993 that he was about to submit for publication. He wanted to know whether I agreed with him that the man depicted in the Bernini caricature that the Lavins had bought in London in 1974 (*fig. 1*) could be Bonaventura Bisi (1601-1659), a learned Bolognese Franciscan monk whose miniature paintings earned him the nickname Il Pittorino. He was a friend of Guercino and a busy art agent in frequent contact with Francesco d'Este, Duke of Modena, and Cardinal Leopoldo de' Medici in Florence. Irving's text summarized all the evidence we have about Bernini's caricatures and their admirers as well the origins of this genre in the studio of the Carracci - and even earlier antecedents - to culminate in Bernini's single figure depictions of known individuals¹.

Irving focused on a witty letter written by Bernini in 1652 that he sent to a man named Bonaventura and his friend Don Giberti for whom he had just made two caricatures – one of a tall man [Giberti], and one short [Bonaventura] whose surname is not given.² Did I agree that this caricature is not only by Bernini – that I never doubted – but also that it depicts Bonaventura Bisi?

Irving's visual evidence included, among other items, an undated caricature of Fra Bisi by Guercino in the Ashmolean, Oxford (*fig. 2*)³. Since Bernini's caricatures were admired in Rome because his subjects were recognizable despite his distortions of their salient features, I looked for some physical resemblance between the two men. The differences between the hunch-backed dwarf with a swollen head carrying a bucket and the normal physical proportions of Bisi, seemed to me too extreme for both to depict the same person.

It would be wonderful to have a Bernini caricature documented by the artist himself of someone whose appearance is recorded by another artist who knew both parties. However, Irving's hypothesis was difficult to support. The Bonaventura Bisi in Guercino's drawing in Oxford is a seated Franciscan monk of normal proportions, if a tad overweight, who is checking the time while holding his place in a large book. Bernini's dwarf may be a minor cleric but he is not wearing the robes of a Franciscan with a cowl and a knotted rope around his waist. Guercino's images of Bisi stress his intellectual pursuits - he has piles of books in the Oxford drawing, and shelves of them in the background of the flattering portrait painting of Bisi by Guercino recently acquired by the Ringling Museum in Sarasota, a work not known to either of us in 2012 (*fig. 3*)⁴.

We ended up having a friendly argument about what the hunchback with a big head is actually doing. Irving thought he was sipping from a glass of wine while making the rounds to collect money in the half-hidden bucket held in his left hand. Felice Stampfle had suggested to me long ago that this man is carrying a container of holy water and is using a small brush as an aspergillum to sprinkle it about, an explanation I pre-



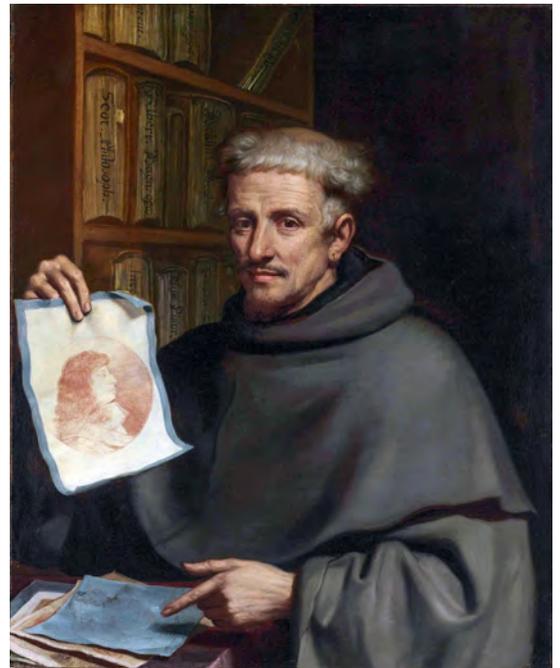
¹ "Bernini and the Art of Social Satire" in I. Lavin et al., *Drawings by GianLorenzo Bernini from the Museum der Bildenden Künste Leipzig*, at The Art Museum, Princeton University, Fall 1981, pp. 25-54. The exhibition then travelled to the major art museums of Cleveland, Los Angeles, Fort Worth, Indianapolis and Boston in 1982. Irving elaborated on this subject in "High and Low Before their Time: Bernini and the Art of Social Satire," in K. VARNEDOE, A. GOPNIK (eds.), *Modern Art and Popular Culture. Readings in High & Low*, New York, 1990, 18-50 (revised and reprinted in *Visible Spirit*, I, London 2007, pp. 397-468).

² The letter was first published by L. OZZOLA, "Tre lettere inedite riguardanti il Bernini", *L'arte* 1906, p. 205. It was reproduced and the transcription altered slightly by A.M. NOCCO: "Una lettera e due 'caricature' inviate da Bernini ad un amico di 'rozzo ingegno'", in F. Petrucci, *I volti del potere: ritratti di uomini illustri a Roma dall'impero romano al neoclassico*, Roma 2004, pp. 180, 183. Irving stated that his transcription "varies slightly from both earlier versions".

³ N. TURNER, C. PLAZZOTTA, *Drawings by Guercino from British Collections*, British Museum, 1991, pp. 222-223. The drawing is in pen and brown ink, 198 x 237 mm. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, Inventory number KTP870.



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ferred. Irving insisted that only ordained priests could perform this ritual and this monk was not of high enough rank. I doubted that monks of any rank collected money in a bucket while drinking wine. I sent him images of aspergillums culled from Wikipedia, none of which looked like the modest objects in use by this poor monk. We never settled on the contents of the bucket. Irving never published this article although he mentioned his suggestion that the Bonaventura in the 1652 letter might be Bisi in a footnote in 2008⁵. My entry for this drawing in my long delayed catalogue of Bernini's drawings suggests that readers decide for themselves whether the bucket contains wine or holy water. I have not mentioned Irving's proposal as new information about Bisi makes it unlikely that he ever visited Rome, and since Bernini rarely left Rome after moving there as a child from Naples until he went to Paris in 1665, they probably never met⁶. Finally the tone of Bernini's letter to this other "Bonaventura" in 1652 implies that the recipient was a good friend and someone he expected to see soon:

mio sig.re

Da chavaliere vi giuro di non mandarvi più disegni perchè avendo voi questi dui ritratti potete dire d'avere tutto quel the può fare quel baldino di bernino, ma perche dubito che il Vostro corto ingegno non sapia conoscerli per non vi fare arrossire vi dico che quel più lungo è Don Giberti e quel più basso è Bona Ventura. Credetemi che a voi è toccato aver la buona Ventura perchè mai mi sono più sodisfatto che in queste due caricature e lo fatte di cuore. Quando verrò costì vedrò se ne tenete conto.

Roma li 15 Marzo 1652 Vero amico mio sig.re

G. L. Bern⁷.

This Bonaventura was not important enough to appear in Franco Mormando's lavishly footnoted edition of the biography of Bernini by his son Domenico, but the letter of 1652 is preserved in the Chigi archives, suggesting that this man lived in or near Rome.

I treasure my memories of this exchange with Irving because it shows that he was willing to consider the views of another scholar and even accept that he might be wrong, though I suspect he still preferred to think that their drawing shows a monk collecting money in a bucket. Moreover, he seems to agree with me that

⁴ Christie's sale London Dec. 9, 2015, lot 168. The portrait was in two earlier sales: Sothebys, London, 1992, Dec. 9, lot 44, and Sotheby's New York, Jan. 31-Feb. 1, lot 57 [not sold]. For a substantial new account of the career of Frate Bonaventura Bisi and the portrait of him by Guercino, see D.M. STONE, "Il frate con l'orecchino d'oro: Bonaventura Bisi pittore e mercante d'arte, e un nuovo ritratto del Guercino", in *Nuovi Studi sul Guercino da Cento a Bologna, da Piacenza a Bologna*, ed. D. Benati and D.M. Stone, Piacenza, 2020, pp. 71-80.

⁵ I. LAVIN, *L'arte della storia dell'arte*, Milano 2008, pp. 73-74, 94, nota 32, cited by Stone, art. cit. p. 20. I wish to thank David Stone for sending me a pdf of his article of which I was unaware when I started drafting this tribute to Irving.

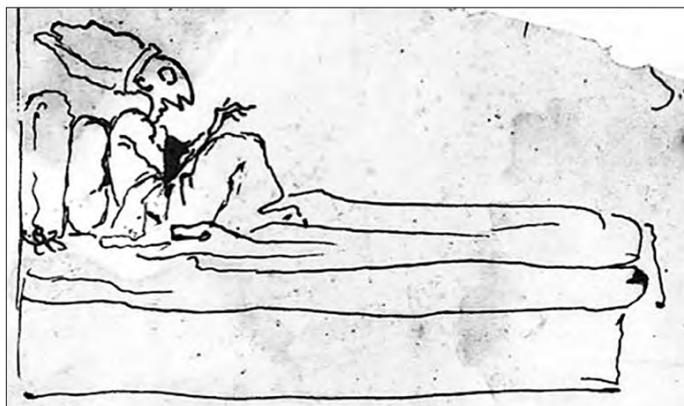
⁶ Stone, art. cit., p. 60 where Stone explains why a trip to Rome in 1625 when he might have met Cassiano dal Pozzo is unlikely.

⁷ Here is the Irving's lively translation: "As a *cavaliere*, I swear I'll never send you any more drawings because having these two portraits you

almost all of the caricatures attributed to Bernini in the Vatican Museum and the Gabinetto di Stampe in Rome are copies: “The suggestion has been made, on purely stylistic grounds, that none of the Roman drawings are autograph, all being copied from lost originals⁸. The suggestion gains weight from the fact that the paper in each Chigi set, though different from one another, is uniform in size and type. This unwonted uniformity would best be explained if both sets were redrawn from originals that had been produced less mechanically, over a period of time and in a variety of formats”.

The suggestion made “on purely stylistic grounds”, was mine, made in the article he cited about a group of caricatures by Angelo de’ Rossi. It was indeed made on stylistic grounds, that article not being the place for a full discussion of that beautifully bound album in the Vatican into which some copies of caricatures by different hands – none Bernini’s in my opinion - with inscriptions that are not in Bernini’s hands – have either been drawn on a page or mounted on it. Irving’s point about the same paper is well taken and will be in my catalogue. And my essay about Bernini’s caricatures will owe a great deal to Irving’s thorough gathering of every scrap of evidence for the existence of and appreciation for this aspect of Bernini’s drawings and achievements as an artist.

Productive intellectual friendships depend on understanding the arguments of both sides, and also agreeing to disagree, as we did. Finally I admire Irving’s essay about social satire in part because the subject is visual humor – to put it simply - and thinking about our long dead artists joking about themselves and others makes them seem alive again briefly⁹. Irving’s essay cited above is a *tour de force* survey of all earlier discussions of caricature that ends with several surprises, including one about grasshoppers, and an extremely unflattering description of Innocent XI, the Pope represented in Bernini’s last caricature (*fig. 4*).



Irving makes every line in that scrap of a sketch significant, which it is. I also doubt that Bernini showed it to many people – it is too cruel, even disrespectful of that unpopular Pope – which may explain how it survived among his own drawings after his death and is now preserved in Leipzig. Almost all of those in collections of caricatures mentioned by Filippo Baldinucci and Domenico Bernini as well as the twenty seven mounted and framed that were displayed in Bernini’s bedroom at the time of his death, have vanished. Even this point did not escape Irving! Bravo! Bravissimo!

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ANN SUTHERLAND HARRIS was born in Cambridge [UK] and has lived in both the UK and USA, the latter permanently since 1965. She has a BA [1961] and PhD [1965] from the Courtauld Institute of the University of London. She taught at several American universities before joining the faculty at the University of Pittsburgh as a Professor in 1984; she retired in 2012. She has written mainly about seventeenth-century Italian and French artists, in particular Andrea Sacchi [monograph 1977], Gian Lorenzo Bernini [*Selected Drawings*, 1977], Nicolas Poussin and the Carracci, with an emphasis on their drawings and those of many other artists. She also organized with Linda Nochlin the first major exhibition of European and American women artists working between 1550 and 1950 [Los Angeles County Museum, et al. 1977]. Her current project is the completion of a monograph on the drawings of Gian Lorenzo Bernini. ash@pitt.edu

can say you have all that little rascal Bernini can do. But since I doubt your dim wit can recognize them I’ll tell you the longer one is Don Giberti and the shorter one is Bona Ventura [a proper name meaning ‘Good Fortune’ in Italian]. Believe me, you’ve had Good Fortune, because I’ve never had greater satisfaction than in these two caricatures, and I’ve made them with my heart. When I visit you I’ll see if you appreciate them. Rome, 15 March 1652. Your True Friend G. L. Bern.”.

⁸ A.S. HARRIS: “Angelo de’ Rossi, Bernini, and the Art of Caricature”, *Master Drawings* 1975, No. 2, pp. 158-60.

⁹ “Con una satira quasi demoniaca, il papa è raffigurato con l’emblema del suo potere, pure nell’intimità della camera da letto. Il papa rigorista, che aveva fatto rivestire l’ignuda *Verità* nel monumento di Alessandro VII, giace su un letto lunghissimo, tremante dal freddo, puntellato agli enormi cuscini, rannicchiato penosamente” (MAURIZIO e MARCELLO FAGIOLO DELL’ARCO, *Bernini*, Roma 1966, p. 308).