Bernini and the Practice of Physiognomy

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> In regard to the concord and discord of the motions, we consider how two, three or four may be united together and expressed in the self same body, showing forth their vigor in the same face: which thing the best Painters both ancient and new have done.[1]
> - Paolo Giovanni Lomazzo, 1598

Introduction

Seventeenth century painters and sculptors believed that the activities of the soul were physically impressed on the face, such that a trained viewer could read them. This was "physiognomy" and as its name suggests, it was accepted as science at the time, much like astrology. Humanistic interests of the Renaissance revived the Aristotelian concept of correlating facial traits with personality.[2] In addition, practitioners of physiognomic "science" believed that the face itself distinctly and truthfully mirrored a person's soul.[3] As a contemporary of the painter Alberti, the humanist Guarino da Verona praised a painting of St. Jerome sent to him by Pisanello as "a wonderful example of your power and skill. The noble whiteness of his beard, the stern brow of his saintly countenance, simply to behold these is to have one's mind drawn to higher things.[4]

Renaissance theory urged artists to portray figural and facial expression so that the spectator might experience emotional inspiration by the physiognomic characterization.[5] In addition, handbooks of this period suggested that artists examine the emotional composition of subjects of different age, sex, rank and character.[6] Artists such as Bernini, attempted to interpret their subjects' characters and personal dispositions to gain insight into their souls in order to represent them in art. This effort at translation

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[1] P.G. Lomazzo. *A Tracte Containing the Arts of Curious Painting*. 1598. (Amsterdam, New York: 1969) 77.
[2] A.W.G. Posèq. *Caravaggio and the Antique*. (London: 1998) 134.
[3] M. Barash. "Character and Physiognomy: Bocchi on Donatello's *St. George*, A Renaissance Test on Expression in Art," *Imago Hominis: studies in the Language of Art.* Vienna, 1991, 44.
[4] M. Kwakkelstein. *Leonardo da Vinci as a physiognomist: Theory and drawing practice*. Leiden, 1994. 42.
[5] Kwakkelstein. *Leonardo,* 60.
[6] Kwakkelstein. *Leonardo,* 60.

from subjective to objective reality was said to be accomplished by reading physical signs evident on the face, by becoming familiar with the sitter through dialogue and by the sitter's recollection and relation to the artist of certain states of mind.

There was no shortage of contemporary literature on the philosophy and practice of physiognomy. Among the several authors who published books about physiognomy during Bernini's era, the three principal writers on this subject were Gian Paolo Lomazzo, (1598), Charles Le Brun (1668) and Govian Battista Della Porta (1586). Posèq also mentions the work "On Physiognomy" by M. de Montaigne (1533-1592), which he believed influenced the work of Caravaggio, who painted two decades earlier than Bernini did. Posèq states, "even if we cannot be sure that Caravaggio really read these authors, they provide a cultural framework indicating the way Caravaggio's works would be seen by his public."[7]

We may assume that Posèq's premise holds true for Bernini: that even if we cannot be sure that Bernini read these authors, they provide a cultural context for the interpretation of his work by a contemporary audience. This essay permits a brief examination of the principles of physiognomic study found in Lomazzo, Le Brun and Della Porta and a short discussion of Bernini's application of these theories in some of his works. In addition, selected portraits of Bernini will be discussed in view of their physiognomic traits which might reinforce the textual evidence of Bernini's character.

Physiognomy

Defined in a modern sense, physiognomy is considered the art of judging character and disposition from the features of the face or the form of the body generally.[8]

[7] Posèq, *Caravaggio,* 147.
[8] Oxford Shorter Dictionary, "physiognomy," Oxford, 1973. 1576.

Kwakkelstein writes that in the Renaissance, physiognomy was considered a "codified reading of human character and disposition from bodily form, complexion, hair, movement, posture, facial expression and voice".[9] This 'science' was a broad category, and included other practices such as chiromancy or palmistry (fortune telling from the shape and lines of the hand), metoposcopy (judging character or divining the future by reference to the shape of the forehead), and phrenology (judging character or fortune telling by reference to the topography of the skull itself).[10]

In Paul Fréart de Chantelou's diary, Bernini made explicit references to the importance of the human forehead and other facial features, as being indicative of character. We can assume that Bernini was fully aware of the practice of physiognomy and specific references of his comments will be discussed below. Sara McPhee lists a book concerning physiognomy found in the library of Bernini's brother, Luigi Bernini, which may have originally belonged to Gian Lorenzo.[11] This 1538 volume by Giovanni Manente is entitled *Il segreto de segreti, le moralita, e la phisionomia* and apparently discusses Aristotelian teaching on the subject. Aristotle's treatise on physiognomics suggested that the soul and the body react upon each other. He believed that when the character of the soul changed, it reacted upon the form of the body and, conversely, when the form of the body altered, it changed the character of the soul.[12]

In Bernini's era, the theory and practice of physiognomy was principally based on ancient texts and the study of antique sculptures. The earliest artistic representation of

[9] Kwakkelstein. *Leonardo,* 9.
[10] Oxford Dictionary, "physiognomy," 1576.
[11] S. McPhee. "Bernini's Books," *Bernini and the Early Modern Subject: Portrait/Biography*, FAH 1288 course guide, 2003, 445.
[12] Kwakkelstein. *Leonardo,* 55.

physiognomy presently known occurs in the writings of Xenophon.[13] Xenophon in describing the dialogue between Socrates and a sculptor, notes that Socrates asks:

> Does not the exact imitation of the feelings that affect bodies in action also produce a sense of satisfaction in the spectator? Then must not the threatening look in the eyes of fighters be accurately represented, and the triumphant expression on the face of conquerors be imitated? It follows, then, that the sculptor must represent in his figures the activities of the soul.[14]

In his *Traité des passions*, Descartes (1596-1650) likened the body to a machine which "acts on the soul, causing feelings and passions."[15] He said that the experience of physical or moral pain could trigger the internal emotions of fear, anger or indignation. In addition, Descartes stated that "the soul has the power to move the body" and the feelings and passions that are experienced by the soul, can result in physical manifestations.[16]

Michael Kwakkalstein suggests that it was during the 16th century, that the 'science' of physiognomy began to interest Italian theorists of art and that Pomponius Gauricus may have been the first person to actually incorporate physiognomics into his art-theoretical treatise, *De Sculptura* in 1504.[17] Moshe Barash has narrowed the dates down and writes that it was only in the last two decades of the 16th century and in the early 17th century that theorists began to unite art theory with physiognomic practice.[18]

Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo

Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo was Bernini's contemporary and was an author who wrote on art theory. One of his books, *Lomazzo di Pittura,* published in 1584, has been

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[13] J. Montagu. The Expression of the Passion: The Origin and Influence of Charles Le Brun. (New Haven, 1994) 1.
[14] Montagu. Expression, 1.
[15] G.G. Le Coat. "Comparative Aspects of the Theory of Expression in the Baroque Age," *Eighteenth Century Studies*, Vol. 5. (Baltimore: 1971-72) 219.
[16] Le Coat. "Comparative," 219.
[17] Kwakkelstein. *Leonardo,* 63.
[18] Barash. "Character," 36.

catalogued as having been found in the Bernini Library.[19] Another of Lomazzo's books on physiognomy was translated into English in 1598 as "*A Tracte Containing the Arts of Curious Painting*." The theories in Lomazzo's *Tracte* were an attempt to translate the "scientific" knowledge of physiognomy into an artistic doctrine. Lomazzo includes thorough descriptions of physical parts of the body and face and identifies their "motion" or emotional counterparts.[20]

Lomazzo begins with the proportions of the human body, whether it is ten, nine or eight faces or *palmi* high and each of these heights is ascribed a different emotional quality. Bernini was aware of this proportional concept. In Chantelou's diary, he describes a Christ figure that he made with the face being one-ninth of the whole, which was customary at the time. The resulting statue looked to him as if the head were too small and Bernini had to re-measure it several times to assure himself of the proportions. Bernini noted that the figures of Bacchus and Mercury would be given different proportions then a Christ figure, apparently to convey their individual traits.[21]

Lomazzo uses the example of a man's body of ten "faces" as a long, slender body like that of Mars, the God of war. The accompanying emotional characteristics would cause a person to be "boisterous, choleric, cruel, martial, mutinous, rash and prone to anger."[22] Such a person would have large nostrils dilated with heat and wide eyes. In Bernini's works, we can see just such a character portrayed in the figure of Neptune,

[19] McPhee. "Bernini's Books, 445.
[20] Barash. "Character," 36.
[21] Chantelou, Paul Fréart de. *Diary of the Cavaliere Bernini's Visit to France*, introduction by Anthony Blunt, annotated by George Bauer, Princeton, 1985, 140.
[22] P.G. Lomazzo. *A Tracte Containing the Arts of Curious Painting*. 1598. (Amsterdam, New York: 1969) 37.

whose features also portray the qualities of humour choler, which is associated with the element of fire. (Fig. 1)

Lomazzo also accepted the medieval concept that the passions of the mind arose from the predominance in the body of the four "Elements." These elements, earth, air, fire and water were associated with corresponding Humours: melancholy (earth), sanguinity (air), choler (fire), and phlegm (water). In a description most evocative of Bernini's Neptune, Lomazzo portrays a choleric figure as having:

> . . . great, raised and hard limbs with strong joints and mighty bones. This character would have a swarthy complexion, mixed with red, a low forehead, great eyes, yellow colour like the flame of the fire, with large eye-lids, wide and open nostrils, breathing forth vapours in great abundance. A wide mouth, thick, red lips, white teeth, small ears, a round chin and forehead, darkish hairs and tending to fiery, stiff and curled locks.[23]

Bernini was aware of the theory of the "humours" and of the different, corresponding characteristics they imparted to the person who possessed them in varying degrees. When sculpting the famous bust of Louis XIV, Bernini stated that the "Frenchman is by nature not phlegmatic since the calm of peace in France does not endure long."[24] Chantelou mentioned in his diary that Bernini himself was in a melancholic humour as a result of receiving an unpleasant letter,[25] and that a "melancholy humour predominated" in the King himself, a condition which prohibited the King from changing his mind.[26]

Another factor used in portraying the physiognomic qualities of a subject, according to Lomazzo, was the effect on the minds and bodies of men by the movements of the seven then known planets: Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury and Luna.

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[23] Lomazzo. *Tracte,* 14.
[24] Chantelou*, Diary,* 26.
[25] Chantelou, *Diary,* 198.
[26] Chantelou. *Diary,* 104.

Bernini was familiar with astrology and the contents of his library listed a book entitled *Ephemeride del Magini dell'ano 1611* that cites Copernicus and astrology.[27] Bernini is recorded in Chantelou's diary as stating that he owed his reputation to a star, which granted him fame in his lifetime but which, on his death, would fail "very suddenly."[28] Bernini's comment to Chantelou demonstrates the "pathetic fallacy" that one's own existence can somehow determine the course of natural events.

Lomazzo described the traits of a person associated with the fourth planet, the Sun as being:

> . . . associated with Apollo, Lucifer and the Prince of Stars. It signals a nature that is fortunate, honest, intelligent, the bestower of life upon all bodies imbued with soul. The complexion is brown between yellow and black, mixed with red and it physically causes low stature, a comely personage who is bald with yellowish eyes; touching the affections of their mind, sage, considerate, prudent, trusty, vainglorious, magnanimous.[29]

Since Louis XIV was then considered the "Sun King", and closely identified with the sun, this unflattering physical description is certainly not one that Bernini could employ when rendering the king's face in stone. Irving Lavin suggests that Bernini's figure of Truth, which holds the symbol of the sun, portrays the "physiognomical equivalent of the sun's own beneficent splendor."[30] It might be suggested that Bernini was using the personification of the planet Jupiter or a combination of both planets when he began to formulate his sculptural vision of the King. For example, Lomazzo's description of the physiognomic qualities of Jupiter is as follows:

> . . . father of beneficence and liberality: he is otherwise called of the Poets, magnanimous . . . invincible, magnipotent, good-natured, fortunate, honest, of good gate, honorable, wise. Complexion: he makes a man of mixed sanguine,

[27] McPhee. "Bernini's Books," 444.
[28] Chantelou, *Diary,* 75.
[29] Lomazzo. *Tracte,* 17.
[30] Lavin, Irving. Past-Present: essays on historicism in art form Donatello to Picasso, Berkeley, 1993. 141.

> between red and white, either bald or high foreheaded, somewhat big eyes, short nostrils and unequal, the check-teeth somewhat big, a curled beard. All which correspond with the qualities of the mind and the constitution of the body, together with the exterior affections.[31]

In his treatise on physiognomy, Lomazzo lectured painters and sculptors on their method of encapsulating the ideal form of their subjects. In a passage that aptly describes the process that Bernini followed when modeling the bust of Louis XIV, Lomazzo states:

> Wherefore suppose a king were proposed a carver and painter for each of them to counterfeit; both of them would conceive the self-same Idea and similitude of him, proceeding in their minds with the same discourse of reason and art, having the same purpose and end to make the counterfeit as like the person of the king as they could . . . by observing the same *geometrical* quantity of him: suppose of ten faces in length; keeping all his gestures, lineaments, making them neither too big, nor too little, but just as the kings are, observing with all the quantity, and fashion of his forehead, eyes, nose, mouth and the rest of his body, whence the counterfeit would prove answerable to the king's body in all respects. Before they went about the matter, they would delineate upon paper or some other matter all that which they had first conceived in their mind: and so the draught expressing the Ideas of both these workmen, would agree in expressing the true resemblance, which is the essence of this art. . .so that the precepts of Art permit us to represent the Pope, the Emperor, a soldier or any other person with that Decorum which truly belongs to them.[32]

Like Lomazzo, Bernini believed that observation of his subject was the key to understanding and creating an ideal, composite image of his subject. In order to "observe with all the quantity and fashion" the individual parts of the subject, as Lomazzo puts it, Bernini asked that his subject "move and speak naturally" so that he saw "all of his beauty and portrayed him as he was."[33] In addition, Domenico Bernini writes that on occasion Bernini's subject was asked to sit immobile so that Bernini could "portray most diligently those parts that demanded a steady and attentive visual examination."[34]

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[31] Lomazzo. *Tracte,* 17.
[32] Lomazzo. *Tracte,* 5.
[33] Chantelou, *Diary,* 44 n130.
[34] Chantelou, *Diary,* 44 n130.

Bernini conceptualized his subjects, using intense observation, verbal interaction and drawings as sources to "soak and impregnate his mind with the image" of the subject.[35] In a delightful insight into the extent of Bernini's belief in physiognomy, Bernini told Chantelou that "he had searched chiefly within . . . tapping his forehead, where there existed the idea of His Majesty; had he done otherwise his work would have been a copy instead of an original."[36]

Chantelou records numerous comments made by Bernini about the significance of different features of the face and the importance of rendering them properly. Bernini is said to have studied the king's face intently and he noticed that his mouth, eyes and cheeks differed on one side of the face.[37] Bernini believed that the "beauty" of the King was derived from the combination of various facial features and his resemblance to Alexander, in the forehead and the look in his face.[38] Discussion on the subject of eyes occurs twenty-one times in the diary, eleven times concerning the nose, and two times for the chin. The matter of hair is mentioned twenty times.

Bernini's reverence for the forehead in its position as the outward marker of expression and the interior seat for imagination and intelligence is well documented. In the Chantelou diary, for example, the forehead is referred to twenty times when discussing changes to or other viewers' comments about the forehead of the Louis XIV bust. Chantelou's records Bernini as saying about the king that:

> . . . the forehead, nose and mouth of the King were well proportioned in relation to each other, his eyes were a bit lifeless . . . he did not open his eyes wide at all.

[35] Chantelou, *Diary,* 115.
[36] Chantelou, *Diary*, 89.
[37] Chantelou, *Diary*, 121.
[38] Chantelou, *Diary*, 121.

> His mouth changed often, so that he sometimes had to spend a long time watching the king before choosing the expression that was most becoming.[39]

Chantelou and Bernini apparently discussed physiognomy in general and Chantelou offered his opinion to him about the forehead stating, "I said the forehead was one of the principal parts of the head and from the point of view of physiognomy the most important, that it therefore should be visible; moreover, the King had a forehead of great beauty and it should not be covered up.[40]

Lomazzo praised the works of Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo and the physiognomic qualities of their works might well have influenced Bernini. In Chantelou's diary, Bernini, who in other instances in the diary has commented unfavorably about Michelangelo's technique, relates the story of how the artist shouted at a valet to keep his mouth wide open for an extended time in order to study the physiognomy of his face.[41] Other sources describe another legend about Michelangelo, as he prepared to do a work featuring Christ. This story had the artist fixing a porter to a cross and stabbing him, so that he could study first hand the physical and emotional agonies on the face of a dying man.[42] Michelangelo was also quoted, when admiring a patron's inner beauty, as stating, "I see within your beautiful face, my lord, what in this life we hardly can attest; your soul already, still clothed in its flesh . . .[43]

Leonardo was a careful observer of physiognomic qualities in his subjects and his sketches of "madness" convey the turmoil of both their external and inner states. (Fig. 2)

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[39] Chantelou, *Diary*, 170.
[40] Chantelou, *Diary*, 69.
[41] Chantelou, *Diary,* 26.
[42] Montagu, *Expression,* 203 n53.
[43] Hibbard, Howard. *Michelangelo.* New York, 1974.

Kwakkelstein states that although Leonardo had denied the scientific foundation of physiognomics, the artist wrote:

> It is true that the face shows some indication of the nature of men, their vices and complexions; in the face the marks which separate the cheeks from the lips, the nostrils from the nose, and the sockets from the eyes, show clearly whether these are cheerful men, often laughing; and those who show few such features are men who engaged in thought; and those the planes of whose features are in great reliefs and hollows are bestial and angry men, of little reason; and those who have clearly marked lines between the eyebrows are irascible; and those who have horizontal lines strongly marked on their foreheads are men full of concealed or public lamentations" [44]

Charles Le Brun

Charles Le Brun, was an influential artist in the court of Louis XIV, and the creator of the interior of the Versailles. Le Brun believed that only in his century had there been agreement as to which facial muscles corresponded to which basic emotions.[45] Le Brun's theory linked Descartes' explanation of the internal workings of the passions with his own ideas of the manifestations of these passions on the face through the muscles. Jennifer Montagu has written that Descartes believed:

> . . . the soul, which was incorporeal, worked most particularly in the pineal gland in the centre of the brain; the passions were affections of the soul, and the soul controlled the reactions of the body through the motions of the pineal gland, which influenced the flow of the animal spirits to the muscles.[46]

Le Brun believed, and stated that if the passions were controlled by the brain, then the face, which was nearest to the brain, should be the most accurate index of the mind. Although the forehead would seem to be the obvious choice as the prime element in the

[44] Kwakkelstein, *Leonardo, 52.*
[45] Montagu, *Expression,* 1.
[46] Montagu, *Expression,* 17.

facial exhibition of passions, Le Brun chose the eyebrows as being closest to the seat of the soul.[47]

Charles Le Brun and Bernini met personally when Bernini was in France and their acquaintance seemed difficult. Chantelou describes a heated discussion between Le Brun and Bernini about the *costume* of the facial expressions of the kings in Poussin's *Adoration of the Three Kings*. Bernini felt that since they were kings, their images should be evoke qualities of majesty. Le Brun, on the other hand, corrected Bernini and suggested that the facial expressions were appropriate to the characters as *magi*, and that Poussin had represented them according to his own views on the subject. Chantelou states that at the end of this discussion, Bernini abruptly stopped talking and went off to dinner.[48] This anecdote illustrates Bernini's classical sense of physiognomy by demanding that the station of royal personages be represented with corresponding facial features.

The anecdote references the word *costume*. Bernini mentions the word *costume* six times in the Chantelou diary. In Francesco Bocchi's 1584 treatise on Donatello's *St. George*, Bocchi writes about *costume* as the permanent qualities of character that appear in facial expression.[49] He states:

> The *costumi*, then expose our soul and the thoughts which, although in themselves they cannot be expressed in any material [substance], leave traces that easily enable us, as Petrarch says, "to read the heart from the forehead."[50]

Moshe Barach states that Bocchi's treatise favours the forehead as the primary seat of character. Barach quotes Bocchi as stating "the forehead expresses the

[47] Montagu, *Expression*, 17.
[48] Chantelou, *Diary, 26*.
[49] Barash, "Character," 40.
[50] Barash, "Character," 39.

magnanimity and force by which the figure is elevated."[51] In addition, Barach suggests that "the forehead is made into the cardinal field for expressing character and the qualities of the soul – in short, *costume*." [52]

Le Brun's theories of physiognomy were based on three separate areas of study: the heads of ancient rulers and philosophers; the heads of men compared with the heads of animals; and the particular studies of the eyes of men and animals.[53] Le Brun's drawings were derived from a popular book by Giovanni Battista della Porta's *Della fisionomia dell'huomo*, published in Latin in 1586 and subsequently translated into French and Italian.[54]

Giovanni Battista della Porta

Della Porta was famous in the Renaissance for his work on physiognomics, which attempted to precisely link the physical and emotional relationship between man and animal types. His book features woodcuts comparing the heads of men with those of animals and Barash states " his detailed comparisons – the core of the whole theory – refer only to the heads of both beasts and men, and almost completely disregard their respective bodies."[55] Based on pseudo-Aristotelian theory, della Porta's work sought to impute character from physically similar animal types. These individual characteristics, ascribed to idealized physical traits of the animals, were based on traditional folkloric stories.[56]

[51] Barash, "Character," 44.
[52] Barash, "Character," 45.
[53] Montagu, *Expression*, 20.
[54] Montagu, *Expression,* 20.
[55] Barash, "Character," 44.
[56] Montagu. *Expression*, 20.

Le Brun suggested that certain facial resemblances, such as between a boar and a man, produced a "Boar-man" whose personality would be as coarse and brutal as boars were popularly imagined to be. (Fig. 3) Similarly, a "Horse-man" would be strong and intelligent, a "Wolf-man" would be wantonly cruel. (Fig. 4)

In della Porta's book on physiognomy, a woodcut illustrates the majestic features of the lion and a corresponding "lion-man." (Fig. 5) According to Peter Meller, this archetypal comparison was often made between the "brave" lion and the pseudo-Aristotelian hero and he recounts the physiognomic qualities of this leonine/heroic personality:

> A person with a blunt, fleshy, obtuse nose like the lion was supposedly magnanimous. In particular, a rather square face with hanging cheeks, heavy eyebrows, wide mouth and a "moderate" forehead with a certain "cloud" in the middle was taken for the sign of a lion-like character. Those who resemble the lion are manly, strong and wise, but also inclined to anger and fury.[57]

Bernini's portrait of Neptune most nearly resembles this description of the "Lion-Man", but Bernini needed once again to exemplify the inner qualities of magnanimity, strength and wisdom in his important bust of Louis XIV. Bernini is recorded at several places in Chantelou's diary as using the words "hero," "intelligence," "power," "Alexander," "grandeur," "majesty," and "assurance," to describe the king's personality.[58] In an interesting refinement of the archetype of lion/man, Meller describes a "quiet lion" type which symbolized clemency, found carved alongside the more typical "ferocious lion" on Roman statues. This subtlety is certainly not beyond Bernini, from

[57] Meller, Peter. "Physiognomical Theory in Renaissance Heroic Portraits*," The Renaissance and Mannerism.* Princeton, 1963. 59.
[58] Chantelou, *Diary*, 31, 92, 26, 33, 37, 38.

what we know of his approach to his work, and perhaps Bernini was incorporating the traits of this "quiet lion" physiognomic type in the Louis XIV bust.[59]

Posèq makes an interesting observation on the leonine qualities found in Bernini's painting of David and Goliath. (Fig. 6) In this painting the courageous elements of the lion's personality, strength, courage, magnanimity, justice and piety should accompany a man who has an abundance of hair, a nose that is rounded and split at the tip and a square forehead like a lion.[60] These are the corresponding exterior and interior illustrations of regal traits. In Bernini's painting of David and Goliath, it is Goliath and not David who is is given these physical qualities. Goliath has abundant, thick and "wild" hair, a prominent forehead and a large nose tipped by two swellings, whereas in contrast, David is beautiful, "sanguine", and not yet 'manly' in his face, body or posture. Posèq explains that:

> . . . the painting is an "iconic image" in which the severed leonine head, recalling apotropaic images on antique breastplates, is the victor's attribute. The physiognomic characterization of Goliath, therefore, refers not to his prowess, but to David's.[61]

It was possible that physiognomy was sufficiently intuitive for Bernini that he intentionally transposed animal qualities of one character to another in order to set up a series of visual and emotive dualities. His characters emphasize the struggle within an individual between the binary forces of nature: large and small, gentle and fierce, good and evil.

[59] Meller, "Physiognomical," 60.
[60] Posèq, A.W.G. "Bernini's Self-Portraits as David," *Source,* (Summer/Fall 1989). 16.
[61] Posèq, "Bernini's Self-Portraits" *Source,* 16.

Portraits of Bernini

Self-portraiture was common among Renaissance artists. David Summers suggests that the ”genetic relation between artist and images was fully recognized in the Renaissance; it is the meaning of the Renaissance commonplace ‘every painter paints himself’. . . so that the work itself become “physiognomic” at the same time that physiognomy became a part of the science of painting.”[62]

It is generally accepted that Renaissance artists would actually try to empathize with and gain direct experience of the physical and emotional circumstances of the character they were attempting to portray. Chantelou describes Bernini on this topic, “we discussed various things connected with the subject of expression, the soul of painting. The Cavaliere said he had discovered a method that had helped him; this was to put himself in the attitude that he intended to give to the figure he was representing, and then to have himself drawn by a capable artist.”[63]

Thus, Bernini not only assumed the physical attitude of his subject but the emotional attitude as well. Bernini’s own son, Domenico Bernini, depicts his father as burning his own leg in order to experience the pain and suffering of St. Lawrence, while recording the physiognomic reactions in his face from a mirror.[64]

Posèq states that Caravaggio, an artist painting two decades earlier than Bernini, had based his self-portraits on physiognomic studies begun by Leonardo in which da Vinci used “the rhetorical juxtaposition of human types, . . . supplemented by the study of

[62] D. Summers, *The Judgment of Sense: Renaissance Naturalism and the Rise of Aesthetics*. Cambridge, 1994. 110.
[63] Chantelou, *Diary,* 60.
[64] Bernini, Domenico. “The Life of the Cavalier Gian Lorenzo Bernini,” *Bernini in Perspective*. New Jersey, 1976. 26.

the changing expression of his own face".[65] In Caravaggio's *David and Goliath*, for example, Caravaggio substituted his own face for the severed head of Goliath. This has led to much speculation about how Caravaggio may have felt about himself and his work. Bernini, on the other hand, rejected Goliath as a personal, expressive vehicle and modeled both his painting and sculpture of David on his own face. Baldinucci reported that Bernini enlisted his patron, Cardinal Maffeo Barberini, to hold the mirror for him as Bernini recorded his own physiognomic qualities.[66]

The intensity of the set of David's mouth and the passionate determination of David's expression seem consistent with what we know from Bernini himself about his younger self. Chantelou reported that Bernini described himself to Chantelou as having:

> . . . a fiery temperament and a great inclination to pleasure in his youth, he had not allowed himself to be carried away; like a man in midstream held up by gourds; it might sink sometimes to the bottom but would rise to the top again immediately[67]

Another striking feature of Bernini's David is in the metoposcopy of the prominent, protruding forehead. Pliny quoted Aristotle on some of the attributes of this facial feature: "where the forehead is too broad, it is significant of a dull and sluggish understanding beneath, and where it is small, it indicates an unsteady disposition. A rounded forehead denotes an irascible temper, it seeming as though the swelling had left its traces there."[68]

Richard Saunders 1671 book, *Physiognomie and Chiromancie, Metoposcopie* includes woodcuts of precise drawings of different foreheads along with textual attributes of their corresponding "physic" readings. On reading Saunders, it is possible to find a

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[65] Posèq, Avigdor.W.G. *Caravaggio and the Antique*. (London: 1998). 146.
[66] Baldinucci, Filippo. *Vita del Cavalier Gio. Lorenzo Bernino*. Florence, 1682. Trans. By Catherine Enggass, as *The Life of Gian Lorenzo Bernini.* University Park and London, 1966. 13.
[67] Chantelou, *Diary,* 73.
[68] Barash, "Character," 247.

description of character that reminds one of some of the biographical data that is known about Bernini. The associated engraving depicts a man with a wide, lined, broad forehead, a long nose and pronounced eyebrows. (Fig. 7) When one peruses the portraits of Bernini, there is one that bears similarities to Saunders' etching. (Fig. 8) Richard Saunders writes about the forehead:

> This is the metoposcopy of an excellent man, ornate with many rich and excellent gifts from God; likewise adorned with Piety, Humanity and Learning, being liberal, rich, magnanimous, and so beautified with gifts, yet was he mightily tossed on the waves of misfortune . . . for when by the Divine grace and favour, he seems to arrive safe at this haven of rest, and being often within sight of his desired Harbour, again hurried into that depth of perplexities.[69]

Baldinucci describes Bernini's life as being "subjected to persecutions" and "like a city assailed by enemies."[70] Baldinucci also stated Bernini "endured many blows" and that "Heaven . . . in order to test once more his constancy, set new storms moving against him . . .storms truly capable of making any heart tremble."[71] One of Bernini's self-portrait drawings, which illustrated an older, care-worn face, spoke of the trials and disappointments that he had encountered. (Fig. 9) These "persecutions" includes the infamous episode of the allegedly faulty design and construction of the St. Peter's Bell Towers and the rejection by the French court of his plan for the Louvre. Bernini's facial lines may also represent a kind of repercussive dissatisfaction with his work. Baldinucci reports "Bernini was always filled with such zeal and desire to always do better that when he was old he confessed that he had never done anything that completely pleased him."[72]

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[69] Saunders, Richard. *Physiognomie, Chiromancie, Metoposcopie, The Symmetrical Proportions and Signal Moles of the Body*. London, 1671. 220.
[70] Baldinucci, *Vita*. 34.
[71] Baldinucci, *Vita*, 67.
[72] Baldinucci, *Vita*, 10.

It has also been suggested that the troubled eyes and "anxious, almost haunted gaze" may reflect Bernini's obsession with the question of mortality and redemption.[73]

One of the most striking physiognomic features in the Bernini self-portraits is the rendering of his own eyes. (Fig. 10) In some of the portraits, a lighter iris is distinguishable, but in others, the pupil is concentrated in its darkness, round with a distinct highlight painted in. (Fig. 11) Baldinucci states that Bernini is one of a few individuals whose:

> . . . spirit from the dawn of their lives flashes forth from their eyes in such reflection. It seems that the whole spirit actually appears at the windows of the countenance, disdaining to mingle with matter and revealing . . . a hint of its most secret beauties by signs, glance, words and motions."[74]

Chantelou, who knew Bernini well at a time of great productivity and creativity described him as having a ". . . temperament (that) is all fire. His face resembles an eagle's, particularly the eyes. He has thick eyebrows and a lofty forehead, slightly sunk in the middle and raised over the eyes."[75] A woodcut in della Porta's book on physiognomy illustrates the piercing, intent gaze of the eagle as compared with the smaller, but deadly hunting bird, the peregrine. (Fig. 12)

Lomazzo associates such an eye with the eagle, and, accordingly, the characteristics of the eagle to the person who possesses the eye. In his book on physiognomy, Lomazzo quotes the Renaissance poet Ariosto who describes the fearsome, death-defying character of an eagle in the following passage:

> Even as an Eagle that espies from high
> Among the herbs a parti-coloured snake,

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[73] Weston, Aidan, ed. Effigies & Ecstasies: Roman Baroque Sculpture and Design in the Age of Bernini. Edinburgh, 1998. 54.
[74] Baldinucci, *Vita*, 6.
[75] Chantelou, *Diary,* 14.

Or on a bank sunning herself does lie;
Casting the elder skin, till she may spy
Avantage sure, the venom'd worm to take,
Then takes him by the back, and beats her wings
Meagre the poison of his forked stings.[76]

If we are to accept the assumption that Bernini's audience would have viewed his self-portraits, as Bernini would have observed them, from the perspective of informed physiognomy, then we may accept Lomazzo's quote as giving us insight into how Bernini saw himself and how he intended us to see him.

In conclusion, it may be said that Bernini utilized the practice of physiognomy as an artistic and referential tool in order to render expression, character and emotional depth to his works, which in turn, aroused a passionate and persuasive response in his audience.

[76] P.G. Lomazzo. *A Tracte Containing the Arts of Curious Painting*. 1598. (Amsterdam, New York: 1969) 84.

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Illustrations

Fig. 1. Bernini, Detail of *Neptune and Triton,* c. 1620. Hibbard, Howard. Bernini. London, 1990, 40.

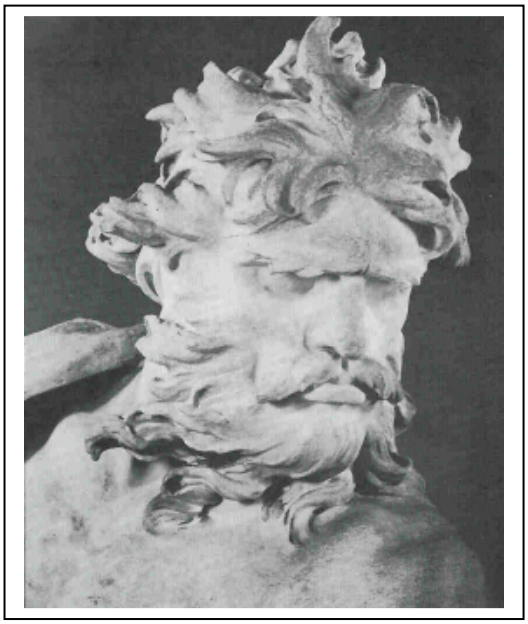

Fig. 2. Leonardo da Vinci, *Five physiognomic types representing different forms of madness*. Kwakkelstein, Michael. Leonardo da Vinci as a physiognomist: Theory and drawing practice. Leiden, 1994, 168.

Fig. 3. Charles Le Brun, *Boar-Man and Pig-Man.* Montagu, Jennifer. The Expression of the Passion: The Origin and Influence of Charles Le Brun. New Haven, 1994, 20.

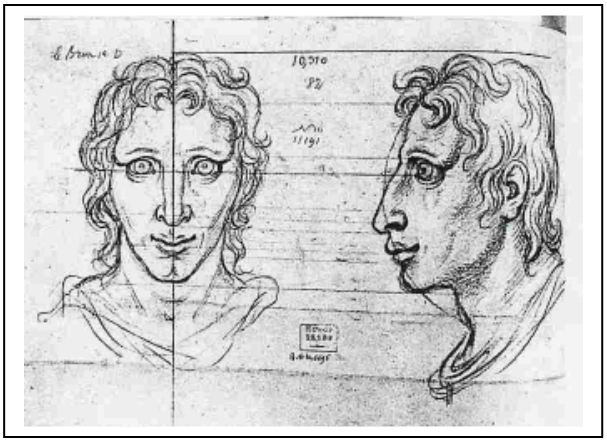

Fig. 4. Charles Le Brun, *Horse-Man*.
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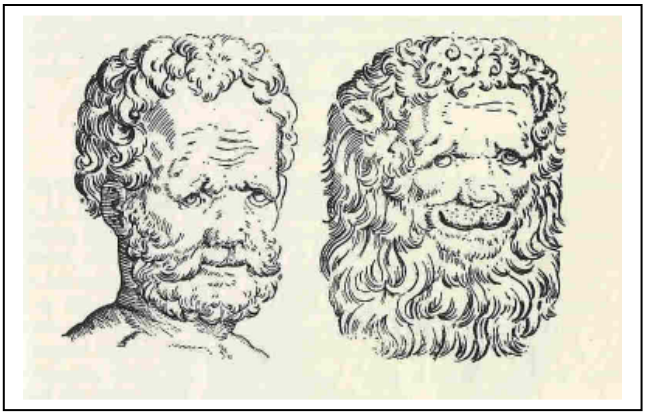

Fig. 5.Giovan Battista Della Porta. "Lion-Man." Della Fisonomia Dell'Uomo, 1610. Parma, 1971, 133.

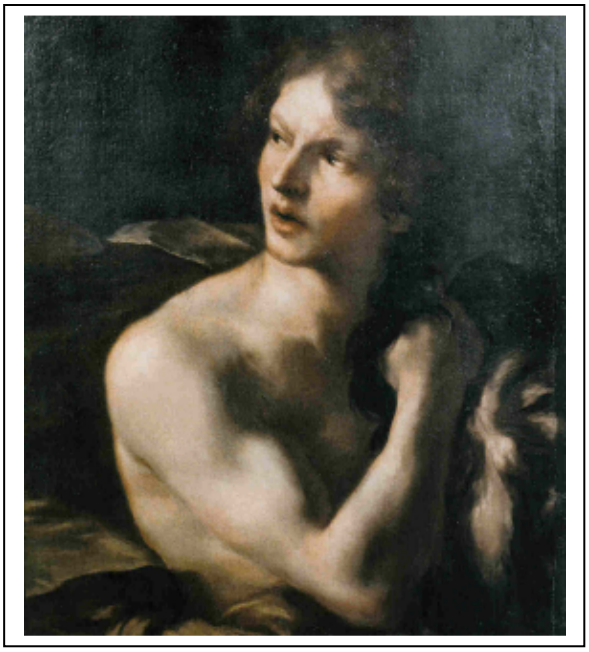

Fig. 6 Bernini, *David and Goliath*.
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Fig. 7. Richard Saunders, *Metoposcopy*.
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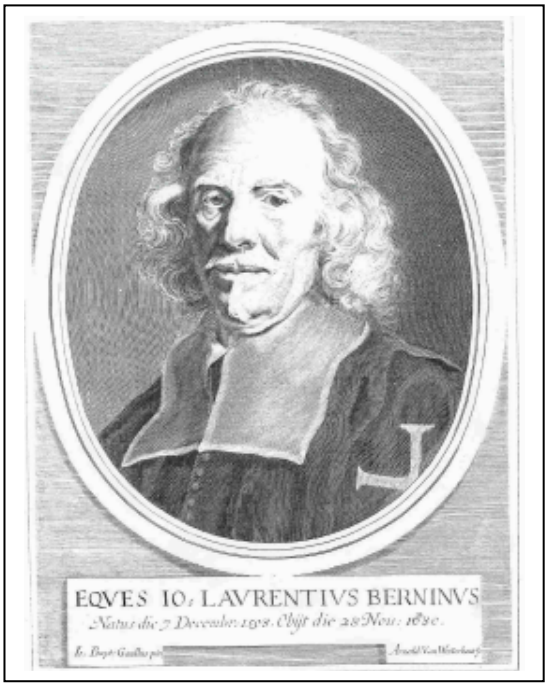

Fig. 8. Arnold van Westerhout, after Baciccio, *Portrait of Gianlorenzo Bernini*.
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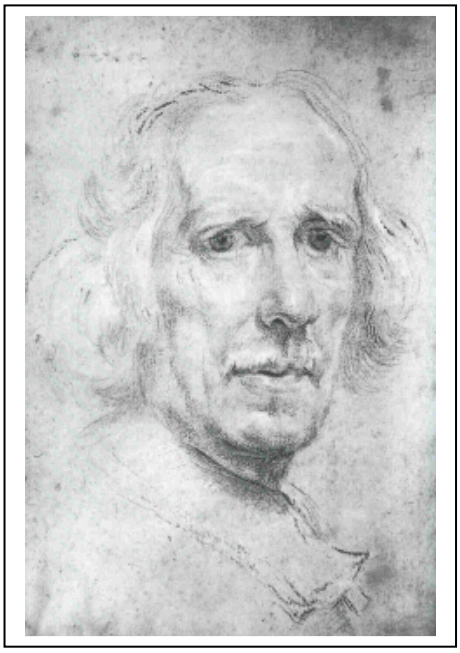

Fig. 9. Bernini, *Self-portrait.* C. 1665.
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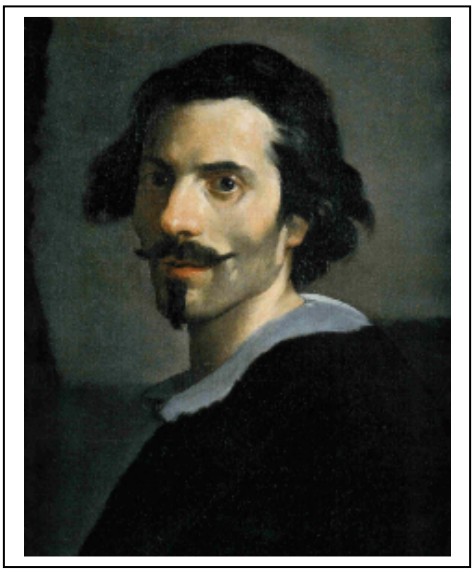

Fig. 10. *Self-portrait.* C. 1630-35.
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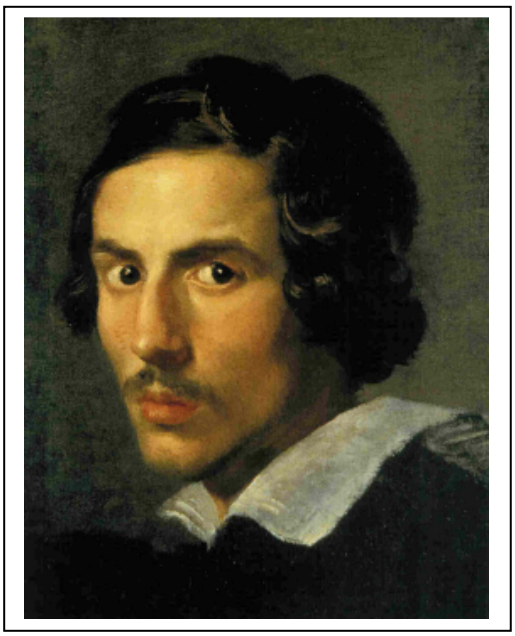

Fig. 11. *Self-portrait.* C. 1623.
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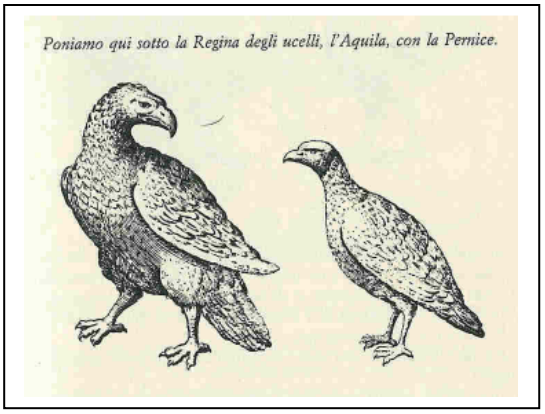

Fig. 12. Giovan Battista Della Porta. "Eagle and Peregrine."Della Fisonomia Dell'Uomo, 1610. Parma, 1971, 63.