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Art of the Gesù exhibition introductory panel

Fairfield University Art Museum

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THE HOLY NAME

Art of the Gesù: Bernini and his Age

The church of the Gesù in Rome is the mother church of the Society of Jesus, the religious order founded by Ignatius of Loyola in 1540 in the charged religious and political climate of the incipient Counter-Reformation. This was a period when the Catholic Church undertook to reassert its authority in the wake of grievous challenges posed by the Protestant Reformation in the north, the relentless Turkish threat from the east, and the cataclysmic sack of Rome—seat of papal authority—by rampaging Imperial troops in 1527. Rising in the very center of the city in the shadow of the ancient Forum and Capitoline Hill, its imposing profile dominating the surrounding urban landscape, the Gesù was a formidable symbol of the Church resurgent, and a testament to the power and prestige of the new Jesuit order born of the moment. Today, it is acclaimed as one of the most significant monuments of Rome—a herald of the Baroque architectural style and showcase of some of the most iconic and significant artistic masterpieces of the period.

The Gesù's great benefactor was the immensely wealthy and powerful Cardinal Alessandro Farnese (1520-1589), grandson of Pope Paul III (r. 1534-1549), who funded its construction and, with a frequent disregard for the Jesuits' expressed preferences, dictated many of its architectural features. For this grand building project he chose the architect Jacopo Vignola (1507-1573); dissatisfied with Vignola's ideas for the façade, he assigned this final stage of the design to Giacomo della Porta (1532-1602). Cardinal Alessandro's beneficence is recorded on the façade in the commemorative inscription that surmounts the shield with the IHS Christogram, symbol of the Society of Jesus, over the central portal, the name FARNESIVS, not accidentally, hovering directly above. Encoded in this visual tableau is the foundation narrative of the church and the order, with due credit accorded the illustrious family who sponsored both.

This exhibition charts the joint first century of the Society of Jesus and the Gesù. Five splendid works of art generously lent by the church—headlined by great Baroque sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini's bust of Jesuit cardinal and theologian Roberto Bellarmino, which has never before left Rome—provide touchstones around which over fifty paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints, rare books, medals and historical documents are here assembled. These are grouped into sections that recount the founding and early success of the Society of Jesus under Farnese patronage; the long and at times challenging campaign to build the Gesù and embellish its vast interior; the commanding personalities of Bernini—who was associated with the Jesuits and the Gesù for much of his life—Bellarmino, and the astute Superior General Gian Paolo Oliva; the imperative to formulate a hagiographic lexicon and imagery celebrating the order's newly canonized founders and other early Jesuit saints and *beati*; the furnishing of altars dedicated in their honor; and the expansion of the Jesuits' presence in Rome through the construction and embellishment of their second great church Sant'Ignazio. *Art of the the Gesù* also highlights the extraordinary creative energies of the many painters, sculptors, architects, designers and craftsmen—Vignola, Giacomo della Porta, Domenichino, Bernini, Giovanni Battista Gaulli, Ciro Ferri, Carlo Maratti, Andrea Pozzo and others—who gave form and visual expression to the Jesuits' most profound spiritual and devotional precepts and who together realized this vast, ambitious and glorious project.

Linda Wolk-Simon, PhD

Frank and Clara Meditz Director and Chief Curator