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Luca Giordano's Baroque Hercules

By VÉRONIQUE PLESCH and ALEXANDRA LIBBY

“AND HERE’S FA PRESTO doing Rubens”—this is how the late Myra Orth, with her typical wit described Colby’s Luca Giordano when she saw it in 1995 (Plate 1, p. 346). Luca Giordano was indeed known in his time as “Luca fa presto” or “Luca does it quickly” because of his speedy working methods, and it is true that this particular painting demonstrates the influence of the Flemish Baroque master, Peter Paul Rubens.

Baroque: The Art and the Period

TODAY, FOR ART historians and for the reader of any art history textbook, the term “Baroque” is simply equated with the art of the seventeenth century—although no seventeenth-century artist would have used such a term. At the time, the Portuguese word *barrocco* referred to an imperfect pearl (as is still the case today).¹ By the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries the word was used to refer to other kinds of objects,² objects that were considered strange, even shocking. This negative connotation is further illustrated in its use by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who defined Baroque music as a “rough music,” one in which “whole harmony is confused, filled with modulations and dissonances, its notes hard and unnatural, the intonation difficult, and the movement constrained.”³ At the beginning of the nineteenth century, architectural theoreticians in favor of drawing formal lessons from Greco-Roman antiquity applied the adjective to Italian seventeenth-century artists to qualify what they found extravagant and against the classical rule in their art.

So etymologically, Baroque was a negative term. And what was in fact expressed by the choice of such a term is that this style challenged Classical ideals and was therefore imperfect, strange.⁴ To start seeing the word used in a more neutral way one has to wait until the very end of the nineteenth century, when in 1888 the great Viennese art historian Heinrich Wölfflin published a

It has been a pleasure to collaborate on this article; we wish to express our gratitude to David Simon and Michael Marlais for offering us such an opportunity. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Franco-Italian festival at Colby in May 2003: our thanks to Mario Moroni for inviting us to participate in this festival.

1. Its use in technical vocabulary of jewelry is documented as early as the sixteenth century. John Rupert Martin, *Baroque* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977) 11.

2. For example, it appears in the French dictionary by Furetière, 1590, and in the dictionary of the Académie Française, 1718.

3. *A complete dictionary of music: consisting of a copious explanation of all words necessary to a true knowledge and understanding of music. Translated from the original French of J. J. Rousseau by William Waring* (London: J. Murray, 1779; New York: AMS Press, 1975) 30.

4. It is exactly the same type of phenomenon that named Gothic art, which literally means barbarian.



Plate 1

Luca Giordano, *Hercules on the Funeral Pyre*, c. 1665–70. Oil on canvas, 44 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 113 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine. Museum purchase from the Jere Abbott Acquisitions Fund.
Photography: Margaret Libby.

study entitled *Renaissance und Barock*.⁵ Even more important was the publication, in 1915, of another book by Wölfflin, the *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (*Principles of Art History*). In *Principles*, Wölfflin, whose aim was to track "the mode of perception which lies at the root of the representative arts in the various centuries,"⁶ further attempted to track the development from Renaissance to Baroque art.⁷ In the years that followed the Second World War, the term Baroque started being used more widely and in a completely sympathetic way, as it came to refer to a certain phase in the visual arts as in literature, a phase in which such values as fantasy, imagination, and seductiveness were stressed, the general effect often being not far from disorder.

*Luca Giordano, the Neapolitan Proteus*⁸

AS AN ARTIST born in 1634, and whose activity spans the second half of the seventeenth century, Luca Giordano fits in perfectly within the Baroque era. He first trained with his father, the Neapolitan painter Antonio Giordano. A defining moment in the formation of his art was when, around 1650, he came to work in the workshop of Giuseppe Ribera, who at the time was the leading figure of the Neapolitan artistic scene. "Lo Spagnoletto," as he was known in Naples, came indeed from Spain and had settled in Naples, then a Spanish possession, before 1620.⁹ During the nine years Luca spent working under Ribera his art became very much shaped by the Spanish master to the point that his early works have been often confused.¹⁰ He was fully converted to the current style in Naples, a dramatic tenebrism. This use of strong *chiaroscuro* was derived from Caravaggio, whose 1606 passage in Naples had left a defining mark.¹¹ But Ribera's tenebrism was not the only influence absorbed by the young Luca. A trip to Rome around 1652, along with visits to Bologna, Parma, and Venice, exposed him to such masters as Titian, Correggio, Veronese, and Tintoretto. In Rome, according to Giordano's early biographer Bernardo De Dominici, Luca studied with Pietro da Cortona,¹² a painter who

5. *Renaissance and Baroque*, trans. Kathrin Simon (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1966).

6. *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, trans. M. D. Hottinger (New York: Dover Publications, n.d.) 13.

7. To do so, Wölfflin proposed five pairs of concepts: 1. the development from the linear to the painterly; 2. the development from plane to recession; 3. the development from closed to open form; 4. the development from multiplicity to unity; and 5. the absolute and the relative clarity of the subject. It should be noted that Mannerism, the art historical period that is now considered to take place between Renaissance and Baroque, did not "exist" at the time. Although sixteenth-century artists and writers used the term *maniera* to refer to their style, it is not until the twentieth century that art historians started contemplating the possibility of a separate period.

8. We borrow the phrase from Giuseppe De Vito, "Alcune risultanze delle prime Mostre dedicate a Luca Giordano," *Ricerche sul '600 napoletano. Saggi e documenti 2001, rubrica per 'Luca Giordano'* (Napoli: Electa Napoli, 2001) 145.

9. Born in Játiva in 1591 and probably trained under Ribalta in Valencia, Ribera traveled to Rome around 1610, where the works of Caravaggio and his followers impressed him. He died in Naples in 1652. On Ribera, a recent and comprehensive source is the exhibition catalog *Jusepe de Ribera: 1591-1652*, ed. Alfonso E. Pérez Sánchez and Nicola Spinosa (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992).

10. For examples of Giordano's early works in the style of Ribera, see entries 1 to 9 and 133 in the 2001 catalog *Luca Giordano, 1634-1705* (Napoli: Electa Napoli, 2001).

11. Mina Gregori, "Caravaggio and Naples," *Painting in Naples 1606-1705, from Caravaggio to Giordano*, ed. Clovis Whitfield and Jane Martineau (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1982) 36-40.

12. Bernardo De Dominici, *Vite dei pittori, scultori ed architetti napoletani* (Napoli: Tipografia Trani, 1844) vol. 3, 129-30 (first published in 1742-45).

"more than anyone else gave Roman high Baroque painting its definitive form."¹³ As a matter of fact, Luca became known for his eclecticism and his "sovranà abilità... di contraffar le maniere de' più eccellenti pittori"¹⁴ (sovereign ability to counterfeit the manner of the most excellent painters¹⁵). Luca drew inspiration from older masters, but also from some contemporaries, most notably from Sir Peter Paul Rubens, whose art he would have known from the Chiesa Nuova in Rome as well as from many private Neapolitan collections. Rubens's work is marked by, as a contemporary put it, a "fury of the brush." An exuberant painterly style relying on color to express form, with paint loosely handled with visible brushstrokes; this had a lasting effect on Luca.

Back in Naples Luca experienced the very dramatic outbreak of plague in 1656-57,¹⁶ married Margherita Dardi in 1658, and in 1665 was inducted into the Neapolitan painters' confraternity.¹⁷ Also around the mid-1650s Luca met a man who was to become one of his greatest patrons, Gaspar Roomer, a Flemish merchant who had settled in Naples in 1634.¹⁸ In late 1664 Luca was again on the road for a few months, visiting Venice, at the invitation of the Marchese Agostino Fonseca, via Florence and Parma. During the following decade, Luca was engaged in large-scale fresco cycles in Naples and elsewhere. His Neapolitan career continued successfully and his fame was such that in 1692 he was summoned by Charles II of Spain, who declared about him: "esto es el mayor pintor que ay in Napoles, Espanna, y en todo el Mundo; cierto este es pintor para el Rey."¹⁹ (This is the best painter in Naples, Spain, and in the whole world; indeed he is a painter for the king.) As a matter of fact, in 1664 Luca was awarded the title of Painter to the King, a position he held until the monarch's death in 1700. Giordano remained in Spain for two more years, working for private patrons, and in 1702 returned home to Naples, where he died in 1705.

Colby's Hercules

*HERCULES ON THE FUNERAL PYRE*²⁰ (Plate 1) entered Colby's collection in 1985, with a dating of 1665-70. We agree with this dating, which places the work in the artist's mature years before his departure for Spain. Unfortunately we do not possess any documentary evidence to flesh out the history of this paint-

13. Robert Enggass and Jonathan Brown, eds., *Italy and Spain 1600-1750: Sources and Documents* (Englewood, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970) 143.

14. De Dominici, *Vite dei pittori*, 194. De Dominici makes abundant references to his imitations: see for instance: Veronese (135, 154), Lanfranco (139), Tintoretto (153), Correggio (157), Bassano (167).

15. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are our own.

16. After the famous pandemic of 1348, plague in Europe became endemic. The major outbreaks in the seventeenth century were in 1630-31 and 1656-57. In Naples fifty percent of the population died. See Carlo M. Cipolla, *Fighting the Plague in Seventeenth Century Italy* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1978) 100.

17. Daniela Campanelli, "Luca Giordano," *Dictionary of Art*, ed. Jane Turner (New York: MacMillan Publisher Limited, 1996) vol. 12, 660.

18. On Roomer and his important collecting activity (he owned seven Rubens) see Francis Haskell, *Patrons and Painters: A Study in the Relations Between Italian Art and Society in the Age of the Baroque* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) 208.

19. De Dominici, *Vite dei pittori*, vol. 3, 169-70.

20. It was the first acquisition from the Jere Abbott Acquisition Fund.

ing. Obviously, Giordano's "mimetism,"²¹ his ability to embrace a variety of stylistic modes, renders difficult the dating of his undocumented works. Nevertheless, Colby's Hercules does fit into some of the trends observable within the artist's development. For instance, we can note resemblance with the *Vulcan's Forge* from a private collection,²² a work previously attributed to the late Titian (yet another tribute to Luca's protean art). In *Vulcan's Forge* we find not only the same theme but also the same powerful and strained gestures, made of contrasting diagonals. The details published by De Vito reveal a similar painterly treatment to that of our painting (Plates 2-4, p. 350 and 351), full of impasti and, in particular, the touches of pure red. De Vito dates *Vulcan's Workshop* from Luca's stay in Venice, between the end of 1664 and 1665, recognizing Titian's impact, but most importantly, because of the type of canvas (a herring bone weave) along with the use of red bole.²³ Some scholars, such as Rossana Muzii, go as far as to suggest that Luca went through a "neo-Venetian period," although specifying that during that period our artist also displayed the influence of Rubens.²⁴ These remarks appear in the context of the discussion of a painting from the late 1650s and the beginning of the 1660s.²⁵ Rubens's impact on Giordano was a lasting one: Denise Maria Pagano notes how several works from the early 1660s share a debt to the Flemish master,²⁶ while Giuseppe Scavizzi considers that this influence was still strong during Giordano's Spanish years.²⁷

The *Sleeping Venus and Cupid with Satyr* from a private collection exhibited during the recent Giordano retrospective²⁸ similarly displays, on a rather elongated canvas,²⁹ a naked body reclining (Venus in this case), along with a figure shown half-length, who stands behind the reclining figure, on the right side of the composition (the satyr). Furthermore, the satyr adopts a pose very similar, although reversed, to that of Hercules's friend about to light the pyre, as he looks towards Venus, his arms directed on the opposite direction, holding a mirror. As in Colby's painting, a golden sky opens up in the upper part of the composition, between the two figures. Mariella Utili, in the exhibition catalog, notes that it could be one of the paintings on mythological subjects that, according to Luca's early biographer De Dominici, were executed for the Prince Andrea d'Avalos. She dates the work to the 1660s.³⁰ In fact, this pas-

21. The phrase "mimetismo giordanesco" is from De Vito, "Alcune risultanze," 151.

22. Reproduced by De Vito.

23. Ibid.

24. *Luca Giordano* 118.

25. *Luca Giordano* 118. The painting is *Vulcan's Workshop*, National Gallery of Ireland (from the collection of Sir Denis Mahon).

26. *Luca Giordano*, 116.

27. *Luca Giordano y España* (Madrid: Patrimonio nacional, 2002) 45.

28. Ibid., 128-39.

29. 133 x 187.5 cm. Colby's Giordano is more elongated in format: it measures 114.3 x 288.3 cm. Over the course of his career, Luca often used elongated canvases; an extreme example are the two paintings in Memphis, in the Brooks Memorial Art Gallery, representing *Perseus Slaying Medusa* and the *Slaughter of Niobe's Children*. The two canvases measure 104 x 345 cm, a format that makes Oreste Ferrari assume that they were part of a frieze (*Luca Giordano*, 48; the paintings are reproduced on p. 47). The two paintings, which have been variously dated (as early as 1660 and as late as Giordano's Spanish period), are stylistically close to our painting. See Michael Milkovich, *Luca Giordano in America* (Memphis, Tennessee: Brooks Memorial Art Gallery, 1964) 33.

30. *Luca Giordano* 128.



Plates 2 and 3 above; Plate 4 on facing page
Luca Giordano, *Hercules on the Funeral Pyre*, detail, c. 1665–70. Oil on canvas,
44 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 113 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine. Museum
purchase from the Jere Abbott Acquisitions Fund. Photography: Margaret Libby.



sage in De Dominici's biography reveals that for this patron Luca painted indeed several "Veneri in varie positura dormienti" (sleeping Venuses in various positions), as well as paintings of Lucrecia and Tarquin, of the dying Cleopatra, and of Hercules with his lover Iole.³¹ Among other patrons is listed the Prince d'Avellino: "Al principe di Avellino dipinse favolosi soggetti, come di Ercole, di Diana, ed altri consimili." (For the Prince of Avellino he painted subjects drawn from mythology, such as from the stories of Hercules, of Diana, and other similar ones).³² De Dominici places this activity after Luca's return from Venice, in 1665, a period thus coinciding with the dating of our Hercules.

Our painting is Luca's earliest one known to us on the theme of Hercules on his funeral pyre. Later, while at the court of Spain, he will tackle again the subject. One such rendition (Plate 5, right), dated from the end of Luca's Spanish years around 1687-1700 and today at the Escorial, was part of an ensemble that included *Orpheus and the Maenads* and *The Death of Nessus the Centaur*. The second one, in the Prado, was probably executed for the Palacio del Buen Retiro. It is assumed that it formed an ensemble with *Perseus and Medusa*, *Hercules and the Cretan Bull*, and *Perseus and Andromeda*, paintings also dated to that period, around 1697.³³

Luca's important activity as history painter, and in particular of scenes drawn from antiquity, was praised by Antonio Palomino, who declared that he was "padre de la Historia con el pincel como Herodoto lo fue con la pluma" (father of History with the brush as Herodotus was with the pen).³⁴

Death and Apotheosis of a Pagan Martyr

HERCULES, SON OF the mortal woman Alcmena and the god Jupiter, had vowed to consecrate an altar to his father to celebrate his victory in Oechlia. For this, he sent his wife Deianira for a new garment. A violently jealous mate, Deianira feared she was being supplanted by another woman, Iole, and so she gave her husband a garment soaked in the blood of the centaur Nessus that Hercules had killed with a poisoned arrow, believing the liquid would have magic powers to revive his love for her.

...Hercules
Received the gift and on his shoulder wore,
In ignorance, the Hydra-poisoned gore.
The flame was lit; he offered words of prayer
And incense, pouring on the marble altar
Wine from the bowl. That deadly force grew warm.
Freed by the flame, it seeped and stole along,
Spreading through all the limbs of Hercules.
While he still could, that hero's heart of his

31. De Dominici, *Vite dei pittori* vol. 3, 158.

32. *Ibid.*

33. See Luca Giordano, 320-23. See also Luca Giordano y España 238-41. Rossana Muzii, *Luca Giordano, 1634-1705* (p. 118) also mentions, although without further details, a "Hercules a the Stake, which appeared on the Milanese art market."

34. Quoted by Alfonso E. Pérez Sánchez in *Luca Giordano y España* 15.



Plate 5

Luca Giordano, *Hercules on the Funeral Pyre*, 49 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 31 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches.
El Escorial, Casita del Principe, Patrimonio Nacional.

Stifled his groans, but when the agony
 Triumphed beyond endurance, he threw down
 The altar, and his cries of anguish filled
 The glades of Oeta. Desperately he tried
 To tear the fatal shirt away; each tear
 Tore his skin too, and, loathsome to relate,
 Either it stuck, defeating his attempts
 To free it from his flesh, or else laid bare
 His lacerated muscles and huge bones.³⁵

To put an end to this unbearable pain, Hercules climbed Mount Oeta and built a funeral pyre. Mounting it, he commanded his servants to set fire to it. All but one man, his good friend Philoctetes, refused. Finally, as Hercules was freed from his mortal being (“of Hercules/No shape remained that might be recognized,/ Nothing his mother gave him, traces now/ Only of Jove.”³⁶), “the Almighty Father carried him away,/Swept in his four-horsed chariot through the clouds.”³⁷

The figure of Hercules, identified by his traditional attributes of lion skin and club, appears as a model specimen of strength and solidity, reminiscent of this favorite ancient model for Baroque artists, the *Farnese Hercules* (Plate 6, right). The lion skin drapes across his body, and the lion’s mouth rests like a crown on his head. The paws cover his genitals and fall limp over his right arm, which also draws attention to the club—a particularly noteworthy element, not only as Hercules’s attribute, but also as it is inscribed in capital letters with the painter’s name: JORDANUS (Plate 7, p. 356). This very clear and obvious manner of establishing ownership in painting is part of a larger tradition, one in which Caravaggio famously contributed by signing his name with the blood shed by St. John the Baptist’s beheading.³⁸ By placing his name on the club he signifies its importance not only as it is the attribute of Hercules, but also as it is in the center foreground of the painting where the viewer cannot miss it. Above, emerging from a hole in the sky is Hercules’s father Jupiter, who swoops down on an eagle to welcome his son to Olympus (Plate 8, p. 356). His robe billows and blends with the swirling clouds encircling him, and his presence creates this wind, which ruffles Philoctetes’s hair just below, who leans over Hercules with a lit torch.

As in several other of Luca’s mythological paintings, the theme here is that of Virtue triumphant over Evil.³⁹ It is a pagan version of martyrdom: a death willed and experienced stoically that leads to apotheosis as the hero dies on the pyre and is received in Olympus. As the great stoic philosopher Seneca has the hero declare: “I’ll pile up wood,/And burn this body, drenched in

35. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A. D. Melville (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) book IX, 203-04.

36. *Ibid.*, 207.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Valletta, Malta, Co-cathedral of St. John, 1607-08. Other artists have done this as well including Lorenzo Lotto, who, in the Louvre’s *Christ Carrying the Cross*, puts his name on the cross not so much for the viewer to read, but rather within Christ’s line of vision. Likewise, in Bergamo’s *Holy Family with St. Catherine*, he signs his name (and dates the painting 1533) on the Virgin’s footrest (Accademia Carrara).

39. Oreste Ferrari, “Luca Giordano as History Painter,” *Luca Giordano*, 46, refers to the theme in moralizing pictures (called then *moralità*).



Plate 6
After Lysippos, *Farnese Hercules* (Roman marble copy of
bronze original), c. 125 inches high.
Museo Nazionale, Naples.



Plates 7 and 8

Luca Giordano, *Hercules on the Funeral Pyre*, detail, c. 1665–70, oil on canvas, 44 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 113 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine. Museum purchase from the Jere Abbott Acquisitions Fund. Photography: Margaret Libby.

impious blood./ As a fit offering to the gods below.”⁴⁰ It is noteworthy that in our painting, unlike in Luca's later rendition in the Escorial (Plate 5), Hercules does not struggle to remove the poisoned shirt: the hero faces death as his friend is about to light the pyre.

Baroque Naturalism

WE OWE TO JOHN RUPERT MARTIN a book-length study of Baroque art's essential characteristics. “Verisimilitude,” he writes, “though it takes varying forms, is a principle to which all Baroque artists adhere.”⁴¹ In fact, it was Caravaggio, the great Baroque painter, who remarked that a good painter should be able to “imitar bene le cose naturali” (to imitate natural things well).⁴² And so does Giordano: the white of Hercules's eyes have touches of red and the expression across his face betrays his anguish (Plate 2). It is not brave and defiant as one would expect of the world's strongest man, but rather frightened. In so doing Giordano transforms a traditional mythological subject and infuses it with fresh life. This naturalist vision is a hallmark of Baroque art, and countless are the examples of Baroque depictions in which “the great subjects of death and martyrdom are imbued with a new pathos and a new comprehension of suffering, cruelty and steadfastness.”⁴³ Also true to life is how the fire burns on the left of Hercules, but he is not quite *in* the fire, rather edged near it, and how the hero's left leg and shoulder are raised in the air, which puts the majority of the weight onto his right side (away from the fire), because, after all, who really wants to burn alive? “This deepened interest in the psychology of pain and suffering is thus explored through the characters' gestures and facial expressions, engaging the viewer and communicating the scene's pathos in a most convincing and direct manner.

Many scholars acknowledge that the great Neapolitan-born sculptor Bernini significantly influenced Luca.⁴⁴ Based in Rome, Bernini came to dominate the entire seventeenth century. Bernini's 1615-16 sculpture of *St. Lawrence* (Plate 9, p. 358) is a work that we believe to be a possible compositional inspiration for Colby's Hercules. The sculptural depiction of the martyrdom of the third-century saint, burned alive on a gridiron (and who remains famous for his humor as he said to his henchmen: “I'm done on one side, you can turn me and eat me.”⁴⁵), offers indeed striking similarities to Giordano's reclining hero, propped on one arm, a leg bent. Both works also depict a fiery ordeal, which, in the case of the sculptor represents a real challenge. If one of

40. Seneca, *Hercules (The Madness of Hercules)*, trans. Ranjit Bolt (London: Oberon Books, 1999) vol. 1, 424-26. The importance of Neo-Stoic philosophy for seventeenth-century artists is well documented: see Mark Morford, *Stoics and Neostoics: Rubens and the Circle of Lipsius* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). The attraction for Stoic philosophy is clear in Luca's oeuvre from very early on, as can be seen in his *Cynic Philosopher* (Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen: see *Luca Giordano*, 72-73). Luca Giordano painted several suicide scenes, in particular that of Seneca, a scene Wolfgang Prohaska, *Luca Giordano*, 136, calls a “paradigm of Stoicism.” In Luca's oeuvre, no less than seven versions of the *Death of Seneca* are known, and three more are mentioned in documents.

41. John Rupert Martin, *Baroque* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977) 13.

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.*

44. See, for instance, Giuseppe Scavizzi in *Luca Giordano y España* 45

45. George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961) 230.

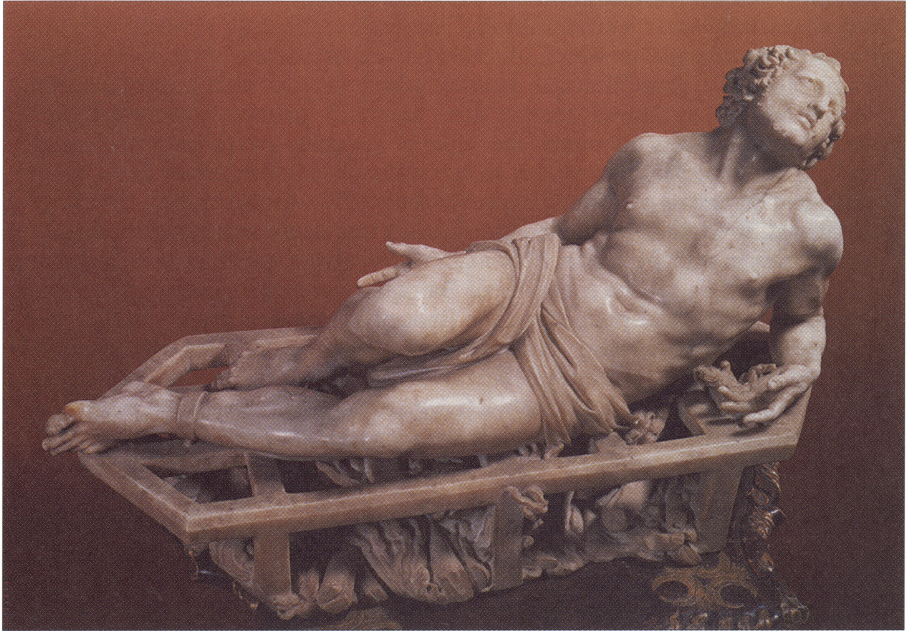


Plate 9

Gianlorenzo Bernini, *St. Lawrence*, 26 x 42 1/2 inches.
Collection Contini Bonacossi, Florence.

the main characteristics of Baroque art is its desire to capture life and movement in all its vividness, what better to express it than the flickering of a flame? However, how does one portray fire in marble? Bernini, barely sixteen or seventeen years old, takes up this Baroque challenge, and, miraculously, fully succeeds. It has been noted how with this work the young Gianlorenzo makes his plea in favor of his medium in the old debate, the *paragone* between sculpture and painting.⁴⁶ Bernini's *Lawrence*, along with other early works such as *The Goat Amalthea with the Infant Jupiter and a Faun* of 1615, or his *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* of c. 1617, shows the inspiration of Hellenistic sculpture.⁴⁷ As a matter of fact, in the Bowdoin College Museum of Art is a Hellenistic relief of Heracles asleep (probably drunk as is suggested by the drinking cup he holds), while several Erotes play with his oversized club that lies by his side (Plate 10, p. 360).⁴⁸ It is not known to us whether any scholar has connected Bernini's *St. Lawrence* with a particular Hellenistic work,⁴⁹ but it is fascinating to find out that a possible ancient source for the depiction of the saint would be one involving Hercules.

Baroque's Sensual Rhetoric

KERRY DOWNES WRITES, "All art reaches the intellect through the senses, for there is no other route; but Baroque art addresses the senses directly and reaches the intellect through the emotions rather than through reason."⁵⁰ So really the whole art of the Baroque is based on the evocation of the material world through a vivid representation of sensorial experience. Within such a definition Luca's Hercules finds a place as it clearly engages the viewer's senses, in particular those of touch, sound, smell, and sight.

Touch—The nose of a small and rather vicious looking dog is situated just millimeters from Hercules's foot. With his red eyes and open drooling mouth, one can sense the breath of the animal on our hero's skin. Hair, robes, plants, and clouds billow in the painting and convey the sensation of wind. As Luca placed Hercules between the fire and the flaming torch held by Philoctetes, he leads the viewer to imagine the blaze about to take place. One can indeed feel the heat of the fire, the whip of the wind, and the breath of the dog—and clearly it is rather unnerving.

Sound—Ovid also mentions the pyre's "crackling flames," and Luca's virtuosio depiction of fire readily suggests such a sound (Plates 3 and 4, pages 350 and 351). Philoctetes, a rather wiry man with disheveled hair, leans over Hercules's feet. He is Hercules's friend and servant, and the only volunteer to help Hercules end his life. He nervously holds the burning torch over Hercules but does not quite touch him. Instead his attention is directed somewhere else. Perhaps he is turning his head away from the gruesome scene alerted by some noise outside of the picture.

46. Charles Scribner III, *Gianlorenzo Bernini* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991) 12.

47. See, for instance, Howard Hibbard, *Bernini* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1961) 25-29.

48. The museum dates the work between 323 BC and 1 BC.

49. Hibbard, *Bernini*, 29, only notes "a pose that probably derives from statues of wounded or dying warriors of antiquity." Scribner, *Bernini* 11, on the other hand sees in Bernini's *Lawrence* "a reincarnation of Michelangelo's *Vatican Pietà*."

50. "Baroque," *Dictionary of Art* vol. 3, 264.



Plate 10

Fragment of a relief depicting a sleeping Heracles, 36 x 30 inches. Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine.

Smell—As the wind blows fiercely it fuels the fire, and we can smell the smoke and soon the burning flesh.

Sight—If one agrees with a definition of Baroque art as an anticlassical and therefore antistructured artistic movement, the role of light becomes important as a means of highlighting what is important or what the artist wants to stress, whether it is an expression or part of a scene. This is certainly one of Caravaggio's great lessons, that *chiaroscuro*, an emotionally charged and spiritualized contrast of light and shadow, is essentially a means of organization. Thus, light effects can guide the viewer's eye. In our Hercules, the manner in which light falls upon bodies is carefully orchestrated to provide the very dynamism and intensity that marks Baroque art. At the top Jupiter descends from the sky, riding his eagle, while on the left the fire crackles at Hercules's back illuminating just the tip of his forehead and the ball of his shoulder. Additionally some light emanates from a source outside the composition, on the right illuminating Hercules's feet and parts of his body, which are turned away from both the fire and the sky.

In a section entitled "The progression from the sensible phenomenon to the supersensible reality," Martin noted that "the purpose of [Baroque art's] illusionism was not merely to astonish but to persuade, and, especially in the case of devotional subjects, to assist the viewer to lift his mind from the transitory things of this world to the eternal things of the spirit."⁵¹ Isn't that what Luca does for us, with the presence right before our eyes of Hercules's club, the hero's attribute but also bearer of the painter's signature? The club, with its inscription in *trompe l'oeil* indeed tricks the viewer into believing its sensible existence. From this meaningful prop the eye travels into the far distance, attracted by the brightness of Jupiter's apparition; indeed we progress, thanks to Luca's talent, from the sensible world to a "supersensible reality."

* * *

ALTHOUGH CONSIDERED perhaps more of an absorber of styles than an original master, one can agree that Giordano's originality lies in his remarkable synthesis of the greatest Baroque styles. Though he uses Caravaggio's trademark *chiaroscuro*, one cannot not go so far as to label this work Caravaggista. And while he does use a fully painterly style, imbued with the furious brushstroke of Rubens, we cannot say that this painting is Rubensian either. Although unmistakably influenced by the dynamism of Bernini's expressive figures and while the legacy of Ribera's naturalism would always be with him, this painting is not one of those "brilliant imitations" for which he was known. Rather, what Luca has done here is to create a masterful orchestration of echoes of the influential and typically Baroque artists he admired. Rubens paired with the influence of Caravaggio, combined with his training under Ribera and love of Bernini, is testimony to Luca's ability to create an entirely encompassing Baroque work. We can agree with Alfonso E. Pérez Sanchez who declared Luca Giordano "figura capital del barroco europeo."⁵²

51. Martin, *Baroque* 170.

52. *Luca Giordano y España* 13.



Plate 1

George Bellows, *Hill and Valley (Monhegan)*, 1913. Oil on panel, 15 x 19 1/2 inches. Colby College Museum of Art. Museum purchase.