

GIOVANNI BATTISTA GAULLI, called BACCICCO
(Genoa 1639 - Rome 1709)

At some time in the 1650's Baciccio left Genoa for Rome, where he soon became a protégé of Bernini. His early style is best seen in the San Rocco altarpiece (circa 1663-6), where the native Genoese tradition of dark backgrounds, highly saturated colour and a painterly manner are combined with traces of 16th century Mannerism and the influence of Rubens. But it is the impact of the Carracci and the academic Bolognese tradition which characterize his first phase as Baroque Classicism. By 1667 he was working for Pope Alexander VII and he continued to receive major commissions from the three succeeding pontiffs. In 1669 he visited Parma to study the frescoes of Correggio. The High Baroque style of his middle years (circa 1670-85) was much influenced by the sculpture of Bernini. His decorations of the Gesù, particularly the nave vault (1676-79), became a landmark in the development of illusionistic ceiling painting. In his late period (1685-1709) he concentrated on portraits and many small private commissions, moving toward a more classicizing style.

Portrait of Pope Alexander VII

Oil on canvas

90 x 76 cm

GIOVANNI BATTISTA GAULLI, called BACCICCIO
(Genoa 1639 - Rome 1709)

At some time in the 1650's Baciccio left Genoa for Rome, where he soon became a protégé of Bernini. His early style is best seen in the San Rocco altarpiece (circa 1663-6), where the native Genoese tradition of dark backgrounds, highly saturated colour and a painterly manner are combined with traces of 16th century Mannerism and the influence of Rubens. But it is the impact of the Carracci and the academic Bolognese tradition which characterize his first phase as Baroque Classicism. By 1667 he was working for Pope Alexander VII and he continued to receive major commissions from the three succeeding pontiffs. In 1669 he visited Parma to study the frescoes of Correggio. The High Baroque style of his middle years (circa 1670-85) was much influenced by the sculpture of Bernini. His decorations of the Gesù, particularly the nave vault (1676-79), became a landmark in the development of illusionistic ceiling painting. In his late period (1685-1709) he concentrated on portraits and many small private commissions, moving toward a more classicizing style.

Portrait of Pope Alexander VII

Oil on canvas

90 x 76 cm

Baciccio owed his first important commissions as a painter in Rome to Bernini, who not only persuaded Prince Pamphili to entrust him with the four pendentive frescoes in . Agnese in Piazza Navona, but also procured him commands for portraits. According to Pascoli, the renown of the pendentive frescoes was such that Pope Alexander VII (1655-67) asked Bernini to introduce Baciccio to him, and was immediately so taken by the young man that he gave him privy access and "si fece fare immediatamente il ritratto, che ancor si conserva in casa Chigi" (cf. Lione Pascoli, Vite, vol.I, Rome 1730, pp.199-200). Pascoli dates the frescoes too early, for we know that Baciccio had painted the Pope (who died in 1667) before their actual execution (c. 1666-72), from a letter of 25th December 1666 to the Duke of Modena from his Resident in Rome, Rangoni. This recommends Baciccio as a portrait-painter on the strength of his portraits of Bernini, the Pope's brother Mario Chigi, and the Pope himself - " e V.A. sij sicura che mai è state fatto if più bello " (P. Imperato Archivio storico dell' arte, II, 1889, p.153). Golzio's transcriptions of documents relating to the artistic patronage of the Pope's nephew Cardinal Flavio Chigi include

payments to Baciccio for two posthumous portraits of the Pope, once in conjunction with a portrait of the cardinal in 1667 (cf. V. Golzio, Documenti artistici sul seicento nell'Archivio Chigi, Rome, 1939, p.289), and on the other occasion as one of a number of portraits of Popes and cardinals destined for the Chigi palace opposite SS. Apostoli (op. cit. p.291).

A number of versions of Baciccio's portrait of Alexander VII are known to exist, and two of his portraits of Mario Chigi. Robert Enggass has discussed the vexed question of which are the prime originals (i.e. the pair painted before December 1666), but concludes that in the absence of the pair of portraits formerly in the Messinger Collection at Munich and not seen since their sale at auction in 1918, it is impossible to pronounce on the matter (cf. The Painting of Baciccio, Pennsylvania, 1964, pp. 77-79 and 130-31 and fig. 111). However, the payments to Baciccio for other portraits of Alexander VII implies that at least two of the replicas must be considered autograph. The high quality of our own picture clearly places it in this category, and suggests that it may be one of the portraits alluded to in the documents.

Exh: Heim Gallery, Summer 1978. No. 18.

estate 1978