



## Borghese, Scipione Caffarelli (1576?-1633)

by Richard G. Mann

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Scipione Caffarelli Borghese, a seventeenth-century Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church, was a bold and influential patron and collector of the visual arts. As is the case with many other famous Europeans of the early modern period, we are dependent primarily upon derogatory sources for documentation of his homosexuality. However, Borghese's art collection also provides clues about his personal life.

In his residences, Borghese displayed ancient and modern depictions of beautiful male figures with strong homoerotic appeal. Prominent works in his collection also reveal a fascination with androgyny and the fusion of genders. Among works by other artists, Borghese eagerly acquired pictures by Caravaggio (1571-1610), who fused homoerotic desire with spirituality in provocative and groundbreaking images.

As a patron and collector, Borghese revealed wide-ranging tastes, but he consistently demonstrated a willingness to challenge conventional standards, as he may have done as well in his personal life.

### Life and Career

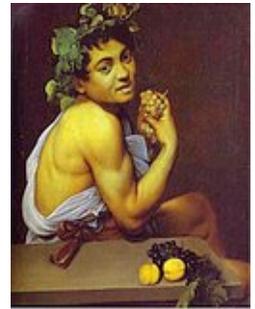
He was born sometime between 1576 and 1579 in Rome to Marcantonio Caffarelli, a distinguished but impoverished aristocrat, and Ortensia Borghese, the sister of Camillo Borghese, who assumed the name Paul V upon being elected pope on May 16, 1605. Paul V ordained his nephew as a priest on August 7, 1605 and appointed him Cardinal only ten days later. When he was made Cardinal, Scipione adopted the name and arms of the Borghese, and he seldom used his father's name thereafter.

As Cardinal Nephew (an official post until it was abolished in 1692), Borghese was placed in charge of both the internal and external political affairs of the Papal States. In addition, Paul V entrusted his nephew with the management of the finances of both the papacy and the Borghese family.

Borghese aroused a great deal of controversy and resentment by utilizing numerous "gifts" from the papal government to fund Borghese family investments. Identifying rental properties as the most efficient means to ensure financial stability, he purchased entire towns and other extensive properties, including approximately one-third of the land south of Rome. Exploiting his authority as Cardinal Nephew, he often compelled owners to sell their holdings to him at substantial discounts. Borghese thus ensured that the fortunes of the family were not permanently dependent on ecclesiastical office.

### Rumors of Homosexuality

However, although he retained his wealth, Borghese lost both political influence and social status immediately upon the death of his uncle on January 28, 1621. Enemies, whom he made through his ruthless management of political and financial affairs, began to circulate malicious rumors and satirical poems about his supposedly insatiable lust for other men. Recorded in letters by diplomats, these claims soon



Two works from the collection of Scipione Caffarelli Borghese:  
**Top:** *Sick Bacchus* by Caravaggio.  
**Above:** A Roman copy of a Greek statue of a *Hermaphrodite* (partial view).

spread throughout Europe.

While such hostile sources cannot be accepted without question, frequent assertions about his love for Stefano Pignatelli (1578-1623) may have had a basis in fact. Shortly after assuming the papal throne, Camillo Borghese exiled Pignatelli from Rome; according to his detractors, this was done because the closeness of Scipione's friendship with Pignatelli threatened to discredit both the papacy and the Borghese family. Before the end of 1605, Paul V relented and allowed Pignatelli to return to Rome, supposedly because his nephew was so deeply distressed by the enforced separation. Subsequently, Pignatelli lived for various extended periods in the Borghese Palace; Scipione gave him various ecclesiastical honors and even arranged for him to be appointed Cardinal shortly before his uncle's death.

### **Art Collector**

Borghese utilized the immense wealth that he acquired as Cardinal Nephew to assemble one of the largest and most impressive art collections in Europe. Even though later generations dispersed some of his acquisitions through sales and diplomatic gifts, the works that he assembled form the core of the holdings of the Galleria Borghese (Rome), a museum housed in the villa commissioned by Scipione (1613-15) from the architect Giovanni Vasanzio (1550-1621).

The *Satyr and Dolphin* (Roman marble copy of lost Greek bronze, 4th century B.C.E.) typifies the elegant and sensual depictions of young male figures that were prominently featured in Borghese's collection. One of his most prized works was the *Hermaphrodite* (now in the Louvre, Paris, Roman copy after Greek original of 2nd century B.C.E.). From the young sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680), Scipione commissioned in 1620 a realistically rendered mattress on which to lay this sensuous nude figure. Borghese is reported to have kept this statue in a specially made wooden cupboard, which he would open with a theatrical flourish to the amusement of his close friends.

Pope Paul V willingly assisted his nephew's efforts to obtain the art works that aroused his interest. For instance, through the influence of his uncle, Borghese secured the cooperation of the parish priest in arranging to have Raphael's famous *Deposition* stolen from the Baglioni family chapel in San Francesco, Perugia, for which it had been commissioned a century before (1507).

### **Caravaggio**

Also, on July 31, 1607, Paul V ordered 105 pictures confiscated from the artist Cavaliere d'Arpino (1568-1640), who had been unable to pay his full tax bill, and he had them delivered to his nephew. Among the pictures that Borghese acquired through this seizure were two important early works by Caravaggio (both 1593, still in Galleria Borghese): a probable self-portrait, usually called *Sick Bacchus*, and *A Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, an overtly homoerotic image of a youth extending both a large basket of fruit and his tongue seductively toward the viewer.

Borghese also greatly admired Caravaggio's naturalistic and psychologically complex later religious paintings, such as the brooding (but still sensual) youthful *Saint John the Baptist* (1605/6), which the collector acquired from the artist's estate shortly after his death, and the intense *David with the Head of Goliath* (1609/10), which represents the Biblical hero extending outwards a decapitated head with the features of the artist.

Borghese appropriated Caravaggio's *Madonna and Child with St. Anne*, a large altarpiece commissioned in 1605 for a chapel in the Basilica of Saint Peter's, but rejected by the College of Cardinals because of its earthly realism and unconventional iconography. Recent archival research has established that Borghese intended from the early stages of the commission that the altarpiece would end up in his own collection.

### **Patronage of Bernini**

Borghese's early patronage of Bernini helped to establish him as the leading Italian sculptor and architect of the seventeenth century. Between 1618 and 1624, Bernini worked primarily for the Cardinal, creating for him innovative pieces that served to define Baroque principles in sculpture. For the decoration of the Villa Borghese, Bernini produced a life-sized figure of *David* (1623), originally displayed to create the impression that he was hurling a stone directly at the spectator, and three sculptural groups with mythological themes.

The culminating work in this series that Bernini created for Borghese, *Apollo and Daphne* (1623-25), represents an incident popular in Italian poetry of the early seventeenth century, and ultimately derived from the *Metamorphoses* by the ancient Roman poet Ovid. Bernini depicts Apollo reaching out toward the river nymph Daphne just as she is transformed into a laurel tree by her father in order to prevent her from being burned by the touch of the god of the sun. Understood within its original intellectual context, this group represents frustrated desire and enduring despair and pain, provoked by love.

These meanings may have had special resonance for Borghese, who, at the time, was widely ridiculed for his attraction to other men. The specific moment depicted by Bernini also was thought in the early seventeenth century to signify the fusion of genders, more explicitly depicted in the *Hermaphrodite* also in the Cardinal's collection.

In 1632 Bernini executed two marble portrait busts of Borghese (both Galleria Borghese). These works capture the exuberance that the Cardinal's friends admired and which his critics decried as frivolity inappropriate to his office.

### **Collection as a Whole**

Within the scope of a brief entry, it is impossible to acknowledge fully the breadth of Borghese's collection. Although he is most associated with the development of the Baroque, he also eagerly collected works of many artists of quite different styles.

Borghese's collection includes works as diverse as Early Renaissance altarpieces such as Fra Angelico's *Last Judgment* (ca 1450); examples of northern art such as two paintings of Venus (early 1500s) by Lucas Cranach; sixteenth-century Venetian paintings such as Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* (1514); and classicizing pictures such as Domenichino's *Diana* (1616/7). The Cardinal even owned a very uncharacteristic work by Michelangelo, a depiction of Cupid now called *The Manhattan Marble* (Payne Whitney House [Embassy of France], New York, 1490s).

### **Development of Gardens and Restoration of Churches**

Borghese took special interest in the development of the extensive gardens undertaken by various artists at his Roman residences, the Palazzo Borghese on the Quirinal (primarily 1610-16) and the Villa Borghese (initiated in 1613 and elaborated for the rest of the Cardinal's life). Both these influential gardens featured innovative elements such as waterfalls, and they incorporated dense groves of trees, which provided rural seclusion within the city. Derek Jarman and other queer artists and writers of the twentieth century celebrated the gardens of the Villa Borghese as a place of sexual and psychological freedom.

As Cardinal, Borghese took seriously his responsibility to contribute to the care and decoration of the churches under his supervision. Particularly after the death of his uncle, he seems to have utilized the embellishment of church buildings to demonstrate concern for the well-being of the faithful. The reconstruction of San Crisogono, Rome (1618-28) was probably the most costly project of redecoration undertaken in any church in the city during the early seventeenth century. Gold covers the ceiling and many other surfaces. With the Borghese arms and inscriptions glorifying the patron displayed throughout, San Crisogono seems almost a personal monument, rather than a place of worship.

Such public undertakings helped Borghese rehabilitate his reputation, though he never regained his political influence. He died on October 3, 1633 in the Borghese Palace, where he had assembled a large part of the art collection that has secured his lasting fame.

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