CONTEMPORARY BOOK REVIEW

Manifesting the sacred: the ‘Ecstasy of St. Teresa’, the ‘Call of St. Matthew’ and the ‘Conversion of St. Paul’ characterized in printed tourist guides

Lonely Planet, by Abigail Blasi and Duncan Garwood (Us), Italy, EDT s.r.l., Torino, 2018, 351 pp., €21.00, ISBN 978-88-370-9338-9
Le Guide Mondadori, by Erica Magnaghi and Pier Angela Mazzarino, Milano, Mondadori, 2013, 440 pp., €26.50, ISBN 978-88-370-9338-9
National Geographic – Walking Guide, by Katie Parla, Rome, Washington, Milano, Italy, White Star, 2013, 192 pp., €12.50, ISBN 978-88-540-24089-4
Touring Club, by Antonio Federico Cajola (The Conversion of St. Paul); Giuseppe Morganti (The Calling of St. Matthew) and Marina Magnani Cianetti (The Ecstasy of St. Theresa), Milano, Touring Editore, 2016, 1168 pp., €29.90, ISBN 9788836-56-7980
Le Guide Michelin, by Domitilla Cavalletti, Betty de Andressian, Anne Leboff, Milano, Italy, Michelin Italiana, 2012, 159 pp., €10, ISBN 976-88-540-3848-6

The traveler in Rome, during the Middle Ages, was fully animated with a religious spirit. In fact, more than a traveler he was a pilgrim. Thanks to the Mirabilia Urbis Romae—the detailed manuscripts over the churches and monuments of the eternal city—he could easily find the treasures of the metropolis. The Mirabilia continued to be used until the end of the 1600s. After this, when Rome became the destination and fulcrum of the Grand Tour, travelers often wrote down ponderous volumes, in which they expressed the wonders of Rome in a new way, and with a certain esprit de finesse.

They not only mentioned the beauty of every corner of Rome, but they also commented on the sights from a less religious and more critical point of view. We can, for example, refer to Goethe’s Journey in Italy from the end of the eighteenth century, or Stendhal’s Promenades dans Rome from the early nineteenth century, which often motivated the traveler to visit the city of the popes. Both books were more concerned with art criticism than spirituality.

Today also, modern guidebooks obtain a passive but significant power directing the traveler to knowledge and understanding of the magnificence that the city of Rome offers. In this review, we would like to examine and discuss the way in which modern guidebooks express the sacred dimension of certain masterpieces of art in Rome. We must keep in mind that the space dedicated to the works of art in guidebooks is necessarily brief and that the text describing the masterpieces is aimed towards a broad audience and therefore adopts a popular tone.

For this purpose, from amongst the numerous English-language guidebooks that you can find in the city center’s best bookshops we have chosen five volumes by well-known editors: Lonely Planet, Rome; Le Guide Mondadori, Rome; National Geographic – Walking Guide, Rome; Touring Club d’Italia, Rome; and Guide Michelin, Rome.

Inside these five guidebooks, we have chosen to highlight three famous works of art that could be of major interest for a curious tourist when visiting the capital. Hopefully, the tourist would first read the texts presented in the guidebook, and then admire them on site in Rome. The chosen works are:

1. The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa, by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, at the Basilica of Santa Maria della Vittoria
Our discussion will have three parts. We will start with a brief presentation of the three works. Then, using the five selected guidebooks, we will examine how each book describes the selected works. Finally, we will consider whether the guidebooks have appropriately expressed the spiritual dimension of these great works of Bernini and Caravaggio; and, where they have not, we will try to suggest some improvements regarding this, for guidebooks to be published in the future.

The works of art

1) Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* - the Basilica of Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome

The Saint is reclining on a soft cloud and enveloped by loose clothing, such that we can hardly observe her anatomy: an angel is fastening a burning arrow in her heart, which causes her a mysteriously pleasing ache ('this delectable pain, which is not really pain'); these are the words in which, in her autobiography, *Interior Castle*, she described her spiritual experience), that transfigures her face. Her half-shut eyelids and the position of her body call to mind the figure of Christ in the famous *Pietà* sculpted by Michaelangelo, which is located in Saint Peter's Basilica.

Bernini was commissioned with crafting this sculptural group by Cardinal Federico Cornaro around 1647. It is located inside the Cornaro family chapel, and the artist also sculpted figures of the members of this noble Venetian family, whom he placed on two small stages, like spectators of the extraordinary event. The marble was completed by Bernini in 1652.

The whole assembly is illuminated by the natural light from a specific window, so placed by Bernini as to ensure a glow along the bronze rays of the sculpture, suggestive of a heavenly light when the religious ecstasy occurs to Teresa.²

2) Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Call of Saint Matthew* - the Church of San Luigi dei Francesi (The Contarelli Chapel), Rome

Outside a Roman tavern, on the left side of the painting, we see the publican Matthew sitting at a table. Christ, on the right side, is pointing. Even today, it is discussed which figure in particular is Matthew: is he the character with a thick beard who appears surprised, almost incredulous at the call of Christ? —or, is he man who is still counting his collected coins, and is Caravaggio showing this moment before his conversion?³

Caravaggio was greatly inspired by the vault of the Sistine Chapel, frescoed by Michelangelo, where Adam receives the spirit of life from the index finger of the Eternal hand. In the Contarelli Chapel, he replicated that moment, showing the figure of Christ who redeems Matthew and with his pointing finger calls him for his evangelical mission.
3) Caravaggio, the Conversion on the Way to Damascus - the Basilica of Santa Maria del Popolo (The Cerasi Chapel), Rome

Saul is lying on the ground, while a seraphic stableman is holding the bridle of his horse. For this painting, Caravaggio kept in mind the figure of Saul designed by Raphael for the splendid tapestry concerning the same subject, which is today preserved in the Vatican Pinacoteca. The Lombard painter represents the next moment, in which Saul heard the famous words: 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' (Acts 9), while he was traveling to Damascus.

In the first version, today preserved in the Odescalchi collection, Saul is depicted in the moment when the light of Christ dazzles and blinds him (he will recover his sight after three days). In the later work, that is, in the canvas kept in the Cerasi Chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo, Caravaggio paints the face of Saul whilst he already is manifesting the grace he has received and projects onto him the serenity of a martyr. Moreover, Saul’s posture is a reference to the frescoes of the early Roman Christian art, where the ‘orante’ was depicted with open arms, in the same way as the redeemed apostle painted here by Caravaggio.

The guidebooks

As already mentioned, we will now browse through the five selected guidebooks in order to see in what terms the above three works are explained.

Lonely Planet:

p. 45: Caravaggio, The Call of Saint Matthew, San Luigi dei Francesi:

Here the cycle of St. Matthew is mentioned (Matthew’s Vocation, Matthew and the Angel and The Martyrdom of St. Matthew), painted by Caravaggio in about 1601.

p. 99: Caravaggio, Conversion of Saint Paul, Santa Maria del Popolo:

The text refers to the Cerasi Chapel, in the Basilica of Santa Maria del Popolo, and the two paintings by Caravaggio: The Conversion of Saul and the Crucifixion of Saint Peter.

p. 105: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Ecstasy of Saint Teresa, Santa Maria della Vittoria:

The description of the work is presented by two adjectives: ‘Extravagant and sexually’; then the text continues with a tone intended to outline the work in more objective language: ‘This daring sculpture portrays Teresa engulfed in the folds of a flowing cloak, floating in ecstasy, while a teasing angel pierces her repeatedly with a golden arrow’.

Le Guide Mondadori:

p. 124: Caravaggio, The Call of Saint Matthew, San Luigi dei Francesi:

"In the three paintings (alludes to the entire cycle, performed by Caravaggio, for Cardinal Contarelli: Saint Matthew and the Angel, Conversion, and Martyrdom), we note a disturbing realism and a dramatic use of light". The text also refers to the first version of Saint Matthew and the Angel, a work that was rejected by the clerics of the church and which was destroyed in the fire of 1945 at the Flaktum Friedrichstain in Berlin (where the painting had been temporarily placed after the Second World War), when
the building, in which had been transported many works from the Berlin museums, was under the control of the Russian army.

p. 141: Caravaggio, *Conversion of Saint Paul*, Santa Maria del Popolo:

In the short article dedicated to the Cerasi Chapel, the title of the canvas is mentioned, but more attention is dedicated to the *Crucifixion of Saint Peter* and to explaining how in that work Caravaggio realistically portrays the effort of the executioners to affix the cross in the ground, made burdensome by the weight of the martyr.

p. 254: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, Santa Maria della Vittoria:

The sculpture of Gian Lorenzo Bernini is here sketched with a brilliant text, from which undoubtedly emerges a direct and detailed knowledge of the work: 'From niches similar to boxes, witness the scene, the figures of the commissioner, Cardinal Federico Cornaro, and the members of his family (…) The spectator is struck by the apparent physical nature of the ecstasy of Saint Teresa. The Saint lies on a cloud, with a half-open mouth, and eyes closed, with a cloth richly draped around the body. From above, a curly angel looks at her with a smile, which may appear tender or cruel (…) The marble figures are surrounded and illuminated by rays of divine light, materialized in bronze'.

National Geographic - Walking Guide Rome:

p. 45: Caravaggio, *The Call of Saint Matthew*, San Luigi dei Francesi:

The paintings by Caravaggio, in the Contarelli Chapel, are mentioned without further comment.

p. 82: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, Santa Maria della Vittoria:

The text that accompanies the *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa* underlines the counter-reformist significance of the Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s marble, a work in which we read: "The challenge of the Catholic Church to the Protestant Reformation. (…) The intensity of art promotes and exalts the supreme importance of the pope and the church".

p. 186: Caravaggio, *Conversion of Saint Paul*, San Luigi dei Francesi:

The presence in the Cerasi Chapel, in the church Santa Maria del Popolo, of the two paintings by Caravaggio, *The Crucifixion of Saint Peter* and *The Conversion of Paul*, is mentioned.

Touring Club d’Italia:

p. 248: Caravaggio, *Conversion of Saint Paul*, Santa Maria del Popolo:

It is noted that the protagonist in the painting is the horse, and that Saul is blinded on the road to Damascus.

p. 348: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, Santa Maria della Vittoria:

As usual, they point out the dubious angelic nature of the seraphim: "From the coffered vault, rains, on the famous group, a golden light, that creates a suggestive and secret penumbra: an ambiguous angel is about to hit the heart of the saint, […] facing [the spectacle are] the members of the Cornaro family."
Regarding the work, it is emphasized how the scene is represented, and how light is the protagonist of the painting.

Guide Michelin, Roma:

p. 49: Caravaggio, *The Call of Saint Matthew*, San Luigi dei Francesi:

The canvas is considered as an expression of the "blackest vein of the Baroque." Caravaggio is called a "brilliant artist."

p. 88: Caravaggio, *Conversion of Saint Paul*, Santa Maria del Popolo:

It says the work shows an "unconventional and brilliant vision"

p.65: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, Santa Maria della Vittoria:

It says that "the artist demonstrates an extraordinary mastery, working the marble-like wax and thus offering an innovative representation of mystical ecstasies".

**About the guidebooks**

It is clear that the guidebooks dedicate more space to the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* than to the other works, and that it is sometimes described with erotic overtones. For example, the phrases used by *Lonely Planet*: ‘extravagant and sexually’ (p. 105); and *Touring Club*: ‘an angel with an ambiguous smile’ (p. 348).

In contrast, the guide *Mondadori* moves away from the temptation to read in the marble an erotic component, merely describing the angel ‘with a smile, which may appear tender or cruel’ (p.254). The *National Geographic* guide calls attention to the historical period in which the work was executed, mentioning ‘The challenge of the Catholic Church against the Protestant Reformation’. While the *Michelin Guide* appropriately highlights the refined technical ability of Bernini, who ‘working with marble as wax’ (*Michelin* p. 65) invents a new iconographic model for the representation of the difficult subject of mystical ecstasy.

With regard to Caravaggio, the guides highlight the character of his painting: ‘blackest vein of the Baroque’ (*Michelin* p. 49); or underline how the Lombard painter adopts a careful use of light and how ‘light is the protagonist of the painting’ (Touring Club pp. 248, 424).

We cannot pretend that, in writing a guidebook about *The Call of Saint Matthew*, the writers must necessarily mention the commentary of St. Bede the Venerable, who wrote ‘Miserando atque eligendo’ (‘[Jesus] having mercy and even choosing [Matthew]’; the motto stands on the emblem of the Pope Francis).

Even so, the guidebook could, albeit briefly, relate the painting to the other two works in the Contarelli chapel: *St. Matthew and the angel* and the *Martyrdom*. And then, he could situate *The Call* as part of an existential parable of the publican, which Caravaggio stages: Matthew will rise to follow Christ, he will write one of the synoptic gospels inspired by the angel, and finally he will suffer martyrdom: the artist paints this moment (in the canvas of the *Martyrdom*, placed inside the Contarelli Chapel, opposite the *Call*) with the saint on the ground, turning his face towards the face of the executioner;
his arm touches the water of a baptismal font. Matthew, in death, therefore, is born to new eternal life—Caravaggio might also have wanted to make some reference to his own spiritual life.

In any case, the works of art could be presented as part of a larger program performed by the artist: for example, in the case of Bernini, the editor could correlate the Ecstasy of St. Teresa with another powerful sculpture by the same artist and portraying a similar reality: we refer, of course, to the Ecstasy of Blessed Ludovica Albertoni, preserved in the church of San Francesco a Ripa in the Trastevere neighborhood in Rome.

Considering, therefore, that Gian Lorenzo Bernini dedicated two large marbles to the same subject, even the most stubborn agnostic would perhaps come to reflect upon the reality of what Bernini strove to represent in cold, hard marble: that particular spiritual state experienced and described by Teresa, Ludovica and other mystics, and which St. Paul refers to in these words:

> If I must glory (it is not expedient indeed), but I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ above fourteen years ago (whether in the body, I know not, or out of the body, I know not; God knoweth), such a one caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man (whether in the body, or out of the body, I know not; God knoweth), that he was caught up into paradise, and heard secret words, which it is not granted to man to utter. (2 Corinthians, 12: 1–5)

It should be also noted that, at the base of the Ecstasy of St. Teresa, Bernini inserted a relief with the Last Supper, putting the saint’s body in relation to the Eucharist: that is, the artist models the transverberation—the “piercing through”—of Teresa as a visible representation of transubstantiation, a truth which was one of the pillars of the Catholic Counter-Reformation. In Catholic doctrine, the term “transubstantiation” expresses the conversion of the bread and the wine into the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ during the Mass.

In addition, Bernini demonstrates that he is well aware of the writings of the saint, who said that the elevation of her spirit took place just as she consumed the sacred particle during the Eucharistic celebration. It is not a coincidence that at the top of the work Bernini has inserted this inscription: Nisi coelum creassem, ob te solam crearem (If there had not been heaven, I would have created it only for You).

**Conclusions**

We can consider the texts of the guidebooks concerning the three works discussed here well written on the stylistic level and chiefly concerned with an immediate perception of the works of art. Their aim is to capture the attention of the tourist with an engaging text. However, only the Michelin guide considers the religious aspect of the Ecstasy, pointing out that it is a clear expression of the Catholic Counter-Reformation. Indeed, in the other guidebooks, there is absolutely no spiritual reading of the three works analyzed here.

We could, therefore, suggest that a guidebook at least relate the main work of art in question with other pieces by the same artist so that it could be seen as a tessera of a larger mosaic, consisting of the artist’s homogeneous work: eg pluribus unum.

As for the interpretation of these works, the Ecstasy undoubtedly suffers from the famous and controversial interpretation given to it by George Bataille, who, perhaps inspired by Stendhal, defined the Bernini marble as an example of ‘sacré érotisme’. Without a
doubt, numerous websites dedicated to this sculpture have been inspired by this definition, often supported by a psychoanalytic interpretation.

In conclusion, the works examined here are undoubtedly animated by the desire to spread the story and the beauty; but it is evident that the spiritual aspect is almost completely absent. Perhaps the critical spirit of Goethe and Stendhal have, across two centuries, cultivated a historically cultured but religiously skeptical ground, from which the five guidebooks in question derive.

We certainly respect those writers with no religious faith, but for anyone who has in mind to write a paper guidebook to the great works of art in the Eternal City, we would like to suggest that he try to imagine a time—particularly here in Rome—when the last ray of daylight, in the late afternoon, was considered as an intense and tender gaze of God, which Caravaggio and Bernini made eternal, and visible, on the faces of Teresa, Saul, and Levi.

Notes

1. “….my God could be described as the fire in a lighted brazier, from which some spark will fly out and touch the soul, in such a way that it will be able to feel the burning heat of the fire; but, as the fire is not hot enough to burn it up, and the experience is very delectable, the soul continues to feel that pain and the mere touch suffices to produce that effect in it…. this delectable pain, which is not really pain, is not continuous….. it never completely enkindles the soul; for, just as the soul is about to become enkindled, the spark dies, and leaves the soul yearning once again to suffer that loving pain of which it is the cause.” St. Teresa of Avila, Interior Castle, TAN Books, Charlotte, NC, 2011.

2. E. Lavin, Bernini and the unity of the visual arts, Oxford Press, New York, 1927.

3. Sara Magister, Caravaggio. Il Vero Matteo, Campisano Editore, Roma, 2018. On Caravaggio’s opera omnia: Maurizio Marini, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio “pictor praestantissimus”, Newton Compton, Roma, 1980.

4. Regarding this, see the lecture of Andrea Lonardo the Contarelli Chapel: (www.gliscritti.it/blog/entry/792), in which Andrea Lonardo, mentions how Caravaggio depicts the martyrdom of the Saint beside a baptismal font. According to this scholar, the martyrdom would represent the need for bodily death in order for spiritual rebirth to take place.

5. R. H. Bainton, The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century, Bacon Press, Boston, 1952.

6. An interesting study on light, painted with a symbolic meaning, is in: E. Panofsky, Early netherlandish painting: its origin and character, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 1953; in particular, the chapter: Spiritualia sub Metaphoris Corporalium, pp. 131–148.

Luigi Senise
Art e Dossier, Rome, Italy
seniseluigi@hotmail.com

Available online at https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2018.1540912