

JANINA KNIGHT

Borromini's First Encounter with the Unique Architectural Designs of G.B. Montano

Giovanni Battista Montano, born in Milan in 1534 and trained as a woodcarver, moved to Rome in the early 1570s where his interest in sculpting was replaced by an intense interest in the antique Roman ruins found throughout the city and its surrounding countryside. It was following this move to Rome that Montano embarked on an ambitious project of drawing hundreds of ancient Roman ruins, imaginary buildings and antique architectural details, a venture on which he worked until his death in 1621 at the age of eighty-seven. While the majority of artists in Italy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had an interest in and admiration for the artistic and architectural achievements of antiquity, Montano's interest and admiration went much further and dominated the majority of his artistic output during his career in Rome. He coupled his interest in ancient buildings with an uninhabited artistic freedom that he expressed in his drawings.

Although Montano, who throughout his lifetime worked as a model-maker, draughtsman, architect, and lecturer, was not himself famous, a large body of his intriguing designs based on Roman antiquities gained him fame and celebrity after his death.¹ This success was due to the posthumous publication of many of his designs by his pupil Giovanni Battista Soria (an Italian architect and sculptor).²

1 Lynda Fairbairn, *Italian Renaissance Drawings in the Collection of Sir John Soane's Museum* (London: Azimuth Editions, 1998), 541. This catalogue includes photographs of the close to three-hundred Montano drawings in Sir John Soane's Museum, London, England. The subjects explored by Montano in these drawings include temples, tombs, sarcophagi, friezes, oil lamps, columns and capitals. In almost all of his drawings Montano used a combination of graphite, pen and ink, and ink wash in order to generate drawings that were detailed and possessed a sense of volume. While the engraved versions of Montano's designs reproduce his original drawings quite accurately, the engravings fail to translate the subtle shading and sense of volume achieved by Montano in his drawings.

2 Birgitta Ringbeck, *Giovanni Battista Soria: Architekt Scipione Borghese* (Münster: Lit, 1989), 9-16.

After Montano's death in 1621, Soria acquired his master's collection of finished architectural drawings and published them as a series of engraved books, the first and perhaps most important, being *Scielta di varij tempietti antichi*, published in 1624.³ This book of fantastical and imaginative architectural designs included both reconstructions of ancient Roman ruins as well as unidentified, perhaps purely invented buildings. It was through Soria's publication and its numerous later editions that the unique architectural ideas presented in Montano's designs were transmitted to Rome's young generation of Baroque architects, which included Francesco Borromini, who would become one of the most important architects in seventeenth century Rome.

While the impact of Montano's works on Rome's young Baroque architects has been acknowledged in art historical literature, Montano's own life and works have yet to be explored in great detail.⁴ This talented draughtsman, whose work would come to furnish material for the whole first generation of Roman Baroque architects, approached the architectural drawing of ruins in a novel way. He was not interested in recording ancient buildings as they stood in his own time, as the majority of his predecessors had done, but in studying the architectural and decorative variety that could be found in Roman architecture and reconstructing these ruins in drawings. Since Montano never made constructing his designed buildings a priority, his inventive vision was never stifled nor discouraged by the practical concerns involved

3 The seventeenth century publications by Montano are listed in chronological order: Montano, Giovanni Battista. *Scielta di varij tempietti antichi*. Edited by Giovanni Battista Soria. Rome: 1624. Montano, Giovanni Battista. *Architettura con diversi ornamenti cavati del antico*. Edited by Giovanni Battista Soria. Rome: 1624. Montano, Giovanni Battista. *Diversi ornamenti capricciosi per deposito o altari*. Edited by Giovanni Battista Soria. Rome: 1625. Montano, Giovanni Battista. *Tabernacoli diversi*. Edited by Giovanni Battista Soria. Rome: 1628. Montano, Giovanni Battista. *Architettura con diversi ornamenti cavati del antico*. Edited by Calisto Ferrante. Rome: 1636. Montano, Giovanni Battista. *Raccolta*. Edited by Calisto Ferrante. Rome: 1638. Montano, Giovanni Battista. *Le cinque libri di architettura di Gio. Battista Montani Milanese*. Edited by Giovanni Jacomo de Rossi, 1684. Montano, Giovanni Battista. *Li cinque libri di architettura di Gio. Battista Montani Milanese*. Second Edition. Edited by Giovanni Jacomo de Rossi, 1691.

4 For an overview of the career of G.B. Montano see Fairbairn p. 541-734 and Joseph Connors, "G.B. Montano," in *The Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects*, ed. Adolf K. Placzek (NY: Free Press, 1982), 276-279.

with constructing a building. His designs, which are often described as fantastical and imaginative, reflect the fact that Montano was not concerned with historical accuracy, but rather with experimentation and the promotion of architectural freedom. The free inspiration in Montano's designs has been credited as the reason for the resounding success of the published collections of his works.⁵

Montano's surviving drawings, the majority of which are today housed in Sir John Soane's Museum in London, England, testify to the draughtsman's interest in using drawing to document and explore Rome's antique architectural "exceptions" to the norm rather than simply making a compilation of Rome's most famous monuments.⁶ Along with this unconventional subject matter, Montano's drawings are made more unique, and therefore of greater importance, by his almost obsessive habit of adding multiple freestanding statues to his reconstructions of temples and tombs.⁷ Additionally, Montano would "correct" the ancient buildings he was drawing by altering them in order to achieve a greater symmetry and regularity, even though such symmetry was not necessarily typical of the Roman buildings he was reconstructing.⁸

Soria writes in his preface to the 1624 publication of *Scielta di varij tempietti antichi* that Montano would measure the ruins on the sites throughout Rome and its countryside and descend into caverns and grottoes when necessary, but that he would also supplement the ruins with sections and elevations drawn with his "exquisite imagination".⁹ Despite this description of Montano's methods, it can be shown that a number of Montano's drawings are actually based on designs by earlier

5 Paolo Portoghesi, *Roma Barocca*, trans. Barbara Luigia La Penta (London: The MIT Press, 1970), 44.

6 Connors, 227.

7 For an example of Montano's liberal addition of freestanding sculptures to his designs see the first engraved building in *Scielta di varij tempietti antichi* (1624). These added sculptures are almost always standing in contrapposto and are reminiscent of Hellenistic sculpture, for example the *Laocoön*, Vatican Museum, Vatican City.

8 Roberto Weiss, *The Renaissance Discovery of Classical Antiquity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), 59.

9 G.B. Soria and cited in Connors, 227.

architectural draughtsmen.¹⁰ On the other hand, what Soria's description does reveal is that Montano used the Roman ruins as a "foundation" or starting point for his drawn, highly decorated, and mostly imaginary building designs.

What is most important about Montano's imaginative explorations of antique Roman architecture is that his works demonstrated that the architectural precedents in Rome could be used to explore new ideas that deviated from the city's more characteristic antique architecture. As a result, many Roman architects of the early Baroque were inspired to be inventive in their use of classical architectural features. Montano's designs constructed an image of antiquity that meshed with the taste for the style of Baroque architecture that was being formed at this very time in the early seventeenth century

The influence of Montano's part-historical and part-invented designs is most prevalent in the architecture of Francesco Borromini (1599-1667). Anthony Blunt writes that within Montano's corpus of reconstructions and designs is found a number of fundamental Baroque types of buildings and conventions in embryo that would become typical of the work of Baroque architects like Borromini.¹¹ Among these most important features are the juxtaposition of concave and convex forms, curved forms, circular enclosures, and the use of false perspective. The importance of these ideas must not be overlooked given that they since Montano began to explore them long before they became popular conventions employed by architects. Additionally, Montano's innovative concepts promoted to young architects the idea of approaching and using traditional architectural features in unconventional ways. Such freedom of design might never have been cultivated in early seventeenth-century Rome without the dissemination of Montano's architectural ideas.

10 Montano copied numerous buildings which had been explored in the designs of his predecessors, who include Baldassare Peruzzi, Sebastiano Serlio, Pirro Ligorio, and Andrea Palladio. In Montano's typical fashion, he would elaborate on the ornamental features of the architectural designs he was copying. His elaboration of the Roman ruins studied and recorded by his predecessors made his designs more appealing to the architects of the seventeenth century who preferred more elaborate and ornamental styles of art and architecture.

11 Anthony Blunt, "Introduction," in *Studies in Western Art* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 8.

The seventeenth-century writer Filippo Baldinucci recorded that by 1619 Francesco Borromini had become so interested in everything having to do with design and drawing that he wished to go to Rome to study the city's antique monuments.¹² The Roman guidebook writer Fiorvante Martinelli also mentions his friend Borromini's interest in ancient architecture and he states that Borromini regarded and admired the ancients as architectural authorities.¹³ Once Borromini's interest in all things antique is considered, it is no surprise that the young architect was drawn to Montano's drawings of antique architecture and used them as inspiration for his own works. Although many of Montano's reconstructions can today be shown to be pure inventions by the draughtsman, these designs were regarded by Borromini and other Baroque architects as reliable reconstructions of ancient Roman buildings.

The direct influence of Montano's designs on Borromini's own architectural works is perhaps best represented through the comparison of Borromini's lantern for the church of S. Ivo alla Sapienza in Rome to Montano's drawing of an invented temple-like structure.¹⁴ Borromini's lantern of S. Ivo, which he began work on in 1642, corresponds in all essential details to a unique groundplan drawn by Montano, which is today preserved in Sir John Soane's Museum, London.¹⁵ Both the plan found in Montano's drawing and Borromini's design for the lantern of S. Ivo are in essence circles that have niche-like semicircular indentations all around the exterior. The resulting appearance of both is a circular plan with outer walls that are composed of six convex semicircles. The building in Montano's drawing has not been specifically identified, but whether it is based on an actual building or not is of no importance to this study. Rather, this comparison is one of many that makes seem indisputable the hypothesis that Borromini studied Montano's designs and

12 Baldinucci as cited in Rudolf Wittkower, *Studies in the Italian Baroque* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), 158

13 Anthony Blunt, *Borromini* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1979), 27.

14 For a reproduction of Montano's temple see Blunt, *Borromini*, 43 and compare to Borromini's plan for the lantern of S. Ivo alla Sapienza, also reproduced in Blunt, *Borromini*, 40.

15 Fairbairn, 669. See for a reproduction of Montano's original drawing.

reconstructions.¹⁶ since such a design seems to have been first explored in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century by Montano.

While the influence of Montano's designs on the young Borromini has been recognized for many years, it has proven more difficult to establish with any certainty how or where Borromini first came into contact with Montano's designs. In his preface to *Scielta di varij tempietti antichi*, Soria writes that at the time of the first publication in 1624 the drawings were in his possession and had been given to him by Montano himself.¹⁷ This group of drawings eventually found its way into the collection of Cassiano dal Pozzo (1588-1657), a Roman antiquarian-connoisseur and art patron.¹⁸ Dal Pozzo played an important role in Rome during his lifetime since he was one of very few men who truly realized the value of artists' sketchbooks. Dal Pozzo appears to have acquired Montano's drawings sometime before Soria's death, but the reasons for Soria's selling of the corpus of drawings, which appear to have been of great artistic and personal value to him, remain unknown.

It is known that Borromini and dal Pozzo were acquaintances, but not enough is known of their relationship to say that Borromini would have been permitted to see the drawings in dal Pozzo's collection, which was housed in the dal Pozzo family palace on the Via dei Chiavari in Rome.¹⁹ There exists, however, evidence which suggests that at some point during his career Borromini was invited to look at the drawings in the dal Pozzo collection. This visit is proven by the survival of a number of Borromini drawings that are copies of designs found in the Codex Coner, a Renaissance sketchbook filled with drawings of antique buildings which was also

16 Montano was one of the first architects and draughtsmen of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century to explore in great detail architectural designs based on the use of convex and concave shapes. Therefore he can be credited with helping to instigate the use of such forms in later architecture.

17 Fairbairn, 552.

18 Cornelius Clarkson Vermeule, "The Dal Pozzo-Albani Drawings of Classical Antiquities: Notes on Their Content and Arrangement." *The Art Bulletin* 38 (1956): 31.

19 Fairbairn, 552.

owned by Cassiano dal Pozzo.²⁰ Borromini's surviving copies of drawings from the Codex Coner prove that at some point in time he had the opportunity to study the original sketchbook in the dal Pozzo collection. This fact has led to the assumption that Borromini must also have been given the opportunity to study Montano's original drawings in the same collection.

The problem which arises from making this assumption is that the date of dal Pozzo's acquisition of Montano's drawings from Soria is unknown. Decoding this situation is therefore made more problematic because it is possible that dal Pozzo did not acquire Montano's drawings until closer to the middle of the seventeenth century, and yet Borromini's work begins to show the influence of Montano's designs earlier than this. Nevertheless, research into Borromini's early activities in Rome helps bring to light the circumstances in which he may have had access to Montano's drawings as early as 1625.

While it is difficult to prove how and where Borromini saw Montano's drawings, it is easier to assume that he would have seen, and perhaps even owned, one of Soria's publications of Montano's designs. These publications were widespread throughout Rome during the seventeenth century and even if Borromini himself did not own a copy, he had many learned acquaintances who were likely to have possessed at least one of the publications of Montano's designs. There exists evidence, however, that suggests that Borromini studied the original drawings and not just the engraved versions. For example, the elaborate fluting used by Borromini on his fireplace of the Sala di Ricreazione at the Oratory of St. Philip Neri is an almost exact copy of the fluting in a Montano drawing of Roman columns which

²⁰ Blunt, *Borromini*, 37.

was neither engraved nor published in the seventeenth century.²¹ The conclusion that may tentatively be drawn from this fact is that at some point in time Borromini observed and studied Montano's original drawings.

The connection between Borromini and Montano's works is made clearer by studying Borromini and G.B. Soria's activities in Rome during the 1620s. Borromini had arrived in Rome in 1619 and secured a position working on the most important building project in Rome at the time, St. Peter's Basilica. During his early years in Rome he worked under Carlo Maderno, the chief architect at St. Peter's. It was not long before Borromini was entrusted with designing some of the innumerable architectural features of the basilica and soon after he was recognized as one of the best draughtsmen in Rome. As Maderno aged and his hands became crippled with gout, he relied more on Borromini's skills as a draughtsman capable of producing innovative architectural designs and solutions. Eventually Borromini, who became Maderno's favourite assistant, was placed in charge of overseeing all designs and planning that came from the aging architect's office.²²

It was at this time that Borromini first came into contact with another young artist gaining importance in Rome at the time, Gian Lorenzo Bernini. In 1624 Bernini was commissioned by Pope Urban VIII to complete the crossing of St. Peter's and the design of the Baldacchino. Since Maderno was still the head architect of St. Peter's at the time, Bernini and Borromini had to collaborate on this important feature of the new basilica. The design of the Baldacchino has traditionally been attributed to Bernini, while Borromini's contribution to the project has been largely

21 *Ibid.*, 41. For a comparison of Montano's original design for a column see Blunt pg. 42. The column drawn by Montano is unique in that he draws a variation on the typical purely vertical fluting found on columns. Rather than having each raised portion of the fluting end where the column joins the base, Montano curves the raised portion upwards in a U-shape and it continues to the top of the column. In the space between the two raised portions Montano adds one vertical raised line, as well as small ornamental raised details at the bottom of the column. This very unique arrangement is echoed almost identically in the fluting of a pilaster designed by Borromini for the fireplace in the Oratory of St. Philip Neri in Rome. The similarities between the designs make it seem unlikely that such parallels between could have been a coincidence.

22 Wittkower, 158.

overlooked. Although by this time Bernini was recognized as one of Italy's greatest sculptors, he had no training or experience as an architect and consequently relied on Borromini's technical skills and experience to help carry out his commissions at St. Peter's.²³

The oversight regarding Borromini's role in designing the Baldacchino is in part caused by the fact that it is difficult to determine who is responsible for having designed the different components of the Baldacchino. Bernini obviously played the main role in the invention of the Baldacchino as a whole, yet all surviving drawings for the columns and entablature are by Borromini.²⁴ Nevertheless, the roles these two young architects played in the design of the Baldacchino help shed light on how Borromini may have come into contact with Montano's original drawings.

As part of the process of the Baldacchino design, Bernini hired a sculptor in 1625 to make wooden models of the twisted columns, complete with their capitals and bases, which would be the supports, as well as major decorative elements, of the Baldacchino. The sculptor entrusted with the job of making these important wooden models just happened to be Montano's very own pupil Giovanni Battista Soria.²⁵

It was around this very time of the model commission in the mid-1620s that Soria was in possession of the majority of Montano's drawings and was in the process of publishing hundreds of the designs as engravings. *Scielta di varij tempietti antichi* had only just been published by Soria in 1624, one year before he received this important commission. The surviving drawings of the early Baldacchino designs, almost all exclusively in Borromini's hand, might be taken to show that Borromini would have communicated with the sculptor Soria, who was responsible for bringing to life Bernini's and Borromini's design. If it is true that Soria and Borromini became acquainted while working on the Baldacchino project, then it could very well have been possible that Soria provided the young Borromini access to Montano's

23 Blunt, *Borromini*, 21.

24 For drawings by Borromini related to this project see Heinrich Thelen, *Die Handzeichnungen* (Graz: Akademische Druck und Verlagsanstalt, 1967).

25 Fairbairn, 550.

original drawings. Perhaps Soria detected both Borromini's talent as a draughtsman and his interest in antique architecture and wished to show the young architect the outstanding drawings by his deceased master.

The possibility that Soria himself provided Borromini with the opportunity to study Montano's drawings has never before been considered. While it is possible that Borromini might have seen the engraved version of *Scielta di varij tempietti antichi* before ever meeting Soria, it may have been the opportunity of studying Montano's original drawings that made the greatest impact on Borromini. The quality of Montano's drawings is far superior to the engraved versions of his designs since they showcase Montano's talent as a draughtsman through the precision of his drawings, the masterful use of an ink wash to generate three-dimensionality, and the delicate use of pen and ink to trace the finest and most minute of details.²⁶ Since the books of engravings were produced after Montano's death, the job of engraving his designs was left to an engraver who was not able to fully capture the delicate details present in Montano's original drawings. The opportunity to study Montano's original architectural designs and reconstructions would most definitely have been appreciated by a talented architect, draughtsman and amateur antiquarian like Borromini.

The intention of this paper is not to clarify which features of the Baldacchino were designed by Borromini and which by Bernini, but rather to demonstrate that it was through the process of designing the Baldacchino for St. Peter's Basilica that Borromini likely became acquainted with Soria. To date the question of how Borromini gained access to Montano's drawings has remained one of the missing links in Borromini studies. This paper seeks to use the knowledge of Borromini's participation in the designing of the Baldacchino to forge such a direct link between Borromini and Montano's original drawings. Montano's designs influenced Borromini during a crucial period of his development as an architect,

26 See Fairbairn's *Italian Renaissance Drawings in the Collection of Sir John Soane's Museum* for photographs of the over three-hundred Montano drawings in the Soane collection. The Centre Canadien d'Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montréal has three original Montano drawings in its collections.

and so Montano's role in the development of Borromini's personal style must not be ignored. Borromini's works have been described as possessing "a pure and indisputable notion of the Baroque," and Montano's drawings undoubtedly played a fundamental role in the development of this style.²⁷

JANINA KNIGHT is currently a first-year Phd student at Queen's University after having completed her Masters degree at this same institution in the summer of 2008 under the supervision of Dr. Pierre du Prey. Her recent studies have focused on the little known sculptor-turned-architectural draughtsman Giovanni Battista Montano (1534-1621), whose main body of works is today housed in Sir John Soane's Museum, Londond, England.

²⁷ Jean Rousset, *La Littérature de L'âge Baroque en France: Circé et le Paon*, trans. Timothy Hampton (Paris: José Corti, 1954), 8.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Blunt, Anthony. Introduction to *Studies in Western Art*, vol. 3, pp. 3-11. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963.

Blunt, Anthony. *Borromini*. London: Penguin Books, 1979.

Connors, Joseph. "G.B. Montano." In *The Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects*, edited by Adolf K. Placzek, pp. 227- 228. New York: Free Press, 1982.

Fairbairn, Lynda. *Italian Renaissance Drawings in the Collection of Sir John Soane's Museum*, vol. 2. London: Azimuth Editions, 1998.

Montano, Giovanni Battista. *Scielta di varij tempietti antichi*. Edited by Giovanni Battista Soria. Rome: 1624.

Portoghesi, Paolo. *Roma Barocca: The History of an Architectonic Culture*. Translated by Barbara Luigia La Penta. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1970.

Ringbeck, Birgitta. *Giovanni Battista Soria: Architekt Scipione Borgheses*. Münster: Lit, 1989.

Rousset, Jean. *La Littérature de L'âge Baroque en France: Circé et le Paon*. Translated by Timothy Hampton. Paris: José Corti, 1954.

Thelen, Heinrich. *Die Handzeichnungen*. Graz: Akademische Druck und Verlagsanstalt, 1967.

Weiss, Roberto. *The Renaissance Discovery of Classical Antiquity*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969.

Vermeule, Cornelius Clarkson. "The Dal Pozzo-Albani Drawings of Classical Antiquities: Notes on Their Content and Arrangement." *The Art Bulletin* 38 (1956): 31-46.

Wittkower, Rudolf. *Studies in the Italian Baroque*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1982.