

STAGES OF UNDERSTANDING: THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT IN ITALIAN ART

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, definitive pieces of Italian art are considered and then grouped into one of three categories of context as defined by the author: no context, viewer-synthesized context, or ultimate context. The author will illustrate each category of context by first analyzing each artwork, then explaining how the context in which the piece is displayed has an effect upon the impact and comprehension of the individual, based on his or her level of previous knowledge. This will demonstrate the usefulness of these categories to interpreting works of art.

INTRODUCTION

Each day, people are constantly bombarded by visual information. Minute by minute, individuals are presented with new media and imagery to process. The way this information is interpreted and understood has much to do with its surrounding context. The context surrounding an object, image, or piece of information has much to do with how humans interpret and react to each situation. For the purposes of this paper, context will use the Merriam-Webster definition: "The circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood and assessed."¹ In art, as in everyday life, the context in which a piece is displayed or presented is crucially important. Over time and due to various environmental and historical events, the context of an artwork may be compromised or lost entirely. Here, observations of paradigmatic artworks one would typically view on a trip to Italy are discussed within their contextual groupings. The author here has discerned three possible categories into which every work falls: no context, viewer-synthesized context, or ultimate context. These varying levels of contextual information result in differing amounts of clarity and accessibility to the everyday viewer. This paper seeks to identify and explain the relevance of context to viewer interpretation by illustrating the three categories of context with examples of definitive Roman art and, by doing so, drawing attention to this method as a useful component of art interpretation.



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Fig. 1. Roman copy of the *Tyrannicides* (*Tyrant Slayers*), Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

NO CONTEXT

The *Tyrannicides*, or the *Tyrant Slayers* group, is a statuary group comprised of sculpted full body portraits of two Athenian men, Harmodios and Aristogeiton (see Fig. 1). The grouping was originally commissioned by the Athenian state in 510 B.C. as an icon of rebellion for the people of Athens. This bronze depiction of the *Tyrannicides* was so prized that it was taken by the Persians, rather than destroying it when the rest of Athens was sacked and burned in 480 B.C.. Furthermore, upon its theft, the Athenian government quickly had another group made and placed in the Agora, or main public area, in 477 B.C.² This statue group is one of the first on record that was displayed in a public space and features contemporary people, rather than deities. The *Tyrannicides* were such popular icons that they were consistently reproduced on coins, vases, and reliefs.³ As is the case with many statues of Greek antiquity, both sets of the original Greek bronzes have been lost. Various Roman versions remain in fragments. The most intact Roman marble grouping is now in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli. When viewing this statue group, one can note several things: the presence of heroic nudity, the young Harmodios about to strike passionately with his sword, the older Aristogeiton on the defensive – about to stab in self-defense rather than recklessly attack.⁴ To the citizens of ancient Athens and later of ancient Rome, these statues represented the ideals upheld by their governments: those of rising against tyranny and oppression, as well as the importance of justice. To viewers who see this group in the Naples Museum, however, the original context of the *Tyrannicides* is gone.

The *Tyrannicides* therefore clearly fall under the category of “no context.” Little is known about where the statues were placed in Ancient Rome. The first sure record of the *Tyrannicides* comes from an inventory of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese’s collection made in 1587. The inventory records show the two statues categorized as “gladiators.. They are identified within the records by height, description, and the appearance of Aristogeiton in drawings of the collection. The sculptor Giambattista de’ Bianchi was charged with restoring the group and creating a new composition that also featured at least four other statues and would present an entirely new subject: that of the battle between the Horatii and Curiatii. The statues remained improperly displayed throughout the 17th and 18th century, until their removal and placement in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli.⁵ Since their installation in the museum, debates over the positioning and orientation of the statues have raged. In a particularly compelling argument, B.B. Shefton proposes that though traditionally the *Tyrannicides* are shown back to back and placed parallel to each other, this placement must be incorrect. When placed parallel, the statues face opposing directions. Shefton argues that instead, the statues should be viewed either on a trapezoidal base or facing chest to chest.⁶ This controversy only serves to demonstrate the confusion that can arise when original context is lost.

Clearly, the lack of context of the *Tyrannicides* is detrimental. Over time, the original copies of the statuary group have been lost and the fragments have been refurbished to serve other purposes. In the expanse of time from their creation until now, the *Tyrannicides* have lost their surrounding context. Forced upon the ancient statuary group is the context of the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli. Though the statues are preserved and maintained in the museum, they also become entirely alienated from their original meaning. Even researchers and scholars who have learned previously about the *Tyrannicides* can only analyze the formal properties in relation to the historical records of the sculptures. The typical white cube setting of the museum diminishes these statues into mere historical artifact. Surrounded in the museum by colossal ancient statuary from the Baths of Caracalla, today’s viewers may interpret the *Tyrannicides* as fighters or mythological deities. Unless the viewer approaches the statue with previous knowledge of these men and why they were so important, the historical magnitude of the statuary is lost. Although the title *Tyrannicides* or *Tyrant Slayers* hints a modicum of background information, there is no further evidence in the gallery of the overwhelming significance that the *Tyrannicides* held to both the ancient Athenians and ancient Romans. The complete removal and destruction of context over time voids the cultural importance and relevance of this statuary group, which once stood as a symbol of the citizen class.

VIEWER-SYNTHESIZED CONTEXT

The next decisive category of context is that of viewer-synthesized context. Though considerably more rare, this grouping is best typified by the grotto of the imperial villa at Sperlonga (see Fig. 2). The villa is about sixty miles south of Rome and is known to have been one of the villas of the Emperor Tiberius.⁷ The grotto and its sculptures, however, are by far the most studied parts of the archaeological site. Discovered in 1957, the oldest parts of the site are dated to the late Republican period, though the statuary groups in the grotto are dated within the 1st century A.D. and were likely commissioned by the Emperor Tiberius.⁸ The main structure of the grotto is as follows: a large, natural cave adorned for use as a *triclinium* (summer banqueting room), a façade of tufa tesserae,⁹ a large pool with a small island, and two smaller caves inside that contained fountains. Inside the grotto, there stood four distinct sculpture groups depicting various scenes from the *Odyssey* saga. The main groups are *Odysseus Rescuing Achilles' Corpse* (at the mouth of the cave), *Odysseus with Diomedes and the Palladion*, *Odysseus' Ship Encountering Scylla* (in the center of the pool), and *The Blinding of Polyphemos* (most likely in the backmost corner of the cave).¹⁰



Fig. 2. View from the outside of Tiberius's grotto, Sperlonga

Each of the four statuary groupings apparently was meant to point out facets of Tiberius's character. Like Odysseus, Tiberius was known to have a complex and multifaceted character and also was exiled to Rhodes. In depicting various scenes from the *Odyssey*, then, Tiberius chose to illustrate different aspects of his personality¹¹. In the two leftmost groups, the groups of Achilles and Scylla, the emphasis is on Tiberius's valor, whereas in the two rightmost groups, the groups of Diomedes and Polyphemus, the emphasis instead lies on Tiberius's deviousness.¹² Even the left-and-right division of themes lends itself to the interpretation of Tiberius's complex and discordant personality.

By reading explanations of the original creation and design of Tiberius's grotto, one can visualize just how captivating and extraordinary the setting of the *triclinium* must have been. The statuary groups were most likely destroyed by Christian iconoclasts in the fourth century, during the Constantinian shift and takeover of Christianity. In the 1957 exploration archaeologists discovered the ruins of the villa, the structure of the grotto itself, and fragmentary pieces of the four groups. Since then, the groups have largely been restored by splicing together fragments based on references from representations in minor arts and other broken copies of the statuary groups. A major flaw in this restoration procedure, therefore, is that the sculptural groups are seemingly "known" by their new plaster versions, drawings of possible reconstructions, or worse, drawings based on the objects from which the reconstructive studies themselves are based.¹³ Though undoubtedly this is an issue in the overall historical accuracy of the sculptural program at Tiberius's grotto, the site is still an important one in demonstrating how a viewer can understand and interpret context.

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Fig. 3. *Blinding of Polyphemous*, Plaster reconstruction using statuary fragments, Sperlonga

Though neither the statuary groups nor the plaster reconstructions still remain in the grotto, a small on-site museum dedicated to housing the original fragments and the documentation of their reconstructions is located nearby. The viewer is able to experience the fragments of sculpture and gather an idea of the scale and grandeur of the works at the museum (see Fig. 3). After seeing the sculptural program, the viewer can then walk down past the ancient villa and into the grotto itself. In the grotto, among the vaulted spaces and serene pool, one can observe and infer where the sculptural groups once stood in relation to the space, each other, and the *triclinium* itself. This is where viewer-synthesized context occurs. Once aware of the magnitude of the statue groups, and the even more enormous grotto that housed those same groups, the viewer can visualize what the grotto would have been like in ancient times. For example, the viewer observes a large, broken space in the center of the inner pool of the grotto and understands that at one time the group of *Odysseus' Ship Encountering Scylla* stood upon that platform. Furthermore, in the back area of the cave there is a dimly lit area where the *Blinding of Polyphemos* stood. The viewer can understand that, especially when lit by torchlight, the scene of the Polyphemos group would have appeared wildly convincing. Typical of Julio-Claudian and late Hellenistic Baroque sculpture, these statuary groups show a flair for the dramatic and theatrical.¹⁴ The extravagant settings of the grotto and intensely theatrical sculptural groups come together in the viewer's mind to synthesize a stunning mental image of the context in which the Emperor Tiberius lived and entertained. It allows today's viewers to somehow recreate the sense of wonder and awe that the grotto once produced, while preserving the statue fragments and plaster reconstructions from the elements.



Fig. 4. Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome

ULTIMATE CONTEXT

The Cornaro Chapel in Santa Maria della Vittoria of Rome best exemplifies the final and most extreme level of context, referred to here as ultimate context (see Fig. 4). The design and execution of this chapel is largely referred to as Bernini's "greatest achievement and the paradigmatic example of 17th century art."¹⁵ The chapel, which forms the left transept of the church, was commissioned by Cardinal Federico Cornaro in 1647.¹⁶ The chapel was meant to serve as a mortuary for the Cardinal, honor seven other members of the Cornaro family, and most of all, honor St. Theresa of Avila.¹⁷ The Cornaro Chapel is a clear example of ultimate context – every surface is treated and designed in a way that glorifies St. Theresa of Avila and the Cornaro family. In fact, taking a photograph of the entire tableau is impossible: the scale is too grand and every surface, from floor to ceiling, is treated.¹⁸ Bernini's design for the chapel is very clearly stratified. The centerpiece is an altarpiece that features St. Theresa and a smiling angel rendered in shining white marble, set on a theatrical, stage-like platform, complete with a proscenium made of marble columns and an intricately carved canopy. Sunlight shines through a stained glass window hidden behind the "stage," and then onto gilt bronze rays behind Theresa and the angel. Bernini uses different colors of marble to reinvent the chapel into his own depiction of heaven. Eight members of the Cornaro family (four per side) are sculpted and placed in theater boxes on either side of the altarpiece. They appear to be discussing and meditating upon the scene unfolding in front of them, safely perched in their *coretti*.¹⁹ Cardinal Federico Cornaro, the patron of the chapel, however, appears to ignore the chatter around him. Rather, he stares directly out in the direction of the viewer. Roundels on the floor feature skeletons rising from the church's crypt, depicted against a background of colorful inlaid marble. Above, clouds and angels swirl over the chapel and frescoes depicting episodes in the life of St. Theresa. The theme of showing the otherworldly intruding into the viewer's space because of the importance of this moment continues.²⁰

Bernini was interested in creating *un bel composto*, or a beautiful whole.²¹ Fresco, sculpture, marble inlay, and various other techniques all come together to create context in its most extreme sense – not one part of the chapel is left untreated or unconsidered. In this, the chapel becomes almost a stage in a sense, an effect that is intensified by the *coretti* containing Cornaro family members. Again, the altar is framed by columns that give the effect of a stage and its proscenium, and the curving architecture lends itself to the dramatic push-and-pull feeling of Baroque theatricality.²² Furthermore, the spectacular and stage-like treatment of light that runs through Bernini's oeuvre makes itself apparent in the Cornaro Chapel; light falls in from a hidden window to illuminate the faces of St. Theresa and the angel, and is amplified by the golden rays behind the duo.²³

The implications of the stage, however, serve an important role in the viewer's subconscious understanding of the piece. With a saint whose visions verge so closely on the brink of eroticism, the treatment of the actual depiction of St. Theresa of Avila mid-vision must be carefully and deliberately designed. As Michael J. Call expounds, the vision of St. Theresa was designed and thus controlled by Bernini in three specific ways: first, by showing Theresa as a passive (she is virtually unconscious) and thus "controlled" female, second, by showing the eight male Cornaros as both witnesses and models of how a viewer should read the event, and finally assigning the viewer to a single, ideal spot from which to read or witness the event. Theresa shows none of the twisting, writhing movement that so characterizes other Bernini works; the viewer can hardly discern Theresa's body under her habit. The only movement she shows is in her face; her eyelids seem to flutter and, from her expression, one almost expects to hear her moan. Her hand, however, lays limp at her side and her foot seems to dangle in midair. In this, there is no jarring, overtly erotic sensationalism; St. Theresa appears to just simply accept her vision, rather than participate. By showing the viewer how other "witnesses" approach the event, it is understood that the scene is neither sensational nor erotic: it is an intensely religious experience that calls for respect and reverence. Finally, by forcing the viewer to experience the chapel from one main perspective, Bernini ensures that no one escapes the stern and intense gaze of Cardinal Federico Cornaro. In this, the viewer is simultaneously asked to partake in the vision and yet cautioned against getting too close: the gaze implies something sacred and yet perilous is taking place.²⁴

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The Cornaro Chapel exemplifies the category of ultimate context. Bernini's *St. Theresa in Ecstasy* is the exquisite centerpiece of an entirely constructed setting; the chapel is designed wholly around the context of the life of St. Theresa of Avila. Each part of the chapel, from the ceiling to the floor, serves to glorify St. Theresa as well as the Cornaro family, and actually forces the viewer to visualize it according to the sculptor's plan. Furthermore, the chapel as a whole can then further be read as relational to the mysticism of the event which takes place at the church's altar. The visual logic dictates a progression of dead rising, the Cornaro family witnessing the proof of divine love, and the Holy Spirit and angels descending into the chapel to rejoice in this miracle. Each part of the chapel relates itself to the whole, and moreover to the theme of the promise of salvation to come.²⁵ In this exquisite display of supremely Baroque dramatic design, Bernini proves to be the master of spaces that destroy the differences between "real and imaginary space, past and present, phenomenal and actual existence, life and death."²⁶ The effect on the viewer proves astounding. Knowing little to nothing about St. Theresa or her visions, one could walk into Santa Maria della Vittoria and forge an immediate emotional reaction with the experience of the Cornaro Chapel. Because of its ultimate display of context, the viewer is able to transcend reality while experiencing the chapel. All of the elements of *un bel composto* work in harmony to create the illusion of a miracle occurring just before the viewer's eyes. Among all of the wild imagery and excitement, however, the viewer is forced to remain grounded by the haunting gaze of Cardinal Federico Cornaro. Here, being unaware of Christian saints or narratives is not an issue: the context of the chapel implies both the significance and the proper reaction expected from the viewer.

CONCLUSION

The importance of context to viewer interpretation can clearly be highlighted by classifying paradigmatic artworks into three main groups. Here, these artworks in Italy fall cleanly into the categories of no context (as in the *Tyrannicides*), viewer-synthesized context (as in Tiberius's Grotto at Sperlonga), and finally, ultimate context (as in the Cornaro Chapel of Santa Maria della Vittoria). The group of no context requires the viewer to come with previous knowledge in order to make formal and historical observations. Without knowing the cultural significance of statuary groups like the *Tyrannicides*, the viewer does not forge any attachment to or lasting memory of the experience. This largely results from the installation of ancient works in white cube gallery spaces: something that robs them entirely of any remaining context. Rather than viewing the statuary groups as they would have been viewed, individuals see the works as simply more of a never-ending line of ancient nude figural sculptures. A different situation emerges with viewer-synthesized context. As in the archaeological site at Sperlonga, individuals are able to experience and observe reconstructions and fragments of the main sculptural groups of the grotto, then visit the grotto itself to walk around and figure out where each sculpture was placed. Though it requires a bit of imagination on the part of the viewer, the experience is closer to what an ancient visitor would have experienced. It allows the individual to not only place the statues in parts of the grotto, but also provides incentive to the viewer to elaborate and wonder perhaps what the scene would look like lit by torches or even in other conditions. Though imaginative, viewer-synthesized context brings in levels of personal bias and other factors that may divert from the original integrity of the design. In the situation of ultimate context, however, there is no opportunity for such divergence to occur. The Cornaro Chapel's ultimate context confronts each viewer with the same awe-inspiring scene: St. Theresa in the throes of her most famous vision. The scene on the altar-stage creates a passionate emotional response in the viewer. The viewers in the spectator boxes instruct us how to respond: respectfully calm, but still questioning and discussing. Bernini's placement of Cardinal Federico Cornaro gives viewers by far the most intense directive; his marble stare seems to penetrate the viewer and keep him or her grounded on the importance of the event, rather than the exuberance and bustle of the scene. Depending on what kind and how much context a viewer is given, his or her reaction, understanding, and emotional involvement in the work will vary. Understandably, contexts may be destroyed over time by the displacement of works or even changes made by well-meaning restorers. In this case, proper research, analysis, and documentation become a necessity in order to interpret the original meaning of a work.

NOTES

- ¹ "Context." *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*.
- ² Opper. "Tyrant Slayers." *Grove Art Online*.
- ³ Shefton, 1960. "Some Iconographic Remarks on the Tyrannicides." p. 176.
- ⁴ See note 2.
- ⁵ Stewart, 2001. "David's 'Oath of the Horatii' and the Tyrannicides." pp. 214.
- ⁶ See note 3, pp.176, 179.
- ⁷ Touchette. "Sperlonga." *The Oxford Companion to Western Art*.
- ⁸ Holliday. "Sperlonga." *Grove Art Online*.
- ⁹ Tufa was a popular building stone, the term "tesserae" references the tile-shaped pieces of tufa used to decorate the façade
- ¹⁰ See note 8
- ¹¹ See note 8
- ¹² Stewart, 1977. "To Entertain an Emperor: Sperlonga, Laokoon and Tiberius at the Dinner-Table." p. 78.
- ¹³ Weiss, 2000. "Odysseus at Sperlonga: Hellenistic Hero or Roman Heroic Foil?" p. 112.
- ¹⁴ See note 8
- ¹⁵ Mezzatesta and Preimesberger. "Bernini." *Grove Art Online*.
- ¹⁶ Avery, 1997. *Bernini: Genius of the Baroque*. p. 144.
- ¹⁷ See note 15
- ¹⁸ Wittkower, 1997. *Bernini: The Sculptor of the Roman Baroque*. p. 158.
- ¹⁹ *Coretti* are the equivalent of theater-boxes, wealthy patrons would have these *coretti* built to sit in during mass; here, the *coretti* hold statues of the Cornaro family men.
- ²⁰ Scribner, 1991. *Gianlorenzo Bernini*. p. 90.
- ²¹ See note 20.
- ²² See note 16, p. 145.
- ²³ See note 18, p. 159.
- ²⁴ Call, 1997. "Boxing Teresa: The Counter-Reformation and Bernini's Cornaro Chapel." pp. 36-7.
- ²⁵ See note 15.
- ²⁶ See note 18, p. 159.

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