Fairfield University

Fairfield to host masterpieces from the mother church of the Society of Jesus

THE HOLY NAME

Art of the Gesù: Bernini and His Age
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Fairfield will host a major international loan exhibition beginning in February, featuring masterpieces from the mother church of the Society of Jesus.

The Fairfield University Art Museum is presenting a major international loan exhibition, *THE HOLY NAME – Art of the Gesù: Bernini and His Age*, which will be on view in the museum’s Bellarmine Hall Galleries from February 1 through May 19, 2018.

The exhibition is exclusive to Fairfield and features works of art that have never before left Rome. The focus is the Church of the Gesù (Chiesa del Santissimo Nome di Gesù all’Argentina), the mother church of the Society of Jesus, which was founded by Ignatius of Loyola in 1540 in the charged religious and political climate of the Counter-Reformation. The Gesù is a testament to the power and prestige of the new religious order, its edifice a formidable symbol of the militant Church reborn.

Organized to commemorate Fairfield University’s 75th anniversary, this historic exhibition features artistic masterpieces from the Gesù itself, never before seen in America: Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s (1598–1680) bust of Roberto Bellarmino (1542–1621), the patron saint of Fairfield University; Giovanni Battista Gaulli’s (1639–1709) monumental painted wood model of the apse; a shimmering gilt bronze altar sculpture by the versatile painter, draftsman, and sculptor Ciro Ferri (1634–1689); the stunning jeweled cartagloria from the altar of St. Ignatius – a masterpiece of Baroque goldsmith’s work – and the magnificent embroidered chasuble of the church’s great benefactor, Cardinal Alessandro Farnese (1520–1589).

Visitors to the Bellarmine Hall Galleries for this landmark exhibition will receive an unparalleled window into the extraordinary works of art found within the walls of the Gesù, the immensely talented artists who created them, and the powerful and strong-willed personalities whose ambitions – and financial means – made it all possible.

Philippe de Montebello, director emeritus of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, is honorary chair of the exhibition committee. "If I were still director of the Metropolitan, I would be jealous of Fairfield doing this show. It’s simply incredible," de Montebello said. “It brings to the Fairfield University Art Museum some of the greatest artists working in 17th-century Rome.”
Artistic Splendors of the Gesù

BY LINDA WOLK-SIMON, Frank and Clara Meditz director and chief curator, Fairfield University Art Museum

The church of the Gesù rises in the shadow of the Forum and the Capitolina Hill at the very center of ancient and modern Rome. In past centuries it loomed over the old Via Papalis, the main papal processional route that once ran through the city’s urban center, connecting the Vatican to the Lateran. Today, it still dominates the vista approaching the Piazza Venezia from the Corso Vittorio Emanuele, a crowded thoroughfare well-known to any visitor to the city.

This strategic topographical siting of the Gesù, its single nave plan and barrel-vaulted ceiling, and the austere elegantly designed façade designed by the late Renaissance architect Giacomo della Porta (1533-1603), were all dictated by the church’s powerful and imperious patron, Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, whose benefaction is prominently commemorated in inscriptions on the exterior frieze and interior entrance wall.

The Gesù is the mother church of the Society of Jesus, founded by Ignatius of Loyola in the militant climate of the incipient Counter-Reformation, and while its most venerated symbol – IHS (the Holy Name of Jesus) – occupies the field above the central portal, it is subordinate to the family name of the patron, FARNESIVS, hovering over it in the surrounding frieze. Herein is a metaphor for the fruitful yet fraught relations between the Jesuits and their greatest benefactor – an ongoing power struggle in which the iron-willed Cardinal invariably prevailed, and from which arose this most glorious monument to the militant Church reborn and triumphant.

The power struggle between the early Jesuits and their patrons is one of the many engrossing narrative threads explored in THE HOLY NAME – Art of the Gesù: Bernini and His Age. This landmark exhibition, organized in celebration of the University’s 75th anniversary, presents five glorious masterpieces from the Gesù itself, augmented by over forty paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints, rare books, documents and objects from American public and private collections that together explore the twinned narratives of the foundation of the Society of Jesus in Counter-Reformation Rome, and the long campaign to build and embellish its church.

Headlining the exhibition is Bernini’s bust of Cardinal Roberto Bellarmino, which has never before left Rome. An early work by the sculptor, who had close ties with the Jesuits and the Gesù for much of his life, it is a strikingly sympathetic portrayal. The sense here of an inner, animating spirit heralds Bernini’s conception of the “speaking likeness.” The bust is the only surviving element of Bellarmino’s lost funerary monument, which was dismantled in the nineteenth century; its presence at Fairfield for the run of the exhibition is nothing short of a coup. That Roberto Bellarmino is the patron saint of Fairfield University makes the loan of this work particularly meaningful.

Alessandro Farnese’s patronage of the Gesù is memorably represented in the exhibition by the sumptuous silk chasuble embroidered with gold, silver and silk threads he gave to the church, and which is preserved there to this day – a rare surviving ecclesiastical vestment from the sixteenth century. The elaborate design includes narrative fields framed by effulgent scrolling borders, the Cardinal’s coat of arms, and the papal insignia, the latter a reference to Pope Paul III Farnese (r. 1534-1549), Alessandro’s grandfather, who approved the foundation of the Society of Jesus in 1540. In the exhibition, this propitious historical moment is brought to life in a papal bull lent by the Morgan Library, bearing the pope’s lead seal and Cardinal Alessandro’s florid signature.
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— PHILIPPE DE MONTEBELLO, director emeritus of The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Although their church was consecrated in 1584, the Jesuits had no saints until 1622, when Ignatius of Loyola and Francis Xavier were canonized — a momentous milestone that galvanized the dedication and furnishing of new altars dedicated in their honor. St. Teresa of Avila from the altar of St. Ignatius, designed by the versatile painter and draftsman Ciro Ferri, is another of the exhibition's highlights. Ciro Ferri probably also vied for the commission to paint the altarpiece for the newly consecrated chapel of Francis Xavier, as a drawing in the Metropolitan Museum records, but the prize was awarded to Carlo Maratti (1625-1713), author of an exuberant study of Francis Xavier in Glory from the Art Institute of Chicago. (Both drawings are featured in the exhibition.)

The canonizations of the Society's founders also gave rise to a new visual hagiography. Two key episodes, Ignatius's Vision of Christ and God the Father at La Storta and the Death of Francis Xavier, are depicted in luminous oil sketches by the Italian Baroque painter Giovanni Battista Gaulli (Il Baciccia) in the exhibition.

The earliest monumental treatment of Ignatius's vision was almost certainly the altarpiece by the gifted Bolognese painter Domenichino (1581-1641) now in the Los
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Art of the Gesù: Bernini and His Age

FAIRFIELD UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM
BELLARMINE HALL GALLERIES

FEBRUARY 1 - MAY 19, 2018
OPEN TUESDAY-SATURDAY, 11 AM - 4 PM,
WHILE THE UNIVERSITY IS IN SESSION

A rich roster of educational programs for adults has been organized in conjunction with the exhibition, all free and open to the public. A subscription lecture series on Italian Renaissance and baroque sculpture is also being offered. Consult the museum's website for details and registration information (fairfield.edu/museum).

An audio guide with narration by Paul Lakeland, PhD, Kelley chair and professor of religious studies, Center for Catholic Studies, Fairfield University, will be available in the exhibition and remotely through the museum's website.

Saint Joseph's University Press, in collaboration with distinguished Georgetown University professor of theology John O'Malley, S.J., is publishing a volume of essays by leading scholars on the art and architecture of the Gesù, available for sale at the museum.

An international scholarly symposium will take place at Fairfield University on April 6, 2017, with a keynote address delivered by Fr. O'Malley the previous evening. For the full program and registration information, see the museum website: fairfield.edu/museum.

Generous funding for the exhibition, publication, and related programs has been provided by the Fairfield University Department of Catholic Studies, a subvention from Vanderbilt University, the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, the Robert Lehman Foundation, the Dianne Modestini Charitable Fund, Christie’s New York, and several private and anonymous foundations and donors.
The Gesù is the mother church of the Society of Jesus, founded by Ignatius of Loyola in the militant climate of the incipient Counter-Reformation.

The great protagonists of the Gesù’s later 17th-century history are Bernini, his protégé Gaulli, and the Superior General of the Society, Gian Paolo Oliva (1600-1688) – the “forgotten celebrity of Baroque Rome” according to Boston College historian Franco Mormando – each among the exhibition’s stars. Thanks to the loan of four exquisite oil sketches by Gaulli, including the magisterial bozzetto for the climactic, explosive Triumph of the Holy Name in the nave (Princeton University Art Museum), the exhibition offers a virtual experience of the entire frescoed interior, portal to tribune. The extraordinary denouement here is Gaulli’s monumental

painted woodapse model, shown with the painted study for the fresco (Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco). Like the other treasures from the Gesù lent to Fairfield, it is making its first trans-Atlantic crossing for this historic exhibition.

Gaulli was tapped for this prestigious commission through the offices of Bernini and the acquiescence of Oliva, whom the sculptor strong-armed into hiring his disciple. Bernini’s involvement in the project, in keeping with his assurances to Oliva, are documented in drawings he made for Gaulli, including two in the exhibition.

Oliva was the Society’s great champion, a politically astute operator and compelling orator whose concern for his place in history is reflected in the published volumes of his writings with frontispieces designed by his friend Bernini, all in the exhibition. Like his predecessors a century earlier, Oliva had to deal with an overbearing – and now far less beneficent – Farnese patron as he struggled to realize his grand projet. The dazzling success of that challenging enterprise may be admired at the Gesù and, for a few brief months, at the Fairfield University Art Museum.  

A version of this essay is scheduled to appear in the January 2018 issue of Apollo magazine, printed here with permission.