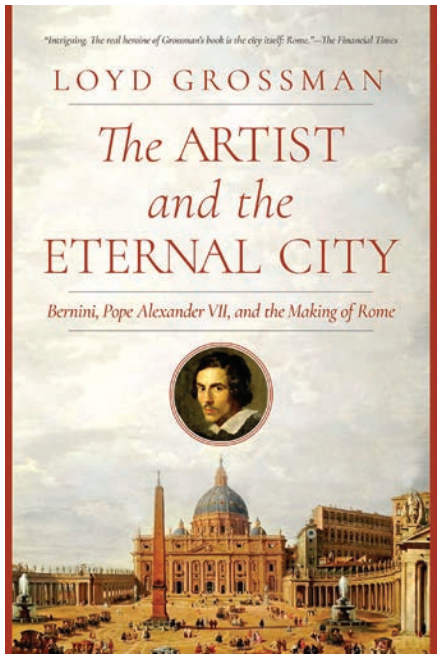
Designing the Theater of Rome

Review by Ben Lima

During his incomparable six-decade career, Gian Lorenzo Bernini defined the Baroque style of sculpture through creative partnerships with the five popes from Paul V (1605-21) to Alexander VII (1655-67). Loyd Grossman — whose authorial voice is that of a lively, chatty, yet scholarly tour guide who knows Rome like the back of his hand — guides the reader smoothly across this vast range by focusing on the evolving three-way relationship among artist, pope(s), and city. Its apex was Bernini's epoch-defining work on St. Peter's, including the baldachin over the high altar; the chair of St. Peter; and the colonnades that define St. Peter's Square.

The emotional, theatrical Baroque style provokes polarized reactions even today: while Rudolf Wittkower praised its "magnificent grandeur" and "sublime emotion," John Ruskin concluded with disgust that it was "impossible for false taste and base feeling to sink lower." The dispute seems to turn on whether the dramatic is somehow inherent to reality, or instead merely dallies on the surface, covering over the real in a potentially false and misleading manner.

Certainly the Council of Trent, which theologically framed Bernini's working conditions, firmly endorsed the theatrical as an aid to devotion. The cardinal Sforza Pallavicino wrote, "Just like God, so to speak, gilded heaven with lights to enamor mortals with it, so it is fitting that churches are illuminated with gold, so that the people fall in love with them, and run towards them, and make a pact between the senses and reason, between pleasure and devotion. … The people want theaters; and it not only follows piety but also politics to make the theaters curing sin more sumptuous and pleasant than those where sin goes to feed."



The Artist and the Eternal City
Bernini, Pope Alexander VII, and the Making of Rome
By **Loyd Grossman**
Pegasus Books, pp. 315, $29

Bernini's views were more morally ambiguous; he wrote that "ingenuity and design constitute the magic art, by whose means you *deceive the eye* and make your audience gaze in wonder" (emphasis added). He did indeed write and produce theater: in one of his scripts, a character declares "the world's nothing but a play."

For this production, as admiringly recorded by English diarist John Evelyn on his 1644 visit to Rome, the artist "painted the scenes, cut the statues, invented the engines, composed the music, writ the comedy, and built the theatre." As much as anyone, Bernini set the standard for the eventual Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the "total work of art" that addresses all the senses at once.

But of course the most important result of Bernini's dramatic sensibility is his sculpture, whether in his Cornaro Chapel, where members of that family are shown in marble relief alongside, leaning out of their pews gesturing in astonishment at the ecstasy of St. Teresa; or in his David, whose gritted teeth and clenched muscles remain eternally frozen in the moment just before he lets fly the deadly stone. For a sense of Bernini's greatness, it suffices to note that at the age of 24, just beginning a long career, he completed a David that outdid Michelangelo and Donatello in its dynamism.

The grandeur of the Baroque naturally appealed to powerful sovereigns in the age of absolutism, such as Louis XIV of France, whose attempt to recruit Bernini was doomed by clashes of personality, culture, and ego. However, the most fascinating theme of Grossman's account is how a series of popes employed Bernini (among others) to systematically remake the whole urban fabric of Rome, following a comprehensive scheme of new buildings, monuments, boulevards, and piazzas, just as the temporal powers of the papal office were beginning a steep and irreversible decline.

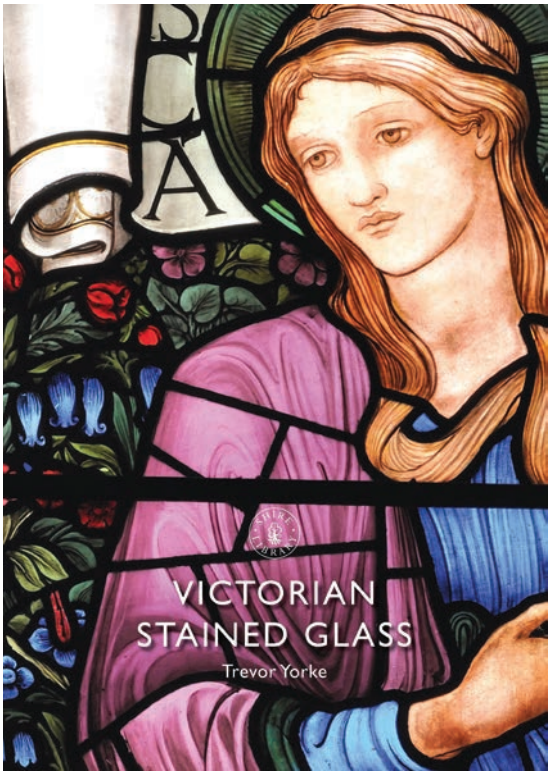
This decline became unmistakably clear at the 1648 Peace of Westphalia that ended the Thirty Years' War, which firmly removed Rome from its previous position as peacemaker and spiritual head of Europe. Innocent X, in *Zelo Domus Dei*, ineffectually denounced the peace as "null, void, invalid, iniquitous, unjust, damnable, reprobate, inane, empty of meaning and effect for all time."

After that, Alexander VII was not even invited to negotiations for the 1659 Peace of the Pyrenees between France and Spain. Finally, following the Corsican Guard Affair, a fatal 1662 skirmish between French and papal troops, Louis XIV demanded a humiliating personal apology from the papal legate, and a monument in Rome to

Color for God's Acre

Review by Stephen Platten

When I was installed as Dean of Norwich in 1995, as ever in such buildings, there was scaffolding alongside various pieces of conservation. One such covered George Hedgeland's great west window. After the 1995 conservation, visitors and worshipers were able to see the window in its original state for the first time for 120 years. Hedgeland's vivid colors had offended Victorian taste, and 20 years after its installation, gray and black paint had been applied to tone down the colors.



Victorian Stained Glass
By **Trevor Yorke**
Shire Library, pp.64, $14

Hedgeland's talent is noted among other Victorian stained-glass artists in this excellent introduction by Trevor Yorke. Its title is slightly misleading since, in a book of limited compass, Yorke charts a clear and concise history of stained glass and the styles and techniques developed over the centuries.

The disastrous effects of the Reformation and Puritan Revolution are noted, with the virtual obliteration of all stained glass in Scotland. Yorke continues by noting the art's revival, first in the 17th-century English country house, and then later, following the influence of the Oxford Movement and Cambridge Camden Society, its rebirth in Victorian times. The Great Exhibition of 1851 is part of the story, with its glass palace transforming a significant piece of God's acre. The work of A.W.N. Pugin and John Hardman and of William Wailes is followed by the establishment of companies including Clayton and Bell and Morris and Co.

William Morris, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, and Ford Maddox Ford and other Pre-Raphaelite figures were seminal in a process that culminated in the popularity of this art in domestic architecture — especially with the advent of the Arts and Crafts movement at the *fin de siecle*; Yorke describes this as "Stained Glass for the Masses." Charles Eamer Kempe was a leading figure at this time. Afflicted by a serious stammer, Kempe gave up his pursuit of a priestly vocation to found one of the most successful stained-glass studios of this period. There are more than 200 Kempe windows in the United States alone.

Yorke concludes with reference to both Scottish artists and the flourishing of the art among women. There is a useful bibliography, and good references to places where one may view some of the best work, including the excellent stained-glass museum in Ely Cathedral. This is a most attractive and useful beginner's handbook to an art that began as a crucial educational tool for communicating the gospel.

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mark the ignominious affair, as the price of releasing the papal possessions in Avignon, which he had been holding hostage in retaliation.

Thus, Rome was increasingly reduced to a kind of "soft power," overawing the ever-increasing number of tourists with its majesty. Among his countless projects within this overall program, Bernini's work on St. Peter's stands apart, as he united architecture and sculpture to define the whole shape of the pilgrim's journey.

On arriving at St. Peter's, one is first welcomed by Bernini's colonnades, about which he wrote: "Since the church of St Peter's is the mother of nearly all the others, it had to have colonnades, which would show it as if stretching out its arms maternally to receive Catholics, so as to confirm them in their faith; heretics, to reunite them to the Church; and infidels, to enlighten them in the true faith."

Then, having entered the church and approaching the culmination of the entire journey, one is guided toward the high altar by Bernini's 94-foot-tall bronze baldachin, an architectural canopy that unites the high altar, and Peter's tomb beneath it, with the enormous surrounding space. Finally, within the apse, Bernini created a setting for the chair of St. Peter, incorporating bronze, marble, gilt, stucco, and lighting, so that the chair appears to hover in the air above four twice-life-size statues of saints. Wittkower called it "the spiritual and artistic climax" of the Baroque.

Somewhat eccentrically, however, Grossman concludes his story not with St. Peter's or Bernini's other best-known work, but with his 1667 statue of an elephant carrying an obelisk, which stands next to Santa Maria sopra Minerva. There is also an entertaining, detailed appendix: a "walking tour" of the 13 ancient obelisks of Rome.

Egyptian obelisks had already been

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renowned for their antiquity and majesty when the ancient Roman emperors began shipping them to Rome, and building their own in imitation. The 1,600 years that elapsed between the Egyptian New Kingdom and Augustus about equals that between Augustus and Bernini. In like manner, the 17th-century popes recovered and restored obelisks too, such that Rome today boasts more of them than any other city in the world.

Contributing to the appeal of the "wisdom of the Egyptians" (Acts 7:22) in Bernini's time, the intelligentsia, led by the influential but unreliable Athanasius Kircher, wrongly believed that their hieroglyphics encoded hermetic wisdom accessible only to the sages.

In the case of Bernini's design, the elephant had long been recognized as a symbol of spiritual wisdom: Pliny had credited elephants with intelligence, honesty, and prudence, while the 16th-century iconographer Cesare Ripa wrote that "The Elephant is an Emblem of Religion, as he adores the Sun and Stars." The obelisk had originally been brought to Rome by Diocletian for the temple to Isis (i.e., "Minerva") on whose site Santa Maria sopra Minerva was later built; after it was rediscovered in 1655, Pope Alexander gave Bernini the commission for its restoration.

Bernini's new installation acknowledges but relativizes Egypt, with an inscription that reads, "Let every beholder of the images, engraven by the wise Egyptian and carried by the elephant — the strongest of beasts — reflect this lesson: Be of strong mind, uphold solid Wisdom." The smallest of all the obelisks in Rome, it is a reminder that the Baroque synthesis can be as effective at a small, intimate scale as at a grand, epic one.

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Spider-Man and Redemption

Spider-Man
No Way Home
PG-13

Review by Leonard Freeman

A few early critics did not give *Spider-Man: No Way Home* a lot of love, but apparently they forgot to check with the rest of the moviegoing public. The first film to pass $1 billion at the box office in the COVID pandemic era, *Spider-Man: No Way Home* has apparently spoken to an entertainment need significantly underserved in what has been gracing theaters recently.

In recent years many critics have applauded dark, murky, odd films like 2021's *Nightmare Alley* (bad psych-out carnival), *Don't Look Up* (the asteroid is coming), *Titane* (woman gets impregnated by a car), and *Power of the Dog* (Benedict Cumberbatch as a really dark, brutal cattleman). But as *Variety*'s film critic Owen Gleiberman headlined: "I hated *No Way Home*, but the Academy should absolutely nominate it for Best Picture." The Academy Awards have gotten out of touch with what people really like, as opposed to what auteurs think we need.

What is popular tells us things about ourselves — what we are wanting, wishing for, fearing, needing, hoping, believing in — at any particular moment. As communications research affirms, the primary effect of mass media is to reinforce and support us in things we already believe in. And for transitional, angst-ridden 2021-22, *Spider-Man* is the vehicle, and a welcome one.

Part of it, of course, is that *No Way Home* is an eagerly awaited installment for a Spider-Man fan base dating to 1962 in comic books and 2002 on film. There have been three cinema Spideys so far, in eight live-action films:

- Tobey Maguire: *Spider-Man* (2002), *Spider-Man 2* (2004), *Spider-Man 3* (2007);
- Andrew Garfield: *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012), *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014);
- Tom Holland: *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017), *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (2019), and *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021).

But you don't need to be a Spider-Man geek to enjoy this show. Yes, there