BERNINI
HIS LIFE AND HIS ROME

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Pedophilia is what we would call it today—a man of twenty-five marrying a twelve-year-old girl—but in premodern Europe, it was, if not common, nonetheless perfectly legal. It had been perfectly legal as far back as anyone could remember and was to remain so for generations to come in the eyes of both church and state. Once the two parties had reached puberty—twelve for girls, fourteen for boys—the law allowed the contracting of marriage, no matter how great the difference in years between husband and wife. And so, in a private, at-home ceremony in Naples, on January 17, 1587, Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s father, Tuscan sculptor Pietro, born in 1562, was joined in matrimony with the Neapolitan maiden Angelica di Giovanni Galante. Angelica, according to their marriage registration, was “about twelve years old.” Choosing for one’s spouse a much younger girl, a child-bride with an impressionable mind and pliable will, was in those days considered by men to be practical and praiseworthy: all the easier to shape her into the
"Pretty-Beard Urban"

The cardinal who emerged half dead but overwhelmingly victorious from the malaria-stricken conclave of 1623 had in fact been a dark horse until practically the last moment. This we know from the scrupulous scorekeeping notes that he kept after each tense round of voting. "He," of course, is Cardinal Maffeo Barberini, who has already figured prominently in our story. Bernini must have jumped for joy when he heard the news. Yet another tried-and-true friend on the papal throne! And one who was young enough (fifty-five) to promise a long reign of large-scale commissions and gifts and rewards. Maffeo assumed the name Urban VIII, in honor of his revered eleventh-century crusading predecessor, Urban II. But the name also fit his "urbane," refined personality and attractive, though somewhat vain and fastidious, personal appearance. Urbano dalla barba bella, "Pretty-beard Urban," was the saucy nickname pinned on him by one of his critics, and it stuck (fig. 10).
"A Universal Father So Coarse and So Deformed"

If there was one thing about the new pope over which almost everybody seemed to agree, it was the fact that he was ugly, distressingly ugly. And in a society so intimately defined by its cult of beauty, that was decidedly a handicap. In fact, as one chronicler reported at the time, many protested "that it was ridiculous to elect as Universal Father someone so coarse and so deformed that his children would never even dare approach him, so repulsive to the sight was he." Yes, in September 1625 poet-scholar Girolamo Brivio had delivered a learned discourse in praise of ugliness to an audience of cardinals and scholars assembled in the Roman home of Cardinal Maurizio of Savoy, but surely his tongue was in his cheek. Not even the exquisite talent of the greatest portraitists of the time—Bernini, Alessandro Algardi, and Velázquez—would be able to hide the fact that Giovanni Battista Pamphilj, aged seventy, elected on September 14, 1644, as Pope Innocent X, was not a handsome man, under any light, from any angle (fig. 16).
“Now here, indeed, does a new order of achievement present itself, in the form of works, all splendid in their magnificence and arduous in their execution, which the Cavalier Bernini so felicitously completed during the twelve years of this pontificate.” With this grand announcement of the coming of a “new order” in Rome—one could almost hear a Baroque trumpet fanfare in the background—Domenico opens the Chigi chapter of Bernini’s life, covering the years 1655–67. It is hard to find fault with the artist’s son for doing so. The lofty language of Domenico’s solemn proclamation is borrowed (as some in his original audience would have recognized) from Torquato Tasso’s popular epic poem, Jerusalem Delivered and is in this case entirely justified. With the “dream team” of Bernini and Alexander at work—and at play—in the streets, churches, and public squares of Rome, the city, already a dazzling “theater” of marvels and
A Roman Artist
In King Louis's Court

Chapter 5

Bernini Becomes a Political Pawn

"I don't know what game it is that we are playing. Your Excellency holds his cards up so high, that one can learn nothing. Therefore, impelled by impatience, I am revealing my own cards." So wrote Cardinal Antonio Barberini from Paris to Bernini in Rome on October 27, 1662. The cardinal was in the French capital for another extended stay, this time not as an exile as in 1645 fleeing from the wrath of Innocent X, but as official papal representative. He had been sent earlier that year to deliver Alexander VII's gift for the newly born heir of King Louis XIV and his wife, Maria Teresa of Spain. (What do you give a royal baby who already has everything? Swaddling clothes personally blessed by the pope.) During that visit, in order to further ingrati ate himself with King Louis, Antonio decided to resurrect the idea of getting Bernini to come to Paris to work for the French court. The twenty-four-year-old, supremely self-confident Louis, the "Sun King," had just assumed personal rule of the nation upon the
"MY STAR WILL LOSE ITS ASCENDANCY"

CHAPTER 6

A BRIEF SIGH OF RELIEF

Bernini must have breathed a deep sigh of relief as he departed from Louis's court on October 20, 1665. Good riddance to all of them—with the exception, of course, of the kind and loyal Chantelou. Bernini simply shook the Parisian dust off his feet and never looked back. That is to say, he resumed being the same man he was before. He picked up his life in Rome exactly where he had left it in April, not skipping a beat. Meeting Bernini just two days after his return to Rome, the pope's brother, Don Mario Chigi, wrote to Prince Mattias de' Medici, governor of Siena, claiming that Bernini "seems to me to have become completely French." But to what was Don Mario referring? His clothes? His manner of speech? Perhaps to the exaggeratedly effusive words of praise of Louis that Bernini was obliged to broadcast to counteract the damaging rumors about his ingratitude toward the king. Instead, all other indications are that Bernini's five months in France did not change him at all, artistically or otherwise. Despite or