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### *The Elephant and Obelisk*

The *Elephant and Obelisk* is a monument situated in front of the Dominican church, Santa Maria sopra Minerva and near by the Pantheon. Dedicated under Pope Alexander VII to Divine Wisdom<sup>1</sup>, this monument has stood since its unveiling in 1667 at the center of a piazza largely unchanged these last many hundreds of years. The work remains underrepresented in scholarly examinations about its designer, Gian Lorenzo Bernini and his oeuvre. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the formation of this monument from its commission to completion using extant documents and by compilation of contemporary scholarly research with the understanding that this work is from a generation from which, “-religious art was assigned the task of rousing the mind from vision to visions.”<sup>2</sup>

Much like his predecessors, Pope Alexander VII’s vision of Rome included many commissions of architecture, sculpture and art which changed the face of the city. Alexander wanted his pontificate to help restore some of the grandeur he believed had been lost since the height of the Roman Empire. He and his contemporaries are described as having concerns that, “Rome could no longer be seen in the very midst of Rome.”<sup>3</sup> To rectify that concern, Alexander invested himself and the church’s treasury in a large-scale architectural program for the city of Rome, one which would allow buildings to be seen from their best advantage.<sup>4</sup> His plan to accomplish this included the restructuring of church-fronting piazzas as well as to widen or straighten roads which would facilitate traffic.<sup>5</sup> Though the church treasury was spending beyond its means during his reign, Alexander believed his program would stimulate growth in the city through the labor needed to complete these projects and in outcome would attract more residents and tourists.<sup>6</sup>

In order to work at his plan, to study the various projects from many angles, it is important to know that Alexander kept a model of the city made out of wood with moveable parts in his rooms.<sup>7</sup> As a means of tracking the variant, pleasing changes he made with those

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<sup>1</sup> William S. Heckscher, “Bernini’s Elephant and Obelisk,” *The Art Bulletin*, 29 (1947): 177.

<sup>2</sup> E.H. Gombrich, “Icones Symbolicae: The Visual Image in Neo-Platonic Thought,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 11(1948): 186.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Krautheimer *The Rome of Alexander VII, 1655-1667* (New Jersey:Princeton University Press, 1985), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Krautheimer *Rome of Alexander*, 13, 81.

<sup>5</sup> Tod A. Marder, “Alexander VII, Bernini, and the Urban Setting of the Panteon in the Seventeenth Century,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 50 (1991), 273, 279. Krautheimer, *Rome of Alexander*, 15, 78.

<sup>6</sup> Krautheimer, *Rome of Alexander*, 80.

<sup>7</sup> Krautheimer, *Rome of Alexander*, 79.

wooden pieces, he wrote out lists of the modifications in his diary.<sup>8</sup> Roads and buildings that needed adjustment were listed; some sculptures and fountains were moved multiple times to accommodate what Alexander considered to be the best visual-impacting setting.<sup>9</sup> This habit of working out placement and design continued throughout his pontificate, with even his last days finding him “-planning and replanning-“.<sup>10</sup>

Sometime in early 1665 while digging during a small restoration project in their garden, the Dominicans of Santa Maria sopra Minerva discovered an intact eighteen foot, granite obelisk.<sup>11</sup> It is reasonable to think that the Pope would have been delighted to receive word of its unearthing as he would clearly recall his time as the Secretary of State to Pope Innocent X<sup>12</sup> when Bernini unveiled his *Four Rivers Fountain* with a great deal of fanfare and pageantry in 1651;<sup>13</sup> a work topped by an obelisk. This new, albeit smaller obelisk presented Alexander the opportunity to combine his urban planning program with his interest in ancient Egypt.

Shortly after the obelisk was uncovered, Alexander turned to established polymath, Athanasius Kirchner for a translation of its hieroglyphics.<sup>14</sup> Kirchner’s interpretation was to be used in helping the Pope find suitable placement for it to be erected. Equally important was the translation in determining what kind of allegorical base would enhance that meaning. Kirchner summarizes his translation in this poem: “The Egyptian obelisk, symbol of the rays of *Sol*, is brought by the elephant to the Seventh Alexander as a gift. Is not the animal wise? Wisdom hath given to the World *solely* thee, O Seventh Alexander, consequently thou hast the gift of *Sol*.”<sup>15</sup> Apparently well pleased by Kirchner’s work, the entire translation was published in 1666. The book also included several anonymous dedicatory poems to the pope.<sup>16</sup>

As Kirchner’s poem explains, the obelisk had been a dedication to the World Spirit and wisdom. Historically he believed the obelisk had originally been in a temple for Isis, a goddess of knowledge.<sup>17</sup> Intentionally or not, the Dominican church which now occupied those same grounds had continued to retain a sort of ancestral devotion; as it too was dedicated to divinity

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<sup>8</sup> Krautheimer, *Rome of Alexander*, 79. Richard Krautheimer and Roger B. S. Jones. *The Diary of Alexander VII: Notes on Art, Artists and Buildings*. (Tübingen: Verlag Ernst Wasmuth, 1975), 199-200.

<sup>9</sup> Krautheimer, *Rome of Alexander*, 79.

<sup>10</sup> Krautheimer, *Rome of Alexander*, 79.

<sup>11</sup> Heckscher, *Bernini’s Elephant*, 156. Krautheimer, *Rome of Alexander*, 88.

<sup>12</sup> Bunson, Matthew, Sept 10, 2011, comment on Fabio Chigi, “Cardinal Nephew” The POPE Encyclopedia, <http://media.isnet.org/kristen/Ensiklopedia/CardinalNephew.html>

<sup>13</sup> “Fountain of the Four Rivers”, accessed November 14, 2011.

[http://www.publicartaroundtheworld.com/Fountain\\_of\\_the\\_Four\\_Rivers.html](http://www.publicartaroundtheworld.com/Fountain_of_the_Four_Rivers.html)

<sup>14</sup> Heckscher, *Bernini’s Elephant*, 156.

<sup>15</sup> Heckscher, *Bernini’s Elephant*, 181. Avigdor W.G. Poseq, On Physiognomic Communication in Bernini,” *Artibus et Historiae*, 27 (2006), 178.

<sup>16</sup> Heckscher, *Bernini’s Elephant*, 156.

<sup>17</sup> Brian A. Curran, “DE SACRARUM LITTERARUM AEGYPTIORUM INTERPRETATIONE.” RETICENCE AND HUBRISIN HIEROGLYPHIC STUDIES OF THE RENAISSANCE: PIERIO VALERIANO AND ANNIUS OFVITERBO,” *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, 43/44 (1998/1999), 181.

(the Mother of God, Mary) over another goddess of wisdom, Minerva. Between its original and current association the obelisk now had a three layered pedigree of divinity and wisdom.<sup>18</sup> In addition to those references, this was a time wherein the obelisk as an emblem was widely understood to be a representation of the sun's rays,<sup>19</sup> something that Kirchner clearly refers to in his poem. Those not aware of any textual inference would have been able to draw every day association between the obelisk and divinity by way of the much larger one in St. Peter's square.

Armed with this information, Alexander was left only with the problem of enhancing the obelisk's implied meaning. Bernini was one of at least two artists whose work Alexander considered for the project. Extant are seven presentation quality drawings attributed to Bernini and/or his workshop (Figures 1-7), though it is unknown, if all seven were actually shown to the Pope for consideration. Each of these drawings show allegorical figures holding up the obelisk. At least one option shows Bernini's nod to the Dominicans by including amongst its obelisk supporting figures, a dog.<sup>20</sup> The dog was a representation of their nickname, the Lord's dogs, a play on the word Domini cane.<sup>21</sup>(Figure 1) Of the seven drawings, there are two featuring an elephant.(Figures 6, 7) Beyond the bases, each of the drawings also offer variant decorated pedestals and obelisk toppers. From these Alexander would have been able to exercise his documented habit of contemplating changes (his model city); in the end choosing to piece together from them to form his preferred whole. In the spring of 1666 Alexander chose Bernini's design of an elephant to carry the obelisk on its back.<sup>22</sup> Figure 8 is a preparatory sketch attributed to Bernini, circa 1665.<sup>23</sup> This drawing predates the two extant and more presentation quality drawings for this project; perhaps a study for how to execute an elephant's trunk or the entire gesture of its head, mouth, eyes and trunk.<sup>24</sup> Figures 6 and 7 shows what are the last drawings for this project, where Figure 7 is likely the one from which the monument was sculpted. The drawing was given over to one of the sculptors from Bernini's workshop. Baldinucci noting that, "Executions were put into Ercole Ferrata's hands, who closely followed Bernini's design."<sup>25</sup>

Much of the research from 20th century historians has been to discern the inspiration for this monument. Beyond its origin there is a desire to know whether the idea came from Pope Alexander VII or from Bernini. The elephant was an animal still rare to Europe, yet its image can be found time and time again on everything from coins and medals to illuminated manuscripts

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<sup>18</sup> David A. Napier, "Bernini's Anthropology: A "Key" to the Piazza San Pietro," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 16 (1988), 19. Heckscher, *Bernini's Elephant*, 156,180.

<sup>19</sup> Poseq, *On Physiognomic Communication*, 178. Howard Hibbard, *Bernini* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1966), 213.

<sup>20</sup> Heckscher, *Bernini's Elephant*, 156.

<sup>21</sup> Heckscher, *Bernini's Elephant*, 156.

<sup>22</sup> Krautheimer, *Rome of Alexander*, 89.

<sup>23</sup> Heckscher, *Bernini's Elephant*, 156.

<sup>24</sup> H.L. Cooke, "Three Unknown Drawings by G.L. Bernini," *The Burlington Magazine*, 97 (1955), 320.

<sup>25</sup> Filippo Baldinucci, *The Life of Bernini* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 382.

and paintings.<sup>26</sup> Art historian William Hecksher gives an in-depth tracing of elephants used in art before this monument; offering a great number of potential source works from which Alexander and/or Bernini may have drawn inspiration. As to which parts of this visual history were common knowledge to Alexander and Bernini has not been proven. However, the Pope had in his library a heavily annotated copy of Francesco Colonna's 15<sup>th</sup> c *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* from which many suppose the monument could have been inspired.<sup>27</sup> (Figure 9)

When looking at the choice of elephant over any of the other suggested allegorical figures, we must in addition to the Colonna book, look at the extremely popular Cesare Ripa text, *Iconologia*.<sup>28</sup> (Figure 10) The image is from the 1603 illustrated edition where his article on Religion features an elephant and says, "The rare qualities found in that noblest of beasts are worthy of honors higher than those of Cardinaldom."<sup>29</sup> Both men were both textually and visually literate so it is reasonable to agree with E.H. Gombrich, that they also would have taken into consideration that symbols such as those found in the Ripa book were meant "to teach the illiterate, equal in status to the letters of the written word."<sup>30</sup> Therefore, finding emblems to pair with the obelisk to express divinity, wisdom, religiosity and to honor the pope would have helped them to make their choice.

Beyond the Colonna and Ripa elephants, it is important that Bernini had seen an elephant twice in person. The first time was in 1630 when one traveled through Rome.<sup>31</sup> Following that encounter he was commissioned to do an outdoor sculpture for the Barberini palace garden.<sup>32</sup> From this incomplete project there exists one clay model. (Figure 11) The Barberini garden elephant does carry a small obelisk on its back atop a saddle of sorts with accompanying cloth beneath. Though it is unknown why that project was not finished, Bernini under Pope Urban VIII was commissioned by the Spanish ambassador, Rodrigo de Mendoza to create a spectacle to celebrate the birth of the Spanish Infanta in 1651.<sup>33</sup> Figure 12 shows an etching showing the fireworks machine Bernini designed for that event. Perhaps working out the garden project idea, here he has had an elephant built; saddled much like the obelisk-carrying one. Twenty five years after that first in-person experience, with the *La macchina* still fresh in his mind, Bernini was in Rome as a secondary elephant traveled through in 1655.<sup>34</sup> This opportunity would have

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<sup>26</sup> Heckscher, *Bernini's Elephant*, 155-182.

<sup>27</sup> Heckscher, *Bernini's Elephant*, 157.

<sup>28</sup> Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia overo Descrittione several ancient quarried et Imagine own invention [1603]*, 430.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Wallace, *The World of Bernini, 1598-1680*. (New York: Time-Life Books, 1970), 93. By 1709, the text for this same emblem read, "The Elephant is an Emblem of *Religion*, he adoring the Sun and Stars."

<sup>30</sup> Gombrich, *Icones Symbolicae*, 166.

<sup>31</sup> Wallace, *World of Bernini*, 93.

<sup>32</sup> Rudolf Wittkower, *Gian Lorenzo Bernini: the Sculptor of the Roman Baroque* (London: Phaidon Press, 1955), 36.

<sup>33</sup> Maurizio Fagiolo Dell' Arco, *La Festa Barocca*, (Rome: De Luca, 1997), [unpaginated].

<sup>34</sup> Heckscher, *Bernini's Elephant*, 157.

presented him the chance to study the animal further, possibly to draw further studies of it while in its presence.

Understanding that we can say for certain Bernini knew of the Colonna woodcut and the Ripa emblems as evidenced by the clay model, it is important to examine them together to consider how the final monument's design might have been derived. Though the etching for the *La macchia* is extant, it is not known how accurately that artist 'retold' the elephant's features, so for the purposes of this comparison we note only that since Bernini continued to employ this base design he must consider the animal as a worthy emblem to be carrier/caryatid towards some higher purpose.<sup>35</sup> Firstly is the elephant's change of gesture. Colonna's is stationary, static in comparison to how Bernini activates his elephant by arching the animal's back. The Ripa elephant, though hidden partially by a figure appears to have the same elongated and unnaturalist body as Colonna's. Both woodcuts have the elephant's feet as paw-like and would be appropriate for some type of feline. Bernini's execution though somewhat difficult to read from the photograph has move slightly away from paw shaped though still not physically correct. The ears on the Colonna elephant appear to be accurately rendered whereas Ripa's look closer to a dog's and Bernini's appear as if they are shells, which may have simply been a stylistic choice rather than meant to reflect nature.<sup>36</sup> The tusks for all are treated differently with Colonna's being the closest to physiognomically correct. Though not part of this comparison, it is interesting to note that even though Bernini had seen the elephant in person, his rendering of the tusks is wildly inaccurate in the presentation quality drawing for the monument project, whereas he apparently showed them correctly in the *La macchia*. The Colonna and Ripa elephants both deal with the trunk in the same way in terms of its articulation, something Bernini brought forward into his clay model; however whereas both of the woodcut trunks end abruptly, Bernini's correctly gives it a pointed tip.<sup>37</sup> Bernini has taken the trunk and turned it to curve around the body, tipping the head slightly dipped down. The liquid wave of the trunk is almost an elephant version of Bernini's speaking likeness. Bernini's elephant has a more naturalistic look to its legs, feet and muscles which speaks to the fact that the artist had seen and studied an elephant in real life. Gombrich suggested thinking about the work as "-a starting point for contemplation."<sup>38</sup> Bernini clearly believed similarly given his work the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*. With *St. Teresa*, every decision made in its execution is an invitation for the viewer to be contemplative, to attempt a participatory role in her moment of divine ecstasy. It is fitting then to pair the noble elephant with the Isis obelisk in front of a church for Mary over Minerva.

After approval by Alexander, Bernini gave over the execution of the marble elephant to Ercole Ferrata in April 1666.<sup>39</sup> Ferrata was a sculptor, whom Domenico Bernini noted as being one of several with Gian Lorenzo Bernini's workshop, not trained by him but, "-already

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<sup>35</sup> Heckscher, *Bernini's Elephant*, 158.

<sup>36</sup> Poseq, *On Physiognomic Communication*, 179.

<sup>37</sup> "Elephants," SeaWorld, accessed Nov 14, 2011. <http://www.seaworld.org/animal-info/info-books/elephants/physical-characteristics.htm>.

<sup>38</sup> Gombrich, *Icones Symbolicae*, 167.

<sup>39</sup> Wittkower, *Gian Lorenzo Bernini*, 231. Heckscher, *Bernini's Elephant*, 157.

established themselves as masters of art who worked with him and perfected themselves.”<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately no primary documents discuss whether it was left to Ferrata to also complete the base, its plaques and decoration as well as the obelisk topper or if those tasks were given to others from the Bernini workshop.

During the approximate year it took to complete the commission, a rumored change in the design came from the argument that the elephant could not hold the obelisk as planned.<sup>41</sup> The supposed design flaw stemmed from the other artist-architect who had vied for the monument’s commission. Whether or not this is a provable argument, the elephant does not feature a hollow space below the its belly as depicted in Figure 6 which Cooke and Hercksher consider to be the one from which Ferrata took as his reference.<sup>42</sup>

As a measure of enhancement to its interpreted meaning, Alexander chose to erect the obelisk in front of the Dominican church where it was found. His placement decision centers the monument in the piazza with the elephant’s face turned away from the west façade of the church. There is a drawing among Alexander’s papers which shows two alternatives for placement of the monument which would have been in keeping with his habit utilizing the wooden model of Rome.<sup>43</sup>

The *Elephant and Obelisk* was erected under the direction of Luigi Bernini<sup>44</sup> and was unveiled on July 11, 1667.<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately Pope Alexander VII passed away approximately one month prior and never saw it fully realized.<sup>46</sup> The architectural programs attributed to Alexander’s papacy were actively being documented by printmaking artist Giovanni Battista Flada. In his second in a series of books is the first known etching of the Piazza della Minerva featuring Bernini’s *Elephant and Obelisk* after it was unveiled.<sup>47</sup> (Figure 13)

Discussion of the completed monument from top to bottom allows us the opportunity to study what final decisions were made based upon the presentation drawings Alexander reviewed. Figure 14 is a detail showing that Bernini topped the obelisk with a metal-cast cross and the Chigi hills with eight point star. Figure 15 is a detail of the saddle cloth. This design is exactly duplicated on both sides of the elephant, also featuring the Chigi star and hills. Figure 16 is a detail of the pedestal where one will find Alexander’s family coat of arms in relief including the tiara and keys of his office as Pope. Figure 17 shows the side of the elephant facing the Dominican church facade. Figure 18 is a detail showing the elephant’s rear end which is fairly non-descript but important because it is the only one where we can easily see that the space

<sup>40</sup> Baldinucci, *Life of Bernini*, 89.

<sup>41</sup> Kristina Dahlberg, February 9, 2007, comment on Elephant and Obelisk, “Bernini’s Elephant Obelisk – “Pulcino della Minerva” Art History Presentation Archive, <http://honorsaharchive.blogspot.com/2007/02/berninis-obelisk-pulcino-della.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Heckscher, *Bernini’s Elephant*, 157

<sup>43</sup> Krautheimer, *Rome of Alexander*, 88-89.

<sup>44</sup> Baldinucci, *Life of Bernini*, 86.

<sup>45</sup> Wittkower, *Gian Lorenzo Bernini*, 231. Heckscher, *Bernini’s Elephant*, 157 (disagrees and says it was Paglia who was in charge of its installation)

<sup>46</sup> Heckscher, *Bernini’s Elephant*, 157.

<sup>47</sup> Heckscher, *Bernini’s Elephant*, 157.

beneath the belly is not hollow but filled. Figure 19 shows the steps and pedestal for the monument. The pedestal, along with the relief of the Chigi coat of arms features two dedicatory plaques which Wittkower states, “- form an integral and important part of the composition.”<sup>48</sup> This is especially true since Alexander wrote both inscriptions.<sup>49</sup>

Facing west it translates to read:

“In the year of Salvation 1667, Alexander VII dedicated to Divine Wisdom this ancient Egyptian obelisk, a monument of Egyptian Pallas, torn from the earth and erected in what was formerly the forum of Minerva, and is now that of the Virgin who gave birth to God.”<sup>50</sup>

Facing east translates to read:

“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.”<sup>51</sup>

Bernini had established a clear interest in how a moment might be experienced. These sort of participatory expressions,”-did not insist-” so much as they were meant to pantomime with such specificity as to be universally understood.<sup>52</sup> It was written that Bernini himself was given to bolstering the theatricality of reveals.<sup>53</sup> Given Bernini’s visual mastery of those reveals and coupling it with Alexander’s almost belabored habit of repositioning work, it is especially important to look at this monument through that perspective. For the directed moment and its engagement in the space one has to consider how Bernini felt the *Elephant and Obelisk* would greet its audience. The majority of traffic through this piazza at the time would have been mostly made up of pedestrians, as well as some people on horse or in some type of carriage. With this understanding, in Figure 20 we get the sense that the pedestal top is probably a little taller than 6 feet. The elephant on top of the pedestal is only listed as being ‘life-size’.<sup>54</sup> So a pedestrian encounters this large animal from below, getting the perspective approximately as seen in Figure 21. The elephant’s eyes are upturned and even the person on foot could be guaranteed to notice this as Bernini designed its massive head tipped down. The on foot audience would come upon this rare creature, under it, forced to look up, mimicking the elephant’s gaze. Following the curved trunk around the elephant’s body, the viewer’s eyes would follow its pointed tip upwards along the receding line of the obelisk, this recognizable emblem of the sun, pointing towards its familiar. Seeing the towering obelisk, seated comfortably in the saddle of such a powerful and large animal, imbued with religiosity, must have been quite awe inspiring for any who encountered it from this perspective. Gombrich may have considered the same perspective of symbols when he said, “-the contemplation of the low will teach us to ascend to the high.”<sup>55</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Wittkower, *Gian Lorenzo Bernini*, 36.

<sup>49</sup> Wittkower, *Gian Lorenzo Bernini*, 231

<sup>50</sup> Curran, *DE SACRARUM LITTERARUM*, 181.

<sup>51</sup> Heckscher, *Bernini’s Elephant*, 180.

<sup>52</sup> Philipp P. Fehl, “Hermeticism and Art: Emblem and Allegory in the Work of Bernini,” *Artibus et Historiae*, 7:14(1986), 174.

<sup>53</sup> Fehl, Hermeticism and Art, 182-83. Heckscher, *Bernini’s Elephant*, 157.

<sup>54</sup> Wallace, *The World of Bernini*, 92.

<sup>55</sup> Gombrich, *Icones Symbolicae*, 167.

From the height of a carriage or on a horse the elephant would probably have been seen in a slightly more intimate way. The viewer, now nearer to eye level with the elephant would see the details finely executed on the trunk, the saddle cloth and the multiple Chigi emblems. (Figure 22) At this intimate level of examination one would begin to share in the elephant's apparent consciousness of its burden.<sup>56</sup> Bernini's design then, no matter the audience, was utterly in keeping with the Grombrich's speculation that the artist desired this work to be a starting point of contemplation. Further even that the placement and use of emblems, Chigi or otherwise, "acted out and lifted above its specific precision into a realm of celebration that at once serves the specific occasion and yet makes it universal. There is no clue, no trick, no deeper hidden meaning in what we see – its depth, its truth, lives on the surface of the work of art and promotes a sense of grace and well-being; it is our delight that is the source of our instruction, and not our probing."<sup>57</sup>

Like many long standing works, the *Elephant and Obelisk* carries a history of anecdotal stories, rumors, still unsubstantiated. Their inclusion in examination of this monument's history provides layers of enduring associations which regardless of truth have taken on meaning in and of themselves.

Father Giuseppe Paglia, (architect of S. Maria sopra Minerva)<sup>58</sup> is said to have competed with Bernini for this monument's commission. Though an image of his submission is not extant it has been described that Paglia had the obelisk supported from atop the Chigi mountains as its base.<sup>59</sup> Alexander's diary, from the approximate year between the obelisk's discovery to when it is connected to Bernini, never lists Paglia.<sup>60</sup> Until such time as other documents appear to supplant them, Alexander's diary and Domenico's biography supersede any other claim.

Probably the most widely spread anecdote also involves Father Paglia, which is that the rear end of the elephant is purposefully directed towards the monastery where he lived.<sup>61</sup> This story likely started with an event connected to the *Four Rivers Fountain*. Domenico relates a story where because that fountain had a hollow directly beneath the obelisk, people believed the base could not support it and were terrified the obelisk would fall.<sup>62</sup> Apparently during a particularly bad storm where several houses had collapsed, a fearful crowd gathered around the fountain. Bernini was apprised of this and went out to the fountain. He inspects it and demands four ropes be attached at its base. Those ropes were then each attached to four nearby houses. Apparently the crowd was mollified by this. Domenico says: "Through this amusing contrivance,

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<sup>56</sup> Heckscher, *Bernini's Elephant*, 167.

<sup>57</sup> Fehl, *Hermeticism and Art*, 174.

<sup>58</sup> Marder, *Alexander VII, Bernini*, 290.

<sup>59</sup> Pollett, Andrea, September 10, 2011, "Virtual Roma: 1998-2008, Curious and Unusual 'Minerva's Chick,'" <http://roma.andreapollett.com/S1/roma-c1.htm>

<sup>60</sup> Krautheimer, *Diary of Alexander*, 222-225.

<sup>61</sup> Dahlberg, *Elephant Obelisk*, <http://honorsaharchive.blogspot.com/2007/02/berninis-obelisk-pulcino-della.html>. Pollett, "Minerva's Chick."

<sup>62</sup> Bernini, Domenico. *The Life of Gian Lorenzo Bernini*. Translated by Franco Mormando. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011, 165.



the people realized the error of their belief and everyone began to distance himself from his former fear by pointing to his neighbor as the culprit; at the same time, they praised the genius of the Cavaliere, who, with so little, was able to bring remedy to so much turmoil.”<sup>63</sup> Explaining that Bernini so trusted the strength of the fountain that those four houses attached by rope to it would be saved from collapse during the fierce storm by its support. Moving forward to approximately 1665 with Bernini’s design featuring a hollow space beneath its belly. The competing designer, Father Paglia claimed traditional canons dictated that “no weight should rest vertically above an empty space, as it would neither be steady nor long-lasting,”<sup>64</sup> If this anecdote could be proven true then it is likely Bernini would have been offended by being questioned on the stability of the design given his proven track record with the *Four Rivers Fountain*. However it came to pass, the obelisk ultimately is not hollow beneath the belly (as it was originally drawn, based on the drawing (Figure 6) so the story goes that Bernini took his revenge on Paglia by designing its tail lifted in an obscene way, sort of allowing Bernini to thumb his nose at Paglia in perpetuity.<sup>65</sup>

Lastly, the *Elephant and Obelisk* has been given several nicknames over the years. The elephant was perceived by the Romans as being rather stout. For this reason, it was nicknamed *Porcino della Minerva* which translates to *Minerva’s Piggy*. The name eventually changed to *Pulcino* (Chick), probably because the pronunciation is very similar.<sup>66</sup> So that today the monument is referred to both as *Minerva’s Chick* or as *The Elephant and Obelisk*.

Despite its many layers of connotation, this monument remains overshadowed within Bernini’s vast achievements in his entire body of work. The only mention of it from either of his contemporary biographers was Baldinucci’s minor notation regarding Ercole Ferrata. No matter the level of importance as determined by modern history books, this monument sits in its original position, unchanged, in front of the Santa Maria sopra Minerva church. The continuation of storytelling which surrounds it suggests that, unlike other works by the artist Bernini, the *Elephant and Obelisk* retains a high measure of affection by the people of Italy. Indeed, if we take the Fehl view of what Pope Alexander and Bernini accomplished together via this monument, we might see that it still exhorts passersby, ‘Here, I direct you towards the divine, and direct it back towards you, come contemplate!’<sup>67</sup> Bernini’s design for the *Elephant and Obelisk* is a subtle but continuously revealing monument to the Pope, a dedication to Divine Wisdom and utterly in keeping with Alexander’s urban planning program.

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<sup>63</sup> Bernini, *Life of Gian Lorenzo*, 166.

<sup>64</sup> Dahlberg, *Elephant Obelisk*, <http://honorsaharchive.blogspot.com/2007/02/berninis-elephant-obelisk-pulcino-della.html>.

<sup>65</sup> Dahlberg, *Elephant Obelisk*, <http://honorsaharchive.blogspot.com/2007/02/berninis-elephant-obelisk-pulcino-della.html>. Marder, *Alexander VII, Bernini*, 290.

<sup>66</sup> Dahlberg, <http://honorsaharchive.blogspot.com/2007/02/berninis-elephant-obelisk-pulcino-della.html>. Pollett, *Virtual Roma*, <http://roma.andreapollett.com/S1/roma-c1.htm>.

<sup>67</sup> Fehl, *Hermeticism and Art*, 156.