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A new plan by Borromini for the Lateran basilica, Rome

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THE RECONSTRUCTION of the nave of S. Giovanni in Laterano in 1646—50 was the most important and expensive commission in the career of Francesco Borromini (1599—1667). It is built on such a scale that the interior spaces of all his other buildings – the Oratory of the Filippini, S. Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, S. Ivo, the cappella dei Re Magi at the Collegio di Propaganda Fide – could fit together inside it, yet some contemporary sources suggest that what Borromini built was a fragment of a still larger plan. A new drawing by Borromini (Figs. 22 and 23), now in a private collection, shows that these sources are substantially correct and that the architect’s ambitions were indeed greater than those of his patron, Pope Innocent X.

In 1716 Giovanni Andrea Bianchi, a Lombard architect working in Rome, said that he had seen autograph drawings by Borromini for the Lateran, some in the possession of the architect’s grand-nephews, and one with a certain Signor Corbellino, a member of the household of Prince Girolamo Pamphilj, the heir of the original patron. According to Bianchi, Borromini had wanted to make the Constantinian basilica look more like St Peter’s:

... the idea of Cavalier Borromini was not only to construct a vault, but also he wanted to put a cupola over the crossing and build a tribune and two lateral arms, as at St Peter’s, and he added [to the tribune] six other niches and the same order [of giant pilasters as in the nave], while the inner aisles would have continued around [the tribune], as in the church of San Carlo al Corso, but more handsomely. The newly discovered drawing is remarkably close to Bianchi’s description. It is composed of two sheets that were separated at the time of auction but, since they fit seamlessly

32. Lower half of a project for the reconstruction of S. Giovanni in Laterano in Rome, by Francesco Borromini. 1647, with a project by Bernardo Castelli Borromini for the façade, 1690—700. Orientation: north to the right. Pencil on paper. 42.2 by 57.8 cm. (Collection of Kate Ganz and Daniel Belin, Los Angeles).

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together and show the plan of the church without a break, they can be considered as a single drawing. It is helpful to remember that the Lateran, with the aisle at the west end and the façade facing east, reverses the standard orientation. The top half, which shows the apse, transept and western bays of the nave, has been cut down the middle so that it now shows only the right (or north) side of the church. The lower, uncut half shows the eastern bays of the nave and the façade, which is heavily overdrawn by another hand. It is a very large drawing: when the halves are united, it measures 122 cm. in length.

In the new drawing the Lateran’s medieval apse, which Borromini left undisturbed during the building campaign of 1646–50 (Figs. 24 and 25), is shown with radical innovations. The old apse was faintly drawn in, then erased, its place taken by an extended choir which seems to be covered with a coffered vault. On the new semi-dome, which is set much further back than the old apse, Borromini wrote an inscription which the present authors read as ‘mosaico antico’. It would seem that the architect thought the apse could be moved and that Jacopo Torri’s mosaic of 1291, which included older fragments, such as the fifth-century head of the Saviour, could be dismantled and re-inserted in the new semi-dome.

Although no scale is given, one can be deduced: the width of the two side aisles taken together (from the side wall to the front pilaster of the nave piers) measures 12.8 cm. on the drawing; from a scaled drawing in Vienna (Albiniara no. 175) this distance is known to be 70 palmi. These measurements imply that the new plan is drawn to a scale of approximately 1:140.

The dimensions of the S. Paolo drawing are 72.6 by 46.8 cm.; the plan of the basilica appears to take up about half the sheet and to be about 30 cm. high.


The top half (Fig.23), which shows the apse, measures 80 by 29 cm. It is made up of two sheets pasted together, the upper sheet measuring 42.3 cm. in height and the lower 40.5 cm. in height; the total, 82.8 cm., was reduced to 80 cm. because of the overlap in pasting. The lower half (Fig.22), which shows the easternmost bay of the nave and the façade, measures 42.2 by 57.9 cm.

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For Dvorkin: ‘The Mosaics of Rome from the Third to the Fourteenth Centuries. London 1967, pp. 70–71 and 311–12, observes that the head of Christ was set on a separate block of travertine and seems to have been preserved from an earlier mosaic, as Torri’s inscription reads ‘vinimus integram repeti facti’.
choir is defined by four massive piers, identical to those Borromini was planning in the nave, complete with niches for statues. The new semi-dome is surrounded by an ambulatory in which each bay is covered by an oval vault; here Borromini wrote 'coro di musici et organo'; evidently he wanted to provide a choir and organ loft, which was lacking in the old church. Later Piranesi addressed the problem, but the present extended choir and organ lofts were built by Virgilio Vespignani only in 1876–86.

The drawing that Bianchi described in 1716 had six niches around the tribune, not four as in the new drawing. But before Borromini finished the drawing he made one final change, sketched lightly at the top of the sheet: he pushed the apse still further back, thereby allowing room for a larger choir with six piers (although he did not draw them on the present sheet). The drawings that Bianchi saw must have been worked up plans for the extended choir that is merely sketched in the new drawing.

An ambulatory is a feature of northern Italian churches, and is not common in Rome, but — as Bianchi perceptively noted — there is one in the Roman church of the Milanese nation, S. Carlo al Corso, designed by Onorio Longhi in 1611. S. Carlo’s ambulatory was not built until 1667–69, but the design was circulated in the mid-seventeenth century in a print by Onorio’s son, Martino Longhi the Younger. We know that Borromini had a copy of this print at least by 1665, when he sketched a revised design for the S. Carlo ambulatory on it (Fig. 26).7

The Lateran apse already had a small ambulatory, the so-called Leonine portico, added to the Constantinian basilica in the Middle Ages by Pope Nicholas IV (1288–92) (Figs. 24 and 25), so the new ambulatory is Borromini’s highly personal reinterpretation of both a medieval and a Lombard form. Borromini was far more careful than Longhi to preserve the continuity between his nave and the new choir. Furthermore, Longhi’s vaults, wider on one side than the other, would have had a strange appearance over the bays of his ambulatory, while Borromini maintained a homogenous sequence of sail vaults behind both the piers and the openings of his choir. Uppermost on his mind was the uniform and uninterrupted sequence of piers with their niches for statuary running all around the basilica:6 these great piers would rotate around the east end of the nave, and with the new choir they would now rotate around the western end too. This is the effect of echo (‘riverbero’) that Borromini famously described on one of his drawings when he was reshaping the entrance wall.9

7 Vienna, Albertina, no.139; see Portoghesi, op. cit. (note 2), fig.127; P. Portoghesi: Disegni di Francesco Borromini, Rome 1967, p.27, no.79; G. Drago and L. Salerno; SS. Ambrogio e Carlo al Corso e l’Arciconfraternita dei Lombardi a Roma, Rome 1967, p.73, note 18; B. Bösel and C. Pronuncii, eds.: Francesco Borromini e l’Urbania honora, Milan 1999, II, p.246. Salerno (p.55) suggests as precedents such Milanese churches as the Cathedral or S. Maria dei Miracoli presso S. Celso. As the print is dedicated to Francesco Biglia, who was primicerio of the Lombard Confraternity until 1640, it was almost certainly issued before that date. The authors wish to thank Anna Bortolozzi for a discussion of the Longhi print.
8 The nave piers have the names of apostles pencilled in by Borromini. Starting from the pier closest to the transept, the first four read: ‘S. Paolo’, ‘S. Jacobs’, ‘S. Bartholomeo’, ‘S. Giuseppe’. For the piers closest to the façade both apostle names are preserved: ‘S. Maestro S. simone’.
9 The inscription on Vienna, Albertina, no.377: ‘Se questa facciata venisse quasedielli enaldi bisognasa fare il tabernacoli/cembre di uno e avete il popolo/che non sta qui il desiderare per seguire l’ordine che non mai interrotto/L’altra non aveva merito di riverbera con il coro o tribunal/premiate che gia... ’, see Roca De Amicis 1993, op. cit. (note 2), pp.79–84 and fig 38. The autograph inscription in pencil in the upper-right corner is faint but mostly still legible, except the last four lines, which have been heavily erased. Bernando Castelli Borromini later wrote over the inscription in pen, as far as we can tell faithfully copying the original: ‘SS. si dice che piausono il disegno ma che non svolga variare/li
Borromini retained the transept of the old basilica, and this inevitably interrupted the sequence of piers between nave and choir. On the new drawing he drew a circle in the centre of the transept, perhaps a rudimentary symbol for the dome (‘cadino’, or bowl) that Bianchi saw on the drawings in 1716. We hear no more of the dome, however, and even the design for the choir brought down the ire of the pope on the architect’s head. In a few sad lines written on the new drawing, Borromini described a difficult interview:

His Holiness liked the drawing, but that he did not want to change the foundations or the site of the ancient basilica, which was built by a saintly pope and a saintly emperor, and that the Good Lord would never have allowed any pope to alter the plan of this holy basilica. Thus he insisted that he wanted to do nothing except strengthen the structure, repair and embellish the church, without varying the foundations in the least. As a result, the apse vault will stay in its ancient location and not be moved in the way the present drawing shows.¹⁰

Which pope delivered this reproach? Was it Alexander VII (reigned 1655–67), elected on 7th April 1655, and still, Borromini might have hoped, open to persuasion? Or was it his predecessor, Innocent X (reigned 1644–55), who first instigated the renovation of the basilica, generous to Borromini but still firm in his commitment to preserve the vestiges of the original church? All the evidence points to Innocent X and suggests that the new plan should be dated to very early in the history of the commission, almost certainly to 1647.

We know from the account of the commission written in 1655 by Borromini’s friend Fioravante Martinelli, shortly after Innocent X’s death, that from the outset two opposing philosophies for the restoration were in conflict.¹¹ Neither is associated with an individual by name, but the protagonists are easy to identify from Martinelli’s account. ‘Some people’ (‘alcuni’) wanted to demolish the whole building down to the footprint of Constantine’s basilica and build a completely new church. This idea was supported by ‘the people, always the friends of novelty’,¹² who were confident that Rome could furnish an architect ‘endowed by nature with an infinite prodigality of invention, deepened with study and experience in the Vitruvian profession’, and that the result would be a ‘new wonder of the world’. Obviously this was Martinelli’s transparent way of describing Borromini and his supporters.

The second party was the preservationists. They recalled the piety of the Lateran’s founder, the emperor Constantine, of the early Christians who had built the church, and of Pope Sylvester (d.335) who consecrated it. They reminded the pope that the church was made with spolia from pagan temples, re-used as a sign of the triumph of Christianity. Rome could not be deprived of its cathedral, and the world would be appalled to hear of the demolition of the caput et


¹² A. Bosio, Roma sottanea, Rome 1651 (in fact 1645); 2nd ed. by G. Severano, Rome 1650, with the Latin translation by P. Arlinghi: Roma ubertana novissima, Rome 1651, I, p. 463.
has been mutilated and the left (south) side cut away. This is unfortunate, because Borromini was designing the chapels first on the missing left side of the sheet, and then reproducing them symmetrically on the right. For example, the central chapel on the left (south) side was the Santoro chapel, built by Onorio Longhi in 1602. Unlike the other late Renaissance chapels along the south wall of the basilica, it was not damaged or occluded in Borromini’s restoration, and there were no plans to replace it. Consequently Borromini designed its symmetrical twin in the centre of the north wall, the large oval chapel we see on the present drawing. It became the fulcrum of a series of new chapels on this side. Doubtless it would have been offered to the Massimi family, since the entrance to their chapel, built in 1561–69 by Giacomo Della Porta, was badly blocked by Borromini’s new system of piers; it is not even shown on the present drawing.

But there is another, more important, case of left–right symmetry that the mutilation of the sheet has obscured. In 1646–47 Borromini planned a small chamber off the left aisle, very close to the transept. It was intended to contain a statue of Innocent X enthroned with his hand raised in blessing, similar to Algardi’s statue of the same pope on the Capitoline. The project is known from a beautiful drawing in Berlin (Fig. 27), an elevation with no accompanying plan. The chamber appears to be circular, or a compressed circle, and in the background two columns frame the statue. Having this chamber on the left side of the nave, Borromini naturally designed a matching chapel on the right side which is what we see in the new plan.

But having drawn this twin, Borromini realised that the three-quarter circle plan did not fit the available space on the right side of the church: the chapel near the transept would have intruded into the room reserved for the statue of Henry IV of France, attached to the east side of Sixtus V’s porcico, so it had to be radically compressed. Of the original six columns, four were kept, and the chapel was reduced to a shallow space...
with an aisle at each end. The Inghirami chapel, begun in 1657 under Alexander VII, was finally built to this design and in this position.15

The second chapel from the top on the new drawing, in plan a three-quarter circle, could have been barely fitted in next to the corridor connecting the church to the Lateran palace. But the corridor was badly aligned with the new basilica, and eventually Borromini invented the brilliant solution of a vestiule with double doors to conceal the misalignment of the two buildings. The vestiule was worked out for the first time on the present drawing, but inevitably the chapel had to go.

Most of the present-day chapels that stand along the northern wall of the basilica were built much later, but the present drawing shows that Borromini had already imagined a symmetrical sequence of chapels. The smaller ovoid ones are paraphrases in miniature of Michelangelo’s designs for S. Giovanni dei Fiorentini, the wooden model of which was on display throughout Borromini’s lifetime. One puzzling feature is that the last, or easternmost, chapel, nearest the façade, has been transformed into a hexagon, like the side chapels of S. Carlo al Corso. It is difficult to tell if it was drawn by another hand, or whether it represents Borromini thinking in an experimental vein as he finished the sequence of chapels.

The good fit of the Berlin elevation with the new plan allows us to date the latter to the pontificate of Innocent X, in fact to the beginning of construction in 1647. This dating is confirmed by the rendering of the inner façade, with its canted piers and convex central bay, which was worked out in early 1647 on a much reworked plan in Vienna (Albertina, no.377). This drawing, as complex as any in Borromini’s œuvre, with the long inscription mentioning ‘riverbero’, provides an insight into the architect’s aesthetic sense.

The Constantinian façade had measured four palmi in thickness but, after Borromini had added a concave curve inside the nave and new piers on the outer face, the thickness grew to nineteen palmi. All the innovations worked out on Albertina no.377 were taken over into the new plan, which therefore can be dated to the spring or summer of 1647, when the commission was about a year old. The foundations had been finished, and construction was about to begin above ground. It was the last time before the building crews moved into high gear in 1647–50 that Borromini could encourage Innocent X to expand his ambitions.16

Another sheet, sold in the same lot as the new plan, contains rough sketches for the façade of S. Giovanni in Laterano on both recto (in ink) and verso (in pencil).17 They show a vast new portico articulated by about thirty-seven monster columns on the interior, while fourteen columns on the exterior flank huge niches. The entrance to the church would have been through a semicircular porch on four columns, half of an oval vestibule. There is very little sense of architectonic form in these sketches, and Borrominian mannerisms, like concave piers, take the place of Borromini’s sense of mass and space. Perhaps further study will clarify the function of this drawing, now in a separate collection.

However, what can be certainly affirmed is that the similar façade drawn in heavy, smudged pencil on the new drawing is not by Borromini, but was added in about 1669–1700 by his nephew, Bernardo Castelli Borromini (1643–1709). The Lateran façade remained unbuilt from 1650, when the nave was finished, to 1732, when Alessandro Galilei began the present façade.18 Evidence for the appearance of Borromini’s projected façade is scanty. Fra Juan de San Bonaventura, a Trinitarian monk who was in close contact with Borromini, said in 1650 that it would have looked like Maderno’s façade of St Peter’s, ‘similar and of no less quality’.19 Various prints and drawings show the great wall, with four voids intended for windows, erected by Borromini in 1647–50, looming over the medieval portico. Doubtless it would have formed the rear wall of a two-storey façade, with a portico below and a benediction loggia above. But would his façade have remained flat in front? A large site plan on Albertina no.373 shows the medieval portico still standing, and also a spacious podium or platform in front of the church. This platform, doubtless built by Borromini in preparation for a façade, had a front edge shaped along a concave curve with a convex bulge in the centre. It raises the possibility that Borromini’s façade might have followed similar curves.

When Alexander VII was elected pope he insisted that the Lateran should be completed with modesty and expediency. In 1657 Borromini submitted a design for a portico only one storey high, with no benediction loggia.20 But the pope was uninterested. The loggia of the late twelfth century, with its Cosmatestque friezes and spoliate columns, dwarfed by Borromini’s immense rear wall, remained in place throughout the rest of the seventeenth century.

Around 1700 the Lateran façade was again a subject for discussion. Cardinal Benedetto Pamphili, prompote of Innocent X, became arch-priest of the basilica in 1669, a position he held until his death in 1730. In the second volume of his Prospettiva (1700) the Jesuit architect Andrea Pozzo said that there had been a competition for the Lateran façade in 1699; we do not know the participants or the outcome. Nonetheless at this time Cardinal Pamphili contributed 20,000 scudi towards the project, and also persuaded Innocent XII to budget 40,000 scudi; Cardinal Pamphili’s brother was also expected to contribute a large sum. It was estimated that a façade commensurate with the foundations built in Innocent X’s reign would cost 100,000 scudi.21

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15 See Sothely’s sale cited at note 1 above, lot 40C.
It seems probable that Bernardo Castelli Borromini’s interest in the façade was stimulated by the competition of 1699. He had no talent either as an architect or as a draughtsman, but he did have one inestimable advantage, namely, possession of his uncle’s drawings. Borromini’s architecture was in high favour with Cardinal Benedetto Pamphili, whose only regret was that Borromini’s original project was lost, hence his call for new projects.22 But Bernardo may have calculated that the cardinal would have built Borromini’s design, if only it could be found. And who better than him to find it?

The façade drawn on the lower half of the new drawing shows forty-eight large columns in the portico, fourteen giant columns lining the façade and twelve giant columns lining the central oval. The smudged pencil imitates Borromini’s style at its most intense, such as in a famous, heavily re-worked plan of the cappella dei Re Magi at the Propaganda Fide, dating from 1660–62.23 But the uncle’s precision is replaced by the nephew’s bombast; even close observation under various light conditions fails to disclose any trace of an authentic Borromini plan beneath this part of the drawing: it is all Bernardo’s wild fantasy. The platform that, on Borromini’s drawing, merely indicated a terrace in front of the façade, in Bernardo’s hands becomes the foundation for a much larger and more pompous façade (Fig. 28), while the huge spiral staircases and lateral walls that curve like stage-flats are far removed from Borromini’s feeling for architectural form.

Thus we must conclude that Bernardo went back to Borromini’s files, extracted an authentic plan for the Lateran — all the more convincing because it showed the unbuilt choir — and added a façade of his own. The most likely date for this travesty is 1699–1700; and in fact the façade is in the same spirit as Bernardo’s project for the Trevi Fountain of 1701.24 On the new plan, Bernardo may have extended his alterations into the body of the church, and possibly we should attribute to him the design of the hexagonal chapel nearest the façade, which is clumsier than the other chapels. He could easily have taken it from the hexagonal chapels at S. Carlino.

For all its pomposity, Bernardo’s façade was not totally out of place in the first decade of the eighteenth century. The architect Ferdinando Reiff won second place in the Concorso Clementino of 1705 with a similar design.25 The oval atrium and the portico, not so crudely juxtaposed as in Bernardo’s design but harmoniously fused, became a motif of great importance for Roman architecture in the first half of the new century, starting with Pozzo’s proposal for the Lateran façade of 1699 and culminating with the model submitted by Ludovico Rusconi Sassi to the competition of 1732.26 This model seems, in fact, a compendium of eighteenth-century Borrominianisms, but ironically some of them come from the nephew, including the great central lantern of the portico, which echoes the tent-like pavilion added by Bernardo to the upper storey of the façade of S. Carlino after his uncle’s death.

Bernardo died in 1709,27 and for a decade we have no idea of where his hoard of drawings by Borromini was kept. In 1720 and 1725 Sebastiano Giannini began to publish books on S. Ivo and the Casa dei Filippini, claiming that he had access to ‘the entire studio of the late Cavalier Borromini’. There can be no doubt that this was true; it is even possible that he had bought the drawings, but not all of them. In 1723 Cardinal Benedetto Pamphili bought a plan and an elevation for the Lateran façade from two of Bernardo’s sons, Giuseppe and Pietro Antonio Castelli Borromini, and Girolamo Corbellini ‘gave’ him four more Latef drawings and was ‘recognised’ with a reward of 200 scudi.28 We are back to the same people, and probably the same drawings, that Bianchi had described in 1716.

Cardinal Pamphili took these drawings and had a model built of what he thought was Borromini’s façade by the architect Mario Barnardi. Other architects were invited to submit projects of their own based on the model. Clement XI died in 1723 before anything could be done, and the new pope, Benedict XIII, used the 3,000 scudi put at his disposal by del Settecento in Roma’, Commentarii 22, no.1 (1971), pp.36–67; Kieven, op. cit. (note 2), pp.112ff., no.37 and fig.39.


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28 Kerber, op. cit. (note 21), p.89: ‘Ma l’esercere smarriti i disegni del famoso Borromini, che mostrò le parti interiori di questa Basilica, disse occasione à gli Architetti di far nuove idee.’
29 Vienna, Albertina, no.889; Portoghesi, op. cit. (note 2), fig.109; Döbel and Frommel, op. cit. (note 13), pp.327–38, no.XVIII.12.
32 H. Hager: ‘Il modello di Ludovico Rusconi Sassi del concorso per la facciata di S. Giovanni in Laterano (1732) e il prospetto a convessità centrale durante la prima metà
Cardinal Pamphilj for the façade to build instead three new chapels at the eastern end of the Lateran nave, following the plan of the two authentic Borromini chapel near the transept. When Benedetto Pamphilj died in 1730 he left plans, models and a large sum of money to build Borromini’s, or at least a Borromanian, façade. In 1730 Leone Pascoli mentioned a number of drawings for the Lateran that were being passed around under Borromini’s name, though he attributed them to Bernardo: ‘And [Borromini] furnished the drawing for the façade, but it is not the one that is making the rounds at present, which is believed to be by his nephew Bernardo.’

In 1732 one of the architects involved in the competition for the new façade, probably Ferdinando Fuga, listed certain criteria for exposing fakes that were being passed off as Borromini’s autograph drawings:

First, the drawing which has been published as an original work of his genius, and which is esteemed as autograph by those who have not seen it or at any rate not examined it closely, this drawing, and here I think I am in agreement with those who really understand architecture, is a changeling [‘un disegno supposto’], not by his hand. In it one does not detect either his special manner, or that character that shines forth in all his great, magnificent buildings, or any of those ingenious new ideas which set every Borromini building apart from the rest, such as his marvellous way of adapting to the site and other givens of the commission; and finally one sees no new invention of ornament, something that he shows even in buildings of minor importance. Instead one finds a hodgepodge of decorative motifs taken from various Borromini buildings, and an affected imitation of his style. All this put together proves that such a drawing is not by Borromini, and thus is unhelpful in tracing his ideas.

Fuga was evidently looking at an elevation drawing, since he criticised the ornament as uninventive, a mere pastiche of motifs found here and there in Borromini’s work. But he might also have seen a plan, since he mentions how the drawing does not show Borromini’s typical ingenuity in adapting designs to the conditions of the site. Fuga’s criteria of conoisoership are sound: with him we must admit that, while most of the ground plan on the new drawing is an authentic Borromini, the façade is not by him, but rather an affected mannerism of his style.

In 1764 Borromini’s scheme for enlarging the choir of the Lateran was revived by Piranesi. His series of twenty brilliant drawings presented to the Venetian pope, Clement XIII, show five different projects for a choir, some relatively small, some gargantuan. Some show an ambulatory and, although none directly follows the drawing by using four, or six, niched piers, all show at least one pair of niched piers at the beginning of the choir (Fig. 29). Borromini thought of his piers as solid structural supports; Piranesi, on the other hand, hollowed them out to accommodate organ lofts, choir and windows. Piranesi regarded himself as an admiring follower of Borromini, but more clever and more daring.

Piranesi’s projects were not carried out, but they showed the options that confronted any potential architect of a Lateran choir: either one could be faithful to Borromini’s nave or one could follow the Clementine transept. Piranesi chose the former; as a result the polychrome transept of 1660 looks in his drawings like an interpoler between a Borromini nave and a Borrominian choir. Virginio Vespignani chose the other route when he demolished the old apse and enlarged the choir for Pope Leo XIII in 1876–8. The marble revetment in his new space and the fictive tapestries with historical scenes painted on the side walls ignore Borromini and continue the decorative scheme of the Clementine transept. On entering the church for the first time, even careful observers might assume that the early Baroque transept and the late nineteenth–century choir are products of a single campaign. Borromini’s nave now looks like the interpoler, a fate that he perhaps foresaw in 1647 when he left his discouraging interview with Innocent X with the new drawing rolled up under his arm.