



FIG. 1. Gianlorenzo Bernini (Italian, 1598–1680) and Ercole Ferrata (Italian, 1610–1686), *Cristo vivo* (detail), designed 1659. Bronze with traces of gilding. Princeton University Art Museum. Gift of Charles Scribner III, Class of 1973 and Graduate School Class of 1977, in honor of Professor John Rupert Martin, Graduate School Class of 1947 (1979–47)

Bernini's Cristo Vivo

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The *Cristo vivo*, or living Christ on the cross, in the Princeton University Art Museum (fig. 1; see also fig. 7) incorporates a striking example of the Baroque vision—indeed revision—of Gianlorenzo Bernini (1598–1680), the artistic impresario of seventeenth-century Rome. Designed and closely supervised by the maestro in 1659 and executed by his assistant Ercole Ferrata (1610–1686), who fabricated the mold from which the bronze was cast, it represents both an addendum and the dramatic finale to the series of twenty-five crucifixes commissioned by Pope Alexander VII (1599–1667) in 1658 for the side altars in Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome.

At the time of this commission, Bernini was immersed in far grander projects for the Chigi pope, who was to leave an architectural imprint on the Eternal City surpassing even his Barberini predecessor Urban VIII (1568–1644) in magnitude. Born into a family of rich Siennese bankers, Fabio Chigi was a close friend of Bernini's and, like Pope Urban, aimed to exploit his papal patronage—and purse—*ad astra*.

On the first day of his papacy in 1655, Alexander VII summoned Bernini, who was already at work on the Chigi family burial chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo, and “with expressions of utmost affection” encouraged him “to carry out the vast plans he had conceived for the greater embellishment of God's temple, the glorification of the papacy, and the decoration of Rome.”¹ He named Bernini his private architect as well as architect of Saint Peter's— a post Bernini had

held since 1629. As scholar and bibliophile as well as builder, Alexander earned his punning papal epithet “Papa di grande edificazione,” and he gave Bernini full rein to fulfill his “edification” of Rome as Europe's Baroque capital.

In 1656, Bernini was commissioned to undertake his grandest project of all, the all-embracing arms of the colonnade (1656–67) at the entrance court of Saint Peter's. The design was the urban embodiment of his creed of architectural humanism: “The beauty of everything in the world, as well as in architecture,” he explained during the colonnade's construction, “consists in proportion. One might say that is the divine element since it originates in the body of Adam which has been created by God's hands and in His own image.” This is why, Bernini maintained, sculptors made the best architects.²

The next year, 1657, the pope commissioned Bernini to complete the basilica with an explosive finale in the apse: the *Cathedra Petri* and *Gloria* (1657–66), his *Gesamtkunstwerk* of bronze, stucco, gilding, stained glass, and light. Among the assistants with whom Bernini chose to collaborate on the larger-than-life bronze sculptures of the Fathers of the Church was Ercole Ferrata, who in 1655 had carved figures for Bernini's tomb for Cardinal Domenico Pimentel (Santa Maria sopra Minerva, Rome). In 1658 he again chose Ferrata to assist on his next commission—the crucifixes.

Although small in scale, this commission was vast in scope: in addition to the twenty-five

FIG. 2. Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Daniel in the Lions' Den*, 1655–57. Marble, over life-size. Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome



FIG. 3. Gianlorenzo Bernini, preparatory drawing for *Daniel*, 1655. Red chalk on gray paper, 37.5 x 23.4 cm. Museum der bildenden Künste, Leipzig



bronze crosses—each bearing a separately cast corpus—there were 150 bronze candlesticks (six per altar) also designed by Bernini, an unprecedented series of bronze furnishings for a church. Ferrara was later to carve for Bernini's Ponte Sant'Angelo—most fittingly—the monumental *Angel with Cross* (1668–69).³ But his earlier assignment, in miniature, was no less crucial.

Born in 1610 in Pelloio Inferiore, near Como, Ferrara came to Rome, and in 1647 he was numbered among Bernini's army of forty-some assistants who worked on the relief nave decorations for Saint Peter's. He then moved on to complete his sculptural training under Bernini's classicizing rival Alessandro Algardi (1598–1654), for whom he remained a chief assistant up to the master's death.⁴ Algardi's papal patron—and Bernini's former nemesis—Innocent X (1574–1655) died the following year, which marked Bernini's reascendancy as undisputed artistic dictator. For most sculptors, working in Rome meant working for Bernini. Ferrara had a new boss.

It appears that originally Bernini planned all the crosses to bear a corpus of the *Cristo morto*

(the dead Christ), as that is the only model the master designed to be executed by Ferrara and cast in 1658. Of the twenty-three extant crucifixes on the side altars of Saint Peter's, eighteen represent that *Cristo morto* model of 1658; only five represent the *Cristo vivo* that Bernini designed a year later, in 1659. While the former recalled his bronze crucifix of 1654 for Philip IV of Spain (1605–1665)—to which we shall turn presently—the latter revived the impassioned visage and animated S-curve of Bernini's recently completed sculpture of the praying Daniel for the Chigi Chapel (1657; fig. 2), as Rudolf Wittkower observed in Bernini's preparatory drawings for the work (fig. 3). The figure's dynamic contrapposto ultimately harks back to Bernini's youthful study of the Laocöon in the Vatican.⁵ Beyond these stylistic affinities, the deeper links between this second crucifix type and the Daniel sculpture shed light on both the genesis of Bernini's *Cristo vivo* and its iconology.

Bernini's first documented commission for a crucifix was early in the reign of Pope Urban VIII, during the construction of the greatest bronze masterwork in Rome, the towering baldacchino

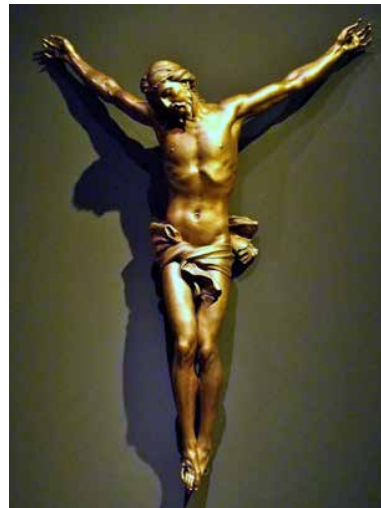


FIG. 4A. Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Cristo morto*, designed 1653–54. Bronze, h. 140 cm (corpus). Real Monasterio de San Lorenzo, El Escorial, Madrid



FIG. 4B. Author with Bernini's Escorial corpus at the Patrimonio Nacional restoration lab, Madrid, 2018

over the high altar at the crossing of Saint Peter's. That bronze crucifix on an ivory pedestal adorned with precious stones was commissioned in 1627 for the first chapel on the right (where Michelangelo's *Pietà* is now displayed), closest to the Porta Santa—the walled-up door opened for the Holy Years—but appears not to have been executed.⁶ We must fast-forward almost three decades to view the first of Bernini's extant crucifixes, the almost life-size bronze commissioned around 1654 for Philip IV of Spain for the royal burial chapel in the Escorial (figs. 4 a,b), probably at the behest of Pope Innocent X, who was pursuing a pro-Spanish policy in contrast to his Francophile predecessor Urban VIII. Bernini's youngest son and biographer, Domenico, described it as “larger than life size,” although this is an exaggeration of a figure of four-and-a-half-feet tall. The chapel was completed in 1654; Bernini's honorarium, according to Domenico, was “a large gold chain.” The crucifix was noted in situ in 1657 but soon afterward was moved to the sacristy.⁷

After the death of Pope Innocent in 1655, Cardinal Antonio Barberini (1607–1671) ordered

a crucifix from Bernini for his house in Paris; the crucifix was donated to Louis XIV of France (1638–1715) following the cardinal's death. It was listed in Louis's inventory of 1684, just four years after Bernini's death, but it disappeared from the royal collection sometime between 1775 and 1788.⁸ Still another crucifix is mentioned by Bernini's biographer Filippo Baldinucci (1625–1696) as having been “made for himself,” which, during the sculptor's visit to Paris in 1665, was given to the Jesuit cardinal Sforza Pallavicino (1607–1667), who was looking after the Bernini family back in Rome and mentoring the master's son Monsignor Pietro Filippo Bernini. A bronze corpus in the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto has been misidentified as that third (Pallavicino) crucifix; instead, it represents a later pastiche, “Bernini based.” It is not Bernini's own vision, much less overseen by the maestro himself.⁹

Bernini later had the (lost) terra-cotta modello for the Escorial corpus cast for a devotional crucifix for Pope Alexander VII (fig. 5).¹⁰ Now in a private collection in Germany, it reveals—as do all Bernini's autograph modelli—the maestro's touch. Immediately noticeable is the absence



FIG. 5. Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Cristo morto*, designed ca. 1654. Bronze, h. 48 cm. Private collection, Germany

OPPOSITE

FIG. 6. Gianlorenzo Bernini and Ercole Ferrata, *Cristo morto*, designed 1658. Gilded bronze, h. 43.5 cm (corpus). The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (54.2677)

of a crown of thorns, consistently missing in the crucifixes Bernini designed at this time for Saint Peter's as well as in the marble crucifix held by his sculpture of Saint Jerome (1661–63) in the Chigi Chapel of Siena's cathedral.¹¹

In view of his original commission for a *Cristo morto*, what are we to make of Bernini's intervention and creation of a second corpus for the altars of Saint Peter's a year after most of the castings were completed? The very fact that at least three-quarters of them (eighteen of the extant twenty-three) represent the *Cristo morto* raises the obvious—if heretofore unasked—question: why at this late stage did Bernini return to the drawing board and design the *Cristo vivo*? What prompted this fundamental revision of style and iconography?

In his seminal analysis of the crucifixes sixty

years ago, Rudolf Wittkower noted in the *Cristo morto* an “Algardesque” quality that he attributed to the final modeling by Ferrata, Algardi's former student and assistant, citing its classicizing beauty and relaxed anatomy (yes, in death!).¹² Yet compared with Algardi's life-size bronze Franzone crucifix in Santi Vittore e Carlo in Genoa, the Bernini-Ferrata *Cristo morto* has more features in common with Bernini's Escorial crucifix:¹³ the overlapping feet pierced by a single nail—not Algardi's typical two—indicate that Bernini designed the model, probably working up bozzetti and perhaps even providing Ferrata with a terra-cotta modello.¹⁴ Nonetheless, it must be conceded that there is little in the graceful yet muscular contours—so brilliantly finessed in the casting now in the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore (fig. 6)¹⁵—to distinguish Bernini's authorship from any residual influence of Algardi via Ferrata. Perhaps it was this generic quality—more conventional than overtly Berninesque—that prompted the maestro a year later to create for the few remaining altars a definitively Baroque corpus of psychological power, passion, and proleptic triumph (see figs. 1 and 7).

Bernini's revision, his *Cristo vivo*, harks back to Guido Reni's high altarpiece (ca. 1640) in San Lorenzo in Lucina—where Bernini was later to contribute the Fonseca Chapel (1668–75)—as it also calls to mind Algardi's *Cristo vivo* modeled around 1646 for Pope Innocent X (fig. 8).¹⁶ In the spirit of the *paragone* between painting and sculpture and perhaps a professional rivalry beyond the grave, Bernini's *Cristo vivo* reveals how much he revised Algardi's vision by introducing the dynamic torsion of the suffering figure in extremis. Bernini heightened this emphasis by rejecting the flying drapery of Reni and Algardi in favor of a tightly wound, compact yet dynamic loincloth that no longer distracts from the corpus as the focal point—his bronze evocation of Christ's prayers from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46) and “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). Whereas Algardi's Savior conveys submissive acceptance, Bernini's expresses ecstatic communion.



FIG. 7. Gianlorenzo Bernini and Ercole Ferrata's *Cristo vivo* (fig. 1) on its original 17th-century wood cross and base with burled walnut veneer. H. 106 cm (cross)

The key to the meaning of Bernini's most passionate *imago Christi* is its link to his contemporary depictions of Daniel (see figs. 2 and 3), a connection that is deeper than the stylistic genesis of the S-curve observed by Wittkower.¹⁷ The Old Testament prophet Daniel's salvation in the lions' den was a traditional prefiguration of Christ's Resurrection, his ultimate triumph over death. This iconographic concordance would have had special resonance with the Chigi pope—and it may even have been his idea—since Alexander VII owned the sole manuscript of the *Book of Bel and the Dragon*, the biblical source of the scene that charges the space across the diagonal axis of the Chigi Chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo as the angel points out the praying Daniel to Habakkuk, who is carrying a basket of loaves to the imprisoned prophet.¹⁸ It is this Eucharistic subtext that Bernini translated into his Christological variation on the theme at Saint Peter's: his *Cristo vivo* conflates Christ's sacrificial death on the cross with a projected image of resurrection, as a sculptural gloss on the sacramental miracle renewed at each celebration of the Mass at the altars. Through the bloodless reenactment of Christ's sacrifice on Calvary, bread and wine are transubstantiated, according to Catholic doctrine, into the body and blood of the living Christ, the Eucharistic *Cristo vivo*.

Bernini's brilliant revision of the corpus thereby effects a conflation, in an iconic High Baroque image, of two distinct moments of the Gospels and Creed: the Savior's immanent death and, proleptically, his Resurrection. This simultaneity recalls Irving Lavin's identification of multilayered allusions to Saint Teresa's levitation, death, and mystical marriage fused by Bernini into a single sensuous sculpture in the Cornaro Chapel in Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome.¹⁹ At the same time, it foreshadows a similar confluence of the Blessed Ludovica Albertoni's physical dying with her mystical vision of Paradise the day before her death, as seen in the master's funerary monument for the Franciscan



noblewoman in the church of San Francesco a Ripa in Rome.²⁰ Bernini's *Cristo vivo* likewise conjoins the sacrificial with the sacramental in this Baroque embodiment of Eucharistic triumph, the ultimate expression of Thanksgiving (the meaning of the Greek word *eucharistia*).

The sheer quality of the Princeton corpus mounted on a wooden cross with burled walnut veneer and inserted into a Bernini-worthy base (reminiscent of his early design for the tomb of Cardinal Pimentel) suggests that this casting was intended for a special patron. The base is hollow, with a wooden tabernacle door on the verso, indicating its probable use on a private altar. Perhaps it was made for a member of the Chigi family or as a papal gift to a high-ranking member of the Curia, as Francesco Petrucci has suggested.²¹ There are two other (gilded) examples of this corpus (neither is mounted on a cross): one in the Staatliche Museen in Berlin, the other in the Martinelli Collection in Perugia. Whether either represents a missing corpus from Saint Peter's remains a matter of conjecture.²² In any case, the Princeton corpus presents a rare additional example of a casting that reveals Bernini's evident supervision.

The lesson of Bernini's *Cristo vivo* was not lost on Ferrata. The year after its design, 1660, Ferrata carved his most Berninesque sculpture to date: *Saint Agnes on a Pyre* for the church of Sant'Agnese in Agone in Rome's Piazza Navona. He went on to become the preeminent teacher of sculptors in Baroque Rome. In his home workshop, according to Jessica Marie Boehman, he not only preserved his own models but collected those of other sculptors along with casts of antiquities.²³ Among the molds inventoried in his estate was that of the *Cristo vivo*.²⁴

FIG. 8. Alessandro Algardi (Italian, 1598–1654), *Cristo vivo*, 1641–51. Bronze, pearwood with ebonizing and staining, h. 77.5 cm (corpus). The Art Institute of Chicago. Alyce and Edwin DeCosta and Walter E. Heller Foundation Endowment; Mrs. J. Ward Thorne Fund; restricted gift of Mr. and Mrs. Fred Krehbiel, Mr. and Mrs. John Jeffrey Louis III, and Harry A. Root (2004.42)

NOTES

To the memory of Professor Irving Lavin—teacher, mentor, and standard—I dedicate this article with four decades of gratitude and affection.

1. Filippo Baldinucci, *The Life of Bernini* (1682), trans. Catherine Engass (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1966), 42.
2. See Charles Scribner III, *Gianlorenzo Bernini: Impresario of the Baroque*, rev. ed. (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2014), 29–31.
3. For a previously unpublished drawing for this angel, see Francesco Petrucci, *Bernini: Un inedito disegno per Ponte Sant'Angelo*, exh. cat. (Rome: De Luca Editori d'Arte, 2016). For Ercole Ferrata's life and work, see Jessica Marie Boehman, *Maestro Ercole Ferrata* (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2009), ProQuest (AA13363256).
4. Boehman, *Maestro Ercole Ferrata*, 20–22.
5. See Rudolf Wittkower, *Gian Lorenzo Bernini: The Sculptor of the Roman Baroque*, 2nd ed. (London: Phaidon, 1966), 228–32. For the Saint Peter's crucifixes, see Ursula Schlegel, "I crocifissi degli altari di San Pietro in Vaticano," *Antichità viva* 20, no. 6 (1981): 37–42; and Francesco Petrucci, in *La Passione di Cristo secondo Bernini: Dipinti e sculture del barocco romano*, ed. Giovanni Morello, Francesco Petrucci, and Claudio Massimo Strinati, exh. cat. (Rome: U. Bozzi, 2007), 102–7. For the documents on these Bernini crucifixes, see R. Battaglia, *Crocifissi del Bernini in S. Pietro in Vaticano*, *Quaderni di studi romani* 12 (Rome: Reale istituto di studi romani, 1942), 21–28.
6. Wittkower, *Gian Lorenzo Bernini*, 268. But see also Louise Rice, *The Altars and Altarpieces of St. Peter's: Outfitting the Basilica, 1621–1666* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 182–86.
7. Wittkower, *Gian Lorenzo Bernini*, 228–29. See also Domenico Bernini, *The Life of Gian Lorenzo Bernini*, ed. and trans. Franco Mormando (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 142n1 (hereafter as Mormando, *Life of Gian Lorenzo Bernini*); and Francesco Petrucci, "Bernini, Algardi, Cortona ed altri artisti nel diario di Fabio Chigi cardinale (1652–1655)," *Rivista dell'Istituto nazionale Darcheologia e storia dell'arte*, 3rd ser., 53 (1998): 192–93.
8. See Wittkower, *Gian Lorenzo Bernini*, 229; and Mormando, *Life of Gian Lorenzo Bernini*, 142n1. The crucifix is listed in the 1775 royal inventory but not in that of 1788 or 1791. Its subsequent whereabouts (if indeed it survived the Revolution) remain unknown. See *Les bronzes de la couronne*, exh. cat. (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2004), 87. It seems more likely that Bernini's crucifix for Cardinal Antonio Barberini—mentioned in two letters of 1655 and 1656 by the cardinal but by neither biographer nor by Bernini's companion in France, Paul Féart de Chantelou, in his diary—was comparable to the one Bernini made for Pope Alexander VII (see fig. 5) rather than to a monumental bronze representing an additional casting of

the corpus for Philip IV, as Wittkower assumed and others have followed. On the aforementioned letters, see Sandrina Bandera Bistoletti, "Lettura di testi Berniniani: Qualche scoperta e nuove osservazioni; Dal journal di Chantelou e dai documenti della Bibliothèque Nationale di Parigi," *Paragone* 36 (1985): 43. Tomaso Montanari has shown that, contrary to long-standing belief among scholars, the crucifix for Antonio Barberini was not ordered as a gift for Louis XIV but rather for the cardinal's own residence, and was donated to the king by Barberini's family after the cardinal's death. See Montanari, "Bernini per Bernini: Il secondo 'Crocifisso' monumentale; Con una digressione su Domenico Guidi," *Prospettiva* 136 (2009): 6–8. Indeed, as Franco Mormando confirmed to me in a June 2018 email, such an identical recasting of Philip's Escorial crucifix for the Francophile cardinal in Paris might have risked a diplomatic slight.

9. See Mormando, *Life of Gian Lorenzo Bernini*, 142n1, and Tomaso Montanari, "Gian Lorenzo Bernini e Sforza Pallavicino," *Prospettiva* 87–88 (1997): 42–68. Montanari published the Toronto bronze corpus as the lost Pallavicino crucifix, but I cannot accept Bernini's oversight, much less hand, in this later casting by a follower of the master who omitted the ever-present side wound of the Cristo morto and added (in an additional mold) a flourish of drapery alien to all Bernini crucifixes. For Montanari's arguments, see his "Percorsi per cinquant'anni di studi berniniani," *Studiolo* 3 (2005): 269–98; and "Bernini per Bernini," 4. But a recent documentary discovery suggests that the "similar" crucifix cited by Baldinucci as given by Bernini to Cardinal Pallavicino was not bronze but cartapesta (papier-mâché). See Rubén López Conde, "A propósito del Crucificado de Bernini en El Escorial: El Crucifijo de cartapesta del cardenal Sforza Pallavicino," *Archivo español de arte* 84 (2011): 211–26. I am grateful to David García Cueto, professor of art history at the Universidad de Granada, for bringing this important article to my attention. For my own case against the Bernini attribution of the Toronto bronze, see Charles Scribner III, "Imago Christi: Bernini Saviours Lost and Found," *Valori Tattili* 9 (2017): 49–59.
10. Petrucci, *La Passione di Cristo*, 88–101.
11. See Wittkower, *Gian Lorenzo Bernini*, pl. 92.
12. Wittkower, *Gian Lorenzo Bernini*, 229.
13. For the Franzzone crucifix, see Daniele Sanguinetti, "Alessandro Algardi's Franzzone Crucifix," in *The Eternal Baroque: Studies in Honor of Jennifer Montagu*, ed. C. H. Miner (Milan: Skira, 2015), 147–58.
14. Marc Worsdale, in *Vatican Splendour: Masterpieces of Baroque Art*, ed. Catherine Johnston, Gyde Vanier Shepherd, and Marc Worsdale, exh. cat. (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1986), 96.
15. The corpus was purchased at Christie's in 1992 on my recommendation to the museum's director (and my former Princeton professor) Robert P. Bergman.
16. On Algardi's bronze corpus, see Patricia Wengraf's catalogue for the 2014 Frick Collection exhibition *Renaissance and Baroque Bronzes from the Hill Collection* (London: Paul Holberton, 2014).

17. Wittkower, *Gian Lorenzo Bernini*, 228–32.
18. Rudolf Wittkower, "The Role of Classical Models in Bernini's and Poussin's Preparatory Work," in *Studies in Western Art: Acts of the Twentieth International Congress of the History of Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 3:41–50.
19. For the best analysis of the Cornaro Chapel, see Irving Lavin, *Bernini and the Unity of Visual Arts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). In a November 2018 email to me, less than three months before he died, Irving Lavin pointed out that the upward gaze of the Cristo vivo as a proleptic reference to Resurrection and Redemption prefigures its literal recapitulation in Bernini's final sculpture of "the living upward-looking Christ who comes back to life at the end of Bernini's own life in the Salvator Mundi, which is also an eschatological promise of redemption." For his iconological analysis of Bernini's final sculpture, see Lavin, "Bernini's Death: Visions of Redemption," in *Visible Spirit: The Art of Gianlorenzo Bernini*, vol. 2 (London: Pindar, 2009), 2:1079–81.
20. See Shelley Karen Perlove, *Bernini and the Idealization of Death: The Blessed Ludovica Albertoni and the Alfieri Chapel* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990).
21. Francesco Petrucci, email message to author, 2016. "I am grateful to Professor Petrucci for both his

friendship and his scholarship. A new candidate, recently brought to my attention by Professor Franco Mormando, is Domenico Jacovacci, who as Pope Alexander's *Maestro delle strade* was in charge of all public works and building in Rome (think Robert Moses to Mayor LaGuardia). The 1675 inventory of Jacovacci's art collection, bequeathed to his heirs Gasparo and Leone Massimo, included "Un Christo grande di Bronzo con suo Tronco di Noce del Cavalier Bernini"; see Maria Barbara Guerrieri Borsoi, *Domenico Jacovacci: Collezionista e Maestro delle strade nella Roma berniana* (Rome: Gangemi editore SpA international, 2017, 124). The fact that the Princeton crucifix is the only known example of a Bernini-designed corpus on a contemporary cross of walnut (noce) makes this hypothesis especially enticing."

22. It is possible, in view of the faint traces of gilding as well as overall quality, that the Princeton corpus was originally cast for Saint Peter's—that is, one of the two "missing" crucifixes—but set aside as a papal gift by Alexander, or perhaps retained for his own family.
23. Boehman, *Maestro Ercole Ferrata*, 104–5.
24. Vincenzo Golzio, "Storia dell'arte e ricerche archivistiche: Lo 'Studio' di Ercole Ferrata," *Archivi d'Italia e rassegna internazionale degli archivi*, ser. 2, 2 (1935): 74, cited by Wittkower, *Gian Lorenzo Bernini*, 229.