

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Gian Lorenzo Bernini  
(Naples 1598 – 1680 Rome)

## *Four Grotesque Heads of Men*

1650 – 55

gilt bronze on black and white  
marble pedestals

height (each):

15.5 cm.; 6 1/8 in.

height (each, on pedestals):

26.5 cm.; 10 3/8 in.

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### Provenance

Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Rome, c. 1655;  
By descent within the Bernini family, Rome, 1680 – 1706;  
Casa Giocondi, Rome, 1900;  
Giocondi Forti family, Rome, 1964 – after 1981;  
Giulio Forti and Maria Caterina Forti Pagani, Rome, since 1999.

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### Literature

S. Fraschetti, *Il Bernini. La sua vita, la sua opera, il suo tempo*, Milan 1900, pp. 197, 198;  
G. White, *Italian Bronze Statuettes*, exh. cat., Victoria & Albert Museum, London 1961, cat. no. 187;  
A. van Schendel & J. Pope-Hennessy (eds.), *Meesters van het brons der Italiaanse Renaissance*, exh. cat., Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam 1961, cat. no. 182;  
F. Borsi, C. Acidini Luchinat & F. Quinterio (eds.), *Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Il testamento, la casa, la raccolta dei beni*, Florence 1981, pp. 52, 108;  
J. Montagu, *Roman Baroque sculpture. The industry of art*, New Haven & London 1989, p. 188, reproduced fig. 261;  
A. Weston-Lewis (ed.), *Scottish National Gallery, Effigies & Ecstasies. Roman Baroque sculpture and design in the age of Bernini*, exh. cat., Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh 1998, p. 92, under cat. no. 44;  
F. Scholten, in *Caravaggio Bernini: Early Baroque in Rome*, G. Swoboda & S. Weppelmann (eds.), exh. cat., Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna and Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Munich

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2019, pp. 279, 299 cat. no. 83, reproduced p. 278.

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## Exhibited

London, Victoria & Albert Museum, *Italian Bronze Statuettes*, 27 July – 1 October 1961, no. 187;

Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, *Meesters van het brons der Italiaanse Renaissance*, 29 October 1961 – 14 January 1962, no. 182;

Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum & Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, *Caravaggio Bernini: Early Baroque in Rome*, 15 October 2019 – 19 January 2020 (Kunsthistorisches Museum), 14 February – 7 June 2020 (Rijksmuseum), no. 83.

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These four character heads in gilded bronze, on marble pedestals, were created by Gian Lorenzo Bernini for the corner posts of his private coach. They are listed in the Bernini family inventory of 1706, and have remained with the artist's heirs ever since. Though Bernini family lore suggested that the set adorned Pope Innocent X's coach for the inauguration of Bernini's *Fountain of the Four Rivers* in Piazza Navona on 12 June 1651, the description in the estate inventory confirms that they in fact decorated the artist's own carriage.<sup>1</sup>

It was common for sculptors in Rome to be commissioned to create symbolic embellishments for the *carrozze romane* [state carriages]; Bernini himself is documented to have crafted such decorations on numerous occasions.<sup>2</sup> For example, the sculptor designed the ornamental figures for the coach Pope Alexander VII gave to Queen Christina of Sweden in 1655, and likely also worked on those for the carriage intended for the King of Spain.<sup>3</sup> Bernini's own coach, for which the present sculptures were made, would have been less extravagant than its royal counterparts. Our heads were cast from the same model, using highly refined alloys with a high copper and silver content. This model was used on several occasions: a few other, un-gilded heads are extant. Casts can be found in the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art, Kansas City, and in the collection of Michael Hall, New York. Another example was formerly in the collection of John Gaines.<sup>4</sup>

The Colnaghi heads all convey the same expression: the four men's mouths are shown wide open, teeth exposed, while their eyes bulge to such an extent so as to cause wrinkles in their foreheads. Bernini had experimented with the exclusive depiction of stirring human emotions earlier in his career. The most famous example is his *Anima dannata* [*Damned soul*] marble, dated to 1619, which portrays a man screaming in agony (fig. 1). The parallels between that sculpture and Caravaggio's representations of strong *affetti*, most famously exemplified by *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* (fig. 2), are unmissable. Unlike the *Anima dannata*, however, the present heads are not naturalistic, instead appearing almost caricature-like in their expression.<sup>5</sup> As such, they fit more neatly into Bernini's 'grotesque' body of works, designed for decorative purposes. This notion is supported by observation of the similarities, in terms of both size and function, between our works and the open-mouthed head that tops the hilt of the *Ludovisi Ares's* sword, which was added by Bernini in 1622 (fig. 3). A later date

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of around 1650-55 seems more suitable for the Colnaghi heads, given that Bernini is only documented to have crafted coach ornaments from the middle of the seventeenth century onwards.

The precise meaning of these four heads in relation to Bernini's carriage is ambiguous. Were they intended as warnings to passers-by to get out of the way? Or did they poke fun at ordinary people who gaped at the splendid coaches that they saw in the street? In either case, they belong to the tradition of *marginalia*: the misshapen and bizarre, marginal figures from the upside down world that provided a derisive, but decorative, commentary on the seriousness of earthly society. Their intention was to put anxieties about everyday life into perspective.

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**Figure 1.** Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Anima dannata* [*Damned soul*], 1619.  
Palazzo di Spagna, Rome

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**Figure 2.** Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*, about 1594-5.  
National Gallery, London

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**Figure 3.** *Ludovisi Ares*, 2nd-century Roman copy of a late 4th-century BCE Greek original (presumably by Scopas Minor), with restorations by Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Roman National Museum, Palazzo Altemps, Rome

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The 1706 inventory describes them as: '*Quattro testine di gettito di bronzo dorato con li suoi piedi di pietra, quali erano li vasi della carrozza già descritta*' ['Four small heads in gilded bronze on their marble pedestals, which were the finials of the said coach']. See F. Borsi, C. Acidini Luchinat & F. Quinterio (eds.), *Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Il testamento, la casa, la raccolta dei beni*, Florence 1981, p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> F. Scholten, in *Caravaggio Bernini: Early Baroque in Rome*, G. Swoboda & S. Weppelmann (eds.), exh. cat., Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna and Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Munich 2019, p. 279, cat. no. 83.

<sup>3</sup> J. Montagu, *Roman Baroque sculpture. The industry of art*, New Haven & London 1989, pp. 188-189 ('*Pour le Roy d'Espagne de l'ordonnance du Cav. Bernin*'), 261.

<sup>4</sup> A. Weston-Lewis (ed.), *Scottish National Gallery, Effigies & Ecstasies. Roman Baroque sculpture and design in the age of Bernini*, exh. cat., Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh 1998, p. 92, cat. no. 44.

<sup>5</sup> F. Scholten, in *Caravaggio Bernini: Early Baroque in Rome*, G. Swoboda & S. Weppelmann (eds.), exh. cat., Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna and Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Munich 2019, p. 279, cat. no. 83.