In Defense of His Holiness: The Cellini Plaque

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Abstract
The plaque depicting Cellini was donated to Gettysburg College by Reverend Jeremiah Zimmerman, Class of 1873, who later became a lecturer at Syracuse University and a frequent benefactor of Gettysburg College. A highly educated alum, Reverend Zimmerman became a clergyman and traveled the world for over a decade to further his studies, ranging from Asian culture to ancient coinage.

The plaque itself measures 32” x 26.75” x 2.5”, is of considerable weight for a porcelain plate, and is painted in the 19th century academic style to offer a dramatic interpretation of Benvenuto Cellini’s actions during the 1527 Sack of Rome. Specifically, the scene captures a dramatized (or even perhaps imagined) moment of Cellini outside the Castel Sant’Angelo, the site of a fortress used by the Holy See to defend against outside invaders. [excerpt]

Keywords
Benvenuto Cellini, Jeremiah Zimmerman, Florence, Sack of Rome

Disciplines
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Comments

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A large decorative plaque that currently resides in Special Collections depicts a dramatic defense of the Vatican by Florentine artist Benvenuto Cellini.

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even perhaps imagined) moment of Cellini outside the Castel Sant’Angelo, the site of a fortress used by the Holy See to defend against outside invaders.

In the center of the composition, Cellini is dressed in a black tunic, gray tights, and a white ruffled collar, fairly typical attire for a 16th century Florentine with high ambitions. Black dress, associated with that of Spanish nobility, was fashionable among the elite of the Italian peninsula including Michelangelo Buonarroti, who used black clothing to symbolize his supposed noble heritage. Cellini’s placement in the work, including his pose (arms outspread and head tilted upward) serves to emphasize his status and importance among the other figures. It is notable as well that Cellini’s pose evokes that of the Apollo Belvedere, a sculpture (c. 350–325 BC) by Leochares, which was thought by Cellini’s contemporary classical revivalists to depict the human aesthetic ideal.

Cellini is flanked on the left by a small group of background figures, a reclining figure in the foreground, and two armor-clad soldiers (one directly to his right and one closer to the far right side of the composition). On the right-hand side of the plaque, religious leaders and other members of the monied class are depicted, as evinced by their brightly colored, elegant clothing and a typical cardinal robe (in the case of the figure directly to Cellini’s left). A small group also gathers in the bottom right corner of the composition, standing on a staircase that possibly descends into the walls of the Castel Sant’Angelo. These figures likely represent a foil to the figures directly behind them, as they are dressed in drapery that lacks the fineries (gold trim, jewels, etc.) of the aforementioned cardinal and his group.
Although the artist of the scene is unknown, the attention paid to perspective (demonstrated in the shrinking of figures as they recede in space) and presenting the three-dimensionality of figures in space clearly demonstrates an awareness of Renaissance techniques. The subject matter itself also demonstrates a knowledge of Renaissance history, and the inclusion of reference to classical works (the Apollo Belvedere) evokes an understanding of Renaissance sentiments regarding a revival of classical sensibilities. Despite originating over 300 years after the event it depicts, this plaque demonstrates the enduring interest in the culture of the 16th century throughout time.

The artist of the work provides an apt example of 19th century Academic style in their rendering of the plaque, harkening back to the themes of the Renaissance through their art. The compositional balance of the work, coupled with the receding nature of the figures in space, provide a visual connection to the works of pioneers such as Leonardo, who rediscovered these techniques during the Italian Renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries. The Academic style parallels a revived interest in Renaissance ideals starting in the late 18th century.
Neoclassicism (the revival of classical and Renaissance thought and culture) flourished throughout Europe at this point, so did the emulation of Renaissance artistic style.

The Life and Work of Benvenuto Cellini

Benvenuto Cellini, one of the premier artists of the Mannerist style in Florence, was born in 1500 AD at the height of the Italian Renaissance. After various short periods in Florence, Bologna, and Siena apprenticed to various goldsmiths, Cellini traveled to Rome in 1519. It is here that he began his notable work, at first creating a set of candelabra for the Bishop of Salamanca in the workshop of Santi, a goldsmith. His work for the Bishop of Salamanca earned him further commissions and began a trend of future successes for Cellini.

Continuing on various commissions in the ensuing decade, Cellini’s work was halted by military conflicts in the surrounding area of Rome, culminating in the Sack of Rome in 1527. Still a fairly young man at the time, Cellini later describes his actions on the ramparts of the Castel Sant’Angelo, asserting that at one point he shot and killed the leader of the invaders, Charles III, Duke of Bourbon. He subsequently occupied an artillery position and gave advice to various artillery captains before retreating to a private room with Pope Clement VII, who asked him to modify the papal jewels so that they might be preserved in the wake of the defeat of the Pope’s forces.
After spending time in Florence (traveling there after killing a rival goldsmith and wounding a notary) and working for the Medici family, Cellini was imprisoned for two years upon returning to Rome for embezzlement. Upon his release, he was invited to the court of Francis I, King of France, for whom he completed a formerly unfinished salt cellar. One of Cellini’s most notable works, the salt cellar is fashioned from ivory and gold and depicts allegorical figures of the sea (depicted as a man) and the earth (depicted as a woman) next to receptacles for salt and pepper (fig. 6). This salt cellar is also worthy of note because it is the only surviving work of goldsmithing that can reliably be attributed to Benvenuto Cellini himself.
In 1545, following a five year tenure in the court of Francis I, Cellini received a commission for his most famous sculpture, a depiction of the mythological figures Perseus and Medusa. Commissioned by Cosimo I de Medici, the statue was erected in the Medici courtyard alongside Michelangelo’s *David*, Bandinelli’s *Hercules and Cacus*, and Donatello’s *Judith and Holofernes* in 1554. He subsequently authored his autobiography, which is written in a conversational style unique to Cellini for his time period. As shown by his autobiography, Benvenuto Cellini is a complex and often flawed figure. Such a rare firsthand account, written in such a manner that it is accessible to the modern reader, provides an in-depth look at the very personality and character of the artist. This fact demonstrates why one would be motivated to depict one of the defining moments in Cellini’s life on a piece such as the Zimmerman Plaque.
The Sack of Rome

The Sack of Rome as depicted on the Zimmerman Plaque is one of the most consequential battles of the War of the League of Cognac, occurring from 1526-1530. The formation of the League of Cognac by the Kingdom of France, the Papal States, the Republic of Venice, the Republic of Florence, and the Duchy of Milan occurred following the defeat of Italian forces by Francis I of France in the first half of the decade.\(^\text{13}\) In order to drive Holy Roman Emperor Charles V out of the Italian Peninsula, Pope Clement VII set aside the past French-Papal rivalry by cooperating with neighboring provinces in a collective defense. However, in the first year of the war (1526), the League was largely unsuccessful against the larger force of The Holy Roman Empire and their Spanish allies, who drove into northern Italy and even forced the Sforzas (the ruling family of Milan) to abandon their territory shortly after the beginning of the war.\(^\text{14}\)

As Charles V’s treasury dwindled due to perpetual warfare in France and Italy, funds designated to pay the Emperor’s army ran out in 1527. Shortly thereafter, his army of 34,000 troops under the command of Charles III (the Duke of Bourbon) committed mutiny and demanded that they be led to Rome. With no substantial obstacle standing in its way, Charles III’s army marched south toward the Papal States, steamrolling the meager defenses surrounding Rome and eventually reaching the walls of the city itself.\(^\text{15}\) After the death of their commander, the invaders overwhelmed the relatively small force of 5,000 militia that mounted a defense of the city. Slaughtering nearly 12,000 civilians in their sack of Rome, Charles III’s army caused the population of the city to drop by over eighty percent, and reduced many of the newly renovated churches and monuments to rubble.\(^\text{16}\) Once they reached the Vatican itself, only 189 members of the elite Swiss Papal Guard remained to defend the Pope himself. Although 42 guards

![Francis I, King of France](image1.png)  
![Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor.](image2.png)
accompanied the Pope into the Castel Sant’Angelo, those who remained outside St. Peter’s Basilica to delay the advance of the now pillaging, leaderless troops of Charles III were slaughtered.17

Following the occupation of Rome by Charles V’s armies, Pope Clement VII was all but imprisoned for the remainder of the war. In the subsequent decade, Clement VII declined to contradict Charles V in political or religious matters, ceding much of the prestige and power of the papacy to the Emperor. Pressure from Charles V and other powerful Catholic leaders later led Clement to refuse the divorce request of Henry VIII of England, consequently sparking the Protestant Reformation in England and lending gravity to the cause of Martin Luther and his allies in Germany, who in turn fought against the authority of Charles V as Holy Roman Emperor.18

The Conflict in Art

Depictions of the Sack of Rome as both a dramatic artistic scene and a historical event have been common since its occurrence. One example created two centuries earlier than the Zimmerman plaque is *The Sack of Rome* (17th century) by Johannes Lingelbach (fig. 7), which demonstrates the Bambocciate style of Lingelbach’s contemporaries. Although Lingelbach came from the Netherlands, his style more closely mimicked that of Italian artist Caravaggio, evident in the prominent sfumato effect and naturalistic detail in the figures. These aspects are featured in
Lingelbach’s *The Sack of Rome*, especially in the atmospheric perspective and detail in the armor of the soldier in the foreground and piled on the right side of the composition. Also featured is the unassuming subject matter of the soldiers lounging in camp, a famous feature of Bamboccia style carried into Italy by northern European artists. These facets of Lingelbach’s style differ from the Zimmerman Plaque, which embodies the Academic style of the 19th century in its utilization of Neoclassical and Romantic elements, such as the dramatized poses of Cellini and the figures surrounding him. Lingelbach’s work is also less focused on a specific subject and is more widespread as a genre scene.

An example closer chronologically to the Zimmerman plaque is Francisco Javier Amérigo’s *From the sack of Rome* (1887) (fig. 8). Although closer chronologically to the Zimmerman Plaque, Amérigo’s work is very aesthetically different from the light pastel plaque. Dark, compositionally complex, and emotionally charged, Amérigo embodies effectively the contrast between Romantic style and Academic style. *From the sack of Rome* utilizes the exaggeration and dynamism of Mannerism, exemplified in the lurching clergyman in the foreground and the triumphant forces of Charles V in the background. The deep coloration and lack of bright, natural light contrasts greatly with that of the Zimmerman plaque, along with the powerful emotions of grief, helplessness and joy exhibited as opposed to the relative stoicism present in the depiction of Cellini.
Although we don’t know if Cellini accurately describes his actions during the Sack of Rome, the creator of the Zimmerman plaque succeeds at embodying the intensely dramatic role that Cellini himself asserts that he played during the battle. Since the Sack of Rome was such a climactic event in the history of Europe, it is well that the artist chose to depict the event in this work. Likewise, Cellini’s unique account of the event demonstrates romantic circumstances that are apt to be portrayed in this decorative piece in the Academic style of the 19th century.

**The Renaissance Context**

The interest of Neoclassicists in High Renaissance style was not a new phenomenon in the 18th century, and had risen throughout Europe often throughout the preceding centuries. The Zimmerman plaque, with its evocation of Renaissance artistic style, would have been at home in a collector’s cabinet of the 16th and 17th centuries. As a work of art, the object would have provided a foil to the works of naturalia present in these collections, and demonstrates the nature of pure artificialia in a profound way. Juxtaposed near replica busts of Renaissance figures or classical rulers and perhaps the expansive collections of wildlife of a patron, the plaque would no doubt be a symbol of the learnedness and worldliness of its owner.

1. Cellini and the Sack of Rome. (Gettysburg, Pennsylvania: Gettysburg College Special Collections, n.d.) Special Collections label.
2. Gettysburg College, Alumni Register, (Gettysburg, PA: 1930), Gettysburg College Special Collections Archives, Gettysburg College, pg. 88, Special Collections.
3. Cellini and the Sack of Rome. (Gettysburg, Pennsylvania: Gettysburg College Special Collections, n.d.) Special Collections label.


11. Ibid, 68.


16. Ibid, 32.

