

ART REVIEW

Conspicuous Consumption, Baroque Style: Flaunting the Power and the Glory

By GRACE GLUECK

The possessions of Roman aristocrats, from rich fabrics to a fabulous harp.

When Antonio Cardinal Barberini died in Rome in 1671, his art collection, hauled from one family palace to another, included 116 cartloads of paintings and 91 cartloads of sculptures, medals, busts, figurines and pedestals, along with a large harp. Conspicuous consumption was the rule of princely and papal life in 17th-century Rome, where everything from the intricate folding of dinner napkins to the construction of vast outdoor squares was meant to display the power of power.

The Barberini harp was no exception. Considered the most famous musical instrument surviving from 17th-century Rome, its carved and gilded pillar is composed of three segments depicting allegorical figures, with the third topped by a prince's crown and the family coat of arms guarded by cherubs. A weighty musical presence, it is in this case also a symbol of dynasty.

The harp, borrowed from the National Museum of Musical Instru-

"Life and the Arts in the Baroque Palaces of Rome: Ambiente Barocco" is at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, 18 West 86th Street, Manhattan, (212) 501-3023, through June 13.

ments in Rome, appears in "Life and the Arts in the Baroque Palaces of Rome: Ambiente Barocco," a sumptuous exhibition at the Bard College Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts in Manhattan. The show lays out in splendid detail the pomp and circumstance of Roman aristocracy in the era of high Baroque.

The Barberini, Borghese, Chigi, Colonna, Farnese, Odescalchi, Orsini, Ottoboni, Pamphilj and Rospigliosi families, among others, were Roman institutions. And the furnishings, festivals, fireworks displays, dinners, balls, domestic rituals, religious rites, paintings, sculptures and bric-a-brac of such nobles are given close attention in the exhibition and its heavyweight catalogue.

Rome, where the exuberant spirit of the Baroque first arose as a reaction to the formula classicism of Paladio and the rules laid down by revivalists of the early Roman archi-

tect Vitruvius, was the perfect arena for princely showoffs. During this era three great talents — Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680), Francesco Borromini (1599-1667) and Pietro da Cortona (1597-1669) — virtually re-did the city. Their contributions ranged from the very particular, like Bernini's completion of St. Peter's and design of the elliptical colonnade that fronts it, to the less specific, like Cortona's deep influence on Baroque ornament and the decorative arts.

The Roman Catholic Church was at peak prosperity, with its popes often drawn from the Roman aristocracy. In the early part of the 17th century a wave of competitive palace building hit Rome in which church and secular nabobs took part. Much has been made of palace architecture (the Barberini's involved Borromini and Bernini, among others), which formed grand backdrops for outdoor spaces, but little has been told about the life inside. This ambitious show and catalogue address the lack.

In each highly structured palace-hold, hundreds of people took part, from the prince or papal eminence to the servants who emptied the chamber pots. Everyone's chief function was to serve the master in his personal and worldly affairs, in accordance with smooth-running rituals. Objects of palace life are well repre-



Bard College Graduate Center

A prie-dieu for kneeling supplicants, in "Life and the Arts in the Baroque Palaces of Rome."

sented in the exhibition, from a magnificently ornamental, noiseless "night clock" lighted inside by a small oil lamp that bears on its front a religious painting, to a tiny engraving in a book that shows the proper tools for carving meat, a serious duty assigned to a highly trained servant.

Other treasures include a Colonna

family prie-dieu, to accommodate the kneeling supplicant, made of ebony inlaid with silver, its main panel adorned with a deeply carved ivory relief of the Deposition of Christ; a wildly Baroque extravaganza of a Bible stand, carved and gilded and bearing the Colonna crest, and an elaborate bench whose relief architectural and figural motifs on the back and base turn out to be trompe-l'oeil painting.

Weapons, costumes, fabrics, tapestries, silverware, console tables, an inlaid table top, a marriage casket for jewelry and wedding documents, an elegant porphyry vase, an imposing walnut medal cabinet, an elongated lute and many other prized possessions give solid evidence of lives not geared to the ascetic.

Although devoted mainly to objects, the show presents some of its story in paintings and engravings. One of the few portraits is that of Maddalena Rospigliosi, niece of Pope Clement IX, painted about 1667 by Carlo Maratta (1625-1713). A noblewoman known for her looks, intelligence and love of literature, she is depicted wearing a French-style black overdress paved with expensive lace and under it a voguish white chemise tied with black ribbons. This type of costume was considered so ostentatious that a decade later it was forbidden by Pope Innocent XI.

A pair of small watercolors, done around 1730 by Salvatore Colonelli Sciarra, offer valuable information on the extensive art collection of the Colonna family. The watercolors depict, in minute detail, the north and south walls of the family's picture gallery, copying the works and their positioning to provide a visual inventory of the most famous paintings owned by the Colonnas.

Other details of Baroque life are depicted in engravings, among them designs for furniture and chariots, views of palaces and piazzas, and spectacular fireworks displays like the one at Trinità de' Monti, the French national church in Rome, on April 20, 1687. While ostensibly celebrating the recovery of King Louis XIV of France from a severe illness, it was also meant to gain support for the Catholic ruler in his expansionist moves. Unfortunately there is little visual material in the exhibition relating to the brilliant extravaganzas staged in honor of Queen Christina of Sweden, a Catholic convert who, abandoning her throne, took up residence in Rome in 1655.

Like most Bard exhibitions, this one, assembled by Stefanie Walker, an assistant professor at the graduate center, is beautifully produced and installed to make the most of the limited display space. It is a big show wrapped in a small one.