Chapter 27

Geometry and Drama in Borromini’s Architectural Details:
The Moldings in Palazzo Falconieri

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on some considerations on the inter-scalar figurative relations which bind all of its constituents and elements of detail, within a work of architecture. This relation can be an environment in which to study the portal created by Francesco Borromini and the door cornices, inside Palazzo Falconieri, so far ignored by historiography. The text contextualizes these analysis and observations within Borromini’s relationship with antiquity focusing on the role of design and of geometry in the definition of his language. The original drawings of the project and the construction of the entry portal to the apartment of Orazio Falconieri were used to evaluate the relationship between the drawings and what was built, based on the data of the direct survey considered, in this case, as the most effective instrument of knowledge. The results, though partial, permit the clarification of some of the construction events related to the Palazzo.

INTRODUCTION

Within a work of architecture there may be a figurative inter-scalar continuity that unites the whole, its constituent parts and elements of detail. If that continuity exists, the detail is articulated as an element capable of expressing, on a smaller scale, the same compositional and linguistic values of the whole of which it is a part. Studying the details by means of the instruments of drawing and survey does not mean extrapolating an element from its context, rather it can serve to understand the context, by interpreting the codes that define its language, in a continuous interplay between the parts and the whole.

This essay deals with the theme of detail in Borromini starting from the survey, as yet not undertaken or in any case unpublished, of the portal dedicated to Orazio Falconieri, situated within the homonymous building in Via Giulia in Rome. The study of the portal is part of a larger work which involved

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the survey of all the other marble moldings in the Palazzo, which constitute an interesting testimony of Borromini’s *modus operandi* on the theme of detail. Especially well known in Palazzo Falconieri, in fact, are the loggia and the four halls with decorated vaulted ceilings, present on the *piano nobile*. They are the result of the expansion and renovation work carried out by Borromini between 1646 and 1649.

The drawing of the survey of the portal has been compared to the original drawings kept at the Berlin Kunstbibliothek, and with a portal created by Borromini in San Giovanni in Laterano, which presents significant similarities to the one dedicated to Orazio Falconieri. The analysis of the moldings, carried out with a fine contour gauge, has permitted a number of useful considerations shedding light on some construction aspects of the Palazzo, for which a detailed study is being currently undertaken.

This paper begins with a reflection on the role of drawings as tools for the development of his language - also through his study of antiquity - and the heuristic use of design in his project research. The great number of attempts and variations of the same profile, among the drawings by Borromini, testify to the centrality of the small scale in the conception of the whole construction. If the detail is able to encapsulate the values of an architectural poetics, becoming the distinctive code and, in essence, the direct expression, then it assumes its own autonomy. As denoting a fragment of a language, it becomes indispensable in the re-composition of those incomplete and uncertain contexts that history surrenders. And it is in this sense that the study has been addressed of the door cornices in Palazzo Falconieri, where the relationship between the parts and the whole is found in a less striking manner, that is, on those hitherto neglected and less documented elements, fragments - indeed - within those spaces already partially studied elsewhere (the halls with their decorated ceilings, the loggia), for a more complete understanding of Francesco Borromini’s intervention on the Palazzo.

**BACKGROUND**

In the work of Francesco Borromini, the linguistic unity between the parts and the whole, between the large and the small, takes concrete shape in the use of unusual and strongly jagged profiles with the same restlessness that animates the wall masses and individual moldings.

Even if one fully accepts Werner Oechslin’s thesis (2000) when regarding Borromini’s creativity, he warns against the risk of equating the work and the artist, that is the risk of interpreting the works of the artist in light of the psychological sphere and conversely, there is no denying that the drama, understood as relentless pursuit of correspondence between form, material, and structure emerges from the material folds of his moldings. Gilles Deleuze (2004, p.5) in 1988 wrote that “Le Baroque ne renvoie pas à une essence, mais plutôt à une fonction opératoire un trait. Il ne cesse de faire des plis. Il n’invente pas la chose: il y a tous les plis venus d’Orient, les plis grecs, romains, gothiques, classiques... Mais il courbe et recourbe les plis, les pousse à l’infini, pli sur pli, pli selon pli”.

(“The Baroque refers not to an essence but rather to an operative function, to a trait. The Baroque continually produces folds. It does not invent things: there are all kinds of folds coming from the East, Greek, Roman, Romanesque, Gothic, Classical folds. . . . Yet the Baroque trait twists and turns its folds, pushing them to infinity, fold over fold, one upon the other”).

This definition, the result of a theoretical thought born within a broader philosophical itinerary, may be encountered in Borromini’s own words which Virgilio Spada thus cites in *Relatione della fabrica di S. Giovanni in Laterano* (as cited in Barroero, 1990, p.160) “Considerò il nostro architetto [...] che la unità è più perfetta della multiplicità. Considerò che la natura è nemica degl’angoli, in maniera che gl’animali