

Spinning a Tale: Familial Editing and Influence
in the *Life of Pope Urban VIII* Tapestry Cycle

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Tapestries in the Baroque world represented a special kind of power, specific only to the richest, most powerful families. Because the designers of tapestries were oil painters who drew cartoons, or sketched designs, and not weavers skilled in working with the threads, a workshop was nearly always needed to complete the monumental works. The primary patrons of the tapestry must not only support the designer of the artist with a commission and material fees, but also a manufactory of workers. Because the patron had so much invested in the process of the tapestry weaving, he also became integrated in the products. Baroque tapestries show an unprecedented control by the patrons of the subject matter. The Barberini Tapestry Manufacture was no different, with possibly even more control given over to the patron, Cardinal Francesco Barberini, as the only man patronizing the manufacture was also the man who owned it. With purpose to display wealth and power, the three greatest projects taken on represented both the physical display of this power, as well as the allegorical manifestations in the content of the tapestries. The most drastic example of manipulation of the tapestry to depict power is seen in the cycle depicting the life of the patriarch of the Barberini family: Pope Urban VIII. With the *Life of Pope Urban VIII* cycle of tapestries from the Barberini Tapestry Manufacture, the cardinal shows a familial and liberal interpretation on Pope Urban's biography by linking his life to that of Constantine and Christ, the subject of the two other monumental tapestries completed under Barberini patronage, and notion of Divine Providence, the subject of the fresco under which the tapestries were designed to hang. While the manufactory did complete three cycles, and those cycles were equal in grandeur and purpose, the connections between the Constantine and Pope Urban VIII cycles are much more explicit and easy to see than those between the Christ and Pope Urban VIII cycles for various reasons. One reason is that the Christ cycle suffered much more damage than either other cycle, though cartoons and contemporaneous descriptions of the tapestries remain. Also, Christ's life has an authoritative text, The Bible, from which the scenes for the tapestry cycle were taken. Certain events and iconography are traditional in the depiction of Christ's life, no matter the context of the art. However Constantine's life allowed more room for mythologizing and creative license without a single, authoritative text, and Pope Urban VIII's life had not yet developed a specific iconography that indicated how and which events should be depicted. Thus Constantine and Pope Urban VIII's lives both have more room for graceful editing within the tapestry. Also the connections of divine actions on Earth are more relevant between Constantine and Pope Urban VIII because they are mortals who have been blessed by under divine providence, while Christ's life itself could be seen as the action.

Though Pope Urban VIII was the subject of the tapestries, and quite often a patron of arts glorifying his family, name and self, the patron of these tapestries was Cardinal Francesco Barberini, nephew of the pope. As one of his first assignments as cardinal, Barberini was sent to France and Spain to settle a dispute over Alpine Passes, and though France defied Rome with its actions regarding the passes, Cardinal Barberini emerged from the trip a complete Francophile. Though he was sent with the explicit instructions to accept no gifts, the seven tapestries depicting the life of Constantine were "cunningly selected, [as the gift to be presented by Louis XIV] reflected French awareness of the Barberini interest in tapestry, the aptness of Constantinian imagery to the Roman court, and the cardinal's own predilection for modern art."¹ The editing process of these cycles was actually begun by the French with the uninvited addition of the *Baptism of Constantine* panel to the cardinal's antechamber at the palace in France to encourage acceptance of the unprompted and unwelcome gift. Depicting the secular ruler of Constantine kneeling before the religious ruler of Pope Sylvester, the meaning of the gift from France to Rome and the tapestry are one in the same. After France had defied Rome concerning secular matters regarding another Catholic nation, Spain, the tapestry was a reaffirmation of the acceptance of the Pope's authority, at least on religious matters. The cardinal could not refuse such a splendid and ego-stroking gift. Thus Barberini acquired seven new tapestries depicting the first half of the life of Constantine, a man to whom Pope Urban VII was very willing to be compared.

However, the cycle was incomplete. Instead of commissioning the Paris tapestry manufacture of Marc de Comans and Francois de la Planche using the five remaining cartoons designed by Peter Paul

¹ James G. Harper, "The Barberini Manufactory," 308

Reubens, or simply leaving the cycle incomplete, Cardinal Francesco Barberini patronized a private tapestry manufacture and had new tapestry scenes designed by Pietro da Cortona.² The decision to keep the workshop private instead of having the papacy support the *arrazzeria*, or tapestry manufactory, meant that the only tapestries completed at the *arrazzeria* were those commissioned by Barberini himself, thus directly and inextricably linking the Barberini to all the resulting tapestries. With the cardinal exhibiting explicit control over how the cycle was finished, the final panels of the tapestry show events in Constantine's life important to the papacy, including *Constantine Slaying the Lion* and *The Apparition of the Cross*.

*Constantine Slaying (or Fighting) the Lion*³ depicts a young Constantine, before he is declared emperor and is still a young military officer, battling a lion in the attire of a soldier. ⁴The story of Constantine fighting a lion seems to be based on contemporary Baroque poems and legends written in reaction to the idolization of Constantine by Pope Urban VIII, opposed to historical evidence biography. The choice to depict this scene, instead of his historical appointment to government rank of *augustus*, which was the result of a military coup during Constantine's time as soldier, is telling.⁵ Firstly, fighting the lion brings up welcome connotations of both David, the biblical poet-ruler to whom Pope Urban VIII also envisioned himself as a parallel, and Hercules, a Classical figure who appears prominently in the ceiling fresco of *Divine Providence*. ⁶ Also, if Constantine's power was depicted as derived from a military coup, then that would show that the power of the first Catholic secular ruler came from the military and not divine or papal authority, and that would set an undesirable precedent. Here begins the editing by the Barberini of the tapestries cycles. Instead of depicting a scene that would be historically accurate and is arguably very important in the biography of Constantine, Cardinal Barberini has the scene replaced with the somewhat allegorical scene of *Constantine Fighting the Lion* showing Constantine proving his worth as a potential leader without bringing up questions of the extents of papal authority.

Another example of Barberini editing is the tapestry of *The Apparition of the Cross*. The Chi Rho commands the borders of the entire Constantine cycle, making clear both the importance of Christ in Constantine's life, and this panel in the cycle. A scene from the war against Maxentius where Constantine was either supposed to have seen a cross, or a possibly the chi rho in the sky, this scene marks divine providence intervening in Constantine's life and his turn to Christianity. A stately Constantine extends his arm in a senatorial, rhetoric pose, similar to the pose given to Pope Urban VIII's tomb by Bernini. The Barberini control of this tapestry is less clear when viewed alone because it does not bring up connotations of another figure or legend, but instead is alluded to in a panel in the later created *Life of Pope Urban VIII* cycle. In the panel *Pope Urban VIII Defends Rome from Plague and Famine*, Pope Urban VIII is staring up to the heavens, with arms outstretched, looking to the sky for divine guidance. Like Constantine with his cross, Pope Urban is the only one who can see the heavenly message, though his is a blessing come in the form of plague protector saints Michael and Sebastian.

Outside of the Constantine cycle and the Barberini Tapestry Manufacture's history, Pope Urban's cycle has its own history. Originally proposed by as a fresco scheme for the salone of the Palazzo Barberini by Federico Ubaldini, that original concept was only to depict scenes from Urban's reign as pope, beginning with his election.⁷ However, the cycle was extended to show some of Urban's actions as a cardinal, and depicted on tapestries instead of frescos. Reasons for the switch in proposed media, though not known specifically, could include the versatility of tapestry, as well as the prestige. Patronized by a Barberini cardinal, to a privately owned Barberini tapestry manufacture, depicting a Barberini pope's life, the family was very much engrained in this project. A fresco would remain in the Palazzo Barberini,

² James G. Harper, "The Barberini Manufactory," 293

³ Because the panels themselves are given descriptive names, the names of the tapestries are not consistent in criticism and analyses. I attempt to be clear myself, if not consistent, to which panel I am referring.

⁴ James G. Harper, "The Barberini Manufactory," 293

⁵ Dubon, David, *Tapestries from Samuel H. Kress Collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art*, 16

⁶ James G. Harper, "The Barberini Manufactory," 307

⁷ John Beldon Scott, *Images of Nepotism*, 190

but the Palazzo Barberini might not remain in the family, which it did not as Cardinal Francesco Barberini, along with his two brothers were exiled shortly after Pope Urban's death by newly elected Pope Innocent X. The tapestries fulfilled both the need to be monumental in size, temporal in placement, and durable in setting. Scholar Adolph S. Cavallo explains the use and appeal of tapestries: "We forget that in earlier periods these woven decorations were put out less frequently, inside and outside all kinds of buildings, on special occasions, on special occasions. It was a point of pride among patrician families to have a large stock of fine tapestries which could be hung on the façade of their palaces."⁸ The three Barberini cycles could be displayed separately, but were conceived to hang below Pietro da Cortona's ceiling fresco of *Divine Providence*. Each cycle was seen as the earthly manifestation of the ceiling's subject. Both divine providence and familial editing are more prominent in the biography tapestry of Urban VIII. The Life of Urban VIII narrative is based in factual events, but "only three of them can be said to depict in any accurate detail an actual historical occurrence."⁹ Not only are the choices of scenes important, but how they are depicted, emphasizing glory and divine providence and hiding nepotism and corruption.

The tapestries of Pope Urban VIII's life include ten panels depicting three historical events in some accurate detail, (*Maffeo Barberini Created Cardinal, Ballot for the Election of Urban*, and *The Consecration of St. Peter's*) while the other seven are focused more on complete allegory. Though the scenes that are heavy in allegory would seem to provide more opportunities for Cardinal Francesco Barberini to control the telling of his uncle's life, the depictions of factual events are also conflated versions of the truth. The inclusion of iconography and deviations from the truth are more poignant in the scenes that reflect actual events because they can be compared to contemporaneous records.

Ballot for the Election of Urban, which was supposed to be the opening panel in Ubaldini's concept of the frescoes¹⁰ because it signaled the beginning of Pope Urban's pontificate, actually was fourth chronological panel in the cycle. Still the depiction of the election is important because history relates the questionable circumstances of the election, and in the panel, the pope's virtues are expounded upon and any hint of corruption is eliminated. After Pope Gregory XV died, and the College of Cardinals was called to the Vatican, an epidemic of malaria broke out in Rome. The upheaval that the plague brought to the conclave included eight deaths of attending cardinals. Another surprising result from the conclave was the unexpected outcome of Cardinal Maffeo Barberini becoming the late frontrunner and then being elected.¹¹ Because of the swiftness with which Cardinal Maffeo Barberini received support from cardinals, even though he himself had contracted the disease and nearly died during the conclave as well, his election was shrouded in doubt and questions of corruption. The tapestry panel follows the directions of Ubaldini for the original fresco and spins the story differently. The panel takes place immediately after the first count of the votes in the Sistine Chapel, showing two cardinals looking for a missing vote and one cardinal finding the offending missing vote. To emphasize the honor and honesty of the future Barberini pope, Maffeo Barberini points emphatically for a recount. Entering the room are allegorical figures of the virtues Modesty and Magnanimity ominously gesturing towards the soon-to-be pope, as well an attendant who hands the distracted cardinal the papal tiara.¹² The inclusion of allegorical figures and the compression of events to a single frame express both the willingness by the designer and the expectation by the viewers for the tapestries not to portray a historically accurate depiction of the life of Pope Urban VIII. This shows a posturing by the Barberinis to speed the mythologizing process of the recent life of the pope to those long past lives of Constantine and Christ. The more honorably Pope Urban VII would be remembered, the kinder the following popes might be to his nephews.

While the tapestry cycle was expanded to begin before Barberini's ascension to the papacy, the election panel still acts as a beginning when the cycle is considered in the context of the two other major

⁸ Adolph Cavallo "Notes on the Barberini Tapestry," 21

⁹ John Beldon Scott, *Images of Nepotism*, 190

¹⁰ John Beldon Scott, *Images of Nepotism*, 189

¹¹ Catherine Johnston, "Illustrations and Catalogue," 47

¹² John Beldon Scott, *Images of Nepotism*, 190

cycles produced by the Barberini *arrazeria* and in the context of where they intended to be displayed. The salone of the Palazzo Barberini's ceiling fresco, painted by Pietro da Cortona, is *The Allegory of Divine Providence and Barberini Power* or simply, *Divine Providence*. The relation between the allegory of the ceiling fresco and the temporal wall hangings is explicated by art historian John Beldon Scott: "As in the Life of Constantine and the Life of Christ tapestry cycles, the Life of Urban series makes manifest the workings of Divine Providence in historical events. In the first two cycles, however, the theme of providential election was only implicit—the *Apparition of the Cross to Constantine* and the *Charge of Peter*. But in the Urban tapestries it is literally depicted."¹³ When an unpredicted, and possibly rigged, win is attributed to Divine Providence those suspected of corruption can be absolved. The election panel symbolizes a beginning of Pope Urban VIII, and while Cardinal Maffeo Barberini could not be easily equated to Constantine and Christ, a pontiff can.

Another panel that depicts a historical event is *Pope Urban VIII Consecrates the Basilica of St. Peter*. However, the event shown was an example of real-life public relations. Pope Urban VIII took a very active role in the renovations and the building of New St. Peter's. The consecration took place thirteen hundred years after the original consecration of Old St. Peter's by Pope Sylvester, the pope who baptized Constantine. Urban was so obsessed with the alignment of the consecrations that New St. Peter's was not actually completed when he performed the ceremony. Also, the consecration was a completely unnecessary one, as Old St. Peter's, in all of the construction and renovation, never stopped being used as a church and consecrations are only necessary for new churches or ones that have been halted in their functions as sacred ground.¹⁴ In the panel, a completed St. Peter's is shown with Pope Urban VIII completely the traditional writing of the Greek and Roman alphabets in ash, surrounded by his nephews and supporters. A completed Baldachino is also visible, even though Bernini's sculpture would not have been completed for another eight years after the consecration.¹⁵ This panel's editing comes less from the power that Cardinal Francesco Barberini had over the *arrazeria*, because the editing began in the actions depicted. Pope Urban's bravado and love of ceremony shows a pattern of how papal families attempted to depict themselves to the public, as well as showing evidence of Pope Urban's personal attempts at connecting himself to great rulers and popes of the past.

The panel *Nations Pay Homage to Pope Urban VIII* depicts a special editing by omission by the Barberini. Foreign interactions during Pope Urban's reign centered on the Thirty Year's War, and his foolish spending and less than graceful military maneuvers had the Papal States in debt and on the losing side of the war. In choosing to depict foreign policy centered panels, the Barberini tapestries could have exclusively shown allegorical and hypothetical interactions, like that of *Pope Urban VIII and Countess Matilda: Acquisition of the Papal States*. In that panel the Baroque pope is interacting with the Medieval countess who secularly ruled the Papal States until her death when she willed them to the Apostolic See,¹⁶ showing from where the papacy derives its secular power over the Papal States. Instead they chose to include a completely allegorical scene of contemporary foreign politics in an attempt to seemingly compensate for the lack of success in foreign policy that plagued Pope Urban's reign. The designers included a panel showing current Catholic nations, in allegorical form, paying homage to the Pope. Depicting allegorical figures instead of rulers of the Catholic nations, like the panel with Countess Matilda, extends the longevity of the piece by not being tied to a temporal ruler and implies if a ruler is loyal to the papacy the entire country is. However, Pope Urban VIII is not depicted allegorically, showing the difference in how papal authority and royal authority was perceived, at least in Rome. While royal authority is inherently temporal, papal authority comes only from divine providence.

The tapestries were more versatile than frescoes because of their ability to be moved, but they also proved more versatile because of their ability to withstand elements of the outside.¹⁷ The variety of

¹³ John Beldon Scott, *Images of Nepotism*, 191

¹⁴ Frederick Hammond, *Music and Spectacle in Baroque Rome*, 53-55

¹⁵ Catherine Johnston, "The Role of Papal Patronage," 15-17

¹⁶ John Beldon Scott, *Images of Nepotism*, 191

¹⁷ Campbell, Thomas P. "Collectors and Connoisseurs," 326

ways that that tapestries could be used expanded the possibility of editing to their contexts. Though the specific use and location of the tapestries was not always recorded, the Barberini did display the completed panels the Life of Pope Urban VIII cycle outside of the Palazzo Barberini during the procession of Pope Innocent X to show the Barberini nephews support of the newly elected pope who was not named preferred successor by Pope Urban VIII. Also, although there is no direct evidence that all three cycles were ever displayed this way, they were designed with the salone of the Palazzo Barberini in mind. The most important aspect of this context is the fresco that adorns the ceiling of the salone, Pietro da Cortona's *Divine Providence*. Besides the already discussed connections between the tapestries and the fresco as the cycles are all earthly manifestations of divine providence, the fresco itself has iconography of the Barberini beyond the identifying bees and papal keys that brings out the emphatic push towards a positive portrayal of Pope Urban VIII by Barberini patronized artists. Included in the ceiling fresco are Divine Providence personified, in the place of the sun, along with classical muses showing Pope Urban's talents as a poet, as well as Religion personified holding the papal keys. Each of these personifications holds a crown, implied to eventually be bestowed on Pope Urban VIII by God, through his divine providence.¹⁸ Divine Providence holds the crown of immortality, to be given to the pope after his death, as he will be immortal in praise, while the muses carry the laurel wreath in triumph, the pope's triumph being of poetry, thus the connection with the muses. Religion personified carries the only crown that the pope has thus received in life, the papal tiara. The ceiling shows the concept that allows Pope Urban's good fortune to be elected pope, as well as the supposed honors someone would receive when acting out a life according to divine providence.

The combination of the Constantine, Christ and Pope Urban VIII cycles in the salon links the three men together under the rewards of being a part of a the divine plan, just as the Barberini family would have wanted. The actions depicted in the tapestries are the worldly results of Divine Providence, and when placed next to Constantine and Christ in the same media with similar formats and iconography, Pope Urban VIII's history is edited. Instead of a nepotistic, corrupt, and expensive pope, he becomes into a parallel to the two greatest figures in the Roman Catholic Church. While his efforts may not have succeeded in erasing Pope Urban's less than perfect reign as pope, Cardinal Francesco Barberini did exhibit an unprecedented control over the development of a contemporary iconography, biography and myth for a contemporary figure. Everything from the choice of medium and subject, to the process of building the Barberini arrazzeria, to how the tapestries were displayed was chosen with one goal in mind: to glorify the existence of the Barberini.

¹⁸ Walter Vitzhum, "A Comment on the Iconography," 426

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