

Baroque Splendors Make their Way to Connecticut

Alexandra M. Fanelli (February 16, 2018)



"The Holy Name: Art of the Gesù: Bernini and His Age" opened at Fairfield University Art Museum on February 2nd. Curated by Director Linda Wolk-Simon, this once-in-a-lifetime exhibition features treasures from Rome's Church of the Gesù, never before seen in America, including a great Bernini's marble sculpture.

Founded in 1541 by the [Society of Jesus](#) [2], [Fairfield University](#) [3], Connecticut, is celebrating this year the 75th anniversary of its founding.

For this occasion [Fairfield University's Art Museum](#) [4] organized a major international loan exhibition titled The Holy Name, Art of the Gesù: Bernini and his Age along with a series of related programming.

On view in the Bellarmine Hall Galleries through May 19, 2018, the exhibition features artistic treasures from the [Church of the Gesù](#) [5] in Rome, never seen before in the United States.

To celebrate this landmark exhibition, the Italian Cultural Institute hosted a talk on February 13th with [Linda Wolk-Simon](#) [6], Director and Chief Curator of the Museum, and [Xavier Salomon](#) [7], [Peter Jay Sharp](#) [8] Chief Curator of [The Frick Collection](#) [8].

A Counter Reformation Masterwork



The exhibition's focus is the Church of the Gesù in Rome, an impressive example of Baroque architecture and Rome's most important Jesuit church.

Founded in 1540 by [Ignatius of Loyola](#) [9], a Spanish soldier turned priest, the church aimed to serve as a center for his newly founded Society of Jesus (the Jesuits), which had been recognized that year by the Pope Paul III, born Alessandro Farnese. Unfortunately, St. Ignatius never lived to see the construction, but he was buried under the altar in the left transept, making the church an important shrine for pilgrims to this day. The first church ever to be named after Jesus, it is a testament to the status and power of the new religious order, whose primary goal was to further the Catholic faith, stopping the spread of Protestantism.

A Fabulous Treasure of Baroque Art

Designed by Jacopo Vignola and Giacomo della Porta, its unique artistic richness makes the Church of Jesus an important chapter in the history of art and one of the most visited monuments in Rome.

It's façade reflects the original very austere Jesuit approach to art, whereas the interior, characterized by movement, bright colors, and contrast of light and dark shows the lavish decoration of the second half of the 17th century.

Above the entrance door, there is a shield with IHS (abbreviated name of Jesus in Greek) monogrammed upon it as well as the name of the patron, [Alessandro Farnese](#) [10]. The most striking feature of the interior decoration is the illusionistic ceiling fresco of the Triumph of the Holy Name of Jesus painted by Giovan Battista Gaulli '[Baciccio](#)' [11] between 1676 and 1679 (about a century after the church was built). Baciccio was recommended by the great Gian Lorenzo Bernini, who was associated with the the Jesuits for much of his life.

A Landmark Exhibition

One of the biggest attractions is [Bernini](#) [12]'s bust of [Cardinal Roberto Bellarmine](#) [13] (patron saint of Fairfield University) that has never left Rome before. It was Xavier Salomon, who is also on the Art of the Gesù exhibition committee, who inspired the idea to bring Bernini's marble bust of Fairfield University's patron saint, from the Gesù to Fairfield, in honor of the University's 75th anniversary.

Other masterpieces in the exhibition include Giovanni Battista Gaulli's monumental painted wood model of the apse, a gilt bronze altar sculpture by the versatile painter, draftsman and sculptor [Ciro Ferri](#), the sumptuous 3-piece jeweled cartegloria from the altar of St. Ignatius, and the magnificent embroidered chasuble of the church's great benefactor, Alessandro Farnese. These masterpieces are displayed along with paintings, drawings, sculptures, rare books and historical objects lent from museums and private collections, including The Met, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Princeton University Art Museum and more. Together these masterpieces tell the fascinating and intertwined stories of the church's early history and splendid interior embellishment, and the foundational chapters of the Society of Jesus .

"If I were still director of the Metropolitan, I would be jealous of Fairfield doing this show," said Philippe de Montebello, director emeritus of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, who is honorary chair of the exhibition committee.

The Holy Name. Art of the Gesù: Bernini and his Age will be on display at the Fairfield University Art Museum, located in Bellarmine Hall until May 19. For more info [>>](#) [14]

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