

# Modelling Sanctity: The Curious Case of Pierre Puget's *St. Alessandro Sauli*

Morgan Currie

*Saint Alexandre Sauli de Pierre Puget (1663–1668) est important dans l'histoire de la sculpture génoise pour avoir contribué à introduire un style d'interactivité spatiale romain, mais il donne également un aperçu des interactions complexes entre l'art, la religion et les politiques familiales du début de la Gènes moderne. Les mécènes étaient des membres de la noble famille du modèle, et cette commande faisait partie d'une stratégie visant à promouvoir la sainteté de leur parent. Des personnages bien établis de l'antiquité chrétienne étaient prévus pour les trois autres piliers, dans une approche post-tridentine typique où de nouveaux saints étaient associés à des prototypes plus anciens. Toutefois, cet assemblage est inhabituel, car Sauli n'était pas encore canonisé au moment de l'installation, et plus de soixante-dix ans devraient passer avant sa béatification en 1741. L'inclusion de cet individu parmi une compagnie aussi auguste offre un aperçu de l'utilisation de la sculpture, particulièrement de la rhétorique affective de la présence tridimensionnelle, pour construire l'identité publique d'un nouveau saint.*

Morgan Currie is an Instructor in Art History at Carleton University.  
—MorganCurrie@cunet.carleton.ca

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Pierre Puget's *St. Alessandro Sauli* is one of four monumental statues that were planned for the crossing piers of the Genoese basilica of Santa Maria Assunta in Carignano in the third quarter of the seventeenth century. | **fig. 1** | The original plan called for Puget to carve all four, but he produced only the *St. Alessandro Sauli* and a *St. Sebastian* before returning to his native France. | **figs. 2, 3** | Filippo Parodi's *St. John the Baptist* and Claudio David's *St. Bartholomew* were not part of the initial scheme and were decided on later. | **fig. 4** | What is curious about Puget's pair is the relative difference in status. Sebastian was a universally-venerated early Christian martyr, intercessor against plague, and the secondary patron of the city of Genoa.<sup>1</sup> Alessandro, on the other hand, was not officially recognized for sanctity at all. Over seventy years passed between the installation of the statue and his beatification in 1741, and full canonization had to wait until 1904. Pairing such asymmetric figures in a balanced installation is a proactive claim of sanctity that assumes the sale, so to speak, while opening a window into the interplay of sainthood, social status and sculpture in early modern Italy. Saints played important roles in many aspects of contemporary society, and defining their official personae was important to noble families and religious orders alike. The *St. Alessandro Sauli* is an aristocratic commission that reveals sculpture to be a hagiographic medium uniquely able to embody the fusion of real individual and spiritual ideal that is the essence of a saint. This deepens our understanding of the affective, rhetorical aspects of mimetic sculpture that were largely neglected in contemporary writing on art.

## The Sauli, their Saint, and their Site

Alessandro's obscurity meant his iconography was limited, freeing Puget to create a spiritually-charged persona sympathetic to the interests of his ambitious patrons. In the oligarchic world of Genoa, political leadership was limited to a select group of noble families, and the Sauli, who first appear in Genoese records in 1393, were elevated to this company in the 1520s.<sup>2</sup> Having already provided the city with two doges as well as eleven other candidates for the position, a saintly ancestor would add further prestige to the Sauli line.<sup>3</sup> The location is also significant in this regard, since few churches are as closely connected to one family as S. Maria Assunta in Carignano and the Sauli.<sup>4</sup> The building originated with a large bequest left in October 16, 1481 by Bendinelli Sauli, a wealthy merchant and financier haunted by rumors of usury. Architect Galeazzo Alessi

1. Louise Jane Marshall, "Waiting on the Will of the Lord": The Imagery of the Plague" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1989); "Reading the Body of a Plague Saint: Narrative Altarpieces and Devotional Images of St. Sebastian in Renaissance Art," in *Reading Texts and Images*, ed. Bernard J. Muir (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002). See Lazzaro de Simoni, *Le chiese di Genova: storia, arte, folklore* (Genoa: Edizione Ceretti, 1948), 72.

2. Marco Bologna, *L'Archivio Sauli di Genova* (Rome: Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali, direzione generale per gli archivi, 2001), 12-17; Giovanni Battista Semeria, *Seco li cristiani della Liguria ossia storia della metropolitana di Genova, delle diocesi di Sarzana, di Brugnato, Savona, Nola, Albenga e Ventimiglia* (Turin: Tipografia Chirio e Mina, 1843), 187-244; Steven A. Epstein, *Genoa and the Genoese 958-1528* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 315.

3. Maria Nicora, "La nobiltà Genovese dal 1528 al 1700," *Miscelanea storica ligure* 2 (1961): 273.

4. Christoph Thoenes, "S. Maria di Carignano e la tradizione della chiesa centrale a cinque cupole," in *Galeazzo Alessi e l'architettura del Cinquecento: atti del convegno internazionale di studi: Genova, 16-20 aprile 1974*, ed. Wolfgang Lotz et al. (Genoa: Sagep, 1975), 319.

5. Luc Georget, *Pierre Puget: peintre, sculpteur, architecte, 1620-1694*, exh. cat. (Marseille: Musées de Mar-

was finally commissioned in 1543 and his Greek cross plan with a central cupola based on St. Peter's was largely complete by 1569.<sup>5</sup> Significant interior decorations, including Puget's statues, date to the second half of the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup> All this work was overseen by the Sauli family, making the church a sort of grand family chapel and public monument to their rising status.

Much of the biographical information on Alessandro Sauli is hagiographic, but the basic contours of his life are clear. He was born in Milan on February 15, 1535 to Domenico Sauli, a wealthy senate president and close friend of Duke Francesco, and Tommasina Spinola of that noble Ligurian family.<sup>7</sup> He was provided a rigorous philosophical and literary education but opted for a religious vocation and joined the Barnabites in Milan. Powerful preaching and fervid devotion impelled his rise to general of the order in 1567. In 1570 he was named Bishop of Aleria in Corsica, considered a place of lawless repute long neglected by the Church. Alessandro's Corsican tenure was not the unequivocal success that his hagiographers made it out to be, but it was positive enough for his spiritual disciple, Pope Gregory XIV, to name him bishop of Pavia in 1590, where he died the following year.<sup>8</sup> It was Alessandro's work as a reformer and, during the Corsican plague of 1580, as a miraculous healer, that set him on the path to sainthood, but he was also personally connected with major Post-Tridentine figures.<sup>9</sup> He was a close friend, life-long correspondent, and confessor of St. Charles Borromeo, preached before St. Pius V as a guest of St. Philip Neri, and was esteemed by St. Robert Bellarmine. Despite all this, canonization took more than two centuries.

Evidence of Alessandro's cult appears immediately following his death, though centred in Pavia rather than Genoa.<sup>10</sup> The Barnabites produced the first of their several *vite* in 1600, which is typical of orders promoting their own candidates.<sup>11</sup> The formal *processus*, or investigation, was launched by the Congregation of Rites in 1623, but ended inconclusively, and a fifty-year



**Figure 1. S. Maria Assunta, Genoa. The exterior as it appeared in 1880-1881.**

Photo: Hallwyl Museum, cropped by author.

Figure 2. Pierre Puget, *St. Alessandro Sauli*, 1664–67. Marble, over life-sized. Genoa, S. Maria Assunta in Carignano. Photo: Sailko.



Figure 3. Pierre Puget, *St. Sebastian*, 1664–67. Marble, over life-sized. Genoa, S. Maria Assunta in Carignano. Photo: Sailko.

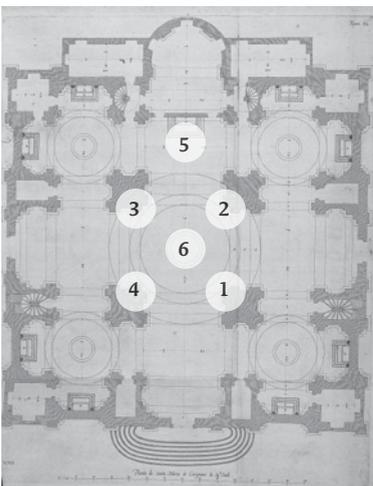
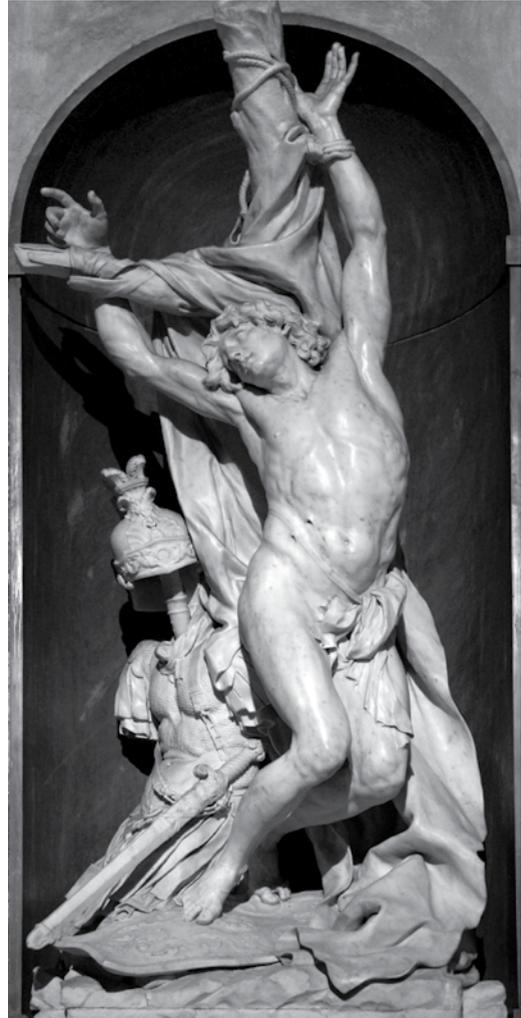


Figure 4. Peter Paul Rubens, *Pianta di Santa Maria Assunta in Carignano di Sig. Sauli*. Photo: reproduced from *Palazzi di Genova*, vol. 11, 1622, fig. 62 with the locations of relevant monuments added by the author.

- Location of relevant monuments:
1. St. Alessandro Sauli (Pierre Puget)
  2. St. Lawrence (Pierre Puget)
  3. St. John the Baptist (Filippo Parodi)
  4. St. Barthelemew (Claudio David)
  5. High Altar
  6. Site of Puget's proposed baldachin

seille; Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1994), 15; Federigo Alizeri, *Guida artistica per la città di Genova*, Vol. 1 (Genoa: Gio. Grondona Q. Giuseppe, 1846), 257; Thoenes, 319–21. A letter from Alessi comparing S. Maria Assunta to St. Peter's is published in Santo Varni, *Spigolature artistiche nell'archivio della Basilica di Carignano* (Genoa: Tipografica del R. Istituto Sordo-muti, 1877), 55.

6. Bologna, 45; Georget, 114; Varni, 7.

7. Alessandro's biographical details are from Giovanni Battista Semeria, *Storia Ecclesiastica Di Genova E Della Liguria Dai Tempi Apostolici Sino All'anno 1838* (Turin: Tipografica e Libreria Canfari, 1838), 231–35; Orazio M. Premoli, *Storia dei barnabiti nel Cinquecento* (Rome: Desclée, 1913); Giuseppe M. Cagni Molledo, "I Sauli," *Eco I Barnabiti* 72, no. 2 (1992): 2–5; Raffaele Soprani, *Li scrittori della Liguria, e particolarmente della maritima* (Genoa: Pietro Giovanni Calenzani, 1667), 85.

8. Ecclesiastic sources present Sauli's Corsican tenure as near-miraculous. See Anton Mariae Spelta, *Historia delle vite di tutti i vesovi, che dall'anno di nostra salute vi. sino al MDCCC successivamente ressero la chiesa dell' antichissima, et regal città di Pavia* (Pavia: Girolamo Bartoli, 1597), 19; Luigi Albacini, *Il lode del B. Alessandro Sauli preposito generale della congregazione de chierici regolari di S. Paolo vescovo di Aleria poi di Pavia* (Rome: Tipografia Salviucci, 1854), 19. For an archivally sourced account, see Antoine-Marie Graziani, *La Corse Genoise: Economie, Société, Culture. Période Moderne: 1453–1768* (Ajaccio: Editions Alain Piazzola, 1997), 146–55. For Sauli's furthering of Genoese economic interests, see Antoine-Marie Graziani, *La Corse vue de Gênes: Fonds Corsica, archivio di stato de Gênes* (Ajaccio: Editions Alain Piazzola, 1998), 6.

9. Godefroy Henschen et al., *Acta sanctorum junii, ex Latinis & Graecis aliarumque gentium antiquis monumentis, servata primigenia scriptorum phrasi, collecta, digesta, commentariis et observationibus illustrata, a Godefrido Henschenio p.m. Daniele Papebrochio, Francisco Berto, et Conrado Janningo e Societatis Jesu presbyteris theologis*, Tomus 1 (Venice: Giovanni Battista Albrizzi and Sebastiano Coleti, 1741), 749–51, CAPUT VI. "Singularis ejus in omnes charitas & in pauperes misericordia: domestica disciplina," col. 826A 68. This entry draws heavily from the Gabutio vita. For a summary of Alessandro's activities during the plague, see Molledo, 334.

10. Spelta, 532.

waiting period introduced by Pope Urban VIII on all candidacies prevented a quick resumption.<sup>12</sup> The beatification of another model bishop, St. Francis of Sales, in 1661 induced the Barnabites to encourage the Vatican to revisit Alessandro's case, and a lavish new *vita* was published in Rome.<sup>13</sup> It was during this optimistic moment that the Genoese branch of the Sauli family commissioned Puget's monumental sculpture. In 1677, the formal process resumed and, after a prolonged investigation, Clement XII pronounced a favorable opinion in 1732. Finally, Benedict XIV proclaimed the beatification, with the intention of canonizing Sauli in the Holy Year of 1750. However, the Congregation was unable to approve two of the submitted miracles, and Sauli's cause was subsequently eclipsed by unfavorable political events.<sup>14</sup> Full sainthood would not come until the twentieth century.

Alessandro's long road raises questions about the strength of his candidacy, and his lack of verifiable miracles is not indicative of a strong cultic following. His tenure in marginal Aleria was less transformative than Borromeo's impact on the more important Milan. Unfortunate timing was also a factor; the processes of St. Rose of Lima and St. John of the Cross also languished during the middle decades of the 1600s, and both benefited from royal and noble supporters.<sup>15</sup> Alessandro did not have advocates of this political stature, although he did have his family and, more importantly, the Barnabite order. The preponderance of early modern saints came from the orders, since these organizations had the connections and longevity to maintain focus over multiple generations, and the Barnabites were involved in every stage of Alessandro's long process. Both the *vite* of 1600 and 1661 and the principle twentieth-century accounts of his life were written their members. It was unusual for cases to drag on as long as Alessandro's, which suggests that the Barnabites lacked the strong political influence of more powerful orders.<sup>16</sup>

The *St. Alessandro Sauli* is the most ambitious of several efforts on the part of the Genoese Sauli to promote their kinsman. These painted a slightly different picture of his sanctity than Barnabite sources, which understandably emphasized his activities in and around their order, and in doing so, remind us that the construction of a saintly persona was a complex process. The early modern saint was a hybrid entity that combined spontaneous devotion with juridical vetting by ecclesiastic authorities. The growth and persistence of a cult instigated an official investigation by the Congregation of Rites, or *processus*, which ultimately passed judgement on the legitimacy of the candidate.<sup>17</sup> This encouraged popular religious sentiment while harnessing it to the current values and priorities of the Church.<sup>18</sup> Hagiography, or the writing of official biographies called *vite*, was instrumental to this process.<sup>19</sup> These lives are better understood as instruments of transformation rather than critical history, since their purpose is to remake the specific details of a candidate into an idealized persona with the appeal of a real historical figure. In the post-Trientine period, the Church chose candidates that hewed closely to a few standard archetypes, meaning someone like Alessandro would be modelled after established saints that express the same type of sanctity.<sup>20</sup> The *St. Alessandro Sauli* performs a similar hagiographic function, only it naturalizes this composite persona as an engaging three-dimensional presence.

11. Premoli, 53. The first life of Alessandro Sauli was written by Giovanni Antonio Gabuzio (1551–1627) in 1600, although it was not published until 1748. Latin *vite* appeared by Agostino Galliccio, in 1661 and by Valeriano Maggi and Luigi Barelli in 1663.

12. Giuseppe M. Boffito, *Scrittori Barnabiti, o della congregazione dei chierici regolare di San Paolo* (1533–1933): *Biografia, Bibliografia, Iconografia*, Vol. III (Firenze: Leo S. Olshcki, 1934), 425.

13. Orazio M. Premoli, *Storia dei Barnabiti nel seicento* (Rome: Industria Tipografica Romana, 1922), 293.

14. Moltedo, 510.

15. Teodoro Hampe Martinez, "El Proceso de canonización de Santa Rosa," *Hispania Sacra* 48, no. 95 (1996): 735.

16. The profiles of Counter-Reformation saints are listed in R. Pochia Hsia, *The World of Catholic Renewal, 1540–1770* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 122. Of the thirty-two saints and six *beati* who lived between 1540 and 1770, none were Barnabites.

17. Ferdinando dell'Oro, *Beatificazione e canonizzazione: excursus storico liturgico* (Rome: C.L.V. Edizioni liturgiche, 1997), 19–21.

18. Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000–1700* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 13; Simon Ditchfield, *Liturgy, Sanctity, and History in Tridentine Italy: Pietro Maria Campi and the Preservation of the Particular* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 130–2.

19. Réginald Grégoire, *Manuale di agiologia: introduzione alla letteratura agiografica* (Fabriano: Monastero San Silvestro Abate, 1987), 13.

20. Peter Burke, "How to be a Counter-Reformation Saint," in *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy: Essays on Perception and Communication* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 57.

21. The Sauli produced eight bishops, including Alessandro, between 1404 and 1710, three archbishops between 1540 and 1638, and two sixteenth-century cardinals. See Vincenzo Canepa, *Cenni storici sulla Liguria e su Genova*, 2nd. ed. (Genoa: presso il librajro Canepa, 1858), 210–11, 174, 162–63.

22. Graziani, *La Corse vue de Gênes*, 6–7.

23. Guy Walton, "Pierre Puget's Projects for the Church of Santa Maria Assunta di Carignano," *Art Bulletin* 46, no. 1 (1964): 90.

The principle hagiographic model projected by Puget's statue is a saintly bishop, which casts Alessandro as another Borromeo, while his inclusion in a group of established saints asserts his status in a more general manner. An episcopal template had a particular appeal to the Sauli patrons. Genoa was typical of early modern Italian states, in that it is difficult to separate the political and ecclesiastic spheres. Virtually all post-Tridentine bishops came from elite families; both Gerolamo (1550–9) and Antonio (1586–91) Sauli occupied the position.<sup>21</sup> Without necessarily diminishing his religious achievements, Alessandro's involvement in his family's economic matters during his Corsican episcopate is undeniable. The pot of treasure overturned at his feet is a pointed assertion that familial riches held no attraction for him. In a context where there is no real line dividing the secular and the ecclesiastic, and where religious expression bleeds into social prestige, it is important to remember the link between "*banquiers et saints*."<sup>22</sup> If the Barnabites saw Alessandro as an exemplary member of their order, the St. Alessandro Sauli presents him as the ideal Sauli.

### Hagiographic Presence

Puget's availability was a stroke of good fortune for the Sauli. The artist had been stranded in Genoa when a marble buying expedition for Nicolas Fouquet abruptly terminated with the latter's arrest in 1661.<sup>23</sup> On March 8, 1664, following a trip to Rome, Puget signed a contract with Giulio and Francesco Maria Sauli for the St. *Alessandro Sauli* and St. *Sebastian*. These were intended to be part of a larger assemblage based on Bernini's crossing of St. Peter's, and Puget had prepared drawings for a central baldachin as early as 1663.<sup>24</sup> The two statues were transported to S. Maria Assunta on May 12, 1668, but the rest of the project never moved forward, and Puget returned to France in 1668 with his grand plan unrealized.<sup>25</sup> Despite this anticlimactic finish, it is still possible to appreciate how the statue functions as a form of visual hagiography to create a recognizable saintly persona.

Hagiography is generally considered a textual genre, but images also repackage lives in accordance with contemporary values. They just do so in medium-specific ways, using visual references to other representations to characterize the subject instead of the allusions and expositions of written *vite*. Sculpture literally embodies the hagiographic image in an anthropomorphic presence that shares the viewer's space and supports patterns of reception that resemble interpersonal encounters. It is not an exaggeration to say that sculptural innovations associated with the Italian Baroque were largely driven by interest in the rhetorical power of sculpted bodies.<sup>26</sup> The St. *Alessandro Sauli* is a huge figure that combines striking surface realism with superhuman scale and marmoreal sheen, a blend of verism and ideality that visualizes the fusion of real person and sanctified intercessor that is the essence of sainthood. The constructed persona is naturalized as a dramatic mystical experience that is witnessed, rather than simply read.

The most obvious identifying elements in the St. *Alessandro Sauli* are his cope and crozier, which define him as an episcopal saint, a common category in early modern hagiography. This follows the most significant Genoese representation of Alessandro prior to Puget's, Domenico Fiasella's altarpiece *The*

*Blessed Alessandro Sauli Brings an End to the Plague* (ca. 1630, Genoa, S. Maria Assunta in Carignano), which depicts him as the heroic bishop of Aleria. | **fig. 5** | Hagiographic modelling is not just the establishment of an iconography, but a way of conceptualizing sanctity in an early modern Church fixated on its continuity with the past. Post-Tridentine historiography casts the Church as fundamentally unchanged from antiquity, but the historical reality is that attitudes and values shift over time. It is not only new saints that are cast from timeless models; the older saints that provide the models are reimagined in contemporary terms.<sup>27</sup> The post-Tridentine episcopal saint is a fine example of this two-way process. The template for Borromeo and Alessandro was St. Ambrose, the canonical fourth-century Bishop of Milan and Father of the Western Church. Two early seventeenth-century paintings by Giovan Battista Crespi illustrate this clearly. | **fig. 6** | Borromeo and Ambrose are virtually identical formally, stylistically, and in expression. Ambrose appears in early modern attire and without his customary beard, in deference to Borromeo's regulations on the appearance of clergy.<sup>28</sup> Another picture attributed to Crespi entitled *Alessandro Sauli in Episcopal Robes* (no date, Pavia, S. Maria di Canepanova) indicates the extension of this model to Alessandro.

Alessandro's conduct during the Corsican plague was a central reason for his comparison to Borromeo and his candidacy for sainthood in general, and Fiasella defined this pictorially as an act of heroic episcopal service. The composition, with the bishop emerging from his church to confront an adversary, is based on Anthony Van Dyck's *The Emperor Theodosius is Forbidden by Saint Ambrose to Enter Milan Cathedral* (ca. 1619, London, National Gallery).<sup>29</sup> | **fig. 7** | Borromeo himself had called the repulse of Attila emblematic of the bishop's charge to risk his life for his flock, making it relevant to dangerous pastoral work.<sup>30</sup> Some decades later, Pietro da Cortona's *S. Carlo Borromeo Leads a Penitential Procession During the Plague of 1576* (1667, Rome, S. Carlo ai Catinari) completes the cycle by setting Charles in a formally and thematically similar composition. This is the nature of hagiographic modelling, with new saints based on older ones and old saints reimagined after the new to match timeless sanctity and contemporary values. These episcopal saints became so strongly associated that there was some confusion in the nineteenth century as to the identity of Puget's figure.<sup>31</sup>

The episcopal saint is one hagiographic type used in the *St. Alessandro Sauli*; another is the ecstatic mystic or visionary. This aspect is indicated by the rapt intensity and straining, twisting form that seethes with a barely-contained force not seen in Fiasella or Crespi's pictures. Techniques developed over the seventeenth century for representing mystical experiences as part of a larger interest in emotional states, and somatic indicators such as tension and loss of self-possession were used to indicate the interior force of divine union. Bernini's *St. Teresa in Ecstasy* is probably the most famous example, but they proliferated until they became something of a trope. Alessandro was not primarily known as a mystic or contemplative, but like all early modern saints, was reputed to have had miraculous spiritual experiences, and his *processes* included numerous accounts of ecstasies, levitations, and other phenomena.<sup>32</sup> The ecstatic appearance of the statue visualizes this supernatural energy with an electric pose and shining marble form that recalls Émile Mâle's famous

24. Enrica Amadei, "Due contratti genovesi di Pierre Puget," *Notizie da Palazzo Albano Urbino* 10, no. 1 (1981): 50.

25. Georget, 112; Varni, 81.

26. Morgan Currie, "Sanctified Presence: Sculpture and Sainthood in Early Modern Italy" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2015), 10–108. For a study on the idea of sculpture as living see Joris van Gastel, *Il Marmo Spirante: Sculpture and Experience in Seventeenth-Century Rome* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2013).

27. Pierre Deloof, "Towards a Sociological Study of Canonized Sainthood in the Catholic Church," in *Saints and their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore, and History*, ed. Stephen Wilson (Cambridge: New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 195.

28. Biscottini, 25.

29. For Van Dyck's influence on Fiasella, see Franco Renzo Pesenti, *La pittura in Liguria: artisti del primo seicento* (Genoa: Cassa Di Risparmio, 1986), 231–306.

30. Adriano Prosperi, "Clerics and Laymen in the Work of Carlo Borromeo," in *San Carlo Borromeo: Catholic Reform and Ecclesiastical Politics in the Second Half of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. John M. Headley and John B. Tomaro (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1988), 115.

31. Léon Lagrange, *Pierre Puget Peintre—Sculpteur Architecte Décorateur de Vaisseaux* (Paris: Didier et Cie., 1868).

32. Congregatione Sacorum Rituum, *Beatificationis & Canonizationis Ven. Serv. De Alexandri Saulij Aleriensis deinde Papien Episcopi, ex Congregatione Clericorum Regularium Sancti Pauli Posito Super Dubito* (Rome: Typographia Reverendae Camerae Apostolicae, 1678), 80–89; Num. 37: "De Cultu Divino," Num 38: "Pietas e Ecstases in Missae sacrificio," Num. 39: "Profunda contemplations cum extasibus."



Figure 5. Domenico Fiasella, *The Blessed Alessandro Sauli Brings and End to the Plague*, c. 1630. Oil on canvas. Genoa, S. Maria Assunta in Carignano. Photo: Saikko.



Figure 6. Giovan Battista Crespi (il Cerano), *Saint Charles Borromeo in Glory*, c. 1615. Oil on canvas, 49.4 × 26.1 cm. Milan, Museo Diocesano. Photo: Museo Diocesano di Milano.



**Figure 7.** Anthony Van Dyck, *The Emperor Theodosius is Forbidden by Saint Ambrose to Enter Milan Cathedral*, c. 1619. Oil on canvas, 147 × 114 cm. London, National Gallery. Photo: Zenodot Verlagsgesellschaft mbH.



**Figure 8.** Giulio Cesare Procaccini, *St. Charles Borromeo in Glory*, 1610–13. Oil on canvas, 285 × 169 cm. Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera. Photo: Brera.

remark that “*les saints de la Contre-Réforme furent eux-mêmes des miracles*” (the saints of the counter-reformation are themselves miracles).<sup>33</sup>

The nature of Alessandro’s state becomes clearer in comparison with Crespi’s painted bishops. Both the statue and the *Alessandro Sauli in Episcopal Robes* depict the bishop in a pose with upturned palms and face suggestive of mystical transport, while the symbols of his ecclesiastic vocation are set aside in the care of a *putto*. However, differences in composition and emotional intensity indicate that these represent different sanctified conditions. Puget juxtaposes the twisting curve of the body with the bold linear diagonal of the crozier and outstretched hand to suggest the tensions and contradictions inherent in ecstasy. A slight lean back, the tight wrapping of the left hand around the torso, and heavy cope create a sense of compression that is countered by the feeling of expansion created by the extended arm, protruding crozier, and general upward curve. This is the representation of a living saint who can barely contain the forces of divine union. Crespi’s figures appear “in glory,” a state that represents their status as timeless intercessors. The relaxed pose and assured expression indicate that this is a natural condition and not a temporary, overwhelming ecstasy. This is not limited to Crespi either; the more stylistically current Giulio Cesare Procaccini depicted Borromeo in glory with dynamic Baroque flair but maintains the sense of self-possession. | **fig. 8** | There is little movement in these figures; certainly not the restless dynamism of ecstasy or the soaring ascent of apotheosis. Cerano and Procaccini’s bishops have completed their journeys, and hang suspended in a state of spiritual perfection between this world and the next. The *St. Alessandro Sauli* depicts a spiritual journey still underway, or what seventeenth-century commentator Ignazio Pallavicino called “*un interiore e spiritual movimento, per mezzo del quale l’anima innalzata a Dio*” (an inward and spiritual movement by which the soul is raised to God).<sup>34</sup>

Puget’s statue appears to be the first time that the mature Baroque visual language of ecstasy was applied to Alessandro. Bernini had recently electrified the saintly bishop type with ecstatic expressions, angular limbs, and roiling drapery in the Fathers of the Church that support his *Cathedra Petri* (1657–63, Rome, St. Peter’s). Puget likely saw the models, if not the finished work, during his trip to Rome in 1662. | **fig. 9** | The Father on the left, appropriately St. Ambrose, shares turbulent folds, an outstretched hand, and angled head with the *St. Alessandro Sauli*, | **fig. 10** | but there are important differences as well. The first is compositional: the statues are simply posed differently. The Fathers are more open, with drapery folds flowing in different directions, while Alessandro is shown in a tight, upward spiral. Ambrose and Athanasius are blazing conduits radiating spiritual energy outwards, while Alessandro seems to quiver with the impossible strain of holding that energy in. The Fathers are closer to a saint in glory, in that they are less in the middle of a mystical experience than superhuman embodiments of sanctity.

The formal differences are consistent with how the reception of the figures is shaped by their respective installations. Ambrose was part of a larger assemblage that was meant to be viewed from a distance and was subordinated to its attenuated compositional pyramid descending from the window. The *Cathedra* revealed the divine origins of the Church as the golden light of the Holy

33. Emile Mâle, *L’art religieux après le Concile de Trent. Étude sur l’iconographie de la fin du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle, du XVII<sup>e</sup> du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1932), 152–4.

34. I. Pallavicino, *Veri e morali ritratti degli amori*, Genova, 1693. Cited in Lauro Magnani, “Pierre Puget, uno scultore barocca fra Genova e la corte di Francia,” in *Genova e la Francia: opere, artisti, committenti, collezionisti*, ed. Piero Boccardo, Clario Di Fabio, and Philippe Sénéchal (Milano: Silvana, 2003), 115.

Spirit that washes over the throne of St. Peter before flowing through the Fathers to the faithful. The expansive drapery and open forms reinforce this sense of dissemination. The *St. Alessandro Sauli* was also conceived as part of a larger project, but the elements were dispersed around the crossing and the statue stood alone in a niche. The composition does not assume Alessandro's intercessory position, but argues for it with a compact, rising form that draws our attention up to the light of the dome, rather than spreading it down to us. The *Cathedra* indicated the rhetorical potential of large-scale ecstatic episcopal saints, but formal and thematic differences show that Puget drew on other sources when modelling his mystically-charged bishop.

If the *St. Alessandro Sauli* was inspired by the *Cathedra Petri* Fathers, this was filtered through Alessandro Algardi's *St. Philip Neri* (1638, Rome, S. Maria in Vallicella), an earlier sculpted mystic saint that became a canonical image of the Oratorian founder. | fig. 11 | Neri was not a bishop but was renowned for ecstasies so violent that his swollen heart was said to have cracked his ribs. The two were connected hagiographically: Neri's invitation to Alessandro to preach in Rome is a typical device where an established saint is shown to recognize the sanctity of the subject as a form of endorsement.<sup>35</sup> Alessandro then affirms the recognition by moving his host and audience with the power of his sacred oratory. Afterwards, the two undertook Neri's pilgrimage to the seven churches, demonstrating their equivalent level of devotional commitment. Even Alessandro's informal title of Apostle of Corsica is a variation of Neri's Apostle of Rome.

The *St. Alessandro Sauli* visualized this connection formally but added an element of Bernini's exuberance to the realistic detailing and psychological subtleties of Algardi's original to amplify the restrained intensity into overpowering tension.<sup>36</sup> Both statues have a basic S-curve composition with heads tilting to the right, though Algardi's relatively subtle contrapposto is reserved next to Puget's almost Gothic attenuation. Each raises a remarkably veristic right hand, revealing the puckered fabric of the sleeve, and both are supported by a kneeling angel holding an identifying attribute. Algardi's model of ecstatic piety has been raised to a fever pitch. It is clear that Puget had been considering this transformation well before his exposure to the *Cathedra*. Prior to his last Roman trip, Puget had painted St. Remi, another saintly bishop, in his *Baptism of Clovis* (1652, Marseilles, Musée des Beaux-Arts), with a familiar rapt demeanour, forceful, but fluidly turning pose, and extended flexed hand.<sup>37</sup> | fig. 12 | Sharp, staccato drapery creates the same quivering impression of barely contained forces. If one were to imagine the *St. Philip Neri* with the tremulous energy of St. Remi, the *St. Alessandro Sauli* is the result.

It is not possible to ascertain the precise contribution of each of these precedents to Puget's creative process; what is significant is that Alessandro's hagiographic image is conceived in terms of extant models. Borromeo, Ambrose, and Remi are episcopal saints that exemplify heroic pastoral service, while Neri embodies the devotional extremes of the mystic. Hagiographic modeling is effective because it is not limited to one source. It combines allusions and analogies into a polysemous sanctified identity that is equivalent to, but not identical with, those of the canonized peers. Alessandro is a bishop like Borromeo and a mystic like Neri, which legitimates his candidacy for

35. Sac. Rituum Congregatione Eminentissimo & Reverendissimo Papien, *Beatificationis & Canonizationis Venerabilis Servi Dei Alexandri Sauli primum Alerien deinde Papien Episcopi Super Dubio. An constet de Virtutibus Theologicalibus Fide, Spe & Charitate & de quator Cardinalibus, Prudentia, Iustitia, Fortitudo & Temperantia. Summarium Additionale* (Rome: Typis Reverendae Camerae Apostolicae, 1689), Num. 9 B, 10

36. Klaus Herding, *Pierre Puget. Das bildnerische Werk* (Berlin: Mann, 1970), 71.

37. Marie-Christine Gloton, "Puget et la peinture," in *Puget et son temps; actes du Colloque tenu à l'Université de Provence, les 15, 16 et 17 octobre 1971* (Aix-en-Provence: Pensée universitaire, 1972), 117.



Figure 9. Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Cathedra Petri*, 1656–66. Gilt bronze, marble, stucco, glass. Vatican City, St. Peter's Basilica. Photo: Dnlor\_01, cropped by author.



Figure 10. Gianlorenzo Bernini, *St. Ambrose and St. Athanasius*, detail of the *Cathedra Petri*, 1656–66. Gilt bronze, over-life-sized. Vatican City, St. Peter's Basilica. Photo: Dnlor\_01, cropped by author.



Figure 11. Alessandro Algardi, *St. Philip Neri*, 1636–38. Marble, c. 300 cm. Rome, S. Maria in Vallicella. Photo: Web Gallery of Art, public domain.



Figure 12 (below). Pierre Puget, *The Baptism of Clovis I*, 1652. Oil on canvas, 158 × 87 cm. Marseille, Musée des Beaux-Arts. Photo: Finoskov.



Figure 13. Pierre Puget, *St. Alessandro Sauli*, detail of base, 1664–67. Marble, over life-sized. Genoa, *S. Maria Assunta* in Carignano. Photo: Saikko, cropped by author.



Figure 14. Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Baldacchino*, 1624–33. Bronze with gilded highlights, 29 m. Vatican City, *St. Peter's Basilica*. Photo: Dennis Jarvis, cropped by author.

sainthood. At the same time, he must be identifiable to be compelling, so the persona must include distinguishing details. Puget used idealized references to Alessandro's actual life to construct an interactive progression from worldly virtue to divine union.

When approaching the *St. Alessandro Sauli*, the viewer encounters the book and the spilled coins first, at roughly eye level. | **fig. 13** | These symbols of his wealth and erudition have been set aside in pursuit of his clerical calling. The eye is carried up by the line of the protruding crozier, the sign of this ecclesiastic vocation, in a visual metaphor for his life's journey. Ultimately, even this is abandoned for a state of pure devotion, visualized by the continuation of the rising movement into the figure itself, through the extended hand and upturned face, and into the unknowable world of divine union. Disregard of worldly honours is a common sign of humility in saints' lives; Alessandro's reluctant acceptance of his episcopate echoes similar reticence in the lives of Borromeo and Ambrose. However, the specific manifestation, with its beginnings in erudition and suspicious wealth, is particular to the Sauli scion.

### Alessandro Sauli in the Company of Saints

Interactive viewing processes are made possible by the ability of a three-dimensional figure to create meaningful physical relationships in the surrounding environment. The *St. Alessandro Sauli* was planned as part of a larger assemblage based on Bernini's crossing of St. Peter's, although it differs for the inclusion of a modern figure amongst the heroes of the early Church. Including Alessandro in this company argues for his sainthood by association and is typical of a general post-Tridentine assumption of equivalence between early Christian martyrdom and more contemporary indices of sanctity. The pairing with Sebastian, the other subject in the original commission, adds a layer to Alessandro's hagiographic persona that was of significance to the Sauli.

Sebastian was the archetypal plague saint, so his presence foregrounds Alessandro's activity during the Corsican plague, but the patrons had their own history of this sort of service.<sup>38</sup> Genoa had been visited by two devastating epidemics in the seventeenth century: an outbreak of typhus between 1648 and 1650 with double the normal mortality rate, and an even more virulent plague in 1557. Between the two, some forty thousand people (roughly half the population) lost their lives and the city took fifty years to recover.<sup>39</sup> The nearly eighty-year-old Giulio Sauli, one of Puget's patrons, was elected doge in 1656 and served throughout the plague despite the death of almost all his colleagues, soldiers, and servants. He survived with a local reputation as "*eroe della Cristiana piet *" and a thematic connection to Sebastian and, by extension, Alessandro.<sup>40</sup> Klaus Herding has suggested that Giulio commissioned the statues as a votive for the cessation of the plague.<sup>41</sup> If this is true, Alessandro was likely invoked as an intercessor along with Sebastian during the epidemic, perhaps at the altar with Fiasella's depiction of the Corsican plague. It certainly explains why it was Sebastian and not Fabian, the other titular saint named in Bordinelli Sauli's original bequest of 1481, that was chosen for the crossing pier.<sup>42</sup> Together, the statues and their patron create a three-way relationship that extends the hagiographic modeling process into everyday life. Sebastian establishes an archetype of sanctity that Alessandro embodies in

38. A. Lynn Martin, *Plague? Jesuit Accounts of an Epidemic Disease in the Sixteenth Century* (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth-Century Journal Publications, 1996), 185; Giuseppe Ripamonti, *La Peste di Milano del 1630* (Pirota: Tipografia a Libreria, 1841), 47–50.

39. Danilo Presotto, "Genova 1656–1657: cronache di una pestilenza," *Atti della societ  ligure di storia patria* 5, no. 2 (1965): 315–440.

40. Romano da Calice, *La Grande Peste di Genova 1656–1657* (Genova: Cooperativa di Solidariet  Sociale Egidio Bullesi, 1992), 131–2.

41. Herding, *Pierre Puget*, 67.

42. Giuliana Algeri, *Basilica di S. Maria Assunta in Carignano* (Genova: Sagep, 1975), 5.

contemporary terms and Giulio aspires to on a more relatable, human level. The kinship and historical proximity between Alessandro and Giulio raise them from instances of individual virtue to collective praise of the Sauli family.

Alessandro and Sebastian were to be part of a crossing like St. Peter's, with a large baldachin in the centre. Preparatory drawings for this have been dated to between 1663 and 1665, and there are documents that indicate Puget was paid for the design of a high altar in the centre of the crossing at this time.<sup>43</sup> The intentions for the other two statues are less clear, although it appears that Puget was to carve them all.<sup>44</sup> He produced a *modello* for a St. Mary Magdalene, but destroyed it before returning to France, and signed a contract with the Sauli in 1691 for a St. Jerome, although it is unlikely he had any intentions of finishing it.<sup>45</sup> The subjects that did fill the remaining niches, the *St. Bartholomew* and *St. John the Baptist*, are not mentioned in any of the early drawings or documents. The ensemble shared the theme of transition between heaven and earth with Bernini's crossing scheme, but with some important conceptual differences. The St. Peter's *Baldacchino* was to have been topped with a statue of a risen Christ, which would have created a vertical axis from the Eucharistic sacrifice on the altar, through the planned image or resurrection, and into the pantokrator enthroned in the dome mosaic above.<sup>46</sup> Light spilling through the dome binds the elements together and adds a metaphysical air. The surrounding pier statues are connected to the *Baldacchino* by gaze, gesture, and shared illumination, which transforms them into extensions or manifestations of the fundamental spiritual truth revealed in the sacrifice of Christ. The replacement of the Risen Christ with the lighter cross and orb obscured the theme of resurrection as the archetypal connection between human and divine that is a necessary condition of sainthood, but the idea of sanctified figured bound into a community by holy light remains.<sup>47</sup> | **fig. 14** |

The design for Puget's baldachin was inspired by Bernini, but accentuated the sense of verticality with larger, steeper volutes. S. Maria Assunta in Carignano lacked the major relics and Christological associations of St. Peter's, but its dedication to the Assumption introduced the other paradigmatic Christian example of a transition between heaven and earth. Had this structure been built, a crowning statue of the Assumption of the Virgin would have restated the theme of spiritual transition in Marian terms, while the illumination from the cupola provides the same suggestions of divine presence and ascent into the light. Puget's design is more dynamic and geometrically complex than Bernini's, with paired columns rising between a square base and curving superstructure, but the connection to the pier figures is the same. The similarities between this baldachin and Gabriel Le Duc's exactly contemporary variation for the Parisian church of Val-de-Grâce (1663–5) cannot be overlooked, and the differences between them clarify the intended function of Puget's configuration. | **fig. 15** | Both transform Bernini's template with extra columns and rounded forms, but Le Duc also changed the relationship with the surrounding space. Unlike either Italian site, the high altar of the Val-de-Grâce is against the apsidal wall and not in the centre of the crossing, making the baldachin more of a framing element than a unifying central axis. Le Duc transformed Bernini's squared structure into a more circular configuration that aligned morphologically with the interior of the church and created

43. Jean-Jacques Gloton, "Pierre Puget architecte romain," in *Puget et son temps; actes du Colloque tenu à l'Université de Provence, les 15, 16 et 17 octobre 1971* (Aix-en-Provence: Pensée universitaire, 1972), 62; Varni, 56.

44. Amadei, 50. The author publishes the original contracts.

45. Walton, 91, 94.

46. Irving Lavin, *Bernini and the Crossing of Saint Peter's* (New York: New York University Press, 1968), 39.

47. *ibid.*, 35–37.

a theatrical space for Michel Anguier's *Nativity* (1665, Paris, Val-de-Grâce). Seen from the nave, the columns seem to coalesce into a cylindrical enclosure with a wide opening beneath a broken pediment, framing a preferred vantage point, and creating a viewing experience that is more scenographic than participatory. Puget's design wedded the graceful form and greater complexity of Le Duc with Bernini's quadrilateral configuration that best aligned with the four pier statues from a central position.

If Puget's full plan had been realized, the four sculpted saints would have been positioned as individual manifestations of connection between earth and heaven epitomized by the Assumption. The inclusion of an altar in the center of the crossing would have added a participatory dimension by allowing communicants to experience their own sacramental union with God. As it stands, viewers and sculpture still coexist in the space of the crossing, only in a less obvious way. Bathed in the same divine light of the cupola that plays off the colossal marble forms, visitors move among huge, luminous, and tangibly real figurations of divine union and Christian heroism. Sebastian's idealized form recalls the antique sculpture that Puget studied in Rome, while Alessandro's ecstatic tension seems almost superhuman in its restrained vehemence.<sup>48</sup> This fusion of the real and the ideal, what Lauro Magnani calls "*naturale-miracoloso*," expresses the invisible but ever-present co-mingling of earthly and divine natures that is the essence of sanctity.<sup>49</sup> Placing Alessandro in this exalted company is the strongest possible assertion of his own sainthood.

It is the way that Puget individuated Alessandro that fully demonstrates the expressive range of his sculpture. The *St. Sebastian* and the *St. Alessandro Sauli* support different patterns of reception based on interactions with their surrounding environments. A comparison is illustrative. Scholars have long recognized the resemblance between the *St. Sebastian* and Bernini's *Daniel* (1655–61, Rome, S. Maria del Popolo), especially the position of the legs.<sup>50</sup> | **fig. 16** | However, the *Daniel* appears to surge out of its niche and into the chapel, confronting the viewer almost interpersonally. The *St. Sebastian* is much more scenographic, or respectful of the barrier between real and pictorial space in the manner of a painted scene.<sup>51</sup> | **fig. 3** | This pictorial quality is enhanced by spatio-temporal indicators that situate the sculpture in a specific historical narrative framework. The image of a Roman soldier shot full of arrows was so commonplace by Puget's time that any viewer with a passing familiarity with visual culture could identify it as a reference to something that happened in late antiquity, rather than an event presented as currently happening. Clear narrative distance supports formal restraint in undermining those visceral and interpersonal qualities accentuated in the *Daniel*.

The *St. Alessandro Sauli* is much closer the *Daniel* conceptually; an independent figure without overt narrative setting to distance its action from the present. The other elements, such as the angel, treasure, and book, are identifying attributes, but do not evoke a specific historical context. His ecstasy appears to be happening right now, a perpetual miracle unfolding in the real crossing of S. Maria Assunta. This is a different communicative mode than the *St. Sebastian*. The latter is more referential of something that transpired elsewhere, like a picture in a history book, while the *St. Alessandro* strives for

48. Soprani, 323–4. The author observes that the head of *St. Sebastian* resembles a Greek sculpture, while the weapons and armor on the ground have the *gusto* of Trajan's Column.

49. Lauro Magnani, "La scultura dalle forme della tradizione alla libertà dello spazio barocco," *Genova nell'età barocca*, eds. Ezia Gavazza, Giovanna Rotondi Terminiello, Carlo Bitossi (Bologna: Nuova Alfa, 1992), 295.

50. Anthony Blunt, *Art and Architecture in France: 1500–1700* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1954), 286.

51. Georget, 118.

the freshness and immediacy of witnessing an event directly. The nature of the representations supports the contention that Sebastian is being used as a hagiographic model for Alessandro. The canonical early Christian archetype of martyr saint is distanced historically, while the potential new saint demonstrates mystical sanctity right now. To use a linguistic analogy, the difference is one of tense: what happened to Sebastian in the past is happening to Alessandro in the present. The old convention gives way to the new, but the reality of sanctity is constant. The equivalence between the two would have been more apparent with the Assumption, rising into the light, as the unifying archetype for individuated instances of divine union. In this configuration, the subjects of the remaining pillars can vary, so long as Sebastian is present as a model of efficacy against plague, which was so important to Alessandro's hagiography and the Sauli's reputation. Any of the other subjects proposed for the niches round out the communion of saints that Alessandro is joining.

### A Revolution in Sculpture?

Puget's work at S. Maria Assunta in Carignano is considered a pivotal moment in the history of Genoese sculpture for introducing dynamic spatial interactivity to what is considered a conservative local tradition.<sup>52</sup> However, this conservatism is really only applicable to stone carving; autonomous, interactive figures were common in Ligurian wood sculpture. These works were connected with the *casacce*, or processional floats commissioned by Genoese confraternities.<sup>53</sup> *Casacce* first appeared in the Middle Ages as modest single figure works, but developed into multi-figure tableaux involving leading artists that blurred the lines between sculpture and reality.<sup>54</sup> Critical neglect of the relationship between wood and stone sculpture in the city is consistent with the bias for marble in early modern art theory, but obscures formal and functional similarities that cross the fine arts divide. Genoese sculptors, including canonical figures like Puget and Parodi, routinely worked in wood and stone, and many wooden sculptures were installed on elaborate altars. The emotionalism, penetrating psychological effect, and appropriation of the viewer's space of the *St. Alessandro Sauli* would not seem all that alien to a Genoese public accustomed to such effects in the *casacce*.

Puget had apprenticed as a wood carver in his native Marseilles before his first trip to Rome in 1638, when he joined the workshop of Pietro da Cortona and changed the trajectory of his career. He never gave up wood sculpture, and his *St. Anthony of Padua* (1665, Genoa, SS. Annunziata in Vastato) reveals that his approaches to the two media are commensurable, despite the prohibition of polychromy in theoretical discussions of sculpture in art history today. | **fig. 17** | The integration of painting and sculpture with the architecture of the chapel setting recalls Bernini and indicates that, conceptually, there was no problem with installing a wooden statue in a place historically associated with marble.<sup>55</sup> The protruding angel in the upper right corner drawing back the curtain to reveal Anthony's vision is a device Bernini had used to challenge spatial distinctions between a sculpted narrative and the surrounding space.<sup>56</sup>

The wood sculpture traditions of Puget's native southern France included pictorial compositions that extend into real space, such as the *Tour des Corps*

52. Venanzio Belloni, *La grande Scultura in marmo a Genova (secoli XVII e XVIII)* (Genoa: G. B. G.: 1988), 138; Magnani, Gavazzi and Terminiello, 256.

53. Orlando Grosso, *Le Casacce genovesi e la scultura lignea sacra genovese del Seicento e Settecento* (Genoa: Edizione Goffi, 1939), 17.

54. Graziella Colmuto, *L'arte del legno in Liguria: A. M. Maragliano* (Alessandria: Tipografia Ferrari, Occella & C., 1968), 10.

55. Léon Lagrange, *Pierre Puget Peintre—Sculpteur Architecte Décorateur de Vaisseaux* (Paris: Didier et Cie., 1868).

56. Antonio Fabio Ivaldi, "Una <> funebre nella Chiesa dei Padri Somaschi (1683). Annotazione sugli apparati effimeri genovesi di fine seicento," *Atti della società ligure di storia patria* 22 (1982): 231–3.

Figure 15. Gabriel Le Duc, *Baldaqin*, 1663–5. Bronze with gilded highlights. Paris, Val-de-Grâce. Photo: Wikimedia Commons, public domain.



Figure 16. (left) Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Daniel and the Lion*, 1655–61. Marble, over life-sized. Rome, S. Maria del Popolo. Photo: Miguel Hermoso Cuesta.



Figure 17. (right) Pierre Puget, *St. Anthony of Padua*, 1665. Polychrome wood, life-sized. Genoa, SS. Annunziata in Vastato. Photo: Carlo Dell'Orto.





**Figure 18.** Guillaume Fontan, *Chapel of Saint Martial*, 1645. Polychrome wood. Toulouse, Saint-Sernin. Photo: Wikimedia Commons, public domain.



**Figure 19.** Fernandino Porta, *St. Alessandro Sauli in Barnabite Attire*, 1741. Oil on canvas. Pavia, S. Maria di Canepanova. Photo: Chiolini, Turconi & C.

Saints in the basilica of Saint-Sernin in Toulouse. In the Chapel of Saint-Martial (1645), sculptor Guillaume Fontan flanked a relief sculpture with a pair of polychrome saints that project from their niches, including a bishop with a crozier and out-turned right palm.<sup>57</sup> | **fig. 18** | This is not an assertion that Puget was directly influenced by this particular work, but an indication of the commensurability of wood and marble sculpture outside of theoretical distinctions. However, it does raise a subject that has received little scholarly attention: the use of polychrome on the *St. Alessandro Sauli*. According to contemporary observer Raffaele Soprani, parts of the angel, including the hair and wings had been tinted “*un coloretto rossiccio così ben accordato; che rapisce gli occhi degli Spettatori*” (a reddish color so well executed that it captivates the eyes of spectators).<sup>58</sup> Dazzling the eye of the spectator is a cornerstone of Baroque aesthetics, but colouring marble was beyond the theoretical pale, even for an illusionist like Bernini. The absence of this pigment today is probably a consequence of its incongruity with later notions of sculptural purity, but what purpose did it serve?

Compared to French or Ligurian traditions of polychrome wood sculpture, Puget’s use of color is mild, which suggests different expectations for wood and marble sculpture despite any formal and functional similarities. Puget obviously did not possess Bernini’s principled aversion to coloring marble, but he also clearly valued the appearance of bare stone. There are different explanations for limiting the use of polychromy. The high cost of marble conveyed prestige and status, and a patron would not wish to obscure this valuable material.<sup>59</sup> On a more general level, expectations condition response and even a mild deviation from the standard monochromy would have been jarring. The much later case of John Gibson’s *Tinted Venus* (1862) is illustrative of how ingrained assumptions shape reception.<sup>60</sup> This controversial statue was also modestly colored but was considered scandalous because the polychromy was light enough for viewers to still recognize it as a marble statue *all’antica* and pass judgement on it in those terms. More dramatic colouring might have deviated too far from accepted norms to be classified as a work of the fine art of sculpture at all. It is likely that Puget did not want to diverge too sharply from contemporary assumptions about marble sculpture in his day either, lest his figures lose their monumentalizing, idealizing impact. The *St. Anthony of Padua* would have been shockingly out of place in the monochrome grandeur of the S. Maria Assunta in Carignano crossing.

The play of light on polished, translucent marble visualizes the mystical infusion of grace in a way that would not be possible were the surface painted. Why, then, was colour used at all? Soprani states that it was limited to the hair and wings of the angel; perhaps it served to distinguish this heavenly being from the mortal saint. He also described it as eye-catching, which means that it drew attention first to the *St. Alessandro Sauli* among the other figures, and then to the lower part of the statue, or the starting point for the vertical progression from worldly attractions to sanctity. Ultimately, the exact reasons for the coloring are speculative, but what is clear that Puget’s sculptural revolution combined the affect and autonomy of the *cassacce* with the optical effects and connotations of polished marble. This balance of real and ideal echoes the mingling of material and spiritual that is the essence of sanctity. It shows

57. Catherine Bourdieu, *L’âge d’or de la sculpture: artistes toulousains de XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Somogy, 1997), 93–94.

58. Soprani, Vol. 2, 324. No trace of this remains today.

59. Francesca Fabbri, “Marmi genovesi nel Sud della Francia, scultori francesi a Genova: nuovi elementi per la vicenda artistica di Honoré Pellé (Gap, 1641; Genova, 1718),” *Artibus et Historiae* 25, no. 49 (2004): 186.

60. Jeremy Cooper, “John Gibson and his *Tinted Venus*,” *Connoisseur* 178, no. 716 (Oct. 1971): 84–92.

who Alessandro was and what he is becoming. It is difficult to imagine a more viscerally powerful visualization of hagiographic identity.

### The Question of Efficacy

If the intent of the *St. Alessandro Sauli* was to define its subject's identity and bolster his prospects for canonization, it is fair to ask whether it was successful. The initial answer is not too positive, given the length of time between its installation and Alessandro's beatification. However, identity formation and influence are nuanced processes that unfold in different venues. It is not reasonable to expect a single hagiographic statue to impel cultic devotion or accelerate an official *processus*. The efficacy is more fairly judged on social and hagiographic grounds; contributions to Sauli prestige and social capital, and effect on Alessandro's reputation and saintly persona. It does appear that the *St. Alessandro Sauli* reflected favorably on the patrons, although it is difficult to isolate the statue from the impression of the overall basilica. When Puget settled in Genoa, the Sauli offered him his first major commission, and his rapid rise to the top of the city's art world confirmed their judgment. When Alessandro was finally beatified, celebrations were held at S. Maria Assunta in Carignano and included effusive praise of Sauli family virtue and piety.<sup>61</sup> A now-lost silver statue produced for the event was described as copying Puget's statue, which suggests that his visualization of Alessandro was at the heart of this grand display of prestige.<sup>62</sup>

The silver statue shifts the assessment of success to hagiographic criteria, since it reveals efforts to establish the *St. Alessandro Sauli* as the canonical image of the new *beato*. Alessandro's pre-beatification iconography was limited and unfixed, but there is an observable difference between representations produced by the Barnabites and those originating outside of the order.<sup>63</sup> Early Barnabite commissions tend to follow the painting attributed to Guido Reni (Rome: S. Carlo ai Catinari) and show Alessandro in the costume of the order without obvious references to mystical spirituality. Works produced outside of the order, such as those by Puget, Crespi, and Fiasella depict him as an episcopal saint in the model of Borromeo and, while Puget introduces an ecstatic dimension, he omits reference to the Barnabites. This is essentially the same vision that appeared in Federico Ferrari's picture for Alessandro's tomb in the Duomo of Pavia (1744), where the curve of his posture and upturned hand are reminiscent of Puget's composition.

In the first half of the eighteenth century, images start to appear that combine ecstatic devotion, episcopal character, and overt references to the Barnabite order. Giovanni Battista Tagliasacchi's *St. Alessandro with the Emblems of a Religious and a Bishop* (Piacenza, S. Brigida, ca. 1737) depicts Alessandro in Barnabite garb, kneeling in cloud-borne ecstasy, while his mitre, crozier, and cross rest in the care of angels. The picture traces the same path through worldly office into the realm of pure spirit that Puget mapped decades earlier, only with a clear reference to his order. The theme recurs in the *St. Alessandro in Barnabite Attire* by Fernandino Porta (Pavia, S. Maria di Canepanova, 1741), which is ostensibly a narrative depiction of a well-known event in his *vita*, when, as a young man, he impressed the Milanese Barnabites with his preaching. | **fig. 19** | Yet this is not a literal illustration, since Alessandro is depicted

61. Moltedo, 503–5.

62. Eugenio Nervi, *Per la Gloria del Beato Alessandro Sauli nel celebrarsi solennemente le Feste della di lui Beatificazione nell'insigne collegiate di S. Maria in Carignano sonnetti* (Genova: Stampe di Paolo Scionico, 1741), 5. An inventory of the basilica from 1741 also mentions this statue. See Varni, 76.

63. For Sauli's iconography within the Barnabite order, see Giuseppe M. Boffito, *Scrittori Barnabiti, o della congregazione dei chierici regolare di San Paolo (1533–1933): Biografia, Bibliografia, Iconografia*, Vol. III (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 1934), 424–6.

as an older member of the order, and the apparition of Christ and the *putti* holding the symbols of his vocation adds a supernatural dimension foreshadowing future achievement. It is an argument for the continuing success of Puget's vision that his version of ecstatic bishop had a lasting effect on Alessandro's hagiographic persona.

The statue had much less of an impact on Alessandro's cult and canonization prospects than on his image. It is possible to estimate where his devotional appeal was strongest from canonization documents and other hagiographic sources. There are references to him as *beatus* from the early seventeenth century, but the evidence for this reputation is limited to certain areas. References to his cult are common in Aleria and Pavia, but there is little sign of a following in Genoa. The frequency and distribution of reported miracles is a rough proxy for the intensity of intercessory requests, and while Pavia, Aleria, Milan, Bologna, Cremona, Novara, and Turin all appear on the list, Genoa is noticeably absent.<sup>64</sup> If the Sauli intended to ignite public devotion with their commission, there is little evidence of success. The only affirmation of a Genoese cult appears in the beatification celebrations, which were centred on the family church.

### Conclusion

The curious case of the *St. Alessandro Sauli* turns out to have been a case of misplaced optimism arising from the same sense of pending canonization that led to the Barnabite *vita* of 1660. But this false alarm calls attention to the personalized, experiential form of hagiography that sculpture offered the saint-making process. Better understanding how saintly personae were defined and projected is of value to historians of religion as well as art. For art historians, Puget's work for the Sauli reveals nuanced visual communication that goes well beyond the definitions of sculpture offered in early modern art theory. One of the challenges to the study of what has traditionally been called Baroque art is that the contemporary theoretical treatises do not address the interactive rhetoric developed by actual artists at the time. Puget drew on his experiences as a wood carver and painter to model a hagiographic image for Alessandro that drew on important prototypes, and then situate that figure as the latest iteration of a timeless ideal of sanctity. The appeal of sculpture is to make this pastiche of other saints, family history, and sculptural traditions into a mimetic presence that is at once lifelike and superhuman: a visual homologue for the saint himself. Works like this demonstrate the affective richness of sculptural signification. ¶

64. For example, the *Sommario de processi fatti d'ordine della Sacra Congregazione de Riti* (1638); *Beatificationis & Canonizationis Ven. Serv. De Alexandri Saulij Aleriensis...* (1678); *vite* by Gabuzio and Gallicio.