

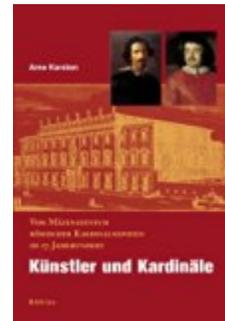
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Arne Karsten. *K nstler und Kardin le. Vom M zenatentum r mischer Kardinalnepoten im 17. Jahrhundert*. Cologne and Weimar: B hlau, 2003. vi + 258 pp.

Arne Karsten. *K nstler und Kardin le: Vom M zenatentum r mischer Kardinalnepoten im 17. Jahrhundert*. K ln: B hlau Verlag, 2003. 258 S. (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-412-11302-5.

Reviewed by Susan R. Boettcher (Department of History, University of Texas at Austin)
Published on H-Catholic (March, 2006)



As the book's title suggests, Arne Karsten's dissertation focuses on art patronage among cardinal nephews in seventeenth-century Rome, from the papacy of Paul V, which began in 1605, to that of Alexander VII (d. 1667), with particular emphasis on information gleaned from Roman *avvisi* or news reports and autobiographical statements of contemporaries, which Karsten maintains are under-exploited in the study of this period.[1] This is not the typical German dissertation: it's short, easy to read, light on exhaustive but obligatory references to secondary literature, free from notation of minor orthographical divergences in sources intended to prove that the author deserves his doctorate, and characterized by a prose style that is always entertaining and often compelling. Karsten begins with the announcement, which feels like an exaggeration, that scholarship has neglected the relationship between politics and art in its analysis of the Italian Baroque. In the end, he convincingly demonstrates this relationship, although not without leaving other questions in the mind of the reader.

Avvisi and diaries allow Karsten to exploit the full gossip potential of the many fascinating stories he narrates. Beginning with a short chapter on Scipione Borghese, the cardinal-nephew of Paul V, the author traces the ways in which the nephews, compelled to demonstrate the social position of their families, began to amass art collections, often without regard for their particular features or quality. One of Karsten's goals is to lay to rest notions that noble players in the Baroque Roman art market were passionate about art for art's sake. One of the first tasks of each cardinal-nephew was the construction or decoration of a representative villa that reflected the

family's prestige. This could happen slowly, or quickly, as in the case of Ludovico Ludovisi, whose uncle Gregory XV's pontificate lasted only two years. But Ludovisi's energy, along with Gregory's willingness, in light of his illness, to push the Borghese clientele out of as many appointed offices as he could, meant that even so his family could assemble a significant collection of art to reflect its prestige. Karsten illustrates the decadence of the period with numerous details, such as Ludovisi's diagnosis with gout in 1620 at the ripe old age of 25 (p. 41); he was also lucky to obtain the sinecure of papal chamberlain, a lifetime position he was able to pass on to a relative for a small fee when a better opportunity, the office of papal vice-chancellor, opened up. In comparison, under Gregory's successor Urban VIII (1623-1644), who enjoyed a pontificate of over two decades, cardinal-nephew Francesco Barberini proceeded much more slowly in creating his representative collection. The pontificate coincided with the Thirty Years' War and the corresponding power loss of the papacy, but this state of affairs did nothing to stop the flow of art patronage. On the contrary, Karsten maintains, popes in times of crisis increased the output of their (family) propaganda machines to compensate.

The most interesting story in the volume is that of Camillo Pamphili, the nephew of Innocent X (1644-1655)–interrupted in his marriage negotiations by his surprising creation as cardinal in a family with a decided nephew shortage. (Originally he had been given the Vatican offices usually distributed to secular nephews, but his uncle wanted to prevent him from making a marriage that would create a family alliance in which the Pamphili

would be the junior partners.) A weakling who lacked the necessary training for curial offices, he was known to lie abed until 7 p.m. Contemporaries found his patronage similarly lacking in style and energy. When he fell in love with Olimpia Aldobrandini-Borghese, a scion of an important family, however, he was allowed to trade his red hat in for a wedding ring—while Innocent cried crocodile tears and Camillo’s influential mother had him banned from court. He was only able to fulfill the role of art patron after reconciliation with his uncle and the failure of two other cardinal-nephews to absolve this task adequately. Karsten ends his narrative with Flavio Chigi, the nephew of Alexander VII (1655-1667), who started his path as cardinal-nephew late because Alexander had declared nepotism the equivalent of atheism, but a year later changed his opinion, allowing his relatives to flood into ecclesiastical positions. Chigi was less moved to augment family prestige through his art patronage and was more interested in following his own tastes. The potentially short term of a papacy, the probability that the pope’s successor would come from a different family, and the need to establish and consolidate the family’s social position in light of these two factors led to the development of a particular iconography of the cardinal-nephew, rooted in portrayals of the classical world, intended to bolster the position of individuals and their relatives for whom the term “social climber” might be considered a euphemism. In some cases (Camillo Pamphili as Hercules) these depictions strained the credibility of their contemporary observers. Because of the significance of such depictions to Karsten’s argument, the book could usefully have included an index of artistic themes or images and not just a register of names. But the author is to be congratulated for writing a work in which the activities of artistic giants such as Bernini and da Cortona are seen in their social and political, not just their aesthetic, contexts. The book also discusses the more pedestrian aspects of creating artistic prestige, as in the treatment of the canopy bed created for Chigi by Giambattista Gaulli.

Most works on art patronage nowadays seem to require shorter or longer references to Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of “habitus” or to the various musings of theorists on the strategic employment of “symbolic capital.” Refreshingly, Karsten convinces the reader of his argument with narration and argumentation alone, but readers may find themselves wondering whether he has gone too far in insisting on the total irrelevance of theoretical debates

about art to the outcomes of art patronage or the complete lack of artistic interest on the part of collectors. Moreover, considering that at the end of his tale, the papal ban on nepotism of 1692 was only a generation away, readers of H-Catholic may find themselves wondering what the larger atmosphere of response to nepotism in Rome was, outside of admiration for or disdain of the style and content of the cardinal-nephews art patronage—and to what extent such activities contributed to social attitudes toward the practice. Clues to another part of the story that is played down—the religious background—are included in Karsten’s many pieces of evidence: Ludovisi’s preference for displaying images of the Madonna in the family’s representative villa (p. 66), debates about the altarpiece destined for St. Peter’s (after p. 94), or Pamphili’s “unusual” preoccupation with financing the construction of new churches, even (or particularly) after he resigned the cardinalship. These tantalizing hints are not pursued; the burden of the narrative suggests that the considerations about the church or religion were non-starters in the lives of the cardinal-nephews. Now demonstrations of the irreligiosity of the Roman curia are legion, so Karsten’s portrayal is plausible, but it sets aside a factor concerning the Church itself, namely, seeing the church as means for obtaining and displaying prestige and the consideration that the nephews’ positions were prestigious precisely because of the potency and prestige of the Church. In any case, one suspects that the story of the cardinal-nephews’ relationship to the Church is a bit more complicated than Karsten suggests. In the end, however, readers must admire the admirable work he has done in fleshing out the social and political context of art patronage and precisely the reputation for abuse and profligacy that the cardinal-nephews enjoyed.

Note [1]. On the origin and contents of *avvisi*, see Mario Infelise, “Roman *Avvisi*: Information and Politics in the Seventeenth Century,” in *Court and Politics in Papal Rome, 1492-1700*, ed. Gianvittorio Signorotto and Maria Antonietta Visceglia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 212-228.

Copyright (c) 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-catholic>

Citation: Susan R. Boettcher. Review of Arne Karsten, *Künstler und Kardinäle. Vom Mäzenatentum römischer Kardinalnepoten im 17. Jahrhundert* and Karsten, Arne, *Künstler und Kardinäle: Vom Mäzenatentum römischer Kardinalnepoten im 17. Jahrhundert*. H-Catholic, H-Net Reviews. March, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11496>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.