



Christ Cleansing the Temple, Bernardino Mei

Christ Cleansing the Temple

Bernardino Mei
Italian, about 1655
Oil on canvas
41 x 55 ½ in.
69.PA.27



Questions for Teaching

What colors stand out when you first look at this painting?

What's going on in this painting?
How would you describe the scene?

What details do you notice about the location of the scene? By looking at the details, what do you think the setting is?

Where do you see movement in this work of art? Observe the colors and lines in the painting. How does the artist use these elements to create movement? (In this case, note the strong red diagonal created by Christ's gesture in the center of the painting. Christ's robe is the only vibrant color in the entire composition. Using this bright color on a diagonal heightens the drama by creating instability in the composition.)

Background Information

Upon seeing the Temple of Jerusalem turned into a marketplace by moneychangers and traders in sacrificial animals, the whip-carrying Jesus bursts out in anger. With an animated composition laid out on diagonals, and monumental figures reeling, Bernardino Mei's canvas aptly portrays Christ's righteous fury.

Mei borrowed the half-length figures and their unique, unidealized faces from Caravaggio's naturalistic followers. From the Baroque whirls of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sculpture, he took the multiple twisting movements, then added a silvery light to harmonize the colors.

Baroque artists often painted this subject because of its tumultuous action and intense emotion. Italians of the 1600s tended to interpret the theme as symbolic of the contemporary reform of the Catholic Church.

About the Artist

Bernardino Mei (Italian, 1612–1676)

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Due to his artistic skill and a powerful patron from his hometown of Siena, Italy, Bernardino Mei rose from obscurity as a provincial artist to fame and fortune in the important city of Rome. He was actively supported by Fabio Chigi, who was from a powerful Siennese family. After becoming Pope Alexander VII in 1655, Chigi summoned Mei to Rome in 1657. There Mei joined the Accademia di San Luca and regularly painted religious pictures and other subjects for the pope and his nephew, Cardinal Flavio Chigi.

Inspired by contemporary Roman painting and Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sculpture, Mei had found his mature style by the 1650s. Complex rhythms and forms, whirling movement, and great expressive power marked these later works—a departure from the style he learned in Siena. But Mei's characteristic silvery light still reflected the influence of Baroque artist Raffaello Vanni, with whom Mei may have studied in Siena. Mei's earlier style derived from Siennese art of the 1500s and from the descriptive realism of engravers. His later works were painted with a lighter palette and consisted of more monumental and sculptural forms.

