

Imagines praepositorum generalium Societatis Iesu

(1748; Rome, 1751)

Arnaldo Van Westerhout

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SAINT JOSEPH'S UNIVERSITY

In the early modern period and thereafter, it was customary to memorialize the most important members of religious orders, civil society, and the ecclesiastical hierarchy by having their portraits painted and biographies written. For instance, the Jesuits used portraits as a visual memorial of the men who made a mark on the history of the Society of Jesus, while hagiographic biographies testified to their virtues and apostolic work. Westerhout's engraved portraits of the Father Generals of the Society from St. Ignatius Loyola (in office 1541-56) to Ignazio Visconti (in office 1751-55) are an outstanding example of this phenomenon.

Here exhibited is Westerhout's engraving of Father General Gian Paolo Oliva (in office 1664-81), the 11th successor to St. Ignatius. Oliva was perhaps the General most devoted to the visual arts, making his greatest impact through patronage. A prolific orator, Oliva frequently appealed to painting and sculpture imagery in his sermons, some of which were published in an edition with a frontispiece by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680), a personal friend. It was during Oliva's term in office that the vast work was begun of decorating (or of rendering baroque) the Gesù. Oliva also oversaw the construction of the new church of the novitiate of Sant'Andrea al Quirinale, for which project Bernini was the architect.

Westerhout's engravings often served as artistic sources for paintings, such as that of Oliva also here exhibited. In continuity with, but a variation on, this tradition were life-size portraits, such as the series of eighteen paintings of the Generals from Ignatius to Lorenzo Ricci (in office 1758-75) produced by Miguel Cabrera (1695?-1768), one of the greatest and best-known painters of Colonial Mexico. Cabrera worked frequently for the Society of Jesus, as well as for a wide roster of other clients—viceroys, archbishops, members of the aristocracy, and various other religious communities—and painted a wide range of subjects, including popular religious themes, portraits, casta paintings, and even a folding screen with a mythological subject.

Cabrera's portraits of the Generals were executed for the former college of the Jesuits in Guanajuato and remained there until the suppression of the Society in 1773, when the college was secularized by the Mexican government. Eventually this set of paintings was acquired in 1887 by Fr. Burchard Villiger, S.J., the fifth president of Saint Joseph's College. Fr. Villiger had Cabrera's portraits framed and hung in the corridors of Saint Joseph's College, where they remained until 1908. Their present whereabouts are unknown.



S. IGNATIUS LOJOLA

SANCTUS IGNATIUS CANTABRIGIENSIS IESU SOCIETATIS FUNDATOR ET PRAEPOSITOR GENERALIS SOCIETATIS IESU. NATUS IN CASTRIS DE LOYOLA, IN REGNO CASTELLAE, ANNO 1493. OBIIIT IN URBE ROMA, ANNO 1556. HUIUS VITAE HISTORIA ET SCRIPTA A DOMINO ANTONIO DE S. JOSEPHO, SACRAMENTARIUM SACRISANTIAE, COMPOSUIT. ROMAE, IN AEDIBUS SOCIETATIS IESU, ANNO 1751. PAGES 114.

Societatis Iesu. Romae. 1751. p. 114.

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SAINT IGNATIUS LOYOLA
 as illustrated in *Imagines praepositorum generalium*
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GENERAL GIAN PAOLO OLIVA

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GENERAL GIAN PAOLO OLIVA

19th century oil-on-canvas painting measuring 24 by 18 inches and modeled on Westerhout's engraving of Oliva.

Saint Joseph's University Art Collection