

Giorgio Vasari's *Madonna of the Rosary*: A Rose Garden of Blessings

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For my teacher and mentor, Lilian Armstrong (1936-2021)

In 1569, Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) completed a painting of the *Madonna of the Rosary* for the private chapel of the Capponi family in the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. In his *Ricordanze* (Book of Records), Vasari explained the commission as well as documenting the assistance of his Florentine pupil, Jacopo Zucchi (1541-1590), in the completion of this painting. This essay discusses Vasari's symbolism of the rosary as a reflection of the Tridentine Reform in Florence as well as a visual interpretation of Italian Mannerist painters on this devotional subject.

Keywords: Giorgio Vasari, mysteries of the Rosary, *virga*, Christian symbolism, Tridentine Reform, Capponi family, Mannerism, Jacopo Zucchi, Cosimo Daddi, Lorenzo Lotto, Margarita Barza, Santa Maria Novella, Bartolomeo Scalvo, Carlo Borromeo

History of the Commission and Placement of the Altarpiece

At the end of 1569, the Florentine artist, art historian, and writer Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) completed the painting *Madonna of the Rosary* for the private chapel of the Capponi family in the church of Santa Maria Novella, Florence (Figures 1a-1b). In his *Ricordanze* (a book detailing recorded commissions, payments received, and purchased materials) Vasari explained the commission as well as documenting the assistance of Jacopo Zucchi (1541-1590) in the completion of this altarpiece. Vasari noted:

I remember that close to end of this year [1569] I completed a painting on the Rosary that was sent to the Church of Santa Maria Novella, it was of 7 braccia high and 4 braccia long. [The painting] was for reverend friar Angelo Malatesti of Pistoia, the prior of said convent [Santa Maria Novella]; above [the painting] there was a tondo containing putti that disperse roses. For such a commission [painting], I received payment of 200 [florins]; 100 [florins] were given to Jacopino [Jacopo Zucchi].¹ (Hall, 1979)

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¹ Karl Frey, *Der literarische Nachlass Giorgio Vasaris* (Munich: George Müller, 1930), II, 881, Ricordo 348: "Ricordo come alla fine di questo anno sifini la tavola del Rosario, cheandonella chiesa di Sant Maria Novella, altabraccia 7, larghaquattro, per il reverend padre Fran Angelo Malatesti da Pistoia, priore di dettoconvento; con un tondo sopra; con putti chegetton rose. Ebesi per pagamento di detta tavola dugentochesene da cento a Jacopino". See also Marcia B. Hall, *Renovation and Counter-Reformation: Vasari and Duke Cosimo in Sta Maria Novella and Sta Croce 1565-1577* (Oxford: Warburg Studies/Clarendon Press, 1979), for a study on Vasari's artistic interactions in the Church of Santa Maria Novella.



Figure 1a. Cheney's reconstruction of Giorgio Vasari, *Madonna of the Rosary*, for Camilla Capponi Chapel, 1569.
Santa Maria Novella, Florence.
Photo credit: Liana De Girolami Cheney.



Figure 1b. Giorgio Vasari and Jacopo Zucchi, *Madonna of the Rosary*, 1569, oil on panel for the Capponi Chapel, now in the Bardi Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.
Photo credit: Liana De Girolami Cheney.

The altarpiece was praised by the Florentine art critic, novelist, and poet, Raffaello Borghini (1537-1588), in *Il Riposo* (1584), stating:

[Vasari] This painting depends almost entirely on the invention of the craftsman himself. It does not seem to me that it is possible not to greatly praise the invention. I see he [Vasari] has made the Mother of the Highest Good in the act of receiving all those who kneel in his holy prayer and the angels, who holding her skirt [mantle] wide give comfort to those who wish to flee the falsehood of the world and shelter under her. (Borghini, 2008, p. 85)

A further comment by Borghini on Vasari's *Madonna of the Rosary* notes that the painting shows a "Very beautiful composition, the Glorious Virgin [is seen] very well portrayed, and the color is very charming" (Borghini, 2008, p. 140).

This essay, in two parts, analyzes Vasari's religious symbolism of the Rosary in this altarpiece: (1) as a devotional reflection of the Tridentine Reform in Florence, and (2) as a spiritual subject visualized by other Italian Mannerist painters under a Vasarian influence.

There are several complexities and vicissitudes associated with this commission regarding its location and relocation within the chapels of the church. The Capponi chapel and altar were the last will and bequest of Camilla Capponi. According to her Will of 4 August 1568, Camilla wished not only to have a chapel and altar with a panel painting of the *Madonna of the Rosary*, but also that every morning a mass should be ministered in the chapel for her soul. Following her wishes, her inheritors contacted Angelo Malatesti, Prior of Santa Maria Novella and Executor of Capponi's will, and Giorgio Vasari, for the implementation and creation of the altarpiece. The chapel was completed six months after Capponi's death. At the end of 1569, Vasari recorded the completion of the painting and receipt of payment from Malatesti.² The installation of the painting in the chapel took place on May 1570, as recorded in the church inventory.³

The original Capponi chapel consisted of an altar with a *Madonna of the Rosary* and a tondo with angels dispersing roses (Figures 1a-1b). In *Renovation and Counter-Reformation: Vasari and Duke Cosimo in Sta Maria Novella and Sta Croce 1565-1577*, Marcia Hall noted that the tondo still exists and is visible in the Capitolo del Nocentino, the convent of the church, behind the refectory of Santa Maria Novella (Hall, 1979, p. 115). It is unclear, however, how the tondo was installed in the chapel. Although Vasari claimed that the tondo was located above the painting, but the window above the altar prevents this placement. It may be that originally the tondo was designed to accompany the painting but that its size prevented its placement above the altar.

Another uncertain account reported by Hall was about the shifting of ownership of the chapel from the Capponi family to the confraternity of the Compagnia del Rosario (Thurston & Shipman, 1912).⁴ In her Will, Camilla Capponi did not mention the confraternity. Today in the Church of Santa Maria Novella, one can see the stained-glass window with the coat-of-arms of the Capponi family that once was part of the Capponi Chapel. The Capponi's crest is composed of an oval cartouche with an interior design containing two separate areas, delineated by a dark or blue/black color and a silver color (Figure 2b). Hence, the area of the chapel originally pertained to the Capponi family and not to the confraternity. Records reveal that, until 1906, the Capponi altar with Vasari's *Madonna of the Rosary* was located on the left side of the nave, covering the precious work of Masaccio's *Trinity* of 1427, done *al fresco* (Figures 2a-2b).⁵ Scholarship by Deborah H. Cibelli on the concealment of Masaccio's *Trinity* explains that Vasari created a stone altar over the fresco for the placement of his oil on panel painting, the *Madonna of the Rosary*. Recently, the interior of the Church of Santa Maria

² ASF Notarile Antecosimiano, N184 (1568), Fos. 108ff, and AFS Conv. Suopp. 102, Vol. 90, Fos. 35v-36r, dated 20 March 1568, and recorded as "Debitori e Creditori Segnato A a.c.151".

³ AFS Conv. Suopp. 102, Vol. 90, Fos. 35v-36r, dated 20 March 1568, and recorded as "Debitori e Creditori Segnato A a.c.153".

⁴ For the history of the Confraternity of the Rosary founded by the Dominican Order, see Herbert Thurston and Andrew J. Shipman, "The Rosary", in Remy Lafont, ed., *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), Volume 13, online at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13188b.htm> (accessed on 15 December 2021).

⁵ Walter and Elisabeth Paatz, *Die Kirchen von Florenz*, 6 vols. (Frankfurt: Vittorio Kostermann, 1952-1954), 3:795, n. 219, on Santa Maria Novella.

Novella has gone through renovation, involving the reconstruction of the stone altars along the side aisles of the church-and unveiling some original frescoes by early Renaissance painters.



Figure 2a. Capponi's window with coat of arms and Masaccio, *Trinity*, 1427, fresco, today.
Santa Maria Novella, Florence.



Figure 2b. Capponi's coat of arms, window and Capponi Palace, Florence.

In 1565, when Duke Cosimo I de' Medici (1519-74) requested that Vasari modernize the interior of the Gothic church of Santa Maria Novella to fit the Florentine Tridentine mandate (Hall, 1979, p. 115; O'Malley, 2002; Mitchell, 2009, pp. 5-46; Bosch, 2020, pp. 37-49), Vasari composed altars in pietra serena along the aisle of the church stone. Each of them framed the space of standing frescoes painted by earlier artists. In order to preserve them, the frescoes were covered by a superimposing panel or canvas painting by a sixteenth-century artist. This architectural design of stone altars was therefore an original method of preservation and renovation. Vasari successfully complied with the Duke's request, followed the Tridentine precepts, and ingeniously protected the old artistic works of art for posterity (Figure 3) (Cibelli, 2020; Crowe& Cavalcaselle, 1883, 2:316-317).



Figure 3. Cheney's reconstruction of Giorgio Vasari, *Madonna of the Rosary*, oil on panel, originally covering Masaccio, *Trinity*, 1427, fresco. Santa Maria Novella, Florence.
Photo credit: Liana De Girolami Cheney.

In *Renovation and Counter-Reformation: Vasari and Duke Cosimo in Sta Maria Novella and Sta Croce 1565-1577*, Hall suggested that in placing the Capponi's altar over the funerary fresco of Masaccio's *Trinity*, Vasari was paraphrasing certain motifs in the painting, for example, the presence of the Trinity, God the Father appearing with The Holy Spirit, and Mary's action of interceding for humankind(Hall, 1979, p. 62 citing Borghini, 2008, p. 10). Cibelli also noted that “the references to Masaccio’s fresco was a ‘touchstone for Vasari’” (Cibelli, 2020, n. 21). In 1573, Vasari repeated the image of the Trinity for the *Aretinegonfalone* (a type of heraldic flag or banner), which was to occupy a permanent place within one of the city’s churches after this section of the *gonfalone*, which originally measured approximately 196 x 138 cm was cut down to 175 x 135 cm to fit the stucco frame when the Compagnia della Trinità had the work installed in the Church of Santissima Trinità (Cibelli, 2020, n. 21).

During the 20th century, as previously noted, perhaps around 1906, in order to unveil the fresco of Masaccio's *Trinity* of 1427, the Capponi altarpiece of the *Madonna of the Rosary* panel was removed from the

stone altar and transported from this area of the chapel to another chapel, the Bardi Chapel, located in the right transept of the church of Santa Maria Novella (Figures 4a-4f) (Dempsey, 1972, pp. 279-281; Casazza, 1998, pp. 65-89, esp. 70).⁶

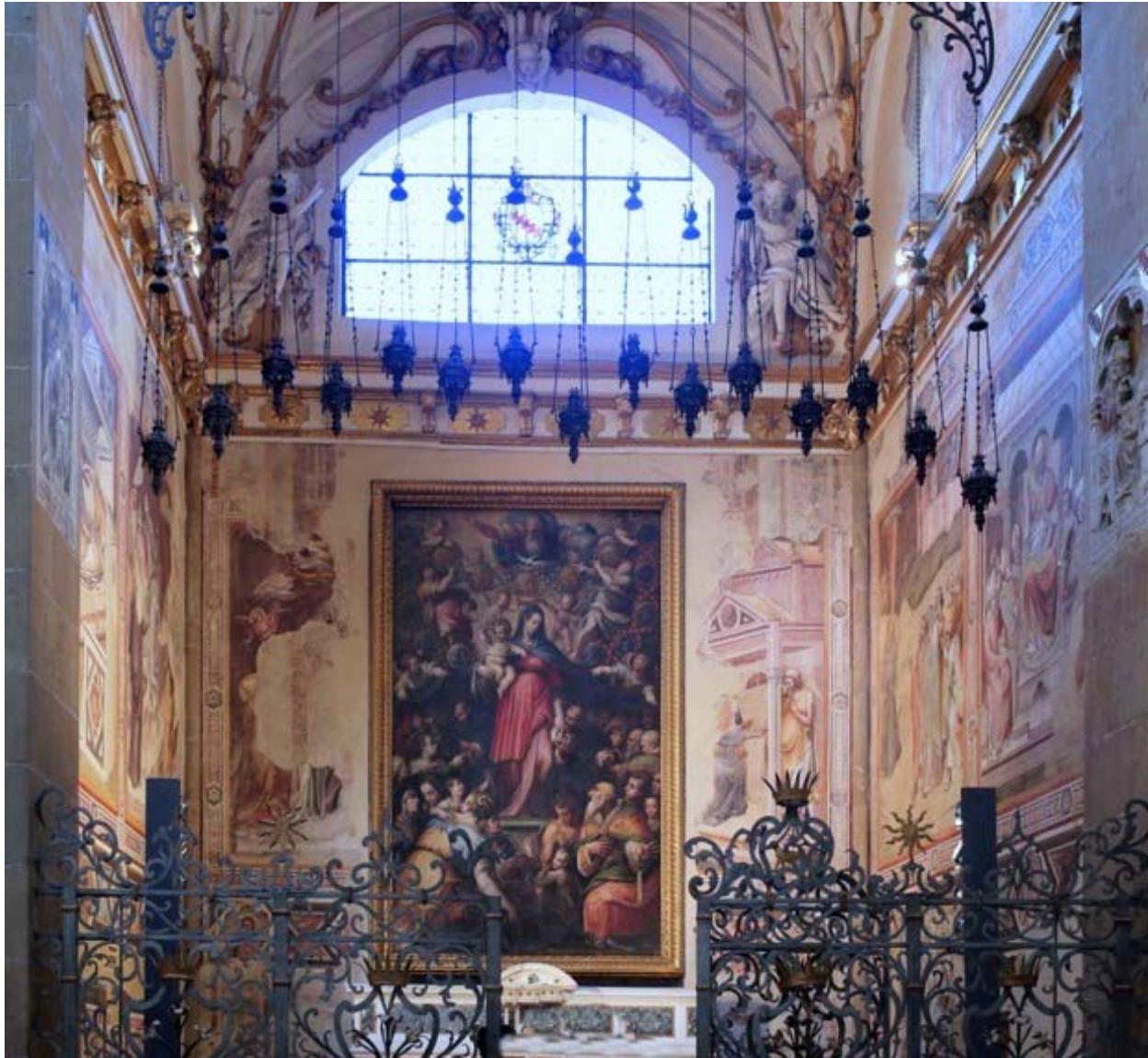


Figure. 4a. Giorgio Vasari, *Madonna of the Rosary*, 1569, oil on panel.

Now in the Bardi Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

Photo credit: Liana De Girolami Cheney.

⁶ Charles Dempsey, "Masaccio's Trinity: Altarpiece or Tomb?", *The Art Bulletin*, 54(3) (September 1972), 279-281, claiming that Vasari damaged Masaccio's fresco; and Ornella Casazza, "Masaccio's Fresco Technique and Problems of Conservation", in Rona Goffen, *Masaccio's Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 65-89, esp. 70, contesting the opposite and citing Vasari's praising remarks on this work in Masaccio's *vita*.



Figure 4b. Giorgio Vasari, *Madonna of the Rosary*, 1569, oil on panel.

Now in the Bardi Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

Photo credit: Liana De Girolami Cheney.



Figure 4c. Giorgio Vasari and Jacopo Zucchi, *Madonna of the Rosary*, det., 1569, oil on panel for the Capponi Chapel, now in the Bardi Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

Photo credit: Liana De Girolami Cheney.



Figure 4d. Giorgio Vasari and Jacopo Zucchi, *Madonna of the Rosary*, det., 1569, oil on panel for the Capponi Chapel, now in the Bardi Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

Photo credit: Liana De Girolami Cheney.

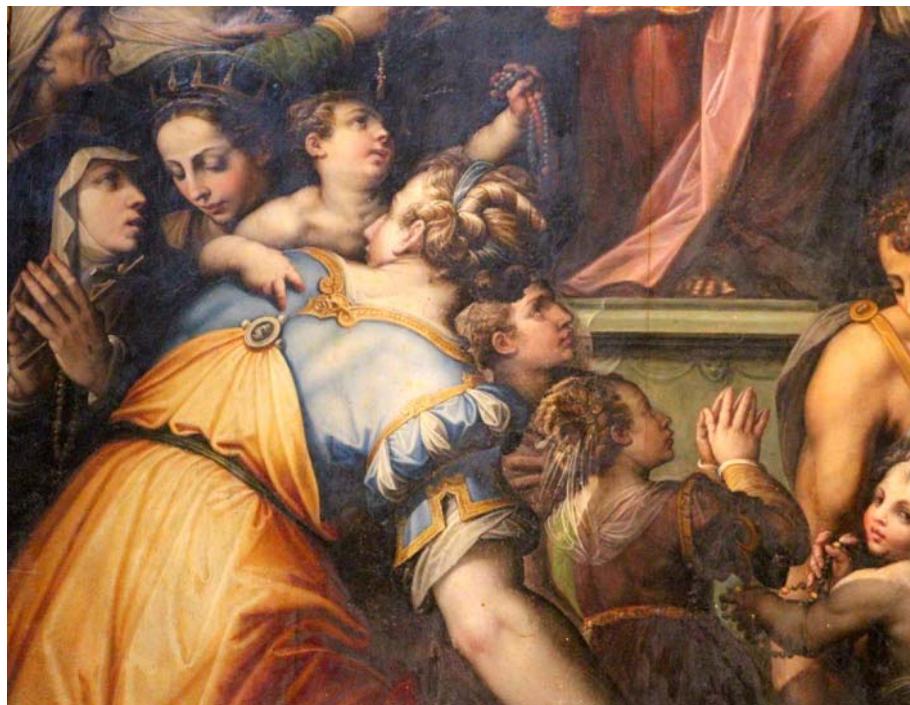


Figure 4e. Giorgio Vasari and Jacopo Zucchi, *Madonna of the Rosary*, det., 1569, oil on panel for the Capponi Chapel, now in the Bardi Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

Photo credit: Liana De Girolami Cheney.

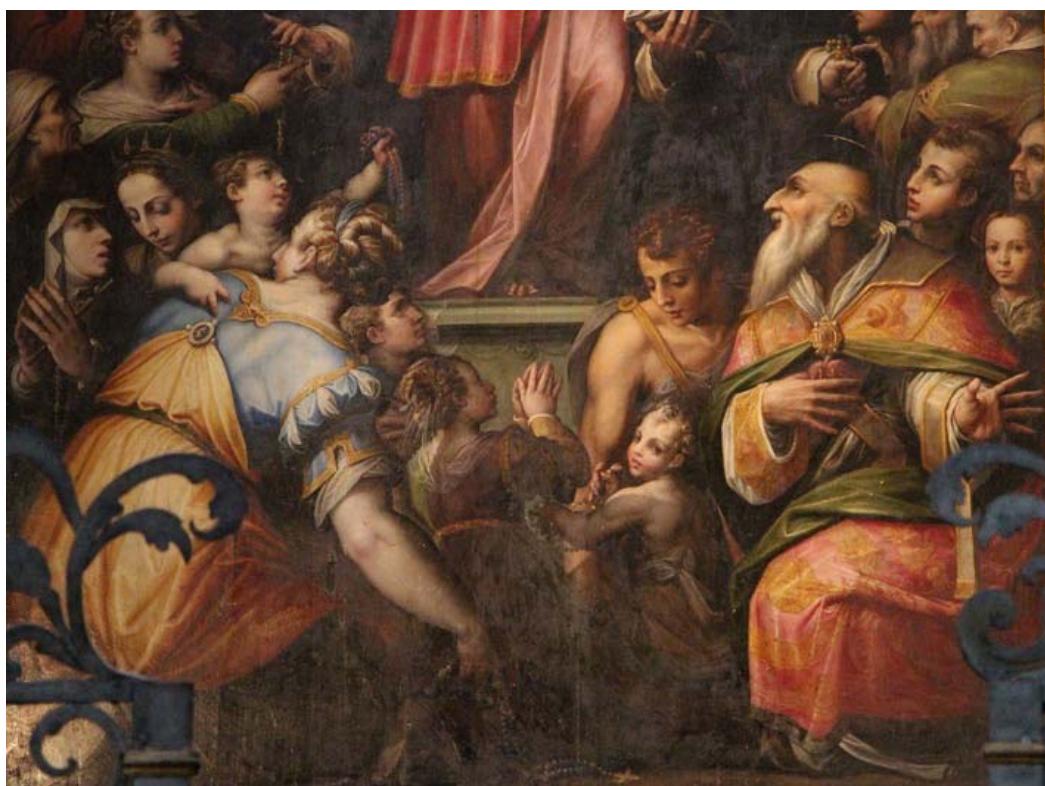


Figure 4f. Giorgio Vasari and Jacopo Zucchi, *Madonna of the Rosary*, det., 1569, oil on panel for the Capponi Chapel, now in the Bardi Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

Photo credit: Liana De Girolami Cheney.

The Bardi Chapel is rich with historical and artistic decorations contributed by several artists since the Trecento (1300s). In 1334, the Riccardo de' Bardi family donated two hundred gold florins for a family chapel, which it was built in 1336 (Raguin & Stanbury, 2005, pp. 175, 182, n. 61, 62).⁷ Around 1405, the sons of the Riccardo de' Bardi commissioned the Bolognese Dalmasio di Jacopo degli Scannabecchi (1315-1374) to decorate the chapel's walls *al fresco* with scenes of the Life of Saint Gregory the Great (540-610) (Raguin & Stanbury, 2005, p. 182, n. 63; Benati, 1986b, 1:193-232, esp. 219-221; Benati, 1986a, 2:567-568; Vasari, 1568/1962, 1:362, n. 2). These were earlier attributed to Spinello di Luca Spinelli, known as Spinello Aretino (1345-1410). The paintings in the frescoed lunette and in the diamond shape, containing religious portraits and located below the narrative scene of Saint Gregory the Great, are attributed to the Sienese Duccio di Buoninsegna (1255-1319) or the Aretine Spinello Aretino (1350-1410). The ceiling, depicting *Saint Dominic in Glory* of 1700, was done by the Baroque painter Pietro Dandini (1646-1712) while he was residing in Florence under the sponsorship of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Cosimo III de' Medici (1642-1723). The Medieval stained-glass window inside this chapel shows the coat of arms of the Bardi family by an unknown artist, consisting of rhombuses (lozenges) of red color placed in a diagonal line (Camajani, 1940, p. 345). Heraldic imagery considered the rhombus to be a symbol of distinction and labor (Camajani, 1940, p. 344).⁸ Vasari's *Madonna of the Rosary* was placed below the window, in the center of the chapel, and above the chancel or sanctuary where it is still on view today (Figures 5a-5b).

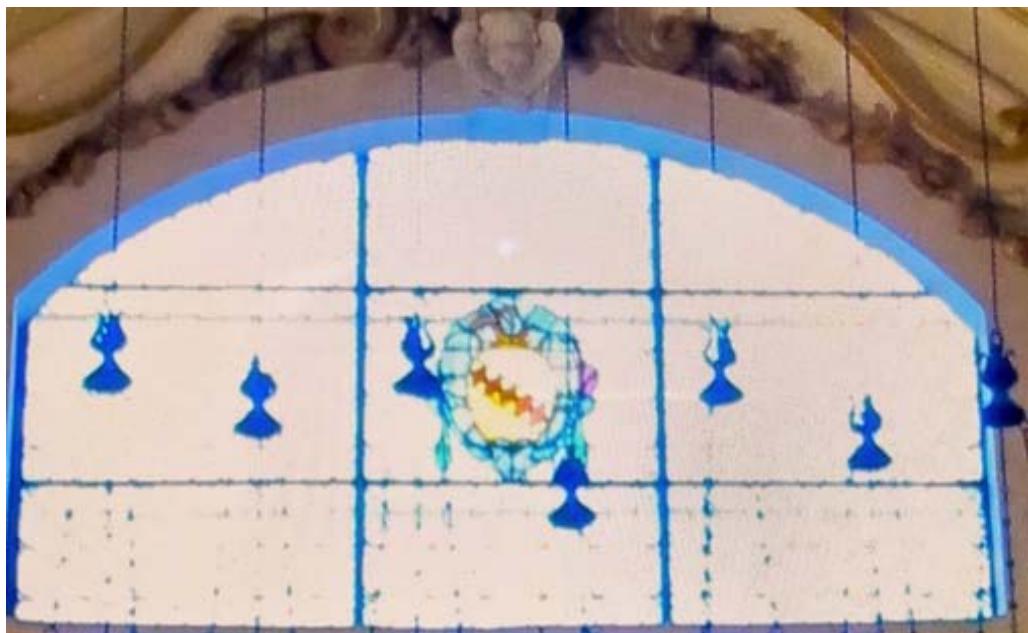


Figure 5a. Bardi's coat of arms in the window of the Bardi Chapel.

Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

Photo credit: Liana De Girolami Cheney.

⁷ Virginia Chieffo Raguin and Sarah Stanbury, eds., *Women's Space: Patronage, Place, and Gender in the Medieval Church* (New York: State University Press, 2005), 175 and 182, n. 61 and 62, mentioning the donations, including a special deed granted by this Bardi family to this Dominican convent. The document is located in the Florentine archives AFS, MS 621, Fol. 18v.

⁸ Curiously, the rhombus is associated with female endeavor and labors.



Figure 5b. Piero Guelfi Camajani, Bardi coat of arms in *Dizionario Araldico* (Milan: Arnaldo Forni, 1940), p. 344.

Symbolism of the *Madonna of the Rosary*

Vasari's *Madonna of the Rosary* is composed of two parts: a heavenly realm and a terrestrial realm (Figure 1b). The Madonna's open mantel of a celestial blue color unites these two realms. In the heavenly realm of divine light, puffy white clouds, and celestial blue sky, God the Father appears from the heavens holding a celestial globe and surrounded by His angelic entourage of different sizes and types of angels, small, medium, and large. Accompanying God is the Holy Spirit, the third member of the Trinity, in the shape of a white dove. These holy figures are perpendicularly above the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God and Queen of Heaven, who carries in her right arm the Baby Jesus, the second member of the Trinity (Hall, 1974, pp. 309-310). Vasari composed an image of the Holy Trinity (Figures 1b-4c).

The angels as messengers of God appear in the sky carrying a large and majestic rosary containing blue/green, silver/white, and red colored beads. The celestial beads trace a beautiful and repetitive pattern of infinity, ∞ , and encircle large medallions with narrative scenes of the three mysteries of the Rosary: the Joyful, the Sorrowful, and the Glorious. Following God's guidance, two small angels are placing a golden jeweled crown on the Madonna's head, while large angels hold above the crowned Madonna another kind of crown, which composed of the shapes of pearl-beads surrounding the mysteries of the Rosary. Other medium size angels open and extend the blue mantel of the Madonna, indicating that she is not only the Mother of God and Queen of Heaven but also the Madonna of Mercy (Charity and Love) (Hall, 1974, pp. 325-326; Jameson, 1903, pp. 83-114). With her blue mantel extended, the veiled Madonna steps onto a large sarcophagus (likely this coffin alludes to Camilla Capponi's tomb). In a classical contrapposto, the Madonna as a holy priestess opens her blue mantle to reveal her vestments, a double layered attire of red and pink colors (Metford, 1983, p. 254). The first layer of her garment is a short tunic of red color embellished by a golden hem, similar to the chasuble of a priest at a religious function of the Mass. A long chemise of pink color flows down to her feet, similar to cassock or *alb*, a long vestment worn by a priest. The Madonna wears an honorific green sash (*cinture* or girdle) around her waist, a Christian symbol of hope and resurrection, alluding to the liturgical time between Easter and Christmas. The girdle functions to secure the *alb* or cassock, here alluding as well to the symbol of the Virgin Mary's purity, her embodiment of the Immaculate Conception (Hall, 1974, pp. 138, 326-327; Ferguson,

1966, p. 157).⁹ The green sash with oriental decorations recalls the design of Raphael's mantle on the Madonna's shoulder in the *Madonna of the Chair* of 1513, oil on panel, now in the collection of the Pitti Palace in Florence (Figure 6). Vasari greatly admired Raphael's imagery, as indicated by the many drawings and paintings he appropriated in his work. Although veiled, the Madonna tresses are braided in the Florentine hairdo fashion. The figure of the Madonna holds in her right arm the Baby Jesus. The nude child wears a white sash around his waist as an attribute of His purity. He raises His hand in an act of blessings and also forms with His two fingers a sign of victory, indicating that He is the second member of the Trinity. The three rays of ethereal light emerging from his curly hair form the shape of a cross and halo, attesting to his Crucifixion and divinity.



Figure 6. Raphael, *Madonna of the Chair*, 1513, oil on panel.
Pitti Palace, Florence.

In stepping onto the coffin, the Madonna of Mercy and Baby Jesus move from the heavenly realm into the terrestrial realm. The loving Madonna turns toward her side and extends her hand to give a white a handkerchief, a symbol of mediated grace, to Saint Dominic of Guzman (1170-1221) (Figure 4d). He founded the order of the preaching friars and devotees of the Madonna of Mercy, and was identifiable by the star on his head; as the legend recounts, his grandmother saw a star in his forehead or head during his baptism (Réau, 2001, 1:394-401, esp. 395). According to the legend of the Rosary, the Madonna appeared to him donating him a rosary for praying; hence this Dominican preacher became an enthusiastic devotee of this ritual. In the painting, Saint Dominic gracefully kisses the Madonna's hand in gratitude, seeking love and protection for his followers, who surround him and are seen under the protective mantel of the Madonna. Her mantel engulfs and embraces people from all aspects of life: poor and rich, women and men, old and young, and holy figures crowned with

⁹ Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, 138, and 326-327; George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 157, also known as a cord, a symbol of Temperance, associated with the rope with which Christ was tied up to a pillar during the Flagellation.

haloes. Included in these groups of devotee are also members of the Capponi family. Unfortunately, it is difficult to identify each of them.

In the painting only the holy figures are depicted with an aureole. There are seven saints portrayed with haloes: Saints Dominic, Francis, Catherine of Siena, Elizabeth of Hungary, Carlo Borromeo, Peter Martyr, and Vincent Ferrer. Visible on the right side of the painting is Saint Francis (1182-1226), who was a close friend of Saint Dominic, hence his representation at the same level but opposite to Saint Dominic and on the other side of the Madonna's mantle (Réau, 2001, 1:394, 1:544-563). Saint Francis distributes rosaries to the faithful. Of note is Saint Francis's action of bending over to grant a rosary to a young, beautiful woman dressed in her finest, wearing a crown of roses and with tresses adorned with pearls. With her left hand she points to herself in gratitude at receiving this holy gift of the Rosary from Saint Francis. This is very probably the patron of the commission, Camilla Capponi. Next to her an elderly veiled woman observes the event with admiration.

Below this group of women is Saint Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) (Réau, 2001, 1:284-289), wearing a halo and in a nun's habit; holding a crucifix and rosary within her praying hands, she turns her eyes with devotion toward the Baby Jesus. Next to Saint Catherine of Siena, wearing a double crown—one celestial, in the shape of a halo, and the other terrestrial, a royal crown—is Saint Elizabeth of Hungary (1207-27) (Réau, 2001, 2:122-127), a patron of brides, widows, and the homeless, her eyes cast down and gazing with piety at Saint Catherine's crucifix. The miracle of roses for charitable deeds associates her with the Madonna of Mercy (Réau, 2001, 1:394, 2:122).¹⁰

In the foreground, the central scene is framed by the large kneeling figures of the personification of Charity and Archbishop Carlo Borromeo (Saint Carlo Borromeo, 1538-1584).¹¹ This area of the painting is in poor condition, perhaps because it was at the level of the placement of candle offerings; hence there is difficulty in viewing some of the details. For example, some young children are kneeling down in front of the coffin, one female child with joined hands prays with fervor, while a very young boy turns towards the viewer with a gentle smile showing his gifted rosary.

The personification of Charity is next to Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Elizabeth of Hungary. She kneels down in front the sarcophagus while embracing several children and providing them with rosaries. One child in particular offers to the Madonna a rosary for her to bless. The figure of Charity wears a cuirass of color blue whose edges are trimmed in gold. A yellow cloak is pinned with a medal to the cuirass while a green belt matches her green undergarment. Her elaborate hairdo is decorated with blue ribbons. The colors of her attire symbolize the colors of the Vatican church, yellow and blue. The medallion that adorns her attire depicts a female figure dispersing or holding an olive branch, confirming her identity as a personification of Charity, one of the theological virtues (Faith, Hope, and Love [Charity]). The child who Charity holds in her arms gestures a sign of victory or blessing with his small fingers while holding a cluster of rosaries in his other hand. The small child's gesture of triumph parallels the divine Baby Jesus's action of blessing; thus symbolically Earth and Heaven are celebrating the victory of praying the Rosary and the faithful are reaping the benefits of charitable actions.

While embracing the children, the personification of Charity turns her head toward Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Elizabeth of Hungary in approbation of their charitable activities. Although the painting is

¹⁰ The legend recounts as the food [bread] that she was carrying in her apron for the poor was transformed into white and red roses, saving her from being tortured or further assisting the needy.

¹¹ He was canonized on 1 November 1610 by Pope Paul V (Camillo Borghese, 1550-1621).

damaged, there seems to be an indication that Charity is reaching for rosaries to be distributed among the faithful. The figure of Charity's gaze also falls on an elegant Florentine noble lady, perhaps the deceased Camilla Capponi, who stands behind Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Elizabeth of Hungary. As noted earlier, she points to herself as if requesting a rosary from Saint Francis, who is dispersing the holy treasure. Her placement near Saint Catherine, Saint Elizabeth, and the personification of Charity is not fortuitous. Vasari parallels Camilla's charitable actions with those of the female saints. Camilla is a female patron who commissions an altarpiece in honor of the Madonna of the Rosary, who is also the Madonna of Charity and Mercy. Saint Catherine, a member of the Dominican Tertiary Order, honors charity and prayer, as reflected in her writings in the *Dialogue or Treatise on Divine Providence* (Walker & Potter, 1911). Saint Elizabeth of Hungary is a princess who dedicates her life to providing alms and bread for the poor. Roses became her attribute because, on a secretly errand of mercy where she is carrying bread for the poor, she is discovered by her non-Christian husband who voices her death if she continues to feed bread to the poor. When Elizabeth confronted her pagan husband at the moment of the discovery, the bread she was carrying transformed into buds of roses.

Furthermore, the personification of Charity is depicted as a large heroic woman, a type of Christianized Minerva, wearing a medal on the back of her cuirass representing a female figure holding an olive branch, a symbol of purification and victory as well as Goddess Minerva's favorite sacred plant (Figure 4e). In a clever way, Vasari linked the pagan Virgin Goddess, Minerva, personified as Charity, with the Christian Virgin Mary, also portrayed as a monumental female figure. Both females are associated with a green verdure or vegetation, a *virga* (rod, shoot) of cosmic and Biblical allusions (Isaiah 11:1; Psalm 88:33) (O'Neil, 1976, p. 57).¹² The olive branch or olive tree is a traditional symbol of immortality for its evergreen physical nature as well as a symbol of purification and victory for its metaphysical allusions. In ancient times the olive tree was considered sacred because it grew on the sacred plains of Eleusis. In Christian iconography, the olive branch and tree are associated with the Virgin Mary's son and His Passion. At His entry into Jerusalem some people greeted him with olive branches, while the cross of His Crucifixion was composed of olive and cedar wood (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994, p. 716). Sometimes in Annunciation scenes, the Angel Gabriel appears to the Virgin Mary with an olive branch (Cooper, 1978, p. 122; Hall, 1974, p. 228). During the 15th century, the cult of the Our Lady of the Olive Tree expanded from France to Italy, associating the Virgin Mary with harmony, love, and wisdom.

But indirectly the reference to vegetation in both figures connects them with the original name of this Dominican church—the Church of Santa Maria della Vigna. In 1279, two Dominican monks, Fathers Sisto and Ristoro, designed this church, which was located outside of the city walls of Florence in a *vigna*, an area surrounded by genus vines and herbs or vegetation, hence the attached appellation of Vigna to the name of the Church Santa Maria. Later in the 14th century, when this church was restored and expanded, the name was changed from Santa Maria della Vigna to Santa Maria Novella, the New Santa Maria.

Depicted opposite to the personification of Charity, on her right side, is the renown theologian Borromeo, appointed Archbishop of Milan (Figures 1b and 4f). He is dressed in his ecclesiastic regalia, kneeling down, and with a loving expression gazes at the Madonna and Child. With one extended hand wearing a maniple, a

¹² William Matthew O'Neil, *Time and the Calendars* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1976), 57, the Virgin Mary was associated with the constellation of Virgo.

symbol of penitence and charitable works (Ferguson, 1966, p. 158), he connects with the viewer as if to call attention to the important presence of the Madonna and Baby Jesus. With his other hand placed next to his chest, he embraces the shape of a red heart containing the monogram of Jesus. By his kneeling feet there is a scroll, placed along the same visual line as the rosaries held by the personification of Charity, referring to his decrees on praying the Rosary (Headley & Tomaro, 1988, pp. 85-111; Buzzi & Zardin, 1997, pp. 257-272). Around him is a group of Dominican holy figures, such as Saints Peter Martyr and Vincent Ferrer, who like himself are crowned with a halo. The figure with a religious vesture of color green, without a halo, receiving a handful of rosaries from Saint Dominic, is perhaps the figure of Angelo Malatesti, the Prior of Santa Maria Novella.

Of interest is the depiction of another female child standing behind Archbishop Borromeo. She gazes at the viewer. Her distinct physiognomy suggests that this is the portrait of a specific person in the Capponi family. In the *Madonna of the Rosary*, there are only two human figures who gaze at the viewer, the two children in the foreground; the only holy figure that visually connects with the viewer is Baby Jesus, who blesses the faithful viewers.

The inclusion of Archbishop Borromeo in this group of devotees is significant. His presence along with the personification of Charity is associated with his charitable activities during his ecclesiastical career, his ardent love for the Madonna, and his strong advocacy for praying the Rosary. By his feet there is scroll, placed along the same visual line as the rosaries held by the personification of Charity, referring to his decrees on praying the Rosary (Figure 4f).

Of a noble Florentine family, the son of Margherita de' Medici Borromeo (1510-1547) and nephew of Pope Pius IV (Angelo de' Medici, 1499-1565), Borromeo was appointed to his clerical role as archbishop of Milan in 1566 after the death of his uncle. Borromeo was an active participant in the religious reforms in the Vatican church during the Council of Trent and a strong advocate for praying to the Virgin Mary (Blunt, 1940/1985, Chapter VIII, esp. 107-208). These actions reflect his role as Archbishop of the Cathedral of Milan as well as his architectural guidance for the renovation of the cathedral. The Cathedral of Milan is dedicated to the Virgin Mary and her symbol is depicted in a 50-foot golden statue, *La Madonnina* (The little Madonna), placed on the highest spire of 108 meters.

In the painting, Vasari included many portraits of individuals with distinct physiognomies as Florentine devotees; unfortunately, further documentation is needed to identify them. But Vasari's ability to combine several levels of thematic imagery from sacred to genre, incorporating historical narrative with classical and religious symbolism, provides a complex and stimulating image in its artistic form and religious significance for the viewer and Christian devotee.

The Cult of the Rosary

Praying with a string or a chain of vegetable grains, beads, or cord with knots is an ancient cultural instrument for the devotee to communicate with divine. In the 11th century, in Irish monastic centers, there was a tradition of placing a crown of roses selected from a *rosarium* (Latin for a garden of roses, place with roses, or garland of roses) above the head of the statue of the Virgin Mary on her feast days (Dubin, 2009, pp. 79-82; Kasten, 2011, pp. 7-11, esp. 9; Winston-Allen, 1997, pp. 13-46, 52-64, esp. 60; Mitchell, 2009, pp. 5-46, 77-113). Christian iconography claims that the praying of the rosary began in the 12th century with Saint

Dominic of Guzman (1170-1221), founder of the Dominican Order, who experienced an apparition from the Virgin Mary in the Dominican monastery of Saint Mary of Prouille, located in the region of Languedoc in France. In his vision in 1208, the Virgin Mary donated a rosary to Saint Dominic, encouraging him to pray with the prayer beads of the Rosary instead of Psalms (Kasten, 2011, p. 8; Miller, 2002, pp. 7-15; Réau, 2001, 1:394-396; Borghini, 2008, pp. 84-85, on the history of the Rosary in 1584). However, the cult of the rosary did not fully develop until 1470 when Alano de la Roche (Alanus de Rupe, 1428-1475), a Dominican theologian and follower of Saint Dominic, formed a Confraternity of the Rosary at Douai, revitalizing the cult of the rosary as devotional manifestation of love towards the Mother of God (Réau, 2001, 1:46).

In the Italian Renaissance, many paintings show the importance of this cult in the portrayal of scenes of the Baby Jesus wearing a chain made of coral beads—a type of rosary. However, in this religious painting the rosary is not depicted with the beads separated according to the mysteries of the Rosary. The images indicate that a type of Rosary was used but not in the structured and organized collection of prayers that will be established later during the Tridentine Reformation (Fragnito, 1997; 2001; 2005).

A remarkable painting by the Lombard artist Bernardo Zenale (1460-1526), *Madonna and Child with Saints Ambrose and Jerome and Joseph* of 1510, for example, shows a nude Baby Jesus wearing a coral bracelet that is part of a long coral necklace (Figure 7) (Shapley, 1968, Catalogue Entry K1626, 17-18). This uninterrupted string of tied up coral beads goes around Christ's neck and drops along the side of His body. Zenale has united two Christian traditions associated with the coral: its use as a mystical devotion in prayers—reciting the Rosary according to Dominican practice—and the apotropaic symbolism associated with the healing power of the coral as a medicinal plant (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994, p. 235). In Italian culture, coral beads and coral horn (*cornicello*) were considered to be amulets or talismans that would protect a child from the malevolent eye and misfortunes in life, as well as bestowing good luck and health on the child (Hall, 1974, p. 74; Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994, p. 235), as seen in Piero della Francesca's *Pala Brera or Montefeltro Altarpiece* of 1422, tempera on panel, now in the Pinacoteca Brera in Milan (Figure 8). In Piero's painting, the child is wearing a short red coral necklace with a small horn at the end. In the Bible, coral was regarded as a precious stone (Ezekiel 27:16; Job 28:18; Prov. 3:15:11; 20:15; 31:10). The red color of coral was also associated with the blood of Christ; hence, for Christian devotees, coral becomes a symbol of life and death and in turn a reference to humanity's redemption and salvation through the death and resurrection of Christ.

Zenale's *Madonna and Child with Saints Ambrose and Jerome and Joseph*, a painting in oil and tempera on panel, was originally placed in the Cappella della Vittoria in the Church of Francesco Grande in Milan but now is in the Denver Art Museum, Colorado, a donation from the Samuel H. Kress Foundation (1916.173) (Figure 7) (Shapley, 1968, Catalogue Entry K1626, 17-18). In this painting, the Madonna and Baby Jesus are seated on a rocky throne in a grotto setting. In the design of the rocky formation in the landscape, Zenale is recalling a composition in one of the versions of Leonardo's *Madonna of the Rocks* of 1483-1486, an oil panel painting transferred to canvas, now at the Louvre Museum. Through the rocky formations in the design of rusticated arches, an atmospheric landscape is seen. In the background the Church of Francesco Grande is visible. The Holy Family is present in this holy conversation setting with Saints Jerome and Ambrose. Saint Joseph, standing behind Saint Jerome, is warmly gazing at this family.



Figure 7. Bernardo Zenale, *Madonna and Child with Saints Ambrose, Jerome, and Joseph*, 1510-1515, oil and tempera on panel.
Denver Art Museum, Colorado.
Courtesy: Gift of Samuel H. Kress Foundation.



Figure 8. Piero della Francesca's *Pala Brera* or *Montefeltro Altarpiece*, 1492, tempera on panel. Pinacoteca Brera, Milan.

Saint Jerome (347-420), as one of the four Fathers or Doctors of the Church (Gregory the Great, Augustine of Hippo, Ambrose), wears an attire of red Damascus, referring to his status as cardinal status. He holds a pen and paper, recalling his translation of the Bible from Greek and Aramaic (Hebrew) into the Vulgate (Latin language) (Réau, 2001, 2:143, 147). A crucifix hangs on the rocky wall behind him, alluding to his period of penance, while in a niche a skull, a *memento mori*, rests on top of his cardinalate hat of red color. At Jerome's feet rests a lion, another attribute for the saint. According to legend, while doing penance in the desert, he removed a splinter from a lion's paw (Réau, 2001, 2:142-143).

Saint Jerome's companion, Saint Ambrose, Bishop of Milan (340-97), kneels on a heretic, an Arian soldier, in front of the Holy Family. He wears a bishop's miter and robe while holding a staff, in the shape of a cross and a whip—attributes associated with his defense of the Christian faith and active involvement in the expulsion of the Arians in Italy (Réau, 2001, 1:68-70). The Christological position of the Church was against the Arian doctrine, which claimed that Christ was the Son of God but was not co-eternal with the Father, hence creating a conflicting conception of the Christian Trinity. In the painting, Baby Jesus grasps Saint Ambrose's staff, acknowledging the bishop's efforts in the defense of the church in His name. Zenale's Baby Jesus is wearing a necklet of coral beads, reinforcing the visualization of the Dominicans' love for the Madonna and Baby Jesus.

After the Council of Trent (1543-1562), the Catholic church encouraged the devotion of the Virgin Mary, emphasizing prayers through playing the psaltery, visually looking at a devotional imagery, and touching a string of rosary beads. A prominent figure during the formation of the reforms in the Council was Cardinal Ghislieri (1504-1572), a Dominican priest who became Pope Pius V in 1566 and who followed this initiative of Borromeo. He strongly advocated the power of the rosary to overcome heresies afflicting the Church at the time. Hence, in 17 September 1569, he wrote an apostolic letter, a papal bull, *Consueverunt Romani Pontifices*, describing the construction of the Rosary or Psalter to the Blessed Virgin Mary and officially approving the practice of the rosary in the liturgy. Finally, in 1572, the praying of the Rosary culminated with the institution of a liturgical feast of the Holy Rosary on 7 October. This celebratory feast was also in honor of the memory and remembrance of the triumph of the naval Battle at Lepanto on 7 October 1571, when the Holy League of Catholics courageously defeated the fleet of the Ottoman Empire in the Gulf of Patras. Christian devotees believed that the prayers of the rosary by the Confraternity of the Rosary assisted in the victorious event.

For Pope Pius V, the composition of the Rosary consisted of two aspects: physical and spiritual. The physical aspect entailed an instrument of praying, composed of a string of fifteen medallions divided into group of fives; each group of five contained 10 beads around them or five decades of the Rosary. The decades in turn were separated by a large bead for the recitation of the Lord Father and Glory Be. The end of the 15 medallions, each with 10 beads around them, was connected at the end of the string by a Crucifix (Figure 9). The spiritual aspect comprised of the placement in the fifteen medallions of meditative entries associated with the life, ministry, and Passion of Christ. The scenes in the medallions were grouped into three sets or cycles called the mysteries—The Joyful Mysteries, The Sorrowful Mysteries, and The Glorious Mysteries.¹³ Each mystery set contained five meditation scenes associated with said mystery. In addition, each mystery set was surrounded by a decade of Rosary beads for the repetition of the prayer of Hail Mary.¹⁴ At the conclusion of each decade, the recitation of the Lord's Prayer and Glory Be to the Father was included.¹⁵

¹³ A fourth set of mysteries was added by Pope John Paul II in his apostolic letter of *Rosarium Virgins Mariae* in October 2002. This set is called the *Luminous Mysteries* or the *Mysteries of Light* associated with the enlightenment on the ministry of Christ. The scenes include: *The Baptism of Christ in the Jordan*, *The Wedding at Cana* (Christ performed His first miracle), *The Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*, *The Transfiguration*, and *The Institution of the Eucharist*.

¹⁴ The prayer of the Hail Mary consists of the following recitation: "Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death, Amen".

¹⁵ The recitation of Lord's Prayer includes: "Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name; Thy kingdom comes; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen"; and the Glory Be to the Father states: "Glory be to the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen".



Figure 9. Cheney's reconstruction of a hanging rosary or the rosary according to Pope Pius V.

The content of these three mysteries emphasized the Christian faith on the Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection of Christ. Each of the composed mysteries—The Joyful Mysteries, The Sorrowful Mysteries, and The Glorious Mysteries—in turn reveals five scenes from the Bible (New Testament). The Joyful Mysteries, for example, are composed of the following: (1) *The Annunciation*: The Angel Gabriel is sent from God to Nazareth a town in Galilee. Coming to Mary, he says, “Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you” (Luke 1:26-28); (2) *The Visitation*: Mary travels to the house of Zechariah and greets Elizabeth. When Elizabeth hears Mary’s greeting, the infant leaps in her womb, and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit, cries out and says, “Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb” (Luke 1:39-45); (3) *The Birth of Our Lord*: Mary gives birth to her firstborn son. She wraps him in swaddling clothes and lays him in a manger. And suddenly there is a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, saying: “Glory to God in the highest and

on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:1-21); (4) *The Presentation in the Temple*: Mary and Joseph take the Baby Jesus to the temple to present him to the Lord. At the temple, Simeon and Anna come forward, give thanks to God, and speak about Jesus to all who are present (Luke 2:22-38); and (5) *The Finding of the Child Jesus in the Temple*: Baby Jesus remained behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know this, thinking that their son was with one of them. After three days pass, they find him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions (Luke 2:41-50).

The second set of mysteries, The Sorrowful Mysteries, also contains five scenes: (1) *The Agony in the Garden*: Jesus travels to Gethsemane to pray: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet, not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:36-46); (2) *The Scourging at the Pillar*: The chief priests hold a council with the elders and the scribes. They bind Christ, lead him away, and hand him over to Pilate, who wishing to satisfy the crowd, has Christ scourged and hands him over to be crucified (Mark 15:1-16); (3) *The Crowning With Thorns*: They strip Christ's clothes off and throw a scarlet military cloak on him. Thus wearing a crown out of thorns and placed it on his head, and a reed in his right hand. Kneeling before him, they mock him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews" (Matthew 27:27-31); (4) *The Carrying of the Cross*: Weak from being beaten, Christ is unable to carry His cross to Golgotha alone; Simon the Cyreniac helps him (Mark 15:20-22); and (5) *The Crucifixion*: When the entourage came to the Golgotha (The Skull place), they crucify Christ and the criminals there, one on his right, the other on his left. Christ proclaims, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do" (Luke 23:33-46).

The third group of Mysteries, The Glorious Mysteries, consists of five scenes as well: (1) *The Resurrection*: Mary Magdalene and the Mary Martha arrive to see the tomb. An angel appears and says, "Do not be afraid! I know that you are seeking Christ The Crucified. He is not here, for 'He has been raised just as He said'" (Matthew 28:1-10); (2) *The Ascension of Our Lord*: As Christ blesses them, He leaves them and is taken up to heaven (Luke 24:44-53); (3) *The Descent of the Holy Spirit*: Christ comes and stands in their midst and says to them, "Peace be with you. Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 14:15-21); (4) *The Assumption of Our Lady Into Heaven*: "For if we believe that Christ died and rose again from the dead, so also God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep through Christ" (1 Thessalonians 4:14-17); and (5) *The Coronation of the Blessed Virgin Mary*: "A great sign appears in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" (Revelation 12:1).

In consultation with his humanist and prelate friend, Vincenzo Borghini, Vasari painted the iconography of the Rosary in the *Madonna of the Rosary* with the Dominican three mysteries—Joyful, Sorrowful, and Glorious—approved by the Tridentines through the Council of Trent. Vasari composed a giant rosary that crowns the Madonna, Mother of God, as well as forming two other compositions with its design. One is the shape of outstretched human arms (*orans* posture), alluding to devotee's posture in attitude of praying or supplication. The second shape is formed by a double row of two inverted semicircles or lunar crescent patterns. This significant design symbolically alludes to the Virgin's Immaculate Conception as described in Book of Revelations: "And there appeared a great wonder in Heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" (Apoc. 12:1). In stepping on the moon, the Virgin Mary fulfills her mission, bringing divine glory and triumph through eternity. Her grant of divine grace will provide liberation from the human sin committed by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In creating this design, Vasari is also recalling an earlier commission from Bindo Altoviti for his church in Florence, *The*

Conception of Our Lady of 1540, in the Church of Santi Apostoli (Figure 10) (Cheney, 2016; Jameson, 1903, pp. 126-131, on the iconography of the Immaculate Conception).¹⁶



Figure 10. Giorgio Vasari, *Conception of Our Lady*, 1540, oil on panel.
Church of Santi Apostoli, Florence.

¹⁶ To note, on 14 July 1570, Pope Pius V decreed in another papal bull, *Quo Primum*, to add to the missal the already established Feast of Our Lady of Rosary of 7 October. This papal bull was influential for the doctrinal decision and dogma of the Virgin Mary as the Immaculate Conception later established by Pope Pius IX (Giovanni Maria Mastai Ferretti, 1792-1878) in the papal bull *On Ineffabilis Deus*, dated 8 December 1854.

In the *Madonna of the Rosary*, the design of the Rosary in the first and large inverted semicircle or lunar crescent joins together two set of mysteries: the Joyful Mysteries on the right and the Sorrowful Mysteries on the left of the standing Madonna with Baby Jesus. In the center of this inverted semicircle there is another inverted semicircle that contains only the Glorious Mysteries. Vasari's design of the location of the mysteries begins on the right side of the Madonna: First are the medallions with the Joyful Mysteries, starting with the scene of the *Annunciation* appropriately placed next blessing Baby Jesus, alluding to His divine conception; rotating upward, this is followed by the scenes of the *Visitation*, the *Nativity* (Birth of Jesus), the *Presentation in the Temple*, and the *Finding of Jesus in the Temple*, which fittingly parallels the open hand of God the Father.

The next set of mysteries form the small, inverted semicircle and include scenes from The Glorious Mysteries. These descend from the last scene of the Joyful Mysteries, the *Finding of Jesus in the Temple*, starting with the scene of the Resurrection from the Glorious Mysteries and followed by the *Ascension*, the *Descent of the Holy Spirit* (Pentecost). Not by coincidence this scene in the medallion is placed above the crowned Madonna and below the Holy Spirit. Vasari painted the traditional white dove as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, but here the third member of the Trinity is imparting a ray of divine light or a "a mighty rushing wind" (Acts 2:2). This is not the first time that the Holy Spirit appeared to the Virgin Mary; the first occurrence was on the Annunciation when He imparted her with a divine fruit, the conception of the Son of God. The second miraculous event is His presence at Pentecost as shown in the medallion, where the Holy Spirit in the presence of the Virgin Mary granted gifts to the Apostle (Acts 1:14). In similar manner, she grants the gift and blessings of the Rosary to the faithful. The presence of The Holy Spirit is a reference to Pentecost, as illustrated in the medallion: his descent to Earth after five days of Christ's Resurrection (Acts 2:1-31). The Holy Spirit offers divine guidance for the salvation of humankind. He is a symbol of union, a balance among the five elements of nature, hence a celestial or sacred symbol of five (De Regny, 1988, p. 86). The symbol of the number five is also part of the composition of the mysteries in the Rosary. The scenes that follow in the medallions are the *Assumption of the Virgin into Heaven* and the *Coronation of the Blessed Virgin Mary by God the Father, His son, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit*.

In the painting, the Glorious Mysteries connect with the Sorrowful Mysteries starting with the scene of the *Crucifixion*, moving downward with the scenes in the medallions of the *Carrying of the Cross*, the *Crowning of the Thorns*, the *Scourging at the Pillar* and ending with the scene of the *Agony in the Garden*.

Vasari organized the appearance and function of the angels, messengers of God, in two modes, relating them to their size: Small baby angels are closely connected with God the Father—they sustain and introduce to the viewer the Joyful and Sorrowful Mysteries—while the large angels interact with the Madonna. These angels present the Glorious Mysteries and open her blue mantle, unveiling inside this merciful mantle her protection for her devotees.

In designing pearls for the beads encircling the medallions that contain the scenes depicted in each of the mysteries, Vasari is recalling the "grain or coral beads" format of the Rosary. The green color of the pearl-beads is a symbol of hope and the "growth of the Holy Spirit in man [the individual]" (Cooper, 1978, p. 40), associated with the Joyful Mysteries; the red pearl-beads are a symbol of fortitude, passion, and suffering, referring to the Sorrowful Mysteries; and the blue pearl-beads are a symbol of cosmic light and celestial transcendence connected with the Glorious Mysteries (Thurston & Shipman, 1912; Ardiissino, 2019, pp. 242-374).

Vasari's Visual Sources for the *Madonna of the Rosary*

Vasari's visual sources for this original composition derives from at least three visual compositions, one of which is the Tree of Life or Tree of Jesse. One example is Taddeo Gaddi's *Tree of Life* of 1360, a fresco painting, in the Refectory of Santa Croce, where there is a depiction of a wooden trellis or branches where inscriptions and figures allude to biblical events (Figure 11). Vasari associated the Virgin Mary with the Tree of Jesse and Christ as a descendent of the branch of Jesse through David, son of Jesse. Hence, he alludes to the family genealogy of Jesus Christ, from the beginning of the creation and through the Old Testament until the coming of the Messiah (Matthew 1:1; Luke 3:23-38). The Church Fathers in their writings and Latin hymns referred to the Tree of Jesse, an allusion to the Tree of Life, as the Davidic vine (*radix Jesse*); they considered the Virgin Mary (*virga ex radice*) to be a branch or offshoot of the root of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1) and her son Jesus as *flos ex virga*, a flower that blossomed on the branch (Schiller, 1971, p. 15).¹⁷ As a 16th-century Christian, Vasari was familiar with the traditional depiction of the Tree of Jesse, where Jesse is shown in a reclined position with a tree springing out of the center of his body, whose branches contain prophets, patriarch, and kings of the Solomon line, thus all the ancestors of Christ. Conventionally in art, at the top of the tree, the Virgin Mary holds the Baby Jesus and angels are also represented, an allusion to gifts of the Holy Spirit, as seen in the North transept mosaic in Saint Mark in Venice of the Bianchini Brothers' *Tree of Jesse* based on a design of 1540 by the Florentine Mannerist painter, Francesco de' Rossi Salviati (1510-1562).¹⁸ Vasari is imitating the designs of Salviati's *Tree of Jesse* and especially of Gaddi's *Tree of Jesse* where the end of the stems contains vignettes of prophets in medallion shapes similar to his depiction of the holy mysteries inside roundels. In addition, Gaddi's Latin mottoes in the shape of scrolls as extended tree branches are like Vasari's string of pearls motif that encircles and unites the holy mysteries of the Rosary (compare Figures 11, 12, and 1b).

¹⁷The artistic motif of the Jesse Tree was known from the beginning of the 11th century and disappeared in the early 17th century.

¹⁸ For the image, see <https://www.flickr.com/photos/28433765@N07/6256546211/in/photostream> (accessed on 15 December 2021).

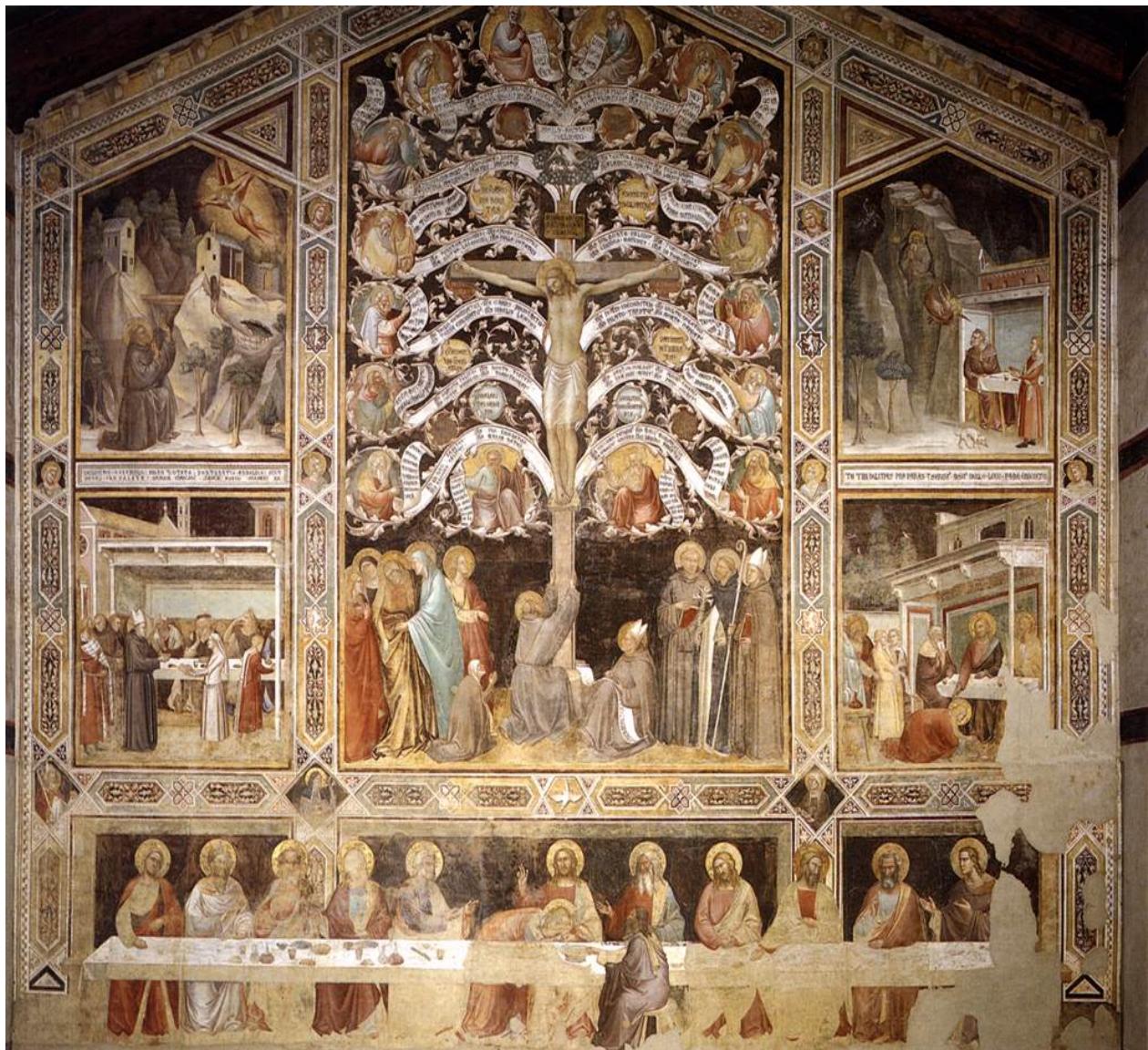


Figure 11. Taddeo Gaddi, *Tree of Life*, 1360, fresco.

Refectory, Basilica of Santa Croce, Florence.



Figure 12. Francesco Salviati, *Tree of Jesse*, 1540, mosaic.
San Marco, Venice.

The second source for Vasari's original composition is the subject of the *Madonna of Mercy*. He was familiar with the images of the Bernardo Daddi, in particular the *Madonna of Mercy* of 1342, *al fresco*, in the Bigallo Oratory in Florence (Figure 13) (Levin, 1996); Parri Spinelli's *Madonna of Mercy* of 1448, *al fresco*, for the Sala delle Udienze of the Fraternita dei Laici in Arezzo (Figure 14) (Galoppi, 2019); Piero della Francesca's *Polyptych of Mercy* of 1462, oil on tempera on panel, in the Museo Civico of Sansepolcro (Figure 15); and Rosso Fiorentino's *Madonna of Mercy* of 1525 (Figure 16), a red and black pencil drawing now at the Louvre Museum.¹⁹ Fascinated with this subject, Vasari even composed a banner of the *Madonna of Mercy* in 1560 for the Aretine Fraternita of Santa Maria dei Laici—not by accident honoring a similar composition of his Aretine compatriot Parri Spinelli (1387-1453) (compare Figures 14 and 17). Vasari's banner, which is painted with oils on silk, is conserved at the Museo Diocesano of Arezzo (Corti, 1989, p. 120).²⁰ In these types of imagery, a colossal figure of the Madonna is portrayed opening her mantle to engulf and protect the fervent parishioners or devotees, a Madonna that appears to Earth from Heaven in order to grant donations and protect her devotees. This type of celestial and royal entrance shows Vasari's constant admiration for Raphael's imagery, as can be seen in the *Sistine Madonna* of 1512-1514, oil on canvas, commissioned by Pope Julius II (Giuliano della

¹⁹ Originally sold by Christie's Sales 2414/Lot 680, 2002.

²⁰ I am grateful to Dr. Galoppi for permitting me to photograph and reproduce Vasari's banner.

Rovere, 1443-1513) for the monastery of the Church of San Sisto in Piacenza, now in Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister in Dresden (Figure 18).



Figure 13. Bernardo Daddi, *Madonna of Mercy*, 1342, fresco.
Bigallo Oratory, Florence.



Figure 14. Parri Spinelli, *Madonna of Mercy*, 1448, fresco.
Sala delle Udienze of the Fraternita dei Laici, Arezzo.



Figure 15. Piero della Francesca, *Madonna of Mercy*, center of a polyptych, 1462, tempera and oil on panel.
Museo Civico, Sansepolcro, Tuscany.



Figure 16. Rosso Fiorentino, attr. *Madonna of the Rosary*, 1525, red and black pencil drawing.
Courtesy: Christie's London.



Figure 17. Giorgio Vasari, *Madonna of Mercy*, 1560, banner.

Museo Diocesano, Arezzo.

Courtesy: Museo Diocesano, Arezzo.



Figure 18. Raphael, *Sistine Madonna*, 1514, oil on canvas.
Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden.

Vasari's third visual source is likely Lorenzo Lotto's *Madonna of the Rosary* of 1539. After his trip to Venice, Lotto (1480-1557) composed this complicated altarpiece in the Marche for the Church of San Domenico at Cingoli (the Balcony of the Marche), in the Province of Macerata (Figures 19a-19b) (Humfrey, 1997, pp. 129-131, Fig. 131).²¹ Peter Humfrey, in *Lorenzo Lotto* (Humfrey, 1997, p. 131, Fig. 132; Aikema, 1981, pp. 443-456), and Esperança Camara, in *Pictures and Prayers: Madonna of the Rosary Imagery in*

²¹ The church is also dedicated to San Niccolò.

Post-Tridentine Italy, suggested Alberto Castellano's *Rosario della gloriosa Vergine Maria* as a literary source for Lotto's painting (Camara, 2002; Anderson, 2007).²²



Figure 19a. Lorenzo Lotto, *Madonna of the Rosary*, 1539, oil on canvas.
Church of San Domenico, Cingoli, Province of Macerata.

²²Esperança Camara, *Madonna of the Rosary, Pictures and Prayers* (Ph.D. thesis, John Hopkins University, Maryland, 2002), for an extensive bibliography on the symbolism of the rosary; and Caroline Corisande Anderson, *The Material Culture of Domestic Religion in Early Modern Florence, c. 1480-c. 1650*, 2 vols. (Ph.D. thesis, University of York, England, 2007), on a careful study on the Rosary reproduction in textual, visual, and material objects.



Figure 19b. Lorenzo Lotto, *Madonna of the Rosary*, 1539, det., oil on canvas.

Church of San Domenico, Cingoli, Province of Macerata.

The Confraternity of the Rosary at Cingoli commissioned this visually and iconographically complex altarpiece. In consultation with the confraternity, Lotto represented the 15 mysteries of the Rosary as medallions hanging on a wooden trellis or branches of a robust tree. The medallions replace the inscriptions or biblical figures contained in the Tree of Life to depict the Rosary's 15 mysteries on the wooden trellis, which alludes to the symbol of the vine and the legend of the True Cross. The rose vine and rose motif, however, symbolize the *hortus conclusus* (enclosed garden or perfumed garden) of Solomon's *Song of Songs* or *Canticles* (4:12-15) (Garrett, 2004, p. 15, 23B).²³ In his painting, Lotto also incorporated a combination of narrative medallions depicting these 15 scenes from the lives of Christ and the Virgin. He included images of the principal Dominican saints, such as Dominic, Vincent Ferrer, Catherine of Siena, and Peter Martyr, as well as

²³ In Christian terms, Solomon's *Song of Songs* is considered an allegory of the relationship between Christ and the Church or Christ and the individual believer. In the Jewish tradition, the *Song of Songs* is an allegorical representation of the relationship between God and Israel as husband and wife. In the *Song of Songs*, the characters are a woman and a man. This poem suggests the amorous transfer from courtship to marriage.

Mary Magdalene with her ointment jar, and Saint Exuperantius, the patron saint of Cingoli, holding a model of the city. The inclusion of these holy figures recalls the imagery represented in German prints celebrating the cult of the Madonna of the Rosary, as seen in Wolf Traut's *Virgin of the Rosary* of 1510, a hand-colored woodcut in red, green, brown, yellow, tan, gray, rose, and black, now in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., a gift from the Rosenwald Collection (Figure 20).



Figure 20. Wolf Traut, *The Virgin of the Rosary*, 1510, hand colored woodcut in *Der freudenreiche, schmerzensreiche und glorreiche Rosenkranz Mariä*.

National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

Courtesy: Gift of the Rosenwald Collection.

Lotto's composition for the *Madonna of the Rosary* is divided into two parts. In an open landscape, framed by two horizontal walls, a robust, bushy tree with large branches supports a wooden trellis of roses and medallions containing the mysteries of the Rosary. These mysteries are displayed in three semi-circles, acting as a triple crown for the Virgin Mary. The row closest to the seated Madonna displays the Joyful Mysteries, the next row displays the Sorrowful Mysteries, and the top row displays the Glorious Mysteries. Unlike Vasari, who focused on the concept of the Trinity in the depiction of the *Madonna of the Rosary*, and placed the scene of Pentecost from Glorious Mystery above the Madonna's head, Lotto preferred to focus on the nature of motherhood, the Virgin Mary as the Mother of God, placing above the Madonna's head the scene of the *Nativity* from the Joyful Mysteries (compare Figures 19b and 4c).

In front of the rose-hedge, there is the second parapet, in front of which there is a stepped stone platform. At one level, there is a stone throne covered with an oriental cloth of honor, where the Madonna is seated. She awards a rosary to Saint Dominic with one hand and with the other hand she holds Christ, who is reaching for Saint Exuperantius' gift, a model of the city. In front of the second level of the platform, six saints in a holy conversation are gathered. Lotto composed a grouping of three figures on each side of the platform, while in the center he placed the small angels and John the Baptist. They are set around a large open barrel containing white rose petals. The angels disperse rose petals to the viewer and the saints. Cleverly, Lotto painted a gentle wind, causing the rose petals to float and scatter as well as attach to the trellis. In this manner, he decorated the entire scene with pink and white petals, alluding to joy, love, and blessings (Camara, 2002, p. 91, n. 161; Powers, 2003, pp. 27-31).²⁴ In the painting, John the Baptist not only points to the Baby Jesus, recognizing his significance as a divine creation, but points as well to the throne's edge where the artist's signature is visible, a human creator.

In this altarpiece, Lotto symbolically combined the theme's holy conversation and heavenly garden with the depiction of the Rosary's mysteries. Vasari emulated Lotto's manner of combining several religious themes in one by combining the same theme of a holy conversation with the depiction of the rosary, but also added the themes of charity and mercy and brought them together with the theme of salvation, following the Tridentine Reform's spiritual aims (Bromiley, 1978, pp. 283-288). Vasari's scene is not in a specified earthly place, that is, it does not take place in an enclosed garden or open landscape as in Lotto's altarpiece. Vasari's imagery is iconic and didactic, again following the Tridentine teachings of love and charity; it is a vision on the benefits of praying the Rosary for the viewer to emulate in order to achieve eternal salvation.

Depictions of the Rosary by Tuscan Mannerist Painters

There are several Florentine Mannerist painters who were influenced by Vasari's *Madonna of the Rosary*. In 1604 an unknown painter copied Vasari's *Madonna of the Rosary*, presently in a side chapel of the Church of Niccolò in Prato (Figure 21). Among the artistic discrepancies are the treatment of color, human anatomy, turning of the body and assigned attributes. Perhaps the major change is in the lower part of the composition, where the only person that makes contact with the viewer is now a young male child holding a rosary. This rosary is of a bright red color, paralleling in coloration the bouquet of roses at the Madonna's feet and the heart

²⁴Camara, *Pictures and Prayers*, 91, n. 161, for the symbolism of petals as gifts of the Holy Spirit during Pentecost, as representing Christ's blood (red petals) or the joy Mary (white petals). See Katherine Powers, "Musical Images for Devotions: Benedetto Coda's Altarpiece for the Rosary", in K. A. McIver, *Art and Music in the Early Modern Period* (London: Ashgate, 2003), 27-31. Petals of roses can be associated to musical notes.

held by Archbishop Borromeo. Oddly, in the group above the Milanese prelate, there is a portrait of a man with partially closed eyes, but facing the viewer, that resembles Giorgio Vasari—perhaps a homage of this mysterious painter to Vasari?



Figure 21. Unknown, after Giorgio Vasari, *Madonna of the Rosary*, 1604, oil on canvas.
Church of Niccolò, Prato, Tuscany.

Zucchi not only assisted Vasari in painting Camilla Capponi's commission, but also painted his own interpretation of the theme in 1569, in oil on canvas, for the Church of Saint Ilario in Bibbona, Province of Leghorn (Figure 22). Taking artistic license, Zucchi composed an intriguing altarpiece. Although Zucchi honors his fellow artist Vasari with a reinterpretation of the theme of the Rosary, he lacks elegance in his treatment of the figures and attires, the Mannerist brilliant coloration, and the pious sentiments expressed by the devotees. Zucchi focused on the Dominican Order worshiping the Blessed Virgin Mary by placing several cross fleury on the tunics of Saints Francis, Dominic, and Borromeo, and having the Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus donate rosaries with this design of a cross fleury at their ends of the beads. The imagery of this type of cross is also seen in the rosaries held by many of the devotees.



Figure 22. Jacopo Zucchi, *Madonna of the Rosary*, 1569-1570, oil on canvas.

Pieve of Saint Ilario, Bibbona, Province of Leghorn.

Photo credit: Dario Grimaldi/ Bridgemanimages.com.

In comparing Vasari's composition to Zucchi's design, other fascinating observations are noted. In Zucchi's painting, the representation of the Trinity lacks the presence of the Holy Spirit as a white dove but God the Father is crowned with a triangular nimbus, a symbol of the Trinity (Ferguson, 1966, pp. 149, 153). He emerges from Heaven surrounded by celestial clouds and golden rays of light, but without a globe. The hand gestures of God the Father, for example, are different as well. With His right hand, God the Father blesses first the scene of His Son's Resurrection, which is seen in a medallion of the Glorious Mysteries encircled by pearl-beads. His blessing extends as well to the devotees, while His Son does not bless them but donates rosaries to them. God the Father, with His left hand, directs attention to His Son's Crucifixion, which is seen in a medallion of the Sorrowful Mysteries encircled by pearl-beads. The radiating nimbus seen encircling God the Father is repeated on a smaller scale for the Baby Jesus and Virgin Mary. Of all the devotees and holy figures depicted, only Saint Francis and Saint Dominic wear a halo. Saint Catherine of Siena does not hold a crucifix in her praying hands. The personification of Charity is stripped of the complex Vasarian iconography. She kneels down, embracing a child holding a Rosary, and reaches for a group of rosaries on the ground to distribute. Archbishop Borromeo is depicted wearing Dominican attire with the cross fleury and covered by a cope, a highly decorative cape, a symbol of dignity (Ferguson, 1966, p. 157). His extended arms are in orans position, praising the Blessed Virgin. Unlike Vasari's Borromeo, Zucchi's figure does not hold a red heart in his hand. Among the figures that visually connect with the viewer are the Virgin Mary and some angels in the celestial realm and, curiously, in the terrestrial realm only a veiled woman, who resides with a group of devotees to the side of Saint Dominic. Perhaps this female figure is Zucchi's inclusion of a patron in the painting. Zucchi ingeniously used the color red to unite God the Father, with his red mantle, with the Virgin Mary, who wears a red chasuble; in addition, the beads around the mysteries of the Rosary are all of one color, red or coral. This is unlike Vasari, who distinguished the pearl-beads surrounding the mysteries of the Rosary by using different colors-green for Joyful, blue for Glorious, and red for Sorrowful.

Another Tuscan Mannerist painter, pupil of Giovanni Battista Naldini (1535-1591), Cosimo Daddi (Dati or Duti) (active 1575-1630), painted an altarpiece of the *Madonna of the Rosary* of 1590 for the Church of Saint Martino a Bagnolo (Baldinucci, 1681/1846, 3:485-486; Franklin, 1995, pp. 48-50; Burresi, 1994; Lazzarini, Lessi, Attinia, & Greciniana, 1981, pp. 33-34, 40-41). Recently disappeared, the image is available through the archives of images from the *Inventario dei beni storici e artistici della diocesi di Fiesole* in Tuscany (Figure 23). This painting was highly praised by the members of the Florentine Academy of Design. The painting, oil on wood, is signed and dated on the pedestal of the throne of the Virgin Mary, COSIMO DATI P. F. DISCEPOLO DI BAT. NALD. MDLXXXVI. In the foreground a young female points to the inscription.



Figure 23. Cosimo Daddi (Dati), *Madonna of the Rosary*, 1586, oil on canvas.

Dioceses of Fiesole, Tuscany.

Courtesy: CEI-Ufficio Nazionale per i beni culturali ecclesiastici e l'edilizia di culto, Tuscany.

In 1586, Daddi was commissioned to paint the *Madonna of the Rosary* as a reflection on Saint Dominic composing a “crown of roses” for the Virgin Mary and referring to her as the “rose without thorns”, which is also an allusion to the theme of the Immaculate Conception. The miraculous event of the Madonna donating a Rosary to Saint Dominic takes place inside an altar niche framed by classical columns. The composition of the painting is in two sections: a celestial assembly and a human gathering. The celestial group is composed of a enthroned Madonna and Child seated on a marble cathedra. The Madonna holds the Baby Jesus with her left arm. The Child, carrying a bouquet of roses, blesses the faithful. With her right hand, the Madonna donates three pearl rosaries to Saint Dominic. The haloed saint kneels down and kisses the Madonna’s hand.

Two celestial messengers present the Rosary as a celebratory festoon to the devotees. The angels are the conduit between celestial and natural realms and the festoon in the shape of the rosary beads unites these realms.

Daddi designed the Rosary's medallions containing the Joyful, Sorrowful, and Glorious Mysteries framing Madonna and Child and Saint Dominic. The organization and sequence of the fifteen rosary's mysteries are according to the narrative in the New Testament of the Bible. Like Vasari's painting of the *Madonna of the Rosary*, each mystery is encircled by a decade of pearls for the recitation of the Hail Mary. Each medallion containing a narrative scene is framed with pearls of three different colors. The mysteries are encircled with pearls of green, red, and white-silvery colors, respectively. In the painting, Saint Dominic receives three rosaries with the same colors as those in the rosary's festoon. Curiously, the Madonna's attire is also decorated with these colors.

In the foreground of the painting is the second group, the human devotees. In Daddi's visualization of the distribution of rosary to the faithful there are two groups of figures, male and female, each grouped in five figures of young and old people. The figures of women on the left are kneeling down and receiving Jesus' blessings with fervor. On the right side, among the men, there is a man wearing a turban, recalling the victorious Battle of Lepanto.²⁵ The different groups of people depict the different stages of the individual, from childhood, youth, and adulthood to old age. They all express gratitude and joy in their devotion of love toward the Madonna and Child.

In the celestial realm of the painting, the placement of the angels holding the medallions of the Rosary's mysteries is not accidental. On the left side of the painting, one angel extends one arm to embrace the medallion showing the *Birth of Christ* (Nativity) while stretching out the other arm to point to the scene of the *Agony in the Garden*. On the opposite side, one angel turns to look at the *Crucifixion* while resting his hand on the medallion representing the *Ascension of Christ*. In this manner, Daddi has visually connected and united the Joyful, Sorrowful, and Glorious Mysteries. He crowned the Madonna and Child with the Sorrowful Mysteries, unlike Vasari, who crowned her with the Glorious Mysteries. In his painting, Daddi focused in his scene on the donation of the Rosary and its reception while Vasari honored the presence of the Holy Trinity and the Madonna of Mercy—the Madonna being the Mother of God and a conduit to God's benevolence and clemency for humankind.

Another observation on Daddi's *Madonna of the Rosary* is his recollection of the structure of the rosary based on the principle of the number five and combinations or multiplications of five: the mysteries of the rosary, for example, and the holy figure surrounded by a halo, The Virgin Mary, Christ, Saint Dominic and the celestial messengers and the group of women and men. A young female centrally placed in the group of the five female devotees, and perpendicularly aligned in relation to the Virgin Mary, indicates two events to the rest of the group as well as to the faithful viewer. One is the miraculous event of the apparition of the Virgin Mary and Child to Saint Dominic, a glorious event during which the Virgin Mary donates the rosary to Saint Dominic, having already donated her Son for the glory of God to humanity. The second event pointed to is the signature of the painter and the date when the work was created. The artist is grateful for God's donation of his artistic talent and recognition in receiving commissions to paint.

²⁵ See <https://opwest.org/lepano> (accessed on 15 December 2021), for the association of the battle with the Holy Rosary.

Coda

Through his friend and Benedictine Prior, Borghini, Vasari was familiar with the publication of the Dominican Alberto da Castello on *Rosario della gloriosa Vergine Maria*. This popular book, with more than 200 illustrations picturing the life of the Christ and the Virgin Mary, including the Madonna of the Rosary, was published in Venice in 1521 and reprinted in 1561 (Da Castello, 1521/1561, esp. f.3v). Both Florentines were especially aware of the recent Milanese publication of Bartolomeo Scalvo's *Meditationi del Rosario: Della Gloriosissima Maria Vergine*. He composed two versions—one in the vernacular language and the other in Latin as *Rosariae*. These versions were published on the same year of 1569 by the Milanese editor Pacifico Pontio (Petta, 2008, pp. 107-127, esp. 113-115).²⁶ Both versions were dedicated to Archbishop Carlo Borromeo on 20 April 1569.

Scalvo provided for the reader two types of didactic instruments for devotional practice: a contemplation and meditation on the visual imagery and a deliberation and reflection on the content of the text, hence composing two types of religious meditative. This text contains a frontispiece with images of the mysteries as well as a decorated page on Mary as preacher of the Rosary (Figures 24a-24b) (Camara, 2002, p. 114, n. 61). Scalvo's dedication to Borromeo suggests both his support for Borromeo's recent establishment of the Confraternity of the Rosary in the Milan and his awareness of the conflict between the cardinal and the Milanese Dominicans (Headley & Tomaro, 1998, pp. 85-111; Buzzi & Zardin, 1997, pp. 257-272). The Dominicans objected to the creation of another confraternity of the Rosary because they were already sponsoring two confraternities of the Rosary in Milan, in the churches of Saint Eustorgius and Holy Mary of Grace. The Basilica of Saint Eustorgius was founded in the fourth century with the significant claim that it housed the tomb of the Three Magi; hence it was considered an important stop for pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem, the Holy Land. Saint Eustorgius was a noble Greek theologian who became Bishop of Milan in 343. At that time he traveled to Constantinople to receive official confirmation for his ecclesiastical appointment from the Byzantine Emperor. In gratitude of this gesture, the Emperor donated him the relics of the Three Magi (Cazzani, 1996, pp. 15-16; Hofmann, 1975, pp. 80-91). Saint Eustorgius transported them from Constantinople to the Milanese basilica. Once there, he translated the contents and inscriptions.²⁷ In the 13 century, this Milanese basilica came under the jurisdiction of the Dominican Order.

²⁶ Massimo Petta, "Books and Devotion in Milan (1570-1590)", in Joaquim Carvalho, ed., *Bridging the Gaps: Sources, Methodology and Approaches to Religion in History* (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2008), 107-127, esp. 113-115, noting that the Ponte family dedicated their press to publications of religious texts and their Latin translations.

²⁷ William of Newburgh, Book 2, Chapter 8, on the relics of the Magi, see <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/williamofnewburgh-two.asp#8> (accessed on 15 December 2021).



Figure 24a. Bartolomeo Scalvo, Frontispiece, *Meditazioni del Rosario: Della Gloriosa Maria Vergine*, 1569.
Milan: Pacifico Pontio.



Figure 24b. Bartolomeo Scalvo, *Enthrone Madonna with Devotees in Meditazioni del Rosario: Della Gloriosa Maria Vergine*, 1569. Milan: Pacifico Pontio.

The history of the church of Holy Mary of Grace is different but it was also under the dominion of the Milanese Dominican Order. The church was built in 1469 over a previous religious site dedicated to Mary of the Grace or the Mary of the Roses. Under the patronage of the Duke of Milan, Francesco I Sforza (reign 1450-1466), a new church and convent was built for the Dominican Order. In the refectory of this church, the genius Leonardo painted the mural of the *Last Supper* in 1495. In view of these renowned and deep-rooted Dominican religious centers, the Milanese Dominicans disputed with Archbishop Borromeo over the formation of another Dominican center for the institution of the Rosary. However, Borromeo, a skillful reformer and theologian, succeeded in his wish.

Scalvo's sentiment and vision continued to influence the imagery of the Rosary in Milanese art. Between 1587 and 1589, after Borromeo's death, a special processional banner (*stendardo* or *gonfalone*) embroidered with the mysteries of the Rosary was commissioned by the Comune di Milano (Municipality of Milan) (Figure 25a) (Piglione & Tasso, 2020, Chapter 24, p. 281). This embroidered banner in silk and wool is designed in two parts. The first section is of a large central scene containing a Madonna in Glory, appearing through clouds in the sky. Her flowing blue mantle reveals her pink dress decorated with roses. The Madonna wears a double crown: one made of gold, a symbol of celestial royalty, as the Queen of Heaven, and the other composed of roses, symbol of love, embodying her as the Mother of Love and Mercy. In one arm she holds Baby Jesus and a rosary in the other. Floating angels crown her with roses and present her with reverence to the viewer. The second part of the banner is formed by a wide border containing 20 medallions that surround the central scene. Across the top and on the sides are 15 medallions in registry format; these contain scenes of the mysteries of the Rosary. At the bottom, there are five medallions: four of them represent the seasons, and the fifth one, placed in the center of this register, shows a picture of a rose bush. This image connects perpendicularly with the Madonna in Glory crowned with roses.

These medallion scenes are embroidered in silk and wool with a slip stitch (*punto raso*) (Piglione & Tasso, 2020, Chapter 24, p. 281). In the 18th century, this banner underwent considerable alterations by an unknown artist, in particular, the central imagery of a different fabric. Today, the 20 medallions are attributed to a well-known Milanese embroiderer Margarita (Margherita) Barza (active 1587-1590), who was highly praised during her life time for her art. In *La nobiltà di Milano* of 1595, Paolo Morigia wrote: "Margarita Barza has received many compliments... her art in slip stitching [*ricamare*] is excellent. Viewers and professionals marvel at her work that is of great merit" ("molte lodi si devono dare a Margarita Barza... la quale virtù del ricamare [è] eccellente [fa] meravigliare i vedorì e gl'intelligenti tal professione e l'opere [sono] di grande pregio") (Morigia, 1595, p. 299). Barza signed her name in the scene of the Visitation (Figure 25b) (Piglione & Tasso, 2020, Chapter 24, p. 281). Thus the Milanese banner of the Madonna of the Rosary honored the female maker, Barza, as well as the spiritualist, Borromeo.



Figure 25a. Unknown artist of XVI century. *Banner of the Madonna of the Rosary*.
Borders attributed to Margarita Barza, 1587-1589, embroidery. Milan Cathedral, Milan.
Photo credit: Mauro
Ranzani/Bridgemanimages.com.



Figure 25b. Margarita Barza, *Visitation*, 1587-1589, det., embroidery. *Banner of the Madonna of the Rosary*. Milan Cathedral, Milan.
Photo credit: Mauro Ranzani/Bridgemanimages.com.

Scalvo's *Meditationi del Rosario: Della Gloriosissima Maria Vergine* also had an impact in Florentine art, as noted earlier. Curiously, in Vasari's *Madonna of the Rosary*, the foreground composition relates to Scalvo's woodcut page in the text of the *Madonna of the Rosary* (Anderson, 2007, 2: Chapter 4, Figures 4.8a and 48b). Vasari was also paraphrasing in his composition the imagery of apparition or vision. For example, Mary and her heavenly court appear to the faithful, consoling them and guiding them to pray the Rosary as well as blessing them for doing charitable things, like the exemplary Camilla Capponi. In placing a rosary medallion depicting the Pentecost above the celestial crown of the Madonna, Vasari was emphasizing the very moment of Mary's glorification as the Mother of Wisdom (*Mater Sapientiae*). Thus, for the devotee, Camilla, eternal

salvation was achieved in having prayed the Rosary throughout her lifetime to the Mother of Mercy, the Mother of God, and the Queen of Heaven.

In Florence, during these Tridentine Reform and the Counter-Reformation times, most Mannerist painters were commissioned by churches, confraternities, convents, and monasteries to compose paintings and altarpieces depicting themes associated with the Life of Christ, including the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, and the Ascension (Falciani & Natali, 2017, pp. 89-113). Vasari and his assistants provided a new devotional theme focused on the love and mercy of Christ's mother (*Mater Dei*) and visualized in the *Madonna of the Rosary*. After the completion of the Vasari's altarpiece, Borghini further commented favorably on the painting's artistic merits and iconographical content in *Il Riposo* (1584), but criticizes the size of the Madonna: "I am satisfied with everything, except the Madonna... whose arm, which is larger than normal, suggests a giant's connection" ("Ogni cosa mi soddisfa, fuorché quella donna... la quale a un braccio, che poco più grande che fosse, sarebbe disdicevole a un gigante") (Borghini, 2008, p. 95; Ardissino, 2019, pp. 343-374; Winston-Allen, 1997, pp. 13-46, 52-64).²⁸ Obviously, Borghini is not equating the Madonna of the Rosary with the Madonna of Mercy (*Mater misericordiae*) or the Queen of Heaven (*Regina caeli*). For Vasari, the Madonna in *The Madonna of the Rosary* embodied all aspects of the Virgin Mary's attributes as an Immaculate Conception, a Madonna of Mercy, a Mother of God, a Mother of Wisdom, and ultimately, a Queen of Heaven. His religious fervor is manifested with the acceptance of a complex spiritual manifestation about the mysteries of Rosary for Tridentine precepts and Counter-Reformation edicts.

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²⁸ "I doubt that one cannot do anything else, but highly praise the invention [creation]" ("Non mi pare chesi possa se non molto lodar l'invenzione"). In this context, Borghini reviews the history of the rosary and its function, 342, n. 66.

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