Cultural and Religious Studies, November 2021, Vol. 9, No. 11, 493-520
doi: 10.17265/2328-2177/2021.11.001

Giovanni Battista Naldini's *Pietà*: Humility and Love*

Liana De Girolami Cheney
University of Massachusetts Lowell, Lowell, USA

For Daniele Paolo Michele De Girolami, MD

"For the Lord takes pleasure in his people; He adorns the humble with salvation"
-Psalm 149:4

In 1564, in honor of the death of Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564), an artistic extravaganza was invented by the Benedictine monk Vincenzo Borghini (1515-1580)—prior of the hospital of the innocents, humanist, and administrator of the Florentine Academy of Design (Accademia del Disegno or Florentine Academy)—and was implemented by Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574)—artist, writer, and artistic director of the Academy, who engaged his Florentine assistants to work on the execution of the tomb in the Basilica of Santa Croce in Florence (see Figure 1). The commission of Michelangelo's tomb was prompted by his nephew, Lionardo [Leonardo] Simoni-Buonarroti (1522-1599), and the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Cosimo I de' Medici (1519-1574). The tomb was completed in 1578. Vasari designed the architectural monument, and his assistants, members of the Florentine Academy, collaborated in the following manner: The sculptures of the Fine Arts were carved by Giovanni Bandini (1540-1599), who represented the personification of architecture; Valerio di Simone Cioli (1529-1599), who represented the personification of Sculpture; and Battista Lorenzi (1527-1594), who represented the personification of Painting and the portrait bust of Michelangelo. Giovanni Battista Naldini (1537-1591) completed *al fresco* the burning urns, the purple-colored doorway of the tomb, the suspended canopy, and the *Pietà* in the center of the marble tabernacle. This latter artistic contribution is the topic of this essay.

Keywords: Pietà, Lamentation, humility, Giorgio Vasari, Giovanni Battista Naldini, Christian iconography, Mannerism, Michelangelo's tomb, Franciscan Order, Counter-Reformation

This essay consists of two parts: (1) a brief analysis of the funerary design and sources in Italian art of the sixteenth-century; and (2) an interpretation of Naldini's *Pietà* as a devotional painting.

Funerary Design and Sources

The architectural composition of Michelangelo's tomb reveals Vasari's artistic appropriations from Florentine Quattrocento types of humanistic tomb for *uomini famosi* (famous men) but with the flare of Mannerist conceits (see Figure 1). Borghini and Vasari aimed not only to honor one of their artistic and poetical

* **Acknowledgements**: This essay derives from a large study: "Giorgio Vasari's Tomb of Michelangelo: Neoplatonic and Spiritual Celebration", in Lilian H. Zirpolo, *Anthology of Sculpture in Early Modern Era* (forthcoming 2022). I am grateful for the suggestions of Professors Lilian Zirpolo, Rutgers University, Ellen Longsworth, Merrimack College, Lynette Bosch, SUNY Geneseo, and my brother, Daniele Paolo Michele De Girolami, MD.
NB: All the images are in public domain, unless photo credit is indicated.
Liana De Girolami Cheney, Ph.D., Professor of Art History (emerita), University of Massachusetts Lowell, Lowell, MA, USA.

mentors but also to affirm the Florentine Academy's professional bond, including Michelangelo and Vasari's assistants.[1] In his lifetime, Michelangelo's accomplishments fused the unification of the Fine Arts, and his tomb composed by various artists displayed this artistic community identity. This artistic endeavor emphasized the artists' reverence for the deceased Michelangelo as an *umono famoso* (famous man) who possessed an *anima santa* (holy soul). This type of celebratory tomb would influence the composition of honorific tombs in the following centuries, for example, Galileo Galilei's Tomb (1642-1674) in the Basilica of Santa Croce (Cheney, 2018).

Figure 1. Giorgio Vasari and assistants, Tomb of Michelangelo, 1564-1578. Basilica of Santa Croce, Florence. Photo credit: Liana De Girolami Cheney.

There are two constructions in the design of Michelangelo's tomb: a two-dimensional construct recessing vertically and a three-dimensional construct built up horizontally. The two-dimensional design, painted *al fresco*, is constructed of layers of overlapping rectangles forming a fictive holy tabernacle: An exterior frame constructed by pilasters and an architrave forming a doorway for the entrance into a symbolic mausoleum

[1] See Wazbinski (1987), for the best and most thorough analysis of the history and formation of the Florentine Academy.

tomb.

The three-dimensional design is a tour de force, a compositional structure that projects frontward, the level of projection intensifying as we reach the end or bottom of the whole tomb construct. Starting from the top or first level, there is a *baldacchino* or canopy painted *al fresco*; underneath the canopy, on the second level, a marble niche contains religious imagery—a Pietà—*al fresco*. Below it, on the third level, there is a white marble pseudo-Doric frieze bearing the Buonarroti coat of arms and the insignia of the Florentine Academy—three interlocking festoons—framed by large corbels that also support the marble niche above and frame a blue-grey marble square and circle. The fourth level contains a porphyry coffin, similar in design to Michelangelo's sarcophagi for the Medici dukes. A white marble bust of Michelangelo stands on a white pedestal in its center. This area intrudes into the area above, which contains a blue-grey marble square and circle. The fifth level consists of a white marble base or plinth that supports both the porphyry coffin and three female statues in white marble that represent the Fine Arts. Two of these seated *sculture in testa* or *statue parlante* (awakening sculptures or speaking statues) are placed on either side of the coffin (painting and architecture) while the third (sculpture) is perpendicular, placed in the center and below the bust of Michelangelo. The extended foot of the muse of sculpture leads the viewer to the sixth and final level of the tomb: a large porphyry epitaph with an honorific inscription in Latin (Wellington Gahtan, 2011).

Naldini's painted *al fresco* the background of Michelangelo's funerary chapel (see Figure 1). The design begins with a fictive door painted purple, simulating porphyry marble, a stone that historically was used only by the imperial family during Imperial Roman times. They used it to decorate their homes with basins, tombs, or temples; for example, the circle in the center of Pantheon's floor in Rome. The porphyry door is framed by two colossal pilasters with Tuscan/Brunelleschi capitals, composed of acanthus leaves, floral leaves, and a rosette motif supporting an architrave. Above them are two ancient types of ignited oil lamps also painted *al fresco* by Naldini (see Figure 1).

In front of the funerary doorway, Naldini painted *al fresco* a *baldacchino* or canopy. This canopy of state or cloth of honor is usually placed above an altar or a tomb as an honorific symbol. The conical canopy (*ombrellino*) is designed to create the illusion that it is hanging from the base of a pilaster located up above. This architectural element is not fictive like the canopy, and it is made of *pietra serena*, adhering to the wall of the church aisle (see Figure 2a).

Naldini painted with brilliant and vivid Mannerist colors a canopy composed of a golden crown holding together two large curtains of Damascus color. Around the rim of the crown and above the curtains is a type of frieze with fringes of blue color and tassels of gold color. At the top, this scalloped design is decorated with *grotteschi* of masks and faces with open mouths, whose gestures announce the burial event or mourning. The border of the curtains is of mint color with fringes of gold color, but the interior of the curtain is of purple color, matching the porphyry color of the door and marble coffin (see Figures 2a and 2b).

Two nude angels, reclining on a round arch of the small tabernacle, hold a large golden disk (*labarum*) featuring Latin inscriptions or initials (Schiller, 1972). The initials, although blurry, are the monogram of Jesus—IHS—*Iesus Hominum Salvator* (Jesus, Savior of Humankind), according to the Franciscan missionary San Bernardino of Siena (1380-1440) (see Figure 3) (Michelson, 2004; Mormando, 1999). The positions of the angels recall the reclining figure of Day/Night and Aurora/Dawn in Michelangelo's Medici Tomb in the New Sacristy of the Church San Lorenzo. Surrounding this marble niche, inside the canopy, other small angels, looking more like *putti*, struggle to keep open the purple curtains of the canopy in order to reveal a small marble niche

with the scene of the Pietà—Lamentation over Christ's body—in the center (see Figures 2a, 2b, 4a, and 4b).

Figure 2a. Giovanni Battista Naldini, Urns, Doorway, Canopy, and *Pietà*, 1570, det., fresco.
Tomb of Michelangelo, 1564-1578. Basilica of Santa Croce, Florence.
Photo credit: Liana De Girolami Cheney

Figure 2b. Giovanni Battista Naldini, Canopy with Angels, 1570, det., fresco.
Tomb of Michelangelo, 1564-1578. Basilica of Santa Croce, Florence.
Photo credit: Liana De Girolami Cheney

Figure 3. Giovanni Battista Naldini, Canopy and Jesus Monogram, 1570, det., fresco.

Tomb of Michelangelo, 1564-1578. Basilica of Santa Croce, Florence.
Photo credit Liana De Girolami Cheney

Figure 4a. Giovanni Battista Naldini, *Pietà*, 1570, det., fresco.
Tomb of Michelangelo, 1564-1578, Basilica of Santa Croce, Florence.
Photo credit: Liana De Girolami Cheney

Figure 4b. Giovanni Battista Naldini, *Pietà*, 1570, det., fresco.
Tomb of Michelangelo, 1564-78, Basilica of Santa Croce, Florence.
Photo credit: Liana De Girolami Cheney

The whole design of the tomb is a collection of visual quotations from Michelangelo's artworks throughout his artistic career. His artist's friends are paying homage to his creations. From the top level of the tomb with its burning urns to the Latin inscription at the bottom, the conceit of this funerary monument is an apotheosis to Michelangelo's creativity and persona. The burning urns, *virtutum omnium vas* (the cup/vase of

all virtues), allude to the concept of artistic excellence or *virtù* in his art (Wazbinski, 1987; Cheney, 2010).[2]

The visual appropriations of classical imagery are intended as a humanistic visual quotation about the pursuits of the Florentine Academy. The collaboration of artists in this project further emphasizes the artistic bond among the members of the Academy as well as important studious and artistic goals for its founders: Cosimo I, Borghini, and Vasari. The latter aimed to aggrandize art and the position of the role of artists as human creators or inventors but also as imitators of the Divine Creator (*deus-artifex*), as he wrote in his *Vite* (Cheney, 2017; Ostrem, 2007).

In the first preface of the *Vite*, Vasari wrote that the concept of creativity originates in God, whom he refers to as "Divine Architect of time and of nature":

> Cosi, dunque, il primo modello onde uscì la prima immagine dell'uomo fu una massa di terra; e non senza cagione, perciò che il divino Architetto del tempo e della natura, come perfettissimo, volle mostrare nella imperfezzione della materia la via del levare e dell'aggiungere, nel medesimo modo che sogliono fare i buoni scultori e pittori, i quali, ne' lor modelli, aggiungendo e levando riducono le imperfette bozze a quelle fine e perfezzione che vogliono.
>
> Now the material in which God worked to fashion the first man was a lump of clay, and this was not without reason; for the Divine Architect of time and of nature, being wholly perfect, wanted to show how to create by a process of removing from, and adding to, material that was imperfect in the same way that good sculptors and painters do when, by adding and taking away, they bring their rough models and sketches to the final perfection for which they are striving. (Bettarini & Barocchi, 1966-1976, Preface One, 6:4)

Hence, the primacy of creation is divine and artists as human creative beings are inspired by God, according to the artistic theory of Mannerist art. Naldini as an exponent of Mannerist art clearly visualized Vasari's thoughts on creativity. Naldini's inventive preparatory drawings for the painting of the *Pietà* and his novelty in the depiction of Christ's humility in the *Pietà* attest to the Christian belief of divine guidance in creativity.

An Interpretation of Naldini's *Pietà*

Through the elaborate canopy with brilliant and vivid colors, the Mannerist painter Naldini unveils inside the canopy a most moving scene from the Passion of Christ: a Pietà or Lamentation over Christ's body (Matt. 27:59-61; Mark 15:45-47; Luke 23:53-56; John 19:39-42) (see Figures 2a, 4a, and 4b).[3] The *colorito* in the painting reveals Naldini's careful study of the paintings of Andrea del Sarto (1486-1530) and his tutor, Jacopo Pontormo (1494-1557), while his compositional constructs show adaptation from Michelangelo and Vasari's art (Freedberg, 1975). Naldini was an invaluable assistant in Vasari's projects at the Palazzo Vecchio and a distinguished member of the Florentine Academy. Later, in the altarpiece of the *Resurrection of Lazarus* of 1588, in the Salviati Chapel located in the crypt of the Church of San Mark in Florence; Naldini repeated some of designs from his compositions of the angels in the canopy of Michelangelo's tomb (see Figure 5).[4]

---

[2] See also De Tervarent (1997, p. 310), noting that in the *Portrait of Lorenzo the Magnificent* in the Galleria degli Uffizi, Vasari employed this same motto to honor this noble ruler.

[3] See Schiller (1972, 2:174 & 175), referring to the Gospel of Nicodemus on the Lamentation that was known in the 12th century.

[4] In a collection of drawings found at the Musée du Louvre, there is a drawing of a *putto* carrying a festoon, an image that resembles the angels inside the canopy in Michelangelo's Tomb. See Scorza (2014); for the image, see https://rickscorza.com/coronae-per-coronas-currunt-louvre-baldinucci-sketchbook-drawing-attributed-giovan-battista-naldini/ (accessed 15 September 2021).

Figure 5. Giovanni Battista Naldini, *Resurrection of Lazarus*, 1580, fresco.
Crypt of San Salviati Chapel, Church of San Marco, Florence.

Naldini's *Pietà*, an *imago pietatis* (image of pity or piety) associated with the Christian iconography of the Man of Sorrow, recalls the prophecy of Isaiah about Christ's suffering (Is. 53:3) (Panofsky, 1927; Schiller, 1972). It also includes iconographical aspects of *Arma Christi* (the weapons or instruments by which Christ defeated evil) and the Trinity (Darby, 2007; Puglisi, 2013; Cooper & Denny-Brown, 2014; Schiller, 1972).[5] He depicted a most remarkable interpretation of the Christian Lamentation scene, a testament of human sorrow and the consolation achieved through Christ's Crucifixion, which granted love and salvation for humankind (Schiller, 1972, on the Deposition). But Naldini focused especially on Christ's humility and sacrifice.

The scene of the *Pietà* is depicted in a confined space, a landscape with three crosses visible in the background (see Figure 4b). The mountaintop of the landscape recalls Mount Golgotha, where Christ was Crucified (Matt. 27:33). At the bottom of the hill, on the right side of the painting, is a sketchy depiction of the rock tomb where Christ will be buried. Originally, this was the tomb of Joseph Arimathea, a follower of Christ and also a prominent member of the Sanhedrin in Judea (Matt. 27:50). The open rock tomb and the placement of a stone slab on the ground in front of the tomb suggests the anointing stone or marble slab whose surface was used to prepare Christ's body for burial after his removal from the cross (Schiller, 1972). Paradoxically, the scene suggests that Christ's body will be placed there, but Christ's gesture with His two fingers in the shape of a "V" implies His survival and victory over death (*Christus victor*, Christ victorious) (Luke 24) (Cheney, 2012).

[5] See also Didron (1965, 2:63-82), on the attributes of the **Trinity**.

In the foreground of painting, a cluster of holy figures witnesses Christ's Crucifixion and burial: the Virgin Mary (the Mother of Christ); Saint John the Evangelist (Christ's favorite and youngest apostles); and Mary Magdalene (a penitent devotee and disciple of Christ) (John 19:25-42). They support the collapsed body of Christ, which is nude except for a loincloth (*perizoma*).[6] Miraculously, He kneels on the ground on his burial linen cloth or shroud (John 20:6-7) (Schiller, 1972).[7]

The Mother of Christ is dressed in mourning clothing of purple colors, while Saint John the Evangelist, dressed in simple attire but with vivid Mannerist colors of red, yellow, and purple, parallels in reverse the bending gesture of the Virgin Mary. Next to the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, dressed in a garment of yellow and green colors, prostrates, as an act of penance, in front of Christ's body while holding and caressing his leg and wounded foot. Next to her, a small ointment vessel identifies her, and also recalls another passage in the Scriptures (Luke 7:38; John 19:39) (Schiller, 1972, on the anointing of Christ's body). Once before, in the house of the Pharisee, she crouched at Christ's feet, washing them with her tears and, after drying then with her hair, she anointed them with fine oils. In other paintings on the Passion theme, Naldini continued to represent Mary Magdalene in a crouching and penitent position—for example, in the *Lamentation over the Body Christ or Descent from the Cross* of 1572, oil on poplar wood, now in a private collection and at the National Gallery of London (see Figure 17).

In the *Pietà*, in front of this mourning group, Christ is placed on His knees with outstretched arms. This frontal position of Christ, kneeling down facing the devotee or viewer, is a most unusual iconographical reference to Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection. Usually in paintings, the only portrayal of Christ kneeling down is when He prays to His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane in the area of the Mount of Olives before His capture by the Roman soldiers (Luke 21:37-39, Mark 14:32-42) (see Figure 6).[8] This moving scene in Naldini's *Pietà*, where Christ is humbly on his knees, is unparalleled in Italian Maniera imagery (see Figure 4b). This devotional imagery reflects the impact of the Counter-Reformation on Mannerist imagery, in particular in Naldini's paintings, emphasizing personal faith, piety, and spiritualism (Freedberg, 1975; Bosch, 2020). Undoubtedly, guided by the Benedictine prior Borghini, influenced by the Counter-Reformation, and under the patronage of the Franciscan Order in Santa Croce, Naldini depicted an image of a humble Christ: "[he] who was humiliated in his Death is now exalted to be King of Glory" (Schiller, 1972, p. 175). This refers to Saint John the Evangelist's verse on the imagery:

> Then Jesus said to them [Apostles] 'When you lift up the Son of Man [Christ himself], then you will know that I am He and that I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father taught Me, I speak these things.

Or it may refer to another scriptural passage taken from the Epistle to the Philippians (Pauline Epistle), which states: "Being found in appearance as a man, He [Christ] humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:5-8).

---

[6] According to the Gospels of Nicodemus (Acts of Pilate), X, and Matt. 27-28, Christ was stripped naked at the Crucifixion, following the Roman tradition—a very humiliating event for a Jew. On this, see Cloer (2021).

[7] In accord with Jewish burial practices, Joseph of Arimathea provided long sheets of linen cloth and aromatic spices to clean and wrap the bloody body of Christ after His descent from the Cross (John 19:38-40).

[8] See Réau (2008, p. 444), for a discussion on the different interpretations in the Gospels of how Christ prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. Luke states that "Christ knelt down and prayed" (Luke 22:41), while Matthew (23:36) and Mark (14:31) claim that "Christ fell with his face to the ground and prayed".

Figure 6. Giorgio Vasari, *Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane*, 1565-1570, oil on panel. National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo.

The impact of the Counter-Reformation on the endorsement of efficacy and piety in the representations of images was established in the final session of the Council of Trent (4 December 1563) under the guidance of Pope Paul III (Alessandro Farnese, 468-1549) (O'Malley, 2013). The Council emphasized in their decree that sacred images should adhere to the writings in the Bible (*Biblia pauperum*) and that their visualization should provide recollections (*memoria*) and spiritual arousal (*exitatio*). The decree urged

> religious leaders to diligently teach the Bible along with meaning of the stories and mysteries of redemption in order to be portrayed in paintings and other representations. Instructing on the Bible assisted in understanding the articles of faith. Hence, great profit is derived from the depiction of all holy images not only because people are reminded of the Bible but also learn about the benefits and gifts bestowed on them by Christ. This experience moved (*exitatio*) viewers to adore and love God and cultivate piety (Schroeder, 1978, p. 216; Paleotti, 1582/1961, 1582/1990, p. 230).

As a Christian devotee and aware of the Christian reforms because of his artistic and patronage circles as a member of the Florentine Academy and Medici patronage, Naldini in the *Pietà* conveyed both the biblical knowledge about the Passion of Christ and the spiritual arousal of compassion, love, and humility in viewing the image as instructed by the Counter-Reformation decree (Panofsky, 1927; Jones, 2010; 2012; Muroaka, 2015).

Naldini was well aware of the signification and impact his sacred image would have when depicted in a Franciscan basilica, Santa Croce, an awareness heightened by the fact that the painting was part of a funerary altar commissioned by a family member of the admired artist, Michelangelo, who was a Franciscan devotee (Wallace, 2015). The role of this church and its liturgy encouraged Franciscan virtues of devotion, poverty, and humility. These Franciscan endeavors were advocated during the Florentine Tridentine reform of the 16th century and were later strongly embodied in the Counter-Reformation (Bosch, 2020; Hall, 1979). The Franciscan Order had pioneered the dissemination of the Passion of Christ, consideration of His suffering and love and exemplification of His human and divine understanding for human inequities. An exemplary of this devotion was the founder himself, Saint Francis, who prayed with humility to experience the imprint of Christ's stigmata (Heywood, 1949; Cousins, 1978; Askew, 1969). Under this religious, cultural, and artistic "canopy", Naldini invented the humble Christ in his *Pietà*.

For his *Pietà* (see Figure 4b), Naldini also composed at least two drawings: a pen and ink now at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lille (see Figure 7); and another study, a beautiful sanguine (red chalk) drawing, now at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Marseille (see Figure 8). In the pen and ink drawing, with a directional diagonal movement, Naldini unfolds the religious drama by placing the figures on the ground of Golgotha. The collapsed corpse of Christ is partially supported by John the Evangelist—forming the top of the diagonal line—while the Mother of Christ—located in the middle of the diagonal movement—attempts with gentleness to embrace her son one last time. She bends over his body and holds one of his lifeless hands. Meanwhile, Mary Magdalene crouches over the feet of Christ, mourning her spiritual Master. Her posture completes the downward direction of the diagonal design. In Naldini's second drawing (see Figure 8), the drama is composed by the lines, color, and movement of the forms, not by Christ's human gesture of "have pity on me" (*imago pietatis*) (Panofsky, 1927; Cordellier, 2005, p. 20). A third possible study is a *Dead Christ Supported by Three Figures* of 1570. This drawing in pen and brown ink over black chalk is now part of the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City (Accession Number: 1972.118.261) (see Figure 9) (Thiem, 1999, Figure 1).[9] In a pyramidal composition, the designs show a man—John the Evangelist or Nicodemus—holding the collapsed corpse of Christ while two female figures—Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary—on the side try to assist in the support. Christ is placed diagonally, partially seated on or propped up against a marble coffin. In front of Christ, on the ground, a crown of thorns is centrally placed, reminding the viewer of His suffering and Crucifixion. The drawing of this *Lamentation* scene reveals Naldini's visual appropriation of the composition from the marble statue of Michelangelo's *Florentine Pieta* (*Bandini Pietà*) of 1550-1555, now in the Museo dell'Opera of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence (see Figure 10).

[9] For other studies, see British Museum, Inv. 1895, 0915.558; Pouncey & Gere (1962, p. 224); and Ceppi and Confuorto (1980, p. 152, n. 328), drawing from Lille (Inv. P.165a), and (p. 150, n. 323), drawing from the Galleria degli Uffizi (Inv. 7447F).

Figure 7. Giovanni Battista Naldini, *Pietà*, 1570, drawing pen and ink.
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille.
Courtesy of Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille.

Figure 8. Giovanni Battista Naldini, *Deposition* or *Lamentation*, 1570, sanguine drawing.
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Marseille.
Courtesy of Musée des Beaux-Arts, Marseille.

Figure 9. Giovanni Battista Naldini, *Dead Christ Supported by Three Figure*s, 1570s, pen and brown ink, over black chalk drawing.
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Credit line: Bequest of Walter C. Baker, 1971.

Figure 10. Michelangelo, Florentine Pietà (Bandini Pietà), 1550-1555, marble.
Museo dell'Opera of Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence.

The treatment of the torso of Christ, with the exception of the side wound, idealizes him as a Hellenistic hero, but His facial expressions and the turning of His head show the pain (*pathos*) that He has suffered. The classical and muscular treatment of Christ's torso is Naldini's appropriation of the Laocoön's torso, a marble statue composed by Agesander, Atheodoros, and Polydoros as *Laocoön and His Sons* around 200 BCE (compare Figures 4b and 11, flipped for comparison). This ancient sculpture was discovered during one of the excavations of Rome in 1506 (now at the Vatican Museum). It was known to Mannerist artists as well as to Michelangelo, who had restored an arm of the Trojan priest (Haskell & Penny, 1981). Naldini's treatment of Christ's torso also recalls the carving of Christ's torso in the *Palestrina Pietà* of 1555, attributed to Michelangelo, now in the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence (see Figure 12).[10]

Figure 11. Agesander, Atheodoros, and Polydoros, *Laocoön and His Sons*, 200 BCE, det., marble. Vatican Museum (flipped).

[10] Today the attribution of this work to Michelangelo has been questioned, see I. Lavin & M. A. Lavin (2020).

Figure 12. Michelangelo, attrib., Palestrina Pietà, 1550-1555, marble. Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence.

In the *Pietà*, Naldini designed a series of interlocking or superimposed crosses, symbols of Christ's triumph over death (*crux invicta*, unconquerable cross) and of Christianity (Schiller, 1972).[11] The symbolism of the cross is also associated with the name of the church where Michelangelo is buried, the Basilica of the Holy Cross. For the Christian devotee, the cross is the vehicle of salvation whereby the soul of the deceased ascends from Earth to Heaven (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994). Metaphysically, the cross provides a vehicle and a bond between the natural realm formed by a square (Earth) and the divine realm formed by a circle (Heaven). The "world is in the form of a cross", hence, Christ is the *axis mundi* or world axis (Didron, 1965).[12]

[11] See also Didron (1965, pp. 307-374), on symbolism of the cross; and Jensen (2017, Chap. 6), on the *crux invicta*.
[12] See also Eliade (1991, pp. 48-51), on the symbolism of the center. For Christians, Calvary is associated with Christ's Crucifixion.

In his *Pietà*, Naldini composed three types of crosses—Tau, Latin, and Greek (see Figure 13) (Didron, 1965). The geometrical forms physically and metaphysically assist in the understanding of sacred mysteries, the connection between Earth (square) and Heaven (circle), and the bond between the faithful and God (Allen, 1994; Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994). In the painting of the *Pietà*, Christ's arms are stretched out and resting on His mother and Saint John the Evangelist's lap. Christ's gesture of extended arms and His kneeling posture forms a Tau cross (see Figure 13). The Tau cross—the mystical cross—suggests that Christ's death was overcome by His human sacrifice and divine redemption. Hence the cross is formed with a single short line extended at the top of Christ's head and a long line perpendicularly moving through the body of Christ to reach down to the linen cloth. This type of cross is associated with the Franciscan Order and Saint Francis of Assisi (Vorreaux, 1999); the patron of Santa Croce, and Michelangelo was a devotee of Saint Francis (Wallace, 2015). In the *Pietà*, in the extended arm resting on the lap of Saint John, Christ is depicted making a gesture with his two fingers, a gesture of victory (*Christus victor*) as well as a reference that He (Christ) is the second member of the Trinity. The Latin cross alludes to Christ's Crucifixion and his human existence on Earth. In the painting, the long arm of the Latin Cross—the cross of suffering—is formed from the head of Saint John the Evangelist, moving perpendicularly to the loincloth of Christ, while the short arm of the cross extends along the sides of the Christ's arms (see Figure 13). The last cross visualized in the painting is in the shape of a Greek cross formed with diagonal lines, also known as the Saint Andrew's cross, whose arms are of equal length and indicate the four cardinal points on Earth (see Figure 13). In the painting, all the lines of the crosses intersect at Christ's pierced side wound), attesting to His human death (John 19:34; Matt. 27:49) (see Figure 13).

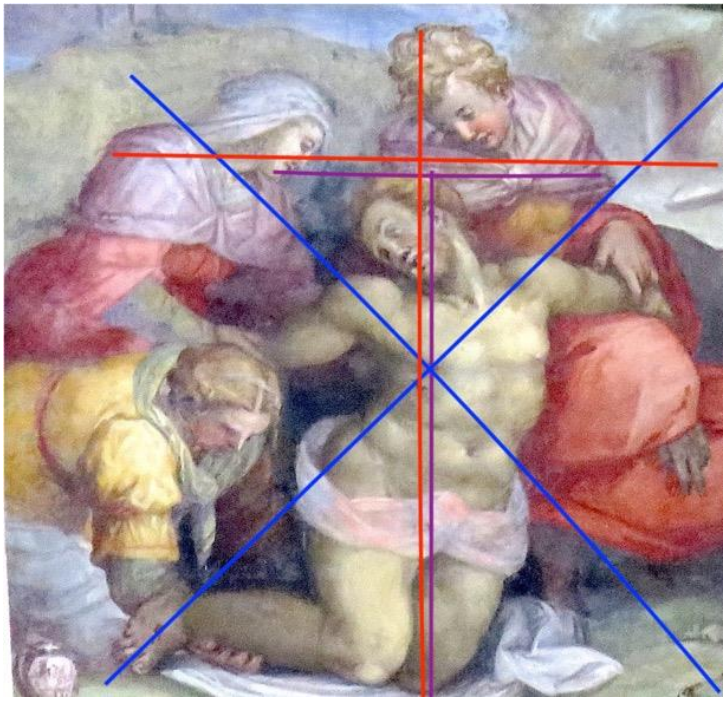

Figure 13. Cheney's diagram of crosses—Tau, Latin, and Greek—in Giovani Battista Naldini, *Pietà.*

In Naldini's *Pietà*, the rotating motion is implied with the intersection of the diagonal lines, which composed the Greek cross. This type of rotation forms an imaginary circle around Christ's knelt body—a physical act signifying the humanity of Christ: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). Another rotating

motion or circling, visualized in the painting, is inferred from Christ's knelt body, starting from His navel-physical center of Christ's body—and gyrating around His body; hence, forming concentric circles around His knelt body. Christ's navel symbolizes the spiritual center of the world—the navel of Heaven (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994, p. 719). Metaphorically, this second circle formed is a celestial, divine circle, the universe or divine cosmos (De Regny, 1988).[13] Metaphysically is a reference of the transformation of Christ's body from human to divine. Christ was crucified, descended from the cross after His death, and triumphantly and divinely resurrected into Heaven (*Christus victor*) (Luke 24).

In Naldini's painting, the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and John the Evangelist hold onto Christ's body, while the body is in the process of *rigor mortis* but before it is placed in the adjacent tomb (open door, slab on the ground), they embrace His body and mourn Him. Christ's body is portrayed in front of the holy group and making the last human and divine gesture: He humbly kneels in front of Christian devotees.

In the *Pietà*, Naldini carefully combined several conceits based on stylistic and symbolic meanings. Stylistically, he followed the Italian Mannerist tradition of merging natural and classical conceits in a composition. Symbolically, as a Christian, he recalled historical biblical events in Christ's life: the Crucifixion (Mark 15:21-41)—Christ as human and humbly suffering in the Cross for the sins of humankind—and the Resurrection (Matt. 28:1-10)—Christ as divine, triumphantly surviving death and granting salvation to humankind**.**

Naldini painted several episodes of the Passion of Christ or the Passion cycle: for example, the *Crucifixion* (see Figure 14), the *Descent from the Cross* (see Figures 15, 16, and 17), the *Lamentation over the Body of Christ* (see Figures 18 and 19), and *Carrying the Cross to Calvary* or *Via crucis* (see Figures 20 and 21) (Cornelison, 2019).[14] It is not within the scope of this short essay to analyze or categorize Naldini's religious paintings or Passion cycles. But a few observations can be made on some remarkable pictures to indicate Naldini's artistic ability and spiritual sensibility. A recently discovered small panel with a *Lamentation over the Body of Christ*, now in a Private Collection (see Figure 22), was probably a predella panel, functioning as part of a large altarpiece or as an intimate panel in a private room or chapel.[15] The scene in this small painting unveils a painful death. In a compressed rectangular space, mourners are gathered around Christ's corpse. In a frieze type of format, the body of Christ is placed directly on the ground. John the Evangelist holds Christ's head and shoulders while Mary Magdalene prostrates over His feet. His mother, the Virgin Mary, in despair with her open arms (*orans* position), kneels next to her son's body. The figures are placed in front of the rock tomb, while in the distance three crosses on Mount Golgotha are visible. Naldini depicted a moving, grieving scene using colors of blue, grey, mauve, and purple with tints of yellow to visually capture the agony of the moment. The intimate and emotional quality visualized in this predella panel parallels the profound sentiment expressed in the *Pietà* (compare Figures 4b and 22).

---

[13] See also Chevalier & Gheerbrant (1994, p. 918), for the square; 195, 198-199, for the circle.

[14] For other depictions of the *Via crucis*, for the images, see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Giovanni_Battista_Naldini#/media/File:Giovan_battista_naldini,_via_crucis,_01.JPG and https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Giovanni_Battista_Naldini#/media/File:L'empoli_o_Giovan_battista_naldini,_via_crucis_(da_pontormo),_1582-89_ca.jpg (accessed 15 August 2021).

[15] Sotheby's New York, Auctioned on 26 January 2006, lot 108. The painting was included in the Sir Frederick Cook collection in the 1840s, see https://www.invaluable.com/auction-lot/giovanni-battista-naldini-fiesole-circa-1537-1591-108-c-iw1jwew8o8 (accessed 15 October 2021).

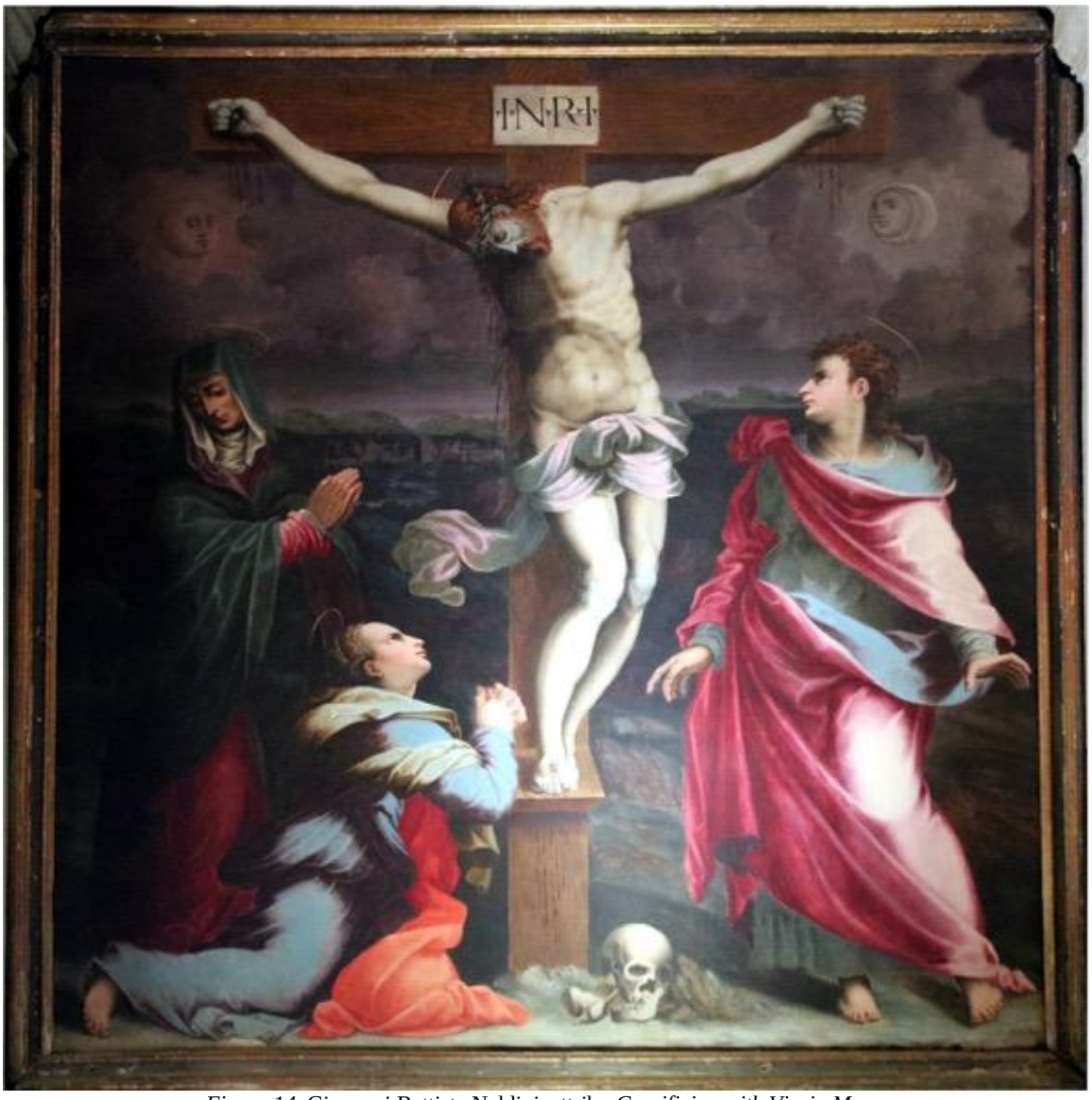

Figure 14. Giovanni Battista Naldini, attrib., *Crucifixion with Virgin Mary, Saints John the Evangelist and Mary Magdalene*, 1570s, oil on canvas. Church of San Fedele, Poppi, Province of Arezzo.

Figure 15. Giovanni Battista Naldini, *Descent from the Cross*, 1572-1573, oil on canvas. Private Collection.

Figure 16. Giovanni Battista Naldini, attrib., *Descent from the Cross*, 1570s, oil on canvas. Church of San Francesco di Paola, Florence.

Figure 17. Giovanni Battista Naldini, *Descent form the Cross*, 1572-1573, oil on poplar wood. Private Collection (Now on loan at the National Gallery, London).

Figure 18. Giovanni Battista Naldini, *Lamentation over the Body of Christ*, 1578, oil on canvas. Museo San Pietro (Colle di Val d'Elsa), Siena.

Figure 19. Giovanni Battista Naldini, *Lamentation over the Body of Christ*, 1578, oil on canvas. Private collection.

Figure 20. Giovanni Battista Naldini, *Carrying the Cross to Calvary*, 1563-1565, oil on panel. Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence, Kansas.
Courtesy of the Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence, Kansas.

Figure 21. Giovanni Battista Naldini, *Via crucis*, 1580s, oil on canvas.
Badia Fiorentina, Florence.

Figure 22. Giovanni Battista Naldini, *Lamentation over the Body of Christ*, 1578, oil on canvas. Private Collection.

With the exception of the *Pietà* and this predella panel, Naldini's other paintings for the Passion cycle are not solo images of the lamentation over the body of Christ but are thematic representations from episodes in the Passion of Christ. In these paintings, the inclusion of saints and donors transforms the historical religious event into a devotional picture. Although witness to the religious changes of the Counter-Reformation movement, the religious advisor or the artist has taken artistic liberties in the interpretation of the religious event, perhaps to fulfill the request of the commission by a patron, a confraternity or a religious order (Bosch, 2020).

These paintings display large crowds of mourners, followers of Christ, as He proceeds to Calvary, at the Crucifixion, at the descent from the Cross, preparing His body for burial, carrying His body to his sepulcher—a tomb that was donated by Joseph Arimathea (Luke 23:53). In most scenes, the body of Christ is in the *rigor mortis* position, His nature is covered with a loincloth, and His body lies on the ground over a linen cloth. These paintings of the Passion cycle depict several vignettes. In the background is a landscape showing Mount Golgotha where the Crucifixion has occurred; three crosses are sometime represented, with two of them holding the bodies of the Good and Bad thieves. The foreground shows crowds of people, the followers and friends of Christ, including His mother, Mary Magdalene, Saint John the Evangelist, Nicodemus, and Joseph of Arimathea. In some other instances, the donor or patron is included among those grieving over the death of the Savior. In front of the recumbent Christ, there are purification items associated with Jewish burial rituals and the Passion cycle, which include white linen cloths, a basin of water, and vessels with special ointments (oils) or fragrant spices. These items are part of the Jewish rituals of cleansing the deceased body before proper burial. Sacrificial items are also included, such as nails or a crown of thorns, which are depicted in full view on the ground next to Christ's corpse as a reminder to the faithful of His suffering and Crucifixion.

Naldini's *Sienese Deposition* of 1578, now in the Museo San Pietro, Colle di Val d'Elsa in Siena, depicts a dramatic and devotional scene. Included among the holy figures—Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and John the Evangelist—are other saints, who were not participants at the Crucifixion but are included for patronage support or religious fervor, such as SS. Francis, Clare, her sister Agnes, and Catherine of Alexandria (see Figure 18). The background consists of vignettes similar to those depicted in previous paintings of the Passion cycle, which

include the Crucifixion at Mount Golgotha and the burial preparation in front of a rock tomb. In addition to the gathering of other saints, what is unique in this *Sienese Deposition* is the composition of the foreground, which shows the Mother of Christ holding her son on her lap while sitting on a large rock formation or plinth. This composition is similar to the marble sculpture's composition of Michelangelo's *Vatican Pietà* of 1498. In Naldini's *Sienese Deposition*, Mary Magdalene is prostrate at the feet of Christ, while behind the Virgin Mary, SS. Francis, John the Evangelist, and Agnes converse—a holy conversation (*sacra conversazione*). In the immediate foreground, Saint Clare points to the crown of thorns at the edge of the marble plinth. On her lap is a crown of roses, a symbol of love, which contrasts with Christ's crown of thorns, a symbol of suffering but also of Christ's love for humankind. Opposite Saint Clare, Saint Catherine of Alexandria also kneels down, propping herself up against a spiked broken wheel, an attribute of her martyrdom and suffering, suggesting another parallel between the spikes on the wooden wheel and Christ's wooden crown of thorns—both suggesting gruesome and painful afflictions.

Another of Naldini's paintings, *Lamentation over the Body of Christ* of 1578, is now in a Private Collection (see Figure 19). Still visible in the dark background is Mount Golgotha, the place of the Crucifixion, with three crosses. In the foreground, the body of Christ has descended from the Cross and is now lying recumbent on the ground, surrounded by a group of mourners. Joseph Arimathea and two women encircle the lamenting group. Perhaps these two women are Mary of Cleophas, the Virgin Mary's sister (John 19:25), or Mary of Bethany or Martha, both Lazarus's sisters (John 11; 12:3). In addition, Mary Magdalene has anointed with precious fragrance Christ's legs, which are crossed. An ointment jar is on the ground next to her, a traditional attribute of purification for Mary Magdalene and a biblical reference to Christ's comment: "[the fragrance] was intended that she [Mary Magdalene] should save this perfume for the day of my burial" (John 12:1-8). With her fingers she points to the wound on His foot. The Mother of God, the Virgin Mary, with tears in her eyes, is kneeling down next to her son, attempting to hold his lifeless hand. With great care, John the Evangelist with his body and arms supports Christ's shoulders and head. Christ, nude except for the loincloth covering His lower part, lays on large, clean linen cloth. In front of him is depicted a crown of thorns, a remembrance of His suffering and death. This same attribute of the Crucifixion is seen on the ground in other paintings of the Passion cycle (see Figures 15, 16, 17, 18, and 19). In this painting, Naldini selected colors of bright red, pink, and yellow to dramatize the moment of lamentation and contrasting with the background colors of dark browns and somber values.

Conclusion

But in all his depictions of episodes from the Passion cycles, Naldini never visualized the same intense emotional and spiritual drama as in the *Pietà* for Michelangelo's tomb (see Figure 4b). For the Christian believer to stand in front this image—looking upward at it from below, perceiving the humble gesture of Christ kneeling on the ground and offering His Holy body—is psychologically and spiritually one of the most moving, tender, and loving moments between God and humankind. Christ's Crucifixion is a symbol of salvation for the Christian devotee, and His humble kneeling reminds the faithful of this precious divine gift—Christ's love.

References

Allen, M. J. B. (1994). *Nuptial arithmetic: Marsilio Ficino's commentary on the fatal number in Book VIII of Plato's Republic.* Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Askew, P. (1969). The angelic consolation of St. Francis of Assisi in post-Tridentine Italian painting. *Journal of the Warburg and*

Courtauld Institutes, 32, 280-306.

Bettarini, R., & Barocchi, P. (Eds.). (1966-1976). *Giorgio Vasari, Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori, nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568* (Vol. 6). Florence: S.P.E.S.

Bosch, L. M. F. (2020). *Mannerism, spirituality and cognition: The art of Enargeia.* London: Routledge.

*Ceppi, Beltramo C. and Nicoletta Confuorto. (Eds). 1*980). *Il primato del disegno - Firenze e la Toscana dei Medici nell'Europa del Cinquecento.* Florence: Centro Di.

Cheney, L. D. (2010). Giorgio Vasari's portrait of Lorenzo the magnificent. In G. C. D. Mansueto (Ed.), *Iconocrazia* (pp. 151-193). Bari: University of Bari.

Cheney, L. D. (2012). Giorgio Vasari: Il Trasporto di Cristo. *Artibus et Historiae,* (Fall), 3-20.

Cheney, L. D. (2017). Giorgio Vasari's Fine Arts in the Vite of 1550. *Journal of Literature and Art Studies, 7*(2), 140-178.

Cheney, L. D. (2018). Galileo Galilei's tomb in Santa Croce: Art and science. In N. Champion and C. Impey (Eds.), *Imagining other worlds: Explorations in astronomy and culture* (pp. 95-106). Bath, UK: INSAPIX and Sophia Center Press.

Chevalier, J., & Gheerbrant, A. (1994). *A dictionary of symbols.* (J. Buchanan- Brown, Trans.). London: Blackwell.

Cloer, E. (2021). The humiliation of Jesus. Retrieved October 15, 2021, from http://www.biblecourses.com/english/downloads/pdfs/crosslessons/030.the_humiliation_ of_jesu.pdf

Cooper, L. H., & Denny-Brown, A. (2014). *The Arma Christi in medieval and early modern material culture.* New York: Routledge.

Cordellier, D. (2005). *De la Renaissance à l'Âge baroque: Une collection de dessins italiens pour les musées de France. Exposition présentée au Musée du Louvre, salle de la Chapelle, du 8 juin au 29 août 2005.* Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux.

Cornelison, S. J. (2019). "Michelangelo's Panel": Content, context, and Vasari's Buonarroti altarpiece. *Art History, 42*(3), 416-449. Retrieved August 15, 2021, from https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12453

Cousins, E. H. (Trans.). (1978). *Saint Bonaventure: The soul's journey into God, the tree of life, the life of St. Francis.* Paterson, NJ: Paulist Press.

Darby, J. N. (2007). *Man of sorrows: As set forth in the Gospel of Luke.* London: Forgotten Books.

De Regny, P. V. (1988). *Dante e il simbolismo pitagorico.* Genoa: Fratelli Melita.

De Tervarent, G. (1997). *Attributs et Symboles dans L'Art Profane.* Geneva: Droz.

Didron, A. N. (1965). *Christian iconography: The history of Christian art in the Middle Ages* (Vol. 2). New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, Co.

Eliade, M. (1991). *Images and symbols.* (P. Mairet, Trans.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Freedberg, S. J. (1975). *Painting in Italy: 1500-1600.* Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, Inc.

Hall, M. B. (1979). *Renovation and Counter-Reformation: Vasari and Duke Cosimo in Sta Maria Novella and Sta Croce: 1565-1577.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Haskell, F., & Penny, N. (1981). *Taste and the antique: The lure of classical sculpture 1500-1900.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Heywood, W. (Trans.). (1949). *Francis of Assisi, the little flowers of the Glorious Messer St. Francis and of his friars* [Vicenza, 1476]. Florence: G. Fattorusso.

Jensen, R. M. (2017). *The cross*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Jones, P. M. (2010). The court of humility: Carlo Borromeo and the ritual of reform. In M. Hollingsworth and C. M. Richardson (Eds.), *The possessions of a cardinal: Politics, piety, and art 1450-1700* (pp. 166-184). University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Jones, P. M. (2012). Bare feet, humility, and the passion of Christ in the cults of Mary Magdalene and Carlo Borromeo in Seicento Rome. In M. Schlitt (Ed.), *Gifts in return: Essays in honour of Charles Dempsey* (pp. 321-336). Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies.

Lavin, I., & Lavin, M. A. (2020). The "Palestrina Pietà": Gatherings on the history of "a statue begun by Michelangelo". *Artibus et Historiae, 82*(41), 249-265.

Michelson, E. (2004). Bernardino of Siena Visualizes the name of God. In G. Donavin, C. J. Nederman, and R. Utz (Eds.), *Speculum sermonis: Interdisciplinary reflections on the medieval sermon* (pp. 157-179). Turnhout: Brepols.

Mormando, F. (1999). *The preacher's demons: Bernardino of Siena and the social underworld of early Renaissance Italy.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Muroaka, A. H. (2015). *The path of humility: Caravaggio and Carlo Borromeo.* New York: Peter Lang.

O'Malley, J. W. (2000). *Trent and all that: Renaming Catholicism in the early modern era.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

O'Malley, J. W. (2013). Trent, sacred images, and Catholics' senses of the sensuous. In M. B. Hall and T. E. Cooper (Eds.), *The sensuous in the Counter-Reformation church* (pp. 15-48). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Ostrem, E. (2007). Deus Artifex and Homo creator: Art between the human and the Divine. In S. R. Havsteen, E. Ostrem, N. H. Petersen, and H.W. Schwab (Eds.), *Creations: Medieval rituals, the arts, and the concept of creation* (pp. 15-48). Turnhout: Brepols. Retrieved July 10, 2021, from https://www.brepolsonline.net/doi/10.1484/M.RITUS-EB.3.3663?mobileUi=0

Paleotti, G. (1582/1961). Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre e profane. In P. Barocchi (ed.), *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento* (Vol. 3, pp. 117-517). Bari: G. Laterza.

Paleotti, G. (1582/1990). *Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre et profane.* P. Prodi, (Ed.). Bologna: Arnaldo Forni.

Panofsky, E. (1927). Imago pietatis. In M. J Friedländer (Ed.), *Festschrift für Max J. Friedländer zum 60. Geburtstage* (pp. 261-308). Leipzig: E.A. Seemann.

Pouncey, P., & Gere, J. (1962). *Raphael and his circle.* London: British Museum Press.

Puglisi, C. (2013). *New perspective on the man of sorrows: Studies in iconography, themes, and variations.* Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications.

Réau, L. (2008). *Iconografia del Arte Cristiano. Iconografia de la Biblia Nuevo Testamento*. (D. Alcoba, Trans.). Barcelona: Del Serbal.

Schiller, G. (1972). *Iconography of Christian art.* (J. Seligman, Trans., Vol. 2). Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society.

Schroeder O. P., J. J. (Ed. and Trans.). (1978). *Canons and decrees of the Council of Trent.* Rockford, IL: Tan Books.

Scorza, R. (2014). "Coronae per coronas currunt": The Louvre "Baldinucci Sketchbook" and a drawing attributed to Giovan Battista Naldini. *Bulletin de L'association des Historiens de L'art italien, 20*, 30-37.

Skinner, S. (2006). *Sacred geometry.* London: Sterling.

Thiem, C. (1999). Der tote Christus, eine Ikonographische Studie zum Werk des Florentiners Giovanni Battista Naldindi. *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz, 43*(1), 225-227.

Vorreaux, D. (1999). *Un symbole franciscain, le Tau.* Paris: Editions Franciscaines.

Wallace, W. E. (2015). "Certain of death": Michelangelo's late life and art. *Renaissance Quarterly, 68*(1), 1-32.

Wazbinski, Z. (1987). *L'accademia medicea del disegno a Firenze nel cinquecento* (Vol. 2). Florence: Olschki.

Wellington Gahtan, M. (2011). Epitaphs in Giorgio Vasari's lives. *Journal of Art Historiography, 5*, 1-24.

Zirpolo, L. H. (Ed.). (forthcoming 2022). *Anthology of sculpture in the early modern era.* Ramsey, NJ: Zephyrus Scholarly Publications.