MITTEILUNGEN DES KUNSTHISTORISCHEN INSTITUTES IN FLORENZ

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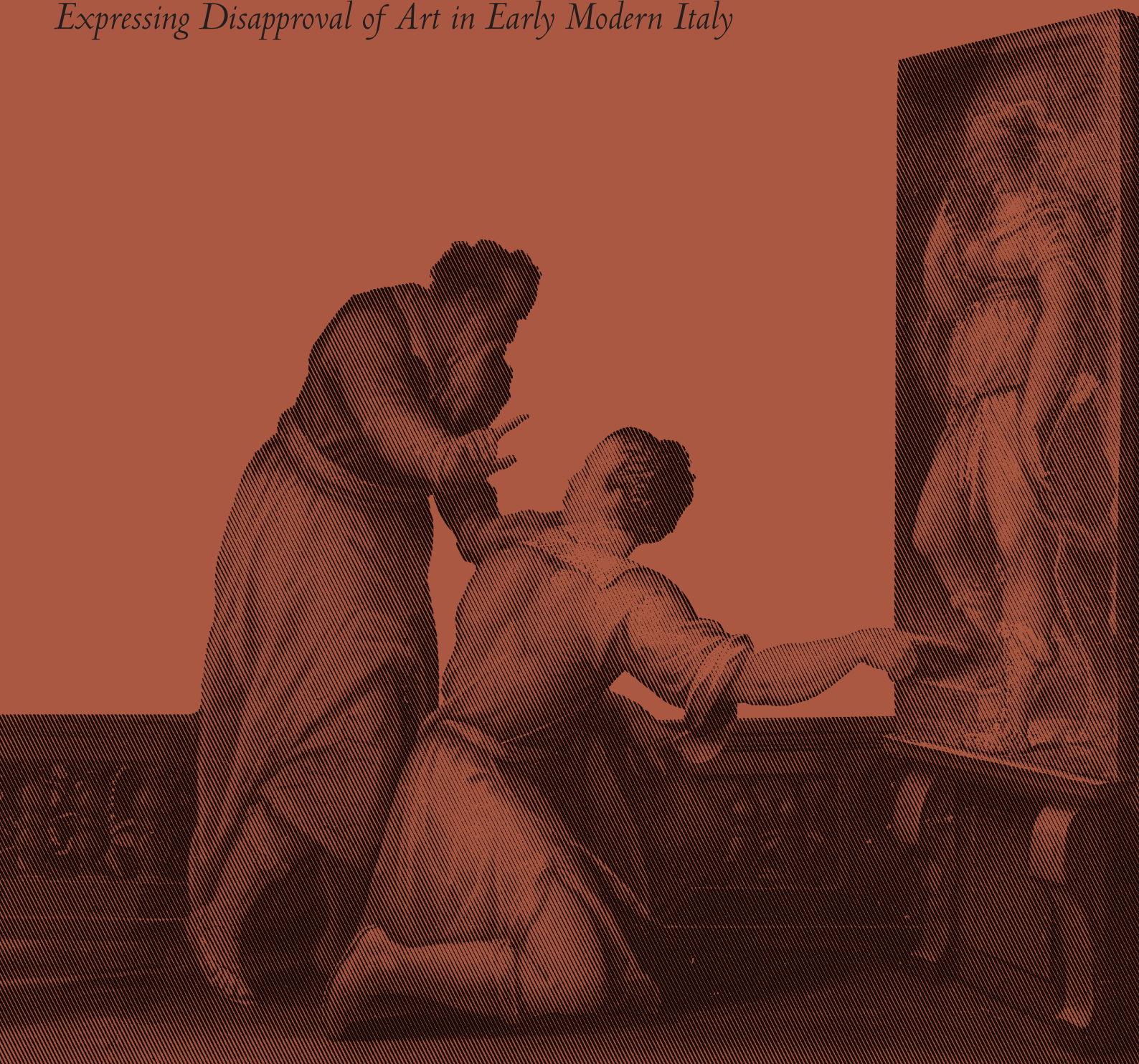
HEFT I

Bad Reception
Expressing Disapproval of Art in Early Modern Italy



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Bad Reception: Expressing Disapproval of Art in Early Modern Italy

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1 Caravaggio, *Saint Matthew and the angel*. Formerly Berlin, Gemäldegalerie

BAD RECEPTION AND THE RENAISSANCE ALTARPIECE

David Ekserdjian

The present contribution explores a number of case studies of the bad reception of altarpieces, while at the same time seeking to investigate the main ways in which patrons and artists combined forces to do their utmost to avoid such disappointments and rejections, which were almost equally undesirable for both parties. In the nature of things, the examples I will be considering are not wholly unknown, but some of them are in essence undiscussed. At the same time, the approach to various aspects of the topic is a novel one, most obviously in connection with the demolition of the false notion that contract drawings were invariably highly finished.

To begin at the very end of the period under consideration, Caravaggio's periodic problems when it came to endeavouring to give satisfaction to his patrons are very well known, and most definitely included altarpieces. In the case of his *Saint Matthew and the angel* for the Contarelli Chapel in San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome, it is generally agreed that the first version (Fig. 1), which was destroyed in Berlin at the end of the Second World War, was disapproved of both because the Evangelist came across as a base – and possibly even illiterate – groundling, whose writing hand needed to be guided by the angel, but also because the relationship between them lacked appropriate distance.[1] If so, then the objection would not only have been to the content of the work, but also to its form. As will become apparent in due course, it was as a rule more common for either content or form, as opposed to both, to be the problem. Oddly enough, in discussions of what may not unreasonably be dubbed the most notorious substitution in the entire history of Renaissance and baroque art, surprisingly little is made of the fact that Matthew is shown writing in Hebrew,[2] which may indicate that

[1] Sebastian Schütze, *Caravaggio: The Complete Works*, Cologne 2009, pp. 108f. and 259f., nos. 24.III, IV.

[2] Brief mention of the Hebrew text is made by Leonard Barkan, *Mute Poetry, Speaking Pictures*, Princeton 2013, pp. 8f.

someone involved with the commission subscribed to the now entirely discredited hypothesis of Papias, the second-century bishop of Hierapolis – as recorded in Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* (VI, 25, 4) – to the effect that the text of the Gospel according to Saint Matthew was originally written in Hebrew and only later translated into Greek. In any event, Caravaggio's second version of the composition, *in situ* in the chapel, has been dramatically altered in all sorts of ways, including the omission of Hebrew text, and not least in terms both of its dimensions and its proportions, since it measures 295 by 195 cm as opposed to the squatter 223 by 183 cm of the first *Saint Matthew*.

At San Luigi, as of course on occasion elsewhere, Caravaggio was allowed to have a second chance, but such was not to be the case when it came to his *Death of the Virgin*.[3] In this instance, early commentators such as Giulio Mancini and Giovanni Baglione are broadly in agreement that it was the undignified way he portrayed the Virgin which caused all the trouble. Be that as it may, the replacement altarpiece by Carlo Saraceni, which has remained in the Roman church of Santa Maria della Scala, does represent her both very much wide awake and also sitting up.[4] Its dimensions are likewise different, and indeed more dramatically so, since Caravaggio's canvas now in the Louvre measures 369 by 245 cm against the 459 by 273 cm of Saraceni's considerably taller and also somewhat wider painting.

The need to start all over again must have been an unsatisfactory state of affairs both for the artist and indeed the patrons, and it is tempting to wonder whether one of the difficulties, above and beyond Caravaggio's complex personality and tendency to do his own thing, was not connected with the fact that he did not draw.

By the second half of the fifteenth century, and even more so in the sixteenth, there are examples of notarial contracts for altarpieces which explicitly state that the appearance of the work must conform to an already existing drawing. An early instance of a contract drawing of this kind is the one referred to in Matteo di Giovanni's commission of 9 July 1487 to execute an altarpiece of the *Assumption of the Virgin* for Santa Maria dei Servi in Borgo San Sepolcro, where it remains, and in which it is specified that the work will be "modo et forma qua constat ex designato cuiusdam cartule designate".[5] The number of extant drawings that are incontrovertibly contract drawings is disheartenningly low, but they do exist.

The earliest known case in point actually precedes Matteo's lost sheet by a couple of decades and is a design for a now equally lost altarpiece representing the *Mystic Mill* (Fig. 2), a rare subject in which the body of Christ is transformed into flour and ultimately into the bread of the host. The altarpiece in question was executed for the Corpus Christi Chapel of Bernardo de Lazara in the Santo at Padua. Now in the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, the drawing forms part of a notarial contract of 17 October 1466, drawn up by the celebrated scribe Bartolomeo Sanvito, and there has been considerable debate over whether its author was Sanvito himself or Pietro Calzetta, who was to execute the painting, but the document itself makes it clear that it was in fact the former.[6] In either

[3] Schütze (note 1), pp. 148 and 270f., no. 40.

[4] *Ibidem*, p. 149.

[5] *Matteo di Giovanni e la pala d'altare nel senese e nell'aretino, 1450–1500*, conference proceedings Sansepolcro 1998, ed. by Davide Gasparotto/Serena Magnani, Montepulciano 2002, p. 125, doc. 2, and pp. 252–254, figs. 1–3.

[6] For the original drawing, see Catherine Puglisi/William Barcham, "Milling the Bread of Salvation: Art, Patronage and Technology in the de Lazara Altarpiece in Padua", in: *Artistic Practices and Cultural Transfer in Early Modern Italy: Essays in Honour of Deborah Howard*, ed. by Nebahat Avcıoğlu/Allison Sherman, Farnham *et al.* 2015, pp. 149–174; for an excellent discussion based on a later copy, see Alberta De Nicolò Salmazo, "Andrea Mantegna e Padova: 1445–1460", in: *Mantegna e Padova: 1445–1460*, exh. cat. Padua 2006/07, ed. by Davide Banzato/Alberta De Nicolò Salmazo/Anna Maria Spiazzi, Milan 2006, pp. 3–27: 6 and 8, fig. 7, and Barbara Maria Savy, *ibidem*, pp. 266f., no. 58.

2 Bartolomeo Sanvito, Contract drawing for *Mystic Mill*. Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, inv. 900255

event, it is explicitly stated that the "squizo" in the contract was based upon a drawing by Nicolò Pizolo in the possession of Francesco Squarcione.[7]

Other contract drawings have become separated from the contracts with which they were originally associated. One such sheet in red and black chalks by Francesco Vanni from the end of the sixteenth century, now in the Worcester Art Museum (Fig. 3), has an inscription on the reverse of the sheet.[8] It reads:

> Io Fran[ces]co Vanni pittore mi hobligo a eseguire il seguente disegnio in pittura a tela / a olio p[er] servitio d[e]l Altare di S. Ansa[n]no in Duomo secondo lobligo fatto da me a / lop[er]a sotto el 14. d[e]l presente mese

[7] Michelle O'Malley, *The Business of Art: Contracts and the Commissioning Process in Renaissance Italy*, New Haven/London 2005, p. 314, note 25, with further references.

[8] On this drawing see David Acton, *Master Drawings from the Worcester Art Museum*, exh. cat. Worcester, Mass., *et al.* 1998/99, New York 1998, pp. 44f., no. 14. A photograph of the inscription is published on the website of the Worcester Art Museum: https://worcester.emuseum.com/objects/20847.

3 Francesco Vanni, *Saint Ansano Baptising the Sienese*. Worcester, Mass., Worcester Art Museum, inv. 1951.54

> di Giugnio 1593 come al giornal d[e]l op[er]a C… / Et Io Giugurta di Fran[ces]co Tomaso op[er]aio accetto el seguente disegno da esequire dalla mano di maestro Fran[ces]co pittore.

Here the artist has signed and dated the sheet, and in addition specified the medium, support, and destination of the work in question. It has then been countersigned by an *operaio* of Siena cathedral. Remarkably, in this instance both the contract for the altarpiece – dated 15 June 1593, a day after the date of the written accord on the drawing – and the painting itself (Fig. 4) have survived. The former was published as long ago as the nineteenth century, while the latter has remained *in situ*.[9] The contract specifies that Vanni has agreed to "fare una dipintura in tela a l'olio, che serva per tavola a l'altare in Duomo detto di S. Ansano, nella quale sia dipinta da il mezzo in giù l'istoria quando S. Ansano battezzò Siena, e da mezzo in su una Nostra Donna che rachomanda la città a Dio suo figliuolo, sicondo il disegnio che n'ha lasciato di sua mano ne l'Opera; il quale possa migliorare et ampliare secondo le regole buone de l'arte sua". Given both the existence of a drawing and – crucially – its retention by the Opera, the patrons presumably felt there was no need for the contract to go beyond a distinctly summary account of the work's subject matter. I will be returning to the reference to Vanni being allowed to "migliorare et ampliare" his invention at the end of this paper, but for the moment it may suffice to make the point that the contract drawing and the final product, although broadly similar, are far from identical.

Before leaving the subject, it seems important to add that the degree of finish of the select few known examples of the type is very variable and therefore

[9] See respectively Gaetano Milanesi, *Documenti per la storia dell'arte senese*, Siena 1854–1856, III, p. 266, no. 169, and Laura Bonelli, "Francesco Vanni e la maniera di Barocci: colore, artificio, devozione", in: *Federico Barocci 1535–1612: l'incanto del colore. Una lezione per due secoli*, exh. cat. Siena 2009/10, ed. by Alessandra Giannotti/Claudio Pizzorusso, pp. 104–111: 109, fig. 70.

that there is no good reason to dub all highly detailed and finished studies 'contract drawings'.[10] More generally, seeing drawings could afford patrons the opportunity to steer clear of iconographic solutions of which they did not approve, as when – as related by Bellori – Pope Clement VIII had Barocci emend his *Institution of the Eucharist* altarpiece for Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome (Fig. 5). In Bellori's words:

> Prima che si dipingesse questo quadro volle il Pontefice vederne il disegno, e perché Barocci vi aveva finto il Demonio, che parlava all'orecchio di Giuda, tentandolo a tradire il maestro, disse il Papa che non gli piaceva il Demonio si dimesticasse tanto con Giesù Christo, e fosse veduto su l'altare, e così fu levato, restando Giuda in quell'atto, che pare stia meditando il tradimento.[11]

The drawing for the work in Chatsworth (Fig. 6) confirms the accuracy of Bellori's anecdote and also reveals that the group symbolising Charity in the foreground was likewise omitted.[12]

Naturally contract drawings, even allowing for their widespread loss, were by no means invariably part of the deal; at least sometimes patrons instead went to considerable lengths to spell out what they wanted in words. A rare instance of almost obsessive specificity is the contract of 25 November 1525 for a now lost or never executed altarpiece ("ut vulgo dicitur anchonam") to be painted by Antonio Semino and Teramo Piaggio for San Domenico, Genoa, which stipulates the following:

> […] in the middle of the painting they should paint nine figures representing, according to the grade and quality of their ministry, the body of Our Lord Jesus

4 Francesco Vanni, *Saint Ansano Baptising the Sienese*. Siena, cathedral

[10] Hannelore Glasser, *Artists' Contracts of the Early Renaissance*, New York 1977, pp. 115–149, for contract drawings and *modelli*.

[11] Giovan Pietro Bellori, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori et architetti moderni*, Rome 1672, p. 188.

[12] See Andrea Emiliani, *Federico Barocci (Urbino, 1535–1612)*, Ancona 2008, II, pp. 296–310, no. 81, for the commission, and p. 300, no. 81.1,

> Christ deposed from the cross, in which there should be the images of the most sacred and nude body of Our Lord Jesus Christ deposed from the cross, the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mary Salome, Mary Magdalen, Saint John the Evangelist, and Nicodemus and Joseph, and also to one side the image of Blessed John the Baptist and to the other the image of Blessed Jerome in penitence, with the upright cross and all the associated ornaments whether on earth or in the heavens in accordance with the aforementioned mystery. They should paint the whole picture and the figures in it well and in oil, and in the predella [*bancheta*] – likewise in oil and with minute figures – they should paint four mysteries representing the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ.[13]

Even here, however, the actual subjects of the four predella panels are not specified.[14]

I hardly need to add, of course, that – in spite of all these kinds of precautionary measures – as Robert Burns observed, "The best laid schemes o' mice an' men / gang aft agley."[15] Almost the entire remainder of this contribution will be devoted to a few further case studies of such bad receptions, but – before getting on to them – it does seem worthwhile at least to mention in passing some of the other sorts of things that could go wrong.

One whole category involves artists either moving elsewhere before completing projects or having the bad grace to die before their work is done. Arguably the most celebrated instance of the former scenario is Leonardo's *Adoration of the Magi* for San Donato a Scopeto, now in the Uffizi, whose survival is doubtless a tribute to the extraordinary awe in which he was held; in due course the commission passed to Filippino Lippi.[16] In the case of death, the normal procedure was obviously to arrange for someone else to take over, as famously happened with Titian's *Pietà* for his own chapel in Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari in Venice, now in the Accademia there, where Palma il Giovane's completion of the work is commemorated in a Latin inscription.[17] Altogether more unusual is the inscription on Parmigianino's *Madonna of the Long Neck* celebrating its unfinished state, which did not deter its patroness, Elena Tagliaferri, from installing it in the family chapel.[18]

Patrons might also die. Vasari relates that he was commissioned by Bernardino di Cristofano da Giovi to paint an altarpiece with "la Nostra Donna col Figliuolo in collo, e poi al San Cristofano gigante un altro Cristo piccolo sopra la spalla". He continues: "La qual cosa, oltre che parea mostruosa, non si poteva accomodare, né fare un gigante di sei in una tavola di quattro braccia."[19] His solution to what he dubs

for the drawing. See also Stuart Lingo, *Federico Barocci: Allure and Devotion in Late Renaissance Painting*, New Haven/London 2008, pp. 154–163.

[13] "[…] in cujus medio debeant in tabula depingi novem figure et imagines depicte representantes secundum gradum et qualitatem earum ministerium *(sic)* Corpus Domini Nostri Iesu Christi ex cruce depositi et in quibus debeant esse imagines Sacratissimi Corporis Iesu Christi nudi ex cruce depositi Beate Virginis Marie Marie Salome Marie Magdalene Sancti Iohannis Evangeliste ac Nicodemi et Iosephi ac etiam ab uno lattere *(sic)* imago Beati Iohannis Baptiste et ab alio lattere imago Beati Ieronimi in modum penitentie cum Cruce erecta et aliis suis ornamentis territoriis ac aere secundum qualitatem misterii predicti et que picture et imagines cum aliis predictis in ipso quadro debeant depingi ad oleum bene et aprime depicte et laborate et in bancheta dicti altaris debeant depingi figure minute etiam ad oleum in quatuor misteriis representantibus Passionem D. N. Iesu Christi" (quoted from Federigo Alizeri, *Notizie dei professori del disegno in Liguria dalle origini al secolo XVI*, Genoa 1870–1880, III, p. 354).

[14] For a discussion of how patrons often left iconographic details to artists, see Creighton E. Gilbert, "What Did the Renaissance Patron Buy?", in: *Renaissance Quarterly*, LI (1998), pp. 367–391.

[15] Robert Burns, *To a Mouse, on Turning Her up in Her Nest with the Plough, November 1785*.

[16] See respectively Frank Zöllner, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Complete Paintings and Drawings*, Cologne 2003, pp. 51–53 and 222, no. X, and Jonathan Katz Nelson, in: *idem*/Patrizia Zambrano, *Filippino Lippi*, Milan 2004, pp. 470–477 and 594–596, no. 52.

[17] Filippo Pedrocco, *Titian: The Complete Paintings*, London 2001, pp. 270f., no. 270.

[18] David Ekserdjian, *Parmigianino*, New Haven/London 2006, pp. 190–211, and p. 209, fig. 227, for the inscription.

[19] Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, a cura di Rosanna Bettarini/Paola Barocchi, Florence 1966–1997, V, pp. 339f.

5 Federico Barocci,
Institution of the Eucharist.
Rome, Santa Maria
sopra Minerva

6 Federico Barocci, Study for the
Institution of the Eucharist.
Chatsworth, Devonshire Collection,
inv. 361

the monstrosity of a giant Saint Christopher and two baby Jesuses in one picture was to produce a drawing in which a kneeling Saint Christopher received the Christ Child from a celestial Virgin, but in the event the patron died, and his heirs did not carry the project forward.

Another kind of misfortune arose when works either never reached their original patrons or were swiftly removed from their intended destinations. As is well known, Raphael's *Transfiguration* was meant to head off to Narbonne cathedral in company with Sebastiano del Piombo's *Raising of Lazarus*, but never left Rome and instead became the only just about iconographically acceptable high altarpiece of San Pietro in Montorio.[20] More thrilling by far was the fate of Memling's triptych of the *Last Judgement*, which was commissioned by Angelo Tani of Florence, but was seized at sea by a privateer called Paul Beneke and came to rest in his native Danzig, now better known as Gdańsk, in Poland.[21]

[20] Jürg Meyer zur Capellen, *Raphael: A Critical Catalogue of His Paintings*, Landshut 2001–2015, II, pp. 195–209, no. 66.

[21] Dirk de Vos, *Hans Memling: The Complete Works*, London *et al.* 1994, pp. 82–89, no. 4.

To return to the Salon des Refusés, one of the most striking instances of what might be described as a radical rejection is that of Fra Bartolomeo's *God the Father with Saints Mary Magdalen and Catherine of Siena*, which ended up in San Romano in Lucca and is now in the city's Museo Nazionale di Villa Guinigi but was intended for an altar in the church of San Pietro Martire on Murano. It was commissioned by Bartolomeo d'Alzano, the prior of the Reformed Dominicans there, and is dated 1509, but the prior had died in December of the previous year and all the evidence indicates that his successors rejected the work and instead ordered a minor local painter, Francesco Bissolo, to produce a substitute, now in the Accademia in Venice.[22] Both paintings have round tops inhabited by God the Father and include Saints Mary Magdalen and Catherine of Siena, but there the similarities come to an end. In his contract, Bissolo was called upon to represent "la madona la qual spoxa Santa Chatarina in uesu [*sic*] christo con quatro santj per laj", which is not precisely what he painted, since the Virgin is conspicuous by her absence and there are actually five attendant saints, not four; but the mystical marriage remains the principal subject.[23] In Bissolo's reassuringly old-fashioned Venetian solution, moreover, the addition of the dove of the Holy Spirit – who, like God the Father, is purloined from Giovanni Bellini's Vicenza *Baptism of Christ*[24] – means that all three persons of the Trinity are present. An aesthetic gulf separates the two works, but their *dramatis personae* and iconographies are also radically different.

According to Vasari, the demotion of Rosso Fiorentino's *Virgin and Child with four saints* altarpiece of 1518 for Leonardo Buonafè, now in the Uffizi, which was intended for the church of Ognissanti in Florence but appears instead to have been packed off to an obscure provincial church, was inspired by the patron's lack of understanding of what a work in progress might be expected to look like.[25] As Vasari relates:

> Fecegli far lo spedalingo di S. Maria Nuova una tavola, la quale vedendola abbozzata, gli parvero, come colui ch'era poco intendente di questa arte, tutti quei Santi, diavoli, avendo il Rosso costume nelle sue bozze a olio di fare certe arie crudeli e disperate, e nel finirle poi addolciva l'aria e riducevale al buono. Per che se li fuggì di casa, e non volle la tavola, dicendo che lo aveva giuntato.[26]

There are two problems with this account: the first is that Buonafè was the very opposite of "poco intendente" and the second that – even on its own terms – it fails to explain why he did not calm down once he saw the finished work. It seems more plausible, especially in view of the fact that it was replaced by an altarpiece from the stylistically altogether more retrograde and bland brush of Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio, that Buonafè was unable to warm to what even today may strike us as the extraordinary boldness of Rosso's treatment of human physiognomy.[27]

In Siena, Domenico Beccafumi's first attempt to paint the *Fall of the rebel angels* for the church of San Niccolò al Carmine is believed to have been repudiated and soon passed to Santa Maria della Scala; it is now in the Pinacoteca Nazionale there.[28] His second and successful effort, which was seen by Vasari in 1535

[22] See Peter Humfrey, "Fra Bartolommeo, Venice and St Catherine of Siena", in: *The Burlington Magazine*, CXXXII (1990), pp. 476–483, as well as Alessandro Nova in the introduction to this volume, pp. 9f. and Figs. 2, 3.

[23] Humfrey (note 22), p. 478. The quote is from Gustav Ludwig, "Archivalische Beiträge zur Geschichte der venezianischen Malerei", in: *Jahrbuch der Preußischen Kunstsammlungen*, XXVI (1905), Beiheft, pp. I–159: 44.

[24] Johannes Grave, *Giovanni Bellini: The Art of Contemplation*, Munich/London/New York 2018, p. 235, fig. 184.

[25] See David Franklin, "Rosso, Leonardo Buonafé and the Francesca de Ripoi Altar-Piece", in: *The Burlington Magazine*, CXXIX (1987), pp. 652–662; and Alessandro Nova in the introduction to this volume, pp. 7f. and Fig. 1.

[26] Vasari (note 19), IV, pp. 475f.

[27] David Franklin, "Ridolfo Ghirlandaio's Altar-Pieces for Leonardo Buonafé and the Hospital of S. Maria Nuova in Florence", in: *The Burlington Magazine*, CXXXV (1993), pp. 4–16, for Buonafè and Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio.

and is still *in situ*, is profoundly different, and while scholars tended to suggest that what the patrons objected to was the mass of writhing nude bodies, the definitive version is also incomparably more tranquil and orderly and accords far greater prominence to the commanding presence of God the Father.[29]

In Cremona, in 1565 Antonio Campi was required to start again on an altarpiece and compensated for so doing, although his *Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* for San Sigismondo (Fig. 7) was already two-thirds complete:

> Ma perché la sopra detta ancona essendo già delle tre parti le dua fatta et puoi essendo concluso di rifarla ad altro modo havendo fatta melior consideratione se promesse al surrip.to M.r Antonio per sua fatica de refarlo in libre settantacinque videlicet L. 75 che viene a esser in tutto L. 325.[30]

Perhaps uniquely, in this instance the patrons seem to take the blame, "havendo fatta melior consideratione". It is impossible to know what Antonio's first conception looked like, but the scene now in the church, of Herodias's daughter extending the charger to receive the Baptist's severed head from the executioner, is profoundly different from the approach he adopted in a somewhat later altarpiece of the subject, dated 1571, in San Paolo Converso, Milan (Fig. 8), which instead shows the kneeling saint looking heavenwards and awaiting his fate.[31]

Last but not least, an altarpiece of the *Miraculous procession of Saint Gregory*, with the Archangel Michael sheathing his sword above the Castel Sant'Angelo to signal the cessation of the plague, was ordered in honour of the reigning pope, Gregory XIII, for his family chapel in the church of Santa Maria del Barracano in his native Bologna. Federico Zuccari executed an altarpiece, which was sent to Bologna in December 1580. Its design is known in the form of a finished drawing and a print by Aliprando Caprioli dated 1581, but it was rejected and sent back to Rome soon after the carnival of 1581; worse yet, Federico was not paid. The commission then passed to Cesare Aretusi, in collaboration with Giovanni Battista Fiorini.[32] An anonymous letter sent from Bologna criticised the work's poor quality, but it is tempting to wonder whether its rejection was not motivated by two other and very different stumbling-blocks. One, especially in the Bologna of Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti, may well have been the inclusion of thinly disguised portraits of ecclesiastical dignitaries, while the other was almost certainly the pile of pestiferous corpses forming what might be described as a crypto-predella at the front edge of the composition. What is indisputable is the fact that Aretusi's substitute differs from it in various ways: the procession moves in the opposite direction, Michael is notably less prominent, and – perhaps most tellingly – the heap of nude plague victims in the foreground is omitted.

Inevitably, these case studies do not represent an exhaustive list, but what is arguably most striking is how seldom things went wrong and how tolerant people tended to be of what they may well have regarded as past follies after the event. The cover-up of Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* is only the best-known compromise solution to such a problem,[33] while

[28] Monica Folchi, in: Piero Torriti, *Beccafumi*, Milan 1998, pp. 126–128, no. P50.

[29] *Eadem*, *ibidem*, pp. 139–142, no. P64, and Vasari (note 19), V, pp. 167f.

[30] See Federico Sacchi, *Notizie pittoriche cremonesi*, Cremona 1872, pp. 238f., for the document, and Bram de Klerck, *I fratelli Campi: immagini e devozione. Pittura religiosa nel Cinquecento lombardo*, Cinisello Balsamo 2003, pp. 161, 168f., for the altarpiece.

[31] For the painting, see *ibidem*, pp. 43, 238f.

[32] Cristina Acidini Luchinat, *Taddeo e Federico Zuccari: fratelli pittori del Cinquecento*, Milan 1998/99, II, pp. 127f., no. 2, figs. 13–15; Elena Capretti, "L'affare Ghiselli' e lo scandalo della *Porta Virtutis* (1580–1581)", in: *Innocente e calunniato: Federico Zuccari (1539/40–1609) e le vendette d'artista*, exh. cat., ed. by *eadem*/Cristina Acidini, Florence 2009, pp. 172–177.

[33] Peter M. Lukehart, "Nuda veritas: The Afterlife of Michelangelo's Indecorous Figures in the Last Judgement", in: *Dopo il 1564: l'eredità di Michelangelo a Roma nel tardo Cinquecento*, ed. by Marco Simone Bolzoni/Furio

7 Antonio Campi, *Beheading of Saint John the Baptist.* Cremona, San Sigismondo

even Botticini's *Assumption of the Virgin* altarpiece for the chapel of Matteo Palmieri in San Pier Maggiore in Florence, which according to Vasari was at some point condemned as heretical, is alive and well in the National Gallery in London, although there is some evidence that it was subsequently on occasion covered with a veil.[34]

It is doubtless always unwise to attempt to formulate general rules from small samples, and we cannot all be presumed to share the same tastes, but it seems to me that it is nevertheless a charming paradox that virtually without fail the rejecting patrons ended up with strikingly inferior replacement works of art. It may of course be that they were so powerfully motivated by other kinds of considerations that this was a matter of complete indifference to them.

In other instances, however, patrons were inclined – within appropriate iconographic limits – to trust artists to know best. That is why – as noted earlier on – Vanni was given licence to "migliorare et ampliare secondo le regole buone de l'arte sua" if he so desired, and indeed he did precisely that. For reasons of space, I cannot explore here the many examples of existing altarpieces whose subject matter diverges dramatically from what was agreed with the patrons in the contracts. I will limit myself to the case of Barocci's *Madonna del Popolo*, where – as it happens – the change precedes the contract. Having received an initial approach from the Fraternita dei Laici at Arezzo – also known as the Fraternita della Misericordia – on 30 October 1574, Barocci in effect replied by return on 5 November.[35] His letter is amusingly torn between his desire to accommodate

Rinaldi/Patrizia Tosini, Rome 2016, pp. 36–55; Thomas Depasquale, "Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* and the Reception of the Nude in Counter-Reformation Italy", in: *The Renaissance Nude*, exh. cat. Los Angeles/London 2018/19, ed. by Thomas Kren/Jill Burke/Stephen J. Campbell, Los Angeles 2018, pp. 365–373.

[34] Jennifer Sliwka, *Visions of Paradise: Botticini's Palmieri Altarpiece*, exh. cat., London 2015, pp. 51f.

[35] Emiliani (note 12), I, p. 312; Lingo (note 12), pp. 33–61.

his potential patrons and his determination to make it abundantly plain from the outset that he does not want to paint a Madonna della Misericordia, although he did at least produce a drawing on that theme.[36] He suggests that whereas the Madonna della Misericordia is not a "sugietto troppo a proposito per fare una bella tavola", there are numerous other mysteries or histories of the Virgin which would fit the bill, and specifies the Annunciation, the Visitation, and the Assumption. In the event, of course, the subject chosen was none of the above, but instead a considerable rarity, which has come to be known as the Double Intercession.[37]

Towards the end of the fifteenth century, the almost dementedly quirky Umbrian painter Niccolò da Foligno, known as L'Alunno, boldly stated his claim to be taken seriously as far more than a mere executant of other people's orders in an extraordinary and rarely considered Latin inscription in elegiac couplets on a predella dated 1492. The predella in question is now in the Louvre, while the main part of the altarpiece to which it originally belonged remains in the church of San Niccolò at Foligno for which it was made. The inscription translates as follows:

> To the reader. The late Brisida, a pious lady, has left in her will that this noble work should be painted. O gift too pleasing to God! If you seek the name of its artist, it is Niccolò Alunno, the fine crown of his native city of Foligno. Eight years had vanished from a thousand and five times a hundred when the last touch was given to it. But who, o reader, deserved more in your judgement, I ask, when Brisida gave the reason, he the hand?[38]

8 Antonio Campi, *Beheading of Saint John the Baptist.* Milan, San Paolo Converso

[36] Emiliani (note 12), I, pp. 312–314, no. 37.6.

[37] David Ekserdjian, in: *Capturing the Sublime: Italian Drawings of the Renaissance and Baroque*, exh. cat. Chicago 2012, ed. by Suzanne Folds McCullagh, New Haven *et al.* 2012, pp. 89–91, no. 40, for the identification of the subject matter, and a suggestion as to why its iconography was hitherto misunderstood.

[38] Filippo Todini, *Niccolò Alunno e la sua bottega*, Perugia 2004, pp. 598–601, no. IV.60, and pp. 402–411. The elegiac couplets of the Latin read

In conclusion, it seems important to stress the extent to which during the Renaissance the overwhelming majority of patrons managed to accept the need felt by artists to be given at least a measure of freedom – sometimes in terms of subject matter, sometimes in terms of form – even in connection with commissioned works.[39] In the very particular context of altarpieces, where there was routinely some kind of legally binding contractual arrangement, for all that only a minute proportion of such documentation has survived, this flexibility is particularly striking. It remains the case, however, that on occasion artists could of course overstep the mark, with the result that their productions were almost bound to receive a bad reception.

The present contribution necessarily draws upon the research undertaken for my forthcoming book, The Italian Renaissance Altarpiece: Between Icon and Narrative, *but contains material that will not be found in the book.*

as follows: "Ad lectorem / Nobile testata est pingi pia Brisida quondam / Hoc opus. O! nimium munera grata deo. / Si petis auctoris nomen, Nicolaus Alumnus / Fulginiae: patriae pulchra corona suae. / Octo quincties [*sic*] centum de millibus anni, / Cum manus imposita est ultima, vanuerant. / Sed quis plus meruit, quaeso, te judice, lector / Cum causam dederit Brisida et ille manum?" (*ibidem*, p. 600). I am extremely grateful to Stephen Harrison for the translation.

[39] For this point, see Gilbert (note 14).

Abstract

This study explores a number of specific examples of the bad reception of altarpieces in Renaissance Italy. It also attempts to investigate the main ways in which both patrons and artists endeavoured to avoid the possibility of commissioned works being rejected, above all because such occurrences were so undesirable for both sides. The case studies which are examined are not wholly unknown, but there is more to be said about almost all of them, not least when they are seen together. Moreover, the overall approach departs from that taken by previous studies in various ways, most obviously in connection with the demolition of the widespread – but manifestly false – notion that contract drawings were invariably highly finished. Specific works that are explored range in date from the second half of the fifteenth century to the first decade of the seventeenth, and particular emphasis is placed upon the extent to which more generally decisions – other than those concerning the basic subject matter of the altarpieces in question, which rested with the patrons – were very often left to the judgement of artists.

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Giorgio Vasari und Mitarbeiter, *Apelle und der Schuster* | Giorgio Vasari e collaboratori, *Apelle e il ciabattino*
Florenz | Firenze, Casa Vasari, sala grande
(S. 46, Abb. 1 | p. 46, fig. 1)

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