MITTEILUNGEN DES KUNSTHISTORISCHEN INSTITUTES IN FLORENZ

LXIII. BAND — 2021
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

edited by Diletta Gamberini, Jonathan K. Nelson, Alessandro Nova

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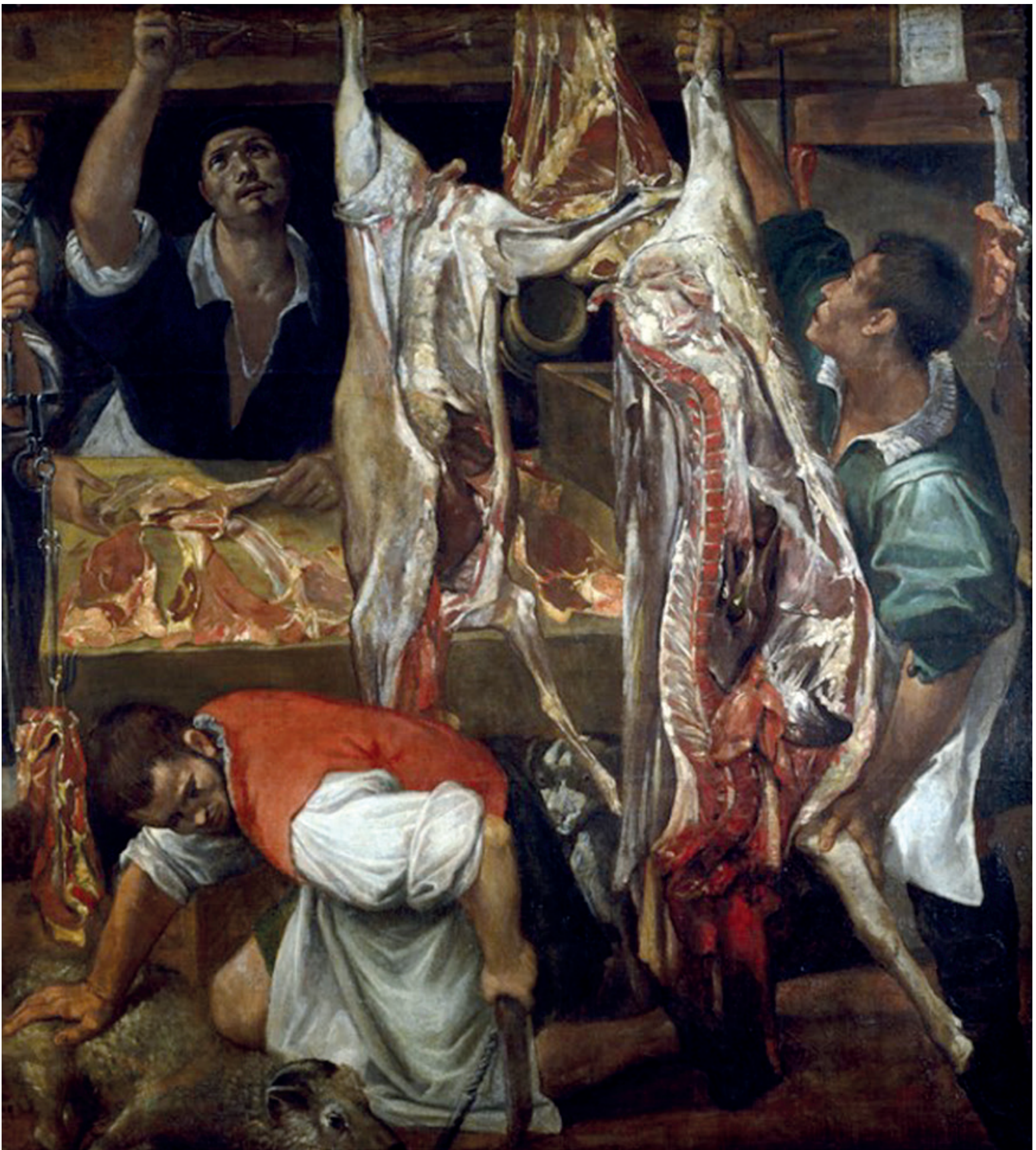


1 Annibale Carracci,
The butcher's shop,
1580s, detail. Oxford,
Christ Church Picture Gallery

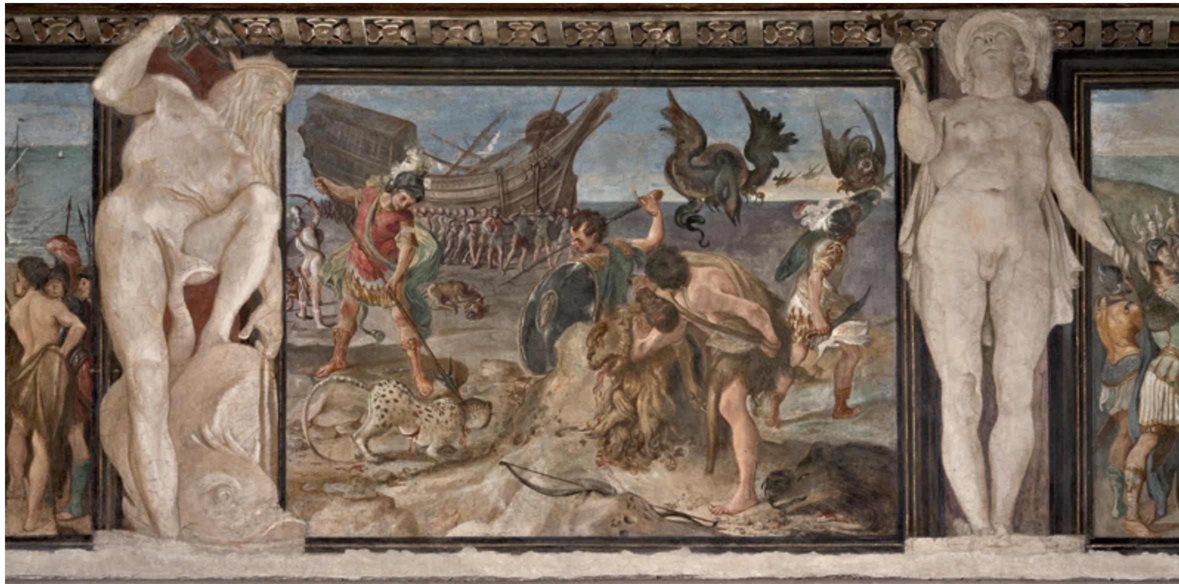
VULGARITY AND THE MASTERLY MANNER
ANNIBALE CARRACCI CITES HIS SOURCES

Gail Feigenbaum

Early in their careers, the Carracci painted several works that got a "bad reception". Their frieze narrating the story of Jason and the Argonauts in the Palazzo Fava, Bologna, got a mixed reception (Fig. 2). According to Carlo Cesare Malvasia, the Bolognese biographer of the Carracci family of painters, this fresco, probably executed in 1583/84, was a praiseworthy work carried out by the young brothers Annibale and Agostino Carracci – Agostino is credited with the lively chiaroscuro figures flanking the individual scenes – with a little help from their elder cousin Ludovico Carracci.[1] But Malvasia reports that the frieze was not entirely to the satisfaction of its patron, Count Filippo Fava, because the Carracci's local rivals were critical of it. Bolognese painter Bartolomeo Cesi, for instance, admitted that it was good but too "strapazzata" ("roughly handled"). Agostino's chiaroscuro terms had merit, but Annibale had dashed things off in his impatient, unpolished way; the images had too much of the sketch about them.[2] Cesi did not consider his narrative scenes to be true paintings, since they had not been properly "aggiustati e compiti", corrected and finished. Malvasia having stated earlier that the Carracci, eager for the visibility, accepted the commission for a "bassissimo prezzo", a very low price, Cesi added the barb that, considering how little he had spent on it, Count Fava should be happy with what he got. Cesi's remark savors of sour grapes and suggests that he may have hoped to obtain the Palazzo Fava commission himself. Malvasia reports that afterwards Count Fava decided to entrust the Aeneas cycle in the adjacent room to Ludovico alone, who was eager to vindicate the Carracci name. The biographer adds – and this is borne out by what we can see – that despite this Ludovico did allow his

[1] Carlo Cesare Malvasia, *Felsina pittrice: vite de pittori bolognesi [...]*, Bologna 1678, I, pp. 368–373.

[2] *Ibidem*, p. 373; Anne Summerscale, *Malvasia's Life of the Carracci: Commentary and Translation*, University Park, Pa., 2000, p. 110.



2 Annibale Carracci, *Transport of the ship across the Libyan desert; battles with harpies and wild beasts*, from *The stories of Jason*, 1584. Bologna, Palazzo Fava

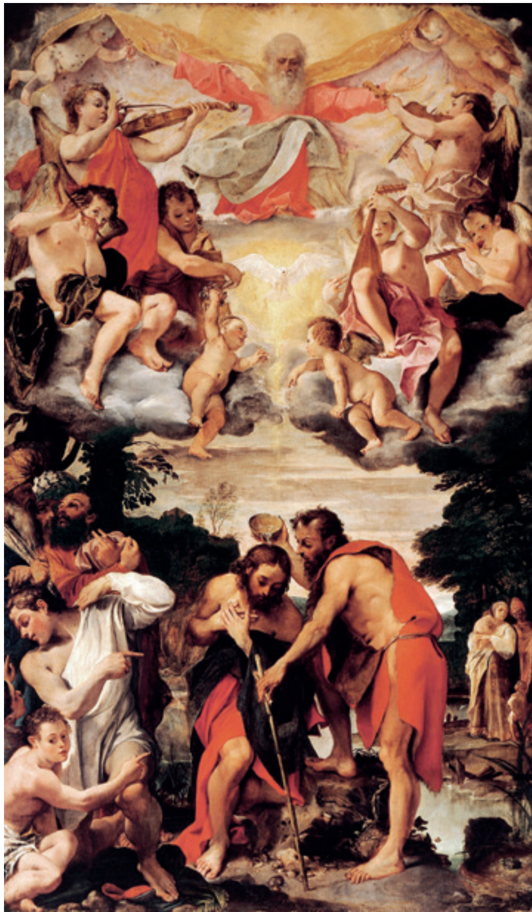
cousins Annibale and Agostino to contribute to the Aeneas frescoes on the sly.[3]

The harsh response to the Jason frieze by Cesi sets the stage for a pattern of criticism aimed at the Carracci by local competitors who had their various axes to grind. Entangled in their anecdotal expressions of rivalry and envy, however, are specific issues raised by the criticism, which chime with the themes and contested theoretical ground of the Carracci's well-known reform of painting. The tenor of the criticism is plainly expressed in the bad reception of two altarpieces by Annibale Carracci painted more or less concurrently with the frescoes in the Palazzo Fava: the *Baptism of Christ* for San Gregorio (Fig. 3), and the *Crucifixion with saints* for San Nicolò di San Felice (Fig. 4), both churches in the artist's native city of Bologna.

The criticism comes down to us in only one source: Malvasia, who published his account seventy years after Annibale's death. Malvasia was an unabashed champion of Bologna, but leaving his *campanilismo* aside, scholars in recent decades have amply demonstrated that he based his writings on documentary research and have dispelled allegations that he falsified documents. His was not, however, a foolproof method of assuring accuracy, and Malvasia made frequent factual errors. His biographies of painters often draw on interviews with men who knew and worked with them, but also on decades worth of memories and tradition, and anecdotes recounted at second hand.

In the case of the episodes considered in this essay, Malvasia was reporting disparagement of Annibale's work which, when it occurred, would have circulated orally, leveled by painters who had died decades before

[3] Malvasia (note 1), I, p. 373. The Europa and Jason fresco cycles in the Palazzo Fava are usually dated 1583/84, and the Aeneas cycle a couple of years later, but the only specific indications are 1580, when the palace was built, and 1584, which appears under the decorative figure of Jupiter in the Jason cycle and is generally taken as a completion date for the frieze, although this is uncorroborated.



3 Annibale Carracci,
Baptism of Christ. Bologna,
Santi Gregorio e Siro

4 Annibale Carracci, *Crucifixion with saints.*
Bologna, Santa Maria della Carità
(originally in San Nicolò di San Felice)

the biographer was born. Both this oral tradition and its transcription by Malvasia shaped the criticism in particular ways, and the processes of shaping and presentation were vitally important. We can only try to find a way through the planes of slippage, the inevitably unreliable reports of Malvasia's sources, Malvasia's intentions to situate the Carracci in art history, and paintings by an artist who may – or may not – have said, "noi altri dipintori habbiamo da parlare con le mani". Indeed, this essay argues that Annibale's response in paint to his critics comprises, in itself, testimony to the nature of the criticism he received. Malvasia and Annibale, each in his own way, transmuted the criticism into the origin story of the Carracci reform of painting.[4] The commentaries accompanying the recent translations of Malvasia's biographies edited by Elizabeth Cropper and Lorenzo

[4] Malvasia's reputation as a trustworthy historian was under attack already in the late nineteenth century, a critique that escalated in the mid-twentieth century, especially by scholars who claimed he falsified evidence. A powerful defense of Malvasia was mounted in response in the form of meticulous examination of Malvasia's methods and evidence. See especially Charles Dempsey, "Malvasia and the Problem of the Early Raphael and Bologna",

Pericolo[5] bear out the view that the author based his writings on extensive documentary research and the testimony of the best eye witnesses he could find, thus emphasizing his goal of historical accuracy and his advanced methodology. It would be imprudent, however, to discount the considerable challenges faced by a writer who, often decades after the death of his subjects, must rely on fragmentary documentation and the memories of men who themselves could often provide only hearsay accounts of events transpired long ago.

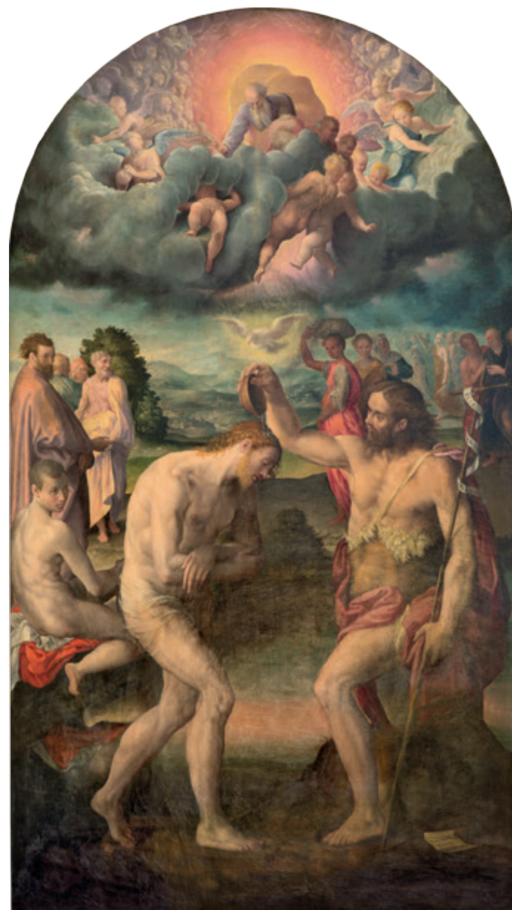
Malvasia, for example, got the dates wrong for the abovementioned altarpieces of the *Baptism* and *Crucifixion*, claiming Annibale painted them when he was eighteen years old. The *Crucifixion* carries a date of 1583, when Annibale would have been twenty-three years old, and the *Baptism* was placed on its altar two years later, in 1585.[6] Malvasia reports that the altarpiece commissions were passed along to Annibale by his older cousin Ludovico, who considered the fee too low to take the work on himself, but who wanted the paintings to come from the Carracci workshop to ensure that the commissions would not fall to their Bolognese rivals. Malvasia named the competition: Camillo Procaccini, Prospero Fontana, Denys Calvaert, and Bartolomeo Passarotti. He added that Ludovico promised to help his young cousin with the paintings and retouch them to reassure the patrons of a good result.[7]

Despite Ludovico's 'guarantee', according to Malvasia, Annibale's two altarpieces were disparaged by his Bolognese rivals for exhibiting a mode that was too low and vulgar – the words Malvasia used were "modo triviale".[8] *Triviale* is a false cognate to the English 'trivial', meaning insignificant. Malvasia's "triviale" is more accurately translated as 'vulgar' in the sense of low, coarse, plebeian, or lacking in decorum. The Bolognese painters asserted that an unskilled painter, finding himself deficient in the basic foundations of the art of painting and lacking a repertoire of skills, could easily strip the clothes off a laborer, put some drapery on him, and reproduce him on the canvas, and in this way could win acclaim with a limited understanding of art and little imagination. In this accusation of an insufficient knowledge of art, of models replicated too directly from nature, sounds the echo of criticism that had been leveled at Caravaggio, especially in Giovanni Pietro Bellori's *Le vite de' pittori, scultori, e architetti moderni* of 1672. If the historical episode of Bolognese painters' reception of the work of Annibale in the 1580s was too early for criticism of Caravaggio to have been a factor, Malvasia's biography of 1678 was another matter. Malvasia had read Bellori's *Vite*, which presents Annibale as the paragon of the classical ideal of painting. Malvasia was mindful that Bellori's hero was the later Roman Annibale, steeped in the art of Raphael and the antique, and not the earlier Bolognese Annibale, for whom nature was the means to inject vitality into an exhausted tradition of art. Malvasia, by contrast, was a proponent of Annibale in Bologna, precisely the early Annibale who had been disparaged for taking nature as his guide, and the writer drew an implicit parallel with Caravaggio.[9]

In comparing Annibale's altarpieces to paintings by those elder contemporaries whom Malvasia named as his detractors, it is easy to see the contrast and to detect what is new in Annibale's approach. Pervasive in the paintings of this Bolognese cohort is an elegant

in: *Raphael Before Rome*, conference proceedings Washington, D.C., 1983, ed. by James Beck, Washington, D.C., 1986 (= *Studies in the History of Art*, XVII), pp. 57–70; Giovanna Perini, "Nota critica", in: *Gli scritti dei Carracci: Ludovico, Annibale, Agostino, Antonio, Giovanni Antonio*, ed. by. *eadem*, Bologna 1990, pp. 33–99: 58–77; Richard E. Spear, *The "Divine" Guido: Religion, Sex, Money and Art in the World of Guido Reni*, New Haven, Conn./London 1997, pp. 11–18; Giovanna Perini Folesani, "Documenti spariti, manipolati, falsificati, ritrovati: le alterazioni della memoria storica come problema di metodo critico. Una casistica tratta dalla letteratura artistica barocca (ovvero: ancora sulla *Felsina Pittrice* di Carlo Cesare Malvasia)", in: *Lost and Found: storie di "ritrovamenti"*, ed. by Grazia Maria Fachechi, Rome 2018, pp. 159–187. For an analysis of the differentiation of individuals of the Carracci family in the early sources, see Samuel Vitali, "La bontà di Ludovico, la diligenza di Agostino, la gelosia di Annibale: i caratteri dei Carracci nella *Felsina pittrice* di Carlo Cesare Malvasia tra topoi e realtà", in: *Vivace con espressione: Gefühl, Charakter, Temperament in der italienischen Kunst: Kunsthistorische Studien zu Ehren von Sybille Ebert-Schifferer*, ed.

late mannerist style marked by artificial light, studied and complicated compositions, poses echoing of Roman art, and polished surface finish, as seen in Prospero Fontana's *Baptism of Christ* (Fig. 5). Annibale's direct confrontation with nature offended them. They described his mode of practice as useful in the life class, the "Accademia del nudo", but not in an altarpiece.[10] They insisted that "il buono, et il bello" could not be achieved by working piecemeal on a composition, studying one figure at a time and groping along. Instead, "the good and the beautiful" were manifest in a composition conceived in purposeful unity and with the aid of what had been seen and studied, showing the prize of past labor and memory and experience. It was no wonder, they said, that the Carracci ended up producing plebeian works – "operazioni basse, e plebee" – because their work derived from nature, which is imperfect, rather than from art, which tames and corrects nature.[11] Malvasia shifts from discussing criticism of Annibale in particular to the judgment of the Carracci and their specific collective agenda: their reform of painting. Malvasia reported that the Bolognese artists/critics concluded that their works lacked the decorum and nobility that only a practiced and secure genius can express. The biographer explicitly exempted Ludovico from their disapproval, noting that the rival painters expressed surprise that Ludovico should have tolerated his cousin Annibale's idle carelessness.[12]



5 Prospero Fontana,
Baptism of Christ, 1561.
Bologna, San Giacomo Maggiore

Himself critical of Annibale's critics, Malvasia described Fontana, Calvaert, and Passarotti as artists who had been to Rome, had known Michelangelo and learned his manner, and who even had the temerity to claim that they had improved on Michelangelo's color. Malvasia observed, however, that they relied too much on what they had seen in Rome *without* improving on it or, in other words, they repeated their artistic exemplars badly. He pointed out that experience in Rome and working at court with popes and kings had lent

by Marieke von Bernstorff/Susanne Kubersky/Maurizia Cicconi, Munich 2018, pp. 189–211. Malvasia treats the Carracci as a kind of trinity, as a unit or as individuals by turns, according to the point he is arguing.

5 Carlo Cesare Malvasia, Felsina pittrice*: Lives of the Bolognese Painters*, ed. by Elizabeth Cropper/Lorenzo Pericolo, London 2012–2019, I, II, IX, and XIII.

6 Clare Robertson, *The Invention of Annibale Carracci*, Cinisello Balsamo 2008, pp. 45–47, with further literature.

7 Malvasia (note 1), I, p. 363.

8 *Ibidem*.

9 *Ibidem*. Malvasia's text is salted throughout with passages that are recognizable, if tacit, responses to content in Bellori's biographies of 1672, suggesting that he inserted them into earlier drafts. My thanks to the anonymous reader who pointed out the parallel with the criticism of Caravaggio.

10 *Ibidem*.

11 *Ibidem*.

12 *Ibidem*. Roberto Zapperi, *Annibale Carracci: ritratto di artista da giovane*, Turin

these artists a credit and respect that staying in one's own city and with one's own family could not.[13]

I argue here that in painting another early work, the *Butcher's shop* (Figs. 1, 6), Annibale responded – at least in part – to the bad reception of his early works, including the *Crucifixion* and *Baptism* altarpieces, the Fava frescoes, and very likely other paintings that have not come down to us.[14] Most scholars have accepted Donald Posner's dating of the *Butcher's shop* to 1582/83 grouping it with Annibale's other early genre subjects, such as various versions of *Boy drinking* or the *Bean eater* (Fig. 9), none of which can be dated with any precision.[15] It is difficult to draw a convincing relation between the *Butcher's shop* and either of the early datable altarpieces; despite their best and even brilliant efforts over the course of nearly half a century to posit a clear chronological development for the early Annibale, Posner, Benati, and Robertson have not been able to devise a truly convincing sequence or compelling idea of a coherent direction that would lend a sense of security to any of the scholar-assigned dates for the undated paintings generally believed to be from the first half of the 1580s. As Robertson notes, scholars have been forced to devise a chronology of Annibale's early work by tethering paintings to only two anchoring dates: the *Crucifixion* of 1583 and the *terminus ante quem* of 1585 of the *Baptism*. A chronology of vague consensus has settled in, still dependent on the authority of Posner's catalogue. Without diminishing the considerable connoisseurial achievement making order of the dozens of works that scholars believe to be 'early', the practice of assigning years to undated paintings, extrapolated from such sparse evidence is inevitably a best guess. Hypothetical dates are repeated as if they were documented, and thereby acquire a misleading aura of accuracy and precision. To my mind, the *Butcher's shop* probably was painted a little later than Posner thought, closer to 1585 than 1580, and it is well within a reasonable margin of error to argue that Annibale responds in the *Butcher's shop* to the criticism of works dating from 1583–1585. Not only has Annibale eliminated any trace of mannerist elegance or exaggeration from his butchers, but the daring concept, the innovative facture, the sophisticated calculus of the composition, and the weight and mastery of anatomy in the realization of the figures all testify to the confidence of an artist who has grown in his technical skill and is verging on the aggressive. He is cognizant here, as he would be in his altarpieces of the second half of the decade, of the requirements of unity and study of artistic tradition that constituted "the good and the beautiful".

Remarkably, nothing is known about why Annibale undertook a monumental composition of this subject. It was an expensive undertaking that must have been a commission. Whatever the circumstances, Annibale would not have made such a large painting for his own reasons, and not every patron would have appreciated such an unusual picture.[16] Seeing the *Butcher's shop* first-hand, a viewer may be struck by two things that may not be evident in reproduction. First is the size of the canvas – almost three meters wide and two meters high – which is populated by life-size figures of men absorbed in their work who stand in a one-to-one relation close to the viewer. Second, the handling of oil paint is astonishing, well-nigh unprecedented in the free brushwork and thick impasto of the meat. The painting is markedly rich in its affordances, suggesting multiple directions of

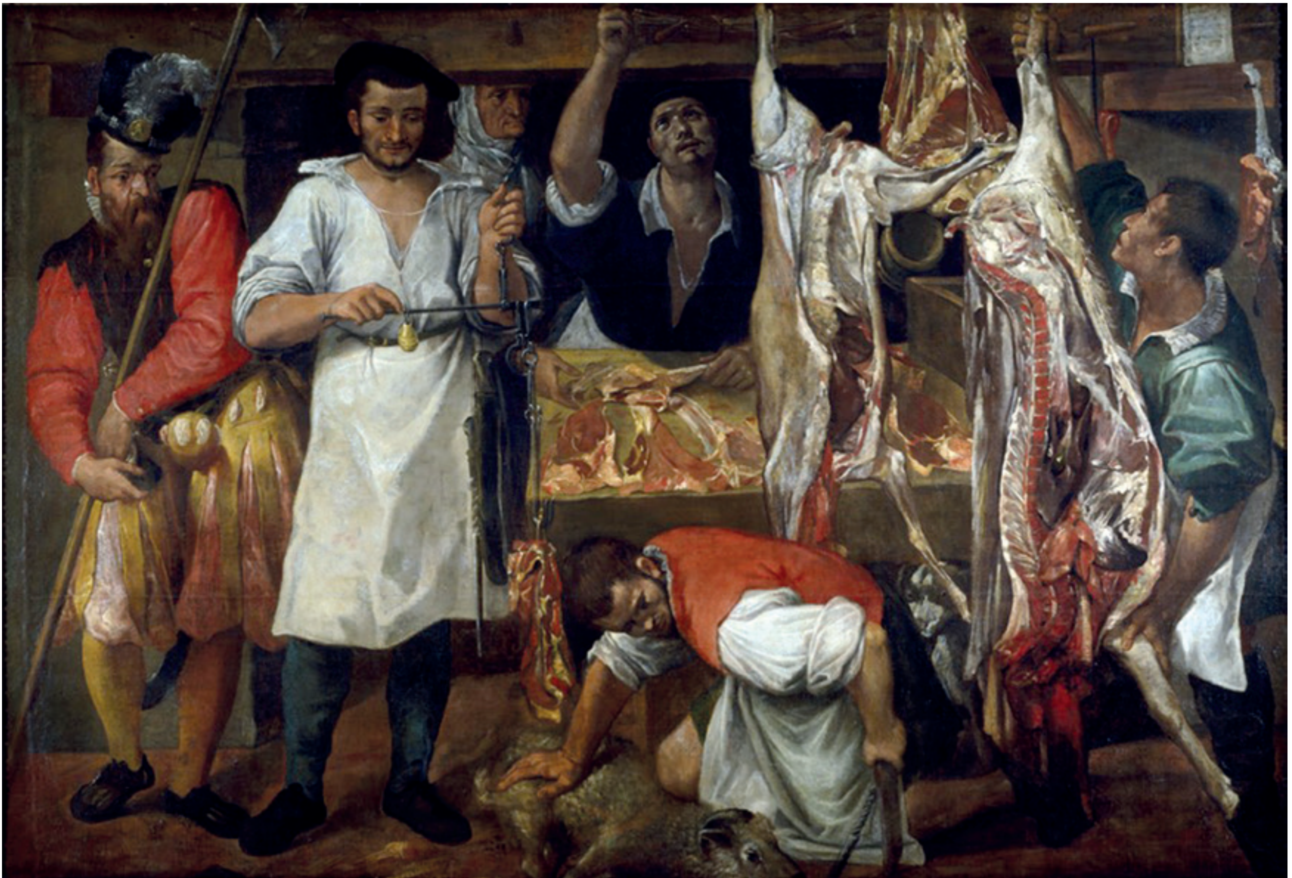
1989, pp. 29–45, plausibly argues that the antagonism of certain of the Bolognese painters was also sparked, at least in part, by the upstart Carracci's opening of an academy that attracted the young talents of the city away from their own established workshops.

13 Malvasia (note 1), I, pp. 363f.

14 Malvasia does not mention the *Butchers' shop*, and he probably did not know the painting, which had been in the Gonzaga collection in Mantua and then sold to the English crown long before he wrote.

15 Donald Posner, *Annibale Carracci: A Study in the Reform of Italian Painting around 1590*, London 1971, II, p. 3, followed by Daniele Benati, in: *Annibale Carracci*, exh. cat. Bologna/Rome 2006/07, ed. by *idem*/Eugenio Riccòmini, Milan 2006, p. 96, and Henry Keazor, *"Il vero modo": Die Malereireform der Carracci*, Berlin 2007, p. 131. Robertson (note 6), pp. 33, 36f., even anticipates the date to 1580/81.

16 Mario Fanti was the first to speculate that a commission may have come through the Canobi family, who were connected with the Carracci and who



6 Annibale Carracci, *The butcher's shop*, 1580s. Oxford, Christ Church Picture Gallery

iconographic analysis and art historical references, and accommodating an array of theoretical discourses.

Scholars have debated the function of the picture, especially after John Rupert Martin half a century ago made the bold claim that the *Butcher's shop* is both a family portrait and a manifesto on the historical mission of the Carracci to inaugurate a new era in art.[17] Annibale's authoritative cataloguer, Donald Posner, dismissed Martin's interpretation. In his view it was neither family portrait nor manifesto; it was a slice of life, a naturalistic portrayal of some butchers at work.[18] Martin, however, had seen through the painting's naturalism to its motives to demonstrate the Carracci's ambitions for the reform of painting. Reconsidering bad reception, it should be stressed that the manner of painting used for the dead meat in the *Butcher's shop* is this work's liveliest feature (Fig. 1).

built a large new butcher's market in Bologna in these years, a promising hypothesis that Zapperi and Dickerson supported. See Mario Fanti, *I macellai bolognesi: mestiere, politica e vita civile nella storia di una categoria attraverso i secoli*, Bologna 1980, p. 130; Zapperi (note 12), p. 69, note 23; and C. D. Dickerson, *Raw Painting:* The Butcher's Shop *by Annibale Carracci*, Fort Worth 2010.

[17] John Rupert Martin, "The Butcher's Shop of the Carracci", in: *The Art Bulletin*, XLV (1963), pp. 263–266.

[18] Posner (note 15), I, p. 16.

Gustav Waagen in the mid-nineteenth century had described the *Butcher's shop* in his international best seller, *Treasures of Art in Great Britain*:

> A picture by Annibale Carracci, painted in a masterly manner, offended me by the vulgarity of the idea. The artist has here represented himself, and the other Carracci, as a family of butchers.[19]

Waagen made three crucial points: one, that it is a family portrait; two, that it is painted in a "masterly" manner; and, three, the vulgarity of the idea. Waagen's observations belong to a premodern sensibility. They divulge a sensitivity to features that hardly register for modern viewers inured by the assault on traditional aesthetics by artists such as Gustave Courbet, Edouard Manet, and Robert Rauschenberg. Waagen's points – the family portrait, the masterly manner, and the vulgarity – serve as historical signposts.

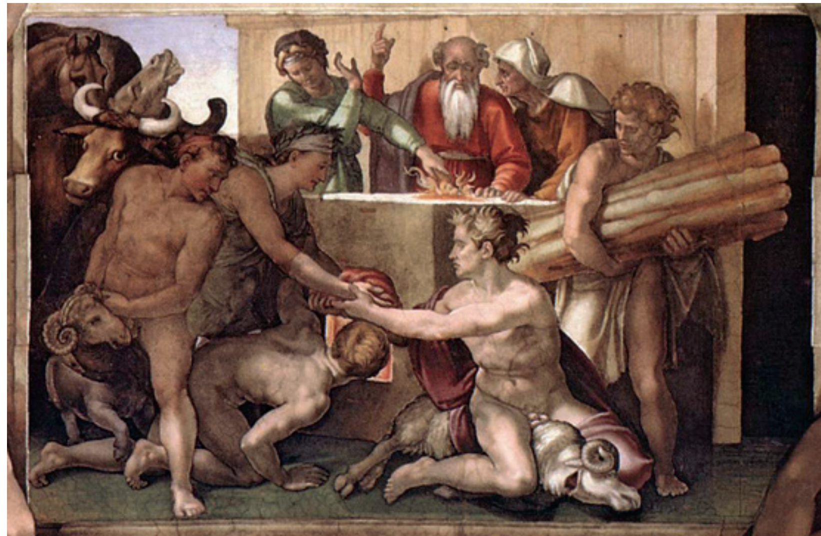
Consider first Waagen's vulgarity of the idea, while keeping in mind the words Malvasia put into the mouths of Annibale's detractors: "un modo triviale", translating in English as 'vulgar'. 'Vulgar', from the Latin *vulgus*, or 'ordinary people', can mean 'low and crass' and, without pejorative connotations, 'used by the people', as in the vulgar tongue. In early modern Italy, this is no small point. Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia* opens a great debate on the *questione della lingua*, and this shades from 'vulgar', in its sense of the common people, to 'vernacular', in the sense of language as spoken by the common people. Artisans, it should be remembered, spoke and wrote their technical treatises in the vernacular, not in Latin. The *Butcher's shop* suggests that Annibale grappled with his own visual version of the *questione della lingua*: high or low? The Latin of the elite and of long tradition versus the living Italian of his here and now. Carrying out the Carracci family's famous reform of art, he translates into painting an idiom of the everyday in a language that expresses the world as he sees it, as nature made it (*natura naturata*). The vulgarity was perceptible and offensive to Annibale's compatriots who were practitioners of a suave, idealized, perfumed manner. It is easy to see the Bolognese painters' objections to Annibale, whose works they considered to be too close to nature. Annibale's emphatic portrayal of raw meat signals the alarm: it is *crudo* and ought to be cooked. A painting with too much nature and not enough culture is deficient in art and made in the language of the people. It is *triviale*, vulgar.

Annibale's *Butcher's shop* is obviously related to the painted market scenes that burst onto the scene in northern Europe in the mid-sixteenth century, brilliantly led by Dutch master Pieter Aertsen and then the Campi family of painters of Cremona.[20] Their pictures of low subjects were large, expensive, and patronized by the elite. In Bologna, Bartolomeo Passarotti – among the named denigrators of Annibale's too-naturalistic altarpieces – himself made a painting of butchers, which is perpetually adduced by modern scholars as an inspiration for Annibale's. Passarotti's composition is assumed to be from the end of the 1570s, but the date, and hence the precedence, is uncertain. Either way, the relationship is interesting. Annibale's *Butcher's shop* is tempered by very different concerns.[21] Annibale's composition, a shallow space framed in a disciplined architecture of wooden beams and uprights, is governed by the proportions of the golden section, the calculated ratio of internal divisions thought to engender an ideal aesthetic balance.

[19] Gustav Friedrich Waagen, *Treasures of Art in Great Britain [...]*, London 1854–1857, III, p. 47.

[20] Sheila McTighe, "Foods and the Body in Italian Genre Paintings, about 1580: Campi, Passarotti, Carracci", in: *The Art Bulletin*, LXXXVI (2004), pp. 301–323.

[21] Zapperi (note 12), pp. 45–69, analyzes in detail the relationship between Passarotti's and Annibale's paintings of butchers, interpreting Annibale's work as responding directly to his presumed master's composition. Passarotti has been supposed by many modern scholars to have been Annibale's early teacher; see Robertson (note 6), p. 17.

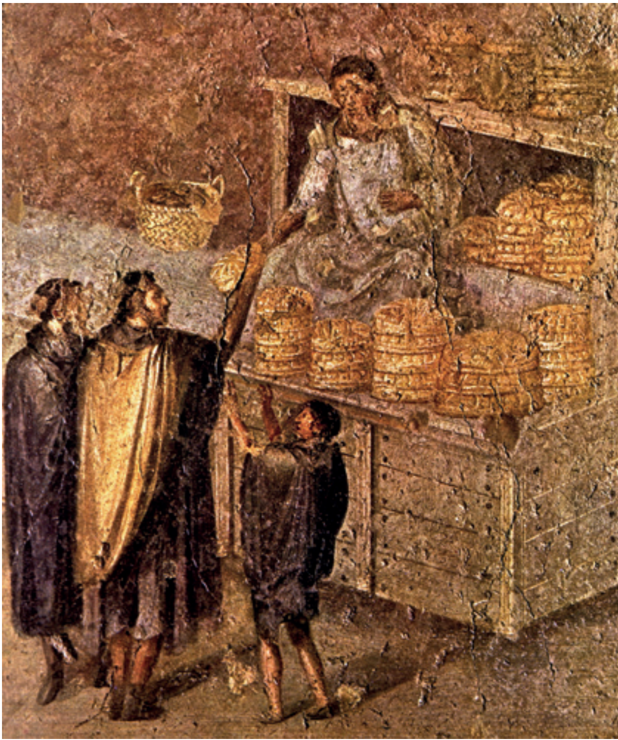


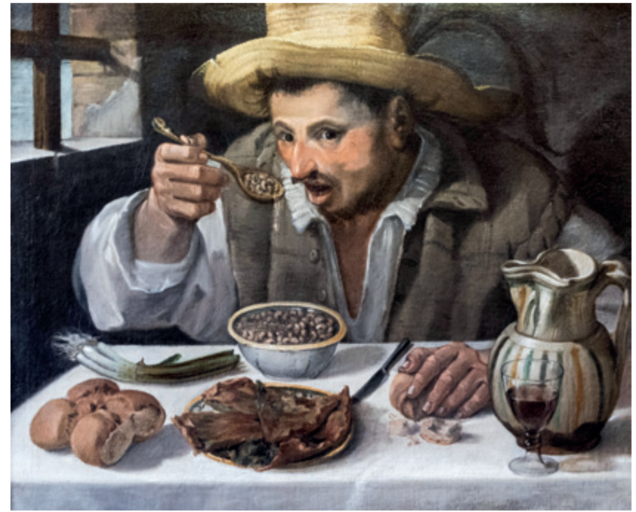
7 Michelangelo, *Sacrifice of Noah*, 1508–1512. Rome, Sistine Chapel

Compositional rigor of this type, a sign of "il buono e il bello", is proper to history painting, to a noble subject like Michelangelo's *Sacrifice of Noah* (Fig. 7), but is unexpected in a scene from ordinary life. An initial impression that Annibale's *Butcher's shop* is a slice of life quickly gives way to an awareness of calculation, of physical and thematic symmetries and pairings: left and right, up and down. The butcher with the scale is balanced by the side of beef. Parentheses are formed by the Swiss Guard and the butcher at the far right. The serene contrapposto of the butcher with the steelyard contrasts with the guard's serpentine contortion. Contrasts are set up between living and dead animals, *carne viva* (living flesh) and *carne cruda* (raw flesh) – the Italian word *carne* denoting both flesh and meat. The cycle is followed from slaughter to sale, sanctified by the inclusion of sacrificial animal and those who benefit from this sacrifice.

How should Annibale's novel use of such high diction for a low subject be interpreted? Gustav Waagen, with his firm grasp of art history, took note of the masterly manner of the *Butcher's shop*. Its grandeur and gravity derive from Annibale's decision to employ, for a crew of butchers at work in their shop, the elevated rhetoric of the *masters* of the High Renaissance, which he establishes, insists upon, and then subverts. Rhetoric has a term for this strategy: the paradoxical, ironic, or mock encomium. The encomium, a literary mode meant to praise heroes and the noble, is used, or misused, to instead treat an ordinary or base subject.[22] It should be remembered that Malvasia put the words "basse e plebee" in the mouths of Annibale's critics. The paradoxical or mock encomium may not be a household concept today, but it was well known during the Renaissance and especially widespread in Italian poetry of the sixteenth century. With ancient roots, it was a favorite device of humanist writers, most famously Erasmus, whose *In Praise of Folly* was its greatest example. Leon Battista Alberti's panegyric on his dog is another instance of the paradoxical encomium which took the flea, the ass, peasants and foodstuffs, the low and the ordinary as its subjects. The device is

[22] The bibliography on the paradoxical encomium in literature of the period is extensive. See especially Paolo Cherchi, "L'encomio paradossale nel manierismo", in: *Forum Italicum*, IX (1975), pp. 368–384; Silvia Longhi, *Lusus: il capitolo burlesco nel Cinquecento*, Padua 1983.





8 *Bakery*, wall painting from Pompei, first century CE. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale

9 Annibale Carracci, *The bean eater*, 1584/85. Rome, Galleria Colonna

malleable as it mocks and ironizes by ennobling its subject. At the end of the Renaissance, artists transposed the mock encomium from rhetoric to painting. The form would have been familiar to a reasonably educated artist like Annibale and to members of his intended audience.

The *Butcher's shop* belongs to the category of genre painting (scenes of ordinary life), attested since antiquity as seen in the bakery wall painting from Pompei now in Naples (Fig. 8). Pliny the Elder reports on the Greek artist Peiraikos, who was famous for his paintings of barber shops and cobblers' stalls, asses, viands, and the like. He was called a *rhyparographos*, a painter of trivial (again, meaning vulgar) or sordid things. Pliny says Peiraikos painted his low subjects in an excellent manner and that they gave great pleasure and fetched higher prices than other painters' grand and noble subjects.[23] Pliny's passages on art were well known in the Renaissance.[24] He did not say if the genre scenes were comic or executed in a style associated with heroic subjects. Therefore, we do not know if rhyparography or genre painting was practiced in parallel with the literary paradoxical encomium, but this precise connection between rhetoric and painting was readily made in the Renaissance.[25] After all, Horace's formulation "ut pictura poesis" – as in poetry, so in painting – was a central tenet of Italian Renaissance criticism. And as a form of *paragone*, the ubiquitous Renaissance com-

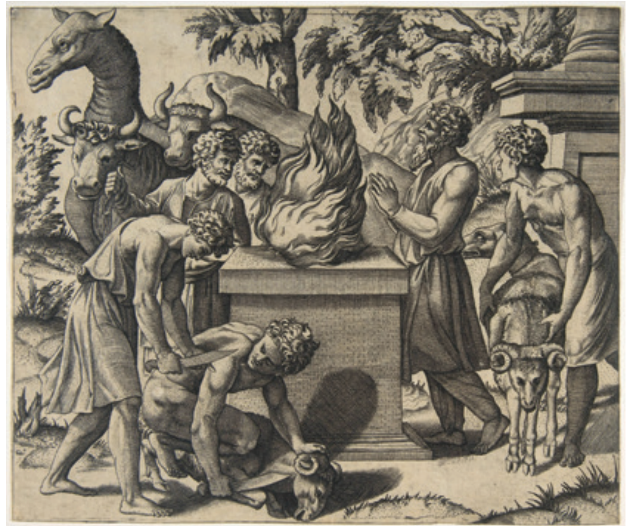
[23] Pliny, *The Natural History*, trans. by John Bostock/Henry T. Riley, London 1855–1857, VI, p. 269 (Book XXXV).

[24] On this aspect, see especially Sarah Blake McHam, *Pliny and the Artistic Culture of the Italian Renaissance: The Legacy of the* Natural History, New Haven, Conn., 2013.

[25] Reindert L. Falkenburg, "Pieter Aertsen, Rhyparographer", in: *Rhetoric – rhétoriqueurs – rederijkers*, conference proceedings Amsterdam 1993, ed. by Jelle Koopmans *et al.*, Amsterdam *et al.* 1995, pp. 197–217. Falkenburg argues convincingly for a self-conscious and knowledgeable deployment of this rhetorical category to painting in the case of Aertsen.

parison of art forms, it was a popular exercise to pit moderns against the ancients and the art of painting against the art of poetry. Annibale was an avid player of this game of *paragone*. His *Bean eater* (Fig. 9) calls to mind a classical example of the paradoxical encomium, Virgil's *Moretum*, a poem describing in quite coarse detail a peasant foraging, preparing, and eating his rustic meal of herbs and fresh garlic, a pesto to be eaten with bread.[26] Virgil's mock encomium poked fun at his peasant, but Annibale's treatment is sympathetic. Similarly, Annibale presents the butchers with irony but without derision. The aim of the paradoxical encomium is not to disparage its subject so much as it is to propose a different way to look at it, while displaying the rhetorical talents of its author in presenting it. Passarotti does not praise or elevate his butchers, nor is there irony in his approach, and by contrast to Annibale's, his painting is a coarse joke.

We can be confident that Annibale knew the concept of the paradoxical encomium and that an informed viewer – and there is little doubt that the *Butcher's shop* was intended for people in the know – would have appreciated the ironic inversion operating in the picture. Not only do Annibale's formal choices speak in more elevated diction than the subject warrants, but as Martin showed, the painter quoted blatantly from the gods of the Renaissance artistic pantheon, Michelangelo and Raphael.[27] He explicitly invoked the old masters. Waagen used the term "masterly manner" not merely to praise Annibale's skill but in appreciation of his dialogue with the Renaissance masters. Annibale counted on viewers of the *Butcher's shop* to recognize citations of the most prestigious sites in Rome, the Vatican Palace and the Sistine Chapel (Fig. 7). He transforms Michelangelo's



10 Marco Dente after Raphael,
Sacrifice of Noah, engraving

Noah/Abel – the identification of the subject is contested (Vasari called it the *Sacrifice of Noah* in his first edition and then the *Sacrifice of Cain and Abel* in his second[28]) – into the butcher in the center of his painting. The altar becomes the butcher block, while the old woman is transformed into a customer. Michelangelo's boy cradling a bundle of firewood echoes in Annibale's halberdier.[29]

Annibale borrows another set of figures from Raphael's *Sacrifice of Noah* in the Vatican *logge*, which probably was known to him through an engraving by Marco Dente (Fig. 10).[30] Raphael's central figure in the foreground sacrificing a ram was adopted with minor revisions in the *Butcher's shop*. And it is a ram, not a sheep, being slaughtered; this sacrificial animal was out of place in a butcher's shop. The correspondences extend to details like the hands and even the

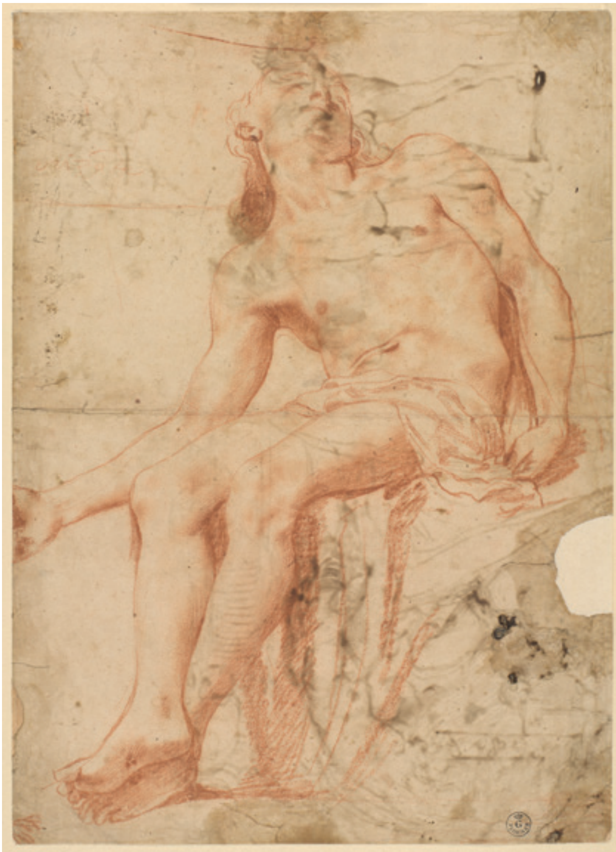
[26] Frequent use of the paradoxical encomium by sixteenth-century poets also would have raised awareness of the technique; see for example Francesco Berni's lodes on lowly foods with sexual double meanings (e.g. *In lode delle anguille* and *In lode delle pesche*), on which see Antonio Marzo, *Note sulla poesia erotica del Cinquecento*, Lecce 1999, p. 27. My thanks to Diletta Gamberini for this reference.

[27] Martin (note 17), pp. 265f.

[28] Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. by Rosanna Bettarini/Paola Barocchi, Florence 1966–1997, VI, p. 42.

[29] Martin (note 17), p. 266.

[30] *Ibidem*.



11 Annibale Carracci,
Study of a seated model.
Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi,
Gabinetto dei Disegni
e delle Stampe, inv. 12418 Fr

odd countenance of the dog in the *Butcher's shop*, which seems to hark back to the ram in Raphael's fresco. These deliberate allusions, loaded onto the butchers as portraits of the Carracci, led Martin to interpret the *Butcher's shop* as a manifesto, the "destiny of the Carracci family, under the leadership of a second Noah, Ludovico, to inaugurate a new era in art".[31]

The impossibility of improving on Michelangelo (as Giorgio Vasari in his *Vite* had formulated the aporia of artistic progress), the crushing weight of the past no longer blocked the way forward. Annibale brandished his famous sources to show how he could remake Raphael and Michelangelo according to the color and light of Titian and Correggio, Northern Italy's answers to Vasari's Central Italian paragons of the High Renaissance. This was the way to reform painting, by breathing new life into the old masters with vigorous brushwork and direct observation of nature. The *Butcher's shop* indeed had the air of a manifesto not only because Annibale achieved this reform, but also because he demonstrated it, made it manifest, insisted on it, and pointed to it with his unmistakable citations and transformations. As Noah's family rescues a future for mankind, so the Carracci rescue a future for painting. Today this may sound pretentious and high-minded, but circling back to the mock encomium, one can see how Annibale handles it with the deftness to be expected from one of the inventors of caricature. Caricature asks the viewer to hold in their mind the image that is the basis for the caricature, so that the parodied likeness and its distance from that original subject are asserted at the same time. Annibale played with this technique by citing the Vatican in a butcher's shop.

In invoking and reforming Raphael and Michelangelo, Annibale had a personal score to settle. He was responding assertively and explicitly to the critics of his early works, the Jason cycle in Palazzo Fava and the two altarpieces with which this essay began. In the *Butcher's shop*, Annibale's citations of Renaissance masters declare: if it is a venerable artistic tradition you want, I will give it to you, but grounded in nature – *my* way. If it is knowledge of anatomy, behold the accurate rendering of bones and tissue in the animal carcasses and the perfect command of drawing and action in the figures. Annibale meant to take his place among his great forbears and improve upon them. Not content merely to copy their figures, he had living models assume the old poses so that he could study them anew.

[31] *Ibidem.*

One sees this in Annibale's drawing from about 1585 (Fig. 11), in which a living model assumes a pose inspired by Michelangelo's famous sculpture of the *Pietà*. Christ's articulated musculature registered emphatically in Agostino's engraving of the *Pietà* from 1579 gives way in the drawing to the physique of a slim youth showing all the boney awkwardness of Michelangelo's pose as enacted by a real body.[32] Annibale's embodiment of both the memory of Michelangelo and the humanity of his living model in the Christ of his altarpiece of *Pietà with saints* of 1585 now in the Galleria Nazionale in Parma[33] epitomizes the concept and method of the Carracci reform of painting according to nature.[34] Annibale transcended the dry, rote imitation of art and injected the verve and authenticity of direct observation. He made new life course through the veins of the butchers, informed by the actors of the High Renaissance frescoes. His critics had accused him of depending too much on life. That was at the heart of his bad reception. But Annibale meant to achieve a reform of painting. No longer must artists choose between *il vero* and *il vivo*, between the ideal and nature. In the *Butcher's shop*, Annibale showed his critics that he was the painter who could deliver both "the true" and "the living" at the same time. Famously quoted as saying "noi altri dipintori habbiamo da parlare con le mani",[35] Annibale answered spoken criticism in paint.

The author wishes to thank Jonathan Nelson, Alessandro Nova, Diletta Gamberini, and Samuel Vitali for their many excellent suggestions to improve this article.

[32] Gail Feigenbaum, "Practice in the Carracci Academy", in: *The Artist's Workshop*, conference proceedings Washington, D.C., 1989, ed. by Peter M. Lukehart, Washington, D.C., *et al.* 1993 (= *Studies in the History of Art*, XXXVIII), pp. 59–76: 66.

[33] *Ibidem.*

[34] *Eadem*, "Models and Natures in the Carracci Academy", in: *Arte dal naturale*, ed. by Sybille Ebert-Schifferer *et al.*, Rome 2018, pp. 35–51.

[35] Giovanni Battista Agucchi, "Trattato di pittura", in: Denis Mahon, *Studies in Seicento Art and Theory*, London 1947, pp. 241–258: 253f.

Abstract

According to Carlo Cesare Malvasia, the Carracci's biographer, Bolognese artists reacted with harsh criticism to the paintings of the young Annibale. They accused him of painting in a vulgar mode, copying nature without adjusting and improving it on the basis of judicious consideration of the good and beautiful in art. This paper proposes that in his monumental painting *The butcher's shop* (Oxford, Christ Church), Annibale fired back at his critics, emphatically deploying citations of the great High Renaissance masters precisely to demonstrate how, within the new terms of the Carracci's reform of painting, he could both embody truth to nature as well as improve on august tradition.

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Umschlagbild | Copertina:

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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