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1 Giovanni Battista Naldini, *The Ascension of Christ with Saints Agnes and Helena*.
Oxford, Ashmolean Museum

TRADITION AND REFORM IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY FLORENTINE PAINTING ALTARPIECES BY NALDINI AND POCCKETTI FOR THE COMPANY OF SANT'AGNESE IN SANTA MARIA DEL CARMINE

Douglas Dow

By the time the interlocutors in Raffaello Borghini's (1537/41–1588) *Il Riposo* came around to their discussion of Giovanni Battista Naldini's (ca. 1537–1591) *Ascension of Christ*, which had been painted for a chapel that belonged to the Compagnia di Santa Maria delle Laudi e di Sant'Agnese at Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence, they had already discussed numerous works in various churches throughout the

city.¹ Over the course of their interactions, Borghini established the identities and points of view of his four discussants: Bernardo Vecchietti (1514–1590), Ridolfo Sirigatti (1553–1608), Baccio Valori (d. 1606), and Girolamo Michelozzi.² Bernardo Vecchietti, for example, was cast as the critic sensitive to the liberties taken by painters and patrons, especially when they contradicted textual sources or

¹ Raffaello Borghini, *Il Riposo* [...], Florence 1584; the treatment of the *Ascension* begins on p. 114 of the first book. Borghini's text is divided into four continuously paginated books. The first book is largely dedicated to questions of iconography and meaning, while the second book addresses issues of form and style. The third and fourth books present biographies of artists, from Cimabue to Borghini's time. The *Ascension* reappears on p. 205 in the second book, and once again on p. 615 in the fourth book. On the configuration of *Il Riposo*, see Marco Rosci, "Saggio biobibliografico", in: Raffaello Borghini, *Il Riposo*, ed. by Marco Rosci, Milan 1967 (reprint of the ed. Florence 1584), pp. vii–xiv; Marcia B. Hall, *Renovation and Counter-Reformation: Vasari and Duke Cosimo in Sta Maria Novella and Sta Croce, 1565–1577*, Oxford 1979, p. 55, and the review of this book by Charles Hope in: *The Burlington Magazine*, CXXIV (1982), pp. 512–514: 513; Rob-

ert Williams, *Art, Theory, and Culture in Sixteenth-Century Italy: From Techne to Metatechne*, Cambridge et al. 1997, p. 94; Marcia B. Hall, *After Raphael: Painting in Central Italy in the Sixteenth Century*, Cambridge et al. 1999, pp. 247f.; Lloyd H. Ellis, "Introduction", in: Raffaello Borghini, *Il Riposo*, trans. and ed. by Lloyd H. Ellis, Toronto et al. 2007, pp. 1–39: 25, 30f.; Stuart Lingo, "Raffaello Borghini and the Corpus of Florentine Art in an Age of Reform", in: *The Sensuous in the Counter-Reformation Church*, ed. by Marcia B. Hall/Tracy E. Cooper, Cambridge 2013, pp. 113–135: 117f.

² For a brief description of each man, as well as a discussion of the role each one plays in the dialogue, see Rosci (note 1), pp. xi–xiii; Francesca Petrucci, "Bernardino Poccetti a Bellosguardo: un inno alla carità", in: *Artista*, 2005, pp. 10–21: 10; Lloyd H. Ellis, "Personae", in: Borghini 2007 (note 1), pp. 41f.; Lingo (note 1), pp. 117f.

seemed indecorous.³ As a foil to Vecchietti and his emphasis on propriety, Borghini presented Ridolfo Sirigatti, who frequently defended artists and works that had been subject to Vecchietti's attacks.⁴ It is no surprise, then, that when the group paused to contemplate Naldini's *Ascension*, the two men exchanged views, with Vecchietti singling out features that he believed to be incorrect or inappropriate, even as Sirigatti intervened in an attempt to explain how those elements came to be included in the painting.⁵

The purpose of this essay is twofold. On the one hand it suggests that despite an increased emphasis on the importance of decorum in religious imagery at the end of the sixteenth century, some patrons preferred aesthetic and iconographic solutions that spoke directly to their constituencies, even if the resultant works of art failed to meet some of the new

standards being promoted for imagery.⁶ On the other hand, it shows that the unconventional elements of the two altarpieces commissioned by the company of Sant'Agnese – the *Ascension* by Naldini and an *Annunciation* by Bernardino Poccetti (1553–1612) – evoked the confraternity's long history of devotional and charitable contributions to the Carmine during a period of change within the church and the wider Catholic world.

Although Naldini's *Ascension* was destroyed in the fire that swept through Santa Maria del Carmine during the night of 28 January 1771, surviving preparatory studies, a small oil sketch (Fig. 1), and textual descriptions of the work – including the discussion from *Il Riposo* – provide enough information to reconstruct the appearance of the painting and especially to consider the passages that Vecchietti found

³ For the historical Bernardo Vecchietti, who was well versed in matters of art and aesthetics, see Michael Bury, "Bernardo Vecchietti, Patron of Giambologna", in: *I Tatti Studies*, I (1985), pp. 13–56; Antonio Natali, "Candidior animus: Santi di Tito e i Vecchietti", in: *idem*, *La piscina di Betsaida: movimenti nell'arte fiorentina del Cinquecento*, Florence et al. 1995, pp. 87–114; *idem*, "Il 'divoto' e il pittore di 'sacra historia': Bernardo Vecchietti e Santi di Tito", in: *Vivens homo*, VII (1996), pp. 119–128; Francesca Carrara, "Il magnifico Bernardo Vecchietti, cortigiano e committente in un inedito epistolario privato", in: *Giambologna: gli dei, gli eroi. Genesi e fortuna di uno stile europeo nella scultura*, exh. cat., ed. by Beatrice Paolozzi Strozzi/Dimitrios Zikos, Florence 2006, pp. 302–314. It is likely that, as Natali 1995, p. 119, suggests, the views espoused by the interlocutor Vecchietti reflect to some degree those that were held by the historical Vecchietti, since it would have been too great a liberty had Borghini put objectionable words in the mouths of his friends, who were "personaggi viventi e noti in città" at the time of the book's publication. For the purposes of this essay, however, it is not necessary to ascertain if these opinions were actually held by the historical Vecchietti; instead they will be taken as representative of the point of view adopted by those who objected to what they considered to be breaches of artistic decorum.

⁴ Ridolfo Sirigatti was an excellent choice to act as the dialogue's defender of artists, as he was himself an artist, the maternal grandson of Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio (1483–1561) and the teacher of Pietro Bernini (1562–1629). For the historical Sirigatti, see John Pope-Hennessy, "Portrait Sculptures by Ridolfo Sirigatti", in: *Victoria and Albert Museum Bulletin*, I (1965), 2, pp. 33–36; Tommaso Mozzati, in: *Il cotto dell'Impruneta: maestri del Rinascimento e le fornaci di oggi/The Impruneta Terracotta: Renaissance Masters and Today's Kilns*, exh. cat. Impruneta 2009, ed. by Rosanna Caterina Proto Pisani/Giancarlo Gentilini, Florence 2009, pp. 104–107, no. II.14.

⁵ Borghini 1584 (note 1), I, pp. 114f. The distinct points of view adopted by Vecchietti and Sirigatti were proposed early in the dialogue by Baccio Valori, who suggested that it would be appropriate for each man to draw on his own experience and expertise, in which case Vecchietti should address philosophy, poetry, and history as they pertain to painting and sculpture and Sirigatti should weigh in on practical, aesthetic, and technical matters (*ibidem*, p. 24).

⁶ The debate in the sixteenth century regarding notions of decorum in imagery was complex and engaged various modes of representation. For a recent discussion of the term, its historiography, and relevant bibliography, see Robert W. Gaston, "Vasari and the Rhetoric of Decorum", in: *The Ashgate Research Companion to Giorgio Vasari*, ed. by David J. Cast, Farnham et al. 2014, pp. 245–260: 245–248. Although propriety was a main concern among commentators who found some religious images to be lascivious or too indebted to pagan models, this essay focuses on the question of accurate representations of sacred history, for this is the subject of Vecchietti's criticism of Naldini's altarpiece. Vecchietti's emphasis on historical accuracy in imagery echoes similar concerns that Giovanni Andrea Gilio expressed less than two decades previously in his "Dialogo [...] de gli errori, e de gli abusi de' Pittori circa l'istorie", published in Camerino in 1564 (Natali 1995 [note 3], p. 102; Williams [note 1], p. 94; Hall 1999 [note 1], pp. 247f). For more on Gilio's discussion of historically accurate religious images, see Charles Dempsey, "Mythic Inventions in Counter-Reformation Painting", in: *Rome in the Renaissance: The City and the Myth*, conference proceedings Binghamton 1978, ed. by Paul A. Ramsey, Binghamton 1982, pp. 55–75: 64–66, 71; Williams (note 1), pp. 91–94; Robert W. Gaston, "How Words Control Images: The Rhetoric of Decorum in Counter-Reformation Italy", in: *The Sensuous in the Counter-Reformation Church* (note 1), pp. 74–90: 85–87.

troubling.⁷ When Michelozzi directed the group's attention to Naldini's *Ascension*, Vecchiotti immediately criticized the work for its anachronistic inclusion of Saints Helena and Agnes in the picture's foreground, remarking that they should not be in the painting because they "vennero al mondo tanto tempo dopo l'Ascensione del Signore".⁸ He went on to object to Naldini's representation of the Virgin as a "giovanetta di diciotto anni, o venti", a chronological impossibility as she would have been a much older woman at the end of Christ's life.⁹ Finally, he pointed out that the painter had omitted the two angels who appeared and spoke to the apostles after Christ ascended to heaven, a complaint that he had lodged against Giovanni Stradano's *Ascension* in the Asini Chapel in Santa Croce only a few moments earlier in the dialogue.¹⁰

Sirigatti, in an attempt to defend Naldini from Vecchiotti's criticism, explained that Saints Helena and Agnes were included to please the patrons of the panel, and although he acknowledged that this did not excuse the error, he argued that the blame should not be placed on the painter.¹¹ Earlier in the dialogue, Sirigatti had presented a more detailed explanation of this practice in response to Vecchiotti's censure of it in Giovanni Stradano's *Baptism of Christ* in Santa Maria Novella. "Non riversate tutta l'acqua adosso a' poveri pittori", he begged, suggesting that Vecchiotti was mistaken when he placed all of the blame on the paint-

ers of such pictures. Sirigatti then went on to explain that painters must please their patrons if they want to make a living, and if they were to refuse to honor a patron's wishes they would lose the commission to some other less scrupulous artist.¹² Vecchiotti granted the truth of Sirigatti's explanation, but suggested that it did not excuse the error, remarking "ma per questo non ne segue che il fallo non sia fallo". He then asserted that over time people would forget the specifics of a commission – facts which circulated mostly in an oral tradition, or, in Vecchiotti's phrasing, "in bocca di questo, e di quello" – and simply attribute all of the characteristics of the work to the painter without considering the role of the patron.¹³ This argument, which was left unresolved at the end of the discussion of Stradano's *Baptism*, was rehashed during the discussion of Saints Helena and Agnes in Naldini's *Ascension*. When Sirigatti explained that the presence of the anachronistic saints reflected the desires of the picture's patrons, Vecchiotti granted that this was true, but he argued that Sirigatti only knew this because the altarpiece had been painted within recent memory. From Vecchiotti's perspective, Sirigatti's justification for the presence of Helena and Agnes only buttressed his earlier assertion that Sirigatti's inside knowledge of the painting was precisely the kind of information that would be lost to future generations, who would have no other option than to assume that

⁷ A compelling account of the fire, which has been extensively consulted by scholars, was recorded by a Carmelite friar, Ranieri Chiti, almost immediately after the event and includes descriptions of works of art destroyed in the blaze (ASF, CRSGF, serie II3, no. 30, fols. 202–209). For further discussion of the works of art lost in the fire, see also *Gazzetta Toscana*, 1 February 1771; *Gazzetta Toscana*, 9 February 1771; Ugo Procacci, "L'incendio della chiesa del Carmine del 1771 (la sagra di Masaccio; gli affreschi della cappella di San Giovanni)", in: *Rivista d'Arte*, XIV (1932), pp. 141–232.

⁸ Borghini 1584 (note I), I, p. 114. Vecchiotti had previously criticized Naldini for this type of anachronism when he called attention to the bishop and two apostles represented in the *Nativity* that Naldini painted for the Mazzinghi Chapel in Santa Maria Novella, noting that "quando il Salvador del mondo nacque, non vi erano Apostoli, ne Vescovi" (*ibidem*, p. 101). For the *Nativity*, see Hall 1979 (note I), pp. 97–99.

⁹ Borghini 1584 (note I), I, p. 114. A similar chronological error in Michelangelo's fresco *The Conversion of Saint Paul* was criticized in Gilio's "Dialogo [...] de gli errori, e de gli abusi de' Pittori circa l'histoire", when the interlocutor Francesco Santi censured Michelangelo's representation of the saint with a beard, since "essendo egli di XVIII. ò XX. anni, l'habbia fatto di LX." (Giovanni Andrea Gilio, *Due dialoghi [...]*, Camerino 1564, c. 89v).

¹⁰ Borghini 1584 (note I), I, pp. 114f. Christ's *Ascension* is recounted in Acts I:1–12. For Stradano's altarpiece, see Alessandra Baroni Vannucci, *Jan van der Straet detto Giovanni Stradano: flandrus pictor et inventor*, Milan et al. 1997, pp. 128f.

¹¹ Borghini 1584 (note I), I, p. 115.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 98.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

the iconographic decisions were the responsibility of the painter.¹⁴ At this point, Sirigatti was unwilling or unable to mount a rebuttal, and without any discussion of Vecchietti's other objections to Naldini's panel – the inaccurate representation of the Virgin as a young woman and the omission of the two angels – he directed the group's attention away from the *Ascension* by suggesting that they consider Santi di Tito's *Nativity*.¹⁵

As it happens, Sirigatti's explanation for the presence of Saints Helena and Agnes was vindicated by the publication of a testament from 11 September 1563, in which a widow named Lena Ottinelli donated the interest on seven hundred florins to the company of Sant'Agnese, specifying that two hundred florins were to be used for the construction of a "cappella moderna" that followed the example provided by the recently renovated Botti Chapel on the other side of the Carmine's nave.¹⁶ In addition to being adorned with a *pietra serena* tabernacle, the bequest specified that the chapel was to be furnished with a large panel representing the Ascension of Christ, with kneeling figures of Saints Agnes and Helena in the foreground.¹⁷ The inclusion of the anachronistic saints can be explained – just as Sirigatti suggested – by their relationship to the chapel's patronage. Helena was the onomastic saint of Lena Ottinelli, while Agnes was the dedicatee of the confraternity.¹⁸ Thus, even though Sirigatti's interpretation was correct, it appears that Vecchietti's assertion that such auxiliary information would be lost over time or simply unavailable to most spectators is also valid, since it took the publication of the testament to definitively establish the reason for the inclusion of Saints Helena and Agnes in the *Ascension*. Of course, given the long

history of including donor portraits and patron saints in religious paintings, one has to wonder if Vecchietti was overstating the extent to which such information would be lost to future generations, who – as Sirigatti did – would draw on their knowledge of these traditions to infer the identities and reasons for the inclusion of such figures.

Because Naldini's altarpiece was destroyed, it is necessary to turn to other sources to gain a sense of how the *Ascension* might have appeared to a sixteenth-century audience. Ottinelli's testament is a crucial piece of evidence. The bequest's explicit invocation of the Botti Chapel as a model for Sant'Agnese's new chapel reveals that the project was understood to be part of the larger renovation of Santa Maria del Carmine that had recently been inaugurated by Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574). The brothers Matteo and Simone Botti had only been granted patronage rights to their chapel in May of 1561, but construction must have progressed rapidly because Vasari's *Crucifixion* was installed on the chapel's altar in December of 1563.¹⁹ Indeed, it appears that when Ottinelli drew up her bequest in September of 1563, the architectural components of the Botti Chapel were already complete, since the testament specifies that Sant'Agnese's chapel should be made from dressed *pietra serena*, with columns and arches, in imitation of the chapel that the Botti had made.²⁰

A codicil to Ottinelli's will, dated 28 June 1572, reveals that the commission for the "tavola grande di pittura" described in the bequest went to Maso da San Friano (1531–1571), who was unable to complete the altarpiece before his death.²¹ When the codicil was drawn up in the following year, Ottinelli decided to transfer the commission to Naldini, even though

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 115.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ For Ottinelli's will, see Catherine Clover, "Documentation on Naldini's Ascension for S. Maria del Carmine in Florence", in: *The Burlington Magazine*, CXLI (1999), pp. 615–617.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ Daniele Rapino, "Vasari in Santa Maria del Carmine", in: *La Crocifissione di Giorgio Vasari nella Chiesa di Santa Maria del Carmine a Firenze: studi e restauro*, ed. by *idem*, Florence 2012, pp. 8–17: 9f.

²⁰ For a transcription of the text, see Clover (note 16), p. 617.

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 615–617.

the panel was still in the possession of Maso's heirs. The documents do not provide any detail as to the state of the altarpiece at this point, but it is possible that when Naldini received the panel, it may have arrived in a partially finished condition.²² Extant preparatory drawings by Maso closely resemble the *modello* for the altarpiece by Naldini, demonstrating a consistent approach to the iconography and general composition of the altarpiece on Naldini's part.²³ In his large drawing of the entire composition of the altarpiece, Maso placed Saint Helena in the lower right corner and Saint Agnes in the corresponding position on the left side, both kneeling (Fig. 2). Arranged in standing positions around the hillock meant to represent the Mount of Olives are another fourteen figures. Although not all of the figures can be identified, among these must number the eleven apostles described at the event in Acts I:I–I2. The other three figures are most likely the Virgin Mary – marked with a halo and positioned just beyond the crest of the hill below Christ's right foot – and two attendants, who are probably the figures farthest back in the distance. Christ, who turns his gaze skyward in the direction of his ascent, occupies the top third of the roundheaded drawing where he is surrounded by clouds and putti.

The *modello* by Naldini closely resembles this drawing by Maso, with the exception of the more prominent position afforded to the Virgin Mary and the substitution of the two angels who appeared to the apostles for the two figures who accompanied the Virgin. Based on the evidence, it seems likely that the altarpiece also represented the Virgin in the center of a ring of figures, in much the same manner as she appears in the *modello* and two extant drawings by Nal-



—
2 Maso da San Friano,
*The Ascension of Christ
with Saints Agnes and Helena.*
Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi,
Gabinetto dei Disegni
e delle Stampe, inv. 602 S

²² *Ibidem.*

²³ Maso's studies include a large drawing of the entire composition and several studies for individual figures (Peter Cannon-Brookes, "Three Notes on Maso da San Friano", in: *The Burlington Magazine*, CVII [1965], pp. 192–197: 195). For Naldini's *modello*, see Paola Barocchi, "Itinerario di

Giovambattista Naldini", in: *Arte antica e moderna*, 31/32 (1965), pp. 244–288: 254; Christopher Lloyd, *A Catalogue of the Earlier Italian Paintings in the Ashmolean Museum (Oxford)*, Oxford 1977, pp. 129–132; Clover (note I6); Colin Harrison/Catherine Casley/Jon Whiteley, *The Ashmolean Museum: Complete Illustrated Catalogue of Paintings*, Oxford 2004, p. 153.



3 Giovanni Battista Naldini, study
for the lower register of the *Ascension*.
Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département
des Arts graphiques, inv. 10306r

dini (Figs. 3 and 4).²⁴ Francesco Bocchi's description of the altarpiece in the Carmine – published in *Le bellezze della città di Fiorenza* in 1591 – also places Mary in the middle of the composition. According to Bocchi, the Virgin, who appeared to be sighing, clasped her hands together and turned towards Christ, while all around her the other figures turned their hands and faces in her direction.²⁵ This description strongly suggests that Mary was the focal point of the pic-

ture's lower zone and that the other figures were arranged around her in a ring. Bocchi's detailed account of the picture does not mention the two angels who appeared to the apostles after Christ's Ascension. The only angels he described were in a carefully arranged group surrounding Christ. These must have been positioned in the upper register among the clouds and radiant light of the heavens, and therefore could not be the two who are shown on either side of the Virgin

²⁴ Cannon-Brookes (note 23), p. 195, remarked upon a *pentimento* in the large compositional drawing at the Uffizi that shows that Maso experimented with placing a figure in the center of the composition. Two extant studies for the lower portion of the *Ascension* by Naldini also feature a figure located in the center of the composition. For the drawing at the Louvre, see Catherine Monbeig Goguel, *Vasari et son temps: maîtres toscans nés après 1500, morts avant 1600* (Musée du Louvre, Cabinet des Dessins: Inventaire général des dessins italiens, 1), Paris 1972, pp. 88–91; for the drawing

in a private collection, see *The Age of Vasari*, exh. cat. Notre Dame, Ind., 1970, Binghamton 1970, pp. 75f.; Edmund Pillsbury/John Caldwell, *Sixteenth Century Italian Drawings: Form and Function*, exh. cat., New Haven 1974, no. 31; Larry J. Feinberg, *From Studio to Studiolo: Florentine Draftsmanship under the First Medici Grand Dukes*, exh. cat. Oberlin/Brunswick/Hanover 1991, Seattle et al. 1991, pp. 138f.

²⁵ “È mirabile la Madonna, et è fatta con infinita grazia: la quale con le man giunte volge la vista quasi con sospiri verso il Salvatore, et così chiun-



4 Giovanni Battista Naldini,
study for the lower register
of the *Ascension*.
Private collection

in Naldini's drawings and the *modello*.²⁶ That Bocchi did not remark upon the presence of the two angels and that Vecchiotti explicitly criticized their absence both imply that the angels were not represented in the finished altarpiece.²⁷

Scholars have traditionally taken the views expounded by Vecchiotti in *Il Riposo* as emblematic of a

new sensitivity to decorum and propriety in religious imagery, also expressed in other texts that began to appear shortly after the conclusion of the Council of Trent.²⁸ It has been increasingly recognized, however, that the relationship between these recommendations and the works of art that were produced during this period was complex and that theologians, patrons,

que à lei è d'intorno con le mani, et col volto si drizza à quella con mo-
venza dicevole, con attitudine honesta" (Francesco Bocchi, *Le bellezze della
città di Fiorenza [...]*, Florence 1591, p. 78). For a translation, see *idem*, *The
Beauties of the City of Florence: A Guidebook of 1591*, ed. and trans. by Thomas
Frangenberg/Robert Williams, London 2006, p. 89.

²⁶ "È fatto il Christo con molta arte, e gli Angeli, che con bell'ordine
gli sono intorno, quello, che narrano le sacre carte esprimono con istudio
senza fatica, e con industria senza stento" (Bocchi 1591 [note 25], p. 78).

²⁷ Other early remarks on the *Ascension* are not as detailed as those found
in Borghini and Bocchi. Fra Girolamo Castaldi, in a history of the Car-

mine he wrote in the late seventeenth century, described the panel as "la
tavola ove si rappresenta l'ascensione del nostro Redentore al cielo, vi è
anco una santa Agnesa, e una S. Elena di mano di Giovanni Battista Nal-
dini eccellente Pittore. Qual tavola fù fatta d'un legato della Signora Elena
Ottinelli del 1576 ove è la sua arme con quella della Compagnia" (ASF,
CRSGF, serie II3, no. I3, fol. 91). Giuseppe Richa, *Notizie istoriche delle
chiese Fiorentine [...]*, Florence 1754–1762, X, p. 27, reiterated Vecchiotti's
criticisms, but only after he praised Naldini for his soft colors and the
pleasing positions of the figures in the painting.

²⁸ Marcia B. Hall, *The Sacred Image in the Age of Art: Titian, Tintoretto, Barocci*,

and artists were all involved in the negotiation of this new terrain.²⁹ In this case, it is difficult to see the *Ascension*, which was commissioned and executed during the same period as the publication of many of the treatises on art, as an embodiment of or a reaction to the contemporary debate about sacred imagery.³⁰ Cannon-Brookes suggested that the debate might provide a *terminus ante quem* for the development of the panel's iconography, arguing that "the depiction in the middle of that decade [1570s] of such a flagrantly 'unconventional' iconography suggests that the iconography had been laid down at an earlier date when the strictures of the Council of Trent were less in evidence".³¹ Other evidence – Ottinelli's bequest and surviving studies by Maso – supports the idea that the iconographic elements of the panel were established before the 1570s. But, the suggestion that the unconventional (at least as it appeared to Vecchietti) iconography would have been an impossibility after the 1570s depends on the assumption that Sant'Agnese felt compelled to follow the new guidelines regarding sacred imagery. This does not seem to have been the case. Another altarpiece, this one an *Annunciation* commissioned from Bernardino Poccetti by the company of Sant'Agnese in the 1590s (Fig. 5), provides a strong indicator that the confraternity ignored the kinds of standards espoused by Vecchietti in *Il Riposo*, for the painting possesses unusual features of the sort that

Vecchietti would have found troubling. Poccetti not only gave his picture a vertical bipartite composition that is rare in images of the Annunciation, with the upper portion of the panel showing God the Father dispatching Gabriel from the heavenly realm, but he also represented the Virgin in the lower register surrounded by – but seemingly oblivious to – a large group of figures.³²

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the confraternity of Sant'Agnese installed the *Annunciation* by Poccetti in a chapel on the east side of the entrance to the Carmine that had long been associated with the company. As early as 1280, the group took an active role in decorating this area of the church and passed a motion to adorn the space with representations of Saints Mary, Agnes, and John the Baptist, as well as to establish a tomb "next to the door of the church, beneath the place where the image of Our Lady, Saint Mary is to be made".³³ It is not known, however, if the confraternity followed through with the project, for five years later its officials requested an image of the Virgin surrounded by devotees kneeling in prayer.³⁴ By 1377, Chiaro Ardinghelli had endowed and dedicated the chapel in this spot to the Virgin Annunciate, and slightly more than two decades later it was decorated with Lorenzo Monaco's polyptych featuring the Virgin and Christ enthroned, flanked by Saints Jerome, John the Baptist, Peter, and Paul.³⁵

El Greco, Caravaggio, New Haven et al. 2011, pp. 117–137; Alexander Nagel, *The Controversy of Renaissance Art*, Chicago et al. 2011, pp. 5f.

²⁹ Gauvin Alexander Bailey, *Between Renaissance and Baroque: Jesuit Art in Rome, 1565–1610*, Toronto et al. 2003, pp. 14–16; Nagel (note 28), pp. 5–7; Lingo (note 1), pp. 113–117. Michael W. Cole, *Ambitious Form: Giambologna, Ammanati, and Danti in Florence*, Princeton et al. 2011, p. 49, noted that Borghini's use of the dialogue format for *Il Riposo* allowed him "to make clear that the positions under discussion were matters for debate". Stuart Lingo (note 1), p. 115, remarked that the diverse perspectives of the interlocutors remain unreconciled and that the dialogue presents "a conundrum, a picture of a culture at odds with itself about the status and purpose of modern art and religious art". For a recent overview of how the concept of "negotiation" has been employed in interpretations of late sixteenth-century art, see Marcia B. Hall,

"Introduction", in: *The Sensuous in the Counter-Reformation Church* (note 1), pp. 1–20: 3–6.

³⁰ Bailey (note 29), pp. 14f.

³¹ Cannon-Brookes (note 23), p. 195.

³² The work is signed and dated 1601. Santi Mattei, *Ragionamento intorno all'antica chiesa del Carmine di Firenze*, Florence 1869, p. 95.

³³ Cit. from Nicholas A. Eckstein, *Painted Glories: The Brancacci Chapel in Renaissance Florence*, New Haven et al. 2014, p. 55.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 56f.

³⁵ Nerida Newbiggin, *Feste d'Oltrarno: Plays in Churches in Fifteenth-Century Florence*, Florence 1996, I, pp. 54f.; Eckstein (note 33), p. 58. For the now dismembered altarpiece, see Angelo Tartuferi, in: *Lorenzo Monaco: A Bridge from Giotto's Heritage to the Renaissance*, exh. cat., ed. by *idem*/Daniela Parenti, Florence 2006, pp. 120–127, no. 8.



5 Bernardino Poccetti, *Annunciation*.
Florence, Santa Maria del Carmine

In 1438, Ardinghelli's niece, Mona Dianora, ceded her patronage rights to the chapel to the prior of Santa Maria del Carmine and the captains of Sant'Agnese.³⁶ Over the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the confraternity continued to promote the cult of the Annunziata and to act as stewards of the chapel.³⁷ On 21 April 1591, the company recorded a motion to confer with the archbishop of Florence, Alessandro de' Medici, about remodeling the chapel in order to bring it up to date with the ongoing renovation of the church.³⁸ By 1595, the confraternity was acquiring building stone for the new chapel, and various allocations of funds and payments to Bernardino Poccetti for his work on the altarpiece are recorded between 1598 and 1601.³⁹ Another series of entries from the end of 1601 and the beginning of 1602 recounts expenses associated with the completion of the chapel's furnishing, namely, an altar frontal and the gilding of the altarpiece's frame.⁴⁰

The unconventional elements of Poccetti's *Annunciation* did not escape the attention of early commentators, but their remarks about the unusual aspects of the work are not explicitly critical. When Giovanni Cinelli published his updated and expanded edition of Bocchi's *Bellezze* in 1677, he noted the bipartite composition of the "bellissima Tavola di mano di Bernardino Puccetti, ov'è dipinta la Vergine Santiss. che fa orazione, e Dio Padre nel Paradiso ordina all'Archangelo Gabbriello l'Annunziazione", but he pronounced the work marvelous in all its parts, just like all the paintings by "questo ingegnoso artefice".⁴¹ Filippo Baldinucci mentioned the altarpiece in his biography of Poccetti, but provided no description of it, except that it was located in the chapel of "Sant'Agata [*sic*] a man sinistra entrando".⁴² Giuseppe Richa called Poccetti's design a "nuova invenzione", before going on to describe the composition which shows the Virgin

³⁶ Nicholas A. Eckstein, *The District of the Green Dragon: Neighbourhood Life and Social Change in Renaissance Florence*, Florence 1995, p. 117. In 1466, the officials of Sant'Agnese referred to the chapel as "nostra chapella" (*idem* [note 33], p. 224, note 93).

³⁷ Newbigin (note 35), p. 54; Eckstein (note 33), p. 58. In 1487, the prior of the Carmine and the captain of Sant'Agnese commissioned Lionardo del Bene to restore the image of the Madonna in the chapel (Jill Burke, "Visualizing Neighborhood in Renaissance Florence: Santo Spirito and Santa Maria del Carmine", in: *Journal of Urban History*, XXXII [2006], pp. 693–710: 702f).

³⁸ "Item elessono per andare à conferire con l'Ill.mo et R.mo Arcivescovo di Firenze la reduction della cappella della Santissima Annunziata di questa Compagnia nella chiesa del Carmine, secondo il modello dell'altre cappelle nuove Niccolò Rucellai uno de' capitani Vincentio Bernardi uno de' consiglieri, et Antonio Gianfigliuzzi uno de' sindaci" (ASF, Sant'Agnese, 5, fol. 118r). For Alessandro de' Medici's activities as archiepiscopal advisor and overseer of Florence's confraternities, see Douglas N. Dow, *Apostolic Iconography and Florentine Confraternities in the Age of Reform*, Farnham et al. 2014, pp. 9–17.

³⁹ For the stone, see ASF, Sant'Agnese, 5, fols. 135r (8 October 1595), 141r (14 July 1596); the description of the painting project included "la pittura della tavola della Santissima Annunziata et dello Apostolo che va nella parrete" (ASF, Sant'Agnese, 6, fols. 3v–4r). For allocations to Poccetti in the *libri di partiti*, see ASF, Sant'Agnese, 6, fols. 22r (13 May 1601: ten *scudi*), 23v (11 November 1601: eight *scudi*), 24r (9 December 1601: six *scudi*); for payments in the account books see ASF, Sant'Ag-

nese, 103, fols. 157v (26 February 1598: five *scudi*), 158r (2 April 1598: five *scudi*), 160v (19 September 1598: ten *scudi*). The payment from 19 September 1598 was previously published by Giuseppe Bacchi, "La compagnia di S. Maria delle Laudi e di S. Agnese nel Carmine di Firenze", in: *Rivista storica carmelitana*, III (1931), pp. 97–122: 108. The panel for the altarpiece was moved from Poccetti's studio to Noferi da Frascoli's workshop and then to the Carmine in spring 1598: "A spese di nostra compagnia per la portatura della tavola [*inserted from above*: de l'altare] da bottega di Bernardino Poccetti pittore a bottega di Noferi da Frascholi per raconciarla e da bottega al Carmine pagati a 4 fachini in tutto lire 5.6.8" (ASF, Sant'Agnese, 103, fol. 158r [27 April 1598]). Another entry on the same page suggests that the panel needed some repair where it had cracked and opened: "A spese di nostra compagnia questo di detto lire nove tanti pagati a Noferi da Frascholi per avere rimesso il mastice la tavola fessa e aperta tutta per l'altare della Nunziata lire 9".

⁴⁰ The frame for the altarpiece, the altar frontal, and a bench for the chapel were all provided by Lorenzo di Giuliano, a woodworker who maintained a shop near the Canto de' Carnesecchi. Payments to Lorenzo for the bench and the altarpiece's frame were entered on 26 and 29 September 1601, while the record for the altar frontal appears on 12 February 1602 (ASF, Sant'Agnese, 117, fol. 94 *destra*).

⁴¹ Francesco Bocchi, *Le bellezze della città di Firenze [...]*, ed. by Giovanni Cinelli, Florence 1677, p. 159.

⁴² Filippo Baldinucci, *Notizie de' professori del disegno da Cimabue in qua*, Florence 1681–1728, IV, p. 247.

at prayer, while God dispatches Gabriel from heaven above.⁴³ Richa's treatment of the altarpiece set the tone for several others that followed, including Vincenzo Follini and Modesto Rastrelli's description from 1802,⁴⁴ and Federico Fantozzi's remark from 1847 that the painting represented a "nuova e poetica invenzione".⁴⁵ In 1869, Santi Mattei noted that Poccetti adopted a conceit for his altarpiece that seemed strange because it departed significantly from the idea of the Annunciation that was commonly held.⁴⁶

Mattei was correct to point out that Poccetti's depiction was an unusual departure from established iconographic norms, but it was not, however, the only painting of the Annunciation in Florence that showed God the Father dispatching Gabriel from heaven while the Virgin Mary remained unaware of the celestial machinations transpiring above, a configuration that has been called "the mission of Gabriel".⁴⁷ Around thirty-five years earlier, Bartolomeo Traballese (ca. 1540–1585) painted a similar version of the Annunciation for the Carloni Chapel in the church of Ognissanti (Fig. 6).⁴⁸ Like Poccetti's altarpiece, Traballese's image not only shows Gabriel receiving his instructions from God the Father, but it also includes auxiliary figures arranged around the Virgin in the earthly realm, as well as what are probably portraits of the donors in the guises of their patron saints tucked into the painting's lower left and



6 Bartolomeo Traballese, *Annunciation*. Florence, San Salvatore in Ognissanti

⁴³ "Il medesimo nella Capella dell'Agnesa, che è la prima nell'ingresso a mano manca, fece la Nunziata con nuova invenzione: veggendovisi la Vergine orante, e nel Paradiso aperto il Padre Eterno, che commette all'Arcangelo Gabbriello di scendere ad annunziare a Maria il gran mistero" (Richa [note 27], p. 27).

⁴⁴ "Alla prima Cappella a mano manca eravi dello stesso Pittore Poccetti una Annunziata esposta con nuova invenzione; poichè vedevasi la Vergine orante, e nel Paradiso aperto il Padre Eterno, che commette all'Arcangelo Gabbriello di scendere ad annunziare a Maria il gran Mistero" (Vincenzo Follini/Modesto Rastrelli, *Firenze antica, e moderna illustrata*, Florence 1802, VIII, p. 68).

⁴⁵ "Bernardino Poccetti esprime con nuova e poetica invenzione la Vergine Maria orante, nel momento di essere Annunziata dall'Angiolo al quale

Dio Padre, che vedesi in alto nell'aperto paradiso, commette la missione dell'incomprensibil mistero" (Federico Fantozzi, *Nuova guida ovvero descrizione storico-artistico-critica della città e contorni di Firenze*, Florence 1847, p. 709).

⁴⁶ "Il Poccetti dipinse in quello l'Annunziazione di Maria Vergine, e adottò tale concetto nell'eseguirlo, che sembra avere dello strano, tanto si dipartì dall'idea che comunemente ce ne formiamo" (Mattei [note 32], p. 95).

⁴⁷ Don Denny, *The Annunciation from the Right from Early Christian Times to the Sixteenth Century*, Ph.D. diss., New York University 1965, pp. 149f.

⁴⁸ For recent discussions of this work, see Simona Lecchini Giovannoni, "Bartolomeo Traballese e il primo tempo della decorazione della compagnia dei 'cocchieri'", in: *Scritti di storia dell'arte in onore di Roberto Salvini*, Florence 1984, pp. 433–440: 434; Ferdinando Batazzi/Annamaria Giusti,

right corners.⁴⁹ Thanks to the legible biblical passages inscribed in the books that they hold, the figures on the left side of the panel have been identified as the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, while it has been suggested that the figures on the right side of the altarpiece represent the Tiburtine and Eritrean sibyls.⁵⁰ The presence of the prophets at the Annunciation can be explained by their longstanding typological associations with the event, and the sibyls were understood to have foretold the coming of Christianity during pagan antiquity.

Poccetti's *Annunciation* at the Carmine also includes figures arranged around Mary in the panel's lower half, but they are not prophets or sibyls. There are three female figures on the left side of the panel. Closest to the edge of the picture, the woman whose neck and shoulders are embraced by two small children personifies Charity. Next to this figure, a woman wearing a light blue dress under a white and gold brocade tunic turns to look at the spectator over her right shoulder. In her right hand she holds a dove. She is most likely a personification of Purity, who, according to Ripa, is represented as a "Giovanetta, vestita di bianco, con una Colomba in mano".⁵¹ A seated figure positioned between Purity and the Virgin cradles a lamb in her lap, the traditional attribute of Saint Agnes, one of the two dedicatees of the confraternity.

She lacks a halo and appears alongside Charity and Purity, however, and these features suggest that she is also a personification. With her head tilted forward and her gaze lowered she resembles Humility, whom Ripa describes as a "Donna con vestimento bianco, con gli occhi bassi, & in braccio tiene uno agnello".⁵²

On the right side of the lower half of the panel stand two figures dressed in rich robes that resemble those worn by Gabriel in the upper half of the painting. The similarity of their dress to that of the archangel as well as the curve of the top of a wing behind the figure on the extreme right edge suggest that these two figures are angels.⁵³ Furthermore, in the fresco of *The miraculous lactation of Saint Bernard* in the Cappella di Santa Maria del Giglio at the church of Santa Maria Maddalena dei Pazzi (Fig. 7), the two angels situated behind and to the right of the Virgin turn their heads to face each other in a manner that recalls the pair in the altarpiece at the Carmine.⁵⁴ A third angel in this fresco – the one on Mary's right side who turns to his left to look up at the Virgin – resembles Poccetti's treatment of Gabriel in the *Annunciation*. It has been suggested that Poccetti was hired to fresco the Cappella del Giglio in part because of his reputation for working quickly to complete a commission, which in this case was being carried out by an heir for a patron, Nereo Neri, who was already deceased.⁵⁵ Poc-

Ognissanti, Rome 1992, p. 76; Gabriella Di Cagno/Donatella Pegazzano, "San Salvatore in Ognissanti: gli altari del Cinquecento (1561–1582) e il loro arredo nel contesto della Riforma Cattolica", in: *Altari e committenza: episodi a Firenze nell'età della Controriforma*, ed. by Cristina De Benedictis, Florence 1996, pp. 92–103: 100; Nicoletta Lepri, "Bartolomeo Traballasi, Santi di Tito, Carlo Portelli e le influenze pittoriche di una sacra rappresentazione (1566)", in: *Arte Cristiana*, CII (2014), pp. 141–152: 144–147.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 144f.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 145f.

⁵¹ Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia*, New York 1976 (reprint of the ed. Padua 1611), p. 447. Although it is true that other personifications described by Ripa hold doves, these figures also possess other attributes that are missing from the figure in Poccetti's altarpiece. Simplicity, for example, wears white and holds a dove, but in her other hand she carries a pheasant; Sincerity wears gold and holds a heart in addition to a dove (*ibidem*, pp. 483f).

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 230. I am grateful to Samuel Vitali for bringing this identification to my attention.

⁵³ On the presence of angels at the Annunciation, see Émile Mâle, *L'art religieux de la fin du XVI^e siècle, du XVII^e siècle et du XVIII^e siècle; étude sur l'iconographie après le concile de Trente*, Paris 1972, pp. 239–242; for a broader view of the history of this tradition, see Denny (note 47), pp. 148–160.

⁵⁴ On the decoration of this chapel, see Francesca de Luca/Stefania Vasetti, "La cappella Del Giglio in Santa Maria Maddalena dei Pazzi", in: *Altari e committenza* (note 48), pp. 158–171; Susanne Müller-Bechtel, "Die Cappella Neri im ehemaligen 'convento di Cestello' (S. Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi) in Florenz und ihre Freskenausstattung durch Bernardino Poccetti (1598–1600)", in: *Studi di storia dell'arte*, XI (2000), pp. 137–176.

⁵⁵ De Luca/Vasetti (note 54), p. 159; Müller-Bechtel (note 54), pp. 137f. The relevant parts of Nereo Neri's testament were published by Mario



7 Bernardino Poccetti, *The miraculous lactation of Saint Bernard*.
Florence, Santa Maria Maddalena dei Pazzi

cetti and his assistants were working on the Cappella del Giglio and the altarpiece for the Carmine at the same time, and the resemblance between the figures in these paintings is most likely the result of a common source.⁵⁶ Preliminary designs for angels could

have been used for both commissions with minimal modifications. A surviving study of two angels standing behind the Virgin in the *Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe* of the Uffizi (Fig. 8) seems to have provided the basis for the renderings of the angels

Bori, "Notizie sulla cappella Neri in Cestello e sulla tavola della cappella Bardi in S. Croce", in: *Rivista d'Arte*, IV (1906), pp. 193f.

⁵⁶ Although he seems to have been the author of the preliminary designs, it has been suggested that Poccetti had at least two assistants working with him on the frescoes for the chapel (Paul C. Hamilton, *Disegni*

di Bernardino Poccetti [San Marino V. E. 1548 – Firenze 1612], Florence 1980, p. 63). This is in keeping with Poccetti's working practices, where he hired assistants as he needed them, using them as sub-contractors on his commissions. For more on Poccetti's working methods and use of assistants, see Stefania Vasetti, "Alcune puntualizzazioni sugli allievi di Bernardino



8 Bernardino Poccetti, study for the lower register of the *Annunciation*. Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi, Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe, inv. 8742 F



9 Bernardino Poccetti, study of Archangel Gabriel for the *Annunciation*. Northampton, Mass., Smith College Museum of Art, inv. SC 1946: 13-1

in both the panel and the fresco.⁵⁷ Another extant drawing, a study for Gabriel at the Smith College Museum of Art (Fig. 9), seems to be the source for both the angel to Mary's right in the *Lactation* and the archangel in the *Annunciation*, further supporting the idea that Poccetti used his designs for angels in both commissions. A sheet with a surviving prepara-

tory drawing for the *Lactation* (Fig. 10) also contains studies that have been connected to frescoes Poccetti was working on at Santissima Annunziata in Florence and at the Certosa di Pontignano outside of Siena and shows how Poccetti's working methods overlapped and encouraged the reuse of motifs within different commissions.⁵⁸

Poccetti e un inedito ciclo di affreschi", in: *Fondazione di Studi di Storia dell'Arte Roberto Longhi: Annali*, 3 (1996), pp. 69–98, especially p. 72.

⁵⁷ Vitzthum connected this drawing to the *Annunciation* altarpiece but did not remark on the similarity between it and the fresco at Santa Maria Mad-

dalena dei Pazzi (Walter Vitzthum, *Die Handzeichnungen des Bernardino Poccetti*, Ph.D. diss., Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München 1972, p. 81).

⁵⁸ Hamilton (note 56), pp. 65f. In this drawing, squared for transfer, the two angels who look at each other are present, but the figure derived from



10 Bernardino Poccetti, study for *The miraculous lactation of Saint Bernard*. Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi, Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe, inv. 863 F

In light of Vecchietti's response to the anachronistic saints in Naldini's *Ascension*, it is easy to imagine that he would have censured both of the paintings of the *Annunciation* by Trallesi and Poccetti for including representations of prophets, sibyls, saints, and personifications who – their relevance to the iconography and patronage of the works notwithstanding –

were not present at the event. Of course, *Il Riposo* was published before Poccetti's *Annunciation* was painted, and therefore the work could not have been a topic for the debate; Trallesi's altarpiece, however, was finished before the composition of the dialogue, and it had the potential to be a subject of the interlocutors' conversation.⁵⁹ Unfortunately, immediately after

the study of Gabriel is different, looking down at Bernard rather than up at the Virgin. For this drawing, see Vitzthum (note 57), p. 84; Annamaria Petrioli Tofani, *Gabinetto disegni e stampe degli Uffizi: inventario*, III: *Disegni di figura 1*, Florence 1991, pp. 355f.; Müller-Bechtel (note 54), p. 146.

⁵⁹ The text of *Il Riposo* was probably complete in manuscript form before 1583, as it does not report the death of the sculptor Stoldo di Lorenzo, which took place in September of that year (Bury [note 3], p. 47, note 1).

Vecchietti suggested that the group might consider the works of art in the church of Ognissanti, Michelozzi refused, stating that he never went in the church because it housed a work by Carlo Portelli (d. 1574) that he found so disagreeable that it threatened to ruin his taste for painting.⁶⁰ Although Michelozzi's objection deprived the readers of *Il Riposo* of a discussion of Traballese's *Annunciation*, the overarching trend of Vecchietti's remarks throughout the first book of the dialogue suggests that he would have been dissatisfied with it and with Pocetti's version. It is worth noting that when Vecchietti drew up his will he charged his heirs with commissioning a painting of the Annunciation to adorn the family chapel in Santa Maria Novella.⁶¹ Scholars have suggested that the resultant altarpiece, a highly traditional rendering by Santi di Tito (Fig. II), should be seen as expressive of Vecchietti's preferences, since it was unlikely that his heirs would have commissioned a work that did not reflect the tastes of its patron.⁶² That Pocetti's *Annunciation* had the potential to offend those who shared Vecchietti's points of view regarding proper and decorous religious images, however, did not deter the confraternity of Sant'Agnese from installing it in their other chapel at Santa Maria del Carmine. This implies that the work met the expectations of the confraternity and that its unusual composition was acceptable or even desirable. To better understand why this was the case, it is necessary to return to Traballese's version.

The unusual features in Traballese's altarpiece – namely the representation of the auxiliary figures flanking the Virgin and the rare “mission of Gabriel”

iconography – have been linked by Nicoletta Lepri to the Florentine tradition of *sacre rappresentazioni*, and in particular to the dramatic performances of the Annunciation. According to Lepri, the prophets and sibyls in the painting's lower zone reflected the speaking roles assigned to them during the staging of the play, and the location of the archangel above Mary evoked the dramatic movement of the actor who played Gabriel in the performance and who was transported from heaven down to the Virgin on a piece of stage machinery.⁶³ Even though the Annunciation play had not been performed with any regularity since the end of the Quattrocento, there was renewed interest in staging a revival of it as part of the festivities held in 1565/66 to celebrate the marriage of Francesco de' Medici to Giovanna d'Austria.⁶⁴ In a letter to Duke Cosimo sent on 9 September 1565, Vincenzio Borghini (1515–1580) suggested that one of the first steps necessary to revive the Annunciation play was to contact the confraternities who had been the traditional stewards of these productions. In addition to including the confraternity of Sant'Agnese in his short list of recommended contacts, Borghini singled out by name one of its captains, Luigi Gianfigliuzzi.⁶⁵ Referring to the stage machinery that was the most important element in the spectacle, Borghini went on to suggest that Gianfigliuzzi “potrebbe pigliare l'absumpto delle cose del Cielo, havendo in mano tutti gli strumenti che sono in essere di questa festa”.⁶⁶ The play traditionally staged by the company of Sant'Agnese in the Carmine represented the Ascension, not the Annunciation, but Borghini was wise to suggest that the confraternity would be a valuable

⁶⁰ Borghini 1967 (note 1), p. 202. For a recent treatment of the painting, Portelli's *Allegory of the Immaculate Conception*, see Lia Brunori, in: *Carlo Portelli: pittore eccentrico fra Rosso Fiorentino e Vasari*, exh. cat. Florence 2015/16, ed. by *cadem*/Alessandro Cecchi, Florence/Milan 2015, pp. 192–195, no. 39.

⁶¹ Bury (note 3) pp. 22, 52, note 53.

⁶² Natali 1995 (note 3), p. 100.

⁶³ Lepri (note 48), pp. 141–144.

⁶⁴ For the history of these plays in the sixteenth century, see Newbigin (note 35), pp. 209–219; Alessandra Buccheri, *The Spectacle of Clouds, 1439–1650: Italian Art and Theatre*, Farnham 2014, pp. 44f.

⁶⁵ Elvira Garbero Zorzi, in: *Il luogo teatrale a Firenze: Brunelleschi, Vasari, Buontalenti, Parigi*, exh. cat. Florence 1975, ed. by Mario Fabbri/Elvira Garbero Zorzi/Annunziata Petrioli Tofani, Milan 1975, pp. 68f., no. I.39. For a translation of this letter, see Newbigin (note 35), pp. 214f.

⁶⁶ Cit. from Garbero Zorzi (note 65), p. 68.

resource.⁶⁷ The group not only had extensive experience putting on the effects-laden production of the Ascension, but it had also recently acquired the machinery that was used to perform the Annunciation, which had been removed from the church of San Felice in Piazza when the Camaldolese monks left in 1553 to make way for the Dominican nuns of Saint Peter Martyr.⁶⁸ Sant'Agnese's acquisition of the stage machinery for the Annunciation play as well as Borghini's recommendation that the group be involved in the 1566 production demonstrate that even at that late date and over half a century after its last performance of the Ascension, the confraternity maintained a connection to its tradition of staging dramatic spectacles, a connection that was not lost on Florentines like Borghini.⁶⁹

How closely the company of Sant'Agnese identified itself with the performance of the Ascension play can be seen in a complaint addressed to Duke Cosimo and sent to the captains of the Parte Guelfa in 1554 regarding the removal of dramatic machinery from the Carmine.⁷⁰ In the letter, the confraternity promoted its history of mounting performances in the church in order to defend its prerogatives and accused the Carmelites of attempting to “spegnere, e levar via ogni vestigio, et memoria di tal festa”.⁷¹ Later in this same letter, the confraternity noted that it had recently acquired the Annunciation machinery from San Felice, and the group assured the duke that “nella chiesa del Carminio si potrebbe fare l'una e l'altra festa”, so that “la posterità non perda la memoria del tutto di così artifiziose opere”.⁷² In light of the confraternity's



11 Santi di Tito, *Annunciation*.
Florence, Santa Maria Novella

⁶⁷ Newbigin (note 35), p. 45. Newbigin noted that one of the *festaiuoli* appointed to oversee this production was Alessandro d'Ottaviano de' Medici (*ibidem*, p. 214, note 18). Although in his role as Florentine archbishop Alessandro later cracked down on secular performances in confraternal oratories, he allowed “rappresentazioni spirituali et edificative” to continue with ecclesiastical oversight and approval. For an overview of this issue, see Adriano Prosperi, “La chiesa tridentina e il teatro: strategie di controllo del secondo '500”, in: *I gesuiti e i primordi del teatro barocco in Europa*, conference proceedings Rome/Anagni 1994, ed. by Maria Chiabò/Federico Doglio, Rome 1995, pp. 15–30, and p. 25 for Alessandro de' Medici in particular.

⁶⁸ Much of this equipment was badly damaged while in storage during the flood of 1557. Nerida Newbigin, “Greasing the Wheels of Heaven: Recycling, Innovation and the Question of ‘Brunelleschi’s’ Stage Machinery”, in: *I Tatti Studies*, XI (2007), pp. 201–241: 211f.

⁶⁹ For the winding down of the performances at the end of the fifteenth century, see Newbigin (note 35), pp. 152–155.

⁷⁰ For a translation of this letter, see *eadem* (note 68), pp. 202–204. The document is published *ibidem*, pp. 233f.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, p. 233.

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 234.

desire to maintain its connection to the *feste* – even if in practice the group fell short of its goals – it is surprising to note that there has been little discussion about the symmetry between the iconography of the two sixteenth-century altarpieces commissioned by Sant’Agnese and the subjects of the plays to which the company staked a claim in its letter from 1554: namely, those of the Annunciation and the Ascension.

A few commentators have remarked upon the connection between the iconography in Naldini’s *Ascension* altarpiece and the subject of the play for which the company of Sant’Agnese had long been responsible, but no extended analysis of the relationship between the play and Naldini’s panel has yet been put forward.⁷³ Nor have Vecchietti’s criticisms of the work been considered in this same light. The inclusion of Saints Helena and Agnes that irritated Vecchietti has already been explained – as it was in *Il Riposo* – as a reflection of the will of the patrons. Vecchietti’s accusation that Naldini painted a Virgin who was far too young echoes criticisms leveled at Michelangelo’s Vatican *Pietà*, which suggests that even though Vecchietti found it troubling, it was not outside of the established iconographic tradition to represent Mary in this way.⁷⁴ Vecchietti’s other point of contention regarding Naldini’s picture was the omission of the two angels who appear to the apostles after Christ ascends to heaven. If the panel is considered with respect to the specifics of the Ascension play as it was staged by Sant’Agnese, one possible explanation for the missing

angels presents itself. According to Nerida Newbigin’s reconstruction of the performance, after Christ has bid farewell to the apostles, the Virgin Mary, and the Magdalene, an iron frame, illuminated and carrying two angels, is lowered to receive him.⁷⁵ This frame was then winched up and away from the scene, where it joined the *nugola*, a larger dramatic apparatus designed to resemble a cloud, at which point both rose to heaven.⁷⁶ After Christ completed his ascent, two additional angels were lowered on ropes.⁷⁷ Unlike the angels who descended to accompany Christ on his ascent, these angels were sent to “greet the Apostles, Mary Magdalene and the Virgin with the words of the antiphon for Ascension”.⁷⁸

If, as seems to be the case from the descriptions in Borghini and Bocchi, the finished altarpiece by Naldini omitted these two angels, it would have more accurately reflected the sequence of events acted out in the Ascension play, where the angels were lowered in a discrete dramatic maneuver after Christ has ascended to heaven, a trip that he has not completed in the altarpiece. In other words, by not representing both Christ ascending and the angels addressing the apostles simultaneously, the altarpiece resembled more closely the events of the play, where these actions occurred at separate moments during the performance. Although Naldini included the angels in his preliminary sketches and the Ashmolean’s *modello*, they are not present in the large compositional drawing by Maso.⁷⁹ This suggests that their omission had been entertained as a possibility by

⁷³ The connection was not lost on the author of an eighteenth-century document in the records of the Carmine, who wrote that “[...] la maggiore e più solenne festa che si celebrasse nel Carmine era la rappresentazione della salita di Cristo al Cielo, qual si faceva con ingegnose macchine sollevate per l’aria, e maestoso apparato di lumi alla qual festa assistevano quei fratelli e contribuivano del danaro, perciò quando fecero dipingere la tavola al loro altare vollero che il Naldini vi colorisse l’Ascensione di Gesù” (ASF, CRSGF, serie I13, no. 7, fol. 394). More recently, Christopher Lloyd (note 23), p. 129, noted that “an Ascension play [...] in the Carmine [...] was staged by the Compagnia di S. Agnese, [and] it is highly likely that this event may have influenced the choice of a subject for their altar-piece”. For more on the author of the eighteenth-century document, the so-called “Fra Anonimo”, see Eckstein (note 33), p. 31.

⁷⁴ This type of chronological accuracy was becoming a concern, however. For an example discussed in Gilio’s “Dialogo”, see note 9 above. For the treatment of this issue by Michelangelo’s sixteenth-century biographers, see *Le vite di Michelangelo Buonarroti scritte da Giorgio Vasari e da Ascanio Condivi con aggiunte e note*, ed. by Carl Frey, Berlin 1887, pp. 44–47.

⁷⁵ Newbigin (note 35), p. 66.

⁷⁶ The exact configuration of the *nugola* has been the subject of scholarly speculation and debate. For a recent overview of the literature, see Bucheri (note 64), pp. 33–37.

⁷⁷ Newbigin (note 35), p. 66.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁹ Cannon-Brookes (note 23), p. 195.

the painter who first received the commission, and that Naldini – whose working methods show a willingness to experiment with his designs – most likely reverted to Maso’s original concept when he painted the lost panel.⁸⁰ This lack of angels might have offended Vecchietti’s sense of historical accuracy, but it linked the iconography of the painting more closely with the Ascension play as it had been staged by the company of Sant’Agnese, thereby enshrining the specifics of the performance in the confraternity’s altarpiece.⁸¹

Similarly, the unusual composition of Poccetti’s panel also recalled one of the other plays traditionally put on in the Oltrarno, that of the Annunciation, for which Sant’Agnese had claimed responsibility after the acquisition of the scenographic machinery used in its staging. An extensive description of the performance of this play was written by Abraham, bishop of Suzdal, who recorded his perceptions of the various spectacles that he witnessed while he was in Florence for the council in 1439.⁸² According to the bishop, the Annunciation play opened with a view of the Virgin seated near a bed reading.⁸³ She was apparently undisturbed by the debate taking place between the four prophets who made their way on to the rood screen shortly after the performance began. Then, accompanied by the sound of cannon fire, the curtains shrouding the upper platform were swept back to reveal God the Father, seated on a throne

and surrounded by flickering lights and boys in white robes, who were singing or playing instruments. After a while, the archangel sent from heaven descended on two ropes towards Mary. After he convinced the Virgin of her crucial part in the heavenly plan for human redemption, the angel was hoisted back up to the platform where God the Father was seated.

When the Annunciation play was revived in 1566, the machinery necessarily had to be reconstructed and modified to fit in the new venue of Santo Spirito, a fact not lost on Vincenzo Borghini, who took the opportunity to suggest pruning some of the lines of the prophets and sibyls, which he claimed “solevano straccare molto gli spettatori et togliuon gran gratia alla bellezza del resto”.⁸⁴ Despite these modifications, the core elements of the play remained, with one of the scenographic highlights being the descent of the Archangel Gabriel from the lofty heights beneath the dome of Santo Spirito to the platform where the Virgin was lost in her prayers. A description of the performance written by Domenico Mellini, who collaborated with Borghini in the organization of the festivities, reveals how much it still resembled the version of the play performed in the Quattrocento. According to Mellini, a stage that represented the room of the Virgin was built beneath the cupola of Santo Spirito, “e sopra il detto palco era fatto la Camera della Vergine con il suo letto, e altre appartenenze, e

⁸⁰ On Naldini’s working methods and his willingness to modify his preliminary designs see Gerhard Gruitrooy, “A New Drawing by Giovanni Battista Naldini”, in: *J. Paul Getty Museum Journal*, XVII (1989), pp. 15–20; Stuart Currie, “Invenzione, disegno e fatica: Two Drawings by Giovambattista Naldini for an Altarpiece in Post-Tridentine Florence”, in: *Drawing 1400–1600: Invention and Innovation*, ed. by *idem*, Aldershot et al. 1998, pp. 150–165.

⁸¹ That the angels were omitted from the final version of the altarpiece does not necessarily mean that Maso and Naldini intended to evoke the play, only that their willingness to experiment with the inclusion and omission of the angels shows that the narrative precision expected by someone like Vecchietti was not at the forefront of their concerns. It remains true, however, that, in its finished state, the altarpiece would have recalled the specifics of the performance for an attentive spectator who was familiar

with the play. In this regard, this analysis reflects Michael Baxandall’s remark that the “account of intention is not a narrative of what went on in the painter’s mind but an analytical construct about his ends and means, as we infer them from the relation of the object to identifiable circumstances” (Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, New Haven 1985, p. 109).

⁸² On Bishop Abraham of Suzdal and his description of the play see Newbiggin (note 35), pp. 2–13; Buccheri (note 64), pp. 29–35.

⁸³ This summary is derived from the translation of the bishop’s description by Newbiggin (note 35), pp. 3–7.

⁸⁴ Garbero Zorzi (note 65), pp. 68f. For a translation, see Newbiggin (note 68), pp. 215–217. The amount of work to be done was considerable; for an account see *ibidem*, pp. 219–223. Domenico Mellini hinted at the extent of the preparations when he remarked that they were using “tutti i

comparirno in su il detto palco i Profeti, e le Sibille a uno a uno, e recitavano ciascuno di loro la loro Profezia”.⁸⁵ After the prophets and sibyls had delivered their lines, the apparatus that was meant to represent heaven and which was positioned beneath the cupola opened and “si vedeva il Dio Padre in mezzo a molti Angeli, e Cherubini, il quale commetteva all’Angelo Gabbriello, che scendessi in terra, e annunziassi a Maria Vergine l’Incarnazione del suo Figliolo”.⁸⁶ At this point, “l’Angelo Gabbriello in una bella mandorla ripiena tutta di lumi scendeva a poco a poco in terra, e sopra di lui poi era un Coro di Angeli, che scendeva insieme seco quasi sino a mezza aria, poi si fermava, e la mandorla, dove era l’Angelo Gabbriello, da per se scendeva a poco a poco in terra”.⁸⁷ After Gabriel arrived on the stage with the Virgin, he stepped out of the mandorla to deliver God’s message.

Pocetti’s altarpiece contains several elements that reflect the details of the performance as described by the bishop of Suzdal and Mellini. While Mellini did not provide precise details about the appearance of Gabriel, Abraham of Suzdal described him as “a beautiful curly-haired boy: his gown was snow-white and decorated all over with gold”.⁸⁸ Because the physical beauty of the actor served as an analogue for the spiritual purity of the character he played, it is safe to assume that the actor cast in the role of Gabriel for the 1566 performance was also a handsome young boy dressed in a luxuriously decorated costume. In his altarpiece, Pocetti gave Gabriel a head of magnificent and unruly curly hair and the features of an adolescent male. The archangel wears a blue brocade tunic with white sleeves under a gold mantle with a white

lining. The action represented in the altarpiece, God’s command to Gabriel to deliver the message of the Incarnation to the Virgin, also echoes the events of the play. In the panel, as in the descriptions of the play by Abraham and Mellini, God the Father is shown surrounded by the divine and radiant light of heaven and numerous angels and cherubs. Below, the Virgin goes on with her reading, apparently undisturbed by the figures crowding around her, just as she did in both iterations of the play described by Abraham and Mellini. Thus, both of the main elements of Pocetti’s altarpiece, the representation of God the Father addressing Gabriel and the Virgin unaware of the crowd who surrounds her or of the action unfolding above evoke crucial features of the play.

Although the Annunciation play had not been staged for over thirty years when Pocetti began painting the altarpiece, he would have had opportunities to familiarize himself with the performance and with the dramatic machinery that was its legacy. There is the possibility that Pocetti had the chance to witness the revival of the Annunciation play in 1566, when he was thirteen years old.⁸⁹ According to Baldinucci, Pocetti – who was “grandemente inclinato all’Arte del Disegno” – began his career as an artist when Michele Tosini observed him drawing on the wall of the church of San Piero in Gattolino as a boy.⁹⁰ Although Baldinucci’s account of Pocetti’s discovery is most likely a poetic invention inspired by the legend recounted by Vasari of Cimabue’s encounter with the young Giotto, his assessment of the young man’s enthusiasm for art was not off the mark. It seems unlikely that the young Bernardino, who lived

vecchi instrumenti e con non pochi di nuovi aggiunti” to stage the performance (cit. from Newbiggin [note 68], p. 240).

⁸⁵ Domenico Mellini, *Ricordi intorno ai costumi azioni, e governo del Sereniss. Gran Duca Cosimo I*, Florence 1820, p. 117. For a transcription of this text, see Elvira Garbero Zorzi, in: *Il luogo teatrale* (note 65), pp. 68f., no. I.39; Newbiggin (note 35), pp. 281f. For a slightly abridged translation, see *ibidem*, p. 216; this translation is quoted in Buccheri (note 64), p. 45.

⁸⁶ Mellini (note 85), p. 117.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁸ Newbiggin (note 35), p. 6.

⁸⁹ Although there has been some scholarly confusion surrounding the place and date of Pocetti’s birth, Vasetti has shown that the painter’s own testimony suggests that he was born in San Gimignano in 1553 (Stefania Vasetti, “La ‘guccia’ di Bernardino Pocetti da San Gimignano”, in: *Paragone*, XLV [1994], 529–533, pp. 154–159).

⁹⁰ Baldinucci (note 42), p. 242.

nearby in the Oltrarno, would have deprived himself of the opportunity to see the ingenious spectacle that was being staged in a church only a few blocks from his home. Even if he did miss the performance of the play in 1566, Poccetti had other opportunities to become familiar with the legacy of the *feste* that had been traditionally performed in his neighborhood. Most notably, Baldinucci claimed that Poccetti studied architecture and perspective under Bernardo Buontalenti (1531–1608).⁹¹ Buontalenti, of course, was the man who continued the tradition of using elaborate machinery to create scenographic effects for dramatic performances after their revival for the staging of the Annunciation play in 1566. Buontalenti's work with theatrical machinery culminated in the construction of the first permanent theater in Florence at the Uffizi in the 1580s, and Poccetti appears in the records of that project, having been commissioned to paint a coat of arms that was attached to the theater's ceiling, which, if it does not confirm Baldinucci's assertion that Poccetti was Buontalenti's pupil, at least places him in contact with the master and his workshop during the construction of the theater in the Uffizi.⁹²

In addition to making references to the traditional *feste* with which the company of Sant'Agnese was associated, the altarpieces by Naldini and Poccetti include other iconographic elements that had specific meanings within the context of the confraternity's practices and patronage. In Naldini's painting, for example, the representations of the Virgin Mary and Saint Agnes reflect the dual dedication and full name of the Compagnia di Santa Maria delle Laudi e di Sant'Agnese. The pairing of Agnes and Mary understandably has a long history within the iconography of the confraternity and dates back to 1280, when

the company wanted to include the two saints in the decoration of the chapel that eventually came to house Poccetti's altarpiece.⁹³ The two saints were also represented together above the door to a hospice for widows that was located north of the Carmine on the corner of the piazza and the Borgo San Frediano and which was one of the company's more publicly visible charitable endeavors.⁹⁴

In Poccetti's painting, the Virgin appears alongside a series of personifications and two angels. The figures in the lower zone of the altarpiece are placed on either side of a vertical axis that begins at the forehead of God the Father and moves down through his leg and the dove of the Holy Spirit, before it passes between Humility and Mary. The three figures to the left of this compositional divide are counterparts to the auxiliary saints that troubled Vecchiotti in the *Ascension*. As in Naldini's painting, the extra figures crowded around Mary in the panel's lower half speak to the specific concerns of the members of Sant'Agnese and the community at the Carmine. The personifications in particular represent concepts central to the confraternity's identity. Charity was one of the main missions of the company, and the pious works of the brotherhood were manifested most prominently in the hospice located on the piazza outside the church. Humility and Purity, meanwhile, were hallmarks of the Virgin, who was born without the stain of original sin in anticipation of her acting as the vessel for Christ – an event that is on the verge of taking place in Poccetti's painting.

The unusual features in each of the two altarpieces that the confraternity of Sant'Agnese commissioned in the last half of the sixteenth century reflected the activities of the company and reminded

⁹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 243.

⁹² For the Teatro Mediceo at the Uffizi, see *Il luogo teatrale* (note 65), pp. 105–131, no. 8; Annamaria Testaverde Matteini, *L'officina delle nuvole: il Teatro Mediceo nel 1589 e gli Intermedi del Buontalenti nel Memoriale di Girolamo Seriacopi*, Milan 1991, pp. 77–90; Carla Bino, "Macchine e teatro: il cantiere di

Bernardo Buontalenti agli Uffizi", in: *Nuncius*, XVIII (2003), pp. 249–268. For the record of Poccetti's commission, see Testaverde Matteini, pp. 64, 220.

⁹³ Eckstein (note 33), p. 55.

⁹⁴ Bacchi (note 39), p. 114; Clover (note 16), p. 617, note II. For the hospice, see Eckstein (note 33), pp. 165–167.

the faithful in the Carmine that the group had a long tradition of staging important religious spectacles in the church and performing crucial acts of charity in the surrounding neighborhood. The altarpieces were commissioned during a period of change, both within the Carmine and throughout the wider Catholic world, and the confraternity must have felt an acute desire to emphasize its longstanding traditions and position within the church when Lena Ottinelli provided the funds for the first altarpiece, Naldini's *Ascension*, in 1563. It was only nine years earlier that the brotherhood had sent the letter objecting to the removal of their dramatic machinery from the church, and – as Ottinelli's bequest makes plain – when she donated the funds to Sant'Agnese, the total renovation of the Carmine's interior was already underway. The confraternity of Sant'Agnese, which had fostered and protected its spaces and rituals in the church for several centuries, must have been sensitive to the potential for a large-scale remodeling of the church to efface or minimize its presence in the Carmine. As a result, the altarpieces by Naldini and Poccetti used iconographic and compositional strategies to evoke and reiterate the important devotional and charitable contributions that the company made to the church and the surrounding neighborhood,

and it appears that the desire to present a continuity with the past overrode concerns about potentially controversial imagery or pressure to conform to new codes of religious decorum. Vecchiotti's criticism of Naldini's altarpiece centered on the notion that the circumstances of the painting's commission will be forgotten over time and that its unusual motifs would become unintelligible to future spectators. Paradoxically, it was a similar concern regarding the preservation of memory that caused Sant'Agnese's altarpieces to include the elements that Vecchiotti found objectionable. The anachronistic saints and the superfluous personifications, as well as the specifics of each panel's composition, were all included as references to the identity of the confraternity, its patrons, and its activities. By enshrining these references to the confraternity in the altarpieces that they installed in the newly renovated church, Sant'Agnese hoped that evidence of their contributions to the vibrant devotional life of the Carmine would live on in the church's new incarnation. If the members of the confraternity ran the risk of rejecting the new standards for religious images that were being negotiated at this time, then it seems that they believed such a transgression was justified by their desire to maintain “la memoria [...] di così artifiziose opere”.

Abbreviations

ASF	Archivio di Stato di Firenze
CRSGF	Corporazioni Religiose Soppresse dal Governo Francese
Sant'Agnese	Compagnie Religiose Soppresse incamerate nel Bigallo: Compagnia di Santa Maria delle Laudi detta di Sant'Agnese

Abstract

During the last half of the Cinquecento, the Florentine confraternity of Sant'Agnese installed two paintings in Santa Maria del Carmine, an *Ascension* by Giovanni Battista Naldini and an *Annunciation* by Bernardino Poccetti. Elements of these works reflected the identity of the company and its patrons and in some cases recalled the traditional dramatic performances of sacred history that were staged in Florence and associated with the confraternity. In Raffaello Borghini's *Il Riposo*, one of the interlocutors censures Naldini's *Ascension*, suggesting that it does not accurately reflect sacred history. Despite the assertion that the *Ascension* was at odds with new standards being promoted for religious imagery, the company later commissioned Poccetti's unusual representation of the *Annunciation*, which also recalls the dramatic performances staged by the brotherhood. That the confraternity continued to embrace unconventional iconographic elements after the publication of *Il Riposo* suggests that, during this period of change within the church, emphasizing the company's long history of devotional and charitable contributions to the Carmine outweighed contemporary concerns about improper imagery.

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