

Giorgio Vasari's *Saint Francis*: An Aretine Fervor¹

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Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), painter, architect, and writer, was fascinated with the image of Saint Francis because of the association of La Verna with Arezzo, his native town, where the miraculous event of Saint Francis's stigmatization occurred in 1224. Also in Arezzo, in the church of San Francesco, the beautiful frescoes of Piero della Francesca's *Legend of the True Cross* were commissioned by his wife's ancestors, the Bacci family. This study discusses Vasari's two types of religious representation of Saint Francis. One type is devotional, as in the paintings of Holy Families, e.g., *The Holy Family with Saint Francis* of 1541, at the County Museum of Art of Los Angeles, CA. The other is historical, focusing on the miraculous moment of the stigmatization, e.g., *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, 1548, in the church of San Francesco in Rimini. Employing mannerist colors to express the spirituality of the event, Vasari created a new conception of piety, where sobriety and humbleness are honored. These paintings reveal the humanness and sanctity of the protagonist, Saint Francis, devoid of any heroic glamour.

Keywords: Saint Francis, Vasari, mannerism, fervor, light symbolism, devotional representation

Introduction

Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), the Aretine painter, architect, and writer, was fascinated with the image of Saint Francis for two specific reasons. One was associated with his marital connection. In Arezzo, the wealthy parishioner and spice merchant Baccio di Massi Bacci commissioned the early decorations for the choir chapel or Bacci Chapel of the Basilica of San Francesco in 1407-1408. After his death in 1417 and thirty years of legal inheritance disputes, in 1447, his son, Francesco Bacci, was able to continue his father's commission. But a severe illness ended his life in 1452. His son, Giovanni Bacci, desirous of continuing the wishes of his father and grandfather, contracted in 1466 with Piero della Francesca to complete *al fresco* the decorations of the choir with stories of the *Legend of the True Cross*.² Vasari's wife, Nicolosa Bacci, was a member of this prominent Aretine family.³

The second reason was the historical association of Saint Francis with Arezzo, Vasari's native town. La

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¹ Versions of this essay were presented to the Society of Renaissance Art History at the annual conference of the South Central Renaissance in Raleigh, NC, on March 9, 2015, and at the International Congress on Saint Francis in Siena, Italy, on July 17, 2015. This essay discusses the imagery of Saint Francis in the Cinquecento (16th century), in particular in Giorgio Vasari's oeuvre, expanding the study of the recent catalogue and exhibition on the Art of Saint Francis at the Accademia Gallery in Florence (June–July 2015) and the writings of Angelo Tartuferi and Francesco D'Arelli, *L'Arte di Francesco: Capolavori d'arte italiana e terre d'asia, dal XIII al XV secolo* (Milan: Giunti, 2015) (*The Art of Francis: Italian Art Works and Those in Asia from the XIIIth to XVth Century*) (Milan: Giunti, 2015).

² See Carlo Bertelli (2002), *Piero della Francesca: The Frescoes of San Francesco in Arezzo*.

³ See Liana De Girolami Cheney (2011), *Giorgio Vasari's Artistic and Emblematic Manifestations* (pp. 425-440).

Verna, an isolated mountain in Tuscany approximately twenty miles northeast of Arezzo, was a Franciscan sanctuary well known since Francis' miraculous stigmatization there on September 14, 1224.

This study examines Vasari's two types of religious representations of Saint Francis. One type is historical, focusing on certain aspects of the saint's life, in particular, in the miraculous moment of Francis' receiving the stigmatization, e.g., *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* of 1548, in the church of San Francesco at Rimini (see Figure 1). The other type is devotional, implying an image for religious worship or an image evoking guidance for living spiritually. This type of devotional imagery considers a combination of narratives such as a holy conversation visualized in the paintings of holy families, e.g., *The Holy Family with Saint Francis* of 1541, at the County Museum of Art of Los Angeles, CA (see Figure 2),⁴ and a devotional scene with donors or patrons depicted in *The Marian Family with Saint Francis and Pope Sylvester* of 1548, for the church of San Francesco at Castiglion Fiorentino, near Arezzo (see Figure 3).



Figure 1. Giorgio Vasari, *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, 1548. Church of San Francesco (Tempo Malatestiano), Rimini.

⁴ Another example is *The Holy Family with Saint Francis* of 1541–1544, at the Davis Museum of Wellesley College (Wellesley, MA), which will not be discussed in this essay but will be explored in a future publication on “Giorgio Vasari’s Devotional Paintings.”



Figure 2. Giorgio Vasari, *The Holy Family with Saint Francis*, 1541. County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.



Figure 3. Giorgio Vasari, *Madonna and Child, with SS. Anne, Francis of Assisi and Pope Sylvester*, 1548. Church of Saint Francis, Castiglion Fiorentino (Arezzo).

The art historical scholarship of Paola Barocchi's *Vasari Pittore*, the Vasarian documentation of collected and annotated letters of Karl Frey, and André Vauchez's recent biographical and historical book *Francis of Assisi: The Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint* assisted this study.⁵ Vauchez's research is partially based on Friar Thomas of Celano's *Life of Saint Francis* written in 1228, after the canonization of Saint Francis by Pope Gregory IX.⁶ Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone (1182–1226) of Assisi, nicknamed Francesco (The Frenchman) and later known as Saint Francis of Assisi, was the founder the Franciscan Order. Francis' aims were to heal the sick, feed the poor, and teach humility; hence the ascribed name of *Il Poverello di Assisi*.

According to Celano, Francis resided in La Verna near Arezzo. On May 8, 1213, a wealthy count, Count Orlando of Chiusi, gave Francis "La Verna", a small piece of land on the top of Mount Penna, as a personal spiritual retreat. Francis lived in a cave. Five years later, the count built Francis a small chapel, which no longer exists. Six years later, on September 14, 1224, at La Verna, during a forty-day fast, Francis received the stigmata. Soon after his death in 1226 he was considered a saint. Wealthy patrons, including high nobles and Church officials, built a series of chapels and churches at La Verna, developing a Franciscan complex, with a monastery and a sanctuary, and thus creating a pilgrimage site.

In his book, Celano vividly recounted the event of the stigmata:

Francis fasted and prayed for a period of forty days at La Verna, with Brother Leo. One morning he had a vision as the sun was rising. In the sky he saw a heavenly form with six wings as a seraph, but suspended on a cross. He wondered what this miracle signified. Moved by the apparition, he fell to his knees with joy. Raising his hands, gesturing praise, he felt sharp pains and discovered that he had received from Christ a stigmata (wounds in the hands, feet, and chest by a lance and nails, as those of Christ during His Crucifixion).⁷

Following Celano's biography on Saint Francis, Saint Bonaventura, a medieval theologian and minister-general of the Franciscan Order from 1257 to 1274, wrote in his book on the *Life of Saint Francis of Assisi* of 1263 a more enthusiastic and mystical passage on Francis' receiving the stigmata.

As it stood above him, he saw that it was a man and yet a Seraph with six wings; his arms were extended and his feet conjoined, and his body was fixed to a cross. Two wings were raised above his head, two were extended as in flight, and two covered the whole body. The face was beautiful beyond all earthly beauty, and it smiled gently upon Francis. Conflicting emotions filled his heart, for though the vision brought great joy, the sight of the suffering and crucified figure stirred him to deepest sorrow. Pondering what this vision might mean, he finally understood that by God's providence he would be made like to the crucified Christ not by a bodily martyrdom but by conformity in mind and heart. Then, as the vision disappeared, it left not only a greater ardor of love in the inner man but no less marvelously marked him outwardly with the stigmata of the Crucified.⁸

Thus, Bonaventura explains that Francis received Christ's stigmata as a divine gift for his religious fervor and devotion to Christ.

A decade after Francis' death and commemorating his canonization as Saint Francis, Buonaventura Berlinghieri (active 1228–1274), a medieval Italian painter from Lucca, completed an altarpiece in the church of

⁵ See Paola Barocchi (1964), *Vasari Pittore*; Karl Frey (Ed.) (1923), *Der literarische Nachlass Giorgio Vasaris* [1]; Karl Frey, (Ed.) (1930), *Der literarische Nachlass Giorgio Vasaris* [2]; H. M. Frey, (Ed.) (1940), *Neue Briefe von Giorgio Vasari* III; and André Vauchez (2012), *Francis of Assisi: The Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint*.

⁶ See Thomas Celano (2000), *The First Life of Saint Francis of Assisi*, for an English version.

⁷ See Celano, *The First Life of Saint Francis of Assisi* from http://www.franciscanfriarstor.com/archive/stfrancis/stf_stigmata_of_st_francis.htm.

⁸ See Saint Bonaventura (1904), *The Life of Saint Francis*, Chapter 13; and for full text from http://www.ecatholic2000.com/bonaventura/assisi/francis.shtml#_RefHeading_Toc351061217.

Saint Francis at Pisa and another for the Franciscan basilica of Santa Croce in Florence. The Pisa altarpiece of 1235 is executed in tempera with a gold leaf background.⁹ A central figure depicts the monk Francis with his gray toga and white cord, showing the wounds of the stigmata. Saint Francis holds a book, perhaps the *Primitive rule* (*Regula primitiva*), a guidebook for the monks of the Franciscan Order, or the book of *Canticles of the Creatures* or *Canticles of the Sun* (*Laudes Creturarum* or *Canticum Fratris Solis*). The *Primitive rule* is based on biblical references to the teaching of Jesus Christ and the vows of humility and poverty.

Berlinghieri's Santa Croce altarpiece of 1235 is also made of tempera on wood with a gold background.¹⁰ The central figure is a depiction of Francis, showing him holding the book of the *Primitive rule* or the *Canticles of the Sun* with the stigmata in his hands. Framing him on each side are vignettes relating to significant episodes in his life, namely the *stigmata* (experiencing the wounds of Christ at the time of His Crucifixion), singing to the birds, rescuing and healing people with leprosy, and defending Christianity at the Crusades.

Historical Representation

In his paintings of Saint Francis, Vasari preferred to represent a single event in the life of saint rather than populate his compositions with kaleidoscopic views of the saint's activities. He painted several devotional paintings of Saint Francis but only one of Francis receiving the stigmata. He noted his *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* of 1548, in the church of San Francesco (Tempo Malatestiano) at Rimini (see Figure 1) in his *Ricordo* 175 (recorded entry):

On January 4 of 1548 Messer Niccolò Marcheselli, a gentleman from Rimini commissions me the following a picture of seven braccia in height and five braccia in length to be executed in canvas where Saint Francis is receiving the stigmata, with the natural depiction of the rocky La Verna[;] so in sky a Crucified Christ with many angels surrounding him[;] and I promised working on it [painting] in his house at his expense with the exception of the [cost of] colors[;] and he promised me with a written note from the hands of Don Gian Matteo of Rimini, Abbot of the White Friars, [to receive] eight golden scudi; I was so pleased for this [amount].

(Ricordo come a di 4 di gennaio 1548 Messer Niccolò Marcheselli gentiluomo di Rimini mi aloga questo di detto sopra una tavola di braccia sette alta et braccia cinque largha da farsi in tela dentrovi quado San Francesco riceve le Stimante con il Sasso della Vernia ritratto natural così in aria un Cristo Crocifisso con assai putti intorno et glio promesso lavorarla in casa sua a tutte sue spese ecetto che I colori et egli mi promette per un scritto fatto per mano di Don Gian Matteo da Rimini Abate de Frati Bianchi scudi ottanta in oro che di tanti ne fui contento.)¹¹

Further documents correct the name of the patron to Carlo Marcheselli and not Niccolò Marcheselli.¹² In his *vita*, Vasari further described the altarpiece as follows.

While the work of copying and revising my book was proceeding I did a large oil painting for the high altar of San Francesco at Rimini of Saint Francis receiving the stigmata on the mountain of La Verna, copied from nature. As the landscape is full of grey rocks and stones and in the like manner Saint Francis and his companions are in grey, I made a sun, within which is Christ, with a good number of Seraphim, and so the work is varied and the Saint with other figures all are illuminated by the splendor of that Sun, and the landscape is in shadow with a great variety of changing colors; all which is not displeasing to many persons and was much extolled at that time by Cardinal Capodiferro, Legate in Romagna.

⁹ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bonaventura_Berlinghieri, for the image.

¹⁰ See http://www.keytombria.com/Assisi/St_Francis_Art.html, for the image.

¹¹ See Karl Frey, *Der literarische Nachlass Giorgio Vasaris* [2], p. 866, *Ricordo*, p. 175; and Alessandro del Vita (1938), *Il Libro delle Ricordanze di Giorgio Vasari*, p. 59, hereafter cited as del Vita, *Ricordanze*.

¹² See A. Tosi (1924), "Le Stimante", in *Cronache d'Arte*, 5, 276.

(Dopo, seguitandosi intanto di scrivere il detto libro e ridurlo a buon termine, feci in San Francesco da Rimini all'altare maggiore una tavola grande a olio, con un San Francesco che riceve da Cristo le stimate nel monte della Vernia, ritratto dal vivo; ma perché quel monte è tutto di massi e pietre bigie, e similmente San Francesco et il suo compagno si fanno bigi, finì un sole, dentro al quale è Cristo con buon numero di Serafini, e così fa l'opera variata, et il Santo con altre figure tutto lumeggiato dallo splendore di quel sole, et il paese ombrato dalla varietà d'alcuni colori cangianti, che a molti non dispiacciono, et allora furono molto lodati dal cardinale Capodiferro, legato della Romagna.)¹³

According to the documentation, the painting was in view on the main altar of the church of San Francesco, also known as the Tempio Malatestiano, until 1809. The original religious edifice was a Franciscan Romanesque church that was renovated by the humanist, theorist, and architect Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) in 1453–1454 as a personal mausoleum for Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta (1417–1468), a condottiere and a nobleman of Rimini, to honor his beloved deceased wife, Isotta degli Atti (d. 1446).

When in 1809 the church became a cathedral, Vasari's painting was moved to a sidewall in the Cappella dei Giochi Infantili (chapel of the Children's Game). In 1924, in commemoration of the Seventh Franciscan Centenary, the painting was transferred to the last chapel on the right side of the cathedral. During the WWII heavy bombing of the region in 1943 and 1944, the cathedral's apse was demolished; hence Vasari's painting was thought destroyed. But in 1963, the painting was discovered in very poor condition in the attic of the neighboring Diocesan Seminary. Three years later, in 1966, the painting was restored by the Soprintendenza alle Gallerie di Bologna and relocated to the main altar of the church, its original site.¹⁴

The painting is composed of an extensive landscape capturing the residence of Francis at La Verna. A series of vignettes on the activities of the monks is surrounded by rocky terrain. Vasari was familiar with the Florentine tradition of depicting the scene of the stigmata as seen in Giotto's versions for the basilica of San Francesco at Assisi and for the Bardi chapel in Santa Croce (see Figure 4). In these depictions, Francis experiences the stigmata in solitude, and the appearance of Christ as a seraph occurs on the top right side of the composition. However, the traditional representation underwent a radical transformation in the Quattrocento, with Domenico Ghirlandaio's depiction of *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata*. In this fresco painting for the Sassetti chapel in the church of SS. Trinità of 1483 (see Figure 5), Ghirlandaio depicts an extensive landscape where Francis' companion Brother Leo witnesses Francis' stigmatization. The action is reversed from Giotto's imagery. Ghirlandaio painted the appearance of Christ with his seraphim coming from left to right. In an interpretation for a marble pulpit in the Franciscan church of the basilica of Santa Croce, Benedetto da Maiano represented a relief panel of the *Stigmata of Saint Francis* in 1472 (see Figure 6). His interpretation is even more dramatic, in terms of his treatment of expression and movement in the human figure and his elaboration on the visual treatment of the rock's design.

Vasari likely studied these works, as he appropriated some of the compositional design, in particular, the vignette composition and rocky formation of the scenery as well as the placement of the figures in the stony terrain. Vasari portrayed Francis as a faithful man, who sets aside his written book of rules, prominently in view in the foreground of the painting, to receive inspiration and heavenly blessing and to accept Christian suffering with love; hence his stigmata.

¹³ See Giorgio Vasari's *vita* (autobiography) in Rosanna Bettarini and Paola Barocchi, (Eds.) (1987), Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori*, 6 vols., issue 6, page 391, hereafter cited as Bettarini-Barocchi, *Vasari-Le Vite*.

¹⁴ See P. G. Pasini ((1968), "Il quadro del Vasari nel Duomo di Rimini," in *Rivista Diocesana di Rimini* 33, 63–64; and Laura Corti, et al., *Giorgio Vasari* (Florence: Edam, 1980), 337–338, for a description on the cleaning of the painting.



Figure 4. Giotto, *Stigmata of Saint Francis*, 1300. Bardi Chapel, Basilica of Santa Croce, Florence.



Figure 5. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Stigmata of Francis*, 1483. Sassetti Chapel, Church of SS. Trinità, Florence.



Figure 6. Benedetto da Maiano, *Stigmata of Saint Francis*, 1472-76. Pulpit det., marble relief. Basilica of Santa Croce, Florence.

Although the painting is heavily restored, it is still possible to see the glowing golden coloration that Vasari referred to in the description of his painting.¹⁵ Vasari depicted two different types of light—natural and celestial. In the background, on the top right side of the painting, the golden mellow sunset light alludes to the spring season, a natural cyclical occurrence. The monks, however, do not respond to this sunset light and instead continue to work on their chores without admiring its natural beauty.

The celestial light appears opposite the sunset. This golden glow is created by Christ's appearance with His choir of seraphim. The spectacular radiance emanates throughout the landscape. While the monks wish to grasp the significance of this moment and attempt to see the image of Christ Crucified, they can only perceive an ethereal light. But Francis blindly perceives and receives with humbleness—noted in his orans position and kneeling stance—Christ's gift, the stigmata. Vasari depicted various levels of faith among the Franciscan monks in response to their seeing the powerful sunlight, that is, the heavenly light. Some, like Saint Francis for example, embrace the vision, believing in its divinity. Others question its divinity and demonstrate little faith, like Brother Leo, who attempts to shield himself from the light; he raises his hand to protect himself from the brightness of this atmospheric light. And still other friars distrust the light's divinity and continue their tasks, hence considering the eerie light a natural, not divine, phenomenon.

In the foreground of the painting there is an open book, whose written words are likely the rules of the

¹⁵ See Laura Corti (1989), *Vasari*, p. 71; Paola Barocchi (1964), *Complimenti al Vasari Pittore*, p. 260; and, Anna Maria Petrioli Tofani, "Due nuovi disegni del Vasari agli Uffizi," in *Giorgio Vasari tra decorazione ambientale e storiografia artistica*, G.C. Carfagnini (Ed.) (Atti del Convegno at Arezzo in 1981; 1985), pp. 417-422. In the Gabinetto dei Disegni e Stampe of the Uffizi, Anna Maria Petrioli Tofani located another preparatory drawing of the monk reclining (Inv. 7058F).

Franciscan order, which provided guidance to human behavior for all friars, an allusion to God's Ten Commandments for humankind. Vasari, however, wanted to differentiate the physical or natural moment, where Francis was reading or meditating on the written words, from the metaphysical or religious experience, where Francis responded with joy in perceiving the presence of God and receiving His gift—the stigmata. In this painting, Vasari depicts Saint Francis' immense and intense faith as a guide and inspiration for the viewer to emulate.

Vasari's devotional paintings on the theme of Saint Francis, although complex in their design and coloration, do not achieve the strong sense of mysticism and fervor displayed in *The Stigmata of Saint Francis*.

Devotional Representations

Vasari's *Holy Family with Saint Francis* of 1541–1542, at the Los Angeles County Museum, was commissioned by the Florentine banker and art collector Francesco Leoni (see Figure 2). In 1541, Vasari was invited to visit Venice by his Aretine compatriot, Pietro Aretino, a satirical poet and dramatist, and by the Florentine banker Leoni. For his friend Aretino, Vasari was to design stage settings for the *apparato* of the *Talanta*, a comedy to be performed by the Sempiterni or *La Compagnia della Scalza* troupe.¹⁶ For Leoni, Vasari was to bring a special gift from their mutual friend, Ottaviano de' Medici, who had commissioned Vasari to paint a copy of Pontormo's *Venus Kissed by Cupid* for Leoni in Venice.¹⁷

In his correspondence and his Ricordo 119, Vasari noted the following.

I arrived in Venice on the 1st of December of 1541, I was a guest in the house of Francesco Lioni [Leone] and Brancatio [Pancrazio] da Empoli to reside there for a few months. [For] the mentioned Francesco, I made a large picture in oils, including an Our Lady with her son in her arms seated on the ground and a full seated Saint Joseph and Saint Francis, costing 20 scudi, [I] received 7 and agreed the rest to follow.

(Ricordo come a diprimo di dicembre 1541 Io arrivai a Venezia et mi messi in casa [di] Francesco Lioni et Brancatio [Pancrazio] da Empoli: per instantiare li qualche mese et a Francesco sudetto feci un quadro grande in tela drentovi lavorato a olio la nostra donna in terra col suo figliolo in braccio et San Giuseppe intero asedere così un San Francesco il quale montò scudi venti di grossi sette dacordo con seco.)¹⁸

The painting was for Leoni's private chapel. Vasari's overall composition of the painting recalls Raphael and Giulio Romano's imagery of this similar theme in *The Holy Family or The Pearl* of 1518 and *The Holy Family below the Oak* of 1518 (both paintings at the Museo del Prado in Madrid, see Figure 7), e.g., a narrative scene takes place in an open landscape with classical ruins in the background. In the foreground, the depiction of the crib in the shape of a coffin is associated with a natural, temporal sleep, as well as with a premonition of death and an eternal sleep. Vasari created a devotional painting where a religious drama unfolds in a beautiful classical and natural setting. Saint Francis, understanding the significance of the presence of the Christ Child and His future predicament, humbly embraces the wooden cross with piety and reverence. Saint Joseph glances at the mother and child with sadness, and the Virgin Mary embraces her Son with tenderness and love. In Vasari's painting, the somber attitude of Saint Francis and his holding a wooden cross close to the body of the

¹⁶ See Cheney, *Giorgio Vasari's Artistic and Emblematic Manifestations*, pp. 52-98.

¹⁷ See *The Medici, Michelangelo, & the Art of Late Renaissance Florence*, Cristina Acidini Luchinat (Ed.) (2002), p. 177.

¹⁸ See del Vita, *Ricordanze*, pp. 37-38; Karl Frey, *Der literarische Nachlass Giorgio Vasaris* [I], pp. 104-110, 125-127, 131-134, pp. 304-305 (Tables 1-2); and Eliana Carrara, Entry on Giorgio Vasari and archival reference (2015): Firenze, ASFI, Acquisti e Doni 67 I, cc. n. n. 8 lettere a Francesco Leoni e Pancrazio da Empoli (30 ottobre 1540–20 giugno 1551), from http://www.academia.edu/1128102/Giorgio_Vasari.

infant Jesus further allude to the omen of Christ's planned Crucifixion. Vasari separates the physical world or the classical world from the spiritual and religious scene with an elaborate hedgerow of ivy, a symbol of perpetuity for its coloration and endurance.



Figure 7. Raphael and Giulio Romano, *The Holy Family below the Oak*, 1518. Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Although it has been suggested that the figure of Saint Francis was a portrait of the donor, at this time I am unable to substantiate this claim, since I cannot find a portrait of Francesco Leoni. However, in studying the image of Saint Joseph and knowing of Vasari's friendship with Pietro Aretino, and his invitation to Venice, I suggest that Saint Joseph might be modeled after Pietro Aretino, based on Aretino's physiognomy as seen in Titian's *Pietro Aretino* of 1545, at the Frick Collection in NYC (see Figure 8). The unusual depiction of Saint Joseph holding a book and resting his foot on a stone plinth evoke the persona of Aretino as writer and the significance of his name Pietro as *pietra* or stone. The book Saint Francis holds is a reference to his *Primitive rule* or *Canticles*.

The decoration of the crib with a lion's head and angels playing with festoons suggests that Vasari attempted to immortalize his patron's family name, Leoni (lion). He employed the animal's head as an allusion to the sign of the zodiac Leo, as reading the name *in Leo*, as well as a reference to the symbolism of strength or endurance,¹⁹ thus praising the family for their spiritual and moral virtue of fortitude, as revealed in Saint Francis' courage but also, in particular, in Christ's valor.

¹⁹ See Hans Biedermann (1994), *Dictionary of Symbolism: Cultural Icons and the Meaning Behind Them*, p. 209.



Figure 8. Titian, *Pietro Aretino*, det., 1545. Frick Collection, New York City.

In the symbolic and ornamental design of the crib, Vasari recalled the Florentine base decoration of the lion's head and angels in the funerary monument of Leonardo Bruni of 1447, in the Franciscan basilica of Santa Croce (see Figure 9). Here the lion's head alludes to the name of Leonardo, the Florentine humanist and secretary of state. In addition, Vasari, in the crib's ornamentation, combined the allusion of the patron's name, Leoni, with the symbol of the city of Venice, the winged lion, where the patron resided, e.g., Lion of Venice in the Piazzetta of Palazzo Ducale in Venice.



Figure 9. Bernardo Rossellino, *Tomb of Leonardo Bruni*, base det., 1447. Basilica of Santa Croce, Florence.

In his *vita* and Ricordo 184, Vasari noted the commission for another devotional painting on the theme of Saint Francis:

On August 5 1548, the Franciscan Superior [of the church of Saint Francis] Mariotto da Castiglion Fiorentino commissioned me to paint a Madonna and Child, above them Saint Anne with kneeling Pope Saint Sylvester and Saint Anthony of Padua as well; to be completed in Arezzo, but then to be taken to Castiglion for one of his chapels in Saint Francis; and for me to totally finish the painting by next October of 1548, and for the expenses of the work, I was pleased to accepted in front of Fra Felice 30 scudi.

(Una tavola drentovi una Nostra Donna col suo figliolo in collo et Santa Anna con quella et San Silvestro Papa ginocchioni et Sant' Antonio da Padova, similmente; da dargene finite in Arezzo, che poi la possa far portare a Castiglioni a una sua cappella in San Francesco, et sia finita da me per tutto Ottobre prossimo nel 1548, et per prezzo di detta mi contentai, presente Fra Felice, di scrudi trenta.)²⁰

In the citation, Vasari erroneously referred to Saint Francis as Saint Anthony of Padua; however, in his *vita*, he corrected the identification, noting as follows.

I painted for Fra Mariotto from Castiglione[i] of Arezzo, for the church of San Francesco in that city, an altarpiece of Our Lady, Saint Anne, Saint Francis and Saint Sylvester.

(Dipinsi a fra' Mariotto da Castiglioni Aretino per la chiesa di San Francesco di detta terra, in una tavola, La Nostra Donna, Santa Anna, San Francesco e San Salvestro.)²¹



Figure 10. Giorgio Vasari, *Madonna and Child, with SS. Anne, Francis of Assisi and Pope Sylvester*, 1548. Drawing at the Cabinet des Dessins (n. 2101), Louvre, Paris.

²⁰ See del Vita, *Ricordanze*, p. 59; and Karl Frey, *Der literarische Nachlass Giorgio Vasaris* [2], p. 867, Ricordo, p. 184.

²¹ See Karl Frey, *Der literarische Nachlass Giorgio Vasaris* [2], p. 867; and Bettarini-Barocchi, *Vasari-Le Vite*, issue 6, page 393.

Paola Barocchi attributed to Vasari a study at the Cabinet des Dessins at the Louvre in Paris (Inv. 2101, see Figure 10).²² The drawing provides greater insight into the painting. In a classical loggia, an extensive landscape depicts the mountain of La Verna. The theatrical curtain wrapped around classical columns separates the natural world from the religious world. The classical decoration of the loggia columns and grotteschi friezes on the base of the column refer to Vasari's quest to integrate the antique with the modern in his composition. The Marian trinity—Saint Anne, the Virgin Mary, and young Jesus—are depicted on the steps of the loggia, while SS. Sylvester and Francis kneel at their feet. Both saints are depicted with books, alluding to their respective formulation of spiritual rules for their devotees.

Saint Francis's book and the lily flowers placed at his feet are visible in the drawing but not in the painting. In Vasari's drawing, the pope is crowned with a papal tiara, a symbol of his religious status, whereas in the painting, the tiara is depicted at his feet, in front of the Marian trinity as a gesture of humility. The pope's action parallels that of Saint Francis, who offers a bird to the infant Jesus, who in turn caresses the saint in gratitude. In addition, as the pope is identified in his papal role, so too is Saint Francis, a confraternity friar who wears a simple grey tunic and a confraternity cord, symbols of humility and mortification.



Figure 11. Michelangelo, *Pietà*, drawing for Vittoria Colonna, 1538-40. Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.

In the composition of the painting, Vasari was inspired by his artistic mentor, Michelangelo. For example, Saint Anne's orans position recalls Michelangelo's *Pietà*, a drawing composed for Vittoria Colonna in 1540, now at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston (see Figure 11).²³ The Madonna's humble attitude and

²² See Barocchi, *Vasari Pittore*, p. 131.

²³ See Alexander Nagel, "Gifts for Michelangelo and Vittoria Colonna," *Art Bulletin* 79 (December 1997), pp. 647-668.

seated position reveal Vasari's appropriations from Michelangelo's *Pitti Tondo* of 1503, in the National Museum at the Bargello in Florence. And the pink and blue coloration of the Madonna's attire are from Michelangelo's *Doni Tondo* of 1504, at the Gallery degli Uffizi in Florence.

There are several associations with the religious activities of Pope Sylvester (314–335)²⁴ and Saint Francis. Both were founders of religious orders, e.g., the pope created the first Christian church in Rome under Emperor Constantine the Great, the first Christian emperor, while Francis organized the Franciscan Order. Both were healers of leprosy, the pope having miraculously cured Emperor Constantine of this malady. The emperor recompensed the pope with a gift, known as the Donation of Constantine, which granted the pope dominion to rule on spiritual matters over the whole Roman Empire. Saint Francis as well took care of people with leprosy during his lifetime.²⁵ Both men loved chanting, e.g., Pope Sylvester established the first Roman school of singing, while Francis loved to chant to the birds and organized in his confraternity the *laudesi*, singers of the *laudi*, songs praising Christ, the Virgin Mary and other saints.²⁶

Conclusion

Vasari employed mannerist colors to express the spirituality of the event in his *The Holy Family with Saint Francis* of 1541 and his *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, 1548. Vasari always embellished his religious paintings with Mannerist conceits, a combination of classical references with integration of nature and fanciful inventions—visual *capricci* (whims) with *disegni* (decorative devices)—which also included an uplifting moral message, thankfulness for the beauty in life. By composing small vignettes about the life and residence of the saint in *The Holy Family with Saint Francis* and *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, Vasari invented a monastic and mystical realm, where viewers experience the gentleness of a simple life as well as the intensity of a spiritual fervor. Further, these paintings reveal the humanness and sanctity of the protagonist, Saint Francis, devoid of any heroic glamour. In doing so, Vasari created a new conception of piety, where sobriety and humbleness are honored.

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²⁴ See Richard P. McBrien (1997), *Lives of the Popes: The Pontiffs from St. Peter to John Paul II*, Entry on Pope San Sylvester.

²⁵ See Vauchez, *Saint Francis*, pp. 22-23. Although a fabricated legend of 750 on the Donation of Constantine, in the *Constitutumm domni Constantini imperatoris*, there is an acknowledgement of praise for Pope Saint Sylvester for having cured of leprosy and converted the pagan emperor Constantine to Christianity. See *Encyclopedia of World Biography* (2005), "Sylvester I" *Encyclopedia.com* (July 24, 2015), from <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3435000185.html>.

²⁶ See Vauchez, *Saint Francis*, p. 315.

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