

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: FRA BARTOLOMMEO AND THE VISION OF SAINT
BERNARD: AN EXAMINATION OF SAVONAROLAN
INFLUENCE

Stephanie Tadlock, Master of Arts, 2005

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Fra Bartolommeo was considered one of the finest High Renaissance painters from the late fifteenth-century to the beginning of the twentieth-century, but there has been a void in recent scholarship regarding his contributions to the period. A staunch supporter of Savonarola, his works are largely religious in nature. Following the taking of his vows, it is believed that Fra Bartolommeo intended to permanently retire from painting.

The Vision of Saint Bernard was the first painting executed by Fra Bartolommeo after his four-year retirement. At first glance, it is a typical depiction of a theme popular in Florence during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth-centuries. However, a reading of this image in connection with Fra Bartolommeo's mentor Savonarola, suggests the friar decided to return to his former vocation in order to promulgate Savonarolan ideas.

FRA BARTOLOMMEO AND THE VISION OF SAINT BERNARD: AN
EXAMINATION OF SAVONAROLAN INFLUENCE

by

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Introduction

Fra Bartolommeo was regarded as one of the most important artists of the High Renaissance from the late fifteenth-century to the beginning of the twentieth-century, rivaling the reputation of contemporaries like Raphael. The nineteenth-century English poet Walter Savage Landor said he would give 1000 English pounds for Raphael's *Transfiguration* but ten times that amount for Fra Bartolommeo's *St. Mark*, testifying to the status of the friar at the time.¹ However, interest in Fra Bartolommeo has waned since the early twentieth-century.

The *fortuna critica* for Fra Bartolommeo consists of approximately a dozen publications from Vasari's *Lives* of 1550 to Gabelentz' publication in 1922.² Following the latter publication, the art historical world for the most part abandoned Fra Bartolommeo until 1961 when S. J. Freedberg addressed him as a serious artist of the High Renaissance.³ Despite Freedberg's attempt to resurrect the friar, a lack of consistent scholarly publications about the artist has relegated

¹ Chris Fischer, *Fra Bartolommeo: Master Draughtsman of the High Renaissance*, London, 1990, p.9. In 1602 the Grand Duke Ferdinando I issued a decree which included Fra Bartolommeo among 19 artists whose works required a special permit to leave the Grand Duchy of Tuscany.

² J. A. Crowe and Cavalcaselle, *A History of Painting in Italy*, 3 vols., London 1864-66, E. Frantz *Fra Bartolommeo della Porta: Studie über die Renaissance*, Regensburg, 1879, Vincenzo Fortunato Marchese, *Memorie dei Più Insigni Pittori, Scultori e Architetti Domenicani*, Firenze, 1845-46, Gustave Gruyer, *Fra Bartolommeo della Porta et Mariotto Albertinelli*, Paris, 1886, H. Wölfflin, *Die Klassische Kunst*, Basel, 1899, F. Knapp, *Fra Bartolommeo della Porta und die Schule von San Marco*, Halle, 1903, and H. von der Gabelentz, *Fra Bartolommeo und die florentiner Renaissance*, 2 vols., Leipzig, 1922 form the *fortuna critica* for Fra Bartolommeo. Vasari is also an important resource for Fra Bartolommeo. He interviewed Fra Eustachio, an 80 year-old follower of Savonarola, who had lived in San Marco with Fra Bartolommeo.

³ S. J. Freedberg, *Painting of the High Renaissance in Rome and Florence*, Cambridge, 1961.

Fra Bartolommeo to artistic purgatory while the artists to whom he had been previously compared, including Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael, have enjoyed continuous attention.

Examining the occasional mention of Fra Bartolommeo in articles and summary accounts of his life reveal that twentieth-century scholars consider him almost purely a Dominican artist who contributed little to the development of the Renaissance. Because Fra Bartolommeo was a staunch supporter of Savonarola, and largely a religious painter, his work has been marginalized. It is true that his oeuvre does not include the plethora of humanist themes omnipresent in other Renaissance artists' works, although Bartolommeo accepted a small number of non-religious commissions, even after he took his vows to become a monk. More importantly, however, scholars should not summarily dismiss his work as simple religious paintings that fulfilled the need of certain Dominican patrons. Instead, scholars should look for the intellectual content and important references within the paintings that motivated so many people for many years to find his works as compelling as those artists that today are labeled the "great masters." Not only did his paintings include rich color schemes and compositions that made them outstanding works produced during a period when the artistic bar was raised to a new height, but there is significant iconography within his paintings that, when carefully studied, suggests there is another layer of meaning waiting to be discovered for those willing to look for it.

This thesis attempts to point out the common beliefs held by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and Savonarola and the effect this commonality had on Fra Bartolommeo's decision to accept the commission of *The Vision of Saint Bernard*. (Figure 1) Ronald Steinberg's research has established a connection between Savonarola's sermons and three of Bartolommeo's post-retirement paintings. This thesis is important because it establishes Fra Bartolommeo's interest in conveying his Savonarolan connections from the moment he returned to painting, therefore suggesting that his desire to include a Savonarolan message may have been a motivating factor for him to return to his vocation after a four-year absence.



Figure 1: Fra Bartolommeo, *The Vision of Saint Bernard with Saints Benedict and John the Evangelist*, Florence, Uffizi, 1504.

The first section of the thesis discusses the fortuna critica of Fra Bartolommeo and his biography. Following is a discussion of Ronald Steinberg's research and examples of the ways in which he connects three of Fra Bartolommeo's paintings

to Savonarola, because methodology used by Steinberg will be relied on heavily when the discussion shifts to Fra Bartolommeo's *The Vision of Saint Bernard*. But before this painting is discussed in detail, an overview is given of the popularity of Saint Bernard's writings, the topic of the Vision of Saint Bernard and other vision paintings executed in Florence. The lives of Saint Bernard and Savonarola are also discussed, as well as their respective beliefs regarding art and how it functioned or should have functioned within the church. Savonarola and Saint Bernard's beliefs had many similarities, suggesting that perhaps Fra Bartolommeo's motivation to come out of retirement for *The Vision of Saint Bernard* commission was prompted by these similarities.

Emerging from this analysis is a new understanding of Fra Bartolommeo's rationale to take up painting again after he had decided to cease his artistic activities. This study also confirms Ronald Steinberg's findings with regard to the numerous references to Savonarola's sermons and beliefs within Fra Bartolommeo's paintings. It is hoped that this inquiry also begins to reveal why Fra Bartolommeo was so revered until the early twentieth-century and why he deserves more attention by scholars in the future.

Chapter 1: The Fortuna Critica of Fra Bartolommeo

The fortuna critica of Fra Bartolommeo consists of publications by Giorgio Vasari (1550), Vincenzo Marchese (1845), J. A. Crowe and G. B. Cavalcaselle (1865), E. Franz (1879), Gustave Gruyer (1886), H. Wölfflin (1899), F. Knapp (1903), and H. von der Gabelentz (1922). Following Gabelentz' work there was a void of publications regarding the friar's artwork until 1961 when Freedberg assigned Fra Bartolommeo an important position in the evolution of Renaissance art in his book, *Painting of the High Renaissance in Rome and Florence*. For the present study, Vasari's work has been used primarily for several reasons.

The information in Vasari's *The Lives of the Artists* has often sparked debate, and Vasari's description of Bartolommeo's life is no exception. Nevertheless, *The Lives of the Artists* is the first written account of Fra Bartolommeo, and it should be carefully considered. Vasari's first edition was published just thirty years after Fra Bartolommeo's death. While preparing this edition, Vasari interviewed a monk, Fra Eustachio, whose time at San Marco overlapped that of Fra Bartolommeo for several years.⁴ Furthermore, Vasari, aside from his usual promotion of Florentine artists, did not appear to have an agenda with regard to the information he provided on Fra Bartolommeo. The relative neutrality of Vasari contrasts with the works of later biographers like Marchese. Marchese's publication, *Memorie dei Più Insigni Pittori, Scultori e Architetti Domenicani*,

⁴ Vasari published the first edition in 1550 and the second edition in 1568. – 30 and 48 years after the death of Fra Bartolommeo.

provides invaluable documentation of Fra Bartolommeo's life, but being a Dominican, and writing a book on Dominican painters and sculptors, Marchese was chiefly concerned with demonstrating a strong link between Fra Bartolommeo's work and his religious beliefs. Therefore, Vasari's account is unique in its relative objectivity. Its suggestions, having been written and interpolated based on known historical and biographical events, should be considered plausible.

The debate regarding the life of Fra Bartolommeo begins with his birth date, which Vasari places as 1475 in the town of Savignano, ten miles from Florence in the territory of Prato.⁵ Knapp's publication of Bartolommeo's baptismal record is a strong indication that the friar was actually born in 1472, several years prior to the birth date given by Vasari. Crowe and Cavalcaselle found no trace of Fra Bartolommeo's family records in Savignano as Vasari records, but instead suggest the family was originally from Suffignano, a village near Florence, where Bartolommeo's uncles lived.⁶ He was born Bartolommeo di Paolo del Fattorino but he was often referred to as Baccio della Porta. Baccio is the Tuscan diminutive for Bartolommeo and della Porta refers to the Porta a San Pier Gattolini in Florence where Bartolommeo lived from about the age of six.

⁵ K. Knapp, *Fra Bartolommeo und die Schule von San Marco*, Halle, 1903. Knapp first published the baptismal record which states the following, "Bartolommeo et Sancti di Paulo di Jacopo popolo di San Felice naque a di marzo 1472 a hore 6, battazato a di 28." Charles Ellis, "Florence and Pistoia Fra Bartolommeo and Fra Paolino," *Burlington Magazine*, 138, September 1996, pp.629. A recent catalog announced an archival discovery which claims his birth date to be 21 August 1473.

⁶ Crowe and Cavalcaselle, *A History of Painting in Italy from the Second to the Sixteenth Century, Umbria, Florence, and Siena*, ed. Tancredi Borenius, New York, 1914, VI, p.50.

Vasari describes Baccio as a boy with a great interest in and aptitude for drawing. Based on this talent, his formal artistic training began with Cosimo Roselli, at the suggestion of the sculptor Benedetto Maiano.⁷ Although the date is not known, we can assume Baccio was about 11 or 12 years old when he entered Roselli's studio, because this is when apprenticeships typically began. Therefore, it is likely Baccio began his apprenticeship after November 1482 when Roselli returned from Rome, where he was working on the Sistine Chapel.

Crowe and Cavalcaselle support Vasari's claim that Bartolommeo worked with Roselli, documenting Bartolommeo's receipt of payment for Rosselli's frescoes in Sant' Ambrogio in Florence in February and May of 1485.⁸ Despite this documentation, many scholars look beyond Roselli for other artists who could have served as master for the talented youth, seeing the mediocre Roselli as an unlikely candidate. Berenson was the first to suggest Piero di Cosimo, senior assistant in Roselli's workshop, as a possible candidate. Baccio's position within Roselli's workshop would have permitted an exchange of ideas between him and

⁷ Fischer, *op. cit* (see note 1) p. 27. Fischer notes that Fra Bartolommeo lived with his parents in Florence, not relatives. He refers to Milanese in Vasari-Milanese, 1878-81, volume 4, pp. 205-207. His father, Paolo di Jacopo, was a muleteer and carter. His mother died shortly after giving birth. In 1476 his father married Andrea di Michele di Cenni da Ponzano. In 1477 Bartolommeo's half brother Piero was born. In 1478 his family moved to the house near the Porta a San Pier Gattolini in Florence.

⁸ Crowe and Cavalcaselle, *op. cit.* (see note 6) p.52. They published three documents showing the payments Bartolommeo received on behalf of Cosimo Roselli from the nuns of Sant' Ambrogio for the frescoes painted in the chapel of the Sacrament. These documents back up Vasari's account placing Bartolommeo in Cosimo Rosselli's studio as an apprentice at least until 1486 when the last payment was made.

Piero di Cosimo, making this a plausible suggestion.⁹ Other scholars suggest Verrocchio, Credi, and Leonardo as possible influences for the young Baccio.¹⁰ It is possible that all these artists influenced Baccio in some way since he had ample opportunity to view their works. Numerous comparisons have been made noting the artistic similarities between various compositions of Baccio and these artists, but beyond style, there is no evidence that suggests Baccio would have trained with any of them. Even Vasari connects Baccio to Leonardo da Vinci, noting that Baccio studied Leonardo's works with great interest after he took leave of Roselli's workshop. Careful study of Baccio's paintings support Vasari's claim. Like Leonardo, his underpaintings included figures modeled in brown, followed by applying a semi-transparent local tone. Baccio also refined his half tones with soft blues like Leonardo, and even unintentionally damaged his work in the same way by using black shadows that ultimately scarred the resulting work of art over time.¹¹ Much of the difficulty in understanding the development and

⁹ Fischer, *op. cit* (see note 1) p.27.

¹⁰ Ludovico Borgo, "Fra Bartolommeo's Beginnings Once More with Berenson," *Burlington Magazine*, 119, 1977, p.90. Borgo agrees with Berenson and supports his thesis by citing the works of the *Holy Family with an Angel* and the *Ponzano* fresco. The documents to support this can be found in Crowe and Cavalcasalle, *op. cit.* (see note 6) p.52. Sheldon Grossman, "An Early Drawing by Fra Bartolommeo," *Studies in the History of Art*, p.13 Grossman cites a drawing of a child's head as linking him to the workshop of Verrocchio. Fahy's theory is that Credi's paintings represented "a storehouse of Leonardo's ideas." Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, vol. 2, London, 1987, p.116. Vasari states that Bartolommeo studied the works of Leonardo as soon as he left Rosselli's workshop. Fischer, *op. cit.* (see note 1), p.96. Fischer talks about Baccio's affinity with Piero di Cosimo, pp. 11, 25. There are more than 1,100 of Fra Bartolommeo's drawings surviving that show an affinity with Leonardo through their chiaroscuro. These drawings show Fra Bartolommeo's interest in drawing primarily as preparation for particular paintings rather than for general exercise.

¹¹ *Masters in Art: A Series of Monographs*, Bates and Guild Company, Boston, 1904, No author listed, but this is based on work by Hermann Lücke.

changing influences on Bartolommeo's style is due to the lack of extant dated works by him.

It was probably while working in Roselli's workshop that Bartolommeo became good friends with Mariotto Albertinelli with whom he entered into artistic partnerships three times over some twenty-three years. Vasari describes Albertinelli as an unruly hedonist and Bartolommeo as a more mild-mannered individual, but their personalities must have complemented one another given the number of times they partnered over the years.¹² Vasari documents Bartolommeo's departure from Roselli's workshop to form an artistic partnership with Mariotto Albertinelli in his home in 1490 or later.¹³

According to *The Lives of the Artists*, Fra Bartolommeo's reputation as a virtuous individual and an equally able artist spread widely and won him many commissions. Vasari's initial characterization of Bartolommeo is one of a rather meek individual with a great sense of piousness. Yet, almost as if Vasari wanted to temper his earlier statement, he provides three examples of Bartolommeo's more confrontational and assertive character.¹⁴

¹² This partnership appears to have been broken around 1493 and resumed after the de-facto ruler of Florence Piero de' Medici and his family were exiled in November 1494.

¹³ Ludovico Borgo, "Fra Bartolommeo, Albertinelli, and the Pieta for the Certosa of Pavia," *Burlington Magazine*, 119, 1977, pp.463. Marchese has documents that document the end of one of these relationships in January 1513. See also, Vasari-Milanesi 1878-81, volume 4, pp. 175-76, 220.

¹⁴ Vasari *Le Vite*, 1550, II: 37-38.

In the first example Vasari provides, he describes the criticism Fra Bartolommeo suffered for his inability to depict nude figures. Upon Bartolommeo's return from Rome, he confronted these accusations by depicting a nude image of Saint Sebastian so powerful that it had to be moved from the church into the chapter house because of the impure thoughts it provoked in the female worshippers.¹⁵ Vasari also recounts the friar's heated discussions with the framers of his paintings, upset that they covered so much of his figures with their frames, and how he ultimately outwitted them.¹⁶ In his third example Vasari addresses Bartolommeo's shift to a more monumental style saying it was an attempt to quiet his critics who saw him purely as a miniaturist.¹⁷

Supporting this critical description by Vasari is a document published by Marchese that records the dispute between the artist and Bernardo del Bianco regarding the price of a commission by Bianco. Marchese's document testifies that Fra Bartolommeo was "concerned for his honor and reputation."¹⁸

Issues of personality are impossible to prove or disprove and, some would argue, have little to do with resulting works of art. However, it appears that Vasari's

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38. The painting was removed to the chapter house and later bought by Giovan Battista della Palla who sent it to the King of France. Only a copy survives in the Church of San Francesco in Fiesole, Italy.

¹⁶ Marchese, *Memorie dei piu insigni Pittori, Scultori e Architetti Domenicani*, Libro Secondo, p.31. Gustave Gruyer, *Fra Bartolommeo et Albertinelli*, p.31.

¹⁷ Ronald Steinberg, *Fra Girolamo Savonarola, Florentine Art, and Renaissance Historiography*, Athens, 1977. p.36.

¹⁸ Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) p.37.

initial assessment of a meek and mild character is the image of Fra Bartolommeo that has been perpetuated over the years, while the qualifying statements by Vasari have rarely been mentioned. The impression of Fra Bartolommeo most receive is one of a rather bland, religious man with seemingly little personality and unfortunately, his paintings have been analyzed in much the same way. That Fra Bartolommeo was religious is not in dispute, because it is unlikely he would have become a monk had he not been somewhat religious. Vasari, in fact, describes Bartolommeo's dedication to his faith while describing the extraordinary Judgment scene at the Hospital of Santa Maria Nuova, noting that Baccio's work remained unfinished due to his preference for religion over painting.¹⁹ To appreciate and understand fully the work of Baccio della Porta, his work should be interpreted with the understanding that although religious, this artist also was proud, competitive, and spirited.

One of Baccio's most important associations was with the Dominican monk Fra Girolamo Savonarola whom he met in 1493, the same year Baccio's partnership with Albertinelli was temporarily terminated. Baccio began his association with Fra Girolamo Savonarola, a Dominican monk from Ferrara who became Prior of San Marco in Florence in 1491.²⁰ It was in San Marco that Baccio first came into contact with the monk and heard his sermons. In 1494 the de-facto rulers of Florence, the Medici, were exiled and Albertinelli and Fra Bartolommeo resumed

¹⁹ Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, de Vere edition, p.833.

²⁰ Fischer, *op. cit.* (see note 1), p.33.

their partnership.²¹ The following year Savonarola lent his support to a new constitution and the Gran Consiglio, a parliament similar to the Venetian model with more than 1,500 elected members.

Baccio's association with Savonarola must have provoked new ideas regarding his art, because Savonarola's sermons often included specific ideas regarding art. He condemned the depiction of pagan themes saying, "Do not let your daughters prepare their 'corredo' in a chest with pagan paintings; is it right for a Christian spouse to be familiar with Venus before the Virgin; or Mars before the saints?"²² Savonarola also objected to the inclusion of non-religious subjects in religious works of art and therefore disapproved of donors being depicted in religious scenes as had been customary in the past.²³ He frowned upon painters who represented religious figures in a similar manner to common men or women. Opposed to the sumptuous dress of women during this period, he found it particularly offensive to see religious figures such as Mary or Elizabeth adorned in contemporary clothing, and he accused the artists of representing vanity in the church by including such items.²⁴

Reacting to this perceived decadence, Savonarola instigated the "Bruciamenti dell Vanità" in February 1497 and 1498. Vasari reports that Baccio, Lorenzo di

²¹ Vasari-Milanesi, 1878-81, vol.4, p.220.

²² Leader Scott, *Fra Bartolommeo*, New York, 1881, p.12.

²³ Marchese, *op. cit.* (see note 16) Libro Secondo, ch. 15, p.424.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Libro Secondo, ch. 15, p.427.

Credi and many other artists burned a number of their drawings and paintings of nude figures and non-religious books considered indecent to the *frate*.²⁵ This “sacrifice to God” of vain items has led scholars mistakenly to interpret erroneously Savonarola as an enemy of art.

Sandro Botticelli was closely connected to Lorenzo de’ Medici. Botticelli, like several others in the Medici circle, was cited by Vasari as having been moved by Savonarola’s powerful preaching in the aftermath of Lorenzo’s death. A noticeable change occurs in some of Botticelli’s work around the year 1500. The *Mystic Crucifixion* in the Fogg Museum and the *Mystic Nativity* in the National Gallery, London both exhibit Botticelli’s move away from the ornamental and courtly style in favor of simplified elements that functioned with the specific purpose of promoting a single narrative. Botticelli, like most other artists who have been inspired by Savonarola were not known to have a personal relationship with the friar, and perhaps that explains the somewhat inconsistent presence of Savonarolan influence in other works produced by Botticelli around the same time.²⁶

On April 8, 1498, two months after the last bruciamento, the monastery of San Marco and Savonarola were attacked by an anti-Savonarolist faction known as the

²⁵ Vasari, *Lives*, de Vere edition, p. 833, Everett Fahy, “A Holy Family by Fra Bartolommeo,” *Los Angeles County Museum of Art Bulletin*, 20 no.2, 1974, pp. 9. and Marchese, *op. cit.* (see note 16) Libro Secondo, ch. 15, pp.428. See also Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17), p.6. Included were works of Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch.

²⁶ Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) pp. 69, 77.

arrabiati.²⁷ Some 500 supporters defended Savonarola and locked themselves in San Marco with him and, according to Vasari, Baccio was among them.²⁸ Vasari recounts that it was during this attack that Baccio, out of fear for his life, promised God that if he were spared he would become a monk.²⁹ As a result of this attack Savonarola was overthrown and burned at the stake as a heretic on May 23, 1498.

Baccio was more fortunate than Savonarola, having survived the attack and its repercussions. According to Vasari, he kept his vow. Vasari tells us in the second edition of the *Lives* that on July 26, 1500, Baccio della Porta entered the convent of San Domenico in Prato as Fra Bartolommeo. However, the two-year gap between the attack on the convent and the date that Vasari gives for his entrance into the cloister of San Domenico raises doubt as to whether the attack was the real impetus behind Baccio's decision to become a monk.³⁰ Vasari also states that with Bartolommeo's entrance into the convent, Fra Bartolommeo's friends were deeply saddened not only at the loss of his companionship, but also

²⁷ Scott, *op. cit.* (see note 22), p.12.

²⁸ Fischer, *op. cit.* (see note 1), p.96. Also Marchese, *op. cit.* (see note 16), p. 23. Marchese suggests that more than 500 citizens, headed by Francesco Vallori, defended Savonarola within the walls of the monastery. In addition there were 200 friars who armed themselves and joined the defense.

²⁹ Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, de Vere edition, p.834 and Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) p.34. The records from the Signoria documenting interviews with all the prisoners from San Marco do not list Baccio among them.

³⁰ Steinberg, *op. cit.*, (see note 17), p.34. Vasari says that the date of Baccio's entrance into the monastery can be found in the chronicles of the monastery in his second edition.

because he decided to stop painting.³¹ Although there is no evidence to disprove Vasari's claim, there are critics of this theory. It is likely that Fra Bartolommeo would have had to cease painting for at least his first year of novitiate as a part of his vows, but the lack of extant paintings from this period suggests he stopped painting for more than a year.³² By November of 1504, Fra Bartolommeo had returned to San Marco in Florence, the church where he first met Savonarola.³³

By 1504 Fra Bartolommeo had resumed painting and by the end of that year Raphael had arrived in Florence. Vasari speaks about the close relationship Raphael had with Fra Bartolommeo, reporting that Raphael assisted Fra Bartolommeo on the principles of perspective, and Fra Bartolommeo shared his expertise in the harmonization of colors. Scholars agree that the two artists were familiar with one another's work, but there is much disagreement as to who was the greater influence on the other.³⁴ Vasari records that Raphael was eager to learn from the friar and was therefore "always in his company."

³¹ Vasari, *Lives*, de Vere edition, p.835.

³² Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, New York, 1987, p.119.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.106. November 18, 1504 is the first documentary evidence we have for his being at San Marco, and this is based on the contract for the *Vision of St. Bernard*. See also Ridolfi 1878, pp.121-122.

³⁴ *Masters in Art: A Series of Illustrated Monographs*, op. cit. (see note 11) p.26. Raphael would have been about 21 years old at the time he visited Florence and he likely would have seen Fra Bartolommeo's *Last Judgment*. After his visit to Florence Raphael went to Perugia and executed a fresco in the Chapel of San Severo. Gustave Gruyer sees Fra Bartolommeo's influence in this work by Raphael.

According to Vasari, Fra Bartolommeo rarely strayed far from Florence, particularly early in his career, but Vasari omitted an important trip that the friar took to Venice in the spring of 1508 for two to three months.³⁵ Marchese's publication refers to the San Marco accounting ledger of June 1508 that documents the friar's visit to Venice to sign the contract for *God the Father, St. Mary Magdalene and St. Catherine of Siena*, commissioned by the Dominican friars of the convent of San Pietro Martire at Murano.³⁶

At the end of 1508 it is believed that Albertinelli and Fra Bartolommeo began their third partnership that lasted until 1513 when Vasari indicates that Fra Bartolommeo left Florence for Rome.³⁷ Vasari tells us that the friar, enticed by what he had heard about the impressive works of Michelangelo and Raphael in Rome, decided to undertake the trip. He immediately received two commissions from the Friar of the Piombo, Fra Mariano. Vasari explains that the atmosphere

³⁵ Peter Humfrey, "Fra Bartolommeo, Venice and St. Catherine of Siena," *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 132, July 1990, p.477.

³⁶ Fischer, *op. cit.* (see note 1), p.28. Fischer cites Borgo, 1976 who documents a June payment from the convent. He also cites Ridolfi 1878 who documents a November payment. See also Marchese vol.2, *op.cit.* (see note 16) p.50-58. Marchese refers to the Libro delle Ricordanze of the convent of San Marco in Florence. The entry dated January 15, 1512 refers to a letter that San Marco had sent to San Pietro Martire, a Dominican church on the island of Murano. The letter documents the disappointment of San Marco that San Pietro had not fulfilled their obligation of payment or accepting delivery of a painting they had commissioned from Fra Bartolommeo. Humfrey, *op. cit.* (see note 35) p.477. Since Marchese's publication it has been known that Fra Bartolommeo visited Venice for a period of two to three months in the spring of 1508. (vol. 2, pp.50-58) Marchese's account of the Venetian visit and its aftermath is based on a number of documents, the most important of which is an entry dated 15 January 1512 in the account book (Libro delle Ricordanze) of Fra Bartolommeo's home convent of S. Marco in Florence. This refers to a letter which the convent had sent shortly before to its fellow Dominican foundation of San Pietro Martire on the Venetian island of Murano, complaining that the Venetians had failed to pay for and to take delivery of a picture ordered by them from Fra Bartolommeo.

³⁷ Fischer, *op. cit.* (see note 1), p.28. Fischer notes there is no documentation for this partnership beyond the contracts that begin listing Albertinelli's name in early 1509.

of Rome was overwhelming to the friar and that being surrounded by so many impressive works of art, both ancient and modern, the friar lost faith in his own ability to paint. He decided to return to Florence, leaving one of Fra Mariano's commissions for Raphael to complete.³⁸

Vasari notes that upon returning to Florence the friar worked for some of the most powerful families in the city, including the Medici, Capponi and Soderini families. However, the biographer omits two important events at the end of his life. In 1515 King Francois I of France invited Fra Bartolommeo to Paris, attesting to his high status as a Renaissance painter. Also in 1516, documentation places Fra Bartolommeo in Ferrara where he worked on a commission to paint *The Feast of Venus* for Alfonso d'Este's Camerino d'Alabastro.³⁹ Other artists hired to decorate the camerino included the highly sought after Raphael and Giovanni Bellini. When Fra Bartolommeo died before completing the painting, Titian was hired to finish it according to the friar's design, demonstrating the high regard Alfonso d'Este had for the friar's work. Just one year later Fra Bartolommeo died on October 31, 1517.⁴⁰

³⁸ Vasari, de-Vere edition, p.837. Fischer, *op.cit.* (see note 1) p.29. Sources give no date for the trip, but Fischer places it in the spring of 1514 or possibly the autumn of 1513.

³⁹ Fischer, *op. cit.* (see note 1), p.30.

⁴⁰ Marchese, *op. cit.* (see note 16), p.160-161. Marchese published Fra Bartolommeo's death certificate listing the date of October 31, 1517. Vasari erroneously reported his burial as October 8, 1517. Vasari-Milanesi 1878-81, volume 4, p.199. *Masters in Art: A Series of Illustrated Monographs*, *op. cit.* (see note 11). Vasari recounts that the friar's downfall began with paralysis of one side, brought on by extended exposure to strong sunlight since he painted beneath a window. On the advice of his doctor, Fra Bartolommeo sought help from the healing waters at the baths of San Filippo. He returned to Florence in the fall and according to Vasari, he ate too many figs that brought on a fever which eventually killed him at the age of 42.

Chapter 2: Savonarola and His Influence on the Works of Fra Bartolommeo

Savonarola had a profound effect on the life of Fra Bartolommeo. Accordingly, it is necessary to understand Savonarola's beliefs and motivations, especially since they are often misrepresented.

Savonarola came to power in Florence in the fall of 1494. His de-facto leadership followed that of Piero de' Medici and Piero's fall allowed him an opportunity to pursue the moral reform he believed the city of Florence needed in order to be saved. His reform began with the churches of Florence, since he believed they had been de-spiritualized by the excesses in art, vestments and other décor.⁴¹

Savonarola is commonly believed to have disliked art. However, Savonarola encouraged the Dominicans of San Marco to create paintings, sculptures and writings to support the monastery financially. Marchese documents the artists' companions in the monastery. In addition to Bartolommeo, apparently there were three miniaturists, two painters, one architect and a modeler of plaster who was the nephew of Lucca della Robbia.⁴² Savonarola wanted the monks to pursue these arts with reserve so that the works of art would not become a distraction to monastic life.⁴³ Savonarola even encouraged those monks who were not gifted in

⁴¹ David Freeman, "The Burial Chapel of Filippo Strozzi in Santa Maria Novella in Florence," *L'Arte*, 1970, pp.109-131, p.122.

⁴² Marchese, *op. cit.* (see note 16) p.32.

⁴³ Ginori, ed., *La Vita del Beato Ieronimo Savonarola*, Florence, 1937, p.52.

the art of preaching to pursue the study of painting or architecture.⁴⁴ In fact, there is significant evidence in Savonarola's sermons attesting to his belief that such art could play an important role in the lives of Christians and that it could stand as an important metaphor in the religious message of his sermons.⁴⁵

Savonarola believed that man's ability to produce verbal and visual images and man's ability to use them to understand God was a divine gift that needed to be fostered.⁴⁶ Savonarola's own use of imagery played an integral role in his growing fame, and the visual arts were important in perpetuating this popularity. By weaving scenes of everyday life into his sermons, Savonarola was able to encourage the general population to think of his teachings as they went about their daily tasks.⁴⁷

In Savonarola's treatise "Il Trionfo della Croce" and in other sermons, he described the power of an image in two distinct ways. First, he believed that an image could help people remember divine things by not burdening the mind with constant sequential development. Second, he felt an image could represent a concept normally too profound to be comprehended in an easily perceived form.

⁴⁴ *Masters in Art: A Series of Illustrated Monographs*, *op. cit.* (see note 11) p.25. This is based on the comments by Gustave Gruyer.

⁴⁵ Steinberg, *op. cit.*, (see note 17), pp.7-9.

⁴⁶ Steinberg, *op. cit.*, (see note 17), p.47.

⁴⁷ Steinberg, *op. cit.*, (see note 17), p.46.

He felt that this one image allowed the viewer to perceive and contemplate it on several levels.⁴⁸

In his sermon on divine love he said, “Love is like a painter, and a [morally] good painter, if he paints well, greatly delights men with his paintings. In contemplation of the painting men remain suspended, and at times in this may appear to be in ecstasy and outside themselves and seem to forget themselves [as corporeal beings].” Therefore, for Savonarola a “good painter” is able to unite the viewer with the deity through the painting, just as a good verbal image from a sermon might. Savonarola was clearly aware of antique relationships, revitalized in the fifteenth-century, between the rhetoric of painting and the spoken or written word as evidenced by his preaching style, his stress on the painted image, and the role of the preacher and painter.

Nevertheless, Savonarola felt the public nature of painting made it inherently dangerous and believed that painting should serve the sole purpose of achieving proximity to God. He was concerned greatly with the artwork present in churches, believing they contained too much artifice and ornamentation. Savonarola thought these qualities were undesirable and damaging because they distracted viewers from the ultimate purpose of the painting, the contemplation of God.⁴⁹ Savonarola was committed to the notion that heaven was a condition

⁴⁸ Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) p.48.

⁴⁹ Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) pp.47-50.

rather than a specific place, and this condition could be reached through contemplation. He believed that the contemplation of harmonious compositions could promote the viewer's proximity to God.⁵⁰ This thought process was similar to the Neoplatonic concept that purification of flesh was achieved through proximity to the deity and through sharing the deity's essential beauty.

Savonarola believed that beauty was a metaphysical attribute of God and that it could often be found in nature.⁵¹ He felt that nature was synonymous with simplicity and purity and therefore virtue and goodness. Savonarola lamented "there once were priests of gold and chalices of wood, now it is the reverse of those ancient days and there are priests of wood and chalices of gold." He hoped that by emulating nature's simplicity, the church would return to its original foundation in which it was ornamented only by its virtues. Savonarola's affinity for naturalism is rooted in theology, and we know he believed in the Aristotelian concepts as evidenced in his sermon on Amos and Zechariah. Like Aristotle, he believed that a supreme intellect guides everything in nature to its own specific purpose or end.⁵² Savonarola integrated Thomistic and Aristotelian concepts of the imitation of nature into a theological system in which production of art served a role for man and the universe that ultimately functioned for a Christian

⁵⁰ E. Frantz, *Fra Bartolommeo della Porta*, Regensburg, 1879. p.89.

⁵¹ Paul O. Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought*, New York, 1965, pp.176-78.

⁵² Steinberg, *op. cit.*, (see note 17), p.55. Steinberg found the quote from Savonarola in *Giobbe II: 135* from *Della Semplicità*, p.226.

purpose.⁵³ He said, “Ask the painters which pleases more, a figure that is affected and unnatural or one that is without such affectation. They will reply that the natural figure is better and more pleasing. Thus rhetoric pleases more when it is hidden, because it is more natural than when you reveal it and force it.”⁵⁴

In one of Savonarola’s later sermons he admitted that he was not initially a good preacher, concluding that his lack of success was due to the use of learned language and scholarly abstractions. He came to realize that in order to reach effectively his audience he had to supplement his rhetoric with imagery. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola admired Savonarola’s eloquence and allusions, saying that his sermon on Noah made his hair stand on end because of its effectiveness in drawing a connection between the story and contemporary times. Guicciardini and Cerretani noted that Savonarola’s sermons shunned artificial language, cadences and devices of eloquence, instead relying on everyday language that was natural and spontaneous and using rich imagery from everyday life. Savonarola’s messages were easily comprehensible through use of this effective imagery that linked the thrust of the sermons to something easily accessible to the common public. His magnetic personality and compelling sermons made Savonarola a very popular preacher.⁵⁵ Perhaps it was this growing

⁵³ Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) p.57. Thomism is the study of concepts based on the teachings of Saint Thomas Aquinas, a member of the Dominican order.

⁵⁴ Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) p.47.

⁵⁵ Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) p.45-46. Savonarola managed to preach for six years in Florence, a city where no one had ever preached for more than two successive Lenten seasons.

popularity that ultimately led to his demise, frightening some Florentines of his potential power over the masses.

Given Savonarola's attention to imagery and the arts, it is surprising that scholars have not looked for a connection between artists working in Florence during this period and the popular frate. For many years, if a connection was explored, it was done in terms of a "Savonarolan style." Many scholars believe that Baccio was one among many artists greatly influenced by Savonarola's magnetic personality. Botticelli and others were reportedly ardent followers of the frate, and it has been argued that these artists changed their artistic style to fit Savonarola's vision, even after his death. When speaking of Savonarola's influence on other Florentine artists we must proceed with caution. Although the idea of a "Savonarolan style" has been perpetuated, Vasari records only two artists (Fra Bartolommeo and Lorenzo di Credi) whose zeal for Savonarola inspired them to contribute work to the pyre of the brucciamenti.⁵⁶ In addition, the concept of a Savonarolan style has proven difficult to argue because analyzing style requires interpretive visual analysis that is frequently quite subjective and for which there is no documentary evidence.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Steinberg, *op. cit.*, (see note 17), pp.7 and 17. As great supporters of Savonarola, Marchese and Villari spend little time examining how artists' devotion to Savonarola may have manifested itself in their works. Instead they immediately jump to the conclusion that Savonarola was responsible for instigating the countermovement to the growing popularity of paganism in the arts. Steinberg, p.4. Authors who perpetuated the idea of a Savonarolan style include Villari, Rio, and Marchese, and all to some extent associated Savonarola's piety to the reformed art style occurring at the time.

⁵⁷ Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) p.58.

In the past, scholars have compared the works of Fra Bartolommeo with other Florentine artists working at the turn of the century, noting that Fra Bartolommeo worked in a simpler style than Ghirlandaio, Verrocchio, and Filippino Lippi. These artists' paintings included extensive drapery patterns with many colors and ornate designs including brocade, landscape vistas complicated with many objects, and numerous other detailed items. Wölfflin noted that Fra Bartolommeo worked in a very different style, instead concentrating on large blocks of color on expansive forms with little detail.⁵⁸ This simple style may suggest to some that Fra Bartolommeo was therefore working in an identifiably "Savonarolan" style. However, these characteristics also fit with the styles of Andrea del Sarto who had no known political affiliations, and Mariotto Albertinelli, Fra Bartolommeo's good friend and occasional business partner, who was a Medici supporter and therefore anti-Savonarolan.

Botticelli, Michelangelo, and Fra Bartolommeo were all said to have worked in a "Savonarolan style." The resulting works of art among these three artists demonstrates the difficulty in characterizing a style since all three artists produced works in very distinctive ways. Ultimately, the notion of a Savonarolan style is fraught with problems because Savonarola was simply channeling discourse for

⁵⁸ Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) p.60., Also Fischer, *op. cit.*, (see note 7), pp.82 and 96. Fischer notes the connection between the Christ depicted in Fra Bartolommeo's early *Calvary* and the philosophy of Savonarola. In 1492 Savonarola wrote the "Trattato dell'Amore di Jesu Cristo," where he describes Jesus as having a sensitive body that is soft and delicate and with a fine complexion. Fischer believes that Fra Bartolommeo was depicting this specific image of Christ in his early *Calvary*. Chris Fischer notes Savonarola's influence on Baccio's artwork immediately following his execution. He notes that his drawings from this period are particularly pessimistic and sinister and suggests that their dreary atmosphere is a result of his religious mentor being executed.

what was already being said throughout Florence regarding humanism and Neoplatonism. The resulting works of art, whether inspired by rhetoric of Savonarola or a humanist, would probably appear very much the same stylistically. Therefore, another method must be established when linking the influence of Savonarola to works of art.

Iconography may provide more documentable connections to Savonarola, particularly through the works of Fra Bartolommeo.⁵⁹ It must first be clarified that the modern notion of iconography, attaching a conventional meaning to a specific object, did not exist in the sixteenth-century. In fact, the word did not exist until the following century, and it had quite a different meaning than it has today. In the sixteenth-century there existed a notion of icon and style that together took the form of rhetoric.⁶⁰ When searching for this combination of icon and style it is appropriate to go to Savonarola's more than 20 volumes of sermons, treatises and poetry as sources. These sources can yield specific results by examining important themes found throughout his sermons that were uniquely Savonarolan.⁶¹ If these themes then appeared within works of art that were somehow linked to Savonarola or one of his followers, a connection can begin to be explored.

⁵⁹ Steinberg, *op. cit.*, (see note 17), p.62.

⁶⁰ David Summers, "Contrapposto: Style and Meaning in Renaissance Art," *Art Bulletin*, LIX/3, 1977, p.337.

⁶¹ Steinberg, *op. cit.*, (see note 17), p.68.

Most of Fra Bartolommeo's commissions understandably came from Dominican churches, monasteries, and convents. It is not surprising that such Dominican saints as Dominic, Thomas Aquinas, Mary Magdalene, Peter Martyr, Antoninus, and Catherine of Siena were prevalent, but there can be no connection drawn between the inclusion of these saints and Savonarola. However, examination of general themes in Savonarola's sermons shows close connections to several of Fra Bartolommeo's paintings, as demonstrated by the research of Ronald Steinberg. Steinberg established connections between Savonarola and three of Fra Bartolommeo's paintings. Because these paintings were executed after Bartolommeo took his vows to become a monk, it is certain that Bartolommeo was familiar with Savonarola, his beliefs, and sermons at the time.

The first of these paintings, *God the Father, Saint Mary Magdalene, and Saint Catherine of Siena*, has an inscribed date of 1509 and was given by Santa Pagnini to the Dominicans of Lucca. (Figure 2) Its large size (12.3 x 7.8 ft.) and its simple decoration made it a very accessible painting for the average churchgoer. However, the learned Dominican is rewarded with another layer of meaning in this painting.⁶²

⁶² Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) p.86 and Fischer, *op. cit.*, (see note 7), p.157.



Figure 2: Fra Bartolommeo, *God the Father, Saint Mary Magdalene, and Saint Catherine of Siena*, Pinacoteca, Lucca, 1509.

Mary Magdalene is immediately identifiable by her ointment jar and Saint Catherine of Siena by her Dominican black and white garments of Penance as well as the book and lily on the floor beneath her. Two angels are holding a rosary across the center of the painting while God is located in the upper portion of the composition in the blessing position, holding a book with the letters Alpha and Omega. In the background we see a distant landscape.

There are three inscriptions in this painting which Steinberg feels begin to reveal its meaning. The first inscription is located at the right of Mary Magdalene's head, *NOSTRA CONVERSATIO IN COELIS EST*, meaning our conversation is in heaven although we live on earth. This quotation can be found in St. Paul's

Epistle to the Philippians 3:20, a passage Savonarola referred to in his sermons eleven times between March 1495 and February 1498. This quotation's placement next to Mary Magdalene is particularly meaningful since her focus was directed to earth until her conversion. Savonarola encouraged his followers to "Go, look at Mary Magdalene who immediately [upon her conversion] had divine contemplation." He urged his listeners to turn their conversation to heaven and away from earth as the Magdalene had done in order to achieve a greater connection with God through this contemplation. To the left of Saint Catherine's eyes is the inscription AMORE LANGUEO, a quotation from two parts of the Song of Songs 2:5 and 5:8. In this case, the inscription refers to the divine love that Saint Catherine had for God for which she languishes, attesting to how man can achieve a greater connection with God. The third inscription on the banderole reads DIVINUS AMOR EXTASIM FACIT, originally found in the writing of Dionysus the Aeropagite whom Savonarola felt was one of the greatest mystic commentators. Combining all the elements of divine contemplation, this quotation allows viewers to partake in heavenly conversation by transporting them outside the world. The location of this inscription in the center of the painting allows it to serve as a visual and thematic link, connecting the earthly and heavenly realms and demonstrating to the viewer how the heavenly realm can be approached. The two other inscriptions have meanings that derive from earth and are delivered by humans, but the banderole caption is conveyed by the divine world and demonstrates the uniting of humans with the divine being.⁶³

⁶³ Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) pp.90-93.

Steinberg refers to the saint's legends to explain their floating position within the composition. Mary Magdalene was said to have been raised to the heavens seven times a day for seven years, and Saint Catherine's early biographies note that she was so preoccupied with divine contemplation that her soul often drew her up towards heaven. The elevation of the saints can also be connected to the Alpha and Omega in the painting. Savonarola consistently referred to the Alpha and Omega (over 160 times) and saw it as representative of God as the beginning and the end, the first truth and ultimate purpose. This usage was not unusual. Savonarola also frequently urged his listeners to contemplate the meaning of Ego Sum Alpha et Omega, saying that contemplation would produce a union of man and God. Savonarola believed contemplation would literally elevate man outside his world as he moved toward God.⁶⁴ He believed that heaven was not a specific place, but a condition that could be achieved through contemplation.⁶⁵

The center of the painting is occupied by Mary Magdalene's ointment jar. The central location of her attribute in contrast to the peripheral placement of Saint Catherine's attributes suggests that greater importance should be given to this object. Savonarola gives this object importance as well, mentioning Mary Magdalene's ointment jar in his 37th sermon on Amos and Zechariah and stating it

⁶⁴ Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) p.89. Alpha and Omega traditionally refers to EGO SUM ALPHA ET OMEGA of the Book of Revelations 1:8, 21:6, and 22:13. See also Fischer, *op. cit.*, (see note 1), p.157.

⁶⁵ Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) p.89.

was representative of her heart, which became cold in her love for the earth after her conversion, relating back to the inscription by her head. In addition, Savonarola mentioned that the alabaster material of the jar was a good insulator and therefore was able to conserve her love for Christ and “unguent of contrition” which further augments the inscription by her head.⁶⁶

Saint Catherine represents the active life and Saint Mary Magdalene represents the contemplative life. Although Savonarola didn’t refer often to this juxtaposition, the theme did appear occasionally in his sermons. The juxtaposition of opposites continues with Saint Catherine being depicted in a less approachable manner as she gazes up towards God, the wind blowing her drapery in the same direction. Saint Mary Magdalene, being a converted sinner, relates to the viewer, looking out towards him.⁶⁷ Saint Catherine was a virgin who had always dedicated her life to God and was of recent origin (she was canonized in 1461) while the Magdalene was a converted pagan, a former prostitute and perhaps the earliest saint.⁶⁸

The learned viewer read this painting in a circular manner beginning with God the Father who is blessing while passing his grace with his right hand to Mary who lowers her eyes and states to the viewer that conversation should not be directed

⁶⁶ Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) p.94.

⁶⁷ Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) p.327.

⁶⁸ Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) p.94.

to the earth but instead heavenly. We move on to Saint Catherine who is in ecstasy because of her love for God and therefore encourages rejection of intellectual and bodily pursuits through love and restores divine grace to its starting place. She is connected to God through her love for him, thereby completing the circle.⁶⁹

Steinberg says, “This tripartite, cyclical concept of giving, receiving, and returning benefits, that is, the power of a god to exert his influence in a triadic rhythm, is an essential element of Platonic theology. This basic and more universal meaning of the painting nevertheless still reflects similar concepts, both Christian and Platonic, expressed by Savonarola in his sermons and treatises. It is the ultimate mystical revelation; the image breathes divine inspiration eternally joining man to his God.”⁷⁰

Steinberg also found connections between Savonarola and *The Mater Misericordia*, signed and dated 1515 and currently located in the Lucca Pinacoteca. (Figure 3) Commissioned by Fra Sebastiano de’ Montecatini, it was produced for the Dominican church of San Romano in Lucca.⁷¹ The patron is identified with the Montecatini arms in the dado below the Madonna along with

⁶⁹ Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) p.94.

⁷⁰ Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) p.95. See Steinberg’s footnotes 52 and 53 for further discussion of connection with Platonic theory.

⁷¹ Fischer, *op. cit.*, (see note 1), p.300. Fra Sebastiano de’ Montecatini probably commissioned this painting under the advice of Fra Sante Pagnini who was familiar with Fra Bartolommeo’s work from San Marco.

the initials F.S.O.P. for Frater Sebastianus Ordinis Praedicatorum. In the lower right of the composition is a Dominican saint represented by Fra Sebastiano who is pointing two men from the Montecatini family towards the Virgin.⁷²



Figure 3: Fra Bartolommeo, *Mater Misericordia*, Pinacoteca, Lucca, 1515.

Above the Virgin, Christ is depicted with outstretched arms, almost like a large bird demonstrating its full wingspan. In front of his body is a plaque reading “MISEREOR SUP[ER] TURBAM. The inscription on the dado below the Virgin reads “M[ATE]R PIETATIS ET MI[SERICORDIA]E. This work falls into the typical misericordia tradition if one excluded the Christ above, the inscription on the plaque in front of him, and the dark cloud in the background.⁷³

⁷² The other self portrait is in the *Gran Consiglio Altarpiece*.

⁷³ Steinberg, *op. cit.*, (see note 17), p.83.

Steinberg connects these three uncharacteristic items for the traditional misericordia painting with Savonarola's sermons. The key to the painting lies in the inscription MISEREOR SUP[ER]TURBAM which is from St. Mark 8:2 and refers to Christ's compassion for the masses. It extends the meaning of a traditional misericordia painting by representing the deity's compassion for mankind through the Virgin as well as Christ.⁷⁴ Christ's outstretched arms could visually represent one of Savonarola's favorite passages from Psalm 91

He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.

Perhaps Fra Bartolommeo was drawing from another of Savonarola's favorite passages from St. Matthew 23:37

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not.⁷⁵

The unusual dark cloud in the background was probably used to refer to Savonarola's sermons that claim that those who are faithful despite their trials,

⁷⁴ Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) p.83.

⁷⁵ Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) p.85.

and those who search for Christ's compassion and the Virgin's mercy, will be protected from the dark cloud and be among the chosen.⁷⁶

The final painting Steinberg examined using this method was *Madonna and Child with Saint Anne and Other Saints*, the altarpiece for the Sala del Gran Consiglio in the Signoria. (Figure 4) Fra Bartolommeo received the commission on November 26, 1510 from Pier Soderini, a staunch supporter of Savonarola and Gonfaloniere.⁷⁷



Figure 4: Fra Bartolommeo, *Madonna and Child with Saint Anne and Other Saints*, San Marco Museum, Florence, commissioned 1510.

⁷⁶ Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) p.85. Steinberg says, “Although none of the images or inscriptions in the painting has its original source in Savonarola’s sermons, it cannot be merely coincidental that their combination into a total and cohesive image has a close parallel in the imagery and quotations used by Savonarola over and over again to express one of his primary homiletic subjects. “

⁷⁷ Marchese, *op. cit.* (see note 16) documenti 5 and 6 vol ii. p.603 and Leader *op. cit.* (see note 22), p.46.

The Sala was an important project for Savonarola once he came into power and in July 1495 he ordered that work on the Duomo, still under construction, should be halted and all the effort should be directed to the Sala del Gran Consiglio. He convinced everyone this would be the new center of God's control on earth, thereby transferring power from the church to a government building and in turn legitimizing his claim to power.

Steinberg refers to Savonarola's sermons on Haggai delivered on December 14, 1494. Within these sermons Savonarola likened himself to Haggai, whose prophecies, instigated by Jerusalem's delays in constructing the Temple, resulted in Jerusalem losing favor with God until the temple was completed. As Savonarola was playing the role of Haggai, he was sending a clear message to the Florentines that the Sala of the Gran Consiglio must be built or Florence would lose favor with God, just as Jerusalem had. Savonarola repeated this theme seven times in his sermon on December 28th and gradually convinced the Florentines that their city had been divinely chosen and that God had designated Christ as their king and therefore they needed to lead this renovation of which the Sala del Gran Consiglio was an integral part. Savonarola's first reference to the Sala was in a sermon delivered May 1, 1495 when he said, "I tell you that this Consiglio is your salvation, and that you should build the Sala."⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) p.98. On July 5, 1495 his sermon was more emphatic in its demands saying that the Sala should be built so no one could try and destroy the Consiglio. On July 12th and 28th he continued urging the public to support the building of the Sala.

Savonarola's sermons on Job in March and April of 1495 continued the theme of Christ as king of Florence. It was repeated again with more intensity in February, March and April of 1496 during his Amos and Zechariah sermons, when he asked his congregation to accept Christ as their king. The culmination took place on March 28th on Palm Sunday when Savonarola called on his followers to process through Florence. Reportedly 5,000 boys and girls with olive branches mimicked Christ's entry into Jerusalem by following a canopied tabernacle, thereby likening Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem to his assumption of the throne in Florence. In early October the substructure of the Sala was completed. By mid-1497, the ceiling was under construction prompting it to be said that angels had been involved in the construction since it had moved along so quickly.⁷⁹ His sermons on Ruth and Micah from May to November of 1496 perpetuated the utilization of other forms of rhetoric, such as composing a poem on the subject and setting it to the music of a popular song.⁸⁰ He then began a series of sermons on Ezekiel on November 27, 1496. The sixth sermon of this series was delivered to the Signoria (at their request) and the theme was Justice. He used Psalm 84 as the text instead of Ezekiel which begins, "Lord thou has been favorable to thy land: Thou hast forgiven the iniquity of thy people." Savonarola used this as a metaphor as he had with other works. This proved to be very important for the resulting work that Fra Bartolommeo produced for the Sala.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) pp.97-98.

⁸⁰ Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) p.97. On March 8 1496 Luca Landucci said there were 15,000 people in the cathedral to hear the sermons.

⁸¹ Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) p.99.

The painting in the Sala is unusual because of the prominence of Saint Anne in the upper section of the painting. The Madonna enthroned is in front of her and the Trinity is represented by three conjoined heads above. There is no other known image of this type, and the inclusion of Saint Anne in this format references the holy lineage of Christ with Anne as the corporeal source of Mary. This theme was important for the Dominicans who believed, following Saint Thomas Aquinas, that the Virgin was sanctified in Anne's womb and the Virgin's purity therefore made the entry of Christ into the world a possibility. Steinberg says, "Justice's descent to the prepared Sala, from her heavenly dwelling can be analogous to the Son of God's descent to earth by His conception in the womb of the Virgin, which was made a pure place by her sanctification in Anne's womb."⁸²

Steinberg's interpretation is strengthened by another of Savonarola's sermons delivered during Advent in 1493 where he described the nativity as having four women standing at each corner representing Mercy, Truth, Peace, and Justice. He said that these qualities were brought to earth through the incarnation of Christ and that they arrived on earth via the bosom of God the Father, thus illustrating that Savonarola interpreted this psalm twice in a manner that could be applied to the Sala and the altarpiece.⁸³

⁸² Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) pp.100-102.

⁸³ Steinberg, *op. cit.* (see note 17) p.102.

Despite claims that numerous Florentine painters were influenced by Savonarola, Fra Bartolommeo is the only painter known to have had a personal relationship with the famous frate. Steinberg has linked Savonarola's rhetoric with three of Fra Bartolommeo's paintings. In connecting unusual aspects of the works with common themes in Savonarola's sermons, he presents a convincing case for the link between Savonarola, Fra Bartolommeo and the resulting work of art. This theory will be applied to one of Fra Bartolommeo's little studied works, *The Vision of Saint Bernard*. Examination of this painting in this new context allows for speculation why the friar was prompted out of retirement for this particular work of art.

Chapter 3: The Life of Bernard of Clairvaux

Bernard of Clairvaux, who later became Saint Bernard, was born in Fontaines-les-Dijon in 1090 to a noble family.⁸⁴ While receiving his liberal arts education at the School of Canons Secular at Châtillon-sur-Saône he resisted a number of sexual temptations, prompting an epiphany, which led him to become a monk.⁸⁵ At approximately 22 years of age he gave himself to God and entered the monastery at the cloister of Cîteaux with about 30 of his friends and family whom he had persuaded to join him.

Cîteaux was founded just twelve years earlier and was known for its austere nature.⁸⁶ It was these austerities that Bernard seemed to embrace, becoming known over time for the consistently severe demands that he made of himself and others.⁸⁷ Three years after entering Cîteaux, in 1115, Bernard became the first abbot of Val d'Absinthe at Clairvaux, a new chapter he founded with several other monks.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Melinda Kay Leshner, *The Vision of Saint Bernard and the Chapel of the Priors: Private and Public Images of Bernard of Clairvaux in Renaissance Florence*, Columbia University PhD, 1979, Copyright 1981, University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, MI, p.4.

⁸⁵ Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84), p.5. The sexual temptations he experienced are described in the *Vita Prima*.

⁸⁶ Jean Leclercq, *Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercian Spirit*, translated by Claire Lavoie, Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1976, p.14. The Order was started in 1098 by St. Stephen Harding, St. Robert and St. Alberic.

⁸⁷ Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84), p.8.

⁸⁸ Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84), p.5.

Much of Bernard's life is known to us through the *Vita Prima*, a compilation of stories from several of Bernard's followers collected throughout Bernard's lifetime. Geoffrey of Auxerre, William of Saint Thierry, and Arnaud de Bonneval all wrote portions of the *Vita Prima*, a book dedicated to Bernard's devotion to quality of monastic life in the church. The *Vita Prima* describes nine visions that Saint Bernard experienced, including one in which the Virgin appeared to him while he was writing a sermon.⁸⁹

The Cistercian order emphasized a simple life with little ostentation. The austerity of their order was in direct opposition to the Benedictine order, which enjoyed everything from extravagant liturgical furnishings to elaborate architecture. The Benedictines felt that the use of material objects could assist with divine contemplation as well as financially represent their commitment and loyalty to God and the saints. Bernard reacted strongly to the wealth that existed within the monastic field. He felt that monks were influenced too greatly by the outside world and that monks had to re-align themselves with God.

Bernard focused on the relationship of man to God in several of his treatises.

While abbot of Clairvaux, he wrote one of the most famous monastic treatises of the Middle Ages, the *Apologia ad Guillelmum abbatem*, in circa 1124-25. The

⁸⁹ Leclercq, *op. cit.* (see note 86), p.10 and Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84), p. 4 and 12. The *Vita Prima* relates nine visions of Bernard. In addition to these nine, there are numerous other visions recorded. For example, the Spanish monk, Herbert wrote *Liber de miraculis* and recorded three other visions experienced by Bernard. Herbert's *Exordium magnum cisterciense* of 1178, *Tertia Vita* by Gaufrido and the *Vita Bernardi* by John the Hermit all relate additional visions by Bernard.

Apologia examines Bernard's notion of monastic excess and divides his argument into two sections, "small things" and "things of greater importance." Small things included excess in clothing, drink, and food. Things of greater importance referred to the problem Bernard had with what he considered to be superfluous monastic art.⁹⁰

Chapters 28-29 of the *Apologia* have been used by art historians such as Panofsky to gain a greater understanding of the medieval attitude toward the art of the period. In this section of the treatise, Bernard laments that too much of the Church's money is spent decorating its walls. He sees little use for decoration in a monastic setting. However, he concedes that these decorations have a benefit in their capacity to instruct and guide, especially those who are illiterate.⁹¹ Bernard says:

"For certainly bishops have one kind of business, and monks another. We know that they [the bishops] are responsible for both the wise and the foolish, they stimulate the devotion of a carnal people with material ornaments because they cannot do so with spiritual ones. But we [monks] who have withdrawn from the people, we who have left behind all that is precious and beautiful in this world for the sake of Christ, ..., whose devotion do we strive to excite in all this? ...is it that we have mingled with the Gentiles, perhaps we have also adopted their ways and even serve their idols."⁹²

⁹⁰ Conrad Rudolph, *The "Things of Greater Importance": Bernard of Clairvaux's Apologia and the Medieval Attitude Toward Art*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1990, p.6.

⁹¹ Rudolph *op. cit.* (see note 90), p.11. "The Church radiant in its walls and destitute in its poor. It dresses its stones in gold and abandons its children naked."

⁹² Rudolph, *op. cit.* (see note 90), pp.279-281.

Meyer Schapiro, a Romanesque sculpture scholar, purports that Bernard's real objection lay in the pagan subject matter which Bernard viewed as a threat to Christianity.⁹³

Bernard was also an author of practical advice on governing the family and management of the papacy.⁹⁴ In addition to mending a rift between the King of France, the Bishop of Paris and the Archbishop of Sens in 1127, Bernard also played an integral role in resolving the papal schism between Pope Innocent II and the anti-pope Anacletus II in 1130. Due to his involvement, he has been referred to as "pater patria" and he was even mentioned in a Roman sacred guide to feast days as "pacificatore del mondo, e padre della patria."⁹⁵ Therefore, over time Bernard has become known as a symbol of peace and justice, a just symbol for the Priors who were responsible for important decisions in the Florentine government.⁹⁶ His reputation as a *pacifactor* grew even after his death due to a popular letter called *Lettera a Raimondo* or *Dottrina del vivere* circulated from the thirteenth to sixteenth-centuries.⁹⁷ This doctrine, or letter, albeit spurious, enhanced Bernard's reputation as a pious and just man due to the sound advice he

⁹³ Rudolph, *op. cit.* (see note 90) p.9.

⁹⁴ Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84) p.120.

⁹⁵ Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84) pp.6 and 70. During the papal schism Bernard helped to win France over to Innocent's side by speaking in his favor at the meeting Louis VI called at Etampes. In 1133 Innocent called on him to "enlist the aid of Milan, Genoa and Pisa." Two years later Innocent called on him again to visit Lombardy and finally in 1138 Bernard met with the main protectorate of Anacletus II, King Roger of Sicily, in Rome. While in Rome, Anacletus died and his successor Victor quickly withdrew his claim to the papal throne.

⁹⁶ Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84) p.72.

⁹⁷ Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84) p.73. Also called *Epistola de cura et modo rei familiaris*.

gave a nobleman on how to conduct an honorable life with a wealthy household and a family. Bernard, according to character, advised the man to maintain a house of order by ruling it astutely and without ostentation.”⁹⁸

Bernard authored the treatise *De consideratione* between 1148 and 1153 for the monk and former follower of St. Bernard, Bernard of Pisa, who became Pope Eugenius III in 1145. Saint Bernard became increasingly concerned with the responsibility of the papacy and in an effort to assist Eugenius III, wrote this five-part treatise that stipulated his requirements for an ideal papal leadership. The lessons within the text were easily transferable to any secular ruler and therefore the text became popular in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance. Unfortunately, Pope Eugenius III benefited little from the treatise that was written for him, since he died in 1153, shortly after receiving the document.⁹⁹

Bernard also wrote several works on the Virgin Mary.¹⁰⁰ He is given credit for assisting in the development of the cult of the Virgin Mary whom he felt acted as the intercessor between man and God or Christ. Bernard was impressed by her acceptance of the Incarnation and felt her virtue made her worthy of emulation.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84) p.73.

⁹⁹ Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84) p.75.

¹⁰⁰ Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84), p.10. *In laudibus Virginis Matris (Missus est angelus)* is a four part work on the Virgin Mary that is based on Saint Bernard's vision of Christ that he had as a child on Christmas Eve. This is described in the *Vita Prima*.

¹⁰¹ Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84), p.10.

Bernard died while at Clairvaux on August 20, 1153. He was canonized by Pope Alexander III on January 18, 1174 and in 1201, he was given the title of “Doctor Egregius” by Innocent III.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84), p.6.

Chapter 4: Bernard as a Topic in Florence

The writings of Saint Bernard resonated with people in the late Middle Ages as evidenced by the numerous transcriptions of his work. In fact, his work was transcribed more often during this period than any other Christian author with the exception of the Church Fathers, the first teachers of Christianity.¹⁰³ Testifying to Bernard's increased popularity, Dante chose Bernard as the last guide to the heavenly vision of Mary in *The Divine Comedy* and Petrarch dedicated a chapter of *De Vita Solitaria* to the saint. Ambrogio Traversari, a famous Greek scholar, recommended reading the *Song of Songs* sermons by Bernard and even suggested that *De consideratione* be on Pope Eugenius IV's reading list.¹⁰⁴ Even the library of Pico della Mirandola, the famous Neoplatonist and humanist, boasted eight Bernardine or pseudo-Bernardine works.¹⁰⁵ Therefore it seems that at this particular moment in time, the Florentines related to Bernard and his writings in a more intimate way than they had previously.

Despite the increased popularity that his texts enjoyed during the Middle Ages, Bernard did not always benefit from such recognition in Renaissance Florence.

¹⁰³ Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84), pp.20-21. Leshner records that Bernardine or pseudo-Bernardine works in the Biblioteca Laurenziana, Biblioteca Riccardiana and the Biblioteca Nazionale in Florence demonstrate the increase in popularity of his writings from two texts in the twelfth-century to 61 texts in the fifteenth-century. In addition Leopold Janauschek, *Bibliographia Bernardina*, Vienna, 1891, pp.7-77. Janauschek shows between c.1471-1500 there were 38 editions of Bernard's texts printed in Italy.

¹⁰⁴ Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84) p.26.

¹⁰⁵ Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84) p.27. This information is according to an inventory of the library conducted in 1498.

He had only three churches or chapels dedicated to him in Renaissance Florence.¹⁰⁶ In addition, the Cistercians, Bernard's order, did not enjoy great popularity, having only two Cistercian churches within the walls of Florence.¹⁰⁷

Not only was Saint Bernard an infrequent topic of paintings, his representation within paintings was not any more common. In fact, Burke shows that of 1,796 religious paintings of the Renaissance period, Bernard shares tenth place with Saint Michael in number of appearances.¹⁰⁸ However, for a brief period of time in Renaissance Florence this changed.

The Vision of Saint Bernard Theme within Florence

Berenson was the first art historian to recognize the importance of the theme of the vision of Saint Bernard, and he stated that the topic warranted a monograph.¹⁰⁹ The vision of Saint Bernard is a theme almost unique to Florence and rarely seen outside Tuscany during the Renaissance. Leshner's research documents the theme's popularity from 1490-1530 in Florence, but she found no examples of the theme painted in Florence from the 1530s until the seventeenth-century and found

¹⁰⁶ Arnoldo Cochhi, *Le Chiese di Firenze dal Secolo IV al secolo XX*, Florence, 1903. Also Leshner, p.68. The three churches were S. Bernardo in Via Porcia in the quartiere of Santa Maria Novella, San Bernardo in Palation, a chapel in the Palazzo Vecchio, and San Bernardo Abbate in Via Cafaggiolo which was sold to the monks of Santa Maria degli Angeli in 1398.

¹⁰⁷ Cocchi, *op. cit.* (see note 106). The two Cistercian churches were San Frediano in Cestello and Santa Maria della Pace outside the gate of San Pier Gattolino. In addition, the Cistercians received the monastery of San Salvatore at Settimo in 1236 as a gift from Pope Gregory IX.

¹⁰⁸ Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84) p.70.

¹⁰⁹ Berenson, *Drawings of the Florentine Painters*, 2nd edition, Chicago 1936, I, p.147.

only three versions of the topic outside of Florence during the Renaissance.¹¹⁰

The subject matter held particular importance for Florentines in the earlier period because it served as the subject of altarpieces, particularly altarpieces commissioned by patrons bearing the name Bernard. It was also important because of Bernard's role as patron of the Cappella dei Priori (Chapel of Priors) of the Florentine republican government located in the newly constructed Palazzo Vecchio. His selection as the patron saint was probably largely due to his reputation as a peacemaker and arbitrator.

A typical vision of Saint Bernard painting depicts the saint interrupted while writing in his manuscript by a vision of the Madonna, who is positioned near him. The lack of visual prototypes suggests that the first Florentines depicting the topic did so based on literary sources. Investigation of manuscript illuminations shows only four manuscripts from the fifteenth-century that render this topic, but these illustrations were executed after the first Florentine painting and therefore it was impossible that they served as the initial prototype.¹¹¹

The First Example: The Master of Rinuccini Chapel

The first extant example of the Vision of St. Bernard is attributed to the Master of the Rinuccini Chapel and is dated in the 1370s. (Figure 5) Lack of evidence

¹¹⁰ Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84) pp. 1, 3 and 36. Leshner notes that she was looking for the vision theme within altarpieces, predellas, lunettes, and chapels. The three versions she found were a predella by Giovanni da Milano for an altar in Prato, a predella by Giovanni di Paolo for an altar in San Galgano (a Cistercian monastery in Siena), and a fresco by Bartolommeo della Gatta, painted in the 1470s in Arezzo.

¹¹¹ Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84) p.38.

precludes a specific date being assigned and leaves uncertain whether the work was made originally for the monastery where it was found or was given to the Benedictines at a later date.¹¹² The floating Virgin is probably taken from a treatise erroneously attributed to Saint Bernard, titled *Liber de passione Christi et doloribus et planctibus matris ejus* (also called *Planctus sancta marie virginis* or Lamentation of the Sacred Virgin Mary). This treatise gained significant popularity in the thirteenth to the fifteenth-centuries and seemed to serve as an important iconographic resource for this painting.¹¹³ According to this text, Bernard was ordered by the Virgin Mary to transcribe with his tears her emotions of grief regarding Christ's death and the story of his Passion since she was no longer able to cry due to her glorification.¹¹⁴

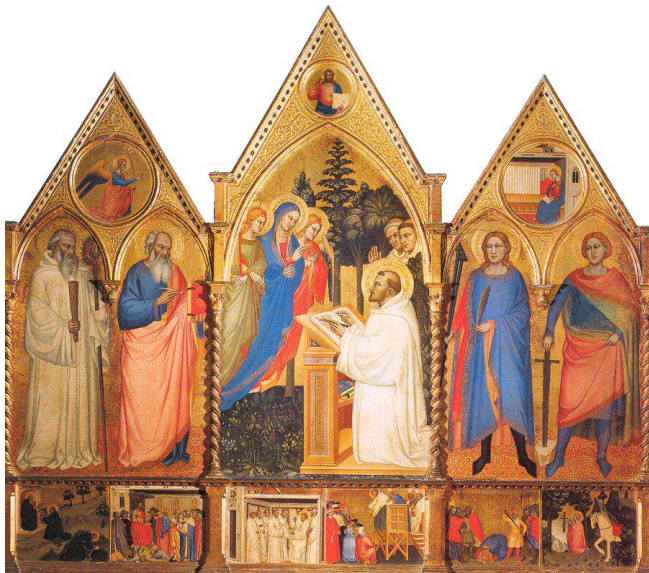


Figure 5: Master of the Rinuccini Chapel, *The Vision of Saint Bernard*, Accademia, Florence, 1370s.

¹¹² Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84) p.132.

¹¹³ Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84) p.24.

¹¹⁴ Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84) p.43.

Despite the popularity of this text, it was not the only one used as an iconographic resource for the vision of Saint Bernard paintings. For example, Filippino Lippi relied on another text for inspiration while executing his painting in the early to mid 1480s.

Filippino Lippi's Saint Bernard Painting

Filippino Lippi's painting, commissioned by Piero del Pugliese, a successful Florentine wool merchant, is the second known version of the *Vision of Saint Bernard* in Florence. (Figure 6) This altarpiece was executed for inclusion in a newly constructed chapel dedicated to Saint Bernard in Le Campora, a Benedictine monastery located outside the Porta Romana and associated with the Badia in Florence.



Figure 6: Filippino Lippi, *Vision of Saint Bernard*, Church of the Badia, Florence, ca. 1485-87.

Compositionally it is similar to the Master of Rinuccini painting, but the text to which it refers provides a different iconographic meaning. Mary and a number of

angels interrupt Bernard who is outside a monastery at a writing table.¹¹⁵ Instead of floating into the scene, Mary is more clearly human with her feet standing solidly on the ground. The Annunciation according to Luke appears in the book behind the two main figures, alluding to a different vision Saint Bernard had as a child as recorded in the *Vita Prima*.¹¹⁶

The manuscript on which Saint Bernard is writing has the words “Let me say something concerning this name [Mary] also, which is interpreted to mean “star of the Sea” and admirably suits the Virgin Mother...” taken from the second homily, *Super missus est*. *Super missus est* is a collection of four homilies written by Saint Bernard about the Annunciation. This text had a profound effect on Marian devotion. Bernard concluded this homily with the words, “When the storms of temptation burst upon you, when you see yourself driven upon the rocks of tribulation, look up at the star, call upon Mary...”¹¹⁷ By selecting the passage

¹¹⁵ Geoffrey Webb and Adrian Walker, *St. Bernard of Clairvaux*, London, 1960. p.42. Webb and Walker purport that Bernard’s placement in a landscape setting refers to Bernard’s claim that his meditation amidst nature assisted him in the comprehension of the Bible more than the reading of theological exegesis. Webb and Walker also state that the setting may refer to a section of the *Vita Prima* when Bernard spent a year in a small hut outside the monastery of Clairvaux recovering from an illness.

¹¹⁶ Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84) p.47. The *Vita Prima* describes a vision that Bernard had while a child on Christmas Eve. This vision inspired him to compose a work that praised the Virgin Mary, the Christ Child and His Holy Nativity.

¹¹⁷ Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84) pp.49-50, 52. Leshner concludes that it was in the second homily that Bernard gave his most specific description of his “ability to behold the Virgin in the physical sense of contemplari as well as in its more abstract meaning of thoughtful meditation. In none of his other words on the mother of God did he so vividly convey his faculty for both the actual and the mystical apprehension of this woman.” It was also in his second homily that Bernard explains the “golden star on Madonna’s blue cloak, the inscription on the frame, and helping the crippled older monk.”

from Luke 1: 26-31 instead of the Trecento selection from the *Liber de Passione Christi* Lippi portrays a Virgin filled with hope rather than lament.”¹¹⁸

These first two paintings illustrate the two different literary sources that inspired very different renditions on the Vision theme. The Master of Rinuccini Chapel focuses on the grief of the Virgin Mary and the significance of Christ’s crucifixion for the salvation of those who follow him. This theme comes from a pseudo-Bernardine text, *Planctus sancta Marie Virginis*, while Lippi’s painting instead quotes the *Super missus est* and the *Vita Prima*. Lippi therefore presents a joyful Virgin who performs as the mother of God.¹¹⁹ Her function as Queen of Heaven may also be referenced by the inclusion of the angels that accompany Mary.¹²⁰ According to Leshner, after these first two prototypes were established, later artists copied them compositionally. However, she believes the clues relating to the intricate iconography were omitted, making it impossible to quote the literary sources from which these images were inspired.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ R. Steven Janke, “The Vision of St. Bernard: A Study in Florentine Iconography,” in *Hortus Imaginum: Essays in Western Art*, edited by Robert Enggass and Marilyn Stokstad, Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1974, pp.45-50. Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 83) p.52. Leshner states that Hartt erroneously attributed Lippi’s painting as quoting the Golden Legend.

¹¹⁹ Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84) p.53.

¹²⁰ Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84) p.45.

¹²¹ Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84) p.54. Leshner says that the only exception to this was the Santo Spirito stained glass window.

Fra Bartolommeo's *The Vision of Saint Bernard*

Fra Bartolommeo's version was painted approximately 20 years after Lippi's work. November 18, 1504 marks the date of the contract for the altarpiece and a partial payment of 60 gold florins was made by the patron, Bernardo del Bianco, on June 16, 1507.¹²² The contract specifies the inclusion of a standing Madonna and Child, Saints Barnabas and Benedict with angels on the left and Saints Bernard and Francis on the right.

Fra Bartolommeo's painting served as the centerpiece of the family chapel in the Badia of Florence. The chapel, designed by Benedetto da Rovezzano, was located in the right nave of the church and was decorated with terracotta angels and covered friezes executed by Benedetto Buglioni.¹²³ Bocchi's description of the space suggests there was also a fresco by Fra Bartolommeo above the altarpiece that was destroyed in the rebuilding of the church in 1627-31.¹²⁴

Bartolommeo's painting originated as a *sacra conversazione* as evidenced by the preparatory drawings that he shared with his patron.¹²⁵ However, it appears the artist found the telling of the story more compelling and therefore, a history painting more suitable, resulting in the final *The Vision of Saint Bernard*.

¹²² Scott, *op. cit.*, (see note 22), p.28.

¹²³ Ernesto Sestan, Maurilio Adriani, and Alessandro Guidotti, *La Badia Fiorentina*, Cassa di Risparmio di Firenze, 1982, p.64.

¹²⁴ Fischer, *op. cit.* (see note 1) p.128.

¹²⁵ E. Ridolfi, "Notizie Sopra Varie Opere di Fra Bartolommeo da San Marco," *Giornale Ligustico di Archeologia, Storia e Belle Arti*, 1878, pp.121-122.

Disguising a history painting within a *sacra conversazione* is something that Fra Bartolommeo could have learned while training with Roselli since Roselli also had made this change at least twice in his career.¹²⁶ Although extended litigation took place after the completion of the altarpiece with regard to the price, the fact that the change in composition never entered this argument implies the patron was content with the resulting work of art.

In contrast to Lippi's composition that encourages the viewer to remain focused on the foreground of the painting, Fra Bartolommeo insists the viewer move between the fore, middle, and background. Saint Bernard kneels at a lecturn that holds a manuscript, no longer legible due to earlier cleanings of the painting.¹²⁷ His hands are raised toward the Virgin who appears to have floated into the composition from the left accompanied by an entourage of angels. She appears in profile, looking down at the Christ Child in her arms. Christ gazes down at the kneeling Saint Bernard who returns his stare. Saints Barnabas and Benedict peer onto the scene from behind Saint Bernard, one directing the viewer's eyes to Saint Bernard and the other encouraging the viewer to return his gaze to the hovering Virgin and Child. An icon of a crucifixion is rendered in the center of the foreground, reminiscent of the one depicted in Fra Angelico's altarpiece in San

¹²⁶ Fischer, *op. cit.* (see note 1), p.128. Roselli drawings are from the British Museum and the Uffizi.

¹²⁷ Leshner, *op. cit.* (see note 84) p.57. Leshner wonders if the manuscript may be the first chapter of Luke.

Marco.¹²⁸ It appears two-dimensional except for a book shown leaning against its side that suggests three dimensions. Three steps leading to a platform mark the middle ground. A landscape, a genre for which the friar was well known, occupies the central portion of the composition background with what appears to be a farm building with a haystack nearby. Baccio draws the viewer's eyes towards the back of the composition by highlighting a portion of the landscape where a cityscape is present, colored by atmospheric perspective persuading the viewer to spend more time in the background than perhaps he or she would normally.¹²⁹ To the far right, behind the Saints Barnabus and Benedict, a steep hill ascends the right side of the painting where in the distance Saint Francis is seen genuflecting in prayer in the wilderness with the wind catching his cape.

Fra Bartolommeo relied heavily on the graceful movements of figures to create a harmonious and balanced composition, and his figures rely on the principles of *controposto* to evoke this harmony. It appears that Fra Bartolommeo drew from his complex drapery patterns used for the apostles within the fresco of *The Last Judgment*. His success in conveying a three-dimensional form beneath the heavy folds assists in the overall smoothness of the composition.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, New York, 2003. p.473. Hartt and Wilkins suggest a connection between the icon in Fra Angelico's altarpiece.

¹²⁹ Fischer, *op. cit.* (see note 1) p.128.

¹³⁰ Everett Fahy, "The Earliest Works of Fra Bartolommeo," *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 51 (June 1969) p.146.

The position of Saint Bernard, the Virgin Mary and angels restate approximately their positions in Lippi's composition. There are, however, some significant differences. Saint Bernard is kneeling at his lecturn, and it appears he is waiting for the Virgin Mary and expecting her to appear rather than acting surprised as he was in Lippi's painting. The Virgin appears strongly as an apparition in Fra Bartolommeo's painting, floating in with her entourage of angels in the direction of Saint Bernard who focuses his full attention on her.¹³¹ The unusual depiction of the Virgin gives the impression of an Assunta or Gloriosa.¹³² She hovers slightly above the saint and is shown in profile, a pose most artists had abandoned after the Quattrocento. In contrast, Lippi's Madonna had her feet planted firmly on the ground. Including the Christ Child with the standing Madonna also differentiates Bartolommeo's interpretation from most other representations of the Virgin since previously only two other early Renaissance artists, Fra Filippo Lippi (in the Barbadori altarpiece) and Botticelli (in the Berlin altarpiece executed by Botticelli's studio and in a small tondo now located in Chicago) had depicted the Virgin in this way.¹³³ Most of the angels accompanying the Virgin are conventional in form, but there are some unusual busts and cherub heads that appear from the folds in the draperies and accentuate her holy nature.

¹³¹ Georg Swarzenski, "Donatello's 'Madonna in the Clouds' and Fra Bartolommeo," *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts*, vol. 40, 1942, p.76. Swarzenski sees the Madonna grouping as an anticipation of the Sistine Madonna.

¹³² Swarzenski, *op. cit.* (see note 131) p.77.

¹³³ Everett Fahy, "A 'Holy Family' by Fra Bartolommeo," *op. cit.* (see note 25) p.12.

Fra Bartolommeo's innovative rendering of the Virgin Mary marks a shift in the manner that the Virgin Mary was depicted that began in the early sixteenth-century. Prior to this time, she was the Madonna of Humility seated on the ground or enthroned and attended by saints in a conventional *sacra conversazione*. Alternatively, she was depicted standing, but only in the traditional *misericordia* pose with worshippers gathered under her mantle. The gradual acceptance of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception (Mary, Queen of Heaven) prompted artists to shift the way in which they depicted the Virgin, portraying her standing for the first time since the Byzantine period. The contract that accompanied Fra Bartolommeo's commission called for the more customary *sacra conversazione* with a standing Virgin bordered by saints rather than the more innovative composition with a floating Virgin that Fra Bartolommeo rendered. It is possible that Fra Bartolommeo utilized this technique to anchor the movement of the painting, to create a place for the viewer to return to after experiencing the movement of the rest of the composition.¹³⁴ Or perhaps the floating Madonna was referencing current theological trends like the doctrine of the immaculate conception that influenced the way in which the Virgin was depicted.

¹³⁴ Chris Fischer, "Fra Bartolommeo and Donatello – a New Tondo," *Kunst des Cinquecento in der Toskana*, 1992, p.12. The Frate appeared to favor the technique of rendering the Madonna in profile. Some examples are the *Volterra Annunciation*, the Uffizi sportelli, the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, *Noli me tangere*, *Virgin and Child with St. Elizabeth and Infant St. John the Baptist*. It is possible that Fra Bartolommeo was referencing Donatello's *Madonna in the Clouds*, which he could have seen just prior to his retirement.

Chapter 5: Fra Bartolommeo's Possible Motivations for Painting Again

The Vision of Saint Bernard is a pivotal work of art by Fra Bartolommeo because it is the first painting he executed after his semi-retirement, the first painting he rendered as a monk, and the first work that established a clear connection between Fra Bartolommeo and Savonarola's influence within his paintings.

Plans that Fra Bartolommeo made for his brother Piero's artistic training suggest the friar did not plan to return to painting once he had ceased. Otherwise it is unlikely he would have entrusted his brother Piero's artistic training to Albertinelli. Marchese published a contract attesting that Piero's training was expected to commence January 1st, 1505 until January 1st, 1511 under the watchful eye of Albertinelli, Fra Bartolommeo's former partner.¹³⁵ If Fra Bartolommeo anticipated painting again a year after he took his vows, as would have been allowed by church law, there would have been no point in making a contract with Albertinelli for six years.

It is not clear why the friar decided to pick up his paintbrush after a four-year hiatus, but it is possible that Santi Pagnini, the new prior of San Marco in 1504 and an art lover, encouraged him to recommence painting given the potential for revenue. However, it is also possible that there was something about *The Vision of Saint Bernard* commission that compelled Fra Bartolommeo to return to his former trade of his own free will.

¹³⁵ Marchese, *op. cit.* (see note 16) p.30.

It is unlikely that the patron, Bernardo del Bianco, drew the friar out of retirement. Review of numerous lists of noble families in Tuscany during the fifteenth-century yields no mention of his name and outside of this commission he is not known to have been associated with any major artist.

Fra Bartolommeo's shift from a traditional *sacra conversazione* to a history painting suggests he was interested in conveying something particular with this commission. The patron's contract and the resulting work testify to Fra Bartolommeo's interest in creating something that fulfilled his needs in addition to the needs of the patron.

Steinberg's research strongly suggests that after becoming a monk, at least three of Fra Bartolommeo's paintings paid homage to the sermons of Savonarola. *The Vision of Saint Bernard* was commissioned just six years after Fra Bartolommeo's mentor Savonarola was executed. I believe Fra Bartolommeo was finally able to come to terms with his dual life as monk and painter through this commission and would like to suggest that this painting also pays homage to Savonarola because of the similarities that exist between Bernard and Savonarola with regard to their views on art.

Savonarola came to power in Florence in 1494 following the fall of Piero de' Medici. Savonarola had consistently criticized the materialistic nature of the

Medici reign, a period when the arts enjoyed enormous financial support. With the departure of the Medici, Savonarola was now free to conduct numerous moral reforms, including condemnation of the de-spiritualization of the church because of its excess luxury.

Like Savonarola, Saint Bernard reacted against excesses of his time. The Benedictines were a very strong order that condoned great financial support of art, liturgical vestments and other decorations for the church. Saint Bernard reacted against what he perceived to be superfluous decoration.

Saint Bernard and Savonarola were often perceived to be against art, but both really were most concerned about art distracting the monks. They both agreed that art could serve the purpose of educating the viewer, particularly the illiterate, and could even stimulate prayer. They both also seemed to realize that art could function positively when trying to establish a new religious Order or trend because it was an effective vehicle for transferring new beliefs and values.¹³⁶

Bernard was not the first religious personage to struggle with the use of art in a church setting. From the time of Tertullian the topic has been debated and many theologians felt that art inspired idolatry. The Iconoclast argument in Byzantium marked the peak of this debate, and although over time the focus of the disagreement would shift slightly, the twelfth-century saw a revival of the

¹³⁶ Joanna Louise Cannon, *Dominican Patronage of the Arts in Central Italy*, Diss. Courtauld Institute of Art, U. of London, 1980. p.168.

argument over the use of art, instigated, some would say, through the writings of Saint Bernard.¹³⁷

Saint Bernard's arguments as written in the *Apologia* are not unique. His argument against excessive spending on the arts causing a distraction for the monks has been referenced since Saint Jerome, who in a letter to Paulinus of Nola, laments the rich church decoration when there are so many poor who go hungry. Candidus reiterates the same argument in the ninth-century. Because monks are seen as individuals who have supposedly renounced all worldly pleasures, many religious figures have found a conflict of interest when art is used in a religious setting. It seems to promote those things that the monks have renounced.¹³⁸

Arguments in favor of church decoration were led by Paulinus of Nola and followed by Gregory the Great in the Middle Ages who both felt that art had indispensable value in its ability to lure believers into church. Saint Bernard seemed to fall in between the two extremes, understanding the importance of art in its epidemiological value in attracting the carnali populi to the church, but also leery of the possible distraction it might incite for the clergy. Most importantly, if

¹³⁷ Cannon *op. cit.* (see note 136), p.77.

¹³⁸ Cannon *op. cit.* (see note 136), p.77.

art were to be used, it had to be simple art without superfluitas, as stated in Cistercian Exordium, an early account of the Order.¹³⁹

Savonarola was clearly familiar with the writings of Saint Bernard since he referred to him several times in his sermons. Some of his early sermons referred to Bernard's homilies, including *Canticum canticorum* and "kiss me with the kiss of your mouth."¹⁴⁰ Like Bernard, Savonarola was striving for reform, both within the Church and among individual citizens.

Savonarola makes specific reference to Saint Bernard in a series of sermons delivered during Ascension and Pentecost in 1483 as recorded in the *Codice Borromeo*.¹⁴¹ As expected, these sermons elaborate on the story of the Virgin and apostles arguing with Christ to stay, followed by a rebuttal from Christ supporting the ascension. The last three homilies then turn to the waiting for the Holy Ghost. This nuptial meeting with the Holy Ghost has been used throughout the history of salvation as referenced by the prophets, apostles and the Church. Savonarola refers to the source for this sermon, "nam tunc studebam sermonibus barnardi super cantica." Bernard had eight themes within his sermon and Savonarola drew on the second homily, *De incarnatione Christi per patriarchas et prophetas nuntiatus, et ardentissime ab eis expectata* (PL, CLXXXIII, 789-794) and the

¹³⁹ Cannon *op. cit.* (see note 136), p.77-79.

¹⁴⁰ Giulio Cattin, *Il primo Savonarola, poesie, e prediche autografe dal codice Borromeo*, Florence, 1973. pp.134, 159.

¹⁴¹ Giulio Cattin, *op. cit.* (see note 140) p.132.

eighth homily, *Quomodo per osculum orid Dei significatur Spiritus sanctus, quem Ecclesia sibi petit dari ad notitiam sanctae Trinitatis* (Ibidem, 810-814).¹⁴²

Because Bernard and Savonarola's beliefs were so similar with regard to the use of art and how it affected the church, it is plausible that the depiction of Saint Bernard in the Bernardo del Bianco commission is what prompted Fra Bartolommeo out of his brief retirement. Although Bartolommeo must have known at the time he became a monk that Savonarola was not entirely opposed to monks utilizing their artistic talents, for whatever reason, the friar decided to prolong his mandatory one-year reprieve from artistic activity. Presumably Baccio decided that he could better fulfill his duties as a monk if painting was no longer a part of his life, but something must have motivated him to recommence his painting. *The Vision of Saint Bernard* commission provided Fra Bartolommeo with an opportunity to showcase his talents and his continued support for Savonarola. This commission began a trend whereby the friar continued to reference his mentor and his sermons through iconography within his works. *The Vision of Saint Bernard* is the most important of these works because its examination in this context allows for speculation as to why the friar continued with his past vocation.

¹⁴² Giulio Cattin, *op. cit.* (see note 140) p.132.

Conclusion

Fra Bartolommeo, by almost all early accounts, was considered one of the most important Renaissance painters in Italy, until scholars stopped writing about him. This lack of scholarly publications caused the friar to fall from attention and he has spent the better part of the last 100 years being largely ignored. Some art historians assert the lack of publications stems from the religious nature of the majority of his paintings, claiming they do not provide enough interesting material to analyze. On the contrary, it is precisely the religious meaning lying deep within the paintings that make the study of his works so rewarding.

R.G. Collingwood stated that “Historical thought is a river into which none can step twice.”¹⁴³ Although it is impossible to re-create exactly the thoughts and feelings of a person who lived 500 years ago, remaining evidence provides ample opportunity to make strong hypotheses.

As we have seen, there existed significant similarities between the philosophies of Saint Bernard and Savonarola with regard to the use of art in church settings. Both were cautious regarding the distractions art might cause the monks, but understood the potential benefits in educating and attracting additional worshippers.

¹⁴³ R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, p.113.

Fra Bartolommeo also appeared to have dual views regarding art. Although not required, he decided to forego painting entirely when he took his vows to become a monk. Evidence regarding the artistic training of his brother strongly implies that the friar had no intention of returning to his former vocation.

Four years after taking his vows and ceasing to paint, Fra Bartolommeo was lured out of retirement with the commission from Bernardo del Bianco to paint *The Vision of Saint Bernard*. Because his intention to retire from artistic activity seemed permanent, it must be assumed that there was something in particular about this commission that compelled the friar to change his mind. As we have seen, evidence suggests his primary motivation was a desire to pay homage to his mentor Savonarola through his paintings. Steinberg supports this theory with strong examples of Savonarolan references within three of the friar's paintings. All of these works were executed after the friar came out of his brief retirement.

Because scholars have largely ignored Fra Bartolommeo over the last century, there is still much work that needs to be done. However, it is hoped that this study begins to provide a better understanding of the man who according to Leader Scott possesses "Leonardo's grace of color and more than his industry, Michelangelo's force with more softness and Raphael's sentiment with more devotion."¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ Scott, *op. cit.* (see note 22) p.56.

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