Joseph as Father in Guido Reni's *St. Joseph* Images

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Joseph as Father in Guido Reni’s *St. Joseph* Images

Alec Teresa Gardner

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Martha Peacock, Chair
Mark Johnson
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Department of Visual Arts
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ABSTRACT

Joseph as Father in Guido Reni’s St. Joseph Images

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This study presents a psychoanalytic examination of Guido Reni’s motivations for creating an innovative painting series of St. Joseph and the Christ Child. The seventeenth-century artist developed a new depiction of Joseph as the tender and loving surrogate father of Christ. This new artistic emphasis on the intimate relationship between father and son reveals Reni’s own psychological need to create a replacement father. Indeed, contemporary biographers report that Reni suffered from anxiety and an aversion to women throughout his life. These odd behavioral traits appear to have stemmed from Reni’s lack of a supportive father figure. Thus, the artist created a symbolic artistic substitute of Joseph, who was himself a replacement figure for God, in order to fill this void in his own life.

Keywords: Guido Reni, Bologna, Italy, Fathers, Joseph, God, Baroque, Psychoanalysis
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Introduction

Guido Reni established himself as an artist of classically effeminate figures in the seventeenth century, the most remarkable being those of devotion. He excelled at imbuing his subject matter with soft, delicate features and a heightened reverence. One such character in his work was Joseph, the earthly surrogate father of Christ. Reni was one of the first to paint the saint alone with the Christ Child. His motivations behind the intimate compositions were to create a representation of the ideal father-son connection, which he had not experienced. As discussed by the scholar Richard Spear, Reni struggled with an overly critical father who rejected his life choices and died when Reni was young, resulting in an under developed masculine identity, anxiety, and fear of rejection.\(^1\) The artist looked to God as a surrogate for his disappointing earthly father. Through his paintings, Reni created a loving bond between a father and his son, reminiscent of the love God would have shared with his children. Utilizing Joseph’s rising status in the seventeenth century to his advantage, Reni used Joseph as a metaphorical substitute for such a loving God.

Reni was a respected and revered artist in his own time. Despite being a renowned painter during the seventeenth century, admiration for the Bolognese artist fell dramatically in the ensuing centuries. Attention in the art world turned from a focus on antiquity to an anticipation of the modern era.\(^2\) Reni’s art was not considered “modern” enough for art that was being produced in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and, unfortunately, his position in the art world faded.\(^3\) The mid-twentieth century brought a timely revival to the recognition of Reni’s

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angelic figures, and attention turned to a formal analysis of his oeuvre. His works were afforded a newfound appreciation.

As his biographies were reviewed in the twentieth century, scholars noticed that the artist exhibited an intriguing personality. For example, contemporaries of Reni describe the artist’s strange behaviors, such as his sudden mood swings and his distaste for being around women. Until the last few decades, little scholarship focused on how these personality traits affected the art that Reni created. Only recently have scholars been interested in the relationship between Guido Reni’s personal life and his art. Richard Spear has explored many aspects of the artist’s character and sexuality. He has analyzed Reni’s lifestyle theoretically, leading to a suggestion of homosexual tendencies. The proposal is based generally on the evidence that Reni’s art was particularly effeminate, and on his aversion to women. While Spear acknowledges that Reni’s sexuality cannot be verified, his scholarship offers new insight. The proposal demands a consideration of the psychoanalytic aspects of the artist’s life. Aside from Spear’s analysis, there has been little investigation of Reni's art in relation to other personality traits such as the unusually strong attachment to his mother and the estrangement from his father. Theoretical progress must be made in order to better define and explore Reni’s personal convictions in accordance with his oeuvre. Indeed, a series of St. Joseph paintings that he completed from 1620 to 1640 speaks very directly to these aspects of Reni's character. This series portrays the Christ Child in the arms of his earthly father, Joseph (figs. 1-6). Suffering from a hindered

4 Spear, 52. Psychoanalytically, there is a suggestion that males who are essentially deprived of a paternal influence are more prone to becoming homosexual. This case could apply to Reni. Henry B. Biller, “The Father and Personality Development: Paternal Deprivation and Sex-Role Development,” In The Role of the Father in Child Development, edited by Michael E. Lamb (Hoboken, N.J.: J. Wiley, 2004), 115.
5 Spear, 51.
6 Six paintings from Reni’s series are discussed here. However, there may be more unknown paintings that the artist created as part of this series that are not mentioned. The dating of these paintings come primarily from museum acquisitions, along with Stephen Pepper’s article: “Guido Reni’s Practice of Repeating Compositions”, Artibus et Historiae 20, no. 39 (1999): 27-57.
psychosexual temperament because of the rejection and loss of his father, Reni used the rising status of Saint Joseph to represent an intimate father-son exchange. While tradition would assume this scene was of Joseph and the Christ Child, for Reni, it was meant as a representation of God, his ideal father, and himself.

**Guido Reni’s St. Joseph Images**

Each of Reni’s six paintings is three-quarter length and contains two figures, Joseph and Christ. The compositions overall depict the infant Christ gazing heavenward toward his male guardian, an elderly Joseph, who likewise returns the loving gaze. While these images span twenty years, they roughly contain the same elements with minor variations. The six images are distinguished into three compositions characterized by background scenery and figural poses. Done in the 1620s, the St. Petersburg painting depicts Joseph cloaked in flowing robes, tilting his head downward to stare at the baby Christ (fig. 1). Christ holds lilies in his hand, symbolizing the purity and importance of Joseph. Here also is the most defined landscape from the series, with an inclusion of detailed trees and atmospheric perspective. To the right, hills fade into the distance and billowing clouds hover in the sky. The landscape creates a convincing scene in which Joseph and Christ are grounded on earth and not in heaven. A notable addition to the St. Petersburg painting is a tiny image of Mary riding a donkey and being led by an angel. The

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7 With the exception of the St. Petersburg image which includes Mary on a donkey with an angel.
8 This painting is located in The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia.
9 Lilies have a long tradition of symbolizing Mary’s virginity and purity, and are frequently shown in depictions of the Madonna. The fact that Christ now holds them could reference his purity as the Son of God, and also serve as a foreshadowing of the sacrifice that he will eventually make. Margaret B. Freeman, “The Iconography of the Merode Altarpiece,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, New Series* 16, no.4 (Dec., 1957): 132.

In addition, Christ occasionally is shown offering lilies to a saint; in this case it strengthens Joseph’s sainthood. Most often, however, when a lily is shown in representations of Joseph, it symbolizes his purity as the earthly father of Christ. George Wells Fergusson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 41, 226.
figures likely act as a reference to Flight into Egypt scenes in which Joseph is often depicted.\textsuperscript{10} The beloved Virgin, however, is notably missing from all of the other paintings in Reni’s series. Therefore, the importance of Joseph’s relationship with Christ is emphasized in the other scenes because of the absence of the important figure of Mary.

The next three Joseph images that Reni painted were done in the 1620s and 1630s (figs. 2, 3 & 4).\textsuperscript{11} They each show a reclined Christ with hands to his side. While he gazes up towards Joseph, Christ’s body is splayed out on Joseph’s arm as if referencing his presence on an altar, a pose comparably less intimate than in the other images.\textsuperscript{12} However, a close connection between the two is still evident in Joseph’s loving facial expression. The background in these paintings is more ambiguous than the defined landscape in the St. Petersburg painting. While there are minimal elements of an outdoor setting, details are lacking. The mysterious surroundings make the composition less earthbound, and they create a devotional, rather than a narrative, mood. This allows for the focus to remain on Joseph and Christ, and not on the landscape behind them. The diminishing background continues through his last images.

Completing the series are the final two images, done in the late 1630s (figs. 5 & 6).\textsuperscript{13} These paintings represent the most intimate poses from Reni’s series, as they show Joseph lovingly bowing over the infant Christ. This affectionate pose reduces the distance between them and emphasizes Joseph’s intense connection with his son. Christ is shown cradled in a white cloth and playfully holding up a piece of fruit. The fruit, likely an apple, symbolizes the fruit of

\textsuperscript{10} It may also have been a purposeful minimization of her importance in this context as Joseph had rightfully taken his place as a divine contributor in the life of Christ.

\textsuperscript{11} The second painting in Reni’s series is located in the Collection Constance Grimand Foundation, Florida, United States. The third painting is located in the Ramon Osuna Gallery, Washington D.C., United States. The fourth painting is located in the Museo Diocesano di Milano, Milan, Italy.

\textsuperscript{12} The reason for these three seemingly less intimate poses, as compared to the first and last images, are unknown. Factors could have included specific commission requests, experimentation, or a personal preference that changed over time.

\textsuperscript{13} The fifth painting in Reni’s series is located in a Private Collection in Bologna, Italy. The sixth painting is located in The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas, United States.
salvation and Christ’s role as the new Adam.\textsuperscript{14} The inclusion of the white cloth, which was traditionally used to cover an altar, references the future sacrifice of Christ.\textsuperscript{15} These last two paintings done in the series have an almost indistinguishable setting. The darkened background contains no reference to earthly elements, differing greatly from the first image. This was done in order to place attention solely on the loving interaction between father and son. Despite minor variations in each of Reni’s \textit{St. Joseph} images, a similar connection is replicated. The chronological progression of the series presents an increasingly intimate bond between Joseph and Christ. Their poses grow physically closer and the prominent background from his first image disappears by the end of Reni’s series. Reni’s primary concentration was to depict an intimate exchange between father and son.

It is unknown who initially began the tradition of depicting Joseph cradling Christ, although Reni certainly popularized the composition. However, the pose itself came centuries earlier from \textit{theotokos} imagery. For centuries Mary had been shown with the baby Christ in her arms, accentuating their intimate bond as church and savior, bride and groom. These images became iconic representations that emphasized the Mary’s role as the throne of Christ.\textsuperscript{16} She was a woman who had claim to both earth and heaven as an intercessor to Christ. The \textit{Our Lady of Vladimir} panel from the early twelfth century is one of the more admired images displaying the connection between the Virgin and Child.\textsuperscript{17} Representations of this type became a tradition that lasted well into the nineteenth century. A later example is Bellini’s \textit{Madonna of the Pear} from 1488 (fig. 7). The couple is presented alone with an ambiguous landscape. Mary, in her

\textsuperscript{14} This is the meaning of an apple when in Christ’s hands. Apples are traditionally an indication of the forbidden fruit offered to Eve. Ferguson, 32.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 289.


\textsuperscript{17} The panel is tempera on wood and is currently located in the State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia.
traditional blue cloak, sits with the Savior on her lap. She exchanges a glance with her son, much like the pose that Joseph and Christ share in Reni’s paintings. Reni purposefully duplicated the elements of traditional *theotokos* imagery in his series in order to reference the role that Mary had in caring for the Savior. He depicted Joseph in Mary’s place because he believed that Joseph shared the same connection with Christ that Mary did.\(^\text{18}\) What once was a pose reserved to accentuate the bond of motherhood, was now used to place importance on fatherhood.

Each of the six images in Reni’s series was meant to bring him closer to an ideal goal.\(^\text{19}\) It was common for the artist to duplicate his themes. Indeed, Stephen Pepper discusses the artist’s penchant for creating thematic series. With slight variations in color, texture, and composition, Reni repeated images of St. Sebastian, Mary Magdalene, and St. Peter, to name a few. Despite criticism that this practice was a result of a lack of talent, Pepper asserts that Reni’s intentions were purposeful and pure.\(^\text{20}\) Reworking his images allowed him to explore different aspects of a theme. In Reni’s *St. Joseph* series, he repeatedly explored the facets of an ideal father-son relationship. The progression of Reni’s series reflects the increasing bond he felt with God. Being a devout Catholic, the spiritual relationship he maintained with God was an important aspect of his life and naturally would have grown over time.\(^\text{21}\) With each variation, Reni pictorially reiterated his desire for a father with a god-like nature of pure love and absolute devotion. As such, his final Joseph image, done only a few years before his death, represented the pinnacle of these ideals. Before the end of his life, with these paintings, Reni had seemingly healed the void within himself caused by his loveless father.

\(^{18}\) Wilson, 49.
\(^{19}\) Pepper (1999), 49.
\(^{20}\) Ibid, 30.
The Life and Scholarship of Guido Reni

Reni was born in Bologna in 1575 and studied in the workshop of the Flemish mannerist Denys Calvert (c. 1540-1619) from the age of nine. Nearly ten years later, he moved on to work in the thriving studio of Ludovico Carracci, from which he launched an independent career. Being a prodigy in the Carracci tradition, Reni remained true to their elegant forms and classical compositions throughout his life.\(^22\) Between 1600 and 1613, Reni resided mostly in Rome, having traveled there to study the work of Raphael.\(^23\) During this time, he received numerous commissions from Pope Paul V and his nephew, the Cardinal Scipione Borghese. By 1614, Reni was unhappy being in Rome and moved back to his beloved Bologna, where he remained until his death in 1642. He achieved international fame with his gracefully angelic feminine figures, gaining the favor of distinguished artists, writers, royalty, and religious leaders alike.\(^24\) King Louis XIII of France, King Philip IV of Spain, and King Wladislaw of Poland all contended for Reni’s talent.\(^25\)

Reni’s talents were celebrated and he was esteemed as a great artist in his time.\(^26\) This esteem lasted until the late eighteenth century. However, Reni’s reputation dissipated in the nineteenth century because of a general misunderstanding and disdain for Baroque art.\(^27\) Realist artists could not tolerate Reni’s idealism, and later artists of the abstract vein struggled with his sentimentality.\(^28\) Reni’s paintings did not offer adequate inspiration for artists of the developing modern art movements. Nevertheless, the end of World War II presented a shift in artistic tastes.

\(^{22}\) Guido Reni 1574-1642, (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1998), 306.
\(^{25}\) Bellori, 366.
\(^{26}\) Ibíd, 36.
\(^{28}\) Lee, 280.
Movements such as Abstract Expressionism, which focused on a loose style of painting, brought a newfound respect for the painterly qualities of the Baroque era. Indeed, the Bologna exhibition of Reni’s works in 1954 displayed the artist’s talents and his reputation was resurrected to its previous glory. Once Reni resurfaced as a noteworthy artist in the mid-1900s, scholars were quick to develop the ideas postulated by preceding texts. In the 1960s Howard Hibbard, who studied with the defining scholar of Renaissance and Baroque art, Rudolf Wittkower, wrote several texts on Reni. Stephen D. Pepper, a student of Hibbard, is considered the premier scholar on Guido Reni. He wrote a monograph and catalog raisonné on the artist in the 1980s that became standard in the scholarship. Pepper’s research was generally a formal analysis. Many of his texts concentrated on assigning dates and providing descriptions of Reni’s paintings. While these necessary tasks are not to be discounted, there was an overall lack of psychological inquiry in past scholarship done on Reni because of the delayed revival of his importance. The end of the twentieth century brought a breakthrough in such analysis with Richard Spear’s book, The “Divine” Guido: Religion, Sex, Money, and Art in the World of Guido Reni (1997). Spear’s text provided a rare psychoanalytic examination of Reni’s art. It is with this study as a foundation that this thesis will further explore Reni’s psychological needs in relation to his St. Joseph images.

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29 Ibid, 280.
Carlo Cesare Malvasia wrote the most notable contemporary biography on Guido Reni.\footnote{The Italian text: Malvasia, Carlo Cesare. 1988. \textit{Vita di Guido Reni}. Roma: Scipioni. A recent translated edition of his book is: Carlo Cesare Malvasia, \textit{The Life of Guido Reni} (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, c1980). Translation and introduction by Catherine Enggass and Robert Enggass. While some of Malvasia’s facts have proven to be inexact, his descriptions do give a presumably accurate portrayal of the artist’s interactions. Notable articles mentioning inaccurate dating are: Howard Hibbard, “Notes on Reni’s Chronology,” \textit{The Burlington Magazine} 107, no. 751 (Oct., 1965): 502-510; and also, Stephen Pepper, “Guido Reni’s Roman Account Book-I: The Account Book,” \textit{The Burlington Magazine} 113, no.819 (June, 1971): 309-317.} Another biographer to note is Giovanni Pietro Bellori, who was also a contemporary of the artist.\footnote{The original Italian text: Giovanni Pietro Bellori, \textit{Le Vite de’ Pittori, Scultori et Architetti Moderni} (Roma: per il success. al Mascardi, 1672). A recent translation of his book is: Giovanni Pietro Bellori, \textit{The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects}, trans. Alice Sedgwick Wohl (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Bellori’s account centers on describing Reni’s notable commissions. While Bellori certainly offers useful details about Reni, they are not as thorough or as numerous as Malvasia’s account.} Like Malvasia, Bellori’s accounts provide greater insight into the life of Reni. However, because of the multitude of accounts provided by Malvasia, his texts have been utilized more extensively than any other biographer in modern-day scholarship. Malvasia was intensely interested in Reni’s personality. In fact, he was the first to list Reni’s odd behavioral traits, and he provided his readers with first-hand accounts of Reni’s life. Malvasia remarked on Reni’s sensitivity about receiving criticism, even though he had great pride in his art.\footnote{Rudolf & Margot Wittkower, \textit{Born under Saturn: the character and conduct of artists: a documented history from antiquity to the French Revolution} (New York: Random House, 1963), 224.} While the artist was generally reserved, he did suffer from bouts of irritation, particularly when he felt he or his art was criticized.\footnote{Malvasia, 75.} On several occasions, when Reni was displeased with money or time arrangements, he would unexpectedly leave an incomplete commission and, in severe cases, escape to Bologna. When Reni was in Rome, he was commissioned to work on a chapel in Santa Maria Maggiore for Pope Paul V.\footnote{Bellori, 355.} However, upset about the terms of the agreement, Reni intentionally left Rome without word, vowing never to return.\footnote{Malvasia, 61. He was also known to sneak out of his house when patrons would visit, likely to escape criticism and/or praise, as he was apprehensive of receiving either in person. Ibid, 139. In contrast, at other times Reni was known to be very calm and gentle. Ibid, 80.} He did of course return
eventually, but it was sudden tantrums like this that hurt his personal reputation.\(^{39}\) It was his internationally admired artistic talent that allowed him to maintain great popularity and recognition, despite his poor temper.

**Psychoanalysis of Guido Reni**

The contentious relationship he had with his father, whether he recognized it later in his life or not, may have been one of the biggest influences on Reni’s character. Daniele Reni, a musician, strongly disagreed with his son’s choice of occupation. He had already designated a position for the young Guido as his musical heir. It took several pleading requests from Calvaert, who recognized Reni’s talent as a painter, before Daniele begrudgingly relented that the artist could take his son on as a student.\(^{40}\) Despite the promising artistic future of his son, Daniele was disappointed that his son did not choose to inherit his musical career. The disapproval Reni felt from his father likely did not dissipate with time, creating a contention between the two that lasted until Daniele’s death when Reni was only nineteen. Later in life Reni voiced his frustrations that his parents had restricted his ability to study and grow as an artist.\(^{41}\) It appeared that even after his father’s death in 1594, these issues were left unresolved and Reni remained perpetually affected by the disapproval of his primary male influence.

Due to Reni’s tumultuous relationship with his father, the artist did not consider him a favorable presence in his life. Spear believed that Reni’s peculiar personality was a result of anxiety.\(^{42}\) According to Henry B. Biller, a Psychologist whose work concentrates on the role of fathers, men who do not perceive themselves as similar to their fathers are likely to be anxious.

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\(^{39}\) Once the commission was completed, Reni swiftly left again for Bologna, so anxious to leave, even if it meant not getting paid for the commission. Bellori, 359.

\(^{40}\) Malvasia, 37. Spear theorizes that if Daniele had lived longer, Reni may have ended up becoming a musician as his father was. Spear, 9. If Spear’s theory had come true, it would have been a result of Daniele’s manipulation and distaste of Reni’s choice to become an artist.

\(^{41}\) Malvasia, 69.

\(^{42}\) Spear, 20.
and unstable.\textsuperscript{43} Likewise, Reni would have struggled to identify similarities with his father because of their differing life choices. The rejection Reni felt seemingly led to a complete detachment from his father. He developed anxiety about his art because of the negative impact being an artist had on his relationship with his father. His father never approved of him becoming an artist and was critical of him. Reni feared receiving the same criticism from others that he had received from his father.

In Biller’s study, men in Reni’s situation also exhibit insecurities in their relationships.\textsuperscript{44} Reni developed an anxiety that seriously affected his ability to maintain relationships. He distanced himself from others and distrusted all of his acquaintances, including those who rejoiced in his successes. Many of his peers feared speaking to him because he was so easily irritated.\textsuperscript{45} For example, Reni would often make ill-tempered statements when given friendly compliments.\textsuperscript{46} One of Reni’s pupils, Francesco Gessi, gave an account of Reni’s anxiety, declaring that Reni was an indiscreet person who “was caviling and too suspicious, that he feared what did not exist, since without any proof at all he was always in fear of poison and witchcraft.”\textsuperscript{47} Reni’s lack of trust towards those around him created a similar dislike from his peers, who took his anxiety as arrogance.\textsuperscript{48} As a result, Reni was known to have destroyed connections with artists like Caravaggio, Annibale Carracci, and even his close friend Albani.\textsuperscript{49} This behavior, while unusual, could very well have been a result of his father’s rejection. Reni feared receiving criticism from his peers, which resulted in an inability to connect with other

\textsuperscript{43} Biller, 106. Henry B. Biller is currently a Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Rhode Island and a licensed clinical psychologist. He has written several books on the subject of fatherhood.

\textsuperscript{44} This further contributed to low self-esteem. Ibid, 106.

\textsuperscript{45} Malvasia, 77.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid, 59.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid, 75. The reference to witchcraft again confirms the artist’s fear of women and general mistrust of others.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid, 59.

\textsuperscript{49} Spear, 20, 22. While Reni’s petulant personality certainly contributed to his destroyed friendships, Annibale Carracci is said to have further turned Albani and Domenichino against Reni. Malvasia, 52. Furthermore, despite these circumstances, later in Reni’s life many of his rivals could speak no ill of him or his paintings. Ibid, 140.
women and men. Reni thought very highly of himself and his talent as an artist, but he had insecurities because of the criticism he was given at a young age from his father.

As a boy matures, he imitates his father in order to make the shift from boy into man. Reni’s father died at a critical point when he was still making the transition, leaving him without a role model to imitate. Sons who experience a father who is either rejecting or absent, grow up with a “highly conflicted sense of masculinity, what psychiatrist Samuel Osherson…calls ‘a wounded father within’.” Reni’s father rejected him while he was alive and was absent after his death. A young boy who is received negatively by his father will show significant evidences of those harmful actions in his later years. The rejection Reni felt at the age of nine, when he entered Calvaert’s studio, continued to affect him when he was an adult. Because of this, Reni suffered from conflicting masculinity. He needed the benefit of a loving, supportive male role model.

The absence of a supportive patriarch in Reni’s life prompted a deep-seated need to find a man who could fill the void of father. Men with absent fathers often seek attention from other, typically older, males. David Popenoe, a Sociologist focused on marriage and families, explains, “because of deprivation effects father-absent children often have a strong motivation to imitate and please potential father figures.” These same children are prone to find role models within their imaginations or in fictional heroes. In Reni’s case, he chose God as his replacement role model.

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52 Ibid, 142.
53 Ibid, 99. David Popenoe is a Professor of Sociology Emeritus at Rutgers University. He has written several books on the subject of marriage and families.
54 Ibid, 101.
model. Completing his family with the addition of a father figure meant that Reni could finally find peace in his own life; it would absolve the pain from his father’s rejection. He relied on his spiritual connection with God to find his ideal father-son relationship.

Without his biological father, Reni’s family consisted of himself and the woman who raised him, Ginevra Pozzi. The relationship he had with his mother was extremely close. Aside from being his mother, Ginevra was also the only woman with whom he willingly kept company. They maintained an exceptionally loving bond throughout Reni’s life. Because she was the only family he had, he kept her close whenever possible, lavishing on her his wealth. His mother took great emotional and physical care of him throughout his life. His reliance on her is mentioned by Malvasia and is reflected in Reni’s decline in cleanliness after her death. While he denounced relationships with all other women, he had a loving admiration for his mother.

According to Samuel Slipp, a scholar of Freud, a man’s character is determined at a very young age by the influence of his mother. From birth, a male infant perceives its mother as having all power because she is his only means to survival. As he grows older, the young child desires a power of his own and strives to “take” that power from her. Realizing that he grew up with complete dependence on his mother, a struggle of domination versus submission ensues in the child’s mind and an unconscious feeling of rage surfaces. He desires to achieve independence but does not want to leave the comfort of his mother’s care. Unfortunately, the

55 What is more significant is the notion that father-absent males vacillate between masculine and feminine manners. Ibid, 99. Reni’s choice in God certainly represents gravitation towards ambiguous male-female characteristics, as God is said to epitomize a “neuter” gender. St. Thomas Aquinas, The “Summa Theologica” of St. Thomas Aquinas: Part I, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne Ltd, 1921), 54.
56 Spear, 19.
57 Malvasia, 109. Additionally, he brought her with him when he travelled to Rome.
58 Ibid, 108.
60 Ibid, 34.
child’s rage only intensifies as he ages and is forced to leave the home. Men often release these feelings by continually degrading all things female. Rage transfers from his mother and he believes that he can gain power by “taking” it from other women. The shift to independence conversely prompts the son to cling tighter to his mother, feeling a loss of intimacy without her. In fact, in the absence of a father, the mother-son bond becomes intensified, which in turn inhibits attachment to other women. Additionally, when a man’s father dies, a strong emotional attachment is created with his mother, which adversely affects his relations with other women. This archetype parallels the behavior Reni exhibited throughout his life. Because Reni lost his father, the connection to his mother grew; unfortunately so did his distance from other women.

Reni intentionally separated himself from other women, making a point throughout his life of removing himself from their company. Having remained unmarried, he was seen to be skittish around even his models. In his biography, Malvasia mentions this odd behavior and claims that the artist saw women as an intolerable sex and avoided them when at all possible. Having a fear of witchcraft, he did not keep women in his home. The dislike was so extreme that he rejected a domestic staff to further avoid being with women in a private setting. While a refusal to be around women was not typical of a devout Catholic, it was certainly an idea supported by his psychological temperament as well as seventeenth-century philosophers. Rene Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke all advocated that women were not equal to men. They promoted that men and women were meant to conduct their relationships in a way similar

62 Slipp, 34.
63 Gilmore, 228.
64 Biller, 115.
65 Malvasia, 126.
66 Ibid, 100, 119.
to a master and his servant. Therefore, it was intended that a woman be treated as a servant. In this way, Reni was culturally and mentally justified in his isolating actions towards women.

Ironically, Reni was known primarily for painting angelic women, particularly the Virgin Mary. His figures were infused with feminine tenderness. The women he painted reflected an ideal, with round faces, pale skin, and rosy cheeks. His most notable images of Mary depict her gazing towards heaven, filled with a divine light. In his art he gravitated towards effeminate features. Reni used these elements so prominently in his art that they often crossed over into many of his male representations. He was internally searching for a male counterpart, but in his art, Reni could not depart from the female attributes. His psychosexual makeup seems to have confused the boundaries of the feminine and masculine, a common issue for a man having lost his father. Feeling the absence of a male influence, he began the search for a replacement father who could adequately provide him with the source of masculinity and protection that he was missing.

Psychologically, Reni needed to find a man who could take on the role of father; personally, he wanted a perfect patriarch to offer support for himself and his career as an artist. Having lost the father from whom he was decidedly detached, Reni was imbued with a desire to find a man who would fill that void. Because he did not find one as a young man, Reni struggled to develop fully the temperament of a conventional male as a result of not receiving emotional and physical safety from his own father. The rejection of his father led him to abandon the qualities his father embodied, namely those of an imperfect earthly man. For this reason, he was unable to find a terrestrial replacement and was forced to look to a divine substitute.

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69 Biller, 98.
God is an immortal being who exemplified all virtuous qualities. He was, in every way, the summation of Reni’s beloved mother and the ideal father he never knew. Reni believed that God could be the perfect father that he needed. It was a resolution that was multi-faceted because it was not only with God that he felt an attachment. He also found a parallel between himself and Christ. Reni’s connection to Christ was based on the fact that both men were essentially fatherless and mortal. However, God gave his own son a replacement father with the appearance of Joseph. Just as God granted Christ an adequate father to reside with him, Reni believed that he could also be bestowed with that same fortune. His ideas translated into his images of St. Joseph. The images were physical depictions of Joseph and Christ, but for the artist, they represented something deeper. The intimate moment, void of traditionally divine features, was a way for Reni to personalize the figures to fit his own beliefs. In place of the infant Christ, Reni saw himself in the arms of a loving father; and it was God he saw in the position of Joseph. God was the culmination of the perfect replacement father that fulfilled both Reni’s psychological requirements and personal needs. Reni was able to create this connection between Joseph and God because of the contemporary religious status of Joseph.

**The History of Saint Joseph**

In the European tradition, the focus on Joseph progressed over time from viewing him as a minor background character to elevating him to a divinely accepted father figure. According to early Catholic theology, God used Joseph solely as a way to conceal Mary’s pregnancy.\(^7\) His literal role as husband and father was inconsequential; his only purpose was to wed the expectant Mary so as to keep her and Christ from harm. It was not meant to be a marriage of love, but rather of convenience. Joseph’s importance in their life after the marriage was nominal. The opposite was true of Mary, however, who was seen as the exemplary mother. As early as the

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seventh century, the cult of Mary took prominence in Catholicism and the belief spread that she was a celestial woman who remained in a perfect state all her life. It was also believed that she was able to communicate on behalf of individuals on earth to Christ and God in the heavens. In fact, because Mary gave birth to Christ as a virgin, Catholics believed that she remained a virgin, destroying the possibility that she and Joseph would have had a sexual relationship. Thus, it was critical that Joseph be characterized as an old man unable to function as a proper husband so as not to encourage the possibility that they could produce more children. Along with keeping Mary’s virtue intact, it also lessened the likelihood that Joseph could care for Christ because of his advanced years. The role of Joseph began as insignificant because of the Church’s focus on Mary’s importance.

It took many centuries, but these ideals gradually began to shift. As early as the twelfth century, new ideas began to form about Christ’s foster father. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) was an abbot known for accentuating Mary’s role as intercessor. However, he was also interested in exploring the importance of Joseph. He believed that Joseph did play a key role in the life of Mary and Christ, despite traditional theology of the time. Because Joseph had been given direct revelation from God on multiple occasions, and because those revelations referenced Mary and Christ, Clairvaux saw Joseph as divine. For a man like Clairvaux, whose beliefs centered on the veneration of Mary, it is significant that he accepted Joseph as a man of God and advocated for the divine role he played in Biblical stories.

72 Schapiro, 6.
74 Wilson, 3-4. Wilson cites Bernard’s writings on Joseph in the four homilies “super Missus Est”, Sermon III for Christmas Even (no. 10), and Sermon IV for Christmas Day (no. 2). These can be found in Migne, J.-P. Patrologia latina. Volume 183, cols. 55-87, 99, 127. Paris, 1862.
Jean Gerson (1363-1429), a writer and scholar of the fifteenth century, similarly began exploring the relationship and divine attributes of Mary and Joseph. However, he went one step further than Clairvaux in validating Joseph’s importance. Gerson viewed Joseph as a chaste father and husband, and recognized their marriage as a solemn union.\(^{75}\) Gerson not only believed that Joseph had been called by God, but he also believed that his role was to deceive the devil. Marrying Joseph was meant to eliminate any suspicions that Mary was carrying God’s Child. With Joseph as her husband, any child born after the marriage would be considered his progeny. This arrangement was set up by God through revelation to Joseph in order to mislead the devil.\(^{76}\) Gerson believed that Joseph acquired divinity by taking an active part in God’s plan of protecting Mary and Christ. His ideas combined Clairvaux’s concept of Joseph’s personal revelation with his own notion that the earthly father’s active obedience diverted attention away from Christ as God’s Child. These actions were necessary in ensuring that Christ survived and succeeded in his role as savior.

During Gerson’s lifetime, progress was made within the Catholic Church to elevate Joseph’s status. In 1399, the feast day of Joseph was sparingly adopted into the Church, being fully instituted into the calendar in 1479.\(^{77}\) While seemingly insignificant, this was a remarkable step towards an acknowledgement of Joseph’s importance that had previously been overlooked. Shortly thereafter, in 1416, conservative reformers along with Gerson approached the Council of Constance in hopes that Joseph would be granted the same status as Mary.\(^{78}\) It was an unsuccessful attempt; the Church was not yet willing to accept that Joseph held the same


\(^{76}\) Schapiro, 7. Schapiro cites Jean Gerson’s original text, *Opera Omnia*, III, Antwerp, 1706.

\(^{77}\) Ibid, 5.

\(^{78}\) Ibid, 5.
devotional importance as Mary. However, Gerson’s writings sparked an international interest in Joseph. Once his ideas were established, they flourished in Southern Europe.

The Council of Trent, held from 1545 until 1563, began another successful movement towards the recognition of Joseph as an important father figure. In the Twenty-Fifth, and last, Session, The Council demanded that the mandates on art be changed. There was a new focus on depicting simplified but recognizable images.\(^7\)\(^9\) There was also a move towards increasing the depiction of saints.\(^8\)\(^0\) With these changes taking place in art, it was an ideal avenue for Joseph’s position within the Church to again be improved. It was not until after the Council met that Joseph’s true cult status took form in Southern Europe.\(^8\)\(^1\) In 1621 the Church mandated that all Catholics celebrate Joseph in a manner equal to that of Mary.\(^8\)\(^2\) While the saint had gained favor throughout the centuries, these accomplishments were cause for an official recognition of the importance Joseph had in the life of Mary and Christ.

A cult of Joseph was formed in the fourteenth century as a result of the increasing acknowledgement given to Joseph’s importance.\(^8\)\(^3\) Initially, the cult of Joseph supported the ideals that broke with traditional Catholic beliefs. However, they were fully recognized during the seventeenth century once their beliefs became standard theology and Joseph was given the official status of a saint.\(^8\)\(^4\) The cult functioned as a way for Christians to openly venerate Christ’s earthly father. They maintained the position that Joseph was a man chosen of God to reside with Mary and become a father to Christ. The role he played in their lives was a critical and important

\(^8\) Coming from the 25\(^\text{th}\) Session. Ibid, 234.
\(^10\) Schapiro, 5.
\(^11\) Black, 23.
\(^12\) Ibid, 21.
one. He was meant to be a part of the Holy Family on earth.\textsuperscript{85} Joseph, Mary, and Christ were all divine beings who took part in God’s plan. The cult emphasized the domestic and moral qualities of Joseph. Even though Joseph and Mary were husband and wife, traditional belief was that their union was only cordial. However, writers like Gerson believed that the couple must have had a virtuous and loving relationship built upon an ideal marriage.\textsuperscript{86} Not only did Joseph protect Mary so that she was able to give birth to God’s son, he remained an integral part of their lives and later provided the two with a home where Christ could be raised in safety.

Additionally, the cult advocated for the divine role that Joseph had in fostering the fulfillment of the Savior’s mission.\textsuperscript{87} There was an overall acceptance that Joseph acted in the shadow of God as a connection was made between the two fathers, as suggested by the scholar Joseph F. Chorpenning.\textsuperscript{88} Joseph watched over and protected Mary and Christ just as God directed. It was suggested that Joseph had been chosen by God because of his “creation” capability. Joseph molded and formed objects through carpentry, comparable to God’s creation of the world, an analogy found in the books of Matthew 13 and Luke 4.\textsuperscript{89} Considering Joseph’s work a form of art, God was likewise referred to as the artist of the world, referencing his formation of the universe.\textsuperscript{90} This analogy was supported by Catholic theology and further strengthened Joseph’s role in Christ’s life. These parallels were crucial in understanding that the call to Joseph was purposeful. He was meant to act as Christ’s guardian; but above all he was ordained to take God’s place as father while Christ lived on earth. People of the Church were beginning to accept Joseph not only as a saint, but also as a replacement for God the Father.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid, 21.
\textsuperscript{86} Schapiro, 5. Schapiro cites Jean Gerson’s original text, \textit{Opera Omnia}, III, Antwerp, 1706, cols. 851ff.
\textsuperscript{87} Black, 23.
\textsuperscript{88} Chorpenning, 278. These notions that Joseph had an affinity with God were accepted in the seventeenth century.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid, 277. Chorpenning found this analogy in patristic and medieval commentaries on Matthew 13:55 and Luke 4:22. Further information on works that discuss this analogy can be found in his cited article.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid, 277.
Saint Joseph Depicted in Art

Just as Joseph’s status increased in Catholic theology, the way in which he was represented in art progressed in a similarly positive manner. Originally, the inclusion of Joseph in depictions of a Biblical story was done out of narrative necessity. In stories such as the birth of Christ and the Flight into Egypt, Joseph’s inclusion demanded a place in the scene in order to make the account accurate. However, because he was seen as a secondary character in the narrative, he was often thrust into the background of a scene as an inconsequential feature. In fact, it was common to show Joseph sleeping as a deliberate sign of his insignificance. Set apart from the glorified Mary and Christ, Joseph was deemphasized because he lacked divinity.

An Italian Nativity and Adoration of Christ scene from 1290-1300 offers an illustration of Joseph’s negligible presence (fig. 8). Mary disproportionally fills nearly half of the image, placing primary concentration on her and Christ. Surrounding the pair are angels and adorers. Joseph’s presence is not readily evident, as he does not reside in the customary focal areas of the image. Rather, he is found crouching in the bottom right, his head facing downward and away from the events taking place. This early example stemmed from the Byzantine tradition, and shows the typical attention given to Joseph in art, where he was not meant to be an active participant in the scene. His role was purely subsidiary. Artists exaggerated his lack of involvement in order to support Catholic theology that Joseph was not an intimate part of Mary’s or Christ’s lives. This and similar images spread throughout Europe and became traditional representations of Joseph in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

A noteworthy image that presents a more positive but a clear division between the traditional roles of Joseph and Mary is Robert Campin’s Merode Altarpiece from 1425 (fig. 9). The Netherlands was equally influenced by Gerson’s writings on Joseph. The altarpiece
separates the couple into two distinct spheres. Joseph is shown in his workshop in his role as carpenter. Tools that symbolize both his work and Christ’s crucifixion surround him. His carpentry is signified by the presence of tools like drills and chisels. The most prominent reference to Christ’s crucifixion is the mousetrap, which symbolizes Christ as bait for the devil. While the iconography of the mousetrap remains genuine, Joseph’s surroundings present the secular world; there are no literal spiritual references, only symbolic. In contrast, the panel of Mary contains two physical representations of deity. The first being the angel Gabriel, the second being the rays of light sending Christ down to Mary. The presence of these figures implies that Mary is on a higher spiritual level than Joseph. Furthermore, her room is filled with numerous symbols, all of which reference her divinity. Some of these symbols include lilies, a lit candle, basin, and the descending Christ, which notably represents Mary’s impregnation by the Holy Spirit. Mary is bound to heaven, but her husband shares no such attachment. Campin’s altarpiece separated Joseph and Mary into different realms while giving unique attention to each; the Merode Altarpiece was one of the first to do this.

As the Renaissance transitioned into the Baroque period and the cult of Joseph began to flourish in Italy, Joseph became a primary figure of worship in the Catholic Church. As Bernard of Clairvaux advocated, Joseph did become a figure of intercession like Mary. It was appropriate to pray to Joseph as one would traditionally pray to Mary; they were both now gateways to Christ and God in heaven. Similarly, in art, Joseph had emerged from obscurity
behind Mary and Christ and instead appeared next to them as a saintly figure in the forefront.\textsuperscript{97} Joseph appeared active in the admiration of the Christ Child. For example, the 1555 \textit{Adoration of the Shepherds}, done by Lelio Orsi places Joseph as the focal point in the painting (fig. 10). He and Mary sit side by side in awe of the glowing Christ Child. Like Mary, Joseph reaches towards Christ in an affectionate manner, forming a link from Christ to both of his parents; this link emphasizes the belief in both Joseph and Mary as intercessory figures. Instead of being cast into the shadows, Joseph receives the light of the Savior and becomes an involved father in the scene. Orsi’s painting illustrates the shift toward less traditional portrayals of Joseph. While the acknowledgement of his participation in the life of Christ was changing, there were still no images solely of Joseph and Christ at this time; such paired compositions were reserved for the Madonna and Child. Paintings containing Joseph typically revolved around narrative events that included both Mary and Christ.

Significantly, seventeenth-century artists developed new representations of Joseph, in which Mary was absent from the scene. Artists began to include Joseph as an intimate participant in the Savior’s life. The subject of Joseph and the Christ Child gained international popularity throughout the seventeenth century, predominantly in Italy and Spain.\textsuperscript{98} There were a number of Italian images that focused on Joseph and Christ, but compositions void of other figures, as in Reni’s paintings, were rare. The most notable of these rare representations that preceded Reni’s series is Pellegrino da San Daniele’s \textit{St. Joseph and the Christ Child with a Shepherd}, done 1500-1 (fig. 11). This is one of the first images to depict Joseph and Christ without the presence of Mary that later became the archetype for Joseph imagery.\textsuperscript{99} In contrast to Reni’s images, the composition does not reveal an intimate connection between father and son; instead, both Joseph

\textsuperscript{97} Wilson, 22.
\textsuperscript{98} Black, 21. For Spain, “St. Joseph was the most powerful saint of the Catholic Church.”
\textsuperscript{99} Wilson, 48.
and Christ stare outwards towards the viewer. Joseph securely holds Christ, but he is not
displaying a loving bond with him as a father would. He provides support physically but not
emotionally. Additionally, this image contains much detail, including an architectural and
landscape setting, as well as another figure. Joseph and Christ are at the center of the painting
and a shepherd boy gazes upwards, drawing attention to the boy and the looming arches
above.\textsuperscript{100} Joseph and Christ’s importance becomes minimized in this crowded painting. A father-
son relationship is not highlighted in da San Daniele’s image, but rather is a subset of it.
However, this painting does present a significant innovation.\textsuperscript{101} The composition of Joseph
cradling Christ had rarely, if ever, been seen before in Italian art. It was a visual manifestation of
the progress Joseph’s status had taken in the Church. It is a pose that Reni undoubtedly drew
inspiration from in his series.

Reni elevated the intimate connection between Joseph and Christ more so than any other
previous artist. He purposefully eliminated a recognizable setting in order to place the focus
soley on the father and son. The relationship that Reni highlighted was a loving one. Traditional
representations of Joseph and Christ underscored a connection so that the focus might be directed
towards Christ. Older images typically drew attention away from an intimate bond. This allowed
Christ’s importance to be emphasized. However, Reni departed from these types of compositions
so that he could focus solely on the connection between Joseph and Christ. The deliberate
downward gaze of Joseph in his images evokes a familial adoration. Christ’s returned gaze
equally reinforces an ideal connection between father and son.

Around the time that Reni completed his series, Joseph and Christ images began to
flourish in Spain, likely taking influence from the Italian artist’s depictions. Having gained the

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid, 50.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid, 48.
favor of the hierarchy of the Church, Reni’s esteem would have been known internationally. Likewise, Spanish artists would have likely seen his St. Joseph images.\textsuperscript{102} Spanish images of Joseph developed in a similar fashion to those in Italy, progressing slowly in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{103} It was not until the mid-seventeenth century, after Reni began his series, that Joseph and Christ images appeared in Spain. Reni’s \textit{St. Joseph} paintings may well have been a principal influence in Spain’s seventeenth-century Joseph and Christ imagery.

Once Spanish society embraced the sainthood of Joseph in the latter half of the seventeenth century, artists created countless images celebrating the earthly father of Christ.\textsuperscript{104} Bartolomé Estebán Murillo (1616-1682) was one of the foremost Spanish painters who focused on the connection between Joseph and the Christ Child. One of his many depictions, done in the late seventeenth century, \textit{Saint Joseph with the Infant Saviour (Angels in the Clouds)}, was a typical Spanish interpretation of the saint and his “son” (fig. 12). Murillo replicated Reni’s figural composition, with Joseph and Christ sharing a similar glance. Christ reaches out to Joseph as if to touch him, showing his desire to be emotionally close to him. However, the intimate emotion between the two is diluted because of the distracting angel-filled sky behind them. The reference to divinity, evidenced in the numerous angels, places more importance on Christ than on Joseph. It also overshadows the importance of Joseph’s role as a protector and father. The heavenly presence implies that Joseph is not able to bestow adequate protection to the Child; instead, the angels reside nearby to provide the necessary safety. This suggestion diminishes Joseph’s role as protector. While this painting undoubtedly depicts a connection between father and son, it does not achieve the psychological intimacy of Reni’s series. Reni eliminated the

\textsuperscript{102} While many of Reni’s \textit{St. Joseph} paintings’ original patronage are unknown, it is likely that these images influenced foreign artists in Spain; especially considering that the Spanish ambassador had commissioned Reni previously. Malvasia, 79.

\textsuperscript{103} This progression is outlined in Charlene Black’s book (2006).

\textsuperscript{104} Black, 35, 65.
heavenly elements, placing the pair instead in natural settings (or in no setting at all) so that the focus would be on the loving connection between a father and his son, and not on an obvious reference to deity.

The Council of Trent’s direction to artists to depict simple and recognizable figures, combined with the cult of Joseph’s rise to fruition, made it acceptable for Reni to paint his unconventional *St. Joseph* images. It was an opportune time for Reni to take advantage of Joseph’s status for the fulfillment of his own psychological needs. He was able to experiment with depictions of the Saint in an innovative manner. Instead of placing Joseph in a narrative setting of the Adoration or the Flight into Egypt, Joseph became a sign of both spiritual and emotional fulfillment. Reni chose to eliminate a story line in favor of an unidentified moment. This unique composition encourages an equally innovative interpretation in modern scholarship. Because the *St. Joseph* images were not based on a Biblical event, they must be read with added inquiry; it is necessary to examine the reason behind Reni’s departure from traditional narratives.

**Imagery of Joseph as God**

In art, Joseph was beginning to take on God-like characteristics, as a result of his rising importance. God directed Joseph in his role as father to Christ. Reni utilized this progression to establish God as his own father via the guise of Joseph in his unique compositions. According to the Bible, God instructed Joseph at several crucial moments throughout his life with Mary and Christ.\(^\text{105}\) Without revelation from God, the carpenter may very well have “put away” his betrothed when it was discovered that she was pregnant; in which case Mary would have lost favor with society and the fulfillment of Christ’s mission would have been threatened. After Christ’s birth, an angel once again appeared to Joseph and commanded him to flee into Egypt in  

\(^{105}\) Wilson, 4.
order to avoid King Herod’s deadly hunt for the newly born Savior. This move saved their child from apparent death; and once it was safe for their return, God revealed it to Joseph. In each of these situations the revelation from God was given to Joseph, and not to Mary. God granted Joseph the responsibility of acting as patriarch; he relied on the carpenter to fulfill the needs of both husband and father. As such, he became the leader of the family, and was the proper conduit to use in the exchange of revelation. Additionally, Joseph acted as a veil in which God could watch over his son. Contrary to early Catholic theology, Joseph was no longer a mere pawn exploited by God; he was a figure central to the safety and growth of Christ. The fact that Joseph was entrusted with the care of God’s most favorable son speaks to his importance. The role Joseph took was a divine one based on the care that God would have provided had he been on earth to look after his son.

A look at Reni’s whole oeuvre offers insight into the unique appearance of his St. Joseph images. Typically, in depictions of the Holy Family, and especially in those of the Madonna, Reni included angels looking down from heaven. For example, in his painting of the Adoration of the Shepherds, done 1640-1642, Joseph, Mary, and the shepherds gaze towards Christ while angels pour down from the heavens (fig. 13). The angelic atmosphere places an emphasis on the holy disposition of Christ, Mary, and Joseph. However, this element is markedly absent in his St. Joseph images. There are no angels in the heavens. This lack shows a prominent departure from his traditional religious imagery. While Reni certainly valued and recognized the sanctity of his figures, he purposefully eliminated the palpable elements of holiness in his depictions of Joseph. His rationale in creating images of Joseph and Christ was to generate a personal connection with

106 Ferguson, 128 as a reference to the Biblical story.
107 Black, 24.
God the Father. He removed features that made the figures divinely inaccessible. His series presented a father and son whose relationship was within reach of a common man such as Reni. Knowing that Joseph was a proper semblance for God, Reni used Christ’s earthly father to personalize a connection between himself and the ultimate father, God.

In order to further connect Joseph with God, Reni imbued Joseph with godly features. Traditional paintings of God the Father presented him as an elderly figure immersed in the heavens and surrounded by a halo or rays of light; these were elements that clearly specified him as God. Any Godly image without this iconography would not have been accepted in Catholic theology because it would have lacked divine reverence. In fact, until the fifth century it was inappropriate to show the full body of God the Father in paintings for fear of breaking the second commandment. Instead, he would be represented as rays of light coming down from heaven. While this convention remained in practice, it became suitable in the fifth century to show parts of his body, such as a hand or a half-figure. This gave way to full-body portrayals; however, the importance of protecting God’s divinity still remained and artists took care to present him as such. In the course of Joseph’s rise to divinity, attributes of God were added to his countenance. Joseph was depicted with visible wrinkles, white hair, and a beard. The elderly appearance of Joseph recalls representations of God. Moreover, the attributes of Joseph as seen in Reni’s series were commonly associated with God’s image. However, it was unacceptable for God to be shown in a secular setting. Because Reni desired a father who could theoretically reside with

108 For the purposes of this discussion, “God” refers to God the Father, distinct from God the Son or God the Holy Spirit, as a part of the Trinity.
109 Ferguson, 157.
111 As referenced in the book of Daniel 7, God appears as the “Ancient of Days”. While this appearance is attributed as the Son of God, and not God the Father, it may rightfully have influenced representations of God the Father in art.
112 Ferguson, 157.
him on earth, it would have been ineffective to compose images of an immortal man. It was necessary that the artist employ Joseph as a façade for the flawless heavenly Father on whom he truly depended. Joseph was a replacement that allowed God the Father to reside on earth and assume the role of patriarch to an artist who unconsciously required one.

A prominent indication of God in Reni’s series is the consideration of color. Purple and gold are two colors used in a number of representations of God. Coming from Late Roman Imperial tradition, purple alluded to royalty, and as such it was also used as a symbol of deity. For centuries, gold was applied as a background in mosaics to signify heaven. It was used to connote sacredness, engulfing figures in an ambiance of divinity. Spanning back as far as the Early Christian and Byzantine periods, both of these colors were reserved solely for the adornment of royalty. Together these colors represented the sacred power of God.

There are many illustrations of God clothed in these colors because it was important that his image be sanctified with reverence. In the Story of Job frescos of the 1360s done by a follower of Taddeo Gaddi, God wears a purple garment and is draped in a golden robe (fig. 14). Additionally, he is surrounded by a mandorla, while a host of angels accompany him to earth, thus maintaining his glory as the King of Heaven. These inclusions were the only appropriate way for God to reside on mortal ground. The Roman Pantheon contains a similar representation from 1475-1485, attributed to the artists Antoniazzo Romano or Melozzo da Forlì (fig. 15). God again is clothed in purple and gold. Instead of ascending down from heaven, he remains in the clouds conveying his presence through golden rays of light. Because of the significance of these colors, it was appropriate that they were reserved for the holiest of beings.

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113 Ibid, 273.
114 Ibid, 275.
115 Wilson, 49.
Joseph wears both of these sacred colors in Reni’s images; but depictions of the earthly father did not always include them. In Christian iconography, it gradually became tradition for St. Joseph to be painted wearing a yellow-gold color.\textsuperscript{116} It was in the fifteenth century that both gold and purple became appropriate attire for Joseph. While dressing Joseph in purple garb was appropriate because of his Davidic lineage, the godly reference to this color was not forsaken. At this time, the status of Joseph was gradually rising as recognition was given to his role in God’s plan. In time, symbolic connections were made between the two fathers, such as reference to their artistry and traditionally worn colors. Thus, clothing Joseph in the colors purple and gold represented the sacred power previously allocated only to royalty and heavenly beings.

An early portrayal of Joseph in gold and purple is Fra Angelico’s painting of the \textit{Nativity}, done 1438-1445 (fig. 16). Joseph appears in gold and purple worshipping the infant Christ. More than a century later artists such as Titian, Tintoretto, and Guido Reni clothed Joseph in these same conventionally sacred colors. In all of Reni’s paintings of the saint, a gold robe is worn, stressing the connection to heaven. In addition, Joseph is wearing a purple tunic in all of the paintings but two.\textsuperscript{117} It is important to note that while each painting in Reni’s series contains variations, such as facial disposition, setting, and pose, the color of Joseph’s clothing is the only consistent element in every image. Reni purposefully made this a constant because it was the most obvious indicator of godly divinity. It allowed for an additional connection to be made between the God of heaven and the earthly Joseph.

In each of Reni’s \textit{St. Joseph} images, the infant Christ is shown looking up towards his father. This heavenward gaze is seen throughout history in various images of Christ as a newborn in order to confirm the divine link between himself and God. In Guido da Siena’s \textit{Nativity}, circa

\textsuperscript{116} Ferguson, 275.
\textsuperscript{117} The Bologna \textit{St. Joseph} painting shows Joseph with a teal-colored tunic with a gold robe. In addition, the Washington D.C. version shows Joseph wearing a dark green tunic and gold robe.
1270, Christ lays swaddled in his manger (fig. 17). His gaze follows the golden rays of light leading to the heavens, which have opened in celebration of his birth. This early example emphasizes the connection made between Christ and his Father in heaven. Similarly, in Lorenzo Lotto’s *Nativity*, 1450-59, a newborn Christ rests in his crib as Joseph and Mary kneel in admiration (fig. 18). In this image the baby eagerly stretches his arms upwards. He looks towards the sky as angels float above, providing a heavenly presence. Christ is reliant on the divine connection to God. He looks heavenward as if God returns his gaze. In Reni’s paintings, however, Christ does not look towards the heavens. Instead his gaze is directed at Joseph. They each appear captivated by one another, amplifying their connection. With Joseph’s significance as God, the link between he and Christ mimics those from previous nativity scenes. A gaze towards heaven is substituted for an exchange between himself and his earthly father, suggesting that Joseph is a replacement for God. With God’s physical presence in the scene, angels or rays of light would serve no purpose in strengthening God’s heavenly presence.

In Reni’s series, Joseph cradles Christ as a loving father would cradle his son. As opposed to early images of Joseph, Reni depicted him as an active patriarch in the Child’s life, just as he psychologically needed one in his own life. Because the artist desired a compassionate father figure, he illustrated that kind of affection in his series. Acting as a devoted father, Joseph bows his head towards Christ in each one of the paintings, creating a tangible relationship. God sanctioned Joseph to take his place in raising Christ, but it was Reni’s prerogative to re-insert God in place of Joseph. This insertion of God parallels the psychological longing of father-absent men to mentally create ideal fantasy fathers. Reni could not settle for a mortal man such as Joseph to fill the void of father; rather it was necessary that the artist turn to an eternal, “fantasy” father, which God embodied. The meaning behind Reni’s bond was epitomized as a

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118 Biller, 97.
loving God and an equally loving son. Reni’s image allowed the true father and son to reside together.

Just as Joseph took the place of Christ’s father, Reni would have envisioned that God could similarly fulfill the fatherly absence in his own life. Both Joseph and God were ideal models of a patriarch. While Reni certainly could have looked towards Joseph to fill the role, God was the absolute Father. The Council of Trent had admonished God’s grace and mercy as a loving Father in heaven. God was the only man who remained perfect in all of his actions. He forever remained unchanged, radiating a complete acceptance and love upon his children; He was not the critical father that Reni had despised. Having experienced what to him was a flawed role model, Reni desired a father with no faults. He believed that God could fill that void in his life, and he actively placed him in that role through his St. Joseph paintings. To Reni, Joseph signified God as man; placing him within an earthly setting, he could believably act as Reni’s father.

**Conclusion**

It was the newfound recognition that Joseph received within the Catholic Church that allowed Reni to illustrate his ideas of an ideal father figure. It took centuries for the cult of Joseph to establish the importance of this earthly father. Once this happened, however, Joseph was justly recognized as a critical figure in the lives of Mary and Christ. He was a man divinely called of God to care for, protect, and love the Savior of the world. These developments likewise transferred into art. Joseph began as a figure relegated to the background as an insignificant character. In time, he emerged as a saint who resided in the foreground as a divine father. Furthermore, Joseph began to be represented as an allusion to God.

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119 Coming from the 23rd Session, Chapter III. Council of Trent, 172.
This materialization in the seventeenth century was an opportune time for Reni to illustrate his personal sanction of Joseph as God the Father. He broke from traditional representations of Biblical scenes including Mary, and presented an intimate moment between Joseph and the infant Christ. His scenes contain no blatant elements of heaven such as angels or rays of light. Additionally, Reni placed the pair in an earthy, ambiguous setting. Such surroundings acted as a secular stage for a personalized father and son interaction.

Reni lived a troubled life of psychosexual conflict. The detachment he felt from his father was heightened by his father’s untimely death. Without a father to act as a male role model, Reni’s masculine nature could not fully develop. This only added to the attachment he felt to his mother; and this also fostered his inability to associate with other women. He experienced a lack of trust in most relationships resulting from the death of his father. Without a secure role model, Reni was psychologically driven to spend his life searching for a replacement. Because of disappointments with his own father, he looked to the idealized male influence: God. God was the ultimate patriarch and was the perfect replacement for Reni’s deficient father. Reni used his series of *St. Joseph* to depict a tangible bond between himself and God. Just as Joseph replaced God on earth, so did God become a replacement for Reni’s father in his art.

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120 Popenoe, 152.
121 Ibid, 142.
Fig 1. Guido Reni, *St Joseph with Infant Christ in his Arms, Oil on canvas. 126x101 cm, 1620s, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia.*
Fig 2. Guido Reni, *St. Joseph and the Christ Child*, 1620s. Collection Constance Grimand Foundation, Florida, United States.
Fig 4. Guido Reni, *St Joseph and the Christ Child*, 1630. Oil on canvas, 123x91.5cm.
Museo Diocesano di Milano, Milan, Italy.
Fig 5. Guido Reni, *St Joseph and the Christ Child*, late 1630s or 1640s. Private Collection, Bologna, Italy.
Fig 6. Guido Reni, *St Joseph and the Christ Child*, 1638-1640. Oil on canvas, 88.9x72.4cm. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas, United States.
Fig 7. Giovanni Bellini, *Madonna of the Pear*, 1488. Oil on panel, 83x66cm. Accademia Carrara, Bergamo, Italy.
Fig. 8. Artist unknown, *Nativity and Adoration of Christ*, 1290-1300. Tempera and tooled gold on panel with vertical grain, modern glass and animal bones, 36.2x28.9cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, United States.
Fig 9. Robert Campin, *Merode Altarpiece*, 1425. Oil on wood, 64.5x117.8cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, United States.
Fig 10. Lelio Orsi, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, after 1555. Oil on canvas, 68x49cm. Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, Germany.
Fig 11. Pellegrino da San Daniele, *St. Joseph and the Christ Child with a Shepherd*, 1500-1501. Canvas, 280x165cm. Udine, Cathedral, Italy.
Fig 12. Bartolomé Estebán Murillo, *Saint Joseph with the Infant Saviour (Angels in the Clouds)*, late seventeenth century. Oil on canvas, 191.7x124.5cm. Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, New Zealand.
Fig 14. Follower of Taddeo Gaddi, *Story of Job, Satan’s Pact with God*, 1360s. Detached fresco, 300x940cm. Campo santo di Pisa, Italy.
Fig 16. Fra Angelico, *Nativity*, Convent of San Marco cell 5, 1438-45. Fresco, 177x148cm. Museo di San Marco, Italy.
Fig 17. Guido da Siena, *Nativity*, ca. 1270. Tempera and gold on wood, 36.4x47.5cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, France.
Fig 18. Lorenzo Lotto, *Nativity*, 1523. Oil on panel, 46x35.9cm. The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., United States.
Bibliography


