'Seek the Eyes of Mary': A Widow and a Virgin's Illuminating Invitation

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ABSTRACT

“Seek the Eyes of Mary”: A Widow and a Virgin’s Illuminating Invitation

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A deep visual analysis of Ludovico Carracci’s 1588 *Madonna and Child, Angels, and Saints Francis, Dominic, Mary Magdalene and the Donor Cecilia Bargellini Boncompagni* with an emphasis on the role of the patron, the significance of the locality, and the visual semiotics of the Virgin Mary’s gaze in prompting conversion in the repentant prostitutes of the Carmelite *convertite* convent associated with Ss. Filippo and Giacomo in Bologna, Italy. Including a commentary on contemporary social expectations of modest behavior and the painting’s deliberate incorporation of inappropriate female behavior towards a religious purpose. A discussion of uniquely Carmelite iconography, the use of Ignatian mental prayer in convents, and self-determination in imagery by a Bolognese aristocratic woman.

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Introduction

“Seek the eyes of Mary,” St Ignatius encouraged the practitioner of his *Spiritual Exercises*, “Following her, thou canst not wander.” In 1588, Donna Cecilia Bargellini Boncompagni commissioned the *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Angels and Saints* from Ludovico Carracci for the side chapel of the small church of Ss. Giacomo and Filippo in Bologna. The church was connected to an adjacent Carmelite convent of *convertite*, repentant prostitutes who had entered monastic orders. Located in the textile district on the Via delle Lame, the church and convent were strategically located on one of the only streets in the city where prostitution was legally practiced. This powerful altarpiece features the Virgin Mary with an inquisitive, inviting gaze that was positioned to be seen immediately upon entrance to the church. The composition echoes the popular Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* by directing the viewer to the eyes of Mary in a moment of challenging self-inquiry. The penitent prostitute was visually drawn in and invited to follow the example of the twisting figure of Mary Magdalene in the lower right corner in turning away from prostitution and leaving the world in pursuit of a holier vocation.

Late sixteenth-century Bologna experienced a flurry of social and religious reforms associated with the post-Tridentine era. Donna Cecilia’s brother-in-law, Ugo Boncompagni, had been elected pope in 1572 and taken the name of Gregory XIII. As the first Bolognese pope in hundreds of years, his papacy was characterized by a reform agenda responding to the recent Council of Trent and his early legal training at the University of Bologna. Connections to Rome were especially strong during his thirteen-year papacy, and Bologna followed Rome’s example in addressing the cycle of poverty and sin for women. As one of the leading ladies of the city,

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Donna Cecilia joined these reform efforts as a patron of the convent of the *convertite*, enabling prostitutes to leave their lives of sin and enter holy orders. Donna Cecilia was particularly devoted to their cause and left a significant portion of her wealth to the convent in her will, asking that they say mass for her in perpetuity.\(^2\) The *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Angels and Saints* that she commissioned from Ludovico Carracci is more commonly referred to as the *Bargellini Madonna* and emphasizes her pious patronage of the convent while encouraging the conversion of the penitent.

Donna Cecilia commissioned an unusually engaging Virgin Mary who visually involves the viewer with a questioning glance. This abrupt departure from traditional imagery and social norms of averted feminine eyes has not been studied, missing relevant elements of sixteenth-century immersive devotion, such as St Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises*. Previous scholarship has failed to recognize the layers of meaning instilled in the precision of the composition, particularly in the prominent depiction of the locality, as well as in the unconventional engagement of the donor, the Virgin, and Mary Magdalene with the expected viewership through their positioning and posing. The donor’s fixed meditative gaze reflects her spiritual practice and is mirrored by Mary Magdalene’s symbolic spiritual turning towards the Madonna and Child. The Virgin’s interactive, interrogatory gaze invites the intended audience of repentant prostitutes to engage in performative piety by following Mary Magdalene in turning from their sins, cleansing themselves, and entering the convent. This performative path would have been revisited repeatedly by the enclosed nuns in daily prayer and meditation in front of the altar, glorifying their city and the donor’s saintly patronage through their spiritual efforts.

The *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Angels and Saints* consists of a foregrounded circle of saints venerating the Madonna and Child, who are enthroned on the right of the painting. The Boncompagni family is represented by their heraldic dragon engraved on the arm of the Virgin Mary’s throne. On the left of the painting, Saint Dominic looks out at the viewer and gestures towards the Virgin. St. Francis kneels barefoot, gazes adoringly, and presents a supplicating woman identified as Donna Cecilia adorned in rich blue-black attire to the Virgin and Child. On the lower right of the painting, Mary Magdalene turns towards the throne and offers her jar of ointment with her right hand while introducing the viewer with her left. The Madonna is celebrated above by flying putti bearing flowers, swinging censers, and lowering a crown onto her head. Taken together, the foregrounded circle creates a *sacra conversazione* with the patron saints of the major mendicant orders in Bologna. Behind the circle, attendant musical angels honor the Madonna with song under an architectural portico framed by columns. In the background, the sun rises over the Bologna skyline, illuminating the famous leaning towers of the city.

**A *sacra conversazione* set in Bologna**

The prominent positioning of the Bologna skyline invites a different reading of this painting. As a *sacra conversazione*, the *Bargellini Madonna* is most often compared to Titian’s *Pesaro Madonna* for its off-center composition, columns and enthroned Madonna on a diagonal with the donor (Fig. 2). Ludovico’s composition, however, brings the *sacra conversazione* group much closer and reduces the number of participants by combining the patron’s family with saints.\(^3\) Unlike Titian’s strong, pyramidal composition, Ludovico employs a more oval,

\(^3\) Carlo Cesare Malvasia, *Malvasia’s Life of the Carracci*, edited by Anne Summerscale (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 127 states that Ludovico was opposed to the practice of ‘obvious portraits in sacred histories, especially in public commissions, saying that his was the refuge of earlier painters who
Mannerist structure, reinforcing the intimacy of the *sacra conversazione* through the various gestures of the saints and *putti* that direct the eye back to the Christ Child and the Madonna. Ludovico complicates the image by overlaying a strong linear perspective on this foregrounded circle, separating the narrative center of the painting from the compositional center. While *sacra conversazione* imagery normally depicts a gathering outside of time and space, Ludovico’s Madonna is meant to reside in a particular time and place with purpose and meaning. The Madonna is the center of action and veneration in the foreground, but Ludovico chose to place the Bologna skyline at the formal center of the painting with the columns framing the open blue space of the sky and drawing the eye to the perspectival focus.\(^4\) The city’s position at the crux of the painting is emphasized by placing the rising sun behind it. Bologna is not meant to be merely a decorative landscape setting but rather assumes a significant role in the *sacra conversazione*.

Bologna also played a significant role in the development of art in the late sixteenth century as home to the *Accademia degli Incamminati*, founded in 1582 by Ludovico Carracci and his cousins, Agostino and Annibale. The Carracci cooperatively created a distinctive approach that combined the High Renaissance techniques of Raphael, Michelangelo, Titian and Correggio with humanistic learning. Ludovico, Agostino, and Annibale collaborated extensively on their early work, making references to the masters and to each other. Relevant here, Annibale also painted his *Madonna Enthroned with St Matthew* in 1588 with a small grouping and tucked

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\(^4\) The columns reference the city’s many famous porticoes that line major streets and provided a covered area in front of palaces for the business of the city to take place. Major building campaigns in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries extended the porticoes throughout the city and up to the hilltop chapel that houses the *Madonna di San Luca*. There are reputedly 42 km of porticoes throughout the city.
a column behind the Virgin’s cloth of honor (Fig. 3). Like Titian, Ludovico and Annibale use architectural elements to expand the wall of the church and create the illusion of deep space behind the altar. However, instead of copying Titian’s ecclesiastical architectural setting opening onto deep space, Annibale placed his grouping directly into a luscious, hazy landscape with nondescript architecture and a column disappearing into foliage. Perhaps both Carracci modeled the off-centered Madonna as a means of engaging viewers progressing up the central nave from a side altar, but they did so with very different localizing effects. Ludovico’s effect is one of deep space and an openness behind the altar that incontrovertibly emphasizes the locale. 5

The unusual placement of the *sacra conversazione* in familiar space enhances the meaning of the painting and its characters and creates a uniquely Bolognese gloss.

As a distinctly Bolognese celebration of the Virgin and Child, the *Bargellini Madonna* echoes Bologna’s most famous Marian image, the *Madonna di San Luca*, an icon of the Virgin and Child done in the Byzantine style believed to have been created by St. Luke himself (Fig. 4). The icon was brought to Bologna in the twelfth century and placed in a church on a nearby hilltop, where it was cared for by a small community of nuns and was believed to watch over the city. For hundreds of years, the icon has been brought down from the hilltop and paraded through the city streets in commemoration of its miraculous guardianship. The *Madonna di San Luca* stopped at various churches, convents, and civic sites to be praised and entertained by plays and music, symbolically drawing together the city and ending with mass on the steps of San Petronio, the cathedral at the city’s center. 6

Ludovico’s *Bargellini Madonna* not only parallels

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5 David Rosand, “Titian in the Frari.” *Art Bulletin/Ed. John Shapley*, 1971, 201-203. Titian’s original painting may not have included columns but may have used a barrel vault more consistent with the Frari’s architecture. The colossal columns would have been painted in later, possibly in 1669. If that is true, then Ludovico’s elegant Corinthian columns would not be a quote of Titian’s painting. Instead, they may be an original design evoking the church architecture, or, has been suggested, they may refer to the characteristic porticoes of Bologna.

6 Nicholas Terpstra, *Lay Confraternities and Civic Religion in Renaissance Bologna*. (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 214. The *Madonna di San Luca* is brought into the city even today annually in
the icon with the Virgin’s outward gaze and the Christ Child’s leftward gaze, but evokes this May festivity through the backdrop of musical angels, the putti with flowers and censer, and, especially, the putti in the act of crowning the Virgin, which replicates the in situ framing of the *Madonna di San Luca* (Fig. 5).

In 1573, officials from Rome attempted to take control of the powerful painting and remove it from its hilltop chapel. Arguments centered around the nuns who cared for the painting not being able to observe strict clausura, but the Bolognese nobility looked on the exchange as another attempt at control of their city by Rome and fought a strategic battle to keep it. The second half of the sixteenth century featured several such battles over local or papal artistic governance. For instance, in 1563, Pope Pius IV used art to show his dominance over the city by restructuring the city center and installing the Fountain of Neptune there. A potent symbol of domination, Neptune’s control of the waters was meant to indicate the Pope’s control over the daily activities of the city. Along with the statue of Pope Gregory XIII erected in the Palazzo Communale in 1580, it clearly indicated external supremacy over commercial activity.

In the case of the *Madonna di San Luca*, the combined efforts of local leaders in the Senate and their elite female family members residing in and ruling local convents to maintain the icon in its traditional location reflect the power of faith to define civic identity locally. Donna Cecilia was one of many noblewomen who wrote letters defending the nuns and advocated for maintaining the icon’s current position, using her familial relationship and influence with Pope Gregory XIII to orchestrate an exception to strict clausura for the nuns and allow the image to stay in its

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May to celebrate the fifteenth-century miraculous deliverance from rain but has also been brought into the city for Holy week, Lent, and for deliverance from plague. See also, Danielle Callegari and Shannon McHugh, “*Playing Papal Politics: Senatorial and Monastic Allies in Early Modern Bologna*” *Renaissance Studies*, 32 no. 4, (2018), 606.

7 Callegari and McHugh, “*Papal Politics*”, 607, 610.

8 Terpstra, *Lay Confraternities*, 212-215. “Both Julius II and Leo X ordered processions of the Madonna di San Luca to celebrate their ‘liberation’ of Bologna”.
The pontiff’s contribution to Bologna maintaining its most treasured image is recognized by his emblem on the throne behind the Madonna. The active role of Bologna’s leading ladies in preserving the icon and of the generations of nuns that had attended it on the hill may also be referenced in this painting that foregrounds women adoring the Virgin and Child. The references to the *Madonna di San Luca* and local practice in the flowers, porticoes and female attendants indicate that the *Bargellini Madonna* depicts Bologna’s distinct local practice of Marian veneration.

**Donna Cecilia as Patron and Saint**

Donna Cecilia’s central positioning in the *Bargellini Madonna* is commensurate with traditional donor portrayals, but her dress is conspicuously non-descript. Her voluminous blue-black drapery and unusual wimple defy easy identification. She is most often described as St. Martha dressed in widow’s weeds but has also been described as a Carmelite tertiary or as St. Clare. The choice of widow’s weeds aligns with her recent widowhood and the significance of altar placement in the family chapel. A depiction as St. Martha would have nicely paralleled her sister’s depiction as Mary Magdalene, pairing the donor siblings with saintly ones. The choice of St. Martha would also emphasize Donna Cecilia’s choice to remain ‘active’ in marrying and participating in good works outside the convent. Mary Magdalene and St. Martha were often used to contrast the choice between the active and contemplative lives, because of their biblical

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9 Callegari and McHugh, “Papal Politics”, 616.
10 Boschloo, *Annibale Carracci in Bologna*, 16 for a discussion of the *Bargellini Madonna* and comparison with Annibale’s *Madonna and St Matthew*. Boschloo assumes the figure is St Martha. Malvasia, *Life of the Carracci*, 127 also describes her as St. Martha, saying that the widow’s mantle was ‘the mark of an exemplary, decorous life altogether different from the vain widowhood of today’. Patricia Rocco, “Maniera Devota, Mano Donnesca: Women’s Work and Stitching for Virtue in the Visual Culture of the Conservatori n Early Modern Bologna.” *Italian Studies/ Publ. by the Society of Italian Studies*, 2015. See 82 for a discussion of Saints Mary and Martha as visual exempla for reforming young women with pious work and pious thought.
story found in Luke 10. St. Martha chose the active life of service and homemaking, while Mary chose ‘the good part’ in continued devotion to the Savior, often associated with the choice to leave home and family and become a nun, enter a convent and take devotion and prayer as one’s occupation. St. Martha was often used to depict those who entered tertiary orders and remained with their families. Tertiary women also chose devotion and prayer but continued to engage with the world outside of the convent, thus remaining ‘active’. Donna Cecilia had a well-documented history of good works and piety in Bologna, and the choice of depiction as St. Martha would be a poetic statement on her self-image. The non-descript attire and lack of other identifying saintly attributes of St. Martha are subsumed under the highly customized portrait of Donna Cecilia the recognizable woman, suggesting an association with the saint but declaring the identity of the patron.

Donna Cecilia may also have chosen the association with St. Martha because of her congruous connection with the work of reforming prostitutes. The convent connected with Ss. Filippo and Giacomo was a Carmelite convent established only a few years before with that specific mission, following the example of the Casa di Santa Marta, or House of St. Martha, established by St. Ignatius and the Jesuits in mid-sixteenth century Rome, discussed below. Donna Cecilia may have meant to associate herself not only with the reforming St. Martha but with the lay Carmelite order. We have no record of Donna Cecilia entering tertiary orders, but she had a strong association with the Carmelites, as her recently deceased son, Cardinal Filippo Boncompagni, had served as protector of the order. The placement of a Carmelite tertiary and

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11 KJV Luke 10:38-42. The person of Mary Magdalene was often combined with that of Mary of Bethany and the adulterous woman of Luke 7 during this time period, following the practice established a millennium earlier by Pope Gregory the Great.
Mary Magdalene at the front of the *sacra conversazione* group creates a pointed commentary on the purpose of the altarpiece and the church within which it resides in ministering to this vulnerable section of society. Indeed, the folds of both women’s dresses follow Mary Magdalene’s foreshortened hand and cascade out of the painting into our space, bridging the divide of the frame. Donna Cecilia’s depiction as a Carmelite tertiary would correspond with Ludovico’s fresco program surrounding the altar, of which one image depicted Elijah receiving the Carmelite scapular. As the legendary founder of the first Carmelites, Elijah’s receipt of the scapular, an important part of the Carmelite habit, from the Virgin was associated with special protection and a promised early release from purgatory for all those who faithfully wore it, both lay and monastic. This promise was theologically contested in the preceding centuries but reaffirmed by Pope Clement VII in 1530, and the cult of the scapular subsequently experienced a revival in the sixteenth century. To this day, professed lay and monastic individuals choose to be buried in the Carmelite scapular in the hopes that the Virgin Mary will intercede on their behalf in an early release from the punishment of purgatory.

The figure of Donna Cecilia also closely approximates the figure of St. Clare in Annibale Carracci’s *Pietà with Saints* of 1585 (Fig. 6). Here in the left front corner are St. Francis and St. 

13 Donna Cecilia has also been identified as a Carmelite nun, as she is now in the official label of the painting in the Pinacoteca Nazionale Bologna – this despite no similarity between her blue-black fabric and the white habits under a black veil that Carmelite nuns traditionally wore in Bologna. The brown habits promoted by St. Teresa de Ávila had not yet been normalized in the international church. It is difficult to know what attire professed Carmelite tertiaries or confraternity members adopted during this time period, though we know that there was a lay version of the scapular promoted. Donna Cecilia does not overtly display the scapular, but her pious posturing and non-descript clothing evoke ritual attire.

14 Sadly, Ludovico’s fresco program was whitewashed over in the Napoleonic suppression. See Ibid, 54-56 for a thorough attempt to reconstruct the missing pieces.

15 Ibid, 56-58 and Peter-Thomas Rohrbach. *Journey to Carith: The Story of the Carmelite Order* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co, Inc, 1966), 72. In 1613 Pope Paul V issued a decree on the scapular “The Carmelite Fathers may preach that the Christian people can piously believe in the aid of the souls of the brethren and confreres of the sodality of the Most Blessed Virgin of Mount Carmel. Through her continuous intercessions, pious sufferages, merits, and special protection the Most Blessed Virgin, especially on Saturday, the day dedicated to her by the Church, she will help after their death the brethren and members of the sodality who die in charity.”
Clare kneeling before the slain Christ on his swooning mother’s lap opposite the Magdalene. The Carracci’s exchange is well-documented, and the similarities in composition suggest correlation in meaning. In Annibale’s Pietà, St. Clare holds her signature monstrance and is dressed in the habit of her order: black veil on gray habit. In Ludovico’s Madonna, there is no monstrance and Cecilia is dressed in rich blue-black, but she is again paired with St. Francis, who even extends his right hand to present her to the Virgin. The local viewer would likely have connected her with the most famous Clarissan nun in Bologna, St. Caterina de Vigri, who was experiencing a rise in popular devotion leading up to her beatification in 1592. St. Caterina established a convent at Ferrara before being asked by the ruling Bentivoglio family to come and establish a similar convent at Bologna in the mid-fifteenth century. Her spiritual leadership in the city was deeply influential, and she is one of the patron saints of Bologna, along with St. Dominic. St. Caterina’s affection for the Virgin famously found an outlet in her devotional drawings of the Madonna and Child, making her the patron saint of artists. Her inclusion by proxy in the painting would have again recalled the local devotion to the Madonna di San Luca by presenting Donna Cecilia as another leading lady participating in Marian veneration. In addition, it would have been a visual pun on Donna Cecilia’s role as Ludovico’s patron and St. Caterina’s role as patron saint of artists. In representing Donna Cecilia in dark, but non-descript attire, Ludovico may have been purposefully eliding all three saints – St. Martha, St. Clare and St. Caterina de Vigri - in the person of the patron. The removal of distinct iconography

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17 Craig Monson, “Disembodied Voices” in The Crannied Wall, edited by Craig Monson (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992). See 196 for a discussion of St. Caterina’s increasing popularity in Bologna before her canonization in 1713. Of particular relevance are the lavish musical spectacles sponsored by influential families to celebrate her feast day.
associated with any of the specific saints emphasizes Donna Cecilia’s portrait likeness while simultaneously suggesting contextual association.

Regardless of whether Donna Cecilia is meant to be perceived as St. Martha, St. Clare, St. Caterina, a Carmelite tertiary or all of the above in one, she is clearly placed before the Virgin and the viewer in the company of St. Dominic and St. Francis, with her praying hands just below the Virgin’s bare foot. The mendicant orders of Dominic, Francis, Clare, and Carmel all experienced a revival in the sixteenth century focused on a return to their vows of poverty. The resurgence of the Carmelite order was led by St. Teresa de Ávila, who founded a branch that came to be called ‘Discalced’ or ‘shoeless’ and was characterized by poverty, mysticism, prayer, and deep ascetic devotion. Donna Cecilia’s hands almost receive the shoeless foot of the Virgin, highlighted in clear light in an otherwise dark space at the center of the painting. Pope Gregory XIII was responsible for formally recognizing St Teresa’s popular Discalced movement in 1580. His representation in the family heraldry on the arm of the throne simultaneously celebrates his defense of a local icon, the Madonna di San Luca, and his support of reforming efforts emblematized by the humble, shoeless Madonna. Donna Cecilia’s commitment to these reform movements is demonstrated by her reverent acceptance of the Virgin’s bare foot, and by the commending gesture of similarly shoeless St. Francis. Donna Cecilia did not take vows of poverty and is not shoeless herself, but her saintly depiction as patron evokes her financial support of the adjacent convent as a physical act of spiritual devotion to the Virgin and Child. She wears rich, luxurious clothing that contrasts starkly in color and texture with the rough habits of Sts. Francis and Dominic. The simplicity of her dress and the near reception of the Virgin’s foot suggest that while she is a woman of wealth, she would rather “lay up treasure in heaven”
and “seek first the kingdom of God”. The humility and piety of her kneeling figure distance her from the criticism leveled by Jesus at the Pharisee in Luke 7, a story that will be returned to later. The Pharisee fed Jesus but did not honor him and so had less part in his forgiveness than the sinful woman who washed his feet with tears and anointed them with oil. The sinful woman’s sins were forgiven and she was told to “go in peace”. Donna Cecilia’s status as an upstanding citizen places her circumstances closer to the Pharisee in this story than the sinful woman, raising the question of whether Donna Cecilia’s religious observance is a superficial show of wealth and magnanimity, or if it is truly a humble offering to God. By having her figure kneel at the foot of the Madonna, Donna Cecilia eschews the sin of pride and distances herself from the hypocritical Pharisee, hopefully taking part in Jesus’ parting words, “Thy faith hath saved thee”. 

**Spiritual Implications of Social Reform**

Donna Cecilia’s patronage follows a larger pattern of Bolognese nobility eliding Christian salvific sentiments with civic pride in an attempt to cleanse the city and care for the female poor. Nicholas Terpstra has extensively documented Italian cities’ attempts to care for women and children in precarious situations. An offshoot of the efforts of St Ignatius to rescue vulnerable souls from the clutches of venial sin, this reform recognized the economic factors that created cycles of poverty and forced women into prostitution. Convents created specifically to target reformed prostitutes, or *convertite*, had been founded across the peninsula in the thirteenth century, but many had fallen out of favor or closed their doors. In the sixteenth century, cities

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18 KJV Matthew 6:20 & 33.  
reinstituted these convents, but also added ‘Houses of Succor’ for those who were unwilling or unable to enter solemn vows.\textsuperscript{21} The houses would teach marketable skills and allow women to earn money towards a dowry so they could afford to get married and re-enter society or choose to enter a convent.\textsuperscript{22} Similar houses were established to care for battered women and the children of prostitutes, as well as orphans. The nobility of Bologna was particularly active in founding and funding this movement, using their patronage as a way of establishing social position and civic pride in relation to other city-states such as Florence. Pope Gregory XIII instituted a special indulgence in 1578 for those who donated to these causes.\textsuperscript{23} Donna Cecilia’s involvement in this movement is well-documented, with contemporary poems written about her illustrious precedent of piety and compassion as an example to other Bolognese women. The religious motivations behind these efforts created a culture of benevolent zeal that saved otherwise helpless women from sin and damnation while glorifying the people and the cleansed city. Contemporary references to “Bologna Perlustrata” or “Bologna, the Lustrous Pearl” were meant to evoke a vanguard city in mitigating the disease and sin associated with prostitution.

Ludovico’s placement of the rising son behind the skyline of Bologna and his use of atmospheric perspective creates a visual lustrous pearl at the center of the \textit{Bargellini Madonna} and highlights Donna Cecilia and the city’s emphasis on reforming prostitution. Ludovico’s \textit{sacra conversazione} is composed of donors dressed as saints glorifying their community, dedicated to helping the poor, and venerating the Virgin by making it possible for prostitutes to leave their sins.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 18-20 for a discussion of the Jesuits’ particular involvement in this reform, the alleviation of the poverty cycle, and the elite’s emulation of Christ in relieving and educating the poor.
\textsuperscript{23} Rocco, “Maniera Devota, Mano Donnesca,” 87.
In the sixteenth century, Bologna experienced major political and economic advantages as the second city in the papal states. This connection to Rome also resulted in social experimentation in addressing the poverty cycle’s impact on forcing women into prostitution and spiritual peril, making Bologna the vanguard example on the peninsula.\textsuperscript{24} St. Ignatius initiated these ideas in the 1540s with the founding in Rome of the Casa di Santa Marta for repentant prostitutes and Compagnia delle Vergini Miserabili, targeting young women at high risk of becoming prostitutes. Some criticized the move, saying that the prostitutes were past saving and could not be reformed. Ignatius’ saintly response characterized the movement:

That is not so. If with all my care and trouble I can persuade but one of them to refrain from sin for a single night…, then I would leave nothing, absolutely nothing, undone in order that she should at least during that time not offend God – even if I knew for certain that she would immediately afterward return to her former vice.\textsuperscript{25}

Ignatius’ active recruitment was documented by his biographer, Pedro de Ribadeniera:

At the time when the Casa di Santa Marta was being established at Rome and some leading courtesans were beginning to turn away from their evil business…. Ignatius made a habit of accompanying them in the public street…. It was a wondrous sight to see the Holy Man – a footman, as it were, running before a young and pretty street girl, in order to save her from the clutches of the most cruel tyrant and to lead her into safety in the hand of Christ…. He went with them either to the newly established convent or to the house of some highborn lady, in which the girls were to be at first accustomed to domestic tasks and then, spurred by the example and admonitions of other girls, to a life of virtue.\textsuperscript{26}

St. Ignatius’ partnership with women of high birth in turning poor women from their errors mirrors Donna Cecilia’s pious role in Ludovico’s altarpiece. Bolognese noblemen in Rome were integrally involved in ministering to the vulnerable women of Rome, with financier Giulio Folchi donating dowries and writing a treatise to encourage others to join him in the blessings of

\textsuperscript{24} Nicholas Terpstra, \textit{Cultures of Charity: Women, Politics, and the Reform of Poor Relief in Renaissance Italy}. I Tatti Studies in Italian Renaissance History. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), 1-2


\textsuperscript{26} Ibid, 262.
charity. Pope Gregory XIII personally answered pleas for help from prostitutes in the street to provide honest lives for their daughters through financial support. In Bologna, confraternities and the nobility engaged in a number of social experiments encompassing the life cycle of poverty to follow this pious example of combatting sin, but the unique social fabric of Bologna changed the surrounding dialogue. Bologna had no class of famous courtesans such as Rome and Venice, some of whom also supported the reform efforts financially. Instead, the fashionable and influential women in Bologna were all from the leading families of the city and maintained reputations of pious respectability. Caroline Murphy’s work on the praise-filled *laude* poems of this period reveals that, “If in Rome and Venice the women of beauty and note included famous courtesans, in Bologna such women are missing from the discourse of the laude. Here the beauty ‘to die for’ (as many writers declared they would) is eminently respectable but no less interesting.” These *laude* poems define the city by the quality of their women and not by their illustrious men. In fact, when listed in hierarchical order of beauty and status, Donna Cecilia appears first among the women of the city.

Donna Cecilia is described as a “*matrone illustre*” or “illustrious matron,” whose physical and spiritual beauty “will spur one onto every kind of thought, but not those of illicit deeds but rather those that will bind one to serve and honour God. She can inflame anyone to true virtue…” The incorporation of the language of love poetry in this *laude* to virtue subverts the genre’s sinful association and subsumes the erotic power of women under a neo-platonic ideal representative of a higher cause. While the great women of other cities might move a man

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27 Ibid, 264-266.
28 Ibid, 265.
29 Caroline Murphy, “In Praise”, 441.
30 Ibid, 443-444
31 Ibid, 450.
32 Alessandro Griffoni, *Discorso della nobilità delle donne, con un breve ragionamento sopra le bellezze d’alcune honorassime gentildonne bolognese*, 1570s, as paraphrased in Ibid, 450.
to sin, the women of Bologna are no less beautiful but move men towards God. The *laude* intertwine the identity of “our city” and “our women” closely, extending the virtuousness of the women into the virtuousness of the city.\(^{33}\) Thus, “Bologna Perlustrata” was defined by the light of its “illustrious women.”\(^{34}\) These *laude* refer to the leading ladies of the city, but there is an interesting parallel with Ludovico’s painting. The virtue of Bologna’s aristocratic ladies illuminates the city gloriously, but the conversion of all women to a life of virtue would only increase the light of the city, especially if it were facilitated by those luminous leading ladies. In fact, when Donna Cecilia’s great-granddaughter Isabella made her entrance into society, she was praised in the popular *laude* just as her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother had been before her. Isabella was described as “a resplendent sun [that] can chase all the clouds away from the earth.”\(^{35}\) These *laude* particularly celebrated the inherited virtue of female ancestors. Just a few years later, Ludovico’s use of a rising sun as the backdrop of his altarpiece echoes this hope of a rising female generation that will “chase all the clouds away” and finish the pious charitable work begun by Donna Cecilia in cleansing the city from sin. In fact, Donna Cecilia’s female descendants did continue to be major patrons of the convent in the following decades.\(^{36}\)

**The Donor’s Portrait as Signature**

As the primary donor, Donna Cecilia’s large, blue-black attire dominates the front-central position of the painting but demonstrates little of her personality. Her patronage facilitated both the painting and the good work of conversion among the repentant prostitutes in the convent, yet her figure in the painting assumes the most static and least dynamic of all poses. She gazes

\(^{33}\) Ibid, 454.

\(^{34}\) In 1590, Giulio Cesare Croce wrote that “as the names of these [illustrious and intelligent] women are inscribed in history, so is the name of Bologna.” As translated in Ibid, 444.


attentively at the Virgin while all other figures are gesturing or twisting in some way. The
semiotics of this gaze can be read as the opposite of the Virgin’s. The Virgin breaks the sacra
conversazione circle by turning her gaze to invite the viewer to participate. Donna Cecilia
maintains the circle with her constant gaze while substantively providing the means for the
viewer to enter the painting and the convent.

Her fixed gaze becomes the defining feature of her personality and ballasts the intimacy
of the foreground with its performative fixity. The direction of her gaze is generally towards the
Virgin, a fact that has been criticized as an example of Ludovico’s still-developing abilities. It is
possible, however, that it is intended instead to be slightly vacuous to signify the visualization
that comes from advanced participation in The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. The Exercises
were widely popular in the sixteenth century with clergy and laity alike and consisted of a series
of guided meditations on the sufferings of Christ and various other topics, with an emphasis on
immersive experience and affective piety.37 They began with a composition of place, a
visualization exercise to set the stage, but the goal was to move beyond visual aides to a
transcendent, even visionary experience. Donna Cecilia’s focused gaze could be intended to
enact this exceptional spiritual practice. Contemporary Lombard style paintings would articulate
a visionary experience by contrasting the detailed, realistic depiction of the foregrounded
supplicant with a hazy, mystical depiction of the subject of the vision, often separating the two
by an architectural feature.38 Ludovico’s Bargellini Madonna separates the foreground visitation
with the Virgin and Child from the visionary backdrop of Bologna Perlustrata with the columns

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37 While the Ignatian Exercises were structured as a four-week spiritual retreat, they were frequently adjusted for use
as a daily devotional guide lasting over the course of several months. In addition, it was common to engage in
meditative mental prayer after the manner of St. Ignatius.
38 Anne H. Muraoka, “Quella inerudite semplicità lombarda : The Lombard Origins of Counter-Reformation
Affectivity” in Art and Reform in the Late Renaissance, edited by Jesse Locker (New York: Routledge, Taylor
&Francis Group, 2019), 124.
of Bologna’s famous porticoes. The implication is that the veneration of the Virgin is an actual occurrence, perhaps eliding her divine presence with the real presence of the *Madonna di San Luca*, while *Bologna Perlustrata* is an ideal object not yet attained. Indeed, Donna Cecilia’s efforts to sponsor reform in her hometown mirrored this spiritual effort, combining secular patronage with prayerful devotion to the Virgin to create a heaven on earth akin to the New Jerusalem. Her conspicuous placement in the company of saints implies that Donna Cecilia may have already reached a transcendent, heavenly state where she can gaze endlessly on the visage of the Lord, while she continues to pray and intercede for Bologna. The elision of several female saints in the depiction of Donna Cecilia and her pose as an intercessory agent almost beatifies the living woman, a message that surely would have been reiterated in the many prayers offered at the altar by the *convertite* recipients of her charity.39 The economic and spiritual vulnerability of the *convertite* meant that their conversion was a greater triumph for God and that their prayers of gratitude for their earthly and heavenly salvation would have had greater efficacy on behalf of their patron.40

Donna Cecilia’s assertive frontal placement in Ludovico’s painting reflects a sense of self, unique in sixteenth-century Italy. This sense of self may have come from Bologna’s *laude* tradition with its unusual emphasis on women, and particularly, widows. In a time when widows were encouraged into various forms of self-enclosure elsewhere, Bologna was notable for its engaged and confident widows. Many of these women had acted as political and financial agents during their husbands’ absences to Rome and received financial self-determination upon their deaths. Such was the case for Donna Cecilia. These widows continued to intervene successfully

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39 Murphy, “In Praise”, 451. Donna Cecilia’s 1598 will requested that mass be said for her in perpetuity by the convent inhabitants.
40 Terpstra, *Cultures of Charity*, 30.
on behalf of their families. The laude reflect this ethic and “[i]f the laude praise onestà, they omit the glorification of the shrinking violet, and some of the laude allude directly to beautiful, assertive, and talented widows.”41 While other donors may have commissioned works as an expiation of personal or familial sin and prominently placed themselves to receive the benefit of prayers offered, Donna Cecilia appears to have commissioned this altarpiece as visual documentation of her pious works and devotional legacy.42 Her portrait becomes an assertive signature of faith and Marian devotion through social artistry.43 The Bargellini Madonna is also the first work Ludovico signed and dated, located around the rim of the situla of holy water, just above Donna Cecilia’s praying hands. Patron and painter are both placed humbly at the foot of the Madonna and centrally in the adoring figures encircling her.

The Gaze as Performative

As mentioned above, the Madonna is placed on the side of the painting at an angle that would be immediately visible upon entrance to the church and would interact with petitioners walking through the nave. Her gaze is unusual and arresting in its directness, making a profound statement about the artist and patron’s intentions towards those viewers. Sacra conversazione imagery normally depicts a Virgin with modestly downcast eyes. She may look towards a portrayed donor, but it is ordinarily a saint that gazes out at the viewer and gestures to the Madonna. Both Titian’s Pesaro Madonna and Annibale’s Madonna and Child with Saint Matthew follow this pattern. Ludovico’s Madonna singularly engages the viewer in an abrupt departure from tradition. In this rather Baroque technique, the fourth wall is eliminated and the

41 Murphy, “In praise”, 442.
42 Rocco, “Maniera Devota, Mano Donnesca”, 88.
43 Murphy, Lavinia Fontana, 226-7 notes that there were several devotional pieces but no portraits in Donna Cecilia’s property inventory, so she may have disliked the genre. This makes the public statement of her positioning in Ludovico’s altarpiece all the more interesting.
viewer becomes an active participant in the discourse of the image. The twisting figure of the Madonna is a “sign-event” that signals a departure from static meditative symbol to discursive, expectant glorified being. The Virgin’s gaze is the sign, and the viewer, as the receptive subject, initiates the event. The work then exists in two simultaneous dimensions of observation and participation. When observed as part of a meditative device, the Virgin’s habitation within the sacra conversazione is outside of time and space and meant to lift the viewer by passively receiving the gaze. The Virgin and Child act in this function in the Pesaro Madonna and Annibale’s Madonna and St Matthew. Both Madonnas look down with humility, gazing near the saints and donors without actually exchanging glances with them. They are present in the company of the saints, but there is no transfer of meaning between them. Titian and Annibale’s Madonnas are passive recipients of the gaze within the painting as well, honored endlessly by painted saints who direct the viewer’s gaze to turn the actor-object dichotomy into an actor-object-object system. In contrast, as part of a participatory experience, Ludovico’s Madonna receives the gaze within the painting but redirects the force of that attention outwards and returns the external viewer’s gaze with an exchange of meaning that induces self-questioning and subsequent action.

44 Mieke Bal, “De-Disciplining the Eye.” Critical Inquiry 16 (3), 1990, 528-530. Bal uses the term ‘icon’ to describe a passive recipient of the gaze, which directly contradicts the discussion of this iconic image as an engaging, interactive figure. I have altered her terminology to eliminate confusion while maintaining the integrity of the argument. See also Patricia Simons, “Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture.” Expanding Discourse/ Ed. By Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, 1992, 20, where she discusses the role of the gaze and proscription of women’s eyes in fifteenth-century Florentine art in a Freudian argument. She makes brief mention of the Virgin Mary’s iconic tradition of gazing out of the frame in an intercessory role in footnote 84 on 28 as nonthreatening to the male gaze but makes no discussion of the gaze in terms of performative expectations of the viewer or engagement outside of erotic subtext. In Ludovico’s piece, the issue of an erotic viewer’s gaze is countered by the Madonna’s depiction as enthroned in chastity and purity. In addition, as discussed below, the targeted audience of female prostitutes alters the gender of the perceiving gaze and adopts the otherwise suggestive semiotic of reciprocal gaze into the sacred context.
The sign-event of Ludovico’s piece turns upon the gaze of the Madonna, creating an active, narrative exchange with the viewer. Ludovico’s Madonna looks at the viewer, rather than through her. This gaze diverges from traditional iconic images of the Virgin Mary facing the viewer, such as Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna* (Fig. 7) and Ludovico’s *Madonna degli Scalzi* (Fig. 8), or even a copy he made of the *Madonna di San Luca* (Fig. 9). The *Madonna degli Scalzi* looks absently to the left of the viewer, surveying through space and time without engaging in reciprocal exchange. Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna* comes closer to viewer engagement by attending directly forward. Her dynamic stance, with one foot lifted to step outwards, almost offers the Christ Child to the viewer. There is, however, no space for reciprocation, no room to enter the painting or return anything again but an eternal, contemplative gaze. This distance is also present in Ludovico’s copy of the *Madonna di San Luca*, with the Virgin directing the viewer to the Christ child in an unchanging, unemotive gesture. In contrast, Ludovico’s *Madonna dei Bargellini* holds her child close. Nothing is offered outside of her eyes and the tilt of her head, which accentuates her eyebrow and almost suggests a raised position and attendant questioning. Ludovico eschews the typical white veil on the Madonna for a barely visible transparent one, maintaining a clarity in coloring and message. The emphasis is on the Virgin’s face – she is an active character, her eyes unbounded by the limitations of extra fabric. The twist of her head, the focus of her gaze is the sign-event by which the meaning of the entire painting shifts from static to dynamic interaction.

There was significant precedent for miraculous interaction between nuns and the iconic images in their convents in the sixteenth century. The chronicles of convents in Rome, Venice, and Florence all document images of the Virgin Mary responding to prayerful petitioners and
miraculously coming alive. It is clear from the record that iconic images were more likely than narrative images to respond and that they had presence and were seen as “conduits of power” through which the Virgin Mary could be personally approached. Ludovico’s turning of the Madonna to visually engage the viewer draws on this tradition of direct, personal engagement between image and petitioner by referencing Bologna’s miraculous Madonna di San Luca icon. By releasing the Madonna’s gaze from the circle of saints and turning it outwards to the viewer, Ludovico invites exchange between viewer and image and sets the stage for a miraculous transaction between them.

The Bargellini Madonna draws on this precedence of interactive cult images’ direct, frontal engagement but diverges from the heavenly setting. When placed in recognizable space, feminine eye contact indicated a social deviation. This active, inviting Madonna is a strong departure from contemporary behavioral expectations of modesty. Counter-Reformation efforts at guarding the sanctity of women focused on their physical enclosure, in part to protect their eyes from taking in or causing evil in others. The enclosure of secular and monastic women was one of the most disputed and disruptive outcomes of the last session of the Council of Trent, with extensive attention paid to their spiritual safety and the benefits to men in not being tempted. Women who looked directly at men were assumed to be prostitutes soliciting business. At first glance, it would seem that the Bargellini Madonna’s distinctly coy gaze approximates more closely the sexual overtures of the world outside than the sacred dedication inside the church. Instead, the Virgin’s gaze becomes a sacred parody of those worldly solicitations, inviting the

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45 K.J.P. Lowe, Nuns’ Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 328, 332.
47 Kate Lowe has noted that the possession of a miraculous icon was one mark of a successful convent in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Ibid, 328.
viewer to follow the example of the Magdalene and turn from sin. The visual language of sexual love has been assimilated and remodeled into heavenly discourse, much like the literary language in the laude mentioned above. There is no eroticism in the Madonna’s posture, with her body still turned towards the saints and the Christ Child tucked safely in her arms. She welcomes the repentant sinner to enter her holy space and be cleansed. The anticipated audience of fallen women is reinforced by the placement of Donna Cecilia and her sister as Mary Magdalene in the foreground of the painting, with their robes rippling into our space. A penitent woman kneeling and praying at the altar would have glanced up to see the foreshortened hand of the patron saint of repentant prostitutes inviting her in, with the questioning gaze of the Virgin querying what course of action she will take.

The Path of Repentance

Ludovico’s dramatic, approachable Madonna emphasizes the empty space at the center of the painting. The Virgin’s encouragement to enter the conversation and Mary Magdalene’s gesture of introduction summons the viewer into the space at the foot of the throne. Ludovico has artificially inclined the space here to emphasize the placement of a beautifully detailed situla and aspergillum in otherwise dark space. The situla is used to hold holy water blessed by a priest and sprinkled with the aspergillum in order to cleanse people, places, or things. In particular, the aspergillum is used to cleanse venial sin as a nun enters a convent and takes her vows. Mary Magdalene, the repentant prostitute, here supplices those of her former profession to join her in worshipping the Virgin and Child by cleansing themselves from sin and entering the convent. She turns away from the world towards Christ, just as the repentant prostitutes would abandon their worldly occupations and cares for a heavenly focus. The putti swing the censer above, evoking imagery of the mass and the sacrament of holy orders.
If the viewer answers this supplication to enter and cleanse herself, then her entrance into the convent would be mirrored in the painting by bringing her into the company of the musical angels. Sixteenth-century convent music is renowned for its quality and virtuosity. Nuns separated from the congregation by the rules of clausura would be heard but not seen as they sang in grated choir lofts. Attendees regularly described this ethereal experience as akin “to listening to angels sing”. Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti made many attempts to simplify convent music in the 1580s, dictating that nuns eschew complicated polyphony for straightforward and easy to understand plainchant, requiring them to remove their organs, and banishing other instruments, such as the lute. The nuns pled for the continued use of their instruments, as their all-female choirs needed the organ or lute to fill in the bass notes of harmony. Craig Monson’s archival research shows that despite Cardinal Paleotti’s repeated efforts to crack down on convent music, the nuns persisted in owning and using instruments and staging dramatic musical displays for holiday services and festivals, such as the parade of the Madonna di San Luca. Ludovico’s inclusion of a heavenly choir adoring the Madonna would have been a clear reference to convent music for the contemporary Bolognese viewer.

For the repentant prostitute considering taking vows, inclusion in the heavenly choir would have symbolized the opportunity not only to be cleansed from sin but to regain personal

48 Craig Monson, Nuns Behaving Badly (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 14-16. “The primary job, the so-called Opus Dei (work of God), of professed, ‘choir’ nuns, had always been to sing the daily round of chapel services.” Prior to 1550, much convent music was simple Gregorian chant with one melodic line. Afterwards, its complexity and virtuosity exploded, attracting musically inclined girls in a socially acceptable location. See also Craig Monson, Disembodied Voices (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 40.
50 Monson, Disembodied Voices, 36-40 for a discussion of Cardinal Paleotti’s efforts to crack down on convent music.
51 Monson, Nuns, 15 discusses the contemporary quality of convent music rivaling that of cathedrals and opera houses. His “Disembodied Voices” in The Crannied Wall 192-193 further elaborates the efforts to enforce clausura and hide the singing nuns, while possibly intensifying the otherworldly experience of glorious harmonies and melodies from an unseen source reverberating off arches and naves.
virtue and honor by forsaking the world. Significantly, Ludovico does not depict the choice to enter the convent and leave the world behind as a gate or prison, but as joining a company of angels in endless devotion to the Virgin and Child. Instead, they stand in the open air in front of Bologna Perlustrata, indicating that the choice to renounce sin is a path of freedom that regains personal virtue and elevates the community through civic purity. Indeed, the overwhelming numbers of women who took monastic orders in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries looked on their renunciation of the world as elevating their families and communities. The prayers of nuns were believed to be particularly efficacious, their purity and devotion commending their petitions to heaven in a way not possible by those still connected to worldly concerns. They were seen as intermediaries for their families and communities, in much the way that the angels in the painting are intermediaries.

The association with Mary Magdalene applies here as well. The Golden Legend describes her long spiritual retreat from the world in terms of music, where “every day, at each of the seven canonical hours when angels lifted her from the grotto up to heaven, she heard glorious chants sung by heavenly hosts.” Her performative turning from sin in Ludovico’s painting is similarly attended by singing angels, just as the entrance to the convent would have been celebrated by the singing choir of nuns. Public performance of music by a woman was just as closely aligned with prostitution as eye contact. For instance, an English tourist described a Venetian courtesan in terms of her seductive voice, “Shee will endeavour to enchant thee partly with her melodious notes that shee warbles out upon her lute, and partly with that heart-temping

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52 Ferrante, “Honor Regained”, 60.
53 H. Colin Slim, “Music and Dancing with Mary Magdalen in a Laura Vestalis” in The Crannied Wall, 141. Slim offers further examples of Mary Magdalen’s iconographical association with musical angels, and particularly with the lute 146-148.
harmony of her voice.”54 Mary Magdalene and prostitution’s close association with the lute makes its prominent placement in the center of the painting noteworthy, especially given Cardinal Paleotti’s contemporary war on instruments in convent choirs.55 Instead, the lute functions here as another sacred cooptation of prostitution’s signatory means of solicitation. Just as the Virgin Mary engages in a direct, questioning gaze to absorb and repurpose the power of a sinful semiotic, the convent choir embraces the seductive display of musical skill and instrumentation and enfolds it into the pious, prayerful act of daily veneration. Interestingly, there are several contemporary accounts of the deaths of pious women in Bologna whose bodies were escorted to the tomb by heavenly music, similar to Mary Magdalene’s.56 Perhaps this heavenly chorus represented the jubilation Donna Cecilia hoped would accompany her soul upon her death.

Mary Magdalene’s position in Ludovico’s painting is also notable for its lack of viewer engagement. In contrast to the Virgin, who questions the viewer directly, and Donna Cecilia’s fixed gaze in profile, which makes her available for our observance without returning our attention, Mary Magdalene is turned completely away from the viewer. Featured as the trope of repentant prostitutes, she performs the action of conversion that the Virgin’s gaze suggests. Her twisting form moves from the space outside the frame towards the Christ Child, offering her jar of ointment, a symbol of her penitence. The jar of ointment typifies Mary Magdalene’s elision with the harlot in Luke 7, who anointed Christ with oil and washed his feet with her tears. Like that harlot, the believing prostitutes who entered the convent would have rejoiced to hear Christ’s judgment of her and them, “Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much:

54 Monson, Nuns, 16.
55 Monson, Disembodied Voices, 47
56 Monson, “Disembodied Voices” in The Crannied Wall, 192 and 204, note 2 describe two instances of “cestial musical instruments” accompanying the deceased nuns to the grave in 1559 and 1599.
but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little. And he said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven… Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace.”57 By turning from the world and entering the convent, the *convertite* would be “going against their own sensuality, and their love of the flesh and of the world” to “make offers of greater worth and moment” in repeating the commitment found in St Ignatius’ *Exercises* on the Kingdom of Christ:

> Eternal Lord of all things, I make my oblation with Thy favour and help, in presence of Thine infinite goodness, and in presence of Thy glorious Mother, and of all the saints of the heavenly court, protesting that I wish and desire, and that it is my deliberate determination (provided only it be to thy greater service and praise), to imitate Thee in bearing all kinds of insult and contumely, and all kinds of poverty as well actual poverty as poverty of spirit, if only Thy Divine Majesty be pleased to choose and receive me to this life and state.58

St Ignatius’ exercise beautifully parallels Ludovico’s painting and the solemn vows that the *convertite* took to enter the convent. In front of this altarpiece, they would be in the company of saints and the glorious Madonna when expressing their determination to take the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and be admitted into the convent’s way of life. A fallen woman concerned for her soul might begin her path to repentance by first engaging in private mental prayer after the manner of St. Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises* and there be motivated to take further steps by Donna Cecilia’s glorious commission.

Mary Magdalene’s turned gaze was fundamental to Ludovico’s composition, as it is the only gaze of the three women that is consistent in a preparatory drawing for the painting (fig. 10). Mary Magdalene maintains a nearly identical pose, with her left hand extending farther in invitation in the final painting. Donna Cecilia’s figure is slightly twisted inward in the preparatory drawing instead of the strict profile she assumes in the painting. In the preparatory

57 KJV Luke 7:37-50. This scriptural connection also allows Donna Cecilia to distance herself from the rich Pharisees in Luke 7, who invited Jesus into their home but did not honor him.
drawing, the figures of Donna Cecilia and Mary Magdalene create an entryway of sorts with their faces performing the part of doors opening inwards towards the Virgin. Either Ludovico or Donna Cecilia seemingly felt strongly about the widow’s fixed gaze in profile to counter the Magdalen’s dynamic posture. The Virgin returns the gaze of the Magdalene in the drawing, instead of gazing out at the viewer. Evidently Ludovico or Donna Cecilia wanted a more direct invitation than the subtle exchange between the repentant prostitute and the Madonna and Child. With the change in Donna Cecilia’s profile to a static pose, the character of Mary Magdalene becomes the operative figure. Her twisting embodies the prostitutes’ conversion as she directs her gaze away from the world towards Christ. The severe angle of revolution almost completely obscures her facial features and evokes the clausura of the professed nuns, who are no longer visible to the world once they have taken the veil and claimed Christ as their spouse.

**Repetitive Cleansing Inside the Convent**

For those women already within the convent, the opportunity to view and meditate on this altarpiece would reinforce their vows year after year, as they visually revisited their path of action and its consequences. A wide variety of prompts were used by monastics and laity to focus the mind and aid devotion with an emphasis on performance. The dressing of Madonna and Child dolls by nuns promoted Incarnational devotion. Floor tiles decorated with luxuries allowed nuns to literally tread upon the riches of the world that they had renounced while they

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59 It is difficult to reconstruct the specific use of physical space in the church from documents, but it appears that there was a choir loft above the entrance wing which the nuns may have used to obey clausura. This would have afforded a view of all three altarpieces and perhaps maintained eye contact with Ludovico’s Virgin. See Brown, “Facts, fragments and fictions” 54-55. It is difficult to ascertain from documentation exactly how clausura worked in this convent at this time, as Tridentine reforms were inconsistently and imperfectly observed at the end of the sixteenth century. Jeffrey Hamburger argues that enclosed nuns had regular access to the public altars in the main church that was taken for granted. Hamburger, *the Visual and the Visionary*, 89.

60 Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary*, 78.
paced back and forth. Nuns wrote and performed plays on the lives of the saints, allowing them to temporarily assume the role of the Virgin or emulate a martyr. St. Francis himself initially engaged with a speaking Christ while praying before a crucifix and eventually acquired the stigmata as a result of focused contemplation on the Passion. The *Meditations on the Life of Christ* were written by the pseudo-Bonaventura as a devotional guide for a Poor Clare nun. The *Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* were written in this Franciscan tradition of affective meditation and were used widely in the sixteenth century by monastics, clerics, and laity alike. All of these exercises were meant to be repeated often, returned to again and again as a means to purify the soul, focus the mind, and gain access to the divine. In post-Tridentine Bologna, a particular emphasis was placed on embroidery, choral practice, and prayer to focus the mind and reform the soul of the nuns. The detailed work of embroidery on carefully chosen subjects allowed the woman to meditate deeply, have visions or complete an implicit pilgrimage, and the practice became highly symbolic. The addition of spiritual readings ennobled the effort and “a deeply meaningful connection was created between embroidery and spiritual meditation, and which brought with it connotations of religious ecstasy.” These exercises had a personal influence but also held significance for the community at large, as Rocco states:

...[T]heir meditative work had a powerful impact on the sanctity of the city, since women’s honour was also inherently tied to the virtue of their city. Therefore, at times even virginity could be conceived of in a virtual sense to be recovered through intense

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62 The topics of these plays reflect the ideas the nuns were contemplating. For instance, Mary Magdalene’s conversion and abdication of the world was a popular subject. See Christine Scippa Bhasin, “Prostitutes, Nuns, Actresses: Breaking the Convent Wall in Seventeenth-Century Venice.” *Theatre Journal* 66 (1), 2014. 21.
63 Muraoka, “*Quella inerudita*”, 119.
64 Rocco, “Maniera Devota, Mano Donnesca”, 89.
65 Ibid, 90. Monson, *Nuns*, 16, claims that Bologna’s Convertite were known for doing laundry such as starching collars and ruffs, a less skilled job for a lower class of women. However, the converse houses were known for teaching embroidery as a useful skill whose sale could earn money towards room and board and, eventually, towards a dowry.
prayer, Christian good works, and above all, a focus on the right images and role models.\textsuperscript{66}

By focusing the mind on beautiful, edifying images while they busied their hands with work, the convertite could regain their own honor and lift the community around them.

Ludovico’s careful composition echoes the ideas in \textit{The Spiritual Exercises}, especially those around venial sin at the end of the first week. After meditating on the weight of one’s sins and the appropriateness of judgment meted, the penitent is instructed to supplicate at the feet of an image of Mary, “O Mary, at once the Mother of God and the mother of the sinner, mother of the Judge and of the criminal let not God your Son condemn your son the sinner.”\textsuperscript{67} The participant is then instructed to ponder the magnitude of venial sin: “It is an evil so great that all the sacrifices and virtues of creatures render less glory to God than one venial sin takes from Him.”\textsuperscript{68} After venial sin, the penitent contemplates the mercy of God in the example of the prodigal son. The second prelude to this exercise encourages the supplicant to “Ask of our Savior the grace to imitate the repentance of the prodigal, and to obtain from Him the pardon of your past wanderings.”\textsuperscript{69} The exercise ends with the encouraging colloquy, “Cast yourself at the feet of Jesus Christ, like the prodigal child at his father’s feet, and solemnly promise never more to forsake Him.”\textsuperscript{70} Ludovico’s altarpiece provides a visual composition of place for the repentant sinners to throw themselves at the feet of the Madonna and be cleansed from sin. By revisiting in meditation their decision to renounce the world and “throw themselves at the feet of Jesus”, the convertite in the convent could continually purify themselves through contemplative

\textsuperscript{66} Rocco, “Maniera Devota, Mano Donnesca”, 91.
\textsuperscript{67} Ignatius, \textit{Manrese}, 94.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid, 95.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid, 102.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid, 106.
penance.\textsuperscript{71} Like the Magdalene who bridges the divide between viewer and Divinity, they could regain virtue through repetitively relinquishing their sins in affective devotional practice.

The main altarpiece of the church of Ss. Filippo and Giacomo reflects this visual emphasis on the Magdalene in creating a composition of place. The church was not a large one, with only a high altar and two side chapels, the left of which was the Boncompagni chapel. The altarpiece of the right chapel was an \textit{Assumption of the Virgin} by Domenico Baroni, which is now lost, but the painting over the high altar was by Bartolomeo Passerotti and depicted the crucified Christ flanked by the eponymous saints of the church (Fig. 11).\textsuperscript{72} In the center, at the foot of the cross, Mary Magdalene kneels with one arm wrapped around Christ’s feet, echoing her washing and anointing of them in Luke 7. Passerotti depicts Mary Magdalene frontally with her eyes turned up towards the suffering Christ’s face. The \textit{convertite} would mirror this position when they knelt at the high altar to receive the Eucharist, looking up to see the sacrificed body of Christ in the elevated Host. This was surely a poignant experience, to be remembered and contemplated during daily prayer sessions. The importance of altarpieces in nuns’ devotions is well documented, and female mystics frequently cite images of the crucifix coming alive.\textsuperscript{73} For the women of the \textit{Convertite} convent, the Passerotti altarpiece would have created a visual prompt to imagine themselves following the example of the remorseful prostitute in embracing the saving power of Christ accessed through the Eucharist. Ludovico’s altarpiece also creates a visual prompt to follow the Magdalene’s example, but with much richer personal and civic implications in their choice to renounce the world. As the nuns meditated on Ludovico’s dense

\textsuperscript{71} Cohen, \textit{The Evolution}, 83-84 for a more thorough discussion of the various forms of penance that \textit{convertite} engaged and the use of Mary Magdalene and other examples to reform “hardened sinners into devout penitents.” Patricia Rocco, “Maniera Devota, Mano Donnesca”, 91 discusses the importance of the manual labor of embroidery paired with prayer for the women and their city.

\textsuperscript{72} Brown, “Facts, fragments and fictions”, 55.

\textsuperscript{73} Hamburger, \textit{The Visual and the Visionary}, 80 & 89.
network of allusions to their immediate surroundings, they would have engaged a questioning Madonna offering an aspergillum and situla for spiritual cleansing and the chance to leave the world and enter a luminous space with music and celebration amongst other saints. As they repeated St. Ignatius’ colloquy from the exercise devoted to Mary, they could look into the eyes of the Virgin and repeat, “If anger, avarice, love of pleasure, shiver thy frail bark, seek the eyes of Mary… Following her, thou canst not wander; whilst thou prayest to her thou canst not be without hope; as long as thou thinkest of her thou wilt be in the path…”74 They would have viewed Ludovico’s surrounding frescoes and remembered the promise of early release from purgatory by taking the veil and wearing the Carmelite scapular. They could contemplate the altarpiece as they prepared to celebrate Holy Week and the arrival of the Madonna di San Luca and their own contribution to making Bologna a lustrous pearl through renouncing their sins and engaging in daily prayer. They would remember the piety of their patron, Donna Cecilia, her generosity in providing for the convent, and her example in pious devotion to the Virgin through good works. After following the example of Mary Magdalene in turning from sin and entering the spiritual life, they could follow Donna Cecilia’s example in focused prayer and hope, like her, to be recommended to God.

Conclusion

Ludovico Carracci’s Bargellini Madonna has previously been seen simply as a compositional homage to Titian’s Pesaro Madonna without recognizing the deep meaning present in the identifiable setting and distinct figural posturing. The complex painting honors its female patron through a network of allusions, while breaking with tradition to challenge the penitent viewer through the gaze of the Madonna. The intended viewership of convertite

74 Ignatius, Manrese, 219-220.
glorified the patron and the Virgin and Child by purifying themselves and their city through repeated devotional practice. Leaving behind traditional sacra conversazione imagery, Ludovico places his Madonna in local space with effectual implications for the contemporary viewer.
Figure 1. Ludovico Carracci, *Madonna and Child, Angels and Saints Francis, Dominic, Magdalen and the donor Cecilia Bargellini Boncompagni*, 1588, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna.
Figure 2. Titian, *Madonna di Ca’ Pesaro*, 1518, Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice.

Figure 3. Annibale Carracci, *Madonna Enthroned with St Matthew*, 1588, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden.
Figure 4. *Madonna di San Luca*, attributed to Saint Luke, unframed, circa twelfth century, Sanctuary of the Madonna of San Luca, Bologna.

Figure 5. *Madonna di San Luca*, attributed to Saint Luke, in situ, circa twelfth century, Sanctuary of the Madonna of San Luca, Bologna.

Figure 6. Annibale Carracci, *Pietà with Virgin and Saints*, 1585, Galleria nazionale di Parma, Parma.
Figure 7. Raphael, *Madonna di San Sisto*, 1512, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden.

Figure 8. Ludovico Carracci, *Madonna degli Scalzi*, 1590, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna.

Figure 9. Attributed to Ludovico Carracci, *Copy of the Madonna di San Luca*, date unknown, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna.
Figure 10. Ludovico Carracci, *Preparatory Study for Madonna and Child with Saints*, date unknown, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Figure 11. Bartolomeo Passerotti, *Crucifixion with Saints Philip, James, and Mary Magdalene*, date unknown, as found in Craig Monson, *Habitual Offenders, A true tale of nuns, prostitutes, and murderers in seventeenth-century Italy*. 
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