August 2006

The Heavenly Host: Angel Pietàs of the Italian Renaissance

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The Heavenly Host: Angel Pietàs of the Italian Renaissance

Abstract
The Angel Pietà or Pietà with Angels was a common iconographical type in Renaissance Italy. However, much of its tradition and meaning still have not been adequately investigated. This paper serves to describe the history and iconography of the Angel Pietà and present three new interpretations of the enigmatic Angel Pietàs of three artists: Andrea del Sarto, Rosso Fiorentino, and Jacopo da Pontormo. The paper elucidates a Virgin as Priest motif in Andrea's painting, a relationship to the Holy Week rite of the Tenebrae in Rosso's painting, and a connection to relief and an emphasis on the viewer in Pontormo's painting.

Keywords
angel, pietà, italian, renaissance, art, iconography, andrea del sarto, rosso, fiorentino, pontormo, michael, cole, michael w cole, art history
THE HEAVENLY HOST

ANGEL PIETÀS OF THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

Melissa Shive

A THESIS

in

History of Art

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts
With Distinction in the Major Subject
Department of the History of Art
University of Pennsylvania

March 2006

Advisor: Professor Michael Cole
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In nearly every case, I derive a certain satisfaction from conclusions—when I finish a task, when I complete an essay, when I have placed the last period on my final sentence. The exception is when I sit down to write my acknowledgements. It is at this point that I like to linger and fondly remember all the people who have helped me along the way. I am indebted and truly grateful to so many people for offering their time and expertise to a curious student researching and writing her thesis. It is therefore my absolute pleasure to thank the following people for their kindness:

First, I would like to thank my advisor, Professor Michael Cole, for his unending encouragement during the entire process, from this topic’s early conception to its completion. There is no doubt in my mind that this project would have faltered at some point were it not for his invaluable inspiration and guidance. I would also like to thank Professor Larry Silver, for answering my questions about Northern art, his comments during my presentation, and a few key book recommendations about French art; Anne Blecksmith from the Getty Research Institute Library for her introduction to the Index of Christian Art and her thoughtfulness during the early stages of my research; Dr. Warren Woodfin for (very thoroughly) answering my seemingly random questions about Medieval art; Professor Ann Matter for sitting down with me to discuss the subtle details of Catholic Roman rite; Professor Stephen Campbell for a valuable book suggestion; and Professor Kevin Brownlee for his help with an Old French translation.
Additionally, I would like to thank my three roommates and my family for their continued moral support throughout the process; their task was certainly not an easy one.
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“[Invenzione] consists in devising poems and histories on one’s own (a virtue practiced by few of the moderns), and to my mind it is a very ingenious and praiseworthy thing.”

Paolo Pino  
_Dialogo di Pittura_

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INTRODUCTION

Quod vero pictura deos expressit quos gentes venerentur, maximum id quidem mortalibus donum fuisse censendum est, nam ad pietatem qua superis coniuncti sumus, atque ad animos integra quadam cum religione detinendos nimium pictura profuit.

We should also consider it a very great gift to men that painting has represented the gods they worship, for painting has contributed considerably to the piety which binds us to the gods, and to filling our minds with sound religious beliefs.

Alberti, *On Painting* 1

In the predominantly Catholic world of Renaissance Italy, religious art was central to Italian life and culture. Both beautiful and didactic, it taught common worshippers appropriate behavior and stirred pious feelings, encouraging meditation upon events such as Christ’s passion.

A standard dictionary of the period, the *Catholicon*, gave three purposes of images:

“First, for the instruction of simple people, because they are instructed by them as if by books. Second, so that the mystery of the incarnation and the examples of the Saints may be the more active in our memory through being presented daily to our eyes. Third, to excite feelings of devotion, these being aroused more effectively by things seen than by things heard.” 2

These tenets placed the artist—the creator of culturally vital objects—in a position to shape contemporary religious sentiment. Artwork served as a religious thoroughfare between the church and its public. Naturally, the painter did not have free reign over the entire composition; as the source of funding, the patron often dictated much of the subject matter. Aside from a

patron’s desires, convention and tradition also formed boundaries for religious art. The Archbishop of Florence, S. Antonio, explained the importance of propriety in Christian imagery:

“Painters are to be blamed when they paint things contrary to our Faith—when they represent the Trinity as one person with three heads, a monster; or when, in the Annunciation, they represent a small infant, Jesus, in the Virgin’s womb, as if the body he took on were not of her substance. . . . Also, to paint curiosities into the stories of Saints and in the churches, things that do not serve to arouse devotion but laughter and vain thoughts—monkeys, and dogs chasing hares and so on, or gratuitously elaborate costumes—this I think unnecessary and vain.”

In creating artworks, the artist had to fulfill his commission and tailor his composition to acceptable standards. These bounds created the framework within which artists strove to make not only attractive but also novel masterpieces.

Part of this framework was seeded in a culture of accepted visual motifs and connotations. There existed a language of forms, symbols, colors, and well-known stories. Through this language, artists communicated a wide variety of themes, developing through both tradition and practice an implicit iconography. These image types ranged from scenes of holy miracles to scenes of the Passion. In these oft-repeated compositions, certain elements and characteristics remained constant. Scenes of the Annunciation normally included Angel Gabriel holding a lily or scepter and a young Mary holding a closed book, which alluded to the prophecy of Isaiah. A source of light often illuminated the pair of figures, referring to God the Father and the Christian faith.

Through these understood symbols, artists could imbue their artwork with meaning and depth that extended beyond the literal plane of their compositions. However, as expected, religious iconography changed over time. Artists incorporated new components, exploring new methods of representation. A dialogue developed between artist and convention—between artistic invention and the rules of decorum. As Salvatore Settis explains:

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3 As quoted in Ibid., 43.
“Iconographic (and stylistic) change is... founded on the interaction between experiment and convention: new types and schemes are grafted on to the established lexicon, which necessarily continues and ensures continuity of tradition; the introduction of a certain number of new types and schemes is partly balanced by the gradual abandonment of a certain number of conventions which thus ‘drop out’ of current usage.”

These experiments resulted in a variety of iconographic types rather than any rigid form. In the ping-pong game of artistic experimentation, artists channeled this level of flexibility toward pioneering innovative approaches to art and, indirectly, to devotion.

The Angel Pietà is an oft-mentioned but seldom-discussed iconographical type. As such, its importance has been largely overlooked despite the multitude of examples produced by some of the foremost painters of the Renaissance. This paper serves two goals: first to contextualize and describe the history of the Angel Pietà and second, to characterize the early Cinquecento Angel Pietàs by three artists: Andrea del Sarto, Rosso Fiorentino, and Jacopo da Pontormo. These three works have fascinated art historians, and their unusual and enigmatic iconographies continue to generate animated debate. However, despite scores of monographs and specialized essays, no scholar has yet to consider these three works together, notwithstanding their origins from a single workshop tradition or their common associations as Angel Pietàs.

The juxtapositions of these artworks expose their congruities as well as their clear divergences from previous tradition. As the logic and reason behind seemingly inexplicable compositional decisions emerge, the works begin to lose a part of their mystery. What displaces

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6 The assumption of absolute originality found in descriptions of these works reveals a measure of the mystery that still clouds these paintings. Shearman writes that the conception of Andrea del Sarto’s Pietà has no precedent: John Shearman, Andrea del Sarto, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 77-78.; In another essay, he notes that Rosso Fiorentino’s Dead Christ with Angels “seems to be without any exact parallel” and has a subject that is “essentially new” and has “no visual precedents”: John Shearman, "The "Dead Christ" by Rosso Fiorentino," Boston Museum Bulletin 64, no. 338 (1966): 150, 52.; Clapp calls Pontormo’s Pietà “our rarest rendering” of a Deposition; Letti considers it “extravagant and totally unprecedented.” Frederick Mortimer Clapp, Jacopo Carucci da Pontormo, His Life and Work (New York: Junius Press, 1972), 45, Elisabetta Marchetta Letti, Pontormo, Rosso Fiorentino, trans. Anthony Brierley, The Library of Great Masters (New York: Riverside Book Company, 1994), 42.
our initial bafflement is an appreciation for the innovative solutions these artists propose for ever-present representational questions.

One of the significant issues artists contended with was creating artwork that would establish a rapport with the beholder, or as Belting puts it, imbuing images with rhetorical activity.\(^7\) In his seminal work *Likeness and Presence*, Belting follows the history of the image in the “era before art.” His discussion centers on the concept of *Bild*, the holy image or icon, and *Kunst*, the modern conception of art that divides Renaissance and Medieval production. He argues that this new idea steadily ousts the medieval icon and “inserts a new level of meaning between the visual appearance of the image and the understanding of the beholder.”\(^8\) Medieval icons contained an inherent truth and sanctity culled from their adherence to an archetype and preserved through copy; artistic authorship was a secondary concern. These icons thus elevated themselves above the world of common materiality to the status of sacred.\(^9\)

Into the Renaissance, the perceived inviolability of iconographical form lessened during this period as artistic compositional choice and change became more accepted. In earlier art, icons held a certain magical aura, infused with divinity and worthy of worship in and of themselves. This idea held especially true for “unpainted” or *non manufactum* images, which people believed were derived from heavenly sources and were untouched by man’s hand.\(^10\) In contrast, the Angel Pietàs of the early Cinquecento indicated their own roles as tools for devotion. These artworks were not simply representations or portraits of sacred figures. Instead, artists adapted works to their functions, changing their appearance to conform more readily to their patrons’ desires. The changes underscore the divestment of the icon’s divine objecthood and the

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\(^8\) Ibid., 16.

\(^9\) Ibid., 1-9.

\(^10\) Ibid., 14-16, 342-48, 70-76.
general acknowledgment of its status in culture and religion. Artists worked to create a more perfect devotional image as defined by its ability to facilitate devotion rather than to accurately mimic historical forms.

This shift underscores not only the central role that art played in everyday life but also the principal role the painter grasped. The move toward the most effective devotional artwork signals its importance to religious practice and subsequently indicates the indirect role the painter could play in shaping spiritual sentiment. If late-medieval paintings had the power and ability to stir devoutness through especially vivid and poignant portrayals of Christ or holy subject matter, the paintings of the early Cinquecento wielded the same supremacy through an artist’s stylistic decisions—effects that could potentially be amplified through consciously and strategically atypical representations of its subject matter. Beyond the simple appreciation of artistic merit, people celebrated and valued an artist’s skill and invention in deep-seated and personal ways.

Entwined in the Angel Pietà’s status as a devotional image is the notion of distance or the perceived or portrayed space between the viewer and the Holy painted figures. As artists painted works that set up an engaging mental dialogue with the viewer, so too did they need to formulate devices that established an appropriate and necessary intimacy, drawing the viewer closer to its revered subjects. The simply inclusion of angels both identifies this distance and helps bridge. This study helps reveal a trend in Angel Pietàs to speak to viewers through references to personal experience and religious institution, thereby making these images exceptionally personal and moving.
Cum accepisset acétum, dixit: Consummárum est: et inclináto cápite, emísit spíritum.

When Jesus had taken the wine, He said, ‘It is consummated!’ And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit.  

Vespers of Good Friday

History and Functions

Leonardo da Vinci once wrote, “Inscribe in any place the name of God and set opposite to it His image, you will see which will be held in greater reverence!”

The Pietà would have served as a perfect illustration of his point. At once tender and tragic, hopeful and sullen, it embodies complementary emotions, reflecting the duality of feeling elicited by Christ’s death and impending resurrection. As normally described, the Pietà, Italian for both piety and pity, depicts the Virgin Mary cradling her son’s dead body in her lap. The German term, Vesperbild, relates the image to the Vespers of Good Friday—an Office whose evocative and dramatic imagery marks the moment of Christ’s death.

Yet the Gospels contain no story that describes the moment represented by the Pietà. The Pietà (Fig. 1) is ahistorical and non-narrative, although it loosely occupies a moment between the Deposition and the Entombment. This trait distinguishes it from other images of Jesus’s life like the Kiss of Judas or the Crucifixion. As such, it often lacks narrative symbols of the passion,

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such as the cross, nails, or sponge. Its severance from narrative imparts a timeless, iconic
dimension to the work—at once imminently relevant, self-referential, and independent. As a
foreign import, some evidence suggests the Pietà may not have been widely familiar to late
fifteenth century Italian denizens. In his *Diary* of June 1482, Luca Landucci wrote, “At this time,
there was much talk of the worship of an image of Our Lady at Bibbona, or rather in a tabernacle
about a bowshot from Bibbona. It is, namely, a Virgin seated holding the dead Christ in her
arms, after He has been taken down from the Cross; which is called by some a Pietà.” The 1498
contract for Michelangelo’s St. Peter’s Pietà clarified the intended subject matter, suggesting that
the Pietà might not have been well known among artists either: “…the said master shall make a
Pietà of marble at his own cost; that is, a Virgin clothed, with the dead Christ in her arms, of the
size of a proper man…”  

But into and throughout the sixteenth century, the Pietà was a popular
subject, decorating altarpieces and private panels for both ecclesiastical and private commissions.

The Pietà originated from Byzantine icons of the Man of Sorrows (Fig. 2) or *Imago
Pietatis*, transmitted to the West and integrated into the existing visual culture. From its
introduction to Europe in the thirteenth century, it quickly spread throughout the continent in the
fourteenth and fifteenth century, in large part because of the significant indulgences associated
with the image. The Man of Sorrows is usually characterized as a half-figure image of the
dead Christ with his hands crossed one over the other, his wounds prominently displayed. As is
the case with nearly all foreign imports, this icon’s assimilation into Italian visual culture was not
a simple adoption of its appearance and meaning. Appropriating the pictorial form of the *Imago

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13 The examples of Landucci’s Diary and Michelangelo’s contract are both noted in Peter Murray and Linda Murray,
14 Sixten Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative: The Rise of the Dramatic Close-up in Fifteenth-Century Devotional Painting*
Pietatis, Italians incorporated it into various Western devotional practices, at times revising its original form to accommodate Italian interpretations.\(^\text{16}\)

The most famous Man of Sorrows panel arrived in Italy around 1380 in S. Croce in Gerusalemme in Rome, where the Pope held Good Friday services (Fig. 3).\(^\text{17}\) Renowned for its believed connection to the Gregorian miracle, the work spawned myriad reproductions, the best-known one by Israhel van Meckenem (Fig. 4). According to legend, the true body of Christ appeared upon an altar of St. Gregory the Great in response to his prayer to convince an unbeliever of the truth of the Eucharist (Fig. 5).\(^\text{18}\) This icon represented the original image that Gregory commissioned in 600 to honor this event, and it quickly developed into a cult image. We now know that this association is false and this icon is actually a Byzantine mosaic from around 1300,\(^\text{19}\) but this inaccuracy did not temper the noteworthy influence of this work.

From this legend, Pietà images developed associations with communion, the mystery of the Eucharist, and the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. They often decorated tabernacles, where the Eucharistic host was stored. Christ as depicted in these Pietàs became a standard iconographical representation of the Eucharistic host, further developing the Pietà’s Gregorian association to the mass.

Noted for its affective power, the Pietà embodied many devotional functions. As Domenico di Cambio commented, it served to “move a man to devotion.” He continued, “Verily,
men who are hard of heart and caught up in this world’s toils, need these pious stories…”

Indeed, the Pietà exemplified a complex array of emotions, encompassing a dual function: to induce empathy and convey Christ’s mercy.

Into this iconographical type, artists sometimes introduced angels. As in the Pietà, artists used the Angel Pietà or Pietà with Angels in a variety of media, including illuminated manuscripts, sculpture, and painting. The forms existed in such assortment that a single term seems almost inadequate to encompass the figural melange. Yet Angel Pietàs nevertheless contained unifying compositional and ideological themes, despite outward diversity.

Scholars have broadly applied the term Angel Pietà to encompass essentially any non-narrative devotional image containing the dead Christ and angels. It is therefore difficult to clearly classify variations within the Angel Pietà, and for every generalization an exception materializes. Recognizing these limitations, it is nevertheless valuable to roughly categorize Angel Pietàs for two reasons: first, to draw attention to the variety within the type, and second, to better describe the breadth of traditions that existed. I have therefore demarcated four main groups: the single-angel Pietà, the Man of Sorrows with Angels, the Angel Marienklage, and the multi-figured Angel Pietà. The popularity of each type varied by region, and each type revealed numerous variations across artists and media. One will also quickly realize that these categories intersect and Angel Pietàs as a whole overlap with their narrative counterparts, the Lamentation, the Deposition, and the Entombment.

The single-angel Pietà consists of a single large angel holding Christ. Though half-figure depictions (Fig. 6) that allude to Christ as the Man of Sorrows exist, artists more often showed

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Jesus in full-length (Fig. 7). The form was more common in France than in Italy, with examples in a variety of materials. This arrangement also contained allusions to representations of the Holy Trinity, in which God the Father supports Christ’s body and to the vision of the Gregorian mass.

In the Man of Sorrows with Angels, one or more angels carry or support a half-body depiction of Christ. Through its intimate character and its isolation from narrative, the half-length portrait was particularly suited to stirring compassion. The type was especially common in Italy and, formally, adheres most closely to its Eastern origins. One of the earliest examples of this type of Angel Pietà is Giovanni Pisano’s Lectern of Pistoia (Fig. 8), which depicts angels displaying Christ’s body against his shroud.

The Angel Marienklage as I define it here consists of Mary holding the dead Christ across her lap (Fig. 9). Angels fly in the background or stand beside the mourning Virgin Mary as she holds the body of Christ across her lap. Unlike the previous two categories, this variant includes the sorrowful Mary, distraught although accepting of her son’s necessary fate. As the mother of Jesus, she suffers with him through his crucifixion, acting out, by example, the

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25 Osten also discusses the Dreifigurenbild or “three-figured picture,” which consists of a Man of Sorrows with two angels. As he defines the term, the symmetrical composition could also contain Mary or John instead of angels. Osten, "Engelpietà," 602, 09.
26 Sixten Ringbom discusses the ‘close-up’ half-length portrait and its emotional capacity in detail. Ringbom, Icon to Narrative, 39-52.
27 Both the Meditations on the Life of Christ and Ludolph of Saxony’s Vita Christi describe the contemporaneous pain Mary feels as her son suffers. In the section dedicated to Christ’s crucifixion, the Meditations read, “The mother stood next to His cross, between the crosses of the thieves. She did not turn her eyes away from her Son; she was in anguish like His…. [Jesus] prayed to the Father for her and silently said, ‘My Father, see how afflicted my mother is. I ought to be crucified, not she, but she is with me on the cross. It is enough that I, who bear the sins of all the people, am crucified; she does not deserve the same. See how desolate she is, consumed with sadness all the
viewer’s appropriate response. A variation of this type places Christ in front of Mary, rather than in her lap and could include one to two other figures (Fig. 10).

In the multi-figured Angel Pietà, the Virgin and a crowd of mourners surround Christ, who is usually shown in whole-figure. It is distinguishable from a narrative Lamentation scene mainly by its intended function rather than obvious visual cues. To cite a well-known example, Giotto’s Lamentation (Fig. 11) is but one scene from the elaborate Life and Passion of Christ frescoes that decorate the Scrovegni Chapel, making it a narrative image. However, as I will argue later, Pontormo’s Capponi altarpiece is a Pietà, even though it too contains a multitude of figures grieving over Christ’s death. To demonstrate the complexity of this classification, neither example contains the cross, Arma Christi, or other narrative components, yet their anticipated roles create the distinction between a Lamentation and a Pietà.

North Italian Angel Pietàs tended to adhere to the classic Byzantine standard, the Man of Sorrows with Angels, typified by a panel from the Veneto (Fig. 12) and a painting from the Rimini School in Emilia-Romagna (Fig. 13). The Imago Pietatis has a rich history in the Veneto, and Venice may have been one of the main gateways through which this icon was disseminated in Italy.28 These Venetian images retain the half-length Dead Christ with crossed arms, usually standing or sitting in his tomb. The front of the tomb becomes an illusionistic device that refers to an altar table and transforms the painting into a visual declaration of the mystery of the transubstantiation—an association that was sometime shown directly (Fig. 14). In each case, Christ displays his wounds and engages the spectator in an empathetic emotional response,

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encouraging him to meditate on the profundity of Christ’s sacrifice. The petite angels in these images hover above the scene, crying and lamenting the loss of Jesus. They are at once ornaments and models, accenting the scene and expressing correct behavior.

In later Pietàs, such as those promoted by Venetian artists like Giovanni Bellini (Fig. 15) and Carlo Crivelli (Fig. 16), angels change in a few key characteristics. They still maintain their function as supportive characters, but they become integrated into the scene, physically supporting Christ. They surround his body, gently holding him in death.

In central Italy and Tuscany, two general characteristics prevailed: the inclusion of Mary and a whole-figured Christ. While some images retained the half-figure depiction, such as one Florentine panel from the first half of the Quattrocento (Fig. 17), most images showed a full-length Christ with his mother, as seen in another Tuscan panel by Francesco Neri da Volterra (Fig. 18) and in a panel attributed to Taddeo Gaddi (Fig. 19). By the addition of the Virgin, these images distanced themselves visually from their Italo-Byzantine Venetian cousins. Thematically, they introduced a bereaved mother, leading the viewer to identify not only with Christ but also with the Virgin.

Coupled with the emotional nature of these types of images, a dichotomous and paradoxical relationship arises between the beholder and Christ. Even as these images stirred empathy through their half-length portrait formats, their inclusion of Christ’s mother, or their infusion with poignant expression, the viewer remained in important ways detached and separate. The composition implied a ‘devotional distance’ between the figure or object and the adoring beholder.²⁹

²⁹ The notion of distance is also mentioned by Belting and Nagel. Belting, Likeness and Presence, 351, Nagel, Reform of Art, 16.
Several factors contribute to the existence of this phenomenon. First, there is an intrinsic awkwardness in a person spiritually identifying with a painted surface. People exist in an object-based world while painted figures live in a flat one. Therefore the viewer must first subscribe to an illusion. Such a leap requires an imaginative effort—an initial hurdle for a devotional painting to overcome. Erwin Panofsky briefly discusses the next two reasons in his explanation of the non-narrative, hieratic representational image or *Repräsentationsbild*. In contrast to the narrative image, which places itself concretely within a timeline and refers to a historical event, the Repräsentationsbild places the representational elements before us in a timeless and spiritually quasi-impenetrable presence: there, the elements correspond so fully to one another that the beholder is held off and virtually distanced from the content of the artwork by an unbridgeable displacement—here they [the elements] are lifted so fully from the timebound form of subjective experience that the beholder finds himself forced into the position of a simple devotee and separated from the object by an unchangeable difference in level [Niveaunterschied]... As Panofsky explains, the Repräsentationsbild’s self-referential nature excludes the viewer, positioning him outside the image’s manufactured mental arena. Furthermore, through its break with a traditional time frame, the form of the Pietà disconnects itself from the time-based world of the viewer.

Panofsky explains that this effect transforms the viewer into a spectator, establishing a hierarchy between him and God. But in a devotional image like the Pietà, this established hierarchy also arises from an additional cause. As the object of adulation, Christ is perfect and flawless. His lessons, his life, and his sacrifice exemplify his merits and place him on a moral... 

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30 Thank you to Professor Michael Cole for this translation. “...das Repräsentationsbild... die Darstellungselemente in einem zeitlosen und seelisch gleichsam undurchdringlichen Dasein vor uns hinstellt: dort sind die Elemente so völlig aufeinander bezogen, daß der Betrachter nur als Zuschauer geduldet und gleichsam durch einen unüberbrückbaren Abstand vom Inhalt des Kunstwerks ferngehalten wird—hier sind sie der zeitgebundenen Form des subjektiven Erlebens so völlig enthoben, daß sich der Betrachter in die Stellung eines bloß Verehrenden gedrängt und wie durch einen unausgleichbaren Niveaunterschied vom Gegenstande getrennt sieht.” Panofsky, "Imago Pietatis," 190.
pedestal above the common sinner, establishing a religious rank—clearly differentiating Christ from man.

By these actions, the Holy Image simultaneously links and dissociates the viewer. It aims to create an intimate relationship with God, while necessarily maintaining and reinforcing the boundary between divine and earthly. The presence of angels not only bridges this divide but also acknowledges its existence.

Art occupies the coveted position of representing this association between Christ and the beholder, and it conveys this relationship through devices such as illusionistic proximity to the subject, inclusion of mediating figures, emotional rendering, environment, subject matter—nearly any compositional decision. It not only portrayed holy figures and the hierarchy that existed, in devotional artwork, it also attempted to break down this distance. Such an effort helped provide the private link to God advocated by the rise of personal devotion in the late fourteenth century and into the fifteenth century. Artists used a variety of methods to try to decrease the devotional distance in a work. Commonly encountered devices include placing a patron within the composition or integrating contemporary details, such as architecture, clothing, or scenery, into the artwork. In Angel Pietàs, angels were a central proponent of this effort.

The angels in these compositions served as essential mediators between the viewer and Christ in three primary respects. First, they directed the viewer toward the intended compositional cynosure. The Renaissance spectator would have encountered this role of an instructive figure through several channels. In the Quattrocento, the festaiuolo served this function in theater and plays. Michael Baxandall writes, “… the plays were introduced by a

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31 For an in-depth discussion on patrons or supplicants in paintings, see Victor M. Schmidt, *Painted Piety: Panel Paintings for Personal Devotion in Tuscany, 1250-1400* (Firenze: Centro Di, 2005), 107-40.
choric figure, the *festaiuolo*, often in the character of an angel, who remained on the stage during the action of the play as a mediator between the beholder and the events portrayed: similar choric figures, catching our eyes and pointing to the central action, are often used by the painters.\(^{32}\)

One must take note that the typical *festaiuolo* was an angel, reinforcing the parallel functions of angels in both theater and painting. In his *Treatise on Painting*, Leonardo da Vinci recommended, “If the subject [of a painting] be an act of devotion, the eyes of all present should be directed towards the object of their adoration, aided by a variety of pious actions with the other members: as at the elevation of the host at mass, and other similar ceremonies.”\(^{33}\) This idea applied both to angels and to other multi-figured compositions—the painted gazes directing the physical ones.

Beyond mere pointing and looking, angels also invited appropriate behavior, weeping and grieving as the viewer should. In his 1435 treatise, *On Painting*, Alberti writes, “I like there to be someone in the ‘historia’ who tells the spectators what is going on, and either beckons them with his hand to look… or by his gestures invites you to laugh or weep with them.”\(^{34}\) This idea hearkens to one of the primary functions of images—to demonstrate appropriate etiquette and instruct the ignorant.

Third, angels served as thoroughfares for devotion. As Sixten Ringbom explains, “As auxiliary figures in a devotional image the angels perform the important function of presenting the dead body of Christ to the worshipper, while at the same time by their presence acting as intermediaries in offering to God the prayers directed to the image.”\(^{35}\) This idea is particularly

\(^{32}\) Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, 72.


\(^{34}\) Alberti, *On Painting and on Sculpture*, 83.

\(^{35}\) Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative*, 68.
revealing. More than serving as models, angels served as prayer facilitators, the midway point between the worshipper and Christ. They were altruistic and divine attendants and the objects of humble gratitude for their acts as spiritual couriers.

In addition to examining the role of angels in art, we must also consider the general cultural climate and discourse concerning these spiritual beings as well. Beginning in the late tenth and eleventh centuries, medieval devotion shifted in tone toward a growing enthusiasm for feelings of love and piety, resulting especially in the expansion from public to private devotion. This trend continued into the twelfth century with a remarkable inflation in attention to Christ in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In the thirteenth century, these developments transformed into methodical programs of piety, leading to the emergence of narrative passion tracts. In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century, this trend continued to the extent that Passion devotion became a primary form of religious reverence, especially in the North with the rise of the *Devotio Moderna*.  

Small, personal sacred images gained new eminence during this period, distinguishing themselves from liturgical pictures in appearance and function. Parents decorated their houses with their children’s piety in mind, suffusing their dwellings with moralizing images of the Virgin and Child or the Suckling Christ and avoiding depictions of material excess.

The growing importance of personal votive images seemed to reflect broader cultural trends, such as the birth of religious confraternities in the thirteenth century and the immense popularity of Books of Hours in the fifteenth century. These books allowed a direct, unmediated access to Christ and Mary, appealing to the lay person and general community. As

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briefly mentioned earlier, the public also gathered to see religious plays or *rappresentazioni sacre*, which reenacted religious miracles or mysteries, often ending with angels impressing the message of the play onto the audience.\(^{39}\)

In addition to cultural cues, contemporary texts and sermons offer insight into the laity’s perceptions of angels. A multifaceted association between angels and humans existed. Angels were an appropriate presence in these sacramental paintings for both their divinity and their virtue. They were exemplars of moral behavior. In his *Imitatio Christi* (first issued in 1418), Thomas à Kempis (1379/80-1471) refers to angels as the summit of morality: “For God is our beholder whom chiefly we ought to worship wherever we be and go clean in his sight as angels.”\(^{40}\) He later humbly remarks upon their privileged status and coveted proximity to God by explaining the distinction between the Christian man and angels: “I verily worship thee whom the angels worship in heaven, but in me it is as yet but in faith and the angels worship thee there in thine own likeness without coverture.”\(^{41}\) Implicit in his words is the matter-of-fact knowledge that angels are elevated in a subtle spiritual ladder.

While people respected angels for their divine attributes, they also made comparisons between people and these holy attendants. In a 1495 sermon, the popular preacher Savonarola said,

“No one today believes that angels participate in the affairs of men and converse with them, or that God speaks to any man. But I say to you that *similitudo est causa amoris*, that is, similarity is the cause of friendship. Therefore the more we draw near to God and to the angels through faith and charity, all the more are we friends of God and of His angels; and they talk and converse with us.”\(^{42}\)

Savonarola explains that interactions and friendship with angels formed a viable link to God, and he emphasizes the similarities between angels and men. This relationship appeared in another

\(^{39}\) Burke, *Italian Renaissance*, 128.


\(^{41}\) Ibid., 263-64.

form as well. In the mid-Quattrocento, boys’ confraternities dressed up as angels in white for
dramatic performances, an example of a literal merging between children and angels.

A dichotomy between humans and angels surfaces. On one hand, the public viewed
angels as holy paradigms and ideals of human perfection. They were models of behavior to
which to aspire, yet people simultaneously drew comparisons between humans and angels. A
tension existed between humble reverence and the desire to attain and perhaps even surpass the
level of angels. This strain manifested in art through a mutual move toward homogeneity.
Human-scale angels grew in popularity, and were more often shown standing alongside man, as
in Francesco Francia’s Pietà (Fig. 20), as opposed to flying in the sky. Such visual changes
allowed a closer identification with these celestial beings, ultimately facilitating their function in
paintings. People could relate more naturally to angels as mediating figures than to Christ or
Mary. As Michael Camille notes, the angels “present an important emotional locus of
identification for the viewer.” As angels in art began to look more physically human-like, the
comparison between angels and humans became more comfortable. It is not surprising then
when in Paolo Pino’s 1548 Dialogo di Pittura, one of his characters refers to twenty-five
“graceful and beautiful” women as angels.

However, the sixteenth century contained the stirrings of religious controversy, which
culminated in the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation in the latter part of the century.
Around 1518, the church faced heated controversy about the truth of the Eucharist and the real

43 “On June 22, 1454, groups of boys on foot led off the parade of edifizi or floats. The Scuola Eugeniana came first,
followed by thirty members of the Company of the Vangelista and the Company of S. Antonio dressed as angels in
white. Then came the first float, which showed the archangel Michael, with God the Father above him in a cloud.
This edifizio was followed by two more confraternities of thirty angels in white, those of the Nativity or Archangel
Raphael and of the Purification.” Richard C. Trexler, Public Life in Renaissance Florence, Studies in Social
45 “Fabio: These matrons are guests at a feast; what will you say of this company of angels? Lauro: A truly divine
spectacle.” Mary Pardo, “Paolo Pino's Dialogo di Pittura: A Translation with Commentary” (PhD diss., University
of Pittsburgh, 1984), 300.
presence of the body and blood. In the following years, Luther rejected the mass, calling it an abomination, and Zwingli likened the Eucharist to cannibalism.\textsuperscript{46}

Alexander Nagel characterizes the period as a time of crisis for not only religion but also the visual arts, in which artists became preoccupied with the backwards-looking idea of reform and the integration of archaizing but desired antique forms.\textsuperscript{47} In this period of accelerated artistic modernization, artists were forced to deal with the tension and difficulties induced by what Marcia Hall later describes as competitive novelty or the drive for artists to continually exceed each other through individual originality.\textsuperscript{48} Using the altarpiece as his paradigm, Nagel argues that artists were placed in the formidable position of reinforcing and maintaining traditional forms, while continuing to instill novelty and innovation into their works.\textsuperscript{49}

In this volatile era, both invention and tradition were prized, and these priorities are especially manifest in the Angel Pietàs of Andrea del Sarto, Rosso Fiorentino, and Jacopo da Pontormo. Through a careful examination of a single iconographical type, we will see the responses and ensuing innovations these artists introduce into their Angel Pietàs.

**Andrea, Rosso, and Pontormo**

In 1516, Giovann Battista Puccini commissioned a work from Andrea for King Francis I of France. According to Vasari, “this work, when finished, gave such universal satisfaction, that Andrea, urged by many entreaties, had it engraved in Rome by Venetian Agostino; but it did not


\textsuperscript{47} Nagel, \textit{Reform of Art}, 15-16.


\textsuperscript{49} Nagel, \textit{Reform of Art}, 140.
succeed very well, and he would never again give any of his works to be engraved”\textsuperscript{50} (Fig. 21). But the work pleased the king so much that in 1518, he invited Andrea to Fontainebleau as a court-painter, where he lived for a year before returning to Florence.\textsuperscript{51} Andrea’s Pietà (Fig. 22), now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, was probably painted in 1518-1519, while he was still in France.\textsuperscript{52}

The Vienna Pietà is an intimate painting. The shallow arrangement of the Virgin, angels, and Christ presses closely against the picture plane. A sullen Mary with a pure white veil draped over her head clasps her hands in prayer, her clenched fingers prominently outlined against her dark blue cloak. Christ’s body stretches across the bottom of the composition, a pale pink cloth encircling his waist, his body propped against the incline of the stone slab, and his head bowed backward in death. His face bears an unmistakable greenish-gray pallor, yet his wounds are muted, visible only on his right foot and right hand. The angel on the left wears a green robe with a white sash tinted with blue draped across its shoulders, its red and blue wings behind it. It gently supports Christ’s body with its right hand, its eyes cast downward toward Christ’s face.

The youthful angel on the right wears a red robe with golden-fringed sleeves, the colors echoing its curly, reddish-gold hair. In grasps Mary’s cloak in its left hand as it holds the instruments of the passion in its right—a broken reed, nails, and sponge.

\textsuperscript{51} Shearman, \textit{Andrea del Sarto}, 3-4.
\textsuperscript{52} There are many differing opinions on this painting’s original provenance. In their catalogue raisonnés Freedberg and Shearman both give this work an Italian provenance: Sydney Joseph Freedberg, \textit{Andrea del Sarto}, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), 90-91, Shearman, \textit{Andrea del Sarto}, 77. Knapp suggests a possible French origin and Northern influences: Fritz Knapp, \textit{Andrea del Sarto, Künstler-Monographien} (Bielefeld, Velhagen & Klasing, 1907), 76. Natali also argues the work was painted in France: Antonio Natali, \textit{Andrea del Sarto}, First U.S. ed. (New York: Abbeville Press, 1999), 121. However, I believe the painting was executed in France around 1518-1519 because of similarities to French and Northern style and iconography and because of Janet Cox-Rearick’s argument for provenance. She writes that artwork’s earliest known location was in the collection of the Duke of Buckingham who purchased it in France through an agent: Janet Cox-Rearick, \textit{The Collection of Francis I: Royal Treasures} (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 163-64.
Of particular note, the blue cloth that adorns the red angel’s shoulders is carefully highlighted in delicate pinks, reflecting and refracting different hues of lambent light. This effect, called *cangiantismo*, uses shifts in hue to define shading and highlights. Popular in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, these effects were especially appropriate for portraying certain figures. In his *Libro dell’arte*, Cennino Cennini suggested *cangiante* green for “an angel in fresco,” and Lomazzo suggested their use for “nymphs of meadows and fountains and such-like, and also for certain angels, whose garments reflect nothing other than the rainbow.”

The work differs from traditional Italian style in several noteworthy respects. Italians normally showed the Virgin holding or touching Christ’s body or, less frequently, with her hands pressed together in prayer (Fig. 23). Moreover, although exceptions exist, the Virgin normally wears entirely blue clothing. Instead, Andrea’s *Pietà* bears many of the stylistic hallmarks of French and Northern European paintings. The choices in the Virgin’s clothing and gesture are remarkably similar to paintings like the Lamentations by Jean Fouquet (Fig. 24) or Gerard David (Fig. 25)—observations that fit with a French provenance.

With Andrea in France, it is logical that he would incorporate Northern style into his *Pietà* for his imaginably Northern patron, yet one element in his composition appears to have no precedent. In a highly unusual if not unique gesture, the angel in red holds Mary’s cloak with its left hand. As previously discussed, the *Pietà* held strong associations with the ceremony of the mass and particularly with the Mass of St. Gregory. It is from French images of the mass that Andrea seems to have drawn his inspiration (Figs. 26-28). The similarities between the acolytes

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54 Lomazzo as quoted in Martin Kemp, *The Science of Art: Optical Themes in Western Art from Brunelleschi to Seurat* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990), 266.
and the red angel are striking. The acolytes in these images look remarkably consistent with Andrea’s angels as they hold the priest’s robe and tapers rather than the Arma Christi. Beyond the common borrowing of form, Andrea has borrowed its function as well, transforming the angel into an acolyte for the Virgin, paralleling the relationship between priest and acolyte.

But why would Andrea have chosen this depiction? Has Andrea turned the Virgin into a kind of priest? Perhaps the answer is yes. In 1437, Jean du Bos, a sewing wares merchant and the master of a literary society, the Brotherhood of the Puy Notre-Dame of Amiens, commissioned a panel of the Virgin as a Priest (Fig. 29)—one of many paintings in the cathedral devoted to Mary.\(^{55}\) In this composition, the Virgin, robed in gold-embroidered vestments,\(^ {56} \) reaches her hand out toward the infant Christ, who is dressed in red and white.\(^ {57} \) The patron kneels in the corner, holding a banner that reads “Digne vesture au Prestre Souverain” (Worthy clothing [vestments] of the Sovereign Priest).\(^ {58} \) In a multi-tiered argument, René Laurentin explains how the theme of clothing and vestments was not only appropriate to a patron who was a haberdasher but also symbolic of the mystery of the Incarnation and the transformation of the Word into Flesh. He highlights the importance of the transmission of priesthood from Mary, the

\(^{55}\) The circumstances surrounding the commission and survival of this work are remarkable, but I will only treat them briefly here. This work was part of a series of paintings that decorated the Cathedral of Amiens. Every year, the Brotherhood of the Puy Notre-Dame of Amiens elected a master on Candlemas (February 2) who would compose a poem in honor of the Virgin, which would contain a refrain or palinod. He then commissioned a painting that included the Virgin, the Christ child, the palinod written on a banner held by the kneeling patron, and a symbolic object indicated by the palinod. The painting was unveiled at Christmas, and the palinod would become the refrain of the confraternity’s royal hymn (chant royal). After 1491, the Brotherhood started decorating the cathedral nave with these paintings, leaving only the current master’s commission on display. The cathedral filled with these paintings, transforming it into an astonishing museum. For additional history about this piece, see Jacques Dupont, "Le Sacerdoce de la Vierge," Gazette des Beaux-Arts (1932): 271-72, Georges Durand, Tableaux et Chants Royaux de la Confrérie du Puy Notre Dame d'Amiens (Amiens: Impr. Yvert et Tellier, 1911), 1-5, René Laurentin, "Digne Vesture au Prestre Souverain," Revue du Moyen-age Latin (1948): 255-57, Carol J. Purtle, "Le Sacerdoce de la Vierge et l'Énigme d'un Parti Iconographique Exceptionnel," Revue du Louvre et des Musées de France 46, no. 5 (1996): 54-56.

\(^{56}\) The Virgin’s vestments conform almost exactly to those prescribed in the Book of Exodus (Ch. 28) for Aaron and his descendents, the high priests of Israel. Purtle, "Le Sacerdoce," 57.

\(^{57}\) Christ wears the mantum, which was the Pope’s everyday outfit. Ibid.: 58.

Levite Virgin, to Christ, the Sovereign Priest, further arguing that through her gestures, the Virgin symbolically represents the Digne vesture or the clothing of Christ’s humanity, which corresponds to the Incarnation.

Decades later, the Queen-mother Louise of Savoy, her son, King Francis I, his wife, and his sister visited Amiens. Louise so marveled at the nave paintings that in 1517 and 1518, she commissioned copies of forty-eight of the artworks dating from 1458-1515. Though almost all the original paintings have now been lost, the miniatures gathered in Louise’s manuscript suggest that the Virgin as a Priest inspired the format of some of the ensuing paintings, even though its own iconography remained exceptional. Andrea’s work under King Francis I only a year later in 1518-1519 and the established artistic relationship between the royal family and Amiens, together open the possibility that the surprising thematic similarities between Andrea’s Pietà and the Virgin as Priest may not have been mere coincidence. This hypothesis is especially appealing given the iconographical uniqueness of both of these works. The Virgin as Priest is a subject that is exceedingly rare and possibly isolated to these two examples; it seems more likely that Andrea had heard of or seen this painting through the royal family and repeated the theme rather than inventing it in isolation.

Though difficult to conclude with certainty, Andrea may too have intended to suggest the Virgin’s role as a priest. As a Pietà, however, her role as priest more likely refers to the

61 While there are no other known Virgin as Priest images in this series, Dupont argues that other paintings share stylistic influences from the Virgin as Priest painting. Dupont, "Le Sacerdoce," 273-74.
62 In discussing the Virgin as Priest, Peeters labels it enigmatic and mystical, and Purtle calls it strange, and totally independent of religious doctrine and of all identifiable popular devotion (“totalement independent de la doctrine ecclésiastique et de toute devotion populaire identifiable”). Ferd. Peeters, "Le Tableau Dit "Sujet Mystique"," Revue belge d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'art (1931): 121, Purtle, "Le Sacerdoce," 56.
Eucharistic host and offer of sacrifice than to the Incarnation. Dupont’s interpretation of the Amiens painting could be applied to Andrea’s work: “The Virgin, who gave birth to Jesus and offered him to God at Calvary, filled the first role of the priest, who consecrates the host and offers the sacrifice.”

Additionally, connections to the mass were already an important component of the Pietà. The Pietà’s Gregorian associations made it a true representation of the miracle of the Eucharist, with Christ’s body above his tomb symbolizing the host placed upon the altar. The motif of the Virgin standing behind Christ placed atop a tomb-like slab that represents an altar is quite common in Italian art, so the association of the Virgin as a priest would not have been entirely unorthodox. However, Andrea seems to have taken the explicit comparisons found in French art and applied them subtly to his painting.

Yet beyond symbolically representing the mass, Andrea signifies its active practice and thereby institutes a direct connection to his audience. In an essay, Camille exposes the dynamic relationship between late-medieval people and Passion images. Far from being passive, images of Christ acted as mirrors for the viewer, at times potent enough to cause the beholder to imitate the portrayed emotions and actions—a concept Michael Camille calls ‘mimetic identification.’

Such reactions demonstrate that these objects blurred the boundaries of replication and instead were ‘real’ representations vested with votive strength and power. Andrea’s unpretentious detail changes the work into a reflection of its viewer, drawing parallels between earthly church and acolytes and heaven and angels. The comparison is especially suitable given the physical changes that exist between Andrea’s angels and earlier angels. Their scale has grown compared

63 Though refuted by subsequent authors in relation to the Amiens painting, his idea may be better applied to Andrea’s Pietà. “La Vierge, qui a donné naissance à Jésus et l’a offert à Dieu au calvaire, a rempli la première le rôle du prêtre, qui consacre l’hostie et offre le sacrifice.” Dupont, "Le Sacerdoce," 268.
64 Camille, "Mimetic Identification," 204-06.
to those in early Quattrocento paintings, and the wings are de-emphasized, especially compared
to his earlier Puccini Pietà with its eagle-like wings (Fig. 21).

Andrea returned to Italy with fresh stylistic ideas and disseminated them among his
colleagues and students. In particular, Rosso’s *Dead Christ* (Fig. 30) bears remarkable
similarities in focus to Andrea’s *Pietà*. Leonardo di Lorenzo Tornabuoni commissioned this
work between 1534 and 1537, during Rosso’s stay in Rome. Although the painting’s original
function remains unknown, its small scale and subject matter suggest that it was probably
intended for personal use. Usually titled *Dead Christ*, Rosso himself described this work as
a Pietà, associating it with this tradition and iconography. He used Andrea’s *Puccini Pietà* as a
model for his Christ, and more interestingly, also followed Andrea’s lead of relating his Pietà
to the church.

Rosso’s *Dead Christ* both retains and drifts away from the traditional form of the Pietà.
Christ’s languid body forms the center of the composition, his head turned in profile. He sits on
a rich blue cloth that covers a symbolic altar. Four angels with hair in tight ringlets surround him.
The two angels that flank him hold large, tripartite, twisted candles—freshly extinguished with
wisps of smoke drifting upward. The angel on the right wears clothing that is highlighted in

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65 As an example, Philippe Costamagna discusses the effects Leonardo da Vinci had on Andrea’s work during his
stay in France. He then discusses the spread of certain aspects of Leonardo’s style through Andrea to artists like
Jacopo da Pontormo, Baccio Bandinelli, and Rosso Fiorentino, arguing that Andrea’s French sojourn affected Italian
art. Philippe Costamagna, "L’influence de Léonard de Vinci sur les Artistes Toscans et ses Apports à la Maniera: le
Paolo Ciardi and Antonio Natali (Firenze: Giunta Regionale Toscana, 1996), 117, David Franklin, *Rosso in Italy: The
67 This title comes from Vasari’s shorthand reference to this type of work as a *Cristo morto*. David Franklin, "New
68 “...figura domini nostra Iesu Christi in forma Pietatis, cum quibusdam angelis circumcircha dictam figuram...”
Ibid.
69 David Franklin, "Rosso Fiorentino and Jacopo V Appiani: Art in Piombino in the First Part of the Sixteenth
Century," in *Pontormo e Rosso*, ed. Roberto Paolo Ciardi and Antonio Natali (Firenze: Giunta Regionale Toscana,
1996), 282.
brilliant *cangiante* pinks and blues that radiate out from its golden buckle. An unspecified source of light illuminates Christ’s body.  

The subject of Christ with angels holding candles was not entirely new. According to Vasari, under the tutelage of Andrea del Sarto, Rosso, along with Pontormo, worked on a predella that featured a dead Christ with two little angels weeping and holding two torches. Though the panel is now lost, this predella for Andrea’s *Annunciation*, presumably created under Andrea’s direction, served as precedent for his work, and further supports the connection between Andrea and Rosso. But nevertheless candles were certainly not common in Pietàs and are perhaps the most unusual aspect of this composition.

The first step, then, to explaining the subject is identifying these grandiose candles. Much too large to be mere altar candles, they seem to be funeral candles. Italian funeral candles varied much, and their presence was a central consideration in and prerequisite for any funeral ceremony. They could be several *braccia* tall, as seen in Ghirlandaio’s *Funeral of St. Francis* (Fig. 31), and were hand-held—not carried in candlesticks or made with a handle, like tapers. While Rosso’s candles do fit these descriptions, the most convincing identifying evidence is the presence of nearly identical funeral candles in images of the Dormition of the Virgin, such as the ones by Cenni di Francesco di Ser Cenni (Figs. 32-33) and Taddeo di Bartolo.

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70 Many scholars have posited interpretations of this painting. Shearman thinks that this painting focuses not on the Transubstantiation as many Pietàs do but on the Resurrection and “Reawakening” of Christ—a detail relevant to Tornabuoni as the Bishop of Borgo Sansepolcro. He identifies Christ’s seat as a sarcophagus and his setting as a sepulcher. He dismisses any functional purpose to the unlit candles (“in the realistic sense, they might just as well not be there”), instead classifying them as symbols. Shearman, "Dead Christ," 150-52. Nagel agrees with Shearman’s interpretation, adding that the picture represents a moment within the tomb as angels hold a vigil for Christ. As Christ awakes, a gust of wind that enters as the tomb’s stone is moved extinguishes the angels’ candles. Nagel, *Reform of Art*, 155-56.


72 Franklin, "Rosso Fiorentino and Jacopo," 281-82.

73 David Franklin, too, associates these candles with death and burial: Franklin, *Rosso in Italy*, 146.

74 For more about funeral candles and the importance of wax, see Sharon T. Strocchia, "Burials in Renaissance Florence, 1350-1500" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1981), 80-88.
In both these paintings, the angels mourning the Virgin hold the same thick, twisted, handheld candles found in Rosso’s painting. This motif recurs in Lorenzo Lotto’s later *Entombment* (Fig. 35), in which two putti also carry relatively large funeral candles.

Why would Rosso include funeral candles in his *Pietà*? Candles fit the narrative need for illuminating a dark sepulcher, but Rosso’s extinguished candles do not provide light. In nearly all religious ceremonies, candles are lit and remain lit throughout its length, including funerals, as seen in Ghirlandaio’s painting. One of the few exceptions is the *Tenebrae* (“darkness”), the name given to the Matins and the Lauds performed during the Thursday, Friday, and Saturday of Holy week. Holy week commemorates Christ’s last week of life, beginning with Palm Sunday, continuing through Christ’s death on Good Friday, and ending on Easter Sunday with a celebration of his resurrection and the lighting of the Paschal candle.

Originally, beginning with the *Tenebrae* of Maundy Thursday, lit candles dispersed throughout the church were slowly extinguished. On Friday, the final candles were put out and the church placed in solemn darkness, representing the death and burial of the true light of God, Jesus Christ. A lone candle was left burning and sometimes hidden from view.\(^{75}\) The candle may have served a practical use, allowing clergy to read by its light, but it also represented the eventual resurrection of Christ.\(^{76}\) By the twelfth century, this extinguishing of lights was performed on all three days of the Easter Triduum.\(^ {77}\) Participants treated the rites during these

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\(^{76}\) William Durandus (c. 1237-1296) was one of the most important medieval liturgists. In his *Rationale divinorum officiorum*, he explains the symbolism and significance of the church, vestments, and almost all facets of the Roman rite. He gives several different meanings for the remaining lit candle. Guillaume Durand, *Rational Ou Manuel Des Divins Offices De Guillaume Durand*, trans. Charles Barthélemy, 5 vols., vol. 4 (Paris: Louis Vivès, 1854), 75-76.

three days as a grand funeral for Christ, complete with a procession to the symbolic Easter sepulcher. The choice of two extinguished candles probably also had a further significance specific to the Passion cycle. The *Vita Christi*, attributed to Ludolph of Saxony (d. 1378), was a widely-read history of Christ’s life from his birth to the Ascension. Chapter by chapter, it describes the events of Christ’s life and expands on stories only briefly addressed in the Gospels. The book survives through copious Latin manuscripts and has been translated into Dutch, German, Italian, Portuguese, Catalan, Spanish, and French. In the section describing Christ’s death and Deposition, the *Vita Christi* reads, “At his death, his eyes went out [were extinguished], and the two great lamps that light up the entire world were darkened in a manner that at this hour, the universe was plunged into deep darkness.” Rosso’s inclusion of two extinguished candles makes Christ’s moment of death particularly poignant and its relation to the *Tenebrae* acutely visible to the Renaissance spectator. The unknown source of light that illuminates the otherwise darkened setting may then be a literal reference to the single candle left burning during the ceremony, or it may refer to Christ’s impending resurrection.

The connections between Andrea’s and Rosso’s Angel Pietàs may not be immediately obvious, but in addition to visual repetitions, Rosso’s panel echoes Andrea’s approach to incorporating ceremony and subsequently accomplishes some of the same goals. By relying on

81 “A la mort, ses yeux se sont éteints, et les deux grands luminaires qui éclairent le monde entier se sont obscurcis de manière qu’à cette heure l’univers fut plongé en de profondes ténèbres... ” Sachsen, *La Grande Vie de Jesus-Christ*, 483.
Tornabuoni’s knowledge of church ritual, Rosso transformed the Pietà into a literal realization of Christ’s funeral and paralleled it to the *Tenebrae*, its ceremonial counterpart. The painting effectively bridges the gap between patron and Christ, fostering an unspoken understanding between the two. Rosso’s painting was popular enough to apparently inspire subsequent works, such as Federico Zuccaro’s *Pietà with Angels* (Fig. 36), although no work seems to replicate his doused candles.\(^82\)

Rosso’s nearly exact contemporary and companion pupil under Andrea, Jacopo da Pontormo, created a Pietà (Fig. 37) that looks nothing like Rosso’s own. The altarpiece forms the central focus of the Capponi chapel in Florence, where it still remains. The identification and subject matter of this altarpiece remain energetically contested, but before a discussion of these issues, the work deserves a brief introduction.

In 1525, a wealthy Florentine banker, Lodovico Capponi purchased a chapel in the Benedictine Church, Santa Felicità. He significantly renovated the interior and changed the chapel’s dedication from the Annunciation to the Pietà.\(^83\) From Pontormo, Capponi commissioned the major paintings—a scene of the *Annunciation*, four roundels of the evangelists on the ceiling, a dome with *God the Father and Four Patriarchs*, and an altarpiece (Fig. 38).\(^84\) A stained glass window of the *Entombment* by Guillame Marcillat adorned one of the walls (Fig. 39).

\(^{82}\) Shearman gives a list of seven paintings that seem to follow Rosso’s trend, although he notes that “none of them repeats Rosso’s subject.” Shearman, "Dead Christ," 170, note 25.
\(^{84}\) Waldman, "New Light," 293-95.
A large-scale altarpiece, Pontormo’s *Pietà* is remarkable for its extraordinary iconography and skillful rendering.\(^{85}\) As the architect of the chapel program, Pontormo also had the flexibility to engage the complete space, uniting its components. Perhaps struck by the potential of his own innovation or maybe just mimicking Michelangelo, Pontormo erected a screen that prevented anyone from entering the chapel for three years,\(^{86}\) privately completing its decoration with his student, Agnolo Bronzino.

As the altarpiece to a chapel dedicated to the Pietà, Pontormo’s painting almost certainly fits into the tradition of this ahistorical devotional work, despite its common designation as a Deposition or an Entombment.\(^{87}\) A comparison between his drawing study (Fig. 40) and his final work also reveals an intentional replacement of the cross from the background with a lone cloud, drawing attention to Pontormo’s desire to make this work non-narrative.

Pontormo’s *Pietà* depicts a dynamic moment as two androgynous youths carry Christ’s body away from his mother. Figures lift to fill the frame, confusing horizon and sky. Every portion of the panel is filled, the figure in green’s sinuous body curving to match the frame and a lone cloud filling the small space at the upper-left. The viewer’s eyes meander through the entire composition, following the disparate gazes of the internal characters. Three hands frame Christ’s left hand, presented to the viewer in the middle of the altarpiece. Unlike many other devotional images, Christ’s body does not hold the undivided attention of the surrounding figures. A swirl


\(^{87}\) Cox-Rearick (1964, v. 2, fig. 253-254), Clapp (1972, fig. 92), Darragon (1981, p. 56, fig. 9), and Lebensztejn (1992, p. 208, fig. 54) call it a *Deposition*, Shearman (1971, p. 5, fig. 1) calls it an *Entombment*, Nigro (pl. IX, I) calls it a *Transportation of Christ*, and Costamagna (1994, p. 63, fig. 47) and Steinberg (1974, p. 386, fig. 1) call it a *Pietà*. 
of draperies creates rich depth and three-dimensionality, and a flurry of color greets the eye. The characters’ telltale red-rimmed eyes and sorrowful faces set the dampened mood.

However, no scholar has explicitly placed this work in the tradition of the Angel Pietà, most likely because its angels lack the most common identifying trait—their wings. With such an important attribute missing, their identification becomes much more difficult. However, a significant body of evidence supports the classification of the two curly-haired youths carrying Christ’s body as angels.

First of all, one can clearly eliminate these two beardless, agile youths as either of the two proper narrative characters, Joseph of Arimathea or Nicodemus. Pontormo also used stunning cangianti effects to add a shimmering beauty to the pink angel’s clothing—just like those found in Andrea’s and Rosso’s paintings. Moreover, one must notice these figures’ proximity to Christ. They carry his body, placing their hands directly upon his skin. Yet tradition often prohibited people from touching Christ’s sacred body, and it is quite unlikely that an ordinary and unidentified human could deserve such a privilege. It was instead more common to have a cloth separate a human hand from Christ’s body. This consideration is conserved in two works Pontormo used as inspiration, Raphael’s Entombment and Michelangelo’s St. Peter’s Pietà, both of which show Christ is held only with a cloth-covered hand.

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88 With only the exceptions of Seraphim and Cherubim, the Bible does not give angels wings as attributes. Instead, they are often described by their clothing or by the speed and suddenness their appearance. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John, the angels that announce Christ’s resurrection to the Holy women wear white clothing, and in Luke, they wear “dazzling clothes” (Luke 24.2-4), making cangianti effects particularly appropriate. Gunnar Berefelt, A Study on the Winged Angel: The Origin of a Motif (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1968), 17, Staale Sinding-Larsen, Iconography and Ritual: A Study of Analytical Perspectives (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget AS, 1984), 120.

89 To my knowledge, the first person to identify these figures as angels was Walter Friedlaender, followed more recently by Leo Steinberg: Walter F. Friedlaender, “Die Entstehung des Antiklassischen Stiles,” Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft 46 (1925): 83, Steinberg, “Pontormo's Capponi Chapel,” 388-91.
Pontormo’s drawing (Fig. 40), gives insight into his compositional process, figural decisions, and selective modeling from Raphael’s *Entombment.*\(^9^0\) As Janet Cox-Rearick notes, repeated *pentimenti* nearly obscure the leftmost figure, indicating indecision about its form\(^9^1\)—a logical byproduct of compositional experimentation. Upon careful inspection, the drawing reveals the leftmost figure’s firmly planted feet, found similarly in the *Entombment* but consciously changed in the final composition. In this surprising deviation, the *Pietà* portrays these two youths delicately balanced upon their toes—a staunch refusal to betray the burden of Christ’s body.

Pontormo’s unusual representation and selective defiance of his model, Raphael’s *Entombment*, has two explanations. First, such a detail itself demonstrates that these beings are incorporeal, indicating their angelic nature. Second, we consider their possible actions. Although many scholars contend that the destination of Christ’s body is downward toward the altar and fictive tomb,\(^9^2\) Leo Steinberg posits an alternate explanation that considers the entirety of the chapel decoration, including now-lost elements.\(^9^3\) First, one recalls Marcillat’s stained glass window of the *Entombment*, completed in 1526, before Pontormo had finished his own

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\(^9^1\) Cox-Rearick, *The Drawings of Pontormo*, 259.

\(^9^2\) Shearman describes Christ being lowered into his tomb and even though Lebensztejn labels the work a Deposition, he describes it as an Entombment. Lebensztejn and Parronchi, *Le Journal*, 214, Shearman, *Pontormo’s Altarpiece*, 22.

work. With Pontormo’s assiduous attention to detail, it is unlikely that he would have chosen to repeat existing subject matter, and hence probably did not intend to depict an Entombment with its implied downward destination. Instead, the two figures more plausibly carry Christ’s body upward toward the image of God the Father that once occupied the cupola. With Christ’s lofty final destination, angels are the only figures suited to this task.

In his remarkable Angel Pietà, Pontormo has created a visually engaging and captivating scene that is nevertheless odd in its presentation of figures. A possible explanation for his stylistic decisions draws on his desire to attain effects of sculpture and relief. According to Vasari, Pontormo created “finished models of clay in the round for almost all of the figures” for his lost frescoes at San Lorenzo. In particular, Pontormo may have drawn inspiration from Michelangelo’s early relief of the Battle of the Centaurs (Fig. 41). Traces of Michelangelo’s style are evident in Pontormo’s work, and Steinberg notes shared aspects between the Santa

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94 Waldman and Steinberg discuss the careful program of the chapel, even noting that the light source in the altarpiece seems to originate from the real window. Steinberg, “Pontormo's Capponi Chapel,” 387-88, Waldman, "New Light," 301-02. Shearman notes that it was unusual that Pontormo would repeat the stained glass window’s subject matter but still classifies the work as an Entombment. Shearman, Pontormo's Altarpiece, 11.
95 The cupola frescoes are now lost, known only through preparatory sketches, reproduced in Cox-Rearick, The Drawings of Pontormo, figs. 246-52. They are also briefly discussed in Clapp, Jacopo Carucci da Pontormo, His Life and Work, 46, 49.
96 Shearman readily notes a fault in Steinberg’s argument: there is little basis for a scene showing Christ’s body lifted up to God between the Deposition and Entombment. Shearman, Only Connect, 91, footnote 26. This incongruity has a couple of possible explanations. Harbison suggests that Pontormo may have looked to a woodcut by Hans Baldung Grien of Body of Christ Carried to Heaven by Angels. Craig Harbison, "Pontormo, Baldung, and the Early Reformation," Art Bulletin 66, no. 2 (1984). Second, perhaps Pontormo did not depict his Pietà as a moment between the Deposition and the Entombment but rather a moment after the Entombment—a type described by Domenico di Cambio, “a Pietà—that is, Our Lord rising from the tomb [quand’esce dal munimento], with Our Lady beside Him…” Origo, Merchant of Prato, 258.
97 Cox-Rearick remarks that Pontormo’s drawings during this time period contain a “radiant chiaroscuro,” and the “new richness of surface often suggests precedents in sculpture.” She also associates the “precisely modeled sculptural form of the Dead Christ study for the Deposition” with Michelangelo’s early Pietà. In his introduction to Letti’s book, Roberto Paolo Ciardi also briefly discusses the relationship between the works of Rosso and Pontormo to sculpture. Cox-Rearick, The Drawings of Pontormo, 61-62, Marchetta Letti, Pontormo, Rosso Fiorentino, 3-4.
98 Vasari, Lives, 1540. “…che quasi di tutte fece i modelli di terra tondi e finiti…” Vasari, Le Vite, 333.
99 Costamagna discusses the “michelangélisme” in Pontormo’s earlier works. Costamagna, Catalogue Raisonné, 64.
Felicità altarpiece and Michelangelo’s St. Peter’s Pietà, suggesting that Pontormo was one of Michelangelo’s many admirers and that he integrated facets of the older artist’s style.

Such a connection explains the gravity-defying stacked figures. The self-portrait of Pontormo as Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea to the far right is reminiscent of the lone face in the center of the Battle of the Centaurs staring out beyond the chaos. The similarity continues even to the hazy disappearance of the Pontormo’s body, echoing the unfinished and rough hewn marble.

A 1547 paragone letter to Benedetto Varchi indicates Pontormo’s interest in two-dimensional representations of three-dimensional forms. In the letter, he compares sculpture and painting and makes the following distinction between painting and relief:

“Its that which I called too daring… consists in surpassing nature by resolving to give a figure spirit and make it seem alive and make it on a plane surface; for if at least he had considered that when God created man He made him in relief—as something which facilitated making him alive—he would not have taken up so artful, or rather miraculous and divine a subject.”

Not only does Pontormo exalt painting above relief (rilievo), he suggests that painting surpasses God’s own technique of creating life. He writes that the sheer difficulty of rendering three-dimensional subject matter in a flat medium makes painting the superior art. Michelangelo, in an opposing argument, also discusses rilievo as a common measure between sculpture and painting in his own letter to Varchi:

“Jo dico che la pittura mi par più tenuta buona quanto più va verso il rilievo, & il rilievo più tenuto cattivo, quanto più va verso la pittura, & però a me soleva parere, che la scultura fussi la lanterna della pittura, & che da l’una a l’altra fussi quella differenza, che è dal Sole alla Luna.

“In my opinion painting is considered good to the extent that it approaches relief and relief is to be considered the closer it approaches painting; and so I used to feel that sculpture was the lantern of

100 Steinberg, "Pontormo's Capponi Chapel," 387.
Here, Michelangelo presents *rilievo* as common measure to both painting and sculpture. This example serves mainly to draw attention to the discourse comparing painting and relief and to give context to Pontormo’s stylistic decisions.

If we accept that Pontormo has constructed a two-dimensional, illusionistic painting using the vocabulary of relief, there must be a reason why. From Pontormo’s own letter, it is likely that he believed his choice of medium illusionistically surpassed sculptural form, and was hence more divine and miraculous—a fitting description for a devotional altarpiece. The idea that an artist’s skill and ability could contribute to the holiness and spirituality of an artwork appears in other contexts as well. In his *Four Dialogues on Painting* from 1537, Francisco Hollanda briefly addresses the idea that an exceptional painting has the ability to inspire awe and engender devotion through an appreciation of the sheer challenge of its construction: “And at [Italian painting’s] best nothing is more noble or devout, since with discreet persons nothing so calls forth and fosters devotion as the difficulty of a perfection which is bound up in union with God.” He continues on to say, “… [devotional images] which are divinely fashioned excite even those who have little devotion or sensibility to contemplation and tears and by their austere beauty inspire them with great reverence and fear.”

Hollanda describes the importance of the painter’s skill to its eventual emotional and spiritual impact. Beyond subject matter, the artistry and competence embodied within a painting furthered its ultimate objectives—an idea of which Pontormo’s writings suggest he was acutely conscious.

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103 Hollanda’s attitude toward God is more reverent than Pontormo’s and refers to God as a painter, rather than a creator of reliefs. The excerpt continues, “For good painting is nothing but a copy of the perfections of God and a recollection of His painting; it is a music and a melody which only intellect can understand, and that with great difficulty.” Francisco de Hollanda, *Four Dialogues on Painting*, trans. Aubrey Bell (Westport, Ct: Hyperion Press, 1979), 16, 66.
Understanding the theoretical basis behind Pontormo’s choice of relief-like painting, we now turn to the unique compositional details he employs in assembling his image. Unlike the traditional devotional picture, each character gazes in a different direction, decentralizing the painting. The viewer’s eyes leap from figure to figure, absorbing the entire composition. Pontormo’s use of varied gazes is a technique designed to hold the spectator’s attention. He specifically rejects the more common practices of either directing the internal figures toward the object of devotion or outward toward the devotee, inviting his attention inward. The characters in the Pietà create a vibrant mix of internal contemplation and external invitation. Figures look toward Mary; other figures look outward in different directions. Robert Gaston discusses the theories behind the painterly capture of attention and writes, “Painters surely understood the psychological consequences for the beholder of the attentional techniques they used. How, for example, the illusion of continuously flowing gestural and verbal interchange between protagonists could be promoted by ensuring that the gazes of those figures did not lock into one another.” He continues on to argue that artists of the Maniera, like Pontormo, relied on developments in portraiture to develop techniques that engaged “the beholder in a richer dialogue with the sacred image.” And such a dialogue was entirely appropriate in the context of the Capponi chapel.

Pontormo’s seemingly erratic configuration and placement of characters, the mixed gazes, and the three-dimensionality of his painting are all clever tools he uses to capture and hold the viewer’s attention and ultimately his devotions. Pontormo’s altarpiece interacts and incorporates the surrounding chapel features, like the painting of God the Father in the cupola, and serves as a central component of a unified chapel program. He calls upon the believer to both comprehend

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and piece together the story he has composed. He generates movement and draws upon the viewer’s memories and cognition, directing his thoughts and physically encapsulating him in the center of the performance as the characters in the Pietà move outward into his space with the conviction of relief. The altarpiece creates continuity between picture space and real space, even incorporating the physical light streaming through Marcillat’s window into his picture. Pontormo’s combination of material and painted effects stretches the Pietà into physical space, enveloping and incorporating the viewer into the pictorial scene, thereby placing Christ’s body in the same space as the worshipper.

As an extrapolation of this idea, the subject matter’s stubborn ambiguity, may actually indicate the altarpiece’s adaptability. If Pontormo’s vagueness is intentional or purposely unresolved, something we find later in Michelangelo’s Last Judgment, it then allows the viewer to interpret the altarpiece as he will. It allows him to adapt its meaning to what is most compelling to him. As the Rorschach test allows people to interpret random ink blots, Pontormo’s altarpiece conforms to the onlooker’s biases, generating wide appeal, applicability, and relevance, creating a malleable chapel program.

Another detail bolsters the hypothesis that Pontormo quite consciously designed his work with a particular concern for the viewer. Operating under the reasonable assumption that compositional changes signal intent, two alterations between the drawing study and the finished altarpiece suggest Pontormo’s attentive staging of Christ’s body (Figs. 42-43). First, he tilts

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105 Waldman discusses the unification of physical and painted light and their engaging effects on the viewer. Waldman, “New Light,” 301-02.

106 In addition to Waldman’s argument (see previous footnote), Nagel remarks on the altarpiece’s embrace of the chapel and a “spiraling movement leading out of the picture.” Nagel, Reform of Art, 137. Shearman also discusses the idea of “shared space,” and while I agree with his overall point, a few details of his argument are not entirely convincing. Shearman, Only Connect, 92-94.

107 Barnes explains some of the devices Michelangelo used to hold the viewer’s attention, including rendering figures in complex poses and consciously veiling the painting’s “meaning to engage the learned viewer more fully.” Bernadine Ann Barnes, Michelangelo’s Last Judgment: The Renaissance Response, The Discovery Series; 5 (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1998), 38, 104-05.
Christ’s face upward, and second, he splays the finger’s of Christ’s limp hand, through both actions, *presenting* Christ to his audience.

The other notable difference between the study and finished *Pietà* is the hand of the woman who stands before Mary. In the study, she grips Mary’s sleeve, but in the final altarpiece, she holds a cloth instead. This mysterious transition is peculiarly reminiscent of the angel in Andrea’s *Vienna Pietà*. As Andrea’s former apprentice, Pontormo may very well have considered Andrea’s earlier work as a precedent to his own, just as Rosso had.\footnote{Freedberg notes, “… this Pietà of Andrea’s was sufficiently meaningful as a classical example to Pontormo almost surely to have influenced him.” Freedberg, *Andrea del Sarto*, vol. 1, 69.} Far from being visually similar, Pontormo’s vivid and elaborate masterpiece speaks to the viewer, and at the very least, it continues along the same path of iconographic deviation that Andrea initiates. Pontormo’s altarpiece differs radically from previous Angel Pietàs in its presentation of the subject matter, its composition, the movement of Christ’s body, and its explicit interaction with the chapel—almost everything except for its function as a devotional altarpiece. To that end, Pontormo has devised a work exquisitely suited to its space and purpose.

**Conclusion**

The Angel Pietà is an image that combines a variety of histories and traditions into a distinctly individual type. Its complex visual characteristics and its interaction with cultural values compose a portion of its intriguing nature. Through its flexibility and multitude of possible interpretations, its form opens to invention and artistic expression in the Renaissance. The correlations to the Mass of St. Gregory and the Eucharist exemplify its representational importance to its contemporaries. Through its inclusion of angels, it imparts a closeness and applicability to its viewers, distinguishing and defining itself from other similar image types.
Animated by these connections, the Angel Pietà played an important role in linking church ritual and significance to heavenly bodies.

The mental qualities attributed to art began especially in the late-medieval ages. The psychological component in these works opened a conversation with their viewers, drawing them in and leading them to invest more time and thought into the composition. In their acts as mediating figures, angels supported these efforts, enhancing a composition’s ability to aid in devotion.

Despite their outward differences, the paintings of Andrea, Rosso, and Pontormo are all bound to each other as Angel Pietàs. They both adhere to and deviate from existing iconography, expanding and shaping the type through their departures. While each composition is founded in traditional imagery, these artists have showcased their creativity and invention through their mix of novel interpretations and established elements.

Andrea’s Pietà clearly incorporated French style. The simple composition was not strikingly different from the expected Angel Pietà, but he applied the pose of an acolyte found in French images to his angel. His conception was unprecedented and yet despite its novelty, the overall work not only remained legible and easily understood but also avoided the danger of inappropriateness.109

Rosso, in turn, created a painting for Bishop Tornabuoni—a man steeped in religious imagery, practice, and rite. Beginning with the form of the Cristo morto surrounded by angels, Rosso’s simple act of extinguishing candles effectively related the painting to Holy week ritual and ceremony. This important yet subtle detail tacitly personalized the painting to Tornabuoni.

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109 The issue of propriety in art arises often within treatises and manuals. These publications often addressed the topic of decorous composition and explained how to correctly depict figures, events, and emotions. For a few examples, see Alberti, On Painting and on Sculpture, 77, da Vinci, A Treatise on Painting, 151-68.
Pontormo’s situation differs from the previous two examples because he devised an entire chapel program and hence, constructed an altarpiece that interacted with the rest of the site. The figures extend three-dimensionally into space, morphing the Angel Pietà into a dynamic vision of Christ’s Passion. The chapel program envelopes the viewer in a viscerally engaging experience, allowing him to imagine Christ entering into his own real world.

And yet, as different as these paintings are, they respond to a fundamental problem. Each artist strove to construct a devotional painting that decreased devotional distance. This issue is well-addressed by the Angel Pietà, through its very form. Each departure from standard iconography served to address the idea of distance and through its success expanded existing pictorial vocabulary. Through the careful discussion of these three paintings, the mechanism of iconographic change begins to emerge. Presented with a question or problem, the artists returned with an answer that fit within the guidelines set by their location and patron.

Whether through a relationship to ceremony, as in Andrea’s and Rosso’s paintings, or through a corporal engagement with the viewer, as in Pontormo’s painting, each work cleverly links the worshipper to God. As discussed earlier, this goal is accomplished through the formation of mediating figures, an intimate perspective, and carefully ordered gazes. But the means through which these Angel Pietàs captivate the viewer’s mind merits a closer examination.

The continuing development of the Angel Pietà leads to the unfolding of a static, iconic picture through a mechanism analogous to narrative. At its core, a narrative image is a representation of a sequence of events in a single picture. From that picture, an entire story unravels, an entire scene replayed based on the viewer’s memories and knowledge. A narrative image inherently relies on the viewer to ‘fill in the holes’ and recreate a biblical story, a myth, or a tale. Within that act lies its meditative power.
Without recontextualizing itself within the Passion cycle, these works refer to events outside themselves—to church rituals or to physical structures. They require their audiences to actively understand and recreate the complete significance. I draw a distinction here to the use of symbols. An object can serve as a reference to an absent article or an event; a lamb refers to Christ, and a crown of thorns refers to Christ’s crucifixion. However, an acolyte refers to church mass; extinguished candles refer to the *Tenebrae*. Both are services known through a viewer’s own personal encounters. A painting that relates to elements outside itself requires a beholder’s understanding of those cues. The Angel Pietà has become participatory, drawing upon a person’s individual faith, memories, and knowledge. As a narrative expands from a single image through a beholder’s comprehension, the Angel Pietà here also expands but into a more personal realm.

This contrasts with icons that change to incorporate a greater reliance on stories and history. In his book, *Icon to Narrative*, Sixten Ringbom traces the development of the ‘narrative icon.’ By looking at several different image types, he explains the growing trend of incorporating narrative elements into traditionally iconic, non-narrative paintings, such as the Suffering Christ and the Salvator Mundi.

These changes fit with the varying attitudes toward devotion and faith. As people began to believe in an individually proactive approach to worship, these artworks shifted their focus to the devotee, acknowledging his presence and incorporating his contributions into the meaning of the artwork.\(^\text{110}\) These artists have developed a new way of resolving the dichotomy of divine representation by internalizing a portion of the experience between a worshipper and his Creator.

In another study, Alexander Nagel examines another interaction between viewer and artwork. He argues that Michelangelo’s *Entombment* (Fig. 44), now in the National Gallery in London, forms a collage of temporal moments that ultimately reinforces the relationship between its “historical event and the ritual structures of Christian worship.”¹¹¹ By its vertical, crucifixion-like presentation of Christ, it represents a “transitional narrative predicament, from which a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ can be clearly extrapolated.”¹¹² From that circumstance, Nagel writes that the *Entombment* interfuses the frontal Man of Sorrows viewpoint and a narrative cycle. The chief notion of distance still figures prominently into this painting but is indicated not by mediating figures as in an Angel Pietà but by the presentation of Christ as he is being withdrawn away from the viewer and toward the tomb—directing attention to its presence.¹¹³ Its grounding in a narrative moment filled with non-narrative cues emphasizes its construction “for” the viewer, presenting both Christ’s body and the Passion cycle.

While the Angel Pietà demonstrates a move toward a greater acknowledgment and integration of the viewer, the works I have examined rely less on narrative than the subjects of Ringbom’s and Nagel’s studies. Instead of transforming the role of the narrative in iconic images, the Angel Pietàs instead ground themselves in religious institution and rite. This is especially seen in a later work by Alessandro Allori (Fig. 45), the pupil of Pontormo’s student, Agnolo Bronzino. His Angel Pietà is an illustration of the ceremony of the Worship of the Cross, performed on Good Friday. The ceremony involves first placing a cushion covered by a white cloth upon the altar steps. A veiled altar cross is then taken and presented to the congregation. In three parts, the veil is slowly removed, revealing first the top portion, then the right arm, and finally the whole crucifix. The unveiled cross is carried toward the altar and the upper portion

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¹¹² Ibid., 71.
¹¹³ Ibid., 81-82.
rested upon the prepared cushion. Allori’s Angel Pietà is an illustration of this rite with the true body of Christ replacing the symbolic cross.

Likewise, the paintings by Andrea, Rosso, and Pontormo refer not to a Passion story but church ceremony, ritual, and architecture. The precise form and reference to medieval prototypes seems to lose its dominance, and the emphasis resides in an artist’s ability to make his painting relevant to his viewer and patron. As these artists invent new ways of interpreting and applying the Angel Pietà type, they demonstrate a recognition of its role in devotional culture, and an increasing awareness of painting’s ability to engage outside of itself—a growing externality. These important achievements are not only commendable on their own but also illustrative of some of the extraordinary qualities fundamental to this image type.

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114 Fortescue, Ceremonies, 304-05.
APPENDIX

To my knowledge, no catalogue of Angel Pietàs exists, so I have appended a brief one here. Admittedly far from comprehensive, it is not intended to definitively catalogue every Angel Pietà in existence. Instead, I use it to share the information I have gathered over the past year and allow others to view the core corpus of images I have worked with. The aim is to remove any hint of privileged knowledge and therefore allow a broader (critical) discourse concerning artistic development. What I know, you now know.

For brevity, I have chosen to focus primarily on images that may definitively be considered Angel Pietàs, excluding most earlier images of Lamentations, Crucifixions, and Entombments with angels, even though some overlap exists. Additionally, I have roughly bounded this collection to artworks from the Trecento up through the mid-Cinquecento, emphasizing painting over other media. I have placed asterisks by entries that illustrate one of a repetitive series of Angel Pietàs and have represented only a sampling of these pieces. These artworks are organized by date with information listed in the following format:

    Artist name (birth and death dates), Title of artwork, Date, Artist’s active location. Artwork’s current location

I hope that the regional variations and chronological developments become clear in this presentation, and that this collection of images will help support and clarify my arguments. I have included a bibliography of image sources at the end of this section, arranged by number. The main sources for this research were the Index of Christian Art, the Getty Research Institute Photo Study Collection, and the Internet.
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<td>Bellini, Giovanni (c. 1426-1516), Dead Christ Supported by Two Angels, 1460, Venice. Museo Correr, Venice.</td>
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<td>Crivelli, Carlo (c. 1430-1495), Dead Christ Supported by Two Angels, 1472, Venice. Philadelphia Museum of Art.</td>
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Crivelli, Carlo (c. 1430-1495), Dead Christ Supported by Two Angels, 1470-5, Venice. National Gallery of Art, London.

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<td>Vivarini, Bartolomeo (c. 1430-1499), Pietà with Two Angels, Venice. Bob Jones University, Greenville, South Carolina.</td>
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70 Zuccaro, Taddeo (1529-1566), Pietà with Angels, 1563, Rome. Private Collection.


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## Images Sources

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<td>71</td>
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1 Perugino, Pietà, 1494-5. Uffizi, Florence (photo: Fisher Fine Arts Library Image Collection)


29 School of Amiens, *Virgin as a Priest in a Church with Donor*, 1438. Louvre, Paris (photo: Purtle, Carol J. "Le Sacerdoce De La Vierge Et L'énigme D'un Parti Iconographique Exceptionnel." Revue du Louvre et des Musées de France 46, no. 5 (1996): 54-65., p. 55, fig. 1)


33 Detail of *Funeral of the Virgin* (photo: author)


