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Volume IV

Plautilla Nelli (1524-1588)
The Painter-Prioress
of Renaissance Florence

Edited by
Jonathan K. Nelson



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PLAUTILLA NELLI (1524-1588) THE PAINTER-PRIORESS OF RENAISSANCE FLORENCE

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PREFACE

“... for no longer should the isolated peaks of familiar achievement alone appear above the fog that veils the little known or the less important, but the intervening ground should be uncovered ...”

Richard Offner, *A Critical and Historical Corpus of Florentine Painting*, sect. 3, vol. 1 (New York: New York University, 1931), iv

WITH THESE WORDS RICHARD OFFNER EXPLAINED HIS LIFELONG EXPLORATION of Florentine paintings outside the accepted canon of Renaissance masterworks. Offner focused his attention on the origins of the Renaissance in the 1300s, whereas this volume examines the period of the sixteenth century. Most art historians of the “High Renaissance” have preferred to climb to the peaks and survey the works of the Michelangelos, Leonardos, and Titians. The present book invites the reader to penetrate the dense fogs of the lesser known, discovering a pioneering artistic culture, as defined by the microcosm of the Savonarolan female convent of Santa Caterina in Florence and its prioress Plautilla Nelli, the first woman painter of Florence.

I am most grateful to Jane Fortune who has generously sponsored the publication of the present volume, the fourth book in *The Villa Rossa Series* of Syracuse University in Florence. Her personal interest in Plautilla Nelli, evinced by her support of the restoration of Plautilla’s *Lamentation* in the Museum of San Marco through the Florence Committee of The National Museum of Women in the Arts, and the personal support of the conservation of Nelli’s drawings in the Drawings and Print Cabinet of the Uffizi, sparked the idea for this publication. I wish to express my gratitude to Jonathan Nelson, editor of the book, for having taken on this scholarly project that dates back to a joint conference on Suor Plautilla Nelli with Georgetown University, Villa le Balze, in 1999, and a first book on Nelli published in 2000 (Nelson, ed., 2000). I also thank Dorothea Barrett, Brenda Cooke, Alexandra Korey, and Kelley Magill, who all collaborated in the making of the book.

Barbara Deimling
Director
Syracuse University in Florence

FOREWORD

THIS VOLUME CELEBRATES SUOR PLAUTILLA NELLI AND HER MOST IMPORTANT painting, the *Lamentation* (app. 2, no. 1; fig. 1). The restoration of the *Lamentation* began as a vision of The Florence Committee of the National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA) in 2003 and is now a reality. The National Museum of Women in the Arts is located in Washington D. C. and exhibits works by women from all periods. The Florence Committee of the museum was founded in 2003 and is a legally recognized Italian non-profit association. It consists of a chair, an executive committee—whose members are Hermione Grassi, Robert R. Hesse, Madeleine Leone, and Kate Rakich—and associates and friends.

The Committee's primary mission is to preserve, conserve, and restore works by women artists held in the museums in Florence. The Committee also extended its work to give public recognition to the women museum directors in Florence, of whom there are currently thirty: an annual awards celebration was created by the Committee to honor their contributions to the culture of Florence, and named after Suor Plautilla Nelli. In addition to the Nelli Award, the Committee also honors an Italian patroness of the arts (the Anna Maria Luisa de' Medici Award) and a living Italian woman artist (the Simonetta Vespucci Award) each year.

For the 2003 visit to Florence of a group from NMWA, the Committee created an itinerary highlighting works by women in the Florence museums. In the course of researching this itinerary, we were introduced to the artistic oeuvre of Plautilla Nelli through the book edited by Jonathan Nelson (Nelson, ed., 2000). Jonathan has been most helpful in assisting us, and introducing us to the leading Nelli scholar, Catherine Turrill. She is a contributor to this volume and an honorary advisor to the Committee.

To see the *Lamentation* in the Museum of San Marco was enthralling, but the work was in dire need of cleaning and restoration. Magnolia Scudieri, Director of the Museum (and the Committee's second Nelli awardee) also recognized this need, and working with her on this project was a great honor. The most exciting part was watching the evolution of

a dull, lifeless work into a brilliant, alive painting. The raw emotional grief over Christ's death, depicted through the red eyes and visible tears of the figures, is haunting. Nelli, a nun and self-taught painter, evokes feelings of compassion in the viewer that linger long after seeing the painting. Rossella Lari was masterful in her restoration, and the restored painting deeply moved her too. In words that capture the feeling of all those involved in the project, Rossella said, "From this restoration, I have come away enriched as a restorer and as a person." All those who took part agree that Nelli has become part of our souls forever.

The Committee followed the restoration project from beginning to end, made a professional DVD of the project, and celebrated the transformation of the work at its unveiling in October 2006 at the Museum of San Marco. A few months later, the *Lamentation* played an important role when NMWA celebrated its twentieth anniversary with a major exhibition in 2007, *Italian Women Artists from Renaissance to Baroque*, in Washington D. C. Given that the painting itself was too fragile to travel, a "pocket exhibition" introduced the artist and documented the restoration by continuous viewings of the Nelli DVD at the show. This book, with my deepest appreciation to Jonathan Nelson and Barbara Deimling, Director of Syracuse University in Florence, is another tribute to Nelli.

The entire restoration process—from the identification of the painting to be restored, to the inauguration of the pocket exhibition at NMWA—has been a pure labor of love. It has already led to new projects. The Committee is committed to focus on Nelli's paintings and drawings, to bring her artistic oeuvre to a wider audience, and to preserve her works. The restoration of her *Lamentation* painting and of several drawings are discussed in this volume. But a major question still haunts us—in 1568, Giorgio Vasari wrote of Nelli that "She made so many paintings for the homes of Florentine gentlemen that it would take too much time to list them all here." However, only three paintings are securely attributed to her—where is the rest of her works? We know that from the restoration, the DVD, and this volume, new information about Nelli will emerge. We hope this will provide a benchmark to uncover lost, or incorrectly attributed, paintings of the first known woman painter of Florence, Suor Plautilla Nelli, and will help establish her rightful place in history.

Jane Fortune
 Founder and Chair
 Florence Committee of The National Museum of Women in the Arts

INTRODUCTION

PLAUTILLA NELLI IS THE FIRST WOMAN ARTIST IN FLORENCE WHO IS MORE to us than just a name. Her body of surviving works is very small, though significantly enlarged by the authors of this volume.¹ The *Lamentation* (app. 2, no. 1; fig. 1), *Last Supper* (app. 2, no. 2; fig. 8), and *Pentecost* (app. 2, no. 3; fig. 12) make Nelli one of the first European women we can identify with large-scale religious works. Most remarkably, perhaps, this Dominican nun became the primary “image maker” of the Order of Preachers in Florence, a role previously played by Fra Bartolommeo. Through her art, she “preached” primarily, but not exclusively, to the nuns in her convent of Santa Caterina da Siena.² Nelli also conveyed her artistic and moral message to all those who could see her many works that were praised by two contemporaries, Giorgio Vasari and Serafino Razzi.³ Both authors observed works in the public areas of Santa Caterina, and Vasari also mentioned paintings in “the homes of Florentine gentlemen.”⁴ Nelli’s fame and works also traveled to other parts of Italy: the author Annibale Caro had one of her paintings in Rome, and several sources praised her *Pentecost*, still in the church of San Domenico in Perugia. But do these paintings make Nelli a “great” artist?

Before addressing this question we can reread, with Nelli in mind, one of the first essays with a feminist approach to art history. In 1971 Linda Nochlin asked polemically, “Why have there been no great women artists?”⁵ This represented her reaction to the attempts, now greater than ever, “to rehabilitate rather modest, if interesting and productive careers” of women artists throughout history.⁶ Nochlin’s essay forces us to reflect on the how we define “great art” and the conditions that facilitate its creation. As she demonstrated, a consideration of women artists can serve as a catalyst to reevaluate the underlying assumptions of art history. Nearly thirty years later, the “Guerrilla Girls”—a group of women artists who make “guerilla attacks” on the art world—responded to Nochlin with another question: “Why haven’t more women been considered great artists?”⁷ They rightly note that many creative works in the traditional female domain, such as quilts, do not receive the same

respect as paintings and sculpture. Certainly the nuns at Santa Caterina carried out lacework, and the fabric arts also provided the convent with a significant source of revenue.⁸ But these nuns surely did not consider themselves “great artists,” and even the Guerilla Girls do not mention Nelli. Few today would argue with Nochlin’s provocative observation: “There are no women equivalents for Michelangelo or Rembrandt.” In attempting to explain this phenomenon, she drew attention to two particularly important limiting factors for women artists in nineteenth-century France: the lack of artistic training and of socially acceptable goals. Only the first applies to Nelli.

In Renaissance Italy the vast majority of women had no way to learn the technical skills essential for any artist. An aspiring painter or sculptor had to become an apprentice at a young age, which usually entailed living for years in the workshop of a master. Clearly, this option remained closed to girls from all walks of life. They were also prohibited from joining art schools, which only came into existence in the late sixteenth century. Vasari, who helped create the earliest art academy in Florence, observed that Nelli “would have done marvellous things had she had the opportunity, as men do, to study and devote herself to drawing and portraying living and natural things.” About four centuries before Nochlin, he explained that lack of training kept Nelli from becoming a “great” artist.⁹ Some modern studies state incorrectly that Fra Paolino, a follower of Fra Bartolommeo, taught Suor Plautilla how to paint, but we read in Razzi, whose sister was one of the many artist-nuns at Santa Caterina, that “despite her lack of formal instruction, she created works that amazed the leading artists in the city of Florence.” Most likely, Nelli was self-taught as a painter, though she probably received some guidance in draftsmanship.¹⁰ Moreover, recent research has revealed that Nelli probably apprenticed in the pharmacy at her convent. This would have given her experience in grinding minerals and in commercial interactions with the public, two highly useful skills for any painter.¹¹

Though Vasari stated of Nelli’s works that “the faces and features of women are much better and have much greater verisimilitude than her heads of men, because she was free to study women at her leisure,” his criticism applies more accurately to the schematic representation of Christ’s body in the *Lamentation*. This brings us to another great limitation in the artistic education of women: their inability to study the male nude, literally central to Nelli’s altarpiece, and to much of Renaissance art. As Nochlin observed of a much later period, this prohibition, “as though a medical student were denied the opportunity to examine the

naked human body,"¹² severely restricted the subjects that women could paint. In addition, for most female artists, the difficulties posed by travel to other cities, or even to monuments and collections closer to home, complicated the possibility of studying ancient or modern masterpieces. Nelli could, however, consult drawings. In his *Life of Fra Bartolommeo*, Vasari noted that most of the Dominican friar's drawings were then at Santa Caterina with a nun who painted; these sheets provided the basis for study by Nelli. Some of the figures in her *Lamentation* certainly derive from Fra Bartolommeo.¹³ However, she also shows originality in the settings of her paintings: the *Lamentation* takes place in a vast and detailed landscape and the *Pentecost* in a monumental building. Similarly, though her *Last Supper* evinces knowledge of Leonardo's interpretation of the subject, and probably Raphael's, both as mediated through engravings, she made significant changes to the setting, composition, and iconography.¹⁴ One of Nelli's sketches (app. 1, no. 26; fig. 15) even indicates how the nun could have studied male anatomy without leaving her convent: it represents the upper half of Michelangelo's *Risen Christ*, which she probably knew from a drawing.¹⁵

Though the lack of access to teachers and male models constituted severe limiting factors for the development of most women artists, Nochlin argued that social expectations were even more serious constraints. In this light she asked, "Why have there been no great artists from the aristocracy?"¹⁶ After all, wealthy noblemen had no practical limitations to their education. For both groups, however, creative endeavors were tolerated at best, but never seen as legitimate professional goals. Throughout the early modern period, most women were expected, above all, to take care of their families. We should marvel whenever a woman succeeded in becoming a painter, sculptor, or an architect.

Some convents, however, did provide encouragement for artistic women. In the chapter on the appropriate work for nuns, found in a manual written specifically for Santa Caterina, Fra Roberto Ubaldini encouraged the sisters to carry out a range of traditional activities including lacework and manuscript illumination.¹⁷ According to Vasari, "this revered and virtuous sister studied the art of miniatures before she began painting panels." In her convent, then, Nelli evidently found support and training for her artistic activities. In this sense, she fits into yet another model described by Nochlin. Women artists, at least until recently, always had the support of their immediate family, usually their fathers. Nelli's spiritual family gave her an opportunity to teach. Both Razzi and the records of Santa Caterina inform us that the convent be-

came an active center of art education and production in the later half of the 1500s and beyond.¹⁸

In the works that Nelli made for her convent, specifically the *Lamentation* and the *Last Supper*, the artist herself constituted part of the audience, and may have been responsible for the commission. This highly anomalous situation helps explain the presence of features that held special interest for the primary viewers of the works, the community of nuns at Santa Caterina. In comparison to Fra Bartolommeo's *Lamentation*, Nelli included two additional women next to the Virgin Mary; no less than five women appear in her *Pentecost*. The figures in the *Lamentation* openly express their grief through their gestures and visible tears. This would have confirmed the opinion held by many Renaissance viewers that art made by and for women was highly emotional. Nelli gives special attention to food: outside the city walls a woman with a small child bends over to collect greens, and on the right a wooden fence encloses a leafy garden. These details recall the role of nuns in the cultivation and preparation of food. Only after the recent cleaning of the painting can we appreciate them.¹⁹ This moving work, though indebted to Fra Bartolommeo's, evinces Nelli's originality and skill.

In the *Last Supper*, too, Nelli included numerous iconographic innovations that reflect her own interests and background.²⁰ Most unusually, in addition to the traditional bread and wine, she shows salad, beans, salt, and a whole roast lamb. Nelli's depiction of the tender embrace between Christ and John, the beloved apostle often associated with the contemplative life, must have had special significance for the "Brides of Christ." In the upper-left corner of the painting, Nelli added a variation of the phrase found in works by Fra Bartolommeo: "Suor Plautilla. Pray for the Painter." Her moral virtues were praised by several sixteenth-century authors. Vasari, using an adjective that runs throughout Renaissance accounts of women artists, described her as *virtuosa*.²¹ The artist's gender and reputation for piety surely added to the appeal of her paintings. Within her convent, too, we can assume that the work of Nelli and her many students was encouraged and praised primarily as a form of (and aid to) devotion, not for its creativity. This is one reason why it would not fit the criteria of greatness used by most art theorists since the sixteenth century. Today, Nelli's innovative works and career indicate an important avenue for artistic expression and education for some women in Renaissance Italy.

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ENDNOTES

1. In appendix 1 of this volume, Marzia Faietti presents the first analysis by a drawings expert of the nineteen sheets in the Uffizi ascribed to Nelli. Of these she accepts nos. 2a, 2b, 7, 9, 10, 12, 14, 15, 16, the last work previously unpublished. In appendix 2, Catherine Turrill presents a checklist (revised from Turrill, 2000a) of fifty paintings that have been attributed to Nelli, including seven extant works with documented or plausible attributions. When this book was in galley proofs, she learned that two of the "lost and untraced works" had just been identified. They were renumbered as 5 and 6 and will be discussed in a publication by Fausta Navarro.
2. In chapter 2, Andrea Muzzi discusses the importance of Girolamo Savonarola and Caterina de' Ricci for Nelli's convent, and specifically the impact on her painting of their views on the value of religious art.
3. These sixteenth-century texts, the most important sources on Nelli, are transcribed and translated in appendix 3 and discussed by Sally Quin in chapter 3.
4. See Murphy, 2000, for a valuable discussion of Nelli's patrons.
5. Nochlin, 1988; I quote the title of her essay, unchanged from the original 1971 publication.
6. Ibid., 1988, 147.
7. *Guerrilla Girls*, 1998, 7.
8. See Turrill's discussion in chapter 1, where she also presents the most important documented information about Nelli and her students in the convent.
9. In chapter 3, Quin evinces the difference in Vasari's appreciation of the paintings by Nelli and Sofonisba Anguissola, a woman artist who did receive an artistic education.
10. In chapter 2, Muzzi demonstrates that Nelli could not have studied

with Fra Paolino, and argues that she was probably self-taught.

11. Sharon Strocchia presented some of this material in her talk "Nuns' Medicines and the Medici State," presented at the annual meeting of the Renaissance Society of America in 2008, and kindly shared other details in conversation. It will be the subject of a forthcoming article.
12. Nochlin, 1988, 160.
13. For Nelli's borrowings from Fra Bartolommeo in the *Lamentation*, see the discussions by Muzzi, Faietti, and especially Scudieri in this volume.
14. For the relationship between Nelli's *Last Supper* and those of earlier artists, see the discussions by Muzzi, Roberts, and Acidini in this volume.
15. For Nelli's sheet, see app. 1, no. 2b, and Faietti's discussion. The errors in her representation of the sponge and rope seem to indicate that Nelli was looking at a drawn copy of the statue and not a sculpted one.
16. Nochlin, 1988, 157.
17. In chapter 1, Turrill discusses the importance of these directives. She also presents a convincing hypothesis that Nelli could have found a role model in the prioress Suor Cecilia, granddaughter of the architect Michelozzo.
18. See Turrill in this volume, and especially eadem, 2000b, and eadem, 2003.
19. The sensitive restoration was carried out by Rossella Lari and directed by Magnolia Scudieri; see their restoration report in this volume.
20. The following discussion draws on the analysis by Roberts in this volume.
21. See Jacobs, 1997.

Plautilla Nelli (1524-1588)
The Painter-Prioress
of Renaissance Florence



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Cristina Acidini is the Superintendent of the Authority for Cultural Heritage and State Museums in the Florence area. After receiving her *laurea* (MA) with honors from the University of Florence, she became the leading art administrator in her native Florence and a highly respected specialist of Italian Renaissance art. Her numerous publications include books on major artists (Botticelli, Michelangelo, Maso di Banco, the Zuccari brothers) and key themes, ranging from *Last Suppers* to mythologies and Medici patronage. Between 2000 and 2008 she directed the Opificio delle Pietre Dure, the state institute for art restoration.

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Marzia Faietti is the Director of the Drawings and Print Cabinet of the Uffizi. She received a *laurea* (MA) at the University of Bologna, where she later taught. One of the leading scholars on sixteenth-century Bolognese prints and drawings, she has organized numerous exhibitions and publications on a variety of subjects, including Italian works on paper through the nineteenth century and late Renaissance painting in Ferrara. Between 1987 and 2004, she worked at the Pinacoteca of Bologna before transferring to the Uffizi. She served as general editor of the volumes on Italian drawings in Bologna and co-authored, with Daniela Scaglietti Kelesian, the major monograph on Amico Aspertini.

Rossella Lari, Conservator of Paintings, Florence

Rossella Lari has worked in Florence for thirty-three years, primarily for civic and state institutions. She collaborates regularly with universities, scientific centers, and research institutes. Together with this activity, her experience working in old Florentine workshops and in foreign

museums has been essential in her professional formation. She has worked on paintings from Renaissance artists (including Botticelli, Perugino, Filippino Lippi, and Pontormo) and modern masters (Renato Guttuso, Marino Marini, Ottone Rosai). She also assists in monitoring paintings in exhibitions and in the permanent collections of museums, especially the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence.

Andrea Muzzi, Independent Scholar, Florence

Andrea Muzzi has published widely on two main topics: the works of Correggio and Parmigianino, and the "School of San Marco" in Florence. Much of his work has concentrated on religious iconography and on drawings. For example, he has studied Parmigianino's *Vision of Saint Jerome*, and, at the Uffizi, co-curated an exhibition dedicated to the drawings of this artist. He has also written the most important studies of Fra Paolino and Sogliano, both active in the "School of San Marco." Other areas of research include the Observant Franciscans in Tuscany and the heraldic seals in the Bargello.

Ann Roberts, Lake Forest College, Illinois

Ann Roberts is the James D. Vail III Chair of Art History at Lake Forest College. She received her MA and PhD from the University of Pennsylvania. Her research focuses on the role of women in early modern culture, in both northern Europe and Italy. She has published on many Renaissance topics, in journals such as the *Art Bulletin* and *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, and is also responsible for the Renaissance chapters in *Janson's History of Art*. Her book *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art: The Convent of San Domenico in Pisa* was published by Ashgate in 2008.

Magnolia Scudieri, Museo di San Marco, Florence

Magnolia Scudieri is the Director of the Museum of San Marco. In recent years the museum and its collection has been the focus of her many publications and exhibitions, including those on the frescoes and miniatures of Fra Angelico, the paintings of Fra Bartolommeo, the library by Michelozzo, and the "relics" of Savonarola. Other areas of research include the city of Fiesole (the collector Angelo Maria Bandini and his museum; the Della Robbia sculptures), the restoration projects she directed, and the remains of the old city center of Florence.

Catherine Turrill, California State University, Sacramento

Catherine Turrill is Professor of Art History at the Department of Art at California State University, Sacramento. She earned her MA and PhD degrees in art history at the University of Delaware, where she studied under the late Maurice Cope. She has published essays and presented conference papers on diverse topics in Italian Renaissance art, including altarpieces by Ercole de' Roberti, frescoes by Giorgione, Girolamo da Carpi's *Muzzarelli Altarpiece*, Parmigianino's *Madonna of the Long Neck*, and the career of Plautilla Nelli, the subject of her current research.

Sally Quin, Independent Scholar

Sally Quin received her PhD from the University of Western Australia in 2004 with a thesis which focused on the critical reception and framing of women artists in early modern Italy. In 2001 she was awarded the Harold Wright Scholarship from Melbourne University for study in the Department of Prints and Drawings at The British Museum. She has curated exhibitions for major public art institutions in Australia and published widely on modern and contemporary Australian art.

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|--------------|---|
| AABAF | Archivio, Accademia di Belle Arti, Florence |
| AOSMF | Archivio dell'Opera di S. Maria del Fiore, Florence |
| APCSM | Archivio Provinciale del Convento di San Marco, Florence |
| app. | appendix in this volume |
| ASBASF | Archivio, Soprintendenza per i Beni Artistici e Storici, Florence |
| ASF | Archivio di Stato, Florence |
| BCP | Biblioteca Comunale, Perugia |
| BNCF | Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence |
| BRF | Biblioteca Riccardiana, Florence |
| c. (cc.) | carta (carte) |
| ca. | circa |
| CD | Carte Dei |
| CRSGF | Corporazioni religiose soppresse dal governo francese |
| fol. (fols.) | folio (folios) |
| GDSU | Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, Florence |
| INOA | Istituto Nazionale di Ottica Applicata, Florence |
| IRR | infrared reflectography |
| inv. | inventory |
| ms | manuscript |
| n. | note |
| no. (nos.) | number (numbers) |
| PG | Poligrafo Gargani |
| r | recto |
| v | verso |

NUNS' STORIES: SUOR PLAUTILLA NELLI,
MADRE PITTORA, AND HER *COMPAGNE*
 IN THE CONVENT OF SANTA CATERINA DA SIENA*

CATHERINE TURRILL

FOR OVER FOUR HUNDRED YEARS, THE SECOND EDITION OF GIORGIO Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* was the most influential source of information about the artistic career of Plautilla Nelli, the sixteenth-century Dominican nun who has been called the "first woman painter of Florence."¹ Composed while Nelli was prioress of her convent, Santa Caterina da Siena, on Piazza San Marco, Vasari's biography provided the starting point for all later accounts.² Most of these added very little new factual information to his narrative, and some of them were enriched with details that have since been shown to be inaccurate. Over time, different stories about Nelli's ancestry, training, and career entered the literature and contributed to the development of a semi-fictional biography that has persisted to this day.³ Furthermore, even though they were mentioned in several histories published after Vasari's *Lives*, her fellow artists at the convent were overlooked by many writers. The re-discovery of Plautilla Nelli has led to the recovery of their stories, and the simultaneous recognition of the high level of artistic production that distinguished their convent from others in Florence in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

The cornerstone of Santa Caterina da Siena was laid on September 30, 1500, four years after the religious community inhabiting it had been founded by Suor Lucia (*neè* Camilla) Bartolini Rucellai (1465-1520), a Dominican tertiary and devotee of Fra Girolamo Savonarola.

Nearly a century later, Lucia's kinsman, Francesco Maria Rucellai, wrote a chronicle documenting her life and those of several other nuns at Santa Caterina, including Nelli, whom Rucellai knew personally.⁴ His unpublished manuscript, amended by later family members, also has one of the few extant depictions of the sixteenth-century convent. While the convent was under construction, Fra Roberto Ubaldini da Gagliano wrote a manual for the nuns that provided both spiritual and practical advice.⁵ The chapter on work concluded with the recommendation that the nuns pursue traditional income-earning activities, such as thread and fabric production, lacework, sewing, writing, and manuscript illumination. Of these crafts, only the fabric arts served as a significant source of revenue for Nelli's convent in the first decades of the sixteenth century. Furthermore, business transactions between the nuns and secular purveyors of the materials they used or sold put them in frequent contact with merchants and artisans, many of whom sent their daughters to the convent.

Among the several tradesmen whose names appear in the convent records in the early 1530s was Piero di Luca Nelli, a resident of the parish of Santa Felice in Oltrarno.⁶ Although Piero's ancestors had their homes in the San Giovanni quarter, which continued to be the neighborhood associated with other branches of the Nelli family, his great-grandfather moved across the Arno River in the early fifteenth century, and Piero, his father, and his grandfather all were born in the Santo Spirito quarter.⁷ The Nelli men were merchants. Both Piero and his brother Niccolò are identified in early records as mercers (*merciai*), dealers in miscellaneous items used in sewing and other fabric work.⁸ Their father Luca was affiliated with two different minor guilds that served the belt-makers and the dealers in oil, sausage, and cheeses.⁹ Their paternal grandfather was a grain-dealer.¹⁰ Thus, contrary to some modern biographies of Plautilla Nelli, her father was neither a painter nor a patrician, although her mother's family enjoyed some status in its neighborhood.¹¹

By 1513, Piero had married Francesca Calandri, daughter of Piermaria Calandri, a prominent resident of the Chiavi district who had twice represented the San Giovanni quarter as prior in the 1490s.¹² Piermaria and his father Calandro were affiliated with another minor guild, the armorers and sword-makers.¹³ Little is known about Francesca Calandri, apart from the fact that she gave birth to two daughters in the early 1520s and died in October 1530, possibly of the plague.¹⁴ The first girl, Costanza Pulisena Romola (the future Suor Petronilla), was baptized on May 9, 1521, and her younger sister, Pulisena Margherita (the future

Suor Plautilla), was baptized on January 29, 1524.¹⁵ Within weeks of their mother's death, Piero Nelli had married the daughter of another resident of the Santo Spirito quarter, Francesca di Tommaso Michelozzi. They were named together in the tax reports for 1530 and 1533, one year before Piero dictated his testament.¹⁶ Whether or not Costanza and Pulisena were placed temporarily in a convent when their mother died or their father remarried has yet to be determined. However, when Piero wrote his will in August 1534, he included a clause that addressed the eventuality of his daughters' entry into either marriage or a convent. Less than three years later, in April 1537, Costanza took the veil as Suor Petronilla. Pulisena, who became Suor Plautilla, probably took the veil in December 1538, eight months after Petronilla made her solemn profession (April 1538).¹⁷ Plautilla may have completed her entrance into the convent at the end of the year in which Piero Nelli died and within three months of the resolution of his estate (December 1539).¹⁸

Although Piero's prior business dealings with the convent may have been a contributing factor in his decision to place his daughters there, they probably were not the only consideration. Some historians suggest he may have been motivated by Savonarolan sympathies, based on the signatures of Giovanni di Matteo Nelli and Francesco di Bartolomeo Nelli on a petition sent to Pope Alexander VI on the friar's behalf in 1497.¹⁹ However, these two men belonged to a branch of the family that resided in the San Giovanni Battista quarter. No evidence has been found to suggest that Piero Nelli was a follower of Savonarola, although both Suor Petronilla and Suor Plautilla later were active in the documentation of the friar's legend. Nonetheless, the convent was so closely associated with Savonarola that anyone placing his daughter there may have had some sympathy for the friar's cause, even if he himself was not a member of the *piagnoni*. As mentioned above, its founder was a close follower of Savonarola. Together with the nearby convent of Santa Lucia in via San Gallo, Santa Caterina was one of the "most important centers of female Savonarolan spirituality" in Florence, according to Polizzotto, and many of the nuns came from *piagnoni* families, including several of the women who worked with Plautilla Nelli.²⁰

Perhaps Piero Nelli was swayed by another common motive for selecting a convent: the presence of another family member. Between October 1537 and October 1539, the years when Suor Petronilla made her solemn profession and Suor Plautilla took the veil, the prioress of Santa Caterina was Suor Cecilia Michelozzi, daughter of Ser Niccolò Michelozzi. She may have been related to Piero's second wife, Francesca

di Tommaso Michelozzi. Suor Cecilia (*neè* Francesca) took the veil at Santa Caterina in November 1505.²¹ The granddaughter of Michelozzo Michelozzi, the celebrated Florentine architect whose close relationship with the Medici was continued by his son Niccolò, Cecilia would have been an exceptional role model for any of the nuns under her supervision, whether or not they were her kinswomen.²² According to Rucellai, she was highly intelligent and well educated, with a sound knowledge of Latin.²³ She also was very informed about matters pertaining to architecture and communicated easily with the workmen hired during the various building campaigns at the convent, some of which she oversaw.²⁴ In addition to serving as prioress four times—three of her terms occurring during Nelli's first decade at the convent—Cecilia was the novice mistress and the pharmacist.²⁵ Her distinctive combination of intellectual, administrative, and practical ability was mirrored in Nelli, who is described in similar terms by her biographers in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Apart from Cecilia Michelozzi, no other obvious kinswomen—that is, no women surnamed Nelli or Calandri—are known to have entered the convent before Piero Nelli's daughters. Instead, it is they who may have drawn relatives to Santa Caterina: their mother's great-niece, Livia di Filippo di Calandro Calandri, joined the community as Suor Maria Filippa in 1585.²⁶

Aged fifteen and fourteen years respectively when they took the veil, Petronilla and Plautilla Nelli may have had some formal education before entering Santa Caterina, whether at home or in another convent. However, the technical skills they demonstrated as adults—Petronilla as a scribe, Plautilla as both scribe and painter—must have been perfected under the tutelage of the Dominican nuns. Petronilla, esteemed for her piety, transcribed a biography of Fra Girolamo Savonarola that was inherited by Plautilla, according to a colophon written by the younger nun at the end of the manuscript.²⁷ Samples of her clear italic script can also be found in the convent records. Other nuns in the convent had family backgrounds that might have provided them with comparable skills. Among the women who preceded Petronilla and Plautilla Nelli at Santa Caterina were the daughters of several stationers, manuscript illuminators, and painters.²⁸ Drawing also was practiced in the convent. According to her obituary, Suor Antonia di Miniato, a lay-sister who entered the convent shortly before the Nelli girls, was a skilled seamstress who also could draw.²⁹ It is very likely that the young Plautilla was trained first in drawing and painting on a small scale appropriate to manuscript illumination, the only pictorial art recommended to the nuns in Ubaldi-

ni's manual, and the medium in which she first excelled, according to Vasari.³⁰ Thus, by the time she was thirty-five years old and credited with income from the sale of paintings to outside patrons, she may have had two decades of training and experience behind her. She also had reached the point where she could lead other nuns in the craft.

In March 1559, Suor Plautilla reported a payment for a panel painting that may have been sent to the Dominican church of Santa Lucia in Pistoia.³¹ Following this transaction and those involving some small paintings done for the Benedictine convent of San Niccolò in Florence, there are records of income from the sale of additional work between 1560 and 1563, when she began her first two-year term as prioress and, according to Rucellai, set aside her brushes.³² However, the paintings that resulted in these account book entries must represent only a fraction of the work Nelli produced before assuming administrative duties for the first time in 1563. The entire inventory would include not only the eleven paintings listed by Vasari but also the many works in private collections, which he claimed were too numerous to count and which also predated her first term as prioress, when he compiled the notes for her biography.³³ Thus the first phase of Nelli's career is the one that established her reputation and secured her place in the chapter on women artists in Vasari's *Lives*. Her own sense of accomplishment is reflected in her repeated use of a signature formula identifying herself as a painter during this period. When inscribing the *Last Supper* painted for her convent refectory (app. 2, no. 2; figs. 8-11), she adopted the feminine version of a formula often used by male artists affiliated with the so-called San Marco workshop, "Pray for the paintress" ("Orate pro pictora").³⁴ By contrast, her choice of the imperfect tense of the Latin verb "to make" ("faciebat") in her signature inscription on the *Pentecost*, the altarpiece sent to Perugia (app. 2, no. 3; figs. 12-13), links her with contemporary lay artists and art theorists.³⁵ She also identified herself as a painter on written documents, such as her sister Petronilla's transcription of a biography of Savonarola. Shortly after inheriting the manuscript, Nelli added a colophon commemorating her deceased sister and signed it "paintress" ("dipintora"), thereby reaffirming her artistic identity—and possibly her role in the convent administration—before becoming prioress in 1563.³⁶ In later years the term "pittora" or "madre pittora" was used in the convent records to identify the nun charged with the oversight of the artists' workshop, even though this was not among the basic offices defined in Ubaldini's manual.³⁷

The second phase of Nelli's active career as a painter, in the six-year

interval between her first and second term as prioress (1565-71), also was marked by a high level of artistic production, according to Rucellai, but is not documented in the extant convent archives.³⁸ However, the third phase of her career, in the decade between her second (1571-73) and third (1583-85) terms as prioress, is easier to assess. The documentary evidence suggests that she continued to be active as an artist from 1573 to 1583, and the subjects of several of her paintings from the mid-1570s are listed.³⁹ One of the larger works from this phase may be a semicircular painting of the *Crucifixion* that was attributed to her when found in her convent in the early 1800s, and which may have resulted from a commission in the fourth quarter of the century (app. 2, no. 4). Judging from the descriptions, a lost painting of Christ with Fra Girolamo Savonarola and his two martyred companions, Fra Domenico Buonvicini and Fra Silvestro Maruffi, commissioned for the convent infirmary in 1579, may have been of comparable size (app. 2, no. 13).

Nelli's last recorded work dates from the brief period between her third term as prioress and her death in 1588.⁴⁰ This was the painting that she and "the companions" ("le compagne") produced for the dormitory chapel in 1586 (app. 2, no. 11).⁴¹ The record-book entry is the single contemporary description we have of a specific project involving Nelli's collaboration with other artists at the convent. Rucellai offered a more general description of her interaction with the nuns and the authority she enjoyed among them.⁴² A natural administrator and talented painter, Nelli probably oversaw art production at the convent more than once. Interspersed with the several entries for income earned by her alone ("di suo lavoro") between 1562 and 1563 are some sales involving Nelli and "their work" ("di lor lavoro"), implying that she had been charged with accounting for the sale of items produced by two or more nuns.⁴³ Yet to be determined is who these other women were or what they made.

Italian historians of the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries recorded the names of twelve artists at Santa Caterina, eight of whom were named in histories published in the 1590s: Nelli herself (the only one mentioned by Vasari), Suor Prudenza Cambi, Suor Agata Traballese, Suor Maria Ruggieri, Suor Veronica Niccolini, Suor Dionisia Niccolini, Suor Maria Angelica Razzi, and Suor Alessandra del Milanese.⁴⁴ Among the three nuns identified as Nelli's "disciples" ("discepoli") by Fra Serafino Razzi, the first historian to consider the group as a whole, only one—Prudenza Cambi—could have assisted her in the production of paintings in the 1560s. Whereas Cambi took the veil in 1544, both

Agata Traballese and Maria Ruggieri entered the convent in the 1570s. Instead, another nun is likely to have been a member of the group implied by the phrase "their work" ("lor lavoro") in the payment records. She is Veronica Niccolini, who took the veil two years after Prudenza Cambi. Dionisia Niccolini and Maria Angelica Razzi, who took the veil in 1550 and 1552 respectively, may have been active as artists by the 1560s, but they were both sculptors, not painters. Nonetheless, it is possible that Nelli may have managed artistic production in both media, as was the case in the 1600s, when a nun who identified herself as "the paintress" ("la pittrice") was responsible for the oversight of the manufacture and sale of Nativity figurines.⁴⁵ In that case, the income that Nelli reported "from their work" in the early 1560s might have come from the sale of images of all types, both painted and sculpted.

Suor Prudenza (née Fiammetta) Cambi, daughter of Filippo di Francesco Cambi and Maria di Francesco della Fonte, came from a wealthy patrician family that enjoyed considerable status in Florence. Their home was in the Drago district of the San Giovanni quarter, a neighborhood occupied by many *piagnoni*, and her paternal grandfather, Francesco di Guido Cambi, was one of the signatories of the 1497 petition in support of Savonarola.⁴⁶ His sympathies for the friar notwithstanding, Francesco Cambi went on to hold high political office, serving on the *Buonomini* in 1501 and the *Priori* in 1504.⁴⁷ Prudenza's great-aunt, Suor Filippa di Bartolomeo Corsini, entered the convent of Santa Caterina in 1536 and was prioress when Prudenza took the veil.⁴⁸ Several other women surnamed Cambi, some of them possibly her kinswomen, also were nuns at Santa Caterina, and Fra Tomaso di Lorenzo Cambi, a Dominican friar from San Marco, was assigned to the convent as its father confessor in 1591.⁴⁹ In short, Prudenza Cambi had the family background that later historians attributed to Plautilla Nelli and, like her, was esteemed by the other nuns, who elected her as their prioress in 1587 and 1593. She died in 1601.⁵⁰

Judging from the convent records, Prudenza Cambi may have filled the office of paintress (*pittora* or *madre pittora*), or at least overseen the work of the artists, while Nelli was prioress. She also must have been successful as a painter in her own right, judging from the earnings (some fairly substantial) that she reported from the sale of her work in the 1560s. Unfortunately, we do not have a single documented painting by her hand.⁵¹ None of her paintings are mentioned in the convent records or early histories; none were identified in the inventory compiled when the convent was suppressed in the early 1800s. As is the case with

her probable successors as *madre pittora*, Agata Traballesi and Maria Ruggieri, the specifics of Prudenza Cambi's painting career remain hidden. We only are aware that she was an artist because of Razzi's brief mention and the equally terse entries in the convent's account books.

More is known about the second of the named artists to arrive at Santa Caterina after Nelli, Suor Veronica (*neè* Laura) Niccolini. She and her sister Dionisia (*neè* Dianora) were the daughters of Febo di Leonardo di Biagio Niccolini and Elisabetta di Cantino Cavalcanti. Veronica took the veil on January 1, 1546, four years before Dionisia entered the convent (December 1550).⁵² According to Rucellai, she was attracted to Santa Caterina by the fame of its founder, Suor Lucia.⁵³ However, the fact that all four of her sisters followed her there suggests that her family also held the convent in high regard, in common with other members of their social class. Unlike Piero Nelli's family, the Niccolini were established members of the Florentine patriciate. Febo Niccolini's family, long-time residents of the Santa Croce quarter, enjoyed both political power and wealth. His grandfather held each of the city's highest political offices one or more times, being elected to the *Priori*, *Gonfalonieri*, and *Buonomini* between 1436 and 1466. He also served as consul for the important Silk Guild (*Arte della Seta*). Febo's father, a business partner of the Medici who went on to serve the Gonzaga in Mantua, was nominated to serve on the *Buonomini*.⁵⁴ Finally, his wife, Elisabetta Cavalcanti, came from yet another wealthy patrician family with a long and distinguished history in Florence. Upon her death in 1571, she left a substantial legacy to the convent.⁵⁵

The social rank enjoyed by Veronica and Dionisia Niccolini may have helped assure their inclusion in some early histories. Dionisia was the only woman included in a list of notable Florentine sculptors in Paolo Mini's *Discorso sulla nobiltà di Firenze* (1593).⁵⁶ Published while she was alive, this acknowledgment is further evidence of her contemporary fame. Razzi said she was renowned for her terracotta devotional images, such as the "very beautiful" *Madonna and Child* owned by Laura da Gagliano.⁵⁷ According to Rucellai, Veronica Niccolini was an exceptionally pious nun who specialized in the creation of paintings on paper and canvas that simulated tapestry work, the sale of which contributed substantially to the convent's income.⁵⁸ Much like Plautilla Nelli and Prudenza Cambi, Veronica Niccolini was esteemed by the other nuns and was appointed to several administrative offices, serving as novice mistress for ten years and as prioress in 1581-83.⁵⁹

In order of their vestition dates, the next artist-nuns known to have

entered the convent during Nelli's lifetime were Maria Angelica Razzi (1552), Maria Ruggieri (1572), Agata Traballesi (1573), and Alessandra del Milanese (1581). Maria Angelica (*neè* Maria) Razzi was the second member of her immediate family to enter the Dominican order.⁶⁰ Her brother, Serafino Razzi, who later wrote about the artists in Nelli's convent, took the habit in 1549. Three years later, Maria Razzi was accepted into Santa Caterina with the financial sponsorship of their older brother, Girolamo; he was an established playwright before entering the Camaldolese order as Don Silvano in 1559.⁶¹ A third brother, Ser Stefano Razzi, was a notary.⁶² Maria Angelica may have been active as a sculptor within a decade of entering the convent. Either she or Dionisia Niccolini could have produced the components of a Nativity figure that were given to the nuns of the Dominican convent of San Giorgio in Lucca in the early 1580s. According to that convent's chronicle, Nelli and Cambi presented the head and hands of the Madonna to the prioress, Suor Felice Balbani, in exchange for the Lucchese nuns' prayers.⁶³ However, the artist responsible for making these pieces is not named. Nor is there any record of Razzi's activity as a sculptor in Santa Caterina's records, although we know that she oversaw a construction project there in the 1570s.⁶⁴ According to her brother Serafino, she made realistic terracotta images of the Madonna, saints, and angels. As examples, he mentions two sculptures of the *Madonna with the Sleeping Christ Child*, one in the church of San Domenico in Perugia (for which Nelli painted the *Pentecost*), and the other in the sacristy of San Marco in Florence.⁶⁵

The last three artists to be considered in this essay were painters. Because they entered the convent in the early 1570s and 1580s, they would not have been able to work with Nelli until fairly late in her career. Like Maria Angelica Razzi, Maria Ruggieri was the daughter of a professional man from outside Florence. Her father, Maestro Francesco di Lodovico Ruggieri, was a physician from Arezzo who placed his two daughters into the convent after the death of their mother, Clemenza, and his remarriage. Clemenza died in 1565; he was wed to Maddalena di Zanobi del Vernaccia by 1568; and four years later, in September 1572, his daughters Margherita and Maddalena were accepted as nuns at Santa Caterina.⁶⁶ Since no other Ruggieri women are known to have entered the convent in this era, one of the two girls probably took the name Maria. A painter on canvas and panel, according to Razzi, Maria Ruggieri may be the "Suor Maria" (no surname is given) who served as *madre pittora* in the first quarter of the seventeenth century, after Agata

Traballesi. She even could have been the anonymous nun who identified herself simply as "la pittrice" in about 1617.⁶⁷

Of all the women considered in this essay, Agata Traballesi is the only one to come from a family of artists. Her father, a tinker (*calderai*) named Mariano di Bartolommeo Traballesi, was reported by Filippo Baldinucci to have placed all five of his daughters in Santa Caterina, but only four women with the Traballesi surname appear in the convent records.⁶⁸ Agata may have been the name chosen by Camilla Traballesi after she was accepted into the convent in 1573,⁶⁹ fourteen years before her younger sisters Magdalena (Suor Reparata) and Lucretia (Suor Eufemia) took the veil in May 1587.⁷⁰ Yet another sister, Maria Caterina Traballesi, was "maestra del lavoro" in 1609.⁷¹ Their brother Felice, who acted as sponsor for Reparata and Eufemia in 1585, was a goldsmith and sculptor who had business dealings with both Santa Caterina and San Marco in the early 1580s.⁷² He later became a Dominican friar and died in 1643. Another brother, Niccolò, also worked as a goldsmith. Best known of the Traballesi clan were Francesco (1544-88), who excelled in painting, sculpture, and architecture, and Bartolomeo (ca. 1540-85), a painter. Author of the *Danae* painting in the Studiolo of Francesco I de' Medici in the Palazzo Vecchio, Bartolomeo joined Florence's Accademia del Disegno in the same year that Agata took the veil (1573).⁷³ Given this background, Agata could have had some artistic training before she entered the convent. Her family even may have selected Santa Caterina because of the fame of its workshop. There are frequent references in the convent records to "Suor Agata Traballesi and the companion paintresses" in the first two decades of the seventeenth century, but no information about what they painted.⁷⁴

Whereas Agata Traballesi is said to have worked on both canvas and panel, the last artist named in the sixteenth-century literature specialized in manuscript illumination, the traditional medium of nuns. Alessandra di Domenico del Milanese was accepted into the convent in 1581, immediately after her father's death and six years before the arrival of her sister, Laura.⁷⁵ The girls' mother, Lucretia Martelli, may have selected the convent partly because of the presence there of a kinswoman, Suor Laura (*née* Maria) di Carlo Martelli.⁷⁶ Like Dionisia and Veronica Niccolini, Alessandra came from a patrician family: her father was addressed as "My Lord" ("Messere") and her brother Antonio was referred to as a "Florentine noble" ("nobile fiorentino") in contemporary documents. Her social status also may have prompted her inclusion in Paolo Mini's history, the only early publication in which her

name is recorded.⁷⁷ There is no documentation of her career in the convent archives, unless she is that anonymous but promising young artist whose small painting of the *Madonna* was presented to Filippo Taddei by Prudenza Cambi, then prioress of the convent, in 1589.⁷⁸ As the convent's financial administrator in Rome, Taddei oversaw the investments that supported several nuns, including Alessandra. It is only natural that the *madre priora* might send him a sample of his beneficiary's handiwork. Such gift exchanges were commonplace between nuns and their patrons, although a package arriving from Santa Caterina also could contain collars or socks, as happened on other occasions.⁷⁹

The eight women profiled in this essay may represent only a fraction of the entire company of nuns, novices, and lay-sisters who participated in the production of painted and sculpted images at Santa Caterina in the last years of the sixteenth century and the first decades of the seventeenth. Unlike Plautilla Nelli, Prudenza Cambi, Veronica and Dionisia Niccolini, Maria Angelica Razzi, Maria Ruggieri, Agata Traballesi, and Alessandra del Milanese, most of these women were anonymous, their works unsigned and their names unrecorded. Nonetheless, their collective achievement contributed to the enduring fame of the convent's workshop and was acknowledged by contemporary writers. In 1602, fourteen years after Nelli's death, Razzi praised these "virtuous and saintly" nuns, trained in both painting and manuscript illumination, whose sculpted images of Christ, the Madonna, saints, and angels were renowned throughout almost all of Italy.⁸⁰

ENDNOTES

*This study is dedicated to the memory of Maurice Cope.

1. See, for example, Nelson, ed., 2000.
2. The first book on Nelli was Pierattini, 1938, which originated as a series of articles in the journal *Memorie domenicane* and was offprinted as a book the same year. Briefer profiles appeared in later publications such as Greer, 1979, 185-86, King, 1997, and Jacobs, 1997, 111-21. Most recently, Nelli was featured in several catalogue essays and entries in Fortunati, Pomeroy, and Strinati, ed., 2007.
3. One error about Nelli's artistic training that recurs in the literature is that she was a pupil of either Fra Bartolommeo della Porta (died 1517) or Fra Paolino da Pistoia (died 1547). The first assumption is impossible; the second improbable. See Muzzi in this volume.
4. Francesco Maria Rucellai, "Memorie e notizie istoriche del monasterio di S. Caterina da Siena nella città di Firenze," BNCF, ms Lindau Finaly, 72. See also Brocchi, 1761, II: 339-47. Rucellai estimated that Nelli was about fifty-nine years old when he wrote his chronicle (c. 264r).
5. Ubaldini's book is cited in Creytens, 1969, 158.
6. AOSMF, Battesimi maschili (baptismal record of Piero Guido di Luca di Piero, popolo San Felice; March 17, 1485); and ASF, CRSGF, 106, no. 117, fol. 1 (testament dated August 19, 1534; popolo San Felice in Piazza). For his baptismal date, see also Herlihy et al., ed., 2002.
7. For the neighborhoods of Piero's father Luca and grandfather Piero, see Herlihy et al., ed., 2002 and BNCF, PG, 1380, no. 239. Both Piero and his great-grandfather Luca were buried in Santo Spirito. See BNCF, PG, 1384, no. 48 (Luca di Niccolò Nelli) and ASF, CRSGF, 106, no. 117, fol. 1 (Piero Nelli's testament, with burial requested in the cloister of Santo Spirito).
8. See BNCF, PG, 1380, nos. 210 ("Niccolò di Luca di Piero Nelli,

merciaio," 1525) and 238 ("Piero Nelli merciaio," 1530).

9. According to Herlihy et al., ed., 2002, Luca Nelli was elected to the boards of the two guilds several times (*Oliandoli e Pizzicagnoli*: 1481, 1483, 1487; *Correggiai*: 1484). Piero di Luca also was considered for the *Oliandoli*'s board in 1497 but was too young to be elected.

10. BNCF, PG, 1380, no. 241: undated entry for Piero di Luca di Niccolò Nelli, here identified as a *biadaiuolo*.

11. See the following: Greer, 1979, 185; Chadwick, 2002, 32; King, 1997, 1010; Marchese, 1879, II: 327; Marchese, 1852, II: 248. Germaine Greer and Whitney Chadwick both maintain that Plautilla was the daughter of a painter named Luca Nelli. Vincenzo Marchese may have been the source of the belief that she was the daughter of a Florentine patrician; see King, 1997, among others. In the English translation of the 1846 edition of Marchese's book, Nelli's father was called Lucca (*sic*), rather than Piero di Luca.

12. Piero Nelli and Francesca Calandri reported at the *gabella* in 1513 and again in 1515, according to entries transcribed in BNCF, PG, 1380, nos. 240 and 243.

13. According to Herlihy et al., ed., 2002, Piermaria was elected to the *Priori* in 1490 and 1497, was considered for the *Buonomini* in 1495, and served on the governing board of the *Corrazzai e Spadai* in 1486, 1490, and 1496. His father, Calandro di Piero, was a guild consul for the *Corrazzai* in 1465.

14. BNCF, PG, 1380, no. 238 (extract from the "Documenti del Contagio, 1523-1530," Archivio della Misericordia, Florence).

15. AOSMF, Battesimi femmini, serie 1513-22 (c. 145v) and 1522-32 (c. 19r). The two girls may have been given the name Pulisena in honor of their grandmother. Piero di Luca di Niccolò Nelli appeared at the *gabella* with a woman named Pulisena (BNCF, PG, 1380, no. 241). In 1482, he was married to Maria di Biagio di Cristofano. See ASF, CD, F. 4, cc. 7-9, and Ildefonso, 1783, XVII: 127.

16. BNCF, PG, 1380, no. 244 (*gabella* entry from 1530) and 1384, no. 66 (*gabella* entry from 1532); ASF, CD, F. 32 (Michelozzi), c. 1r (marriage in 1530, but without a specific date).

17. ASF, CD, F. 4 (Nelli); and Marchese, 1852, II: 327-28. This information was copied from the convent chronicle for the prioress,

Suor Caterina Luisa Amadei, in 1719. The girls' vestition dates are also recorded in ASF, CRSGF, 106, no. 12 (3v, nos. 141 and 144). Both sources indicate that Petronilla took the veil on April 2, 1537. However, the information for Plautilla varies. In the convent records, her vestition is dated December 1, 1538, versus November 1, 1537, in CD. If she was fourteen when she took the veil, as Amadei asserted, the 1538 date seems more likely.

18. Piero Nelli had died by March 28, 1539, and his two daughters came to an agreement with his nephew, Luca di Niccolò, over the disposition of his estate on September 28, 1539. See ASF, CRSGF, 106, no. 117, fol. 1, and no. 31, c. 160.

19. Schnitzer, 1901, 266. For the 1497 subscription list, see Polizzotto, 1994, 455.

20. Polizzotto, 1994, 189. Polizzotto also describes Suor Lucia Rucellai as Savonarola's "spiritual ward."

21. Cecilia entered the convent simultaneously with her sister Domitilla (*neè* Alessandra). See ASF, CRSGF, 106, no. 12, vestitions 43 (Suor Cecilia) and 44 (Suor Domitilla), both dated November 30, 1505.

22. Michelozzo Michelozzi was the favorite architect of Cosimo de' Medici the Elder. His third son, Niccolò Michelozzi (1444-1526), served as secretary to Cosimo's son (Piero), grandson (Lorenzo the Magnificent), and great-grandson (Piero di Lorenzo). In 1513, Niccolò succeeded Machiavelli as Second Chancellor, holding this office until 1520. See Caplow, 1977, 17, and Viti, 1986, 407-21.

23. Rucellai, "Memorie" (above n. 4), c. 68r.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Cecilia was prioress in 1522-24, 1537-39, 1541-43, and 1545-47. She died in 1570, five years after Domitilla. See *ibid.*, cc. 68r and 72r-76v.

26. ASF, CRSGF, 106, no. 35, c. 133.

27. BRF, Moreniana, 219, "Vita di Frate Girolamo Savonarola"; see Razzi, 1588, II: 203, and Marchese, 1852, II: 328-29.

28. Turrill, 2000b, 90-99.

29. Rucellai, "Memorie" (above n. 4), c. 235v ("disegnava in penna"). Suor Antonia died in 1583, aged 67. She entered the convent a few

years before Petronilla and Plautilla (ca. 1532).

30. Although Razzi asserted that Nelli was entirely self-taught, she is likely to have had some training in the convent. See Muzzi in this volume, and app. 3.

31. ASF, CRSGF, 106, no. 53, c. 8r. See app. 2, no. 24.

32. Florence, Archivio Provinciale del Convento di San Marco, III: 9, 47v-48v, 80v, 115v-16r. For the records of income from "suo lavoro," see ASF, CRSGF, 106, no. 53 (dated September 1559 to June 1563).

33. Vasari specified that he wrote Plautilla's biography while she was still prioress, and Rucellai (above n. 4) indicates that she stopped painting during each of her three two-year terms in this office (1563-65, 1571-73, and 1583-85). Thus, all of the works Vasari listed would predate September 1563.

34. See Padovani, 1996, 42-43. As Padovani observes, the "orate pro pictore" signature may have been introduced by Fra Bartolommeo and was adopted by several of his followers, including Mariotto Albertinelli and Antonio Sogliani. The signature formula also appears on paintings by Fra Paolino and Michele Tosini, such as a *Holy Family* that was auctioned by Lepke in Berlin in 1929 (inscribed: "Orate pro pictore. - F. Paulo Pist.," according to the microfiche of the file in the Witt Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, London).

35. The visible part of the inscription on the *Pentecost* reads "S. Plautilla faciebat," or "S. Plautilla has been working (on this)," rather than "S. Plautilla fecit," or "S. Plautilla made this." For the significance of the use of the imperfect verb "faciebat" in signature inscriptions by Renaissance artists, see (among others) Goffen, 2001, 324-28. I discussed this issue in a conference paper: "Signature Inscriptions on the Paintings of Plautilla Nelli," in "Constructing Female Identity: Signatures in Early Modern Italy," Renaissance Society of America, New York, NY, 2004.

36. "Vita" (above n. 27), c. 191r. See also Marchese, 1852, II: 328-29. Petronilla Nelli died on April 26, 1560.

37. The basic convent offices described by Ubaldini in his "Direttorio" (published by Creytens, 1969) were *priora*, *soppriora*, *camarlinga*, *procuratrice*, *borsaria*, *vestiaria*, *sagrestana*, *infermeriera*, and *maestra delle novitie* (curiously, he does not mention the *maestra del lavoro*). Other offices also existed to serve the needs of the convent, including

not only *pittora* but also *refettoraia* (the nun who oversaw the refectory) and *voltaia* (the nun who oversaw a construction project). See app. 2, no. 15.

38. Summarizing the work that had occupied Nelli immediately before she was elected to her second term as prioress, Rucellai alluded to “various works” (“*varii lavori*”), including “panels, painted works, and small miniatures” (“*tavole, quadri in pittura, e operette in miniature*”). See Rucellai, “*Memorie*” (above n. 4), c. 80r.

39. ASF, CRSGF, 102 (Santa Maria Novella), appendix 33 (*ricordanze* kept by Fra Cipriano de’ Servi, father confessor of Santa Caterina), entries dated 1574-76.

40. Razzi said that Nelli died in 1587 (see app. 3). The convent chronicle entry transcribed in 1719 (above n. 17) gave her death date as May 7, 1588. For a contemporary obituary, see the entry by Fra Modesto Biliotti in the “*Venerabilis coenobii Sanctae Mariae Novellae de Florentia Chronica*,” Archivio Santa Maria Novella, mentioned by Marchese, 1852, and transcribed by Pierattini, 1938.

41. ASF, CRSGF, 106, no. 35, c. 222r. See also Nelson, ed., 2000, appendix II. 3.

42. Rucellai, “*Memorie*” (above n. 4), c. 78v.

43. ASF, CRSGF, 106, no. 53 (entries dated between October 1562 and September 9, 1563, ten days before she became prioress).

44. All of these nuns except for Suor Alessandra del Milanese are profiled in Razzi, 1596, 369-72, see app. 3. Successive writers named four other artists—Suor Caterina Eletta Rosselli, Suor Felice Lupicini, Suor Maria Vincenza Brandolini, and Suor Angiola Minerbetti—who entered the convent too late to have been trained by Nelli or counted among her *compagne*. For these nuns, see Turrill, 2000b, 96-100.

45. ASF, CRSGF, 106, no. 80, fol. 3. See also Nelson, ed., 2000, appendix II. 5.

46. Polizzotto, 1994, 449.

47. Herlihy et al., ed., 2002. The twelve *Buonomini* served as one of two advisory councils to the city’s highest administrative authority, the *Signoria*, which consisted of one Gonfalonier of Justice (*Gonfaloniere di Giustizia*) and eight Priors (*Priori*). For the Cambi family’s patrician status, see Litchfield, 1986. Also named among the “patrician houses”

are the Cavalcanti, Nelli, and Niccolini, see Litchfield, appendix B, 368, 376, and 377.

48. In the list of prioresses, Suor Filippa is named three times, with terms in 1543-45, 1547-49, and 1553-55; see Rucellai, “*Memorie*” (above n. 4). Her sister, Fiammetta Corsini, was Suor Prudenza’s grandmother and, probably, namesake.

49. ASF, CRSGF, 106, no. 35, c. 22v (Fra Tommaso Cambi) and cc. 233r-33v (entries for Suor Elisabetta di Bartolomeo Cambi and Suor Maria Gratia di Cambio Cambi); and no. 12 (vestition of Suor Paolina di Giovanni Cambi).

50. ASF, CRSGF, 106, no. 86 (death on April 6, 1601).

51. ASF, CRSGF, 106, no. 53 (entries for both “*suo*” and “*lor lavoro*” in 1564 and 1565), as reported in Turrill, 2000b, 91.

52. For the entries of Laura, Francesca, Dianora, Oretta, and Tecla Niccolini into the convent (1546-55), see ASF, CRSGF, 106, nos. 12 (c. 3v) and 31 (cc. 125, 129, 138, 142) and Turrill, 2000b, 94-95.

53. Rucellai, “*Memorie*” (above n. 4), c. 265v.

54. See Herlihy et al., ed., 2002, and Passerini, 1870, 16. Febo Niccolini’s family home was in the *Ruote* district of the Santa Croce quarter. The Cavalcanti also resided in this quarter. Febo owned one or more shops (*botteghe*) and may have dealt in fabric. Some of his business papers are in the convent archive (ASF, CRSGF, 106, nos. 174, 183). He had two sons, Carlo and Vincenzo (the latter is called a “*cittadino patrizio fiorentino*”: see ASF, CRSGF, 106, no. 84, fol. 2).

55. ASF, CRSGF, 106, no. 35, c. 208r; no. 84, item 4.

56. Mini, 1755, I: 56.

57. Razzi, 1596, 371-72; see also app. 3.

58. Rucellai, “*Memorie*” (above n. 4), cc. 266v-67v.

59. Both Veronica and Dionisia still were alive in 1600 (ASF, CRSGF, 106, no. 36, c. 54v).

60. Suor Angelica Razzi, Maria Angelica’s cousin, was at San Domenico in Pratovecchio. Serafino Razzi dedicated the third book of his *Hymnario domenicano* to her. See Razzi, 1587, III: 47v-48v.

61. For Maria Angelica’s arrival at Santa Caterina in 1552, see ASF,

CRSGF, 106, no. 31, c. 1552. For Serafino's biography, see Orlandi, 1965, 122. For Silvano's vestition on November 2, 1559, see the "Registro dei Monaci," ASF, CRS GF, 86 (Santa Maria degli Angeli), no. 96, c. 70v.

62. Ser Popolano Razzi, father of Maria Angelica, Serafino, Silvano, and Stefano, also was a notary. Both he and Ser Stefano have packets of protocols in the ASF (dated 1520-45 and 1569-1606 respectively).

63. Lucca, Archivio Arcivescovile, Enti Religiosi Soppressi 2620, c.151v. See also Turrill, 2003, 96.

64. In July 1576, Razzi, serving as the *voltai*, oversaw a construction project involving a wall and vault. See ASF, CRS GF, 102, appendix 33, c. 9.

65. See Turrill, 2000b, 96.

66. For Ruggieri's second marriage, see BNCF, PG, 1758, no. 215. Francesco (died 1579), Clemenza (died 1565), and a third daughter, Giulia (died 1569) all were buried in the Badia (see BNCF, PG, 1758 nos. 215, 216, 220). Francesco also had four sons: Giovanni Antonio, Roberto, Francesco, and Paolemilio (ASF, CD, fol. 19, c. 5). The entry of his two daughters at Santa Caterina is recorded in ASF, CRS GF, 106, no. 35, c. 43.

67. See above n. 45 (Nativity figurines). The entry for "Suor Maria e compagne pittore" is dated April 26, 1615 (ASF, CRS GF, 106, no. 36, c.171).

68. Baldinucci, 1846, III: 81. Baldinucci reported that "some" of Mariano Traballese's daughters worked as painters after entering the convent but did not name them.

69. CRS GF, 106, no. 35, c. 209v. Camilla's name in religion is not given here.

70. Rucellai, "Memorie" (above n. 4), c. 276v.

71. ASF, CRS GF, 106, no. 36, cc. 119/cxix (entries dated 1609 and 1610).

72. Ibid., 102, no. 26; *ibid.*, 103 (San Marco), no. 2, c. 3r.

73. Very little has been published about Traballese. In addition to the *Danae* (1572) he also has been attributed with paintings in the oratory of the Compagnia della Santissima Annunziata, not far from his sisters'

convent. See Lecchini Giovannoni, 1984, 433-40; and Sebregondi, 1989, 50-52.

74. ASF, CRS GF, 106, no. 37 (entries dated 1603-13).

75. For the vestitions of Alessandra and Laura, see *ibid.*, 106, no. 35, cc. 119 and 146. In BNCF, PG, 1311 no. 294, there is an entry for M. Antonio di M. Domenico del Milanese, "nobile fiorentino" (1605). Domenico was buried in Santa Maria Novella on August 1, 1580 (BNCF, PG, 1311, no. 286). The Del Milanese family resided in the *Drago* district of the San Giovanni quarter, according to Ciabani, 1992.

76. ASF, CRS GF, 106, no. 35.

77. Mini, 1755, 32; Jacobs, 1997, 111 and 166. She is not mentioned by Razzi or Rucellai.

78. ASF, CRS GF, 106, no. 73. For this gift, see also Evangelisti, 2000, 80.

79. ASF, CRS GF, 106, c. 73.

80. BRF, no. 2012: Serafino Razzi, "Vita del reverendo Fra Girolamo Savonarola da Ferrara," c. 34r.

2

THE ARTISTIC TRAINING AND SAVONAROLAN IDEAS OF PLAUTILLA NELLI*

ANDREA MUZZI

Introduction

THE STORY OF THE PAINTER-PRIORESS SUOR PLAUTILLA NELLI CAN NOT BE fully understood, in all its fascinating and curious details, unless it is seen in the context her life, not only as an artistic nun in Florence in the sixteenth century but also and particularly as a Dominican artist who was a follower of the famous Dominican preacher Fra Girolamo Savonarola and lived in a convent in the congregation of San Marco.¹ Savonarola himself had forged this association of Dominican convents and monasteries in order to launch a widespread moral and political reform of Florentine society, in which art occupied a leading role.

Plautilla was three times prioress of the Convent of Santa Caterina in Cafaggio, now destroyed but once located on Piazza San Marco in Florence. In the Savonarolan tradition, the convent was particularly dedicated to art, stimulated by the great preacher himself.² An important document that testifies to Nelli's Savonarolan beliefs is one of the books she owned: a biography of the friar handwritten in the 1560s by Petronilla Nelli. She was a nun in the same convent and sister of Plautilla, who guarded this manuscript "for its great value."³ Those years, in which Plautilla was painting, saw great changes in the religious world: the Savonarolans, who had maintained a republican position of strong criticism of and opposition to the Medici, were moving ever closer to the prestigious world of the ducal court. This transformation of their

strong republican identity, even if incomplete and difficult to place in a complex historical context, is due in particular to the role played by Caterina de' Ricci (1522-89), another Dominican and Savonarolan nun, who was canonized in the eighteenth century. Caterina de' Ricci was from the Florentine upper classes and in the mid-sixteenth century came to prominence for her radical veneration of Savonarola. She moved from having actual "visions" of Savonarola to making declarations that left no doubt of her esteem for his religious ideas, which were soon shared by many who had nothing to do with republicanism. In addition to the intriguing topic of a female painter in a world of male artists, the study of Plautilla's art can perhaps most productively be seen as closely linked to Savonarola and the history of his following in the sixteenth century.

Savonarola was one of the few great preachers of the fifteenth century who paid particular attention to problem of art, and, fortunately for researchers, many documents containing his opinions on the subject are still extant. This is not the place for an analysis of the consequences of those views; it is sufficient here to note that Savonarola affirmed the great value of religious art and the centrality of its content. In a series of incisive declarations, the friar exhorted artists to eliminate from their works all elements that, in his opinion, constituted distractions from the sacred themes or, even worse, dangerous departures from the truth. Beyond the striking examples of artists who became followers of the friar, or for whom such claims have been made (e.g. Sandro Botticelli, Lorenzo di Credi, and members of the Della Robbia family), we can be certain that shortly after the tragic death of Savonarola, Fra Bartolommeo established a workshop at San Marco that supplied the finest pictorial products, especially to the convents and monasteries that belonged to the congregation. Art historians studying the developments of High Renaissance art have not always been interested in such matters, but further proof of the existence of this conventual workshop can be found in the fact that it was bequeathed, on the death of Fra Bartolommeo in 1517, to his student Fra Paolino da Pistoia. Fra Paolino had followed in the footsteps of his master, even in the matter of giving preference to the convents and monasteries of the congregation, and thus he obtained the most valuable goods of the workshop, most notably the original drawings of Fra Bartolommeo. As we will see, Fra Paolino could not have been Plautilla's teacher, but he certainly inspired the ideological line that she willingly adopted, in the revised version supplied by Caterina de' Ricci. Indeed, the obituary written on the occasion of Fra

Paolino's death in 1547 even states that he had been in correspondence with Caterina.⁴ As discussed below, somehow Plautilla inherited the Savonarolan workshop and transferred it, so to speak, from Pistoia back to Florence.

The depth of these connections between nuns, art, and Savonarola is also demonstrated in other factors: the great preacher had already stimulated an interest in art in the Convent of Santa Caterina in Florence at the time of its foundation. The relationship between religious women and art was explicitly and perhaps deliberately stated in a beautiful letter to a nun with whom he corresponded regularly, Maddalena Pico della Mirandola. In it he refers to the "simple figures" that should adorn a cell.⁵ In the late sixteenth century, Caterina de' Ricci showed great interest in art in the convent and wrote of it in her letters. Though no surviving letters testify any communications between Caterina and Plautilla, I believe such documents must have once existed.

Another historical witness to the impact of Savonarola was Plautilla's first biographer, Giorgio Vasari. The historian and artist from Arezzo, as is known, was one of the most fervid supporters of Cosimo I de' Medici and the one who stimulated and activated the Medicean policy towards art. As such, he had a notable aversion to anything related to Savonarola, an aversion mitigated by the particular admiration that Michelangelo, Vasari's great model, felt for the preacher. Only in the period under discussion, when Savonarolan ideals had been subjected to the kind of political purge to which I have alluded, did Vasari find it possible to approach this world with more respect. If we compare the 1550 and 1568 editions of the *Lives of the Artists*, we can see evidence of this change, and his biography of Plautilla Nelli is part of that evidence. In the first edition, all references to Savonarola and his followers are rather antagonistic, and this peaks in a veritable warning in the introduction to the life of Fra Angelico (a spiritual model for the Savonarolan artists). In the second edition, by contrast, acceptance of Savonarolan ideas seems more or less a *fait accompli* and Vasari even removed the polemical declarations from the life of Angelico.⁶

Scholarship and Ideology: Reflections on Categories

The life of Plautilla Nelli was first told by Vasari, a rather singular case in his *Lives*, both because in it he breaks his habit of treating each artist in connection to his (or her) master and because it is the life of a

Dominican nun, indeed a prioress.⁷ Later, only authors sympathetic to Nelli's beliefs wrote about her. This description applies well to another sixteenth-century author, Serafino Razzi,⁸ the Dominican historian and religious, and, three centuries later, another Dominican priest, Vincenzo Marchese;⁹ and in more recent times to the first woman to study Nelli, Giovanna Pierattini, whose biography of the artist appeared in 1938.¹⁰

As a scholar particularly focused on religious issues and as a woman, Pierattini was to be the forerunner of a new surge of interest in Plautilla Nelli. From the 1970s onward, a lively strain of feminist scholarship included Nelli in studies focused on women artists. These scholars were almost all women, exploring the virtually unmapped territory of the woman artist from the Renaissance onward.

There is no doubt that, in these first phases of renewed critical acclaim for Suor Plautilla, the various scholars' interest was ideological in character, first in studies on Dominican religiosity, then in those on women's history. The proof of this lies in the fact that discussions of Nelli's paintings themselves have been few and far between. Her corpus remains extremely small, and prior to the publication of this volume, there have been very few serious attempts to define it.¹¹ The analysis of how Nelli learned to paint and of the religious and intellectual ambience that sustained her artistic choices is still a little studied aspect of late Renaissance Florence.

Fra Paolino: Nelli's Teacher?

The affinities between the works of Fra Paolino and Nelli have led most scholars to assume—mistakenly, I believe—that the nun received a conventional artistic instruction from the friar. It is true that both painters were Dominican religious in the congregation of San Marco, and neither was very interested in the contemporary developments in art. Moreover, one of the paintings hitherto attributed to Plautilla, the *Adoration of the Magi*, now at the National Gallery at Parma (app. 2, no. 49; fig. 27), is rather similar—in style and technique—to Paolino's altarpiece of the same subject (Pistoia, Church of San Domenico). The work in Parma, however, can be convincingly attributed to Giovanni Battista Volponi, known as Scalabrino (1489-1561), a painter from Pistoia who produced another very similar *Adoration of the Magi* (Tuscania, Church of San Pietro, fig. 28).¹²

For several reasons it strikes me as most unlikely that Plautilla stud-

ied with Paolino. First and foremost, for a woman—particularly a nun—it was unthinkable to frequent a workshop, with its young (male) assistants, its rhythms, and habits. Besides, Fra Paolino's workshop had been transferred around 1526—two years after Plautilla's birth—to the Convent of San Domenico in Pistoia,¹³ and though the distance from Florence was not insurmountable, it would have added appreciably to the difficulties of a nun based at the convent of Santa Caterina. But the most conclusive proof is that the style and technique of the few extant paintings by Nelli exhibit very little correspondence to those by Fra Paolino. For example, in Nelli's *Lamentation* (app. 2, no. 1; figs. 1-4)—the earliest of the surviving paintings, to judge from the references to the works of Perugino (fig. 29) and Fra Bartolommeo (fig. 31)¹⁴—we see, among other things, that the technique, strictly in oils, differs considerably from the mixture of oils and tempera that Fra Paolino always used. Nelli's closest stylistic affinities are with Giovanni Antonio Sogliani, who was active and well known at San Marco and certainly at Santa Caterina as well.¹⁵ His *Last Supper* (fig. 46), commissioned in 1531, seems to me to be the model for Plautilla's painting of the same subject, now in the Convent of Santa Maria Novella (app. 2, no. 2; figs. 8-11). One of Sogliani's students, the rigorously Savonarolan painter Zanobi Poggini, constituted a point of reference for Nelli's paintings. Indeed, one of Poggini's most important altarpieces, representing *Christ, the Madonna, and Three Dominican Martyrs* (Fiesole, San Domenico, app. 2, no. 39), has often been attributed to her.¹⁶ This does not mean, however, that Nelli was the student of Sogliani or Poggini. Most probably, she never frequented a traditional workshop.

Fra Paolino and Plautilla:

"Official" Painters of the Congregation of San Marco

A close examination of the *Lamentation* suggests that, beyond the various citations of stylistic models, Nelli has problems that would not have given any "professional" painter much trouble. The relationship between the foreground and background is awkward, as Nelli concentrates her efforts on the eyes made red by weeping. This aspect is certainly not negligible from the cultural point of view and reveals an attention to content that derives from Plautilla's Savonarolan faith. In representing the tears that all the characters (except the central male figure) are shedding, Nelli must have been inspired by some Flemish

precedent already held in high esteem in the Dominican workshop; indeed, the inventory of works that came to Fra Paolino in 1517 records "Flemish paintings," now lost.¹⁷

If Fra Paolino had any weight in Plautilla's artistic education (and we can not absolutely deny that he had), it was not so much his style that influenced her as his example as a working artist—official painter of the congregation of San Marco—who was a fervid Savonarolan until his death in Pistoia in 1547.

Another argument that is given in favor of a stylistic link between Nelli and the artistic world of the early Cinquecento is the one based on the drawings of the workshop of San Marco. Thanks to Vasari's affirmation, we know that the drawings of Fra Bartolommeo and his workshop—which, for the most part, are now in Rotterdam—were in Nelli's possession. Here again, many commentators claim that she obtained them via Fra Paolino. Perhaps we will never know what really happened. It is certain that the contents of the workshop were given to Fra Paolino for his lifetime. When Paolino died suddenly in the summer of 1547 in Pistoia, the drawings returned to their rightful owner—the Convent of San Marco. We can hypothesize that Suor Plautilla asked for the drawings and received them, thanks to her reputation in Church circles. The assets of the San Marco workshop were considered a Savonarolan inheritance, a collection of images that bore the mark of the great preacher's ideas on art. The possession of that collection was therefore not a mere matter of traditional workshop practice, especially since Nelli's works, aside from the *Lamentation*, rarely include derivations from Fra Bartolommeo. Rather, the corpus of drawings reflects a refined taste in collecting, which in those years was already quite well developed (Bartolomeo Gondi, Vasari, and Niccolò Gaddi). This interest is documented by the fact that Nelli evidently exchanged a few sheets with Vasari, who preserved them in his book of drawings.¹⁸ Moreover, Nelli certainly knew Gondi; he was a collector interested in Dominican art, cited in a document of 1575 among "our working gentlemen" of the monastery.¹⁹

Of the only three paintings currently associated with Plautilla, all were made for Dominican convents, and two are actually signed. The *Lamentation* and the *Last Supper* were painted for Nelli's own convent, and the *Pentecost* (app. 2, no. 3; figs. 12-13) is still in the Church of San Domenico in Perugia; the latter two works are signed. It is difficult to place these paintings in a convincing chronology, except to say that the two Florentine works, both mentioned by Vasari, were complete

by 1568, the date of his *Lives*. The altarpiece in Perugia, as discussed below, was probably commissioned by Guglielmo Pontano, who died in 1555. The *Last Supper* and the *Pentecost* are stylistically similar, whereas the *Lamentation* is different.²⁰ We could hypothesize, therefore, that the *Lamentation* was painted before 1556, because of the references to models by Fra Bartolommeo and Perugino, even by this date rather obsolete, though perhaps not surprising in Nelli's early work. The *Last Supper* is probably later, partly because it evinces more clearly the skill in portraiture that Vasari remarked in 1568, which is already present in the *Pentecost* but absent in the *Lamentation*. Furthermore, in the last painting of our little series, the *Last Supper*, the signature is a feminized version of a formula used in the early Cinquecento: "S. Plavtilla orate pro pictora" (fig. 11). The severe structure that encloses the scene of the *Pentecost* is characteristic of the San Marco workshop, but it refers not so much to Fra Paolino—whose *Sacra Conversazione* (Florence, Museum of San Marco, fig. 37) Nelli could have seen at the Cafaggio convent—as to the *Mystic Marriage of Santa Caterina* by Antonio del Ceraiolo. Nelli's *Last Supper* can be placed at the end of the series partly because of its references to "Florentine Classicism." The painting does not seem to be done by one artist; the identification of different hands is made difficult by the painting's state of conservation. Some faces seem to be painted schematically, and perhaps these were touched up; others, by contrast, are of high quality. Nelli probably worked with other painter-nuns of her convent, and some of the painting might have been done by one or more of them, even though the signature in the upper-left-hand corner should leave no doubt about its authorship.

In 1556, Nelli was thirty-two years old. In view of the fact that her training was outside the normal practice of workshop apprenticeship, which usually started at an early age, it is likely that her career as an artist had begun only a few years earlier. The following years were perhaps brightened by the active apprenticeship described by Vasari, even if, coeval with her first term as prioress and with the post-tridentine pressures for the imposition of cloistering, reports of her work were rarer. I believe that, despite reasonable observations on the possible coexistence of cloistering and art, Nelli's opportunities to paint diminished gradually.

It has been suggested—for reasons to do with her age and a reasonable temporal proximity to her other works—that Nelli painted the *Lamentation* around 1550. The *Last Supper*—for similar reasons—was

probably painted around 1560. If these speculations are tenable, we can note a stylistic development in her works. In the *Lamentation*, we see a notable attention to the role of color—more evident since the very welcome restoration—that seems to follow analogous interests among the followers of Agnolo Bronzino in the same period. In contrast to that tradition, however, Nelli's works not only lack a mother-of-pearl quality, but also exhibit a greater sense of atmosphere surrounding her figures. This skill is clearly not linked to a capacity to create the appearance of distance in a landscape. The inclusion of the flanking hills in the *Lamentation* recalls works by Andrea del Sarto (fig. 30) and especially Bronzino, for example his *Nativity*, now in Budapest; the latter work, according to Vasari, was even copied by Plautilla.²¹ In her own painting, however, the apparent distance in the landscape is not coordinated with the foreground or the background, where the walled city of Jerusalem seems too close to the viewer.

Nelli's other two paintings do not allow us to evaluate the landscapes, and we can hypothesize that, after the *Lamentation*, she voluntarily renounced painting scenes with those kinds of complications. In fact, Florentine art of the mid-Cinquecento could supply a remarkable variety of solutions to these technical problems, but Plautilla does not seem to have been aware of them. The problems of representing figures in a room were very different, and Plautilla found them much easier to resolve, as we see in the *Pentecost* and the *Last Supper*.

Vasari claimed that Nelli was a skilled portraitist. Unfortunately, neither the portraits to which he referred nor any other portraits by her have yet been traced. However, her skill as a portraitist is evident in the *Last Supper*, especially in the third apostle from the right, the bearded one. A good sixteenth-century portraitist concentrated not just on the face but also on the hands, and in Nelli's work we find significant examples of this. It is evident that Vasari was too severe in his judgment that in her work "the faces and features of women are much better and have much greater verisimilitude than her heads of men." But as soon as we turn our attention from the faces and hands to the shoulders and chests, we notice rough and uncertain craftsmanship in the indication of volume and the rendering of anatomy that is very rare in sixteenth-century painters of any level. And it is not a problem of a more or less convincing agreement between the qualities of the colors, tones, and light: these parts of the paintings seem almost sketchy and unresolved. At this point, we must consider the question of her rank among painters, a question that has vexed all who have discussed her, most of whom did

so, as we have said, mainly for ideological reasons.²² If, between the lines, Vasari warned his readers about Nelli's formal quirks, or, to be more precise, the substantial diversities in the quality of her work, the space he dedicated to her—almost that of an entire biography—clearly shows his appreciation of her achievement.

Artistic Dilettantism

But do the surviving works not sufficiently document her talent? I believe the question must be posed in other terms.²³ The social aspect of Suor Plautilla's artistic training should certainly not be undervalued, not least because, as we can see in the literature of the time (from Baldassarre Castiglione onwards), art was assuming an ever more prominent position in the education of cultured people: particularly men (and also women) with high spiritual aspirations turned to drawing as a source of spiritual nutriment. Nelli can only be placed and understood in the context of the well defined sixteenth-century tradition of artistic dilettantes, not in the modern sense of those who practice art as an amusement but in the sense of those who, while not professionals, nevertheless practice art—and particularly drawing—seriously, with a view to their own intellectual improvement. The *Courtier* (first edition 1518) describes this in detail, as does Raffaello Borghini's *Riposo* of 1584. Vasari alludes in various ways to dilettantism. One example is his omission of a piece of information that was of fundamental importance for him, as for others: the name of the *maestro* who was responsible for Nelli's artistic training. Nelli's first appearance in the *Lives* is in the life of Fra Bartolommeo, in connection with her possession of his drawings. Here Vasari does not name her (he refers to her as "a nun who paints"), but later, in the part dedicated to her, he introduces her as "Sister Plautilla, a nun who is now Prioress" and who "began to draw and paint little by little, in imitation of great masters." Here Vasari identifies Nelli with all the signs of the artistic dilettante, even though she "amazed the artists," that is to say she amazed those who, unlike herself, were professionals.

Having before our eyes the works of the dilettante painter Plautilla, we can now evaluate the results that could be obtained through artistic dilettantism, by comparing them to the *Treatise*, a drawing manual by Alessandro Allori, one of Bronzino's best students.²⁴ This book was designed to teach drawing to educated nobles who were unacquainted with the artistic practices of the workshop. Although many of the nuns

in Nelli's convent were from the same social class as the manual's intended audience, it was written later than the period of her training. It is not too late for our purposes, however, considering that the manual was the result of prior teaching experience. At the beginning of the text, Allori addresses Bronzino, who has been asked to teach these noble students:

Have I not told you many times that the knight ... the lord ... etc. have a great desire to learn how to draw, and to learn it as well as they learn all the other disciplines that gentlemen study and value? And they want me to obtain from you the rules and instructions that you, more than anyone else, can give them.

Allori presents Bronzino as the master who will examine and discuss the drawings of his students, with whom, however, he never has personal contact: Vincenzo Acciaiuoli, Andrea Minerbetti, Simone Tornabuoni, Alessandro Segni, Cosimo Rucellai, and others. There are no women in this group, but according to Vasari, Lucrezia Quistelli studied with Allori. If we look at the exact wording, we find a very useful piece of information. In Vasari's *Life of Properzia* [de' Rossi], the link between the discussion of Nelli and Quistelli is the word "similarly":

Similarly, Madonna Lucrezia, the daughter of Alfonso Quistelli dalla Mirandola, and now wife of Count Clemente Pietra, has been greatly praised for the drawings and paintings she has produced and continues to produce, having studied with Alessandro Allori, the student of Bronzino, as we can see from many paintings and portraits by her hand, which are worthy of everyone's praise.

Nelli, then, not only provides us with an interesting example of a painter-nun but also allows us at last to examine the results of a rare and valued case of artistic dilettantism in the Cinquecento, as documented in Allori's *Treatise*, which otherwise would be very difficult to verify. Nelli's case should therefore be considered separately from those of other women painters of the time who obtained professional training and results thanks to ordinary apprenticeships in workshops because their fathers were artists—for example, Lavinia Fontana and later Artemisia Gentileschi. Sofonisba Anguissola, the most famous woman painter in sixteenth-century Italy, was of good family, but she was also helped by her extraordinary precocity and by the support of her father Amilcare, who was very interested in art.

An examination of Allori's manual can help us understand how Plautilla learned the art of painting. The text is centered on drawing exercises with a special emphasis on human faces and hands. According to Allori, other aspects of portraiture are difficult to master without practical experience in an artists' workshop; for example, Allori rightly considers the ability to paint beards or drapery the result of practice and experience. We can see this demonstrated if we compare the beards of characters in the *Lamentation* to those in the *Last Supper*: the latter are more detailed and realistic.

We know that the highest quality of work produced by Plautilla is in some of the faces and hands. It would be interesting to investigate this question in her drawings, but unfortunately the sheets that have been attributed to her are difficult to judge: many have been grouped together because they were deleted from the catalogues of other artists who were considered stylistically similar, such as Fra Bartolommeo and Fra Paolino. Nevertheless, two drawings in the Uffizi are worth particular consideration. Each bears an old attribution, written in pen, probably by Filippo Baldinucci, and therefore of a period in which a reference to Nelli was not suspect.²⁵ One is a study of Michelangelo's *Risen Christ* (app. 1, no. 2b; fig. 15), sketched in outline with shading on the face only. The quality of this drawing shows that it was done by a practiced hand, and it seems a useful example for documenting Plautilla's artistic training by imitating great masters. And, as we have seen, in the biography Vasari refers to the copy of the *Nativity* by none other than Bronzino, who, as Allori's *Treatise* testifies, is the ideal master for the genteel dilettante.

Once more, Vasari, if read correctly, puts us on the right track: his assertion that Plautilla was better at painting women than men because she was more familiar with women, though not exactly true, alludes directly to this world of dilettantes who cannot master the whole but attain respectable results in portraying the details. Dilettantes were often advised to copy the works of great masters precisely so that they could study the various compositional difficulties without encountering too many obstacles.

The *Pentecost* of Perugia

Nelli's least studied work, the *Pentecost*, reflects both her artistic dilettantism and her ties with the followers and ideas of Savonarola.²⁶ It is

rather curious that a Florentine nun should receive a commission from Umbria, even though the Dominican community in Perugia had links to Tuscan convents.²⁷ According to Modesto Biliotti's *Chronica*, written in 1588, the painting was commissioned by a legal scholar, Guglielmo Pontano (1478-1555).²⁸ Though proud of his family ties to the famous humanist Gioviano Pontano, the patron himself is little known. His only other commission, as far as we know, is a series of portraits of famous legal scholars of Perugia in San Pietro in Perugia in 1535.²⁹

An examination of the Pontano's tomb (fig. 38), which is not far from Plautilla's altarpiece, does not add much to our knowledge of his association with Nelli or with people she might have known.³⁰ But the name of the Dominican who solemnly read Pontano's funeral oration is of great help: Niccolò degli Alessi (1510-85). This friar from Perugia took holy orders in 1533 at San Marco in Florence and made his profession of faith the following year.³¹ He is best known as the author of the *Libellus de Gestis*³² on the life of Caterina de' Ricci, who, as we have seen, was a follower of Savonarola. Alessi, then, knew Florence well and was familiar with the Savonarolan circle to which Plautilla belonged. Indeed, one of his teachers was Pier Paolo Giannarini, who assumed the defense of Savonarola in the trial of the preacher orchestrated by Pope Paul IV. We know that Alessi was back in Perugia by 1552, since he was among those who witnessed the death of Fra Timoteo Ricci, the uncle of Caterina de' Ricci. In 1554, he preached at the parish church of Prato, and there he probably had direct contact with Ricci. Alessi must have been the intermediary for Nelli's commission in Perugia, and both frequented the same Savonarolan circle in Florence. The link with Niccolò Alessi enriches the scenario not least because it shifts our attention back to Caterina de' Ricci. As already noted, she was in contact with Fra Paolino, and most probably with Nelli as well.

In the *Pentecost*, Nelli concentrates on the faces and hands, while the spatial disposition (similar to that by Antonio del Ceraiolo) and the anatomy are palpably weak. One interesting iconographic detail, the presence of a group of women around the Madonna, could refer to the tradition of feminine spirituality, given that apostles are usually the only figures, besides the Madonna, depicted as receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Among those women is Mary Magdalene with her jar of anointing oils, a favorite motif in paintings inspired by Savonarolan teaching: according to Savonarola, Mary Magdalene's jar keeps the love for God warm and protects it from earthly desires. The participation of other characters in this event might, however, derive from a pas-

sage in the Acts of the Apostles (1:14), which states that other people were present at the Pentecost and in particular "some women." To cite another example that was certainly familiar to Plautilla, the *Pentecost* (Florence, Museum of San Marco, Armadio degli Argenti) traditionally attributed to Fra Angelico, the great protagonist of Dominican art, uses the same iconography. Thus we see that, even in her iconographical choices, Plautilla was faithful to the intellectual and artistic premises that originated in the late fifteenth century.³³ She also had a particular training, in which art was a means of elevating the cultured individual, which characterized the years in which she lived.

Translated from the Italian by Dorothea Barrett

ENDNOTES

*For an earlier version of this essay, see Muzzi 2000.

1. On the activities of the congregation and its suppression in 1530, see Creytens, 1970, 125-30.

2. The convent was founded by Camilla Bartolini, a disciple of Savonarola, with the help of Suor Caterina da Cutigliano, from the Convent of Santa Caterina in Pistoia, to whom Savonarola had sent a letter on January 24, 1495 (Di Agresti, 1980, 23-24). In the Savonarolan tradition, the preacher had introduced the practice of painting in the convent: see Barsanti, 1782, 145-46. In 1562 the convent housed 133 nuns; see D'Addario, 1972, 396.

3. For a discussion of this, see the essay by Turrill in this volume.

4. For the text, which states that Paolino "multum erat familiaris" with Caterina, see Muzzi, 1991. On the role of Fra Paolino and his workshop in early sixteenth-century Florence, see Muzzi, 1994.

5. Savonarola, 1933, 85.

6. See Muzzi, 1992, 54.

7. See the essay by Quin in this volume and app. 3.

8. Ibid. Razzi attributes to Nelli a predella with scenes from the life of St. Zenobius (app. 2, no. 8). This is perhaps a mistaken attribution of the panel by Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio in the Bigallo Museum, Florence.

9. Marchese, 1879, 326-50. The title of the chapter on Nelli is "Di Suor Plautilla Nelli, pittrice domenicana, e di altre religiose dello stesso istituto, che coltivarono la pittura, la miniatura, la plastica, in Firenze, in Prato, in Lucca e altrove" ("Of Sister Plautilla Nelli, Dominican Paintress, and Other Nuns of the Same Convent who Painted and Sculpted in Florence, Prato, Lucca, and Elsewhere"). The title rightly emphasizes the communal nature of artistic practice in the convent.

10. Pierattini, 1938.

11. Pierattini is an exception: she lists a series of works brought together more by chance than by careful selection. A notable exception is her praiseworthy reconstruction of Nelli's graphic corpus, though a careful critical examination shows that this, too, includes some works by other hands. See Faietti, in this volume, for Nelli's drawings.

12. On Scalabrino, see Andrea Muzzi in D'Afflitto, Falletti, and Muzzi, ed., 1996, 210; on the painting, see Muzzi, 2000, and Silvia Meloni Trkulja in Fornari Scianchi, ed., 1998, 96, who rightly accepts the proposed attribution.

13. See Muzzi in D'Afflitto, Falletti, and Muzzi, ed., 1996, 26-28.

14. For these derivations, see Muzzi in Padovani, ed., 1996, 262, n. 87, and the essay by Scudieri in this volume.

15. The friar Molletti, patron of Sogliani's *Miracle of the Dominican Providence* (fig. 47 in this volume), frequented the Convent of Santa Caterina; see Muzzi, 1992, 51-52.

16. See Muzzi in Padovani, ed., 1996, 259-62.

17. See Muzzi in D'Afflitto, Falletti, and Muzzi, ed., 1996, 197. This special attention to tears in Suor Plautilla returns in the symbolism of the lettuce on the table of her *Last Supper*. Several sources indicate that lettuce symbolizes tears of penitence; see Muzzi, 2000, 43-44.

18. Collobi Raggiante, 1974, 98, notes the provenance but does not ask how these drawings ended up in Vasari's hands. I believe that Nelli acted almost like a collector and therefore exchanged the drawings in her possession.

19. See Muzzi, 1992, 51-52. For the 1575 document, see Nelson, ed., 2000, appendix II, 2, 113-14.

20. Beyond the three paintings under discussion, the only other painting attributable to Nelli on stylistic grounds is the *Madonna with Child and Four Angels* (app. 2, no. 46), a work that I have not seen in the original; the painting seems close to the *Pentecost*.

21. Significantly, the person who commissioned Bronzino's painting was Filippo Salviati (died 1572), who frequented Dominican circles and was a correspondent of Caterina de' Ricci.

22. See the introduction by Nelson in this volume.

23. For Berenson's attack on Nelli's talent, see Muzzi, 2000, 40, n. 18,

and Faietti, app. 1.

24. For *Il primo libro de' ragionamenti delle regole del disegno d'Alessandro Allori con M. Agnolo Bronzino*, see Barocchi, 1977, 1941-81, and discussion in Ciardi, 1971, 267-84.

25. For a discussion of the drawings and the inscriptions on GDSU, 6859 F, *Head of a Youth*; and GDSU, 6762 F, r *Kneeling Woman*, perhaps a representation of Mary Magdalene, v *Christ* (copied from Michelangelo), see Faietti, app. 1, nos. 7, 2.

26. The earliest published reference seems to be Orsini, 1784, 64, which cites "the altar with a painting of the Holy Spirit, by an unknown and mediocre painter" in the center of the left transept of the church of San Domenico. Below the frame, and probably not pertinent, is a sort of predella with three tondi representing St. Jerome, Christ in Pietà, and St. Leonard. Serafino Siepi writes, "Two small fluted columns enclose the painting of the Descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles, painted by Plautilla, a Dominican nun from Prato in Tuscany, ca. 1554; the altar was begun by Guglielmo Pontani and completed by his heirs" (Siepi, 1822, II: 516). The painting was not recorded by Giovanni Francesco Morelli, who instead describes the organ above (Morelli, 1683, 68).

27. It is important to remember that, after Plautilla's death, Serafino Razzi from San Domenico in Perugia mentions that his sister, the sculptress Suor Angèlica Razzi, who belonged to the same convent as Nelli, painted a *Madonna with Sleeping Child* for the Chapel of the Rosary in the Perugia church (see app. 3).

28. For the reference to the manuscript of Padre Modesto Biliotti ("adventus Spiritus Sancti figura Perusis in sede dominicana, sumptu Gullielmi Pintaci civis perusini iuris utriusque sui temporis consultjssimi collocata"), see Pierattini, 1938, 293.

29. Guglielmo Pontano supported the creation of the Tribunale della Ruota by Pope Clement VII; he was called by the University of Pisa in 1545 and made his will in 1550. See Vermiglioli, 1829, II: 244-46.

30. On the tomb, the recumbent form of Pontano is represented lying on some books: below, in its current, reconstructed appearance, is the inscription "d gvielmo pontano prob et ivr prvd precl quam an xlv su ... cv glor pvbl prof e vix an lxxvii mdlv." The sculpture, which is in terracotta, was wrongly attributed to a follower of Jacopo Sansovino (see Gurrieri, 1960, 18) and was recorded as such in a recent guide to

Perugia (Montella, ed., 1993, 144).

31. Born Ottavio. In that period the Church of San Domenico in Perugia was the center of study for the Dominicans in the Roman province. In 1551, the general charter met in Perugia and elected Timoteo Ricci Prior of the Convent. Alessi taught in Rome until 1550; see Di Agresti, 1964, and idem, ed., 1976, 160.

32. Idem, 1964.

33. Perhaps more information could be found in Alessi's *Trattato sui doni dello Spirito*, but it has not yet been traced. See Di Agresti, 1964, I: lvi.

3

PLAUTILLA NELLI'S ROLE IN GIORGIO VASARI'S
LIVES OF THE PAINTERS (1568)
 AND SERAFINO RAZZI'S
HISTORY OF ILLUSTRIOUS MEN (1596)*

SALLY QUINN

A GROWING BODY OF STUDIES ON THE DISCUSSION OF WOMEN ARTISTS IN Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1568) invariably argues that the author placed women in an alternate or oppositional relation to successful male artists.¹ Recent scholarship also focuses on the way in which the language itself reflects normative patriarchal assumptions regarding female nature.² Certainly, Vasari "framed" women artists through reference to their domestic and private virtues, physical beauty and delicacy, dilettantism, and the production of small-scale and intricate works of art. But scholars have not explored closely how the *Lives* also provide models for a positive conception of female artistic agency. For example, Vasari described women in the context of their desire for fame, determination to fulfill difficult tasks, gradual accumulation of technical skills, and the production of ambitious, often large-scale, works of art. To do this, I propose, Vasari represented women as responsive to major patterns in the text and also appropriated contemporary models from literary defenses of women. This literature—which includes the discussion of women within books on a variety of subjects—created a frame of reference for the conceptualization of the female artist in the *Lives*.³

Within this reading of the *Lives*, Plautilla Nelli emerges as a pivotal and instructive character.⁴ She provides an example of unfulfilled

potential against whom the exemplary artist, Sofonisba Anguissola, is plotted.⁵ Moreover, within what might be termed a mini-*Lives* within the *Lives*, these passages demonstrate key ideas related to Vasari's progressive model of artistic achievement reiterated throughout the text. This essay concludes with a brief analysis of the other major sixteenth-century source for the discussion of Nelli, Serafino Razzi's *History of Famous Men, in Preaching and Theology, in the Sacred Order of Preachers* (1596). Although the Dominican friar's description derives largely from Vasari, he created a new context and thus critical framework for the artist.

Vasari's *Lives* describes the ability of individual artists to resolve creative problems and to produce a distinctive *maniera* or style. The creation of good style depended on an artist's latent talent, the correct study after nature and great masters, and an ability to transcribe those forms in a discriminating and beautiful manner through drawing or *disegno*.⁶ Vasari's text also includes artists who do not follow an ideal artistic process and whose progress is seen to be thwarted by particular flaws, ranging from a vain character to a lack of adequate training. As noted by Patricia Rubin, "The superlative (as exemplified by Leonardo, Raphael, Michelangelo) depended upon the comparative; the deviant (as Piero di Cosimo) was referred to the norm."⁷ Women occupy both exemplary and non-exemplary positions in the 1568 text, but the negative definitions of female nature rarely establish these roles. Rather than being regarded as a necessary foil to the positive developmental model of the triumphant male, the success or failure of women artists is dependent on the individual's ability to comply with certain common standards.

In the first edition of Vasari's *Lives* (1550), the Bolognese sculptor Properzia de' Rossi was the only woman afforded significant analysis in her own life. At the end of this text, for the revised edition of the *Lives* (1568), Vasari added descriptions of other female artists: Plautilla Nelli, Lucrezia Quistelli della Mirandola, and Sofonisba Anguissola. Also, in the third part of the 1568 edition, within a section on Lombard painters, Vasari included further discussion of Anguissola and her sisters.⁸ These additions allow us to make comparative analyses and see the establishment of a clear female hierarchy. In making these changes, Vasari was not motivated by the desire for female artistic emancipation. Rather, the integration of women enabled him to increase the conceptual clarity of the *Lives*, even in relation to a sub-group—female artists—that was difficult to assimilate. Ideas which might appear to be mutually ex-

clusive—regarding the limitations and possibilities of female art practice—converge in several complex passages. These reflect the paradox implicit in Vasari's effort to integrate women into a history of masculine excellence.⁹

Plautilla Nelli is the first artist appended to de' Rossi's *Life*. From the opening passages it is clear that Nelli's progress will be understood in relation to a certain set of practices which facilitate artistic excellence. Familiar to Vasari's method is the discussion of the artist's tentative, initial efforts which foresee the development of more ambitious works: "[Nelli] began to draw and paint little by little, in imitation of great masters, until finally through much diligence she executed some works that have amazed the artists." Later in the text Vasari notes: "Because this revered and virtuous sister studied the art of miniatures before she began painting panels and works of importance, she also produced many truly beautiful small paintings." Thus, Nelli begins her artistic life by accumulating skills in drawing and painting, copying the forms of others, and producing works in the small format of the miniature. Vasari makes it clear that only when Nelli had accomplished a proficiency in this lesser genre did she move on to larger-scale works of greater complexity or "works of importance." The description of de' Rossi shares a similar internal logic in the movement from the creation of small-scale to larger-scale work. Vasari tells us that de' Rossi began her art practice by producing highly intricate carvings on peach-stones which encouraged her to vie for a part of the commission for the portal reliefs at San Petronio in Bologna. In order to demonstrate her talent to the wardens of the basilica she created a marble portrait of a nobleman to great acclaim. Finally, having won the commission, de' Rossi completed the emotionally charged marble relief of *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife* (1525-26). Such descriptive strategies situate Nelli and de' Rossi within a system of learning and an accumulation of skills in evidence throughout the *Lives*. The articulation of such processes clearly disrupts a normative understanding of female potential defined in terms of an inability to mature intellectually. In *La donna di corte* (1564) Lodovico Domenichi argues, for instance, that a woman is developmentally akin to a youth. But while a youth will grow and become a man, "the woman remains a youth all her life."¹⁰ Vasari's description of the variety of skills developed by these artists over determined time periods clearly offers a more flexible understanding of female capability.

Significantly, Vasari observes that Nelli had a varied art practice: she does both miniatures and large altarpieces. Vasari does not, however,

annotate in detail Nelli's small works, often private commissions, which were normally the sole province of the female artist. Rather, he stresses a hierarchy of form between "miniatures" and "panels and works of importance." Vasari lists Nelli's more significant commissions for a variety of convents and churches in and around Florence and underlines the large size of the majority of works cited. He mentions a large panel portraying the Madonna and Child with various saints in the Convent of Santa Lucia in Pistoia (app. 2, no. 24), a "large panel ... sent out [of Florence] by the Governor of the Hospital of Lemo" (app. 2, no. 3), and a large *Last Supper* (app. 2, no. 1; figs. 8-11) for the refectory of Santa Caterina. The two private commissions detailed are "a large painting of the Annunciation" for the wife of the Spaniard Signor Mondragone (app. 2, no. 23) and a similar work owned by Madonna Marietta de' Fedini (app. 2, no. 22). In this passage, Vasari emphasized the fact that Nelli was an active practitioner, working on large, ambitious paintings for a variety of patrons.

However, at the end of Nelli's description Vasari tempers his praise. He concedes that Nelli's best work was that which she "copied from others," and he cites a *Nativity* copied from Bronzino as evidence. Acquiring the ability to replicate the work of a great master was, of course, an important part of an artist's evolution towards the creation of works of originality. Vasari sees Nelli's progress as fixed at this imitative level. She was denied necessary tutelage in life drawing which would have allowed her to develop her skills in *disegno*, the foundation of an artist's training in sixteenth-century Italy.¹¹ Proficiency in *disegno* went beyond the mechanical imitation of form, being defined, rather, in relation to "the intellectual ability to perceive and the manual ability to transcribe the most beautiful parts of nature."¹² Without this facility, in Vasari's view of history, Nelli could not create her own pleasing style (*maniera*) and so contribute to the progressive movement of art.¹³ Most importantly, Vasari does not describe Nelli as intrinsically inferior to male artists or lacking in natural talent or inclination. Rather, he makes it clear that improvement would have been made had Nelli practiced drawing from life, and demonstrates this with the assertion that her rendition of women's heads (which she could study with greater ease) were significantly better than those of men. In the *Lives* both male and female artists displayed flaws which might curtail their development. Significantly, Nelli's impediment is related to a set of circumstances beyond her control, rather than the result of a character defect.¹⁴

The concepts and language in this passage relate directly to those

found in defenses of women also written in the mid-sixteenth century. In Giovanni Battista Possevino's *Dialogo dell'honore* (1553), characters discuss the virtues deemed appropriate for exhibition by women of noble status. One male speaker defines ideal feminine virtues as beauty, chastity, and charity, though he does not deny that women could possess intellectual excellence, and cites examples of famous women from ancient to modern times in fields as diverse as war and literature. Nonetheless, he argues that such virtues do not suit a woman's social role or comply with the opportunities available to her:

... one does not see so clearly the intellectual talents in women, [but] this is not, as you say, because of any natural impediment but the result of custom, and because they cannot frequent places of study and schools as men do and so they do not come to learn.¹⁵

This bears strong similarities to Vasari's assertion fifteen years later that Nelli "would have done marvelous things had she had the opportunity, as men do, to study and devote herself to drawing and portraying living and natural things." Both Vasari and Possevino suggest that it is the cultural condition of women, rather than any natural impediment, which makes the demonstration of wider talents so difficult. This approach is diametrically opposed to Domenichi's model previously noted, in which the inability of the female to display wider or more characteristically masculine talents is connected to a kind of biological stasis. Educated readers no doubt understood the topicality of Vasari's discourse. For them, the inclusion of female artists in the *Lives* would have become more comprehensible when framed within the familiar polemic on the limiting factors for the success of women.

Following Nelli's account, a very brief passage is dedicated to another Florentine artist, Lucrezia Quistelli della Mirandola. Interestingly, this artist is described as a student of Alessandro Allori who, Vasari recounts, was taught by Bronzino. Thus, while Nelli copies a Bronzino, Quistelli is far more fortuitously following the tradition of practicing after an illustrious master of Bronzino's lineage.¹⁶ There is scant information provided on Quistelli, although Vasari does underline her high social class, with mention of her father and husband, and commends her many praiseworthy paintings. Nevertheless, readers of the *Lives* do not find the familiar pattern whereby Nelli and Quistelli become acknowledged masters who take on students, or begin a tradition of their own, as they are not seen to have mastered the art of *disegno* or created

a distinctive style. The recognition they receive in Vasari's text follows a normative method by which comparable male artists are described. Vasari writes: "When our fellow artists try to do no more in their works than to imitate the style of their teacher or another man of excellence whose method of working pleases them ... with time and study they might make their works similar, but they can never attain perfection in their art with this alone."¹⁷ In reality, as we shall see in the analysis of Razzi's *History*, Nelli was an important teacher to the nuns of her convent and it seems highly unlikely that Vasari would have been unaware of this fact. But the integrity of Vasari's description of Nelli is dependent on the correlation between her inadequate training and subsequent inability to become a master or a standard for others.

After discussing Nelli and Quistelli, Vasari turns to Sofonisba Anguissola, whose qualities suggest a notable development in terms of both skill and available opportunities.¹⁸ He begins the account with an emphatic "but," and makes it very clear that Anguissola eclipses the diligent studies of Nelli and Quistelli:

But Sofonisba of Cremona, the daughter of Messer Amilcaro Anguisciuola, has laboured at the difficulties of design with greater study and better grace than any other woman of our time, and she has not only succeeded in drawing, colouring, and copying from nature, and in making excellent copies of works by other hands, but has also executed by herself alone some very choice and beautiful works of painting.¹⁹

The significance of this passage lies in the clear distinctions Vasari makes between the Cremonese noblewoman and the Florentine nun. While Nelli copies from nature and from the works of great masters with limited success, Anguissola goes far beyond mere imitation to complete "beautiful" paintings in an independent manner. By implication, she has mastered *disegno* with its attendant intellectual and technical challenges, and thus creates works of a high order. Though Vasari does not name Anguissola's teacher in this section of the *Lives*, she has clearly been afforded the opportunity for more rigorous training than Nelli and this has been vitally combined with the character trait of determination. Anguissola is able to demonstrate wider talents because, Vasari states, she "has laboured at the difficulties of design." Again this kind of descriptive formula for women can be aligned with literary defenses of women. In a poem published in 1550, Laura Terracina urges women to leave behind traditional female pursuits associated with "the

needle, the thread, the cloth" and to "take up the burden of study."²⁰ She laments the fact that "Not many women ... weary themselves with writing both night and day" and begs women not to cease in their intellectual efforts.²¹ Women, she argues, must approach their studies with "total diligence and constant attention" as a means of attaining glory.²² Anguissola's "[laboring] at the difficulties of design" also has a point of reference in the description of de' Rossi who Vasari notes has put her hand "to manual labours, braving the roughness of marble and the unkindly chisels."²³ Emphasis in both Terracina's call to arms and Vasari's prose is upon overcoming problems through significant mental and physical effort. There is a transgressive accent to the language used in both texts which goes beyond ideal prescriptions for the behavior of the noblewoman as found in courtesy manuals. Nelli, however, is denied this level of intensity. No matter how dedicated to the task, she can never overcome the inadequacy of her training, so emphasized in Vasari's description.

In the final section of this life of Anguissola, Vasari recalls that Tommaso Cavalieri made a gift to Duke Cosimo I de' Medici of a drawing by her that depicts a weeping boy. This sheet, Vasari suggests, was sent to the Duke together with another drawing: Michelangelo's *Cleopatra*. Correspondence from Cavalieri to Cosimo in 1562 indicates that, Michelangelo, having seen Anguissola's drawing of a smiling girl, requested that the artist attempt a weeping boy "as a subject more difficult to draw."²⁴ The resultant work is a portrait of the artist's brother, *Asdrubale Being Bitten by a Crayfish* (ca. 1554), which is described by Vasari in terms of its great qualities of naturalism. Here, Vasari sets up an emphatic hierarchy of female artistic achievement between Nelli and Anguissola. There is a significant conceptual and practical divide between Nelli's inability to copy the head of a male correctly because of a lack of access to life models and practice of *disegno*, and Anguissola's brilliance in tackling the subject of a highly animated boy's face in response to a request from Michelangelo. With a boy's head as subject, Anguissola is able to create a work which Vasari found "graceful" and "true to nature,"²⁵ or pertaining to those qualities found in the works of Vasari's modern artists of the third period. It is, in fact, implied that Anguissola has begun to form part of a masculine art-historical progression, being understood in the context of a Michelangelo drawing. Clearly, this does not imply that Anguissola has approximated Michelangelo's skill. Rather, her work is seen to display qualities which suggest a broad proximity to his talent. She teeters on the edge of that male space,

whilst still structurally held within a life devoted to a female artist.

The distinctions between Anguissola and Nelli are further reinforced in the description of Anguissola and her sisters in part three of the *Lives*, within a section entitled "Benvenuto Garofalo and Girolamo da Carpi, Painters of Ferrara, and other Lombards."²⁶ Here, Anguissola and her sisters are discussed beyond the confines of a life devoted to female artists and are, importantly, introduced (erroneously) as students of Giulio Campi.²⁷ Moreover, Vasari writes that the Anguissola sisters did "[Giulio] more honour than any of the rest" of his disciples.²⁸ Vasari suggests that these sisters form part of a competitive culture in contrast to Nelli's framing as a practitioner without a master or attachment to a school. Anguissola's paintings are then described in some detail, with Vasari giving extremely high praise to *The Chess Game* (1555), a portrait in which the characters are said to "have all the appearance of life, and are wanting in nothing save speech."²⁹ Vasari also offers an assessment of the talents of the Anguissola sisters, citing Lucia whose works are seen as "no less beautiful and precious than those of her sister [Sofonisba]";³⁰ Minerva, described as "distinguished in painting and in letters";³¹ Europa, who "is still a child in age" but "will be in no way inferior to Sofonisba and Lucia, her sisters"; and finally, Anna who "although but a little girl, is also giving her attention with much profit to design."³² Hence, each sister is understood in terms of an ascending level of success according to age and skill. Sofonisba Anguissola is at the summit, followed by Lucia, Minerva and Europa. Anna, given her youth and inexperience, trails at the end. The implication is that, ideally, each sister will progress toward the level of Sofonisba's artistic achievements. Vasari does not specify that Anguissola is a teacher to her sisters, but she undoubtedly represents an exemplary standard to be emulated. Clearly, the movement from the early studies of Anna to the mature works of Sofonisba parallels Vasari's notion of ideal artistic evolution and the need to learn from, and eventually surpass, one's elder or master. In his conclusion to the discussion of the Anguissola sisters, Vasari reinforces the notion that these women have the qualities required to play a positive role in this progressive history:

... so that I know not what to say save that it is necessary to have by nature an inclination for art, and then to add to that study and practice, as has been done by those four noble and gifted sisters, so much enamoured of every rare art, and in particular of the matters of design.³³

The Anguissola sisters work within conventions integral to the exposition of the basic tenets of the *Lives*. Equally, Nelli's description acts as a cautionary tale regarding the fundamental nature of a rigorous artistic training. In the text, Nelli, Quistelli, and Anguissola possess varying degrees of creative potential and opportunity, and they are placed in a lineage which highlights the way in which knowledge is accumulated and artistic progress made. This recognition of the different levels of competence in the work of women artists is significant, as it establishes that female artistic achievement might follow a logical process. For Anguissola, a formula for achievement prevails whereby a combination of latent talent, adequate training in *disegno*, and the character trait of determination, leads to the production of graceful or beautiful works. The additions to de' Rossi's life can be seen to work as a mini-*Lives* within the broader structure of the *Lives*, as imitation or copying (Nelli, Quistelli) is surpassed by life-like painting and mastery of *disegno* (Anguissola). Within this concentrated format, key concepts of the text are synthesized and, thus, reinforced. Such a clear exposition underlines the didactic intent of Vasari's prose.

An alternative literary source for the description of Plautilla Nelli can be found in the Dominican friar Serafino Razzi's *History* (1596), where a section is devoted to Nelli and other female artist-nuns in the convent of Santa Caterina da Siena in Florence.³⁴ These passages come toward the end of this lengthy history of illustrious Dominicans from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries and follows directly from a discussion of male artists of the order. Razzi contributes much new information regarding the lives and practices of a number of artist-nuns in the convent, while most of the material on Nelli is derived directly from Vasari. Razzi's reliance on Vasari as a source is also evident in the descriptions of the male Dominicans. He begins the preface to these lives with a discussion of the *paragone* based on Vasari's famous declaration that painting and sculpture are sisters born of the one father: *disegno*.³⁵ Razzi includes many details on these artists taken directly from the *Lives*, and on occasion he directs the reader to the text for more detailed analysis on particular subjects.³⁶ Serafino Razzi's familiarity with Vasari's passages on Dominican artists is no doubt connected to the involvement of his brother, Camaldolite monk and historian Silvano Razzi, in the project of the *Lives*.³⁷

Despite the similarities of the *History* and the *Lives* in relation to their description of Nelli, the intent of the respective authors is substantially different, as is the artist's subsequent critical framing. Razzi opens his

account of Nelli by praising "the goodness and purity of her life, uniquely characteristic of all the nuns of that convent," as well as her "genius above the ordinary in women," demonstrated through her achievements as an artist. Nelli is distinguished from other women through her painting but, simultaneously, is described in relation to private virtues common to all nuns. The creative lives of these women are set within a story of Dominican achievement and, as such, they are framed in terms of their contribution to the order, as both exemplary souls and productive artists. Nelli is, however, afforded the most fulsome and lengthy praise amongst women and is recognized as the group's standard or leader.

The differing context and purpose of the *History* means that, even when quoted verbatim, the meaning of Vasari's text often loses its original significance. Razzi, for instance, laments Nelli's "lack of formal instruction" and repeats Vasari's commentary on the matter:

And one must note that her best works are those she copied from others, as is manifestly apparent in a painting of the Nativity of Our Lord in the room of the Father Confessor of her convent, which was copied from one Bronzino painted for M. Filippo Salviati. The portraits of women in her works are better because she could study them at her leisure.

But Razzi omits the preceding lines from the source, that is: "she would have done marvelous things had she had the opportunity, as men do, to study and devote herself to drawing and portraying living and natural things." As discussed, this important passage in Vasari demonstrated Nelli's thwarted potential in relation to models of artistic progress. For Razzi, however, a lack of training does not hinder Nelli's position of importance within the hierarchy of her particular milieu. And significantly, Suor Prudenza Cambi, Suor Agata Trabalesi, and Suor Maria Ruggieri are named as Nelli's "disciples." The assertion that Nelli is a teacher who set the standard for other artists is perhaps the major point of difference between the texts. Vasari had framed Nelli as a nun working in a creatively isolated environment with no mention of interaction with fellow artists of the order or students.³⁸ Alternatively, Razzi creates the image of a very active artistic community over which Nelli presides. This is a positive validation of Nelli's central position in the convent's artistic life, but the assertion of "genius" and of her role as a mentor would be unintelligible in the context of the *Lives*. For Vasari, Nelli's lack of artistic training, and subsequent inability to create a distinctive *maniera*, precludes her from activity as a teacher.

In Razzi's text, Nelli is not party to the evaluative framework of the *Lives*, and therefore many of the patterns recognized in Vasari's description are omitted. Razzi, for instance, notes the miniatures created by Nelli and her prolific output in this genre, but these works are not, as they are in Vasari, read as part of a movement towards works of greater importance. Further, Razzi mentions a number of Nelli's major commissions but does not underline their great size as Vasari had done, so as to create a hierarchy of form and sense of developmental logic to Nelli's pursuits. Also, less works are detailed by Razzi than in the *Lives*, when the later date of the *History's* publication would indicate a great many more paintings might have been listed. More generally, a different criterion for praise exists within this convent environment as artistic achievement is judged according to the devotional value of objects. Razzi notes that Suor Dionisia Niccolini made "very pious" terracotta works in relief and "very devout" figures in terracotta, as did the author's sister, Suor Maria Angelica Razzi. Nelli's students Suor Prudenza, Suor Agata, and Suor Maria are praised for their work, but particular emphasis is placed upon their dedication to convent life: "[their paintings] helped support their convent: they did nothing else in their spare time, when they were not praying." Similarly, the author mentions a Suor Veronica who "with some others" painted "even though they were engaged in more serious work for their convent."

In Razzi's *History*, Nelli's commendation as a teacher and mentor emerges within the microcosm of the convent of Santa Caterina. Alternatively, Vasari sought a far wider context within which to investigate the lives and works of Anguissola and Nelli. Through a strategy of integration and by introducing alternative models for female behavior in the text, Vasari provided a new framework for the critical evaluation of women artists. Although Nelli's portrayal may be perceived as somewhat less flattering in Vasari's account, it is considerably more complex. In the *Lives*, Nelli provides a necessary corollary to the descriptions of other female artists, and makes possible Vasari's unusual and discriminating exposition of the creative potential and limitations of women within the text.

ENDNOTES

*My thanks to Richard Read of the University of Western Australia and to Jonathan Nelson.

1. For original text and translation for the discussions of Nelli by Vasari and Razzi, see app. 3. All other translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

2. On the gender-specific nature of Vasari's *Life* of Properzia de' Rossi, see Fortunati Pietrantonio, 1981, 168-70; Graziani, 1995, 129-33; Jacobs, 1993, 122-26; and, for the additions to the 1568 edition, McIver, 2005, 179-88. On the gendered language of art criticism, see Jacobs, 1997, and Sohm, 1995. A useful analysis of patriarchal definitions of women in the Renaissance can be found in Maclean, 1980.

3. On this literary genre, see Jordan, 1990. Rubin, 1995, 169, connects the opening of the *Life* of Properzia de' Rossi to treatises on famous women. Jacobs, 1994, 76, aligns sixteenth-century literature which defined the "ideal *gentildonna*" with Vasari's characterization of Sofonisba Anguissola. For a more general discussion of early modern treatises and the female artist, see Jacobs, 1997, 123-47, and Garrard, 1994, 568-70 and 578-79. For examples of early modern writing on female artists see the appendix in Jacobs, 1997, 169-82.

4. On the value of Vasari as a source for the life and works of Nelli, see Nelson, ed., 2000, especially Nelson's "Introduction," 4-7; Muzzi, 2000, 38-40; Murphy, 2000, 61-63; see also Muzzi and Faietti in this volume. See Jacobs, 1997, 111-21, for an analysis of Nelli and her work.

5. The idea that Anguissola is distinguished from other female artists in the *Lives* in terms of the quality of her work has been discussed in detail in Jacobs, 1994, 74-101, and eadem, 1997, 51-59 and 90. McIver, 2005, discusses the exemplary nature of Anguissola's position in relation to other women in the *Lives* and the convention of contrasting pairs of artists but her conclusions are somewhat different from those presented here.

6. See Rubin, 1995, 234-52.

7. Rubin, 1995, 23. She describes (23) a "normalizing or normative process" in which (22), "all artists were subsumed under a scheme of conventional causes and effects."

8. Specifically, Vasari mentioned Lucia, Europa, Minerva, and Anna Anguissola. Other female artists added to the 1568 edition, beyond the life of Properzia de' Rossi, are an unnamed daughter of Valerio Vicentino, Diana Mantovana, Barbara Longhi, Irene di Spilimbergo, and Flemish artists Susanna Horebout, Clara Skeysers, Anna Seghers, Levina Bening, and Catharina van Hemessen.

9. This study concentrates on those aspects of Vasari's *Lives* which served to integrate female art practice into established frameworks but does not deny Vasari's concurrent tendency to differentiate women in the text. For an analysis of both methodologies in the life of Properzia de' Rossi, see Quin, 2004, 5-54.

10. Domenichi, 1564, 3. For further discussion of the static biological model, see Angelozzi, 1974-75, 210-11.

11. Nelli did not, however, seem to lack high-quality drawings from which to copy. In his *Life* of Fra Bartolommeo, Vasari notes that, on the artist's death, his drawings came to be "in the possession of a nun who paints"; see Muzzi and Faietti in this volume.

12. Rubin, 1995, 236.

13. On these passages, see also Faietti, app. 1.

14. In contrast, in the *Life* directly following that of de' Rossi, Alfonso Lombardi is described as an artist who could not proceed in his practice because he lacked the requisite motivation and ambition to attempt more difficult tasks. See Vasari, 1996, I: 862.

15. Possevino, 1553, 220. Other editions of the text were published in 1563 and 1564.

16. See Muzzi in this volume for the concept of artistic dilettantism in the training of both Quistelli and Nelli and the suggestion that Allori's instruction was not intended to prepare Quistelli for professional practice.

17. Quoted in Rubin, 1995, 247.

18. Vasari's description of Anguissola's noble attributes is also a major

point of contrast with Nelli but is beyond the scope of the current study.

19. Vasari, 1996, I: 860.

20. Terracina, 1550, 49. In her poem, Terracina mentions Veronica Gambara, who is also cited by Vasari at the beginning of de' Rossi's life. Terracina, 59, praises Gambara as one of the few women who challenge men through her demonstration of literary skill.

21. Ibid. I thank Niall Atkinson for assistance in interpreting this passage.

22. Ibid.

23. Vasari, 1996, I: 857.

24. Jacobs, 1994, 95.

25. Vasari, 1996, I: 860.

26. Ibid., II: 466-68.

27. Anguissola trained with Bernardino Campi and Bernardino Gatti, see Perlingieri, 1992, 35-55.

28. Vasari, 1996, II: 466. In this section, Vasari notes that Giulio Campi also taught his brothers Antonio and Vincenzio, as well as Lattanzio Gambara. Vincenzio, 466, is described as "a young man of excellent promise," and Lattanzio, 470, as "the best painter that there is in Brescia."

29. Ibid., 466. On the distinctive lifelike qualities ascribed by Vasari to Anguissola's work, see the following: Jacobs, 1994, 77-78, 83, 94-95; eadem, 1997, 51-59 and 90; and Garrard, 1994, 556-58. For detailed analysis of *The Chess Game*, see *ibid.*, 597-604.

30. Vasari, 1996, II: 468.

31. Ibid., 466.

32. Ibid., 468.

33. Ibid.

34. On the activities of these artist-nuns of Santa Caterina, see Turrill in this volume.

35. See Razzi, 1596, 349. Vasari's authorship of the preface of the entire work in which the *paragone* debate is discussed has been challenged

in recent years. See Frangenberg, 2002, 253-54, for the suggestion that Cosimo Bartoli is the author of the *paragone* discussion in the preface. On issues of authorship of various parts of the *Lives*, see Hope, 1995, and Frangenberg, 2002.

36. See the descriptions of Fra Angelico, 354; Girolamo Lombardo, 356; and Fra Giocondo, 357.

37. Serafino Razzi stated that Silvano was responsible for much of the content of the *Lives*. See Davis, 1995, 132-33, and Rubin, 1995, 219. Rubin suggests that Silvano's role in the *Lives* was, rather, related to "seeing the book through the press and possibly assisting with preparing the copy." It does seem probable that Silvano Razzi also supplied certain information on the lives of Dominican artists to Vasari, including that of Plautilla Nelli, although such a contribution is not mentioned in this section of the *History*. Thomas Frangenberg observes that Giovanni Bottari, in his edition of the *Vite* (1759-60), states that Silvano Razzi had a hand in the lives of two Dominican artists, Fra Bartolommeo and Fra Angelico; "Bottari's Edition of the *Vite* (1759-60)," paper delivered February 17, 2008, at the conference "Le Vite di Vasari: Genesi-Topoi-Ricezione," Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz. For Razzi and Nelli see Murphy, 2000, 63, and Turrill, 2000, 95-96, who notes that "Don Silvano probably provided Vasari with at least some of the new material for the second edition his *Vite*."

38. Vasari only hints at interaction with other artists in his mention of Nelli's inheritance of Fra Bartolommeo's drawings. See note 11 above.

THE HISTORY, SOURCES, AND RESTORATION OF PLAUTILLA NELLI'S *LAMENTATION**

MAGNOLIA SCUDIERI

THIS ESSAY ADDRESSES THE HISTORY OF PLAUTILLA NELLI'S *LAMENTATION* (app. 2, no. 1, figs. 1-4), its visual sources, and the results of the recent restoration.¹ The specific date of the painting is unknown, but, if, as seems likely, it was one of the two panels "by her hand" as stated by Giorgio Vasari in the second edition of his *Lives*, it was in the church of the Convent of Santa Caterina, on Piazza San Marco in Florence, by 1568.² This is one of the few paintings by Plautilla that can be identified with certainty, thanks to Giuseppe Richa.³ In his description of the church, published in 1759, Richa specified three altars and the subjects of the paintings that adorned them. Thus, the *Lamentation* must be the panel he described as on the right altar. Its continued presence in the church was recorded by Luigi Lanzi, in 1795.⁴ The convent was suppressed in 1812, and became part of the Academy of Fine Arts.⁵ Soon after, in 1817, the *Lamentation* was listed among the works exhibited in the Gallery of the Accademia,⁶ and it now hangs in the refectory of the Museum of San Marco.

The first critical observations on the painting were made by Lanzi, who, while classifying Suor Plautilla as "a follower of Fra Bartolommeo," claims that the source of this painting was Andrea del Sarto's *Lamentation* (fig. 30), and that Nelli even copied Sarto's composition. Vincenzo Marchese, who considers this Nelli's best painting, emphasizes how much she was inspired by Perugino's *Lamentation* (fig. 29).⁷ Both opinions contain elements of truth: one can see that Nelli's painting references both depictions of the *Lamentation*, now in the Palatine

Gallery, by Sarto and Perugino, even though neither of these can be seen as the stylistic or iconographic model. Comparing the three works and considering the obvious similarities between them, one sees that these are more iconographic and compositional than stylistic. In the landscape, the rocky hills recall those in Sarto's painting; the turreted city rendered in detail harks back to Perugino's. Among the figures, the arm of Jesus is limp, as in Sarto, and Mary's pose, with her head in profile and covered by a white veil, follows the example of Perugino. These comparisons indicate not only Nelli's sources, but also the accuracy of Vasari's observations: "She began to draw and paint little by little, in imitation of great masters, until finally through much diligence she executed some works that have amazed the artists" and again, "... the best works by her hand are those she copied from others."⁸ In fact, Plautilla's *Lamentation* seems to be a reworking of ideas and visual expressions taken from celebrated exemplars which—despite the limitations of her life as a nun—she seems to have known.

The most striking point of reference for Nelli's altarpiece, at least for the iconography and composition, is Fra Bartolommeo's *Lamentation* (fig. 31). This was painted in 1511-12 for the church of the Convent of San Gallo and soon after, when the church was demolished before the siege of Florence in 1529, transferred to the church of Sant'Iacopo tra i Fossi.⁹ Fra Bartolommeo's *Lamentation* was copied with variations by Andrea del Sarto, Fra Paolino, Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio, and other later artists. Nelli, like Fra Bartolommeo, created the scene by showing the body of Jesus laid on a stone on the ground, with Saint John holding the body, Mary Magdalene embracing the feet, and the Madonna kneeling on the ground nearby. Beside the Virgin, Nelli has added two pious women. Standing behind this group, and between the two male figures wearing yellow—in the same attitudes and dress as Peter and Paul in Fra Bartolommeo's painting¹⁰—Nelli has inserted a third, in the dress of a nobleman (fig. 3).

Though this man is difficult to identify, the only possible hypothesis is that Nelli wanted to depict Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea. In the iconographic tradition of the *Lamentation*, these are the only figures that carry the body of Christ to the tomb.¹¹ Despite his central position in Nelli's painting, he does not seem emotionally involved in the drama that is unfolding before him. His presence and the richness of his clothing suggest that he may, in fact, be a portrait of the patron or a benefactor of the Church. Certainly, the viewer's attention is drawn to the highly detailed depiction of the eastern headgear. This figure bears

a striking similarity to the corresponding figure in a fascinating but hitherto unpublished and virtually unknown mural also depicting the Lamentation (fig. 36). This monochrome work, carried out in a dry angular style, appears on the ceiling of the room which originally served as the hospice in the convent of San Marco, next door to Nelli's own convent.¹² The pose, gestures, robes, and headgear of the figure of Nicodemus (or Joseph of Arimathea) in both paintings strongly indicate a close relationship between them. Perhaps one derives from the other or both from a common source, such as a northern European engraving. The headgear in particular seems to reflect Nelli's familiarity with the art of northern Europe.

Two of the Dominican friars who lived and worked at the convent of San Marco, Girolamo Savonarola and Fra Bartolommeo, were Nelli's revered models in life and art. Her close ties with the convent can also be seen from her detailed knowledge of the older artist's drawings. The similarities between the figures in Nelli's *Lamentation* and some of Fra Bartolommeo's sketches are so precise that we must assume that Nelli had constant access to them. This confirms Vasari's assertion that in 1568 most of Fra Bartolommeo's drawings were with Suor Plautilla in the Convent of Santa Caterina.¹³ They probably arrived there after the death, in 1547, of Fra Paolino, who had inherited them on the death of Fra Bartolommeo in 1517.¹⁴

The most significant similarity is that between the figures of Jesus in Nelli's *Lamentation* and Fra Bartolommeo's *Study of Christ for a Pietà* (fig. 32).¹⁵ Presumably this drawing was a preparation for the Pitti *Lamentation* or for another earlier painting, now lost, on the same subject. She copied the position of Christ's hand very closely from the drawing, although Fra Bartolommeo had modified it in the Pitti *Lamentation*. Her Mary Magdalene is strikingly similar to that in one of his *Lamentation* drawings, although all the other components are completely different.¹⁶ Nelli's Virgin Mary is based on two other drawings by Fra Bartolommeo: *Mantled Kneeling Female Figure* (fig. 33)¹⁷ and *Head and Shoulders of a Veiled Woman in Profile*.¹⁸ The figure of the saint in the yellow mantle derives from a study of a *Mantled Male Figure Weeping* (fig. 34),¹⁹ and Nelli's Saint John is taken from his *Draped Kneeling Youth* (fig. 35).²⁰ Although these references are faithful to Fra Bartolommeo's originals, Nelli does not seem merely to have enlarged and transferred the figures from the older drawings to her panel: an IRR analysis of the drawing beneath the layers of paint reveals that Nelli made free-hand changes, or *pentimenti*, to the drawing on her panel (figs. 6-7).²¹ The

relationship with Fra Bartolommeo ends here, in models freely used by Nelli in the drawing of single principal figures. Although it is likely that Suor Plautilla executed her painting with Fra Bartolommeo's *Lamentation* in mind, she seems to have expanded upon it with the addition of other figures.²² But that is not all.

Nelli's background is inspired by another source. Dramatic rock formations reminiscent of Golgotha, fortified villages, and, on the horizon, a great turreted city (is this the earthly or the heavenly Jerusalem?), remind us of the background in Perugino's *Lamentation* of 1495 (fig. 29). This work, painted for the nuns of the Convent of Santa Chiara, is thought to have been a model for Fra Bartolommeo's painting. Although Perugino's landscape is delicate and pleasing, it does not manage to create the effect of a real background, because of the lack of perspective depth and right proportions with the foreground figures; rather, it looks like a theatrical backdrop before which the sacred scene is unfolding. It seems that Nelli wanted to use this theatrical quality in her own painting. She achieved it by enlarging the figures in the foreground and giving them bold, frozen gestures, thus creating an effect very different from the concentrated theological message expressed by Fra Bartolommeo. Nelli's familiarity with prototypes of the quality of those mentioned so far was not, however, sufficient to make her painting comparable to theirs; it remains at the level of good craftsmanship using eclectic sources. Stylistically, she did not manage to learn anything from Fra Bartolommeo beyond suggestions provided by drawings or sketches; she seems entrenched in the late fifteenth-century tradition, clinging to the severely academic methods of Giovanni Antonio Sogliani.

The best quality of Suor Plautilla's painting is the expressive intensity of some of the figures, which makes one forget her inaccuracies of perspective and anatomy. The recent restoration has revealed the original brilliance of the palette and its chromatic transparency; it has brought to light the devotion and rapture of the artist in super-realistic details. For example, the eyes and noses of the pious women are reddened from weeping; this vividly expresses their emotional state and makes them the most striking figures in Plautilla's painting. The verisimilitude of their faces, robes, and veils—the most finely executed parts of the painting—suggest not only the use of real models for the pious women, as Vasari observed, but also that they can be identified with Plautilla herself and a few of her sisters, perhaps those who followed her example of uniting art and devotion.

Translated from the Italian by Dorothea Barrett

ENDNOTES

*The restoration of this panel and related technical analyses were completed thanks to the generous support of the Florence Committee of The National Museum of Women in the Arts and of Jane Fortune.

1. For the restoration report, see the following essay in this volume.
2. See Vasari, app. 3. Vasari does not explicitly cite this painting, while he makes a particularly flattering comment about the other, an *Adoration of the Magi*, the traditional identification of which with a painting in the National Gallery in Parma has been recently put in doubt by Andrea Muzzi: see idem in D'Afflitto, Falletti, and Muzzi, ed., 1996, 262, n. 87; idem, 2000, 36-37; and app. 2, no. 49.
3. Richa, 1759, VIII: 283.
4. Del Migliore, 1684, 207; Lanzi, 1795, I: 139.
5. Gaetano Milanesi in Vasari, 1879, IV: 195, n. 1. In another passage (Vasari, 1880, V: 79, n. 6), Milanesi specifies that the convent belonged to the Academy until 1853 and that in that year it would transformed into a police barracks. On the early history of the convent, see the essays by Turrill and Muzzi in this volume.
6. Colzi, 1817, 42, n. 60.
7. Marchese, 1854, II: 264.
8. See Vasari, app. 3.
9. For the altarpiece, now in the Palatine Gallery, see Ciatti and Padovani, ed., 1988, and Padovani in Ciatti and Padovani, ed., 2003, I: 66, n. 78.
10. In Nelli's painting, the old man crying cannot be identified with certainty as Saint Peter because he does not have the usual attribute of the keys.
11. Representations of this apocryphal episode, which occurs between the deposition and the burial, begin to appear in western art in the

twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The many variations and dramatic accentuations were stimulated by some literary sources and sacred representations of the Passion. On the iconography of the *Lamentation*, see Fischer, 1986, 19-20.

12. The Sala dell'Ospizio now hosts the altarpieces of Fra Angelico in the Museum of San Marco. The unpublished *Lamentation* on the ceiling, evidently not even cited in the art historical literature, is here reproduced for the first time.

13. See Vasari, app. 3, and the discussion by Faietti in app. 1.

14. See Marchese, 1854, II: 264; Muzzi, 2000, 35-36; and Muzzi in this volume.

15. See Petrioli Tofani, 1991, I: 158-59; Fischer, 1986, 118-19, no. 67. (GDSU, 362 F).

16. Fischer, 1986, 61-62, no. 22 (GDSU, 468 E).

17. Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, M 106.

18. Forlani Tempesti, 1988, 38 (Oxford, Christ Church Library, n. 0027).

19. Eadem, 43 (Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, M 134).

20. Eadem, 40 (Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, M 109).

21. For a detailed explanation of IRR, see the restoration report.

22. See Muzzi in Padovani, ed., 1996, 262, cat. no. 87, and his essay in this volume.

5

THE RESTORATION REPORT OF PLAUTILLA NELLI'S *LAMENTATION*

ROSSELLA LARI AND MAGNOLIA SCUDIERI

Construction Technique and Conditions

The Support

The reverse side of the panel provides an interesting document attesting to the general construction techniques employed in large wood-panel paintings. The panel is constructed from seven poplar planks of varying widths and thicknesses. Two original dovetailed conifer battens hold them together. Some of the wooden members have different marks cut into the wood that appear to be construction markings made by the woodworker who chose and prepared the planks: two of the planks have a double "S" cut into the wood; a spiral whirl is carved into a third plank; and a pineapple shape is carved into yet another. Ground preparation layers on wood panels were not applied by the painter but by a woodworker.

The support also reveals the particular way in which the woodworker prepared the housings for the battens. He evened out the thickest planks, so that he could insert and slide the battens into the tracks, which were cut into the panel in a dovetailed section. The back of the panel also has numerous flight holes left by wood-boring insects. Another interesting aspect of the original craftsmanship is that the wood appears to be evened out using an axe and a saw, which have left a series of slight curls on the surface. The different thicknesses of the planks are also visibly evident, and over time this unevenness has contributed to the formation of dark stains from moisture.

The structure contains traces of several moments in the panel's history. For example, two lateral channels cut in the thickness of the panel about halfway up each side, each with two holes. The presence of these housings may indicate that the panel was originally anchored directly to the wall.

Despite its large size, the support appears to be in relatively good condition, with very few modifications made over time. Nonetheless, there are seven wood reinforcement pieces, called "butterflies," inserted into the panel, bridging the joints at the upper and lower sections of the planks. These inserts were added to reinforce the joints and the splits in the wood members, and they are evidence of an attempt to block movements at the extremities of the panel. The wooden butterfly inserts date from a restoration treatment made during the late 1800s or the first half of the 1900s.

The Pictorial Surface

The pictorial surface was obfuscated by yellowed varnish and the colors lacked intensity and transparency. There was also an accumulation of dirt and altered animal glue on the surface, contributing to an overall grayish tonality. This surface glue was applied during previous restoration treatments in an attempt to revitalize and consolidate the painted surface. In the areas of sky and landscape on the upper portion of the panel, the color was thin and abraded, unevenly exposing the ground layers. This situation was the result of both the natural aging of the original materials and various aggressive cleaning treatments carried out in the past. The thinner areas of color, especially the greens and browns in the landscape, are due to the use of more fluid colors, perhaps used to obtain transparency.

There is cupping and slippage in most of the dark colors, as well as very minute areas of paint loss. Over time, these losses were repeatedly reintegrated using a variety of different colors and methods. This may be a sign that paint loss began quite early in the life of the work. It was most likely the result of the aging behavior of some of the materials, their varying proportions, and the painting techniques employed. In the laboratory, close observation under raking light reveals the precise areas of cracking and slippage in the pictorial layers, which take on different characteristics from color to color (fig. 5). On the face of the pious woman, the surface was particularly uneven in appearance, resulting in

a series of transversal striations caused by an underlying layer of color. We can surmise that the ground preparation layers, made of gypsum and animal glue, did not receive the same careful smoothing and leveling that is usually part of proper preparatory technique, and striations left from the brushstrokes contributed to the surface irregularities.

These observations were all made by direct analyses, which were later confirmed and expanded upon using IRR.

A Note on Infrared Reflectography

IRR is a diagnostic technique capable of providing information on both the construction techniques and the conditions of a painting. It has been used for decades as a non-invasive investigative tool for seeing images hidden underneath pictorial layers. This is possible due to the partial transparency of some painting materials in infrared radiations. If the ground below the paint layers is highly reflective under infrared wavelengths, as is the case for gypsum and animal glue, we can obtain a reflectogram of the painting showing the image backlit by the preparation when the infrared waves are reflected back towards us through the paint layers.

The ability to see the preparatory underdrawing in the painting is one of the most important aspects of this investigative technique. The reflectographic image can vary based on the thickness and type of pigments in the paint layer, the amount of contrast between the radiation reflected by the ground and what is absorbed by the drawing itself, and the technique and materials used in the underdrawing. The response is particularly effective when charcoal or graphite is used in the underdrawing, because they absorb infrared wavelengths. Reflectography can also be used to reveal the existence of any painted areas underneath the outermost layers resulting from modifications made by the artist (known as *pentimenti*), or any paint layers subsequently added over the original paint layer. Differences in the transparency of each pigment make it possible to see paint underneath exterior layers because of the incident radiations reflected back out by the ground. In about 1990, high-resolution IRR was developed by the INOA in Florence. This technique uses a scanning device for capturing the infrared images. Recent research conducted by the INOA in conjunction with the Opificio delle Pietre Dure in Florence, resulted in new instrumentation capable of simultaneously acquiring high-resolution reflectograms and color images of the paint-

ing. These can be overlaid on one another, allowing for a more exact, accurate interpretation of the images.

The reflectographic analyses using the INOA scanner made on Nelli's painting make it possible to see the underdrawing as well as to identify many characteristics of her painting technique. The underdrawing appears to be made with charcoal, and we can recognize some of the changes made by the artist during the painting phase. We observe that the city on the hillside to the right was originally conceived and painted higher up in the scene, as it appears in the preparatory drawing (fig. 6). Additionally, there are visible changes made to the figures. It is evident that the forehead and nose in Christ's profile were modified, and even greater changes were made to the female figure behind St. John. In the original underdrawing, the Virgin's head was lower and slightly rotated, a change clearly seen in the drawing of the eyes, the nose and the mouth. Even the profile of the Virgin's nose appears to have been altered (fig. 7).

Reflectography also helps in identifying the artist's painting procedure. The anatomical outline of Christ's abdomen and legs is clearly evident underneath the folds of the loincloth and behind Mary Magdalene's hand. Along Christ's hip, we can perceive the outline of the original version of the drapery. Reflectography also evidences the striations left from the unorthodox leveling of the gypsum ground. Using reflectographic analysis, the color slippage, the thinning, the losses, the repainting, and the strength and size of the brushstrokes are more clearly visible.

Restoration Treatment

The Support

Work on the panel began by disinfesting the wood using the Velox system. The painting was placed in a sort of sealed plastic "bubble" containing an oxygen level that did not exceed 0.2%, a level too low to sustain the wood-boring insects infesting the panel. Using this method, we were able to disinfest the wood without resorting to the use of toxic gases associated with most insecticides. After the painting was sealed in the "bubble" for a month, (the estimated time necessary to exterminate the insects and microorganisms), various applications of Permethar® were brushed onto the back and sides of the panel, finishing the

treatment and helping to reduce the risk of new infestations in the near future.

Pictorial Layers

The precarious conditions of the paint layers, described above, necessitated cleaning the painted surface by a process that could be adapted to the different conditions or artistic techniques. The surface layer of dirt consisted primarily of animal glue that had altered over time and deposits of atmospheric particulate embedded within the glue. Each area of the painting had different types of deposited dirt, resulting in different chromatic effects on the colors. This deposit layer was cleaned using a compound made with a traditional wax emulsion base combined with potassium cocoyl-hydrolyzed collagen, triethanolamine, and ethyl alcohol. The treated area was rinsed with ligroin to remove the residues. In the areas where there was shrinkage in the paint accompanied by flaking, it was necessary to limit the application of the emulsion to the flakes themselves, avoiding the bare areas. In the areas where the paint was thin and the ground was visible, the emulsion was quickly applied, removed and repeated as necessary.

On some of the colors, such as the greens and yellows, the layer of animal glue had to be thinned out. The cleaning procedure on the other colors was more even and homogeneous, and the level of cleaning was varied, based on the requirements of each pigment. In order for the tonalities to emerge, it was necessary to be a little more insistent on the blue pigments. By reducing the thickness of the glue layer, a proper chromatic balance was achieved for the flesh tones, the whites and the light blue in the sky.

In addition to recovering greater color transparency and saturation, it was important to rebalance the chromatic relationships consistent with the gradual spacing of the figures in the landscape. For this reason the cleaning operation did not completely remove all the old layers of animal glue, but simply altered their thickness and transparency.

The insect flight holes and other small losses were filled with a mixture of gypsum and animal glue. Watercolors were used for the pictorial integration, and the color matching was completed using varnish colors. Mastic resin dissolved in turpentine was manually brushed on in two coats as protective layers. During the varnishing, it was important to maintain the original appearance of lean oil while still saturating the

colors enough to resonate and balance with each other. To some extent, varnish can resolve flatness in the colors, making the differences in reflectance more homogeneous. This was also achieved with a final spray-applied varnish coat.

Frame

In addition to numerous flight holes made by wood-boring insects, the wood frame had nail holes, scratches, and stains. In the lower portion, part of the gold leaf was abraded; the various materials that had been used to hide this damage had darkened. On the upper portion of the frame, under a thick layer of dirt, repainting covered an area that had never been gilded. The old blackened layers of overpainting were removed using acetone in solvent gel, rinsing with ligroin. This process was repeated various times until the original layer of gold was exposed. The losses and the holes were filled, and the pictorial integration done with watercolors.

Restorer: Rossella Lari

Director of Restoration: Magnolia Scudieri

Scientific Investigations: INOA, Florence

Disinfestations: Resource Group Integrator

Translated from the Italian by Joan Reifsnnyder

6

THE DOMINICAN AUDIENCE
OF PLAUTILLA NELLI'S *LAST SUPPER**

ANN ROBERTS

TOGETHER WITH THE *LAMENTATION*, THE *LAST SUPPER* SIGNED BY PLAUTILLA Nelli (app. 2, no. 2; figs. 8-11) is probably the most familiar of the few works that survive from her hand. Until the nineteenth century, it was displayed in the houses of Dominican religious—first the convent of Santa Caterina da Siena, then the friary of Santa Maria Novella. It was therefore discussed by Florentine and Dominican historians, such as Giuseppe Richa in the eighteenth century and Vincenzo Marchese in the nineteenth.¹ Their comments are based on those of Giorgio Vasari, who saw the work in the refectory of Santa Caterina in time to include it in his second edition of the *Lives*.² Writing about the picture in the context of a chapter about women artists, Vasari provides the only firm indication of the date of the *Last Supper* (before 1568, the year the *Lives* were published). He also tells us that the picture was hung in the convent's refectory, the room in which the community of nuns gathered at least twice a day to eat. This essay will explore how Nelli's image reflects Dominican practice, liturgy and spirituality, in particular among the Dominican women who were the principal audience of the painting.

The Community at Santa Caterina

The convent of Santa Caterina da Siena was built beginning in 1500 to house a community of Dominican tertiaries who were dedicated fol-

lowers of the fiery preacher, Girolamo Savonarola.³ The community's home was very near the Dominican friary of San Marco, where Savonarola had been prior between 1491 and 1498. The friars of San Marco provided spiritual direction for the women of Santa Caterina and helped to shape their mode of life. Although Savonarola was executed in 1498 and his followers persecuted, the women of Santa Caterina venerated him as a martyr. The community preserved relics, celebrated liturgical offices, and sang hymns (*laude*) for Savonarola and his companions in martyrdom throughout the sixteenth century.⁴ The nuns were committed to Savonarola's ideals of simplicity and apostolic community, a commitment that led to many interactions with other disciples of Savonarola, such as the school of painters that survived at San Marco.⁵ Suor Plautilla's own devotion to Savonarola had even closer connections; her sister Petronilla, also a nun at Santa Caterina, had copied a biography of the friar, which Plautilla inherited when her sister died.⁶

By 1509, the community of Santa Caterina da Siena had been approved for life as Regular Tertiaries, that is, third order Dominicans who followed a rule. As such, the women followed many of the elements of life that pertained to second order nuns, except that that cloister or enclosure (*clausura*) was not imposed on their community until 1575.⁷ Their manner of life was prescribed for them in the *Directives* composed by one of the friars at San Marco, Roberto Ubaldini.⁸ Thus the women took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, but unlike enclosed nuns, they were able when necessary to leave their community and interact with seculars. These factors allowed the community to grow to 133 members by 1562. The women of the community worked in a variety of art forms to support their convent.⁹

Despite its dedication to poverty and simplicity, by the 1560s the convent had been adorned with numerous works of art by Suor Plautilla. Vasari's brief biography of Nelli mentions her paintings throughout the convent.¹⁰ The nuns must have felt that paying for works of art was an appropriate use of communal resources, as many Florentine convents had done before them.¹¹ Most of the women at Santa Caterina came from well-off merchants' families, and as the community grew it attracted donations from other elite families. The expensive bowls of Chinese porcelain on the table that Suor Plautilla sets for the *Last Supper* indicate the economic level of these women. These Chinese basins (*catini*) are portrayed with "noteworthy precision,"¹² probably indicating the artist's careful study of models to which she had access. Furthermore, Nelli's picture has the horizontal format of a painting for

the *spalliera*, or wall panel, itself another contemporary taste among Florentine elites.¹³ Significantly, most earlier images of the Last Supper were done in fresco. That Nelli worked in oil on canvas is a function of her gender, as it was difficult for women to learn the fresco technique. Vasari himself considered fresco painting strictly a man's job.¹⁴

The secular authorities closed the convent of Santa Caterina in the early nineteenth century and reconfigured its buildings for other uses, so the room for which this image was made does not survive. A plan made at the beginning of the nineteenth century offers evidence that the refectory was situated just off the main cloister, as would have been normal practice.¹⁵ As in other convents, the refectory was a long rectangular room. Seating for the community was normally at tables set along the walls, with diners seated at one side, for ease of serving.

Almost two meters wide, Suor Plautilla's *Last Supper* probably hung above the head table, placed at the short end of the rectangle.¹⁶ As Priorress, Nelli would have sat beneath her picture at the head table. The inscription on the painting (fig. 11), in the second person plural, exhorts the nuns to "pray for the painter."¹⁷ She addressed the inscription and the painting to her sisters.

In choosing the theme of the Last Supper for her convent's refectory, Suor Plautilla followed a well established tradition, especially in Florence.¹⁸ Such images represent the events of Holy Thursday, recounted in all four gospels, when Christ and his twelve apostles gather for Passover. Breaking bread and holding a cup of wine, Christ tells the men to eat and drink in his memory, thereby instituting the Eucharist as a sacrament. At the same meal, Christ warns his followers that one of them will betray him: the apostle to whom he hands a morsel of bread. Judas Iscariot is mentioned by name in the gospels of Matthew and John, and in the pictorial tradition, he is usually depicted with a purse to signal his identity. The *Last Supper*, then, portrays the final gathering of the apostles and Christ and the start of his Passion. Many communities of religious—both men and women—commissioned images of Christ dining with his apostles for the room in which they themselves gathered to dine.¹⁹

Nelli's painting sets the Last Supper at a long horizontal table covered by a beautifully depicted linen cloth. The setting for the event, which is so important in many other representations of the *Last Supper*, is less important to her. Her painting has only the bare indication of paneling behind the figures. The white tablecloth on the table draws the eye to the figures sitting behind it, and isolates the figure sitting before it.

Dominican Traditions in Representations of the Last Supper

Though most religious communities in Florence preferred the Last Supper to be depicted in their refectories, the Dominican Order fostered a variety of subjects for paintings in their dining chambers.²⁰ Often these concerned the miraculous provision of food. For example, the friars of Santa Maria Novella in Florence had an *Enthroned Madonna with Dominican Saints* in their fourteenth-century refectory; this image was enframed in the sixteenth century with a fresco of the *Gathering of Manna*.²¹ Many Dominican communities adorned their refectories with images of the Crucifixion, as their customs required them to venerate a Crucifix as they processed into the refectory.²² Among the Dominican friaries that made this choice for their refectories are San Domenico of Fiesole, San Marco of Florence, and Santa Caterina of Pisa.²³ This was also the choice of the community of enclosed (second order) Dominican nuns at San Domenico in Pisa. These women commissioned Benozzo Gozzoli and his shop to paint a fresco of the *Crucifixion with Dominican Saints* around 1490. In this fresco, Dominican saints (Dominic, Peter Martyr, Catherine of Siena) are joined by the nuns themselves at the foot of the cross.²⁴

The other theme Dominicans chose for their refectories was the Miracle of the Dominican Providence. This is an episode from the life of Saint Dominic that takes place in a refectory. While in Rome, Dominic found that the friars of his newly established community had nothing for dinner. He called on them to gather as usual at their table anyway; miraculously, two angels appeared with bread for their meal. This is the theme the friars of San Marco commissioned Giovanni Antonio Sogliani to paint for their refectory in the 1530s (fig. 47), but many other Dominican houses had images of the same subject, among them San Niccolò of Prato, San Domenico of Bologna, and San Sisto of Rome.²⁵ Sogliani arranged the friars around a table the way the apostles are gathered around the table in most representations of the Last Supper. Dominic sits at the center of this gathering as a figure for Christ. This symbolism is underscored by the painting within the painting of the Crucifix above his head.

The most familiar of all Dominican refectory paintings, Leonardo's *Last Supper* in the Dominican convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan, profoundly impacted the way the theme was depicted in the sixteenth century and later.²⁶ The prestige of Leonardo's composition, widely available in prints (fig. 43) and painted copies, may have en-

couraged more Dominican communities, such as Santa Maria del Sasso in Bibbiena, to adopt this theme for their refectories.²⁷

Nelli's *Last Supper* and its Sources

Suor Plautilla's image for her own refectory reflects her adherence to the Florentine tradition of Last Supper images. She likely knew Leonardo's composition through the many prints and other copies that circulated in the sixteenth century, although her choices for the theme differ from his. Like Leonardo's, her image sets Christ at the center of a long rectangular table and makes him the focus of the composition. Some of her figures, like the apostle with the upraised hands and even Christ himself, may derive from Leonardo's image. But Nelli's composition does not adapt the tight groupings of Leonardo's painting, nor is she interested in the complex spatial setting that distinguishes Leonardo's work. She probably also knew the design for the *Last Supper* by Raphael, which circulated in engravings, such as the one by Marcantonio Raimondi (fig. 44).²⁸ Her painting arranges the men at the table in looser groups and places the two men at the end of the table as in Raphael's composition. She also adopts some of the gestures of Raphael's figures, like the hands lifted in prayer of the figure next to John and the clasped hands of man at the right. The identities of the apostles, controversial in Leonardo's painting, are also unclear for most of the figures in Nelli's picture, where the only apostles whose identities are certain are Peter, John, and Judas, the men nearest Christ.

Vasari informs us that Suor Plautilla owned drawings by the painter Fra Bartolommeo of San Marco.²⁹ Yet the only surviving drawing of the *Last Supper* by Fra Bartolommeo, now in Rotterdam, differs considerably from Nelli's; it sets the figures at a U-shaped table very unlike the nun's image. The Uffizi, however, preserves a drawing of Judas by Fra Bartolommeo that may have been of use to the nun; her Judas shares the same lost profile and some of the drapery elements of the friar's drawing.³⁰

In addition to these prestigious models, Suor Plautilla could have looked closer to home for inspiration for her picture. Florence abounded in religious houses with images of the Last Supper. In the period before imposition of cloister on the convent by the Council of Trent, Suor Plautilla would have been able to study the many paintings in her home town on the theme. In addition to paintings by Franciabigio (1514)

and Andrea del Sarto (1511-27, fig. 45), there were several imposing examples in communities very near to her own convent, among them: Domenico Ghirlandaio's fresco for the visitor's refectory at San Marco (1477-80, fig. 41), Andrea del Castagno's in the refectory of the Benedictine nunnery of Sant'Apollonia (1447, fig. 40), and Pietro Perugino's fresco at Fuligno, a house of Franciscan tertiaries (ca. 1490, fig. 42).³¹ Nelli's study of such images reinforced local traditions, especially in the placement of Judas. Where Leonardo and Raphael created compositions with Judas on the same plane as the other apostles, Nelli isolated him from the others, by placing him on the opposite side of the table. In so doing, Nelli emulated Ghirlandaio and other Florentine painters. Nelli also took care to depict Judas holding a purse and accepting a piece of bread from Christ, as the narrative of the Last Supper dictates. Most Last Supper paintings in Florence show Judas to the right of Christ (as seen by the viewer); this would be to Christ's left or sinister side. This is the way both Perugino and Ghirlandaio depicted the figure.

Nelli, however, places Judas to the viewer's left and to Christ's right, close to Peter, who folds his hands across his chest in a gesture of humility that is very familiar among religious.³² The closest precedent for this arrangement is Castagno's fresco.³³ As a nun, Nelli had more access to study this fresco than the male artists of her time. Sant'Apollonia is down the street from Santa Caterina and this physical closeness may have aided Nelli's access to the cloistered house.

Saint John at the *Last Supper*

Nelli's choice to set Judas opposite Peter allows the women gathered in the refectory to gaze at the figure of John resting on Christ's breast. This moment is described in John's gospel account of the Passion. It appears in some, though not all, depictions of the Last Supper in Florence, among them Ghirlandaio's at San Marco and Franciabigio's at the Convento della Calza. Castagno's painting also stresses this detail. In Nelli's painting, Christ actively pulls the figure of John towards him; Nelli could have adopted this gesture from Perugino.

John's posture is significant. For Dominican theologians, John was an important exemplar of the successful mystic and contemplative. In his writings, well known to this community, Thomas Aquinas identified John as a figure for the contemplative life. Thomas saw John's close proximity to Jesus as a reference to the union of the mystic with

Christ.³⁴ Dominican texts like the *Bible moralisée* interpreted the motif of John resting on Christ's shoulder as analogous to Jacob resting on a stone and witnessing the vision of angels climbing a ladder.³⁵ Exegetes and mystics applied the bridal imagery of the *Canticles* to John. Nuns revered John as a visionary and a virgin. Some Dominican women, such as the late medieval community in the Upper Rhine called Katharinen-thal, commissioned books and sculptures that isolated and elaborated this moment in Saint John's life (fig. 48).³⁶ As they sat before Nelli's painting, the women of Santa Caterina da Siena had an unobstructed view of the beloved apostle in the embrace of Christ. John embodied the aspirations of nuns to bridal closeness to their spouse.

Liturgy and Eschatology

The emphasis on Saint John in Nelli's painting reflects Dominican liturgical practice and culture. Chapters 13 to 17 of John's gospel provide the foundation of the Dominican liturgy for Holy Thursday; the readings for the Dominican breviary for this day derive from John's account of events. A community of Dominican nuns would certainly know these texts. Nelli's painting follows this gospel in many details, such as Judas holding a purse and Christ offering Judas a morsel of bread. Her representation of these details is much less ambiguous than the famous compositions by Leonardo or Raphael. In both of those, Christ's hands reach out and rest on the table; in neither does he pass on the morsel of bread. This has resulted in much speculation about the moment depicted in those images. Though if Leonardo depicts Judas clearly holding a purse, Raphael obscures it. In her picture, Nelli again seems to follow Florentine examples as well as the gospel. Perugino depicts Judas with a purse, while Ghirlandaio and Castagno include references to Christ passing along the morsel of bread. Nelli's decision emphatically to follow the gospel was reinforced by the local tradition.

John's gospel not only discusses the institution of the Eucharist and the betrayal of Judas but also the theme of communal life. John reports Christ's instructions on how to live in community while they await his second coming. Christ urges his apostles to "love one another, as I have loved you ... by this men shall know that you are my disciples" (John 13:34-35); he goes on to say, "In my Father's house there are many mansions ... I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:2). Using a vegetal metaphor, Christ describes his relationship to the apostles: "I am

the vine, you the branches. He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same beareth much fruit" (John 15:5). Such imagery may have inspired Nelli to include the vine motifs on the Chinese porcelain on this table. Dominicans as an order were dedicated to the ideal of apostolic community.³⁷ These chapters also contain a strong eschatological content; Christ warns his apostles that he will leave them, but that he will return. The Dominican liturgy for Holy Thursday reflects this warning.³⁸

John's response at Christ's pronouncement that he would be betrayed was to take solace in sleep. The other apostles gathered around the table in Nelli's picture respond by expressing shock, dismay, anger, or resignation. Their emotions are all expressed by gesture and glance, so their large heads and hands carry the meaning. To the right of John, the apostle brings hands together in prayer; the bearded apostle next to him crosses his hands on the table; behind him another apostle reaches over to touch Christ, pushing himself up from the table with his other hand. In the interpretations by Leonardo and Raphael, the apostles gather into groups to discuss the shocking news that Christ has given them, or move abruptly to deny being the betrayer. In Nelli's painting, none of the men speaks. The company reacts wordlessly to the information Christ has just given them. In this silence, the apostles act as role models for the nuns who gathered before this image. Silence was one of the principal strictures imposed on communities of women, and is stressed in the regulations prescribed in the *Directives* for this community.³⁹

The Nuns in their Refectory

The *Directives*, by which the women of Santa Caterina lived, regulated every aspect of their behavior in the refectory. They were required to process into the refectory in order of seniority; that is, the women who had been nuns for the longest period entered first. Once they had taken their places at the table, the nuns were required to say a prescribed grace and await the service of food, beginning with the table where the most junior members of the community were seated and progressing to the prioress's table. The *Directives* also stipulated that the sisters were to drink with both hands; they were not to lift their eyes while eating, nor were they to use forks or eat with the points of their knives. Eating silently, the sisters listened to a reading from an approved devout text. Often, the founding documents of the convent, its *Rule* (the basic regulations) or *Constitutions* (more specific regulations for the com-

munity) would be read; there are indications in the manuscript of Santa Caterina's *Directives* that it was read in the refectory.⁴⁰ The point of dining together was to nourish not only the women's bodies but also to strengthen their commitment to the ideal of community. The *Directives* insist that the sisters were not to ask for anything for themselves, but to make sure that their neighbors had everything they needed, all the while "thinking about the food given to them by their spouse, Jesus Christ."⁴¹

The *Directives* also prescribe the kinds of food permitted in the refectory. The women were permitted meat three days a week, except during Advent or Lent, and two cooked dishes at a meal. The exception to this last detail is that when meat is served, only one cooked item is necessary.⁴² The surviving account books from Santa Caterina record purchases for the community of a variety of foods, eggs, chick-peas, cheese, nuts, wine, lamb, fava beans (*baccelle*).⁴³ Some, but of course not all, of these items appear in Nelli's painting.

In addition to what the women could eat, fasts were strictly limited and controlled. The *Directives* proscribes excessive fasting in the community because this could indicate pride.⁴⁴ Moderation in food practices was frequently urged on religious women, since nuns of many different orders often exceeded these guidelines in excessive fasting or in other extreme dietary habits.⁴⁵ Monastic and mendicant pastors, including Savonarola himself, urged the religious women under their influence to moderate their food disciplines.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, even at Santa Caterina da Siena, one of Suor Plautilla's sisters, Bartolomea di Lodovico Martini, was revered as a *Beata* or Blessed among her contemporaries for her food practices. According to witnesses, Suor Bartolomea mortified her flesh by putting bitter herbs into whatever food she ate, in order to destroy its flavor.⁴⁷

Imagining the Last Supper, Nelli makes the apostles follow the regulations of her own convent. Like the nuns, the men have no forks; they dine with knives, some water and wine, salt cellars, bread, and one meat dish: the lamb. The other foods on the table are bowls of lettuce and fava beans. The latter are a Florentine specialty, usually associated with the diets of peasants.⁴⁸ As prescribed, there is no second cooked dish to accompany the meat. The meal depicted thus follows the community's ideals of simplicity and moderation. Similarly, the apostles act as the nuns were encouraged to behave in the refectory.

A Passover Meal

In making the menu of her *Last Supper* reflect her community's practices, Suor Plautilla broke with the Florentine tradition she had followed in so many other ways. Most other artists naturally emphasized bread and wine on the Lord's table; such is the case in Leonardo's painting, although many of the copies after his work added foodstuffs, either carved meat or fish, among the platters. Raphael set a plate with what may be carved lamb on the table in front of Peter. The contents of plates and serving dishes in many Florentine images of the Last Supper are either invisible or indeterminate, as they are in the frescoes by Perugino and Castagno. At San Marco, Ghirlandaio is unusual in including fruit strewn across the table.

Nelli depicts an unusual variety of foodstuffs and seems to have chosen them carefully. Her decision to depict fava beans, for example, may be symbolic as well as reflective of her own experience, as fava beans were seen as symbols of the emptiness of profane knowledge.⁴⁹ On the table, Nelli depicts a roasted lamb, presented whole on the platter before Christ, and bowls of lettuce, as well as bread, wine, salt, and water. More than the specific items on the table, she depicts foods that identify the meal as a Passover Seder. The identification of the meal Christ shared on Holy Thursday with his followers as a Seder is based on the gospel accounts of the event. It is also a very important element in the Dominican liturgy.⁵⁰

Most probably, Nelli and the other nuns in her community had never witnessed a Seder, though Florence had a growing community of Jews in the mid-sixteenth century.⁵¹ However, the elements of the Seder are described in the book of Exodus (12:1-50). Numerous theologians had interpreted the Passover meal as a prototype for the Last Supper, and by extension, the Eucharist. This connection is made in the *Mirror of Human Salvation*, a popular handbook of theology that circulated widely in the late middle ages.⁵² A Flemish manuscript of *The Mirror* produced in the late fifteenth century depicts the Passover meal as a type for the Eucharist (fig. 49). This image of the Seder depicts the celebrants standing at a table on which bread and a roasted lamb appear. The title above explains, "The Paschal Lamb signifies the Eucharist." The lamb is depicted roasted whole, following the regulations in Exodus, where breaking the bones of the lamb or boiling it is prohibited. Exodus also prescribes bitter herbs and salt water, which are not visible in miniature, but which are clearly described in the Bible and noted by Christian commentators.

The whole lamb sitting before Christ in Nelli's painting thus follows the biblical description of the Passover. As in the Flemish miniature, the juxtaposition of the lamb with Christ identifies him as the Paschal lamb, thus referencing his sacrifice and the commemoration of that sacrifice in the mass. The Eucharistic theme was part of the significance of this image for Nelli's Dominican sisters.

Devotion to the Eucharist was common among religious women of the early modern period, despite the fact that women's access to the sacrament was restricted. As they dined before this image, the women of Santa Caterina da Siena could meditate on Christ as Lamb. The convent's patron, Saint Caterina da Siena, had written of the Seder:

I want to see us at the table of the spotless lamb, who is food, table, and waiter. The fruits on this table are the true solid virtues. No other table bears fruit, but this one's fruit is perfect, because this table is life-giving.⁵³

The Lessons of Savonarola

For this particular community, however, the meaning of Passover would also be enhanced by the teachings of Savonarola, the guiding spirit of their community. The language of Saint John's chapters on the Last Supper, especially John 16:2 ("They will put you out of the synagogues: yea the hour cometh that whosoever killeth you will think that he doth a service to God"), must have seemed particularly poignant to a community who venerated the executed friar. Savonarola left his own glosses on the Passover in a 1496 sermon, published in 1519.⁵⁴ Here he interprets the Seder allegorically: the lamb signifies Christ and his Passion. The lamb, which must be masculine, unblemished and a yearling, must be roasted whole, "cooked on the cross."⁵⁵ Unadulterated scripture is the unleavened bread. The bitter herbs signify penitence.⁵⁶ Given that some of their pious sisters, such as Suor Bartolomea Martini, put bitter greens in their food to spoil its taste, the community probably knew the allegorical meaning assigned to the lettuce.

In the sermon in which this exegesis occurs, Savonarola urges his listeners to frequent penance and communion. The Passover remains a signifier for the Eucharist for Savonarola, even as it must have for Suor Plautilla and her sisters. For Savonarola, frequent communion is the hallmark of the communities of the early Christian Church, whose

simple Christianity he recommended in many of his treatises.⁵⁷ While women in the early modern period generally could not take communion very often (even cloistered women in the strictest communities), their longing for communion was a constant theme in their spirituality.⁵⁸

For Savonarola, the earliest communities of Christians headed by the apostles were the new chosen people, the elect of Christ. As he attempted to build a theocratic government in late fifteenth-century Florence, Savonarola urged the emulation of those early Christian communities. Doing so would make Florentine Christians the new Israelites, the new chosen people.⁵⁹ Yet by the 1560s the political dimensions of Savonarola's sermons were not relevant even among groups dedicated to him; though the friar had been dead for half a century, the Papacy continued to persecute Savonarola's adherents as heretics.⁶⁰

In her painting for her sisters, Plautilla Nelli probably aimed at following Savonarola's eschatological lessons, not the political ones. She depicted the Last Supper as both Passover and Eucharist, with Christ as the center of an apostolic community. Following the example of the apostles, whether reclining in the bosom of the Lord as John does, or sitting quietly and contemplating Christ's sacrifice, the nuns of Santa Caterina could see their own ideals of community, penitence, and simplicity reflected in Plautilla Nelli's painting.

ENDNOTES

*An earlier version of this essay appeared in Nelson, ed., 2000.

1. Richa, 1759, VIII: 278-84. Marchese, 1846, II: 326-50.
2. For proposals for dating the painting more precisely, see Turrill's essay in this volume.
3. The convent's history is summarized in Turrill and Muzzi in this volume, Polizzotto, 1994, 189-97, and Paatz and Paatz, 1940, I: 434-39.
4. Macey, 1992a, 161-89; for the songs themselves, see idem, 1992b, and idem, 1998.
5. For convents' connections with the Savonarolan followers, see Muzzi and Turrill in this volume.
6. For this, see Jonathan Nelson, "Introduction," in Nelson ed., 2000, 4, and Turrill's essay in this volume.
7. This part of the community's history has been explored in Evangelisti, 2000.
8. The text is preserved in a manuscript in the British Library. It was edited and published as Creytens, 1969.
9. See Turrill's essay in this volume.
10. See app. 3.
11. For nuns as patrons, see, for example, Thomas, 2003, Lowe, 2003, and Roberts, 2008.
12. See Spallanzani, 1997, 96-97. These bowls must be imports, because at the time European workshops had not yet devised means to imitate Chinese porcelain.
13. For *spalliera* paintings, see Barriault, 1994. Cristina Acidini Luchinat refers to the painting by Suor Plautilla as a *spalliera* in Acidini

Luchinat and Proto Pisani, ed., 1997, 259; see also her essay in this volume.

14. Vasari, 1966, I: 129.

15. See Fantozzi Micali and Roselli, 1980, 98-99.

16. Richa, 1759, VIII: 284, describes the painting at the "testate," i.e., the head of the room. For a surviving refectory with just such an arrangement, see the Dominican convent of San Vincenzo in Prato, in Bardazzi, 1982.

17. "Suor Plautilla Nelli. Orate pro pictora." In inscribing her picture this way, Nelli was likely following the example of Fra Bartolommeo; see discussion in Muzzi and Turrill in this volume.

18. For this tradition see Acidini Luchinat and Proto Pisani, ed., 1997; Vertova, 1965; Walker, 1979; Gilbert, 1974, 371-402; and Ohlig, 2000. For a consideration of Last Supper images throughout Italy, see Rigaux, 1989.

19. On the reasons for this choice, see Ohlig, 2000, and Gilbert, 1974.

20. Walker, 1979, 44-46.

21. Rigaux, 1989, 249.

22. For this custom, in reference to Leonardo's *Last Supper*, see Verdon, 1985; he enlarges this discussion to consider other refectory images in 1997. The Dominican culture that informed Leonardo's picture is also treated in Rossi, 1988.

23. For Fiesole and San Marco, see Walker, 1979, 231-32, and Hood, 1993, 322. For Santa Caterina, see Cannon, 1980, 146.

24. For discussion and reproduction of this fresco see Roberts, 2008, and Ahl, 1996, 189-90.

25. For Sogliani's fresco, see Muzzi, 1992. For the Dominican convents in Prato, Bologna, and Rome, see Rigaux, 1989, 249, and Ohlig, 2000, 264-73.

26. See Verdon, 1985, and Rossi, 1988. For an exhaustive evaluation of the meaning of Leonardo's image, see Steinberg, 2001.

27. Steinberg, *ibid.*, reproduces many of the copies after Leonardo. For Bibbiena, see Giordano, 1984, 102-03.

28. See Steinberg, 2001, 23, and Landau and Parshall, 1994, 140.

29. See Fischer, 1990, 121-23, and Muzzi and Faietti in this volume.
30. On this drawing, Florence, GDSU, 403 F, see Fisher, 1986, 64-5 n. 25; and Fischer, 1990, 123.
31. For these works, in addition to the sources cited above in note 18, see the essay by Acidini in this volume.
32. The nearest example, geographically, of this gesture appears in the fresco cycle by Fra Angelico at San Marco, on which see Hood, 1993, 272.
33. For recent studies, see Hayum, 2006, and Marchand, 2003.
34. Rossi, 1988, 60. For John's theological significance, see Hamburger, 2003.
35. *Ibid.*, 112.
36. For the sculpted group at the Museum Mayer van den Bergh in Antwerp, see Frings and Gerschow, ed., 2005, 310. These groups have been analyzed in Hausherr, 1964, with similar observations in Hayum, 2006, 261.
37. Tugwell, 1987, 15-20.
38. Rigaux, 1989, 134.
39. Creytens, 1969, 156.
40. See the transcription of the text in *ibid.*, with the inserted phrases "Te autem" that signal the audience's response to the reading.
41. See the chapter, "On Fasting" ("Del digiuno") of the *Directives* in Creytens, 1969, 152-53.
42. *Ibid.*, 154, with reference to cooked dishes (*cose cocto*).
43. Numerous examples of payments for such foodstuffs are recorded in the accounts preserved at the ASF, CRSGF, 106.
44. In the *Directives*, in the chapter "On avoiding singularity" ("Dello evitare singolarità") in Creytens, 1969, 154.
45. See Walker Bynum, 1987. For Italian women and their food disciplines, see Zarri, 1990, and Bornstein and Rusconi, ed., 1996.
46. Savonarola encouraged "temperance" in food disciplines in his advice to women; this is the term he used in his "Libro della vita viduale"; Savonarola, 1976, 43.

47. For such practices, Fra Serafino Razzi, who had a sister in the convent, named Suor Bartolomea a Beata in his compendium of lives of saints and blessed of the Dominican Order (Razzi, 1588). On this text see Quin in this volume.
48. See Grieco, 1991, and *idem*, 1999.
49. For this suggestion, see Muzzi, 2000, 44.
50. The hymns written by Aquinas for the feast of Corpus Christi explain that Christ followed the law regarding the Passover and offered himself as the new lamb, as observed in Walker Bynum, 1987, 45.
51. See Siegmund, 2006.
52. On the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* and its many illustrated versions, see Wilson, 1984, 172-74.
53. Catherine of Siena, 1988, I: 49-50.
54. For the sermon, delivered on Holy Tuesday, March 29, 1496, see Savonarola, 1935, III, part 2: 393-412.
55. *Ibid.*, 406, on the lamb "cotto su la croce."
56. *Ibid.*, 407, on the "lettughe agreste." This meaning had been assigned to the lettuce by Hugh of Saint Victor before him, according to Rigaux, 1989, 244. See also Muzzi, 2000, 44.
57. For example, in Savonarola, 1959, 179, we are told that primitive Christians took communion every day ("si comunicavana ogni di").
58. On the eucharistic spirituality of late medieval women see Walker Bynum, 1991, 119-50.
59. See Polizzotto, 1999, 367-86; and Martines, 2006.
60. Polizzotto, 1999, 438-45; Macey, 1992a.

THE LAST SUPPERS OF DAN BROWN, LEONARDO DA VINCI, AND PLAUTILLA NELLI

CRISTINA ACIDINI

AMONG THE SITUATIONS CONNECTED WITH THE PROFESSION THAT IN RECENT years have tried the nerves of historians of Gothic and Renaissance art more and more frequently and intensely, are, without doubt, those created by Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. I think each of us has come across someone who, with a knowing air, pronounced as certainties intolerable misinterpretations—and expected us to confirm them—about aspects of the *Last Supper* (1495-97) of Leonardo da Vinci in the refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan (see Giovan Pietro Birago's print, fig. 43): the effeminate apostle is Mary Magdalene, the wife of Jesus and perpetuator of his lineage; the knife in the hand of one of the diners is a disturbing and mysterious allusion; and so on, until we get to the Grail, the Knights Templars, and beyond.

And it falls to us to explain that, no, the androgynous figure is not a woman but John, the youngest and most delicate of the apostles, who is sitting close to Jesus and is so upset by the announcement of the betrayal that he leans against his master's breast in a broken-hearted abandonment that is nearly fainting. Like all the artists who painted the Last Supper before and after him, Leonardo chose to accentuate the pathos of the apostle's loving gesture by giving him a delicate face: that, and not literal womanhood, explains the beardless face and the long tresses. Our interlocutor looks at us askance and says, "What about the knife?"

It is Peter's knife, we explain. Peter is impulsive and protective to the point of violence. When Christ is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane at night, Peter wakes up and reacts by taking out his sword and cutting

off the ear of one of the Roman soldiers. At Christ's announcement during the Last Supper—that one of the apostles would betray him—the artists represent Peter brandishing his knife in a gesture of defense that is as quick as it is inappropriate, foreshadowing the aggression he will later display in the Garden with a much larger and sharper weapon.

At this point we have become unpleasant. We have made the mysteries vanish into thin air, and with them the attention of our listener, who does not even ask us about the Grail and the Knights Templars but puts an end to the conversation and leaves, still convinced that Dan Brown is right.

The last time someone asked me about Mary Magdalene and the knife, I posed a rhetorical question: "Which is more exciting (and sells more books): to confirm and explain Leonardo's adherence to most of the iconographic conventions shared by painters of the Last Supper in his time, or to argue that in certain figures and gestures he concealed mysteries only comprehensible to the chosen few, secrets that are jealously guarded by the Church, at the cost of human lives, for more than two millennia?" The umpteenth conversation ended with an icy look.

And yet, yes, even an innovator like Leonardo could not but embrace, in an iconographic subject so authoritatively entrenched in the tradition of Italian and especially Florentine painting, conventional solutions in use since the Trecento.¹ The representation of the Last Supper as the institution of the Eucharist in the form of a communion of bread and wine—as a visual expression of the mystery of transubstantiation and at the same time as the architrave of the entire theological edifice of redemption—could not be trusted to the interpretative and inventive judgment of a single artist. It must be guided by often-used and even fixed canons with very little room for innovation. Each element refers back by allusion to a doctrinal content, thereby taking on the encoded communicative force of a hieroglyphic rather than the naturalistic quality of representation from life. Therefore not only is the bread a metaphor for flesh and the wine for blood, as in the mass, but the clean well ironed cloth that covers the table prefigures the one that will cover the altar; the roast on the table is lamb, an icon of the sacrificial Lamb of Redemption; the fish, when there are any, hark back to the acronym of Christ, ICHTUS, used by the first Christians; what fruit there is, lacking in all verisimilitude (cherries at Easter?!), is another allusion to the Passion in the accepted language of symbols. The knife of Peter expresses the potential violence of the man of faith, disapproved of even when it is inspired by a generous anger; the swollen purse of Judas is the

figurative sign of the price paid for the victim; his unstable stool is the revelation of his imminent betrayal.

Therefore any serious critical treatment that seeks to reconsider the specificity of the scene painted by Plautilla Nelli within a specifically Dominican tradition (as does Ann Roberts, in her scrupulous and thorough post-Savonarolan reading) cannot avoid the forest of symbolic images that, with their deep roots and dense foliage, allow few points of deviation.

The iconographic history of the Last Supper is well known. Representations of it begin to appear in frescoes and panel paintings on the walls of great convent refectories, at first as subordinate parts at the base of more complex compositions, then as autonomous subjects. They were particularly common in and around Florence, but examples were found throughout central Italy. The loss of many of these frescoes and paintings prevents us from reconstructing the entire picture of the development of this sacred theme, but what remains allows us to sketch out at least some of its important phases. In the reconstruction of the origins of the subject, the point of departure is still the scene at the base of the grand and complex composition in the refectory of Santa Croce, executed in fresco in the western end wall by Taddeo Gaddi (ca. 1345-50, fig. 39).² On one level, it serves as a *predella*: the very long table laid on trestles, with the thirteen diners, forms the base for the vertical of a great "painted page" that fills the entire wall. In the center is the *Crucifixion* combined with the Tree of Life, flanked by evangelical and Franciscan scenes with the common theme of meals, solitary or shared. But more importantly, it seems to detach itself, with its own autonomous spatiality, which, using the means of optical illusion, comes out towards "our" physical space—that of the external observer. The painter thus creates the deceptive sensation that the crucial event of the institution of the Eucharist is made concrete to the human beings who look at it and share the experience of doing so together, while the previous and successive events of that sacred symposium constitute nothing but a painted background. The attitudes and gestures of Christ and the apostles obey a narrative canon that is manifestly long-established: it follows the details related in the gospels. Christ blesses and embraces the frightened John, Peter reacts strongly, others discuss and doubt, Judas dips into the wine the piece of bread that will expose his guilt and gets ready to rise, knocking back the three-legged stool. In the unrealistic and easily decoded conventions that characterize images of the Last Supper before Leonardo, Judas is the only one seated on the side

of the table opposite Christ: he already occupies the traitor's place. His back is to us, and we see his face in profile, intent on Jesus, who has just pronounced the prophetic words.

A century later—a century during which many representations of the subject have been either lost or damaged—we find in the heart of the Quattrocento two almost contemporary images of the Last Supper that are nevertheless, because of the dynamic contrast between their authors, completely different. One is in the Pieve di Sant'Andrea in Cercina, outside Florence, between via Bolognese and Sesto Fiorentino; it was painted by Stefano di Antonio Vanni in ca. 1450.³ The other is in the refectory of the Benedictine Convent of Sant'Apollonia, and was painted by Andrea del Castagno (1447, fig. 40).⁴ The first is almost monochrome, a fresco in earth green with a little ochre. The second is intensely colorful; the painter has used refined techniques to portray a room in perspective and with the front wall missing, in which we see the sacred banquet, the splendid variety of white and colored marble in the architecture, the precious cloth with "millefleurs" decoration that covers the back and the seat of the bench, and the heavy drapery of the figures, sometimes enlivened with shot colors.

In Stefano's meticulous and mediocre little theater, the composed attitudes and expressions of the figures find their counterpoint in the profusion of details in their setting: it is so naïve you want to smile. The table is dotted with an unlikely number of bottles (seven of wine, six of water), thirteen half-full glasses, four salt-cellars, seven knives strewn among rolls and pieces of bread, plates of carved-up lamb, apples with the leaves attached; on the floor, cats gnaw bones and leftovers and a little dog rears up on its hind legs, as if it wants to distract Judas from his fatal gesture of dipping the bread into the cup. A few years later, Stefano reproduced the same picture, with a few variations, in the hospital of San Matteo in the center of Florence.

The glowing foreshortened "box" created by Castagno presents a community of apostles who are disturbed but nevertheless magnificent, their gestures eloquent, their faces carefully sculpted to express nobility. The painter does not allow us to see what is on the table—which is seen from below—except the transparent profiles of bottles and glasses and a few foreshortened pieces of bread. In an unusual compositional choice, Castagno puts John to Christ's right (from the observer's point of view) and Judas to his left. Castagno's rigorous spatiality, drenched in the light that at that time pervaded the paintings of Domenico Veneziano and that Piero della Francesca would make his own, confers a

dimension of epic solemnity to the sacred subject.

No less than three representations of the Last Supper were produced by the indefatigable Domenico Ghirlandaio and his assistants over the next few years: at Badia a Passignano (1476-77), San Marco (1477-80, fig. 41), and Ognissanti (1480).⁵ They are balanced airy scenes that give space to nature in their backgrounds (even though, in Passignano, in the form of lunettes with the *Expulsion from Paradise* and *Cain Killing Abel*), in which the narration privileges simplicity as a guarantee of verisimilitude.

A last fifteenth-century landmark in the subject is the Cenacolo di Sant'Onofrio delle Contesse known as Fuligno, painted by Pietro Perugino (ca. 1490, fig. 42).⁶ The Umbrian master, who stayed so long and fruitfully in Florence at the turn of the century, teaches lessons on composure and serenity even when he approaches a subject as full of dramatic potential as this one. The setting is an airy and elegant loggia with densely ornate pillars in the antique style, beyond which the Garden of Gethsemane is set in luminous twilit countryside. Certainly Perugino is thinking of the illusionistic panels that the Florentine Cosimo Rosselli included in his depiction of the Last Supper in the Sistine Chapel (1480-82), but he interprets it in his own contemplative and customary fashion, between chromatic harmony and pictorial sweetness. He even gives Judas, for once sitting quietly on his notorious stool, a melancholy look, more like a condemned man than an executioner.

In the new century, we find two striking representations of the Last Supper: the one by Giovanni Antonio Bazzi, known as Sodoma, in San Bartolomeo at Monteoliveto (ca. 1515-16) is severely damaged, almost destroyed; that of Andrea del Sarto is still whole and very impressive in San Michele at San Salvi (fig. 45).⁷ The latter was executed between 1511 and 1527, the years of the pontificate of Giovanni de' Medici, the son of Lorenzo the Magnificent, who took the name of Leo X, from the return of the Medici to their second expulsion and the end of the brief Florentine Republic. They were difficult years, though magnificent in terms of art. Prints were responsible in part—perhaps above all—for the spreading influence of Leonardo's Milanese *Last Supper*: Giovan Pietro Birago's print, for example, which was followed by imitations, had, by the end of the fifteenth century, already facilitated the dissemination of Leonardo's interpretation, even if it was reduced to a rigid and sad design. The emotional atmosphere of the scene, the passionate emotions of the characters, and the density of the theological and symbolic significance implicit in their faces and gestures had all been changed by

Leonardo. Judas was no longer isolated in the foreground: he blended with the others and was recognizable only by the gesture of being about to rise to his feet. Sodoma (who perhaps saw Leonardo's work during his almost certain visit to Milan) and Andrea del Sarto could not but take notice of it.

These were the models—some great, others even greater—against which, in the middle of the century, Suor Plautilla's *Last Supper* (app. 2, no. 2, figs. 8-11) would be measured. It was probably a *spalliera* painting, i.e. made for the wall, for the refectory of the Dominican Convent of Santa Caterina, of which she was the Prioress. Artistic heir of Fra' Paolino and, through him, of Fra' Bartolommeo, she would certainly have had access to the two images in San Marco: Ghirlandaio's *Last Supper* and Giovanni Antonio Sogliani's *Miracle of the Dominican Providence* (1536, fig. 47). A short walk away, in the Convent of Sant'Apollonia, she will have seen Castagno's *Last Supper*; if she took a short journey north, she would have seen Perugino's at Fuligno. Perhaps Nelli would have been admitted at San Salvi by the cloistered community of women that was set up there in 1530, after the end of the siege of Florence.

How did Suor Plautilla use this splendid collection of precedents, more or less accessible to her? The rose of her artistic borrowings has many petals: a traditional disposition that we could define as pre-Leonardesque, with Judas in the foreground, but at the same time the gestural dynamics are sufficiently agitated to remind us of his *Last Supper* in Milan; the arrangement of the central group is meticulously copied from Castagno, but single apostles are derived from those of from Sarto; she creates a simple, wooden *spalliera*, like Ghirlandaio's at Passignano. Instead of tapestries and decorated cloth, her painting has firm outlines and polished forms inspired by Bronzino. And one could continue, perhaps to link Nelli with the sublime representation of stonework in the background of Castagno's *Last Supper*, with its saturated colors that create a rhythm of dark tones animated by dramatic areas in red.

Plautilla's is an assertive and virile manner of painting, where we search in vain for the feminine element, unless it is perhaps in the loving descriptive detail of the food on the beautiful dishes of oriental porcelain, perhaps belonging to her own convent and so precious as to be included upon the sacred table.

Another link with Nelli's convent must be the fourth apostle from the right, a dark man with a thick black beard, who fixes our gaze with his dark intense eyes, his mysterious impassible expression, and his hands resting calmly on the table amidst the anxious questioning tumult of the

others. Here we find the portrait of a man who frequently visited the convent (confessor? benefactor? handyman?). He is perhaps the only one not wearing a tunic but rather a waistcoat closed tightly over his chest, the buttons straining the material. Perhaps this is a result of the sitter's weakness for fashion—a fashion for clothes that are too tight—or perhaps it is because of his corpulence. This little enigma is perhaps the most stimulating gift of Plautilla's *Last Supper*. It is the record of a strong and memorable identity, which, though lost over the centuries, continues to assert its privilege: though he is seated among the apostles as one of them, he is nevertheless a mere mortal who comes to us immortalized by the brush of the prioress-painter.

Translated from the Italian by Dorothea Barrett

ENDNOTES

1. For this tradition, see Acidini Luchinat and Proto Pisani, 1997, with further bibliography.
2. See Tartuferi in Acidini Luchinat and Proto Pisani, 1997, 116-19.
3. See Simari in Acidini Luchinat and Proto Pisani, 1997, 123-27.
4. See in Acidini Luchinat and Proto Pisani, 1997, 128-34.
5. For the three frescoes, see the following entries in Acidini Luchinat and Proto Pisani, 1997: Proto Pisani, 135-38; Scudieri, 139-43; and Bietti, 144-49.
6. See Padovani in Acidini Luchinat and Proto Pisani, 1997, 152-56; and Proto Pisani, ed., 2005.
7. For the latter work, see Padovani in Acidini Luchinat and Proto Pisani, 1997, 173-79.

Appendices



APPENDIX 1
“IN THE SHADOW OF THE FRIAR”:
THE UFFIZI DRAWINGS ATTRIBUTED
TO PLAUTILLA NELLI*

MARZIA FAIETTI

EDITOR'S NOTE: THE CHECKLIST AT THE END OF THIS APPENDIX PROVIDES essential information on drawings in the Uffizi collection (GDSU) that have been attributed to Plautilla Nelli. In the discussion that follows, Marzia Faietti evaluates the inscriptions,¹ style, function, and history of the drawings. On this basis, she ascribes the following drawings to Nelli herself: nos. 2a, 2b, 7, 9, 10, 12, 14, 15, and an unpublished sheet, 16. Numbers refer to the checklist of drawings at the end of this appendix.

Introduction

A small collection of twelve drawings (app. 1, nos. 1-12) classified under the name of Suor Plautilla Nelli is conserved at the GDSU. This scanty corpus is the result of a combination of old traditions of attribution and more recent critical hypotheses, but on careful examination it does not exhibit stylistic uniformity, nor does it offer absolute certainties to those who wish to reconstruct Nelli's graphic production. Few have studied this particular aspect of her artistic oeuvre;² the lack of available evidence and the rather modest standard of the drawings that have been attributed to her have combined to discourage scholars. In his monumental work, *The Drawings of the Florentine Painters*, Bernard Berenson dispatched the question quickly: "Here my account of Fra Bartolommeo and his following must end. My heart fails me in the presence of Suor Plautilla Nelli, and I will leave her for those who are insufficiently alive to the distinction between curiosity and art."³

Though the study of the drawings by Suor Plautilla seems at first less stimulating than that of the graphic production by artists who enjoy higher stature, our historical sensibility—quite apart from considerations of quality—will not permit us to ignore “the phenomena of women as artists and as nuns in Renaissance Italy,”⁴ in which this Florentine Dominican nun played an important role. Those working at the GDSU can draw on a long tradition of attributions, recorded in various inventories. Therefore it is worthwhile to undertake this critical journey without delay, with the premise that, after scrupulous examination of the earliest sources and after a technical and stylistic analysis of the drawings, we will be able to propose a corpus of drawings that are possibly by her hand.

Giorgio Vasari on Plautilla Nelli

The earliest evidence of drawings attributed to Suor Plautilla in the collection of Cardinal Leopoldo de' Medici (1617-75) is provided by the “List of Names of the Painters whose Drawings are in their Possession” by Filippo Baldinucci (1625-96), printed with the date of September 8, 1673, and, in a copy in the Biblioteca Nazionale Firenze, updated with hand-written entries up to August 1, 1675.⁵ This should be interpreted not only in light of subsequent documents, but also be integrated with what we learn about the nature of Nelli's graphic production from a source that dates to her own time. I allude to the well known biographical digression on Nelli in Giorgio Vasari's *Life* of the Bolognese sculptor, Properzia de' Rossi.⁶ The passage contains some precious information: Vasari claims that Suor Plautilla is the first among women artists whose drawings—among other artistic achievements—bear comparison to those of another woman artist, Properzia. The statement takes on great significance if we consider that Vasari demonstrated his knowledge and appreciations of Properzia's drawings: in his book of drawings, he had several sheets by her in pen and ink that were copies of works by Raphael.

The lines that follow seem in part to mitigate what he said before. First Vasari tells us that before the “revered and virtuous sister” started painting panels and “works of importance” (i.e. of great ambition and effort), she made miniatures, at which she must have been very good, since he mentions “many truly beautiful small paintings, now owned by various people.” Right afterwards, however, passing from information

to critical reflection, he adds:

But the best works by her hand are those she copied from others. In these we see that she would have done marvellous things had she had the opportunity, as men do, to study and devote herself to drawing and portraying living and natural things.

From this we conclude that Nelli's training was gradual and for the most part autodidactic; she derived her style, technique, and ideas from others, through the careful and scrupulous copying of their works, without having the opportunity to draw from life. This limitation, obviously a result of her condition as a nun, hindered her from accomplishing what a male artist of her stature could have accomplished. This introduces an element of contradiction between Nelli's potential and her actual production, which attenuates the celebratory tone on which the biographical note begins.

The end of Vasari's note on Nelli demonstrates the logic of his reasoning and his critical coherence, suggesting that, if we really want to get an idea of the highest criteria of quality expressed by Nelli, we must consider the faces of the women in the surviving paintings (and—for our purposes—in the drawings that can be attributed to her). Once we realize that the drawings of Suor Plautilla had to be limited in large part to copying the works of others, we need to discover more about the sources and models. In this regard, another Vasari text is helpful, his *Life* of Fra' Bartolommeo: “... the greater part [of his drawings] are now in the Monastery of S. Caterina da Siena on the Piazza S. Marco, in the possession of a nun who paints, of whom record will be made in the proper place.”⁷

The information that Nelli had most of Fra Bartolommeo's drawings in 1568 is confirmed by the survival of several hundred sheets by Baccio della Porta and his school, sold in 1727 by the nuns of Santa Caterina to Niccolò Gabburri (1675-1742), collector and Director of the Accademia dell'Arte del Disegno in Florence.⁸ In 1728, the *Notizie dei professori del disegno da Cimabue in qua* by Filippo Baldinucci was published posthumously, edited by his son Francesco in collaboration with Gabburri. In the third volume, he writes that the Fra Bartolommeo drawings that Vasari claimed were in the possession of Suor Plautilla were “presently in the hands of Cav. Gabburri in Florence and are about 500 in number.”⁹

By 1568, after her first experiments with miniatures and nourished by a vast selection of Fra Bartolommeo's drawings, Nelli had already

acquired a certain fame as a painter. It would seem, therefore, that her career as a painter began in the shadow of the friar.

Inscriptions

Helpful indications about her drawings can be found, above all, in the old inscriptions. References to Suor Plautilla appear on the partial study of Michelangelo's *Risen Christ* (app. 1, no. 2b; fig. 15), the *Seated Madonna Nursing* (app. 1, no. 12; fig. 21), the *Head of a Youth* (app. 1, no. 7; figs. 16, 17), the *Standing Male Figure* (app. 1, no. 14; figs. 23, 24), and the *Kneeling Male Figure* (app. 1, no. 16; fig. 26). On two of these drawings (app. 1, nos. 2b, 16) there are two inscriptions by two different hands. Palaeographic analysis kindly performed by Sandra Marsini of the Archivio di Stato in Florence has confirmed that the lower inscription on app. 1, no. 2b and the one on app. 1, no. 7 are both in the hand of Baldinucci. That established, it is possible to recognize the same hand in the inscription on app. 1, no. 14 and that on the lower part of app. 1, no. 16. We have thus established four seventeenth-century inscriptions by Baldinucci attributing the drawings to Nelli. It is tempting to use this nucleus of four drawings as the basis of a new reconstruction of Nelli's graphic production. Nevertheless, we naturally have to keep in mind that even his opinion, however authoritative, is not a definitive proof of her authorship. Rather, the inscriptions provide the principal source of evidence for the attribution that we have discovered so far.

When Giovanna Pierattini wrote the first monographic study on Nelli in 1938, she indicated that she knew only the inscription on one drawing (app. 1, no. 12). She believed this was by Nelli's hand, being familiar with her handwriting from her examination of the papers of the Convent of Santa Caterina from that time; therefore she considered this drawing the only one with a well founded attribution. I have not seen enough of Nelli's handwriting to accredit Pierattini's opinion, but, after the recent palaeographical analysis, we can exclude Baldinucci as a possible author. The drawing itself is executed with a technique that is different from that of the drawings discussed above (app. 1, nos. 2, 7, 14, 16), so much so that it strikes us at first sight. On closer analysis, the technique suggests a careful study of models by Fra Bartolommeo, such as the face of the Madonna in the famous San Marco altarpiece, for which the friar used a small cartoon now at the Uffizi.¹⁰

Collection and Attribution History in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

The aforementioned list by Baldinucci indicated seven drawings by the hand of "Sor Plautilla Monaca in S. Caterina," with the later addition of two more, for a total of nine. A handwritten catalogue of the GDSU, dated June 12, 1673, bears very close comparison with Baldinucci's list. It includes five sheets under the name of "Sor Plautilla monaca in S. Domenico [sic]," with the addition of two more, which correspond to the seven previously included in the list.¹¹ Thus, in a brief period the drawings attributed to Nelli almost doubled, from the original nucleus of five to a total of nine. As is known, the list does not describe the drawings in any way and does not allow us to identify Nelli's nine works; Baldinucci simply supplies a number beside the name of each artist. Both Italian and foreign artists—the "oltramontani," those from beyond the mountains—are listed in alphabetical order. Moreover, Nelli's name does not appear in the earlier archival documentation, that is to say the letters of Leopoldo de' Medici's correspondents, who contacted the collector for acquisitions. Eight drawings by Plautilla, again without descriptions, were recorded in yet another manuscript list of the drawings, dated May 13, 1687; this accompanied the collection when it was transferred from the Pitti Palace, the residence of Cardinal Leopoldo, to the Uffizi Gallery, and consigned to the care of Giovanni Bianchi.¹² The same number was recorded in the volume "Universale VII" and confirmed in the 1784 "General Inventory of the Royal Gallery of Florence."¹³

A brief description of each work appeared at last in the "Inventory of Drawings," compiled some time before 1793 by Giuseppe Pelli Bencivenni, granducal functionary and Director of the Galleria degli Uffizi (1775-92).¹⁴ Of these only five are now identifiable with certainty:¹⁵

- no. 1: *Large Female Bust* (app. 1, no. 10; fig. 20)
- no. 3: *Head of a Devout Youth* (app. 1, no. 7; fig. 16)
- no. 4: *Study of Hands, Drapery, and a Putto's Head* (app. 1, no. 8a; fig. 18)
- no. 6: *Sketch of a Young Figure with a Book in the Right Hand* (app. 1, no. 13; the only sheet not previously mentioned; fig. 22)
- no. 7: *A Large Piece of Drapery* (app. 1, no. 9; fig. 19)

For numbers 2, 5, and 8 in Pelli Bencivenni's inventory—depicting "Draped figures, the second genuflecting, in black pencil"—the identifi-

cation is less certain. Jonathan Nelson suggested that either 2 or 8 is the *Standing Male Figure* (app. 1, no. 14) or the *Kneeling Draped Figure* (app. 1, no. 15), while 5 is the abovementioned *Kneeling Woman* (app. 1, no. 2a).¹⁶ Nelson's position seems tenable except for the *Kneeling Draped Figure*: according to the description in the Inventory, only no. 5 is of a kneeling figure. As we can see, in the temporal journey between Baldinucci's list and Pelli Bencivenni's inventory, one of the nine drawings listed in 1675 was lost along the way. I have no conclusive proof that this was a hitherto unknown sheet, *Kneeling Male Figure* (app. 1, no. 16), traced in the course of my recent exploration of the drawing collections, but, as we have seen, the inscription in Baldinucci's handwriting makes it more than likely.

Collection and Attribution History in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

After a generic citation in Luigi Scotti's 1832 "Catalogue of Original Drawings by Painters, Sculptors, and Architects" of the Uffizi, which adds nothing to our knowledge of Nelli's works,¹⁷ the total number of figure drawings by the artist was halved by the time of the directorship of Pasquale Nerino Ferri (1851-1917). In various documents, from catalogue entries and handwritten inventories¹⁸ to publications,¹⁹ Ferri noted four figure drawings already listed in vol. VI. Three of these must certainly correspond to our app. 1, nos. 7, 8a, and 10, attributed to Nelli in the handwritten entries. The identification of the fourth drawing is less certain but might be app. 1, no. 2a, the verso of which he seems to have overlooked, though it bears two inscriptions about Suor Plautilla. Alternatively, the fourth drawing could be app. 1, no. 3. On the catalogue entries for both, the alternative attributions are written: "Fra Bartolommeo Suor Plautilla Sogliani." It should be noted moreover that the two items are attributed to Nelli in the "General Inventory of Figure Drawings in Storage in the Royal Gallery of Florence, volume six, from N.º 6347 to 7756" (first copy by Sig. C. Carotti), together with drawings listed as numbers 6761 F to 6767 F.²⁰ In the same "General Inventory," nos. 6860 and 6862 (app. 1, nos. 15, 9) are also assigned to Nelli; therefore, in all the nucleus classified under her name in volume six includes a considerably larger group of drawings than the four listed by Ferri in the handwritten inventory forms. In fact, the "General Inventory" altogether assigns to Suor Plautilla the works from number

6761 to 6767 and from number 6859 to 6863,²¹ for a total of twelve drawings. Ferri, moreover, included in his forms a drawing published in 1870 in the Santarelli catalogue as a Nelli original and put in folder IV.²² Despite ever-increasing evidence that Emilio Santarelli did not acquire his drawings through national channels alone,²³ it is very probable that the *Seated Madonna Nursing* (app. 1, no. 12) has a strictly local provenance.

We can assume that the corpus of Suor Plautilla's drawings to which Berenson referred was in part that which still today remains under her name. Certainly it must have been more or less the same group established at the end of the nineteenth century by Ferri, who often retraced his steps welcoming suggestions from other scholars, meticulously recorded in his notes and inventories. It is interesting to note that Fritz Knapp, in his monograph on Fra Bartolommeo and the San Marco School, published in 1903, only lists six drawings under Nelli's name (inv. 6761-inv. 6766).²⁴

In her 1938 study, Pierattini identified thirteen drawings that were the final results of the attributions of Ferri and Santarelli: all the drawings mentioned in the "General Inventory," plus inv. 249 S (app. 1, no. 12).²⁵ She often made rather improbable associations between the drawings and paintings she attributed to Nelli, with the possible exception of the juxtaposition of the *Head of a Youth* (app. 1, no. 7; fig. 16) and the Christ of her *Last Supper* (fig. 9). Pierattini's list of drawings ends with the *Head and Shoulders of a Young Woman* (app. 1, no. 10; fig. 20), in which she sees a level of artistry decidedly above many other drawings in the nucleus, so much so that she concludes, "If this drawing too is hers, we can say that in it Nelli was much more skilful than in her paintings, where the complexity of the problems to be solved hindered her from expressing herself coherently."²⁶ Pierattini also posited that this drawing was an imitation of Raphael's *Madonna of the Goldfinch*; but in reality, if we really want to consider Raphael as a source, the *Bridgewater Madonna* is a more likely candidate, and we should not forget that similar faces recurred in the works of Fra Bartolommeo and of other artists in his circle.

The corpus of Nelli drawings at the Uffizi now comprises an additional five sheets, four of them figure drawings and one from Santarelli. All of these were transferred under Nelli's name fairly recently by Giulia Sinibaldi, Director of the GDSU from 1941 to 1964.²⁷ The five drawings (already listed above) are app. 1, nos. 1, 4, 5, 6, and 11.

Conclusion

If today we want to form an opinion on Suor Plautilla's drawing style and characteristic qualities that is as secure as possible, we must first consider the historical nucleus described in the inventory of Pelli Bencivenni, most of which were identified. Turning to the group of drawings that can be identified with certainty from the descriptions in the inventory compiled before 1793, we can hypothesize that these sheets constitute a second nucleus of possible Nelli originals, even though the different level of quality that distinguishes them causes some reasonable perplexity. The *Kneeling Draped Figure* (app. 1, no. 15; fig. 25) is the only drawing about the identification of which in the "Inventory" there are doubts, nevertheless it seems closer to what we can consider Nelli's average qualitative parameter. By contrast, the *Drapery Study* (app. 1, no. 9; fig. 19), though executed with the same technique, shows a certain measure of greater sophistication in *chiaroscuro* modeling. Finally, the face of *Head and Shoulders of a Young Woman* (app. 1, no. 10; fig. 20), though reminiscent of the typology in the *Seated Madonna Nursing* (app. 1, no. 12; fig. 21), is nevertheless rendered with a softness of *chiaroscuro* never attained elsewhere. Can this qualitative peak be explained by Vasari's praise for her portraits of women, in which Suor Plautilla seems to outdo herself, even though, if we take Vasari at his word, she never painted portraits except of individual figures within her devotional compositions?

The gravest doubts about attribution surround the *Young Male Figure with Book* (app. 1, no. 13; fig. 22), a drawing executed with confidence and good knowledge of anatomy, with a visible *pentimento* in the legs,²⁸ and the *Studies of Hands, Drapery, and a Baby's Face* (app. 1, no. 8a; fig. 18), in which the hands are much softer and more elegant than the many examples in Nelli's paintings of the *Last Supper* or *Pentecost*. The old inscription with the name Primaticcio on the verso side of app. 1, no. 8b—on the lower part of which is what seems to be a study of one of the hands of Michelangelo's *David*²⁹—should not be accepted uncritically, not least because the type of paper seems the same used in other drawings which can be attributed to Nelli with greater certainty.³⁰ Maybe this is a drawing by the school of Fra Bartolommeo which came to Suor Plautilla together with the friar's own drawings.

Turning to the four drawings with inscriptions by Baldinucci (app. 1, nos. 2, 7, 14, 16), we find that, despite the fact that they are in the same medium, the style of the drawings and their techniques are not

always consistent. This could be explained by Nelli's constant practice of copying the drawings by Fra Bartolommeo (and his school), which certainly comprised a wide spectrum of techniques and expressive registers. This practice of copying diverse models may have contributed to the enrichment of her stylistic methods, even if within one fairly consistent level of quality. Only in the partial study of Michelangelo's *Risen Christ* (app. 1, no. 2b) do we notice a drop in her usual quality, and an obvious difference in the quality of the drawings on the recto and verso sides. There are two possible explanations of this. Perhaps she copied the *Risen Christ* on the verso of a drawing by member of Fra Bartolommeo's school; alternatively, this verso drawing more openly reveals all Nelli's uncertainties and limits. Unlike the recto drawing, in the style of one Fra Bartolommeo's drawings in her possession and copied directly from it, the verso is a copy of Michelangelo's work done from memory.³¹ I prefer the second hypothesis and agree with Baldinucci: "The one on the other side seems to me to be by Suor Plautilla of S. Caterina, student of the friar." Still awaiting explanation are the lines that cancel out the drawing on the verso side; these provide eloquent testimony to an awareness of the modest quality of an unimpressive copy.

In conclusion, aside from these four drawings, I consider a further three described in the inventory of Pelli Bencivenni to be by her hand—app. 1, nos. 9, 10, 15—though with varying degrees of certainty. I would be inclined to reattribute two more drawings from the same inventory to the "School of San Marco": app. 1, nos. 8 and 13. The final results, then, are as follows: I support Baldinucci's opinion of the four drawings on which he wrote inscriptions. Others in the late eighteenth-century inventory may possibly be by Nelli (presumably in large part coinciding with those in the list, which in 1673 numbered only seven). In the *Seated Madonna Nursing* (app. 1, no. 12), the meticulous diligence in the copying of an original of Fra Bartolommeo and a certain rigidity in the lines suggests that it is Nelli's work. Finally, I leave to future research further developments to be revealed by new methodologies. In order to gain ever more reliable results, we must subject the Uffizi's vast corpus of drawings by Fra Bartolommeo and his followers—of whom the first and foremost were Fra Paolino and Giovanni Antonio Sogliani—to systematic comparative investigations of the inscriptions, the paper, and the watermarks, besides the ascertainment of techniques and styles.³² These investigations, combined together, could in part correct our perspectives and contribute to our full understanding of the transmission of various kinds of knowledge and even more so of the

movement of drawings between the Convents of San Marco and Santa Caterina.³³

In general, we can say that Suor Plautilla was Fra Bartolommeo's student, however indirectly, not only because she learned style and technique from his drawings (and those of his school) but above all because, entrenched in the Savonarolan tradition, she helped to preserve "devoutly correct"³⁴ figures, postures, acts, and compositional choices at a time when the call for simplicity, decorum, and the educational goal of art re-emerged with strength in the edicts of the Council of Trent.³⁵ In the Convent of Santa Caterina, a real "sacred workshop" in which nuns expressed their fervor through religious works in a great variety of fields,³⁶ the inheritance of the *frate* was jealously guarded and revitalized against a new historical backdrop.

Who knows if Suor Plautilla possessed a drawing by Fra Bartolommeo: a study of the *Lamentation*, now at the Uffizi (fig. 32)?³⁷ It has been reasonably hypothesized that some of the drawings at the convent were absorbed, in her time, into the collections of Cardinal Leopoldo.³⁸ If this were the case, the painter-nun could have had at her disposition, among others, that study, which she must have particularly valued for the intense and—at the same time—tender expression of pain and abandonment. Without that precedent, perhaps she would not have been able to conceive the pain-wracked body of a man—or rather of the Son of Man—in her *Lamentation*, once in the Convent of Santa Caterina (app. 2, no. 1).³⁹

Translated from the Italian by Dorothea Barrett

Checklist of Drawings Currently Catalogued as Plautilla Nelli⁴⁰

1a. *Kneeling Youth*

inv. 423 F r

1b. *Nude Legs of a Seated Child*

inv. 423 F v

Natural black chalk, traces of white chalk; natural black chalk. 24.1 x 18.8 cm (maximum size; the four corners are cut)

Inscription: pen and ink, in the lower margin of the recto side, to the right: "Albertinelli"

Watermark: Briquet n. 7392 (Lucca, 1516-18)

2a. *Kneeling Woman* (fig. 14)

inv. 6762 F r

2b. Partial study of Michelangelo's *Risen Christ* at Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome (fig. 15)

inv. 6762 F v

Two types of natural black chalk, of which one is softer, with traces of white on the recto, 27.8 x 19.3 cm

Inscriptions: on verso, four marks in black pencil over the image and two inscriptions in pen and ink, in different hands and at different heights. Upper, "By suor Plautilla, student of the Friar"; lower, "The one on the other side seems to be by Suor Plautilla of S. Caterina, student of the Friar"⁴¹

3. *Draped Figure, Kneeling, Facing Right*

inv. 6764 F

Natural black chalk, traces of red chalk and lead white, on light brown prepared paper, 28.6 x 20.9 cm

Inscription, in pen, in the lower left corner: "Friar"⁴²

4. *Young Woman (Madonna?), Draped and Seated*

inv. 6820 F

Two types of black chalk, of which one is softer, traces of lead white, watermarked paper, prepared on the recto side in deep blue, 31.9 x 21.2 cm

5. *Madonna and Child with Four Saints*

inv. 6830 F

Black chalk on light brown paper, prepared on both the recto and the verso sides, 27.3 x 33.8 cm; on the verso side, traces of drawing in black chalk

Inscription in pen: "It seems to be by Fra Bartolommeo"⁴³

6. *Draped Figure, Kneeling, Facing Left*

inv. 6842 F

Two types of black chalk, of which one is softer, traces of white chalk, 18.7 x 16.2 cm

Inscription, in the lower-left corner, in pen: "Friar"⁴⁴

7. *Head of a Youth in Three-Quarter Profile, Facing Right* (fig. 16)

inv. 6859 F

Soft black chalk, traces of lead white partially oxidized and perhaps applied later, 19.3 x 14.3 cm

Inscription: on verso, near center, in pen: "Suor Plautilla nun in S. Caterina" (fig. 17)⁴⁵

8a. *Studies of Hands, Drapery, and a Baby's Face* (fig. 18)

inv. 6861 F r

8b. *Study of Two Hands Holding an Object*

inv. 6861 F v

Two types of black chalk, of which one is softer, red chalk and lead white probably applied at different times, 29.1 x 18.4 cm. On the verso side, black chalk

Inscriptions: in the lower-right-hand corner of the recto side, in pen and ink: "6"; on the verso side, in pen and ink, "Primiticcio"

9. *Drapery Study* (fig. 19)

inv. 6862 F

Two types of black chalk, of which one is softer, traces of lead white, 24.5 x 25 cm

10. *Head and Shoulders of a Young Woman* (fig. 20)

inv. 6863 F

Black chalk, *sfumino*, lead white, 32.3 x 23.2 cm; laid down

11. *Draped Figure, Headless, Facing Right*

inv. 80 S

Two types of black chalk, of which one is softer, traces of brush-strokes, 19.3 x 21.6 cm; laid down⁴⁶

12. *Seated Madonna Nursing* (fig. 21)

inv. 249 S

Black chalk, pen and brown ink, wash and/or ink in part diluted, highlights in lead white partially oxidized on watermarked paper, 24 x 19.2 cm (maximum dimensions: the sheet is cut following the outline of the figure and integrated with old paper)

Inscription: recto, from the center down, in pen and ink: "By Suor Plautilla, student of the Friar"⁴⁷

Additional Drawings Previously Catalogued as Plautilla Nelli

13. *Young Male Figure with Book* (fig. 22)

inv. 6766 F

Black chalk, highlights in lead white oxidized on watermarked paper, 28.5 x 17.6 cm

14. *Standing Male Figure, with a Large Mantle (Cope?), Facing Left, Partial Study of the Mantle* (fig. 23)

inv. 6767 F

Two types of black chalk, of which one is softer, traces of lead white, watermarked paper prepared in grey, 27.2 x 18.5. On the verso side two strips of paper have been glued on

Inscription: at the bottom of the verso side, running from the left-hand side towards the center, in pen and ink: "It seems to me it could be by Suor Plautilla, student of the Friar" (fig. 24)⁴⁸

15. *Kneeling Draped Figure, with the Right Hand Extended Forward and the Left on the Chin* (fig. 25)

inv. 6860 F

Two types of black chalk, of which one is softer, traces of lead white partially oxidized, 22.8 x 19 cm (cut around the outline of the figure); laid down

16. *Kneeling Male Figure with Hands Together, Facing Left* (fig. 26)

inv. 6804 F

Black chalk, lead white partially oxidized and perhaps in part added later, 27.5 x 17.3 cm. On the verso side, the paper has been reinforced at the four angles with paper supports

Inscriptions: from left towards the center, in pen, at two heights. Upper: "By Suor Plautilla student of the Friar"; lower, partially covered by the reinforcement paper: "I think it is by Suor Plautilla of S. Caterina student of the Friar"¹⁴⁹

17. *Annunciation*

inv. 6761 F

Two types of black chalk, of which one is softer, lead white, on paper painted with brown watercolor on both sides, 33.6 x 22.6 cm

18. *Seated Draped Female Figure (Virgin Annunciate?)*

inv. 6763 F

Soft black chalk, lead white partially oxidized, on paper painted with brown watercolor on both sides, 27 x 16.9 cm (lower-right corner missing), the verso side reinforced with paper supports at the corners

19. *Kneeling Female Figure, with Mantle, Facing Viewer*

inv. 6765 F

Two types of black chalk, of which one is softer, 18.8 x 16.4 cm (the two upper corners missing), the verso side reinforced with paper supports at the corners

ENDNOTES

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1. The original Italian inscriptions are provided in the notes. As discussed below, several of these can be attributed to Filippo Baldinucci, who compiled an early inventory of the drawings collection, now in the Uffizi. As noted by Andrea Muzzi, in this volume, the inscriptions on GDSU, inv. 6859F and inv. 6762F were written at a time when "a reference to Nelli was not suspect." Catherine Turrill, in this volume, observes that Baldinucci mentioned some of the women artists who worked in Nelli's Convent of Santa Caterina.

2. See especially Pierattini, 1938, 38-45; Jonathan Nelson, "Introduction," in idem, ed., 2000, 5, 6-7. Nelson's n. 14 contains an identification of the drawings according to the "Inventory" of Pelli Bencivenni *ante* 1793, which I discuss later; on the same page, Nelson discusses inv. 6762 F, which he also mentions in Fortunati, Pomeroy, and Strinati, ed., 2007, 103. On Nelli's drawings see also Muzzi, 2000, 36, 40 (in n. 19, he discusses inv. 6859 F and inv. 6762 F).

3. Berenson, 1938, I: 165. It is referred to in Muzzi, 2000, 40, n. 18.

4. Radke, 2000, 13, with further bibliography.

5. The "Lista de' nomi de' pittori, di mano de' quali si hanno disegni ..." was published by Anna Forlani Tempesti, in eadem and Petrioli Tofani, ed., 1972, 75-82, appendix I (citation on page 80), and by Paola Barocchi in Baldinucci, 1975, VI: 181-203.

6. See app. 3.

7. Vasari, 1996, I: 679. For discussion of the passage, see especially

Ragghianti Collobi, 1974, 98.

8. Two years later, the drawings were assembled in two albums, both now at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam; see Fischer, ed., 1986, 11-12, with the preceding bibliography; idem, 1990, 18-20.

9. Baldinucci, 1845, I: 75. On Gabburri, see Barbolani di Montauto, 2006, 83-94; and eadem and Turner, 2007, with the preceding bibliography.

10. Inv. 523 E; see Fischer, 1986, 108, n. 58.

11. GDSU, ms III, cc. 37, 738; published in Barocchi, 1977, II: 571-78, 574.

12. "Nota de libri de disegni [...]," 1687, ASF, Guardaroba, fol. 779; "Affari diversi," inserto n. 9, cc. 995-1027, ms transcribed by Lucia Monaci Moran, in Petrioli Tofani, 1987, appendix I, 743-51 (see 749, c. 1019 r: "Suor Plautilla al 7° L. U. le a c. 34 D 8"). The "Nota" was published for the first time in Gaeta Bertelà, 1982, 107-45 (with transcriptions on 128-42).

13. "Inventario generale della Real Galleria di Firenze compilato nel 1784 essendo Direttore della medesima Giuseppe Bencivenni già Pelli N. P. F. colla presenza, ed assistenza, del Sig.^{ro} Pietro Mancini Ministro dell'Uffizio delle Revisioni, e Sindacati, vol. I, che contiene i marmi, le pitture, i disegni, e le terre, classe III^a, disegni stampe e libri, articolo I, disegni gabinetto dei medesimi," Florence, Biblioteca degli Uffizi, ms 113, c. 351: "Suor Plautilla 8."

14. Giuseppe Pelli Bencivenni, "Inventario dei disegni, ante 1793," GDSU, ms 102, 4 vols. Suor Plautilla's drawings appear in vol. III. See also the "Indice alfabetico dei disegni della R. Galleria," Florence, Biblioteca degli Uffizi, ms 463/1-3: part I, vol. II, under "Suor Plautilla," c. 144 of recent numeration in pencil.

15. Nelson, ed., 2000, 6, n. 14.

16. See above n. 2.

17. Luigi Scotti, "Catalogo dei disegni originali dei pittori, scultori, et architetti, che si conservano nella celebre collezione esistente nella Imperiale e Reale Galleria di Firenze," 1832, GDSU, ms; on page 36 "Plautilla Suor Nelli" is mentioned in the alphabetical listing, the drawings, which are kept in *cartella* 3. Scotti's catalogue includes annotations up through 1837.

18. Pasquale Nerino Ferri, "Catalogo descrittivo dei disegni della R. Galleria degli Uffizi esposti al pubblico [...] compilato da P. N. Ferri dal 1879 al 1881" (inventory of handwritten entries in GDSU); idem, "Disegni di figura in armadi dal N° 1 al N° 18.940" (inventory of handwritten entries in GDSU) [dated November 1887 on the first entry; the catalogue was later continued through no. 21.076 F]; idem, "Catalogo dei disegni, cartoni e bozzetti esposti al pubblico nella R. Galleria degli Uffizi ed in altri musei di Firenze [...], Firenze MDCCCXCV-MCMI," GDSU, ms.

19. Ferri, 1881; idem, 1885; and idem 1890.

20. For details see checklist below: inv. 6761 F (app. 1, no. 17), inv. 6762 F (app. 1, no. 2a), inv. 6763 F (app. 1, no. 18), inv. 6764 F (app. 1, no. 3), inv. 6765 F (app. 1, no. 19); inv. 6766 F (app. 1, no. 13), inv. 6767 F (app. 1, no. 14).

21. Inv. 6859 (app. 1, no. 7); inv. 6860 (app. 1, no. 15); inv. 6861 (app. 1, no. 8); inv. 6862 (app. 1, no. 9); inv. 6863 (app. 1, no. 10).

22. Santarelli, Burci, and Rondoni, 1870, 23-26, 25 ("La Vergine seduta che allatta il Figlio. Penna, bistro e biacca; carta gialletta"). The drawing (GDSU, inv. 249 S; app. 1, no. 12), is the last of the nucleus of twenty-three thought to be by Fra Bartolommeo (inv. 225 S-247 S), immediately after a sheet ascribed to the "Scuola del Frate" (inv. 248 S) and before a group classified under the name of Giovanni Antonio Sogliani (inv. 250-64).

23. Besides Forlani Tempesti et al., ed., 1967, indications of provenance, from which we understand that Santarelli's sources were not only Italian, can be found in the bibliography of Agosti, ed., 2001, 15.

24. Knapp, 1903, 296 (see also 276, 300).

25. Pierattini, 1938, 38-41; she lists inv. 249 S among the paintings and drawings that she is certain are Nelli's (44) and another twelve among those attributed to her (45).

26. Ibid., 41.

27. Giulia Sinibaldi based her identifications on those of Bianca Mori.

28. The same doubts have been expressed in Pierattini, 1938, 40.

29. I would like to thank Giorgio Marini for alerting me to this.

30. See app. 1, nos. 1, 2, 5, 8, 13, 14.

31. Nelson, ed., 2000, 7, suggests that Nelli's sketch is of the marble copy of Michelangelo's work, sculpted by Taddeo Landini in 1579 and located in the church of Santo Spirito in Florence.

32. For the purposes of this essay, investigations have been done of the paper of the drawings that are presently classified under the name of Suor Plautilla and of some other drawings selected from the workshop of Fra Bartolommeo, and reliefs and photographs have been taken of the watermarks by Maurizio Boni, Luciano Mori, and Roberto Palermo (Restoration Laboratory and Photographic Laboratory of the GDSU). These first tests established that the paper used for all these drawings was similar, probably a kind already in circulation in Nelli's time.

33. On this topic also, see Muzzi in this volume.

34. On the writings of Savonarola and their impact on the figurative arts, with bibliography, see Menozzi, 1995, 169-72.

35. See Evangelisti, 2000, 67-82.

36. See Turrill, 2000b, 83-102, and her essay in this volume.

37. Inv. 362 F; see Fischer, 1986, 118-19, n. 67, fig. 89.

38. Ibid., 1986, 11-12.

39. See Muzzi in Padovani, ed., 1996, 262, n. 87, with preceding bibliography.

40. For inventory entries on the figure drawings, see Petrioli Tofani, 1991.

41. "Di suor Plautilla scolare del frate"; "Il di là mi pare di sor Plautilla di S. Caterina allieva del frate."

42. "Frare." Often, in the early inscriptions on drawings by Fra Bartolommeo and his circle, his title of friar (*frate*) appears as "frare."

43. "Pare del Fra' Bartolommeo."

44. "Frare."

45. "Sor Plautilla monaca in S. Caterina."

46. Santarelli, Burci, and Rondoni, 1870, 9, n. 2; this sheet was assigned to Lorenzo di Credi.

47. "Di Suor Plautilla allieva del Frate."

48. "Mi pare che possa essere di Sor Plautilla allieva del frate."

49. "Di Suor Plautilla scolare del frate"; "[m]ipar di Sor Plautilla di S. Caterina allieva del frate."

APPENDIX 2

LIST OF PAINTINGS ATTRIBUTED TO NELLI¹

CATHERINE TURRILL

EDITOR'S NOTE: THIS CHECKLIST INCLUDES ALL PAINTINGS WHICH HAVE been attributed to Plautilla Nelli: extant works in the first part, lost or untraced ones in the second, and rejected or doubtful attributions in the third. The first two sections have subdivisions, first documented paintings, then possible attributions to Nelli mentioned in later sources. Within each subsection, works are arranged in order of their current or last known location. Documented works include the following: those mentioned in the obituary of Nelli by Fra Modesto Biliotti and in the chronicle of the convent of Santa Caterina by Francesco Maria Rucellai, both discussed by Catherine Turrill in her essay in this volume; the published accounts of Nelli by Giorgio Vasari and Serafino Razzi, transcribed in app. 3; and other convent records. For an earlier version of this checklist, see Turrill, 2000.

Extant Paintings

Documented Works

1. Florence, Museo di San Marco

Lamentation, oil on panel; 288 x 192 cm (figs. 1-4)

Original location: Florence, Santa Caterina (church, right altar)

Archive records: a hand-written notation on the cover of the file for her father's legacy mentions Nelli's authorship of "una tavola all'altare a man destra" (ASF, CRSGF, 106, no. 117, filza prima)

Sixteenth-century sources: Vasari, 1568; Biliotti, 1588; Razzi, 1596

2. Florence, Santa Maria Novella (friars' refectory)

Last Supper, oil on canvas; ca. 175 x 525 cm (figs. 8-11)

Original location: Florence, Santa Caterina (convent refectory)

Inscription: "S. Plautilla. Orate pro pictora"

Archive records: a hand-written notation on the cover of the file for the Nelli legacy, cited in app. 2, no. 1, mentions "il Cenacolo di Refettorio"

Sixteenth-century sources: Vasari, 1568; Biliotti, 1588

3. Perugia, San Domenico (left transept, *in situ*)

Pentecost, oil on canvas (figs. 12-13)

Inscription (visible section): "S. Plautilla faciebat"

Sixteenth-century sources: Biliotti, 1588; Razzi, 1596

Comment: This may be the painting that was sent outside Florence by the director (*spedalingo*) of the Ospedale di San Matteo (Ospedale di Lemmo, or Lemo), according to Vasari. Comparing it to Nelli's altarpiece in Pistoia (app. 2, no. 24), he said it was "un'altra tavola grande." It was commissioned for an altar endowed by Perugian jurist Guglielmo Pontani (died 1555). According to the "Registro della chiesa e sacristia di San Domenico" (BCP), Pontani's heirs finished his "cappella o altare" in 1556.

Possible Attributions

4. Florence, Certosa di Galluzzo

Crucifixion, oil on panel; 145 x 232 cm

Original location: Florence, Santa Caterina (convent)

Comment: This is one of three semi-circular paintings attributed to Nelli at the time of the convent's suppression (number 293 in the 1810 inventory, AABAF; see also app. 2, nos. 5 and 6. Its subject approximates that of a painting commissioned by Suor Arcangela Viola for the convent of Santa Caterina in the late 1500s. According to Rucellai, this nun ordered a painting "alla somiglianza" of one of her visions of the Passion of Christ for installation over a staircase that featured in her personal imitation of the Calvary. The Certosa painting depicts Christ crucified in a landscape between two instruments of the Passion, the lance and the sponge-topped staff.

5. Florence, Cenacolo di Andrea del Sarto (Storage)

Saint Catherine of Siena in Prayer, oil on panel

Original location: Florence, Santa Caterina (convent)

Comment: Number 291 in the 1810 inventory (AABAF). The lunette was identified while this appendix was in galley proofs and will be the subject of a forthcoming publication by Fausta Navarro. In the 1810 inventory, it was described as "Un quadro à lunetta rappresentante Santa Caterina in orazione, buon grado," and was attributed to Nelli. Together with app. 2, no. 6, it was sent to the Convent of San Domenico al Maglio in about 1816 (AABAF)

6. Florence, Cenacolo di Andrea del Sarto (Storage)

Saint Dominic Receiving the Rosary, oil on panel

Original location: Florence, Santa Caterina (convent)

Comment: Number 294 in the 1810 inventory (AABAF). The lunette was identified while this appendix was in galley proofs and will be the subject of a forthcoming publication by Fausta Navarro. In the 1810 inventory, it was described as "Un quadro à mezza lunetta rappresentante la SS.ma Vergine che dà il rosario a San Domenico, opera in buon grado," and attributed to Nelli. Together with app. 2, no. 5, it was sent to the Convent of San Domenico al Maglio in about 1816 (AABAF).

7. London, Sotheby's (23 October 1993; lot no. 7)

Madonna and Child in a Landscape, oil on panel; 45.5 x 33 cm

Comment: Based on a larger painting attributed to Albertinelli (Venice, Seminario Patriarcale), this panel was assigned to an anonymous follower of Fra Bartolommeo when it went up for auction in London. An inscription, "Plantilla" (*sic*), on the panel's verso indicates a previous attribution to Nelli, which is further supported by the painting's style, subject, and size.

Lost or Untraced Paintings

Documented Works

8. Florence, Duomo

Scenes from the Life of Saint Zenobius

Sixteenth-century sources: Vasari, 1568; Razzi, 1596

Comment: Razzi describes the painting as "una predella in cui sono

le storie della vita di San Zenobi Vescovo di detta Città, con molta diligenza condotta." Vasari said the scenes were "molto belle."

9. Florence, Santa Caterina da Siena (church, left altar)

Adoration of the Magi, oil on canvas; ca. 288 x 190 cm

Sixteenth-century sources: Vasari, 1568; Biliotti, 1588; Razzi, 1596

Comment: According to Razzi, this altarpiece was more admired than the *Lamentation* (app. 2, no. 1). It was later listed as in the Corridoio Vasariano (AABAF, 1810); and then in the Galleria degli Uffizi, in the "stanze inferiori" (Marchese, 1846, II: 262). Lanzi, 1822, I: 130, praised the landscape: "... con paese da fare onore a un moderno." The 1810 inventory entry (AABAF) reports that it was on canvas, had an arched top, and measured 5 x 3 ¼ *braccia* (i.e., about the same size as the *Lamentation*).

10. Florence, Santa Caterina da Siena (convent, apartment of Father Confessor)

Nativity

Sixteenth-century sources: Vasari, 1568; Razzi, 1596

Comment: According to Vasari, this *quadro* was copied after the painting of the *Nativity* that Bronzino had done for Filippo Salviati (now Budapest, Szépművészeti Múzeum). According to Borghini (*Il Riposo*, 1584, 535), Filippo's son Antonio, a benefactor of Santa Caterina, is said to have permitted other artists to study or copy it. Nelli also could have based her copy on the engraving by Giorgio Ghisi (1553-54).

11. Florence, Santa Caterina da Siena (convent, dormitory, oratory of the Virgin)

God the Father with Angels, Saint Dominic, and Saint Catherine of Siena

Archive records: ASF, CRSGF, 106, no. 35

Comment: According to the convent records, this painting was made in 1586 to enclose a tabernacle containing an older painting of the Virgin that came from Prato after the sacking of the city in 1512 (ASF, CRSGF, 106, no. 35, 222r). Neither work was found in Santa Caterina in 1810. However, a similar painting was listed in the inventory of the Dominican convent of Santa Croce (La Crocetta) at this time: "Un quadro in tavola nel mezzo aperto, e dalle parti dipinti, alto B 1 2/3, largo B. 3 5/6 rapp. un santo ed una santa domenicana" (AABAF). All published references are to the painting of the Virgin only (Richa, 1759, VIII: 284).

12. Florence, Santa Caterina da Siena (convent, dormitory?)

Crucifixion

Documentation: Fra Cipriano de' Servi, "Ricordanze" (ASF, CRSGF, 102)

Comment: Painted in 1576 for Suor Ubbidenza di Carlo Strozzi, this may have been intended for her cell. Its reported cost (14 *lire*) corresponds to that of small devotional images purchased by other nuns during this period (Turrill, 2003).

13. Florence, Santa Caterina da Siena (convent, nuns' infirmary)

Christ with Three Dominican Martyrs

Archive records: signed affidavit by Nelli in 1579 acknowledging her receipt of 20 *scudi* "per fare una tavola nell'androne della nostra infermeria" (ASF, CRSGF, 106, no. 162)

Comment: A successive entry in the convent's records identifies this painting as "la tavola dei martiri" (ASF, CRSGF, 106, no. 162). According to Rucellai, the painting of "Giesù con i tre martiri" was installed "nell'andito dell'infermeria di sotto," as the patron, Marietta Carnesecchi, had requested. From contemporary references to other depictions of this type of subject, the "three martyrs" can be identified as Fra Girolamo Savonarola and his companions, Fra Domenico Buonvicini and Fra Silvestro Maruffi. In Turrill, 2000a, the infirmary painting was tentatively identified with a related work now in San Domenico, Fiesole (*Christ, the Madonna, and Three Dominican Martyrs*; app. 2, no. 39). However, this probably is by Zanobi Poggini, who died in 1564, and thus unrelated to the Carnesecchi commission. Nelli's painting for the convent is not mentioned in the 1810 inventory.

14. Florence, Santa Caterina da Siena (convent, pharmacy or dormitory?)

Manuscript illumination

Archive records: Fra Cipriano de' Servi, "Ricordanze" (ASF, CRSGF, 102)

Comment: Suor Maria Benigna de' Servi, Fra Cipriano's sister and the convent's pharmacist (*spetiale*), paid Nelli 12 *lire* in 1576 "per il minio e ornamento," presumably of a manuscript book.

15. Florence, Santa Caterina da Siena (convent, refectory or dormitory?)

Virgin Mary

Archive records: Fra Cipriano de' Servi, "Ricordanze" (ASF, CRSGF, 102)

Comment: The nun who oversaw the convent's refectory (*refettoraia*),

Suor Maria Clemente, was named in a transaction from May 1576 involving a small painting of the *Virgin Mary* by Nelli ("una Vergine Maria;" 14 *lire*). It may have been intended for a nun's cell.

16. Florence, Santa Caterina da Siena (convent, workroom)

Subject unknown; painting on panel

Sixteenth-century source: Vasari, 1568

17. Florence, Santa Caterina da Siena (convent, workroom?)

Saint Vincent Ferrer, painted on a lectern

Archive records: Fra Cipriano de' Servi, "Ricordanze" (ASF, CRSGF, 102)

Comment: Since this lectern was made for Margherita di Matteo Strozzi, its intended destination may have been the Dominican convent of San Vincenzo in Prato, where she had a small apartment (Turrill, 2003). In 1575, Nelli was paid two *lire* to decorate it.

18. Florence, San Giovanni dei Gesuati (later called San Giovannino dei PP. Scolopi)

Madonna

Sixteenth-century sources: Vasari, 1568; Razzi, 1596

Comment: According to Razzi, this small painting (*quadretto*) was "very beautiful."

19. Florence, San Niccolò di Cafaggio

Nativity

Archive records: Fra Tommaso Martini, "Ricordanze" (APCSM)

Comment: In a passage dating from 1559-60, Martini described the painting as "uno quadro di una natività ... con una cornicietta dorata" (valued at ten *lire*). Like the two paintings of Benedictine saints (app. 2, nos. 20-21), it was commissioned by Fra Tommaso's sister, Suor Lorenza di Vincenzo Martini, a nun at the Benedictine convent of San Niccolò.

20. Florence, San Niccolò di Cafaggio

Saints Benedict and Maurus

Archive records: Fra Tommaso Martini, "Ricordanze" (APCSM)

Comment: In a passage dating from 1559-60, Martini described these two small panels among the four paintings commissioned by Suor Lorenza Martini (valued at ten *lire*). Possibly, they were joined as a diptych.

21. Florence, San Niccolò di Cafaggio

Saint Benedict Giving the Rule to Saint Maurus, oil on canvas

Archive records: Fra Tommaso Martini, "Ricordanze" (APCSM)

Comment: In a passage dating from 1559-60, Martini described the painting as "un quadretto di ½ braccio in tela" (valued at five *lire*).

22. Florence, Collection of Marietta de' Fedini

Annunciation

Sixteenth-century source: Vasari, 1568

Comment: According to Vasari, Marietta de' Fedini owned a "gran quadro" of the *Annunciation* painted by Nelli. She can be identified as Marietta di Francesco Guardi, wife of Antonio di Piero Fedini (Turrill, 2003).

23. Florence, Collection of Wife of Fabio d'Arazzola, Marchese of Mondragone

Annunciation

Sixteenth-century source: Vasari, 1568

Comment: According to Vasari, the wife of this Spanish nobleman owned a painting of the *Annunciation* by Nelli that resembled one she had made for Marietta de' Fedini (app. 2, no. 22).

24. Pistoia, Santa Lucia (church choir)

Madonna Holding the Christ Child with Saints Thomas, Augustine, Mary Magdalene, Catherine of Siena, Agnes, Catherine of Alexandria, and Lucy, oil on panel

Archive records: ASF, CRS GF, 106, no. 53

Sixteenth-century sources: Vasari, 1568; Razzi, 1596

Comment: Vasari described Nelli's altarpiece as "una grande tavola." Fioravanti, 1758, said the "tavola" was "tanto eccellente" that he was reminded of Ariosto's assertion that women excelled in any art in which they exerted themselves ("Le Donne son venute in eccellenza/Di ciascun'arte, ov'hanno posto cura"). This may be the "quadro da Santa Lucia" for which Nelli reported a payment in March 1559. As was the case with another painting sent to a destination outside Florence (app. 2, no. 3), an administrator from a nearby hospital seems to have been involved in the transaction. The "priori di Bonifazio," the Ospedale di San Giovanni, is mentioned in the payment record.

25. Rome, Collection of Annibale Caro

Subject unknown; small painting (*quadretto*)

Sixteenth-century source: Silvano Razzi ("Compendio delle vite de' pittori," BNCF)

Comment: Don Silvano Razzi said that he gave this "molto lodato" painting to Annibale Caro, who died in November 1566. Razzi had visited Caro earlier in the year and also corresponded with him. The 1578 inventory of Caro's collection included a framed, anonymous "quadretto" in oil of the Madonna kneeling—plausibly the type of small devotional picture that the Camaldolese friar would have given him (Turrill, 2003).

Possible Attributions

26. Florence, Collection of Giovanni Battista Clemente Nelli

Crucifixion

Sources: Ildelfonso, 1783 (XVII: 127), and Lanzi, 1822 (I: 130)

Comment: Judging from descriptions written when the work was in G. B. Clemente Nelli's collection, it was a small painting (1 ¼ *braccia* high) filled with small, carefully studied figures—the kind of miniature work for which Nelli was renowned, according to contemporary accounts.

27. Florence, Santa Caterina (convent)

Virgin and Child with Saints Catherine and Dominic, panel, ca. 174 x 145 cm

Comment: This painting was attributed to Nelli in the inventory compiled after the convent's suppression in 1809-10 (AABAF) and may be the same as a work found at Santa Maria Novella a half century later (app. 2, no. 30). In the 1810 inventory (no. 292), it is described as "un quadro rappresentante la Vergine con Gesù Bambino e Santa Caterina, in buon grado, dipinto in tavola (alt. B. 3; larg. B 2 ½)."

28. Florence, Santa Lucia in Via San Gallo

Madonna and Child with the Young Saint John the Baptist

Comment: In 1808, after the suppression of the convent of Santa Lucia in Via San Gallo, an inventory (AABAF), was compiled of the paintings found there, including three that were attributed to Nelli (app. 2, nos. 28, 29, and 33). The 1808 inventory listed, under no. 544, "Suor Plautilla.

Un quadro rappresentante la Madonna, Gesù, e San Giovannino, tavola; alt. B. 1 ½, larg. B. 1 1/5," in mediocre condition. According to the inventory this may have been acquired by an art-dealer named Volpini. A painting of the same subject, formerly in the Palazzo Corsini, has been identified with this work (app. 2, no. 44). If that is correct, this work was not painted by Nelli.

29. Florence, Santa Lucia in Via San Gallo
Madonna and Child

Comment: See previous entry. The 1808 inventory listed, under no. 545, "Suor Plautilla. Un quadro rappresentante la Madonna, e Gesù Bambino, tavola; alt. B. 1 ½, larg. B. 1 1/5," and in mediocre condition. According to the inventory, this painting was sent to Santa Caterina. If so, it may be the work that Colzi saw in the Scuola di Contrappunto in 1817 (app. 2, no. 31). The nuns of Santa Lucia purchased a painting of the Virgin from Santa Caterina for fourteen *lire* in 1576. Its author is not named in the account book entry (ASF, CRSGF, 106).

30. Florence, Santa Maria Novella, Cappella del Noviziato
Virgin and Child Enthroned between Saints Dominic and Peter Martyr, oil on canvas glued to panel; 160 x 115 cm

Comment: In subject and support, this painting is similar to one listed in the inventory compiled at Santa Caterina in 1810 (app. 2, no. 27), but slightly smaller. When examined in 1862, it was described as badly damaged and beyond repair (ASBASF).

31. Florence, Stabilmanto (Conservatorio) di Santa Caterina
Holy Family

Comment: This painting was attributed to Nelli by Colzi (1817, 70) and described as in the Scuola di Contrappunto of the former convent, after its conversion to an art academy. It may have come from Santa Lucia (app. 2, no. 29). It is not included in the 1855 edition of Colzi's guide.

32. Florence, Stabilmanto (Conservatorio) di Santa Caterina
Subject unknown

Comment: This painting was attributed to Nelli by Colzi (1817, 76) and described as in the Scuola di Meccanica of the former convent, after its conversion to an art academy. It is not included in the 1855 edition of Colzi's guide.

Doubtful and Rejected Attributions

33. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie
Christ in the House of Mary Magdalene and Martha (inv. no. 250), oil on panel, 253 x 258 cm

Comment: This dated painting (1524) was assigned to Nelli in the 1810 inventory of paintings found in Santa Lucia in Via San Gallo, Florence (AABAF). It has since been reattributed to Antonio del Ceraio together with its companion predella, now in Cortona (Accademia Etrusca), which had been assigned to Albertinelli in 1810 (Zeri, 1967, 141-44).

34-35. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts

Virgin of the Annunciation (inv. no. 684), oil on copper; 17.78 x 12.7 cm
Archangel Gabriel (inv. no. 685), oil on copper; 17.78 x 12.7 cm

Comment: These two paintings from the collection of Aimée and Rosamond Lamb (Boston) were attributed to Nelli at the time of their accession in 1978. They are now identified as anonymous copies after the "Master of the Miraculous Annunciation of Santissima Annunziata" (Murphy, 1985, 180-81). Judging from photographs, they are not by Nelli.

36. California, Private Collection

Portrait of Fra Girolamo Savonarola, oil on canvas; 61 x 45.7 cm

Comment: Assigned to an anonymous eighteenth-century artist when it was auctioned at Sotheby's (New York) in 1980, the painting later was re-attributed to Nelli by Robert Simon (idem, 2005). The attribution is intriguing but difficult to confirm based only on comparisons with Nelli's extant paintings in Florence and Perugia. Simon noted the similarities between this work and the *Christ, the Madonna, and Three Dominican Martyrs* in Fiesole, San Domenico, formerly attributed to Nelli (app. 2, no. 39).

37. Dijon, Musée des Beaux-Arts

Holy Family with Infant Saint John (inv. no. 69), oil on panel; 66 x 50 cm

Comment: In the catalogues of the collection of Giovanni Pietro Campana in Rome (*Cataloghi*, 1859), this painting and the work now in Nancy (app. 2, no. 48) were ascribed to Nelli. It has since been attributed to an anonymous imitator of Andrea del Sarto (Guillaume, 1980, 4).

38. Empoli, Museo della Collegiata di Sant'Andrea
Madonna and Child with Saint Catherine and Two Angels, or Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine (inv. no. 71), oil on panel; 84 x 62 cm
 Comment: Assigned to Nelli in a nineteenth-century inventory (1863) and by later authors, it is now listed as "attributed" in the museum catalogue (Proto Pisani, 2006, 112). Judging from the published photos, this may not be by Nelli.

39. Fiesole, San Domenico
Christ, the Madonna, and Three Dominican Martyrs, oil on panel, 160 x 201 cm
 Comment: In Turrill, 2000, this painting was tentatively identified with the work commissioned for the infirmary of Santa Caterina by Marietta Carnesecchi (app. 2, no. 13). However, it is probably by Zanobi Poggini, as Muzzi suggests (in Padovani, ed., 1996, 259-60, no. 86).

40. Florence, Museo del Bigallo
Madonna and Child with Saints Martin, Blaise, Catherine of Alexandria, John the Baptist, Cecilia, and Lucy (inv. no. 19), panel; 105 x 164 cm
 Comment: Attributed to Nelli by Pierattini, 1938, 31-32, and others, this painting has since been assigned to an anonymous follower of Benozzo Gozzoli, appropriate for the fifteenth-century style (Kiel, 1977, 123).

41. Florence, Museo di San Marco
Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints Mary Magdalene, Catherine, and Other Saints, oil on panel, 283 x 218 cm
 Comment: Formerly installed in the nuns' choir at Santa Caterina, this painting was assigned to Nelli when the convent was suppressed in 1810 (no. 303; AABAF). For the convincing attribution to Fra Paolino, see Muzzi in Padovani, ed., 1996, 253-54, no. 81.

42. Florence, Museo di San Marco (Library)
Antiphonary E (inv. no. 51)
 Comment: This choral book is said to have come from Santa Maria Novella, and has an illumination that includes Dominican nuns: *Purification of the Virgin*, on 233v. It was formerly associated with Nelli but has since been dated in the late fifteenth century by D'Ancona, 1914, II: 534.

43. Florence, Museo di San Marco (Library)
Antiphonary C (inv. no. 52)
 Comment: This choral book is said to have come from Santa Maria Novella, and has an illumination that includes Dominican nuns: *Virgin and Saint Joseph*, on 2v. It was formerly assigned to Nelli's school but has since been dated in the late fifteenth century by D'Ancona, 1914, 2: 535.

44. Florence, Palazzo Corsini (formerly)
Madonna and Child with Infant Saint John the Baptist (no. 172), oil on canvas; 70 x 60 cm
 Comment: This painting was assigned to Nelli by Fantozzi, 1842, 559; Pierattini, 1938, 36 and 44; and others. Some writers believe it may have come from Santa Lucia in Via San Gallo. However, the only painting of this subject identified in the 1810 inventory was on panel (app. 2, no. 28). Regardless, the ex-Corsini painting is probably not by Nelli. The style suggests the work of an earlier sixteenth-century painter.

45. Florence, Santa Trinita
Marriage of Saint Catherine, oil on panel
 Comment: formerly installed over the high altar of the church at Santa Caterina, this painting was assigned to Nelli when the convent was suppressed in 1810 (no. 290; AABAF). For the convincing attribution to Antonio del Ceraiolo, see Zeri, 1967, 146-47.

46. Florence, Sotheby's (27 November 1989; lot 264)
Madonna and Child with Four Angels, oil on panel; 107 x 81 cm
 Comment: assigned to Nelli in the sale catalogue.

47. London, Sotheby's (July 30, 1932; ex-collection of A. Laws)
Madonna and Child, 27 x 21 cm
 Comment: This painting was attributed to Nelli in the sale catalogue, but judging from a photograph in the archive at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence (no. 87251), it does not seem to be by her.

48. Nancy, Musée des Beaux-Arts
Annunciation with Saints (inv. no. 7), oil on panel; 104 x 76 cm
 Comment: In the catalogues of the collection of Giovanni Pietro Campana in Rome (*Cataloghi*, 1859), this painting and the work now in Dijon (app. 2, no. 37) were ascribed to Nelli. It is now recognized to be a copy of Fra Bartolommeo's 1515 Louvre altarpiece.

49. Parma, Pinacoteca Nazionale

Adoration of the Magi, oil on panel, 195 x 248 cm

Comment: Formerly assumed to have been the altarpiece that Nelli painted for the left altar of the church at Santa Caterina (see Ricci, 1896, 39-41; Pierattini, 1938, 42-43), this painting was reattributed to Giovanni Battista Volponi (called "Lo Scalabrino") by Muzzi (idem, 2000, 36-37). It came from Santa Chiara in Pistoia and previously had been assigned to Fra Paolino da Pistoia, according to an old inscription on the back of the panel.

50. Staffordshire, Alton Towers, Collection of Earl of Shrewsbury (formerly)

Madonna and Child

Comment: Waagen, 1857, III: 382, rejected the prior attribution to Francesco Penni, arguing that "the arrangement of the colors and the handling" in the painting, which was based on Raphael's *Colonna Madonna*, were more characteristic of Nelli's work. The Alton Towers collection was auctioned in 1857.

APPENDIX 3 SIXTEENTH-CENTURY SOURCES ON PLAUTILLA NELLI

EDITOR'S NOTE: THE TWO MOST IMPORTANT PUBLISHED SOURCES ON Plautilla Nelli date from the sixteenth century: Giorgio Vasari's discussion of the prioress-painter, found within his 1568 *Life of Properzia de' Rossi*, and Fra Serafino Razzi's account of Nelli and other painters in her convent, included in his 1596 *History of Famous Men, in Preaching and Theology, in the Sacred Order of Preachers*. Both texts are included below, with the translation following the original Italian. Numbers in square brackets refer to entries on Nelli's paintings, in appendix 2. Also see chapter 3 for Sally Quin's discussion of these two sources: Vasari, 1976, IV: 403-05; and Razzi, 1596, 369-72.

Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite*

Ma non è mancato, ancorché ella disegnasse molto bene, chi abbia paragonato Properzia non solamente nel disegno, ma fatto così bene in pittura, com'ella di scultura. Di queste la prima è suor Plautilla, monaca et oggi priora nel monasterio di S. Caterina da Siena in Fiorenza sulla piazza di San Marco, la quale cominciando a poco a poco a disegnare et ad imitar coi colori quadri e pitture di maestri eccellenti ha con tanta diligenza condotte alcune cose, che ha fatto maravigliare gl'artefici. Di mano di costei sono due tavole nella chiesa del detto monasterio di S. Caterina [1]; ma quella è molto lodata dove sono i Magi che adorano Gesù [9]. Nel monasterio di S. Lucia di Pistoia è una tavola grande nel coro, nella quale è la Madonna col Bambino in braccio, San Tommaso, S. Agostino, S. Maria Maddalena, S. Caterina da Siena, S. Agnese, S. Caterina matire e S. Lucia [21]; et un'altra tavola grande di mano della medesima mandò di fuori lo spedalingo di Lemmo[8]. Nel reffettorio del detto monasterio di S. Caterina é un Cenacolo grande [3], e nella sala del lavoro una tavola di mano della detta [12]; e per le case de'

gentiluomini di Firenze tanti quadri che troppo sarei lungo a voler di tutti ragionare.[20] Una Nunziata in un gran quadro ha la moglie del signor Mondragone spagnuolo [19], et un'altra simile ne ha madonna Marietta de' Fedini [18]. Un quadretto di Nostra Donna è in S. Giovannino di Firenze [13]; et una predella d'altare è in S. Maria del Fiore, nella quale sono istorie della vita di S. Zanobi, molto belle [7]. E perché questa veneranda e virtuosa suora, inanzi che lavorasse tavole et opere d'importanza, attese a far di minio, sono di sua mano molti quadretti belli affatto in mano di diversi, dei quali non accade far menzione. Ma quelle cose di mano di costei sono migliori che ella ha ricavato da altri, nelle quali mostra che avrebbe fatto cose maravigliose se, come fanno gl'uomini, avesse avuto comodo di studiare et attendere al disegno e ritrarre cose vive e naturali. E che ciò sia vero, si vede manifestamente in un quadro d'una Natività di Cristo [10] ritratto da uno che già fece il Bronzino a Filippo Salviati. Similmente, il vero di ciò si dimostra in questo, che nelle sue opere i volti e fattezze delle donne, per averne veduto a suo piacimento, sono assai migliori che le teste degli uomini non sono, e più simili al vero. Ha ritratto in alcuna delle sue opere, in volti di donne, madonna Gostanza de' Doni, stata ne' tempi nostri esempio d'incredibile bellezza et onesta, tanto bene, che da donna in ciò, per le dette cagioni non molto pratica, non si può più oltre desiderare.

Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives*

Even though she drew very well, other women have equalled Properzia not only in drawing but have also done as well in painting as she in sculpture. Of these the foremost is Sister Plautilla, a nun who is now Prioress of the Convent of Santa Caterina da Siena in Piazza San Marco, Florence. She began to draw and paint little by little, in imitation of great masters, until finally through much diligence she executed some works that have amazed the artists. There are two panels by her hand in the aforementioned Convent of Santa Caterina [1]; the one that is most highly praised represents the Magi adoring Jesus. In the choir of the Convent of Santa Lucia in Pistoia is a large panel portraying the Madonna and Child, St Thomas, St Augustine, St Mary Magdalene, St Catherine of Siena, St Agnes, St Catherine the Martyr, and St Lucy [21]. Another large panel by her was sent out [of Florence] by the Governor of the Hospital of Lemmo [8]. In the refectory of the aforementioned Convent of Santa Caterina, there is a large *Last Supper* [3], and in the

work room is another panel by her [12]. She made so many paintings for the homes of Florentine gentlemen that it would take too much time to list them all here [20]. The wife of the Spaniard Signor Mondragone owns a large painting of the Annunciation [19], and Madonna Marietta de' Fedini owns another like it [18]. There is a small painting of Our Lady in San Giovannino in Florence [13] and an altar predella in Santa Maria del Fiore, in which there are some very beautifully executed scenes from the life of St Zenobius [7]. Because this revered and virtuous sister studied the art of miniatures before she began painting panels and works of importance, she also produced many truly beautiful small paintings, now owned by various people, which need not be listed here. But the best works by her hand are those she copied from others. In these we see that she would have done marvellous things had she had the opportunity, as men do, to study and devote herself to drawing and portraying living and natural things. This is manifestly clear in her painting of the Nativity of Christ [10], a copy of one Bronzino did for Filippo Salviati. It is also clear in the fact that, in her paintings, the faces and features of women are much better and have much greater verisimilitude than her heads of men, because she was free to study women at her leisure. Some of the women's faces in her works are portraits of Madonna Costanza de' Doni, who was in our day an example of incredible beauty and honesty. Despite the fact that the artist, being a woman, lacked practice in painting from life, these are painted so well that no one could ask for more.

Serafino Razzi, *Storia degli huomini illustri*

(369) *D'alcune religiose di San Domenico, pittrici*

I. Suor Plautilla Nelli, Fiorentina, Monaca del Monastero di Santa Caterina da Siena, da (370) Firenze, oltre alla bontà e purità della vita, che risplende singolarmente in tutte le suore di quel Reverendo collegio, è stata da nostro Signore Iddio dotata d'un ingegno sopra l'ordinario delle donne. Imperocché nella professione della pittura, senza mai essere istata da veruno instrutta, ha fatto opere, che hanno recato maraviglie à i primi artefici di cotale professione nella sua città di Firenze. Di mano di lei sono due tavole nella chiesa del suo monastero [1], e quella de i Tre Magi viene più lodata [9]. In San Domenico di Perugia [4], & in altri luoghi sono altre tavole di lei. E singolarmente nella chiesa de

i Reverendi padri del Giesu è un quadretto d'una nostra donna molto bella [13]. E nel Duomo di Firenze è una predella in cui sono le storie della vita di San Zenobi Vescovo di detta città, con molta diligenza condotte [7]. I quadretti poi di minio bellissimi fatti di lei per Firenze, & altri luoghi sono innumerabili [20]. E si de[v]e notare che quelle cose di lei sono migliori, le quali ha ricavato da altri: come si vede manifestamente in un quadro che stà nella stanza del loro padre confessore, della Natività di nostro signore [10]; ritratto da uno, che ne fece il Bronzino, à M. Filippo Salviati. I volti medesi-(371)-mamente, e le fattezze delle donne, nelle sue opere sono migliori per haverne veduto à suo piacimento. Passò a miglior vita, già vecchia, essendo istata Priora del suo Monasterio più volte, e divotissima religiosa, l'anno 1587.

II. S. uor Prudenza Cambi

III. Suor Agata Trabalesi

III. Suor Maria Ruggieri

Tutte e tre, discepole della prefata Suor Plautilla, vivono nell'istesso Monastero, e si vengono occupando, con laude, & utilità della casa loro, in dipignere quadri in tela, & in tavole: nè ad altro esercizio attendono, fuori del tempo, che spendono nel dire i divini uffici.

V. Suor Veronica, con alcun'altre, se bene sono in altri uffici più gravi del Monastero loro, di oltre à 130 Suore, occupate, vengono nondimeno elleno ancora dipignendo qualche cosa, essendo parimente dell'arte istessa intendenti.

VI. Suor Dionisia Niccolini, nella medesima casa, e Monastero, lavora di rilievo, figure di terra molto devote. Una della quali, cioè una Madonna col Figlio in braccio, molto bella, non hà molti mesi che io vidi in Firenze, in casa di Madonna Laura da Gagliano, suocera del Signore Antonio Salviati: (372) matrona di molta bontà, e familiare di dette Reverende Suore.

VII. Suora Maria Angelica Razzi, sorella carnale dello Scrittore di questa Cronica, ella ancora nel prefato Monastero, lavora di somiglianti figure di terra, cioè Angeli, Madonne, & altre sante. Onde si vede di lei particolarmente in Perugia, alla cappella del Rosario, una Madonna, che siede col figlio in grembo che dorme, la quale è stata ricavata da una, che fino nel tempo di un secolo addietro, in Firenze con gran venerazione si portava in processione. Et un'altra simile pure fatta da lei si mostra nella Sacrestia dei San Marco di Firenze, dentro all'altare delle Sacre reliquie. Vive questo anno 1587. N. Signore la benedica.

Serafino Razzi, *History of Famous Men*

(369) *Of Some Dominican Nuns Who Were Painters*

Suor Plautilla Nelli, Florentine, nun in the Convent of Santa Caterina da Siena, not only lived the generous and pure life uniquely characteristic of all the nuns of that convent but was also gifted by Our Lord with a genius above the ordinary in women. A professional painter, Suor Plautilla Nelli, Florentine, nun in the Convent of Santa Caterina da Siena. Beyond the goodness and purity of her life, uniquely characteristic of all the nuns of that convent, Suor Plautilla was also gifted by Our Lord with a genius above the ordinary in women. In the field of painting, despite her lack of formal instruction, she created works that amazed the leading artists in the city of Florence. By her hand are two panels in the church of her convent [1], of which *The Three Magi* is the most highly praised [9]. Other panels by her are in San Domenico di Perugia [4] and other places, and in the church of the Reverend Fathers of Jesus is a very beautiful small painting of Our Lady [13]. In the Duomo of Florence is a predella of scenes from the life of St Zenobius, bishop of that city, which is very diligently executed [8]. She also painted innumerable very beautiful miniatures for Florence and other places [20]. And one must note that her best works are those she copied from others, as is manifestly apparent in a painting of the Nativity of Our Lord in the room of the Father Confessor of her convent, which was copied from one Bronzino painted for M. Filippo Salviati. The portraits of women in her works are better because she could study them at her leisure. She went on to a better life at an old age, having been Prioress of her convent more than once, in 1587.

Suor Prudenza Cambi

Suor Agata Trabalesi

Suor Maria Ruggieri

All three, disciples of the said Suor Plautilla, lived in the same convent. Their paintings on canvas and panels won them praise and helped support their convent: they did nothing else in their spare time, when they were not praying.

Suor Veronica, with some others, even though they were engaged in more serious work for their convent of over 130 nuns, nevertheless did some painting, being just as proficient in that art.

Suor Dionisia Niccolini, of the same house, and convent, made very pious relief figures in terracotta. I saw one of these, a very beautiful

Madonna and Child, in Florence a few months ago in the house of Madonna Laura da Gagliano, mother-in-law of Signore Antonio Salviati, a very generous matron and well known friend of those Reverend Sisters.

Suor Maria Angelica Razzi, blood sister of the writer of this chronicle, still residing in the said convent, makes similar terracotta figures, that is to say angels, Madonnas, and other saints. Of particular interest is a work of hers in Perugia, in the Rosary Chapel, a Madonna seated with the Child asleep on her lap, which was copied from one that, up to the last century, was carried in processions in Florence with great veneration. Another similar one by her hand is in the Sacristy of San Marco in Florence, in the altar of the Sacred Relics. She is still alive in this year of 1587. May the Lord bless her.

Translations by Dorothea Barrett

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Fig. 1 Plautilla Nelli, *Lamentation*, Museo di San Marco, Florence (app. 2, no. 1)



Fig. 2 Plautilla Nelli, *Lamentation*, detail



Fig. 3 Plautilla Nelli, *Lamentation*, detail



Fig. 4 Plautilla Nelli, *Lamentation*, detail



Fig. 5 Plautilla Nelli, *Lamentation*, detail, before restoration

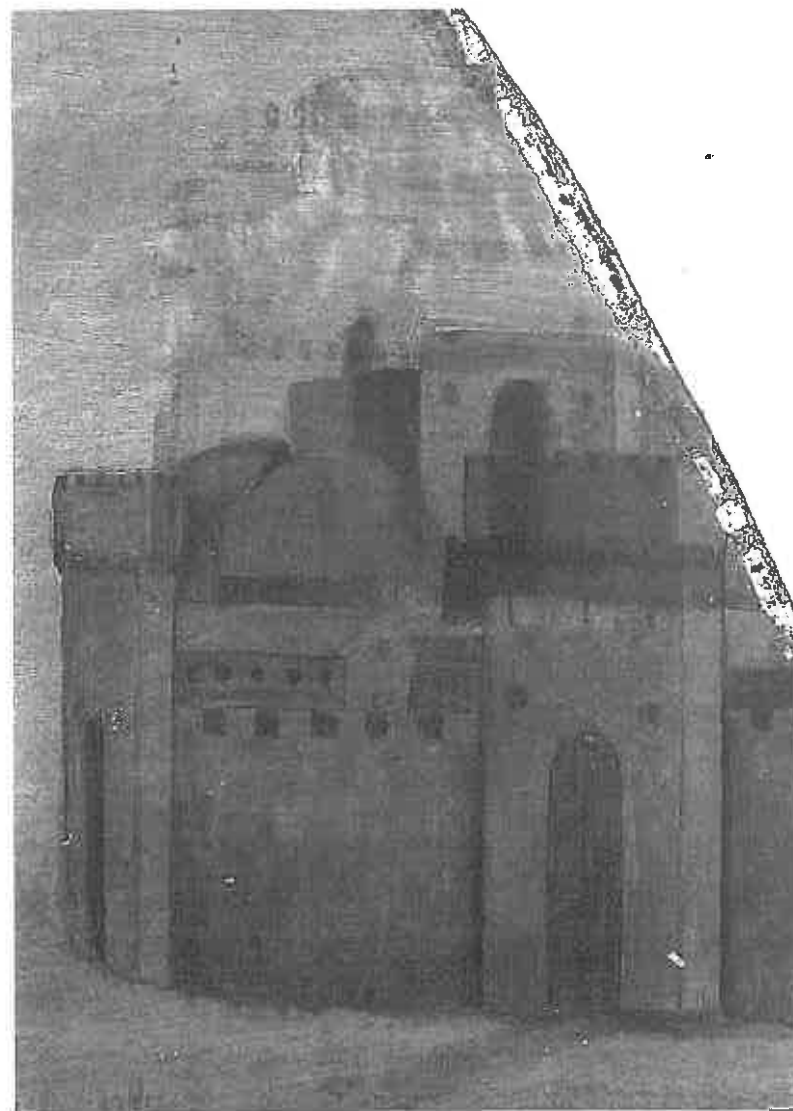


Fig. 6 Plautilla Nelli, *Lamentation*, detail, reflectogram



Fig. 7 Plautilla Nelli, *Lamentation*, detail, reflectogram



Fig. 8 Plautilla Nelli, *Last Supper*, Santa Maria Novella, Florence (app. 2, no. 2)



Fig. 9 Plautilla Nelli, *Last Supper*, detail



Fig. 10 Plautilla Nelli, *Last Supper*, detail

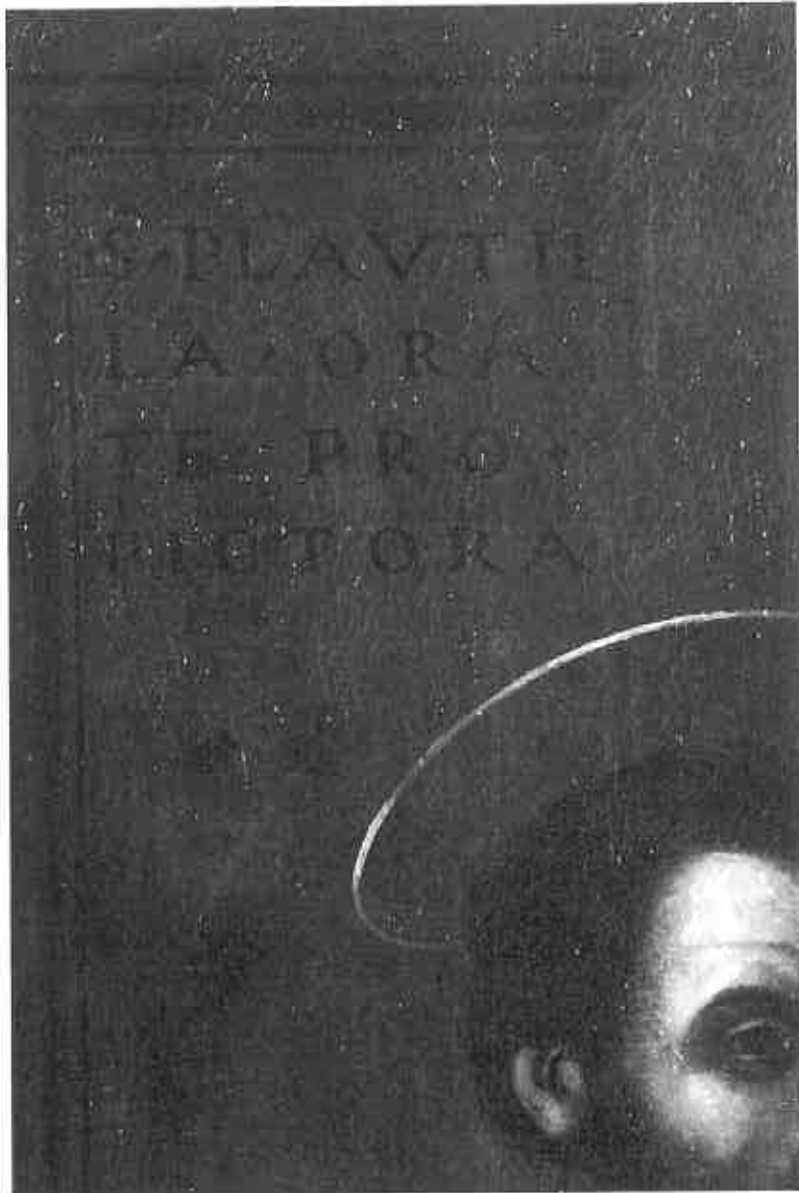


Fig. 11 Plautilla Nelli, *Last Supper*, detail



Fig. 12 Plautilla Nelli, *Pentecost*, San Domenico, Perugia (app. 2, no. 3)



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Fig. 14 Plautilla Nelli, *Kneeling Woman*, GDSU, Florence, 6762 F (app. 1, no. 2a)

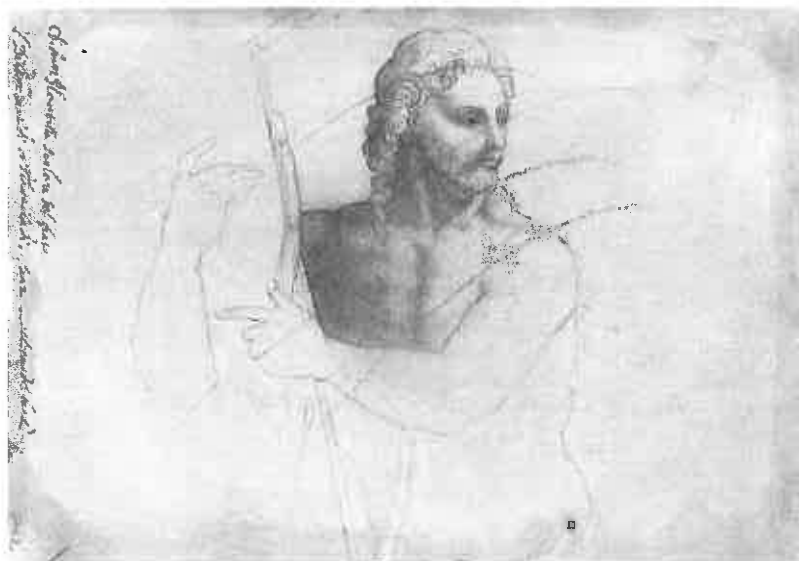


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Fig. 17 Inscription, GDSU, Florence, 6859 F v



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Myra... Plautilla all'ora di...

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Fig. 28 Giovanni Battista Volponi, known as Scalabrino, *Adoration of the Magi*, San Pietro, Tuscania



Fig. 29 Pietro Perugino, *Lamentation*, Galleria Palatina, Florence



Fig. 30 Andrea del Sarto, *Lamentation*, Galleria Palatina, Florence



Fig. 31 Fra Bartolommeo, *Lamentation*, Galleria Palatina, Florence

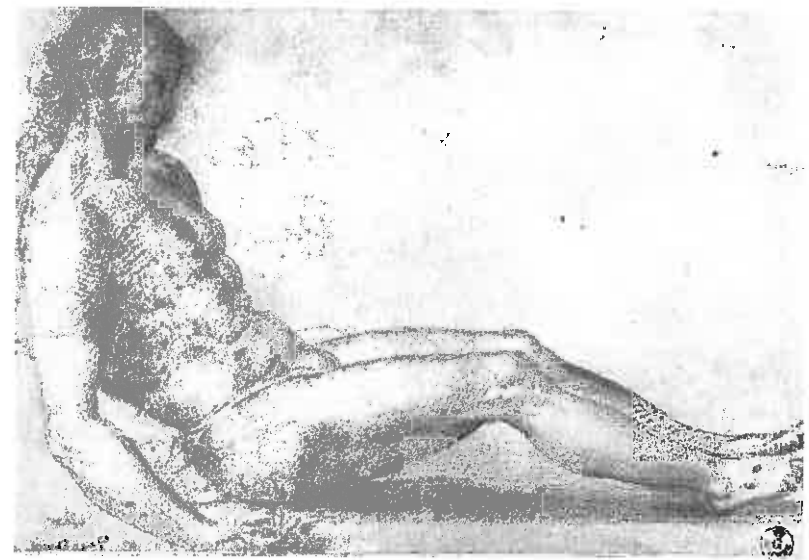


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Fig. 33 Fra Bartolommeo, *Mantled Kneeling Female Figure*, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, M 106



Fig. 34 Fra Bartolommeo, *Mantled Male Figure Weeping*, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, M 134



Fig. 35 Fra Bartolommeo, *Draped Kneeling Youth*, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, M 109



Fig. 36 Anonymous (sixteenth century), *Lamentation*, Museo di San Marco, Florence



Fig. 37 Fra Paolino, *Sacra Conversazione*, Museo di San Marco, Florence



Fig. 38 Anonymous (sixteenth century), *Tomb of Guglielmo Pontano*, San Domenico, Perugia

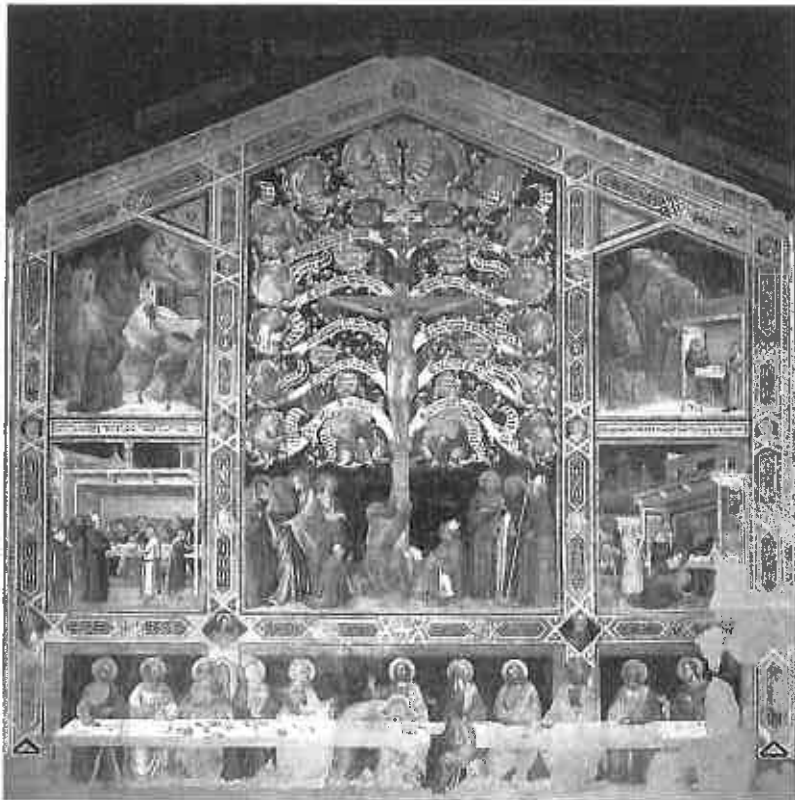


Fig. 39 Taddeo Gaddi, *Last Supper and Other Scenes*, Museo dell'Opera di Santa Croce, Florence

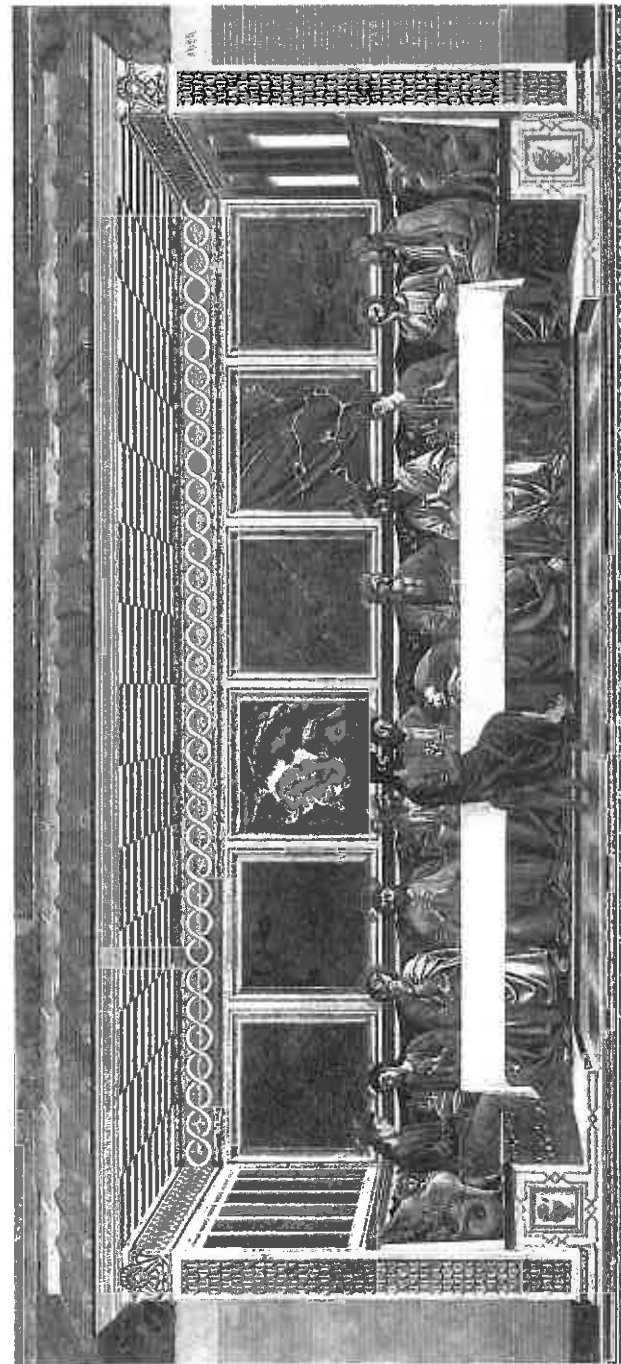


Fig. 40 Andrea del Castagno, *Last Supper*, Cenacolo di Sant' Apollonia, Florence

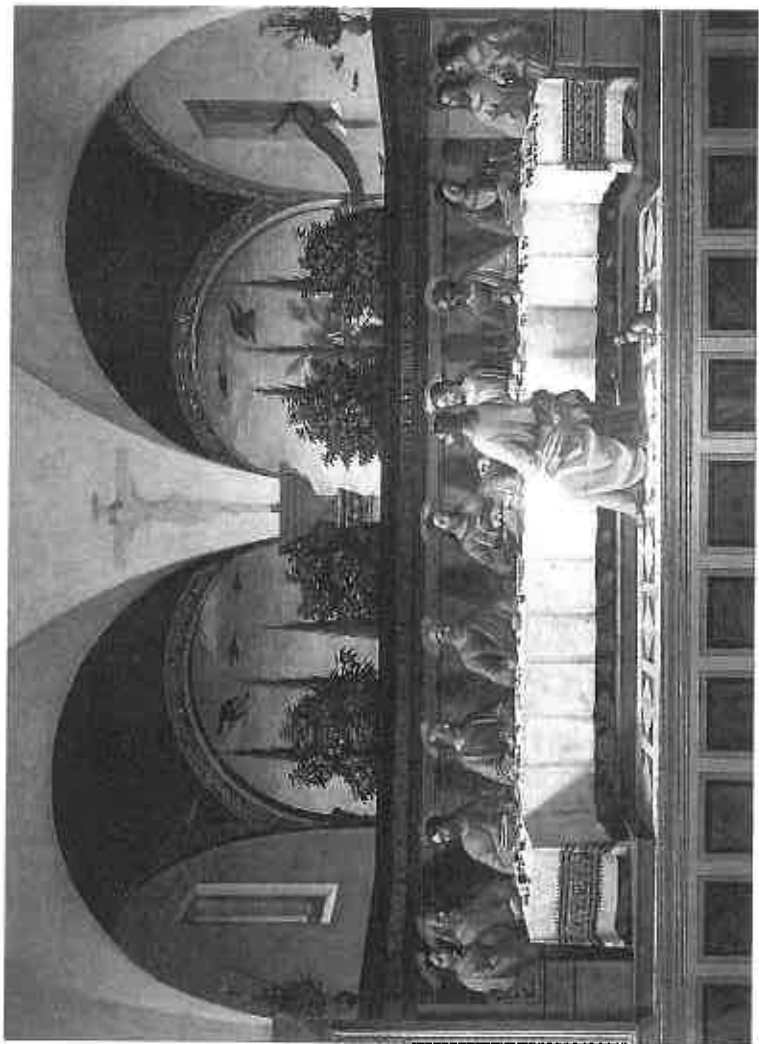


Fig. 41 Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Last Supper*, Museo di San Marco, Florence

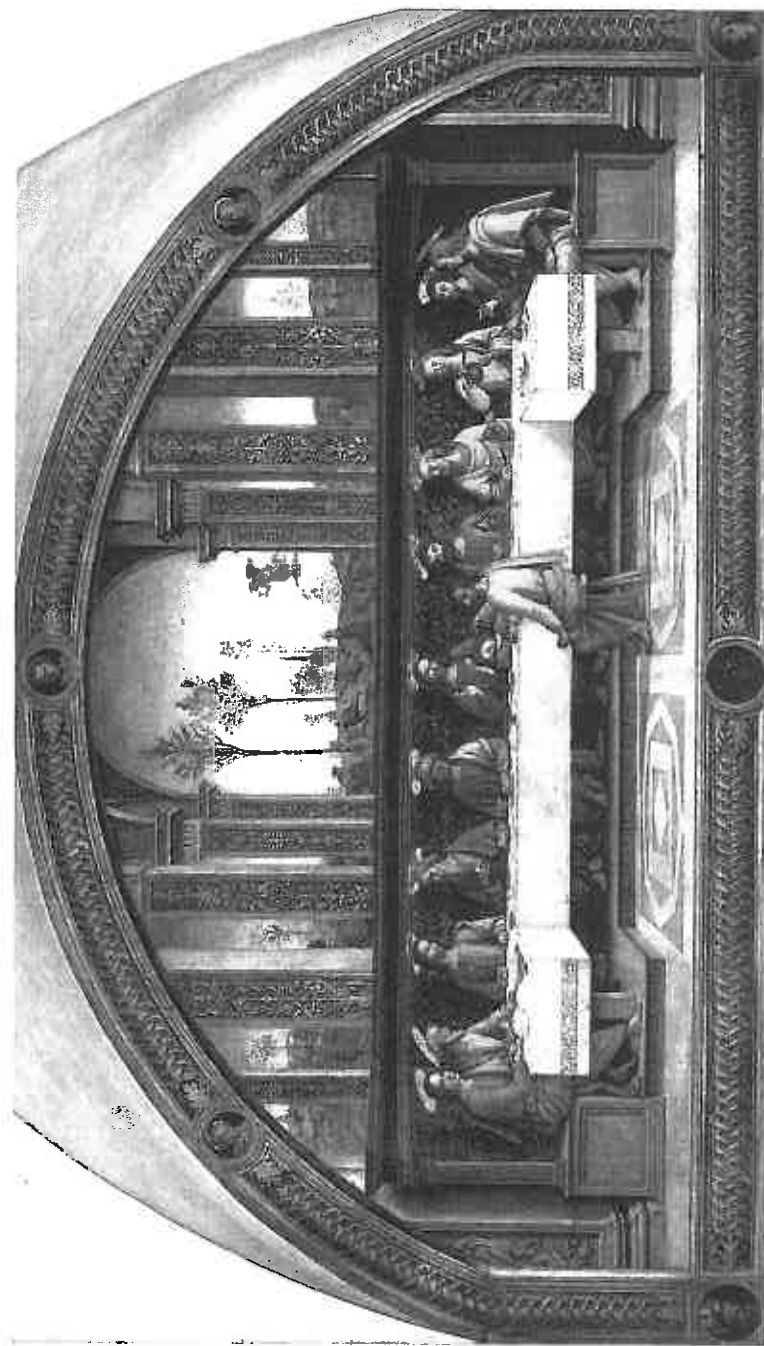


Fig. 42 Pietro Perugino, *Last Supper*, Cenacolo di Fuligno, Florence



Fig. 43 Giovan Pietro Birago, *Last Supper* (engraving, after Leonardo da Vinci), Albertina, Vienna, DG1942/57

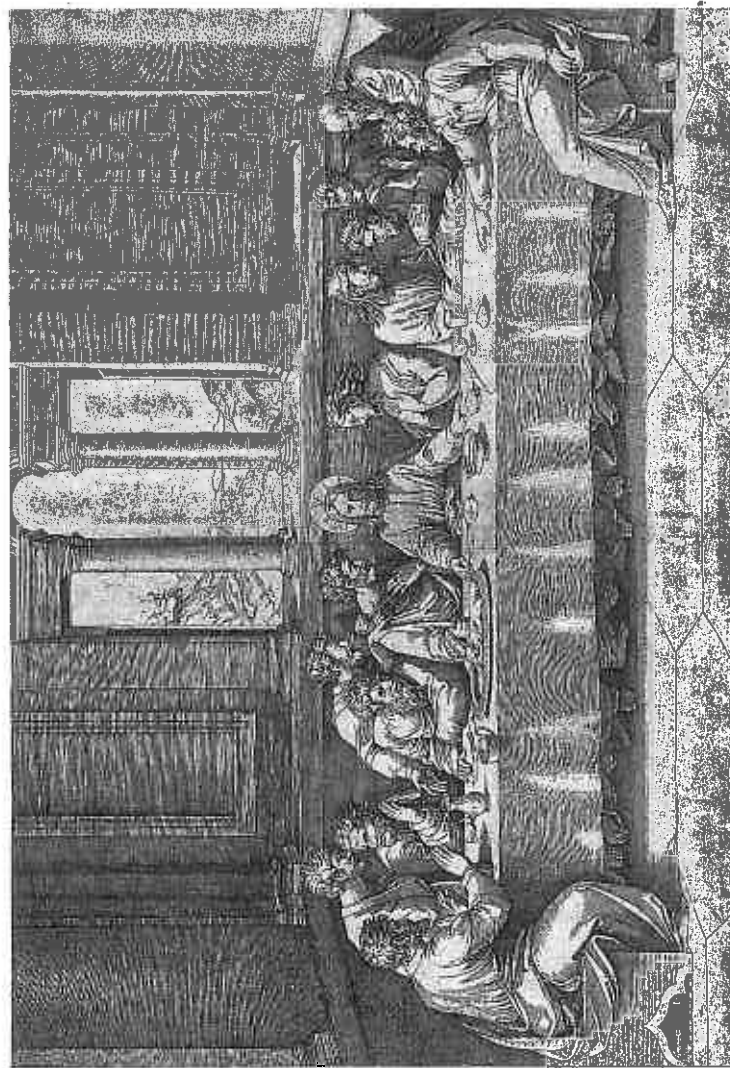


Fig. 44 Marcantonio Raimondi, *Last Supper* (engraving, after Raphael), Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, The Leo Steinberg Collection, 2002.1704

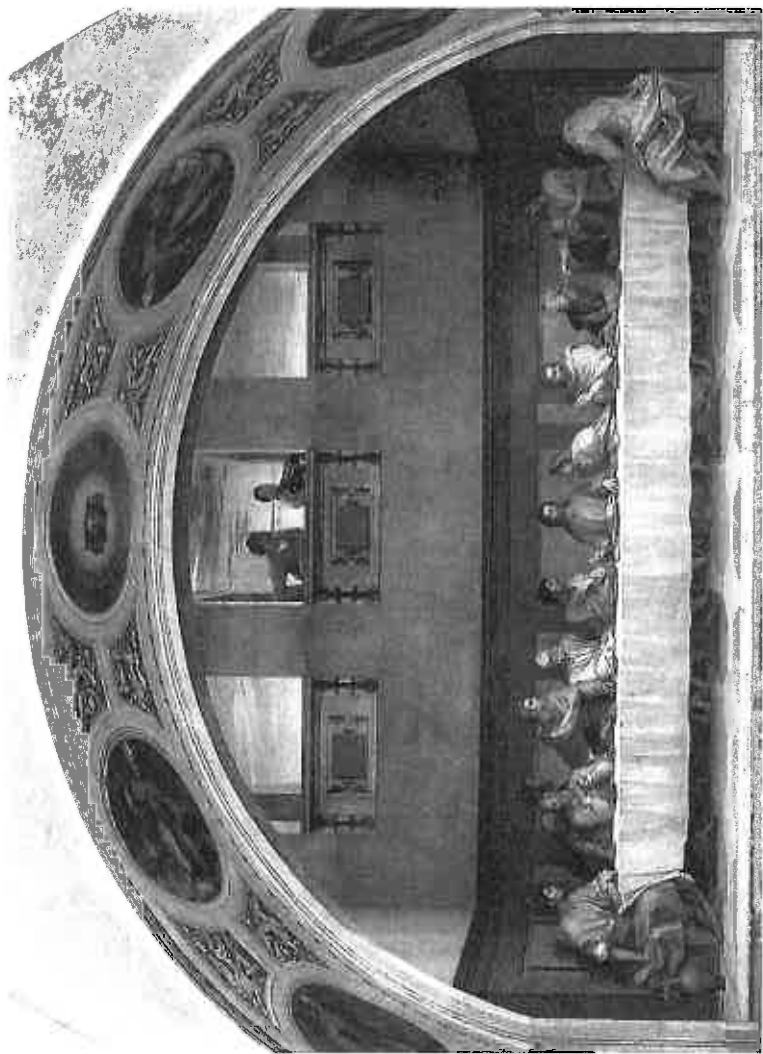


Fig. 45 Andrea del Sarto, *Last Supper*, Cenacolo di Andrea del Sarto, Florence



Fig. 46 Giovanni Antonio Sogliani, *Last Supper*, Santa Maria delle Grazie, Anghiari



Fig. 47 Giovanni Antonio Sogliani, *Miracle of the Dominican Providence*, Museo di San Marco, Florence



Fig. 48 Master Heinrich from Constance, *Christ and Saint John Group*, Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp

Agnus paschat significat eucharistia



Exodi 12^o ca^o

Fig. 49 Anonymous Flemish (fifteenth century), *Passover Scene*, Musée Conde, Chantilly, ms 139 (*Speculum Humanae Salvationis*), fol. 18r

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