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GENDER AND DEVOTION IN DOMINICAN PAINTING IN RENAISSANCE FLORENCE: SUOR PLAUTILLA NELLI IN THE CONTEXT OF THE NINE MODES OF PRAYER AND THE FRESCOES OF SAN MARCO MONASTERY

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**UNIVERSITY OF
PLYMOUTH**

**GENDER AND DEVOTION IN DOMINICAN PAINTING IN RENAISSANCE
FLORENCE: SUOR PLAUTILLA NELLI IN THE CONTEXT OF THE NINE MODES
OF PRAYER AND THE FRESCOES OF SAN MARCO MONASTERY**

By

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fulfilment for the degree of

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Author's Declaration

At no time during the registration for the degree of Research Masters has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Doctoral College Quality Sub-Committee.

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Abstract

Shannon Marie Lewis

Gender and devotion in Dominican Painting in Renaissance Florence: Suor Plautilla Nelli in the Context of the Nine Modes of Prayer and the Frescoes of San Marco Monastery

This thesis examines the gender dynamics of the Italian Renaissance in relation to the devotional imagery created by Dominican painters. It draws attention to the representations of Dominican saints used as models for male and female devotion, such as St Dominic and St Catherine of Siena.

The thesis begins with a broad history of gender differences which essentially affected the cultural developments limiting female productivity in image-making, as well as an understanding of how social views and values dictated the ideal behaviours expected for women to abide by. It is pointed out that the core limitations women faces was through the life paths set out: marriage or joining a convent. Nonetheless, some women sought for independence through utilising what was offered in convents: learning a basic education and learning skills to financially support life at the convent. A prime example of women flourishing within this environment is the first female painter of Florence, Plautilla Nelli, who ran an all-female workshop and was prioress within the Dominican convent Santa Caterina da Siena. Her contribution to the convent allowed recognition in female creative practice in the often male associated medium of painting, as supported by the acknowledgement made in Giorgio Vasari's biography of artists.

To understand the differences between the portrayal of gender in art created by or for Dominicans, the first chapter focuses on the purpose of devotional visual culture as seen as a teaching aid. This includes the analysis of the Nine Modes of Prayer which was used as a model for male devotional practice. It depicts the desirable gestures for prayer performed by St Dominic. Furthermore, with purpose to teach the male members of the order, frescoes are displayed in the private friar cells of the San Marco monastery, painted by Fra Angelico, to which shows representations of St Dominic.

Further on, the second chapter addresses the life and work of Plautilla Nelli, with analysis towards her 'St Catherine with Lily' series, also known as 'St Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci'. The series depicted a hybrid of the female saints St Catherine of Siena and later canonised saint St Catherine de'Ricci; she holds a crucifix with the body of Christ on it, and a long stem of lilies. It further draws attention to the gender dynamics between the female figure and Christ, highlighting the limitations of female sexuality and self-expression. These issues are examined, through the handling of attributed and body language within the paintings. Plautilla Nelli's depiction of a female subject for a female audience demonstrates her skill as a painter and her ability to influence other devout women. It also expresses a female voice during the Renaissance through challenging male hegemony.

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Introduction

This thesis explores the social and historical backgrounds of Italian Renaissance nuns in Dominican convents in juxtaposition to the visual culture created around them. It explores the social situation of Renaissance women as dependants on their family status and the need to maintain family honour. However, it also explores how some women found independence through joining the convents, financially sustaining themselves through producing devotional visual culture. Furthermore, it covers female roles within the religious buildings of the Dominican Order and how nuns were expected to behave and perform certain rituals, encouraged by visual culture used as teaching aids. Through comparing the visual culture created for the convents, this thesis examines the different ways gender is portrayed, particularly in relation to the Crucified Christ: it focuses on the Dominican saints St Dominic and St Catherine of Siena as representatives of men and women within the Dominican Order. Additionally, it addresses the body language and gestures of figures in paintings which suggest a relationship with the crucified body of Christ: how the saints are touching the cross; how they are looking at Christ; how they are positioned to address Christ and the viewer; how close are they to Christ's body. The visual culture to be analysed includes paintings by Fra Angelico and Suor Plautilla Nelli, who were both part of the Dominican Order during the Renaissance, but at different points in time¹. By comparing paintings created by a variety of male artists and the female artist Plautilla Nelli, this thesis explores

¹ Fra Angelico was a 14th century painter and friar, whereas Plautilla Nelli was a 16th century painter and prioress. William Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). Jonathan K. Nelson, *Plautilla Nelli (1524 – 1588) The Painter-Prioress of Renaissance Florence*, (Florence: S.E.I. srl, 2008).

whether the images express different purposes and ideals depending on the gender of the painted saint, the artist, and the intended viewer. Key paintings by Plautilla for analysis include the 'Saint Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' series, which portray female saints Catherine of Siena and Catherine de'Ricci as a hybrid figure, holding lilies and a crucifix with Christ (figs.1-4).

Italian Renaissance Values in Relation to Gender

In the essay "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" Joan Kelly theorises that, because of cultural developments which isolated them, women could not have had a Renaissance, at least not during the Renaissance itself². Kelly highlights the limitations of female creativity as a product of the expectations of women's roles, referring to how female sexuality caused women to be viewed as a form of property, and how female political and social roles undoubtedly led to a lack of formal education for women³. Kelly does, however, consider the women who were able to pursue cultural roles as artists or patrons, but only through privilege of class status⁴, further restricting female creative production to a limited number of women. The women who were able to follow this lifestyle, however, were assigned high-status roles, often political, assuring them some degree of independence and power⁵. Throughout this thesis, consideration is given to the limitations women had and how some women overcame them through pursuing options which allowed, and even encouraged, creative practices, independence and

² Joan Kelly, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?", in *Feminism and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Lorna Hutson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 21-47.

³ Ibid., 21-47.

⁴ Ibid., 31.

⁵ Ibid., 31.

power, particularly through joining the Dominican Order and working as illustrators and painters to financially support themselves and their convent.

In addition to the revival of Antiquity and various waves of Humanism, Christianity remained a determining factor in Renaissance Italy, where several major cities, including Florence, were the pinnacle of a productive and vibrant culture⁶. There were dynamic values in the Italian cities, yet, despite the political and social conflicts taking place⁷, great monuments of the High Renaissance were still created⁸. There were different social attitudes to High Renaissance culture and the history of politics, with both histories preserved separately. Eric Cochrane stated that all the events which occurred during the Renaissance, both cultural and political, represented the peak of a lengthy historical process that shaped social values⁹. These events created morally influenced differences between the genders, with masculinity dominating social and political honour, including strength and power within families and society. Sharon T. Strocchia discusses how honour in Renaissance Italy was more important than life itself, as well as how it was used to locate an individual in the social hierarchy, which offered a sense of personal worth¹⁰. Honour was important to every class and was achieved and

⁶ Eric Cochrane, *Italy 1530-1630*, (England: Longman Group UK Limited, 1988), 19.

⁷ "The Italian wars, in all their multiple manifestations...certainly caused significant losses in terms of people and resources", in Guido Alfani, "Calamities and the Economy in Renaissance Italy. The Grand Tour of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse" in "Book review: Calamities and the Economy in renaissance Italy. The Grand Tour of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse", *Continuity and Change*, vol.30, 2, ed. Guenzi Alberto, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 306.

⁸ Cochrane, *Italy*, 19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰ Sharon T. Strocchia, "Gender and the Rites of Honour in Italian Renaissance Cities" in *Women and Men in History: Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis, (United Kingdom: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1998), 39.

maintained through the actions of individuals and their families¹¹. It is important, though, to understand the differences between men and women in the way they achieved honour and what honour meant in terms of gender; honour played a vital part in the fates forced upon Renaissance women. An example of this is how honour was gained through marriage. A pairing would be made between families to form alliances¹², although the bride and groom were treated differently; the honour gained only truly benefitted the man and the bride's family, with the bride treated as a pawn. The fundamental basis of unequal differences between gender consisted of the bride's family's motives for the marriage: the bride was often younger, sixteen to eighteen, than the groom, often in his thirties, which meant that her family could negotiate a second marriage if her husband died whilst she was still young¹³. This planning for the possibility of re-marriage shows the social intention of families who wished to retain or obtain connections to maintain or improve their family status¹⁴. In addition, the groom was given a dowry when agreeing to wed, which he would spend on developing his trade or business¹⁵. In summary, daughters were effectively sold through the money offered in a dowry in return for honour and alliance which only directly benefitted the families and groom. Avoiding marriage was difficult, but convents offered an opportunity to avoid marriage commitments¹⁶. Some families would send their daughters to convents, as a

¹¹ Davis expressed how the working class had rituals of showing dominance in the streets through fighting with bulls and dogs, and Strocchia explains how honour was gained and stabilised through marriage and ties between families. Robert C. Davis, "The Geography of Gender in the Renaissance" in *Women and Men in History: Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis, (United Kingdom: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1998), 26. Strocchia, "Gender and Rites", 43.

¹² Strocchia, "Gender and the Rites", 43.

¹³ Ibid., 43-44.

¹⁴ Ibid., 43-44.

¹⁵ Ibid., 44.

¹⁶ Silvia Evangelisti, *Nuns: A History of Convent Life*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 17.

dowry for becoming a nun was cheaper than for marriage, but still offered the opportunity to increase the family's status because convents hosted the daughters of the elite¹⁷.

The tactical decision by families to avoid the costs of marriage by sending some daughters to convents had a negative impact on convent life. Throughout the Renaissance, a growing number of young women were removed from the marriage market due to a common family strategy of marrying only a few of the daughters, with a subsequently larger dowry, to gain stronger alliances¹⁸. Sending daughters to convents was an option if the family had too many daughters or some were deemed unmarriageable¹⁹. Arcangela Tarabotti expressed at the time: "They do not give brides for Christ the most beautiful and virtuous, but instead the ugly and deformed"²⁰. This attitude reveals the politics of joining convents during the Renaissance, and how increasing family status was deemed more important than a woman's freedom to choose. Tarabotti herself was from a family of five daughters and the eldest and therefore expected to marry first, however, she was disabled and therefore deemed in Renaissance culture to be unattractive for the marriage market²¹. This demonstrates how women were often treated as goods, as families would pick their least attractive daughters to live in convents. This led to an increase in nuns entering convents with no interest in taking the vow of chastity²², making convents a feminine environment with a

¹⁷ Ibid., 20.

¹⁸ Stanley Chojnacki, "Daughters and Oligarchs: Gender and the Early Renaissance State" in *Women and Men in History: Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis, (United Kingdom: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1998), 70.

¹⁹ Evangelisti, *Nuns*, 20.

²⁰ Ibid., 21.

²¹ Ibid., 21.

²² Ibid., 69-70.

range of values, including corporeality and sexuality. These values towards women in Renaissance society and the contemporary social norms give an insight into the limitations women had in making any decisions about their own lives, due to being restricted to marriage (possibly multiple times) or a commitment for life to the church.

Convents, however, were places where women could receive a basic education²³, which could have encouraged women to join the orders, if indeed they were offered the choice by their families. Convents did not just welcome daughters from wealthy families, they also took in women from poor backgrounds, including women who were prostitutes looking for redemption and women wanting the protection offered by the convents²⁴. However, within convents there was segregation between ex-prostitutes and other women, due to the negative attitudes towards female sexuality other than the socially accepted virginity, asserting the lack of 'honour' the ex-prostitute was afforded socially²⁵. The lower-class women were treated as being of lesser value by the nuns from higher-class backgrounds, proving that social status still held within the convents. Furthermore, there were servant nuns, brought in by rich families, who were expected to do the hard labour of the convent²⁶. These servant nuns were not taught to read²⁷, showing that not all women were offered a basic education within the convent; educational opportunity was still based on status.

²³ Ibid., 20.

²⁴ Ibid., 26.

²⁵ Ibid., 26.

²⁶ Ibid., 31.

²⁷ Ibid., 31.

Women in convents were encouraged to stay silent by male superiors of the church, because they were believed to be descendants of Eve who was deceived²⁸. Under certain circumstances, however, nuns could learn from and teach each other to gain greater devotion²⁹. The only time a religious woman could preach to the other nuns was if the prioress of the convent believed it would be beneficial for the sisters during the chapter meetings³⁰. This shows how the feminine environment of convents was still dominated by male attitudes. Mary Beard uses the term “female voice” to explain how women in general were silenced throughout history³¹. There are numerous primary texts which support Beard’s argument of the silencing of female voices, particularly from Italian men during the Renaissance. Giovanbattista della Porta (1623) is but one example of silencing the female voice; he stated that women have a “feebler voice” and should therefore not be listened to³². Furthermore, Torquato Tasso (1582) said that “silence is a woman’s virtue”³³, supporting the negative views of the female voice. Outside the environment of the convent, women also had limitations on where they could go, being confined to the family home and local church³⁴. It was typical for women to be hidden away, usually enforced by their parents or husbands; the little time spent in public, they were usually fully covered and moved in groups³⁵. Renaissance travellers documented

²⁸ Mary Rogers and Paola Tinagli, *Women in Italy: 1350-1650 Ideals and Realities*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 15. Referring to Apostle Paul: “... she should not teach, lest, when she has formed a false opinion... her authority as a teacher should influence her listeners and easily spread the same errors to others”.

²⁹ Ann Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art: The Convent of San Domenico of Pisa*, (Oxon: Ashgate Publishing, 2016), 19.

³⁰ Ibid., 19.

³¹ Mary Beard, *Women and Power: A Manifesto*, (Great Britain: Profile Books LTD, 2017), 16-20.

³² Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy*, 21.

³³ Ibid., 26.

³⁴ Davis, “The Geography of Gender”, 22.

³⁵ Ibid., 21.

how women were hidden: “Woemen... if they be chaste, [are] rather locked up at home, as if it were in prison”³⁶. Pietro Casola, in 1494, commented on the covering of women: “I do not know how they can see where to go in the street”³⁷. Thus, women were restricted in where to go and clothing; the impracticality of their dress having implications of over-protection in order to preserve their virginity or protect their husband’s honour.

Gender additionally formed the geography of the Italian cities: the layout of the cities represented the differences between genders as the more public areas were male dominated. Robert C. Davis explains how guild halls, taverns and the main streets in the Italian Renaissance cities were places for male creative production and socializing, whereas the household and more private places were identified as feminine places³⁸. This indicates how the development of culture stemmed from male values and ideas, due to men creating places for their social and status needs, and limited the impact women had on the progress of culture. Additionally, male sociability took control over corporate public culture in the form of religious brotherhoods, who collectively worshipped by public and private flagellation, branching away from traditional religious practices of hymn-singing and charitable work³⁹. These more traditional religious practices were, however, sustained by nuns, as they were isolated from the religious brotherhoods⁴⁰.

³⁶ Quote by sixteenth-century Scottish traveller, Fynes Moryson, *An Itinerary*, (Glasgow, 1907), vol.1, 70.

³⁷ Quote by Pietro Casola, *Viaggio di Pietro Casola a Gerusalemme*, (Milan, 1855), 15.

³⁸ Davis, “The Geography of Gender”, 19-20.

³⁹ Strocchia, “Gender and the Rites”, 48.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

The Influence of Visual Culture

The key to the advancement of High Renaissance culture is that it reflected the history of Italian and Greek ancestry⁴¹. Jurists, artists and physicians were inspired by the ancient prototypes and influenced by the earlier models, which led to their development of modern laws of justice, aesthetics and medicine⁴². Moreover, it was thought that if the laws of politics did not correspond to Christian values, they overrode religious opinion⁴³. From these ancient influences within visual culture, and in order to achieve the antique ideals, some artists were put on a pedestal of upmost excellence; despite recognising that there were distortions in the figures for Pope Clement's funeral monument, Cochrane stated that the canonical Michelangelo had "clearly surpassed" the ancient models⁴⁴. This idea that Michelangelo exceeded all others stems from a claim by Giorgio Vasari in his biographies of the lives of artists⁴⁵, making Michelangelo's skill in the visual arts unsurpassable for centuries to come⁴⁶. Vasari acknowledges other artists, such as Leonardo da Vinci, Fra Bartolomeo and Fra Angelico, with chapters documenting their work and achievements. However, Vasari's 'Lives' gives an insight into how artists were male dominated, as the few female artists of the High Renaissance

⁴¹ Philip Schaff, "The Renaissance: The Revival of Learning and Art in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries" in *Papers of the American Society of Church History*, Vol 3 (1891), 7-8.

⁴² Cochrane, *Italy*, 27.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁵ "...no hand but that of the most divine Michelangelo could have been worthy to produce them." Giorgio Vasari, *Vasari's Lives of the Artists*, trans. Mrs. Jonathan Foster, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2005), 134.

⁴⁶ Vasari was a biographer of artists in the 1500's, Cochrane 400 years later follows this idea of Michelangelo being the greatest.

are grouped together in one chapter⁴⁷. Plautilla Nelli, the nun painter of Florence, is one of the few women mentioned. Caught as she was between the Renaissance notion of honour and the dominance of masculinity in culture, it is important to highlight the career and life of a successful female painter and the gender dynamics within Plautilla Nelli's work.

Despite this niche group of female painters, who marked a milestone for female creative production during the Renaissance, restrictions in female creative education and the negative social attitudes towards women throughout the centuries meant many of the women who contributed to visual culture were overlooked until a resurgence of interest in the 1970s⁴⁸. Negative Renaissance views on women stemmed from the opinions of men who stated that women were weak and with low intelligence; Giuliano de' Medici (1453-1478), stated that women were timid in body and placid in mind, but still had purpose in society, such as caring for children⁴⁹. Furthermore, biblical preaching supported female inferiority; the apostle Paul said:

I do not allow a woman to teach or to usurp authority over a man, but to stay silent... Adam was made first and Eve afterwards, and Adam was not deceived but the woman was deceived and transgressed (I Timothy 2:11-14).

These justifications were given by men to diminish and eradicate the value of women within society. Opinions about women by men ranged from the physical

⁴⁷ In this edition of Lives there is only eight pages on the female sculptor Properzia de' Rossi where Plautilla Nelli is also briefly mentioned. Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects, Volume 3*, trans. Mrs. Jonathan Foster, (London: Oxford University Calleries, 1872), 236-244.

⁴⁸ Andrea Muzzi, "The Artistic Training and Savonarola Ideas of Plautilla Nelli", in *Plautilla Nelli (1524-1588) The Painter-Prioress of Renaissance Florence*, ed. Jonathan K.Nelson, (Florence: S.E.I. srl, 2008), 31.

⁴⁹Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy*, 22.

appearance of gender, to biblical and mythological influences. This theme of describing women as weak, dim-witted and not as valuable as men, supports the idea of the limitations women had in progressing in any role other than motherhood or Bride of Christ. Mary Beard, within her book *Women and Power: A Manifesto*, gives examples of how throughout history men have attempted to silence the female voice through literature and visual culture, continuously referring to Greek mythology and the Bible⁵⁰. A key example Beard gives is the story of Medusa and how, despite being the victim in the story, Medusa was the one who was punished⁵¹. The story of Medusa was repeated through Renaissance visual culture, which was viewable to the public eye⁵² (fig.5). By using this myth which represents rape, it potentially portrays the negative social attitudes created towards female sexuality by showing an unmarried non-virginal woman as ugly and monstrous. Moreover, Guido Ruggiero explained how common insults, which were thrown at women to lower the honour of the family, were a variant of 'whore' or 'adulteress', questioning the woman's virginity, which was considered a valuable possession⁵³.

A woman's beauty was also considered as a desirable attribute, with the foundations of physical beauty ideals formed by male poets, writers and artists, who used female beauty as a measurement of love towards a particular woman⁵⁴. As it was higher-class women who accessed these creative works, it was they who aimed to

⁵⁰ Beard, *Women and Power*: a rough summary of the contents of Beard's book.

⁵¹ Ibid., 73.

⁵² Ibid., 73-75. Beard uses Benvenuto Cellini's statue of Perseus holding up the severed head of Medusa, whilst trampling on her dead body, as an example of visual culture attempting to silence the female voice.

⁵³ Guido Ruggiero, *Binding Passions: Tales of magic, Marriage and Power at the End of the Renaissance*, (New York, 1993), 59.

⁵⁴ Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy*, 28.

achieve the ideal features set by the poets, writers and artists⁵⁵. The Tuscan novelist and friar, Agnolo Firenzuola (1493-1543), wrote about “beautiful” women and how society should appreciate them through praising and valuing the individual woman, “since a beautiful woman is the most beautiful object one can admire” and “one so powerful and valuable that wise men have deemed her the best and finest object of love”⁵⁶. These statements by Firenzuola illustrate the admiration towards beauty and the objectification of women during the Renaissance.

In visual culture, female beauty was often expressed through nudity, which was then judged by art historians, not only during the Renaissance but throughout subsequent centuries. Jill Burke in ‘The Italian Renaissance Nude’ expresses how it is the language used to describe the female nude in art which constructs the ideals of bodily perfection⁵⁷. Indeed, Burke gives an example of how art historians criticised Michelangelo’s ‘Night’ (fig.6) as it did not portray ideal feminine beauty, and was therefore deemed flawed⁵⁸. Burke quotes some of the negative words used to describe the female figure, such as “disturbingly or brutally masculine”, “loose-muscled”, “distinctly male”, “slack” and “tired”⁵⁹. The sculpture is commonly referred to as masculine, suggesting that the ideal female figure implied by theorists should not have any masculine features. Furthermore, the critical words used towards ageing, such as slack and tired, form negative opinions on the natural process of ageing⁶⁰, narrowing

⁵⁵ Ibid., 28.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 29.

⁵⁷ Jill Burke, *The Italian Renaissance Nude*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 9.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 9-12.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 9-12.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 9-12.

down the ideals of feminine beauty to being female and young. The purpose of the Renaissance nude varies; however, all variations involve the gaze from both the artist and viewer, possibly created for sexual pleasure by portraying desirable naked figures, both female and male⁶¹. From this desire to view the naked body by the artist and viewer, ideals were set to portray the perfect nude, allowing appreciation of beauty in art, avoiding ageing and the imperfections of a real body that were considered undesirable⁶². Furthermore, the gender of the naked body reflected social views; male nakedness was accepted as either athletic or that the individual lived in poverty, whereas the female naked body was always linked to sexual shame or arousal⁶³. Consequently, women in public were urged to fully cover their bodies⁶⁴. It was thought that the naked female body was dangerously desirable, and not therefore suitable to be viewed by either male or female audiences⁶⁵, despite the fact that art was used as a means of fulfilling these desires.

A resurgence of interest in the last 40 years in the gender roles and achievements of women⁶⁶ has meant that more work by female Renaissance artists has been brought to light from the dusty parts of archives or discovered in the attics of manor homes and chapels⁶⁷. A female painter and nun who has recently been

⁶¹ Ibid., 15-16.

⁶² Ibid., 15-16.

⁶³ Ibid., 20.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 20.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁶⁶ Muzzi, "The Artistic Training", 31. Muzzi mentions how there was a new surge of interest in the 1970's by female scholars.

⁶⁷ Examples are: "small-scale work discovered in the Pitti Palace's attic" for a 'St Catherine with Lily' painting by Plautilla Nelli, Advancing Women Artists, "St Catherine with a Lily", <http://advancingwomenartists.org/art-in-need/what-can-i-help-restore-now/saint-catherine-with-a-lily>, [accessed 27/04/19], as well as Professor Amanda Vickery, *The Story of Women and Art*, Episode 1, 23:25 19/05/2014, BBC2 England, 60 mins.

rediscovered is Plautilla Nelli. Jane Fortune, who founded the Advancing Women Artists (AWA) organisation and contributed to the rediscovery of Plautilla⁶⁸, stated that Plautilla is documented to be the first woman painter in Florence but she is barely known⁶⁹. This thesis will cover the social history of Plautilla Nelli, referring to the convent life for nuns, the ideals for Italian Renaissance women, the impact of manipulation by men in order to control women's lives, and the appearance and values of women. It will also study the works created by Plautilla Nelli and her all-female workshop, and the influence she had on contemporary art historians, including Giorgio Vasari, whose book 'Lives' led to the recovery of Plautilla's work in later centuries by feminist scholars and non-profit organisations such as the AWA. The thesis will consist of two chapters: one on St Dominic, the Dominican Order and Fra Angelico, and the other on Plautilla Nelli and the 'St Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' series of paintings.

The first chapter will touch upon the foundation of the Dominican Order, and the ways St Dominic attempted to control the devotional life of his followers, particularly their relationship to Christ on the cross. It will include an analysis of the Nine Modes of Prayer of St Dominic, both the textual contents translated by Simon Tugwell⁷⁰ and the illustrations from the Vatican manuscript⁷¹, focusing on the body language between St Dominic and Christ on the cross. Consideration will be given to how gender impacts the

<https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/070C39B4> [accessed 12/10/18] finds countless works of art by women within the storage rooms of museums.

⁶⁸ Advancing Women Artists, "Our Founder", <http://advancingwomenartists.org/about/whos-who/our-founder>, accessed 27/04/19.

⁶⁹ Jane Fortune, "Jane Fortune" in *Plautilla Nelli Arte e devozione sulle orme di Savonarola*, ed. Fausta Navarro, (Florence: s.r.l., 2017), 13.

⁷⁰ Simon Tugwell, "The Nine Ways of Prayer by St Dominic" in *Early Dominicans: Selected Writings*, ed. Simon Tugwell, (Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1982).

⁷¹ DigiVatLib, "Manuscript - Ross.3", https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Ross.3, accessed 01/10/2019.

scene, such as how male religious figures showed devotion to visual representations of Christ on the cross. The chapter will then highlight the purpose of visual representations within Dominican monasteries, referring to the frescoes in the friar cells of San Marco, Florence, painted by Fra Angelico. It will discuss the similarities between the frescoes and the modes of prayer, as well as how they were used as private teaching aids for devotion by the friars of San Marco, modelling the expected behaviour for male religious members and forming their identity within the church.

The second chapter will examine the life of Plautilla Nelli, who maximised the options available for women within the Dominican Order to become a painter with a workshop and financially sustain her convent of Santa Caterina, Florence. It will include analysis of her authenticated paintings, 'The Last Supper' and 'The Lamentation with Saints', and her more recently attributed series 'St Catherine with Lily', otherwise known as 'St Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci'. The latter paintings consist of four almost identical paintings depicting a hybrid profile of St Catherine of Siena and Catherine de'Ricci. The uncertainty and fluidity of the saint(s) in profile has been discussed by Fausta Navarro, who draws attention to the historical connotations of portraying certain saints, such as St Catherine of Siena, and uncanonised saints, such as Catherine de'Ricci⁷². This thesis will introduce ideas of the relationships between represented figures, especially St Catherine, and the crucified body of Christ, in connection to the ideals of female devotion and the possibility of subverting the male gaze⁷³ into a female gaze through

⁷² Fausta Navarro, "Semplice lecto, semplice studio, semplice figure", in *Plautilla Nelli Arte e devozione sulle orme di Savonarola*, ed. Fausta Navarro, (Florence: s.r.l., 2017), 42.

⁷³ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". In *Visual and Other Pleasures. Language, Discourse, Society*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), 14-26.

subject, artist and viewer. The key purpose in analysing Plautilla Nelli's representations of a female saint is to help understand how a nun addressed the painting of Christ's near naked body, in comparison to the frescoes created by Fra Angelico and his visual interpretations of male saints in relation to the near naked body of Christ. Comparisons will be made between Plautilla Nelli and Fra Angelico's representations of body language, gender, distance between figures and whether there is any body contact in their religious paintings. Furthermore, this thesis will discuss the use of symbolic attributes and their relation to the social and historical context of the time, such as the inclusion in Plautilla's 'St Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' series of lilies, stigmata and clothing.

Chapter 1

St Dominic and the Dominican Order

St Dominic 1170-1221⁷⁴

In early thirteenth century, the friar that later became St Dominic, amongst others, was instructed by Pope Innocent III (1198-1216)⁷⁵ to form religious orders for the Latin Church, in order to gain support amongst the laity and convert the Cathars⁷⁶. From then on, Friar Dominic and his followers formed their values of poverty and chastity, founding the namesake religious order: the Dominican Order⁷⁷. For the canonization of Dominic there were testimonies from people who knew him, praising his values and behaviours. A testimony by Brother Ventura of Verona, taken on 6th August, 1233⁷⁸, repeatedly mentioned how Dominic's values revolved around poverty, gratitude and ultimate devotion. For example, Ventura expressed how, when travelling, Dominic was happy to sleep on a bed of straw and eat coarse, poor food⁷⁹. Moreover, Dominic would say mass every day if he was near a church, and pray regularly without fail, all whilst weeping⁸⁰. Dominic weeping is often referred to by Ventura, suggesting that his passion for praying and repeating mass overwhelmed Dominic on an emotional level, expressing the ideal devotional behaviour:

⁷⁴ Paolo Morachiello, *Fra Angelico The San Marco Frescoes*, trans. Eleanor Daunt, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 9.

⁷⁵ J.N.D. Kelly, *The Oxford Dictionary of Popes*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), XVI.

⁷⁶ Harry Schnitker, *Great Orders of the Catholic Church: From the Benedictines to the Carmelites*, (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2014), 38.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 38-39.

⁷⁸ Simon Tugwell, "The Canonization Process of St Dominic 1233: Testimony of Brother Ventura (August 6)", in *Early Dominicans: Selected Writings*, ed. Simon Tugwell, (Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1982), 66-69.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 66-67.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 66.

...he preached nearly every day unless he was prevented during which he would weep a lot and make other's weep too.⁸¹

This shows that it was not just Dominic who wept, but that he had the ability to make others feel passionately about their faith too. It was stated that, on journeys, Dominic would always talk or argue about God with people he met, either in person or through the encouragement of his followers to voice his belief⁸². This suggests that Dominic was charismatic enough to convince others to join his cause and share his passion. His aim through travelling and convincing others stemmed from his ideals of wanting people to follow what he did, such as praying regularly and eating modestly: Ventura expressed how Dominic himself always followed these values⁸³. These ideals formed the foundation of the Dominican Order. Prior to the fourteenth century, the Dominicans followed the vow of poverty Dominic had set for them but, gradually, during the Renaissance members started to fill the convents with riches, diminishing the original value of poverty⁸⁴.

Ventura expressed that Dominic had personal traits which made him the ideal friar: Dominic never spoke ill of anyone and showed compassion⁸⁵. Moreover, he was known to be wise, sensible and patient, and Ventura had never seen a mortal man gifted with these qualities⁸⁶. These character traits formed an ideal for the members of the order to follow, especially as Dominic's virtues were not considered the traits of a mortal

⁸¹ Ibid., 67.

⁸² Ibid., 66.

⁸³ Ibid., 67.

⁸⁴ Joanna Cannon, *Religious Poverty Visual Riches, Art in the Dominican Churches of Central Italy in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, (United States of America: Yale University Press, 2013), 1.

⁸⁵ Tugwell, "The Canonization Process of St Dominic", 67.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 67.

man, but similar to those of Christ. Ventura also mentioned that Dominic, on his death bed, expressed that he had avoided sin and kept his virginity⁸⁷. It is well documented that a woman's virginity, before marriage and for daughters in convents, held significant honour for Italian Renaissance families⁸⁸; however, male virginity, suggested by Ventura's testimony⁸⁹, was not as controlled as a woman's but deemed admirable for men in religious life. Additionally, as described by Jo Ann Kay McNamara, unmarried men had less judgment made against their sexual choices compared to women whose "sexual purity" was an important virtue⁹⁰. There is a theory that during the medieval era and the Renaissance, a male virgin body became feminine⁹¹ and that the term virginity was used to express the "physical intactness" of the body and the term chastity was used for the idea of spiritual honour⁹². As Dominic followed the values of both virginity and chastity, this made him an ideal candidate for canonization as a saint, as he was physically and spiritually "pure" in the eyes of medieval people.

The founder of the Dominican Order had strict views on the discipline of his followers and himself: in his testimony, Ventura mentions the strong rules they abided by, such as self-harming through not sleeping or eating, but instead praying, and that any faults of the brethren were punished⁹³. Dominic often wept whilst praying and was seen to be exhausted from lack of sleep by the other friars; his brothers would beg him

⁸⁷ Ibid., 67.

⁸⁸ Segregation against those who were not virgins. Evangelisti, *Nuns*, 26.

⁸⁹ Tugwell, "The Canonization Process of St Dominic", 67.

⁹⁰ Jo Ann Kay McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 1-2.

⁹¹ Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Marina Leslie, "Introduction: The Epistemology of Virginity", in *Menacing Virgins: Representing Virginity in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Nancy Weitz, (London: Associated University Presses, 1999), 23.

⁹² Coyne Kelly and Leslie, "Introduction: The Epistemology of Virginity", 17.

⁹³ Tugwell, "Testimony of Brother Ventura", 67.

to go and sleep, but he would refuse and resume praying⁹⁴. Ventura states this led Dominic to his visions of Christ; it was recorded that Dominic became nauseous and with a pain in his head when he avoided sleep for long periods of time, which were said to be the beginning signs that Dominic was about to have a mystic vision of Christ⁹⁵. This suggests that the strain religious members put themselves through, in the hope of achieving a spiritual connection to Christ, possibly took a toll on their mental and physical state⁹⁶. Furthermore, Dominic's followers were encouraged to copy his self-harming methods and mystic happenings through his preaching and the visual culture created around them⁹⁷. Jean-Claude Schmitt explains how Dominic and the Dominican Order created an intense physical relationship with the image of the crucified Christ and his followers through suffering, often through flagellation⁹⁸. In late medieval religious culture, the pursuit of pain and suffering was often demonstrated by mystics through 'defiling practices' to force a spiritual happening within themselves⁹⁹. Retrospectively, the ideals of Dominic and the Dominican Order become clear: chastity, poverty and self-inflicted suffering, showing the example of humble devotion Dominic strived for within his order, and which future members also strived for. To achieve these values, visual culture was introduced as a method of teaching the ideal ways of the order: St Thomas Aquinas (c.1224/5 – 1274) described the purpose of having a visual representation of

⁹⁴Ibid., 67.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 68.

⁹⁶ In Joseph Breuer's "Studies of Hysteria" there were a few cases recorded in the nineteenth century where people who were distressed or exhausted hallucinated. Joseph Breuer, *Studies in Hysteria*, (Milton Keynes: Lightning Source UK Ltd, 2010), 1-2.

⁹⁷ Tugwell, "The Nine Ways", 95.

⁹⁸ Jean-Claude Schmitt, "Between Text and Image: The Prayer Gestures of Saint Dominic" in *History and Anthropology* 1, no. 1 (1984), 141.

⁹⁹ Mitchell B. Merback, *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel: Pain and the Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe*, (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 1999), 20.

the cross as instructions for “simple people” who could not read, and that “the mystery of the Incarnation and the examples of the saints may be the more active in the memory through being represented daily to the eyes... to excite feelings of devotion”¹⁰⁰. Therefore, the visual representations of the crucifix and saints were used as teaching aids. Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498) wanted the visual culture within convents not to stray from the ideals of poverty, modesty and devotion, but for members of the convent to provide for themselves through creating religiously themed visual culture in the form of paintings, illustrations and sculpture¹⁰¹. Additionally, Dominic built the order on the foundations of flexibility and independence, making it more attractive for clever and ambitious individuals¹⁰² and possibly encouraging artistic members to join in pursuit of having a creative career.

St Dominic’s Modes of Prayer

Schmitt states that “one of the important changes produced in the West during the XIIth century involves the attitudes towards the body” and how they caused a new interest in bodily gestures¹⁰³. The term ‘gesture’ includes the deliberate movement and figuration of limbs, with the purpose of communicating a message¹⁰⁴. Schmitt also acknowledges the increased use of the term gesture with positive connotations, despite similar terms being associated with movements of jugglers and devils¹⁰⁵, as movement

¹⁰⁰ Cannon, *Religious Poverty Visual Riches*, 51.

¹⁰¹ Muzzi, “The Artistic Training”, 28.

¹⁰² Hood, *Fra Angelico*, 20.

¹⁰³ Schmitt, “Between Text and Image”, 127.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 127.

¹⁰⁵ J.C. Schmitt, “Gestus-Gesticulatio, Contribution à l’étude du vocabulaire latin medieval des gestes” in *et sas rapport avec les recherches actuelles sur la civilisation du Moyen Age*, (Paris: CNRS, 1981), 377-390.

of the body became an interaction with nature; the deliberate movements and gestures complimented and formed a link between the individual and the universe in “vast harmony”¹⁰⁶. The purpose of “figuration” gestures was to reflect the inner soul externally¹⁰⁷. Gestures were used by religious members to express connections with the universe; however, if performed incorrectly they were scrutinised by their peers and superiors¹⁰⁸. Models were created representing the body in a variety of forms to teach the “mastery of gestures”, for example the Nine Modes of Prayer which mimic the gestures created by Dominic¹⁰⁹. Marcel Mauss discusses how the discipline of gestures through mastering techniques was used to express and uphold moral attitudes¹¹⁰. During the twelfth century, friars referred to the opuscle by Peter the Chanter on ways of prayer, which expressed treating the human body as a tool¹¹¹. The General Master of the Dominican Order, Humbert of Romans, during the thirteenth century, established that the written description of gestures used for prayer should be considered as “gestural grammar”¹¹². However, Humbert of Romans only considered gestures of the whole body, rather than giving detail on the positioning of arms, hands, head and eyes; he distinguished ways of bending the body, under the names “*humiliationes*” and “*inclinaciones*”¹¹³. The gestures included inclination of the bust, occasionally upright, at

¹⁰⁶ Schmitt, “Between Text and Image”, 128.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 128.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 128.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 128.

¹¹⁰ Marcel Mauss, “Les techniques du corps” (1936), re-ed. In *Sociologie et Anthropologie*, introduction by Claude Lévi-Strauss, (Paris: PUF), 363-386.

¹¹¹ Schmitt, “Between Text and Image”, 128.

¹¹² Ibid., 132.

¹¹³ Ibid., 132.

a right angle, or somewhere in between, as well as the position of the body lying prone, face down¹¹⁴.

To teach the members of the Dominican Order the ideal ways of prayer, manuscripts were made depicting the different methods Dominic used, expressed both visually and in writing, with several copies created; surviving copies include examples from Rome, Madrid and Bologna¹¹⁵. The Roman version of this manuscript is in the Vatican and is written in Latin, and the Madrid version is in the Convent of the Dominican Order of Nuns, written in Castilian; both versions include nine modes of prayer with matching images¹¹⁶. Another manuscript had been kept at the convent of the Preachers of Bologna but is now lost; it was written in Italian before 1470, but instead of nine modes there were fourteen¹¹⁷. The Modes of Prayer created by Dominic and documented anonymously¹¹⁸, also typically known as the Nine Modes of Prayer, consist of various desirable movements and gestures to achieve ultimate devotion to Christ. This thesis will analyze the illustrations from the Vatican manuscript, comparing the relationship between the figure of Dominic and the figure of Christ on the cross. Schmitt states that the Vatican illustrations follow a consistent structural layout of using the canopy or landscape to frame the saint and crucifix¹¹⁹, drawing the viewers' attention to the figures. Analysis of the gestures, movements and touch (or lack of touch) suggested in these images, along with the social context of male behaviour, will help

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 132.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 131.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 129.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 129.

¹¹⁸ Anonymous preaching friar from Bologna, probably between 1280 and 1288: Schmitt, "Between Text and Image", 129.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 135.

form a conception of a male saint's relationship to the crucifix and how he and other religious males expressed devotion.

Mode I, otherwise known as 'The First Way of Prayer', instructs the reader to humbly bow their head before the altar, as if it were Christ, because the altar signifies the presence of Christ¹²⁰. Additionally, in Mode I, Dominic conveys to his followers that they should use this gesture whenever they passed a crucifix as it represented "the humiliation of Christ"¹²¹. This indicates the importance of showing and expressing gratitude to Christ for his humiliating ordeal and sacrifice on the cross. This mode, in particular, has a very simple instruction to show humility, respect and devotion to the symbol of religious sacrifice. In the Vatican manuscript (fig.7), the image used to depict Mode I shows Dominic bowing to an image of Christ on the cross. Dominic is at a distance from the cross, which is spurting blood. The blood is suspended in the air, yet to hit the ground or the altar, giving the impression that Christ is bleeding in the moment in front of Dominic. Christ's blood is considered to be sacred, and iconography of his wounds was formed during early Christianity when the members of the church were deciding the imagery of the cross: there were different accounts of the crucifixation from Evangelists, making it unclear if Christ was affixed to the cross with nails or ropes¹²². However, it was decided that wounds made by nails suited the emotional connection of sympathy the Latin church wanted the public to feel¹²³. To be crucified was to be

¹²⁰ Tugwell, "The Nine Ways", 95.

¹²¹ Ibid., 95.

¹²² "In the early fourth century the Christian apologist Lactantius (d.c. 320) quotes a response in Greek given by the oracle, the Milesian Appolo... the oracle declared that Jesus endured a bitter death 'with nails and pointed stakes'... Bishop Hilary of Poitiers (c.350) expressed some uncertainty, claiming that Christ had been affixed to the cross with nails and ropes". Merback, *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel*, 77.

¹²³ Merback, *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel*, 16.

humiliated, due to prolonged suffering and vulnerability¹²⁴, therefore adding bloodied wounds to the imagery of this capital punishment stimulated stronger emotions of sympathy to the sacrifice Christ made, which in this mode of prayer by Dominic, aims to show respect and gratitude for the humiliation.

The instructions for Mode II describes whole body movement which required more force: it involved Dominic throwing himself to the ground, lying face down whilst speaking aloud “Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner”, often whilst weeping¹²⁵. These gestures were not limited to forgiveness of the individual who performed them but were also done to help save others who were considered as sinners¹²⁶. Dominic told men who he believed were too young to have sinned themselves to pray for those who had sinned, likening them to Christ who “wept bitterly when he saw [sinners]”¹²⁷. This shows how emotions were a key characteristic of expressing devotion, as expressing emotions showed modesty and forgiveness, values the Dominican Order seemingly wanted to take from the way Christ lived. In the image from the Vatican manuscript depicting Mode II (fig.8), Dominic’s body is closer to the altar than the image in Mode I, with the blood from Christ’s ribs still suspended mid-air. The body language of Dominic reflects the written instructions for the mode of prayer: the figure is prone in front of the altar. Not only does the image give instructions to the viewers in following Dominic’s modes of prayer, but also shows the connection and relationship between the saint and Christ:

¹²⁴ Ibid., 16.

¹²⁵ Tugwell, “The Nine Ways”, 95.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 96.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 96.

Dominic is seen as a devout servant keeping low in front of an altar, despite the fact that the figure of Christ appears as the more vulnerable.

Mode III explains the self-harming practices Dominic abided by and encouraged others to follow by his example: he would rise from the ground from the position of Mode II and use an iron chain to chastise himself¹²⁸. Mode III is short in text but explains Dominic's discipline and how the Order must show respect for Dominic's sacrifice by chastising themselves using wooden sticks across their bare backs every ferial day after Compline; friars had to do this either for their own sins or the sins of others¹²⁹. This shows that self-harming through flagellation was an expected practice within the Dominican Order as the friars, including some nuns¹³⁰, followed Dominic's example. However, the obvious difference here is the item used to discipline oneself, as Dominic's choice of object was an iron chain, heavier and likely to cause more damage than the wooden sticks the Order's members used. This suggests that Dominic's sacrifice and self-discipline were far greater than his followers', making him exceptionally devotional. Additionally, this practice happened in front of the altar, which, as previously stated, represents Christ. In the Vatican manuscript, the images of Dominic at each stage of prayer are situated in front of an image of Christ (fig.9). Having parallel figures showing sacrifice and violence creates a visual and spiritual connection between both Christ and Dominic, reflecting the ideals of the period. Mitchell B. Merback explains how intersubjective bonds of shared pain grew stronger during periods of crisis; an example

¹²⁸ Ibid., 96.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 96.

¹³⁰ Dominican nun Colomba da Rieti, documented by Leandro Alberti (1521), starved and flagellated herself using iron chains in hope to receive visions of Christ, similarly to St Dominic and St Catherine of Siena. Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy*, 68-69.

of this was during the peak of the Black Death (c.1348-51) when brotherhoods who practiced flagellation travelled to towns and villages throughout Europe to show compassion through self-harm to help prevent God's wrath¹³¹. The religious brotherhoods that practiced flagellation were strictly male and the practice surpassed the more traditional practices of hymn singing and charitable work, which were taken on by the women in religious orders, although some nuns took it upon themselves to flagellate in isolation as they were excluded from the brotherhoods' practices of group flagellation¹³². This shows the self-harming practice of Dominic and his followers to be a predominantly masculine method of expressing devotion, one reason being that it mirrored the suffering of Christ, a male figure; another reason being that public and group flagellation was a strictly male practice as it required partial nudity¹³³, not deemed fitting for a modest nun¹³⁴.

Schmitt analyzed the modes, both written and visual, and noticed the transition between each prayer, stating that Modes II, III and IV follow each other in close sequential succession: in Mode II the saint has his face on the ground, moving up from the ground to chastise himself in Mode III, then moving to pray in Mode IV, alternating between standing and kneeling¹³⁵. Mode IV describes Dominic standing before the altar, fixing his gaze on Christ on the cross, followed by the saint repeatedly kneeling for hours at a time¹³⁶. Whilst performing these movements, Dominic was praying for protection

¹³¹ Merback, *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel*, 20.

¹³² Strocchia, "Gender and the Rites", 48.

¹³³ See visual examples of male flagellating, they are seen half dressed: figures 9 and 19

¹³⁴ Female nudity often linked to sexual shame. Burke, *The Italian Renaissance Nude*, 20.

¹³⁵ Schmitt, "Between Text and Image", 133.

¹³⁶ Tugwell, "The Nine Ways", 96.

and mercy for himself, the novices of the order and all sinners, sometimes praying out loud or to himself, weeping, as described in Mode IV¹³⁷:

...from the very way he looked that he penetrated heaven in his mind, and then he would suddenly appear radiant with joy, wiping away the abundant tears running down his face... Then he would grow more forceful and insistent, and his movements would display great composure and agility as he stood up and kneeled down.¹³⁸

Thus in Mode IV Dominic expressed devotion both physically and verbally by using gestures, movement and prayer, including consideration for other people rather than isolating his prayer for himself alone. This links to the charitable and selfless values he instigated in the order, as he aimed to help everyone with his prayers and dedication. In the Vatican image of this mode, there are two figures: both are of Dominic but show the different poses of Mode IV's instruction (fig.10). This illustrates the different steps followers should take to imitate Dominic's fourth mode of prayer: to repeatedly kneel and stand before the crucifix. This image is the first of the four modes to express full body movement but is seen in a formal layout where the two figures of the saint do not overlap. Moreover, the image would not seemingly be read from left to right, as the text expresses how Dominic stood before the altar and then knelt, meaning the viewer should perhaps read the image right to left. Interestingly, the Dominic figure standing closest to the crucified figure of Christ is the standing figure. This pose is not as submissive as the kneeling figure and is at eye level to the image of Christ, suggesting the standing figure has a stronger connection to Christ. Additionally, even though Dominic is at eye level to the Crucifix, his head tilts upwards. This gesture of holding his

¹³⁷ Ibid., 96-97.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 97.

head high in a religious setting suggests his authority as a male within the church; this contrasts with religious women who were told to keep their head bowed low in shame of their sex¹³⁹. Dominic can thus be seen to embody the male gender privilege.

Mode V requires less full body movement compared to Mode IV; Dominic would stand upright without support, once again in front of an altar¹⁴⁰, his only movements being occasional movements of his arms into different positions. For example, Dominic would raise his arms in front of himself as though reading a book¹⁴¹. This mode mentions that Dominic imitated Christ's practice in Luke 4:16: "Jesus went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, as he was accustomed to do, and stood up to read", as well as imitating Psalm 105:30: "Phineas stood and prayed and the pestilence stopped"¹⁴². At other times Dominic would bring his hands together in front of his eyes, hunching his shoulders, or he would raise his hands to shoulder height as if he were a priest saying Mass and calling for attention¹⁴³. In this mode Dominic is compared to a prophet communicating with an angel or with God: "now talking, now listening, now thinking quietly about what had been revealed to him"¹⁴⁴. In the Vatican manuscript, each stage of Mode V is explained visually in a layout similar to Mode IV, using an individual figure of Dominic to instruct each gesture (fig.11). The images, however, do not follow the same order as the mode which states the first gesture was hands like an open book, the second clasped hands, and the third raised hands¹⁴⁵. Like Mode IV, the image illustrates the characters from

¹³⁹ Bernardion da Siena (1444): "Don't try and rise above man, it is not fitting for you to stand except with your head bent down and low, under the charge of man..." Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy*, 17.

¹⁴⁰ Tugwell, "The Nine Ways", 97.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 97.

¹⁴² Ibid., 97.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 97-98.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 98.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 97-98

right to left, with the figure of Dominic reading closest to the altar and the image of the crucifix. This could symbolise how this pose particularly imitates Christ's actions and therefore demonstrates a strong connection between the image of Dominic and the image of Christ.

Mode VI moves back to a single pose: in the textual instruction of the prayer, the writer expresses how Dominic was seen praying as though imitating the crucifix, with body stretched upright and his arms spread out¹⁴⁶. The purpose of this mode of prayer created by Dominic was to copy how Christ prayed whilst on the cross¹⁴⁷. Whilst Dominic did not encourage his brethren to follow this mode of prayer, neither did he forbid it; Dominic felt that this prayer should only be performed when God requests it, as "some great wonder was going to occur by virtue of his prayer"¹⁴⁸. The mode mentions how Dominic used this prayer when he raised a boy from the dead¹⁴⁹, suggesting that this particular mode was associated with miracles and therefore considered sacred, only performed by saints. In the Vatican manuscript illustration of this mode, the figure of Dominic clearly demonstrates the instruction of this prayer by standing upright with his arms stretched outwards, mirroring the crucified Christ opposite him (fig.12). The line across the back wall also lines up with Dominic's hands, giving the impression of a fixture holding up Dominic, similar to Christ on the cross. Moreover, Dominic's bowed head implies bearing weight and exhaustion, mimicking the way Christ's head is bowed. This

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 98.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 98.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 99.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 99.

suggests physical and spiritual vulnerability, as Dominic re-enacts the crucifixion, which was Christ's act of humiliation.

Mode VII expresses full body movement: Dominic stretched towards heaven in prayer, with his hands above his head, either joined or slightly apart¹⁵⁰. Dominic's purpose in performing Mode VII was in hope of receiving gifts from the Holy Spirit for himself and his brethren¹⁵¹. Dominic did not spend long in this prayer, seemingly returning from a spiritual journey:

...but returned to himself as if he were coming from far away, and at such times he seemed to be a stranger in the world, as could easily be seen from his appearance and his behaviour.¹⁵²

Furthermore, the mode documents how Dominic was sometimes heard speaking biblical verses: Psalm 133:2 "At night lift up your hands to the holy place" and Psalm 140:2 "The raising of my hands like an evening sacrifice"¹⁵³. The incantations and action demonstrate the intentional display of reaching upwards towards heaven. The Vatican manuscript illustration supports the written mode by portraying the figure of Dominic in an accurate manner to the description: the body stretched upright with the arms and hands pointing upwards (fig.13). The image portrays Dominic, face upwards, without interaction to the image of Christ opposite, different from the relationships portrayed in the previous modes. The only idea of interaction between the two figures is that they

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 99.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 99.

¹⁵² Ibid., 100.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 100-101.

are present in the same room, suggesting that Dominic is not addressing Christ but something else on a spiritual level, supporting the text of Mode VII.

Mode VIII is placed in a different setting. The text expresses how, after meals, Dominic would go to his private cell to show devotion through reading or praying¹⁵⁴. The procedure Dominic followed prior to reading included sitting quietly and “arming himself first with the sign of the cross”¹⁵⁵. The symbolism of Dominic making the gesture of the cross matches the image of the cross itself, showing devotion and respect; it becomes a more personal relationship between Dominic and the crucifix as he is in isolation from his brethren. The mode mentions how Dominic was often found, by those who spied on him, in conversation with God, responding with nodding, laughing and weeping¹⁵⁶. The image of this mode in the Vatican manuscript clearly illustrates the description, confirming Dominic’s isolation with his books (fig.14). Like the other illustrations, this image includes Christ on the cross, in the far right, opposite Dominic. Even though Dominic is sitting and reading at a desk, he still faces the crucifix.

Mode IX was used when Dominic travelled: he used meditation to disconnect himself from reality¹⁵⁷. Dominic would pray as he walked either ahead or behind, sometimes at a far distance from, his companions¹⁵⁸. The method of praying is unusual and unlike the rest of the modes. It does, however, include full body movement, as he prayed like this whilst walking: “he seemed to be brushing away ashes or flies from before his face; and because of this he often defended himself with the sign of the

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 101.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 101.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 101.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 102.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 102.

cross”¹⁵⁹. The hand gesture of Dominic signalling the cross is similar to Mode VIII where he makes the sign of the cross before reading (fig.15). In Mode VIII Dominic faces an image of the crucified Christ, however, in Mode IX he walks outside, without access to an altar.

Overall, this analysis of the Modes in relation to gender and the crucifix shows the interaction between Dominic and the body of Christ, through distance, absence of touch and the mirroring of gestures and suffering. Respect towards Christ’s sacrifice and humiliation is represented through submissive behaviour, such as bowing, and through mimicking gestures of the cross and the individual practice of physical harm to copy the suffering Christ endured. Furthermore, the modes suggest that Christ’s body is an ideal symbol to interact with, as well as Dominic being a suitable model to copy in relation to expressing devotion; the suffering of Christ could be mirrored by a friar through flagellation, forming a connection between Christ and friars. The absence of touch is clear in the Vatican manuscript of the Modes but is not followed in other depictions, particularly by Fra Angelico for the frescoes in San Marco’s friar cells in Florence. In terms of gender, a masculine relationship to the cross is portrayed as the images depict only a male saint. Additionally, in Mode III the flagellation is directed mainly to a male audience as the action was to be performed either privately or within a strictly male brotherhood.

Joanna Cannon explains how the mental image of the crucifix comes from two depictions painted on the walls of the upper church of San Francesco, in Assisi, in the

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 102.

thirteenth century, illustrating the life of St Francis (fig.16 & fig.17)¹⁶⁰. This was when Dominican depictions of the crucifix started to appear¹⁶¹. Cannon found that when comparing the Franciscan crucifixes to the Dominican depictions, the Dominican representations showed the blood of Christ as a prominent feature, but not as copious as in some of the Franciscan examples which exaggerated the bleeding wounds¹⁶². It is clear in the images from the Vatican manuscript of the Modes that the wounds on the figure of Christ and the blood illustrate suffering. To convey the extent of Christ's suffering, early Christian theorists portrayed Christ as crucified by being nailed to the cross, rather than tied with ropes, to show his blood which was sacred¹⁶³. Furthermore, and as stated in the Modes, members of the Dominican order were encouraged to show humility to the image of Christ sacrificing himself¹⁶⁴. Gestures were made by members of the order towards the image of the crucifix by showing devotion at the altar through lighting lanterns, placing visual culture of the scene, and regular praying¹⁶⁵. In the illustrations of the Modes there is no evidence of lanterns or other visual culture surrounding the altars where Dominic prays. This could be because Dominic focused his devotion on the ideal of poverty, or because having extra attributes too close to the image of the altar would clutter the illustration, moving the viewers' gaze away from the image of Christ which holds importance for Dominican devotion. The importance of portraying the cross clearly is to aid in the devotional practice preached to members of the Dominican Order: Fra Giordano da Pisa in 1303-1305 expressed that people can

¹⁶⁰ Cannon, *Religious Poverty Visual Riches*, 47.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 48.

¹⁶² Ibid., 67.

¹⁶³ Merback, *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel*, 77.

¹⁶⁴ Tugwell, "The Nine Ways", 95.

¹⁶⁵ Cannon, *Religious Poverty Visual Riches*, 51.

learn and understand the images they see, and by viewing holy images they can be saved spiritually¹⁶⁶. Giordano thought that an image of Christ reflected both God and the audience's souls¹⁶⁷. Viewing the crucifix became interlinked with Dominican holy days: during Lent the Dominican churches would cover all representations of the crucifix, restraining the members from viewing and praying in front of an image of the crucified Christ¹⁶⁸. Between Palm Sunday and Good Friday the Dominicans held services centring around devotion towards the crucifix: the friars would bring down a single crucifix, uncover and adore it¹⁶⁹. The cross was then brought to all the friars to individually adore, although the Dominican nuns were excluded from the event of adoration by being kept in the choir¹⁷⁰. Physical interactions with the visual representations of the crucifix were an important act of devotion for the Dominican Order; however, it is unclear whether women had a different way of showing adoration to the cross during these holy days.

Fra Angelico Frescoes in San Marco

The San Marco, Florence, priory received support from Cosimo de' Medici in the early fifteenth century; he believed that the building should be the centre of religious life, removing the original residents, the Silvestrines¹⁷¹, and replacing them with Dominicans¹⁷². This was because the Silvestrines were disliked by the Medicis and Florentines, as they were bringing the San Marco building to ruins¹⁷³. Cosimo also had

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 52.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 52.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 164-165.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 165-166.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 167.

¹⁷¹ Silvestrines, in 1299, were a group of friars who followed a reformed Benedictine rule. Morachiello, *Fra Angelico*, 11.

¹⁷² Morachiello, *Fra Angelico*, 11-12.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 12.

his own motives for restoring the priory, including atonement for his sin of usury¹⁷⁴. In 1437 the Dominicans moved into the premises, where the Medici family could begin the restoration of San Marco¹⁷⁵. Cosimo paid for the weekly board, food and wine for the friars, as well as books to support religious studies¹⁷⁶. Between 1438 and 1452, Fra Angelico and his workshop created over fifty frescoes on the walls of friars' cells in San Marco¹⁷⁷. The frescoes each depict biblical themes, always with reference to the crucifixion, either through portraying Christ on the cross or the saints' gestures of the cross, along with the inclusion of apostles and 'living' saints¹⁷⁸. Georges Didi-Huberman expresses that the paintings created by Angelico, using a few coloured pigments for simplicity, were fashioned for the gaze of his contemporaries to aid them in their daily devotion, as they possess "great figurative obviousness and extraordinary figural subtlety"¹⁷⁹. William Hood mentions in 'Fra Angelico at San Marco' that the paintings were created to tie past and present together whilst portraying what the Dominicans believed in. The cells, each identical, were private to the friars, allowing individual meditation and study¹⁸⁰; however, the visual depictions of holy themes in each cell being unique. It was Dominic's request for each friar to have their own cell, where they could dedicate themselves to their monastic and devotional life¹⁸¹; the images were a

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 12.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 12.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 12.

¹⁷⁷ Hood, *Fra Angelico*, 1.

¹⁷⁸ 'Living Saints' are often referred to the saints that existed during the same or just before the contemporary public, particularly medieval and Renaissance, to persuade the public of mystical happenings. (E.g. St Dominic, St Francis and St Catherine of Siena). Georgia Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 2.

¹⁷⁹ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*. Trans. Jane Marie Todd, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 7.

¹⁸⁰ Morachiello, *Fra Angelico*, 22.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 43.

constant reminder of Christ's sacrifice and humiliation¹⁸². This imagery foreshadows the future teachings by Savonarola, about only producing visual culture which supports the teachings of 'religious truth'¹⁸³, suggesting that these frescoes were considered ideal examples of the priory's needs. This thesis will highlight the portrayal of gender in relation to the crucified Christ in the frescoes selected for analysis: 'Crucifixion with Dominic (cell 17)' (fig.18), 'Crucifixion with Dominic Flagellating Himself (Cell 20)' (fig.19), 'Crucifixion with the Virgin, Mary Magdalene and Dominic (Cell 25)' (fig.20), and 'Saint Dominic Adoring the Crucifixion' (fig.21). These frescoes have similarities that are relevant to this thesis: Christ on the cross, Christ above other figures and centred in the composition, and the inclusion of Dominic reacting to the presence of Christ. In all scenes selected, Christ is depicted as a person in the narrative of the image, through his engagement with the other figures, the scenery, and his proportion in relation to the other figures, rather than as an attribute of worship. The frescoes 'Cell 17' and 'Cell 20' were painted in the novices' cells¹⁸⁴. Angelico and the chapter believed that every novice cell should have a depiction of the crucified Christ in order to encourage the novices' admiration of Christ¹⁸⁵. The 'Cell 25' fresco belongs in a friar's cell, and meets the requirements set out by the Constitution for showing scenes of the Passion with the Virgin Mary and Dominic¹⁸⁶. The 'Saint Dominic Adoring the Crucifixion', on the other hand, is not from a cell but a cloister¹⁸⁷.

¹⁸² Within the Nine Modes of Prayer 'humiliation' is often referred to with the request for the Order member to humble themselves before the image of Christ. Tugwell, "The Nine Ways", 95-102.

¹⁸³ Meaning keeping the themes accurate to biblical texts.

¹⁸⁴ Morachiello, *Fra Angelico*, 294.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 294.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 294.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 170.

'Crucifixion with St Dominic (Cell 17)' is presented in a similar layout to Mode IV and shows Dominic kneeling before Christ on the cross. However, in the fresco by Angelico, Dominic is much closer to the crucifixion, with an open book placed between Dominic and the base of the cross. The closeness of Dominic could be explained by the compositional layout of Christ as the central focus; alternatively, the closeness could symbolise the desired relationship between Dominic and Christ. The blood is a prominent feature, pouring out of the wounds of Christ's body, yet there is no blood touching Dominic's clothing or skin, despite the saint being under the dripping wounds. As previously mentioned in the analysis of Mode I, where the blood of Christ is considered as a sacred attribute¹⁸⁸, it is possible that Christ's blood is too sacred for mortal touch, and therefore portrayed suspended in the air, and without reaching the ground from the wounds in his hands and chest. This further explains the relationship Angelico wanted to show as close and humble, yet reminding the viewer of Christ's superiority compared to Dominic, who represents the viewers' mortality.

Similar in layout to the 'Crucifixion with St Dominic (Cell 17)' and showing a similar closeness between figures but portraying a different narrative, 'Crucifixion with St Dominic Flagellating Himself (Cell 20)' portrays the scene of Mode III, with Dominic self-harming with iron chains on his bare skin. By portraying Dominic flagellating, the viewer becomes capable of connecting the verbal teachings of Dominic's prayer, through the comparison of the willing suffering of Dominic to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. This is a further reminder of Christ's humility and Dominic's way of showing

¹⁸⁸ Merback, *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel*, 77.

respect and devotion to this sacrifice. Different from 'Cell 17', 'Cell 20' portrays two partially naked male figures in the same scene. Even though the figures are not completely nude, probably in line with Renaissance values of not portraying Christ naked to avoid inappropriate sexual feelings from the viewers¹⁸⁹, Angelico portrayed the figures in slightly translucent cloth gathered around their waists. It is particularly the cloth on Christ which shows the outline of his legs beneath. The semi-transparent cloth is also used in the 'Cell 17' fresco. This implies the values of poverty of Christ and Dominic, as the fabric is plain and humble. This could also be an example of being truthful to the humiliation of Christ as the cloth is plain, similar in colour to the skin and closely wrapped, giving an illusion of nudity; some religious members praised nudity as a form of sympathy for the crucifixion¹⁹⁰, but simultaneously avoided showing the "shameful parts" of the body¹⁹¹. Furthermore, there is no suggestion of these two figures being aware that they are being viewed, making this moment in the scene appear intimate: Dominic is seen looking up at the face of Christ whilst flagellating, with Christ looking downwards, possibly at Dominic. This could play into the gaze of the viewer, which in this case would have been a friar or male worshipper within his cell.

'Crucifixion with the Virgin, Mary Magdalene and St Dominic (Cell 25)' is a very different layout compared to the two frescos discussed above, due to the inclusion of different scenery and extra figures portrayed as saints. However, the placement and appearance of Christ on the cross is almost identical: the cloth around his waist and the

¹⁸⁹Sexual intentions towards the image of Christ was inappropriate. Burke, *The Italian Renaissance Nude*, 20.

¹⁹⁰The Franciscans praised nudity and used it as a way to sympathise with Christ's humiliation, as he died on the cross naked. Burke, *The Italian Renaissance Nude*, 45.

¹⁹¹ Referring to genitalia as the shameful parts of the body. Burke, *The Italian Renaissance Nude*, 47.

blood suspended in the air are very similar. The placement of the attributes shows the importance of the crucifix as a key visual feature for the devotional practice of the Dominican friars: the crucified Christ is placed high and in the centre. In the 'Cell 25' fresco, Christ is framed by an arch and cliffs, singling him out from the other figures and highlighting his importance. The portrayal of gender in this fresco suggests the dominance of men and submissiveness of women. Christ shows dominance in the image because of his placement in the composition, as well as bearing a halo made unique with a red cross, even though his body language is unquestionably submissive due to his vulnerability of being crucified. Dominic's halo is made unique with a white star placed above it, although not as elaborate as Christ's, with his head held upwards facing Christ. The two female figures have identical, simplistic golden halos; one showing submission to Christ and Dominic and the other showing submission to either Christ or the viewer. Mary Magdalene is placed directly beneath Christ with her arms wrapped around the base of the cross, kneeling. She too is looking upwards at Christ like Dominic; however, Magdalene's body language is more submissive as she is lower to the ground and is closer to Christ's feet, whereas Dominic is standing and at a distance from Christ. This could suggest the submissiveness expected of women during the Renaissance. It could also suggest the lesser status of ex-prostitutes in comparison to the other female figure which is presented higher due to her virginal and honourable status¹⁹². However, the closeness of Magdalene could also resemble the relationships between figures: Magdalene having a closer and more affectionate bond with Christ than Dominic.

¹⁹² Evangelisti wrote that prostitution was considered the greatest crime a woman could commit. The Church created convents dedicated to homing ex-prostitutes for redemption, under the name of Mary Magdalene. Evangelisti, *Nuns*, 26.

Magdalene is closer to the sacred blood of Christ which is prominently dripping next to, and possibly touching, Magdalene's hands. It is possible to read this scene as redemption of, by Renaissance Italian standards, the 'lowest' form of woman, as Christ sacrifices himself for human sins through suffering and bleeding. The Virgin Mary's position is at the same height as Dominic, however she faces away with her head bowed, covering herself not only with clothing but also her hands. This suggests modesty and humbleness, ideals for Renaissance women. Furthermore, unlike the other figures in the painting, she is not engaging with the scene, which implies that her presence is more for the viewer rather than the narrative. Her submissive behaviour illustrates the perfect woman. Religious men often preached to young women about the perfection of the Virgin Mary: Bernardino da Siena in 1427 preached to women to be like the Virgin who "stayed shut away", and did not look at the angel who visited her, presenting herself in "an almost fearful pose"¹⁹³. Therefore, the Virgin Mary is presented in this ideal way for a male audience by a male painter, satisfying their vision of womankind.

'Saint Dominic Adoring the Crucifixion' has a more decorative frame and is placed in a corridor rather than a cell, therefore being more accessible for friars to view. The scene consists of Christ on the cross with Dominic kneeling at the base, hugging the bottom of the cross with Christ's blood dripping down around Dominic's hands (fig.21). The gesture Dominic makes is similar to the portrayal of Magdalene in 'Cell 25', as he embraces the cross as though living through the narrative of the crucifixion. Similarly to Magdalene, he shows submissive behaviour and empathy by lowering himself to Christ's

¹⁹³ Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy*, 44-45.

feet, as well as showing a close relationship with how intimate the cross is against his body, different from how Dominic is portrayed in the previous scenes discussed, including the Modes, which portrayed him at a distance as an observer. Paolo Morachiello note how the saint appears to be yearning to become one with Christ, in spirit and body¹⁹⁴. The differences, however, between this depiction of Dominic and the image of Magdalene, is how the head is tilted. Magdalene's head faces away from the viewer, shown only in profile, as she is immersed with the suffering Christ, unaware of the viewers' presence. Dominic, on the other hand, has his body and head turned enough for the viewer to see his full face, whilst at the same time looking up at Christ. Dominic is portrayed in this manner possibly for friars to learn devotion to the cross from his body language, as where his hands are placed, his facial expressions and body gestures are shown clearly. Magdalene's body language was not an educational tool as the male audience would not look at her for devotional practice.

To conclude, instructional illustrations and frescoes created for the Dominican friars, particularly of San Marco, were created exclusively for a male audience. The relationship between the male figures of Dominic and Christ portray an ideal behaviour for the men of the order to express devotion, without the possibility of a homo-erotic gaze. This was done through keeping a distance between figures and/or no skin contact, as well as covering Christ's genitalia. Devotional messages through these images express the hierarchy between Christ, male saints and female saints: Christ is placed higher than all; then, through the portrayal of Dominic, men are seen as beneath Christ but still

¹⁹⁴ Morachiello, *Fra Angelico*, 170.

dominant over women, represented by the Virgin Mary and Magdalene, who are portrayed as submissive. It must also be taken into consideration that these depictions of the female saints were created by a male painter, whose depictions of female saints was based on idealised female behaviours: staying silent and modest, not to be above men¹⁹⁵. The effect of gender in the relationship between men and women and Christ will be further explored in the next chapter, which will analyse the intimacy between the female saints St Catherine of Siena and Catherine de' Ricci and the Christ figure, as painted by female painter Plautilla Nelli who worked within an all-female environment.

¹⁹⁵ As encouraged by the apostle Paul in I Timothy 2:11-14.

Chapter 2

Plautilla Nelli: Female Roles, Identity and Influences

Plautilla Nelli's Religious Life: Becoming a Nun, Her Role as a Nun and Prioress of Santa Caterina, Florence

Plautilla Nelli, who was originally called Pulisena Margherita Nelli¹⁹⁶, was born in 1524 to Francesca Calandri and Piero Nelli, a merchant¹⁹⁷. When Plautilla's mother Francesca died, possibly from the plague, in October 1530, Piero married another woman of similar status within weeks of Francesca's death¹⁹⁸. It is possible that Piero Nelli was pressurised into remarrying to help create or maintain alliances with other families. Throughout the Renaissance, especially in Florentine culture, there was a pragmatic view of the institution of marriage to strategize social advancement¹⁹⁹. Catherine Turrill's study of Plautilla Nelli discusses the uncertainty of whether Plautilla and her sister were put in a convent temporarily after their mother's death or when their father remarried²⁰⁰. It is possible that living in a convent at a very young age shaped the decision Plautilla later made in becoming a nun, as she would have been exposed to religious devotion; there were strict convent rules about when to pray, what books to read, the visual imagery the women were permitted to see, and who the women should aspire to be like²⁰¹. Such moulding of the opinions and behaviours of the Nelli sisters

¹⁹⁶ Catherine Turrill, "Nuns' Stories: Plautilla Nelli, Madre Pittora, and her Compagne in the Convent of Santa Caterina da Siena," in *Plautilla Nelli (1524-1588) The Painter-Prioress of Renaissance Florence*, ed. Jonathan K. Nelson, (Florence: S.E.I. srl, 2008), 10.

¹⁹⁷ Turrill, "Nuns Stories", 10.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 10-11.

¹⁹⁹ Strocchia, "Gender and the Rites", 43.

²⁰⁰ Turrill, "Nuns Stories", 11.

²⁰¹ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 19-20, gives strict rules to live in a convent and the harsh punishments when rules are broken, such as imprisonment.

could have led them to wanting a religious life, by becoming what the Renaissance viewed as one of the ideals for womanhood²⁰².

Religious values taught to Renaissance women may also have played a part in influencing the Nelli sisters to join convents. Bernardino da Siena, in 1444, preached to women that the Virgin Mary redeemed the sins of Eve: "It was woman who made us fall into death"²⁰³, guiding women to be more like the ideal of the Virgin Mary who obeyed and less like Eve who was deceived by the devil. Bernardino further expressed how women should obey men: "But women, because I am saying this, do not rise up in pride! Do not try to rise above man: it is not fitting for you to stand except with your head bent down and low, under the charge of man..."²⁰⁴. Images of the Virgin Mary were also popular as visual culture for convents, churches and homes²⁰⁵. Evidence of manipulation through visual culture was researched in the twentieth century when mass media proliferated, and some modern media cultural theories can be applied to the use of visual culture within the Renaissance Church. During the first half of the twentieth century, Walter Lippmann noticed the effects of mass media that was able to place exaggerated or false images in the public mind with the capability of influencing opinions, values and behaviours, further creating fear through making the viewer feel defenceless²⁰⁶. From the end of World War I to the end of World War II, it was

²⁰² As said in the introduction to this thesis on women roles and honour. Refer back to Kelly, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?", 21-47, and to Strocchia, "Gender and the Rites", 43.

²⁰³ Rodgers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy*, 17.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 17.

²⁰⁵ It was common for images of the Virgin Mary and infant Christ, whether it was an affordable print or expensive painting: Joanna Pitman, *The Raphael Trail, The Secret History of One of the World's Most Precious Works of Art*, (Great Britain: Ebury Publishing, 2006), 12.

²⁰⁶ Silvo Lenart, *Shaping Political Attitudes: The Impact of Interpersonal Communication and Mass Media*, (California: Sage Publications Inc, 1994), 10-11.

documented that mass media used manipulative methods to direct a large audience into behaving and feeling a certain way, otherwise known as the “hypodermic needle effect”, which targeted defenceless minds and encouraged a single correct view²⁰⁷. This theory can be used to interpret visual culture within Dominican convents as it follows a similar formula: the agenda for images was to visually teach women how they should act²⁰⁸. Manipulating the women in the Catholic church with images and through holy practice would have been affective in encouraging certain behaviours and views and controlling their values, such as modesty, virginity and obeying the male superiors within the order. An example of this comes from the convent in Pisa, San Dominico, where the prioress used visual culture to promote the Swedish saint, St Birgitta: a vast cult following of this saint developed in Pisa because of her mystic visions, miracles and teachings about modesty²⁰⁹.

Another influence behind the decision of the Nelli sisters to join a Dominican convent might have been Piero Nelli’s trading connections with the convent of Santa Caterina, Florence; Catherine Turrill says that some historians suggested that Piero Nelli might have been motivated by Savonarola values, because of documents written by his family members in support of Savonarola in 1497²¹⁰. However, Turrill states that there is no evidence that Piero Nelli was a follower of the Dominican friar²¹¹. Furthermore, Piero Nelli’s will stated that his daughters were eventually to be married or sent to a

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 11.

²⁰⁸ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 1.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 90.

²¹⁰ Turrill, “Nuns Stories”, 11.

²¹¹ Ibid., 11.

convent²¹², suggesting that Piero Nelli had no preference whether his daughters were married or became nuns, unlike other fathers who made the decision about their daughters' fate²¹³.

Plautilla Nelli took the veil in 1538 at the age of fourteen, a year after her sister²¹⁴. Plautilla was a nun within the convent of Santa Caterina da Siena, Florence²¹⁵, later becoming prioress and leader of the all-female artist workshop within the convent²¹⁶. Attending the Santa Caterina convent in particular was possibly influenced by Piero Nelli's new wife, who was related to the prioress of the convent at the time²¹⁷. Joining a convent was an ideal way for female intellectual learning²¹⁸, including Plautilla's. In addition, Plautilla, as a daughter of a merchant, had connections within the convent prior to her joining, and therefore had a better opportunity to rise in ranks to prioress and head of the convent's workshop. Convents allowed women, such as Plautilla, to work within leadership roles they would rarely experience outside the convent²¹⁹. Occasionally, nuns would also win favour from political figures and, less frequently, members of the royal family²²⁰. These were rare opportunities for a woman, as even secular women were believed incapable of public speaking and were encouraged to remain silent²²¹. The creative and respectful life women in convents

²¹² Ibid., 11.

²¹³ Evangelisti, *Nuns*, 20.

²¹⁴ Catherine Turrill Lupi, "Biografia e fortuna critica di Plautilla Nelli:una rilettura", in *Plautilla Nelli Arte e dovozione sulle orme di Savonarola*, ed. Fausta Navarro, (Florence: s.r.l., 2017), 20.

²¹⁵ Turrill, "Nuns' Stories", 9.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 13-14.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 11.

²¹⁸ Evangelisti, *Nuns*, 8.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 19.

²²⁰ Ibid., 19.

²²¹ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 19.

could gain for themselves offered the opportunity for success, acknowledgement and even a voice, demonstrating how Plautilla's career as a painter was both possible and successful²²². Plautilla's success as a painter could also have been reinforced by the connections the church had with the upper class, the networking between merchants, and by the respect given to religious women by political and royal figures. These connections with wealthy patrons would also have increased the number of images the convents owned. Moreover, the patrons often obtained paintings, sometimes masterpieces, to be hung within churches²²³. The walls of public churches and convents decorated with such masterpieces would have been very influential in encouraging devotional behaviour, and used to educate the public and people of the church on religious practice. However, they would also have served as inspiration for Plautilla's devotional paintings; art historians have commented on the noticeable similarities between Plautilla's painting style and other painters such as Andrea del Sarto and Fra Bartolomeo²²⁴.

The Santa Caterina convent had strong connections with merchants and artisans who also sent their daughters to convents²²⁵. These connections with merchants and

²²² Evangelisti, *Nuns*, 9. Evangelisti mentions that Plautilla Nelli was one of the nun artists the reach Florence's city market. She painted for the convent, received commissions for public work, and work for patricians.

²²³ Ibid., 8.

²²⁴ Magnolia Scudieri wrote that Luigi Lanzi (1795) claimed that Nelli's 'Lamentation with Saints' copies Andrea del Sarto's composition of the 'Lamentation'. Magnolia Scudieri, "The History, Sources, and Restoration of Plautilla Nelli's Lamentation", in *Plautilla Nelli (1524-1588) The Painter-Prioress of Renaissance Florence*, ed. Jonathan K. Nelson, (Florence: S.E.I. srl, 2008), 60.

Fredricka H. Jacobs wrote that the drawings by Fra Bartolomeo Nelli had at her disposal were "not only inspirational, they were instructive" and that her style took shape from Bartolomeo's. Fredricka H. Jacobs, *Defining the Renaissance Virtuosa: Women Artists and the Language of Art History and Criticism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 112-117.

²²⁵ Turrill, "Nuns' Stories", 10.

artisans played a role in the encouragement of artistic production within the convent's workshops, enabling convents to support themselves financially²²⁶. Within the Santa Caterina convent trade records, Piero Nelli's name appears often; the men of the Nelli family were merchants²²⁷, suggesting that having a connection with the convent offered business opportunities. Further business connections were possible through the convent via the patrician women who dwelled amongst the nuns²²⁸. The presence of patrician women within the convents also increased female creative productivity through economic support²²⁹. Creative tasks carried out by the nuns included copying manuscripts with illuminations and writing a variety of texts, as well as producing visual culture for the church and for commissioners²³⁰. There is evidence that Plautilla completed such tasks whilst in the convent (fig.22), which in turn might have aided the development of her artistic interest and skill.

Influences and Artistic Practice of Plautilla Nelli

Within Dominican convents, the idea of female productivity was encouraged by Savonarola who forged an association of Dominican convents and monasteries to create a widespread moral and political reform of Florentine society, with visual culture at the forefront²³¹. The convent Santa Caterina, which Plautilla belonged to, followed the Savonarola teachings which encouraged female creative practices²³². Evidence that Plautilla's beliefs followed Savonarola's comes from her ownership of a biography of

²²⁶ Ibid., 10.

²²⁷ Ibid., 10.

²²⁸ Evangelisti, *Nuns*, 20.

²²⁹ Ibid., 20.

²³⁰ Ibid., 8.

²³¹ Muzzi, "The Artistic Training", 28.

²³² Ibid., 28.

Savonarola, which was handwritten in the 1560's by Plautilla's biological sister, Petronilla Nelli²³³.

Creative practices within the convent played an important role in the nuns' devotional practice. Nuns would often engage with plays and music, as well as creating tapestries and other visual culture²³⁴, although within strict rules. Savonarola stated that creative practices should be restricted to devotional works; it was thought that straying from devotional themes formed a distraction from holy practice²³⁵. This rule within the Dominican Order was key to the creation of visual culture. All known works by Plautilla and her workshop are purely devotional, with depictions of biblical scenes and Dominican saints.

Andrea Muzzi states that Savonarola's interest in the visual arts is shown throughout Santa Caterina, Florence²³⁶, meaning that Plautilla and the other nuns would have had access to visual aids portraying the correct expression of devotion to Christ, allowing them to be used as both a behavioural and artistic model. To fill the convents with visual culture, the nuns also had permission to commission well known painters for paintings and frescoes on sacred themes²³⁷. The commissioned male artists were required to create biblically themed pieces to suit the convent life by keeping the imagery close to how the nuns should behave²³⁸ as prescribed by the male members of

²³³ Ibid., 28.

²³⁴ Evangelisti, *Nuns*, 8.

²³⁵ Muzzi, "The Artistic Training", 29.

²³⁶ Ibid., 30.

²³⁷ Evangelisti, *Nuns*, 8.

²³⁸ Keeping modest, loyal and submissive, like what was preached by apostle Paul (1 Timothy 2:11-14) and Bernardino da Siena: Rodgers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy*, 17.

the convent community²³⁹. Silvia Evangelisti explains how visual aids for religious women often held deep devotional meanings and a function different to the other artistic canons of the time: they were addressed to the restricted audience of the convent and aided the nuns' prayers²⁴⁰. These visual aids were necessary for nuns as many were illiterate, helping to teach them about chastity and obedience, and the aim for female perfection²⁴¹. Additional evidence of this is explained by Ann Roberts, who wrote about the Dominican convent in Pisa, San Domenico, stating that the nuns used visual culture to help communicate with each other and the public²⁴². This educational purpose for owning visual culture, such as paintings, helps explain why the convent of Santa Caterina, which had an all-female workshop, was successful in the production of the arts by women; they were able to produce pieces for educational tools to pursue the ideal religious life, whilst also forming ideas about female identity. Analysis of commissioned pieces by male painters and the interpretation of the same scene by Plautilla will highlight whether gender influenced the painters' expression of gender roles in relation to religious attributes.

There has been much debate between scholars on Plautilla, focusing on who taught her how to paint, who inspired her, and who encouraged her artistic practice. Turrill Lupi remarked that, according to some of her first biographers, Plautilla showed early potential in creative practices, first mastering drawing and then painting²⁴³. Some four hundred years after Plautilla, in 1938, Giovanna Pierattini wrote a biography of

²³⁹ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 123.

²⁴⁰ Evangelisti, *Nuns*, 9.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁴² Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 1.

²⁴³ Turrill Lupi, "Biografia", 20.

Plautilla Nelli, which was then later used in arguments by 1970s feminist scholars²⁴⁴ whose surge in interest discovered further knowledge about Renaissance nuns, helping to refine the differences between convents as a whole and the individual success of nuns²⁴⁵. It has been assumed that Fra Paolino, a Dominican friar painter, tutored Plautilla²⁴⁶; moreover, it is thought that Fra Paolino da Pistoia, a pupil and close follower of Fra Bartolomeo, gave the entire contents of the master painter workshop, which he originally inherited, to the Santa Caterina convent where Plautilla dwelt²⁴⁷. However, Muzzi suggests an alternative: instead of Fra Paolino tutoring Plautilla in drawing and painting, she was inspired by his works, and the works of Bartolomeo and Giovanni Antonio Sogliani, as there are similarities between her work and their painting styles²⁴⁸. Muzzi disputes the possibility of Fra Paolino being Plautilla's tutor, arguing that the social context and documented history does not match this idea, as Fra Paolino moved his workshop to Pistoria circa 1526, just two years after Plautilla's birth²⁴⁹. Fredricka H. Jacobs has stated that similarities between Plautilla's figures in 'The Lamentation with Saints' and Fra Bartolomeo's drawings strongly suggest the influence Fra Bartolomeo's collection of drawings had on Plautilla's visual creations (fig.23&24)²⁵⁰. Other items the workshop obtained included wax and plaster models of human figures and limbs²⁵¹, possibly allowing Plautilla and her workshop to learn human anatomy from them. Turrill

²⁴⁴ Muzzi, "The Artistic Training", 31.

²⁴⁵ Turrill, "Nuns Stories", 9.

²⁴⁶ Muzzi, "The Artistic Training", 31-32.

²⁴⁷ Turrill Lupi, "Biografia", 21.

²⁴⁸ Muzzi, "The Artistic Training", 32.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 31-32.

²⁵⁰ Jacobs, *Defining the Renaissance Virtuosa*, 116-117.

²⁵¹ Turrill Lupi, "Biografia", 22.

Lupi mentions that it is still unclear how Plautilla learnt to paint and draw²⁵². However, there are theories on possible teachers, for example Turrill Lupi discusses how the convent was situated near the friary of San Marco and that possibly a member of the friary gave her guidance, namely Fra Eustachio di Baldassare, a skilled painter²⁵³. When considering Plautilla's skills in drawing and painting, it is important to understand that, as a woman, it was very unlikely that she visited a traditional workshop²⁵⁴. Despite this, under Plautilla's influence as prioress, the nuns of Santa Caterina were able to create a functional workshop to financially support the convent²⁵⁵.

Before the artist workshop, the Dominican nuns were advised to practise traditional income-earning activities, to help bring in revenue to supplement the small amount of funding offered in their dowries²⁵⁶. There were many nuns from artistic backgrounds that joined Plautilla's convent, which could possibly be the reason why the convent started an artist workshop run by nuns²⁵⁷. It is possible that sharing their knowledge of visual culture helped develop the skills of the nuns in the Santa Caterina workshop²⁵⁸. There were also aspects of professionalism within the all-female workshop, as they used cartoons within the production of their paintings²⁵⁹. This technique was used in traditional master workshops and by professional male

²⁵² Ibid., 20.

²⁵³ Ibid., 20-21.

²⁵⁴ Muzzi, "The Artistic Training", 32.

²⁵⁵ Evangelisti said that Nelli reached the city market, produced pieces under commission and exhibited the workshops work public churches, which show the successfulness of the convent workshop. Evangelisti, *Nuns*, 9.

²⁵⁶ Turrill, "Nuns Stories", 10.

²⁵⁷ Turrill Lupi, "Biografia", 22.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 20.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 30.

painters²⁶⁰. The other nuns who were part of Plautilla's workshop were referred to as "disciples"²⁶¹. The term "disciples" suggests a religious aspect of the workshop, as artists in other Renaissance workshops were known as students or apprentices²⁶². This idea of using the term "disciples" gives a slight impression of a religious cult, as the nuns, in their following of Plautilla, possibly aspired to mimic the disciples of Christ. Religious cults were popular during the Renaissance and often revolved around living saints²⁶³, such as the cult of St Catherine of Siena²⁶⁴.

The reason why Plautilla was able to successfully run a workshop with a group of nuns could stem from her personality traits. Plautilla is thought to have been able to make her demands both understood and obeyed²⁶⁵. These traits would have been important for production in the workshop, as the other nuns would have understood Plautilla's needs and followed her instructions.

Due to Plautilla being the leader of the Santa Caterina workshop, her influence is imprinted in the style of the paintings produced. Jane Fortune expresses that the style Plautilla used in her paintings portrayed simplicity and clarity, which reflect the Savonarola values of keeping to devotional themes and being truthful to biblical stories²⁶⁶. This shows the impact the friar's values had on Santa Caterina and the visual

²⁶⁰ Method of cartoons and how Raphael and other male masters used the technique. Claire Van Cleave, *Master Drawings of the Italian Renaissance*, (London: The British Museum Press, 2007), 27-28.

²⁶¹ Turrill, "Nuns Stories", 14.

²⁶² Francis Ames-Lewis and Joanne Wright, *Drawing in the Italian Renaissance Workshop*, (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1983), 13.

²⁶³ Navarro, "Semplice lecto", 36.

²⁶⁴ Denise Zaru, *Art and Observation in Renaissance Venice: The Dominicans and their Artists (1391 – ca. 1545)*, trans. Sarah Melker, (Italy: Viella s.r.l, 2014) 15.

²⁶⁵ Turrill Lupi, "Biografia", 22.

²⁶⁶ Fortune, "Jane Fortune", 15.

production within the convent, suggesting he was a key influence on Plautilla's creative practice. Plautilla's painting style, however, was criticised by a variety of art historians who claimed that the paintings she created lack certain desired aspects. For example, Muzzi criticised 'The Lamentation', claiming that the "relationship between the foreground and background is awkward", as it does not create a believable narrative in terms of the layout of the scene; he also stated that Plautilla focused too much on the emotion in the eyes of the Virgin Mary and other female biblical saints, making them "red by weeping"²⁶⁷. The awkwardness Muzzi mentions occurs when the viewer expects a certain visual structure of 'The Lamentation' narrative but is instead confronted by the distress of the women. However, Padre Vincenzo Marchese (1854), within "Memorie dei più insigni pittori, scutori e architelli domenicani", included a chapter on Plautilla which critiqued her; he explained that Plautilla would not have been exposed to a range of emotions and argued that her depiction of emotion was actually restrained²⁶⁸. Plautilla's focus on women crying could possibly stem from the nuns of Santa Caterina's true intentions for the painting, as it could express their personal and religious expression of grief on the death of Christ, as they were considered the Brides of Christ²⁶⁹.

Nevertheless, in her time Plautilla was considered a successful painter. One reason is she was one of the few female painters whose work reached the Florence city market; Plautilla painted for her convent and received commissions for her work to be

²⁶⁷ Muzzi, "The Artistic Training", 32.

²⁶⁸ Turrill Lupi, "Biografia", 25-26.

²⁶⁹ The term 'Bride of Christ' is referred to the nun and the marriage of the Church, as seen in the example: I. A. Muirhead, "The Bride of Christ", in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 5, no. 2 (1952), 179-180. As well as the term 'handmaid' is used to describe a nun's relationship to Christ: Munio of Zamora (1286), "Munio of Zamora: The Ordinationes", in *Dominican Penitent Women*, ed. Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner, (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 41.

exhibited in public churches, as well as creating a few works for patricians²⁷⁰. Her name and works are also mentioned in the biography 'Lives' by Giorgio Vasari, although unlike the male painters in the book who are awarded their own chapter, Plautilla is only briefly mentioned within another person's chapter. This chapter focused on a female Bolognese sculptor, Properzia de' Rossi, who was the only woman afforded significant analysis by Vasari²⁷¹. However, the mention of Plautilla helps give an insight into her and her workshop and the paintings she and the convent produced. Vasari's claim that there were countless works by Plautilla and her workshop suggested to future art historians that there are possibly more paintings created by Plautilla than are currently known²⁷². Vasari mentions the copious number of works created by Plautilla and her all-female workshop for her convent and the homes of gentlemen²⁷³, although does not disclose the actual number of paintings, what the paintings depicted and whose homes they were given to. It is the second edition of Vasari's 'Lives' which contains important information regarding Plautilla's painting career, but Catherine Turrill states that historians must be cautious about the reliability of Vasari²⁷⁴.

Vasari's attitude to Plautilla's painting was significantly more positive than the criticism by later art historians Muzzi and Marchese:

²⁷⁰ Evangelisti, *Nuns*, 9.

²⁷¹ Sally Quin, "Plautilla Nelli's Role in Giorgio Vasari's Lives of the Painters (1568) and Serafino Razzi's History of Illustrious Men (1596)", in *Plautilla Nelli (1524-1588) The Painter-Prioress of Renaissance Florence*, ed. Jonathan K. Nelson, (Florence: S.E.I. srl, 2008), 46.

²⁷² Fortune commented on how Vasari mentions the countless works but none of her peers have heard of Plautilla Nelli. Fortune, "Jane Fortune", 13.

²⁷³ Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, ed. Philip Jacks, trans. Gaston du C. de Vere, (New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 2006), 304 – 305.

²⁷⁴ Turrill, "Nuns Stories", 9.

She, beginning little by little to draw and to imitate in colours pictures and paintings by excellent masters, has executed some works with such diligence, that she has caused the craftsmen to marvel²⁷⁵.

Vasari creates an understanding of the dedication Plautilla had in developing her skill as a painter, from the description of drawing “little by little” and by causing other craftsmen to admire her work²⁷⁶ earned respect for her skill. It is this respect and the mention by Vasari which possibly helped shape Plautilla’s identity as a female painter, along with the opportunities for creative practices under Savonarola’s rules in the convent Santa Caterina. However, there were negative aspects to being a female painter; for example Quin explains how the restrictive ideals for women by Renaissance men impacted the views of women, and that Vasari uses the female artists in his book to critically compare them to the male Great Masters of the Renaissance²⁷⁷. As discussed in the introduction²⁷⁸, women in the Renaissance were not offered the same opportunities as men, who were able to obtain an education and learn in workshops under the supervision of a master²⁷⁹. Therefore, it could be argued that comparisons between female and male painters are biased and unreasonable. These comparisons by Vasari could also have influenced opinion in later centuries, such as by Marchese, as Vasari’s opinion on art was used as an important source of knowledge²⁸⁰, despite the unreliability noted by Turrill²⁸¹. However, regardless of the negative, sexist views against

²⁷⁵ Vasari, *The Lives*, 304.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 304.

²⁷⁷ Quin, “Plautilla Nelli’s Role”, 46.

²⁷⁸ Refer back to Joan Kelly: Kelly, “Did Woman Have a Renaissance?”, 21-47.

²⁷⁹ The artist workshop was run by an experienced artist who brought in apprentices to learn the trade: Ames-Lewis and Wright, *Drawing in the Italian Renaissance Workshop*, 13.

²⁸⁰ David Landau, “Vasari, Prints and Prejudice” in *Oxford Art Journal* 6, no. 1 (1983), 3.

²⁸¹ Turrill, “Nuns Stories”, 9.

women, Plautilla's work still managed to reach the city market and many of her works were held in gentlemen's homes.

Owners of Plautilla's work would have possibly been collectors of Dominican art. Muzzi expresses that Plautilla would have known Gondi, a working gentleman of the monastery who had an interest in Dominican works²⁸². Furthermore, Plautilla gave some of her works to Vasari, who also collected drawings²⁸³; it was a common hobby during the Renaissance for individuals who had an interest in art to collect drawings from a variety of creators²⁸⁴, possibly due to the mass production of paper allowing copious drawings to be created²⁸⁵. The demand for Dominican art by collectors meant it made sense to have Dominican subjects, such as the Dominican saints St Catherine of Siena and St Dominic. There are several paintings created by Plautilla using these famous figures, such as 'Saint Catherine in Prayer' (fig.25) and 'Saint Dominic receives the Rosary' (fig.26), as well as the key paintings that will be analysed in this thesis: the 'Saint Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' series (fig. 1-4). 'The Last Supper' (fig.27) and 'The Lamentation with Saints' (fig.24), created for her church²⁸⁶, kept to religious themes. Plautilla's other paintings were also on biblical or holy themes, and therefore still held their value as collectable items. It is important to understand that visual culture was male dominated during the Renaissance, and this thesis will examine some works

²⁸² Muzzi, "The Artistic Training", 33.

²⁸³ Ibid., 32.

²⁸⁴ Ames-Lewis and Wright, *Drawing in the Italian Renaissance Workshop*, 15.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 43.

²⁸⁶ 'The Last Supper' was hung in her refectory hall of Santa Caterina: Ann Roberts, "The Dominican Audience of Plautilla Nelli's Last Super", in *Plautilla Nelli (1524-1588) The Painter-Prioress of Renaissance Florence*, ed. Jonathan K.Nelson, (Florence: S.E.I. srl, 2008), 72. 'The Lamentation with Saints' was documented to of been in the Santa Caterina convent: Scudieri, "The History, Sources, and Restoration", 60.

created by male painters alongside Plautilla's paintings, to indicate the differences in portrayal of gender.

What Visual Culture Meant for Devout Women

The themes of devotional art would have stemmed from the religious interest some women would have had when joining the convents. Since the early origins of Christianity, women joined the church to pursue an intense religious life in imitation of Christ and the Apostles²⁸⁷. As detailed above, some women had no choice, although Plautilla was likely to have willingly joined, therefore suggesting a religious interest. There were also restrictions on what nuns could possess²⁸⁸, suggesting limitations of inspiration for what could be included in the imagery created by the women in the workshop. The women who joined the convents had to live by strict rules from their male superiors within the church, and were restricted to a bed, a chest or cabinet, a kneeling stool, a small altar, a breviary and a crucifix²⁸⁹. Some of these objects had religious connotations, especially the crucifix, which was a key item for prayer for nuns and friars²⁹⁰. The lack of items in a nun's possession came from the three solemn vows they followed: poverty, chastity and obedience²⁹¹. These vows would have played a part in the narrative of the visual culture they created or commissioned, as the images the

²⁸⁷ Evangelisti, *Nuns*, 15.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 27-28.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 27-28.

²⁹⁰ Evidence to support the importance of owning an image of the crucifixion, whether it was a 3D or 2D object, comes from how Dominicans used holy days to adore the cross: Cannon, *Religious Poverty Visual Riches*, 165-166; and how in the manuscripts of the Nine Modes of Prayer, the images depict St Dominic praying in front of the crucifix: DigiVatLib, "Manuscript - Ross.3", https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Ross.3. Accessed 01 October 2019.

²⁹¹ Evangelisti, *Nuns*, 15.

nuns would see every day would instruct their expected behaviours²⁹². Other aspects of convent life that were affected by the solemn vows were the clothing the religious women were required to wear. Nuns had to wear a habit, veil and cloak, which was a sign of departure from the world and reflected their virgin status²⁹³. Their hair was also kept short so they could spend more time expressing eternal chastity as brides of Christ than on personal appearance²⁹⁴. Nuns dedicated themselves to following the clothing requirements in order to show their devotion to Christ and this iconography is depicted in representations of nuns in visual culture (see Plautilla's examples in figures 1-4, 22, 25). As the visual culture matched the truthfulness of reality, nuns could more easily relate to the teachings within the visual works. The influence of portraying female ideals through female idols, such as the Virgin Mary and living saints, contributes to the high level of devotion by women within convents, convincing them how to behave in line with the expectations of the church. Plautilla was prioress of her convent whilst running the workshop; as written in "The Ordinationes" by Munio of Zamora, a prioress's role was to guide her sisters in living a devout life²⁹⁵. Therefore, it can be assumed that Plautilla also had some influence on what was created in the workshop, which may have guided her sisters to an ideal religious life.

²⁹² Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 3.

²⁹³ Evangelisti, *Nuns*, 29.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁹⁵ Munio of Zamora (1286), "Munio of Zamora: the Ordinationes", 42.

'The Last Supper' and 'The Lamentation with Saints'

'The Last Supper', which is almost seven meters long²⁹⁶, depicts the biblical scene of Christ with his disciples, prior to crucifixion²⁹⁷ (fig.27). This painting was hidden from general public view for centuries: first in the refectory hall of Santa Caterina and then in the friars' dining hall of the monastery of Santa Maria Novella in Florence²⁹⁸. Ann Roberts explains how the painting was originally placed in the Santa Caterina convent, which Plautilla and her workshop attended, hanging in the room where the nuns congregated twice a day to eat²⁹⁹. St Dominic encouraged his followers to show gratitude for the food they were given and to fast on holy days, from the feast of the Holy Cross to Easter³⁰⁰; the Easter holy days included commemoration of the biblical story of the last supper where Christ broke bread with his disciples and announced that he would be betrayed³⁰¹. The location of paintings of 'The Last Supper' suggests the value religious imagery had on the Dominican communities in leading a devotional life no matter where they were; it served as a reminder that, even whilst eating, the nuns or friars should be devout to Christ and his sacrifice. It was also typical for Florentine religious communities to have an image of the Last Supper in their refectories, representing the preciousness of food, the communities adopting seating arrangements similar to the iconography of 'The Last Supper' created by the Renaissance painters: everyone sat at one side of a long table³⁰².

²⁹⁶ Vickery, *The Story of Women and Art*, 16:46-17:22.

²⁹⁷ Roberts, "The Dominican Audience", 74.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 72.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 72.

³⁰⁰ Tugwell, "The Canonization Process of St Dominic", 66-67.

³⁰¹ Matthew 26:17-30.

³⁰² Roberts, "The Dominican Audience", 74-75.

Regardless of St Dominic's teachings of poverty, there are attributes of riches depicted within Plautilla's painting of 'The Last Supper'. Roberts notes that there are Chinese porcelain bowls set on the table before Christ and his disciples³⁰³. Even though the life of the nuns inside the convent of Santa Caterina were dictated by the San Marco friar Roberto Ubaldini, who encouraged the religious women to take vows of poverty and chastity³⁰⁴ as well as the self-sacrifice of poverty following the teachings of St Dominic³⁰⁵, most of the women within the convent originated from wealthy merchant families, attracting donations of expensive riches³⁰⁶. Roberts suggests that it is these riches brought in by the merchant families that are reflected in Plautilla's 'Last Supper' to indicate visually the economic status of the nuns in Santa Caterina³⁰⁷. Roberts implies that Plautilla and her workshop broke away from their vow of poverty, as the portrayal of Chinese porcelain is accurate in detail, signifying that Plautilla had regular access to the objects³⁰⁸.

Other attributes in the painting are placed following the typical composition set by other Renaissance painters, such as Leonardo da Vinci³⁰⁹ (fig.28) and Andrea del Sarto (fig.29), additionally showing similarities in the poses of characters. However, Jacobs claims that Plautilla's figures fail to show the exceptional skill of an artist: Jacobs says

³⁰³ Ibid., 73.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 73.

³⁰⁵ Tugwell, "The Canonization Process of St Dominic", 66-68.

³⁰⁶ Roberts, "The Dominican Audience", 73.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 73.

³⁰⁸ Roberts says that they were painted with care and it indicates that she had access to models: Roberts, "The Dominican Audience", 73.

³⁰⁹ It was Leonardo da Vinci's 'Last Supper' painting in the Dominican convent Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan which created the ideal depiction of the theme that the sixteenth century onwards followed. Roberts, "The Dominican Audience", 75.

that there is an absence of facial expressions as they appear “rigid and archaic”³¹⁰. This contrasts with the analyses made of ‘The Lamentation’ where historians accused Plautilla of focusing too much on facial expressions³¹¹.

‘The Lamentation with Saints’ depicts the biblical story of saints around Christ, preparing for his burial (fig.24). This painting is on display at the San Marco Museum in the large refectory³¹²; at 288cm x 192cm it is comparable to Fra Bartolomeo’s ‘The Lamentation’ at 158 x 199cm (fig.30). The date of Plautilla’s ‘Lamentation’ painting is unknown, however Magnolia Scudieri states it must have been painted before 1568 because the painting was mentioned as being at the Convent of Santa Caterina by Vasari in his second edition of “Lives”³¹³. The painting has been confirmed to have been painted by Plautilla Nelli because of a description made by Giuseppe Richa in 1759: he describes the layout of the church, mentioning three altars decorated with paintings, including a painting on the right altar which matches the appearance of Plautilla Nelli’s ‘The Lamentation’ as it is known today³¹⁴. Furthermore, due to being mentioned in the records of 1795 by Luigi Lanzi, the existence of ‘The Lamentation’ in the church seems to have continued³¹⁵. The location of ‘The Lamentation’ was changed when the church

³¹⁰ Jacobs, *Defining the Renaissance Virtuosa*, 113.

³¹¹ Refer by Muzzi and Marchese: Muzzi, “The Artistic Training”, 32. And Turrill Lupi, “Biografia”, 25-26.

³¹² Advancing Women Artists, “Lamentation with Saints”, <http://advancingwomenartists.org/artists/plautilla-nelli/lamentation-with-saints?rq=lamentation>, accessed on 23/06/19.

³¹³ Scudieri, “The History, Sources and Restoration”, 60.

³¹⁴ Scudieri references to Giuseppe Richa, *Notizie storiche delle chiese fiorentine, divise ne’ suoi quartieri*, 10 vols. (Florence: P.G. Viviani, 1754-62), VIII, 283.

³¹⁵ Scudieri references to Luigi Lanzi, *Storia pittorica della Italia dal risorgimento delle belle arti fin presso al fine del XVIII secolo*, 2 vols. (Bassano: Remondini di Venezia, 1795-96), I, 139.

building became part of the Academy of Fine Arts in 1812; later, records showed that in 1817 'The Lamentation' was exhibited in the Gallery of the Accademia, Florence³¹⁶.

Criticism has been made of Plautilla Nelli's version of 'The Lamentation with Saints', including some of the first observations made by Luigi Lanzi, who stated that Plautilla's version was a copy of Andrea del Sarto's 'Pietà with Saints', due to strong similarities in composition (fig.31)³¹⁷. Vincenzo Marchese claims that Plautilla was inspired by Pietro Perugino's version of 'Lamentation Over the Dead Christ' (fig.32), whilst Scudieri considers that Plautilla was possibly influenced by both artists' depictions of the religious scene³¹⁸. As Plautilla was possibly a self-taught painter, it would make sense for her 'Lamentation' painting to hold strong similarities to other paintings of the scene made by other painters, such as Fra Bartolomeo, del Sarto and Perugino (fig.30-32), as they may have been used for reference. Scudieri argues, however, that both del Sarto's and Perugino's versions of the Lamentation scene were not used as a model for the iconography or style of Plautilla's 'Lamentation'³¹⁹. Scudieri explains that when these three paintings are compared the similarities in composition are undeniable, such as the layout of figures and landscape; however, Scudieri argues the style Plautilla uses in 'The Lamentation' is a hybrid of del Sarto's and Perugino's style: "the rocky hills recall those in Sarto's painting; the turreted city rendered in detail harks back to Perugino's"³²⁰. Furthermore, noting these similarities between paintings supports the statement made

³¹⁶ Scudieri, "The History, Sources and Restoration", 60.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 60.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 60.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 61.

³²⁰ Ibid., 61.

by Vasari, who specified that Plautilla imitated the great masters³²¹; this assertion allowed Scudieri to speculate that Plautilla's 'Lamentation' was an adaptation of visual ideas formed from existing archetypes which she would have been able to see in person, despite her status as nun³²². Plautilla's ability to observe, imitate and adapt, proves her skill as a painter, despite the lack of creative education allowed her as a woman.

The most comparable 'Lamentation' painting to Plautilla's is Fra Bartolomeo's version. As already said, Plautilla's style was heavily influenced by the works of Fra Bartolomeo, mainly because his collection of drawings were inherited by the convent workshop. Researchers have also discussed the similarities between Plautilla's 'Lamentation' painting and some of Fra Bartolomeo's sketches of figures, including Jacobs' comparison between Plautilla's weeping male figure and Fra Bartolomeo's study for a weeping Saint Peter (fig.23-24); Jacobs thus supports the idea that Plautilla had access to the collection of Fra Bartolomeo's drawings³²³. Furthermore, Scudieri states that the figures in Plautilla's painting and Fra Bartolomeo's sketches are so similar that it strongly indicates that Plautilla had constant access to the collection of sketches³²⁴.

The key features that will be compared between the two paintings are the body language and relationships amongst the included figures of the composition. The Virgin Mary holding Christ is depicted in profile in a similar way in both paintings, yet each expresses the Virgin Mary's close relationship to Christ in slightly different ways. In Fra Bartolomeo's version, the face of the Virgin Mary is soft and calm and she uses both her

³²¹ Scudieri makes this point by referring to a quote of Vasari. Scudieri, "The History, Sources, and Restoration", 61.

³²² Ibid., 61.

³²³ Jacobs, *Defining the Renaissance Virtuosa*, 116-117.

³²⁴ Scudieri, "The History, Sources, and Restoration", 62.

hands to hold Christ's head and arm closer to herself; in Plautilla's version, the Virgin Mary has red, puffy eyes focusing the pain of the character in her facial features, and her embrace of Christ is different as she holds the head of Christ in one hand and places the other on her own breast. Jacobs explains that Fra Bartolomeo and his followers typically expressed emotion in visual culture with subtlety, whereas Plautilla expresses emotions with an "individualized intensity"³²⁵. This suggests that Plautilla was attempting to show the pain of the Virgin Mary in a more physical manner, as she clutches her own heart unable to refrain from expressing her own suffering. The relationship between Christ and the Virgin Mary is the central point of both paintings, suggesting that the other figures in the scene are merely spectators as they surround and frame this focus. This creates an impression of the importance of characters: whoever is seen closest and more connected to Christ, in this case the Virgin Mary as she looks directly at him, the stronger the personal bond is between the figure and the depiction of Christ. This is despite the fact that, even though the other figures in the paintings by Fra Bartolomeo and Plautilla show signs of mourning Christ, they do not show the same relationship as they do not look directly at Christ's face; the gaze of the other figures is either averted away from Christ or at a different part of his body, making it either impersonal or showing the status between figures. For example, Mary Magdalene, who is seen embracing Christ's feet, shows a different relationship with Christ compared to the relationship between the Virgin Mary and Christ, because by kneeling by and holding Christ's feet she is showing that she is submissive. This relationship between Mary Magdalene and Christ is demonstrated in 'Lamentations'

³²⁵ Jacobs, *Defining the Renaissance Virtuosa*, 118.

created by both Plautilla and Fra Bartolomeo, whereas in the versions created by Pietro Perugino and Andre del Sarto, which are thought to have influenced Plautilla, Mary Magdalene is shown to be more distant and composed.

The body language and relationships between characters is also important in terms of gender: in both Plautilla Nelli's and Fra Bartolomeo's 'Lamentation' paintings, most of the immediate people surrounding Christ on the ground are female, with most of the male characters overlooking the group with less interaction with Christ's body. This composition of characters could have been created to reflect each individual's relationship to Christ: in Fra Bartolomeo's 'Lamentation' there are two women embracing Christ, with the Virgin Mary the only one touching his skin with her own, showing her status as Christ's mother as above the followers who are using carefully placed cloth when touching Christ. In Plautilla's version however, there are more women surrounding Christ, all of them saints as they are shown with halos, but this time Mary Magdalene and a male figure touches Christ's skin, although not his wounds. This suggests a closer bond between the figures and Christ in Plautilla's depiction of the scene, as well as showing more female than male figures embracing Christ.

Authentication of Other Paintings

'The Lamentation with Saints' and 'The Last Supper' by Plautilla Nelli are her most recognised works that scholars, such as Fredrika H. Jacobs, Magnolia Scudieri, Rossella Lari and Ann Roberts, have analysed thoroughly in order to understand her themes and style in the production of religious visual culture³²⁶. Fortunately, the interest

³²⁶ In chapter 5, "*La Donnesca Mano*", Jacobs analyses Plautilla's 'The Lamentation' and 'The Last Supper': Jacobs, *Defining the Renaissance Virtuosa*, 111-122. Scudieri, "The History, Sources, and

in these paintings has helped authenticate Plautilla Nelli's previously unattributed paintings, such as the 'St Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' series³²⁷. The 'St Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' paintings were authenticated by comparing the figure of St Catherine with the figure of the Virgin Mary within 'The Lamentation'³²⁸. The facial profiles of the two figures are almost identical³²⁹. The purpose of visual culture was as an educational tool³³⁰, so the portrayal of the Virgin Mary and Dominican saints, such as St Catherine of Siena, were ideal women for nuns to admire and learn from about the preferred behaviour for women within society.

'Saint Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' Series by Plautilla Nelli and Her All-Female Workshop

Works more recently attributed to Plautilla Nelli³³¹ include a series of paintings depicting Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Catherine de'Ricci. Plautilla Nelli's convent in Florence was named after the Dominican female saint: Saint Catherine of Siena³³². This link between the female residents, including Plautilla, and the saint, already creates a bond, adding to the likelihood of the 'St Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' series being a desirable creation for Plautilla and her all-female workshop. Depictions of, and references to, Catherine de'Ricci are less common and she was not considered a saint

Restoration", 60-63. Rossella Lari and Magnolia Scudieri, "The Restoration Report of Plautilla Nelli's *Lamentation*" in *Plautilla Nelli (1524-1588) The Painter-Prioress of Renaissance Florence*, ed. Jonathan K.Nelson, (Florence: S.E.I. srl, 2008), 66-71. Roberts, "The Dominican Audience", 72-83.

³²⁷ Rossella Lari, "Note sui restauri e sulla tecnica di Plautilla Nelli", in *Plautilla Nelli Arte e devozione sulle orme di Savonarola*, ed. Fausta Navarro, (Florence: s.r.l., 2017), 60.

³²⁸ Ibid., 60-61.

³²⁹ Ibid., 60-62.

³³⁰ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 3.

³³¹ The confirmation dates will be between 2008-2013, as in sources of Nelli such as Jonathan K.Nelson ed. *Plautilla Nelli (1524-1588) The Painter-Prioress of Renaissance Florence*. (Florence: S.E.I. srl, 2008) they only discuss two confirmed paintings, and according to the restoration charity, one of the paintings was restored in 2013: Advancing Women Artists, "St Catherine with Lily", Accessed 27 April 2019.

³³² Turrill Lupi, "Biografia", 20.

whilst Plautilla's paintings were created³³³; she was a nun contemporaneous with Plautilla, but was not canonised until after Plautilla's death³³⁴. Catherine de'Ricci was admired by many of her peers for her mystical abilities embodying both Saint Catherine of Siena and Savonarola³³⁵, supporting the reason for visual depictions of her as a holy figure. However, the portrayal of an uncanonised person as a saint was disapproved of by the church, making some depictions of Catherine de'Ricci controversial³³⁶. The purpose for identifying the figures within Plautilla's 'Saint Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' series is to understand which saint they portray, as research by Fausta Navarro strongly argues that the figures in the portraits represent both Saint Catherine of Siena and Catherine de'Ricci³³⁷.

To date, four almost identical paintings depicting the saints in profile have been discovered in Italy, and have now been restored and attributed to Plautilla Nelli³³⁸. These paintings were discovered in Florence, Siena, Perugia and Assisi³³⁹. The paintings might have been valued by these locations due to: the proclaimed mystical properties of saints from these areas, such as Catherine de'Ricci's mystical powers within her convent in Prato, Tuscany³⁴⁰; Saint Catherine of Siena's idolised ideals; Savonarola's teachings of encouragement for Dominican nuns³⁴¹. Furthermore, Catherine de'Ricci became prioress of the Dominican monastery of San Vincenzo Ferrer in Prato in 1552, and had a

³³³ Navarro, "Semplice lecto", 44.

³³⁴ De'Ricci was canonized in 1736 after a lengthy trail which took over a century: Navarro, "Semplice lecto", 44.

³³⁵ Navarro, "Semplice lecto", 36.

³³⁶ Ibid., 42.

³³⁷ Read essay: Navarro, "Semplice lecto", 34-55.

³³⁸ Ibid., 37.

³³⁹ Ibid., 37.

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 34.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 37.

significant impact on the religious communities through the increase of visual culture and the encouragement of devotion³⁴². As Plautilla and Catherine de'Ricci were peers, it is possible there were communications between them, or at least acknowledgement of each other's work³⁴³; it may also be possible that Plautilla knew about de'Ricci's mystical visions³⁴⁴, suggesting that the 'Saint Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' paintings were created to suit the religious opinions concerning Catherine de'Ricci at the time.

To attribute the paintings to Plautilla Nelli, the panels of 'Saint Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' were compared to other works that have already been confirmed as Plautilla's, particularly 'The Lamentation with Saints'³⁴⁵. 'The Lamentation' has also been used to confirm the paintings 'Saint Catherine's Vision of Christ' and 'Saint Dominic Receives the Rosary' to have been painted by Plautilla³⁴⁶. These further attributions significantly helped Navarro to confirm the attribution of 'Saint Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' to Plautilla and her workshop³⁴⁷. The process of making comparisons between the paintings included using an infrared reflectography scanner, which revealed the preparatory drawings underneath; the scans also showed that the drawings were transferred onto the panels using the pouncing technique³⁴⁸. This supports the idea that Plautilla was using professional techniques with her all-female workshop. The pouncing technique consists of creating a cartoon with small holes following the outline of a drawing which, when placed over the chosen surface, has

³⁴² Ibid., 34-37.

³⁴³ Muzzi, "The Artistic Training", 30.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 28-29.

³⁴⁵ Lari, "Note sui restauri", 60.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 60.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 60.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 61.

charcoal powder patted over the cartoon, leaving a linear trace of the drawing; once the drawing has been transferred, the artist carefully follows the lines with a charcoal pencil³⁴⁹. It is possible that the same, or a similar, copy of the cartoon was used for the Florence version and the Assisi version of the 'Saint Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci'; they are very similar in size and were both made using the pouncing technique which requires a cartoon, as confirmed by the infrared reflectography scans³⁵⁰. The Siena version, on the other hand, is slightly larger than the versions from Florence and Assisi; however, the similarities of placement and likeness of attributes clearly shows that it is copied from the same prototype³⁵¹. The infrared reflectography image of the Siena version shows that the preparatory drawing was not done through the pouncing technique, but through a carefully placed linear drawing straight onto the canvas³⁵².

The scan of the preparatory drawings for the Florence version of 'Saint Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' were used to help determine if the face of the Virgin Mary in 'The Lamentation' and Catherine's face in 'Saint Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' were taken from the same drawing³⁵³. The lines match almost perfectly, with only the nose and the chin having slight differences; due to the size of the painting of 'The Lamentation', the head of the Virgin Mary is much larger than the head of Saint Catherine, so Plautilla would have resized the drawing to obtain the appropriate scale, a method often carried out with the aid of a grid³⁵⁴. Once the new copy of the drawing was obtained, it could then

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 61.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 65.

³⁵¹ Ibid., 66.

³⁵² Lari, "Note sui restauri", 66.

³⁵³ Ibid., 61-62.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 61-62.

be adjusted as needed, such as tilting the profile for Saint Catherine³⁵⁵. Rossella Lari discusses how the drawing of the face of Catherine of Siena/ de'Ricci', with its carefully defined eyelashes, eyebrows and tears, reflects the details of the Virgin Mary's face in 'The Lamentation', and those of the devout holy women gathered around her³⁵⁶. Lari further compares these paintings through the pigments used, as the colours, composition and thickness of paint show similarities, additionally confirming the attribution to Plautilla³⁵⁷. To understand the style and relevance of the paintings of St Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci within Renaissance visual culture, it is important to observe the common features of other European paintings and how similar or different they are to Plautilla's paintings. Lari comments that the tears of St Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci fall heavily down the saint's cheek, always at the same distance from the eyes with a solid consistency, which is different from the Northern European representations of tears as pearly drops of water³⁵⁸, suggesting that Plautilla was not conforming to the ideals of European technical standards.

Despite the possibility of replication of the 'Saint Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' series, these are the only four paintings discovered that closely resemble each other. However, there are two other paintings of Saint Catherine with a similar profile, although facing in the opposite direction and with different attributes and using different colours. One of these paintings, also titled 'Saint Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci', belongs to the convent of San Marco, Florence and is thought to be a later copy created

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 61-62.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 62.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 62.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 62.

by a copyist³⁵⁹ (fig.33). Navarro explains that this version of the painting is a poor copy on canvas and that, even though the saint's profile is identical to the previous versions, the figure is in fact facing to the right, suggesting that the copyist may have reversed the cartoon used for the tracing³⁶⁰. The second painting that resembles the 'St Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' series, with the same name, is from Prato and is attributed to Plautilla (fig.34). This painting, however, includes different attributes to the series and holds a more mortal theme: there is no cross or halo or even a name, it is an image of a nun reading a book. It is recognised to be an image of Saint Catherine of Siena or Catherine de'Ricci because of the similarities in the profile and facial features of 'Saint Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci'; Navarro states that the profile is identical to the series and that it is possible that Plautilla used the same cartoon³⁶¹. Further comparisons were made between the pigments used, and the contours of the figures, such as the green background being like the series and the details in the saint's hands showing Plautilla's particular painting imprint³⁶².

Iconography and symbols used in the series are repeated in each painting, with only slight differences. To begin with, the identity of the saints will be further discussed, using Navarro's analysis; this will be developed later to understand the paintings' portrayal of two saints. A key attribute to understanding the identity of the saint is the text in the bottom left corner, placed similarly in each painting; Navarro used the text

³⁵⁹ Fausta Navarro, "Entries: 10. Plautilla Nelli (copy after)", in *Plautilla Nelli Arte e devozione sulle orme di Savonarola*, ed. Fausta Navarro, (Florence: s.r.l., 2017), 92.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 92.

³⁶¹ Fausta Navarro, "Entries: 11. Plautilla Nelli (attributed)", in *Plautilla Nelli Arte e devozione sulle orme di Savonarola*, ed. Fausta Navarro, (Florence: s.r.l., 2017), 94.

³⁶² Ibid., 94.

as a key argument for discussing how the paintings depict both St Catherine of Siena and Catherine de'Ricci, as there has clearly been tampering with the letters³⁶³. An example of changes in letters can clearly be seen in the Florence version (fig.2), as in the lower line the letters 'SENIS', referring to Siena, are overlapped with the letters 'RICCI' in order to transform the name of the saint³⁶⁴. There are two versions from the series where the letters clearly just say 'DE.SEN-S', meaning 'Siena': the Assisi version and the Perugia version (fig.1&3). The Siena version, however, is rather obscured as the bottom line of letters is blurred and mixes between 'RICCI' and 'SENIS', as in the Florence version (fig.4).

Other features of the series may seem minor, yet help portray the identity of the Dominican saints and the feminine ideals set by men for women to abide by. To begin with, only the Perugia version of the 'Saint Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' series includes a ring on the saint's left index finger (fig.3). This helps suggest the possible identity of Catherine de'Ricci, as it was thought that she was given a ring by Christ to confirm their mystical marriage³⁶⁵; however, this image in particular has the text clearly stating 'SENIS', which means Siena, again leading back to the image embodying both saints. A possible reason for this blur between saints could be because there was a church ban on uncanonised saints being portrayed as saints in visual culture, which Plautilla would have been aware of³⁶⁶. By keeping the identity obscure, it potentially allowed Plautilla to avoid controversy whilst still showing Catherine de'Ricci as a saint. Navarro claims that, due to public acceptance, Plautilla was able to freely produce and distribute images

³⁶³ Navarro, "Semplice lecto", 38.

³⁶⁴ Fausta Navarro, "Entries: 6. Plautilla Nelli and Workshop", in *Plautilla Nelli Arte e devozione sulle orme di Savonarola*, ed. Fausta Navarro, (Florence: s.r.l., 2017), 85.

³⁶⁵ Navarro, "Semplice lecto", 34.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

of Catherine de'Ricci under the name Saint Catherine of Siena³⁶⁷. Furthermore, the series follows the ideal beauty standards set out by men, further linking the depiction of the saints to a universality for women. As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, a friar, Agnolo Firenzuola (1493-1543), gave a detailed description of what the perfect woman should look like, including pale skin, thin arched eyebrows, and pink cheeks³⁶⁸. These three ideals in particular can be seen in most depictions of female saints, and even the saints in the 'Saint Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' series by Plautilla. However, it is documented that St Catherine of Siena rebelled against her family's wish for her to marry in order to keep her virginity and devote herself to Christ, and scarred herself by throwing herself in boiling water³⁶⁹ and cut her hair short so she was no longer attractive for the marriage market³⁷⁰. Even though the saints' hair cannot be seen in Plautilla's portrayals, due to the typical clothing worn by nuns, it is clear that none of the faces are scarred, in fact they are all flawless and follow the ideals of feminine beauty, as described by Fra Agnolo Firenzuola³⁷¹.

The lilies held by the saints can be interpreted in several ways. Lilies were a common attribute to identify the image as being Saint Catherine of Siena; Denise Zaru explains how Saint Catherine of Siena is known to have carried flowers when walking in public, possibly explaining why she is depicted carrying lilies³⁷² (see figures as examples: 35-37). Flowers in Renaissance paintings symbolise certain values which, depending on

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 44.

³⁶⁸ Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy*, 29.

³⁶⁹ Evangelisti, *Nuns*, 17.

³⁷⁰ Anonymous, "The Miracoli of Catherine of Siena", (1374), in *Dominican Penitent Women*, ed. Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner, (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 92.

³⁷¹ See in: Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy*, 29.

³⁷² Zaru, *Art and Observation*, 124.

the other attributes in the image, can determine their purpose in informing the viewer³⁷³. The lily symbol in Renaissance paintings was used to represent virginity and modesty and was often used in paintings of the Virgin Mary³⁷⁴. Although Navarro's analysis of the 'Saint Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' series does not focus on the use of lilies, but is based on the subjects' profiles, from understanding the typical use of lilies in Renaissance paintings assumptions can be made about why Plautilla painted a stem of lilies in her depictions of St Catherine of Siena and Catherine de'Ricci. For example, Plautilla could have been following the symbolism of flowers in paintings, representing the values of virginity and modesty that Saint Catherine represented³⁷⁵, or following the norm of allowing viewers to identify the saint by using the common symbol of her carrying lilies³⁷⁶. Navarro makes comparisons between Plautilla's versions of the saint and depictions of Catherine de'Ricci created by others, where de'Ricci is often seen holding a stem of lilies also, as in images of St Catherine of Siena³⁷⁷. The paintings and illustrations by Stefano Parenti, which Navarro uses for comparison, depicts de'Ricci in the same profile as Plautilla's but also includes the saint holding lilies (fig.38-39)³⁷⁸. The iconography of the lilies used in depictions by Plautilla and Parenti of Catherine de'Ricci could have been created based on de'Ricci's connection to Saint Catherine of Siena:

³⁷³ Celia Fisher, *Flowers of the Renaissance*, (London: Frances Lincoln Limited, 2011).

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

³⁷⁵ Referred to as the "Virgin" by Thomas of Siena: Thomas of Siena, "The Libellus Concerning Catherine of Siena (Part One)", in *Dominican Penitent Women*, ed. Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner, (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 179.

³⁷⁶ Zaru, *Art and Observation*, 124-125.

³⁷⁷ Navarro, "Semplice lecto", 40-41.

³⁷⁸ Navarro compares the use of iconography in depictions of de'Ricci made by Stefano Parenti to Nelli, stating the similarities in profile such as the "naturalistic representation" of de'Ricci on the wall of her tomb: Navarro, "Semplice lecto", 40-41.

Catherine de'Ricci was the embodiment of Saint Catherine of Siena and of Savonarola³⁷⁹. It was common for people to feel a special connection to their namesake³⁸⁰; this is possibly seen through the use of lilies in the iconography of the two women, bringing together Saint Catherine of Siena and Catherine de'Ricci as a single figure, and further symbolising the virginity of an ideal female figure for nuns to aspire to.

The relationship between the holy figure and the saint that represents a universal nun, as either protective or possessive, can be illustrated by the placement of attributes in the 'St Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' series. The attribute that illustrates this in particular is the lily, which symbolises virginity and modesty³⁸¹. In each painting, the lily is placed behind the cross, with its holy male figure with arms extended outwards; the cross is held by the female saint, putting Christ between her and the symbol of her virginity. This format of placing the lilies of a female saint behind a holy figure is not uncommon, as it is also seen in Andrea Del Sarto's 'The Annunciation' (fig.40). Not only are the lilies in 'The Annunciation' and the 'St Catherine of Siena/Ricci' series very similar in appearance, the lilies are also physically placed away from the female saints: Del Sarto's composition places an angel between the Virgin Mary and the lilies, separating the Virgin Mary from the symbol of her virginity. In the 'St Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' series, the symbol of virginity is also placed away from the female saints and behind a male religious figure, but in this case Christ not an angel. This positioning of the male holy figures between the lilies and the virgins suggests either protection of female

³⁷⁹ In Navarro's essay, she talks about the studies made by Gabriella Zarri, Tamar Herzog and Anna Scattigno who have identified de'Ricci as a transition between St Catherine of Siena and Savonarola, labelled as "living saints". Navarro, "Semplice lecto", 36.

³⁸⁰ Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy*, 56-57.

³⁸¹ Fisher, *Flowers of the Renaissance*, 34-35.

virginity or virginity as the possession of the holy figure. In contrast to the placement of lilies in Del Sarto's 'Annunciation' and Plautilla's 'St Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' series, Fra Angelico's fresco in San Marco titled 'Crucifixion with the Virgin, Mary Magdalene and St Dominic (Cell 25)' (fig.20) portrays St Dominic holding lilies over his shoulder. It is possible that the lilies symbolise St Dominic's virginity, as he was known to be a virgin³⁸². However, the Virgin Mary is also included in the image, so the lilies could symbolise or acknowledge her virginity as well. If the lilies represent St Dominic's virginity, it suggests that he has choice over his celibacy because he is seen holding the lilies with no holy figure as a barrier between St Dominic and the symbol. This suggests that the painters' and contemporary viewers' attitudes to virginity depend on gender, implying that men had more freewill as to whether they kept their virginity, as in St Dominic's celebrated choice³⁸³, whereas women, who were often controlled by family honour and social ideals, were either hidden from public view or made to join a convent in order protect their virginity and avoid family shame³⁸⁴; this reflects how some believed the Virgin Mary was protected through being hidden away³⁸⁵.

The crucifix shown in this series of St Catherine of Siena and Catherine de'Ricci is not a depiction of the crucifixion itself, but an inanimate object being held by the saint; yet, it is an important attribute in each image, with similar importance to the saints. Navarro acknowledges the crucifix held by St Catherine, making a connection to the

³⁸² Tugwell, "The Canonisation Process of St Dominic", 67.

³⁸³ Refer back to Chapter 1 of this thesis: Tugwell, "The Canonisation Process of St Dominic", 67.

³⁸⁴ Refer back to Chapter 1 of this thesis: Evangelisti, *Nuns*, 26.

³⁸⁵ Bernardino da Siena (1427) preached to young women in Siena: "...girls, learn how you should stay at home, and beware of whoever enters the house, as you see that the Virgin Mary stayed shut away at home". Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy*, 44-45.

Dominican iconography of a saint holding a cross that was developed from Fra Mattia della Robbia's early sixteenth century medallions, which depict an image of Savonarola holding the cross (fig.41)³⁸⁶. However, the differences in portrayal of gender is seen in the body language of the saints; despite the similarity of Savonarola's and the St Catherine's profiles of facing the cross, Savonarola's head is not bowed like St Catherine's, therefore showing less submissiveness. Savonarola lacks an emotional closeness to the cross, despite holding the cross with both hands, as his face is calm, without expressing emotion; this is different to Plautilla's depictions of St Catherine, who appears in a more intimate relationship with the cross through emotional facial expressions and holding a hand to their breast. This further reflects the expected behaviours of men and women, as women were thought to be more emotional and weaker than men who were encouraged not to hold the traits deemed to be feminine³⁸⁷. Therefore it suggests that the medallion of Savonarola was more of a model for male devotion, similar to the instructional imagery in the Vatican Manuscript of the Nine Modes and the frescoes within the friar cells of San Marco; the 'St Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' series was a model of female devotion. The importance of the cross in female devotional practice must be noted, especially in relation to Plautilla and her convent. As mentioned previously, devotional imagery was used as a teaching aid to form the opinions and practices of religious women³⁸⁸. Therefore, nuns would

³⁸⁶ Navarro, "Semplice lecto", 45-46.

³⁸⁷ Giovanbattista della Porta (1623) describes women as weak and stupid, less perfect than man: Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy*, 21. Giuliano de' Medici (1453-1478) stated that women were "timid in body and placid in mind": Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy*, 22. Torquato Tasso (1582) stated that men are stronger than women, and typically bravery is a male virtue and silence is a woman's: Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy*, 26.

³⁸⁸ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 3.

demonstrate the expected behaviour of worshipping the cross by imitating the saint depicted: bowed head and gently holding the cross.

In the 'St Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' series there are connections between the figure of Christ and St Catherine through the portrayal of stigmata. St Catherine of Siena's life was documented through testimonies and letters, supported by visual culture created for religious communities. "The *Miracoli* of Catherine of Siena", written in 1374 by an anonymous writer from Florence, gives an insight into St Catherine's life, told by her female companions³⁸⁹. Each chapter of this collection of testimonies includes a positive attribute to confirm the holiness of St Catherine, similar to the testimonies of St Dominic. For example, it begins with the visions Catherine had as a small child, starting her journey as a holy woman³⁹⁰. Raymond of Capua, who claimed to have been present when St Catherine of Siena received stigmata during a religious vision, documented the event: Catherine was inside the chapel of Santa Cristina, Pisa, where whilst praying with her head to the ground her body entered a paralysed state and it was thought that her spirit had left her; after, Catherine moved quickly to a kneeling position with her arms stretched outwards and her eyes closed, until suddenly moving forward to the ground as though she was hurt³⁹¹. Raymond reported that Catherine of Siena told him that she now bore the stigmata of Christ, describing that while she was in ecstasy she saw Christ on the cross with five blood-red rays coming from his wounds targeting Catherine's

³⁸⁹ Anonymous, "The *Miracoli*", 87.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 90-91.

³⁹¹ Raymond of Capua wrote in the *Legenda maior*. Diego Giunta, "The Iconography of Catherine of Siena's Stigmata", in *Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition, a Series of Handbooks and Reference Works on the Intellectual and Religious Life of Europe, 500-1800: A Companion of Siena*, vol.32, ed. Christopher M. Bellitto, (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 260.

hands, feet and chest³⁹². However, whilst in ecstasy, Catherine requested that the stigmata marks not show on her physical body, and the rays of blood coloured light turned clear³⁹³, suggesting that her stigmata could not be seen, although they are portrayed in the 'St Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' series by Plautilla³⁹⁴. Even though there were no visible marks on Catherine herself, she claimed that she felt intense pains where the wounds of Christ were³⁹⁵. Furthermore, it was also believed that Catherine de'Ricci had received stigmata and mystic visions, attracting the wealthy and royalty of Italy to witness these phenomena³⁹⁶. These two female Dominican saints clearly had an impact on Italy and the church when it came to the belief of their stigmata, despite controversial opinions on the stigmata's existence.

The symbolism of stigmata used in the series of 'Saint Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' is considered to be controversial: between 1472 and 1630, a ban was placed on the portrayal of stigmata on images of Saint Catherine of Siena³⁹⁷, which was linked to clashes between the Dominicans and the Franciscans on whether Saint Catherine of Siena actually had stigmata³⁹⁸. On 29th June, 1461, the same day as the canonisation of St Catherine of Siena, the Franciscan bishop Roberto Caracciolo³⁹⁹, in a sermon in response to Raymond's testimony of St Catherine of Siena's stigmata, expressed that because of lack of a visible mark on Catherine's body she should not be

³⁹² Giunta, "The Iconography of Catherine", 260.

³⁹³ Ibid., 260.

³⁹⁴ The uncertainty of St Catherine's stigmata will be explained further in this chapter and the decision made on banning any visual portrayal of her stigmata.

³⁹⁵ Giunta, "The Iconography of Catherine", 261.

³⁹⁶ Navarro, "Semplice lecto", 34-35.

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 38.

³⁹⁸ Giunta, "The Iconography of Catherine", 267.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 259.

portrayed with stigmata in images, as it would encourage belief that she had a visible stigmata in life⁴⁰⁰. Caracciolo further supported his argument by acknowledging that the pope, who canonised St Catherine⁴⁰¹, did not mention Catherine's stigmata in his sermon. However, as noted by Diega Giunta in 1995⁴⁰², Caracciolo fails to acknowledge that Pope Gregory IX (1227-41), in his sermon for the canonisation of St Francis, did not mention stigmata either⁴⁰³; this suggests that Caracciolo applied different standards to which saint could be portrayed with stigmata. It is thought that Franciscans, such as Caracciolo, fought against Dominicans' belief in Catherine's stigmata as they wanted the iconography to be exclusive to the images of St Francis⁴⁰⁴.

In line with the denial of St Catherine's stigmata, there were also doubts that her powers were holy. During the Renaissance, accusations of witchcraft were made towards female Dominicans, particularly St Catherine of Siena, in line with the values and ideas of the Reformation⁴⁰⁵. Contemporary Reformists thought her powers were supernatural rather than holy, and that the unrealistic number of female saints suggested that some may have been witches⁴⁰⁶. Furthermore, medieval theorists made connections between the female body and magic and that all women had the ability to

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 262.

⁴⁰¹ Pope Pius II canonised Catherine of Siena 29 June 1461. Giunta, "The Iconography of Catherine", 259.

⁴⁰² The chapter "The Iconography of Catherine of Siena's Stigmata" from *A Companion to Catherine of Siena* is an abridgement and translation of Diega Giunta's essay from 1995: "La questione delle stimmate alle origini della iconografia cateriniana e la fortuna del tema nel corso dei secoli," in *Con l'occhio e col lume. Atti del corso seminario di studi su S. Caterina da Siena (25 settembre - 7 ottobre 1995)*, eds. Luigi Trenti and Bente Klange Addabbo (Siena, 1999). Giunta, "The Iconography of Catherine", 259.

⁴⁰³ Giunta, "The Iconography of Catherine", 263.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 267.

⁴⁰⁵ Tamar Herzog, "Witches, Saints and Heretics: Heinrich Kramer's Ties with Italian Women Mystics", (*Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 1, no. 1 2006).

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

heal or harm: it was female genitalia and the bodily substances from it that were believed to have held satanic powers⁴⁰⁷. The testimonies about St Catherine of Siena express that she used her powers to heal the sick, similar to the holy figure of Christ, moreover, as they do not refer to the use of any bodily substances there is no implication that her powers were supernatural⁴⁰⁸. This further demonstrates the different standards applied to the female saint St Catherine of Siena compared to the male saint St Dominic, who was not accused of witchcraft or the male saint St Francis, whose stigmata were not banned in representations of the saint.

As stigmata was a feature of both the St Catherines, it was possible for Plautilla to paint a single figure, which represented either or both saints in a single image⁴⁰⁹. However, there are differences in the portrayal of stigmata in the 'Saint Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' series: the infrared reflectography scan reveals that beneath the black veil in the Assisi version there is evidence of a wound on the ribs, similar in size to the stigmata in the Florence version that is easily visible⁴¹⁰. Lari claims that this discovery of the hidden scar on the ribs confirms that the black veil in the Assisi painting was applied later, with the intention of covering up the stigmata⁴¹¹. Moreover, the text in the Assisi version clearly reads as 'SENIS', identifying the image as Saint Catherine of Siena; Navarro noted that the black veil could have been added by a different artist to conform

⁴⁰⁷ Luisa Accati, "The Spirit of Fornication: Virtue of the Soul and Virtue of the Body in Friuli, 1600-1800", (1979), trans. Margaret A. Gallucci, in *Sex and Gender in Historical Perspective*, ed. Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 110-116.

⁴⁰⁸ Miracles occurred through prayer. Anonymous, "The Miracoli", 100-101.

⁴⁰⁹ Navarro, "Semplice lecto", 40.

⁴¹⁰ Lari, "Note sui restauri", 64-65.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., 65.

to the ban on stigmata in visual representations of Saint Catherine of Siena imposed by the church⁴¹².

Through the connection between social context and visual depictions in relation to gender, noticeable similarities arise: contemporary written sources often preached to women to keep their heads bowed and stay silent, to stay modest and uphold 'feminine' values⁴¹³ and in Plautilla's images of St Catherine the heads are bowed and the body language submissive. The written records of friars' instructions to women⁴¹⁴ are in line with visual depictions of idealised female behaviour⁴¹⁵, and together provide evidence of the way visual aids were used to teach behaviour. However, it could have been seen as controversial that a nun, who must be pure and kept away from lust, could be looking upon Christ, who is half naked and facing the nun depicted in the image. Clearly, the image of Christ is as a holy figure, but if the context of religious narrative is removed, he becomes a male figure that is half naked in front of a fully covered woman who is crying. Women in Renaissance Italy, especially religious women, were often hidden away from public view to prevent assault and rape, and thus avoid losing their honour as an unmarried woman⁴¹⁶. If the female figure in the 'St Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' series is seen as a representation of the universal nun, it is possible to interpret the tears as linked to the restrictions unmarried women faced due to their family's fear of loss of honour; she is in fact crying for herself rather than for Christ. Women during this period in Italy, especially religious women, were made to cover

⁴¹² Navarro, "Semplice lecto", 38.

⁴¹³ Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy*, 17.

⁴¹⁴ See Bernardino da Siena: *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴¹⁵ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 3.

⁴¹⁶ Davis, "The Geography of Gender", 21.

themselves from head to toe to demonstrate and maintain their modesty⁴¹⁷. However, the male figure, Christ on the cross, is largely unclothed, portraying different attitudes to depictions of the human body based on gender: this is additionally supported by the depiction of semi-clothed images of the male saint, St Dominic (fig.19).

During the Renaissance period, nudity within visual culture reflected several ideas, from people in poverty to the admiration of God's creation⁴¹⁸. In line with Christian values, the naked body holds both negative and positive connotations depending on the representation of the naked flesh: an example of early depictions of the naked body within Christianity stems from the visual representation of Christ, particularly during the crucifixion, where his nakedness was accepted as evidence of his 'humiliation' and humanity⁴¹⁹, as long as his genitalia were covered⁴²⁰. Genitalia were often considered to be shameful parts of the body, which if seen could stimulate inappropriate sexual feelings in the viewer; it was therefore believed that it was inappropriate for genitalia to be depicted in visual representations of Christ, who symbolised sacrifice for mankind, not sexuality⁴²¹. The Franciscans in particular praised nudity and used it as a way to sympathise with Christ's humiliation, as he died on the cross naked⁴²², although there had to be a balance between the naked body of Christ and his modesty by covering 'shameful parts', which led to very few images of a completely naked adult Christ produced in Italy between 1400 and 1530⁴²³.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 21.

⁴¹⁸ Burke, *The Italian Renaissance Nude*, 15-20.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 45-48.

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 20.

⁴²¹ Ibid., 46-48.

⁴²² Ibid., 45.

⁴²³ Ibid., 47.

The idea of the nude in visual culture during early modern Europe expressed the skill of the artist⁴²⁴; this skill is demonstrated by Plautilla and her workshop by accurately painting depictions of a largely naked Christ, although Plautilla abides by religious sensitivity about nudity⁴²⁵ by covering Christ's genitalia with a cloth. The naked form of a male figure, however, suggests a gaze from both the female artist and female viewers, as well as from the female saint within the image. In Renaissance Italy there was shame in viewing the naked body, even between married couples; it was only considered less shameful if one partner was ill, as that was more of a charitable action, but if they there to view each other's bodies sexually it was sinful despite being married⁴²⁶. The scene in the 'St Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' series, perhaps depict voyeurism firstly through the female artist painting the naked body of Christ, then through the female saint looking at the naked body of Christ, and then the female viewers looking at the saint looking at the naked body of Christ, or just the naked body of Christ itself⁴²⁷. The idea of an audience viewing a naked body or an intimate scene with sexual connotations was not unusual: Bette Talvacchia, in *Taking Position on the Erotic in Renaissance Culture*, analyses a woodcut created by an anonymous sixteenth century artist which depicts a fully clothed, older woman peering through a window into a bedroom to observe an erotic scene between a man and a woman⁴²⁸. Talvacchia believes that the older woman symbolises two things: an intruder in hope of secretly receiving visual pleasure by watching the

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 20.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 51.

⁴²⁷ Burke wrote that the action of voyeurism was included largely in literature and art during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Burke, *The Italian Renaissance Nude*, 53.

⁴²⁸ Bette Talvacchia, *Taking Positions on the Erotic in Renaissance Culture*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 27-28.

scene through a window; a bawd keeping an eye her business⁴²⁹. The older woman is not contained within the intimate scene but is seen only by the viewer of the woodcut, who views her viewing them⁴³⁰, which is similar to the way St Catherine views Christ in Plautilla's paintings, as she is seen alone, unaware of being watched by the viewer, suggesting a secretive viewing of the cross and an intimate moment between her and Christ. Furthermore, pornographic literature from the twelfth century onwards describing the sexually "starved" nun was a popular choice, often negatively impacting on how nuns were viewed by both the public and their orders⁴³¹; it is thus possible that the series of St Catherine observing a semi-nude male figure of Christ, despite the intentions of the female painter, reflected the sexualization of nuns by the medieval viewer. Furthermore, there was an increasing number of women in convents, including those who did not wish to devote themselves to a religious life, making convents less virtuous due to a rise in fornication within the walls. Fornication within convents, ranging between consensual intercourse to rape, increased throughout the centuries of the Renaissance. For example, in 1349, Venetian government regulated religious communities in reaction to the 'abominable frequency' of fornication that happened in the convents, as well as, in 1497, a Franciscan preacher blamed fornication for an outbreak of plague in the convents⁴³². These events show that women in convents were appeared to be desirable sexual objects, causing issues within the convent to make the women live a devout life. A Venetian law of 1420 noted how girls were 'imprisoned' within the convent walls and a Bolognese writer of the 1500s expressed how women

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 27-28.

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 27-28.

⁴³¹ McNamara, *Sisters in Arms*, 353.

⁴³² Chojnacki, "Daughters and Oligarchs", 69.

were forced by their fathers and brothers into convents, where they would “blaspheme and curse the bodies and souls of their parents”⁴³³.

This analysis shows that the four paintings in the series ‘St Catherine of Siena/de’Ricci’ by Plautilla Nelli reflect the social attitudes towards women, especially those placed in convents, and how virginity played a role in the ideal female identity; this is shown through the relationship of the saints to the figure of Christ, the placement of lilies, and the idealised female figure as a representation of all nuns. As a female painter, and despite a ban on depicting St Catherine of Siena’s stigmata, Plautilla Nelli portrays the female saint in line with Raymond’s testimony of St Catherine of Siena by showing stigmata, and a non-canonized woman, Catherine de’Ricci, as a saint, thus challenging the ideals set out by male members of the order. Plautilla expresses her belief in St Catherine of Siena and Catherine de’Ricci’s religious visions; she painted the stigmata and portrayed the female figures as a saint, creating a hybrid of both St Catherines. Conventionally, the virginity of the female figures is portrayed as sacred as the lily symbol is guarded by the image of Christ; this shows that even though Plautilla followed the ideals of male preachers by portraying Catherine as an idealised virgin⁴³⁴, she was subversive in the way she portrayed both St Catherine of Siena and Catherine de’Ricci, as her female gaze has determined the composition and how they were viewed by a predominantly female audience, her workshop. Moreover, the relationship between a female saint, as a representation of Dominican nuns, and the near naked

⁴³³ Ibid., 70.

⁴³⁴ Ideals set by men for religious or unmarried women to be virgins, often referring to the Virgin Mary, who St Catherine of Siena also used as an example in her letters: see St Catherine’s letter and Bernardino da Siena Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy*, 44-45.

crucified Christ on the cross raises issues of gender: the fully clothed nun and the near naked Christ, and the juxtaposition of the naked body and what viewers may have perceived as the sexually “starved” nun⁴³⁵.

⁴³⁵ The term “starved” was used in: McNamara, *Sisters in Arms*, 353.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, an understanding of social history and analysis of devotional imagery has drawn attention to the difference gender makes when depicting devotion to the cross in Dominican visual culture; particularly through comparing the works of female painter Plautilla Nelli with male painters Fra Angelico , Fra Bartolomeo and Andrea del Sarto. Gender differences have also been explored through an understanding of the social and political context of Renaissance Italy and how women were viewed and expected to behave within society, as well as through the analysis of paintings created for religious purposes depicting male or female saints and their relationship to the cross within the image. There were noticeable similarities and differences that became apparent, particularly in the placement of figures and their body language. For example, male figures were often placed at a greater distance from the image of Christ and portrayed as being more assertive, whereas female figures were closer to the image of Christ and submissive. Furthermore, comparisons were made between the gender of the painter and their portrayal of the gender of the saints in order to understand whether their own gender affected the portrayal of figures in their paintings. Women during this time period in Italy were restricted to only a few options in life: marriage, a holy life or prostitution. Despite these restrictions, a few women were still able to pursue careers, such as Plautilla Nelli who became prioress of a Dominican convent under the influence of Savonarolan values and led a successful all-female artist workshop, which financially supported the convent⁴³⁶. The key paintings analysed are

⁴³⁶ Turrill, "Nuns' Stories", 13-14.

Plautilla Nelli's series titled 'St Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' (fig.1-4), which depict the female saints St Catherine of Siena and Catherine de'Ricci holding a small crucifix with the holy figure of Christ, expressing a personal relationship to the image of Christ, and the restrictions on female sexuality through the attributes of lilies as symbols of virginity.

This thesis covered the foundations of the historical, social and political background of Renaissance Italy to determine which affected the life of Plautilla Nelli and her all-female workshop, to understand whether or not Plautilla was part of the Renaissance which is often perceived as strictly male. To answer Kelly's question 'Did Women Have a Renaissance?'⁴³⁷, a large variety of factors were explored to understand the lifestyle and artistic choices made by Plautilla, their influence on the work she produced, and her success as a painter. Factors include: the geography of Renaissance Italy and the way in which certain areas and buildings were considered masculine or feminine; family and individual honour, which shaped the decisions made, often revolving around the un-married daughter's virginity; the meaning behind nudity in art and nakedness in society, and understanding the 'correct' way of portraying a nude Christ in visual culture; the foundations of the Dominican Order, and the behaviours of its founder, St Dominic; how gender is portrayed in relation to the crucifix in Dominican devotional art by the male painter, Fra Angelico; current documentation on Plautilla Nelli's life, and attributed works; the history behind St Catherine of Siena and Catherine de'Ricci's mystical behaviours, which created controversy due to their gender. These factors bring attention to the limitations Plautilla and other Renaissance women would

⁴³⁷ Kelly, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?", 21-47.

have had to overcome to achieve a career in the arts because of family and societal pressures to conform to the ideal woman. However, they also highlight the impressive skills and production of paintings that Plautilla and her all-female workshop obtained despite the restrictions they faced due to their gender. The nuns of the workshop particularly benefited from joining the Santa Catrina convent where they had access to a masters' workshop and were encouraged to create paintings to sell⁴³⁸. However, they did not receive the same education as male painters of the time, instead they are most likely to have taught themselves and each other, and are known to have copied the Fra Bartolomeo drawings left to them⁴³⁹. This suggests that some women did manage to be part of the Renaissance, but through a different and more restrictive route than their male peers. Plautilla achieved respect in both her lifetime and in later centuries, because of her skill as a painter and leader, and the mention of her in Vasari's 'Lives' biography under the list of female artists⁴⁴⁰. In a clearly male dominated society, Plautilla broke boundaries and utilised the benefits of a Dominican convent that encouraged creative production by women.

It can also be concluded that Plautilla, despite being a Dominican nun, expressed an artistic female voice and challenged viewers of her work through her series 'St Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci'. This challenge is shown through the combination of two saints in one figure, one not being canonised at the time of painting⁴⁴¹, and the inclusion of stigmata despite a ban⁴⁴². As prioress of the convent, Plautilla would have been able

⁴³⁸ Turrill Lupi, "Biografia", 21.

⁴³⁹ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁴⁰ Vasari, *The Lives*, 304 – 305.

⁴⁴¹ Navarro, "Semplice lecto", 44.

⁴⁴² Ibid., 42.

to influence the themes produced in the workshop, similar to the prioress in Pisa who encouraged the production of visual culture around St Birgitta⁴⁴³, shaping the values of the nuns and who they should idolise in visual culture. This suggests that Plautilla obtained some power, despite her gender, and was able to express it through painting. However, her challenges in the portrayal of stigmata did not go unnoticed, shown by the addition of a black veil by someone else in the Assisi version of the painting.

Through the study of male and female artists, it can be concluded that the visual representations of saints are influenced by the gender of the subject, the gender of the artist, and the gender of the viewer for whom they serve as role models when worshipping the image of Christ. An example of a male role model in devotion is seen through the imagery of St Dominic used in the Nine Modes of Prayer manuscript and the frescoes in the San Marco friar cells. Frescoes created by Fra Angelico create instructions on the ideal male practices of prayer for religious male viewers, empathising the expected masculine values of nobility and the superiority of their gender by mimicking the image of Christ who is the supreme figure of man. In contrast, Fra Angelico, Fra Bartolomeo and Andrea del Sarto portray female saints, the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, by male standards of femininity: beautiful, submissive in behaviour and silent, and placed in the composition to reinforce their inferiority. Despite her gender, Plautilla also conforms to these male standards in her portrayal of women, although she gives more emphasis to their presence by focusing on their emotional response to the Christ figure. Moreover, in the 'St Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' series, Plautilla challenges

⁴⁴³ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 90.

male standards of femininity as the St Catherines bear stigmata, thus mimicking the scars of Christ and reducing their inferiority compared to male saints.

In conclusion, Plautilla Nelli and her all-female workshop lived in a male dominated era and were required to follow the strict rules on women's virginity and sexuality. The placement of lilies conforms to the restrictions of sexuality, as they symbolise virginity⁴⁴⁴. The lilies are placed behind the figure of Christ, who therefore creates a barrier between the symbol of virginity and the virgin nun; this makes a clear association between the authority of the male figure and the status of the woman. Despite this conformity, this thesis has argued that Plautilla's series 'St Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci' does in fact create a feminine response to female sexuality. This can be seen through the representation of the female figure, which not only represents a saint but can be interpreted as a universal nun, in relation to the near naked figure of Christ on the cross. The female figure expresses intimacy towards the male symbol of Christ; Plautilla's composition gives additional meaning to the female figure's submissiveness and closeness by subverting the restrictions placed on nuns in relation to men through the three levels of female gaze: subject, artist, and, within the confines of the convent, viewer.

⁴⁴⁴ Fisher, *Flowers of the Renaissance*, 34-35.

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Appendix



Fig. 1. Plautilla Nelli (1524 – 1588) and workshop, *St Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci or St Catherine with Lily*, n.d. Oil Paint on Panel, 39 x 28.5cm, Museo Diocesano, Assisi.



Fig. 2. Plautilla Nelli (1524 – 1588) and workshop, *St Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci or St Catherine with Lily*, n.d. Oil Paint on Panel, 38 x 28cm, Cenacolo di Andrea del Sarto, Florence.



Fig. 3. Plautilla Nelli (1524 – 1588), *St Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci or St Catherine with Lily*, n.d. Oil Paint on Canvas Glued to Panel, 57 x 41cm, Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria,



Fig. 4. Plautilla Nelli (1524 – 1588), *St Catherine of Siena/de'Ricci or St Catherine with Lily*, n.d. Oil Paint on Canvas, 79 x 62cm, Convent of San Domenico, Siena.



Fig. 5. Benvenuto Cellini (1500-1571). *Perseus with the Head of Medusa*. 1545-1553. Bronze, with a Marble Pedestal. 550 cm. Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence.



Fig.6. Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564). *Night*. 1526-33. Marble. Length: 194 cm. Sagrestia Nuova, San Lorenzo, Florence.



Fig. 7. Anonymous. *Mode I, Modes of Prayer*. Vatican Manuscript.



Fig. 8. Anonymous. *Mode II, Modes of Prayer*. Vatican Manuscript.



Fig. 9. Anonymous. *Mode III, Modes of Prayer*. Vatican Manuscript.



Fig. 10. Anonymous. *Mode IV, Modes of Prayer*. Vatican Manuscript.



Fig. 11. Anonymous. *Mode V, Modes of Prayer*. Vatican Manuscript.



Fig. 12. Anonymous. *Mode VI, Modes of Prayer*. Vatican Manuscript.



Fig. 13. Anonymous. *Mode VII, Modes of Prayer*. Vatican Manuscript.



Fig. 14. Anonymous. *Mode VIII, Modes of Prayer*. Vatican Manuscript.



Fig. 15. Anonymous. *Mode IX, Modes of Prayer*. Vatican Manuscript.



Fig 16. Giotto di Bondone (1266-1337). *Legend of St Francis: 22. Verification of the Stigmata*. 1300. Fresco. 270 x 230 cm. Upper Church, San Francesco, Assisi.



Fig 17. Giotto di Bondone (1266-1337). *Legend of St Francis: 4. Miracle of the Crucifix*. 1297-1299. Fresco. 270 x 230 cm. Upper Church, San Francesco, Assisi.

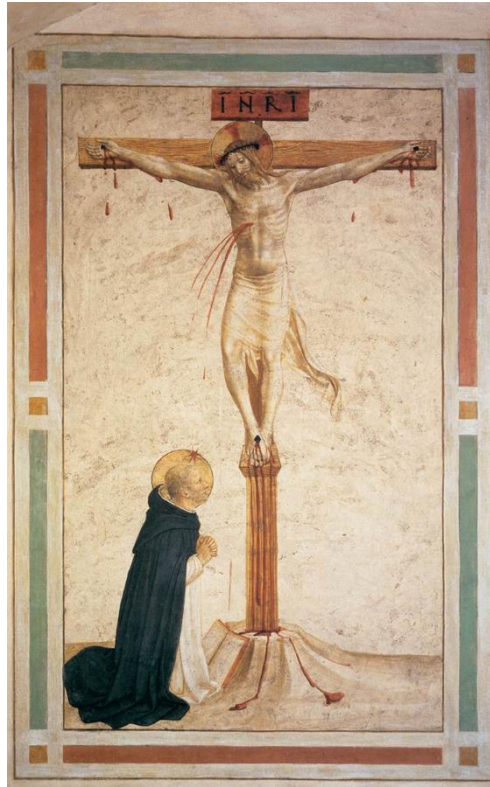


Fig. 18. Fra Angelico (1395-1455). *Crucifixion with St Dominic (Cell 17)*. c. 1442. Fresco. 155 x 80 cm. Convento di San Marco, Florence.

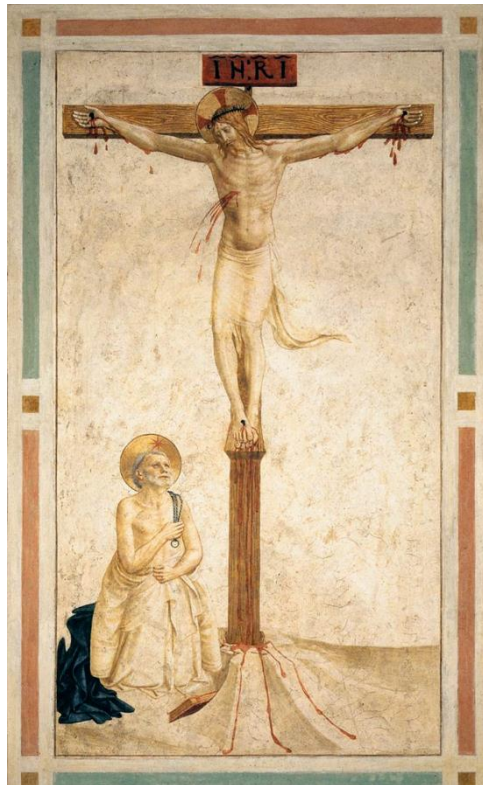


Fig. 19. Fra Angelico (1395-1455). *Crucifixion with St Dominic Flagellating Himself (Cell 20)*. c. 1442. Fresco. 155 x 80 cm. Convento di San Marco, Florence.



Fig. 20. Fra Angelico (1395-1455). *Crucifixion with the Virgin, Mary Magdalene and St Dominic (Cell 25)*. 1441-42. Fresco. 176 x 136 cm. Convento di San Marco, Florence.



Fig. 21. Fra Angelico (1395-1455). *Saint Dominic Adoring the Crucifixion*. 1441-42. Fresco. 340 x 206 cm. Convento di San Marco, Florence.



Fig. 22. Plautilla Nelli (1524-1588). *Initial A: Adoration of the Christ Child with the Virgin Mary, Joseph, and Two Nuns*. 1558. Tempera, Gold Leaf, and Ink on Parchment. 58.4 x 42.2 cm. Museo di San Marco, Florence.



Fig. 23. Fra Bartolomeo (1472-1517). *Study For A Weeping Saint Peter*. 1511-1512. Museum Boymans-van-Beuningen, Rotterdam.



Fig. 24. Plautilla Nelli (1524 – 1588). *The Lamentation with Saints*. n.d. Oil on Canvas 288cm x 192cm. San Marco, Florence.



Fig. 25. Plautilla Nelli (1524 – 1588), *Saint Catherine in Prayer*, n.d., Oil on Wood Panel, 145 x 235 cm, Last Super Museum of Andrea del Sarto, Florence.



Fig. 26. Plautilla Nelli (1524 – 1588), *Saint Dominic Receives the Rosary*, c.1570, Oil on Wood Panel, 147 x 231 cm, Last Super Museum of Andrea del Sarto, Florence.



Fig. 27. Plautilla Nelli (1524 – 1588), *The Last Supper*, n.d., Oil painting, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

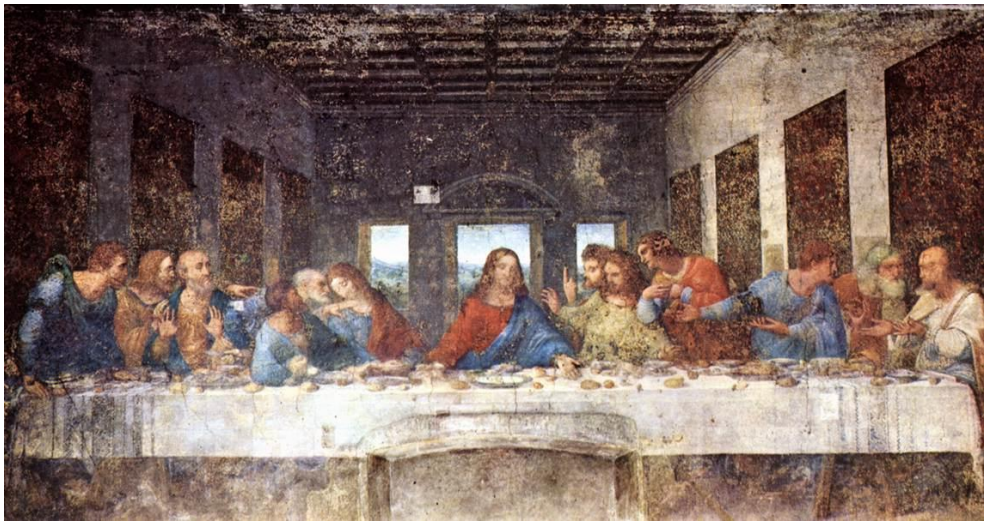


Fig. 28. Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), *The Last Supper*, 1498, Mixed technique, 460 x 880 cm, Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan.

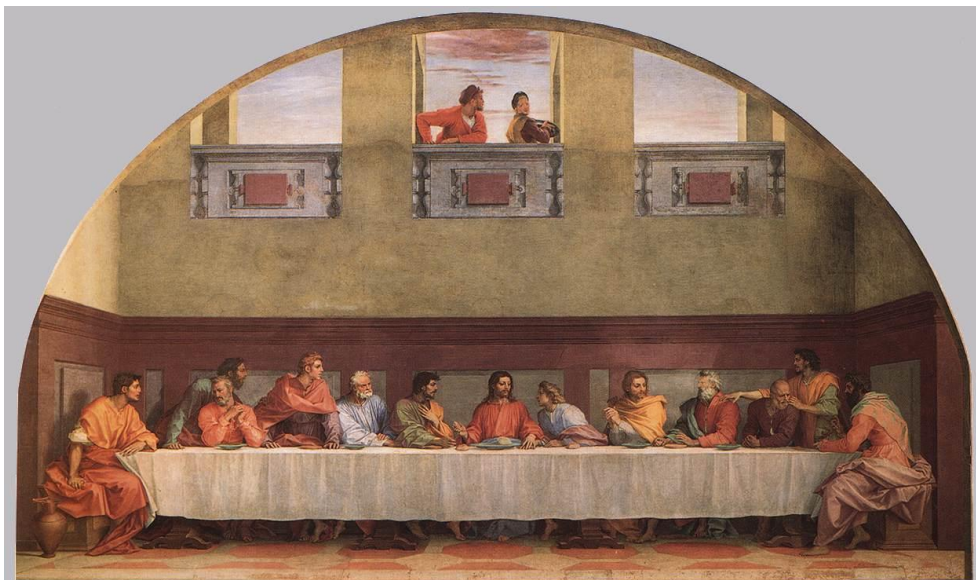


Fig. 29. Andrea del Sarto (1486-1530), *The Last Supper*, 1520-25, Fresco, 525 x 871 cm, Convent of San Salvi, Florence.



Fig. 30. Fra Bartolomeo (1472-1517), *Lamentation*, 1511-12, Oil on wood, 158 x 199 cm, Galleria Palatina (Palazzo Pitti), Florence.



Fig. 31. Andrea del Sarto (1486-1530), *Pietà with Saints*, 1523-24, Oil on panel, 239 x 199 cm, Galleria Palatina (Palazzo Pitti), Florence



Fig. 32. Pietro Perugino (c.1446-1523), *Lamentation Over the Dead Christ*, 1492, Oil on Wood, 220cm x 195cm, Galleria Palatina, Florence.



Fig. 33. Unknown copyist, *St Catherine of Siena/de' Ricci or St Catherine with Lily*, n.d. Oil Paint on Canvas, 65.5 x 49 cm, Convent of San Marco, Florence.



Fig. 34. Plautilla Nelli (1524 – 1588), *St Catherine of Siena/de' Ricci*, n.d. Oil Paint on Canvas, 50 x 39cm, Dominican Monastery of San Vincenzo Ferrer, Prato.



Fig. 35. Fra Bartolomeo (1472-1517), *God the Father with Sts Catherine of Siena and Mary Magdalene*, 1509, Panel (transferred), 361 x 236 cm, Museo Nazionale di Palazzo Mansi, Lucca.



Fig. 36. Fra Bartolomeo (1472-1517), *God the Father with Sts Catherine of Siena and Mary Magdalene* (detail on St Catherine and lilies), 1509, Panel (transferred), 361 x 236 cm, Museo Nazionale di Palazzo Mansi, Lucca.



Fig. 37. Francesco di Giorgio Martini (1439-1502), *Virgin and Child with St Catherine and Angels*, c. 1490, Mixed technique on panel, 62 x 42 cm, Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, Pedralbes.



Fig. 38. Stefano Parenti (17th century), *Saint Catherine de' Ricci*, n.d., Monastero Domenicano di San Vincenzo Ferrer, Prato.



Fig. 39. Stefano Parenti (17th century), *Madonna Gives the Christ Child to Sour Caterina de' Ricci in the Presence of Saint Thecla*, n.d., Monastero Domenicano di San Vincenzo Ferrer, Prato.



Fig. 40. Andrea del Sarto (1486-1530), *The Annunciation*, 1512-13, Oil on wood, 183 x 184 cm, Galleria Palatina (Palazzo Pitti), Florence.



Fig. 41. Fra Mattia della Robbia (1468-1534), *Savonarola Holding the Cross*, n.d., Bronze Medallion, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence.