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Are Angels Allegories?

Late in Gregorio Comanini's 1591 dialogue *On the Purpose of Painting*, one of its characters, the painter Giovan Ambrogio Figino, poses the following question to the group:

„Some maintain that, however ingenious and praiseworthy it may sometimes be in secular images to produce metaphors and allegories, this is nevertheless not allowed in the composition of sacred things, nor in those things that, being the book of the illiterate, ought to be clear in their sense and in what they communicate. Otherwise the simple would not glean from them what is useful – the reason why the Church not only still permits but even orders their use. Now, I do not know whether these people ought to be heeded or not. You advise me on what is appropriate to do.“¹

The priest Ascanio Martinengo fields Figino's question:

„Those who speak in this way must have very little familiarity with the paintings of the primitive Church. Painting the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, angels with the appearance of young men, Christ as a lamb – all of these ancient paintings – are they not in fact metaphors and allegories? And those cherubim that Moses placed on the tabernacles, positioning them so that they faced the altar, were they not a symbol of the angels who contemplate the Son of God?“²

Much Counter-Reformation writing on painting, of course, focused on the importance of purging anything that might be regarded as fictional or eccentric from the

* I owe thanks to Fabio Barry, Steven Ostrow, Ulrich Pfisterer, and Carolyn Yerkes for helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay.

1 Gregorio Comanini, *Il Figino, ovvero del fine della Pittura* [Mantua 1591], in: *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento*, vol. 3, ed. by Paola Barocchi, Bari 1962, p. 337: „Vogliono alcuni che, quantunque nelle profane immagini ingegnosa e lodevole cosa sia il fare alcune volte metafore et allegorie, tuttavia questo non sia lecito nella composizione delle sacre, come di quelle che, essendo il libro degli idioti, debbono avere chiarezza di senso e d'intelligenza. Altramente il semplice non ne trarrebbe quell'utile, per cui la Chiesa non solamente concede, ma ordina ancora il loro uso. Ora, io non so se costoro si debbano udire o no. Voi consigliatemi di quanto mi convien fare.“ Translation modified from Gregorio Comanini, *The Figino, or On the Purposes of Painting: Art Theory in the Late Renaissance*, trans. Ann Doyle-Anderson and Giancarlo Maiorino, Toronto 2001, p. 77.

2 Comanini-Barocchi, *Il Figino* (as in n. 1), p. 337: „Poca pratica debbono avere delle pitture della primitiva Chiesa quelli che favellano in questa maniera. Percioché il dipingere lo Spirito Santo in forma d'una colomba, gli angeli in sembianza di giovani, Cristo in specie d'agnello (pitture che pur sono antiche) non sono forse metafore et allegorie? E quei Cherubini, che Mosè pose nel tabernacolo e fece che riguardassero il propiziatorio, non erano simbolo degli angeli che contemplano il figliuol di Dio?“ Translation slightly modified from Doyle-Anderson and Maiorino, *The Figino* (as in n. 1), p. 77.

religious image.³ The guiding theme in this whole body of texts is that of decorum, helping to establish pictorial genres that would shape European art for centuries to come. The frequency with which this literature turns to the topic of angels, however, suggests that as the new sorting of painting proceeded, such motifs represented a problem case. On the one hand, angels were major actors in a wide range of standard subjects artists were called on to depict. They could not simply be eliminated from the repertory. At the same time, anyone with the most basic training in theology would know that the angels they saw on the walls of every church did not always follow the scant and sometimes contradictory clues that accepted sacred narratives offered to their appearance. To the extent that it was possible to identify visual norms, these could seem to depart from the Scriptures and their commentaries.

If the most familiar variety of angel was the winged adolescent androgyn, for example, one alternative had already arisen in the Sienese territories of the early Renaissance, where angels often appear simply as beautiful young men with flowing gowns: Angelo di Nalduccio's 1370 wood *Gabriel*, now in the Museo Civico of Montalcino, and Jacopo della Quercia's 1422 wood statue of the same subject from the Collegiata in S. Gimignano are distinguished early examples; the angels accompanying the Madonna and Child in the ca. 1475 panel painting by Giovanni di Paolo (fig. 1), now in San Diego, is a later one. The figure type, moreover, was not limited to Siena. The marble figures, presumably angels, that draw the curtains in Donatello's tomb of Rainaldo Brancacci in Naples (fig. 2), have no wings (though the trumpet players above do), nor do the music playing angels in Piero della Francesca's London *Nativity* (fig. 3), Giovanni Bellini's San Giobbe altarpiece (fig. 4) or Benedetto Coda's *Madonna and Child with Saints and Angels* (fig. 5). Wingless angels flank and support God in the altarpiece (fig. 6) begun by Sebastiano del Piombo and completed by Francesco Salviati for the Chigi Chapel in the church of S. Maria del Popolo in Rome. The weightless characters who bear Christ's body in Pontormo's Capponi Chapel in S. Felicità in Florence must also be angels (fig. 7); the changeant pink and blue employed uniquely and dazzlingly on the centermost figure's garment follows the advice that Cennino Cennini and others give for distinguishing such beings through the use of color.⁴ The acrobatic nude adolescents descending with the crown and palm in Bronzino's *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* (fig. 8) more clearly perform angelic duties, but apart from this, and the fact that they can fly, there is little to distinguish these creatures from the children that crawl from the lap of Charity in the center foreground. The angels, moreover, look like they could well grow up to be laborers like those who feed the fire here.

3 See esp. the discussion in Charles Dempsey, "Mythic Inventions in Counter-Reformation Painting", in: *Rome in the Renaissance: The City and the Myth*, ed. P. A. Ramsey, Binghamton 1982 (= Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 18), pp. 55-75.

4 See Leo Steinberg, "Pontormo's Capponi Chapel", in: *Art Bulletin* 56 (1974), pp. 385-399. Melissa Shive treats the topic at greater length in "The Dissolution of Pictorial Thresholds: The Angel Pietàs of Andrea del Sarto, Rosso Fiorentino, and Jacopo da Pontormo", in: *Rutgers Art Review* 24 (2008), pp. 18-40.

Examples like these show that Renaissance angels commonly lacked their clearest attributes. And though this has come to look like artistic capriciousness, it may in many cases have been just the opposite, an attempt to stay true to Biblical authority. Raphael's 1511-12 *Expulsion of Heliodorus* (fig. 9) in the Stanza d'Elidoro in the Vatican shows the episode from 2 Machabees 3 when there appeared to the invaders of the Temple of the Jerusalem „a horse with a terrible rider upon him“ together with „two other young men beautiful and strong, bright and glorious, and in comely apparel“. By showing the two figures with scourges floating above the ground, Raphael indicates that he took them to be angels, but otherwise, he adds little more than a dramatically billowing drapery to the Old Testament's „young men“.⁵ When, in 1516, the Nuremberg sculptor Veit Stoss carved the name saint of the Florentine merchant Raffaello Torrigiani, he appears to have made Raphael wingless (fig. 10), and that is what the Book of Tobit (5:5-6) required:

„Then Tobias going forth, found a beautiful young man, standing girded, and as it were ready to walk. And not knowing that he was an angel of God, [Tobias] saluted him, and said: From whence art thou, good young man?“

The fact that Tobias sees no wings and does not recognize Raphael to be an angel is central to the story.⁶ Before Luca Signorelli painted the vision that Abraham (fig. 11) had in his tent, he no doubt sat down and read Genesis 18:2: „When [Abraham] had lifted up his eyes, there appeared three men standing near him: and as soon as he saw them he ran to meet them from the door of his tent, and adored down to the ground.“ Signorelli's angels look younger than those of the verse, but the painting stays true to the text in simply showing „three men“. Giorgio Vasari's later drawing of the same subject (National Gallery, Canada) departs more from the written source – his figures float in air, and they are surrounded by a cloud. Perhaps he knew that his viewers would need help in identifying just what kind of beings they were seeing. But clarity comes at the cost of departing from the written source.

Michelangelo, of course, would become notorious for the painting of wingless angels in his *Last Judgment* (fig. 12) – another visionary subject. The monumental fresco, seven years in the making, constituted a three-story altarpiece in the Pope's own chapel, and it included teams of angels: they carry instruments of the passion, they play trumpets, and they beat on sinners. All are wingless, a fact that the literature sometimes treats as a radical innovation on Michelangelo's part, though the images we have seen up to this point show that that is not right. The historical importance of Michelangelo's fresco, at least where the angels are concerned, lay not in its new iconography, but in its authoritative status. What clerics realized is

5 For Raphael's visionary scenes more broadly, see Christian K. Kleinbub's excellent, *Vision and the Visionary in Raphael*, University Park 2011, which does not, however, discuss the *Expulsion of Heliodorus*.

6 Although this essay focuses on Italy, there appears to have been a local tradition of wingless angels in South German Renaissance art as well: the Gabriel on Adam Kraft's Sakramentshäuschen in Nuremberg, for example, is also wingless.

that artists would treat it as an exemplary work, that future painters of angels would imitate it. Michelangelo's fresco provided an occasion for debating a wider practice.

And it appears that even in the decades that followed the fresco's unveiling, there was a theological case to be made for Michelangelo's approach. Ambrogio Catarino, an acquaintance of the painter and the author of the first Renaissance treatise on sacred images, wrote:

„If any dull and ignorant man perhaps believes God or an angel to be of human form, he will learn this not from pictures but from the false beliefs that attach to such things. For as Cicero says: whoever imagines God while awake or in a dream, seeing nothing more visible, can attribute no other form to him but a human one, and for this reason, angels have appeared in the form of men, and are described almost as men in the scriptures.“⁷

Catarino's reference here is to Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* 1.18: „All men are told by nature that none but a human form can be ascribed to the Gods; for under what other image did they ever appear to any one either sleeping or waking?“ His basic point here is that any representation of an angel is a dissemblance: its human form is not its nature, it is just the only thing humans are capable of seeing. Even into the 1560s, this seems to have been a position that writers on images could take. The decrees on images that emerged from the Council of Trent in 1563 state that „if at times it happens, when this is beneficial to the illiterate, that the stories and narratives of the Holy Scriptures are portrayed and exhibited, the people should be instructed that not for that reason is the divinity represented in picture as if it can be seen with bodily eyes or expressed in colors or figures.“⁸ And when the matter comes up in Giovanni Andrea Gilio da Fabriano's influential critique of Michelangelo's painting in his dialogue *On the Errors of History Painters*, one of the characters actually defends Michelangelo's manner of working. A speaker named Vincenzo Peterlino, identified at the beginning of the dialogue as a „doctor of laws“, makes a spirited attempt to justify the artist's approach: „Angels don't *have* wings“, he remarks, „and because of this, one cannot say that [Michelangelo, painting them as he did, was] in error.“

But the reply to this marks a turning point. Peterlino's opinion prompts a lengthy discourse from the dialogue's cleric, one Ruggiero Coradini. It is customary to paint angels with wings, Coradini maintains, „in order to show their velocity and quickness in executing God's commands“. He then adduces a series of passages

7 Ambrosius Catharinus, *De cultu & adoratione imaginum*, Rome 1552, p. 125: „Quòd si quis fortè hebes & imperitus aliter sentiat, uidelicet Deum aut Angelum esse humanae formae, non hoc tam ex pictura accipiet, quàm ex priore falsa illi haerente existimatione: siquidem, ut Marcus Tullius ait, Quicumque Deum imaginatur siue uigilans siue per somnium dormiens, nullam aliam illi formam tribuere potest quàm humanam, cum nullam nos uideamus spectabiliorem: & ob hanc causam Angeli in ea specie apparuerunt hominibus, & quasi homines in scripturis describuntur: ut Beatus Pater Dionysius eleganter docet.“

8 Translation by H. J. Schroeder in: *A Documentary History of Art, Volume II: Michelangelo and the Mannerists, The Baroque and the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Elizabeth Gilmore Holt, Princeton 1982, pp. 64-5.

from the books of Ezechiel and Isaiah in which visionaries see angels with wings – not, it seems, to make the point that some historical scenes might call for one mode of representation and others a different one but rather to provide a theological basis for a less flexible rule:

„suffice it to conclude that one must perforce give angels wings, both so that [angels] do not appear to be simply human and to show their speed. Furthermore, one must depict them as beautiful youths, both because this is the way they appeared and in order to make them look different from demons ...“⁹

So, here we have two very different ways of seeing angels. Peterlino had allowed that Michelangelo's renderings have a kind of verism: Michelangelo painted angels without wings simply because angels are wingless. Ruggiero is not quite willing to concede this point, hinting that even if one wanted to paint angels the way they look, one might decide that the visionary record was sufficient to justify giving them wings. Ultimately, though, Ruggiero insists that painters should approach angels in categorically different terms. Even where the wings one sees in pictures contradict an authentic historical description, they serve emblematic ends. And in remarking that painters might give angels wings just to distinguish them from humans on the one hand and demons on the other, he opens a more surprising possibility, that wings can be *arbitrary* additions, meant to clarify what angels are not as much as what they are.¹⁰ In the *Last Judgment*, we might find it difficult to say whether, for example, some of the figures on the ascension side are angels or men, and the same question becomes more difficult still when then context is less famil-

9 Giovanni Andrea Gilio da Fabriano, *Due Dialogi* [Camerino 1564], Florence 1986, p. 121r: „Fu permesso, che si dipingessero gli Angeli (non ostante, che spiriti sieno) in quel modo, che appariti sono. In questo Michelagnolo ha voluto anco trouar noua maniera, che è di farli senza Ale. Disse M. Vincenzo, ò l'Angelo non ha egli ali, non l'hauendo non si puo dire errore. Rispose M. Ruggiero l'antica consuetudine è di dipingergli per dimostrare la sua velocità, e la prestezza in eseguire i precetti di Dio, e poi così sono ne la scrittura figurati. E perche non pensiate che cio vi dica di mio capo sentite quello che ne dice Isaia. In anno in quo mortuus est Ozias vidi dominum sedentem super solium excelsum, & eleuatum, & plena erat domus maiestate eius, & ea quae sub ipso erant replebant templum. Seraphin stabat super illud, sex alae vni, & sex alae alteri. Duabus velabant faciem eius, duabus velabant pedes eius, & duabus volabant. Poco di sotto nel istesso capitolo dice. Et volauit ad me vnus de Seraphin. Ezechiel parlando de' Cherubini c'hauera veduti ne la sua vigione disse. Et atrium repletum est splendore gloriae domini, & sonitus alarum Cherubin audiebatur vsq; ad atrium exterius. Piu abbasso dice nel istesso capitolo. Et cum eleurent Cherubin alas suas. E per non voler allegare tutte l'autorità de la Scrittura, che in molti luoghi si proua e spzialmente ne lo apocalisse, basta à concludere, che per ogni rispetto si deue à gli Angeli far l'ali. Si perche non paiano puri huomini, si per mostrare la loro velocità; & si deue dipingerli anco giouini bellissimi, perche così sono appariti, e per farli differenti da i Demonii, che vogliono essere bruttissimi, acciò spauentino, si come quelli consolano.“

10 A pair of earlier articles argued that Gilio's and Comanini's discussions, like that of Ambrogio Catirino before them, raised questions about just what differentiated angels from demons. The late sixteenth-century literature of art revived the medieval problem of „discerning“ spirits, making this newly relevant to painters. See Michael Cole, „Angel/Demon“, in: *Das Double*, ed. Victor Stoichita, Wiesbaden 2007, pp. 121-137; and idem, „Discernment and Animation from Leonardo to Lomazzo“, in: *Image and Imagination of the Religious Self in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Walter S. Melion and Reindert Falkenburg, Turnhout 2008, pp. 123-152.

iar. Are the characters at the back of the Doni Tondo angels, as Johannes Wilde believed?¹¹ How about the *ignudi* on the Sistine Ceiling? Is it possible, as some scholars have maintained, that the figure in the red gown in the right foreground of Piero della Francesca's *Flagellation* (fig. 13) is an angel?¹² He does not have a cloud and does not fly, but neither does he wear contemporary dress, and unlike the two men he accompanies, he is barefoot and youthful.

Readers of Gilio in the 1580s and 1590s focused on the anti-naturalistic argument. Raffaello Borghini, for example, mentions Gilio by name just before he has one of the characters in his dialogue *Il Riposo* attack Pontormo for the *bambocci* playing trumpets in the subsequently destroyed frescoes Pontormo painted in S. Lorenzo in Florence. When asked why he is uncertain whether or not these figures are supposed to be angels, the speaker paraphrases Gilio's earlier arguments:

„angels have to be painted as beautiful modest youths, and with wings, both to differentiate them from other youths and to figure their quickness and speed in executing God's commands – and also just because we are accustomed to painting them in this way. Being spirits without bodies, [of course], they don't actually have wings.“¹³

Borghini's speaker, like Gilio's, then proceeds to refer to the visions of Isaiah and Ezechiel, though his final statement about the nature of angels raises a new doubt about the status of the creatures the two prophets saw. A painter might decide that angels don't have wings but paint them anyway, he suggests, because the painter regards the wings as symbols or just because he wants to follow precedent.

The priest Gregorio Comanini recasts Gilio's arguments in a vocabulary borrowed from Plato's *Sophist*. He divides paintings into what he calls *icastic* imitations, „things that exist in nature“, and *fantastic* imitation, things „that have their being solely in the intellect“. The critical value of this kind of distinction for devotional works is clear enough; like Gilio, Comanini wanted to limit the field of the artist's invention. It is remarkable, nevertheless, that the distinction between the *icastic* and the *fantastic* (the „natural“ and the „intellectual“) sets the stage for Comanini's reflection on angels, for the example of angels, if anything, only shows how useless the distinction could be. Figino, the painter in Comanini's dialogue,

11 Johannes Wilde, „Michelangelo and Leonardo“, in: *The Burlington Magazine* 95 (1953), pp. 65-75, here p. 69.

12 The earliest proponent of this may be Peter Murray, „A Note on the Iconography of Piero della Francesca“, in: *Festschrift Ulrich Middeldorf*, ed. by Antje Middeldorf Kosegarten, Berlin 1968, pp. 175-179. Creighton Gilbert, „Piero della Francesca's *Flagellation*: The Figures in the Foreground“, in: *Art Bulletin* 53 (1971), n. 1, pp. 41-51 compares the figure to the angels in Piero's London *Nativity*.

13 Raffaello Borghini, *Il Riposo*, Hildesheim 1969, p. 82: „Perche gli Angoli deono esser dipinti bellissimi giouani, modesti, e con l'Ali, replicò il Vecchietto, si per fargli differenti dagli altri giouani, e si per dimostrare in loro la prestezza, e la velocità nell'eseguire i precetti di Dio, e si perche in tal modo si è vsato sempre dipignerli; come che essendo spiriti senza corpo, veramente non habbiano ali, e si perche Isaia dice hauer veduto i Serafini con l'ali, due che velauano la faccia del Signore, due i piedi, e due che volauano, e poco appresso soggiunse, & volò vno à me de' Serafini: & Ezechiel nella sua visione dice, che si vdiua il suono dell'ali de' Cherubini, e poco dopo segue, e quando spiegarono i Cherubini l'ali sue.“

remarks that angels are „real beings of true and noble substance“. Yet since angels do not have bodies, he goes on, „much less those beautiful or ugly forms that poets and painters give them“, it is impossible to approach them in the way painters would approach other things from nature. To this, Figino's interlocutor Stefano Guazzo replies that in his view, representations of angels „are icastic, and not fantastical“. Yet „it is certainly true“, Guazzo adds, „that painting an angel with wings is a fantastical imitation“, for „although no angel has allowed men to see him with wings on his back, the meaning of these wings is nonetheless true, since it is true that angels are agile and quick in the execution of divine commandments.“¹⁴

Gilio, Borghini, and Comanini, in taking up the topic of angels, all exploit the possibilities of the dialogue form, which allows them to present mutually incompatible alternatives and then to suspend rather than resolve these. Where the discussions move toward agreement is on two perhaps surprising points. First, all three writers allow that if an artist were to render an angel as it actually appeared before his eyes, or even as described in Genesis and Macchabees, it might be unrecognizable to normal viewers. Sacred paintings had to be true, but they also had to be comprehensible; the problem with angels was that they brought the dictates of clarity and of historical accuracy into contradiction with one another.¹⁵ Second, the dialogues suggest that the difference between the real form of angels and the allegorical figures with which painters were supposed to render them in fact translated into a division between two *audiences* for paintings: those who needed only to know that it was an angel (rather than, say, a human or a demon) that they were seeing, and those who recognized that the angel's allegorical status might well separate it from the scene in which it appeared.

When the priest in Comanini's dialogue defends the use of allegory, he enjoins his friends to go „Read the images described in the Apocalypse of St. John“:

„They say that the ignorant will derive no benefit from these images, because the sharpness of their intellects cannot penetrate to the mystical meanings contained beneath them. But what does it matter if [these people] don't understand all the allegories of painting?“¹⁶

Scripture, he asserts, provides nourishment for both „those who know and those who do not“.

Such a stance was, by Comanini's time, a conventional one, articulated not just by fictional priests but also by real ones like Catarino. He ultimately justified the

¹⁴ Doyle-Anderson and Maiorino, *The Figino* (as in n. 1), pp. 32-33, translating Comanini-Barocchi, *Il Figino* (as in n. 1), pp. 274-275.

¹⁵ Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti makes much the same point in his 1582 *Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre et profane*. He acknowledges that it appears „madness“ to want to paint angels (or, for that matter, saints) since they are spirits „without perceptible bodies“. He concludes, though, that one may „figure things with the forms we find in the Holy Scripture“, showing angels, for example, „young and winged with the diadem or the other mysteries that suit them“. See Gabriele Paleotti, *Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre et profane*, Bologna 1990, p. 89.

¹⁶ Doyle-Anderson and Maiorino, *The Figino* (as in n. 1), p. 78, translating Comanini-Barocchi, *Il Figino* (as in n. 1), p. 337.

painting of angels by introducing the analogy of the Holy Spirit, just as Comanini would when raising the possibility that angels might be allegories:

„simple people need to be instructed about the truth of things; yet what can also be taken in, through pictures, and about the same God, by prudent men, using sound education and acquaintance, should not for this reason be omitted. For truly the Holy Spirit, when painted in the figure of a dove, presents less occasion for error. As St. Dionysius elegantly teaches, the more dissimilar the similitudes that convey God to us are, so much less are they dangerous.“¹⁷

The ignorant, Catarino concedes, may be allowed to go along thinking that real angels look like painted ones because it is useful for them to be assured that angels really exist. Prudent and informed viewers, however, will know that the angels in paintings do not always offer evidence of how angels actually appear – indeed, the learned will recognize that the dissimilarity of the figure and its object is central to every angelic representation.¹⁸ The very same painted angel may legitimately be regarded as a real presence or as an allegorical dissemblance, depending on who is doing the looking.

To this point, we have been surveying responses by late sixteenth-century church officials to an art of the recent past. Every one of these authors is writing about a painting made at least twenty years earlier; by the time of Borghini and Comanini the wingless angel had vanished from Italian art entirely. But we should keep in mind that our writers, some of them priests, also published their views, mostly in the vernacular, in entertaining books meant for consumption beyond the church and presumably by painters in particular. (It is significant that painters turn up repeatedly as characters in the dialogues.) What then of the artists who, by the

17 Ambrosius Catharinus, *De cultu & adoratione imaginum*, Rome 1552, p. 125: „Quòd si quis forte hebes & imperitus aliter sentiat, uidelicet Deum aut Angelum esse humanae formae, non hoc tam ex pictura accipiet, quàm ex priore falsa illi haerente existimatione: siquidem, ut Marcus Tullius ait, Quicumque Deum imaginatur siue uigilans siue per somnium dormiens, nullam aliam illi formam tribuere potest quàm humanam, cum nullam nos uideamus spectabiliorem: & ob hanc causam Angeli in ea specie apparuerunt hominibus, & quasi homines in scripturis describuntur: ut Beatus Pater Dionysius eleganter docet. Quin & Dominus noster in parabolis Deum per hominem et patrem familias saepe designat. Quamobrem instruendi sunt rudes de ueritate rei, non autem propter eos omittenda est quae potest de ipso Deo à cordatis uiris etiam per picturas salubri recipi disciplina ac notitia. Quòd uerò Spiritus sanctus in figura columbae depingitur, minus praestat ad errorem occasionem. Nam, ut B. Dionysius eleganter docet, quanto sunt dissimiliores similitudines quae nobis referunt Deum, tantò minus periculosae sunt.“

18 On dissemblance in medieval Christian imagery, see also Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*, Chicago 1995; Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, Chicago/London 1994, p. 132 and pp. 155-163; Herbert Kessler, *Spiritual Seeing: Picturing God's Invisibility in Medieval Art*, Philadelphia 2000. On the persistence of this issue in late sixteenth-century Italy, see Michael Cole, „Discernment and Animation“ (as in n. 10), pp. 123-153.

1570s and 1580s, could have read these books? Angels, of course, are everywhere in Italian art, but it seems to me that discussions prompted by the Council of Trent bear in a particularly pointed way on a genre of paintings newly invigorated in those very years, in which seeing an angel is the very subject of the work.

The small angels that inspired Cecilia's music from the margins or background of Raphael's and Michiel Coxci's paintings move in Carlo Saraceni or Giovanni Lanfranco into starring roles. The Agony in the Garden nearly always showed the „angel from Heaven“ of which Luke wrote (22:43), offering Christ the chalice and wafer that point to his sacrifice. But in Veronese (fig. 14), Christ himself becomes the proleptic figure, slumped over the angel's knee as if already the dead man from the *Pietà*. Francis of Assisi's stigmatization conventionally happened through the agency of a seraph, but this convention does little to explain the beautiful young man into whose arms Caravaggio's saint collapses (fig. 15). Is it still a stigmatization we are seeing?

In the cases of Caravaggio and Veronese, the artist reaches back to an old-fashioned type, then transforms this so as to amplify the presence of the angel and make it a primary focus of the viewer's attention.¹⁹ The pictures give the sense that the presence of the angel is somehow responsible for the holy figure's state, and in this respect they could almost diagram a central argument of Angus Fletcher's classic 1964 book *Allegory*: that the allegorical mode consists of a narrative in which the agent is „daemonic“. ²⁰ Readers of Fletcher will recognize allegory not so much in a collection of attributes as in a kind of behavior. Caravaggio's and Veronese's angels are allegories insofar as those painters' Francis and Christ do not deliberate, but „act on compulsion“. They move as though possessed, „demonstrating a lack of inner control“. ²¹ They are pictures not of a person seeing an angel, but of an angel doing something, something internal, to a visionary.

In both paintings, the arrangement of the visionary's body suggests a meditative, even mystical experience. At the same time, both paintings allow that their protagonist may not really be „seeing“ anything at all, in the normal sense. Though in Veronese, light streams down from above, Christ's face is in shadow, his eyes are closed, and he looks to the ground. In both paintings, the angel is *behind* the visionary, out of the line of sight. One could compare such compositions with new formulations of the Annunciation, like Caravaggio's own late altarpiece in Nancy, in which the whole event seems to be taking place in the Virgin's mind. But it might be still more illuminating to view such pictures' simultaneous representation of sight and sightlessness as late Italian analogues to earlier northern works like Van Eyck's *van der Paele Madonna* (fig. 16), in which the patron has removed his glasses

¹⁹ The format points to broader interests on the part of both painters. Portrayals of St. Mark, for example, regularly distinguished him from the other Evangelists through the presence of an angel, but no Renaissance painter had imagined what Caravaggio showed in the Contarelli Chapel, where the author looks to a full-size angel for instructions on what to write.

²⁰ See Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, Ithaca 1964, esp. pp. 25-69 and pp. 181-219.

²¹ Fletcher, *Allegory* (as in n. 20), p. 64.

so as to indicate to the painting's viewer that it is not with his physical eyes that he sees the Virgin.²² If we take seriously the texts on which I have been focusing, the literate response to pictures like this would be to conclude that the viewer of the painting sees something different than the visionary *in* the painting. Allegory becomes the mode that marks the visionary (the „fantastical“, to use Comanini's term), but also a device that differentiates points of view, closing off access to an experience that only the blessed can have. (As writers on allegory have frequently noted, Renaissance authors closely associated allegory with the state of the dream.) Allegory established and reinforced ecclesiastical authority – but not by way of esoteric images that only the educated understand. Just the opposite of this, it was only the *educated* who knew what they couldn't see. Caravaggio's painting reads as a painting of a dream: it is structured so as to indicate that the angel you think you see is not really there. But it does not indicate that to everybody.

By the middle decades of the seventeenth century, the debates of the Counter Reformation seem to have faded. From this period, too, there is a substantial literature that confronts the problem of recognizing real angels, a literature that often starts from the premise that you cannot judge the nature of a spirit by the way it looks. These texts, however, are mostly written in Latin, and they primarily target an audience of seminarians. Gone are the vernacular dialogues that once played out a kind of discussion that must have been common in the years after the Council of Trent.

Still, memories of the controversy lingered. In his 1624 *De sacra pictura*, Archbishop Federico Borromeo dedicates a chapter to the topic „images of angels“. He treats the practice of giving angels the appearance of human beings as a pictorial convention, adding that wings are what distinguish angels from people. He notes that Michelangelo showed angels without wings. He paraphrases the debate Comanini dramatized, recalling the proposition that angels are not true and actual likenesses (*vera germanasque effigies*) but rather fabrications of human ingenuity (*commenta humana ingenii*). Then he rebuts this: „No rational person“, he writes, can fail to see that depicted angels „are not likenesses made from life but rather imperfect representations – symbols and figures – of their nature.“²³ Finally, he relates how once, while he was discussing some representations of angels with an

22 See the discussion in Jeffrey F. Hamburger, „Seeing and Believing: The Suspicion of Sight and the Authentication of Vision in Late Medieval Art and Devotion“, in: *Imagination und Wirklichkeit: Zum Verhältnis von mentalen und realen Bildern in der Kunst der frühen Neuzeit*, ed. by Klaus Krüger and Alessandro Nova, Mainz 2000, pp. 47-69.

23 Federico Borromeo, *Sacred Painting*, ed. and trans. Kenneth S. Rothwell, Jr., with notes by Pamela M. Jones, Cambridge/Mass. 2010, pp. 94-97, here p. 96: „Nam nemo sanus ignorant esse illas Angelorum effigies expressas ad vivum sed imperfect quaedam simulacra sive symbola et figuras naturae eorum“ (English translation modified). Steven Ostrow reminded me of Borromeo's importance even before Rothwell and Jones's important volume appeared.

„expert on painting“ (*studiosum Picturae hominem*), „a certain man“ (*unus homo*) asked whether the heads and faces of the angels that he and the painters were considering had been copied from life. Once again, a priest allows that painted angels divide audiences: the „rational person“ or „expert“ and the everyday passerby will see angels in two different ways.

Perhaps the most interesting seventeenth-century version of this topos is the one recorded by the Sicilian seminarian Ippolito Falcone. He reports that while Caravaggio was painting *The Burial of St. Lucy* in 1608, the chaplains in the church where he was working asked him to fill the upper zone of his canvas (fig. 17) with angels. Caravaggio replied: „Because I’ve never seen [angels], I don’t know how to portray them.“ Of course, Caravaggio *did* paint angels elsewhere, as we have seen above, and he painted them in knowing ways.²⁴ We cannot take the report at face value. One reading of it would be that Falcone is restaging the distinction between the curia and the unlearned, placing the „realist“ Caravaggio on the latter side. Another would be that Caravaggio, who knew perfectly well what the debate was all about, positioned *himself* among the simple folk.

Paintings after 1620, for their part, rarely challenge expectations the way that Raphael, Michelangelo, and Caravaggio had. Still, the most spectacular staging of the issues I have been outlining here may be the greatest icon of the Baroque, Bernini’s Cornaro Chapel in the Church of S. Maria della Vittoria in Rome (fig. 18).

Bernini’s main characters here bear comparison to Caravaggio’s: the founder of a religious order who was also the author of authoritative texts and an emissary from God. In this case, the angel’s form shades it readily into allegory, its age, arrow, curly hair and smile evoking Cupid, or „Amor“. Already in the seventeenth century, Baldinucci captured the double sense of the figure: when he describes „the Angel who wounds [Teresa’s] heart with the arrow of divine love“, he allows both that the boy is an angel and that he is Love personified.²⁵ Baldinucci’s words, moreover, nearly recapitulate those of Teresa herself, who wrote of an angel whose transverberation left her „completely afire with a great love for God“. ²⁶ What are we seeing: a real winged visitor who acts upon her, or a „figure“ of Love, that is, an emblem of what Teresa feels? Is this a depiction of an experience, or is a *legible* metaphor for an experience we necessarily cannot share?

²⁴ On the topos, and on Falcone’s remark in particular, see Steven Ostrow, „Caravaggio’s Angels“, in: *Caravaggio: Reflections and Refractions*, ed. Steven L. Ostrow, Lorenzo Pericolo and David Stone, Aldershot (forthcoming).

²⁵ Filippo Baldinucci, *Notizie dei professori del disegno da Cimabue in qua: per le quali si dimostra come, e per chi le belle arti di pittura, scultura e architettura, lasciata la rozzezza delle maniere greca e gotica, si siano in questi secoli ridotte all’antica loro perfezione / opera di Filippo Baldinucci*, vol. 5, Florence 1974-1975, p. 615: „Tali furono primieramente, il disegno della cappella del cardinal Federigo Cornaro nella chiesa di S. Maria della Vittoria de’ PP. Carmelitani Scalzi, non lungi da porta Pia, e, quel ch’è più, il mirabil gruppo della S. Teresa coll’Angelo, il quale, mentre ella è rapita in un dolcissimo estasi, collo strale dell’amor divino gli ferisce il cuore.“

²⁶ *The Complete Works of Saint Teresa of Jesus*, ed. and trans. by E. Allison Peers, vol. 1, London 1946, p. 192.

The cloud dispels all doubt, should any arise, that it is a vision we are seeing, though Teresa's closed eyes also alert us that this vision, like Van der Paele's, happens by way of what period writers called the „eyes of the mind“. Most interesting of all, though, is Bernini's construction of the architectural frame. Ostensibly, the tabernacle that curves out from the rear wall turns the whole altar zone into a kind of proscenium, and at first we might mistake the balconies at the sides of the space for the private boxes from which the powerful could look onto the altars of any number of Baroque churches. Then, however, we realize that if this is the case, the Cornaros have the worst seats that any theatergoer has ever received, for as plans of the chapel show (fig. 19), and as anyone visiting the space will attest, the columns at the side of Bernini's stage are positioned precisely to prevent those in the balcony from seeing the angelic visitation.²⁷ Not seeing, we might say, is the theme of the chapel. Those standing before the altar could access Teresa's experience mostly through a series of differentiated doubles: what enters Teresa is *like* the Eucharistic spirit that enters those taking communion at the altar, but the comparison is all we have.²⁸ The Love that Teresa feels reciprocates the sentiment addressed to her in the words that two other angels extend across the vault – „Nisi coelum creassem ob te solum crearem“ (If I had not created heaven I would create it for you alone) – and the singular „te“ conveys the line itself to one person only. Far from allowing witnesses watch the performance of a vision, Bernini goes out of his way to establish its privacy and unverifiability. Allegory is just one more means of doing this, since the allegorized angel is not available in the same way for all.

27 Among the numerous recent scholars to insist on this point, the earliest seems to have been Anthony Blunt, „Gianlorenzo Bernini: Illusionism and Mysticism“, in: *Art History* 1 (1978), pp. 67-89.

28 My thinking on this is informed by Giovanni Careri's brilliant *Bernini: Flights of Love, The Art of Devotion*, trans. Linda Lappin, Chicago 1995.



Fig. 1: Giovanni di Paolo (attr.), *Madonna and Child with Angels*, ca. 1475, tempera on panel, San Diego Museum of Art

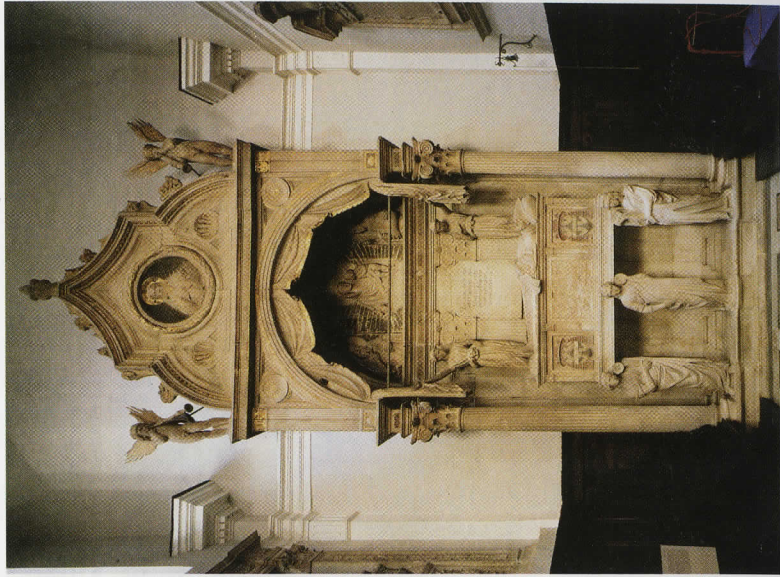


Fig. 2: Donatello and Michelozzo, Tomb of Rainaldo Brancacci, late 1420s, Sant'Angelo a Nilo, Naples



Fig. 3: Piero della Francesca, *Nativity*, early 1470s,
oil on panel, Accademia, Venice



Fig. 4: Giovanni Bellini, *S. Giobbe*
Altarpiece, 14 x 8 cm, ca. 1487, oil on panel,
Accademia, Venice

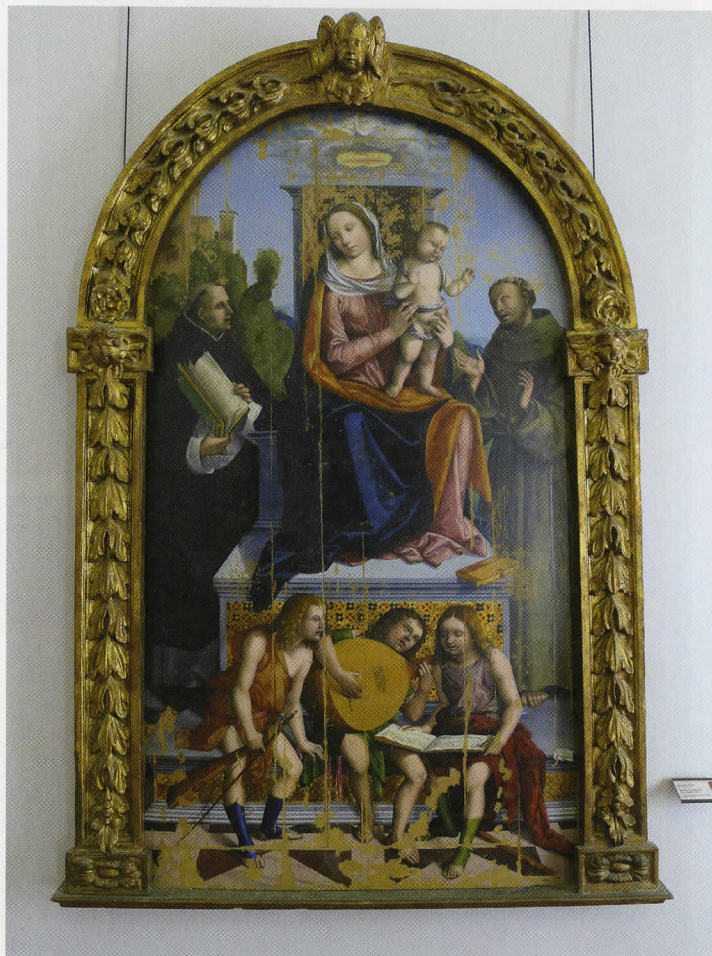


Fig. 5: Benedetto Coda, *Madonna and Child with Saints and Angels*, 1513, oil on panel, Museo di Rimini



Fig. 6: Sebastiano del Piombo and Francesco Salviati,
Birth of the Virgin, completed 1555, oil on stone,
Chigi Chapel, Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome



Fig. 7: Pontormo, *Angel Pietà*, 1525-28, oil on panel,
Capponi Chapel, S. Felicita, Florence

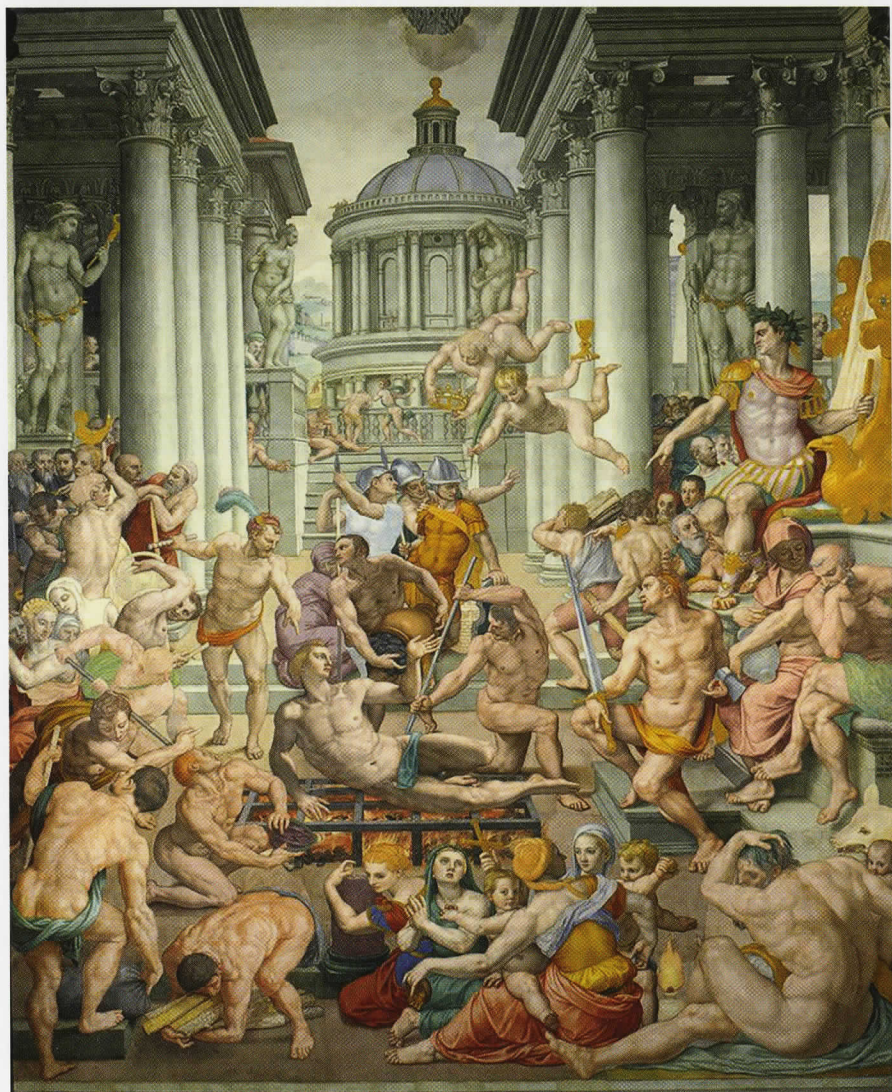


Fig. 8: Agnolo Bronzino, *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*, 1569, fresco, S. Lorenzo, Florence



Fig. 9: Raphael, *Expulsion of Heliodorus from the Temple*, 1511-12, fresco, Stanza d'Eliodoro, Vatican

Fig. 10: Veit Stoss,
*Tobias and the
Angel*, 1516, wood,
Germanisches
Nationalmuseum,
Nuremberg



Fig. 11: Luca Signorelli, *Vision of Abraham*, oil on panel,
Pinacoteca comunale, Città di Castello



Fig. 12: Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Last Judgment*, 1534-41, fresco, Sistine Chapel, Vatican



Fig. 13: Piero della Francesca, *Flagellation*, late 1450s, oil and tempera on panel, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino

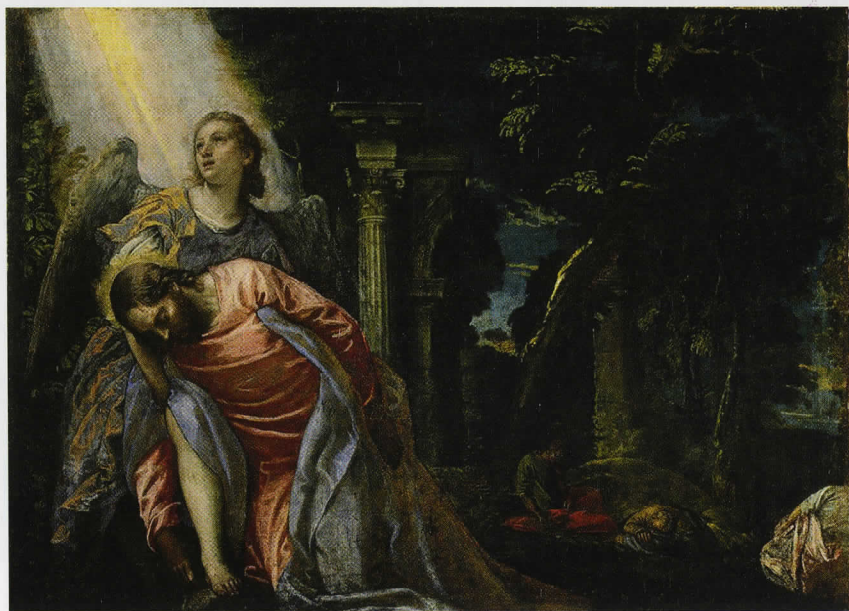


Fig. 14: Paolo Veronese, *Agony in the Garden*, 1583, oil on canvas, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan



Fig. 15: Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *St. Francis and an Angel*, 1595, oil on canvas, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford



Fig. 16: Jan Van Eyck, *Virgin and Child with Canon Van der Paele*, 1434-36, oil on panel, Groeningemuseum, Bruges



Fig. 17: Caravaggio, *Burial of St. Lucy*, oil on canvas, 1608, Bellomo Museum, Siracusa

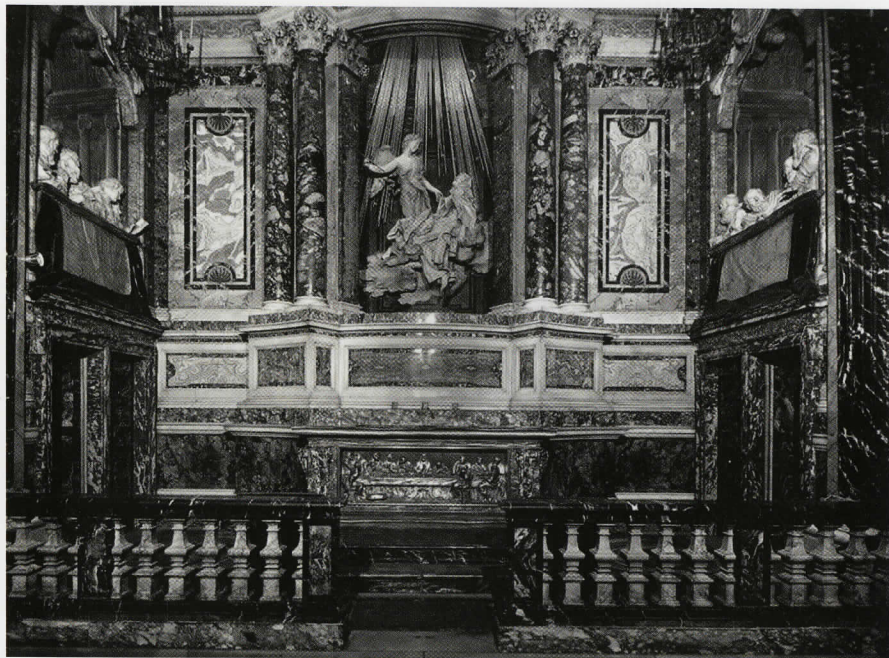


Fig. 18: Gianlorenzo Bernini, Cornaro Chapel, 1647-52, S. Maria della Vittoria, Rome

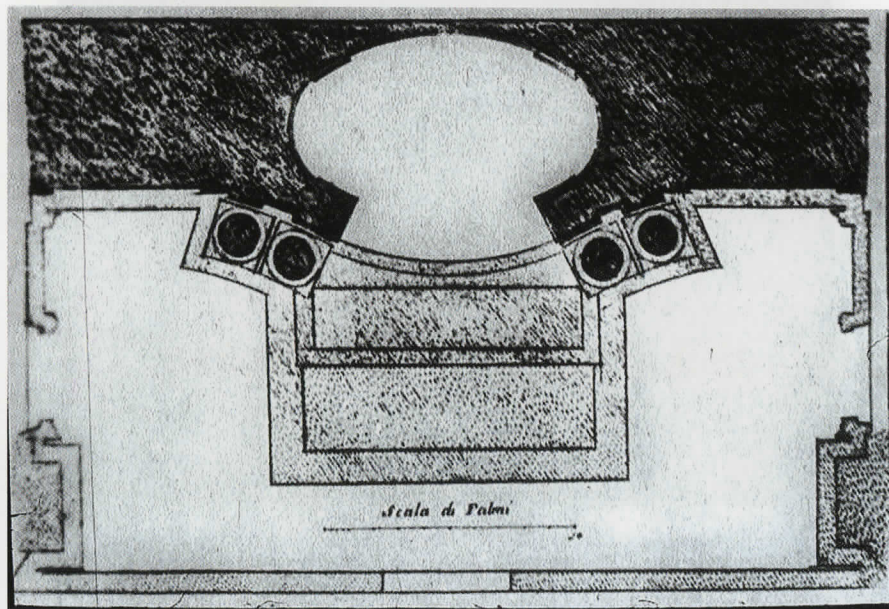


Fig. 19: Cornaro Chapel (plan)