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Contributi/3

Saints in Ecstasy

Discord and Meaning in Roman Images of Visionaries ca. 1590-1620

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This paper examines paintings of «saints in ecstasy» which were commissioned, executed, and displayed in Rome between ca. 1590 and 1620. I read these paintings against treatises on sacred art as well as sermons on Christian devotion and the role of the senses in spiritual life. The juxtaposition of these sources indicate just how problematic images of the saints in ecstasy could be. The *topos* in and of itself was already theologically problematic as there was a top-down attempt to mediate the visionary or mystical experiences of holy people, and especially of women, on behalf of the Church hierarchy. The portrayal of these ecstatic saints, which frequently employ formal elements that underscore sexuality, further troubled an already difficult subject from a moral perspective as well. This paper draws appropriate attention to the army of preachers and art theorists who condemned lascivious images in absolute terms. Their cries were too many and too consistent to ignore.

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Introduction

In 1652, Gianlorenzo Bernini (1598-1680) unveiled his masterpiece, the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, revealing the intimate moment between visionary and the divine for the world to see. Bernini placed the saint before the eyes of the viewer with her robes elegantly draping her body, a cowl that mimics luscious locks of hair, mouth ajar, wrinkle-free skin, youthful, delicate features, eyes rolling back, and legs spread[1]. Meanwhile a half-clad pudgy cherub smiles sweetly over her, wielding a golden arrow and pulling at her garments. In crafting this

[1] See F. Mormando, *Bernini: His Life and His Rome*, Chicago 2011, p. 159. Mormando has recently considered the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* in even greater detail in his lecture *Did Bernini's Ecstasy of St. Teresa Cross a 17th-Century Line of Decorum?*, presented at the Renaissance Society of America Annual Meeting, Boston, 2016, as well as elsewhere, and now available online at «https://www.academia.edu/44401140» (accessed on 9/14/21). I am much indebted to Mormando's analysis in these texts, as well as many conversations with him about this issue.

statue, Bernini worked from a large iconographic repertoire including eyes cast to the sky, hands clasped in prayer, body shrouded in supernatural light. These motifs were long-standing and ubiquitous iconographical features employed by painters to depict saints in post-Tridentine Rome. As Giovanni Morello puts it, «la galleria di santi e sante, 'con gli occhi al cielo', è immensa. Non è esagerato affermare che tutti i maggiori maestri del tempo si sono cimentati con questo tema»[2].

Bernini's ecstatic Teresa begs the question: what exactly was the sculptor showcasing? The statue and its erotic overtones are well known. For example, Jacques Lacan famously and bluntly proclaimed that the statue displayed an orgasmic woman[3]. Those familiar with Teresa's own visceral account of her ecstasy might posit that Bernini made every effort to render faithfully the saint's experience in stone:

> He was…very beautiful…In his hands I saw a long golden spear and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails…The pain…made me utter several moans; and so excessive was the sweetness caused me by this intense pain that one can never wish to lose it[4].

Teresa's description of this liminal experience, caught between heaven and earth, surpasses erotic language and seems to describe a sexual experience. It should be noted, as Alison Weber claims, that Teresa's use of sexual language did not set her apart. In fact, sexual language was characteristic of female mysticism of the time; however, to say that Bernini's portrayal strove for textual accuracy is overstated[5]. Bernini's Teresa breaks with the saint's text and the iconographic tradition. At the time of the «transverberation», Teresa was forty-four, had endured the self-inflicted asceticism of the spiritual athlete for years, and was accustomed to the coarse habit of a Discalced Carmelite nun, donning simple sandals rather than bare feet[6]. The angel wields a golden arrow without an iron tip thus unsubtly and provocatively alluding to Cupid, the paragon of lasciviousness

[2] G. Morello, *Introduzione*, «Visioni ed Estasi: Capolavori Dell'Arte Europea Tra Seicento e Settecento», Giovanni Morello, ed., Milan 2003, pp. 17.
[3] In C. M. Furey, *Sexuality*, «The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism», Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman, eds., New York 2012, p. 328.
[4] Teresa of Ávila, *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*, E. A. Peers, trans. New York1991, pp. 274-275.
[5] A. Weber, *Gender*, «Christian Mysticism», pp. 317. Gillian Ahlgren traces the early modern mystical tradition and its social and cultural context to Raymond of Capua's *Life of Saint Catherine of Siena*, which was published in Alcalá in 1511 and in Medina del Campo in 1569, see G. T. W. Ahlgren, *Ecstasy, Prophecy, and Reform: Catherine of Siena as a Model for Holy Women of Sixteenth-Century Spain*, «The Mystical Gesture: Essays on Medieval and Early Modern Spiritual Culture in Honor of Mary E. Giles», Robert Boenig ed., Burlington 2000, p. 53. If Ahlgren is correct in tracing the roots of early modern female mysticism to Capua's life, then there is yet another problem that of a female voice being interpreted and released through a male author, see C. M. Mooney, *Voice, Gender, and the Portrayal of Sanctity*, «Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters» C. M. Mooney, ed., Philadelphia 1999, p. 1.
[6] In E. Kuhns, *The Habit: A History of Clothing of Catholic Nuns*, New York 2003, p. 100.

and eroticism, not divine love. While the golden arrow, ambiguously directed toward Teresa's genitals, occupies the angel's right hand, his left grasps her habit as if to expose her breasts[7].

These idiosyncrasies are not accidental, but intentional, and knowingly problematic. In Bernini's own day the statue elicited various and divergent reactions. On the one hand, Giovanni Battista Passeri (1610-1679), an ardent critic of Bernini, commented on the Cornaro chapel saying «it is a work of perfect beauty»[8]. On the other hand, one dissenter demurred the sculpture for, «transforming [Teresa] into a Venus who was not only prostrate, but prostituted as well»[9]. Passeri saw exquisite execution that delights the viewer with the illusion of its floating figures, but others could not move beyond the stone's erotic overtures. As bold as Bernini's *Ecstasy* was, it was by no means unprecedented. The erotic iconography featured in Bernini's statues was already familiar to his audience. Though, it is important to note, that other artists practiced more restraint.

At the heart of these works of sacred art and their interpretations was an issue hotly disputed by reformation thinkers: the validity and appropriateness of sacred images. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) upheld the opinion of the Second Council of Nicaea (787) and affirmed the use of images if they display decorum, meaning suitability to their setting, viewer, and purpose, declaring «all lasciviousness must be avoided, so that images are not painted or adorned with seductive charm»[10]. The Council determined that, «great benefits flow from all sacred images…because the miracles of God through the saints and their salutary example is put before the eyes of the faithful»[11]. The depiction of saintly exemplars was useful for «delighting, teaching, and moving Catholic audiences to live a life of faith and good works that would lead to eternal life»[12]. The power of images, especially those of the saints, cannot be overstated particularly since Catholics believed that images had the power, for better or worse, to do what they signified[13]. Images, in the minds of Catholic thinkers, had the ability to move a soul toward greater piety or to lust. Thus, the stakes were high and eternal salvation or eternal damnation hung in the balance. Given this immense power, it is imperative to read images of saints in their context to understand their iconographic and moral meaning. This article examines paintings on the theme of saints in ecstasy commissioned and displayed in Rome from 1590 to 1620 by interpreting them from the view of Catholic preachers and theologians

[7] M. Miles, *A Complex Delight: The Secularization of the Breast 1350-1750*, Los Angeles 2008, p. 15.
[8] Mormando, *Bernini*, p. 159.
[9] Mormando, *Bernini*, p. 162.
[10] In Norman Tanner, *The Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils v. 2*, London 1990, pp. 775-776,
[11] In Tanner, *Decrees of the Councils*, p. 775.
[12] T. Worcester, *Introduction*, «From Rome to Eternity: Catholicism and the Arts in Italy ca 1550-1650», Boston 2002, p. 1.
[13] T. Worcester, *Trent and Beyond: Arts of Transformation*, in F. Mormando, ed., «Saints & Sinners Caravaggio and the Baroque Image», Chestnut Hill 1999, p. 87.

in post-Tridentine Italy. It analyzes the images in light of contemporary views on sacred art and mysticism, here referring to reported direct experiences between humans and the Divine, and sacred art.

1. Depicting Ecstatic Saints

On the *topos* of «saints in ecstasy» the artist had before him a paradoxical challenge; that is, painting the ineffable[14]. The various styles and iconographies used to tackle the issue display a wide range of understandings of mysticism and sanctity. The images' diversity extends even to decorum, which Trent resolved, at least theoretically, as a condition to defend and promote art in the face of Protestant attack and popular superstition. Though there were examples of decorous images that sanitized the sometimes-sexual overtones of ecstasy, and theoretically moved the mind to God; others embraced eroticism, problematizing already liminal and suspect holy experiences, potentially leading their viewers to sin; that is, if the preachers are to be believed. The following images (Agostino Caracci's *Ecstasy of St. Catherine* (1590), Caravaggio's *St. Francis in Ecstasy* (1595), Caravaggio's *Magdalene in Ecstasy* (1606), Artemisia Gentileschi's *Magdalene in Ecstasy* (1620), and Guido Reni's *St. Filippo Neri in Ecstasy* (1614)), highlight the notable variety within this genre[15]. This selection is not comprehensive, but representative. Collectively this group of paintings represents the work of major artists active in Rome and significant saints within Catholic Reformation culture.

1.1 Carracci's Model Ecstasy

In Agostino Carracci's *Ecstasy of St. Catherine* (1590), the saint rests in a recumbent position in the arms of two angels. Both angels wear modest clothes that cover their bodies entirely, which matches Catherine's simple habit and veil. Her collar is tight around her neck and little of Catherine's form or skin is exposed. Her stigmatized hands clasp a cross and the sacred heart. A lily, a symbol of purity and chastity, dangles from the cross, and the crown of thorns rests on her head. Her expression is serene with her eyes and lips fully closed, and there is not a hint of eroticism. Her serenity, the crown of thorns, and the wounds of the stigmata symbolize death. Perhaps, the formalist would argue that a reclining posture in and of itself is reminiscent of classical nudes[16]. Otherwise,

[14] J. F. Hamburger, *Mysticism and Visuality*, «Christian Mysticism» Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman, eds., New York 2012, p. 277.
[15] The variety depends on at least a few factors including the desires of the patrons who commissioned the image as well as the personal artistic expression of the artists. See below for more information on the commissioning documents.
[16] M. Loh, '*La Custodia Degli Occhi' Disciplining Desire in Post-Tridentine Italian Art*, «The Sensuous in the Counter-Reformation Church», Marcia B. Hall and Tracy E. Cooper eds., New York 2013, p. 108.

the image is simple and devotional. It conveys what Weinstein and Bell consider one of the most essential elements of female holiness: perfect chastity[17]. Even though Carracci painted his image of Catherine centuries after she lived, the expectations regarding perfect chastity did not waver. It is also important to note that even when describing her own "mystical marriage" to Christ, Catherine of Siena's language tended to avoid sensuality in ways that Teresa of Ávila did not[18].

1.2 St. Francis from Caravaggio to Giovanni Baglione

Caravaggio's first major religious painting, the *St. Francis in Ecstasy* (1595), is quite the opposite. He depicts Francis lying on the ground in the arms of an angel wearing a traditional brown (perhaps Capuchin) habit. Caravaggio's Francis does not share the serenity of Caracci's Catherine, but he is in a similar trance-like state. Francis's brow is furrowed, and his limbs are uncomfortably splayed about. The half-clad angel that affectionately gazes at Francis while poised between his legs is a Caravaggesque innovation in the artistic tradition and does not match textual records of Francis's stigmatization[19]. There has been some debate about whether this image represents the stigmatization, and its inherent reference to death. Pamela Askew and Howard Hibbard, both interpreted it as such, but Bert Treffers disagreed[20]. He linked the iconography of the image, especially the angel's firm grasp of Francis's belt, to the cult of the guardian angel, preparing Francis for a good death[21]. Might the angel's gesture be read a different way? Could the angel's embrace of Francis and firm grasp of his belt simultaneously refer to the cult of the guardian angel, Francis's evangelical vows, and undressing? As evidence for this latter assertion, Caravaggio offers the protruding fold in Francis' habit, which seems to hint at arousal, and Francis' belt, which lacks the three nodes symbolic of the evangelical vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity. Additionally, as John Spike noted, the recumbent posture of the figures refers

[17] D. Weinstein and R. M. Bell, *Saints & Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700*, Chicago 1982, p. 73. Though Weinstein and Bell studied sanctity primarily in the medieval period, many of their findings are illustrative for the early modern period, especially those pertaining to chastity, which is central to the theme of saints in ecstasy.

[18] Nevertheless, in her descriptions of the event it is impossible to avoid reading her experiences without some reference to sexuality. Discussing her mystical marriage, she claims that Jesus Christ exchanged her corporeal heart for his, and she wore his foreskin in lieu of a traditional wedding ring, see Lisa Tagliaferri, *Lyrical Mysticism: The Writing and Reception of Catherine of Siena*, New York 2017, p. 45.

[19] For Saint Bonaventure's recording of the event, see P. Askew, *The Angelic Consolation of St. Francis of Assisi in Post-Tridentine Italian Painting*, «Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Institutes» XXXII, 1969, p. 283.

[20] See P. Askew, *The Angelic Consolation*; H. Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, New York 1983, pp. 55-61; and B. Treffers. *Il Francesco Hartford del Caravaggio e la Spiritualità francescana alla fine del XVI. Sec.*, «Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz», XXXII, 1988, pp. 145-172. For a thorough analysis of stigmatization, see C. Muessig, *The Stigmata in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Oxford 2020.

[21] Treffers, *Il Francesco Hartford*, p. 161.

to the amorous Cupid[22]. Some may ask: how could the beloved saint Francis be portrayed thus?

Despite the problems inherent in Caravaggio's depiction of the angel, it became an enduring part of the iconographic tradition, but future artists made many efforts to sanitize the erotic elements. For example, Guido Reni's *Ecstasy of St. Francis* (1605) separated the angel and the saint, featured Francis in a composed – albeit unconscious – manner, and included the scene's traditional elements, such as the skull and the cross. The angel in Orazio Gentileschi's *St. Francis Supported by an Angel* (ca. 1600) is fully clothed and braces himself to hold up the semi-conscious saint; the gesture cannot be confused for an affectionate embrace. Baglione also departs from Caravaggio in his *Ecstasy of Saint Francis* (1601) by alluding to the institutional church in the symbolism of the keys of Peter. He also adds the implements of the passion and common instruments of meditation: the crown of thorns, a book, and a skull. Furthermore, Francis's belt is corded and accompanied by a rosary. Baglione's angels seem to be dragging the saint rather than embracing him. As Larry Feinburg commented, Baglione's painting "lacks the tenderness of Caravaggio's picture"[23]. In effect, Baglione removes Caravaggio's erotic ambiguity, but perhaps the painting's affectation as well.

1.3 Caravaggio and A. Gentileschi Mary Magdalene[24]

Images of mystical ecstasies tended to be more overtly sexualized in the case of Mary Magdalene. Caravaggio's *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy* (1606) places the saint in the confines of a typically Caravaggesque dark room, which perhaps alludes to the tradition of the Golden Legend, which affirmed that she spent the last decades of her life in a cave. In a reclining position, she folds her hands together on her stomach and the light source reveals her exposed shoulders, arms, and chest, but she is otherwise clothed. Within the genre of Magdalenes in ecstasy, Caravaggio's stands apart insofar as he clothes the repentant saint. Titian's *Magdalene in Ecstasy*, for example, portrays the saint in «penitential nudity,» covered only by her hair[25]. It refers both to the legend that Mary's clothes disintegrated during her decades of eremitic life, as well as to the sexual nature of her sin. Surely, it was a far cry from Donatello's statue of the same subject, in which the penitential nudity does not hint at eroticism at all. In comparison,

[22] J. T. Spike, *Caravaggio*, New York 2010, p. 55
[23] L. J. Feinburg, *The Ecstasy of St. Francis*, «Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies» XXX.1, 2004, p. 56.
[24] For classic studies on Mary Magdalene and images of the Magdalene, see K. L. Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalene: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages*, Princeton 2001; and M. A. Erhardt and A. M. Morris, eds., *Mary Magdalene: Iconographic Studies from the Middle Ages to the Baroque*, Boston 2012.
[25] For a full accounting of the arguments against Titian's Magdalene, see M. Ingenhoff-Danhäuser, *Maria Magdalena, Heilige Und Sünderin in Der Italienischen Renaissance: Studien Zur Ikonographie Der Heiligen von Leonardo Bis Tizian*, Tübingen 1984.

Caravaggio's Magdalene extends her neck back so that her chin points to the heavens revealing her half open mouth and rolling eyes while the darkness, privacy, and intimacy of the setting render the viewer a voyeur. The Magdalene, like Teresa, Catherine, and Francis is barely conscious. Yet, she hardly seems the chaste woman converted to the life of the Gospels; the sexual nature of her sin is obvious instead. The link between these images is not the piety and spirituality of their subjects, but the artistic interpretation of the mystic, who is not in control, not conscious, who lies deathlike somewhere between heaven and earth.

Artemisia Gentileschi's Magdalene, a copy of Caravaggio's, is worthy of mention because it is the only painting in this study by a female hand. A cursory reading might give the impression that Gentileschi attempted to sanitize Caravaggio's iconography. Mary's face is more serene, with closed lips and eyes, and her folded hands rest upon her crossed legs. Differences in light sources also underscore the effect of the voyeurism in Caravaggio's image. Did Gentileschi attempt to capture Caravaggio's spiritual intensity without the eroticism? The posture of Gentileschi's Magdalene suggests otherwise. With her head tilting back and facial expression, the painting of this Magdalene reminds viewers of Gentileschi's portraits of the Classical seductresses, *Cleopatra* (1611) and *Danaë* (1612)[26]. Furthermore, Gentileschi employs nearly identical formal postural structure for all three. Could the Magdalene be viewed as classical seductress? Quite possibly, yet, it must be noted that the image seduces, not the saint. The saint is lifeless; she cannot seduce any more than Cleopatra moments away from death by lethal snakebite.

Images of the Magdalene in ecstasy differentiate themselves from other paintings because they were rarely displayed in Roman public sacred spaces[27]. At the same time similar images were also widely proliferated and frequently copied rather than censored[28]. Scholars have explained the lack of censorship variously. For some, it depended on the fact that the Magdalene images were typically held in private hands, and thus could not harm the eyes of many viewers. Others simply suggest that erotic Magdalenes were not that problematic simply because audiences expected images of the Magdalene images to be sexualized given the traditional belief that she was a prostitute before she converted to Christianity. It was part of Mary's traditional iconography. Others still suggest that the image's erotic content itself packaged the moralizing message. Could the viewer overcome the temptation presented by the image[29]? Nonetheless it raises

[26] Indeed, in an earlier iteration, Gentileschi's Magdalene was even more like the bare-breasted Cleopatra, thereby displaying the full eroticism of the image and the departure from the already erotic iconography of the Magdalene by Gentileschi and Caravaggio, see L. Treves, *Artemisia* New Haven 2020, p. 182.
[27] P Humfrey, *The Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice*, New Haven 1993, p. 320. Humfrey makes the claim that Magdalene images may have hung on movable altars, but they were typically private images.
[28] M. B. Hall, *The Sacred Image in the Age of Art: Titian, Tintoretto, Barocci, El Greco, Caravaggio*, New Haven 2011, p. 139.
[29] See B. Aikema, *Titian's Mary Magdalen in the Palazzo Pitti: An Ambiguous Painting and its Critics*, «Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Institutes» LVII, 1994, pp. 48-59.

the question: how did viewers, trained to view images of saints as models, react? What did these erotic Magdalenes teach the viewer to do[30]?

1.4 Guido Reni's St. Filippo Neri in Ecstasy 1614

The *St. Filippo Neri in Ecstasy* by Guido Reni was commissioned by the young Counter-reformation 'order,' the Oratorians, leading up to the beatification (1615) and canonization (1622) of their founder, Filippo Neri. The Oratorians first hung the image in the Chiesa Nuova and later moved it to the private apartments of Filippo Neri. It is probably the most enduring image of Neri. Reni's image of Neri presents a new dimension to this study of the saints in ecstasy because, according to his biographers, he is the only saint discussed here who physically reacted to art. Take for example one of Neri's ecstatic experiences upon beholding Barocci's *Visitation of the Virgin*:

> one morning I entered the chapel of the Visitation (with the painting by Federico Barocci) to receive Philip's blessing; he was seated in a small chair, reclining, as if out of himself; it seemed he could not feel anything; I shook him so much that he eventually recovered and he called brother Gallonio[31].

Barbieri argues that Neri's reaction to painting exhibited Trent's desired effect, meaning it clearly and decorously conveyed a moment from the life of a saint emphasizing his piety[32]. Barocci's artwork moved Neri beyond normal human experience to a liminal and mystical encounter. It should also be noted, that despite being an advocate and admirer of art, Neri discouraged his followers from writing about and depicting his ecstasies. Perhaps Neri did not want his ecstatic experiences recorded because he was aware of the controversial nature of mysticism[33].

In Reni's painting Neri is accompanied by a Madonna and putti. The Virgin, holding the Christ child in the upper left corner, is clad in a simple dark blue cloak and a brown veil. The Christ child is mostly nude with a loincloth covering his genitals[34]. What is most interesting though, is that even the putti,

[30] E. J. Campbell, *Prophets, Saints, and Matriarchs: Portraits of Old Women in Early Modern Italy*, «Renaissance Quarterly» LXIII.3, 2010, p. 811.
[31] In C. Barbieri, *'To be in Heaven' St. Phillip Neri Between Aesthetic Emotion and Mystical Ecstasy,* «The Sensuous in the Counter-Reformation Church», p. 207.
[32] Barbieri, *St. Phillip Neri*, pp. 206-207.
[33] Barbieri suggests that this was merely a show of humility on the part of Neri and dismisses the very real possibility that Neri did not want to be perceived as a mystic, see Barbieri, *St. Phillip Neri*, p. 208.
[34] Steinberg argued that displaying the genitals of the infant Jesus was not problematic for early modern audiences because it demonstrated his humanity, see L. Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance art and in Modern Oblivion*, Chicago 1997. Though scholars have widely accepted Steinberg's argument it dismisses the concerns of preachers. Take for example a story told by Bernardino da Siena of one priest, who, while contemplating an image of Christ on the cross, "sensually and foully polluted and defiled himself," see F. Mormando, *An Early Renaissance Guide for the Perplexed: Bernardino of Siena's De inspirationibus*, «Through a Glass Darkly: Essays in the Religious Imagination», J. C. Hawley, ed., New York 1996, pp. 38-39. Perhaps

who are typically naked, only reveal their heads from behind the Virgin's cloak. Neri kneels beside a lily in the foreground of the painting. He wears a chasuble, the attire of a priest celebrating the mass, which links him to the institutional Church, and his head is crowned with a halo, leaving only his hands and face uncovered. His expression is totally serene his mouth and lips are motionless, and his eyes look up to the heavens, and beyond the Madonna. To some degree, this image better represents vision than ecstasy since Neri has his eyes wide open, fixated on the heavens. Nevertheless, there are legitimate reasons to concur with Barbieri's categorization of the image as a perfect synthesis of vision and ecstasy[35]. Since Neri does not contemplate the Madonna and child directly, their presence indicates that this is an inner experience. Indeed, in many ways it is as if the Madonna watches Neri. What is absolutely evident is that reading Reni's *Neri in Ecstasy* erotically would be nigh impossible.

How much influence the Oratorians as patrons had over Reni's idealized depiction of their founder is hard to determine. Still Reni's deep piety and the image's official role in Neri's canonization process surely account for the image's restraint and clear messaging regarding the holiness of the Oratorian founder-saint.[36] There were, of course, many images of saints that were entirely decorous, which, to some degree, demands more explanation regarding erotic ones. Clearly, the Oratorians, desiring the canonization of their founder, avoided even the slightest insinuation of heterodox mystical activity that dogged him and other saints like Teresa of Ávila and Ignatius of Loyola. This image, then carefully crafts a reputation for Neri that emphasizes his piety, divine selection as a visionary, chastity, and obedience to the Church as a priest. It is safe to conclude that artists were familiar with the idea of decorum; and in some instances, their commissioners made sure that they adhered to the rules of a pious image. This begs the question, why depict ecstasy in an erotic way, if a decorous image could achieve the same end? Or do erotic portrayals uniquely capture something about the ecstatic experience?

2. Viewing Ecstatic Saints

Preferences and attitudes of artists and patrons may account for the discrepancy in depicting images of visionary saints, but how were those images received in the culture of post-Tridentine Rome[37]? Which iconographic elements earned praise, and which encouraged scorn? The purpose of these images, as all images in the context of early modern Catholic settings, was to delight,

there was much less tolerance for nudity than what Steinberg suggested? For a more recent take see J. Burke, *The Italian Renaissance Nude*, New Haven 2018.

[35] Barbieri, *St. Phillip Neri*, p. 224.

[36] For more on the image of Neri and other saints at the time of the canonization, see P. Jones, *Celebrating New Saints in Rome and Across the Globe*, «A Companion to Early Modern Rome, 1492-1692», P. M. Jones, B. Wisch and S. Ditchfield, eds., Boston 2019, pp. 151-158.

[37] See J. M. Locker, ed., *Art and Reform in the Late Renaissance After Trent*, New York 2019.

instruct, and move their viewer to greater piety. On these grounds, preachers and art theorists consistently extolled the virtues of painting with renewed vigor, especially in light of the Protestant critique of images. Despite their insistence about the utility of sacred images, many of these same thinkers were terrified of the dangers that lascivious paintings could pose to viewers. These ecclesiastics very rarely commented on the value of a specific painting preferring to consider sacred images as a general category instead. For that reason, it is very difficult to discern a perfect image from a problematic one with certainty. At the same time, the features that they praise and blame in their rhetoric is specific enough that it is possible to draw conclusions about individual images. When the historian turns to treatises and written sermons a very clear message on erotic art emerges: cast them into the fire, and be ever vigilant of their traps! To make this point clear I highlight the specific concerns of two of the most notable art theorists, Gabriele Paleotti and Federico Borromeo, and add the voices of some notable preachers, Robert Bellarmine and Gian Paolo Oliva, who armed their audience against the onslaught of lust and its slippery slope by recommending the custody of the senses to do spiritual combat with the devil. Paleotti's *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*[38] is perhaps the most famous art treatise of the post-Tridentine era. I argue for its importance not least of all for its influence on other art treatises, such as Federico Borromeo's *Sacred Painting*. Though they were bishops of Bologna and Milan respectively, the ideas of both Paleotti and Borromeo were highly influential in clerical circles in Rome.[39] The sermons of Bellarmine, the most significant Catholic theologian in the decades after Trent, and Oliva, one of the most respected preachers of seventeenth-century Rome, demonstrate how the problem of lascivious painting concerned patrons, painters, and viewers as well. It is important to note, that in addition to his sermons on the custody of the senses, Oliva was also one of the most significant patrons of the arts in seventeenth-century Rome commissioning the decoration of Rome's Jesuit churches. Suggesting that more problematic portrayals of ecstatic saints survived because of a nonchalant attitude toward sexual imagery totally ignore moralists, preachers, and art theorists, to whom indecorous and sexually charged religious iconography was repugnant.

Overall, Paleotti's concerns fall into three categories: historical accuracy, theological accuracy, and practice of appropriate decorum. As for the latter topic, which is more pertinent to the senses Paleotti states that the most significant problem with pictures of male and female saints is their «scant honesty and

[38] Ruth Noyes argues that Paleotti's treatise was never widely read. In her view it was published outside of Rome because it was an attack on the curia, which did not embrace reform, see R. S. Noyes, Aut numquid post annos mille qungentos docenda est Ecclesia Catholic quomodo sacrae imagines Pingantur? *Post-Tridentine Image Reform and the Myth of Gabriele Paleotti*, «The Catholic Historical Review» XCIX, 2, 2013, pp. 248, 244.

[39] Their treatises were hardly the only published works about decorum in the arts; however, they are highly representative and indeed influential within the genre for the decades following the Council of Trent.

abundant lasciviousness»[40]. To this he adds the specific admonition that painters should not depict subjects in a lascivious manner that might arouse libidos[41]. So concerned was he with these images, which in his view were the attempts of the devil to corrupt souls, that he even advocates for iconoclasts to destroy them[42].

Borromeo brought a higher degree of specificity to defining the problem of decorum than his mentor, Paleotti. Borromeo defines decorum as «that quality which, when it is rendered visible to us, is so obviously appropriate that nothing can be removed or added. In short, *decorum* is what a thing ought to be»[43]. To this he adds a litany of issues that specifically treat lascivious portrayals of saints. He states that artists must avoid portraying nudity because it is «of necessity unsuited for the truth of a church teaching; it can also offend the sensibilities of viewers and weaken their religious devotion;» that the naked legs of saints, and especially legs intertwined to the result that «unsuitable thoughts could steal into viewers' souls;» that the Virgin Mary should not be clothed in tight drapery so «that it clings distinctly to each of her limbs;» he disapproves of nude figures even if the nudity is biblically accurate, specifying images of the Old Testament heroine, Susanna; he rejects painting Adam and Eve's innocent nudity because «the viewers who look at these painted nude bodies are not themselves in a state of innocence; as a result, they are able to blush and conjure up many shameful thoughts;» and he decries portraying saints with «bodies so robust and muscular that they seem to be painting athletes, not male or female saints»[44]. One wonders if Borromeo was thinking of «the saints in ecstasy» when he chastises artists for painting saints in emotional states not befitting their character[45]. Given these stipulations it is all the more clear that images like Reni's portrait of Neri fit the standard guidelines for decorum. It is worth noting as well that Borromeo was a friend to the Neri and the Oratorians nourishing his cult through this portrait. Perhaps they had Borromeo's ideas in mind. Caravaggio's Francis locked tucked into the legs of the angel, and tightly wrapped around his loins by his habit may have presented a concern for Borromeo. Similarly, the Magdalene's by Caravaggio and Gentileschi for example would fail Borromeo's test on many counts. Her bare shoulders alone transgress his expectations for fully clothed saintly figures. Borromeo's greatest fear in painting above all others was the presence or the

[40] G. Paleotti, *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*, William McCuaig, trans., Los Angeles 2012, p. 176.
[41] Paleotti, *Discourse*, pp. 203-204.
[42] See Paleotti, *Discourse*, «Being unable to get rid of the use of images, the demon tries to fill them with abuses» (p. 176).
[43] F. Borromeo, *Sacred Painting*, Kenneth S. Rothwell, Jr., trans., Cambridge 2010, 9.
[44] Borromeo, *Sacred Painting*, p. 53. Likely, Borromeo has St. Sebastian in mind, whose martyrdom was typically portrayed in highly erotic ways. Typically, portraits of Sebastian's martyrdom display the saint mostly nude and with a very athletic figure.
[45] Borromeo, *Sacred Painting*, p. 41. It is also interesting to note that Borromeo actually owned a copy of Titian's *Magdalene in Ecstasy*, an image known for its nudity, see B. Aikema *Titian's Mary Magdalen in the Palazzo Pitti: An Ambiguous Painting and Its Critics*, «Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Institutes» LVII, 1994, p. 59.

suggestion of nudity and sexuality for its potential danger to the beholder. This fear for the viewer was in keeping with Tridentine artistic recommendations, insofar as the images themselves did not present the danger, but «the danger lay in the excitable eye of the weak beholder»[46]. Many of the artworks in question did not shy away from nudity.

Many scholars prefer to understand these criticisms as hyperbole. Some argue that decorum in art, as set by the Council of Trent, was a relatively minor issue evident by the absence of a Church proclamation that «enforced policy» [47]. Some observe that enforcement was «local, sporadic, and underfunded,» as well as ineffective where implemented[48]. Others contend that the art commentators must hold an exaggerated or overblown stance in light of the sheer number of sensuous artworks that remain extant, as if the subject's proliferation proves that it did not transgress moral expectations[49]. Others still, dismiss these statements as humorous or flattering. For example, the unanimous concern expressed by Filippo Baldinucci that Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne* might offend the chaste eye has been interpreted as «an admiring testament to the sculptor's disarming prowess»[50]. This fails to account for how Maffeo Barberini, by the inclusion of his aphorism to the base of the *Apollo and Daphne*, personally sanitized the erotic elements of the sculpture with a moral message: «The lover intent on the pleasures of fleeting beauty fills his hands with leafage or plucks bitter fruit». Indeed, Robert Bellarmine's biographer, Daniello Bartoli, and the Jesuit art theorist, Giovanni Domenico Ottonelli, both remark on Bellarmine's repugnance of nude images. Bartoli claims that on one occasion:

> [Bellarmine] visiting a great ecclesiastic person during the winter season, and it was particularly cold in when entering into the rooms, he saw above their doors paintings, with nude figures, but he was silent: however after leaving accompanied by that same ecclesiastic, when he was in the rooms with the paintings, My Lord, he said, there are some poor people, that are asking foralms from you. That one responded, very gladly would I give it to them, but where are they? So, Cardinal Bellarmine pointed to the nude figures, behold, he said, My Lord, now it is cold, and these ones are naked, it befits Your Illustriousness to command that they may be dressed and well clothed[51].

[46] Loh, '*La Custodia Degli Occhi*', p. 94.
[47] See J. W. O'Malley, *Trent, Sacred Images, And Catholics' Senses of the Sensuous*, «The Sensuous in the Counter-Reformation Church», p. 28.
[48] See M. B. Hall, *Introduction*, «The Sensuous in the Counter-Reformation Church 6, and O'Malley, *Trent, Sacred Images, And Catholics' Senses of the Sensuous*, p. 28. It seems to me that this assertion is in keeping with the idea of a monolithic Catholicism and adverse to the plurality of Catholic religious expression whose existence O'Malley and many others have argued for in recent years.
[49] B. Talvacchia, *The Word Made Flesh: Spiritual Subjects and Carnal Depictions in Renaissance Art*, «The Sensuous in the Counter-Reformation Church», New York 2013, p. 50.
[50] G. Warwick, *Bernini: Art as Theater*, New Haven 2012, pp. 82-83.
[51] «Visitando egli un gran personaggio ecclesiastico in tempo d'inverno, e di gran freddo all'entrar nelle stanze, vide sopra le loro porte quadri con figure ignude, e tacque: ma dipoi uscendo accompagnato da quel personaggio, poiché fu alle stanze de' quadri, Signor, gli disse, son qui alcuni poveri, che da lei demandano una Limosino. Quegli rispose, Molto volentieri e dove sono? Allora il Cardinal Bellarmino mostrandogli quelle figure, Eccoli, disse, Signore, adesso fa freddo, e queste figure sono ignude: conviene che V. S. Illustrismus comando che siano vestiti

Bellarmine did not make any allowance for private images over publicly displayed ones: nudity would always be a problem. In instances where the patron might not be amenable to moral advice, the responsibility fell on the eyes of the viewer to exercise extreme caution with their gaze.

Consistent with centuries of moral catechesis, the preachers of early modern Rome emphasized the importance of vigilant custody of the senses[52]. Chief among those voices were the Jesuit theologians and preachers Robert Bellarmine and Gian Paolo Oliva. For both, the danger of art was a question of the susceptibility of human beings to succumb to the temptations of their senses, as Bellarmine summarizes: «The eyes are a great gate through which impurity enters»[53]. In a sermon on *Remedies for helping the Heart* he illustrates the danger inherent in the senses by citing the stories of David and Bathsheba (2 *Sam*. 11) and Susannah and the elders (*Dan*. 13). In both stories men are overcome with lust at the sight of a married women bathing, which in turn leads to the upheaval of familial and social order. David conspires to murder Bathsheba's husband, and the elders perjure themselves making a mockery of civil and divine law.[54] The sense of sight triggered these sins; as a result, Bellarmine advises his audience to avoid fixing their eyes upon anything potentially tempting for prolonged periods, and urges them to emulate St. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), who rigorously practiced the custody of the senses such that, according to Bellarmine, «he might not know any woman by her face»[55].

Oliva was *more* zealous in his exhortations to guard the senses. In a sermon on the feast of Luigi Gonzaga, S. J. (1568-1591) he goes to great lengths to explain that abandoning vigilance of the senses even momentarily can have catastrophic consequences. For example, he employs a metaphorical fire to explain that one who practices *constant* vigilance cannot be burned, I quote: «no fire would have destroyed either the base or the body of the mausoleums of Egypt. Instead, one spark would have been enough to reduce the royal palace of David to ashes»[56]. In this metaphor, the pyramid represents the person who practices custody of the senses, while David's palace is the soul that allows the senses to have free reign. In a sermon on Philip Neri, Oliva specifically targets art saying, «the viewing

e ben coperte», see D Bartoli, *Della vita di Roberto Cardinal Bellarmino arcivescovo di Capua della Compagnia di Gesù*, Rome 1678, p. 350. Ottonelli shares a similar story describing how Bellarmine insisted that his host clothe naked statues, see G. Ottonelli and P. Cortona, *Trattato della pittura e scultura: uso et abuso loro*, Treviso 1973, p. 325.

[52] See Mormando, *Did Bernini's Ecstasy of St. Teresa Cross a 17th-Century Line of Decorum?*, «https://www.academia.edu/44401140».

[53] R. Bellarmine, *Sermo Octavus*, «Opera Oratoria Postuma, vol VI», S. Tromp, ed., Rome 1942, p. 118.

[54] R. Bellarmine, *Third Exhortation on the Remedies for Helping the Heart*, «OOP, vol. IX», p. 205.

[55] R. Bellarmine, *Third Exhortation*, «OOP, vol. IX», p. 205. A. Keitt, *Inventing the Sacred: Imposture, Inquisition, and the Boundaries of the Supernatural in Golden Age Spain*, Boston 2005, focuses on the prosecution of "false" mystics by the Spanish Inquisition.

[56] G. P. Oliva, *Sermone XXVII Nella Vigilia del Beato Luigi*, «Sermones Domestici vol. I» Venice, 1722, p. 322. The implication is that the pyramids are made of stone, but David's palace of wood.

of lascivious art – no matter how technically 'fine' that art may be – creates a veritable tempest within»[57].

3. Portraying Mystics

As noted above, the painters undertook depicting an ineffable experience, widely understood in late medieval and early modern piety. What is more, the artist was responsible for making interior phenomena, perhaps a phenomenon of the inner eye, the mind, or the soul, an exterior reality[58]. The ecstatic vision, according to Victor Stoichita, takes place in the soul where the illusion that the vision takes place in space is created[59]. Thus, the painter can depict, on occasion, not only the saint in ecstasy, but the saint's vision by placing the visionary in the lower part of the painting and the vision in the upper part[60]. Because these images inherently dwell in an uncertain world, they were anti-Tridentine since the Church enforced jurisdiction over the right to interpret visions and any subject in a painting[61]. From this perspective, these images were doomed to be problematic, decorous or not, even before the artist brought them to life on a canvas.

What exactly is mysticism, or how was it understood? Mystic experiences are «direct encounters between humans and God»[62]. More specifically they are encounters between the soul, which is always gendered as feminine, *anima*, and God[63]. One element of mysticism's complexity derives from the mystical experience itself, the context of which requires unpacking[64]. Mysticism's complexity presents two problems for the modern scholar trying to understand the experience. On the one hand it involved the interpretation of the Church[65]. In the Catholic tradition mysticism presents a tension in which a third party has the right to label an experience as either a divine gift, or heretical insanity in proud defiance of the Church's role as mediator between heaven and earth. In early modern Spain, Inquisition tribunals were especially keen on eradicating this type of spirituality by including «eucharistic enthusiasts, contemplatives,

[57] Mormando, *Bernini*, p. 167.
[58] V. I. Stoichita, *Visionary Experience in the Golden Age of Spanish Art*, London 1995, p. 197.
[59] Stoichita, *Visionary Experience*, p. 27.
[60] Stoichita, *Visionary Experience*, p. 27.
[61] Stoichita, *Visionary Experience*, pp. 23-25.
[62] N. F. Partner, *Did Mystics Have Sex?*, «Desire and Discipline: Sex and Sexuality in the Premodern West», Jacqueline Murray, Konrad Eisenbichler, eds., Toronto 1996, p. 300. Weber offers a broader interpretation, "I take a broad view of mysticism that considers not only noetic states but also coterminous practices and phenomena such as penitential asceticism, visionary and prophetic gifts, demonic possession, and imputations of sanctity. It might well be argued that this approach distorts mysticism's meaning as infused knowledge of God and exaggerates the importance of asceticism and supernatural favors in the life of the mystic," see Weber, *Gender*, p. 315.
[63] Partner, *Did Mystics Have Sex?*, p. 301.
[64] Partner, *Did Mystics Have Sex?*, p. 301. I consider the contexts of mystic experiences as they relate to texts more fully when I discuss specific paintings in the third section.
[65] A. Hollywood, *Introduction*, «Christian Mysticism», p. 4.

orgiasts, religious hypocrites, and deluded visionaries and stigmatics» under the term *alumbrado*[66]. It is noteworthy that the Inquisition suspected that Ignatius of Loyola's (1491-1556) *Spiritual Exercises* contained *alumbrado* spirituality. For example, the 'composition in place,' which asked the exercitant to imagine him or herself in a religious – typically biblical – scene proved especially troublesome: «see the persons…listen to what they are saying…smell the fragrance and taste the infinite sweetness of the Divinity…Using the sense of touch, I will, so to speak, embrace and kiss the places where the persons walk or sit»[67]. The Church did not officially accept Ignatius's *Exercises* until 1548.

On the other hand, there was a wide diversity of mystical experiences including visions, dreams, inspiration, mystical union, stigmatization, conversion, martyrdom, and ecstasy. In their writings, saints, and their interpreters, use all these terms to describe transcendent experiences of divine communication. Any distinction must be taken with some skepticism considering that Teresa of Ávila herself sought clarity in defining rapture, vision, and ecstasy.[68] It is important, for the sake of accuracy, to attempt to make these distinctions. The terms that commingle with ecstasy most often are meditation, vision, mystical marriage, and stigmatization. Meditation, in terms of early modern mysticism, refers to an intermediate prayer experience, something that is more than reading the Scriptures, but does not yet approach divine communication. For the early modern period the term became widely used after the explosion of the *devotio moderna*[69]. Theories of vision date back to Augustine's distinction between *visio corporalis*, what is seen with the eye; *visio spiritualis*, what is seen with the inner eye, and *visio intellectualis*, what is seen by the eye of the mind[70]. In the mystic

[66] A. Weber, *Demonizing Ecstasy: Alonso de la Fuente and the Alumbrados of Extremadura*, «The Mystical Gesture», p. 141. The early use of the term focused on disdain for ceremony and sacraments and the notion that an individual received divine inspiration from reading the Scriptures. Later in the sixteenth century the term encompassed irregularities in eucharistic or confessional practice and sexual misconduct between priests and penitents, Weber, *Demonizing Ecstasy*, p. 142.

[67] I. Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, «Ignatius of Loyola: Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works» George E. Ganss, ed., New York 1991, 121-126. (The numbers used here are not page numbers but refer to paragraphs in the *Spiritual Exercises*). Yet, great care must be taken when considering Ignatius's view on the senses. He also understood that they could be dangerous and advocates for their custody. In the *Exercises* Ignatius writes that the retreatant, "should keep the eyes closed or intent on one place, and not allow them to wander," see Loyola*, Spiritual Exercises*, 252. Furthermore in the third part of the *Constitutions*, the rule for Jesuit life, he decrees: "All should take special care to guard with great diligence the gates of their senses (especially the eyes, ears, and tongue) from all disorder, to preserve themselves in peace and true humility of their souls…" see: Ignatius Loyola, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, «The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and their Complementary Norms: A Complete English Translation of the Official Latin Texts», John W. Padberg, ed., St. Louis 1996, 250 (also paragraph number).

[68] In V. Casale, *'Più accenarsi che esattamente descriversi'; difficoltà e sperimentazioni nelle immagini di visioni ed estasi dell'arte romana fra Sei e Settecento*, «Visioni ed Estasi»*,* p. 87.

[69] T. H. Bestul, Meditatio/*Meditation*, «Christian Mysticism», p. 165. It is important to note that Bonaventure was one of the first theologians to identify and emphasize looking at images as a meditative practice that leads from visible to invisible known as the *via positiva*, p. 163.

[70] V. Fraeters, *Visio/Vision*, «Christian Mysticism», p. 178-179. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries having visions was a hallmark of sanctity especially for women, p. 183.

tradition it involves seeing, a divine scene or message with the inner eye or eye of the mind.

Stigmatization is, perhaps, more closely related to the concept of ecstasy. Occasionally, a saint, reflecting on the instruments of the passion would see a vision and then awake bearing the five wounds of Christ. Thus, stigmatization is probably best understood as a category of ecstasy insofar as the stigmatic vision finds the visionary caught in a liminal experience between two worlds that results in physical manifestation. The mystical union (or mystical marriage), perhaps most closely related to ecstasy, refers to the idea of being one with God. The erotic model and linking sexual language to mystical experience became the dominant expressive mode dating back to Origen's interpretation of the Song of Songs[71]. Among Spanish mystics of the sixteenth century, Teresa of Ávila's works clearly reflect Origen's interpretation[72]. For Teresa, ecstasy was an intermediate stage for the mystic[73]. Teresa also delineates between rapture (*arrebatamiento*), ecstatic trance (*arrobamiento*), and flight of the spirit (*vuelo de espíritu*) by claiming that rapture is a much more rapid phenomenon whereas the trance is a slow and peaceful experience[74].

This gendered understanding of the mystical union, typically divided on erotic lines, leads to a final complication: the relationship between gender and mystic activity. Alison Weber identifies four characteristics of female mysticism, a struggle with authority that male religious did not always share, use of erotic language identifying their relationship with God as «love madness,» an association with charismatic graces such as visions, locutions, and ecstasies, and extreme penitential practices[75]. The introduction of a «feminine mysticism» is where the scale tips toward the heretical side of the above-mentioned dichotomy. In the early modern mindset, women were more physically attached to carnality and sensuality than men and suffered from a supposed weak-mindedness and generalized inconstancy ingrained in the feminine psyche. These supposed

[71] B. McGinn, Unio Mystica/*Mystical Union*, «Christian Mysticism», p. 202. Bernard of Clairvaux, and later Gian Paolo Oliva would pick up on this tradition of interpreting the Song of Songs.
[72] McGinn, *Mystical Union*, p. 209. It is important to note that Rome in the period in question was to some degree influenced by Spanish grandees, and that there was a great deal of Spanish influence in the Italian peninsula in general.
[73] E. T. Howe, *Donne and the Spanish Mystics on Ecstasy*, «Notre Dame English Journal», XIII, 2, 1981, p. 30.
[74] Howe, *Donne and the Spanish Mystics*, p. 31. As McGinn points out, French mystics of the seventeenth century were split over the issue. Francis de Sales and others interpreted the mystical union as a movement of love expressed in the states of Christ, such as the incarnation that divinizes man; whereas women of the French school, including Marie of the Incarnation, preferred an erotic model. McGinn, *Mystical Union*, pp. 209-210. I include stigmatization with mystical union because often times these two experiences occurred simultaneously. I suggest that in receiving the stigmata a holy man or woman thought of himself as united to Christ in his suffering.
[75] Weber, "Gender," p. 317. For a detailed study that provides a vivid panorama of the problems related to female mystics and their spirituality, see G. Zarri, *Le sante vive: Profezie di corte e devozione femminile tra '400 e '500*, Torino 1990.

attributes rendered them and their spiritual lives subject to demonic expression[76]. Thus, they were subject to regulation. In fact, the Church severely prosecuted «feminine ecstatic and prophetic» mysticism as seen in four separate cases in Naples between 1581 and 1615[77]. While the language of the ecstatic accounts includes «ravishing, the kiss, eating and tasting», it is metaphorical[78]. This widespread erotic language employed by mystics was both appropriated by artists in Rome and condemned by ecclesiastics.

4. Conclusion

How could the Church canonize some mystics, thus celebrating their experiences and the texts that describe them, while continuing an assault on these images? Mystics carefully employed nuance and subtlety to describe their ineffable experiences in language in a way that artists could not. Teresa, for example, frequently noted that the ecstasies she described did not occur in physical space. The paintings, in contrast, convert the experience of one person's inner eye, by making it manifest, or real, to the physical eye of the viewer. Thus, the art renders viewing the experience more real than the lived phenomenon or its linguistic description. Erotic art replaces mystical experiences, metaphorically construed using sexual language, with sexual interaction for the viewer to behold.

In the paintings discussed above there is notable variety. Carracci seems to have taken to heart the decrees of the preachers with his pious image; however, the fact is that little is known about many of Carracci's commissions including the *Ecstasy of St. Catherine*[79]. Caravaggio's St. Francis stretches the boundaries with the overtly erotic longing looks of the angel and the subtle hints of sexual activity[80]. The Magdalenes by the hands of both Caravaggio and Artemisia Gentileschi thrust the viewer into voyeurism with the ecstatic throes of a saint

[76] S. Haliczer, *Between Exaltation and Infamy: Female Mystics in the Golden Age of Spain*, New York 2002.
[77] A. J. Schutte, *Aspiring Saints: Pretense of Holiness, Inquisition, and Gender in the Republic of Venice 1618-1750*, Baltimore 2001, p. 201. Three of the four cases were female, but one was male.
[78] See Partner, *Did mystics have sex?*, pp. 302-308.
[79] C. Robertson, *On the «Reform» of Painting*, «Art and Reform in the Late Renaissance After Trent», Jesse M. Locker, ed., New York 2019, p. 21.
[80] There is little evidence for the commission of the *St. Francis in Ecstasy*, but scholars presume Caravaggio painted it for Cardinal Maria del Monte, who was Caravaggio's patron at the time. The first documentary information about it appears in wills starting in 1606, see M. Marini, *Caravaggio «Pictor praestantissimus» L'iter artistico complete di uno dei massimi rivoluzionari dell'arte di tutti I tempi*, Rome 2001, pp. 389-390.

that evidently resemble orgasm.[81] Reni, like Carracci, opts for a sanitized image[82]. One that employs traditional iconography to express that Neri was a mystic who enjoyed divine visions, but also that he was totally chaste.

The Magdalenes and St. Francis were exactly the types of images that concerned theorists and preachers. Their mission was the salvation of souls, and lascivious art could, in their mind, ruin a life of good works and piety. With eternal salvation on the line, the risk presented by erotic images was too great. This was not an exaggerated stance, but mainstream among religious thinkers. These figures, especially of the stature of Oliva and Bellarmine, formed the opinions of their society and culture with a broad reach that extended to prelates and princes, popular audiences, and pupils. There was a marked discord between artists and theorists, but the paintings survived, nonetheless. Why? Since the preachers were horrified by this reality stemming from art I now return to the original question: why did «lascivious» paintings, of mystic experiences, inherently threatening to unguarded eyes and the institutional Church alike, escape censure?

To find an answer it is necessary to understand their meaning; that is, their context and what they communicate. First, context, where the images were displayed, was all-important[83]. Images painted for private spaces like the Magdalene's and Caravaggio's *St. Francis* enjoyed greater lenience, even if their disrespect of decorum horrified the preachers. These images were less likely to affect the laity. At the same time, as the stories from Bellarmine's life indicate that moralists expected even privately held secular statues to exhibit decorum. Second, in some cases, the identity and status of the patron was equally important. Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte purchased Caravaggio's *Francis in Ecstasy*, for example. A third element was content. Here, patterns emerge. In general, ecstasies of female mystics, partly due to misogynistic attitudes, and already canonized saints seem more likely to be erotic. The stakes were higher for mystics not yet proclaimed as saints. The young Oratorians could not permit

[81] Like the *St. Francis in Ecstasy* there is little commissioning evidence for Caravaggio's *Magdalene in Ecstasy*; however, it appears that he executed the work at Paliano while under the protection of Costanza Colonna Sforza, who sheltered him from Roman authorities following Caravaggio's murder of Rannuccio Tomassoni, see Marini, *Caravaggio*, p. 507. There is even less information about the commissioning and provenance of Gentileschi's *Magdalene in Ecstasy*. For the most up to date information, see G. Pappi, Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy *and the* Madonna of the Svezzamento*: Two Masterpieces by Artemisia*, «Artemisia Gentileschi in a Changing Light», Sheila Barker, ed., London 2017, pp. 147-166.

[82] For more on the relationship between Reni, Luca Ciamberlano, and the creation of Neri's official image, see O. Melasecchi and D. S. Pepper, *Guido Reni, Luca Ciamberlano and the Oratorians: Their Relationship Clarified*, «The Burlington Magazine», 140, 1998, pp. 596-603. Particularly noteworthy is the inclusion of several documents in which Ciamberlano confirms receipt of payment for various images of Neri, many of which Reni designed, pp. 602-603. The close collaboration with the Oratorians as indicated by Melasecchi and Pepper as well as Reni's personal piety were critical contributing factors to Reni's decorous and theologically acceptable portrayal of Neri.

[83] For the different attitudes regulations between public and private art, see Robertson, *On the «Reform» of Painting*, «Art and Reform in the Late Renaissance», p. 20.

an indecorous image of their founder while little could tarnish the centuries-old reputation of Mary Magdalene or the deep affection felt for Francis of Assisi. The stakes were similarly high for the Jesuits and the Carmelite nuns. Rubens's portraits of Ignatius of Loyola and Teresa of Ávila were both perfectly decorous. Bernini's statue, completed about thirty years after Teresa's canonization, might have had more wiggle room. At that point Teresa's image was not as carefully guarded by her order; she was already a saint. Both gender and the political process of saint-making had an impact on what might be permitted in an image.[84] While factors like patronage and canonization politics played a significant role in the preservation of indecorous images they do not account for the continued critiques of erotic representations of saints in ecstasy nor do they explain the ethical and moral dilemmas that such images presented to viewers. No matter who the patron was, the representation, if too erotic, would be dangerous for viewers according to treatises and written sermons. Eroticism was problematic especially if they emphasize a given saints lack of control. One interpretation suggests that the images were misogynistic, they drew attention to the idea that women were out of control, erotic, and hysterical. Therefore, the eroticism was permitted because it proliferated widely held misogynistic beliefs about women. While convincing and legitimate, this interpretation does not explain similar iconography for Francis.

If we consider what the images communicate, we expose another interpretation. In her essay, *Did mystics have sex?*, Nancy Partners concludes that the penchant for mysticism was a release from sexual repression and restriction that demanded people «conform to difficult rules of self-constraint»[85]. While this explains the prevalence of ecstatic experiences, it does not explain the prevalence of erotic iconography in paintings. Franco Mormando quips that the eroticism was propagandistic insofar as it demonstrated the joyous gyrations of Catholicism in a religiously divided world.[86]. I suspect that this answer is knowingly reductive. Instead, I propose that these images transformed metaphorical language and inner experiences into real outer experiences for the viewer to see. Through physicality, the eroticism displays a *most intimate* communion between humanity and divinity that is both perceived by the senses and relatable to the viewer; compelling the viewer to witness God intimately interacting with the world. What is more, the sexually suggestive portrayals of saints in trance like states liken ecstasy to death. The juxtaposition of the erotic and the cadaverous proclaims that God replaces the anguish of death with joy for his faithful people. Despite the faults of erotic ecstasies their meaning was too powerful to dismiss.

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[84] The ways in which the reception of saints, and even individual saints changed throughout the early modern era remains an understudied topic, see Jones, *Celebrating New Saints*, pp. 148-166.
[85] Partner, *Did mystics have sex?*, p. 307.
[86] Mormando, *Bernini*, p. 169.