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Article

From Leonardo to Caravaggio: Affective Darkness, the Franciscan Experience and Its Lombard Origins

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Abstract: The function of affectivity has generally focused on post-Council of Trent paintings, where artists sought a new visual language to address the imperative function of sacred images in the face of Protestant criticism and iconoclasm, either guided by the Council's decree on images, post-Tridentine treatises on sacred art, or by the Counter-Reformation climate of late Cinquecento and early Seicento Italy. This essay redirects the origins of the transformation of the function of *chiaroscuro* from objective to subjective, from corporeal to spiritual, and from rational to affective to a much earlier period in late Quattrocento and early Cinquecento Milan with Leonardo da Vinci. By tracing the transformation of *chiaroscuro* as a vehicle of affect beginning with Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks*, it will become evident that *chiaroscuro* became a device used to focalize the viewers' experience dramatically and to move viewers visually and mystically toward unification with God under the influence of the Franciscans.

Keywords: Leonardo da Vinci; Franciscans; Lombard art; *chiaroscuro*; meditation

1. Introduction

The study of the function of affectivity has generally focused on post-Council of Trent paintings, where artists sought a new visual language to address the imperative function of sacred images in the face of Protestant criticism and iconoclasm, either guided by the Council's decree on images, post-Tridentine treatises on sacred art, or by the Counter-Reformation climate of late Cinquecento and early Seicento Italy. This essay aims to shift the development of affective art to an earlier period in the late Quattrocento and early Cinquecento, centering specifically on Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) in Milan and the *Leonardeschi* in the broader geographical region of Lombardy. The studies of Roberto Longhi and the 2004 exhibition catalog *Painters of Reality* have long acknowledged the debt that artists owed to Leonardo da Vinci's innovative style, ranging from his exploration of naturalism and development of his personal variant of *chiaroscuro*, *sfumato* ((Longhi 1928, pp. 17–33; 1929, pp. 258–320; Bayer 2004). See also (Muraoka 2019, pp. 111–29)). Although these scholars acknowledge the influence of Leonardo's *chiaroscuro* on his contemporaries and followers, they have not adequately acknowledged the origins or the affective role of his light and shadow.

Chiaroscuro was certainly not new. The function of *chiaroscuro* to articulate three-dimensional form and space on a two-dimensional surface has a long history in the visual arts.¹ Its affective role in the realm of sacred art frequently appears in studies on post-Tridentine art, particularly in the works of Federico Barocci (c. 1535–1612) and Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610). In the works of both artists, artmaking in the realm of sacred art came to focus on eliciting the motions of the *affetti* of viewers through the employment of color and especially, *chiaroscuro*, and in the case of Caravaggio, its extreme, tenebrism. Although scholars have tried to explain what I call “affective *chiaroscuro*” or “affective darkness” through the rise of the theology of darkness (1570s) of Saint John of the Cross (1542–1591) and Francesco Patrizi da Cherso's (1529–1597) new Platonism in Rome in the 1590s, this essay redirects the origins of the transformation of the function of *chiaroscuro* from objective to subjective, from corporeal to spiritual, and from rational to affective to



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a much earlier period in late Quattrocento and early Cinquecento Milan with Leonardo under the influence of the Franciscans.

Already in 1483, Leonardo, and subsequently, Milanese and Lombard artists, were beginning to experiment with *chiaroscuro* beyond the purposes of articulating three-dimensional space or plasticity of form to the generation of tangibility, theatricality, drama, and thus, affectivity. Tracing the transformation of *chiaroscuro* as a vehicle of affect, beginning with Leonardo in Milan, reveals that, under the influence of the Franciscans, *chiaroscuro* became a device used to concentrate the viewers' experience dramatically and to move viewers visually and mystically toward unification with God.

2. Laying the Foundation—*Chiaroscuro*

In the last two decades, increasing attention has been placed on the affective modes of painting in the work of Federico Barocci of Urbino and the Lombard painter Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, both as direct responses to Counter-Reformation prescriptions on sacred artmaking. Both painters were lauded by their contemporaries for their use of color in conjunction with their treatment of light and shadow. In fact, Giovanni Pietro Bellori juxtaposed the two artists in his highly selective group of biographies in his 1672 *Le vite de pittori, scultori et architetti moderni*, where Barocci's *vita* preceded that of Caravaggio. In Bellori, one can find general references to Barocci's delicate color. Mentioning the influence of Correggio (and, by extension, Leonardo) on the artist, Bellori stated that Barocci drew from the master's *sfumato* and sweet color (Bellori [1672] 1976, p. 183; Pierguidi 2015, pp. 44–45). Caravaggio, on the other hand, employed a more forceful treatment of *chiaroscuro* and color that gave stark relief to his canvases, compared to Barocci's work.²

Stuart Lingo argued that Barocci consciously mixed *divoto* with *vaghezza*, a combination of devotion and sensuous allure, addressing both the Counter-Reformation interest in archaic models of sacred art and demands for artistic innovation (Lingo 2008). Barocci utilizes *sfumato*—a type of *chiaroscuro* invented by Leonardo da Vinci, where dark shadows blur contours and soften contrast, creating a “smoky” quality—for purposes of establishing harmony and unity (Hall 1992, p. 94). Marcia Hall noted that *sfumato* contributed to his works by presenting a “filmy or assimilated color” rather than “surface color”, which visually encourages viewers to scan rather than fixate on the image (Hall 2011, p. 202).

Caravaggio's approach, while similar in intention, achieves the opposite effect. Rather than employing *sfumato*, the artist intensifies rather than unifies his paintings by exaggerating his *chiaroscuro*, what today we refer to as tenebrism. His contemporaries noted his beautiful color, particularly in his early works, but criticized his unnatural, deep shadows. Bellori denigrated him for relegating his subjects into the darkness of a cellar (Bellori [1672] 1976, p. 205).

Thus, Caravaggio created the illusion of bold fields of contrasting color and dramatic shifts between light and shadow while maintaining overall pictorial unity.³ The large high-contrast color fields in Caravaggio's images create an altogether different effect from the assimilated color of Barocci's paintings. Rather than scanning the image, as in Barocci's works, the viewer of Caravaggio's paintings is struck by the immediacy and verisimilitude of the color contrasts to fixate on the image (Hall 2011, p. 202). The vivid colors and the stark contrasts of light and shadow contribute to what can be described as a narrative without action or a frozen moment.⁴

In the work of both artists, *chiaroscuro* allowed viewers to scan (Barocci) or concentrate (Caravaggio) on the sacred image, which facilitated an evocative emotional response.

The works of Barocci and Caravaggio are seemingly distinct, yet in Bellori's *Vite*, he placed their biographies one after the other. Scholars such as Keith Christiansen and Stefano Pierguidi have explained this perplexing placement of Barocci's *vita* before Caravaggio's as serving the purpose of critiquing and contrasting with Caravaggio's style and work (Christiansen 2005, p. 722; Pierguidi 2015, pp. 43–51). However, a fundamental connection links the two artists in their variations of *chiaroscuro* for the purpose of affect. Regardless of

their divergent approach to color, and especially light and shadow, both artists intended an affective impact on the viewer.

To explain the flourishing effects of *chiaroscuro* in paintings from the last decades of the Cinquecento into the early Seicento and the role of affective engagement between work and viewer, scholars disagree. Much scholarship centers on linking Caravaggio's tenebrism, for instance, to contemporary philosophical or religious literature that postdates the fascination with darkness as a vehicle for affect in Lombardy. The "new Platonism" of Francesco Patrizi da Cherso's *Nove de universis philosophia* (1591) is plausibly linked to Caravaggio's employment of tenebrism through the arrivals of both artist and philosopher in Rome, leading to their shared social circle at the turn of the sixteenth century (See especially (Karalow 2011, pp. 77–85; Bovenizer 2000)). In Patrizi's text, "shade" is explained as a complement to light, thus "positive opposites, not privative opposites" (Karalow 2011, p. 85). Light, however, is privileged because "divine things are the source of light" (Karalow 2011, pp. 84–85). Light functions as a bridge between the earthly world and God. Thus, Patrizi and Caravaggio aimed to facilitate the knowledge of God in both a corporeal and metaphorical sense.

Saint John of the Cross's "Theology of Darkness", as articulated particularly in his *Ascent to Mount Carmel* (written between 1578 and 1579 in Granada), has also been introduced in the discussion of influences on Caravaggio's (and his contemporaries') tenebrism. Maria Rzepińska emphasizes Saint John of the Cross as formative for the development and popularity of exaggerated *chiaroscuro* and tenebrism in the post-Tridentine period (Rzepińska 1986, pp. 100–2). Although Saint John of the Cross's writings were only first published at Alcala de Henares in 1618, Rzepińska suggests that they had circulated in manuscript form earlier.⁵ In his *Ascent*, the three-stage progress of the soul to God is described as Step 1: Active night of the senses; Step 2: Active night of the spirit; Step 3: Passive night (Rzepińska 1986, p. 100). Although Rzepińska acknowledges that Saint John of the Cross's "Theology of Darkness" (and even Ignatius of Loyola's suggestion of darkness as conducive to meditation in his 1548 *Spiritual Exercises*) has precedents in the late fifth-early sixth century writings of Dionysius the Areopagite (Pseudo-Dionysius), she argues that Saint John of the Cross contains the first developed doctrine of the theology of darkness.⁶

Yet, experimentation with *chiaroscuro* for purposes of affect began long before these texts were written. Roberto Longhi's studies on the Lombard predecessors of Caravaggio begin the investigation about when and where the development of *chiaroscuro* as an affective and functional vehicle for meditation begins (Longhi 1928, pp. 17–33; 1929, pp. 258–320). Although Longhi's intention was not to highlight the deepening shadows in pre-Caravaggio Lombard paintings, he nevertheless directs us to an important nexus connecting with Barocci and Caravaggio.

Today, Urbino-born Barocci is not associated with Lombardy. However, Barocci traveled to Lombardy, and, significantly, both he and Caravaggio were placed under the Lombard School in Francesco Scannelli's *Il microcosmo della pittura* (1657).⁷ Scannelli does not characterize this school by geographical factors (birth site or workplace) but rather by style. Although Scannelli identified a "beautiful naturalness" as a major quality of the artists in the Lombard School, these artists were also engaged in affective darkness (Scannelli 1657, p. 196). Cinquecento Lombardy is where the precursors of these artists emerged: Girolamo Romanino (1484/87–ca. 1560), Moretto da Brescia (ca. 1498–1554), Lorenzo Lotto (ca. 1480–1556), Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo (active by 1506–1548), Antonio Campi (1523–1587), and Vincenzo Campi (1530/35–1591). These artists also came from different cities in northern Italy, but as Andrea Bayer has explained, during the Renaissance, Lombardy was a more elastic term, not bound by geographical borders or even political power (which often changed), but rather categorized by shared stylistic affinities (Bayer 2004, p. 4). From Giorgio Vasari to Giovanni Battista Agucchi to Francesco Scannelli, Lombard artists shared an identifiable aesthetic. Thus, the names of Romanino, Moretto, and Savoldo from Brescia can often be found beside the names of Venetian-born Lorenzo Lotto or the Cremonese brothers, Antonio and Vincenzo Campi (Muraoka 2015, pp. 27–35).

Although scholars have observed a propensity toward naturalism in the Lombard style, these artists' experimentation with affective *chiaroscuro* has been largely overlooked. The origins of darkness for the purposes of affect begin in Lombardy, where it also flourished. It was stimulated by the presence and influence of the Franciscans in Milan—the common denominator influencing all these artists, including Barocci and Caravaggio, is Leonardo da Vinci.

3. Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks*

Although Florentine by birth, Leonardo da Vinci spent two periods in Milan, 1482–1499 and 1508–1513. Shortly after his arrival in Milan, he received a commission to paint the central panel of an elaborate altarpiece for the chapel of the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception in the Franciscan church, San Francesco Grande. Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks* (Figure 1) represents the beginning of what would become the quintessential quality of Lombard naturalism. Scholars, such as Joanne Snow-Smith and Regina Stefaniak, have observed the Franciscan-inspired iconography of the panel and its literary sources related to the contemporary disputation over the doctrinal validity of the Immaculate Conception and the iconography of the painting (Snow-Smith 1987, pp. 35–94; Stefaniak 1997, pp. 1–36). The Franciscans were stalwart defenders of the Virgin's birth free from original sin, so Leonardo's painting served as an important visual statement of Franciscan ideology. The church for which it was commissioned, after all, was the first church dedicated to Saint Francis of Assisi in Milan.

Leonardo signed the contract with members of the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception on 25 April 1483. Even before that contract, the Franciscan Pope Sixtus IV (r. 1471–1484) actively promoted the cult of the Virgin. In a 1472 document referencing the construction of Santa Maria delle Grazie, he described Mary as the "Immaculata Virgo" (Goffen 1986, p. 229). He also proclaimed the Feast of the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple as a feast for the entire Church in 1472 (Goffen 1986, p. 229). In 1475, Sixtus confirmed the statutes of the Confraternity of the Rosary, instituted the Feast of the Visitation and arranged a debate on the Immaculate Conception between the Franciscans and Dominicans (Goffen 1986, pp. 229–30). In 1475, Sixtus commissioned the Franciscan friar, Apostolic Protonotary and Secretary of the Pope, Leonardo Nogarolo, to write an office for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, which he approved the following year (Goffen 1986, p. 230). On 28 February 1476, Sixtus IV signed a decree that recognized the Feast of the Immaculate Conception for the Latin Church (Snow-Smith 1987, p. 38). In 1480, he approved a second office for clerical use by the Franciscan and Minister Provincial of Milan, Bernardino de' Busti (Snow-Smith 1987, p. 38; Butler 2009, p. 251). On 7 December 1481, Sixtus celebrated the Feast of the Immaculate Conception in his private funerary chapel in Old Saint Peter's (Goffen 1986, p. 230).

What has not been adequately acknowledged in scholarship is the fact that in the *Virgin of the Rocks*, Leonardo first began experimenting with *sfumato*, deepening the shadows in the cavernous setting of the Virgin, Saint John the Baptist, the Christ Child, and the Archangel Gabriel. For Leonardo, shadows were integral to the impression of space and the rendering of three-dimensional form. According to Vasari:

It is an extraordinary thing how that genius [Leonardo], in his desire to give the highest relief to the works that he made, went so far with dark shadows, in order to find the darkest possible grounds, that he sought for blacks which might make deeper shadows and be darker than other blacks, that by their means he might make his lights the brighter; and in the end this method turned out so dark, that no light remaining there, his pictures had rather the characteristic of things made to represent an effect of night, than the clear quality of daylight; which all came from seeking to give relief, and to achieve the final perfection of art. (Vasari [1568] 1996, vol. 1, p. 630)

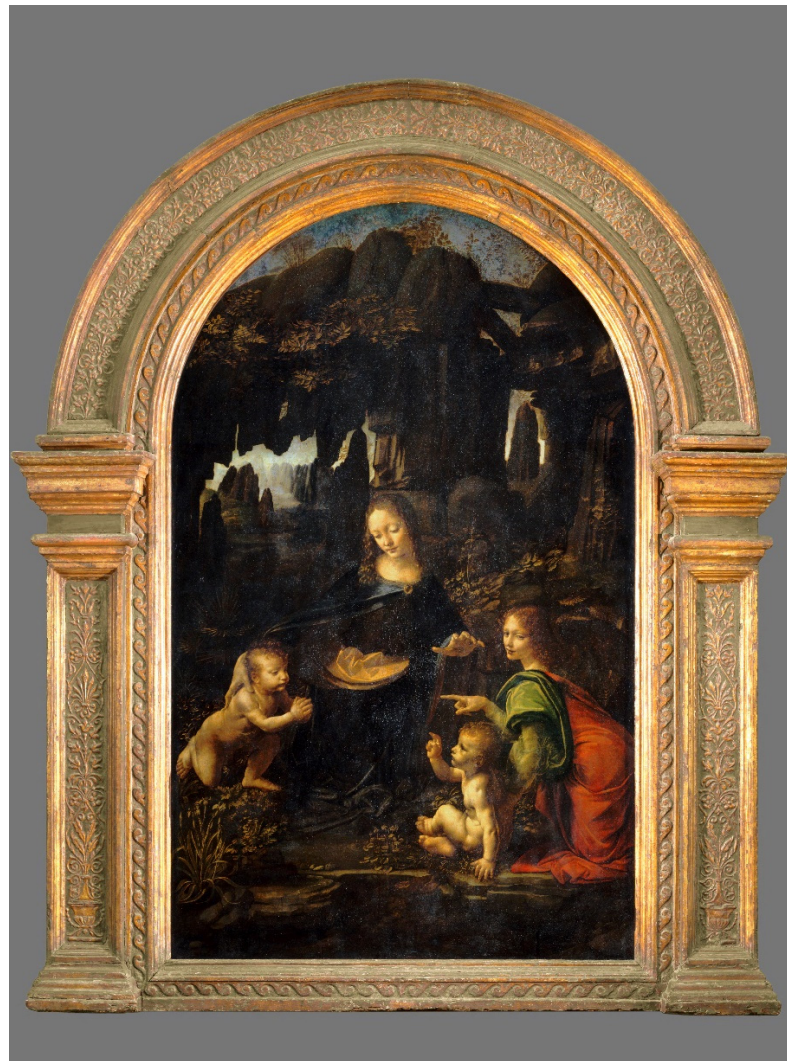


Figure 1. Leonardo da Vinci, *Virgin of the Rocks*, ca. 1483–86. Oil on panel, 199 × 122 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo Credit: Erich Lessing/ Art Resource, NY.

Steven Stowell suggests that Leonardo's writings on painting in his *Trattato di pittura* have a spiritual interpretation (Stowell 2014, pp. 118–60). Two books, one from 1497 (first Milanese period) listing approximately 40 books, and another from 1503–1504 (second Florentine period), with 116 volumes, both contain spiritual texts (Stowell 2014, pp. 119–22). Although not all the texts can be identified, the roster included a work by the Franciscan San Bernardino of Siena and a book of the Passion of Christ, a subject central to Franciscan devotion. Stowell does not address Saint Francis or Franciscan influence on Leonardo's writings on painting, but it is critical to note Leonardo's ties to the Franciscans through his commission for the *Virgin of the Rocks* and his friendship with the Franciscan mathematician Luca Pacioli during his first Milanese period.

The *sfumato* of Leonardo contributes to the mysterious, meditative tenor of his painting. As Alexander Nagel has noted, *sfumato* "gave a new powerful expression to the mystery of concealing and revealing. . .transformed into a site of mysterious disclosure, painting itself acquired a religious mystique" (Nagel 1993, p. 19). In other words, the "revealing and concealing" nature of *sfumato* suggests that the visible or the "known" can lead to the "unknown", or the sensory apprehension of figures in a scene can bring one to ineffable knowledge of the divine.

If the Franciscans of San Francesco Grande played such a pivotal role in the development of the Immaculate iconography in the *Virgin of the Rocks*, could Leonardo's interest in

shadows in this panel also respond to Franciscan inspiration? Edward Olszewski recognizes the shadows as Franciscan-inspired, but one that connects directly with rendering the immaculacy of Mary.⁸ Scholars have long linked the development of naturalism, and indeed, Renaissance style, to the influence of the Franciscans (Cook 2013, pp. 1–12). My argument identifies Milan and the larger Lombard ambient as fertile ground for the birth of affective *chiaroscuro*, stimulated by the presence of Leonardo da Vinci, the Franciscan commission for San Francesco Grande, and the flourishing of Franciscan publications in Milan and its environs. Significantly, both Barocci and Caravaggio also had strong Lombard and Franciscan connections (Lingo 1998, pp. 245–389; 2008; Christiansen 2005, pp. 722–28; Muraoka 2015).

According to Leonardo, “The darkest dark is absolute absence of light, and between light and darkness there is infinite variation, because their quantity is continuous” (Leonardo da Vinci 1956, p. 733). Leonardo describes light and shadow as contiguous, and their shift is gradual, which parallels Franciscan devotional practices on meditation. The fourteenth-century text, *Meditationes vitae Christi*, written by an anonymous Franciscan, functioned as a series of meditative exercises for a Poor Clare (Ragusa and Green 1961). In the text, the Poor Clare is guided through a series of meditations and is urged to recollect the stories of Christ’s life, imagining herself actively following Christ through his journey from birth to Passion. This active recollection of Christ’s life facilitates penance and leads incrementally to spiritual transformation, culminating in the rejection of the physical and sensory world, and represents a fundamental process replete in Franciscan devotional texts (Desires 1990, pp. 133–34). Meditation via the senses leads to a rejection of the physical and visible (whether literal or imaginary), and thus the “known”, to contemplation and unification with God, who is “unknowable”.

Snow-Smith references the *Meditationes vitae Christi* as one of the several texts that may have inspired the iconography of Leonardo’s *Virgin of the Rocks*, largely connecting it to the unusual grouping and the apocryphal narrative of the Holy Family’s return from Egypt when they meet the young Saint John.⁹ Although she emphasizes the Franciscan influence on the iconography, she does not connect it to Leonardo’s employment of *chiaroscuro* or Franciscan devotional practices.

It is significant that Leonardo’s exploration with *chiaroscuro* for devotional affect begins with a Franciscan commission, the *Virgin of the Rocks* (see Figure 1). Here, the infant Saint John the Baptist takes on an unusually prominent role beside the Virgin Immaculate. Snow-Smith connects the favored placement of Saint John beside the Virgin Immaculate as a direct reference to Saint Francis of Assisi (Snow-Smith 1987, pp. 57–65). In the second life of Saint Francis, his first biographer, Tommaso da Celano, notes that Francis’s birth name was John and further elaborates on the parallels between Francis and John the Baptist (Thomas of Celano 1908, pp. 146–47). Saint Bonaventure (also born “John”) expanded Celano’s connection between the two saints: “Like St. John the Baptist, he [Francis] was appointed by God to prepare a way in the desert—that is, by the complete renunciation involved in perfect poverty—and preach repentance by word and example”. Saint Francis was thus not only called an *Alter Christus* but an *Alter Johannes*. The privileged placement of Saint John does not merely reference Saint Francis of Assisi and the Franciscan commission for the altarpiece, but John’s (Francis, as *Alter Johannes*) kneeling position with hands in prayer focused on Christ also points directly to Franciscan devotional practices.

3.1. The Rise of the Franciscans and Leonardo’s *Virgin of the Rocks*

The prevalence and influence of the Franciscans at the time of Leonardo’s commission and the years following must not be underestimated. In 1222, four years before the death of their founder, Saint Francis of Assisi, the Franciscans built a convent behind the fourth-century Basilica of San Nabore in Milan. On 3 October 1226, Francis of Assisi died at the age of 44, and less than two years later, he was canonized as a saint by Pope Gregory IX (r. 1227–1241) on 16 July 1228. By 1233, the Franciscans had built a chapel attached to the apse of San Nabore. In 1256, Pope Alexander IV (r. 1227–1231) gave the Franciscans

permission to take possession of the church of San Nabore, becoming San Francesco Grande. By the time Leonardo arrived in Milan in 1482 and signed the contract for the central panel of the altarpiece for the altar of the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception on 25 April 1483, the Franciscan Order was in a prominent position. The sitting pope was a Franciscan, Francesco della Rovere, or Pope Sixtus IV, as we have seen. Sixtus had joined the Franciscan Order at age nine fulfilling his mother's premonition about her son.¹⁰ He was elected Minister General of the Franciscan Order in 1464, named cardinal in 1467, and four years later took the papal throne. Typical of saintly hagiography, Sixtus is described as a devout Franciscan up until his death. He wore his Franciscan habit beneath his papal robes. On 14 April 1482, Pope Sixtus canonized the Franciscan theologian and former Minister General of the Franciscan Order Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (1221–1274). Even before his canonization, Sixtus referenced Bonaventure's biography of Saint Francis, his *Legenda maior*. The chapel that now bears his name, the Sistine Chapel, was constructed between 1472 and around 1481. On 15 August 1483, the date of the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin, Pope Sixtus IV chose to dedicate the chapel. The Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin was part of the growing Marian cult and celebrations particularly favored by the Franciscans. Francis himself had a special devotion to Mary, according to Bonaventure's biography (Goffen 1986, p. 226).

Erin Benay and Lisa Rafanelli have identified the Assumption of the Virgin as a favored subject of the Franciscans, particularly in its variant of the *Madonna della Cintola* (Benay and Rafanelli 2015, p. 116). Saint Thomas's incredulity about the Virgin's assumption into heaven was overcome when the Virgin dropped her girdle, or *cintola*, to him when she was assumed into heaven. The Franciscans appropriated the iconography to claim that the corded belt of the Franciscan habit was modeled after the Virgin's girdle (Benay and Rafanelli 2015, p. 117). In another episode involving Saint Thomas, his own incredulity at Christ's resurrection, the Franciscans recognized the story of the Doubting Thomas as one that drew parallels with Francis, similar to those forged between Francis and Christ; Thomas did not believe in Christ's resurrection until he could touch his wounds, and many did not believe in Saint Francis's stigmata without tangible proof (Benay and Rafanelli 2015, p. 114). Both narratives center on doubt, the tangible proof via the senses, and the renewal of faith. Benay and Rafanelli make clear that the Franciscan's interest in the "meditative quality of religious life" translated to their promotion and development of uniquely Franciscan imagery (Benay and Rafanelli 2015, p. 114).

Leonardo may have been influenced by the Franciscans at San Francesco Grande and through his Franciscan friend and collaborator, Luca Pacioli, but he may have also been stimulated by Franciscan literature emerging from presses in Milan and Lombardy. Much of the Franciscan literature published and circulating at the time of Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks* centered primarily on the comparison between Francis of Assisi and Christ through an affective lens. Although these texts were not all written in Milan or during Leonardo's lifetime, their popularity and availability in Lombardy should not be dismissed. In ca.1280–90, James of Milan's *Stimulus Amoris* was published in Milan (The text was formerly attributed to Bonaventure) (Lachance 2012, p. 195). In 1477, the first printed edition and Italian translation of Saint Bonaventure's *Aurea Legenda maior Beati Francisci* was published in Milan (Snow-Smith 1987, p. 48). Bonaventure's biography drew heavily from his predecessor, the first biographer of Saint Francis, Tommaso da Celano, in his *Vita prima* and *Vita seconda* (Snow-Smith 1987, p. 48). In Vicenza (a city 200 miles from Milan), the first Italian printed edition of *I Fioretti* was published (Snow-Smith 1987, p. 48). The Franciscan chronicler Bartolomeo da Pisa's Lenten sermons were published in Milan in 1498, and his important *De conformitate vitae B. P. Francisci ad vitam Domini Nostri Jesu Christi* (begun in 1385, approved by the general chapter held in Assisi in 1399) was printed in Milan in 1510 and in 1513 (Bartholomew of Pisa 2020, edited by Short, p. 78). In fact, through the example of Saint Francis of Assisi, as described by his earliest biographers, Saint Bonaventure, and his predecessor, Tommaso da Celano, and other Franciscan literature, the connection between darkness and sacred affect emerges.

In Leonardo's panel (see Figure 1), Saint John, who metaphorically represents Saint Francis (*Alter Johannes*), kneels in ardent prayer directed toward the Christ Child. This recalls not only Francis's practice of active prayer on the life of Christ but specifically his night prayer on Mount La Verna. During his prayer, Saint Francis received the stigmata of Christ, thus transforming him into an *Alter Christus*. Leonardo draws a direct visual parallel between the conformity of Francis and Christ through his landscape setting. According to the Gospel of Matthew 27:51, at Christ's crucifixion, "And the earth quaked and the rocks were rent". In *De conformitate* (composed between 1385 and 1390), which described forty similarities or conformities between Francis and Christ, the Franciscan Bartolomeo da Pisa draws a vivid parallel between Golgotha and La Verna:

This Mount La Verna was prepared by God to be the place where blessed Francis would be stigmatized. The mountain is of great altitude; it is extremely high, its air is pure and free of pollution, it is completely separate from other mountains, and it was especially endowed with the signs of Christ's Passion. For at the time of the Passion, as the Gospel attests, "the rocks were rent", a phenomenon which is strikingly evident on this mountain, for it is cleft from top to bottom. And as can clearly be observed, its parts, i.e., rocks, are all divided one from another. All these things were appropriate for the imprinting of the stigmata. Its altitude is analogous with spiritual elevation, which is required in stigmatization; its purity is analogous with spiritual elevation, which is required in stigmatization; its purity is analogous with purity of spiritual and bodily disposition, because this gift could not fittingly be given to a body that is disposed to, and subject to, impurity; its remoteness is analogous with the renunciation of all things and the desire to be apart from all things. (Bartholomew of Pisa 2020, p. 101)

This allusion to both Golgotha and La Verna is what Snow-Smith identifies in the cavernous landscape of Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks* (Snow-Smith 1987, p. 69). Although approved by the general chapter of the Order in 1399, Bartolomeo's *De conformitate* circulated in manuscript form within Franciscan circles and was finally printed in Milan in 1510; another edition emerged from Milan in 1513 (Bartholomew of Pisa 2020, edited by Short, pp. 19–20).

Bonaventure's *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* references the seraph with six wings that appeared to Saint Francis on Mount La Verna, resulting in his stigmatization. The seraph is significant for Bonaventure, not only for its association with Saint Francis but because the seraph also held a significant position in Pseudo-Dionysius's *The Celestial Hierarchy* (late fifth-early sixth century CE).¹¹ Pseudo-Dionysius explains that seraphim sat atop "a hierarchy. . . a sacred order, a state of understanding and an activity approximating as closely as possible to the divine" (Luibheid 1987, p. 153). There are three groups of heavenly angels: (1) seraphim, cherubim, and thrones; (2) the dominions, powers, and authorities; and (3) the principalities, archangels, and angels. The first rank, the "thrones, seraphim and cherubim", are always near God and are permanently united with him with no intermediary (Luibheid 1987, p. 161). This first hierarchy comprises those directly around God, and particularly the seraphim, cherubim, and thrones". According to Pseudo-Dionysius, "seraphim" means "fire-makers" or "carriers of warmth" (Luibheid 1987, p. 161).

Saint Francis's prayer on Mount La Verna resulted in his vision of a seraph with six flaming wings, with the figure of a man crucified between them. In his official biography of Saint Francis, Saint Bonaventure notes that when the vision disappeared, it "left behind it a marvelous fire in his heart" (Bonaventure 1868, p. 164). It is thus not surprising to find Saint Francis referred to as the "Seraphic Saint" or encounter the word seraphic used to describe his passionate spirit. Saint Bonaventure became known as the "Seraphic Doctor". Even the Franciscan Order was sometimes called the "Seraphic Order".

The unusual emphasis on hands in Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks* may also reference the significance of Saint Francis as the "seraphic saint". At the right, the archangel Gabriel directly points to the kneeling infant Saint John the Baptist. As an archangel, Gabriel figures among the third group of angels in Pseudo-Dionysius's *The Celestial Hierarchy*, "the

principalities, archangels, and angels". This third group guides humans toward God. As such, the Archangel Gabriel guides viewers to Saint John and, thus, to Saint Francis. As the "seraphic saint" marked with the stigmata of Christ with his vision of a seraph, Gabriel points to the highest rank of angels, the seraphim, who are closest to God.

This emphasis on seraphim as "fire-makers" and "carriers of warmth", along with Francis's well-known love and devotion to Christ, both emphasize the affect that led to the development of Franciscan practices and guides to meditation that, in turn, informed Leonardo's *chiaroscuro*.

3.2. Franciscan Affective Darkness and Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks*

Leonardo's development of *chiaroscuro* in the *Virgin of the Rocks* can be understood through the life of Saint Francis and Franciscan devotion. The Franciscan practice of meditation drew from Pseudo-Dionysius's *The Mystical Theology*, which emphasizes the function of light and darkness. In Pseudo-Dionysius, darkness plays a fundamental role in reversing its long-standing identification as the negative companion to light. Only when one leaves "behind them every divine light" and "plunges into the darkness where, as scripture proclaims, there dwells the One who is beyond all things" does true unification with the Divine occur (Luibheid 1987, p. 136). Through the relinquishment of reason, of knowing, of the senses, one is joined to God, who is not in the light (perceivable) but in mysterious, divine darkness. Pseudo-Dionysius does not suggest that light no longer represents God, but rather, when one is blinded by God's light, the individual is plunged into divine darkness, marking one's ascent to God. He proclaims, "I pray we could come to this darkness so far above light! If only we lacked sight and knowledge so as to see, so as to know, unseeing and unknowing, what lies beyond all vision and knowledge" (Luibheid 1987, p. 138). This concept is supported by the words of Saint Paul, "We see now through a glass in a dark manner; but then face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:2).

The import of Pseudo-Dionysius's darkness connects to Saint Francis's love and devotion to Christ and his obtainment of divine darkness with his stigmatization on Mount La Verna (Thomas of Celano 1908, pp. 92–95; Bonaventure 1868, pp. 161–65). It is significant that the pivotal moments in Francis's life and his transformation into an *Alter Christus* occurred at night. In his youth, prior to his conversion to the apostolic life, Francis received a vision at night (Thomas of Celano 1908, p. 6; Bonaventure 1868, p. 11). A follower of Francis, Bernard, witnessed Francis "praying all night, most rarely sleeping" (Thomas of Celano 1908, p. 24). During the period when Francis was composing the first Rule, one night, he fell asleep and had another vision where "the Lord Innocent, the highest and loftiest tree in the world bowed himself so graciously to his will and petition" (Thomas of Celano 1908, p. 33). At night, "about the hour of midnight", Francis received a vision of a fiery chariot (Thomas of Celano 1908, p. 47; Bonaventure 1868, p. 43). "He would often go alone by night to pray in churches which were deserted, or in lonely places, wherein, under the protection of God's grace, he got the better of many fears and distresses of mind" (Thomas of Celano 1908, p. 70; Bonaventure 1868, p. 106). At night, Saint Francis recreated the Nativity for the people in Greccio (Thomas of Celano 1908, p. 33). When he was suffering from infirmities, it was at night "while he was wakeful, and meditating on the Lord, on a sudden was heard the sound of a lyre of wondrous harmony and sweetest tune" (Bonaventure 1868, p. 54). Bonaventure also emphasized that his ardent prayer at night led to ecstasies.

The emphasis on night in the life of Saint Francis has an affinity to Dionysian darkness and may have been purposeful. Several textual connections link Pseudo-Dionysius with Francis and the Franciscan Order. Pseudo-Dionysius's *The Mystical Theology* charts a three-stage ascent to God. First, one must cast aside all attachments. Then, one must contemplate God. As Moses ascended Mount Sinai, he began to contemplate God and came to understand that He is invisible and cannot be apprehended by corporeal eyes. Finally, one breaks free from all attachments, all knowledge, to divine darkness where unification with God is achieved.

Robert Glenn Davis noted that even Bonaventure's *Itinerarium* of Francis was shaped by his understanding of Dionysian ascent (Davis 2015, pp. 433–53). Pseudo-Dionysius's three-stage ascent to God also informed Bonaventure's *De triplici via* (The Triple Way or The Three Ways), a spiritual primer. The first way is purgative, the second illuminative, and the third unitive, corresponding to Pseudo-Dionysius's three-stage mystical ascent to God (Dreyer 1982, pp. 16–20).

An earlier devotional treatise of 1280–90, *Stimulus Amoris* (*The Goad of Love*), written by a Franciscan teacher of theology, James of Milan, further heightens the experience of affective meditation and contemplation begun by Pseudo-Dionysius (Eller 1980, p. 92). The subject of the Passion of Christ plays a central role in the *Stimulus Amoris*, where James of Milan encourages the readers that while meditating on the Passion, they should share the torments of Christ. Christ's Crucifixion represents the focus of Franciscan devotional literature, which also connects to the formulation of affective darkness. According to the Gospels of Matthew (27:45), Mark (15:33), and Luke (23:44), at Christ's Crucifixion, the sky darkened as if it were night.

Franciscan texts, beginning with Celano's and Bonaventure's biographies of Francis, Bonaventure's guides to meditation, James of Milan's *Stimulus Amoris*, the *Meditationes vitae Christi*, and Bartolomeo da Pisa's *De conformitate*, all center on the singular importance of Saint Francis of Assisi's burning love and devotion to Christ, which resulted in his stigmatization, making him *Alter Christus*. This assimilation fundamentally positions Francis and his Order as ideal models. The association of darkness with divine unity as articulated by Pseudo-Dionysius, the fundamental importance of night prayer in the life of Saint Francis, the Franciscan texts that affectively guide the reader to an incremental ascent to the divine, motivated Leonardo to explore the potential of *chiaroscuro* as a vehicle for affect.

4. Leonardo's Saint John the Baptist and the Leonardeschi

The fact that Leonardo further exaggerated his *chiaroscuro* in his panel of *John the Baptist* may also point to Franciscan inspiration. As in the *Virgin of the Rocks*, *chiaroscuro* in Leonardo's *Saint John the Baptist* (Figure 2) functions not only on a technical or theoretical level but also on a spiritual one. "And the light shineth in darkness: and the darkness did not comprehend it" (John 1:5). According to Paul Barolsky, these words from the Gospel of John "illuminate Leonardo's intention, to make visible the relation of Saint John as witness to the true Light", thereby expressing "a divine mystery that Leonardo's *chiaroscuro* evocatively illustrates" (Barolsky 1999, p. 13). Leonardo's ca. 1513 *Saint John the Baptist* visually explicates the incomprehensible. According to the Gospel of John, John the Baptist was a man sent by God:

This man came for a witness, to give testimony to the light, that all men might believe through him. He was not the light, but was to give testimony to the light. That was the true light, which enlighteneth every man that cometh into this world. He was in the world: and the world knew him not. (John 1:7–10)

A clearer understanding of this panel can be reached through the opening passage of Pseudo-Dionysius's *The Mystical Theology*:

What is divine darkness?

Trinity!! Higher than any being,

Any divinity, any goodness!

Guide of Christians

in the wisdom of heaven!

Lead us up beyond unknowing and light,

up to the farthest, highest peak

of mystic scripture,

where the mysteries of God's Word

lie simple, absolute and unchangeable
in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.
Amid the deepest shadow
they pour overwhelming light
on what is most manifest.
Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen
they completely fill our sightless minds
with treasures beyond all beauty. (Luibheid 1987, p. 135)



Figure 2. Leonardo da Vinci, *Saint John the Baptist*, c. 1513. Oil on panel, 69 × 57 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo Credit: Erich Lessing/ Art Resource, NY.

It is beyond light where God resides in “brilliant darkness” and “amid the deepest shadow”. Pseudo-Dionysius instructs that one cannot obtain unification with God if one is caught up with the things of this world. One must abandon oneself and everything else to have direct knowledge of God.

Leonardo presents the viewer with a palpable, tangible, and corporeal form of Saint John that represents what we know, the things we can perceive, the things of this world. Saint John, however, directs our eyes upward toward the light, but I would argue beyond the light to divine darkness. The dark backdrop behind Saint John serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, it contributes to the three-dimensional form of the Saint, pressing the figure forward with great immediacy toward the viewer. On the other hand, it serves a metaphorical purpose by suggesting what lies beyond the world, even beyond the light,

God. Here, Leonardo juxtaposes what can be seen (Saint John) and what cannot (God) communicated by the black abyss behind the Saint.

Lombard artists, following the cues of Leonardo, seem to comprehend the function of his *chiaroscuro* for the purpose of devotional affect. As Franciscan devotional guides to meditation and contemplation center on the Passion of Christ, it is not surprising that affective *chiaroscuro* appears in Lombard works centering on this subject.¹² One example is Girolamo Romanino's c. 1542 *Christ Carrying the Cross* (Figure 3). Romanino extracts Christ carrying the cross from the narrative context of his Way to Calvary, creating a tangible, icon-like image intended for devotional purposes.¹³ The image draws parallels to a drawing of the *Head of Christ* by Leonardo in the Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice, executed c. 1490–95; thus, made during Leonardo's first Milanese sojourn. Romanino has restricted the figures to two, Christ and one soldier, who clenches the rope around Christ's neck. The darkness behind the figures functions to focus viewers' meditations on Christ's suffering while simultaneously referencing affective night, the time when meditation and contemplation are optimal. The light hits the figure of Christ from the upper left, dappling the beautiful red and pink sleeve of his garment with painterly effects. Viewers begin with the visible and tactile, but it is only after relinquishing what they see and know that they can rise to divine darkness to be unified with God. Thus, visually, viewers must abandon what they see and know before they journey to the divine darkness of the unknowable that permeates *beyond* the subject.



Figure 3. Girolamo Romanino, c. 1542. Oil on canvas, 81 × 72 cm. Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan. Photo Credit: Mondadori Portfolio/Art Resource, NY.

The influence of Leonardo-Franciscan *chiaroscuro* can also be found in subjects beyond Christ's Passion. Brescian painter Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo's 1534 *Saint Matthew and the Angel* (Figure 4) depicts the Evangelist at his desk penning his gospel, lit only by the candle that flickers at its edge. Surrounded by darkness, the viewers' eyes focus on the play of flickering candlelight on his red and pink garment. Matthew turns his head upward, casting most of his face in shadow, as he looks toward the angel that hovers slightly above him for divine inspiration. Here, Pseudo-Dionysius's angelology and mystical guide, both of which influenced Franciscan writers, can facilitate our understanding of what Savoldo presents to the viewer. The angel, Pseudo-Dionysius's third rank of angels, those that preside among and as guides for humans, guides ("inspires") Matthew to write the words of his Gospel. Although Matthew appears to look up toward the angel, his gaze looks beyond the angel to the black recesses of the room above him. *Chiaroscuro* once again functions on a practical level to form the figure of Saint Matthew and to focus our attention, but the Evangelist then directs our eyes to divine darkness.¹⁴



Figure 4. Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo, *Saint Matthew and the Angel*, 1534. Oil on canvas, 93.4 × 124.5 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

In Lombardy, we first begin to see *chiaroscuro* used for the purposes of affect, motivated by Leonardo's experimentation with *chiaroscuro*, beginning with his Franciscan commission for the *Virgin of the Rocks*. There, the fertile ground of Franciscan devotional texts drew from the defining darkness of the Pseudo-Dionysius and the Franciscan texts published in Milan and circulating during the early Cinquecento. Together, they facilitated Leonardo's development of *chiaroscuro* beyond the premises of artmaking toward its potential to guide viewers to affective meditation. Light and shadow no longer merely served as binary aspects of rendering three-dimensional form but acted instead as prompts for meditation

and contemplation. These developments emerged prior to the Counter-Reformation. In the 1563 decree about images, formulated in the final session of the Council of Trent, sacred images must “incite devotion”. However, the contention of scholars that affective style began with the Counter-Reformation can no longer be upheld.

One of the primary post-Tridentine treatises that emerged in Italy, Gabriele Paleotti’s *Discorso alle immagini sacre e profane* (1582), notes that paintings should excite devotion and “prick [pungere] the heart”.¹⁵ The focus on Christ’s Passion and suffering in early Franciscan guides to meditation, however, already served to *pungere il cuore* (“pierce” or “prick the heart”), to move the faithful not only to feel grief and regret and repent for their sins, but also to reject the earthly world and the knowable (visible), and to purify their soul in order to achieve unification with the divine, who is unknowable, hidden, and cloaked in divine darkness. In fact, we see this phrase frequently in the biographies of Saint Francis of Assisi. According to Celano, when preaching the Gospel to his first six brethren, “his word was like a blazing fire piercing through inmost heart, and it filled the minds of all with wonder” (Thomas of Celano 1908, p. 23). In witnessing Francis’s repentance and listening to his words, Celano describes how “they were so pricked in heart and urged by so signal an example to a better way of life”, “many of them were pricked at the heart as they wondered at God’s grace and the steadfastness of the man [Francis]”, and “the bishop, pricked at the heart gave thanks to God for the purity of the man of God [Francis]” (Thomas of Celano 1908, pp. 32, 72, 76). More importantly, in Saint Bonaventure’s biography of Saint Francis, he describes that while in fervent prayer, Christ appeared to him in the form of a crucifix,

At which sight his whole soul seemed to melt away; and so deeply was the memory of Christ’s Passion impressed [thus, “pricked”] on his heart, that it pierced even to the marrow of his bones. From that hour, whenever he thought upon the Passion of Christ, he could scarcely restrain his tears and signs. (Bonaventure 1868, p. 14)

Following the example of Leonardo’s exploration of *chiaroscuro* for spiritual means, Lombard artists transformed *chiaroscuro* into a powerful vehicle of spiritual, mystical, and transformative affectivity.

5. Epilogue

Through the framework of “affective darkness”, we can better understand the intensified shadows in Caravaggio’s canvases in the first decade of the Seicento. While writers of the past and present attempt to explain away the artist’s tenebrous canvases via his dark character and familiarity with and proclivity for violence or to hide his lack of skill in the precepts of painting, I would argue we need instead to consider reading Caravaggio’s work through the lens of Franciscan devotion and meditation.

Caravaggio’s first religious work was the c. 1594 *Saint Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy* (Figure 5), currently in the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum in Hartford. The work was owned by the Genoese nobleman and papal banker Ottavio Costa. Whether the painting was directly commissioned by Costa from Caravaggio or was acquired later, a Saint Francis-themed painting would have interested Costa, as his recently born second son had been baptized Pier Francesco, and Saint Francis would have served as his name saint (Ebert-Schifferer 2012, p. 85). The canvas depicts the prone form of Saint Francis (dressed in a Capuchin habit) supported by a youthful angel in the foreground, a pensive Brother Leo in the middle ground, and shepherds that point up to the nocturnal sky in the background.

Pamela Askew, Bert Treffers, and Stuart Lingo have already interpreted the unusual iconography of *Saint Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy* in Hartford in a Franciscan light, but not in terms of Franciscan affective darkness (Askew 1969, pp. 280–306; Treffers 1988, pp. 145–72; Lingo 1998, pp. 186–222). The painting references Francis’s stigmatization on Mount La Verna, but there is a lack of scholarly consensus on the moment captured in Caravaggio’s canvas. Three unorthodox elements contribute to the difficulties in identifying the narrative moment: (1) in the painting, Caravaggio has placed Saint Francis in the foreground, collapsed in the arms of a youthful angel, (2) the vision of the seraph with man crucified is

absent, and (3) the wounds in Saint Francis's hands and feet are also noticeably missing; only the wound in his side is visible. Pamela Askew suggests that it was only when the seraph disappeared that the wounds began to appear.¹⁶ Bert Treffers, on the other hand, proposed that Caravaggio depicts the spiritual ecstasy *after* the stigmatization.¹⁷ Stuart Lingo makes a compelling case supporting the subject of the painting as a stigmatization through the examination of Franciscan and Capuchin texts (Lingo 1998, pp. 186–222). He provides extensive textual evidence that explains the anomalies in Caravaggio's rendition of the stigmatization. Although I agree with Lingo's compelling reading, looking at the iconography through Franciscan devotion and affective *chiaroscuro* may reveal a more cohesive reading of Caravaggio's first sacred image.



Figure 5. Michelangelo Merisi (Caravaggio), *Saint Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy*, c. 1594. Oil on canvas, 92.5 × 127.8 cm. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum, Hartford. Photo Credit: HIP / Art Resource, NY.

As Askew has noted, the composition of the angel and Saint Francis evokes parallels with images of Christ supported by an angel (or angels), particularly his Agony in the Garden (pre-Crucifixion), the Lamentation (*after* his Crucifixion), and the devotional Man of Sorrows (Askew 1969, pp. 290–94). On the one hand, the angel supporting Saint Francis may have functioned as visual evidence of the Saint's conformity to Christ. The night landscape is typically explained through biblical parallels or biographical ones drawn from Franciscan descriptions of Francis's experience on Mount La Verna. There is, I would argue, an additional layer here that connects to the dramatic *chiaroscuro* within the landscape through the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius and Franciscan meditation. In his *The Celestial Hierarchy*, Pseudo-Dionysius notes that at the top of the hierarchy are the "thrones, seraphim and cherubim", who are united to God (Luibheid 1987, p. 161). "Seraphim" means "fire-makers" or "carriers of warmth", which through Franciscan texts—especially Saint Bonaventure—connected to Saint Francis's vision of a seraph on Mount La Verna, as we discussed above, which "left in his heart a wondrous glow" (Luibheid

1987, p. 161; Bonaventure 1868, p. 164). The third rank within *The Celestial Hierarchy* were “the principalities, archangels, and angels”, who guide humans toward God. The angel represents Pseudo-Dionysius’s third rank of angels, those who preside over the human hierarchies and guide humans to God. Saint Francis, who is the Seraphic Saint and *Alter Christus*, is closest to God. The light, therefore, falls largely on the angel. Viewers (humans) are guided by the angel to Francis, the seraphic saint (seraphim). Francis points to the wound at his side, which in images of the Man Sorrows is the most prominent wound on Christ’s body and the one that bleeds more abundantly. In his conformity to Christ, he has united with the divine. His eyes are nearly closed, and he no longer fixates on the visible (the light) but is plunged into metaphorical divine darkness as the darkness of the landscape begins to encroach on his form physically. As Pseudo-Dionysius’s *The Mystical Theology* explains, and Franciscan meditational guides later emphasize, it is in darkness that true unification with the Divine occurs. Here, Caravaggio visually explicates the stages or ways to achieve unification with God, using Pseudo-Dionysius’s angelology.

The mystery may not lie within the realm of what Caravaggio intends to communicate to the viewer, but rather the divine mystery signified by the darkness that visibly and metaphorically lies beyond the edges of the light. In the artist’s c. 1604 *Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (Figure 6), painted for the Marchese Vincenzo Giustiniani and his brother Cardinal Benedetto Giustiniani, Caravaggio extracts the narrative of the resurrected Christ’s appearance to the Doubting Thomas and plunges them into a darkened nondescript space. In doing so, he focuses viewers’ attention on the moment, which visually explicates how one obtains faith. Only the Gospel of John recounts the story of the Doubting Thomas. It was only when Thomas was able to see and penetrate Christ’s wound at his side that Thomas believed. It is Christ’s final words to Thomas, however, that speak directly to the Protestant–Catholic divide between “faith alone” and “faith and good works”. In response to Thomas’s acknowledgment of Christ’s resurrection, Christ utters these profound words: “Because thou hast seen me, Thomas, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen and have believed” (John 20:29). This is a story about true faith. Thomas did not believe until he had seen and then touched his wounds. Christ’s response, however, privileges those that did not require visual and physical proof. Pseudo-Dionysius’s description of the mystical journey toward God connects to this story about true faith and functions as a driving force in the presence of “affective *chiaroscuro*”. He demands that one must abandon the attachment to the senses and knowledge to arrive “where the mysteries of God’s Word lie simple, absolute and unchangeable in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence” (Luibheid 1987, p. 135). The darkness here lies beyond the figures, even the resurrected Christ. Caravaggio directs the light forcefully on the resurrected Christ and Thomas’s finger in His side wound. He visually and metaphorically emphasizes that the senses and empirical knowledge function as obstacles to true unification with God in divine darkness.



Figure 6. Michelangelo Merisi (Caravaggio), *Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, c. 1604. Oil on canvas, 107 × 146 cm. Sanssouci, Potsdam. Photo Credit: bpk Bildagentur/Bildergalerie, Potsdam/Gerhard Murza/ Art Resource, NY.

Elsewhere, I have argued that this distinction between true faith (beyond the senses) and “assisted” faith reliant on the senses helps to confirm that it is the youth at the left end of the custom’s table who is the true Saint Matthew in Caravaggio’s *Calling of Saint Matthew* (Figure 7) (Muraoka 2015, pp. 169–74; 2021, pp. 311–39). He is the only one seated at the table that does not look toward Christ. Taking this a step further, one could argue that his head is purposefully lowered, placing his face alone almost entirely in shadow. Could Caravaggio be metaphorically pointing to the fact that Levi has already converted and achieved the sweetness of unity with the divine? Viewing Caravaggio’s works through this lens of Franciscan affective darkness may reveal additional nuances that have heretofore been described as mere ambiguity.



Figure 7. Michelangelo Merisi (Caravaggio), *Calling of Saint Matthew*, 1599–1600. Oil on canvas, 322 × 340 cm. Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome. Photo Credit: Scala/Art Resource, NY.

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Notes

- ¹ Claudio Lehmann addresses the history of *chiaroscuro* in art and theory from Cennino Cennini to Filippo Baldinucci. See (Lehmann 2018, pp. 9–47).
- ² (Pierguidi 2015, pp. 43–52). Pierguidi notes that juxtaposing Barocci's *Vita* with that of Caravaggio's may have been for the purposes of highlighting the deficiencies in the style of the latter, but there were commonalities between their use of light and color that Bellori failed to recognize.

- ³ Janis Bell notes that while Caravaggio's colors appear saturated, they are in fact desaturated. To maintain the dramatic *chiaroscuro* and tonal unification, Caravaggio adeptly juxtaposed color to maximize apparent saturation. See (Bell 1995, pp. 139–70; 1993, pp. 103–29).
- ⁴ Bellori describes Caravaggio's Cerasi Chapel laterals (*Crucifixion of Saint Peter* and the *Conversion of Saint Paul*) as narratives without action. See (Bellori [1672] 1976, p. 207).
- ⁵ (Rzepińska 1986, p. 102). See also (Gill 2013, pp. 262–66). In this essay, Gill also makes important connections with Augustine on these Spanish mystics, other writers, and post-Trent art. I acknowledge the importance of Augustine even on the Franciscans, which I plan to address in my book manuscript, but the emphasis here is centered on the dominance of the Franciscans.
- ⁶ (Saint John of the Cross 1987, pp. 55–153). Book 1 centers on the first stage, the active night of the sense, Book 2 on the active night of the spirit, and Book 3 on the passive night, or stage of purgation where a soul may reach union with God. See also (Rzepińska 1986, p. 101).
- ⁷ (Scannelli 1657, p. 196). The Lombard School is discussed in Book 2, Chapter 10: "We find in the same School others of different and extraordinary talents, whose paintings are not similar to those of their predecessors, and which procure more praise based on their proper genius with the observations of details, a manner corresponding naturalness, including the great Leader [of the Lombard School] Correggio for being able with such means to form all he could with a particular manner of working, most graceful, delicate and true; in this given manner, [we] see exactly in [the work of] *Federico Barocci* [my italics], Lodovico Civali [Cigoli], Francesco Vanni, *Michelangelo da Caravaggio* [my italics], Christoforo Allori, called Bronzino, and of the others names, the little Spaniard [Jusepe de Ribera], Bartolomeo Manfredi, and other similar one".
- ⁸ (Olszewski 2011, pp. 4–9). Olszewski connects Leonardo's invention of *sfumato* directly to Bernardino de' Busti's *Mariale* (63 sermons on Mary), and particularly on the 9 sermons devoted to the Immaculate Conception. He notes that in the *Virgin of the Rocks*, Mary emerges from the shadow of sin, which connects to passages from de' Busti's passages "Mary, crowned with living light", "free from shadow, you reflect plenitude of grace", leaving humanity "in the orbit of shadow". See (Olszewski 2011, p. 5, note 6).
- ⁹ (Snow-Smith 1987, p. 53). The grouping of the Virgin, Christ Child, and infant Saint John the Baptist, although not unusual in devotional formats, the placement of the figures within an elaborate natural setting, points to a narrative subject. The *Meditationes* recounts this meeting; however, it does not mention the Archangel Gabriel.
- ¹⁰ (Goffen 1986, p. 218). Goffen describes that while his mother was pregnant with him, she had a dream that her son was given the Franciscan habit and knotted cord by Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Anthony of Padua. This dream is visually document in Pope Sixtus IV's first medal where on the reverse of his portrait bust, Saints Francis and Anthony of Padua crown Francesco della Rovere as pope.
- ¹¹ Saint Bonaventure called Pseudo-Dionysius "the prince of mystics". See (Leclercq 1987, p. 29). Special thanks to my student Kayla Bruce. It was while working with Kayla on her master's thesis on the Franciscan connection of Michelangelo Buonarroti's angel heads on images of the Virgin and Christ Child that led me to further think about the relevance of Pseudo-Dionysius. See Bruce (2023).
- ¹² This essay is part of a larger book manuscript, and thus, I am limiting the examples here.
- ¹³ There are numerous Lombard examples of this subject matter, including Lorenzo Lotto (although Venetian, he worked in Lombardy), Cesare da Sesto, and Giampietrino.
- ¹⁴ In her discussion of Savoldo's half-length paintings of the Magdalene, *chiaroscuro* is described as a means to suggest the temporal unfolding of a narrative, while also alluding to something "unpaintable, a transition—from blindness to sight, from loss to restitution, from mortal to supernatural reality" prompted by the visual metaphors of light and shadow. See (Pardo 1989, p. 73).
- ¹⁵ (Paleotti [1582] 1961, vol. 2, p. 408; Paleotti [1582] 2012, p. 251). This phrase has a longstanding history, beginning in Latin patristic literature, through the Middle Ages, and continuing through the Early Modern period. See (Stowell 2014, p. 16).
- ¹⁶ (Askew 1969, pp. 285–86). According to Bonaventure, "The vision disappearing. . .there began immediately to appear in his hands and in his feet the appearance of nails. . .[and] on the right side, as if it had been pierced by a lance". See (Bonaventure 1868, p. 164).
- ¹⁷ (Treffers 1988, pp. 150–54). Treffers has highlighted a sixteenth-century text by Bernardino da Colpetrazzo (1525–93) entitled *Historia ordinis fratrum minorum Capuccinorum*, which describes Saint Francis's physical state immediately after the stigmatization. According to Bernardino, after the appearance of the seraph, Saint Francis's mind turned to God and then the physical transformation began; first with right hand, then the left, the feet, and his side. After receiving the stigmata, Saint Francis fell to the ground "as if he was dead".

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