

Bachelor of Science in Art History and Theory Thesis

Neither Sacred nor Profane, but Somewhere In Between:

Caravaggio's Depictions of Saint John the Baptist in Relation to the Council of Trent

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Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirement for the degree of
Bachelor of Science in Art History and Theory, School of Art and Design
Division of Art History

New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University

Alfred, New York

2017



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On Sunday, May 28, 1606, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610) killed Ranuccio Tomassini in a swordfight. His punishment: exile, with a bounty placed on him—anyone in the Papal States could claim the reward for procuring the artist's severed head. This crime was one of many in the turbulent, violent life of Caravaggio; however, unlike his previous brushes with the law, Caravaggio's wealthy and powerful patrons could not save him this time, and he was forced to flee Rome. For the remainder of his life, Caravaggio was continually on the run, from the Alban Hills to Naples, and from there to Malta, where he joined the order of the Knights of Saint John, only to be "expelled and thrust forth like a rotten and diseased limb" just three months later for assaulting another knight.¹ After Caravaggio's daring escape from an underground prison beneath the Fort Sant' Angelo, Malta, he fled to Sicily. By early 1610, there was hope of a papal pardon for the murder of Tomassini, so Caravaggio set off for Rome in early July that year; however, he would not return to the city. Instead, Caravaggio was wrongly imprisoned en-route at the Spanish garrison Palo. When he was finally released a few days later, the ailing artist desperately rode to Porto Ercole in an attempt to retrieve his precious paintings from the boat that continued its voyage while he was in jail. While the exact circumstances of his death remain unknown, by mid-July 1610 Caravaggio was dead.²

Before the tumultuous events that sent Caravaggio into exile and ultimately led to his demise, he was incredibly successful in Rome and wildly popular thanks to the rich

¹ This is a quote from the records of the Grand Assembly of the Knights of Malta that met on December 1, 1608, that removed Caravaggio from the Order and stripped him of his knighthood. See: Faith Ashford, "Caravaggio's Stay in Malta," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, no. 391 (1935): 174.

² At the time of his death, Caravaggio had three paintings on his person, two of which were depictions of Saint John the Baptist, both of which were reported in a letter dated July 29, 1610 from the Bishop of Caserta to Cardinal Borghese. See: Sandro Corradini, *Caravaggio: materiali per un processo*, (Rome: Monografie Romane, 1993) document 139, p. 105.

and powerful patronage of high-ranking cardinals, clergy and their relatives. Having already painted a number of both secular and religious works, there is one subject that Caravaggio would return to throughout the entirety of his short, turbulent career: Saint John the Baptist. Caravaggio painted at least six different versions of John the Baptist.³ All of the paintings but one are intimate, full-length portrayals of an isolated, scantily-clad youth draped in a sumptuous red cloth. This thesis explores how Caravaggio continues the Florentine tradition of depicting Saint John the Baptist as a youth; however, due to Caravaggio's stylistic use of light and shadow, his emphasis on corporeality, and his rejection of the saint's traditional iconography, the artist's depictions of the Baptist were recognized by seventeenth-century viewers as both sacred and profane. Caravaggio's rendering of the sensuous, adolescent body of Saint John the Baptist serves as a vehicle for salvation—a new approach to private devotion that is radical due to its inclusion of the profane. The three Caravaggio paintings that I will examine simultaneously defy and conform to the Council of Trent's decree on sacred art and present the male body as a path to salvation, pushing the boundaries of the sacred and profane in Counter Reformation art in early seventeenth-century Italy.

Of the six surviving versions, the earliest depiction portrays a young John the Baptist in a sunlit grotto; the authorship is disputed, but the work was painted around 1594 to 1595, and resides in the Cathedral Treasury-Museum in Toledo, Spain. In a short, five-year span from 1602 to 1605, Caravaggio painted three more depictions of John the Baptist alone in the desert. The first shows an adolescent Baptist cuddling a ram, was

³ Four of these depictions of Saint John the Baptist were painted during Caravaggio's stay in Rome, from 1592 to 1606.

completed around 1602, and now resides in the Capitoline Museum in Rome (Fig. 1).⁴

Another semi-length depiction of the saint was completed around 1604. Unlike Caravaggio's two previous depictions of the Baptist, this version is oriented horizontally; it is located in the National Gallery of Ancient Art in Rome.⁵ The authorship of this painting is also disputed due to the sketchy, patchy brushwork; however, there is a possibility that Caravaggio supervised the undertaking of this work by one of his assistants.⁶

Around 1604, Ottavio Costa commissioned the last *Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness* painting that Caravaggio completed while in Rome, which functioned as an altarpiece and is found today in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City (Fig. 2).⁷ During Caravaggio's time in exile, from 1606 to his death in 1610, he continued to paint Saint John the Baptist: at least two of these paintings are extant. In 1613, three years after the death of Caravaggio, Cardinal Scipione Borghese obtained one of these later

⁴ The medium of this painting is oil on canvas and it measures 129 by 95 cm, and is located in the Capitoline Museum in Rome. Inv. PC 239. In addition to the copy in the Doria Pamphilj Gallery, (authorship of which remains disputed but is attributed to a close peer of Caravaggio with possible interventions from the artist himself), there are four copies of this 1602 painting listed in various private collections, as early as 1628 through the year 1691. These various copies are listed in the following inventories: In Spain, an inventory of Doctor Juan de Matute in 1628 listed a painting by Caravaggio as "Nude Saint John embracing the lamb;" in Madrid, a 1691 inventory of the collection of Juan Gaspar Enríquez de Cabrera, Duke of Medina de Rioseco (1646-1705) also includes a painting of "Nude Saint John embracing the lamb;" Wilhelm von Fürstenberg (1623-1699) acquired a copy in Rome that was deemed an original in 1666 when the painting was restored, and remains today in the von Fürstenberg collection in Schönborn Castle, Pommersfelden, Germany; the Doria Pamphilj copy is recorded in a 1652 inventory of the Guardaroba of the Doria Pamphilj Palace. See: John T. Spike, *Caravaggio*, (New York: Abbeville Press, 2001) 139-141.

⁵ This is an oil on canvas painting that measures 94 by 131 cm. inv. No. 433.

⁶ Spike, 206-207.

⁷ This oil on canvas painting measures 172.72 x 132.08 cm. Inv. No. 52-25. Two copies were made of this work: the earliest copy was listed in a 1615 inventory of the Oratory of the church of Sant' Alessandro, and is further documented in a 1624 inventory of the same building. Today, this copy exists in the Diocesan Museum of Sacred Art in Albenga, while the other copy can be found in the National Museum of Capodimonte. Spike notes (p. 181) that the Capodimonte copy could be a contemporary to the Nelson-Atkins original work.

depictions of the Baptist, created from around 1609 to 1610; today it is housed in the Borghese Gallery (Fig. 3).⁸ The sixth version of Saint John the Baptist, created around 1610, which was found on Caravaggio's person when he died, illustrates the saint in profile and reclining on a horizontally-oriented canvas; it is in a private collection in Munich.⁹

Approach

Originally, the focus of my research was reception theory and Caravaggio's patrons. My interest lay in his patrons' desires and their subsequent commissions that Caravaggio fulfilled. Did they knowingly commission paintings from an artist whose altarpieces were often rejected due to their profane content?¹⁰ Were his works considered as risqué and alluring during the Counter Reformation in Italy as they are today? Having already written a paper on the homoerotic qualities of some of the works in Cardinal del Monte's collection, I decided to investigate a topic that Caravaggio returned to at least six times during his short career: his sensuous, corporeal depictions of the adolescent Saint John the Baptist. I then decided to rule out the disputed works and those paintings with an unclear provenance, resulting in the present study that examines the following three works: the 1602 version at the Capitoline Museum in Rome; the 1604-1605 depiction in

⁸ This depiction is an oil on canvas painting that measures 159 by 124 cm, with no known Inv. No.

⁹ This depiction is an oil on canvas painting that measures 102 x 179.5 cm, with no known Inv. No.

¹⁰ Caravaggio had at least three altarpieces rejected while working in Rome. *Saint Matthew and the Angel* was completed in 1602 for the Contarelli Chapel in the Church of San Luigi dei Francesi but was rejected since the saint was perceived as a gaping, illiterate peasant; *Madonna and Child with Saint Anne* completed around 1605-1606 was also eschewed by the Arciconfraternita di Sant'Anna de Parafrenieri due to the Virgin's exposed bosom and the depiction of Saint Anne as an old crone. *The Death of the Virgin*, completed in 1606, was also deemed unfit for the parish of the Carmelite Church of Santa Maria della Scala due to the indecorous portrayal of the Virgin, who was modeled after a drowned prostitute. For more, see: Graham-Dixon, 236-237; 307-309; 311-312.

the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri; and the 1608-1610 version in the Borghese Gallery in Rome.¹¹

Counter Reformation Art before and during Caravaggio's Time

Originally from the little town of Caravaggio, from which he took his name, Caravaggio worked primarily in Rome, from 1592 until 1606, when he was exiled from the city and had a bounty placed on his head for the murder of Ranuccio Tomassini. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was born in 1571, eight years after the Council of Trent (1545-1563) concluded its final session. Well before Caravaggio flourished as an artist during the fourteen years that he spent in Rome, the Council of Trent's decree on sacred and profane images was already significantly impacting Counter Reformation art. The Council of Trent was held in the Northern Italian cities of Trent and Bologna and was composed of twenty-five sessions, ranging in topic from doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church to the veneration of saints, as well as issuing decrees on sacred and profane art.¹² These decrees not only deemed what was part of the canon for the Church and scripture, but also offered guidelines and reiterated the purpose of sacred art. For instance, Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti (1522-1597) played a crucial role during the Council of Trent; his own text, *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images* (*De sacris et profanes imaginibus*), first printed in 1582, outlined the Council of Trent's views on the content of sacred art and emphasized its role to delight, teach, and move (*dilettare, insegnare, et*

¹¹ The works that were not included in this study are the Toledo *Saint John the Baptist* (c.1598), the National Gallery *Saint John the Baptist* (c.1604), and the Munich *Saint John the Baptist* (1610).

¹² For more on the Council of Trent, see: "Council of Trent," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, April 26, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Council-of-Trent>

muovere) the viewer.¹³ Paleotti's *Discourse* presented criteria for an artwork to be considered sacred or profane and expounded on the importance of devotional art as a tool for the illiterate.¹⁴

Ten years after Paleotti's *Discourse* was printed, Ippolito Aldobrandini was elected on February 2, 1592 as Pope Clement VIII (r. 1592-1605), just a few months before Caravaggio's arrival in Rome. Clement VIII was determined to carry out the decrees issued by the Council of Trent; his Papal Bull, *Speculatores domus Israel* (issued June 8, 1592), aimed to examine every church in Rome, from questioning the clergy to scrutinizing the church's decoration and art.¹⁵ Despite his Counter-Reformation zeal and his religious fervor (he personally inspected the churches and interrogated clergy), the hostility and iconoclasm leveled at Greco-Roman mythology and art lessened during Clement VIII's pontificate. Moreover, out of the public eye, those with deep pockets who often had ties to the Church, whether through a relative or the cardinals themselves, were the driving force for commissioning profane images.¹⁶ Caravaggio was one of the beneficiaries of this shift in taste and tolerance for profane art.

¹³ Paleotti discusses the three parts that every Christian image must contain: delight (*diletto*), impact, more so than books (*industria*) and the ability to move the emotions of the viewer (*affetto*). In Book 1, chapters 22 through 26 of his *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*, Paleotti expounds on the roles of Christian images to delight, impact, and move the observer. For more, see Gabriele Paleotti, *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*, trans. William McCuaig (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2012), 111-123.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 309

¹⁵ The Papal Bull was abandoned roughly four years later after only twenty-eight churches were inspected. While the decree failed in examining every church in Rome, Pope Clement VIII succeeded in sending a warning to Roman clergymen to uphold the Council of Trent's decrees and to be fastidious in choosing and displaying sacred art. During his time in Rome, Caravaggio had several altarpieces rejected due to their profane content (see footnote 10 above). For more, see: Graham-Dixon, 71.

¹⁶ Cardinal del Monte was Caravaggio's first patron and primary protector in Rome. He bought several secular works from Caravaggio including *The Gypsy Fortune Teller* (c.1594) and *The Cardsharps* (c.1594) and later commissioned more paintings from the artist, such as *Saint Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy* (c.1595) and *The Musicians* (c.1595). Through Cardinal del Monte Caravaggio was introduced to several more

With the newfound tolerance of non-devotional images within the private sphere, Caravaggio received a range of commissions that included the profane, but also the sacred and those that fell somewhere in-between. Caravaggio's patrons ranged from high-ranking officials in the Church, such as Cardinal del Monte (1549-1627), to the secular bourgeoisie, including the Genoese banker Ottavio Costa (1554-1639) and the nobleman Ciriaco Mattei (died 1614). Even these wealthy and powerful patrons could not save Caravaggio from being exiled and receiving the capital sentence for murder for which he was condemned. As mentioned above, the remainder of Caravaggio's short life after his trial and sentencing was spent on the run in Naples, Malta, and Sicily. In all of these places, he continued to paint and secure commissions.¹⁷ Interestingly, a number of Caravaggio's paintings completed while he was in exile found their way back to Rome because of the strong ties of his former patrons in that city.¹⁸

Caravaggio's representation of an adolescent Saint John the Baptist alone in the wilderness is not unique or particularly groundbreaking; instead, he actually continues the Florentine Renaissance tradition of depicting the solitary prophet as a less-than-haggard youth. Notable examples by the artists in sixteenth-century Florence include the

patrons such as Federico Borromeo who obtained Caravaggio's still-life *Basket of Fruit* (c.1596) and Vincenzo Giustiani, who commissioned *Love Conquers All* (1602). Another of Caravaggio's powerful patrons was Scipione Borghese, who bought several works by the artist, and introduced him to Pope Paul V, for whom Caravaggio painted a portrait, that is now lost. For more, see: Graham-Dixon, 98; 132; 136-137; 240; 304-305.

¹⁷ During Caravaggio's stay in Malta, he completed two separate portraits of the renowned Knights of Malta, Fra Antonio Martelli and a full-length portrait of the Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt in the year 1607, followed by a large altarpiece, *The Beheading of Saint John* in 1608. For more, see Dixon 358-384. In Sicily, Caravaggio was commissioned by the Senate of Syracuse to paint an altarpiece, *The Burial of Saint Lucy*, for the newly-restored basilica Santa Lucia al Sepolcro. The work was begun and finished in the year 1608, in time for Saint Lucy's feast day on the 13th of December; see: Dixon, 399.

¹⁸ Of the three paintings that were on Caravaggio's person at the time of his death, two were depictions of Saint John the Baptist: the Borghese Gallery *Saint John the Baptist* and the Munich *Saint John the Baptist*. In a letter to Cardinal Scipione Borghese, Bishop of Caserta Deodata Gentile mentions these paintings as well as a depiction of Mary Magdalene, possibly the painting *Magdalene in Ecstasy*, from 1610 in a private collection in Rome. For more, see: Spike, 303-308.

following: Leonardo da Vinci's *Saint John the Baptist* (1513-1516) in the Louvre Museum (Fig. 4);¹⁹ Raphael's *Saint John the Baptist in the Desert, Indicating the Cross of the Passion* (1517), also in the Louvre Museum (Fig. 5);²⁰ Andrea del Sarto's *Saint John the Baptist* (1523), located in the Palatina Gallery in Florence (Fig. 6);²¹ Giampietrino's *Saint John the Baptist* (ca.1530), in the Ponce Museum of Art (Fig. 7);²² Agnolo Bronzino's manneristic portrait *Giovanni de Medici as Saint John the Baptist* (1560-1562) in the Borghese Gallery (Fig. 8);²³ and Michele Tosini's *Saint John the Baptist* (1570), in the Saint Louis Art Museum (Fig. 9).²⁴ In each of these depictions, John the Baptist is rather consistently represented as a muscular, handsome youth, shown with a reed cross, a baptismal bowl, or a banderole. The saint is also shown with a lamb, representing the *Agnus Dei*, as seen in the Ponce Museum portrait, or pointing upwards toward heaven and dressed in a camelhair pelt, as represented in the two works located at the Louvre.²⁵ Of these typical attributes shown in these Florentine depictions, the Baptist's garb and the landscape setting are drawn directly from the scripture, where John the Baptist is described as lone voice in the desert wilderness, dressed in camelhair (Mark I: 3-6).²⁶

Unlike these Florentine predecessors, Caravaggio's depictions differ in a variety of ways, including their departure from the traditional iconography, as well as the

¹⁹ This is an oil on wood panel painting that measures 69 by 57 cm. inv. No. 755.

²⁰ This is an oil on canvas painting that measures 135 by 142 cm., inv. No. 40-08-03/64.

²¹ This is an oil on panel painting that measures 94 by 68 cm., no inv. No.

²² This is an oil on wood panel painting that measures 71.1 by 54 cm., inv. No. 62.0263.

²³ This is an oil on panel painting that measures 120 by 92 cm., no inv. No.

²⁴ This is an oil on panel painting that measures 66.5 by 54.6 cm., inv. No. 12:2006.

²⁵ The *Agnus Dei* is drawn from when John the Baptist sees Jesus approaching and says "Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). "Douay-Rheims Bible + Challoner Notes," *DROB.ORG*, accessed March 22, 2017. <http://www.drbo.org/index.htm>.

²⁶ (Mark I: 3-6) <http://www.drbo.org/index.htm>.

addition of tenebrism (the dramatic use of light and shadow), and his inclusion of coarse models who appear to have been pulled off the street. I argue the case that Caravaggio's choice in formal elements and iconography eroticizes the figure, resulting in rather profane portrayals of the saint. Caravaggio's erotic depictions of Saint John the Baptist focus the viewer's attention on the saint's corporeality, rather than his divinity. This focus on the body not only sensualizes the saint but creates a visual tension between the holy figure depicted and the earthly viewer that pushes the boundaries of private devotion outside the Church. Caravaggio uses the male body as a vehicle of faith that offers a new way of engaging with the saint that is much more intimate than the previous depictions of Saint John the Baptist. There is a sense of immediacy and titillation for the viewer that results from Caravaggio's earthly presentation of the Baptist and the saint's placement in the direct foreground of the composition. Rather than portray an untouchable, idealized youth as John the Baptist, Caravaggio's depictions of the saint are more naturalistic, approachable, and sensuous for the viewer. The traditional attributes of Saint John the Baptist such as the lamb, camelhair robe, and severed head are replaced with subtle Christian symbols that link the Baptist to Christ.²⁷ This intimate, appealing portrayal of the saint fulfills the purpose of sacred images according to the Council of Trent—that art should delight, teach, and move the audience. With Caravaggio's subtle handling of Christian iconography, as compared to his Florentine predecessors, his depictions of the Baptist are more sophisticated and were pleasing to his learned patrons due to their revolutionary inclusion of the profane for a sacred subject. Clearly, Caravaggio's fleshy

²⁷ John the Baptist foresaw Christ's coming and ultimately recognizes him as the son of God when John baptizes Christ and a dove appears (John 1:33) <http://www.drbo.org/index.htm>. Caravaggio's emphasis on John the Baptist's link to Christ breaks with the Florentine tradition of the conventional representation of the saint. Additionally, the focus on John the Baptist as a forerunner of Christ emphasizes his and Christ's corporeality and physicality rather than the saint's divinity and martyrdom.

sensory realism and eroticism was not lost on contemporary clergymen in Rome. For example, in 1603, in a letter to a friend, Cardinal Ottavio Paravicino describes Caravaggio's work as "neither sacred nor profane, but somewhere in between (*tra il devoto, et profano*)."²⁸

Saint John the Baptist, 1602-1603 (Capitoline Museum, Rome)

The earliest of Caravaggio's depictions of the Baptist portray the saint as a nude, laughing adolescent who cuddles a ram. This 1602-1603 version located at the Capitoline Museum in Rome, illustrates the saint twisting awkwardly as he sits on a pile of discarded garments; his left arm supports him while his right embraces the ram (Fig. 1). Set in a shadowy, grotto-like landscape, the Baptist is in the immediate foreground. Like Raphael's *Saint John the Baptist in the Desert* from 1517 (Fig. 5), Caravaggio shows the saint in full-length, with foliage and dock leaves indicating his desolate desert surroundings. This is no haggard hermit or crazed prophet in the wilderness but a very real, joyful, adolescent John the Baptist who stares knowingly and merrily out at the viewer. Saint John the Baptist is bathed in a bright, heavenly light, yet he is enshrouded in darkness.

Caravaggio's tenebristic style thereby creates a visual tension that minimizes the landscape setting and positions the subject as the primary focal point for the viewer.²⁹

²⁸ Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), 155. This letter was published by G. Cozzi, "Intorno al Cardinale Ottaviano Paravicino, a monsignor Paolo Gualdo e a Michelangelo da Caravaggio," *Rivista Storica Italiana*, LXXIII, I, 1961, 36-58.

²⁹ Caravaggio's work remains distinct for his use of murky compositions and is credited with the invention of tenebrism. Tenebrism involves the use of a dark ground instead of a light one that results in expressive extremes of bright light and deep shadow. The artist works from dark to light. For more, see: Dixon, 184. A later, seventeenth-century biographer, Giovanni Pietro Bellori wrote that Caravaggio had placed his models in a closed room with a high lamp "so that the light would fall straight down, revealing the

While a similar treatment of light and dark is seen in Leonardo's 1513 painting of *Saint John the Baptist* (Fig. 4), with the smiling saint glowing in the gloom; Caravaggio's figure is clearly discernable, and the entirety of his naked body is on view. The intense light on the exposed flesh of the saint purposefully leads the viewer's eye around the composition, from the brightest highlights on the boy's skinny shoulders to his gangly legs. Unlike his Florentine predecessors, the light in Caravaggio's painting does more than simply illuminate—the light practically caresses the boy's muscles, drawing the viewer's attention to his shining shoulders and gleaming thighs. The saint's naked flesh is further juxtaposed against a wooly ram and furry pelt, further creating Caravaggio's "unique sensory realism" that highlights male corporeality and eroticizes the body.³⁰

While Caravaggio was not the first to portray the Baptist as an erotically-charged youth, his earliest *Saint John the Baptist* is unusual due to the boy's stark nudity and the lack of typical iconographic attributes. Up until this point, John the Baptist was typically represented with a reed cross, camelhair robe, bowl, banderole, and at times, a halo (Figs. 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9). Here, in Caravaggio's depiction, these attributes are noticeably absent; instead, the Baptist's modesty and divine decorum are discarded and replaced with a nude, laughing boy. Even more, the sacrificial lamb—which is a symbolic representation of Christ and the sacrifice he made for humanity—is replaced with a sexually-mature ram (Fig. 1). Caravaggio's boy-Baptist mocks the sincere and stoic saints of his Florentine predecessors, with his merry expression and absence of purpose. He does not point

principal part of the body and leaving the rest in shadow so as to produce a powerful contrast of light and dark," see: Hibbard, 364. Additionally, a legal record dating to September 1, 1605 contains the grievances of Caravaggio's disgruntled landlady and notes that he had "broken a ceiling of mine," perhaps the result of the artist's unusual working methods; see: Graham-Dixon, Caravaggio, 302.

³⁰ John Champagne, *Italian Masculinity as Queer Melodrama: Caravaggio, Puccini, Contemporary Cinema*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). 61.

toward the Trinity or meditate in prayer, and the usual reminders of repentance, such as the bowl and cross, are absent. What Caravaggio has painted is a mischievous scamp who is the complete opposite of even the most scantily clad boy-Baptists of his Florentine predecessors, such as seen in Raphael's *Saint John the Baptist in the Desert, Indicating the Cross of the Passion* from 1517 (Fig. 5) and Agnolo Bronzino's *Portrait of Giovanni de' Medici as Saint John the Baptist* from 1560-1562 (Fig. 8).³¹

Gabriele Paleotti's *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images* (1582), which included the Council of Trent's decree on sacred images and guidelines for artists and clerical staff alike, pointedly addresses the garb of saints, stating that "attention must be paid to the sort of dress in which they are represented...care must be taken that the actions depicted and the other features all conform to the vow they made in this life to spurn the world and throw off luxury and earthly delights."³² In Caravaggio's work, the drastic diagonals created by the boy Baptist's thighs boldly draw the viewer's attention to his uncircumcised penis, and his nudity is emphasized by the discarded clothes around him and the use of the bright, intense light. Not only does Caravaggio's representation of Saint John the Baptist directly contradict the Council of Trent's written decree, but it also goes against the scriptural description from Mark (1:6) that describes John the Baptist as "clothed with camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and he ate locusts and wild honey" (Mark I: 2-8.)³³ John the Baptist is the messenger of God, the lone voice in

³¹ Raphael, *Saint John the Baptist in the Desert, Indicating the Cross of the Passion*, 1517, oil on canvas, 135 x 142 cm. Louvre Museum, Paris; Bronzino, *Portrait of Giovanni de' Medici as Saint John the Baptist*, 1560-1562, oil on panel, 120 x 92 cm. Borghese Gallery, Rome.

³² Paleotti, 214.

³³ (Mark I: 2-8.) <http://www.drbo.org/index.htm>.

the wilderness who foretells the coming of Christ. By choosing to portray John the Baptist as nude, Caravaggio emphasizes the Baptist's human nature over his divine one.³⁴

Andrea del Sarto's painting, *Saint John the Baptist*, from 1523 shows an idealized muscular saintly youth who sits stoically (Fig. 6). While we do not know if a model sat for Del Sarto, Caravaggio's model for his version of *Saint John the Baptist* (at the Capitoline Museum) was actually identified by contemporaries as a young man named Francesco ("Cecco") Boneri, who modeled for Caravaggio for several other paintings.³⁵ Caravaggio, however, was not the first artist to have an identifiable model portray a saint.³⁶ Nonetheless, his portrayal of Cecco as Saint John the Baptist defies the Council of Trent's decree that "saints should never, ever be portrayed with the faces of particular individuals, or worldly folk, or someone whom others would recognize."³⁷ Paleotti went so far to argue that such a masquerade would be "vain and utterly undignified."³⁸ The representation of John the Baptist as the laughing Cecco however, makes the saint much more relatable and approachable to seventeenth-century viewers as well as for audiences today.

³⁴ Leo Steinberg argues that Michelangelo drew on nude bodies from antiquity for his *Risen Christ*, 1514-1520. Michelangelo recast the idealized, nude bodies from Antiquity to depict Christ and those that are resurrected in his likeness to suggest "the possibility of a human nature without human guilt." For more, see Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and In Modern Oblivion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 20.

³⁵ Cecco modeled for the following three paintings by Caravaggio: 1) *Conversion of Saint Paul*, 1600-1601, Odeschalchi Balbi Collection, Rome; 2) *Love Conquers All*, 1602, Gemäldegalerie, Old Masters Picture Gallery, Berlin; and 3) *Sacrifice of Isaac*, 1603, Uffizi Gallery, Florence. The English traveller Richard Symonds kept a diary containing notes on paintings he saw while in Rome from 1649 to 1651. On Caravaggio's *Love Conquers All*, Symonds described Cecco and wrote that "it was ye body and face of his owne boy or servant thait laid with him." See Peter Robb, *M: The Man Who Became Caravaggio*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998), 195.

³⁶ See Agnolo Bronzino's *Portrait of Giovanni de' Medici as Saint John the Baptist* from 1560-1562, mentioned above (Fig. 8).

³⁷ Paleotti, 214.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 214.

Unlike Leonardo's idealized, angelic-like Baptist (Fig. 4) or Bronzino's aloof and haughty depiction of the same subject from 1560-1562 (Fig. 8), Caravaggio's *Saint John the Baptist* is realistic and welcoming. The boy-Baptist is not the embodiment of divine perfection but a flesh-and-blood human being, who pushes the boundary into the viewer's space. John the Baptist's merry expression and sideways gaze invites the viewer to laugh with him, and meditate on the joy of salvation. Caravaggio's placement of the figure in the direct foreground reduces the space between the viewer and figure for a much more familiar portrayal of the saint.

Moreover, the viewer's exceptionally close proximity to the saint further eroticizes the figure. Raphael's depiction of John the Baptist (Fig. 5) places the saint in the center of a leafy, lush, jungle-like setting. By contrast, Caravaggio's Baptist is not located off in the distance or placed in landscape in the middle ground of the pictorial plane, but instead intimately fills the composition in the immediate foreground—practically within the viewer's reach. His twisting pose results in the presentation of his genitalia and thighs, again seemingly just beyond the viewer's touch. Caravaggio's use of both landscape and setting function in a minimizing fashion—the scarce foliage at the Baptist's feet and to his right are enough to imply that he is in the wilderness. I believe that the viewer is meant to meditate solely on the adolescent prophet and his message of hope.

Additionally, the full-length portrayal of the saint and his provocative pose differ from the stoic, saintly depictions of Andrea del Sarto's Baptist in the Palatina Gallery (Fig. 6) and Michele Tosini's Baptist in the Saint Louis Art Museum (Fig. 9). In Caravaggio's *Saint John the Baptist*, the Baptist's pose has secular roots—it draws on

Michelangelo Buonarroti's *ignudi*, the painted idealized male nudes that twist and turn on the Sistine Chapel ceiling (Fig. 10).³⁹ Michelangelo's *ignudi* are visual references to the patron, Pope Julius II, as they are adorned with his emblems of oak leaves and acorns.⁴⁰ Moreover, the *ignudi* function as a visual link to the apex of Western culture in Classical Antiquity and positioned Pope Julius II as the usher of a new Golden Age for Rome with his sumptuous decoration of the Sistine Chapel ceiling and the walls of the Papal palace.⁴¹ Later, in the latter part of the sixteenth century, however, the nudity and seemingly-pagan symbolism of the Michelangelo's figures came under fire and the painter Daniele da Volterra (1509-1566) was hired to paint over the genitalia of the *ignudi* and other figures shown with exposed private parts.⁴² The *ignudi* pose itself is erotic in its display of male musculature and genitalia, and the nature of the *ignudi* as a non-Christian, idealized decorative element further eroticizes the figures (Fig. 11).

Here, in *Saint John the Baptist*, Caravaggio has reclaimed this iconic pose for Christianity, reshaping the idealized pagan *ignudo* into a very real, corporeal Christian

³⁹ Saint John the Baptist has the same pose as the *ignudo* who sits above the Erythraean sibyl and helps frame *The Sacrifice of Noah* (Fig. 10). These figures became controversial following the Council of Trent due to their nudity and their profane presence as an allegory for antiquity.

⁴⁰ Dixon, 226-227.

⁴¹ Pope Julius II commissioned Raphael to paint a series of frescos that depict the four branches of knowledge in the Papal Palace. Of these four frescos painted, so-called *The School of Athens* (1509-1511) was located in the Stanza della Segnatura, where Papal decrees and bulls were signed. This fresco represents Philosophy, and depicts philosophers from antiquity sprawled around Aristotle and Plato, who are debating the nature of truth and knowledge. Aristotle argues knowledge is obtained through lived, earthly experience, while Plato points upward and contends that ideas and knowledge come from divine understanding and the realm of the mind. The painting places Pope Julius II and the Vatican at the center of the debate, both symbolically and physically, as an intermediary between the divine and earthly, and as the authority and herald of a new Golden Age in Rome that surpasses the glories of Antiquity. See: Marilyn Stokstad and Michael Cothren, *Art History Portable, Book 4: 14th–17th Century Art*, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2014), 640-643.

⁴² In 1565, Daniele da Volterra was hired to paint loincloths and fig leaves over any exposed genitalia on the Sistine Chapel ceiling and Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* (1536-1541), which would later earn him the nickname "Il Braghettone," or the Breeches maker; see: Dixon, 227.

saint.⁴³ Michelangelo's lofty *ignudo* has been brought to the mortal realm as a ruddy, chortling, cherubic boy Baptist, complete with dirty toenails and lanky legs. This emphasis on physicality and humility is true to John the Baptist's character as described in the Gospel of Mark (1:6), as a haggard prophet living off locusts and honey in the desert. Caravaggio's use of light and his faithful, realistic depiction of the adolescent Cecco, however, also eroticize the figure and render him tactilely available and sensually appealing to the viewer. Even more, the sumptuous vermilion cloth brings out the Baptist's warm, ruddy flesh, which, in turn, is juxtaposed against the the white linen folds and furry pelt on which he sits. Ambiguity is created by Caravaggio's sensuous blend of realism and sacred Christian themes. After all, the materialization of a saint in "vivid color" before the eyes of the viewer was decreed by the Council of Trent as a way to intensify devotion and move the viewer: "one would have to be made of wood or stone not to feel how much more it intensifies devotion and wrenches the gut."⁴⁴

Furthermore, Caravaggio's *Saint John the Baptist* is self-referential in his pose and the provocative display of his body. He twists to his right, his arm drawing the ram close, which leads the viewer's eye back to the saint's face. In direct contrast to Caravaggio's focus on the corporeal, the Baptists of Leonardo and Raphael point upwards toward Heaven (Figs. 4, 5). This pointing gesture deflects attention away from the saint's body to the heavenly realm that exists beyond the pictorial frame. Instead of a

⁴³ Scholars speculate that Caravaggio may have had a rivalry with Michelangelo, since Michelangelo was not a common Christian name in the Merisi family, and he continued to borrow motifs from the great Renaissance master in later works; see: Hibbard, 154. Additionally, Michelangelo had died just seven years before Caravaggio was born in the year 1564, and his legacy was fresh in the minds of patrons and artists alike due to the publication of Giorgio Vasari's second, revised edition of *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* in the year 1568—published three years after Caravaggio's birth on September 29, 1571; see: Graham-Dixon, 7.

⁴⁴ Paleotti, 119.

lofty, idealized saint who sits stiffly before the viewer and encourages contemplation of the unseen, Caravaggio's Saint John the Baptist acknowledges his physical presence before the viewer. The sensual handling of the saint's body is both profane and sacred; this depiction of Saint John the Baptist allows the viewer to indulge in the pleasures of the flesh but also serves as a means of private devotion that calls attention to the here and now of faith.

The lack of traditional Christian iconography in Caravaggio's work led to misidentifications as early as 1620, in which a guidebook housed in Ciriaco Mattei's collection lists the painting as *Pastor Friso*, a pagan shepherd.⁴⁵ Was the writer responding subconsciously to the Michelangesque pose or the overt erotic treatment of the boy's body? There is no doubt that the subject portrayed is Saint John the Baptist.⁴⁶ Later, in 1627, the work is again identified as *Saint John* in the inventories of Mattei and Cardinal Del Monte.⁴⁷ Although Caravaggio eschews Saint John the Baptist's traditional iconographic attributes, a closer analysis reveals that this work's subject matter is indeed sacred nevertheless.

To understand this unusual portrayal of the Baptist, one must understand the iconographic elements that *are* present in Caravaggio's painting (Fig. 1). The ram may have been based on an image from Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling. In the panel framed by the inspiring *ignudi* is the scene of *The Sacrifice of Noah* (Fig. 12), which depicts two rams: one is being prepared for slaughter, the other having already been

⁴⁵ Graham-Dixon, 227.

⁴⁶ Ciriaco Mattei bequeathed the work to his son, Giovanni Battista Mattei, who shared the name of the Baptist, which suggests that the painting was possibly commissioned to celebrate his patron saint and namesake.

⁴⁷ Spike, 133.

sacrificed. Scholar Andrew Graham-Dixon speculates that the ram, like the Lamb of God (*Agnus Dei*), is a symbol of Christ's sacrifice, a visual manifestation of John the Baptist's own inner vision for the salvation of mankind.⁴⁸ Graham-Dixon expounds on the idea of prophetic joy, arguing that Caravaggio's boy-Baptist elatedly laughs because he foresees Christ's sacrifice and the salvation that comes from it. Furthermore, the ram combined with the inclusion of vine leaves in the upper right corner serve as symbols of the Eucharist and Christ.

Ultimately, Caravaggio's use of these Christian symbols in his *Saint John the Baptist* provokes the viewer to contemplate the fate of Christ, but at the same time experience a lighter, more pleasurable reading as well, one that borders between exhibitionist and meditative. The work was well-received at the time of its completion—Giovanni Baglione (1566-1643) wrote that Caravaggio “pocketed many hundred scudi” from the seduced patron, Ciriaco Mattei.⁴⁹ Clearly Caravaggio's popularity was well known and in demand. Caravaggio's unconventional depiction of the saint pushes the boundaries between the spheres of the sacred and profane. Is Cecco mischievously masquerading as a saint whose merry laughing invites the viewer to buy into the charade, or is this a joyful John the Baptist, delighting in the salvation of mankind?

***Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness, 1604-1605 (Nelson-Atkins
Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri)***

⁴⁸ Graham-Dixon, 228.

⁴⁹ Hibbard, 353.

Two years after Caravaggio painted Cecco cheerfully cuddling a ram, the Genoese banker Ottavio Costa (1554-1639) commissioned the artist to paint an altarpiece depicting Saint John the Baptist in the wilderness that was completed in 1604-1605. Unlike the fully nude Baptist from 1602, however, this rendition of the saint, though also shown full-length, is older, and the mood of the painting is clearly more somber and grim (Fig. 2). Gone is the sunlit grotto and cuddly ram; instead, John the Baptist sits sullenly, illuminated by a harsh, intense light. The saint's glance is cast downward to his left; his expression is one of brooding as he holds the traditional iconographical reed cross loosely in his right hand. Surrounding the Baptist is a dark, gloomy forest that threatens to envelop him, and the dock leaves at his feet have lost their lushness.

Against the murky woods, the Baptist glows with a pale, unnatural light. Like the autumnal woods and browning foliage, life in the painting seems to be decaying, and the Baptist is deep in thought, perhaps contemplating his own mortality and grisly end. His cheekbones and nose are illuminated by the piercing, bright light, but from afar, his eyes are empty sockets while his body is divided into graphic, heavy patches of pale shining flesh and deep shadow that creates a sense of fragility. These extremes of light and dark are characteristic of melodrama, where “dramatic lighting seeks to render visible an interior state.”⁵⁰ Caravaggio's characteristic use of tenebrism, therefore, is a visual, outward sign of the young prophet's vulnerability and contemplation of his own fate. This vulnerability combined with the sensual effects of light on exposed flesh differ drastically from Caravaggio's sixteenth-century Florentine predecessors as well as his previous 1602 depiction (Fig. 1). With the exception of Leonardo's enigmatic *Saint John*

⁵⁰ Champagne, 45.

the Baptist (Fig. 4) rendered in his stylistic *sfumato*, the earlier adolescent Baptists of the sixteenth century are shown in an even, natural light as seen in Raphael's *Saint John the Baptist in the Desert, Indicating the Cross of the Passion* from 1517 (Fig. 5) and Agnolo Bronzino's *Portrait of Giovanni de' Medici as Saint John the Baptist* from 1560-1562 (Fig. 8). The bright, cold light and the resulting extremes in Caravaggio's 1604 *Saint John the Baptist* (Fig. 2) are artificial and visceral; the light here functions as a means of conveying a spiritual inner state while at the same time illuminates the external pathos of the Baptist.

Continuing the Florentine tradition of a youthful Baptist, Caravaggio's *Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness* drastically differs from the 1602 Capitoline Museum Baptist. Here, in the 1604 Nelson-Atkins piece (Fig. 2), the erotic undertones are a result of the melodramatic qualities that underline the prophet's own fate and the need for repentance and exhibits a much more somber allure—not the playful exhibitionism of the Capitoline Museum Baptist (Fig. 1). While the Nelson-Atkins Baptist is also in the direct foreground and dominates the composition, he is less approachable and does not encroach into the viewer's space like the Capitoline Baptist. Instead, he is withdrawn and lost in his own thoughts, as seen in his posture and dour expression. There is a sense of weariness and resignation in his posture as he slumps to his right—is he aware of his fate and the terrible tragedy that will befall him?⁵¹ The pose itself is ambivalent and exaggerates the Baptist's melancholic state of mind. A simple gesture of standing or sitting has become amplified to the point where the viewer cannot discern the Baptist's next move. Gesture is a universal means of expressing what language cannot; regardless

⁵¹ John the Baptist was executed under Herod's orders after his daughter Salome dances before him in exchange for the Baptist's head on a plate (Mark 6: 22-29); see: <http://www.drbo.org>.

if the Baptist is starting to rise or has just sat down, there is a sense of isolation and despair in his pose.

Additionally, the pose of the Nelson-Atkins Baptist is one that is self-referential. The saint twists slightly to his left, his left arm crossing over until it is nearly touching his right bicep. Like the 1602 Capitoline Baptist (Fig. 1), the viewer cannot help but peruse the saint's muscular body; since his gleaming left shoulder is the brightest point in the painting, the viewer's eye naturally travels across his semi-nude body. Since the Nelson-Atkins Baptist was originally commissioned to function as an altarpiece for public devotion, Caravaggio eschewed the sensuality of the 1602 Capitoline Baptist, in favor of a more conservative approach. Instead of a cheeky adolescent boy, this older, somber, Baptist deflects the viewer's gaze as he looks down to the left, avoiding direct engagement with the viewer. This deflection actually serves to enhance the sensuousness of the saint's physical body while underscoring the Baptist's mortal coil. Truly, this depiction of Saint John the Baptist pushed the boundaries for the sacred and profane by providing such an intimate viewing of the saint in a church setting. While the reasons are not explicitly known, it can be argued that Ottavio Costa recognized the palpable intimacy of viewing this work because he decided to keep the painting for his own contemplative use and actually had a copy made for the Oratory of the Fraternity della Misericordia, in place of the one that was to be installed there by Caravaggio.⁵²

⁵² Graham-Dixon, 277. Today, the copy hangs in the Diocese Museum in Albenga. While the artist of this copy remains unknown, of the two copies that do exist, the one in the National Museum of Capodimonte is closer to the original and may have been executed closer to the date of the original work; see: Spike, 181.

Another alluring, melodramatic element is the excessive, luxurious, red cloak draped around John the Baptist's naked torso that contrasts sharply with his ghostly pallor. A white cloth and animal skin are wrapped around his waist, the folds of which fall directly over his genitalia.⁵³ In addition, the sumptuous and impractical folds of vermillion drapery add to the sensuality and physicality of the figure—his costume is far from pragmatic; instead, the rich red cloth is a stylistic device employed by Caravaggio in all of his depictions of John the Baptist, which is visually arresting when placed next to the lithe, ashen skin and musculature of this angst-filled adolescent.

In Caravaggio's naturalistic style, the red ruddy hands of the Baptist, his dirt-encrusted toenails, his messy mop of auburn hair, the fraying red cloak, and the white undergarment of a laborer are rendered with great accuracy and attention. These naturalistic elements add to the humility and physicality of Caravaggio's penitent saint, and in turn, sensualize John the Baptist. Caravaggio transforms the saint from haggard hermit to a handsome and very real, introspective youth on the cusp of manhood, who dwells in isolation on his own gloomy fate and the sins of man. While this Saint John the Baptist (Fig. 2) is much more somber than the smiling Cecco depicted in the Capitoline Museum *Saint John the Baptist* (Fig. 1), he is no less exhibitionistic in his sullen contemplation. The exposed flesh and bare muscles of the Baptist carry an inherent erotic charge as indicators of masculinity.⁵⁴ As the brightest, most visible element of the painting, it is impossible not to closely observe the near-naked body of the surly saint.

⁵³ The scholar John Champagne (p. 74) argues that these direct folds over the genitalia are an indication of "the way in which the Baptist prefigures Jesus's human corporeality." Similarly, the handling of drapery over Christ's genitalia in Renaissance depictions of the *Pietà* and Christ as the *Man of Sorrows* suggest his resurgent flesh and fortitude. For more, see: Steinberg, 84-91.

⁵⁴ Champagne, 68.

These dramatic qualities were not lost on contemporary seventeenth-century viewers of this altarpiece. In his manuscript dated 1624, describing the region and diocese of Albegna, Gio Ambrogio Paneri wrote:

Before ascending to the above-mentioned church, in the narrow but fruitful valley, one comes upon a small, holy oratory...formerly the parish church, restored in the modern style in honour of that mysterious nightingale who announces the coming of Christ, Saint John the Baptist. The image of him in the desert, mourning human miseries, was painted by the famous Michelangelo da Caravaggio, and it moves not only the brothers but also visitors to Penitence.⁵⁵

Paneri's poetic rhetoric used to describe *Saint John the Baptist* paints the work in a deeply devotional function that is at the same time romantic. Even more, in his text Paneri likens John the Baptist to a nightingale, a Christian symbol from the twelfth-century that corresponded to human suffering, passion, and physical desire.⁵⁶ Finally, Paneri's use of the word *moves* is notable because it serves as evidence that Caravaggio's altarpiece fulfills one of the three declarations of the Council of Trent's pronouncement that sacred art must delight, teach, and move. Caravaggio's sensuous handling of the teenage prophet's lithe adolescent body, coupled with the visual ambiguity that stems from rendering his own mournful ruminations, mark *Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness* as one of his most visually compelling works. This altarpiece was clearly well-received by patron and parish alike. Despite the overt eroticism of *Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness* and the roughened teenage laborer chosen to portray him, Caravaggio's altarpiece is a deeply sacred subject.

⁵⁵ Mina Gregori, Luigi Salerno, and Richard E. Spear, *The Age of Caravaggio* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985), 303.

⁵⁶ For more, see: Jeni Williams, *Interpreting Nightingales: Gender, Class, and Histories* (Bloomsbury Academic, 1997). PDF e-book, 34-36.

Saint John the Baptist, 1608-1610 (Borghese Gallery, Rome)

Similar to Caravaggio's other depictions of John the Baptist, the Borghese Gallery version of Saint John the Baptist shows a full-length and practically nude adolescent boy barely covered by a swathe of red cloth and a white undergarment (Fig. 3). He holds his reed cross rather carelessly, and his steady gaze penetrates the viewer. To his right, a ram turns away from the boy as well as the viewer. A warm light permeates throughout the painting, revealing the foliage hanging in the background and causing the skin of the Baptist to glow. Unlike his predecessors, who strove for clarity and relied on the usual Christian iconography of the haggard prophet, such as a camel skin robe and the baptismal bowl, Caravaggio's *Saint John the Baptist* is enigmatic and ambiguous because it lacks these typical attributes.⁵⁷ The idealized pubescent Baptist has been reimagined as a swarthy Sicilian boy, whose sleepy, doe-eyed expression reveals nothing concerning the mysteries of Christ and the salvation of mankind. This sensual teenager could just as easily be the aloof seer, alone in the wilderness, or a sleepy schoolboy, masquerading as a saint.

The tenebristic treatment of light and shadow creates a feeling of ambiguity, but also adds to the theatrical quality of the work. The bright light illuminates the Baptist and his woolly companion, which results in the ram's pelt glittering like a golden fleece. Even with the encroaching murkiness, the boy-Baptist remains the brightest aspect of the painting, and the light that gleams on his exposed flesh immediately draws in the viewer's eye. As seen in Caravaggio's Baptists at the Capitoline and Nelson-Atkins

⁵⁷ See Figs. 5, 6, 7, and 8.

Museums (Figs. 1, 2), the magnificent red drape is more of a costume piece than practical desert-garb, and effectively offsets the olive-skinned boy from his rugged surroundings. *Saint John the Baptist* at the Borghese Gallery (Fig. 3) is a sensory spectacle because of Caravaggio's intense use of light, which plays across the surface of a variety of textures, from the folds of scarlet drapery to the Baptist's naked flesh to the fuzzy woolen coat of the ram. Caravaggio's sensitivity to light and texture combined with the theatrical artificiality of his composition sensualizes John the Baptist in a way that the sixteenth-century depictions do not (Figs. 5, 6, 7).

Rendered in Caravaggio's naturalistic style, the boy's pose is an exaggerated s-curve. He slumps to his left, supported by the enormous red drape. This is no clairvoyant idealized prophet pointing toward heaven or holding the baptismal bowl (Figs. 4, 5); instead, the Baptist is a sleepy-eyed, lanky youth with dirty feet and a pudgy belly, who barely holds his reed cross. The model—a practically nude boy except for the white cloth draped casually over his genitalia—directly stares out and thereby actively engages the viewer.

Like Caravaggio's other semi-nude or fully-nude adolescent Baptists, exposed bodies and accentuated musculature, along with the absence of clothes and the discarded garments themselves, are on display for the viewer. These aspects, combined with the nudity of this prepubescent prophet and his languid pose, function to clearly emphasize John the Baptist's carnality and the staged, theatrical quality of the composition. John the Baptist appears to the viewer as incredibly real; he is a stringy Sicilian stripling who knowingly gazes out at the viewer and acknowledges the absurdity of the painted spectacle of which he is the star. Whether or not this boy was actually identifiable to

seventeenth-century viewers is unknown, however, the figure's slumping posture and gimlet-eyed stare suggest that he was drawn from life.⁵⁸

Like Caravaggio's previous depictions of Saint John the Baptist (Figs. 1, 2), the 1610 Borghese Gallery Baptist is visually self-referential to emphasize his corporeality. His right arm reaches across his skinny body to lightly touch his left wrist. There is a staged quality to this pose and positioning of the hands, which is accentuated by the play of light and shadow across the Baptist's body. Rather than depict John the Baptist holding his usual attributes, such as the bowl or banderole (Figs. 5, 8), Caravaggio emphasized the saint's touch of his own body as the means to salvation. Additionally, the ram, half-shrouded in shadow, turns away from the Baptist and ignores him as if it were a stage prop, merely placed in the composition as a reminder of the sleepy boy's connection to Christ. Furthermore, the presence and juxtaposition of other textures—that are richly rendered in Caravaggio's naturalistic style—further sensualize the saint and his flesh. Together, light and shadow manipulate the viewer's gaze to travel across his exposed flesh until it meets the doe-eyed Baptist's steady gaze. This visual tension and intimacy is clearly meant for private contemplation. After all, Saint John the Baptist meets the viewer's gaze head on, and his body language implies that he is here to stay.

The only traditional iconographical attribute of Saint John the Baptist present in Caravaggio's Borghese Baptist is the reed cross, whereas the camel hair robe has been

⁵⁸ In fact, Caravaggio's Sicilian biographer, Francesco Susinno (1660?-1710?), wrote that Caravaggio had followed a schoolteacher named Don Carlo Pepe and his pupils "to form his inventions." Perhaps Caravaggio intended to use the boys as models. When Don Carlo Pepe questioned the artist as to why he was always around his students, Caravaggio reportedly became "so irate and furious...that he wounded the poor man on the head," which resulted in his speedy departure from Messina. This anecdote is a testimony to Caravaggio's violent outbursts, but also his determination to paint from life and models, even on the run. For more, see: Hibbard, 386.

replaced with a white undergarment, carelessly draped across the boy's genitalia; the ram has been substituted now for the lamb. Other attributes of the Baptist, such as the baptismal bowl, scroll, or halo, have been eschewed altogether (Figs. 6, 7). Instead, the viewer is left with a depiction of a prepubescent teen in costume, masquerading as a saint. Unlike del Sarto and Tosini's Baptists (Figs. 6, 9), Caravaggio's John the Baptist lacks a halo, which renders him all the more accessible and worldly for his mortal viewers. The aura of self-awareness as seen in the boy's coy expression and knowing gaze, combined with costuming and the dramatic composition of the work, adds to the to the erotic overtones of the piece, as if the boy is aware of his own sex appeal. With the viewer's discretion, this swarthy, seductive youth in the guise of a saint offers a salvation that is more corporeal than spiritual.

This depiction of Saint John the Baptist was one of the last works Caravaggio completed, before he died in the summer of 1610 at Porto Ercole. The splendor of his Sicilian saint was not lost on those that heard of his passing. In the summer of 1610, the Knights of Malta rushed to claim Caravaggio's work, seemingly ignoring the fact that he was imprisoned and stripped of his knighthood two years earlier.⁵⁹ The Borghese *John the Baptist* was listed in an inventory that was included with a letter dated August 19, 1610 written by the Spanish viceroy in Naples, Pedro Fernández de Castro, Count of Lemos, who was eager to obtain the work of art. Nothing was heard about the painting, however, until December 12, 1610, when Cardinal Borghese received an update from his connections in Naples that the Count of Lemos had wanted to have a copy made for his own private collection. The story goes that finally, in August 1611, Scipione Borghese's

⁵⁹ Graham-Dixon, 392.

henchman, Deodato Gentile, the Bishop of Caserta pried the painting from Pedro Fernández de Castro's grip and sent it to Cardinal Borghese's palace, where it remains today.⁶⁰ In view of the scramble that ensued after Caravaggio's death to obtain the artwork, scholar Andrew Graham-Dixon suggests that the work was not commissioned but created on impulse, since it was still in the artist's possession upon death.⁶¹ Did Caravaggio compose this boy Baptist for his own pleasure?

Concluding Remarks

Caravaggio's works of Saint John the Baptist remain as titillating and captivating for their audience today as they were over four centuries ago. By analyzing the three depictions located in the Capitoline, Nelson-Atkins, and the Borghese Museums, I discovered that the erotic qualities—which are not found in Caravaggio's Florentine predecessors—are a result of his particular stylistic and iconographic approaches, particularly his emphasis on the adolescent male body of Saint John the Baptist as means to salvation. Ultimately, the subtle juxtaposition of Christian symbolism and corporeal spirituality found in each of the three paintings examined here allowed them to function as sacred images despite their profane aspects. Interestingly, the 1604 Nelson-Atkins *Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness* eroticized the saint through Caravaggio's use of light and emphasis on the body, despite the more traditional approach in regards to the saint's iconography, perhaps because of its originally intended function as a public altarpiece in a church setting. For private contemplation and devotion, Caravaggio's

⁶⁰ Ibid., 437.

⁶¹ Ibid., 413.

depictions of Saint John the Baptist overtly eroticized the figure and rendered them far more approachable.

Together, these three paintings should be considered as fulfillment of the Council of Trent's and Gabriele Paleotti's proclamation that sacred art must delight the viewer and move him or her through the humility and earthliness of the saint's presence. Just as layers and layers of oil paint create the sensuous textures and naturalism in Caravaggio's works, layers and layers of meaning accompany them. While an appreciation for human anatomy and mortality is certainly present in Caravaggio's three portrayals of John the Baptist, the humility and spirituality in these works is undeniable. In the end, truly, Caravaggio's Baptists delight, teach, and move those who look upon them then and now.

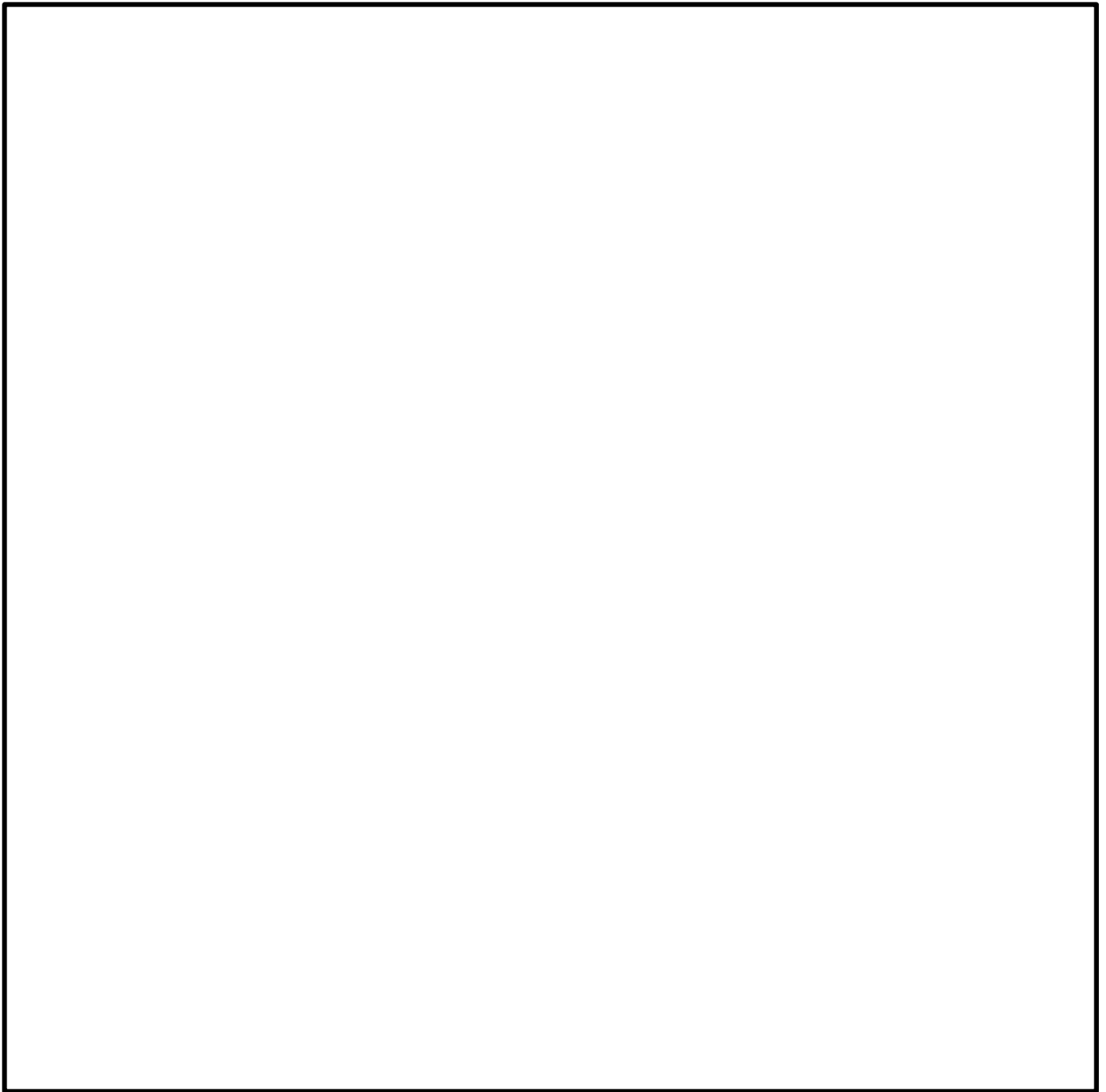


Fig. 1 Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *St. John the Baptist*, 1602-1603, oil on canvas, 129 x 95 cm, Capitoline Museum, Rome, Inv. No. PC 239.

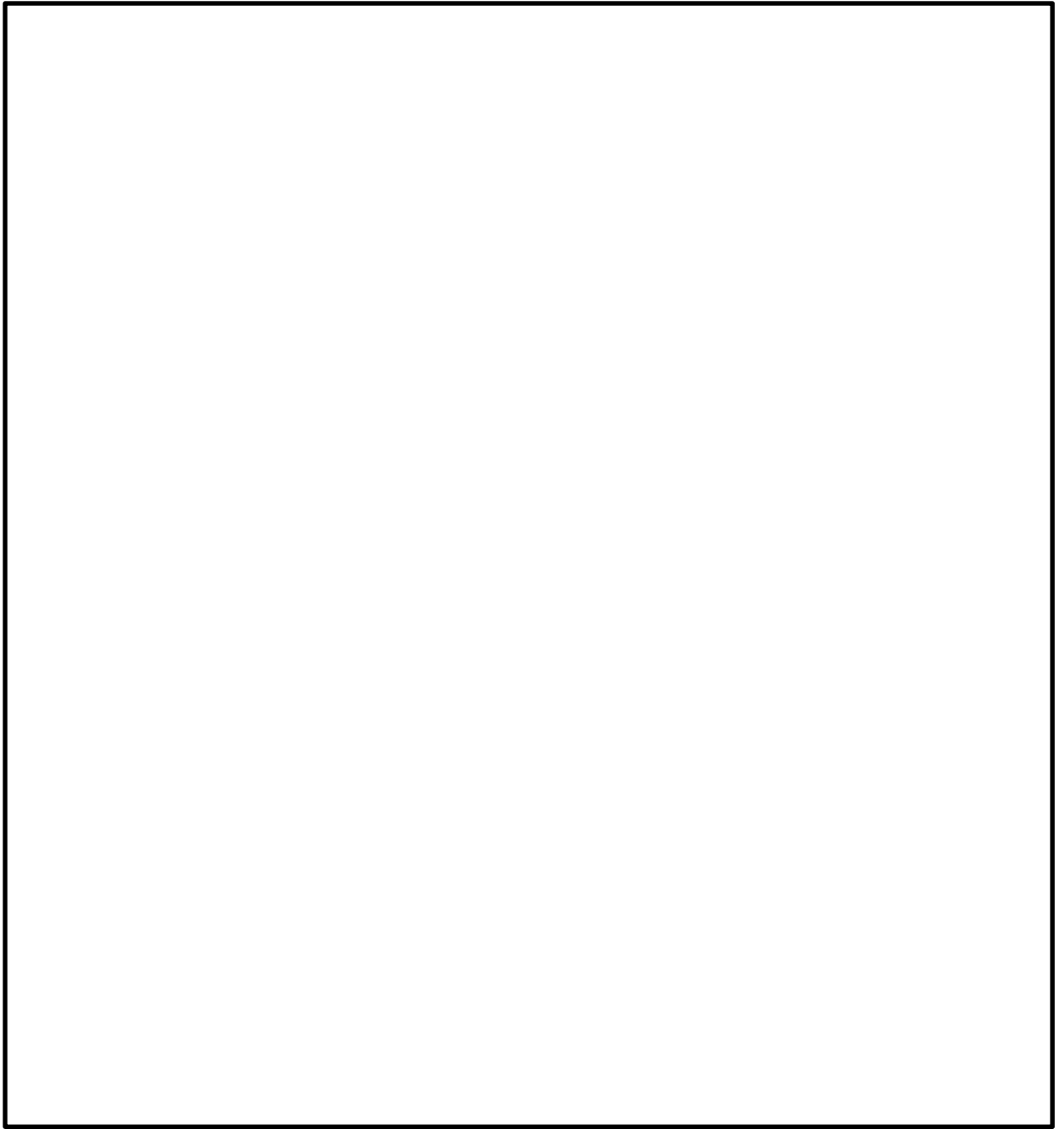


Fig. 2 Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness*, 1604-1605, oil on canvas, 172.72 x 132.08 cm, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, Inv. No. 52-25.

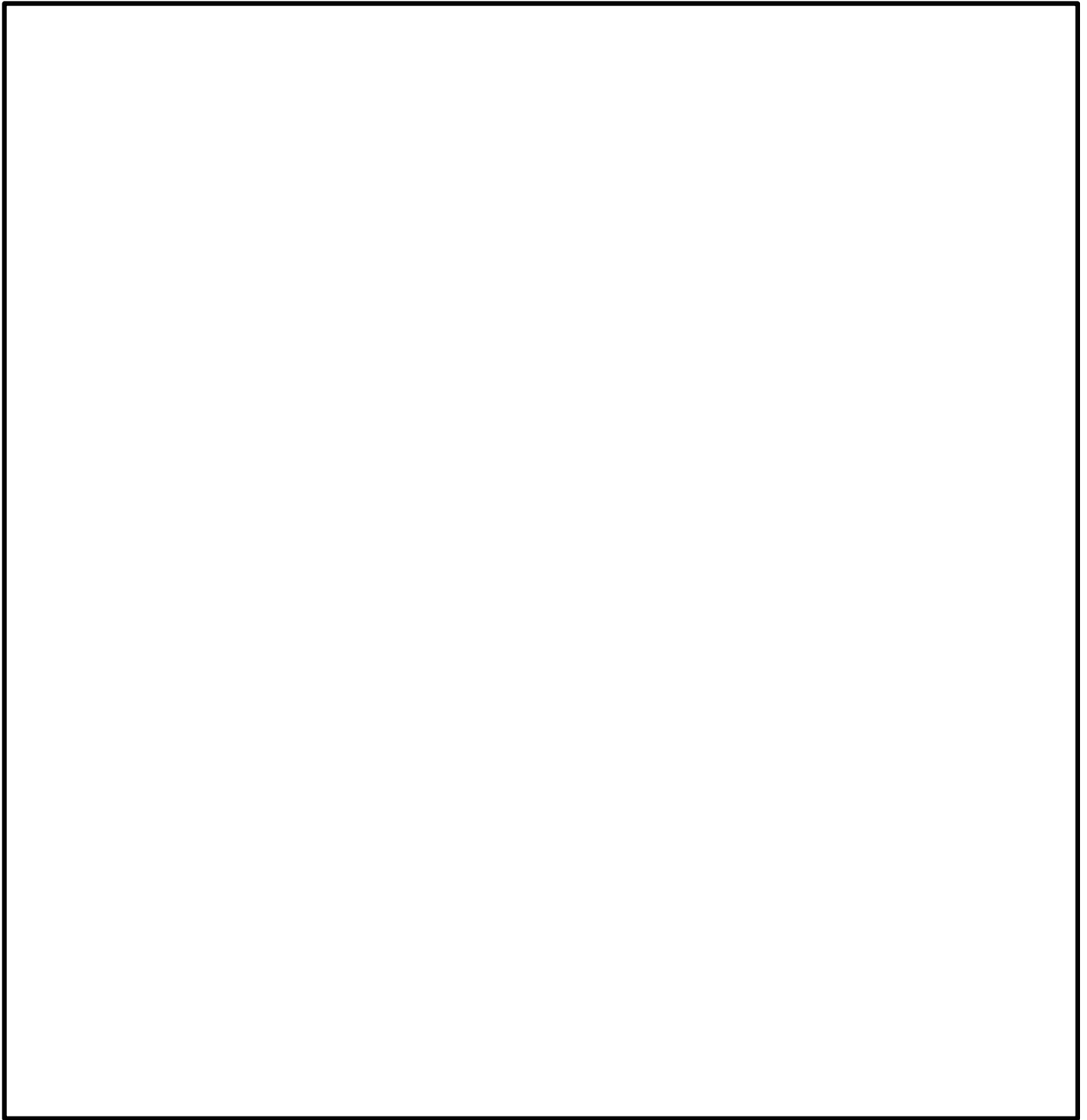


Fig. 3 Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *St. John the Baptist*, 1610, oil on canvas, 159 x 124 cm, Borghese Gallery, Rome, no inv. No.

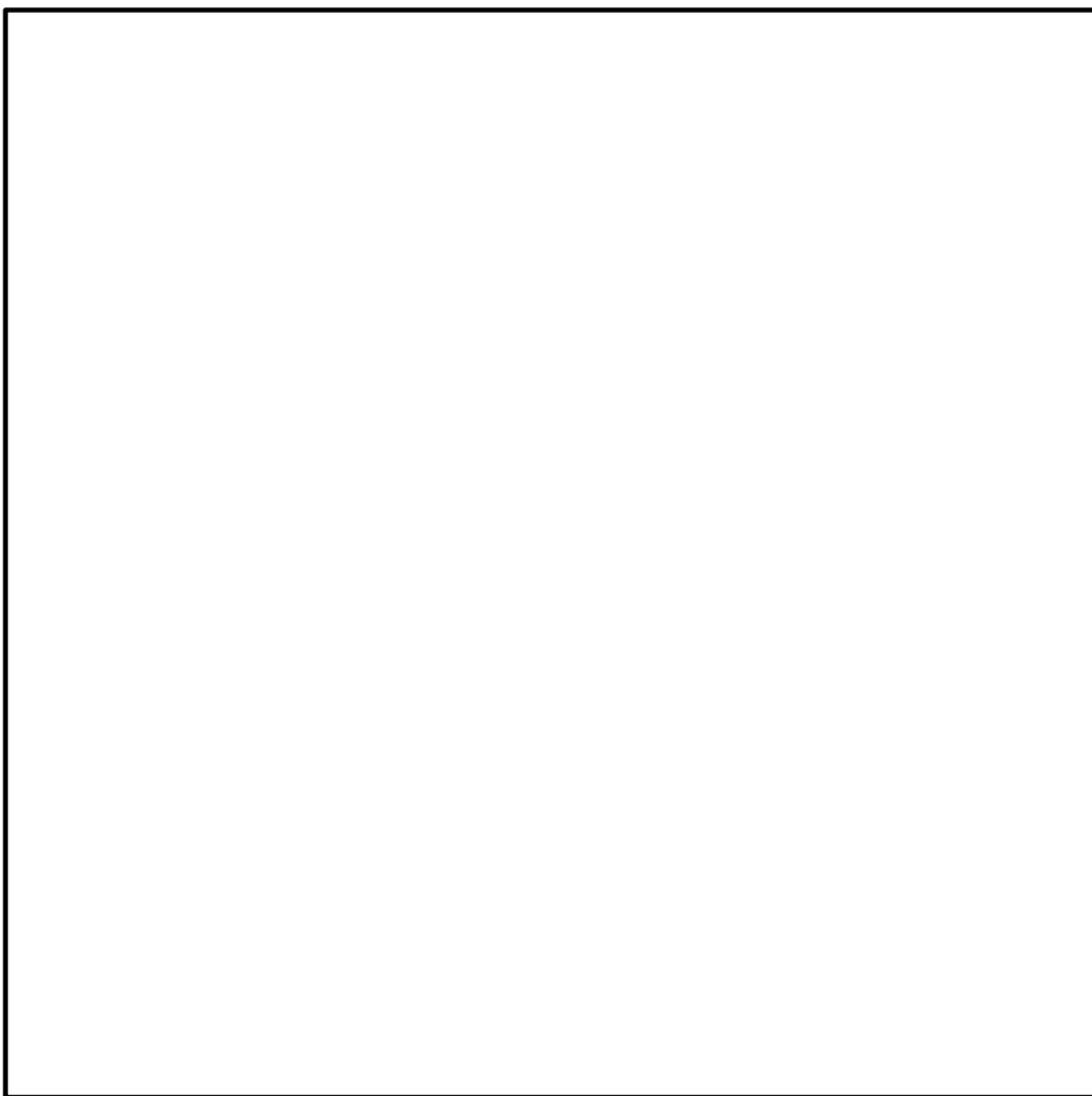


Fig. 4 Leonardo da Vinci, *Saint John the Baptist*, 1513-1516. Oil on wood. 69 x 57 cm.
Louvre Museum, Paris, Inv. No. 755.

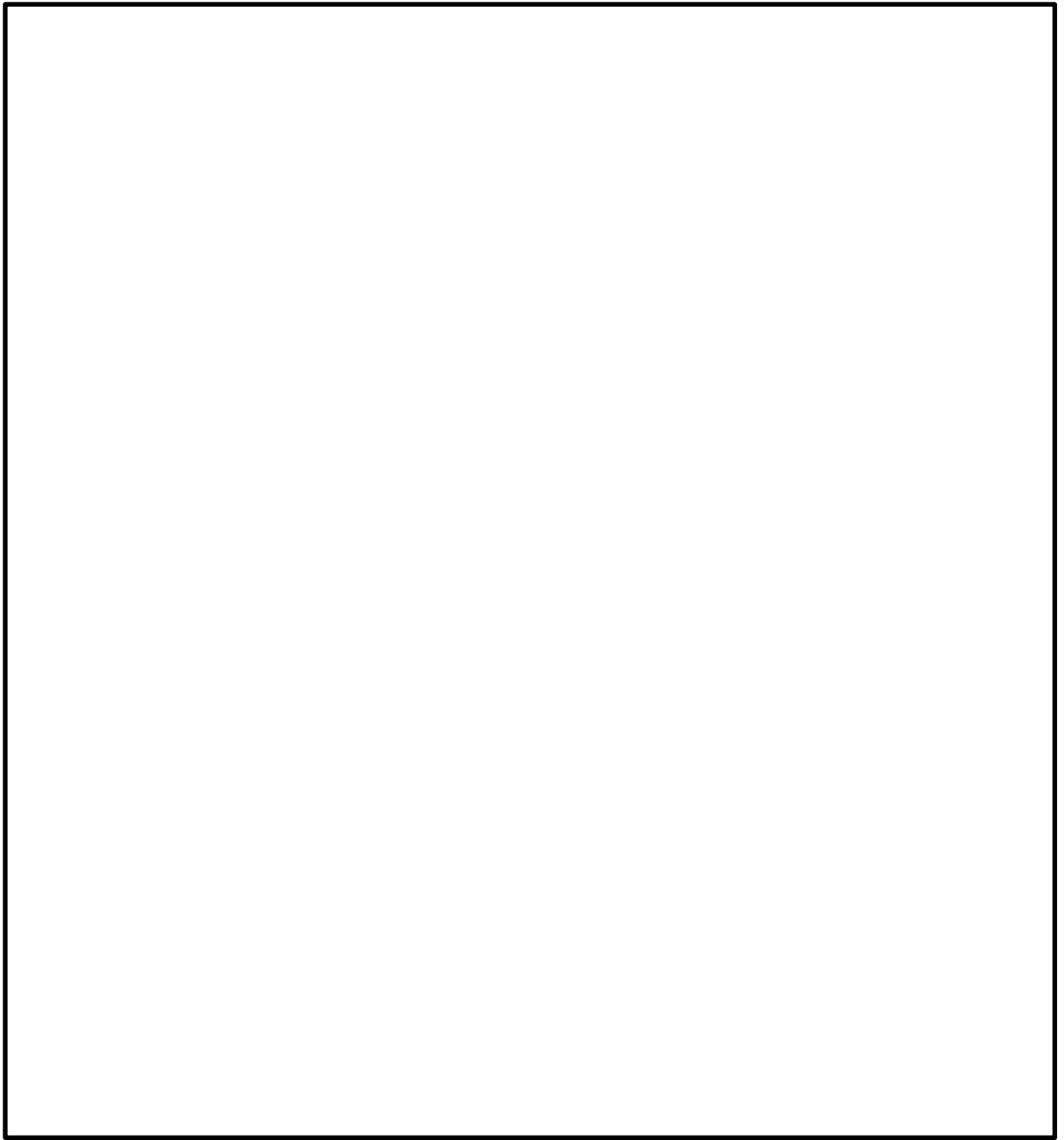


Fig. 5 Raphael, *Saint John the Baptist in the Desert, Indicating the Cross of the Passion*. 1517. Oil on canvas. 135 x 142 cm, Louvre Museum, Paris, Inv. No. 40-08-03.

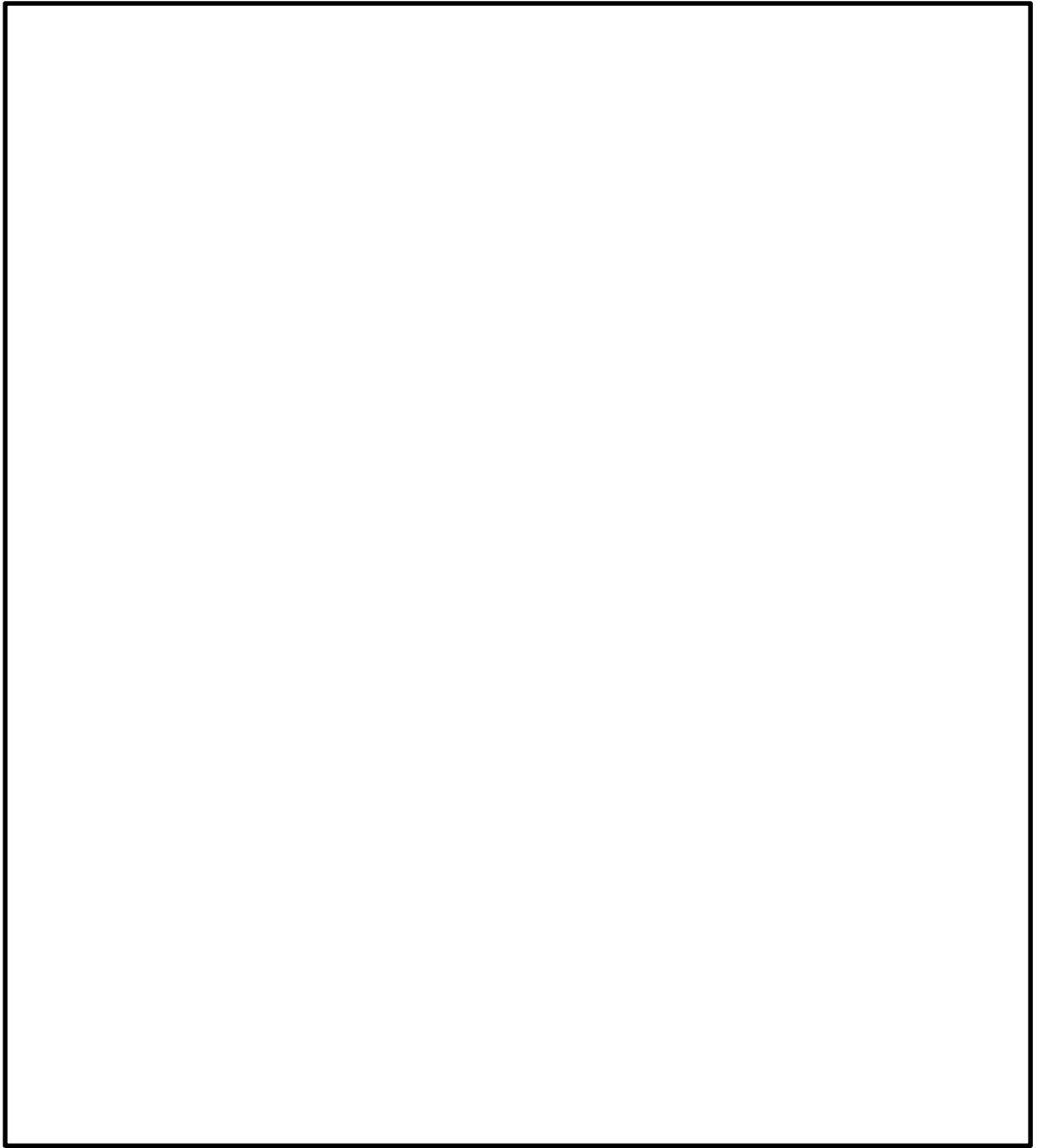


Fig. 6 Andrea del Sarto, *Saint John the Baptist*, 1523. Oil on panel. 94 x 68 cm. Palatina Gallery, Florence, no inv. No.

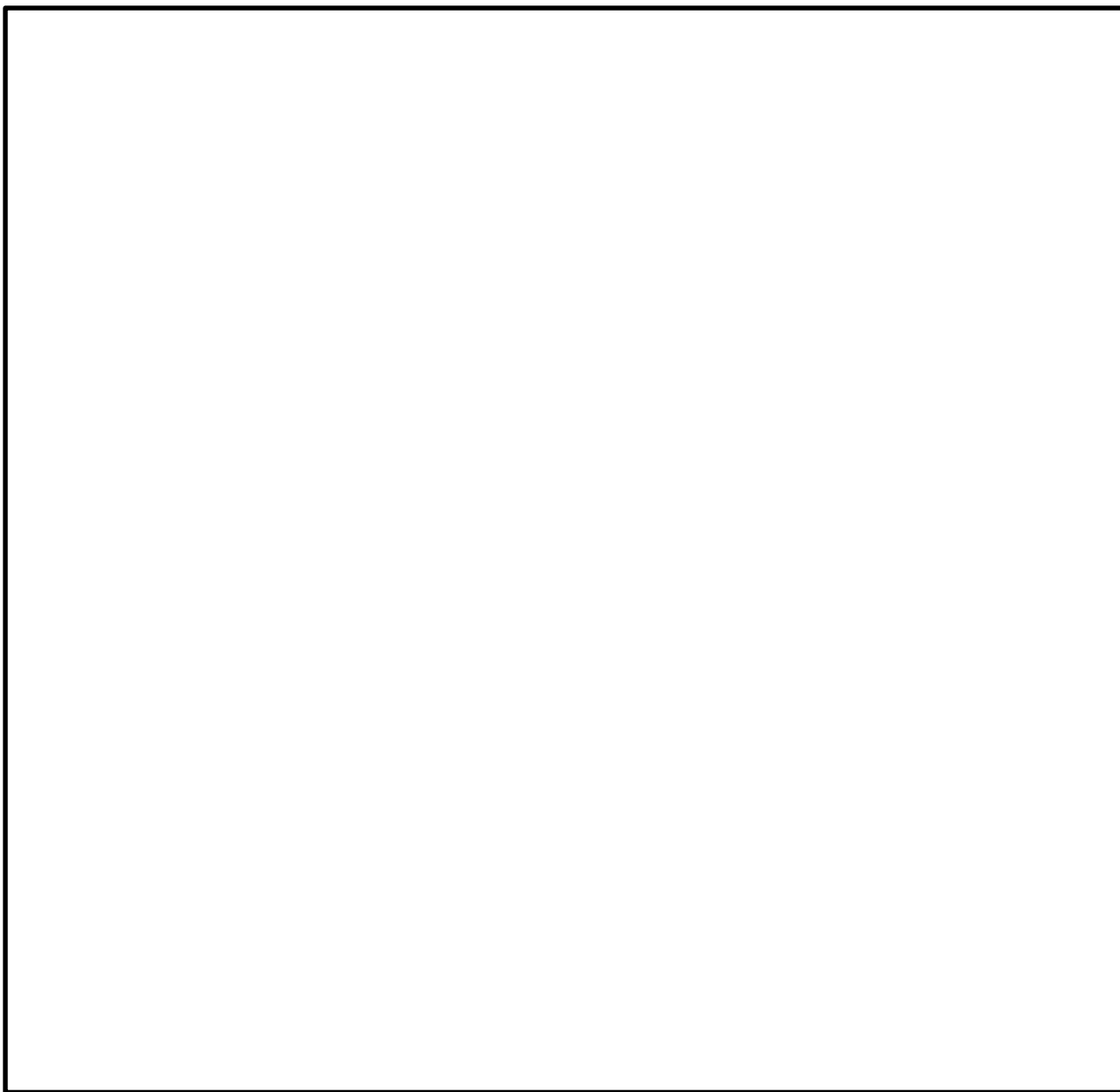


Fig. 7 Giampietrino, *Saint John the Baptist*, c. 1530. Oil on wood panel, 71.1 x 54 cm.
Ponce Museum of Art, Ponce, Puerto Rico, Inv. No. 62.0263.

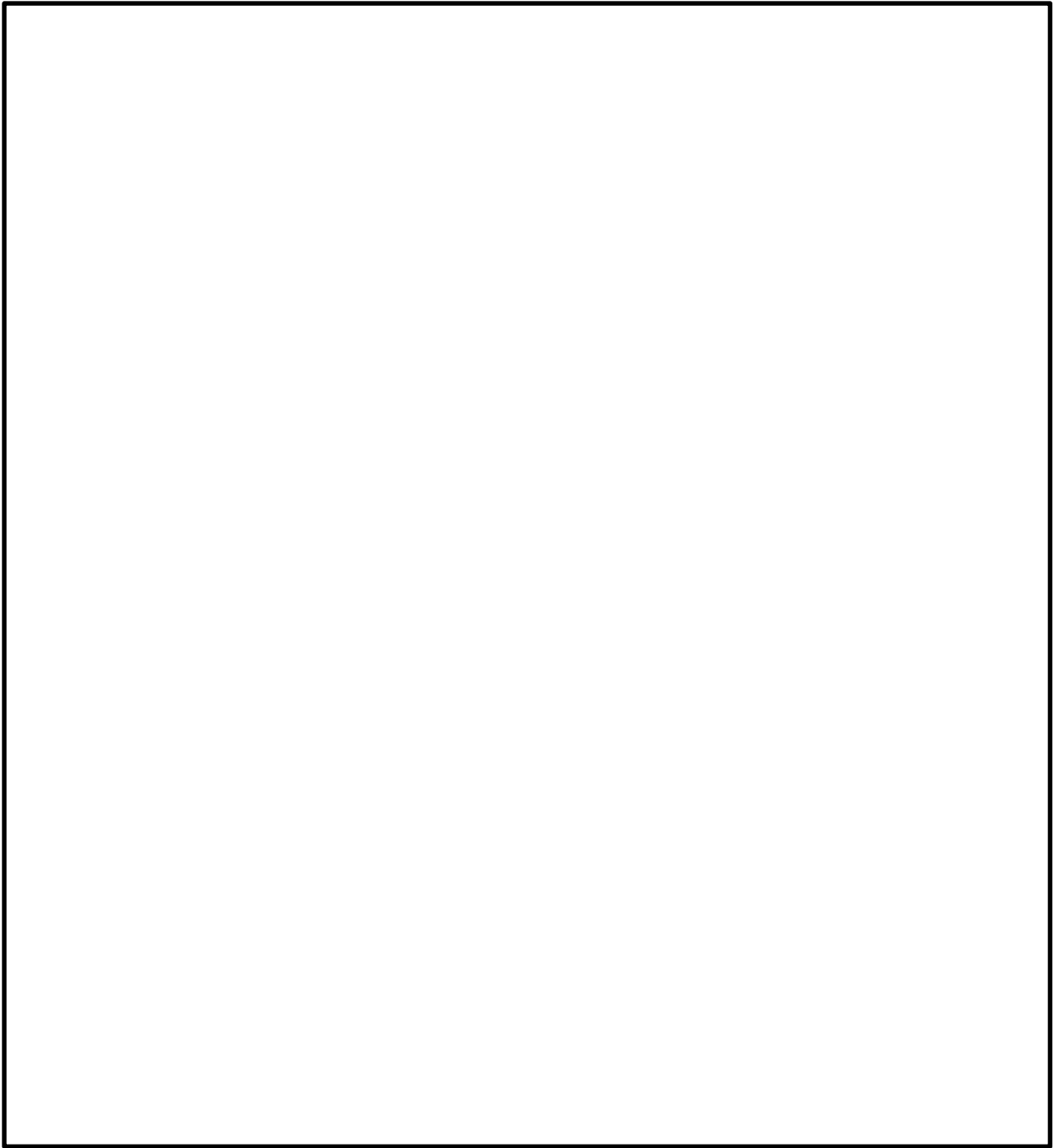


Fig. 8 Agnolo Bronzino, *Portrait of Giovanni de' Medici as Saint John the Baptist*, 1560-1562. Oil on panel. 120 x 92 cm. Borghese Gallery, Rome, no inv. No.

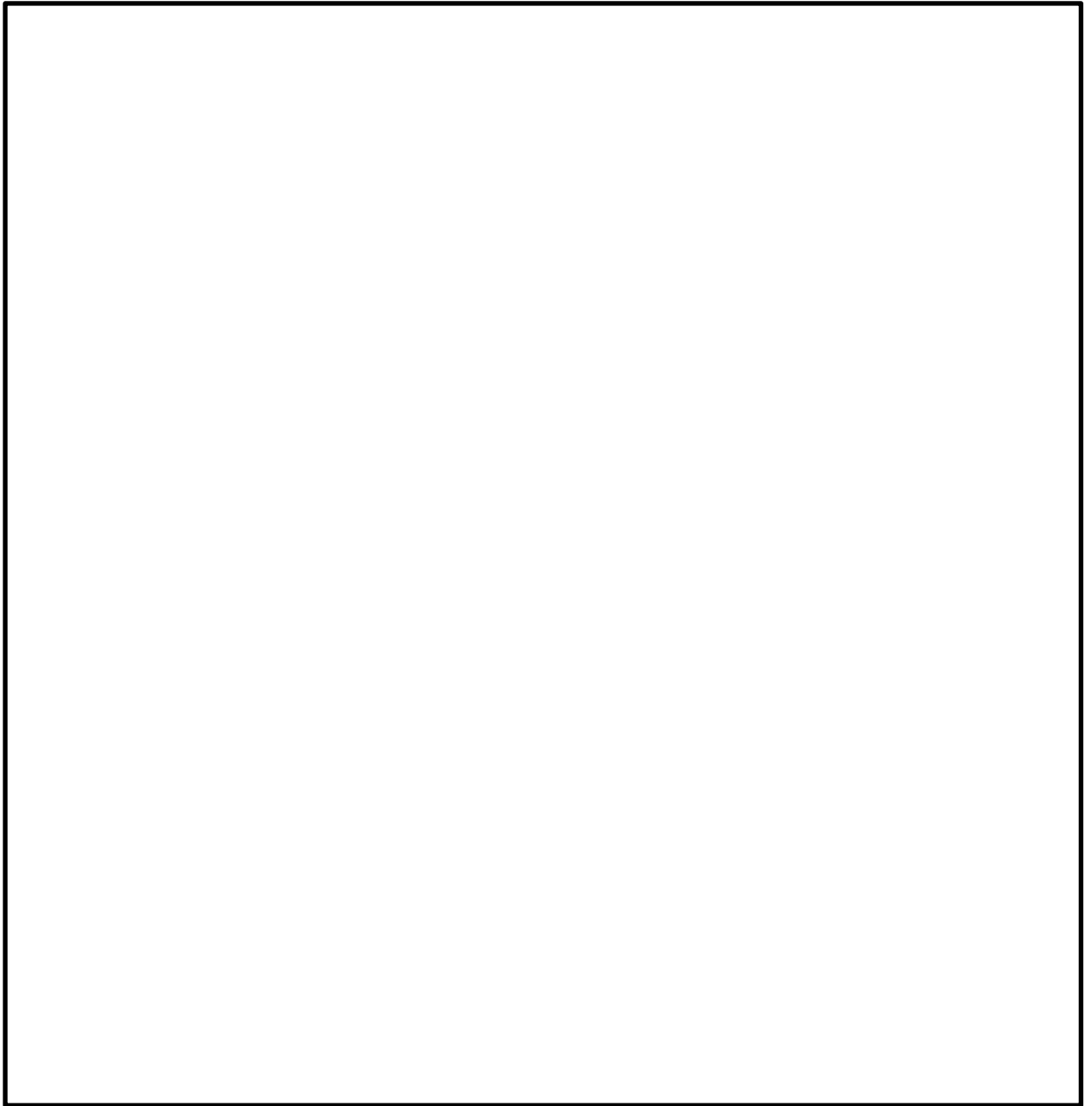


Fig. 9 Michele Tosini, *St. John the Baptist*, 1570. Oil on panel. 66.5 x 54.6 cm. Saint Louis Art Museum, Missouri, Inv. No. 12.2006.

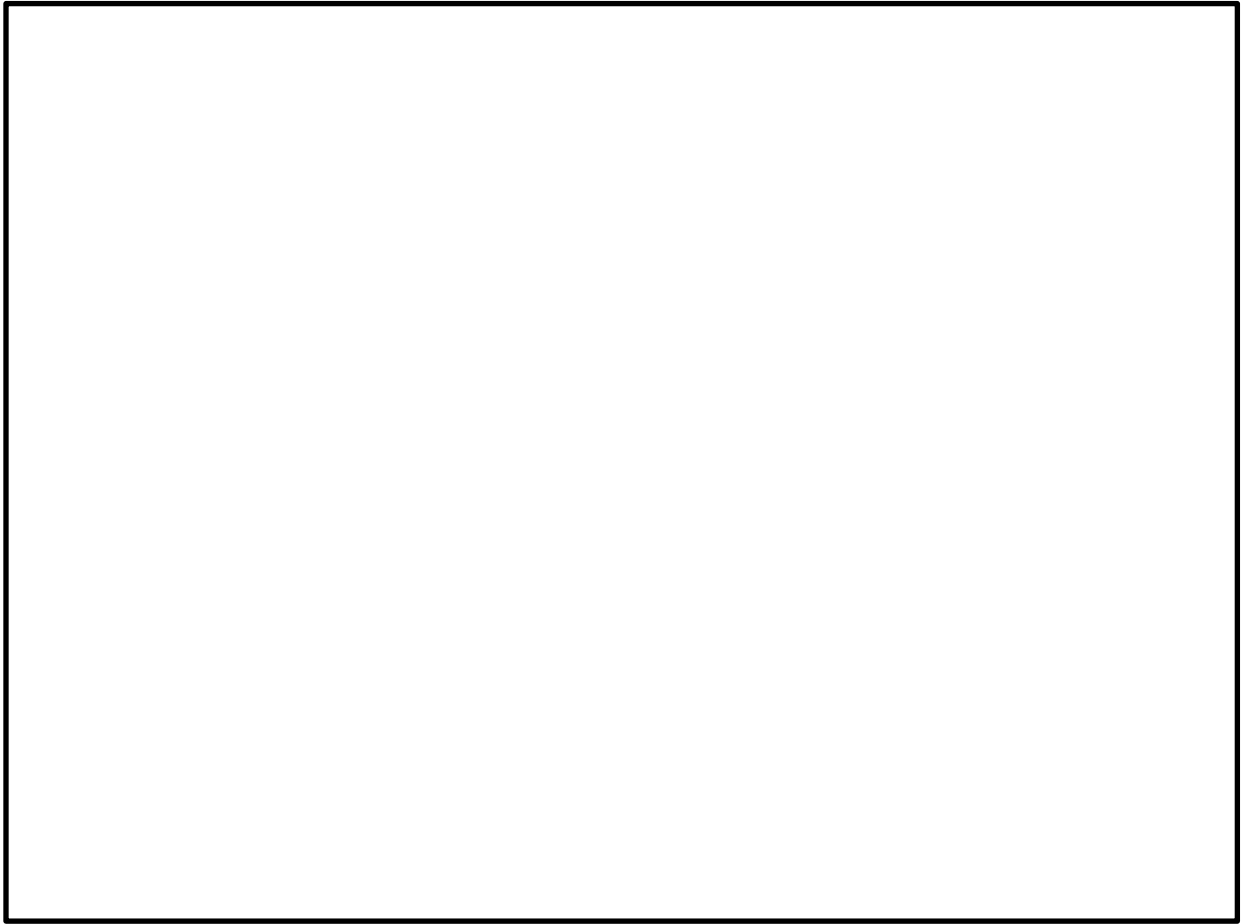


Fig. 10 Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Sacrifice of Noah*, 1509. Fresco, Sistine Chapel Ceiling, Vatican.

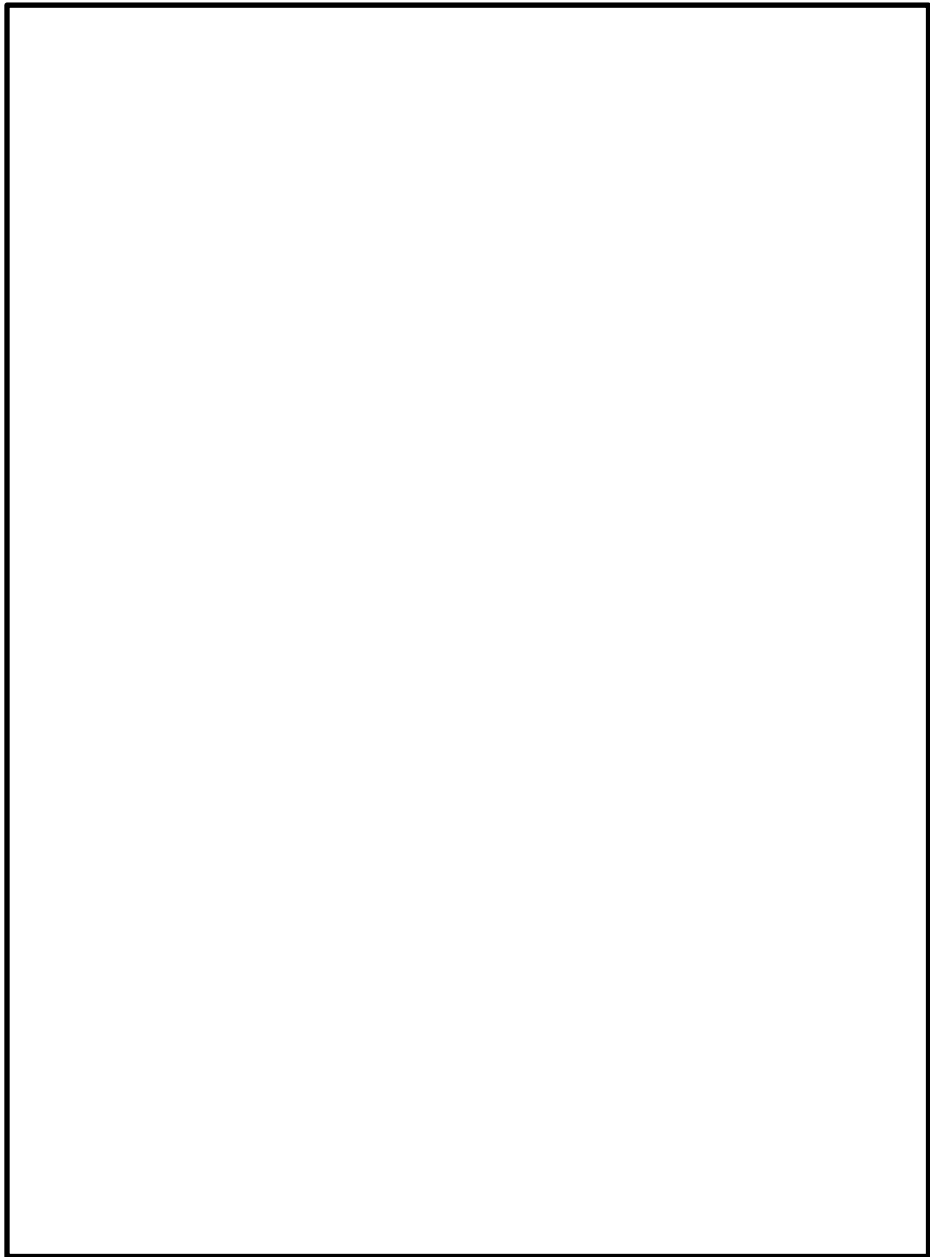


Fig. 11 Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Ignudo*, 1509. Fresco, Sistine Chapel Ceiling, Vatican.

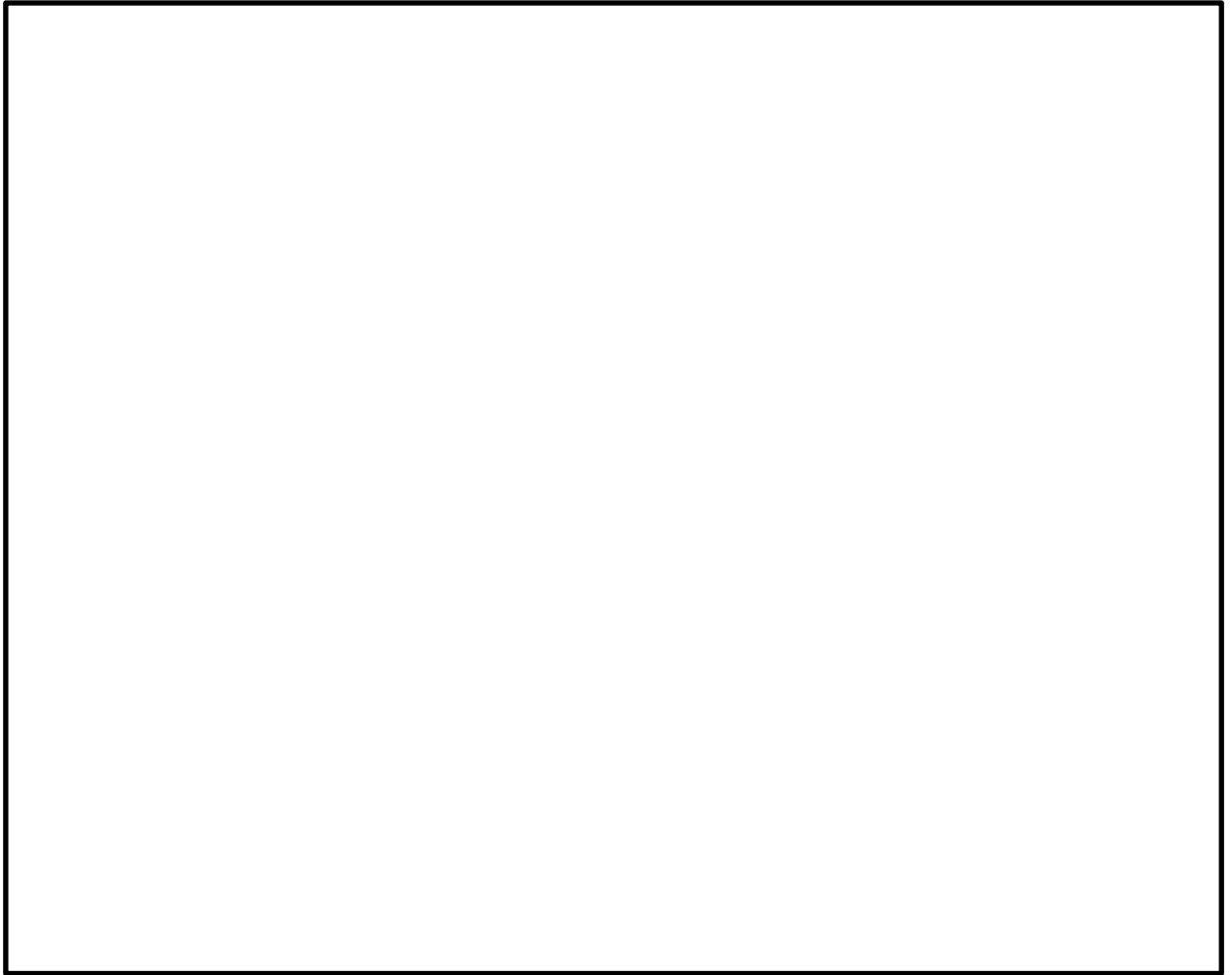


Fig. 12 Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Sacrifice of Noah* (detail), 1509. Fresco, Sistine Chapel Ceiling, Vatican.

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