Cultural and Religious Studies, October 2026, Vol. 14, No. 10, 714-787
doi: 10.17265/2328-2177/2026.10.010

Giorgio Vasari's *The LA Holy Family with Saint Francis*: New Iconographic Observations*

Liana De Girolami Cheney
Professor of Art History (emerita), UMASS, Lowell, USA
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1866-4183

For Francesca De Girolami Carroll

Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), a celebrated painter, architect, and author, was commissioned multiple times to portray Saint Francis of Assisi. Vasari employed vibrant, atmospheric colors characteristic of Mannerism to emphasize the spiritual importance of Saint Francis's presence in his works, offering a new perspective on piety that values humility and devotion. These paintings emphasize both the human and the sacred qualities of Saint Francis, depicting him without heroic glamor. Vasari produced two main types of religious images of Saint Francis. The first is narrative, portraying a specific event from Saint Francis's life, such as the miraculous moment of stigmatization in *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* (1548, oil on canvas), located in the Church of San Francesco in Rimini. The second is devotional, represented by works such as *The Marian Family with San Francis and Pope San Sylvester* for the Church of San Francesco at Castiglion Fiorentino (1548, oil on panel); *The Holy Family with Saint Francis* (1542-1544, oil on canvas), now at the Davis Museum of Art, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA; and *The Holy Family with Saint Francis* (1541, oil on canvas), now at the County Museum of Art of Los Angeles, CA (Fig. A). This last painting serves as the primary subject of this scholarly investigation, which examines its distinctive landscape and classical and Christian iconography. The painting features the symbolism of evergreen foliage, including ivy, fig trees, fir trees, and myrtle within both natural and mystical landscapes. Additionally, the painting depicts books held by sanctified figures that reference the Bible, a crib associated with the birth of Christ as a Nativity, and a cross that signifies Christ's Crucifixion and stigmata while also symbolizing Christian salvation.

Keywords: Giorgio Vasari, Saint Francis, Saint Joseph, classical architectural symbolism, Christian iconography, devotional art, holy books, crib, cross, landscape, foliage, trees

* The findings in this essay were presented virtually at Giorgio Vasari's birthday celebration in Arezzo during the Paradise for Artists Conference, organized by Danielle Villacanti on 30 July 2026. I appreciated the opportunity to share my latest insights on Vasari's *The LA Holy Family with Saint Francis*. My earliest publication on the subject, titled *Giorgio Vasari's Saint Francis: Aretine Fervor*, appeared in the *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, David Publishing Company 5, 8 (October 2015), pp. 859-73.

Liana De Girolami Cheney, Ph.D., Emerita Professor of Art History, UMASS, Lowell, USA; Visiting Art Historical Researcher, University of Aldo Moro, Bari, Italy and SIELAE Art Historical Researcher, Universidad de Coruña, Spain.



Figure A. Giorgio Vasari, *The Holy Family with Saint Francis,* 1541, oil on canvas.
County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Photo credit: Liana De Girolami Cheney.

Introduction

Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), the remarkable Aretine painter, architect, and writer, was fascinated with the image of Saint Francis for two specific reasons. One was associated with his natal and marital connection. In Arezzo, the wealthy parishioner and spice merchant, Baccio di Massi Bacci, commissioned the early decorations for the choir chapel, or Bacci Chapel, of the Basilica of San Francesco in 1407-1408. After his death in 1417 and thirty years of legal disputes over inheritance, his son, Francesco Bacci, continued his father's commission in 1447. But a severe illness ended his life in 1452. His son, Giovanni Bacci, desirous of continuing the wishes of his father and grandfather, contracted in 1466 with Piero della Francesco to complete the choir decorations in fresco with stories from the Legend of the True Cross (Figs. 1and 1.1).[1] Nicolosa (Niccolosa) Bacci of Arezzo (1536-1583), Giorgio Vasari's wife, was a member of this prominent Aretine family.[2]

The second reason was the historical link between Arezzo, Vasari's hometown, and La Verna, a beautiful, remote Tuscan mountainous area about twenty miles northeast of Arezzo, which has been home to a prominent Franciscan monastery and sanctuary with the grotto-cell of Saint Francis where he experienced the miraculous stigmatization on 14 September 1224 (Figs. 2 and 2.1-2.5).

This introduction comprises two concise sections: a brief account of Saint Francis's life to aid readers in comprehending elements of the iconography in Vasari's *The Holy Family with Saint Francis* (1541, oil on canvas, now at the County Museum of Art in Los Angeles, CA (Figs. 3-3.16). This imagery is the focus of the present essay and will be referred to as *The LA Holy Family* throughout the essay.

The second section explores the landscape and vegetation Vasari saw in the highland and woodland regions around Arezzo, such as La Verna and Camaldoli. While staying at the Camaldoli Monastery and visiting its forest, he connected these woods to the mountain terrain of La Verna, where Saint Francis lived and experienced the miraculous stigmata, which refers to the spontaneous manifestation of wounds, scars, and pain on the body that resemble Christ's wounds from the Crucifixion.

[1] Carlo Bertelli, *Piero della Francesca: The Frescoes of San Francesco in Arezzo* (Milan: Skira, 2002).
[2] Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Amore e baci: Giorgio Vasari's Poems to Nicolosa Bacci," in *Italian Culture* (Hamilton, Canada: The Symposium Press, Ltd., 1988), pp. 43-53; and Liana De Cheney, *Giorgio Vasari's Artistic and Emblematic Manifestations* (Washington, DC: New Academia, 2011), pp. 425-40.



Figures 1 and 1.1. Basilica of San Francesco, Exterior and Interior, 1260-1374, Arezzo (left). Piero della Francesca, *Legend of the True Cross*, 1461-1464, fresco. Cappella Bacci with coat-of-arms (right), Arezzo.

Saint Francis and La Verna

This brief overview of the life of Saint Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), an Italian mystic, poet, and friar, is drawn from André Vauchez's *The Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint*.[3] It partly relies on Friar Thomas of Celano's 1228 biography of Saint Francis, composed after his canonization by Pope Gregory IX.[4] Celano noted that Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone (1182-1226) from Assisi, commonly known as Francesco and later

[3] André Vauchez, *The Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012); Timothy Verdon, *The Story of Saint Francis of Assisi: In Twenty-Eight Scenes* (Brewer, MA: Paraclete Press, 2019).

[4] Thomas Celano's *Life of Saint Francis of Assisi* (1228, Chapter 30, Paragraph 86), quotes Saint Francis as referring to Christ in the crib as the "Babe of Bethlehem"; for the image, see https://archive.org/details/thomasofcelanosf00thom_0. See Thomas Celano, *The First Life of Saint Francis of Assisi* (*Vita Prima*) (Philadelphia: Triangle, 2000), for an English version. See also Saint Bonaventura, *The Life of Saint Francis* (*Legenda Maior*, 1260), trans. and ed. E. Gurney Salter (New York: Dutton 1904), Chapter XIII, and for full text, http://www. ecatholic2000.com/bonaventure/assisi/francis.shtml#__RefHeading___Toc351061217; Angelo Tartuferi and Francesco D'Arelli, *L'Arte di Francesco: Capolavori d'arte italiana e terre d'asia, dal XIII al XV secolo* [*The Art of Francis: Italian Art Works and Those in Asia from XIII to XV Century*] (Milan: Giunti, 2015), pp. 421-28 and pp.164-77, on the formation of the Franciscan Order.

canonized as Saint Francis of Assisi, founded the Franciscan Order in 1209. In 1223, in Greccio, a town in Lazio, Saint Francis created the first Nativity scene for the "Babe of Bethlehem" with live animals such as oxen and a donkey, arranging them around a wooden crib or manger filled with hay to celebrate the importance of Christ's birth on Earth.[5]

A year after making the Nativity scene, Saint Francis prayed to Christ for mystical signs of sharing in His suffering during the Crucifixion—specifically the stigmata, the wounds in His hands, feet, and side—to deepen his understanding of His pain. Saint Francis's prayer was answered when he saw a Crucified Christ with the stigmata in the sky and, simultaneously, received the wounds himself.[6]

In 1224, Saint Francis wrote the *Canticle of the Sun*, a collection of religious hymns composed in the local Umbrian dialect.[7] His goals included healing the sick, feeding the poor, and promoting humility, which earned him the nickname *Il Poverello di Assisi*.

According to Celano, Francis lived in a grotto in La Verna near Arezzo (Figs. 2 and 2.1-2.5). On 8 May 1213, the wealthy Count Orlando of Chiusi granted Francis "La Verna," a small plot of land atop Mount Penna, as a private spiritual retreat. Francis resided in a cave there. Five years later, the count commissioned a small chapel for Francis, which no longer exists. Six years later, on 14 September 1224, during a forty-day fast at La Verna, Francis received the stigmata.

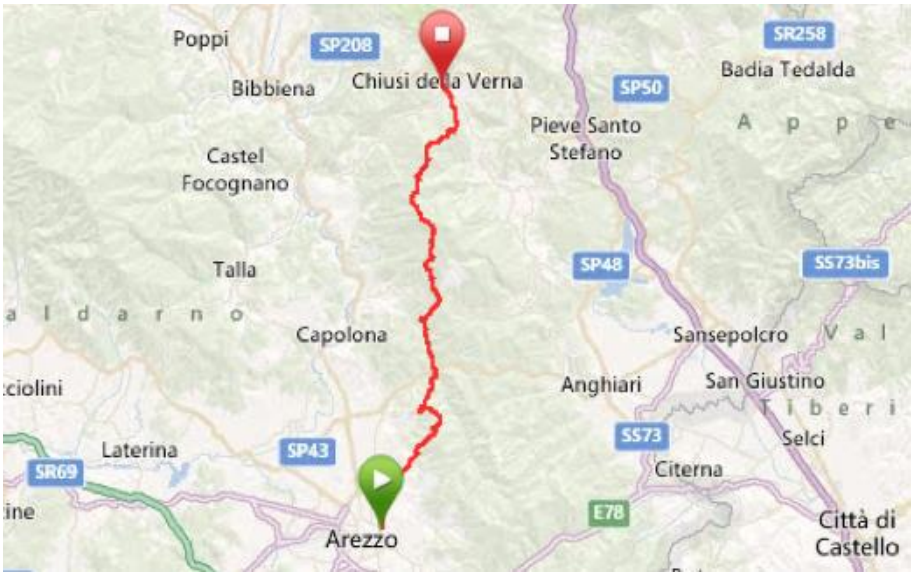


Figure 2. Map from Arezzo to La Verna. Location of the Saint Francis Monastery at La Verna, Tuscany.

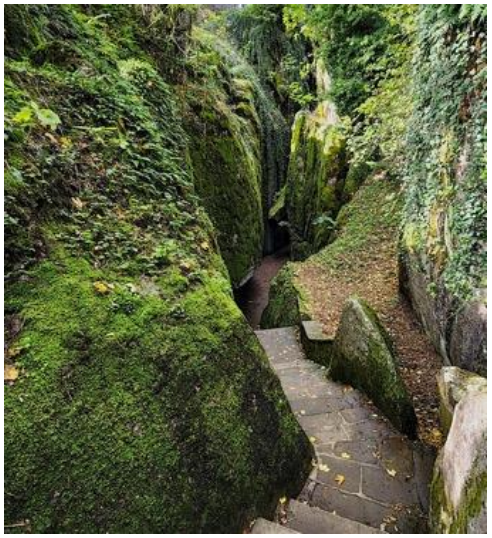
[5] Bonaventura, *The Life of Saint Francis*, Chapter XIII.
[6] Celano, *The First Life of Saint Francis of Assisi*, Book 2, Chapter 3, sections 94-96.
[7] Regis J. Armstrong et al., *Saint Francis: Early Documents* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1999), pp. 113-14.





Figures 2.1a. and 2.1b. Overview of La Verna from Mount Penna, Tuscany.





Figures 2.2 and 2.3. Saint Francis Monastery and Grotto-cell of Saint Francis at La Verna, Tuscany.

In his book, Celano vividly recounted the stigmata that Vasari visualized (Fig. 8):

> Francis observed a forty-day fast and prayer at La Verna with Brother Leo. One morning, as the sun rose, he had a vision: he saw a heavenly being with six wings like a seraph, suspended on a cross. Curious about its meaning, he felt a surge of joy and knelt. When he raised his hands in praise, he experienced sharp pains and realized he had received Christ's stigmata—wounds in his hands, feet, and chest, similar to those from Christ's Crucifixion.[8]

Shortly after his death, he was revered as a saint. Wealthy patrons, including high nobles[9] and church officials, built a series of chapels and churches at La Verna, developing a Franciscan complex with a monastery and a sanctuary, thus creating a pilgrimage site.[10]





Figures 2.4 and 2.5. Sanctuary and Church of Saint Francis, La Verna, Tuscany.

Vasari and Camaldoli

Between 1537 and 1540, Vasari resided off and on at the Camaldoli Monastery and visited the Forest of Camaldoli, located in the Casentino Forest about 42 miles from Arezzo (Figs. 6 and 6.1-6.4).[11] He visited this monastic place for three reasons: to mourn the assassination of Duke Alessandro de' Medici in 1537, a close friend and vital artistic patron;[12] to escape the heat in Florence; and to seek spiritual renewal in a hermetic environment.

While residing at the Camaldoli Monastery, Vasari undoubtedly visited the grand forest and experienced the physical beauty of nature, including evergreen trees and foliage—silver fir trees, fig trees, ivy, and myrtle.

---

[8] This branch of the Benedictine Order in Camaldoli comprised two main parts: the Camaldoli Hermitage, or Sacro Monte, located high in the mountains in a secluded area inhabited only by monks; and the Camaldoli Monastery, situated lower down and functioning as a community hub for monastic activities. It featured the hospital (Infirmary complex), the pharmacy (*antica farmacia*), a guesthouse for pilgrims, and a horticultural center dedicated to growing medicinal plants such as sage, lemon balm, peppermint, rosemary, lavender, eucalyptus, and laurel leaves. The monks produced various treatments using thirty-one different oils from these medicinal plants, laurel leaves for pain and inflammation, digestion and respiratory issues, and especially abetol from fir trees, creating a potent balsamic remedy. For the text data, see http://www.ecatholic2000.com/bonaventure/assisi/francis.shtml#__RefHeading___Toc351061217.

[9] Tartuferi and D'Arelli, *L'Arte di Francesco*, pp. 421-28. Vasari visualized this passage in his painting *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* at Rimini, here Fig. 8.

[10] Tartuferi and D'Arelli, *L'Arte di Francesco*, pp. 184-211 on the iconography of San Francis in the Dugento (XII) and Trecento (XIII). For images, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bonaventura_Berlinghieri#/media/File:Bonaventura_Berlinghieri_Francesco.jpg; and http://www.keytoumbria.com/Assisi/St_Francis_Art.html.

[11] Francesco Traversi, "Prima, durante e dopo Vasari," in *Quiete e Rinascita. Giorgio Vasari a Camaldoli e in Casentino*, ed. Michel Scipioni and Claudio Ubaldo Cortoni (Bibbliena [Arezzo]: Mazzafirra, 2024), pp. 44-46.

[12] Catherine Fletcher, *The Black Prince of Florence: The Spectacular Life and Treacherous World of Alessandro de' Medici* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Captivated by this natural manifestation, he certainly incorporated into the landscape of his devotional paintings not only the physical beauty of vegetation but also the metaphysical significance of the foliage, applying this significance to the imagery of the holy figures in his paintings at this time.



Figure 6. Map from Arezzo to Camaldoli Monastery and Forest, Tuscany.



Figure 6.1. Today's Overview of Camaldoli Monastery and Forest, Camaldoli, Tuscany.



Figure 6.2. Today's scene of fir trees and brooks in Camaldoli Forest, Camaldoli, Tuscany.



Figure 6.3. Today's perspective of fir trees in Camaldoli Forest, Camaldoli, Tuscany.



Figure 6.4. Fir tree with branches, twigs, and ivy. Camaldoli Forest, Camaldoli, Tuscany.

While staying with the Camaldoli monks, a branch of the Benedictine Order, whose motto was *Ora et Labor* [Pray and Work], he completed several paintings for their church in the Camaldoli Monastery, SS Donato and Illario, in gratitude for their hospitality. This essay does not focus on Vasari's commissions by the monks at Camaldoli; they are only noted because Vasari incorporated natural elements of trees and foliage from the Camaldolese Forest into their backgrounds, showing his interest in blending the natural environment with the devotional image in his early works. This interest in observing and incorporating the foliage, forests, and woodland regions surrounding Arezzo—including La Verna, the place where Saint Francis lived and received the miraculous stigmata—continued to influence his commissions throughout the 1540s, as evidenced in the landscape of *The LA Holy Family*. Furthermore, the atmospheric perspective, rendered with Leonardesque *sfumato* in the background of these early works, was inspired by his keen observation of the aerial view surrounding the Camaldoli region.

Among the paintings created for the Camaldolese monks were *Madonna and Child with SS John the Baptist and Jerome* (1537), oil on panel,[13] and a *Deposition* or *Descent from the Cross* (1539), an oil on panel signed GIORGIO VASARIUS ARRETINUS FACIEBAT FECIT.[14] He also began painting the altarpiece of the *Assumption of the Virgin with SS. Augustine and Romualdo* (1539), an oil on panel signed GIORGIO VASARIUS AR. FECIT. Originally made for the transept of the Monastery of Camaldoli, this altarpiece was later transferred to the church of Saint Augustine in Monte San Savino.[15]

[13] Laura Corti, *Vasari: Catalogo complete dei pinti* (Florence: Cantini, 1989), p. 21; R. Bettarini and P. Barocchi, Eds., *Giorgio Vasari, Vite de' piú eccellenti Pittori, Scultori e Architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, 8 vols. in 11 tomes (Florence: G.C. Sansoni, 1966-1990), 6:375-76, hereafter BB-Vasari; Karl Frey, ed., *Der literarische Nachlass Giorgio Vasaris*, 2 vols. (Munich: George Müller, 1923, 1930), 1:124 and 2:855, hereafter Frey-Vasari. For the images, see https://www.meisterdrucke.uk/fine-art-prints/Giorgio-Vasari/1114396/Madonna-and-Child-between-St-John-Baptist-and-St-Jerome.html.

[14] Corti, *Vasari*, p. 28; BB-Vasari, 5:289; Frey-Vasari, 2:857. For the image, see https://upload.wikimedia.org /wikipedia/commons/f/f6/Giorgio_Vasari%2C_La_Deposizione%2C_1540.jpg?utm_source=commons.wikimedia.org&utm_campaign=index&utm_content=original.

[15] Corti, *Vasari*, p. 23; BB-Vasari, 6:377; Frey-Vasari, 2:855. For the image, see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Assunzione_di_Giorgio_Vasari_del_1539,_chiesa_di_Sant'Agostino_%28Monte_San_Savino%29_01.jpg.



Figures 7 and 7.1. Giorgio Vasari, *Nativity* and *Fir Trees*, det., 1538, oil on panel.
SS Donato and Ilariano, the Monastery of Camaldoli, Camaldoli, Tuscany.

While still at Camaldoli Monastery, in the historical quarters of Fontebuono, Vasari completed a Nativity scene, here referred to as the *Camaldoli Nativity* (1538), an oil on panel, signed and dated GEOR. VASARIUS/ARRET.FACIE./MDXXXVIII (Figs. 7 and 7.1).[16] In this painting, Vasari not only adapted the natural landscape and integrated it into the scene but also deliberately included local trees, such as the silver fir. The painting's imagery and iconography closely resemble the theme of the Adoration of the Shepherds, as shown by the shepherds gathered around the manger. Against the dark sky, a radiant white cloud, illuminated by an announcing angel, highlights the birth of Christ. Vasari described the night as "fingendo una notte illuminata dallo spendore di Cristo" [Suggesting a night illuminated by the splendor of Christ].[17] Interestingly, Vasari employed silver fir trunks as supporting beams for the delicate manger ceiling, which is covered with straw and supported by two tall silver fir trees with twig trunks, branch knots or burls, and fuzzy texture.[18] Metaphorically,

[16] Corti, *Vasari*, p. 22; BB-Vasari, 6:377; Frey-Vasari, 2:856; Florian Härb, *The Drawings of Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574)* (Rome: Ugo Bozzi, 2015), p. 210; and Alessandra Baroni and Valentina Zucchi, *Giorgio Vasari e La Natività* (Florence: Edifir, 2024), pp. 9-11.
[17] BB-Vasari, 6:377.
[18] The analysis of the intricate iconography in this painting and thematic interpretation of the Nativity in Vasari's works is beyond the scope of this essay.

the resilience and strength of the fir tree serve to safeguard the Holy Family during Christ's birth and, by symbolically framing the house of God, represent peace and spiritual blessings.

The Camaldoli monks valued the silver fir not only for its physical qualities and commercial utility but also for its spiritual significance. They regarded its straight, upright, and vertical growth as a symbol of the connection between earth and heaven (*axis mundi*—world axis—and cosmic axis)[19]—mirroring the soul's ascent toward the divine.[20] In the Bible, the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (55:1) noted that "Instead of a thorn shall come up the fir tree."[21] The passage describes Christ's Incarnation as superseding the Law of Original Sin (the thorn), as Vasari visualized in the *Camaldoli Nativity*.

The LA Holy Family

In a previous study on the Vasari theme of Saint Francis, I discussed two types of religious representation of Saint Francis of Assisi.[22] One version emphasizes an aspect of Saint Francis's life, particularly the miraculous moment of stigmatization, as seen in Giorgio Vasari's *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* (1548), oil on canvas, in the Church of San Francesco (Tempio Malatestiano) in Rimini (Fig. 8).[23] The other type highlights the devotional element, as illustrated in the paintings of Holy Families such as *The Marian Family with Saint Francis and Pope San Sylvester* (*Madonna and Child with Saints Anne, Sylvester, and Francis*) for the Church of San Francesco at Castiglion Fiorentino, near Arezzo, an oil on panel painted in 1548 (Figs. 9 and 9.1-9.2);[24] *The*

[19] Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1958), chap. 8 on cosmic tree, and chap. 9 on *axis mundi*; J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962), pp. 238-332. Although the deep and complex symbolism of the tree in Christian iconography is acknowledged, it is beyond this essay's scope.

[20] Sonia Marongiu et al., The Camaldolese Forest Conference (May 2012), see https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281202525_The_Camaldolese_forest_code_800_years_of_sustainable_forest_management (May 2012).

[21] Mirella Levi D'Ancona, *The Garden of the Renaissance: Botanical Symbolism in Italian Paintings* (Florence: Olschki, 1977), p. 142.

[22] Cheney, "Giorgio Vasari's *Saint Francis*, pp. 859-73.

[23] Corti, *Vasari*, p. 71. See Vasari's *Ricordo* 175, where he stated: "On 4 January 1548 while lodging in the house of Niccolò Marcheselli, a nobleman from Rimini, I painted a natural scene where San Francis receives the stigmata in the grotto of La Verna and its surroundings with a Crucified Christ in the Heaven"; see Frey-Vasari, 2:866 (fol. 17b). In his *vita*, Vasari described the painting: "While the work of copying and revising my book was proceeding, I did a large oil painting for the high altar of [Church of] San Francesco at Rimini of Saint Francis receiving the stigmata on the mountain of La Verna, copied from nature. As the landscape is full of gray rocks and stones and in the like manner Saint Francis and his companions are in grey, I made a sun, within which is Christ, with a good number of Seraphim, and so the work is varied and the Saint with other figures all are illuminated by the splendor of the Sun, and the landscape is in shadow with a great variety of changing colors; all which is not displeasing to many persons and was much extolled at that time by Cardinal Capodiferro, Legate in Romagna"; see BB-Vasari, 7:391; and Härb, *The Drawings of Giorgio Vasari*, p. 291. Härb's book is the most significant study on Vasari's drawings in relation to his paintings.

[24] Corti, *Vasari*, p. 78. See Vasari, *Ricordo* 184: "On August 5 of 1548, Mariotto da Castiglion, from Arezzo Franciscan Superior at Castiglion Fiorentino, asked me to paint in oil, a wooded panel a scene where Our Lady embracing her son is accompanied by Saint Anne, and Pope Saint Sylvester and Saint Anthony, both are kneeling." Later, Saint Anthony was replaced by Saint Francis of Assisi. Interestingly, this Saint Francis does not carry the usual Crucifix but instead holds a red heart in his hand, representing divine love, an attribute traditionally associated with Saint Anthony. The heart symbol alludes to the biblical saying: "where your treasure is, there will be your heart" (Luke 12:34). Although it is not the purpose of this essay to further explore the significance of this accidental switch in Vasari's paintings, in which he replaced Saint Anthony with Saint Francis and kept Saint Anthony's attribute in Saint Francis's hand, a few general comments may help clarify Vasari's imagery. Between 1221 and 1231, the famous preacher Saint Anthony of Padua delivered his well-known sermon on the miracle of the miser's heart, also called the usurer's miracle, at the funeral of a wealthy lender in Tuscany. He emphasized that the man should not be buried in sacred ground because he lacked a heart—a fact evident when his heart was found in his treasure chest, not in his body. This sermon served as a powerful preaching tool for the Franciscans, whose mission was charity and poverty. See the Paduan humanist Sicco Polentone, *De vita et micaculis sancti Antonii* (1433-1445). Perhaps this is a possible iconographical connection to the heart held by Saint Francis of Assisi. See Frey-Vasari, 2:867, no. 184; BB-Vasari, 7:393; and Gaetano Milanesi, ed., *Le vite de' piú eccellenti Pittori, Scultori, et Architettori*, 9 vols. (Florence: G.C. Sansoni, 1878-1895, 1906-1910, 1970-1974), 7:938-39, hereafter Milanesi-Vasari. See also Härb, *The Drawings of Giorgio Vasari*, p. 296 for the drawing at the Musée du Louvre (Inv. 2101), and p. 297 for a discussion on the painting; and Alessandro Cecchi, Alessandra Baroni, and Liletta Fornasari, eds., *Giorgio Vasari: Disegnatore e Pittore* (Milan: SKIRA, 2011), p. 88.

Holy Family with Saint Francis (1541-1544), oil on canvas, now at the Davis Museum of Art, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA (Figs. 10 and 10.1) [does not include a landscape setting];[25] and *The Holy Family with Saint Francis* (1541), oil on canvas, currently displayed at the County Museum of Art in Los Angeles, CA (Fig. 3), herein referred to as *The LA Holy Family*.



Figure 8. Giorgio Vasari, *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, 1548, oil on canvas. Church of San Francesco (Tempio Malatestiano), Rimini.

[25] Corti, *Vasari*, p. 50, notes that there are several versions on the theme of this painting: at the Musée des Beaux-Arts at Bordeaux; the M.H. De Young Museum in San Francisco, CA; and at the Davis Museum of Art in Wellesley, MA, here illustrated. See Vasari's *Ricordo* 143: "On 6 August 1544, Francesco di Niccòlo Vespucci lodged me to paint a a bust-size depiction of Our Lady with a sleeping child; and behind her two heads of SS Francis and Joseph; see Frey-Vasari, 2:861, no 143. See Härb, *The Drawings of Giorgio Vasari*, p. 233, which also discusses the association of a drawing in a private collection.



Figures 9 and 9.1. Giorgio Vasari, *The Marian Family with Saint Francis and Pope San Sylvester*, 1548, oil on panel. Church of Saint Francis, Castiglion Fiorentino (Arezzo).



Figure 9.2. Giorgio Vasari, Aerial Landscape, det., *The Marian Family with Saint Francis and Pope San Sylvester*, 1548, oil on panel. Church of Saint Francis, Castiglion Fiorentino (Arezzo).



Figures 10 and 10.1. Giorgio Vasari, *The Holy Family with Saint Francis,* 1541-1544, oil on canvas.
Davis Museum of Art, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA.
Photo credit: Liana De Girolami Cheney.

In *The LA Holy Family*, Vasari utilized Mannerist refined design (*disegno*), a brilliant array of color palettes, atmospheric and aerial perspectives (*sfumato technique*), and intricate spatial compositions to emphasize the scene's spiritual significance, providing a novel perspective on devotion. His treatment of *sfumato* in the background paintings not only recalls the work of Italian Renaissance genius Leonardo da Vinci (1411–1519) but also, in particular, those of his admired teacher, the Florentine painter Andrea del Sarto (1486–1530). During his early artistic training with del Sarto, Vasari praised his teacher's *invenzione*, perfect drawing, vivid colors, atmospheric *sfumato* backgrounds, well-balanced composition, and beautification of sacred figures as seen in his *Holy Family* of 1511, oil on panel, now in the Dulwich Picture Gallery in London (compare Fig. 11 with Figs. 3, 3.6, 9, and 9.2). In Andrea's *vita*, Vasari praised his teacher as: "Nel disegno e nel colorito, et il tutto con manco errori che altro pittor fiorentino" [In drawing and coloring, and in all (aspects of art), without errors, more than any other Florentine painter].[26]

[26] See Andrea del Sarto's *vita* in BB-Vasari, 4:341-89, esp. 397.



Figure 11. Andrea del Sarto, *Holy Family,* 1511, oil on panel. Dulwich Picture Gallery, London. Photo courtesy: Dulwich Picture Gallery, London.

In *The LA Holy Family*, Vasari's emphasis on symbolism underscores both the human and sacred dimensions of Saint Francis's humility and piety. Saint Francis's devotional view and spirituality of the cross highlight two religious significances in holding the Crucifix. One is Christ's role as a suffering Servant, drawing heavily on the Bible, the Gospel of Mark (8:31 and 10:5) from 50-80 CE and, in particular, the Book of Isaiah (42:1-49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13; and 53:12) from the eighth century BCE. The second pertains to Saint Francis's plea for a miracle: the receipt of Christ's stigmata, which would allow him to understand human suffering through divine experience. In the painting, Vasari illustrated this concept by depicting Saint Francis with a wounded hand holding a Crucifix, bloodstains marking the end of the cross as he points to his wounded side—two incisions resulting from the stigmata (Fig. 3).

This section describes the painting, focusing on iconographic considerations: the classical architectural landscape; symbolism of the natural landscape (ivy, fig, myrtle, and fir foliage); attire and portraits of the holy figures; sacred books held by the saints; and the connection of the crib with Saint Francis and his "Babe of Bethlehem" Nativity. The ancient Roman settings in the background, painted in hilly and meadow landscapes, reveal a connection with the foreground classical elements. The crib recalls Saint Francis's creation of the Nativity scene, in which he included live animals gathered around a manger made as a wooden cradle. Unlike its traditional function, which suggests the manger contained drinking water for cattle or was filled with grains to feed the animals, Saint Francis's manger was filled with hay.

The fir tree metaphorically traces Christ's Davidic lineage through Saint Joseph, while Mary is linked to the surrounding foliage, alluding to the *virgo* and *virga* symbols of conception found in Scripture. Furthermore, the fig foliage represents divine providence, while the ivy hedge, together with the fig foliage, signifies the shift from the old to the new covenant and reflects God's everlasting faithfulness and blessings to humanity. Additionally, Saint Francis's stigmata is depicted with the wound on this hand holding a cross, with the bleeding end directed toward the saint's side wound, emphasizing the significance of his presence among the Holy Family. These highlighted aspects of the painting pertain to religious symbols and sentiments, which will be examined in the following sections.

Description of the Painting

In his *ricordo* (a type of logbook on Vasari's commissions) 119 (fol. 11a), Vasari wrote that in December 1541, while in Venice, he received a commission for a Holy Family from the banker and art collector Francesco Lioni [Leoni].[27] Vasari and his assistant, San Pancrazio from Empoli, were guests at Francesco Leoni's home in Venice for several months. Vasari ambiguously documented the following regarding the commission in his recorded account:

> Come [il] primo di dicembre 1541 io arrivai a Venezia e mi misi in casa di Francesco Lioni [Leoni] e con Brancatio [Pancrazio] da Empoli per iniziare lì [in] qualche mese. E a Francesco suddetto feci un quadro grande in tela, dentro il quale lavorato a olio la Nostra Donna intera col suo figliolo in braccio, e con San Giuseppe intero, a sedere, così un San Francesco; il quale montò scudi venti.
>
> [Starting December 1, 1541, I arrived in Venice and stayed with Francesco Lioni (Leoni) and Brancatio (Pancrazio) from Empoli [Vasari's assistant], to start working on it in a few months. For Francesco, I painted in oils a large full-size depiction of Our Lady with her child in her arms, a full-length seated Saint Joseph, and a Saint Francis, which brought earnings of 20 scudi].[28]

[27] Frey-Vasari, 2:858-59, no. 119; Corti, *Vasari*, p. 40; Härb, *The Drawings of Giorgio Vasari*, p. 224, figs. 77, 77.1, and 77.2 for a discussion of conception of theme in early drawings at the Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, esp. Inv 6278 F. NB The backgrounds of the scenes are architectural, with no natural landscape features. In the foreground, classical objects such as a column shaft, a pedestal, and a corbel are present, along with an open book and a pillow. Saint Francis kneels, holding a book and touching his chest, signifying that he has received the stigmata.

[28] Frey-Vasari, 2:858-59, no. 119.



Figure 3. *Giorgio Vasari, The LA Holy Family,* 1541, oil on canvas.
County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Credit Line: Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation (M.87.87).

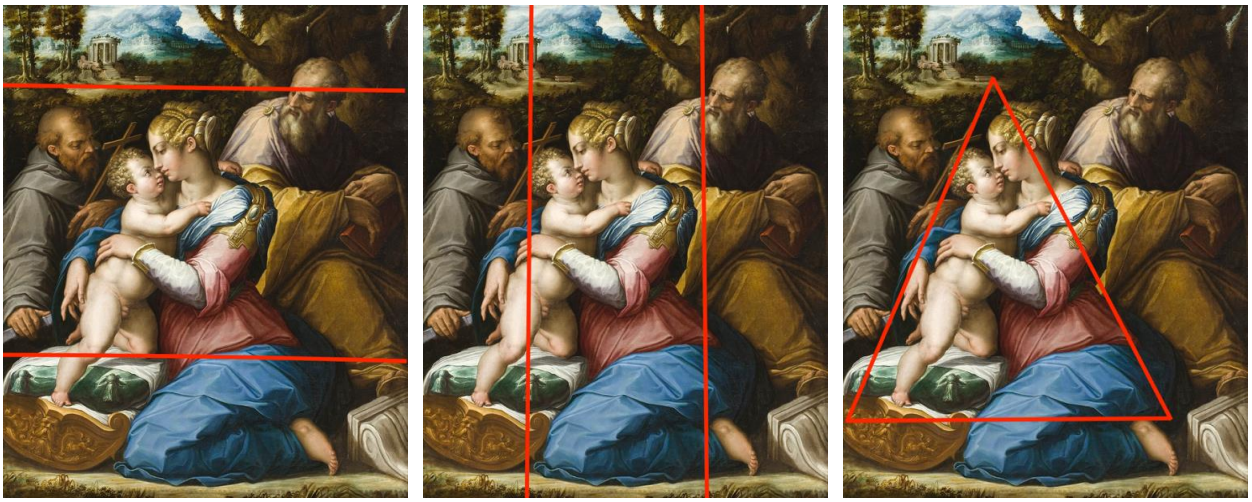


Figure 3.1. Giorgio Vasari*, Saint Francis,* det., *The LA Holy Family,* 1541, oil on canvas.
County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Credit Line: Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation (M.87.87).



Figure 3.2. Giorgio Vasari*,* Crib, det., *The LA Holy Family,* 1541, oil on canvas.
County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Credit Line: Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation (M.87.87).

The geometric metaphor in *The LA Holy Family* reflects Vasari's diagrammatic and intellectual approach to painting's composition, design, and structure. Therefore, the painting's artistic layout is divided into three parts: the background, featuring a classical landscape; the middle ground, displaying the holy figures (Saint Francis, Mary, the Christ Child, and Joseph); and the foreground, emphasizing the crib and highlighting the compositional design, particularly the placement of the holy figures in a natural setting (Fig. 3.3). Vertically, the painting is also divided into three parts, featuring the holy figures Saint Francis, Mary, the Christ Child, and Saint Joseph, emphasizing—through their respective attributes of books, crucifix, crib, corbel, and tree—the symbolism of the holy event (Fig. 3.4). The triangular composition formed by the bond between Mary and the Christ Child functions as the painting's principal visual and symbolic element. It represents Christ's natural and divine birth and alludes to the threefold structure of the universe—heaven, earth, and humanity—as well as his trinitarian divinity—God the Father, the Son [Christ], and the Holy Spirit. Thus this metaphorical geometric shape symbolizes cosmic higher wisdom and the Trinity, with Christ as an integral part of it (Fig. 3.5).[29]



Figures 3.3, 3.4, and 3.5. Cheney's Horizontal and Vertical Division and Triangle Form in Giorgio Vasari, *The LA Holy Family,* 1541, oil on canvas.
County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.

The *LA Holy Family*'s scene unfolds a religious narrative in an open natural landscape, with classical ruins on hills and meadows in the background. In the foreground, the crib, shaped like a coffin, suggests a natural, temporal sleep as well as a premonition of death and eternal sleep. The combination of shadows and dark greens creates a moody twilight atmosphere rather than a lively pastoral scene, with the plants emphasizing the painting's shift in theme from birth to death. Pious Saint Francis, understanding the significance of the Christ Child's presence and His future predicament, humbly embraces the wooden cross with piety and reverence, alluding to Christ's foreseen Crucifixion and his stigmata. Meanwhile, the patriarchal Saint Joseph gazes at the mother and child with affectionate sorrow, while Mary, in a humble kneeling gesture, enfolds her son in a tender, loving embrace.

[29] J.C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), pp. 179-81. This study does not deal with the complex symbolism of the triangle in Platonic and Christian iconography. See Albert Churchward, *The Origin of the Triangle and Meaning of the Different Triangles* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2010); and Samuel Whelpley, *The Triangle: A Series of Numbers Upon Three Theological Points* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2010).

Classical Architectural Landscape

In *The LA Holy Family*, Vasari combined three types of landscape into vignettes. In the deep background, using the *sfumato* technique, classical buildings are set among hills, meadows, and Tuscan mountains. In the middle ground, centered in the scene, is a Tuscan or Roman green landscape featuring bushes, ponds, two clusters of fir trees, and open terrain. The vibrant greenery encircles three significant ancient sites: Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli, the Temple of Vesta at Tivoli, and an open sarcophagus. In the foreground, the religious scene is depicted, with holy figures surrounded and sheltered by rich, abundant foliage rendered with care.



Figure 3.6a. Giorgio Vasari, Aerial Landscape view with Roman Ruins, det., *The LA Holy Family*. 1541, oil on canvas. County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Credit Line: Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation (M.87.87).

Vasari also employed Mannerist variations in the treatment of light, using sharp contrasts to create emotional and visual tension and to emphasize his landscape vignettes: cool, ethereal, celestial light in the background; a spotted, contrasting warm light in the middle ground; and flat highlighting in the foreground, with staged, designed illumination that glows and focuses on the individual holy figure rather than the landscape.

His familiarity with ancient Roman ruins, which he incorporated into the landscape backgrounds of his paintings during this early artistic period, reflects his diligent study of ancient art during early visits to Rome and his keen interest in analyzing and drawing these settings to deepen his understanding of classical culture. His numerous visits to Rome to study ancient art are clearly documented in this *vita*. His earliest trip to Rome was in 1531, when he traveled with his artistic Florentine companion Francesco de' Rossi, known as Francesco Salviati (1510-1563), to study and draw the ancient ruins. Vasari observed that they spent their days sketching ancient and modern monuments separately, and in the evenings, they copied each other's drawings and exchanged sketches.[30] He returned to Rome in 1538 and again in 1539, with a young Florentine assistant, Giovanni Battista Cungi (active 1538-15892). During this time, he spent several months aggressively drawing and studying ancient

[30] Giorgio Vasari's *vita*, 30-40, in BB-Vasari, 6:371. He noted: "Non rimase cosa notevole allora in Roma, né poi in Firenze e altri luoghi ancora, di cui io non avessi disegnato: e non solo di pittura, ma anche di sculture e architetture antiche e moderne; e oltre al frutto che io feci disegnando la volta e la cappella di Michelangelo, non restò cosa di Raffaello, Pulidoro e Baldassare da Siena che nello stesso modo io non avessi disegnato in compagnia di Francesco Salviati" [At that time, there was nothing noteworthy left in Rome, nor later in Florence, nor in other places, that I had not drawn: not only in painting, but also in sculpture and in ancient and modern architecture. Other fruitful endeavors included drawing Michelangelo's vault and chapel. There was nothing left by Raphael, Polidoro, and Baldassare da Siena that I had not drawn in the same way, in the company of Francesco Salviati].

ruins further to improve his artistic techniques.[31] To enhance their productivity, the men divided the work on the ruins and monuments. Cungi focused on measuring and drafting architectural plans, while Vasari sketched figures, reliefs, classical sculptures, and frescoes. By the time Vasari left Rome later that year, he had amassed hundreds of detailed drawings of antiquities. He carefully organized them into a large folio titled *Libro de' disegni* [*Collection of Drawings*], which he kept throughout his career.[32] This collection served as an excellent sourcebook for his fresco projects and Mannerist panel paintings.

Between 1541 and 1543, he visited Rome multiple times while working for Bindo Altoviti and stayed at his house. These travels, artistic experiences, and explorations in Rome were invaluable to Vasari. As he reflected on them, he noted:

> Ma perché l'arte è in sé difficile, bisogna togliere da chi fa quel che può. Dico per questo, però, che lo posso dire con verità: dover sempre fare le mie pitture, invenzioni e disegni, come siano, non dico con grandissima precisione, ma sì bene con indelibile facilità e senza stento.
>
> [Since art is inherently challenging, one must accept what creators can offer. I can honestly say that whenever I produce paintings, inventions, or drawings—regardless of their nature—I do so not with perfect precision, but with a natural ease and without struggle.][33]

Vasari's love for ancient Roman art is clear, evident in his use of poses and motifs from reclining river gods, sarcophagus reliefs, and marble statues, such as the Laocoön, Torso Belvedere, Apollo Belvedere, Sleeping Ariadne [Cleopatra], Venus, and Hercules, as he noted in the Third Preface (Proemio) in the *Vite*.[34]

Between 1538 and 1543, he integrated ancient Roman architectural monuments into many of his paintings. These included illusionistic backdrops with stylized Roman aqueducts like the Claudio Aqueduct, as well as arcades, bridges, columns, temples, vaults, and ruins. Notable examples are the Arch of Titus, the Arch of Septimius Severus, the tondos in the Art of Constantine, reliefs from Trajan's Column, the Colosseum, the House of Nero, the Roman Forum, the Imperial Roman Baths of Caracalla and Diocletian, the Temple of Minerva Medica, and Porta Maggiore. He also portrayed the notable Pantheon, converted into the Italian Renaissance as a church called Santa Maria Rotonda, featuring its large portico, coffered concrete dome, and Corinthian columns. Additionally, he noted that this historical pagan temple was not only converted into a Christian religious structure but also into a burial monument, the final resting place of the Italian High Renaissance painter Raphael Sanzio (1483-1520), known as the "Prince of Painters" for the elegance, grace, and beauty reflected in his paintings.

Furthermore, Vasari's interest in classical culture was complemented by his earlier studies with the Latin grammarian and humanist Giovanni Lappoli (1465-1540, known as Pollastra) and the mythographer Pierio Valeriano (1477–1558), both of whom focused on classical culture.[35]

The overall landscape of *The LA Holy Family* guides the viewer toward the background through a series of architectural vignettes with aqueducts, bridges, basilicas, thermae, and temples. They depict ancient Roman

---

[31] Giorgio Vasari's *vita*, 40, in BB-Vasari, 6:372.
[32] Licia Ragghianti Collobi, *Il Libro de' Disegni del Vasari*, 2 vols. (Florence: Vallecchi, 1974); Per Bjurstrom, *Italian Drawings from the Collection of Giorgio Vasari* (Stockholm: Nationalmuseum, 2001).
[33] Giorgio Vasari's *vita*, 30-35, in BB-Vasari, 6:381.
[34] BB-Vasari, 6:7; Liana De Girolami Cheney, *Giorgio Vasari's Prefaces: Art and Theory* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), p. xliii, and Chapter Six, Third Preface (original and translation), pp. 181-92, esp. 183.
[35] Liana De Girolami Cheney, *Giorgio Vasari: The Quest of a Painter* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2025), pp. 81-89.

architecture in hilly regions, rendered in a painterly style with a suggestive, graduated atmospheric perspective. Vasari creatively combined the mountainous landscape of the Tuscan region with ancient Roman architectural structures in the hills and meadows. Within the classical vignettes, he created two types of perspectival illusion, distinguishing the distant hilly area from the flat terrain. One recedes deeply into the background, with a dramatic aerial perspective fused with rich, vibrant blues and green hues. In contrast, the second perspective moves closer to the middle ground, separating the previous aerial perspective with a green foliage barrier that contains a pond and two clusters of fir trees on small hills. While the first type of aerial perspective diffuses the architecture, the second makes a specific classical building, a *tholos*, recognizable, along with other classical constructs, such as the open sarcophagus. These architectural designs and surroundings suggest symbolic meaning, connecting pagan mythology with Christian symbolism and aligning with Vasari's approach of integrating religious classical elements with Christian iconography.

Vasari depicted the classical landscape as a metaphor for his patron Leoni's connection to Rome, highlighting his role as a merchant and his love for the arts.[36] He also reflected on his own classical and humanist education, recalling his early artistic training in Rome, where he studied and sketched architectural structures and ruins.[37]



Figure 3.6. Giorgio Vasari's Landscape of Roman Ruins and La Verna, det., *The LA Holy Family*, oil on canvas. County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA. Credit Line: Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation (M.87.87).



Figure 2.2. Saint Francis Monastery at La Verna, Tuscany.

[36] Giorgio Vasari's *vita*, 380, in BB-Vasari, 6:380. Vasari recounts residing with Bindo and engaging in activities within his court of the *uomini literati*.

[37] BB-Vasari, 6:371: "Day and night, we drew (Francesco Salviati and himself] and I left nothing in Rome, Florence or any other where place where I stayed, that I did not draw; not only paintings but sculpture and architecture, both ancient and modern." See also Federico Giglio, "Francesco Lioni: A Florentine Merchant in Venice at the Time of Vasari," in *The Medici Archive Project, Florence*. Dutch University Institute for Art History Florence (2021 Fellows Research Reports, 2 March, 2022), np.



Figure 4. Roman Ruins, Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli, 117-138 CE. Italy.



Figure 3.6b. Giorgio Vasari, Top crowned with Ivy, det., Temple of Vesta at Tivoli, 1st century BCE, in *The LA Holy Family*, oil on canvas. County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA. Credit Line: Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation (M.87.87).



Figure 5. Today's photograph, Temple of Vesta at Tivoli, Italy.

In the background of the painting, Vasari combined the vibrant mountainous landscapes of Camaldoli and La Verna with ancient Roman architectural ruins, using brilliant atmospheric coloration (compare Figs. 3 and 3.6 with Figs. 2.1a and 2.2). The ancient Roman sites shown include many already mentioned temples, forums, civic spaces, amphitheaters, bridges, and aqueducts. Of particular note here are two major structures: the ruins of Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli; and the Temple of Vesta at Tivoli on the acropolis of the Etruscan and Roman city (compare Figs. 3 and 3.6a with Figs. 4; 3.6b and 5). This idealized Roman Temple of Vesta at Tivoli from the first century BCE is a marble *tholos* standing on a hill. This circular building, adorned with swags of ivy, is surrounded by Corinthian columns in a serene landscape, with two tall fir trees symbolizing strength and

divinity.[38] The *tholos*'s top is covered in ivy. The temple also features evergreen ivy adorning the top lintel, a pagan symbol of joy and immortality (Fig. 3.6b).

Vasari conflated two iconographic concepts in the symbolism of his Roman temple: the physical *tholos* design, associated with the beauty and symbolism of the Temple of Vesta at Tivoli, with its implied divine fire and purity; and the medieval legend linking the Roman Temple of Peace to Christ's birth. The Temple of Vesta at Tivoli was constructed as a sanctuary in the early first century BCE, prominently overlooking the Aniene falls in the ancient Etruscan-Roman acropolis. An inscription indicates that the Roman general and senator Lucius Gellius (ca.134BCE–ca.72BCE) may have commissioned the building. The temple's *tholos* design, encircled by Corinthian columns, with intricate garlands and bucrania decoration on the circular frieze, was a key feature of the sanctuary complex. The temple was often considered an oracle, known as the Temple of the Sibyl.

The reason for the symbolic connection between the small Temple of Vesta at Tivoli and the grand and magnificent Temple of Peace remains uncertain. Similarly, as a *tholos*, the Temple of Peace was a key feature of the complex's conceptual design and symbolic significance. In 71 CE, Emperor Vespasian constructed the Temple of Peace, known as *Templum Pacis Aeternum* [*The Eternal Temple of Peace*], with its circular architecture to celebrate the end of wars, implying multiple classical theological functions as well.[39] Both ancient Roman temples influenced the construction of Christian and medieval religious churches. According to Jacob de Voragine's thirteenth-century *Golden Legend* (Book 1, Chapter 6, The Nativity), the grand Temple of Peace, built to honor a period of global harmony, was believed to endure forever. However, the pagan oracle predicted it would collapse on the night of the Nativity, when Mary gave birth to Christ.

> For because the world was in such great peace, the Romans had built a temple named the Temple of Peace ... This temple, at the same time that our Lady was delivered and our Lord born, was overthrown and fell down.[40]

This reference indicates the moment when the Virgin Mary gave birth to Christ, symbolizing the coming of the true Prince of Peace and the end of false peace.

Thus, in the painting, Vasari captured this medieval legend's connection by depicting the Temple of Vesta at Tivoli, considered as a Temple of the Sibyl as well as a Temple of Peace, with the Holy Family, who are resting beneath this peace symbol, representing the new peace brought by Christ's birth, a new covenant, and spiritual rebirth. The Virgin Mary's virginity and family mirror the allusion to Vesta's virginal purity—the ancient Roman goddess of the home and family—whose temple is dedicated to her. It also implies an oracle about the coming of Christ through the acrostic prophecy. This divine revelation was found in the ancient Sibylline Oracles (Book 8).[41] Over time, the oracles gained prominence in the Christian world through various adaptations and the efforts of Early Church Fathers. Thus the religious connection with the pagan construction and the foreground birth scene.

---

[38] The fir tree was chosen for the sacred and structural components of Solomon's Temple (1 Kings 6:15, 34); notably, its wood was used to construct St. Peter's. In the Old Testament, the fir tree also symbolized God's miraculous provision of life (Isaiah 41:19, 55:13). See Michael Zohary, *Plants of the Bible* (London/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 106-07.

[39] Pier Luigi Tucci, *The Temple of Peace in Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 1-75.

[40] *The Golden Legend or Lives of the Saints*. Compiled by Jacobus de Voragine, Archbishop of Genoa, 1275. First Edition Published 1470. Englished by William Caxton, First Edition 1483, edited by F.S. Ellis, Temple Classics, 1900 (repr. 1922, 1931), vol. 1, chap. 6, The Nativity.

[41] The Sibylline Oracles are a collection of Greek prophetic verses thought to be divinely inspired. Legend credits the Cumaean Sibyl with bringing this collection to Rome around 500 BCE. The Roman Senate kept a copy in the Capitol, but it was lost in a fire in 83 BCE. Over time, the oracles became more prominent in the Christian community due to adaptations of Early Church Fathers. See Louis de Tracy, ed., *The Sybilline Oracles* (London: Forgotten Books, 2018).

Natural Landscape: Foliage

As previously noted, Vasari visited the Monastery and Forest of Camaldoli during his trip, located in the Casentino Forest. He was also familiar with other natural areas and mountains around Arezzo, including La Verna (Figs. 2-2.3 and 6-6.4).

In the natural landscape of *The LA Holy Family*, Vasari constructed a botanical composite with different kinds of foliage embedded within the vegetation, distinguishing three levels of foliage: the primary foliage consists of fig leaves—broad, irregularly lobed, palmately leaf-shaped, with a soft and irregular texture—forming a hedge behind the holy scene, a dominant feature of the vegetation (compare Figs. 3.7, 3.7a, with 12).



Figure 3.7. Cheney's Red line indicating Foliage Separation in Giorgio Vasari, *The LA Holy Family,* 1541, oil on canvas. County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.



Figure 3.7a. Giorgio Vasari, Foliage Separation–Ivy, Rod, Myrtle, and Fig–det., *The LA Holy Family,* 1541, oil on canvas. County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Credit Line: Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation (M.87.87).



Figure 12. An actual photograph of a Fig Tree.

The secondary foliage comprises smaller, differently shaped leaves, such as climbing ivy—smaller, leathery, 3- to 5-lobed, with a leathery texture and trailing vine quality—around the fir tree and interwoven with the fig leaves in the hedge (compare Figs. 3.7, 3.7a, and 3.9 with Figs. 2.3 and 6.4).



Figure 3.9. Giorgio Vasari, Ivy Climbing Up a Fir Tree, det., *The LA Holy Family*, 1541, oil on canvas.
County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Credit Line: Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation (M.87.87).

The third botanical motif is the short, thick rod or twig and myrtle—small, oval, evergreen leaves—in open bud, also intertwined in the hedge located behind Mary's head (compare Figs. 3.8 and 3.8a with Fig. 6.4; and Figs. 3.8b and 3.8c with Fig. 13).



Figure 3.8. Cheney's Arrows indicating the Foliage: Twig and myrtle in Giorgio Vasari, *The LA Holy Family,* 1541, oil on canvas.
County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.



Figure 3.8a. Cheney's Arrows Pointing to the Twig in Giorgio Vasari, The LA Holy Family, 1541, oil on canvas. County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.



Figure 6.4. Fir tree with branches, twigs, and ivy. Camaldoli Forest, Camaldoli, Tuscany.



Figure 3.8b. Cheney's Arrows point to the Myrtle in Giorgio Vasari, *The LA Holy Family,* 1541, oil on canvas. County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.



Figure 13. Actual Photograph of a myrtle (*Myrtus communis*).

Vasari deliberately showed an unmasked, thick twig amid the dense ivy leaves to highlight its symbolic religious meaning connected to Mary (Figs. 3.8b and 13). It references the biblical context (Isaiah 11:1), connecting Mary as both a *virgo* [virgin] and a *virga* [green shoot, rod or twig]: "Et egredietur virga da radice Iesse, et flos de radice eius ascendet" [A shoot will come from the stump of Jesse] and "Virga Jesse floruit: Virgo Deum et hominem genuit" [The rod of Jesse has blossomed: A Virgin has borne God and man]. This passage will be addressed in subsequent sections of this essay. The biblical symbolism of the twig not only signifies her purity but also correlates with the fir tree depicted in the painting, thereby further emphasizing Mary's connection to Christ's Davidic lineage through her husband, Joseph.[42]

Furthermore, Vasari placed the fir tree trunk with branches within the landscape encircling the Holy Family; it remains conspicuous despite its partial integration into the foliage, which comprises ivy, twigs, myrtle, and fig leaves. The ivy, agile yet assertive, climbs in search of support and seems to take pleasure in the fir tree—a Vasarian *capriccio* (Fig. 3.9). By including the fir tree, Vasari visually recalled his stay in the Infirmary of the Camaldoli Monastery and the natural forest of fir trees surrounding the area.



Figure. 3.9s. Giorgio Vasari, Fir tree trunk and branches, det., *The LA Holy Family,* 1541, oil on canvas. County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Credit Line: Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation (M.87.87).

[42] Michael D. Taylor, "A Historiated Tree of Jesse," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 34/35 (1980-1981), pp. 125-76.



Figure 14. Actual photograph of fir tree crown at La Verna (Arezzo), Tuscany.



Figure 6.4. Actual photograph of fir tree with branches, twigs, and ivy. Camaldoli Forest, Camaldoli, Tuscany.

Behind Saint Joseph stands a tall fir tree trunk with branches (compare Figs. 3.9 and 3.9a with Figs. 6.2-6.4 and 14). This type is found in the Camaldolese Forest as well as in La Verna, with a heavy trunk and branches surrounded by lacy tendrils and thin foliage, serving as a metaphorical reference to the Davidic lineage (Matthew 1:18-25, originating from the prophecy of Isaiah 11:1). The Davidic lineage associated with Joseph is linked to the symbolism of the Tree of Jesse. While the Tree of Jesse is founded on biblical genealogies, it establishes a connection between Joseph and the Davidic lineage, thereby linking to the lineage of Christ. But the connection between Joseph and the fir tree originates from popular folklore related to the *Legends of the Flight into Egypt*, including the *Legend of the Hidden Fir Tree*.[43] During the Holy Family's swift escape from King Herod's

[43] The legend appears in The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, specifically in Chapters 20 and 21, part of the New Testament Apocrypha. As noted by David R. Cartlidge and James Keith Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 21-46, especially 32, these legends mention other types of trees, including the palm and sycamore. See Zohary, *Plants of the Bible*, pp. 60-61 on the palm; and pp. 68-69 on the sycamore.

soldiers, who aimed to kill the newborn, they were mythically protected by trees such as the fir tree. According to the *Legend of the Fir Tree*, as Herod's soldiers drew nearer, a large fir tree lowered its dense, evergreen branches to the ground, concealing Joseph, Mary, and the infant Christ from view. Thus the tree becomes an essential link to the theological narrative of the Incarnation and the anticipated Passion, as well as to humanity's hope in Christ's foretold Resurrection. This complex collection of vegetation and foliage is both emblematic and pictorial.

Ivy

In *The LA Holy Family*, Vasari depicted a devotional painting in which a religious drama unfolds in a beautiful, classical, and natural setting (Figs. 3 and 3.7a). In the scene, Vasari separated the physical or classical world from the spiritual and religious realm with an elaborate evergreen ivy hedgerow, a symbol of perpetuity for its green color and endurance.[44] In classical and Christian iconography, the ivy (*Hedera helix*) has many symbolic associations with death and sleep, as in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Book 3:582-667) and Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* (Book 16.62). In the early Renaissance, the French humanist Petrus Berchorius, a close friend of the Aretine poet Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374), wrote around 1355 a biblical and moral dictionary entitled *Repertorium Morale*, in which he stated that the ivy symbolized the Cross of Christ because its strong roots could not be destroyed, as Christ could not be. In *The LA Holy Family*, behind Saint Francis holding a Crucifix, the hedge of ivy creates a protective barrier and forms a metaphorical crown around Saint Francis's head (compare Figs. 3, 3.1, 3.7, and 3.7a). In classical literature, evergreen ivy, with its clinging nature, symbolizes divine inspiration and attachment, reflecting its green color and vining characteristics.[45] In Christian iconography, ivy symbolism is connected to the Incarnation. Christ's divinity represents an incorruptible ivy-vine because he mirrors the perennial green ivy leaves.[46] The ivy also becomes an attribute of Mary's delivery of Christ, as noted in a poem entitled *De Beata Maria Vergini*: "Tying the vine to the ivy, you became fruitful, while you were taken into labor, a branch by the word of the word." Undoubtedly, from his patronage and travels, Vasari would have been acquainted with the ivy that encircles the grotto-cell of Saint Francis at La Verna (compare Figs. 3.6 and 2.3). In *The LA Holy Family*, Vasari depicted Mary's postpartum body, referencing Christ's recent birth, as she kneels down, lifts him from the crib, and embraces her son. Like Saint Francis, she is guarded by an intertwined fir-and-ivy hedge visible behind her.

Fig

Vasari also explored the symbolism of fig leaves, equating them with ivy in both classical and Marian Christian iconography **(**compare Figs. 3.7 and 3.7a with Fig. 12). Although the fig tree is not native to the cold climates of the Camaldoli and La Verna regions, like ivy and fir, it was commonly cultivated in the Aretine area and became part of the broader Tuscan landscape. Vasari considered it a significant Christian symbol because of its biblical and Marian associations. He portrayed a fig hedge as a barrier dividing the natural world from the divine. This is evident in his earlier 1540s commission, *The Conception of Our Lady*, created for the Florentine

---

[44] Zohary, *Plants of the Bible*, p. 121.

[45] Petrus Berchorius, *Repertorium, Morale*, 1, p. 2101 [Cologne 1477; repr. 1489 Nuremberg: Anton Koberger, ed. Johannes Beckenhaub]. In classical literature, Horace's *Odes* (Book 1, Ode 1) notes that the clinging ivy's enduring nature symbolizes a mind attuned to higher spiritual realms [David Ferry, trans. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998; repr. 2015)]. Similarly, Virgil's *Eclogues*, particularly *Eclogue* 7, present the ivy crown as a symbol of the poet's divine inspiration [C. Day Lewis, trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999)]. See J.B. Trapp, "The Owl's Ivy and the Poet's Bays," *The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 21, 3-4 (December 1958), pp. 227-37.

[46] D'Ancona, *The Garden of the Renaissance*, p. 192; Zohary, *Plants of the Bible*, p. 121; Angela Paine, *Healing Plants of Renaissance Florence: The Development of Herbal Medicine in Florence* (London: Moon Books, 2024), pp. 93-98.

banker and merchant Bindo Altoviti (1491-1557). This oil-on-wood panel painting is in the patron's church, SS Apostoli, in Limbo Square, Florence (Figs. 15, 15.1 and 15.2; note Fig. 15.a).[47]



Figure 15. Giorgio Vasari, *The Conception of Our Lady*, 1540, oil on wood panel. Santi Apostoli, Florence. Photo credit: Art Resources, NY.

[47] David Brown and Jane van Nimmen, *Raphael and the Beautiful Banker: The Story of Bindo Altoviti* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Alan Chong, ed., *Raphael, Cellini and a Renaissance Banker: The Patronage of Bindo Altoviti* (Milan: Electa, 2003); Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Giorgio Vasari's *Conception of Our Lady*: A Divine Fruit," *Cultural and Religious Studies* 4, 2 (February 2016), pp. 87-114; Härb, *The Drawings of Giorgio Vasari*, pp. 184-88.
Note on Fig. 15.3. A captivating 1611 print by Philippe Thomassin, inspired by Giorgio Vasari's imagery, was copper engraved and published in *Illustrium Virorum Utriusque Testamenti Vultus* [*Faces of Illustrious Men of Both Testaments*] in Rome between 1611 and 1612. It depicts Adam, Eve, kings, priests, soldiers, and Moses, chained at the base of a fig tree, around which a serpent coils. Above, the Virgin sits on a cloud, surrounded by angels. Latin inscriptions referencing the Bible appear at the top, while the margins credit the creators and include a dedication. Below Adam, a note identifies Giorgio Vasari as the original artist, and an ornate coat of arms is displayed. The device, a cartouche with a Latin inscription, honors the wealthy patron "Lord Alessandro Garabolonghi, Nobleman of Rimini, most fervently adorned with every kind of virtue." The coat of arms features a medieval soldier's helmet, bent-leg, part of the patron's family crest, serving as a heraldic pun on his surname (bent-leg, *gamba*). The zodiac band featuring a shooting star represents cosmic authority and lasting fame, in keeping with the patron's family. See Jamie Gabbarelli, "Philippe Thomassin and Giulio Mancini's Art Collection," *Print Quarterly* 32 (2015), p. 386.



Figure 15.a. Philippe Thomassin after Giorgio Vasari, *Allegory of the Immaculate Conception,1611,* copper engraving. British Museum, London.
Photo credit and courtesy: ©The Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 15.1. Cheney's Arrows indicating foliage separation in Giorgio Vasari, *The Conception of Our Lady* 1540, oil on wood panel. Santi Apostoli, Florence.



Figure 3.8. Cheney's Arrows indicating in the foliage: Twig and Myrtle in Giorgio Vasari, The LA Holy Family, 1541, oil on canvas. County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.

Vasari encountered the affluent Altoviti at the Camaldoli Monastery between 1537 and 1540. Altoviti later supported Vasari's artistic endeavors and became an avid patron (compare Figs. 3, 3.7, and 3.7a with Figs. 15 and 15.2).[48] In the *Conception of Our Lady*, Vasari clearly identified the fig foliage with the fig tree (*Ficus carica*), whose iconographical identity belongs to Genesis 3:7 and 3:15, where Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge in Paradise and made "garment skin" from the fig leaves, noting that the fig leaves are now used to conceal internal guilt from an All-knowing God. Therefore, the painting's theological framework hints at Christ's sacrifice, as noted in the *Protoevangelium* (First Gospel), which first announces the coming of the Savior, and the "garment of skin" symbolizes the covering of human sin that will be redeemed by Christ's birth and death. Therefore, Vasari acknowledges the fig tree's dual meaning and ambiguity: it symbolizes both an abundant source of fruit and knowledge, as well as a test of obedience as forbidden fruit—an evil element that led to the human Fall (Genesis 3:7).

[48] Corti, *Vasari*, p. 36; BB-Vasari, 6:380-81; Härb, *The Drawings of Giorgio Vasari*, pp. 185-88, 217; Cheney, "Giorgio Vasari's *Conception of Our Lady*," pp. 87-114.



Figure 15.2. Giorgio Vasari, Fig Tree, det., *The Conception of Our Lady,*
1540, oil on wood panel. Santi Apostoli, Florence.
Photo credit: Art Resources, NY.



Figure 3.7a. Giorgio Vasari*,* Foliage Separation–Ivy, Twig, Myrtle, and Fig–det.,
The LA Holy Family, 1541, oil on canvas.
County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Credit Line: Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation (M.87.87).

Vasari's fig tree and the fig foliage in the *Conception of Our Lady* link Christian iconography to Genesis: Adam and Eve represent the fall of man (original sin), acknowledgment, and Mary and Christ represent humanity's salvation. Theological connections of good and evil in the *Conception of Our Lady* run from Eve to the eaten fruit/fig to the fall of humanity and death, while redemption occurs through Mary's bearing of Christ, granting grace and salvation. *The LA Holy Family*, in theological contrast, links Mary to the birth of Christ—the Incarnation—which also anticipates Christ's future Passion, death, and glorious Resurrection. Vasari beautifully created a visual meditation on humanity's passage from Fall to Redemption (compare Figs. 15, 15.1–15.2 and 3.7, 3.7a, and 3.8 with Fig. 12).[49]

Interesting further observations are found when comparing the two paintings—*Conception of Our Lady* and *The LA Holy Family* (compare Figs. 15.1 and 3.7). Vasari explored the use of botanical vegetation to depict Christ in the *Conception of Our Lady*, linking it to the Fall, Knowledge, and Redemption in Genesis. Here, vegetation, specifically the fig, is rooted in Genesis and serves as a theological reminder, whereas in *The LA Holy Family*,

[49] Zohary, *Plants of the Bible*, pp. 58-59.

the vegetation is rooted in a metaphorical landscape that symbolizes the living natural world associated with the Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection. In both paintings, Vasari considered the fig metaphorically, as it is traditionally associated in Christian iconography with the Fall; by contrast, the ivy (*Hedera helix*) is associated with classical and Christian symbolism as an evergreen emblem of permanence, endurance, and immortality.

Furthermore, in *The LA Holy Family*, the foliage formation, which contains numerous iconographical references, has a more morally ecological and encyclopedic character. Vasari gathered various plant forms, transforming the landscape into a vibrant, protective botanical setting surrounding the holy figures. Thus the vegetation in Vasari's *The LA Holy Family* does not constitute a single botanically homogeneous species; instead, several distinct leaf forms appear interwoven throughout the landscape. This is in contrast to the *Conception of Our Lady*, which features only a fig tree; the small *Holy Family*, which features only fig foliage (compare Figs. 16 and 16.1 with Fig. 12);[50] *The Temptation of Saint Jerome*, which features the ivy and fig foliage (compare Figs. 17 and 17.1 with 12);[51] and the *Camaldoli Nativity*, which features only the fir tree (Figs. 7 and 7.1). In the Chicago Art Institute's version of *The Temptation of Saint Jerome*—unfinished oil on panel, dated between 1541 and 1558 (Figs. 18 and 18.1), Vasari highlighted a large fir tree beside the penitent Saint Jerome, minimizing the fig or ivy foliage.[52] The distant background features an atmospheric landscape with lakes and mountains similar to those seen in previous paintings: *The Marian Family with Saint Francis and Pope San Sylvester*; and the *Holy Family* (compare Figs. 9 and 9.1-9.2 with Figs. 3 and 3.6).

[50] This oil-on-panel painting of 1540s is now in a private collection. See Corti, *Vasari*, p. 58; and Cecchi, Baroni, and Fornasari, *Giorgio Vasari*, p. 76.

[51] Vasari covered a fir tree with ivy and fig leaves in other paintings, such as *The Temptation of Saint Jerome* of 1541, oil on panel, Palatine Gallery of the Pitti Place but now at the Gallerie degli Uffizi in Florence; it was commissioned by Ottaviano de' Medici around 1541; see Frey-Vasari 2:858. See *Ricordo* 114 for the image, https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/vasari-st-jerome. He created several versions of this theme, combining fig leaves with a fir tree covered in climbing ivy. See Corti, *Vasari*, p. 38; Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Saint Jerome: A Biblical Icon of Diligence," in Liana De Girolami Cheney, *Giorgio Vasari's Teachers: Sacred and Profane Art* (London/New York: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 156-67; and Cecchi, Baroni, and Fornasari, *Giorgio Vasari*, p. 70.

[52] Another version, a 1548 oil-on-panel painting of Vasari's *Saint Jerome Adoring the Crucifix*, owned privately, shows the penitent Saint Jerome kneeling on a rock. He is surrounded by a large fir tree decorated with fig and ivy leaves. For the image, see https://www.wikiart.org/en/giorgio-vasari/st-jerome-in-meditation.



Figure 16. Giorgio Vasari*, Holy Family*, 1540s, oil on panel. Private Collection.
Photo credit and courtesy: Robert Simon Fine Art, NY.



Figure 16.1. Giorgio Vasari*,* Fig Tree and Foliage, det., *Holy Family*, 1540s, oil on panel.
Private Collection.
Photo credit and courtesy: Robert Simon Fine Art, NY.



Figure 17. Giorgio Vasari, *Temptation of Saint Jerome*, 1541, oil on panel. Palatine Gallery, Pitti Palace, presently at the Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence.



Figure 17.1. Giorgio Vasari, Ivy and fig foliage, det., *Temptation of Saint Jerome*, 1541, oil on panel. Palatine Gallery, Pitti Palace, presently at the Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence.



Figure 18. Giorgio Vasari, *Temptation of Saint Jerome*, 1541-1548, unfinished oil on panel. The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL.



Figure 18.1. Giorgio Vasari, Fir tree trunk and branches, det., *Temptation of Saint Jerome*, 1541-1548, unfinished oil on panel. The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL.

Myrtle (Myrtus communis)

The abundant leaves and dense foliage—ivy, fig, and twigs or rods, also including myrtle—surrounding Mary symbolize a stylized representation of the *hortus conclusus* [enclosed garden] (compare Figs. 3.7, 3.8b, and 3.8c with Fig. 13).[53] By depicting the sacred figures, particularly Mary, amidst a dense wall of continuous green foliage, Vasari underscored Mary's enduring virginity. This verdant green myrtle foliage is painted among the ivy hedge, positioned above the twig (rod) and directly over Mary's head (compare Figs. 3.7a and 3.8c with Fig. 13). In Christian symbolism, myrtle (*Myrtus communis*), not the lemon myrtle plant (*Backhousia citridora*), is predominantly associated with the Virgin Mary as an emblem of virginity, purity, and triumphant love of God.[54] Its small, white, sweetly scented flowers represent the sacred presence, humility, and love—attributable to their modest size—and her virginity, as indicated by the whiteness of the flowers and the evergreen nature of the leaves, which corresponds with the virga and virgo symbolism (Isaiah 11:1). Furthermore, it was also seen as a symbol of joy and linked to childbirth.[55]



Figure 3.7. Cheney's Red line indicating Foliage Separation in Giorgio Vasari, *The LA Holy Family,* 1541, oil on canvas. County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.



Figure 3.8. Cheney's Arrows indicating in the Foliage: Twig and myrtle in Giorgio Vasari, *The LA Holy Family,* 1541, oil on canvas. County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.

[53] Anna Brownell Jameson, *Legends of the Madonna* (London: Unit Library, 1903), p. 38, citing Solomon's *Song of Songs* (Cant. IV.12).
[54] In the Greek Orthodox tradition, Mary is referred to as "Our Lady of the Myrtle" (*Myrtidiotissa*).
[55] D'Ancona, *The Garden of the Renaissance*, p. 239 on the Virgin and myrtle; Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*, p. 110 on childbirth.

Furthermore, in scriptural typology, patristic medieval theological writings, and hagiographic liturgical texts, *Myrtus communis* is linked to Mary as the New Eve. This art-historical essay does not aim to explore the detailed and intricate theological discussions on the myrtle's symbolism in the Bible and its commentary and interpretations by ancient and medieval scholars, such as Saint Jerome's *Commentarium in Isaiam Prophetam* (347-20), Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* (Book XVII, Chapter 7, 560-636), and Albertus Magnus's *De Laubidus Beatae Mariae Virginis* (1200-1280), to mention a few. Only a couple of Old Testament references are included to help visualize Vasari's imagery.

In the Bible, the myrtle tree, known for its fragrant leaves and attractive blossoms, holds significant symbolism. It appears in multiple passages, notably in Isaiah (55:13) and Zechariah (1:8), representing peace, renewal, and divine favor. The Prophet Isaiah also links it to Mary's role as the New Eve in his commentary: "Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree: and it shall be to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign ..." (55:13). Patristic and medieval scholars view the "thorn and brier" as representations of disobedience and original sin (Genesis 3:18). The aromatic, evergreen *Myrtus communis*, which thrives in this context, symbolizes the Immaculate Conception. As myrtle replaces the thorn, Mary (the New Eve) embodies purity and grace, symbolizing the replacement of Eve's wrongdoing.[56]

In the Prophet Zechariah's vision, he described seeing "a man on a red horse among myrtle trees in a ravine during the night" (1:8). Scholars from the Patristic and medieval eras interpret this scene as a symbol of humility. The small, low-growing myrtle, rooted in a ravine, was metaphorically associated with Mary's humility (*humilitas*).[57] The divine presence among the humble myrtles in a ravine foreshadows the Incarnation. The New Testament describes Mary as the "humble handmaid of the Lord" (Luke 1:3), recognizing her humility in accepting her role as the Mother of God.[58] Vasari highlighted Mary's virtue of *humilitas* by depicting her kneeling beside the crib, embracing her newborn. This is a classic portrayal of the Virgin of Humility in Mannerist art.[59]

Vasari was familiar with the spiritual symbolism of myrtle and praised its value as an aromatic evergreen with medicinal healing properties while residing at Camaldoli.[60] Following the Dominican friars in Florence, who cultivated medicinal plants and herbs behind the Basilica of Santa Maria Novella and established a monastic herb garden and infirmary in 1221,[61] the Camaldoli monks have, since 1331, maintained an apothecary known as Antica Farmacia. They valued *Myrtus communis* for its aroma, which promotes a peaceful ascent, clears the

---

[56] For the symbolism of the myrtle trees and the various references in the Bible, see https://biblehub.com/topical/s/symbolism_of_the_myrtle_trees.htm; D. H. Russell and B. Barnes, *Eva/Ave: Women in the Renaissance and Baroque Prints* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1990); and Brian K. Reynolds, "Marian Typological and Symbolic Images in Patristic Christianity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, ed. Chris Maunder (Oxford University Press, 2019), Part 1, cha. 5, https://www.academia.edu/40130532/Marian_Typological_and_Symbolic_Imagery_in_Patristic_Christianity.

[57] Beth Williamson, *The Madonna of Humility: Development, Dissemination and Reception, 1340-1400* (London: Boydell Press, 2009).

[58] See Dom, "The Man Among the Myrtle," https://www.strengthenedbygrace.org/blog/the-man-among-the-myrtle-trees (2023).

[59] Vasari also portrayed a Madonna of Humility in his small *Holy Family*, but he reversed her stance.

[60] Pierluigi Licciardello, *Le origini dell'eremo e della congregazione di Camaldoli* (Florence: SISMEL, Galluzzi, 2004), Inventory 1460, for cross reference between the fir tree and myrtle as a distilled botanical ingredient "*Lacrima d'Abeto* [*Tears of the Fir*] in *Antica Farmacia dei Monaci Camaldolesi*, Archivio Storico (Camaldoli, Arezzo). See also A.E. Al-Snafi, J.O. Teibo, H.M. Shaheen et al., "The Therapeutic Value of *Myrtus communis L.*: An Updated Review," *Naunyn-Schmiedeberg's Arch Pharmacol* 397, 4579-4600 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1007/s00210-024-02958-3.

[61] James Shaw and Evelyn Welch, *Making and Marketing Medicine in Renaissance Florence*, Clio Medica vol. 89 (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Paine, *Healing Plants of Renaissance Florence*, Introduction.

mind, and supports easy breathing. They have also used the leaves and oils in medicinal preparations (*acque distillate*), medicinal tonics, cough syrups, and natural ointments.[62]

Thus, Vasari metaphorically indicated that the depiction of this cluster of plant foliage surrounding the sacred figures is not only visually exquisite and symbolically meaningful but also alludes to both physical and mental healing. Consequently, the presence of the Holy Family functions as a conduit and emblem of healing and love for the faithful viewer.

Fir

As noted in the *Camaldoli Nativity, Chicago Temptation of Saint Jerome*, and in *The LA Holy Family*, Vasari certainly drew on memories of the fir trees he encountered during his travels in the Camaldoli and Casentino Forests, as well as his knowledge of the forests and grottos near La Verna in Tuscany (compare Figs. 6.2, 6.3, and 6.4 with Figs. 7, 18, and 3). The Camaldoli forest was renowned for its towering silver fir trees, which were harvested commercially, especially for the construction of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Altoviti was also the banker for the Holy See and oversaw a detailed operation to acquire and transport fir trunks from Camaldoli to Rome. Meanwhile, the Medici utilized these trees to produce masts for their military and commercial ships.



Figure 3.9. Giorgio Vasari, Ivy Climbing Up a Fir Tree, det., The *LA Holy Family,* 1541, oil on canvas. County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Credit Line: Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation (M.87.87).

In *The LA Holy Family*, the tree behind Saint Joseph is intriguing as well; it looks like a fir tree—its trunk is sturdy and evergreen, with small, scale-like leaves, as seen in the versions of the *Temptation of Saint Jerome* in Florence and Chicago (Figs. 17, 17.1 and 18, 18.1 and compare with Figs. 3, 3.9 and 14). The projected fir

[62] Vasari highly valued the love of nature, plants, and fruits, as noted in his purchase of his first house in Arezzo. See Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Giorgio Vasari's Fiery Putto: Artistic Armorial," *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, 11, 11 (December 2021), pp. 161-85, esp. p. 168, citing Vasari's *vita*, where he wrote: "I bought a house already begun in Arezzo, with a site for making beautiful gardens in the Borgo di San Vito." See Gaston du C. de Vere, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors & Architects*, 10 vols (1912-1915), English translation of Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori* (1550), 3:2234. For further studies on the myrtle as Renaissance medicinal plant, see Paine, *Healing Plants of Renaissance Florence*, pp. 111-14; and Farman Ullah et al., "Myrtus communis L. (Myrtle): A Comprehensive Review of its Folk Uses, Medicinal Uses, Historical Perspective, Phytochemistry and Pharmacology," *Journal of Agricultural Sustainability* 4, 1 (June 2025), pp. 28-56, doi:10.56556/jase.v4i1.1333.

tree's branches in the *Temptation of Saint Jerome* do not possess the same iconographical reference as those behind Saint Joseph, who is metaphorically associated with his divine lineage through his descent from the royal House of David and the Tribe of Judah (Luke 3:23 and 3:38) (Figs. 3 and 3.9).

The comparison between *The LA Holy Family* painting and the *Camaldoli Nativity* reveals intriguing differences regarding the fir tree (compare Figs. 3 and 3.9 with Figs. 7 and 7.1). In both artworks, the fir tree signifies Christ's Incarnation. The Nativity scene shows Christ right after birth, lying in the crib, while in the Holy Family image, Christ has been removed from the crib and is held by his mother. In the *Camaldoli Nativity*, the fig tree supports the manger where Christ is born. In *the LA Holy Family*, the fir tree is positioned behind Saint Joseph, symbolizing the Davidic lineage. Although the fir tree resembles those from the Camaldolese Forest, Vasari may have chosen a fir from the Sanctuary of La Verna, where Saint Francis sought refuge and received the stigmata.



Figure 3.7. Cheney's Red line indicating Foliage Separation in Giorgio Vasari,
The LA Holy Family, 1541, oil on canvas.
County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.



Figure 3.10. Cheney's Arrow connection fir tree branch with Christ in Giorgio Vasari's *The LA Holy Family*, 1541, oil on canvas.
County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA

The fir tree is often referenced in the Bible (Ezekiel 27:3-5).[63] Vasari intentionally depicted the fir tree behind Saint Joseph with a sturdy trunk and an extending branch, symbolizing Christ's Davidic lineage and his legal entry into the house of David through Joseph. In the composition, the fir branch connects diagonally to Christ (Figs. 3.7 and 3.10).[64] The Bible affirms Joseph's male lineage and legal paternity, where the divine promise transitions from the Old Testament (2 Samuel 7:12-16, Jeremiah 23:5-6, and Numbers 1:18); God's covenant with David: "I will raise up your descendants after you … and establish the throne of their kingdom forever." Additionally, Jeremiah 33:17 documents God's covenant with David: "David will always have a successor to sit on the throne of Israel." In the New Testament, Jesus's identity as the Messiah is announced

[63] Zohary, *Plants of the Bible*, pp. 106-07.
[64] Note that, in the upper landscape of the painting, above the head of Saint Francis there is a cluster of fir trees.

through his mother, Mary, in Matthew 1:1-17 and Luke 3:23-38. Specifically, Luke 1:32 notes that at the Annunciation, "Gabriel tells Mary that God will give Jesus from the throne of his father David."

In the symbolism of the Tree of Jesse, Jesse is honored for his paternal role as David's father. The sturdy fir trunk and branch that Vasari depicted behind a large, seated figure of Joseph, who turns to look warmly at and connect with Mary and the Christ Child (Fig. 3), may symbolize the paternal connection between Joseph and Christ. Vasari visualized the natural formation of a tree: roots (implied), trunk, and branches, with a symbolic reference to the Bible's account of the Tree of Jesse. In this depiction of Christ's lineage, Jesse is shown as the root at the base of the trunk, with the trunk and its branches rising upward to represent the various descendants who extend toward the tree's culmination or cusp, where Christ rests in his mother's arms.[65]

Vasari has artistically and metaphorically intertwined ivy and fig foliage with the fir trunk, portraying a substantial, vigorous vine that envelops the trunk but not the extended branches, thereby accentuating the power and uniqueness of the single extended branch, which has its own identity and recalls Christ's Davidic lineage.

Furthermore, the tree-and-branch is likewise indirectly associated with the symbolism of Mary in relation to the Tree of Jesse.[66] This link is reinforced by Isaiah (11:1) in the Latin Vulgate: "And there shall come forth a rod or shoot or twig out of the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise out of his root." Mary is the virgin and the twig, while Christ is the flower. Hence He is the flower blooming from Mary, metaphorically emerging at the top and culminating in the Tree of Jesse's thriving green stalk. The reference to *virgo* and *virga* implies that Mary is depicted as pure, like a fresh green sprout and a topmost flower, serving as a vessel that signifies the fulfillment of the Davidic lineage and evokes the symbolism of the Tree of Jesse. In *The LA Holy Family*, Vasari deliberately depicted a thick twig or *virga* rising from the ivy hedge, positioned amid the greenery and aligned with Mary's head. This serves as a nod to Christian iconography portraying Mary as the rod from the root of Jesse (Fig. 3.8a). Vasari had previously visualized and symbolically interpreted this theme in 1540 in the *Conception of Our Lady* (Fig. 15).[67]

Additionally, the foliage contrasts with the prominent fig tree in the *Conception of Our Lady*, where its botanical significance is key to the Genesis story. The surrounding foliage of *The LA Holy Family* seems to blend fig, ivy, and myrtle, but Vasari's simplified illustration of the plants makes exact identification uncertain. However, *The LA Holy Family*'s clinging, evergreen vegetation alludes to a potential permanence and continuity of life as a counterpoint to the *Conception of Our Lady*, where the painting extraordinarily emphasizes, through the birth of Christ, his future Passion, death, and Resurrection. Vasari significantly expanded this iconography in *The LA Holy Family* by depicting Christ with an elongated body emerging from the crib (birth), with Francis's bloodstained cross touching Christ (passion and death), and with surrounding architectural fragments that suggest the transformation of the past into the future, symbolizing renewal and hinting at the Resurrection.

Attire and Portraits of the Holy Figures

As is frequently observed in his artistic repertoire, Vasari's depictions of saints incorporate donor features to acknowledge the patron who commissioned the artwork. Additionally, he occasionally included his self-

[65] Liana De Girolami Cheney, *The Tree of Jesse in Italian Mannerist Paintings* (Oxford: Peter Lang, forthcoming, Fall 2026), Introduction.
[66] Taylor, "A Historiated Tree of Jesse," pp. 125-76.
[67] Cheney, "Giorgio Vasari's *The Conception of Our Lady*," pp. 87-114.

portrait as a signature on the painting. Some scholars have proposed that the Saint Francis portrait may be modeled after the donor, Francesco Leoni, who commissioned it, although no existing portraits of him are known (Fig. 3.11).



Figure 3.11. Giorgio Vasari, Saint Francis (possibly Francesco Leoni). det., *The LA Holy Family*, 1541, oil on canvas. County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Credit Line: Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation (M.87.87).

In analyzing the image of Saint Joseph, I earlier considered Vasari's friendship with Pietro Aretino and his visit to Venice to be the source of the portrait (compare Figs. 19 and 3.12).[68] But re-examining Joseph's head—the hairdo with the central curly lock, the nose, and the parted beard—leads me to believe that it could also be Vasari's self-portrait because it resembles his portrait in the 1568 woodcut depicted in the *Vite*. Thus the portrait may serve as a self-referential image, symbolizing his devotion to Saint Francis and his authorship of the work (compare Figs. 20 and 3.12). Or, Vasari may have conflated both images—Aretino and himself—for the portrait of Saint Joseph.

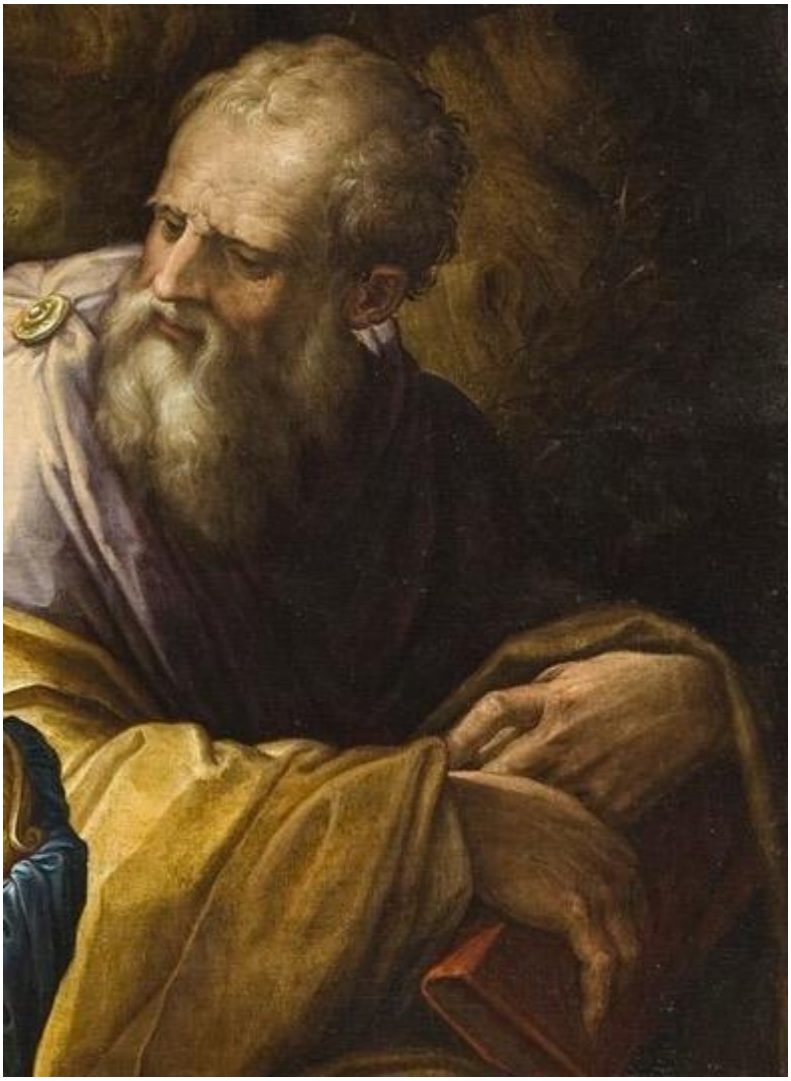


Figure 3.12. Giorgio Vasari*, Saint Joseph,* det., *The LA Holy Family,* 1541, oil on canvas.
County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Credit Line: Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation (M.87.87).

[68] In Cheney, "Giorgio Vasari's *Saint Francis*, pp. 859-73, I suggested that, given Vasari's friendship with Pietro Aretino and the Venice invitation, Saint Joseph might be modeled after Aretino. This is based on Aretino's physiognomy as depicted in Titian's 1545 portrait at the Frick Collection. I also suggested that the portrayal of Saint Joseph holding a book and resting his foot on a stone may symbolize Aretino as a writer, with his name, Pietro, meaning stone (*pietra*). For the image, see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portrait_of_Pietro_Aretino_%28by_Titian%29_-_The_Frick_Collection.jpg.



Figure 19. Titian, *Portrait of Pietro Aretino* (flipped for comparison), 1545, oil on canvas. Palatine Gallery, Pitti Palace, Florence.



Figure 20. Giorgio Vasari, *Self-portrai*t, woodcut from *Vite* (Florence: Giunti, 1568).

Vasari frequently portrayed himself as a saint for spiritual and professional purposes, using the portrait to signify his involvement in religious events as a devotional homage or to validate his work, treating it as a signature device; for example, his self-portrait as Saint Luke, featured in *Saint Luke and the Virgin Mary* (1555/1559), a fresco in the Cappella dei Pittori at SS Annunziata in Florence (compare Figs. 21 and 3.12).[69]



Figure 21. Giorgio Vasari*, Saint Luke and the Virgin Mary,* 1555/1559, fresco,
Cappella dei Pittori, SS Annunziata, Florence.
Photo credit and courtesy: Meistrerdrucke.

[69] Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Cappella degli Artisti: Montorsoli's Marble Plaque," in *The Historian's Eye: Essays on Italian Art in Honor of Andrew Ladis*, ed. Hayden B.J. Maginnis and Shelley E. Zuraw (Athens, GA: Georgia Museum of Art, 2009), pp. 215-23.

As a painter, Vasari employed Mannerist coloration not only to enhance the aesthetic appeal of his composition but also to suggest traditional symbolic meanings conveyed through the figures' attire. When comparing the attire of Saint Francis and Saint Joseph, their colors conform to early medieval traditions and symbolism (Fig. 3.12a). Founded in 1209, the Friars Minor Order (the Franciscans) is associated with Saint Francis, who is kneeling before the crib and wearing a deep charcoal-gray habit. According to religious tradition, the habit was made of unbleached ash-gray wool, which led to monks being called "Grey Friars," and the gray color alluded to their mendicant quest and symbolized poverty.[70]



Figure 3.12a. Giorgio Vasari, SS Francis and Joseph holding books, det., *The LA Holy Family,* 1541, oil on canvas. County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.

Seated Saint Joseph is dressed elegantly in a violet tunic with a golden circular clasp fastened on his shoulder, a large golden-yellow mantle, and sandals. The violet/purple hue has a double meaning, symbolizing his Jewish royalty and alluding to his Davidic lineage, and it also alludes to the liturgical color symbolizing sorrow.[71] He glances sadly at this family and at the birth of Christ, aware of his future death. The large ochre yellow-color mantle enveloping Saint Joseph also bears ambivalent significance; the color is associated with goodness and sacredness, consistent with Joseph's biblical background,[72] and is also the traditional medieval color associated

[70] James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1974), pp. 131-32.
[71] J.C.J. Metford, *Dictionary of Christian Lore and Legend* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1983), p. 206 on the purple color; p. 146 on Saint Joseph's role in Christian art.
[72] Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 42 on the positive aspect of the yellow color.

with the Jews, as seen in Michelangelo's Joseph in the 1512 lunette fresco of the Ancestors of Christ in the Sistine Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican (Fig. 22).[73] In 1215, at the Fourth Lateran Council, Pope Innocent III forced the Jewish people to wear yellow garments to make them more visible and to prevent interfaith relations and other political interference.[74]

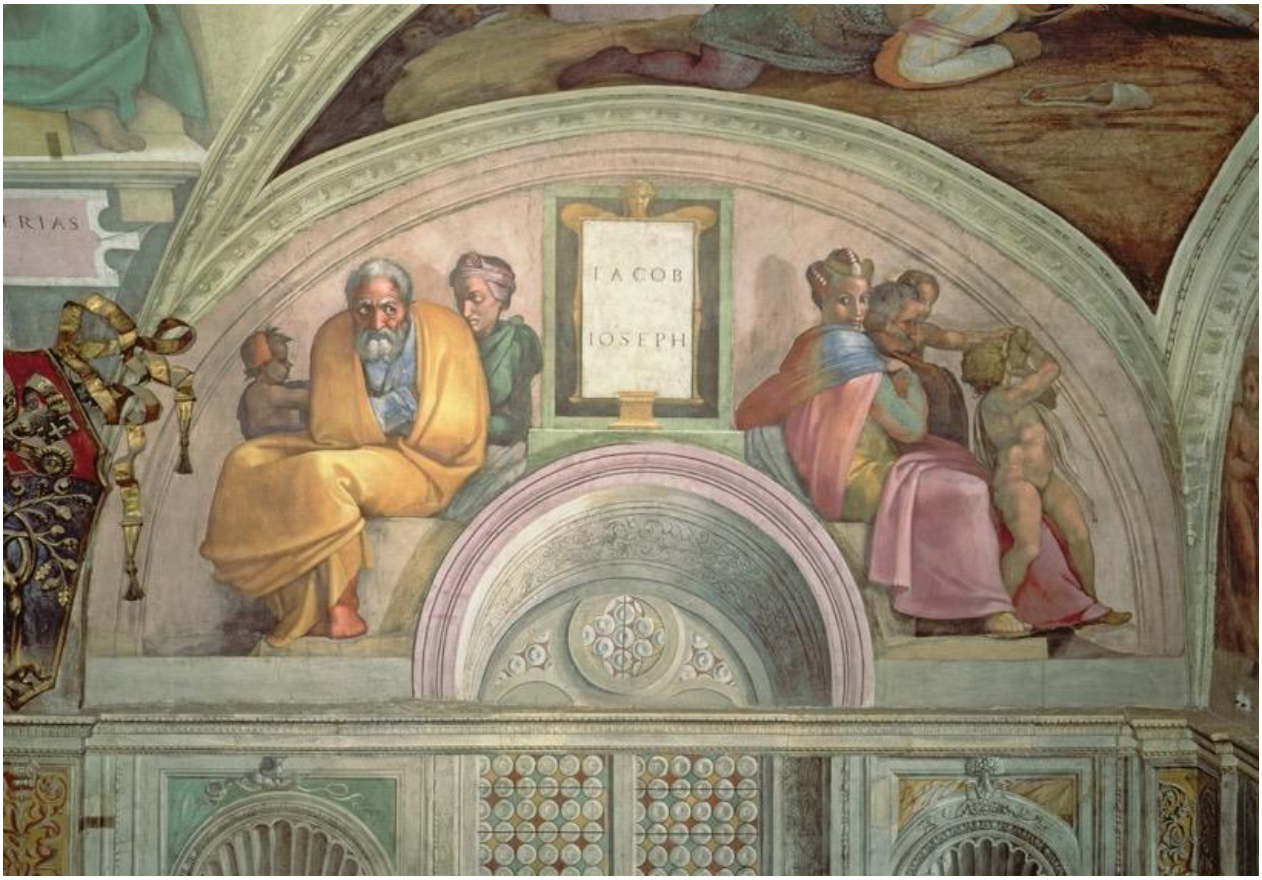


Figure 22. Michelangelo, *Saint Joseph*, det., Ancestors of Christ,1512, fresco, lunette.
Sistine Ceiling, Sistine Chapel, Vatican.
Photo credit and courtesy: Meistrerdrucke.

Among these holy figures is Mary, the Mother of God and Queen of Heaven.[75] Mary, barefoot, kneels beside the crib, expressing her humble love and service to the Lord as a Madonna of Humility, a common figure in small devotional paintings for private chapels. Although her pose is reversed, her humble stance resembles that in the *Holy Family* (compare Figs. 16 and 3). In a lush green setting with fig leaves, Vasari captured an

[73] Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, p. 42 on the negative aspects of the yellow color.
[74] H.J. Schroeder, trans., *Pope Innocent III: The Fourth Lateran Council* (La Vergne: TN: Dalcassian Publishing Company, 2023), Canon 68. The Florentine painter Giotto's Judas wears a large yellow mantle in the fresco paintings of 1304 in the Capella Scrovegni (Arena Chapel) in Padua. For the image, see https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c6/Giotto_di_Bondone_-_No._31_Scenes_from_the_Life_of_Christ_-_15._The_Arrest_of_Christ_%28Kiss_of_Judas%29_-_WGA09216.jpg?utm_source=commons.wikimedia.org&utm_campaign=index&utm_content=original.
[75] Throughout the Council of Ephesus of 431, Mary is officially named Theotokos (Mother of God); see https://ia802804.us.archive.org/8/items/councilofephesus0000mara/councilofephesus0000mara.pdf. See also Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*, p. 186.

intimate scene in the Holy Family's life. Mary's gentle gesture of carefully unwrapping the Christ Child symbolizes a loving mother's wish to prevent harm. Meanwhile, the playful Christ Child, standing near his mother on her blue mantle, looks happy and caresses her. Joseph, seated behind them and resting his head on his hand, watches his family with a natural, pensive expression.[76] Mary's barefoot kneeling stance signifies her humility and deep devotion to her son, the Son of God, reflecting her heartfelt sincerity and unwavering love. A similar sentiment appears in *The LA Holy Family*, where Mary's humility and devotion mirror the devotional feeling Saint Francis conveyed through his tearful, cast-down eyes as he looked at the Crucifix he held. Mary is dressed in traditional symbolic colors, wearing a blue mantle that signifies the heavens and divine grace and underscores her role as Queen of Heaven. Her pink (reddish) dress alludes to her humanity and motherhood, while the white sleeve and gold accents highlight her purity, divine radiance, and majesty.[77] Vasari completed Mary's outfit with an elaborate Mannerist hairstyle that reveals not only her spiritual beauty but also her physical beauty; her golden hair is braided and woven with white ribbons, forming a golden-brown crown, while the rest of her braided hair falls over her shoulders (compare Figs. 3.13 with Figs. 15.3 and 17.2). Mary's hair symbolizes her grace, modesty, and her unique purity, reflecting the liturgical and theological idea of *Tota Pulchra*—the complete beauty and immaculate virgin—embodying both maiden and mother (Song of Solomon 4:7). In Franciscan iconography, Mary's beauty and purity are closely associated with the Order's historical mission and role as her defenders. In the thirteenth century, Saint Bonaventure adapted and compiled the Song of Solomon to promote the Marian vocation, including the *Tota Pulchra Es* antiphon.[78] Vasari artistically merged the Franciscan symbolism with the Mannerist concept of female beauty, exemplified by the pagan goddess Venus.[79] He continued to adorn his heroic female figures, Judith and Mary, with intricate hairstyles that symbolize both physical beauty and divine grace and courage.[80]

---

[76] See https://www.thewintershow.org/artworkdetails/4737/giorgio-vasari-the-holy-family.

[77] Jameson, *Legends of the Madonna*, pp. 46-47; Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, pp. 323-24.

[78] In the fourth century, Solomon's phrase was incorporated into the Christian hymn *Tota pulchra es Maria*, which means "You are all beautiful, Mary." Additionally, a passage about valor from the Book of Judith 15:9 was adapted from Song of Solomon 4:7 and highlights her bravery, stating: "Tu gloria Ierusalem, tu laetitia Israel, tu honorificentia populi nostri" [You are the glory of Jerusalem, the joy of Israel, the highest honor of our people]. For more information, see Robert J. Karris, O.F.M., *The Complete Works of St. Bonaventure*, 19 vols. (New York: Franciscan Institute at St. Bonaventure University, 1955-1960), Book 9 regarding hymns.

[79] Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Giorgio Vasari's 'The Toilet of Venus': Neoplatonic Notion of Female Beauty," in *Neoplatonism and Western Aesthetics*, ed. Aphrodite Alexandrakis (NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 99-113; for the image, see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vasari_-_The_Toilet_Of_Venus.jpg.

[80] See Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Giorgio Vasari's *Judith*: Athena or Aphrodite?" *Fifteenth Century Studies Journal* 25 (2000), pp. 154-92; for the image, see https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/87/Giorgo_Vasari_-_Judith_and_Holofernes.jpg?utm_source=commons.wikimedia.org&utm_campaign=index&utm_content=original.



Figure 3.13. Giorgio Vasari, Mary's Coiffure, det., *The Holy Family,* 1541, oil on canvas. County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Photo courtesy: County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.



Figure 15.3. Giorgio Vasari, Mary as Rosa Mystica, det., *Conception of Our Lady*, 1540, oil on panel. Santi Apostoli, Florence.
Photo credit: Art Resources, NY.

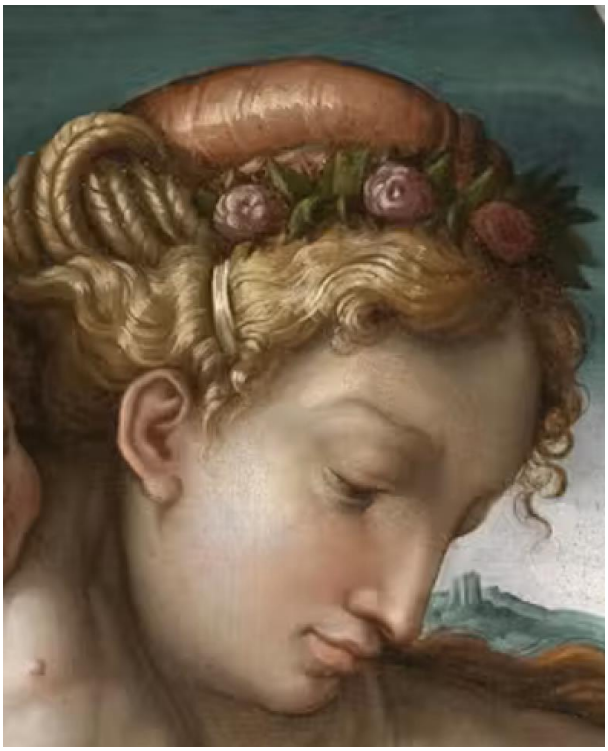


Figure 17.2. Giorgio Vasari, Head of Venus, det., *Temptation of Saint Jerome*, 1541, oil on panel. Palatine Gallery, Pitti Palace, presently at the Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence.

Vasari's inspiration for the inclusion of *all'antica* elements in Mary's attire likely stemmed from his familiarity with ancient sculpture and classical military motifs, as evident in the scene of the Allocution Address, where a Roman Emperor addresses the Praetorian Guard from the Arch of Constantine (175-196 CE), a marble relief,[81] or in Marcus Aurelius with his Praetorian Guard, also a marble relief of 176 CE, which was once part of his Arch in Rome (Fig. 23),[82] as well as in the classical sculptures of Minerva,[83] the visualization of the biblical heroine Judith,[84] or the emblematic depiction of the cardinal virtue of Fortitude.[85]

---

[81] For the image, see https://ancientrome.ru/art/artworken/img.htm?id=2819.

[82] This relief comes from a series of panels on the Arch of Marcus Aurelius. The arch was destroyed in the sixth century, and many panels were repurposed into the Church of S. Martina. In 1515, Pope Leo X directed that several relief panels from the Marcus Aurelius Arch be relocated to the courtyard of the Palazzo dei Conservatori on Capitoline Hill. Now they are housed in the Capitoline Museum in Rome. See Kathleen Wren Christian, "The De' Rossi Collection of Ancient Sculptures, Leo X and Raphael," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 65 (2002), pp. 132-200.

[83] See Parmigianino, *Minerva*, 1530, drawing at the Art Institute of Chicago, for the image, see https://picryl.com/media/minerva-or-bellona-in-a-niche-5ad428.

[84] See Donatello, *Judith and Holofernes*, bronze statue of 1457-1464, Palazzo Vecchio; for the image, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judith_and_Holofernes_%28Donatello%29#/media/File:Giuditta_di_donatello_04.JPG.

[85] For the image of Fortitude, see: https://artepiu.info/affreschi-vasari-sant-anna-lombardi-napoli. See Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Vasari and Naples: The Monteoliveto Order," in *Parthenope's Splendor: Art of the Golden Age in Naples,* ed. Jeanne Chenault Porter and Susan C. Scott (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), pp. 48-126. Vasari continued to use *all'antica* attire in his later paintings, such *Judith and Holofernes* at the Saint Louis Musuem of Art; for the image, see https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/87/Giorgo_Vasari_-_Judith_and_Holofernes.jpg?utm_source=commons.wikimedia.org&utm_campaign=index&utm_content=original. See also Cheney, "Giorgio Vasari's *Judith*, pp. 154–92. Also see the soldier in the battlefields in the Salone dei Cinquecento in Palazzo Vecchio; for the image, see https://www.meisterdrucke.ie/fine-art-prints/Giorgio-Vasari/162745/The-Founding-of-Florence-from-the-ceiling-of-the-Salone-dei-Cinquecento,-1565.html. See also Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Giorgio Vasari's Military Dress Code in the Battlefield: The Honorific Helmet," in *De re Vestiaria: Antiquity and Fashion during the Renaissance*, ed. Damiano Acciarino (Venice: Anteferma Edizione, 2022), 176–92.



Figure 23. Marcus Aurelius with Praetorian Guard, 176 CE, marble relief, Arch of Marcus Aurelius, now in the Capitoline Museum, Rome.

He incorporated *all'antica* elements into Mary's attire, crafting an intricate classical design that symbolizes devotion, royal honor, and heroic valor. Her shoulder and upper arm are adorned with elaborate golden, curved ancient Roman military *pteruges*—ornamental shoulder and armlet straps—along with a large oval medallion containing reflective blue light and a grotesque mask at its border. This metaphorical shield ornament is designed to hold in place the blue mantle enveloping her and her child. This implies protective, armor-like qualities that allude to symbols of valor, her triumph over evil, and celestial queenship. Vasari transformed the humble Mary into *Mary Invicta* [The Undefeated], associated with the Tower of David (*Turris Davidica*). The allusion to Mary as *Invicta* and the Tower of David became popular in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, as seen in the prayers in the Litany of Loreto (Fig. 24).[86]

[86] Father Lawrence G. Lovasik, *Litany of Loreto* (New York: Macmillan, 1957); and Maureen Mullins, *The Litany of Loreto: How it Came to Be* (Strongsville, OH: Specter, 2022).

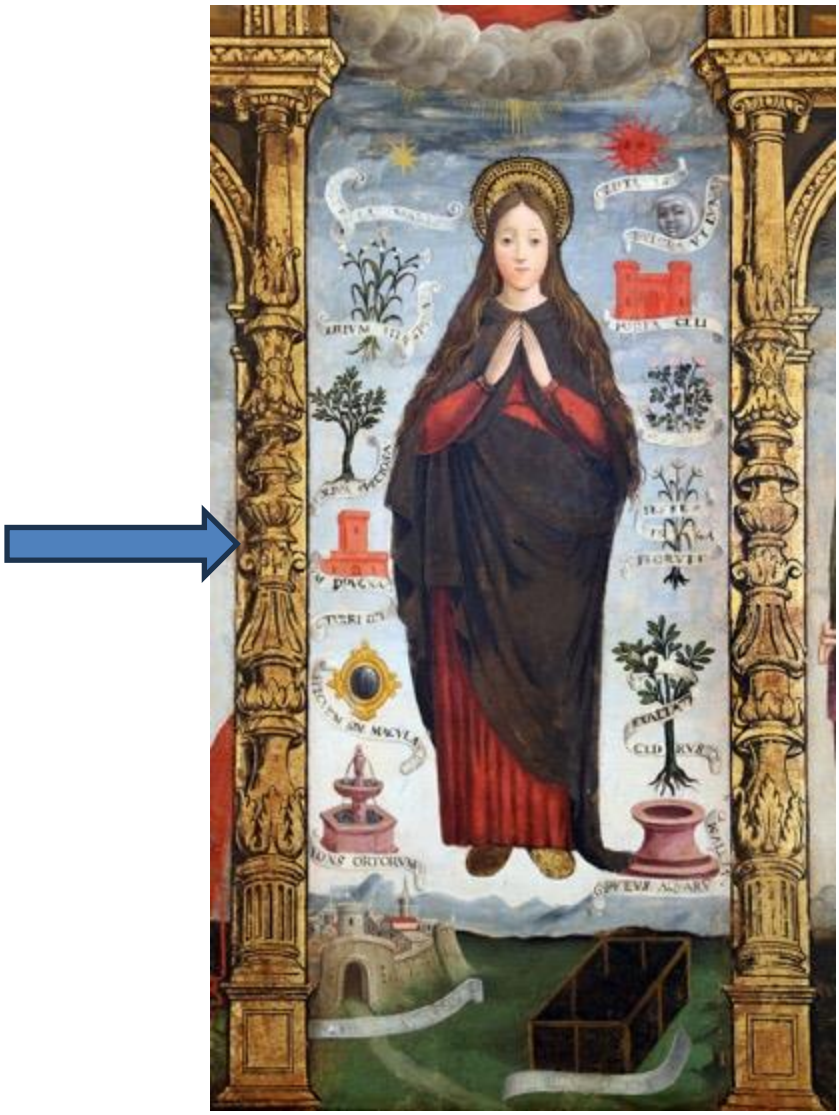


Figure 24. Unknown painter, Virgin Mary and attributes, including the Tower of David, central panel, det., *The Immaculate Conception with Saints*, 1480s, tempera on panel.
Museo d'Arte di Palazzo Gavotti, Savona, Italy.

Vasari's symbolic association is a metaphor of physical and spiritual strength that derives from Solomon's *Song of Songs* (Canticle 4:4), referring to Mary: "Your neck is like the tower of David, built in courses; on it hang a thousand bucklers, all shields of warriors." Mary is called the "Tower of David" because, as the Mother of the Redeemer—the son of David—she provides a spiritual refuge and protection from the enemy. This includes how military and architectural metaphors (such as the *Turris Davidica*) illustrate her role in offering defense against temptation. Furthermore, medieval French theologian Richard of Saint Laurent (d. 1250), in his treatise *De laudibus beatae Mariae* [In Praise of the Blessed Virgin Mary], interpreted the phrase from Book II, Chapter 1—"Sicut turris David tuum" [Like the tower of David, you [Mary] are a pillar]—as depicting the tower of David as a symbol of Mary's womb. This womb held the life of Christ, a descendant of King David. As a result, Mary is regarded as a refuge and protector for her child and for believers.

Another notable detail in the lower part of *The LA Holy Family* is the parallel alignment of the holy figures' feet, which highlights and directs attention to particular objects that signify their meaning. For example, the partially kneeling and standing Christ Child rests one bare foot on the linen cloth of his crib. His "underfoot" alludes to his mortality, Crucifixion, and Resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:25–26 and 1 Corinthians 15:27: "For God has put all things in subjection under his feet"). A parallel scene depicts the Christ Child with the *Holy Family*, wherein he is positioned on his mother's mantle and raises his hand to affectionately touch her, presently appearing more closely connected to her than to his impending destiny (compare Figs. 3 and 16).

The white linen cloth, as swaddling cloth, which is now part of the crib after his birth, will become a metaphorical covering cloth for his genitals during the Crucifixion, and later this linen cloth will transform into his sudarium, burial cloth, during his Entombment. This sudarium will be discovered "folded up in a place by itself" within the empty tomb by his Apostles John and Peter. This indicates that Christ has risen, departed from the tomb, and left his garment, thereby signifying His Resurrection (John 20:6-7).[87]

The white linen cloth also covers a decorative green pillow adorned with tassel trim (compare Figs. 3 and 10.1).[88] The tassel ornament references Isaiah's prophecy concerning the birth of Christ in a manger (Isaiah 1:3) and the garments that adorned it, including tassels (Numbers 15:38-41). In the Hebrew Bible, under Mosaic Law, tassels (Hebrew *tzitzit*) were to be attached to the four corners of Israelites' garments to remind them of God's commandments. In accordance with this law, Christ's garment was adorned with tassels or fringe along the hem of his robe (Luke 8:44; Matthew 14:36). This practice not only fulfilled biblical commands (Numbers 15:37–41; Deuteronomy 22:12, "Make tassels on the four corners of the cloak you wear") but also symbolized Christ's healing and miraculous powers because of his birth (Malachi 4:2; Mark 6:56)

In the painting, Mary's bare foot follows a horizontal line (Fig. 3.14). She kneels on the ground, symbolizing her humility as the Madonna of Humility (Luke 1:48, Magnificat: "I am the humble servant of the Lord"). Her bare foot also signifies her purity and triumph over evil, as referenced in the *Protoevangelium*, or First Gospel (Genesis 3:15).



Figure 3.14. Cheney's Arrows directed at the feet in Giorgio Vasari, *The LA Holy Family*, 1541, oil on canvas. County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.

[87] Janice Bennett, *Sacred Blood, Sacred Image: The Sudarim of Oviedo* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2005).
[88] Härb, *The Drawings of Giorgio Vasari*, pp. 231–33 and 248–49 for the depiction of pillows with tassels in Nativities.

In contrast, continuing the horizontal parallelism of the holy figures' feet, Joseph's sandal-clad foot emphasizes his role. His sandal resting on a marble corbel highlights his function as a vigilant protector of the family. The material and shape of the corbel, an architectural element that supports roof eaves, cornices, and beams, highlight its role as a load-bearing structure. This highlights stability and represents Joseph's role as a spiritual father to Christ, signifying the support and maintenance of God's house. The corbel, a stone block, acts as a solid foundation akin to a rock, reflecting the concept of "digging deep and establishing the base on a strong rock" (Luke 6:48). The depiction of Saint Joseph clutching a book and placing his sandal on a fragmented corbel symbolizes his custody of Christ's Nativity, his safeguarding voyage to Egypt, and his compliance with divine commandments, reflecting a modest act akin to Mary's humble submission to God. The corbel, representing a rock, also signifies Joseph's Davidic heritage, highlighting his lineage from the house of David. It also symbolizes Joseph's strength and his family's protection of Mary and Christ, with divine support. This is reflected in his ancestor David's Psalm 18:2: "The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer: My God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold."

Thus the clothing of the holy figures, as well as their poses, symbolizes the decline of the pagan world and the emergence of a new Christian era marked by Christ's birth. Mary's attire and presence serve as a bridge between the Old and New Testaments. Saint Joseph represents family heritage and protection, while Saint Francis's presence mirrors Mary's dedication, piety, and devotion to Christ.

Additional elements in *The LA Holy Family*, such as the books and the crib, further suggest the painting's distinctive spiritual symbolism.

Sacred Books and the Holy Crib

The saints in the painting are depicted holding books that reference the Bible. Saint Francis, with a gray book matching the color of his habit, metaphorically represents the 1223 *Primitive Rule*, or the *Canticles of the Creatures*, a collection of poems associated with humility, peace, and spirituality (Fig. 3.12a). Saint Francis's writing was indirectly inspired by the New Testament, particularly the Gospel of Saint Mark.

Saint Joseph's red book symbolizes the Law or Scriptures (Old Testament), representing prophecy and the promise of Christ's sacrifice, with emphasis on the redness of Christ's blood (Fig. 3.12a). Both saints hold the book differently: Joseph grips it with both hands, highlighting his Hebraic heritage, while Francis keeps it at his side and holds the Crucifix in the other hand, recalling Christ's passion. Their gestures, movement, and placement around the crib also differ. Kneeling, Francis leans forward, holding the bloodstained wooden cross above Christ's head, referencing the prophecy of the Passion and Crucifixion as well as recalling his stigmata visible on the dorsum of his hand and right side of his chest. Meanwhile, Joseph's seated posture and thoughtful expression indicate that the prophecy has been fulfilled, as predicted in his book.

Vasari created numerous drawings and paintings of the Nativity and various Holy Family themes, including the Marian Holy Family, the Holy Family with saints, and the Holy Family with donors.[89] In addition, he was inspired by Saint Francis's deep devotion to and love for Christ, especially by the historical account that Saint Francis composed a revolutionary type of Nativity scene by including live animals surrounding a manger to commemorate the Birth of Christ. The manger served as a crib for the metaphorical placement of a newborn child,

[89] Härb, *The Drawings of Giorgio Vasari*, pp. 231-33 and 248-49.

whom Saint Francis called the "Babe of Bethlehem."[90]

Saint Bonaventure's *Major Legend of Saint Francis* (1260), Chapter 10, Section 7, mentions the miracle of the Greccio manger scene, a hill town near Rome. The story recounts how Francis asked his friend Giovanni Velta to recreate Christ's nativity scene in a cave, similar to Bethlehem, to help people understand the hardship and cold Christ faced at His birth. Miraculously, in December 1223, a real child appeared in the crib, and Francis embraced him. Additional evidence is found in Thomas of Celano's *Vita Prima* (1228-1229), Book 1, Chapter 30, which describes Saint Francis creating the first Christmas crib. Therefore, Vasari successfully linked Saint Francis visually with the history and miracle of the crib in his *LA Holy Family painting* (Figs. 3, 3.11 and 3.15).



Figure 3.15. Giorgio Vasari*,* Crib., det*., The LA Holy Family,* det., 1541, oil on canvas.
County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Credit Line: Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation (M.87.87).

Furthermore, in Italian Renaissance imagery, the Nativity's placement varied, featuring shelters such as caves, open ruins, and makeshift wooden structures.[91] In these depictions, the crib was often a focus of the event, particularly in the Nativity. Sometimes the crib is replaced with a plain white cloth, hay on the ground, or Mary's mantle is used as a cover to protect against dirt.[92] These elements all symbolize the humble birth of Christ. At other times, the crib or manger is depicted as a woven or straw basket filled with hay, or as a wooden animal stall once equipped with water for drinking and hay or grain for feeding.

Moreover, in the Italian Renaissance, the actual built cribs were straightforward and practical, typically crafted from local woods such as pine or chestnut. They usually consisted of a hollowed log shaped into a curved, semi-cylindrical form, allowing gentle rocking on their rounded bases. Occasionally these cribs were decorated

---

[90] Celano's *First Life of Saint Francis* (1228), Chapter XXX, Paragraphs 84-86; Saint Bonaventure, *Life of Saint Francis* (*Legenda Maior*), Chapter 10, Section 7.

[91] For the image, see https://www.nga.gov/artworks/431-nativity.

[92] For images, see https://www.metmuseum.org/essays/the-birth-and-infancy-of-christ-in-italian-painting; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fra_Angelico_%28Fra_Giovanni_da_Fiesole%29_-_The_Nativity_-_68.41.8_-_Minneapolis_Institute_of_Arts.jpg; and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mystical_Nativity_%28Filippo_Lippi%29#/media/File:Filippo_lippi,_adorazione_del_bambino_coi_ss._giuseppe,_girolamo,_ilarione_e_maria_maddalena,_1455_ca._01.jpg.

on the front and back panels with carved Renaissance motifs, including biomorphic shapes, swirling tendrils, foliage, architectural details, and sometimes the donor's coat of arms. These types of cribs were depicted in paintings, as seen in Raphael and Giulio Romano's *Holy Family*, particularly the one created in 1518, oil on canvas, transferred from wood to canvas, housed at the Musée du Louvre (compare Figs. 25 and 25.1 with Figs. 3 and 3.15).



Figure 3.16. Cheney's Connection Arrow for Crib and Sarcophagus in Giorgio Vasari, *The LA Holy Family*, 1541, oil on canvas. County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.

In *The LA Holy Family*, Vasari set up the narrative scene in an open landscape with classical ruins in the background, showing, next to the Temple of Vesta at Tivoli, an open sarcophagus that connects to the foreground crib (*culla*) (Fig. 3.16). Vasari's crib composition draws inspiration from ancient Roman marble sarcophagi for

two main reasons: his appreciation for the aesthetic appeal and intricate decorations of ancient art, such as bucrania, festoons, masks, and putti; and the sarcophagus's symbolic significance as a burial site for the dead, metaphorically linked to Christ's death and burial (compare Figs. 26 and 27 with Fig. 3.15)





Figures 25 and 25.1. Raphael and Giulio Romano, *Holy Family* and crib, det.*,*
1518, oil on canvas, transferred from wood.
Musée du Louvre, Paris.



Figure 26. Open Roman sarcophagus with festoons, masks, and putti, 2nd century CE, marble. Excavation at Stratonikeia, Turkey.



Figure 27. Lidded Roman sarcophagus, festoons, masks, and putti, 150-180 CE, marble.
The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD.

This is also referenced in Lorenzo Lotto's *Madonna and Child with SS Jerome and Nicholas of Tolentino* (1523, oil on canvas, in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), where the crib has been transformed into an actual baby coffin (Figs. 28 and 28.1). These images of pagan and Christian motifs share a theme: the crib-shaped coffin symbolizes a temporary sleep and a premonition of death and eternal sleep as visualized in Vasari's painting (compare Figs. 29.1 and 3.15).



Figures 28 and 28.1. Lorenzo Lotto, *Madonna and Child, SS Jerome and Nicholas of Tolentin*o, and crib, det., 1523, oil on canvas.
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA.

A closer examination of the crib's composition reveals three components: the wooden structure, the linen cloth, and the pillow with tassels. The crib's semicircular wooden form, with frontal decoration including a lion's head and angels with festoons, suggests that Vasari intended to immortalize his patron's family name, Leoni (meaning "lion") (compare Figs. 27 and 3.15). It also evokes his patron's residence in Venice, where dramatic lion masks adorn the corbels of architectural roofs in San Marco Basilica and the Doge's Palace (compare Figs. 29 and 3.15a). Curiously, Vasari included a corbel below Saint Joseph's foot (Fig. 3). The grotesque lion mask also functions as a funerary symbol, embodying apotropaic magic intended to ward off evil. It signifies the transition from life to death and represents triumph over mortality, paralleling Christ's victory over death as described by Evangelist Saint Mark in his Gospel (Mark 15); not coincidentally, his symbol is the Lion.



Figure 29. Unknown sculptor, Lion's Head, corbel decoration, roof, c.1348-1442, stone. Basilica of Saint Mark and Doge's Palace, Venice.



Figure 3.15.a. Giorgio Vasari, Crib., det., *The LA Holy Family,* 1541, oil on canvas.
County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Credit Line: Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation (M.87.87).

Referring to Christ, who was explicitly born to die for human salvation, Vasari's scene alludes to both Christ's birth and death (Luke 2:6–7). The linen cloth, or bedsheet, wrapping around the pillow with tassels, recalls not only His birth but also His burial shroud, which are interconnected. The cradle is embellished like a sarcophagus, symbolizing death. Acanthus leaves, an evergreen plant similar to ivy, frequently appear in Roman sarcophagi or cinereum (compare Figs. 30 and 3.15). Within the cradle relief, the decorative plant held by angels surrounding the lion's mask traditionally signifies eternal life, immortality, and rebirth, reflecting the themes of Christ's Nativity and Resurrection.



Figure 30. Roman Cinerarium with acanthus leaves, 20 BCE, marble.
Getty Villa, Los Angeles, CA.



Figure 3.15. Giorgio Vasari, Crib., det., The LA Holy Family, 1541, oil on canvas.
County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Credit Line: Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation (M.87.87).

In other depictions of the Marian Holy Family, such as *Holy Family with SS Anne and Baby John the Baptist*, 1540s, oil on panel, now at the Bradford Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom, Vasari constructed the rocky crib frame featuring a cartouche design decorated with elaborate classical motifs (Figs. 31, 31.1, and 3.15). Festoons are held by fanciful females with outstretched arms; large curved volutes rise from the base of a garland vase; and a prominent mask with a large mustache and curved beard dominates the scene's center. A moving vignette is set in the foreground of the painting, and in front of the crib, a prominently displayed marble kylix, intricately decorated with putti, scrolls, and masks, alludes to a drinking vessel or a baptismal container. A wooden Latin cross is placed horizontally above, reminiscent of the Crucifixion, much like Saint Francis holding the stained Crucifix beside Christ's body (compare Figs. 31.1 and 3.11).



Figures 31 and 31.1. Giorgio Vasari, *Holy Family with SS Anne and Baby John the Baptist*, and crib, det., 1540s, oil on panel. Bradford Museums and Galleries, UK.

Lavinia Fontana (1552-1614), another Italian Mannerist painter, is regarded for her depiction of the connection between Saint Francis and the Holy Family. This prominent artist from Bologna received her artistic education from her father, Prospero Fontana (1512-1597), a disciple and collaborator of Vasari. In her 1578 oil painting *Holy Family with SS Francis and Margaret*, signed and dated LAVINIA FONTANA DE ZAPPIS FACIEBAT MDLXXVII, now at the Davis Museum at Wellesley College, she also drew inspiration from the crib's symbolism associated with the Holy Family and Saint Francis. In Lavinia's painting, Saint Francis is depicted holding a crucifix with the crucified Christ and displaying the stigmata. In this scene, the Christ Child

recognizes Saint Francis's devotion by blessing him (compare Figs. 32 and 32.1 with Figs. 3 and 3.11).[93] Lavinia also added another figure to the holy gathering: Saint Margaret, who is traditionally regarded in the martyrology as a protector of childbirth. According to medieval legend in Jacobus de Voragine's *The Golden Legend* (1260), she is said to have triumphantly escaped from the dragon's womb, cutting its insides with a Crucifix, as the dragon is seen next to her.[94]



Figures 32 and 32.1. Lavinia Fontana, *The Holy Family with Saint Francis and Saint Margaret,* 1575, oil on canvas.
Davis Museum of Art, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA.
Photo credit: Liana De Girolami Cheney.

In *The LA Holy Family*, Vasari depicted Saint Francis with stigmata as he gazes upon a bleeding Latin Cross Crucifix that he holds, nearly touching the body of the Christ Child. This imagery symbolizes his anticipated mortal death, while also embodying the divine salvation awaited by humanity (Figs. 3 and 3.11). Furthermore, in Vasari's depiction of the swaddling clothes, he alludes to the prefiguration of the white linen of Christ's burial shroud, and the inclusion of the crib metaphorically parallels this reference by evoking a coffin or burial place for Christ. Although these Christian iconographical elements are somber in context, Vasari provided more inspiring and heartfelt Christian symbolism through the depiction of the function of the crib or manger (Figs. 3 and 3.15)

---

[93] For the history and iconography of this painting, see Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Lavinia Fontana's *Holy Family and Saints*, 1578," in *Lavinia Fontana of Bologna: 1552-1614*, ed. Vera Fortunati (Milan: Electa, 1998), pp. 54-55; and Liana De Girolami Cheney, *Lavinia Fontana's Mythological Paintings: Art, Beauty, and Wisdom* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023 and 2024), pp. 10-31.

[94] William Granger Ryan, trans., *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993 rev. ed.), pp. 368-70.

The manger, etymologically derived from the Latin *manducare*, meaning to eat, and the Old French word *mangier*, also meaning to eat, was traditionally a receptacle not only for gathering water for thirsty animals but, in most cases, for feeding them hay or dry grains. Christ was laid among the animals, but inside one of these feeding containers. The "Babe of Bethlehem," a term coined by Saint Francis, was not just any child; he was born specifically in Bethlehem, whose name means "House of Bread" (Beit Lehem in Hebrew). The reference to his birthplace and the setting in which he is placed after birth allude to Christ as the "Bread of Life," the living bread, emphasizing his birth in the "House of Bread" and the divine purpose of his arrival on Earth. His placement in a feeding trough symbolizes that He came to nourish a spiritually hungry world.

In the Gospel of John, Christ declares, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven" (John 6:51) and "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst (John 6:35). Deeply moved by John's passage, Saint Augustine of Hippo, in Sermon 189 on "The Manger as the Altar of Food," noted that "The inn was too small; wrapped in swaddling clothes, He was placed in a manger. Who does not marvel? He who fills the world found no room in an inn; [He] laid [or placed] in a manger; he became our food. Saint Augustine connected the humble animal manger to spiritual nourishment for believers, citing Isaiah 1:3: "The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib (manger)." He emphasized the manger's role as a feeding trough (*praesepe*).[95] In his well-known sermon 190 on Isaiah 1:3, he encouraged the faithful to imitate the humble ox and donkey by approaching the manger to feed on Christ, so as not to remain spiritually hungry

Saint Francis was inspired by Saint Augustine's manger metaphor, which likens the manger to the dish for the Bread of Life and made it a tangible, sensory experience. In 1223, in the small hill town of Greccio, Italy, Francis organized the first live Nativity scene. This was more than a simple Christmas play; it was a groundbreaking liturgical event designed to showcase Francis's deep and visceral "food theology."

Saint Augustine emphasized that Christ was "placed in a manger, [and] became our food." Francis took this literally. When he set up the Nativity scene in a rocky cave, he did more than place a doll in a crib—he had the priest celebrate Holy Mass directly above the hay-filled manger. By using the actual animal feeding trough as the foundation for the Eucharistic altar, Saint Francis visually illustrated Saint Augustine's theology: the baby historically placed in the Bethlehem trough (the "House of Bread") is the same Christ who becomes tangible, consumable food (the Bread of Life) on the altar during Mass.

Saint Francis shifted the focus from an intellectual approach to a sensory one. Unlike Saint Augustine's primarily intellectual and rhetorical theology, Saint Francis emphasized sensory experience. He encouraged people to "see with bodily eyes," smell animal dung, feel the cold of the cave, and taste the Eucharist on the straw. He transformed Saint Augustine's sermons into immersive encounters where the Word of God was not only studied but also experienced through the senses of smell, touch, and taste.

Thus, the "Babe of Bethlehem," Christ in the manger, fulfills a dual purpose: physically containing food to sustain animal life and, spiritually serving as the receptacle in which Christ is placed to nourish human life through salvation. Spiritually, the significance extends to the meaning of the Nativity, wherein Christ's birth symbolizes the promise of eternal life through His body, fulfilling the soul's deepest needs.

---

[95] Edmund Hill, O.P., trans., *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for 21st Century*, 10 vols. (New York: New City Press, 1990-). Sermons 184-229 are in vol. 6, Part 3: Sermon 189, *On the Nativity of the Lord*, pp. 33 and 39; and Sermon 190, same title as 189, *On the Nativity of the Lord*, pp. 38 and 42.

Conclusion

Vasari's religious artwork exemplifies Mannerist characteristics, incorporating classical and biblical references, natural motifs, and innovative details referred to as visual *capricci* and *invenzione*, accompanied by careful *disegno* and vibrant coloration. It underscores themes of moral elevation and reverence for life and artistic beauty. The composition depicts both the human and sacred facets of Saint Francis, emphasizing his devotion to Christ. Vasari engenders a monastic and mystical ambiance that encourages viewers to embrace life's gentle simplicity and spiritual fervor. Furthermore, Vasari created a distinguished and exquisite painting of *The Holy Family with Saint Francis*, commissioned not only for the private chapel of Francesco Leoni but also intended to serve as a source of spiritual inspiration for contemporary viewers and to foster reverence for the "Babe of Bethlehem."

References

Al-Snafi, A. E., J. O. Teibo, H. M. Shaheen et al. (2024). "The Therapeutic Value of *Myrtus communis L.*: An Updated Review." *Naunyn-Schmiedeberg's Arch Pharmacol* 397, 4579-4600. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00210-024-02958-3.

Armstrong, Regis J. et al. (1999). *Saint Francis: Early Documents*. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press.

Baroni, Alessandra and Valentina Zucchi. (2024). *Giorgio Vasari e La Natività*. Florence: Edifir.

Bennett, Janice. (2005). *Sacred Blood, Sacred Image: The Sudarim of Oviedo*. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press.

Berchorius, Petrus. (1477, 1480). *Repertorium, Morale*. Cologne 1477; repr. 1489 Nuremberg: Anton Koberger, ed. Johannes Beckenhaub.

Bertelli, Carlo. (2002). *Piero della Francesca: The Frescoes of San Francesco in Arezzo*. Milan: Skira.

Bettarini, R., and P. Barocchi, eds. (1966-1990). *Giorgio Vasari Vite de' più eccellenti Pittori, Scultori e Architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568.* 8 vols. in 11 tomes. Florence: G.C. Sansoni.

Bjurstrom, Per. (2001). *Italian Drawings from the Collection of Giorgio Vasari*. Stockholm: Nationalmuseum.

Bonaventura, Saint. (1904). *The Life of Saint Francis* (*Legenda Maior*, 1260). Trans. and ed. E. Gurney Salter. New York: Dutton.

Brown, David, and Jane van Nimmen. (2005). *Raphael and the Beautiful Banker: The Story of Bindo Altoviti*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Cartlidge, David R., and James Keith Elliott. (2001). *Art and the Christian Apocrypha*. London: Routledge.

Cecchi, Alessandro, Alessandra Baroni, and Liletta Fornasari, eds. (2011). *Giorgio Vasari: Disegnatore e Pittore*. Milan: SKIRA.

Celano, Thomas. (2000). *The First Life of Saint Francis of Assisi*. Philadelphia: Triangle.

Cheney, Liana De Girolami. (1988). "Amore e baci: Giorgio Vasari's Poems to Nicolosa Bacci." In *Italian Culture*. Hamilton, Canada: The Symposium Press, Ltd., pp. 43-53.

———. (2009). "Cappella degli Artisti: Montorsoli's Marble Plaque." *In The Historian's Eye: Essays on Italian Art in Honor of Andrew Ladis*, ed. Hayden B.J. Maginnis and Shelley E. Zuraw. Athens, GA: Georgia Museum of Art, pp. 215-23.

———. (2011). *Giorgio Vasari's Artistic and Emblematic Manifestations*. Washington, DC: New Academia.

———. (2016). "Giorgio Vasari's *The Conception of Our Lady: A Divine Fruit*." *Journal of Cultural and Religious Studies* 4, 2 (February), 87-114, doi: 10.17265/2328-2177/2016.02.002.

———. (2021). "Giorgio Vasari's Fiery Putto: Artistic Armorial." *Journal of Literature and Art Studies* 11, 11 (December), pp. 161-85.

———. (2000). "Giorgio Vasari's Judith: Athena or Aphrodite?" *Fifteenth Century Studies Journal* 25, pp. 154-92.

———. (2022). "Giorgio Vasari's Military Dress Code in the Battlefield: The Honorific Helmet." In *De re Vestiaria. Antiquity and Fashion during the Renaissance*, ed. Damiano Acciarino. Venice: Anteferma Edizione, pp. 176-92.

———. (2012). *Giorgio Vasari's Prefaces: Art and Theory*. New York: Peter Lang.

———. (2025). *Giorgio Vasari: The Quest of a Painter*. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

———. (2015). "Giorgio Vasari's Saint Francis: Aretine Fervor." *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, David Publishing Company, 5, 8 (October), pp. 859-73.

———. (2000). "Giorgio Vasari's 'The Toilet of Venus': Neoplatonic Notion of Female Beauty." In *Neoplatonism and Western Aesthetics,* ed. Aphrodite Alexandrakis. NY: State University of New York Press, pp. 99-113.

———. (1998). "Lavinia Fontana's *Holy Family and Saints*, 1578." In *Lavinia Fontana of Bologna: 1552-1614*, ed. Vera Fortunati. Milan: Electa, pp. 54-55.

———. (2023 and 2024). *Lavinia Fontana's Mythological Paintings: Art, Beauty, and Wisdom*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

———. (2007). "Saint Jerome: A Biblical Icon of Diligence." In Liana De Girolami Cheney, *Giorgio Vasari's Teachers: Sacred and Profane Ar*t. London/New York: Peter Lang, pp. 156-67.

———. (Forthcoming Fall 2026). *The Tree of Jesse in Italian Mannerist Paintings*. Oxford: Peter Lang.

———. (1993). "Vasari and Naples: The Monteoliveto Order." In *Parthenope's Splendor: Art of the Golden Age in Naples*, ed. Jeanne Chenault Porter and Susan C. Scott. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 48-126.

Chong, Alan, ed. (2003). *Raphael, Cellini and a Renaissance Banker: The Patronage of Bindo Altoviti*. Milan: Electa.

Churchward, Albert. (2010). *The Origin of the Triangle and Meaning of the Different Triangles*. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing.

Cirlot, J.E. (1962). *A Dictionary of Symbols*. New York: Philosophical Library.

Cooper, J.C. (1978). *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols. London*: Thames and Hudson.

Corti, Laura. (1989). *Vasari: Catalogo complete dei pinti.* Florence: Cantini.

D'Ancona, Mirella Levi. (1977). *The Garden of the Renaissance: Botanical Symbolism in Italian Paintings*. Florence: Olschki.

de Tracy, Louis, ed. (2018). *The Sybilline Oracles*. London: Forgotten Books.

Dom. "The Man Among the Myrtle Trees." (2023). https://www.strengthenedbygrace.org/blog/the-man-among-the-myrtle-trees (2023).

Eliade, Mircea. (1958). *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. London: Sheed & Ward.

Fletcher, Catherine. (2016). *The Black Prince of Florence: The Spectacular Life and Treacherous World of Alessandro de' Medici*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Frey, Karl, ed. (1923). *Der literarische Nachlass Giorgio Vasaris*. Vol. 1. Munich: George Müller.

———. (1930). *Der literarische Nachlass Giorgio Vasaris*. Vol. 2. Munich: George Müller.

Gabbarelli, Jamie. (2015). "Philippe Thomassin and Giulio Mancini's Art Collection." *Print Quarterly* 32, p. 386.

Giglio, Federico. (2022). "Francesco Lioni: A Florentine Merchant in Venice at the Time of Vasari." In *The Medici Archive Project, Florence*. Dutch University Institute for Art History Florence (2021 Fellows Research Reports, 2 March), np.

The Golden Legend or Lives of the Saints. (1470, 1483, 1900, 1922, 1931). Ed. Jacobus de Voragine.

Granger Ryan, William, trans. (1993). *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*. 2 vols. Princeton: Princeton University Press (rev. ed.).

Hall, James. (1974). *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers.

Härb, Florian. (2015). *The Drawings of Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574*). Rome: Ugo Bozzi.

Hill, Edmund, O.P., trans. (1990). *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*. 10 vols. New York: New City Press.

Horace. (1988, 2015), *Odes*. Trans. David Ferry. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Jameson, Ann Brownell. (1903). *Legends of the Madonna*. London: Unit Library.

Karris, Robert J., O.F.M. (1955-1960). *The Complete Works of St. Bonaventure*. 19 vols. New York: Franciscan Institute at St. Bonaventure University.

Licciardello, Pierluigi. (2004). *Le origini dell'eremo e della congregazione di Camaldoli*. Florence: SISMEL, Galluzzi.

Lovasik, Lawrence G. (1957). "Our Lady in Catholic Life." In *Litany of Loreto*. New York: Macmillan.

Marongiu, Sonia, et al. (2012). The Camaldolese Forest Conference (May 2012). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281202525_The_Camaldolese_forest_code_800_years_of_sustainable_forest_management (May 2012).

Metford, J.C.J. (1983). *Dictionary of Christian Lore and Legend. London*: Thames and Hudson.

Milanesi, Gaetano, ed. (1878-1895, 1906-1910, 1970-1974). *Le vite de' più eccellenti Pittori, Scultori, et Architettori*. 9 vols. Florence: G.C. Sansoni.

Mullins, Maureen. (2022). *The Litany of Loreto: How it Came to Be*. Strongsville, OH: Specter.

Paine, Angela. (2024). *Healing Plants of Renaissance Florence: The Development of Herbal Medicine in Floren*ce. London: Moon Books.

Ragghianti Collobi, Licia. (1974). *Il Libro de' Disegni del Vasari*. 2 vols. Florence: Vallecchi.

Reynolds, Brian K. (2019). "Marian Typological and Symbolic Images in Patristic Christianity." In *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, ed. Chris Maunder. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://www.academia.edu/40130532/Marian_Typological_and_Symbolic_Imagery_in_Patristic_Christianity.

Russell, D.H., and B. Barnes. (1990). *Eva/Ave: Women in the Renaissance and Baroque Prints*. Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art.

Schroeder, H.J., trans. (2023). *Pope Innocent III: The Fourth Lateran Council.* La Vergne: TN: Dalcassian Publishing Company.

Shaw, James, and Evelyn Welch. (2011). *Making and Marketing Medicine in Renaissance Florence*. Clio Medica 89. Leiden: Brill.

Tartuferi, Angelo, and Francesco D'Arelli. (2015). *L'Arte di Francesco: Capolavori d'arte italiana e terre d'asia, dal XIII al XV secolo* [The Art of Francis: Italian Art Works and Those in Asia from XIII to XV Century]. Milan: Giunti.

Taylor, Michael D. (1980–1981). "A Historiated Tree of Jesse." *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 34/35, pp. 125-76.

Trapp, J.B. (1958). "The Owl's Ivy and the Poet's Bays." *The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 21, 3-4 (December), pp. 227-37.

Traversi, Francesco. (2024). "Prima, durante e dopo Vasari." In *Quiete e Rinascita. Giorgio Vasari a Camaldoli e in Casentino, ed. Michel Scipioni and Claudio Ubaldo Cortoni*. (Bibbiena [Arezzo]: Mazzafirra), pp. 44-46.

Tucci, Pier Luigi. (2018). *The Temple of Peace in Rome*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ullah, Farman, et al. (2025). "Myrtus communis L. (Myrtle): A Comprehensive Review of its Folk Uses, Medicinal Uses, Historical Perspective, Phytochemistry and Pharmacology." *Journal of Agricultural Sustainability* 4,1 (June), pp. 28-56. doi:10.56556/jase.v4i1.1333.

Vauchez, A. (2012). *The Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Verdon, Timothy. *The Story of Saint Francis of Assisi: In Twenty-Eight Scenes*. Brewer, MA: Paraclete Press, 2019.

Virgil. (1999). *Eclogues.* Trans. C. Day Lewis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Whelpley, Samuel. (2010). *The Triangle: A Series of Numbers Upon Three Theological Points*. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing.

Williamson, Beth. (2009). *The Madonna of Humility: Development, Dissemination and Reception, 1340-1400*. London: Boydell Press.

Wren Christian, Kathleen. (2002). "The De' Rossi Collection of Ancient Sculptures, Leo X and Raphael." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 65, pp. 132-200.

Zohary, Michael. (1982). *Plants of the Bible*. London/New York: Cambridge University Press.