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Federico Barocci and the Oratorians

CORPORATE PATRONAGE AND STYLE IN THE COUNTER-REFORMATION

IAN F. VERSTEGEN

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Contents

Illustrations .................................................................................................................... vii

Preface ........................................................................................................................... xi

Introduction: What’s in a Style? Barocci and the Oratorians .............................. 1

Chapter 1: Federico Barocci, Filippo Neri, and Christian Optimism .............. 15

Chapter 2: The Altarpiece Cycle: The Rosary and Coordinated Devotion ......... 43

Chapter 3: The Visitation and the Presentation of the Virgin ......................... 67

Chapter 4: The Nativity of the Virgin for the High Altar and the Institution of the Eucharist for the Pope ................................................................. 95

Chapter 5: Baroccismo into the Seicento ................................................................. 121

Appendix 1: Chiesa Nuova Altars and the Altarpieces Adorning Them .......... 143

Appendix 2: Chiesa Nuova Timeline ..................................................................... 146

Appendix 3: Order of Altarpiece Commissions and Completions ................. 148

Appendix 4: Giovan Battista Guerra’s Renovations in the Chiesa Nuova ......... 149

Works Cited ............................................................................................................... 150

Index ......................................................................................................................... 163

About the Author ..................................................................................................... 172
Illustrations and Tables

Illustrations

Plate I: Federico Barocci, *Visitation of the Virgin and Saint Elizabeth*, 1586, oil on canvas, Chiesa Nuova, Rome (photo by author). ............................................. A

Plate II: Federico Barocci, *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*, 1603, oil on canvas, Chiesa Nuova, Rome (photo by Bradley Cavallo). ..................... B

Plate III: Peter Paul Rubens, *Adoration of the Madonna Vallicelliana*, 1608, oil on slate, Chiesa Nuova, Rome (image from Wikimedia Commons). ........... C

Plate IV: Federico Barocci, *Head of an Old Man (Filippo Neri?)*, ca. 1583, charcoal pastel on paper (Galerie Hans, Hamburg)................................................. D

Plate V: Federico Barocci, *Nativity of Christ*, ca. 1597–99, oil on canvas, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan (© DeA Picture Library/Art Resource, NY).............. E

Plate VI: Federico Barocci and Alessandro Vitali, *Saint Ambrose's Pardon of Theodoric*, 1603, oil on canvas, Duomo, Milan (Fabbrica del Duomo di Milano)........................................................................................................ F

Plate VII: Federico Barocci and Alessandro Vitali, *Nativity of the Virgin*, ca. 1588–1603, oil on canvas, San Sempliciano, Milan (Soprintendenza per i beni storici artistici ed etnoantropologici per la provincia di Milano). ............... G

Plate VIII: Federico Barocci, *The Institution of the Eucharist*, 1603–1608, oil on canvas, Santa Maria sopra Minerva, Rome (photo by Chris Paprocki)...... H
Fig. 1.1: Guido Reni, *Saint Filippo Neri in Ecstasy*, 1615, oil on canvas (Biblioteca dell’Istituto centrale per il catalogo e la documentazione)........................................20

Fig. 1.2: Copper engraving from *Vita Beati P. Ignatii Loyolae Societatis Jesu fundatoris* (Rome, 1609) (New York Public Library)....................................................28

Fig. 1.3: Copper engraving from *Vita Beati P. Ignatii Loyolae Societatis Jesu fundatoris* (Rome, 1609) (New York Public Library)....................................................29

Fig. 1.4: Federico Zuccaro, *Seven Archangels in Adoration of the Trinity*, 1600, oil on panel, Gesù, Rome (photo by Ron Reznick, digitalflashimages.net)....38

Fig. 2.1: Chiesa Nuova (Santa Maria in Vallicella), Rome (photo by author). .......50

Fig. 2.2: Anonymous, *Madonna Vallicelliana*, within Rubens’s altarpiece, date unknown, fresco, Chiesa Nuova, Rome (photo by author).........................52

Fig. 2.3: Copper engraving, after Nicolas Beatrizet, *Madonna of Loreto* (detail), published by Antoine Lafréry, Rome, 1540–66 (© Trustees of the British Museum)...................................................................................................................54

Fig. 2.4: Title page, detail of copper engraving frontispiece from Cesare Baronio, *Annales ecclesiastici* (Rome: Tipografica Vaticana, 1588), (Ryan Library Collection, St. Charles Borromeo Seminary, Wynnewood, Pennsylvania). 55

Fig. 2.5: Andrea Lilio, *Assumption*, 1610, fresco, Annunciation Chapel, Chiesa Nuova, Rome (photo by author).............................................................................56

Fig. 3.1: Four *scarpigni* at the same scale: Barocci, compositional studies, ca. 1582 (left to right: Statensmuseum for Kunst, Copenhagen; Fondation Custodia Collection Fritz Lugt, Paris; Institut Neerlandais, Nationalmuseum, Paris; Stockholm; Stockholm [2])...................................................................................74–75

Fig. 3.2: Federico Barocci, *Visitation*, ca. 1582, in the Chiesa Nuova, Rome (photo by author) reduced six times, compared to Edinburgh *modello* (National Galleries, Scotland) and Berlin 20522 (bpk, Berlin/Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museum, Berlin/photo by Jörg P. Anders/Art Resource)...76–77
Fig. 3.3: Federico Barocci, *Presentation of the Virgin*, ca. 1583, in the Chiesa Nuova, Rome (center, photo by Bradley Cavallo) reduced seven times, compared to (left) Barocci, sketch, with Uffizi 11434 (Suprintendenza Speciale per il Patrimonio Storico, Artistico et Etnoantropologico e per il Polo Museale della città di Firenze) and (right) after Barocci, *Presentation of the Virgin*, ca. 1610, drawing 2006.11.4 (Woodner Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC). ................................................................. 86–87

Fig. 3.4: Federico Barocci, *Lamentation of Christ*, ca. 1612, oil on canvas, Biblioteca Comunale dell’Archiginnasio, Bologna (Soprintendenza per il patrimonio storico, artistico et demoetnoantropoligico, Bologna). .................. 93

Fig. 4.1: Same-scale comparison of (left) Federico Barocci, *The Calling of Saint Andrew*, ca. 1588, oil on canvas (El Escorial, Lessing Images) and (right) Federico Barocci and Alessandro Vitali, *Nativity of the Virgin*, ca. 1588–1603, oil on canvas, San Sempliciano, Milan (Suprintendenza per i beni storici artistici ed etnoantropologici per le province di Milano). .......... 100

Fig. 4.2: Federico Barocci, Kneeling woman, compositional study, ca. 1585, chalk on paper, Düsseldorf, inv. 162 (Stiftung Museum Kunstpalast-Horst Kolbert, Düsseldorf /ARTOTHEK). ................................................................. 105

Fig. 4.3: Federico Barocci, Arm of a child, study, ca. 1583, chalk on paper, inv. 20158 (bpk, Berlin/Kupferstichkabinett/photo by Volker-H. Cutter/Art Resource). ........................................................................................................ 107

Fig. 4.4: Same-scale comparison of (left) Federico Barocci, *Circumcision*, 1590, oil on canvas (Musée de Louvre, Alfredo Dagli Orti/The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY); (center) Federico Barocci and Alessandro Vitali, *Nativity of the Virgin*, ca. 1588–1603, oil on canvas, San Sempliciano, Milan (Suprintendenza per i beni storici artistici ed etnoantropologici per le province di Milano); and (right) Federico Barocci, *Visitation of the Virgin and Saint Elizabeth*, 1586, oil on canvas, Chiesa Nuova, Rome (photo by author). ........................................................................................................ 108–9

Fig. 4.5: Sano di Pietro, *Birth of the Virgin*, 1448–1452, tempera and gold on panel (University of Michigan Museum of Art, Museum purchase made possible by the Thirtieth Anniversary Project and the Friends of the Museum of Art, 1977/2.1). ........................................................................................................ 112
Fig. 5.1: Cristoforo Roncalli, Saint Filippo Neri in Ecstasy, 1600, oil on canvas, Chapel of Filippo Neri, Chiesa Nuova, Rome (photo by author)..........122

Fig. 5.2: Federico Zuccaro, Portrait of Filippo Neri, 1593, oil on canvas, Oratorio of Santa Maria in Galliera, Bologna (Congregazione dell’Oratorio di San Filippo Neri).................................................................127

Fig. 5.3: Cristoforo Roncalli, Saint Domitilla with Saints Nereo and Achilleo, 1601, oil on canvas, Santi Nereo e Acchile, Rome (Mondadori Portfolio/Electa/Art Resource, NY).................................................................129

Fig. 5.4: Francesco Vanni, Madonna Vallicelliana Adored by Saints Francis and Restituta, 1601, oil on canvas, Santa Maria degli Angeli, Sora (photo by author)..................................................................................131

Fig. 5.5: Antonio Viviani, The Apparition of the Angel at the Meal of the Poor, 1603–6, fresco, San Gregorio Magno, Rome (photo by author).................................................................134

Fig. 5.6: Federico Barocci, Penitent Saint Jerome, 1597, fresco, Villa Borghese, Rome (Soprintendenza per i bene artistici e storica de Roma).........................136

Fig. 5.7: Luca Ciamberlano, after Federico Barocci, copper engraving from Noli me tangere, 1609 (Soprintendenza per i bene artistica e storica d Roma, Gabinetto Fotografico).................................................................140

Tables

Table 1: Price of artwork in the Chiesa Nuova and the Gesù (in scudi)..................41

Table 2: Subjects of Rosary devotions represented in Chiesa Nuova altarpieces and in the Gesù Chapel of Madonna della Strada......................................................66

Table 3: Typology of altarpiece subjects in the Chiesa Nuova.................................66
Preface

This project began with material external to my dissertation on Federico Barocci, which became my paper “Federico Barocci, Federico Borromeo, and the Oratorian Orbit.” The paper combined documentary research into Barocci and the Oratorians with my interest in historiography and its theorization. Several years have allowed me to reflect on deeper issues on Barocci and the Oratorians, including Oratorian spirituality, the significance of the iconographic program of the Chiesa Nuova, and Barocci’s ill-fated Birth of the Virgin for the church’s high altar.

I am grateful for the hospitality of Padre Alberto Venturoli in the archive of the Chiesa Nuova many years ago, Mons. Marco Maria Navoni of the Biblioteca Ambrosiana, and more recently the Archivio di Stato in Florence. In addition, Gauvin Alexander Bailey, Costanza Barbieri, Dave Elder-Vass, Jonathan Gilmore, Paul Grendler, Marcia Hall, Pamela Jones, Bram de Klerck, Jonathan Kline, Stuart Lingo, Laura MacCaskey, Giancarla Periti, and Ulrike Tarnow offered their help, information, or encouragement. Hayden Maginnis offered an insight that set chapter 4 off rolling. Ideas for chapter 1 were first presented in the College Art Association session “Muta Poesis: Interpreting and Picturing Silence” at the 2003 meeting.

In particular, I want to single out three people. First, Marcia Hall has been a constant encouragement, and I have been pleased to discuss with her matters relating to Barocci over the years since completing my dissertation under her guidance. Costanza Barbieri first introduced me to the Oratorians in Rome and has been a ready and helpful discussant of matters relating to Filippo Neri and Barocci. Finally, I have had the pleasure to collaborate with John Marciari over the past few years and he has been a precious sounding board for issues dealt with in this book. I thank them all!
Introduction

What’s In a Style?

Barocci and the Oratorians

*The national character is not something that can be appealed to as an explanatory historical principle in concrete cases; it is, rather, something which not only demands concrete explanation, but which demands constant reinterpretation in the light of actual events.*

Maurice Mandelbaum, *The Problem of Historical Knowledge*

In 1586 Federico Barocci, the famous painter from Urbino, delivered his *Visitation of the Virgin and Saint Elizabeth* (plate 1) to the Chiesa Nuova in Rome, to great applause. Barocci was already well known throughout Italy because of his *Deposition* (1569) in Perugia and *Madonna del Popolo* (1579) in Arezzo, but this commission for the fathers of the Congregation of the Oratory would lead to a quarter century of domination of the art scene in Rome. While Barocci was not a resident in the Eternal City, there was no other artist from whom it was harder to get work and no other artist who charged such high prices.

Yet Barocci’s talents in Rome were almost completely monopolized by the Oratorians. In the early 1590s, the fathers considered having Barocci paint the pendant transept chapels; eventually he only painted the *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*, which was delivered in 1603. Barocci was bold enough to propose to do the altarpiece for the high altar. Money constraints made this very well-received idea flounder, but Barocci did manage to send one more important work to Rome, his *Institution of the Eucharist* for the Aldobrandini family chapel in Santa Maria sopra Minerva in 1608.

Scholars have noted the remarkable fact of these four altarpiece projects in one very important Roman church; this is due to the special relationship between the works and

2. On Filippo Neri and the Oratorians, see Capecelatro, *La vita di s. Filippo Neri*; Cistellini, *San Filippo Neri*.
the founder of the Oratorians, Filippo Neri (1515–95). We know from contemporary documents that the Visitazione was Neri’s favorite painting. He was often in the chapel, where he performed miracles or was seen spending hours lost in rapture. No doubt the saint’s interest in the painting was due both to the feminine humility of the two bearers of Saint John the Baptist and Christ, and to the way in which Barocci had painted it so sweetly. From that moment on, Barocci would be a model for capturing what the Oratorians appreciated in an altarpiece and, reflexively, the painter helped the fathers understand just what their aesthetic was.

But perhaps this remarkable success has caused us to move too quickly to facile observations, like Barocci’s “Oratorian piety.” Indeed, it has become quite fashionable to debunk various stylistic concepts with reference to an implicit Zeitgeist thinking and uncovering the “Hege- lian unconscious.” At least two important surveys of painting in sixteenth-century Italy specifically invoke Jeroen Stumpel’s criticism of the concept of Mannerism, following his recommendation to abandon the usage of the term, and with it a series of important works from the 1960s that clarified its usage for an earlier generation. Is this the end of the long winding down of nineteenth-century historicism, or are any of these ideas still workable?

Such doubts are well placed, for a review of the literature shows that attempts to relate artists to various religious bodies have been unsuccessful. Immediate evidence of this fact is that any argument for Barocci’s Oratorian piety would have to contend with Walter Friedländer’s thesis that it was in fact Caravaggio who most exemplified Oratorian values. According to Caravaggio Studies, the humility and earthiness of Filippo Neri’s spirituality—his service to pilgrims and the poor, his unassuming manner, and his impatience with pomp and formality—were an inspiration for Caravaggio’s brutal realism. Although Friedländer was sympathetic to Barocci and had written extensively of him in his early work on the Casino of Pius IV, he found it possible to pass over this artist’s demonstrable success with Oratorians, as if his fame alone merely carried him.

But of course the Caravaggio industry has not rested content with the Oratorian interpretation, going on to produce Augustinian and Franciscan interpretations. Such exercises


4. Franklin, Painting in Renaissance Florence; and Bailey, Between Renaissance and Baroque; both citing Stumpel, “Speaking of Manner.” See further Franklin, Review of After Raphael, by Marcia B. Hall.


6. For the Augustinian, see Calvesi, “Caravaggio o la ricerca della salvazione.” For the Franciscan, see Alloisi, “Panigarola e Caravaggio”; and Pupillo, “Pauperismo e iconografia francescana.”
will continue indefinitely until we think about the units under consideration. Although such interpretations are conducted through source material, such that expressed spiritual goals (or imagery) are matched to similar pictorial strategies in some artist, what is at the base of such readings is a formal similarity.

Because of the apparent fruitlessness of this endeavor, most have given up as naïve those gestures of art historians like Friedländer, Panofsky, and others that presume some kind of essential historical entities. While the transgressions of unbridled stylistic history have been many, this study upholds some kind of Oratorian aesthetic, which Barocci satisfied so well. By reflecting on the nature of social collectivity and styles, it will be possible to make a reasonable case for limited social distinctions and style concepts with limited purchase. With this new understanding as background, one may uphold the traditional assertion of an affinity between Barocci and the Oratorians based on a reconsideration of new and previously known data about the theology, iconography, and practices of the Oratory.

The relationship can be affirmed more positively, furthermore, by looking at different patrons and artists. For example, looking at Oratorian commissions outside Rome and commissions by Oratorians for other benefices expands our view. Inserting Barocci’s relationships with Federico Borromeo (1564–1631), cardinal and archbishop of Milan, and with Pope Clement VIII (1535–1605) into the Oratorian ambience helps specify what we mean by Oratorian piety. Borromeo, the disciple of Neri and benefactor of the Chiesa Nuova, oversaw four concurrent commissions to Barocci that substantially enlarge the Oratorian picture. Clement VIII’s commission was also conceived within the Oratorian sphere. Similarly, by looking at what was being done by students Barocci trained and those he influenced, we are able to see the larger coordination of aesthetic outcomes. Viewing all these forces in a unified context shows the give and take in Barocci’s very busy career, where different bodies did their best to deal with Barocci’s popularity. In this way, the true force of Oratorian interest emerges.

Historiographic Nominalism

One could say that the current situation in historiography is a conflation of libertarian and postmodern philosophies that has brought art history to a point where historical difference has been leveled out. The libertarian contribution was the reductive, commonsense reaction to High German art history by E. H. Gombrich. Following on the disasters of World War II, Gombrich responded with a libertarian approach to history that banished all reference to collectivist concepts—style, nation—and was content to remain at the level of the individual artist. Gombrich’s art historical position was widely shared in history, by his friend Karl Popper and by others like Pieter Geyl and Karl Löwith.

7. On Borromeo, see Gabrieli, “Federico Borromeo a Roma”; Agosti, Collezionismo e archeologia cristiana nel seicento; Jones, Federico Borromeo and the Ambrosiana.
9. Popper, Poverty of Historicism; Geyl, Toynbee, and Sorokin, Pattern of the Past; Löwith, Meaning in History; Nisbet,
This commonsense approach was shared by a number of authors and is reflected, for example, in the shrinking importance of the notion of "style" in successive discussions. For example, departing from Meyer Schapiro's exhaustive "Style" from the 1953 collection Anthropology Today, we can see that each author that followed Schapiro, including James Ackerman and Gombrich himself, continued to limn the concept down in application and importance.\textsuperscript{10}

This ground was well prepared when from another angle disenchanted Marxists found the master narratives of class struggle and emancipation lacking in the 1970s. The way was open for post-structuralist theories in art history that stressed the constructedness of discourses about art and artists. Naming schools was a political act, and the best we could do, as Foucault reasoned, was to mark out the genealogies of ideas. Jean-François Lyotard gave a name to this new tendency: the suspension of "metanarratives."

In addition, the way histories were constructed was seen as a poetic act, which added something to the inert historical material. Thus Hayden White suggested that historians come to historical material with a fictional sense of how the work should be "emplotted." So, far from letting the material determine the form of the work, it was moral or aesthetic ideas that led the historian toward the final form of his work.

As a result, a kind of post-structuralist nominalism reinforced that which Gombrich had already supported. What was forbidden in both the Anglo-Saxon and Continental cases was roughly what Popper had found objectionable in what he called "historicism," that is, holism and teleology. When young art historians began to be weary of inherited style concepts like "the Zeitgeist," "the Baroque," or various unexamined truisms about artists, national schools, or styles, they had at least two sources to support a return to contextualistic studies.

In both the Anglo-Saxon and Continental cases, moreover, great energy was devoted to uncovering the "Hegelian" biases of earlier historians. Thus, interestingly, there was a double Oedipal critique of founding figures of the discipline like Erwin Panofsky. Gombrich criticized him for his latent Hegelianism that took for granted the workings of the Zeitgeist and reliance on national characterizations. Reviewing both Panofsky's newly translated Perspective as Symbolic Form and group of essays edited by Irving Lavin, Three Essays on Style, Gombrich was slightly shocked by some of the sloppy recourses to period style and national character that Panofsky fell back upon. The discussion of the Baroque, for example, mentions "the experience of so many conflicts and dualisms between emotion and reflection, lust and pain, devoutness and voluptuousness [which] had led to a kind of awakening, and thus endowed the European mind with a new consciousness."\textsuperscript{11} Similarly, a post-structuralist such as Keith Moxey in quite a different way could criticize the smuggled nationalistic and teleological assumptions in Panofsky's accounts of Dürer or early Netherlandish naturalism.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10} See Schapiro, "Style"; Ackerman, "Theory of Style"; and Gombrich, "Style."
\textsuperscript{11} Panofsky, Three Essays on Style, 75; Gombrich, "Icon" [review of Panofsky, Three Essays on Style].
\textsuperscript{12} Moxey, "Perspective, Panofsky, and the Philosophy of History," in Practice of Persuasion.
According to this viewpoint, anything valid about groups is restricted to their individual materiality. There are just people, not groups, races, or nations. In addition, individual cultures and cultures in general do not progress. What is especially interesting here are the strict dualities. Either one is a full-blown Hegelian or one is a legitimate nominalist. Especially in the post-structuralist case, however, to be nominalist has a progressive political valence attached to it. To uncover tacit reliance on notions of group or nation, or their development, is an act uncovering the deep historical biases in the Western historical tradition.

There are indications that we need to reconsider the case for historical collectives and their styles. For both postmodern and libertarian politics, the absence of a dichotomy of agent and social structure has been disastrous. Libertarianism is unable to understand the structural positioning of resources that constitutes the material conditions of society, let alone the rules that keep it going. On the other hand, by conflating the agent and the structure, postmodernism has forestalled any possibility of analytic clarification of the categories of social life. The same is true for history. In an era of aggressive worldviews and fundamentalism, we need to be able to catch as much of the complexity of the world in theory as possible in order to fight over precisely those slightest gradations between where reality leaves off and trickery begins.13

A Cautionary Tale: The Jesuit Style

The major cautionary tale for such an enterprise involving Barocci and the Oratorians is the now almost debunked notion of a “Jesuit style,” which has its origins in nineteenth-century German historiography. The consequences of imputing overarching stylistic ideas to the Oratorian may not seem such a big deal, but when transposing this problematic to the Jesuits, the stakes become quite clear.

In an important historical reconstruction, Evonne Levy has shown how “Jesuit” served in primarily German historical writing as a forerunner for the Catholic Baroque.14 As the Jesuits were perceived as being in lockstep with the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century papacy, all of the products of Catholic pomp could be gathered under the concept of the Jesuitenstil. Thus, shortly after Bismarck evicted the Jesuits from Germany in 1872, we find the emergence of the concept of the Barock containing many of the same concepts: degeneration from the Renaissance, rhetorical insincerity, and manipulation of the masses.

In the early twentieth century, works on Counter-Reformation art carried over the concepts but not necessarily the framework inherited from the previous century. Work became more limited to painting or architecture. Yet the easy elision of the corporate body (Jesuits) and their products was increasingly under scrutiny, finally giving way to suspicion after the horrors of World War II. An increasing number of works emerged that put to rest

13. For a political critique of “weak ontology,” see Dean, “Politics of Avoidance.”
Index

Bold indicates an image; T indicates a table. See also list of Illustrations and Tables (pp. vii–x) and Index of Artworks (pp. 170)

A

Aachen, Hans van, 85
Abromson, Morton, 133
Ackerman, James, 4
Agucchi, Giovanni Battista, 35–36
Alberti, Durante, 11, 53
Aldobrandini, Ippolito (cardinal), 69, 118
altarpieces. See also Chiesa Nuova; Gesù chapel;
Index of Artworks
aesthetic unity of, 51
and Barocci, 21, 35, 67, 71–80
comparison of Sano, Barocci, and Osservanza Master, 112, 112–13
cycles of, 45n
by Rubens (see also under Index of Artworks)
of Santa Croce, 44, 46
of Siena Cathedral, 44
styles of
Jesuit, 34, 36, 57–58
Oratorian, 15, 17, 46, 57–58, 62–63, 113–16
and tabernacles, 45, 47, 85, 114–15, 130
thematic relationship of, 63
typology of, 66T, 82
Ambrosiana library, xi, 88–89
Anastagi, Simonetto, 73
d’Ancona, Cesare, 126
anecdotes
about Barocci, 137
of money and fame, 40
about Neri, 2n3, 30, 79–80
about Reni/Domenichino, 35–36
Angelic Sisters of Saint Paul, 102–3
Antoniano, Silvio, 117, 126
Archer, Margaret, 8
architecture, 6, 46, 49
d’Arpino, Cavaliere, 37, 57, 62, 83, 117, 128
art. See also Index of Artworks.
drawings/models, 74–76, 84, 105–6, 117–18, 128, 138
frescos, 63, 79, 82, 97, 111, 114, 123, 132, 134, 136, 137
knowledge types in, 34–35
prices of artwork, 40, 41T, 67, 72, 114
rare features of, 112–13
sfumato, 34, 36, 77
terms used for, 105

B

Bacci, Fr. Pietro Giacomo, 25, 48–49, 59, 79, 128
Baglione, Giovanni, 132. See also under Index of Artworks
Bailey, Gauvin Alexander, xi, 6, 25, 37, 39–40, 57, 64, 125
Baius (Michel de Baye), 23
Baldinucci, 123
Barbieri, Costanza, xi, 35
Barocci, Federico, 83–84, 128. See also under Index of Artworks
after the Presentation, 132–35
biography of, 18–22
borrowings of artistic figures, 107–11
career’s end/death of, 135–36
compositional drawings of, 74–76, 84, 105, 106, 117–18
correspondence archive of, 88–89
derivative works of, 109–10
diplomatic connections, 69–71
and Francesco Maria II della Rovere, 19, 70
iconography of, 12, 36, 73–74, 77–78
imagery of, 12, 36, 73–74, 77–78
money and fame, 39–42
and patronage/commissions, 19, 83–84
piety of, 2, 14, 19
poisoning of, 137
and reform painting, 122–24
retrospective determinism of, 80

163
Barocci, Federico, continued
and Roncalli, 121–22
scarpigni of, 74–75, 77
into the seicento, 121–42
spirituality of, 21
styles of
Baroque, 18–19, 39
and color, 77, 85
compared with Zuccaro, 37
as corporate, 13–14
as feminine, 34
influences on, 70–74
and Jesuit/Oratorian contrast, 15, 123
and Oratorians, 3, 11, 33–39
as visionary, 21, 35
time line for artworks, 99–111
and Vitali, 98–111
and Viviani, 133
working methods of, 72–78, 95–99, 118–19
Barocci, Giovanni Maria, 70
Baroccismo, and patronage/comissions, 121–22
Baronio, Cesare (cardinal), 9, 24–25, 30, 33, 55, 81, 117, 124–28, 130–33, 141. See also under
Index of Artworks
Baxandall, Michael, 11
Baye, Michel de (Baius), 23
Beatrizet. See Index of Artworks
Bellarmino, Roberto Francesco Romolo (cardinal), 25
Bellori, Gian Pietro, 19, 67, 70, 118, 120
Bhaskar, Roy, 8
Bolognese artists, 125
Boncompagni, Giacomo (cardinal), 69
Borghese family, 119
Paul V (pope), 135
Scipione, 121, 124, 133–35, 138
Borromeo
Carlo, 45, 70
Federico (cardinal), 3, 9, 32, 51, 67–68, 87–89, 98, 141–42
Borromini, Francesco, 30, 41
Bosio, Antonio, 9, 30
Bozio, Tommaso, 81, 130
briefs, 11–12, 22, 39, 142
Brill, Paul, 82
C
Calvaert, Denys, 125
Calvesi, Maurizio, 104
Calvinism, 16, 24
Cantalice, Fra Felice da, 16, 24
capitalism, 10
Capuchins, 16, 19, 24, 137
Caravaggio, Amerighi, 2–3, 51, 104, 124, 128
Carducci, Ludovico, 70
Carracci family, 123–24, 137. See also under Index of
Artworks
Carthusianism, 22
Castello, Alberto da, 58–59
Cati, Pasquale, 125. See also under Index of Artworks
Cesari, Guiseppe, 64
Cesi
Angelo (bishop), 82
Federico, 69
Pierdonato (cardinal), 17, 45, 49, 69, 82
chapels. See also Chiesa Nuova; Gesù chapel
Aldobrandini Chapel, 1, 116
Bichi of Sant’Agostino, 111
Capella dei Signori, 111
Chapel of Pentecost, 124
Chapel of San Ambrogio, 91–94
Chapel of San Giovanni Buono, 91–94
Chapel of the Annunciation, 55
Chapel of the Ascension, 63
Chapel of the Crucifixion, 18, 63
Chapel of the Holy Spirit, 57
Chapel of the Pietà, 47, 49, 51, 63, 124
Chapel of the Purification, 57, 60
Chapel of the Visitiation, 49, 63
of Chiesa Nuova, 57
decoration of, 63
do Neri, 126, 128
pairings of, 17–18, 63–64, 82, 144–45
Quirinal Chapel, 137
Sistine Chapel, 126
typology of, 63, 66T, 82
Chiesa Nuova, 17, 50. See also chapels; churches/ cathedrals
and altarpieces, 33, 40, 43, 46–47, 57–58, 71–86, 95–99, 144–45
artists of, 18, 40
donated by Gregory XIII, 47, 49
Guerra’s renovations, 149
iconography of, 45–46, 57, 95–99, 114–15
and Marian devotion, 59–60, 90–95
and prices of artwork, 41T, 67, 72
and reformed painting, 123
and Rosary devotion, 66T
Santa Maria in Vallicella, 50
time line, 146–47
and Tridentine church design, 44–45
wraparound pattern of, 17, 58
Christian optimism, 22–26
Christology, 59, 119
churches/cathedrals. See also Chiesa Nuova
Orvieto Cathedral, 46
projects for, 128–32
San Girolamo della Carità, 30
San Paolo Converso, 102–3
Santa Maria in Vallicella, 30, 50
Santa Maria sopra Minerva, 1, 116–17
Santi Nereo e Achilleo, 53
Siena Cathedral, 44
Saint Peter’s Basilica, 44–45, 128–32
Ciamberlano, Luca, 25, 137–39, 141. See also under
Index of Artworks
Cigoli, Ludovico, 123, 132
Cimatori, Antonio, 125
Circignani, Niccolò, 79
Clarici, Giovanni Battista, 83
Clement VIII (pope), 3, 9, 16, 25–26, 69, 80–82, 116–17
Coebergher, Wenzel, 51, 124. See also under
Index of Artworks
Coney, Thomas, 32
Connors, Joseph, 30
Conti
Cesare, 125
Vincenzo, 125
Cort, Cornelis, 70, 112–13. See also under Index of
Artworks
Cortona, Pietro da, 39, 51–52, 97, 114, 121. See also under
Index of Artworks
Council of Trent, and church design/decoration, 16–17, 44–45, 115
Counter-Reformation, 16–17, 34–35, 122, 132
Count of Olivares, 69, 101–2
Croce, Baldassare, 125
Cusani, Agostino (cardinal), 57
D
Damiano, Fra, 89
daella Porta, Giacomo, 17, 49
daella Rovere. See also under patronage/commissions
Francesco Maria II (Duke of Urbino), 8–19, 22, 68, 70, 81, 87–90, 97, 101–2, 116–20, 132
Giovanni, 61
Girolamo (cardinal), 69, 81
Giuliano (Msgr.), 126, 135
Giulio Feltrio (cardinal), 19, 70, 126
Lavinia, 40, 69, 71
daella Somaglia, Margherita, 126
Dempsey, Charles, 123
Denys the Carthusian, 21–22
determinism, of historical laws and society, 8
Dilthey, Wilhelm, 7
Domenichino (Domenico Zampieri), 35–36, 39, 138. See also under Index of Artworks
Dominicans, 24–25, 59–60, 62
Duke of Urbino, 8–19, 22, 68, 70, 81, 87–90, 97, 101–2, 116–20, 132
Duomo of Milan, 83, 92, 96–97
E
Ekserdjian, David, 21
Elder-Vass, Dave, 8, 11
Emiliani, Andrea, 96
Eustachio, Bartolomeo, 70
F
Falucci, Baldo, 40
Farnese, Alessandro (cardinal), 17, 37, 39, 45, 69
Ferri, Cirro, 45, 114
Fonseca, Pedro, Institutionum dialecticarum, 32–33
Forty Hours devotion, 119
Foucault, Michel, 4
Franciscans, 16, 19, 55, 61–62
Francis de Sales, 53
Francis Xavier (saint), 25
Freedberg, Sydney, 39
Friedländer, Walter, 2–3
Fumaroli, Marc, 141
G
Gallonio, Fr. Antonio, 9, 22, 25, 30, 79
La Vita di San Filippo Neri, 32, 48, 121
Gesù chapel
altarpieces, 33, 36–37, 38, 45–46, 57–58, 114
architecture of, 46, 57, 63
iconography of, 48
and prices of artwork, 40, 41T
and Rosary devotion, 66T
and Tridentine church design, 45
Geyl, Pieter, 3
Ghirlandaio, Domenico, 111
Gilmore, Jonathan, Life of a Style, 11
Giorgio, Francesco di, 111
Giustiniani, Vincenzo, 128
Glorieri family, 82
Gombrich, E. H., 3–4, 7, 12
grace, as category of thought, 34
Graeve, Mary Ann, 58–59
Graziosi, Grazioso, 101
Gregory XIII (pope), 16, 57
Gregory XIV (pope), 80
Guercino (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri), 26, 121
Guerra, Giovan Battista, 11, 49, 63, 78, 113, 125, 128, 149
Guidi, Raffaello, 89
Guzman, Enrico (Count of Olivares), 69, 101–2
H
Hall, Marcia, xi, 10, 37, 45
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Haskell, Francis</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hibbard, Howard</td>
<td>39, 48, 57, 64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Index**

- Haskell, Francis, 39
- Hibbard, Howard, 39, 48, 57, 64

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>history/historiography</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contextual</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and determinism</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hegelian</td>
<td>4–5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and holism</td>
<td>4, 9, 11–12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>impressionist</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>individualist theory of</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian sixteenth century</td>
<td>16–18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesuit style</td>
<td>5–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>libertarian</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marxist</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and metaphysical ideas</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nominalist</td>
<td>3–4, 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesuit</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Marian devotion</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Nativity of the Virgin</td>
<td>101, 111–15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Neri</td>
<td>21, 26, 45, 121, 128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>new/developing</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Oratorians</td>
<td>114–15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and politics</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of Presentation of the Virgin</td>
<td>85–86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and the Rosary</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of Siena Cathedral</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of Sistine Chapel</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignatius of Loyola</td>
<td>22, 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as alter Christus</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beatification of</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesuit/Oratorian depictions of</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Neri</td>
<td>26–30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-fashioning of</td>
<td>27, 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society of Jesus (Jesuit)</td>
<td>17, 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Exercises</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>imagery</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of Barocci</td>
<td>79–80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counter-Reformation</td>
<td>16, 34–35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of Gallonio</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>immaculist</td>
<td>62, 115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of Oratorians</td>
<td>30, 35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**J**

- Jansenists, 25
- Jesuits
  - and Church Militant, 30
  - and Counter-Reformation art, 17
  - decoration pattern of, 57–58
  - and Gesù chapel, 57
  - iconography of, 25, 34, 36, 123
  - Loyola as founder of, 15
  - mission agenda of, 27
  - and Oratorians, 10, 15, 22–23, 25, 30–33, 37, 42
  - and Passion devotion, 45
  - and payment to artists, 40
  - and quietism, 24–25
  - style of, 5–7, 15, 39
- Jones, Pamela, 88

**K**

- king of Spain. See Phillip II; Phillip III
- Korrick, Leslie, 79
- Kummer, Stefan, 58

**L**

- Lavin, Irving, 4, 58
- Lavin, Marilyn, 46, 63–64
- Levy, Evonne, 5–6
- Lilio, Andrea, 39, 55, 62, 115, 123, 125. See also under Index of Artworks
- Lingo, Stuart, xi, 36, 68, 73
- Lombardelli, Giovan Battista, 125
- Lonati, Pietro Antonio, 88
- Longhi, Martino, 17
- Lorenzetti, Pietro, 111, 113
- Löwith, Karl, 3
- Loyola. See Ignatius of Loyola
- Lyotard, Jean-François, 4, 8

**M**

- MacCaskey, Laura, xi, 114–15
- Maderno
  - Carlo, 119–20
  - Stefano, 130
- Madonna della Vallicella cult, 130–31
- Madonna of Loreto, 53–55, 72
- Maginnis, Hayden, xi, 111
- Malvasia, 35, 137
- Mancini, Giulio, 151
- Mandelbaum, Maurice, 1, 9
- Mannerism, 2, 18
- Marciari, John, xi, 47
Marian devotion
  and Chiesa Nuova, 59–60, 90–95
cult of the Madonna della Vallicella, 114–15
  of Franciscans, 61–62
  and Madonna of Loreto, 53
  and Neri, 22, 31, 34
  of Oratorians, 22, 31, 34, 43–46, 65
  and “Our Lady’s Psalter,” 61
  and Presentation of the Virgin, 85
  and the Rosary, 59–60
  in Urbino, 19
in Milan:
  Ambrosiana archive of, 89–90
  Lamentation of Christ, 91–94, 93
  and Nativity of the Virgin, 86–91
  and Oratorian orbit, 103
  Saint Ambrose’s Pardon of Theodoric, 91–94, 118
in Urbino:
  Portrait of (by Zuccaro), 126, 127
  preference for Visitations, 78–79
  and Caravaggio, 2
  and Clement VIII, 80, 116–17
  and Counter-Reformation art, 17, 122, 132
  Francis de Sales, 53
  Girolamini, of Naples, 141
  iconography of, 36
  imagery of, 30, 35
  and Jesuits, 15, 22–23, 31–33, 42
  and Marian devotion, 22, 31, 34, 43–46, 65, 95
  and Neri, 15, 30, 124–26
  and payment to artists, 40
  physiognomy of, 43
  political alignments of, 68–69
  and Roncalli, 121
  as secular priests, 30
  structures and actions of, 9
  style of, 39, 62–63, 132
  and Vanni, 132
in Rome:
  Ospedale of Santa Maria della Scala (Siena), 111
  Osservanza Master. See Index of Artworks
O
  Ochino, Bernardino, 24
  Oliva, Gian Paolo, 30
  O’Malley, John, 32
Oratorians
  affinity with Barocci, 2–3, 22, 67–68, 121–24,
  126, 133
  altarpiece program of, 15–17, 47–48, 57–62, 114
  artistic consensus of, 30, 122
  chapel decoration of, 63
  and Clement VIII, 80, 116–17
  and Counter-Reformation art, 17, 122, 132
  Francis de Sales, 53
  Girolamini, of Naples, 141
  iconography of, 36
  imagery of, 30, 35
  influence of, 128–29
  and Jesuits, 15, 22–23, 31–33, 42
  and Marian devotion, 22, 31, 34, 43–46, 65, 95
  and Neri, 15, 30, 124–26
  and payment to artists, 40
  physiognomy of, 43
  political alignments of, 68–69
  rhetoric of, 31
  and Roncalli, 121
  as secular priests, 30
  structures and actions of, 9
  style of, 39, 62–63, 132
  and Vanni, 132
in Urbino:
  portrait of (by Zuccaro), 126, 127
  preference for Visitations, 78–79
  and Caravaggio, 2
  and Clement VIII, 80, 116–17
  and Counter-Reformation art, 17, 122, 132
  Francis de Sales, 53
  Girolamini, of Naples, 141
  iconography of, 36
  imagery of, 30, 35
  influence of, 128–29
  and Jesuits, 15, 22–23, 31–33, 42
  and Marian devotion, 22, 31, 34, 43–46, 65, 95
  and Neri, 15, 30, 124–26
  and payment to artists, 40
  physiognomy of, 43
  political alignments of, 68–69
  rhetoric of, 31
  and Roncalli, 121
  as secular priests, 30
  structures and actions of, 9
  style of, 39, 62–63, 132
  and Vanni, 132

N
  Nadal, Jerome. See Index of Artworks
  Navoni, Marco Maria, xi
  Nebbia, Cesare. See Index of Artworks
  Neri, Filippo
  and altarpieces, 26, 48–49, 58
  anecdotes about, 2n3, 30
  and Barocci works, 36, 71, 126
  and Caravaggio, 2
  and Clement VIII, 80, 116–17
  and Counter-Reformation art, 17, 122, 132
  Francis de Sales, 53
  Girolamini, of Naples, 141
  iconography of, 36
  imagery of, 30, 35
  influence of, 128–29
  and Jesuits, 15, 22–23, 31–33, 42
  and Marian devotion, 22, 31, 34, 43–46, 65, 95
  and Neri, 15, 30, 124–26
  and payment to artists, 40
  physiognomy of, 43
  political alignments of, 68–69
  rhetoric of, 31
  and Roncalli, 121
  as secular priests, 30
  structures and actions of, 9
  style of, 39, 62–63, 132
  and Vanni, 132
  Orsini, Francesca Colonna, 69
  Orsini, Lavinia della Rovere, 40, 69, 71
  Ospedale of Santa Maria della Scala (Siena), 111
  Osservanza Master. See Index of Artworks
P
  Pagani, Gregorio, 123
  Paleotti, Gabriele (cardinal), 9, 81
  Discorso intorno alle imagini . . . , 34–35
  Panofsky, Erwin, 3
  Perspective as Symbolic Form, 4
  Passignano, Domenico, 18, 115, 123, 132
  patronage/commissions, 148
  of Anastagi, 73
patronage/commissions, continued
and Barocci, 19, 83–84
and Baroccismo, 121–22
by Baronio, 130, 132
of Borghese, 138
and Borromeo, 45, 96–97, 141
and Borromini, 41–42, 122
of Cesi, 69, 96
for Chiesa Nuova, 11, 45, 49, 69, 95–99
and Clement VIII, 81, 116–17
of della Rovere, 21, 71, 97, 119–20, 125
of Farnese, 45
as individual affair, 121
influence of, 44
of Lonati, 88
and the Milanese, 86–91, 96–97
and Oratorians, 18, 22, 30, 35, 49, 51, 67–71, 81, 83, 87, 121–22, 124
and Reni, 124, 137–38, 141
and Roncalli, 124, 128, 141
of Serra, 114
of Sfondrato, 141
significance of, 82
Paul IV (pope), 16
Paul V (pope), 135
Pepper, Stephen, 121, 124, 138–39, 141
Peretti, Michele (prince), 126
Peretti-Montalto (cardinal), 126
Periti, Giancarla, xi
Petrucci, Pietro Matteo, 23
Philip II, king, 16
Philip III, king, 88, 101
Picchi, Giorgio, 125
Piceni, Sodalizio dei. See Index of Artworks
piety, 2, 36
Oratorian, 3, 23–24
Pillsbury, Edmund, 71, 99
Pimentel, Maria, 69
Pinelli, Domenico (abp), 70
Pius IV (pope), 16
Pius V (pope), 16, 58, 85
Platonism, in Neri’s rhetoric, 32
political alignments
and Neri, 128
of Oratorians, 68–69
Pomarancio (Cristoforo Roncalli), 121
popes
Clement VIII, 3, 9, 16, 69, 80–82
Gregory XIII, 16, 57
Paul IV, 16
Pius IV, 16
Pius V, 16, 58, 85
and sainthood, 16n
Sixtus IV, 16, 60, 85
Sixtus V, 16, 71–72, 85
Popper, Karl, 3–4, 8
Poussin, Nicholas, 39, 138
Pozzomiglio, Francesco, 72
predestination
and Dominican predetermination, 24
and free will, 23
vs. voluntarism, 23
production modes, 10
Pulzone, Scipione, 18, 34, 36–37, 39, 69. See also under Index of Artworks
Q
quietism, 23–24, 26, 36
R
realism, 10–12
Redin, Gonzalo, 87n
Regio, Raffaellino da, 125
relics of martyrs, 53
religious bodies, 7–13
Reni, Guido, 26, 39, 115, 121. See also Index of Artworks
as alter Baroccius, 135–42
compared with Roncalli, 138
and Domenichino, 35–36
and iconography of Neri, 25, 31, 128
leaves Rome, 141
mature work of, 138
and patronage/commissions, 124, 137–38, 141
style of, 137–38, 141
and Vanni, 138
rhetoric
and irony, 31, 33
of Jesuits, 6, 32–33
persuasion vs. love, 32–33
visual, 15, 23, 33, 37–38, 138
Ricci, Flaminio, 51, 96–98, 104–5, 124
Roman Catholic church. See Council of Trent; Counter-Reformation
Roncalli, Cristoforo (Pomarancio), 118, 121, 124–25. See also Index of Artworks
compared with Reni, 138
drawings of Neri, 128, 138
and Oratorians, 126
and patronage/commissions, 124, 128, 141
reputation of, 132
style of, 128, 138
as substitute for Barocci, 141
Rosary devotion, 58–65, 66T
Rubens, Peter Paul, 34, 40, 48, 50–51, 53, 57, 60, 97–98, 114. See also Index of Artworks
Rufino, Fra, 61
Rusticucci, Girolamo (cardinal), 104


**S**

Sabatini, Lorenzo, 125
Sadeler, Egidius, 89
Salimbeni, Ventura, 39
Salò, Andrea Gianetti da, 60
Sangiorgi, Fert, 1–2, 103, 110
Sano di Pietro. See Index of Artworks
Sarto, Andrea del, 111
sbozzo, 96, 104–6
Schapiro, Meyer, *Anthropology Today*, 4
Schaur, Hans, 64
Segneri, Paolo, 23
Senarega, Matteo, 84
Senigallia. See Index of Artworks
Serra, Giacomo (cardinal), 98, 114
Sfondrato Niccolò, 80
Paola Antonia, 103
Paolo Emilio (cardinal), 9, 81, 103, 130, 141
Shearman, John, 119
Siena, 111–12
Siena Cathedral, 44
Simmel, Georg, 7
Sixtus IV della Rovere (pope), 16, 60, 85
Sixtus V Peretti (pope), 16, 71–72, 85
Soares, Cipriano, *De arte rhetorica*, 32–33
social structure, 8–12
Society of Jesus. See Jesuits
sociology, development of, 7–8
Stradano, Giovanni. See Index of Artworks
Stumpel, Jeroen, 2
style. See also under artist’s names; Barocci, Federico
as abstract categories, 12
Baroque/Baroccesque, 4–5, 18, 123, 128, 133, 141
and biological analogy (Gilmore), 11
concept of, 4, 11
critics of, 123–24
derivation of, 12
emergentist, 11
essentialism, 11
German Romanticism, 7–8
of Jesuits, 5–7, 15, 39
Neoplatonic, 34
of Neri, 3
nonessentialist, 11
Oratorian, 39, 62–63, 132
post-structuralist, 4–5
proto-baroque, 39
reformed, 16–17, 34–35, 122–24, 128
of seicento artists, 128
structuralist, 8
symbols, in *Visitation*, 77–78

**T**

tabernacles. See under altarpieces
Tarnow, Ulrike, xi, 78
Tarugi, Francesco Maria (cardinal), 9, 128, 130
Tempesta, Antonio, 25–26
Terenzi, Terenzio, 125–26
Theatines, 16
typology, 62–65, 66T

**U**

d’Urbino, Terenzio, 125–26

**V**

Valeriano, Fra, 37, 39, 115
Valier, Agostino (cardinal), 9
*De rhetorica ecclesiastica . . .*, 32
*Philippus: Dialogus de laetitia christiana*, 22
Vandenberghé, Frédéric, 7
Vanni, Francesco. See also under Index of Artworks
death of, 139
and Gesù chapel, 39
influence of, 132
patronage/commission for, 122
and Reni, 137–38
and Sfondrato, 103
style of, 122–24, 130, 133
*Vita devota* style of, 137
Van Veen, Gijsbert, 78
Vasari, Giorgio, 44
Velli, Angelo, 124–25
Villamena, Francesco, 137
Vincenzi
Guidobaldo, 83, 87, 101
Ludovico, 96, 101
Vitali, Alessandro, 82, 88, 92, 98–100, 103–11. See also Index of Artworks
Viviani, Antonio, 51, 76, 105–6, 122–25, 133. See also Index of Artworks
Baroccesque style of, 133
voluntarism, 10, 23

**W**

Walters, Gary, 119–20
Wazbinski, Zygmunt, 117
White, Hayden, 4
women, depiction of, 34
Worthington, Thomas, *Rosarium sive Psalterium Beatae Virginis Mariae*, 60–61

**Z**

Zeri, Federico, 37
Zuccari, Alessandro, 35, 39, 58, 62, 73, 125, 133
Zuccaro, Federico, 37, 39, 72, 85, 112, 126. See also Index of Artworks
Index of Artworks

Bold indicates an image; T indicates a table

A
Anonymous
Madonna della Vallicella, 48, 51, 52, 53, 57, 60, 97, 98, 116
Pietà, 47

B
Baglione. See also in main index
Lamentation, 40
Barocci. See also in main index
Arm of child study, 107
Assumption (lost), 103
Beata Michelina, 21, 110
Calling of Saint Andrew, 99, 100, 105
Circumcision, 106–7, 108
Coronation of the Virgin, 18, 63–64, 82–83
Cristo vivo, 21
Crucifixion with Three Saints, 84, 110
Deposition from the Cross, 1, 123
Fall of Manna (unfinished), 82, 94
Flight of Aeneas from Troy, 19, 80, 135
four scarpigni, 74–75
Head of an Old Man, plate IV
Immaculate Conception, 21, 62, 110
Institution of the Eucharist, 1, 116–20, plate VIII
kneeling woman, drawing, 105
Lamentation of Christ, 91–94, 93, 118, 141
Last Supper, 82, 102–3
Madonna and Child with Saints John the Baptist and Francis, 19
Madonna della Gatta, 99, 110
Madonna del Popolo, 1, 36, 69–70, 72, 123
Madonna del Rosario, 21, 80, 110
Madonna in the Clouds, 70
Madonna of Saint John, 19
Madonna of Saint Lucy, 110
Madonna of Saint Simon, 19
Martyrdom of Saint Vitalis, 72, 123
Moses and the Serpent, 137
Natività of Christ, plate V
Noli me tangere (engraving of), 140
Penitent Saint Jerome, 136

Perdono di Assisi, 21, 70
Presentation of the Virgin at the Temple, 1, 33, 67, 80–86, 86–87, 92, 110, plate II
sketch, 86
Rest on the Return from Egypt, 14, 132, 142
Stigmatization of Saint Francis copy, 137–38
Virgin Mary’s arm drawing, 106
Visitazione of the Virgin and Saint Elizabeth, 1, 2, 33, 35, 37, 40, 48, 63, 67–68, 71–80, 125
illustrations of, 76–77, 100, 108–9, 125, plate I
Barocci-Vitali
Saint Agatha in Prison, 92, 109, 110
Saint Ambrose’s Pardon of Theodoric, 91–94, 96, 110, 118, plate VI
Stigmatized of Saint Francis, 61, 102, 110, 137–38
Vision of Saint John of Patmos, 109
Baronio. See also in main index
Annales ecclesiastici (engraving of), 55
Beatrizet, Madonna of Loreto engraving, 54

C
Carracci. See also in main index
Baptism, 123
Pietà, 123
Castello, Rosario della gloriosa Vergine Maria, 58, 59
Cati. See also in main index
Matyrdom of Saint Lawrence, 125
Ciambelano. See also in main index
engraving of Barocci’s Noli me tangere, 139, 140
Coeburgher. See also in main index
Pentecost, 40
copper engravings
frontispiece from Baronio, Annales ecclesiastici, 56
Madonna of Loreto (Beatrizet), 54
Noli me tangere (Ciambelano), 56
Vita Beati P. Ignatii Loyolae Societatis Jesu funda-
toris, 28, 29
Cort. See also in main index
Madonna del Gatto, 70
Natività of the Virgin, 112
The Rest on the Return from Egypt, 70
Sienese Virgin, 113
Cortona. See also in main index
Saint Michael and Angels with the Instruments of the Passion, 114

D
Domenichino. See also in main index
Flagellation of Saint Andrew, 35–36
Flagellation of Saint Andrew, 138
portrait of Reni, 137

L
Lilio. See also in main index
Assumption, 56

M
Maderno. See also in main index
effigy of Cecelia, 130
Molinos, Guida Spirituale, 23
Muziano. See also in main index
Ascension, 62
Circumcision, 81

N
Nadal, Imagines, 62
Nebbia
Adoration of the Kings, 47, 48, 49
Pentecost, 4

O
Osservanza Master, Birth of the Virgin, 111, 112–13

P
Piceni, Virgin and Child and Saints, 104, 107
Pulzone. See also in main index
Crucifixion, 36, 48
Lamentation, 36–37

R
Reni. See also in main index
Annunciation, 141
Crucified Christ, 141
Immaculate Conception, 141
Martyrdom of Saint Peter, 138
Meeting of Young Christ and John the Baptist, 141
Saint Andrew Led to Martyrdom, 138
Saint Filippo Neri in Ecstasy, 20, 21, 24, 121, 128
Saint Francis, 141
Roncalli. See also in main index
Ananias and Sapphira Struck Dead, 132
Fall of Simon Magus, 132
Filippo Neri and Virgin and Child, 128

Filippo Neri Having a Vision of the Virgin in Heaven (lost), 126, 128
Madonna and Child with Saints Andrew and Gregory, 130
Saint Domitilla with Saints Nereo and Achilleo, 129, 130
Saint Filippo Neri in Ecstasy, 122
Saint Simon, 132
Sylvester Baptizing Constantine, 132
Rubens. See also in main index
Adoration of the Madonna della Vallicelliana, 104, plate III
Life of Ignatius of Loyola, 139
Nativity of the Virgin Mary, 95, 114, 115
sacra conversazione, 114

S
Sano di Pietro, Birth of the Virgin, 111, 112
Senigallia, Entombment, 89
Stradano, Ascension, 62

V
Vanni. See also in main index
Death of Saint Cecilia, 130
Madonna della Pappa, 132
Madonna della Vallicella Adored by Saints Francis and Restituta, 130, 131
Vitali-Barocci. See Barocci-Vitali
Viviani. See also in main index
Apparition of the Angel at the Meal of the Poor, 134
Imago Pietatis, 141
Mater dolorosa, 142
Triclinium Pauperum (seven scenes), 133

Z
Zuccaro. See also in main index
Portrait of Filippo Neri, 127
Seven Archangels in Adoration of the Trinity, 37, 38
About the Author

Ian Verstegen is Associate Director of Visual Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. He completed his doctorate at Temple University, working with Marcia Hall. His current research focuses on early modern and modern aesthetics, historiography, and art history. His monograph A Realist Theory of Art History was published in 2013 by Routledge. He is editor of Maurice Mandelbaum and American Critical Realism (Routledge, 2014) and Patronage and Dynasty: The Rise of the della Rovere in Renaissance Italy (Truman State University Press, 2007).
In 1586, Federico Barocci delivered his *Visitation of the Virgin and Saint Elizabeth* to the Chiesa Nuova in Rome. For the next quarter century, Barocci dominated the art scene in Rome; there was no other artist from whom it was harder to get work and no other artist charged such high prices. Having two important altarpieces in the Chiesa Nuova and two additional commissions discussed was an impressive feat for an artist living exclusively in Urbino. Why did the Oratorians monopolize Barocci’s talents in Rome and why does it seem that Barocci was their first choice when considering artists to decorate their church? What was it about Barocci’s art that appealed to Oratorian sensibilities and their vision of the artistic program for decoration of their church?

This book examines the relationship between Barocci and the Congregation of the Oratory, arguing for a distinct physiognomy of Oratorian patronage and exposing the function the Oratorians expected of religious imagery in contrast to other groups of their time. While explaining Oratorian patronage, it thus deals with a thorny question in social science: how can a collective body have unified intentions and actions? The result is a contribution both to the history of Italian painting and to art historical methodology.

*Federico Barocci and the Oratorians* is a meticulously researched, carefully plotted piece of detective work that reconstructs the process of Barocci’s commissions for the Oratorians from various angles, including a philosophical reassessment of art historical method, a thorough and insightful use of archival sources, a critical eye, and rich, balanced contextualization with the historical, political, and religious climate of the time in Italy and beyond. Ian Versteegen is one of the world’s foremost experts on the art of Federico Barocci in particular and the Oratorians in general, and this book makes an invaluable contribution to the growing field of post-Tridentine art.

— Gauvin Bailey, Alfred and Isabel Bader Chair in Southern Baroque Art, Queen’s University