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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

Department of Art History and Archaeology

Marble Made Flesh: Michelangelo's Bruges *Madonna* in the Service of Devotion

by

Lindsay Sheedy

A thesis presented to the
Graduate School of Arts & Sciences
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
of Masters of Arts

May 2016
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Introduction

As one of the first freestanding marble sculptures to grace a Christian altar, the Bruges *Madonna* (Fig. 1) demonstrates Michelangelo's ability to effectively communicate traditional liturgical themes in a radically innovative fashion. The sculpture, however, is also problematic: little is known about its commission or creation, it fits no secure iconographic program, it inspired little artistic progeny, and even Michelangelo's biographers did not identify it correctly.¹ Rather than inspire questions, these inconvenient facts of the sculpture's history—or lack thereof—combined with the statue's five-hundred-plus year residence outside of Italy in present-day Belgium, have inspired relative silence on the work's significance. Through an in-depth analysis of the sculpture's role as both an altarpiece and an art object, this thesis aims to provide a small but significant step towards establishing the Bruges *Madonna* as an innovative work not only within Michelangelo's oeuvre but also within the changing tradition of the altarpiece at the turn of the sixteenth century.

Part One begins the thesis by situating the Bruges *Madonna* within its historical context, focusing on questions of its creation and commission. Relying on primary sources such as letters and bank ledgers, this section provides a more specific interpretation of the sculpture's origins,

¹ In 1553, Ascanio Condivi remarks that, "*Gittò anco di bronzo una Madonna col suo figliolino in grembo, la quale da certi mercanti fiandresi de' Moscheroni, famiglia nobilissima in casa sua, pagatagli ducati cento, fu mandata in Fiandra.*" ("[He] also cast in bronze a Madonna with her young child in her lap, which certain Flemish merchants [by the name] of Mouscron, a very noble family in their parts, paid one hundred ducats, which was sent to Flanders."); after not mentioning the *Madonna* in his 1550 edition of *Le Vite*, Giorgio Vasari compounds Condivi's errors, stating in the 1568 edition, "*Fece ancora di bronzo una Nostra Donna in un tondo, che lo gettò di bronzo a requisizione di certi mercatanti fiandresi de' Moscheroni, persone nobilissime ne' paesi loro, che pagatogli scudi cento, la mandassero in Fiandra.*" ("[Michelangelo] made once more in bronze a Madonna in a tondo, that he cast in bronze at the request of certain Flemish Merchants called Mouscron, very noble people in their home country, who paid one hundred scudi for it, and sent it to Flanders."). These descriptions are at once oddly specific yet thoroughly mistaken, with the commissioning family and price correct while the description of the statue as bronze, or, in Vasari's case, as a bronze tondo reveal that neither Condivi nor Vasari had ever seen the work, which is not surprising considering it left Italy years before either of them were born. For original Italian references see Ascanio Condivi, *Michelangelo: La Vita*, ed. Paolo d'Ancona (Milan: L.F. Cogliati del Dr. Guido Martinelli, 1923), 78-79, and Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori*, vol. VII (Florence: GC Sansoni, 1906), 158. Translations mine.

from the time frame in which it was produced to the possible connection between Michelangelo and the sculpture's wealthy Flemish patrons, the merchant brothers Jean and Alexander Mouscron. It concludes with the Bruges *Madonna*'s departure from Italy, at which point it sailed to Bruges and was eventually installed at Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk, or the Church of Our Lady.

After situating the Bruges *Madonna* historically, Part Two analyzes the sculpture's function as an altarpiece and considers its place within the changing tradition of the altarpiece during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. It begins by challenging the statue's current installation and proposes a revised placement that allows for a more meaningful visual relationship between the altarpiece and the altar. This, in turn, modifies how the statue would have interacted with the performance of the Mass in general and the celebration of the Eucharist in specific, emphasizing the Eucharistic symbolism of the statue and its role in visually reinforcing the miracle of Transubstantiation. Through such an examination, it becomes clear that Michelangelo carefully considered the sculpture's place within a liturgical environment and its role within the liturgy itself.

Turning away from function to focus on form, Part Three considers the artistic sources Michelangelo utilized in creating the Bruges *Madonna*, the religious atmosphere in which it was produced, and the correlation between the two, focusing on how such influences contributed to the realization of a freestanding sculpture as an altarpiece. Of particular interest are Michelangelo's sources of inspiration, his possible engagement with images of the Mass of Saint Gregory, and the relationship between the Bruges *Madonna* and its predecessor, the Rome *Pietà*.

The thesis concludes with a brief examination of where the Bruges *Madonna* stands today, both within the Church of Our Lady and in the scholarship and popular culture of the twenty-first century. Although recent events have caused a surge of general interest or at least

knowledge of the sculpture's existence, the Bruges *Madonna* continues to be one of—if not the most—underrated works by Michelangelo. As this thesis aims to prove, it is also one of Michelangelo's most important works, as it stands at the intersection of art, religion, and the changing relationship between the two at the turn of the sixteenth century.

Part I: The Bruges *Madonna* in Context

Due to a lack of concrete documentation, the specifics of the Bruges *Madonna*'s commission and execution remain elusive.¹ Scholarly consensus brackets the work between Michelangelo's return to Florence in 1501 and his departure for Rome in the earliest days of 1506, when the artist was already deeply entrenched in the first stages of the Julius Tomb.² In the life of a prolific Renaissance artist who died at the age of 88, this proposed five-year time span may seem both specific and rather insignificant, but the reality of Michelangelo's career during this time betrays the vast array of possibilities that five years can contain. Through an examination of Michelangelo's commitments and whereabouts from 1501 to 1506, in combination with known monetary interactions that he had with the Mouscron during these years, we may whittle down the timeline of the Bruges *Madonna*'s creation further.

Those who date the Bruges *Madonna* near the beginning of this five-year time period base their chronology on the stylistic affinity that the statue shares with both the Rome *Pietà* (Fig. 2) and the *David* (Fig. 3).³ While these formal similarities certainly exist, a chronology that relies solely on aesthetic factors ignores the reality of Michelangelo's workload during this time. Between 1501 and 1504 alone, the artist completed at least four different statues: two statuettes for the Piccolomini altar, the *David*, and the bronze *David* made for Pierre de Rohan, the

¹ For what little archival evidence exists on the Bruges *Madonna*, see Harold Mancusi-Ungaro, *Michelangelo: The Bruges Madonna and the Piccolomini Altar* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 135-146, 167-177. In this volume, Mancusi-Ungaro provides transcriptions of both correspondences and bank ledgers concerning the statue.

² Charles de Tolnay proposes an early date of 1501, while Henry Thode, John Symonds, and Charles Wilson claim that it belongs to Michelangelo's early Roman period. Other predecessors and contemporaries of Tolnay suggest a date of 1503 or later, such as Karl Frey; for a concise listing of various scholars' proposed dating see Charles de Tolnay, *The Youth of Michelangelo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943), 158-159. Following the publication of Tolnay's text in 1943, more scholars have joined the discussion. To name but a couple, Howard Hibbard proposes a date of 1503-1505, while Martin Weinberger argues that Michelangelo made the sculpture in 1505, by far the latest proposed dating of any scholar; see Howard Hibbard, *Michelangelo* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 73; Martin Weinberger, *Michelangelo the Sculptor* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), 114.

³ Tolnay suggests that Michelangelo's rendering of the Bruges *Madonna* acts as the intercessor between Michelangelo's Roman and Florentine triumphs of the *Pietà* and the *David*, respectively, and dates the group quite specifically to the spring and summer of 1501, just before his work on the *David* began; see Tolnay, 158.

Maréchal de Gié.⁴ Based on the sheer amount of material that he produced during these four years, it is unlikely that Michelangelo would have been able to significantly work on, much less finish, the Bruges *Madonna* during this time.

From 1504 to 1505, however, the artist's workload was much less heavy, at least in terms of tangible output. Though the Opera del Duomo's commission for the statues of the twelve apostles looms over these years, Michelangelo only ever produced a partial figuration of St. Matthew, which may have been done as late as mid-1506.⁵ More securely, we know that Michelangelo produced a cartoon of the *Battle of Cascina* for the Signoria sometime between 1504 and early 1505, which likely required far less time and physical exertion than any marble statue.⁶ Based on a timeline of his commitments and completed work during the earlier part of the decade alone, it is reasonable to assume that Michelangelo completed the Bruges *Madonna* sometime within the period of late 1503 and 1505, which was the general time period that the artist conceived of and/or finished several other depictions of the Madonna and Child, such as the sculpted Taddei and Pitti tondi and the painted *Doni Tondo*.

The ledger books of Baldassare and Giovanni Balducci, the Florentine bankers based in Rome who handled both Michelangelo's and the Mouscron's finances, record two separate payments by the patrons to the artist between late 1503 and 1504, which suggests Michelangelo

⁴ Mancusi-Ungaro argues that the Bruges *Madonna* was conceived and executed as part of the Piccolomini altar, though his argument is usually dismissed as unsustainable considering that the *Madonna* would not have fit in the main niche in Siena. For W.R. Valentiner's original argument regarding the Bruges *Madonna* and the Piccolomini altar, see W.R. Valentiner, *Studies of Italian Renaissance Sculpture* (New York: Phaidon, 1950), 193-223. For Mancusi-Ungaro's argument, see Mancusi-Ungaro, 35-54. Birgit Lennertz provides a thorough analysis of why Mancusi-Ungaro's theory is unlikely and offers an alternative reading of the primary source material that he utilized to support his argument in Birgit Lennertz, "The Commission of the Bruges *Madonna*: Michelangelo and the Mouscron" (Master's thesis, Washington University in St. Louis, 1992), 14-21.

⁵ Tolnay, 170.

⁶ Charles de Tolnay, *Michelangelo: Sculptor, Painter, Architect* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 20.

began the sculpture during this timeframe.⁷ The first of these payments, dated December 2nd, 1503, marks the first documented interaction that Michelangelo had with his patrons, who deposited 50 ducats into the sculptor's account "*per una statua*", likely as a first installment towards the commission.⁸ The Balducci posted a second payment from the Mouscron to Michelangelo for the same amount in October of the following year.⁹ These split payments, deposited less than 10 months apart, strongly suggest that Michelangelo began work on the project within this timeframe, with the commission overlapping that of the Signoria's for the *Battle of Cascina*. A drawing within the holdings of the British Museum corroborates this hypothesis.

The recto of the drawing (Fig. 4) features a small ink sketch of a Madonna and Child (Fig. 5) group on the right side of the page amidst larger black chalk drawings of nude males relating to the *Battle of Cascina*.¹⁰ Clearly an early iteration of the Bruges *Madonna*, this abbreviated ink sketch shows the artist examining the contours of the Madonna's body, clearly delineating her collarbone and the suggestion of breasts, implying that Michelangelo was working out how the drapery might fall along the front of her body. The Christ Child, whose lines are darker and more confident, stands fully realized between his mother's legs, the position he would assume in the finished work. On the sheet's verso (Fig. 6), two small ink sketches of a child occupy both the left and the right margin, bookending a full-length chalk sketch of a man's nude back paired with an ink sketch of a muscular leg. This juxtaposition of the Madonna and Child with nude male bodies in motion suggests a temporal correlation between the Bruges

⁷ Mancusi-Ungaro provides transcriptions of these transactions in Mancusi-Ungaro, 161-169.

⁸ Mancusi-Ungaro, 161.

⁹ Mancusi-Ungaro, 169.

¹⁰ Weinberger rightly points out that those who date the Bruges *Madonna* earlier than late 1503 must consider this ink drawing a "memory sketch," though he asserts that the drawing is, most likely, not a sketch done from memory, as it shows only the most rudimentary elements of the composition. Michelangelo has determined how he wants to place the Christ Child, but the pose of the Madonna is still in the conceptual state; see Weinberger, 115-116.

Madonna and Michelangelo's initial conceptions for the *Battle of Cascina*, which shows that he was simultaneously devising the first stages of the *Battle of Cascina* while he was reaching the final composition of the Bruges *Madonna*. Combined with records of payment in the Balducci ledgers, this allows us to place the execution of the statue firmly within the later part of the timeline proposed by most scholars.

Due to the fact that Michelangelo only received the first payment from the Mouscron in December of 1503, it is unlikely that he began the project any earlier, especially when one considers that he was still sketching the sculpture in mid-to-late 1504. In addition to marking the completion of commission agreements, the first payment would likely cover the cost of procuring the marble block, which would include quarrying and transport costs. The second installment of 50 ducats in October of 1504 overlaps with the projected dating of the aforementioned drawings, which may suggest that the patrons were aware of the sculptor's progress and continued commitment to the project, thus following a relatively standard payment structure. It is impossible to know whether or not Michelangelo had begun to actively sculpt the statue in 1504, though his penchant for fleshing out blocks of marble while still tweaking their design does not exclude the possibility.

Having established that Michelangelo started the Bruges *Madonna* in late 1503, we may now inquire as to where he would have sculpted the statue. As there is no indication that Michelangelo had a studio at this time, the places he could have worked on a block of marble that weighed nearly two thousand pounds are rather limited.¹¹ Of the possible options, Martin Weinberger's hypothesis that Michelangelo carved the Bruges *Madonna* during his eight-month

¹¹ William Wallace, "Reversing the Rules: Michelangelo and the Patronage of Sculpture," in *Patronage and the Italian Renaissance*, ed. Kathleen Wren Christian and David Drogin (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), 150; and Weinberger, 114.

stay in Carrara from May to December of 1505 is most plausible, though it is not without its faults. Weinberger asserts that Michelangelo carved the Bruges *Madonna* while overseeing the quarrying for the blocks of marble intended for the Julius tomb, arguing that managing the quarry work would not have adequately filled the sculptor's days, leaving him time to work on and finish the statue away from the constant demands put on him in Florence and Rome.¹² Entries in the Balducci ledgers and Michelangelo's personal correspondences may confirm this hypothesis.

In August of 1505, when Michelangelo was in Carrara, a small debit of one ducat, six bolognini "*per inchassatura di la ighura a Firenze*" appears in the Mouscron accounts, possibly implying that the *Madonna* was not in Florence as of that date.¹³ Furthermore, after departing from Carrara to Rome in December of 1505, Michelangelo penned a letter to his father dated January 31st, 1506, in which he asks his father for two small favors. One of these said favors regards "*quella Nostra Donna di marmo*", which Michelangelo asks his father to bring inside the house and "*non la lasiassi vedere a persona.*"¹⁴ The fact that Michelangelo asked his father to keep the marble *Madonna* out of sight makes it unlikely that he had carved the statue in a semi-public space such as the location where he had carved the *David*, in which case it would

¹² Weinberger, 114-115.

¹³ Giovanni Poggi, *La Madonna di Bruges di Michelangelo* (Florence: Fratelli Alinari, 1954), 8; Mancusi-Ungaro, 170-171. Mancusi-Ungaro translates "*per inchassatura di la ighura a Firenze*" as "for the crating of 1 figure in Florence". The preposition "*a*", however, has two possible translations. One could also translate the line from the Balducci ledgers as "for the crating of one figure to Florence." In the Balducci ledgers, all other entries concerning the shipping of the *Madonna* employ the preposition "*a*" to mean either "to" or "in."

¹⁴ The portion referencing the *Madonna* reads, "... ancora prego voi che voi duriate un poco di fatica in queste dua cose... l'altra è quella Nostra Donna di marmo: similmente vorrei la faciessi portare chostì in casa e non la lasiassi vedere a persona." ("... once again I beg you to do me a favor in two things... the other regards the marble *Madonna*; similarly I would like you to bring it in the house and not let anyone see it.") in Paola Barocchi and Renzo Ristori, eds., *Il Carteggio di Michelangelo*, vol. 1 (Florence: Sansoni Editore, 1965), letter VII, 11-12. Translation by author.

have already been seen by many.¹⁵ Perhaps Michelangelo carved the statue within the vicinity of his father's house; however, even if his father's house did have a courtyard suitable for the messy process of carving marble, this would not explain why Michelangelo wanted the statue brought inside as opposed to leaving it wherever it stood. Based on Weinberger's hypothesis, Michelangelo carved the statue in Carrara and arranged for its shipment to his father's house via the Arno before the sculptor set off to Rome.¹⁶ Though it would have been no small task to send the statue upriver to Florence, and even superfluous considering the Bruges *Madonna*'s ultimate destination, perhaps Michelangelo did not want to leave the statue unattended in Carrara upon his departure for Rome and chose to send it to his father's as he awaited further instructions regarding its shipment to Bruges. Though not ideal considering the high cost and risk of shipping such goods, this hypothesis provides a possible explanation as to where Michelangelo may have carved the Bruges *Madonna*.

Regardless of where the statue was made, the letter from Michelangelo to his father confirms that he had finished the *Madonna* by January of 1506, as he was not in Florence for any substantial amount of time between this date and the sculpture's departure in August. Several more entries regarding the sculpture appear in the Balducci ledgers throughout 1506. The Mouscron made three deposits, each worth 1 ducat and 55 bolognini, to Michelangelo's account between April and June in anticipation for the materials needed to crate the work for shipment; a final payment in August for the amount of 6 ducats, 8 bolognini, and 8 denari, covered the cost of shipping the sculpture to Bruges via Lucca.¹⁷ These payments, in addition to letters

¹⁵ Weinberger also notes that, though the Opera del Duomo was building Michelangelo a house where he could work on the twelve apostles, the location likely was not finished until September of 1506, at which point the Bruges *Madonna* had already shipped to Belgium; see Weinberger, 114.

¹⁶ Weinberger, 114.

¹⁷ Lennertz, 23.

confirming the sculpture's shipment via Lucca, show that the Bruges *Madonna* left Italy by the late summer of 1506.¹⁸

As with most aspects of the statue's creation, the nature of Michelangelo's relationship with the wealthy family who commissioned the work leaves us with more questions than answers. According to documents cited by Tolnay, Alexander and Jean Mouscron hailed from a family of wealthy Flemish merchants engaged in buying and selling English cloth in Rome and Florence.¹⁹ Though the Mouscron and Michelangelo both used the Balducci brothers as bankers, this commonality alone does not account for how the Mouscron brothers managed to entice the artist not only to accept a commission, but also finish and deliver it.²⁰ At any time in Michelangelo's life, this was a veritable feat indeed, and it signifies a strong desire on the artist's behalf to please the patron for motives that went beyond money. Michelangelo's commitment to the project confirms that he was personally interested in the commission and the outcomes it might bring.

Given his relatively secure finances at the time he made the sculpture, Michelangelo sought more than monetary compensation for this patron-artist exchange.²¹ It was throughout the first decade of the sixteenth century that Michelangelo began to consider the possibility of expanding his artistic presence on an international scale, given his burgeoning fame in both

¹⁸ Payment for 6 ducats, 8 bolognini, and 8 denari appeared in the ledgers of Bonifazio Fazzi and Company, which confirms that the Bruges *Madonna* was ultimately sent to Bruges via Lucca. This is consistent with the letter sent from Giovanni Balducci to Michelangelo, which specified that the statue should be entrusted to "Bonvisi di Lucha" and set sail via Lucca if Balducci's first choice for the job, Francesco del Pugliese, was not able to ship it via Viareggio. Barocchi and Ristori, letter XI, 17; Lennertz, 23.

¹⁹ Tolnay, *Youth*, 157.

²⁰ For more on the Mouscron's financial relationship with Giovanni and Baldassare Balducci, see Lennertz, 33.

²¹ If he had completed the Arte della Lana's commission for twelve giant statues of the apostles, Michelangelo would have had constant and well-paid work for a projected twelve years. The sculptor's inability to commit to the project, leading to the contract's eventual nullification, has much to do with his overwhelming number of commissions during the years between 1504-1508, but it also speaks to the artist's ability to turn away from lucrative opportunities in favor of others with more immediate benefits; see William Wallace, *Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man, and his Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 61; Wallace, "Reversing," 157.

Rome and Florence.²² The Bruges *Madonna* represents one such opportunity, as he had to chance to install an altarpiece in one of the most prominent churches in Bruges, which still retained some semblance of its former glory as the commercial capital of Europe.²³ Although Michelangelo certainly did not need further commissions at home much less abroad, the visibility of such a location provided a valuable platform for his talent, given the number of people who might visit the church and see his work.²⁴ He was also keenly aware of the effects a successful commission could have closer to home in the realm of social relationships and family advancement.²⁵

Many uncertainties still riddle the early history of the Bruges *Madonna*. Primary sources such as the Balducci ledgers and Michelangelo's own correspondences show that the sculpture

²² Michelangelo had other international opportunities at this time. In addition to completing a bronze statue of David for Pierre de Rohan, Maréchal de Gié, he considered working for the Sultan of Turkey, Bajezid VI, to build a bridge over the Golden Horn from Pera to Constantinople; see Caroline Elam, "'Che Ultima Mano?': Tiberio Calcagni's *Postille* to Condivi's *Life of Michelangelo*," in Ascanio Condivi, *Vita di Michelangelo Buonarroti*, ed. Giovanni Nencioni (Florence: Studio Per Edizioni Scelte, 1998), xlii-xliii; William Wallace, "Michelangelo In and Out of Florence Between 1500 and 1508," *Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael in Renaissance Florence from 1500 to 1508*, ed. Serafina Hager (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1992), 58; Tolnay, *Youth*, 37.

²³ Despite the nineteenth-century conception of "Bruges la Morte" during the Renaissance, the city did not decline as sharply as such a nickname might suggest. With the silting of the Zwin harbor and a failed rebellion against Emperor Maximilian, however, Bruges did experience a depression in the final decades of the fifteenth and early decades of the sixteenth centuries. Although Antwerp quickly overtook Bruges as a commercial metropolis, the latter still enjoyed a prosperous wool and textile trade well into the sixteenth century; for more on the status of Bruges and its decline in trade during the Renaissance, see Wim Blockmans, "*Fondans en melencolie de povreté: Living and Working in Bruges 1482-1584*," in *Bruges and the Renaissance: Memling to Pourbus*, ed. Maximiliaan Martens (Ludion: Stichting Kunstboek, 1998), 26-32.

²⁴ Between 1501 and 1508, Michelangelo accepted no less than 18 commissions, of which he completed only a fraction; see Wallace, "In and Out," 57. Over a decade later in 1521, Michelangelo sought a similar platform of visibility when he began work on the Medici tombs in the church of San Lorenzo. Unlike the early years of the sixteenth century, however, the sculptor felt the urgent need to prove himself in Florence, where his work on the San Lorenzo façade proved a humiliating disappointment and his only well-known sculpture remained the *David*, which he had carved nearly two decades earlier; see William Wallace, "*La bella mano: Michelangelo the Craftsman*," *Artibus et Historiae* 32, no. 63 (2011): 91-97.

²⁵ As Wallace has correctly remarked, Michelangelo did not focus on building a steady and monetarily stable profession, but rather he sought the best opportunities available to him at any given moment, readily abandoning accepted contracts when a better one presented itself; Wallace, "Reversing," 156-157. The Mouscron's commission may have been particularly intriguing given the family's prominence in the cloth and textile trade. Perhaps not coincidentally, Michelangelo's favorite brother, Buonarroti, was growing steadily more active in the Arte della Lana—the wool guild—which was closely related to the Calimala guild, to which the Mouscron belonged as importers of foreign fabrics. Buonarroti eventually worked in a shop belonging to the Strozzi, the then-leading family of Florence, in 1508, though it is uncertain whether or not the Bruges *Madonna* played any part in this promotion; Lennertz, 33-36.

was made between late 1503 and early 1506. Why Michelangelo not only accepted the commission but also finished and delivered the sculpture remains the work of educated conjecture. We know for certain, however, that the Bruges *Madonna* left Italy for Bruges in the late summer of 1506, where it was eventually installed as an altarpiece in the Mouscron family chapel in the Church of Our Lady, where it still remains today.

Part II: The Bruges *Madonna* as an Altarpiece

Situating the Bruges *Madonna*

In his seminal work on Italian altarpieces, Jacob Burckhardt states that Michelangelo's Rome *Pietà* was the first freestanding marble group to grace an altar in the Christian era, marking "the final conquest of the Christian altar by large-scale statuary."¹ More recent scholarship, however, has called the original placement of the Rome *Pietà* into question, suggesting that the sculpture may never have been intended for installation as an altarpiece at all.² According to Burckhardt, the next freestanding marble sculpture to "conquer" an altar was Andrea Sansovino's *Virgin and Child with St. Anne* (Fig. 7), made in 1512, a full decade after

¹ Burckhardt specifies that the Rome *Pietà* was the first freestanding marble statue to adorn an altar independent of a marble wall altar. He does not specify whether or not his statements encompass only Italian altarpieces, the focus of his study, or all Christian altarpieces as is suggested in the quoted statement; see Jacob Burckhardt, *The Altarpiece in Renaissance Italy*, ed. and trans. Peter Humfrey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 34-36. More recent studies have shown that freestanding sculptures were regularly placed on altars from at least the ninth century; these statues, usually made of wood, were defined by their mobility, as they were often used in processions or placed at various other locations within the church. Their multi-functional, perambulatory nature directly contradicts the sheer weight and, therefore, relative permanence of a marble statue; see Ilene Forsyth, *The Throne of Wisdom: Wood Sculptures of the Madonna in Romanesque France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 1-12; and Kees van der Ploeg, "How Liturgical Is a Medieval Altarpiece?" in *Italian Altar Painting of the Duecento and Trecento*, ed. Victor Schmidt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 107. van der Ploeg specifies that even when wooden cult statues remained at the altar for the sake of convenience, they were fitted in a shrine-like enclosure with wings that would be opened only on special feast days, limiting their visibility to the public; van der Ploeg, 108.

² Most scholars accept the *Pietà* as an altarpiece due to the fact that the statue has been displayed as such since the second decade of the sixteenth century, when plans for New St. Peter's necessitated the demolition of the rotunda of Saint Petronilla, where the *Pietà* originally resided in the Cappella Regis Francorum. However, no secure information regarding the placement of the statue within the chapel exists; see Kathleen Weil-Garris Brandt, "Michelangelo's *Pietà* for the Cappella del Re di Francia," in *Il se rendit en Italie: Etudes offertes à André Chastel*, ed. André Chastel (Rome: Edizioni dell'Elefante, 1987), 87-89. Using a combination of visual and documentary analysis, William Wallace has persuasively argued that the statue was originally intended to mark the tomb of its commissioner, French Cardinal Jean de Bilhères; see William Wallace, "Michelangelo's Rome *Pietà*: Altarpiece or Grave Memorial?," in *Verrocchio and Late Quattrocento Italian Sculpture*, eds. Steven Bule, Alan Phipps Darr, and Fiorella Superbi Gioffredi (Florence: Le Lettere, 1992). Others have remained more ambiguous in their evaluation of the statue's original installation, stating that it was made to mark or at least be in close proximity to the Cardinal's tomb; see Tolany, *Michelangelo*, 10; Umberto Baldini, *L'opera completa di Michelangelo scultore* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1973), 92; Rona Goffen, *Renaissance Rivals: Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael, Titian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 117; Hibbard, 43; Joanna Ziegler, "Michelangelo and the Medieval *Pietà*: The Sculpture of Devotion or the Art of Sculpture?" *Gesta* 34, no. 1 (1995): 29.

Michelangelo's sculpture.³ For any number of reasons, Burckhardt's study does not address Michelangelo's other freestanding marble sculpture to adorn an altar in the first decades of the sixteenth century: the Bruges *Madonna*.⁴

The original circumstances of the Bruges *Madonna*'s commission and intended installation remain even more ambiguous than the Rome *Pietà*'s. Other than the monetary exchanges between the Mouscron and Michelangelo recounted in the previous chapter, we have no concrete evidence regarding the Bruges *Madonna*'s commission—we simply know that it was made, paid for, shipped, and received. In fact, following Giovanni Balducci's letter to Michelangelo regarding shipping logistics dated August 13th, 1506, the next documented sighting of the statue occurs nearly fifteen years later, when the artist Albrecht Dürer saw the statue *in situ*.⁵ The artist recorded the encounter in his travel diary, stating rather anticlimactically that during his visit to the Church of Our Lady in Bruges in 1521, "... sahe ich das alabaster Marienbild zur unser Frauen, das Michael Angelo von Rohm gemacht hat."⁶ Dürer's single-

³ Burckhardt, 36. As demonstrated by the scholarship of Virginia Bonito, the contract for Sansovino's *Virgin, Child and St. Anne* was intended to be seen in tandem with Raphael's *Prophet Isaiah* fresco. Bonito describes the altarpiece ensemble, which was destroyed in the mid-eighteenth century as having had three zones: Raphael's fresco occupied the top third, the middle third featured Sansovino's sculpture, and the bottom third contained the altar itself. After restorations forced the sculpture into a side chapel, the original relationship between Raphael's fresco and Sansovino's sculpture was all but forgotten; see Virginia Bonito, "The St. Anne Altar in Sant' Agostino in Rome: A New Discovery," *Burlington Magazine* 122, no. 933 (Dec., 1980): 805. As this discovery came after he published his seminal volume on Italian altarpieces, Burckhardt could not have acknowledged that Sansovino's *St. Anne* was indeed originally seen within a larger altarpiece ensemble.

⁴ As addressed in n. 1, although his comments regarding the "conquest" of the Christian altar seem to refer to the wider realm of Christendom, Burckhardt's book is a case study of Italian altarpieces. The examples he puts forth appear to be Italian-made altarpieces that adorn Italian altars. Though Italian-made, the Bruges *Madonna* never resided as an altarpiece in Italy, which seems the most likely reason it goes unmentioned. However, given the general lack of attention paid to the sculpture, it is also possible that Burckhardt simply did not consider it at all given the plethora of other objects available to him.

⁵ Barocchi and Ristori, letter XI, 17.

⁶ "... I saw the alabaster statue of Our Lady, that Michelangelo from Rome made." Translation by author; for original see Albrecht Dürer, "Tagebuch der Reise in die Niederlande," in *Albrecht Dürers schriftlicher Nachlass*, ed. Ernst Heidrich (Berlin: J. Bard, 1908), 89. Dürer's short entry contains two forgivable errors. First, the Bruges *Madonna* is made of marble, not alabaster. It is likely that Dürer mistook the white Carrara marble for white alabaster, given that the latter was a much more common material in the Netherlands. Second, Michelangelo is from Florence, though much of his adult life was spent in Rome.

sentence record of his encounter with the statue provides us with one seemingly obvious but key piece of information regarding the statue's whereabouts: it was situated somewhere inside the Church of Our Lady in Bruges by April of 1521.

A document from the city's archives closes the considerable gap between the statue's departure from Italy in the summer of 1506 and its subsequent sighting by Dürer in the spring of 1521. First published in 1867 by J. Gailliard, the document states that in 1514 Jan Mouscron ordered the construction of a new altar in memory of his parents, which would include a "sumptuous tabernacle" that would hold an "excellent" sculpture of the Virgin that is "very precious" and "costly"; the document further stipulates that "this image one may not alter" in the future unless authorized by close friends of the donor.⁷ First noticed by Tolnay, the referenced statue is undoubtedly the Bruges *Madonna*.⁸ The document, however, does not state where the Bruges *Madonna* was situated before the new altar was built nor how long the project took to complete. It does state, however, that Jan's father is one Alexander Mouscron, surely the same

⁷ J. Gailliard, *Inscriptions funéraires et monumentales de la Flandre occidentale*, vol. 2 (Bruges: E.D.W. Gailliard, 1867), 282. The pertinent section of the entry reads: "*...d'heer Jan de Moscron porter van Brugghe huut sonderlinghe devotie ons te kennen ghegheven heeft sine goede gheneghentede ende affectie hebbende ter vercieringhe van Onzer Vrouwen kercke voorseits, ende principalie ten outare die men nu ter tyt heet de Langhe Moeder Gods staende aen de suutside van de kercke, ter eeren van den almoghende God, sinder ghebenedider moeder Marie, ende ter decoratie van den selven outare, ter memorie van wiilen Alexander Moscroen sinen vader ende van sinder moeder ende ghoede vrienden die inde selve kercke begraven sin, ende an ons beghert heeft te maken eenen nieuwen outaer ende daerboven te stellene eenen sumptuese tabernakele met eender excellente beelde van Marie seer rikelic ende costelic, de welcke beelde men niet verstellen en sal moghen in toecomende tyden ten sy by consente van de vrienden van den voorseyden suppliant.*" "The lord Jan de Moscron, porter of Bruges, has showed us his exceptional devotion, his good will, and affection in the adornment of the aforementioned Church of Our Lady, and principally the altar that one now calls the "Langhe Moeder Gods," which stands on the south side of the church, in honor of the almighty God and his holy mother Mary; for the decoration of the same altar, in memory of the venerable Alexander Moscroen, his father, and of his mother and good friends who are buried in the same church, he has desired us to make a new altar and above it to place a sumptuous tabernacle with an excellent image of Mary, very rich and costly; this image one may not alter except as will be allowed in future times by consent of the friends of the aforementioned supplicant." Translation by Marisa Bass, e-mail message to author, January 30, 2016. "Langhe Moeder Gods" likely refers to both the dedication of ("Moeder Gods", or "Mother of God") and a spatial description of the chapel ("langhe", or "long"). Given the chapel's location in the south transept, it is considerably larger than other side chapels flanking the church's nave, which may explain this emphasis on spatial description. The spatial quality of the word "langhe" was first suggested to me by Dr. Marisa Bass, e-mail message to author, January 30, 2016.

⁸ Tolnay, *Youth of Michelangelo*, 157.

Alexander Mouscron who commissioned the work as mentioned in Balducci's letter to Michelangelo.⁹ The language of the document, though somewhat ambiguous, strongly suggests that Jan Mouscron donated the Bruges *Madonna* to the Church of Our Lady as part of the new altar and tabernacle, forming an ensemble that future generations should never change. Though impossible to determine the statue's location between the summer of 1506 and 1514, it was surely placed in a wall niche behind a newly built altar sometime around 1514 according to Jan Mouscron's instructions.¹⁰

Excepting two brief stints as war booty and one in a short exhibition, the Bruges *Madonna* has remained—just as Jan Mouscron requested—in its current setting for over five hundred years.¹¹ Its surroundings, however, have evolved. The decoration of the altar has expanded around the Bruges *Madonna* over the centuries. For example, in 1560, Marcus van Waernewyck stated that Pierre Mouscron had commissioned Jan de Heere and his son Lucas to

⁹ For Alexander Mouscron's relationship with Jan Mouscron, see Gailliard, 282. We can surmise from this information that Jan Mouscron was likely one of the heirs to whom the statue was shipped, as mentioned in a letter from Balducci to Michelangelo regarding the shipping arrangements for the statue; see Barocchi and Ristori, letter XI, 17.

¹⁰ One cannot begin to hypothesize the Bruges *Madonna*'s location during this period of approximately 8 years. Although the statue is extremely heavy and logically would be moved as few times as possible, Marisa Bass has suggested that there would have been no shortage of equipment with which to move the statue upon its arrival in Bruges, considering the city's status as a bustling center of trade. Given the availability of such equipment, the process of transporting the *Madonna* was surely easier than it would have been in Florence; Dr. Marisa Bass, e-mail message with author, January 31, 2016.

¹¹ French troops brought the statue to Paris during the Napoleonic Wars but returned it to Bruges in 1815; see Umberto Baldini, *The Sculpture of Michelangelo* (New York: Rizzoli, 1982), 41. During World War II, German soldiers hid the statue in the salt mines of Altaussee, where it was subsequently recovered and returned to Belgium; for a narrative account of this ordeal, see Robert Edsel, *The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves, and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History* (New York: Center Street, 2010), 97-101; for a first hand account, see Thomas Carr Howe, Jr., *Salt Mines and Castles: The Discovery and Restitution of Looted European Art* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1946), 143-144, 159, 222-224. In 1952, the Bruges *Madonna* returned to Italy for the first time in over 400 years on a temporary exchange with Belgium. While the Bruges *Madonna* was on display at the Bargello in Florence, the *Portinari Altarpiece* by Hugo Van der Goes was sent to Belgium by the Uffizi; see Baldini, *Sculpture*, 41.

plan and design, respectively, the decoration of the wall behind the altar.¹² This black and white marble wall mural continues to flank the sculpture today, as do three colored marble columns on either side. Undulating lines of black marble trim and white spiraling columns crown the now-wall altar, while a number of smaller statues perch atop the structure. Below, a white and pink marble altar leads down to a black and white checkered floor, effectively rounding out the *horror vacui* effect that the ensemble now exudes. Despite the suffocating additions of subsequent, the Bruges *Madonna* still manages to capture the eye. Admittedly, this is more due to the contrast of the statue's creamy white Carrara marble against the black marble niche than to its inherent beauty. Michelangelo clearly did not intend for this slightly smaller-than-life-size sculpture to become part of its current multi-generational collage.

Unlike the Rome *Pietà*, no scholar has ever questioned the Bruges *Madonna*'s status as an altarpiece. With such a dearth of documentary evidence regarding the original circumstances of the commission, however, we are forced to face an uncomfortable question: was Michelangelo conscious of the Bruges *Madonna*'s eventual destination? Or, as with the Rome *Pietà*, do scholars tacitly assume that the sculpture's five-hundred-year presence atop an altar indicates the original intentions of both artist and patron by default? The answer to these questions, I believe, resides in the sculpture itself, and, more specifically, in its reciprocal relationship with its liturgical setting and, more specifically, the altar below. There is a distinct *rightness* about seeing the Bruges *Madonna* above an altar, both visually and liturgically speaking.

From a purely visual standpoint, the sculpture's current placement makes sense of the figures' proportions and expressions. Examining the statue from other viewpoints, it becomes

¹² As cited in Henry Thode, *Michelangelo: kritische Untersuchungen über sein Werke* (Berlin: G. Grote'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1908), 60. Pierre Mouscron was subsequently buried at the base of the altar. His tombstone, which was restored in 1829, bears an inscription commemorating his commission of the marble wall mural, which was completed in 1571; see Tolnay, *Youth*, 157.

apparent that Michelangelo intended the statue to reside in a specific place and at a specific height in order to achieve optimal effect. For example, as Paul Joannides has articulated so well, the statue looks “most unhappy” in the high placement suggested by Harold Mancusi-Ungaro (Fig. 8).¹³ Indeed, such a high angle impedes the visibility of the intricacy of detail that has gone into the sculpture, such as the buttons adorning the Virgin’s wrists (Fig. 9) and the knuckle dimples of the Christ Child’s fleshy hands (Fig. 10). Such a height also gives the unseemly impression that the Christ Child may plummet to his death at any moment, contradicting the deliberate attention paid to the careful act of stepping. In addition, when the viewer must look up at the statue from a steep angle, the Christ Child’s carefully carved body dissolves into an awkward assemblage of limbs topped by an enormous head, while the Madonna looks comically pouty.¹⁴ Conversely, when seen from above (Fig. 11), the right forearm of the Madonna appears entirely too long, and the viewer cannot appreciate the expression on either her or the Christ Child’s faces (Fig. 12).¹⁵ Placing the statue at eye level resolves these issues of proportion while still allowing the appreciation of various visual elements that Michelangelo has included in the statue. This placement also situates the viewer in a hierarchical position of deference to both Madonna and Child without the looming presence suggested by a steeper angle of viewing, which sharply counteracts the unmistakably maternal relationship between Mother and Son.

The tentative step of the Christ Child from his mother’s embrace implies a perceived destination below the sculpture itself. The downward gazes of both figures enhance the viewer’s expectation that something lies before the sculpture, literally and figuratively. By emphasizing

¹³ Paul Joannides, Review of *The Bruges Madonna and the Piccolomini Altar*, by Harold Mancusi-Ungaro, *The Burlington Magazine* 115, no. 842 (May 1973), 332.

¹⁴ Weinberger notes that the Christ Child becomes abnormally large when seen from too far below; see Weinberger, 110.

¹⁵ Weinberger, 110.

descent, Michelangelo forces the viewer to consider where exactly the Christ Child is going, and, considering the somber look on the Virgin's face, what might be waiting for him when he gets there. The installation of the statue above an altar answers this visually inspired question with an equally visual answer, as will be addressed shortly.

On a technical note, the chisel marks on the back of the statue indicate that Michelangelo prepared the group for a niche, which would limit the arc of viewing in order to hide the unpolished portion of the work. This suggests that the artist had some idea—or, at the very least, assumed—how the Mouscron intended to display the statue. Combined with the angle of viewing and the implication of a niche-like setting, the fact that the Mouscron commissioned a Madonna and Child sculpture that shortly found its way into their family chapel, dedicated to “*Langhe Moeder Gods*” in a church bearing the name of “Our Lady” points to the logical conclusion that Michelangelo created the Bruges *Madonna* with a specific altar in mind, though he certainly had no first-hand knowledge of the location himself.¹⁶

Despite having established that the Bruges *Madonna* likely remains in its original location above its intended altar, the statue's current placement on top of a black marble base disrupts the optimal viewing experience. Though not displeasing, the pedestal bearing the Mouscron coat of arms (Fig. 13) prevents the implied descent of the Christ Child from achieving its full emotional valence.¹⁷ The distance between the bottom of the niche and the mensa of the altar also impedes what could be a more visually immediate relationship. Lowering the statue to

¹⁶ The chapel has undergone several re-dedications over the centuries. It was previously dedicated to St. George, and it is currently called the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament; for the church dedication during the first decades of the sixteenth century, see Gailliard, 282-283.

¹⁷ The coat of arms on the statue matches that of the funerary slab marking Pierre Mouscron's burial before the altar, as documented by an early twentieth-century drawing in Brussels at the Musées royaux d'Art et d'Histoire. The handwritten note on the drawing transcribes at least part of the inscription on Pierre Mouscron's tomb and references that the slab was restored in 1829.

align the bottom of the built-in base with the top of the mensa would heighten the illusion of the Christ Child stepping directly down onto the altar.

Lighting also plays an important role in our perception of the Bruges *Madonna*. Although Michelangelo never saw the Mouscron chapel, certain aspects of the statue suggest that he designed the sculpture to accommodate an elevated light source falling from the viewer's right hand side. As medieval churches commonly had high windows, the sole variable Michelangelo had to consider was the direction of the light source, a condition that could have easily been described to him upon commission. For example, the edge of the veil that crowns the top of the Madonna's head ripples down the left side of her face while remaining tucked neatly against the other (Fig. 14). In addition to representing Michelangelo's supreme skill with his materials, the flowing edge of the fabric shields the Madonna's face more fully on the left hand side. Even in the sculpture's current placement, when light filters through the window on the altar's right—the only source of natural light in the southern transept—from a sharp angle, the slight protrusion of the Madonna's veil casts her upper face in shadow while illuminating the intertwined hands of the Madonna and Son as he initiates his descent (Fig. 15). Lowering the statue would allow light from the sun to hit it at a steeper angle, thus maximizing the potential interplay between the glowing marble and sun-cast shadows. As well as creating a sense of psychological introspection on the part of the Madonna, this shroud of shadow softens the harsh symmetry of her face and corrects the eerie appearance of her thick-lidded, unseeing eyes.

In an essay that treats the validity of objects being called “altarpieces,” Paul Hills considers the attempted reconstruction of an original context as an “article of faith” to which art

historians seeking a “badge of professionalism” must seek.¹⁸ Although specifically referring to de-contextualized works of art removed from their original environments, Hills’ advice should apply to any circumstance in which the status of an object as an altarpiece exists with reasonable doubt, especially when an analysis of the said object depends on its installation above an altar. The lack of secure documentation regarding the origins of the Bruges *Madonna* and its nearly ten-year absence from all records until 1514 necessitated a more thorough evaluation of its status as an altarpiece. As I have shown, based primarily on visual analysis, Michelangelo created the Bruges *Madonna* to rest in a niche above an altar. The various “coincidences” we have encountered thus far—the Mouscron family chapel’s dedication to “*Langhe Moeder Gods*”, the construction of a new altar to commemorate the *Madonna*’s patron, Michelangelo’s apparent gamble on a specific light source—provide tantalizing hints that Michelangelo may have known more about the *Madonna*’s destination than previously expected.

The Holy Trinity: The Sculpture, the Space, and the Eucharist

“Altarpiece” is a functional category that defines objects placed on, behind, or above an altar with the basic purpose of enriching the celebration of the Mass.¹⁹ In the fifteenth and early

¹⁸ Hills encourages this due to the fact that paintings—the subject of most volumes on altarpieces—seen out of context in museums may appear to look like other in situ altarpieces, but formal adherence to stereotypical altarpiece forms does not necessarily prove that they were altarpieces themselves. Instead, one must use a combination of provenance research and educated hypothesizing to attempt reconstruction of an original context; see Paul Hills, “The Renaissance Altarpiece: A Valid Category?” in *The Altarpiece and the Renaissance*, eds. Martin Kemp and Peter Humfrey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 43.

¹⁹ For the definition of an altarpiece as a functional category, see Henk van Os, “Some Thoughts on Writing a History of Sieneese Altarpieces,” in *The Altarpiece and the Renaissance*, eds. Martin Kemp and Peter Humfrey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 25. For the explicit function of the altarpiece as a liturgical accessory, see Burckhardt, 40; Henk van Os, *Sieneese Altarpieces 1215-1460: Form, Content, Function* (Groningen: Bouma’s Boekhaus B.V., 1984), I: 7; Scott Nethersole, *Devotion by Design: Italian Altarpieces Before 1500* (London: National Gallery Company, 2011), 24; Martin Kemp, “The Altarpiece in the Renaissance: A Taxonomic Approach,” in *The Altarpiece and the Renaissance*, eds. Martin Kemp and Peter Humfrey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 6-7; Beth Williamson, “Altarpieces, Liturgy, and Devotion,” *Speculum* 79, no. 2 (April 2004): 342-344.

decades of the sixteenth centuries, paintings and wall-like sculptural reliefs still comprised the vast majority of altarpieces, as such forms were considered less physically obstructive and distracting than free-standing sculpture.²⁰ Burckhardt theorizes that the emergence of freestanding sculpture placed on or above the altar was the result of a centuries-long evolution of the increasingly figural ornamentation of baldachins.²¹ As a freestanding white marble sculpture weighing nearly a ton, the mere physicality of the Bruges *Madonna* was certainly a novelty in its time, both in Italy and undoubtedly in Northern Europe, where wood polychrome sculpture was normative and sculptural altarpieces in the round were rare.²² The themes that Michelangelo's sculpture communicates, however, are consistent with those present in the more traditional forms of altarpieces.

An altar, which designates the central locus where the most important liturgical and sacramental rituals of the church take place, is the most basic requirement for an altarpiece's existence.²³ The most important event performed at the altar is, of course, the sacrament of the Eucharist, during which the priest consecrates the bread and wine, thus turning it into the body

²⁰ Burckhardt, 36-40.

²¹ For the full evolution of Italian sculptural altarpieces, see Burckhardt, 30-40.

²² In his extensive guidebook to Bruges, nineteenth-century British art historian W.H. James Weale stated that the Bruges *Madonna* weighed 800 kilograms (approximately 1,764 pounds) based on the determination of the statue's volume in 1871. Weale does not elaborate further on who performed the measurements or how they were taken; see W.H. James Weale, *Bruges et ses environs*, 4th ed. (Bruges: Desclée, De Brouwer et Cie, 1885), 125. In her article on Michelangelo's Rome *Pietà*, Joanna Ziegler notes that, compared to traditional Flemish sculpture, the Bruges *Madonna* would likely have had a "bizarre, nearly alien sculptural presence" in Flanders; see Ziegler, "Michelangelo," 32.

²³ What does and does not qualify as an "altarpiece" is an inherently slippery distinction, given the fact that some works of art meant for an altar never reach their final destination while other works that were never intended to be used as altarpieces (possibly Michelangelo's own Rome *Pietà*?) find themselves acting as altarpieces. There is also the possibility that altarpieces were made without a specific altar in mind, such as the altarpieces produced for mass-market consumption in the Netherlands at the beginning of the late Gothic period. For our purposes, an "altarpiece" is defined as a work of art created with the intention of its placement on, above, in front of, or behind an altar. For information on the mass marketing of altarpieces in the Netherlands, see Lynn Jacobs, *Early Netherlandish Carved Altarpieces, 1380-1550: Medieval Tastes and Mass Marketing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 149-238. Joseph Braun's volume on the Christian altar, which traces the development of the altar throughout history, remains the most seminal text on the subject; see Joseph Braun, *Der christliche Altar in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung*, 2 vols. (Munich: Alte Meister Guenther Koch & co., 1924).

and blood of Jesus Christ.²⁴ Henk van Os theorizes that the rise of the altarpiece is inherently tied to this miraculous act of Transubstantiation, which was officially decreed by the Lateran Council in Rome in 1215.²⁵ Altarpieces acted as a dramatic backdrop to the moment the priest elevates the Host post-consecration, presenting to the faithful the bodily substance of the Lord.²⁶ Although altarpiece imagery was not officially codified, the content of most altarpieces contained scenes that conveyed Eucharistic and sacramental themes, primarily those of the Passion and its subsequent events (the Crucifixion, Lamentation, Entombment, etc.).²⁷ Scenes pertaining to the birth of Christ, such as the Annunciation or the Nativity, were also appropriate subjects given their ties to Incarnation.²⁸

As Burckhardt rightly points out, paintings and sculptural retables were perceived as optimal narrative media due to their ability to communicate multiple stories and holy images in a single object.²⁹ This is a challenge that a single, freestanding sculptural altarpiece presumably could not surmount due the limitations of the medium. The Bruges *Madonna*, however, defies such logic. Instead of bowing to its limitations, Michelangelo exploited the properties of his chosen medium to craft a freestanding sculptural altarpiece that exists symbiotically with the altar it adorns. Through a combination of transient gestures, iconographic ambiguity, and spatial engagement, the Bruges *Madonna* communicates multiple narratives regarding the spiritual

²⁴ Williamson, 343.

²⁵ van Os, *Sieneese*, 13. Williamson does not explicitly disagree with van Os's theory, acknowledging the rise in altarpieces post-1215. She does, however, question the absoluteness of van Os's claims, pointing out that his study does not transcend regional or national boundaries. She also states that the decoration of altars occurred before 1215; see Williamson, 347.

²⁶ van Os, *Sieneese*, 13-14.

²⁷ Williamson, 351.

²⁸ Barbara Lane, *The Altar and the Altarpiece: Sacramental Themes in Early Netherlandish Painting* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1984), 41.

²⁹ Burckhardt admits that sculptural altarpieces in the round could certainly be successful, as works by Michelangelo and Andrea Sansovino have shown, but he does acknowledge that such projects should be left "to masters of the very highest rank"; see Burckhardt, 40.

journey of Christ and his mother. In doing so, it imbues conventional themes of sacrifice and Incarnation with a physical, figural presence unaccounted for by more traditional altarpiece media.

Before continuing with an analysis and interpretation of the Bruges *Madonna*, it is necessary to acknowledge the danger of over-interpretation that pervades many studies of altarpieces, and, for that matter, art history in general. Charles Hope encourages a more commonsensical approach to the reading of altarpieces, which, in his opinion, are often too “theologized” by scholars.³⁰ Approaching the topic from a similar perspective, van Os champions a better-rounded interpretation of altarpieces not just as liturgical objects but also more broadly as art objects—that aspects of patronage and artistic creativity deserve as much attention as the liturgical function and symbolism of the finished object.³¹ Both Hope and van Os agree that the vast majority of altarpieces contain Eucharistic symbolism, but warn against the pitfalls of trying to find profound, revelatory meaning in common symbols or iconography.³² The following interpretation yields to such pragmatic warnings.

³⁰ Hope’s essay focuses on paintings as altarpieces, though a sanitized version of his argument can certainly be applied cross-media. He does not condemn the interpretation of altarpiece imagery. He does, however, criticize the over interpretation of small details or the inclusion of supporting personages, such as in altarpieces featuring the *Sacre Conversazione*. The inclusion of certain saints, he argues, usually occurs at the bequest of the patron for various reasons independent from Eucharistic themes; see Charles Hope, “Altarpieces and the Requirements of Patrons,” in *Christianity and the Renaissance*, eds. Timothy Verdon and Peter Humfrey (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 535-564. Though he does not name the scholars whom he respectfully criticizes, Williamson suggests that Hope’s essay stands in opposition to the more interpretative approaches of Barbara Lane and Ursula Nilgen; see Williamson, 351. Van Os’s own line of thinking parallels that of Hope’s; see van Os, “Some Thoughts,” 27-29.

³¹ van Os, “Some Thoughts,” 25-26.

³² van Os uses the example of the Man of Sorrows to elucidate this critique. He acknowledges that the iconography of the Man of Sorrows certainly has sacrificial and therefore Eucharistic meaning, making it an appropriate subject for an altarpiece. However, the presence of such iconography in an altarpiece does not prove that the artist or patron was interested or engaged with the cult of the Corpus Domini. This is something for which an altarpiece alone cannot vouch; van Os, “Some Thoughts,” 25-27. Hope particularly despises the over interpretation of decorative elements, stating that altarpieces were meant to function liturgically but that they were also supposed to be beautiful; Hope, 554.

The Bruges *Madonna* does not convey profound theological truths in and of itself. Unlike the brilliance of its creamy Carrara marble and Michelangelo's extraordinary talent for turning stone into flesh, the deeply Eucharistic themes that it conveys are not self-evident. Instead, the sculpture relies on its environment to activate its full potential as an accessory to the celebration of Mass. Considered in its rightful place above an altar, the Bruges *Madonna* demonstrates Michelangelo's ability to successfully communicate abstract concepts of Eucharistic theology. This, however, is true of many artists producing exceptional altarpieces in fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Europe, from Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden to Masaccio and Mantegna. Michelangelo's greatest accomplishment with the Bruges *Madonna* was not his sensitivity to liturgical context—though that is very significant—but rather the effective communication of such messages in a two-figure composition carved in the round. If not unprecedented, such a feat was unquestionably novel in its time.

The narrative power of the *Bruges Madonna* lies in its ability to linger in the in-between, both compositionally and iconographically. The subject of the statue is one of the most common in Renaissance art: the Madonna and Child. Though not radically different from traditional depictions of the group, the Bruges *Madonna* contains one glaring innovation on the theme: instead of sitting in his mother's lap, Michelangelo has depicted the Christ Child between her

knees in the act of descending. This seemingly subtle shift is the most novel feature of the work, and one that has an enormous effect on the liturgical implications of the sculpture.³³

The placement of the Christ Child between the Madonna's knees carries two obvious connotations: childbirth and transition. Though perhaps equally apparent when considered *in situ*, the implied movement of the Christ Child from the safety of his mother to the altar below carries the most overt reference to the Eucharist. Indeed, the Christ Child steps down towards the very surface where the priest lays out the fruits of his sacrifice—his very flesh and blood—for the salvation of the faithful through consumption. The sheer youthfulness of the Christ Child, with his pudgy cheeks and doughy body, however, contradicts the more sacrificially explicit imagery associated with the Eucharist, such as scenes from the Passion. Rather than impede a sacrificial interpretation of the sculpture, Michelangelo's chosen version of Christ as a toddler encourages a full-bodied narrative of Christ's journey from birth to death. This would have been further enhanced by the presence of a crucifix standing on the mensa, an accessory that was universally present during the celebration of the Mass as decreed by Catholic doctrine.³⁴ The brilliance of such a conception lies in the ability to suggest an unfolding narrative through static, figural sculpture. The entire story of Christ's life, from his childhood to his martyrdom, becomes

³³ Leo Steinberg has written extensively on the relationship between Christ and the Madonna in Michelangelo's work. Although Steinberg focuses primarily on Michelangelo's *Pietàs*, he briefly addresses the placement of the Christ Child between the Madonna's knees in the Bruges *Madonna*. He argues that Michelangelo adapts earlier examples of symbolic representations of filial progeny, which is often conveyed through the compositional arrangement of figures; Leo Steinberg, "The Metaphors of Love and Birth in Michelangelo's *Pietàs*," in *Studies in Erotic Art*, eds. Theodore Bowie and Cornelia Christenson (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1970), 263-264. Tolnay calls Michelangelo's idea to place the Christ Child between the Madonna's knees "exceptional"; see Tolnay, *Youth*, 158. Such a placement also recalls Saint Bridget of Sweden's vision of Christ's birth, which was nearly miraculous for its lack of effort or strain on the Virgin. Per Bridget's writings, the Christ Child appeared from the Virgin's womb clean and radiant; for Bridget's account of this vision, see Saint Bridget of Sweden, *Revelations of St. Bridget, on the Life and Passion of Our Lord, and the Life of His Blessed Mother* (New York: D. & J. Sadlier & Co., 1862), 37-41. This possible correlation was first brought to my attention by Dr. Judith Mann.

³⁴ For more on the necessary presence of a crucifix during mass, see Joseph Braun, *Das christliche Altargerät in seinem Sein und in seiner Entwicklung* (Munich: Max Hueber Verlag, 1932), 466-474. An altarpiece containing a depiction of the crucifixion would also suffice, thus making a second crucifix on the mensa redundant and unnecessary; see Braun, *Das Christliche Altargerät*, 473.

an invisible but implied narrative occupying the empty space between the Christ Child and the altar.

Though certainly the most novel element of the sculpture and the one most clearly tied to its interpretation during liturgical services, the Christ Child is not the primary figure in the group. The few sixteenth-century documents that refer to the statue articulate this quite clearly and in several different languages: Michelangelo refers to the sculpture as “*quella Nostra Madonna di marmo*,” Jan Mouscron calls it a “*beelde van Marie*,” and Dürer redundantly labels it “*Marienbild zur unser Frauen*.”³⁵ Despite being the more physically active figure and positioned at the compositional forefront of the sculpture, the Madonna, not Christ Child, is the primary subject of the work. This is confirmed not only by the sculpture itself, but by the dedication of the chapel and the performance of the Mass before the altar.

Most altarpieces contain imagery that relates to the dedication of the chapel altar to which they belong.³⁶ The Bruges *Madonna* is one such altarpiece, depicting the Mother and Child in a chapel dedicated to *Langhe Moeder Gods*. The emphasis on the Madonna as the primary figure of the group also correlates to the broader iconographical understanding of Madonna and Child imagery: the Virgin represents the primary object of devotion.³⁷ As the secondary devotional figure, the Christ Child thus becomes an “attribute” of his mother.³⁸ Regardless of the

³⁵ Barocchi and Ristori, letter VII, 12; Gailliard, 282; Dürer, 89.

³⁶ Whether or not altarpieces had to relate to their altar/chapel/church remains a debate amongst scholars. Despite an attempt in 1310 by the synod of Trier to decree that altarpieces must indicate the dedication of the altar that they adorned, both Williamson and Hope note that such policies were rarely enforced. Williamson elaborates, stating that many churches deviated from canonical rules and that local devotional practices varied greatly, though Northern European churches appear to have respected canon law more so than Mediterranean locales. Therefore, one should not automatically assume that an altarpiece relates to its altar’s dedication unless the work’s subject and altar or chapel dedication seem to match. This is especially important for altarpieces that have been taken out of their original context; see Williamson, 356-365; Hope, 537; and Kemp, 14. For more on the decrees of the 1310 synod at Trier as they related to altars, see Braun, *Der christliche Altar*, 2: 281-283.

³⁷ Kemp, 12.

³⁸ Kemp, 12; Hope, 543-545.

iconographic primacy of the Madonna, the descent of the Christ Child of the Bruges *Madonna* remains the most overt analogy to the Eucharist. As the Christ Child steps down towards the altar, however, he also steps away from his mother. The sacrificial language of the sculpture thus becomes twofold, simultaneously communicating the bodily sacrifice of Christ and the maternal sacrifice of the Madonna.

Though she resists association with a single cultic persona, the titular subject of the Bruges *Madonna* embodies an amalgam of different Marian types.³⁹ For instance, the Madonna's seated, straight-backed posture resembles a Madonna Enthroned (Fig. 16), a popular Marian subject in both Northern and Southern Europe. The architectural puckering of her mantle at the top of her head reinforces this conception of the Madonna as celestial royalty, as if peeling back the garment would reveal a crown.⁴⁰ Yet upon closer inspection, the Madonna does not sit on a throne but rather on a large rock formation (Fig. 17), and her mantle is nothing but cloth. This adheres to the iconography of the Madonna of Humility and thus emphasizes the Madonna's humble nature—the seeming opposite of the Queen of Heaven. In addition, this rock also alludes to the Madonna's status as the Mater-Ecclesia, the Mother of the Church as founded *super petram*—a metaphor for Christ as the foundation stone of the Church.⁴¹ The flow of the Madonna's garment around the Christ Child's body also recalls the protective skirts of the

³⁹ Michael Carroll observes that over time Catholics have “splintered” the Virgin Mary into a wide variety of personalities, resulting in a similarly wide range of Marian cults, each of which focuses on a different facet of Mary; see Michael Carroll, *Madonnas that Maim: Popular Catholicism in Italy Since the Fifteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 2. Given the multitude of Marian types, Michelangelo is not the first to create a Madonna that resists neat classification, as some types overlap with others in a variety of other artists' works; see James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1979), 328. For a summary of the most common depictions of the Virgin, see Hall, 323-335.

⁴⁰ Rona Goffen has been the only scholar to comment on the odd structure of the Madonna's mantle, suggesting that the agitated nature of the Madonna's mantle communicates “a kind of psychic disturbance, like brain waves indicating awareness of [her and the Christ Child's] destiny.” See Goffen, 112.

⁴¹ Weil Garris Brandt, 80; Emily Fenichel, “Michelangelo's Marian Imagination” (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2013), 27; Kathleen Weil Garris Posner, “Notes of S. Maria dell' Anima,” *Storia dell'arte* 6 (1970), n. 64; Hibbard, 28.

Madonna of Misericordia (Fig. 18), though Tolnay alternatively suggests a connection to the Madonna Platytera (Fig. 19). The Madonna Platytera, a traditional Byzantine type, conventionally depicts the Madonna holding the Christ Child, who is encased in a glowing mandorla, indicating the Incarnation of Christ in his mother.⁴² While such iconographic plurality makes the sculpture difficult to place within the multifaceted cult of the Virgin, it allows the Bruges *Madonna* to embody the spiritual characteristics of these different types simultaneously: she is crowned in majesty and humility, acting as a solid foundation and a loving embrace.⁴³

Much like the Christ Child descending towards the altar, Michelangelo imbues the stoic figure of the Madonna with a story of her own. Mary's narrative, however, revolves around that of Christ. This begins with the positioning of the Christ Child between her knees in an overt reference to the act of childbirth and, in turn, the Incarnation. Through this extraordinary compositional innovation, Michelangelo emphasizes Mary's role in Christ's journey towards impending sacrifice. This is not the implicit symbolism of the Incarnation suggested by all Madonna and Child imagery above an altar, but an overt communication of the miracle in visual terms.⁴⁴ While it does not explicitly depict the birth of Christ, Michelangelo's ingenious decision to position the Christ Child between his mother's knees ensures that the viewer will not forget the Christ Child's origins: "He was born of the Virgin Mary, the chosen woman in the chosen

⁴² Tolnay was the first to suggest the Bruges *Madonna*'s association with the Platytera Madonna but offered no further interpretation as to the significance of this Marian type; Tolnay, *Youth*, 158. Rona Goffen has stated that the Platytera is tied to the Incarnation; see Goffen, *Rivals*, 158; Rona Goffen, "Mary's Motherhood According to Leonardo and Michelangelo," *Artibus et Historiae* 20, no. 40 (1999): 49.

⁴³ Focusing specifically on the Madonna of Humility, Beth Williamson argues for a more nuanced approach to the analysis of Marian types in art. She encourages scholars to consider the mental and spiritual attributes that imbue each Marian type rather than attempt to fit such "types" into iconographical categories in order to comply with homogenous over-arching meanings; see Beth Williamson, *The Madonna of Humility: Development, Dissemination, & Reception, c. 1340-1400* (Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2009), 15. Williamson also acknowledges the multivalent interpretations of images of the Virgin; see Williamson, "Altarpieces," 383.

⁴⁴ Forsyth refers to the Incarnation as the "subject" of sculptural depictions of the Madonna and Child enthroned; see Forsyth, 4. However, any depiction of the Madonna and Child communicate the miracle of the Incarnation, given that the Christ Child is the direct result of it; Williamson, 385.

people.”⁴⁵ The Christ Child, however, is not an infant. He is, by all accounts, a toddler who has already learned to walk.

Michelangelo’s choice to depict the Christ Child as a two- or three-year-old toddler, combined with the evocative positioning between the Madonna’s knees, creates the perception of an unfolding narrative. In contemplating the act of Christ’s birth, the faithful viewer automatically considers his conception by the Virgin Mary, the vessel through which he became man, through the intervention of the Holy Spirit. These events from Jesus’s life, as told in the four gospels and summarized in various creeds, were inscribed into the mind of the believer. Despite the many scholars who conclude that Madonna and Child imagery always symbolizes the Incarnation, none have established whether or not contemporary Renaissance viewers would have readily identified such imagery’s symbolic nature.⁴⁶ The sheer number of images of the Madonna and Child during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance may have desensitized the viewer to the underlying implications of such imagery, encouraging devotion to the Madonna and Child more than overt reflections on the miracle of the Incarnation, even though the latter is technically a prerequisite for the former.⁴⁷ Rather than leave such imagery up for interpretation, Michelangelo tells the story in marble, representing the Madonna as the source of both her Son’s birth and as a participant in his ultimate sacrifice.

⁴⁵ Matthew, 1:18.

⁴⁶ The connection between Madonna and Child imagery has been explicitly linked to the Incarnation in Forsyth, 1-10; Nethersole, 30; Williamson, “Altarpieces,” 351-352, 363, 385; van Os, “Some Thoughts,” 27.

⁴⁷ Hope makes the excellent point that the commissioning documents for many altarpieces are more concerned with the “who” than the “what” or the “how,” specifically with *Sacre conversazioni*. Hope discourages gratuitous interpretations of the presence of particular saints or the symbolic meaning of decorative elements, stressing that figures were sometimes present without any reason other than the patron’s request that they should be; see Hope, 535-560. This could be applied more broadly to imagery depicting the Mother and Child. Although the miracle of the Incarnation obviously lead to the existence of the Christ Child, one might question the validity of stamping all Madonna and Child imagery as representations of the Incarnation or if such imagery simply exists to encourage veneration of the Madonna and Child as holy figures.

While the placement of the Christ Child between the Madonna's knees identifies her as the source of his mortal life, making her the "tabernacle for the Holy Spirit", the interaction between mother and Son conveys her role as a participant in his martyrdom.⁴⁸ As Christ steps down, the Madonna becomes his anchor. Slinging his left arm over the Madonna's thigh and clasping her left hand in his right, the Christ Child begins his descent. The elevated light source illuminates the slung arm and the intertwined hands, deepening the emotional power of these natural gestures between Mother and Son, carved so flawlessly that the viewer can almost feel the grasping hands and the sensation of flesh slipping through flesh.

Sitting with her left foot propped up on a jutting piece of the rocky base, the Madonna's askew knees frame the Christ Child's abdomen and legs, creating a structural support for his downward movement. The folds of her voluminous mantle gather around the Christ Child's head, as if transforming the glowing light of traditional Byzantine mandorlas into cloth.⁴⁹ Though not immediately apparent when facing the statue head-on, the fabric of the Madonna's mantle encases the Christ Child's upper body. Viewed at an angle from either side (Fig. 20), the Madonna's mantle creates a literal connection between the two figures. When entering the chapel from the nave, which is to say from the viewer's left, a swath of fabric falls from the Madonna's left shoulder and disappears behind the Christ Child's head, while another fold of either the Madonna's skirt or mantle becomes pinched between his cheek and shoulder (Fig. 21). From the other side, the fabric emerging from behind Christ when viewed frontally cups the back of his head in a gravity-defying wave of material (Fig. 22). This relationship between the Christ Child

⁴⁸ Fenichel, 19-20. Lane provides a detailed analysis of the analogy between the Madonna and the tabernacle; see Lane, 14-35

⁴⁹ Tolnay, *Youth*, 158.

and the garments of the Madonna creates a sense of unfurling, as if moments before he had been wrapped up against her and is only now succeeding in disentangling himself.

In the Bruges *Madonna*, Michelangelo's manipulation of cloth acts in a similar way as in the Rome *Pietà*. The latter features a shroud that Mary uses to cradle the dead Christ, reverently separating her hands from his skin (Fig. 23), as an adaptation from earlier examples of the *Pietà*, in which the Madonna drapes her own cloak over Christ in a gesture of maternal protection.⁵⁰ In the case of the Bruges *Madonna*, the fabric is not a literal shroud as it is in the *Pietà* nor does it explicitly reference the swaddling clothes used during the Nativity, which also have a connection to the altar cloth.⁵¹ Instead, Michelangelo manipulates the fabric of the Madonna's mantle to create a literal connection between mother and Son, reinforcing the impending physical and emotional separation that will occur when Christ breaks away from his mother to step onto the altar. By emphasizing this act of disentanglement, Michelangelo emphasizes not only Christ's downward movement but also the act of separation occurring between mother and Son.

As in images of the Madonna della Misericordia and the *Pietà*, the Bruges *Madonna*'s encompassing garments act as a physical manifestation of her protection, which unravels as the Christ Child prepares to break away from her. The true moment of separation, however, has yet to occur, leaving the viewer to contemplate the impending rupture. The significance of the Christ Child's descent, therefore, is twofold. As he steps onto the altar, thus fulfilling his sacrifice, he takes leave of the Madonna, who is forced to watch the unfolding events of her Son's

⁵⁰ William Forsyth, "Medieval Statues of the *Pietà* in the Museum," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, New Series 11, no. 7 (March 1953): 180.

⁵¹ Lane argues that shrouds and swaddling clothes contribute to the sacramental nature of altarpieces due to their parallel relationship with the altar cloth. While not incorrect, one might question how many viewers were actively conscious of this symbolism; see Lane, 95. William Forsyth notes that Saint Bernardino once gave a sermon in which he remarks that the Madonna envisioned Christ's death shroud as His swaddling clothes; see William Forsyth, 180. Weil-Garris Brandt also remarks that Michelangelo's use of drapery always have purpose and "logic", most often to imbue his figures with a sense of realistic volume and to create aesthetic appeal. It would be irresponsible to assume that each and every element of clothing or cloth served a symbolic purpose; see Weil-Garris Brandt, 92.

martyrdom. This may explain the somewhat unnatural juxtaposition between the touchingly maternal gesture of the interlaced hands and the mask-like visage of the Madonna's face, complete with her disconnected gaze. She is simultaneously protective yet aloof, maternal yet distant. Following the downward slant of the Madonna's eyes, it becomes clear that she is not watching the Christ Child, but rather gazing down at something in front of her. Just as the Christ Child's downward step logically leads to the mensa, so, too, does the Madonna's line of vision. As she looks down at the altar where the sacrifice of her Son is habitually reenacted, her existence becomes trapped between two disparate moments of existence, forcing her to consider Christ's future martyrdom before he, as a child, has yet to break away from her grasp.

The tablet in the Madonna's lap reinforces her prescience of Christ's future. Although universally referred to as a "book," the slab of stone that seems to slip out of the Madonna's limp right hand bears no resemblance to a printed volume, but it remains consistent with Michelangelo's previous representations of "books" in the form of tablets, such as those belonging to the saints of the Piccolomini altar. Regardless of being called a book or a tablet, the object in question projects the same symbolism, signifying the Madonna's divine wisdom and her role as the Mother of Wisdom, or the *Mater Sapientiae*.⁵² Michelangelo's choice to carve a slab instead of an actual book, however, remains rather curious. Given the level of detail he included on the sculpture—from the delicate buttons on the Madonna's sleeves to the decorative piping on her dress to the texture of the rock on which she sits—we are encouraged to consider why Michelangelo chose to represent the Book of Wisdom as a slab of stone rather than as a printed volume. In addition to being historically accurate, the careful juxtaposition between the hardened edges of the tablet and the swell of the Christ Child's hip creates the haptic sensation of

⁵² James Hall, 329.

stone biting into soft flesh. Indeed, the corner of the tablet comes into direct contact with the Christ Child's skin (Fig. 24), creating a sensorial evocation of Christ as the Word made flesh.⁵³

The Madonna, aware of her Son's future sacrifice, watches the physical remnants of His martyrdom laid out before her with a mournful expression, even as she continues to physically support his descent. She does not restrain him, but allows him to step down from her, ready to catch him should his tiny feet slip on the hem of her skirt (Fig. 25). Parsing out these various details, it becomes clear that the sacrifice of the Christ Child is also that of the Madonna, who allows her Son to embark on the journey that will eventually result in his violent martyrdom on the Cross. The remarkably cruciform-like shape formed by the Madonna's rectangular neck brooch and the vertical folds of fabric that emanate from it (Fig. 26) reinforces the importance of the Madonna's role in Christ's death, implying that she, too, bears the weight of his sacrifice. One is reminded of Saint Simeon's prophecy of Christ's death in which he warns Mary that, upon the sacrifice of her Son, "a sword shall pierce through thy own soul."⁵⁴

⁵³ Paul Barolsky has observed the same juxtaposition between book and flesh in the *Pitti Tondo*. Instead of the tactile sensation of contact between skin and stone as in the Bruges *Madonna*, the *Pitti Tondo* shows the Christ Child's arm appearing from the pages of a book as if flesh and page have melded together, thus visually implying the theological belief of word made flesh; see Paul Barolsky, "The Meaning of Michelangelo's *Pitti Tondo*," *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 22, no. 2 (Winter 2003): 10-12.

⁵⁴ Luke, 2:35.

One-Statue Act: The Dramatization of the Liturgy

As a liturgical accessory, the Bruges *Madonna* fulfills its intended function: to dramatize and visually support the performance of the Mass.⁵⁵ Michelangelo accomplishes this through a clever compositional arrangement featuring two figures who interact with each other and the space around them, generating a narrative that illustrates Christ's story from child to martyr and that emphasizes his mother's shared role in this sacrificial journey. The statue as a liturgical accessory reaches its full potential during the celebration of Mass, acting as both an eye-catching backdrop and visual reinforcement of the words and actions of the clergy.

Strictly speaking, the presence of the Host or the performance of Mass is not a prerequisite for understanding the relationship between the Bruges *Madonna* and its surroundings. As a symbolic structure in and of itself, an altar represents the table of the Last Supper and thus carries its own connotations of the Eucharist and sacrifice, though Kees van der Ploeg questions how often side chapels were used to perform Mass versus their more common function of providing a space for the extra-liturgical devotions of laypeople.⁵⁶ The presence of an altar, however, still signals the constant presence of Eucharistic symbolism regardless of how often it was actively used for Communion. The presence of the Bruges *Madonna* allows those visiting the chapel the opportunity to meditate on the journey of the Christ Child from birth to

⁵⁵ Gregory the Great described images as the "books of the unlettered." Scholars often apply his reasoning to an explanation for the existence of altarpieces, stating that they acted as a visual illustration of the events taking place at the altar. The benefit of such visual "illustrations," however, is not limited to the illiterate or uneducated. In addition to providing instruction, altarpieces enhanced the experience of Mass by adding both decoration and visualizing important themes within the liturgy; see Kemp, 7; Sixten Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative: The Rise of the Dramatic Close-Up in Fifteenth-Century Devotional Painting* (Doornspijk: Davaco Publishers, 1984), 11. For Gregory the Great's defense of images, see epistle XI: 13 in St. Gregory, *Selected Epistles of Gregory the Great, Bishop of Rome, Books IX-XIV*, trans. James Barmby (Oxford: J. Parker, 1898), 297.

⁵⁶ Nethersole, 18; Caterina Limentani Virdis and Mari Pietrogiovanna, *Gothic and Renaissance Altarpieces* (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 2002), 14; Kees van der Ploeg, "How Liturgical is an Altarpiece?" in *Italian Panel Painting of the Duecento and Trecento*, ed. Victor Schmidt (Washington: Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, 2002), 111.

death independent of formal liturgical services, perhaps in moments of private devotion and prayer. Such meditations are, of course, possible even without the presence of an altar, altarpiece, or even a church. However, the presence of such imagery in a devotionally charged environment certainly enhances and encourages such reflections to occur, thus stimulating a devotion to or at least a consideration of the subject portrayed.⁵⁷ Regardless of how frequently liturgical services were performed within the chapel, the Bruges *Madonna* creates a particularly stimulating visual experience when considered in light of both its environment and the celebration of Mass.

During Mass, the climax of the service comes when the priest elevates the Host post-consecration.⁵⁸ As illustrated in a detail of Rogier van der Weyden's *Seven Sacraments* (Fig. 27), a work that will be revisited in Part III, the priest raises the Host facing towards the altar and away from the congregation. An altarpiece depicting Christ on the Cross acts as a backdrop to the priest's demonstration, linking the miracle of transubstantiation and the presence of the Host with an explicit illustration of Christ's sacrifice.⁵⁹ The Bruges *Madonna* acts much in the same way. As the priest elevates the Host, the sculpture would become only partially visible, and the body of the Christ Child would likely be almost entirely obscured (Fig. 28). The journey implied by the Christ Child's descent reaches its visual culmination in this moment, as the representation

⁵⁷ Kemp, 7.

⁵⁸ Lane argues that the reception of the Host by the faithful represents the climax of the Mass, but Kim Woods observes that the reception of the Host is very rarely depicted in Renaissance art, while artists frequently depicted the Elevation of the Host as the height of action during Mass. Kemp supports this conclusion, noting that the Elevation of the Host represents the first moment that the congregation is presented—visually speaking—with the transfigured body of Christ. Lynn Jacobs asserts that a new emphasis was placed on the act of Elevation, and that the altarpiece was meant to frame this sacred moment; see Lane, 14; Kim Woods, "The Netherlandish Carved Altarpiece c. 1500: Type and Function," in *The Altarpiece and the Renaissance*, eds. Martin Kemp and Peter Humfrey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 89; Kemp, 7; Jacobs, 13.

⁵⁹ Lane, 84.

of the toddler that is Christ becomes visually connected with the material vestiges of his martyrdom.

The relationship between the sculpture and the liturgy changes drastically in this moment. As the priest elevates the Host, thus blocking a good portion of the Christ Child's small body, the Madonna becomes the recipient of his offering. The priest effectively presents her with the transfigured body of her Son, which the Madonna stoically receives with her distant, mournful expression. As the congregation sees the Host for the first time post-consecration, it is made to visibly associate the miracle of transubstantiation with the Madonna, the origin of Christ's mortal body, which is now present by way of the Host. Through the vehicle of the Madonna, the Incarnation of Christ has now come full circle.

The status of the Bruges *Madonna* as a freestanding sculpture serves to inject a physical reality into this process.⁶⁰ By its very nature, sculpture in the round inhabits the same space and dimension as the viewer, as opposed to painted figures on panel or canvas, which occupy a perceived notion of space as it is created by the painter's brush. With its inherent mass, weight, and sense of solidity, the Bruges *Madonna* declares itself as a corporeal reality rather than a painted illusion, allowing for a more significant engagement with its viewers.⁶¹ Upon its installation around 1514, Michelangelo's group must have projected an unearthly presence in its niche above the altar, at once physically present in the viewer's space yet not of the human world. The very material of the sculpture—Carrara marble—signals an otherness in and of itself. The overall effect of nearly life-sized figures carved in white marble is one of the Madonna and Child being frozen in both time and space, of once-living beings turned to stone. This, of course,

⁶⁰ Joanna Ziegler, *The Sculpture of Compassion: The Pietà and the Beguines in the Southern Low Countries c. 1300 - c. 1600* (Brussels: Institut Historique Belge de Rome Etudes d'Histoire de l'Art, 1992), 158.

⁶¹ Ziegler, *Sculpture*, 158.

is in major part due to Michelangelo's ability to turn marble into the semblance of living flesh. He achieves this so successfully that it appears the opposite may be true—that flesh has now become stone. While the viewer can physically relate to the statue, the Madonna and Child remain psychologically out of reach, with the Madonna gazing into the distance and the Christ Child remaining focused on his descent.

In addition to its physicality, the Bruges *Madonna*'s medium is also fundamentally related to the statue's subject and function. The concept of physical transformation and material presence is inherent to the miracle of Transubstantiation. The Eucharistic wafer and wine become physical manifestations of Christ's body, which, during Communion, the priest offers to the faithful, allowing them to become one with Christ through a tactile and experiential interaction with the transubstantiated Host. The Bruges *Madonna* supports this interaction by acting as a constant reminder of Christ's physical presence on earth and the Madonna's role as the vehicle for his Incarnation. As the priest holds up the consecrated wafer, and in so doing partially obscures the Christ Child's body, the act encourages a conceptual juxtaposition between the solid, physically present marble figure and the Host. As a visual sequence, the priest replaces the "flesh" of Michelangelo's marble Christ with Christ's actual flesh in the form of the Host. The Madonna herself beholds this transformation, the Child still tangled in her robes transforming into a sacramental offering before her very eyes.

As a backdrop to Mass, the Bruges *Madonna* reinforces and dramatizes the miracle of Transubstantiation and the Host's subsequent elevation. While not essentially or doctrinally necessary to the performance of Mass, the presence of the sculpture above the altar creates a visual reinforcement of the miraculous but entirely invisible transformation of bread and wine into flesh and blood by providing consistent messages of material conversion. Not only does the

Christ Child stepping down onto the altar signal a future change in state—of his eventually crucified body becoming an offering on the symbolic table of the Last Supper—but the interaction between the statue and the Host during the elevation provides visual commentary to the transmutation of substances, thus providing a visual support to this otherwise invisible change in the outward appearance of the Host.

As an object of devotional and liturgical significance, the Bruges *Madonna* became the spiritual property of those who beheld it. To responsibly acknowledge the pitfalls of over interpretation according to the warnings of Hope and van Os, however, there is still one question left worth considering: how much of this interpretation of the Bruges *Madonna* did Michelangelo actually intend to convey? Though intentionality is an inherently slippery topic, I believe that Michelangelo ruminated deeply on both the religious content and artistic integrity of his creations. There is an important difference to be made, however, between actively embodied meanings and *available* meanings within any given work of art.⁶² The Bruges *Madonna*'s imagery and its natural connection to a liturgical environment leave little doubt that Michelangelo created the sculpture to adorn an altar. In doing so, he found ways to effectively communicate traditional altarpiece themes through a non-traditional medium. Whether or not he was aware of all the various nuances expressed here is impossible to say, but we might ask ourselves: does that make such nuances any less meaningful to the viewer who sees them?

⁶² With his explanation of active versus available meanings, Kemp cautions art historians against reading too far into religious symbolism, namely the type triumphed by “Panofskian iconographers” in search of hidden symbolism. Although his arguments refer specifically to paintings, I believe the concept can and should be applied across media. Kemp does not denigrate the practice of Panofskian iconography, but rather suggests that meanings *available* to contemporary audiences—meanings that could be gleaned from works of art—are not necessarily always intentionally communicated by the artist; see Kemp, 11.

Part III: The Art of Devotion

In both Northern and Southern Europe, religious images achieved their purpose to “move a man’s spirit to devotion” through a combination of aesthetic beauty and devotional content, thus speaking to the soul through the engagement of the eyes.¹ As an altarpiece, the Bruges *Madonna* is simultaneously an instrument of devotion and a material marker of talent and wealth. While Michelangelo carved the sculpture to serve as a backdrop to the liturgy, he also created a testament to his skill as an artist whose ability to visually communicate theological concepts matched his talent for turning marble into flesh. The Bruges *Madonna*, despite its radically innovative concept as a freestanding altarpiece, does not exist in an artistic vacuum. In addition to its value—both monetary and otherwise—as a material object, the Bruges *Madonna* demonstrates Michelangelo’s appropriation and adaptation of other artists’ work. These influences did not merely influence the design of the Bruges *Madonna* as an aesthetic object, but also impacted Michelangelo’s conception and execution of the sculpture as an altarpiece that responded to the religious atmosphere of its time.

A Duality of Function

As previously demonstrated, Michelangelo created the Bruges *Madonna* with a specific location and function in mind. His careful consideration of how the sculpture would interact with

¹ Domenico di Cambio, a proto-art dealer of the fourteenth century, expressed his opinion that devotional art should “move a man’s spirit to devotion” in a series of letters to Francesco di Marco Datini of Prato, as cited in Ringbom, 33. Koster notes the similarities between Domenico’s thinking and Northern Renaissance art, especially art produced by Hugo van der Goes, in Margaret Koster, *Hugo van der Goes and the Procedures of Art and Salvation* (London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2008), 137. In the early fifteenth century, Jean Gerson, Chancellor of the University of Paris, expressed the same sentiments regarding the power of religious images when he remarked, “And we ought thus to learn to transcend with our minds from these visible things to the invisible, from the corporeal to the spiritual. For this is the purpose of the image.” As cited in Sixten Ringbom, “Devotional Images and Imaginative Devotions: Notes on the Pace of Art in Late Medieval Private Piety,” *Gazette des beaux-arts*, 6th ser., 73 (1969): 165, 169 n. 52.

the performance of Mass, however, far exceeds his basic obligation as an artist to finish and deliver a statue of the Virgin and Child to his patron.² Likewise, the Mouscron's choice to commission an almost life-sized marble statue for their family chapel goes well beyond an altruistic display of devotion and piety. While commissioned and designed to function as an altarpiece, the Bruges *Madonna* serves an equally important role as a showpiece demonstrating Michelangelo's artistic skill and the Mouscron family's wealth. Though it may seem contradictory by modern standards, the Bruges *Madonna*'s role as a devotional object did not conflict with its status as a worldly good.

Throughout the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, churches in general and family chapels in particular increasingly came to represent more than spaces of worship and devotion. As public and semi-public spaces, they represented a platform through which to put a family's worldly power and prestige on display. The growing status of the artist during the Renaissance introduces a new element of human enterprise into the production of art destined for such environments, as an artist's ability to secure and fulfill a major commission for a prestigious church could forge the foundation for a very lucrative career. Michelangelo's own career began in earnest according to this trajectory after he completed the Rome *Pietà*, made for Cardinal Jean de Bilhères Lagrulas for the Cappella del Re di Francia in the most important church in Christendom: St. Peter's.

² Hope outlines the basic elements common to sixteenth-century commissions for altarpieces in particular, noting that throughout Italy there was a "striking consistency" in extant documents, which focus more on materials and workmanship than iconographic requirements; see Hope, 538. Although we do not have the commission documents for the Bruges *Madonna*, one may assume that if the Mouscron and Michelangelo ever had a formal, written agreement, it would have likely followed a traditional schema in which the patron dictated the subject, materials, and level of workmanship and the patron and artist mutually agreed on a timeframe and cost. If the agreement was informal amongst a group of acquaintances, the dictates may have been even less specific and not legally binding; for more on how the Bruges *Madonna* fits into characteristics of early Cinquecento patronage, see Lennertz, 25-49.

An examination of the Bruges *Madonna* as an art object may seem at odds with the previous section's analysis of the statue's function as an altarpiece, but these two "roles" are in no way mutually exclusive. In fact, the brilliance of the Bruges *Madonna* as an altarpiece comes from Michelangelo's drive to create something new and different by building off and innovating artistic precedents while remaining sensitive to the statue's ultimate destination. The patrons also benefitted from this duality, as installing such a precious object in their own family chapel signals both their religious devotion and their worldly status as a successful family.

The 1514 document recording Jan Mouscron's generous donation to the Church of Our Lady makes clear references to the statue as both a devotional offering and aesthetic object. It opens declaring that Jan Mouscron "has showed [the church] his exceptional devotion, his good will, and affection" by way of his generous donation, and it goes on to list the nature of his donation, which includes "an excellent image of Mary" that is "very rich and costly".³ The passage provides no physical description of the statue, but it does specify the donor's desire that no unauthorized person should ever make changes to the statue's placement.⁴ Furthermore, the document specifies that while Jan made the donation "in honor of the almighty God and His holy mother Mary", the decoration of the chapel specifically served to commemorate the memory of Jan's mother, father, and friends buried within the church.⁵

Jan's donation serves two clear purposes. While it demonstrates his piety and devotion to God, the Madonna, and the Church of Our Lady, it also signals the Mouscron family's presence within the church. This presence is both literal, as several family members are buried within the church, and figurative in that it serves as a worldly reminder of the merchant family's purchasing

³ Gailliard, 282. For entire passage and translation, see Part II, n. 7.

⁴ Gailliard, 282.

⁵ Gailliard, 282.

power and status as artistic patrons. Jan's resolve that no unauthorized person should modify the "image" of the altar and its décor is closely bound within this framework. As a donor, he would have wanted to safeguard the original conditions of his bequest in order to ensure that the altar and its décor would remain properly tied to the Mouscron family, as religious endowments were critical to cultivating and maintaining a family's social position within society.⁶ In other words, Jan Mouscron wanted to ensure that his family's money was well spent.

The donation document lauds the Bruges *Madonna* as an object that is both costly and rich, adjectives that emphasize the statue's literal value as a material good. Though perhaps unexpected by modern audiences enamored by Michelangelo's cultic persona, it is unsurprising that he goes unnamed as the sculpture's maker. In 1514 Michelangelo was still in the relatively early stages of his long career, having finished work on the Sistine Chapel ceiling just two years previously. His name in and of itself would not have imbued the Bruges *Madonna* with any significant value at that point in time, at least not to the clergy of the Church of Our Lady. Michelangelo's materials and exquisite craftsmanship, however, certainly played a role in the statue's perceived value.

Procuring marble is neither cheap nor easy, even in countries where the material is locally available. In addition to its high price tag, marble is extremely heavy, which makes its transportation an enormously difficult and expensive task, and it is also significantly harder to carve than other stones given its density. In the Netherlands, where marble is not locally available, sculptors relied on wood and alabaster as the primary materials of their craft,

⁶ Susanne Franke, "Between Status and Spiritual Salvation: *The Portinari Triptych* and Tommaso Portinari's Concern for His *Memoria*," *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 33, no. 3 (2007/2008): 123-124.

sometimes using the latter as a substitute for marble itself.⁷ The Mouscron brothers' interest in commissioning Michelangelo for a sculpture likely had more to do with the luxurious material than the sculptor himself.⁸ However, if one were to pay an exorbitant amount for such an object, a talented sculptor of increasing fame would seem like a natural choice for the commission. The Mouscron brothers shrewdly capitalized on the opportunity to endow their family chapel with such a rare and precious object.

That is not to say, however, that the Mouscron saw Michelangelo's sculpture solely as a conveyor of status and wealth. The commissioning of altarpieces such as the Bruges *Madonna* also brought supplicants closer to spiritual salvation. Placed within the family chapel, the site of family burials and private worship, it encouraged the living to say prayers for the souls of the deceased donor and his family members. The inclusion of the Mouscron coat of arms on the superfluous black base of the statue inspires such an association between the family and the altarpiece, ensuring that prayers directed at the Madonna and Child might include some for the family that commissioned it. Thus the statue fulfills two roles for the Mouscron: it acts as a symbol of the family's wealth and status while providing a spiritual marker within the Church of Our Lady, soliciting prayers of spiritual redemption for the family's deceased.

Michelangelo sought a similar duality of purpose when he executed the Bruges *Madonna*, a commission that presented him with an opportunity to create something new and unexpected. It posed the particular artistic challenge of creating a freestanding sculptural altarpiece from a

⁷ Like marble, alabaster is not indigenous to the Netherlands. It was, however, easier to both procure and carve, given its relative lightness and softness when compared to marble. The majority of alabaster used in Northern Europe during the Renaissance came primarily from deposits in Burgundy, Lorraine, and—most commonly—England; for more on the stone and the location of major deposits, see Aleksandra Lipinska, *Moving Sculptures: Southern Netherlandish Alabasters from the 16th to 17th Centuries in Central and Northern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 20-22.

⁸ The likely role that the desirability of marble played in the commission of the Bruges *Madonna* was first brought to my attention by Dr. Marisa Bass; conversation with author, October 5, 2015.

single block of stone. This must have been one of the greatest driving forces behind the completion of the Bruges *Madonna*, as it kept Michelangelo sufficiently engaged for long enough to finish the statue before a better commission came along.⁹

Michelangelo the Magpie: Influences at Home and Abroad

Michelangelo was a great collector of artistic detail and ideas. In observing the art of both his peers and predecessors, he had a great perspicacity for singling out the most successful or visually appealing elements of any given work, which often found a second life in his own art. Proudly insistent on his own originality, however, Michelangelo rarely deployed such quotations without adapting them to fit his own artistic needs. Indeed, the most significant influences on the Bruges *Madonna*—that is to say, influences that affect not just the outward appearance but also the underlying conception of the work—are perhaps not the most immediately recognizable.

A number of scholars have suggested the similarities between Michelangelo's Bruges *Madonna* and a number of other Madonna and Child sculptures made by the artists of previous

⁹ Michelangelo did not suffer mundane commissions if he could help it, and he went to considerable lengths to nullify commissions that no longer held his interest, whether because another opportunity had come along or the project was simply not interesting to him. The Piccolomini altar serves as one such commission, having been abandoned by Michelangelo after he completed only four of fifteen statuettes. The commission for statues of the twelve apostles, however, shows the shortsightedness of Michelangelo's priorities. If he had completed the twelve statues, he would have had steady work and income for over a decade, not to mention such a project had the potential to transform the very trajectory of Renaissance sculpture; Wallace, *Michelangelo*, 61. The sculptor, it seems, balanced the desire to conquer challenges with the more immediate needs of his own life, family, and career.

generations, namely those by Jacopo della Quercia and Donatello.¹⁰ The basis for these comparisons lies in an aesthetic resemblance of form. While valid, such superficial influences are of little importance to the significance of the Bruges *Madonna* as an altarpiece, though they do indicate a certain level of appreciation Michelangelo had for the artists in question. Jacopo della Quercia's *Madonna and Child* and four workshop-produced saints (Fig. 29) for the church of San Martino in Siena would have likely had a more significant impact on Michelangelo's eventual conception of the Bruges *Madonna*, as he would have likely seen the altarpiece during his visits to Siena to prepare for work on the Piccolomini statuettes.¹¹ As the first Italian altarpiece to consist of a freestanding sculptural ensemble, della Quercia's revolutionary undertaking surely paved the way for Michelangelo's own eventual innovation of the altarpiece.¹² One of Michelangelo's primary inspirations when making the Bruges *Madonna*, however, would be found even closer to home.

Michelangelo's greatest rival, Leonardo da Vinci, returned to Florence in 1500 after spending nearly twenty years in Milan. Sometime in 1501, when Michelangelo himself had returned from Rome, Leonardo publicly displayed a cartoon he had made for the high altarpiece of the church of Santa Maria Annunziata. The much-lauded cartoon featured an image of the

¹⁰ Baldini, *Sculpture*, 41; Goffen, *Rivals*, 158; Tolnay, *Youth*, 158. Several scholars have also noted the similarities between the Bruges *Madonna* and Donatello's *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, specifically Michelangelo's toned-down appropriation of Judith's ornamented neckline for the Bruges *Madonna*'s brooch and the similar fall of the figures' veils; see Weinberger, 111-112; Ewing, "Further Observations on the Bruges *Madonna*: Ghiberti Sources for Michelangelo," *Revue belge d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'art* 48 (1980): 83; Reinhard Liess, "Beobachtungen an der Judith-Holofernes-Gruppe des Donatello," in Argo: *Festschrift für Kurt Badt zu seinem 80. Geburtstag*, ed. Martin Gosebruch and Lorenz Dittmann (Cologne: DuMont Schauberg, 1970), 201-202. Michelangelo saw Donatello's *Judith* daily while working on the *David*, which at one point was suggested to replace the statue of Judith in the Palazzo della Signoria in Florence; see Charles de Tolnay, *The Art and Thought of Michelangelo*, transl. Nan Buranelli (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), 10.

¹¹ The attribution of the San Martino saints to della Quercia remains debatable, though they were most certainly the products of his workshop. Conversely, della Quercia likely carved the San Martino *Madonna and Child* without significant workshop intervention; see Charles Seymour, Jr. *Jacopo della Quercia: Sculptor* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 56-57; James Beck, *Jacopo della Quercia*, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 187-188.

¹² Burckhardt, 30.

Madonna, St. Anne, and Christ Child in a composition that was likely similar to the Burlington House cartoon (Fig. 30), now in the National Gallery.¹³ Michelangelo certainly saw the cartoon, as evidenced by a quick sketch of the composition (Fig. 31) found in his sketchbook, which shows the Madonna sitting in the lap of St. Anne while an infant Christ rests on his mother's hip. From the sketch, it is clear that Michelangelo was particularly concerned with capturing the figures of the Madonna and St. Anne, his fascination with their intertwined limbs manifesting itself in quick, dense strokes that nearly dissolve into chaos. The inclusion of the Christ Child, articulated in a dozen lines and minimal shading, is merely an obligatory accessory in Michelangelo's interpretation of the cartoon.

Michelangelo carefully considered Leonardo's cartoon while working on his own commission for an altarpiece, though he adapted the older artist's convoluted composition to fit his own artistic scheme. Much like in the Burlington House cartoon, the Christ Child of the Bruges *Madonna* emerges from his mother's body while still remaining closely connected to her, thus communicating Christ's Incarnation via his mother. The placement of the Christ Child between the Madonna's knees is a subtler indication of this miracle as compared to Leonardo's cartoon, in which the Christ Child appears to sprout directly from his mother's womb in a more literal interpretation of the miraculous event. The sketch Michelangelo made of Leonardo's displayed cartoon suggests a similar progression from St. Anne to the Virgin to Christ, each one materializing from the next in a continuous chain of progeny. The result is frenzied but not

¹³ Vasari, 29-30. Kenneth Clark asserts that the Burlington House cartoon is not the original cartoon that Leonardo displayed, despite previous assumptions to the contrary. See Kenneth Clark, *Leonardo da Vinci* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 164.

unpleasant, and in forcing the eye to attempt to reconcile the odd configuration of bodies, the composition creates a sense of continuous movement.¹⁴

Although his cartoon could be read as a visualization of the Incarnation and Immaculate Conception, Leonardo took little—if any—interest in portraying religious miracles. Instead, he was concerned with the compositional relationship between bodies and their movements, and the Santa Annunziata commission provided a paid outlet for this interest. Unlike his atheistically inclined rival, Michelangelo was deeply interested in both artistic exploration and religious expression. In the Bruges *Madonna*, these two interests go hand in hand. By playing off of Leonardo's example, Michelangelo injects his Madonna and Child with a sense of dynamism, resulting in an aesthetically interesting composition that remains steeped in religious significance. Moreover, the difference in medium creates an entirely different experience for the viewer. Instead of being confined to the surface of the canvas or paper, Michelangelo's controlled evocation of Leonardo's lively figures projects into space, making a more stately Christ Child appear to move downward and away from his mother, thus engaging the viewer's own conception of space.

Following his return to Florence from Rome in 1501, Michelangelo made no less than four variations—three sculpted, one painted—of the Madonna and Child. While one could argue that Michelangelo felt passionate about the subject matter, the fact that he never produced another Madonna and Child image in the fifty-plus years following this Florentine period points to a more specific catalyst of inspiration. That Michelangelo should start producing such groups so assiduously after sketching Leonardo's cartoon is not a coincidence. Having exhibited the

¹⁴ For Michelangelo's and Leonardo's engagement with the movement and interrelationship of figures, see David Summers, "*Maniera* and Movement: The *Figura Serpentinata*," *Art Quarterly* 35 (1972): 269-301; for Summers' discussion of Leonardo's influence over the Bruges *Madonna* in particular, see Summers, 279-280.

cartoon in 1501, Leonardo's compositional experiment incubated in Michelangelo's mind for at least two years before he put chisel to marble for the Bruges *Madonna*. This two-year period, however, saw Michelangelo transform from an envious admirer of the older artist into his direct competition, as both had received commissions for battle frescoes in the Sala del Grand Consiglio in the Palazzo Vecchio. Michelangelo appears to have internalized this unofficial contest, engaging with Leonardo much less publically and outside the realm of secular imagery through his engagement with the Annunziata cartoon.¹⁵ Rather than quote Leonardo's work directly, however, Michelangelo adapted the older artist's experimentation with figural relationships to complement the underlying significance of the relationship between Mother, Child, and the Christian faith.

Unlike the evidence linking Michelangelo and Leonardo, there is no clear indication that Michelangelo looked to Northern European models when carving the Bruges *Madonna*, though he readily engaged with them in previous works.¹⁶ As channeled through Francisco de Hollanda, Michelangelo's later opinions on Northern Renaissance art do little to encourage the theory that

¹⁵ Goffen, *Rivals*, 156.

¹⁶ One of Michelangelo's earliest works, per Condivi and Vasari, was a painted copy of Martin Schongauer's *Temptation of St. Anthony* on wood panel. Condivi, from whom Vasari took the story, tells us that Michelangelo's finished product inspired great envy from Domenico Ghirlandaio; Condivi, 9-10. Michelangelo also drew on northern precedents for the Rome *Pietà*, a predominantly sculptural theme originating from Rhineland; see Ziegler, "Michelangelo," 28-29.

he looked to the North for artistic inspiration.¹⁷ With the Bruges *Madonna*, however, Michelangelo appears to have engaged at least competitively—and perhaps conceptually—with Northern artists, particularly Hugo van der Goes.

The early histories of van der Goes's *Portinari Altarpiece* (Fig. 32) and the Bruges *Madonna* are remarkably complementary. Tommaso Portinari, a Florentine businessman working for the Medici bank in Bruges, commissioned van der Goes to paint an altarpiece in the early-to-mid 1470s. Once completed, Tommaso sent the altarpiece to Florence to the church of Sant'Egidio, part of the Santa Maria Nuova hospital complex that had been founded by the Portinari family centuries earlier. Installed on the altar in the Cappella Maggiore in 1483, van der Goes's altarpiece became the first Flemish painting to grace a Florentine altar.¹⁸ As Roger Crum has noted, the changeable nature of the winged triptych, which would be opened and closed according to a liturgical schedule, likely struck viewers as an “avant-garde alien on foreign soil,” given that Italian altarpieces tended to stray away from closeable triptychs, instead preferring to present the viewer with a unified field of viewing.¹⁹ Joanna Ziegler describes the Bruges *Madonna*'s probable reception in Bruges in remarkably similar terms, stating that the sculpture would have had a “bizarre, alien-like presence” within the church, which may have unnerved

¹⁷ As described by Hollanda, Michelangelo's views on Flemish art and artists are quite negative indeed. His opinions are particularly vitriolic when discussing religious paintings, which he considers distasteful due to their excessive emotionalism combined with an over-the-top descriptive naturalism; see Francisco de Hollanda, *Diálogos em Roma (1538): Conversations on Art with Michelangelo Buonarroti*, ed. Grazia Folliero-Metz (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1998), 12. Though many scholars doubt the truth of Hollanda's written accounts of a conversation that had occurred among himself, Michelangelo, and Vittoria Colonna, others believe no reason to question the information put forth, though they caution that it may be an oversimplification of Michelangelo's thoughts; for dissenters, see Carlo Aru, “I dialoghi romani di Francisco de Hollanda,” *L'Arte* 21 (1928): 117-128; and Hans Tietze, “Francisco de Hollanda und Donato Giannottis Dialoge und Michelangelo,” *Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft* 28 (1905): 295-320; for supporters, see Robert Clements, “The Authenticity of de Hollanda's *Diálogos em Roma*,” *PMLA* 61, no. 4 (Dec., 1946): 1018-1028; Paula Nuttall, *From Flanders to Florence: The Impact of Netherlandish Painting 1400-1500* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 1-2.

¹⁸ Roger Crum, “Facing the Closed Doors to Reception? Speculations on Foreign Exchange, Liturgical Diversity, and the ‘Failure’ of the *Portinari Altarpiece*,” *Art Journal* 57, no. 1, *The Reception of Christian Devotional Art* (Spring 1998): 13, n. 9.

¹⁹ Crum, 6-10.

churchgoers accustomed to more traditional Northern altarpieces, such as van der Goes's.²⁰ Thus, the Bruges *Madonna* and the *Portinari Altarpiece* remain closely linked, particularly considering their shared liturgical function and singular foreign presence in opposite cities.

Michelangelo would have known the *Portinari Altarpiece*, if not through curiosity alone then most certainly through his apprenticeship with Domenico Ghirlandaio, who held van der Goes's work in high enough esteem to use it as a model for his own *Sassetti Altarpiece* just a few years before Michelangelo's brief stint in his workshop. The altarpiece's installation in the church of Florence's most popular hospital, which also functioned as a banking facility, ensured its easy accessibility.²¹ The sheer novelty of the *Portinari Altarpiece*, however, should have been enough to catch Michelangelo's attention. Therefore, when he received a commission from wealthy Flemish merchants for an altarpiece destined for Bruges, Michelangelo would have logically looked to the *Portinari Altarpiece*, if only as an example of the artistic competition he faced in Northern Europe. A closer consideration of the relationship between van der Goes's altarpiece and the Bruges *Madonna*, however, suggests that the works had a deeper connection than has ever been realized.

If Sant'Egidio followed the normal protocols for triptych use, the wings of the *Portinari Altarpiece* should have remained closed outside of Mass, feast days, and special viewings.²² Therefore, any visitors who came outside of these specific times would not have seen the inner panels containing the Adoration of the Shepherds and donors' portraits. Instead, he or she would have encountered the two outer panels of the closed wings, both of which contain grisaille

²⁰ Ziegler, "Michelangelo," 32.

²¹ Michelangelo himself opened an account at Santa Maria Nuova in February of 1505; see Rab Hatfield, *The Wealth of Michelangelo* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2003), 37.

²² Shirley Neilsen Blum, *The New Art of the Fifteenth Century: Faith and Art in Florence and the Netherlands* (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 2015), 144.

figures set into simple niches that, together, depict the Annunciation (Fig. 33). On the left panel, the Virgin turns away from her bookstand, casting her eyes downward as she reacts to the angel Gabriel, depicted on the right panel, who gestures to the sky with a delicate hand to signal the source of his information. While the grisaille and the angular folds of drapery give the impression of marble or alabaster sculpture, the figures' delicate gestures in response to one another gives the impression of a living moment captured in stone. The swooping bird above the Virgin's head reinforces the illusion of stopped time, while the slight projection of the hem of Gabriel's robe playfully skews the perception of painted surface and the viewer's own space. With the altarpiece standing at over eight feet tall, the grisaille figures fool the eye, creating a *trompe-l'oeil* effect of monumental stone sculpture above the altar.

Many Netherlandish triptychs include sculpture-like grisaille figures on their outer wings, from Jan van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece* (Fig. 34) to Rogier van der Weyden's *Nativity Triptych* (Fig. 35). In particular, the use of such figures encourages the viewer to conceptualize the distance between the worshiper and the divine image, a divide that is bridged during the performance of Mass.²³ This contrast between a sober exterior and spectacularly chromatic interior, doubled in size when opened, surely lent a devotional theatricality to liturgical services. In addition to their religious connotations, the grisaille figures also reflect Flemish painters' great artistic interest in the merging of sculpture and painting, in which the latter imitates the former.²⁴ Indeed, some Flemish altarpieces actively incorporated both media into a single ensemble.

The altarpiece included in the background of van der Weyden's *Seven Sacraments Triptych* (Fig. 36) shows such a hybridity in action. In the painting, the priest elevates the Host in front of a carved retable topped with a small polychrome sculpture of the Virgin and Child

²³ Neilsen Blum, 144.

²⁴ Neilsen Blum, 196.

nestled into an intricate tabernacle flanked with painted wings depicting the life of the Virgin. Three—presumably four if not for the cropped viewpoint—polychrome statues of a similar size to the central group flank the sides of the altar as part of the larger architectural frame that designates the holiest point of the church. Though alike in both subject and medium, the presentation of van der Weyden's *Madonna and Child* varies greatly from that of the Bruges *Madonna*. In the triptych, a fair-skinned Madonna dressed in golden robes presides over the altar as a true queen of Heaven, complete with a golden crown, while her story literally unfolds around her, neatly dissected into eight separate scenes. The doll-like Christ child sits firmly in her lap, his head turned toward St. Peter, who holds the key of the Church in his hand. Despite their beauty and the added verisimilitude of the polychrome, the *Madonna and Child* exist as part of a larger collective that retains the lingering medieval flavor of the mid fifteenth-century. The altarpiece within an altarpiece, however, provides an excellent illustration of what a Flemish altarpiece featuring sculpture may have looked like in the early modern period. It also provides an example of how different the Bruges *Madonna* would have looked compared to more elaborate ensembles found in prominent Northern churches.

The Bruges *Madonna*'s installation above an altar would bear a much greater resemblance to the grisaille figures on the outer wings of the *Portinari Altarpiece*, which, unlike the *Seven Sacraments Triptych*, Michelangelo would not only have encountered but known well. The underlying resemblance, however, depends more on the installation of the stone freestanding sculptures—whether a painted illusion or actual realization—in simple niches above the altar than a shared subject matter or style. Moreover, van der Goes's conception of the Annunciation in sculptural terms depends on figural movement and gestures to convey meaning and narrative, much in the same way Michelangelo does in the Bruges *Madonna*. Closed above the altar, van

der Goes's figures signal the Incarnation of Christ, reminding viewers of Christ's imminent presence on the altar, which is then revealed to them during the performance of Mass. This is a departure from the sculptural ensembles of altarpieces executed by Jacopo della Quercia and Donatello, which stand as representations of the *Sacre Conversazione* rather than as conductors of narrative.

The similarities between the Bruges *Madonna*'s and the *Portinari Altarpiece*'s beginnings are remarkable, as is their similar use of sculpture—painted or real—above an altar. Commissioned by Flemish merchants for their family chapel in Bruges, the Bruges *Madonna* became the first Florentine altarpiece—and a freestanding sculptural altarpiece, no less—installed in the city. Is this Michelangelo's response to van der Goes's triptych, the first—and only—Flemish altarpiece in Florence in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries?²⁵ While possible, as a singular example of a Flemish altarpiece in Florence, the *Portinari Altarpiece* likely acted more as a resource from which Michelangelo could gauge the expectations of Northern audiences and perhaps even those of his own patrons while remaining true to his own artistic identity as a Florentine sculptor.²⁶ Unlike with Leonardo's *Annunziata* cartoon, however, there is no tangible proof to tie Michelangelo to the *Portinari Altarpiece*. The formal and historical parallels between the *Portinari Altarpiece* and the Bruges *Madonna*, however, suggest that the Flemish altarpiece played a more significant role than has ever been acknowledged in Michelangelo's creative process as he began work on an altarpiece destined for Flemish soil.

²⁵ Crum, 13, n. 9.

²⁶ This more nuanced consideration of Michelangelo's interaction with the *Portinari Altarpiece* is credited to Dr. William Wallace, who first brought it to my attention.

Picturing Christ's Presence: Prints of the Mass of St. Gregory

As a miracle that fails to delight the eye, the belief in Transubstantiation depends entirely on the faith of those who behold it. Although not formally decreed until the Council of Trent in the later half of the sixteenth century, the belief that the Host could be transformed into the body and blood of Christ existed centuries before the miracle became official doctrine, as a literal interpretation of John 6:51: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."²⁷ The Bruges *Madonna* visualizes this passage through the descent of the Christ Child towards the altar, where the priest prepares the Host. This innovative element is similar to that of a popular Eucharistic trope disseminated by Northern printmakers in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the Mass of St. Gregory, in that both enforce the concept of Christ's presence in the Eucharist.

A belief in miracles is often strengthened by the act of seeing them occur—or, at the very least, hearing stories about someone seeing them occur.²⁸ The most prevalent Eucharistic stories concerning Transubstantiation began to appear in literature during the eighth century with the rise of saints' biographies and general theological texts. Saint Paschasius Radbert's *De Corpore et Sanguine Domini* includes four such stories, including that of the Mass of St. Gregory.²⁹ Having first appeared in a biography of Pope Gregory of the Great written by an anonymous

²⁷ Caroline Walker Bynum, "Seeing and Seeing Beyond: The Mass of St. Gregory in the Fifteenth Century," in *The Mind's Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*, eds. Jeffrey Hamburger and Anne-Marie Bouché (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 209; John 6:51.

²⁸ Miri Rubin. *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 113.

²⁹ Rubin, 116.

monk in 713, the story of the Mass of St. Gregory exists in a number of variations.³⁰ In all versions, St. Gregory the Great beseeches God to help him convince a doubting woman of the reality of Transubstantiation, resulting in an apparition of either a part of Christ's body or Christ as the Man of Sorrows appearing on the altar, thus converting the woman's doubts into ecstatic belief in the miraculous nature of the Host. Where the different versions vary, however, is in the form in which Christ appears on the altar.

In the original story, after St. Gregory prays for visual proof of Christ's presence in the Host, a single, bloodied finger replaces the bread that the doubting woman had provided to the then-pope.³¹ Later versions represent this bloodied finger transformed into an apparition of the Man of Sorrows, or a tortured Christ, who stands on the altar in all of his bloodied and beaten glory. As the more dramatic of the two, the latter version was better suited for visual expression and, perhaps more importantly, did not upset the concept of God's immutability that gave fifteenth-century theologians such anxiety.³² After all, images of the Mass of St. Gregory do not illustrate the actual transformation of bread and wine into flesh and blood, as such a

³⁰ William Roach, "Eucharistic Tradition in the Perlesvaus," *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie* 59 (1939): 16. Curiously, the story does not appear in Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*; for the entry on St. Gregory the Great, see Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 1: 171-184.

³¹ For more on an image of the Mass of St. Gregory featuring the bloodied finger, see Michael Heinlen, "An Early Image of a Mass of St. Gregory and Devotion to the Holy Blood at Weingarten Abbey," *Gesta* 37, no. 1 (1998): 55-62.

³² Bynum argues that Transubstantiation did not become official doctrine until the sixteenth century despite the orthodoxy of the belief centuries before for a good reason: it was very difficult, and remains difficult, to explain. According to Christian theology, God is changeless. Thus, Christ—the Son of God—cannot turn into bread. As Bynum explains, during the process of Transubstantiation, the bread and wine must turn into Christ "by ascending to join Christ where he resides with the angels in heaven" through the act of consecration; on the issue of change, see Bynum, 229-231. Although not properly defined in official doctrine until the sixteenth century, the word "transubstantiation" was in widespread use as early as the twelfth century. At the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, the belief in Transubstantiation was ruled as *de fide*, and therefore to deny it would be heresy; see Gary Macy, "The Dogma of Transubstantiation in the Middle Ages," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 45, no. 1 (1994): 11. Even after the Fourth Lateran Council, however, the theological specifics of Transubstantiation remained undefined. It was only after the Council of Trent that the concept of Transubstantiation within Eucharistic doctrine was elaborated on and became formally associated with the Aristotelian philosophy as first explained by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century; see Macy, 11-13; E.A. Livingstone, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006): 588, 596.

transformation defies illustration through its very invisibility, given the lack of outward change in the Host.³³ Rather, the images reinforce the belief that Christ is present in the Eucharist and, ironically, encourage the beholder to believe in this unseen presence.³⁴ Though subtle, this distinction is nonetheless important, as perceiving the presence of Christ was not a visible experience, but an experience that revolves around feeling the power of Christ's perceived presence, which could be stimulated through the use of images.³⁵

Images of the Mass of St. Gregory originated in Northern Europe and were especially popular during the fifteenth century in Germany and the Netherlands, where they were commonly found on the exterior of polyptych altarpieces and in print.³⁶ Given the lack of major Netherlandish altarpieces in Italy, much less ones featuring the Mass of St. Gregory, the image's transmittance from Northern to Southern Europe likely owes its success to the popularity of the subject in print, as prints were more travel-friendly than paintings and therefore were more widely circulated. The German printmaker and goldsmith Israhel van Meckenem alone made at least eight versions of the Mass of St. Gregory in the last half of the fifteenth century.³⁷ The series of prints demonstrates the codified iconography of St. Gregory's vision of Christ as the

³³ Bynum stresses the importance of the "unseeability" and immutability as concepts that defy visualization, and which lay at the heart of theological debates surrounding Transubstantiation before the Council of Trent made it official Church doctrine; see Bynum, 231-232. Achim Timmermann supports Bynum's argument, noting that an image of the Man of Sorrows on an altar would have done nothing to aid the viewer in perceiving Christ's presence—still "unseeable"—in the Host; see Achim Timmerman, "A View of the Eucharist on the Eve of the Protestant Reformation," in *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Reformation*, ed. Lee Palmer Wandel (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 392.

³⁴ Bynum, 232.

³⁵ Bynum, 232. While stories of Eucharistic miracles about the transformation of the Host into the body of Christ were recorded already in the eighth century, by the time images of the Mass of St. Gregory became popular in the fifteenth century, debates regarding Transfiguration had become far more nuanced than the one-to-one conversion of bread and body relayed in these medieval stories.

³⁶ Lynn Jacobs, "The Triptychs of Hieronymus Bosch," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 31, no. 4 (Winter 2000), 1033; Elena Fitzpatrick Sifford, "Hybridizing Iconography: The Miraculous Mass of St. Gregory Leatherwork from the Colegio de San José de los Naturales in Mexico City," in *ReVisioning: Critical Methods of Seeing Christianity in the History of Art*, eds. by James Romaine and Linda Stratford (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013), 133-134; Herbert Thurston, "The Mass of St. Gregory," *The Month: A Catholic Magazine* 112 (1908): 303.

³⁷ Fitzpatrick Sifford, 133.

Man of Sorrows appearing on the altar while surrounded by the instruments of the Passion.

Within the series, however, van Meckenem visualizes Christ's appearance in two distinct ways: either in half-length emerging from the altar as if it were a tomb or as a smaller-than-life-size figure standing directly on the mensa.³⁸ While the first type bears a striking resemblance to Hieronymus Bosch's painting of the Mass of Saint Gregory on the outer panels of the *Epiphany Triptych* (Fig. 37), thus demonstrating the continuity of imagery the theme experienced during this time, the latter anticipates Michelangelo's own innovations with the Bruges *Madonna*.³⁹

As with any image of the Mass of St. Gregory, both of van Meckenem's versions of St. Gregory's vision encourage the viewer to perceive Christ's presence on the altar and in the Eucharist. Depending on the print, van Meckenem conveys this divine presence with varying degrees of subtlety. In one of the more overt visualizations of Christ's presence in the Eucharist (Fig. 38), Christ as the Man of Sorrows rises from a sepulcher-like opening on top of the altar, his hands crossed over his chest as blood shoots from the wound in his side into the chalice placed on the altar. St. Gregory and two attendants kneel before the apparition, while others stand by, oblivious to their pope's vision. In a slightly altered version (Fig. 39), Christ appears to St. Gregory on the altar without the dramatic spurt of blood. Though both convey the divine presence, the former creates a one-to-one parallel between Christ's blood and the Communion wine, engaging the concept of "accident" versus "substance," while the latter suggests a general conception of Christ's presence in the Eucharist without directly equating his body with the

³⁸ Herbert Thurston notes three different "attitudes" (i.e. presentation methods) of Christ within prints depicting the Mass of St. Gregory from 1450-1510. The first shows Christ on the altar with his hands crossed over his abdomen, the second shows Christ pushing on his side so that blood spurts from his wound, and the third shows Christ rising from a tomb-like sepulcher situated on the altar; see Thurston, 303-306. van Meckenem's series of eight prints adhere to these three "attitudes" with minimal variation. Here, I have addressed two types instead of three, as van Meckenem situates Christ with crossed arms in the sepulcher, thus combining two "attitudes" as categorized by Thurston.

³⁹ I am grateful to Dr. William Wallace for suggesting the possible connection between the Mass of St. Gregory and the Bruges *Madonna*; conversation with author, April 23rd, 2015.

Host.⁴⁰ A third print (Fig. 40) shows a much smaller Christ standing directly on the altar as St. Gregory falls to his knees before the sight. Christ touches his wounded side, though the blood leaking from the wound does not fall into the chalice sitting on the mensa, while his other hand motions to a window-like opening where the tools of the Passion and symbols of martyrdom hang suspended in air. Given Christ's minute size, this final version of the print conveys less of a literal presence than a conceptual one, but Christ's placement directly on the mensa expresses a sense of physical immediacy. As depicted in this print, St. Gregory could easily reach up and touch the apparition of the Savior, whose stigmata-marred feet may just leave stains on the corporal.

Michelangelo adopts the same visual rhetoric as images of the Mass of St. Gregory in the Bruges *Madonna* to encourage the viewer's perception of Christ's presence during the performance of Mass. As a sculpture, the physicality of the Bruges *Madonna* conveys the presence of Christ in the Host more effectively than print or painted media, especially during the Elevation of the Host after the priest has consecrated it. Although Transubstantiation is invisible—the visual perception of the bread and wine remaining unchanged—the relationship between the statue of Christ and his mother and the Eucharistic wafer reinforces that a connection exists between the wafer and the Body of Christ. This connection could not be made with altarpieces that featured the Mass of St. Gregory on the exterior, such as the aforementioned *Epiphany Triptych* by Bosch, as the triptych would be opened in preparation for Mass, thus hiding its outer wings from the congregation. The Bruges *Madonna*'s unchanging place above the altar evokes a similar oscillation between physicality and phantasm as the van Meckenem

⁴⁰ “Accident” refers to the unchanging properties of the bread and the wine—their color, texture, taste, shape, size, etc.—while “substance” refers to the essence of the entity, which, during consecration, is the transformable element; see Livingstone, 4, 564.

print in which Christ appears directly on the altar in miniature form. As previously stressed, the physicality of the freestanding marble sculpture engages the liturgical space by occupying and displacing it in a way that painted panels and canvases did not. Yet the creamy white marble imbues the figures with an otherworldliness that—despite the convincing rendering of flesh and form—ensures that the viewer could never confuse the sculpture with living, breathing bodies. The result is a dramatization of the Elevation that provides a visual prompt through which the viewers may better conceptualize Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, as if they, too, are experiencing an otherworldly vision.

Much like the *Portinari Altarpiece*, we have no evidence that Michelangelo saw either printed or painted images of the Mass of St. Gregory, although such prints reached peak popularity in the final decades of the fifteenth century.⁴¹ In the unlikely case that Michelangelo was unfamiliar with such imagery, the visual rhetoric of placing Christ on the altar—or, in the case of the Bruges *Madonna*, directly above with the altar as an implied destination—speaks to a shared fascination with and a desire to promote the same strains of Eucharistic theology and religious thought in visual form. The increase of Eucharistic imagery featuring Christ as the Man of Sorrows, reflected in the popularity of the Mass of St. Gregory, maintains a strong link to the emphasis on Christ’s humanity that dominated the religious atmosphere of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, commonly referred to as the *Devotio Moderna*.⁴² Although the *Devotio Moderna* originated and was practiced predominantly in Northern Europe, the ideas it inspired were not limited to geographical boundaries, as demonstrated by the popularity of the Dutch author Thomas à Kempis’s *Imitatio Christi*, a text steeped in the teachings of the movement, in

⁴¹ Fitzpatrick Sifford, 133.

⁴² Moshe Barasch, “*Elevatio*: The Depiction of a Ritual Gesture,” *Artibus et Historiae* 24, no. 48 (2003): 55.

Italy.⁴³ As suggested by the title of Kempis's book, this movement encouraged its followers to imitate Christ in both their devotional exercises and daily lives. While this may seem at odds with the humanist culture of Florence, humanism and the *Devotio Moderna* sought a similar balance between meditation and action, and matters of religion profoundly affected Italian humanist thought.⁴⁴ The movement also encouraged an intimate connection between the devout and the subject of their devotion, which visual imagery could help stimulate.⁴⁵

The intense focus on Christ's human nature manifested itself in the celebration of and devotion to the Eucharist, which contained the Real Presence and, moreover, was thought to literally embody Christ's most human form: his corpse.⁴⁶ While images of the Mass of St. Gregory found mobility in print, the most common and arguably most effective place to express the humanity of Christ in relation to the Eucharist was above the altar itself. In the Bruges

⁴³ Koster, 137. Though not the founder of the movement, Thomas à Kempis was a prominent spokesperson for the *Devotio Moderna* and was educated by the Brethren of the Common Life, an association founded the founder of the *Devotio Moderna*, Geert Groote, that promoted a more personal experience of religion through meditation on Christ's divine nature as well as his humanity, the qualities of which devotees were encouraged to imitate in their daily lives; see Ricardo García-Villoslada, "Devotio Moderna," in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., vol. 4 (Detroit: Gale, 2003), 707-708.

⁴⁴ The Italian humanist Aurelio Brandolini wrote, "Christ should be imitated by us in every aspect of life... Do you dare to call yourself a Christian if you do not follow the precepts of your author and leader Christ, nor imitate his example?... if you wish to be called a Christian... you must not only worship Christ in observing the sacraments but also imitate him in your life." As quoted in Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 317, 451. Timothy Verdon refers to Italian humanist's attempts to combine the learning of the ancients with the truths of the Church as not only an "achievement" but "genius"; Timothy Verdon, "Christianity, the Renaissance, and the Study of History: Environments of Experience and Imagination," in *Christianity and the Renaissance: Image and Religious Imagination in the Quattrocento*, eds. Timothy Verdon and John Henderson (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 31. For more on the intersection between Renaissance Humanism and Christianity, see John O'Malley, "The Religious and Theological Culture of Michelangelo's Rome, 1508-1512," in Edgar Wind, *The Religious Symbolism of Michelangelo: The Sistine Ceiling*, ed. Elizabeth Sears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), xli-xliii.

⁴⁵ Lane, *The Altar*, 9. Koster credits the Florentine preacher Fra Manfredi da Vercelli for importing ideas associated with the *Devotio Moderna* to Florence in the early fifteenth century, including the importance of visualization during devotional meditation; see Koster, 139.

⁴⁶ George Devlin, "Corpus Christi: A Study in Medieval Eucharistic Theory, Devotion, and Practice" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1975), 16-17; Devlin traces the origins of this Christological outlook to the Carolingian period, but argues that devotion to the humanity of Christ reached its peak with the institutionalization of the feast of Corpus Christi by Pope Urban IV in 1264. He remarks that the "great age of Eucharistic devotion", however, occurred in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and experienced a revival during the Catholic Reformation; see Devlin, 17, 269-308.

Madonna, Michelangelo employs the same visual rhetoric as the Mass of St. Gregory in order to communicate Christ's presence in the Host but eschews representing Christ as the Man of Sorrows. Rather than express Christ's human nature through his physical body post-Crucifixion, Michelangelo chooses to emphasize Christ's humanity by depicting him as a young child taking leave of his mother. Michelangelo's Christ Child has yet to experience the suffering and torture that results in his incarnation as the Man of Sorrows. This invites the viewer not only to relate Christ's presence to that of the Host due to the statue's placement above the altar, but also to engage psychologically with the innocence of a young child whose bloody ending is known to all, including the Madonna. The faithful viewer is thus forced to endure the realization that this sweet, innocent Christ Child, no older than a toddler, will eventually bear the pain of bodily torture and a brutal death for the sake of the viewer's salvation.

Images of the Mass of St. Gregory, whether on the outside wings of triptychs or rendered in print, demonstrate one way that artists visually communicated and encouraged belief in the tenets of Eucharistic theology that dominated the devotional atmosphere of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century. Michelangelo sought to express those same concepts in the Bruges *Madonna*, indicating Christ's literal presence on the altar through the downward movement of the Christ Child. Though not strictly necessary in either the liturgy or moments of personal devotion, images such as these acted as an aid to understanding during the performance of Mass as well as a stimulus for personal devotion through a visual connection. This emphasis on Christ's humanity and devotional objects as emotional stimulants manifested itself in other image tropes during the same period, namely in images featuring the *Pietà*, a subject in which Michelangelo had firsthand experience.

Pietà as Precursor

During his work on the Bruges *Madonna*, Michelangelo's most profound artistic influence was most certainly himself. When he began to carve the Madonna and Child from a pristine block of Carrara marble, the Rome *Pietà*, which he had finished just a few years earlier, surely informed the process. The similarities between the Rome *Pietà* and the Bruges *Madonna* have not gone unnoticed. In Weinberger's words, the two sculptures are unmistakably "sisters," and their strong familial resemblance reveals the continuity of Michelangelo's thought process as he moved from one sculpture of the Madonna and Son to another.⁴⁷

As with the Bruges *Madonna*, the Rome *Pietà* demonstrates Michelangelo's ability to solve problems inherent to his medium and subject matter. In the *Pietà*, his main issue was one of proportions: how to situate the body of a full-grown man on a woman's lap in a believable manner. He did this by disguising the Madonna's lower half beneath cascades of drapery that distract the viewer's eye from her impossibly large lower body.⁴⁸ This was a perceived improvement on the compositions of previous Pietàs, a traditionally sculptural theme originating from Northern Europe.⁴⁹ As we have previously seen, Michelangelo invoked this same spirit of innovation whilst working on the Bruges *Madonna*, challenging stereotypical compositions of the Mother and Child as he sought to create an effective altarpiece in the form of a single freestanding sculpture.

A visual comparison of the Madonnas erases any doubt as to the correlation between the two statues. In addition to their aforementioned sisterly, even twin-like faces (Fig. 41), the similar style of their clothing indicates that Michelangelo crafted the titular figure of the Bruges

⁴⁷ Weinberger, 111; Hibbard, 46.

⁴⁸ Hibbard, 46; John Dixon Jr., *The Christ of Michelangelo: An Essay on Carnal Spirituality* (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1994), 94.

⁴⁹ Ziegler briefly traces the evolution of the theme across Northern Europe in Ziegler, "Michelangelo," 28-29.

Madonna in the likeness of the *Madonna of the Rome Pietà*. Although the former is clothed more moderately, whereas fabric practically consumes the latter, both *Madonnas* wear mantles that cross over their backs (Fig. 42), the excess material of which they use to protectively embrace the bodies of the Christ figures (Fig. 43). Such a gesture emphasizes the maternal, protective relationship between mother and Son. Moreover, it insists on the sacrificial nature of the depicted moments, regardless of the differing functions of the sculptures themselves. Whether utilized as a funerary monument or an altarpiece, the Virgin's mantle embracing Christ's body parallels the act of laying the consecrated Host on top of the liturgical corporal, which itself acts as a symbol for Christ's death shroud.⁵⁰ Moreover, the *Madonnas* sit on similar rock-cut stools, thus representing an image of the Virgin *super petram*, or the Virgin sitting on a literal rock that symbolically represents Christ as the foundation of the Church.⁵¹

While Michelangelo continues to challenge traditional compositions as he strives to achieve maximum visual effect, the *Bruges Madonna* suggests an element of self-restraint—or at the very least, developments in artistic maturity—not present in the earlier sculpture.⁵² The *Bruges Madonna* is noticeably more subdued than its precursor, which boasts a proto-baroque style of drapery that anticipates the works of Gian Lorenzo Bernini over a century later. In the *Bruges Madonna*, Michelangelo has calmed the cascading fabric of the *Pietà*, opting instead for

⁵⁰ Goffen, "Mary's Motherhood," 46.

⁵¹ Weil Garris Posner notes that this imagery corresponds to contemporary scriptural citations made in 1492 by Italian theologian Bernardino de Bustis (*Officium Conceptionis Virginis Mariae*), in which he states that the *Madonna* is founded eternally "*super petram*" and that "*per petram autem in S. scriptura intelligitur Christus*"; this is an expansion of Hibbard's earlier observations about the symbolic nature of the stone block upon which the *Madonna* sits in Michelangelo's *Madonna of the Stairs*, as an image of the *Madonna* supporting Christ while sitting on a rock symbolically conveys that the *Madonna* both supports and is supported by Christ, exactly like the Church itself; see Weil Garris Posner, n. 64; Hibbard, 28.

⁵² Tolnay asserts that between the years of 1501 and 1505, Michelangelo began to subordinate a richness of details to the larger conception of the whole. His works become "stricter" in both emotion and form; Tolnay, *Michelangelo*, 11. We see this clearly when comparing the *Rome Pietà* and the *Bruges Madonna*, namely in the sobered style of the latter, in which emotions are directed inward rather than projected outward, resulting in a more stoic representation that lacks the earlier sculpture's frantic garments.

a more restrained flow of garments that reacts more naturally to the volume of the Madonna's body and the forces inflicted upon it by the Christ Child's movement, excepting the collection of fabric around his head. The vertical character of the statue also forms a more severe pyramidal composition that preserves a sense of the marble block from which Michelangelo carved it, imbuing the group with a sense of permanence above the altar. Such verticality also reflects the common preference for altarpieces to privilege height over width, thus complementing both the upward thrust of most church architecture while symbolically representing an orientation towards the divine. Despite its considerable girth and enormous weight, the flowing drapery of the Rome *Pietà*, on the other hand, creates a sense of impermanence and fluidity corresponding to the transience of the moment depicted, as if at any moment the figures might turn to a cascade of crashing water.

In many ways, the Bruges *Madonna* and Rome *Pietà* stand in opposition to one another as two ends of the same spectrum. Both sculptures depict a two-person group of the Madonna and Child, though the Rome *Pietà* presents the theme more abstractly in that it returns Christ to his mother's lap as a grown man following his death. The Bruges *Madonna* depicts the exact opposite. Still entangled in his mother's robes, the Christ Child slips from the Madonna's lap on wobbly, chubby legs to take the first step of his journey towards the *Via Dolorosa*. Considered part and parcel with its installation above the altar, the viewer becomes intimately aware that the Child will not return to the safety of his mother's supportive body while his heart still beats. Thus the Rome *Pietà* and the Bruges *Madonna* form a quasi-inverted prophecy, with Michelangelo contemplating the Christ Child leaving the Madonna only a few years after he had executed a statue that showing the exact opposite: Christ's return to his mother, not as a child but as a corpse.

Despite the contrasting moments depicted, the two sculptures emphasize a profound moment of separation between mother and Son. This element of physical and/or psychological separation appears in all of Michelangelo's early Madonnas, in which the sculptor consistently juxtaposes maternal gestures with psychological introspection.⁵³ With the exception of the *Doni Tondo*, none of Michelangelo's early Madonnas actively look at the Christ figure; from the *Madonna of the Stairs* to the Rome *Pietà* to the Bruges *Madonna*, the Madonna's gaze appears to move beyond the physical body of her Son.⁵⁴ Even as she looks outward, a sense of psychological contemplation pulls her focus inward. While impending separation is inherent to any image of the Madonna and Child, Michelangelo's predecessors and contemporaries rarely gave visual expression to this foreboding sense of rupture between Mother and Son. Michelangelo's insistence on portraying such mental or physical separation between mother and Son emphasizes the Madonna's prescience while also playing on the viewer's own human experience.⁵⁵

Although images of the Madonna and Child are universally relatable, the depiction of the Virgin Mary as the ideal mother often required a suspension of belief on the behalf of the Renaissance viewer, whose lived experience likely did not parallel such an ideal given the high infant mortality rate and the number of women who died during childbirth.⁵⁶ Indeed, this was the trajectory of Michelangelo's own experience, given that his mother, Francesca del Sera, died in childbirth when he was only six years old.⁵⁷ Although little is known about his relationship with his mother, Michelangelo's repeated engagement with images of the Madonna, most of which

⁵³ Dixon, 92.

⁵⁴ Dixon, 92.

⁵⁵ Goffen, "Mary's Motherhood," 35

⁵⁶ Goffen also states that the relationship between mother and children, especially in the higher echelons of society, differed greatly from the idealized relationship between the Madonna and Christ, as children were often handed off to wet nurses and caretakers shortly after birth; see Goffen, "Mary's Motherhood," 35-36.

⁵⁷ Hibbard, 15.

carry an element of separation or loss, suggests how deeply affected he was by his own loss, perhaps seeking personal catharsis through his art.⁵⁸ Moreover, the Rome *Pietà* and Bruges *Madonna* encourage the viewer to consider the Madonna's pain as she meditates on her Son's death, realized or impending. Even more so than general images of the Madonna and Child, Michelangelo's portrayal of maternal separation was surely more universal than the smiling Madonnas of Leonardo or Raphael. Rather than focus on the experience of an ideal relationship between Mother and Son, Michelangelo focuses on the universal possibility—even the promise—of Renaissance motherhood, in which life is innately tied to death. The Madonna, whose own experience of motherhood involves the prescient knowledge of her Son's death, provides an ideal platform for such meditations.⁵⁹ Michelangelo's Rome *Pietà* and Bruges *Madonna* both capitalize on this pathos of loss, encouraging the viewer to meditate on the Madonna's own sacrifice, through which the faithful will find their rebirth.

Michelangelo's patrons, Cardinal Bilhères and the Mouscron brothers, certainly dictated the subject matter of their respective statues. Nevertheless, the *Pietà*'s subject—a quiet moment post-Deposition and pre-Entombment in which Mary grieves over the dead body of her Son—has an element of separation built into its thematic core. As previously mentioned, although all images of the Madonna and Child act as preludes to the later tragedy of Christ's life, Michelangelo is one of the first artists to actively incorporate a sense of this foreboding into his

⁵⁸ Psychiatrist and Freudian psychoanalyst Robert Liebert addresses the significance of Michelangelo's early loss of his mother and his wet nurse and how this loss manifested itself in the artist's depictions of the Madonna and Child. He argues that the detached state of the several of Michelangelo's early Madonnas conveys "an emotionally unavailable mother," and may be interpreted as a reflection of the artist's own experiences; see Robert Liebert, *Michelangelo: A Psychoanalytic Study of His Life and Images* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 73-101, esp. 95-99. Similar interpretations of Michelangelo's early Marian imagery are also noted in Dixon, 98; Hibbard, 15; Wallace, *Michelangelo*, 32.

⁵⁹ Tolnay, *Art and Thought*, 34.

Madonna and Child imagery.⁶⁰ In the Bruges *Madonna*, Michelangelo's innovative placement of the Christ Child between the Madonna's knees in a deliberate act of departure communicates a literal separation more clearly than any other image he produced of the subject during this time. The Madonna's unmistakable resemblance to that of the Rome *Pietà* and the emphasis on separation present in both sculptures suggests just how heavily the shadow of the Rome *Pietà* must have loomed over the process of making the Bruges *Madonna*.

Signifiers of Change

As freestanding sculptures of traditional subjects, the Rome *Pietà* and the Bruges *Madonna* also fit into a broader history of religious sculpture depicting the Madonna and Christ. As the scholarship of Joanna Ziegler and Ilene Forsyth has shown, during the Middle Ages and even into the early Renaissance, freestanding sculptures depicting the Madonna and Child or the *Pietà* were often treated as cult objects. These sculptures, usually made of polychrome or gilded wood, were not merely thought of as representations of their subject but as proxies for the Virgin Mary and Christ, which could work as mediators or vehicles of communication between the worshiper and the divine.⁶¹ Such sculptures were worshipped not as art objects but as religious instruments, and their veneration was not limited to visual meditation, often resulting in a physical metamorphosis of the sculptures over time due to practical wear, changing fashions, and

⁶⁰ Goffen, *Rivals*, 113.

⁶¹ Ilene Forsyth, 9-10; Forsyth notes that such idols of Christianity were not limited to a specific geographic area or culture but existed in religious communities all over Europe, with examples found as far east as Hungary. Their origins, however, are unknown; see Ilene Forsyth, 3-8.

the effects of physical adoration, which has led Jules Helbig to refer to the statues as “abandoned to devotion.”⁶²

As an altarpiece and tomb monument, respectively, the Bruges *Madonna* and the Rome *Pietà* were made with particular functions in mind; unlike the miraculous nature of many cult statues, however, they did not literally function. With their subject matter and placement, Michelangelo’s statues could inspire devotion or prayer and visually communicate aspects of Church doctrine and/or common religious narratives. Michelangelo’s medium, however, rejects the most common elements associated with medieval cult statues: mobility and physical interaction on behalf of the devotee. The weight of marble denies easy transportation around the church or through the streets, its hardness rejects change despite its paradoxical brittleness, and the *Madonna*’s carved clothing discourages the urge to add additional fabrics.⁶³ In the case of both the Rome *Pietà* and Bruges *Madonna*, the fact that the patrons would have likely dictated materials and subject matter to the artist reinforces the statues’ place within this changing tradition.⁶⁴ After all, Cardinal Bilhères and the Mouscron brothers commissioned an artist who worked primarily with marble to create their desired works. Clearly, these men were not looking for traditional objects of worship. Rather, they desired works of art that could inspire devotion

⁶² Ziegler recounts that many statues of the *Pietà* exhibit holes or “damage” due to pilgrims pinning votive offerings to the statues themselves, leaving the wood “marred”—as it would be considered by most art conservators—by this religious interaction. She also notes that generations of worshipers have “gilded, dressed, rubbed, [and] washed” such sculptures, all of which left a physical imprint on the statues themselves; Joanna Ziegler, “The Medieval Virgin as Object: Art or Anthropology?” in *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 16, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 261. For Helbig’s comment, see Jules Helbig, *L’Art Mosan depuis l’introduction du Christianisme jusqu’à la fin du XVIIIe siècle*, vol. 1 (Brussels: G. van Oest & Co., 1906), 124.

⁶³ Ziegler notes that the medium of marble “insists on itself as itself” as a sculptural material that usually remains “materially nude”; Ziegler, “Michelangelo,” 23. This is, of course, a gross generalization. Michelangelo’s sculptures—and marble sculptures in general—could *potentially* be dressed and painted by subsequent generations. Nothing about the material inherently prevents this from happening. Ziegler’s argument, however, relies on the material as it relates to Michelangelo’s intentions and wishes. Unlike medieval sculptors producing sculptures of the Virgin and Child that might someday become cult objects, the growing status of the artist in Renaissance society attached value to the artist’s intention.

⁶⁴ Ziegler, “Michelangelo,” 33.

through both their aesthetic beauty and sacred subject matter. While it was Michelangelo's job to bring such desires to fruition, he was not merely a craftsman who substituted marble for wood but an artist whose intellectual engagement with both theology and aesthetics revolutionized the traditional subject matters themselves.

Unlike the Rome *Pietà*, which marked a singular break from the sculptural tradition of the *Pietà* type, the Bruges *Madonna* is merely one example in a continuous narrative of changing attitudes towards religious sculpture during the Renaissance.⁶⁵ Given the ubiquity of the Madonna and Child in both Northern and Southern Europe, precedents for such a change had already been set by the Madonnas of Jacopo della Quercia and Donatello, amongst others. The Bruges *Madonna*'s lone presence within a niche above an altar, however, creates a distinct visual connection between the Bruges *Madonna* and the ancient idols of pagan altars.⁶⁶ Rather than subvert Christian tradition, Michelangelo harnesses the power and beauty of marble sculpture—the primary material of the Romans—for a Christian subject depicted in an object utilized for Christian purposes.⁶⁷ Though by no means gone, as the coming decades of the sixteenth century would prove, the fear of pagan idolatry that had haunted the Church for centuries appears to have

⁶⁵ Ziegler, "Michelangelo," 33.

⁶⁶ Tolnay speaks of all of Michelangelo's early religious works, including the Bruges *Madonna*, as if they are more pagan in nature than Christian. Indeed, that is precisely his argument. He claims that Michelangelo's Virgins are interchangeable with Sibyls, just as a putto is interchangeable with Jesus; Tolnay, *Art and Thought*, 58-59. Fenichel disagrees with Tolnay's privileging of pagan implications over Christian ones, specifically in regards to Michelangelo's Madonnas. Instead, she argues that Renaissance minds linked the Virgin to pagan sibyls due to her prophetic nature, which was already given visual form in the fifteenth-century works of Masaccio and Giovanni Pisano. Michelangelo's Madonnas remain very much within the Christian tradition, which has already subsumed the iconography of prophetic sibyls to signal Mary's own prophetic nature; Fenichel, 12-13, 32-48.

⁶⁷ Ilene Forsyth argues that the reliquary—in containing the physical remains of a saint—was a key bridge in the process of making Christian that which was once associated with paganism (i.e. idols). She compares this process to the conversion of pagan temples into Christian churches by way of installing relics and dedication to Christian saints; Ilene Forsyth, 81.

quieted enough to allow for the installation of a freestanding marble sculpture above an altar.⁶⁸ Thus, as one of the first of its kind, the Bruges *Madonna* demonstrates not only Michelangelo's radical innovation of the traditional altarpiece but, more broadly, the changing perceptions of sculpture as religious art in the Renaissance.

⁶⁸ Camille notes that Renaissance artists who had contact with antique sculpture almost certainly knew that such sculptures had once been idols; Michael Camille, *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image-Making in Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 341.

Conclusion: The Bruges *Madonna* Today

In terms of cult worship, Michelangelo's Bruges *Madonna* has lived a thoroughly unspectacular life. Its status as an art object—something costly and precious—has arguably prevented it from becoming a vessel of religious belief in the way that so many other statues of the Virgin and Child have.¹ Pilgrims have not reverently gouged pins into its unyielding flesh, locals have not dressed it in contemporary clothing, and, given its sheer weight, crowds of worshippers have never paraded it through Bruges on feast days.² Moreover, while its nearly pristine condition following two different wartime kidnappings certainly suggests divine intervention, it has not, to my knowledge, performed any miracles. On the contrary, it has existed in relative obscurity, in no small part due to its location far away from the usual sites where tourists and art historians alike go to see and study Michelangelo's works. Recent events, however, have produced an increased interest in Michelangelo's most underrated work.

Hailed as a work by the "divine" Michelangelo and introduced to pop culture via both the book and movie version of *The Monuments Men*, the Bruges *Madonna* has become an object to be looked at but not truly seen, the subject of a casual photograph rather than an object of reverence. A growing aura of fame and the cult-worship of famous artists as opposed to objects have largely detracted from the sculpture's liturgical function. Few of the tourists who flock to gaze upon the Madonna and Child today likely acknowledge the statue's devotional significance, even though it remains in place as an altarpiece within the sanctity of a church. Unlike so many of Michelangelo's works, one cannot blame such a change on secular museum environments or highly altered viewing arrangements, as the sculpture still remains on the altar for which it was

¹ For more on the perceived power of medieval statues of the Madonna and Child, see Ziegler, "The Medieval Virgin," 251-256.

² Many of these statues still function as cult objects of worship today; for one such example, see Ziegler, "The Medieval Virgin," 258-260.

made over half a millennium ago. From increased tourist traffic alone, liturgical activity within the Mouscron Chapel, now called the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, appears to have declined as the fame of the Bruges *Madonna* continues to rise.

The Church of Our Lady in Bruges has responded to recent events in history, placing a bulletproof panel in front of the statue to prevent any potential dangers to the statue's well being.³ Like so many churches containing artistic masterpieces, the church charges a small admission fee for visitors whose primary reasons for visiting do not include worship.⁴ Moreover, the church regularly places fresh flowers on the center of the altar directly below the statue's base, a gesture that appears to pay homage to both the altar and the statue itself, as do the votive candles available for visitors to light within the confines of the chapel. This inspires the unanswerable question of how many candles over the years have been lit in honor of the Bruges *Madonna*—or Michelangelo himself—rather than in earnest supplication to the Madonna and Christ Child. Regardless of their dedication, the candles offer visitors the opportunity to engage in an act of devotion—to the art, the artist, the Madonna and Child, or a combination of all three.

In addition to increased tourist attention, a symposium held at the Nederlands Interuniversitair Kunsthistorisch Instituut in 2010 entitled “Michelangelo's *Madonna and Child* in Bruges: Context and Reception” indicates that the Bruges *Madonna* has begun to attract significant attention from scholars as well. This attention, however, has not yielded any scholarly publications, indicating that progress still needs to be made to shine light on Michelangelo's most underrated—and arguably one of his most beautiful—works. This thesis argues for the

³ In 1972, Laszlo Toth infamously attacked the Rome *Pietà* with a hammer, resulting in major damages to the sculpture's arm and face; see Deoclecio Redig de Campos, “La *Pietà* di Michelangelo e il suo restauro,” *Bolletino dei monumenti, musei e gallerie pontificie* 1 (1977): 33-39.

⁴ As lamented by many tourists on major travel websites, however, the church's current renovations intermittently disrupt the statue's visibility. The church's website, <http://www.onthaalkerk-brugge.be>, last available in December 2015, is also under construction.

importance of the Bruges *Madonna*, both in Michelangelo's oeuvre and within the history of the altarpiece, and has proved its merit as an object deserving of serious art historical inquiry.

While Michelangelo made the Bruges *Madonna* on commission, the sculpture does not merely represent an exchange of goods between artist and patron. Rather, it demonstrates the artist's profound concern for its divine subject matter and his thorough consideration of the sculpture's liturgical context. In addition to being deeply entrenched in theology, the Bruges *Madonna* marks a daring attempt to innovate the traditional forms of the altarpiece without sacrificing the narrative possibilities of retables, paintings, and multi-media ensembles. To accomplish this, Michelangelo appropriated and transformed the work of other artists, employed popular artistic tropes, and reflected on his own past work to create a sculpture that communicated traditional theological themes without the aid of anything but the altar itself. In doing so, he showed his artistic prowess in the expert manipulation of his chosen materials as well as his ability to convey complicated theological concepts in a single block of marble.

Figures



Figure 1 – Michelangelo, Bruges *Madonna*, c. 1503-1506, Carrara marble, Bruges, Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk

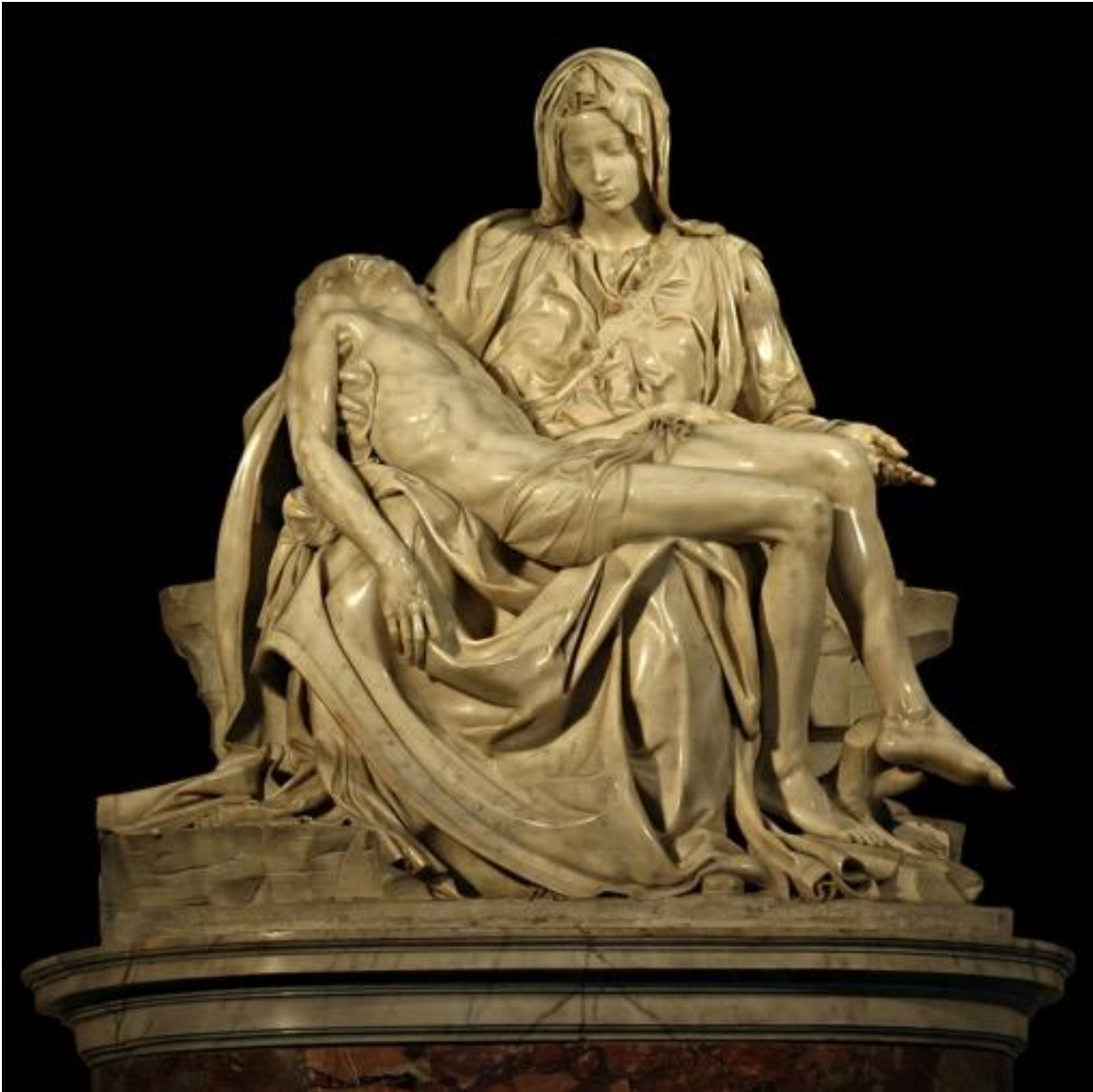


Figure 2 – Michelangelo, *Pietà*, 1498-1499, Carrara marble, Vatican City, St. Peter's Basilica



Figure 3 – Michelangelo, *David*, 1501-1504, Carrara marble, Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi



Figure 4 – Michelangelo, Drawing of Cascina figures / Bruges *Madonna*, recto, c. 1503-1504, London, British Museum



Figure 5 – Michelangelo, Drawing of Cascina figures / Bruges *Madonna*, detail, recto, c. 1503-1504, London, British Museum



Figure 6 – Michelangelo, Drawing of Cascina figures and child, verso, c. 1503-1504, London, British Museum



Figure 7 – Andrea Sansovino, *Virgin, Child, and St. Anne*, 1512, marble, Rome, Sant'Agostino



Figure 8 – Placement of Bruges *Madonna* in the central niche of the *Piccolomini Altar* in Siena as proposed by Harold Mancusi-Ungaro



Figure 9 – Bruges *Madonna*, detail of button on sleeve



Figure 10 – Bruges *Madonna*, detail of Christ's hand



Figure 11 – Bruges *Madonna*, view from above



Figure 12 – Bruges *Madonna*, detail of expressions

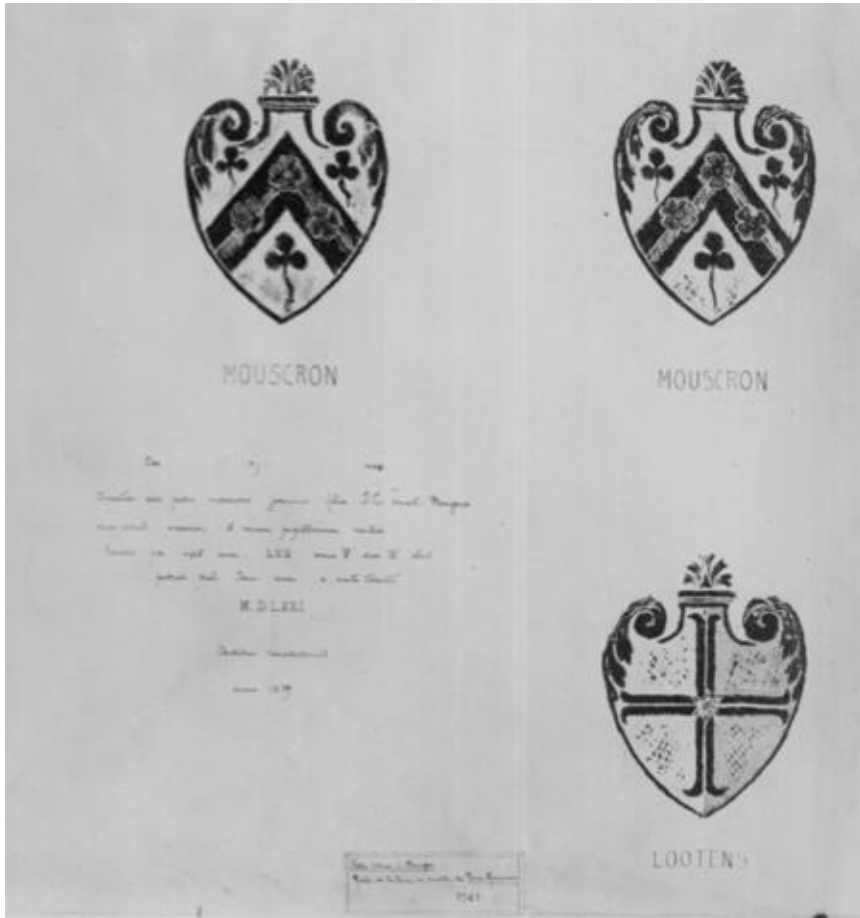


Figure 13 – Mouscron Coat of Arms, as copied from Pierre Mouscron’s funerary slab along with a transcription of his funerary inscription, Musées royaux d'Art et d'Histoire



Figure 14 – Bruges *Madonna*, detail of mantle



Figure 15 – Bruges *Madonna*, emphasis on the lighting



Figure 16 – Perugino, *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints John the Evangelist and Augustine*, 1494, Cremona, Sant'Agostino



Figure 17 – Bruges *Madonna*, detail of rock base



Figure 18 – Piero della Francesca, *Madonna of Mercy*, c. 1460-62, Sansepolcro, Museo Civico di Sansepolcro



Figure 19 – Paolo Veneziano, *Madonna Enthroned*, c. 1340, Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia



Figure 20 – Detail of Bruges *Madonna*, side views



Figure 21 – Detail of Bruges *Madonna*, Christ Child



Figure 22 – Detail of Bruges *Madonna*, Christ Child



Figure 23– *Pietà*, detail of the Madonna cradling Christ



Figure 24– Bruges *Madonna*, detail of the Madonna's book



Figure 25– Bruges *Madonna*, detail of Madonna



Figure 26– Bruges *Madonna*, detail of Christ's feet



Figure 27 – Rogier van der Weyden, detail from the *Seven Sacraments Triptych*, c. 1440-1445, Antwerp, Royal Museum of Fine Arts



Figure 28 – Reconstruction of Bruges *Madonna* during the Elevation of the Host



Figure 29 – Jacopo della Quercia and Workshop, *The San Martino Altarpiece*, c. 1400-1419, Siena, Chiesa di San Martino



Figure 30 – Leonardo da Vinci, *The Burlington House Cartoon*, c. 1499-1508, London, National Gallery



Figure 31 – Michelangelo, Drawing after Leonardo, c. 1501, Oxford, Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology



Figure 32 – Hugo van der Goes, *Portinari Altarpiece*, c. 1470, Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi



Figure 33 – Hugo van der Goes, *Portinari Altarpiece*, exterior



Figure 34 – Jan van Eyck, *Ghent Altarpiece*, c. 1430, Ghent, Sint Baafskathedraal



Figure 35 – Rogier van der Weyden, *Nativity Triptych*, exterior, c. 1450, Berlin, Staatliche Museen



Figure 36 – Rogier van der Weyden, *Seven Sacraments Triptych*, detail



Figure 37 – Hieronymus Bosch, *Epiphany Triptych*, exterior. 1480, Madrid, Museo del Prado



Figure 38 – Israhel van Meckenem, *Mass of St. Gregory*, c. 1480-1485, engraving, Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art



Figure 39 – Israel van Meckenem, *Mass of St. Gregory*, c. 1490-1500, engraving, Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art



Figure 40 – Israel van Meckenem, *Mass of St. Gregory*, c. 1480-1490, engraving, Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art



Figure 41 – Comparison of Rome *Pietà* and Bruges *Madonna*



Figure 42 – Comparison of Rome *Pietà* and Bruges *Madonna*



Figure 43 – Comparison of Rome *Pietà* and Bruges *Madonna*

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