

A rediscovered altarpiece by Pietro da Cortona and insights into the collaboration between the master and his pupils

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THIS ARTICLE ILLUMINATES the working methods of Pietro da Cortona and his collaboration with his assistants and pupils during the last fifteen years of his life, when the artist received a large number of commissions but also suffered from poor health. Donatella Sparti has studied his studio practice in his workshop in via della Pedacchia, Rome, to which he moved in 1652.¹ It appears to have been a sort of 'industrial production line', whereby the master conceived the composition and made the *abbozzi*, while part of the overpainting (in some cases, all of it) was entrusted to his pupil-collaborators who had proved their ability to assimilate his pictorial language. According to Sparti, this was a fluid entrepreneurial arrangement between master and assistants. Now two paintings can be added to his later *œuvre*.

A large altarpiece, identified by some early sources as the work of Pietro da Cortona but lost from view since 1867, has come to light (Fig. 13). The earliest references to it, when it was in the Dominican church in Forlì (known both as S. Domenico and S. Giacomo Apostolo), are in two eighteenth-century manuscripts. The first, dated c.1750–70, is by the painter and writer Giuseppe Marchetti (Forlì, 1722–1801) who names Cortona as its author (see Appendix 1 below). Marchetti's attribution merits attention because he worked in S. Domenico, painting frescos and altarpieces, and consequently knew the church and its history well.² He described the subject of the work as St James the Less exorcising a woman.

The altarpiece was also seen in the Dominican church by Luigi Lanzi, who, in his manuscript notes on his travels in Romagna in 1782, identified the subject as St James the Less

preaching and praised the work for its style and colour, especially for the *contrapposto* of the women in the foreground (see Appendix 2).³ In contrast, he thought poorly of Cortona's celebrated *Martyrdom of St Lawrence* in the church of SS. Michele e Gaetano in Florence. While the Bolognese art historian Marcello Oretti, writing in 1777, seemed unsure of the attribution,⁴ the local scholar Lucio Bosi, writing in 1820, was confident that it was the work of Cortona.⁵ The last person to record the work in Forlì was Giovanni Casali who, in his guide to Forlì of 1838,⁶ and again in his revised edition of 1863,⁷ listed an altarpiece by Pietro da Cortona of St John Chrysostom evicting the adulteress from the temple in the presbytery of the Dominican church of S. Giacomo Apostolo. On 1st January 1867 the church was closed, following the unification of Italy,⁸ and many of its works of art were moved to other churches in the city or entered the civic art gallery. However, there was no further trace of some of the paintings, including Cortona's altarpiece, which was probably sold by the monks. Casali's references to the painting were ignored in subsequent monographs and articles on Cortona.

Lanzi referred to the '*bellissimo contrapposto di figure*' (the two central female figures) and especially to the '*colorito vivo*' of which the latter is still partly visible today in the light blue of the chasuble of the saint and in the women's drapery, despite its less than perfect state of preservation. The painting, today in a private collection, was bought in Forlì by a Roman collector in the late nineteenth century.⁹

The subject is evidently St James the Less preaching before a ruler. James the Less was believed to be the brother or the cousin

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¹ See D.L. Sparti: *La casa di Pietro da Cortona. Architettura, accademia, atelier e officina*, Rome 1997, pp. 53–68. Regarding the delegation of the work by Cortona to his pupil-collaborators, see also E. Fumagalli: 'Le "ambiguità" di Pietro da Cortona e la prima attività di Ciro Ferri', *Paragone* 48 (1997), pp. 50–51.

² See M. Foschi and G. Viroli, eds.: *Il San Domenico di Forlì. La chiesa, il luogo, la città*, Bologna 1991, p. 146. On Giuseppe Marchetti, see G. Viroli: *Pittura del Seicento e del Settecento a Forlì*, Bologna 1996, pp. 179–89.

³ Lanzi also recorded a painting by Pietro da Cortona of St James preaching in the Dominican church at Imola ('né poco vasta è la Predicazione di S. Jacopo in Imola alla chiesa de' Domenicani'); see L. Lanzi: *Storia pittorica della Italia, Tomo primo*, Bassano 1795–96, p. 504. However, this could be an error, as the Imolese scholar Giovanni Nicolò Villa observed in his description of paintings in Imola, which he began writing in 1794, that the painting in S. Domenico of Imola mentioned in Lanzi's book did not exist: 'Né nella chiesa presente de' Domenicani, né nella sagrestia, e neppure nel convento ritrovo questa pittura. Stupisco come il Sig. Abate Lanzi, che ne fa parola nel suo passaggio per Imola non ne verificasse la esistenza'; G.N. Villa: *Pitture della città di Imola*, ed. C. Pedrini, Imola 2001 (a CD-ROM accompanies the book). It is possible that Lanzi, or one of his collaborators, had confused Imola with Forlì. Briganti included the painting

indicated by Lanzi in Imola among the artist's lost works; see G. Briganti: *Pietro da Cortona o della pittura barocca*, Florence 1982, p. 363 (with earlier literature).

⁴ 'Santo che pare essere opera di Pietro da Cortona'. Oretti's manuscript ('Pitture nella città di Forlì descritte da Marcello Oretti bolognese nell'anno 1777') was published in O. Piraccini, ed.: *Il patrimonio culturale della Provincia di Forlì, II, Gli edifici di culto del centro storico di Forlì*, Forlì 1974, p. 50.

⁵ 'Evvi lateralmente nel coro altri due quadri, l'uno a mano destra rappresentante S. Giacomo Apostolo di Pietro da Cortona, e l'altro il Ven. P. Orselli Domenicano di Felice Cignani'. Bosi's manuscript ('Serie, ossia raccolta delle iscrizioni lapidarie antiche esistenti nelle chiese di Forlì e descrizione delle medesime chiese e descrizione di tutte le sculture e pitture, che in esse vi esistono, con l'indicazione certa dei rispettivi loro autori e pittori'), dated 1820, was published in Piraccini, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 67.

⁶ G. Casali: *Guida per la città di Forlì*, Forlì 1838, p. 33: 'Il coro e il presbiterio di questa chiesa [la chiesa di San Giacomo Apostolo di Forlì] ci offrono anch'essi de' bei dipinti. All'altar maggiore vedesi la Vergine col Bambino, s. Giuseppe, s. Jacopo ap., e s. Domenico, dipinti da Ignazio Stern discepolo del Cignani: li due laterali a questo esprimenti il b. Francesco Orselli, e s. Giovanni Grisostomo che scaccia dal tempio l'adultera sono dei pittori Felice Cignani, e Pietro Berrettini da Cortona'.

⁷ *Idem*: *Guida per la città di Forlì. Seconda edizione con aggiunte, note e correzioni*, Forlì 1863, p. 32.

⁸ See Foschi and Viroli, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 45.

⁹ Reported by the present owners of the painting, descendants of the purchaser, who allowed me to make a technical examination. These tests revealed no extensive repainting, merely some retouching. The work underwent only a light cleaning in 1995, but it is not in the best condition and signs of poor conservation are still visible.



13. *Sermon of St James the Less*, by Pietro da Cortona and collaborators. 1660s. Canvas, 285 by 220 cm. (Private collection, Rome).

of Jesus and is often depicted with a similar physical appearance. His attributes are a book and the club with which he was killed – the club is present in the underpainting (Fig. 14). St James the Less shared with the Dominicans his fame as a preacher and his anti-Semitism.

Stylistically the work is typical of Pietro da Cortona. The fact that it was always given to the master indicates that he was commissioned to paint it and was responsible for the underpainting and the co-ordination of its execution by his assistants. In my opinion, he was also responsible for parts of the painting.¹⁰

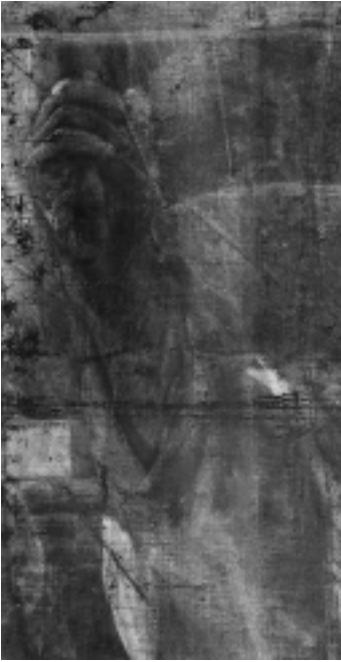
His hand can be recognised in the figure of the saint and in the woman on the far left of the painting, turning spontaneously towards the ruler.¹¹ X-radiographs show that initially she was conceived in profile (Figs. 16, 17 and 18), and such pentimenti are not unusual for Cortona. For example, in the *Rape of the Sabines* (Pinacoteca Capitolina, Rome) the pose of the central male figure underwent a repeated rotation from the underpainting to the finished work.¹² In this way, the painter acted as a director who makes modifications to the scene, building the relationships between the figures in a dynamic way, above all in crowded

¹⁰ On Pietro da Cortona's bad health, which forced him to use collaborators, see M. Campbell: *Pietro da Cortona at the Pitti Palace. A Study of the Planetary Rooms and Related Projects*, Princeton 1977, pp. 215–16; J.M. Merz: 'I disegni di Pietro da Cortona per gli affreschi nella Chiesa Nuova a Roma', *Bollettino d'arte* 86–87 (1994), pp. 61 and 75;

Fumagalli, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp. 50 and 66; and Sparti, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 56.

¹¹ One of the most famous examples of such a woman appears in the *Crucifixion* in the chapel of the Barberini Palace, Rome.

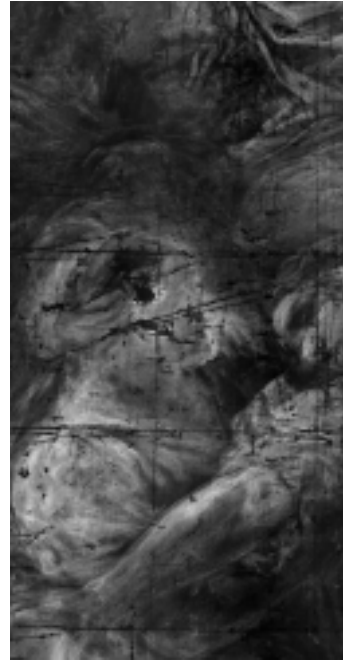
¹² See P. Masini, ed.: exh. cat. *Pietro da Cortona, il meccanismo della forma. Ricerche sulla*



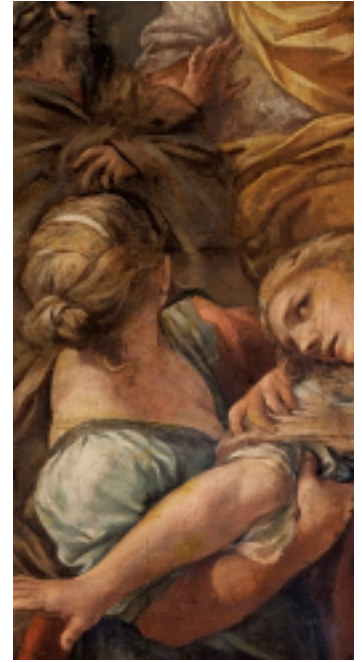
14. Detail of X-radiograph of Fig. 13.



15. Detail of infra-red reflectography of Fig. 13.



16. Detail of X-radiograph of Fig. 13.



17. Detail of Fig. 13.

compositions, as in the *Rape of the Sabines*. However, in the Forlì painting only minor changes were made from the underpainting to the final composition. In the underpainting, the saint was shown holding the club in two different positions, and it was finally eliminated in the overpainting. Consequently the saint's index finger of his right hand points heavenwards to highlight the gesture of preaching. The contour of the hand – and the index finger in particular – was very carefully drawn, as is evident from reflectography (Fig. 15). A balustrade, planned in the underpainting below the saint's raised arm, was then eliminated (Fig. 18). In the underpainting, the nose of the woman in the foreground with outstretched arms (Fig. 18) is not so prominent, and she may not have been painted by Cortona; like the woman to her left, she must have been painted by one of his collaborators over the master's white lead underpainting.

One possible contender is Lazzaro Baldi, a painter who, while 'speaking' Cortona's language, displays certain distinctive characteristics, such as the strong facial features, unlike Ciro Ferri, the only pupil who was able to replicate his master's style perfectly. Baldi was one of the group of painters who collaborated with Cortona and enjoyed his master's trust, working on the frescos of the Gallery of Pope Alexander VII in the Quirinale and on the restoration of Pope Alexander VII in the mosaics in St Peter's in 1659.¹³ He also witnessed Cortona's will.¹⁴ In 1661 Cortona chose Baldi, Ciro Ferri and Guglielmo Cortese to paint a series of frescos for an apartment in the Ducal Palace in Modena that was never executed.¹⁵

As an X-radiograph reveals, Pietro da Cortona's underpainting is fairly detailed. The only changes are, not surprisingly, to be found in the figures attributable to him: the woman on the left-hand side (Fig. 17) and St James the Less. While the master changed his mind between the planning and execution,¹⁶



18. Detail of X-radiograph of Fig. 13.

the parts painted by his assistants follow the underpainting. The figures in the background are rendered somewhat loosely and could be the work of Baldi or other more minor collaborators. The building behind the trees closely resembles that in the *Martyrdom of St Bibiana* (S. Bibiana, Rome), and the trees on the right are similarly depicted in many of Cortona's works.

The collaborative nature of the execution suggests that the new altarpiece dates from Cortona's last decade of activity. In some cases documentary evidence makes it possible to identify the painter who collaborated with the master. For example, the contract for the *Immaculate Conception* (S. Filippo Neri,

tecnica pittorica, Rome (Pinacoteca Capitolina) 1997–98, p. 111.

¹³ Spati, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 57.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

¹⁵ For this commission, see A. Jarrard: 'Pietro da Cortona and the Este in Modena',

THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE 140 (1998), p. 23.

¹⁶ The frequent modifications in the course of the work from the underpainting to the overpainting are typical of Cortona's technique, see M. Cardinali, M.B. De Ruggieri and P. Masini in Masini, *op. cit.* (note 12), pp. 15–29.



19. *Martyrdom of St Martina*, by Pietro da Cortona and collaborators. 1660. Canvas, 216 by 158 cm. (Sacristsy of SS. Luca e Martina, Rome).



20. X-radiograph of Fig. 19.

Perugia),¹⁷ dated 23rd March 1658, makes it clear that this was a collaboration between Cortona, responsible for the design and for the most important parts of the painting, and his most trusted pupil, Ciro Ferri, but without that evidence it would have been difficult to distinguish the two hands at work.¹⁸ But in the case of the painting from Forlì, Baldi's style is more easily recognisable. While Ferri could speak the same language as Cortona, Baldi only managed a dialect of that language.

The altarpiece of St James was placed in the presbytery of the church, a space for the exclusive use of the Dominicans. The link between Cortona and the Dominicans of Forlì can be traced to Cardinal Antonio Barberini, governor of the papal legations of Bologna, Ferrara and Romagna, who chose to live in Forlì in 1640;¹⁹ from 3rd October 1633 he was also the Protector of the Dominican Order.²⁰ Cortona was familiar with Antonio

Barberini, who, together with his brother Francesco, acted as an executor of the artist's will. Cardinal Antonio was also Protector of the Conservatorio di S. Eufemia, the institution to which Cortona delegated the administration of his vast inheritance.²¹ All these connections were strong reasons for the Dominicans of Forlì to choose Cortona to paint their altarpiece.

No preparatory drawing for the painting has emerged, but a later one from the artist's circle has some features in common, and demonstrates how Cortona's assistants could elaborate on a design by the master. A preparatory drawing, attributed to Ferri (Istituto Nazionale per la Grafica, Rome, F.C. 124344), was used by Pietro Lucatelli for an altarpiece for the cathedral of Nardò depicting St Gregory the Armenian preaching (c.1680).²²

With regard to the second painting to be examined here, a contemporary document has emerged relating to its execution,

¹⁷ E. Ricci: *La chiesa dell'Immacolata Concezione e di San Filippo Neri (Chiesa Nuova) in Perugia*, Perugia 1969, pp.29 and 68–74.

¹⁸ D.L. Sparti: 'Cortona tardo: "modus operandi" e problemi di bottega', *Antichità viva* 2–3 (1997), p.16.

¹⁹ 'E da riflettersi, che non sempre venne posteriormente obbliata Forlì nella qualità di capoluogo, poiché in specie nel 1640 Antonio Cardinale Barberini Nipote del Papa di allora governò le tre provincie risiedendo in Forlì'; M. Placucci: *Memorie storiche sul passaggio per la città di Forlì di Sua Santità Pio VII*, Faenza 1822, p.234.

²⁰ K. Wolfe: 'Cardinal Antonio Barberini (1608–1671) and the politics of art in Baroque Rome', in M. Hollingsworth and C.M. Richardson, eds.: *The possessions of*

a cardinal. Politics, piety and art 1450–1700, University Park PA 2009, p.287.

²¹ Sparti, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.142.

²² G. Manieri Elia: 'Notizie su Pietro Lucatelli pittore romano. Le sue opere a Nardò ed alcune ipotesi di committenza Chigi', in E. Debenedetti, ed.: *Alessandro Albani patrono delle arti. Architettura, pittura e collezionismo nella Roma del '700*, Rome 1993, pp.256–57, figs.1 and 2.

²³ See I. Salvagni: 'La chiesa dei Santi Luca e Martina ai Fori Imperiali e l'Accademia di San Luca. Dall'Università all'Accademia: istituzione e sedi tra primo Cinquecento e gli anni trenta del Novecento', Ph.D. diss. (Università degli Studi di Roma Tre, 2004–05), p.LXXXVI. In August 1623 Antiveduto Grammatica was paid to copy

or rather to its underpainting (see Appendix 3). In the report of the Apostolic Visitation made to SS. Luca e Martina, Rome, on 7th February 1660 by Cardinal Giulio Rospigliosi and Volumnio Bandinelli, Patriarch of Constantinople, mention is made of a painting placed on that day above the high altar. Apparently it had been rapidly sketched in a single day ('24 hore') by Cortona. The church was undergoing architectural renovations under the direction of Cortona himself that had been in progress since 1656. On the date of the visitation the high altar had just been completed, including the altar step, designed by Pietro da Cortona, and the wall for the altarpiece,²³ but before the day of the visitation, the space above the main altar was apparently empty. The original altarpiece, depicting St Luke – one of the two saints of the church's dedication – was attributed to Raphael, but had been substituted with a copy by Antiveduta Grammatica. This picture of St Luke had been in the church of S. Luca, used by the Accademia di S. Luca until the church was destroyed to make way for the reconstruction of Piazza S. Maria Maggiore. Grammatica's altarpiece had probably been moved to avoid its being damaged during the building works.

Just before the Apostolic Visitation, Cortona quickly sketched a picture of St Martina to act as an altarpiece during the Visitation, when it would have been obligatory to have an image of the church's titular saint above the main altar. As soon as the Visitation was over, the picture was probably moved, eventually to make room for the pre-existing painting of St Luke after the building works were completed. This rapidly painted image of St Martina can be identified with a canvas kept in the sacristy of the upper church, the dimensions of

which perfectly match the space above the high altar (Fig. 19). Pietro da Cortona depicted the second titular saint of the church, St Martina, for whom he had a particular devotion,²⁴ as has been noted by Merz.²⁵ The painting was more than likely completed by Cortona's pupil-collaborators.

The painting of St Martina has been attributed to the School of Pietro da Cortona by Incisa della Rocchetta.²⁶ Certainly it shows few elements that can be traced back directly to the master. It is therefore interesting to analyse the underpainting, which the X-ray (Fig. 20) shows to have been quite detailed in the delineation of the figures of the saint and her executioner. Subsequently the executioner was painted out, but the poor state of preservation of the painting makes him visible to the naked eye. It is probable that Pietro da Cortona delegated the overpainting to one or more collaborators. It is quite different from the underpainting. For example, the saint's blue cloak was less heavy in the underpainting.²⁷ The best part of the final painting is the face of St Martina, an improvement on the underpainting, softening her features in a manner typical of Pietro da Cortona's repertory. It cannot be ruled out that the artist reserved the task of painting the face of his favourite saint for himself. The executioner on the left seems to have been a later addition to the underpainting; his proportions are not entirely convincing compared to the martyr and he appears to be painted in a rather hasty and ill-defined manner. In terms of quality, the picture is visibly inferior to the larger *St Martina* (Pinacoteca Comunale, Siena),²⁸ one of the most celebrated depictions of the martyr by Cortona, which is why, after the underpainting had served its purpose for the Apostolic Visitation, it was relegated to the sacristy.

Appendix

1. **Description of the paintings in S. Giacomo Apostolo (also called S. Domenico) in Forlì by Giuseppe Marchetti.** (Forlì, Biblioteca Comunale, A. Saffi, 'Raccolta Piancastelli, Sez. Carte Romagna, Nota delle più rare, e più esposte pitture di Forlì. Autografo del pittore Giuseppe Marchetti' [c.1750–70], manoscritto B.177.176, unnumbered pages).

Il Sig. Pietro da Cortona un'opera sola ci ha dato, almeno, che sia alla pubblica luce ma di tanta stima, che equivale a molte altre. È questa nella chiesa de' PP. Domenicani, rappresentante S. Giacomo, che libera un'ossessa e molte figure, e le bellissime espressioni, che su quella tela raccoglie, bastano a riportare tra gl'eccellenti l'Autore.

2. **Description of two paintings by Pietro Cortona in a travel notebook by Luigi Lanzi.** (Florence, Biblioteca degli Uffizi, L. Lanzi, 'Viaggio specialmente del 1782 per Bologna, Venezia, la Romagna', manoscritto 36/1, fol. 25v).

Berrettini Pietro. San Giacomo Minore vestito da Patriarca con pallio e in atto di predicare. Frati Domenicani di Forlì. Bellissimo contrapposto di figure che lo ascoltano; colorito vivo, atteggiamenti che hanno del nuovo. [...] S. Gaetano in Firenze. Martirio di S. Lorenzo quadro non de' migliori specialmente nel colorito; è tratteggiato molto, e lontano dalla finitezza.

3. **Description of the interior of S. Luca in S. Martina, Rome, by the Apostolic Visitors Cardinal Giulio Rospigliosi and Patriarch Volumnio Bandinelli, 7th February 1660.** (Archivio Segreto Vaticano, 6, Acta Sacrae Visitationis Apostolicae S.D.N. Alexandri Divina Providentia PP. VII, Secunda Pars, fol. 60r).

D'ordine della santità di Nostro Signore fu visitata l'Accademia, e Confraternità di San Luca in Santa Martina dall'eminatissimo Signor Cardinale Rospigliosi, e da Monsignor Illustrissimo Patriarca di Costantinopoli Bandinelli Maggiordomo di Nostro Signore serviti da me Virgilio Spada li 7 febraro 1660 et havendo principiato dalla Chiesa superiore, quale si sta tuttavia fabricando con li assegnamenti delli scudi 500. L'hanno applicati da molti anni in qua dall'eminatissimo Barberino Protettore di essa confraternità, et accademia, fu ritrovata finita la Cappella, et Altar Maggiore con la figura di Santa Martina di Marmo, iacente sopra l'altare, opera del Sig. Nicola Menghino, e con la tavola dell'altare sbazzata in 24 hore dal cavaliere Pietro da Cortona; il rimanente della chiesa è tutta circondata di muraglie alte fino al cornicione, et ornata di colonne di travertino, delle quali si stanno facendo al presente i capitelli, e con la facciata per di fuori parimente tutta di travertino, e per dentro di stucchi totalmente finita.

the *St Luke* attributed to Raphael; see K. Noehles: *La chiesa dei SS. Luca e Martina nell'opera di Pietro da Cortona*, Rome 1969, p.335.

²⁴ Spati, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp.15–17.

²⁵ J.M. Merz: *Pietro da Cortona and Roman Baroque Architecture*, New Haven and London 2008, p.56: '... in 1663, the dome was not yet finished and the possibility that Cortona considered a fresco in the cupola cannot be excluded. A problem would have been the iconography, because Cortona was evidently intent on building a church in honour of St Martina, not St Luke. The inscription on the frieze of the façade and the relief panels with palm branches and lilies, which appear on

the façade and on the vaults, clearly express that the church is dedicated to the virgin martyr'.

²⁶ See G. Incisa della Rocchetta: 'Notizie sulle opere d'arte e le memorie storiche', in K. Noehles: *La chiesa dei SS. Luca e Martina nell'opera di Pietro da Cortona*, Rome 1969, pp.181 and 198.

²⁷ Although not in a good state of preservation, the painting does not show evidence of extensive repainting, only some retouching, visible under ultraviolet light.

²⁸ The *S. Martina* was dated by Briganti to immediately after 1655; see Briganti, *op. cit.* (note 3), p.260.