

Douglas N. Dow

Bernardino Poccetti and the Art of Religious Painting at the End of the Florentine Renaissance

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Douglas N. Dow

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The publication of this book is made possible by a grant from the Kansas State University Department of Art.

Cover illustration: Bernardino Poccetti, *Funeral of Saint Bruno* (detail), 1591–1593, fresco. Galluzzo, Certosa del Galluzzo, Church of San Lorenzo. Source: Sailko, Wikimedia Commons (CC BY 3.0 / detail from original)

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden

Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

ISBN 978 94 6372 952 9

e-ISBN 978 90 4855 095 1

DOI 10.5117/9789463729529

NUR 654

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List of Abbreviations

ASF	Archivio di Stato di Firenze
Corp. Rel. Sopp.	Corporazioni Religiose Soppresse dal Governo Francese
DBI	Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani
GDSU	Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe degli Uffizi
ICG	Istituto Centrale per la Grafica, Rome



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Acknowledgments

This book has benefited immensely from the assistance and resources provided by numerous individuals and institutions, and it is my great pleasure to recognize their contributions in the lines that follow. Much of the research in Florence was conducted during my sabbatical in 2014–2015, and I am grateful that the Department of Art and my institution, Kansas State University, saw the merit in this project during its early stages. While in Florence I spent a productive and enjoyable period in residence at the Nederlands Interuniversitair Kunsthistorisch Instituut, and I would like to thank Michael W. Kwakkelstein and Gert Jan der Sman for providing me with all of the resources that the NIKI has to offer. I would also like to thank the staff of the Archivio di Stato di Firenze for their assistance with the historical records that form a crucial part of this book. Back in the US, I am grateful to the team at Interlibrary Services in Kansas State's Hale Library, who went to extraordinary lengths to provide access to the secondary literature so necessary to my research. At Amsterdam University Press, I would like to thank Erika Gaffney whose advice has been invaluable, Alison Levy, the series editor, and the peer reviewer of the manuscript who offered a crucial insight into the book's structure that has strengthened it greatly.

Early versions of this study were presented in various venues and I would like to thank the many people who organized and participated in those meetings for their invaluable insight and commentary. These include Alexandra Bamji, Cristelle Baskins, Angi Elsea Bourgeois, Sally J. Cornelison, Julia Delancey, Megan Holmes, Nicholas Terpstra, and Saundra Weddle. Others to whom I owe a debt of gratitude include Niall Atkinson, Nicholas Eckstein, Konrad Eisenbichler, Matthew Gaynor, Kelly Hemphill, Fabian Jonietz, Anne Leader, Elizabeth Mellyn, Koen Ottenheim, John Paoletti, Sharon Strocchia, and Max Wiringa. Transcriptions and translations are my own unless noted otherwise, but I would like to thank Robert Fredona for his vital assistance; any errors that remain are entirely my responsibility.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this book to Jennifer Noonan, who was alongside me during the COVID-19 pandemic when much of the writing took place; by now she knows as much about Bernardino Poccetti as did his friends at La Trave Torta.



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Introduction: 'Il primo uomo da dipingere in fresco, che sia in questi paesi'

Bernardino Poccetti and the Historiography of Florentine Painting during the Late Renaissance

Abstract: Bernardino Barbatelli (called Poccetti, 1553–1612) was a successful fresco painter in late sixteenth-century Florence, yet he remains largely overlooked by contemporary scholarship. In addition to the obstacles posed by his prolific output and the inaccessibility of his monumental murals, this chapter examines historiographical reasons for Poccetti's obscurity, exploring how shifting artistic styles and aesthetic tastes led early Seicento commentators to see the last half of the Florentine Cinquecento as a period of stagnation. This narrative was later reinforced by the preferences of nineteenth- and twentieth-century art historians, which reflected modernist ideas of artistic innovation and stylistic progression. Historical evidence shows, however, that Poccetti's contemporaries valued his works as a continuation of an esteemed tradition of Florentine fresco painting.

Keywords: Bernardino Barbatelli (called Poccetti); Florence; Renaissance; fresco; historiography

In April of 2021, as this book was well underway and the world was in the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic, renovations undertaken at the Uffizi revealed two frescoed portraits of Medici rulers by the hand of Bernardino Barbatelli, now known as Bernardino Poccetti (1553–1612).¹ By almost any measure, Poccetti was one of the most successful fresco painters in late sixteenth-century Florence, and however serendipitous this discovery might have been, it is by no means surprising. Poccetti and his workshop painted an impressive number of monuments for a wide range

1 'Restauro una stanza e scoprono due affreschi agli Uffizi', *La Repubblica*, 22 April 2021, https://firenze.repubblica.it/cronaca/2021/04/22/news/restauro_una_stanza_e_scoprono_due_affreschi_agli_uffizi-297538483/.

of patrons throughout the city, an achievement that did not escape the attention of the painter's earliest biographer, Filippo Baldinucci (1625–1696). In his discussion of Poccetti published in the *Notizie de' professori del disegno da Cimabue in quà* (6 vols., 1681–1728), Baldinucci remarked that it would be an 'impossible task' ('cosa impossibile') to describe the entire oeuvre of this prolific Florentine painter, and so he warned his reader that he would limit himself to mentioning 'only a few, indeed very few, and almost none' of Poccetti's many paintings in Florence and elsewhere.² In this respect, the seventeenth-century biographer was neither shirking his duty nor overstating the case, for Poccetti and his collaborators executed an impressive number of commissions. At the close of the eighteenth century, Luigi Lanzi (1732–1810) echoed Baldinucci's description, remarking that although his work on panel or canvas was rare, Poccetti's frescoes could be found in 'nearly every corner in Florence' ('pressochè in ogni angolo di Firenze').³ As the discovery of the paintings in the Uffizi shows, and even though 230 years have elapsed since Lanzi published those words, his statement remains largely true today. Despite the fact that Italian scholars have created a substantial body of literature on the man and his work—efforts that are part of a broader reconsideration of the late Renaissance in Florence—Poccetti has remained an overlooked figure in English scholarship on the period.

This contribution to the literature on Poccetti had its origins in my own discovery of what Baldinucci and Lanzi already knew: that in addition to being a prolific painter, Bernardino was also a frescoist of the first rank who possessed a mastery of color, an eye for detail, and a knack for creating dynamically composed narratives.⁴ In that previous study, Poccetti was one of many artists who collaborated on decorative programs commissioned by Florentine confraternities at the end of the Cinquecento, and as a result his work—although substantial and important

2 'Sarebbe ora a me cosa impossibile il descriver tutte l'istorie grandi, e piccole, delle quali si ha notizia; e però mi basterà far solo menzione d'alcune poche, anzi pochissime, e quasi niuna, rispetto alle innumerabili, che fece nella nostra Città, e fuori'. Baldinucci, *Notizie*, 4:244. Several editions of Baldinucci's *Notizie* have been published. Although the first edition was once less widely available than the anastatic reprint of the Ranalli edition from 1845 that was published by SPES in 1974, the digitalization of primary sources has now made the first edition readily accessible. In the case of Poccetti, the biography in the first edition is slightly different than the one that appeared in the Ranalli edition. An English translation of Poccetti's biography derived from the Ranalli edition was published by Raymond Petrillo. All subsequent references are to the volumes of the first edition published from 1681 to 1728, unless otherwise noted as 'Baldinucci-Ranalli', and all translations are mine unless noted otherwise. For more information on the various editions of the *Notizie*, see Tovey, *Pouncey Index*, 12–13.

3 Lanzi, *Storia pittorica*, 110.

4 Lanzi credited Poccetti's transition from a decorator of palace facades to a painter of monumental narrative frescoes to his trip to Rome, after which 'tornò poi in patria non sol figurista vago e grazioso; ma compositore ricco ed ornato: onde potè francamente variare le sue istorie di be' paesi, di marini, di frutti, e fiori; senza dir della pompa de' vestimenti e delle tapezzerie, che imitò a meraviglia'. Lanzi, *Storia pittorica*, 110.



to a pivotal chapter—was not the focus of the book. This book, however, places Poccetti and his frescoes front and center. In so doing, it hopes to illuminate not only the man himself, but also how he produced his compelling works and what made them so popular among Florentine patrons at the end of the sixteenth century. In the process, it examines how Poccetti and his patrons negotiated the increasingly fraught terrain of sacred painting in the age of religious reform, showing that in some cases patrons ignored the prescriptions of reformers, even as they and Poccetti collaborated to forge new or to modify existing iconographies to better reflect contemporary concerns.

Bernardino Poccetti's Body of Work

Although he enjoyed a successful and prolific career, Poccetti and his work have not attracted widespread attention from historians of Late Renaissance and Baroque painting. Paradoxically, as Baldinucci noted, the painter's success and popularity among patrons led to an enormous body of work that spanned various genres, making it difficult for scholars to arrive at an overall assessment of Poccetti's achievements. A brief and necessarily incomplete summary—one that excludes all of Poccetti's many *sgraffito* facades and complex programs commissioned for the palaces of the Capponi, Usimbardi, Spini, and Medici families, as well as his contributions to Bernardo Buontalenti's (c. 1531–1608) Grotta Grande in the Boboli Garden—provides a glimpse of his extensive body of work.⁵

Along with the frescoes that he painted in the Chiostrò Grande at Santa Maria Novella and which are discussed in Chapter Two, Poccetti also painted lunettes for similar programs in the Chiostrò di Sant'Antonino at San Marco, in the Chiostrò dei Morti at Santissima Annunziata, and in a cloister at Santa Maria degli Angeli.⁶ Along with the Canigiani Chapel at Santa Felicita, which is analyzed in Chapter Three, Poccetti and his collaborators painted the Neri Chapel at Santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi and the Ticci Chapel at Santa Maria degli Angeli.⁷ Poccetti's frescoes in

5 For Palazzo Capponi, see Vasetti, 'Poccetti's Frescoes in the Great Hall', 59–141; for the frescoes at the Palazzo Acciaiuoli commissioned by the Usimbardi family and largely destroyed during World War II, see Vasetti, 'Poccetti a Palazzo Acciaiuoli', 131–34; on Palazzo Spini-Feroni, see Vasetti, 'Frescoes by Bernardino Poccetti', 95–123; on the Sala di Bona painted for the Medici in Palazzo Pitti, see Vasetti, 'Fasti granducali', 228–39; Bastogi, 'Sala di Bona', 87–97; on Poccetti's frescoes in the Grotta Grande, see Cecchi, 'Garden Grotto', 35.

6 Proto Pisani, 'Ciclo affrescato', 2:321–46; Bailey, 'Catholic Reform', 23–31; Hoffmann, *Heiliger*, 221–56; Conigliello and Vasetti, 'Affreschi', 50–58.

7 For the Neri Chapel, see De Luca and Vasetti, 'Cappella Del Giglio', 158–71; Müller-Bechtel, 'Cappella Neri', 137–76. On the Ticci Chapel, see Conigliello and Vasetti, 'Cappella Ticci', 82–92.

the Chiesa dei Monaci at the Certosa del Galluzzo discussed in Chapter Four are accompanied by his other efforts in the Cappella delle Reliquie and the Cappella di Tobia in that same monastery.⁸ Poccetti also painted frescoes at other Carthusian sites in Calci (near Pisa) and Pontignano (near Siena).⁹ Although his travels outside Florence were infrequent, he frescoed lunettes in a cloister at Santissima Annunziata in Pistoia for the Servites, one of whom boasted in an entry from 1601 that they had secured the services of the best fresco painter in the land ('il primo huomo da dipingere in fresco, che sia in questi paesi').¹⁰

In addition to the extensive contributions he made to Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence, which are discussed in Chapter Five, Poccetti also worked in many other churches throughout the city. Inside Santissima Annunziata, for example, he painted the half-dome of the Cappella di Sant'Ignazio and the vault of the Cappella del Soccorso, a space that Giambologna outfitted to serve as his final resting place.¹¹ At Santa Maria Maggiore Poccetti frescoed another vault, this time with scenes from the life of San Zanobi, in a chapel for the Carnesecchi family.¹² He did the same for the Strozzi family in the Cappella di Santa Lucia at Santa Trinita, where he painted prophets and personifications in the pendentives and lunette, along with a fresco of God the Father in the chapel's dome.¹³ The Strozzi also commissioned frescoes of *Humility* and *Glory* that faced the images of Saints Bartholomew and Miniatus by Poccetti on the retrofacade of San Bartolomeo a Monte Oliveto that are discussed in Chapter Five.¹⁴ At the Ospedale degli Innocenti Poccetti painted frescoes in the loggia and a large fresco in the girls' refectory.¹⁵ Bernardino also worked for Florence's lay companies, contributing the bulk of the frescoed decoration at the oratories of the companies of Santissima Annunziata and San Lorenzino in Piano.¹⁶

Even though Poccetti's skill with fresco meant that it was his preferred medium, he also painted in oil on panel. These works include large altarpieces, such as the

8 Chiarelli and Leoncini, *Certosa del Galluzzo*, 262–64, 274–75.

9 For an overview of Poccetti's efforts on behalf of the Carthusians, see Vasetti, 'Bernardino Poccetti e i certosini toscani', 5–61. On the Certosa di Pontignano outside Siena, see Mancini and Vannini, *Cartusiae prope senas*, 98–181. For the Certosa di Calci outside Pisa, see Giusti and Lazzarini, *Certosa di Pisa*; for Poccetti's efforts there, see Lazzarini, 'Apparati decorativi', 79–81.

10 This document was published by Chiappelli, 'Bernardino Poccetti', 186. For an account of Poccetti's dealings with Servites in Pistoia, see Chapter One. For more, see also Cappellini, 'Decorazioni ad affresco', 54–55; d'Afflitto, 'Da Firenze', 67–68.

11 On Poccetti's half-dome for the Cappella di Sant'Ignazio (also known as the Cappella del beato Manetto), see Casazza, 'Cappella del beato Manetto', 43–48; Fabbri, 'Controriforma', 90–91; Ceccanti, 'Ferdinando I', 82. For his fresco in the Cappella del Soccorso, see Hoffmann, 'Zu Einer Mariens', 122.

12 Pagliarulo, 'Jacopo Vignali', 41n52.

13 Lecchini Giovannoni, 'Cappella Strozzi', 171–75; Vasetti, *Poccetti e gli Strozzi*, 15–17.

14 Vasetti, *Poccetti e gli Strozzi*, 22–23; Meloni Trkulja, 'Opere d'arte', 121–22.

15 Presciutti, 'Carità e potere', 241–59.

16 Dow, *Apostolic Iconography*, 103–69; Sebregondi, 'Antica sede', 4–9.



Annunciation executed for a chapel that belonged to the confraternity of Sant'Agnese at Santa Maria del Carmine, and the *Way to Calvary* painted for the no longer extant church of Santa Cecilia, as well as small panels inserted in larger architectonic furnishings like those in the large tabernacle at the Carmine discussed in Chapter Five, or the images that decorate the tabernacle of Saint Catherine at Santa Maria Novella.¹⁷ When one considers his deep appreciation for food and drink, as well as the many hours he spent among his *brigata* at his favorite tavern, La Trave Torta (The Crooked Beam), it is not surprising that Poccetti brought considerable flair to his numerous banqueting scenes.¹⁸ In addition to a *Last Supper* at Sant'Apollonia and a fresco of *Angels Ministering to Christ in the Wilderness* for the Carmelite nuns of San Frediano in Cestello, Poccetti painted the *Wedding at Cana*, the *Last Supper*, and the *Supper in Emmaus* on a single wall at Santo Spirito, as well as a large fresco of the *Wedding at Cana* in the Badia a Ripoli.¹⁹

This summary begins to reveal the extent to which Poccetti's paintings were prized by his contemporaries and it begs the question why art historians have been reluctant to seriously consider his works and their place in the history of art. Before discussing the effect that the aesthetic preferences and historiographical inclinations of scholars had on this situation, it is worthwhile to note that there were—and, in many cases, still are—other obstacles that impede studies of the man and his paintings. Many of Poccetti's frescoes are in cloisters, family chapels, monastic buildings, or palaces that themselves have not been especially accessible to the public. One thinks, for example, of the frescoes in the Chiostro Grande at Santa Maria Novella, which were part of the Carabinieri barracks and were thus behind locked doors for many years. In other cases, even if Poccetti's works are accessible, as the frescoes in the Chiostro Grande are now, they are extensively weathered. Other works, like the frescoes at Santa Maria degli Angeli or the Neri Chapel at Santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi, are essentially closed to the public, in the first case because the structures have been converted to secular use and in the second because it requires scarce resources to open, monitor, and maintain such a space. And even when his work is centrally located, protected from the elements,

17 On the *Annunciation* altarpiece, see Dow, 'Tradition and Reform', 262–68. For the *Way to Calvary*, see Brooks, *Graceful and True*, 130. The panels for the tabernacle at the Carmine were destroyed in the fire that swept through the church in the eighteenth century. For more on this, see Chapter Five. For the tabernacle of Saint Catherine, see Bisceglia, 'Spazio ecclesiale', 105–8.

18 For a discussion of Poccetti's social habits and his circle of friends and associates, see Chapter One.

19 The fresco at San Frediano is in the refectory of the former convent, which is now used as the *aula magna* of the Seminario Arcivescovile Maggiore. There is virtually no published information on this fresco or the *Last Supper* in the refectory at Sant'Apollonia, which has also been converted to an assembly room. For the scenes at Santo Spirito and the Badia a Ripoli, see Vasetti, 'Santo Spirito', 198–203; Vasetti, 'Badia a Ripoli', 204–7.

and readily accessible, as is the case with the Canigiani Chapel in Santa Felicita, it sits in both literal and figurative shadows—literal in the sense that the space is poorly lit, thereby making it difficult to appreciate the paintings, and figurative in that the Canigiani Chapel is outshone by its more famous neighbor across the nave with its paintings by Pontormo (1494–1557). Poccetti's frescoes at the Certosa del Galluzzo, arguably some of his finest and best preserved religious works, are located outside of Florence and only open for limited hours during guided visits, and so the opportunity for the public to witness his large-scale sacred painting is diminished.

It is true, however, that Poccetti's entire period in Florence—roughly the last two decades of the Cinquecento and the first ten years of the Seicento—is the subject of increasing scholarly analysis. Much of the credit for Poccetti's rehabilitation over the previous few decades goes to Stefania Vasetti, whose scholarly output on the painter has been almost as prodigious as Poccetti's own artistic production, and the debt this study owes to her scholarship on the painter is clear in both the text and the apparatus. But since the historiography of the period, as well as the history of the reception of the works of art it produced, play a role in how those works have been understood (or misunderstood), it is worth considering how the scholarship on the histories of style and artistic reform have inflected readings of Poccetti's work. Much has been written about what Stuart Lingo has recently called 'the oversimplification of our inherited historiography' of the period in which Poccetti lived and worked.²⁰ The purpose of this book is not to rehearse or dissect the complexity of this 'inherited historiography', but to look closely at the elements of Poccetti's paintings that were not valued by the scholars who wrote those histories and to determine why Poccetti's contemporaries saw those same features in a positive light. So, before turning to the paintings that are the subjects of the ensuing chapters, it will be useful to remark upon a few of the historiographical circumstances that have affected the scholarly reception of Poccetti's oeuvre.²¹

Bernardino Poccetti and the Historiography of Renaissance and Baroque Painting

One of the largest factors in how Poccetti's work has been understood is the scholarly notion that the last few decades of the Cinquecento were a period of decline for

²⁰ Lingo, 'Federico Barocci', 154.

²¹ There are many excellent analyses and summaries on the historiography of sixteenth-century Italian art. For a recent example, see Locker, 'Introduction', 1–11.

Florentine art—a conception that Michael Fried has described as 'hackneyed and in vital respects outdated'.²² That these ideas are no longer widely held is true, but they still merit analysis for the purposes of historiography. This idea of decline was first articulated as early as the end of the seventeenth century, when Carlo Cesare Malvasia (1616–1693) and Giovanni Pietro Bellori (1613–1696) both described sixteenth-century art after Raphael (1483–1520) and Michelangelo (1475–1564) as inferior to the works produced in the early decades of the Cinquecento.²³ At the end of the Settecento, Lanzi cited an excessive dependence by later generations on Michelangelo as the reason for the deterioration. In his discussion—which appears beneath the heading 'Imitators of Michelangelo'—Lanzi argued that these painters were unable to grasp the theoretical underpinnings of Michelangelo's highly idiosyncratic work ('non penetrando nelle teorie di quell'uomo quasi inimitabile') and, as a result, misused his examples in their own paintings.²⁴ In Lanzi's view it was Ludovico Cigoli (1559–1613) and his followers (a group from which Lanzi excluded Poccetti) who finally led the way out from this impasse, a change that Lanzi dated to around 1580.²⁵ Elizabeth Cropper has noted the symmetry between Lanzi's treatment of Florentine art and artists from the decades between 1540 and 1580 and that of Sydney Freedberg's discussions of these same works and painters.²⁶ For Freedberg, these works were examples of the 'Maniera'—a style that was intentionally self-referential and artificial.²⁷ Unlike Lanzi, Freedberg believed that there was a group of painters who preceded Cigoli but still rejected aspects of the 'Maniera' style and forged alternate paths. He dubbed these painters, whose lodestar

22 Fried, *After Caravaggio*, 1.

23 Bellori, *Vite*, 19–20; for a translation, see Bellori, *Lives*, 71–72. Malvasia, *Felsina pittrice*, 2:9. For a discussion of these descriptions by Bellori and Malvasia, see Dempsey, 'Idealism and Naturalism', 234–36.

24 Lanzi, *Storia pittorica*, 92–95, quoted text on 94. For a recent discussion of this passage, see Cropper, 'Florence in the Late 16th Century', 291. Long before Lanzi, Michelangelo himself, in a statement attributed to him by Giovanni Battista Armenini (1530–1609), suggested that simply copying his works would lead to a painter's undoing. For the remark, see Armenini, *Veri precetti*, 66; Armenini, *True Precepts*, 138; for a discussion of it, see Veen, 'True Universal Art', 105–6; Cropper, 'Florence in the Late 16th Century', 291–92.

25 Lanzi, *Storia pittorica*, 112. For more on Lanzi's treatment of Cigoli, see Struhala, 'Resisting the Baroque', 293.

26 Cropper, 'Florence in the Late 16th Century', 292.

27 Freedberg first developed these ideas in an article from 1965. They were then explored more fully in his *Painting in Italy: 1500–1600*, first published in 1971. Freedberg, 'Observations', 187–97, especially 189–90; Freedberg, *Painting in Italy*, 175–77, 421–30, 607–9. References here are to the most recent edition of *Painting in Italy*; published in 1993 it demonstrates the stability of Freedberg's stylistic conceptions over time. For a recent discussion of Freedberg's concept of the 'Maniera' style, see Cropper, 'Florence in the Late 16th Century', 292–95; for a historiographic analysis of the term '*maniera*', see Aurenhammer, 'Manner, Mannerism, *maniera*', 18–22; for a broader discussion of Freedberg and his scholarly emphases, see Curran, 'Teaching', 32–34.



was Santi di Tito (1536–1602), the ‘Florentine Reformers’.²⁸ Freedberg included Poccetti among the group, even as he supplied a string of caveats that pointed to many features of Poccetti’s paintings that he saw as redolent of the ‘Maniera’ style, and therefore too retrospectively ‘Maniera’ and not sufficiently forward looking.²⁹

The second circumstance is that the perception of the late Cinquecento in Florence as a period of stagnation was reified by comparing Florentine works to those being produced in Bologna and Rome by Annibale Carracci (1560–1609), Ludovico Carracci (1555–1619), and Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610), who were seen as innovators and harbingers of the new Baroque style. The notion that these figures brought forth a novel style in painting also has its origins in the seventeenth-century writings of Bellori and Malvasia, but as the narrative arc of art history was forged, scholars placed an emphasis on the study of stylistic progression and change.³⁰ When viewed retrospectively, such periods of innovation became the focus of historians interested in locating stylistic shifts in art, a fact that encouraged them to see the progenitors of the new style as heroic explorers and members of an artistic vanguard.³¹ This conception proved attractive to twentieth-century art historians who frequently described these painters as ‘reformers’ or ‘revolutionaries’—characterizations that resonated with contemporary ideas of the avant-garde and the inexorable changing of artistic styles associated with modernism.³² In a

28 Freedberg called Santi di Tito ‘the earliest—and also most important—of the Florentine reformers’. Freedberg, *Painting in Italy*, 620. This characterization has been reiterated by most later commentators on Santi di Tito. For example, according to Spalding, ‘Santi di Tito’, 41, ‘Santi’s style ... constitute[s] a transition between Mannerism and the Baroque’ and the painter ‘quietly yet thoroughly transformed the high Maniera of his master Bronzino’. For similar descriptions of Santi, see also Hall, *After Raphael*, 252; Bailey, ‘Santi di Tito’, 31–32; Giannotti, ‘Stile puro dei fiorentini’, 47–48; Hall, ‘Reform After Trent’, 100.

29 Freedberg argued that Poccetti ‘preserved the pointed and complex mobility of Maniera draughtsmanship especially, and according to Maniera habit stressed the role of rhythmic continuities in large design’. *Painting in Italy*, 627. Compare Freedberg’s assessment of Santi di Tito’s rejection of ‘Maniera’ in favor of a more naturalistic style, which put him on the path to his *Supper at Emmaus* in Santa Croce (1574), a panel that Freedberg called ‘the most radical accomplishment of naturalistic painting of the time’. *Painting in Italy*, 621–22, quoted text on 622. To be clear, Freedberg’s formal assessment of Poccetti’s accomplished draughtsmanship and affinity for rhythmic compositions is astute; his subtle implication, however, that such features are retrograde and thus inferior does not seem to have been widely shared by Poccetti’s contemporaries.

30 For a concise discussion of the changes in painting around 1600, see Dempsey, ‘Idealism and Naturalism’, 233–42.

31 In addition to the role of revolutionary, Caravaggio has had many other identities thrust upon him by scholars. For an early and incomplete list, see Previtali, ‘Introduzione’, xiii, especially note 3. Dempsey, ‘Caravaggio’, 91 considered these various identities and argued for a more nuanced view of the painter, suggesting that scholars too readily dismiss opposing interpretations as ‘myths’ rather than engaging them critically.

32 Fried, *After Caravaggio*, 1–2.

widely delivered lecture on the Baroque style that Erwin Panofsky wrote in 1934 (but which was not published until 1995), Caravaggio 'shattered the artificial world of mannerism' with his 'revolutionary effort'.³³ In 1948, Walter Friedlaender pitted Federico Zuccaro (1540/1541–1609) against Caravaggio, and not only characterized the artists using terms derived from nineteenth-century ideas about the opposition between academic and avant-garde art, but also referred to Caravaggio's paintings as 'revolutionary products'.³⁴ Similarly, Sydney Freedberg's book *Circa 1600*, which was drawn from a series of lectures on Caravaggio and the Carracci that was delivered in 1980 and published in 1983, was subtitled '*A Revolution of Style in Italian Painting*'.³⁵ To be clear, this is not to suggest that a shift in style cannot be discerned in the works of Caravaggio and the Carracci, only that the predispositions and preferences of art history for the 'avant-garde' have created tendencies to see Florentine art of this period as insufficiently innovative by comparison. For example, in his early and insightful treatment of Annibale Carracci, Charles Dempsey outlined how the artistic ideas and practices of the previous decades influenced Carracci's 'reform', remarking that despite playing an influential role in the early phase of this stylistic development, the Florentine painters were hampered by their strong traditions, suggesting that they were unable or unwilling to carry these developments to their conclusion.³⁶ Indeed, the emphasis on the innovations of Caravaggio and the Carracci has been so prevalent in scholarship that it has not only colored perceptions of late sixteenth-century Florentine art, but it has also overshadowed Florentine art of the seventeenth century, a circumstance that prompted Eva Struhal to remark that 'in contemporary narratives concerning the rise and origins of the Baroque ... Florence routinely falls off the map'.³⁷

In his study of Annibale Carracci, Dempsey acknowledged that the different trajectory followed by Florentine art posed 'an immensely interesting question'.³⁸ As a means of opening this study it is time to introduce some potential ways of addressing this question that will be explored in greater detail in the following chapters. Poccetti's success and acclaim—both remarked upon in Baldinucci's *vita*—are evidence that his works appealed to and satisfied a diverse group of Florentine patrons, and so an examination of Poccetti's work provides an avenue towards a greater understanding of the direction Florentine sacred painting took at

33 Panofsky, 'What is Baroque?', 36–37. For the history of this lecture and its subsequent publication in 1995, see Lavin, 'Introduction', 6 and especially the notes on 200–203.

34 Friedlaender, 'Academician', 34.

35 Freedberg, *Circa 1600*.

36 Dempsey, *Annibale Carracci*, 15–16, 20.

37 Struhal, 'Resisting the Baroque', 293.

38 Dempsey, *Annibale Carracci*, 20.

the end of the Cinquecento.³⁹ By most reckonings, Poccetti's popularity was more likely to be the result of his skill and efficiency as a painter, and not of his personal disposition, which seems to have been stubborn, mercurial, coarse, and even cruel in some circumstances.⁴⁰ His painting, however, offered several deeply traditional and emphatically Florentine features that were attractive to his patrons, and it is time to examine them in greater detail.

Bernardino Poccetti and Florentine Artistic Tradition

The first distinctly Florentine feature of Poccetti's artistic practice was his preferred medium of monumental fresco. Michael Fried has suggested that the increased emphasis at the end of the sixteenth century on the 'gallery picture' (defined as 'a framed canvas of limited dimensions painted for wealthy and important collectors to hang in exhibition spaces in their homes and palaces'), alongside the innovative aesthetic potential offered by the use of oil paint, decreased the importance of large fresco projects, which had been seen at the beginning of the Cinquecento as pinnacles of artistic achievement.⁴¹ Such a shift would seem to put someone like Poccetti, whose skill at monumental mural decoration was forged early in his career while he was working in *sgraffito*, and then honed through his involvement in many of the most substantial fresco projects in Florence, at a distinct disadvantage. But Fried's discussion of the rise of the 'gallery picture' describes developments in Rome, while in Florence the taste for monumental fresco painting continued essentially unabated. Part of the reason for this was that Florentines had embarked upon a series of ambitious decorative campaigns in the cloisters of the city's most important churches—projects upon which Poccetti worked and which have been briefly mentioned above and are analyzed in detail in Chapter Two.⁴² These decorative interventions formed one piece of a larger project to revitalize and fortify the Roman Church against the threat of Protestantism. As Gauvin Bailey has pointed out, the cloister cycle not only offered a monumental and expanded field upon which the individual episodes from a saint's life could be presented, but it

39 Baldinucci, *Notizie*, 4:241 described Poccetti as 'loved by nobles, embraced by princes, desired by all' ('amato da' Cavalieri, accarezzato da' Principi, desiderato da' tutti'), even though he shunned these contacts, preferring instead a group of associates that Baldinucci saw as social inferiors.

40 For discussions of Poccetti's willingness to abandon a job without warning and his penchant for sometimes cruel practical jokes, see Chapter One.

41 Fried, *After Caravaggio*, 78.

42 For Poccetti's contributions to the decoration of the Chostro Grande at Santa Maria Novella, see Chapter Two. For a list of the Florentine cloisters decorated at the end of the Cinquecento, see Bailey, 'Catholic Reform', 23.

also possessed a 'triumphalist aspect' as a result of its sequential format.⁴³ Thanks to these advantages, monumental fresco painting remained valued in Florence at the end of the Cinquecento, and Poccetti's indisputable mastery of the medium meant that his services were in demand.

Along with his skill at fresco painting, Poccetti had other abilities that made him and his works desirable to Florentine patrons. Prominent among these was his talent for invoking and recasting the painting style of Andrea del Sarto (1486–1530). At the end of the sixteenth century, Sarto had become a celebrated hero in the history of Florentine art. An inventory taken shortly before Poccetti's death in 1610 reveals that he had a portrait of Sarto in his own art collection, suggesting the extent of Poccetti's admiration for him.⁴⁴ Further evidence for the value placed on Sarto's works abounds. Between 1579 and 1584, for example, three paintings by Sarto arrived at the Villa Medici in Rome, which was being furnished at the time by Ferdinando I de' Medici (1549–1609), where they were joined by other prized examples of Tuscan art.⁴⁵ It was also in 1584 that Ferdinando's older brother, Grand Duke Francesco I de' Medici (1541–1587), purchased two panels by Sarto from the highly regarded *spalliere* representing the stories of Joseph from the Old Testament that Salvi di Francesco Borgherini had commissioned from Sarto, Jacopo Pontormo, Francesco Bacchiaca (1494–1557), and Francesco Granacci (1469–1543) in 1515. In addition to the paintings by Sarto, the Grand Duke simultaneously acquired two panels by Granacci, but he paid four times as much—360 *scudi*—for Sarto's pictures as he did for Granacci's images, a startling indicator of the greater desirability of Sarto's work.⁴⁶ Part of the reason for the elevated price of Sarto's paintings had to do with the scarcity of his pictures—a fact attested to once again in 1584 in a letter from Alessandro Allori to Eleonora de' Medici, the duchess of Mantua, who was seeking a work by Andrea.⁴⁷ In this letter, Allori noted that his diligent attempt to secure a picture by Sarto was frustrated by the fact that his paintings had been highly sought after for many years ('quest'opere d'Andrea da molti anni in qua hanno havuti moltissimi desiderosi d'haverne').⁴⁸ The demand for paintings by Sarto led to them being placed on a list of works of art by eighteen artists that were banned from export in 1602. This list, compiled by the Accademia del Disegno, also featured several other important figures from the early Cinquecento and the

43 Bailey, 'Catholic Reform', 23.

44 Röstel and Lewis, 'Poccetti as Collector', 51–52.

45 Cecchi, 'Andrea del Sarto', 152. The other painters showcased at the villa included Domenico Beccafumi (1486–1551) and Alessandro Allori (1535–1607). Barocchi and Gaeta Bertelà, *Da Cosimo I*, 82.

46 Natali, *Andrea del Sarto*, 114; Cecchi, 'Andrea del Sarto', 152–53.

47 Fumagalli, 'Collezionismo mediceo', 249; Cecchi, 'Andrea del Sarto', 153.

48 The letter and subsequent correspondence regarding the pursuit of a painting by Sarto is published in Luzio, *Galleria dei Gonzaga*, 252–54, quoted text on 252.



Florentine tradition: Leonardo, Michelangelo, Fra Bartolommeo, Rosso Fiorentino, and Pontormo, to name only a few.⁴⁹

In addition to the value placed on his works by the market and elite collectors, the esteem for Sarto was manifest in the privileged status his works enjoyed as models to be studied and emulated by aspiring painters, a circumstance that was reflected in and fueled by the fulsome praise lavished upon him by writers like Francesco Bocchi (1548–1613 or 1618) and Raffaello Borghini (c. 1537–1588). In his *Il Riposo* from 1584, Borghini cited frescoes by Sarto in the Chiostrino dello Scalzo and the Chiostrino dei Voti as worthy of study by those who wished to become skilled painters.⁵⁰ Antonio Natali has noted that these suggestions by Borghini placed Sarto's work alongside other famous Florentine examples—the Brancacci Chapel at Santa Maria del Carmine and Giotto's frescoes in Santa Croce—that were recognized places of study for young and ambitious artists.⁵¹ Similarly, Bocchi praised Sarto as an excellent painter, suggesting that he held his own against—perhaps even surpassed—Raphael (1483–1520) and Michelangelo (1475–1564) thanks to his use of color, his mastery of light and shadow, and the life-like three-dimensionality of his rendering.⁵² In one of his earliest—yet never published—works, 'Discorso sopra l'eccellenza dell'opere d'Andrea del Sarto, pittore fiorentino', Bocchi set out five qualities necessary for excellence in painting—*disegno, costume, rilievo, colorito*, and *una certa dolcezza e facilità*.⁵³ Robert Williams has carefully parsed the significance and complexity of these terms in Bocchi's usage, but in brief they refer to drawing, the depiction of an individual's inner spirit, three-dimensionality, use of color, and a sense of effortlessness and facility.⁵⁴ Once he had established these criteria, which were heavily indebted to concepts outlined by Aristotle in the *Poetics*, Bocchi then found instances of each in paintings by Sarto.⁵⁵ In so doing, Bocchi not only limned a theoretical set of standards that prioritized the emulation

49 The complete list: Andrea del Sarto, Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564), Raphael (1483–1520), Domenico Beccafumi, Rosso Fiorentino (1494–1540), Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), Franciabigio (1484–1525), Perino del Vaga (1501–1547), Jacopo Pontormo, Titian (c. 1488–1576), Francesco Salviati (1510–1563), Agnolo Bronzino (1503–1572), Daniele da Volterra (c. 1509–1566), Fra Bartolommeo (1472–1517), Sebastiano del Piombo (c. 1485–1547), Filippino Lippi (1457–1504), Antonio da Correggio (c. 1489–1534), and Parmigianino (1503–1540). Cecchi, 'Andrea del Sarto', 153, 157n12.

50 Borghini, *Riposo*, 418, 421. See also Chapter Two, note 67; Chapter Three, note 20. On the importance of the frescoes in the Chiostrino dello Scalzo as exemplars to artists and questions of accessibility to the space, see O'Brien, 'Who Holds the Keys', 210–61.

51 Natali, 'Andrea del Sarto', 30.

52 Natali, 'Andrea del Sarto', 30–31.

53 Williams, 'Treatise by Francesco Bocchi', 112; Spagnolo, 'Fortuna', 36. The treatise was published as an appendix in Williams, 'Treatise by Francesco Bocchi', 122–39.

54 Williams, 'Treatise by Francesco Bocchi', 112–16, 122.

55 Williams, 'Treatise by Francesco Bocchi', 112; Spagnolo, 'Fortuna', 36.



of nature and posited a 'sweetness free from all affectation' ('dolcezza priva d'ogni affettatione') as the main objective of painting, but he also pointed to concrete examples of these concepts in Sarto's oeuvre that could be seen by aficionados and emulated by artists.⁵⁶

Bocchi revisited these ideas in his *Bellezze della città di Fiorenza*, first published in 1591. In one passage in this text, Bocchi rhapsodizes over the elegance and beauty of Sarto's *Madonna del Sacco*, a frescoed lunette above a door in the Chostro dei Morti at Santissima Annunziata (Plate 1).⁵⁷ Once again a striking—yet seemingly effortlessly achieved—naturalism was the focus of his attention, and Bocchi homes in on this idea in the very first sentence of his lengthy discussion of the fresco when he described the depiction of Joseph as 'completely real and completely alive' ('tutta vera, e tutta viva'). Likewise, Sarto's coloring of the Virgin's skin tones is 'neither more nor less than flesh itself' ('ne più, ne meno, come è la carne').⁵⁸ Bocchi then turns his attention to Sarto's treatment of physical objects, praising Sarto's representation of drapery. The white cloth around Mary's neck, for example, is so lifelike that if a real cloth were attached to the wall next to it, the actual cloth would seem painted in comparison.⁵⁹ Bocchi also greatly admired the sack upon which Joseph reclines. Undoubtedly real and not a painting ('tutto vero senza dubbio, & non dipinto'), the foreshortened sack with its cinched opening projecting towards the spectator achieves a startling sense of three-dimensionality ('sporgendosi verso chi guarda con la bocca, interamente apparisce di rilievo').⁶⁰ For Bocchi, Sarto's astonishing skill is all the more praiseworthy because it does not draw attention to itself, but is instead subsumed by a seemingly effortless emulation of nature.⁶¹

When one considers the elements of Sarto's work that were admired by Poccetti's contemporaries, it is easy to see why his paintings were so popular. As the analyses in the ensuing chapters will demonstrate, Poccetti's frescoes address many of the same concerns with good design, pleasing and efficient use of color, the psychological states of the individuals depicted, an illusionistic three-dimensionality, and the appearance of an effortless execution. By looking back to Sarto for inspiration, Poccetti charted a way forward for his painting. By cultivating a naturalism that rejected excessive affectation, Poccetti created compelling narratives that reflected the concerns of his patrons and engaged his spectators. This is not to say that he

56 Williams, 'Treatise by Francesco Bocchi', 115–16, 135–36.

57 Natali, *Andrea del Sarto*, 157 describes this passage in Bocchi as 'an unbridled panegyric'.

58 Bocchi, *Bellezze*, 229. For an English translation, see Bocchi, *Beauties*, 216.

59 Bocchi, *Bellezze*, 229; Bocchi, *Beauties*, 216.

60 Bocchi, *Bellezze*, 231; Bocchi, *Beauties*, 216–17.

61 'Perche è cosa rara oltra tutte, che tanto possa in altrui l'humana industria, che l'artificio, mentre che adopera, ponga se stesso in oblio, & faccia, che da se nasca in un certo modo la natura.' Bocchi, *Bellezze*, 232; Bocchi, *Beauties*, 217.



eschewed all innovation or that he followed all of the various prescriptions being put forward for religious painting at the end of the Cinquecento—the chapters that follow will show that this was not always the case. But he found a way to recast existing formulas and styles without taking egregious liberties that might leave him and his patrons open to criticism and possible censure. In the process, he updated or embellished traditional iconographies so that they spoke to their immediate audiences, even as he carefully ensured that his solutions did not conspicuously flout the expectations of the sixteenth-century Catholic Church.

The Structure of this Book

Having outlined the extent of Poccetti's career and briefly discussed the historiography of Late Renaissance painting in Florence, it is time to turn to the case studies that are the focus of this book. Before addressing his works specifically, however, it is necessary to engage the lengthy and detailed *vita* of Poccetti written by Baldinucci, since the Seicento biographer remains an important source of information and his *vita* helps to flesh out a portrait of the painter and his life. Recognizing that such a source must be read critically, Chapter One also scrutinizes the techniques, rhetoric, and ideological motivations of the biography's author to better understand how and why the *vita* took the form that it did. However indebted to longstanding myths some of Baldinucci's anecdotes might be, and however much the *Notizie* must be contextualized within the intellectual world of Seicento writing on art, the image of Poccetti presented by Baldinucci's *vita* is corroborated by other sources and reveals a man with a challenging personality who was dedicated to his work, his friends, and his colleagues. He enjoyed success, but does not appear to have been driven by it. Instead, Poccetti preferred to live largely on his own terms, comfortable with his position in Florentine society and the places that he knew best, among which the most prominent was his habitual haunt, the tavern of La Trave Torta. For Baldinucci, Poccetti represented the continuation of a venerable Florentine tradition of fresco painting, and the anecdotes deployed in the *vita* serve to reinforce a narrative that echoes, affirms, and updates many of the rhetorical themes of Giorgio Vasari's *Le vite de più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani da Cimabue insino a' tempi nostri* (1550, 2nd ed. 1568). Baldinucci's life of Poccetti, therefore, offers both a view of the painter himself and an image of Baldinucci's concerns and interests. Chapter One analyzes each of these to arrive at a deeper understanding of both, the painter and his biographer.

Chapter Two outlines Poccetti's early years after he left the shop of Michele Tosini (1503–1577) and set out on his own. A recognized master of grotesque and *sgraffito* decoration, he became known as Bernardino delle Grottesche and Bernardino delle

Facciate. After a trip to Rome that he undertook between 1578 and 1580, Poccetti returned to Florence and set himself to painting monumental frescoes. Some of his earliest efforts are found in the Chiostro Grande at Santa Maria Novella, where he painted an almost completely destroyed fresco of the *Mission of the Apostles* alongside five lunettes in varying states of conservation that represent scenes from the life of Saint Dominic. Already in these works Poccetti demonstrated his aptitude for monumental narratives, deploying his customary use of color, composition, and detail to create interesting and lively scenes from Dominic's hagiography. In many of these images, Poccetti not only displayed his deep knowledge of traditional Florentine fresco painting, referring to and taking inspiration from works by Domenico Ghirlandaio (1449–1494) and Andrea del Sarto, but he also updated the episodes from Dominic's life to address contemporary concerns facing the Roman Church, thereby making the long history and experience of the Order of Preachers relevant to immediate theological concerns and pressures as well as to an audience of sixteenth-century Florentines.

At the church of Santa Felicita, Poccetti painted the frescoes that adorn the Canigiani Chapel, which is found on the left side as one enters the church, facing the Capponi Chapel with its decorations by Pontormo. Chapter Three demonstrates how Poccetti's images in the chapel communicate themes relevant to the patron, Giovanni Canigiani, as well as to the shifting emphases of the Latin Church. References to the patron abound. These include the saints in the pendentives—all of whom share the patron's first name—and the representation of the miraculous snowfall on the Esquiline hill that led to the construction of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, the cost of which was underwritten by a patron who was also named John. The iconography of this fresco, which occupies the entire lunette on the wall to the left of the chapel's altar, was an unusual choice in Florence, but it also resonated with Canigiani's identity and priorities. The close reading of the works in this chapter shows how Poccetti skillfully integrated various ideological and rhetorical objectives into his frescoes, balancing the traditional demands placed on painters by patrons with the new expectations placed on religious painting by the church, which was actively emphasizing the traditional role of saints as intercessors and the importance of good works within Catholicism. Even though the decoration in the Canigiani Chapel is modest when measured against some of Poccetti's other commissions, it stands as a testament to his abilities thanks to its careful use of color and composition. Bernardino must have understood that his work would be seen in comparison to the paintings by Pontormo only a few steps away, and ensured that his efforts in the chapel showcased his skill and spoke to his strengths. Unfortunately, the history of art has not celebrated the Canigiani Chapel to the extent that it has the Capponi Chapel, and so the images decorate what is now a frequently dark and overlooked space.

Over the course of his career Poccetti made many contributions to decorative programs sponsored by various monastic and mendicant orders, including the Camaldolese, the Servites, the Dominicans, and the Carmelites, but he seems to have been especially popular with the Carthusians, for whom he painted frescoes at charterhouses outside Siena, Pisa, and Florence. Chapter Four takes up one of Poccetti's efforts in the church at the Certosa del Galluzzo outside Florence, where he painted a series of wall frescoes representing the life of the order's founder, Saint Bruno of Cologne (c. 1030–1101), and images in the vault of important figures from the history of the Carthusians. When Poccetti decorated this space, Bruno was not yet a saint, and efforts to have him canonized had only begun earlier in the sixteenth century. As a result of the intense focus on their eremetical objectives, the Carthusians had not developed an extensive iconography for their founder or their order, and when Poccetti rendered Bruno's life in a monumental visual program, he was one of the first artists in Italy to do so. These frescoes, therefore, provide a compelling example of how Poccetti and his patrons shaped the narrative of Bruno and the other charismatic Carthusians represented in the webs of the vault to suit the demands of late Cinquecento Catholicism as it repositioned itself in response to the perceived threat of Protestantism. For their part, the Carthusians were assuming a more active role, emphasizing their order's history in ways that highlighted its relevance for those challenging times even as they presented Bruno as a pious and saintly man dedicated to ecclesiastical service. Once again, however, Poccetti and his patrons took liberties in the images that some of the more reform-minded commentators on religious painting might have found disconcerting. The large fresco of Saint Bruno's funeral, for example, shows the obsequies taking place in a vast and elaborate church, instead of Bruno's modest Calabrian hermitage. Alongside the funeral bier are a number of Carthusians, many of whom appear to be portraits of the monks at the charterhouse when Poccetti painted the murals. Although practices like these—creative deviations from official narratives and indulgent inclusions of anachronistic portraits—were among the abuses singled out by reformers, Chapter Four contextualizes these elements within the goals of the Carthusian order and demonstrates that even though they might have appeared transgressive to some, they effectively addressed current concerns and highlighted the relevance of the order for the Church in a period of reform.

Poccetti had a close personal and professional relationship with the Carmelites at the church of Santa Maria del Carmine. He lived most of his life nearby in the Oltrarno, and he selected the church to be his final resting place. He credited the Carmelite saint, Andrea Corsini, with his recovery from a stroke and for healing his wife's broken rib, and he made significant contributions to the Carmine's decoration. Indeed, had the church not burned in the eighteenth century, its nave and chapels would have stood as an impressive showcase of Poccetti's abilities as



a painter. Unfortunately, Poccetti's presence at the Carmine started to diminish even before the blaze that destroyed most of his efforts in the church, when his heirs relieved themselves of the financial burden of his burial chapel shortly after his death. Chapter Five brings the book to a close with a reconstruction of the appearance of the Carmine at the time of Poccetti's burial in 1612. Derived from an examination of printed and manuscript sources as well as visual comparisons to other similar works by Poccetti and his collaborators, this reconstruction reveals the extent of Poccetti's involvement in the church's decoration and sheds light on how the Carmelites updated the style and iconography of the visual program in the nave. Between the newly renovated altar tabernacles, each one framing a recently completed altarpiece by some of the city's best painters, monumental frescoes of the apostles adorned the nave walls. Surmounted by narrative scenes of their martyrdoms and surrounded by fictive colored-marble revetments, the apostles in the nave emphasized the Roman Church's origins in Christ and his first followers, even as the illusionistic marble brought the decoration in line with the latest architectural fashions and reiterated the Church's commitment to splendor and luxury.

As has been shown above, the critical stances towards late Cinquecento painting in Florence adopted by writers like Bellori and Malvasia informed art historical writing on the Late Renaissance in Tuscany well into the twentieth century, and the notion that this was a period of stagnation and decline was further reinforced by an approach to the history of art that emphasized stylistic change. As a result, studies that valorized the penchant for innovation—itsself a cornerstone of modernism—tended to minimize the relevance of painters who were seen as insufficiently avant-garde and to celebrate those whose works departed from convention. Thus, someone like Poccetti, who was deeply engaged with the Florentine tradition of fresco painting as it had been forged by Domenico Ghirlandaio and especially Andrea del Sarto, was bound to receive only minimal notice from historians more focused on innovation than tradition. But, evidence from late sixteenth-century Florence suggests that Poccetti's retrospective style was esteemed by his contemporaries. Both Borghini and Bocchi, for example, praised Sarto and urged aspiring painters to carefully study his efforts if they wanted to succeed. It was not only writers on art and artists who valued Sarto's works, however, and there is plenty of evidence—from fruitless efforts to secure paintings by his hand to the higher prices his works commanded when they were available—that attests to Sarto's popularity. It is no wonder, then, that Poccetti's works reflect his careful study of Andrea's paintings. Once an emphasis on stylistic innovation fades from view, the reasons for Poccetti's success come into sharper focus. As the following case studies will show, his painting fulfilled the demands of its patrons and audiences by speaking to their aesthetic, iconographic, and ideological preferences. That his



works failed to address the form these preferences took in the minds and eyes of later critics explains its relative obscurity. By reframing our perspective, this book helps us to see Poccetti as one of his patrons and contemporaries did, as ‘il primo huomo da dipingere in fresco che sia in questi paesi’.⁶²

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62 Chiappelli, ‘Bernardino Poccetti’, 186.



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