

TRUTH AND DENIAL: INTERTEXTUAL COMPOSITIONS AND VISUAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE ‘CARAVAGGISTI’ GALLERY PAINTINGS

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Set on a dark background, bodily fragments, fabrics and armours reveal the presence of nine figures gathered around a marble block. On the right, two gamblers stare at some dice and dissociate themselves from the animated activity happening besides them. Another figure sitting at the front of the table is turning his head backwards. His twisted posture forms a line that proceeds by sharp turns, alternatively leading the viewers’ gaze to the group on the right and to the one on the left. A woman is inviting him to look in the opposite direction. She points towards an old man in the background, who has also been approached by a soldier and seems to be wondering why. Doubtful, he raises his eyebrows while pointing at his chest. As the title of the work suggests, the old man is St. Peter, and this is the moment in which he denied being himself.

Bartolomeo Manfredi and the other painters arriving in Rome between 1600 and the 1630s seeking Caravaggio, who are now known as ‘Caravaggisti’, represented this biblical episode sixty times, always setting it in a seventeenth-century Roman tavern.¹ This unconventional formula was only made possible by the emergence of a secular space for the display of visual arts: the private picture gallery. Studying how the creation of these simultaneously sacred and profane images for the Roman Galleria manifested offers a new perspective on seventeenth-century collecting practices and on the artistic production of this generation of artists. Their works have been invariably seen as copying motifs inaugurated by Caravaggio over and over again until undone by their own exhaustion. However, a crucial aspect that is worth noticing is that while most of the religious works by Caravaggio that entered private galleries did so after dispossession from churches, those produced by the so-called Caravaggisti were often intended for private and secular displays.²

The production, acquisition and reception of representations conceived for a gallery display is less documented and less studied with respect to relocated works. After all, the Galleria originated from the dislocation of images due to iconoclasm and religious conflict, which caused religious painting to be removed from churches and accumulated on the gallery wall.³ Yet, gallery displays were also rooted in the emergence of a new kind of painting produced for sale directly within the market.⁴ Inferences about the expectations for religious pictures specifically created for the Galleria can inform us of the radically different, yet still existing function of biblical narratives in a since-then incompatible context.⁵ As inventories and commissions prove, Roman patrons requested specific religious paintings for their galleries, suggesting that subject matter was still crucial.⁶ These documents also reveal that religious subjects for the Galleria were often uncommon and displayed in unorthodox ways.⁷ Biblical episodes were fundamental in gallery collections to create surprising compositions and unexpected juxtapositions, which is at odds with the general understanding of Counter-Reformation art as mainly didactic and ultimately aimed at restoring Catholic predominance through propaganda. Moreover, it is interesting to find the so-called Caravaggisti involved in many of these commissions. I propose that collectors were intrigued by the way these artists reimagined traditional subjects for the new space of the Galleria, whose norms regarding the display of religious art were never formally established. Patrons selected iconography with intention and saw in the Caravaggisti's works the capacity for long-established narratives to be transformed through the visual coalescence and interaction with other subjects.

The conflation of sacred and profane in the numerous versions of the *Denial of St. Peter* is as noteworthy as it is understudied. Their idiosyncratic intertwining of biblical narrative and genre scene differs from Victor Stoichita's evolutionary model of meta-painting – according to which in the Galleria religious art progressively gave way to genre painting⁸ – but also from synchronic models in which the two subjects occupy conceptually separate realms and presuppose different viewing strategies. Through observation of different paintings representing this subject by Bartolomeo Manfredi (1615–1616), Nicholas Tournier (1625–1626, figure 1; ca. 1630, figure 2) and Valentin de Boulogne (ca. 1615–1617), this article endeavours to further scrutinise the epistemological shift that religious art underwent and enacted



Figure 1 Nicholas Tournier, *The Denial of Saint Peter*, 1625–1626. Oil on canvas, 172 x 252 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid. Photo: Museo del Prado.



Figure 2 Nicholas Tournier, *The Denial of St. Peter*, ca. 1630. Oil on canvas, 160 x 241 cm. High Museum of Art, Atlanta. Courtesy of the High Museum of Art.

in the gallery. Rather than arguing for a drastic transition from the devotional function of the cult object to its exhibiting itself as a representational medium, this study focuses on the unstable, metamorphic and still unsettled nature of sacred representations in this context and considers the diverse modes of reception they produced. The representations of Peter's denial are a case study that allows us to better situate instances of this phenomenon, providing a striking example of the convergence of religious images with non-religious ones, but also of the painters' engagement with seventeenth-century artistic, social and philosophical concerns.

Indeed, as this article explores, the relocation or production of sacred paintings for Roman galleries paralleled contemporaneous humanist intellectual endeavours to investigate the fluid meaning and epistemology of sacred representations when intersected with other notions. The complex question of whether truth can be produced in painting paralleled changing early modern notions of truth – increasingly contested due to religious splintering and the pursuit of natural knowledge. Through juxtapositions, new narratives would be generated and with them new meanings and truths. The intertextuality allowed by the Galleria provided occasions to challenge traditional categories of knowledge – such as sacred and profane, truth and falsity – and this necessarily relied on visual juxtapositions of these concepts. In other words, the representation of religious subjects was necessary for the activation of a discourse that aimed at disputing conventional and established notions. Only by shaking tradition, doubts could be raised and binary categories revisited.

The currency of this biblical story among the so-called Caravaggisti, I argue, was due to its aptitude for fostering a meditation over the very possibility for painting to represent truthfully. Pivoting around the concept of denial, scenes representing St. Peter's negation made viewers wonder to what extent painting could represent or undermine truth. Indeed, while the repeated subject in these works generates resemblances, it also awakens continuous transformations that trouble many of the notions intrinsic to truth, such as mimesis, identity, recognition, faith and sensorial knowledge. By questioning multiple facets of truth through a denial, these paintings presented viewers with a complex web of contradictory, yet simultaneously possible notions. On the picture gallery wall, the immanent and transcendent ontologies of the heterogeneous subjects portrayed in these paintings became

visually inseparable; and different spheres of truth, although conceptually incompatible, folded into one another in an indecipherable mixture of meanings.

The versions of this episode painted by Manfredi, Valentin de Boulogne and Nicholas Tournier will be explored following different avenues, not so much to distinguish these painters from one another, but rather to observe how their images generate resemblances and differences, opening various visual and conceptual paths for the beholder. The compelling subject of the paintings under analysis lies in the contradictory aspects of perceptual and spiritual territories alike, all unfolding from the core event of a negation.

Truth and Identity

In all versions of the *Denial of St. Peter* under scrutiny, the apostle mingles with the heterogeneous group of soldiers, gamblers and servants. If in Nicholas Tournier's (figures 1, 2) and Valentin de Boulogne's versions Peter can be identified through his traditional garments, in Manfredi's scene he blends with the chaotic crowd. In each case, the seventeenth-century characters appear to respond differently to the appearance of this out-of-place figure, some acknowledge his presence and some take no notice of it; some accuse him whereas others overlook him. These reactions mirror the viewer's encounter with the confounding coexistence of sacred and profane in these scenes and with the unidentifiable figures that elude both the tradition of religious subjects and that of genre painting. Existing scholarship has attempted to determine the identities of the portrayed characters, but this works against the paintings' own agenda. Indeed, these scenes engaged with a particular idea of truth about the world that pertained to painting's role in rethinking reality, and certainly they did not aim at coherence or predictability. Rather than representing stability, this truth was marked by the shifting identities that these artists encountered in Roman streets.

Indeed, seventeenth-century Rome was not solely the site where the Counter-Reformation Church centralised control and enforced tight mandates. The city also presented an uncertain and ever-changing urban and social fabric that resisted legibility and order. Street regulations show that authorities endeavoured to control people's movements and clothing to make public spaces unambiguous.⁹ Women could not dress in men's attire, prostitutes could not wear cloaks and ride carriages as gentlewomen, and

Jewish Romans needed to make themselves visually identifiable wearing a yellow cap or cloth.¹⁰ The efforts exerted by Roman authorities to make citizens recognisable betray a deep concern with those who nevertheless escaped categorisation by disguising themselves or by interpreting the phrasing of the regulations towards their own ends.¹¹ For instance, a prostitute riding on a carriage could claim to be a courtesan, denying her identity and escaping the rules she was prescribed. To avoid this slippage, authorities started to include several variations on single categories which could be as vague as that of the 'dishonest women'. Paradoxically, this strategy worked against recognition, complicating the authorities' own attempts to confine people within the categories they struggled to establish.

In Manfredi's canvas the illegibility of Roman everyday life is translated into fragmented bodies emerging from and receding into darkness. The fragmentation of bodies also fragments identities, making actions discontinuous and disrupting vision. Indicative of this are the figures on the right, whose presence is solely revealed by the reflection of light on the polished crest of a metallic helmet. By encircling a floating wrist below, that same metallic material is the only hint at who might be the person pointing at the dice scattered over the marble surface. Besides embodying law and order, alleged soldiers join the game and become themselves gamblers. The cross-dressing of both players and soldiers also happens in Nicholas Tournier's (figures 1, 2) and Valentin's paintings. It similarly points to the threat of identity inversions and blurred categories that regulations failed to overcome.

In all these paintings, identification is complicated by the biblical character appearing among the players. By visually integrating the disciple with the dice players, the soldiers and the woman through physical accumulation and overlaps, Manfredi's painting seems to suggest that the instability of factual or doctrinal truthfulness is the very subject of the scene. The identification of Nicholas Tournier's and Valentin de Boulogne's otherwise unmistakable Peters is nonetheless disrupted by their very anachronistic appearance. In all instances, rather than bringing religious truth within the scene, Peter's presence hampers legibility and recognition, clashing with the didactic and propagandistic purposes of the Counter-Reformation visual agenda. This lack of persuasiveness is consistently underlined by the woman questioning other characters or Peter himself about his identity. As her very suspicion reveals, Peter is at some extent unrecognisable. Just as identification of the other

characters is disrupted through cross-dressing, Peter's identity is irreparably fractured by the confounding presence of his body in a Roman tavern and the simultaneous withdrawal of his identity through his own denial of it – something I will come back in the next section.

The different reactions displayed by the characters invite beholders to question the very capacity of recognising religious identity in a lay context. Some figures in Tournier's two paintings further complicate identity recognition, presenting beholders with ontological reversals: one is the man sleeping on a bench (figure 1) and the other a dice player dressed in yellow (figure 2). While wearing armour, the sleeping man's pose recalls the innocent St. John resting on the table in scenes of the Last Supper. Similarly, the player in yellow sitting at the front of the marble block recalls representations of Judas Iscariot in the same biblical episode. The alleged presence of John and Judas in a seventeenth-century tavern participates in the continuous identity shifts. This instability undermines the idea that tavern scenes portray reality with unmediated naturalism while biblical narratives are based on religious truth. Indeed, this narrative is staged in an everyday setting precisely to question the possibilities and impossibilities of truth that both faith and sensorial knowledge present.

Truth and Denial

Peter's denial of Christ is a crucial component used in these scenes to elaborate on the issue of truth. Negation alters the truthfulness traditionally attributed to biblical accounts, while also disrupting epistemological knowledge, adding to the uncertainties of the tavern scene within which it is set. As the canonical Gospels recount, during the Last Supper Jesus predicted that Peter would disown him three times. All Gospels also have accounts of the fulfilment of Jesus's words to Peter, who denied being an apostle while Jesus was being sentenced to death.¹² All versions of the story differ from one another and resist simple harmonisation, common to many other biblical episodes. Yet, what makes this moment particular is the lack of exegesis concerning why Peter denied knowing Jesus or what his lie entails at a doctrinal level. This is why, whenever depicted, the scene was always inserted in a narrative cycle for pedagogic purposes, such as on the early Christian door of St. Sabina, in the Byzantine mosaics in St. Apollinare Nuovo, and in Duccio's *Maestà*. During the Counter-Reformation, the representation of the denial's

aftermath – Peter’s sorrow – as an independent image had been generally favoured as it epitomised the sacrament of Confession.¹³ Committing sin was inevitable, but salvation could only be found in repentance. Guido Reni, for instance, painted several half-figures of the ashamed Peter crying and praying for forgiveness. Caravaggio himself, in his *Denial of St. Peter*, represented a deeply moved apostle, whose wet eyes anticipated the upcoming bitter weeping that followed his negation.

In the works of the so-called Caravaggisti, Peter’s denial is isolated and suspended in time, represented as being – and, I argue, *because* of its being – an inherently perplexing, alarmingly non-exemplary and deeply human moment. It is a biblical narrative, and yet it is neither separated from, nor made invulnerable to, the worldly. For this reason, it has been argued that the ambiguity in Manfredi’s *Denial of St. Peter* partakes in the non-traditional use of the *istoria* in Caravaggio’s *Calling of St. Matthew*. This has encouraged an ongoing debate over which of the figures at the table is Jesus’s chosen apostle.¹⁴ Some have identified Matthew as the man who looks at Christ and points towards himself in an interrogative gesture.¹⁵ Others have recognised him as the young boy counting money at the end of the table.¹⁶ The most obvious Matthew, the man pointing at himself, hides a factual truth: the real Matthew, who is only revealed at closer observation. This is backed up by the scriptures, the doctrinal interpretation of the episode and the commission requirements themselves. Matthew’s Gospel recounts that ‘as Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax office, and he said to him “follow me”. And he rose, and he followed him’.¹⁷ The contract between Caravaggio and his patron Giuseppe Cesari established that the scene had to depict the suddenness and certainty that distinguished his divinely-gifted and speedy conversion.¹⁸ The apostle, therefore, cannot be the one who at first sight appears the most obvious candidate. That fundamental narrative details – such as Jesus’s pointing hand – are hidden and decentralised, suggests that the true protagonist of the scene could in fact be in a peripheral position. Although this was a subversive and subtle manoeuvre on the part of Carravagio, with careful observation, the image can be still recognised by the beholder as portraying the unexpectedness and unquestioned unfolding of the miraculous conversion.

What distinguishes Manfredi’s *Denial of St. Peter* from Caravaggio’s use of the *istoria* is an even greater enhancement of the narrative elusiveness. The

very act of negation intrinsic to the episode could not be more functional to this agenda, as it doctrinally equates Peter to, and visually merges him with, any other character. His sin becomes the epitome of his humanity, turning him into a figure with no predominance in the narrative. His proximity to the other figures generates resemblances that provide the evidence for his being one among the many. This reminds viewers of the complex seventeenth-century notion of *mimesis*, not merely understood as visual analogy and physical resemblance to reality. As Michel Foucault has claimed, during this period *mimesis* also referred to the invisible sign of a spatial relationship that generated unexpected resemblances between different things as their proximity increased¹⁹ – a process that was at the core of the viewing act in the Galleria. Upon denial of his subjectivity and by virtue of physical proximity with other figures, Manfredi's Peter becomes vulnerable to the impact their bodies bear on his own corporeality.

Although Peter appears more recognisable in Tournier's and Valentin's *Denials*, their paintings still elaborate on negation to overturn how the beholder categorised Peter's ontology. The apostle is repeatedly represented in the moment when he affirmed 'I am not'. Valentin's choice of portraying Peter while warming himself over the fire alludes to the very moment in the Gospel in which he experienced his identity crisis. This moment problematises Descartes's famous expression 'I think, therefore I am'²⁰, which determined that the only thing that qualifies as indubitable is the proposition 'I am – I exist'.²¹ Peter's existence would be necessarily true if Peter was to affirm it. And for Descartes, this proposition would only prove his existence as no more than a thing which thinks, a mind, while it would not guarantee his bodily existence.²² But Peter says 'I am not', and in so doing he deprives himself of his very existence. Through the representation of his negation, the artists boldly declare to the viewers that the apostle is so co-dependent, so folded into the objective and figural Peter, that his subjectivity is visually put at risk. In one of Tournier's canvases (figure 2), by pointing so vigorously towards his chest, Peter seems to invite the other figures to touch him, to realise that his very presence makes him no more than a body among bodies. In the moment of touch, the extremity of another person's hand denotes the beginning of the apostle's own, and through a mimetic relation they become one and the same matter. Peter turns into a person whose ontological truth is ultimately betrayed by a lie.

While the act of denial ineluctably causes Peter's self-erasure, it also somehow affirms his presence. Indeed, Peter's negative statement also entails a positive premise, because negation is nothing but a statement of a positive proposition plus a negative operator. Thus, negation is first acceptance.²³ Negation is necessarily contingent on that which is being negated, and that something is the apostle Peter, whose persona is presupposed by the very act of negating identification. Tournier's and Valentin's Peters are also somehow revealed through erasure. By negating their identity, they also reveal it, by raising a hand in admission or by trying to escape as if guilty (figures 1, 2). Their *Denials*, thus, not only engage with the dualisms that Descartes was theorising, but also present the paradox that his scepticism was going to face. As Descartes explained, while anything can be denied, doubting one's selfhood inevitably proves its reality: 'we cannot doubt of our existence while we doubt'.²⁴ The existence of Peter the apostle could be theoretically confirmed by the very possibility of it being denied by Peter the man.

Yet, these artists do not present any of these possibilities as a definitive fact about Peter. They use his image to question, rather than represent, truth. Valentin and Tournier transform the quasi-invisibility of Manfredi's Peter into an unsettling duality that makes the apostle's presence impossible to understand through either concepts of sensible presence or faith. Moreover, by reusing the same model for Peter as they do with players, soldiers and women, these artists appropriate a common mechanism in sacred art – repetition – but employ it to encourage and then destabilise, rather than facilitate, recognition. Multiple but recurring Peters and his surrounding characters network with one another by virtue of a repetitive formula that creates an oscillation back and forth across historical moments and ontological categories, making knowledge vacillate.

The act of denial that is so strongly underlined in Valentin's and Tournier's paintings intensifies the problems of recognition and overturns this pivotal trope in Christian art that had since then functioned as a mode for apprehending revelation.²⁵ In the complex way I described, Caravaggio's *Calling of St. Matthew* could still be taken as an example of how recognition creates a challenging path towards knowledge, discipleship and faith. Together with Peter, Tournier's alleged John and Judas also recalls the Last Supper when Peter's Denial was predicted and thus reminds viewers of Jesus's sacrifice that followed. Yet, at the same time, they make beholders aware of the limits of

true knowledge by performing very human acts: Peter lies and puts his own identity into question; John is totally oblivious to the event, as those unaware of it would be; Judas meditates on the dice, and his meditation reminds beholders of the dichotomies of chance and faith, randomness and destiny, truth and deception. While working as visual clues that stimulate viewers to recognise interlinked biblical narratives, these characters also invalidate any approached recognition.

Reflection on the dynamics and reversals of Christological recognition is further encouraged by Valentin's *Denial*. His painting invites recognition of Jesus's upcoming sacrifice through the prominent marble block amidst the figures. The viewers alone can see that its carved surface recalls a sacrificial altar. The prominence and centrality of Hercules raising the animal on his shoulders appears as an allusion to an upcoming sacrifice, further underlined by the proximity of the fire onto which Peter warms his hands, as narrated in the Gospel. Through recognition of Peter as a disciple, beholders can seize visual hints at Jesus himself. As with representations of the crucifixion, Valentin's and Tournier's *Denials* complicate the epistemological problems that recognition entails.²⁶ Depictions of the crucified Messiah present an unsolvable paradox, just as these paintings do with Peter's negation. What these episodes suggest is that recognition of both Christ and Peter must be twofold: one has to acknowledge that Jesus is the son of God and that Peter is Jesus's apostle, but also that the first can die and the latter can lie. These incompatible affirmations belong together and can only be recognised as simultaneously possible through a process of transformative knowledge, which is essentially conversion.²⁷

By denying his identity, Peter performs an unorthodox conversion that frees him from the biblical guise his name bears, complicating iconographical methods of recognition. What appears familiar inevitably resists immediate meaning. Viewers cannot establish who is who, if Peter is Peter or, as he says, he is not. Moreover, the proximity of the fire onto which he warms his hands with the marble block establishes an ambiguous relationship between Pagan and Christian sacrifice, the first almost denying the latter. Valentin's composition in particular turns the fireplace into the keystone where the complex truthfulness of the scene converges: where Peter – as Jesus on the cross – is and is not at the same time. It hints at the sacrifice that beholders themselves must perform, namely giving up certainty whether the image allows factual knowledge or

faith. Because of the continuous reversals enacted by Peter's negation, the beholders' attempts to unify the narrative are ever-haunted by contradiction. The concept of denial works as a nucleus where truths and fictions of both everyday life and biblical narrative paradoxically converge. Revolving around this negation, binary oppositions – sacred and profane, true and false, being and not being – fall apart, disrupting their inherent oppositional logic. Denial inevitably makes any associations questionable, but still possible, and causes knowledge to lack stable solutions, although it invites us to seek them. As such, the declarative statement 'this man is Peter' is pushed to the limit by the image of a denying Peter. As the beholders, some characters accuse him and apparently know the truth, while others do not recognise him, validating his negation. Yet, the paradox of this negation is that it is a truth. The truth about Peter's denial, after all, is that it is a lie. It is exactly in the arena of these paradoxes and dualisms that these paintings dwell.

Complex Truthfulness

In sum, these artists did not use painting to represent what truth is. They rather staged concurrent visual deceptions that hinted at various notions of truth and then negated the possibility of harmonising them. More precisely, they produced occasions for probing one's tendency to self-deception. Among these, denial was pivotal. But is truth completely denied? Can deception, instead, be thought of as another of its challenging categories? Does awareness of self-deception lead one to know more truthfully? In order to answer these questions, one needs to consider how these paintings complicate the notion of truth. Any intention to find the true meaning of these images is impossible as they present at once the irreconcilable difference between one's experience of religious truths and epistemological knowledge. This difference can be understood as the Derridean concept of *différance*, as it involves insolvable ambiguity rather than separation.²⁸ The figures that populate the *Denials* take on a *différance* which makes them escape unity while cohabiting the same space. Moreover, the way these subjects negate one another – or even themselves – makes them shift continuously between different spheres of truth. Thus, they do not lack truthfulness, but rather engage with a much more problematic notion of truth.

The ontology of Tournier's John and Judas can abruptly shift. At first, they appear as seventeenth-century characters, or visible confirmations to our idea

of reality, what seventeenth-century linguists called ‘truth-makers’.²⁹ Soon after, they are seen as apostles, or things that do not have the perceptual reality of physical beings and yet can be conceived and talked about, which scholastic philosopher Francisco Suarez defined as ‘beings of reason’.³⁰ In other words, they objectively appear as gamblers or soldiers, thus deceiving viewers into thinking of them as images of everyday life. Yet, by recalling biblical characters, they resist this identification. When viewers accustomed to sacred art recognise John and Judas in these figures, they discover their previous self-deception but they substitute it with a new kind of self-deception that consists of seeing these figures no longer objectively, but inwardly in the mind.³¹ In other words, viewers can identify biblical subjects in these figures, despite, in fact, their contemporary guise visually denying such identification. These ambiguous subjects work as traces, simulacra of presences that dislocate and refer beyond themselves. Their mutable appearance evokes an unfamiliar ontological sphere, which is simultaneously immanent and transcendent.

The same can be observed in the gamblers. Rather than revealing the cheat, Tournier’s and Valentin’s *Denials* present its potentiality. Their gambling scenes encourage the viewer to search for a cheater by choosing to depict the uncertain moment in which a player has just rolled the dice. As such, gambling is used to question the foundation of truth. In Tournier’s paintings, the dice are represented already scattered on the marble block, but viewers are still unable to read their top surfaces. The game remains unresolved – and not solely for beholders. The central player’s gesture conveys surprised wonder and the other players, still suspended in expectancy, neither rejoice nor bemoan. There are neither winners nor losers. The illegibility of the dice intensifies the players’ and the viewers’ desire to discover the unrevealed truth and to catch the trick that disrupted its revelation. Yet, the potentiality that a cheat has occurred necessarily implies the lack of epistemological resources necessary to account for a sought-after truth. In other words, the perceived cheat might have happened in these images, but no sensible data can provide certainty about it.

The challenge these depictions pose to affirmative knowledge encourages us to see beyond binary oppositions. While the figures in these paintings alarmingly defy knowledge, they also extend it to what escapes perception through inexistence and invisibility. Their ambiguous subjecthood remains undefined and yet is not absolutely nothing. It is the very possibility for them

to be conceived as something else and – as in Peter’s case – this means that recognition of them extends to their *not being*. Because of their potential to be cheaters or apostles, these characters reveal a different category of truthfulness that, although possible, does not rely on outer reality, but rather an abstraction of it. Through these figures, deceptions become ‘beings of reason’,³² which exist despite falling outside the category of perceivable beings. Complex truthfulness lies in the essential reversibility of these subjects, which requires imagination, rather than faith, reason or sense-experience, to be envisaged. Early modern artist and writer Gian Paolo Lomazzo made this clear in his *Temple of Painting* (1590):

But what about the act of representing that, by means of it [painting], produces things that cannot be seen if not through the imagination of those who understand them in their nature and meaning?[...]By transferring things imagined to the representation, such effects result which are admired by the world[...]with extreme marvel, like miracles, seeing in them one thing for another, even though they are the same.³³

Only by making use of what Lomazzo defines as ‘the art with which imagination accompanies representation’³⁴ viewers can freely move through the complex web of actions and subjects that the *Denials* display. As Lomazzo implies, concepts like objectivity and subjectivity are not the only means by which images can be represented and looked at, let alone understood. Things that can only be imagined, rather than experienced, are those that produce the greatest marvel. These are like miracles, like the apparition of St. Peter in a seventeenth-century tavern. And as miracles stimulate wonder but also doubt, this one literally invited viewers to ask many of the unanswerable questions which both reality and faith constantly presented them with.

Lomazzo’s idea is echoed by Robert Burton in his 1621 treatise on melancholia. In a passage, the author claims that melancholic individuals were particularly enticed by the puzzling spectacle of images in the gallery of Roman Cardinals displaying a dubious truth:

‘Who is he that is now wholly overcome with idleness, or otherwise involved in a Labyrinth of worldly cares, troubles, and discontents, that will not be much lightened in his mind by reading of some enticing story, true or fainted’.³⁵

While proving that the space of the Galleria generated new debates about the effects of painting in relation to truth, knowledge, the psyche and passions, Burton also reiterates the bewildering visual effect of these complex representations, which he prescribes to observe as a cure against melancholy. For Burton, then, the remedy alleviating those suffering from this condition was not truth per se, but rather those elements that, by falling in and out of it, revealed its possibilities and impossibilities. When seeing these paintings, melancholic individuals encountered a reality that equalled the complex truthfulness of which their melancholic condition made them aware. Indeed, what is nowadays understood as a hazy state of mind, in the seventeenth century was believed to enhance one's powers of discernment to a more comprehensive yet troubled truth. This comes forth in Giulio Mancini's biography of Annibale Carracci.³⁶ While describing the artist's decline into melancholy, Mancini underlines that Carracci remained a 'true painter' because he painted from his *fantasia*.³⁷ The images produced out of the fantasy of a melancholic mind may be either true, false or represent an abstraction. Mancini declared that 'in a moment, [melancholia] forms a thousand images and phantasms', activating the spirits and generating a vivid imagination.³⁸ Thus, rather than merely producing fantasy, enhanced imagination could remain in the realm of the verisimilar or the probable; a superior imaginative power could wander into other, even unperceivable spheres of the world. Through or in melancholia one could see more aspects of truth – the false, the unthinkable or even *phantasms* occupying an ambiguous status between sensorial perception and imaginative creation. Therefore, the seventeenth-century understanding of melancholia and the way the Galleria engaged melancholic individuals reveal that gallery paintings encouraged a speculative effort and originated a feeling of disorientation by presenting a more complex truthfulness, one that lacked a cohesive or totalising meaning.

Indeed, what both Peter and the gamblers present range from real subjects, to those that can be conceived without contradiction, and even ontologically undetermined ones that can be defined as nothing at all. More importantly, these diverging ontologies reside in individual subjects. In the Galleria, their ambivalence played with the beholder's viewing customs and originated unfamiliar states of mind, but it also allowed for movement in the viewers' consciousness. As historian José Antonio Maravall claimed about Baroque painting:

It was not a matter of attaining the public's intellectual adherence so much as moving it; therefore, a state of suspense was used as an expedient to launch a more firmly sustained movement. And that was the question: to move.³⁹

In experiencing the *Denials*, viewers were transformed by the contradictions they encountered. In turn, the representations were continuously rethought by the beholders, escaping stable definitions. These paintings enacted an epistemology of oscillation and betweenness produced within, and not in spite of, the religious subject. This represents a shift from the dominant account – propagated by many during the Catholic Reformation and recapitulated in recent scholarship – in which Counter-Reformation visual culture was primarily aimed at ‘moving the soul’.⁴⁰ These paintings rather enacted a visual dynamic that challenged both empirical knowledge and doctrinal convictions, breaking through the fallacies of integral truth. They raised questions that awaited answers, but none of the answers appeased the questions. Any interpretation of these scenes was bound to unwork itself, but ultimately such instability embodied their unreduced truthfulness.

Observing the representations of Peter's Denial and the challenge they posed to faith, knowledge and the complex notion of truth in painting, this article has endeavoured to reconsider assumptions about the role of religious art in seventeenth-century secular contexts of display at the time of the Counter Reformation, while also observing the idiosyncrasy of the Caravaggisti artistic paradigms. By bringing religious and secular subjects close in the microcosm of the Galleria, these artists adopted unorthodox visual strategies to explore how new and traditional ideas of truth met and destabilised one another. In so doing, they undermined the very possibility for any notion of truth to outlast, but also invited beholders to read paintings anew. Their versions of Peter's Denial revealed that what we call truth hides a complex web of puzzling relations among objects and subjects, whether perceived, believed or imagined. These artists ultimately challenged the assumption that truth in painting could be determined through affirmative or negative concepts, because in their complex scenes of denial, beholders encountered both and beyond both.

Notes

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- 1 On the Caravaggisti, see: Benedict Nicolson, *The International Caravaggesque Movement*, Oxford, 1979. On the versions of the *Denial of St. Peter*, see Jutta Gisela Sperling, *Roman Charity: Queer Lactations in Early Modern Visual Culture*, Berlin, 2016, p. 119.
- 2 Todd P. Olson, 'Caravaggio's Dispossession and Defamation', in Gail Feigenbaum, Galina Tirmanić and Sybille Ebert-Schifferer (eds), *Sacred Possessions: Collecting Italian Religious Art, 1500–1900*, Los Angeles, 2011, pp. 55–65.
- 3 On the dislocation of sacred painting, see: Victor I. Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight Into Early Modern Meta-Painting*, Turnhout, 2015; Feigenbaum, Tirmanić and Ebert-Schifferer (eds), 'Part One. Changing Contexts: Aesthetics of the Sacred', in op. cit., pp. 8–68.
- 4 Patrizia Cavazzini, 'The Market', in *Painting as Business in Early Seventeenth-century Rome*, Pennsylvania, 2008, pp. 1191–52.
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