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Barbara Longhi's Madonna Purissima

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“[Vergine Madre] L’amor che muove il sole e altre stelle.”

[Virgin Mother] The Love that moves the sun and the other stars.

Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto 333:145

ABSTRACT

The essay examines for the first time the Christian symbolism in the Immaculate Conception or Madonna Purissima (1620–1625) of Barbara Longhi of Ravenna (1552–1638). In the Italian sixteenth century, she is the first female painter to concentrate in her oeuvre on sacred devotional painting of Marian iconography. This endeavor reveals her aim to fuse physical motherly love and spiritual devotion. Her religious images reflect the artistic patronage of Ravenna as well as the religious decrees of the Counter-Reformation in Italy. Longhi's Immaculate Conception represents the Virgin Mary (Madonna) as the Woman of the Apocalypse described by Saint John in the Book of Revelation (12:1, 2, and 5). Longhi paints the Madonna emerging from a cloud of light and standing on a crescent moon holding her son, Christ. Rays of light emanate from her being and continue to expand in vortices within a nimbus (mandorla) to a ring of twelve stars crowning her and her son. The Madonna's virginal nature embodied in the divine golden light designates her as “Maria Purissima.” The stars forming a celestial crown metaphorically symbolize her immortality and wisdom. In the doctrinal precepts of the Counter-Reformation, the Virgin Mary became honored as the Virgo Sapientissima and Gloriosa, the Queen of Wisdom and Glory, and Regis Coeli, the Queen of Heaven. In her artistic manner, Longhi paved the way for mystical devotion, which would later be interpreted by female painters in the seventeenth century.

Keywords: Barbara Longhi, Counter-Reformation, Immaculate Conception, Virgin Mary (Madonna), Christian symbolism.

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1. Methodology

This study benefited from two types of scholarly studies. For research on the Immaculate Conception, the following scholars were consulted: Stefano M. Manelli (2015); Brian K. Reynolds (2008); Hugolinus Joseph Storff (2007); Morello, Francia, and Fusco (2005); Stefano M. Cecchin (2003); John O'Malley (2002); Suzanne L. Stratton (1994); Gabriele M. Roschini (1969); Bruno Korošak (1958); and, in

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particular, Mirella Levi D'Ancona (1957). For the study of the visual imagery, the writings of the following were considered: Giorgio Vasari (1568); Giordano Viroli (2000); Serena Simoni (2000); Lynette M. F. Bosch (2020); Paola Barocchi (1961); Anna B. Jamieson (1903); and A. Cippi (1853). Their insight on doctrinal theology, Marian symbolism, the historical understanding of the development of the dogma, and the prescriptions of the Counter-Reformation assisted in the interpretation of the religious imagery of Longhi's *Madonna Purissima*.

The approach to this study is art historical, employing the comparative method, which combines visual and stylistic observations with contextual cultural meanings. The artistic comparative method (*paragone*) aided in stylistically placing Longhi's work in the tradition of sixteenth-century Italian art and demonstrating the uniqueness of Longhi's interpretation and style in relation to other painters of the time. This art-historical approach further promotes the understanding of the symbolism in Longhi's *Madonna Purissima*. Employing iconographic and iconological methods of investigation facilitates the deciphering of the meaning in this religious painting and its emblematic devotional significance as well as the assessment of the impact of the Counter-Reformation (1543–1563) on art.

2. Introduction

Among Longhi's Marian paintings, *Madonna Purissima* or *The Immaculate Conception* of 1620–1625 in the Seminario Arcivescovile in Ravenna (Figure 1)² is unique in its devotional tone and in the artist's careful laboring over her visual scene. Longhi paid close attention to formal details in the treatment of color, movement of the figures, and spatial composition.³ She also closely investigated the symbolism of the image in reference to the Evangelist Saint John's description of the Woman of the Apocalypse in the Book of Revelation (12:1, 2, and 5): "A great sign appeared in Heaven ... A woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars."

This section considers the following: 1) a definition of the Immaculate Conception ("Maria Purissima"⁴); 2) a brief account of the doctrinal theological disputation; 3) a comparative artistic visualization; and 4) Longhi's interpretation and signification of "Maria Purissima."

2.1 Immaculate conception: Definition

In studying this painting, two considerations are evident: the complexity of the religious subject of the Immaculate Conception, whose polemic began in the middle ages and continued to evolve throughout the sixteenth century; and its visual rendition in Italian painting during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The literature on the historical and theological polemics of the Immaculate Conception is extensive. Some references are included here in order to explain Barbara Longhi's



Figure 1. Barbara Longhi, *Madonna Purissima* or *The Immaculate Conception*, 1620–1625, oil on canvas. Seminario Arcivescovile in Ravenna. Photo credit: Courtesy of Seminario Arcivescovile, Ravenna.

² I am grateful to the Seminario Arcivescovile in Ravenna for their assistance in reproducing the image and their many suggestions. This essay is part of a larger study, a book on *Barbara Longhi* under contract with Lund Humphries of London, which will be available in 2022.

³ Cheney, 1988; Cheney, 1994–2000; Cheney et al., 2000, Introduction, pp. xxi–xxvi, 42–66; Viroli, 2000, pp. 215–161 [check!]; Simoni, 2000.

⁴ In this essay I use the term "Maria Purissima" to designate the concept of the Virgin Mary's Immaculate Conception; and I use *Madonna Purissima* to designate Barbara Longhi's painting, sometimes also referred to as the *Immaculate Conception* painting.

iconography in her painting of *Madonna Purissima* or *Immaculate Conception*.⁵ The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception deals with Mary's conception in the womb of Saint Anne without original sin because God chose Mary from the House of David to fulfill His plan for the Redemption of humankind. Thus Mary became the only human person conceived without sin, i.e., “*Maria Purissima*.”⁶ The Virgin Mary's Immaculate Conception is also associated with her Assumption into the glory of Heaven. The Virgin Mary being free of all sins—that is, preserved free of any stains from original sin—was transported at the end of her life, body and soul, to Heaven (Jameson, 1903, pp. 443–45). She was the first participant in her son's Resurrection in fulfillment of the prophecies in the Scriptures (Jeremiah 13:18; Isaiah 66:7–14, 26:17; and Revelation 12:9). Her ascent to a higher world allowed her to be an intercessor for human salvation (Genesis 3:15).

2.2 “*Maria Purissima*”: Doctrinal and theological disputation

The theological disputation on the nature of the Immaculate Conception first emerged in the twelfth century in France with the polemics of medieval French philosophers, in particular, the Doctor of the Church Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) and the Scholastic Peter Abelard (1079–1142) (Jameson, 1903, pp. 126–40; D’Ancona, 1957, p. 70, n. 163; Reynolds, 2008, pp. 330–70). Mariology, the cult of the Virgin, began in the fourth century with Saint Ambrose (340–397 CE), the Bishop of Milan, and continued into the sixteenth century.⁷ The dogma of the Immaculate Conception was confirmed in 1439 at the Council of Basel (Cecchin, 2003, pp. 44–62). However, clarifications and discussions continued to developed until a significant event occurred between 1475 and 1476, when the Franciscan Pope Sixtus IV (Francesco della Rovere, 1411–1484), promoted the dogma of the Immaculate Conception and established a feast day. The pope was an avid patron of the arts and sciences, commissioning the architecture of the Vatican Library and the wall decorations in the Sistine Chapel. He was a Franciscan devotee of the Virgin Mary and in her honor added a feast day of December 8 to the Christian calendar. He also wrote an article of faith and bull promulgating the dogma and the feast, *Cum Praeexcelsa* (Jameson, 1903, pp. 128–29; Lamy, 2000; D’Ancona, 1957, p. 70, n. 163; Roschini, 1969, pp. 3–337). But ecclesiastical and theological disputes between Franciscan and Dominican theologians halted the commemoration and dissemination of this feast.

“*Maria Purissima*” is another term for the Immaculate Conception, alluding to Mary's birth without sin (John 12:1–2) (Jameson, 1903, pp. 126–40, esp. 126). During Longhi's lifetime, this doctrinal issue continued to be a subject of religious debate. On July 1615, reviewing the bull and encyclical of Pope Sixtus IV, Pope Paul V (Camillo Borghese 1550–1621), a lawyer, theologian, and an established expert in Roman canon law, composed another bull commemorating the Immaculate Conception and her feast on December 8—as had been earlier proclaimed by Sixtus IV but not instituted (Jameson, 1903, pp. 129–30; Cecchin, 2003, pp. 44–62). Although debated and partially supported by the members of the Counter-Reformation, this dogma of the Immaculate Conception, as it is known today, was officially formalized and instituted with Pope Pius IX's proclamation of *Ineffabilis Deus* on 8 December 1854.⁸ Thus, in the visualization of the Virgin Mary as *Madonna Purissima* (Figure 1), Longhi was responding to Pope Paul V's bull mandating the commemoration of the Immaculate Conception and her feast on December 8 as well as abiding by aims and decrees of the Council of Trent. In part, she probably was also following the postulations of Gabriele Paleotti (1522–1597), a Doctor of Civil and Canon Law and Archbishop of Bologna and a major contributor to the reformations of the Church during the Council. In 1582, Paleotti wrote in his *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images* on the merits of painting for a Christian individual, among which are to not only create art that imitates the natural world but also art that imitates for the glory of God ([*l'individuo*] *Cristiano aquista insieme un'altra nobile forma ... oltre l'assomigliare nella pittura ... ad fine maggiore, mirando la eterna gloria*).⁹

⁵ Some suggested sources on the topic of the Immaculate Conception: Storff, 1925; Roschini, 1969, pp. 9–337, esp. 249–51 on Saint Thomas Aquinas and Marian polemics; Stratton, 1994; Manelli, 1994; Healey, 2015; Reynolds, 2008; and, in particular, D’Ancona, 1957.

⁶ Cecchin, 2003, pp. 44–62; Jameson, 1903, pp. 126–40; D’Ancona, 1957, p. 70, n. 163 on the discussion of the Latin Church Fathers associated with the Immaculate Conception (Saints Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory) and the Church Doctors (Anselm and Bernard); Reynolds, 2008, pp. 330–70 on the Immaculate Conception.

⁷ Maunder, 2008; Bosch, 2020, pp. 37–51 on energeia, the spiritual and visual power of an image or a cult.

⁸ Korošak, 1958, pp. 29–35 on the church fathers, 92–95 on propaganda; Jameson, 1903, pp. 129–30.

⁹ Barocchi, 1961, 2:119–515, esp. 211, quoting Gabriele Paleotti, *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images* (see Paleotti, 2021 for the English translation).

A decree of the Council urged religious leaders to diligently teach the Bible along with the meaning of the stories and mysteries of redemption in order that they might be portrayed in paintings and other representations. Hence the depiction of all holy images with their iconography should provide recollections (*memoria*) and spiritual arousal (*exitatio*) (Schroeder, 1978, p. 216; O'Malley, 2002, *passim*). These experiences (*exitatio*) would then move viewers “to adore and love God and cultivate piety” (Schroeder, 1978, p. 216). Adhering to these principles, Paleotti's position on creativity recommended that artists compose art for the glory of God. Longhi—an artist, a devoted daughter, and a faithful Christian—abided by these prescripts aimed at developing a mindful individual and a moral initiator. Hence, with the imagery of her Madonna Purissima, she was assisting the devotee to visually experience the beauty and holiness of the Virgin Mary and, in particular, to “adore” her as The Mother of God (*Mater Dei*) (Bosch, 2020, pp. 37–51).

2.3 Artistic visualization

During the fifteenth century, some religious paintings dealing with the theme of the Immaculate Conception were associated with the theme of the Annunciation following the reference of the Evangelist Saint Luke (1:28). Luke's text described the Archangel Gabriel appearing to and greeting the Virgin Mary as “Hail full of Grace, the Lord is with Thee.” Florentine painters such as Fra Angelico (1395–1445) and Botticelli (1445–1510) depicted this passage in their paintings. In the paintings of the sixteenth century, the thematic focus on the purity of Christ's birth or His divine conception in the Virgin Mary, previously seen in the paintings of the Annunciation, shifted onto the Church Fathers' disputation on the Virgin Mary's purity at birth or conception to Saint Anne (D'Ancona, 1957, p. 17). Hence the visualization of this theme changed to illustrate in the scenes of the Immaculate Conception a three-part composition: foreground, middle area, and upper area. The foreground or the terrestrial realm depicted the Doctors of the Church or Church Fathers arguing with their open books. The middle area included the ancestors of humanity, Adam and Eve, surrounding the Tree of Knowledge. Their presence referred to their act of disobedience and pride in the Garden of God. The upper area depicted

the Virgin Mary with God the Father residing in the celestial realm, Heaven. The paintings of Dosso Dossi (1489–1542) and Guglielmo Marcilla (1470–1528) illustrate this type of imagery. Dossi's *Immaculate Conception with Four Doctors of the Church and Saint Bernardino of Siena* in 1532 or 1541 (date in question) depicts the Church Fathers—Saints Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose, and Gregory—disputing the doctrine of the Virgin Mary's conception.¹⁰ The Suxena family of Ferrara commissioned this painting for their altar in the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception in the Duomo of Modena. At an unknown date, the painting was moved from the Chapel to the Gemäldegalerie in Dresden. It was destroyed during the bombing of 1945 in WWII. Luckily, a surviving photograph assists in recollecting the imagery.¹¹ The original painting was visually divided into two parts by clouds: the lower area or the terrestrial realm represented the disputation among the Church Fathers, while the upper part or the celestial realm showed God the Father crowning the Virgin Mary. Around these holy figures, a choir of angels celebrated this heavenly event. Other painters continued to represent the theme of this theological disputation, for example, Giorgio Vasari's teacher in Arezzo, the French glassmaker Guglielmo Marcilla (Guillame de Marcillat), composed a unique painting in a rectangular panel, the *Dispute of Church*



Figure 2. Rosso Fiorentino (after), Study for an Immaculate Conception, c. 1528, drawing. École des Beaux-Arts, Paris.

¹⁰ For the image, see http://www.cassiciaco.it/navigazione/iconografia/pittori/cinquecento/dossi/dosso_dresda.html (accessed 15 March 2022).

¹¹ A photograph by Philipp Andreas Killan is found in the Dresden collection.

Scholars over the Immaculate Conception, c. 1525, which is now in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin.¹²

The theme of the Conception of the Virgin Mary fascinated sixteenth-century Italian Mannerist painters, as attested in many drawings and paintings and also numerous replicas in drawings, paintings, and engravings. Examples include Rosso Fiorentino's *Study of the Immaculate Conception* of 1528 (full drawing in a private collection and details at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris [Inv. Masson 1198] (Figure 2) and *Gabinetto dei Disegni e Stampe* at the Uffizi [Inv. 15559F]; Girolamo Mazzola Bedoli's *Immaculate Conception* of 1533 for the Oratorio della Concezione in Parma (Figure 3), now in the Galleria Nazionale of Parma, and its *Study of the Immaculate Conception* of 1533–1538, a drawing in the Cabinet des Dessins at the Louvre (Inv N.6321r);¹³ and Giorgio Vasari's *Conception of Our Lady* of 1540 in the church of Santi Apostoli in Florence (Figure 4), as well as his numerous versions and drawings in different collections (Cheney, 2016; Lora, 2008; O'Connor, 2000). In their imagery, these painters fused biblical references of the Virgin Mary's association with Eva/Ave (Russel and Barnes, 1990; Sesti, 1991, pp. 486–88), and the birth of Christ and its signification, to the writings of Jacobus de Voragine in the *Golden Legend* about the Tree of Life, The Tree of Knowledge, and the Tree of Jesse.



Figure 3. Girolamo Mazzola Bedoli, *The Immaculate Conception of the Virgin*, 1539, oil on canvas. Palazzo della Pilotta, National Gallery, Parma.



Figure 4. Giorgio Vasari's *Immaculate Conception*, 1540, oil on panel. Santissimi Apostoli, Florence.

In the Seminario Arcivescovile of Ravenna, the *Madonna Purissima* or *The Immaculate Conception* of 1620–1625 is beautifully displayed (Figure 1). Longhi's message is devotional and pious (Cheney, 1988). She visually expressed these sentiments through simple composition, soft colors, gentle treatment of the human figure, and, in the earlier works, an exaggerated linear quality. She was inspired not only by her father's paintings but also by the Emilian school, in particular the paintings of Antonio Allegri da Correggio (1489–1534), Dosso Dossi (1489–1542), and Parmigianino (Francesco Maria Mazzola, 1503–1540). She also carefully studied the engravings of Marco Dente (1493–1527) from Ravenna as well as the Roman engravings of Marco Antonio Raimondi (1480–1514) and Agostino Veneziano (1490–1540) after Raphael's Florentine period (1506–1508). Notwithstanding these influences, Longhi developed in her religious paintings her own recognizable style, reflected in

¹² For a discussion of the painting, see Kroegel, 2020; and for the artistic influence of Marcilla on Vasari, see Cheney, 2014. For the image, see <https://www.smb.museum/en/exhibitions/detail/ave-eva-a-rediscovered-major-work-by-renaissance-master-guillaume-de-marcilla/> (accessed 15 March 2022).

¹³ Milstein, 1978, pp. 252–57 for discussion on this remarkable and unusual painting. There is a study at the Louvre Museum, composed of a drawing in red chalk, heightened with white on beige paper, see Popham, 1964, esp. n. 17, pl. 2.

delicate modeling of the necks, arms, and feet of her Madonna and Christ, and with her saints, who are no more fleshy or corporeal than their curling garments. She used a warm palette with pastel and subtle colors. The result is uncluttered statements of cultivated piety.

Curiously, in the mentioned paintings of the Immaculate Conception by Rosso, Bedoli, and Vasari, these painters never depicted the Virgin Mary holding her son as Longhi did. The complex symbolism of the Immaculate Conception has been discussed by several scholars, including how it was imaged in sixteenth-century art, but such discussions have excluded Barbara Longhi (Morello, Franco, and Fusco, 2005, pp. 33–53 and 79–91; Lora, 2008, pp. 157–63). If they had, they would have observed that Longhi did not represent the theme of the disputation in her painting. On the contrary, she visualized and promoted the dogma of the Immaculate Conception promoted by the Counter-Reformation. Years later, artists began to disseminate this theme, in Italy with the paintings of Guido Reni (1517–1642) and in Spain with the pictures of Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617–1682), Diego Velazquez (1599–1660), and Francisco Zurbaran (1598–1664).

2.4 Longhi's "Maria Purissima" iconography

In Longhi's painting (Figure 1), the attributes and symbols associated with "Maria Purissima" are a conflation from the Litanies of the Virgin, sections in the Canticles, biblical prophecies, and ancient astronomical references associated with her gentle nature, moral beauty, purity, and the glorification of her being. Along with the physical descriptions there are the metaphysical or cosmological references to her divinity as the Mother of God. Hence some of the symbols are sunlight, the moon, and the stars, "Electa ut Sol, pulchra ut Luna" (Bright as the Sun, Fair or Beautiful as the Moon) (*Canticum Cantorum* or *Solomon's Canticles*, chapter 6, line 9; *Song of Songs*, 6; Jameson, 1903, p. 37).

In the *Madonna Purissima* (Figure 1), Longhi presents an apparition of the Virgin Mary with Christ emerging from a celestial golden light surrounded by fluffy tinted gray clouds, emanating from the heavenly ethereal light into bubbles of air. The full standing figure of the Virgin Mary is in a *contrapposto* stance. Her red attire is enveloped by a large blue cloak. The Virgin Mary's flowing veil intermingles with her long golden tresses. Longhi designed an elaborate trim for the neckline of Mary's dress, which is decorated with a band of garlands of gold color. The trim edge of the hem shows (still visible in part) a frieze with love knots of gold color. Mary's foot standing on the moon shows that she is not barefoot but wears a sandal of gold color. All of these motifs are celebratory symbols of physical and spiritual light and cosmic bonds (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1996, pp. 442, 575).

In her glorious entrance, the Madonna carries a clothed Christ who is blessing with one hand while the other holds an orb with a cross, symbols of His universal, limitless, and timeless power as well as of divine salvation (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1996, pp. 724). The Madonna stands on a silvery crescent moon that is cleverly designed and composed to imply a full circle, as the central area of the crescent tapers to points forming a circle—a globe—a metaphysical parallel with the physical orb held by Christ. The crescent moon is an allusion to the classical crescent that forms a crown, implying a lunar goddess. The Virgin Mary is a lunar divinity just as Christ (God) is a solar divinity.

This unusually large devotional image addresses a challenging theme about the physical and metaphysical beauty and purity of Mary relating to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception—Mary being the only human person conceived without sin.¹⁴ Ingeniously, Longhi chose to paint a mystical vision of the "Woman of the Apocalypse," as written by the John of Patmos in the Book of Revelation (12:1, 2, and 5): "There appeared



Figure 5. Francisco Pacheco, *Immaculate Conception*, 1621, oil on canvas. Palace of the Archbishop, Seville, Spain. Photo credit: Alamy.com.

¹⁴ Eco, 1988, pp. 111–13 for a discussion about physical and metaphysical light (*lumen* and *lux* or *claritas* and *resplendentia*) as references to beauty (*pulchro*) and good (*bono*) for physical light; and divine illumination or divine emanation for metaphysical light. See also Grant, 1994, pp. 390–93.

a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet, and above her head a crown with twelve stars.” This linking of the Virgin Mary with the Woman of the Apocalypse was noted by Saint Bonaventure in the thirteenth century and revived during the Counter-Reformation, in particular by the Spaniard Francisco Pacheco (1564–1654).¹⁵ In the *Art of Painting* (1638–1649), Pacheco explained the iconography of his *Immaculate Conception* of 1621 (Figure 5). He described his painting as inspired by references to the purity of the Virgin Mary by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and Peter Abelard. In turn, Saint Bernard adopted King Solomon’s *Song of Songs*, chant 4, verse 7: “Tota pulchra es. Amica mea, et macula non est in te” (You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no spot [flaw] in you) to refer to the Virgin Mary’s physical and spiritual pulchritude (“*Maria Purissima*”) as “Tota pulchra es, Maria. Et macula originalis non est in Te” (You are all beautiful, Mary, and the original stain [spot] [of sin] is not in you).¹⁶ While in Paris in 1230, Abelard debated the doctrine of Immaculate Conception, holding the position that Mary was both conceived and born without original sin.

The subject of “*Maria Purissima*” also reveals Isaiah’s prophecy about the Virgin Mary (11:1–2): “Et egredietur virga de radice Jesse et flos de radice eius ascendet” (And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots) (Figure 6). Fortuitously, this association was noted in astronomy in the second century CE. The Greek astronomer Ptolemy (d. 170 CE) included the constellation of Virgo in his catalogue of the twelve constellations because it was the second largest and most luminous constellation in the sky. The constellation of Virgo was represented as a gorgeous maiden holding a palm frond. In ancient mythology, she was associated with beauty, purity, fruitfulness, and fertility. During the Middle Ages, the constellation of Virgo was associated with the Virgin Mary and Isaiah’s biblical prophecy, thus linking the etymology of Virgo with *virga*, meaning a “green twig,” “rod,” or “broom,” as well as a convenient near-pun with Virgo or Virgin, which undoubtedly influenced the development of the image.¹⁷ The Virgo constellation also was closely connected with certain points in the sky, in particular, with the star of Beta Virginis, the fifth brightest star in this constellation and the constellation of Pisces.¹⁸ In Antiquity, this constellation symbolized the union between the pagan gods Venus and Cupid, later Christianized and associated with the Virgin Mary and the birth of Jesus (Allen, 1899, pp. 339 and 463). The constellation of Pisces is traditionally associated with the time that Christ was born, thus indirectly linking the Star of Bethlehem with the date of Christ’s birth (Biedermann, 1994, p. 131).



Figure 6. Francesco Salviati, attr. Tree of Jesse, 1540, mosaic. Church of Saint Mark, Venice.

Of note, from time to time, artists have responded and visualized aspects of this astronomical phenomena in art. One such example is Giotto’s *Adoration of the Magi* of 1305, a fresco painting in the Scrovegni Chapel (Arena Chapel) in Padua, in which Giotto depicted the Star of Bethlehem as Halley’s comet passing near the Earth during the time of Christ’s birth. In this painting, the star (comet) guided the Magi, the Three Wise Men, on their journey to visit the newborn child (Matt. 1:18–2:1–12).¹⁹

In Longhi’s painting, the figure of the Madonna emerges from Heaven in a radiant fiery light. There are three types of lights as she emerges from Heaven. In the celestial realm there is sunlight emitted and diffusing; in the metaphysical realm appears an ethereal light enveloping the holy figures;

¹⁵ Stratton, 1994, pp. 139, 140, and 142 on Abelard’s position on the Immaculate Conception; Jameson, 1903, p. 130.

¹⁶ Stratton, 1994, pp. 39, 140, and 142 on Abelard’s position on the Immaculate Conception.

¹⁷ O’Neil, 1976, p. 57; Mâle, 1913, pp. 165–68 for a discussion on Flos, pl flores, as Latin for flower. See also Jameson, 1903, p. 39 on the rod, olive branch, and palm frond as symbols of peace, victory, and grace.

¹⁸ Sesti, 1991, pp. 427, 475–89, esp. 488–89 on the astrology of the Virgin Mary.

¹⁹ For the image, see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Giotto_-_Scrovegni_-_18_-_Adoration_of_the_Magi.jpg (accessed 15 March 2022).

and crowning these atmospheric lights is the cosmological light of the twelve stars that emanate throughout the universe. In the *Paradiso of the Divine Comedy*, Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) wrote about the light connected with celestial movements embodied in the Virgin Mary's spiritual beauty; "love that moves the sun and the stars" (Canto 33:145).²⁰ This light is connected with God's creation, illuminating the cosmos. Dante draws a parallel between the source of light as being the source of love. He projected the light of God on the Virgin Mary's attributes as the Mother of His Son. Hence the light symbolizes her grace, purity and wisdom, as well as His generosity, love, and salvation for humankind.

The divine cosmic light is composed of several levels of luminosity, from the brightest sun rays to the earthly illumination. In *Madonna Purissima*, Longhi recalled Dante's verse in reference to the Virgin Mary as "flaming brightness" (Canto 31). The gradation of brightness is parallel to the Madonna's movement from Heaven to her visual apparition in the sky, that is, from her divine transformation of Mother of God to the human Mother of the Faithful.

It is not surprising that Longhi was inspired by Dante's *Divine Comedy*. This eminent Florentine poet and theologian resided in Ravenna between 1318 and 1321 and was buried there with great pomp in an ancient Roman sarcophagus located in the cloister of the Franciscan monastery of San Pier Maggiore (now Basilica of San Francesco). Significant and painful political circumstances forced Dante into exile from Florence in 1302. During this exile, Dante completed the *poema sacro*. He took refuge and received protection in several cities but resided in Ravenna during the last years of his life. Since then, the citizens of Ravenna have honored his memory and carefully protected his remains. During the Renaissance, there were several unsuccessful attempts to steal "Dante's bones." One in particular was in 1519, when a group of distinguished Florentines from the Accademia Medicea, including Michelangelo and Pope Leo X (Giovanni de' Medici), pleaded with the Ravennese for his restitution, which was denied. But days later, a determined and zealous Florentine troop sneaked into the cloister of the church in order to steal Dante's bones; surprisingly, they found the sarcophagus empty. In anticipation of this action, the Franciscan monks had cleverly removed and hidden Dante's bones. At a later time, they were safeguarded and displayed, always remaining under the jurisdiction of Ravenna (Raffa, 2020).

Returning to the iconography of Longhi's *Madonna Purissima*, the Madonna's classical stance and statuesque appearance contrast with her gentle, loving smile in partaking of the blessing gesture of her son. Her windblown veil reveals her long, loose golden locks as a symbol of purity (virgo or virginal nature).²¹ She appears presenting her divine fruit, Christ, who warmly blesses the viewer, the Christian faithful. He holds a celestial orb with a cross, symbols of omnipotence, sacrifice (Crucifixion), and love for humankind. His cuddling of His mother reveals His mother's love and sacrifice undertaken for humankind as well.

As the Mother of God steps on the Moon, a cloudy atmosphere is provoked, making the fluffy clouds spin into a rotation that will continue until the clouds are dissipated and transformed into ethereal sunlight, partaking of the heavenly atmosphere. These clouds are the physical and metaphysical vehicle that carries the holy figures from the celestial to the terrestrial stratosphere.²² Longhi painted the clouds in a mauve color, matching the colors in the Madonna's attire and metaphorically referring to the Madonna among the clouds as being the buffer between the celestial and earthy realms. The clouds symbolize a threshold, creating a passage of salvation for humankind through the intercession of the Virgin Mary as the carrier of the Son of God.²³ The grace of God through the Virgin Mary pardons the original sin and transgressions of human beings (D'Ancona, 1957, p. 14). These clouds connect the Madonna's celestial realm (divine grace) with the faithful's terrestrial realm (human salvation).

Thus Longhi depicted the Virgin Mary as the Woman of the Apocalypse as written in the Book of Revelation. Rays of light emanate from her being and continue to expand in vortices within a nimbus (mandorla) to culminate with a ring of twelve stars crowning the Virgin Mary and Christ. The twelve

²⁰ Inspired by John's passage (4:16), "God is love; and He that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him," Dante conflated the Virgin Mary's love with God's love. See Dante's *Divine Comedy-Paradiso*, 1867, p. 223. In the *Paradiso*, other Canti also referred to the conceit of light associated with the Virgin Mary (Canti I, 12, 23, 26, 30–33).

²¹ Cobb-Stevens, 1993; D'Ancona, 1957, pp. 20–22 and 51 on Mary and Wisdom.

²² Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1996, p. 206 as instruments of apotheosis; Barbieri, 1993.

²³ Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1996, p. 997 on the symbolism of threshold

stars crowning the holy figures are a metaphor for the cosmological complexity, not just referring to the ancient tradition of the vault of Heaven (the twelve zodiac signs) but also a biblical metaphor for the twelve tribes of Israel, the chosen people of God, the twelve apostles, the followers of Christ on Earth, the twelve fruits created from the Tree of Life.²⁴ Thus the symbolism of the twelve stars has biblical and planetary allusions, recalling the origins of God's land and the house of Jesse from the tribes of Israel as well as his ministry with the twelve apostles on Earth. Traditionally, the planets and the zodiac signs created a circle consisting of twelve star signs, metaphorically forming a crown of immortality and wisdom (John 1:9). The luminosity of the stars parallels the brilliant reflection of the Moon.²⁵ The Moon, in conjunction with the stars, adheres to the signification of practical and spiritual knowledge acquired through reflection (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1996, p. 670). Hence the Virgin Mary stepping on the Moon and crowned with stars alludes to her embodiment of wisdom and celestial royalty as *Virgo Sapientissima* and *Gloriosa*, the Queen of Wisdom, and *Regis Coeli*, the Queen of Heaven (John:12:1, 2 and 5) (Jameson, 1903, pp. 80, 91; Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1996, pp. 601, 604–05).

3. Conclusion

Barbara Longhi was trained by her father, Luca Longhi (1507–1580), a Mannerist artist from the Emilia-Romagna region influenced by the Roman and Central Italian (Florence, Bologna) schools of art.²⁶ Records indicate that traditionally in these artistic centers, during the Italian sixteenth century, female artists were trained by their fathers—including Bolognese Lavinia Fontana by Prospero Fontana and the Venetian Marietta Robusti (La Tintoretta) by Jacopo Tintoretto. Barbara Longhi was no exception, being trained by Luca Longhi (Cheney, 2020, pp. 12–13 and 43–45).

Barbara Longhi won the esteem of contemporary connoisseurs during her lifetime. The Florentine artist, historian, and writer Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) commented on her art: “[Her paintings] Unique for their purity of line and soft brilliance of color” (Vasari, 1568/1881, 7:420–21); and in 1575, the academician and theoretician Muzio Manfredi of Ravenna (1535–1609) stated: “Her art is quite marvelous, and even her father is surprised by her art, especially her portraits.”²⁷

In her *Madonna Purissima*, a symbolic portrait of the Virgin Mary (“*Maria Purissima*”), Longhi creatively painted the Virgin Mary as the Mother of God who proudly proclaims from Heaven the coming of the Savior of the world, the Redeemer. Whether Longhi, as a good Christian, consulted the Book of Revelation or was guided by the inspiration or dictum of a religious patron, her image represents a before and after event, a vision of foretelling the future, the anticipation of her conception with the divine fruit. This is why the image of the Virgin Mary with Christ is depicted emerging from a magical divine light where there is no spatial or temporal limitation. Therefore, all in one divine instant, Mary is born immaculate and her Son is born immaculate; God *a priori* and *a posteriori* bestowing blessings and forgiveness on humankind. Hence the firmament, the sky, the moon, stars, and divine light evoke contemplation on the part of the viewer. This is the culmination of Longhi's artistic achievement, a Dantesque vision of goodness where the ultimate bond for the faithful is to contemplate Mary not as a nursing mother (*Mater Lactans*) or sorrowful mother (*Mater Dolorosa*) but as the Mother of God (*Mater Dei*). This painting epitomizes Longhi's fervor and the spiritual message prescribed by the edicts of the Counter-Reformation (Bosch, 2020, pp. 37–51; O'Malley, 2002, Introduction).

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²⁴ Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1996, p. 1043 on the Christian symbolism of twelve; D'Ancona, 1957, p. 14.

²⁵ Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1996, p. 924 on the symbolism of the star.

²⁶ Corbara, 1975, pp. 86–94, 87–88 for catalogue entries on Barbara Longhi; Cappi, 1853/1985, pp. 24, 166; Arfelli, 1935, pp. 120, 23; Ricci, 1906, pp. 54, 86.

²⁷ Manfredi, 1575, pp. 22–23; also quoted in Viroli, 2000, p. 191.

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