

“WHY TEAR ME FROM MYSELF?”: THE DEPICTION OF  
FLAYING IN THE ART OF JUSEPE DE RIBERA

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines from an original point of view the relationship between technique and subject matter in Jusepe de Ribera's depictions of flaying. Ribera revisited the topic throughout his career, painting it more than any artist at the time – there are eight extant paintings showing the Martyrdom of St. Bartholomew and Apollo flaying Marsyas. Scholarly interest in Ribera has thus far been predominantly biographical and attributional, treating his paintings mostly in terms of style inherited from Caravaggio and subject matter as a reflection of the supposedly violent nature of “Neapolitan society.” This thesis argues that Ribera's paintings of flaying offer viewers a visual paradox by never aligning, or making coherent the relationship between the force of their subject and their technique.

This thesis focuses on the relationships between corporeal and pictorial surfaces in order to explore life and death, chiaroscuro and spirituality, touch as creative and destructive, violence and materiality. The fundamental question of life and death is treated in relation to corporeal fragmentation and the integrity of pictorial surfaces. The chiaroscuro is considered as a moving fold in relation to apophatic and cataphatic theology. Touch, as the key gesture of these paintings, is explored in relation to making and unmaking. And finally, violence is examined in relation to materiality. This thesis pays special attention to the working of the canvas, impasto, and chiaroscuro, interpreting them as refashioning the subject's narrative, temporality, and spirituality. Ultimately, this dissertation shows that Ribera's paintings of flaying should be conceived as powerful, distinct pictorial bodies, rather than altarpieces or gallery pictures representing an extravagant subject matter.





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## **Author declaration**

I, Ioan Bogdan Cornea, declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

## INTRODUCTION

Mutilated bodies, faces twisted with pain, flayings and ruthless martyrdoms – these are the subjects that occupy much of Jusepe de Ribera’s oeuvre. Known to his contemporaries and early writers as *Lo Spagnoletto* and *Lo Spagnolo* (“the Little Spaniard”, “the Spaniard”), Ribera’s name has become synonymous over the centuries with a terrifying art of victims and executioners – a conflation of “Spanishness” and violent cruelty. This reputation was fanned in the nineteenth century by his Romantic admirers, among whom were Théophile Gautier and Lord Byron.<sup>1</sup> The Romantics found Ribera’s paintings of violence and martyrdom fascinating in their gruesome bloodshed. Lord Byron praised the artist: “Spagnoletto tainted/ His brush with all the blood of all the sainted” (*Don Juan*, xiii. 71) while Gautier wrote in his sonnet *Prometeus*: “Thou cruel Ribeira, harder than Jupiter,/ You make hollow flanks, by frightful gashes,/ Rivers of blood flow in cascades of guts!” (*Sur le Prométhée du Musée de Madrid*, 1843). Even today, most scholarship tends to interpret Ribera’s violent images as the product of either his supposedly tormented life – according to his eighteenth-century biographer Bernardo de’ Dominici – his Spanish origin, or/and the purportedly violent nature of Neapolitan society.<sup>2</sup> My thesis offers a different interpretation of Ribera’s paintings of violence by challenging the view that they are simple reflections either of “Neapolitan society” or of the artist’s personal idiosyncrasies. Instead, I argue that they are powerful artworks that have the ability to produce new modes of perception and artistic engagement.

I was drawn to Ribera’s paintings initially by their violence and emotional intensity. I have always found this difficult to articulate into words, because they do not offer a clear interpretation either in terms of subject matter or technique. While researching my Master dissertation, I became interested in the relationship between Ribera’s paintings of violence and Longinus’ concept of the Sublime, which was rediscovered, published, and disseminated during the second half of the sixteenth century in places like Parma, Rome and Naples. I

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<sup>1</sup> Harald Hendrix, “The Repulsive Body. Images of Torture in 17th-Century Naples,” in *Bodily Extremities. Preoccupations with the Human Body in Early Modern European Culture*, Florike Egmond and Robert Zwijnenberg eds., Ashgate, 2003, 68.

<sup>2</sup> Craig Felton and William Jordan, *Jusepe De Ribera: "Lo Spagnoletto", 1591-1652*, Kimbell Art Museum, 1982, 35-36; Clovis Whitefield and Jane Martineau, *Painting in Naples: From Caravaggio to Giordano*, Art Books Intl Ltd, 1983, 22.

initially analysed features such as: chiaroscuro, colouring, composition, graphic depiction of violence and strong emotions in relation to characteristics attributed to the sublime. However, I soon found this approach limiting and unsatisfactory as it restricted images to rhetorical tools, concentrated mainly on style and subject, and assumed viewers were aware of Longinus' writing and interpreted the paintings according to a pre-established set of rhetorical prescriptions. This approach risked losing sight of what is peculiar about Ribera's paintings by imposing a grand narrative constructed around a rhetorical and literary concept, rather than inquiring into what initially drew me to them.

I realized that the fascination I have with Ribera's paintings cannot simply be reduced to either the gruesomeness of their subject, the dramatics of the gestures, the brilliance of the impasto, or the lavish handling of the chiaroscuro, although all of these aspects form an essential part of that mixture. Instead, my enthrallment springs from what I perceive to be a constant friction and displacement at work between subject matter and technique. A crucial turning point was also my encounter with the paintings in the flesh, having the opportunity to indulge in the pleasure of looking and exploring their surfaces. This experience helped shape my argument that Ribera's paintings offer viewers a visual paradox by never aligning, or making coherent the relationship between the force of their subject and their technique.

In order to explore this tension, I focus on eight paintings by Ribera depicting the act of flaying in two scenes: first Apollo's punishment of Marsyas and second the martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew. The paintings are: *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.1) (1618-1619; Colegiata de Santa Maria Church, Osuna), *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.2) (c.1620; Palazzo Pallavicini-Rospigliosi, Rome), *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.3) (c.1628-1630; Palazzo Pitti, Florence), *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.4) (c.1625-1628; Basilica Cattedrale di San Nicola di Bari, Nicosia), *Apollo flaying Marsyas* (Fig.5) (1637; Museo di Capodimonte, Naples), *Apollo and Marsyas* (Fig.6) (1637; Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels), *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.7) (1644; Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona) and *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.8) (1634; National Gallery of Art, Washington).

I have chosen to restrict my research to Ribera's paintings of flaying because the removal of skin as a method of torture and execution permits the possibility of questioning the complex nature of surfaces as skin, and raises the problem of the relationship between pictorial and corporeal surfaces. Ribera offers in his paintings a prolonged and visceral engagement with these issues. At the core of the problem lies the difficulty of conceiving skin

as the only corporeal surface, given that Ribera's paintings depict bodies that are skinned, with the muscles and veins of a limb exposed as surfaces. Ribera's paintings suggest a disjunction between the notion of corporeal surface and skin, while reinterpreting the relationship between skin and pictorial surfaces. The surface of the body is not to be equated only with skin; and hence the surface of the painting can be conceived as skin, rather than merely as paint on canvas. The surface of Ribera's paintings takes on the potentiality of skin, while corporeal surfaces are not to be interpreted as only skin. Below I argue that the surface of Ribera's paintings should be conceived as complex layers of skins; the visible rough canvas and multiple layers of paint take on the potentiality of skin in the process of flaying. Ribera's painting of flaying therefore offers a new way of thinking about skin in relation to corporeal and pictorial surfaces. In the paintings what is set up is a relational referencing of skin by paint and paint by skin the other in a complex relationship where the act of flaying exposes the tension between subject and technique.

Through the depiction of the act of flaying, Ribera's paintings reveal the inside to be a facet of the outside. I relate this to the artist's complex handling of pictorial surfaces and materiality. Ribera's interest in portraying the aging skin of elderly men it is related to his subtle questioning of the nature of surfaces and the relation between interior and outside. In Ribera's paintings of flaying, skin is problematized as a complex material surface. The different textures, density and elasticity of skin are explored by the artist through the versatility of the canvas and paint. Ribera emphasizes the materiality of the canvas and paint through diverse means – such as the impasto technique and the opacity of the surface. Moreover, the theme of flaying allows for the play between his different pictorial strategies to emerge more sharply, highlighting Ribera's engagement with issues such as: life and death, violence, spirituality, and the senses.

While both *Apollo flaying Marsyas* and the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* depict a scene of flaying, there are also notable differences between the two types of subject matter. One depicts a mythological scene of divine punishment, where Marsyas is flayed as punishment for his hubris of challenging the god Apollo and his celestial music, thus disrupting the given order and balance of the universe. The other shows an act of human cruelty and injustice as well as the power of the saint to withstand this. The Apostle Bartholomew is flayed alive by Astyages for converting his brother Polymius, King of Armenia to Christianity. In their own unique way both subjects makes the viewer question his position as embodied

viewer and witness – the Greek work μάρτυς (martyr) means witness – and that will be explored further in the following chapters.

Ribera's paintings of *Apollo flaying Marsyas* (Fig.5) (1637; Capodimonte Museum, Naples) and the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.8) (1634; National Gallery of Art, Washington) illustrate the displacement between subject and technique. In *Apollo flaying Marsyas*, the dramatics of the subject – conveyed through the Marsyas' petrified screaming face, the drama of Apollo's purple flaying cape, and the horror of the bystanders – does not match with the handling of the impasto, which is especially refined on Marsyas' and Apollo's bodies. What's more, the restrained intensity of the subject in the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* – a moment just before the flaying when the executioner stops and stares at the saint with a look that betrays a touch of empathy – does not match with the broad, rough, and coarse use of the impasto, especially on the figures of the saint and executioner. Both these paintings articulate a relationship between subject and technique that is fraught with tensions, frictions, and contradictions. The aim of my thesis is to explore this relationship by analysing not only the strategies through which the artist achieved them, but also how they affect our process of interpretation and most importantly what they allow us to see.

The displacement between subject and technique in Ribera's art has not yet been properly addressed in the literature. The literature focuses either on questions of style, attribution and biography, or attempts to place Ribera's art within the Neapolitan artistic milieu.<sup>3</sup> However, the paradigm used by these studies and the approach they take to Ribera's work fails to address my problematic. For instance Spinosa accounts for the violence of Ribera's painting, especially his scenes of martyrdom thus: "the artist depicted the violence of man against man, giving visual form to the conflict between spirit and matter, nature and history, and dream and reality. Using strong slashes of light and shadow and dynamic contrasts of resplendent materials and gloomy tones, Ribera participates more sorrowfully in the drama of the event."<sup>4</sup> More recently, in 2011, Javier Portus explains Ribera's images of

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<sup>3</sup> For questions of attribution and style, see: Spinosa, *Ribera. The Complete Work*, Electra Napoli, 2003; Gianni Papi, *Ribera a Roma*, Edizioni dei Soncino, 2007; Papi, "The Young Ribera: Reflections," in *Caravaggio's Rome*, Rossella Vodret ed., Skira, 2012, 407-417. Indeed there is a growing interest in Ribera's early years, between his arrival in Italy and settling in Naples, evidenced by the 2011 itinerary exhibition *Il giovane Ribera and El Joven Ribera* in Naples and Madrid. See: Spinosa ed., *Il giovane Ribera tra Roma, Parma e Napoli. 1608-1624*, Arte'm, 2011; and the Spanish version: *El Joven Ribera*, Brizzolis, 2011. For studies that contextualize Ribera's art in Naples see: Felton and Jordan, *Jusepe de Ribera*; Silvia Cassani ed., *Civiltà del Seicento a Napoli*, Electra 1984; Whitfield and Martineau, *Painting in Naples*. For a study that considers Ribera's art in relation to Naples and Spain, see: Alfonso E. Perez Sanchez and Nicola Spinosa (Eds.), *Jusepe de Ribera, 1591-1652*, Yale University Press, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> Spinosa, "Ribera and Neapolitan Painting," in Perez Sanchez and Spinosa, *Jusepe de Ribera*, 22-23.

violence by attributing them to the artist's interest in depicting emotions in order to convey fervent religious feelings: "and within the wide range available to him, in most cases he explored those aspects related to devotion, piety, cruelty and pain."<sup>5</sup>

Some scholars have interpreted Ribera's paintings of violence by appealing to philosophical and literary ideas that circulated in Naples in the early years of the seventeenth-century. Juan Luis González García interprets Ribera's chiaroscuro in his paintings of cruelty and violence as reflecting the rising popularity in the early seventeenth century of Aristotle's *Poetics* – with its emphasis on tragedy – and Longinus' *On the Sublime*.<sup>6</sup> Harald Hendrix argues that the "aesthetic of extreme violence" permeating early seventeenth century Neapolitan painting – of which Ribera stands as a case in point – can be interpreted as a response to the dissemination of Giambattista Marino's poetical concept of *meraviglia* – meaning "shock," "wonder," and "astonishment."<sup>7</sup> Both these studies attempt to explain Ribera's paintings by appealing to literary and philosophical concepts; an approach that risks turning artworks into mere reflections of the changing taste of patrons or literati.

What all these studies overlook is the fact that Ribera approached each painting in a unique way, using it as an opportunity to explore new aspects of the relationship between subject and technique. If one pays attention to these shifts and changes in Ribera's works, what emerges is that the interplay between surface, materiality and corporeality is at the heart of his work. Each time Ribera seeks new dissonances and dislocations by altering the relationships in his paintings between touch, violence and spirituality. This is evidenced not only by his use of impasto, but also by his chiaroscuro. Ribera never had one recipe for using the chiaroscuro in his paintings of flaying and his use of it was certainly not restricted to his early works – as suggested in the literature.<sup>8</sup> Nicola Spinosa, for instance, reduces Ribera's use of chiaroscuro to the artist's early period, treating it as "influence" from Caravaggio, from which the artist "evolved" by the 1630s to a "picturesque" approach "inspired" by Titian's

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<sup>5</sup> Javier Portus, *Ribera*, Ediciones Poligrafa, 2011, 92.

<sup>6</sup> Juan Luis González García, "Jusepe de Ribera y lo trágico sublime. A propósito del Martirio de San Bartolomé y su modelletto (1624)," in *Goya: Revista de arte*, 2000, 214-225.

<sup>7</sup> Harald Hendrix, "The Repulsive Body," 68-91. Hendrix also attributed the rising popularity of paintings depicting violent subjects to the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century dissemination of Aristotle's *Poetics*. See also: *Idem*, "The Representation of Suffering and Religious Change in the Early Cinquecento," in *Forms of Faith in Sixteenth-Century Italy (Catholic Christendom, 1300-1700)*, Abigail Brundin and Matthew Treherne eds., Ashgate, 2009; *Idem*, "Renaissance Roots of the Sublime. Ugliness, Horror and Pleasure in Early Modern Italian Debates on Literature and Art," in Christophe Madelein, Jürgen Pieters and Bart Vandenabeele (Eds.), *Histories of the Sublime*, Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Spinosa, *Ribera*, Electra, 2003, 82-111.

later works.<sup>9</sup> Spinosa's approach is grounded in a teleological view of history and artistic progression, where Ribera becomes a receptacle of stylistic influences from previous artists. Ribera's art and originality risks being treated as a mere reworking of other artists' art; his originality reduced to finding new pictorial solutions to older – and other people's – questions. Spinosa writes that through chiaroscuro Ribera “had found in the example of Caravaggio the means of giving a quality of concrete reality to their subjects and an air of truthfulness to the most hidden aspects of the mind, sometimes pushing the results to a heavy physicality and ruthless realism.”<sup>10</sup> Gianni Papi goes so far as to suggest that because Giulio Mancini in his book *Considerazioni sulla pittura* (1617-1624) mentioned Ribera among Caravaggio's “followers” – together with Bartolomeo Manfredi and Cecco del Caravaggio – he must have been in “direct contact with Merisi (and also probably emotionally involved with him) and became a painter through that experience.”<sup>11</sup>

In the 2011 exhibition catalogue *Caravaggio and his Followers in Rome*, Sebastian Schütze more cautiously places Ribera in Caravaggio's circle in Rome – although insisting on a stylistic connection, rather than a physical one – writing that Ribera's “violent naturalism and *tremendo impasto* [...] represents emblematically the diversity among [Caravaggio's] early followers.”<sup>12</sup> For Schütze, the relationship between “Caravaggio and his many followers” can best be described as a complex planetary system, where Caravaggio is the central star while the other artists are individual planets, with their own laws and substance, moving around the master's central axis.<sup>13</sup> This interpretation is so popular that entire exhibitions were dedicated to the supposed influence that Caravaggio's “realism” had over seventeenth-century Neapolitan painters.<sup>14</sup> While these studies are helpful in emphasising Ribera's use of chiaroscuro, their approach tends to reduce the artist to a follower of Caravaggio, overlooking the ways in which the artist radically departed from what his predecessors or contemporaries achieved. It also groups artists according to style, a move that risks imposing a coherent, rationalized grand narrative onto artworks and artists that are substantially and fundamentally different. It is clear however that a linear mode of viewing

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<sup>9</sup>Spinosa, *Ribera*, 146-175.; See also: *Idem, José de Ribera : bajo el signo de Caravaggio (1613-1633)*, Generalitat Valenciana, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Spinosa, “Ribera and Neapolitan Painting,” 20.

<sup>11</sup> Papi, “The Young Ribera: Reflections,” 408-409.

<sup>12</sup> Sebastian Schütze, “Caravaggism in Europe: A Planetary System and its Gravitational Laws,” in David Franklin and Sebastian Schütze eds., *Caravaggio and his Followers in Rome*, Yale University Press, 2011, 29, 38,

<sup>13</sup> *Idem*, 45-46.

<sup>14</sup> See for instance: Thomas Loughman ed., *Fierce Reality: Italian Masters from Seventeenth Century Naples*, Skira, 2005.



Ribera's oeuvre – the sort of teleological progression of “influences” from Caravaggio to Titian into which Ribera is supposed to fall – is not adequate simply because it does not explain why the artist returns time and time again throughout his career to the use of chiaroscuro in specific paintings and to what end.

My thesis argues that the question of violence and chiaroscuro in Ribera's paintings is closely connected to the depiction of the body, skin and flesh, and the senses, in particular the sense of sight and touch. I explore the tension between the subject of flaying and the technique of rendering skin. Few scholars have specifically addressed flesh or skin in Ribera's work. Javier Portus, in 2011, argues, “the wrinkles, the aged skin, the ragged attire and even the earthy range of colours that served to formulate the theory of realism in fact belong to a codified vocabulary, some of the roots of which date back to Antiquity, which emerged as an alternative to the idealization conventions that had governed painting ever since the Renaissance.”<sup>15</sup> Itay Sapir provides a fresh interpretation of Ribera's engagement with skin and surfaces in relation to the hierarchy of the senses.<sup>16</sup> According to Sapir, Ribera's paintings of the martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew create a play between the corporeal, tactile experience of the saint's suffering and his deficient visual perception when looking into the light shining from above – a tension that challenges sight and privileges touch.<sup>17</sup>

On the one hand, existing scholarship on Ribera does not address the problematic of displacement at work within his paintings simply because their various paradigms focus on providing a coherent stylistic narrative, or creating a literary or social context that should account for the paintings' extreme violence. On the other hand, the rare times when scholars do actually acknowledge the technique of Ribera's paintings – the impasto, canvas threads, and chiaroscuro – they fail to set it into a correlative relationship with the subject matter and its effect within the process of interpretation.<sup>18</sup>

I argue that Ribera's paintings of flaying should be conceived as powerful, distinct pictorial bodies, rather than altarpieces or gallery pictures representing an extravagant subject

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<sup>15</sup> Portus, *Ribera*, 40.

<sup>16</sup> Itay Sapir, “Blind suffering: Ribera's Non-visual Epistemology of Martyrdom,” *Open Arts Journal*, Issue 4, Winter 2014–5, 29-39.

<sup>17</sup> *Idem*, 37-38.

<sup>18</sup> A notable exception is Edward Payne, “Skinning the Surface: Ribera's Executions of Bartholomew, Silenus and Marsyas,” in *Bild-Riss: Textile Öffnungen im ästhetischen Diskurs*, Mateusz Kapustka ed., Edition Imorde; Reimer, 2015, 85-100. As Payne's article came out when I was just about to submit my thesis I was not able to engage with it extensively and integrate it into my thesis. However, on a first read it appears that some of his ideas are close – though not similar – to my own, especially when discussing Apollo's touch as making and unmaking.

matter. By interpreting Ribera's paintings as bodies I do not mean to equate paintings to human bodies or suggest that paintings are in any way organic entities. Instead, my interpretation rests on a repositioning of the body in a conception of changing matter and materiality. In Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.7) (1644; Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona) the canvas and paint are worked in such a manner by Ribera that they take on the potentiality of ruptured skin and open flesh. The materials appear here to influence our interpretation of the painting's temporality in relation to the subject's narrative and violence. My interpretation of matter as active, which I call materiality, is indebted to scholars including Katie Lloyd Thomas, Andrew Benjamin, and Caroline Walker Bynum. I also draw on the scholarship of Lorenzo Pericolo, Jodi Cranston, and Georges Didi-Huberman in understanding how the painting's material status can influence our interpretation of the subject.

Caroline Walker Bynum's research on the role of matter and materiality in late medieval Christianity is central to the development of my interpretation because it goes against a restricted understanding of "the body" as simply "human individual" by repositioning it in conceptions of matter (*materia*).<sup>19</sup> Bynum argues that there is a paradox lying at the heart of late medieval Christianity where matter was seen as both threatening to and offering salvation because of its capacity to suffer change.<sup>20</sup> For Bynum, medieval art encapsulates this paradox by insistently displaying and commenting on materiality; images do more than reference the divine, they actually "lift matter towards God and reveal God through matter."<sup>21</sup> Bynum's insights provide a useful framework for my argument on Ribera's paintings as bodies, and informs my interpretation of pictorial matter as showing a spiritual movement, which I discuss in relation to Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.3) (c. 1628-1630; Palazzo Pitti, Florence) in Chapter Two.

Jodi Cranston's study on Titian's loose brushstrokes is useful when considering Ribera's handling of the impasto.<sup>22</sup> After rejecting the Renaissance's self-negating illusionistic transparency of the surface, Cranston argues that Titian's materially opaque brushstrokes act as an index for sixteenth-century conceptions of beauty, embodiment, artifice, and violence.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality. An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe*, Zone Books, 2011, 32.

<sup>20</sup> *Idem*, 34-35.

<sup>21</sup> *Idem*, 35.

<sup>22</sup> Jodi Cranston, *The Muddied Mirror, Materiality and Figuration in Titian's Late Paintings*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010.

<sup>23</sup> *Idem*, 16-18.

Cranston's study is crucial for my thesis as she looks at a similar problematic: the interaction between subject matter and technique, interpreting it as a corresponding relation between subjectivity and disfiguration.<sup>24</sup> It also offers an excellent contrasting point to Ribera's *impasto tremendo*. It helps to sharpen understandings of the unique strategies through which Ribera's impasto emphasises not only the materiality of the surface but also the way in which it can alter the violence of the subject matter.

Lorenzo Pericolo's research on Caravaggio's treatment of pictorial narrative has also been important to my research.<sup>25</sup> Pericolo interprets the dramatic language of figures as "subordinated to, sometimes even subdued by, the global arrangement of the painting's surface."<sup>26</sup> Thus, Caravaggio's chiaroscuro and *non-finito* "acquire an unprecedented independence by configuring a syntax of their own, which does not necessarily match, and occasionally even surmounts the *istoria*."<sup>27</sup> Pericolo's study is crucial for the development of my argument because it offers a rare analysis of the way materials such as canvas and paint were conceptualised and interpreted in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in relation to pictorial narrative.

To accentuate the peculiarity and originality of Ribera's use of materials in relation to each painting, I avoid adopting or creating one single definition of materiality. My thesis therefore will not provide a coherent, conceptually consistent classification of what materiality is in Ribera's paintings, but will adopt a variety of perspectives depending on the work and detail in question. That being said, I do resort to a broad understanding of materiality as the *insistence of the medium* within the generation of the work's meaning. This interpretation is indebted to Andrew Benjamin's conceptualization of *mattering*. For Benjamin, "meaning is always, and only, an after effect of the way matter works. As such, the working of matter is the precondition for the possibility of meaning. This aspect of a work can be understood as its *mattering*."<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, Benjamin looks at the way in which matter works, or is made to *matter*, within the generation of the work's meaning, arguing for the possibility of linking materiality to the conceptual and ideational, without imposing an idea upon matter. Benjamin claims that to insist on mattering is to consider matter as a locus of activity. For Benjamin, to

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<sup>24</sup> *Idem*, 6.

<sup>25</sup> Lorenzo Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative: Dislocating the Istorica in Early Modern Painting*, Harvey Miller Publishers, 2011.

<sup>26</sup> *Idem*, 423.

<sup>27</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Benjamin, "Colouring Philosophy: Appel, Lyotard, and Art's Work," in *Critical Horizons*, 11.3, 2010, 401.

analyse the work of mattering is to pay attention to the particular characteristics of each painting.<sup>29</sup> Taking my cue from Benjamin, I consider materiality as specific to each work of art, bearing in mind the uniqueness of every process and the effects it produces. This approach involves a way of looking and interpreting paintings that moves from the particular to the general, resisting the imposition of an ideal concept over a set of paintings or the artist's individual approach. Thus, by looking at paintings as bodies I not only resituate the body in materiality, but also consider each painting as an individual body with its own tensions and frictions, constituting a unique repositioning of the relationship between the technique and representational.

The work of George Didi-Huberman has proven to be of great significance in exploring the tense relationship between pictorial technique and representation.<sup>30</sup> Didi-Huberman criticized the art historical approach of interpreting paintings inherited from Vasari and Panofsky because it assumed that visual representation is made up of legible signs, which lends itself to rational scholarly thought personified in the 'science of iconology.'<sup>31</sup> Instead, Didi-Huberman argues that images have an 'underside' in which apparently comprehensible forms lose their clarity and definition, ultimately defying rational understanding. Didi-Huberman calls this underside of images their *symptom*: an action of the image that deforms resemblance and legibility.<sup>32</sup> Didi-Huberman's conceptualization of the symptom relies on a psychoanalytical understanding of the gaze and dream processes. It is the *symptom* that brings the image into the realm of non-knowledge and mystery, removing the viewer from his/her position as a person of knowledge. Thus, the *symptom* introduces the risk of non-knowledge and of friction within the image.<sup>33</sup> By following Didi-Huberman, I look at paintings as objects embedded with ruptures, contacts, inflections, collisions, and deformations. I believe it is the tension arising from the limits and contradictions within the pictorial body that yields a fascination over viewers, urging them to return and engage with the artworks time and time again.

By referring to Ribera's paintings as bodies, I suggest an interpretation of the "body pictorial" as an assemblage of complex material surfaces, devoid of any supposedly meaningful interior. This body is not made of a superficial surface and a valuable interior

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<sup>29</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>30</sup> George Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, Penn State University Press, 2009, 85-124.

<sup>31</sup> *Idem*, 85-139.

<sup>32</sup> *Idem*, 139-144.

<sup>33</sup> *Idem*, 144-162.

where knowledge is supposedly located, but is an assemblage of surfaces capable of effecting meaning.<sup>34</sup> This is made visible through the act of flaying where the removal of one surface – skin as surface – reveals another surface – the surface of the muscles and veins. In Ribera's *Apollo and Marsyas* (Fig.6) (1637; Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels) Apollo's gesture of flaying does not uncover what should be Marsyas' interior, but another clean surface – the surface of the flesh, muscles and veins as the smooth surface of the painting. Daniela Bohde's study of Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas* provides a constructive contrast to Ribera's approach of unveiling the manifold surfaces of Marsyas's body.<sup>35</sup> Specifically, it questions the various ways in which depictions of flaying can challenge the binary of exterior/interior and looks at surfaces as bearers of meaning and identity, as places where interpretation is produced.

My argument that Ribera's paintings are best conceived or interpreted as bodies, centers on the acknowledgement of the potentiality of corporeal and pictorial surfaces in producing new interpretations. My approach here is indebted to Andrew Benjamin's conceptualization of the surface. In discussing architectural surfaces, Benjamin argues that the surface is "that which will have an effect rather than simply being the consequence of the process of its creation. Once a surface can effect – i.e. it can bring something about – then it can be understood as that which works to distribute program. The effect will not be instrumental; rather it will be inherent in the operation of the surface itself."<sup>36</sup> Benjamin draws a distinction between the surface as a structural or decorative element and what he calls "surface effects," the ability of a particular surface to effect, produce, and affect a subject. Thus, a consideration of the surface involves not only a rethinking of the opposition between interior/exterior, but also the way meaning is produced.

I argue that Ribera's paintings should be considered as fragmented planes, made of multiple surfaces that enter into a tense relationship with each other; they are assemblages of disjointed surfaces, rather than coherent, unitary planes. For my argument, Gilles Deleuze's conceptualization of the baroque fold is crucial as it shows how a surface can be fragmented

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<sup>34</sup> On the importance of surfaces in the process of producing meaning see: Guliana Bruno, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*, University of Chicago Press, 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Daniela Bohde, 'Skin and the Search for the Interior: The Representation of Flaying in the Art and Anatomy of the Cinquecento,' in *Bodily Extremities. Preoccupations with the Human Body in Early Modern European Culture*, Florike Egmond and Robert Zwijnenberg eds., Aldershot 2003, 10-48.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Benjamin, "Surface effects: Borromini, Semper, Loos," In *The Journal of Architecture*, 11, 1/2006, 1-35.

and made up of divergent parts without implying severability and complete detachment.<sup>37</sup> For Deleuze, the entire universe is a process of folding and unfolding of the inside into the outside. This process creates an interior that is not an inside developed separately from the outside world, but in fact it is a doubling of the outside.<sup>38</sup> My interpretation of paintings as bodies made of complex surfaces hinges on Deleuze's idea of fragmented surfaces as well as the notion of the inside being a fold of the outside.

By considering Ribera's paintings as bodies – grounded in materiality and made of complex surfaces – I point out two key features that define them as such: the fact that they are *living bodies* and *distinct* or separate from the world of the beholder.<sup>39</sup> When I claim that Ribera's paintings may usefully be thought of as living bodies, I argue for the possibility of conceiving them as inorganically alive, rather than representing a figure so “true to life” that it actually *appears* to be alive. To support my argument I turn to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's conceptualization of *inorganic life* – a reconsideration of the notion of life as permeating all things organic and inorganic.<sup>40</sup> Thus, my thesis interprets paintings as having a life of their own, departing from Fredrika Jacobs' *The Living Image in Renaissance Italy* (2005), which discusses the “lifelikeness” and “aliveness” of art mostly from the point of view of the contemporary natural sciences.<sup>41</sup> By emphasising the materiality of Ribera's painted surface – through the impasto, for instance – my interpretation permits a consideration that is not limited to the representational model. They offer a surface that is full of blind spots, contradictions, frictions and tensions, rather than a transparent plane that reflects a pre-existing coherent reality.

Ribera's paintings therefore appear as distinct forces and living bodies that do not reference an existing “reality,” but are set apart from the world of the viewer. They do not offer a bond with or access into their own world, but position the viewer on their surface as the site of visceral experience, subtle reflection and tense interpretation. This interpretation is not restricted to Ribera's paintings, for it can also be applied to other artworks of the same period. What is productive about thinking of artworks in this way is that it surmounts binaries, such as: representation/technique, inside/outside, inorganic/organic, and allows the contradictions

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<sup>37</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold*, 5-6, 13.

<sup>38</sup> *Idem*, 39, 104, 109, et passim.

<sup>39</sup> My interpretation of paintings as living bodies is indebted to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of inorganic life. For a detailed analysis on how Ribera's paintings of flaying are inorganically alive see Chapter 1.

<sup>40</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

<sup>41</sup> Fredrika H. Jacobs, *The Living Image in Renaissance Art*, Cambridge 2005.

and paradoxes imbedded within the work to emerge more sharply and produce new forms of interpretation. The incoherent and ruptured surface enforces the paintings' inherent distinctiveness from the world of the viewer. This is not to say that I consider the world of the viewer as a stable reality, but that both painting and viewer constitute distinct, separate worlds that are in themselves incoherent, fractured, and paradoxical. The relationship between viewer and painting takes place between the limit of the painting's surface and the sight and touch of the viewer; this "contact in separation" – as conceptualized by Jean Luc Nancy – will be discussed in Chapter Three.

My interpretation of Ribera's paintings as distinct derives from Jean-Luc Nancy's thinking on the image. In *The Image – The Distinct* (1999) Nancy argues that images should not be thought in strict mimetic terms as portraying a scene or figure from a recognizable pre-existing reality.<sup>42</sup> Instead, Nancy is more interested in what he calls the "image function," an image detached from other surfaces by lines and shadows, a phenomenon that endows the image with intensity. Nancy points out that viewers are not simply exposed to an environment that mimics "reality," but to "a indefinite totality of sense" or world. The viewer is held on the threshold of the line, the line that simultaneously divides and shares inside and outside, light and shade, life and art. This is possible because "If it is possible for the same line, the same distinction, to separate and to communicate or connect (communicating also separation itself...), that is because the traits and lines of the image (its outline, its form) are themselves (something from) its intimate force."<sup>43</sup> Thus, the image does not represent this intimate force, but it is it; it activates it through a play between drawing and withdrawing it, extracting it by withholding it.

By interpreting Ribera's paintings as distinct, the pictorial body acquires a different ontological status from the rest of things – as Nancy writes "the image is a thing that is not a thing: it distinguishes from it, essentially. But what distinguishes itself essentially from the thing is also the force – the energy, pressure, or intensity."<sup>44</sup> Thus, what makes Ribera's paintings distinct is their force and the energy created through the tension arising from subject and technique. The lines, patches of paint, canvas threads, shades and light, do not imitate a body existing in "real life," but create an intensity that transforms them into distinct bodies. The intensity of Ribera's pictorial bodies originate in the tear and rupture between subject and

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<sup>42</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Image – The Distinct," in *The Ground of the Image*, Fordham University Press, 2005, 1-14.

<sup>43</sup> *Idem*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> *Idem*, 2.

technique – never cohering one with the other – which gives rise to the paintings’ (violent) ability to generate new forms of engagement.

Ovid’s line from his *Metamorphosis* (vi.383–400) describing Marsyas’ terrible scream while being flayed alive by Apollo, “Why tear me from myself,” expresses brilliantly the rupture and tear at work within the painting as a body. By “tearing apart” or disjoining the paintings’ technique from their subject matter, Ribera was able to create powerful surfaces capable of effecting force and energy. It is this force and intensity of the split surface that fascinates and urges viewers to return in front of the canvas time and time again.

An aspect of my approach is the relationship between historical specificity and theory. My engagement with historic specificity springs from an interest in theoretical debates on issues such as corporeality, spirituality, materiality, and violence, present not only during the time Ribera painted his paintings of flaying, but also in the present day. As such, I am interested in questions that were not only discussed during a specific moment in time – the moment an artwork was created – but also contemporary debates that influence our present mode of engaging with Ribera’s artworks. My research therefore considers the pitfalls of reducing the interpretation of a work of art to documents and ideas that existed at the time of its creation in an effort of pinning down its meaning to a particular place and time in history - a stable fixed meaning that art historians have the duty of retrieving.

Didi-Huberman argues in his analysis of Fra Angelico’s frescos from the cells in San Marco in Florence that the “euchronistic harmonies” so much respected by scholars – that is, the relationship between a visual work and a “contemporaneous” textual source – are plagued with problems and inadvertencies that ultimately do not aid in understanding the artworks.<sup>45</sup> This is because “contemporaries often fail to understand one another any better than individual who are separated in time: all of the contemporanities are marked by anachronism. There is no temporal concordance.”<sup>46</sup> Didi-Huberman interprets a painted surface as a complex object with impure temporality, “an *extraordinary montage of heterogeneous times forming anachronism*.”<sup>47</sup> This interpretation challenges the supremacy of “style” and “epoch” in art-historical research; it also threatens the presumed stability and assignation of the meaning of a work of art within to certain place in the past. For Didi-Huberman, “the history of images is a

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<sup>45</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 11-52.

<sup>46</sup> *Idem*, 37.

<sup>47</sup> *Idem*, 38.



history of objects that are temporarily impure, complex, overdetermined. It is therefore a history of polycronistic, heterocronistic, or anachronistic objects.<sup>48</sup>

Moreover, I do not consider historical specificity as a given narrative that awaits discovery, nor do I intend to retrieve meaning from a particular place in time; instead, my approach explores specific problems and issues present posed by the artwork and the way they were conceived and interpreted at different times in the painting's history. For this I engage with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century treatises of art criticism and theology, travelogues, journals, and poetry as much as contemporary theory and philosophy. This allows an exploration of the artworks and the way they alter our perception of things such as the relationship between corporeality, time, and violence. By looking at the way these accounts relate questions of corporeality, materiality, violence and spirituality to Ribera's paintings I aim to explore the ways in which these artworks were interpreted as visceral bodies at the moment of their creation as well as today. My engagement with historical specificity therefore is deeply linked with theoretical issues and this reveals Ribera's paintings to be a site of mixture of questions from earlier periods and the modern to come.

In each chapter I focus on two of Ribera's paintings of flaying, analysing them through a specific lens: life and death, surface and spirituality, corporeality and touch, and materiality and violence. I have chosen these specific themes not only because they are central to the subject of Ribera's paintings, but because they also tease out in a fruitful way what is really at stake in the relationship between technique and representation – a paradoxical conjoining of two opposites without falling into a dialectical or a binary paradigm.

I contrast Ribera's paintings with other artworks of the same period, by artists including Caravaggio, Artemisia Gentileschi, Titian, Bartolomeo Manfredi, Bernardo Cavallino, Diego Velázquez, and Francisco de Zurbarán. By doing this, I intend to draw out the different ways in which artists conceived the relationship between technique and subject, and to sharpen Ribera's own distinctive approach. Thus, I do not seek to establish a similarity between Ribera's paintings and those of the other artists, nor do I wish to pose questions of style and influence. Instead, I will focus on how these paintings problematize, in divergent, often conflicting ways, issues such as touch, chiaroscuro, and violence. The relationship between Ribera's art and those of his contemporaries is treated here in terms of disparities, contradictions, and ruptures in approaching similar problems.

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<sup>48</sup> *Idem*, 42.

Caravaggio in particular features preeminently as a fruitful point of comparison and contrast to Ribera's works. On one the hand, this is because Caravaggio's painting tackle problems such as touch, spirituality, life, and violence in a comparable, yet distinct way to Ribera's own approach. For instance, the way the materiality of the canvas and impasto is used to evoke violence is similar up to a point – both artists use a variation of rough or smooth impasto, but their brushstrokes are distinct and the way they are used in relation to the subject and its temporality is dissimilar and brings about divergent interpretations. On the other hand, my reliance on Caravaggio as a point of contrast is also due to the immense secondary scholarship available on this artist. Caravaggio's paintings – more than any painter contemporary to Ribera – were written about by contemporaneous scholars and since then have been interpreted by scholars in relation to both sixteenth- and seventeenth-century art theory and contemporary theory. Thus hugely facilitated a more in-depth analysis and provided a strong point of comparison to my own questions and research on Ribera.

I consider sixteenth- and seventeenth-century authors, including Bernardo de' Dominici, Ludovico Dolce, and Antonio Palomino, by placing their ideas into a direct dialogue with writers including Gilles Deleuze, Jean-Luc Nancy, Andrew Benjamin, Georges Didi-Huberman. In so doing, I draw out, on the one hand, the difference between ideas and ideals about works of art, and on the other hand, exploring these ideas in relation to what the painting itself has to offer. That is, I do not attempt to recreate what was assumed to be the "original" meaning and interpretation of an artwork, nor to build a bridge across a void, but to expose the friction between what the art criticism seen as relevant and important and what the work of art itself reveals today.

In Chapter One I look at the way Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.1) (1618-1619; Colegiata de Santa Maria Church, Osuna) and *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.2) (c.1620; Palazzo Pallavicini-Rospigliosi, Rome) become living things – bodies that possess a life of their own – rather than being simple imitations of "real life". By engaging with questions of colour – particularly flesh tones – and the fragmentation of the body in relation to the pictorial surface, I investigate how and question why Ribera brought figures to life only to portray them being put to death. The chapter therefore aims to reconsider the relationship and boundary between life and death, as well as sacrifice and threshold.

In Chapter Two I address the thorny problem of Ribera's handling of light and dark in his *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.3) (c.1628-1630; Palazzo Pitti, Florence) and *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.4) (c.1625-1628; Basilica Cattedrale di San Nicola di

Bari, Nicosia). I argue that the juxtaposition of light and dark creates a folding surface that simultaneously affects cataphatic and apophatic modes of spirituality. While chiaroscuro is usually credited with creating an illusion of depth and *rilievo*, in this chapter I explore the alternation of light and darkness in relation to the saint's body, analyzing the relationship between surface, movement, and spirituality.

In Chapter Three, by focusing on the question of pictorial corporeality, expressed through sight and touch, interiority/exteriority, I analyze Ribera's *Apollo flaying Marsyas* (Fig.5) (1637; Museo di Capodimonte, Naples) and *Apollo and Marsyas* (Fig.6) (1637; Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels). First I seek to demonstrate the inadequacy of the representational model and the supremacy of sight by exploring passages in the paintings where the legibility and visibility of the figures are challenged by the working of the materials. I investigate the nature of Apollo's touch and the touch of the artist in relation to Marsyas' body, problematizing the issue of corporeal surface and depth.

In Chapter Four I tackle the nature of violence in Ribera's *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.7) (1644; Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona) and *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.8) (1634; National Gallery of Art, Washington). I explore violence as something worked through the materiality of the surface – the rough texture of the canvas threads and the coarse impasto – rather than something restricted to the representational. I examine how materiality disturbs the subject's narrative and temporality in order to open up new forms of pictorial and corporeal violence.



## Chapter One: Living Bodies

*Painting paints the threshold of existence.  
In these conditions, to paint does not mean to represent,  
but simply to pose the ground, the texture,  
and the pigment of the threshold.*

Jean-Luc Nancy, *On the Threshold*

### Introduction

Francisco Pacheco, the Spanish painter and author of the *Arte de la pintura, su antigüedad, y grandezas* (1649), described Ribera's paintings from the collection of the duke of Alcalá de los Gazules:

Such is Jusepe de Ribera's manner of painting that among all the great paintings owned by the duke of Alcalá his figures and heads appear alive, while the rest seem only painted – even though his works hang next to those of Guido Bolognese [Reni].<sup>49</sup>

A similar quality was noted and described by Bernardo de' Dominici almost a century later when he described Ribera's paintings in terms of lifelikeness by emphasising their sense of physical presence, and how they create a powerful sensation that the painted figures are becoming alive:

Ribera was painting astonishing [meraviglia] and beautiful heads of old man so truthfully that they resemble the living, and at that time deemed inimitable, and judging from all the master

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<sup>49</sup>“Cosi lo fa Jusepe de Ribera, infatti le sue figure e teste, tra tutte le grandi pitture che possiede il duca d'Alcala, sembrano vive e il resto sembra dipinto, sebbene la sua opera sia vicina a quella di Guido Bolognese.” Translation mine. Francisco Pacheco, *Arte de la pintura, su antigüedad, y grandezas describense los hombres eminentes que ha auido en ella, assi antiguos como modernos* [etc.]. Seville: Simon Faxardo, 1649. Quoted from: Perez Sanchez and Spinosa, *Jusepe de Ribera*, 38.

of our arts, it is believed that no painter of our time has depicted paintings more alive and true (...).<sup>50</sup>

There is a long tradition of considering works of art to be so “lifelike” that they appear to move, speak, breathe, and pulsate; they are considered for a brief moment living entities with which one can interact and relate.<sup>51</sup> The concept of the work of art being “lifelike” is central to artistic reception, which stands within a tradition stretching back to Pliny the Elder and the Pygmalion myth.<sup>52</sup> This trend reached its climax during the sixteenth and seventeenth century, when the critical vocabulary of describing works of art as living presence was codified. Expressions such as: ‘vivo’ (alive), ‘vivere’ (to live), ‘veramente vivissimo’ (truly alive), ‘una cosa viva’ (a living thing), and ‘la tavola viva’ (a living picture) not only defined the Italian artistic theory of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, but also sanctioned a way of looking and interpreting works of art.<sup>53</sup>

This chapter focuses on the question of life in Ribera’s *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.1) (1618-1619; Colegiata de Santa Maria Church, Osuna) and *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.2) (c.1620; Pallavicini-Rospigliosi Palace, Rome). Scholarship on “lifelikeness” in art tends to treat the issue in a representational key, where the artwork assumes qualities and powers of the thing that it is supposed to represent. In this chapter I resist treating art in a representational framework, in which something references or imitates an external object or person, by suggesting that paintings have a life of their own. The first part of the chapter focuses on the question of inorganic life in Ribera’s *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.1) (1618-1619; Colegiata de Santa Maria Church, Osuna). As an alternative to looking at Ribera’s paintings through the lens of skilful imitations, I wish to interpret them

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<sup>50</sup> “facendo il Ribera a meraviglia bellissime le teste de’ vecchi, e con tanta verita somiglianti il vivo, che furono in quell tempo stimate inimitabili, e per giudizio di tutti i maestri della nostre arti, si stima, che niun pittore de’ passato, e de’ tempi nostrii gli abia dipinti piu vivi, e veri.” Translation mine. Bernardo de’ Dominici, *Vite dei Pittori, Scultori ed Architetti Napoletani*, Tip. Trani, 1884, 5-6.

<sup>51</sup> Most lifelikeness responses are treated in a representational framework where the thing depicted is supposed to act for the thing represented. On different theories and tales of “living images” and “living-presence responses” see: David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*. University of Chicago Press, 1989 – a trans-historical and cross-cultural study on living-presence responses; Kenneth Gross, *The Dream of the Moving Statue*, Penn State University Press, 1992 – a study on how writers, artists, and filmmakers reacted to the power of real or imaginary “living statues,” using examples from Ovid to Charlie Chaplin; Fredrika Jacobs, *The Living Image in Renaissance Art*, Cambridge University Press, 2005 – studies lifelike artworks in the Renaissance by looking at the medical discoveries and natural philosophy of the time; Caroline van Eck, *Classical Rhetoric and the Visual Arts in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge University Press, 2007 – considers “living-presence” responses in the context of visual rhetoric.

<sup>52</sup> On the ‘Pygmalion effect’ from antiquity to the present day, see: Victor Stoichita, *The Pygmalion Effect. From Ovid to Hitchcock*, University of Chicago Press, 2008; Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things*, Harvard University Press, 2010.

<sup>53</sup> The list of critical terms is indebted to: Jacobs, *The Living Image in Renaissance Art*, 16-61.

as surfaces endowed with inorganic life. I argue that paintings do not have an agency that can make viewers believe that what they are seeing is alive – agency grounded in a representational framework - but instead that they do actually have a life of their own. To argue my point I turn to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of *inorganic life*.<sup>54</sup> For Deleuze and Guattari, material existence is not divided into organic and inorganic things, and therefore life is not to be restricted only to the organic sphere, as for instance biology assumes. Discussing Wilhelm Worringer’s interpretation of the Gothic line, Deleuze and Guattari state that “it is inorganic, yet alive, and all the more alive for being inorganic”.<sup>55</sup> Thus, life can also be articulated in all objects and things regardless of their organic or inorganic nature.

The second part of the chapter looks at the relationship between lifelikeness and colour in his *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.2) (c.1620; Pallavicini-Rospigliosi Palace, Rome). It questions the meaning of bringing the figure of Saint Bartholomew to life only to have him put to death. It does this by investigating the way colour has the ability to express the complicated relationship between life and death. For this I turn to Jean-Luc Nancy’s interpretation of painting as something that does not represent the world, but that locates viewers on its threshold, the threshold of the impossibility of the world and of existence. Nancy outlines his ideas about painting-as-threshold in his essay on Caravaggio’s painting *The Death of the Virgin* (Fig.9) (1601-1606; Louvre, Paris).<sup>56</sup> Nancy argues that Caravaggio’s painting locates the viewer on the threshold of death, of the world, and of existence. I am arguing that Ribera’s painting can be interpreted as a living threshold of death, where the living image of Saint Bartholomew becomes a threshold of death.

### **Inorganic, yet alive**

Ribera’s *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, (Fig.1) (1618-1619; Colegiata de Santa Maria Church, Osuna) confronts viewers with a force and intensity that proclaims its distinctiveness by creating a rift between the viewers’ world and the pictorial world. By showing the complexity of corporeal and pictorial surfaces, the painting draws attention to its own nature as something separate from what is supposed to be a stable “reality.” *The Martyrdom of Saint*

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<sup>54</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Trans. Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

<sup>55</sup> *Idem*, 550. For a genealogical critique of the concept of inorganic life from Worringer to Deleuze, see: Joshua Dittrich, “A Life of Matter and Death: Inorganic Life in Worringer, Deleuze, and Guattari,” in *Discourse*, Volume 33, Issue 2, Spring 2011, 242-262.

<sup>56</sup> Nancy, “On the Threshold,” in *The Muses*, Stanford University Press, 1996, 57-68.

*Bartholomew* is part of a series of five paintings depicted by Ribera between 1617 and 1619 for Pedro Téllez Girón, 3rd Duke of Osuna, Viceroy of Naples (1616-1620).<sup>57</sup> The painting shows the saint leaning back on a tree trunk with both hands tied above his head; one leg stands on the ground while the other rests on a rock. Bartholomew's naked figure dominates the entire canvas, leaving little room for the bystander who is tucked in the upper right section of the canvas. In viewing the painting, one is left with an extraordinary sense of movement coming from the saint's body. It is not a movement within a credible space that extends through the fictional depth of the landscape, but a movement forward, an emergence towards the surface of the canvas. This is underlined by the squeezed position of the bystander (Fig.13). Bartholomew's figure becomes a zone of force, a surface of intensity that pushes the saint onto the surface of the painting. The movement of the saint is one of the key forces that endow the painting with its distinctiveness, transforming its entire surface into a separate entity that eludes imitation and representation as it reflects upon its own presence.<sup>58</sup> This self-reflection is accomplished through the spatial construction of the painting that defies a fictive continuation with of the viewer's space. Far from presenting time, space, and surface as something coherent and unitary, the painting shows them to be in a state of fragmentation. The surface of Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (1618-1619; Colegiata de Santa Maria Church, Osuna) can be interpreted as an assemblage of different elements set into a tense relationship with one another.

The executioner, wearing a white butcher's apron stained with blood, pushes down the skin from Bartholomew's left arm with his bare hands, while holding the knife in his mouth. The brutal flaying shows a detailed view of the saint's anatomy, strongly reminiscent of anatomical drawings.<sup>59</sup> However, what is interesting about the cut and the method of flaying is not the display of anatomy – or interpretations of whether it is accurate or not – but what it does to the painting. In effect, the cut separates the body of the saint from the painting's ground; it raises the body forward, turning it into a separate frontal surface. Bartholomew's body therefore becomes a piece of the assemblage, an element forming the fragmented surface of the painting. The cut exposes the inside of the body by presenting it as a complex surface, a surface effected through violence that becomes the surface of the painting. The flaying – far

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<sup>57</sup> Spinosa, *Il giovane Ribera*, 184.

<sup>58</sup> What I am arguing is that the figure of the saint is one of the key forces that make the painting distinct. Other elements such as *chiaroscuro*, touch, *impasto*, materiality, and temporality will be discussed in the following chapters.

<sup>59</sup> Ribera's interest in anatomy can be observed in his etchings and drawings. See: Perez Sanchez and Spinosa, *Jusepe de Ribera*, 193-231.



from making corporeal and pictorial depth visible – creates an intensity that separates the painting from the exterior world by turning it into a distinct surface of violence. The relationship between the flayed surface of Bartholomew’s body on the one hand, and the different muscles and veins visible in the wound on the other, is one of violence and movement; it is a dynamic relationship between two elements of the same body that animates the surface with inorganic life.

Ribera’s painting therefore presents itself as a surface constructed from different elements set into a tense relationship with each other. This relationship forms an assemblage of surfaces capable of effecting inorganic life. To interpret Ribera’s painting, I turn to Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptualization of inorganic life. According to Deleuze and Guattari, everything is inorganically alive because everything is assembled. Deleuze and Guattari set out to challenge the way biology has appropriated life – restricting it to organisms – by offering an alternative interpretation in which life permeates many diverse modes of existence. In other words, they are interested in the question of what life is, and whether life is limited only to the organic sphere. In *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari argue that “the organism is that which life sets against itself in order to limit itself, and there is a life all the more intense, all the more powerful for being inorganic.”<sup>60</sup> Accordingly, it is not so much that organisms are not alive, but that life can exceed organism. As such, the organism – including cells, genetic codes, populations, species, or ecosystems – loses its privileged place as the definitive unit of life.<sup>61</sup> The following section offers an interpretation of the *topos* of lifelikeness in relation to Ribera’s *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (1618-1619; Colegiata de Santa Maria Church, Osuna) by appealing to Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptualisation of *inorganic life*.

### **Blurred boundaries?**

In order to explore the radical new way in which Ribera’s painting addresses pictorial surface, space, time, and *disegno* (compositional arrangement of actions) in connection to lifelikeness, I turn to the question of art and its relation to what is perceived to be the beholder’s stable “reality”. Amongst the many diverse scholarly approaches to the issue of lifelikeness, one of

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<sup>60</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 30.

<sup>61</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet. *Dialogues*. Columbia University Press, 2002, 51.

the most challenging is that adopted by Caroline van Eck.<sup>62</sup> Van Eck argues that in early modern Italy, paintings or buildings were considered to be so lifelike that they actually become alive in the viewers' experience. In other words, the artwork did not possess a life of its own, but had the ability to make viewers believe that what they were seeing was not a representation, but the represented thing itself. Her stance is particularly helpful here to draw a sharp distinction between interpretations based on visual rhetoric and my interpretation of surfaces as effecting a life of their own, a form of inorganic life. Van Eck's fundamental argument is that representation dissolves into what it represents; in other words, a work of art reaches its highest quality and is most persuasive when it ceases to look like art.<sup>63</sup> According to van Eck, the artist's goal matches the orator's: to move his audience by awakening a vivid response through compelling description and skilful use of persuasive techniques. Accordingly, van Eck points out that painting as well as speech relies on *enargeia* (vividness) and *energeia* (actuality) to create a strong suggestion of "life" in the figures depicted. This is achieved by blurring the boundaries between "gods and men, in the sense that the capacity to make dead matter seem alive or the absent present was a capacity generally attributed to the gods."<sup>64</sup> Blurring of the boundaries between viewers and artworks can be achieved by artworks that display "persuasive" features like dramatic gesturing – such as figures looking at the beholder – and a credible extension of space and time – for instance reproducing the tiles of the church's floor into the painting and dressing up sacred figures in contemporary clothes.<sup>65</sup> For these pictorial strategies to function one must also presuppose a rhetorically informed viewer, familiar with the writings of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. Van Eck grounded her interpretation of lifelikeness in the Horatian trope of *ut pictura poesis* (as painting so poetry) not because one art resembles the other, but because both have the same aim of imitating life. Life is here taken in a specific sense: "that of plot and characters, of human beings engaged in events and situations the spectator can identify with."<sup>66</sup>

Van Eck asserts that artists like orators need to create a common ground between artworks and audience so as to persuade them in such a manner that they can identify with

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<sup>62</sup> Van Eck, *Classical Rhetoric and the Visual Arts in Early Modern Europe*; See also the recent collection of studies by: Caroline van Eck, Joris van Gastel, and Elsje van Kessel, *The Secret Lives of Art Works: Exploring the Boundaries between Art and Life*, Leiden University Press, 2014.

<sup>63</sup> *Idem*, 57.

<sup>64</sup> *Idem*, 7.

<sup>65</sup> *Idem*, 65-73.

<sup>66</sup> *Idem*, 156.

what is represented.<sup>67</sup> This is achieved through a fictive continuation of space which relies on techniques like compositional arrangement and linear perspective; this creates an apparent extension between the viewer's world and the painted world. According to van Eck, Renaissance authors such as Alberti, Borghini, Dolce, and Pino "did not discuss composition while considering paintings as autonomous, bounded images, offering a pictorial reality *sui generis*, clearly distinguished from the 'real world' of the beholder. Instead, practically all Renaissance discussions of composition start from the assumption of continuity between reality and image."<sup>68</sup>

The question of temporality is central in establishing a common ground between painting and viewers. Van Eck argues, for instance, that Venetian painting of the second half of the sixteenth century shows that Aristotelian considerations of a good plot can be combined with Albertian use of perspective space. In discussing Veronese's *Feast in the House of Levi* (Fig.10) (1573; Galleria dell' Accademia, Venice), van Eck suggests that the painting's monumental size, theatrical architecture, and arrangement of figures into groups encourages the viewers to look at it as if they were watching a play.<sup>69</sup> For van Eck, Veronese's painting transforms the "two-dimensional pictorial representation of an event" into a "temporal succession in the act of looking at it, not unlike the way we watch a play and only grasp the whole when we have seen all of it."<sup>70</sup> Thus, temporal coherence and unity coupled with the use of perspective and the credible arrangement of figures in space – the theatricality of the work of art – encourage spectators to get involved in the unfolding of pictorial events.<sup>71</sup>

In a recent essay, van Eck enriched her theory of living presence responses by coupling classical rhetoric – especially the concept of the sublime – and the anthropological theory of art as agency developed by Alfred Gell.<sup>72</sup> Van Eck argues that Gell's theory offers a better understanding of such responses since it does not focus on the artworks, but instead on their agency.<sup>73</sup> Thus, van Eck suggests that in order to understand such experiences historically – that is, to connect Gell's ahistorical anthropological account with an art-

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<sup>67</sup> *Idem*, 55-84.

<sup>68</sup> *Idem*, 73.

<sup>69</sup> *Idem*, 81-82.

<sup>70</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>71</sup> On art and theatricality see: Caroline Van Eck and Stijn Bussels, "The Visual Arts and the Theatre in Early Modern Europe," in *Theatricality in Early Modern Art and Architecture*, Caroline Van Eck and Stijn Bussels eds., Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, 8-23.

<sup>72</sup> Caroline Van Eck, "Living Statues: Alfred Gell's Art and Agency, Living Presence Response and the Sublime." *Art History*, 2010, 33, 642-659.

<sup>73</sup> *Idem*, 644.

historical approach – one must turn to the concept of the sublime. Conceptualised over the centuries by Longinus, Boileau, and Burke, the sublime encapsulates two aspects: one rhetorical, focused on stylistic techniques, and another aesthetic, concentrated on the viewers' experience. For van Eck, the sublime is “so transcendental that it makes the viewers forget its representational character.”<sup>74</sup> The sublime distorts the boundaries between art and what it represents. Despite the shift to Gell's theory, van Eck's interpretation is framed by the principle that the agency of art, articulated by the sublime, is so powerful that it creates in the viewer's experience the impression that artworks become the living being they represent.<sup>75</sup>

On the contrary, following Nancy and Deleuze, I argue that Ribera's paintings create a disruption or difference between the world of the viewers and the world offered by the pictorial surface. Not only do paintings not dissolve representation into the represented, but they actually affirm their separateness by staging their surfaces as planes of inorganic life. This distinction arises from the relationship between the painting's compositional elements, which in Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* are not completely consistent and fully integrated with each other. In believe paintings seldom, if ever, readily conform to theoretical and rhetorical strategies of spatial, temporal, and compositional unity and coherence. Therefore, the essential distinction between van Eck's arguments and mine is that she considers artworks in terms of agency – where art becomes more and more *like* the living as its agency comes closer and closer to human agency – while I argue that they are in fact alive on their own terms as inorganically alive. Also, while van Eck claims a blurring of space and time between the pictorial world and the viewer's world – by constructing a common ground between the two – I argue for a sharp separation between painting and viewer as well as the incoherence and fragmentation of the pictorial surface.

### **Fragmented surfaces**

To investigate further the fragmented nature of paintings, I contrast Ribera's work with Caravaggio's *The Seven Works of Mercy* (Fig.11) (1607; Pio Monte della Misericordia, Naples).<sup>76</sup> The painting depicts the seven works of mercy in an unusual way as Caravaggio chose not to depict them separately – the acts were generally depicted individually in pictorial

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<sup>74</sup> *Idem*, 658.

<sup>75</sup> “The sublime experience is based on the effective use of figures. This dissolves the representational character of painting or speech and transforms art into living beings.” *Idem*, 653.

<sup>76</sup> Sebastian Schütze, *Caravaggio. The Complete Works*, Taschen, 2009, 186-192.

cycles – but instead combined all of the works in a single large composition.<sup>77</sup> On the right hand side of the canvas there is the episode of the so-called *Carità Romana* (Cimon's daughter giving her father suck in prison), which contains in itself two charitable acts: visiting prisoners and feeding the hungry. In the background one can see a priest holding a torch while a dead body is carried away suggesting the charitable act of burying the dead. In the foreground the charitable act of dressing the naked is illustrated by Saint Martin and the beggar. Next to this scene, the host and Saint James of Compostela portray the offering of hospitality to pilgrims while Samson drinking from the ox jaw stands for relieving the thirsty. The young man on the ground behind the beggar of Saint Martin suggests the merciful gesture of caring for the sick. Looking upon the scenes unfolding is the Virgin Mary and Christ the child held by two boyish angels.

The painting is far from exhibiting an articulated and integrated compositional arrangement; instead, it is more an assemblage of various scenes that do not engage with one another. Despite the fact that certain acts are amalgamated into one group and action – such as the *Carità Romana* – the relationship between them is fundamentally fragmented and disjointed. Each group has its own specific spatial and temporal dimension. This difference is sharpened by the presence of the Virgin and Child supported by angels. Most scholars treat Caravaggio's angels as nothing more than boys, rather than immaterial celestial beings.<sup>78</sup> Caravaggio however makes use of their physicality to open a place of dark, temporal infinity between their arms; this infinity bypasses the fragmented human temporality unfolding below, creating a separate spatial and temporal register of darkness dashed by a streak of white paint a cloth of light.

Lorenzo Pericolo discusses Caravaggio's tendency to challenge theoretical prescriptions on the coherence and unity of *disegno*, *decorum*, and *invention*. He emphasises Caravaggio's legacy through which painters understood and adapted his innovative narrative features. Art theorists found it difficult, or rather lacked the conceptual instruments to appreciate the painter's subversive changes of the *istoria*.<sup>79</sup> Pericolo argues that seventeenth-century criticisms of Caravaggio's art were still deeply shaped by Alberti's fifteenth-century

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<sup>77</sup> *Idem*, 192.

<sup>78</sup> Stephen Ostrow reviews the art historical scholarships on Caravaggio's angels – including Peter Robb, John Spike, Roberto Longhi, and Charles Dempsey – himself taking an opposite view that Caravaggio's angels are liminal creatures precisely because they are rooted in the *vero*. See: Ostrow, "Caravaggio's Angels," in *Caravaggio. Reflections and Refractions*, eds. Lorenzo Pericolo and David M. Stone, Ashgate, 2014, 136-8, 143.

<sup>79</sup> Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative*, 21.

conception of *istoria*.<sup>80</sup> Critics such as Malvasia and Scannelli relied on such a system when they claimed Caravaggio's figures appear to be dead.<sup>81</sup> Pericolo takes these sources as a point of departure for his analysis and concludes that "any rigorous dichotomy between realism and idealisation is unfit to truly explain Caravaggio's novelty."<sup>82</sup> This is because Caravaggio combines in the same painting "purified" figures – figures that are conceived as appropriate for a narrative in Alberti's sense – and figures of the most extreme "realism." According to Pericolo, Caravaggio's technique of "dislocating" the *istoria* – the plausible application of figures in time, space, and narrative – had a great impact on early seventeenth-century painters by urging them to explore the indeterminacy of pictorial narratives. This indeterminacy creates an *aporia* that is interpreted by Pericolo as characteristic of "Caravaggism," of Caravaggio's followers<sup>83</sup>

Art historians usually focus on the unity of the scene and the way Caravaggio managed to integrate the diverse episodes into one presumed coherent surface. Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, for instance, points out that the painting is a "masterpiece of compositional economy in that each figure is assigned two functions or meanings."<sup>84</sup> Ebert-Schifferer takes pains to show that Caravaggio's painting is far from being a fragmented surface by suggesting that for sophisticated viewers "each figure alludes to further contextually related levels of meaning."<sup>85</sup> Ebert-Schifferer disregards the painting's compositional incoherency by interpreting it through an idealistic key, producing a spiritually coherent meaning grounded in Post-Tridentine precepts. She points out that "the gospel links the practice of mercy with the Last Judgment, which in turn was linked to the dogma of the purgatory."<sup>86</sup> This is ultimately connected to what Ebert-Schifferer calls "Counter-Reformation teachings" on justification which state that "the believer could avoid the torment of purgatory only through active charity, which also helps alleviate and shorten the sufferings of the souls already in Purgatory."<sup>87</sup>

Ebert-Schifferer's determinism in interpreting Caravaggio's painting can be fruitfully contrasted with Helen Hills' interpretation of the indeterminacy of seventeenth-century Neapolitan art and spirituality. Hills argues that "it may be useful to think of architecture" –

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<sup>80</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>81</sup> *Idem*, 35-65.

<sup>82</sup> *Idem*, 58.

<sup>83</sup> To argue his position, Pericolo discusses in three long chapters paintings by Cecco del Caravaggio, Diego Velasquez, and Valentin de Boulogne. See Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative*, 481-558.

<sup>84</sup> Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, *Caravaggio: The Artist and His Work*, J. Paul Getty Museum, 2012, 201.

<sup>85</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>86</sup> *Idem*, 202.

<sup>87</sup> *Idem*.

and therefore of painting and sculpture as well – “less as mimetic representation of ‘spirituality’ (preconceived) / liturgy, etc., but as zones of intensity, of pure ‘affect,’ which can enhance the human power to become.”<sup>88</sup> Therefore, instead of thinking of art as a reflection of the fulfilment of Post-Tridentine precepts, one might consider it as producing effects and affects that operate a change in the spiritual life of the believers – art as generating new meanings and new forms of spiritual becoming. Moreover, Hills also draws attention to the fact that when thinking of spirituality during this period one must be careful not to treat it as a monolithic phenomenon, since “there was no single spiritual life to which all adhered, and there was no distinct form of life which was spiritual.”<sup>89</sup> In fact, as Hills points out, “even within the main religious orders, religious practices varied considerably.”<sup>90</sup> Therefore, Caravaggio’s painting can be interpreted not only in terms of spatial, temporal, and figurative fragmentation, but also as spiritual fragmentation, where each act of charity can work autonomously or in conjunction with the others in effecting a spiritual engagement with the beholders.

### **Assemblages of surfaces and temporalities**

Ribera’s *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.1) (1618-1619; Colegiata de Santa Maria Church, Osuna) presents the relationship between space, time, and narrative as a sum of fragmented surfaces set in a tense relationship with each other – a relationship that creates the painting’s creative force and intensity. One such relationship exists between the three figures and the surrounding landscape. A close inspection reveals that the figures do not occupy a credible place within the receding landscape as they appear to be glued on the surface of the painting. This is especially true for the figure of Saint Bartholomew, as the position of his leg on the foreground and his leaning torso on the tree trunk in the middle-ground is spatially inconsistent, giving the impression that the body is painted on top of the landscape and not within it (Fig.12). This discrepancy is also at play between the figures themselves. Saint Bartholomew does not interact with the executioner, while the bystander paradoxically looks away from the scene (Fig.13). The bystander’s figure has no clear spatial designation even though his place should be behind the executioner. His face actually appears closer to the viewer than the figures of the saint and executioner. The painting therefore is less a single

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<sup>88</sup> Helen Hills, “Indeterminacy and Architectural History: Holiness in southern baroque architecture” in *field*, vol 1, no. 1, 53.

<sup>89</sup> *Idem*, 45.

<sup>90</sup> *Idem*.

coherent surface – with consistent space, time and narrative – and more an assemblage of surfaces: the surface of the landscape, the surface of Saint Bartholomew’s flayed body, the surface of the executioner, and the eerie surface created by the profile face of the bystander. The landscape and the individual figures can therefore be interpreted as autonomous surfaces with their own temporality and narrative set into a colliding relationship with one another.

The fragmentation of surfaces in Ribera’s painting can be thought of in relation to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of the *assemblage*. For Deleuze and Guattari an assemblage can be a lot of particular “things” or pieces of “things” collected into a single context or environment:

a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns--different natures. Thus, the assemblage's only unity is that of co-functioning: it is symbiosis, a “sympathy.” It is never filiations which are important, but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind.<sup>91</sup>

Therefore, the notion of assemblage is opposed to essentialism and reification as there is no centre or point of focus from which everything emerges or returns. It is a gathering of discrete parts or pieces that is able to produce a large variety of effects, rather than a closely organised, logically coherent totality offering one dominant interpretation. Deleuze insists that what is important is the relationship between these random pieces and the “consistency” they effect:

But an assemblage is first and foremost what keeps very heterogeneous elements together: e.g. a sound, a gesture, a position, etc., both natural and artificial elements. The problem is one of “consistency” or “coherence,” and is prior to the problem of behaviour. How do things take on consistency? How do they cohere? Even among very different things, an intensive continuity can be found.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues*, 69.

<sup>92</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975--1995 (Semiotex/Foreign Agents)*, ed. David Lapoujade, MIT Press, 2007, 176–79.



It should be stressed here that Deleuze and Guattari's concept of consistency is actually closer to the way cement is thought of, describing it as "soupy," "coarse," "consisting of stone and lime," rather than "lacking in contradictions". In other words, "consistency" is not to be understood here as a synchronised state of being without logical contradiction, but more as the way heterogeneous elements or objects manage to stay together. An assemblage can be plagued with contradictions whilst still effecting consistency and coherence.

In Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (1618-1619; Colegiata de Santa Maria Church, Osuna), the consistency in the Deleuzian sense of the painting as an assemblage of surfaces gives rise to a tension not only in terms of space and place, but also of time. Time is fragmented here as each figure is made to belong to a different temporality. On the one hand, the figure of Saint Bartholomew belongs to ancient times while the executioner is dressed in contemporary seventeenth-century clothes. The seventeenth-century man is flaying the ancient man, flaying the past which is made present. This gives rise to a tension between how temporalities engage with each other in the painting and how the seventeenth century interacted with the past, flaying it and revealing its depths as surfaces. On the other hand, the man in the background pertains to a different temporality, a temporality that is neither human – ancient or early-modern – nor divine. His time is the temporality of the painting's surface. By turning away from the act of flaying, the figure withdraws itself from the temporalities of the two other characters. This move creates a further rift between the temporality of the figure as the surface of the painting and the two distinct temporalities belonging to the saint and executioner. The painting therefore distances itself in order to become a critical time that looks away from the subject's temporal engagements.

The tension generated by the figures and their distinct temporalities contributes to the surface's creative force and intensity. This intensity is comparable to the force attributed to painted figures by Ludovico Dolce, in his *Dialogo della pittura* (1557):

What is needed is that the figures should stir the soul of the spectators – disturbing them in some cases, cheering them in others, in others again inciting them to either compassion or disdain, depending on the character of the subject matter. Failing this, the painter should not claim to have accomplished anything. For this is what gives the flavour of all virtues. Exactly the same thing happens with the poet, the historian and

the public speaker; if their products, that is, whether written or recited, lack this power to move, they lack also spirit and life.<sup>93</sup>

Informing Dolce's passage is the notion that the force of a painting is intimately connected with the figure's ability to move the soul of the viewer. This is not merely a force of visual persuasion, but an intensity that creates a new form of life. It is the stirring of the soul through the surface's material becoming that resonates with the viewers on a corporeal level. There is a distinction to be drawn here between the idea that the effectiveness of figures rests in their ability to persuasively imitate an external reality with "real" events and people, and the notion that these figures are autonomous things or surfaces endowed with spirit and force. The figures are therefore not simple imitations of real human beings, but inorganic surfaces of intensities with a life of their own.

My interpretation at this point is indebted to Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualisation of *becoming*.<sup>94</sup> Becoming is a process of change or movement within an assemblage. Instead of thinking about the pieces of an assemblage as an organic whole, within which the different elements are held together through a stable harmony, the process of becoming accounts for the relationships between what Deleuze and Guattari call the *discrete* elements of the assemblage. In the process of becoming, one piece of the assemblage enters into the area of another piece, thereby changing its nature and significance by generating a new union. According to Deleuze and Guattari, becoming is not simply a case of A becoming B through imitation, or A turning into B. Instead, A becomes B when B itself takes a new direction of movement to become something else.<sup>95</sup> The process of becoming removes or dislocates an element from its original place in order to bring about a new one. The process therefore is not one of analogy or imitation; in Deleuze and Guattari's words: "A becoming is not a correspondence between relations. But neither is it a resemblance, an imitation, or, at the limit, an identification."<sup>96</sup> Becoming instead is generative of a new way of being, functioning more on the principle of movement and change rather than resemblance.

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<sup>93</sup> "Questo e, che bisogna, che le figure movano glianimi de' riguardanti, alcune turbandogli, alter rallegrandogli, alter sospingendogli a pieta, & alter a sdegno, secondo la qualita della historia. Altrimenti repute il Pittore di non havere fatto nulla: perche questo e il condiment di tutte la sue virtu: come avviene parimente al poeta, all'Historico, & all'Oratore: che se le cose scritte a recitate mancano di questa forza, mancano elle ancora di spirit e di vita." Dolce, quoted from: Mark Roskill, *Dolce's Aretino and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento*, University of Toronto Press, 2000, 157.

<sup>94</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 106.

<sup>95</sup> Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues*, 73.

<sup>96</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 237.

In light of the above, Ribera's working of the painting as a collection of surfaces entering into a tense relationship with each other can be interpreted as generating the painting's surface into a plane of intensity. This process of becoming transforms the painting from a mere assemblage of individual surfaces into a surface of inorganic life.

### **Slashing living surfaces**

At this juncture, I turn to the relationship between the force and intensity effected by the flayed surface and the depiction of blood as the source of inorganic life. I suggest that the executioner's gesture of opening up the body of Saint Bartholomew can be interpreted as an act that draws attention to the surface of the painting as a plane of intensity and force. The flayed surface enters into a tense relationship with the blotches of blood flowing from the wound, a relationship that endows the surface of the painting with inorganic life. Slicing Bartholomew's body therefore becomes a creative act that produces the surface of the painting into a plane with the potentiality of becoming alive, rather than being a mere gesture of sadism fulfilling a narrative.

Ribera's working of the surface in relation to violence can fruitfully be contrasted to Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (Fig.14) (c.1614-20; Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence).<sup>97</sup> Gentileschi's painting depicts the biblical story of the young widow Judith who, in order to save her home city of Bethulia from destruction, seduces and beheads the Assyrian general Holofernes. The painting shows the climactic moment when Judith, with the help of her faithful servant Abra, manages to pin down the General in his bed and slash away his head with a sword. Gentileschi's work has received scholarly attention mostly in terms of her status as a female artist in a male-dominated world.<sup>98</sup> As one of Gentileschi's most famous works, *Judith Slaying Holofernes* has been interpreted in a psycho sexual key. Indeed, Mary Garrard associates the subject of the painting with the artist's traumatic experience of being raped, suggesting that it functions as "a cathartic expression of the artist's private, and perhaps

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<sup>97</sup> The painting is often compared with Gentileschi's other version, *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (c. 1611-1614; National Museum of Capodimonte, Naples), especially in terms of composition and the depiction of violence. However, despite the similarities, the two paintings offer divergent points of view of the intensity and violence of the climactic moment.

<sup>98</sup> See: Mary Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*, Princeton University Press, 1989; Idem, *Artemisia Gentileschi around 1622 : The Shaping and Reshaping of an Artistic Identity*, University of California Press, 2001. A different interpretation can be found in: Mieke Bal, ed. *The Artemisia Files: Artemisia Gentileschi for Feminists and Other Thinking People*, University of Chicago Press, 2005.

repressed, rage” against her rapist Agostino Tassi.<sup>99</sup> A commonplace in the literature is to interpret Gentileschi’s painting in terms of artistic influence with Caravaggio’s earlier depiction of *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (Fig.15) (1598–1599; Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica at Palazzo Barberini, Rome).<sup>100</sup> My interpretation however does not focus on issues of gender, rape, or artistic influence. Instead I suggest that Judith’s cut effects the surface of the painting into a plane of violence, a place that not only cuts the viewer’s access into the painting, but that is also *the* place of violence of the painting.

Unfolding in the foreground, the event is structured as a triangle formed by the three protagonists. Standing on the right is Judith wearing a sumptuous yellow dress, with one hand wielding the sword while with the other hand holding Holofernes’ almost severed head. Next to her is her servant Abra struggling to pin down the General. The focal point is built around Holofernes’ half-naked figure lying on a bed. The General is depicted in the last thrash for his life as his right hand escapes Abra’s hold and goes for her neck. The sadism of Judith’s act is matched by the intensity and force of Holofernes’ struggle. This is the General’s last gesture; the expression on his face, and in particular his white empty eyes, suggest that he has already died. The scene is set against a background dominated by the dark drapes of a tent.

Judith’s sword transforms the surface of the painting into a plane of force and intensity, effected through a violent cut. The incandescent steely blade is positioned parallel to the surface of the painting, thus cutting away not only Holofernes’ head, but also the viewers’ access into the painting. The sword therefore performs an act of violent becoming and movement on the surface, which turns the surface into a plane of violent force. The force of the surface is made evident by the peculiar rendering of the spots of blood bursting from the General’s neck. Gentileschi painted the blood in two distinct ways: as gushes sprouting from Holofernes’ severed neck and as spots of blood already fixed or attached to objects. Of particular interest are the fixed spots of blood because they seem to be positioned on the surface of the painting, rather than on objects and figures within its fictional depth. In other words, Gentileschi painted the blood as stains on the surface of the painting as if the murder happened somehow in front of it, or more accurately on its surface (Fig.16) than on the inside of the painting. Not only are the spots of blood deprived of all pretence of depth, but they

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<sup>99</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 311.; See also: Elizabeth Cohen, “The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rape as History”, *The Sixteenth Century Journal* Special Edition: Gender in Early Modern Europe, Vol. 31, No. 1, Spring, 2000, 47-75.

<sup>100</sup> Ward Bissel, *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Authority of Art*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999, 191-198.

actually become a creative element of the surface. Together with the cut of the sword they challenge not only the viewer's access into the painting, but also the notion that there is a depth where one can accede. The relationship between Judith's cut and the spots of blood therefore transform the surface into a plane of tension and intensity of movement and becoming.

### **Planes of time and violence**

Bartolomeo Manfredi's *Apollo and Marsyas* (Fig.17) (1616-1620; Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis) shows a different approach to the fragmentation of time and surface than Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (c.1618-1619; Colegiata de Santa Maria Church, Osuna).<sup>101</sup> Despite the fact that both paintings depict an act of flaying, their engagement with space, time, and the creation of the surface through violence is quite dissimilar. Manfredi's painting depicts the gruesome outcome of the song contest between Apollo and Marsyas, where Marsyas is flayed alive by Apollo. Manfredi offers a close view of the flaying by painting the figures half length and setting them against a bright blue sky with passing grey clouds. The horror of the punishment is contrasted here with the beauty and serenity of the firmament. Marsyas, wearing animal fur around his waist, is standing tied to a tree trunk. Next to him Apollo, wearing a red cloak over his back and arm and a laurel crown over his curly hair, slices the satyr's left arm. I argue that the interaction between figures as well as the wound on Marsyas' arm is fragmented, almost incoherent, producing a spatial-temporal tension on the surface of the painting.

The compositional agreement of the figures in space is disjointed as Marsyas is placed closer to the viewer than Apollo and looks in shock and wonder straight past the god. At the same time, Apollo, occupying the place between the satyr's body and the extended flayed arm, is looking past Marsyas; Apollo's attitude is even more conspicuous as he is not looking at the wound, but past it. The figures, both seen in profile, do not interact with each other. Instead, through their gazes and the position of their bodies, the figures are creating a series of parallel planes traversing the surface. One might even be tempted to argue that these planes create a spatial depth inside of the painting. However, the way in which Apollo executes the wound challenges that interpretation by turning the fictitious depth of the scene into a surface of violence played not inside of the painting, but on its surface. By slicing Marsyas with the knife

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<sup>101</sup> For an informative discussion on Bartolomeo Manfredi's *Apollo and Marsyas*, see: Nicole Hartje, *Bartolomeo Manfredi (1582 - 1622)*, VDG, 2004, 344-347; Franklin and Schütze, *Caravaggio and His Followers in Rome*, 280.

in a parallel position to the surface, Apollo is in fact cutting the viewer's access into the painting and transforming the pictorial surface from a singular frontal plane into a violent plane made up of several parallel surfaces. The wound here does not show a frontal surface, but rather a cut parallel to the painting's surface. The cut opens up a rift on Marsyas's body as well as on the surface of the painting, splitting open its spatial-temporal coordinates.

These parallel surfaces have their own distinct temporality; this is made clear by Marsyas' facial expression which does not cohere with the wound on his arm. Marsyas' reaction is one of wonder and surprise, even shock, and not one of horror and excruciating pain. It has more in common with the slight wonder shown by the satyr in Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas* (Fig.18) (c.1570–1576; National Museum, Kroměříž), rather than the horror and pain seen in Ribera's *Apollo and Marsyas* (Fig.6) (1637; Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels).<sup>102</sup> Marsyas' body has its own temporality, distinct from that of his hand, as they occupy different planes of the same surface. Between the satyr's body and his hand stands the figure of Apollo, with his own place and temporality. The play of temporalities in Manfredi's painting stands in stark contrast with the temporalities displayed by Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (1618-1619; Colegiata de Santa Maria Church, Osuna). In Ribera's case, the temporalities of the painting are built around the figures, Saint Bartholomew belonging to ancient times, the executioner to seventeenth century, and the bystander as to the temporality of the painting itself. In Manfredi's case, on the other hand, time is divided into parallel planes, depicting distinct moments from the same narrative. The division of time therefore is not played here on a grand scale, but reduced to the narrow temporality of the event. Moreover, if in Manfredi's case the surface is fragmented into parallel planes that resist depth, in Ribera's painting it is the frontality and detailed rendering of the wound that come into focus.

### **The body as an assemblage**

In Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.1) (1618-1619; Colegiata de Santa Maria Church, Osuna), the large wound on Bartholomew's arm reveals an anatomically correct interior, with veins and muscles, while the flow of blood is reduced to a minimum (Fig.19). The wound can be interpreted as a constituent surface making up the assemblage of the painting. It is in itself a surface that contributes to the becoming of the painting's surface into a plane of inorganic life. The other element is the drops of blood, subtly rendered dripping on

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<sup>102</sup> For a discussion on Titian's *Apollo and Marsyas*, see Chapter 3 and 4.

the hands and apron of the executioner before reaching the ground (Fig.20). I suggest that the tension arising from the relationship between, on the one hand, the wound's smooth and glossy surface and, on the other hand, the surfaces of the subtle drops of blood create inorganic life. In other words, it is the relationship between the two elements that create inorganic life, rather than the mere depiction of an anatomically correct human body.

A challenging interpretation of the *topos* of "lifelikeness" in the art of the sixteenth and seventeenth century in relation to scientific anatomical discoveries is offered by Fredrika Jacobs.<sup>103</sup> Jacobs interprets the sixteenth-century depictions of Apollo flaying Marsyas in light of the anatomical studies presented at the Accademia del Disegno.<sup>104</sup> Seeing that the academy required its members to attend annually the dissection of a corpse, Jacobs argues that the dismembering of a body became an important factor in the creation and reception of artworks. This dismembering and fragmentation of bodies was crucial because artists were encouraged to follow the ancient example set by Zeuxis, who created an image of Helen of Troy by taking the best features from the most beautiful girls he could find in order to unify them into a perfect whole.<sup>105</sup> This fragmentation of the body is not, however, one where the parts are used to create a process of becoming, but one where each part is selected to fit in a pre-established framework. Jacobs' interpretation therefore relies on an idealistic representation of the human figure, and although she points out that artists used to paste together different anatomical parts to create an entire body, that process was governed by a desire to imitate a perfect idea of what a perfect human body should look like.<sup>106</sup> Therefore, Jacobs suggests that it is the accurate anatomical imitation of a human body that makes viewers interpret a figure as being lifelike.

By contrast, in Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (1618-1619; Colegiata de Santa Maria Church, Osuna), the anatomy plays a part in creating the surface of the painting into a plane of force and intensity, not by suggesting an ideal accurate imitation of human anatomy, but by engaging its parts into a relationship of becoming. This engagement between the various parts of Bartholomew's body gives rise to its surface as a plane of inorganic life. Inorganic life therefore appears to be more of an effect rising from the relationship between different surfaces and their distinct force rather than properties of a single element that is either wholly present or wholly absent. In Deleuze and Guattari's words, inorganic life is:

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<sup>103</sup> Jacobs, *The Living Image in Renaissance Art*.

<sup>104</sup> *Idem*, 11, 62-104; see especially 82-86.

<sup>105</sup> *Idem*, 12.

<sup>106</sup> *Idem*, 94-96.

this streaming, spiraling, zigzagging, snaking, feverish line of variation [which] liberates a power of life that human beings had rectified and organisms had confined, and which matter now expresses as the trait, flow or impulse traversing it. If everything is alive, it is not because everything is organic or organized, but, on the contrary, because the organism is a diversion of life. In short, the life in question is inorganic, germinal, and intensive, a powerful life without organs, a body that is all the more alive for having no organs.<sup>107</sup>

According to Leslei Dema, inorganic life can be characterised as a type of emergentism; however, not in the sense of matter being endowed with emergent life, but that life steams out of the special relationship or becoming at play within an assemblage.<sup>108</sup> As such, in Ribera's painting, inorganic life does not originate in the anatomically correct surface of the wound or in the skilful rendition of Bartholomew's body, but it appears as an effect of the relationship between them. The flayed surface of the body can be considered in its own right an assemblage, as the different anatomical parts are held together by the tense interaction between them, while the skin as the covering organ supposed to hold everything together is removed. The force and intensity of the flayed surface originates in the way the various muscles and veins are shown as moving, pulsating red flesh. The clarity and smoothness of the wound's surface is put into stark contrast with the intact skin of the saint painted in subtle brushstrokes with colours varying from intense red, visible on the face and chest (Fig.21), to various yellow hues on the waist and legs (Fig.22). The subtle variation between the smoothness and roughness of the surface, coupled with the significant difference between the colouration of its parts, suggest a body as a sum of different fragmented surfaces. These disjointed and patchy surfaces enter into a tense relationship with each other, transforming Bartholomew's body into an assemblage. In turn, it is the saint's body as an assemblage that produces a tension capable of effecting the painting's surface into a plane of inorganic life. The focus therefore falls not only on the wound, but on the tense relationship of movement and alternation that takes place between the two distinct surfaces of flayed and still intact skin

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<sup>107</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 499.

<sup>108</sup> Leslie Dema, "'Inorganic, Yet Alive': How Can Deleuze and Guattari Deal With the Accusation of Vitalism?," *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, 15, (Winter 2007), [http://www.rhizomes.net/issue15/dema.html#\\_ftn1](http://www.rhizomes.net/issue15/dema.html#_ftn1) (accessed 12,12,2014).



(Fig.26). In other words, in Ribera's painting, inorganic life arises from the dynamic relationship at play between the various fragmented surfaces worked into an assemblage.

### **Moving materaility**

The subtle variation between the smooth and rough surfaces of Bartholomew's body brings into focus the painting's materiality. I argue that the materiality of these surfaces held together into an assemblage produce a living pictorial body. In other words, Ribera's painting should not be conceived only as an assemblage of (equally rendered) surfaces effecting inorganic life, but as a living body, body grounded in the surface's distinct and various materiality. For this, I turn to Caroline Walker Bynum's conceptualization of change and materiality in relation to holy images.<sup>109</sup> Bynum's study investigates the medieval conception of matter as active in relation to the sacred – a materiality that does not point beyond itself to the transcendent, but one that asserts its material quality even after undergoing a process of transformation through the sacred. The aim of Bynum's study is to resituate the conception of the body in matter, as it would have been conceived during the high and late Middle Ages.<sup>110</sup> In spite of the common conception that during the late Middle Ages people ascribed to a dualist conception of mind/body, which entailed a hatred of the body, Bynum argues that theorists from Isidore of Seville to Nicole Oresme and Marsilio Ficino “did not see body primarily as the enemy of the soul, the container of soul, or the servant of soul; rather they saw the person as a psychosomatic unit, as body and soul together.”<sup>111</sup> According to Bynum, medieval theorists were more concerned with “bridging the gap between material and spiritual and to give to body positive significance.”<sup>112</sup>

Of particular interest is Bynum's investigation of the paradox between a conception of matter as locatable, divisible, temporal, and changeable on one side, and the Christian God as whole, immutable, and transcendent. In her view, “corruptible matter must be – impossibly, inconceivably, paradoxically – capable of incorruption.”<sup>113</sup> Analyzing the medieval

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<sup>109</sup> Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 25-36.

<sup>110</sup> The conception of matter as active within Christianity was based on the doctrine of the Incarnation – Christ the Word was made flesh (matter). Bynum argues that the doctrine of creation was at the time considerably more important, because the concept of *corpora* – also encompassing the doctrine of the Incarnation of Christ – refers not only to the human bodies, but also to trees, comets, etc; that is the entire creation. Therefore, when Christ resurrected, he took to heaven not only his flesh, but flesh as matter. See: *Idem*, 261.

<sup>111</sup> Bynum, “The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Late Middle Ages,” in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, Zone Books, 1992, 222.

<sup>112</sup> *Idem*, 223.

<sup>113</sup> *Idem*, 175.

conceptions of matter – between 1150 to 1550, with allusions to the late sixteenth century – Bynum draws attention to Isidore of Seville’s definition of matter as *mater* (mother), making the fundamental nature of matter maternal, namely fertile and capable of becoming.<sup>114</sup> In a complex argument that includes considerations of medieval attitudes on alchemy, the Ovidian reception of the *Metamorphosis*’ stories concerned with matter and change, as well as the commentaries on Aristotle’s *On Generation and Corruption*, Bynum concludes that “by the fifteenth century, authors began to see all matter simply as animate.”<sup>115</sup> According to Bynum, since Aristotle was unclear on the fact that all matter is endowed with movement and potentiality, the late medieval Aristotelian tradition assumed matter to be more labile and fertile than the philosopher initially intended.<sup>116</sup> On the other hand, even the Neo-Platonists of the fifteenth century “tended to assume, in spite of themselves, a basic dynamism lurking in matter.”<sup>117</sup> A case in point is the Florentine physician Tignosi da Foligno whose analysis of matter and change in his two treatises on platonic ideas offers Bynum a further consolidation of her argument that matter was perceived as dynamic, where “matter is all the stuff of creation, forever in motion exactly because imperfect, in contrast to the perfect God.”<sup>118</sup> Bynum argues that animated images or relics do not point beyond their own materiality to heaven – as is usually assumed – but that they offer a relationship with the sacred through visible and tangible things.<sup>119</sup> Thus, the outbreak of the holy in matter was more than a simple change, the animated objects “bursting forth of life could be understood as matter triumphing over exactly the change it represented.”<sup>120</sup>

A distinction needs to be drawn at this point between Bynum’s argument of animated images through divine change and Ribera’s living pictorial bodies. I am not arguing that Ribera’s paintings become animated through a process of material change and transformation operated by the divine. In contrast, I argue that it is the process at work between the materiality of these surfaces that produces the inorganically alive assemblage into a living pictorial body. Therefore, it is the process between the materiality of one distinct surface, such as the wound, in relation to another distinct surface, like the varying shades of still intact skin, that produces the pictorial assemblage of the painting into a living pictorial body.

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<sup>114</sup> *Idem*, 231.

<sup>115</sup> *Idem*, 237.

<sup>116</sup> *Idem*, 236.

<sup>117</sup> *Idem*, 239.

<sup>118</sup> *Idem*, 238.

<sup>119</sup> *Idem*, 250.

<sup>120</sup> *Idem*, 256.

Accordingly, Ribera's painting should be understood as a living body, where life amounts to the inorganic life of the assemblage and body to the grounding of the surface in materiality.

### **On the Threshold**

Ribera's painting of the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.2) (c.1620; Pallavicini-Rospigliosi Palace, Rome) confronts viewers with a paradoxical image of a body that is brought to "life," only to be put to death. It is a body always set on the threshold of life and death. The figure of the saint is shown kneeling on a stone slab, with both hands tied to a dark tree trunk. Bartholomew's body occupies almost the entire surface of the canvas, leaving little room for the figure of the executioner, who is constricted to the extreme right-hand side of the painting. Bartholomew's flayed right hand is shown here perpendicular to the torso, inviting a comparison between the surface of the flayed flesh and the surface of the still-intact skin. The variation in portraying the body of the saint can also be observed on other parts of his body, as there are sections where the colours suggest a tissue that is already dead, like on the right leg, and others where it is still alive, such as his chest. The colours depicting the body of the saint therefore show a paradoxical relationship between life and death coexisting on the same surface.

This relationship is defined by the surface's potentiality in producing parallel existential states, such as life and death. However, what the viewer is made to see is not a simple progression from life to death, or vice versa, but the body of the saint turned into a living threshold of death. My interpretation of the body of Saint Bartholomew as a living threshold of death is indebted to Jean-Luc Nancy's conceptualisation of death in his essay *On the Threshold* (1996). Both life and death appear as impossible necessities, as limits that touch each other on the surface of the painting. This can be observed on the saint's torso (Fig.26), where the flagging skin is coloured in nuanced flesh tones that reveal a complex multilayered surface; a colour that changes according to the texture of the skin as it varies between smooth and rough areas. Rough flesh stands next to intact skin, while "dead" sections of skin coloured in green-blue-yellow nuances are shown next to "living" tissue painted in shades of red-pink-yellow. The relationship with death becomes problematized through colour and surface as viewers are made aware that there is no communication between what is before and beyond it; one can never gain access to the mystery of death, just as one can never go beyond the surface of a painting. The coloured surface of Bartholomew's body becomes a threshold; not only the threshold of the painting, but also the threshold of death.

## The surface as threshold

A point of contrast with Ribera's painting is Caravaggio's problematization of death, threshold, and surface in his *Death of the Virgin* (Fig.9) (1601-1606; Louvre, Paris).<sup>121</sup> Caravaggio painted the canvas as a commission for the papal lawyer Laerzio Cherubini, to adorn his chapel in the Carmelite church of Santa Maria della Scala in Trastevere, Rome. The monumental canvas shows the Madonna unceremoniously laid on a bed, moments after her passing, in the presence of the grieving apostles and Mary Magdalene.<sup>122</sup> The Virgin is depicted in a red-coloured dress, surrounded by grieving apostles; some of whom have their heads buried in their hands, while others are pensively holding their head, a few in the background are turning to each other in silence. Only the yellow-coated figure identified as Saint Paul is shown in a state of distress, raising his hands in surprise. The event is portrayed in a semi-obscure room, with the only source of light coming from the upper left side of the canvas. Against the illuminated empty wall in the background stands a radiantly rich scarlet drapery attached to the wooden ceiling, high above the group of mourners. Although Caravaggio painted the scene as a desolated image of the passing of a dear person – rather than a glorious depiction of the Queen of Heaven – the painting is far from devoid of subtle grandeur and monumentality.

Soon after it was installed in the chapel, the Carmelite friars removed the painting, forcing Cherubini to put it on private sale in 1607. The same year it was purchased by the ducal ambassador Giovanni Magni for his master, Vincenzo I Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua and Montferrat, following Pieter Paul Rubens' recommendation.<sup>123</sup> The removal of the painting caused a sensation, prompting Caravaggio's biographers to speculate on the rationale behind this extreme action, as well as giving rise to an immense amount of art-historical scholarship. For instance, Gulio Mancini in his *Considerazioni sulla pittura* (1621), gave an unflattering account of Caravaggio's painting, deeming the work "inappropriate in lasciviousness and decorum" on account of its "portraying a courtesan as the Virgin."<sup>124</sup> Indeed, much of the

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<sup>121</sup> John T. Spike, *Caravaggio*, Abbeville Press Inc., 2010, 150-156; Ebert-Schifferer, *Caravaggio*, 179-184; Schütze, *Caravaggio*, 125, 138, 141 – 142.

<sup>122</sup> Caravaggio's depiction of Mary Magdalene is unconventional. A sustained interpretation of her presence can be found in: Pamela Askew, *Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin*, Princeton University Press, 1990; On the importance of gender regarding the witnesses of the Virgin's death, see: Stephen Shoemaker, "Gender at the Virgin's Funeral: Men and Women as Witnesses to the Dormition," *Studia Patristica*, 34, 2001, 552-58.

<sup>123</sup> Schütze, *Caravaggio* 125.

<sup>124</sup> Mancini, quoted from: Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, Westview Press, 1985, 347. Frances Gage argues that Mancini regarded the painting as a blasphemous gesture because it portrayed the Virgin as a "dirty whore" –

literature dedicated to the painting is devoted to its controversial removal from the church and its alleged lack of decorum.<sup>125</sup> It falls beyond the scope of this study to speculate on the reasons behind its rejection. Instead, I will pay attention to Caravaggio's portrayal of the subject of death and his working of the surface in relation to the notion of the threshold.

Without a shadow of a doubt the woman lying on the bier is dead: the body lacks any articulation in the musculature, her head tilted to the left while the left arm hangs outside of the bier; her face is swollen as the skin acquires a discoloured greenish tinge (Fig.23). Indeed, Caravaggio leaves little room to interpret the state of the Virgin's body. Colour signals her state as a corpse showing the first stages of decay.<sup>126</sup> According to Giovanni Baglione, the appalling appearance of the Virgin's body prompted the barefooted Carmelites to remove it from the chapel.

For the Madonna della Scala in Trastevere, Caravaggio painted the Death of the Virgin, but because he had portrayed the Virgin without decorum, swollen (*gonfia*) and with bare legs, it was taken away.<sup>127</sup>

Todd Olson argues that by using the word *gonfia*, or swollen, Baglione implied "the corruption of the body through pathology or post-mortem distensions," an act that points to "the overt representation of the Virgin as matter."<sup>128</sup> According to Olson, Baglione attempted to associate Caravaggio's depiction of the Virgin with "abject anatomical distention," visible in the "puffing up of the members," as a result of "faulty drawing and unstable foreshortenings."<sup>129</sup> Thus, Olson interprets Caravaggio's depiction of the Virgin as a departure from Alberti's criteria on how to paint a dead body; an endeavour that was considered at the

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among other things. Gage points out that blasphemy must be interpreted not only as a heretical behaviour condemned by the Church, but first and foremost as an expression of social and cultural marginalisation and rebellion. See: Frances Gage, "Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin, Giulio Mancini, and the Madonna Blasphemed," in *Caravaggio. Reflections and Refractions*, eds. Lorenzo Pericolo and David M. Stone, Ashgate, 2014, 83-104.

<sup>125</sup> Apart from the entries on the painting in the above quoted monographs, see also: Avigdor Posèq, "Pathosformeis, Decorum and the 'Art of Gestures' in Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin," *Konsthistorisk tidskrift/Journal of Art History*, Volume 61, Issue 1-2, 1992, 27-44; Frances Gage, "Illness, Invention, and Truth in Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin" in *Gifts in Return: Essays in Honour of Charles Dempsey*, ed. Melinda Schlitt, Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2012, 337-362.

<sup>126</sup> This remark is indebted to Todd P. Olson, *Caravaggio's Pitiful Relics*, Yale University Press, 2014, 143-144.

<sup>127</sup> "Per la Madonna della Scala in Trastevere dipinse il transito di N. Donna, ma perché havea fatto con poco decoro, la Madonna gonfia, e con gambe scoperte, fu levata via." Baglione, quoted from Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 354.

<sup>128</sup> Olson, *Caravaggio's Pitiful Relics*, 139, 142.

<sup>129</sup> *Idem*, 143.

time the “ultimate application of the artist’s invention and emulation of antiquity.”<sup>130</sup> On the other hand, Olson argues in Baglione’s term an indirect, unwilling praise as it invokes material processes that go beyond Alberti’s definition of the *istoria* and an appeal to antique sources. In view of that, Caravaggio appears as a “committed materialist – experimenting with primers, grinding shells and mineral to achieve pictorial effects.”<sup>131</sup> Olson suggests a connection between Caravaggio’s approach to the Virgin’s body and the depiction of the dead, recommended by Cennino d’Andrea Cennini in his *Il Libro dell’ Arte* (c.1390). When painting a corpse, Cennini advised painters to leave the *terre verte* – the green under-painting used for flesh in the fourteenth century – exposed in order to highlight the transition between shadows and morbid flesh. Rejecting the use of pink, Cennini restricted the tones of flesh to three tones: ochre tempered with red white, lead white to signal the reflection of light on dead flesh, and *verdaccio* for shadows and hair. Thus, Olson points out that Caravaggio’s depiction of the Virgin’s body has more in common with Cennini’s approach rather than with Alberti’s decorous *istoria*, since for Cennini, death is “the negotiations of the boundaries and the visibility of the layered surface, the revelation of strata.”<sup>132</sup> For Olson, Caravaggio’s painting was an example of perishable materiality that was no longer attuned to the political, social, and religious requirements for the depiction of a holy body, not to mention the body of the Virgin.<sup>133</sup> Olson’s observations on the complexity of layered surfaces and the exposition of different strata is significant here since it evokes Ribera’s depiction of the body of Saint Bartholomew (Fig.2) (c.1620; Palazzo Pallavicini-Rospigliosi, Rome) as a complex layered surface showing death.

Contrary to Caravaggio’s biographers, Pamela Askew argues that Caravaggio’s *Death of the Virgin* was conceived “essentially as a meditation upon death,” rather than as a blatant “realistic” event that defies decorum and Albertian conventions.<sup>134</sup> Askew points out that during the early seventeenth century the Catholic Church did not have a definitive doctrine on the Virgin death or *transitus*; did she die a mortal’s death and was she assumed to heaven three days later, or was she assumed before her death, still alive? These were open questions for Catholic theologians, clerics, and believers.<sup>135</sup> According to Askew, there was a growing

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<sup>130</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>131</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>132</sup> *Idem*, 144.

<sup>133</sup> *Idem*, 184.

<sup>134</sup> Askew, *Caravaggio’s Death of the Virgin*, 104.

<sup>135</sup> *Idem.* For theological debates on the nature of the Virgin’s death, see also: Shoemaker, *The Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary’s Dormition and Assumption*, Oxford University Press, 2006, 201.

consensus among theologians that the Virgin had indeed experienced death as any other mortal; the word used was *transitus*, meaning death, as death is a transitory state before the resurrection of the flesh at the Last Judgement.<sup>136</sup> This view was shared by theologians from John of Damascus to Cardinal Cesare Baronius. Baronius, in his *Annales Ecclesiastici* (1588 - 1607), writes: “The Catholic Church admits no doubt concerning the death of the mother of God because it knows that she shared human nature; it affirms that she experienced equally the human necessity of death.”<sup>137</sup> Thus, Caravaggio’s painting, through its exclusion of supernatural manifestations, emphasises the physicality of her death as a universal human necessity. Askew points out that because the painting does not show the depiction of Christ taking the Virgin’s soul into Heaven and the legendary story of the Jew it is a sign of Caravaggio’s commitment to “verifiable experiences to belief.”<sup>138</sup> Askew argues that Caravaggio took inspiration from the Mediaeval sources in depicting the Virgin’s death – such as Pietro Cavallini’s *Transitus* (Fig.24) (1296-1300; Basilica di Santa Maria in Trastevere, Rome) and Giotto’s *The Death of the Virgin* (Fig.25) (c.1310; Gemäldegalerie, Berlin) – and favoured what she calls “a truth of human experience and significance for an immediate present.”<sup>139</sup>

An interesting interpretation is offered by Askew in relation to the attitude of the figure cloaked in yellow – identified as Saint Paul – and the nature of the Virgin’s body.<sup>140</sup> Paul is the only apostle who raises his hands in wonder as he responds to the sight of the dead body, a gesture interpreted by Askew as one of stupor and recognition. He clearly saw something that he wasn’t expecting to see in a person that has just died. This is significant as Paul is the apostle who proclaimed the universal law of death as the result of original sin, which applies to all except those who will live at the Last Judgment, who instead of dying will be instantly transformed from corrupt flesh into incorruptible. According to Askew, Paul becomes aware that the Virgin did not suffer the consequences of death because she was exempt from Original Sin; interpretation that accords with the emerging belief of the Immaculate Conception.<sup>141</sup> What Paul sees therefore is the incorruptible nature of the Virgin’s body immediately after death, sharing – albeit on a subordinate stage to Christ – the divine privilege of becoming

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<sup>136</sup> *Idem*, 20-21.

<sup>137</sup> Quoted from: *Idem*, 22.

<sup>138</sup> *Idem*, 33. For the legend of the Jew present at the Virgin’s funeral, see: Shoemaker, “‘Let Us Go and Burn Her Body’: The Image of the Jews in the Early Dormition Traditions.” in *Church History*, 68.4, 1999, 775-823.

<sup>139</sup> *Idem*, 37.

<sup>140</sup> The following interpretation is taken from Askew, 41-42.

<sup>141</sup> *Idem*, 42.

immortal before the Last Judgment. Askew finally argues that this interpretation is coherent with the Carmelite devotion to the Virgin. Caravaggio replaced the visible presence of Christ with an invisible divine intervention into the nature of the Virgin's body, one recognised by Saint Paul.

One can note here the underlying difference between Olson's and Askew's interpretations of Caravaggio's depiction of the Virgin's body. While Olson draws attention to the morbid materiality of the body, and the material processes used by Caravaggio to underline its condition, Askew sees in the depiction the promise of corporeal immortality and incorruptibility. Indeed, Olson concludes his analysis of the painting by stating that it was already anachronistic at the time it was installed because the ideas about relics had changed and "the dead Virgin's materiality, the risk of corruption, the weight of the figure, the violent traces of competing contraries, could not be sustained."<sup>142</sup> The play between the corruptibility and incorruptibility of the body after death, present in both studies, Olson's emphasis on the boundaries and layered surfaces, as well as Askew's interpretation of invisible corporeal transformation will prove significant for my interpretation of Ribera's depiction of Saint Bartholomew.

A key interpretation of the painting is given by Jean-Luc Nancy in his essay *On the Threshold*.<sup>143</sup> Fundamentally different from Olson and Askew's interpretations, Nancy's analysis of Caravaggio's painting does not centre on seventeenth-century artistic, theological, political, and social debates surrounding the representation of the Virgin's death. Instead, Nancy argues that Caravaggio's painting positions the viewer on the threshold of death, the world, existence, and implies that art also operates this way in general, not so much representing the world as presenting it, locating the viewer in the impossibility of the world, and of existence. Nancy's main argument is that there is no death *itself*, and that "the subject of this painting [is]: there is never death [in] itself."<sup>144</sup> While describing Caravaggio's depiction of the body of the Virgin, Nancy writes that: "one might say she is resting, as if she were still on this side of death, or else already beyond it. But, is not death itself already both on this side and beyond death?"<sup>145</sup> What Nancy is pointing out is that because there is no death in itself, one is always on this side of death or beyond it. For Nancy, death appears as an event,

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<sup>142</sup> Olson, *Caravaggio's Pitiful Relics*, 191.

<sup>143</sup> Nancy, "On the Threshold," 57-67.

<sup>144</sup> *Idem*, 59.

<sup>145</sup> *Idem*.



where: “There is no ‘death,’ but a dead man, a dead woman, numerous dead who are firm, whole, present among us, woven with us into life.”<sup>146</sup>

Nancy supports his claim by pointing towards the relationship between the Virgin and Mary Magdalene. For Nancy, the Virgin appears dead because Mary Magdalene appears alive as their presences are made to alternate, as “one appears to support the other” by endlessly bringing the other to light. According to Nancy, one answers the other: “across the two shores of death, where there is nothing but light and the thin line of shadow that runs along the edges of the bodies, the folds of the linen and the clothes.”<sup>147</sup> Because of the individuality of the event of death, there is no access to “death itself,” and as such, it could not be presented through artistic means, or indeed through any other means. Martta Heikkilä argues that Nancy’s interpretation of death is related to Heidegger’s idea of mortality, according to which “*Dasein* postpones its own death and thus makes its time its own: we are never and always in death, both inside and outside of it, but never in a way that there would be mediation. Thus, at the core of this notion of death is especially the aspect of space.”<sup>148</sup> For Heikkilä, Nancy’s notion of death is closely related to the problem of space, where not only death creates a threshold, so does the painting; indeed, the spectator too is turned into a threshold.

Nancy extends his analysis from Caravaggio’s *Death of the Virgin* to a general remark about paintings, saying: “This is the ordinary command or demand of painting: very simple, very humble, even derisory. See the invisible, not beyond the visible, nor inside, nor outside, but right at it, on the threshold, like its very oil, its weave, and its pigment.”<sup>149</sup> Thus, Nancy’s interpretation of the threshold goes beyond death, arguing that paintings as well as viewers become thresholds. According to Nancy, Caravaggio’s painting “arranges and exposes its plane. It lays it out flat,” producing its surface as a threshold.<sup>150</sup>

So, we have entered there where we will never enter, into this scene painted on a canvas. All at once, there we are. We cannot exactly say that we have penetrated there, but neither can we say that we are outside. We are there in a manner older and simpler than by any movement, displacement, or penetration. We are there without leaving the threshold, on the threshold, neither

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<sup>146</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>147</sup> *Idem*, 60.

<sup>148</sup> Martta Heikkilä, *At the Limits of Presentation: Coming-into-presence and Its Aesthetic Relevance in Jean-Luc Nancy's Philosophy*, Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2008, 236.

<sup>149</sup> Nancy, “On the Threshold,” 60.

<sup>150</sup> *Idem*, 67.

inside nor outside – and perhaps we are, ourselves, the threshold  
just as our eye conforms to the plane of the canvas and weaves  
itself into its fabric.<sup>151</sup>

According to Nancy, Caravaggio's painting invites viewers to enter the scene, although this entry is granted only on its surface, as one is neither outside, nor inside the work – “the painting is our access to the fact that we do not accede.”<sup>152</sup> One is therefore trapped on the surface of the painting – with its paint, weave, and pigment – since all that needs to be seen is already there. There is no need to “go behind the canvas,” since the desire to see the “invisible” either beyond the picture, or inside or outside of it, is hollow and pointless. Everything is there on the surface of the painting, “right at it, on the threshold.”<sup>153</sup> What is visible for Nancy is the matter of the painting – the canvas, the paint, the pigment and the texture, and most importantly of all, the effects created by these: light.

Nancy thus suggests that viewers have no access to what is thought of as the invisible, inside, or behind the surface of a painting, simply because one is unable to go through the painting's impenetrable materiality. By locating viewers on its threshold – like all paintings – Caravaggio's work evokes a position which is analogous to humans' existence as mortal. For Nancy, if there is not death itself, neither is there before or beyond: one is never in death, and one is always there. Between the two planes, there is no mediation or communication, just like there is no passage between the inside and the outside of a painting. Not only are viewers positioned “on the threshold” of the painting's impossibility, they are also themselves living thresholds of death. From one point of view, there is the unapproachable, unknowable side of death that awaits the submissive coming of the living. From the other, there is the side of life, where the viewer encounters death and face up to their own mortality through the death of others.

### **Colour – Living Threshold of death**

I suggest that the surface of Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.2) (c.1620; Pallavicini-Rospigliosi Palace, Rome) effects a threshold as a meaningful site where the relationship between the painting's subject of death and its life is negotiated. In order for this surface to be considered a threshold, one must distinguish it from other surfaces, like the

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<sup>151</sup> *Idem*, 57.

<sup>152</sup> *Idem*, 61.

<sup>153</sup> *Idem*, 59.

surface of a closet or the surface of a wall. For this, I turn to Nancy's conceptualization of the image as distinct. In his essay *The Image – The Distinct*, Nancy rejects any notion of art as imitation or mimesis, challenging the representational model through which art can be considered to reflect, or reference an event, figure, or object from some determinate or recognizable pre-existing external reality.<sup>154</sup> Nancy argues instead that a painting traces or figures a form through a line which has no pre-existing model or reality. The key word used by Nancy is "line" (*trait*), a concept that entails a double function; to draw a line may suggest tracing a figure – that is, drawing it – and enforcing a separation or distance.<sup>155</sup>

Nancy argues that paintings *extract* an intimacy and force. In his words: 'the traits and lines of the image (its outline, its form) are themselves (something from) its intimate force: for this intimate force is not 'represented' by the image, but the image is it, the image activates it, draws it and withdraws it, it extracts it just as it withholds it, and it is with that force that it touches us'.<sup>156</sup> Thus, according to Nancy, an image communicates with its beholders through touch. However, this touch does not imply continuity and immediacy and it is not a sentiment of feeling, but a form of closeness in distance; touch is the force of the line that simultaneously brings the beholder into contact and separates him/her from the painting. Touch is a form of contact in separation.<sup>157</sup>

This separation and distance is best articulated by Nancy's concept of image – painting or any form of art – as *distinct*. Nancy discusses the distinct by introducing two oppositions: one between the sacred and religion and one between what can and cannot be touched. Nancy argues that despite the fact that there is a long association between art and religion, it does not have its origin in religion but in the sacred. While religion forms and maintains a bond, the sacred is forever set apart and separated; there is no connection which could be constituted and preserved with the sacred. In Nancy's words: 'the sacred is what, of itself, remains set apart, at a distance, and with which one forms no bound (or only a paradoxical one). It is what one cannot touch (or only by a touch without contact).'<sup>158</sup> The image belongs to the sacred and that is what makes it distinct.

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<sup>154</sup> Nancy, *The Image – The Distinct*, 9.

<sup>155</sup> In Nancy's words: "Every image is in some way a portrait, not that it would reproduce the traits of a person, but in that it pulls and *draws* (this is the semantic and etymological sense of the word), in that it *extracts* something, an intimacy, a force. And, to extract it, it subtracts or removes it from homogeneity, it distracts it from it, distinguishes it, detaches it and casts it forth." *Idem*, 4.

<sup>156</sup> *Idem*, 5.

<sup>157</sup> For an analysis on Nancy's concept of touch in separation in relation to Ribera's paintings, see chapter 3.

<sup>158</sup> Nancy, *The Image – The Distinct*, 1.

The distinct for Nancy is something that is separated by marks; it is both withdrawn by a line, and marked as withdrawn with a line. The distinct marks something that belongs to what cannot be touched, although this “is given in the trait and in the line that separates it, it is given in by this distraction that removes it.”<sup>159</sup> Even though the image is sacred, it is not sacrificial. Sacrifice belongs to religion as it involves a transgression of boundaries, whilst the sacred maintains the separation and rupture of the limit. In contrast, the distinct “crosses the distance of the withdrawal even while maintaining it through its mark as an image.”<sup>160</sup> This type of crossing does not create continuity: “It does not suppress the distinction. It maintains it while also making contact: shock, confrontation, *tête-à-tête*, or embrace. It is less a transport than a *rapport*, or relation. The distinct bounds toward the indistinct and leaps into it, but it is not interlinked with it.”<sup>161</sup>

The double movement of the distinct creates the intimate force of the image with which it touches the beholder. It is through this force that the distinct “approaches across a distance, but what it brings into such close proximity is distance.”<sup>162</sup> The image’s double movement of withdrawing in drawing and drawing in withdrawal establishes a twofold separation. It is through this double separation that the image exposes itself by exposing the ground. First “the image is a thing that is not the thing: it distinguishes itself from it, essentially.”<sup>163</sup> This separation from the world of objects is one way in which Nancy disconnects the image from a representational model. The second separation is from its ground as the image “is detached from a ground [*fond*] and it is cut out within a ground. It is pulled away and clipped or cut out. The pulling away raises it and brings it forward: makes it a “fore,” a separate frontal surface, whereas the ground itself had no face or surface.”<sup>164</sup> This raising of the image emphasises its material quality; for Nancy the image is always material, it is “the matter of the distinct, its mass and its thickness, its weight.”<sup>165</sup> By interpreting Ribera’s paintings as distinct, the pictorial body acquires a different ontological status from the rest of things. It is through this distinction that the surface of the pictorial body acquires the potentiality of becoming a meaningful surface, in our case a threshold.

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<sup>159</sup> *Idem*, 2.

<sup>160</sup> *Idem*, 3.

<sup>161</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>162</sup> *Idem*, 4.

<sup>163</sup> *Idem*, 2.

<sup>164</sup> *Idem*, 7.

<sup>165</sup> *Idem*, 12.

In Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.2) (c.1620; Pallavicini-Rospigliosi Palace, Rome), the flesh-coloured surface of Saint Bartholomew is set into a constant movement, or turning the painting's surface into a living threshold of death. The moving effect of Ribera's use of colour was noted by Bernardo de' Dominici, in his *Vite dei Pittori, Scultori, ed Architetti Napolitani* (1742):

Thus Jusepe, matching the valiant nature of Caravaggio, chose the naturalism and the beautiful colour of the Lombard school, from which he created his own manner. It is truly a wonder [meraviglia] to see how, with his impasto so dense in colour, he made the muscles of the human body turn [girare], but every small part of the bones and of the hands and feet, which were always finished with unmatched degree of diligence and mastery.<sup>166</sup>

According to De' Dominici, it is Ribera's use of colour that is responsible – together with the *impasto* technique – for moving, or “turning” the figures, endowing them with a sense of lifelikeness.<sup>167</sup> De' Dominici's remark evokes the sixteenth and seventeenth century art historical discourses on colour, in particular the colour of muscles as a source of lifelikeness. Marco Boschini, in his *Le minere della pittura veneziana* (1664), opens the long quotation of Palma il Giovane's recollection of Titian's method of painting by saying that “Titian was undeniably the most excellent of all those who painted because his brush always created an expression of life.”<sup>168</sup> Sixteenth-century theorists argued that in order for painters to achieve an effect of lifelikeness it is capital that artistic invention, gestures, expressions, surrounding, movement, composition, and colouring be successfully worked together into a consistent, harmonised whole. Ludovico Dolce, for instance, in his *Dialogue on Painting, or L'aretino*, refers to movement in painting as a source of astonishment:

For it is genuinely pleasing and astonishing to the spectator's eye to see in stone or on a canvas or in wood an inanimate object

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<sup>166</sup>“Così dunque Giuseppe accoppiando alla fierezza del Caravaggio lo scelto del naturale, ed il bel colore della scuola lombarda, ne compose la maniera che fu sua propria; e fa veramente meraviglia il veder come col suo impasto così denso di colore egli facesse girare non solamente i muscoli del corpo umano, ma eziando le parti minute dell'ossa delle mani e de' piedi, i quali si veggono finiti con diligenza e maestria inarrivabile.” My translation. De' Dominici, *Vite*, 115.

<sup>167</sup> For a detailed discussion on Ribera's use of *impasto* to create a sense of corporeality in relation to touch, see Chapter 3.

<sup>168</sup> Marco Boschini's entire quotation is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

which gives the appearance of moving. (...) And again it is necessary that every movement should – as I remarked earlier when speaking of invention – discharge its function well.<sup>169</sup>

The importance of movement – gestures, arrangement, expressions – was also stressed by Gian Paolo Lomazzo in his *Idea del Tempio detta pittura* (1590), where it is pointed out that: “The greatest grace and elegance a figure can have is demonstrated by its movement, which painters call the intensity of the figure.”<sup>170</sup> However, for Dolce and Lomazzo, the successful delivery of lifelikeness meant more than artistic invention and movement; it was also an effect of the credible use of colour. Dolce argued that “colouring takes its cue from the hues with which nature paints (for one can say as much) animate and inanimate things in vegetation.”<sup>171</sup> This is not a passing observation on Dolce’s behalf, but a deeply ingrained conviction, as it is repeated several times throughout his treatise. For instance, Dolce observed that:

Certainly colouring is so important and compelling that, when the painter produces a good imitation of the tones and softness of flesh and the rightful characteristics of any object there may be, he makes his paintings seem alive, to the point where only breath is the only thing missing in them.<sup>172</sup>

On a similar note, Lomazzo observed of Titian that:

The flesh has so much loveliness and grace, with its blend of colours that it appears real and alive, and particularly the gracefulness and tenderness that are so natural to him.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> “aggradevole, e di stupore: che aggradevole e nel vero, e fa stupir gliocchi de' riguardanti, vedere in sasso, in tela, o in legno una cosa inanimata, che par, che si mova. (...) E mestiero ancora, che tutte facciano bene (come ho detto parlando dell'inventione) lufficio loro, in modo, che se uno havra a tirare un colpo di spada, il movimento del braccio sia gagliardo, e la mano stringa il manico, nella guisa, che conviene: e se alcuno corre, dimonstri, che ogni parte del corpo serva al corso: e se e vestito, che'l vento ferisca ne' panni verisimilmente.” Dolce, quoted from: Roskill, *Dolce's 'Aretino*, 147.

<sup>170</sup> Lomazzo, quoted from: John Sherman, *Mannerism*, Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1967, 81.

<sup>171</sup> “Il colorito serve a quelle tinte, con lequali la Natura dipinge (che cosi si puo dire) diversamente le cose animate & inanimate.” Dolce, quoted from: Roskill, *Dolce's 'Aretino*, 117.

<sup>172</sup> “E cert oil colorito e di tanta importanza e forza, che quando il Pittore va imitando bene le tinte e la morbidezza delle carni, e la proprieta di qualunque cosa, fa parer le sue Pitture vive, e tali, che lor non manchino altro, che'l fiato.” Dolce, quoted from: Roskill, *Dolce's 'Aretino*, 153.

<sup>173</sup> „E nelle carni ha avuto tanta venustà e grazia, con quelle sue mischie e tinte, che paiono vere e vive, e principalmente le grassesse e le tenerezze che naturalmente in lui si vedono.” Lomazzo, quoted from: Sherman, *Mannerism*, 81.

Thus, when speaking of colour and lifelikeness, sixteenth-century theorists refer to the use of soft tonal contrasts, above all when depicting flesh and skin. In his *Dialogo di pittura* (1548), Paolo Pino used the depiction of flesh and its effect of lifelikeness as the ultimate argument for painting as the paragon of the arts:

Painting and sculpture were born together and were both produced by human minds to the same end and for the same purpose: to imitate and simulate natural and artificial objects. We come much closer to such an end than sculptors, in so far as they can only give their figures shape, which is mere being, but we painters, besides giving them shape and being, we adorn them with total existence, and this means that we also simulate the carnal body, where one notices the variety of complexions, the eyes as distinguished from the hair and from other parts, distinguish, that is, not only through shape but also through colours as they are distinguished in life.<sup>174</sup>

As Ann-Sophie Lehmann observes in a recent study on the depiction of flesh and artistic theory from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century, the painter's most difficult job was to go beyond the tendency of portraying skin as monochrome in an attempt to capture its subtle textures and nuances.<sup>175</sup> A key role is occupied here by the human body, as the referential point for flesh colour, known as *carnatura*.<sup>176</sup> According to Lehmann, discussions on flesh colour during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries revolve around studio practices, with Paolo Pino warning painters about skin looking like wood or stone, and Vasari advising artists not to use black in shaded areas.<sup>177</sup> Colour therefore was an important visual element that established the material identity of the object depicted. On the other hand, the use of flesh

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<sup>174</sup> "La pittura e la scultura nacquero insieme, e furono ambe due prodotte da l'intelletti umani a uno istesso fine e a un solo effetto, per imitar e fignerle le cose naturali e artificiali, al qual fine noi s'accostiamo molto più perfettamente che gli statuari, imperò che lor non puono dare a una figura altro che la forma, ch'è l'essere; ma noi pittori, oltre la forma e l'essere, l'orniamo del ben esser integramente, e questo è ch'insieme figniamo la forma composita di carne, ove si discerne la diversità delle complessioni, gli occhi distinti dai capegli e dagli altri membri, non dico solo di forma, ma di colori, come è anco nel vivo distinto." Paolo Pino, in Paola Barocchi, *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento, fra manierismo e Controriforma*, I, Bari, G. Laterza, 1960-62, 127-128. Translation from: Robert Klein and Henri Zerner, *Italian Art 1500-1600: Sources and Documents*, Northwestern University Press, 1990, 15.

<sup>175</sup> Ann-Sophie Lehmann, "Fleshing out the body. The "colours of the naked" in workshop practice and art theory, 1400-1600," in Ann-Sophie Lehmann, Herman Roodenburg (eds.), *Body and Embodiment in Netherlandish Art/Lichaam en lichamelijkheid in de nederlandse kunst*, Zwolle, 2008, 87-109.

<sup>176</sup> *Idem*, 89.

<sup>177</sup> *Idem*, 97.

colour, or *carnatura*, was not restricted to the depiction of human figures seeing that Cennino Cennini talks about the *incarnazione* – flesh-coloured – of the paper.<sup>178</sup> Thus, the set of nuances and shades depicting the human figure become powerful incarnated surfaces that have the ability to move and change.

However, for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century art critics the appearance of life was still subordinated to ideas of decorum and invention; colour being just one of the pictorial elements that established the appropriateness of decorum, together with gestures, expressions, landscape or architectural space, and temporality in depicting the *istoria*. This can be observed in Francesco Scannelli's criticism of Caravaggio's art. Scannelli, in his *Microcosmo della pittura* (1657), describes Caravaggio's paintings as:

The work by Caravaggio is not natural, except on the purely superficial level because he gives it no life, it is without spirit, grace, and appropriate expression so that one could say that everything appears dead.<sup>179</sup>

Scannelli suggests that the apparent lack of decorum in Caravaggio's paintings is primarily responsible for his figures appearing dead. On the other hand, Scannelli's criticism can be contrasted with Giovanni Pietro Bellori's description from his *Vite de' Pittori, Scultori et Architetti Moderni* (1672):

Since he [Caravaggio] aspired only to the glory of colour, so that the incarnation, skin, blood, and natural surfaces might appear real, he directed his eye and work solely to that end, leaving aside all the other aspects of art.<sup>180</sup>

Thus, by avoiding all the cosmetics and vanity in his colour, he strengthen his hues, giving them blood and flesh again, thereby reminding painters to imitate nature.<sup>181</sup>

Although Bellori recognised the importance of colour in portraying flesh and endowing figures with the appearance of life, he still regarded Caravaggio's approach as

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<sup>178</sup> *Idem*, 92.

<sup>179</sup> "e'altra del Caravaggio non dimostra la naturalezza, che nella pura apparent superficie, perche non valendo in fatti per animarla, si ritrova priva dello spirito, gratia, e debita espressione, che si puo dire per ogni parte morta." Bellori, quoted from: Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 360.

<sup>180</sup> "E perche egli aspirava all'unica lode del colore, sinche paresse vera l'incarnazione, la pelle e 'l sangue e la superficie naturale, a questo solo volgeva intento l'occhio e l'industria, lasciando da parte gli alti pensieri dell'arte." Bellori, quoted from: Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 362.

<sup>181</sup> "Laonde costui, togliendo ogni belletto e vanità al colore, rinvigorì le tinte e restituì sa esse il sangue e l'incarnazione, ricordando a' pittori l'imitazione." Bellori, quoted from: Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 371.



superficial. For Bellori, Caravaggio missed what was actually essential to art – invention, decorum, and design – remaining dependent only on the surfaces that presented themselves before his eyes:

Such praise caused Caravaggio to appreciate himself alone, and he claimed to be the only imitator of nature. Nevertheless, he lacked *invenzione*, or any knowledge of the science of painting. The moment the model was taken from under his eyes, his hand and his mind remained empty.<sup>182</sup>

Bellori therefore could not accept Caravaggio's treatment of coloured surfaces as sites of meaningful effects, calling them "superficial" surfaces; the critic believed that by painting only the skin pigment of a body, artists missed the internal structure of the body, which for him corresponded to the internal mechanisms of art. However, we have seen that Caravaggio's treatment of coloured surfaces in his *Death of the Virgin* is far from being "superficial" as the painting's surface effects different textures, layers, and thresholds.

If in Caravaggio's painting life and death are alternated with the figures of the Virgin and Mary Magdalene – one dead, the other alive, and vice versa – in Ribera's painting both life and death are simultaneously effected by the coloured surface of the saint's body. The skin and flesh of Saint Bartholomew are depicted as complex surfaces composed of many subtle nuances, joining soft and rough, smooth and wrinkled areas. This is particularly true of his torso, leg, and face, which are simultaneously opaque and transparent, creating intricate shadows and reflections. A close scrutiny reveals that in Ribera's painting there is no flesh colour in itself, just like there is no death in itself; instead, there is a particular colour, a nuance, or shade, unique to each area. This treatment of colour touches on Jean-Luc Nancy's thinking of colour as "always the colour of 'each time:' each time, in each place, *local* colour, literally."<sup>183</sup> According to Nancy, one cannot speak of colour in general, red or green as a general colour; rather, any colour is local by nature, it is the empirical *technique of the local*, belonging to a particular place.<sup>184</sup> Nancy also points out that "local colour" is not the property of a thing, but is the result of different sets of relations. What colour opens up is not the

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<sup>182</sup> "Per le quail lodi il Caravaggio non apprezzava altri che se stesso, chiamandosi egli fido, unico imitatore della natura; contuttocio molte e le migliori parti gli mancavano, perche non erano in lui ne invenzione, ne decoro, ne disegno, ne scienza alcuna della pittura mentro tolto da gli occhi suoi il modello restavano vacui la mano e l'ingegno." Bellori, quoted from: Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 371.

<sup>183</sup> Nancy, "On Painting (and) Presence" in *The Birth to Presence*, Stanford University Press, 1993, 352.

<sup>184</sup> Nancy, "The Technique of the Present On On Kawara," in *Multiple Arts. The Muses II*, Stanford University Press, 2006, 191.

quality of the thing, rather it is the act through which the presence of the thing is set forth, into the “world of its various connections: origins, relations, processes, finalities, becomings.”<sup>185</sup>

Accordingly, what is at stake in Ribera’s use of colour is the set of relationships that this particular colour of flesh and skin sets into motion. The torso of the saint and his legs shows colour turning, alternating, and moving between green-grey-yellow areas that suggest dead tissue and pink-red-yellow areas implying a still living membrane (Fig.26). These areas are not stable as one changes position in the painting; one can observe that these areas acquire a different nuance. In fact, the entire area covered by the saint’s skin appears to move, effecting a threshold where areas of surface are both alive and dead. There are also transitional areas where the skin seems to exfoliate, suggesting a body in full transformation from one state to another. The particularity of colour depicting the figure of the saint sets into motion concomitantly the potentiality for life and death, effected through the moving surface.

The critical detail of the painting is nonetheless the wound. Ribera painted it with restrained nuances of reddish-yellow paint for flesh and skin, small bluish lines for the veins, the intense red spots portray the drops of blood. Ribera’s meticulous treatment of the wound can be contrasted with Bernardo Cavallino’s approach from his *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.27) (1634; National Museum of Capodimonte, Naples).<sup>186</sup> Cavallino depicted the saint seated on a marble slab with arms and legs tied for execution. On Bartholomew’s right Cavallino painted himself pointing towards the scene. The two executioners are set at work with one proceeding to flay Bartholomew’s left forearm, while the other one secures the ropes. On the side there is a group of bystanders watching the scene with attention. Cavallino’s use of colours is vibrant; the intensity of the blue sky is only matched by the strength of the blood red-patch of the wound. Taking a closer look at the open wound (Fig.28) one notices that it does not resemble an anatomically correct human interior, with muscles, fibres, and veins, as one can see for instance in Ribera’s painting. Instead, the wound here is depicted as a red surface, a patch of undifferentiated red paint. One cannot tell where the uncovered muscles and veins are and where the interior of the removed skin is. One can only see a patch of blood red paint trenched between the executioner’s hands and set

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<sup>185</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>186</sup> For a recent study on the painting, see: Nicola Spinosa, *Grazia e tenerezza in posa : BERNARDO CAVALLINO e il suo tempo 1616-1656*, Ugo Bozzi, 2013, 290-293.

against the saint's arm. This patch of paint functions as a surface that does not allow access into the wound, and therefore the painting, presenting itself as a compact surface of paint.<sup>187</sup>

Cavallino's treatment of the wound as an undifferentiated surface differs substantially from Ribera's delicate colouring and detailing. Although both wounds effect the surface of the painting as a threshold, one is constructed through uniform paint while the other through nuanced local colouring. The locality of colours making up the wound produces the painting's surface into a threshold where viewers are granted access to the fact that they have no access. What the viewer is made to see is not a simple progression from life to death, or vice versa, but the body of the saint turned into a living threshold of death. Both life and death appear as impossible necessities, as limits that touch each other on the surface of the painting, both set into a contact of intimate distance.

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<sup>187</sup> For an interpretation of surfaces of paint as a patch that resist legibility and representation, see Chapter 3.



## Chapter Two: Folding Light and Darkness

### Introduction

Jean-Baptiste Mercier Dupaty, the Président à mortier of the Parlement de Bordeaux, commented in his *Lettres sur l'Italie (écrites) en 1785*, on a crucial trait of Ribera's paintings:

Lo Spagnoletto's pencil is rather gloomy and severe, it is true; but it is vigorous and boldly aimed, as that of Caravaggio, to strike with terror, and astonish the eye by contrasts, rather than to move or flatter it by gradations and shades; Lo Spagnoletto lavishes his light and shade.<sup>188</sup>

Dupaty's observation ascribes a tradition of considering Ribera's paintings first and foremost in terms of a strong chiaroscuro associated with Caravaggio's paintings, such as his altarpieces from Naples: *The Seven Works of Mercy* (Fig.11) (1607; Pio Monte della Misericordia, Naples) and *The Flagellation of Christ* (Fig.31) (1607; Museo di Capodimonte, Naples). In 1724 Antonio Palomino writes that Ribera "applied himself a great deal to the school of Caravaggio, and reached that manner of chiaroscuro, to which he was increasingly dedicated every day."<sup>189</sup> On the other hand, Ribera avoided adopting Caravaggio's chiaroscuro unequivocally. In reality, the young artist responded to Caravaggio's chiaroscuro in divergent ways, building upon the technique while exploring its various possibilities. Ribera's ingenious use of a strong chiaroscuro did not pass unnoticed at the time. Giulio Mancini wrote that Guido Reni "thought a great deal about [Ribera's] determination and handling of colour [*colorito*], which for the most part follows the path of Caravaggio, but is more experimental and bolder."<sup>190</sup>

This chapter focuses on Ribera's handling of light and darkness in conjunction with spirituality and surfaces in the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.3) (c.1628-1630; Pitti Palace, Florence) and the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.4) (c.1625-1628; Basilica

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<sup>188</sup> Dupaty, Charles-Marguerite-Jean-Baptiste Mercier, *Lettres sur l'Italie, en 1785*, De Senne, 1788, vol.2, p. 189; My translation.

<sup>189</sup> "Si applico molto alla scuola del Caravaggio, e raggiunse quella maniera di chiar oscuro, nella quale s'impregnava ogni giorno di piu." Palomino, quoted from: Spinosa, *Ribera*, 410. My translation.

<sup>190</sup> Mancini, quoted from Perez Sanchez and Spinosa, *Ribera*, 81.

Cattedrale di San Nicola di Bari, Nicosia). I resist treating the artist's use of chiaroscuro as a mere theatrical prop that supposedly enhances the drama and "reality" of the event depicted. Chiaroscuro as a technique is usually credited with the creation of volumes and the illusion of three-dimensionality, making figures and objects appear to jump out of the picture frame, a view grounded in the Cartesian interpretation of space, clarity, and mimesis in art.<sup>191</sup> Instead, I offer an interpretation that goes beyond binary oppositions of depth-surface and light-darkness by deploying Gilles Deleuze concept of *the fold*.<sup>192</sup> Deleuze argues that the viewer's perception of objects and surrounding is united by a single, curving visual surface that is dependent upon motion in time.<sup>193</sup> In his book *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (1988), Deleuze outlines an aesthetic of changeable curvilinear shapes and forms in a non-Euclidean geometric space that rejects the Cartesian three-dimensional coordination of space.<sup>194</sup> As an alternative, Deleuze proposes an understanding of space that transcends the principle of point-positions by replacing it with a visible surface in curvilinear space. Deleuze's interpretation of the world is grounded in Leibniz's conception of curving shapes derived from his differential geometry. According to Leibniz, the whole universe relentlessly experiences curvilinear change as a result of being compressed by an active force that endows matter with a constant curving movement. This conception of unending movement of flat and distorted planes allows for an interpretation of perceptions as events that unfold in a single surface, or field of vision.

The unfolding of light and darkness fuses distinct characteristics of space and surface. Deleuze argues that curves affect all materials in different sizes, speeds, and vectors of force, a process that shapes and consolidates them into "expressive matter." The relationship between folding and chiaroscuro is articulated by textured surfaces of color that bear a subtle resemblance to the folds of fabric. For Deleuze, "the Baroque refers not to an essence but rather to an operative function, to a trait. It endlessly produces folds."<sup>195</sup> However, while there are many types of folds – Eastern, Greek, Romanesque, etc. – "the Baroque trait twists and

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<sup>191</sup> For a study on early seventeenth century chiaroscuro as a technique of depth and illusionism and its relation to Galileo's interpretation of space, see: Sergio Benedetti, "Darkness and Light," In *Darkness and Light. Caravaggio and His World*, eds. Edmund Capon and John Spike, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2004, 28-32.

<sup>192</sup> For the implication of the Deleuzian notion of the fold in art history see: Hills, "The Baroque," in *Fabrications: The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Australia and New Zealand, 17:2, 48-71; Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*, University of Chicago Press, 2001.

<sup>193</sup> Deleuze, *The Fold*, 7.

<sup>194</sup> The following interpretation of Deleuze's conception of space and surface is indebted to: Ted Kafala, "Deleuze's Aesthetics: Curvature and Perspectivism." *Enculturation* 4.2 (Fall 2002): [http://enculturation.net/4\\_2/kafala.html](http://enculturation.net/4_2/kafala.html).

<sup>195</sup> Deleuze, *The Fold*, 3.

turns its folds, pushing them to infinity, fold over fold, one upon the other.”<sup>196</sup> The fold is employed by Deleuze as “baroque’s synecdoche” and it “theorizes and embodies relationships without center”.<sup>197</sup> Ribera’s art appears as an art of textures and complex surfaces, rather than one of structures, illusionist three-dimensionality, and “realism.”

Interpreting Ribera’s handling of light and dark as a fold, draws attention to the key role played by inflection. In the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.3) (c.1628-1630; Pitti Palace, Florence) the inflection between light and dark can be interpreted as staging the painting’s surface in an event of spiritual *becoming*, of spiritual movement. This is not to say that Ribera’s paintings enact sanctity, such as miraculous images or relics do. Instead, through the inflection of light and dark the saint’s body becomes fragmented, creating a tension between parts that gives rise to a spiritual movement of becoming. In the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.4) (c.1625-1628; Basilica Cattedrale di San Nicola di Bari, Nicosia) I suggest that Ribera’s use of light and darkness can be compared to the divine mystery, where darkness resists legibility and representation. In this painting, the material obscurity of the dark surface espouses a simple analogy to a divine state: invisibility or visibility, presence or absence, immanence or transcendence, precisely because its surface is staged as a material *symptom*, or trait, of the divine mystery. Both paintings use the chiaroscuro to stage their surfaces into potentialities, or processes of *becoming* in relation to the divine. These processes entail movements that change the texture of their surfaces, a phenomenon that invites viewers to reassess their spiritual lives starting from their embodied selves.

## Moving Surfaces

Ribera’s *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.3) (c.1628-1630; Pitti Palace, Florence), confronts viewers with a forceful working of light and dark. Among a restless crowd of bystanders and executioners lurking in the dark, the figure of Saint Bartholomew is staged in the intensive light as the visual climax of the painting. The moment when light and dark come into contact with each other – most visible on, though not restricted, to the figure of the saint – can be interpreted as moments of inflection on the surface of the painting. These inflections produce movements that stage the potentiality of the surface into an event of moving from one value to another. The intense shifts between light and dark create areas that challenge the

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<sup>196</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>197</sup> Bal, “Ecstatic Aesthetics” In *Compelling Visibility: The Work of Art In and Out of History*, eds. Claire Farago and Robert Zwijnenberg, University of Minnesota Press, 2003, 5, 19.

organic coherency of bodies and surfaces, fragmenting them into apparent unrelated fragments. The relationship between these fragments is one of continuous movement and reconfiguration, shaping the potentiality of the moving surface into an event of continuous pendulating between knowing and un-knowing.

To contrast Ribera's use of chiaroscuro it is useful to take a look at Caravaggio's approach to light and dark, especially at the tension between pictorial surfaces and the so-called *rilievo* effect. *Rilievo* is the relief effect created by the strong juxtaposition of light and darkness, and credited during the sixteenth and seventeenth century with a powerful effect of lifelikeness as well as powerful sense of volume in modelling three-dimensional objects, particularly the human body. The earliest description of Caravaggio use of chiaroscuro appears in Giulio Mancini's *Considerazioni sulla pittura* (1621):

That these living painters [Caravaggio's followers] be divided into four categories or classes, or better schools, one of which is that of Caravaggio, which had a wide following and was taken up with vigor and knowledge by Bartolomeo Manfredi, Spagnoletto, Francesco also called Cecco del Caravaggio, Spadarino [Giacomo Galli], and partially by Carlo [Saraceni] Veneziano. A characteristic of this school is lighting from one source only, which beams down without reflections, as would occur in a very dark room with one window and the walls painted black, and thus with the light very strong and the shadows very deep, they give powerful relief to the painting, but in an unnatural way, something that was never thought or done before by any other painter like Raphael, Titian, Correggio, or others.<sup>198</sup>

Mancini discusses Caravaggio's use of chiaroscuro mostly in negative terms, pointing out that the strong contrast between light and darkness achieves an effect of *rilievo* that is wholly "unnatural," that is non-naturalistic. Mancini's condemnation derives from his belief

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<sup>198</sup> "Che questi (pittori) viventi si reducono a quattro ordini o classe o ver vogliam dire schole, una delle quali e quella del Caravagio, assai seguita, caminando per essa con fine, diligentia e sapere Bartolomeo Manfredi, lo Spagnoletto, Francesco ditto Cecco del Caravagio, lo Spadarino et in parte Carlo Venetiano. Proprio di questa schola e di lumeggiar con lume unito che venghi d'altro senza riflessi, come sarebbe in una stanza da una fenestra con le pariete colorite di negro, che cosi, havendo i chiari e l'ombre molto chiare e molto oscure, vengono a dar rilievo alla pittura, ma pero con modo non naturale, ne fatto, ne pensato da altro secolo o pittori pui antichi, come Raffaello, Titiano, Correggio et altri." Mancini, quoted from: Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 350.



that Caravaggio's chiaroscuro subverts the principles of harmony, beauty, and appropriateness, values that not only guided the art of Raphael, Titian and Correggio, but are also responsible for endowing paintings with a naturalistic effect. Decades later, Giovanni Pietro Bellori in his *Vite de' Pittori, Scultori et Architetti Moderni* (1672) describes Caravaggio's use of chiaroscuro the following way:

But Caravaggio [...] was becoming more famous every day because the coloration he was introducing was not as sweet and delicate as before, but became boldly dark and black, which he used abundantly to give relief to the forms. He went so far in his style that he never showed any of his figures in open daylight, but instead found a way to place them in the darkness of a closed room, placing a lamp high so that the light would fall straight down, revealing the principal parts of the body and leaving the rest in the shadows so as to produce a powerful contrast of light and dark.<sup>199</sup>

Caravaggio's chiaroscuro appears truly radical if one looks at sixteenth-century artistic practice and theoretical discourse on *rilievo*. Lodovico Dolce, for instance, in his *Dialogo della Pittura* (1557) affirms that *rilievo* should be achieved through subtle gradations rather than strong contrasts:

Now the blending of colours needs to be diffused and united in such a way that it is naturalistic, and that nothing offends the gaze such as contour lines, which should be avoided (since nature does not produce them), and blackness, a term I use for harsh and unintegrated shadows. These lights and darks, when they are laid out with judgement and skill, make the figures rounded, and give them the relief which is needed; whereas

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<sup>199</sup> "Ma il Caravaggio, che così egli già veniva da tutti col nome della patria chiamato, facevasi ogni giorno più noto per lo colorito ch'egli andava introducendo, non come prima dolce e con poche tinte, ma tutto risentito di oscuri gagliardi, servendosi assai del nero per dar rilievo alli corpi. E s' inoltro egli tanto in questo suo modo di operare, che non faceva mai uscire all'aperto del sole alcuna delle sue figure, ma trovo una maniera di campirle entro l'aria bruna d'una camera rinchiusa, pigliando un lume alto che scendeva a piombo sopra la parte principale del corpo, e lasciando il rimanente in ombra a fine di recar forza con veemenza di chiaro e di oscuro." Bellori, quoted from: Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 364.

figures which are devoid of this projection look painted, as you rightly say, since their surface remains flat.<sup>200</sup>

Underlying these accounts of Caravaggio's "harsh and unintegrated shadows" is a way of thinking grounded in an opposition of binaries, such as inside/outside, depth/surface, light/darkness. Following the paradigm established by Caravaggio's contemporaries, chiaroscuro is usually interpreted as a technique of creating volume and illusionary three-dimensional space. Some of the scholarship on chiaroscuro picked up on this idea, developing it in creative diverging ways. Louis Marin discussed what he calls "Caravaggio's paradox of making viewers look into a "black' space," which the writer identifies with a trunk, coffin, cell or a tomb like space.<sup>201</sup> Marin's interpretation of Caravaggio's space is grounded in the Cartesian idea of a triple-axis coordinated space, and stands in stark contrast with Ribera's interest in complex, textured surfaces. For Marin, despite being a contradiction in terms, the black space depicted in Caravaggio's paintings – such as *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (Fig.15) (1598-1599; Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica at Palazzo Barberini, Rome) – resembles a closed cube, without a window opening it up to the world. Thus, the space within the frame is a dense and full surface of infinitely dense volume. In Marin's own words, "a *black* painting is a represented space that expels the objects the painter wanted to include, forcing them outside of the painting and beyond its surface."<sup>202</sup> According to Marin, this can be achieved by a beam of light projected from outside of the pictorial space, running parallel to its surface that "will instantaneously extract fragments of objects and figures from it. These fragments remain caught up in the compact texture of the surface, but they also move forward in front of it, doing so all the more strongly if the light is intense."<sup>203</sup> Nonetheless, in Marin's view, the movement of the objects and figures placed within light does not make the black ground recede; on the contrary, the thick solid mass of black all the more extends forward.<sup>204</sup>

Thomas Puttfarcken, on the other hand, provides an interpretation of Caravaggio's chiaroscuro in relation to pictorial composition that bears greatly on the idea of spiritual

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<sup>200</sup> "Ora bisogna che la mescolanza de' colori sia sfumata & unita di modo, che rappresenti il naturale, e non resti cosa, che offenda gliocchi: come sono le linee de' contorni, le quali si debbono fuggire (che la Natura non fa) e la negrezza, ch'io dico dell ombre fiere e disunite, Questi lumi ed ombre posti con giudicio ed arte fanno tondereggiar la figure e danno loro il rilievo che si ricerca; delqual rilievo le figure, che sono prive, paiono, come ben diceste, dipinte, percioche resta la superficie pianta." Dolce, quoted from: Roskill, *Dolce's Aretino*, 154.

<sup>201</sup> Louis Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, University of Chicago Press, 1995, 160. For a discussion on the relationship between painting and tomb, see: Marin's essay "The Tomb of the Subject in Painting," in: Marin, *On Representation*, Stanford University Press, 2001, 269-284.

<sup>202</sup> *Idem.* 162.

<sup>203</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>204</sup> *Idem.*

animation of paintings.<sup>205</sup> While discussing the relationship between the figures' life-size and their effect of lifelikeness, Puttfarken argues that Caravaggio 'was not thinking of painting on a surface or behind a picture plane. He was painting figures to be seen as present in the world of the viewer.'<sup>206</sup> Thus, according to Puttfarken, Caravaggio sought to endow his figures with a sense of figural presence through *rilievo* and 'lifelikeness' to the point where the figures lack only breath and pulse. This gives the impression that things and bodies depicted in the picture are somehow continuous with the "world of the viewer;" tying the contents of the painting to a world which Puttfarken perceives as a stable place.<sup>207</sup>

Discussing Caravaggio's altarpiece *The Inspiration of Saint Matthew* (Fig.29) (1602; Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome), Puttfarken argues that darkness "acts like a foil against which the figures of the saint and his angel are picked out by a realistically inexplicable bright light. [...] there is no space sufficiently articulated to define the setting of the figures as different from the real world of the viewer – a badly lit side-chapel on the north side of S. Luigi."<sup>208</sup> Indeed one can observe that Caravaggio portrays the stool on which the saint is kneeling as on the verge of tumbling out of the painting onto the altarpiece. In relation to Caravaggio's *The Entombment of Christ* (Fig.30) (1602-1603; Pinacoteca Vaticana, Vatican City) Puttfarken argues that the figures' *rilievo* and 'lifelikeness' make them appear to occupy the space in front of the pictorial surface. As such, the deposition of Christ's body in the tomb becomes a lowering onto the altarpiece itself, where his body transforms into holy host.<sup>209</sup>

In contrast with Marin and Puttfarken's interpretation of Caravaggio's use of chiaroscuro in relation with the construction of pictorial space, stands the artist's radically different approach in the *Flagellation of Christ* (Fig.31) (1607; Museo di Capodimonte, Naples).<sup>210</sup> Caravaggio uses darkness here to completely envelop the surrounding of the scene, except for the immediate foreground where darkness dissipates into an opening within the picture's space. It is true that the receding space of the picture is fairly shallow, or stage-like, but it is nonetheless there, opening within the picture's plane. Light does not expel the figures out of the painting, but contains them firmly within the painting. This effect is further reinforced by the figure of the kneeling executioner, whose head and partially obscured body

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<sup>205</sup> Thomas Puttfarken, *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition: Theories of Visual Order in Painting, 1400-1800*, Yale University Press, 2000.

<sup>206</sup> *Idem*, 148.

<sup>207</sup> *Idem*, 123.

<sup>208</sup> *Idem*, 149.

<sup>209</sup> *Idem*, 150.

<sup>210</sup> Spike, *Caravaggio*, 192; Ebert-Schifferer, *Caravaggio*, 202-208; Schütze, *Caravaggio*, 192-193.

is projected onto Christ's figure, thus pulling him back into the painting and maintaining the distinction between the pictorial fiction and the beholder.

This fictitious extension of space, either inside or outside of the picture frame, gives rise to a state of tension on the painting's surface. However, there is a strong conflict between the *rilievo* effect evoked by critics and Caravaggio's exploration of surfaces as the site where point of view is produced. In Bellori's account of Caravaggio's art, one can observe this anxiety when he refers to the artist's depiction of bodies:

It has been said that Caravaggio, admonished for not understanding either planes or perspective, placed the figures in such a position that they appear to be seen from sharply below, so as to vie with the most difficult foreshortenings.<sup>211</sup>

[Caravaggio] colored all his figures within a single light and on one plane without any diminution.<sup>212</sup>

What Bellori points out here is Caravaggio's supposed inability to construct pictorial planes based on perspective, arguing that his figures appear to occupy the same narrow space of the foreground. This led critics, such as Mancini, to accuse Caravaggio of not knowing how to create *istoria* – the spatial-temporal unfolding of events in a credible succession. Bellori and Mancini's criticisms spring from what they perceive to be Caravaggio's major flaw: his peculiar "ephemeral" naturalism based on the artist's experience of the world rather than the permanent idea or theory that was supposed to govern the arts. In a study on Caravaggio and "realism," Charles Dempsey argues that the artist's unique approach to chiaroscuro is closely related to his interpretation of naturalism and the production of pictorial surfaces.<sup>213</sup> According to Dempsey, the discrepancy between Venetian artists – particularly Titian – and Caravaggio's approach to the surface of the painting "was not confined to an opposition of idealist to naturalist styles in the sixteenth century, but revolved around alternative naturalist manners."<sup>214</sup> Dempsey distinguishes between the Venetian rough, loose brushstrokes, otherwise known as *macchia* – which he calls *macular* or *maculated* style – and Caravaggio's polished, mirror-like surfaces – which he names: *specular* – arguing that the difference lies in

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<sup>211</sup> "Dicesi che il Caravaggio, sentendosi biasimare di non intendere ne piani ne prospettiva, tanto si aiuto collocando li corpi in veduta dal sotto in su che volle contrastare gli scorti piu difficili." Bellori, quoted from: Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 374.

<sup>212</sup> 'coloriva tutte le sue figure ad un lume, e sopra un piano, senza digradarle' Bellori, quoted from: Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 364.

<sup>213</sup> Charles Dempsey, "Caravaggio and the Two Naturalistic Styles: Specular versus Macular," in *Caravaggio: Realism, Rebellion, Reception*, ed. Genevieve Warwick, University of Delaware Press, 2007, 91-100.

<sup>214</sup> Dempsey, "Caravaggio and the Two Naturalistic Styles," 98.

their relationship which was perceived to be reality and truth.<sup>215</sup> While the Venetians – and in Dempsey’s argument also Bolognese artists, such as Annibale Carracci – sought to express the *verosimile*, that which could be taken as possible and probably true, Caravaggio as an alternative rejected the ideal naturalism in favour of the *vero* (true), the raw, experiential quotidian that lay before his eyes.<sup>216</sup> By doing this, Caravaggio was accused by his contemporaries of stripping painting of art – art understood as grounded in the ideal. Indeed, it is within this context that Poussin famously complained that Caravaggio came into this world to destroy painting.<sup>217</sup> Dempsey suggests that Caravaggio “made of reality a polemic, not only as a matter of style, but also as a matter of interpretation.”<sup>218</sup> This was achieved by creating paintings that “derive from the uncertain and mutable perceptions of an individual human psyche,” and not from the idea of a world dominated by the “permanent, divinely endowed principles regulating the natural universe.”<sup>219</sup> Therefore, Caravaggio’s naturalism stems from his own fragmented view of the world rather than the *idea*, an approach that favours the depiction of surfaces as the place of phenomenological experience. This does not mean however that Caravaggio’s paintings appear flat, or plane, as this is far from true. It does however entail a new mode of constructing pictorial space, one that is not dependent upon binaries such as ideal/nature, ideal/time, depth/surface, or inside/outside, but on *point of view*.

### **Distinction without separability**

In contrast to Caravaggio’s chiaroscuro, Ribera’s treated light and dark in his *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.3) (c.1628-1630; Pitti Palace, Florence) as an inflection that entails movements, or a set of vibrations; through the inflection, the surface of the painting becomes a dynamic place of movement. Ribera managed to bypass the antagonism between light and dark by treating the relationship between the two as a curve or inflection onto the surface of the painting. The treatment of light and dark in this instance overcomes this binary by confronting viewers with a sharp modulation of the two elements folding on the surface of the

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<sup>215</sup> However, it should be noted that Caravaggio’s paintings show a wider interest in surfaces than Dempsey acknowledges in this article – they vary from the polished surfaces of his earlier paintings to the loose brushstrokes of his later works. This aspect of Caravaggio’s work will be discussed in Chapter 4. For the Venetian approach of loose brushstrokes, in particular Titian’s *pittura di machia*, see Chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>216</sup> Dempsey, “Caravaggio and the Two Naturalistic Styles,” 93.

<sup>217</sup> “Some people consider him to have been the very ruination of painting.” Giovanni Baglione, quoted from Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, University of Chicago Press, 1994, 4; “Poussin could not bear Caravaggio and said that he had come into the world in order to destroy painting.” André Félibien, quoted in Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, 99.

<sup>218</sup> Dempsey, “Caravaggio and the Two Naturalistic Styles,” 93.

<sup>219</sup> *Idem*.

painting. The painting's chiaroscuro is worked with little or no transition between darkness and light. On the right hand side of the canvas, just behind the figure of the saint, darkness is opaque and almost impenetrable, while the left side is worked in brown nuances. Between these two sides stands Bartholomew's fragmented body as moments of intense light forming distinct curves on the surface. For instance, the torso of the saint shines in the light that reaches its climax on his chest, while his side and back are made invisible by the dense darkness (Fig.32). This relationship produces vibrations on the surface of the painting that engages viewers in a spiritual process of contemplation and re-incarnation. The relationship between light and dark brings to the fore the problem of the union of body and soul, and the spiritual involvement of the viewers in a material world created by God.

In order to approach the issue of light and dark as clarity and obscurity without turning to an oppositional model, while at the same time avoiding a blending of the two into a unifying whole by preserving their distinctiveness, I turn to Gilles Deleuze's concept of the *fold*. Deleuze's conceptualization of the baroque fold has at its center a world of material fabric, made up of small subdivisions called monads. The connection between monads creates the general *texturology* of the world. For Deleuze, the monad is the smallest unit of a body, although it can also be an entire body.<sup>220</sup> By way of Leibniz's ontology, Deleuze opposes Descartes' mind-body dualism by arguing that a body – or object – is made of organically cohering and curving parts, rather than separable extremes. Deleuze compares the monads to a Baroque house, an association that has at its centre a new conception of bodies. Deleuze brings light and dark into his explanation, stressing their lack of opposition and interpreting the relationship between the two as a resonance unfolding between the two levels of a house.

The Baroque is inseparable from a new regime of light and color. To begin, we can consider light and shadows as 1 and 0, as the two levels of the world separated by a thin line of waters: the Happy and the Damned. An opposition is no longer in question. If we move into the upper level, in a room with neither door nor window, we can observe that it is already very dark, in fact almost decorated in black, 'fuscum subnigrum.'<sup>221</sup>

Deleuze compares the dark in paintings with the upper level of the baroque house. The allegory of a two-story house allows Deleuze to differentiate between two types of folds that

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<sup>220</sup> Deleuze, *The Fold*, 121-123.

<sup>221</sup> Deleuze, *The Fold*, 35.

move in parallel toward infinity, thereby suggesting that infinity is composed of two stages, or floors: ‘pleats of matter’ and the “folds in soul.”<sup>222</sup> The lower floor of the house has windows and a door – a model corresponding to the five senses – so everything from the outside can be experienced inside. The ground floor is open to the outside (exteriority) and functions as a space of coming together and exchange. It is on this floor that matter is amassed and organized according to the second type of folds. An opening leads us to the upper floor (interiority) where there are no windows or doors, just a dark room decorated with stretched canvas diversified by folds. This is the place where the reasonable souls dwell; it is the floor inhabited by the *incorporeal* aspect of subjectivity. The second floor is not totally enclosed but neither completely open, it has ‘some little openings’ that allow for the lower level to interact with the upper level through vibrations or oscillations.<sup>223</sup> The pleats of matter envelop the levels and the souls in the upper floor; souls that spring into action at the activity of matter. Therefore, the soul suddenly begins to move when matter triggers vibration into the lower level; just like in a body, the activity of the soul is a representation of what is happening in the organs. The relationship between the two aspects – material and immaterial – is one of folding, preserving their distinct nature while retaining a fundamental intimacy and inseparability.

This interpretation allowed Leibniz to overcome the distinction between mind and body, putting forward the idea of the two as resonating together in a pre-established harmony.<sup>224</sup> Leibniz’s doctrine of pre-established harmony offers an original, non-dualist explanation to the problem of the relationship between mind and body. Leibniz conceives the body and soul as two independent substances, or things having the ability to act on their own, although set in a harmonious relationship of synchronization, agreement, and accord. These substances are regulated and dependent upon God as the creator of the best of all possible worlds. God is the cause of the correspondence between these two substances, as Leibniz writes in his *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686): “it is very true that the perception or expressions of all substances mutually correspond in such a way that each one, carefully following certain reasons or laws it has observed, coincides with others doing the same.”<sup>225</sup> This correspondence between substances – or, body and soul – is solved by Leibniz through

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<sup>222</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>223</sup> Deleuze, *The Fold*, 4-5.

<sup>224</sup> For a clear and concise account of Leibniz’s philosophy of mind and the relationship between body and soul, see: Mark Kulstad and Laurence Carlin "Leibniz's Philosophy of Mind", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2013 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/leibniz-mind/>>.

<sup>225</sup> Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, Hackett Publishing Company, 1989, 47.

the concept of the pre-established harmony that functions like ‘two clocks or watches in perfect agreement.’<sup>226</sup> This can occur, according to Leibniz, by having them programmed so perfectly that they will constantly be in perfect harmony. God created the world so flawlessly that bodies are set to act of themselves at exactly the moment the soul has an appropriate thought, and in turn the soul has this thought only in compliance with the previous states of the body.<sup>227</sup> Thus, in Leibniz’s theory, the substances of body and soul do not really interact with each other, but are programmed by God to act concomitantly in perfect, divinely ordained harmony. Therefore, Leibniz managed to preserve the independence and distinction of body and soul – something which he observed and could not deny – while overcoming a dualist model; a model where the mind or soul is usually regarded as the only true substance, while the body is downgraded to a thing lacking in substantial unity.<sup>228</sup>

Leibniz’s idea stands in stark contrast with René Descartes’ influential dualist conception of mind and body. Descartes argued in his treatises *Discourse on the Method* (1637) and *Meditation on First Philosophy* (1641) that because the mind is a nonphysical thing it must be substantially different from the body, which is a physical thing “located in space,” encompassing “atoms familiar to chemistry.”<sup>229</sup> In contrast to the body, the mind is an immaterial thing that does not possess a precise location, and cannot be seen or touched.<sup>230</sup> Even though the body and mind are ontologically two completely distinct things, Descartes argued that they are set in a *casual* relationship to one another, where the body is stripped of any independence, being completely dependent upon the wishes of the mind. For Descartes the mind is the total essence of human beings, while the body does not partake to this essence; a conclusion he reached through his method of doubt with the famous dream argument and the hypothesis of an evil demon.<sup>231</sup> During his meditations, Descartes imagined himself without a body, but not without a mind – the mind being his ultimate case for knowing that he exists.<sup>232</sup> This lead Descartes to assert that true knowledge came only from pure reason exercised by the mind, and not through the senses, or empiricism which he deemed unreliable.

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<sup>226</sup> *Idem*, 147.

<sup>227</sup> *Idem*, 84.

<sup>228</sup> Kulstad and Carlin "Leibniz's Philosophy of Mind."

<sup>229</sup> Ian Ravenscroft, *Philosophy of Mind: A Beginner's Guide*, Oxford University Press, 2005, 9.

<sup>230</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>231</sup> For a recent comprehensive study on Descartes’ method of doubt, see: Janet Broughton, *Descartes's Method of Doubt*, Princeton University Press, 2003.

<sup>232</sup> “I can conceive of myself as lacking a brain, But I cannot conceive of myself as lacking a mind. If I try to doubt that I have a mind, I will discover myself with thoughts like 'I doubt I have a mind', and so much admit that I have a mind – for the activity of doubting is mental. Hence brain and mind must be distinct.” Descartes, as quoted from: George Graham, *Philosophy of Mind: An Introduction*, Blackwell Publishers, 2002, 151.



For Deleuze, Descartes' error was that to believe that "the real distinction between parts entails separability" – meaning that light and dark, organic and inorganic, and most notably mind and body should be considered as separate things.<sup>233</sup> On the other hand, conforming to Leibniz, "two parts of really distinct matter can be inseparable, as shown not only by the action of surrounding forces that determine the curvilinear movement of a body but also by the pressure of surrounding forces that determine its hardness (coherence, cohesion) or the inseparability of its parts."<sup>234</sup> Thus, for Deleuze, the fold is a concept that circumvents binaries, absolutes, and hierarchies. Even though there is no primacy given to one or the other as well as there is no inside or outside, these elements retain their distinctiveness. Just like the two floors of the baroque house, between dark and light there is a sharp distinction to be made, although this distinction is not one of complete separation as the two floors interact with each other and are continuous through vibrations or oscillations as folds.

### **Broken folds – Broken body**

The relationship between continuity of folds and corporeal fragmentation can be observed in Francisco de Zurbarán's *The Martyrdom of Saint Serapion* (Fig.33) (1628; Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford). The painting shows the martyrdom of the English-born Mercedarian Friar Peter Serapion, who was captured by English pirates in Scotland in 1240, tied by the hands and feet to two wooden poles, beaten, dismembered, and disemboweled. Finally, his neck was partially severed, leaving it to dangle by only a small portion of skin. Zurbarán's painting shows the moments after the execution, when the head of the saint rests between his shoulder blades with his hands still bound. Although the form of martyrdom suffered by Serapion is a particularly gruesome one, Zurbarán conspicuously chose not to depict it. As a substitute, the viewer is confronted with the sumptuous white, untarnished habit of the Mercedarian friars set alongside the dark background. The close-up view of the scene coupled with the elimination of other participants gives the painting a sense of quiet grandeur and isolated monumentality. It is this effect that spurred art historians to interpret the painting through an illusionistic lens, comparing it with seventeenth-century Spanish polychrome sculpture.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Deleuze, *The Fold*, 5-6.

<sup>234</sup> *Idem*, 6.

<sup>235</sup> For instance, in the catalogue entry of the Zurbarán exhibition held in New York City in 1988, the painting is described as being represented realistically, with an almost illusionistic manner. See: Jeannine Baticle ed. *Zurbarán*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1987, 102-104.

Within this framework, darkness is to be interpreted as a receding background creating *relievo*, giving the figure a sense of sculptural three-dimensionality. Xavier Bray argues that Zurbarán, “the most sculptural of painters,” depicted *Saint Serapion* as a striking example of the Spanish paragon, which “produced sculpture that was exceptionally painterly, and paintings that were remarkably sculptural.”<sup>236</sup> However, in a move that shatters the fictitious depths of the painting’s dark background, a piece of paper bearing Zurbarán’s signature is pinned to the dark surface. This pinned piece of paper not only makes viewers aware of darkness as surface, but also comments on the nature of representation by challenging it through a detail of pictorial self-reflexivity.<sup>237</sup> Once the idea of pictorial depth through darkness is undermined, the painting’s chiaroscuro can be interpreted as a fold, where light acts as an inflection within darkness that allows the event of the painting to take place – in a move reminiscent of Ribera’s handling of chiaroscuro in his *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.3) (c.1628-1630; Pitti Palace, Florence). Darkness and light here are folds unfolding on the surface of the painting, bringing the viewer closer to the white habit of the friar. The binary of depth-surface is also challenged by the habit of the friar; the deep, broken folds echo the violence of the broken, fragmented body that supposedly lies hidden beneath. Through this move depth is eliminated as the painting presents itself as a depthless surface.

Serapion’s sumptuous folds keep the viewer on the surface of the painting, enfolding him/her into the event of the martyrdom. Bray argues that “Zurbarán’s rendering of the drapery and the manner in which light and shadow falls on its deep folds is a *tour de force* of painting, endowing the figure with a physicality and grandeur that belie his broken body.”<sup>238</sup> However, instead of treating the white habit as something that fails to show Serapion’s martyrdom, I am arguing that it is precisely the deep folds of the drapery that show the broken, fragmented body of the saint. Therefore, the folds of the habit not only show that the binary of depth/surface in the painting is superfluous – as the painting is constructed as a self-aware surface – it also folds the viewer directly onto the fragmented surface of habit. The fragmentation of the habit through complicated, deep folds does not entail a separability of the parts, instead it signals a fragmentation within a continuous surface unfolding on the painting. Therefore, the point of view of the beholder is formed on the surface of the folds as the

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<sup>236</sup> Bray, *The Sacred Made Real*, 191.

<sup>237</sup> On painting and self-awareness, see: Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting*, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

<sup>238</sup> Bray, *The Sacred Made Real*, 192.

fragmented body and skin of the saint, creating a relationship of folding between subject and object.

*FRAGMENTED, YET INSEPARABLE PARTS*

If Zurbarán's conceived the folding relationship defining the fragmentation of Saint Serapion's body through the folds of his white habit, Ribera, on the other hand, problematizes corporeal fragmentation and folding through the inflection between light and dark. By taking a closer look at the surface of the painting, one can observe that the figure of Saint Bartholomew is fragmented by sharp inflections between light and dark. The viewer can see only some parts of the saint's body, such as his chest, face and right leg, while the rest is simply missing, or not there. Fragmented by darkness, Bartholomew's left forearm, his right wrist, and right upper leg, appear disjoined from the body; the transition from light to darkness appear as sharp moments of inflection, curves that move and modulate the surface of the saint into a different bodily conception. This is a body composed of distinct parts that remain inseparable, a body that is simultaneously hard and fluid: a body as a fold. These areas of the painting shown in light, such as the faces and hands of the executioners, the chaotic crowd of bystanders, the white cloth and marble head, are presented as non-coherent assemblages, intended to fracture apparent real-world continuities and produce associations across the surface of the painting. These relationships are assembled in a fractured spatio-temporal fold that challenges the idea of painting as a unitary and coherent surface.

A point of contrast to Ribera's fragmentation of Bartholomew's is Caravaggio's handling of chiaroscuro in his *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* (Fig.34) (1599-1600; Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome). Todd Olson argues that Caravaggio used the chiaroscuro in relation to the figures depicted to "produce the strangeness of a gaping hole where flesh belongs. If the light raking a body abruptly leaves a part of its continuous surface in complete darkness, the effect is one of corrosion, self annihilation. Light and shadow create relief but if a body is severely divided by luminosity and opacity it is disrupted."<sup>239</sup> For Olson Caravaggio's chiaroscuro creates surfaces that are discontinuous, where "planes do not adhere" and visible body parts "fail to cohere into a body."<sup>240</sup> This interpretation challenges

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<sup>239</sup> Olson, *Caravaggio's Pitiful Relics*, 75. See also: Olson, "Pitiful Relics: Caravaggio's Martyrdom of St. Matthew," *Representations*, Vol. 77, No. 1, 2002, 107-142.

<sup>240</sup> *Idem*.

Alberti's principles of composition as well as the idea of "naturalism." According to Olson, "the seemingly accidental illumination of objects in Caravaggio's painting ultimately produces doubt regarding the integrity and presence of bodies."<sup>241</sup> This strategy is interpreted as "foreshadowing" or anticipating Matthew's impending corporeal fragmentation – in the sense of relic fragmentation – as martyr. Olson interprets Caravaggio's work within the context of the late sixteenth-century catholic martyrs in protestant countries – such as Britain – and the spread of iconoclasm.<sup>242</sup>

As the pictorial structure disintegrates in the *Martyrdom*, Matthew's corporeal integrity is threatened and martyrdom becomes imbricated in an iconoclastic gesture. In order to defend the status of the religious images, there is paradoxically a close identification between the martyrdom and the violation of the pictorial unity. The picture [...] stages its own destruction and flirts with iconoclasm. Indeed, iconoclasm was constitutive of Caravaggio's painting practice.<sup>243</sup>

Thus, for Olson Caravaggio's use of chiaroscuro is suggestive of the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century religious turmoil, interpreting it "within a visual and political culture preoccupied with the destruction of saints as well as art."<sup>244</sup>

In contrast, the fragmentation of Bartholomew's body is different as it does not assume severability and disconnected incoherency of the body, but a body made of distinct surfaces held together through what Deleuze and Guattari call "consistency."<sup>245</sup> In other words, Ribera's fragmentation of Bartholomew's body is realized through inflection that assumes a 'consistency' that holds together heterogeneous parts. Thus the inflection between light and dark in Ribera's painting appears as a process that encapsulates both the movement of fragmentation and harmony, folding and unfolding. As Deleuze argues:

The unfold: clearly this is not the contrary of the fold, nor its effacement, but the continuation or the extension of its act, the condition of its manifestation. When the fold ceases being represented in order to become a "method," a process, an act, the

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<sup>241</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>242</sup> *Idem*, 76-88.

<sup>243</sup> *Idem*, 85.

<sup>244</sup> *Idem*, 76.

<sup>245</sup> See Chapter One on consistency and the assemblage.

unfold becomes the result of the act that is expressed exactly in this fashion.<sup>246</sup>

This relationship between folding and unfolding is perhaps most visible in the inflection of light. This is made apparent in Ribera's painting by the strong shaft of light that illuminates the central surface of the painting occupied by the fragmented body of Saint Bartholomew. Although some body parts are not visible, the texture of the surface is at its most visible at the moment of inflection – the curving point that stages the opaque spots as organic surfaces, distinct yet a part of the surface's general *texturology*. Thus, the inflection between light and darkness brings into question the notion of what is perceptible and imperceptible in painting. Inflection is the point where light and the perceptible are drawn out from what Leibniz calls the "dark background" of a monad, or what is seen as the imperceptible.<sup>247</sup> In Deleuze's words, baroque painting accomplishes that process of extraction with the help of strong chiaroscuro:

This is a Baroque contribution: in place of the white chalk or plaster that primes the canvas, Tintoretto and Caravaggio used a dark red-brown background on which they placed the thickest shadows, and paints directly by shading towards the shadows. The painting is transformed. Things jump out of the background, colors spring from the common base that attests to their obscure nature, figures are defined by their covering more than their contours. Yet this is not in opposition to light; to the contrary, it is by virtue of the new regime of light.<sup>248</sup>

This is an ongoing ontological process where "clarity comes of obscurity and endlessly is plunging back into it. Thus the Cartesian map of darkness – clarity – confusion – distinction is redrawn with an entirely new meaning and new set of relations."<sup>249</sup> Light brings the *istoria* of the painting into focus. In Ribera's painting the pictorial composition resulting from the use of the modulation *darkness – light – darkness* is that of an inflection that creates movement on its surface. According to Deleuze: "a flexible or an elastic body still has cohering parts that form a fold, such that they are not separated into parts of parts but are rather divided to infinity

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<sup>246</sup> Deleuze, *The Fold*, 40.

<sup>247</sup> *Idem*, 36.

<sup>248</sup> *Idem*, 35.

<sup>249</sup> *Idem*, 102.

in smaller and smaller folds that always retain a certain cohesion.”<sup>250</sup> This body forms what Deleuze calls a *texturology* – a philosophical and artistic conception in which matter is clothes in a sense that it is an envelope fabric, of texture.<sup>251</sup> For Deleuze, *texturology* is a site where the subject’s point of view is formed in relation to an organism that is “a buoyant surface, a structure endowed with an organic fabric.”<sup>252</sup> Thus, the body of the saint can be conceived as a fragmented surface defined by inflection and surface movement, or vibration.

Ribera’s treatment of light and darkness can be seen as analogous to Leibniz’s conceptualization of the monad.<sup>253</sup> The monad involves a clear region, a place of perception, with everything outside of this region making up the larger dark background: the imperceptible. Describing the interior of the monad, Deleuze refers to Bernard Cache’s definition of the point of inflection, arguing that it is the force of the fold, it is “the ideal genetic element of the variable curve or fold,” that actualizes “the pure Event of the line, or of the point, or of the virtual, ideality par excellence.”<sup>254</sup> For Deleuze, inflection is the principle condition or a *virtuality* that exists only in the monad that encloses it and is connected to the plastic point-fold.<sup>255</sup> In other words, inflection is a point that changes the direction of a line’s trajectory; it is a point of turning of difference.

Therefore, Ribera’s handling of inflection on the body of the saint is substantially different from that of Caravaggio. If Caravaggio depicts the fragmentation of the body in his *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* as a complete rupture and self annihilation, where darkness entails a complete severability of the parts, Ribera, in contrast, uses inflection between light and dark to fragment the body while retaining its consistency in the general *texturology* of the surface. In other words, Ribera’s fragmentation of the body of Saint Bartholomew does not entail a complete severability of the parts, but constructs a body made of complex surfaces brought into close proximity to one another. The inflection between light and dark creates new types of associations between heterogeneous parts or surfaces holding them together into the *texturology* of the fold.

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<sup>250</sup> *Idem*, 6.

<sup>251</sup> Bruno, *Surface*, 48.

<sup>252</sup> Deleuze, *The Fold*, 131.

<sup>253</sup> “Leibniz’s most famous proposition is that every soul or subject (monad) is completely closed, windowless and doorless, and contains the whole world in its darkest depths, while also illuminating some little portion of that world, each monad, a different portion. So the world is enfolded in each soul, but differently, because each illuminates only one little aspect of the overall folding.” Deleuze, *Negotiations*, Columbia University Press, 1990, 157.

<sup>254</sup> *Idem*, 15.

<sup>255</sup> *Idem*, 27.

## Spiritual fragmentation

Ribera's painting invites beholders in a process of contemplation and self-awareness; it implies an engagement where the subject is defined through its *point of view* in relation to the painting, and saint's body.<sup>256</sup> The formation of point of view assumes a *folding* relationship between subject and object, where beholders are invited to contemplate the role of corporeal and spiritual fragmentation in achieving a spiritual connection with the divine. This folding relationship between beholder and painting is problematized by Mieke Bal in her study on Caravaggio.<sup>257</sup> While discussing Caravaggio's *Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (Fig.35) (c.1601-1602; Sanssouci Palace, Potsdam), Bal offers a new conception of folding as the relationship between subject and object, where the painting the beholder's sees "as a remote historical object is molded within our present being. This is not to say that it did not exist in the past. But, to use a Baroque conceptual metaphor, it only comes to life – or rather to light, to visibility – for us through our point of view, which itself is modeled by *it*, folded *in it*."<sup>258</sup> Thus, the relationship is one that shifts from subject to object, and then goes back again to the subject in a movement of folding that sets the subject and object into a co-dependent interaction.<sup>259</sup> Bal positions her study in a conception of Baroque as resisting the separation between mind and body, form and matter, line and color, image and discourse. This is accomplished by Bal through the concept of entanglement; in her own words: "What is specifically baroque about this construction of the Baroque (Bal is referring here to Deleuze's interpretation of Leibniz and *the fold*) is this point of view that involves two mobile positions. It neither entails something that is simply relativism nor allows universalism or absolutism to assert itself. The term, rather, is *entanglement*."<sup>260</sup>

Conversely, Bal's argument also brings into discussion a historical engagement with Baroque artworks that she deems *anachronistic*. For Bal, the past does not determine the present; on the contrary, the present establishes the uniqueness and importance of the past. In Caravaggio's *The Resurrection of Lazarus* (Fig.36) (1608-1609; Museo Nazionale, Messina)

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<sup>256</sup> This is contingent upon the Leibnizian idea that point of view is formed in the body, as was made clear by Deleuze "Leibniz states that the point of view is in the body." See: Deleuze, *The Fold*, 11.

<sup>257</sup> Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*.

<sup>258</sup> *Idem*, 27.

<sup>259</sup> *Idem*, 28.

<sup>260</sup> *Idem*, 25.

Bal argues that this is achieved through the viewers' reflection in the small "mirrors" embedded within the texture of the white shroud, an entanglement that entails a "swapping of the scale."<sup>261</sup> Bal's interpretation relies on Deleuze's explanation of white as "falling apart into microscopic bits, but if these bits are convex mirrors, they enlarge and deform what they reflect."<sup>262</sup> Thus, the small convex mirrors embedded in the white cloth "*theorize* the simultaneous importance of fragmentation and wholeness, of tiny and large, of detail and encompassing."<sup>263</sup> They also create a relationship of folding that is interpreted by Bal as undermining the subjectivity of the beholders in relation to the work of art.

In Ribera's case nevertheless the folding relationship between beholder and painting – while still retaining the folding movement between subject-object-subject – is one of spiritual contemplation and corporeal re-evaluation, where the viewer is made aware of his/her own fragmented self. The fragmentation in Ribera's painting invites viewers to contemplate their embodied self as fragmented during their earthly life, when their body and soul are united, and in their death, when their soul is separated from the decaying body. During their earthly life, people are fragmented beings, as body and soul are not complete, only in a state of potentiality, awaiting their death, resurrection, redemption and communion with God. In death, fragmentation transforms into incompleteness, as Thomas Aquinas argued. Aquinas sees the separation of the soul from the body as an anomaly; namely, the survival of the soul apart from the body amounts to an incomplete, fragmented state of affairs.<sup>264</sup> As Aquinas makes clear in his *Summa Theologiae* (1265–1274): "since the soul is a part of human nature, it does not have perfection of its nature except in union with the body . . . and so, although the soul can exist and intellectually cognize when it is separated from the body, nonetheless it does not have the perfection of its nature when separated from the body."<sup>265</sup> The body is not fully realized until after resurrection, until then it is only a potential that is on constant move. Therefore, the fragmentation of Bartholomew's body through the inflection between light and dark invites beholders to undergo a continuous process of spiritual and corporeal transformation – a process that entails continuity and discontinuity – something that is required from every Christian as the relation to the divine is never a stable and coherent one.

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<sup>261</sup> Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*, 50. Bal's interpretation is grounded in Leibniz's idea that perception is both microscopic and macroscopic.

<sup>262</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>263</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>264</sup> This interpretation is indebted to: Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas*, Routledge, 2005, 189-217.

<sup>265</sup> Aquinas, quoted from: Stump, *Aquinas*, 201.



## **The Surface of Darkness**

Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.4) (c.1625-1628; Basilica Cattedrale di San Nicola di Bari, Nicosia) presents viewers with a fierce cut, shearing through the thick texture of darkness; it is a cut performed by the martyred body of the saint. This cut amounts to an event of opening, an opening as a wound; the body of Bartholomew appears to wound the painting's surface in an act that reenacts on a different scale the slicing of his hand by the executioner. By taking a closer look at Bartholomew's left forearm, one can see that the trajectory of the cut is guided by the direction of the saint's raised hands, sprung open in a diagonal across the surface of darkness. The cut of the executioner is therefore set in a referential relationship with the cut of the saint's hands, where one eludes the other discreetly. These cuts entail a movement that draws the viewer from the detail to the general, from the executioner's cut on the saint's arm to the cut performed on the surface of the painting by the position of Bartholomew's body. This move transfixes viewers, bringing them closer to the surface, while holding them there at the opening, on the surface where materiality becomes most visible. One cut is folded onto the other in a process that turns the painting's surface into an event that shows the operation of the divine within matter. The body of the saint is staged as a wound that opens the painting to a folding relationship between visibility and invisibility, light and darkness. The body as a wound sections the surface to allow visibility; it forms a rupture on the surface of the painting that encapsulates the paradoxes and sharp inconsistencies active in the painting. Moreover the dark surface extending behind the saint appears as an event of divine activity, in terms of its simultaneous intervention and withdrawal from humanity.

### **Cutting light**

First the issue of the cut produced by light within darkness as the original act of creation. The light is the first cut that opens the painting to appearance and legibility, while also pointing to divine absence and invisibility. It is an act grounded in the original, paradigmatic act of creation, when God created an opening of light within darkness. In Genesis (Genesis 1:4), God first created light, though not the light of the Sun, as that was created in the fourth day, but the

singular light of his glory that allowed earth, sky, time, animal and human existence to unfold. At the end of the creational process, God withdrew into darkness, so as to allow human existence to take hold and express itself through free will. In Ribera's painting, light and darkness can be seen as articulating, in their own unique way, the material trait of the divine creation and withdrawal, divine mystery and the original act of creation.

The original cut or opening performed by light amounts to an act or event of distinction within continuity, rather than severability or disconnection. Light appears here as a temporal inflection within the fold of darkness engulfing the surface. Light appears like an island, a moment of variation within the sea of darkness. Starting from the lower section of the canvas, the first curve is a small one created by darkness in the lower foreground of the painting (Fig.37). It comes from somewhere outside of the painting and extends within the painting's forefront, losing its intensity as light starts to illuminate the edges of the ground and rocks. This curve is followed by another one made of light, which illuminates the event of the martyrdom. Finally the inflection finishes into the darkness extending in the upper level of its surface.

Discussing the problem of the baroque regime of light, Deleuze observes that for Leibniz, light in the monad "slides as if through a slit in the middle of shadows," and thus it can take the form of a "thin opening" within darkness.<sup>266</sup> The thin opening of light evoked by Deleuze can be related to the cut performed on the surface of darkness by the illuminated figure of Saint Bartholomew – particularly by the diagonal position of his arms – together with the section of land extending in front of the saint. What we are made to witness is the tearing of human temporality in order to create a distinct fold of the divine. Ribera used light to illuminate a patch of ground, a raised, rock-like formation that forms an island within a sea of darkness. This ground however does not offer the figures a stable position, as neither of them is actually placed on it. It stands empty and barren but for the white cloth, which extends out of the light. The two bystanders and executioner are set within darkness, while only the figure of Saint Bartholomew appears to be indirectly connected to the ground by way of the cloth. This ambivalence of things in light plays on the assurance that the human world can only exist as an opening or cut onto the immovable dark fabric of the divine. If light acts as an inflection that gives place, time and physical human existence, it does not mean that darkness is necessarily atemporal, or timeless. In fact, the painting bypasses this binary of light as

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<sup>266</sup> Deleuze, *The Fold*, 35. This observation is made by Deleuze while discussing the regime of light and shadows in relation to monads. While modals are dark and completely without openings, the light that appears in them is produced by tiny inner mirrors.

temporal and darkness as atemporal by staging darkness as the material surface that presents the withdrawal of the divine as a mystery. In other words, the surface of darkness is produced as a paradoxical material working of the divine, a move of withdrawal that guarantees the figures their place; and as we shall see, it is their attitude towards the dark surface that establishes their spiritual difference in moral status.<sup>267</sup>

### **Modulating Light and darkness**

In Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* light and darkness are produced as folds. The movement effected by the folds of light and dark stage the invisible, ineffable, and unfigurable divine presence at the scene of the martyrdom. The modulation of light and darkness in Ribera's painting is worked analogously with cataphatic and apophatic theologies, where darkness is presented as a material surface of divine activity and light as an opening of human temporality. The painting's surface therefore becomes a site of potentiality for the holy. By focusing on the painting's surface, one is able to avoid an interpretation that tends to overlook the painting's material specificity in favour of the transcendent and metaphysical.

In Ribera's painting, light and dark are staged as pictorial symptoms of the divine mystery worked through the materiality of paint. Ribera replaced the depiction of divine presence as a beam of light, angels with palms, or the appearance of Christ in scenes of martyrdom by making concrete in paint the divine absence present. This concreteness is expressed through the dark surface extending in the background that presents through its materiality a symptom of the tense relationship between God and humans. Therefore, the modulation of light and darkness on Saint Bartholomew creates folds that position him into the wider fabric of the world created by God, while the dark surface appears as the place of divine activity. Darkness resists representation and legibility as it creates the material possibility through which viewers can interact with the divine mystery.

To contrast Ribera's modulation of light and darkness and his staging of the dark surface as the site of spiritual potentiality I turn to Caravaggio's depiction of Christ from his *Calling of Saint Matthew* (Fig.38) (1599–1600; San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome).<sup>268</sup> In this painting, Caravaggio's use of chiaroscuro on the figure of Christ surpasses its use as a mere

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<sup>267</sup> The problem of God's relationship with time - Arguing for God as atemporal, outside of time is Augustine "Further, it is difficult to contemplate and fully know the substance of God; who fashions things changeable, yet without any change in Himself, and creates things temporal, yet without any temporal movement in Himself." Augustin, *On Trinity*, Book 1, quoted from: Philip Schaff ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series, Volume III St. Augustine: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises*, Cosimo Classics, 2007, 18.

<sup>268</sup> Spike, *Caravaggio*, 94-96; Ebert-Schifferer, *Caravaggio*, 126-129, Schütze, *Caravaggio*, 102-105.

effect of “reality”, by staging it as expressing his paradoxical nature defined by the “hypostatic union.”<sup>269</sup> The painting shows Christ’s summoning of the sinful tax collector Matthew to faith and apostolate.<sup>270</sup> Caravaggio set the meeting in the gloomy interior of a bare room, with a window on the upper left corner. Saint Matthew is depicted sitting at a table with four other men, counting the money they have just collected, when Jesus walks into the room accompanied by Saint Peter. Originating somewhere behind the figure of Christ, a strong beam of light emphasizes his raised arm by drawing it out of the surrounding darkness, reinforcing the rhetoric of his calling – *Sequere me*.

Caravaggio’s use of light is usually treated in the literature as a sign of divine presence and enlightenment, with the dark shadows symbolize spiritual oblivion and damnation. The theological thinking to which most of Caravaggio scholarship adheres presupposes a binary opposition, where light denotes divine presence and darkness divine absence.<sup>271</sup> Generally defined in terms of a dichotomy, the contrast between light and dark goes back to the creation of the world, when God separated the two and deemed light as good: “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night” (Genesis 1:3-5). The Old Testament abounds in metaphors where the distinction between evil and good is expressed through this antagonism: “I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things” (Isaiah 45:7). Above all, John’s gospel reveals the great spiritual divergence between light and darkness, where light is used as a metaphor for life and darkness for death: “Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life.’” (John I: 8-12).

Indeed, soon after Caravaggio’s painting was installed in the Contarelli Chapel in the church of San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome, contemporaries began to interpret the strong lighting

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<sup>269</sup> On Christ’s hypostatic union see: Pace, Edward. “Hypostatic Union,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 7, Robert Appleton Company, 1910, <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07610b.htm>>.

<sup>270</sup> Joachim von Sandrart offers a telling description of the painting: “Caravaggio represents Christ entering a dark room with two of his disciples, where he finds the tax collector Matthew drinking and playing cards and gaming with dice with a group of rogues. Matthew fearfully hides the cards in one hand and lays the other to his breast, recalled by Christ to the apostolate. One of the rogues with one hand sweeps his money from the table into his other hand and slinks shamefully away, all of which is true to life and nature itself.” Sandrart, quoted from: Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 378.

<sup>271</sup> Spike, for instance, argues that Christ is the Light of the world and through the raised hand he imparts grace; namely, the bestowal of grace through light. See: Spike, *Caravaggio*, 94; Ebert-Schifferer also writes about Christ’s gesture that “it is not issuing an imperious command; his is the power to convert through mercy, materialized through the beam of light.” Ebert-See: Schifferer, *Caravaggio*, 128.

accompanying Christ in spiritual terms. Lorenzo Pericolo draws attention to an epigram composed in 1601 by the jurist-consult Marzio Milesi in honor of Caravaggio's canvas:

Here is my beloved guide, who supports my poem,  
Exhorting me to begin. I already see my Lord  
As he comes to convert publicans and sinners  
Upon his first appearance he frees  
And enlightens Matthew's mind that,  
Greedy and blind, was constrained in the world  
By harsh chains. Jesus glows in such way  
That he pushes the viewer's mind and eyes to look  
At him again, and seems to make the mortals'  
Souls blissful. If he is like this on earth  
Through the artist's work and brush  
How will he then appear in heaven!<sup>272</sup>

In Milesi's poem, light functions as a phenomenon that proclaims both the divinity of Christ and Matthew's spiritual transformation. By acknowledging the light, Matthew's soul and mind are enlightened, responding to Christ's summoning. Most notably, Milesi emphasises the role of light beyond its actual presence on canvas, insisting that it emanates from Christ. Milesi's interpretation of the figure of Christ as radiating light is evocative, although substantially different from the patristic mystical tradition, in particular the interpretation of light offered by Macarius of Egypt (c.300 – 391) on Christ's transfiguration on Mount Tabor.<sup>273</sup> In his *Spiritual Homilies*, Macarius speaks of the soul's experience of grace in terms of light, as the soul is penetrated and immersed by the light that shines from

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<sup>272</sup> "Ecco ch'a cominciare hormai m'invita,/ E che regge il mio dire amata scrota,/ E gia veggio il mio Christo, ch'a chiamare/ E' publican venne e peccatori,/ Come al primo apparir sgombra e rischiara/ La mente di Mattheo, ch'ingorda e cieca/ Si stave al mondo in duri lacci avvolta,/ E Giesu che risplende in guise tale/ Ch'a rimirarlo attrahe gl'occhi e le menti/ De' risguardanti, e par beati renda/ De' mortali gli spiriti. Et tal s'e in terra/ D'artefice per opra e di pennello,/ A rivederlo in cielo hor che fia, dunque?" Quoted from Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative*, 214.

<sup>273</sup> Although the theology of transfiguration received extensive treatment by the Church and Desert Fathers – it is in the last category where Macarius falls – it was the writings of Saint Gregory of Nyssa and later Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite that consolidated the 'theology of light.' Their 'theology of light' proved to be fundamental for the development of Christian mysticism – especially the contemplative Byzantine tradition, and later in the fourteenth-century Saint Gregory Palamas' doctrine of the uncreated "light of Tabor." For a general discussion on the treatment of the transfiguration in the Early Christian writers see: Andreas Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology And Iconography*, St Vladimir's Seminary Pr, 2005; see also: Andrew Louth, "Holiness and the Vision of God in the Eastern Fathers" in Stephen C. Barton (Ed.), *Holiness: Past and Present*, Bloomsbury, 2003, 228–234.

Christ's face.<sup>274</sup> Macarius associated this idea with the transfiguration on Mount Tabor, where the "divine glory and infinite light" engrossed not only Christ's soul but also his body – together with the bodies of the two accompanying prophets.<sup>275</sup> Most notably, two centuries later, Maximus the Confessor (c.580 – 662), in his meditations on the transfiguration of Christ, interprets the blinding light that shone from Christ's face as a negation of human comprehension of the divine, while the radiance of his garments expressed revelation.<sup>276</sup> Maximus is drawing attention here to the ambivalent role played by light as not only illuminating – or functioning as the giver of knowledge – but also as an overwhelming, blinding experience. Thus the light of transfiguration can be interpreted as paradoxically showing that which ultimately remains unknown.<sup>277</sup>

Helen Langdon, nonetheless, argues that the collision between light and darkness in Caravaggio's painting can be interpreted in terms of a metaphorical confrontation between spiritual awakening and oblivion.<sup>278</sup> To support her interpretation, Langdon appeals to the biblical narrative. In the Old Testament the foretold birth of the Messiah is described through the metaphor of a light shining into a dark place: "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned." (Isaiah 9:2). In the New Testament, the sorrow at the death of Christ is symbolized by a great mantle of darkness enfolding the earth: "And the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst." (Luke 23:45). Apart from the biblical passages, Langdon points out that light was also used as a rhetorical tool for late sixteenth-century theologians in their defence of the Church against the rise of Protestantism. The introduction to the *Annales Ecclesiastici a Christo nato ad annum 1198* (1588–1607) written by Cardinal Cesare Baronio, includes an admonition for the Church to return to the light of the archetypal Christian values so as to disperse the gloom and darkness spread onto Christianity by the teachings of Luther and Calvin.<sup>279</sup> Thus for Langdon, the light in Caravaggio's painting is a sign of divine presence and Christ's divinity. In a similar vein, Sebastian Schütze interprets the artist's use of chiaroscuro in the *Calling of Saint Matthew* in terms of light as a conveyer of spiritual

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<sup>274</sup> Macarius, *Spiritual Homilies*, (I.2.) See: Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*, Oxford University Press, 2007, 119.

<sup>275</sup> *Idem*, (XV.38; cf. XX.3, I.3) in Louth, *Origins of Christian Mystical Tradition. From Plato to Denys*, Oxford University Press, 2007, 120.

<sup>276</sup> Louth, "Apophatic and Cataphatic Theology" in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman, eds., Cambridge University Press, 2012, 142.

<sup>277</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>278</sup> Langdon, *Caravaggio*, 188-189.

<sup>279</sup> *Idem*, 189.

enlightenment and darkness as its rejection and oblivion.<sup>280</sup> For Schütze, the characters that acknowledge the physical light experience a spiritual enlightenment, while the figures placed in the darkness, continuing their egotistical business uninterrupted, remain in spiritual oblivion. Langdon and Schütze's interpretations remain largely dependent upon a mode of interpreting light and dark as a metaphor for good and evil.

On the other hand, as Lorenzo Pericolo observes, the description offered by Milesi's poem bears little resemblance to the actual painting, as the figure of Christ is shown partially hidden from sight.<sup>281</sup> If we take a closer look at the canvas, it becomes apparent that Caravaggio partially concealed Christ by placing him in semi-obscurity, just behind the figure of Saint Peter. The face of the saviour seems to be modulated by shadows, falling into deep folds onto his forehead, eyes, and mouth. The shadows on Christ's eyes and mouth are significant here as they suggest a blind and silent call; a powerful mystical summoning that resonated profoundly with Saint Matthew. At the same time, and in stark contrast with the darkness of his silent call, Christ's extended right hand shimmering in the light reinforces the rhetoric of his spoken words "Follow me!" Therefore, Caravaggio's figure of Christ draws attention to the artificiality of thinking of light and darkness, or speech and silence in oppositional terms, as they are all modulated on his figure in a move that makes them dependent on one another. Caravaggio's Christ shows that apart from being light – in relation to the created light of knowledge – God is also simultaneously darkness – as one can never truly know him. Knowledge and non-knowledge of the divine unfolds onto Christ's body as a spiritual texture, modulating his presence and absence, grounding its elusiveness in the relationship of folding.<sup>282</sup> The two elements, no longer opposable, become part of a wider framework of expressing the divine. Ribera's painting, on the other hand, preserves the equal correlation between seen and unseen, visible and invisible, presence and absence only when it comes to the modulation of the figures, while favouring darkness as a place of divine mystery.

### **Silent Darkness**

Ribera's treatment of light and darkness in relation to the figures portrayed in his *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.4) (c.1625-1628; Basilica Cattedrale di San Nicola di Bari,

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<sup>280</sup> Schütze interprets the light as spiritual illumination – "the light falls with full intensity upon Matthew, who in a moment – illuminated by divine resolution – will rise in order to follow unreservedly his calling to be a disciple." Schütze, *Caravaggio*, 105.

<sup>281</sup> Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative*, 215.

<sup>282</sup> I am not using the term non-knowledge as ignorance, but the alternative way of experiencing the divine which goes beyond human knowledge and reason.

Nicosia) creates an effect of folding that defines the spiritual dimension of the painting. This phenomenon is made apparent on the figure of Saint Bartholomew. The body of the saint, dominating the centre of the image, has certain parts suffused by light – such as, his chest and right arm, the left thigh, and the right half of his face – while others are plunged into opaque darkness – like, the connection between his left shoulder and part of his left arm, the left side of his abdomen, and the lower section of his leg (Fig.39). Indeed, the darkness extending onto the left side of Bartholomew’s abdomen appears like an embrace, taking hold of his body at the very moment of his martyrdom. On the other side, the two female bystanders and executioner are positioned within the darkness extending on the left side of the picture, with only part of their bodies made visible by the glowing light. The modulation of light and darkness defines the ontological nature of the figures in that it proclaims saint and sinners, executioner and victim, bystanders or accomplices as part of the fabric of the world created by God. This process of folding of light and darkness is analogous to the relationship between cataphatic and apophatic theologies, where both modes of apprehension and experience of the divine position the viewer in the divine fabric of the world, a fabric where God is simultaneously invisible and visible, transcendent and immanent of his creation.

The use of positive (*cataphatic*) and negative (*apophatic*) terms in talking about God has a long history, predating Christianity as it appears in the Hebrew Scriptures and the writings of classical Greek Philosophers – especially Plato.<sup>283</sup> However, the terminology of cataphatic and apophatic theologies was firmly established in the Christian tradition during the fifth century by the author writing under the pseudonym of Dionysius the Areopagite – Saint Paul’s convert – writer known today as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.<sup>284</sup> In his *Mystical Theology*, Pseudo-Dionysius argues that cataphatic and symbolic theology is concerned with what we can affirm about God, while apophatic theology is concerned with our understanding of God when speech and thought fail us and we are reduced to silence.<sup>285</sup>

Cataphatic theology – otherwise known as positive theology – seeks to understand God in positive terms by trying to comprehend what one can know about Him through divine revelation. Within this paradigm, one of the great governing factors and principles by which

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<sup>283</sup> Louth, “Apophatic and Cataphatic Theology,” 137.

<sup>284</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius did not invent the terms *apophatic* and *cataphatic*; instead he introduced them to an already growing theological approach. He borrowed them from the Neo-Platonist Proclus (410-145) the *diadochos* of the academy in Athens. For an in-depth analysis of Pseudo-Dionysius’s corpus, see: Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence*, Oxford University Press, 1993.

<sup>285</sup> Louth, *Origins of Christian Mystical Tradition*, 160.



mortals can attain knowledge and achieve grace – in particular knowledge of the divine as the supreme form of awareness – is light. Light as phenomenon has the ability to reveal things, making them visible to our perception. Thus, the relationship between cataphatic theology and light is a close one, given that light is one of the most common metaphors used to describe God.<sup>286</sup> In the New Testament, light was typically associated with divine presence, and used more specifically as a metaphor for Christ: “Then Jesus told them, “You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. Whoever walks in the dark does not know where they are going.” (John 12:35). However, we have seen in the case of Maximus the Confessor’s interpretation of light that it can stand for both cataphatic and apophatic experiences. Therefore, the link between cataphatic theology and light is strong but not exclusive as light points beyond itself to the way of negation, indicating that in darkness God can also be sought. Going beyond light into darkness suggests that God is fundamentally unknowable – not necessarily only because humans are not capable of understanding him, but also because he is in his nature beyond knowledge – as one can only grasp the manifestation of God in his creation, and not his manifestation outside of it; God ultimately remains transcendent of his manifestation.<sup>287</sup>

Apophatic theology, on the other hand, claims that because God is incomprehensible to humanity, human language proves to be limited in trying to understand him; words and concepts fail to account for the one who is beyond all human comprehension. Such an approach is rooted in the Scriptures as the Old Testament makes it clear that God created not only light but also darkness: “I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the Lord, who does all these things.” (Isaiah 45:7). Moreover, darkness is presented as the place where God dwells: “The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was” (Exodus 20:21).<sup>288</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius in the first chapter of *Mystical Theology* interprets Moses encounter with God the following way:

And then he [Moses] becomes also set free from that which is seen and from that which sees, and he infiltrates into the *gnofos* (darkness) of unknowing, into the truly mysterious, where he renounces all perception that stems from knowledge, and he

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<sup>286</sup> Although, as we have seen above in Maximus the Confessor’s interpretation of the Transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor, light can also be the vehicle of apophatic experience, not only cataphatic.

<sup>287</sup> Louth, *Origins of Christian Mystical Tradition*, 167.

<sup>288</sup> Philo of Alexandria (15/10BC – 40/45AD) interpreted the darkness described in Exodus as a condition of the knowledge of God. See: Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974, 31- 43.

arrives at that which is altogether intangible and invisible, surrendering his entire self to Him who is beyond all, and belonging neither to his own self nor to someone else; and through the deactivating of all knowledge, being united at a higher level with the entirely unknown, by not knowing anything, knows beyond all knowledge.<sup>289</sup>

Pseudo-Dionysius speaks of the relationship between darkness and knowledge not in terms of ignorance – something that would place importance on the intellectual learning about God - instead he interprets this darkness as the Light which cannot be sensed or seen as it exceeds human logic, hence darkness of light. In essence, the distinction between the two theological approaches lies in the acquisition and use of knowledge, language and concepts used – or indeed if we can use any language at all – in trying to apprehend God.<sup>290</sup> Thus, because knowledge and language is created and finite, it cannot account for God who is not a creature and not finite. The core of apophatic theology for Pseudo-Dionysius is about arriving at the point of theological silence, in what he calls “the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.”<sup>291</sup> Indeed, Pseudo-Dionysius opens his *Mystical Theology* with a prayer:

“Trinity! Higher than any being, any divinity, any goodness!  
Guide to Christians in the wisdom of heaven! Lead us up  
beyond knowing and light, up to the farthest, peak of mystic  
scripture where the mysteries of God’s word lie simple,  
absolute, unchangeable in the brilliant darkness of a hidden  
silence. Amid the deepest shadow they pour overwhelming light  
on what is most manifest. Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen  
they completely fill our sightless minds with treasures beyond  
all beauty.”<sup>292</sup>

In this prayer, Pseudo-Dionysius encapsulates the paradox of speaking and being unable to speak about God in the structure of his prayer. Pseudo-Dionysius achieved this

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<sup>289</sup> As cited in: Uros Todorovic. ‘Transcendental Byzantine Body: Reading Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, Gregory of Nyssa and Plotinus in the Unfolded Marble Panels of Hagia Sophia,’ *Athens Dialogues. Quality of Life. Body and Spirit*, 2010, <http://athensdialogues.chs.harvard.edu/cgi-bin/WebObjects/athensdialogues.woa/wa/dist?dis=141>.

<sup>290</sup> Especially in scholasticism the difference between the two became a matter of doctrinal dialectics. Louth, “Apophatic and Cataphatic Theology,” 143.

<sup>291</sup> (MT I-997B/135). Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, 21.

<sup>292</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *Mystical Theology*, 997 A-B; Quoted by: Turner, *Darkness of God*, 21.

through the use of a destabilizing utterance, which first says something about God, only to unsay it moments later, in the same sentence.<sup>293</sup> For Pseudo-Dionysius, divine light is a “brilliant darkness,” while the mysteries of God’s word” is uttered in a “hidden silence,” and that what is “unsensed and unseen” manages to paradoxically convey an experience “with treasures beyond all beauty.” Thus, according to Pseudo-Dionysius, saying that God is one thing or another – light or darkness – is off-putting since he is neither and both at the same time: “Darkness and Light...it is none of these.”<sup>294</sup> Accordingly, for Pseudo-Dionysius, the paradoxical dark brilliance and brilliant darkness are allies that transgress one into the other, as God transgresses everything and nothing.

Despite his paradoxical use of brilliance and darkness to convey the inexpressibility of divine ontology, Pseudo-Dionysius argues for the use of darkness – the darkness beyond light – as a mode of expressing the divine.<sup>295</sup> Even when one reaches the highest level of knowledge and light, God “plunges the mystic into the Darkness of Unknowing, whence all perfection of understanding is excluded,” and thus “all his reasoning powers is united by his highest faculty to him who is wholly unknowable; thus by knowing nothing he knows that which is beyond his knowledge.”<sup>296</sup> In the last line of his prayer, darkness removing the believer from all that is senses and visible, from the material world by “filling our sightless minds with treasures beyond all beauty.”<sup>297</sup>

The twofold approach of Pseudo-Dionysius to light and darkness can also be detected in his atypical use of apophatic terms. Pseudo-Dionysius inserted in Greek a negative letter at the beginning of certain words – such as *aoratos*, meaning invisible – in an attempt to entail an additional cataphatic interpretation.<sup>298</sup> This insertion transforms affirmation into an assertion of the state of lacking. Consequently, although *aoratos* is a negative term, it also expresses simultaneously an affirmation of the condition of lacking visibility. This conception implies that whether one favors the apophatic or cataphatic method of theology, each approach symmetrically involves the other. It also means that adjectives such as “invisible” entail two

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<sup>293</sup> *Idem*, 21-22.

<sup>294</sup> *Idem*, 22.

<sup>295</sup> “Since the way of negation appears to be more suitable to the realm of the divine and since positive affirmations are always unfitting to the hiddenness of the inexpressible, a manifestation through dissimilar shapes is more correctly to be applied to the invisible” Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, “The Celestial Harmony,” 141A, in: Paul Rorem, trans., *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, Paulist Pr., 1987, 150.

<sup>296</sup> *Idem*, 1001A.

<sup>297</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>298</sup> This interpretation of Pseudo-Dionysius use of apophatic terms is taken from: Todorovic, “Transcendental Byzantine Body.”

equally significant references – one suggesting the lack of visibility and the other affirming invisibility.

Jeffrey Hamburger argues that the Christian stance on divine visibility and invisibility cannot be disentangled from the Jewish tradition, which insists on the invisibility of God as *Deus Absconditus* (The Hidden God).<sup>299</sup> This is the God that hid his “face” from Moses on Mount Sinai and dwells in an impenetrable darkness: “And he made darkness pavilions round about Him, dark waters, and thick clouds of the skies” (2 Samuel 22:12). On the other hand, Christianity affirms the visibility of God, made possible through Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, God the Son. The doctrine of Incarnation is critical in supporting this stance. In Colossians 1:15, the Apostle Paul writes: “The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.” Lorenzo Pericolo, in his interpretation of Caravaggio’s painting of the *Supper of Emmaus* (Fig.40) (1606; Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan), draws attention to John of Damascus’ (c.675 – 749) *Treatise on Divine Images* for a metaphysical discussion on divine representation. According to John, Christians “dare to make the image of the invisible God, not because he is invisible, but because he made himself visible for our sake, partaking of flesh and blood.”<sup>300</sup> Throughout the text, John constantly reminds readers that Christ’s historical figure embodies the divine as “the Son is the image alive, natural and perfectly similar of the invisible God; he carries in himself the Father, and is identical with him in everything, except for this single fact, that he derives from him as from his [primary] cause.”<sup>301</sup>

It is essential that visibility/invisibility is not to be equated with presence/absence, as the divine made himself visible as Christ – Christ as the Image of God – while ultimately remaining invisible; God is present and absent, transcendent and immanent at the same time.<sup>302</sup> This position is articulated by Pseudo-Dionysian dialectics of transcendence and immanence, according to which God is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, he is distinct

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<sup>299</sup> Jeffrey F. Hamburger, “Mysticism and Visuality,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman, eds., Cambridge University Press, 2012, 278.

<sup>300</sup> John of Damascus b, 701. My interpretation of John’s writing in is indebted to: Pericolo, *Caravaggio*, 266-267.

<sup>301</sup> John of Damascus, b, 704, as quoted in: Pericolo, *Caravaggio*, 267.

<sup>302</sup> “Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature” (Colossians 1:15). On sacred images and the representation of God see: Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, University Of Chicago Press, 1997; Herbert L. Kessler and Gerhard Wolf Ed., *The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation*, Electa, 2000; Kessler, *Spiritual Seeing: Picturing God's Invisibility in Medieval Art*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000.

through his indistinction, absent through his presence.<sup>303</sup> In this respect, the twelve century Richard of Saint Victor (d. 1173) writes: “But if nothing is more present than the most absent One, if nothing is more absent than the most present One, is anything more marvelous, anything more incomprehensible?”<sup>304</sup> Likewise, Meister Eckhart (c.1260 – c.1327) argues that: “God is inside all things in that he is existence and thus every being feeds on him. He is also on the outside because he is above all and outside all. Therefore all things feed on him, because he is totally within; they hunger for him, because he is totally without.”<sup>305</sup> For that reason, Thomas Carlson argues that God, who is simultaneously *all in all* and *nothing in anything*, can never be captured or imagined in its entirety because his presence amounts to an absence.<sup>306</sup> He is the presence of absence and the absence of presence, played in images through the figure of Christ that embodies this dialectics of visibility and invisibility. Christ is God made visible, although his divine nature – inextricably bound with his human – remains invisible. This dialectics – in a similar vein to Pseudo-Dionysius’ tradition of cataphatic and apophatic – realizes one in another, in that one inescapably slips into the other.

The use of light and darkness in Ribera’s painting therefore does not imply a religious opposition between good and evil, divine presence and absence, but a relationship of folding between mankind and the divine. This process of folding defines the nature of the relationship between divine visibility and invisibility as well as transcendence and immanence as aspects of the same elusive being. The folding of light and darkness therefore proclaims distinction without a separation; a connected web of sinners, bystanders, and saints are enveloped by this modulation into the divine fabric that makes up the world.

On the other hand, this does not mean the spiritual life of all the figures is somehow merged one into another by the process of folding; on the contrary, the distinction between the characters lies in their attitude towards the dark surface looming in the background. While the executioner and the two bystanders look away from the dark surface towards the viewer, Saint Bartholomew is shown turning his head away from the beam of light – a typical pictorial device that proclaims God’s presence at a martyrdom – to look into the darkness extending in the upper right corner of the painting. Darkness is acting here as the surface against which the point of view of the characters and the viewers is formed and defined in relation to the

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<sup>303</sup> The discussion on transcendence and immanence is indebted to: Thomas Carlson, “Unlikely Shadows: Transcendence in Image and Immanence,” in *Transcendence*. Regina Schwartz, ed., Routledge, 2004.

<sup>304</sup> Richard of Saint Victor, *The Mythical Ark* 4.17, quoted from: Carlson, *Unlikely Shadows*, 115.

<sup>305</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Comm. Ecc.* 54, in *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher*, Bernard McGinn, Elvira Borgstädt eds., Paulist Press, 1986, 179; as quoted in: Carlson, *Unlikely Shadows*, 115.

<sup>306</sup> Carlson, *Unlikely Shadows*, 115.

mystery of the divine. One such point of view is the event that viewers are actually made to see, the martyrdom in light as the insertion, or inflection of human temporality within the fabric of the world created by God.

Darkness in Ribera's painting dominates the entire background, covering more than half of the pictorial surface. Darkness is treated on a monumental scale, overwhelming viewers with its intensity and force. The surface creates the impression of a vast, dark-filled emptiness, a surface that resists legibility, as there is nothing that presents itself overtly to the gaze. The question of why would the saint turn away from the light that is usually associated with divine presence and grace and look towards darkness can only be answered if in fact, that surface is not empty, nor is it a mere pictorial prop. Indeed, the dark surface of the background stands as a surface onto which the potentiality of divine mystery is played out.

### **The symptom of Divine Mystery**

To contrast Ribera's handling of the dark background, I turn to Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus* (Fig.39) (1606; Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan) as a painting where darkness is produced in a twofold manner: as an active element within which the Christ disappears, and as a transcendental place of journey towards the encounter with the divine.<sup>307</sup> Caravaggio's painting presents darkness as the ultimate privileged place of experiencing the divine. After undergoing spiritual purification, the soul ascends to a level of contemplation where it feels compelled to negate the knowledge acquired through light – cataphatic experience – by plunging into what Pseudo-Dionysius calls “brilliant darkness.” Thus, if in the *Calling of Saint Matthew* the light and darkness modulating Christ's body is produced simultaneously as a cataphatic and apophatic experience of the divine – where, as we have seen, light can stand for both theologies in the view of Maximus the Confessor – in the *Supper of Emmaus* darkness becomes the paradoxical place where light and darkness becomes one, joining in a mystical union where the faithful experience the dark light of the divine.

The painting shows Christ with his two apostles – presumed to be Luke and Cleopas – sitting at a table, with the innkeeper and servant standing on the saviour's left side. Caravaggio depicted the climactic moment when Christ is consecrating the bread and the apostles are recognizing him, the moment followed by his dramatic disappearance. Giovanni Pietro Bellori

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<sup>307</sup> Schütze, *Caravaggio*, 158. For an analysis of Caravaggio's 1601 version in terms of colour and chiaroscuro see: Janis C. Bell, “Light and Color in Caravaggio's "Supper at Emmaus",” *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 16, No. 31, 1995, pp. 139-170.

offered a telling description of the painting in his *Le vite de' pittori, scultori et architetti moderni* (1672):

For the marchese Patrizi he painted the *Supper at Emmaus*, with Christ in the centre in the act of blessing the bread: one of the two seated apostles extends his arms as he recognizes the Lord and the other one places his hands on the table and looks at him with astonishment. Behind are the innkeeper with a hat on his head and an old woman who brings food. He painted a quite different version for Cardinal Scipione Borghese; the first one is darker, but both are to be praised for their natural colors even though they lack decorum, since Michele's work often degenerated into common and vulgar forms.<sup>308</sup>

After describing the painting, Bellori made a comparison between Caravaggio's other version of the same theme – *Supper at Emmaus* (Fig.41) (1601; National Gallery, London) – mentioning that the 1606 version is “darker” in tone, even though “both are to be praised for their natural colors.” Indeed, at first sight, a comparison between the two reveals that in the second version the gestures of the figures are less dramatic, the colours are subdued, and the background darkness is intensified and made thicker. If in the first version the light overcomes darkness and reveals the wall behind the figure of Christ, in the second version darkness proves to be impenetrable. This distinction is significant as it shows Caravaggio's growing interest in using darkness not only as a dramatic backdrop, but as a vital player in the *istoria*.<sup>309</sup>

Lorenzo Pericolo argues that Caravaggio's painting poses “the crucial theme of divinity's appearance and disappearance, conceptually exemplified by the pictorial dialectics of light and dark.”<sup>310</sup> According to Pericolo, Christ's paradoxical state of visibility and invisibility is worked out by Caravaggio “not so much on the level of the narrative, but above all on that of technique and chiaroscuro.”<sup>311</sup> As such, Caravaggio devoted the left side of the

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<sup>308</sup> “Ed al marchese Patrizi la Cena in Emaus, nella quale vi e Christo in mezzo che benedice il pane, ed uno de gli apostolic a sede nel riconoscerlo apre le braccia, e l'altro ferma le mani su la mensa e lo riguarda con meraviglia: evvi dietro l'oste con la cuffia in capo ed una vecchia che porta le vivande. Un'altra di queste invenzioni dipinse per lo cardinale Scipione Borghese, alquanto differente; la prima pui tinta, e l'una e l'altra alla lode dell'imitazione del colore naturale; se bene mancano nella parte del decoro, degenerando spesso Michele nelle forme umili e vulgari” Bellori, quoted from: Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 367.

<sup>309</sup> This remark is indebted to: Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative*, 265-295.

<sup>310</sup> *Idem*, 291.

<sup>311</sup> *Idem*.

canvas to darkness “because he meant to widen the void’s scope and endow it with a pictorial role and physical relevance.”<sup>312</sup> For Pericolo, the darkness on the left appears to be impenetrable as well as materiality concrete, a pictorial force that overtakes the left side of the picture. Darkness overcomes its function as a mere dramatic backdrop onto which the figures spring forth, by becoming an active figure in the painting’s *istoria*.<sup>313</sup> It is on this plane he argues that the temporal dimension of the narrative is played, through a contrast of light and darkness that signals divine visibility and soon to be invisibility. Pericolo concludes: “in his last Supper at Emmaus, Caravaggio therefore not only visualises Christ’s glowing epiphany, but also animates the vehicle of his divine disappearance: the pitch-black darkness that will engulf him.”<sup>314</sup> For Pericolo, darkness acquires an identity as *the* place of divine retreat into invisibility and ideal retreat from the world.

Indeed, the thick darkness opening up behind to the Christ’s right hand is given as much attention as the figures appearing in front of it. Caravaggio moved both the innkeeper and the old woman to Christ’s left, while leaving darkness to dominate the space on his right. The positioning of darkness onto the right of Christ is evocative, as it points to the place of grace found at *Dextera Domini*, to the right of God. To be placed at the right is a sign of honour in the Christian tradition, bearing in mind that after his accession to heaven, Christ sits at the right of God the Father; in addition, at the last judgement the damned are situated to the left while the saved to the right of God.<sup>315</sup> The darkness on the right of Christ therefore stands as a place of salvation and grace, a place of divine retreat into invisibility.

Ribera’s *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.4) (c.1625-1628; Basilica Cattedrale di San Nicola di Bari, Nicosia), on the other hand, presents the dark surface as an overwhelming obscurity that resists legibility and representation. It refuses the simple assignation to a particular divine state: invisibility or visibility, presence or absence, immanence or transcendence, precisely because its surface is staged as a *symptom* of the divine mystery. For this interpretation I will appeal to George Didi-Huberman’s analysis of the white wall dominating the background of Fra Angelico’s *Annunciation* (fig.42) (c.1436-1445; Convent of San Marco, Florence). Didi-Huberman argues that the apparent “empty” white wall in the centre of Fra Angelico’s fresco defies the pre-eminence of the *visible* – imitation – on the

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<sup>312</sup> For a parallel see also: Pericolo’s: “Visualizing Appearance and Disappearance: On Caravaggio’s London Supper at Emmaus,” in *Art Bulletin*, nr. 89, 2007, 519-39.

<sup>313</sup> Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative*, 295.

<sup>314</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>315</sup> For a discussion on the meaning of the right hand, the position at the right of God, See: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, “Question 58. Christ’s sitting at the right hand of the Father”



*visual* as well as the *legible* – iconology – on the *figurable*.<sup>316</sup> For Didi-Huberman the *visual* is: “not *visible* in the sense of an object that is displayed or outlined; but it is neither *invisible*, for it strikes our eye, and even does more than that. It is material. It is a stream of luminous particles in one case, a powder of chalky particles in the other. It is an essential and massive component of the work’s pictorial presentation.”<sup>317</sup> At the same time, the *figurable* “stands opposed to what we habitually understand by ‘figurative representation.’ just as the *visual* moment, which it makes happen, stands opposed to, or rather is an obstacle to, an incision in, a symptom of, the ‘normal’ regime of the visual world, a regime wherein we think we know what we are seeing, which is to say wherein we know how to name every appearance that it pleases the eye to capture.”<sup>318</sup> Thus, for Didi-Huberman the white wall of the fresco is more than a simple, painted object; it is an *event*, a powerful surface of paradoxes that amounts to a *symptom*. Didi-Huberman uses the Freudian concept of the *symptom* – in an altered, non-clinical way – as a visual means that *opens representation* in Fra Angelico’s painting to the mystery of divine incarnation; it manifests as a “knot of an arborescence of associations or conflicting meanings.”<sup>319</sup>

In light of Didi-Huberman’s conceptualization of the white wall in Fra Angelico’s Annunciation fresco, one can proceed to interpret Ribera’s handling of the dark surface in his painting of the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* as a symptom of the divine mystery, which is made visible by the slicing of the executioner and the cut of Bartholomew’s pose on the obscure surface. In Ribera’s painting, the dark surface achieves its potentiality through the cut performed by Saint Bartholomew’s hands, slicing the dark surface from the lower left side to the upper right corner of the painting. This cut follows the trajectory of the cut executed by the executioner on Bartholomew’s right forearm. The violence inflicted on the figure of the saint, turns his body into a cut itself, a wound that slices the surface of darkness. In turn, the transformation of the saint’s body into a cut/wound not only turns him into a martyr, but works the potentiality of the painting into a symptom of the divine mystery by stripping the image bare to a dark surface. This move is reminiscent of what Didi-Huberman calls *figuration* – the exact opposite of *figurative* – a rejection of mimetic representation by hiding

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<sup>316</sup> “The history of art, a “modern” phenomenon par excellence – because born in the sixteenth-century – has wanted to bury the ancient problematic of the *visual* and *figurable* by giving new ends to artistic images, ends that place the visual under the tyranny of the *visible* (and of imitation), the *figurable* under the tyranny of the *legible* (and of iconology).” Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 8.

<sup>317</sup> *Idem*, 17.

<sup>318</sup> *Idem*, 28.

<sup>319</sup> *Idem*, 19.

or displacing, a *dissemblance*.<sup>320</sup> Didi-Huberman argues that such attitudes are not ‘popular’ but rather learned:

It is that of a negative theology. It requires that one strip oneself bare so as to strip the image bare, the most difficult thing henceforth being to reach the lowest level and, like Christ himself, humiliate oneself in the dissemination of pure material events, in order to give oneself the chance of apprehending the unique aspirational, *anagogic* force of the desire to go as high as possible...<sup>321</sup>

Therefore, one can interpret the simplicity and force of Ribera’s dark surface as analogously evoking – as Didi-Huberman suggests – Christ’s simple and humble presence on earth. It draws analogous associations with Pseudo-Dionysius notion of “dissimilar similarities” – a logic that follows a non-representational system builds on paradoxical relationships of displacement and trancelike associations, rather than figurative, iconological depictions.<sup>322</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius talks about “dissimilar similarity” between God and humans, arguing that: “In [dissimilar similarity] one can behold the sacred forms attributed to it by the scriptures, (...) so that we may be uplifted by way of the mysterious representations to their divine simplicity.”<sup>323</sup> The simplicity of Ribera’s dark surface therefore presents viewers with a material symptom of the divine mystery as God is made present at the scene of Bartholomew’s martyrdom, at the same time as he withdraws from human history, a withdrawal into silence from the place of humanity. The condition of divine presence and withdrawal leaves viewers bewildered as the encounter with the divine is not offered by this painting as something readily resolved. On the contrary, far from offering a stable, resolute, and comfortable relationship with the divine, Ribera’s painting poses it in terms of a demanding, discrepant, problematic, even violent, tormenting act. Indeed, the dark surface problematizes the relationship between God and humanity in terms of open, unlocked contradictions, resisting in delivering a straightforward answer. Thus, the dark surface remains an obscure symptom of divine presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, transcendence and immanence. It

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<sup>320</sup> For a discussion on figuration and dissemblance see: Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico. Dissemblance and Figuration*, University of Chicago Press, 1995, 3.

<sup>321</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 201.

<sup>322</sup> Didi-Huberman made a similar association between Fra Angelico’s lower panel of Madonna of the Shadows (c.1440-1450; Monastery of San Marco, Florence). See Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico*, 6, and *passim*; and *Confronting Images*, 200-205.

<sup>323</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names,” in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, Ed. John Farina, 1987, II. 117AC.

positions the painting within a double movement analogous to cataphatic and apophatic theologies, between figurative and figuration, semblance and dissemblance, everything staged on the surface, activated by the succession of cuts or openings operated by the saint's figure.



## Chapter Three: Creation at the Limit

'Why do you tear me from myself?'  
Oh, what is my repentance!  
Oh, a flute is not worth all that!  
Despite his cries, his skin is torn off his whole body;  
(..) his naked muscles become visible;  
a convulsive movement trembles the veins,  
lacking their covering of skin.  
Ovid, *Metamorphoses*<sup>324</sup>

### Introduction

In this chapter, I explore Ribera's two paintings of Apollo flaying Marsyas by taking as a starting point the problem of touch.<sup>325</sup> I argue that Ribera's depiction of Apollo's gesture of flaying draws attention to the nature of touch as being essentially paradoxical, revealing its contradictory nature by simultaneously performing two diametrically opposing actions. The paintings fulfil their *raison d'être* in touch by virtue of their subject matter and the particular artistic manner in which they are executed.<sup>326</sup> Ribera's technique constitutes an important

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<sup>324</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, Charles Martin trans., W.W. Norton, 2004, 6:386-390.

<sup>325</sup> The subject of Apollo flaying Marsyas is one that Ribera returned to through his career. An early depiction of the myth was praised by Giulio Cesare Capaccio in his *Il forastiero* (1634) in Gaspar Roomer's collection, while in the mid 1640s we know that a canvas with the same subject was executed for the marquis de Serra. See: Giulio Cesare Capaccio, *Il forastiero*, Napoli 1634, ed. Stefano De Mieri and Maria Toscano, PDF - published: May 2007, [http://www.memofonte.it/home/files/pdf/guide\\_capaccio.pdf](http://www.memofonte.it/home/files/pdf/guide_capaccio.pdf), 575. The two existing versions that form the focus of the present chapter are both dated in 1637, so neither of them can be the paintings mentioned above. See: Whitfield, Martineau, *Painting in Naples*, 229. Historically speaking, do not know much about Ribera's existing paintings of the myth, except that the canvas currently in Naples was part of the marquis del Vasto's collection until it was later acquired by the Museo di Capodimonte. Sanchez, Spinosa, *Jusepe de Ribera*, 119.

<sup>326</sup> On the subject of Apollo and Marsyas see the following ancient sources: Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, with introduction and comment by William S. Anderson, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1997, 382-400; Apollodorus, *Scriptor Bibliothecae*, Scarpi, Paolo, Ciani, Maria Grazia, Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, 1996, 4.2; Herodotus, *Histories*, transl. by Aubrey de Sélincourt, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1972, vii.26.3. For the importance of the myth in Renaissance Italy, as well as for the different interpretations and meanings attributed to it – in particular the Pythagorean and Platonic interpretations – see: Edith Wyss, *The Myth of Apollo and Marsyas in the Art of the Italian Renaissance: An Inquiry into the Meaning of Images*, University of Delaware Press, 1996.

feature that underlines the following analysis by emphasising the role played by the artist's exploration of the potentiality of his impasto in relation to materiality and corporeality. My argument proceeds in two stages. In the first part, I will look at Ribera's *Apollo and Marsyas* (Fig.5) (1637; Capodimonte Museum, Naples) in order to argue that Apollo's touch is engaged in concurrently creating, or making and destroying, or unmaking the body of Marsyas. This conflicting state of affairs originates in an interesting patch of paint that seems to dissolve Marsyas's body into a dark tree trunk, only to be literally opened up by Apollo's flaying. I suggest that Apollo's touch can be interpreted as creating Marsyas's body through its very destruction. This implies that Apollo's touch acts as the original gesture that turns the patch of paint as matter into active materiality that presents itself as Marsyas's body.

In the second part of the chapter, I will consider Apollo's touch from Ribera's *Apollo and Marsyas* (Fig.6) (1637; Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels) as a conflicting gesture that directs the viewer's attention towards the inside of Marsyas' body, only to reveal its density and mass as surface. This interpretation draws attention to the subtle dialectic at play between the inside and outside of Marsyas' body, as well as the relationship between the satyr and the painting itself. There are two moves embedded within this particular form of touch: the first points towards the density of the painting in order to give it a sense of corporeal presence – signalling a move to interiority as interior and depth – and the second drawing attention to the painting's ultimate surface like nature – a final move of exteriority. The second move towards exteriority and surface destroys the fiction of the first move, revealing the potential of the pictorial surface to effect meaning and interpretation beyond a binary of interior/exterior.

## Touching Materiality

Bernardo de' Dominici in his *Vite dei Pittori, Scultori, ed Architetti Napolitani* (1742) attends to the physicality of Ribera's paintings as a source of corporeality and bodily presence:

Is it truly a wonder [meraviglia] to see how, with his dense impasto so full of colour, he would not only turn [girare] the muscles of the human body, but every small part of the bones and of the hands and feet, always being finished with an unattainable degree of diligence and mastery.<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> Così dunque Giuseppe accoppiando alla fiera del Caravaggio lo scelto del naturale, ed il bel colore della scuola lombarda, ne compose la maniera che fu sua propria; e fa veramente meraviglia il veder come col suo

In de' Dominici's passage, Ribera's depiction of flesh involved a technique where the medium reveals the complex nature of its surface by revolving the depiction of bodies, a phenomenon that produces movement and life. According to him, Ribera's figures are not only furnished with skin – the superficial stratum – but also with flesh, muscles, veins, and bones; to be precise, the artist's impasto does not merely show the surface of the figure's body, but also brings to the surface their internal structure by turning them inside out. De' Dominici purposefully used the verb *girare*, meaning “turn” or “revolve,” to describe the manner in which the impasto changes dead matter into active materiality, the dynamics between canvas and paint into flesh and skin. Through the use of the impasto, Ribera worked the potentiality of materials into corporeality and physicality.

In Italian the term *impastare* means ‘to slur,’ ‘to make a dough,’ or ‘to mixt,’ while the verb *impastare* translates variously as ‘to blur,’ ‘to mould,’ or ‘paste.’ The term impasto therefore describes a manner of handling materials that is not restricted to painting, but extends to baking and making pots. At first sight, the reference to pottery and baking may be interpreted as being somewhat unflattering for an artist in the seventeenth century through the allusion to mere craftsmanship. On the other hand, it can suggest a similar modality of working materials where the artist interchangeably uses the tools of his profession with his bare hands and fingers. The impasto allows viewers to see the strokes of the brush and the imprint of the hand and fingers; it allows them to trace the artist's workmanship and, in so doing, makes them aware of his creative touch. The impasto also brings the rough texture of the canvas to the fore, the thick paint and layered surfaces, raising awareness of the picture's opaque materiality.

In addition, the allusion to potting can also be understood as referring to the sculptural and material qualities of Ribera's paintings. It can point to the practice of sculptors making *bozzetti* – a small scale model of a sculpture – as well as to the pictorial practice of creating textured surfaces by means of adding coatings of paint. Ribera's handling of the impasto reveals an intimate relationship between the pictorial technique and the working of a sculpture. The successive layers of paint of the impasto create a sculptural surface, where the paint is not merely applied on the flat canvas, but moulded onto it. Ribera's impasto takes on sculptural

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impasto così denso di colore egli facesse girare non solamente i muscoli del corpo umano, ma eziando le parti minute dell'ossa delle mani e de' piedi, i quali si veggono finiti con diligenza e maestria inarrivabile. Laonde così fondato nel disegno, nel colore, e nel naturale più nobile, espose con occasione [...] un quadro [...] che rappresentava un San Bartolomeo scorticato, ove nella persona del santo espresso una divota costanza, e in quella de' carnefici la perfidia e la crudeltà.' My translation. De' Dominici, 1742, 115.

qualities reminiscent of Michelangelo's *non-finito*. Literally meaning "unfinished" or "not finished," the *non-finito* refers to the technique where the artist intentionally leaves certain areas or the entirety of a work in an unpolished, rough state. This method emphasizes the unevenness of the surface, while suggesting an unfinished viewing and interpretative engagement that allows the artwork to continue in the imagination of the viewer in decidedly unfixed ways; indeed, the *non-finito* also suggests "infinity" (as 'never finished'). Moreover, the *non-finito* allows viewer to trace the artist's phases of execution by revealing the artworks artifice, while creating an awareness of the dynamic interaction between the artist and artwork. The *non-finito* was predominantly associated with Michelangelo's sculptures – and thus closely related to the master's *terribilità* and *furore*. The artist's *Saint Matthew* (Fig.43) (1506; Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence) as well as his series of "slaves" for the Tomb of Julius II, for instance, *The Awakening Slave* (Fig.44) (1525-30; Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence), show the human figure engaged in a strenuous effort of surfacing from the undistinguished masses of marble.<sup>328</sup> Michelangelo's method of pulling out or extracting bodies from a base mass through his "divine" touch can be fruitfully contrasted with Ribera's *tremendo impasto* or Titian's *pittura di macchia*.

In the following analysis, I argue that Apollo's touch – his gesture of opening up Marsyas's leg – sets into motion the painting's materiality by working its potentiality into corporeality. At the core of my interpretation lies a conceptualization of touch as paradoxically creating or making and destroying or unmaking. There are three main forms of touch that are set to work within Ribera's paintings. The paradoxical touch of Apollo, the touch of the artist made visible by the impasto, and the tactile relationship developed between painting and viewer elicited by the impasto and Apollo's touch.

### **Pictorial Corporeality**

I turn to Titian's *pittura di macchia* in order to highlight the originality of Ribera's use of impasto. By contrasting Ribera's approach with Titian I aim to show how similar techniques of painting in open surfaces, thick glazes, and broad brushstrokes deliver different pictorial effects and conceptions of corporeality. Despite the fact that Titian's method was discussed in sixteenth and seventeenth-century literature mostly in terms of its effect on the beholders,

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<sup>328</sup> The bibliography on Michelangelo's *non-finito* is extensive. For key studies, see: Pietro Sanpaolesi, "Il "Non finito" di Michelangelo in scultura e architettura," *Atti del Convegno di Studi Michelangioleschi*, 1966, 228-240; Teddy Brunius, *Michelangelo's Non Finito*, Victor Pettersons, 1967; Creighton Gilbert, "What Is Expressed in Michelangelo's "Non-Finito"," *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 24, No. 48, 2003, 57-64.



today's scholarship tends to focus more on questions of style and finish.<sup>329</sup> As Thomas Puttfarcken pointed out, Titian's *The Flaying of Marsyas* (Fig.18) (1570-1576; National Museum, Kroměříž) is frequently weighed against *Tarquinius and Lucretia* (Fig.45) (1571; The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge) in terms of *finito* or *non-finito*, despite the fact that the former is signed and the surface well defined; Thomas Puttfarcken arguing that some areas of the painting reached a degree of finish which could not have been developed any further.<sup>330</sup> On the other hand, an exploration of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writings reveals a widespread interest in Titian's *pittura di macchia* as a source of corporeality and physicality.<sup>331</sup> Amongst the first reactions to Titian's style of painting is Giorgio Vasari's well-known paragraph from his *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori da Cimabue insino a' tempi nostri* (1550), where he observed:

All these pictures are in the possession of the Catholic King, for the vivacity that Titian has given to the figures with his colours, making them natural and as if alive. It is true, however, that the method of work which he employed in these last pictures is no little different from the method of his youth, for the reason that the early works are executed with a certain delicacy and a diligence that are incredible, and they can be seen both from near and from a distance, and these last works are executed with bold strokes and dashed off with a broad and even coarse sweep of the brush, insomuch that from near little can be seen, but from a distance they appear perfect. [...] And this method, so used, is judicious, beautiful, and astonishing, because it makes pictures

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<sup>329</sup> For the most recent comprehensive discussion on Titian's late style, see: Sylvia Ferino-Pagden ed., *Late Titian and the Sensuality of Painting*, Marsilio, 2008; Johanna Woods-Marsden ed., *Titian: Materiality, Likeness, Istorica*, Brepols Publishers, 2007.

<sup>330</sup> Puttfarcken, *Titian and Tragic Painting*, 193-194.

<sup>331</sup> There are a few solid studies on the matter, such as: Jodi Cranson's (2010) book on Titian and the use of materiality to address issues of desire, making and unmaking and violence. Tomas Puttfarcken, (2005) draws attention to the way Titian's loose brushstrokes acts upon the eye by urging it to explore what seem to be unsteady and therefore moving connections between figures and background. Elsewhere, David Rosand (1999) considers Titian's *pittura di macchia* as a method design to transform colour and paint into a physical substitute for flesh, whereas Daniela Bohde (2004, 63-89) points out that Titian's use of the technique is meant to express the decomposition of the physical body.

appear alive and painted with great art, but conceals the labour.<sup>332</sup>

Vasari showed his appreciation of Titian's technique and connected it to corporeal presence and aliveness – the highest praise an artist could have received at the time. Even so, it is clear that Vasari sensed the danger presented by the impasto, with its emphasis placed on the physicality of the medium over its illusionist qualities, and thus recommended that the viewers should take a step back in order to *properly* enjoy the paintings. To be precise, an up-close view of the paintings reveals, through the sketchiness of its execution, the physical stuff from which it was made, whilst the distance of space created a coherent, ideal illusion, ultimately preserving the integrity of the mimetic idea.<sup>333</sup> On a different level, Vasari's observations are interesting since they point to another significant aspect – that of organizing the viewers experience in an objective manner; namely, the *pittura di macchia* forces viewers to take a physical attitude towards the paintings by making them move backward and forward, side to side, change the angle in order to discover their multiple facets and values. In relation to this point, Frederick Ilchman mentioned that Titian's reconsidered the roles of painter and beholder, by changing the viewer's position from passive observer to an actual participant that completes the scene.<sup>334</sup> Accordingly, the *pittura di macchia* requires a corporeal engagement where the viewer has to move in order to interact with the painting; seeing becomes therefore a matter of the body.

Vasari's scrutiny of Titian's *pittura di macchia* can be fruitfully contrasted with Pietro Aretino's reaction at the sight of his own portrait in order to emphasize the range of attitudes towards the artist's technique. If Vasari's appreciation of Titian's style is followed by a cautious reluctance, Aretino's admiration is joined by a blazing irony.<sup>335</sup> *The Portrait of Pietro Aretino* (Fig.46) (1545; Palazzo Pitti, Florence) – a possible commission for Cosimo I de'

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<sup>332</sup> "Le quali pitture sono appresso al re Cattolico tenute molto care, per la vivacità che ha dato Tiziano alle figure con i colori in farle quasi vive e naturali. Ma è ben vero che il modo di fare che tenne in queste ultime è assai diferente dal fare suo da giovane: con ciò sia che le prime son condotte con una certa finezza e diligenza incredibile, e da essere vedute da presso e da lontano, e queste ultime, condotte di colpi, tirate via di grosso e con macchie, di maniera che da presso non si possono vedere e di lontano appaiono perfette. (...) E questo modo sì fatto è giudizioso, bello e stupendo, perché fa parere vive le pitture e fatte con grande arte, nascondendo le fatiche." Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, 457-8.

<sup>333</sup> On the issue of distance in seeing Titian's paintings, see: Philip Sohm, *Pittoresco: Marco Boschini, his Critics, and their Critiques of Painterly Brushwork in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Italy*, Cambridge University Press, 1991, 43-53.

<sup>334</sup> Frederick Ilchman ed., *Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese: Rivals in Renaissance Venice*, MFA Publications, 2009, 21-41.

<sup>335</sup> On Aretino and Titian, see: Luba Freedman, *Titian's Portraits Through Aretino's Lens*, Penn State University Press, 1995.

Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany – is among the first paintings to show clear traces of Titian’s growing interest in the potential of the impasto. When Aretino saw the painting, it is reported that he avowed:”it breathes, pulsates and moves the spirit, in the same way I make [present] myself in real life.”<sup>336</sup> Despite this cry of admiration, Aretino goes on to ironically point out that if he had paid Titian more money his portrait would have had a higher degree of finish.<sup>337</sup> Aretino’s observation that Titian’s finish was directly related to pecuniary matters may not be completely unfounded; still, Aretino’s located the strong sense of aliveness and bodily presence in the materiality of the painting, brought forward by the impasto.<sup>338</sup>

Vasari and Aretino reactions to Titian’s paintings are significant because they locate the source of corporeality in the painting’s working of materiality through the impasto. However, both writers seem oblivious to, or ignore the process through which this effect is achieved. As shown above, Vasari’s recommended method of seeing Titian’s paintings involves a physical engagement, where one is advised to move back and forward to admire the painted surface. Although Vasari’s reasons for advising this kind of interaction had everything to do with the preservation of the mimetic idea, his observations paradoxically point beyond his much cherished mimetic visual ideal to a corporeal, tactile way of interacting with the painted surfaces.

Lodovico Dolce, in his *Dialogue on Painting*, commented on the artist’s technique: “one can truthfully say that every stroke of the brush belongs with those strokes that nature is in the habit of making with its hand.”<sup>339</sup> Dolce’s observation suggests that during Titian’s lifetime the technique was understood in terms of his touch, a gesture that calls to mind the creating touch of nature. Referring to Titian’s *Venus and Adonis* (Fig.47) (1553; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), Dolce mentions that it is so vividly depicted:

that there is no man so sharp of sight and discernment that he does not believe when he sees her that she is alive...for if a marble statue could, with the shafts of its beauty, penetrate to the marrow of a young man so that he left his stain there, then

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<sup>336</sup> “respira, batte i polsi e muove lo spirito nel modo ch'io mi faccio in la vita.” Aretino, in Cecilia Gibellini, *Tiziano, I Classici dell'arte*, Rizzoli, 2003, 44.

<sup>337</sup> “And if only I should have counted out more scudi for him, the clothes would have been actually shining and soft and firm as are actual satin, velvet and brocade.” *Idem*.

<sup>338</sup> For Titian and money, see: Philip Sohm, *The Artist Grows Old: The Aging of Art and Artists in Italy, 1500-1800*, Yale University Press, 2007, 84-92.

<sup>339</sup> “puossi con verità dire, che ogni colpo di penello sia de que' colpi, che suol far di sua mano la natura.” Dolce, quoted from: Roskill, *Dolce's "Aretino"*, 214-5.

what should this figure do which is made of flesh, which is beauty itself, which seems to breath?<sup>340</sup>

By returning to the terms of the *paragon*, Dolce claims that Titian's painting surpasses classical sculpture as an object of touch, by describing Venus' figure in terms of living, breathing flesh. Dolce's evocation of the tactile sense therefore, sets Titian's Venus within a framework of an intense sensual engagement usually reserved for sculpture.<sup>341</sup> This move turns touch into the paramount mode of interaction between viewer and the rough painted surface, while vision loses its predominance. The surface of the painting, the process of its creation, and the response that it induces are all evoked in terms of a succession of touches, simultaneously invited and bestowed. One can distinguish a strong sense of desire, possession, and craving embedded within Titian's manner of painting and working of materiality.<sup>342</sup> As David Rosand mentioned, Titian's technique of leaving visible the marks of his brush marks a critical point in the development of a so-called "aesthetic of the touch," in which "we attend closely to the inflected pleasures of the brush, to the nuances of direction and speed of application, to the meanings of thick impasto, of crisply bounded touches or the open attenuations of the more lightly dragged brush".<sup>343</sup> In this respect, Rosand's interpretation of Titian's *The Rape of Europa* (Fig.48) (1560-1562; Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston) draws attention to the way "her ample body offers an unusually rich feast to the senses of sight and touch; [...] Sight and touch follow and delight in the alternating sensations of veil and flesh."<sup>344</sup>

Although it remained highly controversial during his lifetime, Titian's *pittura di macchia* became so influential that artist such as Tintoretto and Veronese appropriated it in their own unique way, thus making it the trade mark of Venetian painting.<sup>345</sup> A century later, Marco Boschini, in his *Le minere della pittura veneziana* (1664), describes in some detail Giacomo Palma il Giovane's recollection of Titian's method of working:

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<sup>340</sup> "non si truova huomo tanto acuto di vista e di giudicio; che veggendola non la creda viva...se una statua di marmo pote in modo con gli stimoli della sua bellezza penetrar nelle midolle d'un giovane, ch'ei vi lasciò la macchia: hor, che dee far questa, che è di carne; ch'è la beltà istessa; che par, che spiri?" Dolce, quoted from: Roskill, *Dolce's "Aretino"*, 215-7.

<sup>341</sup> Stoichita discusses touch as sensual caress animating sculptures in relation to the Pygmalion myth: see Stoichita, *The Pygmalion Myth*, 17-18.

<sup>342</sup> For an rich and interesting discussion on Titian's *pittura di macchia* in relation to materiality and desire see: Craston, *The Muddied Mirror*, 21-46.

<sup>343</sup> David Rosand, *The Meaning of the Mark: Leonardo and Titian*, Spencer Museum of Art. University of Kansas, 1988, 49, 79.

<sup>344</sup> Rosand, "Titian and the Eloquence of the Brush", *Artibus et Historiae*, no. 3, 1981, 94.

<sup>345</sup> For an excellent study on the interaction between Titian, Tintoretto and Veronese, see: Ilchman, *Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese*.

Titian was indeed the most excellent of all those who painted because his brush always created an expression [extrusion] of life. Giacomo Palma il Giovane [...], who himself enjoyed the good fortune of receiving Titian's wise advice, told me that the latter laid such mass of paint on his pictures that it served him (so to speak) as a bed or base in expressing what he wanted to do. I myself have seen such determined brushwork in a thick mass of colour. At times, a streak of pure red earth served him (so to speak) as a halftone. At other times he dipped the same brush that he has used for lead white in red, black or yellow, thus making a relief of light parts. And by following this saying he was able to create the promise of a magnificent figure with only four strokes of his brush.<sup>346</sup>

Far from treating Titian's *pittura di macchia* as unfinished or the product of minor studio hands, Boschini's account regards the master's loose brushstrokes as a lively technique of creation that provokes a strong sense of corporeality and life. By following Boschini's description of the process, it becomes clearer that Titian's technique involves sculpting, or modelling the surface of the painting through the thick application of paint. Boschini, following the path of Aretino and Dolce, locates the sense of corporeality or strong physical presence in the materiality of the picture, in its canvas, patches of paint, and roughness of execution.

After having laid these precious foundations, he propped the paintings against a wall and sometimes left them there for several months without looking at them again. And when he wanted to apply his brush to them once more, he examined them as rigorously as though they were his greatest enemies, to see if he could discover any mistakes. And if he found anything that was not in strict conformity with his intentions, he proceeded

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<sup>346</sup> "Tiziano veramente è stato il più eccellente di quanti hanno dipinto: poiché i suoi pennelli sempre partorivano espressioni di vita. Mi diceva Giacomo Palma il Giovane (...). che questo abbassava i suoi quadri con una tal massa di colori, che servivano (come dire) per far letto, a base alle espressioni, che sopra poi li doveva fabbricare; e ne ho veduti anch'io de' colpi risoluti con pennellate massicce di colori, alle volte d'un striscio di terra rossa schietta, e gli serviva (come a dire) per meza tinta: altre volte con una pennellata di biacca, con lo stesso pennello, tinto di rossi, di nero e di giallo, formava il rilievo d'un chiaro, e con queste massime di dottrina faceva comparire in quattro pennellate la promessa d'una rara figura." Boschini, 1664, quoted from (altered) Ferino-Pagden, *Late Titian and the Sensuality of Painting*, 21-22.

like a good surgeon treating a patient, healing an injury, reducing a swelling, adjusting an arm, or setting a bone if he did not like that way it lay, paying no attention to the pain he was causing or to any such thing. Working in this manner and reshaping the figures, he reduced them to the most perfect symmetry for representing the beauty of nature and of art; and then, having done it, he laid his hands on the next one, even before the first was dry, and did the same to it. Gradually he covered these quintessential extracts with living flesh, going over them many times, so that only breath was lacking from them to come to life.<sup>347</sup>

Boschini's account also reveals the extraordinary bond that appears between the painter and his painting. Titian developed a physically powerful relationship with the materials, a situation made apparent by his abandonment – for the most part – of the use of the brush in favour of his bare hands and fingers. This is a highly significant detail that betrays an entire mode of experiencing art, one that goes further than the obvious sense of sight into the realm of tactile values. Touch here seems to be matching sight as the sense able of interpreting presence and existence.<sup>348</sup> It is through touch, Titian's touch and the touch of the viewer's gaze, that the corporeality of the figures can be negotiated into being. Therefore, Titian's attitude towards painting echoes a phenomenological understanding of art given the emphasis put on experiencing figures primarily in corporeal terms, testing them through touch, skin on skin, and flesh on flesh.

Further on, Boschini bonded the corporeality of the figures with the physicality of the materials and Titian's exceptional technique, leaving aside Vasari's idealistic concept of illusionism and mimesis.

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<sup>347</sup> "Dopo aver formati questi preziosi fondamenti, rivoglieva i quadri alla muraglia, e gli lasciava alle volte qualche mese senza vederli: e quando poi di nuovo vi voleva applicare i pennelli, con rigorosa osservanza li esaminava, come se fossero stati i suoi capitali nemici, per vedere se in loro poteva trovar effetto, e scoprendo alcuna cosa che non concordasse al delicato suo intendimento, come chirurgo benefico medicava l'infermo, se faceva di bisogno spolpargli qualche gonfiezza o soprabondanza di carne, radrizzandogli un braccio, se nella forma l'ossatura non fosse così aggiustata, se un piede nella positura avesse preso attitudine disconcia, mettendolo a lungo, senza compatir al suo dolore, e cose simili. Così operando, e riformando quelle figure, le riduceva nella più perfetta simmetria che potesse rappresentare il bello della natura, e dell'arte; e dopo fatto questo, ponendo le mani ad altro, fino che quello fosse asciutto, faceva lo stesso; e di quando in quando poi copriva di carne viva quegli estratti di quinta essenza, riducendoli con molte repliche, che solo il respirare loro mancava [...]" Boschini, quoted from (altered) Ferino-Pagden, *Late Titian and the Sensuality of Painting*, 21-22.

<sup>348</sup> For a collection of studies on the sense of Touch in early modern culture, see Elizabeth Harvey ed., *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

He never painted a figure in advance and he used to say that anyone who improvised their song could never compose a verse that was either profound or well made [adjusted]. He did the final retouching by rubbing with his fingers, blending the highlights into the halftones, and one shade with another; sometimes he used only his finger to put a streak of black in a corner to make it stronger, or he used a stroke of red like a drop of blood to give liveliness to the surface, and thus he brought his animated figures into perfection.<sup>349</sup>

The abandonment of the intermediary tools emphasizes Titian's understanding of the act of painting as a material embodied experience, rather than an intellectual pursuit. For Titian painting a figure is a matter of processing materials, of working the paint directly onto the canvas, rather than resorting to preparatory drawings. Boschini emphasizes that Titian looked down on the idea that a figure had to be prepared in advanced – the classical Florentine model – considering it a sign of impoverishment for the art. Titian created figure *alla prima*, gave them texture and consistency so as to “give liveliness to the surface,” accomplished through touching materiality and conferring corporeality.<sup>350</sup> So powerful is the sense of bodily presence that Titian's strokes of red appears in Boschini's account as drops of blood, while the mass layers of paint present themselves as flesh and skin. This aspect can be linked with the suggestion – in the first paragraph of Boschini's text – that Titian treated the canvas as a bed supporting the thickness and weight of the bodies depicted.

However, Boschini goes further than any of his predecessors by emphasizing the idea of the artist as god-like creator, where Titian models figures in a manner comparable to that in which God created the first humans.

And Palma assured me, in truth, that in the end he painted his pictures more with his fingers than with his brush. And working in this manner, he knew what he was doing: he wanted to imitate

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<sup>349</sup> “[...] né mai fece una figura alla prima, e soleva dire che chi canta all'improvviso non può formare verso erudito né ben aggiustato. Ma il condimento degli ultimi ritocchi era andar di quando in quando unendo con sfregazzi delle dita negli estremi de' chiari, avvicinandosi alle meze tinte, ed unendo una tinta con l'altra; altre volte con un striscio delle dita pure poneva un colpo d'oscuro in qualche angolo, per rinforzarlo, oltre qualche striscio di rossetto, quasi gocciola di sangue, che invigoriva alcun sentimento superficiale, e così andava a riducendo a perfezione le sue animate figure [...]” Boschini, quoted from (altered) Ferino-Pagden, *Late Titian and the Sensuality of Painting*, 21-22.

<sup>350</sup> This practice echoes the ancient story of Pygmalion, see: Stoichita, *Pygmalion effect*, 2008.

the task of the Great Creator in forming the human body with his hands from earth.<sup>351</sup>

The suggestion reinforces the idea that by evoking the divine act of creation, the artist is able to create figures that bring life to mere matter. It also suggests an interpretation of paint as earth, matter. The act of creation is accomplished here through touch – not only the touch of the brush on the canvas, but also of his fingers and hands. The distinct corporeality assigned to Titian's figures, draws attention to the artist's interaction with his own paintings in terms of a physical contact with another body. The sensorial, tactile relationship developed between painter and painting reveals the latter's distinctive corporeality. That being said, it is sufficient to point out that Titian developed a complex phenomenological approach to painting, one that positions the sense of corporeal presence in the very materiality of the pictures, created and experienced through touch.

### **Making and Unmaking**

Ribera's painting of *Apollo and Marsyas* (Fig.5) (1637; Capodimonte Museum, Naples) problematizes the relationship between making and unmaking in the patch of dark paint around the satyr's legs and open wound (Fig.49). On close scrutiny of Marsyas' tightly fastened legs to the trunk of a tree, one sees that from the knees up, the satyr's legs decidedly lose their definition, becoming indistinguishable from the tree. They seem to fade or even merge with the dim pigments of the trunk. By visually trailing the depiction of Marsyas's body from his head and torso from the foreground of the image, to his legs tied upwards to the tree in the middle-ground, a serious crisis arises in understanding what happens to the satyr's body. As the various compositional elements become impossible to differentiate from one another, the entire area succumbs to what appears to be a large patch of dark paint. This patch presents itself as nothing more than what it is – a scrap of paint on canvas, made possible by Ribera's technique of painting with bold brushstrokes and opened surfaces. Although it may first seem trivial in comparison to the rest of the picture's surface, this patch effectively collapses the

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<sup>351</sup> 'Ed il Palma mi attestava, per verità, che nei finimenti dipingeva più con le dita che co' pennelli. E veramente (chi ben ci pensa) egli con ragione così operò; perché, volendo imitare l'operazione del Sommo Creatore, faceva di bisogno osservare che egli pure, nel formar questo corpo umano, lo formò di terra con le mani. Questo serva per un poco di abbozzo del mio rozzo dire, per riferire quei favorevoli racconti, che mi furono da quel sì erudito Palma partecipati.' Boschini, 1664, quoted from (altered) Ferino-Pagden, *Late Titian and the Sensuality of Painting*, 22.



traditional system of reference, thereby resisting interpretation.<sup>352</sup> For that reason, I take this patch to act as a challenge to the idea of *mimesis* and constricted iconographic reading of the picture, at the same time as creating the premise for a different interpretation in terms of matter, materiality and corporeality. The patch also brings into question the problem of making – and, as we shall see, unmaking – of the picture, as the surface’s perceptible impasto insinuates the idea of the artist as god-like creator bringing into existence the picture as a body.

The patch brings a moment of disruption onto the surface of the picture by proclaiming itself not as a figure, object, or surrounding, but as matter; deformed, unmade matter. The association between the patch in Ribera’s painting and the idea of matter functions on a deeper level as the Greek word used by Aristotle to refer to matter is *ύλη*, *hyle* – meaning, among other things, wood, or tree. The mark in which Marsyas’ body dissolves is therefore not merely a tree, but a tree as a scrap of matter. Aristotle discusses matter in relation to form and change in the category of substance. Substance in Aristotle’s view is made up of form and matter. Unlike Plato, Aristotle does not place a sharp emphasis on the superiority of form over matter, although he does separate between the two in a passage discussing the making of a brass sphere.<sup>353</sup> For Aristotle, matter is inert and undifferentiated, it is shaped by form to which it only gives presence; it has no effect over form. As such, matter appears as a virtual substratum of transformation, that is, of changing form. Therefore, since for Aristotle matter is formless, form must be imposed upon matter in order to give it substance; this can only be achieved through the agency of an exterior factor, a god-like creator. That being said, Aristotle’s conception of matter is illuminating here only so far as to prove that what the patch proclaims is indeed its inherent nature of paint as matter – *hyle*, wood. The similarities however stop there as the patch appears to be charged with a certain potentiality rather than being inert and dead, as thought by the popular Aristotelian model.

In a complex argument on the character of details and patches of paint in Johannes Vermeer’s paintings, Georges Didi-Huberman brings into question the apparent, uncomplicated meaning that language and iconographical reading impose upon paintings, by contrasting it with what he sees as the painting’s material status or “the substance paint

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<sup>352</sup> My understanding of “the patch” is indebted to Georges Didi-Huberman’s conceptualization of the term as will be detailed bellow.

<sup>353</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1032.a – 1033.a.

itself.”<sup>354</sup> This resistance is achieved through what Didi-Huberman calls *the patch* – a visual moment that transcends or refuses to give in to mimesis by proclaiming itself as pure matter, stretched across or marked onto the canvas.<sup>355</sup> In his analysis of Vermeer’s painting *The Lacemaker* (Fig.50) (c.1669–70; Louvre Museum, Paris), Didi-Huberman observed that the patch causes “a virtual explosion in the picture;” the patch work’s as blazing flash of a substance and a colour without a well-defined limit; it confronts us with its material opacity and, tempted as we may be to plunge through it, opposes any mimesis likely to be thought of in terms of a ‘product of the glass lens.’<sup>356</sup> The materiality and opacity of the patch therefore defies the conventional mode of interpretation and understanding based on the coherence of the visual – the consistent depiction of the subject – by declaring itself openly as a non-descriptive area that perturbs the subject, object and viewer.

The patch appears here as the site of problems and conflicts; it is the spot of unending contradictions, movements and potentialities. Most significantly, it is the place where the painting’s materiality insists most strongly on the interpretation of the painting. I wish to bring into discussion here Andrew Benjamin’s conceptualization of *mattering*. Benjamin’s interpretation of mattering starts from a materialistic ontology of the work of art where the material object is defined in terms of activity – in other words, the work of art *works*.<sup>357</sup> In this economy, the meaning and interpretation of each artwork depends upon the way matter is made to work – mattering is therefore an essential, prerequisite element for interpreting works of art. In Benjamin’s own words: “to insist on mattering is both to maintain the centrality of matter thought as a locus of activity rather than a merely static event, while at the same time

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<sup>354</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, “The Art of Not Describing: Vermeer – the Detail and the Patch”, *History of the Human Sciences*, 2, 135, 1989, p.135.

<sup>355</sup> In his study on Fra Angelico, Didi-Huberman observes that the (Proustian) term patch in paintings: “is a way of naming those zones, those moments in the painting where the visible vacillates and spills into the visual. It is a way of naming “the cursed part” of painting, the indexical, nondescriptive and dissemblant part. In fact painting often reserve – and this is once more their gift of disconcerting – a part of themselves for negating and clouding what they affirm in the mimetic order. Something in their aspect collapses at that point of dissemblance, a sort of disturbance, comes to reign there as the omnipotence of strangeness. There is nothing metaphysical about this strangeness in itself: it is only the power, the very symptom of painting – the materiality of painting, that is, *color* – color that no longer “colors” objects but rather irrupts and ravages the decorum of the aspect.” Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico*, 9.

<sup>356</sup> Didi-Huberman, “The art of not describing,” 153.

<sup>357</sup> “[...] it is, nonetheless, essential to recognize that intrinsic to artworks is their capacity to work. In place of the static and the substantive centrality is given to what can be described as the object’s workful nature and thus to its active or dynamic quality.” Andrew Benjamin, “Art that Matters: Howley’s Work,” in *Writing Art and Architecture*, re.press, Melbourne, 2010, 98.

holding to the necessity of the particularity of a given work.”<sup>358</sup> Therefore, not only does one need to look closely on how matter is made into mattering, one also needs to take into account the specificity and distinctiveness of each artwork. Benjamin also warns about the simple reduction of materiality to the work’s material presence: “painted presence can be held apart from materiality in so far as the former is straightforwardly concerned with the way in which content is ordered and presented.”<sup>359</sup> Instead, Benjamin argues that “materiality can be understood within painting as the insistence of the medium within the generation of the work’s meaning.”<sup>360</sup> The materiality – or mattering – of the patch of paint in Ribera’s *Apollo and Marsyas* produces the visual stammer which dislocates the traditional categories of interpretation.

Nonetheless, moving on the surface of the patch, one is further amazed by the paradoxical interruption of what ontologically *is* a moment of interruption. The patch itself as a moment of suspension appears to be interrupted by the intense red opening of the wound; the only indicative sign that Marsyas’ legs are still there, or that compositionally they should still be there. This is accomplished through Apollo’s excruciating touch. It is Apollo’s touch that endows the patch of paint with a dynamic materiality, worked out as Marsyas’ corporeality. The materiality of the patch can be interpreted as the staging of matter’s appearance as flesh and skin through touch. Within this line of interpretation, touch becomes the central element of the patch, as the generative act of its liveliness.<sup>361</sup> Touch turns the matter of the patch into materiality; it allows it to insist within the interpretation of the painting, whilst opening up questions on the picture’s temporality. At this point, going back briefly to Andrew Benjamin’s interpretation of touch and materiality will prove constructive for interpreting Apollo’s touch.<sup>362</sup> First of all, Benjamin writes that “the material object, matter as skin or stone, for

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<sup>358</sup> Benjamin, “Colouring Philosophy: Appel, Lyotard and Art’s Work,” in *Critical Horizons: A Journal of Philosophy & Social Theory*, Volume 11, Number 3, 2010, 401.

<sup>359</sup> Benjamin, “Matter’s insistence: Tony Scherman’s Banquo’s Funeral,”

[http://www.tonyscherman.com/catalogues/catalogue\\_html/bonquoenglish.html](http://www.tonyscherman.com/catalogues/catalogue_html/bonquoenglish.html)

<sup>360</sup> Idem. It should be noted that Benjamin’s thinking on the energetic effect of matter in a painting echoes Heidegger’s assertion that matter – *hyle* – is co-responsible for the work of art; see Martin Heidegger, “The question concerning technology,” Harper Torchbooks, 1982.

<sup>361</sup> Indeed, Aristotle in his *De Anima* argues that “the primary form of sense is touch, which belongs to all animals...some classes of animals have all the senses, some only certain of them, others only one, the most indispensable, touch.” *De Anima*, 658, 659. This makes touch the fundamental character of all things living – a characteristic of animal life. However, this doesn’t mean that the patch is itself alive like a human or animal, but that it shares some dynamic characteristics with living things – among the most important being the strong evocation of a desire for tactility.

<sup>362</sup> The following analysis is indebted to Andrew Benjamin study: “Endless Touching: Herder and Sculpture,” in *Aisthesis – pratiche, linguaggi e saperi dell’estetico*, 1/2011, 73- 92.

example, is that which the hand alights.”<sup>363</sup> For Benjamin however, it is important to differentiate between matter’s empirical presence and its materiality by allowing for “the necessity to incorporate the immaterial as part of matter’s presence.”<sup>364</sup> This means that touching – as well as seeing – must also be distinguished from their literal presence; their conceptualization must be opened up if one is to allow “touch to become another modality of seeing.”<sup>365</sup> This complicated problem will be resumed later in this chapter; however for the moment it is sufficient to point out that for Benjamin the action of touching is placing matter in time as well as allowing “matter to become a locus of activity.”<sup>366</sup> Within this framework, Apollo’s touch can be understood to trigger the activity of the patch into a materiality that presents itself as Marsyas’s corporeal presence.

The patch of paint, rendered through Ribera’s *tremendo impasto*, evokes a tactile interaction within and outside of the picture. Within the painting, Apollo’s touch produces a sensation on the patch that is more than a mere tactile-muscular interaction; it provides a sense of presence, making the tactile experience of the patch a form of creative production. The touch of Apollo may look at first sight to be an imposition of form over matter – an interpretation that not only falls back within the Aristotelian model, but can also signal a retreat to the classic Apollonian (ideal, superior) – Dionysian (base, lower) dichotomy. Apollo may seem the ideal of beauty, crispness and divinity at first – especially as he is placed in sharp contrast with Marsyas’ body – nonetheless if one takes a closer look at his hands, it becomes evident that they are dirty. His hands are stained with blood and dirt is stuck beneath his fingernails. As such, this is by no means a perfect ideal act, but a corporeal process of extracting, opening up Marsyas’ body from within the impasto.<sup>367</sup> His touch is grubby and bloody, features that are quite far removed from what someone might expect of a “divine touch.” To further the impression of a soiled process, Ribera painted Apollo’s hands as well as the red wound with a tempered impasto; not as strong as to actually smudge things, but neither as clean as to suggest ideality. This interpretation is coherent with Ribera’s resistance in treating Apollo’s act as an imposition of an ideal form over matter, and instead opting for a working, or handling out of matter into a body.

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<sup>363</sup> *Idem*, 74.

<sup>364</sup> *Idem*, 79.

<sup>365</sup> *Idem*, 74.

<sup>366</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>367</sup> An interesting analogy can be made with Merleau-Ponty’s argument from his essay on Cézanne, where painting – creating – works as a non-philosophical case in point of thinking through perception – “thinking in painting.” See: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” in *Sense and Non-Sense*, Northwestern University Press, 1964, 178.

On the other hand, Apollo's touch is also destructive, rupturing the matter that has transformed under his fingers into Marsyas' body, opening it up and revealing his pulsating red flesh. This suggests Ribera's paradoxical conjoining of two of the most contradictory facets of the tactile sense by presenting Apollo's touch as not only creative, but also destructive. It is as if Marsyas' body is decomposing into a patch of paint as matter, only to be touched by Apollo and worked out into a corporeality that is simultaneously taken apart. Creation is shown here to be also painful and destructive, harbouring an intrinsic violence of the process, and indeed the final result. Apollo's paradoxical touch brings forth the issue of making and unmaking, not only of Marsyas' body but indeed of the whole picture.

### **Creative Touch**

As a point of contrast to Ribera's problematization of the paradoxical nature of touch in his Neapolitan version of *Apollo and Marsyas*, I turn to Diego Velázquez's *Female Figure* (Fig.51), or otherwise known as *Sibyl with Tabula Rasa* (1648, Meadows Museum, Dallas). The picture is one of the Velázquez's most enigmatic works, with the identity of the figure still undecided by art historians. The most commonly accepted interpretation is that the painting depicts a Sybil – an explanation that relies on the image's similarity to the artist's *Juana Pacheco, Wife of the Artist, as a Sibyl?* (Fig.52) (1631-32; Prado Museum, Madrid). Admittedly, the association is quite striking in that both paintings show half-length female figures in profile, holding what seems to be a stone tablet. Large tablets or opened books are the traditional attribute of Sibyls – the ancient Roman prophetesses that, according to Christian tradition, predicted to the Romans the birth of Christ. This interpretation is supported by Jonathan Brown, who suggested that the female figure is in fact Clio, the muse of History – even though he was ultimately forced to admit that the muse's pen – her other traditional attribute apart from the tablet – is conspicuously missing from the image.<sup>368</sup> A different interpretation of the picture – one that is far less popular among art historians – relates the enigmatic female figure to that of Arachne from Velázquez's *The Fable of Arachne*, the so-called *Las Hilanderas*, (Fig.53) (c.1657; Prado Museum, Madrid) in that both figures have a comparatively similar movement, arrangement in space and modelling.<sup>369</sup> This line of thought

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<sup>368</sup> Jonathan Brown, *Velázquez: Painter and Courtier*, Yale University Press, 1986, 181.

<sup>369</sup> August Mayer, *Velázquez; a catalogue raisonné of the pictures and drawings*, Faber and Faber, 1936, no. 570; José Lopez-Rey, *Velázquez: Catalogue Raisonné*, Taschen, 1996, 266, no. 107.

argues that both women are in effect personifications of painting, and that what they hold in their hands is not at all a tablet, but an empty canvas.

Although both explanations have their merits and shortfalls, I suggest that the identity of the figure was purposely blurred, or left opened by the Velázquez to direct attention from iconographic interpretations and focus on the action she is engaged in. However, I would also point out that she can equally be interpreted as the personification of painting not because she resembles – quite unconvincingly – the figure of Arachne, but by virtue of the figure’s emphatic gesture of touching what seems to be a canvas. The absence of the traditional attribute of painting – the brush – is not necessarily an impediment to interpreting the picture as an allegory of the art of painting. As was pointed out earlier, during the sixteenth and seventeenth century it was not unheard of painters to abandon the use of their brush and palette in favor of their hands and fingers. Therefore, it is by no means implausible to suggest that the picture actually depicts the allegory of painting – although one of a particular type where the figure is relinquishing the traditional tools of the craft with the purpose of painting with her hands. For that reason, the figure remains un-fixed and un-fixable, phenomena that should redirect the viewer’s attention to what seems to be the true climax of the picture, the figure’s touch on the canvas/tablet as the origin of creation.

I suggest at this point that Velázquez’s *Female Figure* fulfils its *raison d’être* in touch. Touch is staged here as the summit of the picture, the act through which creation – be it painting or writing – is brought into existence. Looking at the painting, the viewer’s attention is slowly but steadily directed to the figure’s hand engaged in the gesture of touching the empty canvas/tablet with her finger. The figure’s touch bestows meaning and potential to what is virtually a *tabula rasa* – a blank slate. The Latin term *tabula rasa* was used by the Romans to describe the wax tablets used for writing that were subsequently blanked by exposure to heat. The term was also used in philosophy – first by Aristotle – to describe the epistemological assumption that people are born without inherent mental knowledge and that information comes from experience and perception.<sup>370</sup> This theory was largely supported by the Aristotelian tradition throughout the centuries and picked up in the seventeenth century by the empirical philosophers, most notably John Lock.<sup>371</sup> Nonetheless, what is interesting in this case is that the slate, be it a canvas or wax tablet, is in fact an empty surface on which the figure can work out its creation. The identification with the *tabula rasa* tradition also suggests

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<sup>370</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima*, Book III, chp. 4.

<sup>371</sup> For Lock conceptualization of the *tabula rasa*, see: John Lock, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Kenneth P. Winkler ed., Hackett Publishing Company, 1996, 33–36.

the rejection of an idealist interpretation of art where an external idea is imposed upon an inert material – there is no reference to an external design, or *disegno*. Instead it reveals the corporeal and material process involved in creating a work of art. The figure's touch instils energy and dynamics into the materials, turning their materiality into open potentiality.

By focusing on the figure's finger, one can also see that through a few strokes of the brush, Velázquez blurred the distinction between the finger and canvas (Fig.54). As the finger slowly progresses from the palm, its precision becomes increasingly cloudy, to such an extent that when it finally reaches the canvas, it becomes difficult to separate the brushstrokes meant to render the finger from those belonging to the canvas. As if canvas and flesh become one and the same, a single body. On the other hand, the distortion, or vagueness is not complete – as it is, for instance, in Titian's *Apollo Flaying Marsyas* (Fig.18) where parts of Marsyas's body become virtually indistinguishable from the surrounding nature - only evocative, and hence preserving a distinction between the two. Velázquez's treatment of the Sybil's hand and finger is comparable to that effect with Ribera's impasto used to render Apollo's hands inserted within Marsya's body. However, the depiction of touch in Ribera and Velázquez's paintings is not limited to the action within the picture, but extends outwards to the artists themselves; their depictions of the act of touching rendered through a subtle impasto points not only to the creative power of the figures touch, but also to the touch of the artist visible on the surface of the paint.

In closing the analysis of Ribera's *Apollo and Marsyas* (Fig.5) (1637; Capodimonte Museum, Naples), I wish to take a closer look at the relationship between Ribera's tactile manipulation of paint and Apollo's touch. I argue that the visible traces left by the artist on the surface of the canvas establish an organic relationship between Apollo's touch by means of engaging with its creative and destructive nature. The use of the impasto allowed Ribera to offer his reflection on the creative process involved in making a painting, while establishing a subtle parallel between Apollo's paradoxical touch as simultaneously making and unmaking. An interesting parallel can be made here between Ribera's painting and Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas* (c. 1570–1576; National Museum, Kroměříž). As Jodi Craston argued, the figure of Apollo appears to be “absorbed and careful, he seems to act more like a painter with a palette knife, who crates rather than destroys the body with each move of his arm. The productive creator and punitive destroyer inhabit the other, with the direction of the reference shifting between the two: the action of the flayer suggests that of the painter, and vice versa, so that

making and unmaking are inextricably linked if not a form of each other.”<sup>372</sup> Craston’s argument about the shifting identity between artist and god in the paradigm of making and unmaking also points to the idea of the artist as god-like creator. God as *deus artifex* can then be considered being the prototype artist, and the divine genesis the original creation.<sup>373</sup> This idea pervaded fifteenth and early sixteenth century literature which tended to compare artists to God – an outstanding example being Raphael.<sup>374</sup> To temper this extravagance and near blasphemous equation in the mid-sixteenth century writers started to point out that although human creation can be partly divine, it can never attain divine perfection – in particular, they cannot create things *ex nihilo*, only things that do not yet exist. As Benedetto Varchi emphasized, “it is very true that God alone, and no one else has the omnipotent faculty of creating; therefore He alone, and no one else is able to be called Creator.”<sup>375</sup>

Briefly returning to Boschini’s account on Titian’s method of working, in the last paragraph of the quote the idea of the artist as a god-like creator appears as the artist models his figures and bring them to life. For Boschini this idea is intimately connected with the impasto technique – relationship made stronger by the implication that the impasto is also the working of clay into figures, act that echoes the creation of the first humans in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Ribera implicitly reframes the idea of the artist as god-like creator by suggesting that not only the materials are manipulated by the artist, but in turn he is also modelled in his choice of design and execution by the materials used, according to their own physical potential. Therefore, the artist is not the only one that has the power to model things, by activating the materiality of the painting through the dissolution of form, the materiality of the artwork also acquires the power to shapes the artist, his actions are modelled by the materials he used and this is evident in Ribera’s use of impasto and canvas. As a result, by dissolving Marsyas’ form into matter – *hyle* as wood – *superficie-materia* as that part of the tree, Ribera not only challenged the dominance of form over matter, he gave matter freedom on the surface of the canvas. Significantly enough, the liberation of matter from form – through the process of transformation – not only activates the materiality of the picture, but also draws attention to the role of materiality in disturbing the interpretation of the picture.

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<sup>372</sup> Craston, *The Muddied Mirror*, 58-59; My interpretation of the issue is based on Craston’s, who devoted an entire chapter of her book to Titian’s painting as a paradigm of making and unmaking. See also pages: 47-74.

<sup>373</sup> My analysis of the idea of the artist as God like creator in the Renaissance is indebted to: Jacobs, *The Living Image in Renaissance Art*, 117-118.

<sup>374</sup> Raphael’s reception in the sixteenth century, for instance, can be considered along those lines – Antonio Tebaldeo’s epigram pronounced Raphael the “God of Art.” See: Jacobs, *The Living Image in Renaissance Art*, 42.

<sup>375</sup> Benedetto Varchi, quoted in: Jacobs, *The Living Image in Renaissance Art*, 118.



## Inside Out

Moving on to Ribera's other painting of *Apollo Flaying Marsyas* (Fig.6) (1637; Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels) I argue that Apollo's gesture of flaying Marsyas's body draws attention to the subtle dialectic at play between the inside and outside of the painting. The painting depicts the body of the satyr stretched out on a ground, with his goat legs tied up by the massive tree trunk. With his hands outstretched, the satyr gazes out of the picture screaming at the onlooker in a gesture of despair and horror.<sup>376</sup> Towering above the satyr, the beautiful god Apollo looks thoroughly absorbed in his gruesome task of flaying. Apollo is shown with his left hand holding part of Marsyas' already detached skin, while with the right he is separating the skin from the satyr's flesh. What remains is a skinless section of the leg with a clean, almost meticulously rendered surface. It therefore appears that Apollo is plunging his hands within Marsyas' body to uncover his deep internal structure, only to find that the removal of the skin/surface brings him back onto another surface – the surface of the flesh, muscles and veins – indeed on the surface of the painting. There are two paradoxical moves imbedded within this particular form of touch: the first points towards the density of the painting in order to give it a sense of corporeal presence – and therefore a move of interiority – and the second drawing attention to the painting's ultimate surface like nature – a final move of exteriority.

### Towards "Interiority"

The move towards interiority is signalled by Apollo's gesture of removing the skin, which can be interpreted as investigating, or testing the deepness of Marsyas's body. The gesture can also be interpreted as pointing towards the thickness and depth of the painting itself, thereby revealing touch as the defining relationship at work within the painting's materiality. This explanation seeks to account for a type of artistic appreciation where artworks are perceived as bodies. The relationship between the figure's corporeality and the painting itself can be observed in Paolo Pino's commentary from his *Dialogo di pittura* (1548):

The sculptor cannot endow a figure with anything beyond its form, which is its essential being; whereas we painters, in addition to form and being, adorn it with specifications [that

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<sup>376</sup> On Marsyas's look see: Harald Hendrix, "The Repulsive Body: Images of Torture in Seventeenth-Century Naples," in *Bodily Extremities: Preoccupations with the Human Body in Early Modern European Culture*, Florike Egmond, Robert Zwijnenberg eds., Ashgate, 2003, 68-91.

make] for integral being. And this consists in our feigning the whole composite carnal form, in which one may discern the diversity of complexions, the distinction of the eyes from the hair and other members, not merely in their form, but also in their colours, just as they are distinguished in the live model.<sup>377</sup>

Pino's assessment of the two arts falls within the ongoing debate about the superiority of either painting or sculpture – the *paragone*. In Pino's opinion, sculpture cannot be thought of as the superior art mainly because of the severe limitations imposed by its medium in delivering the distinctive mixture of colours and textures characteristic of the human body. In contrast, painting can render a figure's whole compositional carnal form by re-creating corporeal essentials as the variety of skin complexion, hair, and eyes; in Pino's words: "just as they are distinguished in the live model." For Pino, form and matter are inextricably and successfully bound in painting – a phenomenon that gives the artworks a corporeal quality. By emphasising the importance of matter and colour, Pino praised and defended the traditional Venetian technique of painting. This unavoidably implied challenging the Florentine idea that matter had no place in the intellectual invention and appreciation of a painting.<sup>378</sup>

On the other hand, Marco Boschini highlighted the corporeal nature of the paintings themselves in his quotation of Jacopo Palma il Giovane's recollection of Titian method of interacting with his painting.<sup>379</sup> Acting as a surgeon treating a patient, Titian inspected his pictures with exigency and demand, "treating" and mending any faults. Boschini describes Titian's paintings by evoking human corporeal elements, such as organs and members, even suggesting that the painting is endowed with sense and can experience feelings such as pain. This appreciation of art considers painting to be more than a mere object, interpreting it as a meaningful body, a corpus. Boschini connected Titian's attitude towards paintings distinctively with the artist's *pittura di macchia* – and therefore with a mode of painting where the artist abandons the use of the brush in favour of his fingers. The interaction between painter and his paintings therefore is one of touching – expressed even by the popular name given to Titian's technique: *pittura di tocco e di macchia*. Touch therefore becomes the defining relationship that not only endows a figure or painting with a corporeal quality – and

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<sup>377</sup> Quoted from: Mary Pardo, *Paolo Pino's 'Dialogo di Pittura': A translation with Commentary*, PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburg, 1984, 360ff. My interpretation of Pino's text is based on Mary Pardo's

<sup>378</sup> On Florentine art theory, see: Moshe Barasch, *Theories of Art: 1. From Plato to Winckelmann*, Routledge, 2000, 209-240.

<sup>379</sup> The quote is discussed above.

thereby operating a change in their ontological status – but also signals the way in which these paintings should be interpreted.

By following Apollo's gesture and delving deep within the painting's strata, one is confronted by the nature of the relationship between the matter of canvas and paint as being grounded in *touch*. On the deepest level, the relationship of touch at work within the painting's materiality prompts an experience where the picture is transformed from a meagre object into a *body*. It follows therefore that this particular understanding of bodies is grounded in a relationship of touch. Nonetheless, touch is not taken at this point as a mere sensorial contact, but as a creative interaction between two distinct elements. In order to tackle the issue of touch, I turn to Jean-Luc Nancy's thinking of touch and corporeality. For Nancy the body is "that limit point at which sense and matter touch or come into contact, and it is at the limit, at this point of touch or contact, that the opening of a world or the event of being occurs."<sup>380</sup> Nancy thinks of bodies as entities that "first articulate space," and "as the taking place of sense" – they are the place of sensations, pain, pleasure, sight, and touch.<sup>381</sup> As Ian James points out Nancy's thinking of the body or *corpus* is dependent on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's ontology of *flesh*.<sup>382</sup> Derrida suggested that Merleau-Ponty's *flesh* may not fit in every respect within the "haptological tradition" of continuity and presence. Indeed, Derrida calls attention to the fact that Merleau-Ponty's discourse on touch may imply rupture and separation.<sup>383</sup> As James pointed out, "touch for Merleau-Ponty is, then, a touch which occurs against the backdrop of a discontinuity, a discontinuity which is not the separation of distinct entities or properties (mind/body) but rather a separation of those heterogeneous and singular elements which are nevertheless conjoined in the contact of touch."<sup>384</sup> It is at this point that Derrida's thinking comes close to Nancy's *corpus* that discloses existence in the very interaction between discourse and matter. In Nancy's words, "*Bodies don't take place in discourse or in matter. They don't inhabit "mind" or "body."* They take place at the limit, *qua* limit."<sup>385</sup> By engaging with Descartes, Nancy asserts that the body and soul come into contact as the soul extends throughout the body, making it aware, providing knowledge; while in contrast, the

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<sup>380</sup> My analysis of Nancy's corpus is indebted to: Ian James, *The Fragmentary Demand: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy*, Stanford University Press, 2006, 131.

<sup>381</sup> Nancy, *Corpus*, Fordham University Press, 2008, 27, 103.

<sup>382</sup> On Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh, see: Bernard Flynn, "Maurice Merleau-Ponty," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta ed., 2011, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/merleau-ponty/>.

<sup>383</sup> James, *The Fragmentary Demand*, 130.

<sup>384</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>385</sup> Nancy, *Corpus*, 17.

body appears as the extension of matter, of that which is known, into the soul. James points out that, if for Merleau-Ponty the incarnate sense of existence penetrates matter, for Nancy matter is impenetrable. However, the two forms of extension come in contact through touch, and it is this particular form of exposition that discloses existence.<sup>386</sup>

### Touching Materiality

Artemisia Gentileschi's *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting*, otherwise known as *La Pittura*, (Fig.55) (1638-1639; Royal Collection, London) can be contrasted with Ribera's problematization of touch and materiality. The picture was painted during Gentileschi's stay in England, after her first Neapolitan sojourn. The image is usually thought to be inspired by Cesare Ripa's description of the *Allegory of Painting* from his *Iconologia* (1593). In Ripa's book the embodiment of painting appears as: "a beautiful woman, with full black hair, dishevelled, and twisted in various ways, with arched eyebrows that show imaginative thought, the mouth covered with a cloth tied behind her ears, with a chain of gold at her throat from which hangs a mask, and has written in front *imitation*."<sup>387</sup> The features are essentially captured by Gentileschi's portrayal of the subject, with the significant exceptions of the inscription on the mask and the gagged mouth; a significant oversight to which I shall return later. This particular interpretation of the image is reinforced by the existence of a letter sent by the artist to Don Antonio Ruffo in Sicily, where she declared that "you will find the spirit of Cesare in this soul of a woman."<sup>388</sup> Thus, a profusion of art historical studies focus today on mainly two things: that the image is either a comment on the condition of the artist – rendered here most emphatically as the embodiment of Painting in a self-portrait – and as a powerful statement of Artemisia Gentileschi's unique position as a female artist in a male dominated world.<sup>389</sup>

Nevertheless, I suggest that Gentileschi's *La Pittura* problematizes the intrinsic value of materials used in the act of painting – the brush, paint and canvas. By doing so, Gentileschi was challenging the *Idea* as understood in the sixteenth- and the seventeenth-century artistic

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<sup>386</sup> James, *The Fragmentary Demand*, 137-138.

<sup>387</sup> Quoted from: Keith Christiansen and Mann W. Judith, *Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001, 417-418.

<sup>388</sup> Quoted from: *Idem*, 420.

<sup>389</sup> See: Ward Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Authority of Art: Critical Reading and Catalogue Raisonné*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999; Mieke Bal, "Grounds of Comparison." *The Artemisia Files: Artemisia Gentileschi for Feminist and Other Thinking People*. Ed. Mieke Bal, University of Chicago Press, 2005; Mary D. Garrard, "Artemisia Gentileschi's Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting." *The Art Bulletin* 62 (1980): 97-112; Susan Vreeland, *The Passion of Artemisia*. New York: Penguin Group, 2002.

theory by emphasising the materiality of the picture and the sensuous process involved in creating and hence interpreting it. This understanding can also explain why the painter, who carefully reproduced the description from Ripa's book, opted not to include two essential details: the gagged mouth and the *Imitatio* inscription on the medallion. It appears that Gentileschi deliberately followed Ripa's description up to a point – in order to clearly identify the source – only to break away from it in the most essential of places. First, the artist ungagged the mouth of the figure, a bold gesture that can be interpreted as a proclamation of liberty from the constraints of artistic convention, a restoration of the artist's freedom of expression, interpretation, and identity. Second, Gentileschi excluded the inscription *imitatio* from the medallion. This gesture supports the first as it might suggest a withdrawal from the classical representational model.

Of particular importance is the massive surface of unpainted canvas that looms in the background. On its surface the painter is engaged in an eye-catching gesture of touching the canvas with her brush full of paint. One is confronted with the delicacy of the procedure and the monumentality of the moment when the two materials touch each other. Touch is presented here as the foundation of painting, the element onto which the technique of painting is based. Nevertheless, the materials involved in the act of painting do not get confused, but retain their respective uniqueness. That is why the viewer does not actually see the paint on canvas, but only the actual touch at the limit, where the canvas remains clean and the brush full of paint. Therefore, the touch here is not a touch of continuity, of absorption of one material into the other, but a touch that takes place at the limit between those two elements; what Nancy calls a *touch in separation*. One can observe the result of that relationship directly on the surface of the picture. The section dominated by the canvas is painted in thin layers of paint, just the right amount to allow the canvas threads to permeate the surface. At the same time, in other areas of the painting – particularly on the figure's dress (Fig.56) – the paint is applied in thicker layers and looser brushstrokes, thereby achieving a sense of weight or carnality. The density of the paint becomes particularly relevant when considered in conjunction with the palette held by the figure onto which the five patches of paint recreate the painting's overall colour scheme – including the tones that render her flesh (Fig.57).

### **Liminal materiality**

In Ribera's *Apollo and Marsyas* (Fig.6) (1637; Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels) touch is shown as a place of limit and difference that holds together the innermost structure of

the picture, and is responsible for the painting's strong physicality. The flaying leads the viewer from grazing the surface of the picture into its most intimate level – at the point where the canvas and paint meet each other. Once there, one is confronted with the relationship of touch between materials as a contact occurring at their respective limits – a similar relationship that defines Marsya's flesh and skin. In order to preserve the distinction of each material, a place of difference must be present. Touch opens an interval therefore, and it is within this interval that the materials take up existence. It discloses existence at the limit. The materiality of the canvas acquires its individuality only when it enters into contact with the paint, and vice versa – a contact that can only take place at their limits.<sup>390</sup> In effect, Ribera's working of touch here creates an experience of the picture as something that takes place on, and at the same time, is being placed at, the limit. The picture is thus revealed through the questioning of touch as occupying a place of liminality.

This aspect of the picture is meant to appeal to the viewer's fundamental nature as an embodied being by raising awareness of one's own limits. Ribera's working of the limit and body comes closer to Nancy's thinking of *corpus*. Nancy's conceptualization of bodies as something that take place at the limit of discourse and matter can offer a viable key of unlocking how Ribera's painting achieve that strong sense of corporeality. It also points to the mechanism of reference, or resonance through which the painting appeals to the viewer – touching upon the viewer's bodies as places of liminality. I do not wish to imply here that the canvas and paint can in some way be understood as soul and body – that is, to equate canvas with soul and paint with body, or vice versa – but merely to suggest that the interaction at work between the two materials is analogous to the *process* of their coming into presence, as described by Nancy's in relation to bodies.<sup>391</sup> Namely, what is comparable between the painting and body – and what makes the painting a body – is the *process* at work, rather than one or the other materials involved.

The issue of touch and limits at work between the different components of an artwork is addressed by Benedetto Varchi in one of his *Lezione della maggioranza delle arti* (1546) delivered at the Florentine Academy. Varchi talks about the union between matter and form by comparing it to the union of body and mind:

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<sup>390</sup> This analysis is indebted to Nancy's understanding of bodies from his: *Corpus*, 80.

<sup>391</sup> Nancy argues that there is no point in talking about mind and body as separate items – subsisting independently from each other – because they exist only insofar as they touch upon each other and this touching is in itself the limit that marks the spacing of existence. Nancy, *Corpus*, 34.

That which is generated by nature, or made by art, is not only in form, nor only in the material; but the whole is composed together [*tutto composto*]; such that, if one asks what is that which a sculptor has done when from a mass of bronze has cast, for example, a Perseus, we ought to reply that as he has not made the material, that is the bronze, so similar he has not made the form of Perseus, but the whole composed, that is the material and the form together...A man is not in form only, that is the soul, nor matter only, that is the body; but the soul and body together.<sup>392</sup>

Varchi's text is grounded in the Aristotelian tradition. Aristotle insisted upon the unity of man in order to explain phenomena such as sensation and voluntary movement, which involve the operation of both soul and body. In order to explain the unity of man, Aristotle argued that the body and the soul are conjoined the same way as matter and form; that is to say that soul is the form (actuality) gives life to matter (potentiality).<sup>393</sup> The soul bears the same relationship with the body in the same way the form of wax to its material basis; form is considered to be the active principle, while matter the passive.<sup>394</sup> However, Varchi's text is relevant to our inquiry not because of the elements of form and matter that he brings into play, but for the particular type of interaction he is outlining. Varchi describes a union of form and matter as the source of the entirety of a work of art where the individuality of the constituent elements is retained. The two elements do not get metamorphosed into a whole new element, but retain their individuality within a relationship of conjoining. It is from this relationship developed between the limits of each element that the wholeness of a work of art emerges. Jodi Cranston points out that Varchi, through the intertwining of form and matter, is

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<sup>392</sup>"Lezione di Benedetto Varchi sopra il sottoscritto Sonetto di Michelagnolo Buonarroti, fatta da lui pubblicamente nella Accademia Fiorentina la Seconda Domenica di Quaresima l'anno MDXLVI." Varchi, quoted from: Cranston, *The Muddied Mirror*, 40.

<sup>393</sup> "Now given that there are bodies of such and such a kind, viz. having life, the soul cannot be a body; for the body is the subject or matter, not what is attributed to it. Hence, the soul must be a substance in the sense of the form of a natural body having life potentially within it. But substance is actuality, and thus soul is the actuality of a body as above characterized." Aristotle, *De Anima*, 412a1 17-22.

<sup>394</sup>"If, then, we have to give a general formula applicable to all kinds of soul, we must describe it as an actuality of the first kind of a natural organized body. That is why we can dismiss as unnecessary the question whether the soul and the body are one: it is as though we were to ask whether the wax and its shape are one, or generally the matter of a thing and that of which it is the matter." Aristotle, *De Anima*, 412b 2-6; It is important to point out that for Aristotle form is not transcendent from the material world. Aristotle advocated a sort of "dualistic-monism" where form is inseparable from matter, meaning that both substances are physical and part of a teleological matter-form; that is, matter and form are naturally purposeful.

emphasising the importance of the senses of vision and touch in experiencing sculpture.<sup>395</sup> Varchi's text too falls within the *paragone*, where the defence of sculpture is intimately related to the sense of touch. As such, Varchi's explanation of the interaction between form and matter recalls the relationship of touch in separation at work within the materials of Ribera's painting – an interaction that gives rise to the wholeness and corporeality of an artwork. By moving this sort of relationship from the level of form and matter to the relationship between the materials themselves, one can develop a new type of matter as active matter, or materiality.<sup>396</sup> The materiality of the painting, grounded in that fruitful relationship of touch at the limits of canvas and paint, is the main source of experiencing a painting as a body.

Hence, it is at the limit and through the awareness of the limit that the viewer comes into contact or experiences the picture as a body. The *touch in separation* between two elements opens an interval from where the viewer can interact with the wholeness of the painting as a body. For a moment, during the process of discovery and interpretation, the viewer is positioned yet again at the limit – although this time at the “internal” limit of the picture, rather than the external one. This would imply that there is a relationship of resonance at work between the “internal” limit and the external limit or the threshold of the picture's surface.<sup>397</sup> By internal I do not mean that the paintings have depth; instead I am referring to the relationship between canvas and paint, a relationship that is ultimately one of complex surfaces. This relationship of limits developed on the surface of the picture not only works as a token of the viewer's limited ability to access the picture but also as an appeal to one's embodied condition – a body conjoined by two distinct parts that is taking place at the limit of “mind” - “soul” and “body” - “matter.” The viewer becomes aware that the picture presents itself as corporeality because it takes place at the limit, very much the same way bodies take place at the limit.<sup>398</sup> By drawing a parallel between Nancy's thinking of the body and Ribera's picture as a sum total, I suggest that the corporeality of the entire painting is not to be located

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<sup>395</sup> Cranston, *The Muddied Mirror*, 40.

<sup>396</sup> The concept of active matter is indeed a departure from Aristotle's conception of matter as passive. I refer here to Andrew Benjamin's definition of *mattering* as discussed above.

<sup>397</sup> For a discussion on the surface as a threshold see Chapter 1.

<sup>398</sup> I refer to the limit as a place where bodies take up existence as described by Heidegger: “The limit, however, is not only the outline of frame, not only were by something ceases. Limit means that whereby something it's gathered into its ownness, in order to appear from out of this in its fullness, to come forth into presence. 'Heidegger, quoted from: Andrew Mitchell, *Heidegger Among the Sculptors: Body, Space, and the Art of Dwelling*, Stanford University Press, 2010, 58-59.



in the canvas or paint, nor discourse – subject matter – but in the interval of their touching, in the process that takes place at their limit.

### **On the Surface**

Thus far I have discussed Apollo's touch from Ribera's *Apollo and Marsyas* (Fig.6) (1637; Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels) mostly as a move towards the picture's "interiority." Now I wish to turn to Apollo's touch as a move towards exteriority, a simultaneous phenomenon that endows the gesture with its paradoxical nature. While this act engages the layers of the surface, it also points to the limits of the painting as a material object, drawing attention to the tactile values imbedded onto its painted surface. In other words, Apollo's hand seems to plunge within the fictional inner depths of the painting – and thus making one aware of the *touch in separation* relationship at work within the painting's materiality – only to reveal its density and thickness as being merely skin-deep, a surface. It encapsulates an instantaneous move towards interiority in order to expose it as a facet of its intricate exteriority. The density of the bodies depicted and painting as a whole is therefore exposed to us as being at the same time of depth and a surface. If we take a closer look at the wound, it appears that the tactical removal of Marsyas' skin reveals an interior that is clean and polished, with the surface of the muscles and veins shining as neat surfaces. Whereas Ribera's other version of *Apollo and Marsyas* (Fig.5) (1637; Capodimonte Museum, Naples) shows an incipient wound rendered with visible brushstrokes – a dirty, soiled process – in this case the injury is considerably cleaner, depicted with subtler strokes of the brush.<sup>399</sup> During the act of flaying, Apollo's hand can merely penetrate through to another surface, no further than the canvas shown to us underneath the paint. The heightened exposure of the wound raises awareness of the conflicting nature of Marsyas's body when it comes to the limit between the interior and exterior. The surface-like interior of the satyr propels one back onto the surface through a move of liminal positioning, of placing the viewer yet again at the surface-limit of the painting. It seems that Marsyas's interior raises awareness about the exterior of the painting in a move of blurring the distinction between the inside and outside. This phenomenon is achieved through the presentation of the mass of the body as a surface. Marsyas's body, as it is presented to the viewer, is here reminiscent of Jean-Luc Nancy's conceptualization of the body from his essay *Corpus*:

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<sup>399</sup> Though the wound may be cleaner, Apollo's hands still show signs of a similar dirty process of creation discussed earlier in the chapter.

A body always weighs; it is itself weigh, be weighed. A body does not have weight, it is weight. (...) Bodies weigh lightly. Their weight is the rising of their mass to their surface. Endlessly, the mass rises to the surface, and peels off as a surface [*s'enleve en surface*]. Mass is density, the consistency concentrated in itself: but this concentration in itself is not that of spirit, for here the "self" is the surface whereby mass is exposed. Massive substance is supported only by a spreading, not by interiority or by a foundation.<sup>400</sup>

Another significant element that raises awareness of the painting's surface is the group of four bystanders placed behind the tree trunk in the lower right corner of the picture. In contrast with the bystanders from the other version of Ribera's *Apollo and Marsyas* (Fig.5) (1637; Capodimonte Museum, Naples) who are looking in horror at the scene of flaying, in this version (Fig.6) (1637; Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels) the bystanders are either lowering their eyes and blocking their ears with their hands, or talking to each other about the terrible event. Conspicuously enough, the figure closest to us has his head completely turned away from the scene while his hand is raised in a gesture of point out the flaying. The figure's refusal to look coupled with the extended arm act as an open invitation of a primary tactile interpretation, rather than a purely visual one. The raised hand can also be construed as directing the viewer back onto the surface of the image, instead of merely drawing attention to the scene. There is therefore a subtle coordination between the picture's iconographic details and the particular manner in which they are depicted. For instance, the figure of the bystanders raising his hand is rendered in a strong, visible impasto in comparison with other areas of the painting, such as Apollo's body. As such, once positioned on the surface by iconographic details, the viewer is urged to engage with the painting's rough exterior where the creative touch of the artist is allowed visibility. The surface therefore acquires a primarily tactile value, effecting an unattainable desire to touch.

At this point it is essential to clarify the nature of this particular form of touch in relation to the surface of the picture. In order to do this I will return to Andrew Benjamin's conceptualization of touch and materiality. Earlier in this chapter I pointed out that Benjamin's interpretation of touch and materiality is grounded in an alteration of their positioning as literal

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<sup>400</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, "Corpus," in *The Birth to Presence*, Stanford University Press, 1993, 198-199.

presences with the aim of bypassing “a simple counter positioning of eye and hand.”<sup>401</sup> This move can only happen if the nature of matter is reworked. Benjamin argues that: “once the material and the empirical have been separated then implicit within the work and as part of the object’s material presence is an active quality that is inherently material.”<sup>402</sup> For Benjamin, “the hand, though this will be equally true for the eye, can be opened up. The opening and the loosening will allow both the hand and the eye another possibility in which neither hand nor eye are defined by their literal presence.”<sup>403</sup> Benjamin argues that the aesthetic need of controlling sensation destroyed the equation of sight with its literal presence through a move to cognition, while touch remained tied to its original condition. Benjamin therefore seeks to position touch as another modality of seeing, and thus operate a transformation in what is understood by seeing and touching. This implies a rethinking of touch – whilst not denying its empirical presence – and a question of how it conveys knowledge. According to Benjamin this operation is conditioned by the nature of touch as being temporal.<sup>404</sup> In a complex argument, Benjamin argues that “the move from Descartes to Diderot, one in which Herder can be located, is the reposition of the *soul* from the subject to the object.”<sup>405</sup> As a result, the object acquires a new, different ontological status due to the newly acquired centrality of the hand and touch. In the end, Benjamin contends that touch not only transforms the empirical to the material – in terms of *matter*ing – but also guarantees seeing.

### **Touching Surfaces**

I turn to the contrast between Ribera’s problematization of touch and Caravaggio’s in his *Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (Fig.35) (1601–1602; Sanssouci Palace, Potsdam).<sup>406</sup> I argue that Caravaggio’s painting illustrates a form of touch that is comparable to that shown in Ribera’s *Apollo and Marsyas* (Fig.6) (1637; Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels) – a paradoxical touch that encapsulates a comparable move towards the interiority and exteriority of the picture – though the similarity only goes so far, as there are also substantial differences between the two portrayals. Caravaggio’s painting literally revolves around the gesture of touching, as the characters of Christ and the apostles are arranged in a semicircle with its focal point on Thomas’s piercing finger. Caravaggio depicted Christ grabbing Thomas’s finger and

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<sup>401</sup> Benjamin, “Endless touching,” 73.

<sup>402</sup> *Idem*, 81.

<sup>403</sup> *Idem*, 73-74.

<sup>404</sup> “Touch takes place over time. Touch is timed.” *Idem*, 74.

<sup>405</sup> *Idem*, 82.

<sup>406</sup> Spike, *Caravaggio*, 123-126; Ebert-Schifferer, *Caravaggio*, 166-167. Schütze, *Caravaggio*, 142, 157.

pushing it deep within the wound at his side. The moment is emblematic as it shows Thomas's mistrust in the sense of sight and confidence in touch as the ultimate empirical proof for Christ's bodily presence. Touching does not occur here on the surface of the body, on the skin, but within Christ's body, right in, at the intersection between his opened flesh and folded skin. As such, the position of the apostles and their absorptive state of mind, coupled with Thomas' probing gesture, moves the viewer towards the inside of the picture. The move towards interiority as well as the absorptive quality of the painting is discussed in some length by Michael Fried in his book on Caravaggio.<sup>407</sup> While arguing that the painting, through its play of absorption and address is paradigmatic for the emergence of the "gallery picture", Fried interestingly draws attention to the tear in Thomas' jacket, while wondering about a possible connection between the tear and Jesus' wound.<sup>408</sup>

Following on Fried's observation, I argue that the small tear in the shoulder seam of Thomas's jacket invites the viewer inside the painting only to push him/her back onto its surface. This implies that the tear must act as a counter moment to Jesus' wound. Even though the tear may seem at first sight to have nothing to do with touch, a close scrutiny of Thomas's positions reveals that in fact it is a direct result of touching. By itself, the tear is a consequence of Thomas's gesture of touching, holding his torso with his right hand, forcing the fabric of the jacket to break. The rupture of the fabric therefore resonates with the rupture of Jesus' skin; both having Thomas's touch as their central element. Jesus' wound – coupled with the absorptive state of the apostles and Thomas's touch – acts as a moment that draws the viewer inside of the picture, while the white fabric of the shirt poking through the tear pushes him back onto the surface. Here again we are confronted with the paradoxical nature of touch pointing as a move towards interiority and exteriority.

However, the touch that appears in Caravaggio's picture is substantially different from that of Apollo in the Ribera's painting. While Apollo's touch encapsulated the move towards the inside and outside in the same act of touching Marsyas, Caravaggio's painting shows the same man touching different people – Jesus and himself – with different hands. Also the question of temporality arises: Apollo's touch is presented as long – the flaying is a long temporal process – and simultaneous – containing both movements in one single act – while

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<sup>407</sup> Michael Fried, *The Moment of Caravaggio*, Princeton University Press, 2011, 83-86.

<sup>408</sup> Fried sees the tear as a moment that heightens the realism of the picture as well as a rouse, a device that distracts the viewer, diverting his sight from the action, only to release it moments later. Fried also makes the connection between the tear and Jesus' wound, but does not elaborate on the presumed relationship. See page 86.

Thomas's touch is short and twofold. It might seem that Thomas is touching Christ's wound at the same time he is touching his side, in fact there is a temporal split between those two as the latter is a reaction of the former. Thomas is touching his side as a consequence of touching Jesus' wound – this feature will be further discussed below. There is also the temporality of interpreting the two touches: in Apollo's case the eye remains on the same spot and the touch becomes simultaneous, while in Caravaggio's painting the viewer's eye is forced to move along the surface of the painting from one place to the other in order to make the appropriate connection.

Thomas's touch, Christ's body remains virtually untouchable due to its transformed divine nature. As such, by paradoxically touching the body of Christ, Thomas touches upon the untouchable. Touch here grants access only to the limit of what remains remote and inaccessible. Moreover, Caravaggio depicted here a form of touch that does not act upon the person touched, but the person who does the touching. This is made clear by the impenetrable, assured expression of Christ and the expression of shock and wonder visible on Thomas's face. In a paradoxical move, Caravaggio portrayed Thomas as if he was touching himself – since what he was supposed to touch turned out to be untouchable – at the limit of touching Christ. Caravaggio even depicted Thomas holding his left hand upon his side as if he was penetrating himself with his right, and not Christ. The expression on Thomas's face and the gesture of holding his side while piercing Christ imply a touch that makes the apostle aware of his own corporeality and finitude. Caravaggio's painting shows that touching what is untouchable makes the person who does that touching aware of oneself, of one's bodily finitude and distinction.

Furthermore, Caravaggio portrayed Thomas's touch as a complicated sensorial connection that not only stands in for the empirical proof of Christ's bodily presence, but goes further in substantiating the painting's own corporeality. This suggestion relies on the same system of reference at work in Ribera's paintings, the resonance between the depicted subject matter and the painting as a whole. Lorenzo Pericolo argues that the awkward alignment of the characters, especially the figure of Thomas which is not properly spatially aligned, suggests that what the apostle is piercing is not merely Christ's side, but also the painting itself.<sup>409</sup> At this point Thomas's gesture threatens the integrity of the canvas through a forceful touch that points towards the materiality of the painting.<sup>410</sup> Touch situates the body of Christ in a direct

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<sup>409</sup> Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative*, 459.

<sup>410</sup> *Idem*.

relationship with the body of the canvas. It also draws attention to the distinctiveness of the image as we are invited to touch upon it. As far as the touch here involves also a moment of withdrawal, this counter-movement within touch acts as a signal of the picture's uniqueness. Therefore, touch here is not only a mode of approaching a painting as body, but also a mode of stepping-back, of distancing from it in order to preserve its exceptionality and dignity.

The juxtaposition between the textured surface of a painting and the evocation of the sense of touch through iconography can best be observed in Ribera's *The Blind Sculptor, or Allegory of Touch* (Fig.58) (1632; Prado Museum, Madrid). The painting is one of Ribera's two surviving canvases depicting the sense of touch – the earliest version, *Sense of Touch* (Fig.59) (c.1615-16; Norton Simons Museum, Pasadena), is part of a celebrated series of the five senses the artist created while living in Rome.<sup>411</sup> The painting shows an old blind man touching with both hands the head on an ancient statue – probably Apollo – while on the table is a foreshortened painting depicting what appears to be a male head. The subject of the painting noticeably alludes to the artistic *paragon*, as the image of a blind man touching a statue was a common *topos* within the debate.<sup>412</sup> Although the issue of the *paragone* is important at this point to show the connection between subject matter and materiality, it is not the main concern of the argument; therefore I will only highlight the main ideas that dominated the debate without going into much detail.

The term *paragone* is used to describe the Renaissance debate where one form of art – architecture, sculpture or painting – is championed as superior to all others.<sup>413</sup> A key argument in supporting one of the arts over the other is formed by appealing to a hierarchy of the five senses – in particular to the comparison between the senses of sight and touch in relation to painting and sculpture.<sup>414</sup> Aristotle for instance favoured sight above the rest of the senses, while Leonardo da Vinci argued his defence on the superiority of painting by claiming the superiority of sight.<sup>415</sup> Later on in the seventeenth century, Galileo Galilei notably supporting

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<sup>411</sup> On this painting see: Craig Felton, "Ribera's Early Years in Italy: The 'Martyrdom of St. Lawrence' and the 'Five Senses,'" *Burlington Magazine* 133, 1991, 71-81; 77, 80 ; also: Pérez Sánchez and Spinosa, *Jusepe de Ribera*, 60, 64.

<sup>412</sup> For the subject of the blind man touching a statue as a key image for the *paragone* see: Peter Hecht, 'The Paragone Debate: Ten Illustrations and a Comment,' in *Simiolus* 14.2, 1984, 125-36.

<sup>413</sup> For a general discussion of the *paragone* in Early Modern Europe see: Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *The Blind Spot: An Essay on the Relations Between Painting and Sculpture in the Modern Age*, Getty Research Institute, 2008.

<sup>414</sup> For an comprehensive overview of the role played by touch and sight in the *paragone* in Early Modern Italy see: Geraldine Johnson, "The Art of Touch in Early Modern Italy," in *Art & The Senses*, Francesca Bacci and David Melcher eds., Oxford University Press, 2011, 59-84.

<sup>415</sup> A thorough introduction on the Renaissance *paragone* – in particular Leonardo's contribution to the debate by arguing the superiority of painting and sight – can be found in: Claire Farago, *Leonardo da Vinci's Paragone*:

the Aristotelian idea of touch as the most reliable of senses – although sight being the noblest – in a complex argument where sculpture is argued to be inferior particularly because it does not satisfy the sense of touch:”only the simple minded [...] think that sculpture can deceive the sense of touch [...] Who would believe that a man when touching a statue, would think that it is a living human being.”<sup>416</sup>

In contrast, Michelangelo favoured sculpture as the superior art – therefore advocating a more tactile engagement with the arts – by arguing that painting is at its best when it resembles sculpture and sculpture at its worst when it resembles painting.<sup>417</sup> In supporting Michelangelo, Benedetto Varchi argued that although sight might be the noblest of the senses, touch is the most reliable – and by invoking Lucretius words: “For touch, through its divine omnipotence, is the sense of our whole body” – stated that: “The most certain sense is touch, so that whoever denies touch is a lost cause.”<sup>418</sup> A century later, Gian Lorenzo Bernini evoked the example of the blind man touching a statue as evidence for the superiority of sculpture, while his sculptures – a prime example being *Apollo and Daphne* (Fig.60) (1622–25; Galleria Borghese, Rome) – appear to capture the transformative powers of touch.<sup>419</sup>

*The Blind Sculptor* offered Ribera the opportunity to engage with the *paragone* on several levels, ultimately challenging the superiority of sculpture over painting. Itay Shapir, referring to Ribera’s *Sense of Touch* (Fig.59) (c.1615-16; Norton Simons Museum, Pasadena) argues that the artist’s reference to the paragon is ambiguous since “sculpture is shown here as the richer and more satisfying medium, it is only so because of the man’s handicap; one could argue that, according to Ribera, sculpture’s only use is as ‘painting for the blind’.”<sup>420</sup> On a fundamental level, the artist subverted the standard ascription of the sense of touch to

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*a critical interpretation with a new edition of the text in the Codex Urbinas*, Brill, 1991; For Aristotle’s conception of the sense of sight see: Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 980a21.

<sup>416</sup> Quoted from: Samuel Y. Edgerton, *The Heritage of Giotto’s Geometry: Art and Science on the Eve of Scientific Revolution*, Cornell University Press, 1991, 224-225; For a discussion on Galileo Galilei and the arts see: Erwin Panofsky, “Galileo as a Critic of the Arts: Aesthetic Attitude and Scientific Thought,” *Isis*, Vol. 47, No. 1, 1956, 3-15.

<sup>417</sup> Paola Barocchi, *Scritti d’arte del Cinquecento*, Vol.1, R. Ricciardi, 1971, 522.

<sup>418</sup> Lucretius was quoted in Latin: “Tactus enim, tactus, pro diuum numina sancta, corporis est sensum” and Varchi’s words: “più certo sentimento è il tatto, onde chi niega il tatto è di perdita speranza.” Quoted from: Achille Mauri, *Biblioteca Enciclopedica Italiana: Opere di Benedetto Varchi*, Volume 38, 1834, 128; See also Barocchi, *Scritti d’arte del Cinquecento*, 533-534.

<sup>419</sup> Paul Fréart de Chantelou, *Diary of the Cavaliere Bernini’s Visit to France*, Princeton University Press, 1985, 258-259; On Bernini and Touch see also: Andrea Bolland, “Desiderio and Diletto: Vision, Touch, and the Poetics of Bernini’s *Apollo and Daphne*,” *The Art Bulletin*, 82.2, 2000, 309-30.

<sup>420</sup> Itay Shapir, “Blind Suffering: Ribera’s non-visual epistemology of Martyrdom,” in *The Open Arts Journal*, Issue 4, Winter 2014-2015, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2015w02>.

sculpture and the sense of sight to painting – feature that dominated the debate – by depicting a three dimensional marble object in the limitations of a flat surface. On the other hand, Ribera's engagement goes beyond standard iconography by evoking the sense of touch through his working of the painting's surface. The entire painting is rendered through a vibrant impasto that significantly becomes accentuated in the area around the blind man's hands and the marble head (Fig.61), endowing the surface with a distinct tactile quality.



## Chapter Four: Surfaces of Violence

### Introduction

In *El Museo pictórico y escala óptica* (1724), Antonio Palomino describes Ribera's art by saying:

He did not delight in painting sweet and pious things, but to express horrendous and rough things: which are the bodies of old man, dried, wrinkled and consumed with skinny and haggard face; all done with natural accuracy, as a passionate painter, with force and elegant handling. This is made visible by the Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew, where he is being flayed and the internal anatomy of his arm exposed, by the celebrated Tityus, whose entrails are being devoured by a vulture as a punishment for his wanton audacity, and by the torments of Sisyphus, Tantalus and Ixion.<sup>421</sup>

Palomino focused his description on the intense and elegant handling of the Ribera's brush in creating surfaces, drawing particular attention to worn, dried, creased skin of the human bodies. For Palomino these surfaces are horrendous and rough, and they bear on the excessive violence portrayed by the paintings. Especially significant is the description of Ribera's portrayal of Saint Bartholomew, where the surface of the older man, his wrinkled skinny skin, is removed to expose the internal anatomy of the body.<sup>422</sup> Palomino's account reveals the strong relationship between Ribera's handling of the surface of the picture, the skin of the depicted bodies – and its removal – and the violence of the subject.

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<sup>421</sup> "No se deleitaba tanto Ribera en pintar cosas dulces, y devotas, como en expressar cosas horrendas, y asperas: quales son los cuerpos de los ancianos, secos, arrugados y consumidos,- con el rostro enjuto, y malicento; todo hecho puntualmente por el natural, con extremado primor, fuerza, y elegante manejo: como lo manifiesta el San Bartolomé en el Martyrio, quitándole la piel, y descubierta la anathomia interior del brazo: el célebre Tcio, a quien el Buitre lesaca las entrañas , por cáitigo de su insolente atrevimiento: los totmentos de Sisifo, de Tántalo, y de Ixion, expressando (especialmente en este) con tal extremo el dolor, atado á la rueda, donde era continuamente herido, y despedazado. Palomino, quoted from: Spinosa, *Ribera*, 410. My translation.

<sup>422</sup> The painting in question has not been identified. However, the painting that is going to be discussed further bellow – *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (1644; MNAC, Barcelona) – is one that shows the arm of the saint being flayed.

This chapter explores Ribera's treatment of the pictorial surface as a site where the issues of corporeality and violence are negotiated in relation to temporality. I focus on two of Ribera's paintings of the flaying of Saint Bartholomew – the first canvas is the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.7) (1644; MNAC, Barcelona) and the second is his earliest version of the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.8) (1634; National Gallery, Washington). The subject of flaying, the removal of skin, is in itself one that draws attention to the issue of surfaces, and Palomino sharply connected it with his brilliant handling of the painting's surface. This interpretation tries to see beyond the surface as a mere cover for a more valuable interior – the quest for a “deeper meaning” – by treating it as a significant site where the painting's complex forces meet. Andrew Benjamin and most recently Victoria Kelly call attention to the complex role of the surface as a site that generates meaning, typically the first we come in contact with and the most accessible to the senses – sight and touch. While questioning the binary oppositions of surface/depth, surface/structure, and surface/core, Kelly revealed the fallacy of assuming that the real value of something lies deep within its inside, overlooking the significance of its surface.<sup>423</sup> In art, for instance, the surface layers of objects are treated with great care – glazing, polishing, and lacquer – indicating a material complexity that has the potential power to alter the interpretation of the entire object. Moreover, because they are exposed, these surfaces are susceptible to change over time – this aspect will be addressed in relation to Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (1644; MNAC, Barcelona). Thus, the material complexity of the surface, its structure, texture, consistency, and even thickness, can work as a productive field that brings together different forces with the power of inviting investigation to create meaning.

I argue that Ribera, in his portrayal of the martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew, worked the materiality of the canvas and paint into a powerful sense of corporeality by staging their potentiality as either flesh or skin. Ribera draws attention to the separability of these substances, yet in terms of vision and touch they are made to work as one. Therefore, material separations are to be distinguished from emerging sensibility. The production of the painting's materiality as corporeality involves a temporal dimension which simultaneously heightens and expands the violence of the subject matter. The chapter starts with a questioning of surface. Drawing on the work of Andrew Benjamin, I explore how the surface of a painting, its texture

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<sup>423</sup> Victoria Kelly, “A special Guide to the Deeper Meanings of Surface,” in *Surface Tensions. Surface, finish and the meaning of objects*, Glenn Adamson and Victoria Kelley ed., Manchester University Press, 2013, 13-25.

and materials, are brought to matter in an artwork's interpretation.<sup>424</sup> By examining Ribera's working of the materials and the contemporary discourse on the role of flesh and skin in paintings, one notices a certain hesitance in assigning a fixed identity to either canvas or paint as flesh and skin, or for that matter a definitive distinction between the inside and outside of a body. This ambivalence is noticeable in Ribera's working of the materials in relation to the surface. Thus, on one hand, in the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (1644; MNAC, Barcelona) the handling of the canvas' texture in relation to the layers of paint on Bartholomew's torso suggests an interpretation where the materiality of the painting presents the potentiality of the canvas as flesh and of the thin layers of paint as skin. On the other hand, in the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (1634; National Gallery, Washington) the impasto not only creates the corporeality of the figures, but also enhances the violence to the scene; therefore, the lack of overt violence is substituted here by the violence of the impasto. In addition, Ribera's working of the canvas and paint's materiality dislodges the narrative and temporal dimension of the painting in a process that amplifies and reinforces the cruelty and sadism of the subject.

### **Rupturing Skin**

The extreme violence of Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.7) (1644; MNAC, Barcelona) is not limited to the gruesome portrayal of the subject, but it is also worked through the materiality of its surface. The surface of the painting shows signs of rupturing that are comparable to the ruptured skin of the saint. If one pays particular attention to the torso of Saint Bartholomew and the white cloth covering his groin, one is struck by the insistence with which the canvas threads seem to push forward through the strata of paint (Fig.62). Ribera's thin layering of ground and paint in these particular areas of the picture allow the rough weave of the canvas to emerge all the way through the surface. This phenomenon essentially disrupts the cohesive nature of the paint's exterior plane by breaking the integrity of the outer layer. During the slow process of drying, the crust of the solidifying paint is broken or cracked by the emerging threads of the canvas. This breaking gives the impression of an act of violence, a brutal rupture that inadvertently alters the surface of the saint's body. The resulting texture physically changes Bartholomew's appearance from a smooth and articulate exterior to one that is rough and broken. The materiality of paint takes on the potential of skin, while the

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<sup>424</sup> Andrew Benjamin, "Surface effects."

surfacing canvas presents itself as flesh. Thus the process of surfacing in which the canvas is involved in concert with the ground, underpaint and overpaint is inherently a violent one. And that this particular type of violence – of breaking the surface and showing what lies underneath – acts as a reverberation of the rupture of Bartholomew’s skin and the presentation of his inner strata, of his flesh. This alteration dramatically affects the way viewers experience the entire picture by making the viewer acutely aware of the painting’s multifaceted sense of violence.

### **Rough canvases**

The canvas entered the artistic world an essential expressive means that correlates or works together with the ground and layers of paint. It became a popular and practical medium for painting in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, when it slowly replaced in some ways the less convenient support of wooden panels.<sup>425</sup> Though it was used before by Mantegna and later Raphael, the proper acknowledgement of the canvas as an expressive pictorial means was fully exploited by mid-sixteenth century Venetian painters, led by artists such as Titian, Tintoretto and Veronese.<sup>426</sup> Venice, as a major commercial centre for textiles ranging from luxury silk and wool to cotton and flax, offered a great variety of fabrics to the local painters, the most popular choices being linen, hemp and jute. While certain fabrics were made of simple weaves such as tabby and twill, others incorporated more elaborate patterns like herringbone and damask.<sup>427</sup> Painters usually used a wide variety of patterns and weaves in accord with the size of the painting, though there are some cases where the canvas is made up of a mixture of weaves fitted into the same stretcher – such an example is Titian’s *Pietà* (Fig.63) (1570-1576; Gallerie dell’Accademia, Venice). As the century progressed, the type of canvases used by Venetian painters tended to become increasingly rough, although canvases made of finer textiles continued to be woven and were still obtainable in the seventeenth

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<sup>425</sup> For a brief overview of the canvas see: Caroline Villers, *Artists Canvases: A History*, ICOM Committee for Conservation, Ottawa, 1981.

<sup>426</sup> For Mantegna’s canvases see Andrea Rothe, ‘Mantegna’s Paintings in Distemper’ in *Andrea Mantegna*, Jane Martineau ed., The Royal Academy of Arts, London, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 80-88. For Tintoretto’s canvases see: Joyce Plesters, ‘Tintoretto’s Paintings in the National Gallery: Part II’. *National Gallery Technical Bulletin*, Vol 4, 32–48. Plesters, and Lazzarini, Lorenzo, “Preliminary observations on the technique and materials of Tintoretto,” in *Conservation of paintings and the graphic arts: preprints of contributions to the Lisbon Congress, 1972*, 153-180; *Idem*, “I materiali e la tecnica dei Tintoretto della Scuola di San Rocco,” in *Jacopo Tintoretto nel quarto centenario della morte, Atti del convegno*, 1994, 275.

<sup>427</sup> Robert Wald, “Materials and Techniques of Painters in Sixteenth-Century Venice,” in *Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese. Rivals in Renaissance Venice*, ed. Frederick Ilchman, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 2009, 73-74.

century.<sup>428</sup> This practice implies the growing importance of the canvas to painters as a material means designed to further the expressiveness of their paintings.

Before analysing Ribera's painting, I propose to consider Titian's engagement with the surface in relation to flesh and skin as a point of contrast in discerning the different ways in which artists addressed this issue at the time. Titian excelled in making full use of the canvas's texture as one of the picture's key expressive means. To achieve this, the artist placed the canvas in an interdependent relationship with the paint, where the canvas exceeds its simple status as mere support by influencing the way the subject is interpreted. Titian was among the first artists of the sixteenth century to acknowledge not only the potentiality of the canvas, but actually turned it into an active element of the *istoria* depicted.<sup>429</sup> This approach forms an essential part of the artist's celebrated technique of *pittura di macchia*.<sup>430</sup> Titian's engagement with the canvas varied, depending on the subject of the picture. At times he used a type of canvas that was relatively tightly woven, while other times he preferred the surface created by the thickly spun linen, intentionally used for its slight irregularities and roughness.<sup>431</sup> In order to achieve a more direct interaction between the canvas and paint, Titian applied only a thin layer of gesso – no more than the required bare minimum to fill in the interstices of the canvas weaves – and left the texture of the canvas to penetrate through, thus attaining a tactile effect of roughness.<sup>432</sup> Therefore, the rough texture of the weave, coupled with the use of a thin layer of gesso ground, created a unique surface that required the artist to adjust the application of paint.

A case in point of Titian's diverse engagement with the canvas as either skin or flesh can be observed in his two of portrayals of the entombment of Christ: *The Burial of Christ* (Fig.64) (1559; Prado, Madrid) and *The Burial of Christ* (Fig.65) (1572; Prado, Madrid). In both paintings, Titian's handling of the materials creates a proliferation of multiple surfaces, a phenomenon that alters the temporality of the scene, either by suggesting the preceding or the following moments of the narrative. In regards to the first painting in question, *The Burial of*

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<sup>428</sup>Jill Dunkerton, *Durer to Veronese: Sixteenth-century Painting in the National Gallery*, Yale University Press, 1999, 268-271. See also: Martina Griesser and Natalia Gustavson, "Observations on Technique and Materials in Titian's Late Works," in Sylvia Ferino-Pagden ed. *Late Titian and the Sensuality of Painting*, Marsilio, 2008, 103-104.

<sup>429</sup> On Titian and materiality see: Cranston, Jodi, "Theorizing Materiality: Titian's Flaying of Marsyas." In Joanna Woods-Marsden, ed., *Titian: Materiality, Portraiture, Istorica*. Brepols, 2007.

<sup>430</sup> See: David Rosand, "Titian and the Eloquence of the Brush," *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 1981, 85-96.

<sup>431</sup> For a technical account of Titian's late paintings from the Kunsthistorische Museum, Viena, see: Griesser and Gustavson, "Observations," 103-111.

<sup>432</sup> Dunkerton, *Durer to Veronese*, 270.

*Christ* (1559; Prado, Madrid), I suggest that the canvas's texture is staged here as Christ's disfigured skin, where the roughness and bumpiness of its surface resonates with the ruptured, bruised and wounded skin of Christ. The surface of the painting is dominated here by the presence of the canvas, which permeates through the layers of paint. This phenomenon can be observed in the consistency of the body of Christ as well as on the surface of the white cloth, two areas heavily textured by the threads of the canvas to the point that they acquire a distinct tactility in relationship to other parts of the painting. The gravity of the moment is achieved through the application of paint in thin successive glazes, thereby allowing the canvas to filter through and dominate large sections of the surface. The new idiosyncratic texture resulting from the interaction between the thin and rough paint, and the coarse canvas evokes a certain fleshiness and physicality. Above all, this is noticeable on Christ's body, which acquires a consistency and texture that makes it appear heavy and torn apart. The coarse dominating texture of the canvas suggests the violence that preceded the scene depicted. The canvas is staging here Christ's body as the ultimate figure of self-sacrifice. The rough appearance suggests a skin that was ripped apart by flagellation and a flesh perforated by the thorns of the crown, the nails from the cross, and Longinus's spear.

On the other hand, Titian's second version of the *Burial of Christ* (1572; Prado, Madrid) works the canvas together with the paint as Christ's flesh after the resurrection. Despite the fact that both paintings have a similar compositional arrangement, the second version is executed with thicker layers of paint and glazes than the first version. This is especially visible on Christ's body and the supportive white cloth. The overall sense of the image still remains highly tactile owing to Titian's intense use of paint; however, what has changed is its potentiality in interpreting the scene. It plays on the evanescence of the tragic scene by emphasizing its transitory nature, rather than focusing on its weight and heaviness. The paint is here worked in light glazes, and although the canvas is still visible, the numerous thin layers of paint creates a multilayered surface that makes the figures seem ephemeral. The surrounding details are simplified, the colours are not as strong and mixed with white, the body of Christ appears dead and brittle, everything seems as though fading into a white light. The canvas and use of colour, particularly white, makes the body appear fragile and ready to break; its pallor gives it a feeling of lightness and something which won't sink down, but will eventually evaporate into nothing. This effect protrudes within the temporal sequence of the narrative to suggest the altered nature of the body of Christ after resurrection. Saint Paul writes that after the resurrection, Christ's body remained physical but acquired a different nature: "So

will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body (1 Cor.15:42-44).”<sup>433</sup> Titian’s depiction therefore can be interpreted as expressing Christ’s newly acquired corporeal nature by staging its whiteness, lightness, and ephemerality, subtly hinting at his transitory state between the moment of resurrection and the ascension to heaven.

Titian’s versions of the *Burial of Christ* offer two paradigmatic examples of the enormous expressive potential of the canvas by using it to vary the weight and heaviness of the body of Christ in order to rework the materiality of the surface and temporality of the depicted moment. In the first version of *The Burial of Christ* (1559; Prado, Madrid), Titian was able to create a rough, heavy, torn apart body and scene, implying the extreme violence of the preceding moments, the passions. In the second version of *The Burial of Christ* (1572; Prado, Madrid), despite the fact that the canvas retains its importance, Titian completely altered its use. While the canvas’ texture is still coming through very strongly, it is more refined and does not disrupt the strokes of paint as coarsely as in the first version. In this picture, with the combination of lighter paints, Titian paired the two media to create a brittle, fragile body, emphasising the painting’s ephemeral atmosphere. This effect unanchored the interpretation of the scene’s temporality by suggesting the ontologically different nature of Christ’s body between death and ascension.

### **The Texture of Violence**

A contrasting exploitation of the canvas can be observed in one of Diego Velázquez last works, *Mercury and Argus* (Fig.66) (1659; Prado, Madrid). Velázquez found a different solution from Titian in tackling the problem by altering not only the temporality of the scene but also its sense of violence. The painting depicts the mythological story from Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* in which Mercury – following Jupiter’s orders – kills the shepherd Argos and sets free a calf who is in fact his transformed lover, Io.<sup>434</sup> Velázquez’s handling of the story’s

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<sup>433</sup> For an informed interpretation of the body of Christ after the resurrection, see also: Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, Yale University Press, 1999, 126, passim.

<sup>434</sup> *Mercury and Argus* was originally part of a series of four mythological works – the other three depicting: Apollo and Marsyas, Venus and Adonis, and Cupid and Psyche – that decorated the Hall of Mirrors (Salón de los Espejos) in the old Alcazar Palace from Madrid. The four pictures would have hung together with other masterpieces by Titian, Rubens, Tintoretto, Veronese, and Ribera – depicting mythological and biblical subjects related in some way or another to the topic of princely virtues – until 1734 when a fire broke out on Christmas day, which wiped out a large portion of the palace and destroyed a third of the Royal Collection.

temporality can be effectively contrasted with Rubens's *Mercury and Argus* (Fig.67) (1635; Prado, Madrid) painted for the Torre de Parada in the Monte de El Pardo. While Rubens portrayed the climactic moment when Mercury with his sword raised high is about to sever Argus's head, Velázquez showed the moment of suspense before the murder, when Mercury is slowly moving in for the kill. Velázquez offers a contrasting point where the violence of the subject is not conveyed through the depiction of the climactic moment, but through the brilliant working of the materials, in particular the canvas' texture. Velázquez's use of the canvas alters the temporal narrative of the scene by suggesting the climax moment through the violent texture of the surface. The roughness and brutality of the canvas moves the building tension of the proceeding moments to the culmination of the killing. The strong sense of violence that pervades Velázquez's painting is the result of the correlation between the rough texture of the canvas and the suffocating tension of the narrative, and not the gruesomeness of the beheading.

Svetlana Alpers argues that Velázquez replaced the depiction of violence with a pervading sense of shared fatality.<sup>435</sup> Alpers argues that the two figures, the killer and victim, are the expression of what Aby Warburg called *pathosformel* – an emotionally charged visual trope evoking Pathos.<sup>436</sup> Alpers' interpretation is based on the claim that both figures are modelled after the same Roman sculpture of the fourth century *Dying Gaul* (Fig.68) (3<sup>rd</sup> Century; Capitoline Museums, Rome), and as such mirror each other's position. Because of their common origin, Mercury and Argus share a common destiny of suffering and death. In a sense, the murderer and the victim become equals, trapped in a continuous dance macabre.

I suggest that the painting's powerful sense of violence is conveyed not through the climactic moment as in Rubens's case, but through the rough texture of the canvas. Although Velázquez's approach to painting loosely echoes the Venetian tradition through its richness of colour and use of the loose brush, after the 1630s he began to revise his technique, especially in the mode of applying paint.<sup>437</sup> However, in stark contrast with Titian's method of adding a succession of thin layers of paint, or glazes – as for instance in Titian's *The Burial of Christ* (Fig.65) (1572; Prado, Madrid) – Velázquez proceeded to reduce the thickness of paint down to a semitransparent layer. In *Mercury and Argus* the canvas is prepared with a thin, somewhat

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<sup>435</sup> Svetlana Alpers, *The Vexation of Art. Velasquez and Others*. Yale University Press, 2005, 111- 132.

<sup>436</sup> For Aby Warburg's *pathosformel* see: Colleen Becker, "Aby Warburg's Pathosformel as methodological paradigm," In *Journal of Art Historiography*, Nr. 9, 12/2013.

<sup>437</sup> The following analysis draws on the painting's technical study in: Jonathan Brown and Carmen Garrido eds., *Velázquez: The Technique of Genius*, Yale University Press, 1998, 206-213.



brownish base onto which the thin layers of paint were added (Fig.69). The translucency resulting from its thinness allows the canvas to become the primary source of texture of the figures and objects depicted. For Velázquez, the use of fabric was always conditioned by the way he intended to prepare the surface and execute the composition – in that respect very similar to the practice of Titian and, as we shall see, of Ribera. Velázquez selected the quality and pattern of the canvas adjusting its texture with that of the paint to suit the problematic of a subject.<sup>438</sup> The preliminary ground layers, together with the subsequent layers of paint, appear to work in concert with the canvas in delivering an expression of roughness and brutality.

Hence, in Velázquez's case, the violence so conspicuously lacking from the depicted moment (in any case not overtly present) is effectively staged through the textured roughness of the surface. It is a violence that is sweltering underneath, a violence that is suggested through the coarse quality of the canvas, complemented by the loose, long touches of the brush. The canvas thus captures, preserves, and puts forward the violence that is moments away from happening. It also suggests the internal struggle of Mercury in anticipation of his act. The figures stand still for the moment, but in the end, Mercury will deliver the final blow, and that gust of extreme violence is encapsulated in the working of the surface.

### **Fleshy Canvas**

In light of the previous discussion, let us turn to Ribera's painting of the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.7) (1644; MNAC; Barcelona) and his engagement with the texture of the canvas. Ribera used the texture of the canvas on Bartholomew's torso in such a way as to stage it as a process of continuous surfacing, where the paint as skin is ruptured in order to expose the canvas as flesh – a dynamic process that echoes and reinforces the flaying of the saint. This phenomenon involves a technique that produces a twofold experience. First, I argue that the process of exhibiting the canvas as emerging through the paint can be interpreted as a heightening of the picture's material presence. And second, because the painting can be understood as a corporeal presence, the exposure of the canvas through ruptured paint resonates with the rupture of Bartholomew's skin and the exposure of his inner flesh. At this point, the body of the painting echoes the body of the saint through the violence exerted on their respective surfaces.

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<sup>438</sup> See the following technical analysis in: Garrido and Carmen, "Genius at Work: Velázquez's Materials and Technique", in Brown and Garrido, *Velázquez*, 15-17.

The manipulation of canvas and paint as flesh or skin was considered highly problematic in sixteenth and seventeenth-century art-historical discourse. There was no fixed identity ascribed to either material; the canvas and paint were variously understood as flesh or skin. This interpretation echoes the sixteenth and early seventeenth-century interpretations of the limits of the human body.<sup>439</sup> In effect, both materials were seen as interrelated parts of the body, an interaction that endows the image with a strong sense of corporeality. The lack of a fixed identity attributed to flesh and skin opens my interpretation of Ribera's treatment of canvas and paint in the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (1644; MNAC; Barcelona). I suggest that Ribera staged the materials so as to present the canvas as flesh looming underneath the thin layer of paint as skin. This interpretation would imply that in this particular picture, Ribera worked the potentiality of the canvas as flesh and the paint as skin. The flesh underneath the skin is staged as coming forth to present itself not as interior but as another complex surface. Ribera's approach is however not coherent throughout all of his depictions of Bartholomew's body. In the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.8) (1634; Washington) for instance, the staging of materials is reversed, so that the paint is presented as flesh opened up onto the canvas. The working of the canvas's materiality as flesh surfacing through ruptured paint as skin requires a closer look at the painting's surfaces and an analysis of the picture's temporality and violence.

The surface of the painting reveals the ground layer as a site of (meaningful) processing; a site where the emergence of the canvas onto the surface is negotiated. The ground was usually used as an intermediate layer between the canvas and paint, with the purpose of preventing the canvas from absorbing too much oil from the paint. The handling of the ground varied greatly from artist to artist, and from painting to painting; for instance, in Titian's the *Burial of Christ* (Fig.64) (1559; Madrid) and Velasquez's *Mercury and Argus* (Fig.66) (1659; Prado, Madrid) the ground was applied only in the thinnest possible layer. This prevented the canvas from absorbing too much oil, while retaining its ability to influence the surface. On the other hand, Ribera used the ground layer to substantially influence the tone and texture of the painting through its colour and consistency. Ribera typically used ground made of a rough-grained heterogenic mixture, which he applied in various degrees of thickness. This type of ground is composed of a wide variety of warm tones, from ochre yellow to dark brown and almost black tint, colours that influence the appearance of the paint

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<sup>439</sup> See: Bohde, "Skin and the Search for the Interior."

by softening its tone.<sup>440</sup> The relatively thick ground thus prevents direct contact between paint and canvas, acting as a limit, a site of contact where the texture of the paint is fashioned. As such, the texture resulting from the application of the paint on the surface depends on and is a direct result of the degree of thickness of the ground layer. The technical analysis is significant here because it is through matter that the painting's corporeality is negotiated; it is here that the potentiality of the emerging canvas presents itself as flesh breaking through the cracks of the paint as skin.

The issue of skin in the sixteenth century falls within a larger debate on self identity and the distinction between the inside and outside of a body. Skin was thought of as a border, yet the question of whether it was a closed border or an open border was open to debate. Daniela Bohde explores the question whether personal identity was conceived in the sixteenth century in terms of a complete separation from the immediate surrounding – through the skin – or whether the skin was seen as a porous border between the self and environment.<sup>441</sup> Bohde argues that the preoccupation with the act of flaying in the middle of the sixteenth century suggests that the idea of skin as a border has emerged, though it wasn't seen as stable and secure, but something exposed to danger.<sup>442</sup> The act of flaying places the figure's identity into question in a paradoxical manner: "on the one hand skin is presented as the bearer of identity, on the other it appears as a covering, concealing 'real' identity."<sup>443</sup> Bohde interprets Michelangelo's St Bartholomew from his *Last Judgement* (1536-1541; Sistine Chapel, Vatican City) as an expression a sixteenth-century platonic notion of identity as enclosed or hidden by the skin, where skin was thought as a mere exterior. In contrast to that principle, Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas* (Fig.18) (c.1570–1576; National Museum, Kroměříž) depicts the

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<sup>440</sup> To my knowledge there is no technical study on Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (1644; MNAC, Barcelona). Therefore, my description is based on close visual analysis of the surface and a comparison with the technical studies published in the exhibition catalogue dedicated to Ribera's *Pieta* (1633) from the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza collection. See: Ubaldo Sedano and Clara González-Fanjul, "Cuatro Pitturas a Examen," in *Ribera La Piedad, Contextos de la Colección Permanente*, 14, Madrid, 2003, 53-60; Tomás Antelo and Araceli Gabaldón, "Las radiografías de la *Piedad* del Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza y el *Entierro de Cristo* del Museo de Bellas Artes de Asturias: análisis comparativo," in *Ribera La Piedad, Contextos de la Colección Permanente*, 14, Madrid, 2003, 61-68; Sedano and González-Fanjul, "Observaciones sobre la *Piedad* del Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza y el *Entierro de Cristo* del Museo de Bellas Artes de Asturias," in *Ribera La Piedad, Contextos de la Colección Permanente*, 14, Madrid, 2003, 69-72; Dolores Gayo, Andrés Sánchez, Jesús Gomez, "Estudio de materials," in *Ribera La Piedad, Contextos de la Colección Permanente*, 14, Madrid, 2003, 73-80; Sedano, "Apreciaciones sobre los materials," in *Ribera La Piedad, Contextos de la Colección Permanente*, 14, Madrid, 2003, 81-84; See also the technical study on Ribera's *Saint Jerome* (1646; National Gallery, Prague): Mojmir Hamsik, [http://www.technologiaartis.org/a\\_3malba-platno-technika.html](http://www.technologiaartis.org/a_3malba-platno-technika.html)

<sup>441</sup> Daniela Bohde, "Skin and the Search for the Interior."

<sup>442</sup> *Idem*, 32.

<sup>443</sup> *Idem*, 11.

exterior and the interior of the satyr's body as being inextricably merged together, making skin the bearer of identity. This interpretation challenges the neo-platonic idea of self. For Bohde, the rising popularity of the images of flaying suggests that the notion of skin started to be regarded as an outer layer, a membrane that not only shields and circumscribe the inner depth of a body, but is also responsible for forming individual identity.<sup>444</sup>

Bohde also draws attention to the fact that skin and flesh, though sometimes seen as divergent, were also perceived as dialectically interconnected parts.<sup>445</sup> Lorenzo Pericolo, extending Bohde's study, analyse two sixteenth-century sources that address the issue. The first text is Giovan Paolo Armenini's *De' veri precetti della pittura* published in 1582:

And then comes the skin, which covers everything, and which Nature created soft and delicate, strewn with a beautiful and alluring variety of tints; as a covering, the skin renders the body's whole composition pleasant, graceful, and marvellous; [the execution of] this part is difficult by all means, but especially so in the representation of those nudes demanding much artifice, which therefore causes knowledgeable scholars to insist ordinarily on an excess upon whatever lies underneath it, which they believe to be accomplished and, always keeping this in mind they hardly tolerate [adding] the ultimate finish of the skin, as if they were displeased to employ [here] their knowledge, which they [instead] strive to express outside [in representing whatever lies underneath the skin] with such hardship.<sup>446</sup>

In this passage, Armenini advocates that painters should not pay excessive attention to the anatomical precision of the human figures, as the "knowledgeable scholars" – art critics –

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<sup>444</sup> *Idem*, 31-37.

<sup>445</sup> Bohde, *Haut, Fleisch und Farbe - Körperlichkeit und Materialität in den Gemälden Tizians*, Emsdetten/Berlin 2002.

<sup>446</sup> 'Di poi vien la pelle, che cuo- pre ogni cosa , la quale la natura ha fatto molle e delicata, sparsa di belle e vaghe varietà dei colori; la qual coperta fa che tutto il componimento del corpo riesca piacevole, vago e meraviglioso; la qual parte e difficile in tutte le maniere, ma e molto piu ne gl'ignudi molto artificio, il che ne cagiona la troppo impressioni che gli studiosi si sogliono pigliare delle parti di sotto, le quali essi trovano esser terminate e cosi, tenedo in mente tuttavia, fan che mal pastiscono poi quest'ultimo compimento della pelle, come che siano quasi constretti a dover mostrare quella intelligenza di loro cosi spiacevole, che con tanta fatica si sforzano voler esprimer fouri, dove che molti se ne lavano poi finalmente, tardi accorgendosi quella dover essere maniera piu conveniente ed atta per I sommi principi che per le private persone, alle qual essi piu spesso servono e dove, con piu riputazione e men fatica, fanno I fatti loro.' Armenini, quoted from: Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative*, 488.

of his time demand. Instead, they should attend to suit the surface of their paintings and the surface of their figures by covering them with soft and delicate skin in a variety of tints. Armenini's text also suggests that the layers of paint covering a painting can be staged as skin. The production of paint as skin covering the surface of a picture suggests that the painting as a material object can be interpreted as a body.<sup>447</sup> Armenini's observations are significant here not only because they question the distinction between interior and exterior, but also because they further my interpretation of Ribera's engagement with the surface in relation to the body of Saint Bartholomew. Pericolo draws attention to Raffaello Borghini's *Il Riposo* (1584) which says that:

One must put aside the canvas for many days until the applied colours are dry; then, one must consider it attentively, and amend what needs to be emended, giving it its ultimate skin of finest colour, diluted in little oil, so that they will be always beautiful and lively (alive).<sup>448</sup>

In this passage, Borghini interpreted the thin layers of paint as the figure's ultimate skin. However, his interpretation is by no means definitive as Borghini does not assign a fixed identity to paint as skin and support as flesh – he rather sees skin as colour and life.<sup>449</sup> This is made apparent in another passage from the same book where Borghini interprets the supporting surface – in this case the wall of a fresco – also as skin:

One must apply this mixture upon the wall with a large brush, spreading it with a heated towel in order to cover all the holes of the plaster layer, thereby making a uniform and smooth skin throughout the wall.<sup>450</sup>

The production of skin and flesh in relation to either canvas or paint is by no means a clear-cut phenomenon. Indeed, they were seen as interrelated parts that formed the surface of

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<sup>447</sup> In accordance with Armenini's observation, Daniela Bohde argues that: "knowledge of the inner body served not only to represent the human figure 'correctly', but also to enhance the status of their own art metaphysically." See: Bohde, "Skin and the Search for the Interior," 21.

<sup>448</sup> "Il buon pittore (...) dee, poschiache ha calcato il cartone sopra il suo quadro, andarlo campeggiando co' colori, percioche quello, in secandosi, diviene nero, e poi metter da canto il quadro per molti giorni, tantoche i colori dati siano secchi; poi lo rivegga deligentemente, e racconci quello che gli pare da racconciare, e gli dia l'ultima pelle si colori finissimi e temperate con poco olio, che d'ital maniera saranno sempre vaghi e vivi." Borghini, quoted from: Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative*, 449.

<sup>449</sup> On colour and corporeality see: Ann-Sophie Lehmann, "Fleshing out the Body. The Colours of the Naked in Dutch Art Theory and Workshop Practice 1400-1600."

<sup>450</sup> "E questa mistura con un pennel grosso si metta sopra il muro e si vada distendendo con una cazzuola infocata che riturera tutti i buchi dell'arricciato e fara una pelle unita e liscia per il muro." Borghini, quoted from: Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative*, 448-449.

the picture as a body. The technical term for *skin – pelle* in Italian, or *cutis* in Latin – was used as a synonym for the canvas and the picture’s upper layers ever since Leon Battista Alberti’s *De Pictura* in 1435. Mary Pardo calls attention to Alberti’s treatment of painting as an art of surfaces.<sup>451</sup> Pardo quotes the following passage in order to show Alberti’s concurrence between skin and cloth/canvas:

“If many lines, like the threads on a cloth, are joined closely together, they will produce a surface. For the surface is the extreme part of the body, which is known not through its depth, but only its height and breadth.”<sup>452</sup>

Pardo emphasises that in Alberti’s view: “Among the properties of the surface, the contour is the ‘border’ or ‘hem’ (*ora o ... lembo*), whereas the expanse of surface proper moves textile into quasi-anthropomorphic analogy, as it ‘is in a manner of speaking like a kind of skin (*una certa pelle*) stretched over the entire back (*dorso*) of the surface.”<sup>453</sup> The production of the cloth/canvas as skin in Alberti’s interpretation of the surface suggests a conception of the painting as a body. Pardo concludes that, although Alberti was notably uninterested in the materiality of the pictorial materials, by attending to the machinery of perception and representation, he attached the physicality of the *velo* – a conceptually charged cloth/canvas – to the poetics of the painting.<sup>454</sup> As such, Alberti drew attention to the interaction between the painter’s means and the depicted subject.

If until now I have explored the staging of a painting’s surface predominantly as skin, I now turn my attention to its production as flesh. As was pointed out above, in the sixteenth and early seventeenth-century there was no clear distinction between canvas and paint in terms of flesh and skin. This situation is perceptible in Lodovico Dolce’s *Dialogo della Pittura* (1557):

So the man who practices a detailed elaboration of the muscles is really aiming to give an organized picture of the bone structure, and this is commendable; often, however, he succeeds in making the human figure look flayed or desiccated or ugly.

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<sup>451</sup> Mary Pardo, “Veiling the Venus of Urbino,” In Rona Goffen (Ed.) *Titian’s ‘Venus of Urbino,’* Cambridge University Press, 1997, 108-123.

<sup>452</sup> Alberti, quoted from: Pardo, “Veiling,” 113.

<sup>453</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>454</sup> *Idem*, 121.

The man who works in the delicate manner, on the other hand, gives an indication of the bones where he needs to do so; but he covers them smoothly with flesh and charges (fills) the nude figure with grace.<sup>455</sup>

Dolce, echoing Armenini's advice, points out that painters should not be excessively concerned with anatomical knowledge and drawings, since it makes the human figure look dry and lifeless. Instead painters should concern themselves with the surface of the figures, covering them with smooth flesh in order to give them grace. Remarkable in Dolce's account is the use of the term *carne*, which is usually translated as flesh, though here it stands for both flesh and skin. At this point one can suggest that Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (1644; MNAC, Barcelona) belongs to a particular type of artistic interaction, where the materiality of canvas and paint can evoke at different times and circumstances either the flesh or the skin of a body. It becomes apparent that the canvas – so much a part of Bartholomew's corporeality – was perceived at the time alternatively as skin and as flesh, and that painters and critics were aware of its conceptual implications.

### **Folding Skin**

Before moving on to the issue of surface and violence, I turn to the *folding* relationship between Ribera's depiction of Saint Bartholomew and the white cloth partially enveloping his body. To unravel this issue, I draw on Gilles Deleuze's exploration of the baroque through the notion of the *fold*. Ribera's painting shows a multiplication of folds, from the creases formed by the saint's haggard skin and white cloth to the folding of time and narrative. By taking a closer look at Saint Bartholomew one can observe that his body appears to be engaged in a move of folding that begins from his upper body curving down his lower part. On one hand, Bartholomew's upper section of his torso, his chest, open hands and stare outside the picture gives the impression of a body stretched, widened in such a way as to resemble a canvas on a stretch bar.<sup>456</sup> On the other hand, the saint's lower body, starting from his hips, is engaged in a twisted move of folding and turning that is reminiscent of a creased cloth falling down to the ground in sumptuous folds. As such, the frontality of his upper body is stretched just like a

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<sup>455</sup> "Chi adunque va ricercando minutamente i muscoli, cerca ben di mostrar l'ossature a luoghi: ilche e lodevole; ma spesse volte fa l'huomo scorticato, o secco, o brutto da vedere: ma chi f ail delicate, accenna gliossi, ove bisogna, ma gli ricopre dolcemente di carne, e riempie il nudo di gratia." Dolce, quoted from: Roskill, *Dolce's "Aretino"*, 142-143.

<sup>456</sup> Although the upper body is stretched, the folds are still present on the saint's forehead, his skin folding as he looks out towards the viewer.

canvas on a wooden bar, while his lower body is folded – the twisted hip, one leg on top of the other – onto itself, evoking the folds of the white cloth. Moreover, the relationship between Bartholomew’s body and the cloth’s folds is by no means restricted to the compositional arrangement, but appears to also engage the saint’s skin. This is especially visible on his lower hip, where the fold created by the cloth underneath the saint is continued by the folds of skin, and on his upper hip, where again the folds of the canvas are continued by the creases of his skin (Fig.9). The body of the saint seems therefore not only folded onto himself, but also folded in a shared entanglement with the white cloth and the stretching and unfolding of the canvas.

The folds on Bartholomew’s body and the white cloth force the viewer to remain on the surface of the canvas by resisting an interpretation of corporeal and pictorial depth. For Deleuze, the *fold* is a concept that allows a creative rethinking of the production of subjectivity. The fold resists typical accounts of subjectivity that assume a simple interiority and exteriority – or surface and depth – by proclaiming that the inside as a fold of the outside. In his book on Foucault, Deleuze observes:

The outside is not a fixed limit but a moving matter animated by peristaltic movements, folds and foldings that together make up an inside: they are not something other than the outside, but precisely the inside of the outside.<sup>457</sup>

The production of subjectivity through the fold defines one’s relationship with oneself, in terms of affect of the self *on* the self. This relationship is one of folding, where one-self is folded over one’s *self*. Mieke Bal, commenting on Deleuze’s folds, points out that “the fold insists on surface and materiality, a materialism that promotes a realistic visual rhetoric in its wake. The materialism of the fold entails the involvement of the subject within the material experience, thus turning surface into skin in a relation that I call ‘correlativist.’”<sup>458</sup> Although Bal uses the “correlativist” relationship to account for the interaction between viewer and artwork, I am adapting it here to the relationship between the saint and cloth, on one hand, and saint and canvas/paint, on another. Thus, the relationship between Bartholomew’s body and the white cloth can be interpreted as correlativist, involving the saint’s body within the cloth’s material existence and turning the picture’s surface into skin.

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<sup>457</sup> Deleuze, *Foucault*, University of Minnesota Press, 1988, 80.

<sup>458</sup> Mieke Bal, “Baroque Matters,” in Helen Hills ed., *Rethinking the Baroque*, Ashgate, 2011, 191.



The arrangement of Bartholomew's upper body is reminiscent of Titian's positioning of Marsyas in his *The Flaying of Marsyas* (1570–1576; National Museum, Kroměříž). Daniela Bohde argues that because Marsyas is tied to the tree with red bows – bows which could not possibly support his weight – his body loses its fleshiness and physicality in order to become a painterly experiment concerned with skin and its relation to paint.<sup>459</sup> Thus, the presentation of Bartholomew's upper body as stretched skin/canvas, calls attention to the depth of his body as being merely skin deep. This interpretation should also take into account the act of flaying – already underway on Bartholomew's right arm – as another pictorial device that presents the saint's interior as a mere surface, as the inside of his outside. At the same time, the lower part of the saint twists and turns, creating numerous folds of skin that are set into an interdependent interaction with the cloth's folds. Commenting on folds of clothing, Deleuze writes:

In every instance folds of clothing acquire an autonomy and a fullness that are not simply decorative effects. They convey the intensity of a spiritual force exerted on the body, either to turn it upside down or to stand or raise it up over and again, but in every event to turn it inside out and to mold its inner surfaces.<sup>460</sup>

The relationship between the folds of the cloth and the folds formed by Bartholomew's skin is not one of metamorphosis where skin and cloth merge into one another. Instead, they are set in a correlativist relationship which retains their distinctiveness by referring to one another as surfaces, as folded textures that proclaim the inside of Bartholomew's body as a mere fold of the outside. This surface is matter, and it conveys the spiritual force at work within Bartholomew's body as he suffers martyrdom. The folds of his body, coupled with the flaying, point towards Bartholomew's inner matter spilling onto the surface, lifting his skin on the surface of the picture and staging it as paint. Bartholomew's body and the cloth are therefore set into a co-dependent relationship, where one is folded into the other. This process of folding ultimately reveals both the nature of the saint's body as surface – in Deleuze's words as “the inside of the outside.”

### **Endless Violence**

The canvas's potentiality to produce violence can be observed on Bartholomew's torso. The texture and threats of the canvas intrude like stabbing cuts into the smooth surface of the

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<sup>459</sup> Bohde, “Skin and the Search for the Interior,” 46.

<sup>460</sup> Deleuze, *The Fold*, 140.

saint's body, a process that involves the collapse of sequential narrative and linear time. Certain areas of the surface show definite signs of the canvas's emergence, while in others it is fully obscured by the layers of ground and paint. Ribera resorted to rendering the figures with different degrees of finishing, thus highlighting their distinctive corporeality. For instance, the executioner's figure, especially his face, is executed here with visible blotches of reddish-brown paint and sweeping touches of white pigment as reverberating light, all applied in great quantity (Fig.70). The density of the pictorial texture lends a grotesque expression and a strong sense of carnality to the executioner, creating a disturbing physicality. In contrast, large parts of Bartholomew's body are constructed with thin layers of paint, allowing the weave of the canvas to permeate through and shape its surface, giving it texture and consistency (Fig.62). The visibility of the canvas through Bartholomew's body cannot be compared, for instance, with that in Velázquez's *Mercury and Argus* (Fig.69) where the canvas's texture dominates the surface. In Ribera's case, the canvas's threads come into sight only through the cracks in the thin layer of paint. In Ribera's painting, the canvas is essentially caught somewhere in a state of perpetual emergence; it is neither completely hidden by the ground and layers of paint, nor is it completely visible; it is in a position of constant surfacing. This continuous process worked out at the level of the picture's materiality necessarily involves temporality, where the violence of the flaying presents itself as horrifying everlasting presence, a present that is too unbearable, an ever-present.

Ribera's extraordinary handling of the canvas opens up a new dimension of thinking about its production, not only as flesh or skin, but also as an element engaged in a violent act. By staging the canvas as caught in what seems to be a perpetual movement from within the painting's shallow interior towards its surface, Ribera went beyond the usual treatment of flesh as only a feature of the figure's corporeality, by using it as a thing of turmoil, tension, and violence. The brutality, the pain, and the bloodshed saturate all aspects of the painting, involving its materiality with the violence of the subject matter. This phenomenon was eulogized in verses by Giambattista Marino in one of his poems from *La Galeria* dedicated to an unidentified painting by Annibale Carracci titled *Herodias with the Head of Saint John the Baptist*:

Oh dire tragedy,  
Cut off and exsanguine,  
The sacred head of the good Precursor  
Tinges the white threads with red blood!

Only royal tables  
Are adorned with such meals.  
Believe me impious woman, this spread  
Does not belong in a poor person's meal.<sup>461</sup>

Marino's poem describes how the blood spilling from John the Baptist's severed head seeps into the threads of the white cloth. Lorenzo Pericolo offered a meta-pictorial interpretation of the poem, stating that the blood of the Baptist rests in the canvas itself, implying that the image's horror penetrates even the support of the picture.<sup>462</sup> Thus, Marino suggests that the violence is not solely restricted to the subject but also pervades through the physical structures creating the image, making its materiality an active element in the scene. This phenomenon is also evident in Ribera's working of Bartholomew's torso but in an opposite direction as the canvas's texture ruptures the surface of the paint. The violence of the fissures summons a correlative relationship between their destructive nature and the horror of the subject matter. The flaying of Bartholomew therefore corresponds in nature with the rupture of the paint as skin, and the production of the canvas as flesh. This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that the open wound on Bartholomew's right arm is painted only with a thin layer of ground and red paint, in so doing allowing the texture of the canvas to move forward. This is in sharp contrast with the forearm and hand of the executioner; starting with a smooth rendition of skin at the shoulder, the paint increasing in thickness as the hand reaches into the saint's exposed wound, where the canvas threads as just as present as is bright red paint (Fig.71).

The production of canvas and paint as rising flesh and ruptured skin on Bartholomew's torso dislodges time from the narrative moment, though it does not move it forward – as in the case of Titian and Velázquez's paintings discussed above – but turns it into a never-ending present, or ever-present.<sup>463</sup> Ribera's painting does not collapse temporality by reducing the moment depicted to a petrifying instant – a frozen time and action as problematized by Louis Marin in relation to Caravaggio's work – but a working continuous process realised before the viewer's eyes through materiality.<sup>464</sup> Thus, staging the paint as brutally cut skin disturbs the

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<sup>461</sup> "Oh tragedia funesta/ Come tronca ed essangue/ Fa del buon Precursor la sacra testa/ I bianchi lini rosseggiar di sangue!/ Ahi pompose ne van di cibi tal/ Sol le mense reali./ Non e (credilo a me) donna nefanda./ Da desco poverel simil vivanda." Marino, quoted from Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative*, 453-454.

<sup>462</sup> Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative*, 454.

<sup>463</sup> The following analysis is indebted to Andrew Benjamin's conceptualization of materiality, time, and narrative in *Matter's Insistence*, <http://www.tonyscherman.com/catalogues/catalogue.html/bonquoenlsh.html>

<sup>464</sup> Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, 150-171.

presumed coherence between the painting's temporal dimension and the depiction of the narrative moment. The temporality of the painting is negotiated in two intertwining registers. On one hand, there is the temporality of the picture's materiality and, on the other hand, the time unfolding within the narrative sequence.<sup>465</sup> It is within the narrative that the painting's materiality intervenes, disconnecting time from the moment depicted, thereby affecting the viewer's perception of the picture's fictive progression through time. This process produces a cleavage between subject and subjectivity. Once time is dislodged from the narrative sequence, the viewer's focus shifts to the process of narration and materiality of the scene, leading him/her to an interpretation of the scene beyond the bare story line. In other words, instead of focusing on the chronological elements of narration that allow the events to be acted out, the viewer's attention is redirected to the tension arising between narrative and the temporality of the painting's materiality.

The opening between time and narrative allows for the materiality's temporality to take its own course and affect the violence of the scene. It is this endless temporality that endows the surface with an intensity that gives the painting an extreme sense of violence. At this point materiality becomes horrible. This is not a violence that will end soon with the saint's demise in the narrative fictive sequence, but will continue to be enacted forever on the painting's surface. Therefore the surface is not a static temporal place; it does not form a coherent unity with the moment depicted, but is a site of an ongoing process of creating tensions between subject, subjectivity, and the painting's materiality. The violence of the act of flaying the saint is heightened by emphasizing the materiality's endless temporality; that endless violence is made to work in turn with the surface's potentiality as either flesh or skin.

### **The Painful Opening of Flesh**

In Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.8) (1634; National Gallery, Washington), I argue that the figure of Saint Bartholomew is staged as a paradoxical body that is at the same time detached and distinct – separating the viewer from the space of the painting – as well as opened and accessible – unfolding his inner depths onto the surface of the painting. The first state is achieved through the painting's remarkable compositional arrangement where

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<sup>465</sup> There is a third dimension that will not be discussed here. It concerns the temporality of the materials, of the technique, conditioned by space and time and made visible here by the cracks on the surface of the picture – a result of the thin paint drying and aging. This is a historical temporality that affects the empirical presence of the canvas and paint.

Bartholomew's body appears to be trapped in a move of turning away from the viewer, his hands and torso acting as a cut separating the surface of the picture in two parts. The saint's separation is further emphasised by his spiritual absorption, made apparent by Bartholomew's gaze firmly directed towards the light that is shining onto his face. On the other hand, the state of openness is accomplished through Ribera's powerful impasto; the artist worked the materiality of his impasto in such a way as to present the broad open brushstrokes that make up Bartholomew's body as sections of opened flesh, turning the body of the saint inside out. Bartholomew's body therefore can be interpreted here as a threshold, a body caught in paradoxical movement of turning that confronts the viewer with the fallacy of what is considered to be pictorial depth at the same time as reaffirming its surface like quality. The surface therefore becomes a site of tension, where the materiality of the paint is used to break the binary of the surface/depth, urging the viewer to attend to the surface of the painting as one of its most important sites that effecting effect and affect.

The material complexity of the painting's surface is primarily composed here by Ribera's strong impasto. If in the Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.7) (1644; MNAC, Barcelona) the materiality of paint takes on the potentiality of ruptured skin, in this case, the materiality of the impasto presents itself as open flesh. The opening of Bartholomew's flesh disrupts the painting's narrative sequence. This implies that the materiality of the paint in Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.8) (1634; National Gallery, Washington) alters the temporality of the scene by acting as a narrative prolepsis, a pictorial move forward that urges viewers to interpret the moment depicted through the subsequent narrative moment.<sup>466</sup> This process of opening up the saint's body emphasizes the role of the surface in heightening the intensity of the scene, giving it that extreme sense of violence, ferocity, and horror that contemporaries such as Dezallier d'Argenville so passionately articulated in their writing.

### **Turning at the limit**

In interpreting Ribera's painting of the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.8) (1634; National Gallery, Washington), the saint's unique compositional arrangement demands attention. Bartholomew's body dominates the foreground, his right wrist bound above him to the trunk of a tree, while looming above him is the imposing figure of the executioner,

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<sup>466</sup> My interpretation of materiality as something that acts as a narrative prolepsis is indebted to Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative*, 444.

sharpening his blade. Just over the executioner's shoulder, two eerie bystanders are chatting with each other, showing a conspicuous lack of interest in the scene unfolding in the foreground. The peculiar, oblique composition and the close proximity offered by the half-length size draw the viewer within arm's reach of the events taking place and ever closer to the picture's surface. One is instantly confronted with the wretched figure of the saint as Bartholomew's hands, fastened tightly to the tree now barely visible, form a diagonal starting from the upper right corner of the painting leading down to the lower left. This dramatic axis created by the hands sharpens the saint's pose by forcing his torso to turn away from the viewer. One is confronted with a body caught in a semi-profiled angle, an inwards facing figure, with his arms opened not towards the viewer in a move of exposition, but turned towards his executioner and the internal space of the picture. The sense of detachment is further reinforced by the saint's absorbed look towards the light shining from above.

Bartholomew's pose in the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (1634; National Gallery, Washington) appears in its full eccentricity when considered alongside Ribera's other depictions of the same subject. Ribera's painting shows the saint in a reclining pose with his arms outstretched; a position that opens the saint's body to the viewers. This move of openness is reinforced by the saint's gaze fixed upon the viewers – the only painting of the subject where the saint appears to engage directly with the beholder. The entire composition revolves around the presentation of Bartholomew's body in the very act of presentation. One is presented here with the depiction of a saint who is actively presenting his own body to the viewer through direct engagement. The difference between the two depictions of Bartholomew lies in the character's physical reference to his own corporeality, or at least to certain aspects of it. If in the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (1634; National Gallery, Washington) the saint seems detached from the events of the narrative and his body turned away from us, in the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (1644; MNAC, Barcelona), the saint is vigorously presenting himself to the viewer, seeking his/her attention and reaction.

Ribera's treatment of Saint Bartholomew can be weighed against Caravaggio's *Martyrdom of Saint Ursula* (Fig.72) (1609-1610; Galleria di Palazzo Zevallos Stigliano, Naples). The painting is one of Caravaggio's last works and it depicts the princess Ursula being struck with an arrow by the king of the Huns as punishment for refusing to marry him. The king is shown on the left side of the foreground with his hands still raised and holding a bow, while on the right side Ursula is looking at the arrow shaft which has just penetrated her heart. The scene, which is set against a dark background, is witnessed by three soldiers. The

spatial and temporal relationship between the king and the saintis of no particular importance to my argument, but instead the attitude Ursula takes towards her own body.

Lorenzo Pericolo offered an interpretation of the painting in terms of “meta-narrative,” where the arrow not only acts as a reference to the picture’s materiality, but also threatens the very integrity of the picture.<sup>467</sup> Pericolo argued that, “in this case, the meta-pictorial is designed to interface with and compliment the viewer’s reception and interpretation of the pictorial narrative.”<sup>468</sup> As such, Caravaggio “did not intend to underscore the efficiency of the meta-narrative effects induced by the shooting act, but instead contended himself with indicating the potential of this pictorial device [...] Caravaggio alludes to, but simultaneously mitigates, the illusory charge of the painting.”<sup>469</sup> Further on, Pericolo mentions that Caravaggio relinquished the mimetic value of the painting by potraying Ursula as a “pictorial form rather than as a pictorial body.”<sup>470</sup> This implies that the *Martyrdom of Saint Ursula* “discloses the fictiveness of the painting as a technical encoding and not a reproductive mirror of reality.”<sup>471</sup> Pericolo connected his meta-pictorial/meta-narrative analysis of the painting with a lyric interpretation where the painting depicts the terrible ending of a non-mutual love. Pericolo points out that: “if, traditionally, it is the woman who metaphorically wounds the man by piercing his heart with the arrows of her eyes, inflicting a metaphorical death on the unfortunate lover, in the Naples picture it is the man who, rejected, literally wounds the woman by piercing her breast with a real arrow.”<sup>472</sup> Therefore, for Pericolo, the interpretation of Caravaggio’s painting as an inversion of a classical poetical trope, implies that Ursula’s attention directed towards her own wound is an expression of the beloved’s detachment that visually evokes “the woman’s insensitivity to man’s gaze.”<sup>473</sup> There is an irony within this inversion: despite the fact that Saint Ursula is the one who will moments later die, she will still be triumphant over death through her sanctity and martyrdom, while the king who will continue to live dies spiritually by seeing his beloved suffer death.

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<sup>467</sup> Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative*, 451; I have discussed Pericolo’s idea of *meta-narrative* in the previous chapter in relation to Caravaggio’s *Incredulity of Saint Thomas*.

<sup>468</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>469</sup> *Idem*, 476.

<sup>470</sup> *Idem*. The painting suffered several damages even before it dried out. Lanfranco Massa in a letter from 1610 to Prince Marcantonio Doria writes that: “I planned to ship the picture of Saint Ursula to you this week, but to ensure that it was perfectly dry before I sent it, I exposed it to the sun yesterday, which rather than drying it caused the varnish to resurface, for Caravaggio spreads it very thick. I want to return to Caravaggio to have his advice as to how to prevent any damage.” quoted from: Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative*, p. 466; see also the technical reports from: *L’ultimo Caravaggio*, 2004, 91-111.

<sup>471</sup> *Idem*, 576.

<sup>472</sup> *Idem*, 475.

<sup>473</sup> *Idem*.

Pericolo's interpretation is significant because of the way he employs the concept of meta-narrative/meta-pictorial in analysing the painting, which in turn sets into motion my own interpretation. I argue that Ursula's attitude towards her own wound is one of deep spiritual absorption, the wound becoming a focal point that draws together the rest of the image into a process of transformation where the materiality of her body becomes spiritual. Far from looking tormented and agonized or in a state of divine bliss, the saint seems to be rather stunned, if not curious by the arrow piercing her breast.<sup>474</sup> With her hands raised around the wound from which blood flows out in violent spurts, Ursula appears to be thoroughly immersed in the opening of her own body, becoming aware of her own corporeality and materiality. Ursula's bodily state is reinforced by the attitude of the king and the soldier in armour on the extreme right corner; both appearing to be captivated by the wound. The lack of any explicit signs of a divine presence, common in scenes of martyrdom at the time, doesn't necessarily imply the absence of the spiritual; it only means that the spiritual is to be found somewhere else. As such, the painting's focus towards the wound suggests a different understanding of the spiritual, where the spiritual, rather than being an external divine intrusion, is to be located inside Ursula's body. What draws the attention to the wound is the moment of transformation, when Ursula's materiality becomes spiritual at the same time as the spiritual acquires materiality.

The unity of flesh and spirit, materiality and spirituality, in Caravaggio's painting is discussed by Helen Hills.<sup>475</sup> Hills points out that Caravaggio's painting can be interpreted as depicting the moment when Ursula's body suffers a transformation into a silver reliquary. Stressing the relationship between the portrayal of the saint and the silver busts adorning the Chapel of San Gennaro, Hills writes: "we see at once together woman-saint and reliquary bust, as if in a montage. All colour drained from her; she gleams a silver white, the very colour of the Neapolitan reliquary busts, her metallic sheen emphasized by the glistening steely armour of the soldier to her left."<sup>476</sup> The saint's bloody wound therefore can also be interpreted as a

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<sup>474</sup> What I wish to emphasize here is Ursula's unconventional attitude during martyrdom. In the early seventeenth century, the most common way of depicting saint undergoing martyrdom is by showing them in a state of divine grace of bliss. See for instance Guido Reni's contemporary portrayals of the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian. Piero Boccardo, Xavier F. Salomon, Eds., *The Agony and the Ecstasy: Guido Reni's Saint Sebastians*, Cinisello Balsamo, Milano : Silvana, 2007; See also: Vega de Martini, *Pathos ed Estasi: Opere d'arte tra Campania e Andalusia nel XVII e XVIII Secolo*, Electra Napoli, 1996.

<sup>475</sup> Helen Hills, "Through a Glass Darkly: Material Holiness and the Treasury Chapel of San Gennaro in Naples," in Melissa Calaresu and Helen Hills eds., *New approaches to Naples c.1500-c.1800: The power of place*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, 31-62.

<sup>476</sup> *Idem*, 58.



fenestella – the heart of the bust holding a relic – a place of transformation where the materiality of the reliquary/body becomes sacred and the sacred material.<sup>477</sup>

Ursula's unconventional attitude towards her own martyrdom can be fruitfully contrasted with that of Saint Bartholomew. It appears that both paintings attempt to engage with the relationship between the spiritual and the material; nevertheless they achieve this through significantly different strategies. If in Ursula's case the transformation is focalized in the wound as the place of "material spiritual production," in Ribera's case Bartholomew's entire body becomes a productive place of in-betweenness, where the two dimensions interact with each other organically.<sup>478</sup> This meeting between the material and spiritual is not a transformation of one element into another, there is no dominant side, but a place where the two affect each other and reveal their common relationship with the saint's body. Saint Bartholomew's arrangement in a semi-profiled angle suggests his position of liminality between the two worlds. Bartholomew's eyes lifted towards heaven and the light shining onto his face suggests the external presence of the spiritual, while the strong impasto rendering his features ground the material opening of his body. The body of the saint therefore becomes a threshold that unifies and makes fluent what is generally perceived to be two distinct substances, and his position of movement and turning emphasizes the dynamic process at work between materiality and spirituality.

### **Surface as flesh**

Bartholomew's ambivalent nature can also be discerned in the variations of the impasto used by Ribera to render his body. By drawing closer to the surface of the picture, one is confronted with the technique used by the artist to portray the saint. A strong textured impasto varies from the subtle brushstrokes of the left arm to the thick paint of the hands and face.<sup>479</sup> I argued above that Ribera used the impasto to draw attention to the picture's materiality as

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<sup>477</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>478</sup> The idea of the "material spiritual production" appears in Helen Hills, "Beyond Mere Containment: The Neapolitan Treasury Chapel of San Gennaro and the Matter of Materials," in *California Italian Studies*, 3(1), 2012, 1-21.

<sup>479</sup> Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, (1634; National Gallery, Washington) conservation note reads: "The support is a twill fabric prepared with a thin, smooth reddish brown ground. Over this is a second, dark layer, black or possibly brown, with a rough texture that suggests application with a palette knife only under the main area of the composition, as visible in x-radiographs. The paint was manipulated skillfully to express different textures. Thin wispy strokes were used to modify the fluidly applied flesh tones, which also show the wet-into-wet application of black paint. A pointed object was dragged through the still-wet paint of the executioner's beard to create the texture of the hair." <http://www.nga.gov/collection/gallery/gg30/gg30-72037-tech.html>.

corporeality. In the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.8) (1634; National Gallery, Washington) however, the impasto also achieves an effect where the paint is presented to the viewer as opened flesh onto the canvas. As such, the impasto exceeds here its potentiality as mere corporeality by not only turning Bartholomew's body away from the viewers, but actually turning it inside out. In that respect, the potentiality of paint is changed here from surface as skin to open raw flesh. The role of the impasto in *turning* flesh and muscles was observed by Bernardo de' Dominici in a passage describing Ribera's handling of paint:

Is it truly a wonder to see how, with his dense impasto so full of colour, he would not only turn [girare] the muscles of the human body, but every small part of the bones and of the hands and feet, always being finished with an unattainable degree of diligence and mastery.<sup>480</sup>

While emphasizing the role played by the impasto in furnishing Ribera's figures with a sense of corporeality, de' Dominici makes use of the verb *girare*, meaning: "turning" or "revolving," to describe its effect on the figures. This effect implies a subtle dialectic between Bartholomew's physical attitude towards interiority and the impasto as a technique that opens the saint's body.

The sophistication and inventiveness of Ribera's technique in working the surface of the painting brings to the fore the intricate relationship between the inside/outside as well as depth/surface of Bartholomew's body. This relationship can best be interpreted by turning to Deleuze's notion of the *fold*. The impasto prompts an experience where the saint's body opens onto the surface of the canvas, expressing and presenting itself to the viewers as a site of ambivalence, of unstable and therefore moving relationships. The inside opens onto the surface to presents itself as a fold of the outside. The loose brushstrokes, through their broadness, width, and spread, open the section of flesh they portray; that is to say, they disclose it to the world and in so doing, make it accessible to interpretation. Despite their would-be individuality, these fleshy segments cannot be untangled from the wholeness of the body. This interpretation of Bartholomew's body is evocative of Deleuze's treatment of matter in his study on the Baroque fold. According to Deleuze, Descartes' interpretation of matter – or rather the theory that Leibniz attributes to Descartes – as fluid and without texture stems

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<sup>480</sup> "e fa veramente meraviglia il veder come col suo impasto così denso di colore egli facesse girare non solamente i muscoli del corpo umano, ma eziando le parti minute dell'ossa delle mani e de' piedi, i quali si veggono finiti con diligenza e maestria inarrivabile." My translation. De' Dominici, 1742, 115. A discussion on a larger text by De' Dominici – which includes this quote – can be found in Chapter 3.

from his belief that a distinction between parts presumes separability. On the other hand, Deleuze argues:

A flexible or an elastic body still has cohering parts that form a fold, such that they are not separated into parts of parts but are rather divided to infinity in smaller and smaller folds that always retain a certain cohesion. Thus a continuous labyrinth is not a line dissolving into independent points, as flowing sand might dissolve into grains, but resembles a sheet of paper divided into infinite folds or separated into bending movements, each one determined by the consistent or conspiring surroundings. [...] A fold is always folded within a fold, like a cavern in a cavern. The unit of matter, the smallest element of the labyrinth, is the fold, not the point which is never a part, but a simple extremity of the line. That is why parts of matter are masses or aggregates, as a correlative to elastic compressive force. Unfolding is thus not the contrary of folding, but follows the fold up to the following fold.<sup>481</sup>

The visible brushstrokes of paint can be interpreted therefore as folds, where the inside of the outside is unfolded onto the surface. The unfolding of Bartholomew's body through the impasto reveals the thickness of the paint and canvas by dipping into the body's interior only to expose it as another facet of the surface. For that reason, the brushstrokes as sections of flesh disrupt the idea of the body as a site of complete unity – of absolute intertwining elements that cannot be conceived as discrete singular entities – by exposing it as a place of contradictions, of coherent discontinuity; not as a separation of mind/body, but as a body that shows its sections of flesh as corporeal openings of places, of folding and unfolding of the surface.

The corporeal openness created by the broad strokes of the impasto prompts an interpretation that is underlined by a surface logic and accomplished through touch. Ribera's impasto is achieved through touch, specifically the touch between the layers of paint constituting the thick strata. There is a relationship of touching within the different materials of the painting, where the canvas is touched by paint and in return the canvas touches the paint, thereby modelling it; and so the subsequent levels of paint touch one another creating an

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<sup>481</sup> Deleuze, *The Fold*, 6.

inter-relationship of density and weight. Conspicuously enough, in the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.8) (1634; National Gallery, Washington) touch is not elicited through the executioner's gesture of flaying the saint – as in the other versions – but through the fundamental interaction between materials. In the same way, the openness of Bartholomew's body is not achieved through an obvious opening of the wound, but through the broadness and thickness of the impasto.

A striking point of contrast can be made with Titian's depiction of Marsyas from his celebrated painting of *The Flaying of Marsyas* (Fig.18) (1570-1576; National Museum, Kroměříž). If in Ribera's case the impasto takes on the potentiality of flesh turned inside out, in Titian's painting the *pittura di macchia* creates a body where the thick strata of paint is presented as multilayered skin. I will turn to Daniela Bohde's interpretation of Titian's painting to reveal the sharp contrast between these two distinct ways in which the materiality of the paint can be used to stage either skin or flesh. Bohde's interpretation takes into account the interaction between the paintings's narrative and subject on one level and its materiality on another – in her view, “Titian merged the metamorphosis, skin and art of painting so attentively, that they appear like a single phenomenon.”<sup>482</sup> Bohde points out that in Titian's case – as opposed to Michelangelo's ideal – form is not freed from the material, but instead it is created through the application of paint. Although one can assign to Apollo the principle of form and to Marsyas that of the material, Titian in fact unites both aspects within his *pittura di macchia*. The artist's method of painting therefore allows on one level the emergence of a material language of its own and on another level the traces left by the artist in the paint itself.<sup>483</sup> Bohde ultimately points out that this interpretation actually reveals “an insight into Titian's painting technique: glazed veils of paint, dry or strong impasto strokes without a finishing gloss are layer over each other.”<sup>484</sup>

Further on, Bohde calls attention to the central position of the satyr and his well-lit skin provides viewers with a disturbing insight into Marsyas's pulsating fibres: “Titian does not render an insight into the inner body, but presents a kind of many-foldedness of paint. One has the impression of gazing into a mysterious coat of unending skin, always unfolding but never revealing a core.”<sup>485</sup> It appears that Titian's insistence on the texture of the paint and canvas draws attention to his interest in the many-foldedness of the surface rather than the fictive

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<sup>482</sup> Bohde, “Skin and the Search for the Interior,” 45.

<sup>483</sup> *Idem*, 43.

<sup>484</sup> *Idem*, 37.

<sup>485</sup> *Idem*.

dimensions of depth.<sup>486</sup> As such, Bohde argues that Titian is not presenting a transformed interior covered by skin, but that the satyr's skin and flesh, his interior and exterior merged together. This move of blurring the boundary between the internal body and the exterior – though during the sixteenth century there was no clear distinction between the outer and inner body – confronts viewers with the many-foldedness of the satyr's skin achieved through the strong impasto strokes.<sup>487</sup> The insistence on the transformation of paint as skin is also evidenced by the Titian changing the ropes used to hold up Marsyas with red laces tied as bows. The fact that the laces could not possibly sustain the weight of Marsyas' body makes Bohde conclude that the satyr's body is not presented here as flesh and blood, but as a painterly experiment with skin and its relation to paint.

Daniela Bohde's interpretation of paint as skin in Titian's painting acts therefore as a sharp contrast to Ribera's staging of paint as opened flesh. If for Ribera, Bartholomew's compositional move towards the interior of the image and his spiritual state of absorption point towards the body's distinctiveness – and by extension the painting's distinctiveness – the staging of the impasto as an opening into the saint's body draws attention to its openness. One is confronted here with an elusive, paradoxical body. This contradictory state of affairs is best expressed by the saint's hands (Fig.73). The brushstrokes rendering Bartholomew's body are concentrated especially on the hands and face – as the most expressive parts of the body – thus relating the articulacy of the human body and painting technique (Fig.74). The use of the impasto on the saint's hands is significant when considered in relation to their arrangement. The right hand (Fig.75), positioned deep within the picture, has its fingers closed, drawing attention to the body's enclosure and the picture's physical distinctiveness. At the same time, the left hand, situated close to the viewer, is opened, thereby suggesting the picture's openness. Bartholomew's closed and opened hands thus point to the distinctiveness of the painting and the elusiveness of the saint's body, both paradoxically characterized by openness and interiority. This interpretation calls to mind the issue of the threshold discussed in the first chapter. Bartholomew's body is not entirely turned away from us; he neither completely faces the background, nor the viewers. As such, his body acts more as a threshold, a place that is neither here nor there, in the sense that it is presented to us in a state of intermediacy, as both an opening and a closure. The inherent materiality of the picture and Ribera's exquisite

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<sup>486</sup> *Idem*, 39.

<sup>487</sup> For the lack of difference see: *Idem*, 31-37.

handling of the brush, expresses an ontological understanding of the body and painting as a paradoxical site of unity and discontinuity, a finite openness.

## Revolving Flesh

At this point I turn to the relationship between the painting's impasto and extreme violence. To contrast Ribera's working of the impasto in relation to flesh and violence I turn to Caravaggio's use of the *non-finito* technique as a way of reinforcing the drama and violence in his *Denial of Saint Peter* (Fig.76) (1610; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City). If Caravaggio's earliest paintings were generally characterized by precision and polish – in the vein of *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* (Fig.77) (c. 1593 Galleria Borghese, Rome) – during his fugitive years, the artist started to use an increasingly loose brushstroke. There is a definite trend in Caravaggio's application of the *non-finito*, a strong focus on the human body – though in no way restrictive to it – intended to emphasise the fleshiness of the figures and draw attention to their distinct corporeality. The rich over-layering of paint and swiping strokes of the brush highlights the materiality of the figures, working its potentiality into a powerful sense of corporeal presence. Giovanni Pietro Bellori in his *Le vite de' pittori, scultori et architetti moderni* (1672) observed that Caravaggio's handling of the brush was said to rival nature, in that it was capable of recreating what death takes away: life. Bellori recounts that at the death of Caravaggio:

There was universal sorrow and Cavalier Marino, his very close friend, mourned his death and honoured his memory with the following verses:

Death and Nature Michele made a cruel plot against you;  
The latter feared to be bested by your hand in every image  
Which was by you created rather than painted;  
The former burned with indignation  
Because with high interest  
As many people as his scythe cut down

Your brush would recreate.<sup>488</sup>

Marino suggests that the artist as creator brings his figures to “life;” this he relates with the brushwork of the artist, the touch of the brush on the canvas, and the powerful effect of the tones. One can interpret this relationship as giving rise to a powerful sense of corporeality, a bodily presence of the figures depicted. Caravaggio’s use of the *non-finito* never reached the profusion of Titian’s *pittura di machhia*, or Ribera’s impasto; for the Lombard master it was always a question of making a point, of highlighting certain aspects of the work in relation to the whole painting, subject, or viewers. As Bellori observed Caravaggio’s brushwork, together with the tones of paint, acquires a meaningful role in the creation of figures:

Thus by avoiding all prettiness and vanity in his colour,  
Caravaggio strengthened his tones and gave them blood and  
flesh. In this way he induced his fellow painters to work from  
nature.<sup>489</sup>

For Bellori too, the *non-finito* and the strong tones Caravaggio used bestow upon the figures depicted a sense of corporeal presence, of flesh and blood. Caravaggio’s shift in technique and the adoption of a highly personal and specific approach to the *non-finito* – different in nature and value from that of his Venetian predecessors – was well-known at the time. For instance, Bellori observed the change in style while describing Caravaggio’s *Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* (Fig.78) (1608; St. John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta):

In this work, Caravaggio used all the power of his brush, and worked with a great deal of fierceness that he left the canvas in the preliminary half-tones: so that, apart from the honour of the cross, the Grand Master put around his neck a rich chain of gold and gave him two slaves, as well as other expressions of esteem and satisfaction with his work.<sup>490</sup>

Bellori shifts the emphasis from Caravaggio’s use of a strong chiaroscuro – until then a common trope in the Caravaggesque primary sources – to the master’s use of spontaneous brushstrokes and rough colouring of the scene. Most significantly, Caravaggio’s brush

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<sup>488</sup> ‘Fecer crudel congiura,/Michele, a' danni tuoi Morte e Natura:/Questa restar temea/ Da la tua mano in ogni/imagin vinta,/ Ch'era da te creata e non dipinta;/Quella di sdegno ardea/Perché con larga usura,/ Quante la/falce sua genti struggea,/ Tante il pennello tuo ne rifacea.’ Quoted from: Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 371.

<sup>489</sup> See chapter 1 for an extended discussion of this passage in relation to colour.

<sup>490</sup> ‘In quest’opera il Caravaggio uso ogni potere del suo pennello, avendovi lavorato con tanta fierezza che lascio in mezza tinte l’imprimatura della tela: sic he, oltre l’onore della croce, il Gran Maestro gli pose all collo una ricca collana d’oro e gli fece dono di due schiavi, con alter dimonstrazioni della stima e compiacimento dell’operar suo.’ Bellori, quoted from: Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 369.

powerful and fierce, ferocious; as such, his *non-finito* appears to be charged with a degree of violence comparable in intensity and scope to that of Titian and Ribera. Therefore, the experience of corporeal presence seems to be a precondition of experiencing the violence of these paintings, violence that is located on several layers – in the overt depiction of the subject and in the painting’s materiality – the potentiality of materiality as flesh and skin desecrated and brutalised.

Caravaggio’s *The Denial of Saint Peter* (Fig.76) (1610; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City) problematizes in new ways the relationship between the *non-finito* and the violence of the subject. The half length painting shows the moment when Peter is denying Jesus for the third time, thus fulfilling Christ’s prophecy uttered at the last supper.<sup>491</sup> The painting is executed with a subtle *non-finito* characteristic of Caravaggio’s last works, predominantly visible on the clothing and armour of the soldier, the white scarf of the woman, and the face of Peter. Edifying here is Lorenzo Pericolo interpretation of the painting in accordance with Vasari’s principles of the *non-finito*.<sup>492</sup> Pericolo argues that the painting can be interpreted in a “two-prolonged manner: by deciphering its figures gestures and expressions, of through the materiality of its pictorial surface.”<sup>493</sup> As such, Pericolo points out that Caravaggio used the *non-finito* in a ground-breaking way with the purpose of challenging, manipulating, and channelling the viewer’s understanding of the *istoria*’s temporality.<sup>494</sup> Caravaggio achieved this shift by creating of distinct narrative foci through the *non-finito* that do not always seem to fit with the *istoria*’s narrative. This implies that the figure’s volumetric physicality, their gestures, expressions and attitudes become subordinated by the handling of the painting’s surface – though they do not stop conveying the “affects” of the *istoria*; in Pericolo’s words: “the figure can serve as a vessel through which the pictorial matter expresses its dramatic force and unrestricted potentialities.”<sup>495</sup>

Caravaggio’s manipulation of paint that makes up Saint Peter’s face (Fig.79) is interpreted by Pericolo as challenging his dramatic self-assertive gestures of the hands by shifting the temporality of the scene forward to suggest the saint’s future admission of sin and

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<sup>491</sup> ‘About an hour later another asserted, “Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean.” Peter replied, “Man, I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: “Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times.” And he went outside and wept bitterly.’ Luke 22:59-62.

<sup>492</sup> Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative*, 415-425.

<sup>493</sup> *Idem*, 425.

<sup>494</sup> *Idem*, 422.

<sup>495</sup> *Idem*, 423.



trial of repentance.<sup>496</sup> Pericolo's concludes that: "whereas Peter's figure plays out denial, the nearly distorted smear of his face transmits the ineffable throes of his subsequent ordeal, an ordeal synonymous to repentance in the viewer's eyes."<sup>497</sup> While I generally agree with Pericolo's idea that the materiality of the *non-finito* can challenge the temporality of a scene, in this case I believe that the impasto on Peter's face is not so much a sign of his future repentance but more a reflection of the internal conflict ravaging his soul.<sup>498</sup> This interpretation of the painting firmly grounds the temporality of the scene in the moment depicted, thus refusing the chronological discontinuity of the narrative in favour of temporal coherence and simultaneousness. Within this interpretation the *non-finito* on the Peter's face expresses the violent shock experience by the saint when, upon hearing the rooster's crow, realises that he betrayed Christ. With his hands still clenched in self-assertion, Peter becomes aware of his betrayal, on that very moment when the violence of the blow takes hold of him. The violence of the *non-finito* brings on the surface the internal struggle of saint, making it visible and susceptible to interpretation. Thus, what is altered here is not the temporality of the scene, but its intensity and emotional dimension, shifting the focus from the saint's remorse and repentance to the force of his internal struggle and violence.

The comparison between Caravaggio's use of the *non-finito* on Peter's face and Ribera's use of the impasto in relation to Bartholomew's body brings forth two different ways in which the materiality of the paint can be used as potentiality in order to alter the narrative sequence of the story depicted or to express or emphasise the violence of the scene. Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.8) (1634; National Gallery, Washington) does not illustrate the process of flaying. This lack of overt portrayal of violence was subtly substituted by Ribera with the working of the surface as a site of unending negotiations and potentialities that make up a painting. There are two significant details that suggest violence – the sharpening of the knives and the brutal way in which Bartholomew's hands are tied to the tree. Although, suggestive as they may be, the iconographic details do not completely account for the picture's strong sense of violence. Therefore, another explanation is needed. I argue that the violence of the subject is suitably reinforced by Ribera's working of the surface through the materiality of the impasto. As was pointed out earlier, the impasto's materiality stages the

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<sup>496</sup> *Idem*, 424.

<sup>497</sup> *Idem*, 425.

<sup>498</sup> Keith Christiansen points out as well that Caravaggio's brushwork "was not meant to replicate the surface appearances but the probing of the deeper human significance of the action portrayed." In "Going for Baroque: Bringing 17th-Century Masters to the Met." *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 62 (Winter 2005), 34.

body of the saint as already opened, his rough flesh pulsating underneath the viewer's eyes. This dynamic process presupposes a shift in the temporal sequence of the painting's narrative, phenomenon that will be under consideration in the following analysis.

Georges Didi-Huberman showed how the splashes of colour and the plasticity of paint can be interpreted as having an “overdetermination of meaning.”<sup>499</sup> Didi-Huberman pointed out that the handling of paint and the style of a painting can imply an idea or purpose, rather than simply give shape to an object or figure. As such, the impasto does not only build up the figure of the saint into a body, but also adds to the violence inflicted on the same body. The relationship between the impasto and violence was duly noted by Ribera's contemporaries. Bernardo de'Dominici, in his *Vite dei Pittori, Scultori, ed Architetti Napolitani* (1742) observes:

And so he return to his earlier studies, and began to paint with bold innate power and tremendous impasto so dense and full of colour, that can reasonable be said that in this respect he superseded Caravaggio himself.<sup>500</sup>

De'Dominici associated in this passage Ribera's impasto with a powerful sense of violence by describing it as *tremendo*. The Italian adjective *tremendo* – Eng. *tremendous* – means awful, terrifying, fearsome, and unbearable. It suggests a state or moment of extreme tension and intensity, an inspiring awe or dread. De'Dominici located at least part of the violence of Ribera's painting in the surface's materiality. De'Dominici's observation is not singular as it appears in other contemporary sources. In 1648 for instance, the Bolognese essayist and historian Virgilio Malvezzi – who spent some time at the Spanish court of Philip IV – made a similar observation in his commentary on Plutarch's *Life of Coriolanus*, titled *Considerationi con occasione d'alcuni luoghi delle vite d'Alcibiade e di Coriolano*, (1648). While discussing Titian's change of style from his earliest smooth finish to the late opened brushstrokes, Malvezzi observed:

Titian, perhaps the most famous of painters, and certainly among the most famous, painted at times with so many and such diligent brushstrokes that it almost seemed as if he wished to make each and every hair countable; and at times he was content

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<sup>499</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico*, 83-86.

<sup>500</sup> Torno dunque a'primieri studi, e si diede col naturale avanti a dipingere di forza con tremendo impasto di color tanto denso, che ragionevolmente puo dirsi che egli in questa parte superasse il Caravaggio stesso.' De'Dominici, 1742, 3.

to rough in his paintings with few and very rough strokes [di pocchi, e rozzissimi colpi]. The intelligent observer of such diverse styles will recognize in the one the charm of the feminine [il vago della femina], in the other robust masculinity [il robusto maschile]. The former will be given passing praise; the latter will hold one fast in admiring contemplation: one will feel oneself gently attracted by the delicate, violently seized upon by the crude.<sup>501</sup>

The question of assigning gender to styles was addressed by Philip Sohm in his study on *Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism*.<sup>502</sup> What is of interest to us in this passage is Malvezzi's association of the rough strokes of the impasto with a sense of violence and cruelty, an abductive violence. Another example can be found in Giovanni Battista Armenini's 1586 treatise, *De veri precetti della pittura*. In a passage reminiscent of Vasari's advice in regards to the way Titian's paintings should be properly viewed, Armenini advised viewers not to engage with Tintoretto's paintings from up too close because: "his sketches as finished works are so rough that his impetuous and fierce brushstrokes may be seen."<sup>503</sup> Armenini's use of word *fierezza* – which in English can be translated as *fierce* – again draws attention to the apparent savage and violent nature of the impasto, as something extremely ruthless and terrible.

The impasto used by Ribera in his *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.8) (1634; National Gallery, Washington) can be regarded therefore as strengthening the subject's violence. Specifically, it intensifies the fierceness of the moment depicted through subtle temporal manipulation. In order to build up Bartholomew's body, Ribera used the palette knife and the coarse bristles of his brush to texture the paint and stage it as flesh, skin and hair. The rough finished surface of paint open Bartholomew's skin to reveal his inner flesh, it turns the

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<sup>501</sup> 'Titiano forse il piu famoso Pittore, e senza forse fra piu famosi, tal'hora dipinte con tante, e cosi diligenti pennellate, che parve quasi volesse far numerabili i capelli: e tal' hora si contento grossamente le pitture di pocchi, e rozzissimi colpi figurare. Spettatore intelligente da cosi diversa maniera nell'una riconosca il vago della femina, nell'altra il robusto maschile; Quella passara con lode, in questa si fermara con ammiratione; sentirassi dalla delicata soavemente inclinare, dalla rozza violentemente rapire.' Malvezzi, quoted from: Sohm, "Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia," *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 4, 1995, 797.

<sup>502</sup> Sohm, "Gendered Style."

<sup>503</sup> "Costui ha fatto più volte senza i desengli opera molto important, lasciando le bezze per finite, e tanto a fatica sgrossate, che si veggono i colpi del pennelo fatto dall'impeto, e dalla fierezza di lui, ue percio sovo poi da essere tropo considerate a minuto." Armenini, quoted from: Donald Posner, "Concerning the 'Mechanical' Parts of Painting and the Artistic Culture of Seventeenth-Century France," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 75, No. 4, 1993, 595.

inside onto the surface of the canvas to expose it as an outside. This process involves a temporal alteration to the narrative sequence where the impasto points to the moments following the scene depicted. If one looks closely at the surface, it becomes apparent that certain areas of the body – especially on the neck, face and hands (Fig.73.74.75, 80) – are treated as if the skin was already removed and the flesh made visible. The variation on the roughness of the impasto creates narrative foci that disrupt the sequence of the narrative by drawing attention from the specific moment depicted to the subsequent moments of the actual flaying. These narrative foci also draw the viewer's immediate attention from the interaction between the executioner and saint on one level, and the saint and divinity on another – even though they continue to reference it in a subtle manner; the executioner will continue his gruesome task and the saint will become a martyr. The paint's materiality has the potential to disrupt the sequential moments of the narrative by making visible what is yet to come. One can see and feel the pulsating, revolving flesh that is cut and opened onto the surface, turning his body into a wound and therefore prefiguring Bartholomew's fate.

## Conclusion

My thesis has demonstrated that the displacement at work between subject matter and technique in Ribera's paintings of flaying is important for an interpretation of his work. I have explored the ways in which Ribera's paintings of flaying can best be interpreted as living pictorial bodies, rather than mere altarpieces and gallery pictures that represent or reflect a determinate and determinable pre-existing reality. By focusing on the interaction between, materiality, surfaces, narrative, temporality, violence, touch, I have avoided restricting my interpretation to either the representational or technique. Instead, I have focused on the way the technique interacts with the representational. A consideration of Ribera's paintings as distinct and separate bodies allows for a better understanding of the way the surface and materiality of the pictorial body can affect the representational. My analysis of the relationship between the representational and technique elicited the following themes as central to Ribera's paintings: life and death, surface and spirituality, corporeality and touch, and surface and violence.

Chapter One showed that Ribera constructed the pictorial body as an assemblage of fragmented, non-coherent surfaces, set into a tense relationship with each other. I argued that it is from this relationship that the paintings acquire their inorganic life. I have shown that there is a strong connection between inorganic life and colour. The relationship between the surface as inorganically alive and colour as flesh colour transforms the painting into a threshold between life and death. Through the particular use of flesh colour on the skin and wound of Saint Bartholomew, Ribera's paintings present viewers with death as an event of becoming. Following Jean-Luc Nancy, I argued that death is not an abstract concept, but is instead something that can only be experienced on a personal level. Ribera's body pictorial achieves this presentation of a personal experience of death by placing the beholder on its surface as threshold, a threshold of his/her individual life and mortality.

Chapter Two demonstrated the potential of looking at Ribera's use of chiaroscuro in terms of the way it constructs a folding surface, rather than as an illusionistic effect designed to create *rilievo*. By analyzing the surface of the paintings as a fold allows for the relationship between light and darkness to be considered in terms of fragmentation defined by inflection and movement (the act of folding), rather than the severability of the parts. Thus, I argued that

there is no absolute detachment between light and dark, only a fragmentation that creates movement and inflection. By relating light and darkness to the spirituality of the subject matter, I argued that they should not be treated as spiritual opposites – where light denotes divine presence and darkness divine absence – but as two interrelated ways of experiencing the divine. Light is analogous to the cataphatic while darkness is to the apophatic; and Ribera's paintings of the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* present a continuous pendulation between these two modes of experiencing the divine. Visibility and invisibility, and speech and silence, are intimately connected with the fragmentation of the saint's body. The chapter points out that the movement generated by the light/darkness fold should not be thought of in terms of directing the viewer away from the canvas to an external, remote divinity. Instead, it shows the materiality of the dark surface to be the place of divine activity and movement.

Chapter Three focused on touch in Ribera's *Apollo and Marsyas* (Fig.5) (1637; Capodimonte Museum, Naples) and *Apollo and Marsyas* (Fig.6) (1637; Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels). I argued that Apollo's touch when flaying Marsyas can be interpreted as both destructive and creative since it simultaneously creates the satyr's body from the dark patch of matter and unmakes it by tearing it apart. One implication of this is that creation emerges in Ribera's work as painful and destructive, harbouring an intrinsic violence of the process. Apollo's touch draws attention to the way Ribera not only used the impasto and the materiality of the surface to challenge sight in favour of touch, but also to problematise the nature of touch. Since Apollo's touch separates Marsyas' body from itself, I argued, following Nancy, that touch should be understood here as a contact in separation, rather than a direct and unmediated contact that implies immediacy. Therefore, the relationship of touch endows the painting with corporeality: corporeality made of complex surfaces and created through violence.

Chapter Four addressed the relationship between corporeal and pictorial surfaces and violence to argue that Ribera worked the materiality of the canvas and paint into a powerful sense of corporeality by staging their potentiality as either flesh or skin. An analysis of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century conceptualizations of canvas and paint revealed that there was no fixed identity assigned to the canvas as flesh and paint as skin, or vice versa. Instead they referred to canvas and paint interchangeably as either flesh or skin. Thus I have shown that in the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.7) (1644; MNAC, Barcelona) Ribera worked the threads of the canvas on Bartholomew's body as flesh protruding, or rupturing, the paint as skin. While on the other hand, in the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.8) (1634; National

Gallery, Washington) Ribera used the broad and coarse brushstrokes of the impasto to create thick surfaces, where the paint takes on the potentiality of open flesh. In so doing, Ribera shifted the temporality in the scenes by disconnecting time from the narrative sequence altogether. Thus, the sense of violence of the act of flaying is heightened by emphasizing the materiality's endless temporality.

By interpreting Ribera's paintings as distinct living pictorial bodies, rather than mere representations of an external pre-existing reality, my thesis offers a new methodological framework to explore the frictions between representational and technique. My interpretation goes against recent studies of seventeenth-century paintings, including Michael Fried's *The Moment of Caravaggio* (2011). Fried focused his book on Caravaggio's paintings and those of his "followers," including Ribera, arguing that these paintings constitute a collective effort to formulate a new paradigm as gallery pictures. Fried argues that the paintings proclaim their quality as distinct gallery pictures by encapsulating two dialectical moments: one of "immersion," when the artist is caught in his/her own painting, and one "specular," when he/she detaches violently from the work.<sup>504</sup> However, Fried's study focuses solely on the representational aspect of paintings and is concerned with assigning a specific historical moment to the emergence of the tableau.

Instead of forcing things into a coherent dialectical structure, my interpretation points out the paradoxical relationship at work within these paintings: between their subject and technique. As such, a major conclusion of my research is the characterization of Ribera's paintings as paradoxical, ambivalent, always shifting and fracturing the relationship between technique and subject. One case in point is Ribera's problematisation of Apollo's touch in *Apollo and Marsyas* (Fig.5) (1637; Capodimonte Museum, Naples) as simultaneously creating and destroying Marsyas' body. By opening Marsyas' body, Apollo not only destroys but also creates the satyr's body by exacting his corporeality from within the dark mass of paint. This contradictory coupling of opposites, I argue, effects the painting's force and intensity. In addition, Apollo's touch reveals the fallacy of interpreting the satyr's body through the binary depth/surface by showing the inside to be another surface. The dark patch of paint constitutes a moment when the technique of the painting – its impasto – disturbs the coherency and clarity of the subject matter. It also shows the inside to be an outside and the body – the pictorial body and the body of Marsyas – made up of and acting through surfaces, rather than a deep

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<sup>504</sup> Fried, *The Moment of Caravaggio*, 39-67.

meaningful interior. Paradox therefore can be used as a working paradigm and interpretative tool to highlight the ambiguousness of artworks while exposing the limits of interpretation.<sup>505</sup>

Taking the cue from Caroline Walker Bynum, I understand bodies as grounded in materiality. Bynum offers an overview of late medieval conceptions of matter as paradoxical, or as Nicolas of Cusa put it: “a coincidence of opposites.”<sup>506</sup> Bynum explores materiality as a paradox affirming the omnipotence, eternity, and immutability of an invisible and ineffable God. She argues that late medieval devotional objects were not only mimetic *representations* of the divine, but actually revealed the divine *itself* through their very materiality. However, my interpretation of materiality is indebted to Bynum’s only in so far as it encapsulates a paradox capable of turning objects into bodies, leaving aside its conceptualization as the actual place of divine activity. I argued that Ribera’s paintings can be interpreted as bodies because their paradoxical materiality effects a movement that is *analogous* to the movement effected by the divine in miraculous objects. Thus, I interpret the dark paint extending into the upper part of Ribera’s *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.4) (c. 1625-1628; Basilica Cattedrale di San Nicola di Bari, Nicosia) as emphasising the moving materiality of the surface. This movement of the dark surface evokes the darkness of apophatic theology, the darkness of divine withdrawal into invisibility and silence. The relationship between Saint Bartholomew and the divine is therefore one of tension expressed through a continuous movement between presence and absence, and knowing and not-knowing. The violence of the scene is enhanced by the spiritual ambivalence of the chiaroscuro. The painting as a pictorial body therefore encapsulates the paradox of asserting at the same time opposite values, without turning them into a coherent dualism.

I have shown that the intensity of Ribera’s paintings arises from the way pictorial surfaces are constructed as collections or assemblages of disparate elements. Thinking of Ribera’s paintings as fragmented surfaces rather than unitary and coherent planes is fundamental for understanding the relationship at work between representational and technique. The fragmentation of the surface is partially responsible – in conjunction with its materiality – for the painting’s inorganic life, spirituality, and violence. As I argued in Chapter Two, these fragments are differentiated by inflection and integrated by folds. They do not imply severability or complete detachment between parts, but are distinct elements forming a non-unitary whole. As Deleuze argues, folded surfaces have a ‘consistency’ of their own. A

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<sup>505</sup> My use of paradox as an interpretative tool is indebted to Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 34-36.

<sup>506</sup> *Idem*, 268.



fragmented surface is a gathering of discrete parts or pieces that is able to produce a large variety of effects, rather than a closely organised, logically coherent totality offering one dominant interpretation. This is especially visible in the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.3) (c. 1628-1630; Palazzo Pitti, Florence) where the fragmentation of light and darkness is analogous to the fragmentation of the saint's body. The movement of inorganic life effected by the fragmentation of the surface is directly related to the spiritual movement effected by the fold of light and darkness. Light and darkness therefore are not to be understood in a Cartesian framework and illusionism, but as distinct fragments of a folding surface that stages the saint in a movement towards the divine.

The fragmentation of the surface works in conjunction with the materiality of the canvas and paint. My approach of analysing the way materiality functions within the process of interpretation is indebted to Andrew Benjamin's conceptualization of *mattering* as the insistence of the medium within the artwork's meaning.<sup>507</sup> I have broadly adapted Benjamin's notion of *mattering* to Ribera's paintings in order to analyse the way specific pictorial details problematise the painting's subject matter. This allows for a more in-depth analysis of the particularity of each painting, while keeping with Benjamin's undertaking of avoiding turning materiality into an abstract ideal imposed upon pictorial specificities. Thus, I consider materiality only in the particular, and always set it in relation with the surface – be it pictorial, sculptural or architectural – and subject matter. For instance in the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.8) (1634; National Gallery, Washington) the broad brushstrokes of the impasto opens the saint's body. Each brushstroke acquires the potentiality of fragments of open flesh. The fragmentation of the surface here acts upon the temporality of the scene and its violence, disconnecting time from narrative and shifting the focus from the violence of the portrayed moment to the violence of the impasto. The impasto here takes on the potentiality of distinct sections of open flesh, fragmenting the surface of the saint's body. In the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig.7) (1644; MNAC, Barcelona), on the other hand, the canvas is worked through the thin layers of paint, rupturing the integrity of Bartholomew's body. Here the canvas is staged as flesh coming through and rupturing the paint as skin, fragmenting the saint's body. Ribera's paintings therefore do not cancel the body – be it the pictorial of the body of the figures depicted – but reinvent it. James Elkins, for instance, argues that “all representations of the body distort it by pressing it flat, and in so doing extracting its motion, its roundness, its texture, its individuality. They hide the body erasing some part, censoring

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<sup>507</sup> Benjamin, “Banquo's Funeral.”

and repressing others.”<sup>508</sup> However, I have shown that Ribera’s painting can be interpreted as moving bodies, bodies of surfaces, textures, and individuality. This interpretation allows for the tension emerging between their fragmented surfaces, subject matter, materiality of paint and canvas, chiaroscuro and impasto to become a constant process of moving and changing. Ribera’s pictorial bodies encapsulate an ongoing process of creative tension between subject and subjectivity.

I have argued that pictorial bodies should not be understood as made up of an exterior and interior, but as complex surfaces. Here I have drawn on Giuliana Bruno and Jean-Luc Nancy to new ends. The relationship between surface and depth is crucial to Ribera’s paintings of flaying. Ribera shows the depth and interiority of a body, presenting it as a complex exterior surface. The problematisation of bodies as complex surfaces concerns not only Marsyas’ or Saint Bartholomew’s bodies, but indeed the paintings themselves. It is through the surface of the painting, which is set into a process of becoming the flayed surface of the saint, that paintings proclaim their quality as distinct things, ontologically separate from the world through their intensity and force. Nancy’s conceptualization of images as distinct is crucial here, and I am indebted to it throughout my thesis. However, I have departed from his interpretation in one key aspect. While Nancy regards images as things, I emphasise their corporeal character. In other words, for Nancy images are distinct because they have a force and intensity of their own, due to their discreteness and technicity, while I suggest that Ribera’s paintings of flaying are bodies because their intensity comes from the staging of their surface as either skin or flesh. The intensity they entail is deeply corporeal and it is played through their surfaces.

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<sup>508</sup> James Elkins, *Pictures of the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis*, Stanford University Press, 1999, 282.

**Illustrations**



Figure 2 Jusepe de Ribera, *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, 1618-1619, Colegiata de Santa Maria Church, Osuna.



Figure 3 Jusepe de Ribera, *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, c.1620, Palazzo Pallavicini-Rospigliosi, Rome.





Figure 4 Jusepe de Ribera, *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, c. 1628-1630, Palazzo Pitti, Florence.



Figure 5 Jusepe de Ribera, *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, c. 1625-1628, Basilica Cattedrale di San Nicola di Bari, Nicosia.





Figure 6 Jusepe de Ribera, *Apollo flaying Marsyas*, 1637, Museo di Capodimonte, Naples.

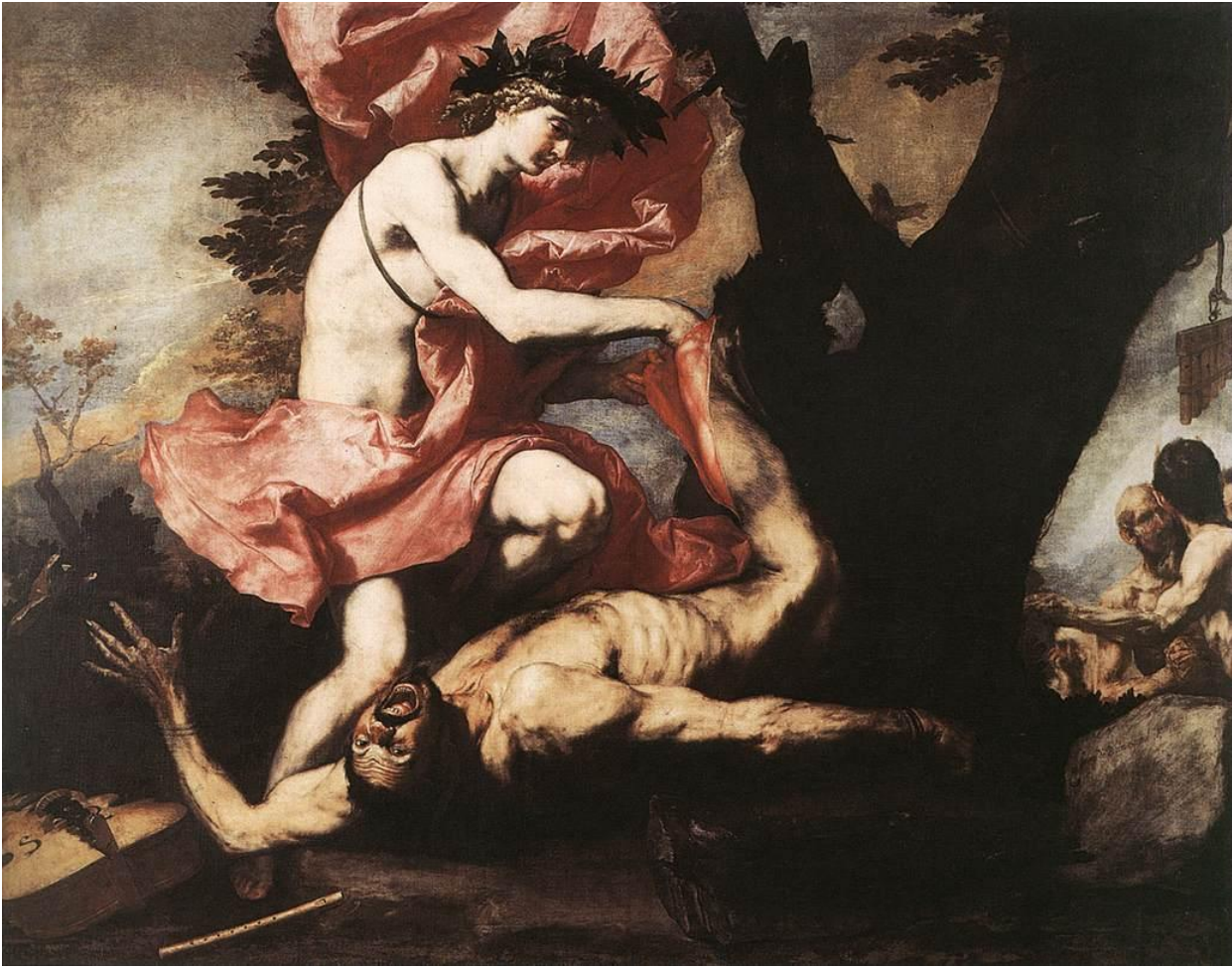


Figure 7 Jusepe de Ribera, *Apollo and Marsyas*, 1637, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels.



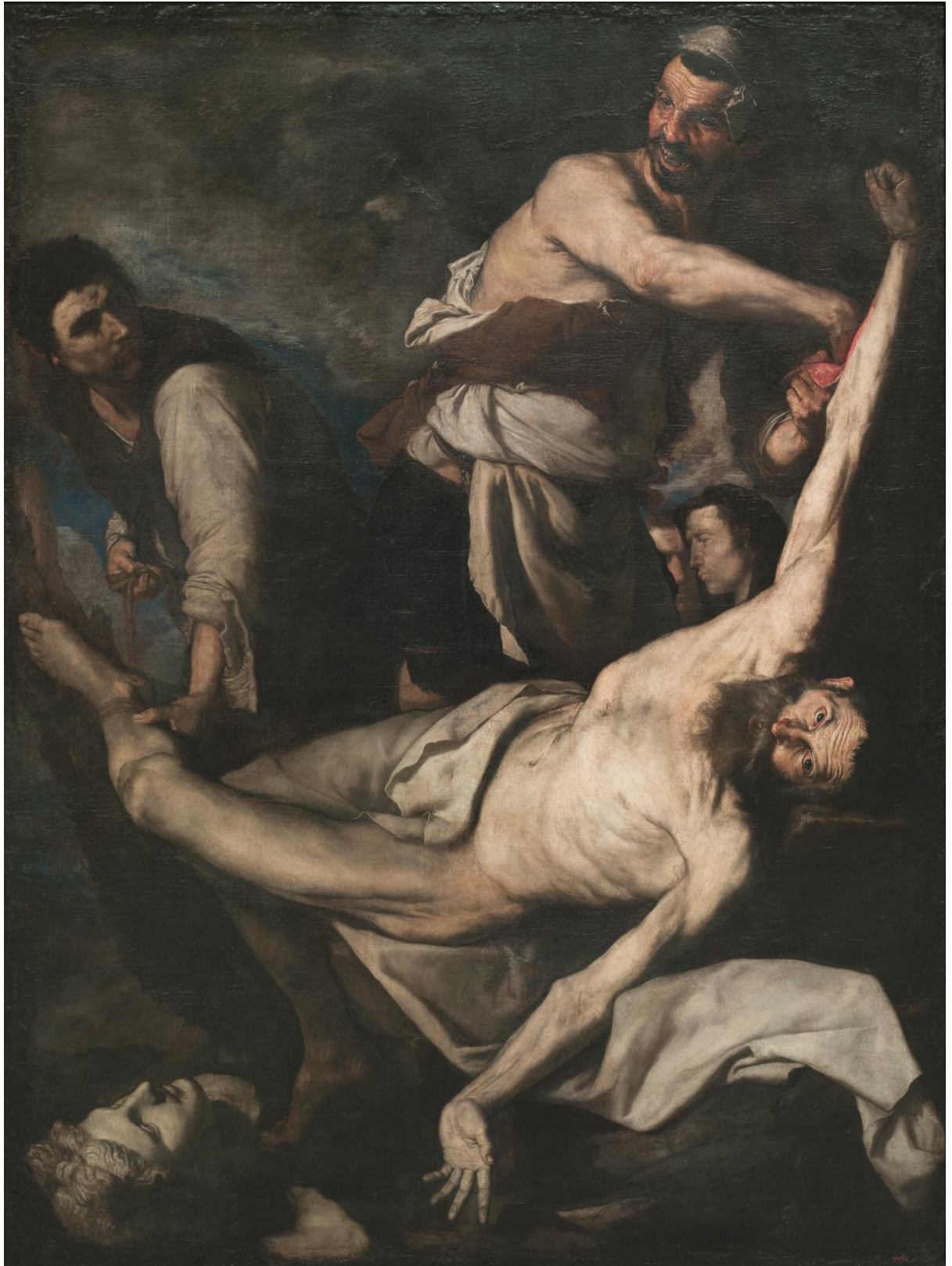


Figure 8 Jusepe de Ribera, *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, 1644, Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona.



Figure 9 Jusepe de Ribera, *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, 1634, National Gallery of Art, Washington.





Figure 10 Caravaggio, *The Death of the Virgin*, 1601-1606, Musée du Louvre, Paris.



Figure 11 Paolo Veronese, *Feast in the House of Levi*, 1573, Galleria dell' Accademia, Venice.



Figure 12 Caravaggio, *The Seven Works of Mercy*, 1607, Pio Monte della Misericordia, Naples.





Figure 13 Jusepe de Ribera, *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, 1618-1619, Colegiata de Santa Maria Church, Osuna, Detail.



Figure 14 Jusepe de Ribera, *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, 1618-1619, Colegiata de Santa Maria Church, Osuna, Detail.



Figure 15 Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, c. 1614-20, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.





Figure 16 Caravaggio, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, 1598–1599, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica at Palazzo Barberini, Rome



Figure 17 Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, c. 1614-20, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Detail.



Figure 18 Bartolomeo Manfredi, *Apollo and Marsyas*, 1616-1620, Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis.



Figure 19 Titian, *Flaying of Marsyas*, c. 1570–1576, National Museum, Kroměříž





Figure 20 Jusepe de Ribera, *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, 1618-1619, Colegiata de Santa Maria Church, Osuna. Detail.



Figure 21 Jusepe de Ribera, *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, 1618-1619, Colegiata de Santa Maria Church, Osuna. Detail.



Figure 22 Jusepe de Ribera, *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, 1618-1619, Colegiata de Santa Maria Church, Osuna. Detail.



Figure 23 Jusepe de Ribera, *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, 1618-1619, Colegiata de Santa Maria Church, Osuna. Detail.



Figure 24 Caravaggio, *Death of the Virgin*, 1601-1606, Musée du Louvre, Paris. Detail.



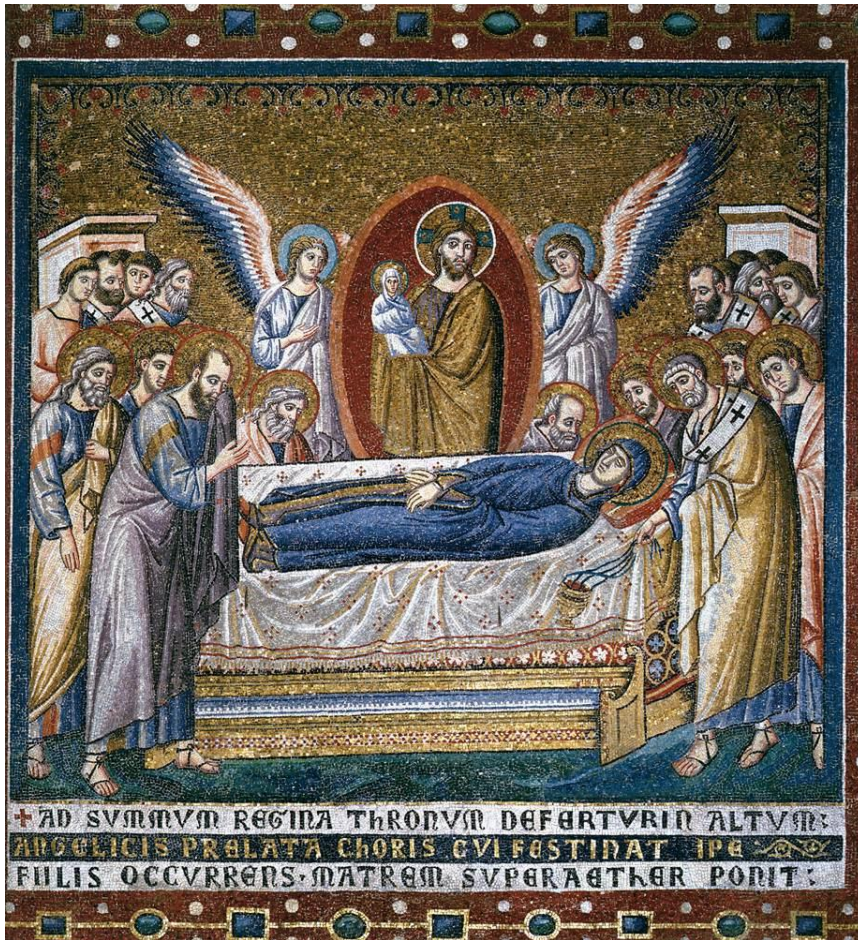


Figure 25 Pietro Cavallini, *Transitus*, 1296-1300, Basilica di Santa Maria in Trastevere, Rome.

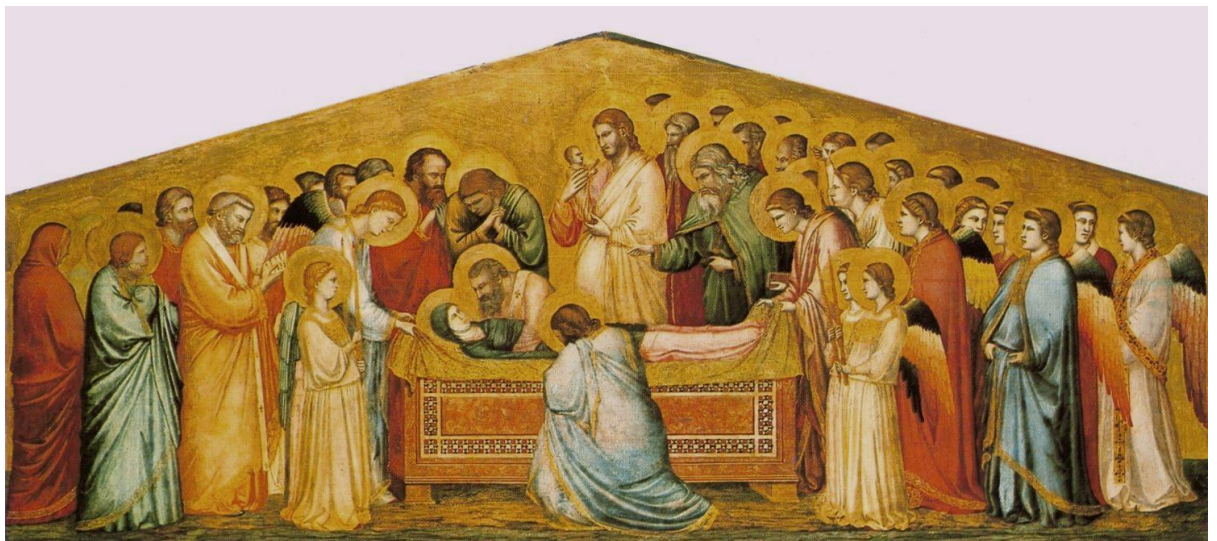


Figure 26 Giotto di Bondone, *The Death of the Virgin*, c.1310, Gemaldegalerie, Berlin.



Figure 27 Jusepe de Ribera, *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, c.1620, Palazzo Pallavicini-Rospigliosi, Rome. Detail.



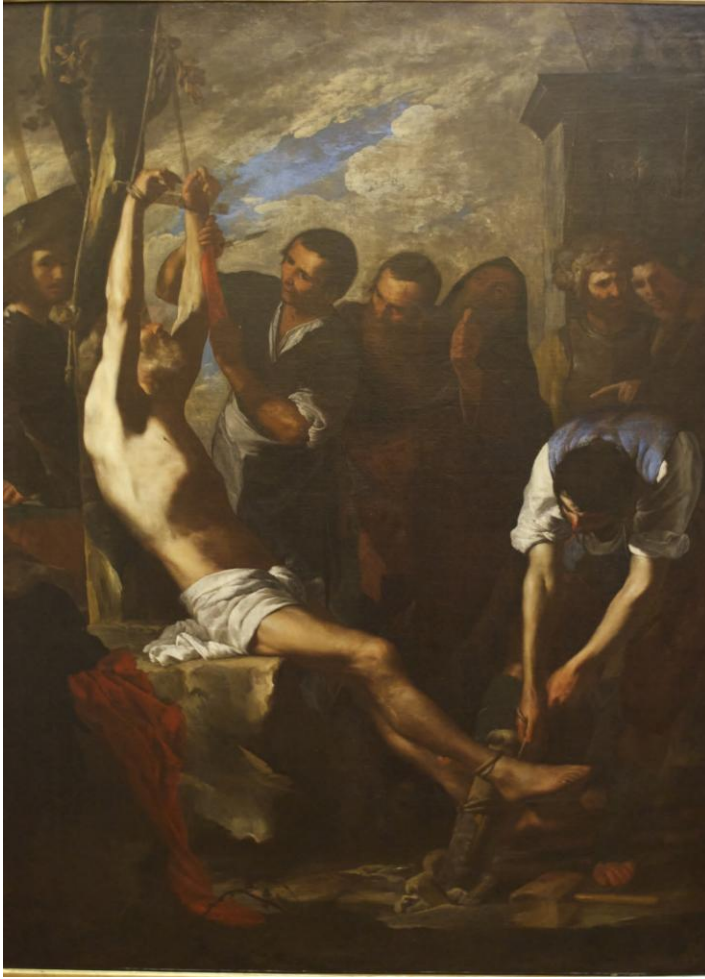


Figure 28 Bernardo Cavallino, *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, 1634, National Museum of Capodimonte, Naples.



Figure 29 Bernardo Cavallino, *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, 1634, National Museum of Capodimonte, Naples. Detail.



Figure 30 Caravaggio, *The Inspiration of Saint Matthew*, 1602, Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome.



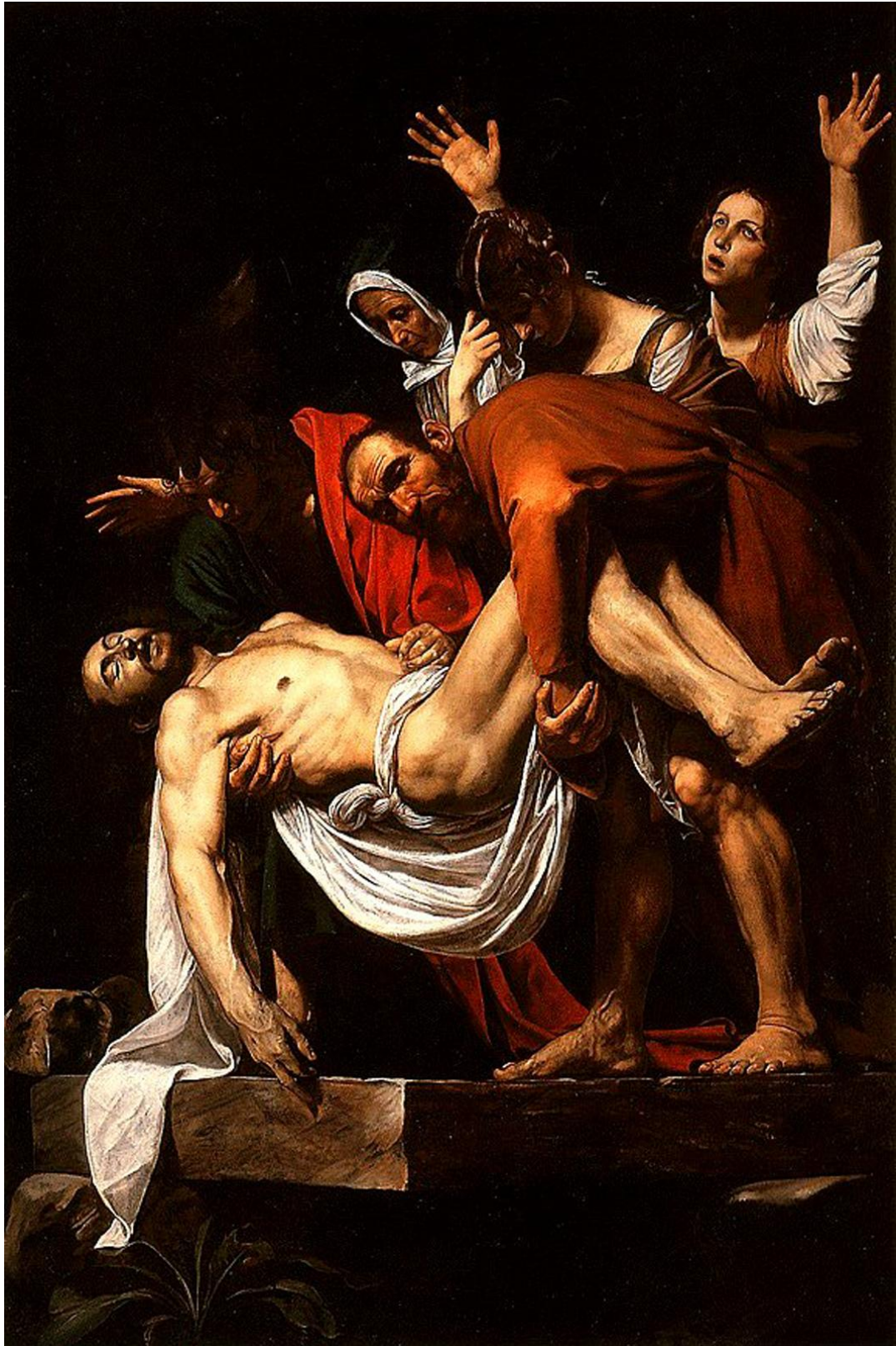


Figure 31 Caravaggio, *The Entombment of Christ*, 1602-1603, Pinacoteca Vaticana, Vatican City.





Figure 32 Caravaggio, *Flagellation of Christ*, 1607, Museo di Capodimonte, Naples.





Figure 33 Jusepe de Ribera, *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, c. 1628-1630, Palazzo Pitti, Florence. Detail.



Figure 34 Francisco de Zurbarán, *The Martyrdom of Saint Serapion*, 1628, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford.





Figure 35 Caravaggio, *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew*, 1599-1600, Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome.

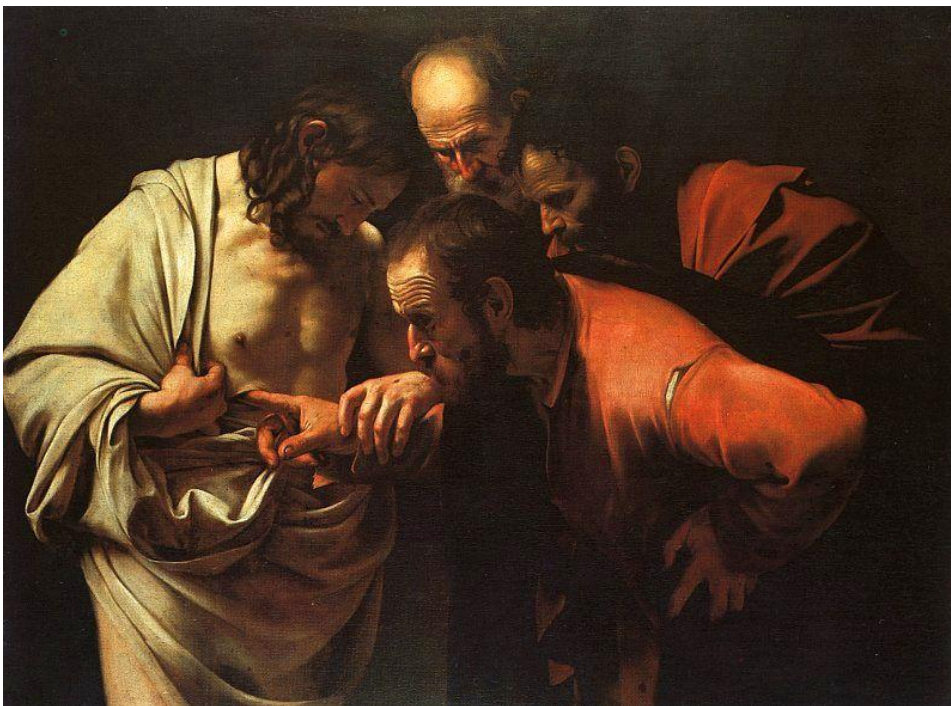


Figure 36 Caravaggio, *Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, c.1601-1602; Sanssouci Palace, Potsdam.





Figure 37 Caravaggio, *The Resurrection of Lazarus*, 1608-1609, Museo Nazionale, Messina.



Figure 38 Jusepe de Ribera, *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, c. 1625-1628, Basilica Cattedrale di San Nicola di Bari, Nicosia. Detail.



Figure 39 Caravaggio, *Calling of Saint Matthew*, 1599–1600, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome.





Figure 40 Jusepe de Ribera, *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, c. 1625-1628, Basilica Cattedrale di San Nicola di Bari, Nicosia. Detail.



Figure 41 Caravaggio, *Supper at Emmaus*, 1606, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.



Figure 42 Caravaggio, *Supper at Emmaus*, 1601, National Gallery, London.



Figure 43 Fra Angelico, *Annunciation*, c. 1436-1445, Museo Nazionale di San Marco, Florence.





Figure 44 Michelangelo, *Saint Matthew*, 1506, Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence.

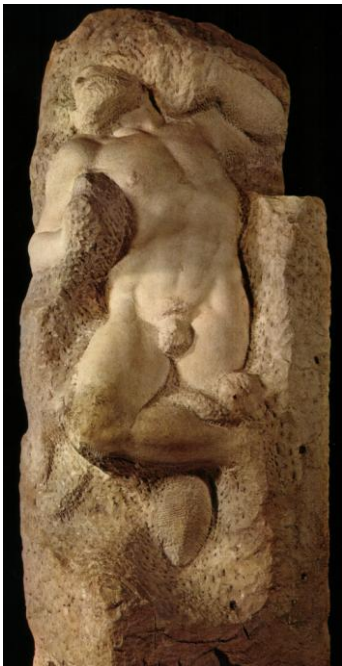


Figure 45 Michelangelo, *The Awakening Slave*, 1525-30, Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence.



Figure 46 Titian, *Tarquinius and Lucretia*, 1571, The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.



Figure 47 Titian, *The Portrait of Pietro Aretino*, 1545, Palazzo Pitti, Florence.





Figure 48 Titian, *Venus and Adonis*, 1553, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 49 Titian, *The Rape of Europa*, 1560-1562, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.



Figure 50 Jusepe de Ribera, *Apollo flaying Marsyas*, 1637, Museo di Capodimonte, Naples. Detail.





Figure 51 Vermeer, *The Lacemaker*, c.1669–70; Louvre Museum, Paris.





Figure 52 Diego Velázquez, *Female Figure (Sibyl with Tabula Rasa)*, 1648, Meadows Museum, Dallas.



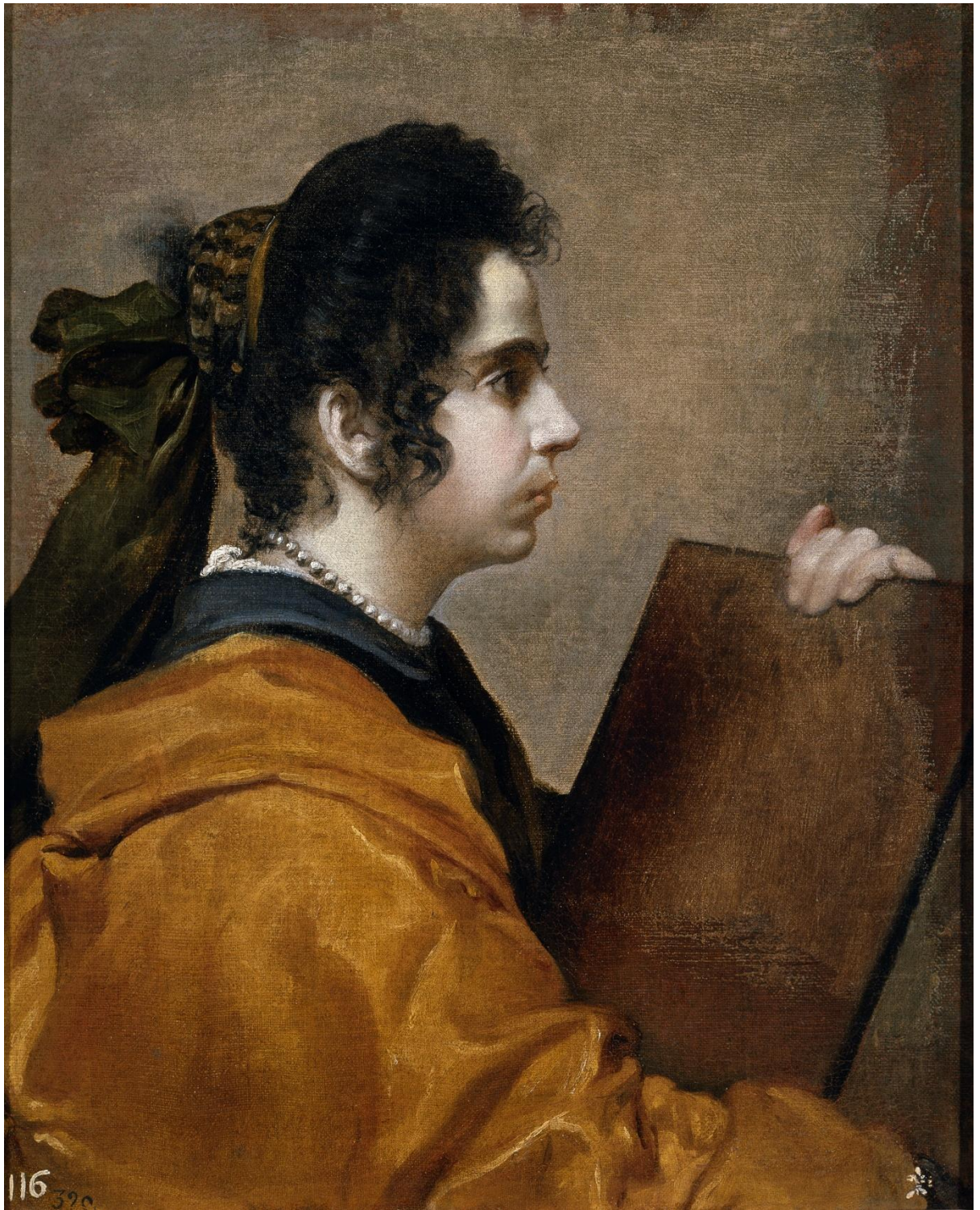


Figure 53 Diego Velázquez, *Juana Pacheco, Wife of the Artist, as a Sibyl?*, 1631-32, Prado Museum, Madrid.





Figure 54 Diego Velázquez, *The Fable of Arachne (Las Hilanderas)*, c. 1657, Prado Museum, Madrid.



Figure 55 Diego Velázquez, *Female Figure (Sibyl with Tabula Rasa)*, 1648, Meadows Museum, Dallas. Detail.





Figure 56 Artemisia Gentileschi, *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting (La Pittura)*, 1638-1639, Royal Collection, London.



Figure 57 Artemisia Gentileschi, *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting (La Pittura)*, 1638-1639, Royal Collection, London. Detail.



Figure 58 Artemisia Gentileschi, *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting (La Pittura)*, 1638-1639, Royal Collection, London. Detail.



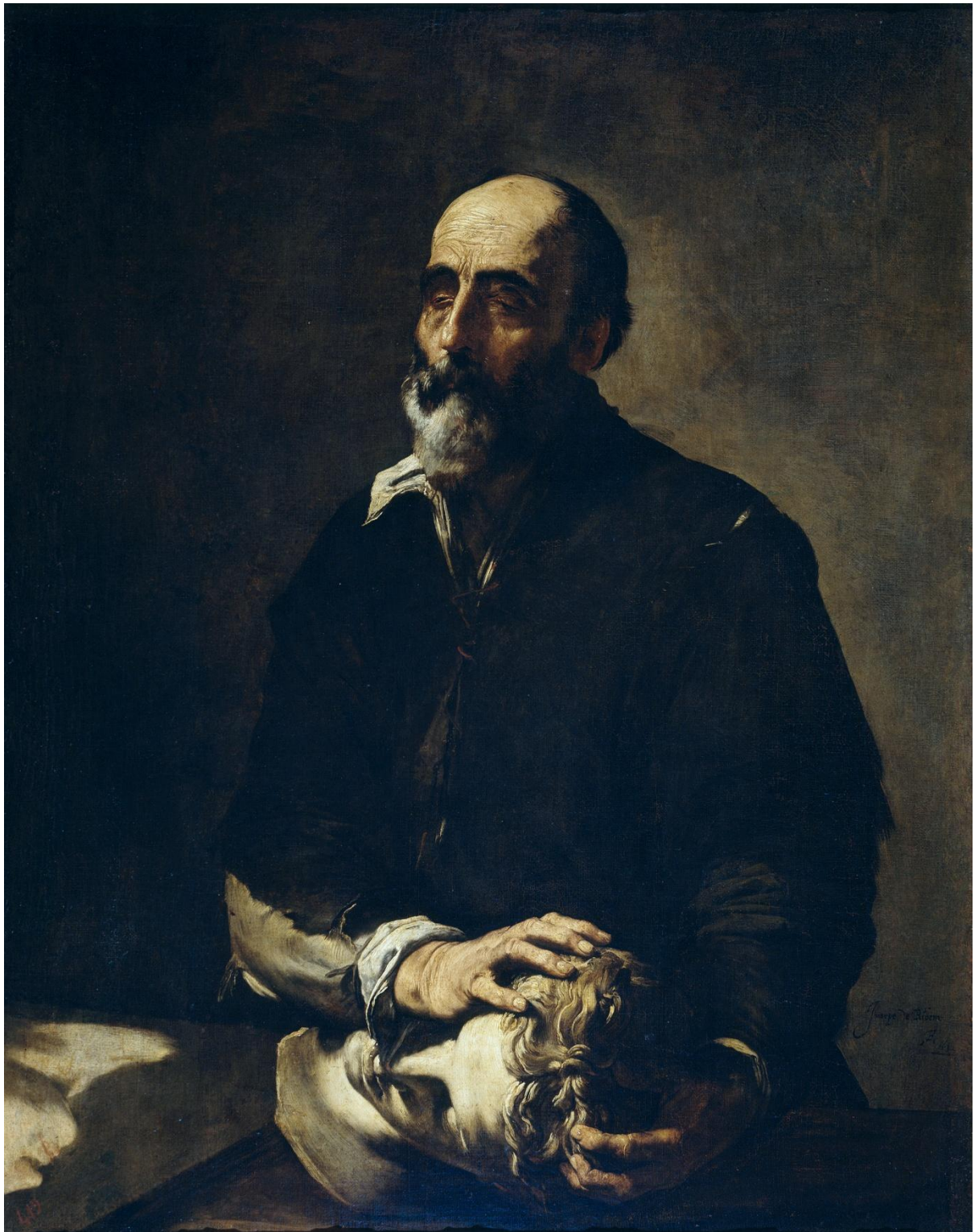


Figure 59 Jusepe de Ribera, *The Blind Sculptor, or Allegory of Touch*, 1632, Prado Museum, Madrid.



Figure 60 Jusepe de Ribera, *Sense of Touch*, c. 1615-16, Norton Simons Museum, Pasadena.



Figure 61 Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Apollo and Daphne*, 1622-25, Galleria Borghese, Rome.





Figure 62 Jusepe de Ribera, *The Blind Sculptor, or Allegory of Touch*, 1632, Prado Museum, Madrid. Detail.



Figure 63 Jusepe de Ribera, *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, 1644, Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona. Detail.





Figure 64 Titian, *Pietà*, 1570-1576, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice.





Figure 65 Titian, *The Burial of Christ*, 1559, Prado, Madrid.



Figure 66 Titian, *The Burial of Christ*, 1572, Prado, Madrid.





Figure 67 Diego Velázquez, *Mercury and Argus*, 1659, Prado, Madrid.



Figure 68 Rubens, *Mercury and Argus*, 1635, Prado, Madrid.





Figure 69 *The Dying Gaul*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Century, Capitoline Museums, Rome.



Figure 70 Diego Velázquez, *Mercury and Argus*, 1659, Prado, Madrid. Detail.



Figure 71 Jusepe de Ribera, *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, 1644, Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona. Detail.



Figure 72 Jusepe de Ribera, *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, 1644, Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona. Detail.





Figure 73 Caravaggio, *Martyrdom of Saint Ursula*, 1609-1610, Galleria di Palazzo Zevallos Stigliano, Naples.



Figure 74 Jusepe de Ribera, *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, 1634, National Gallery of Art, Washington. Detail.



Figure 75 Jusepe de Ribera, *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, 1634, National Gallery of Art, Washington. Detail.



Figure 76 Jusepe de Ribera, *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, 1634, National Gallery of Art, Washington. Detail.





Figure 77 Caravaggio, *Denial of Saint Peter*, 1610, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.



Figure 78 Caravaggio, *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, c. 1593, Galleria Borghese, Rome.



Figure 79 Caravaggio, *Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*, 1608, St. John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta.





Figure 80 Caravaggio, *Denial of Saint Peter*, 1610, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. Detail.



Figure 81 Caravaggio, *Denial of Saint Peter*, 1610, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. Detail.





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